

DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 7

by
The Elite BBS Collective

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War Games

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

Deep Space 1 Somewhere in sector (-5, -2)

Admiral Smith was arriving! On the eyes of the rank and file, not only he made it, that daredevil had the panache of even stopping on the way to prevent a war. After his actions on Quexce, they'd assault the Imperial Palace itself, follow him to the very pits of Hades if it ever comes to that.

His scorched Falcon landed on the Shiva's docking bay and was moved through the airlock to the main hangar, which had been turned into a parade court, grunts and flyers side by side, perfiled, waiting for the hero to come out from his victory chariot.

"BRETHREN, ATTENTION!", sounded the PA, and seven hundred former slaves showed to be soldiers, standing at attention as one single body. A ladder was placed by the Falcon's airlock as it finished its pressure equalization cycle; when it finally opened and the Admiral appeared, seven hundred arms were presented.

"Three cheers for the Admiral!" Sgt. Major Alwin Kinderrick cried out, "Hip, hip!"

"HORRAH!" spiritedly replied the brethren.

"Hip, hip!"

"HORRAH!"

"Hip, hip!"

"HORRAH!!!"

* * *

In a conference room, four persons discussed matters of utmost importance. A screen on the end wall showed some infographs with result bars and probability projections.

"We have finished the novices' initial processing and we found fifteen spies. Most of them were freelancers trying to infiltrate us and sell us out, but there were two confirmed Imps, a Fed and an AJ among them. Their recent memories have been wiped, and they were put though the punitive nightmare", reported Adm. Jane Braben of the SB Intel.

Adm. Smith sighed. "The thing is, Jane, I don't really care about how many were caught, what concerns me is how many passed our scans."

"Relax, Smithy, The computers only concluded 60% of the psyche evaluation so far, but the statistic analysis tends to zero."

Smith nodded, "The surprise attack and lack of knowledge of our actual counterespionage capabilities didn't gave enough time for anybody to put properly trained people on Quexce, but you can bet everyone is trying to guess where we'll go next. The next time they'll be better prepared..."

"And that's a good question. What should our next objective be?" asked the Second Fleet Admiral, Marion Lamu.

The SB Marines force Admiral, Charles Ping pressed a few commands on his console and a galactic map replaced the previous screen. There were some green dots representing the SB regional bases, and other red ones circling them. "These reports about the Interpol attacking our patrols are growing too frequent, and they are zeroing in on some of our op bases. How about if we drop in on Lave?"

"Lave?! Slavery is illegal on Lave, what can we gain by attacking them?" asked Braben.

"Who said anything about attacking? I was thinking about a diplomatic visit to the Interpol HQ, to drop off their people we rescued from space after being forced to make them cease their hostile actions... It might be overkill, but I think Smitthy's better take the *Tyr Lynx* carrier and its whole battlegroup."

"I don't know, Charles, it seems... too aggressive, doesn't it?" disagreed Smith.

"The Spartacus would know! and... speaking of him, where did he go this time?" asked Lamu

Adm. Braben punched in some more commands and the map zoomed in on a sector. "The last time he made contact, he reported to have bugged the *Azure Sunset* and closing in on Mosser. By then, he was on Ioenin and also sent us a message to be delivered to an Imperial prince, an AJNIB tracker signal for us to loose and a lot of raw intel."

"And where is he now?" asked Adm. Lamu.

"He's been out of contact for some days, but we can try to call him."

"Do that, and if he still doesn't answer, I'll send some ships in. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Smith shook his head in dismay. "Against the *Azure Sunset*? That's too risky!"

"Ioenin is between the *Tyr* and Lave, and we could use it as assembly point," suggested Braben.

"So we put two bad ideas in motion at once. If by any chance the *Tyr* battlegroup isn't destroyed by the AS, we can still get into another debacle on Lave. Just great!"

"Aw, cut it out, Smith! If you weren't so defeatist you'd be a nice guy", grinned Adm. Lamu. "The Spartacus calls you Von Paulus with good reason: you never like the plan, but also don't balk out."

Smith frowned, got up and nervously started pacing. "And have I ever been wrong? We've almost got it sour twice already, and it only didn't went worse for pure luck!"

"And some help from you, don't be so modest," interjected Braben. The point is, something HAS to be done about Interpol, and we need the Spartacus. I say go!"

"Oh, brother, here we go again!... And who's going to command the fleet? Not me again, I hope."

"Yes, you. You are already well known, that may help the negotiations," insisted Lamu.

"Don't you even think about it! I won't do it, I simply refuse to declare war on Interpol without Spartacus' opinion!"

Adm. Braben made a circular movement with her finger. "Which takes us back to the starting point: we'd better find him quick."

Smith fell back on his chair, defeated. "Ok, give me a day to refit and I'll be on my way. I'll send a couple of squadrons to start looking for him, but I need a boarding party."

Another Day, Another System

[Stenson / Kemper / de Havilland]

It wasn't a clean entry.

Smash! The right wing hit the bay door remnants, tearing off at the seam, throwing the ship sideways. As if attached on a hinge, the nose swung sideways into the right wall of the LRC's central ship-way. The Eagle's momentum dropped, but it continued sliding and skidding sideways, throwing up a shower of sparks as the crumpled nose shrieked and groaned. Stenson looked on as horror, a passenger on this ride of death. Through the sparks he saw an outcropping from the wall. The remains of a half open door.

Oh no...

He clutched the controls harder, knuckles white as he rammed the controls forward, urging the ship to respond. But there was nothing he could do but watch, eyes wide in fear as the outcropping came closer and closer...

And smashed through the bubble cockpit of the Eagle Mk I.

Vacuum. No air to breath, no external pressure to keep the body regulated. A slow and painful death.

But not today.

Seconds before the crash, he undid his crash webbing and tensed his feet against the seat. As soon as the outcropping hit, he closed his eyes, exhaled, then jumped out of his spaceship. His trajectory sent him up to the roof, while the ships velocity kept him moving towards the centre of the ship. He tensed, half expecting-

-impact against the top of the ship-way. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. His tongue began to fizz, then boil. His fingers clawed for a hand hold as his skin went numb.

He was out of breath. His hands and legs thrashed about uncontrolled, desperately searching for any nook or cranny. Fingers clawed outward as his forward momentum from the ship kept him tossing and tumbling along the roof. What if he didn't find a handhold? What if just kept rolling along until he died of asphyxiation? He thought of Mosser, the bastard clone having the last laugh. Then he thought of Ariel. They were in bed, intertwined. They had just made love. It was late. He was tired. He rolled over and waved the light off. Time to sleep. The darkness was inviting. He rolled himself up in the blankets. He felt like he could just drift away...

Bang! He hit something. His back roared in pain. His numb body still managed to acknowledge that he had just collided with something solid at starship speed.

He realised the back of his head was sore.

Pain...

He was still alive. He lashed out with his feet. Contact. His skin was beginning to bloat. He could barely feel anything. And he didn't know where he was. He didn't want to open his eyes, scared what might happen to them, but he didn't have a choice. It was open his eyes or die here.

Ariel...

And then he realised that he did love her, that he did want to be with her. All his excuses were just that: excuses. He would survive this, bring down Mosser, and go home to her. Who cared about the age difference or the rules of Interpol.

Your feet are on a recess, his oxygen deprived brain registered. He felt around with his boot. Wedging his feet in a corner he pulled himself forward, and opened his eyes.

It was a door. A big spaceship sized door. With an emergency switch just metres below him! He pushed off with his feet and flew out towards the button. His lungs screamed at him. His tongue was dry, raw, and his eyes felt like they would pop out any moment. He closed them again, willing himself to float faster.

Then he hit the switch.

He felt rather than heard the doors open. Holding on to the switch, the retreating door dragged him sideways. Pulling himself inside, he kicked the emergency button, releasing it. The door lurched to a halt, then began to close

again. With his last burst of energy he pushed himself clear of the doors. Fuzzy dots clouded his vision and he floated through the vacuum. His last thoughts were of tranquillity before everything went dark.

He opened his eyes.

He was on the floor, breathing air, the great big door he pushed through, in front of him, closed and sealed. But why was there air in here? An automatic reaction to his use of the emergency button? Which meant that the people onboard knew he was there. Have to get moving...

Slowly he pulled himself to his feet. He felt around his body for equipment. Radio comlink. His detective special. Not really enough to take down Normans crew. What had he been thinking?

I thought I would have the arsenal in the Eagle at my command.

No time for regrets. He was here now. He was an Inspector. He should start acting like one.

Step One: Intelligence. Find out what he could about the oppositions, numbers, strength and firepower.

Step Two: Routine. Where are they located and where do they go? Where do they frequent?

Step Three: Stay alive: Find a way to fool the life sign scanners and stay hidden.

He took a step forward then spun around, scanning the huge room he found himself in. Actually, it wasn't that large. The Eagle would probably fit comfortably within, he decided, but not much larger. A Krait would be the maximum. He eyed a bank of computers down one corner and an access door.

Begin Operation Sun Chaser...

* * *

"We got 'em!" whooped Roj, pointing at the view screen. The others of the crew crowded around the acute angle image of the ship-way door. A large wing and other fragments of the Eagle space ship floated lazily away from the *Azure Sunset*.

"Where's the rest of it?" Sam demanded, hands on his hips at the back of the crowd.

"What else do you want, Kemper?" Lucky asked. "You said so yourself it's an Interpol agent. Not some clone super-soldier!"

Sam smiled, bringing his hands forward, palms out. "Look, I just don't want to take any chances. I got a bad feeling about this, is all."

De Havilland slinked up to Sam's shoulder, right hand rubbing his chin. "There was a Mk I Eagle at Williamson's Base while we were there. And so was an Interpol agent." Sam glanced sideways at him, his lips locked in a puzzled smile. De Havilland went a little red. "Engineering is all in the detail."

Lucky scoffed at the two of them, shaking his head in dismissal. "The Mk I is one of the most populous craft in space! I would have been more concerned if there wasn't a Mk I at Williamson's Base."

Sam looked down irritably. "Just get down there and make sure, ok?" He turned back to de Havilland. "I'm going to check on Norman."

"You better get up here Kemper," warned Moore, before disconnecting the comm. Link. He shoved the radio in his pocket and turned to the massive array of navigation computers. The *Sunset's* hydrogen tanks were 98% full. It was going to make a jump any second. A random jump, to any place the *Sunset* felt like going. They had an old mining asteroid retrofitted as a makeshift shipyard to repair and restore the *Sunset*. But first they had to get there. And that meant taking back control of the ship. He watched the fuel indicator increase in factors of 0.1%. When it reached 99.6%, Sam burst through the lower bridge door on the right.

"How we looking?" he called, a little short of breath.

99.7%...

"We've got about two minutes to deactivate the lock on the *Sunset's* Navigation computer before she makes her next jump." Sam spun from the computers to face Moore. The two locked eyes.

"Only Norman has the authorisation. After the Drake debacle, he doesn't trust anyone."

"Not even you?"

Sam shook his head. "Nope, not entirely."

99.8%

"So what do we do?" Moore asked. Sam shook his head, but bent over the controls again, as if looking at the screen would conjure up the answer.

99.9%

A growl rumbling from his bowels. He stood up and swung his hand on in a fist, hitting a column.

"I guess we're going on another tiki-tour."

"I guess so."

100%

The display changed from progressive green bars to a flashing red sign 'Jump in Progress'. The regular vibration of the engines changed tone slightly. Sam knew these engines like the back of his hand; he could feel the different stages of the huge Imperial hyperdrives as they powered up, ready for the jump.

