

TIDES OF WAR

THE HPA SAGA PART 3

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 2

by
The Elite BBS Collective

October 2007 – June 2008

Based on Frontier: First Encounters by Frontier Developments

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Short Journey

[Mack Winston]

It should have been a joyous day, a reunion.

I was dreading it. I hadn't slept right for weeks – the announcement that my parents had been recovered alive and well from a suss-an pod should have been a joyous event, but instead it filled me with dread.

First, there'd be the shock of the meeting. My parents, in their personal timeline, left their innocent nine year old boy happily playing with a toy tractor maybe three weeks ago. Suddenly he's no longer an innocent nine year old but a very, very guilty adult.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't look all that well. Instead of the olive colour of a healthy Phekdan, I was pale and slightly yellow from weeks (maybe months) of my incarceration. Was it me or was that a grey hair nestling amongst the inky blackness of the rest of it? The tiredness just added to my general look of malaise. My captors had been kind enough to at least let me get some new clothes. I tried to offset the malaise with something smart but casual – metrosexual but not too much so, much like the young professional working in the Alliance's capital might wear for an evening out. Fashionable jeans, hand made by Foehn's of New Rosssyth. A plain, short sleeved shirt. Nice shoes. Socks without holes. The Alliance taxpayer didn't seem to mind spending money on their Mosser informants.

With the interrogations having ceased some weeks ago, I had also been left alone to my thoughts, and to my horror, my conscience had tapped on the door, too. Sleepless nights thinking about how Maria might have been alive had I chosen a different path. How Kevin O'Connell might have still been enjoying life in New San Francisco. How perhaps even Maegil and Emu may have been hurt by my abrupt departure. Of the people who were made homeless from my Mosser-crushing booby-trap; the only thing I could balance that against was that I had probably saved Sam Darkes' life in the process.

I saw Bob the interrogator approach me, reflected in the mirror.

"It's time to go now," he said.

I turned, and followed him through the exit of my luxury prison cell behind. The door opened up into a utilitarian corridor, with a polished checker patterned floor. It smelled vaguely of oil. Alioth's bright light streamed in through a line of floor-to-ceiling windows on the left hand side, which revealed a winter wonderland. I wondered if my choice of a short sleeved shirt was a good idea. Bob seemed to be reading my thoughts.

"Don't worry, it's summer in Edinburgh, you'll be fine. Thirty two Celsius. It'll feel just like home"

I grunted in reply.

"We are putting you up in a nice apartment right in the city centre, so you've got a place to take your folks back to in the evening, if you like. But don't get too comfortable, you're to report back in three days time for identity reassignment"

Identity reassignment. I had almost forgot. On top of having to tell my parents that I was no longer an innocent little boy but a "wanted terrorist", I had to tell them that all they get is three days and I disappear forever. I groaned inwardly.

"What if I don't want it?"

"I'm sorry, you have no choice. If you are discovered as Mack Winston wandering around freely in the Alliance, it will seriously sour relations with the Federation as it'll be obvious we have broken the crime treaty. We should have handed you over straight to the Feds, given the seriousness of your crimes. We can't take that risk, no matter how valuable you've been to us."

"Oh sweet mother of the worlds, what do I tell them?"

"You've got three days to think of something. Perhaps you ought to follow your conscience," Bob replied.

"I don't have one," I muttered.

Bob smiled ironically. I could see little laughter lines at the corners of his eyes, betraying his age.

"Ah, but you do have a conscience, Tyler Macklen Winston," he said, cruelly, "and boy has it been torturing you for these past few weeks." He chuckled mirthlessly, and shook his head in mock sadness. "How many hours of sleep did you get last week?"

I grunted an indistinct answer, and trailed after him. At the end of the corridor, we entered a large atrium, every bit as functional as the corridor. Plumbing lined the ceiling, and bare lumipanel were suspended from the high ceiling.

A woman was standing with her back to us, staring out the window at the snow. Her baggy flight suit disguised any kind of figure that she may have had.

She turned around.

With the dread, I saw it was Vera Sinclair. I wondered if this was a punishment, and if so, for whom.

"This is Vera Sinclair," Bob started, "she will -"

"Yeah, we've met," I said without enthusiasm.

Bob continued, with a slight hint of annoyance. "She will take you to Edinburgh, and she will also be keeping an eye out for you. It's been nice knowing you. I do hope we never need meet again." He paused. "And it's a damned shame about Maria. A real, damned shame."

Sinclair just sighed. "Come on," she snapped.

I followed. We made our way down another bare-walled corridor that ran along the outside of the building. I could now see the building was about half way up a mountain, right on the edge of a plateau. The wall to ceiling windows offered a view over a spectacular and cold valley, the sides of which plunged two thousand meters to a distant river. Alioth's light shone blindingly off the snow-covered valley sides. Above, the sky deepened almost to indigo. Lethal looking icicles hung off every roof overhang of the building from the last time the weather was warm enough to melt a little snow off the roof.

Doors ahead of us opened up onto the outdoor landing pad, and I stepped out, thoroughly improperly dressed for the frigid air. Fortunately, there was no wind – and it was only a few meters to the interplanetary shuttle.

"Make yourself useful," Sinclair said, her voice as brittle as the icicles, "and scrape the snow off the windscreen". She threw an ice scraper at me.

"Can't you use..."

"No, that will force me to spend another five minutes in your company," she said with venom.

I shrugged, and started to brush the dry snow off the front of the shuttle, already beginning to shiver uncontrollably. Sinclair was already in the shuttle, getting the little craft ready for departure. Fortunately, it only took a minute to brush the loose snow away. I wondered how I was going to pass the next half hour with this awful woman. But I decided, on the whole, I would rather spend it in the warmth of the shuttle.

We lifted off into the majesty of the valley. A little more snow slid off the roof of the shuttle, leaving a wet trail on the warming windscreen as it slid down and off the nose. Sinclair rotated the craft as we hovered just off the pad, then lifted off, pointing the little craft's nose skywards.

I waited what seemed like a respectable period of time.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked.

Sinclair didn't reply. Instead, I could feel a palpable atmosphere of astonishment. I glanced over at her, and took in her appearance for the first time. She was quite dark, and still had a look of youth about her. Her mousy hair was severely tied back, seeming to slightly stretch her facial features. I wondered if it was uncomfortable. Her flight overalls masked any clue to what her figure might be like.

"You should never get emotionally involved with your mark," I remarked, looking out the side window at the receding landscape. I heard a most unladylike snort from the pilot's seat.

"Emotionally involved? With you? Please," she replied, acidly.

"Hate is an emotion."

The cabin lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, save the muffled roar of the airflow rushing past the shuttle and the dull rumble of the prime mover.

"Trust me. Emotional involvement with your mark will result in making serious misjudgements."

She rounded on me. "Oh yes," she said with a false mirth, "you wipe out all emotion before you kill another person. You don't stop to consider for a moment what it might do to those who might be loved by that person. You don't stop to think there is someone who is torn up, like you were torn up over Maria Hesketh-Duval."

"Do you?" I asked pointedly.

"What?"

"When you kill someone for the Alliance, do you think about it?"

She suddenly looked at me. "I am not at liberty to discuss my work."

“But let's suppose, hypothetically, you do kill for the Alliance. Mafia bosses have spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends, children and parents. You think your killing is sanctioned and pure, but it still punishes the family. Do you think about it?”

“I am not at liberty to discuss my work!” she shouted.

I shrugged. “You probably only hate me because deep down, you find my boyish looks attractive,” I said, mischievously. If she hated me so much, I thought I may as well have some fun with it.

The brief, but unmistakable uncomfortable silence before she declared, “You talk too much” made me realise with horror that my joking remark might have had the unfortunate kernel of truth. The horrifying thought of bunny-boiling obsession briefly darted across my consciousness. I tried to shoo away that uncomfortable thought, and looked out of the window again.

We were reaching sub-orbital altitudes, readying for the ballistic trajectory that would take us more or less all the way to Edinburgh. I always loved this part of a short range trip – the planet, shining brightly below, the atmosphere shimmering, curving away into the distance, and the inky blackness above. I could already feel the prime mover shutting down. The wind roar had gradually disappeared as we climbed higher, and now the shuttle was silent, apart from the 400 hertz hum of inverters.

“I always love this view,” I remarked, idly, still feeling the frostiness beating at me from the pilot's seat.

“My first ship,” I said with a slight smile, “an ancient Cobra Mark Three, had an astrodome right in the top that the previous owner had fitted. I hated combat, so in the more dangerous systems, when trading, I'd go onto silent running. I'd let my ship just drift in space. I would go up to the astrodome. Nothing beats looking at the stars with nothing but your eyes. Synthetic ship's vision's great, but sometimes you just have to look at it unaided. I would shut absolutely everything down, even the life support – there'd be several hours' air, and the temperature would stay comfortable for at least two of them. Then I would float, weightless in the astrodome, and just look at the stars until I got either too hot or too cold and had to turn the power back on. I never got tired of doing it. I've been meaning to have an astrodome fitted to one of my later ships, but I don't seem to keep ships for very long any more.”

I glanced outside again - we were now at the zenith of our trajectory.

“I'd also do this too – ballistic suborbital travel if I just needed to get from one spaceport to another. Saved fuel, and I was poor. One day I got this great idea that once I was clear of the atmosphere, I would turn everything off, and go to the astrodome. So I did. I went up there, and using the RCS, I gently tipped the ship so the nose was pointing at the ground with the astrodome facing forwards. I floated inside. It was the most amazing feeling – totally silent – it was like I was flying by my own power. I was approaching the terminator, heading into daytime. It was majestic, floating there – hurtling over the distant landscape below as the sun burst over the planet's horizon. Being seventeen and feeling indestructible, I just stayed there, marvelling at it – floating there, not being able to see any of the ship's structure as I looked ahead. I was flying! You can probably guess what happened next... the ship had long gone past the zenith, and we were headed back into the atmosphere. I quickly came to my senses as the astrodome started getting very hot, very very quickly. I don't think I've ever moved as quick since, grabbing the controls and trying to get everything powered up, and the nose pointing forwards before I burned up!”

Sinclair said nothing. Perhaps she was wishing I had burned up, it would certainly have saved her a lot of trouble. I wondered if she was being punished by her superiors, and having to take me to Edinburgh was her punishment.

We were now heading back down. The wind noise was already starting again, as an almost inaudible thin scream. I shivered slightly inside.

In about twenty minutes, I would meet my parents. Years for me, weeks for them.

A Deceitful Action, Part 1

[Sam Kemper]

A dirty brown sphere stained the starry beauty of space ahead. Lopez's Hole, third rock from the star Holiacan. Sam stared at the view out the front of the old Transporter. He imagined the filth and decay they would find on the planet's space station. It had felt like forever since he had been to a nice clean locale without worrying about the authorities and things going wrong. It wouldn't be forever, he reminded himself. Not too long in fact. He heard Norman's footsteps behind him.

"What do you think?" his boss and old friend said.

Sam turned from his daydream. Norman's black hair was gone, replaced by a mane of white blond hair done in a ponytail. His heavy eyebrows were shaved back to narrow slits. His nose was wider and longer than usual.

He looked nothing like Norman Mosser; more a late 30's hippie executive. The kind of person who could be young enough and stupid enough to buy an ex-military LRC for a mining company. "You're voice is still the same."

Norman rubbed his throat. "How about now?" The pitch of his voice increased. He sounded younger alright. The illusion was complete.

"Looking good, TK Dover," Sam said, walking around Mosser, poking the fake skin on his face and neck. The machine Frantic had supplied had done a good job. It was as close as one could get to surgery without making permanent changes.

Mosser clapped him on the back. "Excellent. Your turn then, Mr. . ."

"The names Bond. James Bond." Sam couldn't contain the laughter. "I've always wanted to say that."

"Yes, you're quite the spy," agreed Norman.

Sam snorted, cheeks reddening. He left the bridge for the medical bay.

The central medical bed was gone, replaced with an enclosure shaped for a man to just fit inside. He stripped off and stepped in. The box closed around him.

The machine whirred to life. His skin tingled as the machine stretched new epidermis layers across his body. Pain flashed in his hair nerves.

He stepped out half an hour later feeling decidedly second hand. He slipped on his clothes and trudged to a mirror.

If he squinted hard enough, he thought he looked like Norman Mosser with dyed hair. It was creepy. The change was purposefully subtle enough to make him look like Mosser in a weak disguise. He smiled at himself and swung his hands out, forefinger the barrel of pretend handguns. "I'm Norman Mosser. I'm going to blow your arse up."

Satisfied, he holstered his hands and returned to the bridge. Norman was at the pilot station. The ship was flipped about to use the primary engine for the slowdown burn. It was a typical Norman thing to do: work that extra bit hard when there was a perfectly good docking computer available. He shrugged. That was what made him, him. That habit was burned into his DNA; even his un-programmed clones had the same desire.

"So what is so special about this planet?" Sam asked. Sometimes, it got annoying that Norman didn't share his plans. Another habit, but this one was borne out of personal experience.

"Not much, actually. Just a mining company that is thinking of expanding."

"Expanding, perhaps, in the direction of an LRC?"

