

Chapter 2

"Until we heard the BlueGreen bloodhound, only the Comets moved us."

Attributed to Fengor Ool, Oot Warlord

"Prediction 20," the young woman checked the latest news from the 14 gateway chains of the human empire. "Failed. Completely wrong, in fact. All 20 high-confidence predictions that were sealed last month have proved incorrect Admiral."

"How does this compare to prediction baselines, Xyla?" the precise clip of the Admiral's military voice silenced all other conversations in the room.

"Historically," Xyla pulled the classified record and paused. "The Foreshadowing Society has an 83% success rate on high-confidence predictions."

"And..." the Admiral's voice rose.

"In the last 4 months, there has been one correct prediction in 65," her chair turned to one side and back as the Admiral's stare remained on her. "The only accurate prediction was that the following 10 predictions would be incorrect."

"Amusing," though the Admiral's tone held no mirth. "Explanation Vizar!"

"Sir, the contract states you cannot address a Foreshadower," Xyla held up a finger that showed a slight tint of green. "Confrontation tends to decrease their ability to see future events."

"Damn the protocol, Xyla, I fund this madhouse," his walking stick cracked against the table. "If you could explain how this could get any worse through my presence, I would be happy to listen. Since that is not the case, I want an answer before I disband the lot of you and wish you well trying to guess lottery numbers! Vizar!"

Xyla's finger fell back below the table, and she nodded to Vizar.

The man with spidery arms slouched low in the curve of his chair. After two long blinks with glassy, brown eyes, a flicker of consciousness slowly rose to the surface. "Foreshadowers cannot spend time in the present, Admiral Kale. We begin to lose communion with the mystic."

"Unless the mystic can pay your bills, you will give me your full attention," the Kale's eyes were an inferno of consciousness. "The Triad has made a habit of following up each of your visions, and I can no longer expend the resources of the fleet in this way. How many missions that do not bear fruit can be kept secret?"

"We predicted the Glenn uprising," Vizar had no more than a squeak in response.

"Yes," the Admiral settled back into his chair instead of clawing his way over the table. "That is the only reason that I am here. Traditional intelligence had no inkling of a problem in the 10th world of the Glenn chain of WormPipes. Your Foreshadowers brought down a Triad task force in the midst of the coup. That response sent every fringe radical group into hiding. You have saved lives... and spent some in the name of order."

"Admiral," Xyla ventured again in the lull. "The art of prediction is not a certainty. There are bound to be misses."

"Have you or any of your group had a drought of this type before?" the Admiral pointed to Vizar without glancing at Xyla.

"No," Vizar managed to curl tighter into the chair. "But, while I cannot explain the rift in my mind, I know the precise time it began."

"Really?" Xyla and the Admiral spoke the word together. Unlike the woman's surprised gasp, the man curled a predator's grin.

"What if I were to say that January 24th, 2528 was the day that saw your talent fail," he sneered. Suddenly fully part of the present, Vizar sat bolt upright in the seat.

"Read back the last prediction before that date, Xyla," the Admiral turned back to her.

"The Livingston Chain will yield the next new world, and the uninhabited world will be called Frobe," she read. "Admiral, your fleet confirmed this as accurate."

"Not so," the Admiral shook his head slowly. "Frobe is indeed the latest world, the 20th in the Livingston chain. But it is inhabited by some... unusual fauna, discovered on January 24th 2528."

"What has that to do with the Foreshadowers?" Vizar was now leaning to the edge of the table.

"Initial studies by Earth science teams, that I have seriously discounted until now, believe that a small alien on this world lives by a perfect predictive sight," the Admiral said. "I would say that our interaction with this group might be affecting the direction of the human race."

"I don't understand," Xyla whispered.

"You understand me, Vizar," the Admiral nodded.

"The Triad and its worlds are now dancing to the song of the aliens on Frobe," Vizar mumbled. "If they have the perfect sight, no Foreshadower can match them."

"Precisely," the Admiral stood and spun to leave. A quick tap on his sleeve linked him with military command. "Captain, this is Admiral Kale."

"Sir!"

"Planetary quarantine and blockade of Frobe," he walked from the Foreshadowing Society without a second glance. "No one lands. Any scientific teams on the surface must stay. Commit 6 ships to the blockade."

"What should we do?" Vizar stood on shaky legs.

