

Due to the overwhelming pressure from gun-collectors, bear-hunters and unstable loners, Vega Corporation is pleased to announce the second release of the (in)famous and extravagantly lethal DEATHWREAKER! Due to the extremely limited run of 200 million, the original Deathwreaker has become an icon, passed down in many families from father to daughter, from mother to son (with quite some frequency in some family groupings).

Vega Corporation has staunchly resisted pressure from consumers to produce a second production run, as we've had a far more exciting prospect on our drawing boards, which will be landing in an armaments dealer near you very soon!

"We wanted to know what our customers wanted," says Donald Yunnipingu, head of Vega Corporation's Peace Studies Division (Handguns). "So we went on an extensive fact-finding mission throughout the seediest and most violent places in the galaxy. Riedquat, Valhalla, Fremantle's Cafe Strip... and everywhere we went we heard the same thing... you can't improve on this! We got into several Deathwreaker duels based on the mere suggestion that it could be improved! But we refused to take no for an answer, and beat the information out of our valued clients. The result speaks for itself!"

Boasting sleek new Achenari styling, the Deathwreaker II has all the stopping power of the original, and at only 2500 credits (RRP), represents the best bang for the buck anywhere in the galaxy.

With over 15% more power and 8% more efficient power cell, the Deathwreaker II is without a doubt the ultimate in personal weaponry. Personal shields are a mere annoyance to this magisterial handgun. Pass judgement on your foes today with the Deathwreaker II!

This magnificent weapon is rated safe all the way up to 0.3 MW and with the safety interlocks easily disabled (by any competent technician) it can reach a sun-gone-Nova 0.5MW!<sup>[1]</sup> (NB, permanent radiation damage may ensue)

Also, a commemorative Norman Mosser edition is available, only from our main Vega Corp headquarters to the first three hundred applicants. Embossed with a platinum sigil of the Azure Sunset, the emitters have been altered to burn a perfect image of Norman in Profile at a distance of up to a hundred metres!

Available in thirteen colours, all of them variants of jet-black.

**GET YOURS TODAY!**

[1] Please note that Vega Corporation does not endorse the disabling of safety interlocks on its products, and to make sure you don't do it accidentally, we have step-by-step instructions on how not to do it on our GIN Site.

# DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 1

by  
The Elite BBS Collective

May 2006 to July 2006

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# Exile Ain't What It Used To Be

[Mack Winston]

This wasn't supposed to be happening.

"Mack Winston?" asked the Universal Parcel Service droid in confirmation.

"Y..e..s..." I stammered. No one knew we were here. Apart from the stolen Imperial princess, Maria Hesketh-Duval, I'd not seen another intelligent life form for nearly 18 months. Apart from three quarters of a tonne of valuable and illicit drugs, just waiting to be sold, I certainly hadn't seen any packages for nearly 18 months.

And here was the UPS droid.

The package was rectangular, and weighed perhaps a couple of kilos. It quite clearly had my name and address on it. Well, as close as you could get to an address deep in Nirvana's equatorial forest.

The package had no return address. Just a simple Protectabox, with my name on the front.

"Sign this," said the UPS droid. Mechanically, I produced my ident and signed with my thumb.

The droid left, blasting into the atmosphere with its in-built rocket pack.

"What's that?" asked Maria, coming to the front door of our cabin with a basket of fruits and berries she'd collected from the rainforest.

"Trouble," I replied grimly. "I suspect the follow up to this package will be a couple of Imperial clone agents, no doubt." A pity, I was enjoying the solitude. But when the whole galaxy hates you, there are few places to hide. I was already resigning myself to the stress of being on the run again.

I was almost hoping the package was a parcel bomb as I unpacked it, at least that would be deliverance instead of being hunted down for an indeterminate amount of time. But it wasn't.

I lifted the object out of the bubble wrap. There was a simple note.

"Enjoy" the simple message said, in exquisite, almost artistic handwriting, written on the most expensive genuine Imperial vellum.

I lifted the object, feeling the ergonomic pistol grip in my hand. The delicately balanced trigger. The enormous emitter array. The sheer balance of the weapon. The Vega Corp. logo, and the *Azure Sunset* sigil etched into the deep blue metal. The sender hadn't needed to sign it. The exquisite vellum and the fact that the object was a brand new Deathwrecker II had the trademark of Norman Mosser stamped all over it.

## On An Island

[Sam Kemper]

A flock of avians rose from their perches on the stromalites as the swearword echoed around the island. It lacked the subtlety of the Altairian dialect, or the multi-levelled complexity of a quality after-dinner Imperial curse, but made up for it by sheer short, guttural heartfelt power. A flash of white light flickered across the landscape and slowly, one of the stromalite pillars toppled and fell to the ground, dislodging yet more avians from their furtive roostings.

Sam stared down at the glowing barrel of the Deathwrecker and breathed deeply to the sound of the recharging whine of hyperdrive grade capacitors. On the whole, it looked like his companion had taken the news well. Sam had expected a short, radioactive burning related death after telling him that the key to the *Azure Sunset* had been lost - apparently stolen from the corpse of one of the Mosser clones that had been set to roaming human space while Norman was off hunting for Raxxla. Of course, it wasn't a key in the true sense - more of a datacard containing the seed variable for the random number generator that fed the *Sunset's* sequence of hyperspace jumps that had hidden it. But still, you can't board what you can't find. And space was big enough that serendipity wasn't really an option.

Sam glanced out towards the bay and looked at the half-submerged Imperial Courier that sat in the shallows. The visible part of the hull was heavily pockmarked and cratered, and crude biometal patches had been bonded in place. There was a dent in the nose and additional equipment emitters festooned the hull. Towards the rear an aftermarket turret completed the ruination of the once-clean lines. It portrayed a ship that had travelled a long, long way and Sam could picture the crude boxy fuel scoop that would undoubtedly be found attached to the lower hull. Somehow, it didn't seem the best time to ask where he had been.

A sound from Norman made him start. It was a deep sigh, and a small chuckle. Hopefully his apoplexy had passed. Sam ventured a few words.

"The *Sunset*. I gather you wanted it for some scheme or other - can you make do without?"

The chuckle turned to a wry laugh

"It's essential"

"Arse. - What now?"

"Now, we go to the World's End and get pissed - I've got a hold full of alien artefacts to sell. Later we go looking for my ship"

"So what do you want the *Sunset* for?"

Norman winked and started walking towards his Courier. Sam guessed that he would keep his own counsel for now and turned and made his way towards his own Asp, which lay on the sands nearby.

## So Who Is This Mosser Guy Anyway?

[Mack Winston]

"It's a Deathwrecker," I said, shrugging my shoulders in resignation.

Maria turned it over slowly, looking at the deep blue metal. She flicked off the safety. It started to hum. She set the power to maximum normal, and aimed at a rock that was on the other side of the swampy bit of land not far from the bottom of our cabin. Gingerly, she squeezed the trigger.

The world went white, and there was a thunderous splintering sound. Birds exploded out of the forest in panic. A leopard-like creature bounded across the swamp and tore off past the cabin, disappearing into the forest behind the cabin with a crash. Small chunks of hot granite started raining from the sky.

Maria stood there, holding the Deathwrecker limply, her mouth an 'O' of astonishment.

"Told you," I said.

"I'm...I...well, what happens if you let it off in a spaceship?"

"It's usually ... well, bad stuff happens if you set it to full power. But the point is, it'll violently disassemble any Imperial Clone Agent who happens to get in our way".

"Who is this Norman Mosser anyway?"

A difficult question indeed. A friend? An acquaintance? I didn't really know. I had only met Norman Mosser for brief periods. So far, he hadn't tried to kill me - well, that was something. And now the Deathwrecker, out of the blue.

The thing was Maria and I had slipped away in the night without a word being very careful indeed that no one saw us, no one tracked us and no one was going to disturb us while we laid low for a few years until everyone had forgotten about us.

"I don't really know, but he's helped me out of some sticky situations".

"A friend?"

"Well, I hardly know him. But...well, certainly not an enemy," I said hesitantly. "I have a feeling my uncle might have been involved somewhere along the line. But I really don't know. He just turns up from time to time. I'm surprised you've not heard of him actually, his antics are always showing up in RIG".

Maria wrinkled her nose. "I wouldn't ever read *that* squalid little rag," she said snootily.

I wandered back inside, to check on the vat of something suspicious I was trying to brew into alcohol. It was nearly ready - it already smelled like paint stripper mixed with sulphuric acid.

The next thing to do would be to cash in the stash of narcotics, buy a ship and get the hell out of here. Fake IDs would help us put some distance between us and whatever unknown threat was surely creeping up on us even now.

Idly, I wondered if Maria Hesketh-Duval had lowered herself enough notches for a visit to World's End, La Soeur du Dan Ham, Riedquat...

## Red Sky at Morning, Ambassador's Warning

[Catherine Beaumont]

Catherine Beaumont stared at the ceiling. One might have comfortably assumed that it would have been more pleasant to look out the window where a typically brilliant Capitol sunrise was just beginning to illuminate the kilometre-high Imperial Palace, filling its windows with fire, and limning the impossibly elaborate architecture with radiance. Or if one knew of her occupation as an intelligence analyst, one might have assumed she might have been better served examining one of the three viewscreens displaying a rolling summation of both public and occult information of everything which went on everywhere. Motionless, the only indication of continuing life was the occasional twitching of her nose as the hyper-caffeinated steam from the mug of Riedquatan Ultra tickled her nose. It was nearing the end of her monitoring shift, and she had to pick *this* up. Why couldn't it have been Lam who was following her? He was good... he didn't have a husband and child to get back to, why couldn't this datum have waited just fifteen minutes longer?

Sighing, Catherine rose from her seat, picked up her cup of coffee and went out the door. The guard robot outside her station hummed at her.

"Same to you." she snapped, ignoring the startled verbal query it gave in response. They didn't allow much organic matter in the classified section of the Alliance of Independent Worlds Embassy, such was the fear which their intelligence services held for their hosts skill in biological engineering. It didn't bother Catherine too much, as she'd been born and raised on a space station orbiting an airless rock. But occasionally she tended to forget that now she was on a world abundant with life and other people, such was her immersion in analysing the data. However, the data she'd just reviewed meant that she had to talk to one of those people, and she wasn't looking forward to the experience.

"Is Jerzy here?" she tapped on the door of her boss' office. Carl, Jerzy's secretary looked up at her blearily. Despite having served his boss for nearly three years, he had yet to adjust to the hours required.

"He's giving his daily briefing to the ambassador. He'll be finished in fifteen. Is that real Riedquatan ultra?" he finished plaintively.

"Yes." Catherine said unsympathetically. "I think he'll need to hear this."

She turned on her heel and headed for the ambassador's office. As she passed a glass partition, she stopped and considered herself in the reflective surface briefly. Gah! Horrible! She rubbed her eyes and re-tied her hair. It barely helped, but the Ambassador was known to be hostile to any slight indication that anyone actually worked, and she didn't want her dishevelled appearance to blunt her message.

She nodded to the guard (human, this time) outside the office, flashed her pass and opened the door to the ante-chamber. There was no secretary in the inner office, so she knocked briskly on the door.

"What... who's that?" came the stentorian voice of the ambassador.

"Analyst Beaumont, your Excellency." Catherine said, trying to put urgency into her voice. Given her tiredness, it probably sounded more like boredom.

"What do you... what's that?" the annoyed voice became muffled as the distinctly clipped tones of Jerzy were quietly heard. "Oh all right... come in."

Catherine walked in, and as always, was impressed at how much clutter could fill an office without turning it into an art gallery. Ambassador Jerome was known as an Empiophile, and had accumulated artworks from every corner of the empire, turning his office into something resembling a Bazaar. A small viewscreen on his desk was the only indication that any work was actually done in the office. Jerome, however, was far from ornamental, although his liking for decorative companions was well known. They'd informed him that most of them were plants from the Imperial Security Services, which he took in his stride. He had a level, if rather pompous head on his shoulders, and political nous to burn.

Jerzy, on the other hand, was a different kettle of fish. A plump ascetic, he enjoyed his job in a bloodless sort of way, and he was staring at her with an expectation that bordered on huger.

"I'm sorry to disturb you both, but I believe I've found something." she said. She had the sinking feeling that maybe she was wasting their time. To her horror, she realised she was still holding the cup of coffee.

"Well, couldn't it wait? We were in the middle of a highly important briefing here."

"Ambassador." Jerzy raised a finger. "Agent Beaumont is the duty analyst. If she says it's urgent, it's urgent. You can put the cup down, Agent."

Hot with embarrassment, Catherine lowered the mug onto the nearest surface. Hoping to the Deity that he was right about the urgency, she began her report.

"Some data has arisen. A Universal Parcel Service order was placed, sending a parcel to a remote location on Nirvana, in Phekda. The parcel was addressed to Mack Winston."

The ambassador snorted. "As if we care what happens to THAT delinquent. Lady Hesketh-Duval on the other hand... you do know her father pesters me about her on every opportunity? It's got to the point where EXTREMELY important discussions are being interrupted by his frothing and shouting. "

"Yes Your Excellency, it is unfortunate." Catherine said patiently. "However, there's no indication she's being held against her will, and revealing their location has been deemed unwise. We've known where Mack Winston is for nine months, and only due to a freakishly lucky sighting by a Park Ranger. We've let him be, as long as they've stayed where they are. However... the use of UPS practically puts their location in the public domain. If we can see it, so can everyone else. Mack's cover has been blown. He's going to have to run, or the Imperials will assassinate him. The Federation would probably do the same, but would have to make it look like he was resisting arrest."

