



PLANET ARKADIA
CHRONICLES

PLANET
ARKADIA



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PREWORDS

Singapore, May 1, 2014

Welcome to the chronicles of Planet Arkadia!

Arkadia is a planet in change. Just like our own real life is changing, so is Arkadia.

The story here will give you an understanding of the history behind Planet Arkadia. You will learn why we have travelled to Arkadia and established a colony. It is in no way a finished story. The story is evolving as we continue this journey with you; the players.

It is my hope that you will take the time to read the story, so that you may further engage with the planet. It is my strong belief that you will get out more of your game-play on Arkadia if you understand where we have come from. You will gain a deeper understanding about what has happened, what is going on and maybe you'll be able to figure out what will be happening in the future?

Have you ever been thinking about why Celeste Harbor is named Celeste? Have you ever wondered why there is a statue of Milton Lee in the square?

The answers are here in these chronicles.

I won't delay you any longer from reading the story. Just let me wish you an exciting read!

See you in-game!

Best Regards

David Dobson

CEO, Planet Arkadia Pte Ltd

PLANET ARKADIA

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CHAPTER 1



1.1: TOÁN'S EXILE

DATE: 12 SEP 3007

TIME: 14:56 hours

LOCATION: Interplanetary Transmission Recovery and Decryption Unit (ITRDU), Imperial Federal Navy Headquarters Space Station Vigilant

'Sir, initial transmission from Celeste Space Probe is coming online. Images will be up in 45 seconds.'

The excitement in the signal analyst's voice caught Commodore Toán Harvir's attention immediately. The ITRDU processed hundreds of transmissions daily, ranging from routine reports from the colonies to classified military communications. Only very rarely were they from any of the dozens of exploration probes that had been sent out into the galaxy. Celeste was one such probe. For the life of him Harvir could not remember seeing reference to it previously. He still struggled to come to grips with which probes had been sent out by the government over the years, even after the three years he'd been left to rot in this unit.

For a moment his eyes lost focus as he once again heard the voice that had haunted his dreams - the cold, hard voice of the judge at his court martial, reading a verdict that found him guilty of insubordination. He had risked his entire battle group by lingering to recover wounded troops during a frenzied withdrawal from a battle against robots closing on human controlled space. Stripped of his command and removed from frontline service, he was effectively banished with little hope of redemption to this windowless room in the Navy's Headquarters on Vigilant.

Realising he hadn't been paying attention, Harvir quickly accessed the Unit's archives, scanning the available information on Celeste. The probe had been sent towards a planet that scientists speculated held the potential for life or would at the very least be suitable for colonisation. It was one of the first such probes launched, after wormhole technology had been perfected, and had thus travelled a lot further than most probes previously launched. Fitted with an older communications system still limited to light speed, its initial transmission was only just reaching Earth.

It took Harvir a few moments to absorb these facts before he returned his attention to the recorded data from Celeste. Images swam into focus, giving him his first look at the planet. Even from thousands of kilometres away the planet looked stunning, with large oceans separating several huge continents. Clouds of various shades were spread across the planet. Dense patches of lush vegetation threatened to hide entire areas of the continents completely. The view of the planet slowly enlarged as Celeste travelled closer and the probe's scanners began to record further details. It had a nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere at levels very similar to Earth's. Surely in the nursery of the stars, Harvir mused, this planet had been born Earth's sister.

Spectroscopic emissions from dust clouds in the atmosphere hinted encouragingly at both known and unknown minerals. Harvir knew that large quantities of the basic minerals would be extremely helpful, ensuring this planet would kick start its own industrial economy and quickly be independent of substantial Federal Imperial aid. An added bonus was the presence of unique minerals that were sure to excite mining corporations throughout human controlled space, especially if discovered in abundance on the surface. Yes, Harvir thought to himself, definitely a promising prospect for colonisation.

‘Sir, could you take a look at this? There appears to be a large field of debris orbiting the planet. Some of it is made up of composites unknown to our databases.’

Harvir shifted his gaze away from the planet itself and looked at what the analyst was scrutinising. The excitement of seeing images of the planet had caused them to overlook the outer atmosphere. At first glance it looked like a normal planetary debris field, though at an unusually low orbit. From Celeste’s current range it resembled nothing more than a dust cloud, but as the view closed in he got some perspective on how big some of these pieces were. His first thought was that it would be hell flying a ship through it all. The debris ranged in size from space dust up to large pieces that would easily rival the size of the Navy’s smaller warships.

The analysis of the debris field indicated that some of it consisted of regular asteroids. The rest, however, appeared to be a series of unusual metallic compounds that the data banks informed him could not form naturally. Harvir frowned and carefully studied the entire mess again. His attention was arrested by something that looked alarmingly familiar.

‘Focus on that section there’ he said.

The analyst zoomed in on the object indicated. Harvir could only stare for long seconds as his brain flew through multitudes of possibilities. He’d spent thirty years of service in the Navy, including five years commanding his own battle group, but he had seen nothing like this. It didn’t seem possible; his mind was already flashing through the implications of what it could mean. The object looked like a section of a destroyed ship but the design was unusual. Foreign. The piece was barely recognizable but too symmetrical and linear to be natural. Its composition was all wrong. Even without consulting the Unit’s database, he was sure that no human or robot built ships like that. He quickly turned to the duty watch keeper.

‘Notify the Fleet Admiral’s Office immediately and forward a copy of everything this probe transmits up the chain of command. Tell her it appears that we have found a derelict ship of unknown origin.’ Harvir ordered, before turning back to his analyst. ‘Focus your scan on the planet’s surface immediately. Look for any indication of sentient life. We need to know what we’re looking at here. Something must have created this mess.’

Harvir cast his eyes over the whole field of rocks and wreckage again. He sent a query to the network, to confirm what he already suspected: the unknown compounds in the wrecked ship he’d been studying were present throughout the entire debris field. He realised there must have been hundreds of wrecked ships around the planet. He wasn’t an easily worried man. He’d stood in the frontlines against robot assaults and commanded fleet actions, but the sheer size of what he was looking at made him nervous. Had they been robot ships, he wasn’t sure the entire Navy could have stood against them. He allowed a wry smile to play across his lips and he thought, maybe, just maybe this is my ticket back to the front lines, command and my troops.

Suddenly an alarm sounded, deafening and urgent, Harvir’s head whipped round.

‘What’s happening?’ he demanded.

'Sir, it's the unauthorised communication alarm.'

'I know THAT! Tell me why is it sounding?'

'Something is transmitting a signal. A signal to Celeste! Its signature doesn't match human or robot.... Sir it's.... It's alien Sir?'

1.2: DIARY OF MILTON LEE

DATE: 18 SEP 3007

TIME: 23:07 hours

SOURCE: Transcript of Milton Lee's personal Voice log

So suddenly there appears to be evidence of sentient life in the universe other than humanity and those damn robots. Possible wrecked ships, ruined remains of surface structures and, most incredibly, a signal transmitted to a supposedly undetectable space probe protected by a highly advanced encryption shield. Amazing. The mind boggles to consider the possibilities. You'd think such an important discovery would be instantly released. But how long does it take for the military to release this information to proper scientists who might actually know how to do something with it?

4 WHOLE DAYS!

Apparently it took those meat-heads in the Military's Science Division THAT LONG to realise that they had no chance to decrypt a new type of signal all by themselves and FINALLY work out that someone else would have to do it for them. And here I am, me, Milton Lee who holds doctorates in three separate fields of science. I, who as a boy was invited to commence higher education at an age when my peers were still struggling to read. I, the man who optimised the equations for the Advance Wormhole Jump Drive, allowing ships to travel 23% quicker along wormholes. Here I am, clearly the most brilliant scientist of the century, maybe the millennium. But do they ask me?

NO!

No, they release it to the entire world and offer a reward for the person who can crack it. Now I have to compete with people who can barely count without using their fingers and toes for my right to one of the greatest discoveries since mankind first learnt how to travel amongst the stars. It was released two days ago and this is the first time I've been home from the lab. Even then I had to walk since I've run out of mind essence. I'm sure I'm close to working this out.* If I'd been allowed to buy the gear I'd asked for years ago, or if the military had accepted my application, I'd have access to the right equipment and I would have cracked it by now. Ignorant recruitment psychologist!* What right did he have to say I was psychologically unsuited to the military and block my application? Well, despite their determination to stop me, I'll show them. Then all those who have forgotten about me will come grovelling back.

The Military should have consulted me about the signal before releasing it to the world. Everyone knows that I am the leading expert in real and sub-space physics, so surely it doesn't take that much

brainpower to believe that I could help. I feel like I'm wasting time resting while some mud-brained excuse for a scientist could be about to stumble across a solution and take credit for what should rightfully be mine.

I can almost understand how those fools thought they might actually be able to decrypt the signal. To people with their ability it wouldn't seem to be that different from the sort of technology that we currently use. But it's obvious to me at a glance there's nothing simple about it. It's transmitted using energy variation technology similar to our communicators, which means that it should have been relatively easy to create a device to hone into the correct frequency and analyse the properties, and inevitably lead to a solution. However, it seems to work on some higher level of applied physics, so how any equipment not designed to receive it managed to do just that is beyond comprehension. Unless the device that transmitted the signal is somehow self-regulated to a level that it can adjust to Celeste's unique protection codes, which definitely should be impossible. And yet, all the laws of physics seem to be preserved, working within the same restrictions that we ourselves observe.

Even stranger, the source of the transmission could not be derived. Perhaps it is shielded in some way, but I am beginning to suspect that the signal itself could be constantly changing, perhaps by some mathematical sequence unknown to humans or via some kind of self-aware virus. But how is it possible to change recorded information without the transmitting or receiving object undergoing even a minute physical change? According to our current technology, that simply isn't possible. Yet I'm looking at proof that it is. The signal seems to generate the command to change itself. I can understand why such a thing might be done but I still can't understand how.

Obviously whoever created this Signal has a greater understanding of physics than humans or robots do. I am forced to admit that their understanding and obvious expertise is vastly superior even to my own. They work in a direction that we're not used to, that we haven't even thought of up until now. I wish I could get a hold of whatever was transmitting the signal. If I was able to see the technology that created it, I'm sure I could make huge advances in other fields as well. Whoever it is, they must be hugely advanced in other areas as well. Power generation? Communications? Weapons? Who knows what else?

I managed to get a copy of the military's classified recordings and noticed their interest in the compounds of a debris field around the planet. Thinking that it might pertain in some way to The Signal I had a look myself and grudgingly find I have to agree with the Military Science Division. They obviously haven't gone far enough though.

There are definitely the remains of a lot of wrecked star ships circling that planet.* It doesn't surprise me that the military haven't noticed that the unusual compounds can be classified into two entirely different groups. The smaller of these groups contains traces of elements found in the planet's atmosphere and are therefore likely native to this planet, while the larger group is almost certainly from elsewhere. There is only one plausible reason that I can think of for there being so many derelict ships: a battle of titanic proportions took place above this planet.

But none of that proves to be of any help in decrypting The Signal. My head aches from trying to think of a solution and the lack of sleep over the past two days is certainly not helping.* But how can I relax knowing that each minute I sleep takes me away from such vital research? I think I should try to get a few hours sleep and get back to the labs. Hopefully I'll wake up with some new insight that unravels this whole mystery.

1.3: FINDING SUNDARI

DATE: 17 SEP 3007

TIME: 11:06 hours

LOCATION: Somewhere in the desert

The sound of the arriving craft drowned out everything else as it settled a short distance away from the habitation module in Sundari Zhen's camp. It had barely stopped, sending up a cloud of dust, when two men emerged. A man in a Federal Imperial Navy uniform approached in a dignified manner, followed by a stumbling man who was nevertheless immaculately attired. Their manner indicated they were high ranking personnel, which made Sundari wonder why they had travelled hundreds of kilometres into the desert to talk to her.

When she had first heard their approach across the barren desert, she had hurriedly washed her face and arms of the dirt and grime of her morning's work. By the time the men made their way toward her she was covered in dust again, with fresh trails of perspiration running down her face. No amount of dirt and sweat, however, could ever have masked her natural beauty. She smiled warmly at the men. The visit was unexpected, but she thought she could make a guess at the reason.

'Miss Zhen?' the man in the military uniform asked.

'That's me,' Sundari replied.

‘You are a difficult woman to find’, he said, somewhat irritably. ‘We had to transit by air instead of teleporting to your ...’

‘Miss Zhen,’ the civilian man broke in, ‘we need to talk to you about a matter of some urgency.’

She glanced between the two men, bemused. ‘Of course. Let’s get out of this heat and you can tell me about it.’

They made their way inside the module and through the interior, where various benches were filled with an assortment of bones and artefacts. Even though each item was labelled, they didn’t seem to follow any sorting system that either of the men recognised. Sundari noticed them looking around at the mess as she guided them to a central table.

‘Sorry about this. The patterns help me think.’

The men shared a brief puzzled glance then just nodded politely, as she quickly cleared room on the table. They seated themselves as the civilian man cleared his throat.

‘Miss Zhen, would you be able to tell us how you came to be in this line of work?’

Sundari paused for a second to think. She was not shy despite the question coming from complete strangers, and likely influential ones at that. She knew that since they had come a long way to find her they probably knew her background better than she did. So she answered with more detail than she usually would, guessing that they were looking for something more specific from her.

‘When I was a little girl my parents would frequently have drawn out disputes. Both worked hard to maintain a basic standard of living for us and eventually the strain would show in periods of violence. During those times I would live with my Grandmother and she would fascinate me with tales from hundreds of years ago. I always yearned to learn more and would read every night on a wide range of topics, but usually history about ancient civilisations and cultures. I guess you could say that sparked my interest in archaeology, because I wanted to learn more than was already documented.* But to truly understand the history, I found I needed to understand people as well, how they thought and what drove them. Not just the people around me but everyone throughout history. I wanted to know how cultures had developed. That is why I also went on to study psychology and anthropology, which has become a passion for me.’

‘So you would consider yourself to be an expert on mapping the progression of civilisation?’

‘Not really,’ she laughed easily, ‘I’ve only explored a fraction of earth’s historical cultures. Even with old records I can’t be sure if I’m always on the right track. But I can make a decent educated guess.’

‘With your qualifications you could easily work within the government sector. Why do you choose to work out in remote locations?’

Because there are so many ancient civilisations on the streets of cities, Sundari thought, amused by the question. Seeing the serious expressions on their faces quickly strangled her sense of humour. It seemed important to these men to find out about her and her work.

‘I have to admit that I enjoy the challenge. I like proving that I can survive in the wild like our ancient ancestors did. Also, I like how quiet it is out here. There’s none of the bustle that you find in the populated centres. I like to get away from the attention when I can.’

The men were silent for a moment. From the way their eyes glazed briefly she could tell that they were communicating via their implants.

‘You recently sent a report to the Archaeological Society regarding the newly discovered planet by Celeste Space Probe. You postulated that it was inhabited by not only a sentient species but one that is quite possibly humanoid in nature. Do you still stand by your conclusions?’

She frowned, then stopped when she realised she’d done it. Her Grandmother had always said not to frown. It makes you age quicker, Gran would say. Sundari had extrapolated a little from what she had seen of the pictures released to the public, all of which were taken from space and not as detailed as she would have liked. Yet the placement, size and shape of the settlements across the world seemed to indicate these beings had similar needs and requirements to humans. The specifications of the planet even supported the likelihood of a biological evolution similar to Earth’s. Certainly, the ruins she had seen were different from Earth’s own cities and towns but there were enough similarities to suggest that this species could have physical characteristics that resemble those possessed by humans. None of this was concrete proof, but a large number of minor details had harmonised within her mind that she was certain.

‘Yes. Yes, I do stand by my conclusions.’

‘Your background brings a different perspective not shared by the Archaeological Society. Is there some way you can prove your conclusions?’ the civilian man pressed.

‘Not from here, no.’ Sundari paused, an idea taking shape in her mind. She added quickly, ‘I would need to go and see the ruins for myself and examine any relics and artefacts I can find to be sure. Unless, of course, the original inhabitants are still there.’

She had meant the last part as a joke, but the two men just stared straight at her for a long moment. Suddenly the uniformed man cast a triumphant sideways glance at his civilian counterpart and spoke for only the second time since they had met.

‘Miss Zhen, the Federal Empire itself cannot ignore the possibility of another sentient, intelligent species existing on another planet. We are here to request you be a part of the initial fleet sent to investigate this planet.’

Sundari’s breath caught. The possibilities were almost too much to contemplate. The fact that her report could result in such an offer being made hadn’t ever occurred to her.

‘When?’

‘You’d better pack your bags. We leave for Space Station Vigilant as soon as you are ready.’

1.4: TO RISK THE WORLD

DATE: 22 SEP 3007

TIME: 15:17 hours

LOCATION: Milton Lee’s Laboratory

‘But you can’t connect The Signal to the global network!’ Milton Lee’s assistant repeated as he followed the professor around the laboratory, much to Lee’s annoyance. ‘We barely know anything about this signal,’ he continued. ‘Even the Military refer to it as just The Signal. For all we know it could be transmitting a virus. If we connect it to the network it could infect the whole planet! It would be the same as what the Robots did a few years ago.’

‘Don’t be such a coward!’ Lee snapped. ‘When have I ever been wrong? We both know I’ve successfully developed an algorithm that will decrypt The Signal, given time. We know it hasn’t harmed the laboratory’s internal systems. Even you agree this isn’t anything the Robots could’ve produced! Stop worrying.’ Lee returned his attention to his work.

‘But Professor, testing it within the laboratory is a completely different situation, with a lot less at stake than exposing it to the global network!’

Lee slammed the tool he was using onto the desk. He knew he was close and shouldn’t have to tolerate such questioning from a mere assistant. ‘Rubbish! We’ve already heard audio from The Signal thanks to the adapter I built. So we know that they’re trying to talk to someone, whoever they are. But we can’t understand it. We must assume it’s in their language.’ Distracted by this last thought, he continued to himself. ‘The problem is there’s no context, no key to unlock the meaning. How can we translate it? The Signal is so advanced ‘surely it can translate itself? Yes, I’m sure it can, if we give it the chance. And when I give it access to the global network, which contains all of our language, it will have its own decryption key.’ He glared back at his assistant. ‘It will work. It has to.’

‘Please, Professor Lee, listen to me,’ his assistant pleaded. ‘It could be disguised that way to invite us to translate it. What if The Signal was meant to be a weapon? Something designed to cripple enemy technology, and we’re the enemy? Even if it’s not, it could still damage our systems beyond repair, because it’s not compatible. We don’t understand the technology that produced it. We’

‘You may not understand it, but I do.’ Lee cut him off. He had not stopped glaring at his assistant, and now his expression hardened further as he picked the tool up again. ‘The risks are acceptable considering what there is to gain. Imagine the technology I could develop,’ he said. ‘There, I’ve finished upgrading the adapter. Now we shall see what The Signal has to say.’

Before his assistant could interrupt further, Lee activated the adapter and connected it to the global

network. He quickly turned his attention to the display to watch a detailed readout. It was hard to work out exactly what was going on, but it was clear that The Signal was spreading itself. Lee experienced a moment of panic, realising that maybe his assistant could have been right. If he was, it would destroy Lee's reputation. But The Signal wasn't doing anything malicious; it just seemed to be searching for something. Lee reassured himself that his assistant would have to be wrong as he would struggle to outthink a gerbil.

The laboratory systems began relaying information around the room, alerting Lee to any changes in the recording. Sounds that could only be an alien language emitted from the room's audio projectors. Minutes dragged into hours without any noticeable change. Finally, Lee's assistant spoke up, with relief in his voice.

'Professor, it isn't working. Thankfully there doesn't seem to be any harm to our systems or the global network. I told you this would be a monumental risk for no reward. It was just a long shot in the dark, a—'

'QUIET!' Lee shouted suddenly. 'Listen! There! Do you hear that?'

Through the jumble of alien sounds, Lee had heard a word he understood. He leapt from his seat. His plan was working. He listened carefully and after a while recognised other words. Slowly but surely The Signal was translating itself.

Time seemed to pass quickly as Lee sat listening late into the night. Even his assistant was sitting in captivated silence. Small sections of The Signal were translated, enough that they could now understand some of its contents. The voice was musical with soft feminine tones. It was a voice neither were likely to forget.

The Signal was almost half translated before it abruptly stopped. The rest remained incoherent. Lee didn't understand why yet, but for the moment he didn't care. What he'd already heard was beyond his wildest dreams.

He was Milton Lee, the Greatest Scientist of all time. With pride, he listened again to the sections translated so far.

I exist as Sal'diresh, last remaining Knight of the world Arkadia. Hopeless is our chance of survival. Those that remain exist here at Artalia, both final bastion for hope and final despair for the people of Arkadia. Any beings to hear, we ask please. Help us.

From starting, the beings whose name they gave as Oratan, came to this world. Sought not they to trade or learn. They did seek only to steal and kill. We met with them above the skies. We met with them on the land. Limited numbers had they. But led by the Knights, with technology of Arkadia superior, the people did hope.

Lee reviewed and then transmitted the translated sections to the Military. After a moment of thought, he decided to defy the conditions of the Government's reward and sent it to multiple media outlets as well. He sat back and marvelled at his work. He had done it. For centuries to come he'd be recognised

for the genius he was; the man who'd connected humanity with this new sentient species. All that remained now was to investigate why the second half had not decrypted itself. That would surely be a breeze. After all he had achieved, nothing could stop him regaining the recognition that was rightfully his.

1.5: CONVERGING PATHS

DATE: 01 OCT 3007

TIME: 09:15 hours

LOCATION: Interplanetary Transmission Recovery and Decryption Unit (ITRDU), Federal Imperial Navy Headquarters Space Station Vigilant

'Commodore Harvir?' Milton Lee asked.

Harvir turned at the sound of the voice, expecting to see yet another clerk rushing to give him some final notes before the briefing. Instead he found himself facing the scientist who had decrypted The Signal. He was easily recognisable since the media had seen fit to broadcast his face at every available opportunity, along with the extract of the decrypted Signal. Harvir hadn't realised Lee was on Vigilant, but he was almost certain there was no way that Lee could have arrived here uninvited.

'Yes?'

'I'm Milton Lee; I'm the one who cracked The Signal.'

'Yes, I recognise you. How can I help you?' Harvir asked, wanting to get to the point. There were only a few minutes before the briefing and he didn't want to be late.

'Congratulations on your new command.' Harvir immediately tensed at Lee's words; few people outside the Admiral's office knew of his request to lead a fleet to the planet Arkadia. Fewer still knew that his request had been granted and his command reinstated. 'Since you're the Fleet commander, I'm sure you know that I'm going to be joining you on your journey, but I've'

'How do you know about this?' Harvir said sharply.

'been led to believe that I'm going to be assigned to the IFNS Newton,' Lee continued, ignoring the question. He smiled ingratiatingly. 'I'm sure you will agree this arrangement just isn't acceptable. How am I supposed to work surrounded by all the idiots on the scientific research vessel? I must be on the Flagship.'

Harvir stared incredulously at Lee, unable to believe what he was hearing. 'Professor Lee, I don't know how you found out what ship you've been assigned to or even how you got on this station. However, if you are to be a part of this Fleet, you'll go on your assigned ship or you'll go strapped to the hull. This is a military operation and all civilian scientists will be aboard Newton or one of her sister ships.'

‘Look, you need me on your ship, Commodore,’ Lee said, annoyed that Harvir had not instantly agreed. Didn’t Harvir understand how important he was? ‘I was the only one who was able to decrypt The Signal. I will be the only one able to understand any technology we discover there. We’re bound to make some advances in weapon technology, I’m sure I could see to it that you get one of the first prototypes?’ He offered, smiling unconvincingly.

‘I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear you say that,’ Harvir growled with a dangerous glint in his eyes. At his look, even Lee realised that he had overstepped a boundary by trying to deal with the Commodore in such a way.

He opened his mouth to try and salvage something from the conversation but his attention was wrested away by the approach of two people. One was a junior officer, but the other was a remarkable looking woman dressed in civilian clothing. He dismissed any thoughts of Harvir from his mind. Noticing Lee’s distraction, Harvir turned just as the young officer stopped to introduce the woman to them both.

‘Commodore Harvir, Professor Lee, this is Doctor Sundari Zhen. She is an expert in the fields of archaeology and anthropology. She will be accompanying you on the Fleet,’ the officer said after saluting Harvir. Having completed his task, he turned and left, leaving the three alone.

‘And this mission was supposedly classified,’ Harvir mumbled under his breath.

There was a brief moment of awkward silence as nobody quite knew what to say. Sundari was the first to recover, flashing the two men a smile.

‘Hi,’ she said, offering her hand in greeting.

Harvir stepped forward to shake her hand but was beaten to it as Lee brushed past.

‘Good afternoon Miss, I’m Professor Milton Lee. I’m the one who decoded The Signal. I must say how glad I am to hear that such a beautiful and intelligent woman as yourself will be accompanying us,’ Lee said as he stepped forward and kissed Sundari’s extended hand. ‘Perhaps we will get a chance to discuss this new species during the journey? I do consider myself something of an expert.’

‘That would be interesting,’ Sundari said as she reclaimed her hand. ‘My colleagues and I would be keen to hear your thoughts on how technology could have altered the course of cultural development on Arkadia. It’s something that I’m sure we’d all like to hear.’

Harvir fought to stop himself from rolling his eyes at Lee’s poorly hidden attraction to Sundari, but couldn’t stop a wry smile of amusement forcing its way across his face at how subtly she was able to deflect Lee’s attention. No doubt such exchanges were nothing new to her. Hell, he thought, I can hardly blame Lee. But this woman has her head screwed on right.

He was still struggling to understand why these civilians were even on Vigilant, and apparently being included in the Fleet. It wasn’t his decision, but he felt he should have been informed since he would be

responsible for these people once the Fleet launched. Harvir suspected the decision may be politically motivated, but there was little he could do if the Admiral had already approved it.

‘I don’t know how much research either of you are going to be able to do. This is a military mission; we’re not sure what we’re going to encounter when we get there.’ Harvir said with a sideways glance at Lee. ‘All Celeste has seen is ruins, so we’re not even sure if this message is current. If it is, we might be busy trying to save the Arkadians.’

‘Either way suits me fine,’ Sundari said easily, appearing equally happy with either prospect. ‘I’ve always enjoyed studying Earth’s various ancient cultures and ruins. I think that it’ll be even more exciting to study another species’ culture. And if the Arkadians are still there, I’d be happy to help them. From what I’ve surmised so far, they are a lot like us.’

‘One thing I’ve learnt from the front lines is that things are often not as they seem, Doctor Zhen,’ Harvir said, his natural instincts making him cautious. ‘That will be even truer when dealing with a species we’ve never encountered before.’

‘Ha, science can find the answer to anything.’ Lee said, seemingly annoyed at being left out of the conversation and determined to reassert himself.

Sundari nodded agreement at Lee before responding to Harvir. ‘Maybe so, but we’ll have to work that out when we get there,’ Sundari replied. ‘Whatever motivates us, we all agree the risks are acceptable or we wouldn’t be going. There is the possibility of it being dangerous, yes, but we believe what we will discover will make it worthwhile.’ Harvir held her eye a second before giving her a slight nod. She smiled inwardly; recognising that he also knew the risks involved but was willing to accept her assessment of the situation. She was relieved to find the man who would command the Fleet was prepared to listen to her and to respect her opinion.

Just as Lee opened his mouth to impose his thoughts, an announcement was broadcast throughout the space station, informing everyone they had only a few minutes to be seated for the media briefing. Harvir turned and led his two companions into the briefing theatre to hear what the Admiral would say.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have called this media conference in response to the request for help contained within The Signal we received from the planet known as Arkadia. Though we lack resources immediately to hand, the Government has decided to offer whatever support it can muster. Today I am announcing the formation of a new taskforce, called Liberation Fleet. When ready, this Fleet will launch for Planet Arkadia, to provide assistance where possible.’

The Admiral’s voice drifted into a low background buzz in Sundari’s ears as she became lost in her thoughts. There was one question she noticed that hadn’t been asked so far about the message; who, or what, were the Oratan?

