

# DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 4

by  
The Elite BBS Collective

October 2006

Based on Frontier: First Encounters by Frontier Developments  
All Rights Reserved. Elements of the above intellectual property are used without without permission, not for profit and with all rights reserved to the owner of the intellectual property.

# CONTENTS

Dancing With the Devil and Dan Ham's Sister.....	2
Triage .....	5
The Invasion of Williamson Base.....	7
Armistice.....	11
Sitcom .....	15
Night on the Bare Mountain.....	19
Blue Sky Thinking.....	21
A Dark Day for the Empire .....	22
Bushwhacked.....	23
Deus Ex Machina .....	25
You Need a Witness .....	26
Paint it Black .....	28
Review: The Greatest Crime of Norman Mosser .....	30
The Saker's New Clothes .....	32
SIGTERM.....	35
Grasshoppers in a Minefield.....	36

## Dancing With the Devil and Dan Ham's Sister

[Vasquith de Havilland]

de Havilland recognised him the instant he walked through the doors to the World End Tavern. Not because he knew the face as well as his co-pilot, but because of the effect he had on the patrons within. Within the blink of an eye, the barkeeper was upon Norman Mosser, barring his way with a wagging finger. Heated words were exchanged, but de Havilland could only hear snippets, some of which involved furniture and force fields despite the tavern freezing into silence. "What's going on?" de Havilland asked Veruz.

"Norman isn't popular with the staff around here," Michael whispered back.

"...a simple business meeting..." another snippet from Norman. The conversation continued for several moments, allowing de Havilland to size up the infamous criminal. Physically, he didn't look like much. Muscular sure, but like a man who went to the gym, not like a man who needed or used the muscle on a daily basis, like he had back in his army days. Norman had the air of an Imperial about him, arrogant and proud, but that was possibly from the up turned chin. He oozed confidence, as if he knew he was indestructible. But what de Havilland really noticed about the man was his eyes. Even from across the bar, they felt alive, almost glowing with the knowledge behind them. The wonders that those eyes must have seen of the galaxy... de Havilland felt a sudden pang of envy for the criminal. Finally, Norman reached down and withdrew the weapon from his thigh holster. It was a brand new Mk II Deathwrecker. de Havilland drooled at the highly engineering killing machine. He wanted one.

"The other one," the Barkeeper barked. Norman gave him a bashful smile, then reached behind him to withdraw another from within his coat. The two men stood facing each other for several seconds before the barkeep stood to one side. "Enjoy your stay at the World's End," he said. Norman took two steps forward to pass the barkeeper, then stopped and scanned the punters. Finally his eyes found de Havilland, who was staring straight back at him. Michael had warned him about Normans ego, and that making eye contact was tantamount to a death sentence. But he couldn't afford to bow down to this man. He needed to stay in the box seat, and control events. Otherwise they would end up dead and discarded. As Norman walked straight toward them, several of the closest drinkers began shuffling their tables and desks away, clearing a circle around de Havilland's. Norman stopped directly opposite de Havilland, looking down at him. "You've been advertising a holiday." It was a statement, not a question.

"That's right," de Havilland replied with a forced smile. "You look like you could do with a break. Sit down, and we'll talk about it over some Brown."

Norman remained standing. "Actually, I am quite protective of my vacation time. Perhaps we could go somewhere more...private?"

Alarm bells went off in de Havilland's head. This son of a bitch wants to kill you and take the information. But what had he been expecting? An honourable criminal? They were all the fucking same.

"I'm actually quite happy here," de Havilland replied. An audible gasp rang around the bar.

Norman smiled, both at de Havilland and the audience. "Is that a fact?" Norman asked, struggling to keep a straight face. His eyes turned to lasers, piercing de Havilland's own, but de Havilland held his ground, an equally fierce look in his eyes. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. Time had stopped. Everyone was looking at the stand off.

"Was that a Mk II?" de Havilland asked, keeping his eyes locked on Norman's.

"Aye. An authentic, Mosser version."

"With the tribarium recoil damper and Zitrix focusing crystal?"

"Adds an extra half kilowatt of stopping power," Norman said with a grin.

"I prefer the Colt 'Diplomat'. Shoots as straight as an Inspector Special and has nearly the same power as the Mk I Deathwrecker."

"You know your weapons," Norman said with a hint of respect.

"Hard not to in my old line of business." De Havilland could see Norman working things through in his head. Was de Havilland for real? Would he put up a fight? Could he actually take him down man on man? de Havilland was pretty confident he had a good couple up on Norman, but he wasn't the person who needed convincing.

Finally, Norman spoke up. "In that case, I'm going to need something stronger than Brown." He motioned to the bar, then moved the chair back and slipped into it, directly facing de Havilland. Michael, to de Havilland's right gave him a nervous look. De Havilland smiled back. This was like a big poker game. But there were no cards and the stakes were life and death. A server droid rolled up and deposited a strong smelling drink on the table. Norman nodded in appreciation, took a sip, then turned back to de Havilland. "So you have a suggestion where I should take my holiday?"

"Actually I have a whole list of places you might like to visit."

Norman's right eyebrow raised slightly. "I'd be interested in seeing that list," he said.

de Havilland nodded. "I'm sure you would be. There is a few things we need to get out of the way first."

Norman threw his head back in laughter, then rocked back, clearing a tear from his eye. "You're asking me for money. You really do have some balls. I like you."

"I did lose my ship getting this data, but no, money isn't what we want."

Norman glanced over at Veruz, who looked away nervously. "Who's the kid?"

"Steve."

"Interesting. So what do you want?"

de Havilland looked from side to side, eyeing the surrounding tables. "Protection."

Norman's brow wrinkled. "I get the feeling you know how to look after yourself, Mr...what is your name anyway?"

"de Havilland. And normally, yes, but...how can I say this?" He looked at Veruz for support, who just shrugged. Despite being a big fan of Norman Mosser, Michael seemed to be struggling in his presence. "Let's just say we have people interested in killing us who have resources beyond comprehension. They also know where the holiday venue is. That is to say they saw us scoping out the camping ground."

Norman leaned back in his chair, his fingers interlocked, looking like he was in deep thought. de Havilland let him have his moment. This was the moment of truth. Did Norman want to get involved? How badly did he need the *Azure Sunset*? Now that they had told him someone else knew where it was, he may go to them for the information. Norman leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I may, or may not know who you are talking about." de Havilland gave him a curious expression. "If you had some sensor readings on your 'fellow campers' I may be able to help more," he explained.

"I don't want to know about your criminal contacts," de Havilland replied with a measure of disgust, "I just want to know if you can protect us from them."

Norman flashed a look of irritation before composing himself. "Well you're both gutsy to have come this far, and you seem to know what you're doing. I'm being forced to rebuild a team for a certain 'job'. If you join my organisation, you will have all my resources to defend you. A smile broke out over Michael's face, stretching it beyond design specs. It was as if he was like a school kid learning he could hang out with his hero.

"Out of the question," de Havilland replied curtly, waving Michael down. "We're not criminals, Mr Mosser, nor will we ever be."

Norman replied with a smug smile. "By not killing me right now, you're breaking the law. Aiding and abetting a man charged under the 'Being Norman Mosser' Act. With any luck, you wouldn't get an Imperial prison. The conditions are..." Norman trailed off, assuming his point was taken.

"Let's just say I have my own set of morals, and I'm not prepared to break them. Not for you. Not for anyone."

Norman stood up. "Well I appreciate your candour Mr de Havilland, but there doesn't look like there is any middle ground for us to work on." Norman turned to leave.

"Wait." He turned back to the table. de Havilland pulled back his outstretched hand. "I won't commit any crimes. But I can turn a blind eye to them."

"You have an interesting set of morals, Mr de Havilland. Maybe there is room for negotiation after all." He sat back down. "Anything else you need besides protection?"

Veruz began to speak, but de Havilland cut him off. “No. We don’t want any blood money from you. Just our lives.”

“If we’re going to be working together, then I’m going to have to be able to trust you. Currently, I don’t. I’m sure you don’t trust me either.”

“Very perceptive, Mosser,” de Havilland replied, trying to hide his disdain for the criminal. Associating with this slimebag was the last thing he wanted to be doing, but he didn’t have a choice. He just hoped he didn’t soil his soul by his proximity to Norman. “As a gesture of good faith on both our parts—” de Havilland was cut off by sirens and red lights flashing from the roof.

“Red Alert,” sounded a controlled, computer voice.

“What’s going on?” Michael asked de Havilland.

“We’re under attack,” Norman replied. The trio moved through corridors of chaos as some chose to flee to their ships or apartments, while others, the locals, carried on like usual. Despite the computer voice urging calm and staying clear of the walk ways, everyone was doing the complete opposite. “La Soeur du Dan Ham houses interesting people. It’s not uncommon for it to get attacked by nut bags every now and again. We won’t be in any danger though,” Michael said in reply to de Havilland’s quizzical look at the people. “Those aren’t normal nut bags out there now,” Norman stately simply. He lead the other two across the mezzanine, Deathwrecker out in front, managing to look lethal and exquisite at the same time.

“How do you know?”

Norman turned round to face Michael, a twinkle in his eyes and a grin on his face. “Criminal instinct.” They reached the elevators on the far side, squeezing in with a group of frightened people, who upon seeing the Deathwrecker, screamed and ran out. Norman leaned forward and casually pressed the ship deck button, whistling a faintly familiar tune. The lift rocketed down from the outward ring of the station to the central core where the docked ships were located. They exited the lift at speed, wading through the throngs of panicked people. de Havilland and Michael followed Norman as he ran for his docked ship, dodging through the streams of other ship personnel running every which way but loose. The red lights continued to flash, the sirens singing their screeching song, but de Havilland blocked it out. He was only just keeping up with Norman who was proving to be a whole lot more agile than he had given him credit for. Norman stopped by a door, allowing the others to catch up.

“What now?” de Havilland asked between breaths.

“This place isn’t safe. We need to go somewhere controlled. Come with me.”

De Havilland shook his head. “We have our own transport. Just tell us where to go.”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Norman replied.

de Havilland pursed his lips, deep in thought. It all came down to time. When the *Azure Sunset* would appear next balanced with how soon it would take to get there. He had worked it all out earlier however, but now that it came to it, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to give Norman the information. Finally, he sighed and pulled a piece of flimsi from his pocket and wrote down a set of 3D coordinates. “Meet us there in exactly five days, alone. If you don’t the deal’s off.”

“I could just go there, take the *Azure Sunset* and kill you both now,” Norman said with a glint of humour.

“It’s too late for you to organise a team to take control of it. If you kill us now, you’ll never find out where it will go next time and you’ll lose it forever,” de Havilland said back, yelling over the noise of the running people around them.

“A test of trust then.”

“A test.” The two men locked eyes for a second, each looking for a hint of deception or mistrust, but they both saw mirrors of themselves: focused, determined men who wouldn’t let anything get in the way of their goal, whether it was criminal in nature or just survival.

“I’ll see you two in five days then,” Norman said before slipping through the docking bay door. The station rocked slightly and de Havilland felt an instant of weightlessness. The lights dimmed but returned within a second. De Havilland looked at his co-pilot. “Let’s get out of here.”

# Triage

[Norman Mossers]

Norman Mosser opened his eyes. Everything was pitch black and his neural lace was politely informing him that it had disabled his pain receptors. It was also telling him that he had been buried in the ruins of an apartment block that had been rather rudely blown up around him. To be fair, he had worked that out for himself. His last memory had been climbing up a staircase in the building and pushing the call button on Sam Darkes' front door. Then there had been the fireball washing up the staircase and the rumbling as the building collapsed. Then blackness. According to his chronometer, it had been roughly thirty minutes or so since it had happened.

He tried to move. Nothing. Mosser turned down the pain blocker. That at least told him of the broken ribs, legs and left arm. With his right, Mosser managed to claw some of the muck from his face and pushed aside some debris. The staircase area had created a cavity around him when the building fell.

No signal from the ship yet so he couldn't get help. Best thing to do would be wait until somebody dug him out. He instructed his neural lace to wake him up once he was rescued and let himself pass out again.

\* \* \*

Norman Mosser opened his eyes. His alarm clock had gone off. Time to get up and check the news. A report had come in from Sol - New San Fran. Apparently somebody had blown up a building. Leaks suggested Mosser involvement. No signal from Mack Winston either. Mosser bided his time for a few hours - still nothing.