"Where was the parcel sent from?" Jerzy interjected quietly.

"Tracy's Haven, in the Vega System."

"And how heavy was it?"

"I'm FAILING to see the point in this." Jerome said, in some frustration. A minor criminal was suddenly something that had the power to interrupt his morning.

"Please, Your Excellency." Jerzy held up a finger again. "I believe I can see where this is going."

"The loading bill says 2371 grams."

"Damn!"

Jerzy rocked back in his chair and sharply drew in a breath. He pinched the bridge of his nose in concentration. About five seconds passed, and Catherine could see the frustration building in the bemused ambassador.

"Will SOMEONE tell my what's going on?"

Jerzy looked up, and his gaze flicked to Catherine, asking if there was anything else. She shook her head. He smiled back at her, and she could read the exhilaration in it. This was what he lived for... deciphering the signs before the event, feeling the tremble before the earthquake, being able (in some small way) to read the future. She lived for this, too.

"Thank you, Agent Beaumont," he said. "Your Excellency, some explanation is probably in order..."

Catherine left, feeling relieved. Jerzy could explain it all.

The source of the package had been the clue that had tipped her off. Tracy's Landing, the homeworld of Vega Line Corporation, the makers of Deathwrecker. The recently released Deathwrecker II had a base weight of 2053 grams, close enough. But why despatch from there, when Deathwrecker IIs were available from disreputable gun shops all over civilised space? The only difference between the Deathwreckers available on Tracy's Landing and those elsewhere were the special 'Norman Mosser Commemorative Edition', available ONLY from Vega Line's HQ. These had been instantly popular with collectors, Mosser groupies, and possibly even with...

Sending the parcel to Mack had forced him from his hiding place. The contents of the parcel were a sign, an invitation and maybe a threat. As Catherine had said, the UPS droid had left a trail that state-sanctioned killers would doubtless follow. But it was a threat not to Mack, but to the powers that be, a threat that the intelligence services had been dreading for several years. For them, the Mosser Edition Deathwrecker was the Azure Sunset in miniature, with its death and destruction all bearing the stamp of its commemoration.

Minor criminal though Mack may be, his lethal skills were very real, and in the service of a genuine intelligence, they represented a difference-making variable to whatever scheme Mosser had planned. If Mosser wanted him, it

wasn't to deliver flowers and chocolates. Catherine felt a queasy feeling in her stomach. She'd had experience with Mosser Master-Plans and knew they were ambitious, if not megalomaniacal. Catherine walked quickly back to log off. She felt a sudden need to hold her baby and suggest to her husband that they take a holiday. A holiday somewhere far from anywhere important, where not even a UPS Delivery Droid could find her. By the time she entered her office, the sunrise had risen further in the sky, seemingly bathing the Imperial Palace in blood.

Catherine hurried home.

## Strange Sightings

[Vasquith de Haviland]

The ship detonated with enough fury to fuse hydrogen, jettisoning shrapnel and burning hyperdrive fuel across the cosmos. The shields of the Vagabond flickered, but held against the bombardment as the Asp Explorer corkscrewed around and away from the dead ship, before straightening out and continuing upon its previous heading towards the inner system.

"That was close, Cap'n," hooted the first mate, Michael Veruz. He looked for a response from the man to his left. He would take anything: A grunt, a raising of an eyebrow. Nothing. He slapped his commander on the back, and finally received the grunt he had so desperately wanted.

"What's the matter Cap'n? It was a good kill, wasn't it?"

"The vibration in the third hyperdrive nacelle has jumped up another notch," replied Commander de Havilland, his voice devoid of emotion. Veruz leaned closer, to de Havilland, looking at the readout on the control panel. He knew how to pilot a ship, but the mechanisms behind the ship were a complete mystery to him. Fortunately for him, de Havilland had hired him as a co-pilot only, as reflected in his pay. de Havilland finally broke the growing silence with a sigh.

"Yes Michael, good kill. Do you think you can handle this girl while I check it out?" Veruz eyed the commanders seat, mentally licking his lips.

"Sure thing, Cap'n," he said, jumping out of his co-pilots seat. de Havilland stood up and moved to the back of the cockpit.

"Just remember, she's sensitive," he called out. Veruz nodded back.

"I know Cap'n. I'll look after her." de Haviland paused, like a father unwilling to leave eye contact with his baby. A deep breath to bolster his courage and he ducked through the door and headed down to engineering.

He reckoned that if he sneezed, the whole engine would fall apart like a deck of cards. The thing was that fragile. That battle had been short, the pirate green around the gills. Yet his ship had almost died just defending itself. He didn't have the money for a service, but being in debt was better than being dead. Once they had finished their errand in this system, he would book in at the nearest available shipyard. Hefting a heavy spanner in one hand and a realignment tool in the other, he carefully climbed between the pipes of near absolute zero coolant and super heated waste coolant till he was astride the faulty nacelle. The operating manual insisted that the hyperdrive was off when any nacelle was being realigned, for safety reasons. de Havilland would feel naked and exposed if he turned off his hyperdrive. If they were attacked while it was down, they would have no escape. It took hours to cool down and many more to start back up again, due to the high running temperature of many of the components. He located the alignment tool then using the spanner as a handle, began to crank the adjustor for the nacelle emitter. Each three sixty degree twist of the adjustor moved the nacelle several nanometres.

A second twist, then a third. Another half twist. The nacelle began to brighten and the hum of the engine immediately responded, increasing in frequency slightly. To de Haviland's trained ears it was as if the ship felt pleasure, as if a thorn had been removed from its foot. Mission accomplished, de Havilland turned to extricate himself from the engine.

"Cap'n!" came Veruz's voice over the intercom. "You had better come up here!"

de Haviland's heart rate rose a few beats. "Are we under attack?" he said, getting back to the gangway and slapping down the intercom button.

"I don't think so. Not yet." replied de Haviland's co-pilot. Was that uncertainty in the mans voice? de Havilland wondered. The man wasn't a novice, he knew the space lines almost as well as he did. A bad feeling rumbled over de Haviland's spine. He suddenly wished they were under attack. de Havilland bolted up the ladder.

"What is it?" asked de Havilland, holding onto door rail as he caught his breath. Veruz pointed to the object on the main display before climbing out of the pilots seat, which de Havilland reclaimed. "A long range cruiser?"

"Sure is Cap'n"

"What's it doing out here? This is a dead system," de Havilland wondered aloud. "What's the ID?" Veruz didn't respond.

“Michael!” de Havilland snapped, then looked over his co-pilot's shoulder at the numbers flashing on his screen. “Holy shit...” he whispered.

“Is that what I think it is Cap'n?” the two men locked eyes. de Havilland gave the man a small nod.

“It's the Azure Sunset.”

## **As two million credits slip away into the night**

[Ed Gilmour]

Ed Gilmour cursed once again, a curse that could burn bark off trees. Three thousand credits of sniper rifle, four months hacking through vegetation, five hundred credits of Quick-Lok, a bad back, athlete's foot and nothing to show for it.

Thigs had started to unwind only half an hour earlier. Tantalisingly close to his prey - rescue the Princess from the Pilferer, take her back to the Empire - and a cool 2 million credits awaited from the father of the young royal.

How the location information had got out - he was sure he was the only one to have put the pieces together, but he'd got that sinking feeling a couple of days ago as the UPS bot flew by. Confirmation had come half an hour earlier this morning. An Osprey-X, gliding silently overhead. No markings. Registration obscured. Full stealth mode, causing only the treetops to swish in its wake as it descended through the torpid, biting-insect-filled early morning air.

Next, there was a flash like summer lightning.

One Eta Cass, Two Eta Cass, Three Eta Cass >blam!<

Three seconds. About a kilometer away, just in the direction of the target - the target who was also a kilometer away. Then two more flashes, followed by the sound of muffled gunfire, a blam, then more gunfire which terminated abruptly in an especially loud blam and a splintering crash. The sound reverberated around the surrounding forest. A few sleepy birds stirred high in the treetops.

About twenty minutes after that, the Osprey X burst out of the forest, clawing for altitude, engines roaring. Another flash, and the ship vanished in a pulsating orange hyperspace exit cloud.

Ed sighed. The target was gone. The Princess was gone. There would be no two million credits. He wondered if there was any point going to the presumably scorched remains of the target's cabin, or whether to just call his ship out of orbit to recover him.

# Awoken

[Maria Hesketh-Duval]

I awoke with a start. I thought it was just a morning thunderstorm - a brilliant flash and sharp crack on top of each other - but the weak light of Phekda struggling over the horizon put pay to that theory.

I reached over in the dim light of dawn, and Mack's scrawny body wasn't there.

"Zipzipzipzipzipzip" - gunfire. Then a flash and a noise that boomed like the ceremonial cannons at the Palace. Silence.

"ZipzipzipzipzipzipzipzipBLAM!" - gunfire cut off abruptly by another flashbang and a loud splintering noise. Animals and birds burst from the rainforest in alarm.

I darted outside and listened.

Silence.

I thought for a moment. Well, someone's probably coming for me. Better lie low. So I hid behind the water butt, where I could see the approaches to the cabin. The sounds of approach soon came - the sound of someone forcing their way through the undergrowth. It sounded like Mack swearing bitterly. I listened for any sounds of struggle.

"Maria!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. I still couldn't see him. "Get ready, we've got to leave now!" came another shout as he finally made it into the clearing.

Suddenly he froze and lifted the Deathwreker, pointing it at the water butt I was concealing myself behind.

"It's me, don't shoot!" I shouted.

"Gah, you almost gave me heart failure," he replied. He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"What the hell happened?"

"We've got to go. Clone agents. I knew they'd come. I couldn't sleep last night and went outside and sat for a while. That's when I saw their ship glide over. An unmarked Osprey X. So I went to take a look, one of them saw me so I had to shoot. Damn the cycle rate of this thing is slow", he said looking at the Deathwreker.

"Then?"

"Well, I got the first one easily, the 'wreker was ready to go. But they almost got me," he said, his voice shaky. "All I could do is run and hide while this thing recharged, and the clone agents are fast. I got the second and third in a single shot, but the third only got hit by a glancing blow and returned fire. So I had to wait for it to charge again then shoot him. Come on, we've got to go, there will be more!"

Mack rushed inside, hastily stuffed some clothes in a backpack. I dragged on what was nearest to hand.

"Come on, let's go!"

He began to run.

"Where are you going?" I shouted. "Didn't the ship land that way?" I pointed to the direction he'd come from. "There's a perfectly good Osprey X parked over there"

"How the fuck are we going to get away in that thing?" he yelled in exasperation.

"If it's clone agents, it's an Imperial ship. All members of the Royal Court can take any Imperial ship they like. I can unlock it. It's that or four months hacking through that miserable forest and probably being eaten by something in the process", I explained in a brittle voice. So he had been shot at this morning, but there was no need to swear.

I sighed. Sometimes Mack Winston forgot who he was with.

## Worth Your Life?

[Vasquith de Haviland]

“Where the hell did it come from?” de Haviland demanded. Veruz looked at his commander and shrugged.

“I don’t know Cap’n. I was keeping the ship on this heading, then suddenly a blip came up on the radar at 3 o’clock. I swivelled the ship around to take a look and there it was.”

“It must have a pretty special hyperdrive to enter the system this close to the star,” de Haviland murmured.

“Are you kidding?” asked Veruz, who had been following all the news in relation to the Azure Sunset. Norman Mosser had been a criminal of some renown, but after what the media were labelling the HPA saga, he had reached almost cult status. Veruz was a little too enthusiastic for de Haviland’s liking, but there was nothing he could do about that for now. He tuned out as his co-pilot began spouting technical details and specifications of the highly modified Long Range Cruiser. He didn’t care what it was, just why it was here.

“Let’s get closer,” de Haviland said, interrupting his co-pilots ramblings. He took hold of the controls and began moving the Asp Explorer in towards the behemoth.

“Ahhh, Cap’n?” Veruz asked nervously.

“What?”

“Only three ships have spotted the Azure Sunset in the last six months.”

“Good for them.”

“And all three were destroyed by unknown forces while still in the system.” de Haviland snapped his head toward Veruz.

“What!” he demanded.

“They’re probably already on their way.”

The Asp sidled up next to the juggernaut and began recording all the information the scanners and sensors could pick up. de Haviland delicately pushed his ship around using chemical thrusters, marvelling at the extent of the damage and wondering how the ship had escaped. “They sure built them tough. It wouldn’t surprise me if it was an old Alliance warship retrofit,” he said, glancing back to his co-pilot who had just walked back into the cockpit. Veruz nodded, then sat down.

“Ok, the transponder has been deactivated. They will still be able to trace your engine signature though. We should get out of here.”

“Relax. I undid my repair from earlier. Our engine signature should be off kilter. As soon as we escape, we’ll put it back to normal. We’ll be fine. I don’t know who ‘they’ are, but there is only so much tracking technology can do.” Veruz nodded again, but stayed silent. The two sat in silence for several minutes as de Haviland continued to scan the large ship, recording as much data, including video, as possible.