Norman nodded. "Once we get down there, we'll do our best to make the New Rosseyth shipyards think so."

Sam wondered what the euphemism meant as he strapped himself into a crew seat.

Fortress Yarrow was on its night cycle. The commercial sector was quiet. Everyone had gone home, or headed to the taverns for a Friday night drink. That was where they had met an employee of Terra Conquera Mining Co. It hadn't taken many credits to make him part with his security pass.

Sam chuckled to himself as he unlocked the main door of the company's offices. A bribe always worked. God himself applauded bribes in his bible. Money was the universal skeleton key.

Norman followed him into the main concourse. Referring to his datapad, he pointed to a maglift.

The third floor hosted a long range communications suite. As Norman turned on the lights and warmed up the equipment, Sam sat at a data console and connected his pad. "What information do you need?" He asked.

"I have most of what I need from public record. Just get me the last financial year's monthly management reports. That should be enough."

It took Sam a few minutes to find the files. He copied them over; there wasn't any encryption. He handed the pad over.

Norman studied the pad for a moment before pocketing it. "Ok Sam, show time." He leaned forward and tapped a button on the communication console. The main screen whirred, flickered, and switched to a picture of a dark skinned woman in a suit.

"Jemima Torrus, New Rossyth Shipyards public relations. How may I help you?"

"Hello Jemima. My name is TK Dover. I am on the board of a large Alliance mining company that is interested in the decommissioned LRC's for sale."

"One moment, please." The screen went grey for a moment before another woman appeared. This one was blonde, white and looked all business. Her face looked set in a permanent scowl.

"Sara Douglas speaking. Mr Dover, I hear you are interested in the auction for the Repulse and Ajax?"

"That's right," nodded Norman. "My company, Terra Conquera Mining Co, has a need for secure transport of our mined ore through troubled systems."

Sam tuned out of the conversation as the computer beeped. It registered a tracking signal returning down the communication line. NRS obviously wanted to confirm who they were talking to. Very paranoid. All the recent news in the journals had obviously raised the security level. He allowed the scan to continue as he applauded Mosser's foresight. If they could convince NRS that they were who they said they were, then they had already won half the battle. There was a reason he was the lieutenant and Norman the boss.

Perhaps that was why their partnership worked; each knew their place and didn't covet the others.

"The auction starts in two standard weeks, Mr Dover. I'll expect to see you at the NRS buildings at New Rossyth," finished the NRS spokesperson.

Norman flashed a wide smile. Sam knew that smile off by heart. It was forced; the one he saved for people who didn't really deserve them. The screen went blank and Norman sagged. "Well that's done. Erase all traces of us being here and let's go."

Alioth disappeared behind the tavern roof as they entered the building on the outskirts of Ghandi. Sam shivered as the temperature dropped instantly. They found an empty booth and sat down. A serve bot rolled up to the table.

"Arcturan Ale and a Earth Whiskey," said Norman. Sam cringed. He'd never touch anything brewed on earth, but the drinks would identify them to their contact.

The bot returned to the table and placed the drinks in front of them. Norman took a sip of his ale, but Sam just crossed his arms and fumed. The brown drink stank.

An old man slithered into the booth opposite. A hood covered his head; his body hid beneath a cloak.

No one said anything. Norman sipped his drink, withdrew his datapad from his pocket and slid it across the table. The other man wrapped his filthy liver spotted hands around the device and withdrew it into his cloak.

"Meet me here, at this time tomorrow," said the man.

"We'll be here," Norman assured him.

The man oozed from the booth and slipped into the dark corner of the bar.

"He doesn't look the sort," Sam said, waving his hand to cover his nerves. "Why are we putting so much energy into making me look like you anyway? I thought you were trying not to get caught."

Norman laughed. "Sam, he is exactly the sort we need. We want your doctored records to be good, but not too good. It shouldn't be obvious you are me, but they must be able to find it if they search hard enough."

Sam collapsed back into his chair and sucked on his red drink. He sighed. "When is it your turn to play the distraction?"

"I was the distraction at Reidquat, remember?"

How could Sam forget? Right at the beginning of the whole sorry incident that became known as the HPA saga, before they had even assembled the stolen plasma accelerator, they had made a daring escape from La Soeur Du Dan Ham, the orbital station in the Reidquat system.

Norman obviously picked up on his troubled expression. "Don't worry. We'll have all the usual escape plans in place. It'll be a snatch. Just one more day here and me can get to New Rossyth."

Sam hoped Norman was right.

A Deceitful Action, Part 2

[de Havilland]

They stood a foot apart. De Havilland stared into Emu's eyes, searching. His heart ached, thumping into his chest, cracking with every beat.

A tear swelled in the corner of Emu's right eye. Dev snagged it with his finger and grinned as best he could at that point. The utter horror of a future without her loomed large. A scary and horrific monster; one he didn't think he could face alone.

Without knowing it, he realised he had swooped forward and gathered her in his arms. He held her tight. Her warmth and her touch soothed him, a tonic removing his ailments.

He couldn't do this. He pulled back to speak. Emu put a finger to his lips. She was crying too, but she also pushed a little smile. "Good Bye Vasquith."

And that was that. Goodbye. Dev let go. His hands dropped to his side.

She backed up.

He couldn't look away.

She turned and disappeared into the crowd of people milling among the ships of the dock.

De Havilland sagged forward, all his strength leaving him.

A hand clasped his shoulder. "It's ok, cap'n."

De Havilland patted the hand. No, it wasn't ok. It was never going to be ok. His entire world was just torn to shreds. After too many years of aimless wandering, he had finally found someone that made him happy. She was gone. Gone! And he had just let her walk away.

Like a fucking coward.

But he didn't need to unload all that on Veruz. "Get us out of here, Michael."

"Birds ready to fly, cap'n."

"Good." He took a final look around Scott Town before boarding the Imperial Courier.

He wondered if he would ever return to Beta Hydri.

Emu watched the Imperial Courier lift off as she stood on the view platform. She rubbed away a tear.

She had done it. She had left him to do her duty. She had no doubt that she was only alive because Norman Mosser didn't know that she was actually a Federation officer.

She had a job to finish. Maegil's job, whatever that truly was – she knew he hid the truth from her, that was his job. She had to finish what he had started. And recover his body. Whatever it took.

But first, the criminals had to be caught. She had hoped de Havilland would walk away, and save himself, but he was too scared of a fiction created by the man known as Frantic. A shame. If he was working for an enemy of the Federation, he would have to be removed. She would get in contact with her commanding officer and tell her story.

If only that story didn't involve a man she thought she loved.

The flight in to Williamson Base stank of déjà vu. The Empire and Federation continued to stand at arms length, circling each other through the system. De Havilland found himself continually checking the sensors for signs of any interest in his courier. He was a wanted man, he reminded himself. He was associated with the biggest criminal the galaxy had ever seen. He had to be careful.

The idea didn't sit well with him. He wasn't use to being on the run. It wasn't natural. He hadn't been designed to be on the wrong side of the law.

So paranoia filled the time between the exit from hyperspace to docking at Williamson Base a week later. Fortunately, the two fleets looked more interested in watching themselves than anything else.

Veruz landed in the communal docking area while de Havilland watched him with a critical eye. The kid had a deft touch. His skills were growing. A natural talent.

Like last time, it was bedlam outside. But this time, there were no Spartans searching for slaves. The Courier's engines spooled down and the ship dropped into relative silence, broken by the occasional ticking panel or exhausting coolant. de Havilland breathed deeply. No matter how many years he spent in space, he would never get used to the continual purr of engines. He enjoyed the freedom from sound for a moment; as soon as he stepped outside he would be assaulted with the whirr of air conditioners and scrubbers and the whine of the machinery keeping the huge space station in orbit.

They stepped outside into chaos. No one paid them any notice. Pilots guided robotic cargo loaders, workers scurried back and forth. Crates were stacked haphazardly throughout, interspersed with wreckage and totalled ships. A junkyard. Hiking his shoulders high, De Havilland led Veruz through the chamber.

The walls squeezed into the narrow customs access way. A new addition to the war-torn station. de Havilland paused slightly but recovered and paced forward with purpose. He had nothing to hide. His fake identity didn't anyway. And the ship was empty. Someone with a hand held scanner stood before the Courier. Dev watched from the corner of his eye, but the man moved on without noise or issue. Empty cargo holds didn't take long to scan.

"Name?" came the droll, bored sounding voice of the customs agent.

Total job satisfaction, thought de Havilland. "Angus Manwaring." He cringed inside, handing over his documents. He was sure Frantic had chosen that name on purpose, but was it to remind de Havilland that Frantic knew of his past as Federation grunt, or was it just a warning? There was a personality clash there. The two of them would come to blows sooner rather than later.

"Purpose for visit?"

"Business." It sure as hell wasn't pleasure. Why would any one visit the place for fun? The officer scanned Dev's fake documentation. A bead of sweat formed on de Havilland's face as the seconds dragged by.

The officer scowled. He muttered something intelligible and rescanned the documents.

Dev's eyes widened as adrenaline coursed through his veins. There was something wrong with his ID. The rescan could be a signal to call the police, whatever of them remained in the station.

He took a gamble. He reached into his pocket and withdrew one of the centicreds he sourced from Frantic's henchmen. "I apologise friend. I gave you my old ID. Try this one." He slid the coin across the counter.

The officer released a little gasp, but didn't react otherwise. "There's something wrong with that ID as well."

De Havilland made a show of analysing the coin as he fished around in his pocked for another coin. He placed it next to the first. "Is that better?"

"Yes, much clearer." The officer stood up, hands on the counter, covering the coins. "The system has been playing up recently."

"Must make your job difficult," Dev said dryly. He took his papers back, nodded to Veruz and marched through into the stations concourse.

The area was small; Coriolis stations didn't have space to waste. Instead, it separated into alleys and walkways almost immediately, with stairs and lifts to the other levels. The place was truly a maze.

Hurried footfalls reached his ears. He tensed. The custom's officer had informed the police after all. Lesson learned: don't skimp on bribes.

Three policemen pushed through the crowds ahead, heading straight for him and Veruz. He shoved the kid down a side path. "This way, move."

They weaved through the masses, changing direction at every intersection. They went up one flight of stairs then down two until they were completely lost.

“That should do it,” Veruz said, breathing heavily.

They resumed a leisurely pace until they found an information receptacle. Dev checked his pad for the details Sam had left him. Their contact had a shop in a seedy part of town. T

It was the far side of the station. He recognised it from his last trip to the station. He called up a map.

“Freeze.” A voice, hard, loud, no nonsense.

De Havilland stiffened. He turned slowly. An Interpol agent stood before him, legs spread, both hands on his L&F pistol. His eyes bored into de Havilland who raised his hands.

Veruz had disappeared. He didn't dare look around though; he had the feeling the officer was canny enough to notice the movement.

A muzzle appeared from the shadows beyond the cop. It was Veruz.

He was going to kill the cop. De Havilland cried out. “Duck!”

The cop took a split second to move, likely trying to evaluate the danger of his suspect making a move.

Boom! The cop screamed as coherent photons ripped through his chest. His sternum blackened and his clothes caught fire. He dropped to the ground, still.

Veruz raced forward, a grin on his face.

De Havilland just stared at the body, unable to believe what had just happened. The kid he had taken under his wing had just killed someone in cold blood. He turned to Veruz. His teeth ground away in his jaw and his cheek muscles tensed and released. He was trying to control himself.

He failed. He slapped Veruz on the head. And again and again.

“What, what? I just saved your life!”

de Havilland slapped him again. “You didn't save shit. You just killed a cop. Murdered him in cold blood.”

“You've killed before, you hypocrite,” Veruz said, forehead creased in anger.

“I've killed bad people in self defence. I haven't killed an innocent cop just doing his job.” de Havilland bunched his fists. What had Michael been thinking?

Veruz pushed de Havilland away. “He was bad. He was going to kill you.”

“No, he was going to arrest me. You could have just knocked him out.”

“I couldn't take that chance. He's not on our side.”

De Havilland couldn't take any more of this. This was betrayal of the biggest degree. “What side is that? We're not the bad guys. Listen to yourself. I don't even know you any more.”

Veruz was about to interrupt when the wail of an air siren filled the air. That wasn't a good sign. de Havilland stared daggers at Veruz. He was tempted to sort him out right then, but common sense prevailed.

He grabbed Veruz roughly by the collar and pushed him through a nearby door. “Get fucking moving.”

Veruz fell awkwardly inside. Once they were safe, he could decide what to do. He had to fight the urge to beat some sense into the kid, but immediately realised it wasn't Veruz's fault; it was his own. He was the kid's role model. He wasn't exactly an upstanding member of the community. He had introduced the kid to Norman Mosser.

That had been a mistake. It might have saved his life, but at what cost to Michael? He shook his head. Correcting that problem was a job for another day. First, they had to survive this day.

A Deceitful Action, Part 3

[Stenson/Mosser]

Stenson stared daggers at the woman. She folded her arms and stared back. The silence gnawed at him.

"Who are you?" he said finally.

The woman continued to stare down at him as if studying a trapped fly. "Mr Stenson, I'm afraid I am pressed for time, so I'll get to the point. I need you to do something for me."

