

Squiddy McSquid's Possibly Short Life



Volume 1

An X-Universe Tale by NUKLEAR-SLUG

WARNING: CONTAINS SPOILERS!

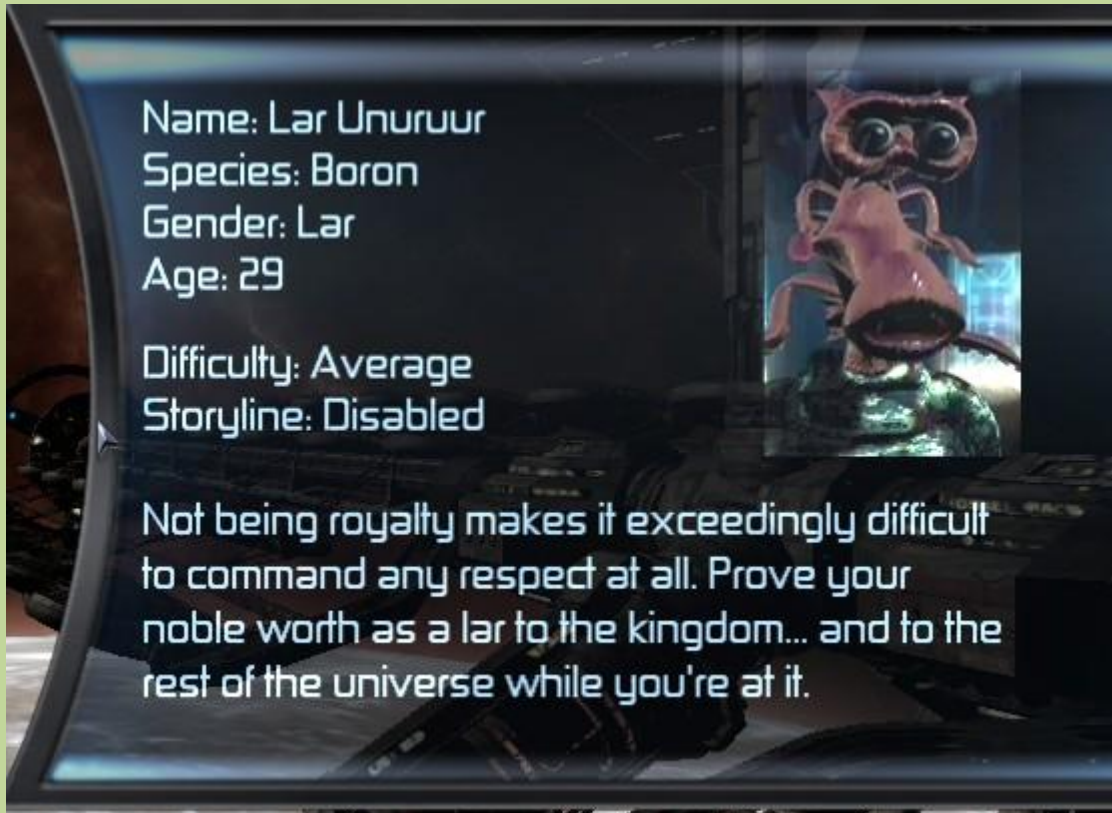
YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!

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Introduction

I thought I might try a new start with a few ground rules in place to make things a little more interesting. I've seen a few people try a dead-is-dead approach so I thought I'd give that a go and pick the Boring Boron start since that's the one that seems to start you off with the least to your name.



Rules:

1. Dead-is-dead
2. No buying ships. If I want it I have to persuade the owner they'd quite like to donate it.
3. No reloads: If I lose an expensive ship, then that's tough.
4. Personal ship repairs only - anything else gets paid for.

So this is going to be the exciting (if possibly quite brief) series of events that follow.

Part 1 – Tough Decisions

Zero-time puts me in Kingdom End, a nice tune playing in the background.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

1x 1MJ shield

2000Cr

Right, I've got no weapons, a miniscule hold that can only hold S-class freight and bugger all cash. This severely limits the mission options available. Looks like it's going to be a trader start for me.

So with that in mind I decide to head down to Herron's Nebula and see what the current price for Space Fuel is. On the way I stop at Three Worlds equipment dock, sell my 1 MJ shield and buy a duplex scanner. I'm working to the theory that if I die it's game over so the more intel I have, the greater my chance of not having something nasty creep up on me. Seems my luck is in and SFD-beta has rock bottom prices. Spend a little time zipping back and forth with the trading station selling fuel and slowly upgrading my Octopus. Eventually some git comes along and buys up the lot but not before I've made 28,000Cr and upgraded some.

Space Fuel trade opportunities are a bust so what to do next? I really don't fancy trading e-cells in an Octopus so I decide to head down to Elena's Fortune and see if the pirates are causing any trouble. I might be able to pick up a few dropped missiles. Decide to stop off on the way and grab a couple shields and IREs. You know, just in case...

Elena's Fortune seems kinda quiet. I'm assuming that's due to the Titan, three Cerberus and two dozen escorting smaller craft that are stationed around the south gate. I pop down into Split Fire to see what's around. Seems the pirates are all blue to me at present and really aren't interested in me so feeling brave I head into Brennan's Triumph. Again pirates have no interest in me but are jumping the odd transport group. I manage to snag a couple missiles from destroyed escorts. I continue on into Danna's Chance and going through the gate take a hit from the rear turret of a Paranid transporter which puts my hull to 85%. Good thing I bought those shields or that would have really hurt! Note to self: be wary of Paranids.

A quick run away and repair and I'm into Nopileos' Memorial, which seems to have changed colour these days. Think I preferred the blue. A Paranid task force is in the distance, Deimos and escorts. I'm wise to them this time so trail along behind at a respectable distance. Halfway through the sector I get a missile-warning. Gravidar says I'm clear, sector map says nothing unfriendly nearby. Bleeps are getting faster. Looking ahead I suddenly spot the missile, so a quick turn and run. Target computer

says it's a Tomahawk. Encyclopaedia says it does 625k damage. I have 2MJ shielding. It's moving faster than I am...

Part 2 – Easy Come, Easy Go

Fortunately the Tomahawk is still a few kilometres out so I've got time to do something about it. I've got a couple of IRE's so spamming fire at it is an option, on the other hand I've watched the AI hit things with them before and they seem to make quite a bang and I'm not entirely sure if they have a blast radius. So plan B, hide behind a rock. Fortunately Nopileos has quite a few asteroids so a quick jink to put one between me and it and all was well. There was a hell of a bang behind me. I didn't look but I suspect there wasn't much of that asteroid left.

I decided cowardice was probably the best approach from here on in so scarpered back to Argon space to see if i could find any missions I could do. Found a couple of ship recovery for 3-4k each, rescuing M5's then hit the jackpot with an 11k recover Argon Express Hauler. That's handy, I've got a single octopus, in need of a transporter class and they want me to go recover a TP for them... and they expect to see it again. OK, slight catch, it's in Empire's Edge - Paranid territory. It's the same guys that just recently tried to shove a thermonuclear warhead up my jacksie.

Anyways I scoot on down there and all goes well. The Express is right by the gate as I jump in, couldn't be better. As I'm busy securing it though, a couple of the local customs ships take an interest. Only an M4/M5 duo and I could probably take them if I wanted, but I'm doing crime and I'm trying to do my crime quietly and shooting up the place doesn't feature in that plan. Fortunately they seem only interested in me so I lead them off a ways while the Express slips through the gate. I've only got 20 minutes to get to the pirate base and the Express is so damaged that will only be just enough.

Next sector doesn't go so well, halfway across the sector and then border control shows up. This time it's two M3 and despite my best efforts to draw them off they decide they want my TP first and the Express goes down in a blaze of HEPT fire. Nothing for it, I'm going to have to run. I'm not thinking my client is going to be too happy and the rep-loss on a TP is likely to be painful. I'm pleasantly surprised however to get a message regretting the loss and small %10 payment for my time. No rep-loss! Guess they appreciated my attempts to bring their property back. Good thing they didn't realise what I had in mind for it.

Heading back to Argon space I pick up yet another recovery mission but this one's for 33k. I'm thinking it might be a problem but it's just an M5 and it turns out it's in the next sector over. Cakewalk.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

2x 1 MJ shield

2x Ire

34000Cr

Head up to Atreus' Clouds Pirate base grab me a freight scanner and now I'm all set to do crime.

Part 3 – Striking it Lucky

Right, Octopus is fine for tooling around but is very limited so what I really need is a TS to allow me to take on all these lucrative delivery missions.

Unfortunately I'm not thinking I'm going to find one just floating about which means I'm going to have to 'liberate' one and be careful about doing it. I've got paper-thin hull and only one chance to get it right so careful target selection required here. What I'm looking for is a nice super-freighter, preferably under-shielded and no fighter drones on board. Parking up by the north gate I start scanning passing Split Caimans looking for a potential candidate. Sadly most of them seem to either have a boatload of drones on board or they've got escorts, which is more than I'm inclined to tangle with in an Octopus.

After a bit a lone tech freighter wanders into scan range. Mother lode! This guy's got about 4 Mill in weapons and shields on board. Sadly most of it is M class so worthless to me. On the plus side though, he does have 10 Mass drivers on board, and they're S class. Oh, and there's the small matter of the 9 MKII fighter drones. Now I've seen the MKII in action, a careless pirate group attacking a freighter that had some onboard and the pirates came off worse. But 10 Mass drivers. Dilemma.

After some careful consideration, unadulterated greed triumphed over common-sense and self-preservation as it so often does in these situations and I decided to implement a two-part plan of the utmost cunning. Part 1 proceeded well as I boldly blazed into action and hammered away the shields of my target. The Split's response was to yell abuse and jettison the MKII's at which point I implemented part 2 of the plan and ran away like a girl.

Now MKI drones are fast but weak. MKII's might be hard as nails but they're slow. A lazy trek around Atreus' Clouds and they eventually ran out of fuel. Problem sorted. I caught back up with my target and we then negotiated from Rolk's Fate south gate all the way to the Ceo's Buckzoid west gate, me demanding he cough up the goods, him telling me to go take a long walk. Finally just as I'd decided he wasn't going to cooperate and was going to let him escape through to Ceo's he gave up and spewed crates all over the sector. Success!! 10 mass drivers worth a cool million. Time to

head back to Rolk's Fate equipment dock and sell my ill-gotten gains.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

2x 1 MJ shield

2x Ire

800Cr

10x Extremely hard-won Mass Drivers.

Part 4 – The RLSG Manoeuvre

So, cruising back down through Rolk's Fate to sell my ill-gotten gains I bring up the sector map and set autopilot for the equipment dock. Except I don't. Because it's not there. Pause for a couple seconds while I contemplate that one and recheck the factory listing. Nope, no equipment dock. Flick back to universe map to make sure I am actually where I think I am and yes, this is indeed Rolk's Fate which I passed through fairly recently and which definitely had an equipment dock earlier because I distinctly recall docking at it to flog a couple missiles to make room for all those mass drivers I fully planned on bringing back. This confuses me some.

Epiphany strikes me in the form of a blossom of red on my gravidar and in my main view I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. ...or it could have been Kha'ak beams around Plankton Farm L alpha. Just as I'm starting to realise where the equipment dock has gone and that I might be in trouble here a purple pineapple looms out of the pea-soup low on my right and confirms beyond any doubt that yes, I am indeed hurtling into the middle of a Kha'ak taskforce and that's not generally a good thing to do. There's really only one thing to do at times like these and that's run screaming like a girl, so I do. In fact I'm beginning to suspect that this is something I may be doing a lot in this game so henceforth this will be known as the RSLG manoeuvre.

Giving the centre of the sector a wiiiiiiide berth it appears there's 3 KM2 and a bunch of scouts busy wrecking the place. While I've no intention of tangling with them I'm certain I can outrun the scouts so I sit back and watch the fireworks.

After a while a Thresher and escort appears to the south and heads after one of the KM2's that has split from the rest. Now he may have some escorts but I'm thinking KM2 v M7? My money's on the Kha'ak for this one but I nosy on over to see the action. As it happens it seems the Thresher packs a mean punch because even though the KM2 is doing damage the Thresher is winning. Looks like 1-0 to the Boron, unfortunately it seems the Thresher captain is a little target-fixated because he doesn't bother to slow down, or evade. Consequently there's an almighty crash and the Thresher comes off the worse for it, going down in flames. The final impact

though does strip the remaining shields off the KM2 and the Thresher escort makes short work of a shieldless destroyer. Sadly they then go after the other two KM2's and without capital support promptly get shredded in short order so bit of a pyrrhic victory there.

Anyways, nothing further I can do here so I head back down to Atreus, sell my Mass Drivers at the military post and go back to hunting for a vulnerable transport. Deciding what I really need to help out here is something to thin the fighter drones out I nip off and pick up some mosquito missiles which lets me go after transporters with more drones on board and knock a few out safely while running away until they're at more manageable numbers. End result of picking on half a dozen or so energy traders is a Caiman Superfreighter large-type bails for me.

