Squiddy McSquid's
Possibly Short Life

Volume 2

An X-Universe Tale by NUKLEAR_SLUG

WARNING: CONTAINS SPOILERS!

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!

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Part 1 – Where Heroes Dare to Tread

A quick systems check and then bracing myself for trauma I drop into X598 to be greeted by a wall of red on my Gravidar. Ah, no, wait. Hang on, that's just jam (never eat while flying). Actually it appears there's a mere three ships guarding the other side. Fair enough it's an M2 an M1 and a Q but still, only three ships. Xenon, plague on the universe, my arse.

Anyways, I'm much faster than them and by the time they've realised one of those meatbag critters is invading their space and turned around I'm already going hell for leather towards the east gate. Way off in the distance by the north gate I can see what looks like another three Q's but I'll be long gone by the time they get anywhere close. Apparently the Xenon aren't really expecting people to fly INTO Xenon territory as they haven't bothered to guard the east gate at all. I guess just me and Mahi Ma's idiot friends do this kind of thing. Reaching the gate without incident I head through into X627.

OK, that's almost even better, a grand total of two ships this time. An N and what is apparently a PX, a variant on the P I'm guessing? The N isn't a problem as it's 20km away and it's an N. The PX, on the other hand, is right on top of me. Fortunately I've got the positional advantage and 6xHEPT eat through PX quite handily it seems. Continuing across the sector I start to see movement in the distance.. maybe this sector is a bit livelier after all. I can't see much more than a single J/K at the moment though as they're still out of gravidar range.

Quarter way across the sector and I start to get registers on gravidar and the place lights up red, a jam-free red this time. This is more what I was expecting. I might be inclined to back off at this point were it not looking very likely that the next gate leads me to my goal. Then again it might turn out that's a goal I don't want to achieve.

Anyways, I'm currently looking at one K, possibly another in the distance and a Q plus a veritable horde of fighters. There's even some closing in behind me from the edge of the sector cutting me off, and they're all converging on my position. I'm not too concerned though, I have the utmost confidence in Thunderchild's ability to handle the smaller stuff and I have a little surprise in my cargo bay. Continuing on a little further I reach a point towards the centre of the sector which puts the maximum number of targets in range and at this point I cut the engines and go 'Deathblossom'. Rapidly cycling through targets I dump all my missile tubes and approximately 4GJ of damage goes streaking out across the void towards the incoming Xenon.

First strike is a resounding success and scores a path through the centre of the Xenon fighter swarm. Foot to the floor I go burning down the middle of the resulting debris field towards the east gate into Core 023. A couple more follow-up missiles pick off a straggler or two and a quick dodge around an asteroid to avoid that K and

I'm clear and free. The only thing that can catch me now is a wing of N's coming up rapidly from the south but Thunderchild's turrets and shielding is more than capable of withstanding them and a few Wasps in the mix soon thin out the swarm. Coming up fast on the gate I break through and into...

... I'm not quite sure what actually. Well I'm not in Core 023 where I was expecting, that's for sure. I know where that is and there and here is most definitely not the same place. It appears I'm in some large structure of some sort and if what I can see out the 'window' is anything to go by I'm way the hell too close to a sun for my liking. SPF-50 really isn't going to cut it if the shields on this place fail. On the plus side at least nobody is shooting at me at the moment so that's some consolation and it looks like there's a busted up ship not far off. Could be the Boron guy's idiot friends.

Yep, that's them all right. The black box says the Xenon didn't appreciate them interloping and shot the hell out of them. Well who would have thought, eh? Anyways, as far as I'm concerned, that's my end of things dealt with so I guess I'll drop by Kingdom End and report in with Mahi Ma. Hopefully I'll get that reward he was being so vague about before.

I think I'll tell him they died horribly, just for giggles.

Part 2 – It Wasn't Me, Gov'nor

I decide to jump back to Kingdom's End. There is a rather large cloud of nice missiles still waiting to be picked up in X627 and having expended my entire stock of Thunderbolts on the run in it's a little tempting, but there are a few capital ships in there still and I suspect they're quite annoyed with me so it's not worth the risk.

Mahi Ma seems pleased to see me, he hasn't got my reward though, in fact he's more interested in the widget I found and wants me to take him there despite a fairly gruesome account of his friends' demise. I just left a Xenon sector, why exactly would I want to go back? And where's my reward? I agree to take him though after he points out I can jump straight there and avoid all the Xenon. Besides, if it turns out it's not worth my while I can always leave him there.

Arriving uneventfully, which mollifies me slightly, Mahi Ma does something clever and fixes the docking clamps and then informs me in tones of hushed awe what a fantastic contraption this is and oh, can I pop off and find him 400 computer components? Well I could, but what's in it for me? Reward? I don't work for free you know. Fortunately I just so happen to have quite a few computer components already from my piratical exploits in Nopileos' Memorial so I don't have to splash out much to make up the remainder. Jumping in one of my SF with the required parts I'm informed that that'll be perfect now can I just go pop off and rustle up 500 microchips... 500? Is he nuts?

Leaving Mahi Ma alone next to a sector full off angry Xenon to ponder the advisability of irritating the one person in the entire known universe who currently knows his whereabouts, I head back to Elysium of Light to organise delivery to those crazy Goner dudes. They seem quite happy to buy my Ore/Silicon which is good as I'm equally happy to sell it to them. Heading back through Omicron Lyrae, I get commed again. It's that same guy as before wanting me to escort some diplomat back to Terran space, in case the Xenon get him. OK, fine. I'm in the mood to kill something, so yeah, I'll do it. Bring 'em on.

Two M's and two N's. Hardly worth the effort but it seemed to impress the Terran guys, they'd like me to go visit one of their guys for a patrol mission. I guess I could do that, maybe they'll have something for me. Apparently I have to meet up in one of the Terran sectors so I guess I'll get to see how the other half lives. Lining up on the north gate I head through into new frontiers.

Good God, those Terrans have some fugly ships. I don't know who their lead designer was but he seriously needs to take a course in astro-mechanical aesthetics. I mean, I thought the OTAS Corporation had some horrendous looking monstrosities but these Terran guys could give them a run for their money. And why is it my jumpdrive doesn't work? Can't these Neanderthals even manage that basic a function? At least the place is secure and given the amount of capital firepower

passing by that hardly surprises me. A bit of a militant bunch these Terrans, the Split should get on fine with them, assuming they don't start a war with them.

Seems they want me to do a basic patrol with them, which is fine, I wasn't expecting trouble but I really ought to know better by now. Initially all is fine but halfway through our run it all kicks off and before we know it we're involved in a running battle with some fairly heavy Xenon forces. Apparently the Xenon have been pretty quiet up until recently when the Terrans reckon someone stirred them up. I decide it probably best not to mention my recent misbehaviour in X627.

Mission over with and a fat pay cheque (I think I'm going to like working for the Terrans) and the next thing they want me to do is simple tail job. Find the guy, follow the guy, be discreet. Discreet in an HCP..? Well I'll give it a go. As it happens it's a cakewalk and he leads me to an unknown sector off PTNI Headquarters where...

... Oh, hallelujah!

Part 3 – Train Hard, Fight Easy

With my slaves enrolled in the mercenary training plan and learning their little socks off it's time to decide what to do next. I still need a supply chain for my currently largely useless missile frigate. Along those lines I also need to find myself a suitable sector to setup in. I could also do with at least one more TM as my poor Zephyrus is running itself a bit ragged trying to be in five places at once and I could also do with a TL. And then of course there's the annoying Boron and his outrageous microchip demands.

Further captures are out for the moment until my new squaddies have put in some training time and I don't have the cash to get a second complex going yet, even if I had somewhere to put it, so I think further exploration is in order. I assign my three SF to sector-trader duty to generate some cash-flow, order my Blastclaw wing to split up and start mapping out sectors around Paranid Prime and southwards and my remaining transporters get the unenviable task of fanning out from Kingdom's End with the sole instruction to trawl every sector in the universe for as many microchips as they dig up. Meantime I'll be exploring new frontiers.

After a good long time trawling through sectors, scanning asteroids and doing the odd mission here and there I've managed to discover a couple of unknown sectors which might meet the material needs for what I have planned and I've managed to lose a Blastclaw which was ganked by a Kha'ak Cluster somewhere on the outer edges of Priest's Pity. Rather irritatingly of the four I had out and about earning their boy-scout mapping badge the Kha'ak elected to pick on the one I had setup as a capture ship and the one I used to get my HCP. Consequently it had quite a selection of expensive equipment onboard. I'm not happy, those little purple dudes are going to get it one day.

My microchip-farming fleet has also finished its lengthy trawl of the known universe and between them they've wiped the universe clean of microchips and amassed a quite staggering 145 units. Obviously 145 units is a touch shy of the 500 I require so it would appear I need a new plan. I certainly can't afford to setup my own chip complex yet but fortunately I don't need to. The next best thing to setting up your own is obviously to borrow someone else's so with the help of the encyclopaedia to identify chip plants I jump a ship to each one and park it there to monitor stock levels. Soon as they reach about 15 units I buy them up.

Meantime I break my SF crew off ST duty and get them to jump around and keep the chip plants fed. With 14 chip plants now effectively working for me full tilt that's only 3/4 of a full cycle + whatever extras I can find myself to get me over the 500.

Hopefully that loony Boron won't have any more unreasonable requests and I can get back to something a little more interesting tomorrow.

Total Assets:
1x HCP 'Thunderchild'
4x 200MJ shield
6x HEPT, 2x PBG, 3x PBE, 3x ION-D

1x Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'
1x Zephyrus TM
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'
1x 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'
5,800,000Cr

Part 4 – Drive-by Tasking

Well, my ghetto chip complex is busy cranking out silicate goodness and currently even turning me a profit as I supply it with resources so it's off to the Goners again. Sadly it seems they've had all the minerals they want off me which is a shame, I was quite happy supplying them. Now they want me to run a Teladianium panelling delivery for them which I'm quite happy to do, it's an easy run and the pay is good and I'm all in favour of that kind of thing.

Next job they've got for me though poses a slight complication. Seems they want three Argon transporters. I'm hoping they won't mind if they come with a few scorch marks as I'm going to have to purloin them someplace. Nopileos' Memorial being my favoured hunting ground I jump to the south gate ready to setup a capture operation. As I arrive I check the sector map to see what's what and...

.. the situation suddenly changes just like that and it's another crash-plan mission on a capital ship. Unfortunately the majority of my mercs are busy in training and currently the only ones free are the three remaining members of the Misfits and three complete noobs, who couldn't be greener if they were cabbages and are probably more dangerous to themselves than anyone else.

As if that wasn't bad enough Nopileos' is not a good place to perform the op the way I would prefer as it's too cluttered and I have to make the intercept before the Minotaur reaches Brennan's Triumph as there's a Brigantine hovering around Brennan south gate and will very probably wipe it out.

Relocating to Danna's Chance I setup and wait for the Minotaur to reach strike point...

... which gives all its escorts plenty of time to form up into a nice tight group which I'll need when I alpha-strike the lot...

.. quad-Hammerhead salvo away and a few seconds of patience is rewarded with...
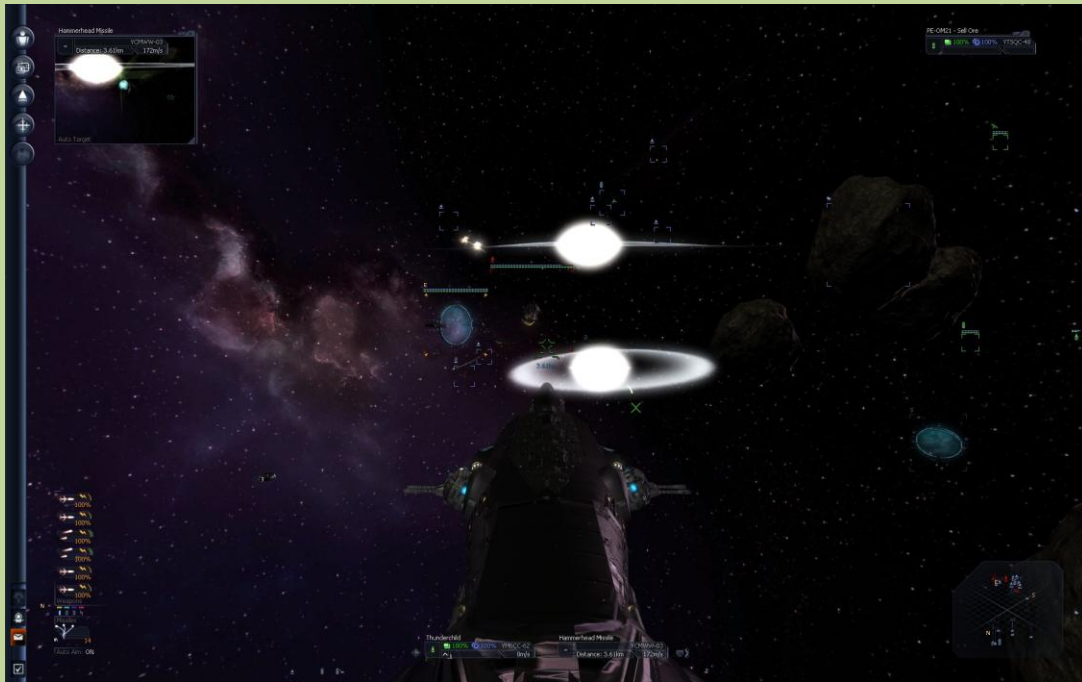
.. clean connection and the entire escort wing insta-gibbed.

With the escort removed I switch turrets to missile defence, load ION-D in each one to give me all around protection and bring down the shields. The Minotaur fires a few rounds of Flails at me but with my EM defence not a single missile gets through. Shields down and I jump my TP up north and deploy troops...

.. It seems they elected to split into two teams because I get a fail message on the hull followed by a successful breach so it looks like one guy tried to go solo. You can see him heading back to the TP here...
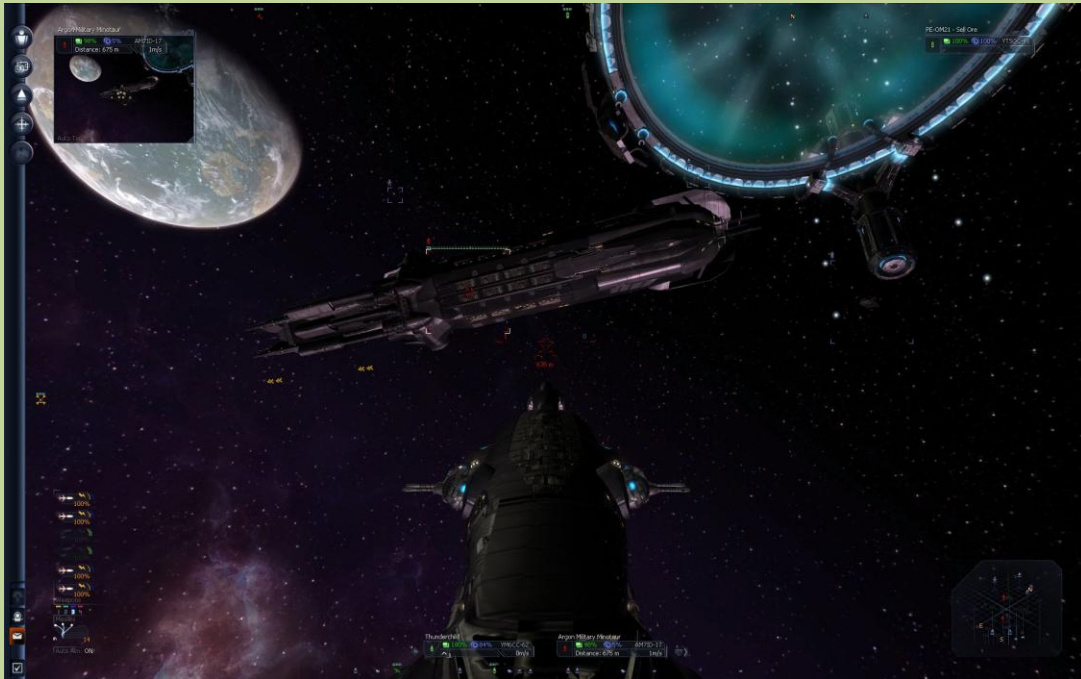
.. With my team onboard I'm fairly confident they'll do the job and I'm just sitting back to wait it out when...

