

## Long Live Confusion

[Mack Winston]

"So basically, I think we should be loyal to Mosser #1", Maria said.

"Why?"

"First come first served. And he had gone out of his way to make sure that dead Imperial agent never made it, and he did get the ship fixed. The others weren't nearly as accomodating."

"I think we'll cristen Mosser #1's target Mosser #2. And Mosser #2's primary target as Mosser #3. But don't confuse Mosser #3 with Mosser #1, since he's only Mosser #2's secondary target."

"I'll remember that," Maria said levelly.

The universe wasn't big enough for three Mossers. The trouble was that in the past, a single Mosser wasn't really all that bothered (so it seems) about dying, because a new Mosser would be pressed into service and the mind transfer completed. I got the impression that three Mossers, all with their own motives but all wanting the same thing (the Azure Sunset) would probably have a keener sense of self-preservation.

Since all three of them had asked me to kill one or more other Mossers, it was also probable that each Mosser also expected me to be coming for them because another Mosser had asked this. So murdering a Mosser could not be done up close and personal. Not that it would be a good idea even if there was only one Mosser with a deathwish.

Yes, this needed a trip to Veliaze for a very special weapon from a very special arms dealer. Much to Maria's chagrin, the very special arms dealer was very definitely not a gentleman.

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# DEATHWREAKER

## THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

### A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 2

by  
The Elite BBS Collective

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## Saved by a Snake

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The echoing of heavy, rushed footsteps came at the pair from all sides. Outflanked by an enemy with more resources: firepower, manpower and technology. But they kept running. They didn't have a choice. The enemies sensors were relaying their every move. They had to stay mobile; keep running and hope they outran their predators. If they stopped, they died. "Go, Go!" de Havilland urged his young co-pilot, pushing Veruz as the man stumbled forward, tripping over a dislodged metal grating. Speed was their ally. "You can breathe later," de Havilland yelled between gulps of air, heart threatening to explode out of his chest. They had ditched their space suits; whatever they had done on the ships bridge had brought it out of its slumber. Stale air was still hissing out of ducts lining the corridors, while the familiar hum of the engines reverberated through the floor gratings and wall. De Havilland wiped the sweat from his brow, eyes darting around, eyeing every intersection, every dark corner and every possible problem his hyperactive imagination could come up with.

This was a race.

De Havilland just hoped that the enemy didn't know where the finish line was, because frustratingly, he didn't either; Veruz was beyond talking now. The kid needed to keep his fitness up, de Havilland thought. If he gets out of here alive. He sucked in another deep breathe, cleaning away such thoughts. He had to stay positive if he was going to get both of them out of here, but the longer they kept running, the longer a universal truth kept reverberating in his head. *You're not as young as you used to be.* Veruz took a left at the intersection ahead, leading to a single ladder, looped over the railing. They two of them flew down the ladder and back into the corridor. Deck 16: Hydroponics, Cosmos Cartography and premature death. Lungs burning, de Havilland kept pushing, one leg in front of the other, the adrenaline keeping his muscles moving. He chased Veruz through a T-junction, then around the corner...

...Straight into an enemy soldier! De Havilland didn't pause, bringing his weapon to bear immediately. "Down!" he roared. The soldier raised his own weapon, just as Michael collapsed out of the way. De Havilland brought the carbine up to his shoulder, fingers curled around the trigger. Like old times! THUMP! The laser blast boomed out of the rifle, exploding into the soldier's skull, throwing him backwards. De Havilland didn't stop; years of close quarter combat had given him a sense when he was walking into a trap. He pushed every last ounce of speed out of his tired legs, sprinting through the cross intersection -

- as several laser blasts flashed in front and behind him, their bass note blinding his hearing. De Havilland dived past the intersection, laser shots missing him by micrometers. He ended in a heap, collected by a computer console just past the intersection. He quickly got into a crouch, examining the battle zone, old instincts coming alive. He had trained as an engineer, but he was programmed as a soldier. The corridor walls provided relative safety, providing none of the soldiers actually moved into the centre of the intersection. Then his eyes flicked to Veruz, his inert body lying face down in the middle of the intersection. No... He was too far away to grab. What could he do? Think! But his mind had turned to slush. Laser blasts continued to fire overhead, smashing into the walls near de Havilland's head,

"Michael," he whispered, praying for a response. The body stirred, groaned. He was alive! "Sit tight," de Havilland cautioned him, new resolve unfreezing his mind. It was time to take control of the situation. Checking the charge on the carbine, he hustled forward into the centre of his corridor. THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! De Havilland dived back behind the computer console just as laser blasts flashed above his head from behind him. They had him surrounded!

"You have lost, Vasquith. Surrender now and we won't kill you." The voice came from around the corner, beyond the intersection, dripping with unbridled arrogance. Whoever this guy was, de Havilland thought, he's cocky beyond belief. Multiple footsteps began approaching from the beyond the intersection. He had about three seconds until end game.

His assets totalled his Marines Laser carbine and the two pistols. What he needed was a personal shield and a couple of his old 301st buddies. His eyes drifted back to the pistols. The voice of his old urban combat instructor entered his mind. There is more than one use for any item, whether it's a chair or a pistol. He frantically unclipped one of the pistols and overrode the safety mechanism. The charge began to build inside the metal casing. A nervous second passed as he watched the pistol intently. Another second crawled by. The pistol began to whine in protest, the power building up beyond what it normally coped with. A single LED flashed up on the pistol's handgrip. All four had to be alight to overload the weapon. The footsteps sounded like they were right behind him. He was out of time.

"Ok, I'm coming out!" de Havilland yelled, dropping the pistol on his foot and grabbing his rifle and putting both arms up in the air. Risking a glance down, he shuffled out from his hiding place. He was facing two men, their

carbines aimed at his chest. Freedom lay beyond. He awkwardly turned to face the intersection, where four men came into view, their own weapons up and ready. Don't screw this up. The pistol shrilled. He glanced back at the two men down the corridor. Their weapons had dropped noticeably. Maybe they thought four weapons was enough to pin him down, but it was still sloppy.

"Deactivate the weapon, Vasquith. How stupid do you think we are?" It was the same arrogant voice as before. The high frequency pitch of the pistols whine actually started giving de Havilland vertigo. He slowly began to lower his arms from above his head.

"Slowly!" one of the men cautioned, itchy fingers dancing over his carbine's trigger. The pistol started screaming. Now! His heartbeat pounded through his mind, blocking everything else out. Rifle down by his chest, he turned it around and ejected the power clip -

- just as he swung his right leg up, sending the overloading pistol, still resting on his foot, high up in an arc. The four soldiers looked at one to the incoming pistol, their focus changing for a split second. De Havilland spun around and ran, straight at the two soldiers behind him! The two men brought their weapons up. Fast. For an instant, de Havilland feared he wasn't going to make it in time. Holding the rifle out sideways in front of him, he closed his eyes...

BOOM!

The shockwave catapulted de Havilland forward as he crunched into the two men, the three of them collapsing to the floor as an intense wave of heat flushed over them. He opened his eyes, untangling himself from the two men in a scrappy swarm of fists and boots. Something cracked against de Havilland's head and he dropped. Swinging his rifle up behind him, he felt an impact. He pushed up off the floor and gathered himself again. Both the two men struggled to get up, one getting a boot to the forehead, the other a rifle butt into the throat. Both collapsed, laying still. Grabbing his battered carbine, he sprinted down the corridor. Then the weapons behind him opened up. Laser blasts thumped as they flew through the air, staccato explosion as they ripped into the corridor walls all around him. With his last burst of energy, de Havilland pushed off with his left foot, diving around the far corner, landing against the far wall, out of the field of fire. His body took a quick time out, panting hard as he searched for damage. Bruised knuckles, head and chest, but otherwise fine. Shaking away the stars, he got to his feet and crept to the far wall and weapon up, risked a quick look around the corner, then ducked back quickly as laser fire exploded all around him, fragments from the walls turning to snow like dust, smoke issuing from the craters in the walls. There were three of them still firing. They looked messed up, but obviously had enough time to duck out of the way of the exploding pistol. That was going to make this a whole lot harder. He looked back down the long corridor, disappearing into the darkness. There was nothing out there. All he had to do was keep moving down there and he would survive.

But he couldn't. Not yet. He wasn't going to leave a man behind. But he was outnumbered, and they continued to lay covering fire down the corridor. He couldn't go out there without getting shot. He looked back towards the dark corridor. He had never left a man behind. Never. He gritted his teeth. Then stepped out. But fell to his knees immediately. The shots went high as he brought his weapon to bear. The laser blasts started tracking down. de Havilland fired. Thump! He moved the rifle slightly, took aim and fired. Two men fell, collapsing to the ground amid a chorus of screams. One left. De Havilland leaned backwards to fall back behind the corner. Just as a laser pulse burned into his shoulder. The impact swung him around, slamming his head into the wall, again. Everything went white as he felt another big hit. The floor, he realised. Rolling over, he looked up the ceiling, trying to get his blurry eyes to focus. Keep Moving! He yelled at himself. He reached out for his carbine, his hand moving across the floor, fingers reaching out. Cold metal, cold metal. Warm metal. He clenched his fingers around the weapon's body. Crunch! He cried out in pain as his wrist shattered, caught between the hard steel of the weapon and a weight from above. Spots began appearing in his vision, threatening to swap the all encompassing white with infinite darkness. Fighting back the physical shock, he clenched his teeth and looked up to see a black military boot clamped down on his left arm. And a tube of Andrometic Steel pointed straight at his head.

Behind the weapon, was a man, a weathered, hardy face with an evil smile. "Not a fan of going quietly huh? I wouldn't want to be in your position either. I would hate to think of the 'questions' my superiors wish to ask you."

De Havilland locked venomous eyes with the attacker, anger and failure swirling through his expression. He's not the trained soldier. You are! And he's beaten you. De Havilland realised he had hoped to die with his ego intact. No such luck. The man tightened his fingers around the trigger.

THUMP! De Havilland flinched, despite himself, but opened his eyes immediately, realising he was still alive. Focusing, he saw the ugly man groan, then collapse backwards. Smoke issued from his chest. De Havilland just lay in silence for several moments, gathering his breath, letting his mind sort out what had just happened. He had never been so close to death before. *Reflect later, you lump-head, you're still in danger.* Slowly, painfully, he used his right arm to push himself upright, shaking away the cobwebs from his battered head. Keeping his useless left

arm up by his chest, he carefully peered around the corner. Michael was still lying on the ground, rifle in hand, wavering as he tried to hold it steady, but dropped it in relief as De Havilland rushed forward to give him a hand up. "You ok?" de Havilland asked, examining his co-pilot's body. There was a nasty laser burn to his stomach. He hated to think what damage it had done, but it obviously wasn't life threatening. "You'll be fine," he said with a smile, holding the younger man steady as he found his feet. He rotated his shoulder experimentally; grimacing at the result. The two men took stock of their surroundings, noting the uniforms of the cadavers. No ID, no markings, unknown weapon design.

"INRA?" Veruz asked, travelling along a similar line of thought.

"Doesn't make sense," De Havilland replied, though his only knowledge of INRA came from old timers drinking away the terrors of their youth in spacer bars.

"Was that the last of them?" Michael asked. De Havilland's blew out his cheeks in contemplation. It was likely, but it was unsound tactics to underestimate your enemy's strength. Best to assume they were still some of them onboard and move accordingly.

"Even if all the guys onboard are dead, there are still the ones outside. I counted more ships earlier than I did dead bodies," de Havilland cautioned. "So where are you taking me anyway?"

"I found us a ticket out of here," Michael explained. "Come on!"

\* \* \*

The Krait loomed above them, snug in the tiny storage bay. The green skinned machine sat high on its landing gear, facing the big doors, which led directly to the main flight deck. De Havilland spent a moment admiring the ships lines. The paint was shiny, like it had just rolled off the production line, the registration number bright and glossy. "How many of these did you say there were?" de Havilland asked Veruz.

"Two dozen."

De Havilland couldn't spot a single defect in the paint; no carbon scoring, no laser marks, no pits from micrometeorite hits. He turned to find his co-pilot, who was punching some buttons on a computer console across the way. "Can you launch them all?"