Success, not only have I got the first TS I need to do the bigger payout missions but I transfer a cargo life-support over to the SF and go pick-up the ex-owner. This guy is now my first marine, or at least he will be once I figure out how to get him trained for it.

Time to look for a few more ship recovery missions while my SF heads for Argon space and gets himself repaired and upgraded for duty.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

1x Caiman SF (83%)

2x 1 MJ shield

2x IRE

1,000,000+ Cr

Part 5 – A Close Shave for Squiddy

I came this close --> <-- to having a terminal accident today. More on that later...

So my SF is off to spend some of my cash on upgrading itself and while it potters on over to Argon Prime I'm doing more ship recovery missions being as they're the only ones I can do near enough. Seems I've crossed some sort of rank threshold as I'm now consistently getting ship recovery missions in the 30-40k range whereas before they were 5-10k. I'm not complaining, they're easy to do and nobody tries to kill you. Suits me. Today, though, I properly failed my first one.

Now I don't use the guidance feature because I find it more entertaining to actually have to go hunt for the thing rather have it handed to you on a plate and up till now that hasn't been a problem. This time around though it was only a Harrier they wanted returning but it was in The Hole which is both pea-soupy and colossally huge. I had an hour and change to track it down but despite criss-crossing all over the sector do you think I could find the thing? Like hell. I spent so long looking that my SF had trekked all the way back from Atreus, got himself fully kitted out, trekked down to Terracorp, bought a jumpdrive and jumped to Elena's Fortune to grab a triplex scanner before I finally started jumping him into the 4 gates of The Hole to see if my SF could spot the damn Harrier on his triplex, eventually picking it up near the west gate.

By the time I've got over there, zapped it with the repair laser and set it on its way home there are 7 minutes left on the clock, which is not quite enough time. I'm hoping though that the mission time runs over and I'll get away with it as sometimes it does that for some reason. Nope, mission ends right on cue, I get accused of stealing it and my Teladi rep takes a dropkick to the 'nads. Oh, well maybe I'll be able to sell it as a consolation. Nope, two Teladi police M5's jump in and promptly shoot hell out of it. The day is not going well.

Oh well, at least my SF is up and running. I made the decision to spend nearly all my cash maxing out his cargo hold. It cost most what I had a but it'll come in useful in the long run I think for doing the delivery missions where they want large quantities. Currently I've got him doing e-cell runs all over Argon space as there seems to be a huge shortage in the Argon Prime area and nearly all the factories are stalled. Might not seem like much but I'm making 40% profit or so per run which is pretty good.

I head back up to Atreus' Clouds and see if I can steal another Caiman SF to partner up with my first but it seems today the RNG gods are not smiling upon me and despite a fair amount of time invested and a dozen or so attempts not a single one shows any inclination to part with his ship. I think I'm going to give up for now and go back to running recovery missions. Cue auto-pilot for Cloudbase South-East, line up on the gate, hit SETA and settle back for a quiet ride back.

Suddenly the screen whites out blinding my view there's an almighty roar of engines

and the auto-pilot pulls some kind of wild corkscrew manoeuvre. Resettling my eyeballs back on an even keel I take stock of what's what. Seems I'm not dead which is nice to know. Checking behind me there's a freighter which wasn't there a moment ago.

It seems TC now has freighters that use jumpdrives. More to the point it seems they use jumpdrives that are considerably better than mine as I still have to use the jumpgates and they seem able to point-jump anywhere in a sector. Including, it appears, directly in my flight path. I'm not sure how close I came, but apparently traffic control weren't too impressed.

Squiddy now has only 8 of his 9 lives remaining. Squiddy is a fish, not a cat. I'm unclear if this is pertinent.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

1x Caiman SF fully upgraded at great cost. I hope no one shoots it.

2x 1 MJ shield

4x IRE

128,000 Cr

Part 6 – The Temptation's Too Great

So after my near-death experience I decide to take a more sedate approach to things and build up my cash reserves a bit. Fully kitting out my lone SF 'Tax Deductible' nearly used up all my reserve but I'm not too worried. The whole Argon Prime region still seems critically low on energy cells to the point that practically no manufacturing is taking place. All the factories have the secondary and tertiary resources in stock in high numbers so there's almost no money to be made there but hardly anyone has e-cells to power it all.

It's not for a lack of SPPs, there's a fair few in the surrounding sectors, it just seems the NPC traders can't be bothered with anything so lowly. No worries, I'll do it then, I'm not proud. So while my SF jumps e-cells around and kick starts the local economy, I go mission-hunting. I'm getting about 40k a recovery anyway plus flitting through the sectors looking for ships I can pick up the odd "Deliver me 8000 e-cells" missions which pay a nice bonus.

So I do this for a while, my cash reserves are creeping up nicely and then I get a recovery mission for a Kestrel. What the hell is a Kestrel when it's at home? Consult the encyclopaedia (very useful) and it informs me that it has no idea either (not very useful). Seems I've not come across one of those yet, sounds kind of Teladi-ish though. Intriguing. My luck's in and it's floating down in Cloudbase South East, which is only two jumps away and a tiny sector anyway so I should have no problem finding it or getting it home if it's a slow one.

Entering the sector through the north gate and I can see it just off to the left on the sector map, M5 icon, fair enough. I pull up next to it capture and start repairing it, takes a couple of repair charges so in between recharges I check it out. What we got here then? 600+ speed (Hells bells!), M-class cargo, 5MJ shield, room for PACs and a rear turret to boot. Ok, I'm sorry. I'm trying to be good here. All I wanted was to run a few trades, return a few ships, generally mind my own business and then they go drop that in front of me. Fine, I'm weak! I admit it! But they ain't seeing this one again.

Ok, I've still got 48 minutes on the clock before anyone starts wondering where their Kestrel went. My Argon rank is pretty good and I'm pretty sure I can handle a couple police M5s coming after me. I mean, seriously, how much trouble could I possibly get in for stealing one little M5?

Right, 47 minutes on the clock, no time to dawdle. Dump all ship equipment out the Octopus. EVA over to the Kestrel. Send trusty Octopus to shipyard, won't be needing that again. Scoop up my gear. Potter over to Equipment Dock. Upgrade cargo/rudder/engines. No 5MJ shields available but there's a factory in Elena's. Exit Equipment Dock, line up on gate. Hit boost.

WHOMP! My skull practically exits through the back of the crash-couch and I'm hurtling (not flying, I know what flying is like and there's some definite hurtling action going on here) towards a rapidly-approaching jumpgate. This thing isn't an M5, it's a missile with a pilot chair taped to the nose.

I make it to Elena's, grab me a 5MJ shield and a triplex plus a couple of PACs from the military outpost and I'm good to go. 40 odd minutes left to go before Plod comes calling - gives me enough time to do a few taxi missions since I can now take passengers. That'll earn me a bit more rep and mitigate the rep-loss when it comes.

Total Assets:

1x Kestrel

1x 5 MJ shield

2x PAC, 2x IRE (rear)

600,000+ Cr

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

Part 7 – Squeezing the Juice from the Bird

In the interests of not reducing myself to a molecule-thick smear on the side of an asteroid I decide it's probably a good idea to get used to handling my new Kestrel before I get too clever with it, plus it'll be nice to see exactly what it can do.

A quick scan of Ore Belt nets me a couple asteroid scanning missions for a few thousand apiece plus a taxi mission into Cloudbase South West. No problem so far, I can scan the asteroids I need here, then head to CBSW and drop off the guy. Luck's in so I manage to pick up another scan mission and another taxi run and things pretty much tick along happily like that. I've got a jumpdrive in case time gets short but with some smart juggling of scan missions I'm able to go from sector to sector without having to double back much and at one point I've got 4 separate missions on the go and successfully complete them albeit with only a couple of minutes to spare. Speed is good!

Seems I must have crossed another threshold though as I'm starting to see a lot more delivery missions in the 10000+ units area. Highest I've seen was for a little over 29,000 e-cells. Pay was good but too short a time to do with a single SF. I'll have to see if the RNG gods are in a better mood and try and cap another one or two. Also getting some really nicely paid courier missions of 500K or so showing up but though I could do it with the Kestrel in the time allowed the quantities they want moved are too much for my little 55 unit cargo space.

Cruising across Home of Light, I decide it's time to test combat out a little bit so I pick up an easy station defence mission and chase out to intercept the incoming M5s. First one in a Harrier doing 500+ and we go blazing past each other so fast by the time I've turned around we're already several kilometres apart. Not too hard to catch up with though, but I'm so focused on chasing him down that I nearly plough into one of the station pylons right after he suicides into it. The rest are easy to chase down as they're much slower Discoverers and they don't even get halfway to the station before I'm behind them and blasting away. The M8 launches a couple fruitless Tomahawks at the station but they're no problem to intercept and a few high speed passes strip the shields off it and a Wildfire in the face finishes the job.

The Boron is happy, aside from a small Harrier-shaped impact crater near the docking arms his station is undamaged. I'm happy, my little Kestrel is proving to be capable both as a mission ship and fighter and the previous owner of my Kestrel is most definitely very, very unhappy. Quite how unhappy I quickly come to realise as there's a jumpdrive flash off to my right, my proximity alarm bleeps a warning and a Heavy Centaur starts gobbing missiles and fiery white-balls-of-death at me.

Total Assets:

1x Kestrel

1x 5 MJ shield

2x Pac, 2x IRE (rear)

750,000+ Cr

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

Part 8 – Fair Weather Friends

It's times like these when it's most convenient to be sat in a ship that bears more than a passing resemblance to something that should be fired *at* ships rather than be one itself. Being able to do 0-600 faster than you can say "... " certainly doesn't hurt either. Anyways, I pull a full-on RSLG manoeuvre to the sound of thunderous explosions behind me and put some distance between me and the Centaur. I'm not particularly concerned by the missile warning as according to the encyclopaedia the only missile I currently know about that can actually catch me is the Rapier and they only do 1MJ damage. Even then I've still got that handy back turret so should be fine.

Pulling up a few kilometres away I bring up the sector map to see what's going on. Yep, there's definitely a Heavy Centaur there and he's heading this way. Also my Argon rep seems to have dropped through the floor, I'm now Suspected Foe and the local laser tower has gone red on me. I take some solace from that fact that I'm only a suspected foe, it implies someone somewhere feels I may have some redeeming qualities after all. The Centaur on the other hand seems to be in no such moral quandary, is very sure I'm an actual foe and not merely a suspected one, and is fully intent on doing something about that.

Aside from that though, all the rest of the sector is still blue to me. Suddenly there are more flashes around me and the sector map acquires a few new red contacts. A panicked stab for the cancel map button and I'm RSLGing again. A quick glance behind me reveals there are now 5 M5's and a Nova chasing me. What's the deal here? Does this Kestrel belong to his dead grandmother or something?

I'm now having serious concerns now as to whether I'm going to have ships attempting to jump me at every opportunity, so I make a swift dash through the superstructure of the nearest Crystal Fab and then head for the east gate. One of the M5s tries to follow but doesn't quite make it. Stopping in the middle of President's End I wait for a couple minutes, finger on the boost button, just in case any more jump in on me but nothing seems to happen so it looks like that was the lot. It appears though that somewhere along the way I took a hit as my hull is down in the nineties. I'm fairly sure I didn't take any laser fire so I think I must have been clipped by a Mass Driver. Hopping out quick to patch the hole I get a proximity warning...

they're following me.

Ok, fine, I was quite happy to just run away but if they want to follow me then there's going to be trouble and if there's going to be trouble it's going to be in Paranid space. Might as well get a bit of Paranid rep out of this mess, perhaps then they'll stop firing nukes at me.

Down in Priest's Pity the local defence force seems to have taken out the pirate base, there's just the burnt out hull left. So I potter around for a bit waiting for the Argon police to arrive. When they do get there they're nicely strung out so no problem to deal with. There are only 3 of them though so it looks like another one has come a cropper somewhere. Bumped into a pirate on the way down through Split Fire perhaps? Anyway, I presume the Nova and Centaur are on the way down too but even knocking out those 3 M5 seems to have been enough to get me into bare minimum docking rights with the Paranid which is all I really need so I spend a while doing missions in the area and jump my SF down to do a few factory runs. They may not be red to me but I've no longer got Argon docking rights so there's nothing my SF can do around Argon space anyway.

Ship recovery here, taxi mission there, a liberal sprinkling of e-cells and much apologising to Paranid border control and I'm now in the good graces of the Paranid Empire. The Nova eventually shows up as I'm looking for a lost Jaguar and while I'm a little wary of that Mass driver a single M3 isn't a problem. Takes a while to wear him down but my speed leaves him wallowing. I'm assuming that Centaur is still out there somewhere but I don't fancy trying to take him out so instead make a long loop round the back and up through CBSW/Red Light to Kingdom End, across to Menelaus' Frontier and then down to Atreus to try and grab another SF or two. If that Centaur is still following me, that'll give him a nice long run to catch up so I'll be safe for a good while.

Sadly despite a fair amount of time spent chasing down freighters the RNG gods are still wholly disinclined to shower me with their bounty and nothing bails. Perhaps I should head down to Xenon 101 and punt my SF ex-pilot out the airlock as a human sacrifice...