The bridges viewscreen showed a swirling fog of cyan-blue light, which separated into concentric circles.

Then, with a flash, the ship rocketed forward. They were in hyperspace.

* * *

"Where's that Mack fellow? De Havilland asked.

Sam shrugged. "Dunno. Probably best it stays that way." The two were walking back from Medical Centre One, having checked on Mosser, Maegil, Emu and Veruz.

"Full of anger, isn't he?"

"You would be too if the love of your life had been killed."

"Indeed." De Havilland paused, both vocally and physically, turning to Sam.

"Can we...trust him? To walk around I mean? I don't want to walk around a corner and have him waiting for me, if you know what I mean."

"Can we trust him," Sam repeated, a smile on his face. "You part of the group now, Vasquith? Part of our criminal group?"

De Havilland's eyes flashed, but he covered, grunted and kept moving. "You didn't answer the question."

Sam laughed, then slapped de Havilland on the shoulder. "I think he'll be safe until Mosser wakes up. If he wants to churn the beef with you, he'll give you plenty of notice."

"Hmmm. What about sabotage?"

"Moore knows these systems inside out. He is keeping an eye on everything. If Winston farts near a computer panel, he'll know."

De Havilland nodded. "Did your men find out about the Interpol ship?"

"Yup. She was totally destroyed. An outcropping hit the cockpit, totally destroying it. Haven't found the pilot's body, but it stands to reason it was messed up some."

De Havilland pursed his lips, then looked down to the ground, shaking his head.

"What about that empty hangar that was re-oxygenated?"

"Moore said it was a short tripping the emergency alarm." Sam shrugged. "She's an old ship. The superstructure almost tore itself apart at one point. Can't expect her to be in brilliant shape."

"Hence the dry dock you've established at an asteroid."

Sam thrust his hands into his pant pockets, then squared up and faced de Havilland.

"Look, with Mosser out of action, I guess I'm running things. The crew assumed as much."

"But?"

"But I don't know what Mosser has planned. When we first talked about getting the *Sunset* back, he told me it was crucial to his plan. He didn't tell me what that plan was."

De Havilland leaned back against the wall, hands folded across his chest. "Well I'm not part of your crew, Sam. I'm not here to engage in piracy and murder. I'm here because after I found this LRC and I got flagged by some black ops ship that won't leave me alone. I need Mosser's protection and his contacts, to find out who these people are and stop them. That's all. I'm not going to help you wage your criminal war. Don't get me fucking started on killing that Interpol agent."

"Self defence, Vasquith," Sam replied quickly, index finger pointing at de Havilland, venom filtering through his words. "And right now, this is my ship, so you'll do what I tell you, or you'll get the hell out." The two looked at each other in stony silence, neither of them flinching. Finally de Havilland spoke.

"This is your ship," de Havilland echoed. "And I'll follow your orders...to a point. I'm not going to cross the line."

Sam dropped his finger, clenching his fists and steadying his stance. De Havilland looked straight back, his ubiquitous blue eyes calm, solid, unmoving. Sam unclenched his hands, grinned, then broke into a cherry laugh. "You know, it's a shame Mosser didn't find and recruit you before you developed principals. Come on, let's get a drink." Sam walked off, de Havilland a step behind. He imagined what his life would have been if he had been part of Mosser's group. A hired gun? Engineering specialist? Yes, it might have been exciting, but it would have been wrong.

But here he was, chatting to and going off to have a drink with the lieutenant of the most notorious pirate in the galaxy. Whether he liked it or not, he was in deep. Would he ever be able to get out?

Would Mosser allow him to leave, after everything he had seen? He subconsciously felt for the Peacemaker, fingering the wooden grip. When friends become enemies.

He was looking down on Mosser's inert body when his eyes flicked open. De Havilland jumped back in surprise, then laughed. "How you doing you old pirate?" de Havilland asked. Norman's eyes flickered once, twice, then focused on de Havilland.

"Feel like I've been run through a trash compactor. How about you?"

De Havilland rotated his arm, feeling the wound in his shoulder. It was tender, but functional. Just another scar, now. "Not too bad." The AutoDoc beeped and de Havilland turned to read the output.

"Looks like you're good to go. And not a moment too soon." He reached forward and helped Mosser to his feet.

"How have things been without me?"

"Boring."

Merry Go Round

[Interpol / Spartacus Brotherhood]

Two squads of five Interpol Eagle fighters each came out of Hyperspace in formation. By the book, each of the ships on small fighter squads had a specific set of equipment and relayed the data to the others, allowing a better use of the little space available. The ships with long range scanners started their sweeps.

"Chief, there's a lot of ship's debris scattered near here and some more near Ioenin C1, including a certain NM-001. Mosser's ship!"

"He's here?" incredulously asked the mission commander, Chief Inspector Galway.

"Negative, it seems adrift. It seems Inspector Stenson was right, and already had an altercation with the perp."

"OK, I'm receiving the data. Whisker four, where is he now?"

The second squad's hyperspace cloud analyser equipped Eagle pilot came in "There are exit cloud remains near C1 corresponds to an LRC. Also, there are also more ships coming in. Heavy stuff due to arrive in about seventeen minutes at 12 AU away, and more in the following days."

"Yes, I see them. Twelve ships, Two Asps, two couriers and eight assorted heavy fighters, and then... I won't even bother to count. People, it seems we've just stumbled on an assembling Spartacus Brotherhood task force!"

"Chief, the tracker stabilized in deep space. It seems the *Azure Sunset* has mis-jumped."

Galway was galled. Opportunities like these are so rare that it hurt seeing them show up at the same time and having to discard one! Taking the only possible decision, the Chief gave his orders. "I've got to report all this... fire up the hypercomm. We'll wait and see where the LRC goes to, and hunt it there; our priority right now is to assist Stenson. We'll watch the Spartans from a safe distance until the AS reaches another system, but for now we'll go check the debris for survivors."

When the SB's first ships arrived, they strangely didn't do anything. They didn't call the Interpol patrol to 'politely' declare the area as a War Zone as they usually do, but then again there wasn't a government on Ioenin against whom to declare war. Nor did they closed into the other clouds to cover their arrival. Instead, they just stood, as if waiting for something... It were the ships that later entered the system that finally closed in to check the already badly dispersed debris, and they seemed purposeful about it.

"Chief, the AS stabilized."

"Very well, let's check their position and jump out in formation."

As the Interpol squads performed their pre-jump checks, the Whisker four pilot noticed something on her display. Raising a brow, she punched a few commands for a deeper analysis. "Hum!? Oh, Chief, the SB patrol just jumped out... Guess what, straight to the same system we're going!"

"After the *Azure Sunset*?!" Galway pondered for an instant. The terrorists must have planted their own tracker on the ship and were sparing fuel while they waited... HQ must learn of these developments. "Hold the jump while I report."

The Interpol squadron came out of their jump right in the middle of a large ambush force. In a few seconds, all were destroyed by the twenty unknown ships, but not before some data went out. The Interpol HQ found from its analysis that the attackers bore no symbols, had some sort of military transponders and acted with according precision - apparently were of the same force as the debris in Ioenin, but that was all. They weren't Spartans nor any known military force, and the SB had probably collected the debris leaving very little for the Interpol to work with.

As for the SB squadrons, they arrived a little later, not far away. The unknown ships bore down on them, but the SB chooses its ships considering speed, and seeing a superior force coming at them, they fled towards the AS. After a few days, they flipped to reduce speed and the attackers chose to split their force in half to perform a fly-by attack, while the rest continued on an intercept course to the LRC.

The faster group accelerated towards the SB ships who spread on a perpendicular plane to the assailants' vectors to avoid presenting more than one target to any individual ship. Both forces fired a missile salvo when closing in, but the SB did so at odd angles... As chaff clouds were deployed, the reason for this became apparent: the

attackers' missiles went in a straight line towards the Spartan chaff clouds, whereas their missiles had to make a curve before locking on intercept courses. Even though the fighters managed to outmanoeuvre most of the Spartan missiles, they still reduced the enemy numbers by three.

Then it came a short joust, concentrated on predetermined ships to ensure their destruction. In two seconds it was over. The ships closed in at neck breaking relative speed, passed each other with guns blasting and a few explosions flared before the combatants were out of range. Both sides took some casualties; even though the Spartans had larger numbers and heavier weapons, they found the opponents' shields stronger than normal. As it was, the Spartans would have at least half free day to do whatever they wanted and clear out before the other flotilla gathered near the AS.

Would have, if they had it their way. After the melee, when the *Azure Sunset* was almost within grasp, Mosser appeared on the screens. "That was a rather nice demonstration, but I'll decline. Bye...!" and it jumped out.

The Spartan commander resorted to vocabulary best left for tug pilots, and slammed his Courier's dashboard.

"Ease down, Captain! We'll get them yet!" said his co-pilot.

"Yes, sorry about the rant... patch me to the Admiral". He reported to his superiors, and waited for orders. Seconds later, the others also left the system.

* * *

Aboard the Lynx carrier *Tyr* on Ioenin, Adm. Curtiss Smith of the Spartacus Brotherhood finished reading reports, both from the patrol's and the engineering about the debris, on his terminal. Adding them, things didn't look good... he flicked the comm on. "Can we follow the tracker on hyperspace and predict where it'll come out?", he asked his aide.

On an affirmative, he voiced what he feared to do, but also had to. "We're taking the fleet chasing the *Azure Sunset*. I want a combat deployment jump and everybody on their toes, we might be ambushed by the INRA."

A Cure for Depression

[Mack Winston]

I sat on the floor, my back against the cold, bare wall of the narrow corridor, my feet against the opposite wall. It was dark. The air was stale. Most of the lighting panels were broken, and shards of the broken lumipanel littered the corridor.

The *Azure Sunset* was in poor shape, and the fetid air - unstirred by the long defunct ventilation system in this sector of the ship - cemented my dark mood.

It was the recurring dreams I couldn't take. Not nightmares, but just dreams - being with Maria again, doing normal every day things. Then I would wake up and remember she was gone forever. I felt rudderless and out of control. Killing a million Mossers wouldn't solve this. He wasn't my real enemy. He was just a proxy for... for, I didn't know what. My life had always been so sharply purposed. Even in that forest on Nirvana, Phekda, I had a purpose. But now, I was just being dragged along by a torrential current.

This wasn't a life. This was a drowning.

I made a decision. I was leaving. I couldn't care less about the Mossers or the reward any longer. I just had one last mission to do, and it was the only mission of any importance. The mission would not be hard for anyone to guess.

Avenge my fiancée's murder.

I stood up, and carefully walked back up the corridor towards the light at the end, my feet crunching over the remains of the corridor's lighting.

I thought it over. I remembered what it was like, plunging that awful duralium assassin's knife into Carstein, and how it would feel triumphantly plunging it into Burton-Riddick's chest. It wouldn't be all that hard if I didn't need to get out alive. I started to smile, welcoming my final annihilation - the sensation of the clone agents' plasma bolts starting to rip into me, as I tore out Burton Riddick's heart and lungs in a vile, bloody tangle. I...

A silhouette appeared at the end of the corridor. A slim figure. The backlighting accentuating some short spiky black hair.

Just the man I needed...

"We're leaving," I said flatly, as I approached.

"What?" Kevin O'Connell replied, surprised. I think he was preparing to tell me how he'd been "looking all over for me" and how "we'd all been worried".

"We're leaving. Come on, get your things from Maegil's ship. We're getting out of this scrap-heap"

Kevin followed, obviously deflated at having lost the initiative. "Where are we going?" he querulously demanded.