1.6: ROLLING THE DICE

DATE: 08 OCT 3007

TIME: 14:58 hours

LOCATION: Bridge, IFN Cutlass

Toán Harvir looked down at his display on the bridge of the IFNS Cutlass, Flagship of the newly formed Liberation Fleet. He had spent most of the day reviewing the Fleet's composition. He couldn't say that he was entirely happy with what he saw. Over half the ships were civilian, ranging from converted merchant transports to privately owned vessels supplied by the different groups interested in Arkadia. He didn't know how he was supposed to co-ordinate a fleet with so many civilian ships in a potentially hostile zone, especially when many were unarmed. He had no problem with the supply or medical ships since they were vital to any military engagement, but it was a different story for the ships owned by mining companies, private entrepreneurs and scientific vessels. There was even a ship leased by the Archaeological Society, a small but high tech cruiser.

Even though the civilian craft were under Harvir's command, along with the rest of the task force, he knew that they were not trained to respond to his commands during battle. If they did encounter a hostile force around Arkadia, his first duty would be to protect the civilian ships. Some of humanity's greatest war machines would therefore be reduced to acting as escorts. He'd always been proud of his ability to keep people under his command alive. But he found it irritating to be forced to protect civilian ships for the reason of ensuring public support for this operation remained unwavering. He'd already been subtly warned by the Admiral that it would be a bad idea to let any of the civilian ships or personnel come to harm. This warning had come directly after the Government had guaranteed their safety even though they had no idea what truly awaited Humanity on Arkadia. Now it was up to him to fulfil these promises.

'Damn, I hate politics' he mumbled to himself.

Despite all his worries and the many details that still required his attention, Harvir managed to find time to marvel at Earth, the planet of his birth. It was a sight that never failed to amaze him. He wondered if Arkadia would affect him in such a way.

He forced his mind back to the task at hand and checked the time. He had ordered all ships to be ready to launch fifteen minutes from now. So far the preparations had gone relatively smoothly, especially considering the speed at which the ships had been forced to assemble. He had been concerned the Fleet's departure would be delayed by the assembly and loading of the civilian ships. But it seemed that when the various companies put their minds and their money to work, preparations went like clock-work. Harvir could only think that it was because they were able to pay the workers enough that they were willing to go without sleep.

The Fleet was equipped with everything the troops would need to conduct a campaign on a foreign world. All the usual equipment needed for an operation of this size was present, such as weapons, vehicles and support units. They also had the latest gadgets for establishing rapid-deployment Forward Operating Bases. The modularised forts and firebases that could be assembled by VTOL drop craft were particularly exciting. These forts included some serious ground based firepower, as well as the

new upgraded automated gun turrets for remote sites. The military ships in the Fleet were at capacity transporting this volume of hardware, barely leaving enough room for the troops. Nowhere near enough troops in Harvir's opinion. Especially for an undertaking of this size.

'And with no backup,' he murmured to himself.

His eyes strayed back to the civilian ships again, as if hoping they'd turned into destroyer class ships to support his troops. These merchant ships were also heavily loaded, carrying everything that the companies would need on Arkadia. Harvir had to admit that the converted transports were proving useful, since the Military's warships were not designed to carry such cargos. Some ships were full of miners and their machinery. Others contained all the construction equipment and tools the engineers would need to expand their bases or to help the Arkadian's restore their shattered cities, should any remain to be saved. Most of the remaining ships were occupied by a range of scientists, from biologists to physicists and everything in between. Finally, there was the Archaeological Society's cruiser.

Harvir exhaled slowly as he remembered that there was also Milton Lee, who was supposed to be on IFNS Newton, a ship commissioned by the scientific community. But of course he wasn't. No one could explain how he'd managed it, but the Professor's name had somehow found its way onto the crew manifest of the Cutlass. By itself, this was bad enough, but Lee had also had Sundari Zhen re-assigned to Cutlass as well. Harvir didn't even want to imagine why. He'd only met Lee twice but it was already clear that he was going to cause difficulties. The man seemed almost proud of the fact that he'd broken regulations to get reassigned. If he could have, Harvir would have had Lee transferred to Newton where he was supposed to be, but the launch was so close that there wasn't time. Holding up the entire launch would probably only serve to satisfy Lee's ego, he thought.

Soon they would commence charging up the powerful wormhole drives that they would use to travel to Arkadia. Wormhole drives that are significantly more efficient thanks to the work of Milton Lee, Harvir reminded himself, almost feeling guilty at his previous thoughts about the Professor. He had to admit the man was good at what he did, even if he was incredibly annoying. Despite some resistance, Harvir had insisted on the Fleet emerging from the wormholes early to be sure they didn't appear in the middle of an enemy armada. None of the civilians seemed to realise that such an encounter would quickly put an end to the entire expedition, not to mention their lives. Dropping out early would also give them a chance to observe the situation from a distance so they could work out the best approach.

Only minutes before they were expected to leave, the last ship signalled that all systems were green and the Fleet was ready to jump. Back on Earth the media had begun a countdown to the moment when the Fleet would launch. This many ships simultaneously engaging their wormhole drives would be visible from the surface. People on the other side of the world would be able to access data streams of the launch from the newly established Planet Arkadia News and Information broadcast. Harvir was not about to deprive Earth of such a spectacle. The captains all knew their orders and were just waiting on their Fleet Commander to initiate the countdown. After one final check, Harvir nodded his approval.

'T minus ten seconds,' the helmsman announced.

Harvir swept a look around the bridge, noting the distinct air of excitement among his crew.

'Five.' The drive reached a consistent pitch.

'Four.'

Harvir settled into his seat, hands gripping the rests. His return to command had been a long time coming, but now he savoured the moment.

'Three.'

'Two.'

Everyone held their breath with anticipation. Surely nothing could go wrong now.

'One.'

'Activating wormhole drive.'

Dozens of tongues of fire streaked the sky and then they were gone. The Fleet disappeared from orbit and Earth itself disappeared from the ships' sensors. There was nothing more to be done, except await their fate on Arkadia.

1.7: APPROACHING DESTINY

DATE: 27 NOV 3007

TIME: 21:46 hours

SOURCE: Personal Log (Unofficial) ' Lieutenant [Name withheld] ' Pilot, 8th Combat Squadron

We've made it deep into the Arkadian system without encountering any hostile forces. So far no-one has seen a trace of any new intelligent species, nothing of either the Arkadians or the Oratan. Personally, I'm just happy that it wasn't a trap, even though it would have been more exciting if it was. Space battles might be hard to survive, but at least they're usually over quickly. Instead of fighting enemy ships, we're travelling through a thin asteroid field. It isn't the hardest thing to do, but it definitely takes a toll on the nerves. You can never take your eye off the ball, if you don't want to become just another fossil floating around in this graveyard. Call me crazy, but it's not my idea of a good time.

We emerged from the wormholes hours ago and, when the initial scans discovered nothing, we flew on towards Arkadia. As the Fleet moved further into the system, we began encountering the ever thickening sea of space junk that we saw in the Celeste probe's pictures. There really must have been a huge battle here. I bet the flying will get really interesting when we approach Arkadia itself.

The remains of asteroids and destroyed ships drift around the planet like a protective shield, a silent testimony to the lives lost in the battle. A sea of lost souls, destined to maintain their eternal watch over the planet. How many died here? How many were torn from those they loved?

— LOG PAUSED —

I've just come off duty again. I have to admit I'm quite excited. I got my first good look at the planet through our short range sensors. It's breathtaking. I remember the first time I saw Earth from orbit. The feeling was amazing, of pride and belonging to that rich world of blue and green. The view of Arkadia is similar and just as incredible, for all its differences. Wide oceans separate continents and clouds roam freely across the sky. Twin moons chase each other around the planet in an infinite race. Although we are the strangers to this world, it feels inviting, as if the planet itself is welcoming us. I wish I could go down with the landing parties to explore the surface. I'm drawn to it in a way that I never expected; like the sailors of old, I cannot resist its Siren song.

I've heard that the scientists and miners aboard the other ships are excited about the potential for new compounds and alloys to be discovered amongst the debris and wreckage. I wouldn't want to pilot the shuttles collecting the samples; flying close enough to collect anything would be a nightmare. Even for someone of my ability it wouldn't be easy. This far away it's not that concentrated but I still have to be constantly alert to avoid any collisions. Unlike the civilians, I've seen firsthand what would happen to this ship's atmosphere if any of this floating junk punctured the hull.

I haven't heard what the Fleet Commander intends to do now, since the planet appears to be deserted. There's been no indication of intelligent life. I knew there wouldn't be ten minutes after we arrived. It's too quiet out here. We haven't picked up any communications, let alone seen any space traffic. This just shouldn't be possible if anyone remained, since we know that both species have achieved space travel. We'd have heard or seen something by now. All we have heard since our arrival is The Signal, loud and clear and continuously repeating. It hasn't been switched off since we got here. Does nobody know we're here? Or are we too late?

— LOG PAUSED —

The planet is almost primitive. Not lifeless; we've detected movement, so there's something down there, but not anything that The Signal implied we'd find. I feared we'd arrive in system amid a massive space battle or just get attacked before we could work out who was who. But we were lucky and now it's up to the scientists and archaeologists to discover what has happened so far. I can't help feeling this isn't over yet. Someone ought to have survived, yet they haven't hailed us. Maybe they can't, but what if they just don't want to? But hey, I'm just here to fly the ship and make sure that everyone gets down to the planet in one piece. It's more than enough to keep me busy since there's a million bits of rock and metal threatening to steal the air from our lungs if I make a mistake and let them hit the ship.

— LOG PAUSED —

I ran into Lieutenant Chan in the mess during my last break. His troops will be among the initial landing party. We were discussing how the Fleet and the mission have been run so far. The Commodore knows what he's doing and the intent behind every order has been clear. The man's service record is outstanding. He has fought in countless battles. Then suddenly he was removed from active duty, I can't find any record that explains why. One minute he's commanding a fleet and the next he's reassigned as commander of a support unit. Chan and I were wondering what did he have to do to get his command back? Maybe, given that the Fleet could have been destroyed as soon as it arrived, he was just seen as expendable? If that is the case, who set him up to fail?

He's well suited to command. The veterans in the Fleet who've fought with him previously swear he's one of the best. They say he's never left a comrade behind. I can't help but think that he feels that he hasn't got much to work with. I would have blown a gasket if I was in his position. The Government has given him a bunch of civilians to look after; civilians who are armed with our guns and military hardware but have no idea how to use them. The miners look like a tough bunch at least, I reckon they'd be able to hold their own in a fight. I can't see the scientists being much help, though they could probably explain how our most complex weapons work at a glance, but I doubt they could fire them. The archaeologists seem more promising, that Doctor Zhen seems to know what she's about and the others from her Society take her lead. It doesn't surprise me since she's incredibly smart and good with people. She is one of a kind that one.

— LOG PAUSED —

I swear none of the civilians have any idea about how a military campaign is supposed to be run. The Commodore has ordered all the captains on the civilian ships not to accept any orders unless they're approved by him. He wouldn't have wanted to stifle a captain's initiative or flexibility, but was forced to issue that order after the Newton opened fire on one of the larger wreckages. Apparently her captain was talked into it by the scientists on board 'to see what effect our weapons had on the unknown compounds.' What kind of idiot could have thought that that was a good idea? It was comforting to see that we could destroy the pieces, even if it was just a wreck, but I was on patrol at the time and spent the next ten minutes dodging the shrapnel. We were lucky we didn't lose a shuttle. A little warning from Newton would have been nice or even better, the authority to open fire in the first place.

I'm back on duty soon. With any luck the Commodore will order the troops deployed down to the surface when we arrive in orbit around Arkadia. Hopefully I'm wrong and we're not too late for this party after all.

— LOG ENDS —



1.8: IN THE BALANCE

DATE: 03 DEC 3007

TIME: 21:48 hours

LOCATION: Bridge, IFN Cutlass, Flagship of Liberation Fleet

‘What do you mean, it wasn’t completely correct?!’ Harvir erupted, unable to contain his shock. Moments earlier he had been outlining the strategic situation to Sundari so that she could begin working on a deployment plan for the Archaeologists. It had been going well until he was interrupted by an urgent transmission from Newton. ‘Transmit all your findings over to Cutlass immediately,’ he ordered.

He sat for a brief moment, absentmindedly drumming his fingers on the arm of his command seat. What could a change in The Signal mean for the Fleet?

‘Comms,’ he said, catching the attention of his Communication Watch Officer. ‘Get Milton Lee up here right away, I want him to hear this too.’

Several minutes passed before the doors slid open and Lee strode onto the bridge.

‘What’s so urgent that you needed to see me right away? I was in the middle of some important research into the nature of...’

‘Stop.’ Harvir held up his hand to cut off the Professor. ‘I just received this transmission from Newton. Some of your colleagues have been reviewing your decryption algorithm to aid in future translations. They tested what they came up with against your original translation of The Signal. They say yours might not be entirely correct. Let’s listen to their version shall we?’ Before Lee had a chance to interrupt, Harvir started playing the new message.

I exist as Sal’diresh, last remaining Knight of the world Arkadia. Hopeless is our chance of survival. Those that remain exist here at Artaia, both final bastion for hope and final despair for the people of Arkadia. Any beings to hear, we ask please. Help us.

From starting, the beings whose name they gave as Oratan, came to this world. Sought not they to trade or learn. They did seek only to steal and kill. We met with them above the skies. We met with them on the land. Unlimited numbers had they. But led by the Knights, with technology of Arkadia superior, the people did hope.

Sundari frowned. She couldn’t hear any difference, but as she glanced towards Harvir she noticed he had gone completely still, his gaze distant. ‘What is it Toán?’

‘Unlimited numbers had they,’ Harvir said in a hushed voice. ‘Not limited. Unlimited.’ His eyes swung slowly to look directly at Sundari, the rest of his body seemingly frozen in place. ‘This changes everything.’

‘That’s not true,’ Lee said, with suspicious calmness. ‘It changes nothing. If there really were unlimited numbers of Oratan down there we’d have seen something by now, but we haven’t.’

‘How could you have missed such an important detail? Was your device just not up to the job and these other scientists had to improve it?’ Harvir demanded of Lee, as he struggled to regain control of himself. Sundari was amazed; both men had quickly picked up on the implications but seemed more intent on assigning blame than working out what to do next.

‘Hardly,’ Lee said scornfully. ‘I’ll admit that the device I created was put together in some haste, but I assure you that the translation process worked smoothly and accurately...’ Lee trailed off, finally noticing the chasm opening beneath his feet.

‘You lying... dammit, you knew!’ Harvir said, his voice angrier than Sundari had ever heard. ‘You knew your initial decryption wasn’t perfect! That one small change means we could be facing a hell of a lot more hostile forces than we expected. And you said nothing! You let us jump into this system knowing we could be facing an enemy that vastly outnumbers us!’

‘I had my suspicions but nothing concrete! Besides, the risk was still acceptable considering what there is to gain.’ Lee said, his voice rising angrily at the accusation. Despite his loud conviction, he was unable to meet Harvir’s eyes and instead addressed his comments to Sundari, hoping for support.

‘You are not the judge of what risks are acceptable to this fleet!’ Harvir roared. ‘I’ve had enough of you. Comms! Get a security detail to the bridge at the double. I want this man confined immediately for deliberately placing this fleet at risk.’

‘Wait!’ Sundari said forcefully. She had sat silently through the exchange up to this point. Since she had spent a large part of her life studying human behaviour, she knew that she needed to now intervene for the sake of the mission. ‘Commodore, you must realise that Professor Lee would have told you if he knew for certain his translation was in error, if only because his own life is at risk. But he’s not to blame as much as you’re making out. Be thankful that the scientists aboard Newton brought it to our attention before it was too late.’ Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lee’s smirk, but she wasn’t letting him off the hook. ‘And you,’ she said, turning to face Lee, ‘have to realise the gravity of your actions. These are peoples’ lives you’re playing with when you withhold information! How many discoveries do you think you’d be able to make if everyone was killed? This isn’t your laboratory where you can wait until you have proof. If you even suspect something is wrong you have to report it!’

‘Too late for reporting once there’s blood on your hands,’ Harvir said. ‘We’ll have to totally reassess our strategy. If we’d known this before leaving Earth we might not have launched at all. I’m sure the Admiral wouldn’t have allowed so many civilians to join with barely enough troops for protection. We may even have to abort the mission and return to Earth, taking what information we have so far.’

‘Toán, I understand what you’re saying,’ Sundari said in a gentler tone. ‘But everyone knew when they agreed to launch with the Fleet that there was a significant risk involved. That hasn’t changed. We know you’re worried about trying to protect us all and we’re grateful for the concern. But Milton’s right, we haven’t seen any trace of the Oratan anywhere, so it’s possible they don’t have the numbers implied by the Arkadian signal. Or they’re not here in those numbers anymore. Our approach has

always been cautious, and with this new information we'll be able to respond quicker if a significant threat does arise. Surely we don't need to turn back?' Sundari asked.

'I'll admit that we might not have to,' Harvir said, relaxing a little as he recognised the truth of what she had said. 'As it stands, our troops are on a one hour notice to move and we could have a forward command established within one week.' Harvir said. He continued before the others could begin asking questions. 'I know that you both have a lot that you'd like to say, but there's a lot to consider. This is not a decision that I'm going to rush.'

'Come on,' Sundari said to Lee, grabbing his sleeve and dragging him from the bridge. She looked back at Harvir, giving him a confident smile. 'I'm sure the Commodore will inform us of his decision in good time,' she added as Lee opened his mouth to speak.

As Harvir watched the bridge door close behind Sundari and Milton Lee, he sighed heavily. He needed to think clearly and consider all options without interruption. His thoughts continued to chase themselves in circles. 'Comms, I'm going to try and get some rest. I'll be in my staterooms. If anything changes to our situation, notify me immediately.'

Seven hours later Harvir was once again in his command seat. The bridge crew furtively watched him from the corner of their eyes as they went about their work. He didn't notice as his attention was dominated by one simple problem. How could one single word make such a profound difference? What had previous been an easy decision had suddenly become a hard one. He looked over at the Captain of Cutlass.

'Captain, have the latest scans revealed anything new on the planet's surface?' He asked.

'No, Sir. Conditions are unchanged. The troops remain on a one hour notice to move.'

There was a pause as Harvir took a final deep breath.

'Launch the drop ships, Captain. I think it's time we had a look at this planet for ourselves.'

■

CHAPTER 2



2.1: ARKADIA RISING

DATE: 11 DEC 3007

TIME: 07:23 hours

LOCATION: Main Base, Planet Arkadia

A peal of thunder split the air as a dozen drop ships entered the atmosphere, each smashing through the sound barrier as it made its descent. Toán Harvir stood on a nearby hill accompanied by a single platoon, watching. The ships spread out in perfect formation as they flew along their designated vectors. As they arrived at their assigned release points they cut loose their enormous cargos. Once released, the huge assembly modules plummeted towards the surface and crashed into the ground with a shower of dirt and rock. Then the ships were gone, turning and climbing steeply along their individual flight paths back into space. Before the dust had settled, another wave of drop ships approached along the same vector, this time carrying several hundred technicians and engineers as well as the platoons of troops assigned to protect them. With experience gained from hundreds of insertions into hostile territory, the pilots expertly landed and the troops rapidly deployed around the area. Thirty minutes later, with military precision, the next wave carrying construction equipment and tools descended towards the peninsula.

Harvir nodded with satisfaction. The initial deployment of troops a week earlier had gone just as smoothly. The scouts were the first to land, securing the landing zone, and they were soon followed by the main body of the Fleet's troops. Harvir had been among them, choosing to command from the ground where he could respond quickly to changing circumstances. He'd always felt that a leader should lead from the front, and he would never order troops into danger that he wasn't willing to face himself. Perhaps it wasn't the safest or smartest course of action, but his attitude earned the respect of the troops, which he'd always considered a critical element of effective command.

Harvir had wanted to be sure the area was completely secure before he ordered the construction to begin on the main base. It had taken a week to satisfy him that the area was sufficiently under the control of his troops. He had first identified the area as a potential landing site when he had seen the original images sent back to Earth by the space probe Celeste. The view from orbit only confirmed his thinking; the peninsula was an ideal position to create a foothold on the surface. Its natural choke point was easily defensible and could be protected by a single fortified position.

The base itself was positioned on the side of a hill next to a spring that fed a cascading waterfall. This would ensure the base had a secure supply of fresh water and, once the enormous turbines were installed, would also provide them with all the power they would need. The elevation of the base gave them a good view of every possible approach. The drop ships had delivered the modules to create a Forward Operating Base a little higher up the peninsula, to be used as a fortified command post. VTOL aircraft had manipulated the modules into place with astounding accuracy. Harvir had witnessed it from the ground, eager to see the first real test of the newly designed deployment system. It was a remarkable sight and he had been highly impressed by what he had seen.

Several squads of scouts had reported sightings of some humanoid beings, but so far there had been no engagements. It had only been an hour since he ordered construction of the main base to begin, which had initiated this flurry of action on the surface. Already the technicians were scrambling over the giant modules like a swarm of ants. Following a complicated procedure they started the activation

sequences, beginning the process of automating the deployment. Harvir knew that the next few days would be filled with the sound of tools and equipment. Once completely deployed, the modules would join together to create the skeleton of the buildings that would form the main base for all the Fleet's surface activities. Local materials would be required to finish the buildings, but simple sheeting over the framework would provide ample shelter for his troops to begin with. The success of the initial phase of the operation had given Harvir the confidence to proceed to this current phase.

From his vantage point atop the nearby hill, Harvir took a moment to scan the surrounding landscape, eyes searching the gently forested slopes that rolled away from the base. The surrounding land was a patchwork of green and brown that contrasted sharply against the sparkling blue of the ocean in the distance. He could hear the constant dull roar of the waterfall below him, which couldn't quite drown out the sounds of construction from the base. On the plains below a platoon was coming into view, returning from patrolling the area, every man alert as they approached the base.

To the North, he could make out the fortified command post's heavy turrets. The weapons looked formidable even to his battle-hardened troops. Harvir realised he had conflicting feelings of wanting to see what such fearsome weapons were capable of, while at the same time hoping that the fort would never be threatened to the point where they were needed. No sooner had this realisation occurred to him when the sudden deep booming of those turrets carried clearly to him through the crisp morning air. Great, he thought, I launch the ground crews and immediately we have contact. Now we're caught with our pants down.

'Lieutenant Moshane,' he said, turning to the platoon commander beside him, 'I want a contact report from that fort immediately.'



A sudden cry from below interrupted the Lieutenant's reply. Harvir's head whipped around as he looked back down towards the returning platoon. They were surrounded by a small band of creatures that were closing in quickly. How did they get so close? Harvir wondered to himself. 'Get some support down there!' Harvir yelled to Moshane, even though he knew that one way or another, the engagement would be over by the time reinforcements arrived. Like all the troops with the Fleet, the patrol was well trained and had reacted instantly, moving into defensive positions. Weapon fire erupted from both parties at the same time. The ambush was so close that Harvir could hear the platoon's Lieutenant bellowing orders between the bursts of gunfire. The skirmish was over almost before it had begun. Several of the creatures had fallen in the attack and the rest were retreating into the forest. Two men had been knocked off their feet but they were already getting up again, their armour having protected them from any real harm. Although they had encountered these beings that Harvir assumed were Oratan, they had seen nothing this close to the base previously. It was disconcerting, and Harvir knew that he was going to have to increase the patrols in the area. If one band had managed to slip through unnoticed then there could be more. Even though the platoon had dealt with them easily, the Oratan would have done a lot more damage to an inexperienced or less prepared force. They seemed to have reasonably advanced firearms, but their body armour was far more primitive. If this attack was any indication, they didn't have a good grasp of tactics either. The assault could have been so much more effective. Not seeking cover had been a suicidal move by the Oratan, throwing their lives away as if they meant nothing.

'Lieutenant, I want this base so secure that a bug can't get in unnoticed before the civilians arrive in a week's time. It seems these Oratan want to play after all.' Harvir said. He couldn't help wondering, did they really have so little idea about tactics? Or were they merely testing the discipline and capability of his troops?

2.2: THE HUNTED

DATE: 17 DEC 3007

TIME: 13:57 hours

LOCATION: Approaching Main Base, Planet Arkadia

Milton Lee watched the ground approach through the window of the drop ship. The Fleet Commander had finally given the order to allow civilians down onto the planet's surface. Lee couldn't believe it had taken so long. Being forced to wait in orbit had been a slow torture and he had only found solace through reading the reports sent up to the Fleet from the ground forces. When he'd first read about the skirmishes with hostile beings, his excitement had become unbearable. He had grown frustrated at having to remain in orbit as he hungered for the chance to inspect the technology of these beings. Although the reports seemed to indicate that their weapons were surprisingly low-tech, there were bound to be differences from anything humans had produced. He was certain he could develop new technologies for humankind if only he had samples to research.

Before Commodore Harvir had departed for the surface a week earlier, he'd told Lee to collaborate with his scientific colleagues in developing a plan detailing what was needed for their research once they reached the surface. The other scientists had suggested all the usual setup details such as lab equipment, workspace, storage and such. Initially Lee had been fairly uninterested in the process, only idly monitoring their discussions while trying to engage Dr Zhen in conversation, even though she was occupied with planning what areas should be examined first by the Archaeological Society. But once he'd been able to confirm that there were alien technologies to research he became much more interested.

Then he'd started insisting that everything be handed over to him to examine first. The other scientists had dismissed the idea instantly, but Lee promised himself that one way or another he was going to be the first to get his hands on the new technology.

The drop ship was nearing the peninsula where the main base was under construction. Lee thought that it looked like a giant construction kit with people swarming all over it like ants, even after a week of constant work. Skeletal outlines of buildings were appearing at a rapid rate, and with roads also now clearly defined, the eventual size and shape of the base was becoming evident. The only completed structures to date seemed to be those intended for the military, such as the depot they were heading towards. As the ship descended Lee amused himself by trying to work out which structure was going to be his. Even though the building would eventually house all of the scientists who had accompanied the Fleet, he was already thinking of it as his own personal possession. As much as he hated the idea of having to share the building he had to concede that it was a reasonable idea. No point in spreading the artefacts between multiple locations, he reflected.

His thoughts were interrupted as he noticed a streak of fire race up from the ground some distance away from the base. Lee watched its graceful arc, wondering which equation would best describe its trajectory. Suddenly he realised that he didn't need to work it out at all; whatever it was, it was heading straight for them. Before he could say anything, he was thrown forward as the object exploded against the ship, setting off an ear-piercing alarm. He could feel vibrations as the ship's weapons locked onto a target and returned fire, hammering the ground with hundreds of rounds in a matter of seconds. There was a screech of tearing steel and then all he could hear was a deafening roar as the main cabin lost pressure. He was crushed back into his seat as the pilot jammed the nose of the ship down, rapidly picking up speed and losing altitude as they raced towards the safety of the base. Lee was so excited it felt like his heart was trying to escape out of his chest.

A minute later, after a noticeably rough landing, the drop ship powered down. Ground crews rushed about as the passengers were checked for injuries. At the edge of the platform, Lee stood oblivious to all the action around him, finally breathing in the sweet Arkadian air. It was infinitely superior to the stale air he'd been breathing for the last few weeks in space. However, he was too impatient to stand around gawking at all the buildings being erected. He had work to do, starting with getting a sample of the weaponry that had fired that projectile at the drop ship.

He glanced around at the chaotic mob of people; passengers, medics, ground crew and troops that were only now starting to gain some coordination in their movements. He hurried to retrieve his pack and, detaching himself from the crowd, walked confidently off towards the site of the attack. No one seemed to notice that he was supposed to be with the other passengers, who were now being herded off to the orientation briefings that the military had arranged for all new arrivals.

Lee skirted around the base of a building, hoping to escape from the restrictions that were bound to be in place around the base. He threw a quick look over his shoulder and could just make out a construction worker talking to one of the troops and gesturing in his direction. He sighed, feeling vexed. They'd soon work out that he was missing and he knew that they'd send someone to escort him back. If they did, he hoped that he had a good enough head start to reach his target. Oh well, he thought, whomever they send will be useful in carrying back what I find.

As he hurried away from the base, he noticed a rock formation a little way off. It gleamed as it caught the sun, streaked with a large mineral vein. It looked vaguely familiar but he didn't think it was anything that could be found on any other colonised planet. He wondered why it tugged at his memo-

ry, but couldn't think of a reason why it would. He hesitated, wanting to examine it closer, but decided to continue on. He didn't want anyone to catch up until he'd recovered the weaponry.

He soon crested a small rise close to where he thought the attack had come from. He immediately noticed scarring on the ground that could have only been caused by the violent impacts of the rounds fired from the drop ship's weapons. He grinned in excitement; soon he'd have his first research item.

