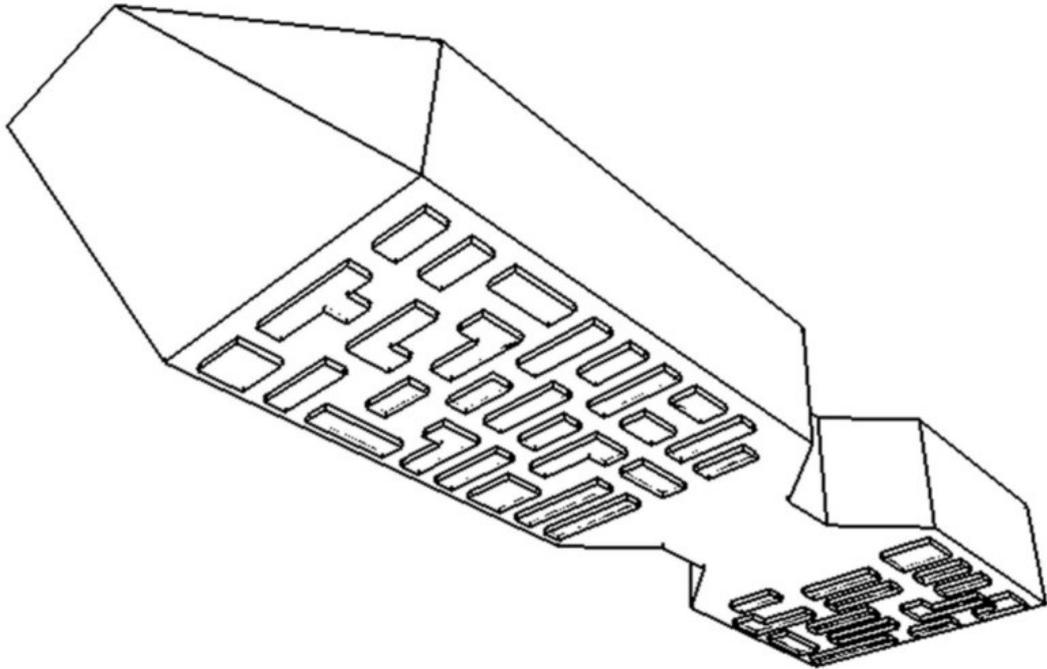


The Elite BBS Presents:  
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

# ENDGAMES

## THE HPA SAGA



Volume

7

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## Sunset over the Empire

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens]

It was like a scene from a circus. Everywhere I looked, clones were enacting another paean of worship for the Crown Prince and Emperor. Unfortunately, the well-choreographed sequence of signals to order the performance didn't come. Many of the clones clumped together in tight groups with shining eyes, shouting, "Long live the Emperor! Long live the Prince!" over and over. Others ran forward until they met a solid object, then bounced off and began running in another direction. Others seemed to have had other sequences triggered and were singing Imperial Anthems, though rarely did two clones sing the same song at the same time. Fortunately, the acoustics weren't good enough that they clashed. Too much, at any rate.

The main staging area had been dolled up a treat. Huge arches and columns (having no architectural justification whatsoever) had been grafted onto the basic metal box shape of this huge room. Heavy curtains and glittering canopies of jewels billowed about at various stages of rigging. The walls had been polished to a mirrored sheen. Along the floor next to the wall (I had to look twice) was a row of doves. Presumably mechanical, they stood patiently in lines, ready for the signal to flutter up into the view of the news cameras. There was still a bit of scaffolding and the various detritus of decorating around, but it looked pretty much ready for the divine presence of the Duvalian Scion.

Clone mothers lifted clone babies high. The two were probably the same age and had probably been spawned in the same bath of nutrient, but to very different specifications. Here and there, I saw station personnel and guards trying to make sense of the chaos, but most seemed too stunned to actually do anything. I saw one guard red-facedly shouting into the face of a clone. The response? A big, mindless smile and "Long live the Emperor! Long live the Prince!"

"Vlad! Vlad!" Bec called. The droid was nowhere to be seen, and our chances of finding him were remote at best. I squeezed her arm, hard and she turned to look at me.

"Where's Traffic Control?" I mouthed. The shouts, singing and general chaos made proper communication almost impossible.

Bec's face screwed up in concentration. This wasn't her home station, but she was the only one who knew it even slightly. After a moment, she shrugged and waved a hand vaguely at the bunting and decorations. As far as I could tell, she was saying that she might have known, if all the glitz hadn't fatally interfered with her at best scant knowledge. I began to look around desperately. We'd have to pick a door and hope it was the right one, or got us close. I started moving off towards one wall, but was brought up short by Catherine's hand on my Imperial Cadet collar. I staggered off balance, and shot her a hurt look. She placed a finger against her lips for silence, though in the bedlam around us I found that rather redundant. Catherine closed her eyes, tilted her head back and took a deep breath.

"Any clone agents in the room get your hairless butts here right now!"

"Are you nuts?" Bec shouted, "A, they won't hear a thing and B, the last thing we need... what, Red? What?" I tugged at her sleeve. It was already coming.

It was just like the bar at Zelagre, the sheen of a bald head twirling around people, vaulting over people with inhuman grace and agility, pushing them aside like plastic mannequins. It was mesmerising to watch, it moved so fast and so gracefully across the huge room, dashing in and out of groups of clones and station personnel, that it almost looked like there were two of them.

I swallowed heavily. There were two of them. No, three! This really was altogether too much of a good thing. I really hoped that Catherine had thought this through. Catherine looked distinctly uneasy. If it came to dying, the HPA would have been relatively painless. I had the distinct feeling the Clone Agents would be less so.

In a moment, the three stood before us. There were two males and a female, and all looked mightily unimpressed by the reason for their summons. The three looked almost identical, but unlike the earlier troopers, all three could pass as human. The same human, granted, but nothing to remark upon if they weren't standing together. The central one spoke first, in a voice just loud enough for us to hear.

"I am Clone Agent 15612 in His Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. Wasting the time of a Clone Agent is an offence under His Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations Unit Act 3215. You have fifteen seconds to justify your request."

For a precious five seconds, we were all silent. In front of us, a sense of severe menace swelled, like watching a droplet form on a blade of grass. If it fell, we were in trouble. Then, Bec poked Catherine in the ribs and she suddenly started talking quickly. With any luck, the Intelligence Analyst could concisely sum up the hell of the past few months. I crossed my fingers.

"Vequess, Olcanze, Norman Mosser, Huge Particle Accelerator, narcotics..." Catherine poised for dramatic effect, wasting further precious seconds. Bec and I stared daggers at her. If the Agents didn't kill her, we would. "The Heir." Catherine exhaled, obviously somewhat pleased with her summation.

The three agents mulled it over for a second or two, and then exchanged glances. The female looked up at us.

"Your attempts at joining these connections into a singular nexus are highly speculative. To avoid prosecution, further interrogation and research will be necessary. Please remain stationary."

The two males stepped forward, preparatory to taking us into custody. With extreme prejudice. Bec and I braced ourselves. This was going to hurt.

"And..." Catherine blurted out, desperate to convince. "And... we also know what happened to the Clone agent on Exioce. The one who... dammit Red, what happened?" Catherine plucked at my sleeve.

"The one who got... uh... decapitated... yeah, I was there. Not," I hurriedly qualified, "that I had anything to do with it. I was just a witness, the killer was uh... one of the members of the Cabal. We need immediate assistance! The Crown Prince is in danger!" I let hysteria colour my voice at the end. Hopefully, it covered the lack of an Imperial Accent to back up my patriotic fervour.

The three agents stopped dead. For a brief second I wondered whether they would attack. Then, a subtle change in demeanour washed over them. The look of fierce physical concentration lightened, though their eyes remained burning. It seemed even Clone agents felt for their own.

"What assistance is required?" One of the males finally said.

"Traffic Control!" the three of us said in unison.

"Follow." One of the agents said, and the three of them turned and began running. The three of them spread out in a wedge in front of us and it was fascinating to watch as resistance ahead of us melted away. The Station Guards and personnel melted away as they saw the triumvirate of Clone agents coming. Clone agents were built to be anonymous, but when the three of them moved in such deadly unison, they were unmistakable. Those who failed to notice were bowled over, crashing to the floor as the Clone agents effortlessly swept them aside, without even breaking step. We merely tried to keep, up, as the three of them crashed through the crowd like a spaceship through a cloud of butterflies. I winced a bit as we crashed through groups of crowd clones, as their cousins certainly showed them no favouritism, brutally flicking them aside. They did not resist, but fell very hard.

Then we were moving through a short corridor, turning a corner to a guarded door at the end. A single, rather overweight looking guard was standing there, who seemed petrified at the apparitions approaching.

"Halt!" He quavered, raising his rifle. He was in early middle age, fifties or so, and looked like he was wishing he had already retired.

"Lower your weapon. I am Clone Agent 15612 in His Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. You will stand aside now and allow us to access Traffic Control. May I remind you that in the case of resistance, we are authorised to perform summary executions. We would regret that outcome, as it would require additional paperwork. In triplicate." The agent added, as his two companions nodded.

"Yes, My Lord." The man raised his rifle to point to the ceiling, away from us. We began charging forwards.

The guard then lowered his weapon and began firing, at point blank range.

\*

The Imperial Spokeswoman was bored out of her mind. The Crown Prince wasn't setting foot on the station for another day and a half, and Space Station air did horrible things to her complexion. The entertainment facilities on this ghastly station were pathetic, and none of the other members of the Imperial Court had deigned to join her, all waiting for the Crown Prince to arrive. The only good side to being on the station was that there were vast amounts of high quality drugs available. She spent most of her day in a blissed out daze, with her faithful pedicurist slave dutifully refilling her derm injector at regular intervals. Even through the veils of pharmacopoeia, she was still aware

of the bone-crushing boredom of her situation. Since her elevation to Miss Empire, her life had been a series of met desires and constant diversions. There had barely been a moment when she hadn't had her every need met. The denial of fantasy was doing terrible things to the lustre of her hair, among other things.

"Any ships arriving today that I should care slightly about?" she turned to her pedicurist slave, with a note of desperation in her voice.

"Only one, Ma'am. The *Abraham's Son*, an LRC registered to Viscount Preston." The pedicurist turned her head only slightly, keeping her eye on the expensive vial of Xiao's Tincture she was measuring into the derm injector.

"That odious little man." The Imperial Spokeswoman spoke from experience, having had the fool slobber over her once at a ball. Or had it been an orgy in her pre-Beauty Queen days? She forgot. "Why should I care about it?"

"He's donated the entire shipment to the Grand Charitable Convoy. A personalised tribute may be in order."

"I'm so glad the last derm hasn't worn off. Otherwise I'd probably be projectile vomiting at this news. Did I really just say that?" The Imperial Spokeswoman giggled.

"Couldn't say, Ma'am." The pedicurist slave said deferentially. She knew better than to either confirm or deny that sort of statement.

"I'll do it later. Get the speechwriter to write something... appropriate."

"Yes Ma'am." The pedicurist said, pressing the derm into the back of her mistress' wrist. The hand she was holding suddenly flopped, as if the bones had melted.

"Oh, and don't let me straighten out, if he's on board. I'd prefer to not recognise him if I can possibly avoid it."

"Yes Ma'am. I'll make sure you're insensible when the *Abraham's Son* arrives." said the pedicurist, who suddenly appeared to have grown several extra heads, and had little Thargoids with wings fluttering in and out of her ears.

"That would probably be best." The Spokeswoman said clearly, before dropping into a highly pleasant delirium.

\*

At close range, the central agent (the one directly in front of me) didn't have a chance, and bolts slammed into his body, severing his head and spattering a good deal of his viscera on my Imperial Cadet's uniform, giving me perhaps the least pleasant experience of my life. In retrospect, though, it was actually quite an improvement on the original colour scheme of the uniform.

The two remaining agents bounced sideways, vaulting off the wall and backwards, then leaping again to bounce off the other wall and around the corner. The guard tracked the female one with his rapid-fire rifle, beams of energy burning long furrows in the corridor walls. Between them, Bec and Catherine dragged my stunned form around the corner. Luckily, the guard knew who was dangerous and didn't spare any laser fire on the three of us.

The two of them dragged me round the corner and propped me up against the wall, oddly enough next to the head of the Clone agent, which had bounced it's bony way along past the corner to carom off the far wall. The Clone's expression was one of pain and shock, and showed far more emotion in death than it ever would have in life.

"Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" Bec clawed off my smoking, blood caked jacket. "Shit, this is disgusting." she muttered, holding the jacket at arms length, while Catherine probed my chest.

"That jacket contains genetic material which is classified secret under the Imperial Special Investigations Act 3215..."

The two Clone agents were standing behind us. The male appeared to have been hit in the arm, but the small wound had cauterised and if it was bothering him, it didn't show. The other agent was unhurt, but she looked mighty pissed off.

"Fine!" Bec hurled it down the corridor.

"He's fine." Catherine said with relief. "A minor burn, but nothing dangerous."

I stood up, took off my shirt and began wiping my neck and face of bits of Clone agent. I felt more than vaguely nauseous.

"It appears the plotters have some help on the station." I said redundantly. "I wonder if he knows that his mates are planning to destroy him as well."

"Doubtful." Catherine said, "but try sitting him down and telling him that and see how long he holds off firing."

The female agent peeked round the corner. She snapped her head back as a volley of fire sent a shower of sparks flying past our faces.

"Try starting to tell him that and see how long he holds off"

"He has raised the corridor's defensive barricades. He will be difficult to dislodge." The Clone agent speculated.

"We don't have the time!" Bec raged. "That damn ship will be in range soon!"

"No chance the two of you could..." Catherine asked the obvious question of the two Clone agents.

"Given the weaponry the traitor possesses and the position he is in, he could quite conceivably terminate us both before we reached him." The Clone agent's face was set in a calculating expression, but there was an edge of desperation that I didn't like.

I was struck by a sudden feeling of helplessness. The *Azure Sunset* was slowly sliding into position, probably still faithfully following the course laid out by the station it was about to destroy. Mosser and the mysterious Marcus were probably sitting together, drinking a bottle of fine wine, laughing at the devastation they were about to cause. I fervently wished for them to suffer simultaneous heart attacks, for them to suddenly start brawling, for something to happen to them to make the attack fail. Kill the head and the body will die.

"I've got an idea." I said uncertainly. "Not a particularly good one, but ... can the two of you run out there and still evade this guy for a second or two?" The Clone agents looked askance at each other. I could almost feel their contempt at the waffle-headedness of these free-range humans. "Unless you've got a better idea, of course." I finished acidly. Bowing to the logic of that statement, the two of them nodded.

"If you can draw his fire momentarily, I should be able to distract him long enough for one of you two to get to him."

"You believe your plan has a high probability of success?" the female said, incredulous.

"Well I think dying is a certainty if it doesn't." I said pragmatically. I leant over and picked up the essential element in my plan. For a moment, I was worried I wouldn't be able to get a grip, but my finger found a small hole to gain purchase in. Bec and Catherine tried not to watch. Bec appeared a little green.

"OK, let's do it. You guys race out and as soon as I hear him start firing, I'll follow. I want him committed to trying to kill you. When I make my play, do your thing." The two agents nodded.

"You two stay here. If this screws up and I don't make it-"

"Oh save it, Red." Bec said, angrily. "That romantic bullshit is getting thin. We'll do what we need to do. Just don't fucking let that asshole kill you. That's my privilege."

A weary smile played over Catherine's lips. She'd heard these lines too many times as well. She patted my shoulder and said nicely, "What she said."

"Go!" I shouted, and almost faster than I could see, the two Clone agents were flying past me, bounding off the wall, and out into the corridor. The apparently incompetent guard seemed to be far less of a slouch than we'd thought, and the gunfire started up almost immediately. I charged out into the corridor, trying desperately not to lose what was in my hand.

The guard's barricade was a metre deep section of floor that defenders could obviously raise to defend against frontal attack. It had been raised about 1.25 metres high and the guard was crouched behind it, weapon sticking out of a groove in the barrier.

The guard hadn't noticed me yet, and was training his fire on the rapidly darting forms of the agents. The corridor was only so wide, however, and as the agents went closer, his aim got better. I had seconds to act, at best. Lunging forwards, I did a full over arm throw, briefly imagining myself one of the great Zero-G cricketers. It was a hard task, but it flew out of my hand like a dream, rising in a perfect arc up and over the barricade to drop neatly over the other side. I then threw myself to the ground and hoped like hell. The hail of fire continued, but he must

have taken a brief instant to look at what was beside him, because a strangled scream issued from the other side of the barricade and the gun fell silent. I looked up, and saw one of the Clone agents leap over the barricade. The scream was abruptly cut off.

"HowZAT!" I yelled, pumping my fist. The clone agent lowered the barrier, and Bec and Catherine rushed 'round the corner. The female Clone agent had caught a stray bolt in the upper chest, and bright, arterial blood was spurting out in jets of decreasing height. She was toast. The other Clone agent and knelt close to his fallen comrade. For a moment, I thought I'd seen a display of genuine compassion.

"Is there any essential intelligence that you require me to record?"

Her face twisted in pain, the agent could only shake her head.

"I do not understand the enemy's reaction." The agent stood and turned to me, his dying companion forgotten as she jerked around in agony. "The object was inert and no threat to him. Why did he react in such an extreme manner?"

I looked down at the 'object', lying next to the body. "The normal reaction to having a severed head land beside you is pretty similar to his." I observed tartly, as I liberated the rifle from the guard's body, and tossed his side arm across to Catherine. She cocked it professionally and held it in the ready position.

"Nothing for me?" Bec asked, plaintive.

"No! I've seen what you're like with handguns, anyway."

"This, from a man who lobs heads around." was Bec's dismissive comment.

Surreptitiously, I wiped the finger that had found purchase inside the skull on my dress uniform. There was some spongy matter under the nails that I prayed was just loose skin.

"Your hand contains genetic material which is classified secret under the Imperial Special Investigations Act 3215. Under the act, Extreme Measures may be employed in order to recover said genetic material. " The Clone agent said severely.

"Fine!" I snapped at him, "You can cut off my finger after we're finished."

"Thank you for that verbal agreement with Extreme Measures. It may be used as a Legally Binding Contract at a later date."

The agent turned around and started keying a long sequence into the door controls.

"Since when did they start including sarcasm in your core training program?"

"It is a matter of operational experience." The agent said, without turning round.

\*

"Beginning course correction in five, four, three, two, one, mark!" The helm called out in a singsong voice. Marcus nodded, like a man hearing a clock toll the hour.

The course correction stated was actually a deviation from the flight-path set out for them by Fort Donalds Traffic Control. The original course had them slowly stopping just outside the exclusion zone in front of the station, where swarms of drones would have come out to relieve the 'Abraham's Son' of its cargo of 'narcotics'.

This flight plan was not going to be followed. It was a thirty-click exclusion zone around the station. Dreyfus and the technicians estimated the maximum range for the HPA to be twenty clicks. As astronomic distances go, ten kilometres was nothing, but right now, it seemed as gaping as a parsec.

"Estimated time to firing distance?" Dreyfus barked the question at the helm officer.

"Twelve minutes." came the tense reply. Marcus' little set piece had bought them the crew's acquiescence, but even the best crew had to be a little touchy this close to the prize.

"How long before they notice our deviation?" Marcus called from the chair. The pistol grip linked to the HPA's trigger mechanism had been snapped to its place on the command chair's armrest. Marcus' hand curled lightly

around, almost caressing it. He looked relaxed and content. The fact that he was about to kill thousands of people was perhaps the only thing keeping an outright smile off his face.

"Three minutes, maybe." Dreyfus said. Most of this conversation was redundant. They'd gone over everything in their endless planning sessions with the late Norman Mosser, and all of them had the same access to readouts. But Dreyfus knew the value of this public theatre.

