

DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 8

by
The Elite BBS Collective

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Fight Or Flight Syndrome

[Vasquith de Havilland]

Several small camera views created a mosaic on the bridge view screen, bringing pictures from across the repair asteroids surface. Half of them were looking west toward the Federation's fleet. The other half were focused east, at the Imperial Navy's forces. Although the capital ships were outside the asteroid field, their scouts had already delved in, firing seismic chargers at every asteroid they could target. De Havilland stood rock still, eyes wide as he chewed through the information.

"Both fleets?" He said finally. "Haven't we been here before?"

Norman looked slightly more relaxed, a hand rubbing his stubbly chin. His eyes were darting across the view screen. "They're not attacking each other. Look at their formation. They're definitely looking for something."

"Us, no doubt", agreed Sam, an eyebrow raised. He pointed to the sequence of seismic mines both fleets were deploying through the field then detonating. Another burst of light and a nearby asteroid disintegrated. The resulting debris hit the Azure Sunset's asteroid, rocking the ship slightly.

"But how did they find us? And why did we not see them coming? It must have taken days to travel in system."

"They haven't found us yet, Sam," Norman replied. His eyes were still seeking, analysing. "Patience. Let's see how good the hologram is first."

"The asteroid field blinded our sensors," said Lucky. "And red dwarf and asteroids don't exactly cast a big gravity shadow. Their hyper-jump must have arrived pretty close."

They watched in silence for several moments. The only sound was their breathing. The ships on the screens spread out. The smaller ones flew into the asteroid field, coming closer and closer. The bulk of the respective fleets were moving away from each other. It looked to de Havilland like they had agreed to carve up an equal share of the asteroid and search half of it each. This didn't bode well for them. A flight of Falcons turned to approach their asteroid. The flight split up, leaving a sole Falcon heading straight for them. It's external lights were ramped up to maximum, its active sensors at full swing.

"Norman," de Havilland whispered. Norman put his hand out to halt any further talk. He watched the Falcon intently as it moved from one view cam to the next. It was moving at a precise, methodical speed, performing a thorough examination of the area. His hands clenched tight into fists. His heart began pumping a little faster. If they were discovered;

But the Falcon continued its relentless search, passing beyond the asteroid. De Havilland's shoulder slumped as he sighed in relief. "That was close."

The prime mover of the Falcon flared. The ship dipped to the side and the side thrusters kicked in, spinning the falcon around, heading straight for the asteroid!

"Ok Gentlemen, let's go!" said Mosser. His crew dissipated immediately, each of them jumping to their stations. De Havilland and Veruz stood in the centre of the bridge, watching Mosser as he walked over to the command seat and sat down. He waved his finger around the arm rest.

"You get that last emitter installed?" he asked. De Havilland looked at the ground quickly, then back at Mosser. "Umm, about that..."

Mosser looked up immediately, eyes burrowing into de Havilland's. "Yes?"

"You don't have a spare by chance?"

Mosser jumped back to his feet "What did you do?"

De Havilland put his hands up to console him. "Look, the seismic charges unbalanced the cargo bot as it was putting it in place. It fell and shattered."

Mosser's nostrils flared and his fists clenched, but he took a deep breath and put a hand on de Havilland's shoulder. He turned de Havilland around to face the view screen. "We *need* that gun working, Vasquith."

"Where's the replacement?"

"Sam?" Norman yelled, eyes not leaving de Havilland.

"We only had enough time to manufacture the bare minimum."

"Rule of Thumb Sam: put a safety factor on everything! You should have picked that up from me by now."

"Vasquith. Get down there and make it work." The words were dripping with acid. The hand on his shoulder was squeezing a bit tighter than needed. De Havilland glanced at the hand then knocked it aside.

"You don't need the HPA to escape. You don't need to kill all those innocents out there"

"Innocents?!" Norman asked, arms wide in the air. "They're here to kill me, you, and everyone else on this ship. They won't give you parlay. This is war, Vasquith."

De Havilland stared back at Norman, eyes narrowed. His face was red. Things were getting worse and worse. It felt like every moment he had to make a choice, which took him further and further from his old life. He understood that to escape they may have to destroy some of the fed or Imp ships, but the HPA would completely cross the line.

He knew if he made the wrong decision here, it would dictate the rest of his future. He turned to the view screen and watched as the closest ships focused their seismic charges on the asteroid. The *Sunset* shook on cue, the floor shimmying and bucking, threatening to break apart. "You just put this thing back together de Havilland. You going to watch it fall apart again?"

De Havilland turned back to Mosser. He half turned and glanced back at the view screen, face screwed up as if the indecision was tearing him apart. Was his own life worth the death of thousands more? Was that what kind of person he was? Was he more worried about self preservation than his humanity?

"What the hell is that?" Lucky called out. De Havilland whirled back to the screen. A Goliath class Dreadnought appeared at the edge of the view, its slow, but incredibly massive bulk coming in from the distance, trying to catch up with the rest of the Federation fleet.

"Zoom in, Sam," said Norman. The view centred on the approaching ship and magnified. The front of the ship looked different from those de Havilland had served on back in the Corps. Then he gasped. It wasn't the ship that was different. It was the weapon.

"Is that another Huge Plasma Accelerator?" he asked.

"Get that goddamn gun working, de Havilland!" Norman roared. De Havilland swallowed. He might not have been happy firing an HPA against relatively undefended craft, but a ship with its own HPA was fair game.

"What do you want me to do? It won't work with one emitter short."

"You're the engineer. Figure it out."

De Havilland nodded slowly. He turned to Veruz. "Let's go." They raced off the bridge.

* * *

A second before impact, de Havilland promised himself he wouldn't rush when he was EVA.

"Opmmf!" He whacked full spread into the port on the HPA where the missing emitter would have gone. Veruz came to a gentle stop beside him.

"You ok, Cap'n?"

"ahhh, yeeah" Fortunately the space suit had taken the brunt of the impact. Around them, the *Azure Sunset* continued to shake from the seismic charges, as well as vibrate from the engines. They were left on standby for just such an emergency. Now they were spooling up to full power.

"The fleet cruisers and destroyers are closing in. We'll drop the hologram in five minutes and make a run for it." Norman's voice, distorted from radio interference.

"How long till the Fed's HPA is in range?"

"Fifteen minutes."

De Havilland gritted his teeth. He looked at the machine, trying to keep a positive frame of mind. *What the heck am I going to do here? Think!* Ok, he had one emitter missing. That basically ruined a whole nacelle of the HPA. Could it run on only seven nacelles? That would ruin the dynamic balance, unless he rejiggered the ignition sequence. It wouldn't be a perfect fix, but it may allow a couple of low powered shots. He turned to Veruz.

"We need to close down this particular nacelle, fool the initiation routine into thinking its active, then modify the ignition sequence. Then it should work."

"Uh-huh."

The ship began to hum as all of its systems powered up. The asteroid continued to rock and vibrate, courtesy of lasers, missiles and mines. De Havilland knew their time in hiding was up. With the Fed fleet closing in quickly to minimise the chance of their escape, their window for departure was rapidly closing. But he wasn't anywhere near complete. He was making it up as he went along. His only saving grace was the work he had done on the NPA, but that was still inadequate training.

It was just too big for two men to fix. He abseiled around the frame of the weapon, a wrench in one hand, a welding torch in the other. Veruz was lower down, half hanging in one of the gas chamber ports leading to the neutered nacelle. There was a sensor inside which needed shorting out. Although the port was a small off shoot from the gas chamber, it was still bigger than an entire Asp Explorer. The scale still baffled de Havilland. It was impossible to get his head around the fact that man had made a weapon so big. All that research money and time could have gone to solving humanities problems, not making them bigger.

Veruz cried out suddenly

"What's wrong?"

"Hit my head."

"Is it done?"

"Yeah, it's done."

"Ok, get out here. I'm almost done."

* * *

De Havilland's fingers flew over the controls. They were standing in the cargo controller's station, a glass box, overlooking the empty space the HPA. The automated electronics of the HPA filled the converted controller station. The systems were old however, and the room had only basic equipment: strapped on displays, bulky wires coming in through holes in the floor.

An engineer's nightmare. A small screen to the right had been slaved to the bridge's view screen: he could see what the bridge crew could. It wasn't pretty.

The *Azure Sunset* was flying as fast as it could from the Federation fleet, navigating amidst a maelstrom of rock. Many of the asteroids could severely damage the hull; some were larger than any man made structure and would mean instant obliteration should the *Azure Sunset* crash into them - or the other way around.

It was difficult to keep track of all the menaces, all the miriads of trajectories. The flying stones had no pattern, each vector had to be computed to define which asteroids would try to occupy the same position in space as the LRC. The AS' defensive array had to fire not only the enemy, but also clear a path of any asteroids large enough to cause serious damage. At least the Imperial fleet wasn't present to complicate the matter even more. Mosser had explained that something had occupied them, but had left it at that.

Cruisers, destroyers and carriers surrounded them, lances of light blaring out from what seemed like a million different weapons from hundreds of ships. The *Sunset* shook and lurched with each shot, but held together. The thrumming from the engines seemed even louder than before. The AS' pale blue beams of plasma accelerators vaporized asteroids. A light cruiser swarmed toward, then over the view, a stinger of yellow light flashing out in front. The *Azure sunset* shook violently, shaking de Havilland's hands off the buttons. He braced his feet, clenched his jaw and forced his hands down, going faster and faster. The control sub routines were refusing his changes; he was violating a fail safe and he couldn't find a way through.

Norman's voice boomed over the radio. "Where's that goddamn gun?"

"Having some trouble here."

"We just lost the starboard thruster array. We need that gun now!" De Havilland glanced from the controls to the view screen. A Federation cruiser flew into the path of one of the *Sunset's* small plasma accelerators. The beam sliced like a cutting torch. The Federation ship tried to manoeuvre, but it was too late. The two halves of the ship separated. The cut edges glowed bright, then dimmed in the coldness of space. They floated away, little more than lifeless junk. Whooping noises echoed across the radio.

De Havilland shut it off. He paused, then rubbed both hands through his hair. He took a deep breath. He dived back onto the controls. The ship rumbled again and began shaking as if it was in a ultrasound bath. The two men looked at each other.

"Wh.what's that?" Veruz asked. The whole superstructure began to moan slowly.

A big explosion suddenly rocked the ship. De Havilland and Veruz went flying through the small control room. Shaking away the cobwebs, de Havilland yanked himself back to the controls.

There! He pressed the debug command. He stared at the screen, waiting for the error message. Each heartbeat felt like an hour. The ship lurched. His heart pulsed.

De Havilland stood rock solid staring, holding his breath.

"Cap'n, you did it!" De Havilland looked at Veruz, then realised he was bathed in the blue wash of Cherenkov radiation. He was right.

It was good to go. A wide grin on his face, he turned the radio back on. "Ok Mosser, we're ready!"

"Goddamn it de Havilland, we just lost half of Sector 7. Get that gun working!"

"It's going, it's going, but you'll only have one or two shots max." Then he paused, brow wrinkled.

"Sector what?"

"Seven."

De Havilland gasped. Sector Seven. Security Station IV. Emu.

De Havilland bolted for the door.

"Wait!" Veruz yelled, throwing an arm out to stop de Havilland. "Where are you going?"

"Sector seven. I need to check on it to make sure Maegil hasn't escaped."

"He can look after himself! I don't know how to work this." De Havilland stood in the doorway, eyes flicking from Veruz to the ground. He had to go. He had to go now.

But he was needed here. He clenched his fists and slammed his right into the doorframe. He rushed forward and returned automation to the bridge. He half turned back to Veruz. "If this indicator goes into the red, slam this button down. I don't care what Norman says; the misalignment will tear the gun and the ship apart. Got it?"

"Um, I think so, what do-" Veruz asked turning back to de Havilland. But de Havilland was already gone.

* * *

His ragged breath rang in his ears. His heart thumped like a drum, pressing against his chest. But he didn't stop. He couldn't.

"Keep going, keep going", he repeated to himself. He focused on each leg, forcing the next one in front of the other. He had about a kilometre to travel. On a flat piece of road, a good nights sleep, and a few years less under the belt, he could have done it in four minutes. Now he had ladders and a maze of corridors, not to mention a dire lack of sleep. His battered body struggled onwards. He pictured Emu dead, or crushed, calling out for help. He pushed himself harder. His chest felt like it was going to explode.

The stitch ripped into his sides. He started screaming. But he didn't stop. He couldn't. The lights dimmed for a full two seconds. The HPA's capacitors were charging up!

Then the ship shook like a wet dog. He could almost feel the radiation from the weapon. His mind started wandering, thinking of the thousands of Federation officers and soldiers the weapon had killed, when he came up to a door leading to Sector 7. The automatic bulkhead doors were sealed and the wall seemed askew; he couldn't get in.

"No!", he whispered. His hands hit the cold steel. He dropped his forehead against the door, then turned and collapsed against it. His face was wet. "Ahhh!!!" he slammed his fist sideways into the frame. An electronic beep echoed through the hallway. Sniffing, de Havilland cleared his eyes and looked down at the small control panel and checked the readout.

There was still oxygen on the other side! Not a full atmosphere, but more than enough to breath. There was still a chance! The manual override! He opened a panel and fitted the metal handle on its slot. He started turning it, and the safety locks disengaged. They clicked open and the doors separated slightly. The air around him immediately rushed through the gap. He turned the lever with all his strength, and it yielded a little more before it stopped with a metallic hum. He dug his fingers into the gap and pushed sideways Adrenaline was fuelling his body now. He felt rough metal cutting into his hands. He kept pushing until the gap was big enough to sneak through. He pushed his body into the gap, then taking a last breath of full oxygen, disappeared through the gap.

A faint wind danced down the corridor, pulling at his loose clothes and hair. The entire ship was constantly vibrating, the floor and walls shuffling and bouncing like an old sail boat in a storm. The crew had affected some structural repairs, but the ship would never be perfect again. Eventually the stress would reach the UTS. He didn't want to think about what happened after that. He just hoped Norman had things under control upstairs. Pushing it from his mind, he sucked in a depleted breath. His whole body protested under the strain. He just wasn't getting enough oxygen in. He had to slow down. Each breath rasped through his lungs. His chest was rising higher and higher, trying to find enough oxygen. Spots began flashing across his vision like stars

He came to a clumsy halt outside the security station. The security field had failed, but the door still held strong. He pressed the controls. The door beeped but didn't open. He slammed against it angrily, but it didn't budge. He took a few steps back, then ran forward, swinging his shoulder in to take the hit. Pain flared up his arm. *You're starting to lose it.* Shaking his head to try and clear his vision, he studied the door. Again, he operated the manual override. It slid to the left when it opened, but it moved even less than the previous. The wind around him changed, suddenly flowing through the slit between the door and its housing. His heart jumped - there was a leak!

De Havilland tried to force the lever again, to no avail. He frowned. He wasn't strong enough. *No', you can't quit now!* He took a few steps to the other side and kicked at the right most edge of the door at hip level. Hitting it at centre height, he'd prevent it from jamming even further out of parallax disalignment. The metal door moved ever so slightly.

The door must have already been under stress. The gasses whirled and howled around him, forcing their way past the door.

Gritting his teeth, he braced himself the best he could and kicked again, causing the door to move ever so slightly. He kicked again.

And again.

And again.

Sweat was pouring down his face, his leg swinging like a pendulum from the floor to the door. His vision was darkening. He closed his eyes. He kept kicking like a mindless automaton, visions of Emu injured and dying spurring him on.

"Not..going..to..let..you..die." The door finally gave, buckling a little more into the wall. De Havilland could see light from the other side. He dropped to his knees and peeked through.

Smoke and fire. A structural beam skewed from the ceiling at an unhealthy angle.

Movement! He struggled against the gap, eye searching relentlessly, but it disappeared. He jumped back to his feet, causing the blood to rush from his brain. He staggered and put his arm out to support himself. He gathered his wits and took another swing at the door. It moved another millimetre. The whole ship shook violently, jarring de Havilland's body. He paused. That wasn't from a laser beam. Something was wrong with the engines.

He didn't have long. Summoning up every last ounce of strength in his body, he tensed, screamed, then smashed his foot forward as hard as he could.

CRACK!

The door buckled inwards. He pushed his hands and arms through the enlarged gap and pulled the door sideways on its rollers. It slid a foot, then seized, shrieking to a stop. But the gap was big enough. Still gulping like a fish out of water, He squeezed through, collapsing through the hole. He looked up to find himself in hell.

* * *

Fires, weakened by the low oxygen, fizzled across the room. Smoke flowed to the back wall, escaping through cracks and micro-holes. The far wall had collapsed like a mining tunnel. Structural steel members and bulkheads lay collapsed and squashed upon each other creating a jungle of metal. The fire retardant systems were trying, but the foam was following the smoke through whatever cracks led to the vacuum outside. He knew with a certainty that there was no structure past that collapsed wall. He prayed whatever strength was holding out the vacuum kept up for a little longer.

He scanned the room. The cells were empty. He couldn't see her. Panic began to take hold. What if the vacuum had sucked her out before the wall collapsed? What if the wall had collapsed on top of her? His mind was swimming and he had to force himself to concentrate. His vision went fuzzy and he collapsed to the floor.

His hand hit something soft. Not hard like metal, but warm, like, like... Emu's hand! De Havilland reached out with both hands and explored the skin as if checking to make sure it was real. There was no doubt about it; this was her hand. He followed the arm along... to find it end underneath a metal locker.

De Havilland's heart missed a beat. "No, no, no, no." He forced himself to his feet and took hold of the large metal box and pulled with all his might. It moved an inch. He got a foot under it, then bent down and screaming, hauled the control station housing up and to the side.

Emu lay beneath, her inert body huddled over that of Maegil. Neither of them were moving. She gave her life in vain to save the one she loved. De Havilland turned away. This whole fucking situation was un-goddamn fair! He wished he had never seen the stupid LRC. His life would be simple, and those he loved wouldn't die.

"Fuck!" he bellowed, head tilted back, arms wide. He dropped to his knees, then collapsed forward onto Emu. He couldn't hold back the tears. They dribbled down his face. He stopped. He held his breath, listening. He moved his ear on her body. Nothing. His own heart beat rushed in his ears.

"Come on, come on," he whispered. His mind must have been playing tricks on him.

There it was! A pulse! Faint and very slow, but she was alive! He almost choked, then burst out laughing. He wiped the tears from his face. New determination flowing through him, he got to his feet and dragged her to the door. He forced her limp body through. He turned back for Maegil. He wasn't moving either, but he didn't look hurt.

Leave him there

De Havilland paused. What if he did just walk away? It wouldn't be murder. It would also be one less psycho to worry about.. And without Maegil, Emu would be free to take up other options; He turned back to the door. No. How could he even think the idea? Such an insidious act would be worse than outright murder. He had to save Maegil. Not just for his own soul, but for Emu, because that's what she would want.

He reached down and pulled Maegil up to the door, then turned and pushed him through. Maegil collapsed through the other side of the door. The vibrations in the ship suddenly jumped up in magnitude. Then the whole ship bucked. De Havilland bounced and hit his head against the mangled roof. Collapsing back to the ground, he reached out and grabbed some of the torn metal from the door. His mind screamed at him to get out; this room wasn't going to hold much longer.

The ship bucked again, and again, each time coming louder and quicker than the one before.

