

A CALL TO DUTY

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

by
Vasquith de Havilland

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Chapter 1

de Havilland tuned out, ignoring the high pitched plea for help. It wasn't his problem.

Serves them right for entering an anarchy system unprepared, he told himself. De Havilland checked the scanner of his ship for what felt like the hundredth time. His new Cobra Mk I, the *Odysseus*, was mildly 'Iron-Ass', and was an order of magnitude greater than his old Adder.

De Havilland moved his hand to the cockpit comm. He paused a moment, but deactivated it anyway, silencing the stricken pilot. He pursed his lips and activated the star dreamer.

*

The *Greased Monkey* was run down, dirty and crowded. It was perfect. He slinked into a corner booth where the light was dimmest. He hadn't cut his fiery orange hair in half a year; it was growing out of control. A thick beard hid his face, while the darkness concealed his all-blue eyes. All the better to stay anonymous.

The booth also had strategic value. He could watch everyone in the bar. No one was going to sneak up on him. Able to relax slightly, he grabbed his drink from the table and took another sip.

Fire! He muffled the cough that exploded from his mouth and forced his face expressionless. He scanned the bar and narrowed his eyes at anyone who looked his way. Couldn't let them think he was a pussy; easy prey. That was a good way to start a fight. He subconsciously fingered his Colt Diplomat. A rugged and user unfriendly weapon, but powerful and accurate.

The patrons returned to their drinks. De Havilland became acutely aware of how quiet the bar was. A holonet relay played an article in the corner, but it was muted. The music box half way down the far wall was dark; off or broken

De Havilland psyched himself up and took another sip. The cheap copy of Altairian Ale scratched and clawed its way down his throat. *Three credits for this swill?* He forced more of the liquid down. The taste mellowed. De Havilland's eyes snapped to the crowd by the bar. He was getting drunk already. Not good for self defence.

Screw it. He wasn't exactly helpless. He would be ok. He could relax. He needed it. Had earned it.

A man flew backwards from the bar. The noise level doubled.

"Get out of my face!" a gravelly voice yelled. De Havilland cocked his head. The voice was familiar...

He heard the sound of bone against flesh, then twice again in quick succession. Another body crashed backward into a table. Half the patrons backed away; the other half closed in to watch or take part.

"I'll rip you apart, son!" went the gravelly voice. De Havilland's eyes widened in recognition. It was his old sergeant from the marines. By the time he thought to stand up, he realised he was already moving into the fray.

What the hell is Sergeant Wagin doing here? De Havilland knelt forward, brought his shoulder up and tackled two men to the floor. He leapt to his feet and barrelled into another. The man went flying and de Havilland straightened out. A fist came flying at his face, but swerved aside at the last moment.

"Corporal?" Wagin breathed in sharply but chuckled. De Havilland wasn't sure if that was from nostalgia or because his own presence had just halved the odds in their favour.

"Reporting for duty," de Havilland rushed, while ducking a fist and returning his own to his assailants stomach. The man doubled over and de Havilland kned him in the head. *One down, another popping into his place.*

The horde forced them back up against the bar. De Havilland fended with one hand while reaching behind him with the other. It closed around the neck of a bottle. He swung his arm out over his head in an arc, and smashed it down onto a man's head with all the force he could muster.

The body collapsed; the bottle shattered, leaving a sharp serrated edge above the neck. De Havilland held the weapon in front, but didn't go on the offensive. It was a bar brawl. They were about getting roughed up, not dead. There were rules. Hence why the Diplomat was still tucked into his belt.

A bottle hit the left side of his face. Warmth splashed his skin. One of his eyes went red.

Fuck the rules.

De Havilland pushed forward, sluicing the glass weapon straight through a man's stomach until it bottomed out. He withdrew the weapon, kicked the crippled man away, ducked, spun and repeated the process. His head felt wet and warm. One eye was covered in blood. *I'm ok. It's superficial.*

He went into autopilot. The muscles remembered the moves, the sub conscious knew what to do. The old training slipped into place like a leather jacket.

Punches flew, blood spat. The mob of punching bags thinned then finally dissipated entirely. Chest heaving, de Havilland leaned back against the bar. He shook his head to clear the tunnel vision of combat. A wave of fatigue washed over him.

"Well that was one hell of a fight, eh Corporal?" Wagin clambered onto the stool next to de Havilland. He fished around behind the counter. He came back with a bottle and two glasses.

"Like old times," replied de Havilland. *Except I'm getting older. Christ that took it out of me.* He scanned the bodies laying thick across the floor. Most of them were still breathing. The ones that weren't had probably deserved it; self defence was the only moral way to commit murder. From his point of view, anyway.

Wagin handed over one of the glasses and de Havilland took a deep chug. He felt the fire burn its way through his body. It felt good. He gave his body a once over. Nothing a medical kit couldn't fix. Or the local nurse at the worst. He wiped his face to clear his eye. His hand was red, but fortunately not dark red.

"Well Dev, I can honestly say it's a surprise to see you. What brings you out here?" Wagin emptied his glass and refilled it. De Havilland couldn't remember Wagin not having a drink after combat.

