JUMP POINT

IN THIS ISSUE

GREETINGS, CITIZENS!

This month, **Jump Point** gives us a quick tutorial regarding best laid plans.

First, we had planned to run a couple of the new multicrew ship revamps for our Work In Progress, but both artists were pretty much unavailable, along with the final, lighted versions of their work . . . I hope to have them soon, but (as I am increasingly aware) I can make no promises. Well, except this: instead, you may take a stroll on the lighter, more refined side, with a promenade through the Million Mile High Club, and envision yourself partaking of its many amenities.

Second, as many of you know, I solicited questions about the user interface for an interview with Zane Bien. But Zane is in the middle of moving from Los Angeles to Manchester (CIG-LA to F42), while he tries to polish off several remaining projects, while the LA office is moving to larger digs. That's definitely better than "the dog ate my homework," so we have excused him from answering your questions until next issue – at least, that's our plan . . .

He *was* able to answer one question (thanks, BuzZz_Killer!) and he hopes to give the others his full attention as well, within the next month.

I have two items for this month's terms of the issue, with credit to Wikipedia for the POM explanation, and Cort Soest (ATX Senior Technical Artist) for the UDM description.

POM. "Parallax occlusion mapping is an enhancement of the parallax mapping technique. Parallax occlusion mapping is used to procedurally create 3D definition in textured surfaces, using a displacement map (similar to a topography map) instead of through the generation of new geometry."

I think this means it's a way of applying a skin that isn't flat – it has bumps and dips instead of being totally smooth. Or as Art Director Mark Skelton informs me, "it's like a normal map, but better."

UDM. Unified Detail Mapping is a technique used to help add a more detailed visual read to an art asset as the camera changes its relative distance from the item. While something like our tiling texture accomplishes this from a given distance, the look can break down as you near the asset. Thus we use UDMs to great effect to help break up tiling textures and gain a much more unique-looking object from any distance.

And that's enough of that for one issue. Art is definitely much more than a handful of crayons and a pad of paper nowadays. Congratulations to Cloud Imperium (three years since the successful completion of the initial crowd-funding, yesterday), and I'll see you again next month.

Hold on, it's gonna be a wild ride!

David

David.Ladyman@cloudimperiumgames.com

Million Mile High Club

Initial Overview

The Million Mile High Club was conceived early in the life of *Star Citizen*. Here is the original concept (which, as you know, often changes significantly as development proceeds):
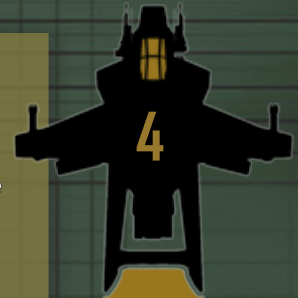
The Million Mile High Club is an exclusive club for the backers who pledged 10k or more through the Wing Commander or Completionist packages.

The reward definition was:

1 Million Mile High Club Ownership. Invite your guests to your private club! Exclusive access to the 1 Million Mile High Club, a private facility that you run in the game.
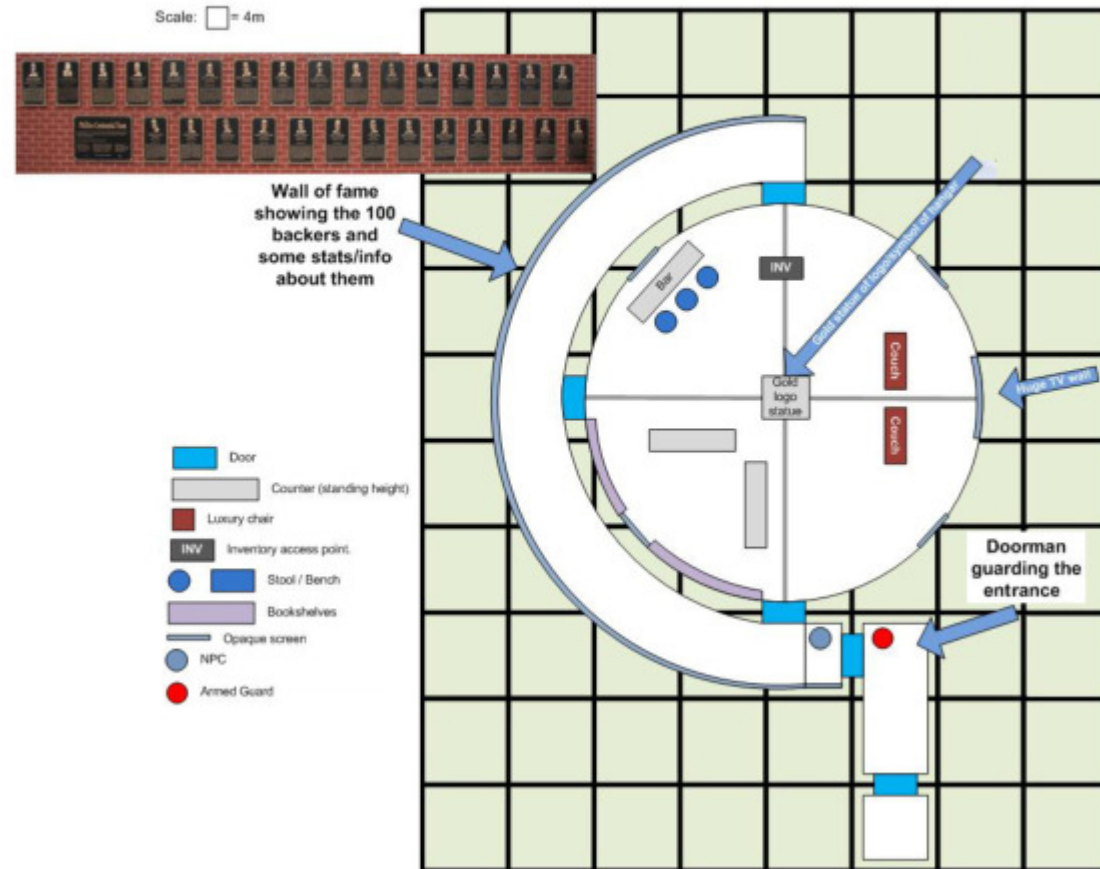
Original Description

For years, the Million Mile High Club has been impressing refined and sophisticated clientele with its unique blend of luxury and comfort. Designed by famed architectural firm Ido, this executive lounge features polished hardwood floors, a fully-stocked bar and two floor-to-ceiling aquariums. Whether hosting work associates, friends to watch the latest SataBall match, or pulling out the stops for an all-night affair, the Million Mile High Club is the perfect venue for any kind of occasion.

- Private lounge area for you and your friends

- Doorman greets each of your guests

- Socialize in main bar area or sports room

- Dedicated bartender serves drinks and keeps the room polished and pristine

- Jukebox with expandable music library allows you to set the mood

- Subtly blends tech with traditional wood finishes

- Invite entire organizations or individual players to visit

- Accessible to those you've invited even if you're offline

- Enter via any elevator on ArcCorp

- Show off trophies you've earned and souvenirs you've collected in ornate display cases

- Two wall-size aquariums you can fill with exotic fish, plants and other decorations that you find or purchase

- Supports up to 25 simultaneous players

Million Mile High Club

Scale: ☐ = 4m

Wall of fame showing the 100 backers and some stats/info about them

■ (blue)	Door
▭ (gray)	Counter (standing height)
■ (red)	Luxury chair
INV	Inventory access point.
● ■ (blue)	Stool / Bench
▭ (purple)	Bookshelves
▭	Opaque screen
● (blue)	NPC
● (red)	Armed Guard

Bar
INV
Gold logo statue
Couch
Couch
Huge TV wall

Doorman guarding the entrance

Corentin Chevanne, Art Director, Behaviour: Preliminary concept for Million Mile High Club specialty rooms

Chris Roberts: It should have a bouncer with a list, and a dance floor.

Maybe something for guilds? I wonder if we can do some custom screens for a guild? Ranks? Guests? Missions? (This is a longer-term thing but I could see the club begin a guild meeting place, etc.)

Can we get a wider view of the room? Where would you enter from the outside environment?

Who did this concept work?

Corentin C: The bouncer would be at the entrance.

We can definitely have a wider view. This is a first exploration concept, to set the mood and start discussions. Some others will come when the design would be refined/ whiteboxed.

We were thinking adding a large fish tank wall to break the "wall of fame."

The image was done by Jeremy Valerius, our internal concept artist.

Mark Skelton, Art Director, ATX: So in the interest of saving time and money, we propose that we repurpose the G-loc bar and make this space into a high-end industrial type bar. This is just a quick layout that BHVR did, but with some hero props and proper lighting, I feel we could finish this much faster than starting from scratch.

Phil Meller, Lead Designer, F42: Maybe it's me being a gaudy Brit, but I'm getting too much of a Man Cave vibe. I was expecting some sort of Russian Oligarch Dubai penthouse/cocktail bar. A display of wealth that'd make Donald Trump vomit with envy.

Mark S: That would be great, but reusing the assets we have will speed up this process by 10-fold.

Chris R: I do agree on the Man Cave aspect. I think we can still reuse the super modern elements from R&Y plus bar elements to have a high end personal club / space without feeling like it's the basement of a rapper's house in MTV cribs ...