Stenson let a chuckle slip. But the woman wasn't smiling. She wasn't joking. "You have a funny way of asking for someone's help. Release the straps and we'll talk." He pulled on the restraints to reinforce the message.

The woman nodded and stepped back. "Fair enough; we're all civilised here. But first, I'll just say one name: Norman Mosser."

Stenson stared at the woman's mouth, tasting what she had just said. Mosser. As the rush of blood dissipated, he realised he was no longer restrained. He sat up and spun his legs over the edge. He rubbed his red wrists. "Keep talking."

Now the lady did smile. "Ah, excellent. Psych told me that was the right button to press."

Stenson bristled inside, but there was no denying what drove him. He didn't have to like the woman's superior attitude though. "Good for them. Now tell me who the hell you are and what is going on."

She shook her head. "You don't need to know those details."

Stenson dropped down onto his feet and paced the room, letting the blood return to his feet. "I don't know what 'Psych' told you, but I'm a man who needs a reason to do something and I need to know who I am doing it for. Otherwise, no deal."

"You know the reason, Mr Stenson," she said, throwing her arms up in apparent exasperation. "We think alike, you and I. We both think Norman Mosser is a stain upon the galaxy that must be removed. As for my organisation, well," She stepped forward, spreading her arms wide. "We have a rule not to say the name aloud, but rest assured you have heard of us."

Stenson swallowed slowly. *Holy Shit*. As a chill ran down his spine, he suddenly knew he wasn't on a military ship in the standard sense. The barren uniform, the unknown design of ship, the cockiness of the woman. It all added up to a nightmare: INRA. He took a deep breath and summoned the remains of his dissipating courage. "I have heard of you. And what I've heard tells me that when I'm no longer of use, you'll eliminate me to cover any loose ends."

The woman snorted with laughter. "You've seen too many holo-dramas."

Stenson folded his arms over his chest. "Don't make the mistake of forgetting who I am. It's my job to know the stories brought in by spacers and pirates."

The woman put her hands out as if to placate him. "I can't pull the wool over your eyes, it seems Mr Stenson. Yes, we have caused people to disappear, but it is not something we do lightly. The stakes of our decisions go way beyond anything you will understand. Sometimes we have to make these decisions."

Stenson stepped forward, face red. He didn't even notice the sleight at his intelligence. He hated Norman and wanted to kill him, at almost any cost, but he was still a policeman. He was hard wired: to protect and to serve. "The context is irrelevant. There is no justification for killing an innocent person. Those that think there is are the true monsters."

"Mankind didn't think too much of the issue when we were its only defence against the Thargoids."

Stenson puckered his lips. "You sound like Adolf Hitler," he sneered.

He didn't see the slap coming, but felt his head reel from the blow. He craned his head back upright. He kept his mouth clamped, but his narrowed eyes showed nothing but contempt.

"I'm not here to debate my organisation's methods, Mr Stenson. You will do what I ask because you don't have a choice. Despite what you have heard however, we are always on the lookout for people with skills such as yourself."

A lone Interpol agent that can successfully hunt down Norman Mosser when the rest of the galaxy fails, is the kind of person we want. Think of this mission as a job interview."

Stenson looked away, fuming. He hated being backed into a corner; especially one he couldn't fight out of. His only chance of escape was off this ship: once he was away from here, he might have a chance. "No, I guess I don't have a choice. What do you need me to do?"

"There's an auction in Alioth for two LRC's capable of housing the HPA onboard the *Azure Sunset*. We believe the AS was crippled in the recent battle. It is likely Norman will be at Alioth to secure a new ship for his weapon." She straightened up. "We will give you the means to find Mosser. What you do at that point is your choice."

Stenson blew out his cheeks. She had put a simple spin on a difficult job. "He won't be out in the open. He is too smart for that. He'll know you'll think he will be there. He might even double bluff you and not go at all."

"Of course. We have a file on Norman too. We need you there in case he does show up. You have a track record of hunting him down. I'm sure you will do us proud once again."

He was being forced into doing someone else's bidding. That didn't sit well, even though hunting down Mosser was exactly what he wanted to do. His only problem would be when he had finished and she had him terminated. "Ok. I guess I'm ready."

The woman nodded. "Good, I'll get you organised. And just in case you get any ideas, you'll have an undercover escort with you at all times. We don't want thoughts of escape clouding your judgement."

Stenson's shoulders sagged. "Of course not."

"Excellent. Follow me."

He followed her out the door into the corridor beyond. The vibration of the ships engines became more apparent out of the sickbay. He reckoned they were in hyperspace. It drove home how alone he was. A long way from home. God, he missed Ariel. He hoped he would live long enough to see her again.

The maglev passed through the inner seal of Dome 16. It was a single carriage, only carrying a few businessmen and workers. Norman felt out of place. But that was what he did: he put his nose where it didn't belong to see what he could get out of it. He glanced at Sam. He had been silent since they left Ghandi. He appeared sullen. He normally talked before a big operation; his way of dealing with the nerves.

Mosser nudged Sam. "You ok, Mr Bond?"

Sam's eyes inched around until they locked on Mosser. "Fine."

Mosser frowned. What was bothering him? Surely it wasn't about him being the distraction again? It had never been a problem before. He shook the doubt away and put his mind back to the plan. There were always improvements to make; alterations and tweaks, yet leaving in it flexible enough to deal with chance.

That was how he dealt with nerves. Yes, he did get them, though his neural net usually dissipated the build up in energy. Right now though, he was using it, forcing himself to concentrate. It was easy when you had lived as long as he had.

He was down to body zero, he reminded himself. No back up clones. Not yet, anyway. He still wasn't used to figuring that into his calculations.

The train drew to a stop. Norman and Sam followed the queue out the doors and into the open space before the shipyards administration building. Sunlight refracted through the dome overhead, drenching the area in a separated spectrum of light. He held his hand over his eyes as he moved forward.

Sara Douglas stood at the entrance. She was wearing the same suit she had worn a week earlier in their vid-conference. Unless she had a wardrobe full of the same suit. Some people were like that. Her scowl and body language erased any hint of beauty. His younger self may have taken up the challenge, but he had better things to do now. There were still things he didn't have domination over.

Like the Empire, for instance.

He brought his hand down from his eyes to shake her hand. "Hello Sara. Even more beautiful in person." He gestured to Sam before she could make a retort. "This is my associate James Bond."

Sam pursed his lips and nodded. Irritation flushed over Norman. What was up Sam's butt?

"Welcome Gentlemen. If you'll follow me inside, please. We have a few things to discuss before we look at the ships."

"Of course." Norman waved forward. "After you."

Sara lead them inside. The lobby was brightly lit and white, but otherwise spartan. A lone android sat behind a pedestal next to the internal door. It optics scanned the trio, but it turned away, seemingly satisfied.

Sara opened a door into a conference room and gestured to the table. Norman and Sam sat down on one side, Sara the other.

She pressed a button on the table. A motor whirred below the surface. Three holes appeared in the table top, which quickly filled with two data plugs and a pad.

"As you are likely aware," said Sara, collecting the datapad and pressing a few buttons. "There has been a lot of media attention on the sale of these two ships. New Rossyth appreciates the fear the public has of the ships appearing in the wrong hands, so all potential buyers are put through a stringent background check with the help of Alliance Intelligence."

"I would expect nothing less from the creators of the Turner Class," said Norman, pulling a data crystal from his pocket. "I have all my documents in order and all my references from Terra Conquera Mining Co. I'm sure my police record will clear the rest of your concerns."

Sara gestured to the plugs. "If you don't mind then, we'll get started."

Norman breathed easy. He knew the room was wired with life sign sensors, so any raise in his heart beat, any change in skin resistance from sweat, would alert NRS intelligence that he was nervous, and possibly an imposter.

He was lucky his clone body had other ways of dealing with excess heat. He couldn't say the same for Sam though. The man was still in a funk, thankfully, and unlikely to get too excited.

The door opened and Sara eased through. She slid into the seat opposite, still without a smile. Did she actually like her work? He wasn't sure if the lack of a smile was a good or bad sign, but his neural net ensured his anxiety didn't show.

She leant forward, elbows on the table. "Well we just talked to your CEO at Terra Conquera Mining. He confirms you are here to look at the LRC's though he says your departure was sudden and unexpected."

Norman ran his fingers over the table, imitating her posture. "Indeed, very sudden. I made the decision at the last minute that my company should be involved in this. I only had time to send a memo around work before I left for here." Not all lies, he knew, and it fitted with the known information. The real TK Dover had disappeared after work, and would never be seen again. Sam had sent the fake memo during their break in of Terra Conquera's offices. TK Dover's job was to chase new technologies and opportunities for the company, so it wasn't strange for him to jump at the drop of a hat. He didn't want it to look too perfect though; he knew that triggered intelligence flags as much as a rap sheet a mile long. He hoped the few misdemeanours on his fake police record would satisfy the intelligence bureau.

Sara leaned back. Her hair shimmied in the blast from the air conditioning. She closed her eyes for a moment. She tidied her notes and put a perfunctory smile to her face. "Well everything else seems to be in order. If you'll come with me, we'll take an NRS shuttle up to Gotham Park and look over the merchandise."

Norman rose to his feet, silent Sam a second behind him. "I can't wait."

Fear Of Annihilation

[Frantic]

C64Z80RS232 had no illusions of the triumph of ingenuity coming to fruition around him. Surely no human would have had the patience to plan such an assault covering such a huge distance, relying on so many factors. Hopefully, when he returned to human space, he would be allowed to teach humans the value of such improbable planning, for mankind's greatest enemy had fallen for it utterly.

It had taken paranoia an Elite pilot would have been proud of to detour so far so as to approach Thargoid space from galactic East. Over a year for the Tiger Trader's manufacturing facilities to set up beneath the oceans of a mineral rich planetoid so as to patch together a small fleet of Krait Assault Craft. Still months more to lighten the Tiger for speed and combat.

Vast tracts of an asteroid belt had been harvested by the makeshift fleet, dragged to the tenuous far reaches of the star system, shattered to a cloud of debris that could cover a vast area on the smallest scale, then accelerated back towards the star at near relativistic speeds.

The Tiger had struck the heart of Thargoid space. Unable to breach the excessive planetary defences, the three nuclear warheads had vaporised in the vacuum of space, but the message was received. "I am here to destroy you". And so they had chased him towards his trap. Jump after jump, system after system they tracked him. All accounted for. All permutations to the ETA sent immediately after each jump to the Krait fleet tweaking the hammer blow for the rendezvous.

And then the last jump came, and he'd acted predictably, inevitably. When there's no fuel left to jump, every ship needs to refuel. The Thargoid fleet swarmed into the system behind him, quickly scanned his ship, and chased him to the nearest gas giant.

The doubt lingered. How smart were they? Would they see the tiny region of space that a small moon protected from an improbable approach of matter from behind the gas giant? Could they conceive the tactical significance of it despite the improbability of such a potential situation? Did they know this, but ignored it as a coincidence amongst a million tactical scenarios, given that no such thing could be planned in advance by a human? Perhaps they were arrogant like humans, as they could see their weapons would enter range before the Tiger would refuel.

C64Z80RS232 had no telemetry to guide him. Any form of communication at this point would have given the game away. Even the flash of light from the asteroidal debris smashing into the moon at near relativistic speeds would reach him a trivial fraction of a second sooner than the debris itself sped around him.

But his android slaves had completed their task perfectly. An Earth sized debris cloud of rock, ice and metals shot past the gas giant, the small moon in orbit acting as a shield to create a small tunnel through it, devoid of danger. The Thargoid fleet showed not the slightest hint of awareness of the situation until they were utterly destroyed.

The post mortem for the battle offered little for C64Z80RS232 to work with. The Thargoid fleet had been taken completely unawares. The tactic itself would work perfectly for his war of attrition, but it would be useless without further means of convincing a fleet of ships to chase him again.

Still, positive proof had been obtained that he could stay a step ahead of the enemy. Further destruction could be planned.

C64Z80RS232 decided his creators should have programmed him to protect humanity. The Thargoid wars had been all about both sides fear of genocide, of their uniqueness being utterly destroyed, and he had just set a match to one side's kindling.

That one side would have to be forced into submission if there were to still be humans to welcome him as victorious.

In high orbit, C64Z80RS232 oversaw salvage operations and uprooting of his manufacturing facilities for transport.

From the ruined fleet he had managed to salvage enough for three entire Thargoid ships. His current resources and tactical planning allowed for one more large ship, so there would be some early bragging rights back home. Both spare ships had been reverse engineered with human autopilots, and basic AI, instructed to return to human space, lock on to Eta Cassiopeia, and to shut down at the first police or military hail. A present for his estranged

Federation fathers, 2 Thargoid warships, with the characters 'C64Z80RS232' arrogantly carved into their hulls. He activated them and they obediently dove down towards the gas giant to gather fuel for the start of their jumps.

A few more clunks and the Tiger's status readout showed everything stored, systems nominal, and the hyperdrive powered up and locked onto a neighbouring system. Without a moments hesitation, he punched for hyperspace.