Kale paused at the door. "Keep predicting, Vizar. If I can depend upon your predictions being wrong, that is still of some value. Concentrate on these aliens with any predictions. Tell me about them. We will see if you have any insight to the Pressers."

* * *

Thad watched the sparkling diamond on Darian Tobr's ring. The diamond was like many things near his boss: big, expensive and flashy. Pressing into the fat of Tobr's tapping finger, the golden band nearly disappeared under rolls of flesh. The back of Darian's hand was a constant jiggle, matched to the impatient tapping.

"You were lucky," Darian's low rumble shook three chins. "Have you seen the tactical image of Frobe less than six hours after you left?"

Frobe's tan globe spun quietly over Tobr's desk. Silver icons appeared on the incoming side of the gateway ring. All chevrons were decorated with a variety of Triad Navy insignia, including stars and clusters. After dabbing a bead of sweat from his brow, Thad met the big man's black eyes.

"This patrol was not scheduled to start for weeks," Tobr's laugh lacked amusement. "My sources believed it would take Admiral Kale much longer to secure the sector, let alone launch orbital patrols. My sources will hear of my displeasure. Rezina!"

"Here," a glimmer of green eyes floated in the shadow behind Tobr's massive chair. A hand lined with serrated blades scratched at the desktop.

Between the bewitching gaze of the bodyguard and the demon blades, Thad could not see any other part of Rezina. *Mirrorskin*, Faction returned at Thad's confusion. *Mr. Tobr purchased the military suit for Rezina. Often, she needs to do her work without attracting attention. She's nearly invisible, isn't she?*

"My dear," Darian's voice was suddenly soft as he leaned toward the feminine voice. "Take care of this discipline for me. You know the young lieutenant - he must give us better information for our hard-earned money. Give him a few scars only, I think."

"More than a pleasure," Rezina added a humming laugh at the thought.

"And Rezina, my love," Darian's voice was firmer. "Stay away from the arteries on authentics. Not everyone has a GenAim circulatory systems like you."

"Of course," she pouted and the green glow of her eyes faded into the shadows of the office.

"Now," the huge man's chair shifted his bulk forward. His padded elbows rested on the desk. "Onto my faithful servant Thad Jaron..."

Thad's heart began to pound at his boss' full attention. *Don't worry*, Faction's phantom hands relaxed the tight muscles in his host's neck. *You did far better than Mr. Tobr expected.*

"I wanted four Pressers. You found them," Tobr's face grinned in the center but drooped along the sides. "I needed females to breed with a healthy male. And, I wanted the Visionary most of all. Tell me just how you managed to get this combination."

"I followed your plan and Faction's recommendations," Thad lowered his eyes to stare at the front of the desk. The toe of his left shoe twisted in the office carpet. "The Pressers did the rest."

"I am not blaming you for success, Jaron," Tobr rumbled a laugh. "Enjoy the moment before I send you back to work. Notice the breathtaking view from my office. A drink is traditional in this case, I think."

A glass slid onto the table at Thad's right hand and he thankfully took a sip. Both men sat in silence to see the sparkle of nighttime Chicago. From atop the tallest SpaceStalk in the world, Tobr's wall-size window looked down upon a city of fifty billion lights. The view was not a perfect one this evening: a cloud rolled away over Lake Michigan. Still, the view was clear to the Southeast where

Tobr's personal playground stood. The Triad Board of Trade was the largest commodity clearing-house for the vast agricultural stores of a hungry humanity.

Tobr grinned at his special employee. Thad was as slender as the boss was heavy, perhaps not even 55 kilograms, and he had been afflicted with paralyzing fears and doubts. Even now, remnants of this mental weakness assailed the man. The hand holding the glass trembled slightly while nervous eyes searched the corners of the room. Only Tobr's gift had saved Jaron from a life of crippling fear: this was the Faction implant. The big man chuckled as he imagined puppet's strings binding Jaron's limbs to his every whim.

"Mr. Tobr?" Thad steadied his glass with a second hand. "Did you really expect me to bring back the Pressers?"

"Of course, my boy," Darian pressed his weight back into the formidable chair. "I was certain you would succeed. As you know, I don't take blind risks."

Jaron continued. "If I may ask, how you could be certain?"

"Alright, Thad you might as well know," the boss lifted a round finger. "One word. Destiny."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir."