Mark S: That will throw more time into it, since I'll have to rethink how those two things will coexist. Plus the R and Y hangar has a completely different material set which we will have to consolidate. That was the whole purpose of going this direction, to get it done quick and easy. Maybe we can come up with a few hero props to reinforce a more upscale vibe ...
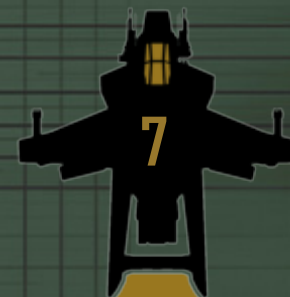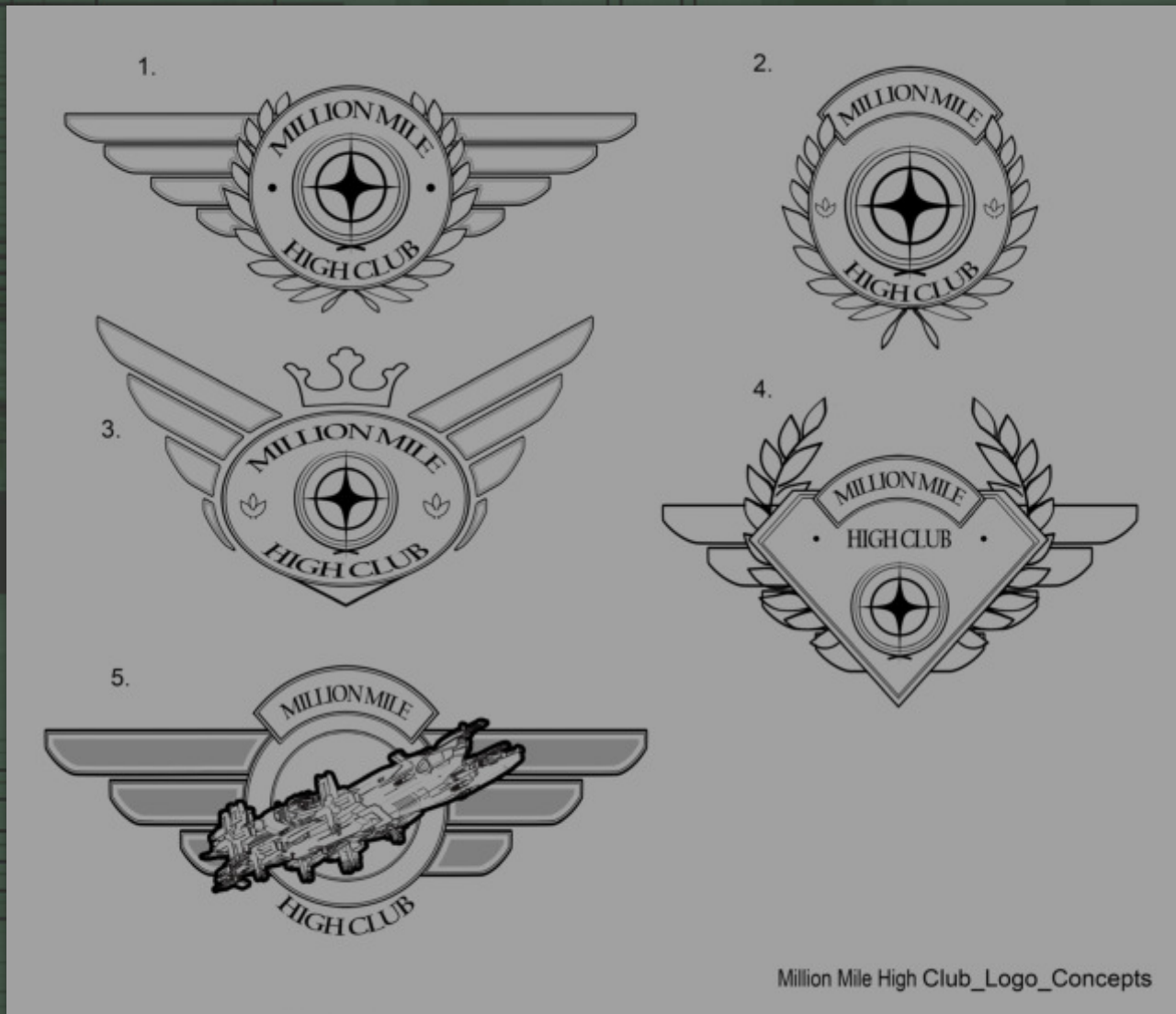
Mark S: Here's the quick paintover of where I want to go with the MMHC. If this is NOT what we want, we need to make the decision now to adjust it, since we are running out of time.

Chris R: Classy – I like it … (Although not so sure about the old school Million Mile High logo – kind of has an old school feel to it.)

Mark S: Ok. I can do some iterations of it.

Million Mile High Club_Logo_Concepts

Kenneth Fairclough, Associate Concept Artist, CIG-ATX: MMHC Logo Concepts. Quick studies to find a direction/look for the Million Mile High Club logo that will be featured on signs and wall/floor decals.

Will Weissbaum, Senior Writer: Not sure if it's intentional, number 1 looks a lot like the TM logo for the 'Mile High Club.'

Also, we may want to put 'Mile' and 'High' on the same line to avoid having it read 'High Club.'

Jason Hutchins, Senior Game Producer: Coincidence? I think not. :)

I think Will is right. High Club looks wrong, unless it's also a dispensary. I like #4, though. Enough of an homage to the MHC and incorporates the *SC* wreath. Nice work!

MILLION MILE HIGH CLUB_LOGO_CONCEPTS_02

1

4

2

5

3

6

Ken F: MMHC Logo second pass, addressing feedback to make logos more scifi and fit better with the room.

Mark S: I'm digging 6. Clean and straightforward.

Chris R: I like 4 but I worry it says combat too much — what if you are a pacifist trader?

Perhaps try a version of 6, but with an 890 Jump instead of the rising star (so mimicking 4 a bit).

10

WORK IN PROGRESS

Ken F: Alternate version of the MMHC logo, less combat oriented featuring the suggested 890 Jump. The top-down silhouette of the 890 in this scenario is an interesting nod to NASA mission patches and the retro "rocket ship" shape.

Chris R: Very cool! Its between 2 & 3 for me! Perhaps 3?

Mark S: Yeah, #3 for me.

Mark S: This is the main sculpture for the MMHC. It will hang over the dance floor. I figured the wood would match the dominate wood texture in the rest of the club.

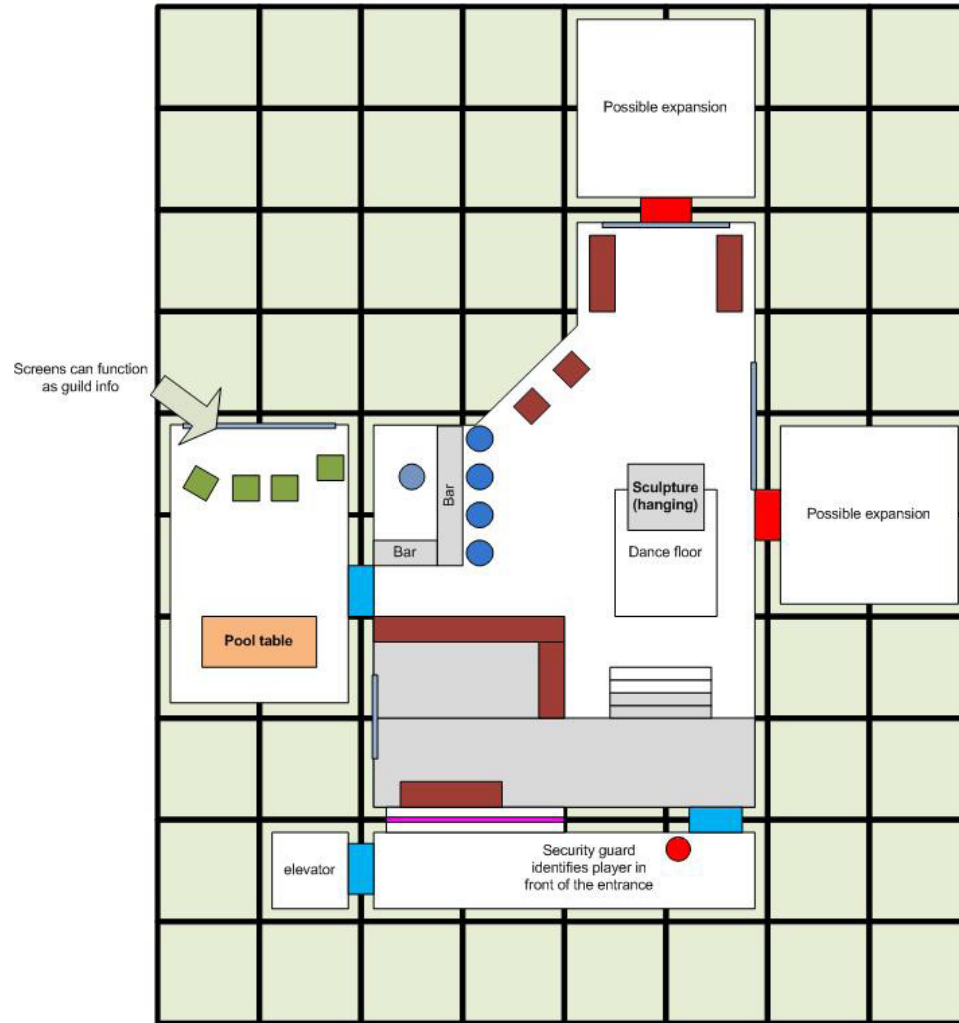**Chris R:** Cool. Dig it!

MMHC_Hanging Sculpture_Concept

RESTING

IN MOTION

MMHC_Paintover Concept

Mark S: Paintover for CitizenCon.

