

# DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 9

by  
The Elite BBS Collective

May - September 2007

Based on Frontier: First Encounters by Frontier Developments  
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## Vera Sinclair

[Mack Winston]

"Get it closed, I'll launch!" she shouted, bounding up the narrow entrance corridor of the Saker. I closed the outer door, then the inner door of the airlock. Green light. We could go. Indeed, I could feel a movement. Undoubtedly, we were launching without clearance.

It had been a close-run thing. Security started pursuing us the moment we'd left Building 11 in the Duval Complex. Fortunately, we had enough of a head start such that they never got time to train their guns on us.

I'd followed the woman to her ship. She assured me that my travelling companions were safely on board. I could see my Krait - or rather, one of Norman Mosser's Kraits, parked on another pad at the spaceport. Farewell, I thought, as we climbed on board the woman's Saker Mk.3.

I reached the cockpit of the Saker as we broke down.

"Get belted up, this is going to be rough!" the woman shouted.

She violently twisted on full power. To my horror, we were headed straight towards the towering buildings of Duval City!

"Aaaargh?" I half asked, as the buildings drew close at an alarming rate. "It'll delay their Vipers from getting a bead on us," she replied.

I closed my eyes. I was sure we were going to hit the tallest one. What about the ground defences?

I felt the onset of G-forces as she pulled back hard on the manual controls.

"Vera, they are launching," the ship's measured voice said.

I glanced in the rear view screens. Four... five... six... Viper Mk.2s were scrambling, and clawing for air. Soon, the orange lick of lasers would be upon us.

"They are starting to shoot," the measured voice said once more.

"Thanks Mikie," the woman - Vera - said.

I looked at her. "Mikie?"

"There's a time and a place to ask about my ship, and this isn't one of them!"

"I'm pre-charging the hyperdrive. I will override the safety systems, which will allow us to jump one thousand metres earlier, with a twenty percent chance of taking some drive damage," the ship's voice said calmly.

"Do you want me to take the rear guns?" I asked. Vera glanced at me sardonically.

"Tell me, Mack, did you poke hornets nests with a stick when you were a kid?"

"I did, once," I replied.

"Well, now you know why we should not shoot back!"

I hoped she knew what she was doing. She was pointing the ship at the largest thunderstorm I had ever seen. It began to go dark around us. An eerie angry greenish darkness. Tiny flashes danced over the windscreen, as hailstones flashed into plasma against the shields. Despite the enormous energy pouring from the ship's engines, it couldn't mask the violence of the air around us. The ship began to shake.

"Vera, the drive is ready"

She stabbed at the instrument panel.

It was like no hyperspace entry that I had ever witnessed. Instead of the slight buffeting, and a gentle fluctuation in G-forces, we flashed into hyperspace with enormous violence. I could feel myself being wrenched against the harness, and I could no longer focus on the ship's cockpit around me! There was a sudden sideways lurch that caused my head to bang against the side window.

Suddenly, the violence ceased, to be replaced by the cool blue witch light.

Then we dropped back into real space.

"Damage report nil, but the drive will need servicing on our next stop," the ship's voice said without passion.

"That was the roughest takeoff I've ever experienced," I said, looking over at Vera. "Who are you? Vera..?"

"Vera Sinclair."

"You said my ship mates were on board. Where are they?"

"Sleeping. Don't worry, they are safe."

"Let me check on them, they aren't exactly space farers, that'll have scared the tar out of them," I said, concerned, leaving my seat.

I left the flight deck, and entered the ship's tiny living quarters. Hold on...asleep? Kevin at least had been pretty damned alert forty five minutes ago. Something didn't compute. I turned around.

Vera was standing at the flight deck entrance. She was holding... a weapon. A design I didn't recognise. It was bulky, and had a polished, spherical business end.

I sighed. Once again, things were not turning out particularly well.

"OK," I said, and began to raise my hands, knowing I was beaten.

Vera said nothing. She pulled the trigger. I was hit in the midriff by ... something. It didn't hurt. Suddenly, I felt weak. Too weak to stand. I fell down. It didn't hurt - rather, I felt numb all over. It was all too clear why Kevin and Ezra were currently fast asleep.

Vera walked over to a small storage locker. She opened it, and took a hypodermic gun out of one of the compartments. She then picked up a vial, and gave it a shake. She held it up to the light.

"You're a nasty piece of work, Mack Winston. I wish my superiors hadn't specified they wanted you unharmed. I really do."

"What... what are you... who are you? What are you planning to do to me?" I slurred, barely able to control my voice.

She inserted the vial into the gun.

"Unlike the innocents you murdered, I won't hurt you. This will just send you to sleep".

I noted that the stunner she had shot me with had no effect on my prosthetic right arm. My fingers still moved normally on that hand. Perhaps I could move my arm enough to grab her wrist when she knelt down to give me the injection. What then? Break her wrist if she made a move, and then wait for the stunner's effects to wear off.

"For how long?" I slurred.

"As long as my superiors require. Hours. Days. Even decades if necessary."

"How did..." I gasped with the effort. I had to try and keep her talking to give me time to use my fingers to drag my arm into a better position. "How did you find me?"

"You should never have left Cdr. Maegil. He made my life hard, he had the paranoid suspicion that made him into a survivor. He just knew you were bugged. Once you left Cdr. Maegil though, you were so easy to track."

"Ugh," I replied weakly.

"I began to enjoy the hunt. You know, I can respect your love for Maria. I can't respect anything else about you, though. You're a vile sociopath who will now be removed from society. Not a moment too soon."

"People misjudge me," I said more clearly, using all my strength to just about move my head.

She knelt down. Quickly, my prosthetic fingers made my arm scurry in an almost comic way towards her.

Suddenly, she moved, and slammed her knee down on my elbow.

"No you don't" she said.

She carefully pulled my sleeve back, pulled back the fake skin and knocked the securing pin out. My arm fell off. She picked it up and examined it carefully.

"I didn't think even Maegil would find the one I hid in here the first time." She shook her head, and carefully placed my arm on the counter top.

"I'm actually quite nice if you get to know me," I muttered.

I felt the hypo gun in my shoulder. The light faded.

The light came back.

I opened my eyes and stared groggily at the ceiling. Something felt very odd.

I suddenly discovered I was lying in a bed. A normal bed, with sheets. Something felt wrong. I glanced at my right arm. It was ... it was no longer false. I felt it - it was real flesh and bone. As my mind finally started to wake up properly, I took the room in.

It looked like any bedroom in any home. A dressing gown was hanging on the door. I got up, and wrapped it around me. I realised I was feeling extremely thirsty. I had to find something to drink. The bedroom door lead into a large lounge - a fairly luxurious one. A leather suite, and deep pile carpets.

I must be dreaming. But I was thirsty.

The only other door lead to a bathroom. There was a glass tumbler sitting by a mirror over a small sink. I filled it, and drank noisily. I filled it again. And again.

Something was beginning to dawn on me - I had seen only two doors. One, from the lounge to the bathroom. One leading from the lounge to the bedroom. With rising anxiety, I quickly examined all the walls in the three rooms.

There were definitely no other doors. I was trapped. It seemed too real to be a dream, but who knows what that drug in the hypo had done to me. After all, here I was in a set of rooms with no way in or out, and I had a real right arm again! But it felt too real. There must be an entrance.

"You're looking for the exit, aren't you?" said a man's voice from behind me.

"Aaargh!" I shouted, jumping with shock.

"Please, sit down." the man invited, indicating the leather couch. "You are wondering how I got in. Do not concern yourself with such things."

"Oh."

The man sat down on one of the other seats. He was wearing an expensive looking suit. He was young, bronzed and had the look of a rich executive. However, I couldn't shake off the feeling that he resembled a ferret.

"My name is Bob. I am to be your questioner."

"Can I ask a question?" I asked, cautiously.

"By all means."

"Is this real?"

"Yes."

I paused. Well, he would say that. It did seem very real.

"What happened to Kevin and Ezra?"

"They are safe."

"That didn't sound very convincing."

"Kevin is also being questioned. Ezra will be taught basic literacy, given a new ident, and released".

"So you're not the Empire."

"No. You'd be in the Vequess slave mines by now if we were."

"Why am I here?"

"To tell us all you know. Let me tell you what happens next."

"OK". It wasn't that I had much of a choice.

"We believe in using the carrot, not the stick. If you cooperate fully, you get to choose a new face, a new ident, and the slate gets wiped clean. The rest of the universe goes on thinking you're dead. You, on the other hand, get your freedom and four million credits worth of cosmetic surgery to make you look completely different. You get a fresh start."

"And if I don't cooperate?"

"We will use a brain dump to find out what you know. Then you'll be turned over to the Federation, where you will spend the rest of your life locked up. They won't execute you, because they wouldn't want to endanger the extradition treaty. I'll also like to point out that the brain dump will give you very severe brain damage. We would rather not have to do that. Also, your friend Kevin O'Connell will be turned over to the Federation. Given that he's a Federation citizen, he will probably be executed for his role in helping you out."

"So what do you want me to do?"

Bob sucked the air between his teeth.

"Answer our questions fully and completely, with no attempt to lie or be economical with the truth. Answer the questions we don't ask, too."

"Hold on - how do I answer the questions you don't ask?" I asked, sensing a fit-up, a mind-rending brain dump and a life rotting in some federal hell hole.

"What I mean is this. If I ask you where the Azure Sunset is, how would you respond? Just for argument's sake?"

"I don't know where the Azure Sunset is," I replied cautiously.

Bob got up and started to pace around the room.

"Now you and I both know you're telling the truth. You indeed don't know where the Sunset is, and the lie detector confirms you are telling the truth. But you didn't answer the un-asked question."

"How can I? You didn't ask it!" I said. It seemed totally unreasonable.

"Just use your imagination. If I ask you where the Sunset is, think what follow-up questions there may be. For example, you could ask yourself what happened next? You could go on to add that although you didn't know where the Sunset was, you saw it hyperspace, and you knew its next jump was to Barnard's Star. That's just an example, mind. You could go on to ask yourself a question about the disposition of the crew, say - you thought Sam Kemper was about to lead, as an example, a mutiny, and take the ship to Achenar. Again, just an example to help you understand."

"I see," I said.