... it all goes a bit wrong. Ok, seems I have a problem here. A moment ago there was an M7M in front of me the next it's jumped... taking all my mercs with it. Not good. So I'm sat there looking stupid, wondering what I'm going to do next when my comm

beeps and a really-rather-pleased-with-itself Teladi voice informs me they've captured the ship! That's nice, care to let me know where it is? I start checking nearby sectors and then realise that's a dumb move and just look under my ship list and yep...

... there she is and hadn't gone too far.

Debrief:
Another successful zero-plan mission. That can't continue. I suspect the Misfits did most of the grunt-work but at least the other guys made for good meat-shields. As it was there were only two casualties although one was unfortunately Olmanckelttak, which is a bit of a shame as he was getting to be quite good.

Anyways, another M7M to add to the fold, now I really need to work on that missile complex.

Total Assets:

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1x M7M Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'
1x Zephyrus TM
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'
1x 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'
5,800,000Cr

Part 5 – Fish and 'Chips

Not a hugely successful day today.

My ghetto chip complex has finally coughed up enough chips to leave me with 515 units which is just a little over what I require for Mahi Ma and upon delivery that satisfies him enough to get this Hub thing slightly working. He reckons it's some big machine for rerouting jumpgates which sounds interesting and he needs me to choose a target point for it. I think just about anywhere other than between Xenon sectors will do but I have a plan.

I'm wondering if I can use it to annex off a chunk of the galaxy, say the pirate sectors from Split Fire to Hatikvah's and split those sectors off from the rest of the gate network. Unfortunately I've only got one go at this until he can fix some more of it so I go for the east gate of Split Fire as the first one. Sadly it seems Mahi Ma's theories of how it works aren't quite right or I misunderstood (it's probably me but I'm blaming him regardless). Anyway, it appears that what it actually does is insert itself BETWEEN jumpgates, sort of like a bridge. I'm not sure that's going to achieve what I'm after.

Anyways, it's done now and appears to be working ok, only problem now is the crazy Boron now wants me to acquire for him the entire mineral content of a small solar system in order to fix the next widget. This is going to require some thought.

Dropping down into Olmancketslat's later on a satellite replacement run I discovered what had killed off the last one. It's that Pirate Centaur I saw many moons back, or at least one of his cousins. Now while I certainly have very few complaints about my HCP one of them is that it's geared for war and consequently doesn't have a Tractor Beam mount. The Pirate Centaur does however, as well as having a funky paintjob. I need a tug and this is going to be it.

Except it's not, because I manage to screw up what should, by rights, be a simple capture. Four Dragonflies pop the four Harriers escorting and then it's quad-ION-D to burn the guns out, so far so good. I decide he's too quick to use a dropship on, so I call in one of my M7M's to pod some guys over. Unfortunately this particular Centaur was massively under-shielded, only 2x25MJ so they recharge quite quickly which means I can't switch to M7M, fire pod and switch back in time to keep the shields below danger point. This means I'm going to have to rely on a shield suppressor.

Now the smart move would have been to call in a dedicated Blastclaw to do the job since they've proven exceptionally suited to the task in the past, so of course I didn't do that. I decide to be clever and let my HCP do the job for me. Not cool. HCP is good but it does handle like a bit of a cow and suffice to say after some general wallowing around and minimal achievement the auto-n00b decided the solution to

the problem was a head-on collision. Were that not bad enough though, having knocked off 90% of the Centaur's hull, it then decided to finish it off with missiles despite me telling it specifically not to use them... <sigh>

Finally, just to cap off the day I somehow managed to lose a couple of mercs during transfer between ships. I'm still not quite sure how but I definitely ended up with less than I started with. I'm guessing they weren't too happy at being press-ganged into service and decided to do a runner.

About the only bright spot to it all is my latest batch of mercs is at 3-star and they are ready to rock. Consequently, Operation: 'Dude, where's my car??', which is the long-planned smash and grab raid for a Split Elephant, will kick-off tomorrow and should all go well, I'll end up with my TL.

We'll see...

Part 6 - Operation: 'Dude, where's my car??'

Mission objective is a smash and grab raid on one of the Split core sectors to acquire a Split TL. The goal will be to get in, hijack the target and get out again as fast as possible as my presence in sector is likely to cause a bit of a stir.

The target for this mission is the TL Hospital ship currently ambling around Thuruk's Pride. This ship was chosen specifically as it has the happy benefit of being completely unarmed so no need to disarm any turrets. Simply drop shields and pod in, as soon as the ship is captured, evac' ASAP.

Ships for this Op will include:
HCP 'Thunderchild' (Target suppression and area defence)
M7M 'Shoot First' (Boarding ops)
M3+ Medusa 'Questionable Ethics' (Decoy/Jumpdrive transfer)

I'm also experimenting with some new hardware today, specifically the Hornet missile. I've chosen to use this one because it does a speedy 186m/s while packing a nice round 200MJ warhead. This is convenient for my purposes as TL class ships mount 200MJ shields so I can very precisely reduce my targets shields to 0% at distance. Plus if anything tries to interfere I can punch it in the face - really hard.

First run doesn't go well. Jumping from staging ground in Nopileos' into Thuruk's, I have to close 25km to target and my M7M isn't that fast. By the time I'm down to 10km I've already attracted the attention of the local Python and even though I've convinced it to chase my Medusa, extra M6 forces have arrived in-system from the north and south gates and are rapidly chasing down my decoy.

Jumping my Medusa out to safety just causes all opponents to turn on me and I'm only barely in strike range of the TL. There's a time to fight and a time to not fight and knowing which is which is a fine line sometimes. This time though I'm clearly outgunned so accept my defeat graciously and call an abort.

Despite being forced to turn tail in Thuruk's, the game is not over yet. It's always good to have a plan B and I've got one in Family Pride. Jumping to the west gate the sector seems fairly clear, just a few police M4/M5's in the area, which are no threat and my target...

... and he's not too far away though he's heading for the Equipment dock. I jump in my M7M behind me and order him to follow as we go in hot pursuit of the TL Arena. I'm very carefully making sure I stay within 5km of my M7M at all times because I need to be able to transport over and fire a pod. The sector is still clear of any immediate danger to me and I'm rapidly closing the gap on him when suddenly...

...uh-oh, that's a Raptor and he's locked on me and heading in on full power. I don't know how well armed it is, I don't particularly want to find out. Either way I don't have time to mess around with it so it needs removing. Switching to Hammerheads, I fire off a salvo of three and as soon as the first strikes, I follow it up with a half-dozen Hornets just to make sure before sending five after the TL to knock out his 1GJ of shielding...

With the TL's shields reduced to tatter and the M1 destroyed, I quickly transport back to my M7M, fire a pod at the TL and while it's tracking in I switch back to my HCP and tap the shields to keep them down. A successful pod attachment and my guys are in and doing their stuff. I call my Medusa back in as I'll hopefully be needing him in a minute. Meantime, a quick check on the sector map shows that the M1 going up left some goodies behind.

... Bonus! The boarding op drags on for a fair while and I'm starting to get the impression it's not going well when eventually...

...Result.

Debrief:
A bit of a false start in Thuruk's and it wasn't quite the quick-in, quick-out I was originally aiming for. And the boarding operation did indeed go badly. I managed to lose three squaddies doing it, including one 3-star fighter so that was a tough nut to crack. The chief issue, I think, is relying on the M7M to pod troops across. It may be easier and help them breach the hull but the Minotaur itself is not a fast-mover so sec-def gets time to respond.

Mission accomplished though. Next time I'll attempt an EVA capture, I think.

Total Assets:

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

1x M7M Minotaur 'Shoot First'	3x Caiman SF - L
1x M7M Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'	2x Caiman SF - S
1x Elephant	1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'
1x Zephyrus TM	1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'	1x Toucan Hauler 'Training - 01'
1x Blastclaw	1x Hermes 'Training- 02'
3x Blastclaw Prototype	1x Express 'Carjacker'

7,200,000Cr

Part 7 – On the Trail of Another HCP

Some may get the impression that I'm good at what I do. I plan to dispel that particular myth. More on that later.

I've chosen to place my initial support complex in the two unknown sectors past Unholy Descent. I've scouted out the area between the two and there's enough minerals to support a sizeable industrial setup as well as it being safely out of the way of any marauding lunatics. The downside is that most of the silicon is in asteroids that are massive distances from each other so there's going to be a fair bit of tractor beam work required to bring it all together. I must track down another pirate Centaur somewhere.

Meantime in order to fund the build project I'm aiming to place down there, I've raided my UTHQ piggybank which had built up a nice 11 million to date and I've been using the cash to do station delivery missions with my new Elephant. It's a pretty good earner and no one tries to kill you. Ideal mission in my book. An afternoon of chasing around the universe and I've built up sufficient cash to make a substantial start on the basic infrastructure of my complex.

With the basics in place and manufacturing starting up I'm now both poor and in the mood for misbehaviour. My squaddies are now all fully trained 3-stars, so it's time they got to work. If I'm going to achieve my ultimate goal of capturing a Brigantine of my own, then I'll be needing some good fighters, so these guys need to get some training time in.

I've previously laid an AdvSat network throughout all the pirate sectors so I can keep tabs on what's passing (Oddly, I have to keep replacing the Hatikvah's one as somebody keeps taking it out) and a quick check through reveals nothing of any special interest aside from a Carrack in Danna's Chance, but I'm not feeling brave enough to take on a full M7 yet. Just on the off-chance though, I flick through a couple of other AdvSats I've got up and spot an HCP in Nathan's Voyage heading west. Cool, I could always do with a second one of those and with my current hardware I reckon this should be a relatively simple mission, however it turns out that I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about.

My plan went something along the lines of pick up the HCP inside the unknown sector to avoid any defenders, strip his weapons, pod over, capture, go home smiling. How it actually went down wasn't much like that at all. Initially all went well, hit him hard, switched to ION-D and fried him good and proper and then managed to screw up the M7M switch to the point that my first pod ended up hitting his shields and half the team got fried, the other half winding up in space.

Realising the need to speed up the pod launch I decided on a different approach. The HCP had 200MJ shields so I fired a single Hornet in a wide arc and while it tracked in I switched ships and got my pod ready. The instant the Hornet hit and zeroed the HCP's shield I fired my pod - just as the HCP swung round and fired his one remaining CIG and took out my entire team. It was entirely my fault for being greedy and trying to capture a free CIG.

Burning out the last of his weapons I tried again and my last pod seemed to blow up early or not connect properly or something as my mercs ended up floating in space instead of attached to his hull. So now we're in the situation of a whole bunch of marines in the area trying to capture an HCP going 5 times faster than them. I'm just thinking this isn't going very well when the Kha'ak arrive.

The first thing I spot is a missile on my gravidar but since I've not got a lock warning I'm wondering where it came from, Kha'ak interceptor apparently, targeting my mercs. I watch as the missile curves around and vaporises one of the poor blokes. Oh, well I guess it was quick. Dealing swift retribution to the incoming Kha'ak units I switch to my TP and go pick up my remaining floating squaddies. For some reason though, when my TP scooped up my mercs I wound up with a cargo bay full of passengers instead of soldiers. I guess the trauma of the day has shell-shocked them to the point of forgetting their training.

The HCP has given up and is now dead in space but I've no mercs left to capture it with. Of the 15 I started the day with I now have just 7 remaining. It's been a very costly exercise and I've absolutely nothing to show for it.

And so I find myself ending my day parked up next to a dead-in-space Argon HCP, firing the odd wasp missile at encroaching Kha'ak scouts and wondering where it all went wrong while my remaining squaddies are sent off for retraining. I plan to stay here until they're done. Given the amount of grief this HCP has given me there is absolutely no way in hell I'm leaving this spot until it's mine.

Part 8 – They Must Know Squiddy's Partial to HCPs

Today has been mostly spent staring at the fat arse of an HCP while I remotely go about running my freighters around and my boarding crew of numpties get themselves reacquainted with the process of holding a gun the correct way around and shouting threatening piratical type slogans.

It's also transpired that what I thought yesterday was an unfortunate run in with elements of a broken cluster was not actually the case. This sector seems to have a heavy Kha'ak presence to the point that my babysitting was interrupted by a fairly unpleasant looking Kha'ak M6 which I had to move to intercept. I've subsequently had a couple more show up over the day and I'm somewhat concerned about a KM2 putting in an appearance as that would force me to abandon my prize.

A short while ago things took an interesting turn when I got an unexpected visitor...

... two for the price of one is always welcome and this time I didn't try and be clever about it and just got the job done. Strip, disable and subdue. A short while later and with a bit of judicious tug work (i.e. ramming) I get a nice picture...

When my mercs finally get back here (about 50% trained now) I should be fine for both. Happy days!

Part 9 – Freedom!!

Finally, after a day and a half cooped up in this godforsaken hellhole at the arse-end of the universe, the cretins that I employ to capture ships for me have finally got their sorry carcasses trained up to the level of 'monkey-with-a-gun'.

It has not been a fun time baby-sitting my charges chiefly because those little purple horrors have been harassing me constantly. It got to the point where I eventually decided to go porcupine, called in my entire capital fleet, set up a box around the two HCP's and then set turrets to fire at will. Elephants these days seem able to pack quite a nice array of weaponry; I've got Ion-Shard Railguns and Flak on mine and with me lobbing the odd missile into the mix that made for quite a nice kill zone.

Anyway, with my last seven squaddies having finally got here and done their job (badly, I might add, as yet another five of them managed to get themselves killed), I can finally get out of here. It's been a long operation but the end result is somewhat satisfying. I'm now the owner of three HCP's and in the process have accounted for:

KM3 x45
KM4 x26
KM5 x145
KM6 x9

It's some consolation for what they did to my Kestrel; not enough, but it's a start.