"Away," I replied. I didn't want to reveal where just yet. He would be very helpful in my quest. If I told him once we were in witch-space, I'd have at least the journey to the next station to convince him that he should help me.

I walked quickly to the docking bay. It was in a sorry state, but not as sorry as the state of the ship that looked permanently wedged into the far end. Maegil's ship was not much better - battered and scarred - certainly not spaceworthy. I tried not to pay too close attention to the state of the docking tube, from which a faint scream of escaping air could be heard.

I picked up a few things from our tiny bunk room on the Asp, including the awful Imperial assassination knife. Kevin watched me in quiet fascination as I turned it over, inspecting its lethal blade. I smiled wryly, and pressed the button.

The side blades erupted with a loud crack, and Kevin jumped back a bit. Carefully, I retracted the blades, and placed the knife in the bottom of my bag. I shoved what little I had into the remaining space.

"Come on, let's go before that docking tube bursts," I said, trying to hurry my companion along.

* * *

The good thing, I thought - fifteen minutes later as Kevin and I started out on our task of grand theft spacecraft - about *The Azure Sunset*, was that Norman Mosser had always insisted that the fleet of Kraits was on easy standby. Little security - just jump in and go. It was great for getting a quick scramble in case of a threat. But now it was turning out to be a good way for us to leave.

The Krait was dated, and probably older than my entire family. But it was unlocked and waiting to fly. I jumped eagerly into its pilot seat.

"At least it's in good shape," I commented. "The thruster's accumulators have all held pressure since it last flew. We can probably slip it out of here without even starting the engines."

"That's good?"

"Yes, it means we can be outside the ship without drawing too much attention to ourselves. Then we hyperspace away. If the others are not fully preoccupied with the *Sunset* and see us go - they can't even make chase. They haven't even got control of the old barge. It'll be fifteen minutes before they can even get to one of the other ships parked here. A fifteen minute head start is all we really need."

I released the docking clamps, put the thrusters on manual, and used the aft manoeuvring thrusters to shove us out of the dock.

"Pick a hole, any hole," I muttered, looking at the docking bay's many perforations. It wasn't a happy time for the *Azure Sunset*.

"Oh shit!" Kevin suddenly shouted.

My heart was almost in my mouth, as a small ship - it looked like an *Eagle* - flashed by and smashed into some of the *Sunset*'s internal structure. Pieces of the *Eagle* cannoned off the sides of the dock. There was a flash, as a large piece severed a power conduit.

"Well, I guess that's the end of him," I muttered, regaining my composure. I aimed the nose of the ship at what was probably once the docking port entrance, and activated the aft thrusters for a few seconds.

"Look at that," I said, pointing upwards at the exposed inner structure of the *Sunset*. "I wonder if they realise that her back is almost broken. One good burn on the main engines while trying to turn the ship will fold her right up over herself," I said. I pointed to the twisted duralium which once gave the immense ship her strength.

I don't think any of them realised how badly damaged the *Azure Sunset* had become after all the impacts right in her docking bay. I composed a brief message, intending to send it just before we hyperspaced, warning the others about what I had seen. Perhaps that good turn would make them decide to let me be.

Our liberated Krait drifted silently out of the dock, and into open space. With little regard to where we were going, I simply set the astrogation cursor on the nearest inhabited system.

We were suddenly bathed in deep amber light, as the *Azure Sunset* - now above us, winked out of existence and disappeared into witch space.

"Well, that's one problem less," I remarked, and pressed our own hyperspace button.

Observation

[Vera Sinclair]

Something strange had happened.

From the dark edges of the star system, the advanced sensors on Vera Sinclair's ship noted an Eagle plunge into the side of the Azure Sunset.

It also recorded a Krait departing.

The computer decided it better alert her captain...

Unnecessary Shower Scene

[Norman Mosser]

It was all about water pressure. In space, such things cost a fortune. Even in the Courier, there wasn't the room for the hardware for a high-pressure shower that met the perfection of this one.

Norman reached forwards and increased the water flow even further. This was a luxury few spacers ever got to get. Some relied on deodorants or gel cleaners. The luckier ones had sonic showers and if you crewed a decently specced ship, the head may double as a wet room, but nothing beat scalding hot water and a flow rate high enough to near flay the skin from your body.

It was indeed the perk of the Azure Sunset that there was space for such a decent shower. In fact he had three installed across the ship. One for the officers, one for crew and one for him alone. Once they were in, the expense was immediately appreciated and a rota set up to ensure no fights broke out.

As Norman shampooed, he heard the door to his cabin slide open. As a precaution, Norman removed his ELITE badge and its chain from around his neck and wrapped it around his fist. He then retrieved the kinetic pistol that lived in the cubby next to the soap.

"Norman?"

Norman relaxed. It was Sam.

"I'm in the shower"

"OK. It can wait"

Norman smiled and returned the pistol to its cubby before putting his head back under the jet of water.

Escape Plan

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The southern end of the ship was empty. Now that everyone was a picture of health, people had gone back to business as usual; Maegil and Emu were in the brig, Mosser's crew were on the bridge controlling the ship, Mack was no where to be found and Mosser was mossering around, Sam following him like a little puppy. He shook his head. Mosser's lieutenant seemed to be quite a strong and smart fellow and had looked after things quite well. Then as soon as Mosser had woken up, it was like something inside realised he was no longer the alpha male and he turned into, well, a follower. Was that effect of Mosser? He shrugged. It didn't really matter, though he did miss their late night stimcafe chats. The man had some tall stories indeed!

So with everyone otherwise occupied, that left de Havilland and Veruz free to talk. De Havilland led his co-pilot through the labyrinth of hallways to the end of the ship.

Engineering.

They pulled through the door and the sound of a trillion horses at work suddenly hit them. It was deafening. This was only part of the hyperdrive, but it was large enough to fill a Panther Clipper several times over. He briefly wondered what it would be like to pull one of them apart.

"What's happening Cap'n?" Veruz yelled, hands over his ears. De Havilland looked down both ends of the hallway.

"We need an escape plan!" he yelled back. Veruz' expression soured. His eyes shifted just fractionally, but de Havilland saw it. "What?"

"I don't know if I want to escape!"

de Havilland's jaw dropped. Was the kid serious? Was Mosser romanticising the life of a criminal to the point where he was converting good, regular kids right under his nose?

"It feels like whenever I do anything with you, I get shot at. Or shot." Veruz rubbed his wound for emphasis.

De Havilland felt a pang of guilt. Of course if anyone was going to turn him over to the darkside, it would be his mentor who was acting quite the criminal these days. Normal people didn't get shot at.

This was his fault. He clenched his jaw. Now he had another reason to escape; get the kid out of this environment before he decided to take it up full time.

But they still needed Mosser. His shoulders sagged. What was more important: principles or life? Well he had already made that decision for himself, but he had unfairly brought Michael into it. He had to get rid of the kid, for his own good.

"Look, we've seen too much of Mosser's organisation and activity. We are now a liability to him. When he gets bored"

"He gave us his word!" said Veruz.

"Are you willing to risk your life on that word? I just want a backup plan. Just in case."

Veruz moved to say something, but stopped.

"Look. Do you want in or not?" de Havilland probed.

"Ok, ok. So what do you want to do?"

"Let's get back to the Saker."

* * *

There was a message waiting.

Kane Scott. His old boss, and now seriously pissed off friend.

"I don't pretend to know the whole story Dev, but the evidence is stacking up against you. We need, I need, information. I'm in it deep after that attack. Get your butt back here and explain yourself," finished the recording. De Havilland looked to Veruz and back at the now inert relay screen.

Was AIB, the Alliance Intelligence Bureau pursuing them?

We must have left a pretty easy trail to follow," Veruz said.

De Havilland grinned. "Some criminals we are, huh?" He leaned forward and pressed the 'Reply' button.

"What are you doing?" Veruz put a hand on de Havillands. "They'll be able to trace the signal you send."

"We're going to mis-jump next anyway; it doesn't matter. Veruz released him. They both stood back into the view of the camera.

"Hi Kane. I'm real sorry for the grief I have caused you. You saved my life with that little ship. I owe you everything, but coming back right now is something I cannot do. I can't really go into any detail, but I am using Norman Mosser for protection. Once he sorts out my problems, I'll come back and pay you back my debt. I promise. You just have to trust me. I'm the same old Vasquith." He leant forward and sent the recording to the transmitter. Once they re-entered real space, it would automatically send.

Am I still the same old Vasquith?

He waved the thought aside. It wasn't the time for doubts. Once Norman got things moving properly, he wouldn't have much time. He needed to get things prepared now.

"Ok. I need you to move the Saker. Take it right to the end and turn it around so its facing the exit. There's an empty Krait docking bay near the end. I want you to get her as close as you can to the bay door. I'll organise some the escape route and some other surprises, so if we need to make a run for it, We can scoot straight to the Saker and take off.

"Ok," said Veruz, He didn't look as alert as normal. De Havilland hoped that if push came to shove, Veruz would actually make the escape with him. If this kid decided to stay behind, that would be another failure on his behalf.

No. that was one failure he could not accept. This kid was going to lead a normal life without piracy. He was not going to be responsible for destroying Michael's life.

"Get moving," de Havilland urged as he moved for the landing ramp. "I'll catch up with you when you're done."

Sunchaser

[Kim Stenson]

Moore glanced up at the bulkhead. Years of engineering experience slowly worked its way through the slightly mushy synapses of his forebrain. He didn't need to run a scanner over it. That bulkhead looked wrong. As he sucked air through his teeth, he admitted it kind of overshadowed the fault with the hangar pressurisation system. Plenty of scope for catastrophic failure here. He'd have to put a 2g limit thrust cap on the ship and keep the artificial gravity on all the time just to hold it together. If it failed in a gravity well, the ship could very well tear itself apart under its own weight.

That said, there was plenty of scrap duralium around if Norman was prepared to lose some cabins and some cargo space, a cross brace could be easily rigged up.

Moore rubbed his eyes at that point. He'd swore he's seen an Interpol officer dart across his peripheral vision.

He glanced across. Nothing.

Reaching into a pocket, Moore dug out a vial of space madness pills and some industrial ethanol. For his nerves of course.

His nerves weren't helped by the wrench that cracked across his head and he slumped onto the floor.

"I am arresting you for..."

Kim Stenson shrugged

"...crime"

A quick search of his pockets turned up some drugs, a multitool, a datapad and a laser pistol. Kim then dragged Moore into a decompression shelter, tied him up and locked him in.

"One down, X to go" muttered Kim

The datapad contained a handy deck layout and showed useful features like the bridge, the HPA hangar and where the brig was. Two cells were occupied. Potential allies?

Lone copper against a horde of pirates. It was almost like dreamware.

8.8 Psychosis

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Maegil drifted out of slumber. He couldn't move and his chest weighted a ton. A pressing memory was roaming on the outskirts of his mind, but had the definite notion he shouldn't want to know what it was. Something too painful, but also too important to disregard. He made an effort, and it started to come back to him...

Emu! Emu was dead, he recalled in shock. de Havilland killed her!

A heart rate monitoring beeping accelerated. He opened his eyes.

An enfermary. Yes, he vaguely remembered it, Kemper had shot him... What else happened?

Kevin was also shot, and...

A lump grew in his throat as he recalled the events. Mack and Kevin were both dead, piled on a lump on the corner, and de Havilland had a fishing net wrapped around Emu's naked body. de Havilland cutting little coins of skin, exposing nerve terminals. Rubbing salt and electricuting the wounds.

"Speak! Who are you and what do you want?", he demanded, but Maegil was too drugged to tell de Havilland what he wanted to know, and the sadistic bastard just kept going and going...