Total Assets:

1x Kestrel
1x 5 MJ shield
2x Pac, 2x IRE (rear)
900,000+ Cr

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

Part 9 – Dearly Departed

Oh dear, today we mourn the loss of a loved one... <sniff>

Things started off so promisingly, I actually managed to convince a freighter that I was a very scary desperado engaged in acts of a piratical nature and gained myself my second SF but that was to be the only one. In retrospect I suspect my charade was not particularly convincing and that particular Split captain was just of a nervous disposition.

Decided I should probably sort out my Argon rep so I can get jumpdrives again and get the new SF doing something useful, maybe turn him into a sector-trader, perhaps. Remote trading is OK, gets you a little rep and keeps the cash flowing but the real cash and rep boosts comes from the missions with the bonuses. Fortunately I'm currently occupying that happy borderline that exists between persona non grata and shoot-on-sight so while I'm free to travel through Argon sectors they won't let me dock in core sectors or buy any goods. That's fine though, so long as I can dock, I can still sell stuff and given the state of the local economy there's always someone down in the border sectors crying out for e-cells and willing to give a good bonus for them.

So I switch to my SF and do a few runs between Queen's Space and CBSW stocking up those ever-hungry weapon facts then after a while I spot a guy who wants a taxi run to the Pirate base in Antigone Memorial. Now last I checked there wasn't a pirate base in Antigone memorial but then there isn't one in Ore Belt anymore either since the local defence force paid a visit. They must have set up a new one! That's handy because I've been picking up any boarding pods I can find since apparently they get a bit rare later on. Not a problem, I task my Kestrel to go scout out the sector while I decide where I'm going to get 255 Space Fuel from for the guy that wants to pay me 400k for the privilege; I decide not from anyone who likes me enough and go back to e-cell trading.

By this point I've managed to convince the Argon that they were right to only *suspect* me as a foe and that I'm really not all that bad and they let me get back to trading basic goods in their core sectors. Oh, and some stupid M5 exiting a gate and not watching where he's going has managed to knock a 30% chunk out of my hull. Maybe I should invest in some shields..

A few minutes later I'm cruising through CBSE when I'm somewhat disturbed to hear Betty calmly inform me that one of my ships is under attack. Now I've only got three. One is sat in Terracorp HQ awaiting a jumpdrive, one's off looking for pirate bases and I'm sat in the third and I'm pretty sure I'd have noticed people shooting at me which means... oh, bugger!

"Your ship, Blinkandyou'llmissit! has been destroyed in sector Antigone Memorial by, Khaak Scout"

Total Assets:

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

1x Caiman SF (85%)

150,000Cr

Part 10 – Paddling in the Deep End

Well it's not a complete disaster; I've still got my two freighters and a reasonable reserve of cash so economically I'm not in any trouble. If I'm going to progress though, I'm going to need a combat capable craft. This means I'm going to have to go stealing things again. You see you try to be good but you end up forced into criminality anyway. I blame society.

This time around I think I may just 'borrow' a ship for a while. With the support I've got from my freighters I can max out whatever I find, use it to capture something else and then return it in time for tea and biscuits with nobody any the wiser - except the previous owner of 'liberated' ship, but that guy will be duck-taped and stowed in my hold. Shhh!...

Sadly it seems the RNG gods are still out to get me with a vengeance and despite doing cargo runs across a number of sectors it's a good while before I can find a recovery mission. Plenty of stolen ship missions but while the Caiman can fit frontal guns it fairly lacks the speed and manoeuvrability to chase down anything much faster than a one-legged asteroid. First up is 100k mission, that's the biggest payout I've seen for a recovery so I'm assuming it's something big.

Unfortunately the guys giving these missions out never seem inclined to let you in on those niggling little details such as where it might be and what it is you're actually looking for until they've got you to agree to do it.. at which point they cheerfully inform you there's a broken down Dolphin 80km off the ecliptic of X598 and can you bring it back for the princely sum of 12 credits and a packet of breath mints. And they want it back in 12 minutes. Or else. Yes we mean it, or else. Anyway, this one turns out to be a Falcon Vanguard. M3 - nice, but only 48 minutes, so not really what I'm looking for. Unfortunately having accepted it I've now got to do it. Or else.

It turns out Caimans aren't ideal for ship recovery missions either. It works fine if the ship you're looking for just so happens to be near a gate as you can jump around till you spot it but if it's deeper in sector you have to go looking for it and with a top speed of 89m/s that's not a quick exercise in a larger sector. Eventually though I find the thing. Looks like had I gone north rather than south from the Emperor Mines east jumpgate, I'd have found it almost immediately and not had to do a sector circuit but

there you go. Falcon Vanguards aren't very quick though and I've wasted a lot of time already as I've only got a fraction under 10 minutes to return and given the slightly over the top response to me stealing an M5 I'm not keen to have the entire Teladi Home fleet come after me because they think I'm stealing an M3.

Basically I need to get this ship back on time and the only way to do that is to jump it back to CBSE. Unfortunately if I do that then when I return it I lose the jumpdrive. While I'm not hurting for the money that is my only jumpdrive and the Argon are still a little ticked over the Kestrel incident and aren't prepared to let me buy another just now. Time is ticking and there's only one way this is going to work then so I transfer jumpdrive + e-cells to the Falcon, order my SF to head back to CBSE and jump to CBSE myself. Ejecting the jumpdrive, I exit the Falcon and order it to make its way back to the PRG forge (should manage that with a few minutes to spare) Meantime I kick in my suit thrusters and start EVAing my way back through the jumpgate and across Ore Belt to meet up with my SF somewhere along the way.

Halfway across Ore Belt the potential foolhardiness of this exercise dawns on me given that there is potentially still a Heavy Centaur looking for me, but on the bright side my O₂ levels are holding out nicely so at least I'm in no immediate danger of suffocation.

Total Assets:

1x Spacesuit

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

1x Caiman SF (85%)

Part 11 – Those Bugs get Everywhere!

Crossing Ore Belt doesn't take too long using strafe and judging from the distance counter ticking down it looks like I'm pulling about 100m/s which is pretty good going in a spacesuit. Safely hooking up with my SF on the west side of Ore Belt I head back the way I came to CBSE to pick up my jumpdrive, On the way there I pick up a couple more recoveries, one a Caiman Miner down in CBSW for an hour and a half and one for an Octopus over in Red Light with a 3 hour timer which is perfect for what I need. I skip down to CBSW west first to get the Miner, it's a bit busted up and slow and I'm not inclined to spend an hour repairing it so I decide to send it to the trading station first for some engine tunings. Doesn't matter if I spend 10k or so since it's a 48k mission so I'll still come out on top either way.

Once that one is on the move I jump up to Red Light north gate and immediately spot the Octopus off in the west corner so that was good fortune. A quick trek over and repair and I'm up and running just need some suitable weapons and shields and I'm back in business. I transfer over to the Octopus and head for the trading station to sort engines and rudder while I send my SF off to get some IRE's and a couple

1MJ shields then head up to Argon Prime via Ringo Moon to meet up with it by the west gate a quick transfer of equipment and I'm all set. I let my SF go off and do some more e-cell trading and plot a course to Atreus' Clouds. I've got two and a bit hours and I aim to misbehave.

Scooting across Argon Prime towards the east gate through The Wall I'm just passing the centre of the sector when there's flashes around me (again), the gravidar blossoms red (again) and the proximity warning kicks off (again). Who's trying to kill me now? Everything is quiet for a second or so and then there's the sound of kyons. Not the little higher pitched small ones either but the big capital-ship rending gamma variety. Looks like another Kha'ak task force having a go at Argon Prime and I'm in the middle of it. Great! At least I assume they're after Argon Prime, though the amount of trouble I've had with Kha'ak so far I'm starting to think they've got something against me personally.

Fortunately Argon One is in the vicinity and the Kha'ak seem more interested in that than the little Octopus running away crying so I manage to put enough distance between me and the nearest KM2 for safety then park up for a moment to see what's what. Two of the KM2 have engaged Argon One, the third has wandered off with a second cluster and is busily shooting up the station to the south. By this time the clusters have all broken and the space around Argon One is filled with little purple triangles kyoning the bejeezus out of it while Argon One tries to swat them with what I guess is a flak cannon.

Now Argon One always used to have Invinci-Armour™, does that still hold true? It's going to be an unfortunate day for the Argon home system if it isn't because there's currently no other capital ships in the system. With the amount of abuse it's taking it's not long before the shields go down and after a few percent of hull gets ripped off no further damage gets taken, Yep, still invulnerable. You know you'd think that having an indestructible capital ship at his disposal Mr Danna could have come up with a better strategic move than park it in home space orbit and chase the odd pirate. This is the guy that's going to win the war? Pfft..

Oddly enough the situation seems to be a bit of a stalemate. The KM2's can't destroy Argon One but it appears the Argon One isn't packing anywhere near the firepower it used to as it's barely denting the Kha'ak shields. This looks like it'll be a long fight though I'd probably give it to the Kha'ak on points as KM2 No.3 is busy vaporising the south stations while his two buddies run interference. Anyways, time is ticking so I decide to leave them to 'negotiate' and get moving.

A quick sprint through The Wall and The Hole and I'm back in the familiar territory of Atreus' Clouds. To be honest it's always familiar in Atreus, no matter which way you look it's always pea-soup. My goal is to capture an M4 or possibly an M3 if the RNG gods are feeling benevolent (fat chance!) so the danger involved is significantly

greater than from a few fighter drones from a TS so I need to be very careful I choose the right target. Ideally I want a lightly shielded victim with no turret and with no tracking missiles on board. I don't want to have to be dealing with a lock-on and lose my position on his six. High-tech and Weapons dealers are almost invariably well armed and shielded or have escorts whereas the basic freighter types go solo and are often under-shielded with minimal weaponry.

I'm confident patience will be rewarded (preferably within two hours) so meantime I settle down next to the gate, in my Octopus, with an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu, and start eyeing up likely candidates.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

2x 1 MJ shield

4x IRE

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

1x Caiman SF (85%)

300,000Cr

Part 12 – Squid and Dragonfly in Perfect Harmony

So I'm initially just sat there using the freight scanner to run passive scans of the weapon load-outs of passing M4/M3's. This is fine as only a deep scan incurs a rep loss or chance to aggravate the target. Ideally I'm looking for a Split ship since I'm in Boron space and don't want the hassle with the authorities, but needs must and if the opportunity presents itself I'll take whatever I can and worry later, so I'm checking everything.

Most of what passes by I rule out on passive scan either because they're too heavily shielded or have weapons/turrets I don't want to mess with. Of those that look worth a deep scan, again I rule out most if they have too many fighter drones or they have tracking missiles on board. That does leave a few though and I make a few attempts. Most are Scorpions which I can try in sector, a couple are other races which I tail and allow to fly into other sectors before engaging so as not to annoy the Atreus border control. No luck so far though as either they refuse to bail and I have to destroy them or they fire missiles at me while under IRE fire and the resulting explosion destroys their own ship outright.

I'm coming up for about halfway through my time now and no joy when my AdvSat to the east picks up a couple pirate Buzzards exiting the Pirate base there. Now a Buzzard is a fairly good M4, shielding is pretty respectable and it has a nice turn of speed, so one of those would be a nice capture. Heading over from where I've been laying doggo, I catch up to them as they're passing the Military outpost and pull in behind. A quick scan reveals that one's packing fragbomb launchers and

Firefly/Hurricane missiles and the other PAC and Wasp/Wildfire.

Weighing up the odds the more dangerous one is going to be the one with the swarm missile. The second Buzzard has just the single Hurricane so if he did fire it at me and it detonated that's not enough damage to kill the Buzzard in one go. The first has that Wasp though which means he needs to be taken out quickly both so he doesn't get the chance to launch and so I can be on the tail of the second one to stop him launching either. Time to break out my secret weapon...

Dragonfly, under 1000Cr apiece, run at 250m/s and dish out 5k of damage a pop with an 18km reach. Available from all good weapon shops, all good weapon shops apparently being limited to the solitary Dumbfire missile production complex in Cloudbase North West. Quite why these little dudes are in such limited demand I've no idea because they are utterly fantastic. Contrary to the fact that they're built by a Dumbfire complex they are in fact seeker missiles and they have a truly excellent tracking ability. They cost less than the equivalent firepower in Silkworm and are both faster and have the added advantage of being more warheads in the air and so are that much harder to shoot down plus they're available in large quantities. I strongly suspect a lot of X3: R vets remember Dragonfly being a worthless missile and don't realise just how great they are now. Try them out for yourselves.

Anyways, pulling back to 800m or so behind I target the more dangerous of the two and empty an appropriate amount of Dragonflies at him, ie. all of them. Where it comes to missile doctrine I come from the 'Nuke the site from orbit, it's the only way to be sure...' school of thought. Besides I've got a SF parked by the East gate with another 500 or so on board so it's not like I don't have spares.

While they track in I drop behind my main target and as my first Dragonfly makes contact open up full bore. A few short seconds later and there's a dead in the water Buzzard in front of me, only 50%ish hull left but it's blue and that's what counts. The shields are even ticking up slowly so there's at least some equipment still on board. Bonus!