He shrugged. Looks like Mack had either come a cropper or been persuaded to play with one of the fake Mossers. Good job he had decided to follow up on that ad on the BBS system. He entered the co-ordinates of Riedquat into the hyperdrive and pushed the big red button. As his Imperial Courier ripped a hole in space he mused that it could well be a trap, and it could well be kosher, and possibly both. But it was his only lead at the moment.

\* \* \*

Norman Mosser opened his eyes. Cool clean air washed over his face. A few hours had passed and finally, the rescue team had dug their way down to him. He focused on a face peering down into the cavity in which he lay.

"Jeez buddy, you are one lucky guy. We've pulled thirty people from this building, and you're the first live one!"

*\*uplink acquired\**

Norman Mosser smiled. "Golden Rule."

"What? - you ok?" The rescue worker looked down into the street and shouted, "Guys, I've got a live one - We need a medic ASAP - Looks like it could be head injuries!"

There was scrambling on the rubble and the rescuer was handed a bio scanner. He pointed it at Mosser and it beeped accordingly. The rescue worker visibly blanched and looked into the street and back at Mosser a few times. Norman saw him mouth the word 'Mosser'. Ho-hum. Norman reached with his one good hand into a pocket and removed a pack of smokes. He placed the filter end of one in his mouth, and lit it. His neural lace informed him of the 600cr fine he had just incurred for Narcotics use. Not long now.

A black suited individual appeared at the hole. "Norman Mosser, I am arresting you for..."

Mosser gestured with his hand and blew a smoke ring. "If it makes you feel better, I'll waive my rights to the full speech. I demand to see my lawyer though."

"You will, we've got him in Ross 128 for aiding and abetting."

*\*complete\**

"Just one more thing though officer."

"Go on."

"Don't feel bad tomorrow when they ask for your resignation. I am superior to you in every possible way. Which is why I've just escaped." Mosser winked.

The suit looked up into the sky with dawning realisation, swore and pulled his sidearm. The last thing Mosser saw was a bright flash.

\* \* \*

Norman Mosser opened his eyes. Or rather code, simulating his eyes, engaged the eye-opening subroutine. he was in what he recognised as a virtual space running on the shipboard AI of his Cobra. His neural lace had succesfully uploaded his sentience into the ship. A luminous sign appeared in front of him.

Load Saved Commander Y/N?

Y

---

# The Invasion of Williamson Base

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

*Quexce (-2,-2)  
Williamson Base*

The Imp Trader and the Anaconda arrived in convoy about half an hour after the docking of a Viper MkII from the planet below. Williamson Base is a talon-like brown orbital trading post in a geosynchronous orbit over Finn Rock's Gomez Starport. Its four claws protrude from a central body into space, curve to a parallel, then bend back inside toward the rotation axis and touch each other again in their tips.

Major June Tylor was the Anaconda's pilot. After getting clearance from the traffic control, she put the ship in the correct approach path and turned the PA on to inform the troops. Just on time, the battle ahead is still raging but shouldn't last long by the looks of it. Soon the diversion will be over and the security will be tighter.

\* \* \*

Inside the ships, the SB Marines made their last preparations. Sergeant-Major Alwin Kinderrick didn't worry about the lack of experience of his troops. Only one third of them had been with him since the StormBillies, the others came with the summoning to the SB members when the Chief S... Spartacus set up the first SB training camp outside the Billies six months ago, and had yet been under fire only once. He says an army called Wermacht once had to expand very quickly and 1 to 3 dilution was found not to affect too greatly the performance, and he had complete trust that Spartacus was right.

He does mind, though, the loss of 2/3 of his best lads and lasses to the creation of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd SB Marine Assault Regiments with the new recruits; they are good soldiers and many of them were promoted to command positions on the other MARS. Some not so good lads decided to remain in the Billies in their eternal quest for plunder and thrills, and those he doesn't regret having lost. Anyway, these new recruits did well so far, and he could at least retain the honour of leading the 1st's Alpha Company.

"Come on, me hearties, we aren't paid by the hour! check your gear: Kinetic body armour, vital sensors on, helmet camera on, air mask, magnetic boots, personal shields, Ingram 350KW pulse rifles or Vega PGL-14 plasma grenade launchers, 2 Vega PG 12 plasma hand grenades, combat knife, ammo, never again pill. Underwear isn't in the list, so it's an optional item." A little humour to relieve the tension.

"Hey, all they have to do is to increase the Gs and we're done for!" It was one of the new lads, an Imp called Champot. It's harder for the Imps, but still they joined in, often with more zeal than us Indies. Maybe because the slavery conditions in the Empire are harsher and even less humane than elsewhere.

This also explained why there are so many women in the brotherhood: no matter what, slavery is always harder on them. Maybe we should be a Sisterhood instead...

Champot's joke caused some laughter. Nervous laughter, but laughter nonetheless, this was good for the morale. "We have to finish this today, so look sharp!"

"You, Matazzo, get rid of that 'wrecker, we're fighting in confined quarters and I don't want any friendly fire incidents. Arachnids on, load IFF programs and check final status; engineers check explosives, cutting laser, plasma blow torch, emergency hull sealant, hacking gear...", I continued, reading the final checklist.

The pilot activated the PA. "The traffic control gave permission. Be ready, we'll be in in about 2 minutes."

We are!

The ship clanked a bit, and stopped. The PA sounded again "We're in. The Imp Trader will be entering soon, stand by... there's a patrol coming."

It was too soon for discovery, the other ship must also get in.

\* \* \*

Major Tylor had been in the Brotherhood since her rescue two years ago; of course there wasn't a brotherhood then. Back then there were the Billies, and the Brotherhood was just an aid association by and for rescued slaves. Some would become pirates, and were trained by the Billies; others the Chief Scout trained himself for the flight

permit test but put them to fly (and gain combat experience, I see that now) in a frontier trading company or another. That's for the spacers like herself, anyway, since there were all kinds of specialties taught in the fast-lane professional formation provided by the Brotherhood, be it marines, hyperdrive mechanics or hydroponics technicians, including the psychiatrists who assist the people just after their rescue, even free colonists in a few outer systems... A lot of people, really! And those are less than half of all the people the Chief Scout rescued with the Billies, the others went their ways without joining, or just didn't answer the summoning. The Spartacus called us out to go to war, and are the ones who came. We owe it to him, and to all the slaves out there!

The patrol boarded and the pilot went to greet them in the entry hall. Five men and an officer, could they suspect something? "I am sorry, commander, but the station is in lockdown and your ship is hereby commandeered until the end of the present emergency," said the officer in a pompous way. "The contents of your cargo holds will be unloaded and kept safe until the ship is returned. By the way, what is in your cargo roster?"

Tylor couldn't help but to smile, that question came as by a cue. "Free Brethren and battle weapons. one MAR of them, to be precise."

The doors suddenly opened and the security patrol found itself under the sights of a whole squad. "On the contrary, Sir, It is the Spartacus Brotherhood that's commandeering your orbital station.", he said in the same pompous tone the security officer used.

The prisoners were quick-locked and the troops awaited the signal. "Don't forget we're the good guys, eh, so behave.", said Sergeant Marteen, the squad leader. This isn't only a combat operation, it's also a PR operation and they couldn't afford to make any slip ups.

\* \* \*

Lucius Duran, the station's CO, was on his office cursing the Foreign Affairs minister. The idiot had received an ultimatum from the Spartacus Brotherhood nearly one month ago and filed it as a prank! Duran had to go all the way to the planetside to hear that and put up with the Chamber of Commerce making absurd requests to "deal with the brigands". He returned just in time to watch the start of the battle in a live newsflash broadcast from the network that paid more for me to let a ship out. As he expected, the Imps are being very badly mauled and won't hold out much longer.

"Deal with the brigands", ha. He would have resigned on the spot, wasn't for his reputation being permanently wrecked. It's better to have a reputation of having fought against a huge fleet and lost than one of a coward. He'd be fired, but at least would be able to find another job...

The general quarter alarms! So soon? He took his comm and called the security central. "What's going on?"

"Sir, there is a security breach in the hangar level. Armed men, we don't know how many. They appear to be coming from the two ships that came in."

"Trojans! Seal them there and hold them off, and send reinforcements. They mustn't reach the central shaft."

"It's already done. Sir, we're receiving a message from the Anaconda."

"I'm going there." Duran left his office and ran a few corridors to the security central beside the traffic control.

\* \* \*

The signal came. An engineer debarks first, alone and wearing a mechanic's jump suit. The hangar is an octagonal towerlike structure on the station's rotation axis, around which the ships are landed in a common area spread by several sub-levels. He pretends to be checking the ships, approaches the internal airlock door and starts to weld it shut.

"FOR SPARTACUS AND FREEDOM!", I bellowed, and the battle cry was picked up by the troops. They're excited. They're ready. We rush to the door. My company has to secure the hangar, opening the way for the others. The cameras see us and alarms go off. It's begun! Next to our Anaconda, the other ship also had its own gray spill; that's the 2nd MAR Alpha company. In the event they had put the ships in different hangars, they'd be responsible to take it too, as it is, they'll just be our backup.

The snipers shoot the cameras while my lads go for the doors, only too late. The blast doors were already down.

"BLOW TORCH!", I shouted, and the engineers come running. "Cut this door down, yesterday!"

"Yes, Sarge."

\* \* \*

The alarms went off, now they know we're here. that was sooner than expected, but the damage was done. Major Tyler opened a channel to the traffic control. "Hello, it's just to inform you that my registration isn't really SP-619, but SP!619, and you are now under martial law according to the SB Ultimatum of the 4th of this month! Throw down your weapons and surrender, you are overwhelmed. All resistance is futile!"

She always wanted to say that.

\* \* \*

"Sir, the hangar has been completely overrun. The invaders surrounded the maintenance area and the police hangar. The police is trying to fight them back, but say they have military shields and equipment. They say they can't hold them for long."

"Damn, they're cut off. There's nothing they can do, tell them to see if they can hold on until Jack can reach them. If not, surrender. Did Jack and the reinforcements arrive at the reception area yet?"

"No, sir. they're on their way!"

\* \* \*

The blast door isn't difficult to overcome with the help of the engineers, but did allow the few defenders time to barricade themselves in the reception area and the lounge. If they manage to keep us here long enough, they'll receive reinforcements, and THEN things'll get nasty. Here it goes, they've cut it down, and laser fire starts. "Fire in the hole!" Someone fires a plasma grenade and wipes out the defenders.

Covering each others, my lads start gaining terrain. Spartacus was right, two rookies to a veteran works. "Third squad, keep going! Secure the lounge!"

\* \* \*

Jack M'bende, the SC, decided to personally lead the defense party. He and his men ran down the stairway to the lobby and the customsless reception area. If he didn't get there in time... Panting, one of his security guards pulled the door to the lobby, only to be greeted by a "FREEZE!".

He shoved the door closed and put his back to it, trying to catch his breath. He didn't, his breath was permanently halted by a hale of laser fire trough the thin door and wall.

"Shit!!!" M'bende said. the corpse slid down the door and stood sitting, the head bobbed down. The SC peeped trough one of the holes on the wall, pulled out his comm and linked to the command centre. "Lucius, the lobby has been taken by soldiers in full combat gear and combat robots! I'll hold them in the stairway as long as I can, but we're severely outnumbered and outgunned. Send more people NOW!"

\* \* \*

Soon we gain the central shaft access from the hangar level. The central shaft is an long, huge corridor at 0G that goes across this end of the station and allows access to all the levels on the station's four arms. It is in the access tunnels to here and in the stairway around it that the defence will be more dogged, and not in the mopping up of any individual level. Our first job was done, and my MAR's Bravo and Charlie Companies now take the lead up the shaft, walking in their mag boots with the arachnids humming overhead. Meanwhile the 2nd MAR proceeded to take the stairway to find a computer node, sweep the first three levels and reach the traffic control room.

\* \* \*

His long time right arm and friend, Jack, had been killed and the bastards are all over, they landed half an army at least. The bad news keep coming...

"The lifts and trams have been hacked, we've lost control over them, sir."

"Hacked? And our firewalls?"

"They gained access directly from a node, bypassing the firewall. They have now entered the power grid management program."

"It's over."

