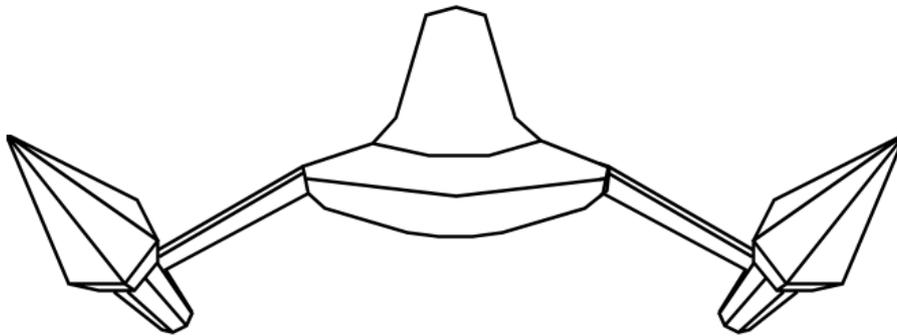


The Elite BBS Presents:
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

REVELATIONS AND INTERLUDES

THE HPA SAGA



Volume

3

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NEWSFLASH: Rebel Forces Garrison Imperial Base

[Galactic News]

There has been a report in the last few hours that Dickens Base in Vequess has been overrun by rebel forces.

The Imperial-ruled system, which has had long-term trouble with a faction known as the Vequess Liberation Army, was taken over by rebel forces during a large-scale riot in the later hours of yesterday evening.

An independent freighter in the vicinity of the system, the *Northern Star*, picked up a distress call from who we assume is one of the station's staff, and transmitted it back to us. We have converted it to text below;

"Mayday! Mayday! All Imperial forces please respond! Dickens Base in Star System Vequess has been taken over by hostile forces. The security forces have been overwhelmed. All Imperial forces please respond. Long Live the Emperor! Mayday! Mayday..."

The Empire has released a statement, saying this is an "simple disturbance of no intergalactic interest."

However, it is understood that the 5th Marine Unit has been deployed onboard the ISS *Jameson*, and there are even many strong rumours from Imperial Sources that Imperial SSS (Special Space Service) Unit *Scalpel* has been deployed to the system, also.

The Empire has released no comment on this, and we will keep you updated with this story as it breaks.

Steve Philips, Galactic News

* * *

To All GalNet Commanders

[Frantic]

Transmission to all GalNET commanders:

Attention all GalNET commanders in the vicinity of the Vequess system. A possible humanitarian catastrophe is being reported in Vequess as riots are becoming widespread.

I would advise all concerned commanders to hold position near Vequess, but to not to attempt entering the system. Imperial forces are likely to make a large strike to quash the current rebellion. In this situation there may be large quantities of civilians requesting independent evacuation. Until this request is made, you are advised NOT to intervene in any manner not compliant with normal trading practices.

If evacuation becomes necessary, I will be leading an evacuation fleet in my personal Taipan Mk II. Under no circumstances should Imperial forces be engaged, and reinforcement will only be given to those ships firing when fired upon.

Mark "Frantic" Smart - GalNET Deputy Chief Administrator

Commentary on the Dickens Base standoff.

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

The takeover of Dickens Base has sent a ripple throughout civilised space, with the longstanding tension between Vequess natives and the occupying Imperial forces having once again boiled over into bloodshed. The speed at which the base was overcome is indicative of meticulous planning and cumulative resentment.

The mainstream Vequess Liberation Army have denied all knowledge of the Dickens Base takeover and have claimed that they're committed to negotiation with the Empire over the status of Vequess.

Somewhat proving this, only the splinter groups have joined into the chaos so far, along with the more excitable members of the public. The VLA seems to be holding back to see what will come of this, as they know the Empire won't put up with armed insurrection for very long.

The lack of spaceborne skirmishing has been curious, as the conflict seems limited to Dickens Base and the Planetary surface. The possible entry of GalNet administrator Commander Frantic seems redundant, since the Vequess system has been almost devoid of space traffic (Imperial Military excepting) since the crisis began. Long Range Cruisers and Lynx Bulk carriers have been arriving in the system, taking one look and warping out again.

The Empire will have to be careful of how hard it strikes however, as the VLA is no longer a poorly armed, rag-tag group of terrorists, and could cause some serious grief should they be drawn into the conflict (via one of the atrocities which seem to be a part of almost EVERY Imperial Campaign). The appearance of the ISS Scalpel has been almost a welcome sight, as the Special Forces troops abroad are known more for their clinical viciousness than indiscriminate savagery. If they can recover Dickens Base quickly, then a wider conflagration may be avoided.

Seasoned Empire-watchers have speculated that this situation presents a challenge to the Crown Prince, whose credentials in a crisis have taken a battering in recent years. The Emperor's previous attempts at delegating authority to his heir have had mixed results, to say the least. If (as seems likely) the Crown Prince is given the task of recovering Vequess, a dangerous situation may become even more confusing.

The long-term economic, political and military effects of this uprising are unclear, although the Conversion Stock Exchange was down six percent on the news, rebounding to finish the day on a three percent loss.

With neither side in this conflict negotiating with any sort of good-will, it is hard to see that the outcome of the standoff will bring anything but more hardship to the longsuffering inhabitants of the Vequess System.

Cmdr Red Ravens [DE-013]
In-Transit, Canayze System (-2, -5)

In 't Loop

[Norman Mosser]

La Soeur Du Sam Han loomed on Norman's viewscreen as the autopilot guided Norman's Courier into the dock. He guessed rightly that his arrival would be noted by a number of different groups and that word he had turned up again would spread. No doubt there would be at least one attempt on his life before he left the station. It came with the job, he mused.

Dropping out of the loop for so long was probably unwise but it was very enjoyable. After all, there were parties, there were Parties and then there were recreational gatherings of the great and, er, great that were so intense and well, decadent that the press would never hear about them. The sort of events where heads of state let their hair down. Invitation only, total information blackout and an unspoken agreement not to talk about it. Ever.

Norman had been surprised and suspicious when he got motives but decided to go along out of curiosity. For one thing it was a damn good knees-up and it was one of those events where while nothing officially was supposed to come from it, you would invariably come back with little bits of information. For instance, he could see an improvement in Alliance-Imperial relations on the cards in the near future courtesy of an Alliance ambassador and a high ranking figure in the navy. Not to mention that the Federation finance minister was an absolute master at mixing cocktails.

That was in the past though. What he needed to do now was catch up on news. Partly to discover what he had missed, and also so he could track down his Long Range Cruiser. He had lost contact with it which meant that he no longer knew where the HPA was.

And then there was the matter of the welcome map he had created which highlighted all of the systems in which he would be shot on sight, arrested, permitted to dock only to fuel up and leave again, expected to leave within 24 hours, expected to leave within 72 hours, accepted, welcomed and hailed. There were now large areas of red on it, and it looked like he wasn't welcome in Alliance space any more. And the Empire merely tolerated him.

As Norman disembarked from his ship into the landing bay he wondered if he was to be crippled by his own reputation.

Reinforcements

[Count Rowan "The Rowan" Weston]

Manhattan Base's main hangar was in total chaos as crewman sprinted around loading all the equipment needed for a Cougar/X class battleship into the small fleet of orbital shuttles. On board the ISS Alberto Knox, Count Weston watched the departure preparations on the main screen with interest and then turned to the Squire at the navigation console.

"Status?" he asked the junior officer.

"Course plotted for Vequess, jump drives standing by at stage two" reported the navigator, before turning back to his board to recheck the co-ordinates.

Back on the planet, all the shuttles had left the main hangar and started the climb into orbit. However, on the other side of the starport island, doors concealed behind metres of rock ground open and a flight of four heavily armoured military shuttles rolled out onto a launchpad which could easily have been mistaken for a natural ledge.

In orbit, Count Weston sank down into his plush command chair and flicked up the small screen in the armrest which connected him to the navy-grade precision sensors mounted in the Knox's lower bow. Flicking a tiny switch mounted next to it, he scrutinised each of the shuttles in turn.

"Naval Shuttle KG-01+; Drive: Interplanetary; Cargo: 50 Marines, 5t Hand Weapons"

"Naval Shuttle KG-02+; Drive: Interplanetary; Cargo: 20t Battle Weapons (Light MICVs)"

"Naval Shuttle KG-03+; Drive: Interplanetary; Cargo: 20t Nerve Gas"

"Naval Shuttle KG-04+; Drive: Interplanetary; Cargo: 10 NK-4077 Strategic Sub-orbit Nuclear Missiles"

He sighed. hopefully the NK-4077s and the nerve gas wouldn't be needed, but he had authorisation to use them if necessary for the good of the Empire-better to kill a million innocents than to let Dickens Base fall into enemy hands. As the shuttles docked and the Knox prepared to make the jump to Vequess with its escort ships, he couldn't help wondering- was it just chance that had led the federals to strike there, or did they know that this was the home of the top secret "Omega Project"?

A Bridge Over Troubled Water

[Mack Winston]

I'd been out of the hospital for a few weeks now, and thrown straight into prison, awaiting trial for the assassination of various riff-raff on this very station. Facing frontier justice, of course.

I had finally got used to my replacement arm, and the hospital had supplied me with a surprisingly realistic fake skin covering. Most people couldn't tell it was a prosthetic. It even worked right. In fact, I was beginning to like it.

Especially as it was somewhat stronger than the original item that was so cruelly lopped off with a sword. It hadn't taken me long to find out how to modify the force limiters. Of course, it meant I had to re-learn how to use it. It's sort of nice being able to write without snapping the pen in half by accident.

It was prison visiting time. My partner-in-crime, the gregarious half-brother of the much loathed and maligned Jannah Berihn was the only one I knew on the station (well, apart from the prison guards of course). My uncle had left a couple of weeks ago without so much of a word. But he did give me a small game puzzle, and of course...the guards let me have it, seeing no harm in the simple, plastic toy. Little did they know the puzzle pieces had imparted a short, slightly non-specific, but hopeful message.

"I still can't get over your lowlife uncle," my partner-in-crime ranted, "just leaving you like that. They are gonna find you guilty you know..."

"Take it easy. He has a plan"

"Bollocks!" My friend exploded, making the guards turn around and look at us harshly.

"Why do you lack confidence?"

"Well, he just buggered off without so much as a goodbye. He finds that huge plasma accelerator part more important than you, I think. I thought the Winston family was honourable!"

"Trust me." I said.

He just shook his head. "Look, I've been out here longer than you by a good few years. I know when to trust someone and when not to, and your uncle is a slimeball, sorry," he said with feeling.

I was a little bit shocked about this. "And I've known my uncle for a good while longer than you, and I can trust him, alright."

"Well, what is he going to do? He's probably light-years away now."

"I have no idea. But we'll find out soon enough."

"Well, the trial's tomorrow, it's an open-and-shut case against you, I mean the DNA and photos match precisely, and judging by the last poor sap that went through that court, you end up with the executioner within a couple of days. They don't mess around, you know..."

"Don't remind me, I'm trying not to think of it."

It was rather worrying, of course. I didn't even have a lawyer. Didn't really see the point really. I had one appointed to me, although I hadn't met her yet. That was supposed to happen this afternoon. The speed in which the case was proceeding really showed what dire straits I was in.

*

It was open-and-shut, and I was as guilty as hell. To cap it off, frontier systems seem to relish old-fashioned execution methods. I had tried to find out what they used on this system, but I had been stonewalled. I had heard rumours that it was the guillotine. After all, the original settlers were French...

*

Some hours later, I was languishing in my prison cell. I was still brooding about my meeting with my partner-in-crime. Maybe he was right about my uncle. If he was, it wouldn't matter to me in about two days time because I'd

be more worried about my head about to fall off. If he wasn't...what the hell could he do? I had surreptitiously tried to observe security around the prison. It was very, very good.

For me, fatally good, I feared.

A guard started to unlock my cell door. The thick metal door swung open.

"Prisoner Winston, your attorney is here."

And in walked a woman. Probably in her late 50s, but obviously taking care of her anti-ageing system. She looked barely more than 30. And recognition dawned.

"Hello, my name's Mary Dixon, and I'm your state appointed attorney. Let's talk about your case".

She nodded to the guard, and my cell door was closed.

Recognition began to dawn...

I made a sign with my fingers, very carefully. A sign from my childhood. She acknowledged...only one person knew that sign. Of course, I didn't speak her real name, for it was not Mary Dixon, but Pam Gilmour...

Excess Paperwork

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

“Surrender the unit or we’ll wipe you out of reality!”

“Hmm... poetically inclined!” Bec said, bringing our heading round to face the two Harriers.