Pulling up a few metres away from it I jump ship and start patching up the holes in my new acquisition.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

1x Pirate Buzzard (51%)

2x 1 MJ shield

4x IRE

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

1x Caiman SF (85%)

300,000Cr

Part 12a – Those RNG Gods are the Superstitious Ones

So I'm drifting in the pea-soup welding panelling back on my Buzzard. The Buzzard has 15MJ of shielding which for an M4 is in the mid to high-end range. Couple that with a 265m/s top speed and decent weapons load-out and rounding it out with M-class cargo opens up a whole new set of opportunities.

It's taken quite a bit of damage though and this is going to take a few charges of the repair laser so in between recharging I bring up the universe map and start plotting my next moves. However fate, it turns out, can be a fickle mistress indeed and has her own plans for me. Just in case there's any doubt she illustrates the point quite graphically moments later as my new Buzzard explodes in my face.

I'm probably sat there at that moment with a quite stupefied look on my face as I can quite honestly say I've not the faintest clue what just happened. One second I'm fixing my new M4, the next, without warning, I'm enveloped in a rapidly cooling cloud of vaporised M4 parts. A few seconds later the cause of my misfortune appears, a point of light crawling lazily across my screen and disappearing off into the fog leaving just a blue wake behind it. It's a Banshee missile.

Comprehension suddenly dawns on me and I realise what's happened. As I caught up to the Buzzard duo and started trailing them they had passed the Atreus Military outpost. It seems while I was busy choosing my targets and making my move we were drifting further inside the missile envelope of the Medium OWP and it responded the only way it knows how. A ship would have stopped firing once the Buzzard had quit but I guess a missile once locked is committed. Had I realised the threat I could have countered it but I hadn't considered the possibility. It seems the RNG gods give and the RNG gods take away.

Fortunately I hadn't by that point transferred any equipment across so despite a slightly scorched spacesuit and down a few credits in Dragonflies I'm not for all practicality any worse off. It would appear I'm going to need this Octopus just a little longer. Heading back towards the west gate I top off my Dragonfly supply, resume my station and start watching the traffic go by once more. A couple more attempts on Scorpion escorts yield me nothing more than a few percentage points of hull damage when I fail to realise until too late there's a Jaguar attached to one particular flight group but a quick missile kill on the Scorpion and then its one-on-one so no problem in the end.

Now you'd probably be forgiven for thinking that after the events of earlier I'd expended my quota of misfortune for the day but you'd be entirely wrong. Who remembers that Caiman Miner? The one I sent off for an engine upgrade before returning home? Anyone who does, you get a gold star and a pat on the head. I however get no star and a slap round the head. The Argon also now consider me a Confirmed Insurgent which is a cheery thought in itself.

By now I'm wondering if possibly I should quit for the day before something even worse happens (though I'm at a loss for the moment to think what that might be) when I scan a passing Teladi freight M3. It's a Perseus but it's got only 7MJ of shielding, a single IRE in front and a single Firefly missile, In fact the only thing that's even giving me pause for thought on this one is the Fragbomb launcher in the rear-turret. Today seems a good day to die, however I'm not keen on that idea and would much prefer today to be a good day to cap a Perseus.

I'd like to have wasp missile at this point to distract the turret while I make a move but sadly the Octopus can't handle them. Fortunately Fragbombs are slow with low ROF so a bit of deft flying should win the day. I make a couple passes, strip the shields and start nibbling at the hull while dodging turret fire. I get a lag spike for a couple seconds and take a hard hit I never see coming which knocks my hull right down into the red on 13% but when it kicks back into action it's a beautiful sight in front of me - a blue M3 and a spacesuit rapidly jetting off into the distance.

I save and go make a cup of tea.

Total Assets:

1x Octopus

1x Perseus (84%) (Unless some spiteful misfortune occurs to it)

2x 1 MJ shield

4x IRE

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

1x Caiman SF (85%)

300,000Cr

Part 14 – Squiddy Doesn't Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth

By this point I've developed a healthy paranoia of anything that looks like it may be going my way so I resist the urge to take control of my new M3 and instead stay in my Octopus and wait for something bad to happen. There's no particular reason for me to think a missile is going to come screaming out the fog and vaporise my new toy. Nor have I any expectation of a Kha'ak taskforce suddenly dropping out of nowhere all around me or even that Heavy Centaur to finally show up but I'm not giving the RNG gods the opportunity. While I act as overwatch, I order my SF to jump out and pick up some 25MJ shields from the fab in Rolk's Fate.

On its return I transfer control, exchange freight with my Octopus and then beam myself over. It's nice to have managed to make it into the cockpit of this one and even though my shields are only on 5% and charging I'm already feeling a lot more secure than I did in the Octopus. Something about 10x the armour and 75MJ of shielding has that effect. I've currently still only got the 4 IRE fitted so not a massive firepower improvement yet although with the weapon generator on an M3 that will let me fire them pretty much continuously. My available missile options have also significantly improved although I've no plans to do away with my trusty Dragonfly which has proven so useful.

Checking my ship stats in the encyclopaedia it seems the Perseus is a fairly well-rounded ship. There's no particular area in which I would say it excels but then from what I can see it has no real weak areas either. All in all it's a solid ship and should put me in good place to expand from and what I've discovered from my time spent patiently watching traffic flow through the gates is that there are actually quite a lot of M3+ in common use by traders. Betty on sector map just lists them as freight transporters without saying what they are, you have to look to see and I'm thinking this will be the better avenue to try and capture one rather than try and take on a military convoy. Anyways, those are musings for later. Right now I need more guns. Lots of guns.

The playing field has changed and I've gone up a notch in the food chain which means all those Split Strong Arm weapons dealers and Hi-tech goods convoys that I've previously had to allow to pass unmolested are now very much on the menu. There's pretty much two types. The TS class which are your standard type with either none or a single M4/M5 escort, and the other is the TM class which is considerably more dangerous and usually has four escorts in the M4/M5 range. TM seems to me to tend to have the more valuable cargo on board. Right now seems an excellent time for me to field test the 'Shifty Business'.

My standard practice for assaulting a TM class is to fall in behind it and then fire a single Dragonfly at any M5 first and then fire several at any M4. Dragonfly on an M5 is a one-shot kill and targeting the M5's first you can almost guarantee they're all destroyed before they can react. If you target the more dangerous M4 first the M5's

get time to react and most can outrun a Dragonfly and you're left with them nibbling at you while you deal with the TM which is not good news.

A half-dozen or so runs nets me a bunch of PACs to give my Perseus a little more teeth and approx a million credits in other weapons/missiles that won't actually fit my ship but they'll be good to sell. I also manage to bag a single PBE which should come in handy for capping.

Life is looking up.

Total Assets:

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

3x 25 MJ shield

5x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Maxed Caiman SF 'Tax Deductible'

1x Caiman SF (85%)

1,500,000Cr

Part 15 – Squiddy Snags the TP

OK, I have small confession to make; I may have slightly lied in the last part. You see I claimed to have picked up a PBE when that wasn't entirely true. In all fairness it did look like a PBE, but it's turned out it's actually a magic ship-capping artefact dealing 4d20 of panic damage to targeted pilots.

Of the last seven ships I've gone after 5 have bailed. Consequently my little fleet of three has suddenly gained three extra Caiman super freighters, a Caiman Hauler, a Toucan Hauler that went pirate on scanning it and a Pirate Hades that I picked up off a station defence mission I decided to do on a whim during a slow period in Split freighter traffic. All in all a pretty good haul. The Hades even came with a single Tomahawk left intact so I've got the capacity to punch a capital ship in the face really hard should the urge (or need) take me.

Now the extra observant among you may have realised that actually makes six ships. Sadly I did manage to lose one to a Pirate Scorpion I didn't see coming because I was too busy capping ships left and right and not paying enough attention to security. Unfortunate but lesson learned. My big problem now is that I've actually got too many ships which probably seems an odd issue to have but being Boron and about as welcome in Split space as a bacon sandwich at a bar mitzvah this makes procuring 25MJ shields a little tricky. Currently I'm aware of only two fabs in the universe as explored to date and one of those is in Argon space and right now they're not too happy with me. Unless and until I can get hold of a 25MJ production capacity of my own it looks like I'm going to have to feed these two fabs and buy up

shields as they get built which means getting back on good terms with the Argon. Not ideal but it'll have to do.

The other big gain aside from the bomber, of course, is the Toucan. This is my first TP and gives me the capacity to board larger vessels as soon as I can get hold of some suitably trained psychopaths. Originally I had planned to source all my marines from the ex-pilots of the ships I capture and as it is I do actually have enough for a small team now. Trouble is as far as I know there isn't any way to actually convert captured passengers into marines yet, or at least the functionality isn't present in the game yet. If anyone knows different feel to correct me. Otherwise seems like I'm going to need a different method of obtaining marines that sort of stays within the rules. Suggestions?

Meantime my small fleet is holed up in Atreus Military outpost and I need some 25MJ shields, which means I need to play nice with the Argon, which is going to be bad news for Paranid shipping in the area.

Total Assets:

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

3x 25 MJ shield

5x PAC, 1x PBE

2x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1 x Hades 'Special Delivery'

1,500,000Cr

Part 16 – Brigantine Sideshow

So, who remembers that Caiman Miner? Yep, it's true I've just noticed I've STILL got the damn thing holed up in a trading station hiding away from the small cloud of M4/M5's that are staking the place out ready to shoot it if it so much as peeps out. You know given that they're Argon police forces and it's stuck in an Argon sector you'd have thought they'd just kick in the door and get on with it. I guess there must be some jurisdictional issues between stations and local border control. Anyway, for the trouble it's caused me I think I may just keep it now. It seems safe where it is and maybe the police will give up eventually.

Right, I need to get back on friendly terms with the Argon partly because I now suddenly have a small fleet that needs jumpdrives and partly because they own 50% of the known 25MJ shield production available to me. Quickest way to get back in their good books is probably to start shooting up Paranids. Let's face it, who isn't pleased to see Paranids getting shot up? Anyways, I decide to head down to Elena's

Fortune since that's probably the best place to find both Paranid heading up from the Paranid core sectors and of course any Pirates passing through. Double the rep opportunity there.

As I'm passing through the south Atreus gate I'm very nearly hit square in the face by a transport which turns out to be a Dukes TP and a particularly nervous one at that as he can't bail out quick enough when I open up. So the first salvo of the day nets me a second TP. I'm off to a good start here. This worries me somewhat as I'm assuming yesterday the RNG gods just weren't paying attention and therefore I'm expecting divine retribution any moment.

Moving down through Farnham's Legend I come across a couple of M3+ tech dealers one of which is an Eclipse. Now I remember the old Eclipse had 125MJ shields, so it seems they've done some upgrading there as it now sports a most impressive 200MJ. Speeds been sacrificed a bit but for the survivability bonus that may actually be worth it, especially in my case. Still looks like something you'd find crawling down your wall though but then looks aren't everything.

Down through south gate and I'm in Elena's Fortune and staring straight at a Brigantine beating the snot out of the sector defence. Now this could be interesting to watch, it's the first time I've seen a Brigantine and I have to say it is a pretty nice looking ship actually. Might have to try and capture one perhaps one day. It seems quite effective as Sector defence seems to be throwing themselves quite ineffectually at it, M3 and M6 are popping left and right. The Brigantine has escort so they're helping keep things stirred up too.

Interestingly there seems to be a couple Pirate Kestrels in the mix. More interestingly it appears that Pirate versions are actually slightly better spec than the one I had before. More interesting even than that is the Colossus that's coming up fast from the south behind the Brigantine and more interesting than all those things is what looks through the vid goggles to be a Titan group coming through the west gate but which is not quite in gravitar range to confirm. It's going to be interesting.

I'm not quite sure how you creep up on an M2 with an M1 but the Colossus captain seems to manage it somehow. The Brigantine is having such a fine time swatting fighters it's completely oblivious until the Colossus closes to point blank and opens up. It's a commendable move by the Colossus captain and had he been in an M2 with some actual effective weaponry would most likely have been a stunning victory. Sadly he's not. It takes a couple of seconds for the Brigantine to realise the danger but after that it slews over and shatters the Colossus in moments for the loss of about 20% shielding.

It does turn out to be a Titan group and it's a pity the Brigantine lost some shields as it would have been nice to see the two taskforces slug it out at full strength. As it is the end is never really in doubt but the Pirates make a good show of it and the Titan ends the day losing 90% of its shields.

Show's over so I get going and spend a good while blowing up Paranid shipping in and around the lower Argon sectors. I do get a couple bails from M4/M5's but nothing that survives the experience due to some overuse of Wasps. Still it's a couple more potential mercs. At least I'm back in favour with the Argon even if the Paranid now hate me with a passion again.

Total Assets:

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

3x 25 MJ shield

5x PAC, 1x PBE

2x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

1 x Hades 'Special Delivery'

1,500,000Cr

Part 17 – Ker-ching!