"Not much really. Just exploring. You?"

Wagin was silent for a moment. "Work. But now I'm stuck here."

"Stuck?"

"I don't have transport. No son-of-a-bitch is willing to help me without money."

"So where did all your money go? And isn't your father rich?"

Wagin snorted. "Yes, my father is one rich son-of-a-bitch. Why would he share that with me?" He took a swig of his own bottle. "Anyway I used all my money on the job. I haven't been reimbursed. Yet." He said the last sentence with a sly smile.

De Havilland raised an eye brow but said nothing. He wobbled to his feet; the adrenaline had drained from his body. He was still good to walk however.

"I have a ship," he said. "I've seen enough of this shit hole planet. Let's get to the star port."

Wagin brightened immediately and slapped de Havilland on the back. "'On ya, lad."

Chapter 2

A patch of red flashed in the ground cars wing mirror. Again. De Havilland straightened in his seat. Surely not; he was just being paranoid.

Their AI controlled Taxi-car turned left at the intersection. The red car turned left as well. Wagin obviously noticed de Havilland's posture. "Problem, Dev?"

De Havilland ignored him, eyes glued to the mirror. They went through another intersection. The red car also made the turn.

"I think we're being followed."

Wagin had the sense not to turn his head around. "Range?"

"One to two hundred. Double front seat, single back seat." De Havilland pursed his lips. "I say we bail."

"Pull over," Wagin ordered the AI. The taxi slowed and moved to the left. "You break left, I'll go right."

"Roger."

"Go."

De Havilland and Wagin threw open their doors and rolled out onto the pavement. De Havilland tucked in his chin, completed the roll, pushed up with his feet, ignored the pain from his cuts, and raced between two buildings.

He squatted and twirled, pulling the Diplomat from his belt and aiming back toward the road, firing hand supported by his other.

He took long, slow breaths from his stomach, steadying his hand. His eyes searched the road. Wagin was across the way, crouched behind a trash unit.

Brakes screeched beyond his field of vision. *Visitors*, mused de Havilland. He tightened his grip on the pistol, ears straining against the background noise. He needed cues; footsteps, warming power packs.

SCHULCK!

De Havilland knew that sound intimately: a grenade launcher. *Trouble*. He had two choices: Back further into the alley or go forward. The decision took less than a micro second – his body was already moving forward.

He saw the glint of metal fly above him from over a building roof. De Havilland kept his weapon up and raced to the corner of the alley.

The grenade exploded. Gas billowed around him. The world turned white, thick with smoke. De Havilland's eyes watered. His throat felt sandpaper raw. He coughed and hacked. His strength left him; his legs buckled. A figure appeared through the smoke ahead. De Havilland aimed through teary eyes and fired. The silhouette disappeared. De Havilland felt the gun leave his hand. He collapsed to the ground in a fit of coughing. Tears streamed down his face.

He felt cold metal against his head. Half inch bore. Thick; a gas silencer.

"Give us the data," said the voice, distorted with a gas mask. De Havilland retched, unable to reply.

There must have been a door down the alley. Should have checked. Idiot.

"Where is it?" the voice repeated, more urgently. The gun barrel pushed harder against de Havilland's skull.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" de Havilland squeezed out between coughs. Pain exploded in his face and His head snapped backwards from a kick. Blood poured down his face; his nose was broken. He received another kick in the gut and the barrel reappeared at his head.

BANG!

De Havilland flinched, but he wasn't dead. The pressure of the gun disappeared and he heard a thump. Keeping his eyes shut, de Havilland crawled forward till the smoke cleared. He made out a figure.

No two figures. Wagin aimed his pistol down the alley with one arm, while his other snaked around the other man's neck.

"Stop lying around Corporal." De Havilland grunted in reply and leaned against the building wall to wedge himself upright.

"What the hell kind of data are you carrying, Sarge?" de Havilland asked.

Wagin clenched his right arm, eliciting a squeak from his captive. "Tell him," said Wagin, releasing his grip slightly.

"Critical information on movements, locations and blue prints for Mr Pirelli's organization."

De Havilland glanced at Wagin, eyes brows raised. "You're a spy?"

"They're criminals, Dev! Organised-fucking-crime. I'm doing the world a favour."

"You're not a marine any more Sarge. Let him go."

Wagin's eyes narrowed. His voice took on a dark tone. "Not before I kill him."

De Havilland took a step forward, locking eyes with his old Sergeant. Something inside of him tried to hold him back. *He's your sergeant. Don't question him.* But they were civvies now. They were equals. *He's saved your life too many times. He'll always be the sergeant.*

"You have your life back now, Sergeant. You don't need to keep pretending. Why would you go invite trouble like that? Are you sick of living already?"

"I'm not doing this for me, Kid."

De Havilland folded his arms across his chest. His full-blue eyes turned to ice. Wagin worked his teeth for a moment then released his arm around the man's neck.

"Get the fuck out of here before I change my mind," Wagin growled. The man scampered without looking back. Wagin watched him go then rounded on de Havilland, pushing his face into de Havilland's. de Havilland held his ground.