This business was proving a boon for our Elite rating, as it was sending us into combat very regularly, goons after the unit (which was now housed in a special unit which made the signal easier to find) along with the occasional pirate. Fortunately for us, our erratic itinerary meant that we were rarely facing more than three ships at a time. Agent Beaumont (who we were slowly getting to know as Catherine) speculated that the forces we were up against were actually spread quite thinly looking for us, as well as enacting whatever nefarious plot that was their *raison d’etre*. We’d merrily destroyed twenty so far, so we were at least throwing a minor spanner into the works.

Significantly, Viscount Preston’s Imp Explorer was nowhere to be seen, and we rarely faced anything of any size. Beaumont shrugged and said that it was probably a matter of resources again, they were saving their big ships for something equally big. Which was worrying.

The initial laser fire only shaved our shields, crackling harmlessly alongside the flank. The two were armed with 4MWs though, so we’d have to be somewhat careful. The pilots we had faced varied from Below-Average to Deadly. Catherine had kept a record of their identities, and was trying to cross reference them to find a link. We’d defeated them partially through Bec’s and my efforts, and partially due to the snazzy additions to our Constrictor. Bec and I had fallen in love with our ship all over again, which was a lovely feeling. The ship had been a bit damaged early on, when we were showing off rather than doing what we should be doing, which was surviving.

We turned and tracked the more dangerous of the two, a Dangerous rated pilot with a 350Cr bounty. The Harrier is not a fighter craft, although they can be dangerous in the right hands. He was well shielded, so although we kept on hammering him, he managed to return fire with the 1MW pulse in his rear mounting. This skittered off our front shields, but chipping away could still leave us vulnerable to his compatriot, who tried to move onto our six in order to relieve his wingmate (as well as deliver some punishment to our rear shields). Bec quickly performed a flip manoeuvre and wound on the forward thrust. The poor Harrier pilot must have had the fright of her life, seeing the ship she was chasing turn and rush at her at a million clicks an hour. Instead of shooting past us and keeping our window-of-fire to a minimum, she panicked and tried to bank away from us, which also meant that she couldn’t return our fire, while we still had a clear shot at her.

We had her shields down to five percent when we felt a concussion from above. The Dangerous pilot was back, and had depleted our shields down to thirty. We immediately broke off pursuit of the other ship as Bec evaded. But I was being thoughtful, and lobbed off an NN500 at the retreating Harrier.

“You reckon we can take the other one?” Bec asked me. We’d already written off the ship we’d damaged, an assessment that was confirmed as the missile struck and detonated. A brief flare of light danced across our ship before we returned our attention to the more dangerous pilot. He seemed to hang back briefly, then accelerated towards us, firing a missile. Even before I engaged the ECM, I had a nagging suspicion that the opposition was a discerning pilot when it came to missiles. I was confirmed in my suspicions as the bright blue glow of the ECM failed to have any effect whatsoever on the advancing missile.

Bec reached over to evade, but I shouted at her to stay on course. She looked at me funny, but complied. Catherine turned around to see what was happening, saw me making fine adjustments to the laser targetter.

“Cowboy!” she sniffed dismissively and turned back to her panel.

“Here we goooooo!” I whooped and fired. For a few seconds, the beam spat out into the darkness without effect as the missile galloped towards us and I fiddled frantically with the fine-motor controls. Then there was an expanding cloud of gas in front of us as the laser scythed through the missile and the warhead detonated.

“Showoff!” Bec said, in the same tone of voice that Catherine used.

We returned our attention to the Harrier, which seemed quite disheartened by my marksmanship, which was pretty much what I’d intended. There was a flash of light around the ship, and then the distinctive billowing cloud of plasma was all that was left of the ship’s presence on this side of Witchspace.

“Chicken!” I crowed.

We then turned our attention to the cargo canisters from the other ship strewn around the battle zone. We didn't have a huge amount of cargo space after the upgrade, but that was quite OK. Survival and greed are usually at war in most bounty hunters, and I was glad that we'd had that decision made for us by Winston.

After half an hour's patient scooping, I snorted in disgust.

"More Narcotics."

"What?" Bec was still nudging the ship closer to another canister and wasn't paying more attention.

"Has it occurred to anyone here that the only thing we've been picking up for the last two weeks has been narcotics?"

Catherine and Bec turned and gave me their attention.

"They've all been Imperial Citizens and we're close to Imperial Space, why wouldn't they have narcotics?" Catherine said rhetorically, speaking slowly.

"It's legal everywhere around here, of course they're trading it." Bec said dismissively.

"Exclusively?" I let the question hang. "Every ship we've destroyed over the past fortnight has been carrying narcotics. Now I believe in co-incidence as much as the next bounty hunter –"

"Hey, that's me!" Bec grinned. Like many pilots, she doesn't care for superstition.

"- but it strikes me unusual that every one of our would-be assassins *just happens* to be carrying a full load of it."

Catherine looked at me, chagrined. She's the intelligence analyst, and yet she hadn't picked up on the fact. She turned back and brought up the database she'd developed on our attackers, based on Ship Registry and subsequent ID enquiries at port.

"Hmmm... I'll submit financial probes on these people to the Alliance hackers. They should turn up some dirt. I only hope that it's relevant dirt."

I shrugged and went back to penning my commentary on the Vequess crisis. A minor newspaper on my homeworld had foolishly agreed to pay me a minor sum for 'Exotic Space Tales' (their description, not mine!). I'd chosen to be topical and write about Vequess and also chosen to pretend that we were right in the thick of the action rather than just... er... in the general region. It was interesting, at any rate, to see how brutally the Empire would crack down on the rebellion. It was also interesting in that trade routes altered during crises like this, which changed piracy, bounty hunting and the economies of ALL the systems in the area. It was fun, and challenging stuff to write. It also took my mind off the crew problems we were having.

Despite the potential risk, we decided to spend a day or so in Zelagre. Although we had only spent a couple of weeks in space, having three people operating in a space designed for two was wearing away at our nerves. Bec and Catherine had settled down to a quite decent working relationship and I was frankly admiring of Catherine's intelligence skills. She treated both of us with an occasionally distant courtesy, perhaps conscious that we HAD blown her cover, jeopardised her career and separated her from her husband, who I was fairly sure she was missing badly.

No, the main problem was that Bec and I were tense to the point of conflict. Bec seemed (obscurely) to blame me for getting us into the whole situation. I suppose the lure of the bounty-hunter life for the rich heiress had been freedom from suffocating duty. My little leap from the cockpit of a destroyed Harris had landed the both of us with more duty than either of us wanted. It wasn't unnatural that Bec might feel a bit upset about this, especially since we had been ordered (yes, *ordered*) to go to Achenar. I suspected Bec had reason to avoid her homeworld. I tried to talk to her about it, but she wouldn't respond and merely continued sniping, putting me down and talking over me. We couldn't argue and banter in the way that we used to and only seemed to be friendly in the old way when we were actually in combat.

We docked, and three grown spacers squabbled like three year olds trying to get out of the hatch at the same time.

*

"Kohl." The man said colourlessly. He was a colourless man, pale and ordinary. His head was shaved, like many space station employees and his eyes had a dull, disinterested quality. He was dressed in a grey coverall no different to a hundred billion others throughout the universe and appeared unarmed.

“Yes?” Kohl looked up. He was the Deputy Engineer of Zelagre’s major Space Station, and was reviewing maintenance reports. He was chubby and always looked stressed, which he was. Even despite his... other activities, it was a busy job,

“What is your connection to the Vequess uprising?”

Kohl reached over to call for security, but paused.

“Why shouldn’t I call the guards and have you thrown out of this office and for that matter, off this station?”

The man smiled in a practised way. It was totally without substance, an evil grin by rote. Kohl still felt uneasy. His hand drifted nonchalantly to the hand weapon clipped to the underside of his desk.

“I am Clone Agent 15007 in his Imperial Majesty’s Special Investigations unit. You would be advised to co-operate or I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork.”

Kohl paled. If this was a joke this wasn’t very funny. The man’s voice was even and modulated, a bland, boring drone.

“How dare you question my loyalty! If this is some test, then it is totally unwarranted!” He blustered.

The Clone cocked his head, considering.

“An intelligent response. A generic expression of loyalty, designed to satisfy either side in case it is a trick question. Your evasiveness does you credit. What is your connection to the Vequess uprising?”

Three years! Three years he’d been a servant of the cause and now this dull robot of a man was going to take it all away from him? *He* deserved to be the Station Manager, not that arse-licking fool Muehlenberg.

“I don’t know why you’re here, but you won’t –” Kohl brought the pistol up from beneath the desk and fired. He then blinked in surprise. The man was gone. He looked at his weapon in surprise. He hadn’t thought it was that powerful.

A hand chopped at Kohl’s neck from behind his chair. Perfectly placed, it struck at a nerve cluster and rendered him unconscious without pain. Kohl slumped in the chair. The agent moved out from behind the chair and lifted Kohl effortlessly, placing him on the floor leaning against the desk. It still surprised him how slow the reflexes of these free-range humans were. Kohl had telegraphed the presence of the gun for nearly a minute. He sat down in Kohl’s chair. The computer security was pitiful, and he broke in within eight minutes. When he got into the personal files, he was disappointed to find that Kohl was as discrete a plotter as poor as he was an administrator. There was no evidence of anything. The desk was more fruitful, with a diary bound in Thompsonsworld Wall-Slug Leather. Kohl had used a manual pen and had either written in code or had very bad handwriting. The agent filed it away for future analysis. He looked down at the unconscious form beside him. He doubted this creature could tell him any more than what he would already learn from the personal diary. He presented far more of a problem than an opportunity. Though perhaps there was some way to turn this problem into an opportunity.

The agent reached down and squeezed Kohl’s neck with his hand. The only reaction was a single crack, like someone leaning back on a chair. The agent quickly left the office and went down to the station’s only bar. Apart from the staff on duty, almost all of the station’s personnel clustered there in their spare time. He would go there and observe. Cockroaches always scuttle quickly when someone snaps the light on.

*

Zelagre’s main (and only!) bar was huge, and that was about the only pleasant thing you could say about it. The bar’s kitchen was doing a roaring trade and in the further corners Narcotics dealers were plying their trade. All this was cheerfully ignored by the owner, an ebullient woman named Karika. She greeted all of us with a bear hug and a complimentary drink.

“Come in and sit down, you must all have been in space for a year! I recommend our masseur Brian, he gives wonderful relief to tired spacers. Also... we have just had a new shipment of Brown from Riedquat and it’s had a few days to settle. Hungry for real food, of COURSE you are... the Trachnid steaks are excellent, especially in apricot sauce!”

We eventually extricated ourselves from the one-woman bordello and settled in at a not-too-obscure table. I had the unit on me (we didn’t dare leave it on the ship) but in deference to the fact that it was radioactive I had it in a

shielded container. I'd finally found out what it was. Winston had called it a pattern replicator. Essentially, inside this little device held a scale model of the field pattern for the HPA. When you placed enough enhancers and amplifiers around it, it replicated the field pattern on a large scale (about twenty metres in diameter) which would then generate the plasma to be accelerated. It was the equivalent of the lens for a laser. Without it, the best they could do was spew low grade plasma out of the muzzle at a low acceleration, which made it more like a second prime-mover than the deadly weapon it would be once the pattern replicator was fitted.

I had BS Vodka, while both Catherine and Bec went for the Riedquat Brown. Damn! Outnumbered again in the alcohol department!

"I got the results back from the Alliance hackers." Catherine said, after finishing her first half a litre.

"And?" we waited, with baited breath.

"Until about a year and a half ago, all of our attackers were relatively law-abiding Imperial citizens. Most come from a similar background. Wealthy, but not rich. Powerful, but without influence. Talented, but not gifted. All on... shall we say, the second tier of the Imperial nobility."

"Malcontents." Bec said knowledgeably.

"Exactly. Now as I said, until a year and a half ago they were relatively normal citizens. Then their spending habits changed dramatically. A lot of them first upgraded their ships into Iron Asses...then there's a dramatic change in their spending habits. They started to buy narcotics. "

"And?"

"*Not* selling them."

"And?" I said. It seemed my role today to say 'And?', impatient with these revelations that went nowhere. "A few more rich Imperials are suddenly injecting or smoking or snorting or inhaling or getting narcotic enemas or whatever!" Catherine looked at me with some impatience.

"I did mention that they were wealthy, didn't I? We're talking thousands of tons of narcotics. And these are only the people we know about. There are probably many others who we haven't met yet, and probably quite a lot who are otherwise normal citizens stockpiling massive amounts of..."

