

TRADE FIGHT BUILD THINK

# X3

ALBION PRELUDE

3.0

*Shady Business*



# Shady Business - Prologue

Sector - Sol  
2942 EY / 772 NT

The Jonferco representative looked out with mild apathy as a relentless wind sent red grit scraping across the thin Martian soil. Titanic scars from rouge terraformers still lingered across its wind swept surface. Despite constant erosion, they had changed little in the past nine hundred years. Mars itself buried the shattered husks of geodesic domes long ago, but an entire millennia of blown sand could not scour Terran memory.

To the Argon standing placidly before the full length reinforced glass however, it was ancient, if not mythical, history.

Five hundred stories below him, a thin fog kept a tenuous atmosphere clinging to the western edge of the Valles Marineris. Thousands of lights twinkled below, outlining hazy structures to the hundreds of atmospheric lifters fluttering about like busy space faring bees.

The door to the conference room opened with a soft pneumatic hiss, and the Terran offshoot turned to address the newcomer, smoothing out the blue trim on his creaseless white business attire. He wasn't used to wearing anything but plasticized cloth fashioned from Argon rimes, but the current situation asked that he go incognito.

"Welcome to Twelvetowns, Mr. Sayreen." The older woman with short cut graying hair and pale skin the color of cream stepped just inside the doorway, allowing it to close. She clasped her hands behind her back in formal greeting. "I hope your flight from the Asteroid Belt was uneventful. I'm surprised that USC patrols didn't intercept you in Heretic's End." A small hint of a smile played across her creased features.

"I had a close call at the jump gate to Circle of Labor, but aside from that, the trip was rather pleasant." The Jonferco businessman's return smile was polite but non-committal. And even if an USC patrol had performed a routine customs inspection of the Scabbard, there was little aside from darker skin tone to distinguish him from their shared Terran ancestry.

The fledgling Argon Secret Service assured him that only an exhaustive comparison of his Mitochondrial DNA would expose him, but after what Argon interrogators had done to Terran spies infiltrating the Commonwealth after the Neptune Incident, he really didn't want to put that to the test.

As the interrogatee commented on after, humans should never do things like that to fellow humans.

"Good." She extended an open hand to the direction of the conference table off to one side of the lavishly furnished room, offering him a seat. "You won't mind if we get right down to business then."

He let the forged smile drop of his square jaw and dropped into a soft chair opposite of the aging Martian industrialist. She laced her wrinkled fingers together expectantly on top of the slate table after joining him. Mr. Sayreen fished about an inner pocket for a datapad, and after some difficulty with the material, dropped it between them with a soft clatter. She scooped it up eagerly, glancing at the genomic data.

"I must admit, Ms. Neveline, why is it that you are so interested in the neIV/732 gene?"



"I could ask you the same about Orbital Liner Trans-Accelerator technology." The look in her dark eyes turned shark like. "Let's just say it is a gift to my future heiress."

She downloaded the data to a terminal built directly into the conference table and uploaded some engineering specifications before returning the data pad. The business transaction took less than a minute.

Its implications would span generations.

"Thank you for doing business with us, Mr. Sayreen." The Terran seemed eager to cut this clandestine Argon visit short. "I would offer you a visit to our ancestral home world, but I have yet to secure ATF Lunar security access myself." They got up and made their way to the pressure door. Neither of them had much time left to waste.

"Perhaps I can offer you a visa to Sonra-4? Menelaus Paradise instead?" He turned around after entering the empty hallway. "The beaches there are fabulous."

"Perhaps." She nodded back graciously, though her intent was lacking. "One day." The pressure door closed between them with a final hiss.

It would be the last time Terrans would willingly share technology with their Argon cousins.