With my Argon rep now firmly back in the black I can get my fleet up and running properly so a fairly boring escort job back to Argon Prime and then I leave them to get themselves off for kitting out. Getting this lot fully upgraded and repaired however is going to cost fair amount so for now I spend what I've got on getting the Hauler upgraded fully and set him up as my logistical support freighter. His task will be to keep me supplied with missiles and sell off any loot.

Jumping back to Atreus' south gate I arrive just in time to meet a pirate convoy heading down into Farnham's, two Blastclaws and a TS. The TS doesn't interest me but the Blastclaws do as it seems they can mount ION Disruptors and I'll have need of that in future. Both are armed with those PBG's and I don't fancy trying to take both at once but they're not paying me any attention anyway so I let the TS go through and once the first of the Blastclaws is committed to jumping I hit the second. Seems he doesn't want to bail but he does drop two Hammerheads which is pretty nice. Heading through I just jump the second one but he fires a missile at me and blows himself up in the process. Not a huge success to date but early days.

With nothing particular of interest in sector I head over to the nearby factory to see what missions are on offer. The only one there that interests me is a scanning one. Apparently they'd like me to scan a load of freighters in pirate space for which I'm offered 8% of the total cargo value. Now I've not done one of these before so I've no idea what they consider to be 'valuable freight' but the obvious solution here is just scan everyone and their dog, can't go too wrong then.

Jumping down into Split Fire where the main flow of traffic is I zip around there and Brennan's Triumph scanning absolutely every ship that passes by until the 10 min timer runs out. The payout for the mission isn't huge, only about 40k, but what I've discovered is there's a rather large amount of expensive goods flowing through the pirate sectors. This is handy since I'm going to require a fairly fat wad of cash to repair, rearm, upgrade and generally get my little freighter fleet up to scratch.

With criminal intent in mind I head back to Argon space and spend what cash I have on getting my Hauler fully upgraded. The plan is to go on a piracy run down through the Split Fire to Hatikvah's Faith sectors and bag as much loot as possible. I'm fairly sure of a pretty good haul given what I saw earlier. Soon as everything is ready I'll get going but for now what I want to do is work on the merc problem. It turns out I've acquired a total of eleven cheery volunteers by this point and I just need to get them educated for the job. That's going to take a little while so sooner they get in training the better.

On an earlier pass through the pirate sectors there was a merc training facility down in Danna's Chance so with my Toucan loaded up and ready I jump into the sector to make sure the coast is clear only to find it most assuredly is not. Not only has the merc facility been destroyed but as the jump effect clears I appear right in the face of a second Pirate taskforce and staring down the barrels of a second Brigantine. And they're not happy to see me.

Fortunately it appears the Brigantine captain is as shocked to see me up his left nostril as I am to find myself up it and as he slews around and fire starts landing around me I hear that noise that every capital ship owner dreads, grating hull-metal. Luckily for me the Brigantine succumbs to carelessly steering into the gate before he can bring any flaks to bear and cracks up in a huge explosion. That just leaves his slightly confused escort to deal with and while they try to sort themselves out I launch everything I've got and blanket the area in missile fire. It's a less than 30 second engagement but at the end of it the only one left alive is me... with this to show for it:



I think that will sort my immediate monetary concerns..

Total Assets:

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

3x 25 MJ shield

5x PAC, 1x PBE

2x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

1 x Hades 'Special Delivery'

2,000Cr

Part 18 – No Turning to Stone for this Squid!

Moving north into Brennan's Triumph to make sure nothing nasty is coming I call my Support-Hauler into Danna's and order him to collect all the goodies while I watch on the sector map to make sure nothing comes from the east gate to get him. Soon as he's done I drop back down through and hook up with him.

With the destruction of the Danna's merc base I'm going to have to look elsewhere for mercs which probably means venturing down into the 'Pirate Alley' sectors of Loomanckstrat's Legacy. Since I'm going to have to go that way anyway I might as well do a piracy run from here through to Aladna Hill and grab as much loot as possible on the way. So with him following at a safe distance behind on ware-collecting duty I make my way eastwards hitting anything and everything with stuff worth stealing on board. By the time we've hit Hatikvah's east gate my Support-Hauler is stuffed to the gills and I've got a few bailed ships floating around in pirate space which I'll pick up another time. My rep has taken a little abuse across the board and I'm not sure if I've now got negative rep with the Corporations or whether that is going to cause me issues later but to be honest OTAS ships are fugly anyway so I'm not too bothered.

Passing into Aladna Hill I jump my Support-Hauler back to CBSE equipment dock, I'll sort through the goodies later and see what's worth keeping. Plotting a course to Loomanckstrat's via Avarice it's nice to see it's acquired a couple of asteroids, I'll have to check back at some point and see if it's worth building here now. Arriving in New Income I jump in my Toucan and head to the Pirate base with it where I convert my passengers to slaves before continuing down to Loomanckstrat's.

Loomanckstrat's, it appears, is about to get blown away. There's a fairly comprehensive Boron fleet sat at the north gate obliterating anything that moves and heading down the sector a short way I start detecting a sizeable Paranid force as well. It appears they were waiting for me because as I arrive they start moving towards the Anarchy port and its surrounding factories. This isn't good news as Loomanckstrat's is currently housing enough capital firepower to handily take on a fairly busy Xenon sector so I'm not thinking the merc base is going to last long once they get in range. In fact there's a Thresher headed for it right now and a Ray not all that far behind.

Looks like I'm going to have to do a crash trading session here. I don't have time for the Toucan's auto-n00b to negotiate the asteroid field so I transport over and take control myself and head straight for the merc base. As I'm getting into docking range it's already taking PPC fire and lost about 15% shields. A quick dock manoeuvre at far too high speed nearly puts me into the side of the station but I just about make it and quickly 'educate' my slaves in to mercs. Undock and transport back over to my Perseus and I order my Toucan to jump back to CBSE.

A quick look over my shoulder shows me the battle is raging proper now, Anarchy Port laser towers are lancing fire into the night, streamers of PPC fire are smashing against station hulls and between it all the small specks of fighters exchanging HEPT and PBG fire. It's not looking at all very good for the bad guys.

Not having quite enough e-cells to make a full jump back to Atreus I end up in Brennan's Triumph and make my way up through Olmancketslat's. On the way I come across a Teladi tech transporter which immediately goes pirate when I scan him. This pleases me immensely because it's a Medusa and I quite fancy the idea of upgrading to an M3+. 75MJ of shields is fine but still susceptible to capital ship fire or heavy missiles. I'm not really going to feel secure until I'm somewhere around M6 level shielding.

The problem with this one is that he's armed with quad PBG up front which means I really, really don't want to go head to head with him and he's got PBE in the turrets which means I really don't want to be behind him either. Sometimes however you just have to accept the lesser of two evils and take it on the chin so setting up behind him I do my level best to dodge a practically insta-hit weapon while trying to encourage him to bail. We're at it for a few minutes ducking and dodging around an asteroid, him slowly chewing into my hull and me slowly chewing into his before he finally gives up on 81% with me down to 84% by this point.

Feeling rather pleased with myself I transport everything across, send my Perseus to the Atreus Pirate base and slowly make my way back to CBSE. Life is good.

Total Assets:

1x Medusa

3x 25 MJ shield

5x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

2x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

1 x Hades 'Special Delivery'

2,000Cr

Part 19 – Fall In, Squid Squads!

Arriving back in CBSE I join up with my Support-Hauler and sift through the goodies on-board to outfit my Medusa before sending him to the equipment dock and selling some stuff off. Taking the advice of those that know better I'm keeping the IBL's and some other stuff I don't recognise until I've had chance to field-test it myself but even so from the Brigantine salvage and my piracy run I manage to top 10 million. Sweet!

A quick upgrade for myself and some repairs at the shipyard and I'm good to go. I've lost about 20m/s in speed over the Perseus but the trade-off is an extra 25% in shielding and extra cargo space for missiles so I think overall it's a good upgrade and leaves me a little more secure.

I've had enough of fighting for the time being plus I've got a lot of administration work to do, ships to get repaired, upgraded put to work etc. plus I think it's time to lay down some factories. I want to build a small loop in President's End which produces e-cells, silicon and ore for sale and provides me a safe point to refuel and then get back to running trade missions while my freighter fleet gets repairs upgrades and are assigned jobs.

I now have a total of ten mercs working for me and checking their stats it appears that five of them are 2-star fighters and the other five are 1-star. I'm not sure of the relative strengths the fighting ability gives them so seeing as how I have two TP's at the moment I decide to split them up into two squads and train them separately. I think ultimately I'll try and get five TP's and fill them according to fight star rating so as mercs improve they get promoted to better squads. Currently my squads are as follows:

Squad 1: 1-Star

Ho t'Sht
Ha t'nst
Olmanckelttak
Fui t'Nnt
Cho t'Knt

Squad 2: 2-Star

Ra t'Plp
Holigis Gutosos Yahondras VI
Gaga Lo
Yosulis Joranas Tzessosis VIII
Na t'Ztk

Squad 1 should get on OK, being Split and Paranid. I'm not sure how well the lone Boron is going to do in Squad 2 with the Split for company but we'll see...

Part 20 – Tentacles Work Better Than Blastclaws

Easy come, easy go. It's amazing how quickly you can burn through 10 million and by the time I'm done sorting everything I'm down to just a few hundred thousand again and my mercs it seems are training fast, at least in the initial stages and consequently with ten of them on the go are eating funds quite rapidly. My doing missions and my SF's running cargo around is only just about sustaining them.

However it's not all bad, all my administrative stuff is done, all my freighters are fully upgraded and assigned their tasks and my loop is built and making money.

Unfortunately the Ore mine had to be separate because it was too far away to connect directly so until I can get a tractor beam and an M6 I'll just have to move goods the hard way. I've also rescued the Caiman Miner I had elsewhere for only a minor drop in Argon rep (less said about that the better) so now I've got him wandering around Ore Belt collecting ore and delivering back to my Ore mine.

Personally I'm laying doggo in Farnham's Legend by the north gate as I've recently realised that there's a pirate convoy that makes its way up here periodically from somewhere, docks at the Atreus Pirate base and then heads back down again presumably to wherever it came from. Currently I've caught one in Atreus space and am monitoring it on my sat-net waiting for it to do its return journey. Generally each convoy consists of a TS plus a few escort Blastclaws/Prototypes/Elites. I'm feeling a bit of a bruiser in my new Medusa and plan to put it through its paces and hopefully grab at least one Blastclaw in the process as I'll be needing one for my upcoming boarding plans.

As I'm watching the convoy returning towards pirate space a small Xenon wing enters through Atreus' north gate. A P, an M and an N. Not particularly notable normally but for me these are actually the first Xenon I've seen in my entire game to date. Previously there wasn't even a reference in my encyclopaedia for Xenon. Khaak, yes, cos they've been trying to kill me since day one, but never a single Xenon before. Odd. Anyways, they disappear off through the west gate to go do whatever it is that Xenon do (probably try and terraform something) and my pirate convoy drops through the gate in front of me and heads off towards the south gate. Silently I drop in behind them and follow at a discreet 10km distance.

As they reach the south gate and slow to pass through I close the gap. I allow the TS and two of the Blastclaws to commit to entering and then volley fire Wasps and Dragonflies at the Elite while I pounce on the last Blastclaw. The Wasps totally confuse the turret on the Elite and allow a gap for the Dragonflies to get through and it's dead and I'm on the six of the Blastclaw before it can react. A short burst of EBC and then a switch to PBE and the Blastclaw pilot can't jump out quick enough. Well that was easy!

Following down through the gate into Elena's Fortune the convoy is a ways ahead of me and it would seem pirates are none too bright as they don't appear to have realised two of their number have disappeared someplace. I try the same trick down by the south gate and then the on the last one in Split Fire but it seems I'm only destined to get the one capture today. Maybe tomorrow.

Total Assets:

1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'

4x 25 MJ shield

4x EBC+Ammo, 4x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

1x Blastclaw

2x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

1 x Hades 'Special Delivery'

250,000Cr

Part 21 – Taking the Rough with the Smooth

Bit of a mixed day today...

Started off well, captured another SF-L to add to my freighter collection, also getting quite adept at taking on these pirate convoys and managed to bag myself a second Blastclaw and even a Blastclaw Prototype. All of them bailed in the high 80's, which was pleasing; there was, however, a small incident with the second Blastclaw where it appears I may have accidentally fired a Wasp missile at it. Instead of being treated to the view of my Wasp missiles spiralling off into the distance and the Jaguar I was targeting going up in smoke they spiralled off a short way, promptly did a 180 and flew back behind me. Eep!

I knew instantly what I'd done and feeling a complete numpty, had to do a quick about face myself and attempt to PBE wasp missiles out the air before they impacted my shieldless (obviously...) Blastclaw. I got a couple so the damage wasn't as bad as it could have been but from 80+% it was down to 45%. Not a good result and I've learned an expensive lesson, from now on I always carry an extra 25Mj shield to transfer across after a capture. It's not going to protect a capture from a determined attacker but it will at least protect them to some degree from my own stupidity. However this was not to be the end to my woes, nor was Wasping my own Blastclaw going to be the pinnacle of my incompetence for the day, No, that event was merely a warm-up for what followed.