"So you must volunteer any related information. Incidentally, you may like to know that the Huge Plasma Accelerator, the weapon which you helped steal, was used in battle a couple of days ago. The Azure Sunset's crew annihilated a Duval class vessel - the Vesuvius. Then, for an encore, it blew the back end of the Federation starship Yamato clean off. Your friend Mosser added to the chaos by activating a banned Torus jump drive".

I didn't say anything for a few seconds. I was quite honestly surprised that the Azure Sunset hadn't broken its back before it could fire. I doubted even Norman Mosser could have arranged much repair to its superstructure in the time since I had left.

"What about these conditions? If I tell you everything I know, and I presume this conversation will soon go Mosseresque, and you wipe the slate clean, what are the conditions?"

"Firstly, we know you have a kernel of goodness in you. People from Dublin Citadel said you were a nice kid when you were there with your uncle. Of course, they don't know the real reason why you left, but even so, you were mostly a nice person. We want to resurrect the nice Mack Winston and see an end to the nasty one I have in front of me. You have to be fit to return to society. At the moment, you are a menace. A danger to society. We know you've been nothing but a pawn for the last few years, and I can allow for that - but you're a really unpleasant human being nonetheless".

He said that as if he was talking about the weather. I was about to answer back. He held his hand up to silence me, and continued.

"The conditions are this. You get to choose how you look. We will provide you with some additional education so you can have a worthwhile career. But you will never touch a weapon again. You will never make an act of violence again. You will not perpetrate any crimes. You will not attempt to make contact with any of your former criminal associates, including Kevin O'Connell. Twenty years down the line, when you think we've finally forgotten about you, don't think of welshing on the deal. That natty handgun you've always wanted? Touch it, and we'll know. If you break the terms, we will take you and turn you over to the Federation."

"So what if I want to go back to trading?"

"Stick to Sol and Barnard's Star. I hear you can do that perfectly safely without weapons".

"What if someone attacks me in a bar?"

"Turn the other cheek"

"So I can't even defend myself?"

"No. I would advise you don't get into situations where there is a risk of getting involved in a fight".

"What kind of a life is that?"

"It's a much better life than being in Federation prison".

I sighed. I really didn't have much choice.

"What happened to my arm?"

"We grew you a new one. We know how you liked to use that prosthetic as a weapon. We couldn't have that."

"How long have I been out?"

"Only two weeks".

"How long will I be held here?"

"For as long as it takes. We want to know everything you remember. Right from your first meeting with Norman Mosser."

It was going to be a long time. A long time indeed ...

## Proactive Measures

[Kim Stenson]

Stenson muttered to himself. An ambush only worked if the prey walked into it oblivious. But sometimes, the prey could be unpredictable.

Unpredictable, like ignoring the obvious fault he had caused in the *Sunset's* systems to concentrate on other problems.

It was his own fault. He had underestimated the damage to the *Sunset*. Obviously there were more important jobs. The HPA itself and structural strength most likely.

Stenson groaned and stepped out of his hole. Days of hiding in wait had turned from nostalgia to discomfort. His old body refused to take it any longer. He had to accept the truth: They weren't coming.

It should have been clear to him days ago, but this wasn't a normal situation. It was more than a job. This was about Norman Mosser. Norman Mosser!

It wasn't about his career or the kudos. It was the principle of the thing.

Stenson had to win. Had to. He was pushing retirement, but he had to get Mosser first.

But he wasn't going to get him today. Not like this. He needed a new strategy.

He went to check on Moore. The pirate was so out of it he didn't need minding, but he did need food. The ship shook suddenly. A rumble, small at first. He registered the feeling, but ignored it.

But the second shake made him take notice. He grabbed the wall to steady himself. Something was wrong. He wiped his suddenly sweaty hands on his pants. What now? The crew of bandits would likely rush to the bridge to find out what was happening. Something he had in common with them.

Footsteps! Stenson flicked his head side to side and dashed through the nearest door, fading into the shadows. A figure sprinted past. Upright, fiery orange hair and tired pilot fatigues.

Vasquith de Havilland. Stenson narrowed his eyes. The unknown. Sure, he had the man's file and before he met the man, thought he had him figured out. But with a gun pointed in his face, de Havilland had told Stenson he needed Mosser more than Stenson needed to arrest him. He really wanted to know what de Havilland's part was in all of this. He squared his shoulders. He had been hiding long enough. He was an investigator. Time to do his job.

The door to the bridge loomed ahead. Shut, but unlocked as far as he could see. Stenson inched closer-  
-the door suddenly parted, opening.

Stenson froze, pupils dilating. It was all over.

But the moment passed and Stenson didn't hear any yells of surprise or anger. No laser bolts. His eyes focused and he saw the expansive bridge before him. Norman's crew were all facing forward, intent on the view screen. Stenson followed their eyes

The Imperial fleet. No. Not just the Imperial fleet. Federation ships too. Stenson gulped as he slid up against the hallway wall, head poking around the edge of the parted door, not quite flush with the wall. They still hadn't noticed him.

He brought his head back behind the meagre cover of the opened door. He had all he needed here. The *Azure Sunset* was under attack by two fleets. He had to find shelter, and he had to find it fast. Arresting Mosser came second to survival.

"Get that goddamn gun working, de Havilland!" Stenson heard Norman roar.

Stenson ran.

He shuffled sideways, trying to keep balance as he shrugged the spacesuit on. It was a rush job. No double check on the seals. He donned the helmet, heard the seal take and turned on his oxygen. He stepped into the airlock and he quickly cycled through into the main docking channel that ran through the centre of the *Sunset*. He needed a quick escape if things turned ugly.

So, if he was going to hide, he was going to do it on a ship.

The Black Saker sat on its landing struts before him. The landing ramp was down; the lights were on inside. Stenson frowned. Had de Havilland been preparing an escape strategy of his own?

Or was one of the pirates stealing from de Havilland? Either way, it was his ship now. Claimed in the name of Interpol, or something. It wouldn't be a problem to justify it, especially after he showed the lab coats the paint. They would love it. He shuffled across the channel floor and reached the landing ramp.

Crack! It wasn't a noise – he was in a vacuum – but he definitely felt it! He fell to one knee as another crack ran up through the deck into his leg. He put his hands out to break his fall. He tried to push up from all fours when the ship shook like a house in a hurricane. He fell forward, smacking his head into the ramp before he suddenly shot up and hit the lower superstructure of the Saker.

Gravity returned and he collapsed to the landing ramp with a whack.

Everything went dark.

\*

Stenson woke with a groan. His eyes flickered open.

Memories flooded into his brain. Vacuum. Spacesuit. Crash. His hands flew to his helmet, frantically running over the glass to check for cracks.

He let out a sigh. No hiss of escaping air, no noticeable cracks.

*How long have I been out?* He checked the suits chrono. Four hours! His heart rate jumped. What happened? Did the *Sunset* escape? Where were the crew? He lay still, holding his breath, feeling the floor beneath him for vibrations.

No explosions, just the thrum of...the hyperdrive.

They were in hyperspace. Stenson sat up to look down the end of the channel.

It was blue. He stared, mesmerised.

Witchspace flew past outside, through the destroyed door of the channel, wisps of light, like wash from the bow of an ocean boat, flicked inside, before being pulled back again.

Stenson finally pulled his eyes away. How long had he been staring? He had to keep control. Witchspace was dangerously hypnotic.

He got to his feet and gave his body experimental twists. Nothing particularly sore or broken. Good. He slowly shuffled down the landing ramp. He had four hours to fill in. There was a battle of some kind. He wondered what kind of damage the *Sunset* took. He looked up at the channel roof and gasped.

The place was fucked. Whatever had happened during his beauty sleep, it hadn't been kind to the *Sunset*. She looked like she would collapse under her own weight: bulkheads were torn, collapsed and twisted. Structural members dangled uselessly above the docking channel.

Something eating away at his subconscious finally flared into recognition. The vibration under his feet was the hyperdrive, but it didn't feel right. It was rougher than it should be. There was a pattern. He counted every sixth rumble was accompanied by what he could only label a cough. It was almost like the engines were missing a beat every moment or so.

Not healthy. He turned to the Saker. He thought of abandoning the mission. It would be unfortunately if the ship collapsed on top of him.

But he did have a prisoner. It was his duty to protect Moore. That would be his first port of call. He turned and moved for the nearby air lock.

Or so he thought. Within fifty metres of the medical station where he had left Moore, he knew something was wrong. The airtight doors had dropped and were active. He moved to the screen by the door.

The entire deck beyond the doors were gone. Nothing but vacuum. Moore was out there somewhere, floating in space. Whoops.

He shrugged. The poor bastard was probably out of his misery now anyway.

Voices. Stenson perked his ears and turned slowly, listening. A couple of corridors over.

Norman's voice! If it was just him and one other, maybe Stenson could take him right then! Struggling to quash his excitement, he crept forward.

"...totally ruined. I'm not sure how the old girl pulled through."

"She wanted to live, Norman."

Stenson held the gasp in his throat. *Sam Kemper!* Norman and his number 2. What a prize.

"We need repairs, now. Where the hell is Moore? I haven't seen him in ...jesus, I don't even know. Find him. And where the hell is de Havilland? I can't believe he ran away during battle! We need the HPA up and running again." Norman sounded agitated. This was an interesting conversation.

"Where the hell are we going to stop for repairs, Norman? We're out of friends. You still haven't told us what your quest is, but perhaps it's time to abandon the *Sunset*. You're down to your last clone, remember. Is it worth your life?"

Norman snorted. "No Sam, we can't abandon her. Not yet, anyway. And we still have a few friends. We'll just have to crash in on them and hope they don't mind."

Sam made a short laugh. "Frantic?"

"Frantic."

The voices trailed away. Stenson edged forward, hands tingling. *The last Mosser!* Was God suddenly making up for all the times he had let Stenson down? All his Christmas' had come at once.

If there was any time to act, it was now. He pressed up against the wall at the intersection between Norman's hallway and his own. He peered around the edge. They had disappeared around another bend. He looked the other way, took the Detective Special from his belt and took a step into the hallway.

Each step was a perfectly performed sequence of events. Put out one foot. Press foot to ground on side of the sole, rolling onto the heel and toes. Transfer weight to foot, bring rear foot up. Stenson put all his concentration into keeping his movement quick, but silent. He kept to the edges of the floor, where the metal flooring would creak less. He could hear Norman and Sam talking, but he wasn't listening to the words, just concentrating on the noise, so he knew how far away and what direction they were in. It was—

—"Who the hell are you?"