"Insubordination?" Wagin asked with more surprise than anger.

De Havilland flinched in spite of himself. He straightened his shoulders. "We're not in the unit any more, Sam," de Havilland said. "Now tell me what the hell is going on."

Wagin clicked his tongue, sighed and nodded. He pulled de Havilland into the alley, to keep them out of sight and earshot of passer-bys.

"I'm not exactly on a job," admitted Wagin.

De Havilland snorted and shook his head. "No, I didn't think you were."

"I'm trying to remove the Pirelli organization from this planet."

"What?" de Havilland cried. He searched Wagin's face for a hint of humour. But this old sergeant's face was straight. Dead serious. "Why? What did they do to you?"

"It's not what they've done to me, de Havilland. It's what they are doing to everyone."

"Everyone's not you. It's not your problem any more. Go have a life – you don't need to artificially shorten it with this crusade."

Wagin flashed anger. "Dammit Dev. Can't you remember what it was like back in the marines? Fighting for something bigger than yourself? The flag? The country? The entire Federation?"

De Havilland's fist flew without thought. Wagin's head snapped back and he staggered backward. He straightened himself without a word and wiped the blood from his nose. He stared at de Havilland.

"No one gave more to the unit than me, Sarge. Ten years of one hundred and ten percent commitment. I lost my youth and a chance for a normal life. Now it's my turn. It's my time to live. And I'm going to fucking do it."

They stared at each other: one favouring his left ribs, one holding his head back to stem the flow of blood from his nose.

"Look, I'm going to the Starport and I'm leaving. You coming with me or not?" de Havilland asked.

Wagin brought his head down. "I've seen what those crooks do to the people here. I couldn't live with myself if I left before fixing it. If you can, then bugger off and get out of my sight."

De Havilland flinched at the remark; dismissal always hurt, even ten years out of the service. It hurt inside, but he kept this expression neutral and walked away.

"You have any ordnance I can use?"

de Havilland froze mid step. He kept his back to Wagin. "On my ship."

Chapter 3

Crooks infested the Starport concourse. Their disguises were poor; they were minions of the Pirelli empire. *Rank Amateurs*

“Shoot or sneak?” de Havilland whispered from their dark corner. They had to get across the concourse to the far landing pad aisle.

“Shoot would be easier, but the civilian casualties would be unacceptable,” whispered Wagin. De Havilland was about to argue, but stopped cold. *There is looking after number one and there is being inhuman and not worrying about others needless deaths.* What had happened to him?

“Ok. Stay here. I’m going to find us some disguises,” said de Havilland. Wagin nodded and disappeared into the shadows.

Although the planets main imports were weapons and drugs, there was a sizeable wool export; the planet was filled with old rural farms. At least that was de Havilland understood from the lady serving at the souvenir store. De Havilland left with a woollen overcoat, woolly hat with ear flaps, two pairs of sunglasses and hair dye. He walked casual, keeping his head still while his eyes darted from side to side, analysing the movements of the people around him. Some looked busy, some looked rushed and some looked totally unconcerned about de Havilland. The rest were trying to look that way. Four that he could see so far. There were probably more behind him. He ducked past the edge of a store and moved down the service alley to where Wagin was waiting.

He handed over the clothing, bar the hair dye and a pair of glasses. He poured the dye into both their hair and messed it around. His fiery orange was now a mix of blue, purple and red. He donned the glasses and grinned at Wagin.

“Haven’t these people heard of retinal adjustment?” Wagin asked dismissively.

“It’s a fashion statement,” de Havilland replied. He adjusted the glasses slightly and folded his arms over his chest. “They just look cool.”

Wagin grumbled, but donned his pair anyway. The coat and hat covered most of his features. De Havilland realised it was actually quote warm. *Too obvious?*

“Ditch the coat.” De Havilland unbuttoned his light jacket and handed it over. De Havilland gave him another look. He was looking at Sargent Wagin in shades and his jacket.

“Well, it’ll have to do,” he said, unconvinced. “You hold back for a few minutes,” said de Havilland as he left.

Keep it cool. Just relax. He knew if he made a beeline for the landing bay aisle, the crooks would spot him and the show would be over. Whistling, he strolled across the concourse, bobbing his head as if looking for a particular shop. There were several options, but he wasn’t interested in clothes, food, drugs or ‘massages’.

Actually he was feeling hungry. He changed direction and walked straight for what looked like a food store. He saw a man in a trench coat look at him over a datapad. *Someone’s been watching too many holovids.* Trenchcoat’s eyes stayed on him. De Havilland began to sweat. Was he that obvious to these amateurs? His hand crept down to his belt, fingering the cool steel of the Diplomat. If anything happened, he was going to be ready.

But the man’s eyes returned to his datapad. De Havilland visibly relaxed. He entered the food store without looking back. It might look suspicious if he looked around for Wagin. The Sarge could look after himself anyway.