Maegil recalled having done that once, but it was to make a terrorist confess to where the liner's passengers had been taken, and he only needed to go as far as three cuts and a few menaces. As for de Havilland, de Havilland, de Havilland, he went the whole way, and enjoyed it too, before finally slitting her throat.

Emu was killed, he got Emu killed! Everybody was dead and Kemper shot him, keeping him alive for questioning. That was forgivable, in the line of duty, but de Havilland... He'd learn the meaning of 'extreme prejudice'! Maegil cringed his teeth and tried to get up. He'd, he'd... do nothing until he freed himself.

Only then he realized he was on a autodoc stretcher, bound by velcro straps. Testing them, he found them well secure, and too strong to break. Could be worse if they were the metal shackles he recalled having been bound to a pipe with not long ago, but he knew what he needed to get free. It was more than a normal person can do in normal circumstances, unless he was rescued or his captors were foolish enough to unbind him without some sedation - Mosser simply wouldn't make such a mistake.

Nevertheless, there were known cases of people breaking even metal shackles. The extinct terran chimpanzee had been much smaller than men's size, but was said to be six times stronger derived from the famous animal strength. This strength wasn't limited to animals, people could also draw upon it: anyone who ever got into a fight knew it, even if in a much lesser degree. Nowadays some of these biochemical substances were depured and produced to be used used by the military everywhere as combat stims - increasing the soldiers' power and stamina beyond normal levels even for combat without blurring their minds - but there were soldiers of the antiquity who would produce them naturally when the situation so required. From the norse sagas there were the tales of mighty warriors who were capable of defeating bears with their bare hands or make short work of any army in their path. For that, they drew upon bloodlust and battle madness, released the irrational animal within and allowed it to take over.

Maegil couldn't activate the combat stim on his arm, so it's up to his organism alone. He would have to take his domain over his own body and soul to its limits, use what he knew of these fighters of legend and what learned from Rajman, then turn to the opposite way of the one he had led him.

* * *

Rajman Shivaputri. If one wanted to see how a man on a holy quest looks like, he should have been at Eta Cassiopeia's JFK, on that morning over ten years before.

Special Forces Lt. Maegil Arvendor (Ret.) was having a very bad day. After his discharge from the psychiatric hospital he needed more than ever to bash some Imps, and he had been refused even the dirty work. Even though he had rank for it - as a career officer at that, not as some common mercenary - the External Services' Fred refused him a decent mission. Deliveries, the Fred had offered him in a wooden voice, 'Unfit for combat duties', he read from Maegil's record with a wooden face.

Having properly convinced the Fred that it wasn't neither wise nor healthy to speak as he did to a certified nutcase, the Lieutenant left the building under armed escort. Outside, Rajman found him. In retrospective, it was funny, but so are most things that don't leave the person dead or maimed.

"Milord, there you are", called Rajman in a loud voice, "Lord Shiva, you called and I came!"

When someone is recognized as a Lord, in a Federal Special Forces uniform and in front of the Federal Military Intelligence Bureau HQ, questions are made. They even have special rooms to make these questions, rooms with uncomfortable chairs and plasteel cupboards containing mind probes, sharp things and lots of little bottles; usually the word 'spy' also tends to come into these questions. It really hadn't been a good day until then, and it managed to get a lot worse.

So, a man on a holy quest is essentially a senseless twit, but religion does that to people and Rajman was a priest. Or, it may be that these are hard things to say of someone who saved Maegil's life more than once, and in more than one way. It would definitively be extremely impolite to say this kind of thing about someone who took the shot that would have killed Maegil and that was about to save him yet another time, but Maegil used to called Rajman a twit on his face, and they'd both laugh about their meeting.

Also it had been Rajman's explanations about the Shiva's portfolio who gave Maegil a purpose, even if not the way Rajman wished. Even tough Maegil always denied being his or any god's avatar, he told taught Maegil his god's ways. More importantly for the situation at hand, Rajman taught Maegil the Old Ayurveddic Yoga. Not that Maegil cared for making impressions of a contortionist statue, but the meditation and the biometabolic control came in handy more than once.

And would again.

* * *

Maegil closed his eyes and concentrated. Breathe in, then out. In, out. Complete relaxation. In, out. Don't starve the body for oxygen, reduce the demand. In, out. Slowlier. In. Out. His conscience started slipping to deeper levels. In. The cardiac monitor beeping slowed as the metabolism decreased. Out. A tray full of medicine flasks spun into position. In. A mechanical arm stuck a syringe on a flask. Out. Another flask. In. The syringe found the IV connector on Maegil's arm. Out. He drifted out to a 'small death'.

Burning inside. Pain. Maegil was brutally awoken with the feeling he was about to erupt. The autodoc had detected his heart slowing down too much, thought him yo be dying and injected a batch of stimulants into his bloodstream. Now it was his turn. He visualized Emu being tortured by de Havilland. "RRRAAAAHHH! I'LL KILL YOU, DE HAVILLAND!!!" Emu had screamed in terrible agony, Maegil was obviously too drugged to tell them what they wanted - and de Havilland knew it. "I'LL TEAR YOU LIMB BY LIMB AND EAT YOUR LIVING HEART BEFORE YOU DIE!!!", he roared to the top of his lungs, "I'LL DESTROY YOU! AAAAAARRGH! YOU'RE PIG FODDER, WAIT 'TILL I GET YOU!!!"

Going from a near coma to berserker in less than thirty seconds, he jerked on the bed, twisted himself letting his fury grow as he pulled on the straps to no avail, twisted them and tore his own wrists' skin. "EMU! EMU!!!", he cried out as he forced himself to remember, to relive Emu's final moments, her destroyed and broken body, her whimpering when she had no more strength to scream. The medicine tray started spinning again.

Maegil went beyond simple rage, allowed it to grow to the level that got him on therapy, brought out the worse in him, saw himself killing de Havilland in a thousand different and cruel ways. The autodoc's syringe arm was filling up with a new load of chemicals. Maegil jerked, forced, bled, and got more and more excited. Finally, the onslaught was too much and the right hand strap ripped open.

Steps running. Approaching. Maegil released his left arm, just in time to avoid the chemical override to his escape; grabbing the medical monitor, he timed a throw with the arrival of those boots' owner. It was de Havilland, he appeared by the doorway right on time to be hit by the appliance and stumbled backwards with a grunt of pain. Maegil unbound his legs and went for de Havilland before he could recover his weapon from where it fell and back to bear - superfluously, as he was dazed and his right collarbone had been smashed.

Red-faced, with bulging eyes, the temple's arteries pulsating, muscles bloated as ripe melons on the shirtless torso and hands dripping his own blood, Maegil was an incarnation of savage fury. He approached de Havilland in broad stomping steps, grabbed him by the groin and shoved him upwards, banging his head on the ceiling and dropping him to come back crashing on the floor. Unsatisfied, he caught the stunned, winged man by the throat, slammed him off his feet into the wall, pulled de Havilland's knife and roared like an animal on his face.

Maegil now had de Havilland's full and undivided attention. "I could gut you like a fish right here and now and leave you to die squealing as the pig you are, de Havilland," he snarled on the man's face with the knife's tip to his bladder, "but that would be too nice! No, for torturing and slaughtering Emu you'll die a thousand deaths and give up on begging me to finish you off before I'm done."

de Havilland tried to say something, but the powerful fingers pressing his throat were too tight even for breathing, much less for speaking.

Maegil was about to practice some more violence on de Havilland when, on the corner of his eye he saw de Havilland peeking from the far end of the corridor. He threw the knife at a nearly impossible range, and only de Havilland's reflexes saved him from receiving a fifteen centimetre blade on the face. de Havilland ran away, leaving Maegil with a nearly suffocating man on his grip and a confused look on his face. "You're not de Havilland!"

Roj Wafturn made minute movements with his head and emitted a choked "-o! -o!"

Maegil dropped Wafturn, who crumpled on the floor. "Sorry about that", he excused himself without the slightest feeling. He got Wafturn's 'wrecker from the floor, returned to the enfermary to retrieve his 'daisho' from the table and left in search of his quarry.

Wafturn thought wiser to stay very still and wait until the madman had disappeared around the corner. Pulling a comm from his waist, he coarsely reported to Mosser as he limped his way to the autodoc.

* * *

"I did WHAT?!", incredulously asked de Havilland.

"Tortured and killed Emu, he said." Mosser wasn't amused. "The guy probably delirated the whole episode under anaesthesia."

Yeah, but he also mistook Wafturn for me! He's out of his mind, that psycho, and now he's after me. Do you think he's that good?"

"You bet," said Annalise, "from what uncle Jay used to tell, he's more than enough to do it."

"Uncle Jay? Who's he?", asked Veruz.

"Jay Carstein, the 'Empire's #1 bogeyman', that's whom", she said, beaming with family pride. "Anyway, he used to say that Maegil was like a crossover between a psychotic clone agent and Don Quixote!"

Mosser snorted, "It might even be so, but I won't have him using my crew as windmills."

Veruz nodded in agreement. The others just looked at Annalise, not getting the analogy.

"And who's Don Quixote?", asked de Havilland. Veruz explained.

"You simply don't cease to amaze me!"

"I was talking to Mack and he told me the tale. Maegil didn't avenge uncle Jay's death by Mack's hand, and that says a lot about his sense of honour. "He could have killed him for my uncle's murder, but Mack said he called it a 'professional hazard'. On the other hand, Maria wasn't an operative or an assassin, nor is Emu. They were on his ship and he feels responsible for them, so owe of who touches them. On the other hand, so said Mack, he didn't believe Maegil would raise a finger to avenge him. As for the cute guy, Kevin, Mack wasn't so certain after what went on the other day."

"Well, then, maybe it's easier if we just show him Emu's still alive. Annie, go get her on the brig and bring her here. And... if he's half of what you think of him, you'd better go the long way. Only hurry up, I don't need more damage here."

Annalise nodded with something odd about her expression and turned to leave. She'd wouldn't mind to try her chances against Maegil, but she wouldn't disobey Mosser. Then again, she thought while she was on her way, she wouldn't mind having someone who'd go mad over her as Emu had... Could this be envy?

A little while later, she was back with the shackled prisoner, and the madman hadn't still graced the bridge with his presence.

"We might have to kill your boyfriend in self defence, I thrust you're aware of that.", warned Mosser.

Emu was thrown to a console's seat. "Yes, I'm afraid so. I'd better talk to him before he kills someone."

"Ha!", laughed Mosser, unamused. He fingered the huge bulk of his hand gun on his hip. "You'd better, because if he gets in my sight, it's me who's going to waste him."

Based on her uncle's opinion of Maegil, Annalise wasn't entirely convinced of who'd shoot who, but she knew better than to disagree with Mosser - especially when he was on this kind of mood.

* * *

Stenson was really getting too old for this, another couple of years and that knife would have been stuck on his face. Instead, it stuck on the wall. At that distance, for crying out loud, and on duralium! It didn't even had the decency of clanging on the wall and falling to the floor, it just stuck there as it was thrown!

He was now running for his life. "DE HAVILLAND!!!", the monster shouted on his pursuit and fired at him. Stenson had just made a turn but still felt the blast's shock wave on his back; he lost his balance, rolled and kept running. He was gaining on him, and Stenson's breath was running out.

"IF YOU WANT MERCY, YOU'D BETTER KILL YOURSELF", the guy raved behind him, "COS YOU'LL GET NONE FROM ME!". Stenson ran even faster, regretting bitterly having gone to investigate the shouting and even more hanging around to see what would happen next.