"They've been taking a fair percentage of stock out of circulation," Bec piped up, "leading to a slowly rising price which would be attributed to other less-nebulous factors. The demand, being constant, would mean that the production and trading industries would expand, without there being any real growth in the market." I stared at her. She shrugged, a little embarrassed. "I'm not my mother's daughter for nothing. I understand SOME economics."

I was confused and signalled to one of the waiters, who were over-attentive when you were fine and scarce as Alien Artefacts when you needed a drink.

"Do you need some more BS, sir?"

"Quite enough of it at the table already." I muttered.

"Sorry?"

"Yes please, another vodka." I said quickly. "So all of this huge thing is just a market manipulation?"

"Not... exactly." Catherine hesitated, weighing her words. "I'd say that if there were more independents involved and more criminals. Bec, could you explain to Red how important narcotics are in the Empire?"

"Was that a non sequitur?" I asked.

"No." she said shortly, and gestured for Bec to continue.

Bec explained that Narcotics weren't just recreational in the Empire, although some used them for fun. Slaves were given them, to make sure they didn't rebel, and to work harder and longer. Army troops were given them to make them tougher, impervious to pain, and fanatically loyal. Navy pilots took drugs to aid concentration and reflexes. Students took them to help the memory. Homemakers took them to while away the dullness when they were stuck at home with the kids.

"I remember I used to nick my dad's LuLu tablets. They were a mild hallucinogen. I used to take them at breakfast so that I could eat without having to listen to my parents argue. And I loved how the little eyes on my breakfast cereal actually started to wink at me!"

Narcotics weren't available in schools or in the army, though this was more due to the disciplinary requirements rather than any moral objections. Narcotics were a vital factor in almost all strata of Imperial life.

"If you asked most Alliance or Fed citizens what the Imperial economy runs on, they'd say slavery. But coming a very close second are Narcotics." Bec shook her head, "You don't realise how all-embracing it is until you get out of Imperial space. It makes living in the Empire tolerable, in spite of all the shitty, oppressive stuff."

I was impressed. I hadn't heard Bec talk politics before.

"So what you're saying is that they're buying up the lifeblood of the Empire to drive up the price of it. Then what?"

Catherine spread her hands, opening the discussion up. A rather grey-looking man passed by the table, so we waited until he sat down a fair distance away before continuing.

"Look, Mosser IS a career criminal, and he is the one who actually HAS the HPA." I said.

"True. But the people we've been dealing with are not criminals. They're not into it for profit." Catherine pointed out.

"So the question becomes what the hell do they have to gain from stockpiling narcotics? Money?" Bec was looking at it from an economic perspective and I tried to get my head into her space. What would cause a big jump in the price of something? A drop off in supply. But the plotters hadn't been affecting the means of production for Narcotics, so that left the trade routes.

"Vequess!" I said loudly. A little too loudly as the grey, shaven headed man on the table near the door looked up at my exclamation. I quietened my voice.

"What about Vequess?" Catherina asked.

"Vequess is a major exporter of Narcotics, because it's a major trade hub for the Western edge of the Empire into the centre. LRCs and Lynx Carriers dock there, and their cargo is ferried into the core Imperial systems by smaller vessels. The Vequess uprising isn't about Vequess at all... it's about interfering with the trade routes into the central Empire! The plotters probably supported and instigated the uprising so that... my, that's clever!"

A hand fell on my shoulder from behind.

"What is your connection to the Vequess uprising?"

I looked around in surprise and saw that the bland, bald man who had been sitting at the table was now standing behind me, looking at me with dull intensity.

"Who the hell are you?" Bec said, standing up (and 'shaping up').

"I am Clone Agent 15007 in his Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. You would all be advised to cooperate or I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork."

Message to Vequess forces

[Imperial Command]

To: Commanders of ISS *Alberto Knox*, ISS *Scalpel*, and all attendant ships.
From: Imperial Naval Command, Topaz

Due to the circumstances involved in this action, you are hereby authorised to use battle-scale tactical nuclear warheads at your own discretion. Authorisation for Strategic weapons is withheld until there is agreement that the planet is lost.

* * *

[Norman Mosser]

Norman read the messages and the dispatch that had come through for his eyes only. It came in the form of a suggestion. Nothing more, nothing less. It merely pondered as to whether the ringleaders, who seemed fully willing to spend the lives of their compatriots for the sake of a principle would act the same if someone closer to them was threatened. As expected it came with a list of names and locations and implied that the Emperor may be favourably disposed should a solution to the current situation become found.

Fairly clear cut then by the looks of it. Persuade the ringleaders to stop their uprising, either by threatening their own or by showing them how heartless and implacable the Emperor could choose to be if provoked. While Vequess was impotent, it would not be beyond the means of the Empire to sterilise the planet and pay for the redevelopment by reselling the exploitation rights. After all, Vequess tended to be merely a dumping ground for the more foolhardy of political agitators until they could be fully indoctrinated into the slave/clone caste.

As Norman set the co-ordinated for Vequess he considered a short passage of Imperial doctrine

'First they mock us, then they fight us, then we win'

The rebels may have balls for trying to pull this off, but the Emperor has the biggest balls in the galaxy. And, it would be in everybody's interests if the ringleaders to be persuaded to admit defeat and the disposable hardliners be killed early enough to avoid martyrdom. The skill came in playing it so that the Empire came out as the good guys.

Norman reached out and pushed the big red button to hurl his Courier into witch-space

Transmission to the Alberto Knox

[ISS *Scalpel*]

To: ISS *Alberto Knox* - Count Rowan Weston Commanding
From: ISS *Scalpel* - Lord Johnathon Regent Commanding

Count Weston,

At 08:10:19 hours this morning, Imperial Command gave us authorisation to use battle-scale Nuclear Warheads. As your vessel is the only one armed with such warheads, I am pulling the last of the *Scalpel* forces out of Dickens Base now.

We have not yet been given the authorisation commands to use planet-scale warheads, but I have ordered weapons hot for the ship-side silos.

Good luck.

END MESSAGE: ISS *SCALPEL*

* * *

[Norman Mosser]

As Norman's Courier tore itself into the Vequess system he was gratified to find some messages waiting for him on the communications network. The Azure Sunset, his Long Range Cruiser had re-established contact and at the moment was holding at a prearranged location in interstellar space until it was needed. Unfortunately the HPA was still useless, but a lead had arisen in the shape of a pair of bounty hunter types who seemed to have picked up the desired part and were currently in Zelagre. So far attempts to intercept them had failed and so Mary Darkes, his second who had been heading up the operation on the LRC had decided to keep bouncing cannon-fodder off them to lull them into a false sense of security and grab the part when they were docked. A few bribes to security, a staged fight and arrest, and their possessions 'confiscated' while they were locked up and hopefully the component would be secured.

John Randall, Norman's current co-pilot looked up from the communications console where he was busy decoding Naval communiqués.

'Norman?'

'Yes John?'

'Another message has come through - It looks like the Navy is getting ready to start nuclear strikes.'

'Tactical or strategic?'

'Tactical at the moment. I think they want to disrupt the chain of command in the malcontents.'

'Not the way I would have done it.'

'It never bloody is with you. I bet you've got some plan or other which will end the uprising quickly and peacefully.'

'Of course' replied Norman smugly.

'So, are you going to tell them your bright idea? After all, they nudged you to assist didn't they?'

'No.'

'But surely it would help?'

'John, how long have you known me?'

'A good few years.'

'And we both know how I operate.'

'Sneakily.'

John smiled, they both knew fully well what Norman was up to. He had to keep on good terms with Imperial High Command, but at the same time, they had to make sure the uprising lasted long enough to allow their Imperial associates to carry out their plans. After all, the cessation of shipments of certain goods out of Vequess needed to bite on the local stock markets first. And if they were lucky, they could help kill the uprising and impress High Command at the same time.

'One more thing John. Can you find out what is happening with the Winston trial? I want to know when the hearing starts.'

'Okay, I'll look into that. Not now though.'

'Why not?'

'I'm picking up a swarm of Asps on the scanner - and they're headed this way.'

Misfire

[Commander Red Ravens]

"I am Clone Agent 15007 in his Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. You would all be advised to co-operate or I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork."

I'm not telepathic, but I'm fairly sure that the same thought was going through all three of our heads: Oh Shit. It was unlikely that this vat-grown Imperial spy knew what we were carrying, and possibly not even that Vequess was connected to the HPA. What he DID know was how to kill a human in over thirty-eight ways, barehanded. With the bare hand he had on my shoulder he could probably... well it's better not to think about that in these situations.

I looked up and smiled nervously into those dull, grey eyes.

"Uh... I write a column on interstellar affairs for the Coopersworld Tribune. I was just speculating on whether the uprising against the uh... glorious Empire was related to the narcotics trade... um... supported by Federal rabble rousers I'm sure."

The clone seemed to weigh this for a second. Bec remained standing, while Catherine looked like she was ready to dive under the table.

"You are all displaying what is colloquially known as 'fight-or-flight' behavioural nuances. However," I could almost see the wheels spinning behind those eyes. I knew that this *thing* was organic, but I've met androids that displayed far more humanity, "this reaction is within normal situational responses." A massive, silent sigh of relief passed over the table.

He demanded our names, and we complied. Even Catherine gave hers, which meant that she was either supremely confident that her Alliance cover was intact or, alternately, that she was scared out of her wits.

"I will check your details and return shortly. Do not attempt to leave this establishment or I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork." The agent stalked off. Bec sat down again with a heavy sigh. These agents were the stuff of nightmares. In-vitro genetic manipulation was illegal throughout known space. However, it was covertly practiced by so many people that the Treaty of Beta Hydri was pretty much 'guideline only'. The Imperials had taken that manipulation to its logical extreme, and created 'biotechnology assets' like that creature that had been questioning us. While the great powers programmed androids to become close to - and pass - for, human, they programmed clone agents to separate them utterly from human emotion. Out of the vat, into the lab, into the barracks, into the world.

"I think we should..." I made frantic shushing notions to Bec, pantomiming a hand to my ear like someone listening. I could still see the figure of the agent in the far corner of the room, bent over a GalNet terminal. I didn't know how good the agent's genetically modified hearing was, but I didn't feel like finding out. Instead, I shielded my hands with my body and used some gesturing. I pointed at all three of us in turn. I then walked my fingers nonchalantly along the table, then made them run. The fingers then jumped into a ship and I made a soft zooming sound as they flew away, off the edge of the table.

Bec nodded subtly, while Catherine just rolled her eyes. She considered us hopeless amateurs in terms of intelligence work. Unfortunately, we were a fair way from the door, and if the agent spotted us trying to leave, I didn't give too much for our chances. The other two were looking at me expectantly. It was my plan, such as it was, and I would have to make the first move. I was a bit at a loss, when fate gave us a knees-up, as it often does to Bounty Hunters down on their luck.

"Citizens! Remain seated!" At the entry to the bar, a group of security guards had gathered. There were only about half a dozen, but they were all armed with stench grenades and painsticks. All of which were *technically* non-lethal. Though having been on the other end of a stench grenade, I had certainly *wished* I'd been dead.

"This station's Deputy Engineer has been murdered. Please remain in your- " at this unwise comment, the entire establishment erupted in chaos. I didn't know who this Deputy Engineer had been, but his death seemed to be exciting quite a bit of shouting. People were shouting at people, and inevitably, a punch was thrown. After that it was one-in, all in. Groups seemed to be fighting with other groups with certain individuals fighting with the ferocity of cornered rats. The security guards at the door waded in, swinging their painsticks indiscriminately. I caught sight of the clone agent, trying to watch everything at once. He didn't look surprised, merely concerned with watching who was the most distressed at the news.

By common consent, we ran towards the door. A security guard swung his painstick at me, but it missed and clanged onto the table in a shower of sparks. He turned to swing at me again, but we'd already disappeared between other combatants. He didn't bother chasing, as there were a plethora of targets to strike at.

While we forced our way across to the door, I caught sight of the clone agent. He had spotted us. It was a beautiful and terrible thing to watch him coming at us. Like a dancer or acrobat, he vaulted over tables, dived between legs, pirouetted away from careening brawlers, even climbing over the backs of combatants like a sheepdog. A security guard swiped at him with a painstick, striking a glancing blow. He didn't even flinch at the agony, turning round and delivering a roundhouse blow that threw the guard back five metres.

Desperately, we scrambled out the door. Bec and Catherine were both from lighter-G worlds than me, and quickly outpaced me. We skidded round a T-intersection and I slammed against the opposite wall, bringing myself to a halt.

"Come on!" Catherine screamed, not stopping

"Prep the ship! Be along... <gasp, choke>... presently."

"But..." Bec actually slowed down, craning her head around.

