



ALIEN ALLIANCES: THE GAUSTION

By Steve Hayhurst

Based on the Starbase C3 Series

ALIEN ALLIANCES: THE GAUSTION

A Starbase C3 Series
BY STEVE HAYHURST

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Manufactured in the United States of America
Planet Earth.

FIRST PRINTING JUNE 2002

ALLIANCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S LOG: 2550

“Personal Recorder on. Background information regarding the update to the First Contact event of 2151 with the Gaustion hegemony.”

“With reference to the First Contact between the Triad Alliance and the Gaustion hegemony during the VOX war...”

“Information that was originally classified under the Alliance War Powers Security Protocols of 2150 has now been declassified and made available to the general public through the Alliance Freedom of Information Act of 2545. Which faced a Judicial Challenge which was not overturned until just this year”

“Therefore, this historian will be adding this addendum to the official records.”

”My hope that future generations will be able to gain an understanding of a critical moment in our dark past were key players affected the outcome of our war with the VOX.”

“Official recording begins...”

CHAPTER 1

The silence in the diplomatic quarters was broken by the call. “Ambassadors Roberts and Zela, please report to Command.” Roberts looked up in surprise, concentration broken by the request. “Do you know what’s going on?” looking across the desk at Zela, his Aelori counterpart. “I am unaware.” Zela replied. Williams, Roberts’s Aide sitting next to him, looked up at the sound of his voice. “Sir?” he inquired. “Better come along.” Williams nodded seeming eager to step away from the paperwork he was reading. Both Human and Aelori made their way out of the diplomatic department and into an elevator for the ride up to the command section of the space station. On their way up, the elevator tube passed between sections of the station. The open segments were comprised of a clear steel material that was very strong, yet allowed a dizzying view of space around the giant station. Off to his left, Roberts could see the construction pylons where a number of ships were undergoing retrofit or construction. His eyes immediately tracked to the sealed bay at the far end where a new class of diplomatic vessel designated the Ambassador class and rumored to be named the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ was nearing completion. The Ambassadors were a new class of diplomatic vessel merging the best of the Terran, Aelori, and Brak’kan technologies. Space trials were scheduled to start in a Terran week, again according to rumors.

A week was also the same timeframe he was facing on the draft schedule for the First Contact Meeting with the Gaustion Hegemony and he was feeling the pressure. Zela, sensing his annoyance, spoke up. “We’re still ahead of schedule for your first contact summit with the Gaustion Hegemony, Ambassador.” Roberts turned his attention back to Zela. “...and I would like to stay that way too!” he countered rather tersely. He rubbed his hand across his cheek tiredly, then waved absentmindedly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. Too many hours and not enough sleep.” The Aelori tach suit inclined slightly, acknowledging the apology. No one really knew what an Aelori looked like as they were constantly enclosed in their personal suits. One of the oldest races around, the Aelori had approached the Terrans almost a year ago with the warning about the VOX, whom the Terrans, Aelori, and Brak’kan were locked in a war with. The VOX were the greatest threat to the Galaxy ever known. When a lifeform became infected, they lost their free will and linked to the VOX hive—not an appealing way to live for the Terrans, Aelori, Brak’kan and a handful of other worlds out there. The Aelori had first appeared in the VRNet most of humanity used to near addictive levels. The first Aelori delegation arrived a month or so later in their shiny tach suits, which can function as a self-contained spaceship as well. Since that time, the Triad Alliance and its allies, had fought the VOX expansion to pretty much a standstill. Neither side was making significant gains over their opponent. With the Adlai Stevenson and vessels like her, The Triad Alliance hoped to change that. Their top speed of tach 9.9 was a full tach level above the next fastest Alliance vessel. Even then, the other Alliance vessels could only do Tach 9 in brief spurts. The Ambassadors could do it until they ran out of fuel—eight months after they started. With that speed and technology, the Alliance

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hoped to spread out and reach other worlds and get them to join the Alliance against the VOX, before they could be assimilated—making these ships as deadly as any warship.

CHAPTER 2

Roberts, Zela, and Williams emerged from the elevator on the command deck for the station. Overhead, a domed ceiling provided a panoramic view of the proto-system where the SV Leonis Minoris Shipyards were hidden.

Leo Station, as it was called, was one of twelve separate shipbuilding facilities hidden in various locations throughout Alliance space. The proto-system held the beginnings of five rocky worlds and eight gas giants—as well as an almost unmeasurable amount of dust, debris, and radiation which rendered sensor sweeps from outside the system useless.

To find the facility would require an enemy to venture into the system and almost ram it—and there was an impressive array of warships and defense platforms around to make certain that would never happen.

“Gentlemen?, over here.” A figure beckoned from a nearby conference room doorway.

Upon entering the conference room, the trio immediately snapped to attention at the familiar forms of the Triad Alliance General Council seated at the far end of the room.

“Stand easy,” Councilor Grant said, acknowledging their salutes.

“We’re sorry to pull you away from your critical work at this time, but we have a mission for you and the Adlai Stevenson.” Councilor Dra’Bin, the Brak’kan representative stated.

“Revered One,” Zela chimed in, “The Adlai Stevenson is not ready according to the rumors I have heard. Space trials are scheduled for one Terran week and a completed outfit of the systems will require at least one more beyond that.”

“You are well informed by such rumors. We shall have to address this lapse of security, Zela,” Thika, the Aelori representative replied. “However, a matter of great importance to the Alliance requires the ship to launch in three Terran days.”

“That is completely impossible!” Williams blurted out in shock. A moment of silence followed and Williams wished he could crawl under the table and hide.

“Nevertheless, it is imperative that Adlai Stevenson launches in three days.” Grant replied. “The Gaustion Hegemony appears to have some interesting technology that could be quite useful for the Alliance.”

Roberts spoke up.

“Are they aware of this change in plans? Will it affect the First Contact?”

Grant shook his head.

“We have received their permission to proceed with the revised schedule. They are most anxious to meet with you. We have been in contact with them via the VRNet, but there has been no physical contact between our races as of yet.” He gestured to Thika, the Aelori Councilor.

“The Aelori have prior contact with them. That is why Ambassador Zela will be accompanying you on your mission.”

Grant pressed a button on the table in front of him.

The lights dimmed and a hologrid popped up in the center of the table between the Council and the three diplomats.

“Gau Prime is located in the constellation of Gemini near Jonckheere 900, a planetary nebula. It is a red giant, classified 12.5 mV.”

“The system is comprised of six main Worlds, mostly gas giants. The worlds of Gau Prime are Gau Alpha, Gau Beta, Gau Gamma, Gau Delta, Gau epsilon, and Gau Sep.”

“The Gaustion homeworld orbits the Gau Gamma gas giant nearly in the center of the biozone for the system.”

“In addition, the Gau System contains the Garqu Asteroid Belt whose various materials left over from the formation of the system itself have been formed by the gravitation fields of the star and worlds.”

Dra'Bin took over the explanation.

“Due to the high radiation and gravity experienced by the worlds, the Gaustion have developed shielding and gravity systems that could prove critical to helping us win this war.”

“In addition, due to their physiology, the Gaustion also have developed a particularly nasty set of sound based weapons that could prove very useful for a ship that has been boarded by the VOX.”

Williams finally got the courage up to ask a question.

“So, what is the downside?”

Another pregnant silence and Williams was ready to apologize when Grant replied.

“The Gaustion have the ability to do many things. They are artists, philosophers, poets... They also have the ability to overdo it with the pomp and circumstance—and They LOVE to posture.”

“How are they in a fight?” Roberts queried.

The three council members exchanged glances.

“That information is sketchy. Their battle records that they have declassified and shared imply they could beat the VOX all by themselves.

The three diplomats exchanged glances and Williams snorted.

“Be that as it may,” Thika replied, rather sharply for an Aelori, “they have technology and they have requested that we form an alliance with them.”

Grant nodded and continued.

“The Gaustion Hegemony has ships, the apparent desire to work with us and, most important of all, the willingness to share their technology.”

Grant walked to the window and gazed out at a passing flight of Slavar fighters heading into space.

“Your job is to take the Adlai Stevenson to the Gau Prime system. Meet with their scientists and evaluate their technology.”

“Time is critical, people. We believe the VOX are planning something. According to Intelligence, they have stopped pressing us in the Arcturus sector and have actually withdrawn from several systems leaving nothing behind but ash.”

Dra'Bin broke in.

“The VOX NEVER withdraw—they always push forward. We are concerned that they are shifting their forces and preparing to strike elsewhere.”

“We realize that the technology will not be adapted to face this upcoming assault, but future conflicts could be swayed by its use.” Zela spoke up.

“Revered Ones, what is to say that we will not be flying into the face of this new assault with the Alliance's newest and most advanced ship?”

“You won't be going alone. We are sending out two task forces as well. One, Task Force Freedom, is a decoy in case there is a leak here at the station-”

Williams interrupted, looking at Grant, alarmed.

“Surely not Sir! Leo Station is the most secure facility in all the Alliance besides Starbase C3 itself.”

“Williams, didn't you EVER learn any manners?” Grant asked pointedly.

Williams blushed and turned to Dra'Bin, bowing slightly, “Uh, my apologies, Councilor Dra'Bin for my outburst. Please continue.”

“Apology accepted, Mr. Williams. The big Brak'kan nodded, “To our knowledge there is no threat, however one must always function with a degree of, what do you humans call it, paranoia?”

He continued.

“The second task force, Discovery, will be travelling in your vicinity in case you need them.”

“That task force will comprise of the Patton class gunships, Gran'harth, Alexander, and Brak'Kas, the carrier Reprisal, the light cruisers Victory and Ti'Ka, and six Griffin-class destroyers.”

“The plan is to have them be the focus, not a single small ship travelling at Tach 4—and you will not exceed Tach4 unless it is an emergency.”

“You will look like a simple freighter which works that general area on a regular supply run.”

“If anyone is watching they will not suspect anything due to the additional sensor package being installed on the ship as we speak.”

The package will mask your actual sensor data with transmitted data recorded over time from the actual freighter.”

“The first chance they might suspect something is when you make the turn for Gau Prime,” He pointed to a flashing dot on the display, “at this waypoint.”

“From there, you should have additional protection from the Gaustion Hegemony Border Forces. IFF and recognition codes are loaded into your ships’ AI.

They nodded.

Grant moved back to stand behind his chair.

“You have three days to complete your work in preparing for this summit—every resource on this station is at your disposal to make it happen, so use them.”

“All pertinent data regarding the mission will be downloaded to your AvaBots and VR systems. The data however, will not be decoded until you have left space dock and made the tach jump.”