Veruz shook his head. "They aren't kitted out for remote control, or at least I don't have access to remote activation controls."

De Havilland shrugged. No big loss. The Krait suddenly activated, and with a whir of gears, the boarding ramp lowered down to kiss the metal floor below.

Veruz appeared beside him. "Will she do Cap'n?" he asked with a grin, which turned to a grimace as he clutched his stomach.

"Get on board," he said, pushing the young man playfully. "Get her prepped. I'll stand guard out here." Veruz nodded and headed inside. de Havilland looked up to the cockpit and saw a light come on. New and different sounds immediately attacked him from all angles; pumping of coolant, the activating of the prime mover, the acceleration of the rotating Hyperdrive Instigator. He turned away from the ship to focus on the door they had come in. Any competent commander would have attacked them before they had found a ship. The next ambush was certainly outside of the *Azure Sunset*. He continued to watch the door: No point taking chances. He thought about what was waiting for them outside. Although the Krait was favoured by pirates, it wasn't that great a combat ship. It would struggle against the military spec armament outside. And they were clearly Elite pilots. De Havilland's combat rating was 'Competent'. He was lucky to survive the first skirmish with them. He doubted he would a second. He needed to remove the ships outside from the equation. How? Energy bomb? No, he wouldn't be able to get close enough to destroy them all, even if he had one. They probably had overload fail-safes anyway. If they jumped to hyperspace straight away, the enemy ships would be able to follow them. Even if they caused a mis-jump, it was possible they could trace them through brute force measures. Hyperspace out then? His eyes lit up. What if the *Azure Sunset* made the jump to hyperspace? Then the enemy pilots would scan the hyperspace cloud and be ready and waiting when the LRC arrived at its destination. The *Azure Sunset* was a Long Range Cruiser, after all: Slow and slovenly, anything could beat it in a hyperspace jump.

He shook his head. No, that wouldn't work. Half a solution at best. What he needed was... Son of a bitch, he murmured, clicking his working fingers. De Havilland ran up the ramp into the Krait. "Run it, run it," de Havilland commanded, impatient. Timing had gone from relatively important to crucial to his continued existence. He needed to know exactly when the *Azure Sunset* was going to make the jump if his plan was going to work. He

hovered over Michael anxiously, watching him tie into the AZ's hyperdrive computer. Relax. Just hold it together for a little bit longer.

"I'm doing my best Cap'n," Veruz yelled back, equally frustrated.

"Do your best. Just hurry," de Havilland urged, applying the Insta-Fit splint bandage to his injured wrist. It quickly solidified, allowing a level of movement in his hand. He slapped a heal patch on his shoulder wound; a temporary fix, he would need to go to a real hospital soon, then passed one to Michael. Satisfied he had done all the preparation he could, he spun the Commanders acceleration couch around and eased himself in, tightening up the crash webbing. Veruz looked up at his commander, an unspoken thought passing between them: Buckle up, this is going to be rough. Veruz frantically threw his harness together before returning to his console, furiously tapping away. De Havilland turned to his controls, eyeing the progress of the warm up. Almost ready. He was sure the enemy ships outside would have detected the power surge and be preparing to attack.

Firing up the ships scanners, he got a two dimensional representation of the flight deck and connecting holding bays. His Krait was off the side of a minor thru-way, connected to the main flight deck, extending from one side of the ship to the other. One of the external doors was forever open, blown apart by a missile less than two hours ago. Shit, was that all? It had felt like a week since he had last been sitting in the *Vagabond*. She was still where he had left her, mortally wounded and left to die, alone. *All she did for you, and you're going to leave her there?* He checked the armaments, clearing the thoughts of betrayal from his mind. A single 1 Mega Watt Beam Laser and no missiles. There goes Plan A, he mumbled to himself. "Michael?" he called, but Veruz just shrugged. If this went wrong he would rather mis-jump out in the open and take his chances, than be inside when the *Azure Sunset* made its next jump. That would accomplish nothing. It would be safer to go outside until he knew exactly when the AZ would make the jump. He blew out a deep breathe, hardening his resolve. Now or never. He activated the prime mover and disengaged the landing pads. Michael turned and pressed a button on the main control panel. The big doors immediately ahead cracked apart and began to open. Air from their storage bay roared out into the vacuum ahead. "Keep working Michael. You do your part, I'll do mine," said de Havilland as he pushed the throttle forward. The Krait wound itself through the maze of flight decks, pausing 300m shy of the jagged hole that used to be a pressure door. "Last chance, Michael," de Havilland said.

"Sorry Cap'n."

de Havilland pushed the throttle down hard. The engines kicked to life, throwing the two men back into their seats. The flight deck flashed by at incredible speed, side passages blurring into the walls as the Krait pushed for freedom...

...And they were out of the *Azure Sunset*. Facing off against twelve ships. Twelve guns. Who knew how many missiles. His earlier logic suddenly failed him, and de Havilland instinctively through to return to the safety of the *Sunset*. But he kept the Krait flying forward as the enemy guns opened up in his direction. The only positive of the situation was his speed; the enemy had been stationary, while he had been absolutely flying. Within a few seconds he was past them and heading for outer space. The enemy ships quickly turned and fired up their engines in pursuit. He had managed to get a quick look at the opposing hardware, but he still couldn't recognise the models; they weren't made in civilian shipyards. Whoever made them, they were light, fast, and hard to hit. His advantage would be over before he knew it. So he flipped the ship around, keeping the prime mover at full power. He began to instantly slow. As his speed reduced, the enemy ships got closer and closer. Back within firing range.

"I got it!" Veruz yelled. De Havilland didn't reply, too busy watching the scanners. His speed continued to drop. He engaged the 1MW Beam laser and began firing at the approaching swarm. He didn't think he would be lucky enough to hit any, but hopefully the attack would hold them off for just a few seconds. "Cap'n! We've got twenty seconds!" Michael yelled.

"Time to go!" de Havilland yelled, more at the engines than himself. The speed continued to drop. Zero. Time stood still. The enemy ships were large in the cockpit window now, like a herd of lions, surrounding a wounded gazelle. Nothing happened... Then they started moving forward, just as the enemy opened up with their guns. Red beams of light criss-crossed the cosmos as the enemy ships lit up, intent on destroying the Krait. De Havilland threw in some basic manoeuvres to evade the beams of light, trying to keep his forward speed at a maximum; he wanted to go straight, as quickly as possible. The enemy ships spun around to come about, now behind the Krait with guns firing. But the Krait was already gone. In a dead sprint, the enemy ships would catch up, however this sprint track wasn't long enough this time. The *Azure Sunset* filled the entire cockpit window as de Havilland kept the acceleration at maximum, pushing, urging the ship to full speed. The gaping hole in the flight deck door lay before them invitingly. The ships behind began nipping at his heels, their distant weapons ineffective, but as they got close, their accuracy improved and explosions rocked the back of the Krait. De Havilland didn't even attempt to evade. There was no manoeuvring space any more.

BOOM!

The Krait shook, skewing upwards towards the LRC's hull. De Havilland pushed forward instinctively on the stick. The ragged edge of the hull loomed closer. If they hit the hull at this speed, there wouldn't be enough parts to identify the ship, let alone their bodies. The hull was so close, De Havilland felt he could almost reach out and touch it. Fear gripped his heart. They weren't going to make it...

But then they were through, back into the flight deck, still flying at full acceleration, pushing the injured Krait for all its worth. The next obstacle in their path was the far flight deck door. It was still sealed shut. "Missile Lock!" cried Veruz. de Havilland glanced at the missile tracker console, then returned to the front view. It was all or nothing now. Death by missile, Hull impact, or would you like what's in the box? He thought dryly. "Cap'n! The door!"

"What's the clock?" de Havilland asked, ignoring him.

"Three seconds!" Veruz yelled. de Havilland kept the speed on. One second passed. They were almost on the door. They were going to get turned into green paint and red blood confetti. Another second. Then de Havilland pulled down the hyperdrive levers and slammed on the Safety Override switch, activating a mis-jump. The Krait disappeared from normal space, nanoseconds before impact with the far door. The missile thundered forward, exploding against the hull door. Then the *Azure Sunset* disappeared in a wink of light and the explosive creation of a hyperspace cloud. The ship was gone.

The enemy vessels gathered around the hyperspace entry cloud, analysers on full power. They could only detect the single cloud – there was no trace of a second. The pilots deduced the Krait was still inside the LRC, thinking it had escaped. Radio signals flew between the ships, intercept coordinates relayed between hyperdrive computers. The ships disappeared in synchronous blossoms of hyperspace clouds. They arrived at the target system well ahead of schedule, then spread out and activated their stealth systems. Days later, the *Azure Sunset* exploded into existence. The pilots of the small ships instantly locked on and flew to intercept, keeping a close eye on any ship trying to flee from within. Scanners on full, they found no trace of the Krait, and no life signs on board. Somehow, the Krait had escaped.

# **New Rossyth Announces Plasma Accelerator Breakthrough**

[Frontier News]

It wasn't that long ago that news of the Federation's successful attempt at building a Huge Plasma Accelerator took the galaxy by storm - especially since the Federation had managed to let one of them get stolen. While the Federation was busy researching the technology required to make plasma accelerators larger, New Rossyth shipyards in partnership with the Alliance Joint Navy were looking at going the other direction - the Nano Plasma Accelerator.

The problem with plasma accelerators is there is generally a minimum practical size: the Small Plasma Accelerator, which made a large ship like the Argent's Quest seem cramped was generally accepted to be the smallest practical plasma accelerator. Engineers at the AAI shipworks in New Rossyth were convinced that the improvements in plasma channelling that were needed for the development of the Class 4 military hyperdrive could be applied to plasma accelerators. After years of research, they settled on a new design for compact plasma accelerators - the "trombone particle accelerator", so called because of its trombone shape (complete with movable tuning slide, making the resemblance even more striking).

The new Nano Plasma Accelerator only weighs 6t and is slightly more powerful than a 4MW beam laser - which weighs in at 20t - or 25t if you want to adequately cool the device. Unlike the 4MW beam laser, the nano plasma accelerator can operate without a laser cooling booster since it is much more efficient. This will be greatly advantageous to smaller ships - from Vipers to Asps - allowing more shield generation or other equipment (or just fuel) to be carried than the current craft using 4MW beam lasers. The extra shield generation will give Police ships an important advantage against pirates.

The drawback is price. Exotic materials and construction techniques means that that an NPA will set the AJN or Alliance police forces back over Cr.150,000 per weapon - so it's likely to only be carried by specialist units. The weapon is not yet on sale outside the police or military - especially since the AJN would rather see a lid kept on the technology for the time being. Reliability is also a concern - while lab tests have been going on for some time, this is not always perfectly representative of the kind of abuse these weapons get in the heat of battle.

# Atomic Laser Death Show

[Namron Resson]

## Las Vegas, Sol.

Mosser#2 was bored. He had spent the last few hours posing at the Vega Line Corporation stall at the Atomic Laser Death Show arms fair in Las Vegas fielding the same questions again and again and again.

"Are you Norman Mosser?"

"Yes."

"Really?!"

"No of course I'm bloody not. Being Norman Mosser is illegal. I'm an actor. I'm here to pose and sell Deathwreakers. Have you tried one on our test range? 'What battle weapon' rated them 89/100 in their review of man portable battle weapons."

"Can I try one?"

"Go ahead."

He smiled. It was ironic really that he was making more out of selling usage of his image for advertising purposes than he ever made from shooting people. Or blowing them up. Or poisoning them. Or, in one case, carefully inserting an Interplanetary shuttle from low orbit and hitting them with the debris as it broke up. And then of course there was the fact that advertisers were queing up for his services. Being controversial and all that. He even made money out of the 'lets wipe out Norman Mosser' branded toilet paper that was used on bidet-less frontier worlds. It didn't matter to him. The users didn't stop to consider that they were bankrolling the subject of their wipings.

Still, today was giving him plenty of time to think about ways of ridding the galaxy of excess Mosserage. Mack hadn't replied to his message, which was in his opinion rather rude. Which would probably mean another Mosser had made a better offer. Mosser#2 mused on this and decided that it would be for the best if the one armed chap met a nasty, violent demise. The stairs outside the Darkes residence would of course be notoriously unsafe...