Chris R: Looks good to me.

Million Mile High Club

Scale: ☐ = 1m

This page and the remaining three pages illustrate the current status of the clubroom, but it will continue to be developed and polished.

Possible expansion

Screens can function as guild info

Bar

Bar

Sculpture (hanging)

Dance floor

Possible expansion

Pool table

elevator

Security guard identifies player in front of the entrance

Door (normal)	ITEM	Physical item(s) on display, hung on wall or table	Luxury chair	Luxury desk	Gatling sentry gun
Door (optional)		Table with vertical see-through screen on top.	Executive chair	Executive desk	NPC
Door (locked)		Counter (standing height)	Comfy chair	Stool / Bench	Armed Guard
Door (instance)	INV	Inventory access point	Table	Bookshelves	Scanner (walk in)
Window	TM	Teller machine	Information Center	Cabinet	Opaque screen

Mark S: MMHC WIP – The Million Mile High Club is an exclusive club for the 100 backers who pledged 10k or more through the Wing Commander or Completionist packages.

Mark S: Looks great, guys! Notes:

- The rug in the front hallway should be red. If we're going to do it, let's go all the way. Although I would desaturated the red a bit.

- Fix Murray Cup video.

- Love the glass chandelier. Very nice weight to it now.

- The mural behind the bar (sky dock) reads like shadows. I feel like we should experiment with another color besides grey.

Patrick Thomas, Lead Artist (PU): Damn! that looks incredible. Yeah. A red rug seems to be a better feel.

Dave Haddock, Lead Writer: Very cool. I love the floor-to-ceiling aquarium.

Could we swap out the mural behind the bar as opposed to changing the color? It feels a little weird to have a picture of the Retribution being constructed in a club.

Mark S: Sure. Do you have any suggestions?
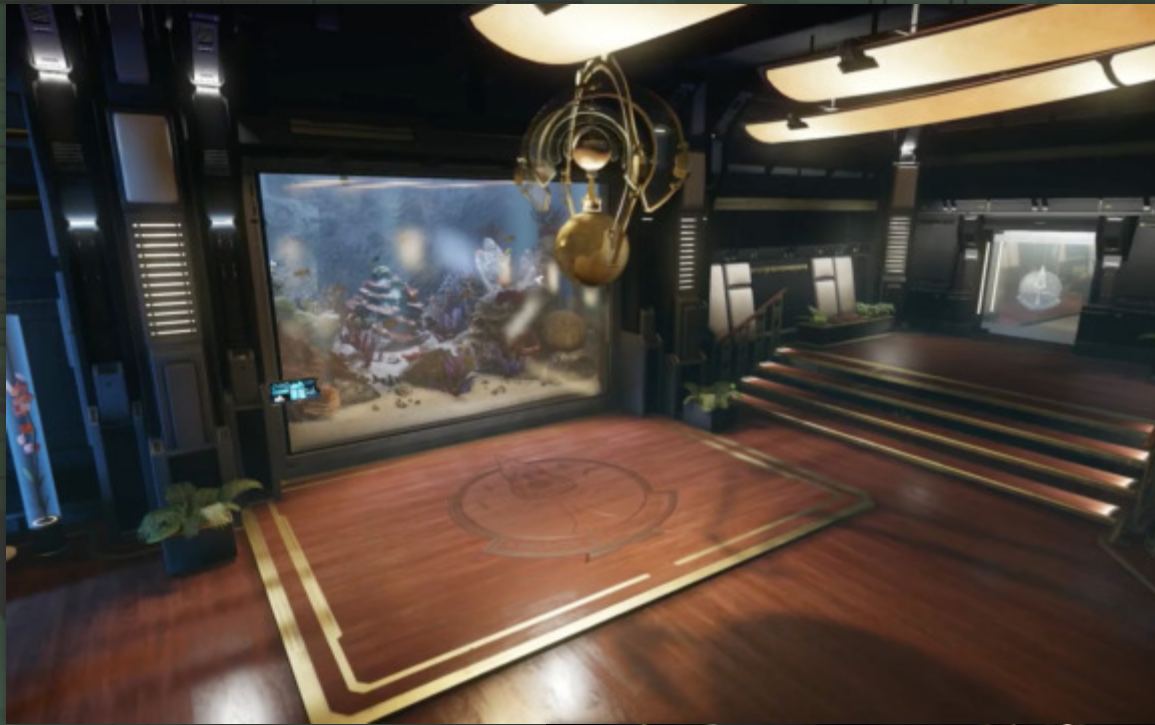
Dave H: Sure, I like breaking up the image and making it look more abstract.

Mark S: Groovy.

Chris R: Looks really, really good! Great stuff!

I wonder what we can do on the bartender / bouncer side to give this a little more life. Have an interaction to enter. Or the bartender asks you what drink he can make or discusses the latest SataBall results ...

Darrell Timms, Senior Designer, S42: Hey, I can implement a bar-man with a conversation tree, if someone wants to give me a script.

APOCALYPSE ARMS
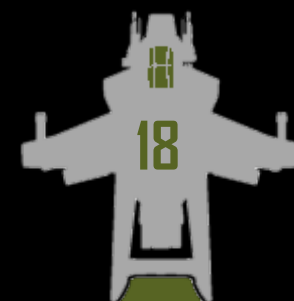
The Crate

Dalton Colabello could never have predicted how drastically his life would change because of one inauspicious crate. A construction magnate with Credits to burn, Colabello's passion for collecting antique weapons led him to buy a strange crate at a military surplus auction in Cestulus. Inside, Colabello found prototype parts for ship weapons unlike anything he had ever seen. The crate's contents fascinated Colabello and started him on a journey that would end with the creation of Apocalypse Arms.

After the auction, Colabello returned home and unsuccessfully attempted to reconstruct the weapons. Though he couldn't get the prototypes working, he was captivated by their unique design and potential power. Colabello quickly became obsessed with uncovering their creator. Comms with the military warehouse only turned up one clue; the crate had been in storage since 2792. The year the Messer regime finally fell.

Fueled by the possibility that these weapons might be a lost part of history, Colabello hired private investigators to chase the digital trail and took the weapons to numerous experts, hoping that one of them could provide answers. Eventually, a Messer scholar at Reis' Carey University found an archived datalog of shipments into and out of the Davien warehouse where Colabello had purchased the crate. A cross-reference against the extensive log scored a hit; the crate had been sent there from an address in Newcastle, Magnus.

The Elusive Engineer

Much to Colabello's disappointment, a Casaba Outlet currently occupied the Newcastle address. Doubting that the fine purveyors of affordable fashion briefly made an inventive and bold set of ship weapons, Colabello searched the site's 2792 property log. Records revealed that Genly Engineering Solutions was renting the space when the crate was shipped to Cestulus. Still, answers did not come easy. Outside of the name on the rental agreement, Genly did not seem to exist.

Years passed without any further information coming to light. Requests to the government uncovered nothing. The lack of progress sunk Colabello into a deep depression and he even considered selling the weapons. Yet his curiosity could not be extinguished. Hopeful that a brute force method would bear results, Colabello went to the Ark to meticulously checked Magnus' 2792 census by hand, which, after months of pouring over names, led him to discover one Genly Maupin. Colabello was disappointed to learn that Genly was only six years old in 2792, but since he was still Colabello's best lead in years, he kept digging and found out that Genly's mother was Juliet Maupin, a former Aegis Dynamics engineer.

Months later, Colabello found the great-granddaughter of Juliet Maupin living in Lo and paid her a visit. He showed her the prototypes and asked if she had any idea if they were her great-grandmother's creation. She explained that she had heard stories from her mother about the awards her great-grandmother had won for her scanner designs, but nothing about weapons. However, she was happy to allow Colabello to examine Juliet's old notes. There, in an unlabeled folder, he found what he had sought for so long: Juliet's original designs for the prototypes and a journal describing their creation.

The Unknown Genius

Prior to designing the weapons that would eventually inspire Apocalypse Arms, Juliet Maupin worked as a lead engineer for the titan of Cestulus industry, Aegis Dynamics. She led the team responsible for the 2783 revamped Retaliators still coveted by today's "bomber boys." Following that success, Maupin was introduced to Sylvain Evans, a high-ranking member of the UEE military. Evans enlisted Maupin for a classified project to produce a new line of powerful and advanced combat systems for the Messer government. Maupin leapt at the opportunity to design weapons with the freedom only government funding could provide.

In 2790, Linton Messer XI felt his Empire crumbling. From without, the ongoing Xi'An cold war and the emergent Vanduul threat were exacting a sustained toll, while from within, the death of Anthony Tanaka had begun to transform the dissenters among the public from mere activists to operational revolutionaries. Messer XI knew his time was limited unless he created a strategic advantage, i.e. bigger and better guns.

Evans provided Maupin with a high-tech lab and an able team in a non-descript building in Newcastle. To keep their work secret, the project was given the codename Genly Engineering Solutions in honor of Maupin's young son. Building off the work she had done at Aegis, Maupin developed prototypes for a ballistic Gatling gun and a mass driver, the weapons that would eventually find their way into Colabello's crate.

In 2792, the military picked up the prototypes with the intention of shipping them to Kilian for testing. During their journey, footage of the Massacre of Garron II leaked to the public and the entire UEE military was mobilized to quell the rebellion. The crate containing the weapons was offloaded into the Cestulus warehouse and forgotten until Colabello bought it well over a century later.