Get out of here! He began pulling himself through the door. He got an arm through to the corridor. Then the ship bucked again. And the entire wall behind him exploded outward.

The wind rushed past his face and body so hard, he started to lose his grip. He squeezed his hands shut, cutting against the ragged metal doorframe. As his blood began to lubricate the metal and loosen his grip, he knew it

would only be a matter of time. Seconds, really. His face relaxed in acceptance. All the air would rush out, he would die of asphyxiation in space and it would all be over. All because he wanted to be a goddamn hero.

No.

Not like this.

If he could force his way through to the corridor, he could inact the pressure shielding to block off the leak. That was a separate system to the door controls, designed to work in an emergency like this. He would be safe. He just needed a little bit of fight to get through. Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself forward. His biceps were straining, threatening to pop. His head got through the gap. He was almost there. He had most of his right arm through. He moved it around to help push him through but he lost his grip and he fell back against the wind, barely grabbing a handhold in time.

He tried to look backward. That was it. He didn't have any energy left. He was going to die.

Well! I might as well go on my terms...

He thought of all he had done with his life, and everything he still had to do. From Marie-Jane to Emu, Then he let go. But he only flew back a foot before he came to jarring halt. He looked up to see a pair of burly hands wrapped around his own. He followed them through the cracked door to their owner.

Maegil.

He wore a determined expression, completely devoid of fear, as if his body was simply an instrument to a purpose. Slowly, de Havilland inched forward. His hands made contact with the corridor side of the door and he latched out, helping Maegil get him through as much as he could. Then his head was through, and his torso, then he pushed out with his knees and with a final effort, he collapsed forward onto the corridor floor. Groaning, he rolled over to see Maegil going over to the lever and trying to turn it. The door was too jammed, de Havilland knew how hard it had been to open it.

Maegil's face purpled as he pulled with all his strength and the door closed a bit. The handle moved another quarter of a turn, and the door responded before jamming again with a grinding.

He changed position. The handle was now horizontal, and Maegil crouched underneath. Forcing it upwards with his lower body power, the grinding worsened. The handle's metal shaft started bending. Suddenly, with a last shriek, the door slid all the way. The entire wall holding the butchered door shimmered, then the air went still. The wild howling reduced itself to a loud, shrill whistle. Maegil turned and took a step toward de Havilland.

Then de Havilland blanked out.

Learn To Fly In Six Easy Lessons

[Kevin O'Connell]

Mack had explained the 'precautionary misjump', and after what seemed like a terrifying view of interstellar space, we were off again, and - he assured me - somewhere populated. I didn't know or care where. I was just relieved that my earlier panic that it was going to be just me, Mack and a Krait for the rest of our (very short) lives stuck in interstellar space . . .

"I need some sleep," Mack sighed. "Mosser didn't equip these with stardreamers, the tight get, so we'll have to take turns keeping watch. So see you in a few hours." He turned to leave.

"Wait - I don't know how to pilot a spaceship!" I replied desperately.

Mack turned. "It's on autopilot. Just come and wake me up if anything bad looks like it will happen"

"How do I tell?" I asked, completely out of my depth.

"Oh, the usual - lasers flashing by, missiles, explosions, people on the comm telling us to surrender or die, that kind of thing," he replied casually. "Oh, the pilot's seat is quite comfortable and doesn't bite".

He turned to leave again, and closed the door on the tiny Krait's flight deck. I looked at the panel. Lights and symbols glowing on the flat interface screens, most of them meaningless. I settled into the pilot's seat, and looked at the incomprehensible controls. Aside from all the screens, there was a couple of stick shaped controls and some pedals on the floor, and a couple of levers. There was another panel marked "Manual Override" with a number of switches, all with incomprehensible labels like "LFT MAN TRSTR", and "REACTION WHEELS". There was a lever I did understand. It said "LANDING GEAR" to the left, and was labelled "UP" and "DOWN". But that was it.

In front of me was a large holographic instrument. It showed a 3D scene of ... something. Lots of lines. Something white that looked like an upside down golf club.

A green box hovered on the main front view out of the window, with a number. 9.083AU it said. I watched it for some time, and after a while it said 9.082AU. Obviously some kind of count down.

I had no clue what I was supposed to tell something was threatening us until it began shooting. It would probably all be too late by then. I tried to relax.

* * *

Two hours later, the initial panic had long subsided, and boredom had set in.

* * *

Another hour passed. The number out of the front view had only gone down a tiny amount. I simply had to get up and walk around. I left the flight deck, walked through the tiny living area, and past the even tinier bunk room and back. I turned around, and walked back up front, and sat back down in the pilot's seat.

'Bing', went something or other. I looked around. A new panel had popped up on the main display. It had a little graphical button saying "Interphone". What the hell was an 'interphone'? 'Bing', the system insisted, and the button flashed. Above this, was the word "Communications system". So at least it probably wasn't the ship about to blow up. Why couldn't they just give you a normal damn comm interface so it was perfectly familiar? Why did they have to make the ship so arcane? Probably to make pilots feel like they are doing something everyone else can't do.

Hesitantly, I touched the graphic marked 'Interphone'.

There was some hiss over the speaker. Suddenly, a voice boomed from the loudspeakers.

"SURRENDER OR DIE!" yelled the voice insistently.

"Wha...?" I asked, starting to feel hot with sudden fear.

"YOU HEARD, SURRENDER OR DIE!" the voice boomed.

I swore, and wrenched myself out of my seat, and promptly fell over the centre console, face planting against the cockpit door. I struggled up again, and untangled myself from the seat belt that I was now caught up with. My hands were now shaking uncontrollably, as I wrenched the door open, hurtled through the small living area and crashed into the bunk room in almost a single, panic stricken movement!

"Wake up wake up wake up we're being attacked!" I yelled as I fell headlong into the room.

I struggled to my feet and stared wildly at Mack.

He was sitting up in the small bunk, trying to stifle a laugh. He looked at me again, and hung up a small handset into a little alcove by the bunk.

"You should see your face," he replied between chortles.

"Wha..? But..."

"Just a test...", he said between gasps, "testing," he said, and lapsed into hysterics.

"You ... you..." as it finally dawned on me. "You bloody psychotic maniac!" I yelled.

Mack was now in fits of uncontrollable laughter, tears running down his face.

"Your face, man, I've never seen anything like it, I'm so sorry," he said, lapsing back into hysterics.

I couldn't take it any more. All that adrenaline now fuelled irrational anger, and I leapt at Mack, my fists flying. He expertly deflected my blows, making me angrier still. I sprung away from him.

"Don't ever do that again!" I yelled angrily.

"I'm really sorry," he said, obviously not sorry at all and enjoying himself immensely, "But the look on your face."

"You're a psycho!" I yelled back.

"I had to make sure you were still awake, I'm sorry," he said. "Have a Riedquation Ultra to soothe your nerves, I made sure I brought my stash," he said, pointing to the pot on the small table, before lapsing into hysterics once more.

I collapsed into the little chair in the corner of the bunk room, adrenaline gone - suddenly feeling exhausted.

"I'm really sorry, honestly - but you understand, I had to see whether you would react properly".

I fixed him with a steely glare.

"You have to see the funny side of it," he added.

"It's not funny!" I yelled, hoarsely.

I slumped back in the chair, and poured a small ultra, trying not to shake it all over the cabin. Mack was trying to be serious, but couldn't keep a straight face. "Man, the way the seatbelt got you. I should send that to Alioth's Funniest Home Movies. Come on, you have to admit it's pretty damned funny."

"You almost gave me a heart attack," I said flatly.

"I'm sorry," he said again, trying to keep a straight face. The edges of his mouth kept twitching, showing he was fighting an enormous internal battle not to laugh again. He put his hand over his face and tried to cough to conceal his continued mirth over my panicked attempt at escaping the cockpit.

"Oh, my sides are hurting so much," he said after thirty seconds. "I'm sorry, I haven't laughed since..." his voice trailed off.

Since Maria was gunned down, were the words he didn't need to add.

I sighed, tiredly. I felt it was my turn to apologise. "I'm sorry for trying to hit you there, but, well, I was so angry."

"Yeah," he replied, laughter finally extinguished.

"Look, Maria wouldn't want to see you miserable. Why don't we just forget this whole idea of going to the Empire? You'll get killed and you know it. Maria wouldn't want it that way."

"Yeah," he replied. "Look, I promise not to, ummm - test you - again. Why don't we discuss plans over a decent dinner made out of proper food when we make landfall? I'm sure we can spare enough time for some real food before my fugitive status catches up, and I'll pay to make up for almost making you have an involuntary bowel movement just there"

"Yeah, OK," I replied tiredly.

I left for the flight deck again. Perhaps talking over some real food in a comfortable, pleasant setting would enable me to talk sense into Mack, instead of the current suicide mission he was hell-bent on completing. Maria wouldn't want it that way, I was sure. Many would think the universe would be better off with both Mack Winston and Lord Burton-Riddick dead in a fiery explosion, but I wasn't so sure.

* * *

Meanwhile, two AU away, the AJNIB Saker winked into existence. Vera Sinclair was quite gratified that her educated guess about where the Krait would end up was right. What the advanced hyperspace cloud analyser

couldn't tell you (all it could say about a misjump was the direction and rough break point), intuition and experience could make up for.

The Krait showing up here, going in this direction also meant that Mack Winston was likely the commander.

Good news indeed.

Battle Of Rocky Fields (Part 1)

[Cmdr. Maegil]

The fleets deployed on the upper and lower sides of the asteroid belt. To the galactic western side of the targeted section, the Federal 3rd fleet spread its heavier ships as a sheet around its sector. The Imperial Navy's VII (Far Systems) Protectorate 4th battlefleet copied the move on the eastern side, but with a tighter capital ship deployment.

Like water to a sponge, masses of small ships soaked through the asteroid field.

On the bridge of His Imperial Majesty's Ship 'Vesuvius', Duke Albright watched the tactical display on the main screen.

"Damn that rag-tag horde of slave scum!" he said, right fist clenched.

The Brotherhood armada were less than one hundred kilometres away, constantly taunting the Imperial fleet. They flowed like a tide; every time Albright's forces moved at them, they fell back, only to return to provoke the Imperial fleet.

The Duke couldn't leave his position to give proper chase, and on one occasion that his screen advanced too much ahead of the main force, they turned back and snapped at it. The dogs!

Not that he feared them. Their superior numbers couldn't compete with his superior equipment and disciplined and experienced crew.

He was also knew the pig in command of the Federation fleet would take advantage of the situation to board the 'Azure Sunset' in his absence, despite their gentlemen's agreement. That, he could not allow.

Albright sent as many ships as he could afford into the asteroids. Keeping a reserve in case of a slave attack reduced his effectiveness as a blockade and a hunting force.

His rear guard maintained their momentum, refusing to sit as targets for the Brotherhood. Pilot chatter over the comm suggested they were unhappy with their assignment, but Albright knew that would rather be looking after the slave scum than down in the asteroid field. Blips of light flashed across the main screen, intersecting and sometimes replacing the dark spots of the asteroids themselves.

"Not a glorious way to go", Albright mused.

* * *

If Master Darren Vilan had heard His Lordship's thoughts, he would have heartily agreed.

"I'm gonna deserve a medal if I get out this alive," he muttered, before swerving just in time to avoid an asteroid. His momentum threw him between two other incoming asteroids. He fired the dorsal thrusters just as they collided with each other, his ship's topside being battered with rock fragments.

Darren jumped as the ship bounced from another impact. His head flicked to the hull condition reading, and he sighed in relief. Pocket marked as it may have become, the Ospray was holding up to the onslaught.

The hull could take the slow impacts, but the real question was: how long would his nerves last? This was more than anything he had ever trained for.

He checked his starboard seismic bomb pod, an uncommon weapon load replacing his usual missiles. He fired off a bomb against an asteroid large enough to hold the 'Azure Sunset', then flicked the controls to port. He forced a smile under his helmet, he had taken that asteroid to school!

The two stage, pressurised explosive detonated silently against an asteroid, followed by a second stage of explosive expanded out against the first wave of gas, creating a shockwave that blasted as a cone into the asteroid. The vibrations fractured it from inside, breaking it in pieces instead of just making yet another crater on its surface.

Still, the flash of light was followed by a shudder through his ship as the shockwave and fragments from the exploding asteroid peppered his ship.

The smile vanished in an instant. "O-h-h, bu-u-ug-ger!", Darren swore as he was viciously shaken by the high-speed stone shrapnel. A warning appeared on the HUD, the starboard thruster had been damaged. The pilot clenched his teeth as he just managed to avoid the larger fragments. If Darren now could only navigate his way back to the carrier, he'd be grounded -and blamelessly safe- until the ship was repaired. Cheering up, he called his squadron leader and reported the 'bad news'.

On the Federal side, things weren't any better. After narrowly escaping death more times than he cared to count, Sergeant Larry Madison's 'Jumper' squadron concentrated its efforts on a near-planetoid sized asteroid. This particular asteroid was so large it would take several thousand seismic charges to break it apart. Regardless, even not fracturing the asteroid, the shockwaves should be enough to collapse any natural cavities.

Approaching on a tangent to the ground, Madison flight's four ships broke from the squadron and proceeded to their sector. Unlike with the smaller asteroids, this one was large enough to have something like a horizon.

The Sergeant levelled his ship and avoided a boulder in a collision course.

"Right, people, this one's like on the low altitude bombing drill." At least this run would bear more resemble to what the pilots were trained to do.

"The weather is kind of heavy, sarge", Jumper 12 crackled o the comm.

"Since when do we care about a bit of hail? Stop whining, you sound like a grunt!" Madison himself would appreciate a long period under heavy sedation after this mission, but wasn't about to allow that kind of talk until the job was finished.

The flight fanned out into a line and started their run, dropping their charges at every 250m and raising tall puffs of dust and debris on their passage.

After bombing their assigned area, the flight needed to reload. He targeted his carrier, the 'Renown' then patched a radio frequency through to his commander.

"Jumper 9 to Jumper leader, returning to...cancel that, I think I saw something!"

Amidst the dispersing dust clouds, the scan showed that the freshly bombed asteroid's surface had gained a long gash, crumbled and irregular on one side but with a ruler-drawn appearance on the other. Visually, it appeared to be lighted inside.

Madison had to turn back - nearly being hit by a huge rock that ended up making a crater on the asteroid's surface. His ship rocked and bounced from the debris lifted by the collision.

He glanced at the hull condition indicator again. Sweat dripped into his eyes; he couldn't get his gloved hands into the helmet to wipe it; he would just have to cope. Putting aside the discomfort he pressed the send button on his radio.

"Affirmative, Jumper Leader, I found a holo field. Mark my position, I'm returning to base to reload".

Slumping back into his control seat, he flicked the ship around and blasted out of the asteroid field as fast as he dared.

* * *

The command came through: Flush out the AS, or bury it for later retrieval.

The target asteroid was quickly surrounded by swarms of small fighters, all launching their seismic charges toward it. Madison was zooming back through the asteroid field to join the fight. He had a full complement of seismic bombs and the short respite on the carrier had been enough to renew him with vigour.

By the look of it however, their efforts were insufficient to cause any significant damage. The dry dock had reinforced walls and a shield surrounded its entrance.

Still, the Federal pilots gave their best and expended all their ordnance on the rift's edge.

"Jumper Leader, Jumper 9. I'm out of charges, returning to base for another load."

Jumper Leader's voice came over the comm. "Never mind, the fleet's coming in. The 'Yamato' can drop marines or reduce this entire rock to smoke"

Madison frowned. The formation of the Federation fleet was spread thin; It would take some time to gather it up and pour it over the protected hideout.

"Affirmative, Jumper Leader." As far Madison was concerned, it would be better to flush the 'Azure Sunset' out and engage it than staying out here dodging boulders. Then, at least it would be lasers, he thought, and liked the idea - regardless of how absurd that improvement might appear to the civilian mind. Madison had, of course, a military one.

Rear-Admiral Logan stood rock still looking at the main screen. The hideout asteroid filled the entire view, the distance to target slowly decreasing. plumes of light and explosions peppered the screen as more and more ships blew up or collided with asteroids. His ship and a few others were closing in, the rest of the fleet not too far behind them. He wasn't afraid of what awaited him; his ship was more than capable of despatching the majority of threats. He risked a look at this wrist chrono.

He had a gentlemen's agreement. If the Imps hadn't seen what he was doing by now, they would in a moment.

Logan was a man of honour, who had fought for his government since he was 18. He had sacrificed family and friends to be the best he could be for the Federation. Even if he didn't value honour (and in his opinion, any officer

who didn't was a disgrace to the uniform and service) and failed to keep his word, the Imps could become annoying on the political front. He didn't pretend to understand that side of the military, but he accepted it was part of it.

Damnit...

Sighing, he signalled for the comm officer. "Get the Imps on the horn. Give them the coordinates for the Azure Sunset."

* * *

The Federal search groups had found the AS's location and were bombing it with all they had. Their flagship was exchanging messages with the Imperial commander. It was time. Smith collected himself for a general broadcast to the whole fleet. Every AV screen and PA system of every ship under his command was ready to relay his words. This could be their finest hour or their doom, and Smith was well aware of the odds.

Smith pressed the comm button. The camera's red light went on. He was on the air.

"Brethren!

This is Our Brotherhood's test of adulthood. Until now, our victories against Imperial fleets were due to surprise or ambush. But today, my brothers and sisters, is different. The enemy we're about to face is from the Seventh Protectorate. Whereas the First has fame and the honour of protecting the Imperial Family, the Seventh has combat experience.

These are the veterans of the Empire, and we'll have to face them on equal terms.

Our mission is a simple one: we'll secure a way out for the 'Azure Sunset', its crew and the Spartacus. But be aware: once they have made their escape, the Seventh will have lost face. When they lose their quarry, their wrath will turn on the irresponsibles - US. They will give no quarter, and the moment we turn to flee will be the moment we doom ourselves.

Nurture no hopes of clemency if you surrender: we all have felt on ourselves the cruelty of man over man, and theirs will be the cruelty of the blood-lusty upon the helpless. It will be a fierce fight, and we'll either vanquish or perish.

Let there be no cowards among us, for they will be the doom of us all. We fight to the death, or to VICTORY!"

The light went off, and the bridge returned to its normal activity. Smith nearly returned to his previous depressed self, but caught himself on time. It wouldn't be good for morale.

The Imperial fleet's capital ships were starting to move towards the 'Sunset's location. "Let's go, Captain. We attack on my mark", he ordered with all the confidence he could muster.

The Spartans didn't wait for the Imperial fleet to end its repositioning, and launched its attack on the precise moment the defensive screen began to turn. They closed in fast in a wedge on the Imperial South flank and a volley of missiles was exchanged.

These were the opening shots of the Battle of Rocky Fields.

* * *

The Imperial VII (Far Systems) Protectorate's crews were, as Adm. Smith pointed out, the veterans of the Imperial Navy. They were used to just about everything, and an attack launched at close range wouldn't be enough to shake them. The defensive screen's ships created an effective chaff barrier as they fired their own missiles and pulled slightly back. Simultaneously, the defending ships from the immediate vicinity to the attack advanced and opened fire at the aggressors from the sides in a well-practised manoeuvre.

The combined water-like movement blunted, then broke the Spartan attack's spearhead with very few casualties.

