

DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 5

by
The Elite BBS Collective

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Tsunami

[Kevin O'Connell]

"Wait till -", I started, enthusiastically.

"No - really, don't. You must not breathe a word of this to anyone. Bragging about this trip will get you in prison or killed in short order. It never happened. You were hired by an Imperial Princess to do some acting for a show she was putting on, and now you're back," Maria said, severely.

We were in a quiet spot in the station Birminghamport, Ackwada. The station itself was large for the type of system it was in - it seemed rather unpopulated. None of the usual bustle of a space port of its size. The observation lounge had the customary large transparent panels through which the blue-green planet shone below. I was going home, yet seeing the blue-green planet made me homesick. I faced Maria. "I better be going, the spaceliner leaves for Barnard's in half an hour."

Maria hugged me, and kissed me on the cheek. She whispered, "Don't let Mack hear me say this, but I think you're cute."

I blushed. She smiled, turned and walked away. I was also now richer than I ever thought I'd ever be. One hundred and fifty thousand... not bad for being a street actor in New San Francisco. But I couldn't even flaunt it - people would get suspicious. At least I could make my place a little bit more comfortable - and knowing for sure where the next meal would be coming from was a bonus. Being an actor in this day and age is a sure trip to the poverty lines - all the starring roles long since taken over by virtual dreamware actors. Machines. But people still appreciated theatre. They just didn't like paying for it. I turned to look out of the observation window. A Python, glinting in the sunlight, slipped berth and sluggishly manoeuvred. A Transporter, ascending from the planet, turned and made its final approach. Then a sound.

A sound like the air being ripped apart. Screams.

Startled, I turned around. I felt a cold, rigid fear take hold of me, and stood rooted to the spot for what seemed like an hour but was seconds at most. A rumpled figure, on the floor - not far from the exit of the observation lounge. The overhead lighting glistening off the rapidly growing pool of blood! I ran towards the fallen figure. Oh, I knew alright who it was and what had probably happened, but the reality of it...vague memories of CPR training, thoughts battling for use of my limbs - the smell of blood already pervading the air. I lost my footing, and fell headlong in the pool of blood. I reeled, and nearly vomited as I slid into the headless body. Maria's headless body! At that moment, Mack Winston rounded the entrance into the observation lounge. He stood, weak, for a second. I looked up, now frozen with fear - he would be forgiven if he thought I had just murdered Maria...

A thin scream - an inhuman noise if I'd ever heard one - erupted from somewhere deep in Mack Winston's body. The few other people in the lounge were now standing - gawping - at the horrific scene. Passers by froze. Mack fell to his knees beside the corpse of his beloved.

"Get some help!" I heard someone shout.

An alarm started to sound somewhere. A flashing light. The scene was taking on a surreal air. It felt unreal - I felt dizzy. I couldn't bring myself to look back at Maria's body, especially the bloody object only a meter away which must have been her h...

Another passer by. A business man in a sharp suit, carrying a briefcase.

Mack was gone.

I looked up in time to see Mack violently collide with the businessman, who turned around and stared in shock at the blood-soaked young man! With an incandescent fury, Mack smashed the man to the ground, where he lay gasping for breath - like a landed fish. He then began to kick the businessman in midriff - over and over again. The man weakly protested, but he couldn't stop the onslaught!

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD!" Winston screamed. He kicked the man again, this time against his head. He'd been trying to get up, but he fell again - and looked dazed. Woozy, but not yet unconscious. By now, two of the passers by were trying to approach. "Back off!" Winston screamed, an animal hatred in his voice. The strangers stopped. Mack grabbed the businessman's briefcase, and battered it repeatedly until it was open. DSUs and a datapad spilled out, the stuff of a businessman. Then three other objects. Winston glared at the man, and grabbed these objects. Realisation started to come as he furiously slotted them together.

A gun. A plasma rifle with a scope. The man was no businessman. The man was an assassin.

Mack lofted the gun, and aimed it at the assassin. I remained where I was - kneeling in Maria's blood, transfixed - a perverse schadenfraude - the way you can't help but watch a spacecraft full of people collide with a mountainside.

Time seemed to slow.

Mack took aim.

The assassin was trying to struggle to his feet.

Mack shot, neatly severing the assassin's left leg at the thigh. I heard a thud as someone passed out. The assassin screamed like an animal.

Mack shot again. And again. And again. The air was filled with the assassin's dying screams. Mack lined up for the coup de grace. The air went electric with plasma for one last time - the assassin's screams abruptly ceased as the plasma sliced his head clean off his shoulders. By now, two burly men were about to strike. "Mack, watch out!" I yelled as loudly as I could. Mack suddenly took off. I struggled to my feet to make chase, and almost immediately fell face first as I slipped in Maria's blood. I struggled upright again, and finally gained traction. Mack had already made good progress, and had disappeared from sight. The two burly men had obviously thought better than to tackle an armed man now so obviously alerted to their presence - and also so obviously unafraid to use the weapon. Instead, they decided to chase me. "Back off!" I screamed in their faces, as they approached. I didn't bother looking at them again. I turned and ran, following the bloody footprints Mack had left. I careered around a bend, and further into the station. The footprints ceased at a closed door. I wrenched it open, and almost fell into the service tunnel beyond! Carefully, I turned around and started descending the ladder. It's the only place he could have gone. In my flight, and in the dim lighting, I didn't register the woman who had followed me. Finally, at the bottom of the ladder, I followed the only exit. It opened into a large room, full of boxes, crates and cargo pods. I scanned the room. Looking down, I saw more bloody footprints - becoming more and more faded. They disappeared into the haphazard maze of boxes. "Mack!" I shouted. I thought I could hear some faint sounds further up the room. A sniff of a wet nose.

"Leave me alone!" came a shout, from the other end of the store room.

"Mack, it's me. Please don't keep running away. Please," I begged, plaintively.

"It's alright, he can't go far," - a soft female voice whispered in my ear. Keyed up on adrenaline, I whirled around and promptly fell over a pile of boxes with a crash.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded.

"Sssh."

She looked familiar. I was trying to put her face to a situation.

"I have a tracker," she whispered.

I narrowed my eyes. Richardson Base. Yes, I'd seen her hanging around while Mack was waiting for his arm back. I heard some sounds at the other end of the room which sounded horribly like new power packs being loaded into a plasma rifle.

"What do you want with him?" I hissed.

"I need to ask him some questions," she whispered.

"What, now?" I hissed.

"SOD OFF WITH YOUR QUESTIONS!" came an enraged shout.

Suddenly, the woman grabbed me and flattened me to the ground. We both lay there, panting. "How did he hear that?" I asked, in awe.

"He was lip reading through the rifle's scope. He has that gun trained right at us," she replied, levelly, as if lecturing a moron.

She must have hidden the tracker in Mack's arm! I didn't know who she was, and didn't really care - she meant the authorities, trouble - or likely both. There was no way of losing her. Suddenly, there was some wild scrabbling further up the room. A door at the other end crashed open and rebounded off its stop, slamming shut again with a violent crash. The woman looked at her small datapad, and then ran. I followed. We both crashed into the door. "He's wedged it shut!" she snarled.

Good, I thought to myself. Suddenly, the woman backed up and took a flying kick at the door. It turned out to be not quite as wedged as she thought, and it crashed open - and she sailed through, landing in a heap in a pile of shipping boxes. It didn't slow her much - she quickly got back to her feet, and ran. Hopefully the slow down gave Mack a bit of distance advantage. She glanced at the datapad, then upwards. Then downwards. A ventilation duct. "Please, come out", she shouted up the duct.

No reply. "He's definitely up there, he can't hide forever," she whispered to me.

"Mack, we aren't ARMED," I shouted up the duct, putting the emphasis on arm. "Lay down your ARM! Or we will be able to keep following you!"

"Arms?" the woman questioned.

"Yeah", I replied. I looked through the duct. There was a service ladder on the inside, which disappeared into the dark heights of the station. He must have been up there somewhere. I listened carefully. From somewhere above, I could hear the sound of sobbing. "He's not in a good way," I told the woman. "We ought to leave him alone."

"No." Tense minutes passed. The woman kept looking at her datapad. Nothing moved. I pressed my ear against the duct again, and I could hear a new noise amongst the quiet sobs. Something being disassembled. "Shit!" the woman exclaimed, "he's falling!"

I waited for the sickening thud. But there wasn't one. Just a tink-tink-tink noise. I reached into the duct, trying not to smile. "This what you're after?" I asked, handing the tracker to her.

She flashed me an evil look. "You aren't making it any easier for him, you do know that!", she shouted. "Get out of my way!" she bawled - and she forced her way past me, into the duct work. I could hear her ascending the ladder.

It would be fruitless. Her datapad showed that the ladder terminated into a series of maintenance access tunnels. He could have taken any one. "Amateurs," I commented to no one in particular. I wondered what to do next. I probably had missed the spaceliner, and I could hardly board covered in more blood than an axe murderer in any case. I decided to go back to Maegil and Emu's ship. I had to break the news to them - if they hadn't heard already. On reaching the public areas of the space station, I found dozens of police officers. I realised there was no way I was getting back to the ship without passing several. "Excuse me," I said to the first one, "I'm a witness to the shooting that happened on level 2. I need to make a report."

The officer gave me a long, appraising look. His partner turned. "I saw you on surveillance. You were the first on the scene, I believe you know the woman who was killed?"

"Yes."

"No hurry. Take this pass so you can get back to your ship, get cleaned up, then we'll take a full report. Frankly, there's not much we can do other than to look for the killer of the assassin."

That was easy. The officer waved me on. Apparently, he didn't have any connection between myself and Mack - or Maria for that matter. All they had to do was look back a bit further in the surveillance, but they were too busy trying to keep the area cordoned off. I stalked back onto the ship. "Maegil? Emu?" I shouted, as I boarded. No response. I arrived in the Asp's small, austere common area. Curled up in a corner, against the wall was a compact mass of misery - Mack Winston. I boggled for a moment how he could have gotten back to the ship so quickly. He must have known the standard layout of the maintenance corridors pretty well, and evaded all the police. I knelt down beside him, and he looked at me, through red eyes. He wasn't the man I had known just half an hour earlier. He looked utterly destroyed, his eyes bloodshot, tears running down his face. His blood soaked shirt stuck to his body. He managed to stop snivelling for a moment - possibly his old bravado trying to reassert itself - but as he looked at me, he broke down again. I reached out to him, and he fell upon my shoulder, and let out an inhuman wail. His real arm touched me gently, while his robotic arm held me in what felt like a death grip. I didn't say anything. I just held onto him, as he buried his face into my shoulder. There's nothing you can say in these circumstances.

Two minutes later, I heard the door open. I could hear Maegil's and Emu's voices. It was clear they didn't know what had transpired on level 2, other than a shooting had occurred. And of course, Maegil said utterly the wrong

thing as he entered the common room and found us there. "Look, if you two guys want to make out, kindly do it in your bunk room. What if Maria finds - "

I turned around, and cut Maegil off with a stare.

"Oh," he said, weakly, finally registering that we had more blood on us than any self respecting serial killer would allow.

Emu groaned. "I knew it had something to do with us," she remarked quietly, with an air of dread.

"Look", I said quietly to Mack, "I'll take you to your room, get cleaned up. You won't feel any better but I think you could do with the privacy while I tell the others what went on."

He nodded weakly, and I lifted him. He clung onto me grimly as I took him to his small cabin. I closed the door, and made my way back.

"It's Maria, isn't it," Maegil asked.

"She's dead," I said, simply stating the obvious. They had to have guessed as soon as they saw the blood.

"What happened?"

"I said goodbye to her, and, well - she turned around presumably to return to the ship. Then there was this noise - it sounded like the air exploded, and she was on the ground in a pool of blood. Beheaded."

"The Empire," Emu said bitterly. "Dishonourable death for a noble ranking higher than a Lord. They behead them."

Maegil was already examining the rifle, which Mack had brought back onto the ship with him. It was slick with Maria's blood. "Look, plasma spreader. So the charges the gun fires are like meat cleavers, wide enough to slice off a man's leg."

"The assassin?" Emu asked.

"Mack killed him. He looked like an ordinary businessman when he walked by, presumably to check on his handiwork. Mack somehow knew though." I wondered how many recurring nightmares I'd have of kneeling in Maria's blood, watching Mack systematically disassemble the assassin with his own weapon. I described the horrific scene to the others, and the mad dash through the maintenance levels. The woman with the tracker.

Emu sighed. "Well, let's get you cleaned up. I think we can get you on the next spaceliner."

"I'm not leaving," I replied. "A friend of mine needs my help and support".

Maegil looked at me. "What?"

"Mack Winston is a friend. I support my friends in times of trouble. Who else is going to do it? You two will want to make capital of this incident to help break him. I can't allow that to happen"

"What?"

"In New San Francisco, we stick around our friends in times of need. Now I'm telling you - " I started. Somewhere in the back of my mind was that miniature version of Kevin O'Connell frantically shaking his head and shouting "no! No! NO!", but I ignored my inner voice, summoning my best act, "- in the name of Randomius Factoria so help me god - if you so much as try and make the tiniest bit of moral capital out of what went on today you will live a long time to regret it." Maegil looked a bit surprised. He had known me as a naive layabout from New San Francisco. I turned up the passion a notch more. "He may be a good for nothing Phekdan, but he is - as you say yourself - saveable! Now if you want him to progress, let him recover from this in his own time. He will surely understand now what it is like to have a loss. Maria is the only being who ever actually cared about him. He's lost that now and he's totally alone. He knows now what it is like to lose that for real. If you dare to make capital of this, you will instead drive him away and drive him to vengeance. Now I don't expect you to be particularly supportive. But I've already provided a shoulder to cry on and will continue to do so!" At that, I stomped out before Maegil could summon up a riposte to my fury - I let them stand and stare at my retreating back in astonishment. I needed to get cleaned up myself.

Mourn Thy Dead, but Remember the Living

[Cmdr. Maegil]

*Ackwada
Birminghamport
Asp Explorer IL-351 "Tenchu"*

He was in the bed, curled in foetal position and drawing deep sighs. "Mack?"

"Leave me alone! You most of all, leave me alone!" he cried in a guttural weeping voice.

"Very well, I will. I'd just like to remind you I offered my friendship, and that still stands. I'll help you in whatever way your heart demands, just ask and I'll be there." I turned to leave. "And, I'm sorry for Maria. She was a good person, and deserved better."

Mack sobbed as I left, really feeling for him. I know loss and when I pointed my gun at her I had no idea what was to happen. If his sorrow drives him to the point of suicide I will always feel I killed him; anyway that wasn't the reason I offered him whatever help he may need, it was rather because I really liked him. I was ruminating in this line of thought when the head's door opened revealing a half-naked Kevin. "You bastard, I told you to stay away!" he said as he came at me and tried to punch me.