"Heh heh heh."

Norman straightened at this point as a group of Federal Naval Officers approached the stand.

"Are you Norman Mosser?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"No of course I'm bloody not. Being Norman Mosser is illegal. I'm an actor. I'm here to pose and sell Deathwreakers. Have you tried one on our test range? 'What battle weapon' rated them 89/100 in their review of man portable battle weapons"

"Can I try one?"

"Go ahead."

## Veliaze

[Mack Winston]

"I wonder," I said idly across the small restaurant table to Maria, "if when antipasto and pasta collide, whether they annihilate themselves?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "Very droll. Now what am I supposed to have?"

"Rigatoni alla Pajata, with extra tomato."

"What is it?"

"You don't really want to know. It's nice. It's key."

The waiter, an old man with an air of superiority hobbled over. Scorched by the harsh Veliaze sun, he wordlessly took our order. I just hoped the same chef ran this place, I didn't really care for extra tomato.

Our meals and beer arrived. I think Maria was a bit glad to be eating proper food rather than the gluck that we had on board our ship, even if the surroundings were decidedly not up to Imperial standards. Meanwhile, as we ate, I waited for Something To Happen. It wasn't. I thought I was destined for disappointment. After settling the bill, we began to leave.

A stocky man strode over.

"I'm the manager. I gather you are not satisfied with our service?" he asked loudly.

"The service is terrible!" I said loudly, ensuring I said only those four words. I saw a glint in the stocky man's eye.

"Well, come into my office, and I'll see what I can do."

We were ushered out. Maria by now was looking very confused.

"Hello Vince," I said, entering the manager's office.

"Do you know you're the first ex-Guild member we've seen in about a year?"

"What happened to the others?"

"All rounded up and killed," Vince sighed. "My best customers. I see the rumours about you and the Imperial princess were right," he added.

Vince was a swarthy man, around middle aged, who seemed very unthreatening despite his roots as a former Mafia assassin. He'd given up killing long ago, and decided to retire into equipping killers instead.

"So, what tools of destruction are you looking for today?"

"Your best sniper rifle. Ballistic, not laser or any fancy technology. A good, honest gauss rifle. Naturally, undetectable and de-identified. Some explosives. Oh yes, and an electrocution kit."

Vince raised his eyebrows. "Big job?"

"You could say that."

Vince knew better than to ask about who the target was. "What's the explosives to be used on?"

"A building. New San Fransisco, Earth, Sol."

Vince swung his chair to a computer display and flicked through some information. "Earthquake zone," he muttered, "you'll need a shaped charge to do any good against an earthquake tolerant building. I think I have just the thing though."

"Excellent."

"But as for your rifle, you need to see what I have," he said, a smile twitching on his usually deadpan face. "Follow me."

We followed Vince to the cache, in the restaurant's basement. He opened a case. "Now broken down," he said, opening a slim case, "this rifle is virtually undetectable. It can be assembled in thirty seconds by a practised marksman. The ammo contains its own powerpack. Keep it separate, makes it harder to detect if it's away from the gun."

He lifted the gun out of its case, as if it were a precious ornament. In seconds, he assembled the three parts into a functional weapon. "Now all you need is the scope. We have a special going this week on a pure optical scope, no energy signatures, no detection. Needs a little skill, but I hear you're up to it," he said, taking the scope from a long, slim velvet bag. He attached it to the gun's accessory rail. "Now let's go to the range for a quick demo," he said.

Once again, we set off. The basement of the restaurant must have been five times the size of the actual above ground building. We entered a long, narrow room. At the far end was a target. Maria looked on as Vince handed me the rifle and some ammo. Carefully, I inserted the first round and locked the chamber. No whining like the Deathwrecker - total silence.

I looked through the scope at the target, and squeezed the trigger. Bang! The round's inbuilt powerpack instantly discharged, creating a powerful magnetic field which accelerated the bullet down the barrel of the gun. Unlike typical energy weapons, the rifle kicked back. I looked back through the scope, and noted the hole. Right in the bull's eye. A nice gun indeed.

"Not quite as accurate as a laser weapon, but not far off. Less than one MOA at eight hundred metres," continued Vince in full sales-pitch mode, "which is very good for a weapon that fires a projectile."

I took another two shots. Vince was indeed right, deadly accuracy, delivering a projectile that had so much more penetrating power through personal shields than the modern small laser. The priceless feature was the difficulty in detection. Wandering around New San Francisco with a laser weapon was one sure way of getting surrounded by Police in short order.

"For you, only ten thousand credits," Vince added, with an air of embarrassment. I think he secretly hated charging people money. It was funny to think that the ruthless killer was afraid to name a price sometimes. Vince had been the sort of man who'd kill anyone for the Guild. It didn't matter who they were - man, woman, or child: he'd dispatch them. But name a price? It made him come over all fear-uncertainty-and-doubt.

We picked up the rest of our purchases - some insanely heavy explosives, which I gave to Maria to carry - some components for performing electrocutions, and my now prized rifle. "So all that guff about the food we ordered, and being displeased with the service, that was some kind of signal?" Maria said quietly, as we left the restaurant.

"Yep."

"A bit insecure isn't it? What if we were overheard? Or even caught and forced to confess?"

"In the case of the latter, well, Vince would kill us first, and in the case of the former, well, the 'manager' of course checked us out first."

"What was the guild?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about that right now," I said rather hastily. I knew it was inevitable she'd probe me about it again some time later. But for now, I just needed to deflect the question. The Guild...well The Guild was a link to a whole lot of unpleasantness I didn't think she should really know about. Not just yet.

We arrived back on ship.

"You know, this job would be so much easier if it wasn't in Sol," I commented. "Especially as Mossers 2 and 3 will undoubtedly be expecting us to finish them off."

"Us?"

"This is a team effort, I'm afraid. Not much compares to Mosser hunting. Especially Mosser with something to lose hunting."

# It Ain't Over Till It's Over

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The tunnel of Witchspace twirled, spun, gyrated and spasmed around the Krait, knocking it around like a zero gee cricket ball. de Havilland pulled himself back into his chair after another violent knock almost threw him clear of his command couch.

"What's going on Cap'n?" asked Veruz from the co-pilot's seat. That was strange in itself, because the Krait was a one crew ship, but de Havilland didn't really expect normality anymore. Things had gotten strange, fast.

"I'm not sure-," he yelped as another hyperspace updraft banged into the ship, knocking it upwards. It felt like they were riding a bucking horse, which was desperate to empty its saddle.

Alarm bells rang across the cockpit, as de Havilland's eyes darted over the readouts, assessing the damage.

"We need to get out of here," Veruz said slowly.

"Don't worry kid. We'll be alright," de Havilland replied automatically, without looking up from the screens. Another bang rocked the ship, forcing de Havilland to look out the Plexiglas window.

Holy shit... The Witchspace tunnel was changing colours. It was as if they were travelling through a cylindrical rainbow; the steady white-blue giving way to green and yellow, then red, pink, then back to orange, the tunnel walls pulsating like the undulations of a pond surface, interrupted by a falling rock. de Havilland's heart rate doubled in intensity.

"Ok, we need to get out of here," he replied quickly, already flicking switches on the computer. In all his years, including as a marine, there were few times when he had felt true fear.

Right now was one of those times. Dying in battle, although a shame in general, was a good way to go; you were able to defend yourself, have some say if and when you went. You had a fighting chance to live.

Not like in hyperspace. The technology was as dangerous as it was commonplace; every time you disabled the safety interlocks and forced a mis-jump, you were inviting danger. Sometimes the danger was reappearing in normal space in the black emptiness between stars. Nothing that another hyperjump couldn't fix. Sometimes the hyperdrive turned to slag in the process. Sometimes the ship is never seen again. Gone, disappeared into the darkness of Witchspace, never to return to normal space. Back in the Thargoid wars, Thargoid battleships would hover in Witchspace, waiting to ambush human ships. Hyperspace opened up the galaxy to humanity, but still no one knew exactly how it worked. It was like playing with fire.

de Havilland wasn't going to get burnt.

"I didn't know you could prematurely leave hyperspace," Veruz said, alarmed. "Don't you need coordinates for an exit point?"

"I've never tried this before," de Havilland replied calmly.

"Oh god," Veruz moaned. "We're going to be trapped in Witchspace forever," despair coated his face. de Havilland couldn't argue with him. The unspoken rule of hyperspace was: You don't fuck with hyperspace. The engines were always left to the experts. The hyperspace motivator, especially, was off limits to anyone who didn't have a degree in Hyper-physics.

Still he felt he had to do something. Take his destiny into his own hands, as opposed to waiting for fate to sort him out. His hands paused as he contemplated the gravity of what he was doing. He could be saving them.

Or he could be sending them to an untimely and unknown death. Or worse.

"Cap'n!" Veruz yelled. de Havilland looked up, but didn't need to see Michael's outstretched arm to see the problem.

Outside the cockpit, things were going from bad to worse. The tunnel walls were so grotesquely out of shape that the engineer inside him screamed that they were going to snap from the stress.

They looked like they had gone a full twelve rounds with Gerry 'The Slicer' Mitz: bruised and beaten until it barely resembled its initial shape. The ship bounced and bucked again and the sound of bending metal filled their ears as the hull was tortured beyond its design limits.

His hands danced over the controls. "We're going," de Havilland confirmed. He opened the menu on the computer system, disabled the safety locks and gained access to the power controls for the hyperdrive.

He cut all power to the hyperdrive.

The ship shook and screamed.

SLAM!

It felt like something hit the ship again and de Havilland was pushed against his restraints, forcing the air out of his lungs. He pushed against the control console to get back into his seat, desperately gulping air back into his lungs. His eyes regaining focus, he looked out the cockpit window to see the most unnatural sight he had ever seen.

Something was out there.

Then it was gone as the Krait shuddered and spun and flipped over.

The world outside went dark.

## So Good They Named It Twice

[Tyrol Brennan]

The Transporter shuddered awkwardly as it rotated for the deceleration burn. From somewhere aft, a worrying metallic groan echoed through the cargo spaces. Tyrol glanced back towards the hatch to the service room, and from there into the hold. The ship had been doing that a lot recently - the service manuals suggested that it was probably a damper somewhere. It was the trouble with old tech superconducting electromagnets - when they got old they lost calibration faster. Still, their cargo should earn them cash to get a service done. It was lame, and a bit cliched, but shipping computers into Sol always made you money. And they had a passenger in one of the cabins. He was only paying a couple of hundred credits, but it was better than nothing and would pay for the fuel.

He glanced around the living space. It was a mess. Back when the ship was new (apparently sometime in 2800 according to the registration document), it would have been home to twenty crew. Now it was just a messy flat for three blokes. The beds were bigger and comfier, there was a dreamplayer on the floor and a still wedged between the autochef and the ceiling. It was home. Tyrol clambered up to the bridge. Technically as Commander he was supposed to be on station when they did manoevers or something, but he knew from experience that Jameson got tetchy if he thought he was being judged. Turning up just afterwards was fine.

"Tyrol. We are going to get that bearing fixed when we dock?"

"Yeah, of course. I've been waiting to get parts from a specialist in Sol. They're harder to find than bloody class four military drives. Did the turnaround go fine?"

"Yeah. No probs. Her arse is pointed at Abraham Lincoln and the prime movers set to stop us a few hundred clicks short. All done by hand naturally."

"Of course. Is Benny up yet?"

They both smiled. Benny was never up early. He'd get up if they were in a fight, or if something broke, but spent the rest of the time 'smoking' and watching dreamvids on his bunk. Jameson tilted his head and looked up at Tyrol

"You can talk - Commander Headache."

Tyrol gritted his teeth. His 'crew' just would not let him forget the time he was too hungover to do anything when they were jumped by pirates. Jameson had run the helm solo with a stinking headache while Benny, who was still pissed had picked the Adder off from the rear turret. All Tyrol was able to do was lie, sweaty and pasty as the Transporter lurched and shook and sparked and hissed as the hull took a pounding. Thankfully the angry silence turned into relentless pistaking after a mere week.

"When do we dock?"