He set off down the slope but before he could get far he heard the sound of men running close behind him, their booted feet trampling the grass. A squad of troops appeared over the rise he'd just crossed and spotted him. He spared them a single frown. Seeing him they visibly relaxed and began spreading out in a large circle around him while one of them approached him.

'Professor, I'm Lieutenant Richards. We've been sent to bring you back to base.'

'What's the rush? We can go back soon, but first I want to find a sample of the local weapons. You can help me, I'm fairly sure it's not far from here.'

The Lieutenant stared at Lee in disbelief. 'Are you serious? That's what you came out here for?' Richards shook his head, 'No way, we are leaving now. The Commodore said that if you didn't come willingly then we were to drag you back. Though that's gentler than what he actually said.'

'Oh, come now Richards, the Commodore is being overly cautious. I've noticed that he has a nasty habit of doing that,' Lee scoffed.

'I suggest you shut up Professor, and don't talk about the Commodore that way. Do you have any idea what kind of danger you've put yourself in by leaving the base unauthorised and unescorted? You could have gotten yourself killed. If you'd remained at the depot you'd know we already have captured weapons.' Richards said, getting angry as he realised that Lee had stopped paying attention to what he was saying.

A flicker of movement in the distance behind the Lieutenant caught Lee's eye. 'Look, over there,' he said, pointing. 'I think they're not far away. It looks like I'm going to need your help to get their weapons though.'

Richards turned to look where Lee was pointing and spotted a humanoid figure just before it moved beyond line of sight.

'Contact!' shouted one of the troops and the entire squad hit the ground as one, flat on their stomachs. The Lieutenant growled and rose up just enough to grab a handful of Lee's clothing and drag him to the ground.

'Eyes open men, we've no idea how many there are. Call base and report our position. Fire and move if we have to, but fall back,' the Lieutenant ordered. 'And make sure the Professor comes with us.'

2.3: BEFORE THE DAWN

DATE: 24 DEC 3007

TIME: 16:41 hours

LOCATION: Briefing Theatre Main Base, Planet Arkadia

‘That concludes the brief. Are there any questions about the details of this mission or the tasks you’ve been assigned?’ said Captain Chiharo, addressing the officers packed into the briefing theatre of the Fleet’s new headquarters on Arkadia.

Her voice was clear and precise as she answered questions. She then directed some of her own questions at randomly selected officers, testing them to ensure everyone understood their orders correctly. Harvir sat in the front row, trying to gauge the response of the troops behind him, as Captain Chiharo concluded the brief. She had spent the last hour explaining the objectives of each company in detail. Harvir had devised the plan with his senior ground combat specialists over the last week and this morning he had made the decision to put it into action.

This phase of the operation was centred on the need to establish fortified positions throughout the mountainous area in the centre of the continent. These Firebases would be critical in maintaining control and security as the troops gradually expanded their influence through the region and would also provide the civilians with protection as they established their assorted camps. This was especially important, since the Government back on Earth had announced that it was assembling a new fleet to bring colonists to Arkadia. The Firebases would provide secure access to future sites useful for colonial growth.

They would also provide protection for strategic sites. Scans from orbit had hinted that the high mountain ranges to the west would likely contain rich mineral deposits. Mining this area would be essential to producing materials required for construction all across the planet. Just as importantly, the mission just briefed would open the door to establishing Archaeological Digs at many of the ruins. It was vital to learn as much about the Arkadian race as possible and discover what had happened to them.

Captain Chiharo paused once she’d finished, making sure that everything had been covered. ‘At this stage we will maintain only a light presence in the desert region in the south of the continent and the jungle areas in the north. We must first secure our primary objectives through the centre of the continent and ensure a solid infrastructure is in place. You have your orders; see that they’re carried out.’

As the men and women around Harvir rose to leave he was unable to suppress a small smile of pride. He knew the troops would follow orders perfectly; they were hastily assembled as the Fleet was prepared, but they represented the best Earth had to offer. The challenging thought crossed his mind that they might be even better than his previous command, something that until now he’d always considered impossible.

Harvir waited as the officers filed out of the theatre, nodding his approval to Chiharo as she left. He was glad for a moment of respite, even if it was only for a minute. Any spare time he should have

had been taken up by meetings with representatives from the different civilian groups, all asking to be allowed to go into the wilderness to begin their projects. He'd explained to them countless times that it was in their best interests that the areas were secured first by the military, but the civilians seemed to be willing to ignore the potential dangers. Even Harvir found that he was beginning to feel more confident, as every indication so far suggested that the hostile forces they had encountered to date weren't a serious threat.

He was getting ready to leave when someone slipped through the doors. He glanced around and sighed with relief when he recognised Dr Zhen. She constantly amazed him; she was incredibly resourceful, helping out in all kinds of ways and was fast becoming one of the better known faces around the base. Her ability to calm irate civilians had become invaluable to Harvir.

'So, have you finally gotten sick of Professor Lee's attention, or have the mining companies enlisted you to help them? They're constantly trying to convince me to let them go digging holes all over the countryside,' he said, smiling.

'Well there was a group of miners and a couple of scientists waiting to ambush you as you left, but I flushed them out and sent them packing. I could fetch them back if you want, tell them you're about to collapse under the pressure and will give in to their demands if they try once more?' She replied, her mouth twitching into a smile that spoiled her attempt at a serious tone. Not many people talked to Harvir that way anymore. They saw him only as the Fleet Commander, which was necessary for the most part, but he found that he enjoyed having at least one person who talked to him normally.

'Please no, anything but that!' He said in mock horror. 'I think I'd rather be attacked by enemy forces than face that lot again.' His face screwed up. 'Actually, if I make them wait much longer, there may be no difference.'

'They understand your reasons, they are just frustrated,' Sundari reassured him. 'Have the scientists had any luck yet tracing the origination point of The Signal?'

'No. It seems to just cycle around the planet, seemingly coming from nowhere and everywhere. We don't even know if these hostile beings we've encountered are truly our enemies. But as my father would say, "there's no such thing as friendly fire." If they shoot at us, does it matter who they are?' He sighed heavily. 'Anyway, I've been meaning to speak to you, but first, what was it you wanted?'

'Actually,' Sundari said, looking apologetic, 'I wanted to talk to you about when we are going to get access to the ruins. We want to get out there and start learning everything we can about the Arkadians. I'm asking on behalf of the miners and scientists too, I had to promise that I would get them to leave. Everyone's getting restless. I hope this briefing is a good sign?'

'Yes. The troops will move out at dawn tomorrow, to establish Firebases across the continent. Assuming that everything goes to plan, you should start to have access to some of the ruins in a few days. We're going to have a problem with transport though; all our VTOLs and ground vehicles are going to be used to support the troops, which is why I wanted to talk to you. You've been busy helping all the different groups that came with us on the Fleet, which has been very helpful. You have contacts within each group, so I think that you understand everybody's needs better than anyone else. Dr Zhen—'

‘Toán, how many times do I have to tell you? Call me Sundari.’

‘—Sundari, I’d like your advice on the positioning and deployment of the teleporters we brought with us.’

‘I’d love to, but why me? Surely all the teleporters will be vital to your strategy?’

‘The larger models will be, yes, but they will be at the major sites and Firebases. I have decided to make the smaller model teleporters available to the civilians, particularly the Archaeological Society. We came here to help the Arkadians, so finding out what happened to them is a priority. You certainly know which ruins you need to focus on better than I do, so you’ll know where to place them to be most effective. And the other civilians will respond better to you. Why use a sword when a smile will do?’

Sundari laughed. ‘Another thing your father says?’

‘No actually, but I think he would have agreed,’ Harvir admitted, a fleeting look of sadness passing across his face.

‘Would have?’

‘My parents died a long time ago. They were killed.’

‘Oh no! What happened?’

‘They got caught in the middle of a gang war. They were killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Losing them is what eventually drove me to join the military. The men and women of the Navy are my family now.’

‘Oh Toán. I am so sorry.’ Sundari said, genuinely touched that he had chosen to confide in her.

‘Thank you, but that’s in the past. We have to focus here and now. Will you work with my staff to develop a deployment plan for the teleporters? The civilians seem to think that I’m doing everything I can to hinder them, but they’ll see you differently.’

‘Of course. I’ll be glad to help.’

‘Good. Thank you, it will make my work a lot easier. I will make sure you get all the necessary information about our inventory, the locations that need to be joined to the network and the requests I’ve had. There are also the plans that were generated by the scientists while in orbit, as well as your own report on priority areas.’ Harvir stood slowly and stretched.

'Now, you'll have to excuse me,' he continued, 'there's a small mountain of paperwork that requires my attention. Our intelligence indicates that tomorrow should go well, but that doesn't mean it can't turn ugly in a hurry. I can't shake a horrible feeling I'm missing something vital about these hostiles.'

2.4: PROGRESS IN RUINS

DATE: 30 DEC 3007

TIME: 11:07 hours

LOCATION: Planet Arkadia

Sundari Zhen was having the time of her life. She was far to the north of the main base exploring one of the ancient ruins. She had chosen to set up Archaeological Digs only at all the smaller sites, which were clustered around the remains of three ruined cities, located in the corners of the continent not occupied by the Fleet's main base. She'd decided to name each Dig after old, sometimes extinct, Earth animals that she had come across during her years as a student. She could still remember the exhilaration of learning about these animals and wanted to capture some of that excitement here on Arkadia. While the Digs' names were yet to be approved, her teleporter deployment plan suggesting that every Dig should receive its own teleporter, had been quickly authorised. That was fine by her, since she considered the construction of the teleporters significantly more important at this early stage.

She had chosen to oversee the installation of the teleporters personally. Not one to let others work while she did nothing, she had joined the work crew and was now covered in dirt and grease just like all the other workers. She'd found the last few weeks stuck in space an uncomfortable experience and she'd found herself missing the outdoors, as most of her life had been spent working outside on one project or another. But since Commodore Harvir had deployed an entire platoon to secure each Dig, she was enjoying working under open skies once again.

She had hitched a ride with the troops as they'd departed the main base, so she'd arrived at the ruins some time before the construction crew, which gave her some time to explore without any interruptions. Her brief look around had already convinced her of one important detail: the ruin must have been abandoned for a lot longer than anyone had originally suspected, thousands of years at least, not just a few decades. What remained of the buildings themselves had aged remarkably well, though sadly not as much had survived as she had hoped. The fact that anything had survived at all showed how well the structures had been originally built. Until she had access to proper equipment and could begin excavating, it was impossible to tell how much of the ruin had been buried through the ages.

She hadn't found anything so far that revealed any clues as to what had happened to the inhabitants, but she had a feeling that it would only be a matter of time. Experience told her that ruins this well preserved always had secrets waiting to be discovered. Judging by the vague outline of the ruin and the heavy fortifications of the outer walls, she determined that it had been built primarily for defence. This led her to speculate that this structure may have been built during the war with the Oratan, though it would be impossible to know for sure until she could compare the style and layout to the ruined cities. It was her theory that the city ruins predated the war, so they should have a very different layout to the Dig she had been exploring. The only problem was that there didn't appear to be any evidence of violent destruction. Considering how hostile the invasion had been, according to The Signal, she found it odd that all structures hadn't been completely wiped out.

Several other archaeologists had arrived with the construction crew to help set up the camp and start exploring the ruin. Among them were Jasmine and Kimi, two of the five junior members of the Archaeological Society who had volunteered for the mission to Arkadia. They were eager but inexperienced, so Sundari had agreed to take them on as her assistants and mentor them. The other three were helping set up camps at other ruins in the south. Jasmine and Kimi had already made an interesting discovery, finding a number of intricately designed pots in a hidden alcove at the base of an inner wall. How the pots had remained intact for so long she had no idea, but they would no doubt shed some light on the Arkadian culture once the team had a chance to study them properly. It was an incredible discovery to have been made so early. If there were such historical treasures hidden in other ruins then they were going to need a lot more archaeologists to hunt for them, not to mention help study each new discovery. Too few archaeologists had joined Liberation Fleet she reflected, but more could always be recruited when the next fleet arrived.

While Sundari helped out with the teleporter, the military engineers were busy fortifying the Dig, which included both the camp and the nearby ruin. By the end of the week, one of the imposing new gun turrets would be constructed in a position that allowed it to protect the entire Dig. She didn't like the idea that the turret was necessary, but she wasn't so naïve that she didn't consider the possibility that they might need it. Besides confrontations with the hostile humanoids over the past weeks, strange and vicious native animals had also been reported attacking the troops. The automated turret could easily deal with either type of threat, at least in the small groups encountered so far. The very act of it firing would serve as a warning system, alerting everyone in the Dig and giving them time to respond. As the turret was constructed and until the area was deemed secure, a platoon of heavily armed expeditionary troops, equipped with special issue kit, would provide more than adequate protection.

There was a loud click as the technician completed his installation checks and activated the teleporter, allowing it to power up. These smaller teleporters were not as intricate as the larger teleporters installed at the Firebases, lacking the halo of bright inward facing lights or the solid integrity of the main support columns. Instead, more delicate columns surrounded a central platform, which was slightly raised and accessed via steps that circled the entire way around the device. Sundari beamed a smile at the other workers, proud at what they had achieved. Her smile faded quickly as the teleporter started humming as it began charging up. Someone's using it already! She thought in shock. What kind of idiot would use it before we've had a chance to calibrate it with the network?

The humming grew louder, accompanied by an intense glow emitted from the centre of the machine. Suddenly, there was a bright flash and through the glare Sundari could just make out the outline of a human figure. Her vision cleared and she found herself facing Milton Lee, who was looking around the ruins in an appraising manner.

'Is this it? I expected—' Lee said, before cutting off what he'd been about to say with an abashed look at Sundari. She got the impression that he was a little disappointed in what he saw, but at least he didn't say that outright as he usually would. She took a moment to look around at the Dig, trying to picture how it would appear to someone who had no idea about archaeology and what it involved.

'It might not be much to look at, but it's an amazing find. I think this ruin is several thousand years old, making it much older than we thought. It's certainly better preserved than any ruins of a similar age that I've seen on Earth,' Sundari said, feeling slightly defensive.

'Thousands you say? That would make the technology of The Signal even more amazing if it's survived all that time. I wonder if there's some way to work out exactly how old these ruins are. Shouldn't

be anything too hard for me to do,' Lee said, trying to make up for his earlier gaffe.

'That would be very helpful,' Sundari said, gratefully. Then she remembered the manner of Lee's arrival. 'Milton, are you insane?! What are you even doing here? Surely you of all people would know better than to use an uncalibrated teleporter! You could have gotten yourself killed. Again!'

'What? It wasn't calibrated yet? But that would mean... my head could've...' Lee paled as he considered the implications. 'How was I to know? I was just on my way to convince the Commodore that I understand the situation better now and ask him to lift the restrictions that he's imposed on me. Then I remembered that he made you liaison to represent all the civilians. So I decided to pay you a visit, and when I checked the status of the teleporter it was online, so I just came through.'

Sundari opened her mouth to rebuke him again, but decided not to say anything, realising that he did understand what could have happened. He wasn't trying to do the wrong thing; he just didn't always think things through first. A wry smile crept across her face as she began to understand why Harvir had been so eager to pass the liaison responsibility on to her.

'Milton, what am I going to do with you?' She sighed. 'You always seem to find new ways to cause trouble for yourself. I can't keep up. I think you'd better explain what you need from Toán, so I can talk to him for you.'

2.5: A PLACE IN HISTORY

DATE: 7 JAN 3008

TIME: 01:37 hours

SOURCE: Transcript of Milton Lee's personal Voice log

My place in history is guaranteed. If my previous achievements were not enough, then I'm certain my work here on Arkadia will ensure that my name is remembered for the rest of eternity. The discoveries I've made in just three weeks will forever alter the scientific landscape. My developments will define this colony and resonate through the ages.

Back on Earth I once believed that I had everything I needed, but that was before I came here. This place is amazing! On Earth I was working in a well-supplied lab, with sufficient grants that allowed me to concentrate on my research without any financial distractions. I was admired by some of the best scientific minds in the world; but all of this was like surviving on scraps compared to the feast that is Arkadia.

I've been working practically non-stop since I landed, studying a whole range of elements and technologies that humanity has never encountered before. I hardly ever sleep these days; there's always another research project waiting for my attention. I can't afford to waste my time doing all the menial analysis myself, so I've organised many of the other scientists into groups each with an assigned task. This will allow them to have a more focused approach, while I oversee the major projects and guide their direction.

My biggest discovery so far was one of the simplest to come by. An abundant energy matter I found in the rivers seems to have high potential as a new fuel source. A suitable secondary material is required to liberate this energy, but experiments I've conducted have been highly successful in producing the desired effect. The resulting Fuel Cell was as efficient as any energy source we currently use, without the downside of any residual pollution. The only problem with my experiment is that so far not all of the liberated energy is captured. I've set up a research group specifically to find a way to increase the energy retained so that existing handheld refiners may be used. Once that group is successful, the colony will be able to refine these cells on a large scale but it will require massive amounts of both materials. The large river system to the north appears to be a likely starting point to isolate the simplest of these materials; I believe we will have to rely on miners to produce the other.

I have submitted a proposal to Commodore Harvir to establish a large dam, equipped with a hydro-electricity generation station, on the river system, with a function designed to isolate the energy matter required to manufacture the Fuel Cells. I'm quite confident the Commodore will accept my proposal, since the electricity generated will also be quite useful to the colony. For the Fuel Cells to be at their most efficient in vehicles we would need to design a completely different type of engine, so entirely new vehicles specific to the requirements on Arkadia will need to be designed. My creation will eventually allow us to fuel all vehicles constructed on this planet using local resources, with zero environmental impact and at a low cost.

I am expecting a big discovery soon from another team of scientists under my direction. They've been running tests on a sample of the ore I thought I recognised when I first arrived on the surface. Eventually it occurred to me to compare it to the metal compounds we collected from the wrecked ships orbiting the planet. After dozens of experiments conducted by the team, all the elements of this metal alloy have been identified. I have worked out the ratio of the different elements used to create the alloy; however, I haven't as yet found a way to make it stable. Whoever made it must have had refinement or synthesising techniques superior to anything I know of. Tests on the samples indicate that it's far stronger than anything we can currently produce and resistant to every form of corrosion, while remaining quite malleable. Unfortunately, we have not been able to gather much of the existing alloy yet; to date our only samples are those that have been scavenged from space. I'm sure that once it becomes more readily available we'll be able to use it to manufacture our own vehicles and machinery. However, until I work out a technique to create it in a stable form we will have to rely on what we can find in orbit or, if we're lucky, on the surface.

It seems obvious to me that any vehicles we produce in the future should be designed to utilise both the Fuel Cells and the alloy. Neither will be easy to mass produce early on, considering that the processes involved are still foreign to us, but eventually the colony should be able to create sufficient amounts to meet its needs. Having come to understand the technology, I think I can make some improvements in other aspects of any future designs of our vehicles as well, but at the moment I don't have the time. The colony will definitely be able to stand on its own feet, independent of Earth, when we start producing our own power, vehicles and, eventually, space craft. And all of this is mostly due to my efforts.

I have to admit that I have a lot to thank Sundari for; she's helped me greatly, especially when dealing with the Commodore. I understand that he's a good tactician and his actions are for the good of the people who accompanied the fleet, but he and I just don't see eye to eye on many issues. He's much too cautious for my liking, especially when it comes to allowing us access to new areas to gather fresh research items. Sundari is the only person who seems to be able to make him see sense.

I wish that she was around the camp more, but she's always off somewhere, exploring one ruin or

another. Then, when she returns, she always seems to be so busy. I rarely get a chance to talk to her for more than a few minutes, even about things relating to my research. I've never met anyone with the kind of work ethic that she displays; she would put a worker bee to shame. It makes it even more amazing that she finds the time to talk to the Commodore on my behalf whenever she can. To thank her for her help, I have begun looking at a method to accurately date the ruins she has been investigating. Since none of our current techniques seem to work, I will need to isolate specific isotopes of native elements used in the construction of the ruins. From there it will be a simple matter of studying the results until I have a definitive date for her.

I heard recently that a new fleet, called Fleet Arkadia, has been launched from Earth and is heading our way. Apparently the Government has decided it is appropriate to allow colonists access to this planet. I'm not sure how many people are going to be with this new fleet, but it will certainly fill any leftover space in the main base. At the moment there are lots of empty buildings around. It almost feels like a ghost town sometimes. Well, a ghost town where the inhabitants enjoy using heavy machinery; there is always some sort of construction project going on. But if rumours about the size of the fleet heading toward us are true, the construction crews are going to need to start building cities. And there will be more people to get in my way.

Oh yes, one last thing; I was right about the local weapons. They are different from anything produced by humans, but no more advanced. It just doesn't quite add up. When we consider the Arkadian technology that produced The Signal, it stands to reason that the hostiles that attack us cannot be Arkadians. But if they are Oratan, how could they wipe out a much more advanced civilisation using such comparatively basic technology? I think I'm going to need to find time to finish decrypting the rest of The Signal. Hopefully it will help shed some light on things.

I think I've spent enough time on this diary for the moment. It's time to get back to my research. My fingers are starting to itch.

2.6: REPORT FROM ARKADIA

DATE: 15 JAN 3008

TIME: 00:49hrs

SOURCE: Transmitted from Arkadia

To: Admiral's Office, Federal Imperial Navy Headquarters, Space Station Vigilant

From: Commodore Harvir, Officer Commanding, Liberation Fleet, Arkadia

SITUATION REPORT OF LIBERATION FLEET, PLANET ARKADIA

1) Establishment of a main base, named Celeste Harbour in honour of Celeste Space Probe, has gone according to plan. Construction of all facilities remains on schedule. A large hydro turbine bank has been built on the waterway adjacent to the base. This will provide the base with all its power requirements. The Fleet HQ building is completed and operational, and all military staff involved in the planning of ground based missions have been relocated to this central building. Initial civilian complexes are currently under construction. The Archaeological Society's HQ has been completed, as well as a museum for early discoveries of artefacts. Further civilian buildings are under construction.

2) Liberation Fleet ground forces have experienced a series of conflicts with a hostile species since making planetfall. Upon initial contact with the species, our forces were attacked and forced to respond with lethal force. On each subsequent contact, these beings have not responded to any form of communication and have attacked without provocation on every occasion. We have taken minor casualties but, despite the aggression, our forces have not been seriously threatened by these attacks. There is nothing to suggest that our forces are in significant danger as long as current security measures are maintained.

3) All attacks to date have been easily repelled due to the poor tactics used by the hostile forces. They rarely attack when they have the advantage and, when they do, it appears to be coincidental. Groups of these beings range from a single squad to a half platoon in size. Their weapons are marginally inferior to our own, reflecting a technology substantially inferior to that used to create The Signal. Although our scientists are yet to finish examining the entire range of captured technologies, early results indicate that these hostile beings are either no longer capable, or have never been capable, of developing such advanced technology.

4) A number of actions have been implemented in response to the sporadic assaults from hostile forces. As well as patrols and troops positioned to defend key strategic military points, rapid-deployment Forward Operating Bases are under construction to serve as firebases. Two of these have been completed: Resolute Firebase and Relentless Firebase, which guard the main approach to Celeste Harbour. A significant effort has been made to establish defences for all areas, particularly those that will be used primarily by civilians, such as archaeological Digs and mining camps.

5) On this continent, Sentosa, twelve ruins of interest have been identified by the archaeologists accompanying Liberation Fleet. It is planned that each of these will have an archaeological Dig nearby,

with six already established and construction at the remaining sites progressing. The members of the Archaeological Society, most notably Dr Sundari Zhen, have been conducting an exploration of the remnants of Arkadian society, searching for any clues that could help us understand what happened to the race that once inhabited the planet. The first established Dig, named Mamba Dig by Dr Zhen, is the site where several artefacts were discovered. It is understood that these are already highly sought after by a number of different parties with vested interests. At this stage the only civilian site to have been attacked is Kestrel Dig, in the south west. Contact reports from the platoon stationed there indicate that the automated defences easily held off the assault with no human casualties.

6) Due to the limited number of archaeologists who accompanied Liberation Fleet, the progress of learning about the Arkadian people has been slow. There are further indications that the Arkadians were humanoid and likely led a more tranquil life than either Humanity or the race that invaded their planet. Unfortunately, so far there has been less technology discovered than expected. Even if the Arkadians were defeated by the race identified as Oratan by The Signal, there should be more technology remaining. This has created speculation that the ruins on the planet are much older than first thought. By extension, how many years have passed since the war between the two races was underestimated. Any remaining artefacts may well remain hidden or buried, waiting to be discovered. It is recommended that assistance for the Archaeological Society be recruited from among the colonists aboard Fleet Arkadia.

7) A significant area of land has been allocated on the west coast for mining with a major camp established by the various mining companies in the mountain range at this location. The area was chosen due to the incredible abundance of minerals in the region, with some of the richest mineral veins discovered anywhere throughout human controlled space. The camp, called 8 Coins, is rapidly developing into a small township. The mining in this region represents a significant step forward in the development of the planet as the materials from these shafts will aid in the construction of cities, forts and other infrastructure all over the planet. As such, a large proportion of the miners that accompanied Liberation Fleet have chosen to set up at this facility, with the remaining miners spread amongst several other promising sites across Sentosa.

8) The location of 8 Coins is surrounded by high mountains, which is challenging as transportation of minerals is a logistical problem. It is not advisable to transport large quantities through the recently constructed teleporter as this may cause overloading of the network. The mountain highlands are a harsh landscape, restricting the use of heavily laden ground vehicles and leaving air transportation as the only effective option. However, as of this date, it is the best area for mining on Sentosa. The 8 Coins development will remain under the administrative control of the mining consortiums, but a full company of troops has been deployed to guard the facility. The difficult land approaches make for an easily defensible position against ground attacks.

9) A second area of land has been claimed on an island off the north coast of Sentosa by a private group, who are responsible for creating a settlement they call Sanctuary Cove. This has been established entirely without military aid, providing their own security force for the protection of the people there. The effectiveness of this protection has so far proven satisfactory, perhaps because the only threat is from native creatures. At this point the true nature of the island is unknown, as it has not been thoroughly explored and there seems to be no explanation for the absence of hostile forces. The intentions of the individuals at Sanctuary Cove remain unknown to IFNS HQ on Arkadia and they are being monitored by Fleet Intelligence. The island is quickly attracting others who wish to be free of the restrictions placed by the military.

10) Patrols have so far encountered two native creatures which they have had to destroy when attacked. Xenobiologists have studied and named these animals, which are reported to be both highly territorial and aggressive. The Kamaldon has armour plating as strong as steel protecting its head, a single large horn and a spiked tail. The Kiana resembles a large Earth tiger. Swift and silent when it moves, it is a creature built to kill with efficiency. Due to the threat that these and other creatures may pose to individuals, as well as ongoing attacks from hostile forces, it is highly recommended that the colonists of Fleet Arkadia are trained in survival and self-defence skills prior to their arrival.

11) Despite the dangers stated above, the progress of development on Arkadia indicates a likely successful conclusion to this operation. Development of the planet is exceeding expectations and the continuation of the operation is warranted. It is suspected now that the Arkadian peoples who called for help did not survive the Oratan invasion and so it is believed that Humanity is free to colonise Planet Arkadia.

Original Signed by:

Commodore Toán Harvir

Officer Commanding

Liberation Fleet

Arkadia Area of Operations



2.7: PERMISSION OR FORGIVENESS

DATE: 21 JAN 3008

TIME: 11:27 hours

LOCATION: IFN Headquarters, Celeste Harbour

Milton Lee was on his way to meet with Commodore Toán Harvir. After the near disaster with the uncalibrated teleporter, Sundari had spoken with the Commodore on his behalf, which had gained him more leniency to work free of the restrictions that had previously confined him to Celeste Harbour. However, his latest request was more urgent, but Sundari had been too busy to discuss it with him privately on short notice. A scan from IFNS Newton had indicated a strange energy spike around a series of caves. It had not been repeated, but he suspected that it might be evidence of active Arkadian technology; though he couldn't be certain until he had a chance to explore the caves for himself.

Sundari had originally set up a meeting between the three of them, but she had contacted Lee minutes before, apologising because she wouldn't be able to stay for his meeting. She had gone on to say that she thought he should be able to handle the meeting himself, as long as he remembered her advice. That made him smile. He remembered sitting with Sundari as she explained to him the pressures placed on a Fleet Commander, particularly in prioritising resources, and advising him that there was a more appropriate way to approach Harvir. Since he would be meeting with the Commodore by himself, he had to hope that Harvir would see past their previous disagreements and acknowledge the importance of Lee's work without Sundari's influence. All of his work was important, but his latest discovery could be his most impressive yet, if his suspicions were correct and he had located the site of hidden Arkadian technology.