Scanning a couple TM weapons dealers I found one that was carrying, among other things a bunch of Tomahawks. Ideal, I thought, as my Hades only has a handful by this point and quadrupling its firepower was a most attractive prospect. As I commenced negotiations with the TM to part with its goods I called in my Hades ready to transfer over the dropped Tomahawks. The TM, however, was not as fixated on me as I had first thought and as my Hades came into range its front turret suddenly decided it preferred shooting at my bomber rather than me.

Now previous to this I'd set up my bomber with a 100% firing ratio and equipped it ready to go so as soon it started taking fire it responded the only way it knew and started firing Tomahawks at the TM. Obviously this was not going to end well for somebody and I suspected that somebody would be me. Realising the danger I instantly switched back to EBC and pounded the TM, but even quad-EBC takes a while to get through 400MJ of shielding and before I could get the shields down and take the TM out my bomber decided to cross the path of my fire at the same time as it launched a torpedo. My fire intersected the Tomahawk, there was a huge explosion and when the screen cleared the only thing left was debris.

In a display of staggering ineptitude I've just blown up my Hades... <cry>

Total Assets:

1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'

4x 25 MJ shield

4x EBC+Ammo, 4x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

2x Blastclaw

1x Blastclaw Prototype

3x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

170,000Cr

Part 21 – The Greed Gene can be Pricey

Dropped into Kingdom End today for a visit, not been here for a while, and as I exited the gate I was commed by a Dolphin. Apparently this joker has a couple mates who decided it would be a grand adventure to go waltzing into a Xenon Core sector. Not just any old Xenon, you hear, but a CORE sector because what could possibly go wrong with that plan?

Anyways, this poor Boron has obviously got me confused with someone else because he's labouring under the misapprehension that a) I give a monkey's what stupidity his friends are perpetrating, b) That I'm as stupid as they are and also think a trip to Xenon-land is going to be a sunshine and pixies experience or c) I'm a suicidal manic depressive looking for swift end to it all. He'd quite like me to take a trip over there and see how they're getting on. He's even given me the sector coordinates as if that's likely to encourage me.

I've looked, they are waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay the hell over the other side of the universe!

I'm all set to inform him up which particular orifice he can shove this plan when he suddenly mentions a reward. Oops, that does it, suddenly my greed gene kicks in and the whole situation loses a little of that 'absolute certain death' feel to it. I mean, I suppose I could always swing by the place. I don't exactly have to go in there, I could just kinda go... near. Besides, if I encounter anything more threatening than a pocket calculator with attitude I can always run like hell. I'll just tell him I found them, they died horribly and it's all very sad. It's not like he's going to know any different is it?

Anyways, I tell him I'll get right on it and that seems to keep him happy. I'm not, but he doesn't know that. I guess I'll find myself down that way sometime (maybe when I have an M6); until then I'm sure they'll keep.

It seems I've got enough captured pilots to get another squad up and running which is cool. Not so cool is the sight I find as I jump into Loomanckstrat's. The merc base is gone. Actually so is everything else as it happens. It appears the Boron/Paranid fleet have quite comprehensively finished the job after I left and the place has been completely devastated. This means before I can get another squad going I'm going to have to track down another merc base so the two squads I have now had better do a good job when they start live ops because they're all I've got for now.

Spying a jumpgate off to the east I decide to investigate and find a pirate industrial sector. As I'm snooping around I spot another Dukes TP and always eager to bolster my ranks make a play for it. The Paranid pilot is a little reluctant to part with it at first but a little PBE diplomacy eventually convinces him of the best course of action. Parking up next to it I take a breather and organise some trading runs for my SF fleet, got to keep them active to fund my merc training. I'm about halfway through

doing this when I begin to get that creeping feeling that something's not quite right. Never one to ignore a feeling of impending doom I quickly bring up the sector map and yes, that Pirate TM that was passing through north to west has changed course and is rapidly closing on my position. Worse still as I'm watching on the sector map it suddenly spits out a wing of five Blastclaws. That's interesting in itself as a Pirate TM can only hold four fighters, but I've no time to worry about cheating pirates right now as I've got a whole bunch of Blastclaws armed to the teeth with burny deathguns hauling arse to my position and my TP is busted to the point it can only do a measly 50m/s. This can't end well.

Going for the distraction option I head one way and order the TP to make a break for the nearest station while I fire a wasp at each to try and get their attention. They're not taking the bait though, they've obviously decided they've got me by the short 'n' curlies and they chase down and incinerate my TP before turning around and closing in on me. I've decided on hit and fade tactics and bolt for the nearby SPP, pull around the back and wait for them to get closer. As they do they open fire on me but I'm safe behind the back of the SPP array.

Or so I thought. Turns out PBG passes through objects, which is a bit of a cheat (damn pirates!) and I'm sat stationary on the other side getting roasted! A quick boost gets me out of the cone of damage and it's very fortunate for me that I am around the back of the SPP because to pursue they're all forced to go around the edge which puts me out of range. Just as well really as I'm seriously hurting! They burnt right through 100MJ of shields and incinerated my hull down to 55% in just a couple of seconds. Safe to say I'm not looking to play anymore and initiate an emergency jump out of there thanking my lucky stars my jumpdrive is still functional.

I guess I had it coming having been preying on Blastclaws for a while now but that's the most resounding whooping I've had to date. Ouch.

Part 22 – Every Pirate Cloud has a Silver Lining

Introduction of funky bonus images for that additional multimedia razzamatazz.

In an effort to find a new merc base I decided to scout out the pirate sectors south of Loomanckstrat's. Today I'm test-driving my as-yet-unnamed Blastclaw Prototype as my Medusa was involved in a small incident with some flamethrower wielding maniacs yesterday and is in the CBSE shipyard getting a couple dents knocked out. Imagine my pleasure as I headed south to come across these guys.



It may not be my M2 but I wonder how much damage I can do with it? Firing a couple Wasp missiles to get the Brigantine's attention you can see where I've parked up behind that Thresher group. I've a fairly good idea what's going to happen next...



Yep, the Thresher group gets whacked hard. Here you can see I've moved down to the Paranid Ares group and am waiting on the Brigantine to do its stuff again. Centre of the screen there is a Kraken group that have woken up and are moving down to intercept the Brigantine. I suspect they'll regret that. From where I'm sat I can see the Kraken firing Hammer torpedoes.



The Kraken took a face-full of PPC and went down hard. I knew they'd regret that. The Ares followed shortly after. What you see there is a big Boron/Paranid/Pirate furball as the respective escort groups take each other out. Meantime I've hopped up north and am heading in to grab all the dropped crates.



The Brigantine has finished off the Boron/Paranid fighters but lost its own escort in the process. Meantime I'm hiding around the back of the Shark. There's also a second Thresher and a couple of Hydras plus all their fighter escort in that area so I'm thinking the Brigantine might not do so well this time.



Brigantine finally went down but it took the Shark and Thresher with it in the process. Left me a present too, yay!

In other news Ho t'Sht's Raiders and Gaga Lo's Misfits have completed basic training to two-star in all fields and will shortly be entering negotiations with a number ship captains with a view to brokering a property 'loan'.

I'm thinking initially Ho t'Sht's Raiders being the squad with the fighting ability of a wet paper bag will cut their teeth by making an attempt on a TM class ship. Depending upon their performance (or lack of) will determine whether or not Gaga Lo's Misfits, the squad with the fighting ability of a three-legged donkey, make an attempt on something a bit toothier like an M6. Missions kick off tonight, results tomorrow.

Total Assets:

1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'

4x 25 MJ shield

4x EBC+Ammo, 4x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

2x Blastclaw

1x Blastclaw Prototype

3x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

20,000Cr

Part 23 – Grab your Bottle, There's a Boarding Party!

Right, it's about time that Ho t'Sht and his Raiders proved that they are indeed the t'Sht and earn their keep. For our first combat mission we will be attempting the acquisition of a TM class vessel so that I don't have to keep making lengthy treks back to Terracorp for a new jumpdrive every time I capture a ship. Having consulted the ever-wise encyclopaedia I've selected the OTAS Zephyras as target as it has the best specs for the role, I think, and because it seems to have escaped the fugliness disease that inflicts the rest of the OTAS product line.

Troops for this mission will consist of:

'Ho t'Shts Raiders'

1-Star Fighters, 2-Star everything else.

Ho t'Sht

Ha t'nst

Oلمانckelttak

Fui t'Nnt

Cho t'Knt

Jumping into Nopileos' Memorial, I survey the sector and choose a position for what may be an extended stakeout. Within 10 seconds of my arrival however a Zephyrus comes belting past me from the west gate. How fortuitous, looks like we're onto a winner here!

I've downgraded to one of my Blastclaws for this exercise as they're the only ION-capable ship I have currently. First thing I need to do is remove any escorts so tucking in behind the Zephyrus at about 6km I launch a couple Wasps at it to encourage it to go defensive and launch its Solanos. Once it does that they get a couple Wasps and eight Dragonflies launched at each just to make sure, which is slightly overkill but it guarantees the job. That leaves just the Zephyrus.

With phase 1 of the plan complete and the escort removed, I switch to phase 2 which entails switching my secondaries to ION-D and frying the bejeezus out of the Zephyrus to kill off the turrets. This takes a few minutes but with that done I've got a defenceless Zephyrus with a single 200MJ shield at my mercy.

Phase 3 involves bringing in the mercs so they can explain my point of view to the Zephyrus captain firsthand. I jump in my Toucan to the south gate. Transferring myself across to the Toucan, I remove all but one gun and set my Blastclaw to attack shields. This actually works really well and he follows behind it firing the odd shot at it. Only problem is the shields are slowly going up so I have to add weapons to his load-out until he's doing enough damage to keep the shields low. I also set IRE turrets to attack all enemies so that it can maintain light fire even when

manoeuvring.

This is a mistake.

With the Blastclaw very slowly whittling away the Zephyrus' shields I move into position alongside and as soon as the shields drop below 4% I make my move and quickly order my mercs to go kick ass. (I've been practicing running through the menus so can do it quite quick now) Ho t'Sht's Raiders jettison themselves off into space towards the Zephyrus and report back to me that they're 'Moving in'.

Now you're probably all thinking you know where I've cocked up but I bet you don't. You see I've overlooked a small consideration. My fire team is made up of four Split and a Paranid. The Paranid don't like me overly but I'm not on shoot-on-sight terms with them. The Split however...



... and I've only gone and set my Blastclaw's turrets to fire at all enemies. Anyone see the potential for misfortune here? Predictably my Blastclaw chooses that moment to make a turn and the rear turret loses its lock on the Zephyrus but hey, no problem, it's just found four new ones!

Fortunately the Raiders are almost on top of their target at this point so even though one of the team gets insta-gibbed by IRE fire the remaining four manage to latch on before anyone else bites it. A short time later, much weapons fire and complaints by Split to watch where people are pointing their guns and it's all over, Olmanckelttak hacks the ship and it's green. Success!

Debrief:

It was a commendable attempt by Ho t'Sht's Raiders. Even though they managed to lose a total of three soldiers, one to err... friendly fire, the mission was a success. The two remaining mercs, Ha t'nst and Olmanckelttak, are now 2-star fighters and have been promoted to the Misfits. That leaves no surviving soldiers in the Raiders so their unit has been regretfully disbanded.

Total Assets:

1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'

4x 25 MJ shield

4x EBC+Ammo, 4x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Zephyrus TM

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

2x Blastclaw

1x Blastclaw Prototype

3x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

130,000Cr

Part 24 – Decisions, Decisions

Yesterday's mission while ultimately successful wasn't the resounding success it could have been. Whether they were unlucky or whether it was just down to poor fight skills is debateable. I'm choosing to overlook my own incompetence. More experimentation is required to provide a definitive answer, however until I can find another merc base I'm sorely limited on troops.

A TP is useable for capturing but is not ideal as without weapon support I have to jump between ships and that complicates an already tricky operation. What I really need is an M6 which can mount ION-D which would negate the need for a TP. Having spent some time with the encyclopaedia it seems the only M6 that can mount ION-D are the Hydra and Centaur. Boron ships are off the menu, at least for the time being, so that means unless I can relocate that Pirate Centaur I saw down in Moo-Kye's Revenge one time I'm going to be upsetting the Argon again

Centaur's seem to come in three variants according to the encyclopaedia, normal, heavy and heavy-prototype. Heavy and Heavy-P seem largely the same except the prototype variant is a whole hell of a lot faster. In fact it's got a top speed that would be fairly good for a fighter. If I'm going to do this then I might as well go the whole hog and go straight for the Heavy-P. In for a penny, in for a pound and all that. First task of course is to locate one. I've never actually seen one up close but I must have passed one at some point.

I buy up a few AdvSats and order a couple ships to layout a grid around the Argon sectors since I'm assuming that's where they'll be while I wander off and do a few missions. Ship retrieval missions are much, much easier when you've got a TM along for the ride and with 600MJ of shielding around me I'm feeling quite safe as I don't think there's much that could do me harm before I can RSLG-JD out of there. I even manage to fit in a nice assassination mission, which for the cost of a handful of Wasps and the Hammerhead I sneaked in under their radar, nets me a cool 3 million. Sweet!