Stenson jumped, spinning around, weapon out in front. So focused on Norman and Sam he hadn't listened to any noise behind him. His finger was already depressing the trigger.

BANG! It took Stenson a moment to realise the noise had come from his own gun. The woman in front of him dropped to her knees, a look of shock on her face. The expression burned into Stenson's retina as her eyes lost focus and she collapsed backwards.

*Jesus. I just killed that woman. I'm a murderer*

Heavy footfalls from behind him. Stenson spun. Hurried voices and shuffling clothes from around the corner. Norman and Sam must have heard the exchange.

The gun shook in his hand. He stared at the cadaver in front of him. His mind kept screaming *run*, but his body refused to obey.

*Go! Go! You can't do anything for her!*

Stenson's grip on the gun loosened; he almost dropped it.

*Stop acting like rookie. Get going, old timer*

It was over. His enemy knew he was here, he had lost the element of surprise. He was outnumbered and he was out of his depth. It was time to go.

Stenson ran.

Straight into someone. Stenson bounced back, hand swinging the Special out in front of him. He brought the pistol to a stop at the nose of...Vasquith de Havilland. The orange haired man's expression changed from confusion, through recognition to relief.

"Hey, you made it," said de Havilland with a smile on his face. Stenson pursed his lips. Prey concerned with his well being?

"You're under arrest, Mr de Havilland," Stenson said. De Havilland leaned against the nearest wall, wrapping his hands across his chest. De Havilland's eyes never left Stenson's. de Havilland's file showed him as a trained killer – a marine. Stenson was kidding himself his pop gun would put any fear into de Havilland.

The foot steps were getting louder behind him.

"I'll take you into custody, one day. Mark my words."

De Havilland shrugged. "Ok."

Stenson brought the pistol down by his side. The two men stood motionless, staring at each other.

"The Spartacus Brotherhood are tracking this ship," said de Havilland.

"What?"

de Havilland smiled, but remained silent. Stenson ground his teeth. He wanted to smash de Havilland's lights out for being such an arrogant shit, but he knew de Havilland was just trying to work him up.

The foot steps were around the next bend. He had to go. Stenson took a step back from de Havilland, moved around him, then sprinted down the corridor.

\*

There was a fundamental problem with running away from someone who controlled all the environment between you and freedom. It was a challenge his younger self may have appreciated. Right now, it was a possible terminal nuisance.

He had to go where they didn't expect him. He couldn't go for the Docking Channel. Too obvious. Still, he needed to get off the ship. The only to do that was through the Docking Channel.

Stenson's mind ran in circles as his body did the same. He was trying to keep distance between him and his pursuers, but he still didn't know where he was going.

He passed a closed, airtight door. Stenson slowed. It looked familiar. He glanced at the door's screen.

It was the same door he had stopped at earlier. He had gone in one big circle. He frowned and moved off, but stopped, turned around and smiled.

He had an idea.

He kept his eye on the floor of the medical bay. Not because he was afraid of falling over – the artificial gravity still worked, despite the large gash in the hull ahead. That was why he was looking down. If he looked up at the hypnotic witchspace, he might not look away again. It was the very edge of reality itself.

He had heard stories. Stories that made space madness look like simple drunken depression.

You didn't go out into witchspace unprotected. Not even if your life depended on it. Not if you wanted to stay sane. One was safe inside a ship. But if you actually went out *there*, anything could happen. Some said that your soul was torn by the gravitational eddies, leaving a part of you behind. Some said it the pulsating lights brain washed you. Others just went stark raving mad.

Stenson froze, keeping his eyes down. Did he really need to go out there? He could move back into the ship, fight off the pirates and get through to the docking channel, probably heavily guarded by the pirates

*No! Get a hold of yourself! This is the only way*

He checked his suits respirator, straightened his shoulders and took a step forward. His back hurt. He wasn't getting any younger, that was for sure. The dash to get the suit, get through the locked door and seal it again hadn't been easy. At least he was half way there now.

He paused at the edge of the abyss. One wrong move could see him tumble into oblivion. He touched the inner hull. Reinforcements and insulation hung out from the wound like artificial gore. The hull was flared inward from the laser blast, taking half the room with it. There wasn't any residual heat so he grabbed hold of a jagged piece of strut and leaned out over the edge.

The hull was smooth. His head dropped. That wrote off his exit plan completely.

*Wait.* A whirlwind of light played over the hull, highlighting the metal skin. There was a recess. Small, but big enough for a foothold. Further along there was another. And another. Heat and moisture vents, probably. But would they continue over the entire hull? What if he made it half way around the hull and found they stopped? He stood still, listening to his body, gauging how he felt.

Completely exhausted. Gutted. Sapped of energy. He had been living on the edge on this ship for too long.

He closed his eyes and concentrating on his breathing. *You can do this.*

He clenched his teeth together and reached out for the first foot hold. He got his right foot in and found a thin slot between armour plates – For overlap during thermal expansion – for his hand to hold.

Regardless of what happened, it was going to be a one-way trip. Stenson swung his left leg out.

\*

His fingers were bloody. They weren't high quality gloves. Spacewalking involved the hands more than the feet, and he had the blisters to prove it.

But he had made it. Stenson collapsed to the floor of the docking channel just in from the external door. He lay on his back, staring at the roof as he waited for his breathing to normalise. He tried not to think about his hands, but every time he moved them, he could feel the blood *squelching* around.

He grimaced at the thought. Not knowing what they looked like made it worse. He sighed and reined in his imagination. It couldn't be that bad. Bent fingernails, superficial damage only.

He looked at this oxygen supply. Running low. He rolled over and pushed himself to his feet, lightheaded after the respite.

It was a slow, pondering walk. He was tired; the suit was heavy. He passed the wreck of his Eagle. He sneaked past the airlock and into the waiting Saker. It was just as he had left it. He sniggered. They should have deactivated it, instead of defending the airlock to the docking channel.

*They probably didn't think anyone to be crazy enough to go outside.* he shook his head. He could still see the swirls, eddies, whirlpools of light, waxing and waning in intensity, moving closer and further away. He hoped he wasn't going crazy.

He stumbled up the ramp but stopped.

*My tracker.*

He had completely forgotten! The whole reason he found his way to the *Azure Sunset* was because he had put a tracker on the Saker. He smiled and worked his way through the ship. He found the tracker, disembarked and buried the tracker in the remains of his Eagle

He collapsed in the pilot seat, ship still open and devoid of air. He didn't want to play his hand too early but activating the ship. He worked his action sequence: Turn on the engines. Activate the generator, close the landing ramp, fly forward. Escape. Good in theory, but there was one hiccup:

There wasn't any space outside to escape to. Just witchspace.

He didn't pretend to understand how it worked. That was what the scientists – lab coats – did. Hyperspace theory was a well guarded secret. If he flew a ship into witchspace, would a dimensional wake catch him, pulling him along behind the *Sunset*? Or could he plot his own course, and possibly get lost forever? Or could he open his own hyperspace entry cloud inside witchspace? What would that do?

*One step at a time.* He had to get out there first.

But was it just suicide? There was more going on than he had first realised. He was now starting to doubt de Havilland as a simple accomplice, a good guy gone bad. The man hadn't even tried to attack Stenson. He recalled now the standoff at Williamsons Base: de Havilland had kept Veruz in check, made him lower his weapon. Was he under cover or something?

But de Havilland wasn't his prime prey: It was Mosser. To arrest Mosser, he had to escape. Now.

*Ariel.* Would he ever see her again if he flew out into the maw now? Would he see her if he stayed? Indecision tore him apart. The right move had always been clear. Now confusion muddled everything. He cursed the woman he loved. He cursed Mosser and he cursed himself. He was a fucking mess who couldn't even take a risk anymore.

He gunned the engines and forced a grim smile. Time to take charge of his life again.

The Saker whirred to life, lights, generators and pumps turning the ship from a silent shell to a living, vibrating being.

*They must know what's happening by now.*

As if in response, a portion of the channel roof opened and a turret appeared. It faced away from the Saker, but was rotating on its bearings fast.

Stenson gulped and without thinking activated the engines. They were still cold. Very cold. Activating them and bringing them up to temperature so quickly could break them.

But he didn't have a choice. He grabbed the weapon controls, manoeuvred the ship to line up against the rotating turret and fired.

A blue beam shot out and smashed into the turret, which disappeared instantaneously.

Stenson's eyes lit up. What the hell kind of weapon was that? *This is an AAI research ship*

He pursed his lips. An experimental weapon then. At least if the ship was AAI, he knew the engines would be of a high quality and might take the stresses he was imposing on them.

It was time to leave. He pushed the ship forward. The channel flashed by in a blur as he held the Saker steady, no mean feat with a damaged stabiliser fin...

...and then he was out, past the *Sunset* hull and in Witchspace.

Stenson stared in wonder.

And then the Saker barrelled out of control. Stenson screamed.

## Aftermath

[de Havilland]

"Where the fuck have you been?" de Havilland flinched at the verbal battery Mosser directed at him.

"Easy. She just lost her boyfriend." De Havilland shot Mosser a *we'll talk later* look and rubbed Emu's shoulders. "Let's get you to sleep," he suggested to the woman, who mumbled acquiescence. He held her lightly; her body felt as frail as a dandelion chain.

He moved her back through the door to his left, into Normans command room. The room was a complete mess after the battle – books and antiques were tossed, smashed and discarded across the floor. He navigated them through the maze and settled her on Norman's bunk. She rolled over and closed her eyes.

De Havilland showed a sad smile. He reached down and covered her with a blanket before turning to leave.

"Wait," she said softly. De Havilland turned. "I'll be right outside."

Emu half nodded. De Havilland waited for another moment then tip-toed out the door—

—To walk straight into Norman Mosser.

"You'd better have a bloody good explanation!" yelled Mosser. De Havilland pushed past him to get away from Emu so she could sleep.

"How could you leave your post in the middle of a battle?"

"I—"

"You of all people should understand the concept of duty!"

de Havilland was suddenly angry. He narrowed his eyes and took a step toward a Mosser. "Don't lecture me on duty you son of a bitch! While you were trying to destroy the galaxy, I was putting my life on the line every fucking day to save it."

The bridge lapsed into silence. Mosser and de Havilland stared at each other, unwavering, unmoving. Mosser's crew quickly found jobs to do or control consoles to look at.

