



PROLOGUE

FROM «THE FIRST CONTACT WAR: A COSTLY MISUNDERSTANDING»: FOREWORD,
(PUBLISHED 2147) BY GABOR CLARKE.

We live in a time of uneasy peace. Humanity's first contact with an extra-terrestrial species had turned into a costly war fueled by misunderstanding and prejudice. Even almost two decades after our defeat and the subsequent conciliation, many still consider the enigmatic Lithides enemies. Our society is scarred by hatred, hindering its own progress by nurturing its base desire for vengeance.

This book of mankind's recent history is my attempt to remedy the situation and to help understand the events around the fateful First Contact War.

Ivo Aatifa sighed and sank into the cushioned reclining chair. He was getting old. Today, he had even left his office early because of a nagging headache. A few years ago it would have been unthinkable for the commissioner of Alliance Navy Security Division 2 to miss even half a day of work. Perhaps it was time to retire.

Joints protesting, he reached for the mug of Covee sitting on the small side table next to his chair. No, there was too much to do for him to think about retiring. ANSEC needed him, and as much as he wanted to deny it, he needed ANSEC. His work put criminals of the worst kind behind bars and brought a sliver of peace to the chaos-ridden worlds of the Solarian Alliance.

He took a sip of Covee and grimaced. The revitalizing drink had become cold and bitter. Ivo turned his chair to face the window front. He had specifically asked for an apartment with good view of downtown Vienna when he had moved here five years back. The blend of old and new was nowhere as distinct as it was here. The gilded roof of the

ancient cathedral peeked out of the jungle of skyscrapers surrounding it, like a small plant striving to catch a ray of sunlight. The church had endured in the shadow for decades, refusing to give up. Sometimes Ivo knew what it felt like to be a relic, stubbornly resisting to what others called 'progress'. To him, it was more akin to youth's folly.

Watching the bustling city outside had a soothing effect on Ivo. It had gotten dark early and the gleaming lights of the skyline had replaced the cloud-obstructed sun. Somehow, the city actually seemed to be brighter during night. Floodlights on St. Stephen's square lit the cathedral in a desperate attempt to rival the holographic billboards and illuminated windows. Hovercars zipped by at the level of the twentieth floor, appearing as streaks of light against the backdrop of mirrored glass. It was hard to distinguish between reflection and actual car.

In the streets below, people enjoyed the mild winter evening, crowding around heating lamps and sipping spiced wine. Others contented themselves with window-shopping at small stores offering little else than rummage. How could things be bad if life continued this peaceably here on Earth? Perhaps the people of this comparatively small city in the center of the European Commonwealth were particularly unconcerned about the worries of the universe. Unfortunately, Ivo could not afford the same carefree way of life. Preventing assassinations, large scale smuggling and fighting organized crime of all flavors were his daily bread. It was very real and ubiquitous.

Lately, angry talk about getting back at the Lithides for what many called the shame of the First Contact War added to his worries. It was not uncommon for people to be chagrined over defeat or even to openly proclaim their xenophobia, but the call to arms in certain circles spelled trouble. The war had ended sixteen years ago, but was still fresh in the memory of many an older individual. Ivo himself often awoke to a nightmare in the middle of the night, a dream taking him back to the disastrous conflict that was born out of misunderstanding and suspicion. Like so many others, he had lost someone very dear to him. He had exhausted his hatred long ago, but could understand those who clung to it as a lifeline. It did not justify arms smuggling and war-mongering, though.

Ivo peeled himself out of the groaning chair – or was it his bones protesting? – and walked into the kitchen to reheat his Covee. A glance at the wall clock confirmed what his stomach was telling him: it was time for dinner. Hopefully, the delivery from Gruber's would be on time for once.

His friend and colleague Coby had often scolded him for his pre-

dictable habit of ordering at the same restaurant every day, but Ivo refused to drop it. If your paranoia got in the way of your belly, the bad guys had already won. He was fully aware that his job made him a potential target for half the syndicates in Solarian space. But none would ever deny him his Thursday schnitzel with potato salad.