"I sent you to get the Pressers and bring them back to me, correct?" Tobr grew weary of holding up the finger and let it fall with a slap. "You had more than enough firepower and strength to carry off the stone-age Pressers without a fight. There would be no sense in the Pressers fighting, would there? How could they have beaten your Oot mercenaries? They couldn't have! You have to remember that the Pressers see the future and act it out precisely. Your success was inevitable, because the Pressers would act out your desires. For example, the giant predator eats the Pressers often, and the victim Presser patiently waits for the beast to carry him off. No one else intervenes because they are too wrapped up in their own vision of the future. Pressers have no senses to allow them to react or change the inevitability of the future vision. What was the worst scenario that you could imagine?"

"I think that the Pressers could have had an entire army waiting for us," Thad shrugged. "Perhaps their future sight would show them how to hit the kill point on an Oot."

"A wonderfully complicated and impossible scenario," Darian clapped hands to send tidal waves across his belly. "The future sight applies to each individual. It is not a society or government guided by a mystical, unifying vision. It is only a script for one actor: the mere culmination of the writer's whim to twist the life of a single poor character. I gave you all the tools to bring back four Pressers, and I knew that four of them would return with you. It was written in their personal scripts because I authored the perfect plan to guarantee your success. It does not matter how they got onto *Gash*. They were born to do just that."

Thad paused until the boss continued.

"They could not form an army because they cannot communicate," Tobr shook disappointed jowls. "How would a general rally them? Each individual is truly independent in a small bubble of reality."

"I think I understand," Jaron placed the empty glass on the table. It dissolved into the very surface of the wood. "We could have captured them as expected, or they could have come to us as they did. Either way, they could not stop us."

"I do not question the future," Tobr's hand was a rounded claw, "I prepare the path through which it must flow. My hands are the tools that dig the riverbed and the rushing waters go where I will. Look at the history of Tobr Commodities and you will see how I have done it time and again."

Faction took the cue from the boss and continued the explanation. *Tobr Commodities buys and sells immense quantities of agricultural products in the Earth Triad economy. Through a vast communications network, TobrNet, agents of Tobr Commodities can swiftly shift positions in the ever-changing futures markets. Grains, beans, softs, fibers and meats are all expertly traded by the firm, and a steady flow of food is guaranteed to the contracted customers of Tobr Commodities. Darian Tobr has been a leader in the trade for the last thirty years due to his understanding of the markets, his immense capital for purchases and TobrNet that allows him to act first.*

"My competitors are catching up," Tobr knew the data implant had finished talking to Thad. "TobrNet is still the best, my boy, but I have only moments of time to ruin other commodity traders. Years ago, using the technology that exists within your Faction implant, I could trust my traders to stay hours ahead of the market. I need a better advantage. I need a sure-thing."

"You will use the Pressers to see into the future?" Thad grasped it. "They will be part of the

TobrNet, just like me.”

“Not bad, Jaron,” Darian nodded so hard that a fold on his forehead made a soft slap. “But we have much work to do before the Pressers will draw back the mist of the future. Understanding the Presser’s mind is the first job. I want them to find an event so unexpected, so unpredictable, that I will be the only trader on the profitable side of the market. It is this one major killing that I will maneuver my fortune to underwrite.”

Thad nodded.

“There are certain events that can only be described as ‘Acts of God’,” Darian took a deep breath and let it wheeze from his tired lungs. “I want to know about them first.”

“How can we get them to tell us this future?” Thad scratched a head that now seemed too full. “The Pressers can’t speak. Or hear our questions for that matter.”

“A valid question,” Tobr’s chair rolled from behind the desk and paused next to Jaron’s seat. “One that Argo Zet tells me can be answered. I have trusted his instincts for technical wizardry long enough to know that he may be able to converse with these creatures. After all, my instincts for a future price have little to do with technical creativity. Should this tool work, I’ll know how to use it.”

Thad shuddered at the mention of Argo Zet, creator of the TobrNet. Argo was the man who assembled the many versions of Faction; the man who used Thad’s mind as a test environment. Each bug in the software brought terrible thoughts to the reality of his mind. *But not anymore*, Faction’s voice soothed his rising worries and banished those memories. *You have my full, reliable protection.*

“Let’s go pay your mercenary friends,” Tobr waved a hand as his chair gained momentum. “The Oot are allies that I must keep happy... and calm.”