“Remember, Tach 4; At that rate, the trip should take you about a week. Any systems that are not critical to the mission can be activated enroute to the Gaustion homeworld by the crew.”

The other two councilors stood.

“Dismissed and good luck.”

“Even with every lifeform on this station working around the clock, we still can not hope to learn everything about the Gaustion Hegemony in time to launch.” Zela stated emphatically as they returned to their work area.

It was the most agitated Roberts had seen the normally nonplussed Aelori. Even so, it required a significant amount of time in close proximity to him to even recognize distress. It was small movements in the tach suit appendages; voice box inflections, etc, that truly clued him into the emotions.

Roberts looked at his partners.

“Well, that is all the time we have; Let’s get educated about the Gaustion Hegemony.”

CHAPTER 3

Back in Combat Control, a mixed crew of Alliance personnel maintained an edgy watch for any unauthorized traffic approaching the station.

An Aelori technician, Dr'beth, who was monitoring the region where the proto-system was at it's densest, literally jumped as a sensor array fed back a potential contact through the interface into its tach suit.

"Command, this is Technician Dr'beth. I have a possible contact in Alpha Quadrant, Sector Zeta Four. Contact is intermittent."

Up in the Command Center, Grant, Thika, and Dra'Bin looked up from their huddle and turned towards the Officer of the Day, Colonel Fischer of Terran Command.

Fischer ignored the three council members and replied.

"Understood Dr'beth, pipe the feed to our console, over."

As he finished, he turned to an aide.

"Launch the alert wing, get the Alert Five wing on deck for launch and set the station on alert status yellow."

The aide nodded and spoke into his headset.

The lighting in the center changed from its normal blue to yellow. Across the station and low muted alarms proceeded to start their moan. Personnel froze for a split second, then hurried to their posts. Fischer turned towards another aide.

"Raise shields and activate the Defense Rings." He paused for a second, then continued. "Who is the nearest patrol vessel to the contact?"

The aide accessed his VR before replying.

"The Gecko class frigates Potemkin and Maine, as well as the Hugo Escort Dral'Lesk are within two minutes, sir."

"Give me Tra'lik on the Dral'Lesk."

"Yes, sir."

On Fischer's VR display, the Brak'kan captain swam into view.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Captain, we have a contact in Zeta Four. You are the primary intercept. The Potemkin and Maine will be your backstop. Your IFF code is Zeta-Zeta-Four-Six-Seven-Seven-Alpha--confirm."

"Yes, Sir. Squawking Zeta-Zeta-Four-Six-Seven-Seven-Alpha."

On Fischer's VR and the main Command screen, a tactical map appeared. A red contact flickered in and out with each sensor sweep and suddenly turned green as the Hugo's IFF code was entered.

"Confirmed IFF code; Nothing fancy and no heroics, Captain."

"Yes, Sir."

The Hugo's drive engine flared and adjusted their course for an interception point.

On the screen, the two frigates changed course as well to back up the Hugo in case there was a need.

The first aide turned to Fischer.

"Flapjack Fighters have launched, Sir. Alert Five Slavars are also ready and we have Two wings of Snub fighter-bombers ready to go as well."

"Outstanding."

Out in Zeta Sector, the Dral'Lesk was rapidly closing on the unknown contact.

From his command seat, Captain Tra'lik looked over his shoulder at Perkins, his Sensory Warfare officer.

"Report."

Perkins' fingers flew across his console and he paused for a moment as the AI analyzed the readings, then fed them to his VR set.

"It looks like an old research vessel of some kind, Sir. The AI is running an ID."

The Brak'kan nodded

"Advise me if you get a match."

The Captain looked over his other shoulder.

"Weaps? Heat 'em up. Safeties off and prepare to fire on my command."

Phillips, the Weapons officer was already working.

“Aye, Sir. Weapons are armed. Awaiting your command.”

Tra’lik nodded with satisfaction. He had a good command crew – even for humans. He had balked at first when he was informed of the assignment of six humans to the 12 person ship, but their enthusiasm and hard work soon won the respect of the rest of the Brak’kan crew.

“AI has a match, Sir. It’s the Calanorian Federation Science Vessel, Zirif.”

“Wasn’t that the ship that brought the VOX infection back—“

Phillips started to blurt out just as a wave of smaller vessels seemed to explode from behind the research vessel.

“Captain, smaller vessels are definitely hostile—a mixture of Calanorian and Dracaena fighters and torpedo bombers.”

“Weaps! Open fire, fire at will!” Tra’lik roared, “Helm, get us out of here!” “Communications, alert Starbase Command we are under attack by VOX forces. Don’t bother coding it, just sent it!”

“Colonel! We have weapons fire! The Dral’Lesk is under attack.”

The second aide announced.

“Battle Stations, launch all fighters!” Fischer ordered,

He looked over to the Council members.

“I would suggest you go to the shelters, gentlemen. I’ll keep you advised.”

The three nodded and were escorted towards the elevator. Grant however, stopped and turned to Fischer.

“Contact Captain Krala on the Stevenson. Have him launch immediately and give them an escort.”

Fischer paused.

“Sir, I have an enemy force inbound of unknown strength at this time. For all I know, this is NOT the main body and they could be trying to flush the Adlai Stevenson out so he can be taken. Until I get a better picture--“

“Launch the Stevenson now, Colonel, we may not have a later.”

Fischer looked at his aide.

“Do it.”

Down in their work area, even Roberts jumped as the Klaxon sounded and the lights were to red.

“We’re under attack!,” he announced looking at his co-workers.

“Let’s get to the shelters.”

At that moment, Zela suddenly stiffened.

“We’ve been ordered to launch the Adlai Stevenson, now.” He stated matter of fact.

“WHAT?!” Williams bellowed, “The ship is not ready-“

Roberts was already moving.

“MOVE!” he snapped, scooping up as much research material as he could carry. “They want us out of here now before it is too late.”

Zela grabbed his equipment and bolted after Roberts, leaving a stunned Williams by himself.

A moment later Roberts stuck his head back in.

“Come ON!” he yelled, “You want to be VOX bait!?”

Williams looked around, grabbed his VR gear and plunged through the door after his superior.

Piling into the elevator, the trio saw flashes as the station’s defenses—Slavars, Skiff fighters, Snubs, Geckos, and Hugos threw themselves at the approaching enemy.

The Dral’Lesk almost made it back to the outer asteroid defense perimeter when a VOX battle cruiser opened fire. The brave little escort simply vanished as it took the brunt of the enemy ship’s forward main guns.

Up in the Command Center, Fischer was busy taking an inventory of their defenses.

“Commit all of the craft we have in the hangars. If it can fly, shoot or make a bomb run, get it moving—even if you just shove it out of the hangar.” He snapped.

He looked over at the Sensory Weapons console.

“What’s the situation?”

The weapons officer fed the AI analysis from his console into Fischer’s VR before starting his narration.

“Based on the remote sensor readings outside of the system, the VOX appear to have two thrust coming at us. Zeta sector and also in Alpha sector—classic pincer. The Alpha group is hanging just

outside of the belt as if they are waiting for ships making a break for it.”

“Pass the tactical situation along to the Adlai Stevenson’s AI,” Fischer snapped. “I want continuous feeds to them when they get ready to make the jump.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do we have an enemy strength profile?” Fischer asked.

“Yes, Sir. Preliminary number indicated the Zeta thrust has a Dracaena dreadnought, a Calanorian fleet-carrier, three battlecruisers, three heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers, 24 destroyers. We estimate, based on standard VOX load outs for their carriers, about 200 fighters and bombers in this group.”

“Alpha thrust is also a mix of races with one Calanorian Dreadnought, one fleet and three escort carriers, two battlecruisers, six cruisers, 16 destroyers, and an estimated 300 fighters and bombers.”

“Damn, they must want us bad. That is just about the entire fleet we were facing in Arcturus.” Fischer murmured.

He thought for a moment.

“What do we have in the way of help we can call in and from where?”

The aide checked another database and fed the VR.

“Fourth Fleet is on the far side of the system with two dreadnoughts, four carriers, eight battlecruisers, 16 cruisers, and 40 destroyers.

They can be here in six hours at maximum tach on the dreadnoughts.”

“We may not be here in six hours. Order the fleet to split up. Leave adequate protection for the dreadnoughts but get the fastest ships headed here immediately. Who else?” Fischer replied.

“Task Force Freedom is one hour away with a dreadnought two battlecruisers, four cruisers, four escort carriers, and six destroyers.”

“Same procedure: fast ships here as soon as possible. NOW!”

The aide nodded and sent the order.

The station rocked as a series of missiles from a wave of VOX bombers slammed into the shields.

“Okay, status of ships in the space docks?”

The aide checked, then fed the data to Fischer’s VR.

“Three cruisers are in dock. Two can fight. Two Patton class gunships also with weapons available. Two freighters, no weapons active. One carrier 50% completed so no weapons or fighters and bombers.”

“Okay, here is what we are going to do. Anything in the dock that can fight should position themselves where they can augment the stations defenses.”

“Get the freighters moving under autopilot and head them straight into the heart of the VOX fleet—maybe they can chew up ordinance that was intended for us. Same for the carrier and the third cruiser.”

The aide paused.

“The capital ships will require Council approval.”

“Just do it--on my responsibility. I know, there will be hell to pay later if we survive this.”

The aide nodded.

In the meantime, Roberts, Zela, and Williams had reached the Adlai Stevenson and boarded.

Murphy, the AI was already on-line and powering up the ship’s systems along with Krala, the Aelori captain.

“Greetings, current situation is that the station is under attack--“ it began.

“No kidding!” Captain Krala, skipper of the ship retorted. “Status on the rest of the crew?”

“The crew is inbound from their quarters in Bay Four--ETA two minutes. This attack caught us on their sleep period unfortunately.”

“In addition, the Command Center has uploaded the current strategic and tactical maps for your perusal. Shall I download?”

“Yes, to my station,” Krala replied.

“Commencing.” Murphy replied.

Zela, in the meantime, had connected himself at the Sensory Warfare console and Roberts flopped into the co-pilot’s seat. Williams stumbled in last, landing at the navigation console.

“Where’s the rest of the crew?” He stammered slightly as a missile blew through the shields, destroying a docking bay two slots down from the Adlai Stevenson.

“Probably still in there,” Murphy stated, indicating the expanding cloud of debris from the destroyed bay.

Williams swallowed hard.

“So we are it? How many are supposed to be on board?”

“Can we discuss this later? Pilot is ready to go... Murphy, what is our launch status?”

“Weapons, such as they are, are hot, battle AI is on-line and processing.” Murphy replied.