My main manufacturing power complex is getting up to speed way down south. It seems I slightly miscalculated the food requirements though so it's overproducing Bofu by quite a bit. Not to worry though, it gives room for expansion later. Trouble is though it's cost me an absolute fortune to get it up and running so I'm now skint for cash which means it's going to be a while before I can fix up my two new HCP's. In the meantime they'll just have to keep Mahi Ma company in Hub dry-dock.

Plans for tomorrow, locate a tractor beam for one. My freighter pilots supplying silicon to my power-plex aren't too happy about having to ship it 200km and since my Elephant can allegedly fit one that solves the tug problem. I'm also going to need some equipment to outfit my HCPs so a piracy run in Nopileos', perhaps. Then again I'm now critically short of mercs being down to my last two so that means no more boarding ops for a while. I've already had to watch several opportunities go sailing past because I don't have the tools for the job. Perhaps a capturing run might be in order instead?

We'll see...

Total Assets:
1x HCP 'Thunderchild'
4x 200MJ shield
6x HEPT, 2x PBG, 3x PBE, 3x ION-D

1x HCP 'Walk Softly'
1x HCP 'Big Stick'
1x M7M Minotaur 'Shoot First'
1x M7M Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'
1x Elephant 'Fatboy'
1x Zephyrus TM
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'
1x 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'
400,000Cr

Part 10 – Serendipity

Thinking it would be a grand idea to outfit my new HCP's with weapons and shields and even grander if I didn't have to pay for them, I jumped my entire fleet (2xM7M, 2xHCP, Scavenger TS) into Nopileos' Memorial and setup halfway between the centre of the sector while I headed in to scan traders for stealable things. There was a Pirate Carrack wandering back and forth between the east/west gates flakking everything in sight and generally making a right old racket but for some reason or other the pirates seem to be back on friendly terms with me just lately so he wasn't a concern, just bloody noisy. I'm guessing the vast amount of cash I've been funnelling into pirate training programs may have boosted my rep with them somehow.

Anyway, we're all OK for a while and I'm busy doing things of a piratical nature. I've even got a couple freighters to bail, when I suddenly notice a bunch of red dots on my gravidar. Now they're not the odd red dot of Split traders in the trade lane, these red dots are way off to the side. With the distinct impression this is unlikely to be a good thing and/or that general feeling of impending doom I bring up the sector map and yep, there's a P and flurry a Xenon fighters coming up through the south gate and heading right for my practically-unarmed and under-shielded fleet. And I don't think they're looking to be friends.

Now you'd probably rightly say it's my own fault for setting up on the doorstep of a Xenon sector but in my defence I'd like to say that in all the time I've spent pirating in this sector not once since day one have I seen so much as a single, solitary N come through that gate, much less a complete P task force. It seemed fairly safe to me. Well they're here now and while my personal desire would be to RSLG my very expensive and hard-won fleet will get totally shredded if I do. Looks like I'm going to have to fight my way out of this one.

Short-jumping to the south gate I start dumping missiles at everything in sight and go straight for the P since that is currently the biggest threat. By this point there's a fairly sizeable amount of fighters around me. I'm not quite sure how many but a quick sector check shows lots, ranging from LX down to N. The P evidently doesn't like being prodded with Wasps and turns to engage me which suits me fine. The fighters have found me by now and as we close to firing range I'm taking light PBE fire as I open up and take him out in one pass.

A quick look behind me and I'm really not liking how many Xenon I can see, especially since they seem to like packing PBE these days. Fortunately I do still have a trick up my sleeve in my M7M's. I've tested the Flail individually before just to see what they do but I've never actually tried the volley-fire command as I've never had enough missiles to be able to waste testing it. Well if ever there was a time to test run it I'm thinking now would probably be it so I get 'Shoot First' to target an M and 'Ask Questions Later' to target another and tell them to have fun. Meantime the

M&N's are all over me by now and my 800MJ is depleting at an alarming rate so I emergency jump to the south gate again.

Arriving at the jumpgate with around 18% shield left, I'm greeted by the beautiful sight of a mass of twirling yellow swarm missiles streaking out from my M7M's towards the enemy. The good thing about the Flail is that it's self-targeting so as soon as the first Xenon goes down they'll reacquire a new target and chase that down. I'm not sure how many my M7M's accounted for and how many went down to me sat at the gate hurling Dragonflies at anything that moved but the rest of the Xenon fighters went down pretty fast and aside from an LX and a couple Ls I had to chase down that was job done.

Unfortunately that's my entire stock of Flails expended and my M7M's are now completely toothless, but given I could so easily have lost both HCP's I think I got off lightly. I learnt my lesson too. I'll be setting up piracy ops on the OTHER side of the trade lane in future.

Deciding that was enough trauma for one day I headed down to my Hub loop which, after much deliberation and in a spasm of creative genius, I've decided to call 'Hub Loop' and did some admin work organising freighters. I've split it into two separate loops, one for Teladianium and one for Ore since I might as well get a head start on the ore production being as that Boron git wants 450,000 units of the stuff.

While I'm there I notice a 'Paranid Employee Shuttle' on my Gravidar which is odd because a) I've set my stations to not trade with anyone else and b) this is an unknown sector so there's no other reason he should be visiting. Being the curious type I wander over to see what he's up to and apparently he's decided he wants to dock at my power loop. Well I've decided no he's not, but, I wouldn't mind another TP. Explaining to the captain why I'd like to borrow his Hermes until say, the end of time, it appears he can't fault my argument and graciously hands it over and what do you think I find when I check in his hold..?

...I reckon that just solved my merc problem.

Total Assets:
1x HCP 'Thunderchild'
4x 200MJ shield
6x HEPT, 2x PBG, 3x PBE, 3x ION-D

1x HCP 'Walk Softly'
1x HCP 'Big Stick'
1x M7M Minotaur 'Shoot First'
1x M7M Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'
1x Elephant 'Fatboy'
1x Zephyrus TM
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'
1x 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'
2x Hermes
1x Express 'Carjacker'
100,000Cr

Part 11 - Problems, Problems, Problems...

With the capture of the Hermes and the press-ganging of its passengers into the Squiddy Space Corps, I'm pretty sorted for meatshields for a while; I just need to get them trained up some. Unfortunately being civvies they're all completely inept at anything involving ship-boarding which means I'm having to train them right up from practically nothing. This is both spamming my message box with a colossal amount of crud and costing me a small fortune as the little suckers bleed me dry.

'Hub Loop' is busy whining about lack of energy cells partly because I screwed up my resource allocations but mostly because I'm trying to get a single XL-SPP to power far more than it's physically capable because I built too big an Ore and Teladianium complex. I'm going to have to supplement it externally somehow. Just to be extra difficult it turns out that Mahi Ma is being a pain in the arse and won't accept any Ore until he's got all the Teladianium he needs. This is a problem as I had originally planned to run the two loops together and do both at once. It seems, however, that isn't going to work so my ore complex is busy cranking out ore that I'm going to have to find someplace to store. I worked it out, I need 450,000 units of the stuff and at 8x storage per unit that works out at a cool 3,600,000 storage units needed or 60 Mammoths worth... Urk.

I'm also running low on specialist armaments, which is admittedly my fault, as I keep firing them at people. I'd quite like to build a supply complex to keep myself in Hornets. I've decided Hornets are my most favourite missile to date. Apart from a slightly poor turn rate they have it all; good speed, good range and 200MJ of KABOOM!!! that quite cheerfully obliterates whatever you aim it at. I like that in a missile. I also, of course, need something to feed my poor M7M's, which are feeling a little emasculated at present.

I've also got two HCP's in need of equipping so they can do something more useful than dangling off a docking clamp and then there's the small issue of my fleet running around on about 65% hull. Sadly all these things require money and lots of it. I'm probably looking at about 40 million, purely for repairs.

On the plus side it turns out the couple of TS captures I made shortly before getting jumped by Xenon the other day included a brace of Mercury freighters, so I'll be delivering them to those mad Goners soon. I'm hoping they won't ask too many questions about the scorch marks.

Plan for the day though is to track down and capture another bomber. I've got a fair mass of Tomahawks I've accumulated to date but no platform to launch them from since I managed to blow up my previous Hades. I'm not sure if they'll bail outside of defence missions but I'll be finding out.

Part 12 – Squiddy's Goner Get Ya!

Apparently helping out the Goners wasn't such a grand idea after all. I ended up biting off a bit more than I could chew.

We were all fine delivering the three freighters they requested and they didn't even query the condition they came in, which is just as well because it would have been kind of tricky to explain that one to a pacifist. Build 'em a Teladianium factory? Yep, no probs. Got 'Fatboy' on the case and job done in no time. I even rescued the Elder Council from a couple of ne'er-do-wells. Quite what their panic was, I've no idea since their ship seems to employ the same type of invinci-armour™ that Ban Danna likes to cower behind. In hindsight though I probably should have left them to it as by this point they'd got this funny notion that I was going to rescue all their little Goner buddies too. Altruism's not really my strongpoint. To be fair though they have been paying me quite well to not really do a whole lot and that's not really the kind of business relationship you want to sour so I guess I can run a few escort missions.

Now you wouldn't think that a bunch of hippy do-gooders could really get themselves into too much strife, but you'd be wrong. I'm not sure how, I'm not sure what they did, I'm fairly sure I don't even want to know what they did, but somehow or other these Goner chaps have really annoyed somebody. I'm not talking your average 'call somebody savoury names when they nick your docking-clamp space' kind of annoyed; more your 'stab them to death with a rusty spoon' kind of annoyed. Which I think you'd agree is fairly annoyed. Hopping down to Bright Profit to escort a freighter, I'm set to deal with a couple pirate troublemakers. Instead I get swamped by a pirate armada. Wings of ships and not just fighters, M6 too - all going after one little freighter. Good for him they came up from the south because I was able to intercept them but that's a little overkill there. I was half expecting a Brigantine to show up any second. With the TS safely away I thought that was it, but no, it seems that another Goner's under attack elsewhere. It turns out that anything in the surrounding sectors with a Goner tag on it is wearing a target as these pirates are after it in force. For the next TS, I don't make it in time as the pirate M5s reach it way before I can get there. The next couple of missions are station defence, which is much easier and then it's another ship protection.

It's a Goner Ranger to protect; this time though, I'm ready for it. I jumped my support-hauler in during a lull in missions and loaded up on Disruptors. As expected the M5's break away for the Ranger but they've got Disruptors after them at the 28km mark and as they're arriving at the Ranger, so my Disruptors are arriving up their tailpipes. The rest is M3 and bigger and no problem for 'Thunderchild' to handle.

Then they want me to go and re-capture one of their ships. Unfortunately it's quite literally guarded by eight Centaurs and Ospreys and being a professional coward, I'm very much disinclined to take that lot on simultaneously. Normally I'd resort to high explosives at this point and use a Hammerhead to blow them all up but my Goner employers very specifically requested I recapture their ship not atomise it, so that rules that out.

Plan B is to call in Gold Wing so they can give me a hand AND use high-explosives. I tell you no plan is ever sound without some suitable application of high-explosive somewhere along the line. I'm limiting myself to Hornets and Thunderbolts though.

With Gold Wing guarding my back, I go to full throttle, fire a swarm of missiles on the way in and plough through the centre of the pack taking out an Osprey on the way while missiles impact all around me. Swinging back around for a second pass it seems a lot of my missiles made it through and Gold Wing is busy causing mayhem. With the damage my missile volley inflicted on their shields, Gold Wing mixing it up and me spraying HEPT and PBG everywhere it's a fairly short and brutal fight. Sadly Gold 1 got fried but job done. Apparently I was supposed to send in marines to capture the Goner M6 but it turned out I could just claim it normally which is just as well as all my guys were in training anyway.

Anyway, I now find myself trailing a pirate Blastclaw back to his base of operations and so far he's heading towards Maelstrom. I have a horrible feeling I'm in for a very long and boring tracking job all the way to Gaian Star.

Total Assets:
1x HCP 'Thunderchild'
4x 200MJ shield
6x HEPT, 2x PBG, 3x PBE, 3x ION-D

1x HCP 'Walk Softly'
1x HCP 'Big Stick'
1x M7M Minotaur 'Shoot First'
1x M7M Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'
1x Elephant 'Fatboy'
1x Zephyras TM
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'
1x 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 'Training - 01'
2x Hermes
1x Express 'Carjacker'
650,000Cr

Part 13 – Squiddy Gets the Truelight Seeker

Yep, a long boring trip to Gaian Star which isn't as bad as it sounds actually as the last time I was down this way the pirates didn't seem to like me too much and I got chased. This time around though, I seem back on half-decent terms with them. I've no idea how or why, but they're blue to me aside from a couple fighters and they even ignored me. Just as well really, as there was a Galleon camped by the west gate and as I passed through into Gaian Star there was not one but two (count 'em!) Carracks lying in flak range the other side of the gate.

Trailing on down to the pirate base in the west, which is apparently the source of the trouble, I get commed by my Goner employer who's made a break for it and wants picking up. Well I'm sure that would be nice but there is the small problem of the pirate base that's just dumped half a dozen M6's between him and me. I'm largely out of missiles by this point and no more inclined to tackle this lot alone than I was the last lot, especially since they seem to be spamming CIG fire my direction and I know for a fact that that stuff hurts when one M6 is hitting you with it, let alone six. Discretion seems the order of the day here so I loop around them using my speed advantage, do a fly-by grab of the Goner dude and RSLG-JD out of here.

Turns out he's most appreciative of the rescue (yeah, I should hope so!) but feels these pirates are going to be a continuing problem until they're dealt with so he'd like me to destroy their base. Now this seems a distinctly un-Goner-like attitude to me, being all peace and fluffy bunnies normally, but I guess when you get enough people trying to kill you then it's probably good to develop some flexibility in your faith. Anyways it's an idea I can get behind, I'm all for blowing stuff up (for profit obviously) and I'll get right on it - right after I sort out my Hub Loop which is all going a bit pear-shaped.

I really need to sort out the resourcing of this thing properly and I also need to sort out the whole storage issue because I'm rapidly running out of places to shove ore and my freighters are running ragged trying to keep it all ticking over. I've also managed to lose another freighter to a pirate Caravel sometime while I was busy saving Goners. I checked my Sat network all around that area with murder in mind but it appears they made a clean getaway which doesn't make me happy.

On the plus side it seems the Elder Council were suitably grateful at my rescue of their never-really-in-any-particular-danger ship and have decided to gift it to me, which is very thoughtful. It's not a particularly outstanding ship in any way other than the quite staggering array of weapons it seems it can mount. That would be a little more impressive if it had weapon generator with slightly more kick than a AA battery. But since it's free, I can't complain too much even if out of that vast array of weapon selections, it fails to be able to mount the one single weapon that would give it a practical use for me... a tractor beam. Oh well.

With my Hub Loop semi-functionally back on track, at least for the time being, it's back to Gaian Star with enough explosives to the level the place three times over. I'm all set to do exactly that when the Goner guy I rescued early suddenly pops in behind me in a Goner HCP (of course the obvious thing to do when you've just recently been rescued from a pirate sector is hop on the nearest ship and head

straight back there!). Anyway, it seems he doesn't want me to blow the pirate base up just yet; he wants me to deliver them a load of space weed to lull them into a false sense of security and then enough Squash Mines to crack a moon and THEN blow them up. That seems an overly elaborate and sneaky plan to me and I'm not really seeing the difference myself given I've already got enough firepower to blitz it right now but hey, he's the one paying.

