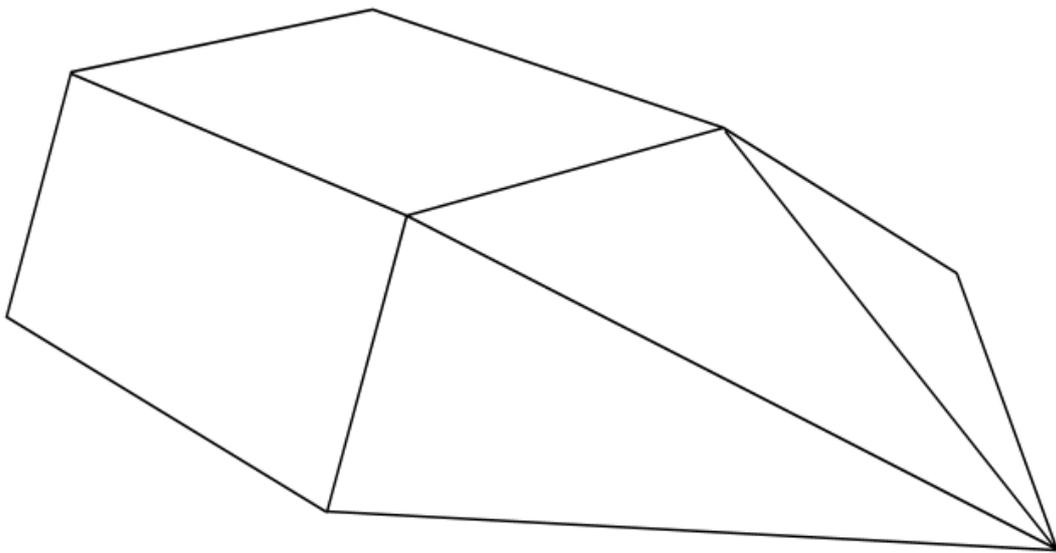


The Elite BBS Presents:
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

DANCING WITH ANGELS AND DEMONS

THE HPA SAGA



Volume

4

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Two of Spades

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

Mary Darkes watched the approaching Boa with some trepidation. The Boa was Marcus' command ship and was fitted out as a quite capable battleship. Having said that, Norman's Long Range Cruiser could still take it apart (though not without difficulty). And once the component was fitted into the LRC, even Capital Class ships would hesitate to tangle with a HPA-equipped craft.

Mary still felt uneasy about the ship. Marcus was a powerful man, and if his plot came good, he'd be one of the most powerful men in civilised space. Norman had been a fool to get involved with him, even for the reward of an HPA. Even an HPA-equipped ship represented no more than a disposable loose end to people like Marcus. Dreyfus seemed a fairly sane and reasonable man, but his loyalties were clear and steadfast. Still, as far as she understood their relationship, Dreyfus fuelled Marcus' megalomania as much as he checked it. Norman had also been uneasy about Dreyfus for another reason, but had refused to divulge his reasons.

"Darkes here. How can I help you, Marcus?"

Marcus was relaxed and smiling.

"I'd like to come aboard if I could, Mary."

"I'm afraid Norman's not here." Mary disliked aristocrats who pretended familiarity to put people in their place.

"I know that, Mary. There are just one or two things I would like to confirm with you personally." Marcus' voice was rich with promise. Mary distrusted it on principle.

"Come aboard, then. But if you could please keep your honour guard to manageable proportions. Darkes out."

A Harrier emerged from the Boa's docking bay and with a gentle push of its main driver drifted slowly across the gap between the two huge ships. Mary had a bad feeling about this. She had her own plots regarding Norman's position, but Marcus' patronage was somewhat like a vicious attack dog: useful against your enemies, but you never knew when you might be the one receiving the savaging.

"Patrick?" She asked the Security Head. Patrick Fujiyama, a short and muscled man with the brow of a dreamer and the aggression of a psychotic, looked up from his station.

"Yes?"

"Could you take a detachment down to meet Marcus' party at the loading bay? Make sure he doesn't bring more than three guards on board. If he huffs and puffs tell him that Norman left very precise orders."

"Of course, 'Norman'." Patrick said with just a hint of nastiness. He turned back and barked orders into the Comm system.

Mary turned the external cameras onto the Harrier and watched it approach. She hadn't been informed on how the plan was to proceed once the HPA was operational. All she knew was that Norman had sped off to Vequess as soon as the rebellion had broken out saying something about the Empire needing all its loyal subjects at this time of crisis. Mary hadn't known exactly how much he was lying to her, certain only that she had been locked out of the plot again. Norman would regret that, in time.

The Harrier docked in the bay below and the hold closed and began to pressurise. Mary switched to the loading bay camera. The camera seemed to be locked in a view on the Harrier's steaming exhaust ports. No matter how much Mary fiddled with the controls, the view remained locked. Mary's brow furrowed again.

"Patrick?" she paged him.

"Yes, Mary?" Patrick's reassuring gruffness came back through the speaker.

"The hold camera is malfunctioning. Is everything all right there?"

"Affirmative, Mary. I'm on my way up with the Heir."

Patrick's voice was unstressed and unforced. He sounded, as always, in control. Mary let out a long breath. She'd been worried for a moment.

"How big is the honour guard?"

"Just the Heir and ourselves."

Mary smiled. Marcus would need more support than that if he was going to pull something.

"Good. Bring him up to Norman's office, I'll talk to him there."

"Will do. Relax, boss, it's all running to plan. Fujiyama, out."

Mary removed herself to Norman's private room, which was filled to the brim with Imperial awards, display uniforms and military honours. By meeting there, she reinforced Norman's status within the Empire, and by extension, her own. As yet, Marcus had no status, just a bold plan and a well-equipped private army. As an afterthought, she gestured for the bridge guard to follow her. A little extra intimidation never hurt.

In a few minutes, Marcus arrived, Patrick and two other guards shadowing him.

"Such a pleasure to see you again, Mary." Marcus purred, seating himself without invitation.

"Yes." Mary said, with just the right degrees of both deference and insolence. Despite her front, she was impressed, as always by Marcus' sense of *presence*. He wasn't just a powerful man, he was a leader.

"The latest reports regarding Norman are grim. His survival must be questioned." Marcus looked directly at her, trying to unsettle her with directness.

"They usually are." Mary shrugged. "I question his survival almost every time he leaves this ship. He's terrible at keeping appointments with death."

"Nevertheless, he cannot be relied upon at this point of the plan." Marcus was unfazed by her nonchalance.

"I'm sure I can see where this is going." Mary said tiredly, "What do you want and what are you offering?"

Marcus leaned forward, his eyes glittering. Behind him, Patrick and his detachment shifted uneasily. Mary noted with some comfort that their hands hadn't strayed far from their holsters.

"Your cooperation. Your loyalty. More to the point, I want your ship. I want you to wield the sword of my destiny. Don't wait on leadership from Mosser, he will always be more concerned with his own pursuits rather than real power. I am offering real power to you. A place at my court if you wish, a place at the head of my Navy should you desire it."

Mary passed a hand over her eyes. The usual horseshit, delivered with the usual absolute sincerity.

"I'm sorry Marcus, but this is Norman's ship. I'm not going to mutiny." 'at least not to join YOU,' Mary added silently. Marcus leaned back in his chair and sighted, half-closing his eyes. His facial expression was one of disappointment, mixed with resignation.

"Loyalty. Such an admirable trait. Sadly, it should also be leavened with self-interest." Marcus' eyes shot open, and he lurched out of his chair, slamming his hands down on the desk. "I am relieving you of command, Darkes! I am commandeering this ship for the good of the Empire!"

Next to Mary, the guard reflexively drew his weapon and pointed it at Marcus. To Mary's horror, Patrick and his two guards drew their weapons and trained them on the man by her side. The loyal guard seemed equally horrified, and his eyes jerked from the unmoving figure of Marcus to those of his erstwhile colleagues. The stand off remained for several seconds. Mary wondered whether she might be about to die. Then the single guard's weapon wobbled, and clattered to the floor.

Slowly, Mary got to her feet, holding out her hands to indicate she was unarmed.

"It doesn't matter if you take over the ship, Marcus. The HPA trigger controls have a Biometric lock. I can't get past it. Unless Norman is here, nothing can happen." Mary's voice was unsteady. Two of the three Judas guards were still pointing their weapons at the loyal guard, while Patrick had altered his target. His characteristic evil scowl had darkened into a demonic grin as he pointed the weapon at her. The biometrics were the last card to play. After this, there was nothing.

Marcus rose and walked around the desk. He gestured and Mary moved over next to the loyal guard. Marcus sat down in Norman's chair, testing the softness and springiness of it. He then looked up at Mary.

"Perfectly true." He nodded to one of the guards, who left the room. Mary's eyes flickered over the situation. She had a concealed weapon in her sleeve, and she knew the guard next to her was a solid and dependable character. Did that represent a chance?

Then the absent guard returned, and next to him was a figure who made Mary's jaw drop.

The man was bald and almost hairless. His eyes were vacant and dull, but his features...

"A remarkable likeness, don't you think?" Marcus commented. "I'm told that certain environmental changes happen in utero which cause minute pigmentation and mental variations, but as far as biometric security systems are concerned, there's almost no difference."

"You stole one of Norman's clones." Mary said tonelessly. Her last card was the two of spades.

"Indeed. I haven't imprinted him with any personality, but what motor reflexes remain are quite enough for my needs." Marcus rose again and crossed over to Mary, placing a comradely arm around her shoulder. Mary fought to control herself as she felt her flesh crawl. "So can I now rely on your cooperation?"

"I am a realist." Mary said, resigned.

Marcus squeezed her shoulder and released her.

"You will still be rewarded. Norman never appreciated you properly." Marcus walked away, pausing at the door, "I will expect you back here at 1300 for a full briefing on the plan. Hondaport has been destroyed. Dreyfus will have recovered the unit within forty eight hours. The final stage is almost commenced. Destiny calls, Mary. Norman couldn't hear it, but I think you can."

Taking all but one of the guards, Marcus left, leaving Mary to wonder how much threat and how much promise was in the Heir's words.

"And YOU, shut your face." she muttered at the inanely grinning, nearly mindless clone.

*

"Hi! Welcome to New Wagner colony. Enjoy your snowfields holiday!" Bec nodded absently at the fur clad nymph at the starport. The poor things were only semi-clad, with fur-lined coats slit to the navel and a skirt so short that... well, let's just say I wasn't in any doubt as to whether she shaved.

Sex sells everywhere.

"A bit... touristy, isn't it?" Catherine said, awed by the tackiness. Men and woman dressed as enormous (which is to say, life-sized) penguins and polar bears were at the dock entrance, handing out bits of whale blubber and caramelized shrimp. Large neon signs were everywhere, advertising this hotel, this bar, this casino. There was a heavy police presence, which seemed to be almost justified by the staggering number of hawkers, touts and peddlers. They clustered around offering a variety of foods, goods and <ahem> 'services'. Catherine's eyes took on a glazed expression and I saw her hand reach for her wallet. Bec intervened and glared the peddler away. The product? Poor-quality reproductions of Emperor Hengist Duval in full military regalia.

For my part, I was fully occupied in shivering. My homeworld is a hot planet, and I kept the cabin temperature in the Constrictor in the mid to high twenties, which favoured Bec's sensitivities rather than mine. O'Rourke's Colony had an average temperature of -14 degrees Centigrade. We were basically on the equator, but it was still well below freezing point. I'd put on basically all of the warm weather gear I had in the ship, and was still suffering a nasty reaction. It was *freezing*.

I *hate* the cold. Know how much I hate the cold? I hate snow, I hate ice, I hate sleet, I hate frost. I hate how you lose sensation in your extremities. I hate each and every stage of hypothermia (what a daggy thing to have on your headstone as cause of death!).

Bec and Catherine seemed to be suffering no ill effects from the cold, and seemed to be enjoying themselves. We'd splashed out on a hotel room, and I was looking forward to getting into it and turning up the thermostat. But before we could go there, we went into a bar that Bec had been to on previous visits. It was Bec's sort of place, full of the young and trendy, with a definite bias towards extreme wealth. Everyone had gloves on, and it was a little

while before I realised the reason. The *glasses* were made of ice. Take too long quaffing your drink and you might find yourself wearing it. Very trendy.

We sat down and procured some alcohol. The handover wasn't scheduled until two days hence. As far as we'd been able to find out, the Viscount hadn't arrived yet. We hadn't been attacked since the reply to the BBS advertisement had come, which we took as a sign that the handover was going smoothly. However, as I had pessimistically pointed out, if you want to shoot a fish, it's easier to wait until it swims into a barrel. Nearly a week without combat had made us a bit edgy.

Catherine's heartfelt missive to HQ had produced a three word reply. 'Previous orders apply'. Bec had turned perversely cheerful now that our ordeal seemed nearer an end. Bec's amoral nature was on display again, but this time I had limited patience for it. Despite my cynical speech to Catherine earlier, I WAS worried about the long-term consequences of our actions. I didn't want to go down in history as the person who could have stopped a tragedy, but didn't.

"So how do you think he'll pay us?" Bec mused. "Cut Gems? Exotic Narcotics? Alien Artefacts?"

"Hand Weapons," I said acidly, "or the wrong end thereof."

Bec merely grinned and poked out her tongue. Nothing could break her mood.

"What're you watching?" I asked Catherine, who was gazing at the large viewscreen, which appeared to be a news program.

"Someone just blew up a space station in Olcanze." she said distantly. Something in the tone of her voice made us turn to look at her. "And of course Olcanze is another leading narcotic-producing system."

"The next move?" I said casually. I wasn't aware of any Clone agents in the room, but the Zelagre experience had made me more conscientious about discreet language. Catherine nodded.

"Any reports on casualties?" Bec asked.

"Ten thousand or so on last count. They used a dirty warhead, so the radiation damage on the planet's ecosystem won't be known for some time." Catherine said tonelessly.

I was appalled at the loss of life. We'd known we were dealing with the heavy mob, but I hadn't quite realised *how* heavy.

Bec tapped on her datapad.

"Narcotics prices had been steadily rising through the Vequess crisis. Over the past two hours, they've doubled. If this *is* a market manipulation, it's worked admirably."

Catherine shook her head. I agreed with her. Nuking a space station is a little too much for mere money. She doodled aimlessly in the frost on the table.

"There has to be something more. I think we'll have to wait until the Emperor responds. There will be something in that to give us a clue."

"What do you think the Emperor will say?" I turned to ask Bec, but she was gone. "Bec?" I stood up and looked around. Bec wasn't far away, she was over by the bar, embracing a young woman with an overly elaborate hairdo. I left Catherine drinking in the news broadcast and went over to the bar. The two of them were chatting like old school-friends, which of course, was what they were.

"Red, this is Evie, who was at Art School with me. Evie, this is Red, my co-pilot."

Bec at Art School? I might have known! Evie was small and dark, with a ridiculous amount of makeup and a hairdo which added about half a foot to her height. She had bright, penetrating eyes and lazy, lascivious lips. A creature of inherited wealth and ingrained pretension.

Nonetheless, she seemed pleasant enough as she chattered away, asking after old friends and relatives. Amidst the important questions, of course.