A woman's voice sounded on the PA. "Honey, I'm fine, please calm down. de Havilland didn't kill me, just come to the bridge and we'll talk."

Maegil's anger managed to reach even higher peaks. "Lies! Lies and a voice sinth, but I'll teach you!", he roared. "Obie, isolate the brige and reduce the oxygen to 14%. Let's give them a taste of anoxia"

Anoxia was something this guy seemed immune to, Stenson's lungs were bursting but the guy was speaking normally despite the long chase. He could only have a pair of artificial lungs, it was just impossible for a person to run like that and not loose its breath! He couldn't hope to get away by running, he had to react...

Stenson kept running, turned to yet another corridor, found a blast door and slammed his hand on the panel. Even as the doors closed, he kept running in case his pursuer would come trough with a dreamwearic stunt jump before they were shut - or chew trough the doors as if they were made of plastisheet, as Stenson was about to believe him capable of.

He found a maintenance shaft and crawled into it. Holding his breath, he couldn't hear any more steps coming after him. "Jeesh," he panted, "that was a close one!" He sure wouldn't like to be in de Havilland's place... Or rather, he had nearly been in his place and didn't liked it a bit. That psycho threw Wafturn around as if he was nothing, and Wafturn wasn't by any means a small boy!

Still, criminal or not, de Havilland had civil rights that Stenson, as an Interpol officer, was sworn to protect.

Which meant facing that guy again.

Then Stenson considered the guy's position. According to what he understood, de Havilland had tortured and killed his girl in front of him - or maybe not? He thought of Ariel, and how would he react if someone had done that to her. It would probably drive him to insanity, too. Not that far out, mind you, but still... And how would Ariel feel if he was killed while trying to save someone as de Havilland? Even if he hadn't done it and the woman's voice on the PA was for real, de Havilland had already gone bad. If it was a law-abiding citizen, he would happily die trying, and even though Ariel would suffer, it'd be for a worthy cause. But to put her, and himself, through that for... him!?

Yeah, right! Just don't hold your breath, you bastard!

* * *

Only two of the bridge's blast doors closed, the battles that took place on that compartment had left their marks. Mosser swore and turned to Lucky, on the engineering console. "Well? Do you mind getting that asshole's worm out of my ship's system already or do I have to call a professional pest controller?"

Lucky was doing his best, but the pesky thing just kept popping up again and again, it rewrote itself to avoid the debugging heuristic routines, it went as far as making fun of him. "I don't know where he got this, but it's not like the common virus you see out there. It's a full AI personality module, on free runtime on the AS' memory banks and having a ball. Look, it's pre-empting my attacks!"

Mosser chortled. "Free runtime for an AI?! Just the thing the Spartacus Brotherhood would do, I guess. They really mean it when they talk about abolishing slavery!"

He looked at the screen. There was a message in large, bold and flashing red and black letters. It read: 'ERROR: CANNOT DIVIDE BY DUVAL. PLEASE REBOOT UNIVERSE AND TRY AGAIN.'

"I think this is the computer's equivalent of mooning. I'm getting wooped really badly here", said Lucky.

"This guy's really annoying me. If they're all this pesky, I'm not sure I'll want anything to do with them after all. You, woman, go and stop him before I shoot you instead!"

Annalise came in Maegil's defence "Hey, go easy on him. He's a man in love!"

Mosser gave her a murderous look, turned back to Emu and xooed her away.

* * *

Maegil was making his way to the bridge when he heard steps coming his way, and a noise of metal - maybe a chain. He entered the nearest door, unpowered the noisy Deathwreaker and waited for whomever it was to pass him by, and jump him from behind. Tap, clink, tap, clink, tap, clink, the steps approached. Maegil sprung into action, putting the Little Moon's diamond edge on the bypasser's neck. "Hello, de Havilland!", he snarled in a low, menacing tone.

"Steel down, dear, it's me!" de Havilland wasn't himself again, it was Emu.

Couldn't be, Emu was dead! He saw her death, it couldn't be... could it? Surprise, and doubt. He pulled her to the room still at sword point, only his hand was by no means steady anymore.

Trembling, Maegil stretched his hand, covered in his own drying blood. He touched her smiling lips, leaving some red flakes on his finger's trail. "Emu?"

"Yes, it's me!" She kissed his hand and touched him on the face, the shackles rattling.

The sword fell with a clang and he caught her in a tight embrace, a bear hug by all standards, as tears welled to his eyes. "Oh, honey, honey, it was all my fault!"

"No, I'm fine, nob..." her words were muffled by his lips, an eager, powerful kiss that was more eloquent than any declaration he could have made. She was surprised at first, but soon emulated him, crying.

Finally their lips parted. "Sorry honey, Emu, Emu... If I hadn't challenged Mosser, if I had just killed him as I should have, nothing of this would have happened." He kept kissing her on the eyelids, her hands...

"No, nothing happened, I'm fine", she said, and kissed him again.

Maegil softly pushed her back. "No! This is no time for denial hallucinations."

"What?!"

Pain spread on his face. "I love you, and I promise I'll join you soon, only right now I'm having a psychotic episode and I need the extra aggressiveness. I'll avenge you, I'll avenge Maria on Mack's behalf as I bid my honour I'd do..."

"No, no, Mack is also alive! I'm fine, I'm not an hallucination!", she tried to stop him, but he just kept going.

"... and I'll join you once it is done. Just, please be at my side and give me strength..."

"No! No! Look at me! I'm here!"

"... for when I meet my blade. Until then watch over me... I love you!"

"Mosser strapped a remote charge on my back and I can't remove it. We have to go to him or he'll detonate it!"

"And... Thank you for coming to me. If you hadn't, I'd just have barged into the brige and be killed. Now that I know you're with me, I can think again."

Maegil stepped back, blew Emu a kiss and turned to leave. Emu, washed in tears, held his bare arm. "Dear, if I shoot you with this stunner, will you know I'm for real?"

"I'd like nothing better than to be shot by you, but... we'll soon be back together."

Emu sobbed and shot Maegil on the back.

* * *

Maegil drifted out of slumber. He couldn't move and his mouth felt like he had been chewing sawdust. He was quicklocked, and there were half a dozen guns trained at him, including... de Havilland! "RHAAAAAAA!!! YOU BASTARD!!!"

"Calm down, dear. I'm here!"

Looking towards the source of the voice, his chin fell in disbelief. "Emu! Was it really you!?"

"It's her and she's alive. Now, GET YOUR SODDEN AI OUT OF MY SHIP or I'll shoot her personally!" Mosser was beside her, and he didn't look happy.

Marked Territory

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The situation made him uncomfortable.

He stood with his arms crossed and legs spread slightly looking down on Maegil's inert body, strapped tight to a med-bench. During the Knorax uprising, he had faced off against one of the militias toughs; doped up on performance drugs, biceps the size of a rugby ball. The tough had been almost seven foot, but de Havilland took him down, unarmed. He looked down at Maegil and smiled. No, he wasn't afraid.

Of course, that was the better part of fifteen years ago. The prisoners body looked relax now, but he studied his arms and neck. A single vein ran up the man's right arm, crossing over the large biceps. He imagined what that body looked like when it was ready for action. During the sword fight with Mosser, Maegil had been very precise with his blows and parries, indicating high agility and coordination.

De Havilland paced up and down by the bed. He looked up at the cold metal roof, then back to the lights of the life support system. Ten years working behind a desk at AAAI had dulled his reflexes, his skill, his edge. The last few years living on the frontier had been a wake up call, but his body had responded, relearning the old habits from the military. Still, he could feel it as each year came and went.

He looked at his hands, turning them over. Calloused and worn. He was getting older, and he was slowing down. Not by much, but he could feel it with every dogfight at the helm of the Vagabond.

Ok, maybe he was a little concerned.

But it was more the situation than the fact that worried him. If that freak got loose, he could murder him in his sleep, or worse. It was easy to sleep with both eyes open on the battlefield, but he couldn't always be on guard here. He needed to relax. He pulled the Peacemaker from his belt and turned it over in his hands, studying the utilitarian finish. Perhaps it was time for a pre-emptive strike?

He turned away. That would be cold-blooded murder. Regardless how he looked at it, killing a man in his sleep would be No, he couldn't do it. He just wasn't wired that way.

"Fuck you, Mum." If only she hadn't raised him properly, instilled a sense of right and wrong in him. A sense of honour.

If only he hadn't made that promise to her.

But then who would he be? He wouldn't be Vasquith Frank de Havilland, pilot, marine, engineer. He would be Inmate # 30451, residing at Ross 128.

From the success of his Nano Plasma Accelerator work to the depths of despair, hunkering down in a trench on some shit hole, watching his comrades get killed around him, his life had had it's up and downs, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He would get through, as always. Still, precautions were sensible. In a cut-throat world, planning was everything. It was probably time to talk to Norman about the status of his ship. De Havilland took a final look at the man's face: calm, almost child like in its forced sleep. Then he tugged on the chains and belts, made sure he couldn't move, checked the autodoc "C still disabled "C then glanced up at the girl. She sat cross legged on a hospital bench, fist clenched in her teeth, streams of salt drying down her cheeks. He gave her a brief smile. She had saved their bacon. Saved his bacon.

"I'm sorry I shot you..

Emu stayed focus on her boyfriend for a moment, then looked up at de Havilland.

"Thank you for saving me afterwards."

De Havilland's grin cracked into a full blown smile. "You're welcome. Thanks for shooting your partner."

Emu sniffed. "I guess we're even."

De Havilland looked around and spotted a tissue dispenser. He grabbed one, then reached over Maegil and handed it to Emu.

"My friends call me Dev." The clicking of the life support punctuated the silence. "Try it out, see how it feels." Finally, Emu nodded. De Havilland looked around, suddenly feeling self-conscious. He gave her a nod. "Ma'am." He turned to leave.

"Dev."

De Havilland turned. A fresh batch of tears were slowly making their way down her face. She padded the tissue to her eyes. "Don't be too hard on him."

De Havilland took a step forward, then another, moving around Maegil. He raised a finger and dabbed her cheeks. The skin was wet, but warm and soft.

"I was in love once too. I can imagine the horror he was going through."

Emu smiled. The room suddenly brightened. She sniffed and wiped her eyes again. Before he could even think what he was doing, de Havilland reached forward and pushed the damp hair from her face. His heart skipped a beat.

What are you doing? Get out of there!

Torn, de Havilland stood frozen, unable to move away. Then Emu started crying and collapsed against his chest. His heart rate jumped while Goosebumps covered his skin. He stood still, not sure what to do, but his instincts took over and he slowly wrapped an arm around her back, another around her head.

"He'll be ok," de Havilland whispered.

* * *

His priorities had changed.

The situation had gotten a whole lot worse. Stenson recounted the problems on his fingers:

1: Trapped on the Azure Sunset without backup.

2: Little weaponry to use

3: Some crazy mother was running around trying to kill the people he was trying to arrest.

He subconsciously checked the action on his Detective Special. He was going to need something more powerful. And, he was going to need explosives. Booby traps. He had already scoped out the armoury however: That feisty woman was practically living in there!

Be Calm. You are an Interpol Agent.

He chuckled slowly to himself. That dance with the vacuum had taken almost everything his old body had. The run from the crazy man had almost done him in.

He was knackered. He was old.

This was too much for him. Why was he such an idiot? He should have waited for backup! He looked down at his right hand. It was trembling. He grabbed it with his left. He cursed. Now was not a good time to be getting the shakes.