"Go!" I shouted.

The others might make it, but I knew that the clone could outpace me, even on one leg. I took the pattern replicator out of my pocket, weighing it thoughtfully in my hand. I was counting on this to halt him in his tracks. I had no other cards to play.

After a moment, I heard a soft and rapidly approaching thudding of spaceboots. It was like listening to a Grass Gazelle back home as it fleet-footedly outpaced a predator. However, what was approaching was predator, not prey.

Listening intently so that I could judge his approach, I braced myself for the confrontation. When he was a scant few metres away from the intersection, I launched myself in the air at where I thought he would be. The Clone agent rounded the corner, and was very surprised to find my fist connecting solidly with his jaw. I leant into the punch, putting all my considerable bulk behind it. I also had the pattern replicator in my hand, which added mass to my fist. He was utterly surprised at the ambush, which was the only way I was ever going to get him.

I fell forwards, groaning from the pain my hand was in. He, however, went flying, down the corridor. I was somewhat surprised with myself, as it had been a massive blow. I picked myself up and scrambled towards the docking bays. I'd hit him with all my might and just had to hope it would slow him down enough that I might make it. A normal human being, I might have worried about having killed him, but these Clone agents must have the gene for old leather somewhere in their makeup, for they're all as tough as...

I also knew that they must have the gene of boomerangs in them, as they *always* come back at you, so I kept running until I saw the welcome sight of the docking bay doors. I slowed down as I approached the entrance and took a moment to gasp. Off in the distance, I heard a sound like a grass gazelle running towards me. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I staggered forward.

Lurching past into the docking bay I made a beeline for the ship, which looked like it was all powered up and ready to rumble. It was nearly eighty metres away, however and I was close to exhausted. I sprinted towards the ship through the brightly lit bay, while behind me, the Clone agent closed. I didn't look around. I'd either make it or I wouldn't. I suddenly realised I'd made the right decision clocking him one. He'd have caught me easy if I'd just ran without slowing him down.

I'd almost reached the ship when I felt something heavy crash into my back, throwing me to the floor. It felt like I'd been hit by a Lynx carrier. I groaned in agony. I was scant metres from the gangplank but the chances of me making it up that metal structure were fairly remote. All I felt like doing was rolling about in extreme pain. I didn't feel capable of rolling about, but I had the extreme pain part down pat. The soft padding got closer. I saw what had hit me, an empty storage barrel now rolling around underneath the ship. I say "empty" but it must have weighed a good fifteen to twenty kilos. The Clone agent had thrown it like it was a Zero-G cricket ball across the bay.

The Clone agent approached. The side of his face was swollen where I had hit him, but apart from that, he didn't look particularly shaken up.

"A 'sucker' punch. Excellent tactical move. Its strategic value was limited, however." He padded closer and I could see death in the way he walked. I whimpered. He fixed me with the first example of emotion I had seen in him.

Cold, stylised anger. "Your companions will provide me with sufficient information about the Vequess plot. I am Clone Agent 15007 in his Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. I will now execute you summarily. I will enjoy filling in the excess paperwork." He stepped forward. For a moment my life flashed before my eyes. All I hadn't done zoomed across my vision... fuel scooped along the edge of a supergiant, reached Elite, collected a bounty on all those bullies at school who had unwisely chosen to become pirates, seen Bec happily shackled up with that idiot from Eta... or was it Facece (?), drunkenly slept with Bec, then been red-faced in the morning...

The Clone agent's head flicked towards my ship. I hadn't heard anything, but he did a backflip the envy of gymnasts everywhere and just in time, as the port manoeuvring thruster fired, sending a column of flame several metres long across the docking bay. On the other side of the plasma stream, the agent looked temporarily non-plussed. Fired by some astonishing instinct for survival, I threw myself towards the hatch. I'd even managed to crawl up one step when I felt arms lifting me. Catherine! Suddenly I heard a heavy clang towards the front of the ship. The Clone agent had climbed on top of it, rather than try to work his way around the manoeuvring thruster. All pretence of gentleness was abandoned, as Catherine hauled my battered body up the gangplank. I gasped and swore at her as the pain shot through my body.

"Faster... for Jameson's sake, faster damn you!"

The Constrictor is not *that* long a ship: the footsteps grew far closer. Catherine basically threw me into the airlock and stabbed at the close button. The system whined and began to close the door. Suddenly the Clone agent dropped onto the rapidly retracting gangplank in front of us. He looked murderous and slightly singed. I groaned and tried to hide my eyes. Catherine pointed her weapon out the door and fired. With superhuman speed, the agent threw himself left, off the gangplank.

"Shit, how do you kill this motherfucker!" Catherine spat. As the door hissed shut, she hit the intercom.

"Move, Bec, let's move!"

The faint grumble of the engines roared into life as the ship lifted from the pad.

"Quick..." I bumbled, "before he throws another barrel at us."

At that seemingly irrational statement, Catherine looked at me with real concern. I was bleeding from the mouth (fortunately only from a cut tongue) and was breathing very raggedly. Catherine dragged me into the flight cabin. The white-hot agony was subsiding into red-hot agony, and I was still conscious, so I heard Bec arguing with traffic control. We were off the launching pad and facing the main space doors, which were firmly closed.

"Look it was just a misfire. It happens, OK?"

"This station is not in the habit of allowing unspaceworthy vessels out –"

"It's a minor bloody manoeuvring thruster..."

"And if you slam into the side of a docking bay on the other side of the system because you have another 'misfire' then I don't want to say that I just let you..."

I beckoned Catherine closer, "Coffee!" I whispered.

"What? You're in no fit state..."

"She spilled her coffee on the controls and is so ashamed to admit it..."

Catherine nodded and moved to the co-pilot's seat.

"Traffic control, this is the co-pilot of DE-013. The pilot just spilled coffee on the controls and the misfire happened while I was cleaning it up. It's my fault, I'm sorry!"

Bec turned and smiled in appreciation at the fib. There was a pause while some discussion occurred on the other end of the comm.

"Well... all right then... we're fining you a hundred and fifty dollars before you can leave. Be more careful next time and don't try and pull the wool over our eyes."

Bec keyed the sequence to pay the fine and sure enough, the doors ahead opened. Bec made sure that we were clear of the doors and turned her head around to look at me.

"I don't even *drink* coffee, Red. Couldn't you think of a better excuse?"

I thought of flipping the bird at her, but then considered the pain involved and thought better of it.

*

"Squire Dreyfus, how positively *delightful* to see you again." Preston lied, shaking the smaller man's hand. The Viscount was a tall man in his early forties, with ash-blond hair and a dark moustache. Members of his crew had speculated on which one was dyed and which was natural. Those members had been denied shore leave for the month following their remarks. The Viscount believed in discipline, among other things. A lazy, dreamy pair of eyes his a keen mind and a vicious disposition. Dreyfus had studied the Viscount extensively before recruiting him for the cause. Preston acted like a fop, but had the instincts of a warrior as well as the mercy of a sadist.

"Likewise, my Lord." Dreyfus returned the falsehood as courteously as his loathing would allow.

"So to what do I owe the pleasure of your brief visit, old chap?"

"I've been sent here by the Heir to oversee the recovery of the unit." Dreyfus said, and was amused to watch the Viscount turn slowly purple with rage.

"I'm not *quite* sure that's on, old chap. I don't really have the inclination to take on another crewmember at this stage, especially one who hasn't been through the process. Don't want to create envy in the ranks, you know." The Viscount sat further back in his heavily upholstered chair and played with his emerald pendant. The pendant was ostentatious, as was the rest of the cabin, which was all either gold-leaf, velvet or leather. Dreyfus thought of Marcus in his bare metal cabin, who was ten times the noble this fool would ever be.

Dreyfus produced a clear plastic tablet and ran his finger along one edge. An image of Marcus solidified on the front of it, and the plastic vibrated, acting as its own speaker.

"A message from Marcus, Heir Presumptive, to Daniel, The Viscount Preston. Preston, I'm sorry to impose upon you, but I believe that Dreyfus' skills are required there. The time is growing nearer. We cannot hope that the Vequess crisis will hold out for much longer. Already, narcotics traders are seeking alternate routes. The second phase of the plan will be commencing shortly, and we need the HPA operational for the third. I am not concerned at being able to destroy the fugitives and capture the unit, simply the timeframe. For the sake of the cause, I need you to work together with Squire Dreyfus to secure the unit. May the light be with you."

The plastic misted back to transparency and Dreyfus put it away.

"On the orders of our Liege, I am afraid we must be companions briefly."

"So be it." Preston said stiffly. His hue still remained more purple than pink, but he made a visible effort to smile. "You might be interested, old fruit, to see what I picked up on the bulletin board when I docked here." Preston tapped a few buttons on a concealed control panel beneath his desk and a leather panel on the wall slid back to reveal a monitor.

Dreyfus stepped closer.

"A friend of Viscount Preston would like to return his heart to him at a romantic dinner for two (only). Pick up the 50 credit bill and we can set each other free. Will make restaurant booking upon RSVP. Hmph. Cute." Dreyfus grunted.

"Extremely. Now the only question that's really remaining to us is how we take the unit and destroy them. I would prefer to have them alive to use them as an example of proper discipline, but..."

Dreyfus was familiar with Preston's line in Dreamware Snuff-Movies.

"With the greatest possible respect, my Lord, as long as we get the unit back I think we might play a straight bat to this offer and honour their offer."

Preston straightened his posture in his chair. He seemed surprised, as well as disappointed. "May I remind you that they have destroyed several of our ships and for that matter threatened my *person*?"

Dreyfus sighed. Preston was a man who enjoyed self-gratification, and both Marcus and himself both knew that it would be impossible to teach the man any sense of self-sacrifice. They had to work around him. "My Lord, if you

wish to continue searching for these bounty hunters after the completion of the current mission, be my guest. But the reclamation of the unit for the cause takes precedence over immediate revenge.” Dreyfus slightly stressed the adjective, hoping that the lure of future retribution would soften the Viscount’s anger. It worked. “Besides, once the Heir takes his rightful place, we can bring ALL our forces against them. Surely that’s worth waiting for?”

Preston’s colour dimmed to only a few shades above his usual pink. “Very well. But should they attempt to cross us - !”

“Feel free to engage your imagination.” Dreyfus finished, trying not to visualise horrors the Viscount’s diseased talent could come up with.

“Very well. Settle yourself in the second stateroom. Rejoin me here at 2015 hours and we’ll decide on the wording of the reply. My old chum Marcus says you’re frightfully clever with words and things.”

Dreyfus gave a short, semi-obsequious bow and exited. Oh, the cause was still in desperate straits when they needed to rely on men like Preston! At least he could be sure that the loose ends of the bounty hunters would be tied up. But Dreyfus hadn’t forgotten that Winston was still standing behind the bounty hunters (something he’d neglected to mention to Preston). He wondered what stunt Winston was trying to pull and whether these bounty hunters might even have their own plans. Wheels within wheels were Dreyfus stock-in-trade, and he had a few of his own to fit and spin into motion.

*

The Merlin streaked out of the station and instead of hyperspacing, drew away from the station. Inside, the Clone agent licked his wounds. He had been grudgingly impressed by the punch that the free-range human had thrown at him, and he wouldn’t make the mistake of underestimating him again. What their connection was to the Vequess uprising was unclear. He had interviewed and terminated several people from the brawl within the bar. All had been minor players, all knowing little more than their role and the identity of their commander, the unfortunate Kohl.

“Cocktail!” he said to the flight computer, which obligingly extended the needle from the arm rest, unerringly finding the vein in his wrist. He disliked the term, which had apparently been a joke by the manufacturers of the device.

“Please State Pharmaceutical Requirements.” The computer said softly.

“Thirty minutes double strength mental processing enhancer and eidetic inducer with a two hour bodily soporific. Also, a one hour recuperation enhancement.”

“Resolving contra-indicated medications. Please wait.” Barely ten seconds later, he felt a stream of liquid shoot into his arm. In it was the mix requested, selected from a range of drugs in a combination with limited side effects. The needle retracted and the agent gingerly felt his jaw. The fracture was only hairline, but he had to be careful.

He flicked slowly through the diary taken from Kohl’s desk, eidetically committing it to memory. One name kept re-occurring in a variety of conspiratorial contexts. Preston. Viscount Daniel Preston. In the trade, that was what was known as a lead. Find Viscount Preston and you find the next link in the chain, and possibly even that ugly heavy-worlder. There weren’t many emotions that clone agents were permitted to enjoy, but anticipation was one of them. He couldn’t wait. Having committed the book, the agent called for another cocktail for a mild hallucinogen and an anaesthetic. He dropped into an instant sleep, filled with chemically regulated dreams.