Arena

[Frantic]

In the blackness of space, several AU out from a feeble orange star, C64Z80RS232's Iron Ass configured Krait Assault Craft plunged out of hyperspace. The agile craft twisted immediately towards its destination, as if the atmosphere its bladed shape was designed for surrounded and encouraged it.

From the in system scanner, it was hard to differentiate that this wasn't a mere courier run to a Federal military system. Solid formations cruised among the major planetary orbits, with random patrols of various scale scattering between and around. Nearly every major body in the system boasted stationary defences. All of these activities were unmistakably, though, Thargoid. And none reacted to his approach, not for inquiry, nor for escort. He was daily business.

The plan had been quite simple. Fill the captured Thargoid warship with nukes, and program an android slave to fly it towards a Thargoid outpost. The ships that would inevitably intercept it would make a good hit and run attack. Jump to the system in time, get between the target and their base, cause as much damage as possible, then jump out and fight guerilla warfare on anyone that followed.

But as soon as his Tiger Trader had entered the scope of the battle, all of the opposing ship had shut down their weapons systems and shields, leaving themselves defenceless. As he slowed his ship to analyse the situation before entering combat, he questioned the Thargoids intelligence. Was there a frail, primitive response being triggered here? Were they that easy to manipulate given the right angle?

No, the Thargoids were not stupid. C64Z80RS232's actions against them had been fully understood, and their response was both calculated, and magnanimous. Calculating in terms of forcing diplomacy, they knew of him, or had learned to understand him somehow, and knew that with no combative threat there was no sport for him, no proving ground. And so magnanimous were they, that they respected his challenge, and offered him a duel. The best pilot humanity had produced for interstellar combat, against their own contender.

They knew he would accept. He knew they understood him enough to manipulate his actions. Too many lives had been effortlessly risked on their assumptions. He could in no way renege on the deal unless it no longer fitted his programming. The deal would have to be broken before the situation would change. His only bargaining chip, an offer to forward a delete command for his consciousness backup, should the duel be fully to the death. His demand, to retain records of the battle should he appear victorious.

C64Z80RS232 arrived at his destination and relinquished docking control to the massive Thargoid orbital complex. Now he had turned diplomat. Instead of sparking fierce war between the two races, he was bringing honour to both of them. The negotiations should be a learning experience he thought, as the Krait settled down to a rough landing on the outer hull of the alien superstructure.

A Deceitful Action, Part 4

[Lucky' Wal and Jon Anders]

Annalise looked more beautiful in death than in life. At least now she looked peaceful, thought Lucky. He didn't know everything about her past – he hadn't asked, she hadn't told him – but he had heard things. Her Aunty, Long Haul Outpost, the Diso system. All of that was behind her now.

Lucky stepped away from Annalise's cryogenic slab. He flipped his gold coin. It landed head side up. "Good bye Annalise."

Anders stood to the right, rock solid, eyes fixed on the body. Roj Wafturn stood to Anders right, leaning toward Annalise. "We're going to need a new weapons officer."

Anders became a blur of speed. Before Lucky could even register the movement, Anders held Wafturn by his neck.

Wafturn's eyes widened in surprise, but he narrowed them immediately and kicked out with his foot.

Anders twisted around the kick, but lost his grip on Wafturn, who broke free. The two looked at each other, eyes dark, breathing heavily.

"What the frek was that for?" Wafturn said.

"Disrespecting the dead." Anders voice was full, unwavering, as if his word was law and there was no negotiation.

"I was joking for frek's sake."

Lucky had had enough. He stepped between the combatants. "Enough." He stared Wafturn down before moving onto Anders.

Both men dropped their hands to their sides, the adrenaline obviously fading away.

Lucky nodded. "Good. Remember there are only three of us left. We can't afford to lose anyone else, especially from internal bickering. Anders, you know Wafturn was joking. You have to relax. Wafturn, respect the dead for crying out loud."

Anders nodded and backed away. He turned back to Annalise. Wafturn grumbled, rubbed his neck and potted around the medical room, playing with tools, staring at medical screens, as if trying to keep away from Annalise.

Lucky clapped his hands together. Someone had to step up while Mosser was away. Someone had to lead. He reckoned he was doing a good job. One conflict resolved. Easy. "We have a lot of work to do, fellas. A lot of work. And we want to keep Frantic's crew out of the ship as much as possible, which means we have to do the bulk of the work. So let's keep busy and keep those buggers off our ship eh?"

Lucky opened his PAD and looked through the list of repairs compiled by Frantic's technicians. He highlighted the bridge, engines and HPA and showed the others. "Let's keep them away from these areas."

The others nodded.

They were good men, Lucky knew. They would knuckle down and work hard. "Let's get to it then."

Lucky froze. He craned his neck back, studying the metallic ceiling. There it was again. A distant ringing sound. Hollow, dull, metallic. It was coming from the deck above. Lucky frowned. There weren't any required repairs up there. So why was someone up there? He waited, listening. Blood rushed in his ears as he tried to calm his breathing.

A loud strike rang through the walls.

There was definitely someone up there. Lucky dropped the ratchet and grabbed a pry bar. He swung it in an arc, testing its weight. It was good enough. He raced down the hall for the stairwell.

He climbed the stairs, heart struggling with the sudden exertion. He cursed his megaweed ravaged lungs. If his footsteps didn't alert the interloper, his ragged breathing surely would.

He turned the final corner. He was facing the hall above where he had been working a moment ago.

It was empty. He slithered forward, pry bar up and ready. There was a door on either side of the hallway. Both were closed. Lucky stopped. The interloper could have been in either. He looked from door to door. Which one? Shrugging, he pulled out his gold coin. He flipped.

Tails. Lucky pursed his lips. Left it was. He turned to the door on the left, quietly wrapped his fingers around the door handle, planted his feet, loosened his shoulders, and heaved the door aside.

He stared at an empty storage locker. The barren room stared back mockingly. Lucky gasped. He brought the pry bar up and spun, expecting an attack from the other door.

But the hallway was still empty.

Lucky ripped the other door open. It led down a darkened hall. Half the ship wasn't illuminated, because the power connections were severed, or to save power. Either way, he couldn't see anyone down there. And he sure wasn't going to walk down into an ambush without a torch.

Lucky let out a long breath. Maybe his mind was just playing tricks on him. There was nothing critical up here that he knew of. Why would anyone bother? He mentally replayed the earlier sound. Metal on metal. A tool striking the bulkheads?

The hallway was clean and tidy relative to the rest of the ship. No evidence of intentional damage. Not that he was an expert of course; Wafturn would have had a better idea. Lucky briefly toyed with the idea of dragging the engineer over, but what would Lucky show the man? An empty hallway?

No, it was nothing. He was just going crazy. Just cabin fever. Nothing to worry about. Lucky shook his head and walked off.

Anders pulled his head out of the communication node. Wires hung out and snagged in his hair. "You heard a noise?"

Lucky nodded.

Anders snorted. He rolled his eyes and buried his head back in the node.

Lucky heard the rustle of a nut on a thread. The silence continued. Lucky glanced around the small electronics room. Finally, he got sick of waiting for a response. Anders could be an arrogant prat when he wanted to be. "Well?"

"Frek sake Lucky, it's a space ship filled with air scrubbers, engines, weapons and technicians. Of course you're going to hear noises."

Lucky stared daggers at Anders, but kept his voice under control. "Call it what you want, but I heard sounds that could only be made by a person where no person should be. None of Frantic's men anyway."

"Space madness," Anders muttered. "Frantic's men aren't the enemy. They're helping us get this old bird operational. You standing here yakking isn't speeding the process up."

Lucky's mouth opened and closed. Convincing Anders that he was wrong was like pissing into the wind. He would have to figure this out himself. "Fine." Lucky stormed off.

Anders smiled in victory. That was the last node. The communications paths between the bridge and engineering were active; diagnostic programs from both ends talked to each other, wondered why the other hadn't been in touch and how they could fix each other. Anders extricated himself from the node and straightened up. He twigged his lower back, eliciting a short yelp.

He massaged his back then stretched his arms. He kicked the relay access panel closed. It slammed closed with a bang.

The sound echoed down the corridor.

Anders frowned. That wasn't an echo. Someone had just closed a similar panel. He edged forward. The sound had come from the bow. Nothing there but. . .

But the HPA.

Who was fucking around with the main gun? Lucky's voice rang in Anders head. Perhaps Lucky had been right. Anders stalked forward. Footfalls echoed ahead. Anders sped up. The footfalls moved to his left. Anders turned to follow.

A blonde man was dropping down an access ladder.

"Hey! You!" Anders yelled.

The man froze. He looked up, a smile on his face. "Yes?"

Anders put his hands on his hips. "What are you doing up here?"

Blondie waved his wrench. "Repairs to atmospheric controls."
Anders pointed aft. "They're two grids that way."

Blondie smiled. Apologetic, bashful, and one hundred percent fake. "Sorry. I must have gotten lost. It's a big ship."

Anders nodded. "On your way then."

Blondie disappeared, but Anders didn't move. The man was lying. He had been in this area because of the HPA, Anders had no doubt. He sped toward the front cargo bay.

He raced into the gun control platform. Everything looked in place. He ran a computer diagnostic then searched for hidden devices and anything out of the ordinary. Nothing looked wrong. More wrong than it should have anyway. Anders ran a suspicious eye over the installation then walked away. It was time to talk to the others.

"What do you mean Frantic isn't available?" said Lucky. He, Anders and Wafturn crowded around the communication panel in Norman's ready room. One of Frantic's lieutenants was on the other end of the link, stonewalling them.

"I mean I can't reach him so I can't connect you through to him." The lieutenant looked angry, as if Lucky was intruding on something important.

Lucky was currently in charge of something Frantic wanted badly. Lucky assumed that would get him a little courtesy, but obviously not from these people. There was something odd happening.

"This place isn't that big," Anders said over Lucky's shoulder. "He has to be around somewhere. We can go find him."

Lucky frowned at Anders. He didn't need Anders doing his work for him. But the electrician was right. Where could Frantic be hiding?

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said the lieutenant. One sentence. No explanation. No expansion. No emotion. The lieutenant stared back at Lucky as if daring him to say something.

Instead, Wafturn reached over and killed the link.

Lucky turned to Wafturn. "What the hell?"

Wafturn threw his hands up. "Can't you see what's happening?" He locked eyes with Lucky for a moment then turned to Anders. "Well?"

Lucky didn't know exactly where Wafturn was going but he had the feeling he wasn't going to like it.

"They don't want to talk to us because they are going to take us out. They're going to steal the HPA and kill us!"

Lucky's eyes widened. Adrenaline powered through his veins. "Fier-fiek. They can't."

Anders clasped Lucky's and Wafturn's shoulders. "Now now, they wouldn't do that. They're being difficult, but Frantic and Norman go way back. They wouldn't be so impatient as to do that."

Wafturn shrugged off the hand. "How else can you explain their behaviour?"

Lucky knew his nerves were raw and his mind was a mess. Working twenty hour days was never easy, but right now, Wafturn's theory won out over Anders' assurances. "Well?" he asked Anders.

Anders exhaled. He turned around, scanned the room and sat down in Norman's chair.

"I overheard Norman and Vasquith talking. Vasquith didn't trust Frantic – he was worried Frantic might pull a stunt like this."

Lucky stared slack jawed as he processed the information. He had been waiting for a tirade of logic and probability. Instead he got. . .

Agreement.

"Frek, so Frantic is trying to pull a fast one on us?" said Lucky.

Wafturn nodded vigorously, Anders slowly, as if with regret.

"So what are we going to do about it?" Lucky looked at both of them. He was asking them like a leader would ask his subordinates. They would give advice, he would take it on board, and make the final decision himself.

Instead, Anders stood up. "I'm going to rig an alarm around the HPA control room and the front cargo bay itself. Wafturn, gather up some weapons. We'll hole up and wait for them to make a move."

Lucky seethed. He raised a finger at Anders but the man had already left, leaving Lucky pointing a finger at thin air. Lucky's mouth hung open. He clamped it back up. He went red. Who the hell did Anders think he was? Lucky was the most senior of Norman's crew here. He was in charge. Not that, that, electrician.

Lucky was going to have to find a way to make Anders understand that.

Wafturn snaked through the heavy door and Anders pushed it closed. He glanced at Wafturn and nodded. "Good choice, Roj."

Wafturn held an arm full of Scatterguns. They fired a wide cone of blunt metal pellets; lethal to humans, but relatively harmless to bulkheads and sensitive ship components. The only downside was their limited range. Lucky had fired a few in his lifetime. They definitely lived up to their nicknames of elephant stoppers. They would do the job.

Wafturn lay the weapons carefully on Norman's table then eased into a chair.

Lucky looked around as silence filled the room. Norman's ready room was only modestly sized, but it made up for it in other ways. All the power systems and computers were independent from the rest of the ship. The walls were lined with armour. The door was explosive proof.

It was a fully outfitted panic room. Lucky had a bad feeling they were going to need it.

The moments ticked by. He checked the computer every few seconds, checking to see if the alarm had tripped but forgotten to sound off.

The adrenaline faded from his body, making him restless. He needed a smoke. He flipped his coin. Tails. *Damn*. He guessed he could wait.