"So, Bec... be honest... is this hairstyle too much? I've been vacillating between having it fixed up like this or having it straightened and just down around my ears. What do you think?"

"Oh Evie, Evie, Evie: let your hair hang *down!* It's far more you. And I must imagine that that hairstyle must make it awfully difficult to play squash. Let the hair down and you won't be such an easybeat."

Evie ducked her head and grinned. Obviously Bec's opinion meant a lot to her.

"So Evie, what are you doing here? On holiday?"

"Oh no! After I finished art school, daddy got me a position here. I'm now Chief Sculptor In Residence at... oh you'll never guess..."

"DO tell!"

Bec's vapid eagerness was beginning to make me feel ill, but I gritted my teeth and smiled unconvincingly.

"The *ice* park! It's a very prestigious position!"

Bec's eyes lit up, as did mine.

"That's quite a coincidence," Bec cooed, "we've got a meeting there with... I probably shouldn't tell you this, but it's... a very important secret deal with-"

"Viscount Preston?" Evie blinked in surprise.

"How did you know?" I blurted. Evie looked up in surprise at my Federation accent, and addressed the reply to Bec.

"He booked the place out for the day after tomorrow. Just himself and guests. Are you *friends* of the Viscount?" Evie asked, with well-disguised undertones of horror and disgust.

"Guests." Bec corrected firmly. Evie understood the nuance and relaxed. "Look, Evie. I'd sooner not put you to any inconvenience, but you could help us a great deal if you could do us a little favour." Bec gave me a covert signal that I should leave her alone with her friend. I returned to the table with Catherine. She'd lost interest in the telecast and was working on her datapad. She had an unhappy, distracted expression on her face.

"The price of narcotics is skyrocketing, but none of the Viscount's friends are selling. They're *still* hoarding their stash. I've got no idea what they're waiting for. Red, I've got a bad feeling about this. It's all going according to their plan. We could be the only obstacle in their way."

"That's the least of our problems. Bec's rediscovered the old-girl's network ." I said glumly.

Understandably, Catherine looked somewhat more perplexed than sympathetic.

*

"You know, old chap, that you really can't trust money-hungry bounty hunters. I sincerely believe that, being one myself and all."

Dreyfus ahhed sympathetically, entirely aware that the poor unfortunate before him had dragged himself up to where he was today from the paltry base of a mere Imperial Courier (fully equipped, and with a 20MW laser) and expert combat tutors all paid for by doting daddy Preston. Which wasn't to say that the Viscount hadn't done well for himself, merely that protestations of fellow feeling rang somewhat hollow. The two of them were sitting on the bridge of the viscount's Explorer as it landed at New Wagner. Dreyfus thought the colony looked rather pretty, laid out before him. It was a gaudy tourist trap, but had been designed by gifted architects, working in rare harmony. The tall glass spires looked like inverted icicles, and the streets and plazas were all designed to look like snowflakes. It was night-time as they descended, and the city was ablaze, brighter than noon. All Preston had talked about was the quality of the whorepits and drug-dens. Architecture was not one of the Viscount's strong points. Dreyfus would have to make sure he kept his mind on the job.

"By this stage, I think they - and, for that matter we - are far too desperate to worry about trust. They're probably tired of being hunted and desperate to get rid of the unit."

The rest of the crew all had their heads down to their controls, determinedly not paying any attention to the two nobles. The Viscount prized obedience, not inquisitiveness.

"I see our man in Olcanze did a sterling job, what? Saw the pictures of Hondaport. Popped open like a piñata, eh?"

Dreyfus kept his voice level, to control his loathing. He had been overruled by Marcus in that element of the plan. Dreyfus had preferred a more elegant solution that didn't require so much bloodshed. But resources had been tight, and expedience had been the deciding factor.

"The operation was a success, yes. When the Crown Prince fulfils our expectations, and the remainder of our plan is effected, it will hopefully be all worth it."

"Having second thoughts, old chap?" Preston daintily reached forward. He kept a tank of Zeessze Ssa Slugs on the bridge. He plucked his chosen dainty from where it had been crawling and popped it in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully, feeling a few last contortions against his tongue before his teeth sheared through the slug. If Dreyfus was even in the slightest unreliable, he could be disposed of and Preston could present himself to the Heir as the obvious replacement. There was even a faint chance he could be a less-obvious successor to the Heir. In time, though.

Dreyfus looked up at Preston without disguising his anger.

"Viscount, I have only two directives in my life. Loyalty to the Empire and loyalty to Marcus. That's all. Everything else is secondary. If I have to sacrifice my life, your life, or even the lives of everyone in Hondaport to serve my Empire and my Lord, then I will."

Preston didn't take kindly to being described as disposable, but filed away his anger to be used at a later date. Possibly not too far in the future. This moustachioed, balding little man had best speak to him more civilly in future. Preston's own loyalty to both the Empire and the Heir had it's limits. Dreyfus had best not rely on Preston's loyalties to maintain his own safety.

"Now I was thinking that we should hire at least a dozen guards, what? We can't let the beggars just walk in and think they're going to walk out again. Wouldn't be good for them, for one thing. You let them think they can bargain with you one moment, and the next-

"No guards. We do the transaction and we let them go. After the unit is delivered you can hunt them to the galactic rim if you wish, but until then we do not risk losing the unit. If they run again, we will not secure the unit in time." Dreyfus cut across Preston. He just couldn't HELP himself, could he? Preston sighed. The little man WAS squeamish.

"And you won't change your mind about coming along to the handover, either?"

"No. Marcus told me to oversee the recovery, and I will do so. I've studied the profile on the two bounty hunters. They're survivors. They will have developed contingencies for trickery. I'm coming."

Preston sniffed. He had the distinct feeling that Dreyfus didn't TRUST him. He felt rather hurt.

*

"Cocktail!"

"Please State Pharmaceutical Requirements."

"Full Combat Spectrum."

The Clone agent's ship sat on the pad at New Wagner. He'd followed Preston's Explorer all the way to Exioce and sure enough the heavy worlder's ship had landed a few days previously. If he'd had any doubts regarding the Viscount's complicity in the Vequess uprising, it had been quashed. He was about to leave his ship, terminate the heavy worlder and detain Preston and the two other bounty hunters.

The bounty hunter's Constrictor had been removed from the landing pad some hours prior to his arrival, but Traffic Control had not cleared the ship for takeoff. Most likely it was being warehoused somewhere. He would find it. He would find them. He was unaware what support and security the plotters would have within the colony, so had decided on a pharmaceutical mix to maximise his speed, reflexes, hand-eye coordination, strength and night vision.

"Please state estimated crash time."

The agent considered. The price of the full combat spectrum was that even his finely tuned body needed to collapse into a fugue state to recover.

"Two hours."

"Resolving contra-indicated medications, please wait."

A minute later, the Clone agent opened his eyes. The Combat Spectrum changed his vision, dulling the colours and sharpening the lines. He experimentally flexed his arms. Yes, the additional strength and grace had infused his body. The agent rose from his couch and opened the door to a freezing blast of wind. The inconvenience of tracking his prey had been surpassed by the glow of professional anticipation. He would tear the heavy worlder limb from limb.

He'd already filled in the additional paperwork.

Zaonce

[Norman Mosser]

The group of engineers glanced at each other uneasily when they entered the hangar. There was not only a Clone Agent waiting for their arrival, but also a detachment of Clone Troopers standing stiffly to attention.

The Clone Agent glared at them. In fact it was more than a glare, it was as if it was staring directly into your soul and weighing up whether you were still of value to the Empire, or whether it would be better to terminate you now. Eventually it spoke, 'Open the ship up.'

The engineers looked at the craft in the hangar. It was an Imperial Courier and it looked as if it was a work of art. It was spotlessly clean and sprouted a number of hairline seams that implied large amounts of non-standard equipment. A trained eye picked up on the fact that the starboard missile tube had been converted into a fuel scoop. Reluctantly they set to work with the cutting equipment and began the unenviable task of cutting through the main entry hatch.

Fifteen minutes later, just as the last few inches of metal holding the hatch shut remained, the Clone Agent signalled for them to cease. The squad of Clone Troopers formed up outside the hatch, their weapons raised and then one of them used its prodigious strength to wrench the door off its mounts. They were greeted by a blast of hot air. Without hesitation, the Clone Troopers swarmed on board the Courier and disappeared for a few minutes. Eventually one of them returned outside.

'The craft is secured'

The Clone agent then entered the ship. Inside, the Courier was completely gutted. The fire had destroyed the entire interior of the craft, leaving piles of slag where the ships systems had originally sat. The forward section of the craft was worse hit and the only recognisable parts were the structural bulkheads. The Agent, satisfied with what he had seen, turned and left the ship. He then pulled a communicator out of a pocket and made his report.

'This is Clone Agent 4291, I have completed investigating the Imperial Courier RL-808. The interior has been completely destroyed. There are no visible signs of the Clone Agent in the remains, but it can be safely assumed that the fire was started to dispose of his corpse. It is possible to surmise that Norman Mosser has left the Vequess system. The recent discovery of a corpse of one of his crewmembers hidden in an access tunnel supports this hypothesis. Records also indicate that a person matching the description of the Winston fugitive was sighted in the station several days ago. This tallies with the last sighting of Commander Mosser. I recommend that Imperial intelligence agencies be directed to keep an eye out for Mosser and attempt to apprehend and question him at the first available opportunity'

*

Norman sat at the table in the cafe, leisurely drinking a beaker of coffee. It wasn't a caffeine enriched ultra coffee, it was a mixture blended for subtlety. If he wanted a pick-me up, he would just use a stardreamer wakeup chem. He smiled wryly as the news nets in the Zaonce system reported that a number of high-profile crime lords had chosen to leave the system early. Reading between the lines, it was probably because someone in the starport had recognised him. That was understandable given his arrival.

When Mack had docked, and muttered a few things about going his own way, and having some time to think, Norman took that as he had probably said a few unwelcome things at the start of their trip. Mack had been strangely uncommunicative throughout the journey in, but when they had arrived, Norman disembarked from the Eagle and passed through the checkpoint without difficulties. On the other side though, on the main concourse he had been recognised.

Not by a spy, not by a bounty hunter, not even by a friend, but by a starchaser. One of those groups of people who religiously sought out the exploits of star commanders in the gossip rags, and hung out in starports hoping they could spot someone famous, or at least notorious. First, there was the gasp of surprise, then there was 'look, its Norman Mosser, over there!', and then everybody on the concourse was looking in his direction. Luckily he beat a hasty retreat through a side exit before they could reach him and demand holographs.

Norman's portable terminal bleeped. It was a message from the shipyard telling him that his ship was ready. When he had shaken off the starchasers, he had dropped into one of the many dealerships located in the Ridley Scott obiter, and spent a large portion of his remaining credit on a brand new Cobra Mark III. He'd specified that it be equipped as a combateer, but to retain the hydrogen drive and add a fuel scoop for extra flexibility. He had written the Courier off as a loss. The benefit of buying in Zaonce was of course the plentiful supply of high technology ship systems. The only limitation to the amount of equipment you could effectively get was cost.

Norman rose, picked up his backpack and hailed an autotaxi to take him to the docking bays. The dealer had also delivered the craft to a hangar, fuelled it up and prepped it for launch. It was only a matter of minutes before he was seated at the controls of his new fighter craft, running pre-flight checks. The avionics were a lot newer than on his Courier, and seemed to run off the Anis variant of the Jordan pattern system. Frowning slightly at the standard fit liqui-couch, Norman got launch clearance and eased the Cobra out of the station under its own power.

He set the navigation systems up to take him to Quator via Lave, where he hoped to find an equipment cache. After that Norman decided to make his way to where he hoped his LRC still was, and hopefully to try and find out what was going on. The hyperspace lock disengaged, and Norman pushed the red button on the dash that sent him into witch-space.

Shortly after Norman entered hyperspace, a squadron of Osprey X fighters emerged from the docking tunnel and followed his wake into hyperspace.

Fear and Loathing

[Mack Winston]

I liked my new ship. It was ideal for my mission of audacious larceny - extremely fast and nimble, which was what you wanted if you'd become as hot as a white supergiant all of a sudden.

I also enjoyed my new look.

I stood on a river bridge in the evening coolness. The sky was as spectacular as the system's description said it would be - no less than five objects in the sky bright enough to cast a shadow. I could see my reflection in the river below.

Gone was the practical, but unstylish clothing worn by so many traders, replaced by the most fashionable business suit, made to order from the best tailors that the Sol system could provide. I wasn't Mack Winston, I was now John Burkhill, young and ambitious Sirius Corp. salesman. I had bleached my hair to look as much as possible like the real John Burkhill, who was happily sleeping in his expensive hotel, completely oblivious to the fact his Sirius Corp. Personal Expense Account had been totally emptied.

It was so easy. With idents effectively unforgeable, no one thought fraud could possibly take place. Therefore, the hotel receptionist who had gave me the hard credits (for entertaining potential customers at the nearby casino) hadn't checked the biometrics on the ident and only made the most cursory comparison between the mugshot encoded on the ident and the person standing in front of them. I had turned on the natural charm on the young lady behind the desk, made confident small talk with her, and she'd mechanically gone about her job, getting another pile of 500cr bills from the safe for another Sirius Corp. salesman out for a night of gambling.

I was just enjoying the evening. I'd wait for the main sun to set, then head off to my ship, leave for another system, and deposit the money into one of the accounts I'd opened under a false name. Easy money. The fifteen thousand credits were safely locked up in my Eagle Mk.3. I wasn't going to walk the streets with that lot in case someone decided to relieve me of my ill-gotten gains.

I didn't pay much attention to the two autoshuttles that stopped nearby. A man got out of each, in itself not unusual. I went back to watching the avians diving into the fast-flowing river in front of me. Then something caught my eye.

One of the men had calmly opened a bag he was carrying, and then pulled out a rifle. Not caring that I was watching him, he raised the weapon and pointed it right at my head.

Oh shit...

"Hold on, I think you've got the wrong guy," I said to the assassin, wondering which way to run.

"John Burkhill?" he asked.

With horror, I realised I had taken on the identity of an assassination target. I looked around and saw the other man raise a handgun. Without thinking, I ran desperately towards the handgun-wielder, who was closest to me, waiting for the inevitable shot from behind to blow my brains out. I cannoned off the man, knocking his weapon away. A bolt of searing energy zipped by my ear.

"Amateurs," I thought to myself. If I was the assassin, I'd have never have missed that one. I vaulted over the bridge rails, and onto the muddy riverbank below, scrambling beneath the bridge. I didn't fancy falling in - swimming wasn't my strong point and the river flowed extremely quickly. The damned assassins wouldn't be long, I knew. I had to go somewhere. I looked for anything I could use as a weapon, and found a suitable piece of driftwood that had been washed up against the riverbank. I heard one of the assassins climbing over the bridge guard rails...

Brandishing my primitive weapon, I waited for him to drop down. He was going to get a headache he'd never forget...

The Sword of the Emperor

[Commander Red Ravens]

"Here I am." I shouted out, and slid to the ground.