"Stay on course."

Marcus' gaze returned to the main viewscreen. Before them hung Capitol, Marcus' home planet. With the naked eye, he could see the concentric rings of the Imperial Palace on the planet's surface. It was proudly claimed that it was the largest single complex in the universe (with the disclaimer, "in Imperial Space" tacked on, sotto voce). It was there he had been born and reared, its endless corridors and gardens his maze and his testing ground. And guards, always guards. It had almost been a relief when he'd fled there, the occasional risk of death on the outside a feeble fear compared to the constant risk of death within its walls.

He would return there soon, when this fleeting business visit was finished. For pleasure and settling of a few old scores.

But in between Marcus and the palace was the hulking, newly polished mass of Fort Donalds. Once that was gone, and his brother was disgraced, then the real work could begin.

"Sir! Transmission from Traffic Control!" The comms officer shouted.

"On speaker." Marcus' smirk vanished, and the crew's calm evaporated, everyone cocking their head to hear the transmission.

"*Abraham's Son*, you appear to have deviated from your course. Please correct three points on Y and minus one on X. Also decelerate to 15 metres-per-second. Please acknowledge, *Abraham's Son*. Over."

It was a routine course correction request. Usually, traffic control only corrected ships seriously off course. Today they wanted everyone on the numbers. Good practice for controllers wishing to keep their heads.

For thirty seconds, no one moved. The sounds of the crew breathing became the dominant noise on the bridge. Everyone's head shifted to watch Marcus, who stood up, dark eyes glittering. Subterfuge was ending now, and they would declare themselves to the universe as a force to be reckoned with.

The comms rang out again "Attention *Abraham's Son*, you are deviating from assigned flight path. Please return to flight path and proceed to assigned berthing coordinates."

"Sir. They're repeating the transmission. Should we respond?"

"No. We'll surprise them. And even if they guess, what could they do? A couple of Vipers against this, the deadliest ship in space?" A smirk crept over Marcus' face. He'd stolen the expression from Norman Mosser, but doubted Norman was in any position to ask for it back. He could see the crew respond to the mannerism, the fidgeting ceasing and the whispering going quiet. "What a joke!"

Instigating the first manual part of the plan, Marcus pressed a button to reply back with a burst of garbled static over the comms. Buying time.

The mass of the Long Range cruiser angled further still. "Attention *Abraham's Son*, you have deviated from your assigned flight path. Return to your flight path immediately and proceed to assigned berthing coordinates."

Another reply of static, with the words 'please hold' and 'cannot' barely audible. They wouldn't be able to stall much longer.

Opposite manoeuvring thrusters fired, slowing the *Azure Sunset* so that it would settle sideways across its previous path. A giant obstacle, blocking the space lanes of the exclusion zone just under twenty kilometres from the station. Safely outside normal weapons range.

"*Abraham's Son*, you are in violation of traffic control. Return immediately to your assigned flight path or you will be fired upon. Acknowledge immediately!"

"Maintain course. Now," he turned to Dreyfus, "the real work can begin."

As we charged in the door, I let a round off at the ceiling. I've been on the other end of a few smash 'n' grabs, so I knew the important thing is that no one has the faintest idea what happened until it's all over. I looked to one side, where a security guard (another one!) fumbled with the rifle. With a stylish (considering my panic) move, I whipped my weapon around, slamming the butt into the unfortunate guard's face. He fell like a sack of spuds, and Catherine moved quickly to remove his weapon. I heard a grunt of appreciation from the Clone agent.

"No one moves, no one gets hurt." I yelled.

Unfortunately, I'd forgotten the legendary xenophobia and paranoia of the Imperial Establishment. The sound of my non-Imperial accent triggered the traditional, unreasoning response. Er... on second thoughts, it was a perfectly natural response.

"A Federal Terrorist!" someone shouted, in panic.

"We must die for the Emperor!" came the reply from a nervy looking black-haired woman on the other side. Everywhere around us, people were jumping to their feet and balling their fists. Pudgy looking station techs were putting on looks of defiance that belonged on Dreamware action stars. (Which was probably where they picked up the expressions from) and staring daggers of state-endorsed hatred at us. Have I ever mentioned how much I hate patriotism?

"Release the gas!" rose up from the hubbub.

"Federal bastards!"

"Poison the dogs!"

"We must die for the Emperor!" came the hysterical affirmation from the nervy woman.

"Now hang on a minute..." Bec said hurriedly.

The officer at the tactical console began stabbing frantically at buttons, preparatory to a snootful of nerve agents. Catherine and I started to run towards her, guns in hand, but were brought up short by about twenty members of traffic control standing in between us and her, looking quite prepared to die to ensure that we died, not knowing that if they did we'd all die. The situation was as absurd at the time as it looks now on paper. The worst bit is that I distinctly remember thinking that I was prepared to kill as many people as necessary to save their lives.

Catherine and I lowered our weapons to stay the advance of the mob. They stopped, but it was only motion stayed, not ceased. They stared at us with unblinking hostility. A tense Mexican standoff ensued. But behind them, I could see the tactical officer still tapping away madly. We had seconds. Someone started singing the Imperial Death March, and soon the entire mob was singing the famous, fateful lines.

"Our corpses where our souls were hous-ed / Surrounded by bodies of thou-sands / Our Emperor's glory we defend / O u-u-unto our bitter end"

Their rhythm wasn't bad, but their harmonising was awful. And they were quite near to bloody killing us.

I turned to Catherine. "Mindless clones outside, mindless drones within. What do we do?"

"Are you a good shot?" Bec tugged urgently at my sleeve.

"No. But at this range, you need a strong stomach more than a steady hand. "

Bec clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"Not them, her!" Bec gestured towards the tactical officer. Green lights had begun to flash across the bridge, and the song of suicidal, patriotic glory had reached a feverish pitch. Seconds remained.

"Oh!" I said, and raised the gun to my shoulder. Catherine did likewise.

As I did, above the chanting there came a solid sound, like an axe striking wood. I tried to line up the tactical officer within the sights, but she was no longer there. Instead, the Clone agent, gently lowering the body of the tactical officer to the deck. I lowered the weapon. One thing you don't want to be caught doing is pointing a gun at a Clone

agent and *not* taking your shot. He stabbed at a few buttons on her console, and the green lights snapped off. Aware of some movement behind them, the mob turned around to look at the Clone agent.

"I am Clone Agent 15304 in His Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit. You will assist these persons in whatever capacity they request. They are acting in the best interests of the Empire."

The mob looked back at us in bemused shock. Then, muttering apologetically, they started to disperse back to their stations, sneaking fearful glances back at the Clone agent as they did.

"Right!" I said, charging over to a station, gun still in hand. "Where is the *Azure Sunset*?" I said urgently to the tech. He looked at me with frightened confusion and pointed at the mass of switches and lights in front of him as if he hadn't seen them before. He stammered a bit but didn't actually come up with anything intelligible.

"Red..." Catherine interrupted.

"We don't have time, Catherine." I pleaded. "Look, we're looking for an LRC which is arriving. Surely you can bring up..."

"Red, that's the liquid and sewerage control station." Catherine said quietly.

Despite the large amount of background noise, I was suddenly in a silent world of embarrassment. I turned and looked at Catherine, who nodded at me and went off to the *real* traffic station. Showing great presence of mind and an absolute lack of shame, I clapped the man on the shoulder.

"Excellent work, excellent work. Keep it up. Keep the... uh... liquids flowing." I said, walking off as unobtrusively as possible.

Quite a crowd had gathered around the station. Bec and Catherine were at the forefront, pointing to the smallish screen and giving orders to a smallish woman with a shaved head, who looked to be on the verge of tears with the stress.

I hustled my way to the front and peered at the viewer. It was the usual scanner display, but with five or six other 'layers' of information over the top, which I assumed was Permissions information, Trade information and the endless minutiae of the Imperial bureaucracy. The central symbol was obviously Fort Donalds, and the exclusion zone was a large clear space before a huge mass of contacts just outside it. I shaded my eyes. It was a decent enough screen, but there were a few too many people jostling to catch a glimpse to give us a decent vantage point.

Catherine finally had enough. She tapped the young woman on the shoulder.

"I think we'd better use the Tank on this one. Could you fill it for me?"

The tech nodded and tapped a short sequence into her panel. I became aware of a green glow behind us and turned around. An area in the middle of the floor of Traffic Control was glowing with a green radiance. I spotted green lights in the corners of the ceiling, where the holographic projectors were concealed. As soon as traffic control staff realised they were on the square, they hurriedly scuttled off it. It unnervingly seemed to 'fill' with colour from the bottom up and I understood Catherine's description of it as the 'tank'. As soon as it was 'full' a large-scale 3D display of the tech's screen winked into view.

The tank was awash with points of light, and a gigantic cat's cradle of coloured lines. I couldn't make out a bloody thing through the morass.

"Eliminate the stationary contacts and orbits." Catherine instructed. Obediently the tech tapped away, and about eighty percent of the dots and lines disappeared. Most of the contact was far out on the perimeter. There were a few closer to the exclusion zone, but with most of these, the tracking lines indicated they were moving away from Fort Donalds rather than towards.

"Bring up 5, -8 and 3." Catherine barked, naming the X, Y and Z axis coordinates relative to Fort Donalds. A flashing cube obediently popped up around the named point, and zoomed in to fill the entire tank. The sight of this in 3D almost caused me to lose my lunch. I tightened my jaw and looked away.

"And anyone not directly involved in saving the station, shut the fuck up." Bec called out, in her best drill-sergeant impression.

Responding to Bec's volume, the room dwindled to the sounds of breathing and the regular pinging of the scanners.

The ship that had been highlighted was an LRC like the *Azure Sunset*, but after a cursory examination, Catherine shook her head.

"Back out to the main view." She said. This time, I closed my eyes to avoid the visual effect. Vomit on the floor would hardly help the situation.

"3, -1, 4." She called out. "Yes! Magnify."

I opened my eyes and looked. A close up of the ship filled the tank, detailed enough to show asteroid dent and laser scar. Superficially, there was no difference to the dozens of LRCs that littered the sky around Fort Donalds. But for people who knew what to look for, this looked like the ship we had seen at Ackdati. The suspicious front bulkhead and the dorsal SPAs were dead giveaways.

"ID?" I said excitedly.

The tech fiddled for a second. "The *Abraham's Son*, registered to-

"Viscount Daniel Preston." Bec, Catherine and I chorused.

"Speed and Course?" Catherine asked urgently.

"Currently coming in at 106ms to the berth on the edge of the exclusion zone for unloading. Uh... it actually should be coming in at 70. We've sent them the usual Course Correction request but..."

"All they're doing is speeding up." Bec said grimly, pointing at the velocity counter in the tank, which had just ticked over to 110. "Scramble every military ship you've got. Do the whatsit that brings them up in that thing." Bec jerked a thumb at the Tank.

Mechanically, the shaven-headed woman turned back to her panel and a couple of dozen red dots popped into existence. Agonisingly, most of them were out on the edge of the scanner range. Even the fastest of them would be hard-pressed to manoeuvre through the throng in time to have any effect. However, six to ten of them hovered near the exclusion zone, albeit on the Achenar side of the station, opposite to where the *Azure Sunset* approached like an HPA-tipped glacier.

"Get them to intercept!" Bec thundered, at no one in particular. The deputy tactical officer (who seemed to closely resemble a saffron-skinned beanpole) hesitantly cleared his throat. He had been promoted quickly and bloodily, and didn't seem to be relishing his new role.

"They're the Crown Prince's escort. The Imperial Imperatives apply. To serve the Prince and protect the Emperor and Royal Family."

"What are they, robots?" I roared. "Get the bastards here now or everyone on the station is dead!"

The beanpole still hesitated.

"And the Prince will be humiliated in the view of all civilised space." Catherine added quietly. "Can you imagine how he will feel, and how great his wrath will be?"

The prose was purple, but the effect was pleasantly electric. After a moment, the Tactical officer nodded and dashed to his panel, hailing the escort and yammering threats at high speed. The potential repercussions of such a public catastrophe extended far beyond the lives of the station crew. Their families, friends, and indeed entire towns stood in peril. The 'Great Wrath' Catherine was talking about was not something out of a religious text, but a deadly political reality of the Empire.

"Plot the intercept, based on the target's current course. Factor in a five percent speed increase, as well." Catherine said heavily. She was biting her lip and didn't look happy. Lines of light crawled out from both the Imperial Escort and the *Azure Sunset*, representing the estimated courses of the two parties. They intersected at a point some distance from the station.

"How far?" Bec asked.

"Sixteen clicks from the station." Catherine said.

"Could you just remind me of the range of the HPA again?" I said, asking the unwelcome question.

"Twenty. I think we're screwed, Red."

\*

"Movement!" called the Tactical Officer.

"Where?" asked Marcus languidly, as if the officer had spotted an old friend across the room. One hand loosely lay across the firing joystick for the HPA whilst the other caressed the Deathwrecker lying across the other arm. He appeared the epitome of cool, relaxed command, although Dreyfus spotted some tightness in his shoulders. For a moment, Dreyfus felt annoyed at the public sign of tension, but on second thoughts, this was his protégé's moment. Let him feel the excitement, even if that meant discomfort and stress. Their ambition was colossal, and it was only minutes away from being fulfilled.

"The Crown Prince's escort. They're scrambling to intercept us!"

Marcus glanced at Dreyfus, who shrugged. They'd never expected to fire the HPA totally unmolested, and it was almost a relief to know the exact degree of difficulty they faced.

"All engines full ahead. What are we up against and will they reach us before the firing point?"

"All ten Imperial Explorers. Given the Engines on full ahead, the ships will contact us about forty five seconds after the firing point." The officer finished concisely. She wasn't twitching now there was action, her face furiously focused upon her readouts, her fingers dancing across the panel to bring up even more up-to-date data.

"My Lord, we're in the clear." Dreyfus said, face breaking into a smile. "Even if they launch their entire battery of missiles as soon as they're in range, they can't stop us. The plan will succeed!"

Fujiyama licked his lips. He knew an opportunity for brown-nosing when he saw it. "Three cheers for the new Emperor! Hip Hip-"

A dull throbbing cut off the first sycophantic hurrah, muting into first a wailing siren, then a pulsing, insistent drumbeat. The main lights dimmed, while displays all over the bridge began to flash in sequence, turning the bridge into a cavern of sub aquatic warbles and ghostly luminescence. Plumes of dry ice billowed from the ceiling, adding to the chaos.

Dreyfus spun this way and that, seeking the source of the mayhem. His processors recognised that the sound and light show was designed to distract and confuse, the predecessor to an attack of some sort. He stole a glance at his master. Marcus looked unfazed by the mayhem. Dreyfus' ears detected a small sigh of resignation.

Aware of vibration, Dreyfus looked towards the hatch, which was shuddering. The blast doors were down, and the security systems were locked down tighter than the Emperor's harem. Regardless, the hatch began to move upwards, as did the wall the hatch was on! There were several crew stations on the rear wall, and they and their seats lifted up into the air with the rest of the wall. The crew looked petrified, but none of them risked falling and remained in their seats, suspended metres in the air. Ornamental lasers and fog-cutter lights punctured the haze, coming from the rear wall, which was now a gaping hole in the rear of the bridge.

Silhouetted in the light show stood a single figure. Dreyfus' bioelectronic eyes and electronic warfare suite were able to penetrate the interference with ease and mere picoseconds passed before he recognised the human, evaluated his physical condition including a 98% accurate estimation of body fat content and determined not only what weaponry he was armed with, but how many rounds were present and preloaded the corresponding response algorithm into his primary data loop. To everybody else, the entrance, the sense of melodrama and the shape were unmistakable, it could only be Norman Mosser.

Marcus paused a moment before swivelling the leather command chair around to face the newcomers. It just would not do to appear surprised. Decades of Imperial training came into play.

"Norman." Marcus sighed, resting his head on his chin and smiling wryly, "Always with the theatrics. You could have just knocked, you know?"

\*

"One of the other ships could ram it...?" I said, trying to stay positive despite the outlook, whilst my optimism indicator was steadily diving into negative territory. And I was probably on the most gradual slope of anyone in the

room. The dirty red flashing alert lights that someone had thoughtlessly engaged were enough to send anyone downhill.

"Do you have any idea how damn slow those things accelerate? Shit, you can make and drink a cup of coffee before they even fire up the engines! Think sensibly, Red!"

Not a chance, and I knew it. A sense of panic had begun to take hold in the control room. The tank flickered as we tested scenarios and envisioned more and more desperate measures.

"One of the smaller craft... a Lion or Lanner or something!" I said, unwilling to let go. Three or four trains of ideas had produced nothing but argument and the shining mote of the *Azure Sunset* drifting closer in the Tank towards the centre, towards us.

Bec tsked. "You read up on the specs of the *Azure Sunset*? The thing is better armed and shielded than some cruisers. Either a> they'd pick it off before it would get close or b> it'd hit, with about as much impact as stubbing your toe."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Bec. Try and help!" I shouted. Bec made to reply hotly, but shrugged and went back to staring at the Tank, trying to divine out of its depths something to save our arses. Catherine had taken over the traffic station and I saw lights from the viewscreen flicker on her face as she searched through screen after screen, trying to find a scenario that could stop the tide coming in.

Since we'd identified the *Azure Sunset* and exactly how dire our situation was, desperation had given way to despair which had given way to sullen resignation. All around us, at their viewscreens people were fidgeting, weeping quietly or cursing under their breath. Only the Clone agent remained impassive, watching the scene without a twitch. The three of us weren't immune to this. We'd come so far, and felt in control, felt able to influence events. Now we were at the death, so to speak, and were powerless.

"Right. Fire every missile on the station. Let's give 'em something to think about. " I said, trying not to let the impending death of thousands of people dent my endeavour. The quaver in my voice, however, put the lie to my jauntiness. Mosser and the mysterious Marcus were going to win, this time. For me, there would be no next time to even the score, though.

The beanpole cleared his throat again and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He looked embarrassed again, which I took as a bad sign.

"Unfortunately, the station's complement of missiles have been put into storage for the duration of the Grand Charitable Convoy's stay, as the launchers are otherwise... uh... required. "

"For what, pray?" Bec asked, with poisonous sweetness.

"Uh... for the celebratory fireworks for the Crown Prince's arrival."

"Of all the egotistical, self-important..." I exploded.

"Red!" Bec said, in warning.

I bit my tongue. I may not have had much life left, but to be killed by someone's penultimate gesture of patriotism for a throwaway bit of abuse would have been a bit silly. "Any suggestions from the floor gratefully received!" I shouted out.

"No chance of negotiation?" a voice called out. Sweet reason? Egad, we were certainly plumbing the depths. I shot a glance over at Bec. She appeared to be shaking slightly, and her eyes were looking far away. With a sinking feeling, I realised she'd given up, and was preparing herself for death.

"They want us dead, the Crown Prince to be publicly humiliated and eventually, the Emperor's throne. Can you think of *anything* we can offer them that compares with that?" Catherine said quietly, without looking up from her screen. She'd folded her hands quietly in her lap. Her too.

All around, the postures were slouched, and eyes stared philosophically into the middle distance.

"Does anyone here want to live?" I shouted, striding forward. "Sure damn doesn't look like it. Is this what it means to be an Imperial citizen? When danger threatens, you lie down and wait for death to come and take you? You've all done absolutely everything you want to do and there's nothing left. No meaning left, everything is fulfilled. Is that it?" I stalked up and down the bridge, bursting with that most invigorating and paralysing of mixtures, gut bursting

anger and stomach-churning fear. I felt a hundred metres high and as weak as a kitten. If hope died, then so did we.