As he walked through Celeste Harbour, Lee noticed how much the base had changed since he'd first arrived. Most structures were now complete and the construction parties were outfitting the interiors and applying the finishing touches. However, that wasn't to say that it was any quieter. There was a constant stream of activity everywhere, largely because the base remained the only transfer point between the planet's surface and Liberation Fleet in orbit. Mineral cargoes were continuously being ferried from mines all around the continent to Celeste Harbour and then to other locations still under construction, since the Fleet's stocks of prefabricated materials were beginning to run low. With Fleet Arkadia on its way from Earth, there had also been an effort to restock resources and develop plans for expanding the base into the first new city on Arkadia.

Lee entered the Headquarters building and, after checking in at the security desk, made his way to Harvir's office. He knew that Harvir preferred to be out in the field amongst the troops, but it was still where the Commodore generally held his meetings. He was beginning to understand that the military had procedures for everything and that by following these he stood the best chance of having his requests granted. That had been another of Sundari's carefully explained lessons, even though it seemed to him that she was allowed to ignore some of the protocols herself at times.

The door to Harvir's office opened as Lee approached. Sundari and the Commodore were inside, smiling and chatting just through the doorway. Seeing them, Lee felt a stab of envy at how close they stood together, but he made sure none of his feelings showed through; he didn't want to alienate Harvir before the meeting had even begun. He waited patiently as they said their goodbyes; Harvir placing

his hand on Sundari's shoulder and admonished her to stay safe. She flashed a smile up at him before turning to the door.

'Hi, Milton,' she said brightly. 'I'm so sorry I can't stay, I've been called away up north. It sounds like they might be on the verge of making an important discovery and they want me to oversee the excavation process.'

'That's alright, I know how important your work is to you and to all of us,' Lee replied, unable to resist smiling at her. He would have been disappointed if it was anyone else, but he couldn't help instantly forgiving Sundari.

'I have to get going, but let me know how it goes. And good luck,' she said, as she turned to leave, obviously eager to get to the Dig. Lee briefly smiled after her, before turning to Harvir.

'Good morning, Commodore,' he said, throwing in a salute for good measure. 'Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.'

Harvir sighed as he directed Lee to a seat. 'What do you want this time? And Milton, civilians don't need to salute. It's a military tradition and not one that you are part of.'

'Ah, I see. Well firstly, as you know I have been working on decrypting the rest of The Signal, but progress has been quite slow. The complexity of the remaining part is much greater than the first. I'm going to give the task to one of the research teams I put together and—'

'Wait! I need it completely decrypted. As much as I might hate to admit it, you're the best person to do that, so I want you to continue researching it yourself.'

Lee paused and took a breath before continuing. He hadn't expected Harvir to refuse such a simple thing, but at least it was recognition of his ability. 'Commodore, with all respect, it is something that will just take time. I think that my efforts will be better put to work elsewhere.'

'Lee, I know this isn't what you wanted to talk to me about. I'm also not going to argue with you about The Signal; it's your responsibility, so it's up to you to see it through. Now, please explain what's so important you needed to meet with me personally?'

'I'd like permission and an escort to go visit this series of caves,' he said, showing Harvir the map that he'd brought along. 'Our scanners recently recorded a strange energy spike in the area, which leads me to believe that the caves could be a site where we will find some active remains of Arkadian technology. Possibly even whatever is generating The Signal.'

Harvir closed his eyes briefly, thinking, before slowly shaking his head. 'No. I'm going to have to deny your request.'

'Ah, Commodore, may I ask why? Surely it's in everyone's best interests for us to learn anything we can about Arkadian technology since it's more advanced than our own?'

‘Two reasons. One: I can’t spare the troops. Yes, I’d be happy if we found something that helped us understand the Arkadian technology, but I can’t afford to pull troops from their current assignments to go on what could be a futile mission. That energy spike alone isn’t enough to support your claims. However, I will see what I can do about getting a scout detail out there to take a look.’ Harvir paused and looked Lee up and down. ‘The second reason is that I don’t want you out in the field, even with my troops as an escort. With your recent history, I don’t trust you to be sensible. I think that the likelihood is too high that you’d place my troops and yourself in danger needlessly and I can’t afford to lose either of you. So, for now it’s not going to happen. You’ll have to make do with what you’ve got here at Celeste.’

Lee stared at the Commodore for a moment, unable to believe that Harvir would dismiss his request out of hand. Anger flamed within him. What’s the point of following the rules when it still doesn’t get you anywhere? He thought to himself.

‘Commodore, if it is where The Signal is originating from, it will help us to decode it. Plus, who knows what other benefits of technology it could bring us.’ Lee said, trying to keep his anger out of his voice.

‘I’ve heard enough Lee, you’ve made your case. I’ve given you my decision, I’ve even explained why. I need a full decryption of The Signal and I needed it last week. Leave the scouting to those trained for the task. You stay here and do what you do best.’ Harvir said, his eyes narrowing slightly as he also grew angry.

‘But Commodore—’

‘Enough Lee! For once, just do as you are told! Now get the hell out of my office and stop wasting my time with your fanciful illusions.’

Lee didn’t trust himself to respond further; he just stood and stormed out of the office. He left the Headquarters building feeling dejected and wondered what he should do next. There was no chance that he would give up on his plans now, not when he was so close to getting his hands on Arkadian technology, or whatever was in those caves. In fact, Harvir’s refusal had only fuelled his determination. Possibilities whirled through his mind. He knew a platoon commander who may be willing to do him a favour. In exchange for the chance to trial a few research items under Lee’s control, surely the Lieutenant could provide Lee with an escort for a quick field trip?

With a smile, he set off to find Lieutenant Richards.

2.8: A FIERY AWAKENING

DATE: 29 JAN 3008

TIME: 07:11 hours

LOCATION: IFN Headquarters, Celeste Harbour

I exist as Sal'diresh, last remaining Knight of the world Arkadia. Hopeless is our chance of survival. Those that remain exist here at Artalia, both final bastion for hope and final despair for the people of Arkadia. Any beings to hear, we ask please. Help us.

From starting, the beings whose name they gave as Oratan, came to this world. Sought not they to trade or learn. They did seek only to steal and kill. We met with them above the skies. We met with them on the land. Unlimited numbers had they. But led by the Knights, with technology of Arkadia superior, the people did hope.

Then did we learn to target the Olatar, to exterminate them. With the Oratan leaders gone, likely was victory to at last happen after many solar cycles. The hope of the people did seem real.

Then is tragedy at Leoi. Many people and even Knights stopped existing. Not beaten in total were we, but the end was signalled and recovery never arrived. We became prisoners in our own cities. Those left to exist did take Arkadia's greatest treasure and secure it at Lo'dela. If all must end, let that be saved. If I cannot save my people, let me save only that.

Please. Any who hear. Help us.

Toán Harvir sat in his office in the IFN Headquarters building, considering the full translation of the message that had been hidden in The Signal. Milton Lee had sent it through to him a couple of days ago, having finally completed the decryption. Harvir had been starting to reconsider his opinion of Lee. The man was certainly a genius, even if he could be infuriating at times, and he was beginning to show some signs of common sense. But then he had once again disappeared from Celeste Harbour without authorisation, ruining the illusion that he was willing to follow regulations. The fact that he had managed to decipher the rest of The Signal was proof of the man's ability, but it was not enough to redeem his irresponsible actions in Harvir's eyes.

It was early morning and Harvir had only just arrived at the Headquarters a short time earlier. Ever since he'd received the decrypted Signal it had dominated his thoughts. After reviewing the overnight reports, he'd soon returned to contemplating the message, trying to understand the meaning behind the words. The only thing that was certain was that the Arkadians had not survived, which meant the aggressive species attacking his troops were definitely descended from the Oratan invaders. But hostile engagements had been steadily declining over the last couple of weeks and he'd been allowing himself to hope that the Oratan had finally realised that their attacks on his troops were futile.

His thoughts were interrupted by a transmission from the Operations Room.

‘Sir, Captain Chiharo wants me to inform you we’ve had multiple reports from Valiant and Defiant Firebases. Both are experiencing heavy pressure from the Oratan,’ the Operations Room Commander said, a hint of strain in his voice.

‘What? There haven’t been any sightings in those areas for days. Tell the Captain I’m on my way. Prepare all reports and visuals from both Firebases; I want a complete status update when I get there.’

He made his way to the Operations Room to find out what was happening, mentally reviewing the deployment of his troops. The doors opened and revealed a scene that was nothing like what he had been expecting. The sound of static dominated the room, broken by dozens of staff as they yelled into their transmitters. Fragments of different conversations reached his ears but he couldn’t make sense of any of them. Captain Chiharo caught sight of him and quickly broke off her conversation to approach him.

‘Sir, both Firebases first reported sightings of the enemy during their dawn clearing patrols,’ said Chiharo quietly, filling Harvir in without distracting the Operations staff. ‘There were intermittent sightings of small groups of hostile forces. We received a Contact Report at 0653 hours when Defiant came under attack by a substantial enemy force. Valiant was assaulted minutes later. At first, it seemed we would easily hold off the attack, but more Oratan have been appearing since then and both bases are becoming hard pressed.’

‘Get that link to Valiant back,’ Harvir said, his voice cutting across the noise of the room.



‘We’ve been trying, Sir, but Valiant and Defiant are no longer answering any communications. They’ve completely dropped off all channels; we’re not even receiving anything from their equipment. Both bases seem to have gone completely offline,’ a Watchkeeper answered.

Harvir paused, thinking rapidly. Were he to attack one of his own Firebases using all of his current forces, he wouldn’t be able to disable it so quickly. There should have been enough warning to allow reinforcements to be deployed through the teleporters if a Firebase was in trouble. Something must have changed, but what?

‘Captain, put all forces on full alert. And remind the civilians that this status means they need to be prepared for immediate evacuation,’ Harvir said.

Chiharo looked surprised. ‘Sir, it may be a communications problem, or they may have lost power to their teleporter, or—

‘Captain, we have a signal, which has been broadcast for millennia, warning us about these Oratan. Scramble all available drop ships to aid those Firebases as they can. Get in contact with Cutlass and have them focus their scans on those same areas. We need to find out where all those Oratan came from. And keep trying to get the connections to the Firebases back. I want constant updates.’

The staff were full of urgency as they carried out his orders. He quickly opened a private transmission to the Duty Watchkeeper at 8 Coins, requesting an immediate Situation Report from their commander. He needed to make sure the facility was still safe. Even though there had been no reports of sightings in the area, he wanted to check in personally. The mining facility contained the largest concentration of people outside of Celeste Harbour and it was vital to help develop a human colony on Arkadia. Or a sustained war effort should it come to that. It was well-guarded and located in an inhospitable area, but Harvir realised if the Firebases could be silenced so suddenly, then there was no guarantee that the other communities would be able to fend off similar attacks.

Harvir accessed the reports they had received from the Firebases before their communications had ceased, listening to everything that went on in the Operations Room at the same time. He absorbed all the information that was thrown around the room. The tension in the room eased as he confidently took control. This was what he had been born to do.

The live feed from Cutlass came online, focussed on Defiant Firebase. A single glance was enough for Harvir to appreciate why communications had failed. The base resembled an island in the midst of a sea of Oratan. It was incredible that the troops had kept them out for so long.

Captain Chiharo’s voice rang through the room. ‘Get the reserve platoons to that Firebase on the double!’

‘Cancel that, Captain!’ Harvir ordered. ‘Withdraw the garrison through the teleporter to Relentless. Cover their retreat, but I’m not losing those troops trying to hold against impossible odds.’ He looked again at the image from Cutlass in orbit, imagining what it would be like at that Firebase for his troops. Comprehension dawned and he realised what it must have been like millennia ago for the Arkadians. We became prisoners in our own cities.

His thoughts moved from The Signal, to the still missing Lee. He had received a video recording from Lee several hours ago, which had been marked as highest priority. He hadn't thought much of it, since Lee's idea of what a priority entailed was vastly different from his own, and he had left it to review later. But now his instincts told him it was important.

With a glance around the room to ensure there was nothing new that required his attention, he opened the file on a side display. Immediately he knew that it had been a mistake to ignore it.

The message wasn't a request. It was a recording that detailed the most selfless act that Lee had ever performed. Harvir stared at it in disbelief.

The image was blurred and unfocussed. The sound of heavy breathing couldn't cover the screams and howls in the background. Lee was running from something, jolting the recording device with each step. He paused and turned back for a brief second and those watching the display in the Operations Room were given a glimpse of what lay behind the frantic professor. Harvir wished that he could forget the sight. It was like a scene out of a nightmare. Distorted and frightening shapes wielding wicked instruments swarmed amongst their human prey. A blood covered Oratan casually hacked an arm from a crippled trooper. Another of the merciless creatures gripped the broken figure of Lieutenant Richards by the neck, lifting him off the ground and tearing out his throat in a fountain of blood.

Then Lee turned away from that scene, a desperate sob escaping him as he forced himself to continue running. He attempted to talk as he ran, spitting out words with desperate determination in between gasps of air.

'Oratan... thousands... out of nowhere... scouts used the teleporter! All dead... can't escape... Commodore! P—' Lee suddenly cried out and the image pitched forward, crashing into the ground. The recording device lay where it had fallen, but Harvir could make out the figure of Lee as he got back to his feet and starting running once again, a blood soaked hand gripping his side. An Oratan chased after him, not far behind. Lee hadn't gone much further before he stopped and turned back, narrowly ducking under a swipe from the Oratan's weapon. He returned to pick up the recording device. With a terrified glance back in the direction of his attacker, he started talking once again to the recorder.

'My files,' he said, wheezing with pain, 'have their genetic structure. You must reprogram the teleporters... Repro—'

He was cut off by the blur of an Oratan weapon and the image was instantly sprayed with blood. Lee collapsed slowly, falling out of view as the recording device once again dropped to the ground. Harvir could just make out the sound of Lee's quiet whimpering. The armoured boots of an Oratan passed in front of the recorder. Lee's soft cries turned into chilling screams of agony that seemed to last an age before being abruptly cut off. All that could be heard was the Oratan grunting with effort as it walked back past the recorder, dragging the headless corpse of Lee behind it.

The Operations Room had fallen silent, every eye on the Commodore's face.

Milton Lee was dead.

A moment of silence passed after the recording finally cut off. Harvir opened his mouth to issue further orders, but was cut off as the piercing shriek of an alarm undulated throughout the building and across the entire city.

Celeste Harbour was under attack.

■

CHAPTER 3



3.1: AGAINST THE TIDE

DATE: 5 FEB 3008

TIME: 14:22 hours

LOCATION: Fearless Firebase

Each breath filled Captain Chiharo's lungs with burning acrid smoke. The Oratan's unceasing attacks had resulted in a toxic haze that had shrouded Fearless Firebase for the last few days. Chiharo looked through the sight of her Herman ARK-65 and pulled the trigger, only to find that yet again she had run out of ammunition. She had never experienced anything like this battle. The days had drifted together in her memory as a blurred montage of horrific images. She reached to her belt for another clip but found that she had only empty magazines. Again.

She stepped back from the wall and her spot was instantly filled by another trooper who immediately began firing down on the Oratan. Most of the remaining troops on Arkadia had been withdrawn to defend Resolute, Relentless or Fearless Firebases. Standing alongside the troops were many civilians who had hastily taken up arms to support the military. The injured troops and remaining civilians had retreated back to Celeste Harbour. Every defender was subjected to a punishing roster that barely allowed for a few desperately needed hours of sleep. Chiharo was even harder on herself, driving herself until only will alone kept her on her feet. This was definitely a time to stand with her troops. She would have had it no other way.

Commodore Harvir still commanded from the IFN Headquarters in Celeste Harbour, choosing to remain with the troops on the surface. On his orders, many civilians had been lifted back to the Fleet in orbit. The window for such evacuations had long since closed, with the drop ships needed to aid the defenders. Harvir maintained command of the defence of Celeste Harbour, and he'd ordered Chiharo to hold out at the Firebases as long as possible. It was what she was best at; under her command they had managed to hold off the Oratan as long as they had. It had been a slow withdrawal. The attackers had eventually enveloped the defences in crushing numbers, forcing Chiharo to abandon the outer Firebases in an effort to reinforce the remaining three. These guarded the main approach routes to Celeste Harbour and were vital in its defence. She'd be damned if she'd give them up easily.

The Oratan had continued to attack Fearless in one continuous, unrelenting swarm. She had managed to hold out by blunting the assault with a series of counter-attacks that stopped the Oratan from focusing all of their attention on the walls at any one time. At other times, she had lured small groups inside the defences to be slaughtered by ambushes. She knew Harvir was unable to aid Fearless' garrison, as the few active troops he had were barely enough to secure the teleporter at Celeste Harbour itself. She would have been optimistic about their chances of success regardless, if reinforcements and survivors had been the only ones using the teleporters. True to Milton Lee's last words, the Oratan had worked out how to use the devices and could teleport their way into any human encampment.

Headquarters had been caught unaware the first time the Oratan attacked through the teleporter to strike at Celeste Harbour, which had nearly been overwhelmed by the surprise attack. The troops had responded desperately and after an hour of hard fighting they had killed or driven all the Oratan from the base. Since then, they had been forced to keep an armed guard around the teleporters that remained in their control, as the Oratan continued to intermittently launch attacks through them. Fortunately,

the teleporters could not instantly transport an overwhelming force, but it placed an additional strain on the defence, tying up even more troops and preventing them from being able to rest.

Enough troops had made it back during the withdrawal from the other Firebases that there was now a large garrison at Fearless, temporarily relieving some of the pressure. But for all Chiharo's strategies, the battle had become a matter of attrition, which the Oratan seemed bound to win. They had killed thousands of the creatures, possibly tens of thousands, but there seemed to be no end to their numbers.

The Commodore had ordered the drop ships converted into temporary gunships by rigging a few unused turrets into their cargo cradles. It had proven an effective, though unusual, defence. There had been no respite for the gunships day or night, until they had consumed most of the fuel stores. Now the remaining Firebases were without any air support and Harvir had ordered the little fuel that remained to be saved for use only in emergency situations. Chiharo found herself wishing that they had somehow managed to gather more material for the fuel cells Professor Lee had developed. Initially, she had commanded enough troops to hold the walls, even without air support, but now that was slowly changing. The number of active troops was dwindling, worn down by casualties and fatigue. And the situation was only getting worse. Slowly but surely they were losing the battle for Arkadia.

She picked up some more ammunition from the stores, wincing at the sight of their rapidly shrinking stocks. Even if they survived the battle they were going to struggle to retake any ground because they were fast running out of vital military supplies. They still had food, water and building materials in abundance, but these were not going to be of any use in the short term. As she reloaded her magazines and weapon, she suddenly became aware that almost complete silence had fallen over the Firebase. She ran back up onto the walls to see what was going on, hoping that the Oratan were finally retreating. Her hopes were dashed as soon as she gazed out across the horde surrounding the Firebase. They had withdrawn out of range of the turret guns, abandoning the sustained assault that had failed to breach the defences, and were forming up for another attack.

Chiharo knew that such an assault would prove costly for the attackers, but so far the Oratan had not been concerned about throwing away their lives in an attempt to overwhelm the Firebases. She was out of options; her troops would cut the first few waves to shreds but the ones behind would get ever closer, eventually hitting the wall in a solid mass. She did not have enough defenders to repel the attack, as long as the Oratan remained focussed. If they gained a foothold on the walls, their superior numbers would win out and they would spread through the Firebase like a swarm of angry bees.

Chiharo ordered all the troops at rest, as well as the armed civilians, to the walls. Harvir had given her an emergency frequency for just such a situation as this. She activated it now and called Celeste Harbour.

'Fuel up those drop ships and get them back in the air, we're going to need them here at Fearless Firebase. Flank around the Oratan attack to the north before you arrive. Try to pin them against the Firebase and we'll hit them from both sides,' Chiharo yelled the order into her transmitter.

A deafening roar erupted from the horde as the Oratan bellowed their battle cries. The mass of creatures surged forward, like a tidal wave intent on smashing itself on the walls of Fearless Firebase. As they came within range, the turret guns began firing with deadly precision, tearing massive holes in the front ranks, but the Oratan kept on coming.

Chiharo raised her rifle and sighted down the barrel, tracking her target. As the enemy came within range of her weapon, she and everyone on the wall opened fire at the same time, cutting down dozens of creatures with each volley. But more were just behind, running through the hail of bullets and lasers, reaching ever closer before falling. Despite the constant fire from the defenders, the Oratan were soon at the base of the walls, raising makeshift tools to try and find a way to the top. Hundreds died but it was not enough to stop the unrelenting horde.

‘Where the hell are those drop ships?’ Chiharo muttered under her breath. As if she’d conjured them, they appeared from the north, a single line that descended upon the Oratan masses. Automatic cannons opened fire as they strafed over the Oratan swarm, leaving hundreds of dead and wounded in their wake.

The Oratan attack faltered briefly before surging forward once again, even more viciously than before, with dozens gaining the top of the walls before they were killed.

The drop ships swung around on another run, cannons firing until their barrels were red hot and smoking. The concentrated Oratan attack once again broke up into a confused, angry rabble. Many retreated back out of the defenders’ range while those that remained were quickly wiped out. They didn’t go far though and Chiharo knew they had won nothing more than a brief respite from the attacks.

If the Oratan wanted to drive her from this planet, she was determined they were going to have to wade through a sea of their own dead to do it.

3.2: SWAMPED

DATE: 8 FEB 3008

TIME: 22:08 hours

LOCATION: Celeste Harbour

Toán Harvir walked out of one of the apartments, which had been hastily converted into a hospital ward, ready to return to the IFN Headquarters. He liked to check on the wounded whenever he had time to make sure their needs were being met. Since it had been assembled so quickly, the Fleet had not been equipped to quickly construct a global network on Arkadia, which could have been used to revive those who were killed. Despite the best efforts of the Fleet’s scientists, a network had not been established before the Oratan had attacked, which meant that every troop Harvir lost was gone forever.

Ever aware of his responsibilities, he had considered risking his drop ships on another trip to evacuate the wounded back to the Fleet in orbit. He reluctantly discarded the idea since some casualties were in such a serious condition that they could not be moved and the Fleet was already overstretched. Out of habit he cast his eye over at the teleporter, noticing the tired figures of his sentries hunched over in the darkness. Then the teleporter activated and a small group of shapes appeared in the centre of the light. The sentries straightened briefly then slumped again. More wounded, Harvir thought, judging by the sentries’ reactions.

Blinking against the glare emitted by the teleporter, he wondered how many more troops had been injured. As the light began to dim, he noticed that the forms inside seemed odd, standing strangely even though they didn't appear to be injured. Their posture was wrong and they looked too bulky. He took a step forward, then suddenly understood what he was seeing.

'Oratan in the city! Stand to! Oratan in the city!' Harvir bellowed. He slapped his personal communicator, opening a channel to the startled Watchkeeper in the Operations Room. 'Sound the alarm! Oratan in the city.'

His personal escort reacted instantly, kneeling and firing into the Oratan who were attempting to run deeper into the city. The fatigued sentries finally reacted, firing their own lasers at the creatures. The Oratan continued to arrive through the teleporter, instantly returning fire against Harvir's troops. Suddenly a round slammed through Harvir's armour into his side and he doubled over, feeling like he'd been hit by a hammer. Despite the pain he heard the dull thud as the Corporal to his right collapsed, his head shattered by another shot. Harvir snatched up the fallen Corporal's Herman LAW-13 and dove for cover. The alarm finally began to shriek, alerting the rest of his troops throughout the city that they were under attack.

He could feel a burning sensation in his side, as blood seeped down his leg. He knew that he was not in good shape, but there was no time to get treatment. More and more Oratan appeared through the teleporter until there were too many for his troops to contain. How many had already slipped past the sentries to spread through the city?

There was nothing he could do to stop them without turning off the teleporter network, which was not a course of action he wanted to consider. Designed for rapid deployment, the teleporters also carried the entire communication network; a quick and easy solution until a global network could be installed. For the thousandth time he cursed that the Fleet was unable to provide an effective bombardment from orbit to support any ground engagements. Their kinetic weapons were only useful for stationary targets because it took so long for the projectile to reach the ground from orbit and even slight atmospheric effects could cause disastrous deviations in their trajectory. If the Fleet used them, they would be just as likely to destroy their own fortifications as do any damage to the Oratan surrounding them. The ship's high energy laser cannons had been firing constantly since the Oratan first attacked, but they were designed to shoot a thin beam of energy through another ship's hull, so they could do little more than disintegrate one or two Oratan at a time. The laser cannons also took several minutes to recharge between each shot. Within Celeste Harbour the Fleet's sensors would struggle to distinguish humans from Oratan, so not even that limited orbital firepower was an option. There were no good options left.

He sighted down his weapon, feeling as if time was moving strangely around him. The loss of blood was turning the battle into a vivid nightmarish experience from which he could not awaken. One moment the world would be moving in slow motion and he had time to take in every detail of the enemy he was aiming at, then suddenly the attackers seemed to be moving with unbelievable speed. Unbidden memories mixed with the present as he was swamped by visions of similar situations in his life long ago.

The Lieutenant in charge of Harvir's platoon had died in the initial attack, killed by a lucky shot from their attackers. Now his Sergeant had just died, a hole blown through his chest. The fighting had been desperate, but now Harvir, even as young as he was, could tell his squad was on the verge of breaking after seeing their leaders killed.

A steely determination had suffused him. He had not fought his way out of the slums, and broken free of the gang wars that claimed many young men his age, just to die trapped in a hole. He had taken command, started issuing orders and encouragement; exhorting the squad to keep fighting, to stay alive. The troops had responded to his voice. Reassured by his confidence, the remnants of his platoon had fought with renewed vigour. The attackers had fallen back in confusion as their prey refused to give in and die.

Harvir raised his rifle and aimed at an Oratan that had just charged out of the teleporter. It was rushing towards a civilian who had blindly joined the fight, hoping to help. The man was wildly firing the Herman ASI-0 he'd been issued, but his panicked shots were flying wide. Harvir fired and the Oratan collapsed at the man's feet. How many more civilians were still stranded out there on the continent, hoping to sneak past the Oratan to access a teleporter? How many wounded at the remaining Firebases needed to evacuate to Celeste Harbour? His lips tightened as he considered abandoning his people to their fate. It was just not something he could do.

He remembered the quick, precise thrust of his knife that had neutralised the sentry before the alarm could be raised. The boarding party had crept through the crippled transport ship, searching for survivors. Earlier, Harvir had received orders to abandon the system, leaving the crippled ship and her crew behind. Newly promoted to Commander and given his first command, Harvir was unable to leave the hundreds of men and women to die aboard the wrecked ship. He'd ordered his own warship to dock with its ailing brethren and rescue the crew, but one of the enemy vessels had reached the stricken ship first. He had recklessly led his troops in a running battle aboard the wreck. The rescue had been successful, but as his ship had disconnected it had taken huge damage from the nearby enemy ship, including a direct hit to the wormhole drive. His ship had been scuttled, but not before he'd managed to rendezvous and transfer both crews to other ships in the fleet. He had known he would face the ire of his superiors over his insubordination, but it was a decision he'd been willing to make to give him the chance to save hundreds of lives.

The Oratan were forcing their way through the teleporter in a never ending stream, their companions already in the city pinning Harvir's troops in place. The city's outer defences were strong; the bridges that formed the entrances into the city were natural choke points that could hold off almost any attack indefinitely. But that was small comfort when the Oratan were already rampaging throughout the city. He was out of options. He activated his communicator.

‘Captain Chiharo. Code Blue. I repeat, Code Blue. I’m shutting down the network.’ Harvir connected back to the Operations Room, to the now attentive Watchkeeper. Wracked with pain, with blood still leaking from his side he closed his eyes briefly and took a breath. May the lost souls forgive me, he thought before he gave the order.

‘Shut down the network, by my order. Do it now.’

As he watched the light of the teleporter wink out, a sudden blow to the side of his head knocked him to the ground. He fell, the wound in his side sending stabbing tendrils of pain throughout his entire body. He managed to roll over just enough to see the looming shadow of an Oratan as it stood over him, weapon pointed at his head. He glared into the barrel, struggling to reach the pistol at his waist. The Oratan’s finger tensed on the weapon’s trigger but was abruptly knocked sideways in a spray of blood. The weapon discharged above Harvir’s head with a deafening roar and he felt a fiery sensation across his face.