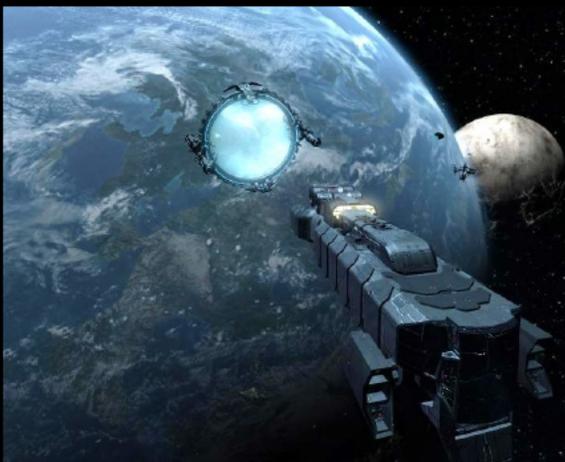
*Sector - Belt of Aguilar  
2946 EY / 774 NT*

Jako Sayreen tapped at some virtual screens, glossing through some progress updates from Research and Development. Despite the furious pace of technicians and engineers in the testing laboratories right outside of his office, the active noise control systems in his plush office kept the vibration outside to a dull roar.

The department head frowned at the report and leaned his stocky frame back into the well used material of his office chair. His thick finger tips drummed across his neatly organized desk. After he collected his composure he initiated a trideo call.

A woman in a seamless white coat answered, her stern features obscured by safety glasses and a molded black respirator. Behind her a brilliant plume of plasma shot out from partially assembled ion drive bolted down to the floor. Technicians swarmed about, taking remote measurements, adjusting tolerances. The sheer force of the reactor drive test shook the feed.

"I just read your report on the new engine requirements. They are frankly, Dr. Meyer, unacceptable." His large brow creased. "Make them more compatible with our existing product line. The Highway system goes live in less than two years."



"But sir, the existing OLTA specifications you provided were designed with matter / antimatter annihilation drives in mind." The roar of the ion output test behind her made her technical assessment hard to understand.

"That is not *my* problem. What am I *paying* you for?" He slammed a meaty fist into his desk. It caused some steaming coffee from a nearby cup to jump its chipped ceramic lip. "Our clients will not tolerate excess drive wear just to shave off a few hours of inter-system flight time."

The engineer glared back at him.

"You have my report. I can't complete this project without Terran drive technology. If you can not supply a working matter / antimatter drive, then that is not *my* problem." She cut the feed, just begging for a *written* performance notice. Her *second* in less than a year.

Jako ran a sweaty palm down his face. He was quickly running out of options. This project could catapult Jonferco ahead of all other competing Argon companies as an engine manufacturer, even the mighty Terracorp. And while

Terracorp had the competitive edge of being founded by two actual Terrans stranded in Argon space, Jonferco's founder, Ser Alman Jonferson, had no such inside advantage.

Procuring Terran technology through legitimate channels was no longer an option.

His business contact in Mars died last year, due to natural causes or Dark Space intervention, he didn't know. And now that the Commonwealth governments banded together to restrict access their technology licenses to Terran interests, he couldn't risk breaking the Advanced Technology Embargo without serious sanctions from the Teladi Profit Guild. Even now rumors circulated that the Argon Secret Service managed to steal blueprints from the AGI Task Force, but his contacts there didn't go deep enough to confirm it, let alone get access to them.

Instead, he'd have to resort to some real Shady Business to see this through.

Jako tapped some controls near the virtual terminal. The clear glass walls of his office polarized. All the security feeds monitoring his room ceased recording. As a final precaution, the executive got up and made double sure the door's mag-locks had engaged. He sank back into the well worn contours of his chair. Jako entered an encrypted passkey into his terminal.

The trideo signal snaked its way through computer systems, chirping several times as it lost its way. Between the minimally maintained network out in Senator's Badlands and his contact off doing questionable deeds at market value, it took several tries for his contact to pick up. A bald Argon with sunken eyes suddenly glared back at him.

"Chikusho! Whadda want?"

Jako always winced at how skinny the pirate was. The gleam bouncing off his sickly pale skin did little to improve his fleeting charm. Whatever banned technology goods his Beryll contact peddled, it probably contained multiple carcinogens.