"To serve the Empire and protect the Imperial Family is a meaningful and fulfilling life by anyone's standard." The Clone agent levelly rebutted my attempted pep-talk. The worst thing is that he was right. The Empire means everything to some of its citizens, and they're fed it from birth, like Mother's Milk spiked with opiates. Man, woman, child, clone or android, they all lived and (even more stupidly) died by the "Imperial Imperatives".

"It's not enough!" I shouted at him and stamped my feet like a three-year-old. It mattered little at this point whether he summarily executed me for treason or not. He wouldn't have time to fill in the paperwork, anyway. I saw a few faces look up at me in shock, if not anger. Bec's wasn't one of them. "You are not expendable extensions of Big Daddy Duval and his precious bloody Crown Prince of a son. You have a responsibility to yourselves and your families. If you can't be bothered with caring whether you live or die, then what the bloody hell are you calling yourself a sentient being for, let alone a human, let alone a proud citizen of the Empire."

I breathed heavily for a few seconds and looked around. People were looking at me with something between awe and confusion. There was still a tiny candle-flame of hope a-flicker in the room.

"Eighty seconds to the red zone." Catherine said quietly. Around me, eyes closed and heads bowed down.

The flickering candle blew out, with barely a wisp of smoke to mark its passing.

\*

Norman stepped onto the bridge and looked around. His shirtless torso glistened in the dim lighting of the bridge and the same lights caused the ELITE badge clipped to his belt to almost glow with an inner red fire. A similar look appeared in his eyes, ecstatic, crazed, supremely confident and with the serenity of a professional killer. It gave confidence to those who were secretly supporting him and kept the hands of those who would dare to oppose him well clear of their holsters.

Except Marcus and Dreyfus.

"You are sitting in my chair," stated Norman as Sam sidled onto the bridge next to him.

Marcus smiled, and gestured to the main viewscreen. As his hand completed the move the screen split. One side showed the vista of Capitol and of the soon to be immolated Fort Donalds. The other was completely dominated by an image of Fort Donalds. The second image was uncluttered by the schematic readouts that were displayed on the first. It was merely punctuated with a spiral targeting reticule.

"And you have arrived just in time to witness history in the making, Norman Hesketh Mosser. The future begins here and now."

"No!"

Even Norman appeared surprised by Sam's outburst. It spread the wrong message amongst everybody present and hands began to creep towards holsters. Fujiyama glanced quickly from Marcus to Norman, weighing his allegiance. If things turned ugly...

Fujiyama interrupted. He didn't like the way this was panning out. "We are in range, if we don't fire soon, we will be intercepted."

Norman's eyes flicked to the main screen to confirm and back to the standoff. They were well within range and ready to fire. A pack of Imperial Explorers would intercept very shortly. Behind them, the entire hive of ships around Fort Donalds were also moving, clearing gaping pathways for other Imperial ships to hurtle down.

"Norman, together we can bring in a better age for the Empire, a new age where the decadence of the past can be swept away and the weak Federation driven before us like cattle. Together, you and I. Destiny is just a button-press away."

Mention of the Federation pulled at deep rooted conditioning in Norman's psyche, just as he knew Marcus would have hoped. He hated the Federation, he loathed them with a vengeance, it had been his life's work to bait, steal from and murder Federation citizens. And Marcus was offering him the chance to be in the position to not just defeat them, not even to destroy them, but to erase them. But, Sam was his trusted ally, one of his few true friends and was telling him that the deal stank. And a small part of Norman was telling him the same, that killing so many was wrong, the reasons were wrong and that Marcus would betray him. But the power, though! *The Azure Sunset*

was carrying the most powerful ship-mounted weapon created by mankind and they were in a position to use it. It was so close, and so easy. Let Marcus pull the trigger and all would be well, save for those on the station. He didn't even have to pull the trigger. Norman had provided the grassy knoll, but the gun and the moral weight of the act were someone else's. The hard thing to do would be to fight Marcus, fight Dreyfus, take control of his ship and run like the devil with his tail between his legs. The blow to his ego and reputation would be colossal, but avoided being implicated in one of the most infamous acts in history. Besides, infamy was his call to fame, wasn't it?

Marcus broke the uneasy silence, lowering his voice and speaking directly to Sam. Sam was the key. If he could swing Sam, Norman would follow.

"Sam, can you honestly say that your fears are truly founded, that you aren't falling victim to the whims of circumstance. Sometimes from one view things can appear quite different to how they really are. Step back and look not at what you think has been done, but consider what can be done. You are akin to Norman, I know, you distrust Capitol as much as you hate Earth. I am offering a chance to change all that, a chance to build a different future. Is that worth wasting over a misunderstanding?"

Sam lowered his head and remained quiet.

"Lead ships have fired first salvo of missiles." The Tactical Officer shouted. Her jumpiness was back now that there was doubt. Variable factors outside the ship were exactly her cup of tea, command indecision was more like her cup of urine.

"Launch countermeasures." said Norman and Marcus in unison. Again in unison, the two of them sought each other's gaze. Who was calling the shots here and who was the passenger? What was the mission? Almost unheard, the pitch of the holstered Deathwrecker whined higher, as if from excitement. The moment seemed to last for hours, weeks, months as both Norman and Marcus stared each other down. They were both on a knife-edge and both sides heralded death.

Sam made up his mind and touched Norman's shoulder. Norman turned, in time to see him nod weakly. Norman smiled. "OK Marcus, we'll decide who gets killed later. We've wasted too much time. Lock target and commence final firing sequence."

Marcus seated himself comfortably in the command chair, gripped the control for the HPA and pulled the trigger. Simultaneously, a large number of displays on the bridge began to display a countdown. The brutal hum of the HPA that had pervaded the ship rose to a brutal scream and the entire superstructure began to vibrate.

Marcus looked benignly upon Fort Donalds. No expense had been spared and the exterior was polished to a mirrored silver sheen, upon which the tiny sparkling navigation lights glowed like jewels on the Crown that was now, undeniably... his.

\*

Everywhere, people were going back to their stations and sitting down, allowing the alleged romance and majesty of the knowledge that they were dying in the service of the Empire, and that their loved ones might receive a ratty memorial medal personally... addressed by a clerk in the Prince's propaganda department. Softly, the Imperial Death March started up again. I saw Bec's lips move, but looked away before I could swear that I saw her singing. Thank God.

"Our corpses where our souls were hous-ed..."

In the Tank, the *Azure Sunset* inched closer, towards the yellow-tinged globe that Catherine estimated was the minimum firing distance for the HPA. Once it reached that point, it was all over. Catherine had turned around from her station, she seemed to have paid at least a little bit of attention to my Churchillian moment.

"Nothing can stop that ship now, can it?" I asked, running my hand along my chin. What felt like a week's growth scraped at my fingers.

"No." Catherine said, "the momentum it has will carry it there, even if the engines blew up, sadly."

"ECM? Can we fog its sensors to buy us some time?"

Catherine shook her head sadly, "The ECM suite here is the best appointed, most up to date equipment known to man. At this range, all they need to do is look out a window with the simplest optical sensor. A glass lens telescope would do just as well."

"How far away are those damn ships!?" I shouted to the shaven-headed tactical officer. She looked up dumbly. Tears streaked her face, and in her hand I saw a thin sheet of plastic with what looked like the pictures of children upon it. "Where?" I shouted. If she wanted to spend her last moments being sentimental about her children, I strangely didn't feel quite the same degree of emotionality.

"One ninety seconds." she sobbed.

"Cath-"

"Sixty seven." Catherine grated.

"No need to be so damn robotic about it!" I snapped, then gawped. "Thargoid shit! It's that simple."

"What?" Catherine looked at my face, having watched my jaw drop with some interest.

"I don't know... it probably won't work... it presupposes a lot of crap... I don't even know if anyone will even notice... or care... I mean, if he's even there it's only a faint..."

"Fifty nine seconds. Shut up and talk." Bec said. She'd departed the choir of the damned, and had come over to join us. Her face was a picture. Pretty as, but then I'd always thought that, but on its face was written a lot of the cruelty of space, along with the vivacity of a quintuple system and the promise of an undiscovered world. She grasped my hand and squeezed it reassuringly. The warmth spread through me like radiation poisoning, an insistent tingle driving its way through sinew, bone and nerve.

As she spoke, I felt my spine straighten and my shoulders set. In a single, quick move, I broke free, dashed across to the shaven-headed officer. I grabbed her by the shoulders, kissed her quickly on the forehead and then spoke quickly and urgently.

"Trigger the welcome sequence for the Crown Prince's arrival." I told her urgently.

"It's," she gulped through the tears. "an offence to trigger that if he's not here. His Royal Highness, I mean."

"Want to see your children again?" I said relentlessly. The dirty red light flickered across my grim features, probably rendering me a hell of a lot more intimidating than I'd intended.

Her face setting in a determined expression, the woman keyed a quick sequence.

"Exterior view." Catherine said quietly. The tank did the quick-zoom effect again. Fortunately, I was far too nervous to be nauseous.

The display was admittedly magnificent. First came the subtle tracery of lines on the surface of the station, kilometres and kilometres of optic cables, strung along the surface and over the station's arms. Glowing in a quick succession of colours and patterns, until it looked like the station was wrapped in luminescent spider webs (discreetly woven into the Imperial crest). Then the rockets fired, emerging from dozens of concealed ports within the superstructure of Fort Donalds. In dizzying patterns they dove and wove, nipping in and out like otters in a river. The vacuum of space turned the trails into frozen ropes of brilliant colour (discreetly woven into the Imperial crest, funnily enough), that remained hanging in space, barely dispersing.

To a few wincing of embarrassment, a couple of them collided with undocked cargo drones, to decidedly un-colour co-ordinated explosions. At the same time, holographic images began to project onto the vapour trails, angels and cherubs, fluttering down and around (funnily enough, they all seemed to be wearing the Imperial... oh forget it!).

From ports at the extreme edge of each of the station's four rotating pods, centrifugal force splayed out streams of gorgeous floral displays. Each flower encapsulated in a protective plastic bubble to protect it from the glare of Achenar's star, and each borne by that same star under the pull of a broad, thin, silvery solar sail. The synchronous spray of flowers would form a cloud of tiny stars in the station panorama, slowly drifting away under the even wind from the star. The effect would last for close to eternity, until stellar dust clogged the sails. An ever lasting reminder of a single Imperial event that would be long forgotten when the flowers were still in the early beginnings of their journey. I had no doubts about the penalty for anyone thinking of collecting one as a souvenir.

The work of hundreds, even thousands of person-hours was before us, a pyrotechnic display of awe. Selfish me was looking to the tiny corner box with an external view of the *Azure Sunset*. All this useless beauty was just that - useless - if it didn't have the desired, if highly improbable effect. I bit my lip, and watched the tiny corner box.

"Thirty seconds." Catherine said, and then descended to prayer.

"Sorry about the Facece idiot, I was a bit hard on him." I turned to Bec. Regardless of the outcome, it was certainly a time for final testimonials. "For a blinkered, shallow, impossibly handsome Imperial idiot, he wasn't that bad a bloke, really."

Bec's face remained impassive for a second, then broke into a smile. A happy smile, certain that the next minute would take care of itself, more or less. She reached out to grab hold of my hand. She squeezed it and didn't let go.

"I like 'em dumb and decent, Red. Nice to have a contrast lying next to you each morning."

"Or above you on the next bunk." I said lightly.

"Goes without..." Bec began.

"Ten seconds." Catherine said, emerging from her muttering. "Main box."

The *Azure Sunset* filled the tank, the hulking mass of it pregnant with devastation, ready to give birth to the death of thousands now, eventually millions. The false bulkhead had been blown, and the deadly spike of the HPA protruded from the fore-below section like a deadly dart.

The room became silent. Hope had fled from there long ago, but expectation remained, undiminished.

\*

"Sir..."

"I see it." Marcus said, and then glanced at Norman. Norman was staring at him with an odd appearance of introspection. Marcus smiled calmly, keeping his mistrust to himself. Norman's moments of deliberation were never public, equivocation was foreign to the grinning, debonair facade of his carefully cultivated image.

Norman grunted, and transferred his gaze to the main screen. His brows raised at what was appearing on it. The station had begun to pulse with a peculiar sequence of lights, and tiny pinpricks of illumination were blossoming on the surface of the station, colonising the surface with colour. Even more strangely, rockets were launching from ports all over the station, although they had absolutely no chance of posing any threat to the *Azure Sunset*.

"How long 'til the thing fires?" Norman asked the Tactical officer.

"Eighteen, sir! Ship rotation slowing. "

Norman kicked an idle boot at the decking, making everyone start at the loud, metallic scraping sound, like the sharpening of a knife. Across the ship, manoeuvring thrusters fired as the belly of the ship was brought round to bear on the station. The HPA did not have a great deal of finesse on its turret.

"Eighteen seconds." Norman repeated, and then left the statement hanging in the air. Eighteen seconds until this majestic weapon fired, and nothing short of divine intervention could stop the *Azure Sunset* from destroying Fort Donalds and starting the long, painful process that would finally bestow upon the Empire an Emperor with the skill and ruthlessness to match its ambitions.

"What a pitiful gesture of defiance." Marcus said sadly, "Nothing for us to worry about, I think."

Norman looked piercingly at him, wondering what Marcus knew that he wasn't telling. Their detente was still very uneasy, and small wonder. Norman was still in the early stages of his resurrection and felt emotionally very twitchy and unusually contemplative. He had no moral qualms (by now) about being a murderer, but being a mass murderer and bloody revolutionary took his crimes and jolly japes into another place, infinitely more frightening.

This was combined with his more familiar paranoia and instinct for knowing when he was being scammed. Marcus was an elegant pissant, and a ruthless operator to boot. Like so many of Norman's erstwhile employers, Marcus only cared about Norman's continuing respiration as long as he was of use. Unlike most of the aforementioned employers, Norman was genuinely wary of Marcus. That man had already cost him one clone on this mission, and he was damned if he was going to gift him a second.

"I don't know, might be designed to amuse us to death. Looks so damn pretty." Norman said tightly, as the clock ticked over to fifteen seconds. Marcus relaxed, keeping his eye on Norman rather than the screen. Not because Norman's light-hearted comment had disarmed him, but because there is nothing more designed to lower the

stress of a situation than to watch someone relax. Fifteen seconds! So close! Beside him, Dreyfus stirred, edging closer to his master. His loyal protector, as ever.

Marcus had known Norman through all his clones, and still wondered at what kind of man would allow himself to be reborn so many times within that vat-cultured flesh. Over him, death held no dominion. It also seemed to lead him to hold the lives of others in a very light esteem. Was Norman about to kill him?

"My Lord." Dreyfus said formally.

"Yes, Dreyfus?" Marcus said, without looking up. Dreyfus would doubtless have some sage advice for overcoming this final hurdle, so close to the end, so close to the fulfilment of over a decade of planning and consolidating their strength.

The blow hit Marcus on the side of the neck, causing him to jolt sideways in the chair. The blow was not hard, but placed with absolute, millimetre perfect precision. Marcus' eyes glazed over. Reluctantly, his hand uncurled from the trigger as he began to fall backwards unconscious into Norman's plush command chair. The hand falling from the trigger mechanism caused an automatic override to come into play. Without the constant biorhythm information of pulse, nerves and alpha-waves, the HPA switched to auto targeting, and the firing controls were locked out.

Dreyfus reviewed the body for a picosecond to ensure its continued unconsciousness, then turned to his primary task.

\*

The *Azure Sunset* entered the red zone, and... nothing happened. My throat grew tight and my muscles tensed. The doubt was worse than the death. Five seconds passed, ten, twenty. The *Azure Sunset* serenely continued towards Fort Donalds, as if it was a perfectly normal delivery of Narcotics, Farm Machinery and goodwill from the outer systems. I began to hope that my wild surmise might have struck it lucky.

I heard Catherine expel a long, pent up breath. Bec crept closer, hoping not to startle the flighty deer of salvation. Thirty seconds.

All around, people were emerging from their comatose states and watching the screen, where the source of death placidly came in to berth. Ninety seconds. The curiosity of Homo Sapiens is one of the great constants of the universe, and I marvelled at it, as light grew in the tank, making the sensors snow with the distortion as a massive amount of energy gathered. I sighed.

"Fuck!" Bec shouted, as death revealed itself to us, the *Azure Sunset* rearing up to give the belly mounted HPA the optimum arc of fire.

"Oh well. It was Achenar to a brick on, anyway."

\*

It had happened in machine speed. Dreyfus' advanced recognition algorithms saw the display for what it was. He recognised the sequence, and it triggered deep-rooted commands in his CPU. He fought the impulses with all the computational ability at his command, trying to confuse it with logic loops and delay it with system shutdowns. The struggle was brief, and futile. Within a trivial number of cycles of Dreyfus' neural net a primary interrupt engaged and compelled Dreyfus to alter his primary objectives. Protect Marcus, Obey Marcus, Survive was changed to: Protect the Prince, Protect Marcus, Survive.

The Prince was on the station. All other prerogatives melted away in the face of this one single fact. Hiding his identity as an android, Protecting Marcus, obeying Marcus, all sank away. His own survival mechanisms were kept alive at the mercy of the new priority only so far as he needed to survive to carry it out.

All of his systems were thrown into full usage. Assessing the situation, detecting dangers, weighing possibilities, calculating different predictions in percentages to thousands of decimal places. The location of every armed person on the bridge was mapped, obstacles charted with the areas they covered.

After knocking out Marcus, Dreyfus attempted to cancel the firing procedure, to no avail. Things were thrown into disarray. The auto locking mechanism was not something he had been made aware of. A backup plan instituted by Marcus no doubt, in case there was trouble on the bridge. The milliseconds ticked away towards when the crew would start firing at him. Arms moving towards holsters of those facing him, turning of heads from those that weren't.

Using the last fractions of a moment he had to spare, he analysed all the knowledge he had about the HPA, the firing controls, and the *Azure Sunset*. From several hundred possibilities, one stood out. He analysed the bridge layout and found the controls he was after.

The plan was fixed, and systems turned over to carrying them out. Dreyfus flicked his head forwards to evade a laser blast from the line of fire of the first guard, whose hand movements he had been tracking at the back of his mind, and launched into battle. Two guards close by, several all about the bridge.

Kicking at the command chair to propel himself, he careered sideways into the first guard, using the inertia to lift him and hurl the body across the room into two others, with explosive force. At the same time he flicked the button to power up the Deathwreaker. Diving and rolling, he avoided more incoming fire and rolled to a standing position on the opposite side of the command chair behind another guard. Quickly analysing the scene, he targeted the guards in between him and where he needed to be, also taking note of others with weapons coverage of the area. The rest of the crew were scattering to the far end of the bridge, where other guards were taking up a defensive position out of sheer habit. Snapping the neck of the guard in front of him, he grappled the body and flicked on its personal shield. As ghostly luminescence enveloped them both he fired over the body's shoulder at a guard on the far side of the bridge.

Dreyfus' predictions about human shields proved gravely incorrect. He only managed to fell a single guard before a huge blast of energy evaporated the shield and disintegrated the body held before him, throwing him to the floor. Norman, who had taken as long as Dreyfus to charge his Deathwreaker. In this, Dreyfus regretted not firing at Norman first of all. The man was a danger, but was not standing in as dangerous a position as other guards against his priority.

The actual hit severed his gun arm, a minor wound in itself. Spinning around as he leapt to his feet, he caught the arm and flung it across the bridge, disabling another enemy with weapons cover on the engineering panel. Before he could straighten out of the spin, the three guards standing at the engineering panel themselves took Norman's lead and opened fire. Two misses and a lucky hit, partially severing his left leg.