It took him a while to realise that he was still alive, his thoughts thick and sluggish. He gently felt his blood covered side. He tried to get up but the effort left him dizzy and he collapsed back onto the ground, pain blinding him to everything else.

Rough hands grabbed him and he briefly opened his eyes, finding himself looking into an indistinct human face shadowed with worry, before he drifted back into unconsciousness.

3.3: HUNTED BY DEATH

DATE: 8 FEB 3008

TIME: 11:02 hours

LOCATION: Northern Sentosa

Sundari wiped the sweat from her eyes. She was slowly excavating an artefact at Jaguar Dig in the far north west of the continent. The sun was high in the sky and her stomach rumbled periodically, reminding her that she needed to eat. Despite the attacks across the rest of the continent, many of the Digs were still unthreatened. She stood up, stretching when the automated turret suddenly kicked into life, deep booms rolling across the ruin as it fired round after round. Sundari reacted instantly, abandoning her work and ordering the nearby archaeologists to retreat to the teleporter. She raced off to find Lieutenant Moshane, whose platoon had been assigned to guard the Dig.

She heard weapons firing as she ran. Moshane had deployed his platoon around the Dig and they had opened fire shortly after the turret. Sundari had nearly reached Moshane's position when she heard a scream off to the left. She changed direction and rounded a corner, only to find herself face to face with an Oratan standing over the archaeologist it had just killed. She drew her Herman ASI-24 but the creature moved like lightning, slapping the weapon from her hand and lunging forward to wrap its thick hands around her throat. As it lifted her from the ground, she pulled her blade from its sheath and stabbed hard at the Oratan, her blade skating across its armour before penetrating deep into the creature's neck. She slipped out of its grip as it fell to the ground, gurgling as it released its last bloody breath.

Sundari was trembling with shock as she retrieved her handgun. She went to find Moshane as the humans slowly retreated back to the teleporter, the defensive circle of troops drawing inwards, shielding the civilians as they made their escape.

Sundari finally found Moshane as the last of the civilians stepped into the teleporter. She caught the Lieutenant's arm as he began ordering his troops to evacuate.

'Lieutenant, I can't go back to Celeste Harbour yet. I have to make sure my assistants and the archaeologists at the other Digs are safe. They need to retreat too. We can't leave them alone out here.'

'What? You can't mean to teleport around by yourself after what we've seen? I can't let you do that, its madness.' In a single smooth motion he calmly raised his weapon and killed an Oratan as it broke through the perimeter.

'Then come with me,' Sundari said. 'Whether you come or not, I am going to do what I can before it's too late.'

Moshane stared at her a second then swore under his breath as he realised she was serious.

'I'll bring a squad, but we're not hanging around if we are engaged by the enemy.'

Most of the troops had now returned to the city and only a single squad remained, holding off the Oratan. No further conversation was possible as the Oratan closed in around them. Moshane deftly altered the teleporter's destination coordinates and ordered the remaining troops inside. He activated the machine just before the Oratan swarmed over the defenders.

They appeared at Cheetah Dig to the west, and quickly discovered that they were too late. Hundreds of bodies lay strewn through the Dig, mostly Oratan but with a scattering of humans who hadn't managed to escape. They moved on rapidly, travelling from teleporter to teleporter. Sometimes they reached a Dig in time to warn the people but, more often than not, they arrived to find the settlement abandoned, the inhabitants having escaped or been killed. Moshane had only once suggested returning to Celeste Harbour but Sundari had ignored him, grimly setting the teleporter for the next Dig.

At Mamba Dig, Moshane finally called a halt. The sun was low in the sky and long shadows stretched over the Dig as Sundari and the squad gathered together.

'Dr Zhen, I don't think we're going to find anyone else. We've done all we can. We need to get back to the city.'

Reluctantly, Sundari nodded her head. Moshane signalled to his Sergeant, who moved to set the teleporter's coordinates for Celeste Harbour.

'Sir!' The alarm in the Sergeant's voice instantly caught Moshane's attention. 'The teleporter! It's dead.'

'What do you mean dead?' Moshane demanded. 'We just came through it two minutes ago.'

'Sir, it still has power. It's not a problem with this teleporter. It appears that the network's control system has been shut down.'

Sundari gazed south towards Celeste Harbour, wondering why Harvir would shut down the network. She turned to Moshane and could see that he was thinking the same.

An Oratan war cry ripped through the silence and Sundari realised how vulnerable they were without a safe escape route. Moshane reacted immediately.

'We go west,' he ordered. 'That cry came from the south, so we're likely cut off from Implacable and Dependable Firebases, probably Formidable as well, and there's no support in the other directions. If we go west we should be able to make it to Sanctuary Cove.'

They set off at a run but didn't get far before the Oratan appeared behind them. The creatures gained ground quickly and it wasn't long before the squad was involved in a running battle. Sundari ran and fought with them, her heart aching each time another of the troops was killed. She was already tiring

and they had a long way to travel. A glance at Moshane confirmed his squad was faring no better.

‘We have to make a stand here,’ he told her as they reached a large rocky outcrop. ‘They’ll cut us down one by one if we keep running. We should be able to hold them here long enough to give you a good start. Head northwest from here and don’t stop for anything. Go, now. Run!’

‘I’m not going to leave you to die!’

‘If you stay you’ll die as well. Don’t let my troops throw their lives away in vain. Go!’

Sundari turned and ran, hot tears sliding down her cheeks, knowing that the troops would have been back at Celeste Harbour if it wasn’t for her. She looked back only once, catching sight of Moshane standing tall and proud amongst his troops. It was a sight she’d remember for the rest of her life.

She ran until every step became agony and the handgun at her belt felt as though it weighed a ton. She was on the verge of exhaustion and with Sanctuary Cove still a long way off she knew she had to find shelter. In the light of Arkadia’s triple moons she spotted a cave on a hillside. With the last of her energy she entered the cave; barely taking the time to check it was safe before collapsing into sleep.

She was woken by a noise from outside the cave. Realising she was trapped, she quietly raised her ASI-24. She didn’t have much ammo left but was determined to make it count.

A shadow crossed in front of the cave and she fired by reflex. The shadow disappeared, dropping out of sight.

‘Hold your fire!’

Recognising the voice, she bolted to the cave entrance and emerged into the night. A bloodied Moshane was climbing to his feet before her, flanked by the last member of his squad.

‘Moshane! I’m so sorry, I was sure you’d been killed. How did you get here?’

‘Not now,’ Moshane growled, ‘we have to move. They’re right behind us.’

‘Where’s your rifle? And the rest of your equipment?’

‘We ran out of ammo and the weight was slowing us down. We had to drop them.’

Sundari fell silent and they started running once again. She concentrated on following Moshane’s lead, trying to ignore the sounds of the Oratan gradually growing louder behind them.

She ran in a daze, losing track of time and how far they had run. As they crested a small rise, a faint blood-red tinge began to stain the sky as dawn approached.

'There it is,' Moshane said.

Sundari looked up, noticing the ocean for the first time. On the horizon she could just make out the island of Sanctuary Cove. They ran on, parallel to the beach so they remained in cover, until they could see the slim sandbar that connected the island to the mainland.

They broke cover, racing for the sandbar, but as soon as they emerged a gunshot echoed across the beach. The trooper behind Sundari collapsed onto the sand, dead before he hit the ground.

'Run!' She screamed at Moshane. They sprinted across the beach towards the water as shots kicked up sand all around them. The Oratan were quick, gaining ground alarmingly fast as she entered the water a step behind Moshane and dived deep. She swam as far as she could underwater with shots hissing through the water around her. When she surfaced, she looked around frantically for Moshane. He floated to the surface a moment later, the water around him clouded red with blood.

With a sob she rolled him over, his sightless eyes staring at the sky. It was too much for her. She swam forward until she could stand on the sandbar. Snarling, she drew her handgun and turned back towards the Oratan.

Soaking wet, standing in waist deep water with her hair plastered to her face, she took aim at the leading Oratan back on the beach. But before she could pull the trigger her target's head exploded in a shower of blood and brains.

3.4: PUNCHING A HOLE

DATE: 18 FEB 3008

TIME: 12:11 hours

LOCATION: Steadfast Firebase

'Once we are through the gates, get your platoons to their objectives. I want the base secured quickly. Stay alert. The scouts have not seen any signs of the enemy, but let's not take any chances,' Lieutenant Commander Taka said to her Lieutenants as they approached the deserted Firebase. 'We want to get in, grab what we need and get out. Also, keep a lookout for civilians. There are still a lot unaccounted for, including Dr Zhen.'

Her company cautiously entered Steadfast Firebase through the main gate. Apart from the odd blood stain there was almost no indication that it had ever been assaulted by the Oratan. An eerie silence hung over the base, broken only by the troops as they reported their progress. There was no sign that the Oratan had made any effort to occupy the Firebase. If they didn't want to control the base, why did they leave it intact? Taka wondered uneasily. Where are the dead?

The base was quickly secured, the Lieutenants reporting the all clear. Taka ordered two platoons to the walls and the other two to begin scouring the Firebase.

‘Check the armoury; I want a complete inventory within five minutes. We need to transport the weapons and supplies back to Celeste Harbour. The remaining Firebases are counting on us to resupply them.’

Taka made her way to the Firebase’s control room to check the status of the defence systems. A quick look showed her that the turrets weren’t connecting to the control panel. She tried rebooting their systems but couldn’t re-establish communication. Technicians would have to examine them before they could be used. She half-heartedly tried activating the main communications network, but it was still down. There was no way she could contact Celeste Harbour.

Taka had been briefed that she would have to sneak her company through the Oratan lines without any support or way to contact her commanders back at Celeste Harbour. The first part of the mission had gone smoothly and they had managed to slip past without alerting the Oratan. Her objective was to recover supplies from Steadfast Firebase and return to Celeste Harbour. The three remaining Firebases were still under siege and Celeste Harbour had only been able to spare her company from its defences. It was a testament to her ability and the quality of her troops that they had been selected for this mission.

Taka activated her personal transmitter, which allowed her to communicate with the rest of the company over short distances.

‘Get a tech team to the control room, I want them working on the damage to the turret systems,’ she ordered, before turning her attention to the other systems.

As she examined the generator controls, one of her troops ran into the room, closely followed by the tech team.

‘Ma’am, the Lieutenant sent me. It’s all gone! There’s nothing left!’ The trooper said breathlessly.

‘Slow down son. What’s gone?’

‘Everything, Ma’am. The Oratan have taken all our weapons and ammunition. They’ve looted everything that wasn’t bolted down. There’s nothing left. Even the vehicles have disappeared, though we’re not sure if they got destroyed in the assault or if they were taken as well.’

Taka felt a chill down her spine. The Fleet was already low on most military resources after the intensity of the initial Oratan assault. If all the Firebases had been looted, they were going to be hard pressed to defend what remained. Her transmitter suddenly came to life as one of the platoon commanders on the walls reported in.

‘We have multiple contacts to the west, at least four companies’ strong so far with more emerging. There’s more than we can handle without taking heavy losses, Ma’am.’

‘Roger that,’ Taka responded. ‘All platoons back to the main gate, we’re leaving.’

Before she left the control room she was interrupted by another transmission.

‘We have eyes on two more hostile forces, to the east and south, Ma’am. They’ve got our escape route cut off.’

How did they get behind us so quickly? Did they leave this base intact as bait, or were we just unlucky? Taka thought to herself as she considered her options. They could move to the north, but that would lead them deeper into Oratan controlled territory, or they could try and weather the storm at the Firebase. Taka turned to the tech team.

‘Are those turrets salvageable?’

‘Damage is minimal; we’ll only need a few minutes Ma’am.’

‘Good. I need those turrets operational and I need them ten minutes ago.’ Taka ordered, before activating her transmitter to call her Lieutenants. ‘New orders. Man the walls, we’re going to hold them here. Get those gates closed. How long do we have until contact?’

‘No more than three minutes, Ma’am.’

‘Copy that. Get ready boys and girls, the party’s about to start. Pick your shots, we’ve only got what ammo we brought with us,’ Taka said as she raced to the wall.

She made it to the top and looked towards the Oratan forces. There weren’t many of the creatures compared to the swarms that had driven the Fleet’s troops back previously, and some of them appeared to be wounded. Regardless, it was more than enough to challenge her company without the support of the Firebase’s defensive turrets. As she watched, the first of the creatures came into range and fell instantly as her company opened fire, but the rest came on. The Oratan charged from three directions, spreading around the Firebase, seeking a weakness in its defence. Scores died as the troops rained death down upon them, but it was not enough to prevent the frenzied creatures launching themselves at the walls, attempting to gain the top by any means possible.

Taka smashed the butt of her weapon into the face an Oratan that appeared before her, knocking the creature off the wall into the masses below. Hundreds of Oratan already lay dead around the Firebase, while her company had sustained only a few casualties. But she knew that she had too few troops to hold the Firebase indefinitely. She needed an exit strategy and fast.

‘Control room, what’s the status of those turrets?’ Taka barked into her transmitter as she killed another Oratan trying to climb the wall.

‘They’ll be online in one minute, Ma’am.’

Taka returned her attention to the battle and swore to herself. The Oratan were beginning to force their way onto the walls, small pockets that quickly grew in size as they were reinforced from below. If

she tried to hold the walls too much longer it would cost a lot of lives.

‘All units get ready to withdraw. Platoons Three and Four, hold the main gate and provide cover fire. Control room, where are my goddamned turrets?’

‘Not ready yet Ma’am! They’re set to auto fire but are still powering up.’

Taka and the two platoons that remained on the walls gradually retreated towards the main gate, conceding large sections of the walls to the Oratan. Although her troops had evened the numbers considerably, once more enemies were inside the Firebase, her casualties would mount quickly.

A new sound suddenly rippled across the Firebase. The turrets burst to life and began firing simultaneously, the deep boom of their cannons like music to Taka’s ears. Between the repeated roars of the turret cannons, she could hear the screams of the wounded Oratan.

‘Now! Go go go!’ Taka ordered. ‘Open the gates. It’s time to punch a hole out of here and go home. MOVE!’

3.5: RECONNECTED

DATE: 25 FEB 3008

TIME: 16:48 hours

LOCATION: Sanctuary Cove

Sundari made her way to Ky Fung’s office. The leader of Sanctuary Cove’s Security Force was reclining in her chair with her feet resting on the desk, rhythmically sharpening her sword. Sundari didn’t quite know what to make of Fung; she was a confident, brash woman who antagonised almost everyone she met. But her coarse personality masked a fierce intelligence that had seen her rise to command the Security Force. She was also deadly with both blades and firearms, as Sundari had seen on the beach the day Moshane died. The Oratan that had survived to reach the sandbar had fallen swiftly as Fung’s blade danced among them.

‘You wanted to see me?’ Sundari said as she entered the room.

‘There you are, Doc. You took your sweet time.’ Fung said without looking up. ‘I thought you’d like to know that we’re in contact with Celeste Harbour again. The teleporter network is back online, so something must be happening over there. You can go back to Celeste Harbour at your leisure.’

A broad smile instantly lit up Sundari’s face. She could return to the city!

‘I can see you’re keen to get your arse back there quickly,’ Fung said with a grin, before jumping to her feet and sheathing her sword with a flourish. ‘Well, don’t hang around like a bad smell; go find out what’s been going on. Oh, and let whoever’s in charge these days know that I’ll be along shortly. I need

to have a little chat with them. ’

‘What should I say you want to talk about?’

‘That’s none of your business, Doc,’ Fung said, ‘just let them know I want to discuss a mutually beneficially agreement.’

‘Alright Ky, I’ll pass it on. Thanks for your hospitality,’ Sundari said, before turning and racing off, impatient to get back and find out if Harvir, Lee and the archaeologists were safe. She was so excited she barely noticed Fung laughing at her eagerness, the sound following her down the hall.

Moments later Sundari was standing in Celeste Harbour, beaming a smile at the sentries. The Sergeant recognised her and waved.

‘Welcome back, Doctor Zhen. You’ll need to report to Headquarters, we’re trying to determine how many are still missing,’ the Sergeant said, a grim look on his face.

The excitement that had driven Sundari to rush back to Celeste Harbour disappeared as she looked around the city. Signs of recent battles were all around her. Most of the troops she could see were still carrying signs of recent injuries. Groups of civilians were cleaning the scorch marks and blood stains from the buildings around the teleporter. The constant sounds of construction that used to cover the city had temporarily ceased as the workers had been either evacuated to space or forced to support



the troops defending the city. The physical features of the city had not changed since she left; the wondrous buildings remained. But the city's inhabitants had now turned all their attention to war and survival.

Sundari entered the IFN Headquarters and made her way directly to Harvir's office. The Commodore was inside, facing a transmission from Captain Chiharo. Sundari immediately noticed the deep bags under Harvir's eyes and the new streaks of grey in his hair. A faint web of scarring crossed his face that she didn't remember being there before. Yet he still stood straight and tall, and the confidence that fuelled his voice was inspiring to hear. If anyone can defeat the Oratan threat, it's Toán, she thought to herself.

Harvir gave his last orders and cut the transmission. Sundari finally knocked and the Commodore looked towards the doorway where she stood.

'Sundari!' He yelled when he recognised her. 'You're alive!' He crossed the room, a faint hitch in his stride, and enveloped her in a hug.

'It was close for a while. I was trapped when the teleporter network went down,' she said as they separated. 'Lieutenant Moshane lost most of his squad, buying me time to run. Somehow he managed to escape with one of his troops and find me again. They—' she was interrupted as a sob escaped from her throat. 'They found me and led us to Sanctuary Cove, but the Oratan caught us on the beach.' Sundari went quiet again. After a moment, she added, 'I made it to safety but only thanks to the security forces from the island, but I had no way of returning until now.'

'Not Moshane too.' Harvir muttered, shoulders sagging at the news. 'Sundari, I had to shut down the network. I couldn't hold it open for even a minute longer.' Harvir's voice grew heavy with emotion. 'The Oratan had worked out how to use the teleporters and were using them to attack us from within. I had no choice, but who knows how many others got trapped like you and didn't make it back? I don't know how many troops died of their wounds because they couldn't return here for the kind of medical help they needed.'

'When the network went down, we knew that things must have been bad. I wouldn't have wanted to make such a horrible choice either, but your decision meant we still have a haven here at Celeste Harbour. If I could find safety, maybe others did as well. But is it safe to have the teleporters active again?'

'Yes, thanks to Lee's research and his forethought in sampling the genetic code of the Oratan. One of his research teams has been able to calibrate the network so it blocks the Oratan's DNA. They cannot use the system any longer.'

'I'm glad that Milton has been able to help. I knew he would. I hope the two of you have—' Sundari drifted into silence as she noticed the grimace on Harvir's face. 'Toán, what is it?'

'Lee's dead, Sundari. He was killed in the initial assault. He sacrificed himself trying to warn us and to tell us his files held their genetic structure. It was his idea to reprogram the teleporters.' Harvir closed his eyes against the memory of that fateful transmission.

‘Oh, Toán.’ Sundari said, tears forming in her eyes.

‘We didn’t always see eye to eye,’ Harvir continued. ‘In fact, I often thought he was a madman with no consideration of others, but there’s no denying he was a brilliant scientist.’

‘I never imagined when we left Earth it would be anything like this. We’ve lost so many,’ Sundari paused and wiped hot tears from her cheek. ‘Milton always seemed to be there, he was like an annoying little brother.’ Her face crumpled as her body shook with wracking sobs. ‘A brother I’ve now lost.’

Harvir let her cry, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. As strong as he knew her to be, she needed to grieve sometime. After a while she quietened and Harvir released her.

‘Thank you, Toán. I don’t know what I’d do without you; you’ve been like a father to me ever since we met.’ Sundari said. After a brief pause she raised her head, anger etched on her tear streaked face. ‘Damn the Oratan! They’re vicious, soulless creatures. First they destroy the Arkadians, now they’re trying to do the same to us! You have to stop them!’

‘We will. With the teleporters back online, we have the advantage now. I have given Captain Chiharo her orders. We’ve withstood the onslaught. Now we will break them.’

3.6: EXTRACTION

DATE: 4 March 3008

TIME: 21:21 hours

SOURCE: Sergeant Jong's personal account

I got my first look at the Dig site from my vantage point on a nearby hill. Travelling under the light of Arkadia's three moons, I had drifted further south than I'd intended and had come upon Falcon Dig from the east rather than the north. Even at this late hour, the Dig was surrounded by Oratan and I was on my own; one man could pass through unnoticed where a squad was sure to be seen. On my approach I hadn't been troubled by any patrols, as the enemy hadn't set up a perimeter. I found it all too easy to slip through the unorganised groups that wandered the area around the archaeological site. Twelve years as a scout counts for something.

The Dig looked much as we left it. From the reconnaissance reports I'd seen of the nearby Kestrel Dig, the Oratan had a similar deployment there. It was a relief to discover that Kestrel is not an isolated case; that our enemies have no concern for defence no matter where they are. We would waste a lot of lives trying to retake the Digs if the Oratan decided to fortify them. The prospect of attempting such an operation without a revival network is daunting enough with such a large hostile force occupying the area. From what I've seen, any attempt to retake the archaeological sites will require a significant force. I can't see the Commodore ordering that yet.

We're only able to consider the possibility of retaking the Digs because the teleporter network has re-established our access to 8 Coins. Thanks to the treacherous landscape around the mines, the Oratan are leaving them largely untouched, so when the mining facility was reconnected we were able to be reinforced by the four fully equipped companies who had been stationed there. 8 Coins is also sending as many resources as possible back to Celeste Harbour. The Commodore has removed our technicians from the defence and assigned them to manufacturing ammunition from the materials supplied by the mines, so our forces are once again well stocked. We're still short on weapons, with so many looted by the Oratan, but the main problem we will face when we try to drive them from our settlements will be our lack of manpower. The resources from 8 Coins will give us a better chance.

We have managed to retake most of the Firebases thanks to Captain Chiharo's crafty tricks and by striking hard and fast through the teleporters. I've heard that Formidable and Dependable Firebases in the far north were re-captured by the security forces from Sanctuary Cove, though I have no idea what the Commodore did to get them off that island of theirs. Despite our gains, I know that our hold on the Firebases is tenuous at best and that we still need most of the remaining civilians to aid in the defence.

My company was part of the mission to retake Redoubtable Firebase. We penetrated the area by night, getting into position before dawn. At first light, Lieutenant Commander Taka's company teleported right into the Firebase, quickly killing all the Oratan inside. Then they manned the walls and began attacking the enemies that surrounded the base. It was like kicking a hornet's nest. I waited along with the rest of my company until the enemy was committed to charging the walls, then we attacked the Oratan from behind, throwing them into confusion. Before they could react to the new threat, we'd slaughtered most of them and driven off the rest. The dead littered the ground as far as I could see. I've never witnessed so much carnage.

That was just the first step of the operation that led to me lying on my stomach, overlooking Falcon Dig. After a while I'd seen enough and was ready to leave, my reconnaissance mission completed. Using my scope, I took one last look over the Dig and glimpsed something strange in a section of ruins on the outskirts of the Dig. I could make out the shape of a figure lying on top of a wall, while several Oratan stood below. In the darkness I couldn't be certain it was human, but I didn't think the Oratan would be playing hide and seek. If it was a survivor I knew I couldn't leave them there. As I watched, the figure moved slightly, readjusting to a more comfortable position. In that instant I saw a gleam through the darkness and realised the figure was holding a standard issue combat knife, the blade catching the moonlight. No-one with any decent military training would make such a rookie mistake, but it could be a civilian.

I moved slowly down the hill, keeping to shadows and cover. The Oratan didn't appear particularly alert, but I wasn't going to take any chances. It would be difficult to make it out alive if I was seen. As I neared the base of the hill, I carefully weaved my way through the increasing number of Oratan, forced to spend more and more time lying still to avoid detection. Eventually I made it to the edge of the ruin, but realised stealth would get me no further. My path was blocked by Oratan who showed no signs of moving.

I drew my knife and waited for what seemed like an eternity. Finally the nearest creature turned away and I leapt. I was stiff from lying still and my movements were slow, but I was still able to grab the Oratan before it could turn to face me. With a quick slash, I cut its throat and quietly lowered it to the ground. The second died just as quickly, but a third spotted me. Before it could announce my presence I threw my knife, the blade sinking deep into the creature's eye. I heard footsteps and flattened myself against the wall. Another Oratan rounded a corner and I stepped out behind it and broke its neck.

I paused, senses straining to detect any sign that the rest of the Oratan had been alerted to my presence, but no alarm was raised. I reclaimed my knife and climbed the short wall. As I reached the top a knife flashed out of the darkness, but I reacted in time to catch my assailant's wrist. The arm went limp and I examined the man before me. He was a civilian alright, probably an archaeologist judging by the clothes. The man cut a ragged figure; tired and thin from what must have been weeks of near starvation, his clothes torn to shreds. When he spoke, his voice was a scratchy whisper that I could barely hear.

'How did you get here?'

'No time to explain, dawn is too close. Can you walk?' I asked him as I lowering myself back onto the ground.

'Yes,' the man said, his voice wavering with a hysterical edge as he followed me down. 'But we won't make it far from the Dig before we get spotted.'

'We don't need to get out, we need to go further in.' I told him, uneasy at how slowly he was climbing down.

'Are you crazy? How is that going to help us? You're going to get us both killed!'

‘Quiet, man, pull yourself together. The teleporters have been reactivated; we can use them to get out of here.’

He stared at me wide-eyed for a long moment and I knew that he was still considering the number of Oratan scattered throughout the area. Without another word I moved off, letting him make his own decision, and when I glanced back I saw him sneaking through the darkness behind me. As we moved through the ruins, it became clear that the man knew how to move quietly; hardly surprising considering how long he’d managed to stay alive. We worked our way towards the centre of the Dig, without being detected, though I was forced to kill another Oratan along the way.

‘There it is,’ I told him, as the teleporter came into view. The area around it was crawling with Oratan.

‘How the hell do we get to that?’ He asked. I knew it would be hard and briefly considered trying to sneak out of the ruin after all, but a quick glance towards the horizon confirmed dawn was too close for us to escape unseen.

‘When I say, we’re going to break cover and run for the teleporter. You got that?’

‘Wait!’ He said frantically. ‘It’s surrounded! We’d never make it through them.’

‘This decoy will distract them.’ I replied as I set the timer and launched the device as far as I could away from the teleporter and our position. I held my breath, hoping the Oratan hadn’t seen where it originated from. The decoy activated and the Oratan howled as they charged towards it.

‘Now!’ I hissed, shoving the man to his feet. We raced for the teleporter and had nearly reached it when the Oratan noticed us. They turned and brought their weapons to bear as I leapt onto the pad and programmed the coordinates to Celeste Harbour. As the machine activated the Oratan released a hail of fire and I was knocked to the ground as a shot smashed through my armour and into my shoulder. We disappeared into the light and emerged at Celeste Harbour, a cry of agony bursting from my lips.

With my other arm I reached for the FAP at my side. Soon the wound would be just another scar. I had plenty already, and one more gained saving a life was a trade I’d willingly make any day of the week.

3.7: MOONSHINE

DATE: 15 March 3008

TIME: 08:11 hours

SOURCE: Extract from partially destroyed personal log

Any faint desire I'd harboured to join the IFN is completely gone now. As part of a militia formed from the civilians who hadn't evacuated to orbit, I was conscripted to aid in the defence shortly after the first Oratan attack. With so many troops killed in the attacks, we were ordered to aid the remaining troops to retake the Firebases. Since then, I've been stuck defending Courageous Firebase with no idea when the Military will release us back to our actual jobs. I can't stand it, even though I know it's necessary, especially since the scouts have reported another build-up of Oratan. I didn't join the Fleet to fight on the front lines.

'Quit your tinkering and put that rifle back together, lad.' The Sergeant murmured right next my ear. I hadn't even heard him approach. 'You never know when the enemy will hit us.'

'Yes, Sergeant,' I said, hastily starting to reassemble my weapon before he had a chance to take a closer look at the components. He watched me for a few moments before he slipped away. I kept methodically reassembling my weapon, knowing that he was probably still watching me from a distance. I knew the Sergeant was only doing his job, and that he treated the militia more leniently than the rest of the troops, but he had us under constant supervision. I hated the scrutiny, for no other reason than that it severely curtailed my more illicit pastime.