He potted out of the store, local variety of apple in his hand and gazed up at the roof. Brown with dirt and crumbling from age, it held his interest for all of half a second. He yawned, checked his wrist chrono and strolled toward the landing bay aisle. Above the entry was a sign: ‘Docking Bays: 1-9’. Beside the door were two men in coats. One leaned against the wall, the other stood straight, a drink in hand. They both looked a little *too* chilled. Of course, they could be loitering for the hell of it. But de Havilland didn’t like coincidences.

They shuffled as de Havilland moved closer. His heart pounded. He tried to control his breathing and body response as adrenaline flushed through his body. The fight or flight response was like an old friend, someone de Havilland knew he could rely on and whose presence was cherished.

That's the world I live in. How sad. His mind switched to combat mode. He kept his motions tame, fluid. He gave a half smile to one of the guards. He looked from one to the other then straight ahead. *Don't look like you are avoiding them.*

One of them moved his hand under his jacket.

I've been had.

Time to react. De Havilland slowly moved his own hand back and cleared the butt of the Diplomat from his shirt. The two men stared straight into de Havilland, their eyes unwavering. They knew their target.

De Havilland took another step. He took two deep breathes as he plotted his moves. He had to assume they both had guns, which doubled the odds of being shot. His left shoulder ached in sympathy at the thought. He looked from the man on the left to the one on the right, the one with itchy trigger finger. *Target number 1.*

He moved another few steps. His body twitched with nervous energy; every sense was alert. He studied the other men's movement down to the micron, looking for any hostile movements. His fingers curled in preparation.

He drew clear with the men. De Havilland moved. He grabbed his gun with his right arm and swung it out sideways while he lifted his left leg and kicked the left man in the groin.

The left man cried and dropped. His pistol smashed into the right man's face. The man's half drawn pistol clattered to the floor. De Havilland pulled his right arm back and fired at point blank range. The right man's head ripped in half, throwing blood across de Havilland. He spun on the spot and aimed at lefties head. De Havilland fired and another head exploded.

Without pausing for a breath, de Havilland rushed down the hallway, gun in hand, blood dropping from his face and shirt.

There was pandemonium behind him. The steady beat of footsteps raised above the blanket of noise. He risked a glance backwards.

It was Wagin, waving him forward. De Havilland ran faster. The rest of the crooks would be chasing after them. They had to get to their ship first.

He weaved through the hallway, eyes glancing at every door, looking for his own bay number.

There! He crashed into the door, hand feeding his ID card into the slot.

"Come on, come on," he muttered.

Wagin skidded to a stop beside him, panting. "Let's go!" he yelled. After what felt like an eternity, the light turned green and the door shot open. De Havilland raced through, Wagin on his tail.

A laser blast flashed down the corridor behind them. "Go!" yelled de Havilland, sprinting for the ship. He pulled the security fob from his pants and flashed it at the ship. With a groan of gears, the landing ramp separated and arced out from the hull. Two laser bolts zapped by overhead and hit the Cobra, scoring the hull.

De Havilland maintained his stride as he scaled the landing ramp. He felt Wagin's weight on the landing ramp, grunted and turned left to get to the cockpit—

—He heard a scream. Loud, stretched. Painful. Wagin's scream. De Havilland stopped and turned. Wagin's face, just visible inside the hull, was contorted in pain and anguish. De Havilland stared for a moment, unable to believe his Sergeant, his mentor, was actually killable, was actually human.

The old training kicked into gear and he dived forward. He grabbed Wagin's outstretched hand and yanked him inside. He slammed the ramp button and the ramp retracted.

De Havilland gave himself a millisecond to determine his next move: Take care of Wagin now, and leave the ship a sitting duck, or take off and worry about Wagin later.

Duty overrode his emotions. He raced to the cockpit and fired up the controls and engines. He bypassed the pre flight checks as the ship powered up. It was terrible for the delicate high temperature components of the engines, but something that had become quite a habit recently.

Why am I always getting chased out of space ports? He wondered. The computer beeped in readiness and he yanked back on the control stick. The *Odysseus* leapt into the air. He pointed her at empty space and engaged the autodrive.

He sighed in relief and wiped the blood and sweat from his face. Another close one.

What happened to living life slowly? He had thought leaving AAAI would give him the peace his heart needed. Now he realised that was the only time in his life he had had peace. He sighed again as the adrenaline dissipated.

Wagin. De Havilland was back on his feet and down the corridor in no time. He gathered his old mentor's head in his lap and inspected the gut wound. A double laser tap. It was cauterised, but the internal damage was great.

Wagin was dying. They both knew it. Wagin focused his eyes on de Havilland and smiled.

"The odds always catch up with you kid. Every time." He retrieved a data crystal from his pant pockets. De Havilland took the crystal without thought. His whole body felt mechanical, like he had no control over it. He was just a third party to events: vested interest, but no actual input.

"Why did you get involved you stupid bastard?" de Havilland said finally. He realised he was crying and wiped them away.

"I'm a good guy, dev. I help other good people against the bad guys. It's what I've always done. Even on our more questionable missions, we always did what we thought was *right*. The question is: Why didn't you get involved?"