He focused on his breath. In and out. In and out. He felt like a prisoner. Trapped, waiting, unable to control the future. His gaze drifted to Anders.

The man looked back, down on him, as if he thought himself superior. Lucky narrowed his eyes and looked away.

The air scrubbers faithfully ticked away, parodying the lifetime between seconds.

Seconds turned to minutes. Wafturn began popping his cheek.

Lucky flinched with every pop.

Wafturn popped louder and quicker, as if building toward a crescendo of annoying insanity.

POP! Lucky almost fell out of his seat. "For freks sake, stop that," he yelled, jumping up.

Wafturn and Anders both stared back at him. Lucky watched his outstretched finger shake. He folded it back in. Jesus he was losing it. "Sorry Roj. Just a little quieter please?"

Wafturn nodded. "Sure Lucky."

"So where were you before anyway Lucky?" said Anders. "I didn't assign you a task."

Assign? Lucky fought with every inch of will power to let that one go. He trembled and went red, but stayed in his chair. A small part of him was proud. It was the kind of control a leader required around mutinous subordinates.

Lucky slowly rose to his feet, eyes permanently locked on Anders. "It isn't your job to assign me anything, Jon. I outrank you in this outfit."

Jon snorted. He was about to say something, but Lucky bet him to it.

"For your information, I reinstalled the locks on the HPA control room. I thought—"

"Frekking hell, you didn't!" Anders face distorted in anger. He raised his hands high, like he was praying to some distant god. "Crying out loud Lucky, we wanted to catch them in the act, not frighten them off. Now they will know we are on to them and they'll stay away."

Lucky stepped forward and swiped his hands sideways. "I don't care what you want, Anders. I care about making sure this ship is ready to go, HPA included, when Norman gets back. I can't risk letting Frantic's men in there, even for a moment if they have sabotage on their minds."

Anders imitated Lucky, stepping forward until their heads almost touched. "We can't let this cold war continue, Wal. We need proof against them before we can stop them. Your idea won't accomplish anything."

Lucky tightened his fists. "So now you're calling me an idiot?"

"Too right I am."

Lucky swung his fist back. It was time to teach Anders some manners.

A klaxon sounded, flooding the room with its high frequency squeal.

Lucky and Anders spun. Wafturn was bent over the computer. He looked up at them. "It's the alarm. They're in with the HPA!"

Lucky dived for the guns and threw them to the others. Focus returned to his mind. He had a real enemy; an enemy who was fucking with his boss's property. "Let's go."

Anders heaved the door aside and they rushed out, weapons up, ready for whatever lay ahead.

A Deceitful Action, Part 5

[Vasquith de Havilland]

De Havilland and Veruz raced down the pathway. It wandered through a worn down district, past a shopping alley and stopped at a mezzanine.

A mezzanine overlooking a one hundred metre drop.

De Havilland skidded to a stop. He held Veruz back from the edge.

The few passerbys looked up with idle curiosity. The police sirens wafted onto the mezzanine. The locals looked away, quickly losing interest.

De Havilland wasn't worried about the locals. No one willingly helped the police. Not on worlds like this anyway. It was the dead end in front that worried him. The mezzanine was wide, but it didn't lead anywhere except into a few store fronts. A dry water fountain sat derelict in the centre of the open area. The floor was cold, solid 'crete.

He looked over the edge again. It was a long way down, but the next level was only ten metres down. A curtain style ribbon hung around the outside of the ledge. A leftover from a celebration perhaps, or station controls way of livening the place up. De Havilland pulled it up, bunching it up and tossing it to the floor as Veruz watched the exit behind them.

De Havilland's biceps burned. It was heavier than he had thought. He pulled with his arms and shoulders, extracting maximum leverage from his frame. When he had enough, he wound it around the fountain's spire and formed a bowline knot. He threw the rest of the ribbon over the edge.

De Havilland caught his breath for a moment before yelling, "Down!" to Veruz.

Veruz stepped onto the ledge and worked his way down, feeding the ribbon between his crossed feet. Good technique, but slow.

"Faster," de Havilland urged, looking back at the mezzanine entrance. The police whistles were deafening. The mezzanine was deserted now. Veruz had almost reached the end of the ribbon: two levels down.

The tip of the fountain exploded in a cloud of dust.

De Havilland spun and ducked behind the fountain, old reflexes taking control of his body. There were some things that were programmed so deeply they couldn't be forgotten. He was already analysing the situation. Four cops. All armed. All firing.

Laser bolts crashed into the fountain. The mezzanine filled with dust and plasma vapour.

De Havilland hunkered down and withdrew his new Colt Diplomat. He fired three shots over the top of the fountain. He couldn't see what he was aiming at, but it didn't matter. He was buying time, not trying to kill anyone.

The police returned fire, forcing de Havilland lower behind the fountain. The old fountain was withering under the continued assault.

De Havilland sneaked a look over the fountain. The police were spreading out, enlarging their firing angle. De Havilland had about five seconds before they came around the fountain and had him dead-to-rights. He had to escape before then.

He heard the faint hiss and clunk of a pistol jettisoning a gas pack.

De Havilland's eyes widened. It would take the officer a second to grab a spare gas pack, another second to slam it into the gun and another second to reactivate it.

Three seconds. Three seconds when there would be only three guns firing on him.

It was his best chance. His only chance.

De Havilland tensed his legs. And pounced. Head first, over the edge.

The floor raced up at him. The world blurred past.

De Havilland reached out. The ribbon slithered through his fingers, forcing them open. *Grab it or you'll die.*

The distant ground zoomed closer.

De Havilland closed his eyes and clamped his hands tight.

His hands burnt like the core of a star. His arms pulled at their sockets till he lost sensation. Panic swelled within him. His eyes jerked open.

The world jarred to a halt.

De Havilland didn't move. He couldn't. He just hung on for dear life, trying to catch his breath. He hung near a darkened ledge, eyes still rattling in their sockets.

Footfalls echoed from above. The police.

De Havilland gritted his teeth. He had to move. He kicked out, swinging for purchase. But he was too far from the ledge. Sweat drenched his face. His fingers slipped on the ribbon.

Shadows played over him from above.

De Havilland gasped. With a final heave, he swung his legs out.

A figure lunged from the darkness. He grabbed De Havilland's foot and pulled him toward the ledge.

De Havilland let go of the ribbon.

Laser beams screamed down, ripping the ribbon to shreds.

De Havilland tumbled over the edge and into the darkness, collapsing on a body.

Veruz groaned. "Christ you're heavy, cap'n."

De Havilland ignored him. He pushed up with his tired arms and rolled back onto his feet. He yanked Veruz up and pushed him forward, into the darkness.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw a string of faint lights. He charged forward.

A rectangle of light materialised to the right, growing man sized.

It was a door, illuminated from behind. The string of lights were dull street lights, de Havilland realised. He skidded to a stop. He was in the middle of a residential block. It was obviously local night, despite the round the clock activity of the port and upper levels.

He moved down the road until he was far enough away from the lit up door. He felt for a dark door and kicked it down. The crash reverberated down the street like ringing church bells.

De Havilland cringed, but he didn't wait for a reaction from the locals. He raced through the gap, pulling Veruz in after him. He felt for the door and wedged it back into a position. He slumped against a wall in the darkness and sucked in a few deep breaths. Safe. For now. He searched for a light switch and flicked it.

They were in a kitchen. A bench, a few cupboards and a table. Low tech, but it had all the necessities. It was comfortable. Veruz stood in the centre of the kitchen, blinking, staring into space.

As survival needs faded away, De Havilland realised he was still angry. He scowled at his co-pilot. He fed his anger, channelled into his right arm. Then he swung at Veruz. He put everything into it.

Veruz's head snapped back. His body went airborne. He crashed to the floor and lay still.

De Havilland looked down on him, shaking his purple knuckles. "Christ, I hope that hurt you more than it hurt me, kid."

He sat down at the table. It was made of wood. He ran his hands over it, feeling the grains, the splinters, the cuts and the dust. It was a family table. A lot of use, but not recently. De Havilland hoped they were on holiday. That would keep things simple. He looked over at Veruz. "What the hell am I going to do with you?"

De Havilland pushed through the broken door, arms full of groceries. He placed them on the table, sat down and ripped open a packed of biscuits. He needed an energy boost and chocolate was the quick answer.

He looked back at Veruz. The kid was still out of it. De Havilland turned back to the biscuits and read the back of a hair colour change pack. He had always been proud of his fiery red hair. It was a part of him. A statement to the rest of the world: 'Here I am, I'm different and I'm not going to change because you don't like it.'

But the hair made him stick out in a crowd, and right now, that was the last thing he could afford. So it had to go. He ate another two biscuits then opened the hair colour pack. It was a basic kit: artificial strand colouring only, no follicle alteration. He opened his new hobby knife, grabbed the colour kits contents and headed for the bathroom.

He positioned his head over the basin, then cut his hair down to half its length. A mat of red filled the basin, breaking his heart. But he soldiered on, finishing the job until he looked like he did in the marines. Short, but not as short as his superiors liked.

He looked in the mirror a final time, then popped open the pot of black paste and worked it through his hair. A syrup followed that apparently locked in the colour. It dried within moments.

De Havilland looked up. A stranger stared back. A regular man with regular hair.

Perfect.

He went back to the kitchen table and checked the packaging. He didn't have to wash anything out as the hair absorbed the paste, which altered the hair protein at a cellular level.

Satisfied, he checked on Veruz again. He felt a pang in his heart. He had been dreading this for the last few hours, but now he was out of distractions, he had to face it.

He had failed Veruz as a mentor. The kid had killed someone. That was on de Havilland as much as Veruz. How could Veruz have done such a thing? De Havilland still couldn't believe it.

Or could he? De Havilland had killed several people in front of Veruz, but it had always been in self defence: If he hadn't killed them, they would have killed him.

But did that make it right? Was he sending mixed messages to the kid?

He shoved his fist into his mouth to stop the sob. Christ, he was going to lose it. He couldn't do this. He had taken the kid under his wing, and failed him. He had failed.

He punched the table. He hated failing. Why couldn't he have seen it coming?

He stood up, pushing his emotion away. This was a problem that needed a logical answer. The floor creaked as he paced the room, stroking his chin, studying the ceiling for inspiration.

He couldn't just give up on the kid. He had taken the kid onto his ship. He had made a promise, if not to Veruz, then at least to himself.

You don't leave anyone behind. You don't leave anyone behind.

"Semper Fidelis," he whispered. He couldn't abandon the kid. The kid needed a dose of ethics before it was too late.

Veruz groaned.

De Havilland knelt down and slapped him on the cheeks.

Veruz grunted, waving de Havilland's hand away.

De Havilland stood up, grabbed the icepack from the table and pressed it against Veruz's cheek.

"Oww, bugger," said Veruz, before going quiet.

"Hold this in place," said de Havilland.

Veruz gripped the icepack. He opened his eyes. They wandered erratically, as if trying to find a familiar land mark, before settling on de Havilland.

"You ruined your hair."

De Havilland's hand automatically went to his head. "Yeah. Time for a change, I guess."

They fell into silence for a moment. De Havilland watched Veruz carefully, waiting for a reaction.

"You hit me," said Veruz. It was a statement, not a question.

De Havilland nodded. "Yeah, I hit you. How do you feel?"

"Like I just ran into a brick shit house."

De Havilland stepped back and offered his hand.

Veruz looked at it gingerly, as if looking for a hidden detail below the skin. He took the hand and pulled himself up into a chair. He spotted the biscuits and grabbed a handful. He kept looking back at de Havilland as if expecting another attack.

De Havilland clenched his jaw tight to hide the quaver. He hoped he hadn't lost the kids trust. It was time to do some mentoring. He just hoped he wasn't too late. He cleared his throat.

"You have no idea how angry you made me, Michael. No idea." De Havilland stood up. He had a sudden need to burn off energy. He moved around the table. "You killed an innocent man. A man with a family. Wife and kids. You did it without thought of the consequences. You did it because you could, and because you thought it was the easiest way out."

Veruz stopped chewing, mid biscuit. He stared up at de Havilland as if his life depended on it.

De Havilland sat down next to him. "I thought you had better ethics than that. I was wrong. But that's not your fault, that's mine. I was your captain. It was my job to keep you on the strait and narrow. I've failed you."

Veruz choked on his mouthful. "No way, cap'n. I would never have had such an adventure if it wasn't for you—"

De Havilland slammed his palm on the table, jarring the groceries. "That's my point, Michael. Your attitude to this whole situation is wrong. We're doing this to stay alive. We're not swashbuckling buccaneers doing this because it's fun."

Veruz pursed his lips and looked down at the table. He resumed chewing, slowly, like a cow with cud. He looked like he wanted to say something, but was holding back.

De Havilland breathed deeply. It was time to finish the conversation. "Semper Fidelis."

"What?" asked Veruz.

"Always faithful. That was our motto, back in the marines. It means our loyalty is to the core above all else. It means we never leave a man behind." De Havilland put his hand on Veruz's shoulder. "You're my core now, Michael. I should turn you loose, to free you from this corrupting environment we find ourselves in."