"Combats reported on sector 1's first, second and third levels, headed this way. They took the central shaft until the seventh level."

An explosion close by shook the walls. Duran could already hear the sounds of combat: laser fire, someone shouting orders.

"It's over. Throw in the towel, tell our men to lay down their weapons." It's time to start writing a resume.

---

## Armistice

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

*Quexce (-2,-2)*  
*Williamson Base*

Lucius Duran gave up. He picked up the comm and the PA sounded throughout the station. "All security forces, this is the station's CO. Cease fire and surrender, we lost."

Major Tylor, standing by on the Anaconda in the hangar, heard the announcement and reported it to the Shiva. "Nothing like good planning!", she grinned to MiKos, her co-pilot.

\* \* \*

*Quexce (-2,-2)*  
*SBNS "Shiva"*  
*In transit at 8 AU from Finn Rock*

Someone rang outside my wardroom. Sitting at the desk, I opened an eye and asked, "Yes?"

"We've just recieved the victory signal from Williamson Base."

"Thank you. I'll be out in a moment."

Time for me to play my part and declaim my lines in this play. I move to the little studio with a pulpit in front of the SB flag, where people started to put make-up and comb me. "Grid broadcast on all channels. Twelve minutes!", bellows someone. Soon they will transmit the SB anthem with the brutal farm factor and the nice green planet clip, and then it'll be up to me. And there is no need to be nervous, I'm not negotiating. Since the transmission takes several seconds to arrive there and that many also for a reply to return, I can just present the demands and be over with it.

\* \* \*

*Quexce (-2,-2)*  
*Williamson Base*

I decided to surrender in my office. I may have lost my station, but not my dignity. The door was opened without knocking, two soldiers and an officer barged in. "Lucius Duran, you are under arrest...", started the officer.

"Good afternoon, madam. Please, have a seat. Do you accept a drink?"

The officer seemed slightly ashamed for an instant. Good! "Hum, no, sir, thank you. I'm Captain Stahl from the SB Marine Force. Good afternoon to you too, and please pardon me for my rudeness."

"Never mind that. You were saying?..."

"Well, I was about to inform you that you are a prisoner of war and will be treated according the New Geneva Convention."

"Bla, bla, and so on. Let's go to the brig, then."

"No, Sir, we're not taking you there, or at least not unless you wish to, or force us to. You are to be set free on parole if you agree. I will ask you to turn your receiver on to any channel for a public announcement, relay it to the station's PA, and tell Gomez to do the same."

"Public announcement?", I asked as I turned to the receiver.

"Yes, Sir, from the SB High Command."

"Ah, your terms... There's a transmission grid with what must be your coat-of-arms. "Spartacus Brotherhood - We Act?". That's your motto?"

"Yes. The chronometer indicates a few minutes yet to begin."

"You're very legal-bound for a brigand fleet: coat-of-arms, ultimatums, prisoners of war, terms of surrender... One might even think of you as a proper government and all."

"But we are. We've registered our statutes as a non-territorial nation on the Ackwada Central Registry under the nomadic and displaced populations act, so according to galactic law we ARE classified as a government in exile. We may legally present ultimatums and declare war, as we did, and we fight according to the laws of war, so please don't call us brigands again."

"That figures. Only, you're not recognized by any other government, so what's the use?"

"But you see, after what we are doing here, we will be recognized. They'd have to be autists not to recognize us."

"So, you're making an example out of us. You'll plunder us to the bone before you leave and create a climate of fear?"

"I asked you not to call us brigands. We don't plunder, but I'll grant that we believe slavists should live in fear. Anyway, it's nearly beginning."

\* \* \*

The lads did well. The slavists tried to put up a fight, even fought well in the stairway, but no deal, we've paved the way with them. I've heard of only two wounded in the 1st MAR, and of no casualties in the 2nd. Great things these shields...

Oops, it's starting. The SB transmission grid on the large screen in the residential square we're in changes to a tilled field with a manor in the background. A slave driver is brutalizing a captive fallen at his feet...

"Oh frie-end, not iin this to-ne!...", starts the anthem. Yeah, take that, you bastard! An orange beam of light from the sky vaporizes the slavist, leaving only his outstretched arm still holding the pain prod. The troops howl in delight.

"Rather le-et us sing more  
chee-erful and joy-yful ones."

An armoured combat suit with the SB logo falls from the sky, followed by others.

I love this clip!

\* \* \*

*Quexce (-2,-2)*

*SBNS "Shiva"*

In transit at 8 AU from Finn Rock

"This is an announcement by the spokesbeing of the SB High Command."

"Greetings.

I am Admiral Smith of the Spartacus Brotherhood.

The SB is an EX-slaves organization, and it abhors slavery. Also, it's a MILITARY organization that has arms to act whereas others just talk.

In the Ultimatum we sent the beginning of the month in an open letter to all the slavist system's governments (when applicable) we granted you the option to voluntarily abolish slavery in gradual steps to prevent productivity loss.

The Ultimatum's deadline has expired and you didn't comply before our arrival, forfeiting this right. In ignoring our terms, you forced us to act, and now I present to you the terms of your surrender:

You will abolish slavery at once with force of system law.

You will perform and allow the SB to perform surprise inspections and you will prosecute any infractions found.

The ex-owners will grant all your former slaves a minimum wage equal to the average of the 10 closest systems excluding the largest and the smallest wages to the function they execute, retroactive to three months.

You will allow the SB to land on the surface and take any refugee that wishes to come with us after collecting its back wages.

The ex-owners will pay the average transport fare for any refugee that wishes to leave on its own after collecting its back wages, up to a radius of 15LY.

Finally, you will surrender the entire Police Viper fleet docked in Williamson Base and all weapons and shields found there as war payment. These are already in our position with the capture of the station.

And why should you agree with any preposterous demands? Because I'm waging the diplomacy of the lance. These terms are not negotiable. You WILL have accepted them by the time this fleet has arrived at Williamson Base.

We are the rescuers of the hopeless, and if you stand in our way, you'll be the villains and will be treated accordingly.

If you insist upon slavery rather than simple humanity, we will invade you. We will personally free all slaves, we will put all slavists through our fast re-education program and, as we leave, we will destroy all slave labour-based productive units to prevent their further use by slavists.

This is what will happen to any slavist who does not abide by the soft terms of our Ultimatum. We are the Spartacus Brotherhood. We act."

There! That wasn't so bad...

\* \* \*

*Liabefa (-2,-3)*

*Asp Explorer IL-351 "Tenchu"*

*In transit at 0.1 AU from Richardson Base*

I was anxious for news. I had already checked the combat expendables, set up a bed in the gallows, checked if the armoury was locked and stopped our "guest's" medication.

We still had time. I took a bath (a long one, thanks to Emu), flogged myself with optical cable in the same manner the old Roman Legionnaires did, donned the training suit, got my sword and went to the cargo hold.

After half an hour of warm-up and callisthenics, I took the sword. I adjusted it in the belt without tying the silk strings, stood upright and relaxed with the eyes closed.

Breath

Breath

I achieved the non-stance, the complete apparent relaxation.

Breath

Breath

I opened my eyes. Battoujutsu: combat while unsheathing the sword.

The straight battou: the right foot advanced as the stance lowered, the right hand flew from its relaxed position to the hilt. Without stopping nor seeming to change the movement in any way, sliding the sword out of the scabbard on the left hand horizontally into the opponent, halting the sword as to shake the blood out and scabbarding it again in the same fluid movement. In less than a second, the sword briefly flashed out and returned to the scabbard, the four fluid steps executed as one.

The tsuka upper battou: the left foot advanced, and the sword half-slid out again, its pommel "hitting" at the height of an imaginary opponent's face before going back in.

The double battou: the right foot advanced and after the sword finished sliding out, I pulled back the scabbard to release it from the belt. The left foot advanced again to reduce range, the left hand metal scabbard's tip hitting the opponent's arm pit after my blade parried his upwards and away, scabbarding at chest level...

The reverse double battou with thrust...

\* \* \*

After bathing again (and again ;-)), I donned the flight suit, put the sword on the left side, my "Diplomat" on the right and returned to the bridge. Emu reminded me that all her stuff stayed at the hotel. No problem, we'll buy new. I'll have to arrange them to send it to Delta Pavonis along with my own.

I'm still anxious, and our "guests" should be almost waking up. I go to the galley to make some real coffee to be served with Tim-Tams to them.

---

## Sitcom

[Cmdr. Maegil]

*Liabefa (-2,-3)*

*Asp Explorer IL-351 "Tenchu"*

*In-transit at 100,000Km from Richardson Base*

"Good Morning!, your Highness," I said enthusiastically to the Princess as she came from my stateroom. Although with a bit of difficulty because of the Gs, she presented herself upright - and regal.

"Please, just Maria will do. Is this the coffee I was smelling from the bedroom?"

"Hi, Maria," said Kevin, the fake Winston.

"Hello, Maria," said Emu. "Yes, It's the South American coffee Maegil brought from Earth. Please sit down and be welcome aboard, and sorry about the accommodations. This is after all a fighting craft, not a passenger liner."

We heard noises coming from the pantry. Emu opened the door, turned around and looked at me reproachfully. "I don't believe you actually left him in there," she said, stepping aside and helping a battered and bruised Mack Winston drag himself out.

Kevin made a good effort in going to help, Maria could barely move at all; in the meantime I stood sitting, calmly dunked the biscuit on the hot coffee and scooped it out with a spoon. "And good morning to you, Mr Winston. Do you care to join us in breakfast?" I said, and kept eating.

"Obie, set gravity to Achenar's Capitol," said Emu, with an angry look towards me.

"Yes, Emu. Gravity now set to 0.55G," answered Obie, and they helped Winston get up. "Really, you talk about him and didn't even think of resetting the Gs for our guest's convenience."

"Well, you did, didn't you?" I replied with a slight bit of sarcasm. "But that's why I love you, you think of these little gestures."

Emu was a bit disconcerted to be receiving love declarations in the presence of strangers.

"What happened to you!?" Maria asked Winston.

"I gave him a reminder for the next time he decides to bomb 56 families, to at least have the decency of noting their existence before squashing them as insects," I casually answered for him. "Now, please sit down.", I told Winston.

Maria was horrified to learn that. "You!... Did that? 56 families?"

"Yes..." whispered Winston.

"How ungentlemanly! I hope it was a good reminder!"

The unexpected comment made an awkward silence fall over the galley.

Emu cut in. "Maria, tell me, how did you two meet?"

"I think that is quite obvious. I was slumming!"

"Oh, what a fairy tale, the Princess and the Vagabond!"

"Hey, I resent that!" said Winston.

"Prove to us that she's wrong and she'll apologise, otherwise drink your coffee and let's talk."

"Cofee? I thought this was tea!"

"Are you trying to piss me off?"

"Fuck you!"

His bravado was too much. He could barely hold himself together even at the ship's present Gs, so bad had been the beating, much less live up to his mouth.

The girls giggled and excused themselves to go where women go together. I stood nonplussed for an instant, then laughed in sincere amusement. "You're a piece, you know?"

"You've got balls, just need a head over those shoulders and you'd be a real man! In fact, it's your lucky day. I decided to have you as my pupil!"

"And who asked you? I was never good at school, you know?"

"I think you know what I'm talking about. It's about improving yourself, making you both harder and more pliable against adversity to the point where you'll be capable of riding its waves. It's about combat, and life, and the choice to remain alive by all means necessary. It's finally about learning how to avoid adversity and master it."

Kevin's eyes glittered. "Are you a real guru?"

Winston spoke over him. "Have you finished your ranting? First of all, WHO\_THE\_FUCK\_ARE\_YOU???" he shouted so loud even the women stopped chirping in the head. "You apparently know all about me, but I still don't know who you are."

"As I said, let's talk. First of all, who the fuck I am. I'm someone who did.."

"...worse things than I did, I know that already, and that you're Maegil with a capital, bold, italic and underlined Conscience, and she's Emu, and you are very much in love. But whom do you work for?"

"What if I told you I'm a freelance mercenary and my fiancé's a Federal Naval officer on vacation?"

"I'd say that's highly improbable."

"Yet, not entirely impossible, and we're here. And what if I told you also happened to have slain a good friend of mine?"

"Mosser is, or was your friend?"

"No, I had only met Mosser when you killed him. I'm talking about a friend of yours, too."