It wasn't enough, though. The Spartan spear's head might have been broken, but the shaft still drove deep into the Imperial rear by momentum and sheer numbers, as the screen was too thin - too many of them were with the search squadrons. The pebble in the pond turned out to be a boulder, splashing in their shallow defensive screen.

Still, despite the ferocity of the follow-up attack, Imperial discipline held firm and the fighter defence was quickly rallied by the commander of the fighter wing.

On her C&C Courier, Countess Jeanne Blackmore was spitting nails at her squadron leaders. "Blue leader, Red leader! shut the door behind them! Cut that prong off from its main body! Green and white, assist, but I'll have your hide if they open another gap!" Obviously, she had decided to deal with the wedge as an elongated exposed flank, and with the timely assistance of frigates and cruisers, the ones that had come in wouldn't have much longer to live.

Such manoeuvre could only work as long as her Ospray, Ospray-X and Eagle MkIII squadron leaders could keep the door shut. And, of course, if the escort ships arrived in good order to destroy the enemy. If one of the two conditions wasn't fulfilled, her fighters would get caught between the hammer and the anvil. On the rooster scanner beside her, several ship icons went from green to red or black, and many more were on the yellow - damaged but fighting. It was taking too long, where were they?! She blanched as she looked at the tactical.

The escorts were going away!!!

"Flag, where's our support going? I need the Couriers and Cougars here!" The Countess nearly gasped.

"I ordered the fleet, you included, to give chase to the 'Azure Sunset'! The target is getting away, so stop playing with the slaves and fall in!"

Unbelievable! The entire rear flank was being overwhelmed and the Duke tells her to get in formation! Blackmore calmed herself, it wouldn't do to shout at the flag lord.

"Mylord, we're being overrun here. I respectfully submit that support ships must be sent to the rear without delay." More icons were changing colour by the second.

"Overrun by slaves!? My dear Countess, how much incompetence can one show? Oh, very well..." His tone of voice conveyed both his incredible arrogance of the man and the disdain he held for both the Spartans and herself. "I'll send help. Are you competent enough to fend them off while we get a head start to the - real - target?"

A Duke could make or break an officer. Her career was over. "Yes, mylord." That was the only possible answer. Still, Blackmore had to try and make a retreat before she lost all her forces. "Blue and Red squadrons, fall back on 120:025! Green and white, assist. Make a perimeter 5000m back, near..." her heart sunk "...the three Cougars our Duke sent as backup!" Three Cougar-X and six Couriers.

Half a squadron of each. That was it.

As a sacrificial lamb, Countess Jeanne Blackmore ordered her pilot to join in with the rear guard. Soon enough, the Imperial fleet's main body rear was being engulfed by the Spartan offensive.

Brought along in the carrier's holds for the specific purpose of taking out the Azure Sunset, a squadron of Imperial Courier gunships was participating in the search.

In command of the hyperspace incapable Imperial Courier with blue splotches on the nacelles, the criptical inscription 'VI#D02S14' on its sides and transponder DF+472, Viscount Ramswool watched the onslaught, eyes wide, carotid spasming in his neck. The slaves were bolder by the day, their previous successes seemed to make them think of themselves as a real navy.

Previous successes over the VI! The _VI_Protectorate's _S_quadron leader of the _14_th Squadron, _02_nd _D_efense Wing AKA 'Sledgehammers', his command, and in fact the entire VI (Border Defense) Protectorate had sworn eternal hate and revenge for the humiliations inflicted upon them.

The Sledgehammers were halfway between the 'Azure Sunset's hideout and the battle raging off the edge of the asteroid field. A decision was necessary: should Ramswool carry out his orders and join the Federal forces trying to flush the AS out, or return to aid the fleet? He wasn't under the Duke's command, the Sledgehammers were a detachment from the VI...

Orders or honour? Be courtmartialled for dereliction of duty, or renounce his protectorate's vows and be forever despised by his subordinates and peers?

There was nothing to think about, really! He told the weapons officers to replace the seismic charge pods from the gunship's reloadable missile pylons for naval missiles.

"PRINCE FRANCEZ!", he bellowed at the comm as he turned his gunship towards the fleet. This was the VI's most recent warcry, reserved for use against the Spartacus Brotherhood in memory of their outraged former Commander-in-Chief.

"Prince Francez, HOORAH!", a chorus replied on the cabin's speakers.

Falling in double-edge formation, the 14th/2nd followed its squadron leader.

* * *

Sam pulled the 'Azure Sunset's helm and it responded slowly at first, then started to point up at the gap with more responsivity as the momentum build.

"How are we going to get out of this?", he asked as he eased the controls.

"Who's got the HPA?", asked Mosser in a rhetorical way. Sitting on the command post, he had access to all the other stations' information.

"We go to the East!"

"Thought you would, Sam... Actually," he smiled as he examined the remaining external cameras' view, "Maegil's friends seem to be just like him; they're biting more than they can chew. But thanks to that, the Imperial fleet seems to be too busy to cut us off. Take us out and to the South-East, we'll use the asteroids for cover until we get clear for a hyperjump."

"Will do!"

"And how are things outside, 'Lucky'?"

'Lucky' was at the tactical console, a look of foreboding on his face.

"It's too cluttered from the asteroids, I can't get good readings except on the shortest range. Lots of fighters and a couple of Asps, and beyond that...", he left the sentence in the middle with a shrug.

"Beyond that, the rest of the Fed fleet. Ready for a workout, Annie?"

Annalise, at the weapons console, was nearly jumping in contentment. "Let'em come, boss!"

"That's my girl. Get the Asps first.", he added as an afterthought, and got a scowl for his impudence.

The ship aligned with the exit. Sam made a final systems check. Satisfied, he pushed the power throttle all the way to 120% and called out. "Here we go, hang on."

"I'm a bat out of hell!", Mosser shouted, and the 'Azure Sunset' trouted out of the Asteroid, lasers blasting, promptly being struck by a Falcon.

The chase was on. All neighbouring fighters homed in, and the 'Sunset' became the target of dozens of pinprick red and orange lasers.

Two Asps came round the asteroid and were promptly cut by plasma, and some of the smaller fighters caught the attention of the automated 4MW turrets.

Without proper missiles to throw at the LRC, some of the Falcons bombarded it with the seismic charges. What little effect they had was disappointing, though. Their explosions proved the charges were too slow for warfare as they were repulsed before the peak of the blast could damage the shields.

Sam took the ship to the desired course, away from both fleets, but the fighters wouldn't let go. Instead, there were more and more arriving, there was no end to it.

Worse, a Puma cruiser opened a barrage of 100MW at them, and *that* was really destructive. The shield condition fell vertiginously until Annalise made her reply, but there was more heavy artillery under way.

"Annie, pass me the missile control. Concentrate your fire on the big'uns and leave the fighters to me."

Annalise broke her attention as she was changing target. "No way, we don't have enough missiles to shoot all of them!"

Mosser gave her his most mischievous smirk "You're doubting me? Watch and learn, woman of little faith."

The AS headed towards a rather large asteroid At Mosser's request, Sam went at it headlong, only manoeuvring in the last possible moment to skim it as close as he could. As the 'Sunset' approached the asteroid, a missile left its pylon and flew at it. It impacted on the surface and lifted up a high-speed shower of smaller pieces, several of which came into the AS' path.

The two squadrons of Falcon fighters swarming the LRC suddenly erupted in a series of explosions or went tumbling away to their deaths as they hit other asteroids. Meanwhile, the Azure Sunset's shields just sparkled and flared as they were hit by pieces of rock.

"Just like playing snooker!", grinned Mosser.

* * *

After the initial clash, the remaining five ships of the once twelve-strong 14th/2nd had hastily withdrawn from the thick of the battle.

They found themselves overwhelmed on a role they weren't equipped to perform; the swarms of Spartans ships outmanoeuvred them and beat them as drums. The Mod 3 Couriers, with their weak shielding and lumbering turns were simply unable to penetrate the slave fleet's screen in order to perform the heavy kills their 100MW military lasers demanded.

In fact, not even their Mod 1 cousins were being capable of that at the moment, so, as an independent squadron, their leader decided it best to take another course of action.

The Viscount examined his sensor array's tactical information and decided its best course of action. At present, the 'Azure Sunset' was in the middle of the asteroid field. To get to it, it would require careful navigation and low speed, unsuited for his ships' role. Let the Feds continue to get killed that way until they flush the LRC out.

However, Ramswool had an easier target, and possibly one that would free the rest of the fleet sooner from its present engagement.

"Hammer 6, take the point. Let's run down the Lynx carrier on the left flank".

"Roger that, Hammer leader", replied a female voice. 13.4Gs isn't much of an acceleration for a Courier, but at long range it eventually builds up enough speed to perform its classical assault run.

"It's a big bird and we're underpowered, we can't go fast. Let's make it a 3Km/s fly-by and two bellies full of missiles, navals and then assault. Prince Francez!"

"Prince Francez, Hoorrah!", responded the crews.

It was a very slow passage by their standards, but it'd have to do. Hammer 6 started its run, followed by the remaining four on a pyramid formation.

After a mathematically precise time of acceleration, the remainders of the 14th/2nd flipped, deployed chaff and throttled away from their target. "That was a beautiful manoeuvre, gentlemen and dames. A pity the rest of the wing wasn't here to see us. Now, re-flip in five, four, three, two, one, execute!"

Again, synchronously the squadron's remnants returned to their assault run.

Their speed increased beyond the previous peak and they started gaining on the chaff cloud, the intercept point calculated to be at the same moment as they crossed the enemy screen, warding them from missile fire.

As they approached the target, the carrier and its escorts begun firing missiles at the inbound ships. Most of them exploded harmlessly on the chaff, dispersing it, and a few late arrivals went through. The attacking wing chaffed again and took evasive manoeuvres, but couldn't avoid all of the incoming projectiles - some found their targets.

Hammer 3 was hit hard and damaged but kept on its attack run, but her pilot considered himself lucky as he saw the Hammer 11's crew become combat casualties and martyrs of the Empire just beside him.

The protection screen opened fire with their cannons, and so did the Lynx's defensive array. Weaving to avoid the plasma and laser net weaved around them, the inbound attackers shrugged a few shots and fired a volley of 24 naval missiles.

"Almost there!... Fire!"

400MW of power ate through the Tyr's soft shielding just as the missiles hit. Their lasers kept cutting through duralium and exposed the carrier's mostly empty flight deck appendages to vacuum, sentencing anyone there to a cruel death. Or would have, as 1.5s before the Couriers' break-off a second wave of ECM-hardened assault missiles loaded with high explosive warheads showered towards the Lynx's hull.

"My life for the Em-", sounded the comm. Taking his attention from the course, the Viscount saw that Hammer 6 had crashed on one of the appendages of the exploding hulk, and knew that its thrusters must have sustained damage from the defensive screen.

The next thing he knew was that a Spartan Ospray-X was directly on his escape vector. The Viscount didn't had time to dedicate his life, nor did he see the rest of his squadron being caught on a well-applied crossfire.

He was dead.

* * *

Meanwhile, the 'Azure Sunset' was having its own problems. Although the Federal fighters were keeping their distance after the loss of a large number of their comrades to a single missile, the Imperial ones had taken their place.

Mosser had made a reprise of the impromptu miner missile manoeuvre, Annalise was meticulously doing her work in silence and picking them one after the other, but Federal frigates and cruisers soon joined them in swarming the retreating vessel.

A Puma cruiser went alongside, raking it with its bottom 20 MWER nearly to the overheating point, turned around as it manoeuvred round a boulder and repeated the operation with its top brother until it found a clear run free of asteroids on which it was free to face the running behemoth and apply bigger punishment with the 100MW front laser.

When it was about to begin its strafing run, it disappeared in a cyan beam.

Other two tried the same manoeuvre, and were more successful. The 'Azure Sunset's shields collapsed and the hull began to receive damage. One of the attackers had to abort its run to evade an asteroid, and the other was taken in a crossfire from LRC's 4MW defensive array - the AS's SPAs were too busy keeping the Panther battleships at bay and clearing the largest asteroids out of her own path.

With the loss of her shields, the 'Azure Sunset' became prey to the fighters again. The Imperial ones were gone, but the Falcons returned to the fray, supporting an Asp frigate flight. They came round the asteroid field from the 'Sunset's port side and took the chance to try and pick off the turrets before the shields could recharge. Mosser fired a barrage of missiles to force them away, and their beams and pinpricks had only the time to carve the hull a little more before the attackers flung themselves in evasive manoeuvres amidst the jungle of flying boulders. Annalise managed to finish off a leaking Asp.

On the 'Sunset's bridge, Mosser was snapping at everybody. "Annie! Do you mind making those bastards stop to scratch my paintwork?"

"Doing my best here! There's just too many of them for the one of me"

"You'd better improve your best real fast before there's all of them and none of you.

However good a weapon officer she was, they didn't had a pause to breathe. From the opposite side appeared a pair of Tiger light cruisers, blasting with their bow 20ers and turret 4MWers. The first managed to dish out with impunity, and caused a very satisfactory explosion on the LRC's starboard flank before zooming over and past the massive hull, changing its searing fire from the front cannon to the stern 30MW military pulse laser. The second dove on the same vector and was crushed by a rock at least as big as itself.

"We've lost the starboard bow thrusters!", shouted Wafturn from the engineering console, over the resounding din of the blasts.

Mosser activated his comm and bellowed at it. "Vasquith! Where's that goddamn gun?"

"Having some trouble here", came the crackling reply.

"We just lost the starboard thruster array. We need that gun now!"

On the tactical post, 'Lucky' shouted a warning. "Annie! Another Puma on the same approach, and more Falcons on its wake!"

With quick decided movements, she reassigned a weapon. "I've got it! Payback time, asshole!"

The Federal cruiser didn't do as well as his previous peers. As soon as it homed in the target, it was received by an oversized plasma cutting torch that neatly split it in half from end to end.

The two halves of the cruiser separated, glowing, into oblivion and a rocky tomb.

"Take THAT!", Annie spat with satisfaction as she retargetted the lasers to take care of the fleas around them.

"Mind your guns! A big one coming in at 297:073", cried 'Lucky'

Taking advantage of the opening created by the fighters, frigates and cruisers, a massive Panther battleship got into firing range from the above the AS' port bow quarter and lashed out with its large plasma accelerator.

The slightly recharged shields held for no more than a second before the cyan beam cut into duralium, finally hitting something important enough to award an explosion.

A smoking gap appeared on Mosser's ship port side near the fore section before the Panther was hit on the bridge by a smaller version of its weapon and ceased its fire, explosions raking its bows.

Wafturn analysed the damage report. "Number two power relay station just went dead and the top 1 and 3 turrets' automations are off-line! We can't take much more of this."

"What are you waiting for? Reroute the power! Find a way!" Taking the comm, Mosser shouted a single word: "VAAASQUIIITH!!!"

* * *

The Duke was beyond himself. "Look at that, Silva! Just look-at-that! They know! Damn them and all the dishonourable Federalist pigs, they know and are aiming as far away from the engines as they can!", he raved on the bridge.

The command crew took fearful quick peeks at their lord's rage, red as a pepper, stomping his feet and shaking its closed fist in menace at the main screen, and panfaced back to their consoles.

The Earl's curiosity, however, managed to win over his fear. "What do they know, mylord?"

The Duke became suddenly aware of the poor figure he has doing, and collected himself. "If they know, it's not a secret anymore! The drive installed on the 'Azure Sunset' is classified equipment, stolen by the treacherous terrorist. It must be destroyed at all costs. Take us in, Silva."

"Yes, mylord." The Earl snapped some orders and the 'Vesuvius' broke off engagement with the Spartacus Brotherhood, on an intercept course to the AS.

The movement didn't go unnoticed. Cornered, the Spartan fleet was in dire straits as its remaining capital ships were being forced to keep away from the 'Vesuvius' superior firepower.

Even with the destruction of the Imperial heavy Couriers, the Empire was managing to outmanoeuvre the Brotherhood until, suddenly, the 'Vesuvius' plasma eruptions ceased and the flagship gave them their six.

"Look, Admiral! They're running away from us!"

"No, Captain! They're going for the 'Sunset'."

Smith was put on a difficult position: could he ask more from the people under his command? The battle had been desperate so far, and all could be for nothing if the AS was captured or destroyed, but how much longer would the brethren's spirit and discipline hold? Could the Brotherhood stand another round?

An immediate decision was needed. Finally Smith decided he'd ask for nothing he wouldn't do himself. "This might be our best chance to turn the tide, Captain. Get him while he's facing the other way. Full speed ahead, if you please."

Smith glanced at the tactical info on the screen before him. Taking the comm, for the first time since the beginning of the battle he saw a chance of victory. "'Badb' and 'Ogun', concentrate your fire on the Dreadnought. 'Brynhildr', lead the remaining escorts to 125:015 and hold off the carrier and the Explorers for as long as you can. Screen, come around me to vector 135:015; when the flagship's shields collapse, take out the turrets."

Flanked by the 'Ogun' Panther on one side and the 'Badb' Griffin on the other, the modified LRC 'Shiva' plunged in pursuit of the Duval class 'Vesuvius'.

It would be do or die, Punching into the retreating Imperial fleet could give them victory, or put the 'Shiva' in a crossfire from which there would hardly be any escape.

Dinner

[Mack Winston]

Camp Jameson, Topaz, Facece.

"Is this really a good idea?" Kevin asked, urgently, as we crossed the park.

The sunshine bore down on Camp Jameson's main park like a blowtorch. The park, lush with giant date palms, was a popular haunt amongst the off-duty Imperial Navy cadets as well as for the students from the nearby university. Facece in general glittered with Imperial wealth, and none more so than Camp Jameson - home to the Navy's headquarters.

"Trust me. No one knows we're here. I don't think anyone will have linked the Krait to us. Besides, I promised to buy you dinner after that little test I gave you a few systems ago."

"OK,"

"And I need to find out when Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval next goes to his getaway in New California"

It didn't seem to stop my companion from fretting. The place was crawling with military personnel. None of them were paying us the slightest bit of attention. We were glad to finally reach the burger shack by the lake. It at least had air conditioning to keep the torpid air at bay. It too was half full with young men and women with severe hair cuts and even more severe uniforms - and loud with the noise of conversation all carried out at full volume. It was a job for the cloned waitress to take our orders.

"Lord-whatsit-Hesketh-Duval? Maria's..."

"Maria's father. I promised I'd see him. Maria told me about his home away from home in New California. He spends an increasing amount of time there. It's beautiful - and at the Lord's request, more or less disconnected from the grid. Maria was good enough to add me to her key a while back."

"So we'll have no problem getting there?"

"None at all. She told me there was an air defence system, but the key will let us through."

"What do you intend to do to him?"

"Do to him?" I said with a smirk. "Just talk to him. That's all. I just need to... I don't know, tell him about his daughter while I still can. I promised that I would visit him. I intend to keep that promise."

"While you still can?"

"Yeah, I don't expect to survive the next mission," I said dismissively.

Kevin looked uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

The rather attractive waitress-clone deposited our orders. Half a kilo of hot, ground beef between two enormous pieces of bread.

"I've worked for the Empire. Against my will of course, but I've worked for them. I know Burton-Riddick's office, as well as those of his colleagues. I know their security weaknesses, because I had to exploit them for some of the assignments they sent me on. The difference then was that I had support to get out again. This time I won't have that help, I'll be working alone. Well, apart from your help that is."