Tyrol and Jameson started. The passenger kept doing that. Appearing as if by magic in the cabin they were in. It was probably some priestly kung fu thing. Religious folk had that they said so it stood to reason that a bearded monk of Kumbayar would as well. He loomed at the back of the bridge.

"Well?"

"Jameson?"

"About six hours. We're slowing down now to dock at Abraham Lincoln."

The priest mused at this.

"Can you divert to New York? My faith demands I touch the hallowed earth of solthree as soon as possible."

Tyrol sucked air in through his teeth at that point. The priest glowered.

"How much?"

"Fifty. We'd need to refile landing clearances and it alters our fuel budget."

"Very well. I'll pay when we touch down."

"Cool."

The priest turned and headed back down to the passenger cabins. Tyrol nodded at Jameson to plot a new course.

Seven hours later and the Transporter was making the final approach to New York. Benny was up and on the bridge tinkering with the engineering panel muttering something about tokomaks and criticality accidents.

"Is it OK?" Tyrol hazarded.

"If you can ask again in five minutes. Yes."

"And if I can't?"

All he got was a withering stare and some muttered swearing in a dead language

New York control took over the autopilot at that point and set them not too gently down on pad 5. As always, there was a delay as the spaceport tried to remember the docking profile for such an old ship. Luckily, as Sol was relatively cosmopolitan they still had one. Nearer the edge they had several times had the tower instruct them to manual land due to 'incompatibilities'

*--Payment Received--*

Tyrol glanced down. His terminal had flagged that their passenger had paid.

"Airlock's cycled." muttered Benny.

"Bit early?" added Jameson.

"Well go and look then!"

Jameson rose and ambled down to the service room. "Hatch is open!" he shouted back up.

Tyrol glanced at the console. Control were shirty now for them breaking the quarantine cycle. They had fined him 50cr and were sending some Customs Men over. Thankfully, they'd sold all their illegals in Barnard's Star before coming over. Nothing to worry about.

"Jame - wait by the door and let the man in!"

They didn't have to wait long. Federal customs were efficient. Three minutes brought a travelpod and two burly and bored looking men. "Afternoon. I am empowered by Federal law to perform a mandatory ship search due to your breaching of quarantine procedures. I have downloaded your manifest. Do you have any contraband?"

"No."

"I note that you have said no."

"I note that you have a passenger. Where is he?"

"In his cabin."

"Show me."

Tyrol showed the customs men to the priest's cabin. He keyed the door open. The little voice inside him telling him that the cabin was empty was annoyingly right. "He was here when we landed."

"Quite."

The second customs guy pulled out a small bioscanner, switched it on and waved it around the cabin. Almost immediately it shrilled.

Almost immediately after that, the customs men drew stunners and shot Tyrol.

He came to on a hard bed in a cell. As he looked up the door opened and a small suited man entered followed by a guard.

"Tyrol Brennan. You are hereby charged with aiding and abetting a wanted criminal. Anything you say or think may be treated as evidence against you."

"What! Who?"

"In addition, you are charged as being a party to a breach of the Being Norman Mosser Act."

"Eh?"

"And finally, I am charging you with operating a passenger starship with a void spaceworthiness certificate. Do you have any questions?"

"Arrrgh!"

"I'm sorry, could you spell that?"

# One Step at a Time

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The Krait reappeared in normal space with an explosion of light, spinning around its longitudinal axis, spiralling out of control. de Havilland struggled against the controls, eventually righting the ship. A quick eye to the scanner. Empty. No one had traced them. Breathing a sigh of relief, he brought the ship to a halt. They two men sat still, breathing heavily, too stunned to speak. Finally, as de Havilland looked over to Veruz, who looked like he was shell shocked.

"Hey," de Havilland said weakly.

Veruz turned to his commander then nodded back. "What the hell just happened?"

"Well I think we left hyperspace prematurely, and without exit coordinates," de Havilland replied flatly. "Pretty cool, really." The two dropped back into a silence. It wasn't from the stress, but from something more foreboding.

Eventually, Veruz broke the silence. "Did you see that?"

de Havilland closed his eyes in defeat. A lot of things worth of mention had happened in the last few minutes, but he had no doubts over what Veruz was talking about. Sure he had seen it. A can of worms was what it was. He sighed, wishing that his co-pilot hadn't seen it. "Yeah, I saw it," he said slowly.

"Was that what I thought it was?"

de Havilland mulled the question over. He hadn't really gotten a good look. What he did know was that it appeared to be hovering in Witchspace and it looked massive. And it had a distinct human design. What had they stumbled across? He shook the thought from his mind. Whatever it was, he was sure it was going to end up trying to kill him. It was best to keep the number of secret groups trying to kill you to one, if at all possible.

"No Veruz, it wasn't. I've learned my lesson about sticking my nose where it doesn't belong." He grabbed the datapad with the *Azure Sunset's* hyperdrive data and dropped it on the controls.

"Our priority is to get this thing sorted out so we can maybe buy our lives back and then get on with them." Veruz maintained eye contact for a brief second, then finally nodded acquiescence. de Havilland could tell the man didn't agree. Veruz had pleaded to him to leave the *Azure Sunset* alone, and now he was the one wanting to continue the death defying adventure.

Well fuck that. He had spent ten years risking his life in the marines. For king and country. Hah! How naïve he had been! He wasn't risking his life for anything anymore. All he wanted to do was quiet boring life, and he wasn't going to let anything interfere with that. Their latest episode reminded him why he had left the marines in the first place.

"So how do we get that decrypted?" Veruz asked, pointing to the datapad.

"I know a guy," de Havilland replied.

\*

They hadn't been traced. At least no one had tried to blow them to bits while exiting hyperspace. A jump to the nearest system, fend off a few pirates, fill up on fuel, then another set of jumps before repeating the process. Several weeks later the Krait appeared back in real space, 40 astronomical units from the giant white star Alioth. The capital of the Alliance.

"I've never been here before," Veruz said idly. de Havilland regarded him with surprise.

"Really?" he swept his hand across the cosmos outside the cockpit window. "This is the technical and engineering capital of the galaxy."

"The Alliance?" Veruz asked incredulously. de Havilland nodded.

"Its leaders knew that the formation of the Alliance would see reprisals from both the Empire and the Federation, so they quickly built a fleet of warships. Not fancy or complicated mind you, they didn't have the money, but they had brains."

"They built them out of LRC's," Veruz finished, obviously knowing a little of recent history.

"That's right," said de Havilland as he locked the automatic pilot onto the New Rossyth Starport on Argents Claim. "It went from there. They did things the smart way; instead of throwing money at the problem, they worked unique angles to their problems, coming up with great results. Like the Class IV Military drive."

Veruz digested the lecture, nodding.

"So how come you know a guy in Alioth if you were a Federation Marine?" de Havilland looked at him admonishingly.

"I wasn't always a marine, kid. I went to University back at home on Earth. I didn't finish before I was conscripted of course, but once I was out, I got a job where I finished off my degree. Eventually I ended up at the AAAI shipyards, working alongside some of the greatest minds in the galaxy. Damn some of those guys were way too smart," he finished with a grin.

"You worked on the Turners Quest?" Veruz asked, referring to the ship, now of pop cult status, which had been the catalyst for the second age of the Thargoids.

"How old do you think I am?" he asked, shock on his face, which settled back to a grin. "No, I did small stuff, weapons and the like. My speciality," he said, his grin growing larger.

"I've figured that out already," Veruz replied with his own lop sided grin.

"Long story short, I got bored. Wanderlust struck and I had to get out and see the galaxy." He mulled the thought over. "Well I mean see the galaxy while I wasn't trying to blow it up. Marine life doesn't give much time for tourism."

"I bet."

"So I know this computer tech who gets paid shitloads and has access to the latest in computer technology. He's a good mate. I'm sure he'll help us out."

"I hope so, 'cos we've come a long way to get rejected," Veruz said, a little too quickly.

"Too right."

The New Rossyth Starport was small in comparison to some in the Core, but it managed well regardless. Initially built as an outside, two berth landing facility, an extra four berths were roughly appended to the complex after the return of the Thargoids. They had never looked natural, like crudely welding extra wings on an Eagle Long Range fighter. It just looked wrong. New Rossyth was the home of the most advanced shipyards in known space, yet they couldn't afford, or be bothered, making the Starport look perfect.

It had been a point of constant annoyance to de Havilland while he had worked there.

"Ugly," he muttered to himself as the autopilot brought the ship down for a picture perfect landing on landing pad 3, one of the new ones. The landing rails made contact with earth, then the ship shrunk an extra few metres as the suspension took up the slack. Finally the ship settled into equilibrium and lay still. As de Havilland deactivated the engines, waste combustion air and hydrogen fuel vented from various ports across the outside of the ship, giving the feeling the ship was a live animal, panting after a great exertion. The two men left the cockpit then travelled down the entry plank to terra firma. The bitter cold attacked from all sides, blowing through their thin bodies as if they were threadbare cloth, chilling them to the bone.

"Must have come at a bad time," shivered Veruz as he huddled his arms around his torso. de Havilland nodded to Veruz's left, who turned to look...

...to see large bio-domes spreading to the horizon. The whole city of New Rossyth was divided into various sections, mostly along Commercial, Industrial and Residential lines. Again, unlike closer to the core, the habitation domes weren't comprised of energy, but cheaper and more efficient Zirconium fibre alloy truss frames with a Tri-Glaze polymer; stronger than glass and more ductile, but with the same transparency. It did the same job but was cheaper. He remembered his old history teachers Number 5 rule to learn from history: "Why, during the 20th century space race did the Americans spend millions developing a pen that can write upside down, and in zero gravity, when the Russians just used a pencil?"

The two men walked across the landing pad to the hangar directly in front. It was large enough to enclose a Panther Clipper, and the sliding doors facing them tall and wide enough to admit one. A smaller, human sized door,

built into the right most part of the door, opened and a man, a Starport representative, motioned them inside. The pair raced inside, out of the weather.

"Welcome to New Rosyth," said the man as he closed the door behind them. A warm, seemingly genuine smile graced his face. He was of average build, probably late twenties and wearing the uniform of Starport personnel.

"It's colder than I remember," de Havilland admitted to the man, who laughed at the comment.

"It's summer," he said with a grin. Veruz laughed at his commander, despite his own discomfort.

"So what brings you to the Capital? Business? Pleasure? Domes 3 and 4 cater for most needs of ship crew." de Havilland shook his head at the offer.

"Business I'm sorry. We need to get to Dome 16." The man raised an eyebrow.

"HQ huh?" he asked. de Havilland nodded. Although the shipyards where repairs, maintenance and construction occurred was part of the Starport they were standing in now, the professional side of the AAAI shipyards, where the engineers designed and tested their technology, took up the entirety of Dome 16, known locally as the Head Quarters, or 'HQ'.

"I'll organise transport," the man said with a less sincere smile, before moving away to access a control panel. de Havilland whispered to his co-pilot.

"He thinks we're bogus. Probably alerting the authorities. They'll do a routine scan on us and our ship." Veruz's eyes widened.

"We're in a stolen ship, cap'n!" he hissed back.

"No shit," de Havilland replied, his voice dropping to barely audible. He fingered through his pockets and found a ten credit coin. He advanced on the Starport worker, who turned as he heard the approach.

"Look chief, we're not looking for any trouble," he said raising the hand with the coin. "I used to work in Dome 16. Name's de Havilland. Check the records if you don't believe me. I just want to catch up with an old work mate quickly. That's all," he finished, spreading his hands open, palms facing outwards. The man's eyes flicked between de Havilland and the silver coin in his hand. Slowly he nodded.

"Yeah, you look like a straight up guy," he said slowly. de Havilland put his hand out in front of him and the other man shook it. When he withdrew his hand, it was empty.

"Can you get the mechanics to look at the main gun?" de Havilland asked at the completion of their shady deal. "I think the secondary emitter is out of alignment."

"It's a slow day. I think they can get on it right away."

"Cheers," said de Havilland, before motioning Veruz over.

"The gun worked fine on our trip in here," Veruz whispered, having overheard the conversation.

"Yes, but this way the ship will be hidden in the repair bay, away from prying eyes. Eyes that may recognise an *Azure Sunset* registered Krait."

"Good idea."

"Come on. We've got a maglev to catch," de Havilland said.