I blocked his punch with my open hand and looked at him with all the sadness I felt showing in my eyes. "You don't know me. Don't you ever, ever assume I'm just a manipulative assassin, and pray you never know suffering half as well as I do. I'm here for him too as much as he wishes me to - either for comfort, or to avenge Maria if that's what his heart needs. Here," I put the sleeping pill I intended to give Mack on his hand, "this will help him rest, make sure he takes it."

Kevin looked suspiciously at the pill, but accepted it without a word. "I'm sorry for you too. For a matter of minutes you didn't get away unscathed."

I left him slightly confused and continued to the galley, where Emu was sobbing softly, mourning.

"Oh, Maegil, she's really gone!"

I embraced Emu. "Yes, that was cruel and now I fear for Mack."

"I should go and try to speak with him."

"Maybe, and maybe not. Leave him to Kevin right now, he's too hurt and he still sees us with some hostility," I said as I patted her on my shoulder. "I think you should rather talk to Kevin, he could also use some consolation."

"Yes, Kevin loved her too, and seems to think you're at least partially responsible for Mack's condition."

"Don't talk about it, just comfort him as you can."

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat, I had to keep my head cold. I let go of Emu and headed to the bridge. I'd mourn Maria later, right now I had to spirit Mack away before the police showed up. The *Azure Sunset* hunt still beckoned, and until Mack decided what he wanted to do, I'll keep on it. For now, for now... Poor boy, and poor Maria. "Obie, get ready for takeoff, open a channel to TC and set destination to Ioenin (-6,-3) on the witchspace governor."

After a little while, we vanished in an orange cloud.

Tenderness

[Norman Mosser]

? [?,?]

Norman paced the cabin of the Cobra and mused. He wasn't sure if Maegil had deliberately misunderstood when he asked for his possessions back. The gun was meaningless - you could get them 400cr a tonne in Zaonce. He had wanted the locator, and he had wanted Mack Winston. Both of them were his. One was good, but he still wanted Winston. Norman took a slug of bourbon from the bottle and looked through the window into space. Maegil's offer was worth taking up though. It opened up possibilities... All he had to do was kill one more Mosser, and reclaim the Sunset. He sat down and began typing some messages. First to the Winston boy.

- Mack,
- I can forgive many things, but dropping a house on me is very close to the edge of what I can tolerate.
- Bring me the other Mosser's corpse and you live.
- Bring me the other Mosser's corpse and I'll back Spartacus.
- NM

It would suffice. He had considered threatening Maria, or the farm on Phekda, but that would have been counter-productive. To the other business. The Quexce offer sounded good. The pay was good, and good PR was good PR. However, his bank balance had other ideas. And there was the fact that he might be able to get himself back into the officer's bar in Facece. Some sounding out was in order. The people he would get in touch with were the people who knew that he was the one who had sold the Guild out. That had paid for fitting out the Sunset and set up the cloning hardware. And bought him a huge amount of blind-eye turning.

- Sentients,
- I am currently in a position where I may be able to provide military superiority in the Quexce system.
- I am looking to accept what I consider is the most beneficial bid to myself.
- All bids will be treated in confidence
- Payment on delivery of course.

Mosser selected his addressees and hit send. The Empire, the Federation, Sirius Corporation and the Quexce company directors in Sol. Not the Alliance though - too many morals. As the messages were sent, Mosser checked his inbox. No replies from Frantic and the others yet. Hopefully they would turn up in Quexce.

* * *

Quexce [-2,-2]

Sam Kemper entered the conference room carrying a steel case. He was shown to a chair and sat facing the director and the production manager.

"You have it then?"

Sam placed the case on the table and undid the catches. He opened the case and turned it around to face the pair.

"What do you call it again?"

"It is called an Initiator. I need several hundred. I also have some dimensions that I would like you to use to construct a rapid inserter-ejector to carry them."

"Do you have schematics?"

"No, I had to leave in a hurry - all I have is this prototype."

"What does it do?"

"Produces an energy pulse."

"Sounds simple."

"The pulse characteristics have to be spot on though."

"Ah."

"That's a 'putting the price up ah' isn't it?"

"fraid so."

"I will point out that this should be well within your company's industrial capability and there are plenty of other firms in Quexce who would be keen to take the project on."

The production manage nodded. "Fine. We can arrange a dedicated fabber and probably get the unit cost down to 500cr per unit. Minimum purchase of 100. The loader will be twenty kay."

"Acceptable. And you can do it in the knowledge that this helps you and it helps Spartacus."

Sam and the Director rose and shook hands, "Done - We'll get our respective people to sort out the fine print."

Sam nodded and was shown out.

Bishop to C5

[Vasquith de Havilland]

They were everywhere. Ships. Big ones, small ones, some bigger than they had any right to be. There were so many blips on the Saker's scanner, that it looked like a solid plate instead of a transparent grid. It was mind numbing.

"Holy hell," Veruz whispered. De Havilland had to agree. He had never seen anything like it before. Space was awash with light; running lights from the massive capital ships, engine wash from the small fighters, darting about like bees around their hive, and the blue-white flashes of hyperspace exit clouds. Turning away from the swamped scanner, de Havilland fired up the IFOF, or Identification, Friend or Foe System. The swarm of ships coalesced into a single group of Federation signals. Panning the ship around, he focused on a second group of lights, about 7 AU distant. Imperial signals, about the same amount as the Federation. There were a lot of signals. For a 'Ground Boy', the sight was totally overwhelming. He had never seen such a collection of military power.

"What do you think?" he whispered to Veruz.

"I don't know," he replied, "could be an entire battle-group."

De Havilland whistled in admiration. "How did they pull together such firepower in such a short time?"

"Have you been keeping up with the news on this Spartacus Brotherhood thing?" Veruz asked incredulously, "I bet both sides were in on the whole thing. Or at least waiting for such an opportunity to occur. The Federation and the Empire are always looking for excuses to get one up on each other."

De Havilland nodded at his co-pilot, not really following what he was saying. He had made it a point in his life to avoid galactic politics. That had been what pushed him away from his military service in the first place.

"I've been keeping an eye on the local space around Williamson Base," Veruz continued. "There is a significant increase in Viper patrols. I think Interpol is a little worried about what's going on. The news coming through indicates that it's something like marshall law down there: restrictions, interdictions, checkpoints. It's crazy."

"And it's all happened in the last few weeks," replied de Havilland. "I hope this doesn't effect our criminal friend."

"Norman will find a way through," replied Veruz, conviction lacing every word.

* * *

Within a few hours of the last hyperspace entry cloud disappearing, the massive fleet began moving. Towards the inner solar system. Checking the long range scanners, de Havilland saw the Empire match the Federation move for move, acceleration for acceleration. For the two superpowers, it was a race.

But for de Havilland, it was a complicated game of Chess. Complicated, because he didn't know how many pieces were in the game, he didn't know how many opponents there were, and he didn't even know the rules of the game. He was an engineer who was good at killing people. Easy stuff. Aim, fire. Design, build. He was so out of his depth here, he just wanted to laugh at himself. How had they gotten to this point? It seemed a lifetime ago he had stumbled upon the *Azure Sunset*, a rare piece of circumstance that had changed his life forever. Now, he was caught between two big rocks, and he didn't have any clue what to do.

Not that he had any options. Norman Mosser was three days overdue for their meeting. They hadn't received any signal. That meant that either Mosser had pulled out of their deal, but de Havilland got the feeling that Mosser was a man of his word, or someone had got to him. Now, with the two fleets moving in towards the main habited planet of the system, de Havilland had only one choice. Throwing stealth to the wind, he powered up the main systems and activated the prime mover.

"What are you doing?" Veruz asked, startled, but nevertheless beginning his side of the operations to get the ship ready for flight.

"We're going to have to go and see what happened to Mosser. If we lose him, we're back to square one."

"We won't have enough time to get there, find him, and get back out before the fleets arrive!" exclaimed Veruz.

"We'll flip over for the deceleration burn, use the prime mover both ways. That'll save us a couple of days. We'll get in, find his ship, see if he can find him, and then get the hell out. This place could turn out to be the next Balkland powder keg!"

"Do you really think this will spark war between the Federation and the Empire?" Veruz trembled

Impressed the street smart youth had understood the historical term, De Havilland suddenly saw the young, vulnerable man within Veruz. He was just a kid, after all. Full of hopes and dreams, not having lived enough reality to set the record straight. He felt pity for the kid. If things turned to custard, he was going to grow up awfully quick. Not events weren't forcing him to do that already. "I don't know, Michael. Let's cross that bridge when we get to it ok? One step at time."

Systems at 100%, de Havilland locked in the autopilot for Williamson base.

For Grief, We Offer Lies

[Catherine Beaumont]

The ambassador's usual ebullience was entirely absent, although Catherine saw the frown waver slightly as he saw the tea platter arrive. Catherine sighed internally, but kept her mouth shut and stood to attention to one side of the ambassador's intricately carved Witchwood desk. She liked the Duval-Nut pastries a bit herself. The sobbing man in the chair kept the both of them immobile with his grief. He'd started out by icy accusation, progressed to enraged shouting and imminent physical violence, and was now reduced to this. Catherine really preferred the shouting.

Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval was still an impressive man entering his late eighties, his hair only beginning to grey at the temples, and his arms still rippling with well-toned muscle. although he wasn't taking the death of his only daughter and eighth heir with anything like the reserve expected from one of the oldest families on Capitol. Distantly related to both Norman Mosser and the Emperor, the Lord treasured his children, and the brutal death of his daughter had brought him to the Alliance Embassy, filled with impotent rage and grief. The ambassador picked his moment and passed the man a handkerchief. "My Lord, your daughter was an impressive young woman and a credit to her family and gene line." he said smoothly, using the points of praise that best described her worth to any doting Imperial father. "Agent Beaumont assures me that she died bravely, quickly and painlessly."

The man's streaming wet eyes focused on Catherine, and Catherine nodded dumbly. She had no idea why the ambassador had requested her presence and was beginning to suspect that she was merely a decoy to avoid being the sole focus the girl's father's blame. "She shouldn't have died bravely... she shouldn't have died at all... until you let that... ANIMAL abduct her. All your dumb beasts from your stinking Alliance..." the sobs interrupted the flow lord's raspy voice, but the blame and menace within his voice did not suffer from the brief interruption. "The Alliance has not heard the last of this."

There was a moment's pained silence. "My Lord, the Alliance is not responsible for Mack Winston and we have cooperated fully with the All-Empire Police Services to bring him to justice!" The ambassador said, spreading his hands. The lord was not without influence, and Catherine knew the Ambassador liked his job to be as easy as possible.

"Maybe." said Hesketh-Duval, taking a moment to choke back his sobs. "But I understand that your intelligence services have been less... cooperative..."

Catherine shuffled her feet nervously. She'd been considering Lord Hesketh-Duval as a grieving family and had forgotten that he was also a leading noble of the Empire, with all of the resources, connections and ruthlessness that this implied. SHE knew that the AJNIB had stonewalled all Imperial requests for cooperation on Mack and Maria's operations, but she was still somewhat discomfited to realise that Lord Hesketh-Duval was as up to date on this as she was. Catherine looked questioningly towards the ambassador. After a moment's consideration and drumming his fingers on the surface of the desk, he nodded. *Be discreet*, the look said, *but throw him a bone*. "My Lord," she began, fighting to keep nervousness out of her voice, "Lady Hesketh-Duval could have escaped at any time she liked. She was not Mack's prisoner. Any scheme they entered into would have been by mutual consent."

The Lord exploded out of his chair. The ambassador sighed and moved his finger closer to the button which would summon security. "You DARE... my daughter was not some common WHORE!"

"Hear me out, my lord!" Catherine shouted back. "Mack was no match for your daughter and he knew it. She was his *employer*." A lie. A white lie, but a lie none the less. From all the sources available to Catherine, it was obvious that Mack and Maria had been an excellent partnership, criminal and otherwise. The two were the type of team who made law enforcement officers take early retirement (voluntarily or not) as they pooled all their resources and intelligence. Reviewing their file, Catherine knew how lucky the universe had been that they'd been content in that shack on Phekda for so long.

"She... he was her bodyguard?"

"Yes, my lord. Her bodyguard, her muscle, her standover man. Mack is indeed a career criminal, but you must understand that in the outer reaches of the Alliance..." The ambassador cleared his throat, not pleased with the implied slur on the Alliance. Much of his work involved convincing the rich and powerful of Achenar that the inhabitants of Phekda did not in fact eat their young, and that the capital of the Alliance actually DID have a working spaceport (actually, eighteen) and still have Dukes and Countesses peer at him as though expecting him to have a bone through his nose. "... having someone with criminal experience on their payroll is good business sense." The ambassador let out a tiny groan. If this got out, the diplomatic corps would be dining out on the admission for months.

"Business sense. She was doing *business*? So she... but Maria never showed any interest in... indeed." Lord Hesketh-Duval sat for a moment, digesting the news that his daughter had committed the slightly lesser sin of commerce. Whilst a definite faux pas in the rarefied air of old Achenar money, it possessed none of the shame of consorting (in all senses) with an Alliance criminal from *Phekda*. The Lord's red eyes refocused on Catherine. In their depths, Catherine saw a wild hope. His daughter may be dead, but her reputation was not quite past revival. She blinked nervously. "You're sure about this? I will want to see your proof."

"I'm sorry, my lord." the ambassador cut in smoothly, "but our intelligence is classified. But I hope Analyst Beaumont has set your mind at rest..."

And it was over. The ambassador was kind enough to pour Catherine a drink. "I'm sorry to expose you to diplomatic work, as I know you're not trained for it." he said as he passed her the glass of Titan Ice-Whiskey. There was a slight fizz as the endothermic chemicals in the whiskey reacted to the air and chilled the drink to near-zero.

"That's quite all right, Your Excellency." Catherine managed, shuddering as the ice of the whiskey was followed by the burning trail of fire of the alcohol. She coughed convulsively, whilst the ambassador looked on impassively.

"A pity we couldn't tell the poor old thing the truth though, wasn't it?" the ambassador moved over to the window and stared out across the embassy gardens. Flowers from every world of the Alliance were spread across its acreage, chosen for all seasons so the garden was always in bloom. In more ruminative moods he went on long diatribes comparing politics to gardening, flowers, bees and anything even vaguely horticultural he could think of. However, today he was obviously feeling more direct. "Wasn't it?" he repeated, with a tinge of impatience.

Catherine was jolted back into the conversation. "Ah... yes Your Excellency. But adding the name Mosser to any conversation is rarely a good idea."