Counterplay

[Mary Darkes]

'People, I've invited you all here for a reason. I've met with you all individually and hinted at my idea, and as you expressed interest, I've decided to outline it in more detail. I'm sure you understand what I'm on about, and if anybody wishes to leave now, do so.'

A pair of hands were raised near the rear of the galley of the Long-Range Cruiser. Mary Darkes, Norman's second-in-command gestured towards the door. The two people got up and left. She nodded in the direction of a pair of crewmembers who followed them out. In less than twenty minutes their bodies would be rendered down in the waste disposal system.

'To business then. All of us are by trade either assassins or mercenaries. We may try to clean it up by using some euphemism or another such as military consultant but essentially we kill for money. Norman brought us together for a bit of work for mutual gain and to assist in some grand plan of his. He has kept this quiet from the rest of you, but I, and a few of the other high-ranking associates, were privy to that information.'

She gestured to four people sitting at the front who nodded. The fifth was with Norman and the sixth had been killed earlier by Mary, after she learned of his loyalties. 'His plan was to obtain this craft and arm it with weaponry - including the HPA - and use it as a base to restart the currently defunct guild and to assist in our activities.'

Mary paused momentarily to allow the import of the situation to sink in. Many had suspected that this was the plan.

'He wanted to use his position as head of the guild to dictate and control what assassinations and mercenary missions were completed as a means of steering the galaxy to greater stability and peace.'

'He, is a liability though. He behaves erratically, going off on escapades instead of controlling the organisation responsibly and has become much too high-profile. Nearly every intelligence agency keeps track of his movements and it is tying his hands. He still keeps up the facade of being an assassin, but as I know, and as some of his closest allies knows, what he actually does is distract people from where the real assassin is.'

Again, a pause to allow the import of the words to sink in. These people needed time to allow their suspicions to turn to acceptance.

'I say that we can do without him. The Guild does not need Norman. We can restart without him. I propose that we go back to what the guild does best - killing for money and fomenting discord to increase our profits - more for the guild, and more for you. Are you with me?'

The assembled people cheered a resounding yes. Mary smiled. She had them now. 'I have taken the liberty of doing a few things in advance of this momentous choice. As I speak, a number of us have been to several secret locations around the galaxy and systematically destroyed a number of hidden facilities. Norman no longer has a ready supply of clones in stasis. If he is shot, he will not come back to life. At this very moment, he is flying a very dangerous course in the Empire. He has sided with a faction that seeks to elevate itself in the Empire. As a result he is playing a dangerous game, and playing the Navy for a dummy. If he fails, and he is caught - which he will be, the Emperor will be completely lacking in mercy.'

'What about the HPA? And what about the GalNET people on board?'

'We are still actively seeking the last remaining part. Luckily our plans can still go ahead whether or not the HPA is working. As for GalNET, the people on board are still useful. It would be folly to anger them at the moment. Needless to say, when the time is right, they will disappear and so will we.'

'And the guild members who are still out there?'

'We have methods of contacting them. Messages are being sent to determine whether they are still interested. But for the time being, we wait until it is prudent for us to declare ourselves. Anyway, it is time to get back to work. Carry on with your current tasks until contacted by me or my associates. Jameson be with you.'

Everybody rose and left the hall. Mary watched them leave. She would be keeping an eye on them in case one turned out to be more loyal to Norman and willing to make an attempt to warn him.

Gilmour's Curse

[Mack Winston]

"I didn't know you were a lawyer," I asked Pam, my uncle's erstwhile partner.

"I'm not."

I looked around my cell. Christ, I go on trial tomorrow on capital murder charges, and I have a not-a-lawyer representing me... "So how can you help me?" I asked, getting a bit worried.

"You can run."

"Well, I haven't got my running-through-walls routine quite perfected yet," I replied, with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

"You won't need...." Pam's words were cut off by a dull thud, followed by a gut wrenching rumble. Sirens pierced the air. I was suddenly hit by something heavy, and fell to the floor. I covered my head with my arms (one artificial) and wondered if the trial was going to be necessary after all...the words "hull breach" drifted idly through my mind through the racket. Suddenly, I felt myself being roughly pulled up. I looked up to see Pam, lightly peppered in plaster dust.

"You better be worth it kid," she yelled, "I'll lose my explosives license for this! Run!"

"Wha...?"

She roughly dragged me along and we began to run across the debris. The entire back wall of mine and dozens of other prison cells were gone. Prisoners were escaping all over the place. Guards were running around in confusion, shooting anything that moved. I felt a burning sensation in the small of my back as one of the guards nearly got me. The explosion had blown out large parts of the prison complex, and we were soon in the main station plaza. It was a scene of utter pandemonium. Civilians, police, military were all running around, shouting orders.

We darted across the plaza. I quickly looked behind me, and I could see three prison guards sprinting after us. I grabbed the back of Pam's jacket and ran as hard as I could. We burst into the shopping area, and I found ourselves a floor above the docking bay access doors...where we needed to be to escape. Another quick glance indicated that one of the guards were gaining.

"Shit!" I yelled.

Pam started to slow down as we approached the dead end in front of us. Railings, a couple of shops, and a drop down into the lower plaza. I grabbed Pam with both arms, and leaped over the railings. We both yelled on our way down, aimed perfectly at the centre of the fountain on the lower plaza. We hit the water, then the bottom of the shallow pond hard. It knocked the wind from both of us, and we started choking from a lungful of water. This time, Pam grabbed me, and we staggered through the doors, into the docking bay. Guards were swarming down the stairs towards us...

Breaking into a run again, Pam guided us to her ship. She had thoughtfully left the door open. Struggling inside and closing the door, we could finally relax.

"They" (puff wheeze) "aren't" (gasp) "going to let" (gasp) "us out you know", I wheezed.

Pam nodded the negative, breathed heavily and said, "They have no choice..."

She breathed heavily, trying to get her breath back, and then lead me up to the bridge of her Harris fighter. Predictably, our request to depart was denied.

"This will show the miserable bastards," she snarled, lifting a small device and pushing a button.

The ship began to move, as the auto-undock sequence began.

"Serves them right for using outdated autodocks," she said as traffic control began to frantically protest over the radio.

Our ship slid out into the night, and moments later, departed into the orange glow of a hyperspace exit cloud.

"Hey, what about my partner-in-crime?" I asked. I'd forgotten about him.

"He can look after himself, he should be able to figure out how to get in contact."

"I suppose so."

"Oh, a message from your uncle. He'll personally kill you with his own bare hands if you get involved with Mosser again," she said, with unmistakable threat in her voice.

"Hey, go easy, I never was involved with him!"

"Could have fooled me. Oh yeah, don't even think about rejoining the guild if it should reform some day," she added.

I felt like a small child being scolded. I opened my mouth to protest.

"Listen, don't try and deny it. You know how we found out? You managed to get so high profile that the AJNIB started investigating your activities. Then they found out who you were. It was a very bad move to get involved with that HPA business. You realise you prevented the AJNIB from getting their hands on a vital piece of kit? It was very embarrassing to your uncle when they found out who you were."

"Oh," I replied weakly.

"Jim has requested that I take you back to Phekda"

"Oh."

"You're going to work so bloody hard on that farm, you'll wish you'd never heard of the HPA."

I sat there, and seethed a bit. Who did she think she was, treating me like a small child? I'd left home years before, been leading my own life, and now she was ordering me to stay at that bloody farm near Newtown.

"Look, thanks for rescuing me, but with all due respect, I'm not going back there," I said levelly.

"I don't think you understand. Your face will be on wanted posters everywhere. You will go straight back to that hellhole of a system if you show yourself in public. You're going to have to lie low until the authorities find more important criminals to chase. News of what you were up to has leaked. There are Imperial clone agents on your tail, Federal Agents on your tail, plus the Alliance and half the freebooters in the galaxy."

"Oh," I said again, weakly. I wasn't taking very good command of this conversation.

"If this wasn't so, I'd drop you off at the nearest space station because frankly I hate your guts," she snapped. That last comment hit me like a slap across the face.

"Hey," I started to protest.

"You're what, not even 25, you've been in space for maybe five or six years and you think you know it all. You should be dead by all rights. Joining that bunch of pirates, the Guild. If it wasn't for your uncle's protests, I'd have gladly watched your execution, and probably enjoyed it!" she snarled.

I was now speechless. I wasn't feeling that great to start with. Now I was being told by my rescuer that she really would have rather see me put to death. She couldn't possibly have meant it, but the comment stung. I'd had enough and felt my anger rise...

I got up, and grabbed Pam's hand-weapon from her holster. She tried to stop me, but I was using my prosthetic arm, which I'd figured out how to recalibrate so that it would grip much harder. I set the weapon to full power, and shoved it in her hand.

"OK," I snarled, "if you would rather see me dead, kill me now. You've got the gun."

All of a sudden, I regretted that remark. The look in her eyes made me thought she was going to do it. But she hesitated. She who hesitates...

"Come on, I'm waiting!" I yelled.

She suddenly grabbed me, and forced me back in my chair, throwing the gun aside. I saw her preparing to shout at me again. Instead, she just collapsed in her chair, exhausted.

"I've had enough. I'm taking you back to Phekda. It's up to you what you do there, but you've heard what I've told you and you can make up your own mind." She paused. My anger steadily boiled as I stared at her. "I'm sorry, I don't really want to see you dead, but I still think you're a hateful, murderous little brat. I don't ever want to see your face again."

She stood up, and grabbed me by the collar, and dragged me to my cabin. I was genuinely surprised at her strength when she bodily threw me into the small cabin. The door slammed behind me, locked.

I angrily gritted my teeth. Exhausted, I lay down on my bunk and tried to think of a cutting parting insult to give her after she had dropped me off...

Policy in Vequess

[Norman Mosser]

On 3302-07-24 09:47:06, Emperor wrote:

*Living in a shroud of ignorance, there are certain things that you do not know. Certain things, you are not PERMITTED to know. While you may know that the year is now 3302, you have no knowledge of the true corruption and evil that IS the empire. Soon, you will have **full** knowledge, and the time for tyranny will be over.*

*I am free. The TRUE empire has been born. In good time, the Duvalian grip on **ALL** systems will be released.*

Information will be shared as it becomes available for all who are tired of living under fear, tyranny, and mayhem.

Remember: There IS a light at the end of this tunnel. Be patient, be strong, and remember that change will come.

*Signed,
The Emperor of the Orz Empire*

'Interesting.'

'Indeed.'

An orderly switched the display off and went back to his position at the edge of the room. The gathered naval officers turned back to the centre of the table and begun to converse. Norman sipped at his drink and listened to the conversation in earnest.

'This emerged on the local networks fairly recently, as far as we know the source is still unknown, but it has instilled extra fervour in the fighters across Vequess. As a result, military progress has slowed even further, although we have secured the surface starports as many of you know.'

Another officer spoke, 'So, we've ruled out using weapons of mass destruction for the moment then. It would be a viable solution to clear out the remaining rebels.'

'True, but it would be costly in terms of the industrial capacity. The current process of capturing key facilities in each installation.'

'Power, heat, life support and so on.'

'Indeed, and using them to threaten the rebels with death should the not surrender seems adequate.'

'True, but a large number seem to be choosing what they consdier to be martyrdom rather than improsonment and return to work.'

'A waste of good slaves.'

'Too true.'

'Is extermination out of the question then?'

The Viscount in charge of the operation looked around the table and spoke. 'It is. As Norman has pointed out, and as the political arm concur, if we can recapture the majority of the slaves and return them to work, it provides a clear signal to similar factions in neighbouring systems that any such action is futile and the net result is absolutely no change in their situation. After all, slaves who are accustomed to this futility are more docile.'

'Very well, although we are losing some officers with this tactic, as the clone troops need at least some direction on the ground.'

'Again, an acceptable risk. And a handy way of weeding out the weaker of the junior officers.'

The men present smiled. The meeting completed and the course of action agreed upon, they rose to leave. As Norman approached the door, it opened and a grey suited humanoid entered.

'Lord Mosser?'

'Yes?'

Norman looked him up and down. It was unmistakably a clone agent. He fought to keep control of his actions. They could smell fear, know exactly when you were lying and had the well-justified air about them that the only thing that stopped them from tearing you in half was because then they would have to get someone to clean the floor.

'I am Clone Agent 8796 in his Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. You would all be advised to co-operate or I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork.'

Norman briefly considered his chances of getting out and back to his ship with all his limbs.

'I detect you are in the process of determining a flee/fight response. It has been noted and I must inform you that neither course of action is permitted.'

'And what do I have the pleasure of your company for?'