The two figures I had been watching spun around. I'd been watching the two of them for nearly ten minutes from my place on top of the refreshments Kiosk. The Ice Park was a stunning edifice, with sculptors like Bec's friend Evie having created amazing likenesses of everything from an Alioth Orchid to a Merlin Lantern-Fish. Most imposing of all was the centrepiece, an O'Rourke's Colony native, the massive form of an Equatorial Whale. On the other side of the park were caricatures of Federation and Alliance public figures, along with the appropriately beautified figures of Imperial Servants.

"Commander Ravens." said the shorter one. I was a bit taken aback. I'd assumed Viscount Preston had been the tall, narky looking one. Tall and blonde and full of well-bred superciliousness. The shorter one looked pudgy and balding. The classic flunky, rather than the overbearing aristocrat. The tall one had on the brightly coloured semi-military uniform favoured by hereditary lords, while the shorter one had a plain black flightsuit.

"Viscount." I said evenly.

There was a harrumphing sound from the taller one. Well... I hadn't been mistaken, after all.

"I did say dinner for *two*, didn't I?" I said pointedly. A one-to-one meeting had fewer variables and fewer chances for treachery.

"I am Squire Dreyfus. I am here merely to ensure that the transaction takes place smoothly. Where is the unit?" The smaller man said patiently, smoothing the matter over.

"Follow me." I said, walking over towards the other side of the park. The others followed me, feet crunching in the snow. It was a relatively mild day in New Wagner, with the temperature hovering around -10 Celsius.

"You'd better have the damned thing here, old chap. I'm not a great fan of the cold at the best of times, and I *do* have to be back in Achenar for an important business transaction." Viscount Preston made his first contribution. Ahh... now this is more what I expected from the aristocracy.

"It's here. I want this over with." I said curtly, gesturing for him to keep ahead of me. The man talked like a dandy, but I didn't mistake that for weakness or stupidity.

It was about 3.00 PM standard time, and the weak light of Exioce's star was getting weaker as it dipped towards the horizon. Shadows lengthened across the ground as we trudged the hundred or so metres. It wasn't a particularly open space. Every ten metres there was another ice sculpture and another potential assassin lurking. I had a prickling sensation at the back of my neck. Granted, that could still have been the cold.

I didn't know how the two of them were armed. I would have to disarm them before I revealed the pattern replicator, as my continued respiration after that event was not one of their major concerns. Bec and Catherine were not going to be in any position for immediate assistance, so my survival was my own concern.

We reached the appropriate spot and I called out for them to stop. We had arrived in the middle of the portraits and caricatures. To my left, stood a variety of dreamware stars, politicians and media figures from the non-Imperial side of the universe which were victims of satire both clumsy and brilliant. To my right stood the Imperial heroes - every pot belly drained, every bald patch covered, every stray imperfection erased.

Crowning (pun intended) this heavenly host was a ten-metre statue of the Emperor. Old Duval is a fair way over the century now, but you wouldn't be able to tell it from the statue, an idealised tribute to a fierce war god.

My two companions turned around to face me. Preston literally steamed with annoyance. He wasn't accustomed to being led around by the nose. Dreyfus seemed more placid, though there was a look deep in his eyes which showed that he was observing current events far more closely than his hotheaded companion.

"Well?" Preston snapped. The bastard looked almost unaffected by the cold, while I was shivering slightly and stamping my feet. I guessed that he must have been wearing far more expensive cold-weather gear than me.

"First, weapons." I said. I gestured on the snow in front of me. Both men cast down a beam weapon each. I gave Preston a look, and, shrugging, he divested himself of four other death devices, designed for both ranged and close combat application. I was under no illusions that he'd disarmed himself, but hoped I had made my point.

"Last. Money!" The chances of us getting out alive was dependent on the two jokers in front of me believing the purity of my motives. 'Purity', of course, meaning absolute monetary greed. I tossed a small card over to Preston. "Fifty thousand smackers into that account."

Preston sighed and stared dully at the card, the thought of being down fifty thousand credits sitting resentfully in his mind. Dreyfus cleared his throat meaningfully. Preston raised his eyes to glare at his smaller companion for a moment. He then reached for his datapad. He placed the card over the scanner screen to scan it, and gave a small, mirthless smile as he saw the destination of his hard-earned (hard-stolen, hard-smuggled, hard-embezzled, hard pirated) money.

"The Fifth National Bank of Miphize. Ah yes, awfully accommodating chaps, I've always found."

I'm sure my cheeks were already red enough from the cold that they couldn't see me blush. The banking sector of the Miphize system were the most notorious financial institutions in known space. Impenetrable, anonymous and prone to occasional destruction in the continual civil war in that system, there were no safer or more untraceable places to deposit your ill-gotten gains. That is, of course, unless your particular bank had the misfortune to be blown up by one or the other rebel movement. It galled me that Preston and I shared any similarity.

Preston did a retinal, voice and biorhythm scan and, with a wince, pressed the button to confirm. I began to take my own pad out to confirm his transaction, when I heard a sound behind me in the encroaching dark. I turned my head around. It appeared to have come from in the Imperial Hagiography Section of the Ice Park.

"You didn't bring anyone, did you?" I asked suspiciously.

"Not us." Dreyfus said quietly. "As far as I know, the three of us are the only ones here."

I walked forward a few steps and picked up the beamer that Dreyfus had dropped. It was much less likely to have any nasty surprises than one of Preston's weapons.

"If there's anyone there, come forward!" I shouted.

The answer came in a prodigious leap from the shoulder of the Emperor's statue. Catlike, the figure landed in front of me in the snow and remained crouched for a few seconds. He then stood up and looked at me. The man's bald head steamed in the cold, and his eyes were burning. Instead of the dull, disinterested expression I'd seen previously, he was focused like a 20MW laser on me. I took an awed step backwards. Previously, I'd been faced with a panther. Now, it had been transformed into a sabre-tooth cat. I looked at the beamer in my hand and gauged my chances of nailing him with it, here in the open, where he could dodge. I didn't like my chances.

"I am Clone Agent 15007 in his Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. Stay where you are. You are now all under my arrest. Should you move, you will be resisting arrest. Resisting the arrest of a Clone agent is a capital offence. "

"You bastard!" Preston shouted, "You despicable rotter! You've betrayed us!" But I noticed he didn't move. He could smell the death in the air.

But to my shock, Dreyfus stepped forward. This middle-aged, unassuming man walked past me, interposing himself in front of the Clone agent. There was a moment's silence.

"I believe I am resisting arrest." He said clearly.

Then the Clone agent exploded from his resting position so fast I could barely see him. He rushed at Dreyfus with a hand poised to administer a fatal blow. Dreyfus seemed to lean sideways casually and wave an arm ineffectually at the agent... who then went flying backwards, landing on his back in the snow. He remained surprised for about a quarter of a second, then acrobatically leapt to his feet. Dreyfus remained standing imperturbably before him. They closed again.

It was like watching a normal fight between two masters of unarmed combat, except that it seemed to happen at three times the speed. The agent threw a combination of blows, any one of which would have killed a normal man if they had connected, Dreyfus' hands moved jerkily, like a mechanical toy, but they followed the agent's hands, blocking them, redirecting them to harmless destinations. I could barely follow the agent's hands as they stabbed at Dreyfus, but Dreyfus was actually *surviving*, and without apparent effort.

By comparison, Dreyfus' counterattacks were slow and purposeful, but well placed. The agent found it hard to avoid the blows, which nonetheless he did. The agent leapt vertically, attempting to surprise Dreyfus with a jump

kick, but Dreyfus leaned sideways and grabbed the agent's foot, using his own momentum to throw the agent into the nearest ice sculpture, shattering it into pieces with the force of the impact. Dreyfus advanced on the agent, eager to finish the combat, but the agent's recovery was too quick and he hurled a large chunk of ice at Dreyfus, catching him in the chest. Dreyfus staggered and fell. For a moment, I wondered if that was the end. But despite having been hit with a twenty (at a guess) kilo chunk of ice, Dreyfus rose, apparently none the worse for wear and returned to the fight.

My fascination for this combat almost proved fatal, save for the crunch of snow behind me. I threw myself to one side, as Preston slashed at me. He roared with frustration at the miss. Unluckily, I'd also dropped the beamer! I scrambled to my feet (far more clumsily than the Clone agent) just in time to dodge another blow. Preston had armed himself with a 1.5 metre Stripsword. When he'd thrown it down on the pile I'd barely recognised it. When it was turned off, it looked like a metallic streamer attached to a handle. When turned on, a magnetic field held the strip rigidly upright and propelled a monofilament wire continuously around the edge of the strip. This cut like a razor-sharp chainsaw. If he managed a decent hit on me, it would slice cleanly through skin, sinew and bone.

Fortunately, I'd armed myself as well. Flipping open a pocket on my pants, I extracted a thin, heavy cylinder. A flick of the wrist telescoped it out to the length of a metre. I pressed the button to activate it and was rewarded with vibrations running down my arm. The Sonic Baton created harmonics down it's length. When brought into contact with the human body, the sonics wreaked havoc on both hard and soft tissue. It was a weapon designed to maim.

The two of us faced each other, breathing out clouds of steam.

Preston lunged forwards and tried what looked like a clumsy overhand chop, I read the move and parried it lightly, not bothering to riposte as his second backhanded stroke would have slashed me from groin to breastbone. I swung the baton crossways, trying to make Preston dodge backwards. Instead, he knelt under the blow and kicked, trying to scythe my legs out from under me. I jumped over his kick, but none too nimbly and Preston tried to take advantage of my loss of balance, surging forward.

At a loss for a quick defensive move, I kicked snow at his face, which he wasn't expecting. He stepped backwards and frantically tried to clear his eyes. The delay enabled me to regain my balance and return to a defensive posture.

We started to circle each other, having taken each other's measure. My Sonic Baton hummed, while his Stripsword gave off a curious whining sound as it eviscerated the air.

Preston was faster and had the longer blade, but I was stronger and had the heavier weapon. Preston had the edge in age and training, but I was fairly confident that I had the edge in actual street-fighting experience. The slums of Coopersworld were a long light-year from the palaces of Achenar, as I'd told Bec on various occasions.

Preston attacked, striking both high and low, trying to find a weakness in my swordsmanship. My swordsmanship was pretty much *all* weaknesses, but still, I managed to stay alive. I counter-attacked, using the weight of my baton to beat aside his blade. I didn't get close to touching him, but I could see that he was starting to tire. Being a heavyworlder has advantages in that you don't get tired as easily on lower-G worlds.

We'd fought our way through the sculptures, and we were in the animals area now. Ebdelan Canopy Gliders and Terran Rhinoceroses (extinct) looked on, disinterested in our battle.

Preston seemed to realise that the longer the battle went on, the better my chances were, so attacked furiously, using tricky circular patterns that were hell to predict, let alone parry. I got careless, and felt the flesh at my shoulder rip. Not a serious injury, which you wouldn't have told by the way I yelled and cursed. It was also bleeding, which would continue to weaken me. The fight was looking more or less even again. Preston crowed at first blood.

"Well old chap, it appears you're going to be beaten, doesn't it? Why not just stand still and let me painlessly decapitate you, eh?"

My blood boiled. I was sick of being beaten. More than that, I was sick of being bodyslammed by the side of a spaceship. Sick of being KO'd with smallgoods. Sick of being crushed by barrels thrown at me by genetically-engineered, superhuman secret-service agents. No way was I going to be beaten, especially not by this grinning example of a millenia's worth of inbreeding. But I banked my anger. I wasn't going to beat Preston with anger. The only thing that anger would give me was a certain closed-casket funeral. I looked around, while keeping my eye on the insanely grinning form of Preston. A statue of a rearing Plains sloth provided inspiration.

I pretended that I was more badly hurt than I was, letting the arm where I'd been hit begin to dangle slightly. I sneered defiantly as I stepped steadily backwards. Blood dripped from my shoulder.

"Viscount, hey? It must be hereditary, 'cause there's absolutely no way you could have earned it."

Preston stiffened ever-so-slightly and flexed the hand around the Stripsword.

"More than you'll ever earn, sport., " he snarled. "I, however, shall rise to the pinnacle of the Empire for services rendered." He didn't pounce. I didn't want him to pounce. I just wanted him to follow me, step for step.

"Oh I don't think so, chuckles. If you can't beat a Competent rated pilot like myself, when you're in a ship ten times my size, then what hope have you got? You should retire planetside to crack the whip over the backs of slaves. That's something more in line with your abilities and... appetites." I said distastefully, pouring a light drizzling of scorn over my words.

Preston didn't break, which I admired, but he grew a few shades purpler and his expression made it clear that a 'painless decapitation' was no longer on the agenda. No matter, we were almost at the right spot...

To my horror, Preston stopped and straightened out of his fighting crouch.

"I know exactly what you're doing, old fruit, and it won't help you a bit."

I ground my teeth, he was about a metre from where I needed him. The pain in my shoulder had turned into a dull throbbing, but the power in that arm was genuinely weakening, rather than just being feigned.

"And what's that, Preston?" I grated.

"You're trying to delay me so your pet vat-boy can come and save you. Well Dreyfus," I saw a quick expression of absolute puzzlement skim across his features, "will soon finish off your friend and I'll finish you."

With that, he leapt forward and slashed at me. I barely got the baton up in time to parry and back-pedalled. We exchanged a few blows and I knew Preston could sense victory. My responses were slow, partially from blood loss and partially because the cold was beginning to get to me. We were now underneath the front of the Plains Sloth, the giant forequarters suspended above us.

I swung the baton in a clumsy-looking backhand stroke. Preston merely leaned back gracefully and watched the baton swing past him. He grinned as it impacted on the edge of the ice sculpture. I recovered the baton to guard position and waited until I heard the cracking. Without hesitation, I then threw myself backwards. Sadly, I missed the look of horror on Preston's face as the sloth statue disintegrated and fell forwards onto him, but the scream cut off by the mini-avalanche was most gratifying.

Sonics can be extremely destructive on crystalline structures. I looked with satisfaction on the rubble. If Preston wasn't dead, he was severely inconvenienced. I jogged back towards the Emperor's statue.

The two of them were still at it, at an only slightly reduced speed. The agent looked tired, his face sporting two or three huge bruises and some fairly deep cuts. Dreyfus looked pretty much the same, but his right arm was moving far more jerkily. His shoulder had an indentation (I had to look twice) the size of one of the Clone agent's hands, about four centimetres deep. I winced. That HAD to hurt. Four or five ice sculptures had been destroyed in the battle, probably from bodies being tossed into them. I stood in the shadows of a half-levelled ice sculpture, leaning against it. I wasn't going to particularly get involved here.

The agent vaulted away from the battle momentarily over near a rack of ice sculpture tools. Dreyfus waited for him to return, not particularly fussed if he escaped.

"If you leave now, I will not follow." he called softly, spreading his hands in a sign of peace.

For an answer, the Agent reached behind him and picked up one of the tools, a scraping blade set on a long, flexible pole. In the same, fluid movement he threw it at Dreyfus. The makeshift spear moved too fast for me to see, and embedded itself deep in Dreyfus' stomach.

In horror, I watched Dreyfus sink to his knees, an expression of agony on his face. The agent dashed over, ready to apply the coup, a heavy ice saw at the ready. He got over to near Dreyfus and leant over. What happened next astonished me. Dreyfus arm came up and the edge of his hand cleanly sliced through the agent's neck. The agent's head seemed to look upwards, but I realised it was really his head falling off his body, tethered only by a thin strip of flesh at the back of the neck. Dreyfus' hand had sliced through skin, flesh, spine and bone. The agent slipped over backwards, the ice saw dropping to the ground.