"Fisty, I need something."

"You and every other soja husker this side of Prime. Is this line even clear? Call back when I'm not hauling tampered chips through The Edge, Bakka."

The feed bounced a little as something jostled the pirate's cramped cockpit. He cursed something unintelligible as proximity klaxons wailed off. For all Jako knew Leo had just sideswiped an asteroid while evading a Paranid customs interceptor.

"Look. I'll triple my usual offer. Just hear me out."

"For triple the usual, I'll *just hear* you out." Leo jammed on the flight controls in front of him and the feed tilted crazily. Off to one side Jako thought he saw the flash of a distant squash mine explosion. Its shock wave rattled the Yaki military transport. "You want more than that, so do I."

Leo righted his Chokaro, a rapacious grin accompanying the obscene gesture he flew his previous pursuers. Jako caught a glimpse of the faded ritual irezumi running up Leo's arm.

"I need you to put out some inquiries. Figure out who works with matter / antimatter annihilation reactions. Preferably their use in propulsion. It's fringe tech, but someone as unstable as you should know a few crackpots willing to play with the stuff." The paper pusher picked up his cup and brought it to his lips.

"Sounds dangerous." Leo grinned, seeing the chance to ramp up payment. Jako found it surprising that Leo still had all his teeth. "If Jonferco could part with a computer plant, I'm sure we could work out something with my oyabun."

Jako nearly spat out his coffee. An entire factory? He was going to have to shuffle a lot of forms to make it disappear off Jonferco's books.

"Fine. Whatever. Just get this done." Jako didn't even wait to see if Leo swung his ship around to pick up any survivors. The Split demand for slave labor in their ore refineries was insatiable, especially after losing so many ships during the final stages of Operation Final Fury. "Oh and Fisty ... this call never happened."

He cut the feed.

*Sector - Thyn's Excavation  
2946 EY / 776 NT*

Fui t'Ktt looked at the steady stream of procedural requests and for the fifth time that day, the Split bureaucrat wished he could simply vaporize them with a disintegrator rifle.

Instead he got up from his console and paced back and forth in front of a curved view port. Just outside Strong Arms Headquarters, several frigates slid about the silent vacuum in precise military formation. As they patrolled the sprawling cluster of factories churning out all types of weaponry and engine parts for the burgeoning Split corporation, Fu'kitt admired the angular red hulls and frontal spines bristling with Gauss Cannons. Automated Flak turrets tracked inbound freighters. Entire batteries of Ion Shard Railguns itched for any excuse to discharge indiscriminately and with extreme prejudice.

Split ship designs mirrored their race. Brutal. Exact. A razor edge plunged into the hearts of their worthy enemies.

Fui t'Ktt paced back and forth in front of the impressive task group, and for the tenth time that day, imagined himself on the bridge of a war machine. Instead, his boots clomped down against a grated floor in monotonous rhythm. The wrinkled skin near his top knot flexed with pent up aggression. This spartan cubicle was a nothing more than a cleverly camouflaged cage.

His console beeped. Fui t'Ktt ignored it. It beeped again, insistent. With a resentful grunt, the untested console warrior sat back down and accepted the incoming call. From the ornate necklace partially obscured by a courtier cloak, the Strong Arms representative knew the caller hailed from one of the minor warring Split families.



*The great Family Rhy requires Strong Arms corvette weaponry and engine parts. The cloaked Split on the other side of the feed wasted no time with veiling his tough negotiation. Fui t'Ktt watched the intricate, six fingered gestures across the feed. You will provide them, at discount, or we will lay waste to your holdings.*

Fui t'Ktt's laughter bellowed, threatening to cross the vacuous expanse without electronic aid.

*Your fleets are decimated. Your factories lay empty. Your threats are hollow and cry desperation" His own gestures swept wide with dismissal. Family Rhy will pay a premium for our goods, or the major families will make your lineage as you have appeared to me. Nameless and soon to be forgotten.*

Fui t'Ktt reached for the terminate call button.