De Havilland gave in first. "Look, I went to save Maegil and Emu. We both knew Maegil was the big cheese of the Spartacus Brotherhood, so we needed him alive. He took off in his ship and turned the tide of the battle. We might not be here without his sacrifice." De Havilland forced his expression neutral, hiding his true motivations for leaving his post.

Mosser's features softened. "Sacrifice?"

"A missile ripped his Asp apart. No escape capsule."

"Well that's one problem solved. What should we do with his girl?"

"I'm looking after her." De Havilland's voice left no room for debate. Mosser raised an eye brow but said nothing.

The bridge floor rattled briefly. The two shared confused looks, then turned to Sam.

"What was that?" Mosser asked. The floor rumbled again, more violently.

It was like a switch was turned on: the ship went into convulsions. Mosser ran to Sam's station. "Get us out of hyperspace!"

"We can't! The extra stress will tear the ship apart. We have to ride it out!" yelled Sam over the noise. De Havilland gathered himself up and grabbed the console on Sam's other side.

"Is it the hyperdrive?"

"What do you expect after the beating it took? I'm surprised we're still in one piece!"

They held on, teeth rattling, grimacing as wall bonding broke loose. A crash of glass behind them made de Havilland turn his head. Sparks exploded from a nearby terminal.

The vibrations slowly died out. Mosser breathed deeply.

"We need to get his girl patched up. Sam you're with me. Mosser half turned, stopped, looked up at de Havilland.

"See what you can salvage from the HPA." He didn't wait for a response, but strode straight out of the bridge, Sam in tow.

"Yes sir," de Havilland mocked.

\*

De Havilland strode through the corridors of the *Sunset*, head down as he waded through a tide of thoughts.

*You can't. Not now. She's grieving. You know the rules*

*You can be her rebound*

*You pathetic bastard*

*You want it*

*Shut up*

De Havilland shook his head and pushed his body faster, launching himself around a corner—

— Into the Interpol agent. The other man's hand was already swinging up, a Detective special clenched between the fingers. De Havilland's expression changed from shock to a smile. "Hey, you made it."

The agent seemed taken aback by the comment, but the gun didn't waver. "You're under arrest, Mr de Havilland," he said.

De Havilland slouched against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. His heart pounded against his rib cage, but he kept the smile on his face, and hoped he wasn't sweating. *Don't look concerned.*

De Havilland heard footsteps ahead of him. They were getting louder fast. They were running. The Agent's head tilted slightly. The gun trembled slightly.

"I'll take you into custody, one day. Mark my words," he said.

De Havilland shrugged. "Ok."

Stenson brought the pistol down by his side. The two men stood motionless, staring at each other.

"The Spartacus Brotherhood are tracking this ship," said de Havilland.

"What?"

de Havilland smiled but didn't say anything else. Stenson took a step back, moved around him, then sprinted down the corridor.

Moments later, Norman came around the corner. "You see him?"

De Havilland nodded. "He put a gun in my face then ran off."

Mosser nodded behind him. "Help Sam. She's hurt."

"Who?" But Mosser was already gone. A perplexed expression on his face, de Havilland moved forward cautiously.

She wasn't hurt. She was dead. He had seen enough of those wide, still eyes to know a cadaver when he saw one. Sam crouched by Annalise's head, slowly stroking her hair. He tucked a loose strand behind her right ear. "Her aunty is going to kill me," he said in a half sniff, half laugh.

De Havilland took a step toward Sam but froze. How good a friend was Sam? De Havilland shrugged, took another step and gave Sam a hug. "I'm sorry Sam."

He stepped back. Sam wiped his nose, sniffed and looked at de Havilland. "I never told her, you know."

De Havilland inhaled sharply. Unrequited love and lost opportunities. He knew Sam's next comment before the man said it: "I'm going to kill that agent."

De Havilland's mind switched to analysis mode. There wasn't a gun in sight. So the agent couldn't have been defending himself. It was unprovoked. His eyes narrowed. Perhaps he had been wrong to help the agent, believing him to be an innocent caught up in the whole mess

*Not so innocent anymore.* He was starting to think like the pirates around him. There had to be an explanation.

"You going to leave her here then?" de Havilland asked. Sam's head flicked from the corridor Stenson had fled down, to de Havilland, a look of horror on his face. "Of course not." He bent down and scooped her up in his hands.

De Havilland patted Sam's back. "I'll go with you."

\*

Veruz was in the HPA control room when de Havilland arrived. De Havilland gave his young co-pilot a friendly nod, but the kid just stared into space.

"You right?" de Havilland asked. Veruz's eyes focused and he gave de Havilland a weary look. "I personally fired a SPA which destroyed a Federation cruiser. I am officially a mass-murderer."

De Havilland looked the kid over. He wasn't shaking or trembling. His eyes weren't bloodshot; he was holding up quite well. "Self defence, kid. Self defence. You did great. You don't look like you were flapping at all."

Michael gave a small smile. "I've had time to calm down. I've never 'flapped' so much in my life!"

De Havilland grinned. "You wouldn't be human if you weren't scared or worried about killing, Michael. It's how you deal with it that defines what kind of person you are."

"I'm a winner."

"Too right, you are." De Havilland turned to look through the view port to the forward cargo bay where the HPA was mounted. "Come on winner. Let's suit up and get out there. I think she's going to be a right old mess."

## Coldness

[ASRS]

The curiously named vessel, "Johnson's Avatar", sped silently through space. A Quest-class vessel of the ASRS (Alliance Search and Rescue Service), it was headed to a small, cold and nameless asteroid a few dozen AU from the nearest of the five Olgrean stars.

It was only because the trade runs had been so quiet, that the sensitive antenna bristling on the skin of the ship had caught the faint, almost inaudible electronic cry for help. The signal had barely been discernible from the background noise. The signal would never have been picked up unless the asteroid's lazy orbit in the system's outer asteroid belt hadn't come more aligned to the main trade route from the hyperspace arrival point. It wouldn't have been discernible if today hadn't been a state holiday in Olgrea.

The two man crew of Johnson's Avatar, the almost unhealthily thin looking captain, Russell Rodriguez and his stocky First Officer, Mike Brandt, sat in silence as the ship approached the icy asteroid. The asteroid, maybe a couple of hundred metres long and forty wide at the centre resembled a mis-shapen peanut. The weak light from the distant star illuminated a shiny object on the asteroid's horizon, pyramidal in shape. From this pyramid, every few minutes, the distress signal was broadcast..

"Escape pod on asteroid OLG 1542, this is ASRS Johnson's Avatar, do you receive?"

No response. Brandt looked at his captain.

"It could have been here for decades for all we know," he said, pointing at the astrogation console. "This asteroid has a very slow rotation. The escape pod has only recently had line of sight towards the star. It's probably been broadcasting fruitlessly in the wrong direction for years"

Rodriguez nodded. "Well, let's check it out. If it has suss-an features, there's a chance that we've found it in time, well, so long as the crew didn't skimp on their survival systems".

Rodriguez had seen many a dead escape pod in his line of work. All for the wont of a few thousand credits in suss-an system maintenance. The suspended animation system that was a standard add-on to any escape capsule could keep the crew alive for years - even decades if the escape capsule wasn't subject to strong heating from a star.

Brandt nudged the Quest close to the asteroid, and instructed the ship's computer to grapple the stricken escape pod. It was an easy catch - illuminated on the asteroid's horizon, visual targeting was easy. Gently, the Quest's thrusters lifted the captured pod off the tiny asteroid, the rock's feeble gravity being no match even for the weakest manoeuvring thruster.

The pod was lifted into Quest's rescue bay. Setting the ship on autopilot, the crew went down to take a look.

It sat forlornly in the bright lights of the bay. Brandt rubbed some of the asteroid's dust that had accumulated on the pod's key entry. He shook his head.

"It's been here for at least twenty years." He pressed a few more buttons.

"Suss-an's still operative," replied Rodriguez. "Send a message to the nearest hospital, I think we may have survivors. Two, according to the suss-an status panel"

Brandt left to call the med centre, and turn the ship around. Meanwhile, Rodriguez continued to examine the escape pod for signs of where the crew was from, and where they were going. The computer, and the escape pod seemed to be in very good condition. He connected a comms cable to the computer, and his datapad could now query the pod for vital details.

Rodriguez looked at the datapad and frowned. There was something vaguely familiar about the crew names that appeared on the screen.

DAMON L WINSTON  
HELOISE MCNAMARA

## What do we do with him?

[AJNIB]

The whole thing with Mack Winston was becoming increasingly bothersome.

Not the man himself. He was cooperating openly and willingly. Eagerly, even. It was quite obvious that a life no longer on the run had a strong appeal to him, after such a long stretch of having to fight just to stay alive.

The first problem was Vera Sinclair. She hated every fibre of Mack Winston's existence and was now letting the hatred seriously cloud her judgement. Every AJNIB meeting where the subject of his continued questioning came up, Sinclair would cuss and moan. "Terrorist, sociopath, nasty piece of work" were her keywords. She wouldn't be satisfied until he was rotting in jail. She had even made an ill-advised threat to go public, until she was reminded that such a serious breach of the Official Secrets Act was a lengthy prison term.

A couple of members of the committee privately worried that she'd go public nonetheless. It would be a bombshell that would wreck Alliance-Federation relations. The Federation had labelled Mack Winston a 'terrorist', and had put a huge bounty on his head. If it turned out that the Alliance was secretly holding him...

Sinclair didn't seem satisfied that Mack Winston would have some very heavy restrictions placed on him that would effectively prevent him from being the menace to society he once was.

It had resulted in Shane Mackay, the chair of the AJNIB Sub-Committee on Mosseresque Affairs having to spell it out for her.

"We need him, is the honest answer. Forever. He knows Mosser better than any of our agents, and the Azure Sunset and the HPA are more dangerous than I think you realise", Mackay stated, with some exasperation.

"Mosser is one man. The Feds or Empire will get a grip," Sinclair had replied, dismissively.

"I don't know whether you've noticed, but wherever the Sunset shows up, Imperial and Federation forces engage in battle with each other. We're worried it'll spiral out of control."

In truth, the Alliance wasn't certain whether this was deliberate or not. Perhaps Mosser was trying to incite a war - or perhaps not. Many in the Alliance would say "who cares if the Federation and the Empire start to fight? We're neutral, right?"