De Havilland felt as if a sledge hammer hit him in the chest. He almost doubled over from the imaginary blow. Why hadn't he gotten involved?

You're just one more selfish prick, looking after himself. But what was wrong with that? He had looked after the galaxy for ten years. Those years when he should have been getting drunk, stoned, laid, married, harbouring kids. Instead he had trained, fought, pushed his body and lived abnormally, all for the common good. What was wrong with taking time for himself?

Well? Are you enjoying it? The question chilled him, but only because he knew the answer: *No*.

What had changed?

Wagin coughed, spluttered and spat blood from his mouth. "You know what they say evil needs to survive?"

De Havilland nodded. *For good people to do nothing.* Another revelation: *I cause evil. I am evil.*

He felt sick enough to throw up. And then shoot himself. *How could you?* Wagin groaned and de Havilland knew his old commander's time was up.

"Get involved Dev. Promise me you'll get involved." De Havilland didn't hesitate. He wouldn't. Not any more.

"I promise."

Wagin sighed. He was dead

Chapter 4

The *Odysseus* lay in geosynchronous orbit, directly above the main city. De Havilland liked to be able to see his victims. He stared through down at the terrain as a flood of emotions crashed through his body unchecked. He tried to clamp down, to regain control. But the flow was too great.

Back in the marines, when de Havilland had needed it the most, Wagin had been a father figure. A strict and hard-ass father, but a father nevertheless. Now he was gone. Gone, because de Havilland wanted to flee in his ship like a selfish git instead of staying to help.

He would still be alive if it wasn't for me. He growled and punched the computer with all his pent up fury. His knuckles bleed, but it was worth it. Doing something was always better than sitting back and letting something happen to you.

So what are you going to do? His eyes focused on the crystal sitting atop the computers data reader. He narrowed his eyes. *Get revenge.* He pushed the crystal into the slot.

An auto batch file in the crystal filled the screen with data. Numbers scrolled by endlessly. In the corner was a blue print of a palace? A fort? Arrows and tiny text peppered the blue print. The fort image began spinning, showing de Havilland a three hundred and sixty degree view of the building.

So this what Wagin used all this money on. So what is it all for?

His eyes soaked in the data, trying to make sense of it all. Some of the numbers repeated. De Havilland gasped. They were dates. And planetary coordinates. It was an attack plan. Against their competitors? Or maybe it was pickup dates for 'protection' money.

It was all data he could use. He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. Wagin would have thought the perfect solution would be the destruction of both the Pirelli family and their competitors. So that was his aim.

While Pirelli's competitors would love to destroy him, how would de Havilland then destroy the competitors? He needed a third party. An icon flashed at the centre of the fort image. De Havilland leaned closer.

It was a radiation symbol. He grinned mischievously. Once he'd made a few local calls, he would need to make a long distant holonet call

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de Havilland shielded his eyes from the setting sun. The yellow sun stained the mesa a golden bronze. He dropped to his stomach at the edge of the plateau. Using his electro' binoculars, he had an unobstructed view of the desert regs below. The basin of rock spread to the horizon, punctuated by a sea of ergs to the left and a fortress to the right. His target: Castle Pirelli. He shimmied into the dusty rock and got as comfortable as he could. He would be there for awhile.

The attack came sooner than he thought. A hover barge, flanked by two armoured Honnette transports screamed across the ergs, spinning dust devils in their wake. From the south, behind de Havilland's position, a squadron of smaller uncovered transports raced along the regs.

De Havilland looked back at the *Odysseus*. She was tucked under an outcropping. It had been a bitch to get her in there, but at least she was invisible from above and would present little reflective surface to onlookers from below.

A third group joined the fray from the north. They were closer to their target than the others; they would get first blood. That was if their rag tag fleet of hover transports, rigged race vehicles and skiffs were up to the challenge. The range was extreme for his binoculars, but de Havilland swore he could see weapon emplacements on all the vehicles.

The sun dropped another half degree. He felt a slight chill. The sky to the north east blossomed in a crimson pink.

Red sky at cool night, murder at last light. de Havilland chuckled quietly. The sun began to disappear behind several buttes and mesas. He got up from his stomach and walked back to the Cobra.

It was time to leave.

He flew across the regs at an altitude of 100m; low enough to avoid detection, but high enough to watch the action unfold. The first group of attackers fired a salvo of laser pulses. A shield sphere flickered into existence in the path of the laser bolts.

The bolts passed straight through the shields, crashing into the structure beyond! Mortar and brick exploded in dust clouds, throwing fragments to the ground.

De Havilland grinned. He had given the shield specifications to Pirelli's competitors. That allowed them to tune their light based weaponry to the same frequency as the shield refresh rate, making it useless to all but projectile weapons.

The attacking craft pummelled the fortress with their laser fire, but the defenders reacted quickly, returning fire with their own defence arrays. Laser turrets detracted from cover and fired into the enemies at a high fire rate. The defenders had also synchronised their weapons with the shields.

A smaller speeder exploded, while a defence laser turned to slag under the withering fire of a gyro weapons platform.