Dreyfus fell towards the ground, analysing the movements of weapons. Quickly choosing an option, he punched out at the metal floor, denting it and propelling himself sideways away from incoming fire. Bringing his good leg up under himself in a crouch, he sprang up from the floor across the bridge, rebounding off the roof and landing behind the engineering controls. Spinning around, his hand shot out in a chop, tearing through the throats of all three guards. In unison, three jugular veins squirted into the air as the bodies slumped down to the ground.

There was one more guard there. Fujiyama. Dreyfus' remaining hand shot out, stabbing into Fujiyama's chest. Fujiyama looked surprised as Dreyfus' fingers entered his aorta and tore out his heart. Dreyfus shook the security chief's body off the end of his hand and turned to the Engineering station.

Ducking down before anyone could react, his hand worked feverishly across the controls, setting the ship's thrusters and placing a lockout. Turning around in his crouch he waited half a second then jumped sideways. Manoeuvring thrusters on both ends of the *Azure Sunset* reversed direction and fired out of sync, and at full burn. Instead of a synchronised slowing of the turn to a complete stop, the reversed thrusters accelerated the movement. The ship's internal gravity, adjusted to the opposite direction, was unable to maintain inertial dampening. The resultant lurch on the bridge enabled Dreyfus to change his position without being noticed. It gave him a precious few seconds to plan his next move.

\*

The automatic targeting system held the barrel of the HPA pointing directly at Fort Donalds, tracking it as the ship slowly turned. As an independent system, it continued tracking the target as the manoeuvring thrusters fired. The whole of the *Azure Sunset* tilted and turned, but the barrel remained steady as a rock, fixated on its target.

\*

Dreyfus grabbed the three bodies of the guards he'd taken down earlier by throwing one at the other two. His chances now were quite slim. The lower half of the bridge was well defended. The only reason he lived was that they didn't know where he was. The engineering controls he had hid behind previously had been blasted to slag.

A counter ticked down in his CPU. The HPA would regrettably fire soon, resulting in a massive power drain. The weapon would still be functional though, so he had to make it to the main cargo bay and destroy the thing once and for all. To do so meant getting past the lower half of the bridge and through the ship. Norman fired off another random shot, this one closer. A data and power coupling was hit, and half of one wall of instrumentation went dark. There was a curse as weapons control went down with it.

Dreyfus could see a display on a far wall showing a smaller version of the main viewscreen, coupled with a forward view from the nose of the ship. While the forward view showed stars whirling past as the ship slowly turned, the turret view showed a targeting reticule fixed dead centre on Fort Donalds, currently aglow in its greeting ceremony. The reticule was locked on optically and tracking perfectly. A progress bar showed the weapon charging up to nearly full capacity, and almost ready to fire. A fraction of a second later, the reticule flashed green and the display blacked out as energy was sucked from the main reactor to the HPA. The last fading image was of a weapons turret, locked on and ready to fire.

Standing up at the same time as the lights dimmed, he hurled the three guards into the air as decoys. Keeping low he scrambled across the control desks as guards reflexively fired at the moving targets. Even to Norman's eyes, the accuracy of his shot came as a complete surprise, shearing off the robot's head and sending it sprawling to the floor.

"Gotcha!" Norman shouted, while the echoes of gunfire died away. There was a series of gasping sounds across the bridge as people took long, gasping breaths and began to stand up.

"Well finally that's over. Hey, Sam, what's happening with the HPA?"

\*

Energies surged through the weapon's systems, building up to be unleashed. The weapon itself started to glow brightly with the heat build-up it was designed to withstand. Pointing directly at Fort Donalds the power build-up reached it's maximum, and the targeting system made final checks and keyed the firing sequence.

The energy surged up the still turning turret as it tracked it's target. Reactor chambers blazing, through the Pattern Replicator system, up through conduction conduits. No form of interference could prevent the energies being discharged.

"Umm... Norman... it's firing!"

In the few seconds before the barrel of the Huge Plasma Accelerator released its destructive beam, the horizon that marked the tail end of the *Azure Sunset* rose to meet its line of fire. Physically prevented from turning downwards any more, the barrel clanged into the safety bar. Sophisticated targeting systems immediately noticed the deviation and pumped more downward force into the motors. Cogs ground to pieces as the system tried futilely to stay on target.

The HPA fired, just as the premature arrival sequence for the Prince reached its crescendo. Eight automated Imperial Couriers in a circle around the station, firing their 20mw beam lasers towards a single point behind Fort Donalds, while simultaneously firing their bottom thrusters and producing a spinning octagon with the station itself as the centrepiece.

The Pattern Replicator system maintained a perfect stream for all of an eighth of a second before the delicate components of the replicator unit itself fused together in a useless glaze. The rest of the stream poured forth in a useless, unfocused plasma stream out into space. In the hubbub of the arrival sequence, no one even noticed.

The eighth of a second of focused plasma stream streaked through space, expanding and expanding across the system the further it went. An hour later, and the size of a large planet in size it passed an Imperial listening station on the far outskirts of the Achenar system. The electro magnetic pulse induced caused every system on the listening station to short, causing it to fall from orbit and burn up in the atmosphere of a lonely, distant planetoid.

"Shields status?" Norman took control.

"Holding at ninety six percent" another salvo slammed into the shields, shaking the crew "eighty nine."

"What happened to the station?"

"Missed sir."

"Can we come about for a second shot?"

"Negative. Appears the Pattern Replicator burned out completely during firing. It's slag. The shot itself wouldn't have breached the station's shields. Also lost remote turret control."

"Charge the hyperdrive."

"No!" It was Marcus. The Heir had recovered consciousness, right in time to risk all their lives. "The readings are wrong, we must come about. Do we give up hope when it comes to the final test, in this, our finest hour?"

"The HPA is two thousand tons of junk, you fool!" Norman shouted.

"Why?" Marcus was incredulous.

"I have no..." Norman began, and was interrupted.

A tinny fanfare tinkled across the bridge, stark against the weeping, groans of pain and sparking of damaged equipment. The main viewscreens were replaced by a grinning figure. Norman Mosser. All heads turned. Norman himself looked to the image, nonplussed. He had no idea what was going on.

"Hi Marcus, this is Norman." The figure said. "If you're seeing this, you've been a greedy bastard and killed me. If any of my clones are there, Hi Norman!"

"Hi Norman." Norman said tiredly. He hated it when he left these posthumous messages to himself. But it always seemed like a good idea at the time...

"I thought this up after my last memory dump. I programmed a virus into the HPA system to feed the energy back into the Pattern Replicator after an eighth of a seconds worth of fire. This should have turned it into slag. If I'd been alive, I would have disabled this virus. Since you unwisely killed me, nothing stopped it. So congratulations, Marcus. All you've done is strip Fort Donalds of shields and made the Imps really, REALLY mad. Norman, if you're there, can I suggest you kill this poseur and get the frell out of there? Bye bye!" the screen-Norman waved cheerfully and the screen returned to black.

Sam felt the final straw give way in his conscience. He held out his arm and spoke. "Gun!"

\*

Dreyfus rerouted power and switched to backup systems. His head contained a good proportion of his primary sensors, and was an integrated part of him. Losing it wasn't fatal, but it was proving to be highly taxing having to reintegrate systems without it. He still couldn't regain motor control. Secondary sensor inputs came online. He immediately routed it towards what little chance he had of completing the mission.

He heard status reports coming in. The HPA replicator was destroyed! The danger was eliminated. Screaming for control, his other prerogatives increased in priority. After cross checking the new information and interrogating all his systems, the overrides finally let go. Reanalysing the situation his original priorities flowed back. Protect Marcus, obey Marcus, survive.

Marcus. He was talking, attempting to gather the troops back for a strike. It was in vain, but he would try anyway. Had to save him from himself.

More systems came back online, secondary visual, motor. He assigned CPU power to maintaining the new sensory system.

"Gun!"

It was Sam. Dreyfus' profile assessment quickly drew up the file and predicted the worst. Dreyfus threw his processor and senses into damaging overload, making perfect use of each nanosecond with what he had remaining. Prioritising motor and audio, he lurched upright. A hatch opened in the wall behind Sam and a robotic arm extended towards him, depositing a concussion rifle in his outstretched arm. Without bothering to look towards Sam, Dreyfus power surged his remaining motor controls and raced forward.

He wasted valuable processing time disabling his emotional response systems as he saw Marcus' expression, realizing finally that his most loyal friend was not what he seemed and the horrified look of betrayal. Dreyfus was headless, was missing an arm, and tangles of wiring and torn fibres stuck out of him in several places. Smoke still curled from his neck where a Deathwrecker blast had severed his head. Blood splattered his tunic in several places, but none of it was his. In the few remaining seconds Marcus would be able to look upon him, he would appear to be, unmistakably, an android. Years of endlessly careful subterfuge gone in an instant, one of the core operating prerogatives of a royal protector failed at last. The conflict over emotional or physical damage to his master was quickly concluded. After what seemed an eternity, he shoved it aside from his thought processes and concentrated fully on the task at hand.

A sound 'ka-klack' as Sam armed the pump action loader, depositing a disposable plasma pack into the power chamber. Dreyfus listened intently, hearing every nuance of the weapon, assessing how it worked and adjusting his movements based on prediction.

Dreyfus reached the command chair just as Sam pressed the weapon's loading button. He punched down hard on the command console, dedicating a large proportion of processing power to judging exactly how much pressure was required to set the mechanism off without destroying it, calculating percentages to millions of decimal places. The escape mechanism buried underneath the chair was a one off device, as was the somewhat brutish triggering mechanism under the control panel. The console display shattered downwards, and forced a contact into place with a solid click.

Hearing the mechanism charge, he realized that it was not instantaneous, that Marcus would be dead, seconds before reaching safety. The concussion rifle activated, sucking in air and smoke from all around forcefully into vents along its length. Sam and Norman's hair and clothes whipped violently as wind rushed towards the concussion rifle, making it heavy with compressed air.

In an attempt to increase the explosion distance from Marcus, Dreyfus leapt forward in his last selfless act just before Sam pulled the trigger, gravity dampeners in the rifle holding it nearly steady. The pellet of super compressed air hit Dreyfus squarely in the chest in mid air, exploding with violent force and shredding all of his artificial flesh into confetti.

The force of the blast threw the remains of Dreyfus across the room at high speed, slamming him into the wall to shatter to pieces. All that remained was the heavily armoured CPU box. Marcus was thrown back violently into the command chair, dislocating his shoulder. Only the plushness of Norman's upholstery saved him from worse damage.

Sam, staggering backwards under the force of the explosion, pumped the rifle again. The used plasma pack dropped to the floor with a clank as a fresh one loaded, and with a key press air began sucking into the concussion rifle again, Sam shaking under the force of the wind. As he pulled the trigger, crash webbing exploded from the command chair, enveloping Marcus completely. The arms of the command chair split off and the chair itself plunged into the floor.

As the pellet of compressed air flew across the bridge, a dented hunk of armour filled with electronics focused all its remaining, smoking, amenities towards a single remaining directive. Attempting to carry it out and fall silent before the inevitable laser blasts disintegrated what was left of it.

Survive.

\*

Marcus plunged through the floor, being pulled by the crash webbing on the command chair. He was jarred again roughly as a mechanism dumped him into the cockpit of a Stowmaster escape capsule. The cockpit roof was slammed down on top of him, and a powerful magnetic rail launched the Stowmaster out into space at high speed.

Rather dazed, Marcus surveyed the cockpit and found manual controls. The Stowmaster had a short-range hyperdrive and fuel scoop, but the police and navy ships bearing down on the *Azure Sunset* would easily be able to tail him wherever he jumped to. Bringing the ship around he made a few quick calculations and sent the ship plunging down into the atmosphere of Capitol where he could disappear into the crowds. High-powered engines and limited cloaking propelled him safely down through cloud layers as the surface drew closer. He had many contacts on Capitol, and would be able to sit back while the storm passed. Then he would return to claim his throne. It would be a long road, and this time he would have to do it alone.

\*

"Three Explorers are coming within range!" The gambler shouted. . The Tactical Officer was dead, her nervous twitches stilled forever. The taller and lighter of the two gamblers had taken her place at the Tactical Officer's station. The odds had not been in the other gambler's favour, his body lying on the floor.

Norman sucked his teeth. The weaponry on those ships would very easily carve through the shields on the *Azure Sunset* if he let them. The screen split into six sections, each showing a quadrant of the view from the ship. Port. Starboard. Fore. Mid. Aft. The Port Fore showed the worrying sight of a battle wing's worth of His Imperial Majesty's Finest coming at them.

"Fire off every missile we have. Buy us some time!" He shouted. The Imperial Explorers were robust ships, and he knew full well that the missiles wouldn't destroy them. Delay! Delay!

Sam was over by the helm. The primary helm officer had been another victim of Dreyfus, but his offside was talking earnestly with Sam.

Sam shook his head as Norman approached. "Something we hit in the firefight must have rebooted the Witchspace Governor. With a ship this size it'll take a while to recalibrate."

"How long?" Norman tried not to look anxious.

"Another two eighty seconds."

"Missiles away!" called the remaining gambler.

All over the *Azure Sunset* ports flipped open and wave after wave of missiles poured out, sparkling as they cleared the shield. In response, radio traffic in the area was overlaid with the white noise of ECM systems firing. However, Norman had avoided parsimony when it came to outfitting the *Azure Sunset*, NN500s all the way.

Over three hundred missiles leapt from the *Azure Sunset*, independently acquiring the targets ahead of them. The phalanx of Imperial Explorers expelled a Magellanic cloud's worth of chaff into space, and Norman watched with worry as miniature explosions announced the deaths of scores of missiles as they struck the cloud. Some managed to penetrate the countermeasures, and burst full force against the Imperial Explorers' shields. The smaller, quicker and far less protected Vipers from Fort Donalds which had (belatedly) joined the fray were less lucky. While the formation quickly scattered and attempted to evade, Norman knew from personal experience how hard it was to evade an NN500 when it was in the mood. He discounted them.

"Hundred Thirty Seconds." Sam called.

"In range in five seconds." called the gambler. The missiles had spent themselves against chaff and shields. As Norman had anticipated, the ships had been weakened by the barrage, but none appeared to have sustained any hull damage, and none were deviating from their course.

"LPA Batteries?"

"Still Off-Line. Five'll get you ten the gunners I sent will get to the manual stations within the minute."

"That's about fifty five seconds too long." Norman said ruefully, his lips puckering.

On cue, the ship shuddered as the first LPA beam cut into the *Azure Sunset's* shields. Norman was quite proud of the ersatz-military shields he'd acquired for his flagship. He'd copied, he'd stolen, he'd traded for them. They'd cost a good deal of his holdings in the Eastern Empire and had been relatively unproven since their installation. They were about to have their specs thoroughly tested now.

"Dropping, dropping, dropping... fifty one percent!" The gambler called as the massive shields evaporated before the big guns. Four of the buggers were within range, with another four about to open up.

Norman considered for a moment. He badly needed some dastardly genius. He felt exhausted and defeated. The bridge was awash with debris, gore and smoke. Those of his crew still alive looked halfway between desperation and despair. Norman glanced at the progress bar on the Witchspace Governor. It was still climbing too slowly, inching inexorably towards its destination. There was no way that it'd complete before they'd be breathing vacuum. Unless...

"Sam, can you buy me some time?" Norman called out

The initial fusillade had passed, and from experience he knew that he had a grace of about ten seconds before the LPAs cooled sufficiently for another shot and the massive ships wheeled themselves around.

Sam looked up, frazzled. Time! When the only thing keeping them alive was the shields, and the only thing he could do was wait and watch the Imperial Navy chew them to bits with no means of counterattack.

"You got a plan? We've got zero options here."

"Yeah, I'm going to program the Witchspace Governor manually." Norman said, jogging up to the Helm station.

Sam shivered. That sort of kit was high precision ultra-tech. You couldn't just pull some numbers out of the air and program it manually. If you got it wrong you could be thrown dozens of lightyears off course, the hyperdrive burnt to

slag, have the ship twisted apart in the currents of Witchspace or even worse! But if anyone could brute force it, Norman could. Possibly. Maybe.

"You sure, because those bastards are swinging back around, and..."

"Here they come again." The gambler breathed.

The second wave of Imperial Explorers strafed the *Azure Sunset*. On the main screen, everywhere Norman looked was another brilliant cyan beam, tearing into either side of his ship. Like the well-drilled elite they were, the ships didn't waste time lining up critical sections, just let loose at the shields themselves to decisively destroy Norman's defences. Behind them, the remaining two Explorers of the party approached, along with the re-formed first wave. As an additional problem, those Vipers which had survived missile attack formed an imposing, if ragged line behind them.

"Six percent." The gambler shouted hoarsely. It was time to close the tote. These odds were prohibitive. The next wave would annihilate them.

"Sam, buy me time! Just surrender or something, or we'll die!" Norman turned away to type frantically on the console.

Sam tapped the comms switch on the panel in front of him. This would be a massive gamble.

"Attention all Navy ships! This is Commander Fujiyama. We surrender unconditionally, please break off your attack!"

Everyone in the room looked agog at Sam's words. Fujiyama? But he was lying on the floor, semi-congealed blood oozing from what was left of his chest. Oblivious to them all was Norman, who was intently working on the Witchspace Governor, the screens on the display flashing from starmap to manifest to command prompt to calculator to system map and back. His injured hand hurt like hell, but he ruthlessly refused to let it compromise his keying in.

"Norman Mosser is dead, I am in command and I surrender. Please break off your attack!" Sam said desperately. It was a risky play and he had assumed the Empire had a big enough file on Fujiyama to realize that he would be the sort of person who changed direction more often than an Altairian stoat. If there was one person who would seize command and hand the ship over it would be him.

Despite his frantic programming, Norman had time to pause for a moment while the shipboard AI started the final pass of his calculations. This would be the moment of truth. He had no more clones, nothing left to retreat to. For the first time in years, death, permanent, cold, eternal death stared him in the face. He shivered as if the Reaper's hand was resting in his shoulder and was for once, terrified. His fate was entirely in the hands of the Empire. Just like the first time.

The Imperial Explorers came into range and... didn't fire.

Norman breathed out and grabbed the edge of the panel to hold himself upright. That had been close. A little too close, but at least now they had time. Time enough.

Norman's console beeped unobtrusively. Success. He'd managed to bypass the Governor and it would now run off the original factory default settings, which he'd changed to meet their circumstances. In theory, it would get them in and out of Witchspace intact.

Well, it had worked the last time he'd tried it in an Osprey, and the principles were the same. It was just a matter of scale, and of knowing roughly where and what you were (in a five dimensional sort of way). On the main viewscreen a white spiral appeared in the corner. They were free to jump. Whether they would survive hyperspace would be another matter.

"Fujiyama, close down your engines and power down your shields. Prepare to be boarded by His Imperial Majesty's Navy! We will not accept your surrender until Norman Mosser's body is delivered to us." Without waiting for a response, the Imperial Explorers arranged themselves in a tight cordon around the *Azure Sunset*, pointing menacingly inwards. In this configuration, it would be a matter of seconds to destroy his ship, despite its size.

"Power down the Prime Mover, but hold out on the shields." Norman said, eyeing Sam, who shook his head, holding up five fingers. Even now the Governor was back on line, with such a large ship the transition to Witchspace would take precious seconds, allowing their besiegers to destroy them easily. The shield coverage

slowly began climbing again. Norman clenched his fists. They needed the shields to flee. Holding out for them could cost everything.

"Fujiyama! Power down your shields or be destroyed. This is your final warning."

"Gunners to stations, Norman! You owe me ten." The gambler said quietly.

It was a second before the import of that statement registered.

"Shit, make sure none of them power up their turrets or the-"

Before he could finish his sentence the *Azure Sunset's* LPA and SPA batteries opened fire, the turret operators obviously unaware of the delicate negotiations. Two of the surrounding ships exploded, bright even against Achenar's sun. Others took heavy damage, but that still left at least six still operable. But the suddenness of the action seemed to have stunned the surrounding crews, and there was no return fire.