“Sensors?” he barked.

“Sensors and navigation are on-line maps are loaded route and course laid in—I think.” Zela announced looking at the board in front of him.

“Murphy can handle that as well.” Krala replied.

“Of course,” Murphy replied, somewhat miffed sounding,

“Murphy, cast off moorings, give me maximum burn. Initiate tach jump as soon as we are clear.” Roberts replied.

Murphy was not amused.

“That is a violation of several Alliance regulations, Captain.” He replied.

“Murphy, in case you forgot, we are under attack. If we creep out of the docking bay, we are going to get nailed. Now, do it!” Roberts snapped.

“Very well. Moorings are off, initiating full thrust.”

The Adlai Stevenson leapt out of the docking bay it’s forward motion augmented by the explosive decompression of the bay doors snapping open with an atmosphere still in the bay. As soon as he was clear, Murphy corkscrewed the ship around to his new heading. Krala, had the battle AI tied into the course and as he cleared the bay, shouted “weapons free!”

The vessel’s functioning weapons immediately locked onto an incoming wave of Slerith-VOX bombers and raked them. The ship was past them before a single torpedo was released.

A Calanorian destroyer launched a spread of Talon ship-killing missiles, which locked onto the diplomatic ship. Krala’s hands flew across the console and evaded the missiles with decoy pods.

Meanwhile, one of the under repair cruisers Fischer had kicked out of it’s repair bay replied with a Harpoon ship killer of its own.

The destroyer came apart in a brilliant flash, taking several other ships on both sides with it who were engaged in a free wheeling dogfight the humans nicknamed a “furball”.

Suddenly, the cockpit was filled with nothing but stars which then blurred as Murphy engaged the Tach Drive.

CHAPTER 4

Traveling in tach space is similar to running in molasses—everything seems to happen in slow motion due to the time distortion. The body does adapt though after a couple of hours to the distortion.

Only after Murphy reported no signs of pursuit did the bridge visibly relax. Even Zela's tach suit seems to slump just a little.

Approximately eight hours into the flight, the AI suddenly spoke up. "I have an incoming transmission from Councilor Grant." Murphy announced.

The Councilor's face appeared on the main viewer. From the look of his surroundings, it was a taped message.

"Gentlemen, now that you have been underway in tach space for several hours, this tape is being played for you. It is not the original tape that you expected however."

Grant paused and leaned in towards the camera.

"For sometime, we have considered the possibility of infiltration by VOX agents here at Leo Station. The attack on the base, in my honest opinion, confirms it."

He continued after taking a sip from the glass in front of him.

"Dra'Bin and I have reason to believe that Thika has been "compromised".

Roberts and Williams both glanced at Zela, but saw no reaction from the suit.

"This base has been one of the most well kept secrets in the universe. As the war has progressed, and not in our favor, frankly, it became necessary to populate the station with more and more personnel to expand the design and shipbuilding capabilities of the Alliance."

"All personnel have been required to be scanned before EVER venturing to any Alliance Station. They must also be tested on a regular basis. The only organics who have not were the Council—until recently that is."

"Dra'Bin and I have both been tested and came out negative. Thika, however, has continued to be unavailable for the procedure for various reasons—casting suspicion upon him."

Grant paused again, a sad look crossing his face.

"If you get this message, in all likelihood I am dead—as is probably Dra'Bin as well."

Williams felt tears welling up in his eyes. He really liked the old guy.

"There is a possibility we are not, but the need to protect your vessel is paramount."

"Therefore, your new orders are as follows: Take the 'Adlai Stevenson' to the Gau Prime system, using Captain's discretion, to arrive safely."

"Since we believe your route has been compromised, I would suggest you DO NOT use the original one."

"When you will rendezvous with my aide, Chelas, at the Gau Sep Research Station."

An image of a very thin, nervous-looking man flashed up on the screen along with his personal data.

"Although there has not been an official meeting of the Alliance and the Gaustion, there has been unofficial diplomatic work done by Chelas. So he has connections within the Gaustion Scientific community that will arraign safe passage for you and the ship to a secure location."

"Once there, the Gaustion will immediately start work on enhancing your weapons and system with their technology."

A grin flickered across his face before the somber look returned.

"...and amazing technology it is."

"Once you have been retrofitted by the Gaustion, take the ship to Pollux Station. The Gaustion will be downloading their technology specs into the AI so that retrofitting can begin on the Ambassador fleet that was actually finished there almost three months ago."

“Good luck, Grant out.”

It was Zela that finally broke the silence.

“How do we know that Grant was not compromised?”

Williams turned, with a sharp retort on his lips, then paused. Zela was asking a valid question.

He glanced at Krala, who also nodded.

Roberts exhaled sharply.

“Ten hours to the next waypoint course change. Let’s go,” he said unstrapping from his seat, “We need a plan of our own before we reach Gau Prime.”

Four hours later, Roberts, Zela, Williams, and Krala had hammered out a plan. They would still go to Gau Prime, but not by way of the programmed route. Too much chance of being intercepted and no one could be trusted--not yet anyway.

Krala and Roberts, a former officer in the Terran Space Command, worked out the new route while Zela and Williams became instant repairmen under Murphy’s guidance to bring the remainder of the critical systems on-line.

Sooner than they hoped, Murphy cleared his throat. They were at the waypoint.

The plan called for the Adlai Stevenson to drop to normal space and travel there for at least two days. This would put any pursuit several light years AHEAD of them and change their arrival time at Gau Prime by another two days. They would also use the time to test the sensors, the woefully inadequate weapons (based on their current situation), and other systems hastily brought on-line.

“Everyone strapped in?” Roberts asked.

“Navigation Aye.”

“Tactical. Aye.”

“Roger... Murphy, disengage the Tach Drive.”

“Tach Drive powering down. Returning to normal space.”

To an outside observer at the point of an extraction from tach space, the ship would suddenly appear in a bright flash where none had been before.

The return to normal space was uneventful. Even more fortunate for them was the fact the waypoint was located at the edge of a gas giant system with a planetary nebula.

Six hours later, the ship was safely nestled in the obscuring blanket of ionized gas.

The radiation from the system would allow them to hide in the nebula safe in the knowledge there was no sensor system capable of detecting them--any ship finding them would have to quite literally run into them in the nebula.

So for the following two days, Roberts, Williams, Zela, and Krala worked almost nonstop bring all of the ship’s unfinished systems on-line.

By then, the four were tired and starting to get on each other’s nerves, but the Adlai Stevenson was as complete as he could be without space dock time. Each person crawled into their own space and slept, with Murphy on watch, for another twelve Terran hours. After a good solid sleep and a meal, Roberts looked at his comrades and said:

“NOW, we are ready to go to Gau Prime.”

“Maybe not.” Zela replied and pressed the console.

“Repeating... Attention all Triad Alliance ships and personnel. The Ambassador Prototype Adlai Stevenson was stolen from the Leo Station spacedock during the height of the VOX attack by her Captain, Krala, Ambassadors Roberts and Zela, and Roberts’ aide Williams.”

“This was unauthorized and they should be considered armed and dangerous. If at all possible, seize the ship, but in case of doubt destroy it. Medical records show that they have been infected and they must not be allowed to turn the ship over to the VOX.”

“These orders are signed by the Council and can be validated by Councilor Thika’s personal Alliance code print attached to these orders.”

“Message ends...”

Roberts threw his pad down in disgust.

ALIEN ALLIANCES: THE GAUSTION

The VOX fleets at the Battle of Leo Station were destroyed due to the heroic efforts of the station crew as well as advanced elements of the First and Fourth fleets. Several vessels did not make it—disappearing in a blaze of glory as their drives overheated. Others dropped out of tach space as their cores burnt out.

Out of control, some of the crippled ships crashed into junk in normal space, unable to dodge or even stop their mad plunge. The lucky ones drifted helplessly; hoping someone friendly would arrive to tow them to the base.

The First and Fourth Fleets paid a heavy price between the emergency rush to station as well as in the battle:

Six destroyers, Three cruisers, Two battlecruisers, and two escort carriers and most of their crews were lost in the defense.

The fleet carriers, Dreadnoughts, and their escorts arrived in time to help mop up the remaining resistance pockets. Over 500 Fleet personnel were killed and another 1,500 were wounded.

The VOX losses were even higher. The VOX came on a suicide mission. They had no intention of leaving--they would fight until the station was destroyed or they were.

The VOX ship loses were: Two dreadnoughts, two fleet carriers, four battlecruisers, eight cruisers, two light cruisers, 20 destroyers, and 90% of the fighters and bombers it threw at the base.

Estimates put VOX personnel losses at 5,000 killed or wounded—most of whom would end up dying due to the inability to treat them. Any contact with the VOX meant infection in the rescuer.

The Station Defense forces also took a pounding. In addition to the Dral'Lesk and it's crew, the Frigates Maine and Cha'Rish, Destroyers Minsk and Bra'kar, the Cruiser Victory, and over 100 fighters and bombers were destroyed. Over 1,000 personnel, including Councilor Grant and Dra'bin were killed and another 3,000 were wounded.

The Potemkin was a hulk, losing half of his crew, but could still maneuver. The plucky Frigate managed to limp into one of the lesser

damaged docks to unload the remaining crew. Fearing an explosion from the badly damaged ship, the Potemkin was pushed out of the dock by conbots and left adrift a safe distance from the station.

Leo Station was heavily damaged. One whole wing of space dock was destroyed and would have to be rebuilt. The other two suffered heavy damage. The command center, design section, and recreation Centers all suffered heavy damage from multiple direct hits.

Estimates put the station out of action for a Terran year.

If Roberts, Zela, and Williams had stayed, they would be dead after a salvo of missiles obliterated their work area, most of the diplomatic section and most importantly, the shelters.

A week after the attack, the Council garb of both Grant and Dra'Bin were found amongst the personnel who died in the wreckage of the shelters.

CHAPTER 5

Thika felt more annoyed than intimidated, however, his tour was over, his mood spoiled, so he aimed his tach suit towards the space station and his anxious protectors.

Thika had escaped unharmed from the attack though. Especially since he knew exactly which areas of the station would be hit, he simply made certain he was in an area that was not attacked. In the heat of battle and with all of the confusion, no one had seen him slip out of the shelter after leaving the target designator.

The VOX missiles, having punched through the battle damaged shields, homed in on the target and obliterated everyone and everything in the shelter leaving him the only Council member alive and simplifying his task of undermining the Alliance.

But that victory was short-lived and now he had a job to do.

One of the nice things about a tach suit is the fact you can go literally anywhere. Thika told himself.