There is one good thing that has come out of my conscription and it's not that we get to play at being soldiers and kill Oratan. No, I'm just glad I've been issued with a weapon. It was nothing fancy before I got to it, but I have been playing around with it when I'm off duty, altering and modifying components here and there. Even without testing I was sure I was going to be pleased with the results.

As I finished assembling the weapon, an alarm sounded and troops poured out of the buildings in the Firebase, running to their assigned positions. I looked around but couldn't see what was going on. I hastily ran through my safety checks to ensure I'd got the assembly right and followed the troops until I found the rest of my squad by the northern wall. At first glance I saw that this was a relatively small attack—the Oratan only outnumbered us two to one.

'Alright boys and girls, looks like we're in for some target practise. Just remember these bastards play rough,' The Sergeant said to the squad as he appeared behind us. 'Remember your training, choose your targets and don't hesitate.'

I don't believe in the whole death or glory attitude like those in the military, so I just readied my weapon and took my place on the northern wall along with the bulk of our forces. I waited nervously with the other militia as the Oratan drew closer. I knew I was going to get a chance to try out my modifications.

The Oratan advanced quickly and soon I could see their features clearly, bringing back terrible memories of when they had attacked Celeste Harbour. They never slowed their pace as they continued to approach us. Then, with a bone chilling cry, they broke into a run, sprinting towards the walls. The turrets started firing and were soon joined by the troops, their weapons having a longer range than anything issued to the militia, and the Oratan fell in droves. As the Oratan rushed forward, I picked a target carefully and pulled the trigger, a full second before the enemy had come into range of the other civilians' weapons.

Compared to how it felt when it was first issued to me, my weapon now felt like it was releasing a lightning bolt with each shot. I hit my target in the head and the creature went wheeling through the air. I fired again and another Oratan fell screaming with a hole through its abdomen. I could feel the sharper recoil of my weapon and hear the faster rate of fire compared to my counterparts. A fierce joy suffused me. My modifications were working!

The battle was over quickly, the Oratan barely making it to the wall before they were killed. Eventually the all clear was given and we were stood down. As I turned to leave, a trooper appeared before me and dragged me away from the rest of my squad.

'Hand over your weapon,' he said, abruptly.

I passed it over quickly, hoping in vain that he wouldn't notice the changes.

'What's been done to this weapon?'

'Nothing, it's the one I was issued.'

'Don't play me for a fool; this is not standard issue. What is it? You'd better have a good explanation or I'll be reporting you for making unauthorised alterations to military equipment.'

'So I made some improvements, what's so bad about that? I'm a technician, it's what I do.'

The trooper turned the weapon over in his hands, as if considering what to do with it. A faint sheen of sweat gathered across my forehead as I wondered what I would have to do to keep my weapon.

'Sounds like contraband to me, I think I'll have to confiscate it.'

'You can't do that!' I said, stalling for time while I considered my next move.

'Oh really? Maybe I should hand it in to the Lieutenant right now? I wonder what she would have to say about civilians illegally modifying weapons?'

'Come now, there's no need to be so dramatic,' I said casually, knowing my sudden confidence would put him off balance. 'If you turned me in, who would modify your weapon? I could make certain adjustments that would improve its performance.'

‘Now that sounds interesting,’ he said, grinning greedily. I struggled to stop myself from smiling; he was hooked and now I just had to reel him in.

‘There’s a price. I need a new weapon; this one is going to draw too much attention in my hands. Get me a new rifle to use. Oh, and a knife. You should probably get yourself another weapon as well, to get through the inspections. Once you’ve done that, I’ll modify a weapon for you, as long as you keep your mouth shut.’

‘I can’t do that,’ the trooper scoffed. ‘I can’t just take weapons whenever I like.’

‘The price must be paid. If they won’t issue you with more weapons, then you’ll need to find some other way to... procure them.’

He considered for a second.

‘Alright, I’ll see what I can do. What’s your name?’

I hesitated for a moment before answering.

‘Call me Moonshine.’



3.8: REFUELLED

DATE: 26 March 3008

TIME: 13:19 hours

SOURCE: Repulse Firebase

The bright light of the teleporter faded and Harvir stepped into Repulse Firebase. He spent a moment orienting himself, taking in all the activity going on around him. Troops and civilians were constantly moving about the base, training and reinforcing the defences. As he stepped off the teleporter pad another small shipment of ammunition appeared behind him. His forces were still limited by the amount of supplies that could be transported through the network but he hoped to have a solution for the problem in the next few days. It was why he had come to Repulse.

‘Commodore, welcome to Repulse, Sir,’ the Base Commander said as he saluted.

‘Thank you.’ Harvir said, returning the salute. ‘How are your troops?’

‘Excellent, Sir. All our systems are back online and my company is fully restocked. We’re rested and ready for anything.’

‘Good. What about the civilian militia? How are they faring?’

‘All units have completed their basic combat training and have had a taste of frontline action. They’re not military, Sir, but they’ll be able to hold their ground and do their part if the Oratan assault us again. However, it appears we have a problem.’

‘What is it?’

‘Two members of the civilian militia have disappeared recently and several weapons have gone missing from the armoury. We have nothing to link the two events, but I have my suspicions.’

‘Damn. I’ve had several similar reports from some of the other Firebases. We need to stop this while they’re still isolated cases. Keep me updated on any future disappearances; we must find out what’s happening to these civilians,’ Harvir said, clearly concerned. He sighed with frustration, then cleared his mind and focused on the more immediate situation. ‘We’ve had to strip the 8 Coins garrison to reinforce the other Firebases. I realise that means your company will be relied upon to defend the facility, since Repulse is the closest Firebase to 8 Coins, but we had no choice. I’ve read your reports about the local Oratan movements. What do you think they are up to?’

‘I’m not sure. All I know for certain is that the Oratan are massing out in the desolate areas. It could mean they’re preparing for another assault. If they are, my troops are replenished now and they’ll be ready for whatever the creatures throw at us.’

'I'm sure they are. I share your suspicions about the Oratan, but we can only wait and see if the storm breaks. I'm happy with your preparations here, Repulse is doing the IFN proud,' Harvir said, clapping the Base Commander on the shoulder. 'Now, has my guest from 8 Coins arrived yet?'

'Yes, Sir, she got here several minutes before you did. She's waiting for you inside.'

'Thank you, carry on.'

They saluted again and Harvir walked into the command post to meet the Administrator from 8 Coins. He needed to frame his request carefully as he did not have the best relationship with the administrator; she had been one of the most outspoken critics of his decision to hold back the expansion when Liberation Fleet first made planetfall. By all reports she was a very professional and capable manager and the mining facility had certainly prospered under her direction, so he was sure she would be able to see past their previous disagreements.

'Good afternoon, Rebecca. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me in person.' Harvir said in greeting.

'Always a pleasure, Commodore Harvir,' she said sarcastically. 'Though if you don't mind, I'd like to get this meeting over with quickly. I have a thousand things that require my attention back at the mines.'

'Very well,' he said, forcing a smile. 'I have an important task I would like you to assist me with. It will involve relocating some of your miners from their current tasks, but thanks to your hard work over the last few weeks we no longer need to produce resources for weapons and ammunition so desperately.'

'What is this task?' Rebecca asked, eyeing Harvir suspiciously.

'I need to get the drop ships in the air again. Ever since they ran out of fuel we've been severely handicapped. They are one of our major advantages over the Oratan. Our research teams are still exploring the possibility of developing Professor Lee's fuel cells and further adapting them to our vehicles, but with the Oratan a constant threat I don't think they'll have time to properly implement any new systems. Your reports indicate you have recently found traces of more traditional fuel sources. I need you to focus your production on securing us the fuel we need. It would be a massive step forward, providing us with air support and allowing us to once again transport resources easily between our settlements.'

Harvir watched patiently as Rebecca stood in silence considering his request.

'I'm sure you realise that we'll have to slow down production of all other resources while we're focused on this. I hope you have some form of remuneration in mind?'

'No, you know as well as I do that you are required to provide to the Fleet any request for materials

that I deem necessary for the defence of this colony. However, you'll be able to return your miners to normal duties once the new colonists arrive.'

'I see you're willing to negotiate as always,' Rebecca said, dryly. 'When do we expect Fleet Arkadia will get here?'

Harvir glanced up towards the sky as he responded. 'Soon, I hope. They carry the necessary equipment to set up the interplanetary teleporters and the revival network.'

'Alright, I'll get the miners on to it. We should be able to start production soon.'

'Excellent. Now, I asked you here to Repulse because I was able to have a VTOL flown as far as this base, but we can't take it any further without more fuel. Please use it to ensure the fuel supplies you mine are compatible with its systems. And thank you, Rebecca, your alacrity in taking on the extra work is much appreciated.'

'We've all lost friends to the Oratan, Commodore. Anything I can do to help avenge them is fine by me,' she said grimly. 'I'd best get back to 8 Coins and get things started.'

As they were about to leave the command post Harvir was interrupted by a transmission from Celeste Harbour. Captain Chiharo, calm but determined, didn't waste time with greetings.

'Sir, we've had multiple contact reports come in within the last few minutes. Half the Firebases are under attack. I've deployed all our off duty troops to aid the defences but they're spread thin across such a wide assault front.'

'I'm on my way, Captain.'

As Harvir ended the transmission Repulse's alarms sounded. The Oratan had returned.

'Get me that fuel, Rebecca. The storm has broken and we'll need everything we have to stand against it.'

3.9: CHIHARO'S GAMBLE

DATE: 1 April 3008

TIME: 14:02 hours

SOURCE: Airborne

The ground rushed past beneath Lieutenant Tien, a blurred mass of bushes and trees, so close she felt like she could reach out and touch them. She began to make out faint signs of the enemy ahead just as the pilot nudged the drop ship up to attack speed. Her squad stood by the drop ship's open hatches, ready to open fire.

'We're coming up on the Oratan, prepare to engage,' Lieutenant Tien ordered her squad as they approached the enemy force.

In a matter of seconds they were above the Oratan and Tien smiled grimly as she saw them panicking when they finally caught sight of the drop ship. With the slightest pressure she squeezed her trigger and opened fire, strafing across the milling hordes. A sound like thunder filled the cabin as the ship's cannon showered hundreds of rounds of death upon the creatures. Moments later the drop ship was beyond the Oratan and banking around for another run.

'Look at them fall,' cried one of her troops exuberantly. 'It's like shooting fish in a barrel!'

'Settle down back there,' Tien said, unable to keep the grin off her own face.

Once again they swept over the Oratan and scores more fell before the onslaught. The swarm was not as large as when the creatures had first attacked weeks ago, but they were packed so tightly together that Tien's squad didn't even need to aim. She thought that if the colony had more fuel, they could wipe the Oratan out without any problems; the creatures had no answer to the aerial attacks. A few more passes and surely the enemy would break. Abruptly, the drop ship turned to the east and began climbing away from the Oratan.

'What the—' Tien cursed. She changed the frequency on her transmitter to talk to the pilot. 'What's going on up there? Why are we breaking off?'

'New orders, Lieutenant, direct from Captain Chiharo. We're to fly to Dauntless Firebase with all possible speed and render assistance.'

'But we've got the enemy panicked here! If we—'

'We have our orders Lieutenant. The garrison at Dauntless is under attack and they don't think they can repel the assault even though they have been reinforced.'

'Roger that,' Tien said, ashamed of herself for questioning the orders. She knew as well as anyone that Captain Chiharo wouldn't issue such an order unless the danger to Dauntless was genuine. Yet something still bothered her about the situation.

Many had considered it a huge gamble by the Captain to strip the Firebases and hold so many companies in reserve. So far, the colony had relied on air power and the superior manoeuvrability that the teleporters gave them to defend the Firebases. The Fleet was also providing valuable support from orbit by using their sensors to keep track of the Oratan movements and firing limited orbital strikes at critical times. The plan was simple; a small garrison remained at each Firebase and if attacked could receive immediate reinforcement from up to four companies on standby at Celeste Harbour. It meant that nearly half the IFN's remaining strength could be in reserve at any one time. Risky as it was, the tactic had worked well so far.

As they flew on, Tien had time to think about the situation. If Dauntless had already been reinforced and still couldn't hold... Tien's stomach tightened as she considered the implications. Her transmitter came to life and she heard the pilot's voice again.

'Lieutenant, we've been ordered by Dauntless' Base Commander to use the ship's cannons to target the larger Oratan, while you and your troops are to concentrate your fire on the smaller creatures.'

Smaller creatures? Tien wondered. What does that mean? 'Confirm orders to target smaller creatures?'

'Confirmed. Those were the Base Commander's exact words, Lieutenant. Hold on tight back there, we're going in hot.'

It wasn't long before Dauntless came into view. Even from a distance it was easy to see that the Oratan force was relatively small compared to other attacks and should have barely troubled a properly defended Firebase. The pilot brought the drop ship in low and fast, trying to maintain some element of surprise. Tien and her squad opened fire and the creatures started to fall. However, some seemed to barely notice the shots raining down upon them. She looked closer and realised with a sinking feeling that some of the creatures were more heavily armoured than their brethren.

The pilot brought them around for a second pass. Once again, they came within range and her squad began shooting, but this time the Oratan answered in kind and shots began to rattle against the heavily armoured drop ship. Startled, Tien stepped back from the hatch just before a shot smashed into the space where her head had been. These were not ordinary Oratan; they were bigger and equipped with weapons that seemed to Tien as though they could damage even the thick hull of the drop ship.

Tien continued to shoot out of the hatch, though the pilot was flying more cautiously, jinking the ship around to randomly change their speed and heading. Despite her squad's advantage of being able to attack from the skies, the creatures refused to give in and the larger enemies were proving much harder to take down than those they had fought up until now. If they didn't kill the Oratan soon they were going to have to disengage and refuel.

As the drop ship pulled out of its attack run it was rocked by a heavy blow and shrapnel exploded through the open hatches, slicing into the interior of the cabin.

There was a pause before screams pierced through the sound of the rushing air. ‘Medic!’ Tien yelled as several of her squad were cut down before her eyes. ‘We’ve got troops down!’

‘Lieutenant, we need to reach medical facilities fast; we don’t have enough FAPs to treat them all,’ the medic said, after briefly surveying the injured.

Tien didn’t hesitate, unclipping her safety tether and racing forwards to the cockpit.

‘I heard,’ the pilot said before Tien could even open her mouth. ‘Get those hatches closed, we’re going into orbit. We’ve been cleared to rendezvous with Cutlass for emergency medevac.’

Tien passed the order on to her squad to close the outer hatches and strap themselves down. She threw herself into the vacant co-pilot’s seat as the pilot swung the drop ship’s nose into a sharp upwards pitch and began to climb.

It only took a few minutes to clear Arkadia’s atmosphere and commence their docking procedures with Cutlass, but to Tien it felt like hours. They were on final approach when alarms suddenly blasted through the cockpit, causing the pilot to swear and change course.

‘What in hell’s that?’ Cried Tien as the drop ship’s display in front of her lit up with hundreds of red dots centred around the system’s outer planets.

The pilot looked across at Tien, then back at the display. As they watched, the red dots turned to green one by one as the transponder codes of the new arrivals registered with the drop ship’s computer.

‘Fleet Arkadia,’ the pilot whispered. ‘They’ve arrived in the outer system.’

3.10: THE LAST STAND

DATE: 8 April 3008

TIME: 18:34 hours

SOURCE: Valiant Firebase

Lieutenant Chan snarled as he slammed another clip into his weapon. He raised his rifle and fired from point blank range into the Oratan leaping at him. In one smooth motion, he shifted his aim and shot a second creature that was charging behind the first. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted another enemy taking aim at him and he quickly dived to the side. The Oratan’s shots whistled over his shoulder as Chan rolled onto one knee and shot it through the head before the creature could readjust its aim.

Quickly glancing around to check he wasn’t in any immediate danger, he continued on towards the Command Post as he’d been ordered. The fighting was different now, as the Oratan had stopped

attacking in the numberless, uncoordinated hordes that had characterised their initial assaults. Instead, they attacked with smaller, better armed and more dangerous forces. It had become vital to pick targets carefully as some of the new creatures wore heavier armour and were noticeably harder to take down, shrugging off ordinary rifle fire with ease. They also carried lethal weapons capable of piercing most military armours. The defensive turrets were powerful enough to kill these tougher creatures, but their programming struggled to identify between deadly Oratan and their less dangerous brethren. They had been positioned to target outwards from the walls, leaving any enemies that made it inside the Firebase for the troops to deal with.

‘Lieutenant!’ Called a voice through his transmitter. ‘We have another wave incoming.’

Chan acknowledged the report as he sprinted the remaining distance to the Command Post, staying low. He found the Base Commander just outside, holding a hurried conversation with Ky Fung, leader of the Security Force from Sanctuary Cove. When the attack had begun hours earlier, a call had been made to Celeste Harbour requesting reinforcements, but IFN Headquarters had replied that Valiant’s garrison was on its own because all reserve forces had already been committed elsewhere. They had been preparing to evacuate when Fung and her force had arrived. Nobody had wanted to ask how she’d known that Valiant needed support.

‘Sir, there’s another wave of them about to hit us and the Oratan still control sections of the southern wall. With the defences compromised, more of them will make it inside the base this time,’ Chan reported.

‘Dammit! We won’t hold for long if they penetrate the base in force. I’m going to begin the withdrawal and save as many lives as we can,’ the Base Commander said.

‘Sir, with all due respect, if we leave now we may never recapture this Firebase. We need to hold.’

‘It’s not your decision, Lieutenant. I’m ordering—’

He was cut off as an Oratan burst around the corner of the Command Post and charged the group, firing as it ran. Several shots flew past Chan’s head, so close he could feel the wind of their passing. The Base Commander was not so lucky, his head exploding in a bloody spray of gore. Fung swore and leapt forward, executing a graceful pirouette that decapitated the creature with a precise slash of her blade.

‘Didn’t quite catch what those orders were,’ Fung said conversationally, as she wiped her blade clean. ‘You’re second in command of this circus, aren’t you Lieutenant? Do we stay and fight, or are we going to run away with our tails between our legs?’

Chan frowned at her for a second before activating his personal transmitter. ‘All units, this is Lieutenant Chan. The Base Commander is dead. I’m assuming command. Hold your positions. We must hold this base.’

He cut the transmission and looked at Fung. ‘That’s what you wanted to hear, wasn’t it?’ He challenged her, but Fung’s only answer was a feral grin.

He turned at a roar from the southern wall. Oratan were already forcing their way past the embattled defenders and storming into the base. Clenching his teeth, Chan ran to join the nearest squad of troops, firing as he moved. He was intercepted by an Oratan wielding a looted blade but he ducked under the creature's wild swing and blew a hole through its chest before it could gut him. He shouted to the squad, ordering them to create a secondary perimeter facing south, to counter the Oratan that were streaming over the wall.

Chan lost track of time in the maelstrom of blood and bullets. The Oratan died in droves all around him, but slowly his troops fell as well, weakening the defences further. Screams coming from the enemy outside told him the turrets were still doing their deadly work, for which he was thankful. But they weren't enough to stem the tide and if the turrets failed, the defenders wouldn't stand a chance. Leaning out of cover, he snapped off a few quick shots before dodging back out of sight.

He waited a moment before repeating the manoeuvre, but as he did a large fist closed around his weapon, wrenching it from his grasp, and Chan suddenly found himself face to face with a huge armoured Oratan. It tossed Chan's weapon aside and reached for him, but he dived low and rolled away, drawing his knife at the same time. Leaping close, he viciously slashed at the creature's chest, grunting with surprise as his blade skidded off its armour.

Chan dodged to the side, adrenaline pumping through his veins, but couldn't find an opportunity to get clear or land a killing blow. He evaded another massive blow and hacked at the creature's elbow but still couldn't do any damage. Step by step, he was driven backwards until he was forced against a wall. He waited, breathing hard, knowing that he would only get one chance to avoid the next swing and escape.

There was a blur of steel behind the Oratan and with lightning quick strikes, Fung's flashing blade sliced through the creature's unprotected heel and knee, hamstringing it. Then, with an almost contemptuous gesture, she drove the point of her blade deep into its neck, severing its spinal cord.

'You had enough yet, Soldier Boy?' She asked, taunting Chan as he leaned against the wall, panting as he caught his breath.

'We're not beaten yet,' he growled, retrieving his weapon from the ground. A quick glance showed that the Oratan were wresting control of the walls. Worse, his remaining troops were now cut off from the teleporter. They were no longer fighting to hold the Firebase but merely to survive; there was no possibility of retreat now.

'All units rally at the Command Post!' He said into his transmitter, running to meet them. The defenders would be able to hold out there for a while, but the Firebase was effectively lost. It was a delaying tactic, but with so few troops remaining, it was their best hope of survival. He heard a sudden howl and snapped his head around to find an Oratan charging straight at him. He raised his weapon and pulled the trigger.

He froze as he heard a faint click.

He was out of ammunition.

Time seemed to slow as he looked into the Oratan's wild eyes, knowing there was no escaping the shot about to burst forth from the creature's weapon.

Suddenly, a laser beam pierced the air, hitting the charging Oratan full in the face. It took Chan a moment to register that he was still alive. As his exhausted mind tried to work out what had happened, it occurred to him that none of his troops had been issued with laser weapons. He spun around and found himself looking into the face of a girl he'd never seen before.

'Where the hell did you come from?' Chan blurted, shocked by the sight of her.

'Where do you think, silly?' The girl laughed at him, her voice sounding like silvery chimes. Before he could reply, a shot blasted through her chest.

'No!' He screamed, catching her falling body, even though he knew she was already dead.

As he gently lowered her to the ground and scrambled for cover, Chan realised he could hear lots of laser weapons discharging all around him. He looked around to see dozens of militia pouring through the teleporter.

'Did you miss me?' Asked a voice from behind him.

'What?' Chan turned and once again found himself facing the girl with the voice like chimes. 'How is that possible? I just saw you die!'

'Revival network, of course. Honestly, don't you ever look up?' The girl said, laughing at him. 'The Commodore wouldn't let us down until it was set up. We came down as soon as we could, but he says it will take even longer to get the interplanetary teleporter network set up.'

Chan stared at her, struggling to comprehend what she was saying, before slowly raising his eyes to the sky. There, hovering far above the Firebase, was the welcome shape of an IFN frigate.

Fleet Arkadia had arrived.

■

CHAPTER 4



4.1: RESET

DATE: 8 Aug 3008

TIME: 07:59 hours

SOURCE: Celeste Harbour IFN HQ

Toán Harvir walked briskly into the conference room of the IFN Headquarters at Celeste Harbour and took his seat at the head of the table.

‘Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I’ve gathered you here to inform you that there has been a new development in our war against the Oratan.’

He paused to let this sink in and give himself a chance to gauge the reactions of the different groups arranged around the table. He had called all the major leaders from the different sectors of Arkadia’s colony.

‘As you all know, the influx of colonists and the completion of the revival network has allowed us to secure the colony on Arkadia. A group of colonists, calling themselves the Arkadia Interplanetary Militia, banded together to launch a series of offensives against the Oratan. Thanks to their efforts and the efforts of many other colonists, the enemy forces have been scattered. As you know, with the Oratan threat under control, I decided some time ago to stand down most military forces so they could recover from the initial assaults. However, we are now beginning to receive reports that the Oratan are gathering in multiple camp sites around Sentosa. I must consider sending the troops to the front again to clear out these settlements.’

‘Commodore,’ one of the economic advisors interrupted, ‘I must advise you that financially it is not in our best interests to send the military back to the frontline. The cost of keeping them equipped and in the field is quite prohibitive considering we could be directing the funds to help grow the colony. We would have to curtail our industrial expansion if the troops are deployed.’

‘Thank you for your input. I am aware of this issue, but let me make something very clear,’ Harvir said, focussing all his attention on the economists. ‘I am going to do what’s best for the whole colony. I’m not going to sacrifice the safety of our people simply to ensure we make a quick profit. Long term stability is far more important than quarterly figures. Clear? Good.’

Turning back to the rest of the group, Harvir activated the display in the middle of the table. ‘Now, this is some surveillance footage of one of the more populated Oratan camps. As you can see, it lacks any defensive structures and is unfortified, but these camps still pose a significant threat due to the potential numbers of Oratan they contain.’

He paused to allow everyone to study the footage. The camp was little more than a collection of primitive huts but the Oratan presence was plain to see.

‘Obviously, these camps are a cause for concern, but we should be able to contain them. The reason

I've brought this before you today is because this sudden desire by the enemy to occupy territory marks the first change in strategy that we have seen.'

'Commodore, those brainboxes you got locked away in the labs worked out how the Oratan are able to sustain such large numbers despite how many we've slaughtered?' Ky Fung asked. 'Some of my men and the civvies think the Oratan are actually innumerable, like the Arkadians said in The Signal. The colonists are a hardy bunch but not immune to fear.'

'Our scientists have not discovered anything to suggest how they support their numbers.' Harvir replied. 'One of our hopes is that with the appearance of these camps we will be able to study the creatures more effectively. This may be our first chance to examine how they live. However, I'm not going to put the colony in danger while we wait for the camps to be analysed. I've already given Captain Chiharo the task of coming up with a strategy to wipe them out if it looks like the camps are staging points for another offensive.'

'Commodore, it's possible that there is some environmental factor that is driving the Oratan to make camps now. Some sort of seasonal routine or something,' said Milton Lee's former assistant. 'Whatever it is, we won't be able to find out if the camps are destroyed before we have a chance to study them.'

'I know that, Professor, but I imagine it's also hard to concentrate when there are Oratan trying to rip you apart. If we tried to neutralise a camp for you to study, it'd be my men bearing the brunt of such a venture. I'm not prepared to put them through anything like that at this stage. Remember and learn from what happened to Professor Lee. His insight would have been more valuable now than ever. Unless my hand is forced I don't want to make any hasty moves until we learn more about what we're dealing with. To aid with this I've set up a system that will allow everyone, from the newest colonist to my senior advisors, to be able to report any new discoveries. I'm hoping this will allow us to learn more about Arkadia, as well as the Oratan and these new camps.'

Once again he looked around the table and was reassured to see that no one seemed too unnerved by the news. Chiharo and Fung were already in a deep discussion about tactics and the scientists were beginning to talk about possible avenues of research.

'While I have you all here, there are a few other issues that I would like to cover,' he said before everyone became too engrossed in their conversations. 'Firstly, I'm sure that you have all noticed that we are no longer seeing as much trade between the different planetary colonies. While our local teleporter network is still in place and fully functional, it seems to no longer be giving us access to the wider universe. A team of scientists has been assigned to look into the problem but is yet to uncover any information about what is causing it. Until we hear differently we are going to assume this will be an ongoing issue.'

He held up his hands as his words were greeted with exclamations of frustration. When everyone had quietened he continued.

'There's some good news. Somehow, new colonists are continuing to arrive through the teleporters, but once here they are forced to find passage on a ship like everyone else if they wish to travel off-world. Unfortunately, despite the vigorous scouting of our Fleet, we have received several reports of pirate activity in the area. In response to this we have seen the rise of the Arkadia Star Fleet and other

such groups to combat pirates that elude the IFN, and offer more protected travel to other colonists. It's not exactly safe out there, and that's an economic threat as much as it is a security threat. What this means is that we need to adjust some of our procedures and manufacturing techniques so that our production utilises more materials from Arkadia itself. I have already been working on this issue with our suppliers at PTech, Herman Industries, Lorika Tek and MAKO, as well as our Gyro FAP team. They are now all ready to move ahead with blueprint upgrades. I believe this will prove to be a beneficial process as it will help us to create a more self-sustaining economy on the planet.'

'I'm going to hand over to the representative from the Arkadian Colonial Administration for a moment. They are better informed than I am to discuss these economic changes.'

The ACA representative stood and gestured at the display. A large map of Sentosa appeared across the table.

'Thank you, Commodore. As everyone here is aware, most of our efforts have been turned to ensuring that the colony is able to adequately defend itself once again. The Oratan invasion stretched our resources to the limit and it was only the dedicated production of materials such as Oil and Lysterium that allowed us to return to pre-invasion stocks. There had been a standing order in place for all PTech equipment to locate such materials as a priority. Once our supply of these particular resources was replenished, we had PTech reprogram the equipment to allow them to discover a more balanced variety of materials.'

The map came to life with different areas highlighted by a complex array of colours representing the known resources.