So I get the weed, I get the Squash mines. The pirates, evidently being too drunk and/or stoned to realise I'm the same person who shot up their ships earlier, happily let me land. Some Terran guy hops onboard and suggests that we might want to leave really, really quickly and the place subsequently blows sky high. See, now I could have done that with none of the required cloak and dagger intrigue. Hopping back to Elysium of Light, I'm thanked for my help and apparently that concludes my business dealings with these crazy Goner dudes.

Interestingly the Goner HCP I saw earlier is on patrol duty in the sector... all alone.

Yarrr!

Part 14 – Corporate Piracy is a Complex Business
Well it was an exciting day today.

I transferred some funds, bought some ore mines, ordered some freighters around, sat in an empty sector while my TL built a spaghetti-plex, transferred some more funds, ordered my freighters back the other way, transferred some more funds, added a bit more to the spaghetti-plex, transferred some more funds, ordered my freighters to go both ways at the same time, added more ore mines, transferred some funds, ordered my freighters to go both ways at the same time while travelling through time and space and then transferred some more funds.

It's hard work this pirating lark.

The ore situation is getting somewhat critical; I'm literally down to cramming it into any and every crevice on any ship I own that can physically get the stuff through the airlock and I'm still not quite keeping up with the production rate of my Ore-plex. I need additional storage space and I need it very, very soon. I think my current band of ex-Paranid shuttle passengers are trained enough to get out there and save the day so tomorrow will see the kick-off of Operation 'If it ain't nailed down', which should alleviate some of the pressure.

Part 15 – Operation: 'If it ain't nailed down'

Objectives for this mission were two-fold. Primary mission goal was to secure much-needed additional storage space for my Ore-plex to dump its overproduction. With this in mind, I needed to get as much bang per buck from my mercs as possible, so that means big ships and they don't come much bigger than the Mammoth. Selected targets for this mission were the unarmed civilian types which are found only in core sectors which tend to be patrolled by capital ships, so operations needed to be carried out with a degree of alacrity or else I'd wind up with an M2 breathing down my neck.

The secondary goal was the acquisition of selected additional targets that my recon crew had picked up and been busy tailing for a while now with a view to bolstering my fleet of warships. Being mobile these could be approached at a point much more of my choosing. Given that operations against this type of target require a greater time investment, this reduces the danger of the authorities getting wind of what I'm up to and spoiling my fun.

Finally, a tertiary goal was designated as 'targets of opportunity', which includes anything I happened to bump into and took a liking to while out and about achieving my main goals.

Troops for the mission consisted of a platoon of 30 mercs designated 'The Expendable Mooks', which mainly comprised a former Paranid Engineering team. I was hoping their engineering expertise might come in handy even if their fighting skills were a little subpar. Hopefully not only would they get the job done but there's always the chance some of them might actually develop a small talent for war and as I'm going to need some decent troops for my Brigantine capture operation a little training couldn't hurt - unless they all died horribly of course.

The main load-out for the mission included the now standard Hornet and Dragonfly/Wasp mix with the addition of a new toy I was using specifically for this op, the Firestorm Heavy Torpedo. I chose this one specifically because it does exactly 1GJ of damage. A Mammoth conveniently mounts 5x200MJ shields for a grand total of 1GJ. This meant I could fire at my target, switch to my M7M and have a boarding pod queued up and ready to fire. The instant the Firestorm went off the Mammoth's shields were at 0% and pods away. This gave me plenty of time to switch back to 'Thunderchild' and accelerate in to keep the shields low. Minimum shots fired at target meant in-system defence forces were slow to realise what mischief I was perpetrating.

When the capture team were onboard and doing their thing I called in a jumpdrive-equipped BCP with a full load of e-cells and as soon as the Mammoth was captured, docked, transferred jumpdrive and e-cells and was away before anything big enough

to stop me could get in range. The few small police and military ships that attempted to intervene were summarily dispatched with Dragonflies.

Operations went smoothly in all areas right up until I got greedy attempting to capture an opportune Split Cobra before it could get through the north gate of Split Fire into Elena's Fortune. Having spotted it late, I wasn't in the position to take its escorts out at range and jumping in I landed right in the middle of the taskforce. Needing to take out the escorting Split fighters quickly, I fired on the Cobra to get it to abort its entry through the gate then accelerated away from the Split fighters, which by now were reacting to my attack on their taskforce leader and were pursuing me with a vengeance. Feeling rather clever with myself for having caught them in time, I switched to the rear view, selected Thunderbolts and started to fire missiles at each of the pursuing Split. Feeling rather clever is, however, no substitute for actually being clever and after firing about five Thunderbolts I ploughed headfirst at maximum throttle into the nearest asteroid.

I'm not really sure how I managed to fail to notice the looming kilometre-wide rock directly in my flight path but I can assure you it makes for one hell of a fender-bender. I came to an abrupt halt, spilled my bofu-juice and 800Mj of shields instantly vanished along with 38% of my hull. Now this in itself is bad enough, I'm at a full stop and there's a horde of angry Split coming up fast behind me but it's about to get worse, much worse. Betty politely informs me that the jumpdrive that used to be installed in the nose of my HCP is no longer functional. Couldn't be the freight-scanner could it? No, of course not.

It's at this point that the first PBE fire starts peppering my ship and with only fractional shields it takes them no time at all to strip what little I've got and start chewing into my hull. With no way to jump out my only option is to evade and fight them, so hugging the asteroid like an agoraphobic limpet I haul myself around the other side until the fighters break off and I'm no longer under PBE fire at which point my shields start to recharge to the point where I can safely fire missiles; and I do... lots of them. I don't dare move so I just hug the asteroid and empty my tubes at everything in sight while Betty gives me a running inventory of all the equipment that used to be installed on my HCP and is now full of PBE holes and useless.

Fortunately I tend to carry lots of missiles and the amount I fire swamps the area sufficiently to save the day; at a cost though.

Ouch.

The Cobra, incidentally, had sneaked off while I was busy getting my arse handed to me but chose to head up through Farnham's Legend which was ultimately a mistake. Calling in a BCP to restore some much needed functionality to 'Thunderchild', I hopped up there and intercepted it at the north gate. No second chance.

Feeling I'd pressed my luck far enough for one day, I called a halt to operations and limped home for some R&R.

Debrief:
Despite some mind-numbing incompetence which is going to cost me a hell of a lot to fix, Operation:'If it ain't nailed down...' was an unqualified success.

The total haul for the day - 5x TL, 3x M6, 2x M7M and 1x M8. Not bad.

'The Expendable Mooks' proved themselves to be mostly exactly that as they died in droves, although there are a couple guys left who have some good fight skill now. I'm not entirely sure what happened with Mammoth-05 as it appears the mission parameters of 'capture intact' were slightly misinterpreted by the squad involved as 'shoot the hell out of everything'. I guess that's what happens when you use an all-Split squad. The way they were going at the time, I'd assumed they were having trouble and were going to fail the capture op but as it turned out they were in actual fact the only squad that completed a mission without losing a single operative.

Makes for a nice view in-sector too...

Total Assets:
1x HCP 'Thunderchild'
4x 200MJ shields
4x CIG, 2x PBG, 4x PBE, 4x ION-D (Hornet/Dragonfly/Wasp)

5x HCP	1x Blastclaw
1x M7M Minotaur 'Shoot First'	3x Blastclaw Prototype
1x M7M Minotaur 'Ask Questions Later'	3x Caiman SF - L
2x M7M Cobra	2x Caiman SF - S
5x Mammoth	1x Caiman Hauler 'Logistical Support'
1x Hades	1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'
1x Elephant 'Fatboy'	1x Toucan Hauler 'Training - 01'
1x Zephyras TM	3x Hermes
1x Medusa 'Questionable Ethics'	1x Express 'Carjacker'
2,400,000Cr	Teladianium remaining: 24,963
	Ore remaining: 450,000

Part 16 – Pride Comes Before A Fall

They say pride comes before a fall and apparently there's a certain truth to that one. Sitting looking at my new fleet arrayed across my hub sector, a sudden thought crossed my mind: I'm missing a ship in that line-up.

Checking down my property list a couple times I can't see it, I'm fairly sure I didn't rename it. Could it be? A quick scan through message log and...

Message from: Jarren Nedley	768-05-06 20:27
They won't be coming back round here in a hurry. You did a great job! Transferring your money now.	
Personal Log Entry	768-05-06 20:10
Your ship Truelight Seeker was destroyed in sector Cardinal's Domain by P. Large Orbital Weapons Platform	
Personal Log Entry	768-05-06 19:57
You have claimed a Heavy Centaur Prototype. This ship is now owned by you.	

... well, nuts!

It's bad enough to lose a unique ship. Worse still, having seen it could mount all those weapon types, I'd filled it with a variety of very expensive equipment I was planning to field-test. I'm estimating around about 6 million in equipment went up in smoke.

I am NOT amused and will be lodging a formal complaint with the relevant Paranid authorities in the near future.

Part 17 – Operation: 'Snowflake'

Thus named because there's a whole heap of them floating down my browser at the moment or because I can't think of anything better right now. Take your pick.

Since it only requires 3-star mercs to reliably capture an M7M, I made the assumption that an actual M7 would very likely be just as easy for the troops to deal with, provided of course they can get close enough. As far as I can tell the only real difference between the two is the M7 has guns, lots of guns, whereas the M7M has none, but can pack enough explosives to crack a moon.

So with that in mind, I've been keeping an eye out for an under-armed M7 and today I found one I decided was vulnerable.

Quite a lot of firepower there still of course but it's much more the types that got me interested. IBL/CIG are pretty hefty weapons but the shot velocity is slow and provided you keep a safe distance and stay alert you can see it coming and dodge. The rest are all lighter weapons and are minimal threat but the big one here is the single, solitary flak weapon. I don't like flak, it's noisy, it's insta-hit and it blows up in your face and stops you seeing those incoming IBL rounds.

I picked him up in Desecrated Skies which is fairly well patrolled by military forces so first task was to get his attention and then lead him way from the centre of the sector so I wouldn't get interrupted. This proved easier than planned as it turned out he must have spotted me the same time I had him and was already moving to try and overhaul me. 70km off the centre I turn and we get to it.

CIGS are first up to batter his shields down and once down to about 10% I pull away and swap them out with ION-D. Heading back in I've now only got a 1km reach which means I have to get that much closer which puts me under more fire but that's what shields are for...

When he gets me down to 25% I decide to back off for a bit, recharge shields some and see how we're doing.

...Yep, he's lost a shield, which makes it much easier for my ION-Ds to fry him, and a few guns have gone as well. Rather pleasingly the flak cannon got disabled fairly quickly which made life much easier (and quieter). Once shields are back up to a healthier margin I head back in for round two. A few minutes later and..

.

... Excellent, all the weapons down the left side have been taken out which leaves a huge blind spot for me to slot myself into and take advantage of. I can hit him...

... but he can't hit me.

At this point I've pretty much got him. With no ability to fight back, I can pound him indefinitely so it's purely a matter of time now before he loses the remaining weapons. A little while later and we're nearly done.

... Just one more to go.

This one's a stubborn one and takes a good while to fry but eventually it goes and the target is dead in space. Time to call in the recovery crew...
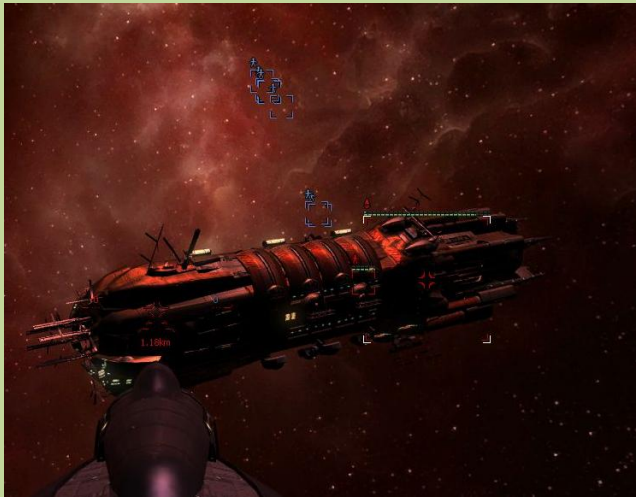
... and a short while later.

Yay!

Debrief:
Yes, they made a bit of a pig's ear of that one again and shot up the hull far more than I personally consider was justified. It was a Split squad-leader again, I think I may have to reconsider the viability of having Split in leadership positions for future ops.

Mission accomplished though, so I guess one can't complain too much. M7 'Maggot' is now heading back to Hub HQ for refit and repair. As a plus I now have something I can actually use some of those IBLs on. The lawyers are still in talks but should negotiations with the Paranid over compensation for the loss of my Truelight Seeker fail then that may come in handy.

Part 18 – A Simple Complex?

I haven't really mentioned my factory complexes other than to say that they're there and that they're doing something useful. So being as all I did today was buildy-related things I thought I might do that instead.

So, this here was the first little complex I put down..

Based in President's End, it produces Ore and an excess of Silicon and E-cells which it sells to the surrounding sectors. It may not sound much but it's actually an extremely profitable little thing given its size. Currently it's been turned over to supplying E-cells to my Hub as a fuelling base.
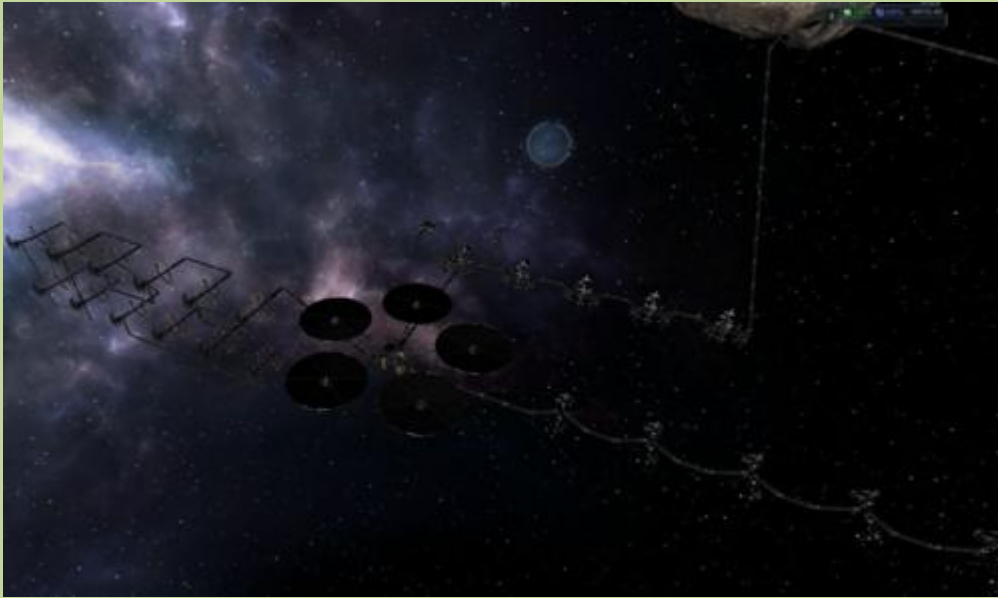
This is my main power complex way down south of Unholy Descent. It's the one I screwed up the food resources for, so it currently has a massive back stock of Bofu, but that'll come in handy somewhere else. It took a little while to build as I was adding bits over time but main feature is 12x Crystal fabs which is 2x and a bit more than it needs to run so it produces an excess of crystals. Recently I've been forcing it to try and power both my Teladianium complex, which is all neat and pretty (and redundant now I've completed that phase)...