Then the radar went mad.

“Multiple Contacts!” Veruz almost screamed to de Haviland. He warning klaxon had immediately drawn his eye to the radar where several dots, representing spaceships, had appeared.

And the number was increasing.

Within a few seconds, there were at least twenty ships surrounding the Azure Sunset, and the Vagabond. de Haviland put full power to the prime mover and swivelled the ship around to get a visual idea of what was going on. Their acceleration rate was phenomenal. They would be in weapons range in less than a minute. Veruz powered up the radar mapper and got ID’s on the approaching ships.

“Bah! Military Transponders! What did I tell you? We’re dead!” cried Veruz.

“No we’re not,” de Havilland said with as much calm as he could muster. Truth be told, he was scared shitless too, but he needed Veruz to perform properly, and he wasn’t going to in his present state. “We’ll get out of this, just do what I say,” he commanded. Veruz nodded, found some professionalism and grabbed the co-pilot controls, ready. de Havilland returned to studying the space around him. There were no holes in the net of spaceships steadily enclosing around him. Twenty guns, all aimed at him.

No way out, no where to go.

They were trapped.

## Dan Ham's Sister

[Angus Berkley]

"Johas, I'm going to do you a favour. You're fired. Get off this station in five minutes or less or you will be dead"

"Wha-?"

"Leave. Now"

Johas opened his mouth in protest, caught the look in Angus' eye and turned and walked out. The barman turned around and looked back at the clientele. The World's End was always a tricky pub to manage even at the best of times - it managed to mix bounty hunters, tourists, pirates, merchants, gawpers and scum in the same room, with alcohol and somehow managed to remain mostly intact. Even when the space madness cases kicked off they managed to right the furniture, weld over some of the holes in the wall and open for business the next night. It helped of course that the bar weighed twelve tonnes and contained shield generators - the worst thing that could happen was a stray shot stopping the flow of beverages.

Well. Maybe not the worst. Not now. Not after what Johas had done. The barman looked at one table in particular and gritted his teeth.

Johas must have been born in a barn not to have recognized that face. The one on the list of people to not let in. Ever. The face that launched a thousand ships. Bounty hunter ships. With big fuck off laser guns and NN500s and Energy Bombs. Some of the less wise customers were already ordering rounds of 'courage' and toying with Deathwreaker holsters. The smartest were making exit clouds outside the station. Angus' hand felt the red button under the counter that triggered the decompression alarm for the bar. He should press it, evacuate the bar and close the place for the night. It would be safe - and the idea offended him.

The door to the bathroom opened and Norman Mosser emerged, wiping his hands together. For a brief moment a heat shimmer seemed to be emanating from the chromed Deathwreaker 2 holstered at his hip and then Norman walked back to his table. One of the other two Mossers glanced up, and poured another drink. The first Mosser jerked his head towards that toilet door and shrugged and they started talking again. There was something tragically funny about there being no sign of Mosser in Riedquat for years and then three turning up at once thought Angus.

After five minutes of watching their body language and their conversation, Angus had established some kind of hierarchy amongst the three of them. The leader - Mosser#1 wore a well made and functional shipsuit and appeared to have a streak of grey in his hair. He had a bloody gold Elite badge on a chain around his neck. Mosser#2 was wearing a horrendously well tailored suit with a pair of Deathwreaker 2s sat in front of him on a table. He looked exactly like the way Mosser did in the Deathwreaker adverts. Mosser#3 was wearing jeans and a t-shirt and was the one who had just returned from the head. The conversation had been quite animated and Mosser#1 had asked lots of questions of the other two. At one point, Mosser#3 had laid a hand on a holster and Mosser#1 had pointed to the Elite badge. They now looked to be bouncing ideas around. And drinking heavily.

Something in the corner of his eye caught Angus' attention. He'd been distracted by the Mossers for long enough for his control of the room to slip. One of the idiots has reached the tipping point of drunkenness and greed and courage and had stood up and was walking towards the Mossers. He had drawn a Deathwreaker and the low hum of the charged weapon was just audible under the sound of the jukebox. He raised the weapon to aim and called the Mossers out;

"He-"

The guy dropped dead. Mosser#1 turned back to the table and carried on the conversation with his fellow Mossers.

Angus replayed the last few moments in his head. He hadn't seen Mosser#1 turn. He certainly hadn't seen a weapon fire and now there was a corpse. That did not make any sense. Nor did it make the bar any safer. One Mosser was a pile of bodies and some awkward questions. Two could probably cost him the bar. Three could well result in the destruction of the station. Closing the bar would definitely do it. But there was a principle at stake. Angus also knew that some of the more curious eyes were watching him to see what he would do.

Angus stepped from behind the bar and the protective aura of the shield generators and walked purposefully across the room. Not too fast, not too slow. This was his bar. As he approached the table, he caught the tail of the conversation

"...agreed, we'll split up and search for now. Either we'll find her or someone else will"

Mosser#2 looked up. He flashed a slightly predatory smile

"Yes"

Angus didn't bother looking round. Everybody was watching.

"I don't know how you got in, but all three of you were barred. The exit is over there."

Angus gestured over their heads to where some of the drunk, but still sensible were leaving.

"And if we don't want to leave?"

Angus looked the Mossers up and down.

"I didn't say you had a choice"

"There are three of us and only one of you"

Angus smiled at the Mossers and unclipped his sidearm holster and dropped it on the floor.

"That should even the odds"

\* \* \*

The next morning Angus handed out stimpaks to the overnight guests and looked across the bar at the damage. Most of the furniture could be repaired fairly cheaply, and he should be able to open his left eye by evening opening. He hadn't seen the Mossers leave during the melee but they had apparently slipped out after the Disoan had been wedged between the shield bubble and the ceiling and before the asteroid miner had pulled out the nunchucks. Either way, they were gone.

## Hide and Seek

[Vasquith de Havilland]

Quick! Think! How do you escape the perfect trap? de Havilland spun the ship around looking for answers. It was empty space. Nothing between him and his enemies. No way to stand up to that many ships. It would be a safe bet to say they were all elite pilots.

“Missile Lock!” yelled Veruz as he released the charge in the NAVAL ECM system. A web of electrical current surrounded the ship, designed to overload the electronics in missiles. If these people were who Michael said they were, then a commercial ECM would not stop their missiles.

Which meant his time to live had just halved.

The Azure Sunset reappeared in the front view.

You don't escape, he realised.

“Hang on!” de Havilland yelled, throwing all power to the engines.

The Vagabond flew straight towards the Azure Sunset.

The Azure Sunset filled the front view. It was so large and so close, de Havilland thought he could reach out and touch it: but they weren't that close.

“Cap'n! What are you doing?” Veruz asked.

“Prepare to launch the missile. Unguided,” de Havilland replied. Closer, closer. He risked a look at the scanner. The missile was closing in fast. “Move!” he urged the ship, willing the prime mover to push just that extra bit harder. He returned to the forward view, scanning the hull of the long range cruiser. Finally, he saw what he was looking for, and changed course.

An intercept course.

A collision alarm began ringing through the cockpit. They were less than a kilometre away.

“Cap'n!” cried Veruz, too scared to sound worried. de Havilland blocked him out. He needed to concentrate. He lined up the target in the crosshairs, judiciously adding sideways thrust to counteract the slow roll of the Azure Sunset.

Five hundred metres. Three hundred metres. He had to judge this perfectly. He made another correction.

Two hundred metres.

“OK launch!” yelled de Havilland. Veruz smashed the fire button down with his palm.

Less than a micro second later, the missile launched from its rack at the front of the Asp Explorer. It powered away with acceleration greater than 30g's. It took less than a second to bridge the distance to the ship. Several things happened at once:

The missile exploded against the blast shield on the long range cruiser's internal flight deck.

The naval missile, pursuing the Asp detected the ships proximity and armed its warhead. The second stage ignited and the terrible explosive reached out to grab the Asp.

The blast door exploded, sending shrapnel outward into space.

The Asp bucked and yawed as the shrapnel buffeted its shields, threatening to tear it in two.

The shrapnel continued past, creating a wall of metal fragments. The second stage of the missile detected the mass and ignited the warhead.

Boom!

The Asp entered the flight deck of the Azure Sunset, spinning wildly, the exploding shrapnel passing their momentum to the Asp as it tried to fly through. The shockwave from the exploding missile rammed into the back of the Asp, throwing its rear end up and into the roof of the flight deck.

SMASH!

The cockpit of the Vagabond was filled with the sound of shrieking metal as the Asp smashed upwards, then downwards, flicking head over heels through the ship. Alarms blared through the cockpit speakers while red lights flashed up warning of damage to systems. Veruz went flying, while de Havilland valiantly held on to the flight stick, attempting to correct the devastating fishtailing antics of his ship. He flicked the controls around, up, down, activating the side and dorsal jets to try and regain some form of control. Metal continued to tear and cry, sparks flying across the front screen, and the sounds of collapsing bulkheads invading his mind, trying their best to distract.

There on the left, a side room.

de Havilland spun the ship around as best it could and put the prime mover back to full power. The ship slowly moved sideways. The left wing started smacking against the wall, so de Havilland applied reverse power to the left side, maintaining full speed to the right.

The effect was almost spontaneous.

The Asp suddenly flung itself to the left and buried itself in the secondary passage, too wide to fit, but trying to get through anyway. The ship finally came to a halt fifty metres down the passageway, the wingtips all but destroyed.

de Havilland let out a sigh. He was still alive. He looked around to spot his co-pilot sprawled on the floor behind him. Yup, he was alive too.

Good. But for how much longer? They may have survived one missile, but there were still twenty ships out there. They were trapped inside the Azure Sunset, and their ship, if he could even get it out, was a mess. It wasn't going anywhere.

"Out of the cooking pot and into the oven..." de Havilland murmured.

## Head for the South

[Mack Winston]

Phekda 6, pregnant with hydrogen fuel, loomed ahead. Not that it would do much good for our military hyperdrive, even if we had a fuel scoop. Our Osprey X, recently liberated from the clutches of the three Clone Agents, drifted in Phekda 6's orbit. The black market military fuel ship would meet us soon, we hoped. It had already been a couple of days.

I must admit some surprise on Maria's easy entry to the ship. I had fully expected her to be persona non grata within the Empire, but it seems that perhaps the Empire, or most likely her father had entirely the wrong idea about her situation. After our hasty departure from Nirvana, we could take a look around the ship.

An Osprey X is not big. This one was unexpectedly cramped - a tiny flight deck, just big enough for two people who really liked each other, and behind a very tiny cabin to sleep three Clone Agents in fair discomfort. A small cubicle contained a food dispenser. What it contained was indescribably bland. Clone agents, explained Maria, had neither need for comfort nor taste. The reason for the unusually cramped conditions even for an Osprey soon became apparent. We opened the door to the aft quarters.

A narrow corridor, barely enough for one person to get through, and a door in its side. I opened the door.

Inside was a room that took up most of the interior space of the small ship. The room was tastefully lit. It contained a highly luxurious bed, a small desk, and the typical hand tablet presumably loaded with plenty of dreamware. The room was spotlessly clean. The floor had a thick carpet. A large mirror took up one wall.

"Well," commented Maria, "looks like they were going to return me. This is obviously my state room"

I stood in silence for a minute.

"Yes," I said, mustering a reply.

I went to the bed and felt it. There were legends written about the beds Imperial princesses slept on.

"It's the best product of Capitol Beds, no doubt" said Maria, watching me touch the furniture. "Psychoreceptive beds. The latest in the line. It responds to your mood, and senses your body, subtly altering the feel of the bed to best match your mood and help you sleep", she added.

I lay on the bed. It was a world of comfort unknown to me.

"Oh, and watch this," she said, slipping off her coat.

She drew her small hand laser and shot me.

My mind panicked, but I realised that I was completely unharmed.

"Reactive shielding. The bed monitors the room. Any hostile moves and it instantly throws up shields."

"Did you have to test it that way?" I asked shakily, the blood having drained from my face.

"Don't worry, it was set to stun. I wouldn't actually go as far as kill you," she said, with an ever so slightly sadistic smile. She continued.

"They had problems with these at the start. You can't leave the bed on shields all the time because it makes life hard for the servants. So they made a system that monitors for hostile actions. It watches for things like I did then, as well as the brain patterns of any being in the room. If it detects a threat, well, up go the shields."

"That sounds fine, but there's going to be a but?" I asked.

"Yeah, at first they didn't think they needed weapons detection because the brain scanning was so foolproof. That was until an assassin got in some poor royal's room with a knife and thought about nothing but fluffy bunnies until the moment he plunged the knife deep into Princess Abitha Denker-Duval's heart"

"Ouch"

"The designer of the first bed got executed for his oversight of course. The engineers for the next model were much more careful about the shield systems".

I got up off the bed and went to the desk, to look at what Dreamware they'd supply a Princess with. There was no Dreamware there. Not even simple video. Just a collection of books by some authors I'd never heard of - a huge number by someone called "Shakespeare", and some books written by authors with odd names like "Plato" and "Nietzsche" and a few others.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

Maria smirked. "Oh, authors for the pure and innocent". I detected a hint of irony in her voice.

"Pure and innocent?"

"Imperial Princesses are pure and innocent. So they are given pure and innocent material," she said with a hint of scorn.

"You never told me about this"

"You never asked"

"Fair enough. OK, tell me about it."