'Have you been passing tactical information to the rebel factions on this world?'

Cold fear passed through Norman. The agent had him bang to rights. He was passing information of upcoming actions to the rebels to slow the fighting down. After all, the rebellion in Vequess had a definite timescale. It was part of the deal with his associates. And if he lied, he died. But maybe there was a route out. Sometimes half-truths worked.

'Yes, I decided that such action would serve the Empire'

'Explain. Now.'

'The rebels now trust me as a source. Apart from a few isolated incidents where officers have died, all material lost has been disposable. We now have a means of supplying disinformation at a critical juncture to collapse their defence.'

There was an ominous silence while the agent considered his words.

'Your explanation appears valid. However, the source of this information implies that your actions are overly secretive and not condoned or condonable, as does your reaction upon my arrival. You are still under investigation. I am going to examine this matter further. You are relieved from duty and are required to disclose your point of contact to His Imperial Majesty's Navy. Should you attempt to leave this facility while the investigation is underway I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork. Good day.'

The agent then turned and left. Norman began to think. It looked like someone in the loop had leaked information. But who, and why? Norman decided to contact his command second Mary on a secure channel and get her to find the leak and perform some damage limitation. If the Navy found out what he was really doing, Norman wasn't sure if he could get out before they came to kill him.

Former Emperor Turned Traitor Escapes!

[Emperor]

IMPERIAL HERALD -- NEWSFLASH

7.23.02 DUVAL CITY, CAPITOL, ACHENAR

Today, in the bright sun of a glorious afternoon in Duval City, throne to the new Majesty, Emperor Harold Duval, Ruler of rulers, a most unfortunate and terrible tragedy occurred. The formerly appointed Emperor-turned-tyrant was freed from incarceration, by an unknown female commander, in a heavily modified Imperial Trader of unknown registration. Unless you have been living under a rock for the last 10 years, you will remember that in 3293, the beloved Emperor Hengist Duval had all but lost his health. He decided to step down and appoint not his beloved son, but the outsider who had mysteriously appeared one year earlier and graced the Empire, especially the Navy, with his abilities. This new Emperor, whose name I cannot even say lest I get sick to my stomach, began to change things. Make slavery illegal, he said. Stop the slaughtering of innocent scientists, he said! Ick! All the goodness that the Empire stands for was at risk, and in 3299, on the eve of the new millennium, the TRUE Majesty, Harold Duval, led a coup and dethroned the tyrant. He was promptly incarcerated and had been awaiting final trial and sentencing up until today.

As for the event that took place today, the ship seemed to appear almost instantaneously, destroy a portion of the royal prison, pick the tyrant up, and likewise depart before orbital and surface defences could even be activated. The ship then appeared to depart towards the Pleiades. An Elite squadron of His Imperial Majesty's most prized Cobra Mk-III's, armed to the teeth, are now in pursuit. These evil-doers may run, but they won't be able to hide for long. Information as to their ultimate destination is sketchy at best, so His Benevolent Majesty is offering a large sum of credits to any who may present useful information. A similar looking Trader was spotted in Vequess and Peter's Base just prior to this incident. Quite peculiarly, this aforementioned Trader was reportedly buying huge quantities of everything ranging from heavy plastics and all sorts of construction equipment to water and grain. Rest assured that the former "Emperor", in all his dishonour, will be caught and executed along with those assisting him.

TO ALL SLAVES OF THE DUVAL DICTATORSHIP --

I am alive and well.

This evil you call the "empire" will not survive.

There are those of you that understand reality. You will know what to do when the time comes to act.

Harry Duval, your days are numbered.

Hauntings from the Past

[Frantic]

They didn't quite know what to expect when jumping into Diso, but having to queue was not on the list of possibilities. More bizarre still was the Imperials letting it happen. A multitude of various ships, many with masked IR signatures, slowly cruised in a rough queue towards what remained of LHO.

As each ship got near the site of destruction, it veered off and jettisoned a wreath or something similar, quite a few of which quickly roasted in the full unprotected glare of the sun. Frantic wondered how many of the ships with masked IR signatures were paying tribute to the dead, and how many were grieving the loss of their favourite hangout. The latter was confirmed in at least one scorch marked Gecko that jettisoned a bottle of scotch.

"I wonder how long that'll float there before someone nicks it," said Honza from the turret control seat.

"About as long as it takes to drift from where it is to the salvage crews I'd imagine."

Frantic veered the Taipan Mk II away from the queue as they came past, and came as close as was allowed to the site where what was left of LHO still orbited. With a slight forward thrust running, he pushed a button to jettison a stream of tiny packages, one for each of the dead. One by one the small packages opened to reveal a small lily flower, protected from the sun by a foil shield, and attached to a small solar sail. The little sails slowly unfolded and began drifting away from the sun, pushed away by the light of the sun itself, and started their journey towards the gulfs of open space.

After a moments pause, Frantic said "Well, that's PR duties over for today anyway. How about a drink?"

"Sure, but the bars are gonna be full here with this mob. Lets jump to Lave, it's close," remarked Honza, prepping the engines.

The Taipan joined the rest of the ships fanning out on the opposite side of the queue heading out to make hyperspace jumps to which ever shady places they jumped in from, or to even shadier destinations. Just outside the safe distance for departure to hyperspace, 2 Kraits veered off course toward the Taipan and started shooting with 1Mw pulse lasers. The shots came out at a seemingly erratic pattern, then both of the ships mis-jumped leaving no trail and no IR signature.

The laser bursts had passed to starboard and not hit the ship, but Frantic sat stony faced and keyed in a reply of what had just occurred from the flight recorder to be sure. "Honza, we're not going to be able to have that drink after all."

* * *

The Taipan hovered for a few seconds over the nondescript pad on Navy Central, then descended on it's landing gear and came to rest. As the engines powered down, the pad sank into the ground and a cover slid into place just above the ship where the pad had been.

"You'd better stay in the ship Honza, it shouldn't be too long. They're also bound to a termination of services agreement, so we should be safe also." Honza grunted a dismissal and disappeared aft to go catch up on the news transmissions.

As the hatch descended Frantic reflected on the events that had led him back to this place after such a long time. He'd spent many years working as a Federal Mercenary, at first just to seek revenge for his parents, then because he was good at it. It boosted his Elite rating, and seemed to help the galaxy as a whole.

Later in his 'career', things got more and more political and his ideas of what was right started to differ greatly from that of the Federal government. Frantic left to pursue his own goals, retiring with a rank of Commodore, a nice gift of a solid diamond sword and a stack of agreements and debriefings. After so many missions, it was a relief to be allowed to just walk out with all he knew.

One of the debriefings however, made him memorise a set of laser bursts that could be used to contact him safely without compromising any future allegiances. When such a signal was received he was to meet back here for further instructions. It was an agreement he signed reluctantly. It stated that he was supposed to respond, but did not specify what would happen if he didn't. After all these years, Frantic had all but forgotten about it, but now here he was.

After descending the ramp, he headed for the simple wooden doorway. No automatic doors here, nothing that

could malfunction during an attack. A waiting guard led him through the complex to an office and closed the door.

Frantic allowed himself a smile, there was no mistaking the position of the man at the desk. Drab clothes, crew cut hair, emotionless face. The thing that made him smile most was that he no longer had to be nice to these type of people, so with a wry grin he said "Hi, Fred."

Not even a flicker of emotion. Back in his mercenary days, these people were the mission officers, all of which had no names and plain features, nothing that could make them identifiable. Behind their backs, they had been nicknamed "Fred", and woe betide anyone caught using the name. As mercenaries, they could not actually be disciplined, but would miss out on good missions in the future unless they toed the line to a certain extent.

Without bothering to ask Frantic to take a seat, the Fred tossed a folder across the table. Instead of picking it up, Frantic looked at him and said, "Why should I be interested? I don't work for money or other people's agendas anymore."

"I'm sure you will be adequately rewarded with resources to assist any goals you have of your own," Came the emotionless reply "And I'm sure you will agree that the mission will benefit the just."

Frantic sat and picked up the folder. He opened it and looked at the mission description, then slammed the folder shut. "A hit? Fuck off, you don't need me for this. There's a thousand other people than can pull off a hit. Besides, there's no way I can do it. I'm an independent now, to do a political assassination would compromise my independence in direct breach of my termination agreement."

"Someone up high hand picked this mission and wants it done properly and cleanly. You will be provided with a ship of your choice with a masked IR signature to protect your identity during the mission. Please read the mission before making a decision."

Reluctantly Frantic picked up the folder and leafed through. They had even included a reasoning report which was usually hidden from the mercenary carrying out the mission. It read "The target is currently grieving the death of his renegade father, and preparing to embark on his own spacing career on funds left him from the will. It is believed that the target will be seeking immediate revenge on the Federation, and will commit acts of terrorism. It is therefore advised for the target to be sanctioned before he gets the opportunity to cause any loss of lives or property. Suggest mercenary division and masked IR ship(s)."

He read the date and time, ship id, locations, and escape routes then browsed down to the target name, Josiah Whitehall Somersby.

Frantic stood up and made ready to leave. "I appreciate that you have a threat to contend with, but this kid's done nothing wrong yet, he's clean. I'm not going to kill someone on the assumptions of their future and the actions of their father. Especially not someone without affiliation just starting their career. If he actually does something wrong that actually warrants termination and you can't handle it yourselves, then call me. Otherwise I'm outta here"

The Fred sensed the resolve behind the statement and after a few seconds reached into a desk drawer and pulled out another folder. "Please review your termination agreement as it extends to this meeting. The folder also contains reimbursement for you trip and time here. Dismissed"

*

Back in the ship waiting for the pad to ascend, Frantic sat in the pilot chair deciding what to do. Legally he was just supposed to fly away and forget all the mission details, but what they were doing was just plain immoral. They killed his father; fair enough he was their enemy and had a bounty for a long time. Frantic was in the same position and could come under attack from his old enemies at any time. But to go on and kill his son without provocation?

Frantic had lost his own parents to an Imperial incursion and been sold into slavery, he knew what it was like to wish for vengeance. He'd escaped to the Federation and joined the Federal Mercenaries, then through them had been able to exact his revenge, a hundred fold times over. He intended to let young Josiah have the same opportunity...

*

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The Krait lifted off from Lave oblivious to the fate that awaited it and its sole occupant. Even as the Krait lifted it's nose, gunned the main engines and started to rise, two Vipers appeared over the horizon coming in on an intercept course.

Josiah spotted them on the scanner and realised their course. Could it just be a police patrol coinciding with his launch? How could it be anything else, this was his first launch. Could anyone have hated his father enough to come after him? And so soon? He keyed the radar mapper one of the Vipers, then the other one. No IR signature? What the hell was this? Could these be the same bastards that killed his father?

The ship to ship comm. blinked at the same time as another blip appeared on the opposite horizon. Josiah keyed the comm. "Josiah Somersby, this is Commander Frantic. The two Vipers that should be approaching your ship right now are mercenaries sent to kill you. You either trust me or die, veer off on a path to get behind me, then get to hyperspace height and get out of here." The comm died as abruptly as it had come on. The oncoming ship was a Taipan Mk II.

Remembering something his father told him about keeping his options open, instead of turning back towards the Taipan, he turned sideways to both intercepts and accelerated towards the ground and low altitude in the hopes of shaking the oncoming craft.

The Taipan headed straight for the fleeing Krait as if to attack, then at the last minute veered off towards the Vipers and fired. The closest Viper suffered a glancing hit and dived down out of the line of fire, while the second one veered up and around to attack the Taipan. Simultaneously while heading head on, the Taipan and Viper launched missiles at each other and veered off to gain new attack approaches. The Viper flared its ECM to no avail and had to dodge sideways back toward the Taipan to avoid the missile. The Taipan however took the missile head on, suffering shield loss, scorching and an appreciable deflection, but headed straight on to the Viper turning to evade it's own missile problems and fired it's forward 4mw beam lasers, crippling the Viper.

The second Viper was closing fast. Josiah launched two proximity mines as he turned to evade incoming fire. The Viper narrowly avoided the first mine, but hit the second one hard. A tell-tale trail of smoke indicated a hull breach and damage, but the persistent attacker launched a missile even as it recovered from the hit. Josiah brought the Krait into a steep dive and keyed the ECM system to no avail. At the very last minute before impacting the ground he pulled up sharply, narrowly missing the ground, and the missile impacted the ground below him. The shockwave caused the Krait to tumble out of control for a few harrowing seconds until he brought it under control. He brought the ship about and noticed the Viper with badly damaged engines moving towards him lopsided.