Thinking of Coby made him smile. It was rare these days to call a man a true friend, let alone one he disagreed with so often. Still, the ANSEC investigator was a person he trusted blindly, even if Coby himself would probably scold him for that. The younger man reminded Ivo of himself in his earlier years with the Division – determined and stubborn, defying most of present day’s social conventions. He *cared*, something that was increasingly rare among law enforcers. If he would not be so intent on seeing a conspiracy around every next corner, Coby Griffin would actually make a pleasant man to invite over for a drink. The old commissioner chuckled at the thought. Getting Coby to join him for a relaxed evening was as unlikely as convincing a tree to grow wings and take off.

The ring of the doorbell dispelled the image. Ivo reached over to the kitchen’s wall terminal and called up the entrance camera feed. Installing the little surveillance gimmick had been one of Coby’s less particular suggestions. Outside, Herbert Gruber’s second son Michael waited with a small package wrapped in metallite foil. It was about time. He was starving. Ivo waved away the cam feed and made for the door.

But the elderly man never reached it. Preceded by only a faint hissing sound, his small world was utterly consumed by searing flame. For the eternity of a split second, Ivo’s existence became one with the scorching heat. And then there was only darkness.



T’Rani Sunfell was nervous and hated herself for this weakness. But more than she would ever loathe her own flaws, she detested the woman she was about to see; the woman who had turned a confident young government official into little more than a puppet and a slave. A year ago, she had delighted at the prospect of administrating a small civilian trade hub on the fringes of Solarian space. It had seemed like a grand opportunity and a chance to show her superiors her qualities as a leader. Like a haughty peacock she had basked in the attention and

even jealousy of her teachers and peers the day she was rewarded with the prestigious post a mere month after graduating from state college. When she had finally arrived at Gemini station her bubble had burst; not just punctured by a needle, but destroyed by a sword. She had not been given a reward. Far from it.

The old space station in the center of the asteroid field of a remote star system tritely named "Kappa-4" was a playground for crime. As far away from Alliance jurisdiction one could get, Gemini had degenerated from a peaceful miner's habitat to stepping stone for lowlifes aspiring to expand their business beyond human territory. An offshoot of Sol's Red Moon syndicate reigned with an iron fist and at its head lounged the very woman T'Rani had been ordered to see today: Nyx – as she called herself – leader of a group of thugs by the name of *Lèi xuè* – 'Blood Tear'.

In the months since T'Rani had assumed her post as civilian administrator, gruesome tales of violence and slaughter had become her daily fare. Nyx cared nothing for authority and had sent her brutes on Sunfell's first day to make certain she would understand. T'Rani often wondered why the crimelord did not just get it over with and ordered her killed.

No, she can't. If I die, the Alliance will send a new administrator eventually. One that is probably less manipulable than I am.

The thought galled her. By doing nothing, she had become an accessory to crime.

T'Rani returned her attention to the station around her. Nyx' goons that made up her escort took the scenic route today. The ample central hall stretched before her. It was more a hollow, really, forming a perfectly spherical cavern around Gemini's central pillar. Tiered promenades, lined with small shops and shady hangouts, orbited the gravitational center of the station. Occasional catwalks connected them to the pillar. Merchants peddled their wares everywhere. T'Rani could easily tell who the smugglers and pirates were and who was hawking restricted goods. She knew by the way they avoided looking at her or, displaying their defiance openly, ogled her with toothy smiles. It was pretty much all of them.

On her first day she had regarded the grimy, chaotic walkways and corridors as charming. Life was hard on the fringe, after all, but it endured. All those months later, she only felt disgust. The twilight halls filled her with dread and she expected to see a murder happening around every corner. The ominously flickering advertising holograms did nothing to soothe her tension.

Their procession turned into a less frequented alley. At its end, the Lair towered.

Nyx' seat of power was a nightclub aptly named "Lair". Her escort walked T'Rani up the stairs, bypassing the crowd of people held back by brawny bouncers. It was always night on Gemini and people unfailingly came to the Lair to drink, gamble and conduct shady dealings. As the inner door opened, booming rhythms assaulted her, originating from numerous unseen speakers. People swayed to the music. Muffled conversation drifted over from small booths situated along the edge of the central floor. Distant laughter conveyed the illusion of innocent entertainment.

As if to mock the good first impression, a set of cages had been mounted above the dance floor and bar. They were just spacious enough to allow the women inside to stand and move to the music. Most of them were next to naked. Some of them were chained to the iron bars. This was where Nyx put women that had displeased her. T'Rani had a rough idea where the men ended up.