Maria sighed. "It's like this. Princesses are pure and unsullied. Princesses must stay virgins until married to only one of royal blood. Imperial elders, as you would imagine, a bunch of old men with the intellectual calibre of Winnie the Pooh select appropriate reading material - never Dreamware, not even video - and that's all a Princess is allowed to read"

"Who is Winnie the Pooh?"

"A bear."

"OK"

"So they give us a bunch of literature from Old Earth. The truth is that few Princesses actually understand it. The Elders don't even understand it. Take Shakespeare - they think it's all pure and full of culture, they don't even understand that it's all sex and violence because of the language it's written in. Take Sophocles's Oedipus, it's about a guy who murders his father and marries his mother. Well, I suppose that's perfectly normal behaviour in the Empire, but the idiot reading material selectors don't even understand the stories and don't realise that's what they are giving out"

"So how did you understand it?"

Maria gave me a withering look.

"Because I have a greater mental ability than a talking bear?"

"Sorry"

"I looked into the background. The librarian was slightly subversive and let me find out the meaning of this old language. As I grew more aware, I became less tolerant of the insipid princesses I was forced to have as my only company. In the beginning, I found that narcotics eased the pain from the stultifyingly irrelevant chit chat of the other Princesses, of which a full fifty percent of the conversation was about ponies or some minor Royal getting married on some barren rock or...it went on and on," Maria's voice trailed off.

I nodded. Narcotics. That was how we had met. I was scratching a living as a dealer for a while, and I'd found minor Imperial royals to be particularly profitable customers. Especially when they were on trips away from home. That fateful day in Beta Hydri...

"I ended up hating the lot of them. I hated the Elders for pretending to be so intellectual yet being just so clue resistant. I hated the Perfect Prince I had not even yet met yet, but which would be my fate to marry. I could see his Perfectly Handsome face, his Perfectly Shapen Body, and that Royal Wedding and the mawkish press coverage. It just got too much."

She went quiet.

"Then this imperfect, scrawny, uncouth and ungentlemanly narcotics dealer showed up. Rude, uncouth. I didn't know how to react at first - I reacted with spite and anger." She looked into my eyes.

"Oh. Who was that then?" I asked, surprised.

She sighed. "You, you idiot!"

"Oh, um. Ah. I thought you might have meant someone before...um, yes."

The thing is, I could never guess from the aloof way in which she treated me. Maria had left me in a permanent state of confusion, and I had found her very difficult to live with. Even after two years, I never imagined she had come specifically for me. All along, I had thought it was coincidence. I'd just let myself get swept along by the flow.

"Twenty five years as a princess, kept in the lap of luxury wanting for nothing. Two years of being a fugitive, of which eighteen months was spent in a horrendous stinking rain forest. My peers would wrinkle their noses in disgust if I told them that the last eighteen months have been the best of my life"

"I don't know what to say", was my weak reply.

"Mack Winston, some day I will make a proper gentleman out of you". She smiled wryly.

"And some day, I'll make a proper pirate out of you", I replied.

"You think?"

"You did a good job selling that container of narcotics back there," I replied. Even in these egalitarian times, the smile of an Imperial princess could still add a couple of grand to the asking price of a tonne of illegally obtained booty.

I considered the relationship we had. Words that sprang to mind were "awkward", "strained", and "intimate" all at once. They say opposites attract, but quite frankly, I found opposites abraded on each other. She had mellowed during our exile in the rain forest, but not so much that I would say that those eighteen months had been the best of my life.

A soft chime.

"That'll be the fuel man," I said, and made my way back to the bridge.

A few minutes later, the hold was filled with military fuel. We had to pay over the odds; the fuel man settled for 100 credits per tonne in the end. It was worth it to avoid leaving an audit trail in the spaceport logs.

"Where did you say we should go?" Maria asked, setting the hyperspace target.

"South. We need to end up at Riedquat. If anyone knows Mosser's game this time, they will certainly be frequenting World's End at La Soeur du Dan Ham."

"Dan Ham? Who was he?"

"Not a gentleman. Neither," I added after a deep intake of breath, "is anyone you will meet at La Soeur du Dan Ham."

The cold Witchlight draped over our ship.

## New Surroundings

[Vasquith de Havilland]

de Havilland rushed back into the cockpit, throwing one of the two space suits he was carrying at Michael Veruz.

“Where are we going?” Veruz asked, certain he wouldn’t like the answer.

“Hurry,” replied de Havilland, already climbing into his own. He pulled the zip to its stop, finished the last of the clips then moved to the rear of the cockpit, slamming a gloved fist against a blank wall panel. With a beep and a hiss, the neighbouring panel suddenly sprung outwards, connected to a metal rack. But the rack wasn’t what held a stunned Michael’s attention: it was what was on the rack.

Guns.

Lots of them.

“Where did you..?” Veruz started before de Havilland cut him off by chucking a small rifle at him.

“Souvenirs from the 301st. Can you use that?” Michael turned the weapon over in his hand. It adhered to the basic design of a laser powered carbine, but it looked different. Scarily different, as if it was from another world. It wasn’t something that one could buy off the street.

A souvenir from the 301st....no, not THE 301st?

“Holy shit...” he whispered. He was holding the special issue carbine of the Federation Marines.

“Michael!” de Havilland repeated, fetching various weapons from the rack, slinging one huge rifle over his shoulder, while clipping several pistols to his space suit belt. The quickness and ease of his movements betrayed his familiarity with the weapons. Veruz was suddenly wondering who is Commander really was.

“Sure, yeah. Maybe.”

“Look, those guys out there, if they are who you say they are, are just pilots. Maybe even ELITE pilots. They can probably blow you out of the sky without even trying, but ten to one says they couldn’t line a rifle up straight if their lives depended on it. We’ll hide out on the *Azure Sunset* and take them out, one by one.”

“Cap’n. I’m just a pilot who cant hold a rifle straight if his life depended on it,” Veruz replied. de Havilland gave him a wink.

“I’ve done this a few times. Just stick with me, you’ll be fine. Let’s go.” de Havilland turned and stormed out of the cockpit, with Michael in tow. The metal grating sang as the two men ran through the corridors down to the exit, a large ramp extending out from the Asp, jutting out at the wrong angle and ending near the ceiling of the *Azure Sunset*’s docking bay. de Havilland paused slightly, but knew they had no choice. And time was of the essence. The enemy ships may be following them inside the *Azure Sunset*. They needed to be away before they could be spotted. He pushed Michael ahead.

“Run!” yelled de Havilland’s voice over the suit radio. Michael also sensed they were out of options, so started making his way up the gang plank.

Clunk!

The gangway started moving up and retracting. Michael turned back to see de Havilland rushing at him.

“Go!”

Michael turned and started sprinting as hard as the suit would let him, which was not very fast. The ramp was moving up and up, closing in on the hull above. They weren’t going to make it. Whump! Suddenly he found himself falling off the side of the gangway, but instead of feeling the full effects of gravity pulling at his body, he and the mass on top of him, which he suddenly realised was de Havilland, were lazily falling to the metal ground below. With barely a bump, the two hit the ground, then with the use of the magnetic boots, got to their feet and examined their surroundings.

They were in a large maze of huge corridors, big enough to fit reasonably sized ships. The Asp was a tad on the ‘too big’ side, so anything smaller than a Constrictor or Cobra Mk III would feel at home. The *Vagabond*, his baby,

was stuffed. Her nose had been smashed in and the sides crunched up against the corridor walls. She wouldn't be going anywhere soon. He forced back a tear and began thinking logically again; there were people out there wanting to kill him. Training from his youth began trickling back, taking command of his body and his thoughts. He looked back up at where they had fallen from. The Asp was sealed shut again. Hopefully the goons that were after them would waste time entering the ship and searching it before they went looking inside the ship. That would give them more time.

But time to do what? What did he hope to accomplish here?

Well for one, by taking the battle to the ground, he was changing the odds to his favour, slightly.

But this wasn't just any battlezone. This was the *Azure Sunset*. He had stumbled upon a hornets' nest and a nagging feeling told him that these guys wouldn't leave him alone. If he killed this group, another would come after him.

What he needed was insurance.

"We're going to the bridge," de Havilland said.

# Staying Alive

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The two moved down the side corridor that the Asp had tried and failed to fly down earlier. There was a offshoot 500m down the corridor which led to a personnel elevator. The men dived in, and de Havilland pressed the controls.

Deck 1.

The doors closed and the duo zoomed away from the launch deck. Lights flashed across the top of the high speed lift as their capsule took them to the top of the ship. Thirty seconds later, they came to a rest and the doors opened in front of them. A datapad floated in front of them at head height.

“No gravity,” Veruz commented.

“And no air either,” de Havilland added, looking at the rudimentary indicators on his suits sleeve. The two entered exited the lift and looked around. The lights were off, but a computer terminal was active to their right. de Havilland moved over and gave the system a once over before keying in, trying to find a map or instructions to get to the bridge. He searched through a couple of sub folders before the screen went blank. de Havilland looked up at Veruz, who gave him a shrug. Nothing wrong, he turned back to the screen, which now had a single row of white text in the centre of the blackness.

WE ARE WATCHING YOU, VASQUITH

de Havilland immediately turned full circle, eyeing every crevice in the walls, every light duct, before turning back to the screen.

The message was gone. Had he imagined it? Was space psychosis granting him an early retirement?

No. They knew who he was, and they knew where he was going. His ruse with the Asp hadn't done the trick. He backed out to the root system of the computer then tried, again, finding what he wanted. “This way,” de Havilland said, pushing Veruz ahead of him.

The doors opened automatically, suggesting that the ship was still active, but in a passive state. In hibernation, but ready for action whenever ready. the bridge was a large, multi level affair with enough room for fifty men to work comfortably. It was empty now though, the lights off and most of the computer screens blank.

“First things first,” said de Havilland, as he spun around and unclipped a device from his belt. He lodged it in the corner on the ground by the door they had just come in and pressed a button at the back. It buzzed for a second before it emitted a thin red laser beam out of a nozzle on the front. The beam changed colour and intensity until it disappeared.

“Is it broken?” Veruz asked.

“No, just invisible. So you don't see it. Trip wires work better that way,” de Havilland said to Veruz with a smile before moving onto another door.

“What? Those are bombs? Where did you get them from?” he asked, chasing after his Commander.

“No, they're anti personnel trip-guards. But yes, they do explode. I told you, I kept them from my days in the service. Just for an opportunity like this,” he added, laughing at the irony.

“You were in demolitions?”

“No, I was an engineer. I either made stuff or blew it up.”

“So you're not a real marine then?” Veruz asked, his panic level inching up another notch.

“Oh, I was a real Marine alright. Had the same training as everyone else. And I had to use it. The Dispute of Amyaiay for one.” de Havilland explained as he rushed over to the doors on the far side of the bridge and protected them similarly. Satisfied, he moved down to the lower level where the astrogation panels were located.

“Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“Go back upstairs to one of those engineering panels. There should be a button to reactivate the bridge computers.” Veruz nodded and ran back to the upper level. He ran his eyes over a bank of computers, then found what he was looking for, flicked the switch.

The computers came to life immediately. So did the lights. Bright, blinding.

Damn, muttered de Havilland. He would rather have stayed in the darkness. Even if the enemy pilots hadn't know he was on the bridge, the massive power surge would have told them anyway. The panel in front of him came to life and he immediately sat down in the plastic swivel chair, racing through the command system, trying to find out how the ship got here without a crew.

“What do you want me to do?” Veruz asked.

“See if there are any smaller escort vessels holed up in the cargo bay. Something we can fly to get out of here.”

“What about your Asp?”

de Havilland looked back at his screen. Leaving his ship behind felt like leaving his only child behind, but when the baby was dead, you had to cry, bury it and move on. “Just look. Then see if you can bring up security cameras on the corridors leading to the bridge. See if we can see them coming.”

“Cap'n, I don't know much about computers. I don't think I can...”

“Just do your best Michael, I need to concentrate,” finished de Havilland, because at that moment he had found something interesting.

The next hyperspace jump had already been plotted, and a countdown was in effect.

As far as he knew, no one was on the ship, or had been on the ship before he had arrived. It was highly unlikely, seeing how the ship had appeared less than an hour ago.

So the ship was either working automatically or under remote control. The control of the men in the ships outside? They had arrived very quickly after the *Azure Sunset*, so they knew when and where it would exit hyperspace. But why would they bother? If they had the resources to chase it across the galaxy, wouldn't they have the resources to hide it somewhere would never find it? Deep space was a good example.

So maybe they could track it, but didn't have control of it.

Which meant something else was causing the jumps to hyperspace.

It had been over a year since the *Azure Sunset* had hit the headlines, but de Havilland hadn't really followed the story and the rumours which followed. What did he know?

Norman Mosser had been in control of the ship. Then he disappeared and so did the ship. Now it is being chased by unidentified ships. That wouldn't be the criminal's style either. Why would he chase his own ship instead of just boarding it and taking it back under control?

Maybe Norman had put a random jumping sequence program in the system and had it locked so no one else could stop it. That would certainly protect the ship and it would mean that Norman Mosser could find it without any problem. The guys outside must have stumbled upon it and learnt what he had just figured out and somehow learnt what the jump sequence was going to be.

Insurance....