"Now Sam!" Norman shouted.

"But..." Sam said, even as he reached to engage the mis-jump. Norman's casual attitude to the Witchspace Governor was frightening. With something as horrifically complex as a Witchspace jump (let alone a deliberate mis-jump), incomplete calculations didn't mean arriving off target, they meant not arriving at all.

"Go!"

Sam hit the big red button, despite the horrified expression of the helm officer. He wasn't the only one who would have preferred the clean death of combat to the uncertainty of hyperspace.

Around the *Azure Sunset*, bright spots of light erupted, multiplying exponentially like bacteria, bathing the surface of the ship in the misty blue radiance of a hyperspace jump. Two of the surrounding ships finally recovered themselves enough to begin firing, and the remaining shields collapsed, but...

The ships vanished and the brilliant matrix of Witchspace replaced it.

"The Witchspace field is..." the Helm officer paused as he tried to interpret the swirling net of data. "... holding! We're going to make it!"

Wild whoops exploded throughout the bridge as the bridge crew realised their escape. Sam slumped in his chair and concentrated on breathing. Norman stretched until he felt his vertebrae begin to separate. Survival always lifted all tiredness from his frame. He padded over to the Gambler, who was staring intently at the Tactical Officer's panel. Norman looked over his shoulder.

"What're the odds? Point five percent left!" he said shakily. "At that rate, another hundred and twenty milliseconds of fire would have..."

Norman put a finger to his lips.

"Gambler's Rule one. Never bet against the survival of Norman Mosser!"

He reached into a pocket and passed the gambler a coin. It was a gold Imperial credit. Both sides were heads and had a portrait of Norman etched onto them. He was winking.

\*

"Oh my God." Bec breathed.

I opened my eyes, wondering why I wasn't dead yet. The tank lay before us, recovering from the massive blitz of EM energy, the image of the still rotating *Azure Sunset* swimming into view, going from grainy to crystal clear as the image buffers filled up.

"It seems..." Catherine said cautiously, "like the HPA has misfired."

"What does that mean?" I asked, obtusely. Catherine placed a finger on her lips and pointed towards the tank.

Misfired? Was this some technical glitch, to be followed by a second take on destroying us? Had my wild surmise caused some mutiny or change of heart?

Meanwhile, the Imperial Navy's finest were approaching the *Azure Sunset*, and appeared to be giving it a right old pasting. Curiously, the *Azure Sunset's* undoubtedly still-lethal weaponry was hushed.

Murmurs were beginning to break out throughout traffic control, but the three of us stayed silent. We had been too involved in this lethal saga for far too long to cheer at another false dawn. Three waves of Imperial Explorers strafed the *Azure Sunset*, causing its shields to burn first yellow, then red. I found that my nails were digging deep into my palms from the stress. I looked sideways at Bec, who had no doubts, and Catherine, whose eyes were shining. I wasn't yet convinced that this wasn't just some sick joke. It couldn't be happening, could it?

Then came the comms transmission we were all waiting for.

"Attention all Navy ships! This is Commander Fujiyama. We surrender unconditionally, please break off your attack! Norman Mosser is dead, I am in command and I surrender. Please break off your attack!"

The voice was full of unfeigned resignation and perhaps even a tiny glimpse of fear. Finally, a roar went up from the station crew. I felt myself shaking as I watched the Navy take up a defensive cordon around the massive ship. Was it over?

"Fujiyama! Power down your shields or be destroyed. This is your final warning."

"Well, that would appear to be -" Bec began, her voice light.

"Wait..." I said, filled with premonition. "It might be-" I began, and then started as the *Azure Sunset's* armoury opened up. In horror, I watched the tank as two of the surrounding ships exploded. It had been a sick joke, and we were all going to die! A great light filled the tank, and I covered my eyes. All around me, people screamed, life seeming far more precious in the brief moment of salvation than it had been in the dulled minutes before the initial blast.

I took a quick, final breath, feeling the stale station air rush into my lungs. This would be the last sensation I ever had. I held my breath. And held it. And held it. The screams died away. Was that it? Was I now in the afterlife? Was there a deity? Had I been sinful enough to deserve punishment? Was I going to burn in the flames of Hell / ice of The Eternal Waste / the dark black hole of the Great Beyond? (Depending on religious grouping)

Bec's voice penetrated my growing sense of wonder. I felt a moment of pity that Bec had ended up here with me. She'd been a nice woman, apart from her capriciousness, bloodthirst, volatility, moodiness...

"Red, you're looking blue, open your eyes."

Finally, I let out my breath and opened one eye a crack. The tank was empty. There was still the debris from the destroyed ships, and the remaining ships, their LPAs scything impotently into now empty space. Along with them was an expanding cloud of reddish gas that signalled a ship entering Witchspace.

"What <gasp> happened to the <wheeze> ship?" I said, steadying myself on Bec's arm.

Catherine looked closer at the shaven-headed tech's panel.

"The *Azure Sunset* would appear to have fled. Could you bring up the HSA reading... thank you." Catherine thanked the tech, and studied the readings from one of the station's Hyperspace Analysers, which could accurately determine the destination and mass of a ship by looking at the composition of the entry or exit cloud. Usually they were used by two groups, cargo ship owners who wanted to make sure their ship had reached its destination; and pirates, whose desires were somewhat in the opposite direction.

"Mis-jumped. Probably thirty or so LY. The Navy will chase them down. They won't be coming back." Catherine said with certainty.

We were safe. Finally, we were safe.

"It's over." I sighed. I looked around for a chair to collapse in. Sadly, Imperial efficiency meant that in Traffic Control, there weren't any chairs surplus to personnel. Bec standing next to me, reached up a finger to my face. It came back with the bright wetness of a tear. Oh. I hadn't noticed.

The comms sprang into life, captains hailing the station with myriad variations on "What the hell was that?" Fired by instinctive professionalism, the station began to return to its usual role. Traffic Control started to return the ships' calls, mostly with variations on "Mind your own business, Long Live the Emperor!" That seemed to work.

"Jesus, I need a drink." I muttered. I did badly need a drink. And some time on a planet with real gravity and air that hadn't been recycled a hundred thousand times. I badly needed a long stretch of time when my life didn't depend on my reflexes with an energy weapon. "How about you, Bec? Bec?"

I looked around. To my shock, she was lying on the floor. I looked up to meet the calm, unemotional stare of the Clone agent. Behind us, Catherine was likewise motionless on the floor.

"Wh-?" I began.

"Debriefing as per the Imperial Security Act -" the agent interrupted, stepping forwards.

To his credit, I can quite honestly say that I didn't feel a thing.

## In All Her Glory

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens]

Several minutes after the *Azure Sunset* had escaped into witchspace the first Imperial Naval cruiser arrived at the scene. Wasting no time, it launched its full compliment of hyperspace capable Ospreys, and sent them all into jumps fanning out around the best guess of a direction the hyperspace cloud analyzer could make of the *Azure Sunset*'s exit point. Charging its own hyperdrive it jumped out also, its escort of Imperial Explorers in close formation.

\*

Seamus Dixon watched the cargo drones loading the rest of his purchases onto *Talon II*, an ancient but well serviced Asp. As he often pointed out to people, it was an Asp Mk II, not an Asp Explorer. There was no visible difference, in fact he'd kept up to date with all the changes made to the production Asp line, but that's what it was called when he bought it and that's what it damn well would stay called. The only real difference was the missing crew quarters and station, he'd had all of that automated at great cost.

Seamus was a sentimental ship owner. Modern life prolonging techniques had let him live so long he stopped keeping track of his age, after a couple of centuries it ceased to matter so much. With so many stories that he and his ship had to tell, it was a constant argument with hull repair companies to leave certain laser scars untouched. More than a few times he'd had to pay extra to have whole segments of hull removed and repaired from the other side.

His eyes drifted to a rather nasty piece of charring on the belly of the Asp which dated back to the end of the Thargoid wars. It was the last Thargoid he'd ever seen, and the last he'd ever killed that left that mark. He considered it to be *Talon II*'s trophy. All the rest he'd gladly get repaired if only to save this one. It reminded him that the ship had got revenge for the original *Talon*.

He'd loved *Talon*, something few other commanders he'd ever met would really understand. To feel guilt over ejecting in an escape capsule rather than dying with the ship was something even fewer understood. He remembered vividly the time when he'd been sucked out of witchspace and mobbed by Thargoids. He'd managed to destroy one of them, and cripple another before managing to lock on to a nearby system and jump out of there, rear military lasers blazing. *Talon* had been mortally wounded though, the reactor had been leaking so much coolant that most of the engineering systems froze over. The reactor refused to shut down and the time until its meltdown ticked away.

There was nothing for it, the second he'd exited witchspace, he'd blown the escape capsule and left the ship behind, seeing it blow apart in the capsule's rear view a minute later.

He'd been careful since that day, always running when outmatched. There was nothing he could do about getting mobbed in witchspace, but he made sure he survived elsewhere. Unlike most Elite pilots he never wore his Elite badge. He kept it in his pocket, felt it when needed, but never displayed it to draw attention. He'd won that badge over countless decades of careful piloting, not through reckless bounty hunting. He hated Thargoids though, he'd never forgive them for the loss of his ship.

The last drone exited through the maintenance hatch to docking bay 4 and the pressure door hissed shut. Seamus walked up the ramp between the landing gears and briefly touched the control panel to seal the ship. The cargo manifest displayed his usual compliment, a full hold of hydrogen fuel and chaff. He would make yet another careful foray around the frontier, choosing his battles, collecting the cream of looted cargo so as not to waste too much cargo space. Always using the fuel scoop to refuel where possible, just in case he needed to hyperspace away quickly, and just in case he had to do that several times before getting another chance to refuel.

Pulling away from Bell Terminal, above New World in Achenar, Seamus set course for Miphifa and engaged the Class 3 hyperdrive.

\*

In deep space, sat a lone derelict Thargoid mothership, its crew dead centuries ago. In a feat of impressive engineering, human made machines sat atop the original control panels, providing mechanical manipulation of the horribly complex alien controls. The machines made manipulations of the controls at incredible speeds, in cryptic patterns that no human could hope to replicate by hand. Humans had tried and failed to reverse engineer captured Thargoid ships for years before giving up. Disassembly only left a random pile of parts that never seemed to work when put back together, and appeared to serve no purpose on their own, somehow missing an invisible link that

could never be restored or detected. Left intact though, the machines would function. But very few were ever captured in a functioning state.

The ship had long since lost its propulsion system, blown away in some long forgotten battle. It had been towed into place years ago and the modifications set to be operated remotely. Left adrift in deep space, it was used occasionally and sometimes manned as a listening post. For all its uselessness as a combat, scout or trade vessel, the ship had one highly valuable function, the ability to pull ships out of witchspace at will.

A nearby Wolf Mk II monitored the mothership's systems closely, watching the scans of ships passing to and fro from the Achenar system. Recognising a Taipan, the witchspace disruption field was activated at the right moment and the ship was dragged off course along a new hyperspace tunnel to exit in the vicinity of the Thargoid mothership. The field was quickly deactivated again to avoid picking up anyone else.

Vomited out of witchspace, the Taipan lost control, gyrating madly for several seconds before managing to straighten up and come to a halt. The Taipan transmitted a word of thanks then formed up on the wing of the Wolf while its shields regenerated.

\*

The pilot of the Wolf Mk II watched as the Thargoid's systems tracked the *Azure Sunset* through witchspace. It looked as if they might be in the clear, travelling along on a misjump to deep space in between systems. They'd heard the Alliance was working on chasing misjumps, but the Empire was certainly incapable of it. No one could know where the *Azure Sunset* would exit without the use of Thargoid technology.

There was another way to chase a ship though, if you had the resources. The Empire certainly had the resources and the will to use them, as a cloud of dots appeared on the witchspace scanner, all small fighters fanning out in the general direction the *Azure Sunset* had gone, none due to arrive outside the long range cruiser's maximum range for a single jump. Their mothership, a powerful Imperial Navy cruiser was itself lumbering along through hyperspace behind them.

The news was not good for the *Azure Sunset*. Two of the Ospreys would arrive under long range scanner distance from the cruiser's exit cloud. They would doubtless signal their cruiser that they'd found a winner. The Navy cruiser was due to exit a third of the distance to the *Azure Sunset's* exit and would receive the message easily in time to catch up with the slower commercial craft.

The low quality pattern replicator they'd substituted earlier would likely as nearly burned out by now through overuse. The *Azure Sunset* would have no chance of defending itself against a heavily beweaponed Naval cruiser and escort.

There was nothing for it. The pilot sent a transmission to HQ for confirmation of her intention, and a request for reinforcement. The reply came back positive and the operation swung into action. A small contingent hiding in deep space just short of a lightyear away appeared on the witchspace scanner as they jumped towards her.

Flipping the witchspace disrupter on once more she set a monitoring program to switch it off after the *Azure Sunset* was pulled off course. Powering up the prime mover she prepared to face the Ospreys that would be sucked through with it.

\*

Norman decided to take a few minutes to relax in his ready-room, there was little that could be done during hyperspace but wait for arrival. After being defrosted, Norman knew that his emotions and body chemicals were in turmoil, and remaining in such a mood would not help much when it came to making important decisions. Losing the feeling of anger that was driving him would not do either, so he figured 10 minutes of Tai Chi would do the trick nicely, followed by a bit of target practice with the Deathwrecker.

He would need to be in peak condition of body and mind when they came out of hyperspace, as the Imps were sure to try and follow the misjump.

As he started the Tai Chi routine, a frightening feeling of deja vu came over him. He felt as if he'd been doing a tai chi routine recently, but knew he hadn't really. Maybe his clone had been doing some tai chi while he was in storage? Norman's mind started drifting toward thoughts of a spiritual connection to his other clones that transcended apparent reality and imprinted memories. The implications of such thoughts were dangerous, as the temptation was to try and explore these random feelings in an endless circle. No, consciousness was not something to think about, that road led to evil realisations that took ages to forcibly forget.

Norman reached towards a personal med-kit pack, and rummaged around for a datapad containing remedies. He scanned down and found an entry marked "Recursive deja vu, complicated by persistent non-existent memories." He located the pill recommended by the entry, a blue one with yellow dots. After swallowing it, his synapses worked themselves into solid pathways avoiding the mental conflict and he felt much better.

Taking a deep breath, Norman turned his attention back to the large viewscreen in front of him. The view-screen showed a forward view of the hyperspace tunnel flowing by hypnotically. In the heightened state of awareness, Norman noticed something wrong with the tunnel, there was a slight bulge forming in the side of it just ahead of them. The ship rocked slightly, not much, but enough to strike fear into any commander who had spent hundreds of hyperspace jumps smoothly gliding through witchspace tunnels.

The ship rocked again, then harder throwing him to the floor. The view ahead started spinning, indicating that the ship was rolling. Klaxons started blaring around the ship, and the bulge ahead started growing at a faster rate. The edge of the bulge reached them and the ship, and he saw that the bulge led into another hyperspace tunnel, that looked far from smooth.

Norman started thinking quickly. Could the Imperials really have the technology to pull a ship out of hyperspace? Even the INRA had never managed to copy the technique off the Thargoids, their technology was indecipherable for the most part. ECM alone had taken years and the squandering of whole planets full of resources.

The ship was dragged into the new hyperspace tunnel, gyrating madly. The effect of the distorted witchspace sucked all the power out of the cruiser's shields.

\*

Seamus Dixon made no mistake in recognising what was happening to his hyperspace tunnel. It had happened to him once before and cost him a ship.

This time there would be no mistakes. Decades of plying the spaceways had given him the money to outfit *Talon II* with the highest quality gear that was available. A 4mw beam laser on the front and rear mountings plus the most expensive shield generators available to the public.

Recovering quickly from the violent exit from witchspace, Seamus spun the Asp around and ploughed forward to the only target he could see, a lone Thargoid mothership. Seamus unleashed the forward 4mw beam dead on target while he kept the prime mover floored, gunning the side and manoeuvring thrusters to weave the ship erratically while it punched forward.

In the Thargoid wars the Thargoids had always come on maddening frontal attack runs. The only defence was to attack right back, lessening the time they had to fire on you before breaking off. Seamus could only assume nothing had changed.

Making as if to ram the Thargoid he kept on ploughing forward, then turned at the last minute and accelerated away on a tangent. Quickly changing to the rear 4mw beam laser, he fired again and again until the laser overheated, all the time weaving the ship around with the main thruster pushing him away on full burn.

Once he got out of range he straightened out to his direction of travel and kept accelerating away under full power. Selecting Facece as his new hyperspace target (a Naval Base seemed the safest place to run to) he charged the hyperdrive and engaged it. The message he most dreaded appeared on the hyperspace display "Drive malfunction".

Not surprised by this, Seamus reached towards the combat console and ejected several tonnes of chaff, masking the view of the Thargoid receding into the distance in the rear viewscreen. Seamus angled the nose of *Tallon II* up slightly to change his course from what the Thargoid would have seen and set the prime mover to remain on full burn.

It was only then that the shakes set in. Seamus extracted a pill from the medicine cabinet to calm his nerves and settled back in the pilot's chair. Caressing the flight console he silently promised to purchase a couple of extra shield generators.

\*

The Wolf Mk II pilot cursed silently as the Asp dwindled into the distance. She could only assume that the commander's mad strafing run on the Thargoid mothership had triggered an auto defence system, throwing the shields up and severing her communications to the onboard systems.

The terrible downside of this was that the witchspace disruptor could not be turned off short of destroying the ship completely. HQ would doubtless be extremely pissed at losing one of the few such ships they had control over.

She briefly considered losing a few shots at the offending Asp, but there was hardly time. Scores of arrival clouds were already appearing as more and more ships got dragged off course. The first of the Ospreys would try to signal their position as soon as they got their bearings, but that no longer mattered. The cruiser from which they'd been dispatched was being dragged through regardless. The prospect of a few advance fighters to deal with had suddenly turned into the spectre of an entire armada.

Coming out of silent running along with the Taipan, she gunned the main engine and formed alongside the Taipan's wing as it sped off to greet the first of the arriving Ospreys. Behind them, the reinforcements brought forth to help deal with the advance fighters were dumped unceremoniously from witchspace, all of them charging weapons.

In the cramped confines of the Wolf Mk II, the pilot took a deep breath, stepped over into the lonely abyss of personal responsibility, and made the call. A single encrypted message was tapped out on a console then released into the depths of space. A message, the pilot knew, that would be taken very seriously by all that received it. 'broken arrow'

\*

The Osprey pilot selected manual control and brought the ship out of its spin. What the hell was that? They'd been thrown out of hyperspace half way through, and before the scanner went offline he'd seen two of his wingmen crashing into each other, completely out of control. He turned the ship around to see if he could find anything visually. There was a massive hyperspace exit cloud forming, no... opening! The *Azure Sunset* came out of hyperspace sideways, filling his view-screen, and heading straight for him.

"Oh, sh-..."

\*

The exit from hyperspace was marked by a deep drumming sound that seemed to reverberate through the ship, followed a few seconds later by several small thumps from different places around the hull, like birds hitting the windscreen of an autoshuttle descending onto a beach.

Norman switched the view-screen towards their exit cloud. He was greeted not only by their own massive exit cloud, but by many small ones opening up fast right behind them, also a very large one further off surrounded by medium sized ones opening up very slowly.

Three of the smaller clouds opened up right behind them, spitting out Osprey attack fighters spinning out of control. They slammed into the hull at high speed, and Norman saw gas spew out of a hole in the middle of the *Azure Sunset*. Another cloud opened up nearby, and even as an Osprey came spinning out of it, two 1mw beams cut it to pieces from a couple of Wolf Mk II's, which quickly moved off to the next entry cloud.