"My help? What are you going on about? I don't understand..."

"Kev, in plain language, I can get in but it's unlikely I can get out. I'm taking the Deathwrecker, and it'll be set to the suicidally highest power setting."

Kevin was looking slightly shocked. I couldn't really understand why, I had muttered on about a plan to take out Burton-Riddick and his ilk already. They were going to pay for murdering Maria.

"I'm going to regret asking this, aren't I?" he said. "About my plan?"

I bit into my burger and chewed on it happily. Good quality meat from the finest Imperial farms, no doubt.

"It's simple, really. It's much easier to get to Burton Riddick if there's no need to get out again. The Deathwrecker, at its highest setting will fatally irradiate Burton Riddick even if I don't shoot him. And his vile colleagues too. And any clone agents that try and rescue him. If he's really lucky, it'll explode before the power pack finally gives up. If he's unlucky, he'll die about a week later of acute radiation sickness. Simple and effective. The only trouble is in order to do this..." I let the words trail off.

Kevin was looking sick.

"In order to do this," I continued, "given the inverse square law of radiation exposure, assuming the Deathwrecker doesn't actually detonate, I'll receive such a high dose I probably won't survive more than six or seven hours even if they don't shoot me."

"No," he said quietly. "Why?"

"The bastards are going to pay for Maria's murder."

"There must be some other way."

"There isn't. The thing is, a ship without a Stardreamer gives you hours to think. I've thought it over time and time again. There is no alternative."

"Yes there is! Surely you can - I don't know - wait a bit until Burton Riddick is out in public and take him out or something? Anything?"

"I don't want to just take out Burton Riddick, I want to take out as many of the bastards as possible. They all need to pay. It'll make their replacements think twice about murdering an innocent Princess"

"Look... can't you... You're young! You've got the rest of your life in front of you!" - his hands made a sweeping gesture across the room - "You've got decades to hatch a plan that doesn't involve a pointless suicide attack! You've..."

"No I haven't," I said, cutting him off icily. "If the Federation find me, they will execute me. If the Empire find me, they will throw me in the slave mines - basically, execution again, just slower and more painful. I'm not even sure if the remaining Mosser is the Mosser who hired us to bump off the other two, so there's potentially an enraged Mosser after me as well. I just don't have a future. I'm unlikely to be alive in a year's time as it is, and if you're hanging around with me still by then, well - you won't be alive either."

Kevin paused, and put his hands over his face. He looked appalled.

"But what about me?" he finally said. "I can't even fly a spacecraft. I get to watch you burn yourself to death with an exploding Deathwrecker, then what?"

"Just get the next spaceliner back to New San Francisco," I replied.

"What, and be arrested?"

"What for?"

"Something like aiding and abetting a terrorist attack? Then I get to go to the gallows, too"

"Well, I'll teach you how to fly the Krait. Then, I dunno, you can set yourself up as a frontier trader. Worked for me."

I took a few more bites from the burger. Kevin seemed to have rather gone off his food.

"You should eat, that's half of my remaining money there," I said.

...

Vera Sinclair decided that this was probably the best bit of her assignment so far. It seemed like all of the military personnel around Camp Jameson were breathtakingly cute.

She put lust out of her mind for a moment, and watched her quarry through the windows of the upmarket burger joint. The binoculars, as well as relaying a high quality stabilised image, could pick out the sound of their voices from the minute vibrations of the window they were sitting by.

Kevin O'Connell looked to have lost his appetite, and it seemed that Mack was threatening to eat his burger if he didn't finish it. Hardly surprising after what Winston had just been saying.

She realised she'd have to capture them soon, but not before they'd visited Lord Hesketh-Duval. There was some important intelligence to be gained there, she thought, and besides - it would be unfair to prevent Mack from carrying out his promise.

But away from Maegil's influence, Mack had become childishly easy to track. Neither of them had noticed the trackers she had planted not only on their ship, but on their bodies. Mack had merely scratched himself when the tiny chip had embedded itself at the bottom of his neck. Kevin hadn't even noticed it when it went through his clothing and into his left buttock. It seemed that Mack, at least, had lost the paranoia from his days as an assassin. Vera mused to herself that this may be the very thing that saved his life.

For the Benefit of Lord Hesketh-Duval

[Mack Winston]

Strausstown, New California, Miphifa.

A typical outdoor Imperial world, if you ask me. You land at the spaceport, look around and see only high class well polished citizenry and shop fronts. The fires of commerce. Scratch the surface, however, and you find the slums. And the mines - operated by the slaves, most of whom live in the slums.

We had no need to go scratching, we had stopped at Strausstown to make some final preparations - fully fuel the old Krait, fit missiles, pick up some extra Deathwrecker power packs - the usual thing a commander does before blasting off into space. Our preparations, however, were just in case we needed to make a quick getaway from Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval's ranch on the other side of the planet.

I was feeling quite nervous. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I was looking for excuses why I shouldn't make good on my promise to visit Maria's father. I could find none. I tried to remind myself, just as I had during my school days under my uncle's wing - that after the lesson for which I had failed (again) to do my homework - I'd at least still be alive at the end of it. It dawned on me in this case that this might not be true. What was to stop Maria's father from just shooting me on the spot?

Yeah, I could take the Deathwrecker with me. I was starting to feel a bit foolish declaring that we should go unarmed. No, I shouldn't take the Deathwrecker. The last thing I wanted was a shoot-out. I didn't really know what Maria's father thought of me, or how he'd react. Or how his sons would react - both young Princes present at the ranch. They probably wouldn't kill us once it became clear we were unarmed. My theory is that it might gain some respect. I was fairly certain that I wouldn't be very welcome unarmed, and definitely extremely unwelcome if I took a gun along. Probably fatally unwelcome.

We finally approached the Krait.

"Suppose we better just go and do it," I muttered.

"You're not ready yet," Kevin replied. It took me by surprise.

"Why not?" I asked, stopping in my tracks.

"You're going dressed like that?" he asked, obvious scorn in his voice.

I was wearing what I normally did in the relaxed atmosphere of my ship. Ex-Phekdan army camouflage trousers, and a short sleeved T-shirt that might have been dark blue once, and my heavy (but comfortable) work boots. Granted, there was a hole just above the right knee of my camos.

"What's wrong with this," I asked, "we're hardly going to address the Emperor?"

Kevin gave me a look of disgust. "Have you looked at yourself in the mirror recently?"

"No, why should I?"

"You look like a vagrant. How do you think _Lord_ Hesketh-Duval, a Prince who is an heir to the Imperial Throne going to form an impression? If you turn up like " - he turned his nose up in disgust - "looking like that, he'll be well justified in concluding that you were never worthy for Maria. But if you turn up dressed at least in the casual attire of an Imperial Gentleman, you may just make a more favourable impression. And by the way there's a hole in your sock!"

"He won't see my sock," I said, pointing to my boots, feeling rather deflated.

"Come on," Kevin suddenly commanded assertively.

"You sound just like my mother," I muttered, and trailed after him.

Clothes shopping. The most tedious activity in the known galaxy - well, unless you're from New San Francisco, when it's some kind of adventure. I felt like a thirteen year old again being dragged around the stores, as Kevin fussed around me, his enthusiasm for the latest Imperial fashion running away almost unabated. The most galling thing about it was that he was absolutely right. What possessed me to even think of turning up looking like a terrorist who's spent three weeks in the jungle? Of course, I could never admit it to him, though. That would be admitting defeat.

"So," Kevin finally asked, after finally approving of my new look, "what do you think?"

I looked at myself in the mirror. Imperial gentlemanly casual dress was simple and to the point, but - I was forced to admit to myself - quite smart. A plain, white, long sleeved button up collarless shirt which contrasted heavily with the tan I had picked up in Facece. A simple analogue watch, with a plain white face, silver bezel and stainless steel strap. Dark trousers. A good quality, long black leather jacket, the bottom of which came down to about knee level.

Shiny, black leather shoes. Socks without holes. A fresh hair cut - gone was the shock of overgrown black hair, replaced with a neat, short cut.

"Yes," I replied, non-committal, desperately trying to avoid having to admit to Kevin that he was right.

"You actually polish up quite well," he remarked. "How did Maria put up with you?" he added rhetorically.

"Well, we did live in a jungle for a year," I replied, sheepishly.

"Come on, let's get this over with," I said, and started heading off back towards our ship.

"So how come Maria's father is only a Lord? She was a princess?" Kevin asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Don't worry, most people get confused by that. He's both a Prince and a Lord. All Lord means, in this context, is that he owns Imperial land."

"So any house owner is a lord?"

"No, that's not Imperial land. That's to say, land that's in the Imperial Family. But you can be a Lord without being a Royal. Norman Mosser, for example, was a Lord. Not any more of course. So was I too, it was my reward for killing Carstein off. I don't think I should go back and try and claim my house back," I said with a smirk.

Kevin began to look uncomfortable.

"What's up, Kev? You don't look so hot."

"Well, you killed your old shipmate."

I sighed. "I'll give you my journal from that period, when the Empire forced me to do so. You'll understand half of it that way, at least."

"And the other half?"

"Carstein wasn't the sort of person you want to share a ship with. He was bigger and stronger than me, and as Commander, well, let's just not go there. Put it this way, I rather enjoyed sinking that knife into him. The look on his face after all those years of treating me as his whipping boy"

"Whipping boy?"

"Look, I just don't want to go there, alright?" I said darkly. "Besides, we need to be getting on, not discussing old times," I said, as we reached the ship.

The Guest

[Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval]

Ezra was Lord Hesketh-Duval's latest project. The young slave, 18 years old - with physical features that made him look more like a Prince than a slave - unblemished skin, slim, undoubtedly handsome - were matched with a sharp mind - and a sharp mind usually meant trouble in the slave ranks.

Ezra placed the pot of coffee down beside the Lord with an air of deference. Just as a good servant should do.

"Thank you," Lord Hesketh-Duval said, with a nod.

He was spending a few days at his private ranch on New California, away from the 'net, continuing to write up the document he hoped would become Imperial policy on the treatment of the more intelligent slaves. The problem - as Lord Hesketh-Duval saw it - was the rather stupid way that the Empire as a whole dealt with its slaves. They were worked hard, and treated brutally. The brutal treatment worked fine for the stupid ones - but the smart slaves - that was a different matter. They would generally seethe with resentment, and the eventual result is some of them would manage to stir revolt. Or escape and form groups like the VLA. Or worse still, Spartacus.

He hoped to change this one size fits all attitude. Instead, he felt that the smarter slaves should be treated differently. Get their loyalty by sparing the stick and being generous with the carrot. Make sure the smart ones get the more interesting work. A comfortable slave was much easier to brainwash, after all. Ezra, he hoped, would be an example of this new approach. He had found the young slave on a visit to Vequess - already sent to the Vequess mines - the usual fate for any slave found to be a troublemaker. The Vequess mines were especially brutal, and slaves usually were worked to death within a matter of a couple of years.

Gently break the intelligent slave's will, and they will provide a lifetime of good service for nothing more than the cost of board and lodgings. Treat them like the dumb slaves, and they will ultimately cause a great deal of trouble.

Prince Michael, his youngest son - the twenty six year old looking so much like he had all those decades ago - broke his thoughts.

"Hugo just called me, he said he was going to be three hours late - some urgent matters came up," Prince Michael said, taking the seat next to his father.

Prince Hugo - Lord Hesketh-Duval's eldest son couldn't have been more different than Prince Michael. Where Michael was thoughtful, Hugo was a bully. Where Michael was timely, Hugo was always tardy. Hugo had definitely been the odd one out of Lord Hesketh-Duval's three children - Princess Maria had been so much like Michael, notwithstanding the last couple of years of her life.

"I thought he might be," Lord Hesketh-Duval grumbled, as he put his datapad down.

"How's your project?" Michael asked.

"Oh Ezra? He's shaping up. I thought he was a lost cause only a few weeks ago, but sure enough - a bit of luxury and he's nicely moulding to the Empire's will. Not even a tantrum in the last two weeks. I'm hoping it won't even be necessary to have him castrated. Perhaps if it all goes well we can even use him as breeding stock."

"Do you think the Court will pay any attention to your paper?"

"Yes, I think I have their attention now, especially since proving the link between the mistreatment of the intelligent slaves and the formation of not only the VLA but Spartacus."

"They may argue it's a bit late"

"They may do, but then I'll remind them that perhaps it's not so good to risk having yet another slave-founded terrorist organization attacking the Empire. Two is enough."

The sound of a spacecraft, its engines at low power as it made its final approach - followed by a rumble from the bottom thrusters cushioning the landing - drifted through the warm, still air.

"I though you said Hugo was going to be three hours late?"

Michael looked nonplussed. Ezra arrived from the house with a tray of biscuits.

"Ezra, pass me my datapad if you'd be so kind"

The young slave handed Lord Hesketh-Duval the datapad, and set the tray of biscuits next to the coffee pot. Lord Hesketh-Duval called up the security cameras by the landing pads.

"That's not Hugo's ship, is it?" Lord Hesketh-Duval asked, half in denial that the air defence shield must have failed.

"A Krait? No!"

Lord Hesketh-Duval frantically tapped at his datapad to find out who's access key had been used to enter the air defence area. Maria's key!

"Oh no," - Lord Hesketh-Duval actually wanted to say something a bit stronger, but didn't want to appear to be flustered in front of his son, let alone his slave.

Instead, he watched the security camera carefully. He aimed and zoomed it to the Krait's exit hatch. The hatch dropped open, and the embarkation ladder slid out to the ground. A man, probably about Prince Michael's age dropped effortlessly down the ladder. He was well dressed, obviously with an eye for fashion, but also obviously very uneasy. Then another man, probably about the same age too - climbed down the ladder, with an air of much greater confidence. The second man was dressed casually, in the style many of the wealthier Imperial citizens liked to dress in their time off. He briefly removed his sunglasses, just long enough that Prince Hesketh-Duval could zoom in to focus on the man's face and see Phekdan eyes. Not that he really needed to see that. The man's face was instantly recognisable to Prince Hesketh-Duval.

The two began walking towards the ranch.

"Ezra, would you please fetch me my gun and a dozen rounds of energy cells if you would be so kind?" Lord Hesketh-Duval asked quietly. "And then please contact Mark, and tell him that I am most definitely not pleased with his or his brother's performance, and they should report to me immediately . . ."

War...

[Mack Winston]

"Maria was so right about Hugo," I remarked, as I made some final adjustments to my appearance in the mirror. "Thick as two short planks, I think was the way she described him. Spot on assessment, I think."
"I can't believe he fell for that," Kevin remarked.
"Nor me. But it buys us four hours."

Kevin smirked as I checked out my sunglasses in the mirror. There was no way I could admit that he had been right back at our last stop, about my scruffy appearance. But he knew that I knew that he knew this already - and was smirking at my inability to admit he was right. I had really let myself go after Maria was so cruelly murdered, and both Maria and I had let ourselves go already. When you spend a year in a forest subsisting off what you find, appearance is secondary. But now I looked like a Prince on his day off. I hoped it'd work on Maria's old man.

We left the ship. I knew that the old man was watching us. There would be cameras, neatly concealed - but there'd be cameras nonetheless. He would undoubtedly be watching us approach the ranch house.

"What happens next?" Kevin asked.

"Keep going as planned. Just make sure Prince Michael doesn't try to do anything rash like run in and kill us. Just keep him calm. Maria said that her father could have a foul temper. With any luck, he'll spare his wrath, seeing me as the last link to Maria. But there may be unpleasantness. Michael may try and intervene. Hopefully, they've noticed we've come unarmed and won't do anything rash."

"OK", Kevin replied, sounding a little unsure. I couldn't blame him. My own stomach felt like it was full of Nirvanan Giant Dragonflies.

With all my practise at keeping my cool, as we reached the door of the ranch house, I felt like jelly. I'd faced far worse things... or at least I thought. The inner terror betrayed this.

"Look, don't worry," I said, trying not to look worried myself. "These people are well educated, and while they may occasionally lurch into violence, they are going to want to hurt me, not you. Just try and tell me if Michael picks up a gun or anything."

We arrived at the door.

"Do we knock?"

"No. Any second now, Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval's personal slave, no doubt young and as good looking as any Prince, will come and answer the door and take us in".

"Oh."

The door opened, and it indeed was the old man's slave. He couldn't have been older than twenty, and had the physical features of any young Prince - except you could tell he was a slave, simply from the air of cowed deference, and the way his eyes never met mine. A Prince would have engaged me with a steely gaze. A slave on the other hand... a slave - you could see the hunted look in his eyes. Poor bugger. He had no traces of bruising to his face, so perhaps Lord Hesketh-Duval was a kind master. A life of drudgery for a rich master. What a waste.

"Lord Hesketh-Duval will see you now," he said - still not looking quite directly at me. "You," he said, indicating Kevin, "are to stay with Prince Michael until Lord Hesketh-Duval has finished".

We followed the slave inside.

The ranch house was decorated inside just like Maria had described it. It was laid out in simple style - a faux look log cabin. The sweet smell of timber. My shoes clicked on the polished stone floor. The slave opened a door to my left, and indicated that I should go in. My heart was racing, and it felt like swimmers were doing mushy backflips in my stomach.

The door closed behind me, and my eyes adjusted to the light in the room. It was large, with three windows on the long side. A log fireplace burned in the centre of the room. There was an old fashioned desk, with a wooden chair on one side, and a deep mahogany drinks cabinet beside it.

I let out a sigh. There was no sign of ...

"You BASTARD!" roared a voice, then a fist the size of a melon, and as hard as a house brick slammed into the side of my head, sending me instantly to the ground. I hit the ground so fast, it took me a couple of seconds to realise what had happened.

I turned around, stunned, trying to catch my breath.

Towering above me - Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval. It was quite clear he was old. It was equally clear that old didn't mean frail. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing massive forearms. He reached down with one of his giant hands and grabbed me by my shirt, and dragged me to my feet. He stood at least thirty centimetres taller than me. Muscles rippled in his body like Pythons being marshalled.

"You BASTARD!" he repeated, drawing his fist back. I put my hands up defensively.

"No!" I croaked, as his fist flew at me again. I ducked, and his fist whizzed millimetres over the top of my head. I hadn't seen his other fist though, which rammed into my stomach, leaving me gasping for breath on the floor!

He towered above me, and dragged me to my feet again.

"Wait - " I croaked.

Lord Hesketh-Duval paused, and let me go.

"You," he spat contemptuously, "how DARE YOU, after ruining my daughter - after getting her killed - " he snorted " - how DARE YOU come to my private ranch! How DARE YOU!" he roared. His face was red with anger.

He came at me to punch me again. I backed off quickly, and soon found myself in the corner of the room.

"You aren't even a real man, otherwise you would defend yourself," he sneered, punching me again. His fist connected with my head, and all I perceived was a strange flash - and as far as I could tell, went instantly from standing to lying somewhere else in the room. Hesketh-Duval stormed back over to me, and once again dragged me to my feet.

"I don't hit frail old men," I answered, with a crooked smile. What possessed me to say that despite the evidence to the contrary - it must have been that warped Phekdan sense of humour cutting through the humiliation of being beaten up by a pensioner.

"How DARE YOU!" he snarled.

"Wait - " I tried to say again.

Whack. I was on the ground again. The attack had been so sudden and ferocious, my senses had left me. I couldn't even figure out what to do next. All my strength had already deserted me. Shout for Kevin to try and intervene? What could he do? Prince Michael would probably give him a pasting - if he was built anything like his father.