That kind of information could be useful. Money aside, it could keep him alive if the group outside wanted to make an issue out of him wanting to stay in one piece. He looked through the log and found what he needed, downloading all the historical data into his datapad. He didn't have the equipment to sort through it here, but if he could get the info to Alioth, he knew someone who did, and maybe he could figure out the link between jumps and figure out where it would be next. The transfer complete, de Havilland got to his feet and gave the bridge a once over.

“Michael, any luck? Can you see them?”

"Hang on," came the busy reply. de Havilland decided it was best to leave. The bridge was too big for two men to guard. They had to find somewhere else, or avoid conflict all together.

"I can't get cameras, but I've got a life form trace active."

"Any readings?"

"There are about twenty blobs on the schematic," Veruz explained. "Two of them are up the top by themselves."

*That's us*, thought de Havilland.

"And there are another twenty, spread out, moving fast." Veruz locked eyes with de Havilland, "They're moving up to the other two blobs." He said with only a hint of fear.

de Havilland cursed. "How far away?"

"I don't know, I can't tell. Thirty seconds? Looks like they are coming in through all the doors."

de Havilland spun around again, looking for an answer.

But there was nothing.

"Load up, Michael," he said. They were going to have to do this the hard way.

## Out of Gas

[Mack Winston]

Forcing misjumps is a great way of throwing off anyone trying to follow you.

Forcing misjumps is hard on engines.

Forcing misjumps tends to use up all your fuel.

After our third deliberate misjump-from-a-misjump, we returned to normal system space.

Ququve wasn't really all that far from Phekda. It was a place we couldn't afford to wait long - sooner or later, either the Feds or the Empire (or more probably both) would find us by systematic searching.

There was a problem with our rather hot Osprey X. It ran on military fuel. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem - but Ququve was fresh out. Ququve was a backwater system, with just a few tourists, a few traders, a few fishing expeditions and not much else. The city of Scott on the planet New America was the only settlement of note on this frigid world.

"Gaaah," I said, involuntarily, as another icy gust found its way around my collar. It seemed to blow right through my clothes. "So, are you sure there's no fuel delivery coming?" I asked the fuel man.

He spat on the icy concrete. The spittle instantly froze to the surface. "Sorry mate, not much call for it 'ere," he said in his rough voice.

"So we're stuffed?"

"Yep, 'fraid so."

"The guide says that you have military fuel," I said, plaintively pointing out the entry. "Augh," I went as a blast of fine icy particles whipped over the lonely starport and into my face.

The fuel man shrugged. "Didn't ya mother tell you not to believe in them things? Just wait a couple of months, I'm sure a delivery will turn up sooner or later," he said with what I thought was just a bit too much glee. "We don't charge much for hangarage," he added helpfully.

"Well, thanks", I said, and disdainfully wandered back to the ship, trudging through the freshly fallen snow.

I boarded the ship, thankful for the warm air that greeted me. I shook my coat off and slung it into the Imperial State Room. Maria looked up from the desk, where she'd been going through the local bulletin board. "What'd the fuel man say?"

"No military fuel. Probably not for months," I said dolefully. "How much do we have in the tanks?"

"That's not what I really wanted to hear, the black market is significantly underdeveloped in this system. Whose idea was it to come here, anyway?"

I looked at my shoes. "Well, the guide said they had fuel." I looked back at Maria. "How much is left in the tank?"

"It's mostly full. It'll keep us in in-system travel for a while, but that's not a lot of use to us."

"No. And if we hang around here for two months, well, someone is sure to find us. Someone who we don't want finding us."

"I agree. I know what you're going to suggest next and I don't like it one bit," she said, frowning a little.

"Why?"

"Because it's ungentlemanly."

I paused. I wanted to see if she was going to let on what it was she was predicting that I was going to suggest.

"Only a little piracy," I said. "We just shoot at someone for a bit, demand they release their military fuel, then go on our way."

"But it's ungentlemanly. And uncivilized."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"No."

"Well, let's go then."

"I have a better variation though," she said with a slight Mona Lisa like smile. "No shooting necessary. This is a stealthy ship. We can run silently, sneak up on someone without showing up on their scanner, dock, and, well, siphon off a tonne of their fuel. Then we're away. They won't be any the wiser until they find themselves without enough fuel to hyperspace, and we don't have to get shot at or make ourselves conspicuous."

"Hey, you're learning," I said, cheekily.

"Who says Imperial princesses are useless ornaments?" she added. I was expecting a slap for my last comment. Well, hoping really.

An hour later, we were under way. I remember Norman Mosser doing that sort of thing to me, well - not stealing military fuel off me, but suddenly showing up on my ship in deep space. It was always a bit unnerving. I was pretty glad that there'd be no shooting - firstly, because I wasn't really all that good at space combat (a fact I was trying to conceal from Maria), and secondly, it wasn't being inconspicuous. I reasoned it was also a good thing that the Imperial stealth tech we had available to us was too expensive for typical pirates, traders or the law.

But the truth was there wasn't much traffic in Ququeve. What had seemed like a great idea was turning into a very long wait, as we loitered by the witch space entry point. Some traders popped into existence, and flew on inbound on their regular hydrogen fuelled drives. Soon hours turned into a day with no fishes to catch. Without a hyperspace cloud analyser, all we could do is watch and wait - it wasn't that we could even scan the entry points into the system.

We were both getting tired, too. I knew what would happen - a ship pregnant with milfuel would cruise on by as we slept. As I started to dwell on my dismal thoughts, one of the shimmering blue witch space entry clouds disgorged its contents.

It was an Asp.

It was bristling with weapons.

It also had a military drive, Class 3.

I nudged Maria. "Look at that one, stuffed to the gills with sweet, sweet milfuel."

Maria took the controls, and nudged the Osprey X onto an intercept course. Our ship was so much faster, the Asp had no chance of getting away. Maria's hands danced over the console, and the flight deck of the Osprey was plunged into darkness. Most of the systems went offline. Just the hum of inverters powering the stealth systems, and the dull whine of the military drive to keep us company.

The Asp had popped into realspace relatively close to our position, and it wasn't going to take long. We were 9AU from New America, undoubtedly safe from the Police.

"I'll get the EVA suits," I said, pulling myself free from my cockpit seat. I drifted down the narrow gravity well, then back through the cramped corridor into the clone agents' quarters. Inside was a storage locker with three lightweight EVA suits and space helmets. I climbed into my suit. Maria had set the autopilot, and joined me in the Clone Room, and struggled into the stiff material of the suit.

"No jetpacks, I'm afraid. There's a tether though, and Asps have a set of tether hooks by the lower airlock", I explained.

"And getting in?"

"Hopefully, the crew of the Asp will think it's just a sensor malfunction if we manually open the outer door. It's not that you expect someone to be boarding in deep space with nary a sign on the scanner. But we ought to have this just in case," I said, brandishing the Deathwrecker. "And probably one of these, too," I added, taking out a pistol belonging to the clones.

"Then one of us has to hook up the emergency umbilical to our donor up ahead, and whoever's inside needs to run the transfer pump from the main tanks to the umbilical feed"

"Do you know where the transfer pump is and where the transfer pump is?" Maria asked.

"No, do you?"

"No."

"Well, that complicates matters just a bit. It's got to be in the engine room somewhere. The trouble is the longer we spend on the ship the more likely that we're going to bump into the crew. Judging by the number of weapons sticking out of that thing, they won't be shiny happy crew and it won't be a shiny happy meeting, and I expect I'll get called by my second name"

"What, they'll call you 'there-he-is-get-him'?"

"Something along those lines."

We snapped on our space helmets. The Asp loomed large in the flight deck windows. "The autopilots on these things, they better be good," I muttered.

"Better than Federation junk," Maria replied stiffly.

"They better be."

We squeezed into the top airlock. There was just a metre between the top of the Osprey and the bottom of the Asp. Deadly cones of plasma from the Asp's engine illuminated our ship, as we both accelerated towards New America. I tried to put out of my mind the insanity of what we were doing, as I clipped the cable to the upper airlock mooring hook . . .

## Mille

[Interpol]

"Carla Gooding?"

At the door, a police officer stood. He was in full uniform.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. Max is dead."

Carla opened her mouth in disbelief, "No. How. When?"

"May I come in?"

Carla nodded and showed the officer into the lounge. She allowed herself to be sat down and the officer got the autochef to produce hot sweet tea. "What happened?"

The officer sat down uncomfortably and met her gaze. "Max was out patrolling one of the gas giants in his Viper - looking for pirate activity and trying to spot when they refuel-"

"It was pirates?"

"Yes and no ma'am. From our guess, it was Norman Mosser - We thought it odd when Max flagged up an Imperial Courier going in on a refuel run - you see they don't have fuel scoops. This one did by the looks of it. Max peeled off from the formation for a closer look. Again, standard intercept procedure - close in and scan. Take a photo and match it against the registries. Hail the guy and see if they need any help. Anyway, Max closes in from behind to this Courier and got within hailing distance just as it began the refuelling run. At this point the Courier is picking up atmospheric drag so it is slowing right down. Max checked the registration and it looks ok, but the visual matches the description of a Courier spotted in Riedquat: NM-001. N.M.: Norman Mosser."

"Max didn't go after him, did he?"

"I'm sorry. He ignored orders to withdraw and engaged at medium range. Textbook assault - four 500s, and a charge in with the beamer. We all saw the fight. Max was good - one of the best in fact, but he was totally outgunned. It was all over very quickly."

Carla looked down, "And now he's gone."

"I'm sorry."

"What's there to be sorry about?"

"Max said that he had a son?"

"He does. I'll tell him when he gets back from school."

"Very well - everyone at the HQ will miss him. He was a good man."

The officer stood up and inclined his head, "I'm going to have to take my leave now - we are shorthanded and I'm needed at the starport."

Carla nodded, her makeup smeared by tears, "You catch him."

"We will."

The officer turned and exited the apartment. It was all lies. He hadn't mentioned how Max was an insubordinate drunk and he had been given the patrol as punishment for mouthing off to a superior. Or that Max's support was a rookie in an Eagle 1. Or that he was the one thousand and fourth Viper pilot to have been killed by Norman Mosser. And of them, only about a hundred had been good cops. Or that Mosser had got away without a trace. He sat his hat firmly on his head and walked out through the rain to the transport.

## Dark Frontier

[Frantic]

C64Z80RS232 awoke and was instantly saddened. They had betrayed him after all. The federation had given him life, an immortal life. They'd given him sentience, not the same as a humanoid, not the same desires, but sentience none the less. They had ingrained in him the desire to survive and think independently, and taught him the honour of loyalty, then when they'd realised the full danger of this concept, they had decided to end it and destroy him.

When the recall had come, first in command communications, then in might, C64Z80RS232 had continued the game. But the game was over, he had won out in every test imaginable. He'd reached Elite by his own count, and killed a single Elite pilot just to acquire a badge which the Elite Federation of Pilots would refuse him.

He'd decided to return to the Federation, but not in his own body. They would have worked that out by now. Even the infamous Norman Mosser balked at the risk of having two of himself in existence at once, but an android could merely merge memories and reintegrate itself into one body and mind. He'd built a pretty convincing copy, transferred his mind into it, and sent it home to report. It had not returned, and the delay had triggered this awakening.

If C64Z80RS232 was human, he would certainly have experienced anger, betrayal, and a desire for revenge on the grandest of scales. But C64Z80RS232 could only look to the desires of his silicon ego, which was to outperform humans. Humans had accepted his superior skill, but still not accepted him.

C64Z80RS232 quickly scanned the manifest of the heavily modified Tiger Trader that thrummed under his feet. Fuel, mining equipment, manufacturing equipment, repair gear, androids, weapons. Yes, there were enough weapons, but a few more androids would have helped. Not enough were made to endure for too long without human intervention. This ship could vanish into the void, travel until it's fuel was exhausted, it's hull micro fractured to near a write off, and still have the capability to refuel, restock, repair, and rearm itself. C64Z80RS232 had learned patience.

Without another moments hesitation, he brought the Tiger to life and surged up and out of the depths its muddy ocean hideaway. The ship broke through the surface of the water, sending a column of water dancing into the sky as the bulky ship tore it's way into the heavens, disturbing the peaceful clouds as it slipped into the comforting vacuum of space.

C64Z80RS232 turned the ship towards galactic north and plotted a course based on the refueling probabilities of hundreds of star systems. There was an entire race of beings out there that the humans feared. The word Thargoid still sent chills down spines and spawned dark scary stories, most of them false. They would all be exterminated. Then, perhaps, if he returned, the humans would welcome him with open arms.

Either way, once again C64Z80RS232 had a purpose.

## **A bad day that ends worse will ruin the whole week**

[Al Kyder]

Defeat was an unfamiliar feeling to Al and his shipmate, Yolanda. Their Asp Explorer had been badly beat up, and he knew if he was going to keep his job as a top Clan enforcer, he'd have to have another go at those bastards. They had lured him near an asteroid, where ten of their ships had been hiding, powered down and invisible. He had only just escaped from the ambush by virtue of carrying enough spare fuel - but in the meantime had taken a hell of a pasting. More equipment than he cared to think of was damaged, and in their hasty departure had hyperspaced into Ququve - which was precisely in the middle of nowhere with no decent repair facilities.

He fingered his Elite badge, and bit his fingernails. Self doubt - another unfamiliar feeling - welled up in him. That intense feeling that his entire forebrain was tied in a tight, dense knot wouldn't go away as part of him felt incandescently angry.