'This seems to be the mineral distribution as we've been able to map it. We have once again arranged for PTech to upgrade its software to give us what we now expect to be a viable, sustainable supply of resources. They tell us that they are ready to go live with their next software upgrade, and that the changes have been fully tested on Earth. The reprogramming is a major factor in our efforts to form an effective economy, and it is our hope that this time round it will bring us the resource availability that we need,' the representative said, returning to his seat.

Harvir spoke once again. 'There's one final report that I believe you should all hear because there is the possibility that it is related to the Oratan threat. I'm going to hand over to Dr Zhen now, who has been studying the phenomenon.'

'Thanks, Toán,' Sundari said as she stood up. 'I'll try to be quick so that we can all get out of here. When I'm not at the Archaeological Society I have taken to studying some of the wildlife that surrounds us. Most of you will be familiar with the research of the biologists, as well as firsthand experiences of most creatures, but just recently I've noticed the appearance of a few new animals. Firstly, there is the Feran, a small flying creature that has emerged along the east coast of Sentosa. There is also the Ostelok, a larger, flightless avian-like creature that has appeared near the Celeste Quarry. While the creatures themselves are interesting, what intrigues me most is the fact that they have only recently been sighted in areas with heavy colonial traffic. It seems strange that they have not been seen earlier. One possible reason for their sudden appearance might be a planetary cycle that we are not yet aware of. Supposing this is true, it could also be the reason behind the Oratan's change in behaviour. I'm not saying this is the case, but I would like to recommend that some effort be put into studying these new animals to learn what we can about them.'

Sundari sat back down with a smile. Harvir got to his feet but before he could speak a lieutenant rushed into the room and saluted.

‘Commodore, Captain, we have a problem. One of the equipment supply ships has been attacked on its descent towards Celeste Harbour. It survived, but sustained heavy damage and we believe most of its cargo is now scattered around the area.’

‘Our recovery troops are currently occupied elsewhere,’ Chiharo told Harvir. ‘They won’t be able to get in there and clear the area for a while.’

‘We’ll have to finish this meeting later. I don’t want those supplies falling into the hands of the Oratan.’ Harvir said to the group, before striding towards the door. ‘Chiharo, with me. Lieutenant, I want a full report ready by the time I reach the Operations Room.’

4.2: DESERT DISCOVERY

DATE: 26 MAY 3009

TIME: 11:49 hours

LOCATION: Sentosa, Desert

The hot sun burned down on Chambers’ unprotected head as he once again thought of the hat he had left back at his quarters. He stepped into the shade provided by the jaws of the giant stone Riptor head he had been painstakingly excavating for the last couple of weeks, and sat down with his back against its throat. ‘What the hell were we thinking last night?’ He asked Kai Tero, who was working next to him. ‘I know it’s been twelve months since we got here and everything, but I haven’t stayed out that late in ages.’

‘We volunteered for this, remember?’ Tero said, ‘And we both know why we did. Sundari said this was one of the most promising sites she’s seen. A structure like this hasn’t been discovered anywhere else on Arkadia.’

Chambers couldn’t deny it but grumbled under his breath anyway, his head pounding incessantly from his hangover. He went to stand up, pushing against the wall when it suddenly collapsed. He fell backwards in a shower of rock and his curses quickly turned into cries of pain as he rolled down a series of steps.

He came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, bruised and winded. For a long moment he lay struggling to suck down a breath.

‘Chambers! Chambers, are you alright?’ Tero yelled from the entrance.

‘I’m alright.’ Chambers called up once he got his breath back. He sat up slowly and tried to work out where he had landed. He was at the bottom of a flight of stairs, at a bend in a passage that was lit

somehow by devices in the walls.

'Hold on, we have to move some of this rubble to fit through.' Tero said. 'Just stay there.'

Chambers examined his surroundings. The floor where he sat was dusty but obviously artificial. The stone paving was too uniform and smooth to be anything else. Was it possible that he had fallen into one of the Oratan's underground lairs? Their briefing had said the closest camp was some distance to the north, but who knew how many more encampments were lying just under the colony's feet?

Chambers hardly dared to breathe, expecting the sounds of approaching Oratan at any moment. He listened carefully but could hear nothing from deeper down the passage despite the noise of his fall. After a moment of consideration, the craftsmanship of his surroundings was enough to convince him he was safe. He could not imagine the Oratan creating such a structure. He got to his feet, smiling despite his aches, realising he may have stumbled onto the colony's biggest discovery yet. Deciding he couldn't wait for the others, he started to slowly make his way further down the passage. At the bottom of the next flight of stairs he was greeted by the sight of several Riptors. Momentarily freezing at the sight of the aggressive creatures, he chuckled to himself when he realised they were just statues lining the walls. As he got closer he noted they were so detailed, that they seemed almost life-like.

He continued onwards, passing through an ornately decorated antechamber and more Riptor statues before he came finally to a large, well-lit room. The entrance was guarded by two imposing warrior sculptures. They bore no resemblance to the Oratan, and he would have bet his last PED that they were Arkadians. He gazed around the room in wonder before turning and running back towards the entrance. He soon met Tero, accompanied by the rest of the dig team and half the troops sent to guard the expedition, already making their way through the passage.

'Kai, follow me. You won't believe what I've found.'

He led them back to the massive chamber and laughed with joy at their expressions when they saw the treasure trove he had discovered. In the centre of the room was a collection of pots similar to those that had been found at the surface, but that wasn't what drew their attention. All around the room there were hundreds of items in stacks and piles as though they had been hurriedly stored.

Within half an hour they had catalogued some of the most interesting objects in the room and sent them back to the teleporter. No one doubted that these artefacts were Arkadian. The collection was made up of all kinds of equipment ranging from a number of weapons and armours to the simplest of pots. To top it off, everything was in extremely good condition. There was even a device with a display that unbelievably had the faintest power charge remaining. Chambers wished that he could be the one to discover its secrets, but decoding devices was a foreign skill to him.

The greatest find so far had been what appeared to be the last stand of a squad of Arkadian soldiers. The team had found nearly a dozen complete sets of scorched and scarred battle gear strewn around the room, arranged in what the troops recognised as defensive positions. The Arkadian formation appeared to have been set in order to protect a series of intricately designed doors embedded in the walls of the chamber, which were sealed with a technology unlike anything the dig team had encountered before. The armour sets had been immediately tagged and shipped back to Celeste Harbour for detailed analysis, but the doors themselves were an enigma. Chambers didn't have a clue how to unravel their

secrets as the team's basic tools couldn't work the complex locking mechanisms. No doubt when the scientists arrived they would be able to work out how the doors opened.

Chambers and Tero soon had the next collection of items topside and almost loaded for transport. These would be the last to go over land to the teleporters as the IFN were organising aerial transport for the rest. Chambers was trying to decide if the last spot should be filled with another suit of armour or a container of shortbladed weapons that emanated with cold, when he was interrupted by one of the troops stationed as a lookout on the hill above the tunnel entrance.

'Sarge!'

'What is it?' the Sergeant called back.

'We've got Oratan incoming from the north! They're still some distance away but moving directly towards us. We've been spotted.'

'How many?'

'Looks like nearly a hundred, Sarge, spreading out to surround us. Way more than we can handle.'

The Sergeant ran a short way up the hill and took one look at the enemy before hastily interrupting the excited chatter on the communicators that everyone in the expedition carried. 'Alright, everyone back to the surface immediately, we're heading back to the teleporter.'

'No!' Tero yelled, wishing they'd installed a teleporter at the digsite. 'We can't just abandon what we've found here.'

'We're taking this load back to the teleporter and I'll seal up the chamber as best I can. Gather your gear, we're leaving.' The Sergeant barked.

Chambers quickly tied the shortblades to the rest of the items as the last of the group came running out of the Riptor's mouth. Chambers looked around and saw the Sergeant finish burying something in the loose sand a short way up the hill before sprinting back down to the group.

'Alright, civilians around the transport.' The Sergeant said. 'Troops, form up around them. On my command, we're going to skirt this hill to the west and hit the Oratan flank while it's still weak enough. We punch through these bastards, then we make for the teleporter as fast as we can.'

'But, what about the passage? We can't leave it for the Oratan to find.' Chambers said.

'I said I'd deal with it. They're nearly on us. Everyone ready? Go!' The troops rounded the hill and opened fire on the Oratan rabble, creating a hole in the thin line that the group passed through in seconds.

‘Run, but stay in formation.’ The Sergeant yelled, and everyone obeyed, quickly opening a small lead on the Oratan. Chambers ran like he had never run before, too afraid to look back as he listened in terror to the gunfire and the cries of the fallen Oratan behind him. Suddenly, everything was drowned out by an explosion and he risked a quick glance over his shoulder. His eyes widened in shock at the sight of sand filling the air as a small landslide raced down the hill. I hope it’s enough to cover the Riptor head, he thought to himself as he strained to keep up with the others.

They had only gone a few hundred metres before Chambers’ breaths began to rasp raggedly from his throat.

‘They’re gaining on us.’ He heard one of the troops cry.

‘Faster!’ The Sergeant yelled, but Chambers’ legs were already burning as he struggled over the soft sand. Desperately fighting for more speed, he could hear the other archaeologists labouring just as hard. He could tell they weren’t going to make it. But even as that thought formed he noticed a new sound and looked up with relief to see a pair of IFN gunships appearing overhead.

The gunships fired as they came, buying the retreating group precious seconds, before circling to land in front of them. Before they could touch down, a rocket leapt out of the horde of Oratan and struck a gunship square in its side. With a deafening roar, the wounded craft rolled over and exploded into flames. Cursing, the Sergeant steered the group towards the remaining craft.

‘Civilians inside, quick.’ The Sergeant shouted. ‘Grab what you can carry and leave the rest; we’ll try to draw the Oratan away.’

Chambers scrambled in with the others and as soon as they were inside, the gunship took off towards Celeste Harbour as the troops continued on towards the teleporter. It hurt him to have to leave most of their newly discovered items behind, but there was no choice. As he watched, groups of Oratan chased the gunship and the remaining troops as they sprinted away, but some remained to swarm over the abandoned relics. He could only hope that they would not discover the cache in the hillside.

4.3: BEYOND THE GOLDEN DOOR

DATE: 6 MAR 3010

TIME: 09:00 hours

LOCATION: Arkadian Golden Door, Aakas

Alice O’Locklan stood at the edge of the broken balcony, looking at the pool far below. Water sprayed from cracks in the walls, casting shifting shadows across the giant statue. Even though scans showed that this chamber had not seen use for many years she felt uneasy. She didn’t fear an attack but had always hated being cut off from the sky. However, she was an IFN Commando and led the best scouts on Arkadia, so she was used to venturing into places that made her uncomfortable.

She was within the chamber beyond the Arkadian Golden Door that had only just been opened for

the first time. Six months earlier the Archaeological Society had offered a million Arkoin reward for the first colonist to craft the Golden Key, which had recently been claimed by Svena Faraday. Since it had been so hard to open the Door, Commodore Harvir had ordered that the military would accompany any initial search, and O'Locklan's experience made her the perfect choice to lead such a mission.

'How's the view, Granny?' Sergeant Hieuro asked from where the squad waited behind her.

'Prettier than you, that's for sure.' O'Locklan said. She turned to Hieuro with a dangerous glint in her eyes. 'Granny?'

He smirked at her. 'You're all wrinkled and tanned. Maybe if you spent less time outside you'd look as good as I do.'

'Call me Granny again and we'll see who ends up looking worse. The rest of you, wipe those grins off. HQ has ordered us to scout the place and set up terminal, teleporter and network access for the Archaeological Society. Something is blocking our scans from penetrating beyond this main chamber but the scientists believe a terminal will be able to cut through any interference. Got that? Right, well it appears we finally get to meet our tech expert provided by the Archaeologists.' She said, nodding towards the entrance as a small man appeared behind the squad.

'Lieutenant O'Locklan? I'm Dr Reginald, your scientific and archaeological liaison for this mission. I've worked closely with both Professor Lee and Dr Zhen and have conducted extensive studies on the Aakas relics. I expect to be so busy examining everything down there that you'll probably have to tie me up and drag me along. Or if we run into any trouble I should be able to find you the fastest route to the best hiding spot.' Reginald said, raising a few laughs from the squad.

'I like this one. Can we keep him, Lieutenant?' Lefevre, the squad's sniper, said with a smile.

'You'd just be happy to have someone along who hides as well as you do.' She replied. Turning to Reginald she said, 'Once we're down there you follow my orders and stay out of the way if things go bad. We aren't babysitters.'

'Don't worry, Lieutenant, I've done this before. I know the drill; I was at Defiant Firebase when the Oratan attacked. I'm more than handy with the Hermans. So where's the path down?' Reginald asked.

'There is no path. Something broke off this balcony and it smashed its way through the bridges below. Sergeant Hieuro, I believe you were volunteering earlier to lead our expedition. Why don't you show the Doc how we're getting down?'

'At once, Ma'am.' Hieuro saluted smartly, stepped forward and dove over the edge. A few seconds later they heard a splash. 'All clear.' Hieuro said over the transmitter. 'Water is even deeper than it looks, which will make it hard for us to get to the lower levels. I'll see if I can find the best way down.'

'Uh, you know, I can think of several better ways of getting down there—' Reginald began.

'Better, but not quicker. It's your turn Doc. Try not to get hit by the equipment when we throw it over. Take a deep breath.' O'Locklan said as she gave him a sharp push that sent him tumbling over the edge. The rest of her squad dropped their equipment with special flotation devices attached and quickly followed them down.

While the squad was making their way down, Hieuro found a hole in the wall above the waterline caused by the falling debris. Once they passed through the makeshift passage they stood within a small, three sided room that looked as if it had remained undisturbed for centuries. While they assembled in the room Reginald paced impatiently as he fiddled with some of his equipment.

'Lieutenant, I'm not getting any connection to my counterparts on the surface anymore.' he said.

'I have no link to HQ either,' O'Locklan said, checking her own systems. 'We're cut off from the teleporter network, as we suspected might happen. Everyone stay on guard; we have no safety net now and we haven't even begun to discover the mystery of this place. Reginald, one of those equipment packs has the terminal for a connection to the teleporter network. It should have enough power to link us back into the network and get our comms back online, so get that set up as quickly as you can. If we run into any surprises I want a route out of here. Sergeant, you and Lefevre stay here and keep him safe. Make sure we don't get flanked by anything coming through the corridor leading towards the surface. The rest of us are going to continue the mission and scout ahead.'

O'Locklan ordered her squad around a bend that instantly opened up into a huge hall. Around the edges stood the tall warrior statues that could be found throughout Aakas. Even at a quick glance O'Locklan could see they were chipped and scarred.

'Watch those statues; they look like the Sentries mentioned during the briefing.' O'Locklan said as they entered the hall. There were too many entrances for her liking and there were small signs that it had seen recent use. She could see faint scuff marks in the layer of dust on the ground.

They hadn't gone far into the hall when a sudden roar shattered the silence. 'Defensive formation!' O'Locklan yelled, her squad in motion before she'd finished the order. As the cry faded the Sentries erupted into action, assaulting the squad from every direction, brandishing swords that glowed red hot with every swing.

'Take 'em down.' O'Locklan ordered. The scouts calmly opened fire, shattering the enemy in the hall one by one. As the last one crumbled and the sound of the guns faded another roar shook the chamber and more of the enemy appeared from every entrance.

'Looks like these guys are serious. Fall back to the entrance,' O'Locklan ordered. 'Don't let them get past and cut us off from the others. Sergeant Hieuro, what's your status back there?' She yelled as the Sentries continued to arrive in increasing numbers.

'All clear here. No sign of a threat from the main chamber.'

'Do we have a connection with the network yet?'

‘Not yet, should be online in a minute. Lieutenant, the ground is shaking in here.’ Hieuro said. As O’Locklan focused on the sensation, a giant Sentry crashed through the other entrance at the far end of the hall.

‘Reginald, get that network link up and running now! We need heavier weapons for this.’ O’Locklan’s said. ‘Lefevre, get up here. Your rifle might be the only thing that can slow this beast down.’

‘In position, Lieutenant.’ Lefevre said seconds later as he appeared by O’Locklan’s side.

‘Good. We’ll focus our fire on the rest; see if you can’t keep the big one off us until Reginald gets the teleporter online. Whatever’s down here must be valuable to have something that big guarding it.’

Lefevre sighted down his scope, breathing steadily. He tried his best to ignore the distractions of weapon fire and the thundering Sentries only metres from him as they continued their assault. Focusing his attention completely on the giant making its way across the hall, he released his breath in a slow stream, counting his heartbeats.

He pulled the trigger.

4.4: UNDERGROUND - PART I - CLEANUP

DATE: 4 MAR 3011

TIME: 06:45 hours

LOCATION: Courageous Firebase

The sun had barely risen above the horizon but already the clean-up was well underway after the latest attack. IFN troopers and civilian militia moved amongst the mounds of Oratan corpses surrounding the walls of Courageous Firebase, stripping anything that looked like it would be of interest to the Science Division. Everything else was dragged into piles and set alight. All around the base, dozens of pyres coughed greasy black columns of smoke into the still morning air. Occasional shots rang out as the few remaining Oratan fought to the death.

Theresa Green was walking among a group of corpses, checking them for life and tech, when she was suddenly struck hard from behind and knocked off her feet. She rolled onto her back as she hit the ground, desperately trying to bring her weapon to bear on the Oratan Miner trying to impale her. Before she could pull the trigger the Oratan’s head exploded, showering her in blood, bone and brain matter.

“Goddamnit!” she yelled, trying to wipe the gore from her armour.

“You missed one, Scrappy,” a voice said through her communicator.

“Yeah, you don’t say. Thanks Longshot.” She winced as she got to her feet.

“I’ve got your back,” Jim Regan, the team’s sniper, replied.

“Ahh! Oh frag it, I think cracked a rib,” Green moaned.

“Hey Double J, Scrappy got her tail waxed, she might need a bit of care and attention,” Regan chuckled.

“Okay, on my way,” came the reply from the team’s medic, John Jones.

“Better bring the good meds, John, she sounds cranky,” Regan teased.

“Come down here and I’ll show you how cranky I am,” Green snapped.

“Give it a rest,” the team’s XO, Lieutenant Jenny Edwards said sternly. “Longshot, did you see where that Oratan came from?”

“Yeah Ironhide, it was hiding behind some rocks just near one of the upper entrances to the caves,” Regan replied.

“Alright, looks like we might have some holding out in the caves then,” Edwards said, “I’ll let the Lieutenant Commander know. Team, prep for clean and sweep of the cave system below Courageous.”

“OoRah!” The squad answered together.

Alpha Team gathered at a rocky outcrop near the cave’s entrance, awaiting the arrival of the team’s leader, Lieutenant Commander Derek Knowles, known to the team as “Bossman”. As he approached, he was finishing a conversation through his communicator.

“Yes Ma’am, will do,” he said, terminating the connection. “Okay, that was Captain Chiharo with our orders. Apparently, these come straight from the Commodore himself.”

A low whistle greeted the news.

“So, what’s the Big Kahuna have to say, Bossman?” Regan asked.

“Ha! Only you could call Commodore Harvir that and not get latrine duty, Regan,” Knowles said with a smirk.

“Well, we go back a long way,” Regan grinned.

“Anyway, we’ve been tasked with clearing out the caves and seeing if there’s anything down there that the Oratan are interested in,” Knowles continued, “They’ve hit Courageous several times lately, more than anywhere else, and Command wants to know what’s so special about this place.”

“And,” Edwards said, gesturing to the large pack of demolitions equipment next to Green, “I take it by Scrappy’s toys here, that if we find anything interesting we are to blow it sky-high, Sir?”

“That’s right, but only if we know what it is and can’t take it out with us. We move out in five mikes so get your kit squared away and be on the bounce.”

Knowles led Alpha Team into the cave system, taking the ramps down into the caverns beneath the mountaintop base. Reaching the first cavern, they spotted a freshly dug tunnel in one of the side walls that must have been made by the Oratan. Scanning the area, they proceeded cautiously through the new tunnel, figuring that whatever the Oratan were after, or protecting, it must be somewhere nearby. After crossing several intersecting tunnels, they came to a dead end. Knowles was about to turn them around and begin exploring another section when he spotted something glowing at floor level at the end of the tunnel.

“Scrappy,” Knowles said, “check out that glow and report back, we’ll cover our six. With all the twists and turns down here, we may have missed a quiet Oratan hiding in a corner. We don’t want the buggers sneaking up on us while we are looking at something shiny.”

“You got it, Bossman,” Green said.

“Seems pretty quiet down here,” Jones said.

“Keep it zipped Double J, you’ll anger Lootius with comments like that. And you know she’ll make you eat your words.” Regan said.

“Really Longshot? I never pegged you for someone to subscribe to that bunk,” Jones said, turning to the sniper. No sooner were the words out of his mouth, than an Oratan appeared at the end of the tunnel, firing wildly and showering Jones with shrapnel as the laser bolts struck the wall beside him.

The team instantly returned fire, quickly downing the lone Oratan before it could get off more than a few inaccurate shots. Lowering his still smoking rifle, Longshot slapped Jones on the shoulder.

“Never hurts to have a little bit of healthy superstition,” Regan said, grinning.

“Jones, say something like that again and I’ll shoot you myself,” Edwards growled.

“Oh, not you too, Ma’am?” complained Double J.

“Uh, guys...” Green interrupted.

“What is it, Scrapy?” Knowles asked.

“We might want to get our butts out of here, Sir. This looks like some kind of tunnelling charge and I think it’s pretty close to going off.”

“Ok team, let’s shift ourselves.” Knowles ordered.

“I think someone might have an objection to that, Bossman. We’ve got contacts back here,” Regan said, pointing down the tunnel where several more Oratan had emerged from the deep shadows and were advancing on the team.

“Open fire!” Edwards yelled and the team brought their weapons to bear on the new threat. More Oratan emerged from the shadows as the team cut them down one by one.

“Dammit, there seems to be no end to them. Where are they coming from?” Knowles wondered.

“Sir, we need to get out of he- ” Scrapy started, when a blast erupted from behind them, cutting her off and knocking everyone flat.

As the smoke and dust cleared, the team struggled to get back up and confront the Oratan they were battling moments ago, when a piercing scream cut through the air. The team turned to see a huge Oratan Miner disappearing back into the hole created by the blast, carrying the squirming, screaming form of Theresa Green.

“Scrapy!” Jones yelled, as he and Regan started to chase after the retreating form.

“Regan! Jones! Stop!” Edwards commanded.

“What?” Jones said, skidding to a halt and glaring at the XO.

“Ironhide, you and Longshot grab Scrapy’s gear and go set it up at that last cross tunnel. Arm it, set the timer for thirty seconds and get after us. Looks like those Oratan shooting at us have disappeared for now, so one of you rig it to blow whilst the other provides cover.” Knowles ordered. “Double J and I will start after Green, so don’t hang around polishing your rifles unless you want to find your own way out again.”

“Yes Sir,” Regan said as he grabbed Green’s pack and ran down the tunnel with Edwards.

“No sense leaving an open door for them,” Jones nodded.

“Exactly. Now, let’s go get our girl and give these bastards a taste of Commando justice!”

Moments later, a couple of guards patrolling the walls of the Firebase had to grip the railings as the ground shook beneath them. As the new tunnel collapsed, a low rumbling echoed up from the caves, followed by a cloud of dust and dirt, causing a flock of birds to scatter away screeching.

4.4: UNDERGROUND - PART II – BREAKTHROUGH

DATE: 11 MAR 3011

TIME: 10:00 hours

LOCATION: Arkadian Underground

‘Welcome Director,’ Xao Peng, the P-Tech liaison, greeted as Director Edward Bishop stepped off the teleporter. ‘Glad you could make it. Did you have any problems finding the place?’

‘You know damn well that I did,’ Bishop replied. ‘I have no idea why this area is segregated from the surface network.’

‘Well Sir,’ Pang said, ‘After the initial discovery, we received orders to collapse the entrance tunnels and to restrict all access to a single teleporter. We believe this cave system is now completely isolated from the surface and the only contact point between the surface and us is this dedicated teleporter. That’s all I know. I don’t have a high enough security clearance for them to tell me more.’

‘Well I’m the Director of the ACA, so my security level should be sufficient to get someone to tell me what’s going on. This is supposed to be a joint P-Tech, IFN and ACA project. We’re about to begin issuing deeds to the general population, so why would they be making security access so tight?’ Bishop said, his face growing red with frustration. Peng opened his mouth to reply but Bishop cut him off before he could say a thing. ‘Bah! I’m tired of being jerked around with all this cloak and dagger rubbish. Harvir never struck me as being the type to participate in this sort of idiocy.’

‘I don’t believe the orders came from local IFN HQ, Sir,’ Peng said. ‘I’ve heard that they came directly from Earth.’

‘Really?’ Bishop said, startled. ‘That is interesting. Why are they taking such an interest in this place?’

‘I’m not sure, Sir. Now, if you’d like to follow me, we have a short drive to reach the control centre that’s overseeing the last of the excavations.’

The two men climbed into a vehicle and drove deeper into the caves. A few minutes later they stopped at the entrance to another cavern.

‘Here we are, Sir,’ Peng said. ‘Follow me please. As you can see, we have some of the new Badger mining bots already running in preparation for when open up the final areas. They have been specially

developed for mining in this underground environment as standard mining practices don't yield results here the same way they do on the surface. The bedrock seems to be of higher density than the ground on the surface. This means the standard P-Tech equipment doesn't penetrate as deep or as wide as normal. However, we have also found that deposits here appear to be richer if you do find one.'

'You don't say,' Bishop said, looking over one of the new mining bots. 'It will be interesting to see how that affects P-Tech's mining strategies.'

'We are still trying to work that out ourselves, Director.' Peng grinned. 'In fact we hope that a combination of the public market deeds we are releasing as well as the potential to hit a huge pocket will encourage the general populace to get more involved, instead of the bigger conglomerates controlling everything.'

'That's not all we've discovered down here though,' Peng continued, 'we've also come across several new species. Initial studies suggest they are completely isolated from the surface and have developed completely independently from anything above ground. Coupled with the Arkadian technology we've encountered, we believe that this area may have served as some sort of biological testing area for the Arkadians. There's already plenty of interest from scientists, hunters and the like. We expect it to take some time before we discover anything concrete but, if you like, I can arrange for you to meet with the science team while you're down here?'

'I'll take you up on that offer later. I would like to get a look at them myself.' Bishop stopped suddenly as he spotted a large floating green ball being worked on by a technician.

'What in Lootius's name is that?'

'Ah,' Peng hesitated slightly, 'we have some of the new IFN Defence Bots deployed down here, though as you can see this one is down for maintenance. They are currently only operating in a closed section. I can't take you there as I don't have the necessary codes myself.'

'I have level eight clearance, Mr Peng,' Bishop said. 'With that, I should be able to go anywhere.'

'Actually, Sir, it's not so much about your security clearance as an IFN transponder code. If you don't have the correct codes the Defence Bots tag you as hostile and will attack.'

Their conversation was interrupted as a klaxon sounded and red lights started flashing around the tunnel.

'That's to signal they are ready to blast out the final section of rock to open up the last cavern,' Peng said. 'We need to go to the control centre with everyone else; it's a precaution just in case the blasting causes any structural collapses. Better to be safe than sorry.'

The two men entered the control centre, Peng manoeuvring them to the back of the room so they could observe without getting in the way. Technicians ran back and forth, checking settings and equipment for the last time. The rest of the cavern was still full of movement as personnel moved other

equipment back to a safe distance.

Once everyone was clear and accounted for, the countdown began, a timer on the control centre's bulkhead ticking steadily down from one minute.

The tension in the room became palpable as the timer passed ten seconds. At five seconds, Bishop could feel the excitement threatening to burst out of him. As the count finally reached zero there was a slight pause. Bishop, full of anticipation, turned to ask Peng why there was no explosion, only to be stopped short by an earth shattering roar, the delayed result of a huge explosion in the final cavern. The entire control centre heaved and shook in its suspension field as clouds of flame, dust and debris filled the outer cavern and tunnel. Alarms sounded even as people started to recover.

'That was far bigger than I expected' Bishop said, trying to see through the haze. Giving up, he turned to see an ashen faced Peng pointing out the window.

'What is it?' Bishop asked.