I was on my feet again. Whack. On the ground again. Dragged up.

Hesketh-Duval seemed finished beating me for a moment. I stood in the middle of the room, breathing heavily.

"How dare you," he hissed quietly. "Why are you here. Why do you dare show your foul, Phekdan face in here. How dare you!"

Through my punch-drunk fatigue, I could feel my anger rise; I felt physically numbed, and no longer feared the pain of the onslaught that was inevitable - whatever I said.

"Ruin your daughter? I think the Empire did that already," I sneered.

Lord Hesketh-Duval let out a snarl, and strode over to me, his fist brought back ready to deal me yet another painful blow.

"Yeah, hit me again, just prove yourself too stupid to listen," I said.

I was on the floor again. The strange thing was that I didn't even feel it. I decided that the last blow must have briefly knocked me unconscious. Once again, I felt a giant hand drag me to my feet. As soon as Hesketh-Duval let go, I staggered, and had to catch myself on the ornate writing table.

"Listen, punk - " he said, spitting the word out, "you are responsible for ruining an Imperial princess, my daughter. And then you DARE... you DARE to come here. To my own ranch, to confront me!"

"If you'd stop hitting me and listen, old man, you might learn something."

I waited for the punch to come. I didn't even bother trying to shield my head from the inevitable blow. But it never came. I drew breath - feeling a sharp pain in my chest - and continued.

"I wrote to you. I promised that I would visit you. If you want to find out about who your daughter really was, you have to listen. All I want to do is tell you about your daughter and then leave, and then I will never bother you ever again. Don't you want to hear about your daughter?"

Silence.

"I didn't ruin your daughter. She loved me. She came for me" - I coughed - my ribs were hurting badly. "She was the only person in the universe who cared for me. If you think you're grieving for her, think how I feel. Remember what it felt like when your wife was killed, not long after Prince Hugo was born."

"What do you, a snivelling, sub-human Phekdan - what do you know about grief?" Hesketh-Duval snarled, through his anger.

What do I know about grief. I had spent weeks almost a total wreck after Maria had been murdered.

"Answer me," Hesketh-Duval snapped.

"Your blows might have broken one of my ribs, but the pain of Maria's murder hurts me a hundred times more," I said quietly. "Much more." An ancient quotation bubbled up in my mind - from my teenage years, from the awful school my uncle had insisted that I should go to.

"Hath not a Phekdan eyes?" I began. Hesketh-Duval fixed me with a penetrating stare. "Hath not a Phekdan hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions - fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons," I winced, a sharp pain in my chest as I breathed in to continue. "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And - " I paused, breathed in, and winced again - "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

Hesketh-Duval sat down in one of the high-backed chairs that faced the fireplace. I staggered over to the other side of the room, and looked out of the window, into the extensive grounds - a lawn, and then a stand of large oak trees. I could imagine Maria and her brothers playing there as children. Grief started welling up inside me, and I tried to choke it back - so as to not show weakness.

I turned back to face Hesketh-Duval.

"I did not ruin your daughter. She decided of her own volition to be with me. I did not kill your daughter, your Imperial superiors murdered her."

"She would be alive today if it wasn't for you."

"Your wife would be alive today if it wasn't for you."

"How DARE YOU - " Hesketh-Duval snarled, starting to get up out of his chair.

"SHUT UP!" I yelled back at him, stabbing a finger in his direction. "See how it feels now? I've lost the ONLY human being that's ever loved me as a person to YOUR " - I tried to think of a suitable adjective, but couldn't -

"YOUR kind, and you DARE to blame me! I think Maria was wrong about you. She respected you, despite it all. She said you were a good man. But you're a slimy, dishonourable backstabber just like the rest of them!" I yelled.

Hesketh-Duval's lips curled into a look of hate, as he let out an angry snarl.

"What do you know about honour! You murdered one of your own ship mates! Don't think I know about the Carstein incident!" he yelled.

Mentioning Carstein was wrong. He was either badly informed or an idiot - but from what Maria had said about him, it had to be the former. The Empire was built on a web of lies and deception, and Hesketh-Duval obviously bought that deception completely. He was, after all, a part of it.

"YOUR Empire forced me into that. YOUR Empire created Carstein. YOUR Empire threatened to kill me slowly in the slave-mines unless I eliminated their Public Enemy Number One, which THEY had created. You think Carstein was a friend of mine when even the slightest intellectual curiosity on your part could easily prove that this was most certainly not the case! When it came down to it, I didn't cower in an office, light years away expecting someone else to do the job. I didn't hide on some roof top with a gun. I was looking into Carstein's eyes when I sank that knife into him. You talk about honour. I don't think you have a clue what the word means," I spat. "YOUR Empire killed your daughter - my fiancée. No one else. YOUR Empire. YOUR superiors. YOUR rotten, corrupt system. Not me."

I had started to shake uncontrollably, and collapsed into the other seat by the fireplace. My rant had sapped the last of my energy. It had stunned Hesketh-Duval into silence. I don't think anyone had ever spoken to him like that - he was probably too used to Imperial deference, and his inferiors bowing and scraping for him. Not giving him a piece of their mind.

"Maria still loved you, but she had the presence of mind to know how rotten the Empire is, and chose to leave on her own accord," I continued more quietly. "She told me, that after we first met - all she could do was think about me. And when your so-called honourable Empire decided to dispose of me like an old toffee wrapper, she came for

me. Your daughter was a greater person than you or any of your vacuous sons will ever be, especially Hugo. As for you," I said, "I had expected more. I never expected you to like me, but I had expected civility, not mindless violence. You are a disappointment."

Silence. In the darkness of the room, I could see the old man's face lit by the fireplace - his face looked as if it were carved from granite. His blue eyes stared at me, as cold as ice.

"How dare you - "

"How dare I, yes." I waved him a contemptuous, dismissive gesture. "You expect people to scrape and bow for you, for a position you never earned. Yes, the Imperial hierarchy, rotten to the core. You, through an accident of birth end up a powerful, land owning Lord. The man who showed us in, who's probably intelligent and strong, ends up an unpaid slave for his entire life because of another accident of birth. Maria had the sense to get out of your rotten, corrupt murderous structures."

He moved - I thought he was going to get up.

"Yeah, hit me again," I said, resigned. "I don't care. I have perhaps days, maybe two weeks to live anyway"

Something had changed in the old man's disposition. The grief was now obvious in his face, the discharge of anger gone. Perhaps he now realised I was the only link to his daughter, and that he perhaps not ought to squander it. Perhaps that was a tear forming in the corner of his eye. Maybe, deep down - he knew the Empire was a rotten edifice, waiting to come tumbling down.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you are the last stop before I seek final revenge for Maria's murder. Justice will be done. Those who perpetrated it will die. Unlike your daughter, though, they will die looking into my eyes. I will be facing those bastards - Burton Riddick and his henchmen - when I kill them. Not like the cowardly way they murdered Maria, from an office dozens of light years away."

I stood up, unsteadily. The old man was now obviously fighting some grief. He was hiding it from me well, but I could see it. I knew how it felt. It would well up inside me, and break out without warning. I could see the grief had welled up inside the old man. I carefully made my way to the drinks cabinet, and opened it. It was richly stocked with the best liquor the Empire could muster. I selected an Achenarian single malt, and poured a generous measure into a cut crystal glass tumbler.

"It looks like you need this," I said, handing the glass to Hesketh-Duval, as if it were a peace offering. Silently, he took the whisky, and looked into it with contemplation, before taking a sip. I sat back down with a glass of my own, and taking care not to have a slobbish gulp, savoured the peaty aroma. It was like liquid fire as it burned its way down my throat.

"It wasn't Burton-Riddick," Hesketh-Duval said at last. "He had no part in this. It was Lord Geoffrey Clarke and his lieutenant, Stanley D'Souza."

I was puzzled. Why was he telling me this? It was as if a switch had flipped inside him - from pure hatred one moment, to reason the next.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" he answered, simply - almost lacking emotion.

Was the old man inviting me to plan the revenge of the murder of his own daughter - after giving me a hiding I wouldn't ever forget? Perhaps he'd just come back to his senses, and perhaps the intelligence that Maria had always talked about had merely managed to reassert itself.

"I can arrange it such that you meet Lord Clarke and D'Souza. I can arrange it such that you are armed and they are not. I can arrange it so you slip away before the Clone Agents come . . ."

* * *

From a geostationary orbit, Vera Sinclair was feigning urgent repairs on her ship so as to not attract any suspicion.

It was also an excellent place to get the encrypted audio feed from the trackers she'd managed to fire into Mack Winston and Kevin O'Connell. Predictably, Mack's tracker had the most interesting audio, and Kevin's had been intensely dull (was Prince Michael really that boring?) But on Winston's tracker - after the obvious sounds of a tremendously violent beating, Lord Hesketh-Duval's attitude was shifting.

It sounded like a plan was being concocted. Perhaps she should leave Mack be for a while, instead of taking him as soon as he left the Hesketh-Duval ranch...if her superiors found out, there'd be hell to pay - but on the other hand, if at least some of the Imperial intelligence hierarchy could be thrown into disarray for a while - a raft of interesting options might open up...

...Peace

[Mack Winston]

"You must not breathe a word of what we discussed. Not a word. Now since our goals are now . . . mutual, I hope I can trust you," Hesketh-Duval said, almost in a stage whisper.
"I hope the trust is mutual," I said, not turning from the window.

So our discussion ended. On one hand, I relished the prospect of personally seeing to the end of Lord Clarke and his vicious henchman, D'Souza. On the other hand, the twins - the same ones I had seen make mincemeat out of two heavily armed men during our escape from the VLA - Mark and David, were not going to be told the plan, either. They would probably capture me, and - if they felt like it, might decide to give me a hiding. The only thing they would know is to take me to a rendezvous point to be taken away by the Empire.

My ribs were really starting to hurt, and I was tired of the pain.

"Now, take your ship mate and leave. You must not even indicate to him that anything other than disagreement happened in this room today," Lord Hesketh-Duval continued.

I turned and left.

I was re-united with Kevin at the front door. Prince Michael fixed me with a disgusted stare. I glared at him momentarily, and replaced my sunglasses, opened the door and left without a word.

Once outside, in daylight, I caught the look of shock in Kevin's eyes.

"What's happened to you?" he asked with concern.

"Oh," I gasped, as another sharp pain shot across my chest, "we had a bit of a fight. The old man won," I said with an ironic grin. "You should see the size of his fists. We - " the next intake of breath really hurt " - we need to stop at a medic station before we leave the planet," I said. "I think I have a couple of broken ribs. So how was your chat with Prince Michael?"

"What?"

"He must have said something to you"

"You're bleeding, look"

I felt my temple, and my hair was caked in partially dried blood.

"I'll live," I said, wincing again. "He must have kicked me when I was down, I was unconscious for a few seconds, I think. Anyway, Prince Michael? How was it, hob-nobbing with royalty?"

"Dull. But don't worry, I'll have the last laugh!"

I didn't like the sound of that. Thoughts of how Kevin had slipped him some poison were filling my imagination. No. Too far fetched, Kevin wasn't a killer. I didn't want any nasty surprises though.

I could have sworn I'd closed up the ship when we left, but the boarding ladder was extended. I climbed inside.

* * *

"Dad?" asked Michael, with concern.

"I'm here, son."

"You OK?"

"Fine. Just fine. Mack Winston's an even bigger worm than I thought. You know he thinks he's going to kill Lord Burton-Riddick?"

"Why didn't you kill him?"

"I couldn't bring myself. He loved Maria, you know. Truly loved her. With all his soul. I just couldn't do it. But David and Mark will not have my emotional weakness over the matter."

Prince Michael held his father's hand.

"I just wish... I just wish things could have been different," Lord Hesketh-Duval said sadly.

"I'll get Ezra to make us some coffee," Prince Michael said. "Where is he?"

"I thought he was with you?" Lord Hesketh-Duval asked.

* * *

I couldn't fully tighten my pilot's harness, it hurt too much, so I just hoped our short flight would be a smooth one - all within atmo, over to Strausstown. I had looked at myself in the mirror and if the pain wasn't already pointing it out, I'd received one hell of a beating.

I gently brought the power up, and we lifted off from Hesketh-Duval's landing pad, and climbed out over the trees. I heard Kevin entering the tiny flight deck.

"How much does an automedic fixup cost in Strausstown, d'you reckon?" I asked, without turning around.

"Sir," an unfamiliar voice, with a very strong Capitol accent replied, "eight hundred credits,"

"Yaargggh!" I said involuntarily, twisting around to face the unknown voice, a sudden, sharp pain flooding across my chest. Standing at the entrance to the flight deck, wearing a nervous smile, was a slim, tall man - barely a man, more a kid. He couldn't have been much over eighteen. He was.. he was..

Lord Anthuviel Christian Alan Peshiviel Hesketh-Duval's personal slave.

I had just stolen Lord Hesketh-Duval's personal slave, moments after making a deal with him to rid the universe of his daughter's killers.

"Oh good grief," I whispered. "How on spaghetti's green earth did you get here?"

"Sir," he pleaded.

"Don't call me Sir," I said, stopping him.

"S.." he started, then stopped " - My name is Ezra. Your friend rescued me."

I buried my hands in my face. This was just what I needed. Kevin rescuing Lord Hesketh-Duval's personal slave. I looked at the kid. He looked relieved and terrified at the same time.

I keyed the intercom.

"Kev," I asked sweetly, "we appear to have a passenger"

* * *

Prince Michael snorted. "The bastard!"

Prince Michael and Lord Hesketh-Duval watched the security camera recording. Michael had left the room briefly, leaving Mack Winston's ship mate with the slave. The slave pleaded with him. He handed the slave an object - an entry keycard! The outside cameras showed Ezra furtively walking quickly towards the ship, unlocking it, and boarding.

Lord Hesketh-Duval growled - a low, angry growl. "Damn it! Damn him!"

* * *

"But he was a slave! He needed to be freed," Kevin complained. Ezra watched us, balefully. We were all squeezed into the tiny flight deck of the Krait. I sighed.

"Yeah, but there's now three of us on this tiny ship, and now we'll have made Hesketh-Duval even more angry than he was in the first place!"

"So what are you saying?" Kevin fumed. "Take him back? Dump him in Strausstown?"

I said nothing. I looked at the young man. His eyes darted between us. I wiped my hand across my face thoughtfully.

"Kev, there's one thing for sure though, he's having your bunk," I growled.

"Fine, fine. What happened to your high falutin' anti-slavery principles?"

"There's a time and a place for everything!" I replied, and immediately regretted it.

Kevin looked shocked. Poor Ezra looked terrified. I suddenly felt as if I'd been extremely mean. A pang of guilt washed over me, temporarily overriding my physical pain.

I looked at him, and sighed. "Ezra, I'm sorry, you're welcome to stay on the ship, but understand something, I didn't expect to be here rescuing slaves. As you see, your former master," I paused "- disagreed with me today, and I've not had a very good day. You can have my bunk if you like, we'll just have to take turns. We'll try and get you safe passage to the Federation. Staying with us is not safe."

"Thank you, Sir," he said, breaking into a nervous smile.

"There's some Riedquatian Ultra in the galley," I added. "And don't call me Sir. I'm not your master."

Kevin glowered at me.

"Sorry," I said. "It's really not been my day. I didn't mean any of that earlier. You did well to rescue him from slavery - really. Showed initiative." I said.

The last thing I needed was a bad atmosphere on the ship. A tiny ship, I thought, now cramped up with three people, on a highly stressful mission. I just hoped fervently that Lord Hesketh-Duval could forgive what had just happened. Or at least, was hell-bent enough on revenge that he would ignore it. Or perhaps use it as cover to make his side of the story more plausible.

An Interstellar Incident

[Natasha Lundquist]

Natasha Lundquist, MAP and Minister for External Relations just wanted a day off. A day to herself. A day away from the press, whose misguided number were currently amusing themselves with linking her to the long deceased Phekdan Soap Corporation - the unlikely sounding company that had controlled half of the planet Nirvana until the Phekdan government had finally formed in the late 3290s.

A day to just relax.

She knew that her day off was about to get cancelled when she read the news.

There had been a killing, right in Capitol, at the heart of the Empire. A couple of high-ranking Imperial officials. For a change, it wasn't the Emperor deciding on a whim to send some of his underlings to the dogs for a perceived slight. No. An "act of terror", the news said. Minutes later, her comm had gone off.

"I'm afraid the Imperial Ambassador wants an urgent meeting with you, Ma'am," came the serious voice at the other end.

So she'd gone digging a little more. The news named only one of the four victims - a Lord Geoffrey Clarke. She didn't have the time to dig particularly deep, but a quick uplink to the AJNIB would at least give her some sort of clue who Clarke was - she had met plenty of the Imperial upper echelons in the course of her job, but the name Lord Geoffrey Clarke drew a blank.

She skimmed the abstract, and groaned inwardly. According to the AJNIB, Lord Clarke was one of the Empire's spymasters. Not only that, the AJNIB already had some sketchy details on his murder. She looked at the fuzzy video images that were attached. The killer knew where to stand, his back always to the camera. He worked carefully to ensure his identity wasn't revealed. There was no audio - but there was obviously a heated argument between the killer and Lord Clarke. Or suspected killer - the video ended before he actually struck.

She left her home - the last thing she wanted to do was leave the Imperial Ambassador sitting, fuming in the waiting room to her office. Not that she cared for the pompous old fool, but it would be altogether better if he didn't waste half the meeting by grumbling about being held up.

The autoshuttle ride to the foreign office in Jakarta Street, Edinburgh took only five minutes. She had barely sat down in her office when the Ambassador was shown in.

"Good morning, your excellency," she said, in her voice reserved for official engagements.

"Good morning, Minister," the Ambassador replied curtly. He was typical of the Empire's officials - ageing but somehow still handsome, and with an air of utter indifference.

"One of your citizens, not twelve hours ago, murdered four Lords of the Empire," he said - getting straight to the point for a change - "and we require you to hand the murderer over to us. Now."

It was going to be a long day. Surely the Ambassador knew that a crime committed in the Empire was outside of her jurisdiction. Surely he knew that it depended on whether the perpetrator was caught by an Alliance member, and surely he also knew that even if that was the case, the Alliance member in question would have to have an extradition agreement with the Empire? And furthermore, no Alliance system had such an agreement? She thought she'd better leave the whole thing about the suspect getting a fair trial until later on in the meeting.

"Forgive me, your Excellency, but we don't know it was an Alliance citizen yet," she said instead, hoping to dodge the entire issue if possible.

Without a word, the Ambassador half threw a datapad across the table. The entire device was filled with a photograph. As soon as she saw it, she started to groan inwardly.

Yep, it was going to be a long day.

The Assassin's Mistake

[Mack Winston]

The air always felt sharp on each intake of breath. It always did right before an assassination.

Lord Hesketh-Duval had kept his end of the bargain. The access card worked, and no one even gave me a passing glance as I navigated the corridors of the sprawling Imperial Central building. There were no alarms. The sun - Achenar - shone brightly in the sky.

Now I was in the waiting room, outside Lord Geoffrey Clarke's office. Lord Hesketh-Duval had told me about the meeting he had demanded with Lord Clarke - a smokescreen to make sure that he looked as much of a victim (although not quite as dead) as Lord Clarke and his lieutenant, D'Souza.