Dreyfus rose from his knees, grabbing the scraping blade with both hands and with a grunt extracted it from his belly, tossing it aside. I saw sparks and the glitter of optical circuitry shine from the gaping wound.

The android Dreyfus looked around and spied me. He grimaced in a very human fashion.

"Is Preston dead?" he asked.

"I don't... I don't know... probably not. He's under an ice sculpture over there." I gestured. I was a bit too stunned to do anything but react.

"Pity." Dreyfus sighed, "Now... Commander, where is the unit?"

"Wha...?"

"The Unit, Commander, what we're here for?" he said, without impatience.

I shook my head. If I didn't want to end up like the Clone agent, I realised I had finish the business.

I went over to the scattered pile of weapons (which neither Dreyfus or the Clone agent had bothered to use) and squatted, sorting through them for Dreyfus' beamer. Eventually, I found it, next to Preston's personal datapad, which he'd dropped when the fight began. On the spur of the moment, I gathered it up as well, slipping it into a pocket.

With Dreyfus beamer, I stood. He looked at me doubtfully.

"I hope you're not thinking what I think you're thinking." he said, with a humourless smile. I shook my head and raised the beamer upwards, sighting along my arm. I missed on my first shot, but scythed the beam across and neatly sheared off the Emperor's upraised hand and sword.

"Look out!" I shouted, as it plummeted to the ground. It fell some distance away and Dreyfus went over to examine it. "In this hilt." I said quietly, and tapped my wrist communicator. It was time to get out of here.

Dreyfus leant over. The pattern replicator was indeed there, embedded in the ice courtesy of Bec's friend Evie, hidden inside one of the facsimile jewels.

"The sword of the Emperor." Dreyfus grinned. It was unnerving to see him grin in such a HUMAN fashion, when I could see optic fibres protruding from his gut. "How ironic."

A thin sound penetrated the park, the sound of Police sirens. Dreyfus looked at me.

"The Police may provide some difficulties."

"Not for me." I said. On cue, there was a great hissing and cracking from the giant form of the Equatorial Whale in the middle of the plaza. Thermal charges underneath the body steamed and shed ice. With the hiss of hydrogen jets, the sculpture lifted from the plinth it was on and rose into the air. Other charges did their work and huge pieces of ice began to flake off the form of my beloved Constrictor. A hatch opened on the bottom of the ship and a long line snaked out, with a lifting belt on the end. I ran over to the line and attached myself to the belt. I looked up and saw the face of Catherine at the hatch. I gave her the thumbs up and the winch began to pull me up. I looked over at Dreyfus and light-heartedly gave him the thumbs-up as the ship began to move upwards. The sirens were very loud, now. We'd cut it fine.

Clearly above the sound of the Thermal charges and the engines I heard Dreyfus call.

"Good luck, Commander!"

I finally reached the hatch, and Catherine helped me over the edge. The hatch closed and Bec fired the main engines. The whale's tail shuddered a moment, and was then popped off the end of the ship by the force of the Prime Mover. It fell to the ground and shattered. Bec wound on the power and the ship shot upwards. Within half a minute we reached the necessary altitude and Bec engaged the hyperdrive, hurling us away from Exioce into the electric blue vortex of Witchspace.

Quator

[Norman Mosser]

The Cobra Mark Three reoriented itself for a final approach to the surface of Davies Earth after completing a braking orbit. Occasional flashes of luminous gas projected from the manoeuvring thrusters as it settled into position. The bottom thruster then emitted a steady glow to slow the descent as it began to drop through the atmosphere. The craft passed over a thick jungle that had encroached fully over a number of ruined cities on the planet's surface.

It had been a long time since Norman had last visited the Quator system and had attempted to start up a colony of his own. The Long-Range Cruiser he had set up to function as an obiter was now in deep space, and providing a platform for the HPA, but some of the settlers were still there. There was a small but profitable brewery on the surface, producing speciality beers. And of course, there was a medical research facility on the planet, cataloguing the local flora and fauna in search of natural sources of existing healing chems. The rebels who had joined The Cause were long gone as well. Norman had sold their identities on to the authorities some time ago, long before he became ELITE.

Of course, there were new arrivals now, treasure hunters and archaeologists who were combing the remnants of Quator's culture for remains. And there were now a number of secret facilities run by the galactic powers in the system. Each would pretend the others weren't there, but periodically one would blossom in a nuclear explosion as an enterprising Alliance, Federal or Imperial commander made an attempt to erase their target from the surface of the galaxy.

Their time on the planet was limited though. Scientists had noted that some of the local fauna had been nudged a few steps up the evolutionary ladder by the wars that had wiped out the human population so many years before. Soon, a certain threshold set by some well-meaning scientists would come into effect, and access to a planet that had native life that was developing sentience would be prohibited. Another few years and the system would be silently dropped from the starmaps, and only commanders with unbounded hyperdrives could travel there. Undoubtedly, a small observation facility would be set up to keep prying eyes away from the system.

An alert on the main console drew Norman out of his reverie. He glanced at the status monitor, and began to swing the Cobra around so it was flying across the surface of the planet. He was flying to his destination by dead reckoning and a grid reference. It was too risky to set up a beacon, so he had just memorised the location and left it at that.

When he arrived at his target location, he had to spend a few minutes burning a clearing to land on, as the jungle had yet again encroached on his landing pad. The LZ cleared, he delicately set the Cobra down on its landing gear, and powered down the main drive. He left the passive sensors on as well as the short range comm system, so the ship could alert him should he have guests.

He disembarked carrying an electric machete, and used it to carve a trail through the dense jungle to a small duracrete building that was hidden from prying eyes by the dense foliage in the treeline. Inside the building sat a small machine. Norman reached into a pocket on his shipsuit and removed a small energy cell which he inserted into a slot on the side. Silently it powered up and ran a biometric scan on Norman. Then it spoke, 'What is the flight speed of an unladen Swallow?'

'African or European?' replied Norman

The security check complete, another generator deep underground powered up, and opened a hidden portal to a rough hewn passageway. Norman followed it down into a chamber deep underground. The chamber was just a storeroom containing a cache of equipment, high value trading goods and various spares and bits of ship equipment. Norman walked across the chamber and pulled a dust cover off one particularly bulky object.

He had found it in one of the shipyards in a ruined city. It had been banned for over a hundred and fifty years due to dangerous side effects caused by its use. It was a late-generation jumpdrive, and hopefully with a bit of work, it would be possible to integrate it into his Cobra.

It took three days to transfer it and install it into the drive system of Norman's Mark Three and as he was finishing up and was running the diagnostics to ensure that the device would function correctly when activated, an alarm went off on the bridge of his Cobra. Wiping his greasy hands on a rag he had set aside for that purpose, Norman entered the bridge and brought up a status report. He had company. A wing of Osprey X Fighters was making an approach to land nearby.

Norman's Cobra was in no fit state to launch so he set the diagnostic check to continue running, and nipped back into the equipment cache, returning with a handcart full of assorted equipment that would probably come in handy. Then he sealed the cache and sat down in the living quarters of the Cobra to wait.

Presently, after the Ospreys had carved themselves a landing area with their main guns and set down, two men and a woman approached the Cobra. Norman stepped out of the entry hatch holding a kinetic impact rifle. He raised it and challenged them as they approached.

'Halt, who goes there!'

'A bit clichéd, don't you think Norman?' replied the woman

Norman smiled easily. 'I know Liz, but it felt right for the moment.'

His visitors returned his smile. 'May I introduce Richard Jeffries and Sam Kemper. They are working with me on this assignment'

Norman shook hand with them. Richard was a few inches taller than Norman with grey hair cut in the style used by the Federal Military. Sam Kemper was shorter, stockier with the characteristic dark skin and eyes of a high gravity desert world.

'Richard, are you a Fed?' enquired Norman.

'Ex, I left some years back. It still shows doesn't it?'

'It does.'

'Oh well, I can't help it I suppose.'

Sam then spoke: 'Whereas I hide it far better than them.'

'Only because you are as sloppy now as you were in the academy, Sam,' Liz retorted.

'Anyway, moving swiftly on...' interjected Richard. 'I believe we have much to discuss. Certain people seem to want this whole HPA affair wrapped up.'

'Indeed, let me tell you what's been going on so far...' Norman described the events of the past few weeks, finishing with '...so of course, once that happened I decided to head out here. I have to say I was half-expecting you to make contact once I got out of Vequess.'

They were now seated around an open fire, cooking burgers and baking tubers, having decided to take a break to build a barbecue and cook some food.

'It still sounds fantastic,' said Richard

'Welcome to the galaxy, Rich,' laughed Sam. "Stranger than fiction and as nasty as hell!"

'Thanks for the social commentary!' grunted Richard. "Save it for the ladies and get back to the cooking.'

Sam grunted and started jabbing the tubers with a stick. Liz then spoke. 'Well, it seems we have things to do now. I'm beginning to suspect that there might be a link between all this and what happened at LHO. I could be wrong, but I'm going to have to look into it.'

'Of course.'

"Rich, you will have to get back to HQ, and let them know what is going on if only to make sure that we don't have to wait too long for backup. And Norman, as you are going back to your LRC, take Sam with you as some backup'

Sam's face brightened, 'Great, I've always wanted to see the inside of a pirate-infested battleship.'

'Yeah right, as if your last command wasn't one,' grinned Rich.

Sam frowned and looked affronted, before bursting out laughing, 'You've got me there my friend. Fair enough, I'll go with Norman as long as one of your ships my Osprey out of here.'

'Done.'

Once the four of them had finished the meal and put the fire out, they said their farewells and parted. Norman and Sam watched the Osprey Xs rise majestically up into the night time jungle sky and shoot off over the horizon

'Strange that they didn't think we've met before, Norman.'

'Their loss. They'll probably find out in due course though.'

'Time to go?'

'Yep, time to get that LRC back.'

They boarded the Cobra Mark Three and then took off into the warm jungle night.

Closure

[Frantic]

Imperial Lynx Bulk Carrier LY-328 cruised through the frontier system of Ayinti [-1,-3], bound for an unknown rendezvous at Ayinti 6a, a small rocky planet with a thin atmosphere. It was accompanied by an escort of 12 Osprey X wing fighters, separated into four v-wing formations of three ships each. One at a time the wings took turns patrolling the space ahead and behind in an erratic manner (and leaving no patrol patterns), while the Lynx made constant scans for any trouble.

Baron Vladimir Stevenson had never before received such an important transport mission, and thus was determined that nothing was going to interfere with it. He regularly barked orders to the escort, and reviewed ambush possibilities. He would like to have run a larger convoy considering what he knew of Viscount Prescott's plans, but discretion was the name of the game and they needed only call to receive backup at any time, though doing so would complicate things.

Stevenson brought his attention back the asteroid field they would soon be passing, and ordered the currently patrolling wing to make a pass by all nearby asteroids to search for hidden ships. It was such a routine patrol pass, that he was greatly surprised to see the burning wreckage of the lead ship come out from behind the effective radio shielding of one of the larger asteroids on the patrol, closely followed by the other two fighters moving on an evasive pattern.

Amid reports from the remaining two ships of a hidden Imperial Explorer armed with a small plasma accelerator, Stevenson flicked a waiting switch on his control panel to power up the Lynx's own plasma batteries and called the ships back. "Break away and regroup!"

The Imperial Explorer came into view from behind the asteroid and fired a few shots toward the receding fighters, before disappearing back behind the asteroid. "That's not going to save you" thought Stevenson and set in a course toward the asteroid. A tactical panel lit up showing him that he now had dual forward mounted Large Plasma Accelerators at his own disposal, and crew manning the top and bottom forward Small Plasma Accelerator turrets, as well as the rear top and bottom turrets. The escort formed a defensive pattern around the Lynx in case of any new surprises, under all circumstances they would remain within range of the Lynx's weaponry for mutual protection.

"This just gets worse!" shouted Stevenson across the bridge as a rarely used warning display indicated incoming jump signatures. Before the turrets could turn around, Asps started appearing to port, eight in all. Four of the Asps locked on and fired missiles, one toward the lead ship of each wing, then all eight quickly split up and headed out of range of the turret weapons. There was no panic amongst the well-trained Osprey pilots, the targeted ships broke formation and began evasive manoeuvres, while the non-targeted ships regrouped in a defensive manner, not willing to be lead away from the Lynx by the attackers.

"Who are these guys?" he shouted to the communications officer. There was a short delay before the response came "Pirates, no IR signatures, no markings".

The Lynx fired a naval ECM system, to no avail. Naval missiles, thought Stevenson, nothing my pilots can't avoid. However, once the lead ships had been chased away from the Lynx, the missiles changed targets and started heading towards the defending ships again. Further complicating things, the Asps had spread out and began firing their four remaining missiles into the defensive ships, scattering them even further. The result was in effect missiles herding the fighters out of range of the ship they were meant to be defending. Stevenson could see what was going to happen, the Asps were already moving into position in anticipation and preparing to unleash 4 megawatt death to the fighters once they had been forced out of range of the Lynx's plasma turrets.

Stevenson cursed under his breath and signalled to his communications officer once again. "Call for backup, get in at least 10 ships." The communications officer started working away on the control panel and started cursing. "Did you hear me Serf? I gave you an order, call in backup now!"

Sweating and noticeably worried, the Serf in question replied "Seems to be a transmission jam sir, I can't get a message out."

"Damn" Stephenson looked at the scanner and noticed that the Ospreys were being destroyed down to the last, there were only four left and they were desperately try to keep in a defensive pattern. They wouldn't last long though, and then the Lynx would be in a lot of trouble. He had to think of a way out soon.

"Prepare for emergency mis-jump." The bridge vibrated slightly as the huge hyper drive powered up, then shook violently as it failed to engage.

"Hyperspace jump blocked sir. Must be a jammer device."

Stevenson's mind started wheeling, these guys were well equipped, what to do? Working quickly he brought the ship around and headed straight for the asteroid they were heading to before they were attacked. There was only one place a transmission jam could be coming from strong enough to block their comms, and that Imperial Explorer had to be responsible. If they could take it out, they might be able to get a message out, or jump out if they still had to.

The Asps finished off the last desperate fighter, and quickly turned around and headed after the fleeing Lynx. As they approached the range of the plasma batteries, they spread out and skirted around the turrets range to form a box around them. With 4 turrets against 8 ships, the Asps began making quick sorties within range and emptying their laser temperature into the Lynx's shields, then ducking out of range again before the turret could finish turning around towards them, at which point the Asp opposite them would make their own sortie to the turrets rear.

"Shields at forty-three percent, Sir!" This had been kept up for the last ten minutes while the Lynx lumbered along its course. Helpless to defend itself from the faster ships, the Lynx's shields were slowly losing efficiency, and would start to go down faster and faster. If this kept on they were doomed.