## The Twist of the Trail

[Kim Stenson]

"What a game!" Clark roared, stumbling through the opening doors into Kim's apartment. A small cube shaped affair, tucked away in the corner of the station, it nonetheless had all the essentials for a detective: Dark, moody light, an ancient and defective air circulation system, a bed, a fridge and a bottle of single malt whiskey. Kim followed Clark in a second later, fumbling for the light switch. An underpowered light globe purred into life in the far corner, casting flickering shadows across the messy open plan apartment, while some corners stoutly maintained their darkness.

"I can't believe we got them!" Kim shouted back to his mate, before collapsing on the ripped and faded couch. "Bond has to be best bowler the Independent worlds have ever seen. Three scalps in that last over! Jesus!" Clark made a beeline for the kitchen counter, swooping up the bottle, grabbed two glasses, then headed back to where Kim sat, rattling the glass containers as he plonked them on the table.

"I'm feeling kind of pissed," Kim confessed. "You had better pour me a double."

"Triple it is!" cried Clark, the close victory lifting his spirits to unknown heights. He poured two drinks, then the men fell into silence as they sipped at the heavy spirit.

"What's that?" Clark asked, dropping his glass to the table as he moved to the far corner of the room. Hidden in the shadows was a model of a starship, a wingspan of a metre and a half. Clark picked up the behemoth and brought it closer to the sole light source of the room.

"A Cobra Mk III," he nodded appreciatively. "Man you've gone to a lot of effort with this one. Look at that carbon scoring. Wow. And what are these markings?" Clark asked, pointing to the fangs near front laser emplacement.

"She was my dad's," Kim said quietly. "The real one," he added. "An ex-pirate sold it to him. He liked the fangs, so he kept them. Thought it might keep some trouble makers away."

Clark continued to turn the massive model over and around, examining every fine detail of the piece of art.

"This must have taken you ages, Kim. I didn't know you had that much spare time!"

Kim nodded. "That was exactly how she looked before...before it was destroyed." Clark nodded, all too familiar with the tragic beginning to Kim's life. He couldn't have been more than 15 when it had happened. Too young. Time for a happier topic, he realised.

"So how about Ariel eh? That seems to be pretty serious," he queried. Kim took another sip, hid a grimace then remained silent for a few more seconds. Finally he spoke.

"We've having fun," he allowed.

"It's a year at least," Clark reasoned. "Surely you have gotten past fun. I know she sure likes you."

"Yeah, I think she does. Why she would be interested in an old cynic is beyond me."

"She's almost half your age, yet she can't get enough of you. You must bring something important to the table, mate."

"Experience," Kim said with a grin. The two broke out in laughter, which lapsed back into an uncomfortable silence.

"So what's the problem Kim? It seems like a good deal for you. Why don't you take it to the next step? Ask her to move in with you." Kim almost spilt his drink in surprise.

"To this shit hole? Are you mad?"

"That's just as excuse," Clark retorted. "You afraid of commitment or something?" Kim nodded.

"Something like that."

Something like that, his mind echoed. He liked Ariel, despite the age difference. In fact, he might love her. If he would let himself open that door.

But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Only one person had ever been through that door. And now he was gone. He had buried the grief and anguish so deep after his fathers death, it had twisted him inside, unable to open up, to care.

Because what would happen if he opened that door again, and then he lost that person as well?

Could he deal with that pain again?

"I'll think about it," he murmured, drowning his thoughts in more whiskey.

\*

Stenson had been involved in live gun fights since he finished Interpol Academy over twenty years ago. He knew the choreography of how these things played out. Each situation had its pros and cons.

Pro: Stenson had known in advance what the footsteps meant and had prepared himself for the upcoming battle.

Con: There were three of them and only one of him.

Still, he knew that to hesitate was to be killed.

So even before the weapons had appeared from within the bearers' vests, Stenson was moving forward...

...Straight into the first man with the big mouth. The big man was expecting such a stupid move on behalf of smaller man ahead of him and did what Stenson forced himself not to do.

He hesitated.

And it cost him, as Stenson rolled his shoulder down and charged like a man possessed, throwing every ounce of strength into the collision. The two impacted with a violent thud. To Big Mouths credit, he didn't fall over, but staggered backwards several feet.

But that played straight into Stenson's hands.

As he dropped his right shoulder for the tackle, he moved his left arm around his back to grasp the powered and ready weapon. As Big Mouth staggered forward, Stenson found himself standing directly between the two armed men, whose weapons were quickly tracking inwards towards him. His left arm still wrapped behind his back, he twisted the weapon out from his belt and pulled the trigger.

THUMP!

The man to his right dropped like a rock. Without waiting to see the effect of his shot, Stenson ducked down, pushed off with his right foot, then charged his head straight into the gut of the man to his left. With a satisfying oomph! the mans diaphragm emptied and he doubled over in pain. Untangling his left arm from behind him, he fired off another shot and emptied the mans stomach, the painful way.

Time for Big Mouth, he thought, and jumped back a step to get out of range of what was going to be a very fucked off killer. He leapt backwards-

-But not fast enough and found himself flying backwards, crashing into the ground, knocking the wind from him. Dazed, he shook his head and found his weapon lying by his side. He dived for the weapon, getting his hand around the trigger, as a foot came out of nowhere and booted the weapon away. It flew across the room, landing with a metallic clang behind him, skidding along the floor into a wall. It came to a halt with a ring, but felt like a death toll to Stenson.

Well, he thought, I got two of 'em. Not bad for an old timer.

Big Mouth stood above him, a big gun in his hand, the barrel pointing straight at Stenson's face. The muzzle was mesmerising, the metal vibrating slightly from the pent up energy within, singing like a quite pitch fork. He dragged his vision from the gun to lock eyes with his soon to be killer. He didn't want this son of a bitch to have the pleasure.

BANG!

In spite of himself, Stenson flinched at the noise, but opened his eyes immediately, to see Big Mouth still standing in front of him.

Had he missed? He couldn't feel any particular, laser wound like, pain. Smoke began to issue from Big Mouths neck and the behemoth staggered back before crashing violently to the ground.

A groan of relief escaped Stenson's lips as he rolled over and staggered to his feet. Looking around, he saw Peter Schofield, standing rock solid, legs spread in a classic shooters stance, a small pocket laser pistol grasped between both his hands, stretched out straight. Stenson eased himself towards the kid, then put his hand on the gun, pushing it down. This appeared to knock the kid out of his trance. Stenson gave him a wink. "You did good kid. Thanks."

"I've never killed anyone before," he replied numbly.

"Well you saved my life. And without trying to sound critical, I'm a much better person than he is," Stenson replied, jerking a thumb behind him at the trio of carcasses. The kid nodded, still looking shell shocked.

"Still dead people don't tell secrets," Stenson mused. It would have been good to have gotten some intel out of them, but he would rather be alive with no intel, than taking the knowledge to his grave.

"So, these Fuel Scoop specs?" The kid nodded, then turned to the bench beside him. He scouted around with his hands, then turned back to Stenson sheepishly.

"I must have left them in the backroom."

"It's OK," Stenson replied soothingly. "I rather you grabbed the gun than the datacard." The kid nodded with a forced grin, still trying to comprehend what he had done to another human being. He followed Peter into the back office where he fetched the datacard.

"It's the '99 model," he explained. "Pretty new. Manufactured by Shepard and Dewey. Uses a distinct tractor beam frequency. I don't know how much use it will be, but there you go," he finished, handing over the datacard. Stenson took it appreciatively. He was about to leave when he wondered whether he should say something to the kid. Peter had just taken a life to save his ass.

"Thanks again kid. Look after yourself. I'll look after these bodies." He gave the kid a final nod then moved out from the office, already on the horn to the local Interpol station to get a clean up crew organised.

\*

This time he went through official channels. Using the terminal on board his Interpol Viper, he made contact with a scanning specialist back at Fort Petersen, who had put him in contact with 'The god on this topic' who was based in Lave. Stenson explained his situation and when asked, the specifications of the fuel scoop.

"Hmm, yeah. Yeah... Hang on," said the man at the other end of the vid-link. He was unkempt, overweight and a social faux pas, as only a computer scientist could be. Still he was good at his job, apparently, so Stenson wasn't going to judge.

It wasn't like he was perfect anyway. There was silence as Stenson saw the scientist scurrying around, eventually finding a data pad. He fired it up and had what he wanted almost immediately.

"You're in luck," the man finally boasted. "Last year, a similar scan was required, but our network relay stations didn't have programming to implement it, so a network wide upgrade was done quickly. It worked too. They caught the son of a bitch."

"So is it a standard process then? I can just call it in?" Stenson inquired. The scientist pursed his lips.

"Unfortunately no. No one had used it since, so procedures were never updated. Don't worry, I'll do the link up now. If he has scooped fuel anywhere within the range of our network of hyperwave relays and listening stations, we'll find him for you."

"Perfect. I appreciate it," Stenson gave a confident smile before logging off. He continued to stare at the blank screen.

"I'm closing in on you, Norman."

\*

Reidquat. A dull system with only one planet, ravaged by civil war and violence. One space port: La Soeur du Dan Ham, orbiting the war-torn planet.

There wasn't much there to get excited about.

But pirates, criminals and bounty hunters alike flocked there uncontrollably, like moths to a flame. On a galactic map of anarchy, it stood out like a bright flame among a sea of tame worlds. Anything went, nothing was illegal and if you needed something done, something bought, or someone killed, you could usually find what you needed there.

At the Worlds Bar on the space station La Soeur du Dan Ham to be specific.

Stenson walked in with the forced swagger that could only come from an Interpol officer trying to blend in. The room turned silent as he crossed the threshold and around a hundred faces looked up from their conversations or drinks to stare down the intruder. They all knew he wasn't one of them.

Fine, thought Stenson. We'll do it this way. He continued without pausing, holding his breath while he kept locking eyes with various patrons. He didn't want to look like a coward; if any of them wanted to pick a fight, he wanted them to know that would get the same back. Still he wouldn't be the first Interpol officer to go mysteriously missing. Criminal respect for Interpol officers was largely laughable, although it was higher than that given to either Federation or Imperial police. Interpol might be the enemy, but at least they were their enemy, not the control freaks the Federation hired, or the clones of the Empire, that didn't belong in Independent space anyway.

He reached the bar untouched. Silently releasing his breath, he called the barkeep over and ordered a Whiskey.

"Sector?" the barkeep asked in a level voice, referring to the origin of the beverage.

"Earth. Scotland," Stenson replied, mimicking the man's tone of voice.

"We don't carry anything that distant, officer."

"Don't try that on me. I know you have some. I've run through the audit of your stock. Now bring it out." It was a lie of course, but police work was all about bluffing. The men's eyes locked, Stenson's burning into his opponent's. The barkeep kept his ground for several seconds. Stenson knew what was going through his mind; he had to show disrespect because he was a police officer, yet he knew that Stenson could get him in real trouble if he so chose to. A difficult decision. Finally, the barkeeper relented.

"That commodity is rare. Pricey. Will cost you an arm and a leg, officer." Stenson flicked out his Interpol E-card. It wasn't the first time he had charged a drink to the company; drinking was a crucial part in both plying sources for information and taking part in stakeouts.

"Cash," the barkeep replied, waving away the E-card. Stenson was about to rebuke such an incredulous demand when he realised the barkeep had come half way for him, so, unless he wanted to make a scene, the least he could do was meet him there.

"Sure." He fished around in his coat and came out with a couple of credit coins. The barkeep concluded the transaction and Stenson took a deep gulp of the brown fluid. It burned all the way down, tickling his nerves, forcing him to cough.

That was the stuff! "Let me see the bottle," he rasped. The barkeep bought the bottle up from its storage slot and Stenson memorised the brand. He would have to get some of that imported to Tionisla.

"So you can probably guess why I am here," Stenson said after a few moments.

"The three Norman Mossers," the barkeep replied quickly. Stenson spat his drink back into his cup.

Three Norman Mossers? At one time? Could anything be more unnatural?

"Three of them?" Stenson managed to get out.

"The fools tore up the whole establishment. I'm surprised Interpol weren't made aware of the situation."