As it happens it seems there are at least two Heavy-P's in the area; the first I pick up in Red Light and assign my Medusa to tail it; the second in Herron's Nebula and attach a Blastclaw to that one. Jumping into Red Light I do a sneaky scan of the Heavy-P. Pros: it's fast, massively shielded and horrendously-well armed. Cons: It's fast, massively shielded and horrendously-well armed... and I have to defeat that.

Hmm, having actually looked at one first-hand I'm suddenly having second thoughts. I'm not really keen to go up against that level of firepower in a single fighter and dropping off troops on it? Ideally I would much prefer to attempt something like this with an M6 for the shielding but with only seven remaining squaddies I can't at the present time afford to take the almost inevitable losses from other boarding actions as that would leave me insufficient manpower to get the Heavy-P. Dilemma.

So what should it be? Do I make the play for the Heavy-P or take a pass on that and try something a little easier... a TL perhaps?

Part 25 – I want THAT one!

I decided to put Operation 'Steal an M6/TL (delete as applicable)' on hold for a brief period while I make a concerted effort to track down a merc base. Until I can get the slaves I've got 'converted' to extra troops the squaddies I've got are a valuable resource. While I'm busy exploring it will also give me some time to monitor the activities of the two HCPs and identify any possible point of vulnerability plus it'll give the Misfits a bit more extra training towards 3-star which can't hurt any.

Getting together a bunch of AdvSats I start up in Farnham's Legend and make a run down through Split Fire to Hatikvah's scouting out each sector and laying an AdvSat in there for Intel. Aside from a Brigantine group floating around Brennan's Triumph the area seems devoid of pirate activity which would seem to indicate the race military patrols are having some success in keeping the bad guys in check. Jumping into Loomanckstrat's is much the same story. The Boron/Paranid combined fleet is still living there quite happily although the Anarchy Port is up and running again. I suspect that's going to be a brief period of operation though as while I'm heading towards the south gate there's stirring in the Boron fleet to the north and some elements are heading east. I think the place will be pirate-free again pretty soon.

Heading down through Moo-Kye's, I'm still keeping an eye out for that Pirate Centaur but it seems as though it was just passing through and wherever it is now it certainly isn't here anymore. West into Desecrated Skies and with that sector scouted and sat-tagged that's pretty much all the main pirate sectors accounted for and no merc base which is altogether a bit depressing. Heading back into Moo-Kye's there's a bit of activity to the south which turns out to be a Minotaur taskforce clobbering a wing of Pirate Novas so I watch that while I ponder what to do next. Far as I'm aware the only other place with a few pirate sectors is way down south-east around Maelstrom. (Down to the last two Novas) It's a good deal more of a trek than I would like however it is fairly off the beaten track so may not have been hassled by any military forces. (Last Nova) This means if there is one down there it's probably still there. (Dead)

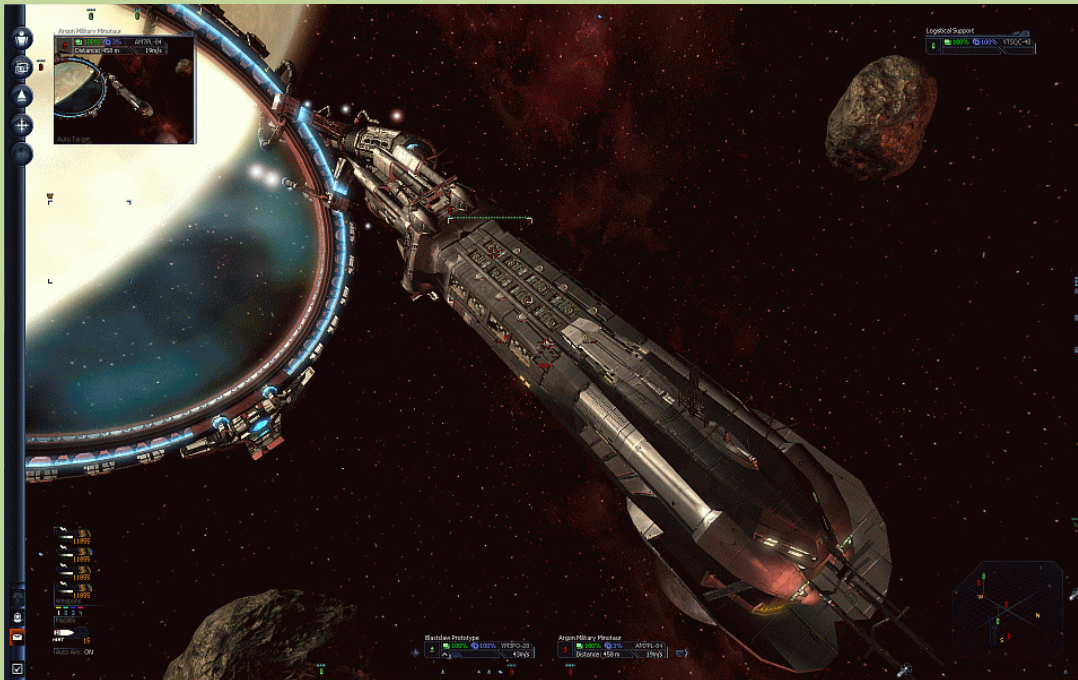
It's as the last Nova goes down in flames and the Minotaur group forms up and calmly resumes its course westwards that the dark thoughts begin to creep into my mind and I start to look at that Minotaur group in a whole different light. Is it feasible? Could my guys actually pull that off or is that too big a fish to be trying to hook? Only one way to find out but either way it's not going to do my Argon rep much good. A quick equipment check and the kernel of a plan forms. Yep, I aim to misbehave.

Lining up on the Minotaur I wait until they're in a clear region of space. The Minotaur is in X formation so I select the M8 in each arm of the formation since they have no ability to shoot down an incoming warhead and fire a Hammerhead at each. 4GJ+ of thermonuclear death goes careening off into the distance and I'm rewarded a short time later by four clean connections and thirteen ships are now two. Somehow or other one of the escort Novas managed to avoid being vaporised but it's not a problem, a couple follow up Thunderbolts resolves that one. With the Minotaur's escort removed and the area made safe it's time to do some crime.

Jumping in my Toucan I order him to initiate boarding ops while I switch to quad EBC and bombard the Minotaur with Thunderbolts. As soon as the shields drop, the Toucan deploys all seven of my remaining troops in an all or nothing assault and they advance to contact.



The split guys are still red to me as you can see but this time around I had the foresight to turn my turrets OFF before starting so we had no repeat of that unfortunate insta-gibbing incident. A quick EVA to target and the Misfits have latched on and are breaking out the oxy-cutters. I'm realistically thinking that this is as far as they'll get because I'm really not expecting them to get through the hull. However my lack of faith in my team is unfounded as they ably prove me wrong.



Having already surprised me by getting through the hull, can they possibly pull it off?
There are seven of them and they do have super-hacker extraordinaire
Olmancelttak to finish the job up.



Mmm...

Debrief:

An exceptional performance from the team in a difficult mission pretty much made up on the fly with practically no planning. Mission success was estimated to be negligible but they exceeded all expectations. Tea and biscuits all around. It's regretful that Gaga Lo didn't survive to share in the victory with his squad mates and though he was never too popular with some of his squad and his death was somewhat controversial the Split members of the squad are vehement in their claim of "Split say, foolish Boron throw pin not grenade!" I guess we'll just have to take their word for it.

Anyways, I now find myself in the possession of capital ship for which I have no weapons and no present manufacturing capacity to be able to supply it. It also needs about 14 million in repairs. Odd how days turn out.

Total Assets:

1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'

4x 25 MJ shield

4x EBC+Ammo, 4x PAC, 1x PBE

1x Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'

1x Zephyrus TM

1x Perseus 'Shifty Business'

2x Blastclaw

2x Blastclaw Prototype

3x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'

1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'

4,800,000Cr

Part 26 – Oops™

Would you believe it only took me about ten minutes to have my first shunt with the Minotaur? Yeah, thought you would.

As part of my piracy runs through Split Fire to Hatikvah's I've been fortunate enough to acquire a fair amount of high-level equipment which up until this point has been sat in a TS in CBSE equipment dock waiting for that day when I might actually have something to plug it into. Well it seems the day has come to put some of it to use and those 4x1GJ shields are going to come in handy after all. Jumping my Support-Hauler in I transfer across some shields and basic equipment and I'm good to get out of here before the Argon wonder why their M7M isn't reporting in anymore.

Once my shields are fully charged I jump back to my fuel base in President's End. As I'm busy checking the property menu, I suddenly get collided with and realise it's my TM jumping in behind me. My fault completely, I'm so used to flying small ships up till now I'd entirely forgotten that I now need to clear myself from gate lanes ASAP as I'm currently piloting a capital ship with a fat arse.

Fortunately the Zephyrus is fairly robust but I'm not able to recover the situation before it's lost all shields and taken about 30% hull damage. Great, I'm already facing a 14mill repair bill and now I've just tagged another couple hundred K on top to fix my TM. Still, I can't complain too much though, I'm lucky it didn't die as that would have been even more costly given it's got two fully equipped Blastclaws on board.

Anyways, minor RTA over with, it's time to consolidate my gains for the day and it seems I'm not quite as toothless as I thought. It appears I actually do have something useful to use with my new toy, 25 Flail missiles I've picked up somewhere and a single boarding pod I got from the Pirate base, shortly before my Kestrel got ganked by that Kha'ak scout. Now this has definite possibilities.

My plan to capture a Heavy Centaur Prototype (HCP) has basically hinged on two unknown considerations. The first would be my squaddies ability to actually do the deed. The Misfits have been whittled down to a mere five now after their last successful op but they're all 3-star trained 2-star fighters. They've also more than adequately demonstrated that they're capable of capturing an M7M given the chance so by comparison an M6 should be a doddle. This leaves the second consideration, which is me. Am I able to adequately suppress an HCP with my current equipment to the point where my boys can do their stuff? I'm not sure yet, but I'm going to find out. What we need is a plan, not just any plan, but a plan of the utmost cunning... Lucky me, I've got one!

Part 27 - Operation: 'Ooh, look! Shiny!' Part I

Intel has indicated that the two HCPs are running patrol routes throughout the main Argon sectors. These routes also encompass the border sectors of Argon space. Extended monitoring of military traffic has indicated a point of weakness, Cloudbase South West. This sector serves the requirements of the mission on several fronts; it's small, enabling full coverage of the sector via AdvSat for early warning. It has no military forces stationed there, nor does it have any police/border control presence to intervene. There are also plenty of obstacles to use should discretion/RSLG be required.

Mission craft for the op will consist of two Blastclaws configured for EBC and ION-D with Wasp backup. EBC will be used to reduce shields and preserve weapon-energy while the ION-D will be used to fry the bejeezus out of the HCP's weapon systems. Wasp missiles will be used as a distraction against the HCP turrets if/when (more likely when) things get serious. Two Blastclaws will be used so that in the event of hull-damage a swap can be made for repairs while pressure on the HCP is maintained.

The actual capture process will be undertaken by M7M-'Ask Questions Later' using our sole boarding pod (provided I've figured out how to work it by then) while the Blastclaws run shield-suppression duty.

Squad for this op will be:

Oلمانكelttak's Misfits:

Oلمانكelttak (Sqd Ldr)
Ha t'nst
Holigis Gutosos Yahondras VI
Na t'Ztk
Yosulis Joranos Tzessosis VIII

Operation: 'Ooh, look! Shiny!' will commence shortly after a cup of tea and a mince pie. Tales of glorious victory against overwhelming odds/bitter recriminations over failure and lives lost to follow.

Part 28 - Operation: 'Ooh, look! Shiny!' Part 2

With the arrival of the HCP in CBSW, the mission is a go and I jump into CBSW geared for war. Of the two HCPs I've chosen to go for, the first one rather than the second. The first has several more weapons onboard which will mean it's going to be more difficult to disable but the second, while less well armed, makes up for it by carrying a substantial amount of missile firepower. Engaging the second would likely result in either it or me getting a capital-class warhead in the face. I don't much fancy either of those possibilities so HCP2 is relegated to backup option.

Currently the HCP isn't aware of the danger and the few seconds before it realises will be crucial to getting the shields low and me into position. To aid this I've brought a couple of Tornado missiles with me which I intend to use to Alpha-strike it. First mistake. It turns out Tornado missiles are IFF locked and it refuses to fire on the HCP. Fair enough just have to do it the hard way and QUAD-EBC it. I've got him down to around 25% shields before he figures out I do actually mean business here and aren't just messing about and then he tags me as enemy at which point I get a volley of CIG fire directed my way. I'm anticipating it though and avoid it.

Now it's turned into a manoeuvring war. I've determined the HCP has a small blind spot slightly behind and below so I'm trying to stay within that zone and hit him with alternating EBC/ION-D. EBC to remove the shields and conserve energy, ION-D to try and burn away those CIGS. Meantime the HCP is manoeuvring to try and bring his side-turrets to bear and fire his CIGS at me. Unfortunately for me the HCP is only marginally slower than I am which means it's hard for me to maintain a steady position. When he does get a bead on me I have to jink out the way but then that puts me even further off position and the speed difference makes it tricky to get back in there without taking fire. While CIG fire is relatively slow it does hit quite hard and in my case every hit is 10% off my shield.