It was beyond the young official how anyone could voluntarily work for Nyx, given the blatant arrogance of the woman's actions. Fear was a powerful motivator, but even intimidation could only do so much to truly secure loyalty. The gang leader took her position for granted – something she would hopefully come to regret one day. For Administrator Sunfell, that day could not arrive too soon.

One of her escorts, a gaunt fellow with a wispy beard and crooked nose, nudged her up the stairs to the second floor. Up there, watching the patrons from an elevated platform in relative privacy, Nyx resided. After checking her for weapons, the otherwise impassive guard let her pass.

On the balcony overlooking the club, the music was muted. Studying her with an almost curious expression, the de facto ruler of Gemini lounged on a cushioned bench. T'Rani was always surprised by how young the other woman actually appeared. She placed her at about twenty-eight, although the slight Asian influence in her features made it hard to guess her true age. She was petite, a good head shorter than T'Rani.

In an unconscious motion, Nyx brushed back a flick of bluish-black hair. Her black synth leather catsuit creaked as she indicated T'Rani to take a seat. Trying hard not to show her nervousness, she did.

In an instant a waiter was there to offer her a colorless drink. Her hostess took the other glass off the tray.

"I am glad you could make it, T'Rani." Nyx opened, smiling a smile

that actually appeared honest. T'Rani could have punched her in the face.

"It's not like I had a choice," she replied, failing to keep the bitterness out of her voice. Nyx' smile vanished as she shrugged.

"I am sorry you feel that way. Well, I did not summon you to discuss our rocky relationship."

Nursing her drink, she pointed at the table next to T'Rani. A sheet of electronic paper rested on the glass tabletop.

She continued, "In two days' time, a civilian transport will dock with Gemini, carrying a few crates of merchandise. I need you to accept the delivery and sign the slip. Business as usual you might say."

"You dragged me out of my office to tell me *that*?" T'Rani spat. "And there I got used to your thugs delivering the paperwork directly to my desk."

She utterly failed to keep the acid out of her voice. Not that she cared. If Nyx killed her for her misconduct, this nightmare would be over at last.

The crimelord just sighed.

"T'Rani, I need to make sure that we are on the same page here. I am pleased with your work so far, but your attitude is... tiring. You refuse my generous offers to cut you into the deals.

"Look, I am not unreasonable. You are spoiled, that's all. You are not in the Core any more, where everyone pretends that the galaxy is a friendly place. If you think I am harsh, you should take a look at Exodus-33 or New Aquila. Consider yourself lucky."

Nyx' tone had grown irritated, her gaze increasingly intense. With her concluding words, her eyes wandered off to one of the suspended cages. Wasn't that miserable girl inside the crimelord's bookkeeper?

T'Rani bit back a testy reply. Her opposite was a dangerous individual who had sent people out of airlocks for as much as a veiled insult. Better not try her luck. The realization made her compress her lips. No, she was not ready to die. Nyx apparently mistook her silence for agreement.

"Good," she continued. "I see we understand each other. Now if you'll excuse me, there is another meeting I need to attend to."

They both rose and locked eyes. The other woman's expression did not give anything away and T'Rani tried her best to appear calm. As she turned to make her way out of the Lair, she barely held herself back from exhaling audibly. Nyx had not mentioned anything about the *other* cargo on board that particular transport. Administrator Sunfell prayed that she would never find out.



Captain Alejandro tugged at a bundle of entangled cables dangling from the ceiling of the *Winged Toad's* cramped cockpit. It had come loose after the last atmospheric descent a week back and no one had bothered to tie it back into place. He didn't mind – it offered a decent handhold after all. His helmswoman, a middle aged Martian going by the name of Sandrine, was impatiently fingering the navigation panel. Like most of his crew, including himself, she was getting restless. Only Victor, a square-faced bear of a man, did not appear overly anxious. He impassively eyed his sensors panel through partly closed lids. Alejandro briefly envied the two for their comfortable bucket seats. But then, he wasn't very keen on being wedged in between the worn panels and tarnished computer screens.