The waiting room was typical Imperial conspicuous consumption. The walls were lined with deep, leather covered seats. In the centre, a miniature garden. More golden trinkets than hung around a Phekdan gangsta's neck. The room was also huge. It could have been a waiting room for a small army.

My polished shoes clicked on the hard marble floor. Hesketh-Duval had recommended that I come in a 'businesslike manner'. So, spending some of the last cash I had, I was dressed to kill. So to speak. I could feel the Deathwrecker against one side, and the Carstein killer blade against the other... how ironic that Clarke may fall to the very blade he undoubtedly had arranged to be forced upon me.

A sound caused me to stop in my tracks.

Gunshot.

Then another. A pause. And another.

I looked around the room. I could hear my own heart thudding in the silence. I started to move off into a position where I wouldn't be seen if Lord Clarke's door was opened. It was too late.

A man emerged, holstering a pistol. He stopped only briefly.

"How convenient," he commented calmly, and began to walk across the room.

I sprinted to Lord Clarke's door, and looked inside.

Three bodies. Questioning turned to a flash of anger. D'Souza lay slumped across a chair, and Lord Clarke was face down on his desk. Well - he would have been if he still had a face. But also, Lord Hesketh Duval was lying in a pool of blood - his midriff torn open. His elderly but magnificent body ripped asunder. His eyes staring lifelessly back at mine...

Pain and anger.

I turned around - the assassin was now halfway across the waiting room. All the nervous energy stored up for an assassination turned into white hot anger and a searing pain of loss. A loss of revenge mixed with the advancing grief of the loss now not just of Maria, but her father, too! I leaped on the assassin, pushing him to the ground.

"You bastard!" was the most creative phrase I could come up with.

The assassin calmly threw me aside. Driven by a searing foil of anger that stabbed through my very soul, I drove the man against the wall, holding him by the throat.

"Please let go," he said, calmly.

"Why!"

Finally, my mind began to register more of the assassin. He was dressed in scruffy Phekdan army trousers, a stained black shirt, and a worn jacket. He smiled faintly.

"Why are you wearing my clothes?" I yelled, my angry red face inches from his.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Who ordered you to do this?"

"Like I'm going to tell you."

I already had the blade. The assassin had been too busy giving me a long, appraising and sarcastic look to notice what my left hand had been up to. He looked down as he felt the point press into his lower ribcage.

"Who ordered you to do this!"

"I'm - " he began.

I gave the knife a cruel shove. It sank a couple of centimeters into his flesh. I don't know what he expected. Perhaps he thought I was a coward. Perhaps he didn't think I could look right into another man's eyes while I pushed a blade through his chest. Perhaps he was just cocky. I twisted the knife a little for good measure.

To his credit, the assassin managed to keep his composure, but a bead of sweat betrayed his calm.

"I won't ask again. Who? Who made you steal revenge from me? Who ordered you to kill Maria's father? Tell me!" I shouted into his face.

"You must understand, I can not and will not tell you. Torture me all you like."

"You really think I won't do this, don't you?" I asked.

He confirmed his earlier misjudgement. "I know your MO," he said, "and I know you won't do it. Needless to say, I have right now a Norman Mosser monogrammed Deathwrecker. Now, you are aware what one of these does when set to its destructive maximum? I'm sure you're aware that you will be dying in some hours time from radiation poisoning? So, please remove the knife, because it hurts quite a lot."

The assassin's eyes opened wide with surprise as he felt the blade slide into him, as I leaned hard on the hilt. "You've been lied to," I snarled. "They said I wouldn't do something like this - they were lying. You have taken away all that I now care about, and you think I care about your empty threats?"

Numbly, I pulled the blade out. It didn't come out easily, and it took several good tugs to remove it. The assassin almost collapsed - falling to his knees.

"I think I need an ambulance," he said, shakily, his mouth starting to fill with blood.

"I think I'm going to watch you die," I replied, "or are you going to shoot me with your fictional Deathwrecker? I could lend you mine," I said nastily, my voice filled with hatred.

The assassin winced.

"You have nothing to lose now, you can tell me who sent you to carry out these murders," I said calmly. I felt cold, somehow in the calm lagoon beyond rage. I realised I was shivering. I started to feel faintly sick - my adrenaline reserves finally empty.

"Mack!" came a female voice from the door.

"I'm busy!" I barked.

"Mack, we need to leave."

"I told you," I said, turning to face the woman, "I'm - "

I realised who I was looking at. I had seen her before. The day Maria was murdered. She was wearing an Imperial law enforcement uniform.

"Ma'am," the assassin groaned, registering the woman's uniform, "please, I need an ambulance".

"Shut UP!" I yelled at him, and kicked him. Finally, he gave a yelp of pain. "Unless you are about to tell me who ordered you to murder these people!"

"No," he said calmly.

"Very well," I said. I carefully avoided stepping in the growing pool of blood, and lifted the man's arm. I think he thought I was going to help him up. Instead, I was feeling for his pulse. It was rapid, but still strong.

"It seems that I've not yet dealt you a fatal injury," I remarked, coldly.

"Ma'am, do something!" he shouted. Strangely, for a law enforcement officer, the woman was doing nothing. She watched as I calmly located the man's heart, placed the point of my blade on his chest - and leaned on it with all my weight...

"Are you finished now?" she asked, testily, as I stepped away from the assassin's rapidly expiring body.

"Who are you?" I asked, half yelling.

"I am here to help you," she replied. "We must go. It won't be long before they discover what's gone on here."

"What the hell's going on?" I asked, glancing back at the assassin.

"Remain calm. We have to get out of here. If you look like that, we're dead."

"I might ask why you have shown up both at Maria's death, and now the murder of her father," I asked nastily, hoping to maybe give the impression that she might be next.

"It's just coincidence. Now pull yourself together, and leave - calmly, and quietly. Please! I'm here to help you. Trust me. Please!"

Everything felt so ... strange. I couldn't clear the image of Lord Hesketh-Duval's body lying on the office floor. Why?

"As far as I can gather," the woman said, "they didn't even know you were coming today, but they knew you were coming sooner rather than later. They evidently wanted Clarke dead - I don't know why yet - but wanted to make it look like you. I guess they just wanted to make sure he really got killed."

"Why didn't they just let me do it?" I whispered, aware we were now out of the waiting room, and trying to walk calmly through the corridors without being unduly conspicuous to the Imperial civil service who surrounded us.

"Perhaps because you weren't planning on taking out Lord Hesketh-Duval."

We continued walking, mutually deciding that this discussion could wait until we were well away from the building.

"You two, wait!" came a voice.

A security officer!

"I want to see your ident," he said - pointing at me - "and I'm sorry officer, I'll need to see your badge".

"No problem," I said, calmly, handing over the ident that Lord Hesketh-Duval had furnished me a few weeks earlier.

"Thank you, that's all in order my Lord," he said - "please understand we like to check all unfamiliar faces".

"That's quite alright," I replied.

"Where are you from?" he asked. I looked for the seeds of suspicion in the man's expression, but saw nothing except for friendly conversation. I didn't lie.

"Newtown, Phekda."

"Don't get many Phekdans here."

"No, I'm the only one. Courtesy of my very own Princess," I said with a wry smile.

"You're a very lucky man. Have a good day," the guard said.

We turned and continued towards the exit. I started to breathe again. Lucky... I didn't think so.

"Damn, that was close," the woman said. "He forgot to actually check my badge."

"I'm very used to being where I shouldn't. There's a technique".

We entered the elevator.

"Down, exit level"

The doors closed, and we began to descend.

"Look, I must get back to my ship. I think things are going to get rather awkward for me here in a few moments. My ship mate has it warmed up ready to go."

The woman turned to me. "Your shipmates are both on my ship already. They are safe."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'll tell you later."

The elevator opened. Only twenty metres away - the exit. In the background, I heard some urgent conversation. A beeping of an alarm.

"And we keep walking calmly towards the exit," I said, "as if we are exactly where we should be."

There was some increasingly frantic activity around a security desk.

"Soon," I said, "I expect they will have looked at the security camera pictures, at which point I get called by my nickname. And when we are called by my nickname, that's when we run. Very quickly."

"What is your nickname?" the woman asked.

"There-he-is-get-him"

"Very droll," she remarked dryly.

The large, heavy double doors, crafted from the finest Achenarian oak, were now in front of us. They swung open.

"There he is! Get him!" came a shout.

We ran.

Battle Of Rocky Fields (Part 2)

[Mosser, de Havilland, Imps, Feds, SB's, etc]

Plunging into the Imperial formation, the 'Shiva's turrets spread death as it proceeded amidst the enemy. The Imperial rear guard, rather than standing in front of the LRC's LPAs, opened the way and manoeuvred to flank it.

"Sir, Explorers and Couriers homing in. Four and eighteen, from the bow and port sides, with a few fighters tagging along," the tactical officer warned.

Captain Michael Stevens, in command of the Spartan flagship, gave a worried look to his Admiral. Smith was completely aware of the attack's near suicidal winner-take-all odds, and decided to go with it to the last consequences.

"Let 'Brynhildr' take care of them, Captain. Use your turrets until we're in range of the Duval, but keep going. No matter what, don't stop!"

* * *

For Master Darren Vilan, it was also a do-or-die situation. He had returned to the Imperial Carrier for repairs when the *Azure Sunset* had destroyed his squadron. Now he was reassigned with other survivors to a more vital function: fleet escort.

"Keep close to the Explorers, people. Don't forget to cover each other, these guys are playing rough!"

Vilan scowled. This new squad leader, Lady Rebecca Chong didn't have to say that. He had been living it! As hard as it was to say it, the pilots on the Spartan fleet couldn't be underestimated as 'just slaves'. It was bad enough to have lost his friends and comrades to the asteroids and the 'Azure Sunset', but saying that slaves had made short work of the pilots screening the fleet was adding insult to injury.

Now he had the chance to avenge the dead. He followed the lead Courier into the fight. Two enemy Adders jumped on their tails.

"Shield 1, whattaryadoin'? Get them off me!"

"I've got them, Ram 1", and Darren dumped some speed to get a better shot. He opened fire at the nearest, missed, and saw the fighter break to the left and turn to engage him. Another two bursts of the pulse laser, and the Spartan fighter went spinning out of control.

Darren didn't had time to rejoice, as he himself became quarry to a red beam from a Cobra MkIII at his port side. He engaged in evasive manoeuvres, took a few pot shots at a Spartan that crossed his sights, and was relieved of his chaser by an expert application of another Courier's 20MWER.

The comm crackled with commanders ordering repositionings and pilots asking for assistance. One of these messages had his number: "Shield 4, get back in position, damn you!"

"Hold tight, Ram 1, on my way."

All around him, ships were involved in criss-crossing death dances. Darren checked his scanner and found his lead again, harassed by the Adder and another Cobra. Pushing the throttle down, he flew into the fray after the fighter that was strafing the Courier.

Centering the Spartan on his sights and reducing the power, he fired nearly at point blank range and banked hard to avoid running into the enemy's wreck before going for the Cobra - who obliged to dance with him. A red beam lanced the space beside him as the ships approached in a very asymmetric jousting match. It seeked him out and carved a deep gash on his starboard stabilizing fin.

Sweating profusely, he swore. The Osprey tumbled past the Cobra. Once, twice, trice Darren tumbled before he could pull it out of the death spin, but it wasn't over. The Imperial pilot swore again as he regained his bearings: the Cobra had turned back and was trying to finish him off.

"Arse! Ram 1, I've got a problem here..."

* * *

Two Imperial Explorers and their entourage of Couriers homed in, sparing the weapon's temperature until in range of their target; another two diverted from its path and lined their trajectories on the capital ship leading the Spartan attack.

Couriers jumped forward, firing a barrage of missiles that went unresponded by the Spartans. The thin sheet of chaff put up was insufficient to hold the onslaught, and the enemy line broke up in explosions before the ships were in laser range.

The remaining of the Spartan fighters in range reformed and engaged the Imperial arrow, turning the assault into a pitched melee. Taking advantage of this, two Explorers found their way to the freedom fighter's core, blasting through its escort. The targeted 'Ogun' Panther battleship turned from its course to face the attack with its main gun as the Explorers came in range. Three cyan beams cut through space. Plasma engulfed the Imperial 'Chang Davos' Explorer and it exploded, followed by the Spartan 'Ogun' who was unable to withstand the double powerful attack.

Four Spartan Asps and Couriers came to the rescue of its capital ships and engaged the surviving 'Michael Riddick' Explorer, who responded with an insufficient missile barrage before trying to shake them off. A Spartan Courier chaffed its way out of the missile's targeting systems as an already battle-damaged Asp fell apart from a direct hit.

The remaining two Spartan frigates entered evasive patterns as the undamaged Courier kept pummeling the Explorer with 20MW of yellow death. Some of the Imperial escort had, in the meantime, managed to free themselves from the enemy screen to come to the aid of the harassed battleship. They chased the Courier away, took positions to cover for the 'Michael Riddick's continued pursuit of the Spartan capital ships chasing their own 'Vulcan', but were surprised by a missile-chased Asp.

The Spartan had been targeted by two of the Explorer's missiles and was out of chaff, so he tried to shake them away. Lt. Mike Santerre's Asp had taken previous damage, and although his shields could take most of the missile's damage, the remaining could disable his ship. He banked hard to the right to avoid one of the missiles, the second one was coming in fast to his lower port side as the Explorer homed on the Ogun.

Mike was horrified by the intensity of the battle. Neither his initial training, two years as a frontier trader nor the Spartan boot camp prepared him to this kind of glorified furball. The Brotherhood was, after all, supposed to be a guerilla force, and trained as such. Still, he'd learned a trick or two on his way to 'Dangerous'. Checking the missile's trajectories, he bucked his ship around, pointed nearly to a collision course with the Explorer who had sent him the presents and pushed the power throttle to the end.

The Asp, laser flaring away, blurred past the 'Michael Riddick's new escort at neck breaking speed. Mike saw the Explorer's shielded bulk growing at an alarming rate and put it on his sights. The 4MW laser hadn't time enough to overheat before he passed so near to the battleship's hull that he'd been able to see the plating seams if he wasn't going so fast. Still, the brightness of his laser eating away the opponent's shields took their toll. Half-blinded by the flash, Mike manoeuvred to a 90° full burn from his previous course and activated his bottom thrusters. He put the Explorer between himself and the missiles.

"Returned to sender", he guffawed before being caught by a Courier's beam.

* * *

The 'Michael Riddick's shields collapsed to the final attack from the Spartan Asp, the second impacting missile doing some superficial damage. Count Lucas Braserwky was calm and focused as he received the damage report, and took no notice of the dead, tumbling Asp. "Helm. To the Griffin, now."

"Yes, my Lord." The ship was running smoothly, as he liked. His crew knew how he liked it to function like clockwork, and the only sounds in the bridge were the breathing of the commons and peers under his command. He took a look at the tactical. The slaves were putting up quite a fight, but no matter.

"Weapons, be ready to put out a chaff layer when those missile frigates start firing. Comm, tell the escort to keep tight with me until we reach the capital ships."

"Yes, my Lord", responded the officers. All was well. In the end it would be as the Doctrine said: 'first they mock us, then they fight us, then we win'. So, for him it was to give the Empire another victory...

Count Braserwky's ship was targeted by a missile barrage from the Spartans screening the capital ships. In a well trained display of precision, a chaff cloud was laid. Two couriers and their attending Ospreys broke out of formation to engage the three Constrictor missile destroyers that were between the Imperial force and the Spartans chasing

the 'Vesuvius'. The 'Michael Riddick' itself took out one of the opponents before pushing through, shrugging off the damage of two more missiles.

"Helm, keep going. If you lose acceleration again I'll have you court-martialled", the Count berated. He didn't yell, nor gave any indication of anger. He didn't have to, the helmsman knew how serious Count Braserwky was. The Imperial Explorer was to keep its course. No matter what, the Count's orders would be carried out.

Flicking the comm, Braserwky called his escorts. "Rams, make sure to destroy your targets quickly. When you're done, catch up with me."

* * *

Time slowed to a standstill, but Darren was unable to avoid the beam that inexorably approached his fighter's canopy. After breaking in and out from the engagement with the Spartan Cobra III, he managed to score a couple of hits, but his manoeuvre was insufficient. Overhead he could see the enemy coming in for the kill, his red laser growing wider and closer and there was nothing to be done. He screamed out of terror for an eternity, each hour that passed was but a small fraction of a second. Darren threw the control to full port, even knowing it would be of no use.

His world became a terrifying red glow. An hour passed. The canopy started melting.

He was dead.

There was a warm, wet feeling on his groin, but he scarcely noticed it. He was... engulfed in milky reddish light. No, it was dark.

Death is darkness.

"Shield 1, WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING?! Get back in line this instant!"

Darren was astounded. He wasn't dead! The top of the canopy was covered in bubbles, hissing, but he was alive.

"How?..."

The hissing. Darren's hand shot up to cover the crack. No, that was wrong, his glove got sucked by the pressure and he couldn't pull it out. What to do? What to do? Darren couldn't think properly. His underwear was wet and cold.

Viscountess Chong's voice crackled on the comm. "Don't wimp out on me, you coward. Come back or I'll go after you!"

"Uhh, I've... aah... got a problem." What to do? Darren pulled his hand with all his weight, to no avail. If it wasn't for the glove, his hand would be seriously hurt.

The Viscountess seemed pissed. "And I've got three. Care to swap?"

"Uuh, Ram 1, I'll be right with you. In a moment." Being scolded made Darren's training come back to him. The emergency depressurization. The flight suit can handle the vacuum. He pulled the manifold valve and the air was violently expelled. The glove came loose and Darren got a canister of hull emergency repair foam from under the seat. Trembling, he applied a layer of foam on the canopy, returned the canister to its place and checked the scanner.

The 'Michael Riddick' was homing in on the Spartan capital ships and Ram squadron was not far behind. With a shrug, Darren manoeuvred back into the battle.

It was hard to see through the damaged canopy, but the Imperial Explorer and two couriers opened fire on the Spartans chasing the 'Vesuvius'. A hammer and an anvil, and the two Spartan capital ships isolated in the middle without their escorts.

"By the Emperor, they got them now!"

* * *

Pandemonium.

A fireball ruptured through space to the left of the *Vesuvius*. Duke Albright clenched his hands on the arm rests of his command chair, holding him steady as his giant ship rocked from the explosion.

"Report," he said calmly, eyes focused on the viewscreen, looking through the kilometres of rubble, scrap and starships.

Looking at the *Azure Sunset*.

"The *Brynhildr*'s gone, sir." Albright whipped around to face the vocal crew man. A Sir, with a straight back and his eyes focused on the Duke without a hint of fear. Good genes? Or stupidity?

Albright nodded. "Carry on." The loss of *Brynhildr* was tragic, as was any loss, but not crucial to victory. Only one thing mattered now. The ship hummed and throbbed as the engines pushed their safety limits.

"Rear shields to 40%!" cried one of his bridge crew. Albright scowled at the dishonourable slave scum, attacking the rear instead of face to face like gentlemen.

But the so called 'Brotherhood' weren't his primary concern either. He had to admit they were proving harder to kill than initially thought, but he had no doubt if he put the full power of his fleet to bare on them, he would destroy them. He just had other priorities right now.