The ambassador waved his hand dismissively. "It was an official Imperial kill order, you can't blame Mosser for her death."

"Yes you can, Excellency." Catherine said, with more steel in her voice than she'd thought herself capable of. "For all we know, Mack and Maria would have been quite happy to grow old together and bring up a few generations of petty thieves on Phekda if Mosser hadn't blown their cover. As it was, he forced them to raise their profile to match *his* ego, which turned Maria from a delinquent into a renegade in the eyes of the Imperial Security Services. I *absolutely* blame Norman Mosser for her death. Mack may be none too bright, but I can't imagine he would have put Maria or himself in danger if he could have avoided it... your Excellency."

The ambassador raised an eyebrow. He was quite an expert at this, and Catherine had once amused herself by watching him do it in the bathroom mirror on surveillance. Then, on the screen, she'd smiled indulgently, as if for an overgrown child. Now, in the flesh, it just irritated. "You obviously have strong opinions on the subject, Agent Beaumont."

Catherine fought a blush. It was unprofessional to give a damn, and especially so to let the ambassador see you give a damn. She'd been on a desk for so long, she'd forgotten the necessary fictions of fieldwork, hiding yourself from your own side as much as from 'the enemy'. She forced her voice to coolness. "It's a tragic loss, of course. All the more so because I... they were of little interest in an intelligence sense except as a very tenuous link to Mosser. Given Mack's personality profile, he will very likely get himself killed in some attempt at revenge before he contacts Mosser again."

"Revenge against whom?"

"Whichever of his enemies, or for that matter allies, whom he holds most responsible."

"You are dismissed, Agent Beaumont." the ambassador said, his attention beginning to waver. "Oh, and take this and see if you can catch Lord Hesketh-Duval, he must have left it behind."

Catherine caught the thrown swagger stick neatly, nodded at the ambassador and left. That was it. Lord Hesketh-Duval would get no further satisfaction from the Alliance, except for patronising sympathy from the ambassador at cocktail parties. She hoped he'd believed what she'd said about Maria. It was a fiction, but it was a comforting fiction that no-one could disprove. Lies were literally all she, and the Alliance had to offer him.

For Grief, I Demand Revenge

[Lord Hesketh-Duval]

"... he must have left it behind."

Lord Hesketh-Duval removed the earpiece and stowed it in his pocket. He gestured for his adjutant to double back to intercept the intelligence agent with his swagger stick. He leaned back on the bench inside the embassy and smouldered. Around him, the twelve members of his entourage watched him silently. Normally a sanguine and predictable Lord, the death of his daughter seemed to have returned him to the capricious demon he had been as a youth. They kept their distance and watched him burn. Rage filled him in a way it hadn't in half a century. They'd thought to deceive him with their lies and misdirection. The Alliance, honourless like all thieves. Him, Lord of a millennia's standing, whose ancestry went back to old Earth, went back further than time itself. So. His daughter was a whore. This could never be made public. In his own mind, Lord Hesketh-Duval cursed Maria, then cursed himself for doing so. He still loved her. It was true, though. All the rumours. Everything. She was a criminal, a rebel, a common vagabond, a political and sexual deviant. No matter. What mattered now was the family honour. What mattered was erasing what shame existed. Challenging the validity of an official SIGTERM was suicidal, at best. Lord Hesketh-Duval had other children, and didn't want to put their futures at risk. But there were loose ends whose clearing up would sate his bloodlust nicely.

"Mark?" A man of impressive, if not stunning physical gifts walked forward. A column of trim muscle and sculpted cheekbones, his piercing blue eyes were nearly as red with tears as the Lord's. He and his twin had been close to Maria, and her loss had hit them both very hard. They were from the Imperial Central Protectorate, tasked to defend the royal family in all its far-flung branches and regressive gene-lines. They'd failed in their duties to protect Maria, and the Lord was within his rights to request their deaths from the Imperial Court. But he was not short-sighted enough to offer them that easy out. They still owed him their duty. "You and your brother have two tasks. Complete them and I will forgive you. I will not accept a living failure."

"Of course, my Lord." Mark said. "Who?"

"Winston. Then Mosser."

Mark's face rippled as the import sank in, but he nodded acquiescence, bowed and left the grove, joined by his brother, identical in every respect. The two were team of perfect, almost artistic killers, not mere muscle to be spent like a spacer tipping whores. They had poetic souls and flawless physiques, the best unmodified humans available to the Empire. Years of training had developed their gifts to the outer limits of physical and mental possibility. They also possessed a special understanding that not even the best genetic engineering could replicate. They were an asset that the Empire could ill afford to lose, and the Imperial Chamberlain would have been aghast that Hesketh-Duval was tossing them aside in revenge for a Empire-Wide laughing stock.

The Lord began to sob, further tears overflowing from some unknown reservoir of grief, untapped despite a solid week of sorrow. His retainers stood, silent, obedient and fearful.

Letter from America

[Kevin O'Connell]

It had been a trying few days. Not that Mack had said much. But it was clear that helpless grief was turning into white-hot anger. I sat on the bunk opposite in the tiny bunk room on Maegil's ship, in transit to the next godforsaken system (whatever it was called), my knees nearly touching Mack's as he sat opposite. I had become acutely aware I was within easy range of a swift punch, and could do little to stop it. "How do you feel?" I asked at last, judging it to be a safe thing to say.

Mack tossed a data pad towards me. I picked it up.

- Mack,
- I can forgive many things, but dropping a house on me is very close to the edge of what I can tolerate.
- Bring me the other Mosser's corpse and you live.
- Bring me the other Mosser's corpse and I'll back Spartacus.
- NM

I felt cold.

"Yes, he survived," Mack said, redundantly. "And he's going to DIE!" he shouted, explosively.

"But - "

He spoke quietly, voice full of quiet fury. "Mosser is responsible for Maria's death. We would still have been happy in our cabin deep in the forests of Nirvana had he not decided to find me and blow my hideout. One of the three Mossers decided to help us when our ship was turned off by the Empire. The other two chose not to. The other two would have just blown our cover and left us to our fates. I can forgive the one Mosser. Not the other two. This Mosser will die."

"You know Maegil met him?" I added, cautiously.

"How do you know?"

"I overheard him mention it to Emu. He could have turned you over to Mosser No. 2"

"Kevin, what's your point?"

"You may find that Maegil isn't your enemy."

We lapsed into silence. I had been wanting to tell him this titbit of news for days, but hadn't plucked up the courage to do so. It was bad enough merely sleeping in the same bunk room.

"Anyway, you still have that disguise," he said. "You will help me terminate Mosser 2 with," - he paused for effect "extreme prejudice." It wasn't a request. It wasn't even a prediction. It was a statement of fact. He said it factually just like someone might say "It's windy outside."

"Oh," I said weakly. The choice for me was to be Mack Winston again and risk getting recognised by Mosser and killed. Or refuse to be Mack Winston again and get killed. I was beginning to regret being that shoulder to cry on. Now that Mack was no longer crying, his anger was searing.

"Look at the next item. I am writing a letter," Mack added, a little more calmly. I picked up the datapad again, and began to read.

Dear Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval,

My name is Mack Winston. I am certain you know of me, even though we never met. You were to become my father-in-law some time in the not too distant future.

Your daughter, Maria, has been murdered by the Empire. The assassin sent out to kill her is already dead by my hand.

Maria and I were deeply in love. Maria is the only human being I have ever known who really cared about me. She was well on the road from turning me from what she called a "savage" to a "gentleman" when she was so cruelly gunned down by the Empire.

While Maria disagreed with every particle of your lifestyle and point of view in life, she always spoke of you with a great deal of respect. While she disagreed with the current Imperial decadence and rampant misogyny of the upper ranks (especially when applied to Princesses, who should be treated much better given their important place in Imperial society), it was a society she respected and wanted to see repaired and bettered - not destroyed. She was truly a woman of spirit and honour. I will miss her with every fibre of my being.

While the Empire is generally a blue-blooded, vengeful and cruel society - these attributes being what drove your daughter away from your kind - from the way she spoke of you, I sincerely believe that you could not have had any part in her murder.

I will find out which of your cold, callous peers ordered the assassination. I know it was one of your peers. I was forced to work for the Empire against their will, and know the Empire's methods and traditions when it comes to dishonourable killing. When I find out who ordered the assassination, trust me when I tell you that they will not live for very long. They should be very afraid.

To indicate the kind of level of fear they should have, I killed Jay Carstein. Not in a cowardly fashion, hiding in a ventilation shaft with a plasma rifle and spreader attachment. I killed Carstein in hand-to-hand combat. It was done on behalf of the Empire. You can check the records if you like. That should give you an indication on how good I am.

If, on the other hand, you have sent assassins after me, tell them to look up Maria's assassin, or what's left of him. And you can be sure when we do meet - which we will, you can be as sure of that as you can be that the Emperor is still nearly dead - the meeting will be rather more cordial if you understand that Maria and I loved each other more than life itself, and you do not send any assassins after me, or clone agents to try and catch me.

**Yours,
Tyler Macklen ("Mack") Winston.**

"You're going to send that?" I asked. It seemed written in haste and anger.

"It's already sent. He may have got it by now if it's hit the right relays."

"You really honestly think that Maria's dad, in his grief, would be sending out assassins, and secondly -"

"YES!" Mack shouted. "You have no idea what the Empire is like. It's not your," he sneered, "soft, touchy feely New San Francisco 'we stand by our friends' method! They are bastards! The whole lot of 'em!" He shouted, slamming his hand down on the small table beside the bunks with a crash, causing a couple of DSUs to slide off onto the floor.

I could sense a mood switch. He looked back up at me. I passed the datapad back to him, and he looked at it. The grief was coming back. He began to bury his face in his hands, trying to not show me that he'd started sobbing again. I reached out to him. He didn't resist as the jerks of his grief shook his body.

For Grief, I Offer My Sword

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Ioenin (-6,-3)

Asp Explorer IL-351 Tenchu

Entry point.

Before jumping I had PA'd to buckle up as that woman that chased Mack could try to ambush us on our destination. It proved providential that I did so, for we did get attacked as soon as we left the witchspace tunnel. The *Tenchu* was flooded by red beams instantly after arrival and I was forced to make some frantic manoeuvring with the shields reaching critical levels before I could make a decent assessment of the situation. In the rear there were screams and curses, it seems someone ignored the "belts on" signal. My right pinky finger was about to press the bomb button when the enemy suddenly broke off their attack. I had a second or two to think. They must be guarding the AS, maybe for Mosser#1. I asked politely if Mosser was around; they chose to be rude, "Fuck you and die!", and to play rough... Emu made a remark, but I was too busy to give her attention.

There were twelve ships in the ambush: Cobra MkIII's, Constrictors, Osprey-Xs, an Harris and an Asp, all set up as Iron Asses; someone decided to throw us an welcoming party. Also, after the frustrated initial all-out attack, they enveloped me from all sides at a safe distance - my energy bomb seemed to be dissuasive enough to prevent them from attacking me all at once. Then they started coming four at a time, trying to finish me off before my shields recharged. Four ships 120° apart from each other cover all angles so that at least one would have a clan shot at my wider surfaces, I couldn't avoid them, but my ship is an ASP! My very own piloted by me Asp, and they were about to discover what that meant...

Since all but the Asp were equipped with 1MW beamers, I gunned the prime mover towards the attacker on the *Azure Sunset's* side (one of the Osprey-Xs) and removed him while outrunning the three behind me. The ship exploded, and I fired a missile at a Cobra beyond, waiting for his attack run. From here, I could have kept running and they would be unable to intercept me at dog-fighting speed, but they could still fire their missiles one by one, deliver a killing high-speed pass when I flipped to decelerate, or catch up with me at the *Azure Sunset*. Best to turn and bite back now to get it over with. I flipped, facing the incoming ships while engaging full retros, and opened fire at extreme range, hitting a Constrictor. He tried to escape, but at long range his angular movement was much slower than my targetting system's adjustment, and my laser kept on him until his scanner signature turned white. The two remaining attackers fired back, but they weren't equipped with a microadjusting computer-assisted targetting system on a gimbaled 4MW beamer as I was, and all I took was a glance from a soon dead pilot. By the time I engaged the last, we were close enough for him to shoot me properly, only his lasers were already nearly overheated. Unfortunately, so were mine, and we passed close pretty harmlessly, licking at each other's shields.

After learning that I'm a tougher target than they imagined (and having three ships converted to educational fees and another one still fuzzballing and running for sweet life), they returned to their positions around me and decided to kill me with a missile salvo... usually it's a safe if a bit expensive tactic, but against the *Tenchu* it was a BIG mistake! I NECM'd to no avail (as it should be against any combateer worth their salt), chaffed where I stood, more or less in the centre of their "sphere", sped through my own chaff in a vector between some of the missiles and near-halted the ship on a spot that Obie indicated as being out of the missile's present trajectories, taking some of the harassing laser fire as I waited. Their missiles targeted the chaff, loosing me. I flipped the ship, ready to shoot any of them inbound from behind, but none came at me. Instead, their naval homing enemas went right through my double-ground chaff cloud without detonating, locked onto whatever ships they found on their path on the other side and produced a nicely cathartic effect as I followed to finish off the survivors on one of the sides, beginning with the guy with the best ship - the Asp, of course... I wonder if the Elite Federation of Pilots considers the missile kills resulting from this tactic as mine, or if they are credited to whomever fired them. Probably they don't even know about it, as I think I invented it, or at least never heard of anybody else using it...

That left me only three ships to deal with on the other side of the "sphere", and they seemed to have lost their heart. I took out a heavily damaged Cobra in a fast jousting pass on my way to a position from which to dance with the Harris to his death; by the time I turned to the last Constrictor, he finally got his priorities straight and jumped out. Around me, eleven wrecks formed yet another ship graveyard. Two entry clouds, two exit clouds? One of the entries is mine, one of the exits is the Constrictor, but who could be the other ship? The HCA indicated it to be... a Harrier, from Ackwada and to Uroland. When we departed, there were no clouds to here, so it came after we left and still arrived sooner; that means a class 3 mildrive... Apparently, the nice lady decided the company here was too mean and fled.

"Obie, check the Ackwada list for Harriers and find out whose is it. Also, scan the debris for computers still working, uplink and brute force them for any information." Finally, I sighed in post-battle relief. "Sorry, dear, did you said something?" I asked.

"Never mind!" answered Emu, still excited by the fight, "That was... beautiful!"

"Cryptographed information retrieved. Beginning to decode," Reported Obie.

"Obie, bioscan passengers and report their condition."

"No further structural damage occurred to passengers. Slight lacerations and bruises detected."

"Someone better check on the boys to see if they're all right."

Emu opened her net and started off. "Yes, yes, someone! Who else is here?" she smiled at me.