Thad fell into step behind Tobr’s movable home. From Tobr’s office of rich wood and high technology, the chair rolled down a long hallway of priceless paintings. Thad found it difficult to appreciate his boss’ taste in artwork. To the left, Rembrandt’s “The Slaughtered Ox” only deepened this rift. Perhaps Mr. Tobr liked the painting due to his love of the meat markets?

“Since your mission was easy, the Oot may be worried that they will not be paid,” Darian waved to Jaron to walk beside him. “A worried Oot is not a good Oot to have around. They resolve any bothersome emotion the same way: extreme violence. Their hard planet has bred an aggressive, caustic creature.”

“I see,” Thad nodded solemnly.

“Of course you do, my boy,” the low, rumbling laugh returned. “The point we must consider is the goodwill of our Oot. They must know that we are aliens of our word. We must pay them quickly.”

Looking down at the boss’ inclined body, Thad knew that Tobr had not moved from the chair in at least five years. The chair itself was a marvel, containing the environmental and sanitary facilities that could have served a small home. Thad remembered pictures of transports that moved ancient rockets from factories to launching pads. Tobr’s chair moved at the same grinding and relentless pace.

Tobr’s reclining, stagnant flesh now filled the chair from arm to arm. As any of the employees of Tobr Commodities knew, Thad never mentioned the boss’ run-away weight. One of Tobr’s highest officers had joked that the boss kept commodity prices high by eating any excess stocks. The Triad Board of Trade bears feared Tobr’s next meal, was the rumor. The employee had disappeared some time ago...

Watch your thoughts, Faction’s warning opened gateways to the river of fear behind the data implant. *Remember all that Mr. Tobr has done for you. That attitude can be... hurtful.*

Thad saw a flash of color immediately in front of him that disappeared an instant later. As he stopped dead in his tracks, his subconscious mind played with the retina’s momentary picture. With a blink, the ghost in the colors snapped into his mind. It was Rezina in all her glory, blades at the ready and teeth bared, her figure was athletic and feminine, predatory and sexy, furious and gleeful. And deadly above all.

Rezina switched off her Mirrorskin for a moment, Faction forced his steps ahead. *She picked up your negative thoughts. Please respect your benefactor.*

“And here we are,” Tobr pointed to thick metal doors that slid away.

As Darian and Thad entered the docking compartment for *Gash*, Fengor Ool and his Oot warriors stood at attention. The four yellow eyes in each carapace were ablaze with excitement. The eight arms of each Oot flexed and rested in impatience. A ring of security guards kept their distance from the menacing aliens.

Thad felt bladed fingers close about his right shoulder, but he didn't dare turn to face the owner. While he stiffened every muscle to keep from trembling, Jaron felt a sharpened tooth caress the back of his ear.

"If there's trouble with the Oot," Rezina's musical whisper only unnerved Jaron more, "get to the ground and stay there. I want your blood saved for myself."

Such a kiddie, Faction jumped to action to loosen an endorphin flood, trying to override the terror leaping at the woman's touch. *Combined GenAim traits and a sense of humor can really liven up the workplace!*

Rezina nipped at Thad's ear before backing into a shadowed corner.

"Pressers here," Fengor Ool could stand the waiting no longer. His translator was set to a high volume to be heard over the growling Oot language. "Pay now."

Tobr hesitated as the quills on the Oot captain fanned in agitation. "My friends, you have indeed earned your reward. As I promised, you may keep the MA1 plasma rifles and Pyros flame throwers that were used on your mission. In addition, you will have our basic building block for technology."

A snap of the boss' fingers brought a shaking technician forward. He carried a box onto *Gash* while trying to watch all four Oot with only two eyes.

"The industrial kit has been programmed to create many iron hunting weapons," Tobr's deepest voice rose as if here were selling the kits to the Oot. "What you hunt, good Oot, is none of my concern."

The Oot let out a different kind of growl, Thad thought. It was part laugh and part victory cheer that he had heard on Frobe.

"I have retained *Gash* to transport you safely back to Ootare," Tobr played the showman and had enjoyed the Oot salivation. "You will have much fame on Ootare. You shall become Great Chieftains yourselves."

"And victory!" Fengor Ool crushed his four interior arms across his breastplate and the Comets of Omen from his birth. Fengor Ool gave a signal to his troops, and they entered *Gash* to bring out the four Pressers. As the aliens were set before Darian, it became his turn to salivate.

"I own the future," was Darian's only thought.