Currently, he was floating out in the asteroid belt far from the bustle of the repair work. Even though his security forces protested, he overruled them.

He needed the solitude away from so many individual voices. He heard only one voice now.

Almost on cue, that voice appeared and broke his meditation.

“The Adlai Stevenson seems to have disappeared.”

“I have their forces searching for it now.”

“It was not found on the flight path you transmitted.”

“Perhaps they had damage and were forced to normal space.”

“We must have them and the ship.”

“I am aware of that.”

“Do not fail us.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes. Give us the Adlai Stevenson.”

CHAPTER 6

Chelas was a worrier. It was part of his nature and he hated it. He wished he could be more unplussed like Councilor Grant, but he wasn't. Word of the attack on SV Leonis Minoris had also reached him along with the report of many casualties—and he knew the Council was on the station at the time of the attack. He was even more worried because the arrival time of the Adlai Stevenson had come and gone. After one day of waiting, The Gaust scientists had left in a flurry of disgust, typical of their theatrics. Still, Chelas had faith in the Adlai Stevenson would arrive. He had to as Councilor Grant felt the fate of the Alliance rested on it. His persistence was rewarded the following day when entered his quarters for the evening. he turned on the room lights to find himself staring at the wrong end of a Brak'kan assault rifle and three grim looking Adlai Stevenson crew members. After a very thorough, but rough pat down by Williams, Chelas was allowed to sit down in a chair placed in the middle of the room. “Where the hell have you been-“, he started only to quail back at the growl from Zela. “He’s a little cranky,” Roberts stated holding up his hands “actually we all are come to think of it... he inclined his head towards Zela. “Even him, which is not a good thing. Ever see a cranky Aelori? Neither have I nor do I think I would want to.” Roberts pulled up a chair opposite of the aide. “So, we nearly got our butts shot off heading out for this little jaunt. We get a message from Councilor Grant saying Councilor Thika

MIGHT be VOX—and then we intercept orders saying we STOLE the ship and have been infected by the VOX.”

He leaned in close and studied Chelas’ face. The look in his eyes made the man instinctively shift back in his chair.

“So, tell us a story Mr. Chelas...”

After six hours, Chelas was tired, frightened, exhausted. The initial adrenaline had worn off, leaving him irritable. Finally, in exasperation he snapped.

“That is IT! You can either believe me or shoot me because I have HAD IT!”

Williams was too surprised to pull the trigger even if he was going to. Chelas snorted, stood up, walked over to the counter, reached under it, pulled out three glasses and a bottle of scotch.

“Zela, can I get you something?” he asked.

“Err, no, thanks, I am fine. Thank you for offering though.” He managed.

Chelas poured a liberal amount into all three glasses and shoved the other two towards Roberts and Williams.

“Well, I have had one hell of a day.” He said, then slammed down his drink. Turning several shades of green, he nevertheless managed to refill his glass again.

Roberts spoke up quietly.

“So is Councilor Grant dead?”

Chelas studied the amber liquid absently in his glass for a moment.

“Yes. They found he and Dra’bin’s garments about a week ago in the wreckage.”

Roberts looked away with tears welling in his eyes. Williams sighed, lowering the rifle.

In the corner, Zela lowered his head and mumbled a Brak'kan Passage Prayer for Dra’bin. When he had finished, Zela spoke up.

“Well then we have a serious problem. The rest of the Alliance thinks we are renegades.” He stated flatly. “Thika was the only other person in that conference room and he is at the head of the lynch mob.”

Chelas nodded as he sipped his drink this time.

Roberts wiped his eyes and turned back to face the group.

“So what do we do now?”

Zela spoke up again.

“How well do you trust the Gaustion?”

CHAPTER 7

Kel-Low'Ya rather enjoyed his position as head of the Gaustion Hegemony Science Federation. No more trudging around hostile environments in a pressure suit. No more cramped quarters, bad food, stupid students.

Now he had a nice office with a view, a nice stipend from several endorsements, a mistress... Life couldn't get any better.

However, this morning when he came into work, he found out his life could get much worse.

Kel-Low'Ya waltzed through the door, turned on the lights, sat at his desk, and he realized he had guests already in his office leaning against his back wall.

"Wwwwwhat do you want?!" he stammered in one of those infamous near panic moments the Gaustion were known for.

One of the figures detached itself from the wall and approached.

"MISTER Chelas, you gave me quite the start—" he started to say as the other three figures also stepped out into the light.

"Minister may I present Ambassadors Roberts, Zela, and their aide-de-camp Mr. Williams from the Alliance vessel Adlai Stevenson."

Kel-Low'Ya lost it.

"The Renegades! The Renegades!"

Chelas finally managed to get scientist calmed down. After an explanation, the scientist was in their court.

"Where is ship now?" the scientist inquired.

"In a safe place."

Kel-Low'Ya chuckled.

"I would exercise caution as well. No need to explain more."

Kel-Low'Ya stood.

"Very well, we need to continue with Councilor Grant's mission. But we need to do it without the Alliance knowing it—a daunting feat given the propensity of my people to brag, blackmail, and in general not play fair."

Roberts looked at the scientist skeptically. "...and you have a plan?"

"Certainly. We tell the truth. The Adlai Stevenson is here as expected crew and diplomatic staff are fine and the ship even managed to beat off several attacks without suffering significant damage."

Chelas laughed out loud as it sank in.

Zela failed to see the humor.

"This place will be swarming with Alliance forces then—or worse, it will be swarming with Alliance AND VOX forces."

Chelas turned to Zela.

"Actually no, it won't. The Gaustion have such a reputation in this sector for exaggerating..." he turned to Kel-Low'Ya, "no offense."

"None taken. It is true." Kel-Low'Ya replied.

"...that no one would believe it." Chelas finished.

Zela shook his head.

"But Thika KNOWS we were coming here."

"But he also expected you two days ago." The scientist pointed out. Roberts grinned to himself in spite of the seriousness of the situation. The Gaustion really did get into this role-playing stuff.

"Do you have any way to tell if there has been any increase in traffic from outside the system over the last week?" Chelas asked.

Kel-Low'Ya nodded.

"Discreet inquiries can be made. Unfortunately, since we have so much contraband moving through the system due to our high radiation, you could probably park a battle fleet on the far side of Gau Sep without raising alarm unless they came looking for trouble."

Zela spoke.

"Let's hope they don't."

CHAPTER 8

Krala had stashed the ship in a radiation zone they had located in the “C” ring of Sep. After a hair-raising ride back through the rings to the ship, they were finally underway.

To Roberts, Kel-Low’Ya’s intimate knowledge of the system suggested he might have dabbled in shady dealings in the past, but he held his tongue. At some point, he would have to start trusting someone in the Gau Prime system to help them complete their mission.

“Lay in a course to the BarLev shipyards using this course.” Kel-Low’Ya instructed, loading a data disk into the navigation console. “This should keep us clear of most of the inner system traffic. Oh, and bring the shielding up to maximum, there is some intense radiation concentrations where we are going.”

“ETA to the shipyards, two hours 25 minutes...” Murphy reported, eliciting a scared squeak from the Gaustion scientist.

“Who was that?!” he demanded.

Williams laughed.

“That is the ship’s AI, Murphy.”

“A pleasure to meet you Doctor Kel-Low’Ya,” Murphy chimed in. Soon, the scientist and the AI were deep into an animated conversation on AI theory, quantum computing, and tach navigation theory.

The remaining crew studied the system as they progressed. With sensors ineffective for the most part, there was a crowd at the view ports to see their surroundings.

Gau Prime, the red giant, filled the view ports. Growing bigger and bigger as they spiraled towards the inner system where the shipyards were located.

There destination was the second world in the Gau Prime system, Gau Beta. Gau Beta is also world with rings and has a large moon, Ehih. Ehih, the single moon in orbit above Gau Beta is a barren world due to the intense radiation from Gau Prime. Surface exposure, due to its lack of atmosphere, would be fatal within minutes even in a standard Alliance radiation suit.

Taking advantage of that sensor-blocking radiation, the Gaustion Hegemony built their primary shipbuilding facilities deep in the radiation belt.

The vessel had just barely entered the gravitational influence of Gau Beta when Murphy reported several vessels approaching at high speed.

“I thought your sensors were ineffective?” Krala ask, returning to the command chair.

“I worked with Murphy to modify your sensor array to function in the high radiation of our system.” Kel-Low’Ya replied.

“If you will allow me, this should be the patrol from the shipyard. Let me speak to them.”

Krala nodded.

Onscreen, a flight of five small ships, obviously fighters swung around and took up positions around their ship. The image was replaced by the interior of a cockpit and a Gaustion in a flight suit. The clicks and whistles were not recognizable with out the translator, but the tone was all business.

Kel-Low’Ya responded quickly and the conversation went on for several minutes.

Finally, Kel-Low’Ya fed what appeared to be an ID card into the console before him and the other figure paused, studied something on his screen, then nodded.

The figure disappeared and the outside view reappeared.

“We can proceed now.” Kel-Low’Ya announced happily.

“Any problems we should be aware of?” Roberts asked.

“No, no problems. The Flight Leader was a little concerned because to the report that this ship was stolen, but a few Drakna changing hands and he was content that it was a garbled communication from the Alliance.”

“Drakna?” Krala asked.

“Gaustion Hegemony currency-- Kel-Low’Ya bribed him.” Chelas chuckled.

Williams looked uneasy.

“What’s to keep the Alliance or even the VOX from doing the same thing?”

Kel-Low’Ya turned to look at Williams and what was probably a grin flashed across his face.

“You’d have to look like a Gaustion. We bribe each other all the time. But if someone from another race shows up without one of us, you will probably get shot at for offending us.” Kel-Low’Ya explained.

“Interesting. I’ll make a note.” Williams replied, looking a little confused.

The massive shipyard swam into view and even Krala was impressed. The shipyard was even bigger than they had been told—at least half again the reported five kilometer surface area.

The crew of the Stevenson could see at least three dozen different classes of ships under construction as they were escorted over to an empty dock near the far edge of the facility.

As their escort veered away, a Gaustion voice broke in and started speaking.

Krala looked at Kel-Low’Ya, who nodded and started his singsong response back.

Everyone jumped when the ship lurched suddenly.

Kel-Low’Ya waved his hands slightly.

“Not to worry. Docking control is in control of the vessel. The autodock system will take care of the rest. Power down your engines.”

Krala looked over at him.

“You mean you have a tractor beam system of some kind?”

Kel-Low’Ya chuckled, a wheezy set of clicks.

“Oh no, you’ve been watching too many human science fiction vids.” He turned quickly to Roberts. “No offense.”

Roberts nodded his head. “None taken.”