"Atta gal!" I slapped her rump as she passed.

* * *

Ioenin (-6,-3)

Asp Explorer IL-351 Tenchu

0.6 AU from the Azure Sunset

The bridge's lights were out and the external holo on, and Emu slumbered in the co-pilot's seat. I sat in contemplation floating among the stars, watching the occasional dust particle crackling on the shields as we approached Mosser's LRC, when Obie alerted me to an transmission attempt. It had to be Mack, maybe he was answering Mosser. "Obie, show me the message and report it buffered for transmission. Also, put the cabin's audio on the earphones," I instructed the AI.

Emu woke up and stretched in a cat-like yawn. "Hello, dear! What's up?"

"Mack is trying to contact someone, let's see whom..."

When I put Obie to spy on Mack on our first stop, it was for totally different reasons, but I didn't regretted it anyway. I cursed Mosser when his message to Mack came through the *Tenchu's* comm, as it might have alerted Mack to the fact that I have a connection with the SB, and worse, that he still considers Mack his personal toy. Anyway, so far Mack didn't seem to have associated that part to my meeting, which is quite revealing on the poor bugger's condition...

"...

Yours,

Tyler Macklen ("Mack") Winston."

I was relieved as I read his letter to Maria's father, as it meant he was coming out of it somewhere on the right side of sanity, that and now his conversation with Kevin... It's time for me to act in name of friendship and true love.

I knocked on the cabin's door. "Yes?" came Kevin's muffled voice, and I opened the door.

"Mack, first of all, I have to apologise. I was worried, and eavesdropped on you." He was dishevelled, his eyes swollen from crying.

"Well, did you? I should have known... just the kind of thing you'd do!" he said with some anger but without fire. "Well, did you enjoy it?" His voice was tired, as an old man, and it pained me to see him in this condition.

"No. I did not enjoy spying on you, but that's beside the point. I came to ask you, is it really bloodshed you want?"

"YES!!!" he exploded in a sudden reversal of his mood. "The Mosser you met will die, whomever signed the order will die and if you stand in my way, you'll die too. Are you going to try to prevent me?"

"No. It's a pity having to kill Mosser after finally having met him, but I pledged to you my friendship and my help, and I will abide by my word. I am yours to command as I promised." I pulled the "Jay killer" from my back and put it on the table. "I will assist you in tearing their hearts out with this, and to cut off their heads and put them on a pike, then, but I won't have you bullying Kevin to go along."

"Hey, nobody is bullying me. I got in this because I wanted, and..."

"Watch this," I cut him off as I took the knife back from the table, stabbed the air sideways in front of his eyes, flicked the lateral blades open and twisted it. "I've just stabbed someone. Can you see the the way this

assassination instrument just ripped the lung apart inside the ribcage?" I viciously pulled the knife back. "And how, now I tore the ribs outwards, exposing the still living, beating heart? THIS is what we're going to do, are you sure you want to take part on it?"

Kevin winced as he visualized what I had just described, and blanched a little, but held on. "And where else can I go? After what happened in Ackwada, I must have been connected with Mack already, and from there to what happened back home. I'm in up to my neck already!"

"It's bad enough as it is now, but from here on it'll only get worse. By the time this is over we'll either be dead or with huge Imperial bounties on our heads, and trust me, you don't need that! You may think until we dock somewhere, after that..."

I turned back to Mack, "I've been thinking about who could have issued the termination order, and came up with three persons high enough to be able of ordering Maria's termination: Her father, but you completely dismiss that hypothesis; Prince Michael Finch, Master of Assassins, Commander-in-Chief of the XXI (Reserve) Protectorate, but I don't believe they'd give a Princess' life to freelancers. That leaves Prince Henry Burton-Riddick, CinC, IX (Intelligence)..."

"Burton-Riddick? BURTON-RIDDICK?!?!?" blew Mack. "I can't believe it... or rather, I should have expected it!" His eyes flared in a way suggesting that if THAT Prince was here now, he would be torn limb by limb in an even gorier way than Maria's assassin.

"I gather you have already met him?..."

"Met him? He's the sweetie that forced me to kill Carstein and then kissed me off to the VLA. Yes, I've met him before, and his purse is far, far too small for what he owes me," he grinned in a mirthless, malign way, "and pay he will! He will... pay! He... Will... Pay... Oh... So... Dearly!!!" Mack's teeth grated, a tear rolling down his cheek.

I was certain Mack wouldn't personally kill himself anymore, but I might be wrong about his sanity. On the other hand, he was as well as he could be after what the poor boy went through! I left the knife on the table and grabbed Mack's shoulders. "Remember, Maria loved you and wouldn't have wanted you to get killed, or to become a wraith, maddened by grief over her. I think she would rather want you to be happy and to live on in memory of her."

After a little eternity, Mack raised his head to look into my eyes, softening his expression. "Thank you!" he finally said.

I nodded, and let go of him. "One last thing. Your letter to Maria's father, I'll make sure he gets it without alerting the ISIS, forfeiting his life and our chances of ever getting near this acquaintance of yours. Please consult with me in these matters, for security's sake."

"That reminds me," Mack added, "I wanted to ask you about this other message. Mosser says he'll back Spartacus if I obey him, what do you know about that?"

Oh, boy! "Well, I met him to try and recruit him for the Brotherhood," I said without further explanations.

"Aren't you full of surprises!? What's next, will you tell me you're an really an ex-Imp working for Federal Black-Ops, or a Thargoid in disguise?"

"Hum!" Damn, that was a lucky guess if ever I'd heard one. It is said that discretion is the best part of valour; I don't usually agree with this saying, but it now seemed like extremely good advice - I just grinned and took my leave. By tomorrow I'd have bugged the *Azure Sunset*, and we could get on with the hunt for Mosser and Burton-Riddick.

Clash of Titans

[Cmdr. Maegil]

loenin (-6,-3)
Asp Explorer IL-351 "Tenchu"
150,000Km from the "Azure Sunset"

Some time before an entry hyperspace cloud had appeared, a Courier by its mass, arriving in a day or so. "That would be Mosser to reclaim his ship, now he has the detector," said Kevin, but Emu corrected him.

"No Kevin, this ship is too large for a single person to take it, it would need at least a skeleton crew of some thirty."

"But I heard the Courier is a large ship... Isn't it?"

"Yes, you probably could pile up 30, even 50 slaves in its Iron Ass configuration, but not a loyal crew, not without the strongest of reasons", I said. "No, he'd bring two or more ships for it." The last time I saw him he was on a Cobra III, but then he was coming from Earth; not even he would dare announcing himself to be Norman Mosser on Earth of all places! On the other hand, the detector is the only one or the Mossers wouldn't be fighting about it, and it's with the Mosser I met. QED, this must be Mosser#2, probably to reset the jump program so no-one else may find the *Azure Sunset*. That's good, it saves us the trouble of having to find him again - something thousands of intelligence and security people throughout the galaxy have been trying for years, and failing miserably.

* * *

loenin (-6,-3)
LRC "Azure Sunset"
4 AU from loenin C4

"What a mess!", said Emu when the Tenchu's landing lights shone upon the darkness. The *Azure Sunset's* docking bay doors had been blown open from the outside, the floor, ceiling and walls were deeply grooved and a semi-destroyed Asp rested on the end of it. "Whomever they were, they were in a hurry."

"Maybe they met the same bunch out there and found it safer inside. The bioscan didn't report any life forms inside, so the poor bastards probably were followed and killed here."

"Let's get it over with and go away. Ship wrecks always give me the creeps," asked Emu.

Kevin got Mack to give a tour after he said he had already been here, and Emu went along. Meanwhile, I went about to do what brought me here. I proceeded to the computer node and accessed the ship's data banks to uploaded them to Obie; then I placed my own transmitter over one of the life support's atmospheric UV biofilters - a maintenance-free part.

Later, we gathered at the bridge. Mack had checked the HPA to see if he could snipe Mosser with it, but it reported a missing primer and wouldn't fire. "Well, the ship is full of other smaller plasma accelerators, why don't you use one of them?" asked Kevin.

"It's not enough. I don't just want to kill him, I need it to be something special... more personal! The HPA would have been personal, as with any other gun, no matter how much overkill it could be, it doesn't have the insult over injury needed for a proper revenge."

"Then use the same rifle that took Maria, cut his head off with it," I suggested.

"He wouldn't know what hit him, and I want him to know it's me. On the other hand..."

* * *

I had turned the Tenchu to face the exit, and "landed" it askew over the other Asp to look like another wreck when Mosser came in; Mack was in a zoot suit, hiding among the debris in a stake-out. When Mosser got out of his ship, I'd throw the lights on, he'd announce himself and...

Mosser's ship approached the docking bay and saw it blown, so instead of entering he just hovered nearby, scanning... he'd certainly detect the Tenchu in such a thorough scan, and mis-jump. "Mack, get in the bridge, we'll have to do it the hardest way and hope for the best. Obie, activate the AS's jump jammer and your comm jammer," I ordered, Obie acknowledged and Mosser immediately started to run.

A few seconds later, we launched out of the bay. Just me and Mack, there was no need to risk anyone else; if it went bad, Emu could kill Mosser with an SPA and go back to the Federation with Kevin in the Krait with a hyperdrive we found among others equipped with IPs and 4MWers. I cut the comm jammer for an instant in a calculated risk. "Norman Hesketh Mosser, did you ever meet with Mack and Maria in an Osprey-X?", I asked, just for confirmation's sake.

"What the fuck are you bastard talking about?"

"You did not? Then prepare yourself to be terminated with extreme prejudice in memory of Maria Hesketh-Duval Winston!" I cut off the comm. "Obie, jammer, combat mode." This way, he wouldn't be able to imprint this information on any clone unless... I don't fear death, but there's a good chance it might end here. I was up against the galaxy's most dangerous criminal in a ship which just happened to have been designed for the specific task of destroying Asps; its very 'raison d'etre', and in the hands of a master, but I was ready. All the motivation I needed was burning beside me.

"Jammer on," said Obie in his combat mode voice, and the bridge disappeared to reveal the outer space; all I could see were stars, Obie's tactical info, the control sticks in my hands that appeared to be connected to the void and Mack hovering in his chair beside me.

"Grappler."

"Grapple routine loaded."

"Mack, are you watching?"

"Yes. Maria Hesketh-Duval Winston?"

"I thought it was appropriate."

"Thank you."

"Range 12,000m", Obie cut in pulling us back to the harsh reality. Mosser's ship was diving straight at me in a by-the-book time-tested-and-proven "Asp killer" Courier jousting pass. Mosser is nearly in my range, and I am already in his but he didn't fire yet; he rather seems to be just targetting me and aligning his trajectory. When he does shoot, he'll probably also fire a missile to finish me off in case he 'only' scores a glance on the first pass, and he'll speed off after the jousting to prevent me from approaching to engage on close quarters. If I go to him, the time during which I stay on his sights is smaller, but I can't match my speed with his before he's far enough to do it again; If I try to run, he'll get on my six and destroy me unless I outrun him and flee.

So, I do both! I point at him, full power in the prime mover, riding his barrel mainly with the X-roll, Y- and Z-axis thrusters but with some erratic yaw escapes from time to time, without a rhythm he could follow and always in the lesser profile to him. At 6,000m he started firing, his yellow stream of murderous photons passing too close and too often to me as he hit me once, then a second time, finally sending a finishing-off missile on my direction.

The ship screamed and shuddered, the space illusion in the ceiling to my left right disappeared and a damage schematic with text blinked into existence in my visual field. One look at it and I felt relieved, all info was yellow or orange. The top starboard bow section had been mostly vaporized, I had lost two shield generators, the HCA, an aux retro, an external holocam and the starboard recycled water tanks, but no vital systems were damaged. If it had been a little to the side and below, though, he'd have hit me straight in the bridge... I returned fire, and wore down his shields as we approached.

At 4,000m range it was close enough. I chaffed twice and flipped to reduce speed in a squid defence. Mosser is Mosser, though, and as soon as I blocked even his visual targetting with my chaff cloud, he changed course. Doing so he avoided my trap, but also lost some of his acceleration towards me. I saw him appearing off the cloud's edge trying to escape to an angle of about 30°. A good choice, as it still uses a good part of the previous momentum while passing too far away for an normal Asp to be capable of matching his speed before he gets a good head start; that's experience showing. A greener pilot might have tried to turn 90°, not increasing his speed to me and not having enough acceleration to escape my faster ship. A normal Asp, not one equipped with fighter ejection rockets. I pressed the "Aux Prime" button on my left annular digit and the *Tenchu* lurched forward, not pointing at Mosser but to intercept ahead of him. For 15 seconds the ship's structure groaned, complaining of the extra acceleration of 6.2Gs that went over the Asp's design specs, but not only I matched our speeds, I actually gained on him. He's mine! We were at 1,000m when I opened fire on his six and he spun his ship on the spot, facing me again. 900m, and he's desperately trying to prevent me from getting any closer. I guess that by now he knows it's over, I'm inside his defence. He fires two more missiles, but at this range I can manoeuvre to avoid them,

and...WHEW!!! The bastard has some good moves, and gave me another close shave with his laser. Had he hit me in my present shield condition, I'd have gone bye-bye!

At 300m his shields collapsed and I still had time to scar his ship before my laser overheated, but I stopped firing. We tangled in a death dance with missiles on the backdrop as I tried to get closer and closer, shooting his shields out again as I came... Mosser blocked one of his ramjets, unbalancing the centrifugal forces from the other one and ramming me away. He dented his ship and nearly burned out my shields, but threw me off him.

"Surfing. Shields 4", said Obie, and I was presented with the horrific view of a 20er homing on me fast! Had I been tumbling, I'd be harder to hit; as it was I threw full power and even tried to activate the depleted JATO rockets, just in case I could still pull any thrust out of them. Mosser followed, a bright yellow beam searing the empty space I would have been hadn't I banked only milliseconds before. Sweating cold, I managed to leave his sights by Mosser's belly, turned around his ship shooting the shields out and gained his top side.

"Grappler away", announced Obie as it fired the bow cable to the Courier's "neck" just abaft the bridge - which stuck on the unshielded hull - and deployed the landing gear. Just to be safe, I chaffed; if the missiles still locked on again, there is a very good chance they'd do so on Mosser's larger ship instead of on me. Mosser spun again, the grapppler's nanotube tether shortened even at the huge traction it was subjected to, and the two stern grapplers fired to a position abaft the first one and reeled in to align my ship with his. The fly was on my web, and I rough-landed on his back, securing the magnetic clamps. Obie controlled the thrusters to equalize with Mosser's frantic manoeuvring attempting to throw us off. "Obie, Bioscan targetting and blueprint."