Peng stood trembling, unable to move. As Bishop took a step closer to the window, a blurry figure suddenly appeared through the dust filled air. Bishop stumbled back as the figure materialised into an Oratan Miner, swinging its massive pickaxe and shattering the window. Green laser bolts suddenly filled the air as screams echoed throughout the caverns and tunnels. Bishop scrambled back further into the room as the enormous creature climbed through and began laying waste to anyone within reach.

'Peng!' Bishop screamed at the liaison who stood frozen in the corner of the room. 'Come on man, we need to get out of here!' When Peng still didn't move, he grabbed the smaller man and dragged him out the door, fighting against the rush as everyone tried to escape the manic attack of the Oratan.

Outside, people were running in every direction, trying to escape what was now an oncoming tide of bloodthirsty creatures swarming through the hole caused by the blast. Bishop pulled Peng towards the vehicle they had arrived in, all but throwing the catatonic man into the passenger seat. As he rounded the front of the vehicle to the driver's seat he came face to face with an Oratan, who swung the butt of its crossbow at him, catching him in the side of the head and knocking him to the ground. Dazed, he could only stare as the Oratan loomed over him. There was a sudden flash of silver and Bishop was deluged in the Oratan's blood as the creature was ripped apart. He lay stunned, watching the whirling armatures of the Badger mining bot that had just saved his life as it turned and drove straight at the oncoming horde of Oratan, sparks raining from its control interface. Bishop got to his feet and scrambled into the vehicle, glancing at the whimpering form of Peng in the other side, who seemed to have recovered some of his senses, his hands flying over his Q-pad.

'What are you doing?' Bishop demanded.

'I overloaded the control systems of the Badgers,' Peng stammered. 'Their safety systems have been destroyed so they will all basically attack everything they detect, attempting to mine anything with a valuable material content...including us!'

'Lootius's beard! We need to get out of here,' Bishop said, slamming his foot down on the throttle

pedal so the vehicle leapt forward, easily running down an Oratan Prospector as they speed into the exit corridor.

As they neared a cross tunnel, laser shots rang out and the hovering green spherical shape of an IFN Defence Bot appeared before them. Panicking, Bishop jerked the wheel, but only managed to slide the vehicle straight into the Bot as it fired at something down the other tunnel. As he tried desperately to restart the engine, the machine rotated and focussed a baleful blue eye upon him, its internal electronic systems scanning him. He remembered what Peng had said about them registering codes and felt every hair of his body raise in fear. He shut his eyes, waiting for the inevitable, only to hear another volley of Oratan lasers pepper the Defence Bot from behind. The bot spun about and began firing relentlessly back at the creatures, its systems prioritising the Oratan as the more urgent threat. Bishop finally succeeded in getting the engine started and tore off down the corridor again, shaking with relief.

After several tense minutes he finally sighted the blue glow of the teleporter near the end of the tunnel. As they passed into the cavern, the ground exploded under them, sending the vehicle spinning through the air before crashing back to the floor and rolling until it crashed against the wall. Shaking his head to clear it, Bishop said a silent thanks to the vehicle's safety systems. Undoing his harness, he looked over at Peng, whose eyes were squeezed tightly shut.

'Come on! We need to get out of here and alert the IFN!' He said, slapping the release on Peng's harness and hoisting him out of the vehicle.

He turned to drag Peng towards the teleporter but stopped instantly, finally noticing a group of snarling Oratan blocking the way, their weapons pointed straight at him.

'Oh crap...' He muttered.



‘Ni!’ Peng squeaked, his eyes rolling up into his head as he fainted. Bishop dragged the unconscious man behind a nearby piece of debris.

The Oratan fired and Bishop, crouched alongside the crumpled form of Peng, tried to make himself as small a target as possible, as laser bolts struck all around him. With his head down, awaiting the killing blow from a frenzied Oratan, he was startled as a sudden cacophony of BLP rounds, lasers bolts and a regular thundering boom filled the cavern around him. Bishop looked up to see what new horror was being visited upon him just as the noise abruptly stopped. There was not a single Oratan left standing.

‘Morning, Director,’ a voice said from behind him, ‘nice day for a drive.’

Bishop looked up into the grinning face of an IFN trooper, a massive BLP rifle resting on his shoulder.

‘Oh, thank the spirits,’ Bishop said fervently. ‘I don’t know who you are, but thank you.’

‘Alpha Team, No. 42 IFN Commandos at your service, Sir,’ another voice said as Bishop was helped to his feet.

‘Lieutenant Commander Derek Knowles. Nice to meet you, Director Bishop.’

‘Alpha Team?’ Bishop said, trying to regain his composure. ‘But you were reported missing a week ago, after the last attack on Courageous!’

‘Yes, well, we got a little side-tracked retrieving one of our personnel from the Oratan,’ Bossman indicated Theresa Green. ‘Unfortunately, something about this place has been blocking our communications ever since we left the area immediately under Courageous.’

‘It didn’t help that we stumbled into the secret Oratan frat house either,’ John Jones chimed in.

‘And we just couldn’t let them keep our little prom queen,’ Regan finished.

‘Bite me, Longshot,’ Scrappy snarled.

‘Stow it, you lot,’ Ironhide said, ‘And get to your defensive positions. We don’t need any Oratan taking us by surprise while you gossip like a pack of schoolkids.’

In seconds, the team had reconfigured itself, with Bishop and Peng protected in the centre of the formation.

‘Move out, Alpha,’ Knowles said, ‘let’s get the Director topside and report in.’

‘OoRah!’ the team replied.

4.5: LEGAL DILEMMA - PART I

DATE: 2 JULY 3011

TIME: 14:27 hours

LOCATION: Arkadian Underground

Blazej and Daryna's discussion about the Wombana's big brain, was suddenly interrupted by a cry for help from near one of the revival terminals in the main underground cave. They rushed to the terminal in time to help the poor figure up. They could hardly recognize Funanya Nwosu, one of the miners they had got to know as a regular down in the Arkadian Underground. It was obvious he had been severely beaten by someone.

'What happened?' Daryna asked with panic in her voice while she and Blazej helped Funanya up on his feet.

'Smugglers...' Funanya moaned with difficulty. 'The Smugglers...' was all he could say before his legs couldn't carry him any longer.

Blazej and Daryna laid him down on the barren cave floor and fumbled after their Gyro FAP's as more people came rushing to offer aid or investigate the commotion.

After some successful applications with their FAP's, Funanya's face started to look like something that could be described as human again as his vital signs came back to normal range. Slowly, he opened his blood stained eyes and looked up at Blazej and Daryna.

'The Smugglers...they attacked me.' He continued with a sobbing voice.

'What?' said Daryna with surprise while she held his hand. 'Why would they do such a thing?'

'They said that I was trespassing since the Underground is their domain now.' He explained, still very fatigued. 'They forced me to hand over all of the treasure I had mined and after that they beat me up as 'a lesson for all colonists'. I tried to defend myself, but there were too many of them. There was nothing I could do.'

'We must go after them!!!' Blazej said jumping to his feet in anger.

The gathered crowd of hunters and miners who had heard Funanya's story agreed loudly and pulled

their guns and other weapons. Some turned immediately and ran for their vehicles in order to take up a pursuit.

‘Wait...’ croaked Funanya, coughing up some blood. ‘They told me something else...’ he continued with difficulty.

‘What did they say?’ Daryna asked anxiously while helping him on his side so he could spit out the blood.

Funanya dried his mouth with the back of his hand. He could hardly breathe.

‘They said...’ he continued after a painful breath ‘... that we have forty-eight hours to evacuate and abandon the Underground. After that they will show no mercy for those who they find down here.’

Daryna looked at Blazej near panic, fear etched clearly on her face. Blazej’s face was like stone and his eyes were black with anger and hatred.

‘What do we do now?’ she asked him.

‘We go after them.’ he replied shortly, ‘You take care of Funanya and contact the IFN and ACA’. He turned and ran to an armed Valkyrie that was waiting for him. The driver was already in and revving the engine impatiently as a sign that he was eager to set off.

‘Payback time...’ Blazej thought for himself while cocking his Herman ASI-44 Arctic.

The hours passed by. Daryna and Funanya, who was now fully patched up, watched as one by one, the spontaneous Smuggler-hunters came back through the teleporter in a broken state, both mentally and physically. Their armours showed clear evidence that the Smugglers were not a bunch of people to be trifled with.

Finally Blazej showed up in the teleporters blue light. His face was dirty and his left arm was bleeding heavily. He stepped down from the teleporter and was immediately helped by some miners with FAP’s.

Daryna and Funanya approached him. They could tell by the sad expression that things hadn’t gone as planned.

‘Have you contacted the ACA and the IFN?’ Blazej asked Daryna while his wounds were cared for.

'Yes, I have.' She replied. 'The Director also talked to Funanya so he could get first-hand information about what happened.'

'So where the hell are they?' Blazej asked while looking around for any sign of either an ACA representative or IFN soldiers.

'I don't know.' She sighed and shrugged. 'The Director said he would contact the IFN at once and I haven't heard anything from him since then.'

'Something isn't right,' Blazej stated, 'I don't know what it is but they should have gotten down here a long time ago.'

'So what do we do now?' Funanya wondered.

'My suggestion is that we make our stand here at the main teleporter.' Blazej said with a brainstorming look in his face. 'If we focus on holding the main teleporter we can at least hold that one open for reinforcement when it finally decides to show up. We have to leave the task to root out The Smugglers to IFN. The Smugglers are too many and too well armed for us to handle right now.'

'Sounds like a plan.' said Funanya.



4.6: LEGAL DILEMMA - PART II

DATE: 2 JULY 3011

TIME: 15:13 hours

LOCATION: The Arkadian Colonial Administration HQ

‘A militia?!’ The ACA Director Edward Bishop roared in astonishment. Even though he was sitting behind his desk, he stretched out both arms to underline his astonishment.

Lieutenant Commander Derek Knowles, standing at ease, cleared his throat and gently replied: ‘Yes Sir, that is what my orders are from Commodore Harvir.’

The director stared at the Lieutenant Commander, his mouth agape. Even when he leaned back in his chair trying to regain his composure, his astonishment was clear to all.

‘I don’t bloody believe this...’ he complained loudly, ‘It’s not enough that the whole joint operation in the Underground was overrun by Oratan, and all the robots the IFN put down went haywire. Now Harvir sends his errand boy, you, to tell me that he won’t deploy any troops down there to sort out these insurgents! Has he lost his mind?’

Bossman, who’d been expecting such a response, didn’t react to the outburst from the ACA Director. He was used to it from his long career in the IFN. Officers and drill sergeants shouting in his face from an inch away had become an accepted thing.

‘Sir, let me continue...’ Bossman said in a voice aimed to calm down the Director. ‘The problem isn’t that the Commodore doesn’t want to get involved. The problem is that he can’t. It is a judicial problem, we have strict rules of engagement on Arkadia.’

Bishop rested his head in his palm and sank down in his chair, well aware that it was true what the Lieutenant Commander was saying. He indicated to the Lieutenant Commander to continue his explanation.

‘The Smugglers are, according to Federal Imperial law, non-combatants. Personnel from the fleets JAG office briefed the Commodore and I just a short time ago. The defence of the Underground is up to the ACA and the Arkadian Land Deed owners. They need to collaborate and form a militia, independent of the IFN ground forces, at this point in time...’ Knowles explained.

‘If the Commodore was to grant your request, he would have to claim that Arkadia is under strict martial law. It would be an understatement to say that it would look rather bad for the IFN and the ACA if combat forces were deployed each and every time problems cropped up in the colony. That and

it would also serve to confirm what the Smugglers have always claimed: that Commodore Harvir is a dictator. Now, we don't want that, do we Sir?' Bossman asked.

'No...' Bishop replied with closed eyes, still resting his aching head in his palm. 'Of course not.'

'Now, here is what the Commodore can do.' Bossman continued encouragingly, 'The IFN will send a "Ready Reaction Force" to assist but they will not be authorized to shoot unless it is in self-defence. Their duties will be limited to organizing a defence only. Alpha Team will act as tactical advisors and train volunteer civilians in paramilitary operations. Many of them have been fighting the Oratan for a long time and have built up sufficient tactical skills from the battlefield where the enemy has attacked in waves. They are used to holding their ground and fending off attacks.'

'However,' Knowles continued, 'the Smugglers are human criminals and are likely to be more strategic in their planning. Defending the teleporter only, is only going to serve to give the rest of the cave system to the Smugglers. The Main teleporter will be well defended, but that is all that will be secure down there. We need to train these civilians in how to act in squads and do patrols -'

'Yes, yes!' Bishop interrupted perceptibly irritated. 'Go ahead and set it all up Lieutenant Commander!'

Giving the Director an encouraging smile, Bossman turned about-face and left the ACA Director's office at a measured military pace, his heels striking a regular cadence as he marched down the corridor and out of the building.

With the door to his office closed and the sound of the departing officers steps faded, Bishop sat for a long time thinking through his options. He finally decided what to do and pressed the touch display on his desks console. His secretary showed up on the display.

'Yes Director?' She asked.

'Get hold of the Arkadian Advisors and tell them to assemble here at my office, ASAP!' He ordered.

CHAPTER 5



5.1: THE HEARING OF SUNDARI ZHEN

DATE: 5 SEP 3011

TIME: 09:00 hours

LOCATION: ACA Headquarters, Interrogation room 5

The ACA representative stood in a small, sterile white room and spoke with authority,

“This is a preliminary hearing with Miss Sundari Zhen. The time is o’ nine hundred hours, standard federal imperial time on the fifth of September, three thousand and eleven.”

The room was a box, windowless with just one simple door, and a table bolted to the floor in the center. The cramped dimensions and the sterile white coloring of everything, together with the bright light that came from the very walls, ceiling and floor, gave Sundari a surreal feeling. The only person, except for herself, was the ACA representative on the other side of the table, sitting on a simple white chair.

There was something odd about him. He looked almost too perfect; no wrinkles, freckles or facial hair. His skin tone was bleached to such a point that he was almost an albino. In stark contrast, he wore a black suit with a blue tie and his hair was cut in a modern style. Finally, Sundari noticed, the man was extremely athletic; certainly not the type of ordinary ACA paper shuffling bureaucrat that she had dealt with previously.

“Miss Zhen, I would like to inform you, for the record, that this is not an interrogation. You are free to cancel this hearing at any time since you are not suspected of any wrong doing in the incident at the Archeological Society.” The representative explained with a strained smile.

“Thank you...”, Sundari replied in a tired voice, stretching her neck. She hadn’t had any sleep, and the tension in her body didn’t seem to want to let go, after all the stress and panic of the firefight in the Archeological Society’s facilities, the night before.

“I didn’t catch your name...” Sundari said.

“It would surprise me if you did, Miss Zhen. I never mentioned it.” The representative replied with almost a witty tone. “I am agent twelve. That is all I can tell you.”

“Agent?” Sundari asked with mild astonishment. “What agency are you working for?”

“In this case, the Arkadian Colonial Administration.” the representative replied with an amused smile.

“Very well...Twelve? Seriously?” Sundari replied, with a skeptical expression on her face.

“Indeed...” the representative continued “...However, we are not here to discuss me. We are here to talk about what occurred at the Archeological Society yesterday. We are pleased that you agreed to talk to us so soon. It is important that, during this investigation, we get as much detail as possible so we can to determine what this was all about.”

“I’ll help in any way I can.” Sundari assured him.

The representative leaned forward on the table, hands clasped before his chin and looked closely at Sundari, who was leaning back on her chair with arms crossed. He studied her face for a while and suddenly asked her:

“So, Miss Zhen, can you explain to me what happened yesterday, In your own words?”

Sundari looked around the room for something to focus on while casting her mind back. Finding nothing to lean her sight on, she closed her eyes in order to mentally picture what had happened the day before. After a quick mental process, the pictures of the chaos started to come back.

“I was standing behind the information desk on the second floor, when I suddenly heard gunfire outside the entrance.”, she explained, her voice quivering at the memory.

“What time was that?”, the representative asked.

“I don’t know exactly, but it was around half past ten in the evening I guess”, she replied.

“What happened after that? What did you do?”, the representative asked with a sharp tone.

“I realized something was wrong, and was about to go check what was happening, when two men in red and black armor showed up at the foot of the stairs”, Sundari recalled.

The representative didn’t say anything, instead gesturing for her to continue.

“I realized after a few seconds that these men were part of the movement called “The Smugglers” and that one of them, with a pistol in his hand, was Ned Kelly himself”, Sundari recalled. “He pointed his gun at me and shouted for me to get down on the floor. The other Smuggler took position by the stairs and guarded it.”

“What happened after that?”, the representative asked obviously intrigued.

“I couldn’t see much as I was hiding behind the desk. It felt like an eternity”, Sundari explained after taking a sip of water from the glass in front of her. “The sound of yelling and screaming and laser and BLP-fire increased down in the lobby as, I assume, more people got involved in the fighting. It sounded like total chaos.”

Sundari suddenly stopped, caught in the awful moments from the night before. She paled, feely suddenly faint and nauseous as her blood pressure bottomed out. The agent, seeing her reaction, snapped his fingers loudly, trying to focus her attention away from the mental images plaguing her.

“Miss Zhen? Are you all right? Do you want to stop the hearing?”, he asked with surprising empathy.

“No...”, she replied with a fatigued voice. “But I would appreciate a break and something to eat.”

“Oh, yes indeed. I can arrange something”, the agent offered, “I might also suggest some fresh air. Would an hour from now be a good timeframe for us to continue?”

“Yes, that would probably work”, She confirmed, with a relieved and grateful expression on her face.

“Good!”, Agent Twelve spoke again, into the seemingly empty air. “Can we make sure Miss Zhen gets something to eat and drink and that she gets some fresh air? Interview suspended at o’ nine fifty three hours. We will resume approximately one hour from now, at eleven hundred hours.”

“Affirmative”, an unidentified voice replied out of nowhere.

The hour seemed to pass quickly and soon they were back in the sterile white room. Sundari felt much better and strengthened by the strong black coffee she had in her hand.

“Can we continue?”, the agent asked kindly.

“Yes, no problem”, Sundari replied with a smile, as she continued sipping the coffee.

“This is the hearing of Sundari Zhen. Time is eleven hundred hours standard federal imperial time on the fifth of September, three thousand and eleven”, agent Twelve stated.

A short silence ensued while the agent contemplated his next line of questioning.

“So...” he began, “What happened after that the fighting started in the lobby?”

“From what I can remember...”, Sundari said slowly, as she thought back, “I could hear Ned shout to the other Smugglers that they should hold the colonists off while he worked on the data mainframe.”

“Aha? The Archeological Society Mainframe?”, the agent asked.

“Yes. Ned would have gone for the computer room and either logged in or hacked into the system”, Sundari explained.

The agent stared at Sundari, a penetrating, yet thoughtful look on his face.

“Can you enlighten me a bit about what is stored on that mainframe Miss Zhen?”, the agent, almost seeming to smirk at the question.

“Everything!”, she replied rather more bluntly than she intended.

“Really? And what exactly do you mean by “Everything”, Miss Zhen?”, the agent asked, sharpening his tone slightly.

Sundari drank the last of her coffee, realizing that she was getting irritable from the exhaustion.

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly, “My nerves are getting a little frayed.”

“I understand completely Miss Zhen,” the agent said, waving her apology away, “Please continue...”

“Of course,” Sundari nodded, leaning forward on the table, “By “Everything”, I mean exactly that. All our previous, current and future dig sites; decryption of ancient Arkadian texts with topics like mythology, symbolism, history, technology and thousands of other facts”, she counted off on her fingers as she elaborated.

The agent looked thoughtful for a moment before replying.

“Miss Zhen, you know these databases better than we do.” he explained. “You also know more about the value of different things when it comes to Archeology, than everyone in our agency, put together.”

Sundari nodded, intrigued by the continual back and forth way this agent questioned her. She also noticed how he was now fidgeting with a pen, clicking it repeatedly as he spoke.

“What we wonder, Miss Zhen, is if there is anything that strikes you, that could be of value to the Smugglers in those databases? Anything? Are there any descriptions of something similar to weapon blueprints in there?”

Sundari frowned as she racked her memory of the collective society database.

“No, there is nothing. Anything we have come across that remotely resemble weapon blueprints or technology, we have already turned them over to the IFN. Nothing of it is stored on our servers”, she concluded.

The agent stared off at the blank wall, almost like he was watching something in the distance. For a long time, he sat there gazing at the wall, clicking the pen repeatedly. He finally stopped, turning back to Sundari again and put the pen down.

“Ok, Miss Zhen...”, he said, almost like he had made up his mind about something. “... tell me, is there anyone else, besides those of the list you provided to us, that has access to these server systems?”

The room became totally silent for a few seconds while Sundari’s tired mind slowly comprehended the question.

“No. Everyone that has access is on that list”, she replied, “Why? Have you found something?”

“No”, he said shortly, “It is just a standard question. After all, it is sometimes possible for people to be left off lists in error for one reason or another..”

“Oh, I see...”, Sundari said, her tired mind not quite immediately grasping the innuendo.

The agent and Sundari stared at each other for a time before the agent spoke once again.

“Miss Zhen, will you excuse me for a moment?”, he asked, abruptly standing up from his chair.

“Yes, of course”, she replied, looking slightly startled by the agents sudden movement.

The agent spun on his heel and left the room, the door opening and closing with a customary hiss.

He turned left in the corridor and left again to another door, situated next to the room he had just vacated.

This room was as austere as the first except for a couple of stark differences. One wall was completely transparent, the view, looking in on the room where Sundari Zhen now sat alone. As he moved across the second room, she leant forward on the table, resting her head against her palms.

The agent stopped next to his colleague, who already stood by the transparent wall, watching the interrogation room.

The two agents stood silently for a moment, till Twelve broke the silence. Without taking his eyes from Sundari he asked, “Do you think she knows anything?”

“No”, the other agent replied. “We would have noticed something by now. I will inform “The Agency” that we should tap her communications, however. Better safe, than sorry”, the second Agent smiled thinly. “Besides, it may give us some valuable leads in the future. If it is like we think it is; that somehow “The Smugglers” have obtained Milton Lee’s QPad... then we should keep a close eye and ear on matters around the Archeological Society.”

“Yes”, said Twelve, “after all, that QPad was never logged as having been retrieved from the site of his death. We checked that with the IFN. That has to be the answer... how else would they know about the backdoor Lee planted in the Archeological Society’s mainframe?”, Twelve said, turning to exit.

“Indeed”, concluded the other Agent.

“Very well. I will let Miss Zhen know that this hearing is over”, said Twelve.

5.2: "... AND JUSTICE FOR ALL"

DATE: 14 NOV 3011

TIME: 10:00 hours

LOCATION: The Arkadian Colonial Administration HQ

"Director Bishop?", The secretary asked over the desk console.

"Yes, Brenda?", director Edward Bishop replied in good mood.

"The delegates from the IFN are here now...", she explained. "Shall I tell them that you are ready?".

"Yes, Brenda, please show them in. And make sure we get some coffee", he replied.

"I will do so", She confirmed.

After a short time, the double doors to Director Bishop's office were opened by the heavily armed security guards, stationed there since the conflict with the Smugglers started. Between them, in the middle of the doorway, a delegation of two IFN officers entered the room. One of them, was Lieutenant Commander Derek "Bossman" Knowles.

"Ahh, Lieutenant Commander Knowles! So nice to see you back on Arkadia. How have you been?", Bishop said while he walked across the red carpet that led from his desk up to the door to greet the officers with warm handshakes.

Lieutenant Commander Knowles smiled as he shook the Directors hand. "Well, a bit of time-out from my duties was welcome, but it also feels good to be back. Thank you!"

Behind them, Brenda entered the room with a serving tray carrying three mugs of hot, fresh coffee. She placed the tray down, smiled and nodded to Director Bishop and left the room as the security guards moved to close the doors behind the delegation. They paused, looking to the Director one last time to see if there was any kind of concern or possible trouble. Bishop shook his head slightly at them, indicating that he was perfectly safe.

"Have a seat gentlemen!" Director Bishop gestured towards the group of comfortable armchairs around the table with the coffee.

Director Bishop waited until everyone had tasted their coffee before speaking, "So gentlemen, I assume this has something to do with Federal Imperial Law since you, Major Ford, are with us?".

"That is correct Director", Major Ford replied, having swallowed his mouthful of coffee. "I will go right to the matter."

Director Bishop had initially been nervous about this meeting, but the smile on the Major's face told him that what he was about to hear was possibly something good for him and the ACA.

"The thing is this...", the Major continued, "We found a loophole in Federal Imperial law that might make it possible for the IFN to participate, in a sense, in the defense of the Arkadian Underground."

"Oh, how is that?", Director Bishop asked, a smile quite plainly spreading across his face.

"Well, since the IFN have assets down there in the form of generators, fuel depots and terminals, we are by law allowed to station IFN personnel there to protect them." The Major explained.

“Here comes the best part...”, Lieutenant Commander Knowles chimed in.

Major Ford smiled at Lieutenant Commander Knowles’s comment since he knew that Knowles was eager to pick up the fight against the Smugglers.

“Since the main teleporter is the only way in, an attack on the teleporter can be seen as an attempt to hinder the IFN from access to its property and equipment.” The Major elaborated.

“Ah, so if the Smugglers attack the main teleporter, the IFN can legally look upon it as an attack against IFN interests?”, Director Bishop excitedly jumped to conclusion.

“Yes, exactly!” the Major finished. “But, and here is the big catch...”

“I should have known, there is always a dark cloud to every silver lining...”, Director Bishop joked.

“Ha ha, yes Sir, I am afraid so...”, Major Ford joked back. “The IFN can only conduct defensive operations in order to secure itself and its interests. Our rules of engagement make it clear that, with the Smugglers being a civilian organization, paramilitary or otherwise, we cannot conduct “active offensive operations” against them. We can defend ourselves, conduct defensive patrols etcetera, but nothing else. Regardless though, this “loophole” means that the main teleporter will never again fall into the hands of the Smugglers.”

“Gentlemen, you just made my day!”, Director Bishop said, almost jumping with joy. “I know this is only coffee but, it is Arkadian Coffee, so I guess it is good enough for a toast. Here’s to you both, the IFN and good news!”

Lieutenant Commander Knowles toasted with the others and, by all appearances, joined in on the celebration. However, the ever watchful Knowles had taken notice of the console on the Directors desk indicating that there was an open audio line... and someone listening.

“So...”, he thought to himself, “... they are closer than we thought.”

5.3: ARKADIANS, COLONISTS AND FRIENDS!

DATE: 12 DEC 3011

TIME: 07:00 hours

LOCATION: The IFN HQ

Today is a great day to be an Arkadian!

Over the years we have seen how the colonists of Arkadia have, without hesitation, stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder with IFN troops and helped us turn the tides of battles against the Oratan. From total disasters and defeat to glorious victory, time and time again. Whenever and wherever there was a cry for assistance, Arkadians have responded.

We have witnessed the courage and dedication in the Arkadian colonist’s hearts and minds that have made an impression that goes well beyond our expectations and previous experience with civilian militia.

Countless times, my officers have reported, not only a willingness to follow the chain of command, but also an ability to take the initiative, to adapt to the tricky nature of battle, to improvise against

non-standard tactics and ultimately to overcome the hordes of opposition. These are in keeping with the most honoured traditions of the IFN and countless military forces before it.

As you all know, the 3rd Imperial Legion that landed with the Liberation Fleet, was largely decimated in the first battles with the Oratan. As a fighting force, its day on the field is over. The remaining personnel are being mustered into the 1st and 2nd Legions that arrived and continued the fight with Fleet Arkadia.

The 3rd Legion will, from this day forth be known as “The Legion of the Dead” - a symbol of respect to all who have succumbed to the final death in the defence of Arkadia, our new home. Rest in Peace, Brothers and Sisters. Your fight is over. Now, it is our turn to hold aloft the torch and banner and look ever onward, your spirits guiding and protecting us till the day we march together once again.

However, until that day comes, we find ourselves in need of new and willing personnel to fill our ranks. To pledge their lives to the defence of Arkadia and take up the mantle left by the brave souls before them. Make no mistake; it is not for everyone.

If you do possess a stout heart, a keen wit and a willingness to go beyond the call to defend your home and fellow Arkadian then come forward!

By Federal Imperial decree, I do hereby make it official that anyone who calls Arkadia home, or themselves an Arkadian, may now apply to join the IFN forces!

Applications are now open to join the ranks for the new constituted 4th Imperial Legion!

Welcome!

Original Signed by:

Commodore Toán Harvir

Officer Commanding

Arkadia Area of Operations





P L A N E T
ARKADIA