...and to power my Oreplex...
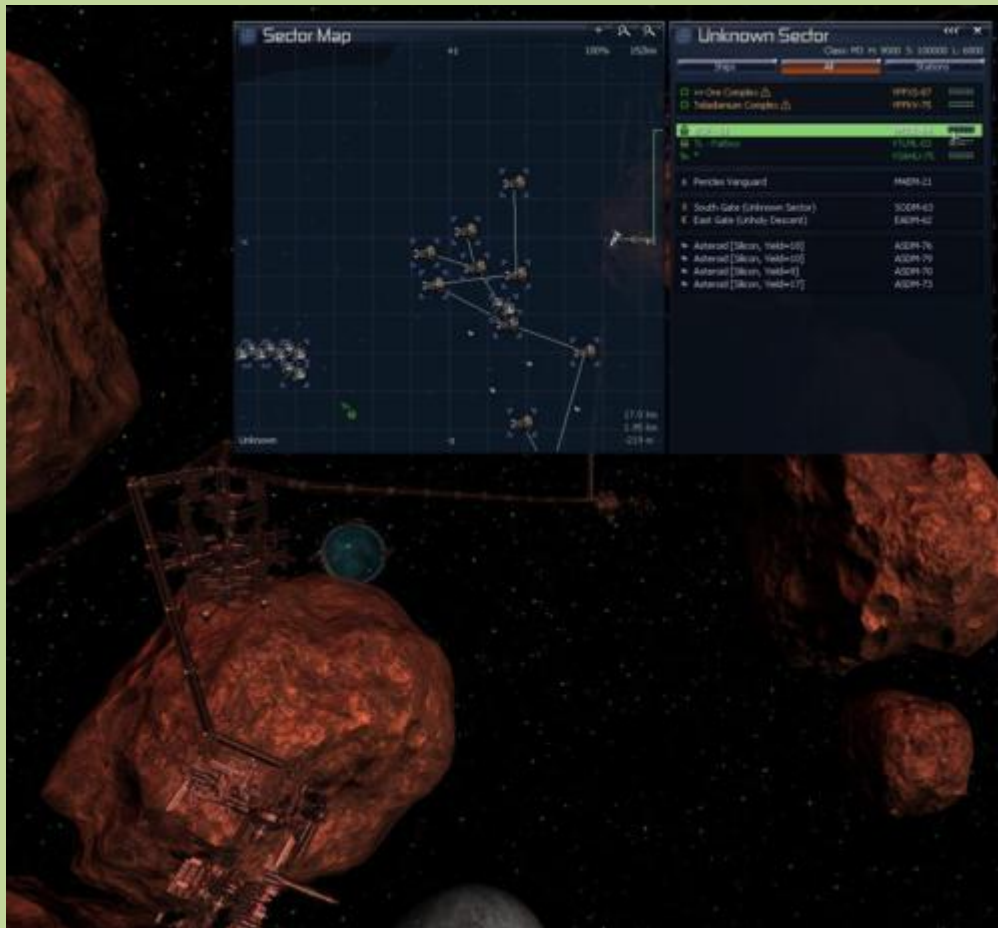
...which is a hideous monstrosity and gave me major headaches trying to store it all.

Fortunately now that the annoying Boron will actually let me deliver the Ore, that problem has gone away but it's still very hungry for E-cells and regularly has to be fed extra.

With the massive storage requirements gone that freed up a lot of ships and I decided to downsize my fleet to a minimum for the time being and use the cash to invest in a support complex. I opted to sell three of my M7Ms and retain one of the Cobras for now as they have a bit more speed and when you're doing hit and run on core sectors that helps. I also sold three of the mammoths and had a clear out of booty from my Hub. The net result was a fair wad of cash which I used to build my current engineering masterpiece...
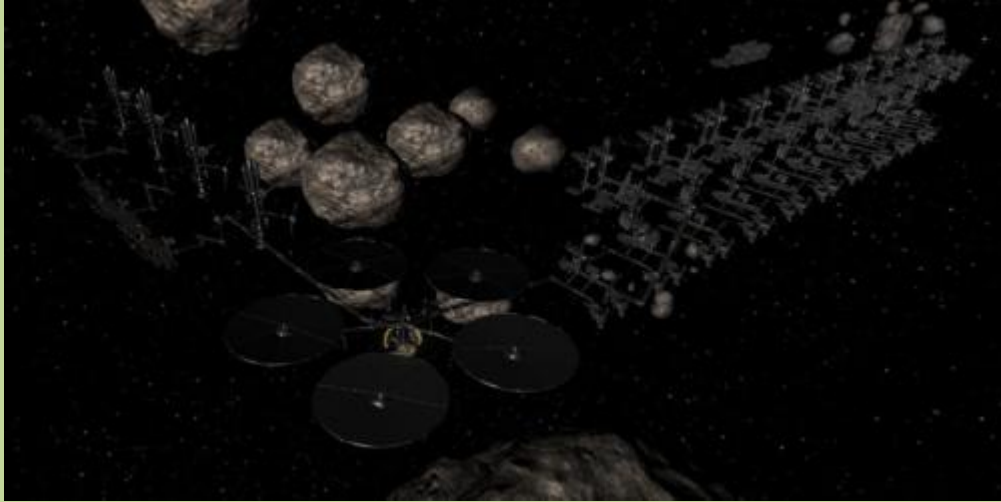
10x Flail Barrage and 10x Hammer Heavy Torpedo for a whole heap of explody goodness and all for just a shade over 90 Million, which even left me enough to fix the hefty dent on the front of 'Thunderchild'. It turns out that I may have overdone this one a tad though, as it does seem to be cranking out torpedoes at a fair old rate of knots.

Part 19 – Bad Omens

What's wrong in this picture..?

Yes, it's not been a good day all things considered.

In hindsight I should probably have taken the hint that this day was destined for a downer when I noticed I'd gained a new option on my nav-menu, 'Unfocussed Jump'. If I'd stopped to think about that one for a second I'd probably have come to the correct conclusion that kicking your jumpdrive into first-gear without actually providing it any destination coordinates is probably about as wise as trying to extract some nutritional content from chewing nails. I mean, seriously, you could end up on the wrong side of a sun, for example, the inside. Or worse...
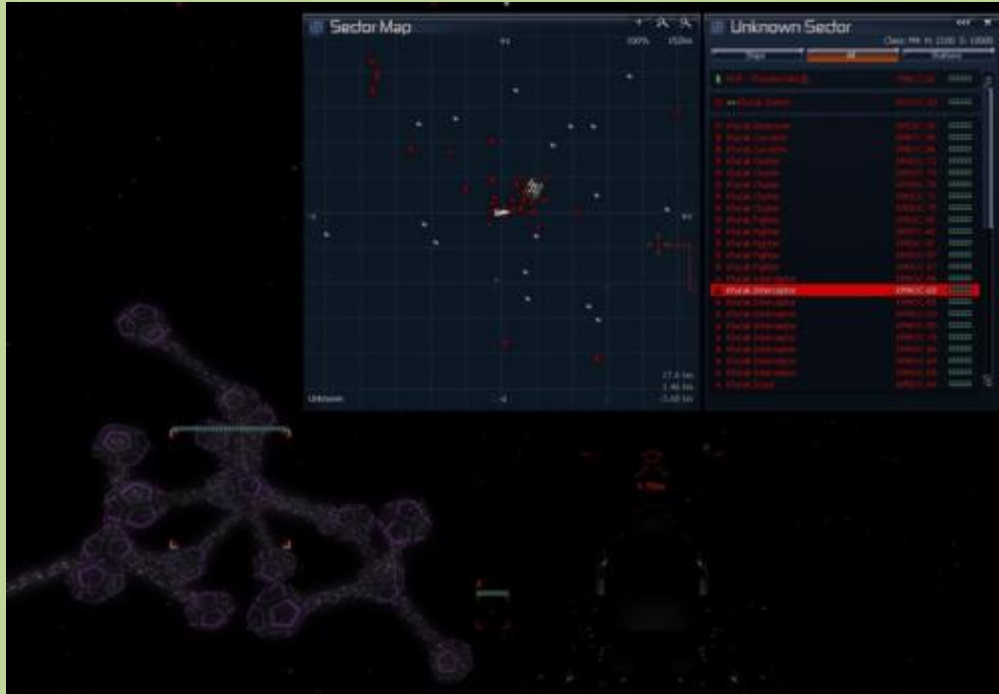
Hive Central!

I was, shall we say, not particularly impressed to find myself surrounded by a bajillion little purple triangles. They, it seems, were as pleased to see me as I was them and introduced themselves in the time-honoured Kha'ak tradition of kyoning the hell out of my shields while I suffered a moment of panicked confusion as to where the return jump option had suddenly vanished to on my nav-menu. Fortunately it turned out just whacking the jumpdrive button was enough to get the ball rolling but there's times 10 seconds can last an eternity.

Returning to normal space, I'm undamaged but one ticked-off fishy. Apparently this jumpdrive 'feature' was my 'reward' from the Goners for my efforts in saving their sorry hides from that Pirate Syndicate. Reward, my arse. I know what this is about. They're trying to cover up their involvement in the Squash-mine bombing of that pirate base they had me do. Let's face it - it sure wouldn't be good for the Goner name if they were ever associated with that particular little event. And what better way to 'make it go away' than to do over the only guy that knows their dirty little secret? Yeah, well it didn't work and I'm onto their game now.

Plots of diabolical retribution will, however, have to go on hold for the moment. I've got a new batch of squaddies fresh out of boot and a need for both a cash injection and some serious training time for my mercs. If I'm ever going to borrow that Brigantine I'm going to need some quality troops and currently I have just three 4-star fighters that are slowly being trained to 5-star in all others. Three isn't enough for a full pod-assault though, so I need at least two more. I'm not sure how many I'll actually need to take an M2 but I'm thinking my 5-man elite squad plus a bunch of expendable mooks to soak up fire. I mean, what could go wrong with that plan?

Scanning down my AdvSat network it appears there's not a single M7M wandering through any of the pirate sectors, aside from the Boron Kraken that's been lurking in Loomanckstrat's since forever, so no easy cash-cow there. I wonder if the top brass have noticed they keep going missing. Instead I decide to set up in Nopileos' and pick on passing TM weapon traders instead, relieving them of the burden of carrying their wares and then the burden of owning their ships. All goes well for the first few and then one hack goes wrong, sadly the ship is too badly damaged to attempt a second go. All my guys get out safely however, so 'meh'. I've also picked up a handful of PPC/ION cannons and a Gauss cannon, so I'm 'squids in' to date.

And then a Gannet pops through the east gate from Hatikvah's. Now this is actually the first time I've ever encountered the Teladi M7M and it's one nice looking ship, in my opinion anyway. It's kind of slow, but I reckon for an M7M speed isn't as essential when you have the capacity to blow stuff up from the other side of the sector. Nice shields too, 3x2GJ, that's destroyer class. It appears I've found myself a flagship.

A short time later and my as-yet-unnamed flagship is heading back to home territory for refit. Apparently the Teladi have taken some exception to its disappearance but I'm sure we can smooth relations out in due course. Scanning through my AdvSat network again, I spot a Minotaur over in Hatikvah's just about to head through the south gate, that's right next door. Well there you go, earlier there weren't any to be found anywhere and then two come along at once!

Catching up with the Minotaur in Clarity's End a few missiles take out the escort group safely. By this point the Minotaur appears to be trying to do something unseemly with the nearby Crystal Fab but with a lack of missiles that's probably going to take a while unless it resorts to ramming so with a seemingly complete lack of interest in me it makes for an easy capture. Not having a jumpdrive to transfer to it as I used my spare on the Gannet I just transfer a few shields over to keep it safe and pick on a couple passing OTAS TMs as they're always useful.

I'm just done capturing the second one when I notice a big red splodge on my gravidar. I'm really going to have to pay more attention to my surroundings, the other day I got clobbered to 50% shields by a Q that I had completely failed to see approaching. This time though, it's a Colossus, Cerberus and fighter complement, which being a good deal slower than a Q is probably a worse thing to be snuck up on by really. Either way they're most definitely displeased with my picking on Argon freight traffic and are heading right for me, trouble is I've got a lame duck with me at present. Myself, 'Fatboy' and my Cobra can jump out easily enough but that would leave the Minotaur to the mercies of the oncoming Argon and they don't look in the mood for tea, biscuits and some light conversation.

It looks like I'm going to have to fight my way out of here again, which is unfortunate both because I much prefer the standard run away option, it being safer and all that, and because if picking off the odd freighter annoys the Argon authorities then I don't think they'll look favourably on me taking out an entire battle group. Fortunately my missile-plex has been cranking out the warheads at a good rate of knots and 'Looks Aren't Everything' has a full complement of 400 Flails and 150 Hammer Torpedoes so I have mucho KABOOM! at my fingertips.

Deciding the Cerberus was probably the more immediate threat, I did a quick weapons calc in my head and fired off a sufficient barrage of Hammers to kill it dead then fired a few Flails to distract it while my Hammer swarm closed to impact. Hitting the Cerberus dead amidships, my initial barrage dealt it a crippling 10% of the damage I was anticipating. I think my Hammer swarm mostly blew themselves up there, oops! Plan B: cycle Flails and Hammers until it's dead. That worked much better and shortly we were one less Cerberus to worry about which left the Colossus which seemed to be having a few issues navigating the asteroids and the mass of fighters that were closing on me rapidly. A few went after 'Fatboy' but he's got a couple of Blastclaws onboard and they did their bodyguard routine. Meantime I switched back to Flails and cycled through targets taking them out. I do like the Flail's ability to seek out new targets after it gets its original one, that's a great feature and it makes short work of fighter groups. A short time later and the area is Argon-free but I'm down one Blastclaw, bravely sacrificed in the defence of his mother ship, and they killed the TMs. The Paranid are well-pleased with what went down and have promoted me to 'Friend of Emperor'; the Argon are not so happy and I'm now a 'Confirmed Insurgent' - I think that's me off their Christmas card list.

Deciding it's time to leave, I set 'Fatboy' off on a jumpdrive-buying run, I somehow doubt Terracorp will sell me one so it's off to Atreus HQ. In but a few scant minutes they'll be back and I can get my Minotaur out of here but it turns out that's a few minutes I don't have as a Raptor suddenly pops through the north gate. Now the Split and I haven't really seen eye to eye for a good while now and this occasion is no different it seems, as he starts spewing Mambas into space. Lots of Mambas. Lots and lots of Mambas. In fact I'm starting to think he's not going to stop spewing Mambas at me when eventually it seems he does have limits to what he can pack in that hull. Finally, having finished launching enough ships to make a respectably-sized locust swarm envious, the whole unwieldy mass starts banking in my direction. Ah, crap! Here we go again...