“We’ve developed a grappler system that can grab a ship of any size and dock it without a dent.” The Gaustion scientist explained.

There was a bump and the Gaustion Voice was back, said something briefly, and was gone.

Kel-Low’Ya clapped his hands.

“Okay, we’re here.”

The airlock light changed from red to green, indicating a solid seal and breathable atmosphere on the other side.

Ambassador Roberts was through the doorway first—and had to grab a handhold as he suddenly felt too heavy to stand up.

“Ohh! I am so sorry!” Kel-Low’Ya said, scrambling to a panel in the corridor. A few adjustments and Grant felt his body weight vary wildly for a second before it settled down to a comfortable one Terran gravity.

“We do have adjustable gravity.” Kel-Low’Ya stated proudly.

“Ambassador, you are uninjured?” he asked anxiously.

“Fine... I’m fine. That first step was just a doozie.” Roberts replied.

“A doozie? Oh Terran slang term. I understand... You walked into a gravity field that was seven times that of your home world. My apologies.” Kel-Low’Ya said. “The station crew should have adjusted the field. I will discuss it with them. Excuse me.”

The little scientist hurried off towards a control station.

As he arrived, the crew of the Stevenson saw his arms fly into the air and he started gesturing and squeaking. The discussion reached a loud crescendo before Kel-Low’Ya came stomping back to the crew.

“The problem will not happen again.” He announced brightly. “Let me show you to your quarters.”

The crew’s quarters were actually quite nice. The view ports were wide, allowing for a spectacular view of the facility itself.

After they had showered, eaten, and stowed their gear, they were ushered into a conference room where Kel-Low’Ya and a group of Gaustion personnel had prepared a briefing on the outfitting of the Adlai Stevenson.

“I’d like to thank the Aelori and Terran delegation, as well as Captain Krala, for making the this dangerous journey. I wanted to let

you know that we have been contacted by Councilor Thika. He has informed, us officially, that the Alliance is postponing the official First Contact between the Alliance and the Gaustion Hegemony until such time as new Councilors can be elected and the fate of the 'Adlai Stevenson' can be determined." Kel-Low'Ya began.

A series of honks and clicks erupted from the Gaustion personnel gathered behind him.

For a second, Roberts and the crew stared at the braying aliens uncertain how to react to the news.

Suddenly Chelas joined in, *laughing*.

"Laugh!" he commanded out of the side of his mouth.

The humans shrugged and started to chuckle as well. Aelori might laugh, but there was really no way to tell if they were.

Finally Kel-Low'Ya raised his hand.

"Well, enough humor, we have some serious business to deal with now."

While Kel-Low'Ya launched into his introductory dialogue,

Williams leaned over to Chelas.

"Why were we laughing, again?"

"To the Gaustion, the whole cloak and dagger you have been going through for the last couple of weeks, plus Thika's orders, smack of rank amateur intrigue at best. They actually feel *sorry* for Thika's lame attempt at cloak and dagger. After all, THEY are the experts in this sector at this."

"Yeah, but will they help *us*?"

"Absolutely. They are enjoying seeing other races try this posturing thing." Chelas grinned. "Besides, it confirms to them that we need them to help them in the fight against the VOX."

"Shhh!" Roberts hissed.

Kel-Low'Ya was completing his introductory speech.

"I turn the floor over to my distinguished colleague from the Terran portion of the Alliance, Ambassador Roberts."

Robert stood, nodded to Kel-Low'Ya, and spent about ten minutes thanking the Gaustion for their pledge to the Alliance as well as the assistance with Thika matter.

When he was finished, he nodded to Kel-Low'Ya and sat down again to polite clapping.

"Very well, let us start the briefing." Kel-Low'Ya announced.

The Adlai Stevenson would be undergoing several major changes to her systems. Among them was: an improved sensor array capable of being modified to work in cluttered environments like the Gau system

A more efficient artificial gravity system that would allow them to program specific portions of the ship at higher or lower gravity for visiting dignitaries.

The engines were also being overhauled. Gaustion technology was advanced enough that they could fit a tach drive system into half the space. This freed up the lower drive section. Therefore, the lower drive section was being modified to be a weapons bay.

There was enough space to hold three Skiff-A variant fighters and five unmanned Drone fighters. The fighters and drones would be installed when the vessel arrived at Pollux Station.

They also were adding to the weapons system with internal weapons bays to bolster the lack of weapons on the ship (much to Roberts' displeasure).

"This is to be a diplomatic vessel." he protested to Kel-Low'Ya.

"A FIRST CONTACT diplomatic vessel." he was reminded. "These ships are going to be going where no Alliance vessel has gone before."

"They will be doing it all by themselves—no Fleet to come to their rescue. So they HAVE to be able to hold off a raider or destroyer class vessel while they make their escape."

Krala's tach suit inclined.

"I agree with Kel-Low'Ya." He stated. "These ships will need to be able to stand off against hostile forces—even the VOX long enough to escape using their superior, we hope, speed."

Roberts shook his head, knowing he had lost this argument.

"How soon will the ship be completed?"

"We will need another month and then we can begin space trials."

"In the meantime, we will be continuing your training as well as supplementing your crew with Gaustion personnel. They will also be

familiar with the upgrades to the ship so that when you arrive at Pollux Station, they will be responsible for overseeing the retrofit of the other ships.”

The month went by quickly. The crew managed to absorb an almost bewildering amount of data on the new systems, which added a very lethal punch to the ship. The ship was so torn up internally that Williams started to wonder if it would *EVER* be finished.

Finally, the refit was done and Krala took the helm with the crew and Gaustion personnel strapped in for the trials.

Under a healthy escort of Gaustion warships, the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ left the space dock and headed out to Gau Delta and the test range for the Gaustion Hegemony.

“There are still no signs of the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ or the renegades, Councilor.” Ariel announced. Thika nodded, hiding his frustration. He had taken a calculated risk and “turned” Ariel, one of his Terran aides--making her a member of the VOX.

Repercussions from the Leo Station raid still reverberated throughout the Alliance as rumors of spies and VOX infiltration had escalated Alliance security measures to the point of paranoia. Still, he needed a network of information so he could be informed of anything going on—even in his position as the most powerful politician in the Alliance.

“What is the problem with these buffoons? How have they managed to resist the VOX for so long?!” he snapped, totally uncommon for the Aelori host.

There was a panicked look in her eyes and Thika struggled to regain his composure. He had been ‘visited’ once again by the Communion--repeating it’s dire threats—which did not help his mood any.

“My apologies, Ariel.” He managed. “I am not responding well to the pressure of the Communion.”

She nodded, already aware of the pressure due to her link to them as well, but the gesture was reassuring none the least.

Thika had also struggled with the rush of alien emotion and mental physiology that made up the millions of souls within the VOX

Communion. The Aelori were driven to explore and meet new races. Being possessed was a totally different thing though.

When he was first taken over a month ago, it had nearly driven him mad. Heux, the Calanorian he had encountered had surprised him on Vorash Six when he was exploring the crystal formations at Ragesh. Heux had stunned him with a taser type weapon that had rendered him immobile, but not unconscious—adding, at the time, a level of horror and dread he had never experienced—feeling his own self will being probed for weaknesses, and then, when a weak point was discovered, the VOX enslaved his will.

He still experienced that horror from time to time in his dreams when the VOX were not as strong, but over time, as the Communion tightened their grip, the nightmares were fading—along with the last vestiges of his will.

The warm feeling of the Communion gently reasserted itself, pushing back the memories of what he was.

“What have we learned about the report of the ship’s arrival at Gau Prime?” he asked his aide.

“So far, that is all we have. We have been slow in placing agents in the system.”

“The Communion believed our attack on Leo Station and your ‘turning’ would be adequate, statistically, to ensure the capture of the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ and the prevention of the Gaustion Hegemony from joining the Alliance.”

She paused and raised her hand towards him.

“There is no blame being attached, directly or indirectly, to you on this matter. It was a failing of the Communion.”

Thika inclined his suit in her direction, acknowledging her, and the Communion, point.

“So what is our status now that we have learned from this miscalculation?”

Ariel walked to the wall display and pressed a console.

“System is secure. No traces found.” A voice announced.

She then loaded a disk into the wall unit.

“Our initial probes into the Gau system find it to be a painstaking search procedure with all of the radiation, debris, and hundreds of moons.”

“In addition, with all of the smuggling, pirating, and illicit activities going on in the system, it is a daunting process.”

Thika connected to the display via his console.

“Our solution, I would suggest, is to take the Gaustion at their word—the ship has arrived and it is being retrofitted. If so...” A dot started blinking in the inner solar system. “it will be at the Barlev shipyards, their primary shipbuilding facility.”

The Communion joined in.

“We can not enter that space, the radiation is too great.”

“That is true.” Thika agreed. “However, if we position our forces outside of the area, we can monitor traffic and strike when the ship comes out.”

“Still a very difficult task. The Gaustion are well armed and we do not have a very strong presence in that area due to the losses at Leo Station.”

“True, but a small force should be capable of overwhelming the ship. The ship is undermanned, since all of the crew except her captain were killed in the attack, and lightly armed—even after the Gaustion refit her.”

Ariel touched the screen in the outer system.

“The Gaustion seem to use this area as their testing ground. Perhaps we could grab them then?”

The Communion was silent for a moment.

“We agree.”

Thika interrupted.

“I have a better idea. Before we send our team in, let use the Alliance to our advantage.”

“How so?”

“If we send an Alliance force into Gaustion space to seize the vessel, the Gaustion will scramble their defensive forces. In the resulting confusion, we can slip our team in and maybe get the two sides to destroy a couple of each other’s ships as well as the treaty.”

The Communion was pleased. “Very cunning. Proceed with the plan.”

The Garik test site is located in a region of lower gravity and radiation near Gau Delta. It has the added advantage of being on the opposite side of most of the Gaust civilization (and prying eyes). The Gaustion, with the superior sensor technology, can track anything approach the system from up to a half of a light year away.

When the Adlai Stevenson sortied from the Barlev shipyard, she had an impressive flotilla with her. The Gaustion Hegemony sent along: two Gaustion battlecruisers, two heavy cruisers, four light cruisers. To patrol the space around the test area, they included two escort carriers, eight destroyers, and a wing of electronic warfare and countermeasures vessels to pinpoint, blank out or jam any attempt to monitor the events surrounding the tests.

In addition, the testing area had it’s own garrison and patrol ships with four destroyers and four wings of fighters and bombers.

“All of this just to watch over us?” Williams asked in awe, looking out over the ships surrounding them.

“This would be where I would look to take the ship.” Krala remarked from the helm without turning.