"Life form found and targeted", he said. I could see Mosser's Courier over a spinning starry field, and my laser's cross-lines on the overlay of Mosser's biometric representation sitting in his bridge, still piloting unaware of how close his life was to end. I opened fire. It wouldn't be so easy for him, though. "Extreme prejudice", demanded Mack; if just shooting him with a plasma accelerator isn't extreme prejudice enough for this context, a 4MWER would certainly not do. I had only shot his shields again, for they had started to recover and were about to repel the grapplers.

"Your turn, Mack, but you might have to run if you want him still alive."

Mack nodded, released the crash net, gripped the "Jay killer" and went out to finish the job. I moved the target to the empty co-pilot's position beside Mosser and waited for Mack to arrive the bottom airlock and cycle through, burning out Mosser's shields from time to time. "I'm ready.", he finally announced.

"Obie, Bioscan Mack.", I ordered and saw a bioscan image overlaying on the cabin's external aft holo, waiting on the invisible airlock. He fumbled on his left arm and activated the combat stim I gave him. Boy, Is it THAT what it does to the organism!? Bloody hell, no wonder I'm stim binned every time, I don't want to think about what even the half-dose I gave him will do!

I fired, but now to punch a hole on Mosser's bridge ceiling and watched the atmosphere's white plume escaping through the hole. Mosser's image changed its status colour before a remlock activated as the pressure fell. To make him stop wiggling the ship, I kept firing and approaching the beam to his seat until I forced him out of it; had he kept jerking the ship, Mack could wind up floating away. "Mack, GO!", I PA'd. He unplugged the data cable from his zoot suit, breaking contact, and the open airlock sign lit. Until Mosser's computer is destroyed, I can't turn the jammer off least he transmits a resurrection code to wherever he clones himself. The rest of us will be able to see it properly later as Mack's got a holocamera on his helmet, right now all I can do is lean back and watch the bioscan's coloured silhouettes. According to the coroner reports on Mosser corpses, they all have a neural lace and reinforced redundant spines, and the scan confirmed it. Thus, he wouldn't even be in pain, probably just severely pissed off. He managed to go to the door, opened it, passed with difficulty because of the draft and closed it behind him. Now that Mack had entered Mosser's ship through its top hatch, the bioscan got a reference to calibrate properly, diagnostics showing some only minor damage on Mosser. Mosser was well, breathing, conscious and operational and Mack would have to contend with a very dangerous opponent...

Mack stopped at the lounge where Mosser was waiting for him, and the bioscan got interference from a large burst of energy. "Life form lost", said Obie, and corrected himself the next second when it locked on Mack again, right behind Mosser, holding him at knife point. They stood still for a moment, and... Mack moved away.

Mack moved away!!!

Oh boy, I'm most very seriously extremely fucked; it's the wrong Mosser!

Quexce Situation Report

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

EYES ONLY

Secure message Cripto level MAX

From:

Admiral Curtiss Smith,
CinC 1st Fleet
SB Embassy
Gomez City
Quexce

To:

The Spartacus

Re: Quexce situation report

Greetings!

To the point: this is not yet another of my doom predictions, Chief. This might come be my very last letter, so I'd better make it good. You often joke calling me your crow of storm, you even once dubbed me "Von Paulus" over his estimate on Rommel's Afrika Korps; unfortunately in two days I might meet my Stalingrad.

First, the operational situation:

Things went too well to be good and we are now drowned in our own success with too many novice brethren and too little ship space, and near chaos on the small planetary starport - further complicating our evacuation. From the previous experience with the Billies, even considering morale components, our predictions were that 10 to 20% of the released slaves would join us - 1000 persons at most; instead almost half the 7500 slaves in the system were so thrilled of being saved by THEIR navy that they volunteered "en masse" and we simply couldn't carry everybody at once.

Instead of a touch-and-go operation, we ended up with a logistics disaster and even with the support fleet's ships we are extremely hard-pressed for time to finish the evacuation before the Imps arrive, but we daren't leave anybody behind either least the Imps decide to go personal with them. This opinion is shared even by those who didn't choose to come with us, and the passenger transports that detoured to here are leaving loaded up to 250% their capacity; for us to succeed, we have been launching at 500%; our ships are too heavily armed to fit too many people and the four transports we brought were far too few. We've closed our recruitment posts some time ago, and are refusing last-moment "recruits" who just want a way out.

Our chronogram is absolute madness, we've been granted permission to use part of the starports as a military zone and are trying to operate our piece of the planetside backwater dirt pad as a major starport, handling hundreds of people and mis-jumping several ships per day, to discretely arrive by their own means at Deep Space 1.

As for me, I've been chosen to take care of my men, and I'll only depart on the last ship. If there is one, I mean.

Bleakening the situation, I believe for the first time in history, the Federal-Imperial Western border is effectively unprotected. The Empire sent just about every VI Protectorate ship in the zone, plus a battlegroup from the VII - as "backup", for you to get the proper idea. The Federation deployed its 3rd and 4th fleets, leaving the way to Earth nearly open until adjacent forces can fill in.

The Imperial intentions are clear, they're coming for us; as for the Feds, I think they came just for 'détente'.

If we can't evac in time, the worst-case cenario is if the Empire is felling bloody-minded, it might just forget Quexce is a neutral state, nuke us out of existence - Gomez city included - and then engage the Federal fleets should the Quexcean government ask for help; an all-out war between them can easily follow.

The middle case cenario, and the most likely: the Empire didn't yet recognized us as a legitimate government, and may demand the Quexceans to extradite us for charges of banditism and terrorism. The local government has recognized us, so they can't comply and the Imps may send special forces units to take our embassy to capture or

kill us, or engage our forces in a limited scale, violating the Quexcean territorial sovereignty in the process. In this case, the Quexceans may call for help, but probably they won't as they know as well as anybody that it may lead to open war; rather they'll turn a blind eye as long as the Imps don't threaten them... The Federation would have no excuse to intervene, but their simple presence should protect the system from any Imperial coup attempts. I can't really blame them for doing so - they don't owe us any favours, not after what we did!

It may happen that we hold the Imps off. A lot of potential embarrassment for the Empire, if we actually deliver some of them to the local police, I'd say, but then again it may lead to a full-scale invasion and/or war between the powers.

The best case scenario involves both fleets circling each other, maintaining the system in a mock siege for a while before they all go home bragging, but this is considered the most implausible of the three scenarios unless we evacuate in time. The best thing to do is to finish packing the ships as sardine cans and run, preventing the situation from deteriorating any further.

We both agreed Quexce wasn't a good idea, but the radicals in the Elegia got it their way and now we're at the edge of a major catastrophe; even if I actually manage to pull it off, they'll be gloating THEIR idea worked. Bah!

P.R.:

Good news at least in this department, our relationship with the locals is excellent at all levels. After the invasion of Williamson Base we took several Vipers and other equipment as war payment, as defined by our terms. However, and praise the psychiatrists, paying for the fuel was totally unexpected by the locals and heavily commented, earning us at least the benefit of doubt at that early stage and greasing the attrition on our relations.

When the government accepted our terms before the fleet's arrival, several riots broke out as the captives rebelled. The police and the defense forces found themselves severely undermanned, and some destruction occurred. I made a transmission addressing the rioters demanding calm and warning that if they didn't stop, we'd consider them as local common criminals. Eventually we offered the help of the two MARs stationed in orbit, who behaved in their prime even under all the difficulties; I'm proud of them. After initial suspicion by the slavist population, who expected the worse from us, our troops demonstrated the highest levels of discipline, professionalism and courtesy, and are now actually befriended with the local populace. The local Interpol agents - even those who fought against us - are positively biased towards us, as we worked side by side with them during the riots, and explained we also fight piracy. They actually didn't mind too much the loss of the Vipers, as they know they'll be used responsibly(?)^[1] for a good cause, and the Quexce government will have to replace them with brand new ones...

Unfortunately, soon the Quexceans discovered that we were open to negotiation in other matters excepting slavery, and asked us to deliver to justice some novices wanted for murdering their former masters. They claimed that the crimes took place after the armistice but before they joined us, putting them under local criminal law. Most of these were among the first to enlist, but we had to comply for our credibility's sake, no matter how hard it was on the morale.

Local politics:

The riots also had a severe impact on the local government; in the wake of the riots, a shareholders audit set out to find out why the security forces were so underpowered, and discovered that the previous Chamber of Commerce members had skimmed several millions off the defence funds. That's the kind of scandal that really shakes investors' trust, and in a corporate system that calls for a new board of Counselors, and another type of contracts on the previous ones. Just as a curiosity, the Chairman got a 30000Cr contract, and none were rated under 15000. Several of our pilots requested a leave of absence to try their luck, but there was no way I could spare them in our present situation.

Again, this turned out to be positive for us, as the new Chamber was already prepared to the new reality and our relations greatly improved (alas, it were them who demanded the delivery of the murderers, I said they were prepared).

News coverage:

Even with all our goodwill efforts and the local's friendliness, the news weren't kind to us. As expected, there is a blackout from the Empire; just a marginal news about the death of the head of the VI. I suspect that's the reason there are so many of their numbers here instead of (Border Defence)ing - they're here to avenge Cemiss and Zeaex, and to honour their deceased commander. I salute them, it's a pity they're the enemy!

The Federal reaction was surprising, though. They didn't pretend we didn't exist, but treated us in a distant way, unsure of what to say. The Times put a 5th page piece on a frontier system being attacked by an anti-slavery organization, and that was after everybody having already watched our ambush "live"... Maybe they're just embarrassed it weren't them bashing the Imps, or are waiting for an official position - which might be depending on the outcome of this crisis.

As for the others, the Alliance news mentioned us, but focused on the economic and migratory effects of the sudden end of slavery, and the Galatic News treated us quite roughly, accusing us of disrupting the peace of the galaxy with our Manifesto - which NOBODY published!

And that's it. Wish us luck, we'll really need it.

Fare well.
Your friend,

Smitty
(Adm. Curtiss Smith, CinC 1st Fleet)

[1] Sorry for the question mark, you know my opinion on this operation from the planning stage, and look what is happening!

Civil War

[Norman Mosser]

Quexce [-2,-2]

Norman Mosser's knee clicked as he walked down the steps leading from his Imperial Courier and into the docks at Williamson Base. This body was getting old. He usually changed bodies faster than any ageing could manifest itself, but this one was a good two years old now - it dated back to the complete snafu that his last trip to Achenar had turned into. His fault for buying cheap clones - but the high order ones were just too pricey. Still, hopefully the medical rig on the *Sunset* would sort it out. Shouldn't be long now.

A guard wearing the uniform of the Spartacus Brotherhood approached the ship. "Good day. As established in the Spartacus Manifesto I will be exercising my legal right to search your Courier for slaves and any found will be freed at your own expense."

"Do Gimps count?"

"What?"

"Do Gimps count as slaves? They are chained and everything, but it is entirely voluntary. Even the whole 'master-servant' thing."

"Are you taking the piss?" The guard put a hand to the handle of his electric nightstick.

"Just joking. Go ahead and look."

Five minutes later, after confirming that the Courier was free of slaves, voluntary or otherwise and after a 'donation' to the brotherhood funds to overlook the more exotic cargo, Mosser was free to leave. Conveniently this was roughly at the same time that Vasquith and Michael had extricated themselves from the crowd of curious technicians who were busily gawping at their invisible flying can opener. Already someone had cut themselves on the poorly defined leading edges of the wings. Mosser and Vasquith shook hands, "Sorry about earlier - I just couldn't find you in all the noise from the warfleet."

"Reckon they'll move in soon?"

"It depends on many things - politics, psychology, potential bad news stories it could kill. The monthlies aren't due out just yet, so there isn't any real impetus to start anything."

"I'm surprised they haven't locked the starport down to traders yet."

"You got searched didn't you?"

"True."

There was a brief pause, and Vasquith spoke again. "I'll level with you. What are we doing here? Who are we meeting and how does it pan out to the *Sunset*? And why is it so important that we are currently in one of the most dangerous systems in space?"

"All in good time. I have a table booked." Mosser hailed an autotaxi that shuttled them to a quiet restaurant on the edge of the spacer's facet. A sign on the window highlighted that it had been booked for a private party. Inside, the only tables in use had been laid together to make a larger table. Seated around it was a wide-ranging collection of dubious types - apparently from all walks of life engaged in conversation. Some had distinctive Imperial accents, others obvious Federation tones. One even talked with the Altairian patois. All of them were wearing small *Azure Sunset* pins.

"That's Roj Warfturn!" exclaimed Veruz "He's worth a quarter of a mill to the Imps."

Mosser looked at Vasquith. He was looking decidedly uncomfortable about these people. Time for introductions. "Gentlemen - and lady." A woman with Disoan eyes nodded. "May I introduce Mr De Havilland and Mr Veruz. They very kindly supplied me with some vital resources for this venture and should be considered partners on our scheme. Vasquith, Michael - may I introduce Sam Kemper, Roj Warfturn, John Anders, Benzedrine Moore, Annalise Berihn, and finally 'Lucky' Wal."

'Lucky' smiled and tossed a gold Imperial credit in the air. "What are the odds it was the location of the *Sunset*."

Mosser smiled. "I was hoping Frantic could have made it. His connections could have been useful. As it is, I think we have a good enough team. We've worked together before and we know the ship."

"And the pay is good" added Roj.

"Sam. Did you get the stuff sorted?"

"I did - the initiators and the magazine for them are loaded on the Lanner. Benny - Your crowd can take the Lanner in. Annalise - use the honeys and that steel booty of yours to cover them from badness." The three of them nodded their assent. Sam continued, "The rest of us will close in on the *Sunset* in our own ships. Once the area is secure, we'll board as one group and make our way down to engineering. The bridge is too much of a mess to use as a Command centre. Don't forget your armour though. There's a chance that the hull will be cheesed and we probably won't have time to fill all the holes on the move."

Mosser gestured to Vasquith and Michael. "I'll sort you with some suits."

There was a knock on the door to the restaraunt. Two Spartacus soldiers were outside. "Commander Mosser."

Norman frowned. "One moment," He rose and stepped to the door. The room seemed to noticeably chill and a number of hidden weapons started becoming less hidden. A curt gesture from Norman made everyone pause. "How can I help you?"

"You are to come with us - the Spartacus wants a word."

"He does, does he? It isn't a matter for the courts is it?"

"No, the word he used was business."

Norman shrugged, "Fine. But please convey to him that I am here as a representative of the government in exile of the Quator system as recorded in the Ackwada registry. I would also like to point out that I have not broken Spartacus Law nor do you currently have reciprocal extradition arrangements. As such, any hostile action taken against me will be considered as a rebuttal of my Ackwada established diplomatic credentials. Doing so counts as a rejection of the legitimacy of the Ackwada registry of governments and brings the legitimacy of your own government into question." Norman glanced at Veruz and winked, "The diplomacy card. Never leave home without it."