After the collapse of the Messer regime, Juliet Maupin grew concerned that her association with the corrupt government would be revealed. She swore off weapon design and fled with her family to the Corel System. Eventually, Maupin went to work at a Lo engineering firm where she worked on a project that built advanced scanning machines used to detect contraband along the UEE-Banu border. Many of the scanners still in use today are based off her designs.

Maupin passed away in 2862 never knowing that her greatest contribution to the world was still to come.

Apocalypse Arms

After unraveling the mystery, Colabello knew what to do next. He purchased the original design documents from Maupin's great-granddaughter, sold his construction business and poured all his assets into launching Apocalypse Arms, a name inspired by a line in Maupin's journals that described her desire to "build guns that could overcome any situation … even the apocalypse."

With the full designs in hand, Colabello was finally able to get the prototypes working and the first line of Apocalypse Arms branded munitions hit the market in 2913. Though updated to take advantage of modern technology, most of what Maupin had originally conceived over a hundred years earlier remained untouched, especially the weapons' unique style and overpowering performance.

In a bold move, Apocalypse Arms' inaugural sales campaign did not shy away from saying the guns were built for the Messers. Many found the strategy obscene, but sales proved it to be effective. Colabello went on any Spectrum show, whether hosted by friend or foe, to talk about the weapons' history, and how these innovative and powerful guns were saved from being used by a despot. From his perspective, Apocalypse Arms was a Human success story.

Today, the specter of the Messers still hangs over Apocalypse Arms and has driven some to shun their products. Many more automatically associate the name with its prevalence in chaotic conflict zones like Nexus IV and Charon III. Still, the guns' quality and effectiveness cannot be denied, and over the years, the brand has built a loyal fan base. Using Maupin's innovative designs as inspiration, Colabello has hired new engineers to continue to expand AA's catalogue. All of this makes Apocalypse Arms one of the more interesting, and deadly, manufacturers in the Empire.

STRIFE MASS DRIVER

APOCALYPSE ARMS

UI

Retaliator Cockpit Layout

As promised here is an interview with Zane Bien, Global UI Creative Director. A very short interview. BuzZz_Killer submitted the first questions, so it's fitting that we use one of his. More to come – the plan is next month.

Zane: Greetings folks, we were all quite ecstatic about how well-received the recently shown UI update was, and we've been reading through all of the various discussions, concerns, and feedback that was received on the video. It's always exciting when we get a chance to tease at cool new features like this, and be able to gauge the level of interest this early on in the development process. With that said, what you saw was only our initial barebones implementation and is only the tip of the iceberg of what's to come in terms of interacting with ship systems. Make sure to stay tuned on this front.

Apart from implementing the new ships UI, we've also been working in conjunction with the PU design team to map out and design the flow of what will become the initial version of the shopping UI. A lot of work has gone into making sure that

the UI is able to elegantly handle the numerous different use-cases that you may encounter when shopping for various types of items, whether it's for clothing, weapons, commodities, ships, and more.

With that out of the way, let's take one question, and then I really do need to go and pack:

From BuzZz_Killer: *What are the primary differences between the pilot's screen setup and those found on other crew stations?*

As the primary concern for a pilot is flight and combat, a pilot's seat generally has a numerous amount of smaller configurable displays that are carefully positioned so as to relay as much critical information to the pilot as possible without impeding on his/her visibility of the outside environment. In contrast to a dedicated crew station, a pilot's screen arrangement is set up to act more as a cursory overview of everything, but less verbose and comprehensive than one would find at a dedicated station.

In terms of the screens themselves, a pilot will generally have two primary multi-function displays (MFDs) available. By default, one is geared toward ship systems management, and the other toward target information. These will eventually be configurable to display either/or. The MFDs serve as the primary window for ship systems interaction / management for a pilot.

A pilot seat also features a multitude of what we call "support screens." Support screens are read-only displays that sit closer within the pilot's immediate field of view, each of which can be configured to display a multitude of information depending on the current needs of the pilot, such as shield status, power generation, current emissions, target identification and much more.

A pilot seat will also feature one or two "annunciator" displays. These work in much the same way that an annunciator panel in a modern aircraft works. When there is an issue with a particular subsystem or component on the

A TYPICAL PILOT SEAT'S LAYOUT

FOCUSABLE SCREEN
SUPPORT SCREEN / OTHER
PHYSICAL CONTROLS
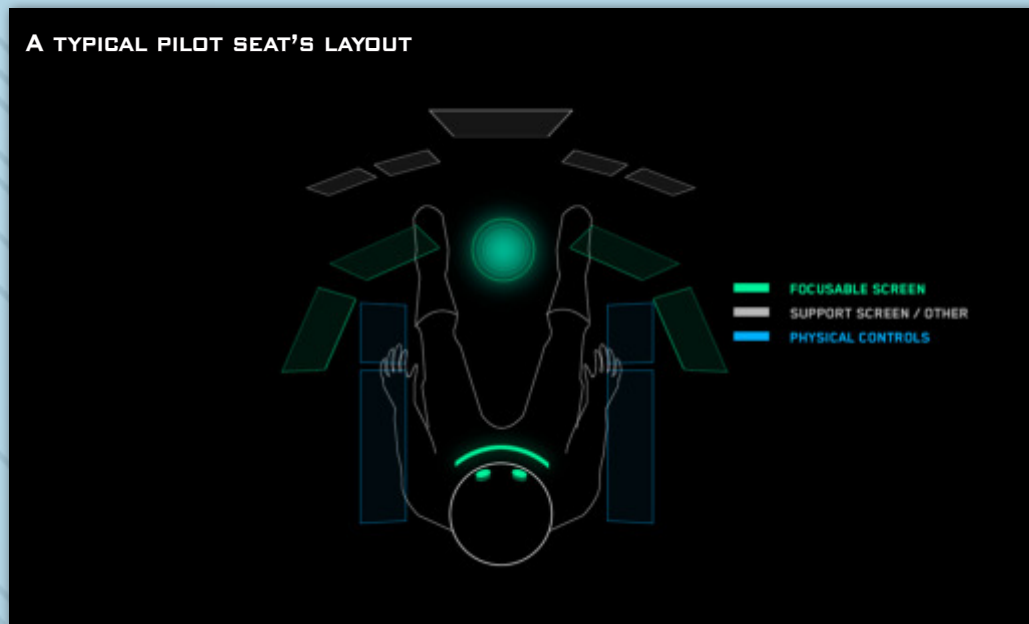
ship, the annunciator will illuminate in order to indicate, succinctly, that there is a problem, and direct the pilot to investigate further.

Then of course, a pilot will have the HUD and radar, which is pretty self-explanatory.

In contrast to a pilot seat, a dedicated crew station features a single, large 16:9 MFD which occupies more of the screen real-estate and is designed to house more comprehensive functionality than found in the smaller pilot MFDs.

In larger capital class ships, a station may have these large MFDs arranged in multi-screen setups, and we could very well end up with stations with dual or even triple screen arrangements, which a crew member can also configure individually to suit his/her multi-tasking preferences.

More to come next month!

A CREW STATION WITH A SINGLE LARGE DISPLAY

16:9 Workspace

- FOCUSABLE SCREEN
- SUPPORT SCREEN / OTHER
- PHYSICAL CONTROLS
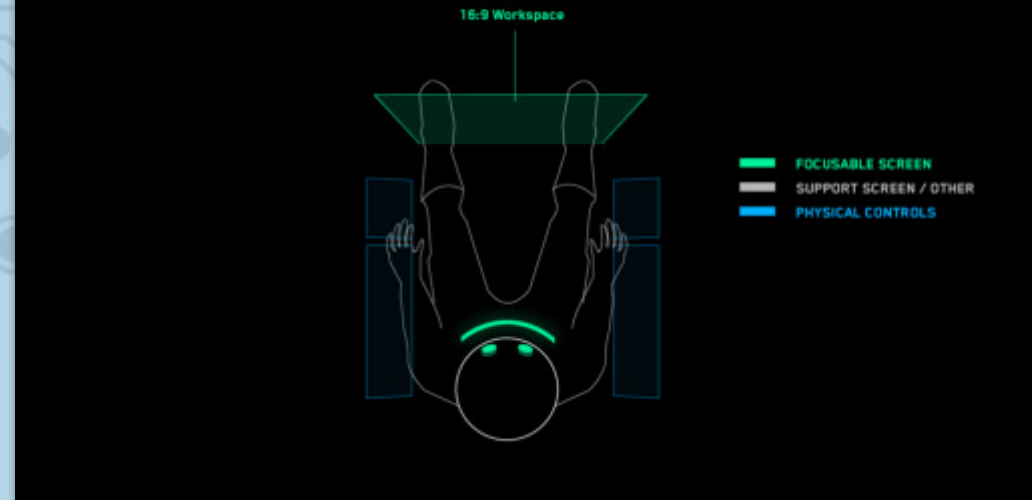
A CREW STATION WITH MULTIPLE LARGE DISPLAYS

16:9 Workspace   16:9 Workspace

- FOCUSABLE SCREEN
- SUPPORT SCREEN / OTHER
- PHYSICAL CONTROLS
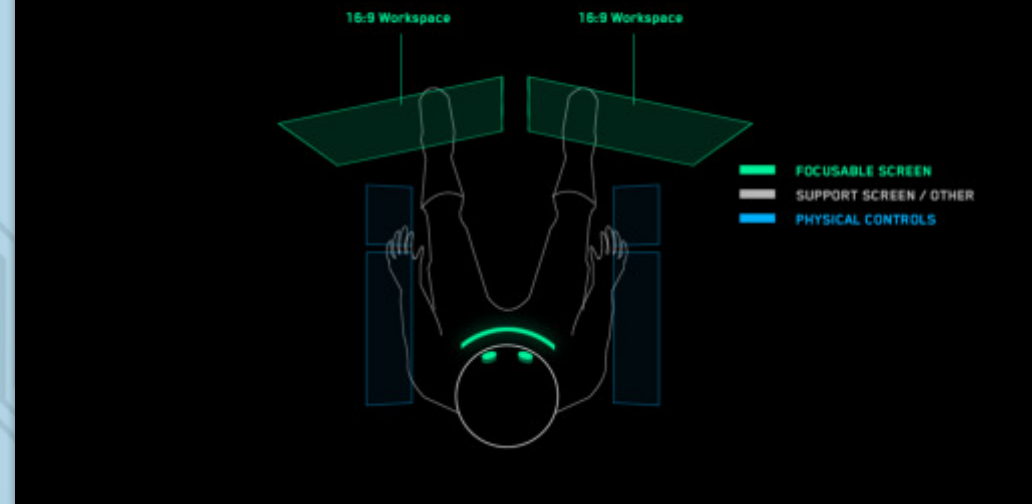
Spotlight: Karl Jones, Lead Systems Designer, F42: Update

Some big, underlying systems are getting real focus now, and many are starting to get their first proper layer of implementation. Getting these systems designed, documented, signed-off, messaged and integrated (and sometimes enforced) is a huge team effort, as they touch all disciplines and often have knock-on effects throughout the entire game.