Indeed, thought Stenson. How could Interpol not have known about this? Was there someone on the inside, working for Mosser? He would have to keep that in mind as the investigation progressed. It didn't help him right now however. "How long ago was this?"

"A week. Two maybe. Time blurs at this place. That wasn't the first time this place had seen some action," the barkeep lectured.

"What else do you know about the incident?" Stenson queried. The barkeep shrugged.

"I wasn't actually here at the time. Heard about it after the event. My boss started the fight apparently." The barkeep nodded to the far corner of the bar, where light feared to tread.

"A few of the regulars might know a thing or too." Stenson casually looked around to scan the room, not pausing as he glanced at the men the barkeep was talking about.

Tough group, Stenson thought. He turned back to the barkeep. "I had better buy that whole bottle," Stenson said, handing over the rest of his cash. He would make an expense claim later. Bottle in hand he moved towards the back of the bar.

\*

"The damn fool tore up my favourite seat," exclaimed the drunk with the hat, clearly the oldest and a veteran when it came to alcohol, appreciating the single malt more than Stenson had. Fortunately, the man had no love for Mosser either.

"Deathwreakers everywhere," he continued, cup swinging about as he illustrated the carnage of a few weeks past.

"It was the fault of Number 1" explained the second regular, a bit younger and not so drunk, but with a weeks growth of stubble populating his face and chin.

"Number 1?" Stenson inquired.

"They were all dressed differently. One of them had Norman's Elite badge. The other two adhered to his wishes, so he said he was number one in the pecking order." Stenson nodded at the logic, then poured the three men another round. The bottle was becoming dangerously empty. He had better wrap this up fast.

"They were after something," piped in the third man, who looked like a younger image of the first drunk, possibly a son or nephew.

"What do you mean?"

"I meandered past on my way back from the bog," he explained. "Moments before Angus Berkley walked up to them and started the whole fight."

"So what were they looking for?"

"I didn't catch all of it. Sounded like something big which had 'escaped them' and was 'theirs by right' I heard the Second one mention Earth." Stenson pondered the choice of words.

"The Earth?" he suddenly realised.

"Don't know any other," the third regular replied.

What would Norman Mosser be doing on Earth? Obviously there is a link between Earth and the Azure Sunset. Stenson poured the last of the whiskey but the men knew little else of value. Similar queries around the bar gathered little information. Downhearted, Stenson realised this well of information had dried up. He would have to move on. But to where? He didn't have much to go on. Just the fuel scoop and something to do with Earth. Making a decision, he left stood up and headed back for his berthed ship.

There was nothing he could do right now. He would go back to Tionsla and hit the databases. With the help of some data miners, maybe he could find a link.

He had finished walking the beat; now it was time to work the data. Do it the hard way.

# Stardust

[Norman Mosser]

Norman glanced down to his wrist and checked the readout on the suit for the sixth time. Everything was still green. He'd not done this before and was mildly dubious, despite the assurances that it was safe. His chronometer reminded him that he had about two minutes to go before he had to get going - a hard deadline as well otherwise he'd be thrown right off schedule. He pushed hard on a stud on the inside of his left wrist and felt the suit fully power up and interface with his nervous system. It immediately became less bulky to wear and felt like a second skin. He reached down and picked up the pack in front of him and checked it one final time before strapping it to his chest. Inherent paranoia kept the kinetic pistol inside. Pride was why the suit it also carried was haute couture.

The one minute alarm pinged and he checked his wrist again. Still greens. He turned and retrieved the helmet from where it hung and placed it on his head. It detected the suit and locked in place. A small display informed him that the suit was fully functional and running on internal life support. The suit was civilian market and overengineered to be forgiving to the novice.

Thirty seconds.

"Cycle."

The airlock door behind him closed and locked. He shifted slightly as the lock depressurised.

Fifteen Seconds.

"Open."

The airlock door wound open and he was almost blinded by the brilliant light coming in. The suits filter compensated and he was greeted by whites, blues and greens.

Sol Three

Ten Seconds.

Terra.

Five Seconds

Gaia.

One Second.

Earth

Norman stepped out of the airlock and began to drift away from the Cobra Mark Three. It climbed away from him slowly and after a couple of minutes he signalled to it and triggered the autopilot. The drives flared into life and it began to climb away ever faster. It would eventually dock at Abraham Lincoln and await his return. With the amount of automation in the port, no-one would notice it was crewless for a few days. He would have plenty of time to get back.

His HUD flashed a message informing him that his accelerometer was climbing. Caught in the gravity well. He glanced down. He was descending feet first towards the Americas. Norman shivered involuntarily. This was completely unlike travelling in a spaceship. It was more frightening than EVA. He thought about the Interplanetary Shuttle he'd used on a job and how something many times his mass had ended up being just a fist-sized chunk of red hot metal. A trickle of sweat ran down his face.

Norman checked his suit status. It was all greens

As his descent sped up, Norman gave up trying to pick out his destination from so high up. What had been said was true - to really appreciate Earth you had to look on it from above with as near as naked eyes as was possible in this age. Ship scanners never did it justice. Minutes went past as he wordlessly admired the inherent rightness of the cradle of humanity.

"Whoa."

A reassuring warmth in his feet made him glance down. Small wisps of atmosphere were appearing around the boots of his suit. His HUD informed him that now would be a good time to let it take over for a bit. With a last look to the looming planet beneath, Norman reached to his wrist and pressed hard on the second stud. The suit autopilot seized control of Norman's motor functions and immediately shifted his arms and legs to position his centre of gravity for re-entry. Experienced 'dusters' could steer themselves, but the amateurs (and Norman) relied on the computer to get his angle of attack correct. He was now descending belly first towards an indistinct green/blue patch that could well be Arizona Bay. As he buffeted in the thin atmosphere the warmth spread across his body from his chest. Ionised gases were blocking his vision now and his suit responded by covering his face with a heavy visor and locking it down. The suit tried to generate an image of the descent for Norman to watch, and after a moment's thought he toggled the controls to display a slowly enlarging vector graphics globe and a rapidly descending altimeter. As a final touch, Norman started playing a suitably ominous song in his head. Late twenty-first century, but appropriate.

He gritted his teeth at this point as he entered the crucial phase of the jump. The suit had heated up to uncomfortable levels and a heatsink on his back was desperately working to draw heat around him and expel it behind so he would survive the atmospheric friction. His right arm jerked right out as the suit attempted to manage his centre of gravity. A warning message politely informed him that the thermal tolerances of the suit would be exceeded in four minutes. Another stat monitored the steadily depleting ablative coating on the suit. A suitably grim number estimated the potential risk of fatality - a mere seven percent at the moment. Wasn't technology marvellous?

Minutes passed and Norman passed the danger zone and was now in freefall. Still a long way to freefall, but without the risk of landing as charcoal. The visor unlocked and lifted and he blinked in the sudden brightness. He brought up the suit controls and informed it of where he would like to land. It duly did things with his arms and legs again and Norman started to drift in what was apparently the correct direction. Every now and then his limbs would shift as his suit adjusted his course.

Relaxed, Norman sent a few messages as he descended and checked his action plan. Turn up at the Darkes place, collect the locator for the *Sunset* and leave as rapidly as possible. Deal with anyone who tried to stop him. Simple and with plenty of scope for improvisation if the situation became complicated. Should Mack turn up, then some 'persuasion' would be in order. If any of the other Mossers be there, then they would die.

Mosser smiled.

He was jerked out of his reverie by the parachute opening. The suit had decided that he was close enough to the ground now and had opened the chute and given his limbs back to him. Mosser flexed his freed limbs and eased the cramps out of them. A side effect of the suit was that it tended to encourage cramp by locking muscles for long periods. Still, it was better than dying.

The ground was awfully close now - his chosen landing spot of a green field by a road was spot on. Some ground cars and a freight vehicle zipped past on their way somewhere. Mosser steered the chute appropriately and landed accurately. He dropped and rolled and lay on the ground as the parachute settled on the ground near him. So far, so good. Releasing the chute he stood up and removed his helmet and inhaled the cool air of Earth. It was a nice day. The terraformers had seen to that. The next few minutes were spent removing the jump suit and packing it and the parachute away in the bag he had brought down with him. The suit was much lighter than before - much of the outer layer had abraded away on re-entry and in some places the outer covering had completely scorched through. If he wanted to jump again he would either have to get a new suit or get it recoated. Mosser shrugged and donned the suit. After a moment's pause he placed the pistol in the jacket pocket.

He finished zipping up the holdall as a horn honked. At the side of the road were a pair of ground cars. One was occupied by a woman, and a man had just exited the other. Mosser waved and walked over. The woman wound down the window and spoke, "You made it."

"Yes."

"Were the theatrics really necessary?"

"No. But it was cool." Mosser smiled. "You got me transport, I see."

"We did."

"And my other request?"

"In the trunk."

There was a clunk from the rear of the ground car as the release operated. Mosser walked around to the back of the vehicle. The cargo hatch was ajar. He reached forwards and lifted it. Inside was a case. Mosser lifted it out and rested it on the body of the car. A shadow crossed the case as Mosser undid the first catch. He sidestepped and parried the swung crowbar with one hand while drawing his pistol and shooting his assailant with the other. The body of the second driver lay on the ground. Mosser had the foresight to grab the handle of the case as the ground car it rested on sped off up the road.

Mosser resolved to deal with that woman later. One of the other Mossers must have tipped her off. He glanced again at the body, shrugged and got into the ground car with the holdall and the case and drove off. Time to go to New San Francisco.

## The Old Haunt

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The Maglev came to a graceful stop within the entry port of Dome 16. Visitors were screened and appointments checked by a receptionist android, programmed with a soothing female voice, but lacking the visual cues to complete the ensemble.

"We're here to see Chris Viet," de Havilland announced as he approached the stand the android was sitting behind.

"Do you have an appointment?" she purred, oblivious of the fact that she had probably said the same statement ever since she was constructed.

"No I don't, but..."

"I'm sorry," the robot continued, "but only people with an appointment are allowed further into the complex."

"Just tell him that Vasquith de Havilland wants to see him," he urged. It was like talking to a brick wall. A wall with a nice voice even.

"I'm sorry but company regulations dictate..." de Havilland stopped listening. He wasn't getting anywhere like this. He should have messaged ahead, gotten hold of Chris on the holonet or something.

"ID Gamma Gamma 1 Charlie," de Havilland suddenly quipped. The robot stopped its ramblings for a microsecond as it processed the passcode.

"Good afternoon Project Manager de Havilland," the robot replied. A motor whirred then stopped with a clunk. "Please go right ahead Mr de Havilland." de Havilland looked back at his co-pilot then nodded him forward. The door opened at their presence and they walked through into the bowels of the AAAI shipyard headquarters.

It may have looked dull outside, but there was nothing dull about inside. Literally. It was lit up like a football stadium at night. There was not one iota of shadow amongst the hallways with their various pot plants detracting from the mind numbing monotony of the clean white walls and floors.

"This place bites," Veruz offered. "How did you stand working here for so long?"

"I'm not sure," de Havilland replied, shaking his head. He much preferred the unorganised chaos that was his old ship, the Vagabond. He wondered whether he would ever see her again. He had lots of little engineering pet projects on board, including an enhancer for his sole energy booster, which, although recalcitrant, was full of potential.

"Here," he said, pausing at a door while it automatically opened. He stepped through to come face to face with 3 banks of computers, screens and command consoles.

"This is the place," de Havilland murmured, taking in the sheer scale of computer power before him.

"Dev!" called a voice from behind the computers. A head quickly appeared from a hatch and a smile exploded across its face.

"Son of a bitch! It is you! I thought I was hearing your murmuring in my head," said the person extracting themselves from the innards of the computer system.

"You shouldn't think of me that way, Chris," replied de Havilland, warmly gripping the man's hand in both of his.

"You old dog, Dev. I knew you couldn't stay away. You love your gadgets and gizmos too much. This place was perfect for you."

"True enough, Chris. Let me introduce you to Michael Veruz. He's my co-pilot. Picked him up off some hick colony on the outskirts of nowhere," de Havilland joked, giving the young man an elbow prod. "Michael, this is Chris Viet. Possibly the best computer nerd I have ever met."