*Wait. The Family Rhy retainer's apologetic gestures stilled Fui t'Ktt's six fingered hand. Kao t'Nnk acknowledges your strength. Family Rhy requires five hundred railguns and two thousand quantum tubes every Mazura. We will honor your demands. Family Rhy will give Strong Arms ten percent more for each part to secure this exclusive agreement. What say you?*

*Twenty percent.* Fui t'Ktt countered, but he had already turned his attention to those other procurement requests still pending. These empty, meaningless exchanges wore on him. Not only did Kao t'Nnk think lesser of him in station, but the courtier saw him as a cleverly disguised Teladi in Split skin.

*It is agreed then. Together, we will crush our enemies before our combined might"*

Kao t'Nnk didn't bother giving a customary farewell gesture before ending the call. If Fui t'Ktt had garnered any honor such blatant scorn would have tarnished it. Still ... what glory could come of supplying puny weapons and ... engine ... parts. His wrinkled brow furled in deep thought.

Yes. This contract would mean competing with the inferior Argon corporation Jonferco. It may only be a trade war, but if circumstances forced him to, Fui t'Ktt would slice his foes down with a thousand paper cuts. History proved competition for resources spurred some of the greatest conflicts.

Fui t'Ktt got back up from his austere metal chair and made his way back to the viewport. His arms folded across his puffed out chest. Operation Final Fury was one such conflict. Led by the revered Rhonkar General Fjuny t'Scct, Commonwealth forces expelled the bug like Kha'ak from known space, though it had come at a high price.

The final battles had decimated many of the major Split family fleets. Rhonkar. Tkr. Zyarth. Njy. With no Kha'ak left to fight, the Xenon a soulless foe, and the Split not yet entering the new Terran / Argon conflict on the border sectors of Heretic's End and Circle of Labor, they instead turned to old habits and petty squabbles.

Family Rhy's expansion into the contested Boron sectors near Rhonkar's Trial meant strong demand for Strong Arms goods. Strong Arms would sit in the background and grow stronger while other families skirmished to keep Family Rhy from expanding their territorial and military might. Perhaps one day corporate logos would grow more important than family names. And when that happened, Fui t'Ktt's name would be the one spoken in legend.

For the first time that day, Fui t'Ktt smiled.

*Sector - Family Rhy*  
*2948 EY / 778 NT*

With some hesitation Mr. Sayreen sipped the blue green drink in his commemorative glass. It tasted of brine, but not unpleasantly so. The head of the Jonferco delegation plucked the artistically sliced sliver of fish from the angled glass lip and plopped it into his mouth.

Jako looked down at the exquisite buffet. Instead of flowers, arranged bladed weapons framed large platters of chelt. The sheer number of variations on the basic scruffin fruit amazed him. As far as Jako could tell, the seasoned dishes didn't even contain scott spices. Family Rhy had truly spared no expense for this ceremony.

And with the string after string of military gains and sector annexations over the past two years, Rhy could afford to.

He let the other members of his delegation mingle with the Split in attendance while he made his way over to Leo in the gambling hall. The Argon executive moved through the packed party with some difficulty. Just about every Family sent representatives to General Chi t'Ktt's wedding. Despite their bickering, all families came to pay respect to the General's impressive military victories against the Xenon, Kha'ak, and those more recent.

A pair of Strong Arms guards stopped Jako before he entered the dimly lit hall. They checked the ever cunning Argon in case he sneaked in a metal utensil from the buffet to use as a weapon if his luck ran out at the roulette. To be fair, most other race sector's law enforcement consider Split cutlery contraband.

The gambling hall didn't sport the same amount of flash or glitter as a Teladi casino, but it was one of the few forms of Split recreation that didn't involve the need for an organ transplant afterward. Jako stepped in beside Leo standing by the massive roulette wheel. It twirled about, curved ornate spines catching what little light came from the embedded ceiling lighting.