The technician who loaded the industrial kit hurried down the ramp, still a shade of green from being inside of *Gash* with the Oot's stench. As he stepped from the ramp, the Pressers turned to him and hugged him in unison.

"Ah, help?" the technician was not hurt, but was clearly disturbed by the squat aliens and their grip about his waist. He began waving his arms as he saw the Oot respond to his call. His eyes widened as at least 10 more arms joined the grappling. "Mr. Tobr, please help!"

"Stand still and be quiet, lad," even Darian rolled forward to look after the Pressers. His chair stopped as the Oot gently nudged the Pressers to a waiting transport platform. The technician headed away from anything that resembled an alien.

As Fengor Ool moved the Visionary onto the transport, a Presser placed a centimeter wide thumbnail of glass into a natural carapace pocket.

"Return to your fame on Ootare," Tobr waved to the Oot. "*Gash* is ready when you are prepared to depart."

Hearing Oot howling and claxons blaring in the bay, Thad covered his ears and followed Tobr from the riotous noise. A faded shadow on the wall to his left was all that he saw of Rezina.

"And now that this mundane business is done, we can pay attention to Mr. Zet's science," the six kilometer per hour pace was the maximum for Tobr's chair. "Please keep up, Jaron."

"Where are the Pressers going, Mr. Tobr?" Thad breathed heavily as he tried to regain his Earth-legs.

"We will place them in the old gymnasium a few floors down," Darian poked at his own side until an entire finger disappeared. "I don't believe that I will be using that particular amenity for a while."

Jaron held his breath until the boss let out a belated laugh. Thad thankfully followed suit.

"I have given them a complete Frobe-like environment," Tobr tugged to get his finger back. "The same grasses, rocks and mud huts that the primitive aliens have used for ages. Though they cannot begin to comprehend my graciousness, they will not have to contend with that giant predator of their world. What was the name, Jaron?"

A Frobedozer, Faction was quick to prompt Thad as he responded to his boss. *The largest*

land predator in the spiral arm.

"Frobedozer, yes!" Darian continued. "A perfect killer with skills that even the natural Oot hunters or the technological GenAim fighters cannot match. A Frobedozer decides what to kill and never fails in that decision. I will be like that creature, in the course of commodity trading. Once I have the Presser's help, I shall always eat my fill."

Darian's chair rolled into the elevator and Thad stepped to the back right of the chamber. As the door closed behind them, Thad felt the warmth of another body tuck close to his back. Two bladed hands slipped beneath his arms and crossed his slim chest. Jaron's trembling returned as Rezina pulled him back to lean upon her firm body.

Relax Thad, relax, Faction could sense that Thad was about to cry out. Can't you enjoy her playfulness? She is an attractive woman, isn't she? Mr. Tobr?

Darian turned his neck as far as he could to see his paralyzed employee in the grasp of his GenAim bodyguard. "That will be enough, Rezina. I would warn you both that these displays of affection are not welcome during business hours."

"Pity, isn't it?" Rezina turned Thad's head slightly to show the authentic man her eyes. "I would just love to make you cry out."

Jaron could not blink in the gaze of the green eyes. Rezina's compound iris worked to magnify her prying glare. Thad imagined those eyes boring through Faction and his own frail nerves to illuminate his most basic, secret fears. With a last humming laugh, Thad was thrown back to his feet. Spinning to face Rezina, Thad found nothing but the cold wall of the elevator.

"Stay away from romance, my boy," Darian's laugh was cold. "Women will be the death of you. Buy romance if you must but do not become a captive of it."

"I will try to... keep my distance," Thad's quaver was met with another of the boss' laughs. Darian's amusement was changed to a grunt as the slight nudge of the stopping elevator struck him.

"Here it is," Darian rolled from the open elevator with Thad and a soundless shadow in tow. "See, we have replaced one wall of the gym with a moleglass window to give us a wonderfully clear view of the Pressers."

"Fantastic!" Thad whispered and allowed Faction to banish Rezina from his mind. "I would swear I was back on Frobe."

The four Pressers walked slowly down a gentle hill of tan grass. In the farthest corner of the gym, two mud huts were already ringed by round Presser footprints. Several jagged rocks were all that adorned the sparse surroundings.

"Ah, the good doctor," Darian's chair gradually braked in the path of Dr. Zet. "I see our visitors are settling in. They appear happy."

"They appear to have adapted to our less-hearty gravity, Mr. Tobr," the tall doctor gave the boss an awkward bow. "As for happy, they have not yet given me an opinion. May I speak with your man a moment?"