Norman shouted across the internal comms "Get the shields back up fast!", and ran towards the bridge.

\*

The scanner was filled with ships, Wolf Mk IIs, Asps, and Cobra Mk IIIs, and what appeared to be a very large Thargoid Mothership just floating in space doing nothing. Ospreys were coming out of hyperspace in wings, the scout ahead ships in an Imperial fleet. Comms showed a transmission jammer active in the area, and a lot of fighting going on.

The system identifier read, unsurprisingly given the circumstances, 'Deep Space.'

They had a much more worrying problem at hand though. As Norman stepped onto the bridge he saw the helm officer lifted out of his chair then propelled towards the main viewscreen before dropping to the ground normally again. Norman felt one of his feet try to move forward as he passed through an eddy in the ship's artificial gravity field.

The problem was a simple one, and deadly. The exit from witchspace had sent the *Azure Sunset* into a tumble, one far faster than the long range cruiser had ever been designed to withstand. The G-forces at the extreme ends of the mammoth vessel, given its length, were extreme. The artificial gravity generators were trying to keep up, and were failing.

Normally, on a manoeuvring long range cruiser, the stars would slowly crawl past the viewscreen. What Norman saw now were stars whirling past. The implications of the stress the ship was under made him feel a sense of dread. If the spin were not arrested, the ship would literally fly apart.

"Brake us out of this tumble!" he yelled at the helm officer, who was already scrambling back to his post, bruised but on the job.

"Already on it sir, it's going to take twelve minutes to slow the spin down to operating speed though. The gravity generators aren't going to last that long though. There's nothing we can do."

"Well think of something!" Norman retorted, then thought about it himself.

Moving over to the helm, Norman pointed to middle of the diagram of the *Azure Sunset* on the console. "What if we evacuated everyone to the centre of the ship and switched off the artificial gravity?"

The helm officer worked a few commands into the console. The centre of the diagram turned a dull red, showing a safety zone where the G-forces would not be deadly. "We'd have to get everyone into that red zone. We'd need to switch off artificial gravity everywhere else but key parts of the ship's structure and the bridge. Even then it might not be enough."

"Ok do it, get everything ready."

Norman walked over to a spare console and keyed in a ship wide alert. "All hands hear this, stop what you are doing and listen. You are all to evacuate towards the red area on the picture I am now relaying to all comm displays. You are to do this immediately, regardless of your post. Some of you may have noticed the artificial gravity going awry, this is because we're tumbling out of control. We're going to switch off gravity in most of the ship to lessen the load on the gravity generators, so if you're not in that red zone before we do, you're going to have to learn to live under the G-forces of standing on a very large gas giant. Move!"

A few minutes later the last of the crew were still entering the red zone when the gravity was switched off. Everyone was suddenly thrown against walls being pushed away from the centre of the ship. The worst affected were pinned under just over 5 Gs.

Loose items in crew quarters leapt into the air and were thrown against the wall. In cargo sections at the extreme ends of the ship foodstuffs were squished into liquid form. The parts of the ship's structure without the remaining gravity concentrated on them were suddenly placed under the greatest stress they'd ever had to deal with, whether manoeuvring or during combat.

Sam unconsciously gripped the arms of his chair, even though full gravity was being retained on the bridge. Norman portrayed the picture of confidence in the plan, as a good captain always did.

The ship started creaking, a deep ominous sound that was felt as much as heard. Occasionally a thump was heard as a panel snapped in two, or a bolt gave up the struggle and was spat out of its bulkhead and sent careering into something before dropping sideways towards the end of the ship it was nearest. Centrifugal force tore and twisted the *Azure Sunset* as it spun in space, manoeuvring thrusters firing in sync to slow it down.

Norman tried to bring up as much ship data on his console as possible, listing power remaining in the artificial gravity generators alongside structural integrity estimates and their turning speed above safe levels. The latter indicator was the most important, if he could get that back down to 100%, everything else would fall into place.

A shudder tore through the bridge as the hull in one of the cargo holds was rent apart and explosively decompressed. Norman quickly selected camera view and dragged it onto the bridge's main viewscreen. The view was from the outside of the bridge itself, looking forward along the length of the *Azure Sunset*. Stars were whirling downwards past a cloud of escaping gasses near the nose itself. Against the direction of spin, yes!

Norman keyed in a ship-wide override on all airlocks and started opening every airlock at the extreme ends of the ship that faced their direction of spin. Geysers of escaping gas erupted one by one on the viewscreen as air was evacuated from the myriad passages within the ship, winding its way out into space. Crew quarters, galleys, passages, storage rooms, and the massive cargo bays themselves all lending their life sustaining air to the survival of the ship. The gas could not escape the maze of the ship instantly, and the geysers continued to erupt on the viewscreen as the moisture of the ships air froze in the coldness of space between the stars. The opposing force was small compared to the power of the manoeuvring thrusters, but every small bit was worth the effort.

Barely noticeable, the power drain in the artificial gravity generators showed on Norman's console, but the stress on the hull continued to increase in spite of the continued efforts of the ship's thrusters. The escaping air was also

reducing their mass by a small amount, but nowhere near enough. Norman turned his attention to a cargo bay facing away from their spin, located just behind the bridge. Opening the doors simply wouldn't let any of the cargo escape, it would all be pinned against the far wall.

The dilemma had to be debated quickly. Would the redirection of their precious gravity better or worsen their situation? Norman decided to let the numbers choose their fate. The gauges showed the artificial gravity dropping to failing point. The speed at which it reduced was slowing, but it was obvious that it would not stop in time. Without another moment's hesitation, he blew the cargo bay doors and assigned one of the failing gravity generators a final task, to shove everything in that cargo hold out through the opening and into space.

The effect was instantaneous. The sudden shift in gravity distribution threw everyone standing on the bridge down to the floor, as the generator overloaded in its efforts and blew completely. Struggling against the high gravity Norman slowly pulled himself up level with the console to see the results of his action.

Their mass had been reduced, but the power left holding the ship together was still dropping, variations in the failing generators causing the hull to be pulled in different directions. The creaking and groaning of the hull was growing louder and coming from all directions, becoming deafening. Norman let go of the console and collapsed back to the floor. His face was now in contact with the hull hearing and feeling its protests up close. It sounded creepily like an old war holo he'd seen once, in which sailors of old earth had fought in weak hulled submarines that would be crushed by water pressure if they sank too deep into the ocean. The crew had sat listening to the sounds of the hull twisting as it sank deeper and deeper, while some brave engineer tried desperately to restart the engines. Norman guessed no engineer of old Earth had ever been expected to work under this many Gs.

\*

Another Osprey pilot came out of hyperspace. A clone in His Majesty's Imperial Navy, there was no fear, or confusion. Such was unthinkable.

Assessing the situation strictly within the boundaries of his training, there could be no mistaking what he saw as an ambush. The wingman on his left exploded brilliantly as a Cobra Mk III mercilessly attacked from their flank mere seconds after their exit from hyperspace.

Visualising the 1mw beam homing in on his ship, the pilot dove sharply, before gunning his engines and pulling back up and banking towards the Cobra. The attacking ship careened past before he could maintain a lock and fire off any missiles.

The accelerating power of the Osprey had left the Cobra behind in seconds, giving the pilot precious time to assess the situation from a better standpoint than dodge and run. The space about him more crowded than he'd ever seen. No fleet would even consider dumping their ships from hyperspace so close together. Even as he left the Cobra behind him, he'd had to weave back and forth to avoid exit clouds and wreckage. Never before had he seen space reduced to narrow pathways between objects, with a path to navigate through never visible until he was right upon it.

Arcing around between two exit clouds he spotted two ships closing on him from open space on either side, sentries posted to catch any stragglers. Directly in front was a debris field moving directly towards him, and he made a split second decision to head into it, trying to pick a path through the tight pack of cargo canisters and junk. He'd no more than passed a few canisters than beam lasers erupted behind and alongside him. Cargo canisters burned brightly as they melted and tore apart, or exploded as their contents ignited. Within seconds his scanner was completely blinded by the destruction that neatly covered his tail from pursuit.

As the debris began to thin, he saw the next obstacle that lay ahead, the immense bulk of a Long Range Cruiser. At the speed he'd obtained, there was no question of being able to break off in time. The nose of the gigantic vessel was rising up to meet him.

Thinking nothing of his own life, the clone determined friend or foe, and from this determined his final orders for the glory of the Empire. He located the most critical system he had the ability to hit, and put all of his concentration into bringing his ship to that point.

\*

With his remaining strength, Norman turned his head towards the viewscreen to investigate the source of the proximity alarm. There was nothing that could be done now, all that remained was to witness the end.

And the end came in the form of the Empire, in all her glory. An Osprey screaming across the viewscreen at blinding speed, main thruster on full power, and spinning as fast as she could. No sign at all of the pilot trying to

save himself, the pilot was giving every visible sign available that there was something greater than himself at work. There was the will of an Empire.

For a split second nothing happened, the downward force exerted by the speeding ship allowed for little to escape, then the viewscreen exploded. A fuel tank for one of the *Azure Sunset's* main manoeuvring thrusters had taken a direct hit. The Osprey had punctured a small hole in the heavily armoured and contained system, causing the entire contents to explode outwards, generating an opposing force far greater than anything Norman, in his desperation, had managed to achieve. The entire ship was rocked by the explosion, sending the permutations in the ships hull stresses into even greater frenzy.

With all of its fuel spent, one of their manoeuvring thrusters ceased to defy their plight, but its necessity was now passed. Norman could feel the gravity slowly returning to normal as the *Azure Sunset's* systems gained the upper hand and began to regain control of the ship.

The creaking started to subside, which prompted cheers from the bridge crew. Norman smiled towards Sam and the helm officer, who moments later reported that it was safe to bring gravity back online. Once this was done, Norman keyed in another shipwide alert.

"What are you apes cheering about? Get back to your posts!"

\*

Remote turret control was down, so gunners had been sent back to man the SPA and 4mw turrets manually and ordered to fire at anything that came near the ship.

"Ship incoming sir, unidentified class".

Norman squinted at the view-screen and increased magnification. It looked familiar. "Can you break through that jammer?"

"No sir, it's blocking all frequencies. There appears to be several ships all using transmission jammers."

Norman keyed the internal comms and spoke quickly "Right, gunners, whatever it is, kill it."

As the turrets turned towards the incoming ship, it reacted by diving sharply and firing twin forward 4mw beam lasers precisely at one of the *Azure Sunset's* docking bays. Not even enough to make the shields drop a percentage point. Twin 4mw beam mountings? "Hold fire!".

The ship came to a halt and started firing at the docking bay again, short bursts tapping out in Morse code "k-n-o-c-k-k-n-o-c-k"

Norman took a good look at the ship. "Ahh, now I remember. A Taipan Mk II."

"Sir?"

"Hmm? Oh! Send a security team down to that docking bay, and let the ship in. Seal off that area, and arm docking bay defences."

\*

As battle raged around, the Taipan came in to rest on the docking bay floor. Even before the landing gear touched the ground, the rear hatch opened and a figure jumped out. Several laser rifles were levelled at several parts of the figure's body as it came to a halt. More than a few, the figure noticed, were aiming at the head.

Frantic suddenly realised that he'd boarded a ship where shooting a visitor was preferable to risking any more problems. With slow movements he unholstered a pair of laser guns, barrel first, and set them down. Then followed a belt with an assortment of clip on gadgets, stun grenades, and a remote ship controller. Finally, a solid diamond sword with a leather handgrip clattered to the deck. Frantic raised his arms as one of the guards lowered his rifle and turned his attention to a weapons scanner.

"Shall we?"

\*

Norman stood facing away from the entry hatch, looking out through the viewscreen and trying to make sense of the sporadic battles outside. Hearing the newcomer being escorted onto the bridge he began to speak in an overly calm tone, with heavy undertones of threatening menace. "What the hell is going on? Who are these maniacs and why are they leading the entire Imperial fleet to my location?"

Frantic swallowed hard. Of all the plans, alliances and priorities in effect, the most important of all would come down to a distinctly grey area between friend and foe on this bridge. Holy crap he thought, what a fucking mess. What should have been a clean extraction was quickly turning into a full scale engagement.

He barely noticed as Norman whipped around in a deft movement and levelled a Deathwrecker at his forehead, nor the determination in his eyes as he stormed forward to meet face to face. He did notice the guards clearing a space behind him and started to think fast. No more games, time to break cover.

"Sorry Norman."

This made even Norman Mosser hesitate. Sorry? When was the last time anyone said sorry for anything?

"The plan was to pluck you from hyperspace when things got pear shaped for you, take out anything that came through with you, and for you to owe us one. We didn't know what your plan was, but we guessed half the fleet would chase you down at no expense when you tried to escape. But it's all gone to hell, we can't switch off the witchspace disruptor, and let me tell you, all the firepower we have won't put a dent in that Thargoid mothership."

Norman struggled to understand what he was hearing. "Are you saying you've got the technology to pull ships out of hyperspace at will, and then gone and used it to get yourselves ambushed?"

Shoving aside all vestiges of sanity, Frantic took a defiant step forward. He could barely see Norman's face past the bulk of the Deathwrecker, its barrel now brushing the hairs on his forehead. "We need to work together if we're going to survive. Blame can wait for later, reparations too. You of all people should know that. Of all the people that I know who made Elite, you're the only one I've met who took more risks than me, and I never intended to make it this far."

Suspecting that Norman didn't really want to kill a fellow Elite pilot unprotected by a hull, Frantic raised his arm and shoved the weapon aside. Guards and crew alike flinched at the sudden action, those nearby visibly ducking out of the way. They all looked up at the two pilots standing face to face, both the rare leftovers of thousands of pilots, born out of skill and the luck of the draw. Both with a badge that held some vague honour code that made them fight to the last.

Norman smiled, a broad grin that his crew recognised. Fearlessness glazed with an insane desire for fame and adventure. "What do you have in mind?"

Frantic stepped past and pointed at viewscreen as Norman turned to follow. He was pointing at a hyperspace entry cloud that dominating the chaos. Surrounding it were dozens of smaller clouds. It could signify only one thing, an Imperial cruiser with heavy fighter escort.

"We have to get the *Azure Sunset* away from that entry cloud. You use the HPA to destroy the Thargoid as you accelerate away, and get a decent distance away before jumping out. We then try to delay the cruiser long enough for your departure cloud to disperse."

But Frantic knew, and hoped Norman would also, that there would be no way an Imperial cruiser would be deterred from making a bee-line through the small defence, and the *Azure Sunset's* pursuit would be resumed. He knew the best option was to stay and fight, but wanted Norman to be the one to suggest it.

Norman finally holstered his gun. His expression changed, as if tiring of the conversation. Almost casually he said "This is my last clone, you know. If I die here, it's all over." So this was it, he thought, no more clones, and no more options. Death was finally coming along for good. No escaping it, no fighting it, no getting that great feeling no one else but him ever got to experience of avenging your own death.

Frantic turned with a puzzled expression on his face. he'd always assumed Norman Mosser had clones scatter all over the galaxy, countless backup plans.

"If you killed me right now, the unpayable bounty would finally be paid." Norman paused for a moment to consider this, then laughed. "All those agencies making up absurd sums to advertise their greatness would suddenly find themselves legally bound to pay up."

"What on Earth are you talking about Norman? This ship has more than enough firepower to defend itself."

"Ahh, you see, that's where you're wrong. We were counting on a forced misjump to make our getaway, not brute force. As you can see," Norman said, gesturing to the destruction and carnage on bridge that the cleaning robots had not been able to fully clear "we've had a bit of infighting. One of the casualties along the way was the pattern replicator of the HPA. My fault I'm afraid, insurance in case I got murdered."

Frantic removed one of his boots and slipped something small out of the padding. "It wouldn't happen to look anything like this would it?"

Norman looked levelly at Frantic for a few moments, expecting some form of tasteless joke. Once he decided none was forthcoming, he frowned, feigning great disappointment. "No. Mine came encased in a gigantic weapon."

It was an attempt at humour, but no one laughed. They were all too exhausted for that.

\*

"Ahem" said an engineer as he stood back from one of the HPA control panels, looking impatient and satisfied all at once. "It seems to work under the test system, but turret control is still down. We'll need someone to operate it manually."

"How many good turret gunners have we got left?" asked Norman

"Four sir, we'll have to pull one off one off an SPA"

"I've got a turret gunner for you." said Frantic "One of the best."

Norman turned around "Who?"

"Tracey, she can pick Ospreys off my tail with a mining laser during a spin."

Frantic fingered his wrist mounted sub-dermal communicator. "Tracey, we've got a job for you. I think you're going to enjoy it immensely"

"Does it involve violence?"

"Yep, and with severe overkill"

"Oh, goody"

A few minutes later Tracey Fields came trotting into the massive cargo hold carrying an automap. She looked up, and saw the massive weapon she was being asked to control. The automap clattered to the floor, and a broad smile formed on her lips.

"Woo!!!"

\*

The huge Imperial Naval Cruiser came out of hyperspace, not out of control, but only slightly askew with fleets of Imperial Couriers, Imperial Explorers, and Osprey X Wing fighters all spinning out of control around it. Its advanced, powerful energy booster units brought its depleted shields back up to maximum in mere seconds.

LPA turrets immediately locked onto the *Azure Sunset* and began firing. As the surrounding fleet started regaining control, the *Azure Sunset's* shields started dropping dramatically. A forward shield collapsed, and the LPA responsible cut straight through the hull in seconds, wiping out one of the crew sleeping quarters, and an SPA turret on the far side. A rear shield started buckling in the same way, and another LPA turret altered its aiming to take advantage of the weak spot.

A bright glow appeared on the underside of the *Azure Sunset*, quickly increasing in intensity until an impossibly large beam shot out of it. The beam hit the forward shields of the Naval Cruiser, and rocketed it backwards, causing it to turn. As the nose moved upwards, the beam moved to the middle of the Cruiser, cutting right through the shields, and hitting it dead centre. The powerful beam tore straight through the hull, completely vaporising the main power core on its passage and taking all with it through to the opposite side, preventing a core overload that would otherwise have fragmented the entire ship. Secondary explosions rocked the cruiser as munitions stores and atmospheric gas canisters gave way to rapidly increasing heat, and it split in two. The rear engine half broke off away from the carnage, and was sent spiralling out into space. The front half careened downwards into the full

brunt of the beam and was cut to pieces. The beam finished firing and the glow started settling down. Three Imperial Couriers nearby had their systems completely shorted from interference, and several Ospreys X Wing fighters were melted into spherical objects. The whole incident, from start to finish, only lasted a couple of seconds.

The remaining Imperial fleet, broke of attack and put distance between themselves and the *Azure Sunset*. They spread out, and came to halt with weapons pointed at the rogue cruiser. Intending to attack in unison, on a suicide run from all directions preventing the enemy from destroying them all, they began closing in. No normal cruiser would be able to withstand that many SPAs, no matter how big a gun they had.

Cyan coloured beams started shooting out of the space all around the *Azure Sunset*, striking all over the massive vessel. Where the beams impacted the shields a white ovular shape was made partially visible around the ship, as the energy being poured into the shields was dispersed. Three similar beams shot back from the *Azure Sunset*, turret mounted SPAs that waved across the space around it. As the beams waved past an Imperial Explorer, another of the incoming cyan beams was ceased in its efforts, and the turret beams waved across to the next available target.

One by one, the beams began winking out preceded by an explosion. The HPA turret fired again, in a fast, calculated, swathing arc across space, winking out several of the beams at once, before ceasing again to recharge. Tracey Fields, alone in the turret control of the HPA immediately went back to work plotting the next firing, attempting to take out as many ships as possible with the few seconds each powerful shot gave.