Amid shouts from the Taipan to just run, he carefully lined up the Vipers in his sights, keyed the open channel and fired shouting angrily "Die, you son of a bitch!"

*

The two ships headed up to a hyperspace safe altitude. Frantic prepared to leave and keyed the private comm. "Josiah, that won't be the last time they'll come after you. Get out of here and get yourself a better ship. Something fast enough to escape the battles you can't win, and big enough to fight the ones you can. Oh, and Josiah,"

"Yeah" Josiah called back, happy to have gotten his first kill.

"Good luck."

*

Frantic knew what was coming as soon as they came out of hyperspace. Six entry clouds opening up at your point of entry could only mean one thing.

Even as the Taipan started accelerating away, six Ospreys came out of the entry clouds and formed two v-wing formations. This wasn't a mercenary hit, this was an official, and ordered, military strike. They'd even switched on a hyperspace disruption field.

One minor advantage you had with being wanted by the Empire was politics. Just because you were wanted dead one day, didn't mean that in the next power struggle within the Empire, the next bunch of people running things would continue the decisions of their predecessors. In fact it was common practice to blame everything on the guy that came before you and cancel many orders given to give a show of "fixing things up". However people would always review records and make decisions all over again to try and gain glory, so you never knew.

The six Ospreys started accelerating hard towards the fleeing Taipan and, at a signal from the wing leader, all fired the two naval missiles each of them was carrying. Twelve missiles being enough to finish off any normal sized ship, the pack split up to surround the target.

Frantic watched the targeting system locked on the missiles winding down to impact, then launched a special proximity mine of recent design. The proximity mine's shell popped open to splay out hundreds of wire thin plastic

sticky cables to form a rough three dimensional netting. The naval missiles passing through the fibres became attached and swerved around in reducing circles towards the centre. The entangled mess of mine, fibres and missiles then exploded with enough force to destroy a passing osprey, and damage two others.

Bringing the Taipan to face the now missile-less Ospreys, Frantic growled "Right: now we're on an even footing."

A Little Nudge

[Mary Darkes]

She sat at her computer terminal in her new stateroom on the Long Range Cruiser. It originally belonged to Norman, but after she removed all of the traps and hidden devices she claimed it for her own. Norman had sent an encrypted message requesting information as to where the leak was coming from. He wanted to know who had supplied the information to the Empire.

Mary composed her response carefully:

Norman, I'll look into the leaks, but agree with your suggestion to do some bridge burning to disassociate us with Preston. I'll make sure they can't link the plot up to our end.

There is something else though. It looks like someone wants you dead. Whoever the leak is has disclosed your fallback facilities to someone, and they've destroyed the lot. I'd be very careful if I were you.

She sent it using a low-level encryption method. It took the computers on the LRC fourteen minutes to decode the key. By her reckoning the Empire could do it in eight. Of course, she took the liberty of sending it via an untraceable comms buoy that was destroyed after sending. And of course she would do the bridge-burning. Letting the Imps find Norman was okay. Allowing them to track the spoor back to the LRC was plain silly. Plus that plot of theirs was nigh on scuppered. Now all she had to do was find that HPA part...

Discretion

[Norman Mosser]

The last few days had been quite monotonous, as seeing as he had been relieved of duty after Imperial Command had discovered that he was passing tactical information to the rebels on the surface of Vequess, Norman was spending all of his time on board his Courier, sorting things out and lazing. There was not much else to do while the investigation continued into whether or not the justification he had given for his actions was valid. Norman's crew had gotten fed up with his inactivity and now only returned to the ship to sleep and wash - the rest of the time they were in the mess hall drinking.

The message he had received from his second, Mary, had troubled him though. Knowing that someone was out to get him explained a few things, but how they had tracked down all of his boltholes and sterilised them was worrying. That implied that it was someone high-level in the organisation was trying to bring him down. And that she named one of the ringleaders of the Imperial faction they were supposed to be allied with was foolish. If they decoded the message he was in trouble. At the very least it would link him to a faction, and that would confirm their suspicions that he had an ulterior motive. And then he must die.

The commlink on the bridge chirped, and so Norman lazily rose and walked down the companionway to the bow of the vessel. He could have taken the call anywhere on the craft, but lethargy and a desire to sit in his leather command chair and press buttons overruled convenience. He entered the bridge, settled down and tapped a button.

'Norman here.'

'I am Clone Agent 8796 in his Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. You would be advised to co-operate or I may be forced to execute you summarily. I would regret this action, as it causes excess paperwork. Open your airlock and admit me to your vessel.'

'Okay, I'll buzz you in. Hold on.'

Norman leaned across and hit the button that unlocked the main airlock to admit the clone agent. As an afterthought, he armed his bridge failsafe. Knowing his run of luck at the moment it would be bad news and there was a very good chance he might be forced to cut and run. Shortly the clone agent boarded and made his way to the bridge. As he entered he drew a stunner.

'Norman Mosser, we have decoded a transmission sent to your craft which implicates you in having a motive other than service to the Empire for your recent actions. You will accompany me to the Vequess interrogation facility to assist the Emperor in learning the truth of your actions. I detect you are in the process of determining a flee/fight response. This action compounds your guilt and has been noted. I note you are unarmed. Any violent act upon me would be foolish and will be met with excessive force. You will now allow yourself to be escorted from this vessel'

The game was up then. One option was left. Norman sighed and then spoke. 'Fuck off and die,' and then closed his eyes.

There was a thump as the agent hit the ground. Five seconds later Norman opened his eyes again. The agent lay on the decking, stone dead. The Langford fractal that had flashed on the viewscreen when he had used the keyword had done its deadly work. There was no doubt in his mind that he had only bought himself enough time to escape. After all, he was a wanted man in the Empire now.

He jumped up and ran to his cabin. Just inside the door was a locker. He pulled it open and removed a backpack that he had prepared for such an eventuality. Strapping it on his back he made his way to the exit of his Courier. Once outside the airlock he forced himself to slow down in case there was someone watching. The longer he took before people became suspicious, the longer he had to get away. He turned and put his hand to the palmplate that comprised the lock. 'Seal and sterilise.'

The airlock slammed shut and locked down. Inside the craft the air conditioning raised the oxygen levels to near 100% and then began to spray a fine mist of a flammable chemical into the air on the craft. Once the entire ship was filled with the dewy mist a spark ignited the lot. The heat shielding would hide the flames from an outside observer while the flames completely incinerated everything inside the hull. When the Imperials would get round to cutting their way in, all they would find would be a fine ash.

With a wry smile, Norman realised that now a number of rare artefacts in the galaxy had now increased in value due to increased rarity seeing as his collection was still on board the Courier. He turned away and made his way

across the hangar into the main part of the docking bay. Now all he had to do was get on a ship and get out of Vequess so he could lie low and sort out his predicament.

Tricky.

Order and Chaos

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

A cracked collarbone and a couple MORE broken ribs were the only serious damage from the Clone agent's barrel tossing, and I considered myself damn lucky. This was balanced by our positively shitty luck in running into him in the first place. We weren't directly involved in the Vequess siege, which (entering its second week) was settling down into overblown Imperial threats and conversely puny statements of defiance from the rebels. But the Imperial Agent had assumed we were part of the greater plot.

"Ow... so we've now got the entire Empire out to get us as well as the plotters." Bec was bandaging me up professionally, but brusquely. Since we were back in space, her stark annoyance with me had returned. She seemed to think it was all my fault that the clone agent had beamed me with a barrel.

"Not necessarily." Catherine speculated from her station in the corner, "as far as I understand, each one of the thousand or so clone agents reports ONLY to the Imperial Spymaster. They can choose to report to the Navy if they want, but ONLY if they want."

Bec pressed a button on the bandage roll and the holding field snapped on, making the bandage rigid around my chest. I whimpered softly as the soft bandage solidified into a hard support. "So they're lone wolves?"

Catherine nodded. "Each and every one."

"Sounds like a stupid way to run an intelligence service." I muttered.

"Not in the Empire. The Imperial Spymaster is one of the few safe positions there. Anyone else can be sacked according to Imperial whim or a shift in the factional politics. But the Imperial Spymaster is the only contact for nearly a thousand of those agents. They usually take care to appoint someone competent to one position, rather than relying on competence in an entire network of contacts."

"Anyway... back to what we were talking about before we were so rudely interrupted by that Clone agent," Bec grinned. I didn't smile in response. I was sick of getting battered and bruised by 'rude interruptions'. "who would benefit from the Empire being starved of narcotics."

"The Empire wouldn't." I said, "If the importance of narcotics is what you say it is, a shortage would make everything begin to wobble. That's if this isn't just an attempt to manipulate the market and get filthy stinking rich."

"Most of the people that Catherine mentioned are fairly rich anyway. No. What they're after is power. Influence within the Empire. Unlike in the Federation or Alliance, wealth is not a guarantee or being powerful. There are relatively poor families who have great influence in court simply because their great-great grandfather was a hunting buddy of a past Emperor. They often trade off their marriageable sons and daughters on a name-for-money basis. But the families *we're* looking at don't have enough to offer."

"So-" I began, to be interrupted by a loud obscenity from Catherine who was over by her station. "What?"

"The AJNIB have ordered us to turn the unit over to the people looking for it!"

"WHAT?" Bec and I shouted.

We crowded round her screen and looked at the message, which she'd picked up while we had docked.

"A strategic decision has been made'? What the hell does that mean?"

Catherine shrugged, her brow furrowed. I could see her turning this order around and around in her head trying to work out what it meant.

"It's a message from Winston?" I asked, trying to puzzle it out.

"The cipher and command code is used by him and about two other people in the upper echelons of the AJNIB. Either way, it's a direct order. There's no wiggle room. It says to hand it over with the least amount of fuss and mess. It's got a copy of a BBS ad on it."

Bec was a connoisseur of the circular language used in BBS ads seeking illegal services and quickly scanned the details.

"Hmmm... 'A friend of Viscount Preston...(that's us, I assume) would like to return his heart (hah!) to him at a romantic dinner for two, only (suits me fine!) Pick up the 50 credit bill (I'm assuming they're talking in thousands) and we can set each other free. Will make restaurant booking upon RSVP. Well!" Bec leaned back and whistled. "The question is... will Preston swallow it?"

Catherine stood up and began to pace. She was upset by the order, but was far too much the loyal intelligence operative to question the wisdom behind it.

"And how can we take their word that they'll 'set us free' and not try to kill us afterwards." I said pessimistically. "Have we got any safeguards?"

Catherine flapped her hand irritably. "We can work on that. What I'm worried about is what they're going to do when they get a hold of it. Look, I'll send Winston *and* the central office a message detailing what we've worked out. They *should* change their minds."

"And if it doesn't?" I said, continuing my pessimism (as well as my bad habit of beginning sentences with a preposition).

"Then we do it! You can be sure Winston would tip off the relevant people in Preston's organisation. We can't outrun *everyone*."

Catherine was actually pacing the cabin now, tense and worried. She'd apparently never had need to question her masters' orders before. Like us, she had the shadow of the HPA lingering in her brain. Alongside this shadow was the mental image of a column of roaring fire bringing death to thousands. Bec and I killed people on a daily basis (granted, they were pirate scum, but the difference between pirate scum and noble, virtuous bounty hunters was about the thickness of the Emperor's new clothes), and the two of us were chilled by the possibilities. I'm one of those soft, liberal idiots who has problems with mass murder being the solution to geo-political power plays. Bec was a tad more pragmatic, which I assume was due to her Imperial upbringing. But we both loathed the thought of the likes of Preston having control of the HPA.

"Where should we hand it over?" I asked the room in general. Catherine could angst about this as much as she liked, but we needed to plan for the worst.

"Exioce." Bec said immediately. "O'Rourke's Colony. There's an ice sculpture park outside the capital. It's perfect."

"Why?" I asked.

"Um... I went there holidays with my family several times. I know that place like the back of my hand. A public place on a well-populated world. It also means it's well-policed. Nothing, and I mean NOTHING is allowed to disturb the tourists."

I nodded.

"Sounds good. Catherine?" Catherine ignored me, deep in a blue funk. "Catherine!" the woman looked up. "Look, I know you're upset about this crap that they're pulling, but look at it from our perspective."

"Why?" Catherine said, her expression saying that looking at it from our perspective was the *last* thing she wanted to do.

"We haven't had control of our destiny ever since we picked up the pattern replicator. We've been chased and shot up, threatened and bribed. We've been shanghaied into the AJNIB and basically been sent out to lure the hunters from their lairs. Long ago, Bec and I decided that the only sane thing to do was to try and stay alive. If the boss says jump, we say 'down the nearest armourfiend hole'. Try to persuade them to pull up. If that doesn't work, we follow orders, give them the unit and then run like fuck for the Frontier Systems. I'd rather do courier runs to Riedquat for the rest of my days than hang around pissing in the wind in the belief that I was making it rain."