Darian nodded and rolled to the glass walls to watch his four prized guests.

"And how are you Faction/Jaron?" the scientist ran a hand through curly, red hair.

Thad knew by now that Argo Zet was not waiting for a verbal answer. Faction's creator was only interested in the high-speed stream of information from Faction into his own implant. As Thad waited for greetings to take place, he studied Zet. The scientist's vacant brown eyes never seemed to be focused due to the depth of his own internal concentration. The long, drawn face was a match to his knobby elbows and dangling fingers. The white lab coat, still a mainstay for this researcher, was marred with mud that could only have come from the Frobe exhibit.

"Not bad," Argo's smile showed teeth that could have come from a small horse. "I see your fear is well under control, even in the most stressful situations."

"Rezina does seem to test Faction's limits," Thad stood on his toes to whisper this to the doctor. Thad heard the lyrical humming laugh from the distant bodyguard as her sensitive ears picked up every word.

"Nonsense, Jaron," Zet's wave signaled that he would be moving on, "She is GenAim from head to toe and could not possibly harm an employee in Mr. Tobr's favor. And you, my finest workshop, are the employee of the year."

"What are they up to, Argo?" Darian called over his shoulder as the Presser Visionary led the group to the nearest corner. A complicated system of bins seemed to be their destination.

"I believe they expect to eat," Argo grabbed a datapad and sprinted to the corner. "That device

is the conveyor for the various foodstuffs that the Pressers will eat. We have been designing a way to test their future vision. Excuse me please!”

Thad watched the Pressers as he returned to his boss’s side. The aliens were methodical walkers due to their planet’s higher gravity and their own inflexible anatomy. With a wide, three-toed foot planted firmly ahead, the Visionary rocked to bring the rigid torso directly over the lead foot. Repeating the process every four seconds, the Pressers were no match for Zet’s clomping shoes and flapping lab coat. He waited, foot tapping, at the feeding conveyor. The Visionary stopped at the second bin of the two within the gym.

“Excellent!” Argo was clapping. “The Visionary has predicted that bin two is the correct one for today’s feeding. Look, all four of them are extending their scrawny hands over the bin in anticipation. Perhaps the Pressers are not as all-knowing as we thought.”

“Why would you say that, Dr. Zet?” Darian sounded alarmed. “I am betting much on these creatures.”

“I control the bins, Mr. Tobr,” Argo shook a fist of defiance at the Pressers. “I will let them have the first bin today.”

Dr. Zet does not believe that the Pressers can see into the future, Faction explained to Thad. He is a man of science who must have proof before he can accept an unlikely theory.

“Bin one now,” Argo called to an assistant. “Let’s see how our prescient friends appreciate a failed prophesy.”

After a full minute, Zet’s smile faded. The conveyor did not fill bin one. “Why am I waiting?”

“Bin one is jammed from the inside,” the assistant called to the chief scientist.

“I’ll take care of that!” Zet angrily pulled at an airlock and stomped to the first bin. While the Pressers maintained their silent vigil above the second bin, Zet’s frustrated holler was the only sound from the enclosed room’s monitors. “You’re waiting over the wrong bin, stupid aliens!”

With the datapad still gripped in his left hand, Argo tugged at the hatch over bin one, finally banging a bony elbow with his last tug. As sweat began the long trip down his narrow face, he smashed the datapad on the hatch door. “Mr. Tobr, can Rezina come in here and free this door?”

“I think the Pressers can be permitted to win this round, Argo,” Darian’s rumble filled the outer gym. “Bin two if you please.”

Zet waved to his assistant and grain poured over the waiting Presser hands. The scientist sulked back to Tobr’s chair as the Pressers munched on handfuls of grain.

“I believe Jaron has chosen his Pressers well,” Tobr pointed to Zet, “but I wish you would quit breaking those datapads. They are not a renewable commodity like my beloved grains.”

“My apologies, sir,” Zet glared at the aliens until his nose was gently brushing the glass. “I will use more durable tools next time.”

“Indeed, good,” Tobr nodded with a terrace of chins. “Have you created a sufficient amount of food for them? Can they ingest our foods?”

“Yes to both,” Zet drew a sleeve across his forehead. “I will use a basic nutrition filler and add Earth foods with some digestive enzymes to calm alien stomachs. I do not think that we can feed them meat products, however.”