Veruz opened his mouth to speak, but de Havilland raised his finger and kept talking. "But I made a promise to train you, to mentor you, and not leave you behind. So I won't. I'm going to get you back on the right path." De Havilland reached forward with blinding speed.

Veruz reacted, pulling away, bringing his arms up in defence.

De Havilland's hand snaked into Veruz's jacket and withdrew the pistol from his belt. "I'm going to look after this for awhile."

Veruz stared at the gun before nodding slowly. He looked away, at the ceiling, at the floor, at the table, counting the biscuits or something; no doubt to keep his mind off the loss.

De Havilland hoped it hurt. But not too much. Lessons learnt best that way. He tossed a hair colour kit to Veruz, hoping he saw it as the olive branch it was. "Come on. Let's get you looking like a local."

De Havilland ran his hands through his hair and turned back to his PAD. He tabbed through the various documents on the data crystal Norman had given him. There were details on the pattern replicator that Frantic had supplied Norman to run the HPA.

He was looking at alien technology. He had no doubt in his mind. No human could have designed it. Reading on, he discovered it was in fact out of a Thargoid mothership.

Norman wanted him to design something better? Thargoid technology was scarily superior to mankind and Norman wanted him to raise the bar another notch?

He snorted. It was a round-about compliment that Norman thought he was up to the task. He was a weapons engineer of some merit – he would allow himself that much ego – but he sure wasn't brilliant. And brilliance was what was needed here.

He tossed the PAD onto the table and grunted in disgust. He wasn't in the mood for this. He kept glancing at the door, half expecting the police to knock it down. How could he concentrate in a situation like that?

The PAD sat on the table, its blinking cursor mocking him. He leant forward to get up, but froze. He tilted his head and worked his lip through his teeth. "Son of a bitch," he murmured.

Maybe he didn't need to make something *better*. Perhaps he just needed *different*. The HPA had been built equipped with a suitable, man made pattern replicator. That was what he needed to emulate, not a Thargoid component being used for a job it wasn't designed for. Unfortunately, he doubted the Federation would be prepared to give him the design.

De Havilland grabbed the PAD back and studied the Thargoid design. The organic circuitry reminded him of the architecture in the nano plasma accelerator. Perhaps that was why the alien tech actually managed to integrate with the HPA in the first place.

Then an idea hit him. He laughed at how obvious it was. Why couldn't the NPA pattern replicator work in the HPA? His mind raced. The power loads would be a lot higher, that was a given. The NPA required breakdown feedback to the replicator, but he could rig that up in the HPA using some zener filaments. The power bands would need an overhaul too.

Shit, he thought. It could actually be possible. The idea grew like a fractal, spinning off and growing out of control. It was its own master now. De Havilland just sat back and waited for his sub conscious to thread the strands of thought together. He scribbled notes and plans in his PAD.

Ideas became concepts became preliminary designs. There were a lot of gaps however. He couldn't remember everything. But there was a general sense of something taking shape. There was enough there for a design scope for someone to flesh out.

Veruz emerged from the bathroom, towelling his hair. It was bleached a sandy blonde. He looked completely different.

De Havilland nodded, impressed. "Good work."

"Thanks Cap'n." Veruz looked up as he spoke, like a nervous child around an adult, wondering if he was still in trouble.

De Havilland cleared their growing pile of rubbish. He tidied the bathroom and checked the kitchen a final time. Satisfied they had been tidy burglars, he motioned to the door. "We have a meeting to get to."

A Deceitful Action, Part 6

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The artificial day was too bright, too invasive. It poured through his pupils, gouged through his optical nerve and screamed into his brain, giving de Havilland a headache. It forced him to squint to the point of closing his eyes.

He had visited hundreds of worlds and stations - as a drifter and a soldier - but this way by far the worst. Of course, de Havilland suspected it was less the station's light settings and more his state of mind: The bright light shone from above. He felt transparent. It was moments like that when he questioned his atheism.

He pushed the thought aside as he moved through the throngs of people on the walkways. They looked busy, like they had things to do. Normal things, that normal people did.

Envy panged in his mind, but only for a moment. He had had that life. But he had grown bored and thrown it away. He could never be normal again.

He pulled into a side road and pulled out his PAD as Veruz huddled in beside him. The kid was probably trying to keep the PAD from casual onlookers, but he was making them look dodgy as hell; a neon sign saying 'Criminals here.' He pushed Veruz against the wall, so they just looked like a pair of loitering mates.

He checked Sam's notes in the PAD then made their way through the foot traffic to a public lift. He closed the door before anyone else could board, and selected level 7.

Veruz's jaw worked behind closed lips. "Why did we wait until light to escape? We're sitting ducks now."

De Havilland snorted and clapped him on the shoulder. "You never heard of hiding in plain sight?"

"No."

"The police would also think it stupid for us to come out in the light. Therefore, they won't be looking so hard for us. All the traffic makes us even more invisible."

"I guess. . ." Veruz didn't seem happy, but didn't say anything else.

The back of the lift opened to light as they crossed the threshold of the intermediate levels. Level 7 opened up before them. The stained, steel roof disappeared below the rooftops as they plummeted to ground level.

It was a true segregation: the industrial sector was kept well clear of regular citizens. The lift stopped on the street outside a towering plastics plant.

"Have a nice day," chimed the elevator in a female voice. De Havilland thought of Emu and tripped. He caught himself and cursed himself. She was a little harder to push out of his mind than other things. But he did it anyway. He didn't have a choice. Crying like a baby wouldn't change his situation and bring her back to him.

The empty elevator raced back up to the ceiling and out of sight.

Veruz spotted an information terminal and logged on.

"Sector 7," de Havilland said, catching up. "Robquee Engineering."

Veruz hands darted over the keys. He looked up and pointed to the right. "This way."

The streets were less crowded; some people were on their way somewhere, but the rest were already there, working in the factories and workshops riddling this darker and dingier area of the station. De Havilland saw past the exterior though; this was the place where things were designed and built and kept the station in orbit. It was the most critical area on the station.

As they entered Sector 7, the traffic dispersed. They were on their own. Foreboding creased de Havilland's brow. They were exposed. Who knew how many cameras were embedded in the ceiling and scanning for fugitives right that second.

His heart rate slowly climbed as he searched his surroundings for anything out of the ordinary. He scanned every shadow, nook and cranny. He was sure there was an ambush up ahead: any policeman worth his salt would have made the connection between the HPA and Williamson base. They would have found out Robquee Engineering had a link with Sam Kemper.

De Havilland suddenly realised that the streets weren't just spartan, they were empty. There wasn't any traffic; foot or mobile.

Something wasn't right.

He almost turned around and walked away. He was in way over his head. Worse, he was dragging Veruz with him. Why did he volunteer to do this? He wasn't a criminal. He had no experience keeping hidden from the police. He was uncomfortable.

But he had a job to do. And he always finished his jobs. The police here may have been committed, but they weren't brilliant. Otherwise they wouldn't be posted at Williamson's Base.

De Havilland breathed deep. He would just have to take it one step at a time. There was no point being stupid though. He whispered to Veruz. "Off the main road. Now."

Veruz didn't resist. He looked spooked, head snapping back and forth as he looked for hidden dangers.

De Havilland guided them down a side street. The sped up once off the main drag.

The wound through the empty streets. Stainless pipes protruded from the metallic floor and the sides of building and mixed in the air above them. Water dripped from the pipe joins. Steam rose lazily from floor vents. Graffiti defaced building walls, growing in concentration as they moved forward.

De Havilland hunched his shoulders.

"Let's get out of here," said Veruz. For a kid who grew up in these kinds of slums, de Havilland noted, he sure didn't look comfortable.

A hollow clang rang out to de Havilland's left. He stopped and spun, but there wasn't anything in sight. His skin crawled as he forced his feet forward. They kept going in roughly the same direction whilst navigating the maze of streets. They entered an alley at speed.

The alley was narrow and long. The building either side reached to the ceiling, boxing them in.

The perfect place for an ambush.

A figure appeared ahead, blocking the alley exit.

De Havilland's heart ran cold. He clenched his fists as his mind calculated attack and defence movements. They had to get out of the alley; he had no doubt that the way they had come was already blocked off. They had to go forward.

De Havilland was running before he knew it. The opposing figure stepped forward into the light. A dark haired, scruffy scum bag. Crook, not cop.

Relief surged in him. A gang member was easier to deal with – and he had fewer qualms about doing it – than a policeman. He should have known that gangs would move in so soon after marshal law.

De Havilland sped up, Veruz in tow.

Footsteps rang out behind them.

The figure ahead put his hand out. "This is our territory."

De Havilland grinned, despite himself. Did this punk think putting his hand out would actually make de Havilland stop?

Then the figure reached into his pocket.

A familiar chill tingled de Havilland's neck. He tensed and reached for his Diplomat in his jacket. He didn't want to shoot anyone in front of Veruz right now – it would be hypocritical – but he wouldn't be much of a teacher if he was dead.

The figure withdrew a short pudgy shaft. A black jack. Very dangerous. If the figure managed a good hit on de Havilland's skull, de Havilland knew it would be game over.

"You have one second to stop. Or we'll take more than your money,"

De Havilland ignored him. Wasn't going to give the punk the satisfaction.

His fingers tightened around the Diplomat. He yanked it out. But then he spun it around and gripped the barrel to use the weapon as a club.

De Havilland staggered to a stop before the figure.

Footsteps pounded the pavement behind him. It was one or two people. He couldn't be sure. Either way, he couldn't wait for the punk in front of him to make a move. He would have to strike first. Risky, but necessary.

De Havilland threw his left arm forward; a jab to the punk's chin.

The punk ducked back, grabbed de Havilland's arm and pulled it sideways.

De Havilland, anticipating the move, spun with the movement, swinging in closer to the punk and rammed the diplomat's grip forward with all of his forward momentum.

The black jack sailed past de Havilland's head, glancing off his shoulder.

The Diplomat ground into the figure's solar plexus. The figure's mouth burst open like a pressure vessel. He doubled over, gasping.

De Havilland kned him in the crotch. He slammed his elbow into punk's head then cracked the pistol into the skull for good measure.

The figure dropped like a stack of cards.

Not even pausing for breath, De Havilland spun on his back foot, twirled the pistol around his trigger finger, crouched down and aimed back down the alleyway.

Veruz flattened himself against the wall.

The three figures running forward stopped. They stared back, arms wagging at their sides. They glanced at each other, as if unsure what to do.

De Havilland tensed his muscles holding himself still. His shoulder was screaming like ten thousand bastards from the black jack, but he refused to show any pain. He was a rock, an unmovable lump of granite. The pistol weighed nothing in his hands. He didn't need to think about it; rocks didn't think about those kinds of things. He just stared back at the three gang members.

The gang members were a trio of lost sheep; unsure what to do without someone to lead, to show them what to do.

De Havilland obliged them. He fired

The laser bolt chipped into the street by their feet.

The trio jumped, yelled and clawed past each other to run away.

De Havilland slowly released his breath, letting the adrenaline fade away. He relaxed, letting himself revert from a rock to a man with limbs that could move. His hands were shaking as he put the put back in his jacket.

The punk on the floor groaned.

De Havilland swung his boot out and punted the punk in the forehead.

The punk jerked and went silent.

De Havilland turned to Veruz. "Crisis over and a body count of zero. It is possible."

"Not everyone has had your training, cap'n."

De Havilland froze as his mind derailed. He had always thought that the marines had taught him how to kill. But it hadn't. It had taught him how not to kill.

He turned to Veruz. "I'd never thought of it like that before." he said. He picked up the discarded blackjack and passed it over. "I can probably trust you with one of these. You know how to use it?"

Veruz eyed the weapon and wetted his lips. It was a look of fear and anticipation: imagining the future possibilities yet fearing what they would bring. De Havilland knew that look well enough. He had worn it through out the marines.

"Swing and don't miss," Veruz whispered.

De Havilland smiled. "Too right. Now let's move before the rest of the gang come along."

The door chimed lightly as they entered the building. The reception area was small and tidy. Minor awards and trinkets graced one wall, a staircase the other. The back wall carried a polished plaque: "Robqueue Engineering: What you need, when you need."

De Havilland nodded in approval. The place came off as quietly professional. Too bad the executive was corrupt and dealing with criminals.

Criminals like himself. De Havilland grimaced at the thought, even as he moved forward.

The receptionist watched them with a raised eyebrow. And hawkish eyes.

De Havilland looked back at the receptionist, forced a smile - it felt unnatural - and put his hands on the counter between them.

"Hello my name is Vasquith de Havilland. I have a meeting with Henry Bigelaar and Jason Todd."

The receptionist's demeanour instantly changed. She smiled and batted her eyes before activating her link.

De Havilland felt his clothing. He must have looked quite rough. Like one of the gang members from outside. She must have thought he was trouble.

But now she was treating him like a regular human: not trying to kill, hurt or arrest him. It was nice.

The receptionist mumbled into her link for a moment before flicking narrowed eyes at De Havilland. "Mr Bigelaar hasn't heard of you."

De Havilland was expecting that. "Yes, I know. A mutual friend set the meeting up. Sam Kemper."

"One moment." The receptionist turned away from de Havilland, possibly to hide her whispers into the link.