Roberts looked up at Chelas, then at the back of Krala’s suit.

“So who do you think it will be? Alliance or VOX?”

There was a beep and Kel-Low’Ya face filled the viewscreen.

“We’ve detected two bodies of ships heading this way. One is definitely Alliance. The other, much smaller, is probably VOX.”

“Lovely.” Williams muttered.

CHAPTER 9

Admiral Horatio Chang sat in his bridge chair on his flagship, the Alliance Battlecruiser ‘Trafalgar’, going over fleet status reports when an aide approached him and saluted.

“Admiral Chang, we have sighted two forces in the region of Gau Delta. The larger force is definitely Gaustion Hegemony and preliminary analysis puts the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ in the middle of the group. The other, coming from the opposite direction as us is approximately a one half light year out, and is definitely VOX.”

Chang looked up at the viewscreen and studied the tactical map.

“So, are the Gaustion bringing the Stevenson to us or to the VOX?”

“Unclear at this time sir. We should be within hailing range in about six Terran hours sir.”

“Very good, set the fleet on Condition Yellow, increase to Flank speed, and attack pattern Sierra Six.”

VOX Task Force

“We have spotted the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ and an escort of Gaustion ships entering the Garik Test Range.”

“Have they spotted us?”

“Their sensor are more acute due to the radiation and debris, so we assume that they have. However, at this time they have not redirected any of their ships to intercept us.”

“Very well, continue on course. Are the commandos ready to go?”

“Yes they are. We are all in Communion. They will launch thirty Terran minutes before we attack and use the confusion to slip onto the ‘Stevenson’.”

“Proceed.”

“Okay, so now what?” Williams demanded.

“This escort we have is not large enough to hold off both fleets.”

“Of course not.” Kel-Low’Ya nodded. He had transferred to the Alliance ship after announcing the sighting of the two fleets on an intercept course.

“So, what are we going to do?”

“We’re just going to let them come barreling in, and then we have a surprise for them, right?” Roberts responded, looking over at the Gaustion scientist.

Kel-Low’Ya wiggled with glee, emitting several excited squeaks that passed for Gaustion laughter.

“I KNEW I was going to like you, Ambassador.”

He paused, then continued more serious.

“Did you think we would keep the Test Range so lightly protected?” he asked. “This is where we test our latest technologies.” We are not going to let anyone, how you say, ‘waltz?’ within sensor range and watch?”

Kel-Low’Ya touched his communicator on his wrist.

“Anytime you are ready, Admiral.”

“Whoa, Whoa, Whoa! Where the hell did THEY come from?!” the sensor officer on the Trafalgar suddenly shouted, breaking the professional calm and quiet of the bridge.

Admiral Chang, startled, looked upward at the tactical map.

Red dots representing Gaustion ships were appearing at an alarming rate between them and the stolen ship’s escorts.

“Give me an estimate!” he barked.

“Admiral, we’re seeing sensor data on EIGHT dreadnoughts, TWELVE battleships, several dozen battlecruisers, heavy and light cruisers.”

He paused as more data was processed and fed to his VR headset.

“To that add at least TWO supercarriers, TWELVE Fleet carriers, forty escort carriers, and at least a hundred destroyers, frigates, and escort vessels. We can’t even get a read on the fighters, bombers, and the smaller ships due to the radiation and debris.”

“Where did they come from?” Chang bellowed.

“We don’t know, Sir. Maybe they were cloaked.” The technician replied, fear creeping into his voice.

Chang slumped back into his chair.

“Reduce speed, open a hailing frequency.”

On the far side of the range, things were getting interesting for the VOX as well.

“Sensor report a massive group of Gaustion warships appearing out of nowhere.”

“Do we have an estimate?”

“They must outnumber us at least 100-to-1.”

“This makes our task more difficult, however, we must proceed.

Attack immediately.”

Kel-Low’Ya laughed out loud as the VOX forces began their attack and the Alliance forces suddenly slowed their advance.

“Yes! Precisely what we expected.” He clicked and whistled merrily.

Kel-Low’Ya turned to Krala.

“Increase speed to pass between the battlecruisers Kel’nak and Zelma’nik, then drop your sensor decoys, Captain.”

Krala inclined his head and turned towards his console.

As the Stevenson passed between the two cruisers, four small electronic devices were ejected and moved away in four different directions.

On the VOX and Alliance screens, the Stevenson appeared to emerge and head back towards the shipyards.

“There is your target.” Flew off of the lips almost simultaneously from both flagships.

Suddenly another signal matching the Stevenson appear to accelerate AWAY from the two battlecruisers and towards open space.

“SIR!” The technician looked concerned and confused.

Chang swore an oath.

“XO! What would you do? Would you run for the shipyard or make a break for open space?”

Before the Executive Officer could even answer, the third decoy started broadcasting and it was heading TOWARDS for the Alliance Fleet.

Almost simultaneously, the fourth decoy went off—heading TOWARDS the VOX fleet.

Chaos reigned in both advancing fleets. Unfortunately for the VOX, the commando’s ship picked the third decoy that was approaching their fleet. As soon as their ship was apparently going to board the decoy, the Gaustion Hegemony Cruiser “Her’Al” opened fired on it, destroying the VOX ship and her commandos.

Chang was besides himself, the bridge was a lunatic asylum of orders, shouted information counterorders, and warnings.

Finally, Chang slammed his fist down on his chair arm (breaking his hand) and screamed “SHUTUP!” and the bridge fell silent, stunned by the outburst.

“XO! I want a communication link to the Admiral of the Gaustion fleet NOW!”

“SIR!”

In the meantime, the VOX were also in disarray, which was not helping their attack.

“We must pull back. The commandos have been eliminated.”

“We can not. We must have that ship.”

“It may be a decoy.”

“Confirm it. We have Communion.”

“Very well.”

The VOX forces were good enough that they managed to drive a wedge into the flank of the Gaustion fleet and may a lunge towards the approaching decoy.

Kel-Low’Ya pressed a panel and the decoy self-destructed, taking out several assault landers attempting to dock with it.

“Now THAT should really piss them off...” Roberts commented.

The little scientist clicked gleefully.

Then, unfortunately Gaustion psychology kicked in and the Captain of one of the cruisers panicked at the onslaught of enemy ships.

Wheeling around, he rammed the ship next to him amidships, mortally wounding both vessels.

Seeing the opening, the VOX ships drove towards the confusion and broke through. Suddenly, there was only the Her’Al, Zelma’nik, and four Gaustion destroyers between the real Stevenson and about 50 VOX warships.

“Might be a good time for Plan ‘B’, Chelas remarked dryly.

Kel-Low'Ya was suddenly all business.

“Oh well, it worked for a while.”

He touched another panel and turned to Krala.

“Captain, if you please, lay in a course for Pollux Station. Tach 9 if you please.”

“Won't they see us?” Roberts asked.

“No, I've set our active sensors to emit background radiation for Gau Prime. They would physically have to SEE us visually making the jump and that should be covered by all of the weapons fire and explosions.”

He looked back at Krala.

“NOW, if you please, Captain.”

“This is Admiral Chang of the Triad Alliance, please respond.”

“Admiral Ge'Bart of the Gaustion Hegemony Twenty-second Fleet. I'm a little busy right now. Can it wait?”

“Admiral, we are here to recover the stolen vessel 'Adlai Stevenson' and arrest the renegade crew which stole her.”

“The Adlai Stevenson? Strange, my understanding was they were here for a retrofit as part of the treaty agreement between us and you.” The picture danced wildly as the admiral's ship took a hit.

“Really Admiral, Chang? Did you say? I MUST insist we discuss this later as my ship is under attack.”

Chang stood up slowly and glowered at the screen.

“Admiral Ge'Bart, don't bullshit a bullshitter...” he began then stopped at the surprised look on his XO's face.

“Very well. Sensors indict the 'Adlai Stevenson' is headed for your fleet as we speak. Oh no!” the Gaustion admiral remarked.

Offscreen, an aide pressed a panel and the Alliance-bound decoy suddenly exploded as well.

“They appear to have been hit by enemy fire, Admiral, I am terribly sorry.” He paused and put on his best pleading look.

I don't suppose we can get your assistance in defeating this VOX fleet could we? We can discuss your unauthorized violation of the Gau Prime territorial space after we get rid of these VOX characters. Ge'Bart out.”

The alien admiral's face disappeared leaving Chang standing slack-jawed until a VOX Battlecruiser loosed a broadside at his ship, rocking it as the shields were pummeled.

“XO, signal the fleet to engage the VOX. Fire at will!” he growled.

CHAPTER 10

The crew of the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ monitored the traffic between the Gaustion and the Alliance for as long as they were in range. Even as grave as the situation was, when the signal finally faded, the entire bridge echoed with laughter.

“That was simply masterful, Doctor.” Roberts managed to choke out, bowing low and tipping a fake hat to the Gaustion scientist.

Kel-Low’Ya had lost all composure, he was on his back on the floor clicking and hooting hysterically, his body racked with spasms of laughter.

Even Zela and Krala were *twitching* as if the suits were reacting to laughter from inside of them.

“All laughter aside...” Williams began, wiping the tears from his eyes. “When we get to Pollux Station we’re are still going to be renegades and Thika will still try to have us arrested.”

“Not really.” Chelas countered, collapsing back into a chair. He held up a disk.

“Thika *was* scanned after all—he just didn’t realize it. Also, he has been bugged, around the clock, by Alliance Security with new technology provided by the Hegemony that normal detection equipment has not been calibrated to see.”

“A copy of this disk went to the head of Alliance Security at headquarters, and to all Security heads at each of our stations and shipyards as soon as we made a break for Pollux. If he isn’t under arrest now, he will be shortly. Him and his co-conspirators.”

Behind them the door opened and a familiar voice floated in.

“I’d like to thank you for your part in making that happen.” Grant voice rang out.

Both humans jerked their heads towards the voice and sat down hard.

“Councilor?!” Williams finally managed.

Grant walked through the doorway, followed by Dra’Bin.

“Captain Krala, I think it would be wise to reduce speed to Tach 4. Doctor Kel-Low’Ya, initiate your freighter profile if you please.”

Both nodded and complied.

Councilor Grant raised his hand as Ambassador Roberts started to ask a question.

“It was necessary for us to ‘die’ to force Thika’s hand.” Dra’Bin started to explain then stopped as both Zela and Williams leapt forward and started hugging the big Brak’kan.

Grant chuckled at the pained and uncomfortable look on the Brak’kan’s face at the show of emotion. Emotion directed at them, especially from other races, was a difficult thing to allow.