He made his way back to the out-of-the-way security station he was holding the criminal he had arrested. Slumped in the one man prison-chamber, the man was still unconscious, but the big bump on his head was still growing. Stenson smiled. If all the crims on this ship were that easy, he wouldn't have a problem. But he had seen the man's space-madness pills. He hadn't exactly been in tip-top shape.

The prisoner stirred. Stenson grabbed his Detective Special from its holster and aimed straight at the prisoner's face. The man continued to groan and mumble, then he opened his eyes. As soon as he looked up at Stenson he recoiled immediately, banging the back of his head. The man cursed loudly, then cradled his head with his hands. "I thought you were a bad dream," the prisoner mumbled through his clenched teeth.

"I am very real," Stenson replied, "But you won't be, if you don't tell me what I want to know."

The prisoner looked from the barrel of the Special to Stenson's face and back again, as if he was weighing up options. Stenson knew the prisoner was worried about betraying Norman Mosser. A sparkle returned to the prisoner's eyes. "Mosser will find me. Then you'll be in trouble."

"Oh, Mosser will find you. But you won't be in a position to thank him."
Stenson fired.

* * *

Stenson didn't know how good the Sunset's life form sensors were, but with any luck the stun setting of the Special would make him near invisible.

He had searched the prisoner, but found nothing. He didn't have time to 'convince' the man to help him; he would have to go this alone.

Working his way back through the ship, past Med Centre One where he had come across the crazy man, Stenson found a solitary door. Above the door was a single word.

JUNCTION

Stenson opened it and walked through.

From what he had read of de Havilland, Stenson thought that the man would enjoy this room. It was an engineering masterpiece: a criss-cross of systems, power conduits and HVAC piping.

The perfect place for some urban warfare. He glanced around. Fire extinguishers, plasma routers and a fuse box.

Yes, he could probably make something work here. He rolled up his sleeves.

Time to get to work.

Rude Awakening

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Maegil drifted out of slumber. He couldn't move and his mouth felt like he had been chewing sawdust. He was quicklocked, and there were half a dozen guns trained at him, including... de Havilland! "RHAAAAAAA!!! YOU BASTARD!!!"

"Calm down, dear. I'm here!"

Looking towards the source of the voice, his chin fell in disbelief. "Emu! Was it really you!?"

"It's her and she's alive. Now, GET YOUR SODDEN AI OUT OF MY SHIP or I'll shoot her personally!" Mosser was beside her, and he didn't look happy.

Maegil cringed his teeth and stared at Mosser. Mosser's eyes met him. A silent duel of wills was fought on the AS' bridge, until Mosser put his gun on Emu's head. "I'm in charge here! Any questions?"

Maegil hesitated for a second. Obie was nearly his last triumph, that lost he only had the trace to indicate to the Brotherhood where he was, and they might never arrive in time. Even if they did, Mosser would know how they had found him and his reaction would be dangerous. Besides, the losses could be appalling... and Emu would be dead. He'd have to play his cards close to the chest. "Very well, you win. Do I have your word she'll be allowed to leave unharmed - to somewhere with a breathable atmosphere?"

"Oh, a lawyer, are you? I know I won, there was no other possible outcome; either way you're not in position to make demands. Just obey or else!"

Maegil groaned as if in the agony of defeat. When all else failed, a good guerilla leader should know when to disband his command and wait for another chance. "Obie, Whiskey Charlie Tango Alpha, uninstall." Wait Call To Arms, the code meant.

"Uninstalling", said Obie. Mosser looked at Lucky who nodded in confirmation.

"Now, Mack told me you were with the Spartans. You want to employ me, I heard?"

"Yes, I have permission to give some very good conditions. It's known that you're against slavery, and that's what we fight against."

"Against the Empire? I wouldn't and you should know it."

"Not against the Empire, against slavery. We don't want chaos, we want freedom; we're not trying to overthrow the Emperor."

Mosser asked him the conditions, and Maegil had a feeling of déjà-vu as he told him the same he had offered the other clone. Unsurprisingly, the same objections were raised, and the same arguments used. It was nearly the same conversation, but this time it wasn't so effective - last time it was over a cup of coffee, now Maegil and the SB had already given too much trouble to this Mosser for him to be well disposed towards the offer.

"I'll have to think about it, until then I won't have you roaming about." Mosser turned to de Havilland, "Take them away."

"How would you like to be an Admiral? Ha!" Mosser snorted derisively. On the other hand, it was just the thing to earn him back his admission to the Officer's Mess in Facece... There was food for thought there.

* * *

"Sir, a coded transmission from the 'Azure Sunset'," said a comm officer on the 'Tyr's' bridge. The tactical officer added his report only second after, "The target has fled the system".

On the bridge, the ship's Captain and the Rear-Admiral read the message. "Very well, pass the information to the Admiral's cabin."

Rear-Admiral Spendlove wasn't pleased with the situation. What good was it to be a Rear-Admiral if a full Admiral was breathing down his neck in command of the fleet and the Spartacus was playing spy on the target?

The Hand That Pulls The Strings

[Melinda White]

She worked her neck around in a circle, clearing out the knots. She gathered up her loose blonde hair, down to her shoulders now, and put it through a hairband. She pushed a few strays behind her ears, then focused on the computer screen.

"Where are you hiding?" She closed her eyes and rubbed them hard. "Lights." The dark control room slowly brightened to normal levels. They were supposed to be running dark, but her eyesight was worth the risk.

The *Azure Sunset* had disappeared into hyperspace after a series of mis-jumps. Although it looked as if Interpol had lost the scent also, that brotherhood of runaway slaves were still roaming about. They were massing up their forces. Perhaps they had a tracker on board?

She checked the screen again. Her organisation had cloaked satellites in the majority of systems within human space. They detected fluctuations in witchspace, such as those caused by a passing spaceship.

But they were showing nothing still. She sighed. If it didn't reappear soon, she would have to assume it was lost in witchspace, not unlikely given the level of structural damage it had suffered.

That would be regrettable as that one basket held all her eggs: Norman and his team, ex-Sergeant de Havilland with the eye disorder and the leader of the Brotherhood, the Spartacus. Melinda leaned back in her seat, rubbing her temples. Many plans were dependent on Norman. He was dangerous, but if on a tight leash, could be quite useful. Right now however, there was no leash at all. The *Azure Sunset* needed to be controlled. All of them needed to be controlled!

She cursed softly, recalling the incompetence of the strike wing that had allowed de Havilland to run free and the blunder of the controllers on the station who had exposed themselves by pulling him out of witchspace and failing to keep a lock on. Her superiors hadn't been pleased. She had downgraded her attack ships to prevent any recognition.

Two dozen of her best crews had been decimated by Mosser, de Havilland and the Spartacus. Mosser was the only Elite pilot among them! That added insult to injury. Maybe the organization's recruiting standards had fallen from the old days when only the best of the best were invited to join their ranks...

Her man on the inside hadn't been able to report yet, but she trusted him. She couldn't just wait for him to call however. She had to assume Mosser had reactivated the weapon; that would have been her first order of business, had their roles been reversed. She needed to be proactive.

A blinking light caught her eye. She turned to read the bulletin. The satellites were relaying the movements of both Federation and Imperial fleets. The fleets erratic behaviour was evidence they were searching for something in the sectors around where Interpol lost the *Azure Sunset*. The Brotherhood were gathering to the North-west. Did they know something the others didn't?

Still, she had no ships close enough that were big enough to take on the *Azure Sunset*. Most of her forces were elsewhere, engaged in other activities.

She stood up, stretched then walked to the autocaf station through the next room. She took a sip of natural coffee, made from real kenyan coffee beans. She inhaled the delicious aroma and her problems left her.

But only for a moment. She still had an important job; millions relied on her. Then an idea struck her. What if she sent in this ship, the *St Helens*? She was larger and more powerful than the old Thargoid Motherships her grand father had fought against. But she want to risk it against an HPA? This job was risky, but it was about choosing the right risks. It wasn't time to show the galaxy the *St Helens* yet. Another idea would come.

She wandered back to her desk. the light to her right was still blinking.

Melinda smiled. "Of course." She almost raced to her seat and dialled in an encoded frequency on the Hyper-Comm. A simple click greeted her. She spoke three numbers. A three dimensional coordinate. The listener would know what they meant. Another click down the line, and it went dead. She changed frequency and repeated the exchange.

That should do it, she thought. While the Federation and Empire were powerful, there was something they forgot in all their calculations.

Her organisation, once run by the top brass of their military, was now the tail wagging the dog. Melinda took another sip of her coffee, then stretched back in her chair, waiting for the drama to unfold.

The Calm Before The Storm

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The ship was quiet. Each person on board had the equivalent of his home town worth of space; nevertheless some of them wouldn't or couldn't enjoy its share.

Norman spread his time between the bridge and his quarters, no doubt planning something diabolical. Mack had escaped on one of the stored Kraits. Moore, the systems engineer had vanished without a trace; Sam and Veruz were looking for him. Anders had gone to check on a fault in a junction room. 'Lucky' Wal kept to his station on the bridge while Wafurn was trying to patch some reinforcements to the bulwarks.

That Annalise lady kept herself in the armoury at all hours of the day - nobody really wanted to know what she did there. As for the prisoners, Maegil was awake and in a lockup on one of the various prison cells dotted around the ship. Emu was only confined to the cell room, while Maegil was locked up and still wrapped in the quicklock - just in case. A security force field ensued she didn't wander.

He got goosebumps remembering Norman putting the weapon to her forehead. He only just stopped himself from doing something stupid and revealing there. He stood before that door now. His arm was half raised, ready to deactivate the security measures.

No, he shouldn't. Especially with that Maegil guy awake now. He didn't want to appear more than just a casual visitor. He just wanted to see her face again. Stare into those beautiful eyes. Hold that soft, sensual skin in his hands.

"No!", he shook his head to return from the reverie.

He turned to walk away, but stopped. He turned back to the door, face contorted as if the indecision was ripping it apart. Finally, he tilted his head back, staring at the sodium orange glow rods lining the corridor roof.

"What are you, 16?" The glow rods dimmed temporarily. De Havilland laughed.

If that wasn't contempt on the glow rods behalf, he didn't know what was. But they didn't know what it was like: They just sat there and glowed. De Havilland on the other hand had emotions to deal with. He remembered the touch of her skin, those beautiful wet eyes looking straight into his. His heart beat faster. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his jacket.

"No. She's not yours to take. She's not interested in you."

He spun back towards the long corridor. God he was useless! If he didn't know himself better, he would have wondered if he was...obsessing. He needed to distract himself. Something big.

The floors vibration turned to a brief shake, then slowly settled down to its usual rhythm. De Havilland surmised they had just exited hyperspace. That meant they were probably at the hidden asteroid base's system. He fingered the multitool in his pocket. There was always something to fix. His communicator beeped. He flipped the shiny plastic tool open.

"It's Mosser."

"On my way."

* * *

At 1.8AU from the system's star, an asteroid field filled the main view-port on the Azure Sunset's bridge. It was no more than two thousand kilometres across and five hundred from top to bottom, but it stretched all around its orbit. It was likely the remains of an ancient collision, when the system was young and the planets still forming.

There were large and small, all spinning and running around each other as if they didn't have a care in the world. A few of the big ones had noticeable wobble. Norman pointed to a large asteroid just off the centre of the view.

"That is our home for the next while, gentlemen."

The Azure Sunset lumbered forward for the following five days, then began making her way through the asteroid field. The shields flared from small explosions as meteorites peppered the hull. The array of defensive weapons

carved up the asteroids too large for the shields to deal with. After several hours of slow and careful navigation, they finally came across the repair asteroid. The darkside rotated into view, revealing an amalgam of metal and rock, with a canyon like groove down the circumference. It looked just big enough for the Azure Sunset.