The asteroid they were heading towards was a large flat one, and their shields would be gone by the time they navigated around it. Baron Stevenson, however, had a small surprise for the Imperial explorer hiding on the other side of the asteroid though. Dual Large Plasma Accelerator mountings were definitely non-standard equipment, and certainly something that they would not be expecting. Instead of slowing down upon the approach to the asteroid, Stevenson kept thrusting forward, past the point where it would be possible to stop and avoid a crash. Several seconds before impact, he engaged the forward plasma batteries and was rewarded with a rapidly expanding hole in the asteroid, boring right through to the other side, and splitting the asteroid in many places.

The Lynx dove into the hole with all turrets facing forward, ready to vaporise the Imperial Explorer hiding on the other side, but before they even reached the other side of the hole, the incoming jump signature warning flashed again and the scanner indicated the Imperial Explorer entering the hole behind them.

It was too late to slow down and block the path to make a stand, the Lynx shot out of the other side trying to swing its turrets back, while the Imperial Explorer shot past shooting its Small Plasma Accelerator at the Lynx's engines. The combination of the wear on the shields of the previous battle, the energy drain of using the forward batteries at full power, and the fierce force of a plasma accelerator was too much for the rear shields. They collapsed and the beam cut through the engines and the upper aft turret, setting the ship adrift, and leaving a large blind spot in its turret coverage.

The Asps were pouring out of the hole and Stevenson knew he was beaten. He gave the reluctant order "Abandon ship!" just as another hit pierced the forward shields and knocked out the primary sensors, effectively blinding them. Stevenson saw all his men to escape pods, but remained behind. Death would be a far better fate than that of what would happen to him if he should survive and return to base with this mission failed. He decided to stay and do what he could to fight back before they took him, so it was crushing to hear the sound of the remaining turrets being targeted and destroyed.

*

Stevenson stood up and wiped his hands on a rag, and then connected up a spare power supply to the console he had been working on. He flicked a switch on the power supply, and the console flickered for a few seconds, then powered up and began to receive input from the secondary sensors.

Stevenson scanned the ship and found to his dismay that most of it had been ransacked. He made a closer scan of the cargo holds; the pirates had cut open the cargo pods and ransacked all the valuable goods, precious metals, hi-tech equipment and machinery and battle weapons, and had no doubt stolen the... Stevenson stared in amazement at the sensor readout, then rechecked and focused the scan on the item in question. Incredibly, the "unit" was still in the cargo pod where it was stored in the first place, discarded amongst a pile of other looting debris. "The idiots!!!" he shouted gleefully and raced to work restoring comms.

The message he was getting on the comms system was the worst thing he could have received; a beacon attached to the ship was transmitting a distress signal on the general wavelength. Anyone could, and probably would, receive it. Whatever chance he had left of delivering the "unit" now rested on shutting that thing off before it drew the wrong attention. The pirates had probably dumped it there so that they could get rescued. "Great!" he thought, "the first nice pirates I ever meet, and in being nice, they cause havoc." He used the sensor console to locate it, and was about to run to the space suit cupboard when the scanner picked up incoming ships.

He was heartened to see twenty Imperial Osprey Attack Fighters incoming. He hailed them quickly and told them to destroy the beacon. They informed him that they were sent ahead of the incoming cruisers to do just that, and that he should brace himself.

With the beacon safely blown to bits, Stevenson relaxed in his seat and made sure the cruisers would send ships to collect his crew's escape pods.

*

Commodore Evans couldn't believe his luck. He'd brought his Long Range Cruiser to the area after a tip off, and after a few days hunting, had received a distress signal. It was too good to be true, and he was wary that it was a trap.

Ayinti was technically an independent, and mostly uninhabited, system – but still lied in an Imperial region of space. Evans communicated his intentions and location back to base, and then ordered the fleet to hyperspace to the destination of the distress signal.

*

The cruiser came out of hyperspace to see a crippled and looted Lynx, defended by twenty Ospreys. Constrictors and Falcons streamed out of the cruiser and attacked the Ospreys, driving them back.

"Scan the Lynx, see what they're defending" ordered Commodore Evans while sidling the cruiser up towards the Lynx.

"You're not gonna believe this sir, but I've got a positive ID on the "unit" in one of the cargo holds!"

Evan stood transfixed for a few seconds before coming to and shouting across the bridge, "Put together a boarding par-" but was interrupted by the sensor operator "Sir, 3 Imperial cruisers incoming, with full escort. Evans called back "What's their ETA?". "2 minutes" came back the reply.

Not enough time for retrieval, thought Evans, and gave an order to destroy the Lynx. The cruiser turned to expose its main plasma batteries to the target, and fired until the Lynx was completely vaporised, and all sensor readings of the "unit" had been obliterated. The cruiser collected up it's fighters and turned about, spreading clouds of proximity mines behind it before jumping out of the system.

*

Later on in a briefing, Evans let out a sigh and said to his officers "Well boys, not the best of outcomes, but we have just made closure on a big thorn in the side of the Federation. We can all expect a promotion on the way for this one. Well done."

Meanwhile, an even more pleased commander sitting on the bridge of an Imperial Explorer far away - compared the real "unit" to a fake "unit" the same as the one that had been left on board the Lynx after he'd helped ransack it. "All look the bloody same to me" he said and prepared for another controlled mis-jump.

The Deal

[Frantic]

The Wolf Mk II waited silently, hiding in a crevasse on one of the many large asteroids nearby. Several times as Imperial patrols came scouring the asteroid belt, it had snuck away silently skirting ahead of the patrols with cloak active, using minimum power, and always keeping a few asteroids in between it and the line of sight of the patrol, and slowly skirting around them and back to the hiding place in the crevasse.

The hidden ship had been there a long time. As far as patience went, the ship deserved the name of an anaconda, rather than a wolf. Back on old Terra in Sol, the anaconda snake has been known to wait days or even weeks, not moving, in the water near a river bank, waiting for the right prey to come along.

This silent predator however, was taking its prey all the time, passively recording all events taking place where the Lynx Bulk Carrier had been destroyed. It had recorded the Asps and Imperial Explorer ambushing the Lynx, the subsequent battle, and subsequent pirating of the ship. There, though, its records differed greatly from those that the Lynx had collected and passed on, as the Lynx had lost its sensors for a long time. The Wolf's records showed where the "unit" was stolen and replaced with a replica.

It had watched silently and watched the Imperial fighters arrive, then the Federation cruiser arrive, and recorded all the scans taken to the effect that the Federation believed the "unit" had been destroyed, and that the Imperials believed the same from their own scans.

The last of the Imperial salvage vessels finished its work and docked to its cruiser, which in turn powered up its hyperdrive engines and pulled away from the scene, then made a jump, leaving behind a massive departure cloud.

Though all was now silent, the Wolf still waited for a long time before daring to detach itself from its hide away and make its own active scans. It then made a close scan of the cruiser's departure cloud, then powered up its own drive and jumped after it.

*

An Imperial Courier, two Osprey X Wings and four Osprey Attack Fighters had been left behind to guard the cruiser's arrival cloud in Exioce, as per standard operating procedure. They would normally wait as long as they could, so that each ship could catch up with the cruiser at the midpoint towards its destination during mid point turn around. As the mid point turn round was the most common time during a journey for an attack, this procedure was rarely broken, but considering recent events, Viscount Preston had ordered them to wait longer and rendezvous later on, just before arrival at the orbital city Macmillan Depot.

Just as the Courier began accelerating away, leaving the faster ships behind, an arrival cloud opened up and a Wolf Mk II burst out of it. This happened so quickly that by the time the Courier had keyed the comms to report the incident to the cruiser, it found its transmissions already being jammed by the Wolf.

The Wolf came to a halt as the ships converged on it, as if wondering whether the ships were going to offer it escort or not. Since the Wolf did not respond to hails, and seemed to have a suppressed IR signature, the Courier answered this question by opening fire with a 20MW beam laser. The powerful beam cut through the shields and cut an opening across the starboard hull.

The Wolf reacted instantly, accelerating quickly and banked away from the Courier's line of fire, just before the fighters joined in with their own laser discharges. The Wolf pilot punched a panic button, which automatically locked onto the two Osprey Xs and fired a naval missile at each. With the close range, neither Osprey had time to evade, and were obliterated, even as the Courier started firing its naval ECM.

The remaining Ospreys in unison began firing their own missiles as they banked to build a formation on the Wolf's tail. The Wolf fired its own naval ECM once, ineffectually, then turned towards the Courier and accelerated in an arc behind it whilst firing chaff. The missiles started hitting the chaff and exploding near the Courier, causing its shields to drop drastically and knocking it off course and out of control.

The single missile that made it past the chaff started closing on the Wolf. Without any chaff left, the Wolf fired its sole remaining naval missile at the incoming one, and used the cover of the resultant explosion to turn and re-enter the battle all guns blazing.

The ageing Wolf hull was custom armed with two side mounted, forward facing, 1mw beam lasers, and a forward central mounted 30mw mining laser. Two of the Ospreys were destroyed at close range head on with a single

mining laser shot each, and the remaining two were dispatched one at a time by the beam lasers from behind, as they struggled to get out of range.

Just as the Courier was regaining control, the Wolf closed on it, targeting the port engine pod. As the engine pod thrusters failed, the commander of the Courier realised his ship was crippled, and quickly engaged the hyperdrive to escape the battle.

Coming to a halt in front of the departure cloud, still with its hull smoking out gasses from damaged piping, the Wolf engaged its hyperspace cloud analyser.

After a few moments, it came to a decision and made a long range scan for the cruiser, then turned towards it and engaged its jump drive.

*

Coming out of jump drive 0.25 AU from the cruiser, the Wolf locked a courier missile onto it, and fired. After checking that the missile was on course and stable, it engaged its jump drive again and headed back to the site of the previous battle.

Locking its hyperdrive onto the destination of the Courier, it jumped out to go and finish it off.

*

Viscount Preston was extremely annoyed at being called to the bridge of the cruiser. He had been fuming in his quarters for days, trying to think of a way to get the plan back on track, with no success.

The destruction of the Lynx had caused him endless troubles in his plans, and not the least of which in his standing in the Empire. He had had to call in every favour owed him, and pulled every string and trick in the book to smooth things out. The Emperor now believed that he had come across the "unit" by chance, and had been secretly transporting it to Facece, so as not to attract the attention of the Federation.

There would still be repercussions for the mission failing, but the fact of the Federation not having it either would be of consolation and noteworthy in his favour. Aside from all that, he now was missing the "unit" which he'd worked so hard to get, and was ready to throttle anyone nearby on the bridge if the reason for his being called out was not a good one.

"Yes, what is it?" he said with a scornful tone.

"Uhh, a couple of things Viscount" replied the cruiser's chief sensor operator "we have not received the scheduled report from our arrival cloud guard wing. Also I am picking up a courier missile incoming, ETA 6 minutes"

"A courier missile? Where from?"

"Unsure Viscount, long range scans show no ships in the vicinity, and the missile is not transmitting anything"

This was highly suspicious. "Send a robotic lifter out to collect it, and run full scans for explosives, it could be a bomb - or worse."

*

The courier missile contained a single message capsule, which not open without his DNA and thumbprint, and not until he had it alone. The capsule contained a message written on plastic sheets in plain, non-descript text. The message read:

"We now have what you want, and are prepared to deal for it. The Federation, the Imperials, and everyone else now think that it has been destroyed, thus leaving you with a large advantage.

Though this will not come cheap, we believe that with your position and contacts, you should be able to secure the following articles for us. We will contact you soon to verify the authenticity of our offer."

The message went on to list Imperial mining technology secrets, ship, weapon, and shield designs, as well as the secret locations of several bases and other high command secrets.

It was hardly surprising. Considering that few pirate organisations had access to jump drives, and the skills to take over a fully equipped Lynx, why not be able to stage a theft so as to look like it didn't happen? The unit itself was

too complex to copy, but something could be made that would appear to be the same until it was used. That, on top of the placing of the distress beacon, did make it seem like a setup.

Preston went through the list and marked off the things he would be able to get a hold of, and crossed out the things he couldn't. He doubted that they would expect to get everything on the list, but used his own judgement as to what they would settle for. Whoever the hell they were.

*

It took Preston a week to gather all the requested information together without drawing attention to him. But contrary to what he was told, not once did he receive any contact from whoever it was that claimed to have the unit.

Then, just as he was about to give it up for a fake, several Imperial Explorers ambushed the Imperial Courier he was travelling in. The transfer was made forcibly, and the ships disappeared, apparently leaving him with the "unit", and leaving with a Prince's ransom in Imperial secrets.

Preston had fully intended to screw them over when they tried to make an agreed transfer, but he guessed they'd expected that and had done the reverse. He didn't put much stock in the "unit" being the real thing.

*

After getting back to base, Preston had his technicians connect the "unit" up to a test apparatus anyway. Anything was worth a try.

It worked.

Good Housekeeping

[Norman Mosser]

'Norman, I've found her!'

Norman climbed down from the bunk where he was dozing and took his place in the second command seat on board his Mark Three.

'Are you sure its her?'

'Fairly sure. I picked up some pretty hefty drive emissions about 8AU away, and this being deep space, its unlikely its passing traffic. So we know where it was about an hour ago.'

Norman and Sam had been searching for the Long Range Cruiser for a week now. They had jumped into the sector of space Norman had ordered the LRC to remain in while he was away to find out that it had been moved. They had backtracked to Riedquat to look up a contact of Norman who had been placed to help the 'right sort of people' find the ship. Shortly before he died, he had given Norman a co-ordinate for a holding point, where expected arrivals could go, and wait until contact was made. They had jumped there and sat on silent running for a few hours until they had picked up the LRC's faint drive emissions.

'Right then, fire up the jumpdrive and we can be there in a couple of hours'

Sam entered a series of commands into the bridge console and hit a chunky, brightly lit engage switch. Both their stomachs lurched as the jumpdrive powered up and began to bend space to shunt the Cobra up to near relativistic speeds.

'So why were they banned? I heard that they were unsafe, but not much else.'

'I'm not sure myself. I heard the word *starquake* at one point when I asked around, but little else.'

'I reckon it was an INRA plot to limit expansion and control commerce by slowing down intersystem communications.'

'Maybe. But you can still pick spares up from antique dealers, and of course, Grey-ops forces use them.'

'Hmmm.'

They soon approached the Long Range Cruiser after making a series of course corrections to compensate for fresh details about the LRC's position. Once they were within five hundred kilometres Norman deftly used the controls to shunt the Cobra so that it had zero relative velocity compared to the LRC. Then, he shut the jumpdrive down and began to accelerate under normal power to the LRC.

The first hint that their approach had been noticed was when a wing of Kraits detached themselves from the hull and began to thrust themselves towards Norman's ship. Then, a channel was opened between the LRC and their ship.

'Identify yourself.'

Norman reached across and pressed the transmit button, 'It's Norman Mosser, your commanding officer. Stand down and prepare a docking bay.'

The reply was contemptuous, 'Yeah right. Norman's dead. D E A D. You must be really damn stupid to pretend to be a dead guy to get on board his old ship. Defense wing, kill him.'

The communications were cut, and the fighters started to accelerate towards them faster.

'Norman. Just a quick question, if you have time.'

'Make it quick, Sam.'

'Just out of interest, how is one Cobra Mark Three going to dock with a Long Range Cruiser that is on alert, is armed with twenty laser turrets and four Small Plasma Accelerators while being chased by six Krait fighters, all of which are armed with Naval Missiles?'