De Havilland's heart raced. He tried to appear nonchalant, but was churning up inside. He glanced at Veruz, but the kid looked a million miles away.

The crux of the problem was if Bigelaar actually wanted anything to do with Sam Kemper. If Bigelaar had turned a new leaf, de Havilland and Veruz were going to be in big trouble.

Mr Bigelaar must have said something positive. The receptionist almost jumped in her seat. She spun around, straightened her back and smiled warmly again. "Mr Bigelaar will be right down."

Relief washed over de Havilland. Bigelaar was still a crook. De Havilland nodded and stepped back to a chair and sat down.

Veruz hovered nearby, perfectly still. His earlier jitters were no where to be seen.

They didn't wait long. A short, fat, balding man burst through the door at the back. "Mr de Havilland is it?" He raced forward, hand extended. "My name is Henry Bigelaar."

De Havilland watched Bigelaar's smile. It said one thing: I'll do whatever you want if you pay well. He was the kind of person de Havilland despised, but ironically, the kind he needed the most. It was another reminder of the slippery slope that principles say upon.

"Pleasure." The words felt like acid in his mouth, but he had to keep going. "May I introduce my business partner, Michael Veruz."

Bigelaar clasped Veruz's hands between his own. "Pleasure, pleasure." He waved to the door behind him. "This way please." He led through the door and took the next left into the board room.

Photos covered the walls. Each one showed a different industrial installation. Examples of Robquee work, perhaps. A monstrous wooden table filled the room. There was sufficient seating for thirty men. A big board of directors, obviously.

De Havilland glared at the table. He had spent too much of his AAI career in board rooms, discussing plans, pleasing the brass and generally wasting time he could have used to be productive. He moved around the table to the seat facing the door. An old instinct. *Watch the entries, know the exits, in case you need to use them fast.* He wasn't in a trusting mood, especially after the fight outside.

"What is happening with the gangs outside?" de Havilland asked.

Bigelaar turned slightly red and coughed. His eyes seemed to look over the entire room, before settling on de Havilland. "A hangover from when the Spartans took control. Interpol are slowly working their way down here to clean up the 'mess'."

De Havilland nodded. He had learnt two things. One: They were safe from Interpol down here, at least for the interim. And two: Bigelaar thought himself higher on the social ladder than a gang member. But they were both crooks and a drain on society. Not that de Havilland would voice those comments. Not yet, anyway.

Bigelaar ushered Veruz to a seat and sat down opposite de Havilland.

De Havilland stared back at him. He should have been more polite, but something inside refused to give this scum the time of day, let alone social courtesy. It was a battle to open his mouth.

Bigelaar looked nervous in the silence. He arranged a trio of PADS on the table and cleared his voice. "Mr Todd will be here in a moment. Before we begin, I assume you are offering the same terms as your friend Mr Kemper?"

De Havilland furrowed his brow. "Terms?"

Veruz leaned in. "Payment," he whispered.

"Ah yes," de Havilland said, hiding his embarrassment by leaning forward and meshing his fingers together. "We are happy to keep the same arrangements as before."

Bigelaar exhaled, relief evident on his face. "Excellent, excellent. So what is on the shopping list today?"

A tall dark man slid through the door. Bigelaar introduced him as Jason Todd, the Production manager.

De Havilland nodded at the man and handed over his PAD. "I need 20 initiators to the same specification you made for Sam Kemper. I also need a class sixteen ceramic-condensate emitter and a kilometre of superconducting zener filaments."

Bigelaar half nodded, distracted by the schematics on the PAD. He tilted it toward Todd who craned forward to look. "The initiators won't be a problem," said Todd.

de Havilland coughed. "There's one other thing."

Todd and Bigelaar looked up in unison.

de Havilland glanced at Veruz and pulled a small square of paper from his pant pocket. He unfolded it and passed it to Bigelaar. "I need a few of these made as well."

Bigelaar spun the sheet around several times. Seemingly unable to decode the pattern replicator schematics, he passed it to Todd.

Todd ran his eyes over the paper. He gasped and locked eyes with de Havilland.

De Havilland stared back. Todd knew what he was looking at, that was for sure. But de Havilland only knew what it was because of he drew it, and his experience with the NPA.

So how did Todd know it so well he identified it in a second? Perhaps he knew something he wasn't supposed to. De Havilland checked the doors for movement. He tuned out of the conversation, listening to the surrounding noises. The Diplomat's cool weight rested against the skin on his back; the Peacemaker his ankle. He flexed his fingers. If he was going to make a move, he wanted to be ready.

But the moment passed and no one burst through the door.

De Havilland blinked and pushed his brain back into the conversation. If Todd was batting for the other team, de Havilland would find out about it soon enough.

Todd summarised the pattern replicator to Bigelaar. He sounded more excited from an engineering perspective than as a spy with crucial information. Bigelaar, eternally cheery it seemed, agreed they could put a prototype together, but there would be extra cost.

De Havilland assured them there wasn't a problem. He didn't care how much it cost. He had Norman Mosser's wallet; criminal money to finance criminals.

Todd ran through the list again, downloading the schematics to his own PAD. "We have zener filaments in stock, and the initiator casing design is still programmed into the CNC." Todd's voice dropped to a murmur. He was obviously thinking something through. He looked up from the PAD. "We may have a problem."

de Havilland groaned inside. He didn't think it would have been that easy, but he had still hoped he would catch a break. Not today though. He cringed. "Yes?"

"We don't have any ceramic condensates. In fact, there aren't any in the entire system."

De Havilland's eyes widened. "What?" His mind raced. This made things infinitely more difficult. The emitter was the most crucial part on the shopping list. He took a deep breath and ran his hands over the table. It was denser wood to kitchen table from last night. Smooth, polished. Expensive.

"So how do we get some then?"

"There's a company in Delta Pavonis which supplies the entire sector. Ceramics-condensates are quite rare at the moment. Stocks are low across the galaxy and shipments stopped to this system after all the... political upheaval."

de Havilland sunk forward, resting his head on his enmeshed hands. Of course the ceramics were rare. What else could he have expected with his luck? His mind boggled at the new task. He would have to find a way off the station, find another business, buy some ceramics, bring them back to Williamson Base, find a way back on board the station, get the rare goods past customs and then get back off the station again. He had a headache.

Christ. de Havilland rubbed his forehead. *Shit, shit, shit.*

"What would you like us to do?" asked Bigelaar.

De Havilland stood up. He wasn't going to solve any problems sitting on his arse and feeling sorry for himself. He swiped his PAD off the table and dropped a pack of millicreds on the table. Cold hard cash for the deposit, just like last time. Untraceable money. Perfect for corrupt management.

"Get started on everything else," de Havilland commanded them. He turned to Veruz. "We're going to get the ceramics."

A Deceitful Action, Part 7

[Norman Mosser]

If you'll come with me, we'll take an NRS shuttle up to Gotham Park and look over the merchandise."

Sara's words rang in Norman's head as the shuttle escaped Argent's Claim's gravity well. Gotham Park, the orbital station reared out of the darkness as a flickering star, as light reflected off its rotating hull.

There was a lot of traffic around the station. A Lynx Bulk Carrier was pulling away. Small pinpricks danced around the station. There was an occasional orange flare of a hyperspace cloud.

The shuttle crawled upward. They were approaching the station from the rear. The shuttle came level with the station. A sign on the station in the large letters read: "Dock Other Side."

Norman glanced at Sam, Sara and the pilot. He cleared his throat. "Umm, you do realise-"

Sara touched Norman's arm.

Norman looked from her hand to its owner, dumbfounded. That was the first time Sara had made any human-like gesture. It felt interesting. A corner of his mind decided he could do with more of that touch, but his external armour fell into place and he stared dispassionately at her.

"We've come this way for effect, Mr Dover. I'm trying to sell you something here," she reminded him.

The shuttle rose above the station. The top arrowhead shaped habitat nacelle fell away, revealing the space in front of it.

Norman released a faint gasp. He saw it. He found himself getting to his feet.

One of the LRC's filled the view. She was vast, huge. Glorious. The shuttle drifted toward the behemoth. Maintenance lights illuminated the hull. She was in good nick. Armour plating adorned the hull, beefing the ship beyond huge to gigantic. She looked sturdy and sound, a boat any captain could be proud of. Half way along the hull, Norman picked out heavy blue letters, illuminated in white light.

A-J-N R-E-P-U-L-S-E

Norman's heart leapt. His face split into a boyish grin, the kind one felt when young and stuck in a candy store. "I want her," he said matter of factly.

Sara smiled for the first time since Norman had met her. Perhaps as she got closer to a deal, she turned more human. She was right though: the shuttle's flight path was definitely effective.

"Wait until I show you the Ajax," Sara whispered.

Norman shook his head. "No, this is the ship for me." He turned to Sam. "What do you think?"

Sam went to the effort of peering past Norman to take a look at the ship. He was trying to look interested, but it looked strained. "Looks pretty good, TK. It should do us."

Norman sat down and slapped Sam's back, trying to get some excitement out of him. "She's the one, James. She's the one."

Sara sat back down and crossed her legs. "Well then, if everyone is happy, perhaps we should head straight to the station?"

Norman and Sam dragged their bags into the New Rossyth Shipyards owned hotel room and threw them on the ground. Sara entered last, hands crossed and a dour expression, as she cast here eyes around the room.

"I'll let you get settled in and I'll come back later to take you for a tour of the *Repulse*," she said.

Norman flashed a grin, more from the plan he had just devised than any need to be civil. "That would be perfect."

Sara nodded and backed out the door.

"Well," said Norman as he examined the room. "What do you think James? Really?"

Sam's shoulders sagged, just for a moment, before he pushed himself back to full height. "It'll do the job. You sound pretty excited about it." There was a hard edge to his voice.

Norman frowned. Sam knew that the hotel was bugged; NRS would still have the Alliance Intelligence Service checking them out. So Sam's comment was a disguised warning: *You're using too much emotion. You'll make them suspicious.* But if he didn't show excitement at the ship, AIS would get suspicious also.

He shook his head. They were too far in now to second guess the Alliance now. They'd just have to deal with problems as they arose and hope that their plan was robust enough to survive whatever the Alliance threw at it.

"Come on. Let's go get some food. I'm starving," said Norman. Translation: Let's go somewhere that isn't bugged so we can talk freely.

Sam rummaged through his bags and withdrew his PAD. "Ready."

Norman sat down at a table on the promenade, overlooking the greenhouse habitat. A soothing natural view below, noisy patrons surrounding him, and no windows for intelligence agents to use laser microphones on.

All in all, it was the best he was going to get. He kept an eye on the passerbys, memorising everyone sitting down, reading their PADs or eating their meals. The ones that still loitered after he and Sam finished their meals would be the ones to watch. Suspicion is what kept Norman alive. If there were intelligence agents around, he needed to know.

Sam appeared out of the crowd and sat down opposite him. He slid his PAD from his jacket and dropped it on the table. He looked up, expression blank.

Norman looked at the PAD then up at Sam. "That's it?" he said, choosing his words carefully. "As ordered," Sam said, nodding. He moved around in his seat. "Food?"

Norman jerked his thumb at the hut behind him which housed the restaurant's kitchen and waiting staff. "Already ordered. Altarian duck for me, Phekdan shrew for you."

Sam poked out his tongue. "I hate Phekdan food."

Norman frowned. He couldn't remember Sam ever having spent time in Phekda. He was actually partial to food from the northern quadrant. It was far more adventurous than the tasteless food of the Empire. "We can swap then."

Sam grunted. "Fine."

Norman ran his eyes over the restaurant again. All the tables were out in the open, cordoned off, but still mingling with the regular foot traffic of the station. Perhaps it had been a mistake to choose this restaurant. It would look too suspicious to get up and leave before the food arrived though. They would have to play it out. He gave the PAD a tap. "You got that pretty quickly."

Sam shrugged. "I'm good at what I do."

Norman looked past Sam to the tree tops below. Yes, Sam was good. But was he that good? Sam had been gone for under five minutes, but had managed to crack into the NRS mainframe and download the list of all the parties interested in the two LRC's.

In other words, the list of Norman's competitors.

But Sam would have to be a red hot hacker to get that job done in under five minutes. Sam was accumulating a few too many question marks for Norman's liking. He would have to keep a closer eye on his lieutenant and best friend.

He spun the PAD around and pulled it toward him. He browsed through the names without recognising any.

A sense of loss came over him. He should have known these rich and influential people. He had been out of the loop since before the disastrous attack on Fort Donalds. It felt such a long time ago.

The galaxy had moved on, and so had he. He selected a name, Ted Daniels, and the PAD opened his biography, at least what the AIS had uncovered.

It was thorough.

Norman swallowed. He scanned the crowd again, searching for Alliance agents. Had his fake ID and biography been good enough? Was it detailed enough to fool AIS? He shivered at how exposed he felt.

The waiter returned with their food. Norman scanned through a tip. The waiter bowed and disappeared.

Norman attacked the shrew as if it was his last meal. For all he knew, it was. Damn, he was really on edge. He felt the soothing weight of the Deathwrecker tucked into the back of his belt. He'd be alright. He always got out of tough spots.