The southern forces joined the fray and began their attack. Half the defensive weapons turned to the new threat, but the attackers concentrated their weapons on the defending laser turrets and the retaliation fire quickly slackened off.

A large gate opened in the fortress and two tracked and armoured Behemoths trundled out. They fired dense laser bolts into the southern forces, destroying a transport instantly.

Then the eastern parade arrived. Laser fire sprang back and forth across the darkening sky. The shield shimmered, but was still ineffective. More defender tanks rolled out into attack formation, while foot soldiers followed them out.

De Havilland checked his distance. *Close enough.* He brought the *Odysseus* to a stop and edged her behind a rusty red butte.

He ripped off the crash webbing, opened the lower cargo doors and rushed to the landing ramp. He bounded outside. The desert air was already cold, too dry to retain any heat. His lungs itched, but he knew it would pass. Goosebumps covered his arms. It had felt wrong to retrieve his jacket off Wagin's body. He would go cold for now. The lower cargo door had fully detracted on its hydraulic arms, resting a ten-metre square section of hull on the desert. Sitting on the square was a rack of weapons and a hover bike. The kid he had brought it from less than two hours ago had put serious time into the engine. Not enough to make him struggle to part with it however. Along with the two anti-gravity pads and the flared handlebars, it screamed *fun*. Work first, he told himself.

He grabbed a long, a laser rifle and extra power packs from the rack. He slung it over his shoulder; double-checked the action on his 'Diplomat' then jumped aboard the bike. He gunned the engine. The butte echoed with the roar of a feral animal released. De Havilland grinned like a school kid. The engine throbbed with power and probably misalignment, shaking his legs and lower torso. The urge to go for a joyride was strong, but even better would be too make his own bike. He filed the idea away for later. He had a promise to keep first.

Wap wap wap wap wap wap. The engines throb was musical. He checked his weapons again and gunned the accelerator. The bike blasted out from under the Cobra. De Havilland gasped in surprise, regained control and swerved moments before crashing into a rocky mound. He smiled nervously, grabbed the controls firmly and juiced the engine. He rocketed out from behind the butte and head for the setting sun. The atmosphere shimmered pink near the horizon, with stratified orange and purple further up. It was a beautiful sight.

It was too bad the day couldn't end similarly.

Chapter 5

He saw the shields collapsed as he roared over the regs at three hundred kilometres an hour.

Or it was a tactical move; chemical rockets launched from the fortress and mass drivers detracted from their sockets. The supersonic roar of the driver pellets and the rocket exhaust blasted across the desert to de Havilland's ears.

Fireballs blossomed ahead of him, punctuating the ever-growing darkness. De Havilland could already smell ozone and rocket fuel.

He avoided a rocky outcrop at the last moment. He corrected and forced his heart rate back down. He was running out of light, but didn't dare activate the bike's lights – they would give his position away instantly. He leaned forward in his seat, eyes straining against the twilight.

He hit the ravine five hundred metres before he expected it. The bike went over the edge and dropped ten metres to the ravine floor. De Havilland pushed down with the controls to suppress the bikes vibration and pushed on.

Fireballs punctuated the darkness. The ravine raced a beeline between two sets of attacking forces. De Havilland caught glimpses of their weapons platforms as he flew by.

A wayward missile hit the edge of the ravine, sending a shower of rocks down into the ravine. De Havilland's heart leapt from his chest and he fumbled the controls, sending the bike up the opposing edge of the ravine. He urged it up further, till he was almost horizontal. He could feel gravity taking part in the dance. *Just a little bit longer.* The controls jittered, the rear of the bike began to lift. He was going to roll!

He cleared the avalanche and swooped back to the ravine floor. He didn't dare take a hand from the controls to wipe his sweaty face.

He zoomed past two sentinel shield 'lappers straddling the ravine. If the shields had still been active, de Havilland would be dead.

But they weren't and he was within the security cordon. The sonic booms and flashes of light intensified. He could hear men yelling over the wind. He saw his target ahead. He let the bike coast to a stop. He got to his feet and wobbled to the reinforced sewage gate. It was the weak point of the fortress; once he got past the gate, he was in.

He heard a blood-curdling scream of pain and spun around instinctively, hand reaching for his pistol. A hover tank floated across the ravine, less than twenty metres from him. Keeping an eye out for more trouble, he released the Diplomat and pulled out the other item from his belt: explosive. It was a local backyard job - something he had learnt to make back with the marines. It was stable, and hopefully effective.

Laser bolts criss-crossed the sky like the effects in a dance club, back and forth with different colours and power settings.

This is your last chance to back out. Once you blow that door, you're committed. He thought of Wagin, and for the first time, he thought of the parents who couldn't afford food because they had to pay protection to scum like the Pirelli family. He thought of the kid who sold his bike, his only means of transport to his part time job, because if his family didn't front up with the money, the Pirelli's would torch their house. *They don't deserve this shit.*

It would be a simple job anyway. The only trick was not getting dead. He grinned. *Story of my life.* He clenched his biceps. Not too bad, he reckoned. He hadn't deteriorated too far. Stamina would be the key. But could he still keep up with his twenty year old self?