As Sam spoke, the lead Krait fired a pair of Naval Missiles at the Cobra. Norman's thumb slid across the control stick and touched the ECM stud. The outside of the ship was shrouded in an electrical wave which looked good, but did little else. 'Hmm. I tell you what, I'm a little bit busy now. If you still want to know in a few minutes, I'll tell you then. Oh, by the way, put your spacesuit on.'

Norman stared intensely at the scanner and used his free hand to switch the targetting systems onto to the approaching missiles. As they had been launched simultaneously they were flying close together. He armed a missile and fired it at the lead one. Then, he maintained their current course and followed the vapour trail of their own missile right up to the point it got close enough to the target to detonate. The blast destroyed the hostile missiles and earthed against the Cobra's shields. The noise generated in the blast blocked out the scanners of the attacking Kraits which gave Norman enough time to neatly carve one up with the main laser. It blossomed into a pleasing explosion. Their enemies quickly recovered and began returning fire with 4MW beamers.

'Hmm. No hyperdrives then. Should mean that the LRC won't jump out while we're distracted.'

One of the Kraits succeeded in raking the Cobra with laser fire. Norman yanked the stick across and engaged a brief burst of full throttle before turning his nose in and returning the favour. Unfortunately he had to break off his attack as two other Kraits came into range and started to home in on the hull of the Cobra. Kraits four and five launched missiles into the melee from where they were circling and standing off. Norman shifted the Cobra so that a Krait had to dive out of the way to allow a clear path for the missile to reach Norman's ship. Norman pushed his ship into the vacated space and accelerated straight at the missile. It broke across his forward shields and collapsed them. All that stood between them and the LRC was the Krait that had launched the Naval Missile at them. Norman slung one at it in return. It darted away and began running in an effort to avoid the missile that was now closing on its tail. The way was now clear for him to approach the LRC.

An alert informed Norman that the three Kraits that he had been duelling with earlier had now formed up and were on his tail.

He turned a grin on Sam, 'Here's a trick I learned from a Harrier pilot.'

Norman grinned, and instead of turning the Cobra around and facing the attacking Kraits, he engaged full reverse thrust and fired the bottom thruster. The pursuing Kraits overshot and passed beneath the Cobra. He managed to destroy one of them before they broke away in an attempt to circle around and get on his tail again. Instead of pursuing them, Norman merely launched his two remaining missiles at them and flew straight towards the tail of the LRC. 'Do you feel lucky, Sam?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, the bottom of the LRC has a battery of 4MWers and the HPA. The top has a battery of 4MWers and four working SPAs. The problem is, I can't tell which is which from here.'

'Can't you swing out and check?'

'No time.' Norman paused for a moment before choosing to go high and go for the upper surface relative to them. The Cobra crested over the top of the drive exhaust on the LRC to be confronted by a large turret set in the middle of the hull. As they approached, eight smaller turrets began throwing laser fire at them.

What happened next was what an outside observer expected. The Cobra dove down lower until it was almost in contact with the hull of the LRC to try and dip below the reach of the laser turrets. Only a few could fire directly at it. The four that could began making short work of the Cobra's hull. One apparently struck a critical point of the ship and caused a hull breach on the top of the hull. The venting of the internal atmosphere pushed one of the tips of the ship into an outcropping on the LRC. The collision sent the ship into a tumble and it bounced across the hull of the LRC leaving great gouges in the duralium hull before exploding dramatically. The remaining Kraits made their way back to the LRC and docked.

One hour later a blood-soaked, smoke blackened and extremely annoyed Norman Mosser was on the bridge of the LRC, facing down Mary Darkes. An equally dishevelled Sam stood at his side, favouring one leg. They were both armed with Imperial GVG assault weapons although they were currently slung at their sides.

'Mary, this is my ship. Is there any reason that half of the crew that are trying to kill me?'

'Preston came and took over. The person who betrayed you did a deal behind your back and invited him on board. He turned up with a load of goons and took control.'

'Were you able to work out who it was?'

'Yes, Norman. I know exactly who it was who betrayed you.'

There was then a loud thumping on the door to the bridge. It had been locked down when Norman had entered as the ship was still crawling with Preston's people. The moment Norman and Sam had boarded and made themselves known they had triggered a running battle between the newcomers and the faction that was still loyal to Norman. Norman had had to fight to secure key areas of the ship. The bridge had apparently been able to hold out on its own, but the fighting in Engineering had been particularly bloody.

'Mary, open up. Norman's on board. You need extra protection!'

Norman raised an eyebrow.

Mary shrugged, 'Preston's men. They like to keep an eye on me to 'protect me' from would-be assassins. It's more of a scheme to ensure I don't do anything not in tune with Preston's interests.'

'And they didn't come earlier?'

'They did.' Mary gestured to the bodies that lay on the floor. Norman recognised them as some of the people he had considered particularly trustworthy.

'They were in the group that betrayed me?'

'They were.'

'Were they the ringleaders?'

The hammering stopped and the door began to glow as a laser cutter began to eat through it. 'They weren't. Norman, this is a bad time. Can we have this discussion after we dispatch the people coming to kill us?'

Norman nodded at Sam and they unshipped the GVGs and faced the door. He turned and addressed the people on the bridge. 'If any of you have guns, it would be a good idea for you to assist us.'

A shot rang out and Norman spun around and dropped to the ground. Sam turned, and for a moment after seeing the gun in Mary's hand thought she had shot him. Then he saw the small red hole in her forehead, and the hairless doppelganger of Norman with a laser pistol gripped in its fist. Then all hell broke loose.

The door clanged to the ground and a group of crewmembers burst in armed with assault lasers, then all the bridge crew drew guns and started firing at exactly where Norman and Sam were. Norman had already brought his GVG to his shoulder and was firing on full auto at the bridge crew, and Sam dove to the side, and once he had brought his GVG to bear started firing at the newcomers.

Sam's left arm went numb and flopped uselessly after a well-aimed bolt took a chunk of flesh out of it, and he was certain that he saw Norman take a hit full in the chest but he seemed to shrug it off and keep on shooting. Seconds later the gunfight was over. The only survivors were Norman, Sam and the clone. The clone was covered in blood, but still had a blank look on his face that made Sam shudder. Norman coughed wetly and stood unsteadily.

'Bastards got me in the chest didn't they?'

He limped over to where Mary's corpse lay and looked sadly at it.

'So it was you was it? Makes sense I suppose. Lucky for me you used one of my clones. I must have forgotten to tell you that I'd given them a low-level impression to be totally loyal to me. Your loss, huh?'

Norman coughed a wry laugh and passed out.

Dinner Guest

[Commander Red Ravens]

Marcus visited Norman in his sickbed. It was actually a sumptuously appointed stateroom, but Norman was still injured and recuperating amid the ermine-covered teddy bears nestled alongside the medical monitors.. The gunfight on the bridge that had claimed Mary Darkes as well as a majority of the other disloyal crew had taken its toll on Norman.

He had no idea why he'd allowed Marcus to come onto the ship and even less idea why he'd let the Lifter-pilot of a man live. Marcus had come alone in an Osprey, without his command ship or his guards.

"My dear Norman, I must apologise to you for this dreadful misunderstanding."

Norman looked up. Despite the sedation he could smell the bullshit in the air. The tall, regal figure of Marcus was always inspiring and convincing, but for once Norman found it aggravating rather than amusing.

"Misunderstanding? You took over my ship and managed to turn my 2IC to your cause. You then told them all I was dead and that if I came back I'd be an Imperial Clone sent to kill them! I'd call that more than a sodding misunderstanding."

Marcus' brow wrinkled and his expression became pained.

"All true, of course, but let's keep to the *important* facts, shall we?"

Norman gestured weakly towards the heavily armed guard standing by the door.

"Any reason I shouldn't have you brutally and painfully killed just for that remark?"

Marcus shrugged gracefully. He was an aristocrat in the true sense of the word, and if Norman hadn't seen him fight in that bar brawl on Lave, he would have thought him to be a soft bastard. But Marcus had popped a man's eye out of its socket and thrown a security guard out a first floor window. He'd been a young buck, then, but had matured far more into a warrior prince rather than a palace noble.

"Because you've got too much to gain by keeping me alive."

"Keep talking." Norman said heavily. He surreptitiously manipulated the remote control for the medication, backing off on the sedative. He needed to think clearly. The pain would be worth it, he hoped.

"I wasn't trying to cut you out of the deal, merely make sure that the plan went ahead. If the plan is successful, you'll have a working Huge Particle Accelerator equipped ship and be a hero within the Empire. Otherwise all you've got is two thousand tons of useless Federal Weapons technology and even more people out looking for you than usual. My agents have secured the missing unit. It's only a short timespan away. YOU are only a short timespan away from having the most devastating energy weapon in known space."

Norman winced as the sedatives began to wear off. He hadn't decided whether he should kill Marcus yet. On the one hand, the sonofabitch had almost gotten *him* killed. On the other hand...

Norman had always had a nagging feeling that his greed was a bigger motivating force than his self-preservation. The massive potential for blackmail, piracy and general mayhem that a HPA represented was almost too good a chance to be passed up. Almost.

"What guarantees have I got?" he grated.

"My sense of honour for one." Marcus' smile twisted, "However, I know that's hardly enough. How about a hostage?"

"Who?" Norman was sceptical. As far as he knew, the only thing Marcus cared about apart from himself was the Empire itself, to which he seemed quite unnaturally attached.

"Me." Marcus knelt, to place himself at eye level with Norman. The guard shuffled nervously and brought his weapon up to bring Marcus to within his range of fire. There had been enough firefights during the past couple of days to make everyone edgy. "I will be on the bridge - under a gun if necessary - for every second of the operation. Will that be sufficient guarantee?"

Norman cursed under his breath. The oily bastard had come up with something ironclad. He lurched forward off the bed and grabbed Marcus by the lapel, bringing his face close.

“Yes you pompous, treacherous git. Yes. But if you or any of your people even twitch funny I’ll strap you to an NN500 and fire you into the nearest asteroid.” Exhausted, Norman fell back on the bed and rammmed the sedative button up to the highest non-fatal level. He was in agony. Marcus’ face began to swim in his vision as the drugs took effect. From a great distance, he thought he heard Marcus speak.

“Destiny is calling, Norman. I’m glad you answered it.”

Norman lost consciousness.

Imperial Measures

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

The amphitheatre was filled with journalists, clutching personal datapads and cameras. The high-vaulting columns surrounding it seemed to stretch out to the stars, tapering off into sharp points. Despite the crowded nature of the area, there were still two distinct groups of journalists within the room. The smaller one was composed of Federal and Alliance journalists who were the official correspondents on Palace affairs. They were treated with disdain, if not outright hostility by the majority of Imperial journalists. Their accounts were considered biased and totally lacking in the proper respect for Imperial majesty.

The Palace was considered a relatively dull beat by most of the non-Imperials. Investigative journalism got you killed more often than not, and the endless stream of self-serving press releases by popinjay Imperial spokespeople tended to dull even the keenest interest in current affairs.

Today looked like it might be more interesting though.

Lleyton Briggs was the correspondent for the Mars Post, and he politely elbowed his way past one of his colleagues to get to a better viewpoint on the Imperial drivel he was about to hear. .

"Sorry sport!" he said affably, as the elderly woman crashed to the ground. He fought his way to where his mate Phyllis from the Trojan Observer was valiantly holding off the efforts of people trying to push her off the step she'd secured for herself. He moved in next to her, and almost copped a knee to the nether regions.

"Lleyton! Shit, sorry! Can you give us a hand here?"

Together they bought themselves some breathing space, with barely a drop of blood spilt. Except for the human icicle representing the Facece Star. His nose just got in the way.

"You reckon the Crown Prince..." Lleyton began.

"His response to the narcotics shortage, yep. No doubt."

Lleyton had been rather proud of the copy he'd written the previous week, one of the 'speculation is growing' breed, about how the Crown Prince was actually being called on to fulfil one of his honorary positions. 'The Lord of The Imperial Courts of Pleasure'.

The Empire hadn't had a narcotics shortage for a good few centuries now, and it was getting to the stage that it was actually starting to upset civil order. Mums and dads weren't able to afford drugs anymore and there was an increase in teenage delinquency and domestic violence. Achenar itself was still more than self-sufficient, but the provinces were beginning to suffer.

And now the vain and self-centred Crown Prince was actually being required to do something. Lleyton almost felt sorry for the young man. The carnival was over and he actually had to drag himself from the endless cavalcade of drugs, sex and self-gratification to work at what he was there to do. Almost sorry for him, at any rate.

Vequess was still bogged down in negotiations and it would be at least another three months before the station at Olcanze was operational again. What quick-fix (pun intended) did the Prince have in store ?

There was movement at the far end of the amphitheatre and the crowd pulsed with new energy. Lleyton and Phyllis fought to keep their feet. Journalists *had* died in the stampede before and statistically, Federation and Alliance journalists were far more likely to be the recipients of an 'errant' blow to the head. The spokesperson for the Crown Prince was a former Miss Empire and had the most perfect teeth that Lleyton had ever seen. She was well trained, well dressed, well made up and well coiffed. She cut an impressive figure on the dais. The outfit was sumptuous, figure hugging and low-cut. All of which were obviously vital to her role in conveying the Prince's will. With a highly theatrical flourish, she unfurled a scroll of wood pulp (!) on which the Crown Prince had allegedly scrawled his proclamation.

"I bear here a missive from His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince, the Heir to the Glorious Heritage of the Stars, Inheritor of the Ten Terrible Duties, Knight-General of the..." and on it went for a while. Lleyton knew it off by heart by now, and mentally tuned out, only tuning back as the third minute approached. "... Patron of the Imperial Dreamware Studios and Lord of the Imperial Courts of Pleasure." the spokeswoman took a big breath, as she looked a little blue from lack of oxygen. "His Imperial Highness has noted with distress the plight of his subjects, who through a tragic series of circumstances have been unable to procure the necessary pharmaceuticals for daily life. His Imperial Highness hears their calls and will come to their aid. In two weeks hence, a massive convoy of

cargo ships will depart from Fort Donalds orbital city above Capitol to bring relief to the affected systems. Elements of the Third, Eighth and Ninth Protectorates will accompany the convoy to safeguard the desperately needed supplies. A complete itinerary will be made available shortly. The supplies will be drawn from both Imperial storehouses in Achenar and private stocks," there was a rumble in the audience at this, as many of the journalists worked for rich proprietors with stocks that would possibly be requisitioned. "and may I remind you that profiteering during such an Empire-wide crisis WILL be considered treason." the rumbling stopped suddenly. "In his wisdom, the Crown Prince has realised that this is the only way to ensure that his subjects will be aided will be to accompany the convoy himself to the afflicted worlds."

The room was suddenly so quiet that you could hear electrons orbiting. The Crown Prince's personal command of the fleet was almost unprecedented. No member of the Imperial Family had *directly* commanded a fleet since... well, not in living memory. The risk of losing the Heir to the Imperial throne was considered too ghastly to contemplate.

"The Crown Prince feels that His Highness' presence is vital. That's all we've got at the moment, we'll be having another press conference probably tomorrow."