“All right, enough.” Grant finally said. “You’re smothering the poor fellow.”

“Okay, I’m working on a MAJOR headache. Would someone bring me up to speed please?” Roberts said.

“Councilor Grant and I have been concerned that the longer Thika was free, the more likely he was to turn other key personnel in the Alliance.” Dra’Bin explained. “Therefore, we decided to use the attack to our advantage and fake our deaths.”

“No small feat, Revered Ones, to accomplish, impromptu, in the middle of an attack.” Zela pointed out.

Grant nodded. “It got a little hairy at times. Especially when Thika left a target designator in the shelter. “Actually, that was what gave us the idea of faking our deaths.”

Chelas scratched his head, looking puzzled.

“But your bodies were identified.”

Dra’Bin corrected him.

“They found our Council robes or what was left of them and identified us based on the DNA. The shelter took a direct hit from a salvo of missiles.” His face turned grim. “I wish we could have saved more people, but the appearance needed to be maintained.”

Krala turned from his console.

“So? What now, Revered Ones? The flight to Pollux Station will require two weeks. At Tach 4, it will take closer to a month. How do we stay invisible for a month?”

“We could get into the trade routes, but on the outer edge on the navigational flightpath.” Williams offered, then shook his head. “But by being on the edge, that might attract attention as well.”

“We hide it in plain view.” Krala stated.

Everyone turned to him.

“What did you have in mind?” Kel-Low’Ya inquired.

Krala manipulated the main viewscreen and a map of the path between their present location and Pollux Station appeared. Next, a series of lines of various colors appeared along the route, crossing the route or running parallel to their route.

Two of the lines started to flash that aligned almost perfectly with their flight path.

“I see where you are going with this.” Exclaimed Kel-Low’Ya.

“You’ found two ships that fly the Pollux Station route.”

He walked to a console and worked the panel for a couple of minutes. Finally, the system spit out data on the two lines.

“The Freighter ‘Tanaka’ out of Deneb and the supertanker ‘Lightening’ out of Lacerta A.”

Kel-Low’Ya looked at Krala.

“The tanker you think?”

“I would. Bigger sensor image to hide in.” Krala turned to the others.

“We can pretty much park ourselves on the supertanker and power down to minimum energy levels since it is an automated ship with a minimal crew. Unless someone goes outside for a walk and finds us attached to the ship, no one would be the wiser that we are along for the ride--the tanker will take us right to the station.”

Grant nodded.

“Let’s do it then. Time to intercept?”

Krala looked at the map.

“Approximately twelve Terran hours.”

“The thanks of the Gaustion Hegemony to the Alliance for your assistance in this attack by the VOX, Admiral Chang.” Admiral

Ge’Bart said pleasantly to the glowering human on his display screen. The two dreadnoughts, damaged but intact, paced each other side by side through the testing range. Occasionally, their shields flickered briefly as a piece of VOX ship was shunted aside.

The VOX had failed badly in their attempt to capture the prototype. The appearance of the much larger Gaustion Fleet from behind their sensor cloak had turned a very quick ‘snatch and run’ into a toe-to-toe slugfest that they VOX were not prepared for. The few surviving VOX ships had retreated from the area leaving almost two-thirds of the assault fleet destroyed or burning in space.

Admiral Ge’Bart leaned forward in his chair, face filling the screen on Chang’ bridge.

“Now if you will kindly withdraw from Hegemony space, I’m certain my government will overlook this unauthorized foray into our sovereign space.”

Chang didn’t even flinch.

“Admiral, we are in pursuit of the renegades who stole the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ from the Leo Station at the height of a VOX assault. Reports placed it here, at Gau Prime...” he continued.

“Why yes, those reports came from us.” The Gaustion admiral replied pleasantly.

“Why did you not detain the crew? Councilor Thika ordered them detained and the ship returned!”

“We were escorting them back to you when the VOX attacked us.”

Chang was totally frustrated. He knew the smug little Gaustion Admiral was lying through his teeth. Taking a deep breath, he studied the placid Gaustion Admiral on the screen.

“We are certain that the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ was destroyed in the attack?”

“The ship appeared to be destroyed according to our sensor records. We’ve reviewed them several times.” The Gaustion Admiral sounded and appeared sympathetic.

“Very well, then. We will retire to Alliance space.” Chang announced, looking at the XO, who nodded.

The Alliance fleet turned slowly, shepherding their wounded ships, and headed out of the test area for the nearest Alliance base.

The 'Adlai Stevenson' dropped to normal space about two hours out from the interception with the 'Lightening' and commenced a sensor analysis of the surrounding space.

In addition to finding no other ships in the area, the data was fed into the Gaustion-enhanced sensor system. The system analyzed the readings, matched them to the ship's energy profile and started broadcasting a sensory "hole" in normal space that would hide the ship for its approach to the supertanker.

"Sensor system appears nominal, Captain, you can commence your approach." Kel-Low'Ya announced, looking up from his console.

"Very good. Thank you, Kel-Low'Ya." The Aelori said, turning his attention to the large, slow moving ship ahead of them on the beacon.

Docking with a large, slow moving vessel in deep space would seem to be an easy thing to do for the uninitiated. However, attempting to dock with a vessel weighing 100 million tons empty, let alone loaded, when they don't know you are coming is very nerve racking. Also to be considered is the fact you don't know what they are doing in the way of course corrections--a lack of knowledge that could be instantly fatal for your much smaller vessel.

Therefore, the interception point was chosen to eliminate as many surprises as possible. The supertanker had just completed a course correction at Waypoint Gamma and was still trying in normal space. It would not jump back to tach 4 for another four hours if it followed the procedures they had noted for the last two waypoints. If not, the turbulence from the massive ship jumping to tach speed could easily destroy their much smaller vessel, so they had to be quick and cautious.

Murphy read off the distance and closing information as they approached the massive ship. They finally had reached the critical moment and even the ship seemed to hold its breath.

"Docking latches are in place. We have a good lock." Murphy finally announced.

Everyone sagged noticeably until Williams spoke up.

"How sure are we that the latches will hold when we make the jump?"

About an hour later, the tension level leapt again as Murphy detected a change in their host's engines.

"Power surge! Their engines are spiking!" Murphy warned just as the stars contorted and the supertanker transitioned.

Ariel was not happy. She could also sense the disturbance in the Communion.

Councilor Thika paced across the bridge of the Alliance Cruiser 'Merik', a totally un-Aelori thing to do—and the crew was noticing it.

After he had learned that the actual construction of Ambassador ships had been going on for some time at Pollux Station, he had lost all hints of Aelori composure and had ordered he be flown there immediately.

Thika was becoming a liability to their goals she found herself thinking.

There is Communion, they told her.

The bridge crew was stunned when Ariel stepped forward, pulled a sidearm out of the holster of a surprised bridge guard and emptied it into Thika's tach suit.

The first three round burst ricocheted off the curved metallic surface of the tach suit. The next burst however, hit the dark blue glassy material most people assumed was the visor and penetrated.

The atmosphere inside suit ignited and Thika became a bomb, destroying the bridge and everyone on it.

On the escort ships alongside of the cruiser, the bridge crews watched in horror as the bridge of the 'Merik' disappeared in a flash and a cloud of debris that quickly vanished behind the ship at that speed.

The cruiser seem to stagger then suddenly lose its orientation.

"Break off! Cut tach engines and drop to normal space!" the Captain of the destroyer 'Midway' screamed as the larger ship swung ponderously into her flight path.

The Merik' brushed the smaller ship just before she managed transitioned to normal space.

Although the brush was ever so slight, the mass o the cruiser, at that velocity, and under the enormous structural pressures from the emergency deceleration, doomed the smaller ship.

It's vector knocked out of alignment, the 'Midway' hit normal space like a diver doing the Terran "belly flop" into a swimming pool: out of control, almost sideways to the original flight path and hard.

The structural integrity fields failed and the destroyer was instantly hulled in a hundred places. Her engines, torn free of their mounts proceed onward at near tach speeds, bulldozing through bulkheads, quarters and the weapons magazine where they detonated the ship's munitions.

'Midway' disappeared in a flaming fireball that immediately was snuffed out by the vacuum of space.

The other escorts were more lucky. They had time to scatter and drop to normal space. While the effort was hopeless, they immediately started rescue operations for the crew of the 'Midway'. Only the Brak'kan light cruiser 'Kratuk', who was abeam of the 'Merik' when the bridge blew, was far enough away not to have to dodge the doomed ship.

As the bridge crew watched in horror, the stricken cruiser proceed to tumble while at Tach 6 and tore herself apart, hurtled ship parts and crew into space.

In a flash, she fell out of tach space and back into normal space, lighting the interstellar darkness like an artificial sun for a few brief moments.

Ahead of her escorts, the flash that blinded the unprepared dissipated and normal space was filled with parts of the once proud ship and grim remains of her crew. The smaller ships heeled over sharply to avoid the debris-filled flight path with several being damaged.

All told, the 'Merik' Disaster, as it was officially called, would go into Alliance history books as unsolved. The results of the incident inconclusive due to no survivors, or recognizable clues from what little debris there was to recover. The Alliance lost the cruiser 'Merik', the destroyer 'Midway', suffered moderate damage to the

Aelori light cruiser 'AlBak', and light damage to the destroyers 'Burke', 'Tobruk', and 'ZeeNan', the escort carrier 'Aberdeen', and the supply ship 'Suffolk'. All of the damaged ships were able to make spaceport under their own power.

The Alliance also lost 1,200 crew members in addition to Thika and his staff and suffered another 400 injured. It would be the largest non-military action loss of life for the Alliance for the next 100 years.

CHAPTER 11

The crew of the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ were unaware of the death of Thika as they drew closer to their destination. Working together, they honed their skills on the ship’s systems. Even the diplomats and councilors took an active role in the preparations for what awaited them.

Finally, Krala and Kel-Low’Ya pronounced them as ready as they could be. All that was left was the waiting. They should arrive at Pollux Station waypoint in two days.

The drop out point to normal space varies for each vessel. With a ship the size of a super tanker, that point is two Terran days from the actual waypoint beacon. This is due to the size of the vessel and the amount of time required to slow her to navigation speeds for approach to Pollux Station.

When the ‘Lightening’ dropped out of tach at the Pollux Station Waypoint, her commanding officer, Captain Andrews, suddenly found his regular routine going haywire.

Sensors reported a welcoming committee of Alliance vessels waiting for them. He groaned, this was not going to be his day.

As soon as the supertanker dropped to normal space, Krala released the docking latches and the ‘Adlai Stevenson’ coasted away from the larger ship. All systems on alert, the crew tensely waited as the ship’s sensors digested data about the surrounding space: radiation levels, other ships, active search probes, anything that could be a threat.