No, but neither could the scum in the fortress. He would be alright. Lips set into a tight line, he planted the explosives against the base of the gate.

He raced back and slid to a stop behind the bike. The explosive detonated, throwing up dirt and dust and knocking the bike onto de Havilland. Shrapnel patted harmlessly against the bikes frame.

Pushing the bike aside, de Havilland peered into the darkness beyond the cratered edges of the gate. He was clear to go.

Chapter 6

He held his right arm at a ninety degree angle; bicep by his side, Diplomat pointing straight out. He heard footfalls above him. He controlled his breathing; in, out, in, out.

He emerged from the sewage drain and into the basement. He scanned around. Empty. He located the stairs and bounded up with an eerie eagerness. He turned left at the top of the stairs and smashed aside a half open door, gun at the ready. Two armed men turned from their firing windows. De Havilland fired twice. One chest shot, pan across, one head shot. Not pausing to confirm the kill, de Havilland moved back down the hall and to the stairs. He had five stories to go...

BLAM! BLAM! He ejected a power pack and slapped a new one in its place. He watched the bodies drop to the ground, scanned the room then stormed back into the hallway and up the stairs at the end. He took them two at a time, head and arms twisting around so he could keep his weapon trained on the top balustrade.

A shadow raced over the roof. De Havilland narrowed his eyes, aimed and pulled the trigger. A head appeared above the balustrade. BLAM! The head turned to pink mist. De Havilland reached the next floor, dropped to one knee and looked around. *Top floor.* Two armed men raced across the far hall, yelling into their radios. De Havilland stopped and listened. The explosions and laser thumps from outside had diminished.

I wonder if that means... A siren blared to life above de Havilland, making him lose balance and almost fall backwards down the stairs

"Enemy forces have entered the citadel." De Havilland got to his feet. The criminals would switch their tanks for hand guns and knives. It was about to get messy. For them, anyway. He slipped forward, ducked into a maintenance cupboard, and closed the door behind him.

It was a tight squeeze. He couldn't breathe properly, but he held his position. Moments later, hundreds of people ran past. He heard the clink of boots and weapons, the rasps of deep breathing and the static of radio.

The sounds died away. Taking a risk, he unlocked the cupboard door and moved out. *Glad I didn't have to take them all on.* He checked his pistol. Three shots left. He tucked the weapon back into his belt and took the rifle from his shoulder. He checked the action, brought the weapon to his shoulder then slinked forward.

The hallway ahead stretched out into the distance, seemingly never ending. *A trick of the light,* de Havilland told himself. He knew the exact size of the citadel; he had read the blue prints.

The floor creaked. De Havilland paused. *This isn't a wooden floor... Trap!* He sprang sideways. The floor where he had been standing erupted in a violent rush of laser blasts. De Havilland rolled through a side door and collected himself up. He looked back into the hallway. The floor was melted, twisted and deformed. He took a step toward the door—

—As a blue uniformed man jumped him. De Havilland didn't hesitate and fired a laser bolt into his abdomen. The soldier fell back, but a second man jumped through the door after him, catching de Havilland off guard.

They crashed to the floor in a pile of limbs and weapons. De Havilland tried to move his rifle but it was pinned between their bodies. He let go and lashed out with his right fist, but didn't connect.

His head slammed back into the floor, igniting a starburst across his vision. He angled his head away. The next blow missed and his assailant cursed. De Havilland worked his left leg loose and rammed his knee into the man's groin. Another yell and de Havilland felt the weight on his chest lessen. He swung his right fist again and connected. The soldier went flying. De Havilland reached down, flicked the rifle up and pumped two shots into the soldier. De Havilland didn't move. He just lay there, panting hard. Smoke and steam issued from the dead soldier's mouth as the air in his lungs, superheated from the laser bolts, slowly escaped.

He leant on the rifle as he got to his feet. His chest rose and fell continuously. His heart thumped hard. He gulped, spat and moved forward to the door.

He glanced out. A laser turret had retracted from the roof and was scanning the room. It detected de Havilland, rotated and fired. De Havilland pulled back as the doorframe exploded into dust.

Can't go that way, he mused. He tightened his hand around the rifle's grip, noticed his hand shake slightly. He quelled the shake and checked his hand again. *You're ok old time. Just keep going.* He looked around the room, seeking inspiration. His eyes settled on the far wall. He moved closer and put his hand against it. It felt reinforced, but he knew from the blue prints that at its core, it was nothing more than the local mudbrick.

He took two steps back, planted his feet a half metre apart, switched the rifle to full auto and fired. In a circle. The wall ripped apart and dust and debris filled the room, turning de Havilland the colour of mud. He stopped firing and charged at the wall. On his last step he brought his shoulder up and jumped.

The wall gave and he crashed through, landing on a round slab of wall, on the floor of the adjacent room. He was already moving. He twisted the rifle around and fired. He turned away without kill confirmation and got to his feet. Laser fire shredded the wall slab a moment later.