"A friend I killed? Who?"

"Do you remember a nihilistic bastard called Jay?"

"Jay Carstein!", he said after a while, bleached to bone white. "And you still want to train me... You're not going to kill me, then?"

"No. You gave Jay an assassin's death; he deserved it as much as I, or you, do. It's a professional risk, so to speak. I would appreciate, though, if you could abstain from doing the same to me."

"And you're not VLA."

"Let's just say I agree with the concept of freedom fighter, but am unaffiliated with them."

"That's what you mean by 'freelance mercenary'?"

"Believe it if you will, that's the story you're getting."

"You say you want to train me? In fighting?"

"No, in life, and also death. And what's important. I think you can call me your new uncle, and I may succeed where the others failed."

Winston shivered at the mention of uncles and aunts "And what makes you think that?"

"They had the wrong approach. They wanted to force you to become a good boy again, and you're too rebellious to abide people pushing you around. What I have to offer is more on your terms, I don't want to be a good boy, just a real man."

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"Your actions, for one. You, as the boy you are, blunder recklessly from chaos to chaos without conscience of your actions. You kill, you betray, get beat up, you run, get betrayed, shot at, always on the run... did you ever stop to think of how to stop? Did you plan any end for it? Do you foresee the results of your actions?"

He nodded. "You really don't beat around the bush. I think I understand what you're saying: life is like chess," he said looking at Kevin. Then his eyes returned to me, flaring again in defiance. "But that still doesn't explain how you've got access to what can only be an police or intelligence file on me. You must work for someone!"

"I have ears. Besides, you've been an awful lot on the news, didn't you? Did you miss the "Mosser: the making of a criminal" series on RIG last year, specially the episode about you? Oh, yes, you've kept a low profile until you surfaced in New San Francisco. Anyway, by your reaction, I think I wasn't too wrong."

"And what do you want with Mosser?"

"For one, his name and his fame."

"What about the *Azure Sunset*? You were too pleased when I told you what the detector was for."

"That's just a bonus if my negotiations with Mosser succeed. A major asset as it could be, but still only a bonus."

"Or you'll take it anyway if they fail?"

"Don't mistake me for a fool, I'd be swarmed by Mossers until one of them managed to get me! No, for me the *Azure Sunset* is just his ship. What I really need is him."

"For what? You want employment?"

"On the contrary, I want to employ him if he accepts, but the precise nature of my proposal will be between us."

"He's expensive."

"It's an offer he can't refuse."

"People with that kind of bait on one hand usually have betrayal on the other."

"Unless they have too much to lose. In face of how good Mosser is, and his ability of taking revenge over his killers, treason doesn't seem advisable."

"Besides, he's so cornered he can barely move, everybody's after him. Why hire someone with so many problems?"

"His visibility is the very reason I want him, he's got all those fans. I said I need his name and fame, his actual presence is not absolutely required."

Winston seemed to be thinking about what I said when the girls returned. "Mack, Emu and I were talking, and she agreed to assist me in train you to behave as a gentlemen along with the Commander.", said Maria.

I think I must have grinned, as Emu added "And you too, Maegil, you're having the opportunity of learning etiquette from a real Imperial Princess. You're not getting away!". It was Winston's turn to grin.

"Maria, I didn't accept yet."

"Oh, yes you do!"

"I want a divorce!" he said straight-faced.

"What?!" Maria asked, flabbergasted.

"Just kidding. Look, the Commander here was just telling me I don't like to be pushed around, don't take it so hard," his grin creeping back again on his face.

"That's why it's so hard to correct your ways. We'll start just after I and Emu make the place a little more habitable," she said, collecting herself with grace.

"WHAT?!" I bawled, appalled. My imagination ran wild as I saw lace dust covers on my control sticks and the such. As if it wasn't bother enough to have to lower the toilet seat, now I'd have women redecorating my *Tenchu*. "Don't you even think about it. That is a direct order from this ship's Commander, I WON'T have pink lace aboard my iron ass!"

"Pink lace? don't be silly! You have to recognize that unpainted duralium walls, foldable chairs and plastic cups IS quite an sterile environment, even for FM standards, though," said Emu. "We'll just go shopping for some items after we dock and won't be long. Besides, both Maria and I need a new wardrobe."

"I prefer to call it functional, spartan or even monastical, thank you very much. As I said, that's an order, no redecoration. Only I have permission to mess the *Tenchu* up, is that clear? Besides, we're just stopping for Milfuel and we'll be on our way."

"What, you won't even fit in a cabin for Maria?"

"No, I only have room for two and a half full jumps worth of fuel, and..."

Emu looked hurt as she stood at attention. "Aye, aye, Sir. No redecoration, Sir."

"The idiocies men do for women! Very well, I'll fit one, but that'll put us on a little less than two full jumps limit and no reserve. Even if I would consider it, I don't think here they deal with military shield generators."

"See, Maria, they are stubborn but we can bend them!"

Women!...

\* \* \*

*Liabefa (-2,-3)*  
*Richardson Base*

After we docked the girls dragged poor Kevin shopping; Winston said was going to fix the arm, and was gone as soon as the pressure equalized. He might even return - my hope; he may try to warn Mosser - wouldn't be bad; or he may just flee to under a cupboard. If he does, I'm mistaken about him, he's of no value to me and I may even do the public a service and hunt him down for the fun of it.

As for me, I stayed to buy a cabin at the shipyard; as soon as I was alone, just in case, I donned a monolayer vest under the shirt, put a throwing knife in the boot and Swiss army knife in the pocket. Just in the case he is that treacherous.

"Obie, keep Winston in constant observation whenever he is aboard. If he..." I instructed the AI. I might be a bit mad as they say, after all, for putting myself on the line this way, but I believe Winston does have his valour, just needing more discerning.

I went to a public terminal and checked the BBS but found nothing for me. Before leaving Earth, I had contacted the Sydney FMIB office and told them to relay any messages along my flight plan to Ackzeand (-5,-3)... Strange, the detector now indicates Zeeness (-4,-3). All the better, that's inside my jump range and still leaves me plenty of fuel.

There were no messages. Oh, well, let's see what they've got in missiles here. Solid fuel, chaff...

---

# Night on the Bare Mountain

[Niccolò Machiavelli]

(To be read while listening to Mussorgsky's "Night on the Bare Mountain")

*Sol (0,0)*

*Earth*

*Galactic Federation Senate*

"The Galactic Federation Senate's security commission is now assembled in closed session. The matters to be discussed are Secrets of State, and any disclosure of this session to unauthorized persons will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. The word is to the Minister of Defence, Mr. Muhammed Graham, speaking for the Cabinet," said Sen. Alex Blain.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman," said the Minister, standing up with a datapad on his hand. "Confusion rages in the highest echelons of the Federation.", he started. "The President called an emergency cabinet meeting over the Zeaex battle and the ambassadors are having the worst day of their lives. And just now that the facts had begun to unravel, comes in the second plasma mortar shell.

"The same organization that caused the incident was also in Quexce, and just as the preliminary reports of a fleet assembly arrived, they all got to watch them slaughter an Imperial Fleet in a live newsflash. First there was that - no, those full pitched battles in Zeaex. Even now the embers of war still gleam over there; every now and then a few shots are still exchanged. At least the survivor's FDRs are evidence that the Imps fired first...

"According to the reports, there is this Spartacus Brotherhood. That they were escorting refugees, there is little doubt. The intelligence reports say they rescued slaves in several systems, and their known routes coincide. Our troops must have fought for a good cause or they would have died in vain; that would be a very bad thing to morale, not to mention a huge PR disaster. Now they play a power move under the galaxy's eyes, and they do it after forcing the Federation's hand into their help; to the Imps it puts us in an automatic alliance with them.

"Even their proclamation of terms was perfect. They didn't demand much for themselves, but the consequences to the Quexcean production will be extremely serious. They made their point, a slavist production system can be put to a standstill if all the slaves are gone."

"Outrageous!" cried someone.

"And the worse is, they got us," cried someone else

The Chairman's buzz overlapped the protests and started to restore order.

"Outrageous it may be, but they're our creation," shouted the Minister over the room's dimming roar. "This was a black-ops operation that begun under the previous administration and ran out of control." The Chairman had to call for order again, and took longer to achieve it. "But we can use this whole situation to our advantage. There has been long-term strategic planning since we begun to lose control over them, and the time to put them into motion has arrived," continued the Minister when there was silence again. "As this escalates, nobody can really blame some systems for starting this phased abolition. We just have to nudge them into doing so by offering privileged trade relations or even aid funds.", said Min. Graham. "This way, we can weaken the feeble sympathy towards the Empire derived from the common use of slavery - and increase them towards the Federation by promising to help maintain their sovereignty should the Imps try to make them to change their minds. The strategic defence fund was fattened for these agreements and aid packages, as we saw we couldn't stop them. The Spartacus Brotherhood is self-financed and would eventually reach its trigger stockpile level, and now they're unleashed."

"Unleashed? It well may be, but they're not attacking just the Empire, they're rampaging the bloody galaxy!" shouted a senator.

The Chairman buzzed again, but the Minister turned to the senator. "Sen. Gilles, they're like dogs of war. When you release dogs on a battlefield, they'll attack anything they perceive as the enemy."

"You're saying we can't control them?", asked the senator.

"I'm saying the only person that they pay some attention to is their trainer. But once they smell the blood, only death or the end of the battle can stop them."

"And who is this "trainer"? One of ours?", asked another senator.

"Correct, Sen, Lizzo, the operation was under a Black Ops Commodore's command."

"Was? What happened?"

"Initially, it was a piracy operation on the Imperial edges, but as they rescued slaves, an independent support association was created by our man and some of the ex-slaves. That eventually developed into the Spartacus Brotherhood. In the creation of the Brotherhood, the other leaders decided that if it was to fight for freedom, they'd do so as a martial democracy. Such as it is, the 'Spartacus' - that's their name for 'President' - can't do whatever he wants, he answers before an 'Elegia' - a senate - in a 'first among equals' position. Their officers don't have many privileges, they rather receive their promotions from a poll among their troops. The Commodore had to either accept this or step aside. He accepted to become the Spartacus and retains some power and a lot of respect, but cannot command - just propose."

"And how do they maintain discipline? It can't work."

"It's a democracy, but it's under martial law. They voted their strategic objectives, and once these decisions were taken by the majority, their High Command plotted the tactical plans to achieve the objectives. Now that the operations started, all are compelled to obey their own elected commanders."

"And it never leaked?"

"They have their security, and some unorthodox methods. We couldn't infiltrate many people, nor has Spartacus ever revealed his true alliance to anyone. Should he do so, his loyalties would be questioned and we'd lose our only link to their command."

"How come we weren't informed?"

"The Commodore is in deep cover, and the operation was on a need to know basis. Only three persons of the present administration knew, and even with his warning we couldn't do anything showing previous knowledge before they started their operations. We had to be completely unaware to avoid suspicion to ourselves. As it is now, Besides five persons of the former Cabinet, only the President, three Ministers including myself, three Admirals of the FM High command and two FMIB-SR flag officers know about it. That's too many people for my taste already, but now we had to extend this knowledge to you twelve Senators on this commission. For obvious reasons it must remain a secret."

"Minister, our hands are tied. We must remain neutral the next time they ask for help," said Sen. Gilles.

"Easier said than done, the hard part will be punishing someone for helping slaves to run away," said Sen. Walla-Walla.

"The Imps can try something of their own, and there some systems may even ask help from the Empire. We'll have to put a lot of people on the field. The Intelligence Minister will put the FIB on it, but there are certain... wetter aspects of it that are more a Black Ops thing," said the Defence Minister.

"You mean a terror campaign?"

"Why not? The Brotherhood takes the blame, and it'll help others to consider doing the right thing. I'm certain they probably have this kind of operation themselves, we'll just help them under the table. We did it before..."

"Yes, but never at this scale. If it leaks in any way, the repercussions will be disastrous. It's a bad Idea to take direct action, but we could unofficially send some "mercenary advisors", sell under-priced "military surplus" items... The best thing would be to stay out entirely."

\* \* \*

The discussions continued among the top Federal leaders in closed offices and scanned rooms for a few days: important political decisions mustn't be hurried...