"Just come with us, sir"

Mosser nodded. De Havilland rose and gestured Veruz up. "I'm coming as well then."

"Are they from Quator as well?" enquired one of the soldiers.

"Nope. Just special advisors."

The guard grunted and escorted the trio to a waiting vehicle. The journey was relatively short and took them to some storage warehouses. Norman's sense of wrongness started to kick in. "Excuse me, but is this the right way?"

The driver responded by pushing a button. A brief whine sounded followed by a bright flash. The vehicle stopped dead. Mosser's neural lace shut down and everyone in the vehicle twitched involuntarily. The driver popped his hatch, dove out and fled.

"E.M.P!" hissed Vasquith.

Mosser reacted by diving to the floor of the car, dragging Vasquith and Michael down with him. The canopy of the ground car was shattered by a hail of gunfire. No lasers, just old fashioned lead. "An ambush then?" muttered Norman as a series of slugs hammered against the bodywork. Nothing was penetrating - yet. Norman gestured at the controls and asked, "How long do you need to get it started?"

"Forget it. It's cheap civilian crap – it's toast," replied Vasquith

"Right. Who has a gun?"

The answer was that they all did. All energy weapons. All cooked. Norman looked thoughtfully at the Deathwrecker. Vasquith smiled. "Are we both thinking the same thing?" asked Vasquith.

"Would it involve the highly unstable powerpack to this chunk of market-driven engineering?" replied Norman.

"It might."

"Here's the deal. You load me. I throw."

"Done."

Mosser popped his head up for a quick look as Vasquith set to work. Two gunmen with automatics were covering the vehicle. They gave him the courtesy of returning his curiosity with high-velocity shrapnel as he ducked back in. They were also stood next to each other and he had direction and range. "You ready?"

"Nearly."

"How long is the fuse?"

"About three seconds from when I drop it in your hand."

Norman cocked his arm and felt the weight of the Deathwrecker powerpack drop into it. It was already blisteringly hot. One. Two. Norman threw. Two and a half. There was a white flash and an explosion. When Norman's vision returned he popped his head. There were two shadows scorched to the wall and no sign of their assailants. "Cool!" exclaimed Michael.

It took an hour before the Spartacus Brotherhood finished interviewing them and they managed to get back to the restaurant. When they arrived, only Sam was left, drinking with the head waiter. "What are you doing back here Norman?"

"Eh?"

Sam frowned, "Show me your badge."

Norman frowned as well, but dug his ELITE badge out of his jacket pocket. "Sam, tell me when I was last here."

Sam poured himself a hefty double, downed it and replied, "About half an hour ago. You said that Spartacus had wanted to tweak the terms, but you had sorted it and then grabbed everybody together to leave for the *Sunset*. I said I'd settle up and sort out some final things before catching up."

"Fuck."

Sam picked up his communicator and dialled the starport, "Can I have the status of Imperial Courier NM001, it should be docked in bay 4." Norman heard the indistinct murmur of a response. "Thanks. Bye. Apparently you left fifteen minutes ago. Along with the Lanner, and all the other guys' ships."

"So the bastard poached the team. And stole my ship," Norman's datapad beeped. A new message:

All your Couriers are belong to us!

:-p

Norman threw his head back and shouted, "MOSSER!!"

Kitchen Knife

[Mack Winston]

Confrontation. In front of me was Mosser 2, apparently with a modified RemLok protecting him from the void. Modified - it hadn't sent him to sleep. Nor was it screaming out on every channel. He closed the door to the wrecked bridge. Air gushed into the room, and he removed the RemLok. He knew I'd be unable to strike him down until I had more manoeuvrability. I tore off the space suit and approached. Mosser grinned. There was that oh-so-familiar whine. The Deathwrecker. Mosser wouldn't be seen dead without one. Anger welled up inside me, as we wordlessly faced each other. "You drop a house on me, and now you come to kill me?" he asked, confidently, raising the Deathwrecker. I threw the flashbang, and shielded my eyes. The room lit up so brightly, I could almost see its details through my closed eyes. Mosser, on the other hand, staggered back, dropping the Deathwrecker. "Aaacckck!" he shouted, staggering backwards. In an instant, I was behind him, the horrific Imperial assassination knife to his... hateful neck. "Mack! What the fuck are you doing?" he shouted, his cool gone for a change - blinded, with a knife to his throat.

"I'm finishing the job I started in New San Francisco." I began to press the knife in for its fatal finale. "This is for Maria," I whispered viciously in his ear.

Puzzlement briefly overruled Mosser's racing thought processes. "Maria wants you to kill - aaagh", he said as the knife went in a bit deeper, "- me, why?"

"She's dead. Dead because of you, Mosser. You blew our cover and left us to twist in the wind. You chose to blow our cover, then not help us when our ship was disabled. The other Mosser at least helped us out. The third Mosser, who didn't help us, ended up dead. And you're next."

"Wait - Maria, DEAD?"

"Dead. We'd have been quite happy in Phekda, but you blew our cover and we were forced to leave. An Imperial assassin killed her."

Mosser 2 snarled. "Where did you get THAT batshit crazy idea? That I was responsible? That I blew your cover? The other Mosser helped you out because HE was following you, HE blew your cover, and HE needed you to deal with me and the other one!"

How could I have been so stupid? I reeled back, releasing Mosser 2 from my death grip. I turned to face him. I didn't sheath my awful knife - I kept it at the ready. I was speechless.

"Thank you," he said. "Now you've left me blind, I suppose I can't kill you just yet in revenge, but - "

"You're not blind," I replied, haltingly, still taking in the news. "You'll be flash blinded for a few minutes, that is all." We stood in silence for a couple of minutes. I collapsed into the corner of the room. How could I have missed it? How could I? Of course, Mosser 1 blew my cover to get me out to finish off Mosser 2 and 3. That's why he had continued to help. Because he needed me to finish off the surfeit Mossers. I considered my fate - Mosser 2 was still incapacitated - he staggered into the chair at the table. He'd still be blinded for a good fifteen minutes from the flashbang. If I left him to recover, would he turn around and kill me in revenge? Would he forgive me, since I had not slit his throat? Should I kill him anyway and be assured survival? Should I just make my exit? Maybe Maegil wouldn't run, and we'd get into a terrible space battle. Maybe Maegil would run and we'd be hunted like dogs.

"So, are you going to finish the job?" Mosser 2 finally said.

"Job?"

"Me. Kill me. Collect the reward the other Mosser will undoubtedly pay you."

"I... I don't know."

We lapsed into silence. "How did she die?" he added after a minute or so.

I told him. I told him everything - the assassin with the decapitation rifle, my butchering of the assassin, fleeing through the station, the woman who had planted a tracker on me. Everything, except for Kevin O'Connell's existence. Until Maria died, I didn't really care much what happened to him - he was just an employee. But he'd done something completely unexpected - supported me in my most vulnerable time. I was regretting getting him involved at all. I just wished he'd bugger off back home to New San Francisco where he should be safe - no one knew of his involvement, at least he hadn't been named in the press yet. But he had insisted on staying.

As if reading my thoughts, Mosser said, "You had a clone. Where did you get that from?"

"Maria had contacts," I said, trying to dismiss this line of questioning.

Mosser looked blindly towards where I was sitting. "You know, I even feel sorry for you, even though you've now tried to kill me twice."

I realised that telling Mosser about what happened to Maria had stirred my grief again. It wouldn't do to start sobbing in Mosser's presence, so I tried hard to suppress it. Perhaps I could control it by the time he could see again. My appetite for killing had gone; in fact, I wasn't really that bothered if Mosser picked up the Deathwrecker and shot me dead where I sat.

The Stranger

[Vera Sinclair]

Vera sat back in the easy chair on her ship to do some detective work. So who was the stranger who seemed to be helping Mack Winston get away? Fortunately, her hidden camera had got a really good picture of him. Several pictures. It also hadn't been hard to slip another tracker into his back pocket, the glue on the sticky version sticking permanently to the inside of his pocket. The ship he'd gone away in had hyperspaced out, but no worries - the galactic internetwork relays would soon pick up an opportune transmission from the tracker. It'd stealthily hide its signal in amongst any other opportune signal, rendering it undetectable - except to the intended recipient.

Vera fed the photo into her datapad, and began a search.

Interpol - nothing.

Federal Police - nothing.

Imperial Police - nothing.

Alliance - nothing.

It seemed unusual that anyone hanging around with Mack Winston would have lacked some kind of negative involvement with the cops. Next, she thought she'd request the surveillance camera network data from New San Francisco in the time surrounding that building being destroyed. The Feds would surely give her access, if she said she was working on capturing Mack Winston and had a good lead. But, to her surprise, the video was already on the Alliance Law Enforcement Database. The Feds were obviously so anxious about the issue they had already volunteered the information. She uplinked to ALED, and minutes later, had the complete video feed. There he was - with - she consulted another window on her display - Maria Hesketh-Duval, talking to Norman Mosser. Suddenly, Norman Mosser collapsed - shot. Then shot again. Police appeared. Mack Winston appeared again in another camera view - impossibly far from the intersection. And ran into another Mosser. How could he possibly have got from the intersection to that fire escape at a speed that seemed to defy the laws of physics? She reviewed the video twice. It was definitely him both times, and the time stamps were definitely correct.

Meanwhile, a wider search for the mystery man had completed. An information box popped up. Paydirt. Several matches - all in the North California region of Earth, Sol (0,0). None of it adverse - just fluff pieces in the press about small theatre work and street performers. There was a picture - the cast in a production of something called The Scottish Play. There - third from the left - was her mystery man. "From left to right ..." the caption read "... Kevin O'Connell". A name. The name made searching the remainder of the data from North California much faster.

Instantly, she had numerous matches - street performances, an impression act, mocking all the big nobs in the Empire. And a video clip. She snickered at the act - it was pretty funny, especially his impression of the Emperor, nearly dead as he was. Impressions. She searched more of New San Francisco's surveillance recordings. Her hunch was starting to work out - there was O'Connell - with Winston - going into a hotel. And some time later, out came Winston, Winston and Maria Hesketh-Duval. "Sneaky buggers," she said quietly, a smile finally breaking her severe look of days. It now fit together - Kevin O'Connell was doing a Mack Winston impression at the intersection, allowing the real Mack Winston to shoot the Mosser. Wherever Kevin O'Connell was, Mack Winston was. Wherever the tracker was, Kevin O'Connell was - or at least, his back pocket was. That would likely leave a sufficient trail.

She checked ALED again, and smiled. The tracker had reported! Quexce! A location. Quexce. Sounds familiar. She checked the local news. Sweet Mother of the Worlds, why did they have to go to the one place which looked like the flashpoint of an interstellar war? Her ship slipped berth. Her little Saker would surely go un-noticed as she threaded her way through the battling titans...

Down The Rabbit Hole

[Kim Stenson / Vasquith de Havilland / Norman Mosser / The Ghost]

He had jumped into Quexce half a day after the Saker, but found its Hyperspace cloud remnant without too much difficulty. The Saker itself was another matter. It was as if it had some kind of invisibility shielding. He couldn't find it anywhere in the system. Couldn't find it heading in system either. The only thing he could do was head to the population centres himself and go looking. The navigation computer listed two major starports: Williamson Base, a trading post, and Gomez Starport, a planet based port. Which one? Not wanting to waste any time, he set the automatic pilot for Gomez.

Then he noticed the gathering fleets.

Holy crap, he whispered to himself. There was more firepower in those two fleets than Interpol had at its entire disposal! It was a mind numbing show of power. They had to be here because of that Spartacus Brotherhood, he realised. Where had the trouble been? Williamson Base. Would this de Havilland person go there? Or avoid it because of the recent troubles? It all depended on his motives in coming to this system. Was he meeting up with Norman Mosser here? Or was it just another stop of many? Had he hyperspaced out already? Or was it a misjump? His mind boggled with so many possibilities, but he was only one man and could only track down one idea at a time. He had to trust his instincts. And they said de Havilland was here, somewhere. There was no information on de Havilland in the Interpol databases, yet traffic reports indicated that an old ship of his, the *Vagabond*, had been flying around the frontier for several years. So he was obviously a seasoned, yet law abiding citizen, up until now. Norman had a tendency to dock at space stations when he had the choice - that was in his file. Maybe Williamson Base was the right call. He checked the system stats. It was registered as an Independent system, but the populated worlds within were under corporate control. Well one of them was. The other was under Spartacus control. That meant he should have some pull as an Interpol agent down below, and hopefully had enough money to grease a few palms up above. In this day and age, discretionary funds were critical to his job. He made a call to both the traffic control centres and after transmitting his identification, found both to be quite helpful. Once the Spartacans were sure he didn't have any slaves and wasn't part of a movement to recapture the place, they were quite polite. Both Starports promised to beam him a message if a Saker Mk III landed at either of their ports.

Satisfied he had done everything he could for the time being, Stenson settled in for the long flight in system.

The call had come in. He had had to wait several days in a parking orbit above the planet, but now he had what he needed: Williamson Base. Currently occupied by the Spartacus Brotherhood. Upon landing his ship had been detained in a common facility and searched rigorously. More so than other ships. He saw a search crew sweep through three other ships in the time it took for his to be completed. He hoped they didn't get upset with the usual Interpol package. If they wanted to charge him with spying, things could get messy. He looked around for the Saker while he waited, but no avail. The search crew finally left his ship and said their goodbyes amongst a set of smiles and waves. So much for the propaganda. It still burned that Interpol had no information on these people. Either that, or they stole some expensive Interpol equipment. Sealing the ship, he decided to investigate more thoroughly. The huge chamber was packed with ships, people, ferry bots and cargo movers. There was a frenetic atmosphere to the place; the people were moving fast, knocking into each other, yelling, cursing. Whistles and sirens tried to gather some form of control, but the people were in chaos. Either they were trying to get off the base, but the Spartacus checkpoint was slowing them all down, or they were trying to get onto the base, for heaven knew what reason. A new set of red klaxons began flashing around the makeshift landing bay as a ship fired up its manoeuvring thrusters and began to move off towards the airlock.

Then he saw it.

Or to be more precise, he didn't see it. As the lumbering Lion Transport ship moved off, its exhaust plumes blossomed out the rear... and then disappeared. It was as if something was blocking him from seeing the flames. It wasn't a regular shape though. It looked kind of like a...Saker! Stenson rubbed his eyes in shock. Yes! There was a ship there, but it was painted in some special black paint that made it nigh on invisible in the shadows near the far end of the chamber. Excited, he gave up all pretence of casualness and made a bee-line for the ship. Once he got closer, he moved to the walls and slinked through the darkness, moving from cargo crate to crate until he was a useful distance away.