"Take her in," Norman ordered.

* * *

The dry dock proved a snug fit. De Havilland, Norman and Sam stood on the metal dock, staring at a small portion of their behemoth. Norman pointed up with his spacesuit hand. De Havilland looked up to see the stars blink out of existence!

"Hologram," explained Norman over the suit radios. He turned to Sam.

"Check out the repair bots. If they're good to go, activate them. Structural repairs first."

"It's going to take a month to fully repair this girl," Sam muttered, walking off. Norman turned back to the ship and stared silently. Air hissed into De Havilland's suit from the tanks. The world was silent save for his breathing. Studying the Sunset now, he could see she had had a hard life. It would be prohibitively expensively to repair her back to show room condition. It was cheaper to buy a new one, usually. Norman didn't have that option however.

"I'm not sure if I told you about a colleague of mine. Goes by the name of 'Frantic'," Mosser said suddenly. De Havilland turned to the criminal.

"Sounds familiar... I think I heard the name from Sam, helped us out on Quexce?"

"He runs an intelligence network, among other things. A GalNet administrator. He wouldn't appreciate me telling you too much about his occupation, but if anyone is going to help us with those unknown black ships, it's him."

"Sounds real cloak and dagger. How do you know that those ships don't belong to this Frantic fellow?"

Norman shrugged. "It's not really his style. He's about ego, that man. Carries a diamond sword. Considers himself a puppet master. Ever heard of Bismark?"

"No."

"Never mind."

"So how will Frantic find out information on a secret organisation that has ships no other human has seen before?"

Norman smiled. "Logistics, de Havilland. Whoever was piloting those ships would have a support crew, superior officers, people to make their food, clean their beds, you name it."

De Havilland raised an eyebrow at him, lips puckered out. Norman put on a stern expression.

"Don't doubt me Vasquith. I'll come through for you. We had an accord, and I don't break my word." Then Norman grinned. "In the meantime, I hear you know a thing or two about Plasma Accelerators?"

De Havilland grinned. "Where are the tools?"

* * *

He leaned back, pulling the support strap tight and looking down at the empty expanse behind and below him. The front cargo hold of the ship had been completely gutted to house the HPA. He turned and looked up at the emitter he had just installed. He checked the setting on the torque wrench and gave the bolts a final tug.

"Ready," he called over the radio.

"Stand by," came Sam's voice.

De Havilland disconnected the safety strap and fired up the suits thrusters. He flew back to get some distance from the weapon as it began to hum. He couldn't hear it through his space suit as the cargo hold was open to vacuum, but he could nearly 'feel' it.

As he watched the emitter power up, his thoughts drifted to the black ships that had harassed him on his first visit to the 'Sunset'. At a time when no one knew where the 'Sunset' was, they knew. The strike wing he and Norman took out was probably a pittance compared to the power they could bring to bear. He shivered. He would never be safe again. He thought of Veruz. He had involved the kid in all this, and he might not be able to get out.

What if he just got in the Saker and took off? These Black op ships would know the Saker and would be able to follow him. But if he made a quick jump to a populated system, destroyed the ship and brought a new one? His old boss Kane Scott might not appreciate losing his NPA prototype, but he would understand. He would find a way to make the AAAI manager understand. Of course, if the Black Op ships did find him, he would want the NPA with him; the weapon was the ultimate trump card.

And what about Emu? Could he leave now, without her? Or without telling her how he felt? Yes, he had to. That was a little secret the psycho boy friend could never find out, or suspect.

The hum of the HPA began vibrating the entire cargo hold. He could see it in the shimmering of the weapon's surface. The charged plasmatic hydrogen nuclei were pushed to over the speed of light on the protonic accelerator emitters' medium and started to radiate electromagnetic waves. Even the sparse molecules on the vacuum were alive with energy as the hold filled with the smooth blue light of Cherenkov radiation. It was a good sign. Had he made a mistake, the accelerator would be crushing atoms instead of pushing them, and he'd be bathed in ionizing gamma rays instead of the harmless Cherenkov and its non-ionizing low radiant energy. If so, he'd be agonizing and hoping for a quick death. As it might well still happen if he made the wrong move with Emu.

It was only a feeling anyway. It would pass. It shouldn't control him.

"She's perfect, de Havilland. One more and you're done," explained Sam over the radio. De Havilland came out of his reverie to see a set of working lights flick off right in front of him. Another set blinked to life below him. He used the suit to fly down to them. He saw movement.

Focusing, he realised it was just a cargo bot ferrying up the next emitter from storage. He reached out, grabbed a foothold on the HPA, and secured himself to the frame. The cargo bot closed in, its thrusters holding it at station less than two metres away. It may have been a vacuum, but the artificial gravity was still going strong. The emitter was held by a pair of flexi-grip mandibles. A third arm reached out and latched onto the ship's frame. They were taking extra precautions with the valuable emitters. The mandibles reached forward and up, angling to fit the emitter into place above the HPA's final reaction chamber.

The Sunset shook violently. De Havilland bounced against the gun housing. He clenched his stomach muscles to regain control and whirled to face the cargo-bot. The emitter was still in place. He blew out a breath and grinned at his reflection in the helmet visor. That was close! The cargo-bot waited for several moments, then seemingly satisfied nothing was wrong, continued to extend its mandibles. As one of the grips moved past de Havilland's face, he realised it no longer had a secure hold on the emitter.

"Stop!"

The 'Sunset' shook again. The emitter jumped, then slipped from one of the mandibles. The remaining one clamped down hard, but the emitter's centre of mass had changed dramatically. His throat constricted and his eyes went wide. The off centre mass pulled the cargo-bot around, straining, then ripping the support arm. The cargo-bot instantly activated its thrusters, but it was too late. The final mandible clamped shut upon itself. The emitter was free and flew off.

It fell. And fell. De Havilland looked down its path, tensing for the crash. The ionic ceramic of the emitters would smash on impact. The emitter disappeared into the darkness.

"Fuck!" He smashed the SEND button on the radio down. "What the hell is going on?"

"Seismic mines. We're under attack. Get your ass up here."

De Havilland unclenched his body and whacked the thrusters on, heading for the nearest access portal.

Up With The Navy

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Edeneth (-7,0)
10.3AU from Edeneth
'Duval' class dreadnought
EP+832 HIMS'Vesuvius'

The orders seemed suspicious. Duke Albright studied the screen for a third time. The words themselves were fine: phrasing, terminology and security codes. Even his Highness' style was intact.

It was just an overall feeling. Mainly, he guessed, because the instructions were the complete opposite of his current orders. For a week now he had his scattered forces looking for the whereabouts of the Azure Sunset over a huge area, waiting for it to resurface and hoping to find it before the Federation. Suddenly, he received orders to abandon everything and leave them to it? The new orders took him too far away from their search path He read the orders again.

From: His Imperial Highness, Prince Sir John Foster,
High Knight of the Most Exalted Military Order of the Lavander Scarf
Governor-General of the Imperial Far Colonies,
Commander-in-Chief of the VII (Far Systems) Protectorate
Swallows Landing, Achenar

To: His Excellency the Lord of the 4th battlegroup,
Duke Louis Albright.

SIR,
You are hereby requested and required at your peril to:

- 1) Proceed without delay to Urhoho (-5,4) and have All Units under your command to do likewise;
- 2) Stand by in said system for further Intelligence regarding the whereabouts of the 'Azure Sunset';
- 3) Proceed to Engage and Capture or Destroy the said vessel by Any Means Necessary;
- 4) Capture or Terminate the Traitor and Renegade Commander Norman Mosser by Any Means Necessary;
- 5) Prevent at Any Cost the Capture of the said vessel by Any Foreign Forces.

Carry on in the Name of the Emperor!

I have the honour to be, Prince,
Etc., etc.,
John Foster

It had to be a Federal Intelligence trick. He wouldn't move his fleet an inch until he had security confirmation. Albright went to his cabin and opened the safe. He removed a numbered lead-sealed package and closed the safe again. Opening the package, he removed a plastic key, inserted it to a slot on his desk and typed the order's number.

Removing the key, he snapped it along a seam and returned it to the package, which he deposited in the disposal bin. After a few moments, chemicals within mixed and reacted, melting the key beyond recognition. The confirmation request would take a few hours. Meanwhile, he would wait and carry on as he was.

* * *

Somewhere in sector -6,4
Deep space
'Achenar' class flagship
??-??? 'St. Helen'

Duchess Melinda White sat back and enjoyed the moment. The screen before her showed the fleets movements. Every hyper-jump was represented by a line. Hundreds of lines converged on sector -6,4, giving the appearance of a starburst on her screen.

Her hand stroked the screen, moving along the white lines. The capital ships of both Federation and Imperial fleets. She grinned at the display. She had command of those that commanded the fleet. Her eyes drifted to the huddling dots to the Northwest.

The Spartans.

They were an uncontrollable variable, a stone on which her plans could trip and fall. A group she couldn't control. Yet.

But even a stone had a use as a marker. The lack of movement in the Spartans' fleet indicated that they were waiting for something, more than likely the AS.

Using them as a centrepiece, she distributed her own forces close by. The Federation and Imperial fleets were in opposing sectors, with the Spartans wedged between them. It would take just another short jump for them to arrive at their final destination.

Melinda wondered what the Spartans wanted with the 'Azure Sunset'. Mosser's position about slavery was well known. They'd win nothing by attacking him. What else could possibly explain their build-up?

She grabbed her coffee mug and moved to take a sip, but the blasted thing was empty. Groaning she got to her feet and went to the Autochef.

Returning to her seat, she looked at the map of lines. Nothing had changed.

Story of my life, she thought. It was her job to come up with answers. Why was she running on empty now?

She couldn't fail, too many plans were resting on her to pull this off.

Plans beyond that of humanity.

"Think, White. Break it down." Her voice was hoarse; she can't remember the last time she had used it. Or had a shower, actually. She wasn't a fan of the sonics, but there came a point - she gave herself a casual sniff - yuck, when you had to do the necessary.

Returning to her previous line of thought: there was only one possible explanation for their built-up: for some reason they were preparing to make a frontal assault on the AS.

Another thing that bothered her was what was the Spartacus doing there with Mack 'Mosser hunter' Winston; an organization's leader, most of all, has no place playing operative. He should have sent someone, never to risk himself like this...

That could be the reason the Spartans were preparing to attack! If for some reason the Spartacus was Mosser's prisoner... Which took her back to the previous question: what was he doing there, with his federalist girlfriend?

But for now, she had a job to do. If the Spartans were waiting for a signal, there would have to be someone to send it. A scout? Shadowing the Azure Sunset, waiting on the edge of the system as it made its jump in? Melinda rose to her feet, fists clenched.

Yes. She didn't need to find the Azure Sunset. She just needed to find that Scout, and send in the rival fleets under her command. Preferably in a way they wouldn't go blasting each other to kingdom come and allowing Mosser to escape again.

On the other hand, if she was right, a Scout would see any entry clouds to the system it was hiding in. It analyse its movement pattern and its transmission and would know someone was searching.

That would make him raise the alarm, warn its Commander and the SB could move in before her fleets were ready...

Melinda paced across the room, hand on her chin. If her ships entered the solar system on the far side to the Scout, he might not detect the entry cloud.

Or she could revert to her organisations superior technology. Besides Thargoid vessels, her own were the only ones able to traverse hyperspace without the use of entry/exit clouds.

She paused. She spun back to the computers, her heart racing a little faster than it should have.