The design of many systems is well underway, but we have to be careful not to roll something out before it's great. With all good systems, we need these base layers to be correct. If your foundations are good, anything you build on top should be solid. Build on top of a bad foundation, and you're in trouble.

Ship UI

The base functionality of the ship UI system is now being integrated into all ships across the game, starting with the Retaliator, Constellation, Cutlass and Avenger. The first layer of this system encompasses the important, high-level functions such as power management, shield control and weapons overview. Initially, some sections of an MFD (multifunction display) screen will be 'OFFLINE', but this is just until the 'under the hood' code hooks can be implemented and we can wire up the functionality properly. Over time new functions will be introduced to allow players greater control over their ships' systems and enable them to carry out new, sometimes ship-specific tasks (such as mining).

Right now, we'll be using the single UI aesthetic for all ships (based on the AEGIS ship manufacturer), but as time goes on we'll be creating a unique UI aesthetic for each ship manufacturer, and the screens and interfaces within the respective ships will adopt these visuals.

To complement the ship screen UI, we'll be introducing the new screen focus functionality. This allows you to quickly and fluidly go from your default, in-game view to focusing and interacting with your MFDs (and other important screens) and back again with a couple of simple button taps. Subsequent button taps will toggle the focus through the focus-able screens, meaning you will always be able to quickly access the important areas of your ship's UI, whenever you like.

Component System

We've recently been working on a system which will be the foundation for how the various ship components fit together. This includes everything about how these components are linked, how they interact, how they can affect each other, how and what they feed and draw from each other, how they're upgraded, how big they are, how they're physicalized, what ships can use them, their limitations/restrictions … etc. A huge amount needs to be considered when designing a huge, important system such as this.

Another layer to the component system is the sub-component system. Depending on various factors (type, size, cost, etc.), a component may have one or more sub-component bays. These are physical voids within the component that allow for the insertion of sub-components. Sub-components will augment the attributes of the main component, normally boosting it in a specific area. For example, you may choose to install a coolant rod sub-component into a

THIS IS AN ABSOLUTELY UNOFFICIAL AND TENTATIVE VERSION OF A SHIP'S SYSTEMS FLOW.
THIS FLOWCHART IS VERY TENTATIVE!

Legend:
- POWER
- AVIONICS
- FUEL
- AMMO
- HEAT
- THRUST

Components shown: COUNTER MEASURE AMMO BOX, COUNTER MEASURE LAUNCHER, BALLISTIC AMMO BOX, BALLISTIC WEAPON, GIMBAL MOUNT, ENERGY WEAPON, EXTERNAL SOURCE, MISSILE RACK, PYLON MOUNT, BALLAST, WC, TC, ADS, RADAR, CPU, AVIONICS MOTHERBOARD, POWER PLANT, GRAVITY GENERATOR, GRAVITY, SHIELD GENERATOR, SHIELD EMITTER, LIFE SUPPORT, O2, SELF DESTRUCT, BATTERY, QUANTUM DRIVE, JUMP DRIVE, ENGINE, NOZZLE, THRUST, QUANTUM FUEL TANK, FUEL TANK, COOLER, FUEL PORT, FUEL INTAKE, EXTERNAL SOURCE, RADIATOR

BEHIND THE SCENES

shield generator in order to reduce heat emissions, increasing your ship's overall 'Stealth' stat.

The component system we're creating is huge, intricate and very open ended/expandable. A lot of care and attention has gone into making sure that the way components interact and the effect they have on one another is very plausible. So much so that someone joked that if you 3D printed one of these ships, it would probably get you into space. (NOTE: It *almost* certainly won't; please don't try it.)

The component system is working out great in our ships, so it's now going to be rolled onto other areas of the game, such as the player character's suit/armour. This means that the player's character-based attributes and abilities will be able to be modified and upgraded via the customisation of the various components within the armour.

A SMALL COOLER, WITH A CYLINDRICAL SUBCOMPONENT IN PLACE (SEE INSET)

WEN-CASSEL PROPULSION
SMALL COOLER UNIT
CONCEPT v3 - JUNE 30TH

THAT SUBCOMPONENT COULD BE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING. LIST IS VERY TENTATIVE!

EFFICIENCY	PROTECTION	EMMISIONS
POWER CONDUIT Power Conduits allow the component to perform better for the same amount of power.	**CAPACITOR** Capacitors help protect components by absorbing harmful or unwanted energy.	**PHASE ARRAY** Phase Arrays reduce EM Signatures by altering the frequency they are emitted at.
COOLANT ROD Coolant Rods enable the component to use less coolant.	**EM INSULATOR** EM Insulators protect components from distortion damage by absorbing EM radiation.	**HEAT SINK** Heat Sinks reduce the IR Signature emitted by the component.
AUXILIARY DRIVE Auxiliary Drives enable knocked out or offline components to boot up faster.	**KINETIC BARRIER** Kinetic Barriers help protect components by absorbing the damage from incoming ballistic fire.	**THIS LIST IS VERY TENTATIVE!**

Spotlight: Rob Reininger, Senior Technical Designer, ATX, PU Team: Attention, SC Shoppers!

Hey, Citizens! We at CIG are happy to give you a glimpse into one of the several core features that are on the horizon for the persistent universe. Shopping! Now while I can't give a specific date as to when this will be released, I can say that it will be coming to you soon. On that note, we wanted to give you some insight as to what you can expect for its first release and some of the cool things that will be coming online as we move forward with the overall shopping experience. We wanted to share which shops would be coming online as we launch this feature, how the shopping will generally work, and what features we'll be adding to help support the shopping experience. So let's start with what shops are in the queue.

Casaba Outlets, a clothing store, will be the first location that will have an active shopping experience. It will offer civilian clothing items that you would expect to see in most any department store. Pants, shirts, jackets, shoes, hats and gloves are among the initial list of items and it will eventually carry additional items like glasses, jewelry and other types of casual accessories. The next few shops, which will require an up-and-coming feature we refer to as "Hangar Storage" are: **Cubby Blast**, your personal weapons dealer for all your FPS weapon needs. The **Medical Unit**, which carries healing-based items used in FPS as well as serving as a local respawning location. **Dumper's Depot**, where all of your ship components will be located. And finally, **Astro Armada**, for when you're feeling like you just want to fly something new …

So how's it going to work? While we've tried to standardize the shopping experience across the board, with the wide variety of items we intend to offer, and the sheer enormity of some of these items, the experience may vary slightly from shop to shop. Casaba, for instance, will show your avatar in 3rd person so you can preview the items before you commit to the purchase. On the other hand, places like Dumper's Depot and Astro Armada, which don't have the physical space to show all of the equipment and ships in their establishment, will require you to use their "Sales Kiosks" to browse through their selections. However, when selling equipment back to a vendor, all sales will be done at that store's sales counter (typically denoted by a sales rep that will stand behind a counter). In stores that can house their items internally you will be able to walk around to the various display racks and investigate what each area within the shop has to offer (whether it be through AR Mode or by interacting with each display to browse the items). In addition to being able to preview the item's details by viewing it in AR Mode, interacting with an object in AR Mode will fast track the purchase interface by automatically selecting the inspected item for your convenience.

For Casaba's initial release, you will be limited to replacing the items that you're currently wearing. However, this feature will be short-lived, as the concept of Hangar Storage is already in development while we're working the kinks out of the shopping experience. When Hangar Storage comes online, from the "Purchase Interface" you will be able to choose whether to send the items you're buying back to your hangar, to a specific ship, or if possible, equip the new item immediately (which will send any item being replaced back to your hangar storage). All in all, we're very excited to get these new features into your hands as soon as possible, so keep an eye out for an official release date and we'll see you in the 'verse.