Neutral, maybe. But the burgeoning wealth of the Alliance of Independent Systems was strongly dependent on the massively profitable trading links that had built up between the Alliance and Federation. The Federation was running an awesome trade deficit with the Alliance. The re-building of some systems absolutely depended on it - Mack Winston's home system, Phekda, was now almost entirely reliant on military fuel shipments to the Federation. It had turned Phekda from a delinquent anarchy to a moderately tolerable place to live with just about a semblance of law and order. Given a few more decades, and Phekda could rival the riches of Alioth.

A war between the Empire and Federation would be catastrophic. It had to be halted at all costs. Every recent skirmish between the Empire and Federation had some link back to the Azure Sunset. Or Spartacus. The Alliance may have supported the anti-slavery goal of Spartacus, but the Alliance simply couldn't support the methods, as the methods risked war between the Federation and Empire. Alliance defence chiefs privately admitted that the Alliance would have to join in - on the Federation's side - to ensure that the Empire could not do serious damage to the Federation. The Alliance's neutrality wouldn't last past the first day of formal hostilities. Battle with the Empire was not an idea that was relished by anyone.

The other problems with Mack Winston paled in significance to the white-hot hatred of Vera Sinclair and her threats to blow the most valuable intelligence find in Mosseresque affairs that the Alliance had to hand.

Kevin O'Connell hadn't been nearly as co-operative. This wasn't a problem - he didn't know all that much, and was only being questioned as part of a system of checks and balances. However, he seemed to have a very strong attachment to his friend, and really didn't like the idea of never being able to see him again. The committee decided that perhaps they should let Kevin and Mack have one meeting before they were changed beyond recognition so they could at least say goodbye.

And now a further piece of news.

"There's been a development," Frank Prosser had said, as the meeting convened. "The ASRS discovered an escape capsule which leaves us with a moral dilemma."

Shane Mackay sighed. Frank always had this sideways method of introducing any kind of news, good or bad. It really irritated Mackay. He just wished he'd come straight out with it.

"Two days ago, the ASRS picked up the escape capsule containing the suspended bodies of Damon Winston and Heloise Macnamara. Mack Winston's parents. They were thought to have died around twenty years ago."

"What's their condition?" Sinclair asked.

"They are currently in a medically-maintained coma. Suss-an is very hard on the body, and they must be brought around gradually, but the hospital says the prognosis is excellent, and they should be up and walking within a week. Naturally, they are going to want to know about their son"

"Well, they just need to read what's in the press, then. We should just tell them he's dead. It would be for the best," Sinclair replied with a slightly nasty tone.

"Vera, I think they have the right to know the truth and see their son. And I think Mack Winston has the right to see his own mother and father"

"He has no rights, as far as I'm concerned," Sinclair snapped.

"It's not up to you," interjected Jane Jones, the law specialist. She looked like she had an eagle somewhere in her ancestry, and there was something about her which really irritated Vera Sinclair. "We - "

Sinclair interrupted. "Do you have a crush on him, or something? Why - "

"Enough!" Mackay yelled. "Vera, I know you don't like Mack Winston, but you're really pushing your luck. Another outburst and you're looking at a demotion. You're letting the issue get to you. A good intelligence officer does not get " - he drew a deep breath - "obsessed by their mark."

Mackay sighed. It was going to be a long meeting. Again. He felt like burying his face in his hands, but he had to push the meeting along. If only the ASRS could have found the capsule a couple of weeks later, it'd have made life so much easier.

# The oncoming train

[Mack Winston]

It was going to be very simple. I was getting a new identity, a new life... and no need to run any more.

First, there was Kevin O'Connell - who was also going to get a new identity, and a new life. I hadn't expected to ever see him again...

...but as yet another day in my luxury prison cell began, Bob, the interrogator arrived. This time, there were to be no questions. With him was my erstwhile shipmate.

Kevin looked tired and drawn as he was lead into my room. In fact, it looked like he might have spent the last twelve hours sobbing his eyes out - they were red and raw.

"So, I will leave you two to get on with it," explained Bob, "and no funny business."  
"Perish the thought," I replied.

I knew we were being watched. Some may call me a terrorist. Some may call me a criminal. But I wasn't thick (despite what the now deceased Prince Burton-Riddick might have said). It wouldn't be long before I had a new life where I didn't have to run any more.

"I didn't expect to see you again," I said.  
"I just wanted one last request, and that was to say goodbye."

I sat back in the deep comfort of the leather sofa.

"I die tomorrow," he added unexpectedly.  
"What?" I half shouted, in surprise.

This was the Alliance. They weren't supposed to go around killing prisoners. At least I thought it was the Alliance. I suddenly felt cold and tingly.

"But... but..." I started.  
"Not literally," he added, mournfully. "This body lives on. But Kevin O'Connell is dead. Tomorrow, I become someone else. Forever, I shall act out someone else's life. So I die"

I relaxed. "You scared the hell out of me then," I said. "I thought they were going to really kill you."  
"They may as well be," he added darkly. "I like being Kevin O'Connell. But I have to be someone else"

This was all getting rather philosophical.

"But you'll still be you. You'll still have your personality. You'll just look different and have a different ident. You are still you," I said.  
"No. I won't be. I can't be."

I shrugged. "Well, I'm looking forward to being not Mack Winston, to be honest. Given a choice of being Kevin O'Connell rotting in federal prison and being someone else and living in a nice coastal town, I would have thought remaining as Kevin O'Connell would have lost its appeal"

He stared at me with teary eyes again.

I spent the next hour trying to smooth things over, but he was totally fixated in losing his birth-given identity. I couldn't see the big deal, I was looking forward to being somebody else. I'd quite frankly had enough of being me. In the end, I just had to let him cry on my shoulder.

The next day, Bob showed up as usual, this time alone. He arranged his ferret-like features into an awkward smile.

"No questions today," he started.  
"OK," I replied carefully.  
"I have some good news," he said, the careful smile returning. "They are deciding on your release date today, and I don't think it will be that much longer. Once the decision's been made, we'll book you in for your total identity change, and then you will be free to go." He paused. "With the conditions I outlined when you arrived," he added, carefully. "We also may need to ask you further questions later, but we won't have to detain you for that if you prove you can behave"

"You know the reasons for what I've done," I replied, "and I think you know you can trust me."  
"Well that's good."

There was a pause.

"And," he added, "your parents have been found alive"

"What?"

"Your parents. Damon Winston and Heloise McNamara. They are alive."

I sat there shocked. I didn't know what to say.

"What...how... where?" I blabbered. They had been missing for twenty years!

"Their escape capsule was found in Olgrea. Suss-an. They were taken to hospital and re-animated. They are being kept under a medically induced coma until their bodies recover from the effects of the suss-an, but the medics expect them to make a complete recovery, and they should regain consciousness in the next couple of days"

"When can I see them?" I asked.

Bob smiled, thinly.

"Think of it from their point of view. They left their 9 year old son what will seem to them was only a couple of weeks ago. They come back, and that innocent 9 year old child has gone, and instead, their son is an adult. Then they find out that their son didn't just come off the rails, he was never on the rails to begin with."

I thought about this.

"They will want to see me, I'm sure of it. You can't very well just tell them I'm dead."

"Why not? It would probably be for the best".

"No. I must see them. They are going to find out what I've done anyway, just trying to catch up with the last couple of decades of current events. I think they should hear it from me."

"That's very noble of you," Bob said, in a tone of voice that said something completely different. "If that's your wish, we'll see if we can allow it."

He left me to stew in confusion. I was elated at the news that my parents were alive, but horrified that I was going to have to tell them a lot of bad things. Perhaps they wouldn't feel so bad when the Alliance carefully faked my death and my identity was changed...but perhaps they would love the sinner and hate the sin, in which case, changing idents and never seeing them again was going to hurt really badly.

I thought about my parents. I realised with sadness I couldn't really remember what they were like. Sure, I remembered faces in an abstract way, but not what they were really, actually like.

I didn't sleep for the next couple of nights. I was left alone with my own thoughts and a growing feeling of dread...

## Introspection

[Mack Winston]

Emotion is not something that weighs heavy on my life. Emotion can't really be afforded; it gives away too much - it gives away your life in my line of work.

But for weeks, like an ever patient woodpecker... something was tapping away, tap tap tap, until it broke through the wall.

Then came the sleepless nights. Laying in bed, in my luxury prison cell, unable to think what I would tell to my parents. How I could tell them. What I would be able to tell them. How to lie?

Not how to lie. How could they fail to not at least see if there's anything to read about me on their long trip to Alioth? Besides, fooling them would be impossible. They were used spaceship salespeople. They could read a faint nervous expression from orbit. I had long ago acquired a skill to read people - it was necessary for me to stay alive, but used spaceship salespeople made this sort of thing a speciality.

As the day of their arrival approached, I became more and more fearful that after the excitement of finding out that they were still alive, I would immediately lose them. The matter of my identity change had now lost its lustre, too. If they accepted me, for all my sins, how could I do that to them?

I also realised I regretted that I would never see my stunt double turned shipmate, Kevin O'Connell, ever again. He seemed to have advice for these touchy-feely kind of situations, advice I could use. I also realised he had been my only genuine friend in... well, I couldn't remember how long.

I used to so like feeling alone, now it kept me awake. I had never felt loneliness in my life, but now it clawed and wrenched at my mind.

The day of reckoning was tomorrow. My parents' new ship, courtesy of the insurance payout, would be touching down in Edinburgh in just a few hours.

I lay in bed, once again, unable to sleep, in a cold, nervous sweat, assessing my life.

## Battle of Rocky Fields (part 3)

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Lt. Mike Santerre's Asp tumbled, dead in the void after being cut from the port side almost to the centre. Mike opened his eyes and groaned. Mike could feel the bruises from where his body had slammed into the crash webbing and there was something pressuring from behind. *Nothing broken? No...* The pressure was from the seat's back that was bent and almost crushed his shoulder.

"...Jamille? Are you all right?"

Major Jamille Werner, his weapons officer, said nothing.

Mike forced his blurry sight to focus on the sparks that flickered briefly on the dark bridge and tried to take his bearings...

The bridge was a mess, the console beside him was wrecked and Jamille's seat was missing - it had been ripped from its fastenings to the escape pod rail. His internal ear told him the ship was spinning slowly and he became aware of some irregular clanking through his seat and the sole of his boots.