Split, not accustomed to relying on luck alone, integrated a measure of skill into their version. As the wheel spun about, the segments along the outer wheel changed colors depending on the series of glyphs it passed. The wheel's rotational speed and glyph set changed with each game.

Only a few attending Split seemed interested in the game of fancy. Most watched the live Ghok fight in the adjacent hall, forming a tight triangle with the buffet hall. Jako looked around the gambling table to the other patrons.

The wild reptilian eyes of the Nvidum Mining and Manufacturing Corporation representative seemed glued to the ever shifting colors of the spinning wheel's edge. He sported an Argnu ranching hat, complete with belt buckle, which amused Jako for some odd reason. A cluster of cloaked Paranid stood off to one side, more interested in deconstructing the mathematical algorithm used to flip the colors than betting on the game itself. Boron would prefer not to be caught dead here.

Leo waited for the rest of the small crowd to place their bets on the next outcome. The shifty Argon, whose formal Jonferco delegate attire seemed out of place, listened intently to the music coming through one wireless earpiece.

Instead of Neo-Ancient Japanese, or Argon Trade Tongue as it was more commonly known, the singer spoke clipped English, which Strong Arms security wasn't fluent in.

*It's Green Arrows Loss / Don't be a Sucker / It's all Backwards - / Always bet on Black*

Once satisfied, Leo let the table attendant slide his octagonal chips over to Black Backwards R. As the tech scoundrel twisted around to talk to Jako, the concealed bulge in his formal jacket pressed outward. The banned device discreetly scanned the table for its current RPM settings and Glyph set, computing the most likely outcome. He had set its probability accuracy to a meager ninety percent in order to dupe security's suspicions.



Leo liked playing the odds. But that didn't mean he wouldn't pass up the chance to stack the odds in his favor.

"Get lost." Leo glared at Jako. "Can't you see I'm winning here?" When Black Backwards R came up, the attendant scooped Leo's winnings and pushed it over to the Yaki in Jonferco colors.

"You said she'd be here." Jako sipped his fish cocktail, trying to appear nonchalant. Under his jacket he sweated bullets. "Four years and millions invested into your wild goose chase. She better show or our hackers are going to come collecting. With interest."

"Relax." Leo placed a small bet on the next losing combination, just to throw ever watchful security cameras off further. "The ISA sponsor is certain the bridle is the same gal we are looking for. She's a real wiz with engines. You'll get your expert." Leo went back to watching his bet, eyes boring holes in the felt surface of the table. The Yaki had been rigging games for years. The Interstellar Slipstream Association races in Freedom's Reach were no exception.

"The wedding should have started hours ago." Jako grumbled. He watched the Argon News Network correspondent covering the event a little ways away, relaying her shared suspicions to the ANN viewers.

"Just keep your jacket on." He rolled his beady eyes at the anxious executive. "We'll come through just like we did for the Assembler Drones. Go watch the Ghok fight or something."

The Ghok Deathmatch in question drew the largest crowd during the festivities. Inside a large triple shielded arena, a lone Split warrior faced off against a huge half reptile, half insect like creature. Its light green fluorescent chitinous scales shimmered under the floodlights as the beast scooted around the warrior, roaring alongside the crowd. A broad tail whipped back and forth. The cheering throng of spectators could not smell its fetid stench through the force shields, but admired its rows of razor sharp teeth and talons that could shred even Terran hull plating.

Any warrior that survived one on one combat against a Ghok garnered much prestige. The less equipped the warrior, the greater the boon. Mo t'Ktt, one of the most famous Deathmathers, managed to kill his opponent with a small knife and one of the Ghok's own broken claws. Mo t'Ktt's remaining limb can still be seen sticking out of his last opponent's mouth, for a nominal ten credit museum entrance fee.

From the third standing row, Fui t'Ktt watched the Split Deathmatcher beat at the maw swallowing him with his own severed arm. With a final gulp, the match was over. Fui t'Ktt looked to either side of the bloodthirsty crowd, bellowing their approval of his beautiful death. He didn't quite understand the rite. What glory had he earned? It all seemed so *wasteful*.