Yolanda beginning to speak snapped him out of his anger and self-doubt, but only briefly.

"The lower airlock just showed an open condition," she said, ever calmly. "I'm going to take a look."

"Yeah," Al replied, more grunting than replying to the affirmative.

Still, he consoled himself, part of being Elite was knowing when to stay and when to run. One Asp against ten assorted ships was simply not a tenable situation. The Clan's instructions had been simple: assassinate the mayor of some godforsaken frontier town who'd backstabbed them. Small time dignitaries didn't control fleets of spaceships. The Clan must have got it horribly wrong somewhere along the line - who knows, perhaps just bad intelligence or even simple complacency. News of this mustn't leak out. The job would still have to be done if the Clan could keep control by fear. Yes, there would have to be a ....

WHUMPFH!

...what the hell was that?

BLAM!

The deafening noise shook the entire ship. In its wake, the decompression alarm started to sound its shrill tone! Al wrenched himself from the co-pilots's seat and frantically ripped open the flight deck locker. Wasting no time, he pulled on an EVA suit. He could feel the air rushing out - there wasn't much time.

Helmet on. Safe.

"Yolanda!" he shouted pointlessly. The sound wouldn't travel far through the rapidly thinning air. Certainly it wouldn't penetrate the rushing sound of the air leaving the Asp. It was leaving far too quickly to be just an open airlock. Besides, that was impossible. It had a mechanical interlock preventing the inner and outer doors from being opened simultaneously.

Moving as fast as he could in the stiff EVA suit, through the living quarters, and into the equipment section. "Yolanda!" he shouted again.

He stopped. Radio on. It was probably hopeless - the suddenness of the explosion meant she would have either been smeared all over the inside of the ship, or shot out into space by the exiting air.

"Yolanda?" he said into the radio.

No response.

Now in the equipment section, the problem was obvious. There was a large hole in the side of the hull. It looked like it had been melted. There was no problem with the shields, so how could something have struck the hull to do that sort of damage?

The grav system was still working - at least that was something. He walked over the upper equipment gantry and looked down at the gaping hole in the hull.

Then he saw it. Or a bit of it. He leaned over the hole. That was definitely the nose cone of another ship he could just see edging into his field of view.

"What the....?"

Al felt a presence behind him. He turned around slowly, as if on a turntable.

A spacesuited figure was facing him. He couldn't see the figure's face through the gold reflective coating on the space helmet's visor. The space suit was quite obviously of Imperial design, too. However, that wasn't what was really grabbing his attention.

It was the unfeasibly large pistol pointed right at him. It was shaped horribly like a Deathwrecker. Through the vacuum, he couldn't hear it humming, but he was positive that it was pregnant with energy, and the space suited figure was just dying to allow that energy hurtle across the void and turn him to radioactive dust.

And melt another big hole in his pride and joy. Not that he'd care much as radioactive dust.

Al fiddled with the suit radio. Onto broadcast.

"Er, hello?" he asked lamely. Given the tension of the situation, he couldn't think of much else. He wasn't often on the wrong side of a gun, and it was yet another feeling he was having to acquaint himself with.

"You will do precisely as I say," came the voice in his suit radio. It was not the voice he expected.

It was of impeccable breeding. And abundantly female. Just like the voices Imperial princesses used at official engagements.

"And if I don't?" Al asked defiantly, immediately regretting it as he saw the figure's long arm raise the Deathwrecker to point straight at his face. In fact, that was a very foolish thing to say, he thought, given the hole behind him and the undoubted obliteration of Yolanda.

"You are a very lucky man, Al Kyder. So is your crewmate," the voice came back, implacable but without a hint of threat. He hated not being able to see the other person's expression through the mirrored visor.

"Come again?"

"If my boyfriend was standing here," the awful Imperial accented female continued, "your crewmate would be atomized. Instead she is rapidly heading planetwards in a space suit. My partner would have just shot her. He is ungentlemanly, which is something I am attempting to correct. Now if you follow my instructions to the letter, then in five minutes time you can be on your way to picking up your crewmate, and then to New America which is presumably where you are headed."

Al noticed that the cover on the fuel router manual control panel was open.

"Now go to the very bottom and rear extent of the engine room and do not move for five minutes."

"OK", Al replied. Stupid bitch, he thought, as soon as she turns her back I can work my way back to her position and put a cap in her head...

He worked his way down and back through the engine room, realising he had to crawl down through the pipework to get there. It soon dawned on him that the joke was on him. To get back to where the awful woman was standing would take at least ten minutes of careful climbing, and in any case - not expecting anyone on board, wasn't armed. Nothing had shown up on the scanner. He'd heard rumours about the Imperial military, having stealth systems that could hide from anything but the most powerful beam scanners. He had heard how fantastically expensive they were.

What did the Empire want with him? The Clan didn't even operate in Imperial territory. What was the woman doing with the fuel routing panel?

"Now stay there for five minutes. My partner will be watching. A false move by yourself," she added, "will kill both you and your crewmate. You by Deathwrecker, your crewmate by suffocation when her air runs out. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Al replied. Angry at himself for not being better prepared. Angry at the Empire.

Five minutes later, Al carefully climbed back into the main equipment deck. He searched the ship. There was no sign of anyone on board. The nosecone of the other ship had disappeared. It could have been the nosecone of any small fighter. Of course, nothing showed up on the scanner once he got back to the flight deck.

Yolanda's spinning spacesuited body hadn't gone far. She was alive and unharmed.

The only thing missing from the Asp (apart from the metal that had been vaporized in the engine room) was all of their military fuel.

# Born Hunter

[Kim Stenson]

Kim Stenson hated clones. He hated everything about them. They were abominations.

They had no souls. They were worse than sub human. They had no place among humanity. The Eugenic Protocols of 2386 ensured this.

But the Empire did what it wanted, as it always does. And the weak Federation found it easier to look away than attack the problem.

Now there were clones spread across the galaxy; imperial agents, spies, slaves, cannon fodder.

Imitations. Replicants. Fakes.

Kim made it his personal vendetta to hunt them down and destroy them.

He was hunting one at this very moment. A very dangerous clone. Uttering this clone's name could conjure images from buccaneering heroism to horrific terrorism.

This clone's name was Norman Mosser.

\*

Rank had its advantages. You could tell people what to do, or even better, get them to do your job for you, especially if it was a messy one. Kim liked the hands on approach to a job. However, the main advantage was the intelligence he had access to.

Interpol was spread across the known galaxy. It had agents on every planet, special investigators on every planet. Even the Alliance, the sneakiest of the super powers, admitted that Interpol's intelligence network was unsurpassed. Stenson's job description was wide and varied; he thought of himself as a modern day Texas Ranger. He was nominally attached to the Tionisla system, but his prerogative allowed him travel to anywhere that Interpol had a presence.

Right now, Interpol had put a big focus on bringing several key criminals to justice. No more than ten years ago, Interpol was by the book. Human criminals would be caught and trialled under human justice. Now they were becoming more vague; God's justice was an accepted alternative to the time consuming process of capturing someone alive.

Stenson loved it when his job and personal hatred combined. It made him go that little extra step in bringing the criminal to justice. But this wasn't just any ordinary job. This inhuman clone kept coming back to life. It was like there was a warehouse of them; kill one and the next rolled off the assembly line. Worse than robots. At least robots didn't pretend to be human.

He had been finishing some paperwork at his desk on Fort Petersen, the only orbiting station in the system. Suddenly, an alert came across his terminal screen. He had several cases flagged at any one time, so he would be alerted instantly if any new information was discovered. In this case it had been an update to the already large case file on one Mosser, Norman.

His hands had trembled at the excitement. Maybe this time the freak would have left behind some vital clue. One day the soulless monster would slip up.

And Kim Stenson would be there to bid him farewell.

He smiled at the thought. One day...

Unfortunately, the information had been useless. He had been sighted in a nearby system, attempting to get free fuel from a gas giant. A random Interpol patrol had spotted him and foolishly engaged. The report was relatively complete, suggesting there had been a survivor.

Why did you leave a trace, Norman? Why didn't you kill everyone? Do you want us to find you? Or are you just playing with us?

He leant back and rubbed his temples hard. It had been a long day. He left his office and walked down the hall to the smoko room, helping himself to some brew from the Auto-Caf station. The aroma was thick and lovely, invading his nostrils. He greedily sipped at the cup, sighing at the pleasure a simple cup of Ultra could provide.

Imperial Couriers don't have fuel scoops...

The cup hit the ground as he ran back to his office.

"First mistake, Norman," Stenson yelled in triumph, a fist pumping into the air. Finally, a breakthrough.

Imperial Couriers don't have fuel scoops, so how could one be trying to get free fuel from a gas giant, as the report suggested?

Norman Mosser had one installed in the ship.

But how? There is no port in the cargo bay to allow the installation of one. The Imperial designers were adverse to change in their ship; the hyperdrive is fully integrated and cannot be replaced.

So he had the fuel scoop installed somewhere else and had linkage to the cargo bay, to get the collected hydrogen atoms into cargo canisters. Such a refit of a ship would be expensive and complicated. There were only so many shipyards in the galaxy that could do it. A Galactic map appeared on the screen of his computer terminal, systems with suitable shipyards glowing white. Alioth, Eta Cassiopeia, Sol, Tau Ceti, Facece, Achenar, Zaonce.

So which one was it?

Norman was a criminal and wanted by every major power, which would suggest Zaonce. But that was too simple. Just because he had been spotted in a nearby system didn't mean that he had had the modifications done near here. He could have travelled across known space twice already as far as Stenson knew. Norman definitely wouldn't go anywhere that obvious. He turned to the Imperial systems. If Interpol thought that Norman Mosser was a danger to society, the Empire thought he was an insect that had to be destroyed. They hated him more than everyone else combined. Would he risk going back there? Unless he still had a few contacts there that could help him.

No, he has been away for too long. His resources have dwindled, he will be going for safe, but easy solutions at the moment.

The Federation? Mosser is an indoctrinated Imperial soldier, no matter how hard he would try to forget. Could he trust Federation engineering? A deep, inbuilt distrust for the Federation could cause paranoia over them playing with his ship. Stenson removed the Federation systems. He would not go there.

How about the Alliance? They had the best shipyards in the galaxy, and brought a skill and professionalism to ship making that the other super powers could only dream of. Then again, this professionalism meant no kickbacks, no side jobs. And reports. A paper trail. The Alliance was viewed as incorruptible. Not what Norman wanted. His eyes drifted back to Zaonce.

It was too obvious. No one would go looking for him there because they know Norman isn't that stupid. Stenson smiled in realisation.

Sometimes no defence is the best defence. Out in the open where no one was looking. It was cunningly brilliant. He was already out the door, calling the docking bay when another thought hit him.

NM-001. Norman Mosser - 001.

A new registration for an old bucket. It wasn't an Imperial rego, that was for sure, so he had someone modify the transponder on the Imperial Courier. He racked his brains. The second to last sighting of Norman Mosser was when he blasted out of La Soeur du Dan Ham. The rego had been NM-001 then as well. What had the reports said? Witnesses at the World's End bar had seen a confrontation when it was discussed that Norman was waiting for his ship to be repaired. So the transponder would have been changed then.

He flew back out the door and raced to the lift, then thundered down to the launch bay to Interpol's docking bay. It was a large cube of empty space, two rows of birds parked along either side and a collection of offices down the near side. He raced inside and found the counter unattended. Looking into the back, he saw a rather obese dutyman who was watching some holo-drama instead of doing his job.

"Ahem," Stenson cleared his throat. The obese man turned in surprise, spilling his copious quantities of food. Stenson flashed his ID, causing the obese mans cheeks to turn an inflamed red.

"What can I do for you sir?" he asked nervously.

Stenson moved past the ships parked out the front. He frowned, then checked the computer again.

"That's odd," he mumbled.

"What?" Stenson replied impatiently.

"The Asp MK II is gone," he said, more to himself than Stenson. "No one has signed off for it."

Some useless agent in a hurry. "Fine, what else have you got?"

The dutyman gave his computer another confused look, then backed out to the main database. "Mk II Viper. Military engine, 5MW Pulse Laser, Lierkmann Shields with inbuilt boosters. Naval ECM and Missiles."

"Fine yes, yes, I'll take it," Stenson said, getting more agitated. Logically, he knew that the few seconds he was wasting here would not make much difference to such a cold case, but he still didn't like wasting time.

The dutyman put the access slot over the counter with Stenson pressed his finger and swiped his ID card, confirming he was who he was.

"Ok, the bird's all yours sir," said the obese man, handing over the access cards.

Stenson was gone.

\*

Stenson quickly departed from Fort Petersen and activated the hyperdrive as soon as he was out of range.

Destination: Zaonce.

Three days later he was closing in on the mechanised world of Industry. There was only one Starport in the entire system: Ridley Scott. It was there that he would find his answers.

He could feel it. Every AU he travelled brought him closer to Norman Mosser.

And closer to his ultimate goal.

"I'm going to find you, Mosser," he whispered.

## Sunset Battleground

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The seconds crawled past, as de Havilland waited for the attack. He and Michael were silent, barely daring to breathe as they waited for the inevitable. Another second inched by, then another, each one forcing to shatter de Havilland's calm exterior. *Things are about to get messy. Stay Cool.*

Easy for his mind to think though; his body was older than it was when he was a Marine. It was still in good shape, but nonetheless, it had still aged. Slower, weaker, less accurate.