Plan C, let's try the Minotaur out. I've heard good things about the missile launch capabilities of the Minotaur and I've already established that the Cobra just doesn't cut it for Hammer barrages. Transporting all my Hammers into the Minotaur, I target the Raptor, assess the rapidly closing distance between myself and the 50% of the Split military machine that's heading my way, do a quick mental calculation of how many Hammers I'll need for the job and then decide, screw it, and fire the lot. The

initial wave of Split fighters is on me at this point and I'm taking PBE fire and even my 3GJ of shields are taking some abuse so targeting the nearest Mamba, I follow the Minotaur's lead and fire a 50-round barrage.

Two things rapidly become apparent in the ensuing couple of minutes. The first is that the Minotaur's reputation is well deserved and it is, quite frankly, 'da bomb' when it comes to launching Hammers. Torpedoes splay out in a beautiful fan and then go streaking off to intercept their unfortunate victim. The second is that, in hindsight, I may have fired just a few too many warheads really. Don't get me wrong, they did a most excellent job of clearing the surrounding space of anything resembling a Split fighter. Unfortunately, having done so, the remainder (a sizeable cloud of them) went streaking across the sector and proceeded to erase everything else that was considered unfriendly to me. Oops!

Many Split died - unfortunate for them. Unfortunately for me the Paranid are semi-friendly with the Split, so as Split fighters and traders died in a hail of missiles, so my Paranid rep steadily plummeted from 'Friend of Emperor'. I'm now a 'Tainted Wanderer'. Tainted Wanderer is shoot-on-sight status in Paranid sectors and this was around the same time as some of the TM's I'd captured back in Nopileos' had made their way to Paranid Prime for selling. They didn't make it to the shipyard. <sigh>

Not having any missiles left, it seemed an excellent time to leave before the other 50% of the Split military showed up so I called back my TL with jumpdrive, transferred it across to the Minotaur and ordered my fleet to head home for refit while I headed back to Nopileos'. Arriving through the east gate I promptly smacked headfirst into what looked briefly like a Zephyrus before I got bounced back and found myself the other side the gate in Hatikvah's. That was unexpected. A quick 180 and back through and yes, it was a TM but it turned out to be a Jonferco weapons dealer. Not only that but a quick scan reveals a huge array of hugely expensive weapons, Jackpot!

Giving him a good clobbering and politely requesting that he parts with it, he equally politely asks me to get bent and launches fighters. I'm briefly aware of an M3 shooting out left and break off to deal with it. Nova Raider, which can be a pain as they tend to be PBG armed but no problem so long as I'm behind it. I've just got him lined up and about to unload quad-CIGs into him when my view suddenly goes completely yellow/orange and I find myself absolutely awash in a sea of fire. My shields start dropping through the floor and I'm instantly and acutely aware that I've just screwed up big time. Hammering the jumpdrive I start dodging as best I can with the flying skills of a small asteroid (As one pirate informed me once) but HCPs aren't really built for trick flying and I'm on about 20% shields already. 10 seconds is an age and they're through my shields and busy slogging my hull before very long. I'm in somebody's good books up there though, as I manage to make it through an

interminable countdown without managing to have my jumpdrive fried, which given how fragile those things are, is miracle in itself.

I wasn't too sure which gate I was going to end up at but frankly any was better than under that blowtorch, but I ended up at the south gate. That's fine. Checking the sector map, it turns out there are three Nova raiders heading my way, so less the one I CIG'ed as the world turned all flamey, means that particular TM was packing 4 M3s and they probably were all armed to the teeth with PBG. Stupid me for not checking, I'd become so used to M4/M5 and the odd M3 that I hadn't thought to look, having been dazzled by the lure of shiny, shiny cargo. That'll learn me. Anyway, I'm in no mood to play games with these three so I wait until they're within reach of Wasps and then fire a few at each followed up by a Hornet.

And so that's how I came by that most distressing picture at the top and how I now find myself piloting HCP-04 while 'Thunderchild' is in for some extensive repair work. The engineer at the shipyard did that whole 'sucky-air-through-the-teeth' thing when he looked at it, so I suspect repairs are going to cost me an arm and a leg.

Oh well..

Part 20 – The Flame-grilled Squid Squad

Another crappy day at the office..

Subsequent to my disaster the other day and having swapped out my HCP for a slightly less charred one, I went back to boarding TM's and training my mercs for their inevitable confrontation with the infamous Brigantine. That's assuming, of course, that I can find another one. Capital pirate ships of any type have been as rare as a Split in a good mood just lately. I've not seen a single one in the Split Fire to Hatikvah's or the Loomanckstrat's 'Pirate Alley' areas for a good long time. I strongly suspect they're tired of being chased by race military ships and are presently all hiding down near Gaian Star.

The first two captures went smoothly and I even got a handful of 5MJ shields and a couple weapons as a nice bonus. By this point of the original twenty or so mercs that I'd been industriously training up I was down to my last five, but they were almost all 3-star fighters by now. 4-stars gets them promoted to my ninja crew, which then gets assigned for full training in all areas. One or possibly two more boarding ops should probably qualify a couple of these guys.

The third capture went fine right up to the point where I'd disabled his weapon systems and beamed over to my M7M ready to launch a pod, at which point it all went horrifically wrong. As I hit the launch button and my brave squaddies launched into space, flames suddenly washed over my ship and my poor band of merry mercenaries in their unshielded boarding pod were instantly reduced to crispy charcoal briquettes.

Blastclaws, a 4-ship wing of them. 95% of the pirates are friendly to me and this bunch of clowns just so happen to come along RIGHT this second and screw up everything. I was not happy. It's not like they even stood a chance either, I'm sure they just did it to spite me. I've got 3GJ of shielding and 500 Flails on board, what were they thinking?

One of them elected to bail out; unfortunate for me that his ship didn't survive the hail of Flail missiles after it, even more unfortunate for him that he did survive it. I'm going to have to find some particularly unpleasant job for this guy to do, preferably one with low survivability. Squash Mine maintenance engineer perhaps? Standard issue equipment, 1x mallet...

In other news, that annoying Boron is making further unreasonable demands (seriously, it's like having a wife). My Ore-plex finally managed to cough up the last nugget required for fixing the Hub gates so now I have a gate set I can move about at will. Some experimentation required there, I'm sure I can come up with some kind of diabolically devious use for a toy like this. The next thing he wanted was 500 units

of Nividium, which after the last request seemed positively benign and since I'd already located a couple Nividium asteroids, not a problem to fulfil. Obviously he also felt I'd accomplished that task far too easily, as now the miserable sod wants 750,000 crystals! I thought he was kidding at first, but no, the smug git really does actually want that many.

I don't think there's that many in the entire universe...

Part 21 – Fun With Wasps!™

Not a lot going on today, bit of admin and some fairly boring acquisition of a few extra freighters to ease resource flow around my complexes. Still haven't decided what to do about those crystals yet. Meanwhile some people have shown some interest in how I make use of missiles so today we have an educational session entitled:

'Fun with Wasps!'™

No, not the little buzzy yellow kind that have a bad attitude and like jam, but the swirly space variety that put large holes in small M5s. The Wasp is a fairly versatile missile with a couple of characteristics that I find attractive.

1. Swarm type - Splitting into 8 component warheads each of which is capable of doing 1K of damage, the Wasp is effectively capable of doing a fairly solid 8K should all warheads contact their target. Compared to other single round missiles such as the Dragonfly which does a straight 5K damage for a similar cost, then you can see that the Wasp does represent good bang for buck. Multiple warheads swarming a target also means that there is a much greater chance that one more warheads will be able to approach on a vector that enables it to hit its target no matter how it tries to dodge.

2. Speed - Being swarm type and designed to kill fast-moving small targets it has the benefit of high speed, which makes it hard to hit when trying to shoot it down. It does however mean it's quite easy for a Wasp to overshoot its target and have to track around again for another go. When you're trying to actually kill an M5 with one this is not really a beneficial feature but if you're attempting to use the Wasp to spoof the turrets on a larger fighter like an M3 then a Wasp that's busy doing loops around it and occupying the turret for a good long time is very useful.

3. Size and cost - Approximately 1K to buy and 1 unit of S-size cargo space makes the Wasp both very affordable and allows you to pack a whole lot of them into even a small fighter.

What to use them on?

Small craft. M5 you can use it to kill just on its own. Sometimes you might need to fire two if the M5 you're after is particularly fast or well shielded. You can also use them on M4, which being slower are easier to hit but equally being better shielded, will require more missiles to deal with. They also make excellent turret distracters, allowing you to either deal with a turreted M3 or keep it occupied while you deal with something else or RSLG. One use that I find for Wasps which probably not a lot of other people do is missile defence. Yes, the mosquito can do the job, but the Mosquito takes up the same amount of cargo space, is one more missile I have to have in my inventory to cycle through and doesn't always hit anyway. Personally I much prefer to have 8 warheads chasing down that Hammerhead than 1 Mosquito.

What not to use them on?

Big ships. Basically anything with M3 or bigger shields you're largely just tickling them unless you plan to absolutely bombard them with them. Also attempting to distract the turrets on anything bigger than an M6 is not going to work well. The Wasp is far too fast getting to target and on a larger ship its wild flight path is still very likely to connect with the target regardless so the turrets aren't going to be distracted trying to chase it down.

Should you be listening to me?

Probably not, as having just told you not to use them on M3 or bigger I'm now going to show you how to use the 'Wasp-Shotgun' technique to great effect on M3 (or bigger). Confusing eh?

Anyway, to see how this works you first need to understand how the Wasp functions. In short it has two modes. Firstly, upon launch, it goes into swirly hit-me-if-you-can mode and spirals in towards its target from wherever you fired it from. As it approaches its target and reaches a point around about 5-600m it changes from avoidance into terminal attack mode where it dives straight towards the target and acts just like any other heat seeker. This is an important point because you can manipulate it to your advantage.

Example:
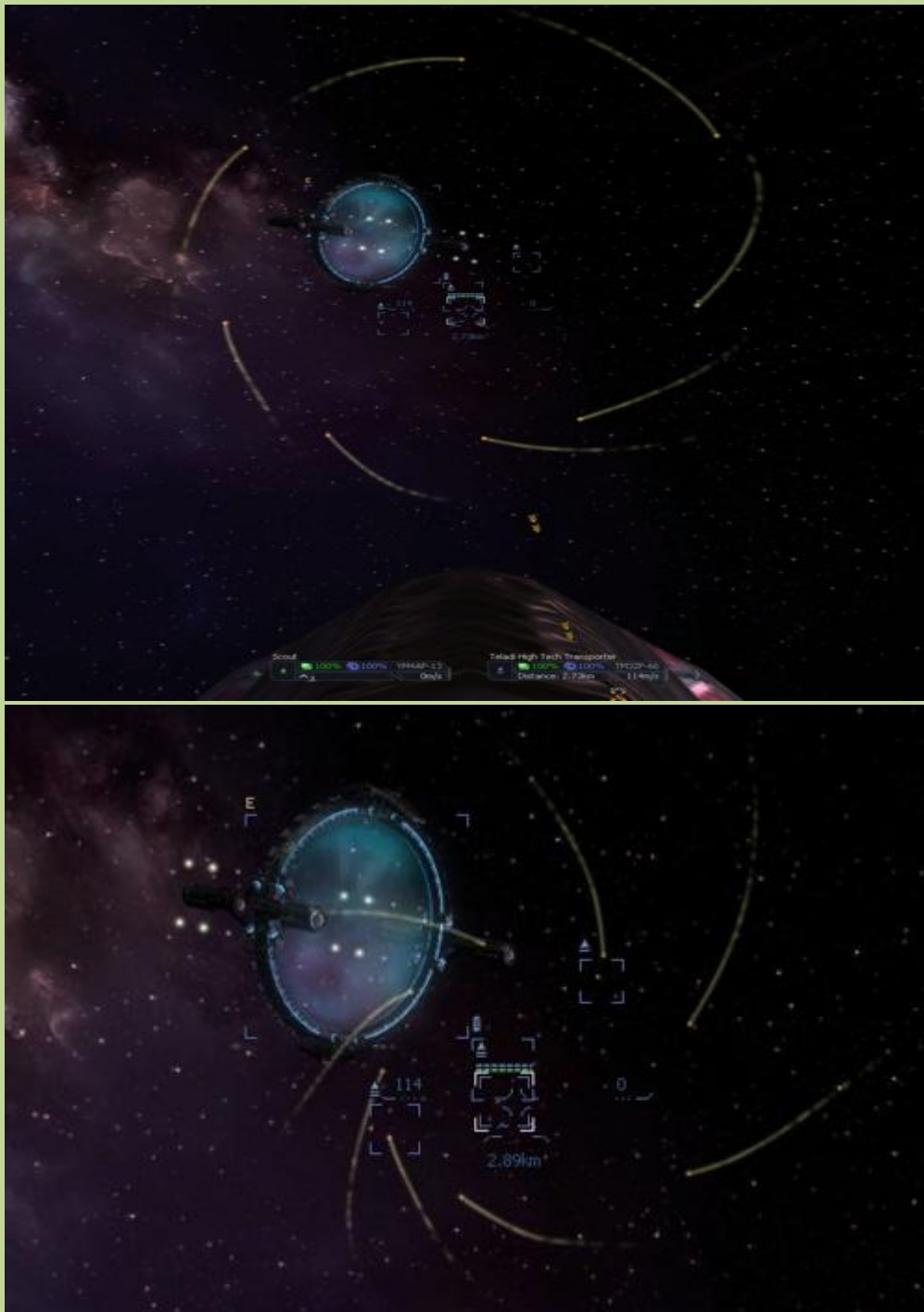
As you can see I fired this one at just less than 3km range and it's in swarm mode as normal.

Example:

This one I fired at approx 600m from target..
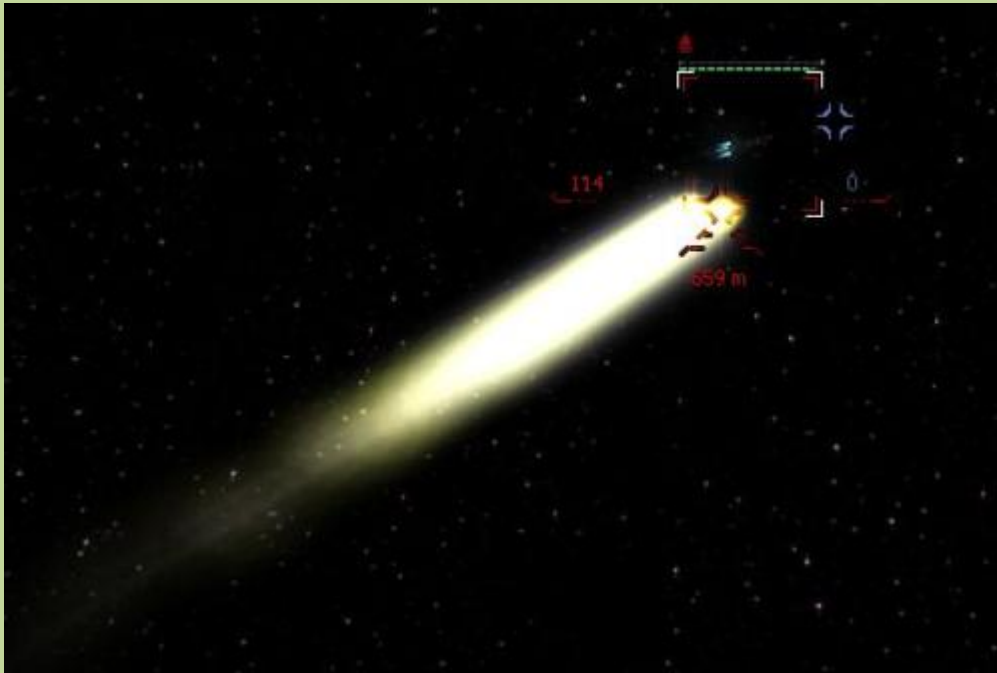
... and you can see that it's not swarming. Because I fired it within the threshold of its terminal attack mode, it's heading straight for target in one solid bunch of warheads. That's 8K of damage heading smack on target.