This inability to understand traditional Split honor probably factored into his assignment as a Strong Arms procurement specialist.

In the lull between fights, Fui t'Ktt heard something in his earpiece that stole his attention. There was some commotion over the Strong Arms Security comm channel. After an exhaustive sweep, the ceremonies' bridle could not be located. His pulse quickened. The Strong Arms representative left his spot in the audience, filled within seconds, and wedged his way toward General Chi t'Ktt's office.

Fui t'Ktt now wished he hadn't offered up the female Split to the Family Rhy General. Though growing up an orphan after a Kha'ak raid, and fostered in a small time salvage operation in Family Pride, her knack with engines attracted the attention of Strong Arms some years ago. What better way to cement the newfound pact between Strong Arms and Family Rhy than with a symbolic marriage?

Once he was out of the Ghok hallway Fui t'Ktt's trot turned into a full fledged run. The rest of security, once guarding the hallway entrances, fell in besides him.

Jako's earpiece, tuned to the Jonferco delegation channel, alerted him to the sudden change in security's movements. He elbowed the Yaki next to him and pointed out the mob rushing down one of the adjoining hallways to the General's office. Leo barely had enough time to scoop up his winning before taking off after Jako.

The two delegations converged more or less in front of the General's door. Fui t'Ktt and Sayreen stared at each other with the sudden realization that they competed for more than just contracts. A small contingent of Strong Arms security popped out of the General's office, exchanging a flurry of gestures and hectic words with Fui t'Ktt.

*Find her!* Fui t'Ktt spat out, his fingers wide and tense. He pointed to the exits leading to the flight deck. *Now.* It took a few seconds for the order to sink into the security detail's thick skulls before they dispersed like a flock of startled birds. He shot his rival a dark look before leaving.

"What was that all about?" Leo scratched the back of his head. His ragged nails scraped against his greasy scalp in confusion.

"You. And you." Jako jabbed at the air in front of his two best hackers. "Stay here and find out what you can about this bridle. I want to know where she is. What she's doing. What side of the bed she gets out of in the morning. Is that clear?"

The two disguised as delegates nodded and went right to work.

"The rest of you, tag behind Strong Arms. I want to know their next move before they do. Understand? I'm going to head back to HQ. This whole situation is turning into a real Cluster-Flak." He turned and stormed off to his personal Phantom.

"And what about me?" Leo tagged close by, not wanting to miss out on continued payment.

"Just pray that we find her Fisty." Jako grumbled. "For your own sake."

Jako left the Yaki at the elevator down to the flight deck. Leo stood there for a while, contemplating his next move. Afterwards he cashed out chips, made an innocuous call or two, and took his sweet time making his own way down to the flight deck. The designated Strong Arms and Jonferco landing slots were conspicuously empty.

As he strapped himself into an Aamon, he closed his eyes and listened to the deep thrum of its hybrid Argon-Terran reactor warming up. He loved this ship, a little present from his friends in the Argon Secret Service. Sure, he could have offered up the blueprints to Jonferco, but the Beryll wanted to make sure they kept the best toys for themselves.

Besides, this little job with Sayreen was just a side contract. His real employer, Mr. Terran Popsicle himself, had his own agenda. When it suited him, Leo would snip his ties with Jonferco and woo the Split hot head with access to forbidden technology, both bleeding edge *and* ancient.

Technology designed to manipulate the stars themselves.

Leo jammed the throttle forward. His prototype heavy fighter roared out of the hanger and left a scorch zone on the flight deck's pristine paint job. Though he was a few minutes behind the others, he wasn't the legwork type of guy. The shrewd pirate would let someone else handle locating the missing bridle.



One missing bridle. Three Factions. Strong Arms. Jonferco. Beryll.

The race against time had begun ...

***X3: Albion Prelude Community Project (AP-CP)***

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helped to test and translate this update.*