The rest of his people stood by in the lower deck, probably re-checking their weapons for the umpteenth time and gulping down a last drink to calm their nerves. The waiting was always the most cumbersome part of being a space pirate. After receiving a tip or, as in this case, an assignment, the crew of the *Toad* moved into place, waiting for their prey to show up.

Today, they had already waited for ten hours. Alejandro was beginning to suspect that the assignment was a hoax. The payment that nondescript fellow had offered was too good to be true, especially considering the conditions. Rarely did a client ask for the crew of a transport and not its cargo. They were free to keep everything they managed to loot and Alejandro was going to make sure to leave nothing that was not nailed down. The job would keep the debtors away for at least a couple of months – provided the promised victim actually showed up.

He decided to give it another two hours before departing the uninhabited system. It should have struck him as odd. They were hours away from the nearest trade route and all this star system offered were a ringed gas giant with two moons and a somewhat pretty comet passing through. Alejandro had initially been delighted to find such a suitable hiding place in the planetary ring. The accumulation of dust, particles and the occasional larger chunk of rock shielded the *Winged Toad* from most scans and would delay detection for the few crucial minutes they needed to intercept the transport before it had a chance to escape.

That had been the plan, originally. Not that it would help them if the assignment turned out to be a fool's errand.

"Anything from the probe?" he queried Victor. The bearded man just shrugged. Sandrine flicked her index finger at a switch Alejandro knew did not serve any purpose.

She grumbled, "How long do we plan to sit on our hands here, Cap?"

Before he could launch into an appropriately bossy reply urging for patience, Victor muttered something distinctively familiar and welcome:

"Ship approaching."

Sandrine's face lightened as she turned back to her console and began entering commands with practiced ease. Alejandro calmly nodded, despite the pang of excitement he felt at the news. The hunt was on.

"Target altering course towards comet." Victor announced. Alejandro often wondered if the sensor operator was so sparing with words to hide his thick accent. "Arriving there in five minutes," he added.

Sandrine shot her captain an eager glance. Alejandro nodded and calmly gave the order.

"Plot an intercept course and fire up thrusters. Stay in the cover of the ring for as long as possible."

Alejandro turned and yelled down the hatch leading to the lower section of the ship.

"Get the weapons ready!"

Someone bellowed an unintelligible confirmation. With a low rumble and a sudden jolt, the *Winged Toad* accelerated. Alejandro felt a moment of pride at how smooth his crew operated. He was one lucky bastard.

Sandrine had lifted the visual cover shielding the cockpit window and steered the ship manually. Dust-enveloped rocks the size of footballs passed by at an increasing speed. Before them, the foggy substance of the planetary ring stretched as far as Alejandro could see. Moving from their position would interfere with Victor's uplink to the small relay probe they had deployed earlier. The sensor readings without it were sketchy at best, but the burly man did not appear concerned – but then, he never did.

Alejandro could feel the inertial dampeners kick in as Sandrine altered course.

"Clearing ring in 30 seconds", Victor murmured. The occasional

rock fragment hit the ship's hull, resulting in a muffled thud.

"Full speed ahead." Alejandro ordered. It was reckless, but nobody complained. Sandrine probably even enjoyed it.

All of a sudden, the view cleared. The last cloud of silvery particles parted and revealed the familiar blackness of space. He could barely make out the speck of light that was the comet their victim was heading towards.

"Target is scanning us." Victor said while he worked to initiate the proper countermeasures. A set of stolen transponder codes would distract the other ship's captain long enough for them to...

A bluish bolt of *something* swooshed by, missing the *Toad* by a narrow margin. Sandrine swore and yanked the helm around, sending the protesting ship into a series of evasive maneuvers. The second bolt followed a few heartbeats later.

"Transport shooting at us." Victor commented superfluously. "I have locked on, too."

Alejandro eyed the small screen displaying a scan of the mid-bulk cargo vessel. Only one of its three container bays was occupied. He ground his teeth. A third bolt narrowly missed them. Luckily, the *Toad* was an elusive little beast.

"Take out that gun. It's time to pull the teeth of our trigger-happy friend." he grunted.

A high-pitched howl resounded through the ship as the small reactor struggled to keep up with the increased power drain. The transport came into view again. A dogged smile graced Sandrine's face.

Alejandro took a deep breath.

"Fire."