BEHIND THE SCENES

28

BEHIND THE SCENES

INVENTORY > CHECKOUT > CONFIRMATION

ITEM NAME	EQUIPPED	PRICE ▲
EZ-CARE INNER STRETCH SLIM FIT	YES	260 UEC
GENERIC WHITE TEE	NO	325 UEC
HANGAR MEN'S COOL 18	NO	485 UEC
BILLY REID 'SHILOH' SHAWL COLLAR PU	YES	580 UEC
VANDUUL MOCK-ARMOR	NO	900 UEC
PAUL FREDRICK MEN'S WOOL / CASH.	NO	1,500 UEC
DIAMOND-LINED SWEATER	NO	40,000 UEC

DELIVERY DESTINATION:
ON PERSON

STOW EQUIPPED:
CONSTELLATION 003

CHECKOUT

CURRENT BALANCE	25,000 UEC
TRANSACTION COST	580 UEC
AFTER-PURCHASE BALANCE	24,420 UEC
SLOTS AVAILABLE AT DESTINATION	1
SLOTS NEEDED AT DESTINATION	1

DETAILS

BILLY REID 'SHILOH' SHAWL COLLAR PU
580 UEC

Nam ultrices pulvinar augue pretium convallis. Aliquam placerat blandit urna, eget elementum lacus. Morbi commodo, magna sed semper sodales, quam lectus viverra erat, id rutrum diam sem sed est.

MANUFACTURER	BILLY REID
TYPE	PULL-OVER
ITEM PORTS	6
FIELD	VALUE

As we were already wearing a shirt, we need to choose a destination to stow the replaced shirt. The first destination in the list however, does not have enough space to stow it.

STOW EQUIPPED:
- CONSTELLATION 003
- CONSTELLATION 004
- RETALIATOR 001
- RETALIATOR 002
- MY CUTLASS BLACK
- BLACKBIRD
- ENTERPRISE

DETAILS

BILLY REID 'SHILOH' SHAWL COLLAR PU
580 UEC

Nam ultrices pulvinar augue pretium convallis. Aliquam placerat blandit urna, eget elementum lacus. Morbi commodo, magna sed semper sodales, quam lectus viverra erat, id rutrum diam sem sed est.

MANUFACTURER	BILLY REID
TYPE	PULL-OVER
ITEM PORTS	6
FIELD	VALUE

We will choose a suitable destination to stow the replaced shirt.

INVENTORY > CHECKOUT > CONFIRMATION

ITEM NAME	EQUIPPED	PRICE ▲
EZ-CARE INNER STRETCH SLIM FIT	YES	260 UEC
GENERIC WHITE TEE	NO	325 UEC
HANGAR MEN'S COOL 18	NO	485 UEC
BILLY REID 'SHILOH' SHAWL COLLAR PU	YES	580 UEC
VANDUUL MOCK-ARMOR	NO	900 UEC
PAUL FREDRICK MEN'S WOOL / CASH.	NO	1,500 UEC
DIAMOND-LINED SWEATER	NO	40,000 UEC

DELIVERY DESTINATION:
ON PERSON

STOW EQUIPPED:
RETALIATOR 001

CHECKOUT

CURRENT BALANCE	25,000 UEC
TRANSACTION COST	580 UEC
AFTER-PURCHASE BALANCE	24,420 UEC
SLOTS AVAILABLE AT DESTINATION	1
SLOTS NEEDED AT DESTINATION	1

Everything looks good. We will proceed to checkout our item.

DETAILS

BILLY REID 'SHILOH' SHAWL COLLAR PU
580 UEC

Nam ultrices pulvinar augue pretium convallis. Aliquam placerat blandit urna, eget elementum lacus. Morbi commodo, magna sed semper sodales, quam lectus viverra erat, id rutrum diam sem sed est.

MANUFACTURER	BILLY REID
TYPE	PULL-OVER
ITEM PORTS	6
FIELD	VALUE

« CHECKOUT SCREEN »

We continue our purchase flow on the checkout screen.

THIS IS AN ABSOLUTELY UNOFFICIAL AND TENTATIVE VERSION OF THE STORE EXPERIENCE.
THIS FLOWCHART IS VERY TENTATIVE!

BEHIND THE SCENES

NEXUS

SYSTEM

LAGO

UDS-2445-3-09, Hathor, the "Crossroads of Crime"; the Nexus System has been called many things during its long history. Nexus is just the latest and most obvious moniker of the bunch. Located at a strategically important junction of jump points, Nexus was a colloquial name for the system first used in the 28th century in reference to its role connecting lawless systems.

When the UEE reclaimed the system in 2931, government officials began an initiative to use the system's older name, Hathor, as an attempt to erase its associations with pirates. However, the name was too embedded in the Empire's lexicon to be changed, and the effort was almost universally mocked. Eventually the UEE conceded and officially adopted the system's name as Nexus.

In fact, its name has always been a strong indication of the current condition of the system. Many believe the history of Nexus can be best understood through the various names it bore over the ages.

UDS-2445-3-09

Nexus was discovered on March 9, 2445, by Dominic Thapa, a UNE Navy pilot probing the then military classified Cathcart System for new jump points. It was the military that assigned the system its first name — UDS-2445-3-09. Pathfinders entered the system shortly thereafter to find a bluish-white A-type main-sequence star, five planets and a mineral-rich asteroid belt.

The UNE's first assessment of the system saw potential, but also a problem. The problem was that Nexus could only be accessed through Cathcart, which was a restricted military system at the time. Rather than risk opening Cathcart to civilian traffic, the military initially tried to make use of the system themselves – terraforming Nexus IV and even experimenting with smog-planet terraforming on Nexus II. Unfortunately, around this time the government started facing a significant budget shortfall, and the expensive development of Nexus was quickly placed on the chopping block. The military still did not want to allow access to Cathcart, so a compromise was settled upon. By allowing limited access to a single corporation, strict control could still be maintained, so the UNE sold Nexus' mining rights to the Hathor Group for a considerable sum, which was immediately used to help fill the budget gap. Some historians believe the decision helped the ruling Universalist party maintain their majority in the close elections of 2468.

The Hathor Group

The Hathor Group purchased all mining rights to the Nexus System in January of 2468. It was an unprecedented deal that centuries later would be the inspiration for the UEE to do something similar in the Stanton System. The subsequent lack of government and public oversight allowed the Hathor Group to run the system as they saw fit. The company's control was so ubiquitous that astronomical charts from the 26th century referred to it as the Hathor System.

While Hathor was in charge, few laws were enforced. The military presence in neighboring Cathcart had dwindled as that system was converted into a dumping ground, and as long as minerals were mined, and profits made, the Hathor Group didn't care what their employees and contractors did outside of work. Nexus became known for gam-

bling, rampant violence and innumerable illicit activities. Crime became the system's only viable economic engine outside of mining.

Illegal activity only intensified with the subsequent discovery of three additional jump points and increased traffic from neighboring unclaimed systems. Gangs began to stalk the flight paths between the jump points and planets, preying on any ship they found. That, combined with the Hathor Group's stranglehold on the system, dissuaded most people from visiting and most businesses from setting up operations.

Meanwhile, the Hathor Group continued to rip resources out of Nexus III, Nexus IV and the Elcibre Belt until the profit margin began to dip below their ballooning security budget. The Hathor Group officially abandoned the system in 2672, leaving behind an inhospitable wasteland, scarred by centuries of mining and lacking basic civilian infrastructure. It should come as no surprise what happened next.

The Crossroads of Crime

After the Hathor Group left, the strip-mined surface of Lagos (in particular) provided perfect cover for criminal packs to move into the system and establish operations. The system's population swelled and led some to believe it could challenge Spider as the center of the underworld. It was during this era that the name Nexus was first used to describe its role as a criminal system hub, earning it an additional tag: the "Crossroads of Crime."
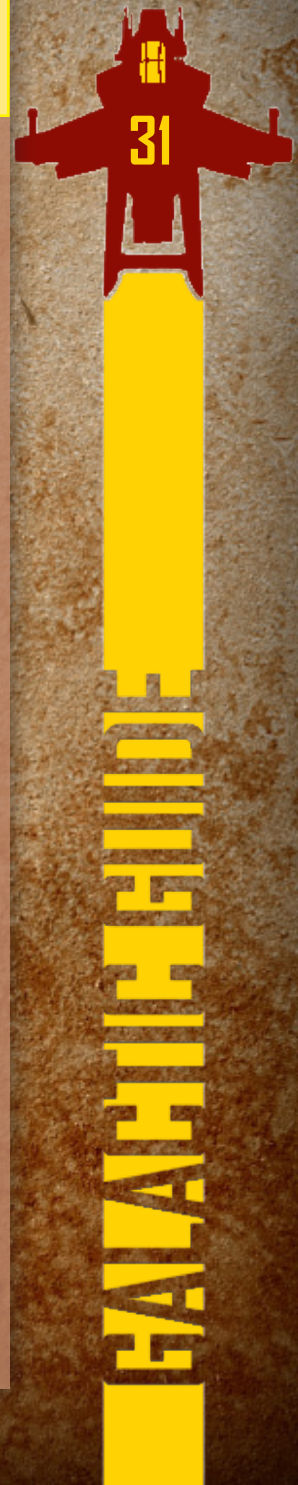
For decades, the UEE allocated minimal resources to curb the system's illegal activity. Then in 2931, when Dean Kellar's infamous and eponymous run spilled into the Nexus System, UEE authorities attempted to reassert control. They were shocked to realize that not only did the criminal element refuse to back down, but that they didn't hesitate to open fire at law enforcement. Once Kellar's Run finally ended, this defiance spurred the UEE to pass a motion to reclaim Nexus and strategically break up the problem-riddled cluster of lawless systems.

The UEE has since instituted a basic infrastructure in Nexus, including establishing a military and Advocacy presence, but conditions in the system are best described as risky. Shipping lanes are mostly secure and even businesses that avoided the system for centuries have started to establish operations. However, entrepreneurial haulers should take note, although the UEE has made progress in the system, the battle for control of Nexus is still ongoing. While the UEE has managed to uproot the entrenched criminal elements on Nexus III, doing so on Nexus IV (Lago) has not been nearly as easy or (as yet) successful.