Something hit his chair from behind, and a rectangular shape tumbled lazily around him... the bridge's door. The force of the explosion had blow the door from its rail. The ship's artificial gravity had failed along with the lights.

The Lieutenant unfastened the webbing, turned on the helmet light and the magnetic boots and looked around. "Jamille?", he called again as he glimpsed her chair illuminated by a stream of sparks from the weapons console. A chill of horror crept up his spine as he approached to the drifting chair, fearing the worst. "Ohh, Jamille..." The back of her seat had been broken, probably struck by the door, and her helmet was crushed. He unfastened her webbing, checked her zoot suit's display for life signs - but found none.

Mike went limp.

With trembling arms, he embraced the body that drifted lifelessly from the grasp of the webbing. *She's dead. My Jamille, dead!* The realization of his loss hit him. A knot grew in his throat, tears that he couldn't wipe threatened to well inside the helmet.

Had he any gravity, he'd have collapsed to his knees; as it was he just crouched into a foetal position still holding his companion and lover's body and yielded to the tears, bound to the floor by grief and the boots' electromagnets.

\* \* \*

Finally emerging from the asteroid field, the battle between the Empire and the Spartans had become a grinding stalemate. Two duellists with locked swords, neither force could retreat or advance; the only move possible was to hold ground and clench teeth while both side's strength faded away, hoping that the other would give out soon. Amidst the chaos, Count Darius Montelli had been forced to assume the command of the fleet from the bridge of His Imperial Majesty's *Explorer* class 'Maxwell Lee' as the most senior surviving officer. Pacing on the elevated central stage's thick carpet, the Count had haggard out his usually well trimmed beard, scratching at it either trying to relieve the stress or from a new nervous tic.

After some hothead from the Seeker squadron in chase of the 'Azure Sunset' wen berzerk and started firing at the Federalists, he had to pull his forces sideways - missing the AS' trajectory - lest his forces got crushed between two enemies. Not that it mattered any more; Mosser was still fending off the Federalists and trying to evade them, but already out of his fleet's range. For all intents and purposes, the Imperial mission parameters had already failed. Even if someone managed to destroy the traitor's ship, allowing the Federalist pigs to do an Imperial Lord's job wasn't acceptable an acceptable outcome in any case.

Besides, forced to micromanage a pitched melee, the Count had his hands full just trying to keep the Empire from losing any more face. A defeat of the VII to the slaves in a frontal battle was unthinkable, a disgrace that would mar the Protectorate's name before the Imperial Navy - forever.

Already he was nearly overwhelmed as the comm and tactical officers called his attention to one of too many simultaneous developments. Disregarding protocol, the techs didn't even raise their heads to tell him what was going on, just blurting their reports right out from their side pits.

"My Lord, the left flank is crumbling!"

"My Lord, Gamma squadron has cleared the enemy and is moving to support the centre."

"Good. Roll Beta to the left" Montelli allowed himself to be a little optimistic - Gamma almost didn't made it in time, but now he could reform his lopsided forces.

"My Lord, the 'Lester M'Bawe' is in position and starting her run."

"My Lord, Beta can't disengage. Gamma is on the way."

\* \* \*

Pressed to the defensive, Commodore Rick Garret saw the failing Imperial flank. He considered an attempt to skirt the centre and attack from the side.

Captain Charles O'Shea, in command of the Spartan Lynx class carrier 'Sekhmet', was busy beside him trying to pull the fleet's last remaining flagship a little bit away from the action.

"Sir, the Cougar-X quitted breathing down our necks and is pulling back", called a Tactical Officer with a tone of relief.

"Hugo, stop here. Line up and support the fire zone. You're doing well!" praised O'Shea, putting his hand on the helmsperson's shoulder

"Full stop, lining up", confirmed the Lynx's pilot. "Thanks, Cap."

Moving from the helm to the engineering console and doing his best to boost the crew's morale, the Captain wished again that his ship had been equipped with one of those military grade automated energy management systems that he saw on the 'Shiva', capable of bypassing damaged sections without the crew's intervention and even rerouting every scrape of power excedents to the most needed subsystems. Unfortunately he knew the Brotherhood had to finance too many other activities with its small budget, so there were only three of those expensive and cumbersome systems on the whole fleet. Or rather, one, now that the 'Tyr' was a dead skewered wreck and the 'Shiva' tumbled crippled and unpowered a few hundred kilometers away.

After making his enquiries and observing the new situation for a few seconds, the Captain was addressed by the current fleet commander.

"How long before the shields are good enough for another go?"

"We're just above 5%. Iacob said another four minutes and we'll be almost full..." said the Captain, then sighed. "It's not going well, Rick. I don't think we're going to make it."

"I came up with a plan that might just do the trick," the Commodore pointed at the Imperial left flank the on the main screen. "What do you think of that side over there?"

Following the finger, O'Shea snorted in frustration. "Looks soft enough to bite - it's just a shame that the fleet pulled our teeth, man," the Captain shook his head at his friend.

"You dead yet?" grinned the Commodore.

"We can't scrape enough ships for that, can we?"

"I don't think so... So we'll just do it the *Sunset* way," Garret said nonchalantly.

"What?!" Baffled, the Captain stared at his friend.

Garret chuckled. "I thought it was a smart pun, Charles. I meant that Mosser is giving us all a lesson here."

Slightly annoyed by the Commodore's propensity to crack jokes on the most inconvenient times, O'shea considered the literal content of the pun. The *Sunset way*...

"Rick, you don't mean to throw us into the thick unassisted, do you?"

Waving his hand about the main screen, Garret let out his feelings about the situation. "I mean, let's end this... this *thing!* I can't even call it a battle anymore, it's a blood-soaked slaughterhouse, this is! Besides..." the Commodore, having vented his disgust at the ongoing carnage, raised his eyebrow and smirked, "...I'm certain the Lordies' mums would very much appreciate if we let their kids off early for their flower appreciation contest, eh, old boy?" he finished in a mock aristocratic tones.

O'Shea studied the tactical map on the main screen for a few moments, with techs shouting the latest developments and important comms all around the two Officers. Garret pointed at the key locations while he explained the plan, to which O'Shea made some suggestions and had to agree that it *could* work and that they *might even* survive it.

Even though the way Garret joked about their chances made O'Shea wonder if his boot-camp buddy really thought they could make it alive to the other side of His Majesty's fleet, it was still a better plan than the one they were following right now.

They knew it would be hard to find enough ships for the attack, but it was even harder than the Spartan officers had thought. There was a but little over half a dozen ships in reserve, gunships and two frigates that the Commodore sent to reinforce the squadron facing the Imperial weak side ahead of the Lynx.

Finally, even though they managed to disengage another precious few heavy fighters from the grinder, it was still an underpowered force that made its way to the flank.

\* \* \*

No respite.

Standing on his high position, the Count locked his eyes on the main screen, hardly blinking as he tugged on his beard. Against the teachings of his upbringing, the slaves were showing to be much better pilots in the kind of melee. Still, they weren't exploiting their advantage, detained by his superior application of the Imperial fleet tactics.

"Send the Ram squadron to the centre. Have it force their way through and cut the enemy's flanking from behind... Can Alpha hold?" Throwing the final reserves in, the Count played a dangerous hand, but it seemed to him the enemy were fighting without coordination.

"My Lord, the Alpha squadron has been destroyed by the enemy reinforcements. Our left flank is open"

"My Lord, the Spartan Lynx is advancing through the left."

*Damn! Is this the end? I wonder if...* Montelli stood motionless in thought, watching the icons on the screen advance, the Spartans advancing through his shattered flank. He didn't have many options, but allowing the slaves to dig into his flank was right out.

Coming to a decision, he pointed at the advancing squadron to issue his orders and was embarrassed to find that his hand trembled. "I'm no coward! Just nerves, that's all", he mumbled to himself under his breath and stood at ease with the hands hidden behind him.

Taking a sigh-like deep breath lest his voice betrayed him too, he tried again. "Tell Beta to cover the left the best they can until Gamma can assist, then move off all the way. The Rams are to hurry and break out as soon as they pass the screen; when they are in position, they're to launch an attack simultaneously with Beta! Get them isolated in a trap."

'Screen' was too strong a word to describe the front line, as fighters, frigates and destroyers from both sides mixed in a mad carnival of destruction. After all he had seen on this day he had no more illusions about neither the skill of the Spartans or their determination, but that only meant that he had to forget his ingrained bias. After all, underestimating them was what had killed all of his superiors and left him in command...

Yet, he was certain that he had appraised the situation correctly. Good as they were individually and in small-scale tactics, they were outweighed by their lack of organization.

*A rabble*, he thought, but then reminded himself of the battle's opening moves, the destruction of the 'Chang Davos', his Duke being chased and rammed by the Spartan flagship... Duly chastised, he corrected the previous thought to *a dangerous rabble. A rabble that'll shred us to pieces if I don't take care!*

\* \* \*

"Whattya mean 'almost done'?! We're moving out NOW, so get your hairy butt back in here or I'll leave you floating!" Viscountess Rebecca 'Bec' Chong shouted at her engineer over the comm, spurring him on.

Master Watson gave the torque wrench a final twist and closed the scorched outer fore access hatch panel to the starboard nacelle, hoping the other coupling on the new Slazinger inducer wouldn't come out with the engine's vibrations. If it did, it'd grind the nacelle to slag - that was certain to land him and his entire family on a slave mine to compensate for the cost of the Courier. Providing that he survives the explosion, that is...

The Master had just closed the airlock's outer door when the prime mover fired, the gees tossing him violently. Almost cursing, he bit his lip instead... his comm was on and he didn't want to think of what the Viscountess would do to him if he was overheard dubbing her 'psycho witch from hell'.

Hurrying back to his station, he fastened the crash web, looked forward and sighed in resignation.

\*CLONK\*, the impact echoed inside his helmet.

Lowering the spud gun, the Viscountess was scowling from inside her zoot suit. "Took your time, didn't you?"

"Yes, my Lady." Silence is golden, and she was so stressed that he risked another tubercle if he spoke too much.

"Now be a dear and wipe that pellet off your faceplate, it's... distracting."

Levelling the speed at 1500Km/h, the computers of the surviving seven Couriers from the original dozen analysed the remaining incoming asteroids' trajectories and plotted an ideal course through the combat zone.

Bec set the comm. to 'squadron' and asked "what did the snail that got mugged by a gang of turtles said to the police?"