It was a risk. But everything she did was a risk. The stakes were high however. Failure would result in, well, beyond forfeiting her life, she didn't want to think of the ensuing disaster.

She gave herself a slap in the face. What was this indecision about?

"Make a choice," she whispered. Any action was better than none.

She walked back and sat down at her chair. She chewed on her lip. Finally, she issued orders to spread her own scouts to the surrounding systems.

* * *

The results arrived within the day.

"Essgreack?" The name rang a bell.

She turned and searched the name through the Galactic database.

Melinda wasn't prone to believe in coincidences, though Mosser was well known for creating them. There was even an expression for such a thing.

She just sat there, looking at the letters which made the system name. This was definitely a 'Mosseresque' moment in more ways than one!

How many years ago had it been since she last came to Essgreack? Fifteen?

Her heart rushed as she relived the excitement: Leading 'Scarlet'squadron from the Seventh, including Mosser, in a raid against a Federation base.

"Mosser, you smooth old dog!" A wave of nostalgia threatened to overcome her, but she pushed it back. She was no longer a young girl. She had a duty. She closed the galactic database and turned back to the intelligence report.

* * *

Essgreack (-6,4)

12AU from Essgreack

SB Cobra MkIII Scout

AB!161

Eating, sleeping, reading and making boring reports. That had been Sergeant Major Lucian Garibaldi's life for two dull weeks. Well, one point of excitement: when the 'Azure Sunset' landed on an asteroid.

There had been a slight hyperspace undulation a few hours ago, but it was so vague he couldn't even pin point it. Probably just a power surge anyway.

Shutting off his datapad, Lucian rubbed his eyes and checked the time. 11:59. Time for a 'nothing to report' report. He yawned and leaned back the best he could. He swiped at the hyperspace comm. Just as he was about to make his call, The passive scanner beeped.

A white dot had appeared. Not a dot, it was more like a largish blur...

"Blast!" a micrometeorite had hit the damn antenna. He couldn't activate his shields whilst on silent duty. He listened for any more hits.

"Blasted system full of blasted debris of blasted asteroid's blasted collisions, oughta blast..." his voice trailed off as he saw the blur for what it really was. Or blurs, as now there was another one. Sending secrecy to the solar winds, he powered the hyperspace cloud analyser.

When he was finally ready to make his report, he wished he had never complained about his solitude's boredom.

A third splotch appeared on the screen about an hour after he reported, but this one he was expecting.

"Let the games begin," he thought, "and may the best fleet win. Who knows, we might even be..."

* * *

Edgreen (-6,4)

Orbiting Rance's Claim

'Valiant' class LRC

AA!276 SBNS'Shiva'

"I see." Adm. Curtiss Smith wasn't surprised. He had had this feeling of dread ever since the assignment had been pushed on him by the Joint Chiefs. Smith sighed and shook his head. He stood up from his desk. Finger tapping on his cheek, he walked over to the viewscreen.

Once he found the 'Azure Sunset' and had his ships attacked by some unknown squadron, he knew he had to assemble everything he had if he was to succeed.

Smith didn't really know what he was up against but suspected INRA involvement. Of course, whenever something odd happened, every good conspiracy theorist would blame Mosser, the INRA, the Tri-Alliance, or more recently, the Brotherhood for it... Since the SB and Mosser were accounted for, the next suspect on the list was the INRA.

Then again, succeed on what? What was the mission? With the Spartacus calling the shots from the AS, all Smith could do was wait... for something.

And something did happen: the Federation and the Empire were on their way to Essgreack, would start shooting at each other on sight of the 'Shiva' and the 'Azure Sunset', and the Brotherhood would be blamed for trying to drive the superpowers to war - again!

Not being able to contact the Spartacus, Smith couldn't just let them take the AS either; he'd have to take action. Equipped with the most sophisticated plasma accelerator and drive technology both powers had, the AS would give the Brotherhood the edge it needed to impose itself as a major player.

Once the SB had such cutting edge hardware, all it would have to do would be to show its face to force any system to abolish slavery. Having it destroyed or taken by someone else would be a major setback, and that was why the Spartacus decided to go there himself.

Or so would Smith like to believe, but he knew his boss only too well!

The fact was, the Spartacus was an action man and simply couldn't sit in an office and give orders, not even with a whole canister of hull sealing on his bottom end...

Smith sighed again. He suddenly became aware Rear-Admiral Spendlove was still there waiting for orders, he hadn't dismissed him. Trying to disguise the fact that he had allowed himself to divagate, he cleaned his throat.

"U-h'm! Is everybody back?"

"Nearly, sir. In less than an hour the fleet should be ready for departure."

For the last few days, an imposed peace had descended over the system. All pirates had fled, and in fact everybody who had a ship ran away on the first signs of the Brotherhood. A lot of of war slaves had been released only to rejoin their original clans. Everybody lost the slaves they couldn't hide but got some of their relatives returned.

No doubt it would all be back to the same old thing once the Brotherhood left. Except for a dozen new recruits, it had been a completely pointless exercise.

It was good for the morale, though.

"Then take the 'Tyr' as your flagship. If I fall, you're in command unless the Spartacus himself takes over the operation. We've got the tracker frequency, so let the 'Azure Sunset' escape if you must; but whatever happens, we must prevent it from being taken by anyone else."

"Do we have a battle plan?"

"I'd wish! I don't know what the other fleets will do, we'll just have to improvise. But we don't engage unless it becomes absolutely necessary."

"I see. Will that be all?"

"Yes... That is all."

The Rear-Admiral turned to leave. Smith knew it could be the last time they saw each other alive, and felt he should say something else.

"Oh, Bernie? Good luck!..."

Spendlove halted at the doorway for a moment, absorbing all the implications of that simple sentence. Facing his superior officer, he could see the stress on the man's face. "Thank you, sir, and to you too."

He left, empathic ally feeling the same gloom that afflicted the Admiral.

* * *

The Spartan fleet was the first to arrive at Essgreack, but its civilian drive technology left it much farther away than the other incoming fleets.

Accelerating the fleet in formation for several days, the Spartacus Brotherhood soon decided that they wouldn't be able to overtake their competitors. Instead of trying to insist and thus pinpoint the target's position to the others, the entire formation changed course several degrees towards a point some million kilometers away.

To the Galactic South-East and at 4.2AU from the star, the first elements of the Imperial fleet arrived closer to the AS' drydock meteor than the Brotherhood. The scouts spotted the SB fleet, but pretty much ignored it and headed to the general area to where they were going. Soon after, arrived the Federation scouts to the South-West. They, too, were fooled and sped away.

Soon the main bodies entered the system with all the three fleets matching each other on size. As far as the SB was concerned, it would be a close thing.

Everybody would be arriving at the asteroid field's phony target at pretty much the same time. Smith hoped this would gain them some time, allow the 'Azure Sunset's crew time to detect the approaching menace and carry out as many repairs as they could while the fleets scattered harmlessly searching the wrong area of the fields...

With some luck, they wouldn't notice the SB ships breaking off and storming the 'AS' before it was too late.

But somehow the trick didn't work. Both the Empire as the Federation fleets started off misled by Smith's 'ruse de guerre', but soon disregarded their scouts indications and the Spartan force's phoney vector and set their course straight to Mosser's general location.

Smith stared in dismay at the console on his desk in the semidarkness of his office. One by one, his fears were coming true. Regardless, instead of despairing, he had a philosophical "I knew it!" attitude. He had done his best to fool the others, but apparently they had their own sources of information.

Not their own spies on the AS, or they would have found it sooner. Perhaps they were following the SB's own transmitter? Smith trembled at the thought.

If that was so, not only his life and his fleet were at stake, the whole Brotherhood could crumble like a pack of cards. The ships the Billies left them and the ones they bought or later captured granted enough military power to awe almost any individual system. Still, all this force could be swept away contemptuously by any of the superpowers if their bases and operations were revealed.

And the situation could mean that Jane had missed at least two spies and the Brotherhood was infiltrated.

Or, alternatively, that his theory was right and the Intergalactic Naval Research Arm really was involved, and they'd need only to have tracked the SB if the rumours weren't too far from the truth. Or, or, or...

So many theories. So many worries, and nothing Smith could do at the moment about them. Best to concentrate at the task at hand. Flipping a switch, he ordered the fleet to return to their original course. It was a race, and they were behind.

* * *

Essgreack (-6,4)
0.3AU from the 'Azure Sunset'
'Goliath' class battleship
TX*304 GFS'Yamato'

Rear-Admiral Jonh Logan swore softly. He glanced side to side, seeing if his subordinates had heard. It wasn't proper to show weakness, but the intelligence report irritated him. It informed him of the real whereabouts of the terrorist's ship, and he had a hope to reach it and carry out his orders before the other fleets could intervene. The Imps had suddenly also changed their course. They either had their own report or decided to follow him. And now, the Spartans too... A battle was brewing, and the prize was big. "Sir, the Imps are hailing", the communications officer reported. "The Imps? How odd! On screen."

The bridge's main screen changed from the external view and the growing asteroid field to a mature balding man on with ducal patches on the red Imperial Navy uniform.

"Greetings! I'm Duke Louis Albright of His Imperial Majesty's Navy", he started. After a brief protocolar exchange, Lord Albright went to the point.

"We have been commanded to capture or destroy the treacherous villain known as Norman Mosser".

"So?" Logan played dumb, he wanted to let the Imp humiliate himself by exposing his intentions and hope for his goodwill, losing bargain power in the process.

"As you may or may not know, this traitor is guilty of the most horrendous crime of attempted regalcide." A pause. Logan pushed his patience a little. "Regalcide? Wouldn't you mean Regicide?"

"No! That would mean a direct attempt on His Most Sacred Imperial Person, and that is an impossible feat." The Duke seemed momentarily horror-struck by the idea. "This criminal tried to assassinate His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Harold Duval. And, he did so bearing a cruel weapon of mass destruction reported stolen from your Navy, if you recall."

Bla, bla, bla. If they weren't verborraic, they wouldn't be Imps... "So you want me to just stand aside and let you take him away? I'm afraid, your Lordship, that I can't do so, my orders are similar to yours. Instead, why don't you occupy yourself with the enemy that seem to be chasing you and leave Mosser to us? I'm certain the end result would be the same!"

"Waste time in a petty melee with brigands and leave you free to reap the glory of capturing the Azure Sunset? To take Mosser alive to trial with your attested lax security?"

So, he was worried that the "Azure Sunset" and its brand new Imperial drive would fall into Federal hands. As he himself couldn't allow the HPA to be taken by the Empire... "So, what do you propose?" Logan could guess what he

had in mind, but it'd look better in the report if he could write that it was the Imp who begged for it. Then he thought of what word juggling the Duke would use in his own report, and nearly grinned at the idea....
"A joint operation, and a Gentlemen's agreement to destroy the terrorist ship without boarding attempts from neither of us."

Here was the loophole. "I'll agree to search along with you, and to have it destroyed without any boarding attempts as long as your forces keep focused on the operation. However, if you decide to withdraw your efforts in order to waste time in petty melees with brigands, I'll consider you uninterested on the 'Azure Sunset' and will act as I think more appropriate." There, eat your own words!

"So be it. Even if there is an emergency, I wouldn't deprive His Imperial Majesty's Navy from the honour of participating on the destruction of the monstrous traitor. You can count on our participation even if the slaves provoke us into killing them. "

* * *

It wasn't long before the powers were scouring the asteroid field, with the Spartacus Brotherhood as an attentive spectator not far from the Imperial fleet.

The Battle of Rocky Fields was about to begin.