Nexus I

This protoplanet so closely circles the system's star that it has been thoroughly charred. Still, that did not stop the Hathor Group from scanning it for resources. Nothing of value was found at the time, to no one's surprise.

Nexus II

Nexus II features a dense, nitrogen-rich atmosphere. Initially, the UEE used Nexus II to experiment with the terraforming of smog planets, but all attempts at sustaining a breathable atmosphere failed. Many believe that the cost sunk into the unsuccessful terraforming experiments drove the UEE to "sell" the system to the Hathor Group.

Nexus III

This naturally habitable world was once the central hub for the Hathor Group before outlaws made the abandoned facilities their own. When the UEE resolved to retake the system, Nexus III was their first target. After a protracted battle to control the planet, the UEE military moved in and established a permanent presence.

Today, the planet is classified for military personnel only and no one without the proper clearance should attempt to land.

Elcibre Belt

In the 26th and 27th centuries, the Hathor Group heavily mined this sparse asteroid belt. Recent technological advancements have found previously undiscovered pockets of precious minerals.

Nexus IV (Lago)

The planet's name, Lago, comes from a famous 26th-century Vid about a fictional outlaw haven. By the 2920s, that vision was turning into a reality. The lack of a UEE presence allowed outlaws to accumulate in numbers not seen outside of Spider.

On paper, the UEE has made great strides in reclaiming the planet. An Advocacy Station, local police force and a small Citizen and civilian population have been established. Military families with service members stationed on Nexus III are offered sweetheart land deals in an effort to infuse the planet with respectable residents.

Yet even with all the positive developments, Lago is not without its issues. Settlements are small, cramped and robustly barricaded against attacks from the criminal gangs

who wish to reclaim it for their own. Supplies are often in short supply. This and more makes Lago an appealing place for enterprising haulers, but a less than ideal place to live.

Nexus V (Red God)

A gas giant nicknamed the Red God by locals for its swirling colors of reds and dark browns. Sources claim the name originated with the Sang Gestas, a cryptic outlaw pack on Lago who believe the planet possesses mysterious powers.

Heard in the Wind

"Today marks a proud moment in history as we embark on this partnership with the government to further develop our ever-expanding territory. I know that by working together, Hathor Group and UNE have many great things in store for this system."

– Jela Martinez, Hathor Group CEO, Statement to the Press, 2468

"That's kinda the thing isn't it? Run 'round Nexus long enough, and there's no telling who you'll meet. Pretty much a who's who of the worst of the worst. As I like to say, all roads lead to Nexus, and you'll probably get robbed on all of them."

– Telly "Tubs" Garson,
Interviewed on Nexus: Crossroads of Crime, *2925*

NEXUS SYSTEM

A

MAIN SEQUENCE

GREEN BAND

EXTENDED GREEN BAND

FROST

0   0.71   1.42   2.13 2.34   3.2   8.53

SEMI-MAJOR AXIS

One Last Job

by Amanda McCarter

Part 3

Jonah paced in the hold. It felt like hours since Char and the Agent went out the airlock. The Agent could have killed her for all he knew. He doubted it. Char was too much of a fighter.

But alone and trapped in his own cargo hold, his imagination ran wild. He thought up all kinds of horrible scenarios.

He tried every which way he knew of to open that door. It still wouldn't budge. The creep politician must have jammed something in the lock. Just the thought of someone vandalizing his ship made his blood boil.

Finally, after Jonah's umpteenth attempt to open the door, he saw Char's face appear on the other side. She opened it with a grin.

"Where's Thrumm?" said Jonah.

"Taking a nap." She turned and walked to the passenger area, waving for him to follow.

Jonah glanced around, following her. He spotted the politician right before the door to the cockpit. A large bruise was blossoming on the right side of his face. His eyelids twitched in his sleep, but, otherwise, he didn't move.

"And the Agent?" said Jonah. "He didn't give you any trouble?"

"I told you I could handle myself," she said, "but there's a problem."

"What problem?" said Jonah.

"He got blown into space," she said. "We can leave him there or go get him."

Jonah stared at her.

"Only thing is," she said, looking at the politician, "this little turd took us off course and cost us time." She kicked him. The man groaned but did not wake. "We're gonna be late."

Jonah's stomach fell. He glanced down at the unconscious man on the deck then back up at Char. "We can't leave Ardoss floating out there."

"Are you sure?" said Char.

Jonah nodded. "He helped us."

She nodded and changed the ship's direction. "So you're going through with it then? Helping him take down Mickey?"

"It's a way out," he said.

She smiled. "Good, it's about time."

"I've got to know, Char. After all these years, why didn't you say anything?"

Char turned to look at him. "You never brought it up, so I assumed you didn't want to talk about it. I appreciate the fact you didn't want to drag me into it, but I've always been looking out for you. So far, the work has been good and steady, and it hasn't been terribly dangerous. You're my friend. I hated to see you work for slime like Mickey Black, but I understood. This time though? Asking you to kill someone? That's not okay."

Jonah didn't know what to say. He could have gotten her killed, destroyed her life, and she was still loyal. He needed to find a way to make it up to her.

Eventually Ardoss came into view. Jonah knew his O2 had to be low. The suits didn't have much.

"I'll get him," said Char, grabbing her suit helmet.

Jonah started to follow and she shook her head.

"I can handle the controls and the rescue," she said. "Stay here and keep an eye on him."

Jonah looked down at Thrumm.

"Why'd he do it?"

She shrugged, her back to him. "Dunno. I punched him before he had a chance to make excuses. We were in vacuum, so I don't think I would have heard it anyways. We're close enough. I'm going to go reel Ardoss in."

Jonah took her spot at the controls and watched as she swam out from the cargo hold into the void. She wrapped her arms around Ardoss and fired the retrothrusters to push back toward the ship. Just watching it made Jonah's stomach flip. Being lost out there was terrifying. He hoped Ardoss was all right. It was a terrible way to die.

When the sensors told him both Char and Ardoss were back in the ship and pressure had returned, Jonah turned his attention to the politician.

He crouched down by the would-be hijacker and examined him. Thrumm smelled of expensive oil and wore a fine suit made out of something smooth and light. Silk? Or some synthetic? Either way, it was expensive.

He turned to look at the man's shoes. Leather. Real leather.

Jonah rubbed his chin. This guy was into the expensive stuff, the finer things in life. Even demanded a private room on a ship that couldn't even afford privacy to its crew.

He slapped the politician.

Thrumm groaned.

Jonah shook the bureaucrat. "Hey, pal, wake up."

Thrumm's eyes creaked open and he mumbled something.

"What was that?" said Jonah. "I didn't hear you." He pulled Thrumm up by his shirt.

"Don't kill me," said Thrumm. His voice was choked.

"That depends on what you say next," said Jonah.

He wouldn't kill him, of course, but the bureaucratic SOB didn't need to know that. He felt a rush of adrenaline and his hands shook, but not from fear. It felt good being in control for a change. The feeling shocked him so much he almost dropped the man.

"It was just a little at first," said Thrumm. "Then it got to be more and more. I couldn't help myself. I got away with it for so long, I didn't think anyone would find out. I got care-less."

"What are you talking about?" said Jonah.

"The money," said Thrumm. "I took it. I'm sorry."

Jonah released the man and sighed. Thrumm whimpered.

"Are you gonna turn me in?"

Jonah raised an eyebrow. "For stealing? I'm not a cop."

"But that man," said Thrumm, "he's Advocacy."

Jonah stared at the politician for a moment, then blinked, and then began to laugh. He laughed so hard he fell back on his hind end. It was so absurd.

"Did I miss a joke?" the Agent said. His voice was wispy. Jonah looked up and saw his face was pale.

"You lived," said Jonah.

"I appreciate you coming back for me," the Agent said.

Jonah stood. "We had an agreement."

"So it was the politician," the Agent said, looking down.

"Embezzler," said Jonah. "He thought you were going to take him away in chains."

"Wait," said Thrumm, "you're not here to arrest me?"

The Agent's eyes went wide and he raised his eyebrows.

"Not hardly," he said. "Embezzlement? Your own govern-ment will have to deal with that. You could have gotten off the ship without a single issue and I wouldn't have even looked at you twice."

Thrumm seemed to collapse into himself and a look of relief passed over his face. "So you'll let me go?"

The Agent snorted. "Don't count on it. You really shouldn't endanger the life of an Advocacy Agent. I'll send local authorities a message as soon as everything's sorted out with the ship. Provided, of course, the pilot lets me use his comm system."

"Go right ahead," said Jonah. He wanted to see this sorry bastard locked away for good.

"I'll go lock him up in the cabin," said Char. "We're back on course. We should be at the jump point within the hour."

Jonah nodded to her.

"Just think, Mr. Thrumm," she said as she pushed him out of the cockpit, "you finally get that private room you wanted."

Thrumm paled. Char drug him past the other two passen-gers. The businesswoman stared in terror and the teen leaned forward in his seat.

"Hey, lady," the boy said, "can I fly next?"

Char snorted. "Get a license."

"So, have you thought over my offer?" the Agent said, closing the cockpit door.

"I want out," said Jonah, "and I don't think Mickey will just let me go. You're the best chance I've got. If I fail to meet Pietro at the drop, Mickey will certainly kill me. Besides, you saved my ship, and probably my life. I owe you more than I can repay."