He panned the rifle around, square a soldier's head in his sights and fired. The body collapsed in a spurt of blood. De Havilland ran toward the body, but twisted his torso so he aimed perpendicular to his run. He had to keep moving: a static target was a dead target. A laser blast flashed over his shoulder. He sighted another soldier. He pulled the trigger.

Click. Out of ammo. The rifle was now a liability. He dropped it, ducked and changed direction and withdrew the Diplomat from his belt. Laser bolts framed him on either side. He turned ninety degrees and charged at the firing soldier, Diplomat out straight ahead. De Havilland fired twice. The second shot caught the man in the chest. He stumbled backwards, shirt on fire.

De Havilland stopped, changed direction and bolted away at an angle as another laser bolt flashed nearby. He searched the room. A soldier stood in the far corner, carbine tracking de Havilland.

De Havilland stopped, changed angles again, sped up—

—and was thrown to the ground. Pain flared through his body. The soldier had shot him. But he wasn't dead. He rolled away, screaming as the pain tore his nerves apart. A laser bolt hit the floor next to him.

He brought the weapon above his head as he rolled. *Keep moving. Keep moving.*

He was screwed. The roll wasn't fast enough. He had less than a second to live. He had to fire first.

You've only got one shot left. The soldier's weapon moved in slow motion. The barrel arced toward his head. It stopped. De Havilland's eyes widened. He was out of time. He pulled the trigger.

BOOM!

He cringed. But he wasn't dead. He opened his eyes. The soldier was writing around on the ground. De Havilland slowly pushed himself to his feet and limped over to the struggling soldier. He looked down into the man's eyes, brought his boot up, and rammed the heel into the man's neck. He heard a sickening crunch and the soldier went still.

De Havilland grabbed the rifle from his prey then took his first proper look around the room. It was a vast stateroom: tapestries and stained glass windows covered the walls. A dusty red carpet weaved its way from the main door up to the...throne?

Mr Pirelli, the kingpin of the organization, sat atop his throne and clapped.

"Well done. Well done indeed. You're hired."

De Havilland frowned. "Hired?"

"I assume you were auditioning for a role in my organisation. And you are right. Once the mess outside is cleaned up, I'll be needing people like yourself."

De Havilland took a step forward and put as much menace into his voice as he could muster. "I already have a job. To kill you."

Mr Pirelli laughed. "Really? And what do you think that will accomplish? Someone else will take my place. The Pirelli family always survives. And if it doesn't, I'm sure my competitors will fill the void. This planet belongs to us. Do you really think you will make a difference?"

de Havilland halted. Pirelli obviously knew he was a do-gooder, trying to make the world a better place. *That crook I convinced Wagin to release. He blabbed to Mr Pirelli about what we were doing.* He shook his head. It was irrelevant now.

“Unfortunately, we’re no longer playing your game, Mr Pirelli. I’m the game master now. I write the rules.”

De Havilland depressed the trigger. Mr Pirelli flinched, then his head snapped back from the shot.

De Havilland took in a deep breath. It was eerily quiet. He could still hear the sound of small arms fire; handguns and low powered rifles exchanging fire through the base. He turned and inspected the room. He approached Pirelli’s body and found the laser turret controls in the arm rest of the throne. He deactivated the turret and turned to leave. He only had one thing left to do before he left. Before he could say he had repaid his debt.

Chapter 7

de Havilland blasted the hover bike back down the ravine. The edges rushed by in a blur, while the citadel and the forces fighting around it disappeared into the background. De Havilland flicked the bikes lights on; stealth no longer mattered.

The ravine came to an end and de Havilland swung the bike up along the edge and over till he was back on the desert floor, racing over the rocky regs. He checked his wrist chrono. It didn't display a time. It was counting down.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

The ground shook violently and night turned to day; pure, brilliant, illuminating white. Darkness returned. He risked a look back.

A mushroom cloud lazily expanded outward from the citadel. The earth settled down and the bike's vibrations returned to their normal throb. De Havilland clenched his teeth and pushed down harder on the accelerator.

*

de Havilland killed the engines on the *Odysseus* and watched the Federation's Sixth fleet pound the living crap out of the desert. They were right on time. They never liked it when they heard of unaccounted nuclear weapons showing up. They were especially displeased when these weapons showed up on anarchy planets in the hands of criminals. De Havilland wasn't sure why Mr Pirelli had brought it, but de Havilland knew that his use of the weapon, bringing peace to the planet, could only be ironic.

The federation cordon tightened. Drop ships landed on the planet. De Havilland smiled as he watched from the safety of his cockpit. The Federation would restore order. They would eliminate the crime syndicates and bring the system into the fold of the Federation. Not ideal, but better than what they had before.

De Havilland glanced at the storage sling to his right: his jacket, claimed from Wagin after de Havilland had buried him, the data crystal and Wagin's old K-bar knife, a memento from the old days. Wagin had died doing what he loved doing; helping people. De Havilland hoped he had helped the planet and its inhabitants.

De Havilland hoped Wagin was happy, wherever he was.