"Possibly?" cried Chris, a look of shock on his face, while he gave Michael's hand a quick shake.

de Havilland gave his old friend a quick look over. The beginnings of a beer belly, but in overall good shape, for a computer programmer anyway. His drooped moustache was showing signs of grey, but his head had been shaved

bald to remove any evidence. "You look like shit," de Havilland summarised. "Lost all your hair, put on weight. Fuck I don't know, I disappear and it all turns to custard!"

"You're showing some signs of ageing too, Dev," countered Chris. "Been looking after your face, obviously," he said, hinting at the wrinkles. de Havilland gave him a punch to the shoulder. Firm, but not painful.

"Ok, enough of that. You know how sensitive I am about my looks," he said with a grin. Chris motioned the two men to empty supply crates, doubling as seats as he clambered into his comfortable, console ridden chair.

"So how did you get back here anyway?" Chris, suddenly realising that de Havilland had no entourage.

"My old access password was still in the system for some reason."

"Maybe they were hoping you would come back," Chris replied. "Scott misses you. You set him back two years on his..." Chris glanced at Michael, "...ah, project, once you left." An uncomfortable silence filled the room. "Umm, anyway, so what are you doing here? I hope it's to drag me away someplace sleazy, fill me with alcohol, then find me some Sheila I can hook up with?"

de Havilland grimaced. "Fraid not. Not this time. I kind of have a problem."

"Deciding the appropriate hair styler or people trying to kill you problem?"

"Umm, the second one." Chris looked at him quizzically. de Havilland gave him a steady stare.

"Shit, you're not joking."

"No. Let's just say I saw something I shouldn't have. Now I, we are in deep shit and we need your help."

"You're the one who was in the army Vasquith, why are you coming to me of all people?"

de Havilland pulled the datapad with the encrypted *Azure Sunset* hyperspace data on it and dropped it on the desk by Chris' chair. He picked it up slowly, analysing the readout.

"I would say it is four stage Zanto encryption over some form of random number generator, possibly based on a mathematical sequence," he said after a few moments. de Havilland nodded, amazed at the man's speed.

"It should be the sequence of hyperspace jumps a particular ship is going to be making," de Havilland explained, keeping the detail to a minimum.

"It shouldn't be too hard to crack it. I'll upload the data to the mainframe and see what I can do. Worst comes to worse, I can always brute-force it," Chris said with a smile. de Havilland got the feeling that Chris would probably prefer that option.

de Havilland pushed back through the door, drink of water in hand, to find Chris explaining some gibberish to Michael. "Once the encryption was gone, I ran the numbers through a Jacobsthal Number Sequence. Group the number into spatial coordinates and wholah! You have all the hyperspace coordinates your ship will use until someone else stops it!" Chris was feeling smug, de Havilland could feel. It was time to level the brain playing field.

"A Jacobsthal Sequence? Isn't that one of the Lucas numbers?"

"It's a member of the Lucas Sequence," Chris agreed, clearly impressed, "Along with Fibonacci and Pell. I wasn't aware your mathematics was that extensive, Dev."

"It's been a while, but us engineers are trained well. Have to earn our keep and all," de Havilland replied.

"Well I suppose you will have to be getting along now," Chris said glumly.

"Actually I ran into Kane Scott while getting my drink. He wants to meet me quickly before I go, but yeah. Sorry buddy."

Chris laughed off the situation. "Hang around any longer and I might get caught in the crossfire from those trying to kill you. Get lost. Come back when your life isn't in danger and we'll have that beer."

"Too right old friend," de Havilland said, giving Chris a quick bear hug.

"Come on Michael," he said, nodding as he disappeared through the door.

\*

"It's coming along nicely," Scott said, standing at the desk behind his window. The view was the kind one would pay money for. The setting sun was reflecting off the domes dotted around the planet surface. The hardy wilderness swayed in the killer wind, while the sky began turning a mellow orange. "It's two years behind schedule mind you, but all things considered, I'm happy with progress." He half turned to glance an eye over de Havilland, standing back and to his left, on the other side of the desk.

"Well you know how to make a man feel guilty, but like I said when I quit, I had to get out."

Scott sighed, his shoulders dropping measurably. "I knew your reason well enough Vasquith, and I understood it perfectly well. Without trying to boost your ego however, you were hard to replace. No one around here had the same knack for particle and beam weapons that you did."

de Havilland shrugged. "It was just physics. I guess I had an invested interest in the project, but I'm glad it was carried on by someone."

"Have you read the Frontier News?" Scott asked. de Havilland shook his head.

"We've released what we call our 'Alpha Product' A few military and police ships have been installed with the weapon. They are doing extensive field testing." de Havilland instantly became excited.

"Did you get the trombone to work properly? How heavy is it? How powerful?" Scott laughed at the barrage.

"I knew you still had it in you. Yes, the trombone is excellent. It weighs six tonnes and is comparable to a four megawatt beam weapon." Scott paused. "However, we have just made a working prototype of our 'Beta' product." The two men locked eyes.

"How powerful?" de Havilland repeated impatiently.

"Early tests indicate eight megawatts!"

"Holy shit Kane! You're almost at 'Gamma' stage already."

Scott waved away the compliment. "Vasquith. There is so much more in it. Gamma stage is going to be nothing more than another step in the process. We are going to be able to go so far beyond Gamma we'll be looking at another Military Laser!"

de Havilland gasped at the information. The Military Laser was banned hundreds of years ago as too powerful for civilian use. The galaxy had been on the edge of breakdown as civilians and pirates alike had the firepower to destroy anything in their path. That had not been a problem during the Thargoid Wars, but once the Thargoids had disappeared, the guns found new, innocent targets. Now AAI was bringing the galaxy back to where it didn't belong. Still, such engineering excellence was inspiring. He wanted one.

"Say, what's going on over there?" Scott asked as he leaned closer to the window, peering out across the way.

Towards the Starport. de Havilland turned, a familiar sense of foreboding running through his chest. It was hard to see from such distance, but there was definitely something happening involving Police Vipers and a lockdown. Scott grabbed a pair of macro-scopes and gazed out at the Starport. "Looks like they are checking out a parked up Krait," he said.

de Havilland lunged over and grabbed the scopes. Sure enough, his Krait had been discovered. It had been pulled out of storage and the police were all over it like a rash. Not good. "Shit," de Havilland murmured as he lowered the scopes.

Scott looked at his old employee with shock. "Vasquith! Have you been doing something...illegal?"

Vasquith gave Scott a withering glare. "Remember who you're talking to, Kane."

Scott nodded. If Vasquith was anything, he was reliable and honest. Most of all, he was loyal. He may have left AAI, but Scott knew he would never have come back and involved his old work mates in something if he was doing something illegal. "So what's going on then?"

"I saw something that I shouldn't have and now some secret organisation is trying to kill me."

Scott looked at de Havilland incredulously, but knew de Havilland to be nothing but a straight shooter. Unlikely as it sounded, it was less likely de Havilland was lying. "Well I guess you're going to need a new ship-," started Scott as Michael burst into the room.

"Cap'n! There's a city wide alert out for the owners of that Krait parked at the Starport."

"Phew, I was scared they would be looking for us. Records clearly show that I have never owned a Krait."

"We're still trapped Cap'n!"

"Not necessarily," he replied. He turned to his former boss. "You were saying?"

"Would you like to try the 'beta' model, Vasquith?"

de Havilland grinned. "Like nothing else before."

# Doppelganger City

[Mack Winston]

I stood there, speechless.

"Hey, bro," said Mack Winston.

"Hey," I replied weakly, examining him.

Maria watched me with an air of satisfaction, as I looked over the scrawny young man. Yep, it was me alright. Right down to the prosthetic arm, the scruffy combat trousers and the faded t-shirt.

I looked at him. "We offered you enough to have your arm amputated and replaced?"

"Nah," he said, "it's fake."

"A fake fake arm?" I asked, in surprise. I was spooked. He not only looked like me, but talked like me, and had...I looked at his left elbow. Yep, there was the scar.

"You didn't believe me when I said what I could do..."

We'd met Kevin a week earlier, while trying to blend into the New San Francisco tourist crowds. A street performer - doing impressions, to be exact, in front of a group of tourists and weirdos. How Maria chortled at his impression of the Emperor Hengist Duval. Not that doing an impression of a nearly dead man was that hard.

It had been Maria's idea to hire him. Neither of the target Mossers would be expecting a Mack Winston clone.

I continued looking over him.

"How did you do the face?"

"Skintex. Breathable. Practically indistinguishable from human skin. You can make it any colour. You can sweat through it, making it even more authentic," Kevin replied.

# The End of the Line

[Kim Stenson]

The numbers scrolled across the screen, but Kim's tired eyes struggled to comprehend; there was nothing of use there. As soon as he had re-entered the Tionsla, system he had sent a system command to the Interpol computer system to organise a search of the data banks. Back at his desk, he was looking through the data collected, but it was an exercise in futility and frustration. Also known as detective work.

He cycled through the clues in his mind again.

1: Mosser was somehow involved with Earth. Most likely, he was going there.

2: There were three Mossers. Statistically, this made it three times easier to find him, but with all Mossers likely to think alike, they would probably all wind up at the same place anyway, nullifying any advantage.

3: The *Azure Sunset* was involved which meant he could get the Interpol computers to trace the movements of all the LRC's in known space. He would have access to historical data as well, but there was little chance the *Azure Sunset* would go anywhere near their sensor stations dotted across the known galaxy.

4: He already had a trace going for the fuel scoop attached to Mosser's Imperial Courier. There had been a few hits, but nothing recent. Mosser was either buying his fuel now, or flying something else.

Four clues. Four! Had his detective skills deteriorated that much? No, it wasn't his fault. When chasing Norman Mosser, four clues was a luxury. He had to milk each clue for everything he could. He grabbed a piece of old flimsy and wrote 'Norman Mosser' in big letters in a circle at the centre of the page.

This was his target.

He wanted to find this man. Everything else was secondary.

So where was he currently? Stenson wrote down this question and drew a line connecting it to a big question mark. Where would he be going? He knew two destinations: Soon, he would be going to Earth. Eventually, he would end up onboard the *Azure Sunset*. He repeatedly underlined the LRC's name on the flimsy, forcing his mind to realise its importance.

He needed the location of the *Sunset*. No matter what Norman did before hand, if Stenson was waiting for him onboard the *Sunset*, he would have him. And this time he would win. His hand unconsciously ran over the scar beneath his jacket top, before clenching into a fist. He had spent his entire convalescence fantasising about killing Mosser...

Of course, finding the *Sunset* was easier said than done. The entire galaxy had been looking for the *Azure Sunset* for over a year and no one had found it. What chance did he have of finding it? His pen hand drifted to the other destination on the flimsy: Earth. Might as well have been Raxsla, for all the good it did Stenson. The Federation was rather protective of the 'Womb of humanity' and Interpol had no presence on Earth at all. So all he could do was go through regular communication channels. He had tried to find someone who would take notice of him, and eventually offloaded his information to someone who appeared to be his Federation counterpart. Whether they would actually use his information or not was another story. He had a burning desire to be the one that caught Norman, to be the one that killed him, because, naturally Norman would try and escape and he would be forced to.

He sighed. In the end, he was a cop, and the law came above revenge. It wouldn't be as satisfying, but if the Feds bagged him, at least he wouldn't terrorise the rest of humanity anymore. He turned back to the computer terminal and opened up the search dialogue. He had been looking for anything that connected Norman Mosser, the *Azure Sunset* and the planet Earth. Nothing so far.

With a groan, he massaged his forehead with his fingers then stood up, stretched, then walked around the office.

Time for a change of scenery, he decided. He left the Interpol offices behind, wandering to the concourse of Fort Petersen, where one could find all manner of food. He waded through the swarms of people, he must have come at peak time, to reach the small sandwich stand across the way. He grabbed a pair of turkey sandwiches, paying with a credit coin. He greedily dug into the meal as he walked through the throngs of people. The bread felt fresh, soft, while the meat was tender and moist. Exquisite. Too good, in fact, for Tionisla, but Stenson wasn't going to complain. He felt like he deserved a good sandwich.