"Help me get Pietro and that will be enough for me," said Ardoss.

Jonah smiled.

"So what do I call you?" he said.

"Ardoss is fine," he said.

"So Pietro was your partner?" asked Jonah.

"More. He was my friend," said Ardoss.

"And that's why you're hunting him down?"

"Yeah. Seems like it should be me who brings him in," said Ardoss. "And if what Char said is true and Mickey forced him into all this, than maybe there's something I can do to help him."

Jonah nodded.

"How did Mickey get you?" said Ardoss.

Jonah held out his hands and looked up. "This ship. I couldn't afford it, couldn't get a loan. Ever since I was a boy, all I wanted was to own my own spaceship. But my family's poor. My father was a machinist, my mother was ill."

"So why not fly for a commercial company?" said Ardoss. "They always need pilots."

"I did, at first," said Jonah. "My first job was as a co-pilot on a cargo run."

"Didn't like it?" said Ardoss.

Jonah shook his head. "I got fired. We were boarded by pirates. One of the crew members tried to fight them off. There were too many for her to handle alone though, so I decided to help. During the struggle some of the rest of the crew got hurt. The company said it was our fault. They said it wouldn't have happened if we had just kept cooperating. Next thing I know I'm out on my ass. After that, I had trouble finding work, couldn't hold anything down for long, so I decided to go into business for myself, but I couldn't buy a ship and no one would let me lease one until I got on my feet. Everyone but one person, that is."

"Mickey Black," said Ardoss.

Jonah nodded. "He offered to buy the ship for me if I agreed to work with him," said Jonah. "I refused at first, wanted to be my own man. He told me that wasn't a problem. I'd simply do him a favor from time to time and I could run the ship how I wanted. That wasn't true though. Even with a ship, I couldn't find work until Mickey set me up with Master Haru, and between the debt and Haru skimming, I don't make anywhere near what I could if I ran my own business. Funny thing is, I've got enough contacts and knowhow now. I could make it on my own if Mickey was out of the picture."

"And the woman from the pirate attack," said Ardoss, "that was Char?"

Jonah nodded. "She's worked with me ever since."

"No wonder she's so loyal," said Ardoss.

"I don't regret it," said Jonah. "I did the right thing."

"Of course you did," said Ardoss.

"Regardless of how I got in the position I'm in," said Jonah, "he knows how to use a bad situation to his advantage. I bet Pietro got into similar trouble and Mickey came to the rescue. It's what he does. And from that moment on, he owns you."

"Even if that's the case, I still need to bring Pietro in," said Ardoss. "If Pietro was blackmailed or strong armed into spying, then Black is a much bigger problem than anyone realized and the Advocacy needs to know. There could be other Agents working for him. There's no telling how deep he's into everything."

Jonah sighed and leaned into the console. He closed his eyes for a moment. He listened to the whir of the ship's engine, felt it vibrate beneath him. It spoke to him. He loved flying, would do anything to keep going.

"So when we do this," said Jonah, "I've got a couple of rules."

Ardoss pursed his lips. "What kind of rules?"

"I won't hurt Pietro," said Jonah. "That's first and foremost. We weren't close, but he got dragged into this just like I did."

Ardoss crossed his arms. "He was my friend too, but if he shoots at any of us, I'm going to shoot back."

"Fine," said Jonah, "he shoots first, I won't stop you, but that leads me to my second rule," said Jonah. "I do the drop. I give him his package and walk away. He won't shoot if I'm giving him what he needs."

Ardoss' forehead creased. "I don't like it. You might warn him I'm there."

"I won't," said Jonah. "I gave you my word. This way, I'm still good with Mickey. Anything that happens afterwards can't land on me. Besides, if I wanted to tell him to run, I'd tell him when I contact him for the meeting coordinates."

"Wait, you don't know where to meet him?" said Ardoss.

Jonah smiled. "You've gotta know Pietro better than that. He's careful. The plan is to reach a nav point and contact him. From there, he gives me the final coordinates."

"So, if I had locked you in the locker?" said Ardoss.

"You wouldn't have gotten very far," said Jonah. "Pietro would have to hear my voice."

"Well, I guess it was meant to be this way," said Ardoss. "We'll try it your way. But if you warn him, the deal is off."

"I understand," said Jonah.

"Then let's go meet Pietro."

*　　*　　*

They made the next jump point without incident. The other two passengers, the teenage boy and the young business-woman, didn't bother them. Jonah figured they were just happy to be back en route. He told them there would be a brief detour and neither said a word.

Jonah was still on edge, though. He could dress it up however he liked, but there was no denying that he was betraying Mickey Black.

Jonah remembered an incident back when he first started working for Mickey. They had met in another grimy bar at a different port. He and Mickey were working out the details of a job when one of Mickey's goons brought someone in.

It was a man a little older than Jonah. His face was bloody and he was begging for mercy. Mickey asked him one question. Why?

The man looked at the floor and wouldn't lift his head until Mickey told him to. When he did, Mickey said it was a shame. The next thing Jonah knew, the man was dead, a shot to the brain courtesy of Mickey. All Mickey would tell Jonah was that was what happened to people who double-crossed him.

But Jonah couldn't keep living like this. He didn't want to die, but to go on while people he cared about were threatened wasn't an option either. Jonah wanted a fresh start. Pietro deserved the same.

He brought up the secure frequency Mickey gave him.

"You're late," said Pietro.

"We had a mechanical issue," said Jonah. It wasn't a total lie. Some idiot took over the mechanics of the ship and sent them off course.

"If I didn't need these supplies . . ." said Pietro.

"I know," said Jonah. "I'm sorry. I'll make up for it on my

end. Send me the coordinates and we'll get you on your way."

Pietro grunted. A text feed went across Jonah's console.

Jonah raised an eyebrow, but before he could say anything else, the line went dead.

"So where is it?" asked Ardoss, who had been listening from a corner of the cockpit.

"It's an old fueling station," he said. "No one's there, low power, and it's beyond the Advocacy's normal reach."

"Smart," said Ardoss. "I take it you've never met him here before?"

Jonah shook his head. "No. Pietro and I didn't run a lot of jobs together. We would cross paths on various assignments, but that was it."

"Assignments," said Ardoss, "you make it sound like some sort of well-run organization."

"There's a reason you don't know much about Mickey," said Jonah.

"But I know Pietro and I've been thinking," said Ardoss, "it's a mistake for you to go in alone and unarmed. When he gets in a corner like this, he's dangerous. You should take Char to watch your back."

She shook her head. "Jonah always does the drops solo. If I come along, he'll know something's up."

"I'll do the drop," said Jonah. "By myself. No gun. That was the deal."

Ardoss frowned and nodded. "Fine. As soon as the drop is done, get clear of the fuel station. If he opens fire when I arrest him, I don't want to risk you getting caught in crossfire."

"Fine," said Jonah.

Jonah's heart lumped in his throat. This was it. They were really doing it. He had one last chance to put an end to it.

Ardoss turned to look at him, and put a hand on Jonah's shoulder.

"Don't have second thoughts on me," he said. "We have a plan. Let's stick to it."

Jonah nodded. This was the right thing to do.

Char entered the coordinates for the drop. They passed a fueling station that serviced the jump point. It was nice, clean, had good food. They served veggie burgers with protein paste and had a good supply of beer.

The place they were going did not. It was out of commission and abandoned. It might still have some fuel, if scavengers hadn't picked it clean. It certainly had power. Not much, but something. Enough to meet and make the drop.

Half and hour later they pulled into its dock and Jonah went to the two remaining passengers.

"We have to stop here," he said. "Once our business is done, we'll be putting this place behind us as fast as possible. There is very little power and the location is abandoned, so for your own safety, please stay on board."

The teenager opened his mouth, most likely to ask if he could come along, but Char squashed the question with a glare. He paled and went back to his Glas. The businesswoman just shrank into her chair. Jonah didn't think he'd have a problem out of either of them.

Jonah went down to the cargo bay and opened the airlock. From there, he went to move Pietro's package off the ship.

"What kept you," a voice asked.

Jonah turned to see Pietro standing just a few feet away.

He looked older than Jonah remembered. His black hair was limp and dull. He had circles around his eyes and his face was gaunt. His normally tanned skin was pale and clammy. Life on the run did not sit well with him.

"I told you, I had some unexpected delays," said Jonah.

"Those delays have anything to do with that shiner on your face?" said Pietro.

"Shiner?" said Jonah. He touched his face and found it tender. Of course, the fight in the cargo hold. Ardoss must have hit him harder than he realized.

"Mickey thought I needed some extra convincing to do the job," said Jonah. "Let's do this quick and we can both be on our way."

"I'm sorry," said Pietro. "I knew you wouldn't try to screw me."

Jonah almost winced. That hurt. Pietro trusted him, or at least trusted he would be too much of a coward to do anything. He was done letting people walk all over him.

Pietro knelt before the crate and thumbed his code. The lid popped and he peered in. He made a face as he pulled a heavy cloth aside.

"Is this some kind of joke, Jonah?" he said.

Jonah felt the blood leave his face. "What joke?"

"There's nothing in here but a pile of bricks."

Jonah stepped to it and looked inside. His stomach knotted.

Bricks. Big gray ones. No supplies, no transmitters, no cash. Just a big stack of rock and clay.

He looked up to find himself staring down the barrel of Pietro's gun. He put his hands up and backed away a step.

"Easy, Pietro," said Jonah.

Pietro cocked his gun. "You've got about sixty seconds to start talking."

"You have half that to put the gun down, Pete," said Ardoss.

To be continued

CHRONICLES

40