---

## Blue Sky Thinking

[Norman Mosser]

The trails of witchspace cleared from around Norman's Courier and it emerged into the Ackzeand system. There was a slight roll to starboard as the gyros in the engines spun up to speed which cleared itself almost immediately. The Courier was probably due a service. Norman glanced down at the scanner and registered the Saker that was waiting by the exit cloud. Spiky, but not lurking in ambush position. His long range passive scan chirruped and it showed a large mass orbiting Ackzeand 4, skimming the gas giant to fuel up its massive hydrogen tanks.

*The Azure Sunset.*

Norman watched as it broke away from the atmosphere of the gas giant and slowly climbed away, and with a blink-and-you-miss-it transition dropped into witchspace. Norman didn't need the scanner to know it had mis-jumped and would then move to its next destination. De Havilland knew his timing - five days was long enough to get here, but not long enough to get here in time. Instead, he got to watch the *Sunset* jump out of the system just over an hour ago. The commlink flashed. Norman opened the channel.

"You've seen the goods, Commander. Are you interested?"

"I am - would you care to discuss this face to face? I can offer the hospitality of my galley."

"You can offer it. But, I'm quite happy with meeting on the Saker."

Norman smiled, "de Havilland, I'll prepare for docking and meet you at the airlock."

The two ships, one large and white, one small and spiky closed and latched themselves together. It took longer than it should have, but Norman judged that de Havilland wouldn't have appreciated sudden moves. And Norman needed to get to the *Sunset*. A few more moments passed and the ships had matched air pressures and the lock itself cycled open. On one side stood de Havilland and Veruz. On the other stood Mosser. They were all armed - naturally. Norman opened the conversation. "I'm glad you agreed to meet me again. As I said - I'm interested in your offer and your terms are acceptable. Give me the location of the *Sunset*, and I'll ensure that you never need to worry about the people hunting you again."

de Havilland raised an eyebrow. "Without killing us?"

"Without killing you. It's up to you what sort of solution you want to go for though. I could arrange an identity change and you could go live under a new name on an edge system, but my guess is that you want something that won't leave you looking over your shoulder. Something a little more – proactive."

de Havilland scowled, "Don't dress it up."

"Okay then. I intend to find out who is lurking around my ship. In return for you showing me where I can find it, I promise to keep you alive. We may need to work together for a bit, and if you object to the killing side of things, you can look away and I'll get on with it. I'd appreciate it if you could tell me at some point a bit more about the ships and how you found the *Sunset* so I can see if I can guess who that rabble are, and why you didn't speak to the Police at Alioth."

"How did you know about that?" asked Veruz.

Norman smiled, "Simple. I watch the news - a story about an attack involving one of the *Sunset's* Kraits, and a rather special Saker. Got overshadowed by some story about two dead Mossers in Sol, but it got down these parts."

"Oh."

"One more thing though."

*[WARNING: Ship is Under Attack]*

"I'm pretty sure the other crowd saw the clouds when we jumped in - are you any good in a fight?"

# A Dark Day for the Empire

[Imperial Court]

*Cemiess (-2,-2)*

*Fort O'Brien*

*Imperial VI (Border Defense) Protectorate HQ*

He spent years haggling for budgetary crumbs to equip his fleets, and now it's gone down to this. First they attacked right here, under the Prince's nose, and now this. Prince Jack Francez was appalled as he watched the special newscast from Quexce. He was ruined, the damage to his career was irreparable.

There were only two measures to be taken. He could be court-martialled and prove his partial innocence with all the requests he had presented over the years, even in which case he and his family would fall in disgrace, or... He told his personal secretary he wasn't to be disturbed until the Imperial Court called him. That shouldn't be long, now. He looked out his office's panoramic window, meditating. Finally decided, the Prince went to his ancient wooden desk and sat down, completely collected.

Slow but purposefully he took his service handgun out of a drawer, checked the tactical map, dictated and sent his last orders. The comm buzzed, just in time. He turned the handgun on, hearing the slight buzz from power-up. The Prince put the handgun under his chin. After a brief pause to say his farewell to life, he took the Rommel exit.

The comm buzzed again.

\* \* \*

## TOP PRIORITY ORDERS

**From: Prince Jack Francez,  
Commander-in-Chief of the VI (Border Defense) Protectorate**

**To: All forces of the VI (Border Defense) Protectorate within 20LY of Miola (-2,-2).**

- **Assemble immediately at Miola (-2,-2).**
- **Jump in attack formation to Quexce (-2,-2).**
- **Pursue, engage and completely annihilate at all cost the terrorist fleet that ambushed our forces and are currently plundering the system.**

**Do this in my memory.**

**Long live the Emperor!**

\* \* \*

*Achenar (1,-4)*

*Capitol*

*Imperial Palace*

The Imperial Court as a whole wasn't the only Imperial party deeply concerned about the Spartacus Brotherhood actions. Over two years he had to postpone his plans because of Marcus, the Bastard, and all the HPA turmoil he created with that Mosser terrorist. These are dark times for the Empire, and there is great need of a strong hand that can save it. Opportunity was knocking on his door again and this time he couldn't fail.

His Imperial Highness, Prince Jason Duval, Second in the Line of Succession, Governor of Achenar and Commander-in-Chief of the II (Achenar) Protectorate decided to call a new secret meeting...

## Bushwhacked

[Mack Winston]

So, I'd found a doctor on Richardson Base. At least the corporation in charge of the system cared for its employees enough to employ a doctor or two. There wasn't really much to do - just clear up a few bruises with a deft application of nanotechnology.

Then it was off to see the station's engineering department, with the hope of having something done about my wrecked prosthetic. The engineer had looked at it sadly. I had to remove it and give it to him. I always felt so naked without the arm. He went off muttering, and left me with my thoughts in the station's small break room.

With some difficulty, I opened my flask of Riedquation Ultra. I had to reduce myself to undoing the cap with my teeth. Even with the non-functional arm, I could at least wedge something between my elbow and body - but it was gone. I sighed and sat down, and nursed the flask of hot, electrifying liquid.

Then Kevin arrived.

"Found you at last," he said with a sigh. "They tried to take me shopping. Maria's idea of fashion..." his voice trailed off. I took in his air of Phekdan-combat-trousers-and-frayed-black-shirt - while he'd got rid of the Mack Winston disguise, he'd not got rid of my usual work gear. "Well, it's what YOU'RE wearing," he said, pre-empting my incoming sarcastic remark.

"You should see what she makes me wear if we go for a night out," I remarked casually, "although I have to admit I look damned hot."

He changed the subject abruptly. "Who is this Maegil person anyway? And Emu? Isn't that a kind of flightless bird?"

I gritted my teeth, then sighed. "I don't really know. Just one more hypocritical bastard." I began the diatribe that had been whirling in my mind as I waited for the engineer to see to my arm. "He's got a bloody nerve. He beat me up, going on about 57 families getting wiped out in that apartment block. It was the middle of the normal daytime cycle for an Earthling, hardly anyone was in at the time!" I took a generous swig of the Ultra, and continued. "Then he goes on about how he did the same, and didn't like it but at least he was following orders and how he had a conscience. At least I can claim I don't care. He instead claims he has a conscience but he was just following orders. Just following orders! The usual excuse of the war criminal! How..." I drew in a deep breath - "how often do we hear that excuse? Time and time and time again! At least anyone in The Guild was man enough to know up front what they were doing and not salve their conscience with 'Just Following Orders'! I bet he calls it 'collateral damage', too!" The brief rant was quite cathartic, and I slumped back in my seat, and took another good swig of Ultra. Finally, it was reversing whatever the evil substance we'd been drugged with.

We sat there in silence for a minute or so. "What about me?" he asked, in his pleasant Californian voice.

I shrugged. "What about you?"

"I ought to be going home. I don't really like being shot at or drugged. Well, except being drugged by choice, you know what I mean."

"I've got quite a stash of Achenarian weed," I remarked. "Pity it's on my spaceship, which is currently running up enormous berthing fees in New San Francisco."

"That stuff's illegal!"

"They won't find it. And if they do, well, it's hardly going to make a difference. The Feds will likely execute me if they ever catch me so a charge for possession of weed's hardly going to matter. It'll be just a juicy detail they release to the press".

I paused. "Look, if you want to go home, just go home. Maria's got all the money, she'll pay you what we owe. Although you better hang on until we get to a more populated system, I don't think the spacelines come here so you'd be forced to take up work with whatever company owns this star system."

"What are you going to do? About Maegil?"

I sighed again. "I don't know. Stick around I suppose, there's no point trying to run away because, well, I don't fancy being stuck on Richardson Base for the next five weeks and stopping that long is likely to be injurious to my chances of staying alive. And he's got the damned locator device too. So as long as he doesn't try and hit me

again, I suppose I'll just lodge on his stinking ship for the time being. Maybe he's got taste and has some Ultra on board, because I'm starting to run out," I said, draining the last drops from my flask. "And as I said, you may as well stick around too, until we get to a more populated system. Although you might want to get off before our final destination"

"Why's that then?" Kevin asked, full of innocence.

"I wager we are Riedquat bound. Good for getting stocks of coffee, not good for a young New San Franciscan who's hardly been outside of the core."

"I've always wanted to see Riedquat," he said, brightening. "The real thing! So many crime shows about Riedquat."

I buried my face in my hands. Or rather, hand. The expression didn't work as well with only one arm. "You know why they make shows about a gritty, violent and short existence in Riedquat? Because it's gritty, violent, and you don't live long!"

"But I'm sure I'd be OK with you and the Maegil dude!"

How touchingly naive. "Yeah, you might do. But really, just visit the shittier parts of New San Francisco and multiply that by twenty and you can pretty much get an idea."

It was hopeless. I could already see him dreaming of telling his friends back home how he'd gone to World's End Bar for a pint of Brown. Fortunately, the engineer returned with my arm - now working. And a bill. He wouldn't give me the arm until I handed him the credits. But at last, I felt whole again. My fingers all worked.

---

## **Deus Ex Machina**

[Vera Sinclair]

It was definitely him. He'd been in the AJNIB bulletin that she'd received - showing up as a 'medium priority' with a polite request to avoid bringing him through Federation space if a successful capture was made.

She could even remember what he was like as a youth. She'd only been a recruit at the time, going through the standard training at the Turner Space Combat Academy, orbiting Hope in the Gateway system. Whenever his uncle was around, so was he. A moody child, not really cut out for life in Dublin Citadel. But now no longer a child, but a wanted felon. But the Alliance wanted to talk to him - and so, if possible keep him out of Federation hands.

Planting the bug hadn't been hard. It looked as if he'd been unfortunate enough to lose an arm in his adventures, and repeatedly unfortunate to get the replacement shot through. Vera briefly thought - whilst hiding the locator transmitter deep inside the skeleton of the synthetic arm - that perhaps it would have been better had he just had a new one cloned then attached by surgeons. She also thought that the engineer was awfully careless to leave the door unlocked, and the arm lying there on his work bench while he took a trip to the men's room.

But no matter. The locator was in place. Richardson Base was hardly the sort of place that she could drag him away - it'd be better to follow at a safe distance, then pounce at a more opportune moment. A good, clean capture would undoubtedly bring promotion.

---

## You Need a Witness

[Mack Winston]

Hours had passed, and Maegil, the strangely named Emu, and Maria had still not returned. I had mooched back to the ship, with Kevin in tow. It was time to rifle through the kitchen and see if there was anything worth eating.

"Don't these people eat?" I remarked, bitterly, after finding only a half drunk bottle of tequila and an unmarked pot of something that looked like a biological experiment. So I mooched out again. Kevin didn't seem to know what to do, so he'd just latched onto me. I was glad of the company, really - he seemed quite good at listening to my occasional rants as we wandered around the station looking for anything half edible. Eventually, I found some 'proper' food if you consider a synthetic representation of mechanically recovered meat to be proper food. 'RONNIE'S BURGER BAR', the sign proudly said. It was as dismal as the rest of Richardson Base.

We took a table by the window, after collecting what passed for food - a piece of greasy "meat" between two bits of bread and bizarrely, mashed potato. Surprisingly, it didn't taste too bad. The barren face of the planet drifted below, its pockmarked visage looming large in the burger joint's windows. "What about this Mosser dude?" Kevin asked.

I sucked noisily at my sugary drink. "What about him?"

"I'm a bit confused. There were two of them."

"Three. We need to meet one of them, and dispatch two of them."