And with that, the gorgeous creature turned on her unbelievably high heels and stalked out of sight. The room burst into applause. In itself this wasn't unusual. The Imperial Press Corps did this after every press conference. What was unusual was that this time there was the underlying hum of sincere approval to it.

Lleyton looked over to Phyllis, whose expression held a mixture of bafflement and grudging admiration. Lleyton was almost impressed, himself. It was a brilliant PR coup, and the Royal Tour of Mercy visiting the major population centres (regardless of whether they were actually suffering a lack of narcotics) would go an immense way to repairing the Crown Prince's reputation. Becoming a new populist folk hero wasn't out of the question, either. It was brilliant from a variety of angles, and couldn't possibly be the unimaginative Prince's idea. Lleyton wondered who'd put the idea into his head.

*

Marcus held the unit aloft, the focus of every eye.

"This holds the beginning of a new era for the Empire, one in which honour will return to the palaces of the mighty, and the undeserving will be forced to relinquish ill-gotten gains from generations of iniquity."

The audience were a mix - from Imperial dandies to leather-clad bounty hunters, to selected members of Norman's own staff. He didn't expect too many to convert to the cause at this late stage, but it was important to keep them in the loop. He'd brought them across to the main audience chamber on his Boa Battleship. It was the best appointed room on the ship, a cut above his own sparse cabin or the ship's cramped bridge. He preferred it that way, with the machinery of power unseen by those who thought they exercised it.

"With one strong blow, we will crack the shell of rust that has enclosed the shining blade of justice and take our rightful places as the wielders of that sword."

All highly purple prose, and Marcus could see that they were impressed. The Imperial nobility had been fed such lines with mother's milk and a warm, familiar, self-satisfied glow had spread across their features.

Norman's staff hadn't been brought up in the same traditions, but some had obviously been impressed, their eyes glazing over most satisfactorily. However, to Marcus' annoyance, Norman Mosser was looking on with an expression of perfectly controlled neutrality, totally unswayed by his oratory. He'd returned to his ship with rather a bang, killing most of the guard that Marcus had left and apparently shooting Mary Darkes into the bargain. A pity. He'd liked her ambition.

The Bounty Hunters who had flocked to Marcus' cause were affected least of all. Most seemed genuinely bored, while a few had the cynical, amused expression of people who'd heard it all before.

"Our course is now set. Some of you I have only met recently. Others have been with me from the beginning, from the very genesis of this great undertaking. All of you are as my brethren and, I would give my blood for any one of you."

Marcus handed the unit over to Dreyfus, standing at his right hand, as always.

"Go now, and take your positions. Fortune awaits us. Power is within reach."

The meeting broke up. Marcus turned to Dreyfus, who was unsmilingly scanning the audience.

"Nervous, my friend?"

"Cautious." Dreyfus qualified, "If we execute correctly, I can't see us being stopped. But I'm pessimistic about probability favouring us."

"Where's Preston?" Marcus asked. "I know he delivered you here, didn't he stay?"

"That man is obsessed!" Dreyfus grumbled. "He was injured during the recovery of the unit and he's determined to revenge himself on the bounty hunter who handed the unit over."

"A problem?" Marcus asked. He didn't want to terminate Preston, but certainly wouldn't hesitate if Preston threatened the plan.

"I don't think so." Dreyfus gave a tired grin. "I sent him off to patrol the borders of the target system. If the bounty hunters appear, he'll pounce. But, of course, they don't have any idea of what the target system is, so Preston will just be cooling his heels."

"Excellent! Go over and install the unit. I'll join you on Mosser's ship presently. We'll have to hurry if we're going to intercept the target ship. By the way, is that a new ship suit?"

Dreyfus absently stroked his repaired abdomen. The self-repair had taken hours in his stateroom.

"Yes. The old one got a little worn. Besides, I needed something new. There's your coronation to consider." Marcus laughed warmly.

"That's years away!" he punched Dreyfus playfully in the arm. "We have plenty of time to consider the height of fashion! Off with you!"

Dreyfus smiled and left for the docking bay. He hated to admit it, but in retrospect he agreed with Preston that they should have silenced the bounty hunters. Equations were that much simpler when there were fewer variables. The bounty hunters had proved resourceful. He suddenly didn't regret sending Preston off on patrol. You could never have too many fail-safes.

Ambition.

It was always ambition that did it mused Norman as he walked slowly through the dim corridors of the Long Range Cruiser with Sam walking by his side. Norman wheezed as he walked and considered the great effort he had to put into attending Marcus' speech. He had to attend because it wasn't really expected of him, thus making it essential. Both the Imperials and the dubious independents he was associating with at the moment had a low tolerance for weakness, and if they realised how badly he had been injured in the fire fight, it could jeopardise his command. He had taken a lot of drugs to ensure he attended and pull off the face of unimpressed passivity that he needed to keep his crew happy. They wanted a leader who wasn't anyone's toy, even a powerful Imperial like Marcus.

Marcus though. Norman's eyes hadn't glazed over like the others but he had listened to what was being said, and watched the body language and tried to get the measure of the man. Marcus had ambition and drive. If Norman was given one shot to choose a successor to the current Emperor, he would probably use it to kill the heir-apparent and elevate Marcus. The heir was fat and decadent along with a large portion of the Imperial nobility. If he got the throne Norman could envisage the Empire becoming softer and faltering. Marcus on the other hand. He was focus, he had drive and ambition. Norman grudgingly admitted that if anyone could pull this plan off, it would be Marcus. With his help of course.

Norman and Sam paused at a door which was locked and guarded by two crew. They nodded to Norman and he placed his palm against a reader which ran a biometric check before unlocking the portal. Norman and Sam then entered and the door closed slickly behind them.

The open space was huge and almost cathedral-like. They stood on a service gantry high above the floor of the main and largest hold of the LRC. It had been adapted to contain the massive bulk of the huge plasma accelerator and the mechanism for the equally huge turret mount. Service lights hanging off key parts of the weapon merely accentuated it's size and dormant might. At the opposite end of the main coil to the emitter and turret mechanism, nestling amongst the wiring, the coolant systems and the conduits was a small room accessible from the floor of the bay by a ladder. It was in there that the slot to mount the initiator was located. Empty of course. Marcus didn't trust him with the initiator just yet.

Norman shivered and motioned to Sam to escort him back to his stateroom. Now though, he needed rest.

Galactic News ed. 7.110

[Frontier News]

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HEADLINES:
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Huge Plasma Accelerator 'stolen' - galactic hunt for thieves
Navy calls for more funding
Winston family in another scandal

HPA stolen

The Federation admitted earlier today that a previously secret defence project to build the largest plasma accelerator known to sentient beings had been stolen. Suspicions were aroused after it was discovered that the Federation had been offering bounty hunters huge amounts of money for capturing the notorious Norman Mosser, who is said to be in possession of the stolen device. The Federation claims that the erstwhile Imperial assassin has a Long Range Cruiser, and had the weapon stolen to equip the LRC.

A Federation spokesbeing told journalists, "The weapon is gone, and there is good evidence that Mosser has it. Not only are we asking for the help of bounty hunters, but we are also sending the Federation Navy after this wanted criminal. Even if he manages to activate the pattern replicator, which is protected by a strong cryptographic key, the Navy will take him down. We will consider lessening the punishment if he returns our property immediately".

ALLIANCE JOINT NAVY CALLS FOR MORE FUNDING

The leadership of the AJN claims that AJN Central is not providing enough funds to maintain an effective defence. The need to replace the ageing "Valiant" class battleships has long been at the head of the siren call for more money, and it's not surprising that as the budget talks come up, it's once again at the top of the agenda. The Navy says it's becoming more urgent as the entire fleet has needed to be called into port at least twice in the last year to pay attention to new sources of fatigue cracking. "These ships were originally long-range cruisers and not designed to have the mass of equipment and power they are currently fitted with. The ageing spaceframes cannot take it any more," said Adm. Charles Albright, who currently oversees Valiant operations. "We need to hurry up their replacement with purpose-built Victor class ships to ensure we've got a viable battle force."

Of course, the fact that Albright's brother is a director of Thorneycroft's in Titican, which is the prime contractor for Victor-class battleships, has no bearing on the call to replace the fleet.

WINSTON FAMILY IN DISGRACE - YET AGAIN

Calls for James Winston's resignation as Commander in Chief of Training Operations (Dublin Citadel, Gateway) are once again in full-swing. It turns out that his nephew is gaining increasing notoriety - normally, nothing to do with Adm. Winston, but this time it appears that a close friend of James Winston sprung his nephew out of jail whilst he was awaiting trial for an assassination carried out in the system. Police in Zaonce have discovered that Pam Gilmour, partner and a long-time friend of Adm. Winston was responsible for the jailbreak. Unfortunately for Gilmour, Mack Winston then proceeded to steal her ship and disappear. Police suspect Mack Winston is involved in an identity-theft gang, and used his insider knowledge to effectively vanish. Police are hunting both Gilmour and Mack Winston.

"It's obvious that Adm. Winston was at least partially responsible for this flouting of the law," said Police Chief Davey of Zaonce. "He has no place in the upper echelons of the AJN".

The Alliance is conducting its own investigation of Adm. James Winston, but has not suspended him from duty. "We take these allegations very seriously," an AJN spokesbeing told The News, "but in light of what Admiral Winston has done for the Alliance, we can hardly punish him unless we can prove that he was involved."

Adm. Winston was not available for comment.

Found Wanting and Tested

[Commander Red Ravens]

Well that was it. We'd failed. We'd followed orders and returned the unit. We'd gotten out alive. They had a working HPA. We'd failed.

Bec was the only one who seemed cheerful. Her brief flirtation with responsibility had ended and she could resume the normal rounds of bounty hunting and dodgy contracts. She potted around the cabin, resuming target practice with her spud gun on the unfortunate robot and planning what we'd do with the 50,000 credits.

"Maybe we should upgrade to something with a bit more combat grunt than a Constrictor. Maybe a Harris fighter or an Asp. We'd probably be scrimping and saving a while to get it outfitted the way we want, but we'd at least have the room to do some trading on the side rather than..."

Catherine and I sat at our stations brooding. The thoughts of Preston and friends having a fully operational HPA was a horrifying one. We had no idea what brain bubbles had caused the AJNIB to order us to turn it over to them. I was also a little disturbed by Dreyfus. The urbane little man seemed to be in a different league to Preston. Androids that can decapitate a Clone agent with their bare hands tend to be thin on the ground.

"... and then lead a Pirate attack on the Eta Cass Naval Base."

I hurriedly tuned back in.

"What?" I said. Bec laughed at having baited me, then came over to give me a hug.

"You're terrible when you sulk, Red. We're out of danger now. We can just go back to where we were before. We're not the sheriff of the universe, you know. We don't NEED to be. I'm sure Catherine's bosses know what they're doing. Everything will be fine, Red."

I didn't believe her. I had the terrible feeling we'd done the wrong thing. We'd taken the only option available under the circumstances, and it had turned out to be the wrong one. Catherine mirrored my views. She'd been the good little agent and done everything her masters had ordered. Yet her expression had the sad feeling of someone who's just seen something bad happen. Bec went into the spare cabin and started noisily stalking the robot.

"So you going back to George Lucas?" I asked Catherine.

"Probably not. Too many questions." Catherine swivelled on her chair.

"Your husband?" I asked. We hadn't had too many personal conversations. All this cheating death robbed you of wanting to make small talk.

Catherine shrugged. "I'll ask him to come away with me to my next posting. I'm not allowed to tell him it's my next posting. As far as he's concerned, it'll be a job offer in a different system and a different station. I don't even know if he'll come. I don't know whether I would, if I were in his position."

"You sure you want to stay in the job?" I asked. "What's the attraction to Intelligence work?"

"The chance to do some good. Excuse me."

I could see I'd upset her, so I let her go. So I was alone in the cabin when the Comm sprang into life. A transmission was reaching us from a ship in the vicinity, though as far as I could see it was still outside the long range scanners. There was only audio, and I flipped open the channel. "This is DE-013, go ahead."

"Ravens, this is Winston. I've only just tracked you down... what's your status?"

I straightened in my seat. Our boss had come back to check up on us. "Oh, pretty good." I said, "We followed the orders and turned over the unit. They tried to kill me, but what the hell, I'm still alive and 50K richer than I was before -"

I was cut off by one of the foulest streams of invective I have ever heard from a sentient being. I've never heard so many different words for simple anatomical structures before... and as for the way they were being combined, WELL! Bec and Catherine heard the din from the main cabin and came in to marvel. The Long Range Scanner bleeped into life. A yellow return that without doubt was Winston. It was accelerating towards us at a good clip. It didn't exactly look like someone running over to say hello and give us a big sloppy kiss.

"... and so did your dung-swimming ancestors. You better have a good explanation... where's Beaumont?"

"Here sir." Catherine said timidly.

"Why did you let this happen?"

Catherine looked helplessly at us. "We didn't LET it happen, sir, we received very clear orders."

"*What?*"

"Using the clearance code 'Breadbin', which means either you or Gateway HQ. I reconfirmed the order, because it was so unbelievable..."

Winston sighed. After the violence of his previous outburst, it was a strangely plaintive sound. On the scanner, the yellow blip stopped accelerating.

"Sir, I'm sorry if the order was a forgery. I used every authenticity test that I have on the orders. I sent them all the information we'd collected and we received exactly the same orders. Have the plotters cracked our encryption codes?" Catherine spoke carefully, not wanting to provoke another tirade.

"No. You were right. The orders *were* from Gateway HQ. The AJNIB knows exactly what's going on. "

Bec decided it was time to speak up. "If they know what's going on, then there's a good reason we had to hand the unit over to Preston, right?"

Winston gave short laugh. "The very worst of reasons. They suspect what's going to happen, and have decided that it serves the Alliance better if it goes ahead. The same probably applies to the Federation, hence they haven't been chasing their stolen HPA."

I was slightly horrified by this. The HPA was a weapon of mass destruction, a killer of many thousands every time it was used. It wasn't a thing used for piracy, it was an tool of chaos. The fact that liberal democracies like the Federation and Alliance were actually *comfortable* with that being used by people like Preston and friends was indescribably awful.

"So what *is* going to happen?" I asked. "We've worked out it has to do with Vequess and Olcanze and the flow of arcotics within the Empire. We had a Clone agent on our case for a while because HE thought that we were involved in Vequess."

Winston paused a moment before replying. I could almost see him organising his thoughts behind the controls of the Asp. "I hadn't noticed the narcotics aspect, but the plot seems to be flowing from a group within the Empire seeking to give themselves a leg-up. Power within the Empire changes hands over generations, not over one lifetime. This group seems unwilling to wait." Winston said dryly. "There's an organising force behind them, which seems to be coordinating a diverse group of forces quite successfully. Usually, they get called 'The Heir' or even 'M'. Olcanze and Vequess prove that he or she's ruthless and sitting squat on that very thin border between genius and insanity. I'd assume it involves civil war or mass disruption at the very least. "

"The heir to what?" Bec asked curiously.

"I'm not sure. There are ten or twelve major posts in the Empire that are hereditary and open to whoever is in the line of succession."