He had to get to the *Azure Sunset*. This was bigger than the criminal Mosser or the Huge Plasma Accelerator. He could not let the Imperial Navy designed engines aboard the LRC fall into Federation hands.

No matter the cost. He was not doing this for himself or his family. He wasn't even doing this for the Emperor himself. He was doing it for the Empire, for his way of life, for everything he believed in. Such unselfishness surprised him, yet somehow it just felt *right*. A peaceful determination settled over him. If he and his entire crew died to save the Empire, then he would do it willingly.

"Inform me when they reach 15%," Albright replied. He turned back to the main screen. The view was thick with asteroids. To clear a safe path through, he had to order a good portion of the *Vesuvius*'s Anti-Fighter weapons to destroy them.

Between the lumps of solid rocks, fireballs exploded and faded. Forks of lightning like laser beams sprayed over the cosmos.

Beyond all this carnage lay his target. On the Federation side of the asteroid field.

"Faster, faster," Albright urged his ship.

"Shields collapsing!"

Albright turned and snarled at the crewman. What had happened to his warning at 15%? He would have to deal with that later.

"Swing her around!" he roared, jumping to his feet, arms out, pointing to crew. "Fire front starboard and rear port thrusters. Radio the *Chekov's Reply* and *Maxwell*. Let's give those anti-slave scum something to think about!"

The crew roared in approval.

* * *

Smith stood in the centre of the bridge and allowed himself a quick smile. The crew applauded. The Imperial flagship had lost its rear shields. It was time to move in for the kill.

"She's turning!" yelled one of the crew.

Smith flicked back to the main screen. The man was right. The *Vesuvius* was turning.

Turning fast.

"How the hell?" How could such a massive ship overcome its inertia so readily? He clenched his teeth. Secret Imperial technology. Developed by inbred lords and manufactured by slaves.

Time to make things right. But he was running out of time. Then an idea formed in his mind. Daring, stupid and suicidal, it was probably their only chance.

“Full speed ahead!” bellowed Smith. “Give it everything you’ve got.”

The *Shiva* lurched forward. She had little acceleration, and was slower than the *Vesuvius* even after many modifications. But he did have one thing on his side: Vector mechanics.

As the *Vesuvius* spun, the prime mover no longer pointed toward the *Shiva*. That meant the *Vesuvius* wasn't accelerating directly away from the *Shiva* but at an angle. Due to the imperial ships high velocity straight ahead, the sideways impulse made no difference to the ships vector.

Which meant the *Shiva*, continuing to accelerate straight ahead, caught up to the *Vesuvius*.

The *Shiva* charged forward, engines at full speed. It thundered forward, closer and closer towards the *Vesuvius*. The Imperials realised too late they were trapped and tried to evade.

Smith went flying as the ship bucked and bounced. The lights dimmed then returned to a dull red. A crewman pulled Smith to his feet as he felt his forehead. Blood.

“What was that?” He croaked.

“Two Imperial Dreadnoughts on our six! The rear shields are falling!” called a crewman before his station exploded in a shower of sparks. He flew backwards, hit the railing of the mezzanine and tumbled over backwards.

Smith looked on in horror, watching the body fall in slow motion, unable to move. The crewman spun, hit a leg on a sensor lead. The leg bent backwards, halting the bodies spin. He landed head first with a sickening crunch. Smith stared. The ship rumbled again as her hull was pounded over and over. Bulkheads groaned and collapsed. Lighting globes shattered, computer consoles exploded.

The ship was dying. Smith's eyes narrowed. *Not yet*

The *Shiva* still had one last task.

“Maintain course and speed,” Smith yelled, forcing himself forward to the Astrogation controls. The crew man climbed back into his seat and grabbed the helm. Smith looked at the main screen. The *Vesuvius* filled his vision. There was no way to avoid it now.

“Contact,” he whispered.

* * *

Madison swung his Falcon around another asteroid then honed his 1MW Pulse laser on the flank of the *Azure Sunset*. The shields were down; some precision shooting from him could disrupt any number of important systems.

Four orange beams of death crossed in front of him, making him lurch down on the controls. Instant death flashed by above. He wiped his brow and took a deep breath. He wanted to vomit. Adrenaline was keeping him running, but his hands were twitching on the controls. This was the edge. Super intense. He fired his weapon into the superstructure, knowing it was an ineffectual shot, and banked away. He needed to get some distance from the *Sunset's* defence systems.

A red beam flashed to port. Madison urged his ship through a tighter curve, while craning his neck to look for this attacker; the scanner was useless in such a thick debris field - he had to use his eyes.

It was an Osprey? Madison frowned. Why was an Imperial attacking him? Didn't the two sides have an agreement?

“Traitorous Imperial slime!” He yelled on an open channel, before switching to his teams frequency. “I've got an Imp on my tail.”

BOOM! Madison saw the explosion of light from the corner of his eye. He turned and saw the familiar reverse-wing shape of a camouflaged Falcon blast through the wreckage.

“Problem solved, Nine,” came the call over the radio: Jumper-8, his wingman.

"Thanks, Kyle."

He wiggled his wings in salute then spun the ship back to face the *Azure Sunset*. The LRC shimmered and lightened slightly as its shields returned. It was short lived however. A flight of Federation battle cruisers broke through the *Sunset's* SPA screen and fired off its own LPA, ripping the shields to shreds and slicing a deep hole through the *Sunset*.

Madison whooped in delight as he flew in closer. He wanted his share of the kill.

* * *

Albright felt dead. He came to on the opposite side of the bridge he had been standing on a moment ago. He tried to move, but couldn't. A million sparks of pain stabbed his body. He couldn't see through one of his eyes.

He had never felt anything so *destructive* before in his entire distinguished career, but he had never been involved in a capital ship collision before.

He looked around. His breath came in short shallow breezes. He looked at his chest.

To see a huge section of wall collapsed on top of him. He couldn't feel his legs, or his right arm.

Several lights gave a sporadic muted red glow to the scene. Members of his crew lay like ragged dolls across the bridge. Some moaned and moved. Others lay in positions which gave no doubt of their status.

He struggled and pushed his body against the collapsed wall, but it would not budge. He screamed, cursed. One of the crew fell to their knees by his head. The crewman was bleeding from the head, badly. But at least he was conscious.

"Help me out," Albright ordered him. The crewman stared straight ahead with wide, shock affected eyes, but, got to his feet and pushed against whatever it was. Albright felt the grip on his body weaken. He wriggled forward a bit. He could move! He grabbed the closest handrail and levered his body out. He got to his feet and clasped the crewman on the arm.

"Good work, soldier. Get to the navigation controls. We still have a mission to accomplish."

"Yes sir," mumbled the crewman. He staggered forward, looked for the navigation console seat, found it in two parts with its old owner, pursed his lips, turned and crouched over the controls.

Albright stumbled across the bridge. Those still alive picked themselves up. He helped them up and ordered them back to their stations.

He realised what the slave ship was going to do at the last moment and kept the *Vesuvius* turning. He also used his escorts to rip the arse out of the slave ship.

The plan had half worked. The *Shiva* had hit the *Vesuvius* amidships. Not ideal, but better than losing the engines or the main gun. It was a mortal blow, but at least she could still navigate and shoot.

He hoped.

"Sensors online," coughed someone.

"Get the viewscreen back up!" barked Albright. The big screen shimmered from a dead black to a black with pinpricks of light around the edges - not a complete starfield.

Then his eyes focused and he realised the stars were simply blocked out by the carcass of the slave ship. It was completely dead; in one piece, but without running lights or power whatsoever.

The radio cursed static, rising and falling as someone tried to remove the interference.

"...Du...Bright...Any...e...live....wn.....the...?"

"Clear up that static," Albright ordered. "And get us moving! Navigation?" Albright moved as fast as his injured body would carry him across the bridge back to navigation. Albright pointed on the scanner to a large white L-shaped line.

“Take us there!” he said. “For the glory of the emperor!”

The ship vibrated as the engines began pushing the ship forward again. The vibration shook the walls and floor until Albright’s teeth were chattering.

The *Vesuvius* would not together much longer, but she still had a duty.

“Duke Albright. Do you read? Is anyone alive down there?” The radio came into perfect focus. Albright recognised the voice of Lord Hiumyum, commander of the *Chekov’s Reply*

“We’re alive, Lord Hiumyum. Cover us. We have one last job to do.” Albright let his words sink in.

There was a pause at the other end of the conversation until the reply finally came in. “For the glory of the emperor.”

* * *

The ship bounced and rocked like a Jjagged Bbanner groupie in a dream-pit. Norman pulled himself off the floor and rushed to Sam’s station. “What the hell was that?”

Sam eyes narrowed. His hands tapped away at the controls.

“Sam!”

“Duval class flagship coming in full tilt, bearing 095 by 310.”

Norman’s throat constricted. Duval?

“On screen!” the view screen panned across the war scene to focus on a huge behemoth of a ship. The engine wash from the rear was enough to light a small planet. The ship looked like someone had run it through a trash compactor. Parts broke off the sides as it sped through the asteroid field.

The front of the ship passed through a clear area and became illuminated by the distant star. A trio of blood red markings spiralled across the nose of the ship. *‘Blood awaits those of honour.’* Mosser shivered.

Only one ship in the entire Imperial fleet looked like that.

“The *Vesuvius*,” he whispered. A large blue beam of energy appeared from the front of the ship.

A moment later, the ship rocked again. Alarms rang through the bridge. The overhead lighting dimmed.

“Damage?” Norman yelled as he crossed to Wafturn’s station.

Lucky grunted, wiping sweat from his eyes. “We just lost sector seven.”

Norman’s eyes went wide. He slammed a palm on his communicator. “Goddamn it de Havilland, we just lost sector 7. Get that gun working!”

He stared at the comm. unit, willing something to happen. Things were unravelling fast.

He needed the HPA.

“It’s going, it’s going, but you’ll only have one or two shots max.” The voice on the comm. was hoarse and rushed. “Sector what?”

Norman blinked. “Seven.” Ignoring the muffled exchange over the radio, he turned to Annalise. “Will you do the honours, my dear?”

“Who do you want me to take out?” Annalise grinned, her eyes wide with anticipation.

Mosser focused on the view screen. He smiled. “Say good night, Duke.”

“Gotcha, boss!” the women spun in her seat and entered the coordinates into the firing computer. “Once she’s charged, we can kiss that Duval class goodbye!” As if on cue, the lights dimmed. The bridge went as dark as an oort cloud. Norman counted down the seconds.

One – one thousand.

Two – one thousand.

The lights came back up. Norman straightened and narrowed his eyes. That should have taken slightly longer, I wonder what—

Then the ship spasmed.

The view of the Vesuvius went blue.

BOOM!

Space went white as the thermonuclear ‘Defence against boarding’ installations detonated within the Imperial ship.

Norman turned from the glare. The all-encompassing white faded. He turned back to the view screen, spots dancing across his eyes. Glowing fragments of the *Vesuvius* floated away, but the fireball had died away, leaving hot metal, smoke and debris.

Annalise whooped in triumph. The rest of the crew joined in. Norman ran back to Sam’s station.

“Sam, how’s the hole in the net looking?”

Sam smiled. “Wide open, Norman. Time to leave this party?”

The ship rocked slightly. Norman grimaced and reached out to steady himself.

One hurdle down, too many to go.

He turned to the view screen, reset to a forward view. The Imperial fleet was leaderless: the vanguard was scattered. The Brotherhood ships surrounded the rear.

The Imperials were no longer a threat. Some of the Federation ships were coming in fast however, though most were waiting at the field’s perimeter.

“I wonder what other surprises they have in store for us.” Norman grabbed his comm. unit. “De Havilland?”

“Gone.”

Norman frowned. “Michael? Where the hell is he?”

“He went after Maegil.”

Norman went rigid. He must have misheard. How could de Havilland leave his post in the middle of battle. That didn’t sound like the man he knew. And why would he go after Maegil? A man who had sworn to kill him?

But it was definitely Michael’s voice at the other end.

“Michael, Get over to deck 5, sector 1. We’ve lost bridge control over the SPA there. You’ll need to run it manually. Shoot everything, ok?”

“Yes sir! Vasquith said you only have one shot left.” The line went dead.

“Better than none, I suppose,” he mumbled. He turned to Annalise. “You heard him. Save the HPA for when we really need it.”

* * *

Major General Tuck tapped the console on his command chair of the *Panther*, bringing up the stats of the Brotherhood fleet, or at least what was left of it. The *Shiva* was gone, and with it their most powerful ship and their greatest leader.

He sighed long and deep. He felt a heavy weight on his shoulders, pushing him down. It was up to him continue the fight that Admiral Smith had started. But was he good enough? Did he have the ability to lead his fellow brethren to victory?

He shoved the doubt aside. It wasn't all doom and gloom: The Imperial flagship was gone, destroyed by the *Azure Sunset's* own HPA. Without leadership, the Imperials would become disorganised and easier to destroy.

In theory. The remaining Imperial ships were in good condition, while the Brotherhood ships would have looked at home in a Wreckers yard. They were down on tech and down on numbers.

They couldn't keep up. He had to get his fleet close enough to nullify the Imperial's range advantage. Maybe they'd take a few of them with them. He indicated to the communications officer to open a channel to the fleet.

"We're going in. This is our last stand, ladies and gentlemen. Let's make our loved ones proud. For Freedom!"

Tuck brought his arm up and swung it forward.

"Take us in."

* * *

"Pull back!" yelled Jumper-1. Madison didn't argue. He had seen that bang just like everyone else in the entire system.

The Huge Plasma Accelerator was active.

"The *Yamato* is coming in. Pull back!" Jumper-1 again.

"I've got Osprey's all over me!" called Jumper-4.

Madison's jaw dropped. More Ospreys? It hadn't been a one off then - the Imperials *were* targeting the Federation. But why?

"What the hell is going on, One? I thought the Admiral sorted those Imps out?"

"Wait one...new orders: Engage the Imperial forces. I repeat, engage the Imperial forces! We need to hold them back until the *Yamato* can get close enough to the *Sunset*!"

"You got it, boss," called Madison. The rest of Jumper squadron called in their affirmatives or double clicked their comm. pressels. Madison swung the Falcon around and pulsed the prime mover. He moved further into the asteroid field. It felt strange to be protecting what was minutes ago his prey, but what the hell. He had a new target. And he actually had something against the Imps.

It was time to party.

* * *

de Havilland opened his eyes.

Maegil. A limp Emu in his arms. Thoughts swirled through his mind: Anger, fear, confusion, but finally they settled down into a hazy memory: He had gone into the room, saved Emu, saved Maegil, and just as he was about to get sucked out of the ship, Maegil saved him.

"We even?" de Havilland rasped. His throat was raw, like he had drunk a hot soup. But this wasn't the first time he had sucked vacuum. He knew the symptoms. The low pressure had caused the moisture in this mouth and throat to boil, burning him from the inside.

It was the least of his troubles however. The *Azure Sunset* was getting a beating. He needed to find out what was going on. He doubted he could contribute much to the crisis, but it was better than sitting against a buckled bulkhead feeling sorry for himself. He felt powerless!

"I need to go," replied Maegil.

De Havilland looked at him. He wore the same determined expression, like he was incapable of emotion. De Havilland returned the stare in kind. Maegil narrowed his eyes. "My Brotherhood is out there. I need to help them."

De Havilland pushed himself to his feet. He flexed his arms, feeling the power return to his body. Winded, but ok. Fit enough to fight.

"We'd better get her to another medical bay," he said. Maegil nodded, lifting her in his arms as he stood. He cradled her like she was something so precious he couldn't let go, yet so fragile he didn't dare hold too tight.

She was all that and more. In that way, de Havilland was glad Emu had someone who thought that way of her. He looked down either end of the hallway. The place was a mess, but he knew where he was. "This way."

* * *

The Autodoc beeped its slow, consistent, monotonous beep. A good sign.

"She'll be fine," Maegil said, but de Havilland knew the man was only trying to reassure himself. He kept his eyes glued to the window, watching the brilliant explosions, laser beams, missiles and collisions of the battle outside.

"It's getting pretty nasty out there," he said.

"Can you...stay with her?"

De Havilland turned around slowly to lock eyes with Maegil. The determined expression was still there, but there was a fragility beneath the surface. De Havilland knew what Maegil was thinking; the man had thought he had lost her once already. He couldn't live through that again. "You want ME to keep an eye on her?"

"Please."

There was nowhere else in the world de Havilland wanted to be. They couldn't drag him away. But he couldn't appear too keen in front of Maegil. "I have to get back to the bridge. They'll need me. You stay."

"I have to get out there. The Spartans need my help. She needs you. Please."

De Havilland studied Maegil's eyes. There was a moment of silence. De Havilland swallowed. Did Maegil know? Or suspect? He pursed his lips and nodded. "Fine."

"I need my swords. Do you know where they are?" Maegil asked. De Havilland frowned.

"No, I don't." The window grew bright from the corner of his eye. He glanced back to find a big orange explosion ripping a ship to shreds. He turned back to Maegil. "A Lynx just blew. One of yours?"

Maegil didn't move but his teeth were grinding together. De Havilland could see he was thinking. But why was he more attached to a pair of swords than Emu?

"I'll come back for them," he mumbled. Still he didn't move.

"Maegil?" De Havilland gave him a nudge. Maegil suddenly spurred into action. He withdrew two disks from his pocket and gave them to de Havilland.

"I'm not sure why an honourable man would claim friendship with pirates, but here are the coordinates for the Brotherhood's base. You'll be safe there. Bring Emu with you."

De Havilland nodded. "and the other?"

"IFF emergency code. To get through the federation fighter screen if you need to abandon the *Sunset*"

"Look, I'm not leaving Michael behind, you can for—"

"Ok, ok." Maegil gave both cards to de Havilland anyway. The two locked at each for a moment. Maegil looked away, kissed Emu on the lips, then ran out the door.

De Havilland put his hand on Emu's arm as the door closed behind Maegil.

* * *

Tuck shook his head and wiped the blood from his eyes. His eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness of the bridge and looked for his crew. There was no movement. He dragged himself out of his chair and surveyed the damage. There was a console still working behind him on the mezzanine floor. He limped over to and up the ramps. His Brethren lay dead on their consoles or along the walkway. Their eyes were wide open, staring.

You died fighting for freedom. You will be remembered.

His leg spasmed and he collapsed against a dead console. He looked down.

The sharp end of a small white staff was stuck in his leg. He stared at it, confused. He couldn't think straight.

It was bone! He had been walking on a broken leg!

He sagged against the console. The full brunt of the pain pushed through his adrenalin dulled nerves. Fire raked up and down his leg, pulling, twisting, ripping at his nerves.

He screamed and fell backwards to the walkway.

It consumed him. Every thought, every nano-second, every fibre of his being focused on his leg. He screamed until his throat went hoarse.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself! he thought. *You're a member of the Brotherhood. No, you are it's leader. Don't make your Brethren's deaths in vain.*

But he was dying. His ship was dead. There was nothing he could do.

The active console. What did it control? He tried to focus, but the pain blocked all thought.

Going to have to do this the hard way. He clamped his teeth together - screaming wasn't going to help. He slowly turned himself around, stifling the screams that threatened to tear through his lips. He pulled his torso up above his arms and inched forward, one hand at a time.

Every movement strengthened his resolve. He could do this. He could beat the pain. He just had to keep moving.