My shields ended up at a critical point and I had to break off, but I'm making some progress as you can see. I've reduced his shields to 25% capacity which makes it easier for me to get the ION-D through. He's also lost a couple CIGS but has



replaced them with PBE which in some ways is easier and others not. If I stay within 950-1000m off his position then he tries to use the PBE on me but I'm just fractionally out of range. If I drift

past 1000m he switches back to CIGS and I have to start dodging. I'm having to try and maintain some fairly precise positioning, while in a turning manoeuvre and while under fire and swapping between EBC and ION to maximise burn time. I need more fingers.



As you'll probably gather, this hurt. A lot. In short I just got plain outmanoeuvred and with his high base speed I wasn't able to pull away fast enough and got banjoed good and proper. I'm fairly sure the mass of Wasps I fired to distract as I hit the jumpdrive saved my skin there. Barely though. Anyways, I wound up at the east gate and while the HCP came steaming in, I quickly called in my second Blastclaw, transferred across and jumped the first one back to CBSE.

Back in action again, I've learned my lesson, and I've decided to change my tactics. Instead of trying to maintain a position close enough to encourage the HCP to waste PBE shots I'm hanging back a little more and consequently I'm having CIG fire lobbed my way again. Instead of trying to follow the HCP though I'm using boost to accelerate to top speed and then immediately cutting my engines, turn to a different vector and repeat. In short I'm making random pulsed movements and hitting him with fire in-between. I'm finding this is confusing his turrets a fair bit to the point where we get here...



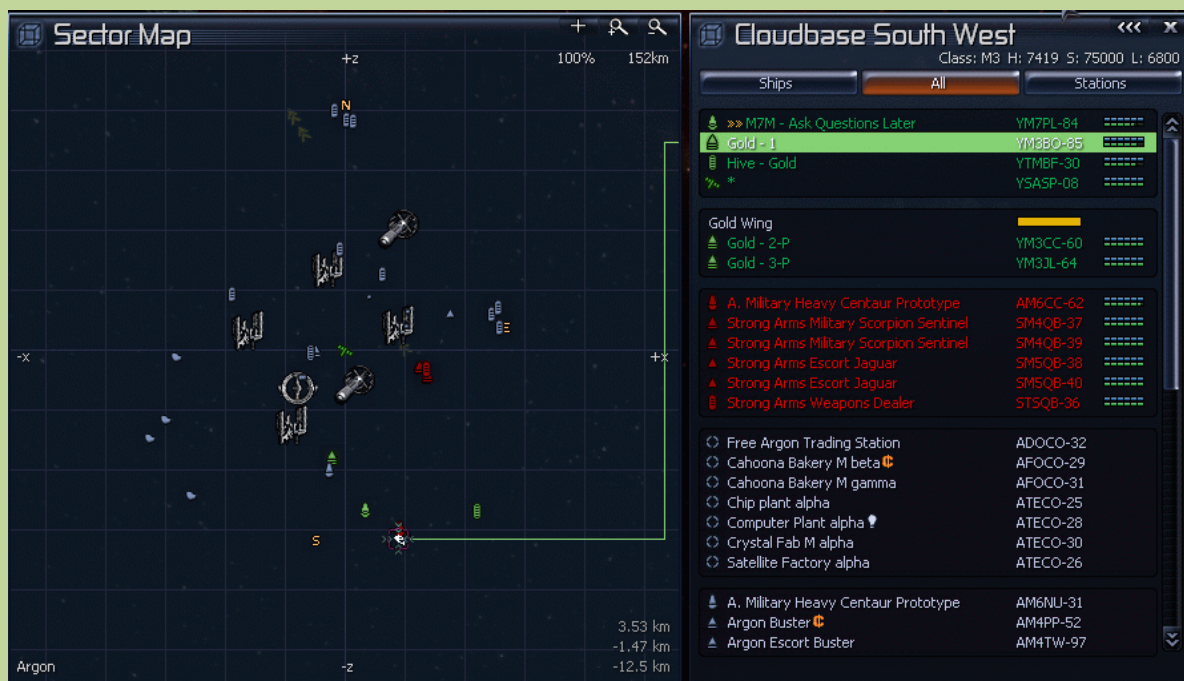
This one's a fair while later but as you can see I've made good progress. In fact left and rear turrets have been completely disabled so I'm now holding position off his left flank and frazzling him with no return fire. It's just a matter of time now. At least that's what I thought. After about 15 minutes of constant frying that turret still wasn't disabled and I wasn't going to attempt a boarding pod with that turret still active. I was starting to wonder if it was because it was the other side of the ship so I decided I'd be clever and buzz over the other side of him and hit it direct. It was a move that turned out to be not so very clever after all because as I did so he suddenly banked round in the other direction, pinned me in a turn again

and then pulled twin PBE out of somewhere and flayed my shields off again before I

could duck under him. I knew he had them but as he'd made no attempt to use them in other turrets I'd made the mistake of assuming he wouldn't.

Lesson learned, I went back to being patient and as you can see, I was duly rewarded. Took a while though.

With the HCP properly disabled this time (and I made sure by flying all around it) It's time to capture it so I jump in my M7M and prepare to initiate boarding action. I'm all set to go when...



..Gold wing shows up, which is a bit of an issue because they've been assigned to follow the second HCP around. It would appear I've been tied up with the first for so long that the other one has caught up. It also appears this guy is aiming to be a pain as well because he faffs around for a full 15 minutes before finally deciding all is fine and heading north. Just as well really because by this point I've called in the rest of Gold wing and was very close to issuing a kill order.

Distraction done with, I set the weapon loadout on my Blastclaw back to quad-EBC and IRE turrets and then transfer across to my M7M. Assigning my Blastclaw to shield suppression the HCP seems to finally give up as he cuts engines and just sits there. Fine with me, that just makes life easier. Soon as the shields hit 4% I fire Boarding pod 01.



...which you can just see between my M7M and the HCP. A clean connection and while they cut the hull I transfer to my Blastclaw and keep the shields low. And they're in.



...it all goes to plan, Olmanckeltak breaks out his Vista boot-disk and reboots the ship computer and...



Sweet.

Debrief:

Aside from a little cretinism on my part, that went fairly smoothly. The mission lasted for nearly an hour in total and given that the only military/police vessel that showed up in all that time was the second HCP wandering through suggests CBSW was indeed a good choice to stage the op. 61% for a capture isn't too bad, it'll cost a few million to repair but that's to be expected. Mission costs were a little higher than would have been preferred. Blastclaw 2 needs at least 500k of repairs and Blastclaw 1 is going to be far too costly to repair. I think I'll just write that one off.

Overall I think the mission total cost was around the 8 million mark when you add everything up. Compared to the approx. 500k it cost me to capture the M7M 'Ask Questions later' that's probably not looking so good, but it was a positive outcome and overall that's what counts at this stage.

Total Assets:

1x HCP 'Thunderchild'
4x 200Mj shield
6x HEPT, 2x PBG, 3x PBE, 1x ION-D

1x Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'
1x Zephyrus TM
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'
2x Blastclaw

3x Blastclaw Prototype
3x Caiman SF - L
2x Caiman SF - S
1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'
1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'
1x Toucan Hauler 'Dropship - 01'
1x Hermes 'Dropship - 02'
1x Express
1,200,000Cr

Part 29 – Come On, Thunderchild

Well, 'Thunderchild' cost a small fortune to repair and upgrade, I even had to dig into my UTHQ slush fund for a couple million to get it all finished. Fortunately I already had all the weapons/shields I needed in storage so at least I didn't have to incur that cost as well. But it's done now and I'm fully tooled and ready to roll.

So where to go from here?

I have the unexpected M7M but without some serious investment in a support complex for it that one is fairly limited in what it can do currently. Ideally my next move would be to attempt to capture a TL as that would probably give me the greatest benefit in terms of cash-making potential. I quite fancy an Elephant as a first TL as they're quite flexible. The tricky bit will be finding one suitably exposed that I can make a play for it. Alternatively, of course, I could always have a go at that second HCP as I've still got a tail on it.

Unfortunately I'm down to three squaddies by this point and although they've done an excellent job to date I think it would be overly risky to expect them to try and take a TL. However, until I can locate a merc base I can't recruit any more reinforcements so it seems essential that I make that the priority which is going to entail some serious exploration. If I'm lucky I'll even find a few more boarding pods on my travels as they're much easier to use than the booting guys out the airlock method.

I think my best bet is probably the pirate sectors down near Maelstrom. Hopefully being so far out the way they've remained unmolested by the race military and I'll get lucky so I'll make the trek all the way down there.

I think I'll take a route via the Split sectors even though they'd quite like to make sushi out of me, partly because it avoids X347 and partly because I want to scout for Elephants on the way. That'll take me down through Scale Plate Green, neatly avoiding X347, and then down through the Argon sectors to Grand Exchange. It also unfortunately looks like it'll put me fairly close to where that whiny Boron said his idiot friends went hunting in Xenon Core sectors for misery, pain and suffering and, I most

likely suspect, found all three in spades. I suppose I should probably make at least some attempt to look for them if only for appearances' sake.

Total Assets:

1x HCP 'Thunderchild'

4x 200MJ shields

6x HEPT, 2x PBG, 3x PBE, 3x ION-D

1x Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'

1x Zephyrus TM

1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'

2x Blastclaw

3x Blastclaw Prototype

3x Caiman SF - L

2x Caiman SF - S

1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'

1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'

1x Toucan Hauler 'Training - 01'

1x Hermes 'Training- 02'

1x Express 'Carjacker'

3,700,000Cr

Part 30 – The Elephant Hunt is Afoot

Well my trip through the Split sectors was educational. My belief that they don't like me was somewhat confirmed and it gave 'Thunderchild' a chance to show what she can do. I do like having ION-D as a turret option all around as it gives me an impenetrable EM shield from missiles and believe me the Split certainly weren't shy about lobbing warheads my way. Big ones, small ones, they really weren't fussed.

I'm also liking the PBG. I've only got the two so far that I was lucky enough to capture along with a Blastclaw but they seem to make good turret weapons. I'm actually quite pleased the HCP didn't load a couple of those into his turrets and fry my face off when I was busy capturing him. He did have three in his cargo bay at the time so the option was definitely there. I guess he didn't qualify for the HCP captaincy due to his smarts.

Add to that the high speed and heavy shielding and all in all I'm very pleased with the performance. If I had to pick one fault though, it would be the slightly small cargo bay. Fully loaded with equipment, weapons and enough missiles to Base Delta Zero a small moon it does leave a limited amount of room for fuel, but then that's what tankers are for, right?

Anyways, I found what I'm looking for on my way through. Having given it some thought I've come to the conclusion I'm unlikely to encounter an Elephant alone outside Split territory unless the RNG gods are smiling upon me and we all know they hate me with a passion. Consequently I'm currently in the early planning stages of Operation: 'Dude, Where's My Car??' which will entail the audacious heist of a Split Elephant from their core sectors, right under the noses of sector security. Should be fun!

Scale Plate Green is surprisingly intact, I was half expecting it to be crawling with Xenon but it seems not. In fact now that I think about I'm fairly sure I've seen a grand total of exactly three xenon craft since day one. In my book that doesn't exactly make them the 'Menace to civilization' that I keep hearing about. Personally I think they just have bad PR. Passing through Omicron Lyrae some bloke in the local Trading Station comms me. Apparently I look like the kind of guy that likes babysitting important dignitaries. Sorry, no. I'm busy, maybe another time. Unless you're paying of course? No? Sod off then.

Into Treasure Chest and I decide to pay the Goners a visit. They're a bit of a loopy bunch this lot but I could pick up some salvage insurance while I'm passing, that's always useful. Except I can't because the mad buggers have dismantled their equipment dock and used the parts to build half a temple. Who builds half a temple without checking you've got enough parts to build the other half? Goners that's who. Seems they'd like me to help them out and unlike the Argon guy, they know how to appeal to my better nature and they'll pay me for the privilege. These are the kind of

guys I can deal with and hey, lucky me, they want ore and silicon and I just so happen to have a small Ore/Silicon complex back in President's End. How cool is that?

I organise a couple freighters to deliver what they want and meantime head on down to Maelstrom to get me some mercs. I don't really like this area, far too big and pea-soupy. It also seems to be fairly pirate-active as there's two Carracks and a Galleon in the area. They aren't pleased to see me either and try chasing me but they're easy enough to outrun. On the plus side though if the pirates are alive and thriving this can only be good for me. Dropping through into Gaian Star I head into the sector and finally at the end of my long, tiresome journey find sweet, sweet FA. Well there's a Pirate base there but that's not what I'm looking for. How tiresome.

Ok, so this avenue of investigation was a bust. Seems I must look elsewhere. Meantime I'm in the area so I might as well make the Boron guy happy. Heading back to Grand Exchange I call in my Support-Hauler and tool up. If I'm going to venture into Xenon territory I'm going in loaded for bear.