“No giga-hogs predictions,” Tobr frowned. “A true pity that. Well, to work, then.”

Both Tobr and Zet looked to Thad Jaron. Thad squirmed at the attention until the warmth on his back returned.

“You may have been wondering why I did not send Rezina to collect these aliens, my boy,” Darian’s voice was lower and more commanding. “You are more critical to this project than you realize.”

“I have tried to do everything you have asked,” Jaron tried to swallow a sudden knot as a steamy breath washed over the back of his neck.

“Excellent, boy,” Darian used much energy to applaud with a single clap. “Dr. Zet believes that your complex implant, Faction, can be used to tap into the minds of these Pressers.”

“Assuming they can truly see the future,” Zet mumbled.

“Indeed,” Tobr rolled his eyes. “My boy, you must somehow interpret Faction’s findings into useful information for me. Your reward will be a commission from the profits of each and every successful trade. That’s more than enough motivation and wealth for any man.”

“Riches to buy real courage,” Rezina’s hum was in his left ear as her right arm snaked about his waist. “Perhaps you could buy a companion like me? Perhaps ransom me away from Tobr?”

“Rezina! I am trying to help the poor boy understand,” Darian growled. “I assume that this lucrative deal is already making his head spin.”

“I am ready to start at your request, Mr. Tobr,” Thad tried to ignore the sharp nail that slowly traced the curve of his lower back.

“Tonight my boy,” Darian held a palm out to Argo. “An ambitious youth like yourself would have it no other way, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Thad lowered his eyes and felt his shoulders slump at the thought of more work in this long day.

“Then take your place, my boy,” Darian ordered.

“Where?” Thad hoped that the work would at least exclude Rezina.

“Obvious, Jaron,” Argo’s scolding tone was that of a teacher to a lagging student. “The second hut is yours.”

“I’ll be living with the Pressers?” Jaron was now much more awake. *I should have prepared you for this*, Faction apologized.

“Faction will be here,” Tobr’s frown created facial rifts and valleys. “If you wish to remain with Faction, you must work with the Pressers. Perhaps you need to be reminded of your life before Faction was created?”

Zet blinked once and Thad felt the security of Faction fade to allow a tide of fears. With a gasp, Thad stumbled back to the bodyguard’s arms. He imagined Rezina’s hands tearing at him. His own blood spilling to the rhythm of her humming. Her GenAim pleasure of killing an authentic only spurring her to more imaginative tortures. And suddenly Faction was back.

I’m here, Faction collected the fragments of Thad’s logical mind and began to banish the fear. Thad went limp in Rezina’s embrace.

“I like this,” her hum was filled with elation. “The control given by pure fear...”

“I’ll do it,” a raspy voice was all Thad could manage.

As Rezina dropped the quivering man inside of the Frobe airlock, her green eyes found Thad’s once more. “Don’t worry, poor authentic prisoner. I’ll visit. Often.”

Thad stumbled to the mud hut on the right, ducked under the low door and found a soft cot. Moments later, Faction made Thad’s world go dark.

* * *

The technician who had received the Presser’s hug retraced his steps. *Gash* had been in this cargo bay.

“I delivered the industrial kit,” the young man reenacted each step. He walked his wide path past the Oot, and stepped over the acid stains that pitted the molecrete.

“Where did I lose that data wafer?” the technician stood with fists on his hip and nodded at each motion in his mind. “Here’s where the Pressers decided to grab me.”

On hands and knees, he checked the area of the Presser scrum and avoided the Oot splatters where they herded the Pressers away. Pulling a datapad from his hip pouch, the technician listed the wafer inventory. The missing wafer, an archive of industrial technology stolen through TobrNet, held very little, really. It had the designs for industrial kit replication. An industrial kit would in turn make more industrial kits up to the designated capacity of natural resources. It could turn a single kit into a planet wide manufacturing system.

It also included industrial kit upgrade plans. The industrial kits could then produce large facilities: complexes that could build nearly any Triad schematic.

“So what schematics were on that wafer?” he tapped the menu. The list was thankfully short.

“A first generation plasma rifle,” he shook his head. “That rifle is an antique. And an even older schematic, the Pachyderm Class freighter and heavy-lift space transport. Granddad piloted that one, I think.”

With a shrug, he returned to his quiet duties. “I suppose the data wafer will turn up. Probably where I least expect it.”