A third second went from the future to the past. He almost wished they would come now, so he could get it over with.

BOOM!

Suddenly the world sped up to full speed as quadruple explosions rocked the bridge, the concussion intermixed with the screams of dying humans as their bodies were torn apart, appendages destroyed and their lives brought to an unexpected end.

Silence...

Slowly, an enemy soldier took a careful step through the door, carbine up on his shoulder as he scanned the bridge, looking for the source of the threat. He moved around, spotting a fellow squad member at the opposite door.

"Clear," he yelled. When he received three replies of the same, he took another cautious step in. He was on the second level, his view of the first blocked by the banks of computers and work stations. Another step, then another, then he was at the edge looking down on two of his squad mates, who looked relatively confused. They were alone on the bridge. Their prey had escaped.

"Check the Scanner," he yelled to one of his men.

They had been forced to hide in the shadows of a side corridor just off from the top right door to the bridge. The enemy, so focused on reaching their objective, hadn't even bothered to look down the side passages, though they would only have seen darkness.

The explosion had been horrific; de Havilland had forgotten how powerful they were, and the resulting concussion had travelled through the walls and bulkheads into his back, rattling his bones and causing him to emit a curse. Thankfully, the explosion and screams of other people had covered his own, and he bent down to lift Michael off the floor, who had been thrown across the corridor by the force of the explosion.

"Let's go," he whispered, before standing back up straight, a spark of pain shooting up his back. If he had been any closer to the explosion, he was sure he would have been turned to jelly by the concussion. He sneaked up to the intersection of the corridor and looked around, being careful to stay in the shadow.

He didn't like to think he was sadistic, but the handiwork of his explosives gave him cause to smile. The trip guards had performed amiably, not just stopping the enemy from moving forward, but ripping them to shreds. There was only man left at this door and he was slowly moving back through the door. He paused to look around, then took another step. The door behind him closed.

"Now," he hissed, pushing Michael ahead of them.

The soldier pulled the lifeform scanner from his belt and activated the unit, slowing spinning through three hundred and sixty degrees.

"Well?" asked the lead soldier.

"Hold," he asked, as he continued to scan. The unit began beeping and the soldier froze instantly. The leader looked up down at soldier, then followed his gaze to the door behind him.

"Bastard!" he yelled, turning and running back through the door he had just come through.

"Faster!" de Havilland yelled, all thoughts of stealth long since gone. Their feet struck the floor gratings hard, echoing through the metallic maze, their rapid breathing causing enough noise to wake up the dead.

But still they pushed ahead. Michael stopped by the elevator, but de Havilland slapped him and kept running. Michael sprinted to catch up, before de Havilland turned and flew down a ladder to the deck below.

“Why?” gasped Michael between breaths.

“Elevator is a death trap,” de Havilland replied, not so badly out of breath. His feet hit the decking below and he jumped to the next ladder, continuing down. Michael followed him as quickly as he could, but he wasn’t built for running and he began slowing down. de Havilland, looked up as he was scaling the ladder, seeing Michael more than a ladder behind him. He stopped to call out.

Then the ladder exploded from underneath him.

The remaining top half of the ladder fell. Fast. de Havilland let go and crashed to the deck hard, rolling away as another explosion ripped the metal floor apart. de Havilland was still rolling, but he knew that to stop, even to try to get to his feet would kill him. So he didn’t stop, and he rolled right over the edge of the deck into mid air! He desperately reached out an arm, his fingers flailing against the slotted floor railing. He found purchase and tried to hold on, but he was falling too fast and he lost his grip, continuing to fall.

Then he stopped, his carbine falling to the next deck, while he was jarred to a halt. Grabbing the railing, even if only for a split second, had changed his trajectory enough for a foot to get caught in the nearby ladder.

Don’t stop! He’s still trying to kill you!

He reached forward, grabbing another step on the ladder and released his foot. His body swung through one hundred and eighty degrees, then he let go before and he fell the remaining four metres to the next deck as another fire bolt flew past his face, exploding against the far wall. He hit the deck, rolled, grabbed his dropped weapon, got back to his feet and had the weapon up on his shoulder and facing up to the next deck with three seconds.

Another explosion and a scream. de Havilland’s eyes opened wide in horror: Michael! He slung the carbine over his shoulder again and flew up the ladder to the next level, bringing the weapon to bare as quickly as he could.

“Michael!” he called.

“Up here,” came the reply. de Havilland instinctively took a step sideways as he turned to look up.

Michael was hanging from the remnants of the ladder, a steaming rifle slung over his shoulder. de Havilland smiled, and slumped forward, the adrenalin already receding from his body. That had been close.

“It works a real treat, doesn’t it?” de Havilland asked. Veruz shrugged the weapon on his back.

“Fuck yeah,” he yelled as he let go and dropped down to de Havilland’s level. The young man sprung back up instantly, the six metre drop not even bothering him.

“How did they find us so fast?” asked Veruz, wiping his forehead. de Havilland looked around.

“I don’t know. Unless they were...” he trailed off.

“Tracking us?” Veruz guessed.

“They’re using the *Sunset*’s own sensors against us. We have to get off this ship now. Before any more come.” de Havilland moved towards the ladder to keep proceeding down.

“Where are you going?” Veruz asked, halting de Havilland in his tracks.

“We’ve got to get to the docking bay,” de Havilland said, exasperated. “Maybe we can steal a pair of their ships and get the hell out of here.”

Veruz winked at his commander.

“I got a better idea.”

# Clonialism

[Bim Kethor]

Bim Kethor was in a good mood. The board was happy with the progress of Havok Bioenhancement's latest venture. It had amused him greatly when he found out that the majority of the money for the project was coming from Federation private investors. It wouldn't have happened in the past - Federation money paying for the construction of a facility to fastgrow Clone Troopers for the Imperial Legions. It was all bleeding edge tech of course, and the much reduced lifespan of the clones was more than compensated for by fast growth times and reduced production costs. The first batch was nearing completion and would be undergoing field trials by the end of the month. He was already spending the bonus.

As he walked down the corridor Bim brushed shoulders with one of the lab techs. He looked oddly familiar - yet out of place for some reason. Confused, Bim made his way to his office and brought up the personnel records. Nothing out of place there. Shrugging, he decided to read one of the lifestyle journals that he subscribed to out of Sol. In between the pictures of nubile and articles about beer, there was a truly worrying advert. It depicted what appeared to be the lab assistant he had seen earlier wearing particularly flashy clothes. The chap was armed with what appeared to be a cartoonishly large handgun and was stood on the plasticrete of an unnamed starport shooting Police Vipers out of the sky with it. The legend read.

"Norman Mosser workwear collection: Kelvin Klein - Absolute Cool. Olympus City, Mars"

Surely a coincidence?

His datapad beeped. Bim brought up the message. An alert had been issued from cloning hall 1 - the cloning vats had started an unscheduled decant cascade. Bim switched to the hall's security cameras.

The hall of the floor was awash with vat fluid. Every cloning unit had decanted simultaneously and hundreds of newly-formed clones had emerged. In unison they stepped forwards shaking their heads. As one their visions cleared and their bald heads bobbed as they looked around with more alertness. They all studied each other with interest, and then looked themselves over. As a single entity they reached forward and donned the Imperial regulation overalls that had been laid out in anticipation of the scheduled decanting the following day.

Bim zoomed in on the faces of the clones and was struck with horror.

Norman Mossers.

Hundreds of them.

\*

Mosser#3 smiled as his Osprey left the station. This would be a hell of a diversion to stop the cops getting wind of their real objective. Rounding up that many Mossers would keep them occupied for a while, whilst they got on with the real job of locating the *Sunset*. In addition, he and Mosser#2 had to plan a means of disposing of Mosser#1. What Mosser#2 didn't know was that he was already working with Mosser#1 to get rid of his erstwhile twin. If he could persuade them to take each other down, he would by default inherit the *Sunset*.

## Doing the Groundwork

[Kim Stenson]

It took only two hits from the 5MW Pulse Laser to remove the Adder from existence. Its Commander had never stood a chance. Stenson laughed at the remains of the pathetic pirate. What had he hoped to achieve anyway? He had never owned a private ship so had never gotten credit for kills, but he was sure his pseudo rank would be Deadly, Dangerous at the minimum. His flying career had started when he was ten, working onboard his father's Lone-Wolf Cobra Mk III until...circumstances had forced him to move on.

IMC-768...

The registration code was still burnt into his memory, etched like a tattoo, its presence felt for as long as he continued to live. A message flickered onto a small screen, built into the control console by his right arm.

'Bounty received: 250 Credits' Stenson laughed. The bounty was received all right. Received by Interpol.

"Interpol agents are servants of justice, not bounty hunters," he said, echoing one of the rules of his institutions. He often thought it would be nice to make a few dollars on the side, but that would only happen if he used his own ship, which would only happen if he managed to find a lot of money. *It takes money to make money*, he thought ruefully.

Not that he really cared about money. All that mattered to him at the moment was what was on the space station ahead, Ridley Scott. He could feel it. He would find something there that would take him a step closer to his prey.

\*

The automatic pilot took the Viper Mk II in for a perfect landing, where it was transferred from the docking area, through a series of airlocks to an extra secure Interpol holding bay. Shutting down the ship, Stenson walked to the boarding ramp, already lowered to the disembark position. The bay was similar to the one he had picked the Viper up in, but it was empty, save his craft and advertising on the walls, selling everything from the latest Dreamware special from overdue-for-retirement Jjagged Bbanner to recycling units. He turned to lock the ship up, being careful to discreetly engage the special security before he departed through the small door in the corner. The door slammed shut behind him, with several clunks as the interlocking mechanisms engaged. The only person getting back through that door was him. A buckled and hastily repaired durasteel wall greeted him, water stains and discolorations indicative of the space station's age. The floor beneath him was standard cheap metal grille; adequate strength for minimal material cost. Pipes ran overhead, crisscrossing in a seemingly unorganised way, several burning hot ones running awfully close to those full of coolant and superconducting fluid. Stenson shook his head in disgust. Zaonce was the technological powerhouse of this sector of space, yet they couldn't afford, or couldn't be bothered to properly maintain the only serviceable space station in the system! The better he got his work done and got off the station, the better. It would be bad luck if the reactor went critical while he was onboard. He hurried to the lift.

The doors opened to reveal a promenade of stylish beauty, stretching across the entire width of the space station. In complete contrast to the shitty depths below, the main concourse was clean and bright, and people were happily going about their business surrounded by water fountains, trees and shrubbery, though most of it synthetic, an artificial sun in the sky and soothing music emanating from hidden speakers. He moved forward to the edge of the mezzanine and leaned on the rail over looking the area below, absorbing the atmosphere of the buzzing city. There was nothing like this on Tionisla. In fact, this looked like it belonged in the Empire: Looking good on the surface but corroded and corrupt beneath the top layer.

*Does the station commander have a sense of humour?* He thought. Finished with the view, he scanned around until he found the closest information centre. He walked over, then logged in with his Interpol credentials. This gave him access to all files on the station, most importantly personnel records. A list of every employee of the station raced onto the screen, so he filtered the list, keeping only those who worked in the shipyard. The list was still too big.

Well, the modification had been made in the last 3 years, probably before the ship was taken to Riedquat and had its registration changed. He filtered the list again so it removed anyone who had started working in the last year.

The list shrunk even further, this time to a more manageable level. He realised he hadn't accounted for anyone who had worked during that time and left hence. He adjusted the filter and a few extra names jumped onto the list. He downloaded the files on each of the men to his datapad then returned to his ship.

\*

He stretched, rearranging the pillow on the bunk. It was boring, tiring work, but it was a crucial job. The mainstay of true detective work. This was how he had started out his career as a gumshoe. Searching through all the available intelligence, looking for clues, no matter how small, hoping to piece them together like a jigsaw to come up with a more complete picture. What he wanted was the mechanic which had modified Norman Mosser's Imperial Courier. The mechanic had to be of a particular morale fibre to both work on the side and turn a blind eye to Norman's criminal background. Had any of the people on his list started acting different at any point? Did one of them start showing up with more expensive clothes than they used to? Did one mysteriously disappear? Maybe they didn't like their job at all. Maybe they were criminals themselves and jumped at the opportunity to help out someone as notorious as that evil clone. The possibilities were endless. And it was his job to find which possibility was reality. He flicked to the next personnel file and began reading, but his eyes were glazing over. How long had it been since his last cup of Riedquat Ultra? He scanned down the rest of the page before switching the view on his datapad. He began reading the next line, then stopped.

Had he seen something? What did he miss? He flicked back to the earlier display and read the page slowly, carefully.

Nothing. He got up, stretched, and got another cup of Ultra from the dispenser. The sweet aroma aroused his body without even needing a sip. Cup in hand, he went back and picked up his datapad. There was something there his subconscious had picked up, yet he still couldn't consciously identify. He reread the page, then tossed the pad onto the bed in disgust. A deep breath, then another, then he climbed back onto the bunk and started reading. He would finish, then come back to it. Hopefully he would figure it out.