... Bang! Instant big chunk out his hull and fire a second to finish the job.

Oddly enough though second one didn't quite do it..

... Not sure I'll get much for 1% hull remaining, but it shows you can cap fighters with missiles (I wouldn't advise it though).

Part 22 – Fatboy's Sudden Weight Loss

Not having a whole lot of luck just lately. Today 'Fatboy', which is my mobile supply base, had an unfortunate encounter with a Q out of X101. Those Q's are surprisingly quick on their feet when they want to be. Suffice to say what was on 65% hull is now on 20%, yet more expense pending.

To be honest I really think I need to look at fixing some of my fleet up as I've a horrible feeling I don't actually have anything larger than a TS that doesn't have some kind of dent/gouge/rent/tear (*delete as applicable) somewhere along the line. In fact I'm pretty sure a good few suffer all of the above. I think my next bunch of mercs I get going will have to make themselves useful capturing large stuff for resale and Mahi Ma will have to wait for his crystals for the time being.

On which subject I think Barren Shores is going to be a key component of the whole Crystal-plex plan. There seems to be rather a large collection of nice silicoids down there and I'll probably need a goodly supply. I'll have to work out later approx how many Crystal fabs I can run off that much silicon, hopefully quite a few.

But I digress. Getting back to the whole Q incident I think it's time to engage in a little live-fire exercise. This will serve the purpose of both clearing out the nasty Xenon infestation from my soon to be mini-universe and allows me to justify expending huge amounts of expensive munitions in a glorious firework show. Cue Operation: 'Hey kids, let's play with matches!'..

Part 23 – Operation: 'Hey kids, let's play with matches!'
Wherein many Xenon will ideally be swatted by a hailstorm of heavy warheads.

Dropping through the north gate of X101, I've decided to bring just the three ships with me for this one.

2x M7M and my one and only active HCP to keep overwatch. I'm pretty sure no one's going to come calling through the one and only entry/exit gate from this sector and any Xenon reinforcements are going to be a good while making their way from wherever so I shouldn't need any major fighter cover.

Hardware wise, HCP-04 has standard anti-fighter load-out, the Minotaur is currently packing 160 Hammer Heavy Torpedoes and my flagship 'Failure To Communicate' is currently carrying 210 Hammer Heavy torpedoes and 520 Flail Barrage. Should be enough.

The goal of this operation will be to eliminate all hostile forces in the sector, split into two objectives. Objective 1 will be handled by myself commanding the Gannet and will entail suppression of all mobile enemy units. Objective 2 will be handled by the Minotaur which will be tasked with destruction of fixed Xenon assets, so in this case just the one Xenon Shipyard. At present there isn't a whole lot on the gravidar...

.. just a couple of Q's and an odd assortment of fighters but I can see some larger ships moving around in the distance, at least another three Q's, so there may be nastier surprises further in.

The Xenon don't seem particularly perturbed by my being here, but we can soon change that; time to get the ball rolling. Accelerating up to my flank speed of a not particularly impressive 47m/s, I creep further in-system. Fortunately speed on an M7M isn't particularly critical as while it may take me a while to get from A to B, I've the weapons on board to be able to punch you at B when I'm still at A.

As I'm moving in, I order the Minotaur to alpha strike the Xenon shipyard only to discover that you can't actually directly order an M7M to attack a fixed structure, only mobile units. Now that's a bit rubbish, as it slightly defeats the point. It turns out that if you target the structure first then you can subsequently order a missile barrage and have the option of using the targeted structure. Bit of a workaround but it does the job. Missiles away!

.. Now the nice thing about the Minotaur is it has three missile banks, so when it fires its salvos, they jettison out of the sides and the top and splay out quite nicely and form a triangular wedge of missiles that head in. Of course if you happen to be directly in front of the Minotaur when it launches, not really a sensible place to position yourself really but there you go, then you get a pretty effect:

... Yep, Xenon shipyards are quite tough so I fired the lot. That's 160 torpedoes heading into target (less the two or three that hit me up the arse because I wasn't quite central) which allowing for a few losses and premature detonations should kill it quite, quite dead.

While they streak in I'm busy bracketing Q's and firing salvos at each, single Hammers at anything M3 or bigger and Flails at anything else. By the time the Minotaur's strike is reaching the Shipyard...

... and taking it out in a glorious explosion that lights up the sector, the space ahead of me is looking a little spartan for Xenon ships.
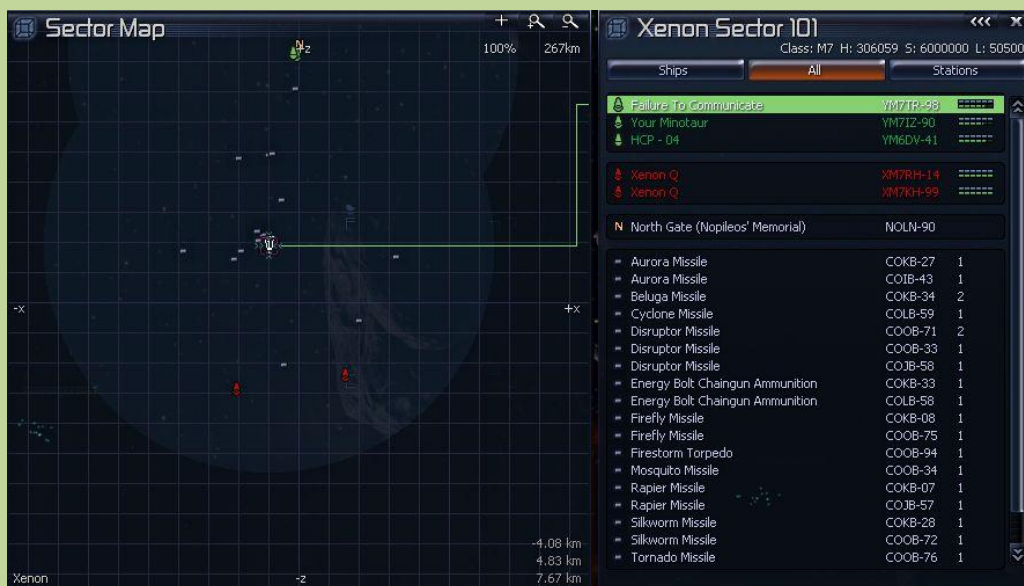
Just the 2 Q's visible now although I've a little further to penetrate so there could be something else back there off the gravidar.

As it turns out though, they were the last two Xenon and with mission accomplished my spoils of war amount to a small collection of largely useless missiles

```
-  Aurora Missile                      COKB-27    1
-  Aurora Missile                      COQB-05    1
-  Aurora Missile                      COIB-43    1
-  Beluga Missile                      COKB-34    2
-  Cyclone Missile                     COLB-59    1
-  Disruptor Missile                   COOB-71    2
-  Disruptor Missile                   COOB-33    1
-  Disruptor Missile                   COJB-58    1
-  Energy Bolt Chaingun Ammunition     COLB-58    1
-  Energy Bolt Chaingun Ammunition     COQB-06    1
-  Energy Bolt Chaingun Ammunition     COKB-33    1
-  Firefly Missile                     COOB-75    1
-  Firefly Missile                     COKB-08    1
-  Firestorm Torpedo                   COOB-94    1
-  Mosquito Missile                    COOB-34    1
-  Rapier Missile                      COKB-07    1
-  Rapier Missile                      COJB-57    1
-  Silkworm Missile                    COOB-72    1
-  Silkworm Missile                    COKB-28    1
-  Tornado Missile                     COOB-76    1
-  Windstalker Missile                 COOB-32    2
```

... Somehow I was hoping for more.

Debrief:
Total success and a comprehensive victory. In fact the only damage I took during the entire operation was from shooting myself up the arse with stray missiles from my Minotaur's initial barrage and, in all fairness, starting a war and not taking a single round of enemy fire is by anybody's standards a fairly successful conclusion to the day. Now to the bit that's probably going to make a few of you wince:

Cost-wise:
Minotaur -
160 Hammers @ avg. 50,536 = 8,085,760

Gannet -
95 Hammers @ avg. 50,536 = 4,800,920
40 Flails @ avg. 33,692 = 1,347,680

Total expenditure: 14,234,360.

Blowing up a Xenon sector from 75Km away: Priceless.

Part 24 – Hubtastic!

Mahi Ma can shove his Crystals where it's going to take some fairly intrusive surgery to remove them - all 750,000 of them. Yes, I'm very happy to say that I no longer need the irritating little prima donna nor do I have to put up any further with his outrageous demands as I've discovered the true secret of The Hub.

There've been many theories surrounding its discovery and its origins. A maintenance station created by the builders of the gate network. A commerce transit point to breathe economic life into the universe. A bridge between disparate civilisations, bringing far-flung star-nations closer together and encouraging intercultural communication and understanding. These and other theories each more outlandish than the last have been put forward and every one of them has one thing in common, they're wrong. It's no trading outpost, no diplomatic facilitator, no shining beacon in the night. I know its true purpose; I know it for what it truly is. It's a weapon.
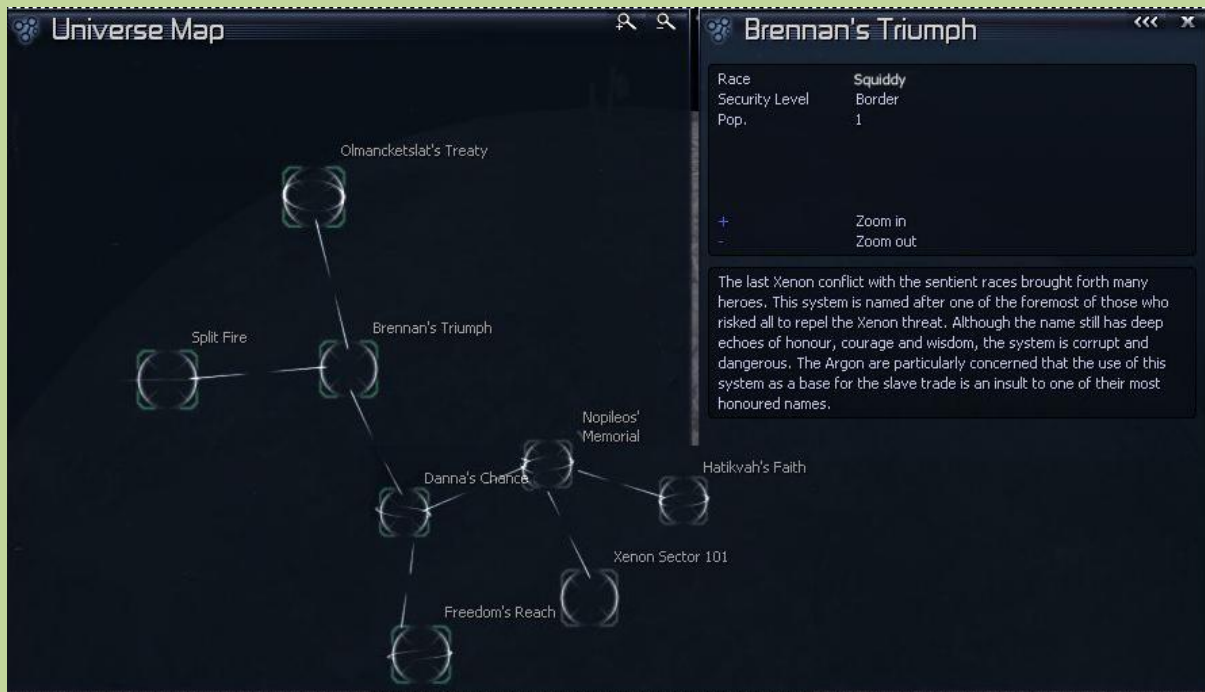
But there are weapons and there are weapons. Planet-busting super-weapons may seem the pinnacle of warfare to some, but they're mere children's toys compared to the capabilities of this device. This is a weapon, the effects of which will be felt on a galactic scale, that will reshape the universe and forever alter the destiny of trillions, and all of this power is in the hands of one individual.

However, with great power comes great responsibility. As with all things, what has the power to destroy, has the power to create. Perhaps the temptation to abuse a power so great can be resisted and from a potentially dark future a new light born as the device is turned to the power of good?
Hell no, where would be the fun in that?

There used to be a long-standing pirate problem in the X-universe. A troublesome breed they occupied the sectors between Argon space around Argon Prime and Light of Heart. Being the shortest distance between these two regions of space this was a principal trade route despite the dangers of being attacked by pirates. The main races' solution to the rampant piracy in these sectors, dubbed 'Pirate Alley', was regular military patrols to eliminate any and all pirate vessels operating in the area. It was thought that the pirate problem would never be truly stamped out and that patrols would have to be maintained for all time. Today however all that changed. Not because the pirates saw the futility of the efforts and gave up, or because the patrolling authorities achieved victory, but because the pirate problem simply vanished, along with eight sectors of the X-universe.

Yep, there is no longer a problem with 'Pirate Alley' because pirate alley no longer exists in the X-universe. It exists as a separate entity entirely outside of the gate network...

Universe Map

- Olmancketslat's Treaty
- Split Fire
- Brennan's Triumph
- Nopileos' Memorial
- Danna's Chance
- Hatikvah's Faith
- Xenon Sector 101
- Freedom's Reach

Brennan's Triumph

Race	Squiddy
Security Level	Border
Pop.	1

+	Zoom in
-	Zoom out

The last Xenon conflict with the sentient races brought forth many heroes. This system is named after one of the foremost of those who risked all to repel the Xenon threat. Although the name still has deep echoes of honour, courage and wisdom, the system is corrupt and dangerous. The Argon are particularly concerned that the use of this system as a base for the slave trade is an insult to one of their most honoured names.

... I welcome you to the realm of King Squiddy I. Population one.