"Yes, but why not hire an assassin? Isn't using the HPA for family planning somewhat like using an Imperial Courier to put down a sick dog?" I observed tartly. It didn't feel like an act of individual aggrandisement. The size of individual egos in the Empire was a standing joke within democratic space, but it would take Psychiatric Asylum levels of megalomania to go to these extremes for personal gain. I didn't doubt that people like Preston were into it for selfish reasons, but Dreyfus had almost behaved like it was a sacred, solemn duty.

"So what do we do now?" Bec said, with the slightest hint of resentment in her voice. The freedom that she'd coveted seemed to be slipping away from her even as she tasted it. "They *have* the HPA now... there's nothing we can do."

"Do you have *any* leads?" Winston asked, more in hope than anything else. There was a moment of disconsolate silence. "Well then..." Winston began, in rather solemn tones.

"No, wait!" I said. "I've got Preston's personal datapad." I'd almost forgotten about my casual piece of larceny.

"Do you think it will have anything worthwhile on it? What do you think, Agent Beaumont?"

I passed the datapad over to her. It was an expensive model, with all the bells and whistles, but the basic design of datapads hasn't really changed in decades. She turned it over in her hands, giving it her full professional attention. "Depends sir. I'll have to crack whatever encryption it has and then have a look. Preston didn't strike me as the most discreet plotter you could ask for. It might take some time is the only thing. Any idea on the timeline, sir?"

Winston sighed. "Pick a timeframe, then halve it. The amount of frenzy that's been going on over this unit indicates that they're working to a clock. Whatever the target is that they want to hit with the HPA, it seems to have a deadline of some sort after which the strike will become ineffective. I'm going to try and beat some sense into the AJNIB top brass, to get some more support. You keep trying to track down the target. There's no real defence against a HPA, but hopefully we will at least be able to minimise loss of life. Winston out." The yellow return on the scanner was replaced with the spreading cloud of gas which indicated an entry into witchspace.

We had a quiet moment in the cabin which was broken by a soft but quite vicious expletive from Bec. I looked at my co-pilot with some concern. "What's wrong, Bec?"

Bec turned to me and I saw there were tears of anger and frustration on her face.

"I'm so sick of this. I'm just so sick of all of this shit. I'm sick of being other people's errand-girl. I'm sick of having people trying to kill us just because you had to play the hero and go into that damn wrecked Harris. I'm sick of you and this bitch acting like goddamn space scouts, dib dib dib!" Bec held up her fingers sarcastically. "I don't give a damn which bunch of murderous idiots has whatever superweapon. I just want to go back to the way it was before. Just you and me and bounty hunting."

Catherine unwisely spoke up. "We do have a duty to prevent -"

"Shut up!" Bec snarled, "I've had duties and honour and personal sacrifice my entire bloody life. I was raised to be that. To be someone that I'm not, to be a person I hate. I escaped that when I joined up with Red. Now I've got you coming here and turning my life back into another huge mass of fucking duty. Well screw that! I resign!" Bec stormed off into the spare cabin and slammed the door. The tiny target practice robot was unfortunately caught in Bec's anger and swept to its doom in between the door and doorframe. Little gears pinwheeled across the floor, spinning in ever decreasing circles until they came to rest.

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"Well, that was bracing." Marcus said breathlessly. The rest of the bridge looked somewhat stunned. They'd just tested out the HPA and everyone had been quietly stunned. Even Norman Mosser, hardened criminal that he was, looked somewhat nonplussed. Norman released the trigger mechanism and shook his head slowly. This was what he'd joined the plot for, and by God it looked to be worth it.

"How did it go?" he asked the slack-jawed weapons officer. The man visibly pulled himself together and examined the readouts.

"A couple of circuits blew out, sir. The shield generator is functioning at a reduced capacity, but we can probably fix that next time we... fire... it..."

"How long would the capacitors take to recharge?" Marcus asked. The weapons officer looked resentfully at Marcus and refused to answer.

"How long, Sam?" Mosser repeated wearily. He admired loyalty (even more than usual, after the past couple of weeks), but they were on the same side now. At least temporarily.

"Another twelve minutes. We can probably shorten that to maybe seven or six minutes after the next firing."

Marcus nodded and tapped his communicator.

"Dreyfus, the test was successful, you can remove the pattern replicator."

Norman directed a sour look at that remark. Marcus was being extra cautious at this late stage, which he resented. They now had the most powerful single weapon known to humanity, and Marcus was still treating it like a vintage Eagle Mk I, insisting on the maximum safeguards and limiting the testing to this one (admittedly necessary) display. It was aggravating.

"Still don't trust me? Whatever happened to the 'All of you are my brethren' bit?"

"Cain and Abel were brothers, you know."

"What?" The reference was lost on Norman. For a man of the future, Marcus was very caught up on the language of the past.

"We have no need to fight., Norman. Once this mission is complete, our ways will part, if you wish. Or you can remain with me, and be a valued member of my court." Marcus smiled and gestured expansively.

"Save it, 'Heir'. Once we complete the mission we can discuss the future. Until then, I'm going to stay obsessed with the present. It's kept me alive, except in a few instances." Norman grinned. He couldn't remember how many clones he'd been through so far.

"As you wish. I will retire to my stateroom now. Please notify me when we are about to jump again." Marcus rose from his seat and left the room. With annoyance, Norman noted that the eyes of several of his crew were following Marcus' exit admiringly. The handsome and charismatic Heir had a corrupting influence on a lot of people who should know better. He'd have to watch that. He trusted few of his crew at the best of times, and these were hardly the best of times.

"Tactical!" he half-shouted.

"Sir!" the woman manning the scanners shot bolt upright, on her feet before she knew what she was doing. Norman gave her a semi-reassuring smile. He didn't mind being feared, but it was unwise to appear the ogre while there was such an obvious alternate leader on the ship.

"What's left of the target?"

"Almost nothing, sir. The only significant debris is a couple of hundred cargo canisters and a small fragment of bulkhead. The canisters appear to contain..." The tactical officer's voice remained level and steady. Norman advised her professionalism. Several of the bridge crew had been visibly affected by the test firing. It was like unleashing a small sun.

"I know what they contain. Helm!"

"Sir!"

"Set a course for the station listed on the itinerary."

"Sir!"

The tactical officer looked quizzically at her captain. "Sir, we could cargo scoop most of the canisters within a couple of hours. They'd be worth quite a lot, and we DO have the room..."

"Are you the captain? Did you hear what I just said?" Norman roared. The officer cringed. The ogre was back. "Damn the canisters. Leave them to the vultures. We have a schedule. Back to your station!" Red-faced, the woman sat back down. Norman breathed heavily. The wounds he'd suffered retaking the ship couldn't be carried forever. The medic had informed him that he'd need to go under the knife. Surgery would leave Marcus in command, so Norman just had to grit his teeth and bear it until he could get that damned pretender off his ship. Suffering may be courage in some people's eyes, but weakness was nothing but death.

And the HPA was power. Norman couldn't forget that. He fingered the trigger mechanism and the pain began to recede. With unfettered access to the weapon, Norman would never be weak again. The only weak ones would be everyone else in the universe. Including Marcus. Convulsively, Norman mashed the trigger. "Firing Sequence Not Initiated. Pattern Replicator Absent or Unformatted. Please Check Replicator and Try Again."

The cool computer voice drowned out Norman's weak laughter.

Pair of Aces

[Norman Mosser]

It felt like there were a thousand needles pressing into his head. Image after image after image flashed before his eyes even when he screwed them tightly shut. A cacophony of noise burst into his mind, leaving him completely disorientated. He opened his mouth and let loose an animalistic shriek, straight from the primitive primeval depths of his primate mind.

Then, as rapidly as it had begun, the sensation ended. Norman opened his eyes, taking long gasping breaths. Then, as his vision cleared, he realised that he was breathing freely and easily, with none of the difficulty that had plagued him these past few days. He focussed on the shipsuit of someone standing close to him and undoing a chin strap and lifting a bulky helmet off his head. With an effort, Norman focussed his eyes and recognised the person as one of the medical techs from the LRC's sickbay.

'Don't worry, you'll be alright in a little while. Disorientation is normal, especially when overwriting.'

Norman glanced over at a chair nearby. He was slumped in it unconscious while another medic removed a similar helmet from his head. Then he remembered. He had decided that his injuries were too debilitating to let him remain in command. His weakness had made him irritable and less sure of himself. And there wasn't enough time to participate in a normal healing process. So, he had tracked the clone down, sloped off to the medlab with him and imprinted it - himself with his personality. It explained the flashes of images, and the sensation of a thousand needles (actually one thousand and twenty four)

'Norman?'

Norman turned to look at the chief medical officer quizzically.

'You, er, he is a lot more resilient than people give him, er you credit for. I'm surprised that he's still alive. His cardiopulmonary system has collapsed, but the implants are keeping his brain alive. I reckon we can have him back on his feet in a fortnight or so.'

A group of medics lifted Norman's morbid form and bore it into one of the intensive care pods. Norman shivered as a medic gave him a mild stimulant injection and then spoke. 'Don't let Marcus or any of that lot know I'm in there. Shave my, er his head and pretend that I've had to put the clone on ice or something.'

The medic nodded, 'Norman, you do realise that in all cases where the host has survived the impressing process, both parties usually end up suffering a catastrophic identity crisis.'

'I know the risks,' Norman snapped impatiently. 'Now get me a shipsuit and a coffee. I have a ship to run.'

After dressing and drinking a large mug of strong coffee, Norman rose and made his way to his stateroom. By the time he got back there, his trademark cocky grin and swagger that had been absent in the past days was back. For the first time in a long while, he felt good.

*

Marcus sat at his desk in the stateroom and reread the message that had appeared in his inbox a few scant minutes ago.

>Marcus,

I've taken a contract out on your head. Before you send one of your burly android lackeys to rip my arms off (which will merely inconvenience me at best) hear me out. Being the best in the business, if someone wants a job done well, they usually approach me first. In this case, the someone is our beloved Emperor's son. I don't know whether it is because he got wind of the scheme or whether it is because he just decided you were a threat, but he asked me to hunt you down and kill you. I've accepted so that he doesn't hire anyone else to do the job, and thus have them stumble on our little, insignificant Machiavellian scheme...

Norman<

Marcus spent a few minutes considering the message before an aide approached him, and reminded him that dinner was now being served in the forward galley.

*

Sprink Masterson juggled the joystick of his Gyr as he maintained the tight formation that the group of pirate ships was flying in. The boss had called all of his forces in when an LRC with an escort entered the system that the pirates were based in. Some bulk freighter had obviously tried to shave some time and cost off a delivery schedule by cutting across an uninhabited system. They had waited until a number of large ships had left the group to prospect for fuel at one of the system's gas giants. Thankfully, at least half of the fighter escorts had joined them, leaving the LRC vulnerable to a massed attack by the pirate fighters.

In addition to at least thirty fighters, the group also was comprised of six Lanners with 20MWers, three Couriers with the same and the boss' Imperial Explorer that he claimed he had nicked from an Imperial shipyard. The latter was packing an SPA. More than enough for the task at hand.

Now, the plan was pulling off beautifully. The fighters went in first and easily drew away the Kraits that were defending the LRC, herding them so that they were not in a position to assist when the larger ships moved in to menace the LRC. The boss didn't want to destroy the ship, merely make it surrender so they could board it and have the cargo and any women.

The Lanners and the Couriers closed in on the ship and began to dance around the perimeter, occasionally ducking in within range to flick a burst of laser fire at the hull. They were emboldened by the paltry defences - only measly 4MW beamers and when the boss' Explorer arrived, they closed in as one. Sprink received the Boss' transmission on his own comm set, as did everyone else in the vicinity.

'Surrender or die. We have you outn-'

Then, the Imperial Explorer just disappeared. There had been a flash of white and so much white noise that the Gyr's scanner had shut down in protest. When the scan image cleared again, the Explorer just was not there. No debris, nothing, just an echo of radioactive noise. Then it happened again and one of the Couriers disappeared. Twice more the same thing happened and twice more did craft cease to exist. Then the remaining attackers dove to place themselves the other side of the LRC. The whiteness flashed once more, this time less powerfully, and Sprink's scanner showed an Imperial Courier spinning out of control, missing an engine nacelle. The 4MWers spoke and neatly gutted the remains of the craft. The remaining attackers had now made their way round to the other side of the LRC. Which was when the SPAs started firing. The ships that had headed to the gas giant now came back into range, and neatly ground the remaining attackers against the millstone that was the LRC.

Sprink suddenly felt very alone. His was the only pirate ship left. Numbed by shock he fumbled to set up a mis-jump to take him out of the system. He only noticed the NN500 streaking towards his ship when the proximity alert went off. By which time, it was too late.

Your sensitive mind notes a wrongness in the universe...

[Patrol #347]

"What the fuck was that?" exclaimed Cdr. Thomsen.

The Harris F.3 was on a routine anti-piracy patrol, in a flight of three. Out in deep space, in an uninhabited system, with two wingmen. They had been on silent running for a while, trying to track down a notorious piracy ring of about 30 ships who had been targeting traders who used the gas giants of the system as a refuelling stop.

Thomsen's ship was lead. The sudden, unexplained white noise on the scanner and two percent dent in the shields had elicited his expletive-laden exclamation. His co-pilot was already running a diagnostic.

"Looks like a distant plasma accelerator discharge, Captain," replied First Officer Haynes.

Thomsen keyed the comm. "Any of you see that?"

"We just registered a large energy spike," came the voice of Cpt. Smith of the #2 Harris.

"Us too," replied number 3.

Haynes looked over at Thomsen. "I think we should use an active scan. Passives aren't showing anything within the distance we'd expect for an energy signature that large. They should be within a few hundred km for that one." "I agree. Just send out one ping. We don't want to draw too much attention to ourselves".

The active scan pulse went out, spreading out over space. The range would be about 1 AU. But five minutes later, nothing had come back. Both crew of the lead Harris watched the active scanner intently.

"Any hyperspace departure clouds?" asked Thomsen.

"None so far, but if they are as far away as the active scan wave, we won't know for another couple of minutes anyway."

"Sometimes the speed of light just ain't fast enough," grumbled Thomsen.

The crew fell back into silence in the dimly-lit bridge of the Harris. The majesty of the universe silhouetted the two men. The feeble main star of the system glinted in the distance, like a baleful orb. "We're getting something - range, 0.6 AU, looks like...looks like about the size of a long range cruiser, and some other stuff around it, debris maybe," said Haynes at last.

"Can the resolver get a better picture?"

"It's already working on it. Yes, definitely a LRC and a large quantity of debris, and a few other ships, a number of small fighters and a slightly larger one."

"What about the energy spike we just registered?"

"Appears to come in on a direct course from the LRC. My guess is..."

There was a pregnant pause. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Cpt. Thomsen.

"An energy discharge from that distance with enough strength to white out the scanner briefly, and put a two percent discharge on the shields, from 0.6 AU away?"

"It's the HPA. Gotta be."

The bridge fell silent for a few more moments. "What do we do about it?" asked Haynes.

"We can hardly not follow it up. Set a course for the LRC. Silent running. And send a report to AJN headquarters via the nearest GIN relay, full crypt mode. And if the bugger hyperspaces, get a full analysis."

The three Harris fighters sped off into the void...