The ship groaned. Not the sharp pain of a devastating laser shot. It was the mortal moan of a slow death.

"Just hold together a little longer," he urged the ship. He moved faster, eyes twitching and teeth grinding with the pain. It felt like someone was cutting his leg open from the inside. He stopped, took a deep breath then reached up and pulled himself upright onto his good leg.

It was a communications and sensor console. He ran a quick eye over the local scanners. The situation was dire. He counted less than half a dozen Brotherhood capital ships left. Their fighter squadrons were looking decidedly second hand also. The *Panther* was dead, drifting through space like a wreck. No weapons, no engines, and eventually, no oxygen.

An Imperial carrier changed course and began to tack around in front of the *Panther* to chase another Brotherhood ship. The *Shiva's* sacrifice still burned in his mind. A wild thought entered his consciousness.

"Shiva, do you read me? This is the Spartacus speaking. Do you copy?"

Tuck looked down at the small scratchy speaker in the console. The Spartacus was alive! Where was the signal coming from? His numb fingers found the reply button and he pushed it down.

"This is Admiral Tuck on board the *Panther*. The Shiva and Panther are lost." He tried to keep his voice neutral, professional, but the lives of his fellow brothers flashed before his eyes. Each life lost was one that he had caused. He hunched over from the weight of his actions. He didn't think he could hold it up much longer.

"I am taking control of the fleet," said Spartacus. "Sit tight. We'll get you."

"We are already lost, leader. We will die as free men." Tuck cut the transmission and looked at the scanners. The Imperial Carrier was moving on the same arc. Tuck studied the readouts and estimated would pass close to the *Panther* in thirty seconds.

Without a moment of hesitation, he activated the self-destruct mechanism. He had sole responsibility for the ship; his voice was enough to start the sequence.

A thirty second timer.

Thirty seconds to live. To live as a free man. The right of all people, regardless of their genes.

He didn't even feel it when the explosion engulfed his ship and the carrier in a gigantic thermonuclear explosion.

* * *

Madison slammed the controls forward as an orange hued beam of light burst into existence where his ship had been a milli-second ago.

It had been instinct. An Asp Explorer jumped on his six, but he passed it off as a Federation ship lining up in support.

But something hadn't felt right and he had juked at the last moment.

And now he knew something was wrong.

"What the hell are you doing?" Madison broadcasted on an open frequency. "The Imps are behind you!"

"I'll get to them in a moment." A cool, almost mechanical reply.

Madison shivered. He didn't like where this was going. Was the pilot serious? The Asp was clearly a superior ship. Madison didn't stand a chance. He had to talk some sense into the Asp pilot.

"Break off your attack!" Madison yelled. "I'm on your side!"

An orange beam ripped through space to his left. Madison dived and put the ship through a corkscrew. Plumes of exhaust gas spiralled around the ship as he used all the manoeuvring thrusters to push the ship through space. He gritted his teeth and forced a calm breath.

The Asp stayed on his six, calmly blating the orange laser beam at him every second or too. Seriously, was he playing with him? He shook the thought away. He couldn't escape from this crazy pilot. He would have to fight him.

He threw all power to his prime mover, waited a moment, and spun the ship around ninety degrees. The ship began moving around in an arc, which lead *behind* an asteroid. He immediately spun the ship one hundred and eight degrees to quell its velocity. The ship came to a stop then started moving back the way it had come until he burst from the cover of the asteroid.

Straight into the oncoming Asp.

Madison had time for a half smile before his world went orange.

Then black.

* * *

Emu awoke with a cough. De Havilland was by her side in an instant. Her eyes rolled around their sockets without focus. She blinked several times. De Havilland clasped her hands between his own. They felt warm, soft, feminine. He thought what it would be like to hold those hands every day. Finally, her eyes settled on de Havilland. It took her a moment to recognise him, then her eyes went wide.

"Maegil!" Emu pushed herself upright on the medical bed, forcing de Havilland to move with her. "The explosion. He's trapped. He's—"

"Ssshhh ssshhh. It's ok. I got him. I got him," said de Havilland in a soothing, quiet voice.

"You, you saved us?" She asked, as if she couldn't quite comprehend the act.

De Havilland churned a comment around in his mouth. It was time to let her know. "I'd do anything for you Emu."

Emu stared at him for an instant. Her cheeks turned a pale pink, before she looked away and swung her feet over the side of the bed.

"Where is he?" she asked.

De Havilland nodded to the view portal. "Out there."

"Now?" her eyes widened. She took a step but faltered. De Havilland held her upright and helped her to the window.

Outside was a blazing circus of pinpricks of light moving around laser beams and asteroids. It only took de Havilland a second to pick out the erratic movements of Maegil's Asp. He had watched the Asp take off, take down a Federation ship and then spin around to the Imperial side of the asteroid field.

De Havilland recognised a few of the famous Imperial designs and gauging their design philosophies was able to figure out which ships belonged to the Empire and thus which ones were the brotherhood.

It didn't look pretty.

The fleets looked about even. They moved and thrashed around the carcasses of other capital ships and asteroids, continuing the dance that had been going on for the better part of two hours.

The Brotherhood capital ships, disorganised last time de Havilland looked, were now flying in a united direction. Together, the group opened fire on an Imperial dreadnought. The result was instantaneous: The combined attack burnt a hole straight through the shields and blasted into the superstructure. A huge plume of gas and vapour exploded outwards, washing against the inside of the shields. They must have hit a primary system.

Osprey's too small to see except for when they reflected sunlight swarmed like hornets around the slower Brotherhood ships, rounding them up like lost sheep.

Then Maegil flew through the Imperial ranks. The Asp opened up with everything it had. A missile launched out from the front while the 4MW beam laser sparkled into existence, crashing through several Ospreys, scything through the ships like the grim reaper as Maegil spun the ship around on its thrusters. The ship danced between the Imperial Ships, spinning like a gyro, the beam laser cutting through three hundred and sixty degrees. Osprey's exploded or disappeared. The Brotherhood ships turned and fled. De Havilland frowned. What were they—

Then Maegil dropped an energy bomb.

The explosion imprinted on de Havilland's retina even from his great distance. A dual inverted cone of flame energy just expanded outward from the centre of the Asp.

Within an instant, everything around him exploded. It was like a fireworks show. The little Osprey's had no defence against the energy of the bomb and their reactors overloaded. A spherical ring of explosions blossomed into life then disappeared.

Maegil had timed his run perfectly, gauged his distances accurately, so not a single brotherhood ship was caught in the blast. De Havilland whistled. That was hot flying. Right then, de Havilland thought Maegil could single handedly change the course of the battle.

But then it all went wrong.

A flash of blue light lanced out across the cosmos. It was too quick, too short for de Havilland to catch, but his subconscious knew something was wrong. He blinked then tried to find Maegil's Asp.

It was listing to one side, belching smoke from a gaping wound in its rear quarters. Emu gasped and held de Havilland tighter. De Havilland held her back.

An Imperial capital ship rained fire down on the Asp. Maegil spun the wounded ship through the debris field, dodging the fire, but every few moments a shot got through the depleted shields and cut into the hull.

More and more shots found their mark. The Asp began haemorrhaging air, smoke and fire in its final death throws.

“No...” whispered Emu. De Havilland put his hand to her hair to stroke her, but couldn't tear his eyes away from the battle.

In a final act of defiance, Maegil managed to spin the ship around and blast away another Osprey before it took a hit to the dorsal plating.

The Asp exploded.

Emu's grip slacked. De Havilland looked down, eyes wide.

Emu had collapsed against him. His chest went wet. Emu began to sob.

De Havilland held her tight, stroking her hair. “I'm sorry,” he whispered.

* * *

Rear Admiral Logan rubbed the stubble on his chin as he studied the readouts his sensor crew were feeding to his command chairs display. He didn't want to jinx the situation by appearing cocky or confident, but he had a good feeling about this.

The Spartacus Brotherhood and the Imperial fleet had almost wiped each other out. They were both leaderless and their ships had dissolved into one on one melees. They were no longer a concern. He had watched a brave federal pilot fly his Asp into the heart of the Imperial attack wing and destroy it almost in its entirety with an energy bomb. The stunt had cost the pilot his life, but he had ripped the heart out of the Imperial attack, allowing the slave group to regather and counterattack.

The only thing that Logan had to worry about was the *Azure Sunset*.

But to Norman Mosser's credit, he was being a nuisance; The *Sunset* was using its SPA's to damaging effect, wiping out any ships that came close, even the larger fleet ships. He brought his capital ships in with LPA's and SPA's which pulverised the *Azure Sunset*. Parts of the superstructure ripped loose, while deep chasms opened across the hull.

But the *Sunset* just kept going. Slowly, but surely, the *Sunset* was escaping.

At least, Norman thought it was. Logan still had a few tricks up his sleeve.

“How long till the *Yamato* is in range of the *Azure Sunset*?” Logan asked the sensor crewman.

“Seven minutes, Admiral.”

Logan nodded and returned his gaze to the readouts on the chairs display. He was a safe distance from the action. Not because he was a coward – he liked to lead from the front, but it was best to take a step back so one could look at the whole picture before making tactical decisions.

The *Azure Sunset* was almost out of the asteroid field. He had to slow it down. He blew out a big puff of air. It was these kinds of decisions he found the hardest. But he had to make the decisions. It was his job. He had to think about what would happen to millions of civilians if the *Sunset* escaped. That outweighed the thousands of navy personnel on board his ships. He huffed again. It was time to be an Admiral. He called for the communications officer.

“Send in the *Crazy Horse*. Tell General Davies I want harassing fire. We need the *Sunset* to change course to slow it down.”

“Yes sir,” replied the comm officer, who put his headset back on and repeated the instructions. Logan turned to the view screen to watch his instructions unfold.

He wasn't sure what would happen to him and his career after this debacle, but he knew that *morally*, he was doing the right thing. He would just have to see how it panned out.

* * *

The Federation battlecruiser simply had more weapons. With a displacement more than half the *Azure Sunset*, the Fed ship kept coming, despite the *Azure Sunset*'s SPA's lashing across it. The Fed ship fired back, withering away at the AS's defence.

Norman wasn't sure the *Azure Sunset* would win.

"Hull Integrity dropping!" said Wafturn over the noise of the vibrating ship.

Norman studied the viewscreen. The Fed ship was bearing straight down on them. Was it playing chicken?

"Sam, divert course."

"Heading?"

Norman pointed at the centre of the battlecruiser. "That way."

The *Azure Sunset* began a slow roll, the starboard thrusters twisting the ship around to face the battlecruiser. Although the engines were state of Imperial art, the *Azure Sunset* was still a big mass to push. Especially with an HPA attached to the front.

The *Azure Sunset* narrowed its angle to the Fed cruiser. Norman felt the rocking lessen as the enemy guns had to retarget. He sighed. A small respite perhaps, but he would take it.

"Ok, you Federation bastard. You want to play? I'll play."

The ships bore down on each other. The sun glanced across the front of the Fed ship. Mosser's eyes went wide, then he grinned.

The weapon coolant line was exposed. "Annalise. Target all SPA's on this point." The blue beams panned and coalesced on the damage. Fire and explosions blossomed, but the ship didn't slow down.

"It's not enough," Lucky called. "We need more weapons."

Suddenly another blade of blue materialised, focusing on the same point as the others.

Then it happened. It was as if the force of the weapons was enough to push the Fed ship to a standstill. It backed up, it rocked and cascading explosions rippled across its surface. With a burst of light, the Fed battlecruiser disappeared.

"Ok Michael!" yelled Annalise. "That kid's OK in my book."

Norman wiped his brow. He turned back to Sam. "Get us out of here." He glanced at Lucky. "What's the neighbourhood like?"

Lucky looked up from his station. "Our little diversion cost us some time. It's going to be close."

"Once we clear the asteroid field, it won't matter. Sam, is the hyperdrive ready?"

A shrieking filled the air as the *Azure Sunset* came under attack. Norman stared at Sam, ignoring the damage. "Sam!"

"I'm getting some weird readings. It's active and ready to go, but it's not." Sam's eyes were wide. Norman couldn't remember the last time he had seen Sam look...perplexed. He rushed up the ramp to Sam's station, banging into the wall as another hit shook the ship. He got behind Sam and steadied himself. He looked down at Sam's screen. Sam was right. It didn't make any sense. It looked like they were stuck dead in the middle of the gravity well of a Sun.

Norman gasped. Maybe they were.

"Those sons of bitches."

Sam glanced at Norman. "What?"

"Hyperspace inhibitors."

"What the hell are we going to do?" Lucky asked, running over to Norman and Sam. Lucky and Sam stared at Norman.

"Norman!" they yelled in unison.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking!" Norman said, hands on his head. His hands were shaking. It was unravelling, all of it, despite his intricate planning. How had they found him? How the hell was he going to get out?

Fuck!

No. He needed control. He was going to get out of this. He had to. If he died now, he would be dead dead. Eternally. For ever.

The ship shook, throwing Norman forward. He put his hands out to lessen the impact and rolled over onto his back. He stared up at the ceiling.

That felt like a kick from a jump drive.

Wafturn appeared before him, but his moving lips were silent. Norman's mind was on the other side of the cosmos.

The Torus Jump drive.

Mosser jumped to his feet, a smile stretching across his face.

He had his ticket out.

* * *

Norman pushed Sam away from the astrogation terminal and activated the Jump drive program array.

"It'll be mass locked Mosser, it won't help us here."

Norman ignored him. Entering his administrative pass, he opened the source code for the initiation sequence.

"Norman! The Fed HPA is blocking our path!" Lucky said.

Norman looked up from the panel. "How long till we're out of the asteroid field?"

"Five minutes. The HPA is two minutes away."

On cue, the bridge speakers came alive. "This is the Commander of the Galactic Federation Systems ship *Yamato*. We have your bow in our crosshairs. Come to a stop and prepare for boarding."

"Annalise, shoot that fucker down. Wafturn, hard to port!" Norman called, before returning attention to the controls in front of him. His fingers danced as he scrolled through the millions of lines of code in the jump drive software.

"The *Yamato* will be in range in thirty seconds," said Lucky.

"Keep firing until she runs dry," Norman yelled. He added a subroutine to the bottom of the initiation sequence, linking back to the main routine. An infinite loop.

"Here she comes..." Sam whispered.

The *Yamato* fired.

* * *

It felt like God himself had grabbed the *Azure Sunset* and thrown it across the sky. The bridge crumpled around them. Fissures opened in the floor and computers exploded in showers of sparks.

Lucky went flying.

Norman knocked his head against his computer terminal.

Sam collapsed to the ground.

Annalise held on tightly, her face drawn tightly around her eyes, her lips unmoving. Her hands were on the HPA controls.

The lights dimmed.

The *Azure Sunset* shuddered. Her own HPA was firing.

BOOM!

Norman flew forward and everything went black.

Norman's eyes opened. Swirls of colour and light flickered past him. He squinted, trying to gain focus. Finally he saw Sam's inert body hooked under a hand rail, the astrogation terminal and a ball of fire float past, all of it about ten metres below him.

"Fuck!" he lashed out, closing his eyes, waiting for the impact.

But he didn't fall.

Slowly he opened his eyes again.

The artificial gravity is gone.

Below him, Sam slowly groaned and spun around.

"Stop lying around Sam! There's a battle outside! Throw me something!"

Sam looked around, eyes blinking and focused on Norman above him. His mouth gaped open, then he narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. He looked around.

"The HPA's gone, Norman." Norman looked over at Annalise. Her eyes were red and moist. He looked to the view screen. The Yamato was listing to port, its lights out, fires burning across its superstructure, as it drifted away from the view. Norman gasped.

The entire rear half of the ship was missing!

The road was clear!

"Heads up!" Norman looked down at Sam to see the man swing and throw a foot long piece of steel straight at him. Norman flinched, but couldn't move and took the hit straight in the stomach, forcing the air from his lungs. He gasped, but also drifted backwards, colliding with the roof. He quickly grabbed hold, spun himself around, then gathered his legs underneath him. Aiming his body for the control terminal, he kicked off.

He reached out and grabbed the terminal, spinning himself around. He held a hand under the terminal to keep his feet on the ground while his other hand called up a ship damage diagnostic routine on the screen.

"Wafturn?"

The engineer gave Norman a hard stare. "She's dying, Norman. We have to get out of here."

"I'm working on it," Norman muttered. He wiped blood from his face. "Lucky. We out of the asteroid field yet?"

"Twenty seconds."

Norman checked the code one more time. The fuel injectors, commands and the drive itself were ready. But would it work? Frantic had explained cascade reaction theory to him over some Brown once, but that had been a long time ago. And it was never more than a theory. If he was wrong about this...

He shrugged. The hell with it.

It was now or never.

Norman reached forward and pressed the 'Activate' button.

* * *

The fuel sensor readings passed their safety locks. It began to count upwards from 100%. The jump drive initiated, but strained against the mass lock restriction. But raw fuel was pouring directly into the jump drive initiation chamber, forcing a micro-jump, with a resulting kick, before the mass-lock overrode the system and reset.

Then the repeating loop kicked in.

The fuel readings passed 200%. Norman's eyes went wide. He couldn't imagine how intense the radioactive decay would be in the jump drive itself.

Another micro jump, another kick. Norman's legs were jelly against the vibration.

300%

The jumps sped up. The kicks became a steady, violent judder.

More importantly, the ship was moving forward.

“Itttsssss woooooorrrrrkkkkinnng!” Sam yelled through chattering teeth.

Norman clamped himself against the terminal to hold himself down, but he managed a smile. Yes he had done it. Again. He was fucking invincible. He studied the view screen. Ships were falling by the wayside faster and faster.

Nothing could keep up.

“Sensors registering several explosions....Fuck me. Norman, look at these readings,” said Lucky. Norman looked down at his screen where Lucky had forwarded the sensor readings. He whistled.

“Holy Shit. What the hell is going on back there?” A wake of seething radioactive isotopes and distorted spacetime was flowing outwards from the rear of the *Azure Sunset*.

“Space Quake!” said Lucky. “All ships caught in the wake are imploding in distorted space-time.”

“This is what jump drives were banned for in the first place,” said Sam, grinning. The shaking and rumbling suddenly stopped. The pinpricks of light out the view screen extended into starlines. The *Azure Sunset* had just escaped Masslock – the jump drive was operating at full speed.

“Rear view!” Norman called. The view screen changed to a picture of the asteroid field shrinking quickly into the background starlight. He disengaged the jump drive, dropping the ship back to normal speed.

“We did it!” yelled Lucky! Norman looked around his crew. Lucky was swimming across the zero gravity expanse of the bridge. Annalise was smiling. Sam gave Norman a slap on the back.

“You did it, Norman. You got us out.”

Norman smiled back. Against all odds, they had escaped. The ship was nearly scrap, but they had escaped. And while they had their lives, they could do anything. Wafturn landed by an empty terminal and trapped a foot under the controls. He fired his fingers across the controls.

“Rerouting artificial gravity power...Now,” called Wafturn.

The effect was instantaneous. The floor reached out grabbed Norman and he stumbled, caught himself on the terminal, then pushed up. It felt strangely empowering to be standing up again. The entire galaxy was available for the taking.

Norman wanted it. He looked Sam in the eyes and backed away from the astrogation controls.

“Get us out of here Sam.”

Sam laughed. “Yes sir.”

Moments later, the *Azure Sunset* winked out of existence.