Still, there were more cyan beams cutting into the shields, some winking out for a few seconds from overheating. Other coloured beams started appearing in the space nearer the *Azure Sunset* as the Osprey X Wings and Imperial Couriers entered range and attacked in unison, and the shields became blotchy, turning dark blue in some areas, and proceeding down through orange to dark red in others. Lasers pierced shields in the darkest areas, and began melting and tearing through hull plating. The *Azure Sunset* was sure to be destroyed before its turret weapons could take out all of the remaining enemies.

Incoming jump signature readings started blaring out on each of the attacking ships. Before the Imperials could break off their attack, another Cruiser appeared from nowhere, with its LPA and SPA turrets facing their rear.

Chaos broke out. LPA and SPA beams cut into the packs from two directions. The new cruiser began deploying Merlin Attack Fighters, and at the same time a small fleet appeared from hiding behind the *Azure Sunset*. A Harris Fighter and a Taipan Mk II led a long line of Asps into the fray, the wing concentrating its fire and taking out anything on its line of attack. Wolf Mk II's and Cobra Mk III's broke off in pairs and attacked from all directions, trying to harass the Imperial Explorers to break off their attack runs. Missiles and ECM systems began firing from both sides, as the *Azure Sunset* started launching its own short range Krait Attack Craft.

With no means of escaping through witchspace, the Imperial fleet fought to the last ship, and escape capsules and debris from both sides littered the area.

\*

The victory was short lived, and there was little choice but to retreat as fast as possible. All scoop fitted ships scrambled to pick up allied escape capsules, while the short range fighters of the makeshift fleet returned to the safety of their hyperspace capable motherships.

While the *Azure Sunset* moved towards the Thargoid Transporter, the other cruiser moved towards the remains of the destroyed Imperial Cruiser. Engaging a tractor beam, the cruiser took the severed engines in tow. This was an unexpected spoil, as all Naval ships were fitted with auto-destruct mechanisms to prevent hardware from falling into enemy hands. This cruiser, however, was brand new off the production line and had been rushed into service before the mechanism could be installed, especially for the purpose of fronting a shiny new cruiser in the Prince's convoy.

Everyone watched in amazement as the first HPA shot from the *Azure Sunset* failed to destroy the huge Thargoid vessel, but buckling it out of shape, and burning the hull so that it glowed in the black of space. The second shot was withstood for half a second, before the ship collapsed inward on itself and the beam, and disappeared entirely.

Large hyperspace entry clouds were opening up from galactic south and north, indicated not only more Imperial Cruisers entering the area, but also a large Federal fleet.

A partially crippled Long Range Cruiser, and a healthy one towing the engines from an Imperial Naval Cruiser formed together with a small fleet. A cloud of mines were dispensed behind them, and shortly afterwards both mammoth ships and all of their diverse escort engaged their hyperdrives.

Soon after, Imperial forces met Federal forces in a destructive battle that lasted several hours. When the Federal armada was finally forced to retreat, there was nothing left of the exit clouds from the *Azure Sunset* and the ships that left with it. Against all odds, the ship that half the galaxy was after, had once again vanished.

\*

"Would my lord like -?"

"Oh for sod's sake, leave the bottle!" I said, irritably pressing my thumb to the credit pad on the table. With an obliging beep, a large portion of my credits funnelled itself into the bar's account. With a frightened look, the waitress slave deposited the bottle of Quphieth Jungle Juice on the table and fled from this surly Federal bounty hunter.

It wasn't the waitress' fault that Bec and Catherine were late. It was to be a farewell drink, of sorts. I'd more or less reconciled myself to the distressing fact that Bec would keep her promise made before we'd jumped to Achenar that we were history. More or less. Rather less than more, really.

During the long days of interrogation, I'd had quite a bit of spare mental space to work out what I was going to do. The interrogation hadn't been too bad, really. Well, actually it had, but at least they hadn't descended to out and out torture. As far as I could remember.

I'd woken up in a room of pure white, strung in a straightjacket with transparent wires suspending me from any contact with any of the walls, or for that matter from wriggling or moving my head. After a couple of hours of this, I'd begun hallucinating, watching rocky-road asteroids bounce off the pure ivory walls, the marshmallows bright against the chocolate.

When the door had opened, I'd actually been annoyed by the interruptions to my fantasy. For the first day, my rather charming first interrogator had shouted at me non-stop about my complicity in the assassination plot, how I was a stooge of the Federation... or the Alliance, it changed from hour to hour. I was a foul and horrible beast to even imagine that I could hurt the Prince and that I would suffer before they'd permit me the blessed escape of being publicly hung, drawn and quartered. Etcetera. Etcetera. I'd passed from resilience to fear to boredom rather quickly. They noticed this, so pumped me full of fear-promoting drugs, along with a stimulant to make sure that I didn't escape into unconsciousness. I began to become unhinged, so they backed off on the fear drugs and began to interrogate me properly. They seemed to cycle through the interrogators, who spent anything from thirty seconds to a couple of hours hammering me. And most maddeningly, they never kept the interval consistent. One questioner would fire off a hundred questions, then the next would do all of three, to be followed by the previous questioner, who would ask fifty, to be followed by another who would ask a hundred, to be followed by the second questioner, who would ask one... and so on. All part of breaking my will.

Not that they needed to. I spilt my guts, relieved that I didn't have anyone to really betray. Except Catherine's position as an Intelligence Operative for a power totally opposed to almost everything the Empire stood for, of course. I rationalised it by reckoning that they'd get it from Bec or Catherine herself. I could have rationalised the rape and murder of my own mother at that point in the investigation.

I looked around. It really was a nice little bar, with sumptuously dressed Imperial Citizens whiling away the day and chiming mobiles of crystal rotating slowly above my head in the gentle afternoon breeze from the open windows. The selection of spirits they had in stock was enough to happily poison me to death, several times over.

My fellow drinkers kept on giving me greasy looks, but I ignored them. What had they done for the Empire lately? I downed my Jungle Juice and poured another shot glass of the light green liquid. I looked at the bottle and frowned. It seemed to have a leak in it, as the contents were disappearing at a very rapid rate.

Of course, once I'd let slip Catherine's identity, the questions really got hysterical. But I was able to silence them by mentioning Marcus Toutarien. My interrogator had gone bone white and left the room. I had about ten minutes of blessed silence then, before they came back in as a pack and accused me of being a filthy, stinking Regicidal Federalist dog. Strangely enough, given what had come before, that was almost a term of endearment.

After a few more days of this madness, I was sedated, and when I came to, I was walking down a particularly grimy street with an equally dazed Bec and Catherine. Veering to the right, we'd slumped against a wall in the poor quarter of Duval City. Assorted lowlifes looked down their noses at us. Hey, even scum have standards!

"You tell 'em everything?"

"Yup. Catherine?" "I like to keep breathing. Yes I did."

"They let you live?" I couldn't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Must have been feeling generous." Catherine said, then leaned forward and vomited. The sedative hadn't been particularly gentle.

Once we'd recovered somewhat, we'd split up. Catherine told us she had to report to the Alliance Embassy. Bec said she had to go see her family. I said I had to go have a shower.

We'd agreed to meet in a bar Bec knew the next day. So here I was, an hour past the appointed time. No Catherine, no Bec.

I worried that they might have been retaken for interrogation, especially Catherine. All the loud, fluting accents of the Imperial revellers around me began to sound like braying threats, each one a disguised Clone agent ready to pounce... "I have just been filling in the requisite paperwork..."

I shook myself from my paranoid mood with difficulty. The giant star that is Achenar's primary glowed red, seeming to take up at least half of the horizon as it set over the Imperial Palace, limning it in fire.

"Here you are!" I looked up. Catherine! At last. I smiled up at her. "I can't stay... he's here, Red, he's here!" My smile fell. Catherine seemed excited, almost dancing. Ridiculously, I noticed she'd had a rather stylish new haircut, her first in a couple of months.

"Who?" I said, feeling stupid even as I said it.

"My husband! The AJNIB have transferred me to the Embassy here on Capito! They're letting my husband join me, they've told him everything and he came, he came! "

"That's fantas-" I began, and was interrupted as Catherine leaned forward, grabbed my chin and planted a kiss on my cheek.

"I've got to go. I'm sorry, his flight's arriving in an hour. I'll see you soon." Catherine said, waving madly as she charged out through the front doors into the fading light. I gave a slightly hollow smile and poured myself another Jungle Juice. It was good to see that the sometimes frosty Catherine was going to have a genuine ride-off-into-the-sunset happy ending. It was also good to see that she was still alive. I'd been hoping that.

I sat there for another quarter of a bottle, waiting, until a call of nature distracted me. As I returned from the toilets (why don't Imperials ever clean them? Is it a Royal Edict or something?) Bec was waiting at my table.

She looked fantastic. Like Catherine, she'd had a haircut and was dressed in a green silk kimono that shimmered metallicly as she walked forward. A series of silver bells chimed along her hems as she walked. She cast a long, slinky shadow in the light of the setting sun. The eyes of half the room were on her, as were mine. My throat felt as dry as a barren moon. I'd decided that my strategy to make her stay with me would be simple and uncomplicated. I would beg. I would plead, I would promise her anything. I would admit all my bad habits, and make up a few to apologise for as well. I'd tell her that we'd do whatever she wanted to (Ship sewerage out of Riedquat for the next five years? No problem!). I'd cajole and I'd weep and I'd wheedle. In summary, I'd do everything short of asking her to marry me. I still have some pride!

"Here you are!" She looked up. At last. I smiled. "I can't stay... Red, he's here!" My smile fell. Deja vu and me have never been good friends.

"Who?" I asked uneasily. My palms felt damp, and it wasn't just from having been to the toilet.

"Him!" Bec said excitedly, grabbing me by the arm. "From Facece, remember? He's here!"

"Oh... him..." I said. The impossibly handsome, mindlessly vain and (for Bec) totally irresistible Navy Pilot had pounced. I felt a hole beginning to open up beneath my feet. "How is he?" I said lamely.

"GORGEOUS!" Bec squealed softly. I was sorry I'd asked. "He's going to get me into the Navy's Special Pilots Program. I'm going to be their star recruit! " Bec leaned closer and grinned. "The best ships, all excitement and zero responsibility..."

"I... that's..." I stammered, feeling the hole beneath my feet yawn wider. This was not going as I'd planned. I was offering her sordid boredom, platonic friendship and an aging Constrictor in need of serious repair. In the other corner were glamour, excitement, wild passionate romance (believe me, I was in the next cabin!) and military hardware several decades ahead of any ship we'd ever own.

"Look, I've got to run. They want me in Facece before the week is out so I can be inducted. Oh, Red, this is so exciting!" Bec's smile was a thing of beauty. Beautiful because it was so transitory. Bec shoved a package into my hands, wrapped in cloth.

"Love you heaps Red." She said, then paused, leaning back to get a better look at me. "But you're far too good for me."

"But..." I said, still unable to form a coherent sentence.

"With Pablo, I don't have to live up to his ideals. It's better this way." She smiled wryly and patted me on the arm. "See you in space!"

And she was gone, the bells jingling as she quickly walked out. I just stood there like a stunned mullet, dumbly holding in my hands a linen white bundle tied up with string. It never occurred to me to rush after her. I just walked slowly back to my table, took a swig of my Jungle Juice and laid the bundle on the table.

So that was it. Two years of friendship, companionship and (go on, say it!) love, and bang. That was it. Goodbye. Farewell. Thirty seconds of semi-intimacy in a crowded bar and off to a new life! Bloody hell.

I looked darkly at the bundle. What was in there? What petty gift had she left me to try and sum up our time together, to sum up everything we'd shared? If she'd retreated to humour, or given me a pair of socks, I would be crushed. Maybe I should just leave it on the table, or drop it on the street in the Poor Quarter, so at least some poor bastard would wear undarned socks for a few days. Or alternately have a good laugh on me.

"Here you are!" I looked up. In front of me was a large, jolly smiling man in an Imperial Factor's uniform. Deja vu suddenly performed a ninety-degree turn. "You can't stay my Lord Ravens, he's here!"

"Now hang on..." I started, but was brought up short by the sleek handgun that the Factor produced from under his voluminous purple robes. Oh shit. There was no way out of this one. The Imps wanted me dead, this goon had probably already killed my companions, and I was next!

"Duck, My Lord, if you would."

I threw myself to the floor as the Factor fired a few warbling blasts of energy over my head. One of the crystal mobiles shattered, its soft chimes turning into a final jagged scream as it was dashed to the floor. Suddenly a lot of people were yelling, and the floor was pounding with footsteps and the crunch of pieces of crystal.

The Factor moved past me with a few deft steps. I looked up to watch him turn over the blackened body of a young woman with a frizzy mop of black hair, a slave's uniform and a small, deadly looking pistol. I rose and shakily moved over next to my saviour.

"Who?" I said weakly.

"Viscount Preston." The Factor said cheerfully. "Milord seems to hold you responsible for his current position of disaffection in the eyes of the Emperor."

I pressed a hand over my eyes. Thank God I was half-drunk. This might be upsetting, otherwise. Above my head, the remains of the mobile circled slowly, razor sharp edges slicing up the dusk. We were alone in the bar, with the body of my would-be assassin.

"We rather need to get out of here, My Lord. I have a shuttle in the nearest bay ready to deposit you at Fort Donalds. Your ship has been repaired and refuelled and is ready to go. I must strenuously suggest that you immediately depart, as we are not able to guarantee your safety in the medium term." The Factor's pistol disappeared back into his robes, but I saw his eyes dart around the bar. Sourly, I reflected that if anyone really cared, they could guarantee my safety pretty much indefinitely.

"I..."

"Immediately." The less-than-deferential factor insisted, a hand snaking around my arm. Snarling, I snatched my arm back from his grip.

"My co-pilot has just left me for the Bloody Imperial Bloody Navy. I couldn't leave even if-"

"We've already identified the best co-pilot from the current pool seeking employment. He is currently en route to Fort Donalds as well." The Factor interrupted smoothly, retaking my arm and pulling me towards the door. He was stronger than he looked.

"All right, all right, just let me grab my stuff." I said. With a sigh, the Factor released me and started looking around shiftily for assassins.

I sighed, went back to the table, recorked the bottle of Jungle Juice and tucked it under one arm. Bec's linen bundle made me pause, but I grabbed it and started towards the door.

Relieved, the Factor followed me with neat, mincing steps. "The Empire is very grateful for your efforts, My Lord Ravens. " I said nothing as I walked heavily alongside him. We emerged into the street just as the sun set over the Imperial Palace, the fire dying away, extinguished by the horizon.

We walked calmly through the crowd that had gathered to view the chaos in the bar and walked into a building opposite the bar. We ascended some stairs onto the roof, where a tiny shuttle had been parked. We climbed in, and the Factor powered the ship up and expertly lifted off the roof, pointing the shuttle spacewards. As the Gs began to build, I took out Bec's bundle and worried at the knot. I peeled aside the folds.

The Factor looked sideways at my staccato burst of laughter, then returned to piloting. Inside the bundle was a potato, Bec's spud gun and a new and still shrink wrapped target robot. Bec obviously didn't want me getting bored and lonely without her. It was the kind of present that kept on giving, as long as tuber-type vegetable matter was available. My smile fell slightly. This was goodbye.

"Which one of these three am I supposed to be, Bec?" I said softly, as we fled the last vestiges of cloud and powered into the jewelled blackness of space.

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"So..."

Norman turned to see the man that had just entered the room. Short, with dark hair and something about the eyes that seemed wrong to him.

The man threw a folder across the table marked "Norman Mosser - Elite". The folder was thick with plastic sheets of writing.

"You impress us Mosser. That folder contains a long, long list of times you should be dead, but have somehow come out alive. Regardless of your methods and whether others would approve of them, they work. Cloning is hardly a standard way of surviving, but you are still sitting in front of me so I guess you are owed the benefit of the doubt."

Norman shrugged, "Lucky I guess."

"Yes, very, but luck runs out eventually. We guess you'd like nothing more than to be able to walk into a space station without someone trying to kill you every time." The man paused to let this sink in. "We can offer you protection independent from all political forces, you can basically disappear. However, we don't trust you enough to let you join us fully yet. You're an accomplished assassin, and an Elite rated pilot though."

"So are a lot of people."

"That pattern replicator you were given will last probably another 2 or 3 shots before it will need to be replaced. I doubt you're going to get very far before your ship is just another cruiser. If, that is you decide to leave now, and we will honour that decision regardless of what you assume. There's not a single person in our organisation that doesn't retain their independence. Most own their own ships, but all heed a call to arms when it's needed. Why do you think that is?"

"That," Norman said "would appear to be obvious."

"No. You're wrong. The only time we touch a person's mind is when they retire. People stay with us for their own reasons. Tell me Norman, why are you rated Elite?"

"Perhaps you should have asked the six thousand people why they wouldn't make Elite. It's because they met me."

"Technically correct, but what drove you to become Elite? For every Elite pilot out there, there are countless thousands that made Dangerous, took their winnings and retired. Their goal was to be rich, to overcome the dangers out there and live comfortably, they saw no reason to stay out there risking their lives every day. To stay out there, ignoring a rising bank account, or squandering it on expensive upgrades has nothing to do with comfort. All those people wanted to make something of themselves, to make a difference. One day they looked in the mirror and thought 'what will my verse be in the poem of time'. So, tell me Norman, why are you rated Elite?"

Norman couldn't remember the last time the words of another had given him pause for thought since Imperial Doctrination. Why had he kept going? He'd always told himself for the need to survive, especially after fleeing the Empire. But this guy was right, liquefying assets at any point would have given him enough dough to hide forever in comfort. He'd stood against galactic governments, even stood between them and etched for himself a name. But in the end he'd still had to run.

Turning his attention back to the unanswered question he gave the best answer he could. "Does it really matter?"

The man on the other side of the desk took a deep breath. He was just going to have to play his cards and hope for the best.

"This little mission has been an enormous success. Self destruct mechanisms on naval vessels, most especially on the newest cruisers, have been a golden rule for all forces since time immemorial. What feat of bureaucracy let a cruiser out of dock without it might never be known, but the simple fact is, we've captured the latest technology in Imperial prime movers and hyperspace drives intact. Do you realise what would happen if we applied that technology to the *Azure Sunset*, upgraded its other systems, and helped stabilise the functioning of the HPA? You'd have a ship capable of taking out any cruiser the galaxy could care to throw at the *Azure Sunset* from a safe distance, and still be able to outrun them. Missions that have never even been contemplated before now become realistic possibilities. The *Azure Sunset* could be used to divert an entire fleet of your naming. War rooms full of Fleet Admirals would shit their pants at the mere mention of the *Azure Sunset* in a mission briefing. We could make a whole scale effort to end slavery in the Empire!

"And why should I want to do any such thing? The *Azure Sunset* is my ship. I didn't gain my freedom just to join another Navy. You want my services? You hire them like all the other scum."

"Agreed."

"What?"

"Agreed, as I said, there's not a single person in our organisation that isn't independent." With this he stood up and crossed the room. With a wave of his hand in front of the wall it dissolved into clear view of the *Azure Sunset* cradled alongside the docking claw. A steady stream of Lifters ferried materials back and forth to the swarm of spider like robots that crawled all over the long range cruiser's hull making repairs and polishing off scorch marks. Towards the end was even more fervent activity where the bottom half of the dumbbell shape's hull had been torn in two and the enormous prime movers could clearly be seen inside.

Movement caught Norman's eye and another cruiser could be seen nosing out from behind the observation deck. This, he noticed, was packed to the brim with his crew, busily getting thoroughly drunk. He fervently hoped none of the engineering staff had been allowed in and were overseeing the repairs. As the cruiser came into full view the captured engines of which they'd spoken were in tow and being brought up alongside the docking claw.