Catherine sat back down again. She wasn't a naive woman, but she was loyal to her employers in a way which almost always means you get kicked in the teeth.

*

Price was having a dull, dull day. The grind of station maintenance was better than the slave farms on the planet below, but only in that he actually got some time to himself at the end of the day. Door not working here. Leaking pipe here. Low air pressure in this section. Hondaport was a big trade hub, the biggest orbiter in the Olcanze

system. It was a hive of activity, but only because Price buzzed about like a bumblebee keeping everything working.

And NOW there was something blocking a passageway down in one of the unpressurised sections. Bloody hell! He grumbled and moaned putting on his skin-suit. What did they expect him to do, lug it out with his bare hands? Probably. Oh well... all for the glory of the Empire. He'd see Rose tonight, she'd be back from patrolling in her Viper. Dating a Viper pilot was pretty inconvenient most of the time, but had its upsides in that she wasn't around pestering him all the time which meant he could live a little and –

Price stopped his moping as he saw what the cleaning drone had reported. It was a cylindrical metal object, about two standard metres tall and another two in diameter. The shiny surface was marked with yellow stripes and a variety of danger signs. A biometric reader and control panel was inset on the side facing the wall. Price approached it cautiously. What in the damned hell was this thing? It looked expensive and appeared to weigh several tons.

He tapped his wrist communicator. "Control Room? Control Room? Answer the Comm you bastards?"

"Dominguez here. What're you whining about now, Pricey?" Dominguez didn't like him. Had he set this up? Was this some sort of practical joke?

"I'm in passageway 12 on level 10. Is there any heavy equipment down here?"

"Only you, Pricey."

In the background, Price could hear the other staff members laughing. Inside his skin suit, Price went red. So he had a weight problem, did they HAVE to draw attention to it all the time?

"Can you punch up the passage camera?" he continued doggedly. There was no way he was going to wear the blame if he wasn't supposed to move this thing.

There was a long moment of umming and ahing, before Dominguez came back on the line. "Doesn't appear to be coming up. Can you have a look at it, Pricey?"

"Oh why don't I, then, if you're asking so *nicely*..."

Grumbling, Price wandered back up the passageway, and came to the camera housing. The camera was missing. Some miserable bastard had stolen it! "It's not there, Control. It's gone."

"What do you mean it's gone, Pricey? Get a bit peckish did you-" Price cut the connection. Dominguez was a pig.

Price wandered back, and had a closer look at the thing. The controls seemed pretty simple. A few buttons and the biometric pad. There were even some numbers on the reader. The numbers were changing, appeared to be counting down. A timer? The reader said seven hours. Price pressed a button experimentally. The countdown accelerated, two seconds clocking off for every one in the real world. Worried, Price pressed the button opposite the first button, assuming that it would slow down. The countdown accelerated further, with four seconds being wiped off for every one. Even as he watched, without any further action from him, the timer bit off a minute for every second. The decrease was growing exponentially. Price backed off. Other lights were beginning to blossom on the surface of the cylinder. "Control." he quavered.

"Dominguez here. Look, sorry about before. What's wrong with the camera?" Dominguez sounded sulky. Probably, the supervisor had had a word in his ear.

"Stuff the camera! I've... we've got a problem." Price's brow followed. This *was* his fault. This was *really* his fault.

"What kind of problem?" Dominguez asked.

"A big one." Price said, as the counter reached zero.

A thermonuclear reaction annihilated Price's embarrassment, along with the majority of Hondaport.

The Better Part of Valour

[Mack Winston]

I finally realised that I'd now slid fully from any traces of honour to full-blown criminal. I reflected it really hadn't taken that long. How long was it since I got that beaten up old Cobra and headed out as a Frontier trader, intent on building experience to become a commander for the Alliance Science Council? Those dreams now seemed more distant than ever, as I piloted my stolen ship into the Vequess system.

And what a theft, too!

Pam Gilmour, my uncle's erstwhile partner, had rescued me from certain death. And how did I pay her back? Yes, dear reader, I stole her ship. She hated me anyway, and had locked me in my quarters. I waited until I felt the ship dock again.

The fire extinguisher was heavy enough to break down the flimsy aluminium door between me and the rest of the ship. I'd managed to catch Pam by surprise, and after a brief fight, purely by luck - knocked her unconscious. I then used her hand print to start the ship. She was just coming around when I finally threw her off the ship altogether. I could hear her groggy shout of rage as I closed the door. Wasting no time, I ran to the bridge and requested launch clearance.

It felt good. I felt excited - not guilty - by my act of aggravated larceny. Pam had thoughtfully fully fuelled the ship, and I jumped into a nearby seething independent system which I knew from my frontier trading days - anything went...

Including the ringers. They'd change the id on a ship for a nominal fee, along with the ship's biometric scanners, plus add a fake title and service history. They had all the highly illegal equipment to change the identity of a stolen ship. To finally wash my hands of the ship, a Cobra Mk.3 (vgc, fsh, three careful owners, L&F aircon, auto, 3866 SMOH as the advertisement would say), I'd sell it via a dodgy dealer in Vequess. Apparently he had a nice Eagle Mk.3 that could be now.

I had also "borrowed" quite a bit of money to help me equip my new ship. Intoxicated with the success of liberating Gilmour's ship from her possession, I also managed to liberate the QuickCheque Expense Account ident from a Sirius Corporation salesman who I'd befriended in some seedy bar on one of the stations I'd stopped at. I had emptied his account at each starport I had passed - I had managed this four times before someone realised what was happening and closed the account. Another forty eight thousand credits would come in quite handy, thank you very much. Good job I had given the Sirius salesman a false name. He thought my name was Lieutenant Hampton from the Federal Navy. The fake uniform I had obtained from the 'Military Store' on Alioth was obviously convincing enough.

I neared the space station in Vequess. That fast piece of Imperial equipment would soon be mine - and it was just what I needed. I had no idea whether I was "hot" yet, but I didn't want to find out. Pam Gilmour would certainly be after me, maybe my uncle too. An Eagle Mk.3 could just about outrun anything else, was extremely hard to shoot, and would be ideal as a courier ship. Or, as I had concluded, I could just keep on living a life of financial crime. I hadn't realised how easy it was to steal from corporate expense accounts. Fake names, fake idents, a bit of social engineering and sweet talking...I could definitely make a very comfortable living.

"I wonder what Norman Mosser's up to now," I thought idly, as I docked...

Red Gold

[Norman Mosser]

The first laser bolt zipped past Norman's left ear, and the second burnt off one of the epaulettes on his shipsuit. Instinctively, Norman dropped, rolled and a small hand laser appeared in his right hand. In a fluid movement, he cocked it, aimed and then raised it again, flicking the safety back on. 'Anyone else, and I'd have called that sloppy aiming. What's your game?'

'Look behind you.'

Norman raised an eyebrow suspiciously and turned. A few feet behind him lay a corpse with a neat hole in the centre of his forehead and a second where his left eye used to be. On the ground, next to an outstretched hand was a silenced kinetic pistol.

'He was going to shoot you in the back with it, so I took him down.'

Norman looked at his rescuer. It was the Winston kid and he looked shaken. 'A handy coincidence.' Norman paused to look at his shoulder, 'Although you have just ruined an eight hundred credit shipsuit'

Mack shrugged, 'It was either that or under your armpit, but I would have nicked you.'

'We can talk shop later. First we have to hide the body. There's a service conduit over there, be a gent an open it up while I keep watch'

Mack did as he was told, and after pulling a multitool from one of the pockets of his shipsuit, deftly opened up the access panel. Together they dragged the body inside the conduit. Once they were both inside, Norman released the safety on his pistol and pointed it at his friend's head.

'We need to talk. I'm a little suspicious of the fact that you just happen to turn up and shoot one of my crew just as he was about to gut me.'

'He was one of your crew?'

'Yes. Someone is trying to shaft me and I'm lacking in trust at the moment. So tell me, why the hell are you here in Vequess, and why are you in this part of the starport? The last I heard of you, you were about to be executed because you had got yourself caught.'

Mack explained all that had happened to him since they had last met, how he had been maimed and then caught, how he had escaped with the help of a family friend, and how he had stolen that person's ship, reregistered it and had thieved his way to Vequess to buy an Eagle 3. 'I've even got the ownership papers here.'

'In your inside pocket no doubt. Take the jacket off and pass it over.'

Mack obeyed, and Norman looked through the papers. He then put the safety back on the pistol and holstered it.

'It checks out. I'll just treat it as coincidence then. A handy one actually. I was heading to meet with the same guy who sold you that Eagle to see if he could help me with a minor problem of mine.'

'Which is?'

'Someone told the Imperial Navy about one of my schemes. I had been relieved from duty pending investigation, but the person who is trying to engineer my downfall fed them enough information to make the charges stick. At the moment, inside my Courier is the charred remains of a Clone Agent. I'm fairly certain the rest will smell a rat soon, so I need to be out of this system. And it appears that my former crewmate was in on the act. Any chance of a lift?'

'You want a lift after pointing a gun at my head?'

'Yes.'

'Alright then.'

The pair of them emerged from the service conduit just as an Imperial officer passed by. He leered at them and sniggered. They then proceeded to the main concourse of the starport and headed out to the entrance to the

hangars. There was a checkpoint there, and the guards were checking IDs. 'They aren't just going to let you into the hangar area are they?' Mack asked.

'Why not? The alarm hasn't been raised, and my ship is in there.'

'Fair enough.'

As Norman predicted, the checkpoint let them through without asking questions and Mack led him to the hangar where his newly-acquired Eagle 3 was kept. Once Mack had run the ownership changes through the ship's systems, the airlock opened and they entered the ship's cramped living quarters.

'Zaonce if you please. I have a contact there who will help me out.'

'And where will you be while I'm launching?'

'In the drive spaces.'

'Hiding from the bioscan. I know that trick.'

Mack prepped the ship, and put in a request for launch clearance. He frowned when the response flashed up on screen. They wanted to search the ship for contraband. Before he could warn Norman, the customs team arrived in the form of the officer that they had encountered in the corridor, and a burly slave. 'Where's your lover, flyboy? Leaving town because you've been dumped? And I bet you're taking all of his lovely narcotics with you.'

The pair then comprehensively searched the cabin and the cargo hold, turning up nothing out of the ordinary.

'Shame you have a license for those hand weapons, otherwise I'd have had you for them. But, I haven't looked in the drive spaces yet. I bet a queen of the spaceways like you is cunning enough to hide something away in there.'

Mack's knuckles whitened. 'You can't go in there.'

'And why not? Is that where you keep your boys is it?'

'No, its radioactive in there. Its why I got the ship cheap. There was a leak.'

'Ah, I see. Pig!' The slave looked up. 'Look in the drive spaces.'

Pig nodded and entered the drive spaces. A few minutes later, he emerged, shaking his head.

'Lucky.'

The pair then turned and left the ship and exited the hangar. The launch sequence began with barely enough time to seal the ship.

Once the Eagle was underway, and had made its first jump, Norman emerged from the drive spaces and lay on the narrow bunk that was behind the command chair. 'Good job he sent the slave in. He recognised me and as I'm popular with their lot at the moment he kept quiet'

'Lucky.'

Norman waited for a few minutes before speaking again, this time with a serious tone. 'You know, that your uncle won't bail you out a second time. In fact, its likely that he might try to bring you in.'

'I don't like being lectured,' Mack bristled.

'I'm not lecturing. I'm merely stating my view. After all, so far you could get away with being a naive youth, led astray. Now, of course, you continue in this line of work, you become a professional.'

'Heard it before. Is this the bit where you tell me I'm a hateful little boy full of spite?'

'No, this is the bit where I show you this.'

Norman passed over his ELITE badge. It sat heavily in Mack's hand.

'You've seen your uncle's. Compare the two.'

Mack weighed the badge in his hand and scrutinised it in detail. 'It's bigger, a bit more stylish.'

'They tailor the look to the personality of the wearer. That way, you can tell if an impostor is wearing one he stole, because it doesn't look right'

'Is that what you wanted to show me?'

'Nope.'

'What then?'

'Look at the colour.'

'Its gold...but it seems redder than my uncle's one.'

'Exactly. Redder because it shows how much cold-blooded killing I've done. The Elite Federation notice what you do in your career, and they add little touches like that to your badge. If you cross the line, they won't let you forget it. Six thousand ships, and a large number of them because I was paid to is a lot of blood to have on your hands. Do you honestly reckon you can do that?'