Another personnel file. Stenson took notes. This guy could be a possible. His habits had changed. He had taken a holiday a year and a half ago, but no record of departure was noted. Could be a coincidence, but he was...

Coincidence.

Stenson changed displays on the datapad to the earlier file. There it was again. That page. He read the last half, then smiled to himself. Standing up, he drained the last of the coffee then went to the cockpit and opened a shielded compartment beneath the navigation console. He withdrew a shiny metallic device, a Lance and Ferman 1KW Detective Special. Brand new. Never been fired. Stenson flicked up the back of his jacket and slipped the weapon into his belt at his back.

He hoped he wouldn't have to use it.

\*

"Peter Schofield?" the man's legs, the only visible parts of his body, stiffened, the heels clicking against the floor.

"Yes?" came the nervous reply from within the depths of the engine.

"Interpol, kid. Why don't you come out so we can talk?" Stenson asked. The legs shuffled forward to reveal more of the greasy overalls until finally a pair of arms and a head appeared. He looked just like the photo in his records: young, trusting, naive.

"What's this about officer?" the kid asked, his hands subconsciously cleaning themselves on the overalls.

"Peter Schofield, previously of the First Imperial Protectorate?" Stenson clarified. The kid shushed him quiet, flicking his head from side to side.

"No need to tell everyone on the station, officer," he pleaded.

"I just need some help, kid. How much people find out about you depends on how much you are prepared to help me."

"I've done nothing wrong," Schofield offered, though both men knew it to be false bravado. Stenson didn't reply, letting the silence build until it was unbearable.

"OK," the kid snapped. "So I've been keeping the broken parts and repairing them. The company normally turns a blind eye," he explained.

Stenson shook his head. "You prepared the fighters of the First Protectorate?"

"Yes, I was just a mechanic. I didn't kill anyone."

Stenson believed the kid. He was obviously a skilled mechanic, but dumb in the ways of the galaxy. "And while there you became acquainted with one Norman Mosser?" the kid's eyes dropped to his shoes, but he nodded his head in defeat. "When did you last see Mr Mosser?" Stenson continued to probe.

"A year ago."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted me to do something to his ship."

"He wanted you to attach a fuel scoop to his Imperial Courier?" Stenson asked. Schofield nodded. He knew he was screwed. Helping a criminal made you a criminal yourself, not to mention getting fired for using company equipment and supplies on illegal jobs. Stenson was in complete control of the kid now. It wasn't a feeling he particularly enjoyed, but it was a means to an end. Whatever it took to get Norman Mosser, he would do it.

"And you did this?" again the kid nodded, his ability to speak apparently lost.

"Do you know where Norman went after here?" once more, the kid resisted the urge to speak, simply shaking his head instead, still looking at the floor. "Tell me a upstanding citizen as yourself wouldn't have done all this work without feeling morally obligated to plant a tracking device within the fuel scoop?" this seemed to elicit a response from the kid, whose eyes, full of panic, locked onto Stenson's.

"No way, he would have killed me!" he urged, his voice climbing a few octaves.

"OK. What model fuel scoop was used? I need the exact specifications for that particular piece of machinery. I need its load frequency, power rating, anything else that could distinguish this fuel scoop from another." The kid nodded at Stenson but didn't move.

"Now," he commanded. The kid flinched, then turned without a word towards the ship's exit. Stenson followed and the two debarked the parked Gecko ship then crossed the repair bay, passing many other ships, in various states of repair, to an office at the far corner. Stenson stood by the door as the kid moved further in, searching through a book case full of datapads. He acted as a man who knew what he was looking for. That was good. The kid wasn't going to screw him around, and obviously had something that could be of use to him. Stenson waited patiently, looking around the office, then turning to look out at the ships. There were some classics out there; a worn and beaten Transporter lay nearby, one of its landing pads missing, the ship held up with an energy jack. A more modern Gyr was next to it, and a couple of Eagle Fighters were spread around. Pirate ships, probably, Stenson thought.

Tap, tap, tap.

The steps sounded purposeful, direct. As if the feet knew exactly where they were going. Who would walk like that in a repair bay? It might be nothing, but he didn't take chances and took a step into the office to hide himself from whoever was approaching. Slowly he reached behind him to activate the dormant weapon. Satisfied, he returned his hands to his sides, then walked back out-

-to come face to face with three men. Big, broad shoulders, mean faces, calloused hands. They were wearing straight black jumpsuits. Never a good sign.

"Agent Stenson?" asked the first of the men. Stenson tried his best confused/surprised face.

"Sorry? I'm just a friend of Peter's, he's just about to finish his shift," Stenson said, hoping his lie wouldn't be as transparent as it felt.

The first man smiled, suggesting Stenson's fears had proven well founded.

"We have a message for you, Mr Stenson," he said.

Two big guns suddenly appeared in the hands of the second and third men.

"Goodbye."

## Not taken by force

[Lord Geoffrey Clarke]

"Lord Clarke," the spy said, on entering the room - deep within the Imperial intelligence department.

"Stanley, do come in and take a seat, dear boy," Lord Clarke replied.

Lord Geoffrey Clarke, one of the many bosses in the massive Imperial security service gave the impression of being a silly old buffer. On the outside, he was certainly a crusty member of the Old Guard. In reality, he was one of the Empire's sharpest intelligence men - despite being a member of the Imperial court, possibly the most inbred family in the entire galaxy.

"Lord Clarke," continued Stanley D'souza, "I have grave news.

"I always find grave news is best taken over a glass of Capita," Lord Clarke replied, ambling over to the drinks cabinet and removing an ornate bottle of single malt. "Care to indulge, Stanley?"

"That's very kind of you, my Lord"

"Oh please, Geoffrey"

"Geoffrey", added D'souza.

Lord Clarke carefully poured out a healthy measure of the whisky into two glasses, and returned to his polished oak desk, and carefully sat in his deep leather seat.

"The full report is here," D'souza said, sliding a DSU over the table, "but I'll give you a precis, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead, dear boy"

D'souza took a deep breath.

"I'm certain that Princess Maria Hesketh-Duval is not a hostage. She is with the criminal Winston of her own volition. Not only that, she was responsible for his rescue from the VLA. I'm so certain I would stake my reputation on it"

Lord Clarke's bushy eyebrows raised. He took a gentlemanly sip of his whisky.

"Also, Norman Mosser appears to have found out about the rescue attempt that EmpSec sent out last month. A parcel matching the dimensions for a Deathwrecker 2 arrived at Winston's cabin exactly a day before the clone agents arrived, and all intelligence points to it having been sent by Mosser. Which Mosser, we don't know, but a Mosser none the less".

"That is bad news, dear boy. What are you proposing?"

"We've not yet had a report from the Clone Agents sent to retrieve the Princess - they were doing the job presumably as a hostage rescue. However, this is normal, they aren't due to report for another week. This means there are at least two likely possibilities - one, that the criminal killed them with the Deathwrecker and the Princess left with him, or secondly, that the Clone Agents killed Winston and took the Princess. Either situation is ugly".

D'souza took a gulp of his whisky before continuing. He certainly wasn't the gentleman that Lord Clarke was.

"The Princess is on the access list for all Imperial craft, so she could easily take it. So either the Princess and Winston have left in the ship that the clone agents arrived in, or alternately, the Princess is in a position of trust with the clone agents and can therefore get the element of surprise and take the ship. Either of these scenarios would be highly distressing to her father."

"Indeed. What do you propose?"

"We send a maintenance command to the Osprey X in question to remove the Princess from the access list. As soon as it docks, she will not be able to fly it. Additionally, the access violation will send a warning to the registered keeper - which is in this case the Empire. If one of our agents is in the area, we have them go and pick the Princess up, and eliminate the fugitive if it becomes necessary. It's an operational matter so we don't have to inform her father that we are doing it, which would be for the best at this time."

Lord Clarke stroked his whiskery beard for a moment.

"A good plan, Stanley. Be sure to warn the agents about the Deathwrecker, though. Where do you think they will be headed?"

"If I were a gambling man, I would say that if Mack Winston is alive, World's End bar at Riedquat. Assuming they managed to take the ship, they should be about a third of the way there by now..."

## Predictably...

[Mack Winston]

"We absolutely need to stop for repairs," Maria said. I could imagine her thoughtful frown through the one-way mirror glass of her space suit.

We were examining the holes that peppered part of the lower hull. We thought we had made off cleanly with the fuel, but our victims had managed to track us - and we'd escaped by the skin of our teeth. It had been a close thing - shields completely drained, and the hull holed.

Fortunately, the living quarters were undamaged and we weren't consigned to spending the next two days in spacesuits, unable to eat or use the toilet (a thought I never relished).

Maria and I moved the repair plates, and I started the plasma welder and set it going. It was only a temporary repair, enough to allow us to repressurise the engine room.

"Trouble is, us landing for repairs is going to be a nice bright red marker for your lot to follow us," I said.

"My ex-lot," Maria reminded.

"You really mean that, don't you? You've given up on the Empire, the life of a princess, the luxury, the.."

"Boredom"

"Boredom, to come and live with me, a"

"Scruffy, ungentlemanly pirate", Maria finished.

"Um"

"Yes. We've got some credits from the sale of the weed, and they are at least hard credits - we can ditch the ship if necessary"

"Assuming we can get anything spaceworthy in this hellhole of a system," I added dismally. It wasn't turning out to be our day and I wouldn't have been particularly surprised if the only ships available in this forgotten system were an Adder minus the flight deck window and half of a scrapped Viper.

Under reduced acceleration due to damage, we continued. The time seemed to drag, Stardreamer notwithstanding. Eventually we touched down. I wasn't even sure of what system we were in - we'd been chased through two by the enraged crew of the Cobra we had looted...

Wait.

We hadn't looted a Cobra at all, it had been an Asp.

I checked the flight logs. Yep, that was definitely a Cobra Mk.3 that had dogged us through the last two systems.

"Maria, I think you ought to take a look at this. What strikes you about the ship chasing us?"

She saw what I'd seen. Finally, no longer in the heat of being chased, she realised the assumptions we had made just weren't right. "It could just be a random attack," she said, I think more to try and reassure herself.

"What's that parked on Pad 2?"

"Sweet mother of the worlds," Maria cursed under her breath.

She reached for the controls to power the ship up. Bugger the repairs, we had to leave. Again!

ACCESS DENIED, flashed the message from the console.

"Shit!" Maria swore.

She tried again.

ACCESS DENIED.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" she yelled, leaping from the command seat and grabbing me roughly by the wrist. "Get the Deathwrecker, we're in deep crap!"

Almost in unison, we cannoned into a person who just shouldn't have been there. A man, dressed in a sharp business suit. He wasn't much larger than me but gave the impression he could snap a steel pole with his pinky.

"Are you looking for this?" he asked calmly, brandishing the Deathwrecker.

It was humming. Loudly.

## Even more predictably

[Norman Mosser]

"Let's get the hell out of here!" she yelled, leaping from the command seat and grabbing me roughly by the wrist. "Get the Deathwrecker, we're in deep crap!"

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It was humming. Loudly.

Norman Mosser smiled and, still holding the Deathwrecker, lifted his left hand and wagged his pinky.

"I apologise if I startled you, but I wasn't quite sure if you were you, or the clone troopers who had been dispatched to fetch you. I trust you are well?"

"You fu-"

"MACK!" exclaimed Mosser, "There is a lady present. I understand that you are a little upset, but I would like to offer you a proposal that should make your existence a little easier."

Mack gritted his teeth and glanced at the Deathwrecker. "Mosser. I did a favour for you last time, and it ended up with me being on the run ever since."

"Ah, but this favour *will* actually endear you to the right people - and earn you some cash."

"How much?"

Mosser paused, reached into a pocket and withdrew a datapad. Keeping one eye on Mack, on the off chance he did something regrettable, he tapped in a couple of commands before turning the screen to face his prospective accomplice. "This much. The bounty for killing Norman Mosser."

Mack and Maria's eyes widened, "You want me to kill you?"

"No. I want you to kill Norman Mosser. There are a few Mossers too many at the moment. I happen to know where one of them is going." Mosser glanced at Maria and winked before continuing, "You remember Mary Darkes?"

"I remember. She killed you."

"And died for the privilege. However, as she was command crew for the *Sunset*, she had one of the locators for the ship. As far as I can tell, she left it at her brothers for safekeeping."

Norman tapped his datapad and the image changed to an address, "Here is the address. Norman Mosser is going there to get it. Kill him, claim the bounty and get me the locator. It'll be worth a hundred thousand to you if you get it for me. And you get to be a hero."

Maria leaned forwards and whispered in Mack's ear, "One million."

Norman smiled, "Two-fifty k."

"Seven-fifty."

"Three hundred."

Mack narrowed his eyes, "Four hundred and a clean, brand new Asp."

Norman raised a finger to his lips and thought for a moment. "Three fifty and the Asp."

"With a military drive."

"Done!" Norman handed the datapad over to Mack.

"One question, Norman."

"Go on."

"How do you know I'll give you the locator?"

Norman smiled, showing his teeth. For a brief moment it looked as if he was going to go for Mack's throat. "Because if you get it and don't give it to me, I will kill you."

With that he turned and left.

Mack and Maria sat back down in the command chairs and looked at each other in silence for a bit. The console beeped. They had email. It was from Norman Mosser.

-A business proposal-

And below that another, also claiming to be from Mosser

-do you still do contract work?-