This was definitely the ship. He could feel it. But where was Mosser's Courier? Maybe de Havilland wasn't meeting him then. Maybe that was best. His target was Mosser, but it could be useful to have a conversation with de Havilland, alone. He patted his pockets, feeling around until he found what he was looking for. Smiling, he approached the stealthed Saker.

* * *

"So you're saying the other Mosser is in league with the Spartacus Brotherhood?" de Havilland asked as they rushed back through the throngs of people to reach the ship centre.

"It's starting to look that way. I can be a real treacherous bastard, can't I? I still can't believe I stole my ship off myself," Mosser replied, the words falling out as if they were foreign and by putting together in a sentence made no sense.

"Stop talking like that," de Havilland replied, "you're confusing me."

They stopped at a crossroads in the artificial street, outside a derelict building. Or at least what looked like a derelict building. "First things first. I need to remedy the mistake I made earlier," Norman told them. He rapped his knuckles on the door. Several moments went by without a single noise from within the building. Withdrawing a newly replaced Deathwrecker, he took aim at the door. He fired off a single shot, the centre of the door exploding inwards, the perimeter fragmenting and collapsing to the ground. The shockwave blew around and past him, singing his hair slightly and giving him a sunburned look. He turned to face de Havilland with an insane smile on his face. "After you," he grinned.

De Havilland shook his head, amused despite himself, and stepped through the crater that used to be a door, the edges still glowing pale orange. Norman followed in after him to find a terrified little man crouched in the corner, covering his eyes and shaking like a wet dog. "When Norman Mosser knocks, then you bloody open the door, fool."

At the mention of the name, the man took a hand away from his eyes, then seeing Mosser, actually relaxed. "Hey Zeus Norman! At least some warning!" The little man got to his feet and wiped himself down, dust and ash coating his body.

"I'm in a hurry, Zim. I need some utensils. Now."

"I'm, umm...all out of your usual Norman. I'm sorry."

"No problem," Norman said, waving off the man. "I was looking for something a little older."

"Older?" the man asked nervously.

"Have you ever heard the expression 'lead poisoning'?"

The man visibly relaxed and a twisted smile played across his face. Obviously, this was an area of particular interest to him. "Maybe you should come out the back," Zim said, ushering them through a rear door. The rickety building got worse, the further they went into it. De Havilland couldn't help the engineer within from eyeing up the structural beams, calculating fatigue, Young's Modulus and Mohr's critical stress loading. After all he had been through, he didn't want to die in some rat infested shit hole like this. He dragged himself back to the events at hand when Zim opened a chest hidden within the floor. "These are the last two I have," the man admitted. He pulled two hand sized metal objects out from the chest. He wiggled his right hand. "This is a six shooter, forty five calibre, Single Action Army Colt Peacemaker. Adopted by the United States of America Calvary in 1873 and the most prevalent gun in the old wild west." De Havilland stared at the gun, dumbfounded. It wasn't just a weapon. It was a piece of art. Nothing like the mass produced rubbish found in the interstellar age.

"I'll take that one," he blurted out, already in love.

"But I haven't told you about the other one," Zim replied aghast, as if not completely his pitch terrified him.

Norman chuckled. "My friend here is quite passionate about his weapons, Zim. I don't think you'll change his mind."

Zim looked crestfallen, but handed over the revolver along with a small box. "Bullets," Zim offered to de Havilland's confused expression.

"Of course." De Havilland played with the weapon experimentally. The hand grip was wood. Old, hard and varnished. Somehow, it felt warmer than that of a metallic laser weapon. The balance was superb and the odd curved back handle allowed the gun to rock back and forth easily. Finally, he took aim at the far wall and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

"It's a single action revolver," Zim yelled, grabbing the weapon back. "You have to cock the hammer back yourself." He grabbed the box of bullets back and began stuffing them into the revolving cylinder in the middle of the gun. "The protruding rim on the cartridge keeps it from sliding through the cylinder. The casing is filled with black powder. Explosive!," he yelled, emphasising with his hands." Satisfied, he handed it back to de Havilland.

"And this is over a thousand years old?" he said, still awe-struck by the polished and deadly weapon.

"Of course not. It's a replica." De Havilland frowned.

"Don't worry," Zim assured him. "It's built to the same blue prints as the originals, and its definitely a working model. Trust me." A thin smile spread across the mans lips.

"Ok," de Havilland said, smile back on his face. He put the ammo and the gun into the satchel slung over his chest, a present from Sam. "Will it go through armour? Shields?" He asked. Zim shrugged.

"It's a .45, which is pretty big. Who knows? Probably not shields. Maybe through non powered armour though. It'll make a mess of anything that gets in the way though." Zim then turned to Mosser, extending his left arm with the second projectile weapon.

"I guess the CCH "Ambassador" is all yours then. This one is a semi automatic. Takes 12mm bullets in a clip." He ducked down into the chest and came out with a fistful of rectangular metal slabs. He gestured to the hand grip of the weapon. "Just press this button, then ram one of these in. Each press of the trigger fires one bullet. You have fifteen in a clip."

Norman weighed the gun in his hand, then satisfied, dropped it into his second holster. "Outstanding Zim. Outstanding." Norman dug into a pocket, fished out a platinum coin, then flicked it to the guns salesman, who dived forward to catch the coin, as if to drop it was to lose it forever. "We'll see ourselves out."

"Was that a kilo-cred?" de Havilland asked quietly, once they were back on the street." Norman smiled.

"He's been good to me over the years. About time he was reimbursed properly. Maybe I'm just getting old," he said, testing his arms, "But I'm starting to get the feeling I'm better off with more allies than enemies."

De Havilland nodded. "Good policy."

"Hey!"

The two of them turned to find Sam Kemper and Michael Veruz running up to them. "Well?" Norman asked impatiently. Sam shook his head, then went quiet.

"I'm sorry Norman." De Havilland gathered that the apology was for more than just his inability to find the men who reproduced the emitters to try and make a further copy.

"We're just going to have to make do with what we've got. We have to hurry."

"Shall we take my ship?" Sam asked, but Norman shook his head.

"No, de Havilland's little Saker will be a lot faster. Besides, your ship is booby trapped to the gunwales." Sam stopped in his tracks.

"What who? Why?"

"Why, me of course. The other one."

"How can you be so sure?" Sam asked. Norman raised an eyebrow. "Never mind," replied Sam, feeling foolish.

"We should go have a look anyway. See if we can salvage anything from her." Norman turned to de Havilland and Veruz. "We'll just be a few minutes. Get your ship powered up and ready to go." The foursome split into pairs as they ran for the ship housing deck.

The familiar whine of a laser pistol warming up. Behind him. "Vasquith de Havilland?" an old, raspy voice from behind.

De Havilland turned around slowly, raising his hands in the air. "You've got the wrong guy," de Havilland smiled. He eyed up his opponent. The man was probably around his own age, but looked older; grey hair and a good dose of wrinkles. Any sign of weakness in the flesh did not carry over into the mans cold, blue eyes however. This was a man not to be taken lightly. The L&F 'Detective Special' in his hand looked firm and in control, the arm not fully outstretched, but also low, not at eye level. This man knew how to handle weapons. Yes, de Havilland sighed, he could be in trouble here. Where was Veruz?

"Really? My records indicate that Vasquith Timothy de Havilland has orange hair and has a rare genetic disorder, which makes the whites of his eyes blue." The man paused for effect. "But I suppose there could be more than one person matching that identity, flying a Saker which I have been tracking since it blasted its way out of the New Rossyth Starport over a month ago." De Havilland tried to cover the flash of surprise and fear which coloured his expression, but judging by the smile on his assailants face, he failed. "I think it's time you and I had a heart to heart."

Movement. Behind the assailant. Slow, steady. Nothing but a shadow. Michael Veruz. De Havilland concentrated on his opponents face, determined not to let anything slip. "Who are you?" de Havilland asked.

"Kim Stenson. Interpol." De Havilland relaxed his tense shoulders, and sighed in relief.

"Then what do you want from me? I haven't committed any crimes."

"Two months ago, I would have agreed with you."

"What do you want from me?"

"Norman Mosser of course." De Havilland got the feeling this man knew about as much about him as he did. It could be dangerous to lie.

"Sorry. I need him more than you do." Stenson paused briefly, probably unprepared for de Havilland's honesty.

"He's a dangerous criminal, and by associating with him, you are going to go to prison for just as long as him."

"Better imprisoned than dead," de Havilland replied with a straight face. The movement in the corner of his eye was closer. It sped up-

-just as Stenson withdrew a second pistol from his belt and stretched his left hand out behind him, stopping Veruz in his tracks, a metal plank raised above his head. De Havillands jaw dropped in surprise. This guy is good! "And this must be Michael Veruz. Don't sneak around in synthetic shoes on a polished floor. Amateur!" Stenson wagged the pistol towards de Havilland. Veruz dropped the metal plank and slowly moved over to join de Havilland. "About Norman Mosser. I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist."

"What about me?" Boomed a voice across the landing bay. Stenson spun his head around, swinging one of his weapons around...

...to see Norman Mosser strutting straight towards him, the Ambassador out and facing the Interpol Agent. Sam, at a slight angle to Norman, was also closing in, a Diplomat fastened between his fists. Sensing the standoff, Veruz pulled his own weapon out and aimed at the Interpol agent, but de Havilland shook his head at the youth and he slowly lowered it.

"Two to one. The question is, how brave do you feel?" Norman asked Stenson. Stenson's head flicked back from one set of opponents to the other. De Havilland could see the calculations flashing by behind the mans eyes. How badly did he want Mosser? He might- Stenson spun towards Mosser and fired! But it was a wild shot, hasty, no aim, because he was sprinting in the opposite direction, ducking behind landing gear of surrounding ships, firing loose shots to cover his exit.

"We'd better go after him. He'll get Interpol down on us so hard-"

"No Sam, we don't have time," Norman explained. He turned to de Havilland. "You boys ok?" The two nodded, then Norman smiled. "Your first run in with the law as a criminal huh? Don't worry, it won't be your last."

De Havilland felt sick to the stomach. He had tried to deny it, but both Stenson and Norman had hammered the thought home. He was a criminal. He had broken an old promise. And there was no turning back.

* * *

The queue for departure was long, delaying them even further. After the incidents at Williamson Base, Mosser # 2 was probably more than a day ahead of them. And in this race, there was no prize for coming second. Michael sat at the controls, while de Havilland sat in the co-pilots seat, rummaging through the code for the hyperdrive computer. "You know you shouldn't play with that," Norman warned him.

"Do you want to beat yourself to the AZ or not?" de Havilland replied without looking up. The banging, rummaging and sirens from outside the ship were managing to find their way in, crowding de Havilland's brain with noise while he tried to concentrate on what he was doing. Norman was right. Messing around with the hyperdrive computer - the sole piece of technology that could successfully navigate a starship through the tricky realms of Witchspace without hitting suns, planets and nebula - was a stupid idea.

Witchspace was, for all intents and purposes, a fifth dimension, where most physical rules such as time either did not apply or functioned differently. Gravity however, seemed to be a constant, and the effects of objects in three dimensional space could still be felt in five dimensional space. Thus when flying through Witchspace, the gravity shadow, generated by large masses, had to be bypassed. Although the planet might not exist in Witchspace, its gravity did and if the ship entered the gravity well during Witchspace, where physics were more dangerous than understood, the consequences were terrible, dramatic and final. So commercial hyperdrives gave gravity shadows a wide berth, with a large factor of safety. But if the hyperdrive was fast enough, or the mass or the ship was low enough, this factor of safety could be reduced, and the ship would have enough speed to escape the gravity without dire consequences.

And that's what de Havilland was doing now. The only reason he could even access the code was because it was an experimental AAI shipyards ship and not fully locked down for the civilian market. He wasn't changing the algorithms, or the calculation routines. That would be suicide, unless he was a specifically trained engineer. He was just going to change the factor or safety. But first he had to find it.

"We're emerging into space," Veruz warned. De Havilland looked up as the various airlock doors flashed by in a hypnotic stream of colours. Then the blackness of space. Interspersed with the white of juggernaut military capital ships. Hundreds of them.

"Holy Crap," muttered Sam.

"Its an invasion force. We're out of time."

* * *

"All ships are ordered to power down and prepare to be boarded. Any resistance will be meet with total force. You have thirty seconds."

"What do we do Cap'n?" Veruz asked. Norman watched the young co-pilot panic as de Havilland ignored him, still tapping furiously away at the computer console. "Cap'n!" Veruz repeated, louder.

"Sssh."

Veruz turned to Norman and Sam. "I think de Havilland is trying to tell you to 'buckle up'. If you don't mind," Norman replied, gesturing to the pilot's chair. Veruz gave up the seat immediately, making space for the more seasoned pilot. Norman looked behind him. Sam and Veruz were standing, hands grabbed onto whatever they could find around the back of the cockpit. He then turned back to de Havilland.

"How are you going?"

"There's no VAT in the system," de Havilland replied. "Variable Allocation Table," he added. "I'm having to go through the whole thing. Search is taking awhile."

"I need a time."

de Havilland paused thinking. Seconds ticked by. "All vehicles not currently powered down have fifteen seconds to comply before they are destroyed," boomed the voice.

"Vasquith," Norman urged.

"Five minutes. Maybe ten." Veruz gasped and Sam shook his head. "We're not going to make it."

"Why don't we just make the jump without these modifications?"

"We can't make the changes once we're in hyperspace, and you can't just stop mid-jump. We don't have the time. We need to get to the AZ before the other me," explained Norman. He looked back to the men behind him, then back to de Havilland, looking for something, but not finding it.

"Looks like the Imperial fleet is coming in at high velocity. That should make things interesting," he said cryptically.

"Hold on tight gentlemen!" and Norman threw the prime movers to full power. The ship lurched forward. The cosmos exploded in light.

It had been awhile since he was behind the 'wheel' of such a small ship, but the specialist skills came back to him without a single hesitation. The body was still fast, despite its age, and his mind was even faster. Lances of light splashed across the darkness of space, threading a web of energy and death all around the Saker. He had once been the sole target of an entire Imperial fleet, the Fifth Protectorate, but he had been in a bigger ship. A special ship. But this ship was special too. He thanked his lucky stars that the Darkpaint made it practically impossible for anyone to lock a missile onto him. In the blackness of space, the only thing that gave away his position was when he blocked out stars, the engine wash from the prime mover and when he fired the NPA, which he did sparingly. The Federation fleet launched their small fighters to try and ferret out both the Saker and other ships that hadn't complied with the earlier order. Engines at maximum and hands dancing over the controls, Norman cut a swathe through the fighters, the NPA slicing through the thin hulls and turning them into confetti. He felt invincible. He felt alive. His weapon tore apart ship after ship, and the superior agility of the Saker kept him out of the crosshairs of the capital ship gunners, while the dark paint made him a hard target for the fighters. As adrenaline coursed through his body, he felt in control of the universe itself.