Eventually, his wanderings led him back to the office, mind refreshed and ready to tackle the problem again. He grabbed a coffee from the dispenser, then returned to his desk to find two flagged messages pop up on his desk. The first was from his search of the link between Norman and Earth. The second was a pickup from the Galactic bulletin board, which obviously had key words or phrases, which the Interpol computers had deemed important. A computer guru then screened these pickups before passing them on, validating their legitimacy. Always a good sign when you were clutching at straws. But after reading the message for the tenth time, he still couldn't understand why it had been forwarded to him. There was just nothing there.

"Wanted: Some one for a removal Job: Commander de Havilland has stolen industry secrets and so he must be provided with a fitting end to his career. 100 000c."

On the face of it, it sounded like a typical assassin contract. The 'removal' and 'fitting career end' referred to cold blooded killing. 'Industry secrets' could have been anything. He ran the name 'de Havilland' through the Interpol database. Although it was a rare name, there were several million listings, though less than 1% were criminals. He would need more information to narrow the search. One hundred thousand credits was a substantial amount of money for an assassination as well, on par with the bounty for killing Norman Mosser. Whatever this de Havilland had seen, it was obviously very important.

But it was just an assassination contract. Why had it been flagged? He shrugged and minimised the pop-up.

The next flag was more interesting. In essence, he had struck gold.

There was a connection between Earth, Mosser and the *Azure Sunset*.

A man. Samuel Darkes. Sister of Mary Darkes and a known rebel to anything that represented 'the system'.

Mary Darkes had been Norman Mosser's right hand 'man' at one point. She was dead now though, her body found adrift in deep space. Her body had been snap frozen in a way suggesting she had been jettisoned from a ship. Evidence suggested that that ship had been the *Azure Sunset*. Stenson gasped.

Had she known where it was?

Of course! Norman wouldn't go to the effort of sneaking onto Earth for a holiday. There was something there he wanted and the only thing Stenson could think he would want was the *Azure Sunset*. Someone, probably this Darkes fellow, knew where the *Azure Sunset* was.

Stenson stood up and paced excitedly. This was good news. Then he fell back into his seat as he realised that it was actually useless news. He couldn't get there in time. He didn't have any agents that could get there in time.

All he had was the Federation Secret Service, and they might not even listen to him. He re-established his connection with the same contact as last time and passed on the information. Again, whether they would use the information or not was in gods hands.

He couldn't rely on that avenue turning a profit. He could only rely on himself. He closed the pop up on the screen. That left the random assassination contract. He moved the cursor to close this as well, but paused, uncertain.

The computer had obviously seen something of interest. There were occasions when it spat out a dud, but it wasn't like he had any other leads. It was worth a shot. Throwing back the now cold coffee sitting by his computer terminal, he once more made for the main concourse of Fort Petersen.

He logged onto a public terminal then to the bulletin board. The ad was there as expected, but the time stamp indicated it was relatively recent, a day old at the most. He clicked on the link. The screen went dark for a split second, then came up with the familiar video connection screen. After a few seconds, he realised that the video wasn't going to load up. His suspicions were confirmed when a blurb followed by a series of written questions flashed up onto the screen.

No video and no audio. Whoever was organising the hit wasn't taking any chances, Stenson deduced. Still, that wasn't strange. People with enough money to throw around for assassinations weren't stupid. He read the new information, which revealed the pilots full name was Vasquith de Havilland. Stenson connected his datapad to the terminal to download all the new information, then started selecting the questions.

"How do I find Vasquith de Havilland?"

"Vasquith de Havilland will be leaving New Rosseyth on March the 18<sup>th</sup>."

Stenson looked at his wrist chrono. That was today, if the ad was using Universal Galactic Time.

“What ship will Vasquith de Havilland be travelling on?”

-“Vasquith de Havilland will be travelling on a Krait, registration AZ-0101.”

That was a nice registration. Small and simple. Like his father’s. Then he concentrated on the letters. AZ. Azure?

The 101st Krait of the *Azure Sunset*? He recalled the discovery of two squadrons of destroyed Kraits just after the *Azure Sunset* incident. They had been catalogued, ID’d and their link to the LRC verified. What had their registration codes been? He would have to find the report and look it up, but the coincidence excited him. If it was an *Azure Sunset* Krait....no, best not to jump into assumptions, he recalled from his days at the academy. That would narrow the mind and make it harder to accept other alternatives. He glanced down at the remaining questions, but they were superfluous to what he wanted to know. He logged off the terminal then sprinted back to Interpol.

Yes! The Krait’s registration code followed the same sequence as the group that had been found destroyed near Imperial space after the *Azure Sunset* fiasco. He jumped up from his seat and with a clenched fist. It was an *Azure Sunset* Krait. There was no doubt in Stenson’s mind. Vasquith de Havilland, the pilot of this Krait, had been on the *Azure Sunset*.

No, not necessarily, but he had had some form of contact with the ship. So there was a good chance he may have some information about it. Information that Stenson wanted desperately. But his source was going to get ambushed by Assassins and Bounty Hunters. Today.

New Rossyth, Argents Claim, Alioth. Unlike Earth, Interpol had a presence there. He had to get in contact with them. And fast. He raced out the door of his office and down the corridor. He flew down a flight of stairs then took a right, bursting through the door to the Mainframe Hub of the Interpol station. The duty technician was sitting at a crowded desk and greeted him distractedly, then returned to the electronic box between his legs, a thin tool clutched in his right hand while his left held it steady.

“I need some help,” Stenson announced.

“Story of my life,” the technician replied flatly.

“I need to get in contact with our people on New Rossi now! As fast as possible.”

“You can try your hand at the hyper-wave transmitter over there,” the technician said, arm flailing to the right as he continued working on the box. “It was working yesterday, but that’s no guarantee. I made a request for replacement parts two months ago. Two months!”

Was the place really falling apart this bad? Stenson hadn’t noticed. Although it wasn’t his job to keep the place ticking over, he still had input into the upkeep of this place. He chided himself for not keeping up to date with things. Shaking the thought from his mind, he tip toed through the assortment of computer cases and parts spread across the floor to reach the hyper-wave terminal. It looked like a regular communication terminal, but Stenson knew it was hard wired into the main transmitter of Fort Petersen, where it interacted with all of Interpol’s other outposts and relay stations. It was exhaustive grid, and the signals travelled through hyperspace, allowing quick conversation between distance points in the galaxy.

Marvellous stuff, if it worked. He fired it up and eyed the read out. The hard coding of the machine booted up then connected to the main transmitter. Several seconds later, it established a connection with the neighbouring relays. Finally, the machine printed a ‘Ready’ message on the screen. He requested connection with the New Rossyth Interpol base. The screen changed immediately to a black screen with white writing:

CONNECTING...

No wonder the unit was falling apart, Stenson realised. It was so old, that replacement parts probably didn’t even exist. That would explain why they hadn’t arrived. He waited several minutes as the machine plotted a hyper-wave route along the line of relays from Tionisla to Alioth. The connection was made and the screen changed to a delayed video feed from the other side of known space.

“This is Agent Ferrel,” said the voice at the other end of the connection. Stenson realised the voice was also quite delayed.

"This is Detective Stenson. I have reports that a Krait, registration AZ-0101 is, or will be, docked at the New Rossyth Starport today. The pilot is to be detained and taken to an Interpol facility for debriefing immediately." As Stenson waited for his speech to travel the hundreds of light years to Alioth, he focused on the video feed. Something was happening in the background. Where was the camera looking? There was a large dome in the distance, and a large, uncovered structure in the mid-ground.

The Starport. Was he too late?

Suddenly two low flying Falcon Attack ships swooped down from behind the camera on a strafing run, launching dual missiles at the Starport. The view disappeared behind a cloud of exhaust smoke, but just as the scene was about to clear, an explosion erupted across the screen, orange and yellow fireballs filling the view as the camera shook and toppled over, coming to rest on its side.

"Holy Shit! What the hell was that? Detective! I think your Krait just got blown sky high! Stenson sagged in defeat against the wall.

No! He had come so close to a breakthrough, only for things to shatter like matchsticks right in front of him! But the action at the far end wasn't over.

"All hell's broken loose!" cried the voice at the far end, answering Stenson's unvoiced question. "A swarm of ships just came in!" An explosion cut off Agent Ferrel's voice, the shockwave throwing shrapnel and twisted metal past the view of the camera. Several ships were now flying around the Starport, engaged in a dogfight. Stenson guessed they were bounty hunters trying to take out their competition so they could claim the bounty. A Viper appeared from a hanger at the corner of the camera view, but was torn apart by a laser beam before it could launch, exploding on the pad.

It was unbridled chaos. It looked like a classic furball fought in the depths of space. Except this furball was being fought mere metres above a human inhabited city!

Another explosion rocked the camera, but then it finally lay still. Fragments of words were coming from Agent Ferrel. It sounded as if he was trying to organise his men and ships, or get the Alliance military in. A curse came across the speakers. He obviously wasn't doing too well. As the number of ships in the sky continued to increase and the number of laser beams slicing open the sky doubled, a lone ship launched from far in the distance.

Not off the Starport, but a hidden launch pad. It was too far away to tell for sure, but it appeared to have the forward swept wings reminiscent of the Saker lineage of star ships. The ships fighting above the city instantly turned to chase. Explosions rocked around the ships and the plumes of missile launches filled the air. Half a dozen ECM systems engaged simultaneously and missile trails raced across the sky in a million and one directions.

"What's happening?" Stenson yelled at the video feed, feeling frustrated that he didn't have all the information and frustrated that he couldn't do anything about what was happening. He felt useless.

A delay. "Someone's escaping....," said Ferrel, his voice dropping off as he focused on something in the sky.

Stenson saw it too.

A missile. Heading straight for the camera!

"Oh go-," came a scream from the link up, cut short by the explosion. The camera and linkup went dead.

Stenson closed his eyes and collapsed against the wall. Fuck it all! All of this because of a fucking clone! He smashed his fist into the wall in frustration.

"What's going on?" came a voice from his left. Stenson looked up. It was the computer tech, who had overheard some of what had been happening on Alioth. Stenson briefly met his eyes, before turning away.

"I just lost my best lead."

## **MAJOR ATTACK ON NEW ROSSYTH STARPORT - FIVE KILLED**

[Frontier News, ed. 47701, Aug 3306]

Five people were killed and almost one hundred injured yesterday, when a number of ships carried out an attack at the New Rossyth starport. Five of the attacking ships were destroyed, and the casualties were caused by the wreckage of one of the ships colliding with the main passenger terminal.

An enquiry is now under way as to why the station shielding failed to protect the terminal building.

New Rossyth police are currently investigating the attack - the first attack within the confines of New Rossyth in over a dozen years. It is believed the victim of the attack was a Krait that was due to leave that day, and that the fugitive Norman Mosser was involved - the Krait in question being registered to the *Azure Sunset*, a long-range cruiser belonging to Mosser.

Witnesses said that the attack was brought to an end by a New Rossyth patrol ship carrying the new nano plasma accelerator that had been developed at the ship yards.

### **FUCHS IN POLL TROUBLE**

An opinion poll for the Aliothan on the personal popularity rating of the troubled AIS President, Michael Fuchs, shows that the recent revelations has not gone down well with the public. It is alleged that Fuchs accepted payments from the president of Zenith Shipyards of Olwain during the competition to select a shipbuilder for thirty Cobra Mk.3s for ministerial transport while he was serving in Margaret Stonecipher's cabinet. The poll showed that Fuchs' approval rating has sunk to its lowest yet - only 12%. Additionally, 60% of respondents thought that Fuchs should resign as AIS president. Fuchs was unavailable for comment - although it's widely expected that if he doesn't resign, the AIS Parliament will force the issue next week.

### **PHEKDA ENERGY TROUBLES CONTINUE**

The Phekda 1 military fuel refinery, operated by TransFuels, is still shut down amid safety concerns. Harsh conditions on the planet have resulted in a series of recent failures, causing continuous interruptions in fuel production. The most recent failure was caused by burst pipework leading from the collector array. A company official said, "Repairs are in hand, and we expect the plant to be operational within 70 hours".

Military fuel prices continued to increase across the Alliance due to the crimp in supply. The Phekda 1 refinery is the largest military fuel production depot in the Alliance, producing about 10% of the milfuel output of systems within the Alliance.