A deafening silence boomed on the speakers.

"Gee, it was so fast!" she answered herself, a bit miffed by the tough audience. "Now, let's see if you people can hit anything crawling at this speed! Who misses pays for the drinks when this is over, and if someone gets two of them I pay the next round." That got some approving comments even despite the fatigue from the prolonged stress of this mad battle. "Now, let's juice up and plunge back in." Bec pressed the 'juice' dispenser on her neck, felt the sting and the swooning of the pilot performance enhancer pharmaceuticals kicking in on her system - for the fifth time already, but with all that was going on there was no helping it - and when it settled, she scanned the ships ahead to choose her target.

The battlefield's shape had changed several times already but the senseless slaughter's magnitude remained constant throughout.

First, the elongated mad dash when Mosser was spotted, when the Spartans ate up the entire rear and destroyed several of the slower capital ships left unprotected. The Fleet reformed to protect the ships chasing the 'Azure Sunset', forcing the Slaves to fight their way through (at high cost) in order to catch up with the 'Vesuvius' and ram it before melting away amongst the asteroids.

As vector mechanics would predict, collisions occur when two trajectories intercept a third on the same space-time. In this case, both the Imperial and the Federal fleets had tried to cut the AS where it broke off the asteroid's edge - and crashed. Some moron saw the feds closing in on what they assumed to be an attack run (only dictated by both side's inertia and blockheadedness), an assumption the equally moronic Federal forces did nothing to dispel... Unsurprisingly, the result was yet more vacuum-dried meat.

Now the fray between the superpowers died down as fleets parted again, not without leaving the Imperial left flank worn thin for the enemy to exploit.

An enemy which was approaching quickly.

The Couriers plunged into the chaos of swirling ships and opened fire one at a time, shrugging off the occasional red or orange beam that made contact. A Spartan Cobra I exploded, an Osprey, Bec got herself a Constrictor, beside her an Eagle was cut in two and spun off into the void... in an instant the shields on the Viscountess' VII#A07S18 dropped and one of the Couriers emerged from a river of blue light as a fireball.

"BREAK, BREAK! Who in His Majesty's name is shooting at us?" she screamed while throwing the ship into a corkscrewing 'tonneau'. The squadron split in evasive manoeuvres as a wide cyan beam and a couple of thinner, yellow ones sought the sleek white shapes.

The Spartan Boa's turret managed to lick another Courier before they were out of range. "Ram squadron, Ram 1. Report," she called her squadron. That pass had been really subpar and she was flushed with rage.

"Ram 2 6-10"

"Ram 4 8-10"

A pregnant pause. Five had also been transferred to the past Emperors' navy. That was totally FUBAR, to lose Sven like that; he was as good as they come...

"Ram 8 7-10", Veronica picked off in a choked voice. Bec wasn't the only one to like Sven, nor who liked him the most; Baroness Watavsky had been eyeing him for marriage, poor girl!

"Ram 9 5-10"

"Ram 11 8-10"

"Proceed to target" she said curtly, and pushed the controls to turn the ship towards the shattered Imperial left flank. Now they were only six from the original dozen...

Finally, the Viscountess turned the ship's helm over to the computer and addressed her Weapons Officer with a mellow expression. "If it was Red, he'd never fail to notice that the Boa was in range, you APESHIT-FUCKING MORON!!! DON'T YOU KNOW YOUR FUCKING DUTIES??? ME DRIVE, YOU FUCKING LOOK OUT!!! IS THAT SO FUCKING HARD???"

"My Lady, I-"

"IT FUCKING SPEAKS?!?" She pointed the spud gun at the man sitting beside her. "Sir Alexander, DUCK!"

As if he could! Constrained by the crash webbing, the WO was hit square on the faceplate.

A lot of cursing and some spudding later, the Knight was relieved to get near the firing range of a ship some fifty times bigger and hugely better armed than their own, and her escorts.

Coming in hard from the rear, Beta squadron and the 'Lester M'Bawe' formed a defensive screen to catch the Spartans when they were dumping speed before turning to attack the Imperial fleet; manoeuvring from the other side, the Rams' arrived at an excellent position to destroy the enemy in a crossfire.

"Right, you guys, let's take out the escorts first. Try to draw them away from the carrier's range, break left and end the run twenty kilometres from the primary", Bec chirped over the comm.

The Ram squadron attacked for the nth time - nobody was counting any more. "And do it right this time if you don't want even more crap on the final briefing than what we've got already coming!"

The Rams zoomed closer to the Spartan capital ship unchallenged. Trying to be as invisible as he could sitting beside the Viscountess, Sir Alexander monitored the enemy movements and called the range. "Forty-five thousand. My Lady, the escorts just engaged Beta - they left the door open for us."

"Is that so?" Bec smiled within as she pressed the 'Transmit'. "Change of plans, let's crash this party! Formation 'C', if someone still got any enemies left, please fire away."

The six Couriers fell into a pyramid formation and began swirling in evasive manoeuvres just as as the Lynx's point defence guns opened fire. Orange and yellow beams sought the Rams, even licked them a few times before the attackers let go their own destructive photon torrents. A couple of missiles trailed off into the large shape, exploding a few meters away from the hull with nothing but a coloured flash to show that they hit.

"Hard muther, ain't you?!" Bec mumbled as her Courier's guns overheated and switched to pulse mode. Their pass hadn't even dented the carrier's shields.

The same didn't apply to the Ram squadron. After several hits, Ram 2 lost a nacelle to a 20MWER in the middle of a particularly tight turn and went away tumbling; another had a hull breach followed by an explosion and started trailing smoke.

"Ram Leader, Ram 9 pulling out," reported the pilot. Bec was aware that her own frigate wouldn't take much more punishment either.

"Where's Beta?" she asked while flipping into another attack run.

"They were held by the escorts but we're arriving at their position in thirty seconds, my Lady."

"Another thirty!?" She pushed the throttle to the bottom and the ship lurched forth "Bugger them all! 'Sync attack' my eye!"

The WO heard but kept his peace. He wasn't about to get spuded again for reminding the Viscountess that it had been herself that ordered them to attack prematurely...

\* \* \*

Even more than the next pilot, Vilan was beyond exhaustion.

But he still fought on.

Master Darren Vilan's mind had pretty much shut down, operating on automatic levels without registering what happened around him anymore. Stress, anxiety, anger, fear, aggression... stark terror... All these emotions took their turns at gnawing on his spirit again and again until they drove him to the point of numbness. Fuelled and driven by nothing but the 'juice', sheer instinct and ingrained training told him what to do.

He no longer cared that his Osprey would be scrapped *even if* he managed to survive the day. The sticky underwear was as unimportant as what he had eaten for breakfast last Tuesday.

The Master didn't even know to what squadron he was assigned any more; he just followed the Imperial ships around and shot at the enemy.

As he still fought on.

A green-gray Spartan Courier flew across his HUD. He followed it, scoring a few ineffective shots with his pulse laser. A red beam shone beside him and he pulled the controls out of a conditioned reflex, oblivious that his port and bottom thrusters were dead.

*Someone* chased the attacker away.

An enemy carrier surrounded by a few white Couriers came his way, exchanging shots with an Explorer. Vilain took no notice.

*Someone* commed *something* that he couldn't be bothered to try to decipher.

The Master didn't recall squeezing the trigger, but the Adder he was chasing exploded anyhow.

He turned at the closest enemy - the Spartan Lynx - and shot at the turrets as his drill instructor had taught him. His fatigued brain registered an explosion, but he felt neither joy nor other emotions.

*Someone* made a report about *something* - or maybe it had been a battle order, he didn't know.

Some battle scarred Couriers swished around him strafing the carrier from stern to bow, causing a flight deck appendage to break off and drift away.

His vacant eyes, staring at the infinity, cared only that they weren't shooting at *him*.

Not really a pilot anymore, Vilain felt like a combat drone.

And this was the condition Master Darren Vilan was in, still fighting on.

\* \* \*

Fortunately the vacuum extinguished the fires.

The gash had severed important systems, disabling them and causing some of the shield generators to overload and explode; the subsequent fireball spread through the main corridor from bow to stern. That was what blew the door from its rail.

And killed Jamille.

Lt. Mike Santerre had managed to reroute power to some systems and took the piloting station to make his way back to the fray. He transferred the comm. and sensor controls to his console, checked again what systems were still functioning and sighed. *Jamille!*

She was resting on the cabin, tied to her bunk. How often had they shared that bunk, he reminisced as he pointed the ship to the ongoing carnage and pushed the throttle.

Whatever he was about to do, Mike knew that he was utterly alone.

A bright flash lighted the asteroid field for a moment and even at over 500Km away, the Brotherhood's last Lynx carrier's explosion shone like a nova in the constellation that was the battlefield. *Sic Transit Gloria Mundis*, he recalled the ancient cliché; how true it was... Swallowing his tears, he couldn't help to hate Adm. Smith's folly of attacking the Imperial navy like this.

And what for? Because the Spartacus wanted Mosser and his ship? *Damn them both to hell! We didn't get to vote for this nonsense!*

Still, his semi-crippled Asp ploughed on. Not for Smith or the Spartacus, not for the high ideal of *Freedom* that the Brotherhood preached about, no longer to reform the Empire, nor to take vengeance - not even for himself anymore. No, he felt dead and void inside.

He went on for his surviving Brethren and Sisters that were still fighting.

Twenty minutes later, while he was decelerating the flipped ship to close the final kilometres, a strange message came in. "All units pull back, energy bomb in 45 seconds." Its authentication code overrode all other battle orders, highest priority...

*How odd!* Mike twisted a control to increase the scanner's range until the sender was visible, locked on it and ran an analysis.

*IL-351 'Tenchu'*

*Asp MkII*

*Hull: 37%*

*Shields: 100%*

*7 military units*

*Radar mapper*

*Energy bomb*

Mike was astounded. *'Tenchu'? I know that ship... The Spartacus!?!'*

Further orders poured in. He watched the scanner where the Spartan clubs with green rings retreating, the Imperial ones with red rings pursuing and the Spartacus with the 'neutral' blue (*Federalist IFF!?! What the heck?!*) ring - no, he changed to green - diving into an attack run right into the Imperial ranks...

\* \* \*

"My Lord, Count Uralov reports that the 'Lester M'Bawe' is almost back on station."