Almost immediately, the sensors detected the picket line ahead of the slowing supertanker, whose Captain had proceed to initiate an

emergency stop. Krala and Kel-Low’Ya immediately activated the sensor package and changed course using thrusters only.

The entire crew held their breath as four destroyers converged on the supertanker and began a sweep of the surrounding area.

In the meantime, Chelas and Williams were busy monitoring the communications traffic and downloading a large amount of data that they had not been able to receive due to their stowaway location on the belly of the tanker.

“He’s dead! Thika is dead!” Williams shouted turning to look at Grant and Roberts.

“Oh, sorry...” he muttered. Obviously, things were tense enough without the outburst, regardless of the relevance of the news.

“Indeed? If you have calmed down enough, perhaps you could transfer the information to our VR sets and to Zela.” Councilor Grant stated, indicating himself, Dra’Bin, and Roberts.

Williams blushed and nodded.

The diplomats reviewed the data, then huddled in a corner of the bridge.

Finally, Grant straightened and turned to Krala.

“Make for Pollux Station. Tach Six.”

Krala paused for a second, then acknowledged.

“Yes, Sir. Tach Six it is. ETA to Pollux Station is one Terran hour.”

Krala turned.

“You realize sir that the defense grid will see us at that speed?”

“Yes I am. If we suddenly just pop up, we’re likely to get blown out of the sky by some trigger happy Alliance fighter jock. So, we’ll let them know we are coming.” Grant responded.

“Combat! This is Grid Control. I have a bogey inbound from the Waypoint beacon. Speed is Tach 6. He must have been hiding behind the supertanker and he is already past the picket line.”

Admiral Jennings, Base Commander, swore an oath, then acknowledged.

“Roger Grid Control. Feed us the data.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Jennings turned to his aide.

“Sound General Quarters.”

“Aye Sir.”

Klaxons wailed and personnel scrambled to their positions as defense batteries swung up from their hiding places or rotated to face the incoming threat.

Jennings raised his VR set and watched from his perch as a squadron of Slavars roared out of Hangar Bay Two heading for the bogey.

“Combat, this is Grid Control.”

“Go ahead.”

“Sir, the bogey is reducing speed. IFF code coming in now...” the technician paused.

Jennings leaned forward, impatient. “Yes? And? IS it one of ours?”

“Sir, IFF identifies the vessel as the ‘Adlai Stevenson’.

Jennings shot a glance at his XO.

“The ‘Stevenson’?! She was supposedly destroyed in Gaustion space. I want confirmation, XO.”

Colonel Bennett, the XO nodded.

“Razor Lead, this Combat, over.”

The Brak’kan flight leader, pressed into his acceleration couch by the full thrust of his engines grunted a reply.

“Go ahead Combat.”

“Razor Lead, the bogey is broadcasting an ALLIANCE IFF for the ‘Adlai Stevenson’. Please confirm it is the ‘Stevenson’. Over.”

“Roger Combat.”

The big Brak’kan, fighting the gravity, slowly looked to his left at the five Slavar fighters in echelon formation off of his wing.

“Razor Two and Three, with me. Weapons hot but do not fire unless I say so—this could be one of ours. Acknowledge.”

“Razor Flight, Weapons hot, but do not fire unless I say so—this could be one of ours. Acknowledge.”

A chorus of acknowledgements rang through his ears.

“Combat, Razor Lead. We’re making our run.”

“Roger Lead, Be careful. Target is still on course and they have dropped to normal space.”

The three Slavars peeled off, punishing the six crewmembers with even more gees as they swung in to pass by the bogey.

On the ‘Stevenson’, Kel-Low’Ya called out a warning.

“I’ve got three fighters inbound, Slavar class. ETA thirty seconds.”

“Confirmed, I see them.” Krala replied.

The three fighters blazed past the ship at a heart stopping rate and range, instantly disappearing from view.

Kel-Low’Ya, however continued to track them.

“They are coming around behind us.” He stated.

Grant looked at the others on the bridge.

“Check you harnesses. Krala, get ready to go to maximum tach, just in case.”

Krala pressed the intercom.

“All hands, strap in. Standby for a possible jump to maximum tach.”

The fighters, however, eased back and drifted in cautiously. While tow of the fighters held back in range and position for a missile launch, the lead fighter eased up alongside of the bridge.

“Unidentified vessel, Razor Lead. Do you read me over?”

Grant touched a panel and the bulk of a Brak’kan appeared on the main viewscreen.

“Razor Lead, this is Councilor Grant on board the Alliance vessel, ‘Adlai Stevenson’. Go ahead.”

“Councilor Grant?! He was killed at Leo Station. What is this!” the stunned Brak’kan demanded.

“I assure you we are both who we say we are.” Dra’Bin replied.

The Brak’kan pilot’s helmeted head swiveled, then bowed.

“Revered Ones, we were told that you were dead. We thought all of the Council was dead.”

“Yes, we just became aware of Thika’s demise. No doubt the work of the VOX for his failures.” Dra’Bin replied.

“We can speculate later, gentleman,” Grant interjected. “if you don’t mind Razor Lead, we have a very tired crew looking forward to getting this ship home.”

“Roger, that Councilor grant. This is Admiral Jennings. We are extremely glad to hear your voice and to see the ‘Adlai Stevenson.’” Jennings relieved voice broke in. “Razor Flight, bring them home.”

EPILOGUE

News of the death of Thika and his staff flashed around the Alliance like wildfire. The information that he had been turned only added to the trauma. For the first time, the Alliance teetered on the edge of collapse. In several cases, VOX implants or those with personal agendas tried to seize the opportunity to coax several of the allied worlds out of the Alliance.

Alliance officials and troops loyal to the Alliance were called upon on several worlds to subdue the resulting violence. Order, however, was restored quickly and several VOX implants were flushed out and captured when news of the arrival of the Adlai Stevenson' as well as the survival of Councilors Grant and Dra'Bin became known. Since order was restored so quickly, the VOX also did not have time to take advantage of the turmoil to make any gains on the frontiers, so the war remained as it was—a virtual standoff.

The potential for a major shift, however, had occurred: The Ambassador class vessels being built were being outfitted with the Technology that Roberts, Krala, Williams, Zela, Chelas, and Kel-Low'Ya had brought back from the Gaustion.

Kel-Low'Ya, for his actions, was rewarded by the Hegemony by being appointed it's first Ambassador to the Triad Alliance. A position that he used to his advantage whenever possible. After all, as the Terran saying goes. 'You can take a Gaustion out of the Hegemony, but you can't take the Hegemony out of a Gaustion'. Roberts, Zela, and Williams assumed their posts as Alliance diplomats to the Hegemony later that year.

As for the Alliance, the Gaustion Hegemony joined with a bang.

A month after the 'Adlai Stevenson' reached Pollux Station with it's critical technology, the Gaustion Hegemony's First Imperial Fleet, led by Admiral Ge'Bart, attacked the VOX base at GJ 1156.

After making a high speed tach run from Gau Prime and slipping, undetected by VOX border patrols, Ge'Bart and his ships swept through the GJ 1156 system like a whirlwind of death.

They blasted the Supply Facility on planet #4, Dyridia, destroyed the repair docks, and reduced a VOX task force docked in port to a debris cloud before punching their way back through the front lines and returning to Gau Prime.

The fleet of Ambassador class diplomatic vessels launched on their First Contact missions six months later. At the front of the fleet was the 'Adlai Stevenson', with Krala still in command, but now as an Admiral of the Triad Alliance. The Ambassadors have supplied the Alliances with several new allies since that time:

The Borax,
The Kalon
The Tsyliac
The Tuche
The Ysal

"Thika's legend would not be of the Aelori who, alongside of the Terran Councilor Grant and the Brak'kan Councilor Dra'Bin, led a diverse Alliance of worlds and races against the greatest danger the Galaxy had ever known. Instead, it would be of the Aelori who was turned. Who sold out his race and the Alliance, who had Councilor's Grant and Dra'Bin murdered, and who had attempted to give the VOX the Universe."

"While unfair in the personal opinion of this historian, I can not allow my personal opinions to be an influence on the perception of those events."

"As an old Earth saying goes, 'One man's freedom fighter is another's terrorist'. Only the reader of this document can make that judgement."

"Recording ends..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Hayhurst is a technical writer by trade living in Kirkland, Washington. He's spent the last several years testing Larry's patience with hare-brained schemes regarding his Starbase C3 environment.

In addition to writing, he dabbles in 3D art and animation and prays daily to the Hockey Gods that they will grant Seattle an NHL franchise in his lifetime.

Steve's artwork can be found on the following sites:

Renderosity

<http://www.renderosity.com/gallery.ez?ByArtist=Y&Artist=shayhurs>

Earthlink

<http://home.earthlink.net/~shayhurs>

His work has also been featured on SciFi.com's Sci-Fi Weekly and Space.com's web sites.

ABOUT STARBASE C3

In 1996 Cube Productions inc. Developed the online science fiction universe named Starbase C3. Created by Cube's founder, Larry Rosenthal, Starbase C3 has been on the Internet for over six years exploring interactive storytelling and online community building. By providing a background structure and "universe" for user/viewers to inhabit and play within. The Starbase C3 website has become a popular new type of science fiction property. Just as Star Trek was to television, and Star Wars was to film, Starbase C3 is to the developing media of the Internet. In 1997 the Starbase C3 universe received a boost by it's inclusion on the entertainment asylum on America Online. Though the asylum was short lived as a network, Starbase C3 continued to grow gathering new "viewers." In the following years as broadband and new web3D technologies developed, Starbase C3 continued to be a test bed site for the adoption of these new web technologies.

WEBSITE LINKS TO STARBASE C3 UNIVERSE

This section describes the various links to the Starbase C3 world.

MAIN STARBASE C3 SITE:

[Http://www.starbasec3.com](http://www.starbasec3.com)

Log into the main site for starship construction, 3D chat, galleries, dataparts system sales and 3D starship models and more!

STARBASE C3 WEBISODES SITE:

<http://www.starshipc3.com>

Log into this site to view "The Rescue," the 3D adventures of the crew of the aurora!

Get the free sample chapter of "First Steps: The story of Astra Wright."

While at starshipc3.com you can try your skills as a fighter pilot by playing "strike fighter" our 3D shooter game!

Finally, check out the new Axel 3D and Adobe Atmosphere creations.

OTHER SITES OF INTEREST

Larry has converted the datakits to MojoWorld!

Look for them on the Starbase C3 Site as well as on the Renderosity web site.

<http://www.renderosity.com>