"But why were there three of the same people?"

"High fidelity clones."

"I thought that was fantastically expensive?"

"It is. Mosser is fantastically rich. From where, I don't know. But he's funded somehow. Very few people can afford one hi-fi clone, let alone the number that he's gone through. He's probably on his fiftieth body".

"So why don't the Imperial royalty do it?"

"Clones? They can't. They have some kind of honour code such that to be anything higher than a Lord, you must be entirely natural. Don't ask why, the Empire has a lot of these strange customs. That's why Emperor Hengist Duval has been nearly dead for the last twenty years, rather than being cloned and transferred into a healthier body. Still, a healthier body wouldn't cure his batshit insane mind."

"I know I want to have a hi-fi clone then. I'd love to be immortal."

"Forget it, you ain't rich enough. The equipment to make a hi-fi clone is the size of a small town to be able to read the brain structure in anything less than a life time. Think of how much that costs to run. Immortality? It's overrated."

"I bet you'd do if you had half the chance."

"If I wanted to be immortal, I wouldn't be in this game. If I'm alive in ten years time I might just die of surprise!"

"You're so defeatist."

"Hey, don't take it as a death wish. I'll try and survive, but in those moments of introspection - you know, like when you're laying in the bath, looking at the ceiling, some little home truths come home to roost. And it's all Mosser's fault, really. I'd be in the Alliance Science Council now if I hadn't met Mosser."

"Are you bitter about him?"

"Nah. I quite enjoy the notoriety, and thumbing my nose at the authorities who keep trying and failing to catch me."

Kevin shook his head sadly. "Pride cometh before a fall," he said simply. He paused. "But - what about Mosser? How many more do you have to wipe out?"

"Oh, only the two. At the request of Mosser of course. The first Mosser did us a favour, and then gave me a contract to take out the other two. For a quite reasonable sum of money."

"Why would one Mosser want to kill another?"

"There can only be one Mosser."

"So now you need to find the first Mosser?"

"And get our little item back. It's Mosser's. It's a locator of some sort. What it points to - I don't know, and I don't care, but I'll probably find out and have to run away from it."

"Run away?"

"Sometimes, survival dictates it. And another thing about Mosser - don't take him for dead unless you actually see him dead. I'm not even going to bother feigning surprise if the Mosser that I blew that building up on turns out to have survived. The only one I can say has been scratched for certain is the one I put the bullet into. Right through the brain. He's definitely dead. The building was a contingency plan. It netted us the item, and I was hoping to just run from there. But then our friend Maegil showed up."

"So - if the second Mosser, the one you blew the building up onto, turns up and claims to be the first Mosser and wants the locator?"

"Tricky. But possible."

I paused. A woman passed by the outside of the burger joint for the third time since we'd been in there. She looked familiar the first time, but I hadn't placed her. I still hadn't placed her. I couldn't even be sure whether the face was truly familiar. Every so often you'd meet people who looked familiar but were total strangers with lives that were light years from your own. Perhaps it was nothing. Probably my own paranoia.

"Fancy a sundae?" I asked, changing the subject.

---

# Paint it Black

[Norman Mosser]

"Excuse me, but has anyone told you you look like Norman Mosser?"

Norman felt a brief pang of deja-vu and paused before replying, "They have. I even grew the moustache to hide it. Relax - I'm not him. If I were, as proprietor of this fine cafe, you would be obliged to call the police, and given his reputation, it is highly likely in the ensuing firefight, the cafe would be destroyed and yourself killed - or worse."

"Oh, - that's OK then"

The baristo placed the coffee pot on the table and backed away respectfully. Norman returned to reading his copy of Frontier News:

## **ECONOMY OF QUEXCE COLLAPSES!**

**The economy of the Quexce [-2,-2] system has suffered utter collapse after the recent invasion by forces of the Spartacus Brotherhood. Recent legislation freeing slaves held in that system and guarantees of minimum wage have pushed many of the system's industries into bankruptcy as the sudden need to pay wages renders their businesses uneconomic. Many of the remaining industries have closed their doors and are relocating to nearby Cemiess and Cegreeth, both Imperial worlds with favourable labour policies. The neighbouring Federation worlds have reported spikes in unemployment figures as ex-slaves are exercising their right to leave the system en-masse and heading north for work and a better life.**

**Investors in the corporate government of Quexce are apparently incensed that their share values have been all but wiped out by the actions of the Spartacus Brotherhood and are currently considering their options.**

**Interpol have also raised a formal complaint against the interim government for seizing Law Enforcement assets.**

**The Empire is rumoured to be considering the deployment of an economic intervention task force to assist the citizenry of the Quexce system in recovering from their economic disaster. Whether this takes the form of the dove's proposal of installation of a puppet government or the hawk's outright invasion has yet to be agreed.**

Norman looked up as Maegil approached. "You got my message then?"

"I did and I was curious. Especially as to how you survived the building being dropped on you."

"I plan ahead. To business though."

"To business."

"A couple of things actually. You appear to have two things that belong to me. I'd like to get them back. You also mentioned about a proposal the last time we met. I was a little busy at the time, but I'm prepared to listen now. Coffee?"

\* \* \*

"Coffee?"

"Sounds good"

Vasquith looked around the galley of Norman's Courier. It was larger than the entire living space of the Saker he was sharing with Michael. The furniture looked like it was the annoyingly fashionable and high quality stuff that probably illegal in some of the more conservative systems. There seemed to be a lot of odd alien stuff lying around as well. It didn't even look like the Thargoid art he'd seen on a dreamware vid. Probably a story or two there.

Norman poured three big mugs of steaming coffee and gestured towards the milk and the sugar. "There if you want it."

"Thanks."

"You fought well in that Saker. A lesser pilot would have been cut to bits - even with that plasma beam. An NPA you say?"

"Nano Plasma Accelerator. And no, they aren't, and it isn't for sale."

Norman smiled, "Now to where we go from here. With the locator, we can find the *Sunset* whenever we like. What I want to do is grab a team of people - hopefully some old friends and ex-Guilders short of cash and get control of the ship. It's an LRC and that means that even I can't run it solo and it also means we'll need near total control of the ship to operate it. That said, when I do get it back, I will back up my side of the deal. I'll probably assemble everyone in Quexce - it looks close to where the *Sunset* will turn up and should be 'interesting' enough that the sort of people we need will not draw too much attention."

"Sounds OK. Where do we fit in?"

"I would suggest that you go hide somewhere, but seeing as you'll ignore that and stick to me like glue, I'll just work with that. I do have something in my hold that should make your life a bit easier though." With a flourish, Norman wandered over to a cupboard, opened it and returned with a small vial. He popped the cap and poured the contents onto a tray. The liquid wasn't just black. It was darkness. "EM soaking paint. Absorbs about 98% of the spectrum. Including most scanner freqs. I got hold of it from somewhere - and then found out that it doesn't let your ship radiate anything either. The Courier just isn't thermally efficient enough for the treatment - and the engines are too noisy. The Saker however..."

Vasquith smiled.

---

## Review: The Greatest Crime of Norman Mosser

[Federal Times - Literary Supplement]

### Review: The Greatest Crime of Norman Mosser by Phyllis Bron (FNP 8.99 credits)

The release of this book is allegedly coincidental with the current upsurge in Mosser related activities, but any suspicions of a quick-knock off are quickly dispelled after the first few chapters. The title does the book a disservice in this sense, as those hoping for lurid true-crime will be disappointed, whereas students of interstellar politics and society will avoid it as sensationalist garbage, which is a pity. Phyllis Bron is a journalist with the Trojan Observer, but manages to avoid the usual clichés the press employs in Mosser Studies, in which Norman's (self-defined) personality is dissected and fatuous conclusions drawn. Instead, Bron analyses the reactions to Norman Mosser within the Governments and popular imaginations of the three great powers, and comes up with some interesting, if debateable, conclusions.

The first four chapters are taken up with a potted history of Norman Mosser's career, and can be easily skipped, as the job has been done in far more style in a variety of other books, especially Manning-Clarke's three volume "A short history of Mosser". The rest of the book however, takes up the intriguing idea of finding out just what it is that motivates such strong feelings about Norman Mosser. In this, Bron tries not to dwell upon the minutiae of individual atrocities, but focusing on exactly what acts prompt the official hysteria of (for example) the "Being Norman Mosser Act" three years ago or the banning of the Norman Mosser Appreciation society as a terrorist front in June. This irrational hatred is what piques the author's interest, and to which she devotes the most interesting parts of the book.

In the Federation, for example, Mosser is hated not just because of his crimes, or because of the personally vindictive way in which he attacks, kills and provokes symbols and officials of the Federation government. Instead, it's because Norman is the perfect Federation man. Technically savvy (if not innovative), unbound by his relatively humble origins, ruthless and disciplined. In this way, he's the absolute opposite of what they expect from a citizen of the hidebound, technophobic Imperial regime. If Imperial citizens can be like this (so Bron's argument goes) and still be opposed to everything the Federation dreams itself being, then this destroys the central plank of Federal contempt for the Empire. How can you have a "them" that looks exactly like "us" and works in the same manner and effectiveness as "us"? The fact that this boundary crossing is so public and so deliberately mashed in the face of the Federation makes eliminating Norman Mosser essential not only to the safety and security, but the moral and emotional comfort zones of the elites as well as the populace.

In contrast, Bron argues a far simpler (if occluded) motive on the behalf of the Empire. Bron dismisses the tradition view that Mosser's status as a renegade from the Emperor's authority causes his outlaw status. In support of this, she cites at least half-a-dozen genuine examples of high-born Imperial citizens on the run from respectability, but effectively tolerated by the Imperial court and institutions. Along with this, she also throws in hearsay about frankly mythical figures such as "The Heir", rather over-egging the pudding. Her point, however, is well made. Norman's real crime, according to Bron, is to breach the centuries old restrictions on cloning of the nobility. This little-known taboo is examined at some length by Bron. Surprisingly, for all their skill in biological engineering, prolonging life by full-body cloning is still the ultimate faux-pas in Imperial society, disrupting inheritance and marriage-based property transfer. Norman's notorious penchant for cloning and contempt for neofeudal traditions (Bron leans heavily on Norman's childlessness and asexuality here) makes his success as a scourge of the Federation a direct insult to the current structure of the Empire. Norman therefore becomes a genuinely revolutionary force within the Empire, fusing anti-Federation sentiment with partial social revolution. A revolution which, with cloning, could last forever.

Her section on the Alliance is somewhat perfunctory after the previous two sections, and given the relative lack of heat the mention of Mosser commands in the AJNIB, it's little wonder. Bron points to the condemnation of several Human Rights bodies, but can find little evidence that Mosser is particularly disliked in the Alliance, despite the fact that Mosser's actions contravene the Alliance's moral code far more comprehensively than any other. Bron refrains from too much theorising, but still finds that Mosser is very much considered by Alliance citizens as a problem "over there", belonging to the Federation and Empire, rather than something which directly concerns the Alliance. Bron paints this as a very short-sighted view, but given that Mosser rarely travels to Galactic North of Eta Cassiopea, one not without foundation.

In the end, Bron has escaped from the trap of analysing Mosser through pop-psychology, but has fallen prey to the trap of using pop-psychology to analyse entire governments and societies. This is perhaps intentional, however, as Bron uses a winsome twinkle-in-the-eye, let's-not-take-Mosser-Studies-TOO-seriously style. She managed to avoid sounding glib, however, and her candid (if anonymous) interviews are used to full effect to display the emotive reactions of civil servants and military officer not just to Mosser the man/clone, but to the very idea of Mosser. One weakness of the fact that the book is not centered around Mosser is that we're left in the dark as to whether Norman Mosser is doing all this deliberately, trying to headbutt the universe out of pure belligerence, or whether

Mosser has been seized on as emblematic of the darkest fears of each group. Without this, it becomes a circular argument with the Greatest Crime of Norman Mosser reduced to just being... Norman Mosser.

\* \* \*

[Mack Winston]

I put the datapad down, and sighed.

"I wish they'd write books like this about me," I complained.

"You're not important enough, dear", Maria replied. "You do other people's work - you don't set the agenda."

"Suppose so," I said sadly.

\* \* \*

[Lt. Emu Maekawa]

"Don't look so down. If it is of any consolation, there was something about you in RIG last year. Maegil subscribes to it, I can look for it.", I said as put away the natto jar and whipped the bowls I had poured. "I can look it up for you."