The man turned to face Norman once again. "Consider this as an investment. We have many of these automated repair facilities dotted about the place. They need to be restocked with raw materials to be of any use, but with a ship as powerful as this you should get quite an in stream of salvage. Any mess you can't clean up on your own, just drop a GalNET salvage beacon. Anyone that responds gives you back a percentage of what they sell as credit. If they help you out in a battle, the salvage gets dished out evenly. In this case, we're taking the technology from those engines as we pull them apart, and you get to keep the engines themselves. They're too big to tow back to HQ anyway, which is far from here and at a location I'm not at liberty to divulge at this stage.

"Our tacticians say that your biggest enemy is going to be hyperspace tracking nukes. We're installing interceptor drones, these can be programmed to fly escort, and also to be deployed to cover your hyperspace exit cloud, and to jump in ahead of you. They're disposable and self destructing, so they come with a combination drone builder/launcher which you'll need to keep supplied with raw materials. Your engineering staff will be trained on its use, but it's nothing they can't handle. If you have the cash to spare, I'd also recommend purchasing a few Taipan scout vessels for reconnaissance purposes, they're fast, self supporting and long range. Also not easily available to the general public.

"Oh! And your crew are holding a competition to decide what paint job to give it. They really are proud of that old cruiser and want the space lanes to know it. They feel they won't need to disguise the ship any longer.

"So... what say you then. It's hardly a deal, you're getting the same salvage rewards as anyone else would have done. Helping you out in Achenar was in our own interests. You'll still retain your independence, for what it's worth. All we ask is that in return for membership, you take the odd mission we pass on if you think it's for the greater good, and the greater profit. Also that you respond to anyone in the organisation that calls for help when you can.

Norman continued to watch the graceful movements of the lifters as they parked their supplies in clusters adrift in space. The last full refit had been, when, ever? What was all this crap about the greater good, they'd tried to destroy a major space station, and these people were taking it in their stride. As if on cue, the Taipan he'd come to recognise came into view and brought its prime mover up to full power. No departure patterns here, the Taipan moved off to a point of its own choosing before engaging its hyperdrive.

Norman turned to face the nameless stranger. "What do you people know of Achenar?"

"Only what witnesses saw, the few that escaped with their knowledge intact. The Empire is doing a class job of smoothing it over. Business as usual. Had you succeeded however, I think we'd have seen a major destabilization of the Empire, which is only a shadow of its former self. The two major powers have all but ceased expansion, instead hoarding their resources to hold power in the core systems, even in the face of Alliance growth. This worries us greatly. Rumours have been circulating, as always, of INRA and the Thargoids. Some of these rumours recently have matched fleet movements and we are worried, very worried.

"The one thing we know that drove the Thargoids to war was the exponential expansion of the Human race, they were obsessively paranoid of extinction, Achenar 6d did nothing to allay their fears. Imagine if the roles were reversed? Either way, we were losing the war. We do know that INRA did something, and peace was obtained, but all expansion stopped. The Thargoids have become all but a myth after centuries of silence, but they are back, maybe. And just maybe they've come to finish the job they started. With so many decades of no expansion, I don't think we stand a chance. We either expand, develop some magical technology like the HPA on a massive scale, or we flee, establishing mobile colonies throughout the galaxy.

"So you ask me what I think of the destruction of a station full of clones? I ask *you*, Norman Mosser, what would a new administration in the Empire do? Would it expand? Would it regain its former glory? I think there'd be an arms race, and perhaps Federal expansion also. The Alliance would certainly be kept on its toes and would perhaps evade the bureaucracy that is taking it the way of the Federation."

"So you want me to be a hero, save the universe, is that it?"

The stranger regarded him for a moment. "You do as you please, as does everyone. I hope I'm wrong and it's all just rumours. There's a lot of us out there trying to make a difference, but there are many that think you have the balls to make a real difference when the time comes. Just remember that, and be out there like the rest, spread throughout the core, anonymous commanders passing by, but ready to come together to make a difference. When the time comes."

They both returned to the table and took their seats. Norman stared at his fingernails, wondering not for the first time if all this was just crazy talk, or if it was a load of Ling Lang dung invented to get information out of him.

"And what of the HPA, what's the deal there? Originally there was one little pattern replicator that half the galaxy was chasing after, and then you guys show up with lots of them. Tell me, what's the big secret there?"

The stranger smiled, realising that no one worked it out. "It's part of a Thargoid drive system that no-one ever understood. They're useless in any drive technology anyone has come up with, but they do have a neat habit of converting plasma streams into powerful discharges. Naturally, since this is not what they were made for, they degrade after a while and need replacing."

"So there's a limited amount of them left over from the Thargoid wars?"

"Well yes, unless we capture more Thargoid ships, which seems unlikely to happen. We have enough in stock though, it's just taken this long for human technology to catch up and to make a weapon that can work around the damn things without blowing itself up."

Norman absorbed all this, but decided it could just as well be baloney until he saw evidence. "OK, but how do I know you people are good enough to be safe to work with?" he enquired.

"Test us. We're not scum off the street you know."

"You also don't wear a golden badge"

The man's face tightened at this. "Would you show mercy to an enemy just because they wore no badge and looked safe?"

Norman leaned back in his chair, putting on an aloof look and thinking of the best way to test these people. Sliding his fingers behind his head as if to relax, he withdrew a hard plastic throwing knife, and in a quick movement flicked it across the room. A palm shot out and hit the knife side on, deflecting it and sending it hilt deep into the wall. The man seated opposite relaxed back in his chair and raised an eyebrow, as if he expected nothing less from Norman.

Impressed, as most people got angry when you threw knives at them, Norman stood up and walked back to the window. Understanding all that Norman had been through, the man waited while an hour passed in silence. Norman kept watching the scenes outside, and reminiscing of times past.

"So even if I never contact you again, I get to leave here with my ship, plus upgrades?"

"That's correct."

Norman finally said "I'll take your offer on two conditions."

"What's that?" said the man, sitting up straight and clearing his throat.

"I need a holiday first, and you'd better start it off with a good hot cup of Reidquatian Ultra. Also, I'll need to imprint a clone. I've got a devilish idea of a place to holiday."

\*

Taking off the facial disguise, the woman stared in the mirror. A simple method of changing sex had proved effective in disguising herself many times, and getting it past Norman Mosser was another success in an illustrious career. Then again, the way he looked at her eyes, might he have suspected?

Reaching into her throat she removed the voice distorter and dumped it into a glass of water. Removing her Elite badge from a drawer and clipping it on made her feel alive again, not some fake character to be disposed off at whim.

Once again she stared in the mirror and spoke to herself. "How can anyone survive the cloning and life that guy has led without despairing?". But left unspoken was the envy she, like many others, felt at the thought of immortality. If only he could be convinced to share the technology. Another time perhaps.

Straightening her uniform, she stepped out of the bathroom to go and give her report. She hoped he'd decide to make a difference. He'd be a great addition.

\*

"Thank you, are there any other questions?" The Imperial Spokeswoman balanced carefully on her stilettos, ready to make her escape.

It was the first stop on the Grand Charitable Convoy, and the media's interest was still high. Nearly two hundred journalists jostled for position and camera angle in front of her. The Convoy was scheduled for another two months of ceremonies, ribbon-cuttings. Occasionally an unavoidable act of charity was required for PR purposes.

As the boredom of the routine would begin to set in, the scrum would diminish, hopefully leaving the journalists of reputable Imperial Newspapers. All these Alliance, Independent and (horror of horrors) Federal journalists insisted on asking questions that she didn't know the answers to. Or even worse, asking questions that she did know the answers to, and wasn't allowed to disclose. The Spokeswoman's exquisitely manufactured brow wrinkled with the terrible stress of it all. She must have answered at least four questions already!

The high clear roof of the dome distorted the many shouts and catcalls from the mob. Above it, steady rain beat down on the glass. It was a beastly day, and the chances of a few hours water skiing were looking awfully remote. Oh well... sooner started, sooner ended.

"Yes, you with the hat." The Spokeswoman's finger stabbed out at a smallish man in a garish looking blue velvet hat, who had forced his way to the front. With that sense of fashion, he had to be a loyal servant of the Empire!

"Lleyton Briggs, Mars Observer."

Drat. A Fed with fashion sense.

"Just a quick question as to the circumstances of that ship exploding near Fort Donalds-"

"As I said in response to the previous question," the Spokeswoman said, annoyance colouring her otherwise honeyed tones, "the display of precision flying by elements of the Crown Prince's Bodyguard resulted in a spectacular display of the lethality of the Imperial Navy when used against the target drone."

"Big target drone!" the man said, grinning in the manner of one who appreciates the suspension of disbelief required for the answer to be taken seriously. "Did the ship know it was going to be a targ-"

"Any suggestions to the contrary are the fevered working of demented and corrupt Federal minds, and the Crown Prince laughs at them." The Imperial Spokeswoman threw back her head and let forth an appropriately derisive titter. Her teeth sparkled under the floodlights, just as her cosmetic dentist had promised.

Lleyton sensed movement behind him and ducked. A less-than-accidental elbow swung where his head had been. The Spokeswoman saw her chance.

"And I believe that draws us to the close of today's conference, thank you."

Lleyton bobbed back up again, having straight armed his attempted assailant (who he reminded himself to buy a drink for, later).

"If I could just..." he started, but was drowned out by the Imperial Fanfare blasting out of the speakers flanking the stage. On cue, all the Imperial Journalists present stood bolt upright, placed hands over their hearts and started belting out tunelessly the anthem with precious little tune in begin with.

"Shit," Lleyton muttered. There was a good story here, but he had neither the time nor the resources to follow it up right now. He filed it in the back of his head to send a note to his editor. Little did he know that another elbow was approaching that location at speed.

\*

The Clone agent watched the Federal journalist fall to the ground with a glimmer of satisfaction. All attempts at breaching Imperial Secrets should be dealt with in such a manner. Though perhaps with a more lethal level of force.

The agent switched off the newscast and looked out to the main screen. Fort Donalds hanging before him, rotating slowly. He regarded it impassively.

He had been there when the station had been saved, and still had no idea how it had been accomplished. The bounty hunters appeared to have fulfilled some sort of crucial role, although he did not have the full set of data to confirm this. The past two weeks, his sole assignment had been to ensure that all information relating to this potential security incident was brought under control of His Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations Unit. Now that assignment had been completed.

"Fort Donalds Traffic Control. Clone Agent 15304 in His Imperial Majesty's Special Investigations unit requesting permission to dock."

With commendably terrified speed, the radio crackled into life.

"Permission granted, please proceed to Bay 2."

The Clone agent leaned forwards and engaged the autopilot. The ship shuddered slightly as manoeuvring thrusters began to bring the ship about. The agent watched the spinning vista as the ship rotated for a moment and then switched off the screen, settling himself in his chair.

"Cocktail." he said aloud. A needle soundlessly intruded itself into his arm.

The cool computer voice whispered quietly. "Please State Pharmaceutical Requirements."

"Euthanize." the agent stated.

"Please Confirm Lethal Dosage and State Required Termination Delay." The computer did not seem surprised.

"Confirm Lethal Dose. Immediate Termination." The agent said levelly. All the Traffic Control staff there had been 're-assigned' to remote regions of the Empire and their memories had been selectively wiped. All the relevant data had been extracted from the systems and archived in the depths of the Imperial Palace. If the agent had had his way, the staff would have been liquidated, but that decision had not been up to him.

Even worse, the bounty hunters had been allowed to leave with only the most basic debriefing. Once again, that had been defined as being outside his mission profile. The newscast had proved that his sanitation job had achieved a satisfactory public outcome.

Discounting the bounty hunters as a potential risk (which took somewhat of a leap of faith), the only remaining intelligence risk therefore needed to be disposed of. Although the chance of the sequence of events being pieced together was remote in the extreme...

"Resolving contra-indicated medications, please wait."

Barely any time passed before the agent felt a cold trickle of liquid seep into his arm. Death came quickly and painlessly. He went at peace with himself. His final assignment had been completed, and his death would (in some small way, he was sure) contribute to the Glory of the Empire.

The ex-agent's ship slid easily into the maw of Fort Donalds station, obediently gliding towards Bay 2. Behind it, the doors closed, leaving the universe outside to its own devices, and its occupants to their comforting, well-earned ignorance.

\*

McLeary was awakened by a cold breath of wind against her face. Drowsy from the drugs, it took a few moments for everything to come into focus around her. She felt the cold hard deck of her Harris against her face and struggled to lift herself up, breathing what seemed like very thin air.

What she saw made her stomach churn. The airlock next to her was wide open, and the vista beyond was an aerial view of a planet's surface. She instinctively scrambled for a hold as her eyes told her that the floor she was on, was really a smooth cliff face dropping straight down and out of the airlock.

She didn't fall though, since the artificial gravity of the ship was holding her pinned against the ship's deck, which in turn was facing ninety degrees to the planet's surface. Riotous laughter erupted from a communications console on the wall next to her, and she saw the face of Mack Winston appear on the screen, obviously watching her every move.

Winston reached across for the crash webbing as McLeary started pleading for her life. "Mack? What about your criminal record?", he clipped the crash webbing in place, "That will all evaporate! You can even get an exciting job in the military!", with a stern look he pulled the tightening straps to pin himself to the chair, "Mack?! I'm serious, we can...", Mack smiled and reached out to a button on the console.

"Wait, no!" The artificial gravity switched off in the ship. With the thrusters holding the ship itself stationary, everything inside dropped to one side of the ship. For McLeary, 'down' suddenly became an open airlock, and she plunged through.

\*

All over Achenar, transmission relays halted their normal signal processing in response to an Imperial protocol code. Much of the data spreading across the system was lost to the open gulfs of space, but the whole was retained due to excessive redundancy. The finest of encryption methods was employed, often the data itself was but a small portion of a large chunk of meaningless camouflage. The transmission itself was all but nonexistent, a small breaker barely keeping its crest above the swell of background radiation, just preventing it being forever lost beneath the deeps.

As each relay picked up a signal, it passed along a kill command, forever preventing the re-use of the protocol code given. The data was re-encrypted and passed along with more camouflage, a meaningless torrent in a meaningless torrent, each relay having its memory wiped clean along the way. The few manned listening stations that received any of the transmission were hapless to gain anything from the tiny portions they were lucky enough to collect, even for those that understood the method used.

Eventually receivers spaced around Capitol awoke to receive the torrent, collecting the data they had waited patiently for years to pass by, and directed it towards its final destination. The data coalesced deep in the bedrock of Capitol in a shielded cave, all but immune from detection. Long silent machines awoke to perform their duties, all in perfect order despite the passage of time. From all the mountainous data so studiously collected, only a small percentage was decrypted and restored to form the original.

The data was passed down a long line of pods, uploading the latest copy to each one. Once the sequence completed, all the pods returned to dormancy, all except for the second from the end, which stood next to a gaping empty capsule, opened long before and forgotten, coated in dust within and without. The second pod opened, hissing gasses as the seal cracked, and spilling light into the cave. As the first air circulated over the artificial skin of the form inside for decades, its start-up sequence began. Several minutes later Dreyfus opened his eyes, and remembered...

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# Imperial Herald

Federal deceit and aggression has been served a courageous blow by His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince.

In a pitiful excuse for an ambush, Federal Spies terrorised and hijacked a civilian Long Range Cruiser, and attempted to draw Imperial Forces into a trap.

As if this cowardly act were not enough, the Federation used illegal Thargoid technology to dangerously disrupt hyperspace. His Imperial Highness personally led the Third, Eighth and Ninth Protectorates and drove off the attempted ambush.

After the comprehensive victory, one of the newest cruisers that performed outstandingly in the action has been rewarded with a deep space exploration mission on the edge, and will not be participating in victory celebrations or been seen for a long time. For anyone possessing knowledge of these events, it is a capital offence to not report to their local police station for debriefing.

We expect the Federal Propaganda Machine to fully implicate itself by refuting these events. His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince's Grand Convoy will continue on its goodwill mission, and those needing urgent supplies can rest assured that their emergency supplies are protected from terrorism.

\* \* \*

# Federal Times

The ongoing investigation into the theft of the Huge Plasma Accelerator has lead to strong suspicion of Imperial involvement. Whilst on perfectly legal investigations around the southern Federation systems, two fleets were ambushed by overwhelming numbers of Imperial ships, which allowed a cruiser carrying the stolen hardware to safely escape.

In direct violation of the Thargoid treaties, the Imperial forces used stolen Thargoid technology to ambush the Federal fleets. The Imperial attack was typically mediocre and the Federal fleets destroyed a new Imperial Naval Cruiser, before escaping with no serious losses.

# Frontier News

Federal and Imperial forces are at it again, each accusing the other of ambushing their fleets and attempting to trigger war. After so many years of such incidents, war seems unlikely. It seems that both the Federation and the Empire use incidents like this so that they can mince it through a propaganda machine and lie to their own people to keep them under control.

Let us all hope that the independent worlds remain free from such political infighting and domination.

Not surprisingly, in all the fighting both sides allowed the stolen HPA to slip through their fingers yet again.

\* \* \*

## UNIVERSAL SCIENTIST

Rumours are circulating Capitol of a revolutionary new hull repair device. Alliance operatives ran scans on a Lynx Bulk Carrier parked outside Fort Donalds in Achenar, and discovered that it had had much of its hull repaired to mirror surface in the few hours since their previous scan.

One was quoted as saying. "We were in the Observation Deck bar and I happened to look out the window and notice the old Lynx we'd been scanning earlier was far shinier than before, as if someone had just taken it sun skimming and melted all the micro fractures out." He began to elaborate on theories of using unfocused plasma bursts before being whisked away for questioning.

The Lynx in question was soon after impounded and moved to a secret location before further investigation could be carried out. A station engineer had been heard to say that they had been tasked recently with commencing a full hull repair of the station within an impossible timescale. Is it possible that someone on the station innovated a new technology as a result of being under pressure?

Such a fast repair system would be a blessing for long haul shipping everywhere. The commercial value of such a process would be worth any figure you care to mention, so its understandable why the Imperials are keeping it tightly under wraps.

\* \* \*

## *Random Intergalactic Gossip*

Some interesting stuff passes the RIG desk, but this you won't believe. RIG is in possession of a holo showing a shady looking character in beach clothes, sipping a cocktail on a beach in Eta Cassiopeia. Behind the hat and sunglasses sits none other than Norman Mosser himself, sitting not far from where the Huge Plasma Accelerator was originally stolen.

In the background can clearly be seen Federal Naval HQ as a body falls out of the sky from a Harris fighter. Just audible on a mobile comm set is the control tower warning the Harris fighter for illegal dumping, just before the body hits the control tower window in a colourful display. The holo is several hours long, and it appears that Norman is just sitting on the beach with his Elite badge clipped to his shorts, relaxing and catching up on the journals. Hi Norman. If you're still there, RUN!

RIG will be withholding the holo from publication under lock and key until it is authenticated.

# Acknowledgements and Cast of Characters

[Frantic]

Thanks to all participants! Apologies to anyone omitted from the cast list.

Thanks to Havok for a recent proof read.

The readers.

The critics and proof readers, you couldn't stop our more outrageous indulgences, but did stop some of the complete crap from being left in the text.

And last but not least, since we are so mean to them these days, Ian Bell and David Braben for the foundations of the world of fiction we've created.

## CAST

Jannah Berrinh	– Jannah Berrinh
Andrew Booth	– Commander Nomura
James Keasley	– Lief Ericson
Dan Lind	– Oscar the Lonely Android
Mike Mersey	– Norman Mosser
Ben Peake	– 'Red' Ravens
Mark Smart	– Frantic
Dylan Smith	– James K Winston & Mack Winston
Jake Somersby	– Jake Somersby
Rowan Weston	– Rowan Weston