Assets:

1x Advanced Discoverer	1x TL Elephant 'Fatboy' Mobile Supply Base
1x TL Albatross 'MPLEX - Storage'	1x Express 'Carjacker'
5x Blastclaw	1x M7M Gannet 'Failure To Communicate' Flagship
2x Blastcaw Prototype	1x M8 Hades
1x Caiman 'Scavenger - 01'	7x HCP
1x Caiman hauler	3x Hermes
1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'	2x M
4x Caiman Superfreighter S	2x TL Mammoth
5x Caiman Superfreighter L	1x Medusa
1x M7 Carrack 'Maggot'	1x Mercury
1x Chimera	1x M7M Minotaur
1x M7M Cobra 'Looks Aren't Everything'	4x Rapier
1x Dolphin Hauler	1x Toucan Hauler
2x Solano	2x Zephyrus
14,800,000Cr	

Part 25 – So Long, Fatboy

I started off the day doing one of those ever-fun ship-recovery missions. They tend to be easy money and minimal hassle. Payouts having been jumping quite a bit and I'm all in favour of 1.3M for a rescued M5, especially when I've got a TL to use to expedite the process. One can only assume the owner must be fairly attached to it to want to shell out that much to get it back. Sentimental value?

Anyway, arriving in Argon Prime to pick up the ship I was a little disturbed to find it wasn't going to fit in my TL being as it was not an M5 but an M7. Who the hell goes losing a Deimos? And when I'm short of cash who the hell gives me jobs like that and expects to see their ship again? It's a crazy, crazy universe..

So, a short time later and 14 million richer, I'm off looking for more missions. Oddly I didn't appear to take a rep hit for fencing the Deimos, I can only assume the authorities couldn't believe anyone would have the audacity to do it. A couple of assassinations here, a delivery there and a taxi mission for a Split guy that seems to do my rep with them no end of good. Given that I was previously Enemy of Rhonkar 99%, suddenly finding myself as popular as Creature was somewhat of a surprise but hey, why not capitalise on it. Jumping into Split territory yes, no one's trying to shoot me. Good stuff.

I've taken to using my TL with a Solano to shuttle me around and then call in whatever ships I need for a mission. The Solano I captured a while back and it's a fairly good looking little ship and is well equipped. A few missions in and around the area and aside from having to apologise to a few police vessels that evidently have slightly longer memories than the average Split no trouble at all. My rep has now gone from shoot-on-sight to merely spit-upon-on-sight which in Split terms is fairly friendly.

Jumping into Family Pride west gate, I was anticipating a less cheery reception being as last time I was here, I stole the Elephant I'm currently sat in and blew up a Raptor. Generally speaking that's not appreciated. All is quiet though, so I exit 'Fatboy', order it to follow me and accelerate in-system to see what's on the jobs boards. I've barely been in the air 10 seconds and brought up comms on the first station when I hear a colossal bang behind me and flicking to my rear-cam with that sinking feeling get to watch the final moments of Fatboy as it goes up in a huge explosion. Moments later the front end of a Split Tiger noses through the expanding fireball...

I'm undecided whether I should consider this a fortunate occurrence and be happy given that mere seconds previously I was stood on the bridge of that debris cloud, or whether I should ponder the 60+ million in assets that just got burnt to a crisp and cry. Now, however, is not an appropriate moment to decide as the Tiger captain apparently blames me entirely for the collision, considers it an act of war and is bearing down on me fast lobbing IBL rounds and flak. Time to be elsewhere.

RIP Fatboy, the 7 fighters stationed on it and all the spare equipment onboard. Mobile Supply Base to cloud of containers in a heartbeat.

Banshee Missile	COOD-44	17
Beluga Missile	COOD-42	3
Crystals	COOD-32	6
Disintegrator Rifles	COOD-30	1
Disruptor Missile	COOD-36	1
Dragonfly Missile	COOD-34	93
Energy Bolt Chaingun Ammunition	COOD-45	192
Energy Cells	COOD-31	2815
Firestorm Torpedo	COOD-41	2
Hammerhead Missile	COOD-43	6
Mass Driver Ammunition	COOD-38	251
Microchips	COOD-35	25
Teladianium	COOD-37	108
Thunderbolt Missile	COOD-39	42
Typhoon Missile	COOD-40	7
Wasp Missile	COOD-33	31

Assets:

1x Advanced Discoverer	1x M7M Gannet 'Failure To Communicate' Flagship
1x TL Albatross 'MPLEX - Storage'	1x M8 Hades
2x Blastclaw	7x HCP
1x Caiman 'Scavenger - 01'	3x Hermes
1x Caiman Hauler	2x TL Mammoth
1x Caiman Miner 'Red Dwarf'	1x Medusa
4x Caiman Superfreighter S	1x Mercury
5x Caiman Superfreighter L	1x M7M Minotaur
1x M7 Carrack 'Maggot'	4x Rapier
1x M7M Cobra 'Looks Aren't Everything'	1x Solano
1x Dolphin Hauler	1x Toucan Hauler
1x Express 'Carjacker'	2x Zephyrus

27,500,000Cr

Part 26 – Just Out of Blind Curiosity

I met yet another weirdo today.

Somehow every time I think I've met the craziest individual in the whole universe the universe goes and dredges up someone even more mentally degenerate than the last. It must be one of those immutable laws of the cosmos or something. Anyway, this particular nut job I discovered passing through Omicron Lyrae.

Jesan Nadina, fighter-jockey, hero-wannabe and man with a most unhealthy hero-fixation on one Julian Brennan. Now I thought I recognised the name as soon as he mentioned it but it didn't click immediately. Normally that might have caused an awkward social situation but old Jesan was so busy looking all misty-eyed and drooly that I don't think he noticed. Good ol' JB, 'Hero of the universe' according to Jesan. Funny, I seem to recall JB got smeared across half a sector by the Xenon.

Anyways, it appears Jesan has grand notions of following in his hero's footsteps and heading into Kha'ak space to end the Kha'ak threat once and for all. Being as that's almost, if not possibly slightly more, stupid than flying into a Xenon Core sector, I feel he's off to a really good start.

Now normally I'd be happy to just wish the poor lad well and leave him to go about organising his own imminent and unsavoury death, but the fate of my little Kestrel of oh, so long ago, is still somewhat of a sore point with me and the opportunity to batter some more of them little purple triangle guys does have a certain appeal, so I think I'll tag along for a bit. This seems to please him and he instructs me to follow him to Black Hole Sun, then goes shooting off at 200m/s. Good for him, not so good for me as I'm currently flying my Gannet with a top speed of 47m/s. Maybe I'll just jump and meet him there.

Arriving in BHS it seems the Xenon have decided to invade and Jesan is clearly eager to die heroically, as he's off to get them. Personally a J, a K and an assortment of P's and smaller fighters isn't something I'm inclined to tangle with up close but that's not stopping him. Fortunately while I may have the pace of a 1-legged hippo, I do have the reach so while they handle the fighters I just stay put and blow up the capitals and Ps with Hammer Torpedoes.

Job done and nothing to show for it more exciting than a handful of Banshee missiles and we're off to some top secret Argon sector hidden away someplace. Turns out it's not quite as secret as they might like to think though as I know it's there already, since it's one of the main routes I go pirating HCPs on. I wonder if they'll remember me.

Turns out no, or if they do they're choosing to turn a blind eye as I'm here 'for the greater good' or some rubbish like that. Anyway, I'm expecting a colossal fleet of warships all primed to jump into Kha'ak space and deliver righteous wrath upon the unclean. Instead the Split general coordinating things wants me to pick up a satellite and go drop it in Kha'ak space on a recon mission. A recon mission? In an M7M? See, now this is why the Split have never defeated the Boron. All the will, none of the know-how.

Arriving in K931 expecting nothing but trouble finger poised over the return jumpdrive button, my first thought is 'Ooh, pretty colours! The second, 'Yipe, that's a lot of fighters!' Fortunately fighters are all there are. I was fully expecting to arrive smack in the middle of a destroyer formation or something but there's not a single one to be seen, I guess they're all busy elsewhere kyoning the hell out of innocent Kestrels.

Fighters aren't much of a concern for me though, 2 salvos of Flails at a fighter N,S,E and W of me and the resulting hail of missiles wipes out everything within 20km. Sweet. Apparently I now just have to punt the AdvSat out of the cargo bay and then go scan that base and job done. Trouble is it's a good distance away and 47m/s is kind of slow. As I'm crawling towards it so fighters are spawning all around me. I suspect it would be more straightforward in a faster ship (probably cost me less in missiles too), but then I'd lose the 6GJ of shielding which is effectively making me invulnerable to them. Trade-off I guess. Many missiles later and job done, it's back to HQ for a debrief.

Apparently my next task will be to go and rescue Jesan's black box recorder from the remains of his ship. It turns out our JB-wannabe successfully emulated his hero by doing something incredibly stupid that got him killed.

I'm sure his parents must be proud and I suppose if nothing else, it benefits the gene pool.

Part 27 – That Sudden Sinking Feeling

Mission No.2, go fetch Jesan's black box recorder.

Apparently this entails another trip to Kha'ak space but apparently a different sector this time. On arrival I'm pleased to find myself surrounded by considerably fewer fighters than before but I'm slightly less pleased to spot a couple of their M6 ships off in the distance. Jesan has rather annoyingly got himself killed 40km or so away so I suspect those M6 will catch up to me a good while before I can get there.

Anyway, clearing the immediate area, I start making my way over to the recorder. As I get nearer so the inevitable fighters jump in all around me but they're of little concern with my shielding and armament. What is confusing me is why all my spare Flails keep shooting off in front of me every time I kill a Scout wing. Most odd.

Getting a little closer, I suddenly spot one of my Flails connect with something up ahead and there's a large explosion. A flash of inspiration hits me and I realise what's going on. Squash Mines! Thinking back, yes, that Split general mentioned something about Jesan being sent off to mine a Kha'ak sector. Apparently I'm busy driving headlong into a Squash minefield. Cool! Unfortunately they're not showing on my gravidar.

Suddenly it all becomes clear, I know what's happened here, I can see it all now. Jesan must have laid out this minefield as planned but being the evolutionary throwback that he is, he neglected to set the IFF transponders to friendly. Consequently as soon as he activated the mines they obligingly blew him sky high. Not so much KIA as killed because his brain was MIA. JB would be so proud.

Anyway, no time to concern myself with the mishaps of the exceptionally dead, I'm still 15km off the recorder with two M6 closing on me fast. A few Hammers at each should do the job quite adequately but apparently these are smart Kha'ak and after the first one takes a hit they quite handily shoot the rest of them down before they can connect. Not to be outdone though, I have another trick. Doing a quick mental calc a 5x Flail strike should be more than adequate for the job on the 5x200MJ shielded one, the one that's already taken a strike I'll send a 4x strike. Let's see if they're smart-arse enough to shoot that lot down.

Nope, not as smart as the fish! Apparently 5x might have been a bit overkill but the good thing about the Flail is it does like to make itself useful and go kill other things too. Bonus!

Black box recovered and it's head home time. I'm getting a little short of warheads for the moment so I'm hoping they don't have anything else lined up right this minute as I need to replenish my supplies a little. Happily, our esteemed general agrees with this idea so I can get back to more business-related matters for a while.

With the loss of 'Fatboy', I've been forced to pull one of my Mammoths out of dry-dock and re-commission it as a temporary Mobile Supply Base until I can reacquire a new Elephant. For the time being then, it's being given a new moniker on the advice of a wise man. Being a deal podgier than an Elephant though this one will for now be designated 'Slimboy Fat'.

A couple of ship recovery missions (only M5s this time) for exorbitant sums (which is the kind I prefer) and a taxi mission wind me up in Tharka's Sun. I'd been given 8+ hours to get the guy here which given that it was only three sectors away he could have just as easily EVA'd his way here and saved himself the 900k. Still it was a quick jaunt for me and his money is the same colour as anyone else's. A quick hunt around of the BBS nodes and it seems there's nothing particularly exciting apart from a SPP owner slightly concerned that he's annoyed some pirates and would I be so kind as to ask them to be nice when they come to nail him upside down to the wall. Fair enough, I've not much else to do but I'll need something more substantial for the job.

Not having anything else currently even remotely prepped for the task I decide to call in my M7 Carrack which I haven't actually ever got around to flying yet. Currently I've had him sat running sector defence and he's quite happily munched a few pirates that had a go at one of my troop transports. With 2GJ of shields and an IBL broadside, a simple defence mission should be no problem. This turns out to be a huge mistake.

I think the main problem centres around the simple fact that I have exactly zero experience of using anything larger than an M6. No, the M7M doesn't count, as those rely on the ability to not let anything get closer than 20km. Apparently there's a certain skill to piloting an M7 which it appears I'm completely lacking. I suspect my choice of weapons didn't really help but then I guess that's all part of the M7 know-how that I don't know-how.

Anyway, it all started off quite well, the initial wave of light fighters I picked off with the ever useful Wasp/Dragonfly mix and then I parked myself a few kilometres off from the gate, angled 45 degrees and waited for the inevitable few M6 to come through, straight into an IBL broadside in my estimation. And come they did, one after the other, into certain doom.

Apparently however, all this pirate activity had attracted the attention of one of the local military patrols, a Dragon and its attached fighter wing and so I found myself vying with the local defence force as to who could land the last hit on the approaching pirate forces. So focused was I on the job at hand that I'd completely failed to notice what was creeping up behind me; a TM. Ah, not just any TM but a Split Boa TM and apparently one that I'd either upset at some point or who hadn't got the memo that I'm now a Split 'Family Friend' and should only be treated with the appropriate degree of Split condescension for others, rather than be shot on sight.

My first inkling that something was up was a light tickling of PAC fire from someplace, followed by the sound of my guns returning fire. This apparently upset the guy who was shooting at me though given that he started it, I feel his reaction a little unfair. Unfortunately it also upset his escorting wing that promptly rounded on me and broke out the blow torches. This resulting calamity then apparently upset the Dragon defence force who seemed unimpressed with my claim of 'Hey, he started it!' and sided with the TM captain, flicked red and turned on me as well.

2GJ is still susceptible to PBG fire, especially when there's lots of it and if you haven't been making much effort to avoid incoming fire on the basis that 'you can take it' then that just compounds the problem. Also, anti-capital guns are not a particularly stellar load-out to be packing when the swarm of fighters hovering around you suddenly gets a strop on..

Realising this situation has deteriorated to a point where I'd prefer to be somewhere five sectors away I whack the jumpdrive button to RSLG-JD out of there. As my shields tick down into single digit figures and the jumpdrive countdown edges closer I take my first bite of hull damage. Instantly, up pipes Betty to cheerily inform me my jumpdrive just got fried!

Bitch...

Part 28 – Epilogue

Split after-action military reports state:

"*The pirate vessel M7 - 'Maggot' registered to one Squiddy McSquid, wanted in connection with the disappearance of the Raptor assigned to Family Pride Home-fleet in addition to other piracy-related crimes across the galaxy, was engaged today in Tharka's Sun while attempting to commit an act of piracy on a TM-class vessel and may have been aiding raiders in an attack on the local XL-SPP.*

Sources further indicate the pirate vessel was intercepted by a Split military patrol from Family Rhonkar who, in coordination with local police defence forces, engaged the rogue vessel.

Despite the enemy vessel putting up a spirited defence, superior Split firepower won the day and the enemy ship was destroyed with all hands.

Glory to Rhonkar!"