"He does?", asked Maria with the slightest hint of disdain.

"He said he subscribed to it not only because in its recklessness, RIG sometimes bumps into thing the others wouldn't dream to publish, but also - or mostly - for the laughs," I explained as I handed Maria and Mack their bowls.

"What's this stuff? A goeey whitish foam, and has some grains in it...", asked Mack, suspicious of the natto's aspect.

"An old Japanese recipe that my family passed on from generation to generation. It's a fermented..." I started, but Mack cut me off.

"I don't think I want to know," he said, and braved a half a spoon.

"Well, It's a easy and natural source of sugars and amino acids, if it helps."

"...delicious! It's... sweet!" said Mack, visibly relieved.

"Quite!" seconded Maria.

The ship's external airlock door opened. "Honey, I'm home!"

---

## The Saker's New Clothes

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The battle had been short, but fierce, pushing de Havilland to the limits of his piloting skills. Operating from his newly christened co-pilot chair, Veruz showed skill and a cool head, working the guns and defence systems professionally.

The presence of Norman's Imperial Courier was the only thing keeping them alive however, despite the two of them acting as a great team. Clutched in a battle for his very survival, a corner of de Havilland's mind still had the time to admire the piloting prowess of the infamous criminal. He made that Courier dance! He could make it turn on a laser point, juke and dive through streams of laser fire and keep a cool enough head to keep a straight trigger finger and return his own fire.

Then Norman had launched an energy bomb. "Kill the ship!" de Havilland roared to his co-pilot, diving to the ground below the pilots chair. Veruz hesitated, not understanding the request. Then he saw the cylindrical object on the scanners. He instantly blurred into motion, shutting down the weapons, shields, ECM and life support systems. De Havilland ripped open a panel by the floor and dragged out a series of control cards. The ship went suddenly quiet as the engines ground to a halt and everything went dark. Then the bomb exploded. A gigantic pulse of electromagnetic noise erupted through space, filling the view port with random white light. De Havilland knew that any electrical systems he had left on would have overloaded. The engines in particular dealt with overloads poorly, usually replying with uncontained explosions. As the pulse died down and darkness returned to space, several secondary explosions bobbed around the black void, flaring up brightly, then winking out of existence just as quick. The two men sat in silence for several moments, an uneasy calm settling over them.

"That wasn't a normal TAB bomb was it?" Veruz asked. de Havilland looked over at his young co pilot.

"Haven't heard that name for them in awhile, but no, I don't think that was a stock standard one." Shrugging, he leaned down and re inserted the control cards to the engines, while Veruz brought the rest of the ship alive. The comm. light began to flash.

"What did you think of my party trick?" came the cocky voice of the pirate, Norman Mosser.

"The engineer inside me is impressed. The innocent civilian inside is scared shitless."

"Excellent." De Havilland could almost hear the pirate's wide smile over the radio.

"Did you get them all?" Veruz asked.

"I think so."

"Will we be safe here for now?" De Havilland asked.

"Don't see why not. Why don't you guys come over here and we'll finish our conversation?"

De Havilland shot a glance at Veruz, who seemed excited by the prospect of seeing inside Norman's ship. He wasn't particularly keen himself, but Norman had fought with them, and saved their lives. He had taken a chance to come onboard the Saker, so it was only fair for him to repeat the courtesy. "We'll see you soon then," de Havilland replied over the radio.

\* \* \*

They were down in the hold, inspecting the 10T worth of 'Darkness' paint, aligned along one wall in the old fashioned extruded hexagonal cargo containers. "I've never painted a ship before," de Havilland confessed, "But that should be enough."

Norman chuckled. "You don't need to spread this stuff on as thick as normal 5-Pak exterior paint. You only need a few microns of the stuff. A couple of tonnes should do you." De Havilland pursed his lips in acquiescence. "Of course," Norman added, "How you get it on your ship is up to you."

"Crap. I hadn't thought of that." De Havilland moved around the cargo hold looking around, imagining the hull of the Saker outside. "There is no way we can do it ourselves. We'll need a proper ship painting booth."

"Why don't you go visit your friends in Alioth?" Norman asked, but de Havilland shook his head.

"Too dangerous. The enemy know all about me."

"I might know some people," Veruz said. De Havilland nodded, then turned back to Norman.

"So Quexce, how far away is that?"

"Not too far. Five or so days travel to get planetside. I won't want to spend too long there."

"Ok then," de Havilland replied, mental arithmetic scrolling across his brain. "Why don't we meet in orbit of the outer most gas giant planet?" He tapped the cargo canister lightly. "We don't want to tip our hand too early by showing off my bird do we?"

Norman smiled. "I'll see you then."

\* \* \*

Veruz had come through. An old bored out asteroid, once a profitable mining operation, was now the home of an illegal spaceship chop shop. Two questions ran through de Havilland's mind. How did Michael know such people? But more importantly, how did his life turn upside down so quickly? One moment he is an upstanding citizen minding his own business, the next minute, his ship is getting a paint job from people whose trade was Grand Theft Spaceship. *I'm doing this for my survival*, he reminded himself. It didn't make it any easier though. He felt dirty just being around pirates.

But they did know how to repaint a spaceship in record time. The Saker looked completely different now. It didn't just look black; it was dark. It was like a man made black hole. No light reflected off the ultra matt surface. The lights from above seemed to fall into the ship like a sinkhole, never to return. The pirate crew looked as interested as de Havilland. Ensuring all the surplus paint was loaded back onboard the Saker and handing out a few extra credits to grease the palms of the pirates, and they were on their way again.

"Off to Quexce Cap'n?" Veruz asked, hands over the navigation controls. Bolted into place and acceleration padding added, Veruz's co-pilot chair was as permanent as it was going to get.

"Yup. We might even be a bit early."

"It will be good to know what Norman has been up to in the meantime. Have you seen this article?" Veruz asked, drawing de Havilland's eye to the Federal Times Journal on the readout screen.

"That Bron lady would pay handsomely to talk with us, I'll bet," joked de Havilland.

\* \* \*

Stenson could not believe his luck. In his darkest hour, when all hope had seemed lost, a beacon of bright light had appeared on the bulletin board, and was subsequently flagged before appearing on his desktop. Unable to believe his good fortune, he had hightailed it to Reidquat with all speed, pushing the Interpol Eagle Mk I for everything it had. Within an hour of landing, he had met the local agent, received a temporary facial modification, then set up shop in the World's End bar and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

Norman strolled in like the king of the world, despite the complaints of the bar keeper. Finally he struck up a conversation with two men, who he could only assume were the initiator of the bulletin board message. He took a scan of their faces, then compared it with his the Interpol database that his datapad was linked to. The younger one was Michael Veruz, a small time trouble maker, but no one of any consequence. The other was Corporal (ret) Vasquith de Havilland of the Federation Marines. Yes! All the loose ends were beginning to come together. This was the same man who blasted out of New Rosseyth in a Saker Mk III. And Norman was here.

Norman Mosser! He could barely believe it. He reached down to his concealed weapon, about to engage the power, but stopped short. Norman was unarmed, but not so the surrounding patrons. Whose side would they be on? His, the law, or Norman, their hero? He discreetly checked his datapad: No news from his backup. They should have been here by now. A younger version of himself would have stepped out, weapons blazing and tried to take Norman into custody straight away. A few years and a few hard lessons however, kept Stenson in his seat. He watched the men have their conversation, but struggled to hear them. Something a bout a holiday? Stenson realised it was code, as suggested by the bulletin board message. Not much he could do about that. He decided there was nothing more to be accomplished from the bar. He knew they were here, and he didn't have the support to enact an arrest.

He needed to be outside, waiting, when they launched from La Soeur Du Dan Ham.

Stenson stood up, then walked out of the bar. Once he was out of eye shot, he ran for the docking level.

In orbit around Riedquat, Stenson had a clear view of the battle. A few large modified Panther Clippers and a Mantis, with fighter escort, put on a poor imitation of Normans *Azure Sunset* attack on Fort Donaldson. He watched, waiting for something to happen. Vipers began to appear from within La Soeur Du Dan Ham, and they raced out to do battle. After several moments, an Imperial Courier emerged from the flight deck. Stenson didn't have to read the registration to know who it belonged to. A minute later the tiny Saker followed suit, both disappeared into the depths of Witchspace. Stenson targeted both hyperspace clouds with his hyperspace analyser. Norman would have mis-jumped as a force of habit. But would de Havilland? He had no criminal record, though he had just violated a few hundred laws just by talking to Norman. Making a decision, he entered the coordinates from the smaller hyperspace cloud into his own hyperdrive and pulled back the levers.

A week of hyperspace, following entry clouds across the galaxy, from one system to the next, Stenson sat in the darkness, waiting. One jump had been into what had looked like a war zone, but it had included the familiar Saker and Courier hyperspace signatures. He had continued to follow the Saker to this dead system. He had drifted in without power, only life support and ultra passive sensors. He had lost the Saker somewhere in the systems asteroid belt. His eyes searched the darkness around him, continually flicking down to the sensors. Nothing. Then a brilliantly bright hyperspace entry cloud blossomed into existence half an AU ahead of his ship. He scanned it immediately. Saker size. So how come the scanners hadn't picked it up?

He shook his head clear. It didn't matter. The target system was inhabited. That was progress. He set the hyperdrive coordinates for Quexce.

---

## **SIGTERM**

[Lord Geoffrey Clarke]

"D'Souza, please come in," Lord Clarke motioned. As was customary, he fetched the bottle of single malt from the drinks cabinet, and poured himself and D'Souza a generous measure. "Regrettably, the Imperial Court have decided on the case of Maria Hesketh-Duval. They wish the embarrassment to cease."

D'Souza nodded. He knew what that meant.

"I shall send out the SIGTERM to our field agents when we're done. Anything else?"

The two Imperial intelligence men continued their conversation - the SIGTERM order passed on with no more drama than if Lord Clarke had asked to be passed the salt at dinner.

---

## Grasshoppers in a Minefield

[Cmdr. Maegil]

*Liabefa (-2,-3)  
Richardson Base  
Mosser's Cobra Mk III galley*

"Coffee?", offered Norman Mosser.

"Sounds good, thank you. You want the locator and your gun back, here. I thought you might want to find your ship." I didn't need it anyway, since I had already copied the locator's cryptographic frequency matrix into my AI and cracked it.

Mosser poured the coffee from an exquisite china pot into its mugs and pointed to the matching sugar bowl and milk jar. "There if you want it," he said with one of those clone-space-time déjà-vu singularities. "And how would you know that?"

"It changes systems and you want it. What else could it be? As for how you found me?..."

"I just followed your flight plan. They're evil, dangerous things, why do you even bother to file them?"

"I figured, just wanted to check. Sometimes I file them so Imperial assassins can find me, and to make them despair in anxiety wondering what is it that I'm up to when I don't. I confound my enemies, rid the universe of murderous scum and as a bonus, I also improve my Elite rating."

"You've got a nerve. To business."

"Before I tell you what I'm about, there are some points we must get out of the way. I should tell you I was a Federal trooper. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Was? The way you spoke, I'd think you still are."

"I have borne an Imperial bounty on my head for the past ten years. I was forced to close my flight school for lack of students after the second bombing and asked to move from JFK in Eta Cass for the other patron's safety before I decided to start filing the blasted flight plans. I have a right to speak like this, as you do about the Federation."

"Point taken. No, I don't have a problem with that."

"Also, my girlfriend is still a FM officer. She doesn't know nothing about what I'm about to tell you but she believes I'm not acting against Federal interests and won't interfere, much less now that she can be charged as an accomplice."

"Hum!" Mosser seemed a bit uneasy, but nodded in acceptance.

"Very well, then. I know despite being as much an Imperial Soldier at heart as I am a Federal one, you don't like slavery. Have you been keeping up with the news?" I asked. Either my relays were too slow or there was a problem with the message I was waiting for; anyway I wound up having to read about it in the newspapers like everybody else - and just in time, too.

"Slavery? Yes... Do you have something to do with that Spartacus Brotherhood?"

"Yes, and I'd like to recruit you."

"You have to be joking. Why would I want to associate myself with you?" he asked, somewhat amused.