But then a lucky shot glanced across the starboard stabiliser fin, sending the Saker into a death spin. Men went flying through the cockpit as Norman battled desperately to right the ship. He pulled out of the spiral with an inverted loop then spun back around and levelled out, back in the thick of things. But the dynamics of the furball had changed. Where he had been the hunter, now he was the hunted. He couldn't shake the pesky Falcons off his tail. "I think we might be in trouble," Norman mumbled, sweating from the concentration. The NPA went silent as Norman spent all his effort on avoiding the beams of red and orange energy flickering above and below the Saker. He imagined the Saker looked like an energy flower with all the manoeuvring jets launching plasma out from every orifice of the ship in all directions as the ship continually fought against its own inertia. Space was a bitch like that. He assumed they had locked onto his exhaust vent and were tracking him with infra red. That made it a bit harder.

"Hey, Norman, is that your ship?" Sam yelled, pointing over his shoulder to the viewscreen. Norman risked a quick glance. It was indeed an Imperial Courier, but it wasn't trying to escape. It was flying directly for the flagship of the Federation.

"A good copy, Sam. It should have an old Imperial navy Friend or Foe system inside." Norman replied, before getting back to work. Evasion was taking more and more effort now as squadron after squadron piled out of the federation capital ships, targeting him explicitly. He fired the NPA sporadically, causing instant death if he found his target, but more often than not, just hitting empty space. Then a gigantic explosion rocked the Saker about, setting off a series of alarms.

"The Courier just blew!" Veruz exclaimed.

"Do you think the Imperials saw that?" Norman asked. The cockpit went silent for a few moments.

"Son of a bitch," said Sam. "Frantic did it."

The number of lasers criss-crossing the stars around the Saker visibly dropped. He knocked off a few more fighters, then found himself in empty space. Swinging the ship around, he centred the view screen on the two fleets. The Imperial fleet was now focusing all of its energy on destroying the Federation fleet, who were scampering back from around Williamson Base to tackle their ancient foe. The cockpit was stunned into silence. Finally after several minutes of silence, Veruz spoke up. "Did we just start an interstellar war?"

"This is just the start kid," Norman replied.

"Ok, lets go," de Havilland spoke up.

"Cap'n!" Veruz yelled.

De Havilland made eye contact with the young man. "I know Veruz. I know. It's too late now. We'll just have to deal with it."

"That Stenson guy is going to put us on the Galaxies most wanted list. We'll never be able to set foot in a civilised galaxy again!"

Sam slapped the back of Veruz's head. "Get it together kid. Mosser and I are still here, living on the run isn't that hard. We'll make it through. The galaxy wont destroy itself that easily."

Sam looked at Mosser for encouragement, who nodded. "Right then. How much time do you think we'll save, de Havilland?"

"Hard to say. We should get there just before them. Hopefully"

Norman pulled the hyperspace levers back. "Let's find out."

* * *

Once he realised his calculations had been wrong, it was too late. The *Azure Sunset* lay directly ahead, about 2 AU distant, slowly circling a large gas giant, scooping up hydrogen in preparation for another jump. But the most troubling aspect was the Imperial Courier directly ahead. With an Asp Explorer attached. There were several hyperspace exit clouds spread around the area. Then they suddenly came alive as several ships exploded into existence. "Well this is going to be interesting," Norman said dryly.

* * *

Frantic was a ghost. He didn't exist. Not in any official databank, not on paper. Even in people's minds, he flittered through so fast, they just wrote him off as a figment of their imagination. But he did physically exist. And so did his Organisation. And certain people in this organisation were getting curious, maybe even concerned, at how events were shaping up in the galaxy. Some divisions secretly applauded the actions, but some were annoyed that anyone other than them was influencing the galaxy so greatly. Such a split in the Organisation was dangerous. So Frantic was here to try and get an understanding of what was happening, and hopefully reel in events to a more controlled level. More controlled, as in only one Norman Mosser. Even one was one too many, but at least it was tolerable. Information was crucial to him. He was nothing without it. It allowed him to strip a problem down to its bare essentials and figure out what to do. It allowed him to be in the right place at the right time.

Such as standing next to Sam Kemper's ship, right now, on Williamson Base, just as Norman Mosser and his sidekick were walking towards him. Releasing his hand from the hilt of his diamond sword, he ran a hand through his dark hair. This is it.

"Frantic, good to see you. I didn't think you would make it."

"I don't work for you Norman, so I don't come at your beck and call. You however still are a contractor to my business and so you are expected to come to mine." Norman seemed a bit taken aback by the bluntness of his retort. Harsh, maybe. They were 'friends', but it was important to keep Norman in his place. "Let's see your badge first," Frantic said. Norman was already bringing it out, as if it was some ritual he was used to. It wasn't a fake; the red blood still looked as if it was real, slowly dripping down the front of the golden bird of prey. "We don't have much time, Norman. The fleets are almost on our doorstep. You need to escape and you need Mosser # 2 killed. We need some help with our cloning processes. I'll fix your two problems if you fix mine."

"I'd be interested in how you are going to fix both those problems," Norman replied curtly, not appreciating the business tone of the conversation.

"I have a spare Courier," Frantic replied off hand. "And without giving too much away. I want to make a clone to destroy your clone. The details do not concern you at this stage, but I know it will be beneficial to you."

"High Fidelity clones are quite pricey and technology something that can't be tossed around willy-nilly," Norman replied, seeming to weight up his options.

"A lower quality clone would probably do for what I have in mind," Frantic conceded. They had the equipment all set up for the cloning process, but the software that would correctly map the intricacies of the human mind was a little harder to come by. To get access to that technology, you had to be either an Imperial Prince or Norman Mosser. Or convince Mosser to give you a copy. Although he would have preferred the top line cloning systems, a lower fidelity setup would be acceptable. It was going to be a short term clone anyway. Norman's face was as still as a slab of granite, not a hint of emotion pushing through his façade as he thought through the permutations of what this would mean to him. As Frantic predicted, Norman came out to the same conclusion as he. Frantic had predicted how this whole scenario would occur before it happened. It was his gift. He wouldn't have got to where he was today without it.

Sighing, Norman reached into his jacket and pulled out a datapad. "This should get you what you need." He extended his hand out to Frantic, who reached to grab it, but Norman pulled back at the last second. "On the condition that you make a few spares for me. I seem to be running low on...reliable ones."

Frantic smiled. "Of course." He hurried off to meet his crew.

The old Taipan was starting to look a little beaten up. But that was just its look. Inside, it was bristling with brand new computers and technology that wouldn't reach the civilian market for at least twenty years, if ever. You had to have an edge. He straightened his belt and donned his blue shaded sunglasses. Unlike the Taipan, he did pride himself on his looks. His navigator, Tracey, rushed forward and gave him a small, but discreet salute. "Is the *Apoc* ready to fly?" Frantic asked her.

Tracey nodded. "Jim has just finished rigging up the fuel cells for their final dance."

"Ok then," Frantic nodded, before taking once last view of the disordered chaos around him. "We've got a clone to make. Let's go," as he followed Tracey up the boarding ramp into the Taipan.

They had a great view of the battle. Perfect. Naturally, Norman would respond as he did, and even more predictably, the Federation decided to punish him. The most predictable set of players at the table however, were the Imperials. They were closing in, retros on full burn, raring to join in the fray. Frantic knew that they wouldn't want the Federation exerting too much influence before they were there to counteract it. Still, it was doubtful they would actually come to blows. Unless the Federation attacked a ship of the Imperial Royal Family.

He saw Norman's Saker take a hit and go spinning away, holding the attention of the Federation ships, until it was too late. For bearing down on the flagship was the rigged Imperial Courier. Faked Friend or Foe recognition, broadcasting so loud it could be heard across several systems, and an engine, primed to explode, packed with extra fuel, just so the Imperials couldn't miss it. It was like watching his own opera. All the pieces were in place. Now he just had to let them unwind and go through their motions, exactly as he had planned. Too late, the Federation saw the Courier on a collision course. Their laser batteries immediately turned to face the new threat and quickly extinguished it. They felt the shockwave over thirty kilometres away, buffeting the Taipan, despite the shields dissipating most of the energy.

Then all hell broke loose. An effective declaration of war between the two biggest navies the galaxy had ever seen. That should keep everyone busy to allow him, and the HPA to slip through away, ready for the next mission.

"Power up," he told Tracey, who reignited the prime mover. That was against the Federations direct order from ten minutes ago, but he doubted that they would notice his insubordination. The Taipan winked out of existence.

We Did It?

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

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

"Sir, the Federal fleet will be in range in 4 minutes, and the Imps in 8. Both fleets are deploying fighters which can arrive sooner, though," said the Quexcean traffic controller.

"And how long for the launching of our next transport?"

"4 minutes, and then it's your turn. Your pilot reported to be ready, but it's going to be tight. You're coming out almost in the middle of them."

Admiral Smith sighed. His mission was, for all due purposes, successfully completed. He had abolished slavery in Quexce, evacuated all the novices and now the last Imp Trader was departing with the 1st MAR's remaining troops. All but himself and the two men with him in the station's traffic control, who would return the station to Quexcean control as his last administrative act before leaving in a Falcon.

If there was still time, that is. "Mr. Duran, it was a personal pleasure to know you. Again, the best to you."

"Do take care of Captain Stahl for me, do you hear me?"

"We take care of our own, you already came to know our ways. Don't worry, son."

Everybody stood in silence for a brief, awkward moment. The traffic controller cleared a Saker for take off, and time returned to normal. "Well, let's go then, or are you waiting for a formal invitation!", joked the Admiral to his aides.

The dock was nearly silent now, quite unlike the state of pandemonium it was in when he arrived. There was a Courier being moved by the docking lift and the Trader was closing its airlocks. His ship was one of the few still in the bay, and once he left Duran would signal the fleets about the station having been returned to the Quexcean government, being neutral territory.

As he boarded his ship, he dared to smile to himself; the Trader was being loaded. We did it! We actuall...

The station was rocked by an explosion, and he almost lost foot. He opened way between his aides with a sense of dread, hasting to the fighter's cockpit and asked the pilot what had been that. WAR, that's what had happened. The Courier that had just left activated an IFF and went straight at the Feds, who obliged.

The Empire has cruel, strange ways to take revenge upon its enemies; in our case they put a blood-dripping knife in our hand, right in front of the galaxy's eyes. That made us become the galaxy's most hated organization in a simple, insidious, treacherous and irrevocable way.

The ship shuddered from the elevator's motion, but Smith knew it was too late.

Stone Cold

[Mack Winston]

"Her name was Selene. They killed her to get at me." Mack Winston looked up at Mosser. He walked over to the autochef and started punching in commands. "Riedquat, or Sol style?"

"Riedquat."

"Too late - I've called up Sol style. Give your palate some flavour for a change."

Mack glanced at where the Deathwrecker lay. It was on standby and humming invitingly. "Go ahead if it makes you feel better" added Norman

"Aren't you blind?"

"Neural lace. I'm on home turf. It does some maths and based on what it knows - where I last was, layout of room, your height and so on and overlays a wireframe onto my optic nerve. It error corrects every time I touch something or I hear something."

Mack's heart sank even lower. So much for getting him while he was vulnerable. If he could muster up some fight, he supposed he could get the Deathwrecker and still kill him. Another Mosser down. But then, he still had time, and might get some answers. Best humour the madman for a bit, "Selene?"

"That was her name. Freighter commander. Kept bumping into each other, started bumping into each other. She found out what I did and wanted me to stop. I was going to, but someone found out. She was jumped by twelve Harriers in Altair. They're all dead now." The last sentence was delivered in a particularly flat tone, uncharacteristic of Mosser's normally florid language. It was punctuated by the ping of the autochef. Two Sol style coffees, their aroma wafting into the room. Norman handed one to Mack. No immediate caffeine hit, but it had something that Mack had not encountered in coffee for a long time. Flavour.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"To let you know I've been there. Been so angry it hurts. Wanted to kill everyone and everything involved with the situation."

For a brief moment, Mack was about to let it drop there. But a memory of Maria, asking the right questions, and finding out where the money really was came into mind. "What's the real reason?"

Mosser smiled "You're starting to think. Simple. The more we talk, the more we empathise, the less likely you are to pick up that Deathwrecker, or that knife and kill me." Mack started. The bastard. All he was doing was trying to save his own skin. He stood up and walked over to where the Deathwrecker lay. "Let me finish. I can tell you some more. I don't know where the other Mosser has been for the past few years, but I can guess his reasons for blowing your and Maria's cover." Mack was curious. "First up. Because you are good enough to take down a Mosser. You brought down Carstein - with a knife."

"This knife."

Mosser paused before continuing, "That knife. The other is that if you wanted to and were smart, you could use it as a way out. I'm sure that certain authorities would ignore past - indiscretions if you gave them a pile of dead Mossers."

"Like yourself."

"Like myself. But then if you force me to choose between myself and yourself. I'll always go with me."

Mack sighed. Mossers were all the same. They always projected that aura of invulnerability.

"It's up to you whether you chose to believe me. The galaxy is so big that people can pretty much get by believing whatever they like. You pick the truth that you like the most and go with it."

"Seems a poor way of doing things."

"It's why I made so much money."

Again, Mosser's words were doing what they did so well. Leaving nasty stains on people's psyches. He could probably talk some ordinary law-abiding person into becoming a feared criminal. In fact, Mack recalled, he had. Back on Barnards star. Many years ago. To a naive trader with a passion for astronomy who happened to be related to someone important. The anger rose, a cold fire burning away everything in its path. "Norman?"

"Yes" he said turning his face towards Mack.

The scalding hot coffee hit Mosser full in the face, "Aaaaarrrrgggh!!" screamed Norman as the hot, sweet liquid burned his features.

Mack was already diving across the ground towards the Deathwreaker. It nestled into his hand as if it should have been there all along. The barely-contained charge purred down the handgrip and it came up to firing position easily. No safety, so Mack just pointed and fired. Decompression alarms sounded as the shot tore through Mosser and punched a hole in the bulkhead between the cabin and the bridge. The atmosphere started to vent through the hole and Mack felt chilled by the breeze. He reached down, pulled the Remlok over his head and started breathing air again. Looking down, he noticed that Mosser's ruined body was still twitching. No charge in the Deathwreaker for a headshot. Mack shrugged - the oxygen starvation would kill him in a few minutes anyway. He entered the bridge and returned to Maegil's ship.