"My Lord, a lone Federalist Asp is approaching our left flank in an attack vector", called the tactical officer, but corrected himself right after. "My Lord, the Asp's IFF changed to Spartan."

*Treachery? Or...* "Where did he come from?" Count Montelli asked. Could it be that the Federalist dogs were trying to help the slaves? Or even allied with them?

The TO rewound the action. "My Lord, It came from the 'Azure Sunset' and destroyed a Federalist fighter before reaching for us."

So this was how the slaves knew where the traitor was! *They had a spy on his ship all along!* If so...

For the first time since this whole debacle started, Montelli smiled. Relaxing on the softness of his Exiocean bear fur-lined command chair, he threw caution to the solar winds. "I want that ship! No matter what happens, we have to get it!"

This single bit of good luck could rescue the Protectorate's name from all the day's setbacks! There was a very good chance that the Spartan spy had the engineering prints for the HPA...

\* \* \*

On the left flank the Ram squadron towed the heavily damaged 'Lester M'Bawe' Explorer – menial hard labour - to a better defensive position.

"You're supposed to be friggin' smart, so tell me: can our four crippled ships still be called a squadron?"

Viscountess Rebecca Chong asked her engineer pleasantly, lightly tossing the spud gun from hand to hand.

Master Jack Wilson exchanged worried looks with the WO. The Viscountess was supposed to be well connected, old blue blood family and all, but she often talked like a commoner... Then again, a noble's "friendliness" could end up (and often did) bringing agony.

Collecting his bravery, he finally managed to come out with a weak "well, not really..."

"Of course not. Then again, I'm supposed to be a squadron leader... but how to call a measly flight a squadron?"

"Hummm... , my Lady, Beta are down to six now, so we're still...", he started but was cut off by the comm.

Count Montelli's orders were as simple as they were impossible: they just had to get an interloping wreck of an Asp and capture the pilot. Alive. With their 20MWers.

*Ha!*, she snorted derisively. Calling the crews under her command, she interpreted the orders for their convenience

"Right, folks, His Lordship seems to want to have a chat with that chap coming to pay his respects, so we're to browbeat the suicidal maniac into submission. Nicely, now, eh?"

Manoeuvring under supervision of Count Fester Uralov from the 'Lester M'Bawe', the Rams took her into the same general vector as the rest of the fleet before detaching their tow cables. While the Couriers separated from the Explorer, five of the six fighters from the Beta squadron around them broke off in formation, then the last one followed.

Coming in way too fast, the Asp was trying to go through their sector, towards the Spartan lines... Bec spurred her command to move but knew they'd be too late to intercept the pass.

Sir Alexander observed on the scanner the ships manoeuvring. "Beta's in position to get that Asp, she can't get through in the condition she is."

"I'm not so certain... That guy is coming in a bit too much to the left to be joining the Spartans..." The Viscountess checked the tactical data on the Asp. "Oh, SHIT!!! That guy's got a bloody tabber up his sleeve", said the commander in a worried tone. "Beta, break out, BREAK OUT, I say! The goddam bastard's got a bloody energy bomb!"

Belying her, the Asp weaved avoiding the enemy fire and started picking off Beta squadron on the pass with his main gun. Unsatisfied with the two he got, the pilot flipped still accelerating with the retros at full burn and destroyed another fighter, then a fourth, flying backwards toward the Imperial centre and apparently unconcerned with the increasing amount of lasers seeking him.

"Bloody hell! Who does HE think he is, a friggin' Elite? Rams, juice up and let's cut his retreat." The Asp plunged into the centre of the melee losing the chance to trigger the bomb.

Trusting the fully recharged shields, the Rams' commander led back into the combat zone in a wider arc than their quarry with the intention of forcing it to their rear where the Count could surround it with the remaining large ships.

While he wasn't stopped, the Asp pilot was having his fun.

Surrounded by the Imperial forces, he was making his way through the field from left to the right, putting up quite a show as he went. Bec couldn't help being impressed by the way the Spartan picked his targets and destroyed them with short, accurate bursts while avoiding being on the receiving end.

With a shudder, She recalled her previous 'worst day in my life' that had also involved a reversed slalom mad dash on an overcrowded bit of space and Norman Mosser playing with the HPA... *but this guy's not only doing it with hostiles on the way, he's wiping the floor with them!*

On the other hand, the enemy was pretty much ignoring her squadron... "My Lady, the Spartans have been routed! We won!" Sir Alexander gleefully rejoiced at what his instruments showed.

"Oh?" Bec saw that was right, they were running aw... "OH, SHIT!!!" She pressed the comm. and positively screamed at it "All ships, energy weapon imminent! Shut..."

Too late. The whole Imperial vanguard became a fireworks show.

\* \* \*

He had issued orders for a regrouping and was opening the way for a final assault. His Spartans weren't ready and he couldn't let the Imps pursuit or reform, so he'd have to hold them himself...

Having wiped out the Imperial left, he turned to the centre to prevent an attack on his retreating forces. A spin, a quick burst from the laser, acceleration, follow the Osprey-X, a burst, next target, destroyed, evasion, cut down another - Maegil's attack could be technically separated into elementary manoeuvres by an experienced pilot, but to the casual observer it would appear as a fluid random motion as he distributed death and destruction around him.

His eyes jumped around on their orbits from the main screen, to the holograms still functioning on the bridge, to the scanner, tracking, analysing and evaluating targets and threats while his hands moved autonomously on the controls.

Still, as he fought, he felt no hate, no aggression. Hate is something personal, useful in revenge or to clear an insult. A man is but a cog in the mechanics of a true battle.

The sound of the overstressed hull's twisting metal vibrated through the chair and the controls, but Maegil ignored it the same way he disregarded the pain of wounds during combat. Pain is an important warning, but must be kept in perspective, Maekawa *sensei* had taught him.

A warrior seeks life in death, and becomes one with the battle until he is one with the universe, with his heart in *mu*, oblivious to himself.

Finally the last friendly left the blast radius. Maegil triggered the energy bomb and, amidst the blossoming fighters, tried to bank toward the Spartan lines, but found that he had miscalculated.

He expected the Imps to be predictable as they usually were and reform their lines for the next clash; instead they forgot all about strategy and composure and were shamelessly ganging up on the 'Tenchu', insistently hailing him and ordering him to power down and surrender.

A youth of suffering and a lifetime of practice on all kinds of combat had given Maegil an uncanny battle sense. This battle sense told him that he had lost the window of opportunity to pull out in time and now it was time to die. From the moment he engaged the enemy, a gauntlet of four Couriers had been driving him and forcing him ever further apart from the Spartan fleet while the remaining fighters were all over his ship. And now, two Cougar-X cruisers were coming his way...

...but that didn't matter at all! If it must be, this was how he had always wanted to go.

"It smells of victory;  
Rest, my tired warrior's bones  
Over a mountain of bodies."

Declaiming his departing *haiku*, Maegil added another enemy to his burial mound and twisted the ship to avoid an attack.

He would almost certainly die in a few moments, but that didn't mean he was just going to cross his arms and let them get him *easily*. He kept fighting even as his ship was hit, hit again and yet another time until the explosion stopped him from fighting any more.

## Imperial Fleet Wiped Out By Slaves - **Federal Times**

The Federal Military Joint Chiefs have released footage of a catastrophic defeat of the Imperial Navy at the hands of the Spartacus Brotherhood and Norman Mosser's band of pirates in an undisclosed system.

Analysis of the 17 minutes long highlights shows that not only are the Spartans a power to be reckoned with, but apparently the infamous Norman Mosser has, if not joined their ranks, struck some sort of understanding.

From the Imperial fleet's actions, it is clear their standards have fallen from the time they were a match for us. Cowardice amongst their higher echelons is now even more rampant than usual.

Upon the first contact, the Imperial fleet routed nearly en masse, leaving a diminutive sacrificial rear guard to protect their escape. Their flagship used its fleet as cover as it tried to flee the battle.

This shameless behaviour was halted when a Spartan capital ship rammed the Imperial flagship, slowing it long enough to allow Mosser's battle damaged 'Azure Sunset' to cut its escape route and destroy it with a stolen Federal experimental plasma accelerator in a single shot.

Military sources stated that the weapon was taken before the project came to a conclusion, and the model now in production has even more output than the stolen prototype. Being so, we are confident that the Duvalian rebellion will be quickly ended should they break the armistice with the Federation again.

## Federalist Criminal Technology Backfires – **Imperial Herald**

Images collected by an unmanned probe revealed that the Federal Military allowed the terrorist Norman Mosser to escape amidst their fingers in yet another display of incompetence and poor command.

After having been surrounded by the Federalist fleet, the 'Azure Sunset' broke out of the encirclement leaving a trail of burning debris. In a final demonstration that even a petty terrorist can beat the Federation stooges, the Imperial-born Norman Mosser duelled with and defeated the mass-murder weapon equipped Federalist flagship with their own stolen Huge Plasma Accelerator.

The High Command spokesperson also conveyed concerns that the Federation might have lost another piece of criminal equipment to Mosser. After beating the federalist commander, the terrorist calmly left the battlefield using a banned jump drive and leaving a trail of distorted time-space that wiped out the remains of the Federal fleet on its wake. Investigations are under way and the Imperial Court will denounce the Federalist criminals for their shameless treaty violations once enough evidence is collected.

## This Ought To Be Juicy – **Random Intergalactic Gossip**

Once again the Feds and Imps are throwing accusations at each other. But, alas, this time they came up with NEW accusations! They both claim the other has lost an entire fleet, backing their claims with video excerpts. Still, since no matter how much we tried, we couldn't make two plus two to equal three, we dug a little deeper and found a few amusing coincidences.

They would make it appear that the two incidents were totally unrelated, as in the Imp video only show Feds being creamed and vice-versa, but we noticed that both feature the 'Azure Sunset', the same starfield and an unusually thick asteroid field. With these leads it would be reasonably easy to find the system(s?), so we asked the astronomers. Bingo! The starfield corresponds to Essegreack (-6,4), who also happens to feature a dense asteroid field. Our reporters went there and managed to scan the system before being forced to leave by a squadron of unmarked ships.

Still, our calculations were right.  $2+2=4$  and we found evidence of the destruction of well over 250 ships in one single massive battle. The questions that remain are: whose heads are rolling, and who were those guys that slammed the door on our face?

As you can imagine, we're not leaving it like this.