"Because you have already done just about everything else there is to do, had your apogee, and if you don't you'll soon find yourself without objectives and that'll be the beginning of your fall. I'm offering you a way to keep surfing on the wave of glory a while longer."

He slammed his hand on the table. "I've killed for less!", he barked, all the mirth suddenly gone. "How dare you speak to me like that?" There was real menace in his eyes, I was stepping on dangerous ground.

"Well, do you have something better to do, or do you rather just reduce yourself to just a fugitive?"

"Me? I wonder for how long your Brotherhood will survive; less than me, I imagine," he spat.

"Even if it does, think of the thrill of actually doing something good, something that you also always wanted to do. Besides, any fans of the SB will also remember that Norman Mosser was one of them, and it'll be one more hole for your album."

That made him pause a bit. "So, you want me to join in for glory?" he asked with a sneer, but he was already seduced.

"If you insist, we can make that for gold and glory. I am certain you wouldn't do it just for gold, though."

"Maybe you're right, but I wouldn't do it just for glory either, I've got my principles. How much are you prepared to pay?"

"I'm allowed to offer Cr250,000 upfront for the permission to use your name, twenty K a month plus maintenance for the *Azure Sunset*, and thirty K as personal wage as an Admiral in the Brotherhood, and they'd like you to teach its combat instructors."

"Are you aware that for me these are little more than token fees?"

"Yes, but that's all they can pay right now, waging a war is expensive. Besides, it's for a good cause," I said with an apologetic smile. "There is a pending problem, though."

"Which is..."

"There are too many of you roaming about, and we don't want another Mosser disavowing us. We can only close the deal after the end of the ongoing Mosser civil war."

"Then don't worry, there won't be a problem for much longer. Nevertheless, it's in your best interest to help me, since if the "other one" wins, he may reject your offer."

"I'm not so certain. If you agreed, I think any other Mossers will too, but if I help you and he still wins... Nevertheless, I handed the detector to you, and that should be advantage enough." It'd certainly would be easier for me to take all the Mossers, throw them in a pit and close the deal with the last one - of course, if I say this I'm dead, so I don't. "When it's over you may contact me by the Brotherhood's BBS donation posts, just leave a message."

\* \* \*

*Liabefa (-2,-3)*

*Richardson Base*

*Asp Explorer IL-351 "Tenchu"*

"Honey, I'm home! Hello, everybody. Did you had a good... oh, I see you did!..." the hallway was loaded with shopping bags, and they were all having natto. "The cabin's fitted, but I don't think you can put all these packages in it and still squeeze Maria in.", I exaggerated, and pecked Emu's lips.

"Hi, dear. Want some natto?" she asked, getting up to serve for me too, the perfect housewife.

"Yes, thank you. But don't spoil your appetites for dinner, I think I'll make something special," I said as I sat beside Emu's seat and across the table from Winston, Maria and Kevin.

"You're going to cook what? I didn't find anything edible in the kitchen but this natto stuff. I didn't know what it was."

"Do you remember the pantry, the place you woke up in?"

"Fuck you!"

I had to do something about his attitude, and this was a time as good as any. "Tell me, do you ever think about the people you killed? About the worth of each and every person for those who love them? Do you know the agony of the loss of kin or loved ones?" I drew my gun and pointed it across the table, at Maria. "Sorry, your Highness, but I'll have to kill you for Winston's advancement. Unfortunately, to make a lasting impression, you'll have to die slow and painfully in his arms." Maria's eyes bulged in absolute surprise.

Winston, sat, implacable. "Go on then," he challenged.

Kevin just stared, awestruck. Emu was startled at first, but having been raised together with me she quickly saw her own father's touch in what I was doing and didn't interfere. Maria was trapped between emotions - fear of getting shot versus fury at Mack for his dangerous bluster. I shouldn't have expected him to make it easy.

"It's not even on, I can tell. You seem to forget I have just the tiniest experience in marksmanship. And you wouldn't do it, anyway. Anonymously rubbing people out's more your style," Winston added casually. "And besides, if you ever did, well, you'd not live long." He seemed to be controlling himself, but the way he said this last sentence had just given him away. The situation was still salvageable, his anger was bubbling beneath the surface and I just needed to spike him a little more.

I flicked the power switch with my thumb and the "Diplomat" started to hum softly. There it was, in Winston's face, covered but not completely hidden by all his cussedness, a pang of terror. "ZAPT!" I shouted before unpowering and reholstering the weapon and letting my poise change to a disdainful sneer.

Mack stood up. "And I didn't find it funny, you little, umm...", he paused, and strolled around the table, his whole meter fifty-five standing over me. "...where are you from?" he asked, disarmingly.

I was right, he was responding as I expected and now it was time for me to pay the price, since I was actually seeking to provoke the violence that was to come. The treacherous bastard came at me in what would have been a surprise attack, finally releasing all that primal rage he had been holding. "You do anything to her and I'll kill you, you...", he roared, his blows driving me back, half-tripping on my chair, to the small galley's wall.

Behind Winston, Emu prevented the others interfering, calming them down. "...alpha male.", I heard a snippet.

It would be easy to pin him to the floor without hurting him. Instead, I let him vent out his fury for a while, only barely being able to block or parry the blows from the mechanical arm. On an adrenalin rush, Winston struck me again, again and again, harder than I thought it possible for this little Phekdan. Vernacular expletives and spittle poured with enough fluency to make a tug pilot - and some of the present company - blush, until I decided it was enough and caught him in an arm lock on his normal side, slamming him on the wall. Blood ran freely from my nose, my left eye was almost closed and as for the left arm and ribs... it's a strong prosthetic he's got! "Remember that feeling. Remember the weakness, the chill in the bowels, remember the helplessness of watching the certain death of someone important to you, and not being able to do anything to prevent it," I whispered in his ear, "Remember your fury and what horrible sensation it was to think the woman you love was about to be killed out of a whim by some murderous bastard, and try and imagine how devastated you'd be if I had really done it; bring that feeling back whenever you - have - to kill someone. Learn to care!"

"You touch her, and I'll get you no matter what!" he hysterically yelled with his face pressed to the wall.

"Oh, but you're used to killing. And what about all the people that don't, all those who can't fight back; what can THEY do? That's why I won't commit assassinations just for money, EVERY PERSON MAY BE LOVED BY SOMEONE. If I'm to kill someone, there must be a higher cause to justify the suffering I am to bring. If I get paid for promoting something good, so much the better - and I do earn my living."

Winston really freaked out. "Higher cause? HIGHER CAUSE?! You were about to kill her just to illustrate your point and you call it HIGHER CAUSE?! You hypocritical son of a bitch, you're even worse than I am but too coward to face it - let go of me and I'll rid you of your precious guilt, you transvestite gutless war criminal!"

His words stung deep, recalling the memory of *that* Main Street covered in civilian corpses, all blackened and twisted from thrashing in the agonizing death I already knew I would cause by blowing up the Imperial 'botanical station's' nerve gas reservoirs. I swallowed dry, it was this I needed to save him from: evil feats, and regrets that can never be washed away. "Yes, it would have been for a higher cause, as you'd finally have found out the meaning of 'personal tragedy' and wouldn't be so willing to spread it so liberally. I am, as you say, even worse than you AND a war criminal, and if that's what it is needed to make your conscience catch up with your deeds, I can still kill her!"

"You're mad! Don't you dare!" he snarled. In the corner of my right eye, Emu nodded to Maria; at least those two seemed to have hit it off.

"There are those who say that. Then again, there are some who believe me to be a god. According to a certain Hindu sect, I'm an avatar of Shiva, their god of destruction," I whispered again near his ear.

"You're madder than the Hatter!", growled Winston, trying to shake himself free from my grip - to no avail - and adding even more fuel to the pyre of his fury. He tried to grab me, started kicking me, head-butted me and stomped my feet to get loose.

I ignored the impacts, pressed him to the wall a bit harder and insisted, "But for them, I'm a good god. Unlike common destruction deities, Shiva's the destroyer of evil that returns the Universe to its primordial purity, He is the fire that clears the old forest so the buried seeds can grow. You see, destruction may not be evil if it serves a good purpose, if it is cleansing. You need to find a cause, some principles for which to fight for, or you won't be more than a greedy, evil sociopath."

Seeing it was useless and he couldn't free himself, Winston stopped jerking and tried to compose himself a bit. "Bloody right, that's what I am, and a good one at that! So what?"

"So nothing. My second, and most important lesson - is over. You'll keep the knowledge you gained today and when the proper time comes, it might flourish. Albeit it maybe too late then, you'll at least have the memory of this conversation as consolation.", I said nonchalantly, letting go of him. "That's the best I can realistically expect."

"Your WHAT?!?!" Still angry, Winston turned from the wall and shoved me away from him.

"You were in the defensive towards me. Had I just lectured to you, you could have even pretended to be paying attention but would have learnt nothing. So, I used your own mindset to make you get emotionally involved, and you discovered by yourself what I wanted to pass. It's even better this way, as it is your own knowledge - not just someone's advice."

"I Knew it! That's why I couldn't "do" you, you're a real guru!" said Kevin with a face-splitting grin. "What an adventure!"

Winston stopped in mid-motion of raising his finger. He gave Kevin an exasperated look, sighed and shook his head before turning back to me, seeming at a loss for the proper insults to throw - either for the intrusion or for having already spent them all. "You... were just playing with me then, guiding me through your script, were you?", he finally asked, stepping towards me. He looked me in the eyes with now cold anger for a minute or so, then punched me hard enough to send me sprawling over the table, and turned his back to me. "You're the smuggest asshole I've ever met, do you know that? That, and you're also a manipulative bastard and a raving lunatic."

It was a magnificent punch but I had to take it, even if it nearly put my lights out. I woozily sat up, and faced him again. "Yes, and I also like to think I'm good enough to be smug. But that's not the thing that pisses you the most right now, isn't it? You're really so pissed because, no matter how mad you think I am or how much you hate me - and that is perfectly acceptable -, the worse is you now can't help but to have some respect for me.", I said with a half-smile, still looking for fracture lines in my jaw.

Winston cringed his teeth and fell back to his last trench: "Fuck you!"

"Anyway, I beat you up on the first lesson, and made you beat me up on the second. Now that we both purged our aggressiveness towards each other, our next lessons should be less... painful!"

Maria came to Winston, hugged and kissed him. "My hero! That was so..."

"Brave? Chivalrous?", Winston brightened up.

"Yes, yes too, and also very magnificently stupid! He's got almost twice your mass." Maria has a way of saying just the right thing to put everything in the right perspective.

I cut in. "Back on Earth, I intended to deliver him to the FIBs or the FSS or whomever they were. It was when he decided to go back for you in the shuttle that I knew he was salvageable, Maria. Did you see his face when I "shot" you? He's so protective of you because you showed him the meaning of happiness, regardless of all the difficulties you've been through. He needed a 'greater cause' to guide him, and I just opened his eyes to the fact that he had already found it: his happiness lies with you. Now he can learn to also value other people's lives and motivations. Don't think of me as an enemy, Winston, I'm just someone who thinks better of you than yourself, and who wants to help you. I'm a harsh teacher, maybe mad as you may believe me to be, but I'm an effective one. Trust me, and we may even become good friends... Mack," I said, offering him my hand.

\* \* \*

*Zeeness (-4,-3)  
Near the system's entry point  
Asp Explorer IL-351 "Tenchu"*

"You can't find it!"

"Affirmative, Maegil. The active sweep does not detect any silent LRCs, and the detector matrix now indicates loenin (-6,-3)."

"Damn, it must have mis-jumped." I wanted to fit my own transmitter on it so I could be sure of finding Mosser after he took possession of it, and I'd have to do it before the Mosser I gave the locator to got there - or any other, for that matter. And I'd have a good chance of it too since my ship is faster than his and thanks to Mosser's habit of mis-jumping, but I wasn't so sure anymore. With the new cabin, I had just almost the fuel I needed. Almost, and even if I could get there, there wouldn't be anywhere to buy milfuel to leave. I knew I shouldn't have agreed to it!

Well, I might as well leave Kevin in a system from where he can easily get back to Earth before he gets yet more corrupted by us, he's a nice kid who shouldn't be involved with assassins. I checked the astrogator... there, Ackwada is a good place if a bit too far from the core, but I can't detour. I'll even pay for his ticket home, it was I who brought him along in the first place...

---