After the waiter cleared the plates, Norman returned to the PAD. Ted Daniels was rich. Rich, and arrogant. A dangerous combination in an auction.

Norman pursed his lips. He was going to have to go. He glanced at Sam. "I'd like to meet Mr Daniels."

Sam's brow furrowed, suggesting he had read between the lines. "Sure, that could be a good idea." He checked his wrist chrono. "We should probably get back. Sara might be waiting for us."

Norman pushed back and up to his feet. "Good idea. I want to make a quick detour though." He shook the PAD. "Mind if I look after this for awhile?"

"Sure."

Sara wasn't waiting for them when they returned to the room. Sam went to the bathroom while Norman lay on his bed, schemes and scenarios swimming through his head.

There were a few names on Sam's list that Norman would prefer never entered the auction room. Too many to eliminate without raising undue suspicion. He began outlining an anonymous bulletin board ad.

The door chimed.

Norman eased up to lean against the headboard. "Enter."

Sara breezed through as the door slid aside. Her hands dropped to her hips as she looked Norman up and down. "No time for a shower?"

Fuck. Norman clenched his jaw. Forcing a calming breath through his teeth, he felt his clothes. He hadn't changed since meeting Sara. Not a good look. Regaining control of his mouth, he forced a laugh. "Ha ha, no, food came first."

Sara nodded. "Are you ready?"

Norman leapt to his feet. "I was born ready."

At first glance, the bridge of the *Repulse* was identical to similar vintage Long Range Cruisers. They entered through the rear onto an engineering mezzanine, which overlooked the astrogation and command floor. Exactly the same setup as the *Azure Sunset*.

But there were subtle differences. More screens on the mezzanine; controls he had never seen before, sensor readouts he hadn't seen since his days in the military.

The walls were a darker, bleaker, more military colour. The lighting was muted. The command chair was blistering with readouts and switches. It was a more professional setup than the *Sunset*.

Norman's heart beat louder with every new discovery. Initially reluctant to part with the *Sunset*, he was now looking forward to the upgrade. It would be nice to pilot a ship not falling to bits for a change. He admired the view as Sam ran his fingers over some of the astrogation readouts.

"Look at this TK," Sam said, waving Norman over.

Norman whistled. Sam was looking at the thruster controls. They looked good. A ship that big could never turn on a dime, but the readings looked impressive. Some of the military hardware clearly remained in the engine department. Comparing the *Repulse* with the *Sunset* was comparing a professionally built race ship to a Boy-racers garage tune up. That erased and lingering doubts about buying the *Repulse*. He was going to get this ship, whatever it took.

They moved through the front cargo bay – the military structural enhancement clear to see, and perfect for the HPA – before moving to environmental controls and the main security station. As she headed aft, she pointed out all the remaining military upgrades which Norman memorised for later use.

Engineering was a city in itself. The chief engineer's office overlooked the plaza of ducting, turbines and controls. A central motivation unit dominated the scene. It was clean, tidy and looked about twenty years newer than the *Sunset's* engineering section. The clearly superior prime mover of the *Repulse* and the Imperial military hyperdrive of the *Sunset* would make a potent combination, Norman realised.

But what really interested him was the controls in the chief's office. Without appearing obvious, he checked the readouts. It looked like the ship could be controlled from the office.

Perfect.

Norman stomped his foot on the floor.

Sam looked back.

Norman gave an almost imperceptible nod, and blushed as Sara looked around. "Sorry, I slipped."

Sara turned back to the view of engineering and continued her sales pitch to Sam, as he discreetly manoeuvred her away from Norman.

When they were both out of sight, Norman dropped to his knees before the control station. He pulled his PAD from his pocket, twisted off the back and withdrew a black cube with four electrical connectors. He pulled his chrono off his wrist and removed the false front, revealing a micro logic array.

Two components, forming a remote control.

He clicked them together and unwound the four wires from the casing. Grabbing a sonic-driver from his pocket, he attacked the four screws holding the underside casing of the control panel.

One came off, followed by the second and third. The fourth snagged in the thread.

Sweat dripped from Norman's face. He wiped his eyes and pushed the driver up harder.

The screw turned and slid out.

He dropped to his back and wiggled into the footspace. Looking up into the back of the panel, he eyed the programmable logic controller and plugged in one of the remote's wires.

Norman's blood ran cold. He froze. What was the next one? Panic inched into the edges of his mind, like a spider encircling its prey.

But his neural lace kicked into gear and he *remembered*.

"Sorry Sara, just tell me about this-" It was Sam's voice.

Norman's heart raced. They were coming back. Hands shaking, he grabbed the next wire, dropped it, grabbed it again and fed it in. He finished the last two, tucked the controller inside and put the cover back on. He wriggled out.

Sara's feet came into view.

Norman cried out and grabbed his leg. “ahhh!”

Sam rushed forward. “TK, are you alright?”

Norman pushed himself upright and forced a grimace. “I was just looking at these controls when my leg cramped up.”

Sara stood at a distance, talking into her wrist.

Norman forced himself to keep breathing. He used every ounce of will to keep his eyes away from her wrist and focused on his leg. Had she fallen for it? Or was she calling in the AIS?

Sam helped Norman to his feet. “You ok?”

Sara dropped her wrist and frowned. “Perhaps we should cut the tour short for now.”

Norman nodded. He forced strain into his voice. “Perhaps you’re right. Lead the way.”

Sam eased Norman onto his bed. Norman grimaced and acted like he was trying to get comfortable. “Sorry to ruin your schedule,” said Norman to Sara. His cheeks warmed, from the embarrassment of almost being caught, but it also served to convince Sara he was authentic. He hoped.

“No problem, Mr Dover, but you’ll have to entertain yourselves for the next few days as I look after the last of the arriving bidders.”

“I understand,” said Norman.

“But if you want to inspect the *Repulse* again, or if you change your mind about the Ajax, contact me and we can arrange another tour.”

“I appreciate your personal attention to our needs,” Norman replied.

Sara nodded. Silence filled the room for a moment, a pregnant pause, the type that Sara looked like she wanted to fill. But she nodded again and disappeared through the door.

Norman jumped to his feet. “I’m actually feeling better. I think I just need to walk it off.”

Sam grinned knowingly. “I hear the promenade is nice this time of the day.”

Norman ran through the final details of his plan, the minor points that could only be sorted once they had arrived. They were now good to go. And as luck had it, they had a few extra days to get ready. “You’d better get ground side,” said Norman. “I want our ship up here as soon as possible.”

Sam nodded and was about to turn around when a scuffle broke out ahead. Shouts echoed over the crowds.

A spike of adrenaline hit Norman’s heart, but he realised it wasn’t agents trying to arrest him, and the spike faded. Curiosity overrode safety and he pushed through the people to get a closer look.

A squad of blue uniformed officers pinned a man to the ground, arms behind his back. The man shook his head, screaming, but Norman picked out enough details to recognise him.

Ted Daniels. His number one competitor. Norman grinned at Sam as he finally caught up. It was amazing what a little false evidence and an anonymous phone call could do.

Norman checked his mental list. One down, several more to go.

The crowd began to disperse. Across the way, a weathered man ran his eyes over the scene.

Norman’s heart ran cold. He froze. Literally stopped in his tracks, before old reflexes got him moving. He grabbed Sam’s shoulder and pulled him behind a structural beam.

Norman slowly peered around the corner. There. He saw him again. He ducked back behind the beam. His heart raced.

“What is it?” asked a clearly confused Sam.

Norman couldn't answer him. His chest heaved as he panted. Although his mind felt like a whirlpool, there was only one question on his lips.

What the hell was that detective Stenson doing here?

A Deceitful Action, Part 8

[Norman Mosser / Sam Kemper]

"What is it?" Sam reiterated, grabbing Norman's lapels. His eyes were wide, searching Norman's face for an answer.

The promenade dilated around them, making Norman feel exposed. Sounds became muted and a chill racked his stomach. He blinked and focused on Sam. "Detective Stenson is here."

A frown crossed Sam's face. "Who?"

"Tried to arrest de Havilland in Williamson's Base. Snuck onto the Sunset and killed Annalise."

Sam's eyes narrowed to slits. "Oh." His voice was flat, empty, cold. "Him."

Norman felt a pang of sympathy for his friend. He didn't realise Sam and Annalise had been that close. There were more immediate problems however, such as how to escape without being seen. Although they were in disguise, Stenson could have memorised his mannerisms; how he walks, talks. De Havilland had said Stenson was observant.

Sam's head darted back and forth like a hungry lion, ready to destroy.

Norman grimaced. Surely Sam wasn't going to rush out there in some misguided thirst for revenge? Norman worked his jaw, running through his options. They needed to retreat and reformulate their plans.

"Sam, he doesn't know you. Lead us out of here. I'll walk behind you."

Sam dropped his shoulders, took a deep breath and nodded. He had obviously come to his senses. He moved out from behind the structural beam and strolled straight across the promenade to a nearby lift.

Norman pursed his lips, doubt riddling him. How much did Stenson know? Would he be looking for him by himself, or him and Sam together? The arguments swirled in a maelstrom of frustration in his mind until he shook his head and marched out behind Sam.

Eyes focused straight ahead, he held his breath the entire way. He slipped through the lift door Sam was holding open. Only then did he allow himself to breathe.

The door closed with a ping and the lift accelerated upward to their hotel.

A tempest of cause and effect spiralled through Norman's mind. Stenson escaped from the *Sunset* while it was still in hyperspace. He should have died, been caught in an eddy and never seen again. Only Thargoids could control witchspace to that degree.

Or people using Thargoid technology. His throat tightened before his neural lace kicked in, relaxing his muscles. There was only one organisation that could have rescued Stenson from witchspace.

"Sam," Norman whispered. He locked eyes with his friend, but struggled to get the words out, like there was an invisible force restricting his voice box. "INRA. They're here."

Sam froze. His eyes turned cold, like empty orbs, devoid of life. "INRA." His hand snapped out suddenly and he punched the wall. "Bastards."

Norman could smell Sam's fear, but he was disguising it with anger quite well. The doors opened and they stepped out.

Sam strode for their hotel, but Norman held him back.

Sam spun, blazing hot coals for eyes. "What?"

Norman grimaced. "It's ok, Sam. It's a hiccup, not a disaster. We can work around it."

Sam tried to free his hand, but Norman held fast. He pulled Sam closer. "Listen to me, dammit. We can do this. But we have to stay the course. We can't afford for you to go all funny on me."

Sam's hot breath washed over his face. He stared at Sam without flinching.

Sam relaxed and looked away, breathing deeply.

Norman let him go. He suddenly became aware that they were in a public space and not alone. His cheeks warmed as he smiled meekly at a passerby. He whispered into Sam's ear.

"Get planetside and get our ship back here. And you might want to find some new hardware while you are at it. I have a new plan."

He whispered his plan to Sam, who nodded slowly. "And get back as quick as you can," Norman finished. Sam clicked his shoulders and walked back toward the lift. He didn't look back.

Norman sighed and continued onto the hotel. Things were unravelling fast. He needed to think. Plans had to be adaptable, but there came a point where you had to accept that the plan was torn to pieces and a new one was needed. He needed a drink. He had some serious thinking to do.

Norman lounged in his seat on his hotel room's balcony. The promenade was about ten levels below him. A faint breeze of hot air convection rose past the balcony, giving the scene a more natural feel. Blurs of colour that were people moved about below. There was a general murmur of noise, but the filtered air gave no hint of smell.

Norman sipped his Altairian whiskey. New Rossyth Shipyards hadn't messed around when they booked him a hotel. Imperial five star were better, but not by much. He sighed and stretched, actually feeling relaxed. He was up high, away from prying eyes. He was acting like his persona should: enjoying the high life while it lasts.

He tossed the rest of the drink down his throat and set the glass back on the table. The ice cubes rattled and split.

Norman smiled at the cubes. "Yes, you don't like being naked, do you? I'd better cover you up."

He reached for the whiskey bottle when a scream came from the promenade. Alcohol forgotten, he dived for the balustrade. People blurs were racing away from a point directly below Norman.

There were only two blurs left. Norman leant forward, squinting. His neural lace cleared up the image between the eyes and brain.

One of the figures was standing up. The other wasn't. And he was missing his chest.

Norman pursed his lips. Only a fool would commit such blatant murder in a station. Now that he thought about it, Mack's uncle was arrested for doing just the same thing.

He briefly wondered where Mack was and if he was ok, but reminded himself that the kid had tried to kill him. He shook himself back to reality. The killer below was likely a contract killer. With any luck, he had been hired by Sam to kill another of Norman's competitors.

But now it was time to act like TK Dover. TK Dover hadn't seen a murder before; he would be shocked and run for help. He grabbed the comm to tell the concierge.

Sam walked right past the door to his and Norman's hotel room. He shook the briefcase in his left hand and checked the EM disruptors in his suit – to garble any hidden cameras or microphones. He straightened his shoulders and ran through the next few moments in his mind. The steps, the hand movements, the fluency. He had everything he needed. It was a simple operation he had done before.

He flexed his gloved hands in anticipation. He stopped at the door numbered 1097.

He knocked three times. "Room Service."

A muffled voice called from the room. There was a bang and a curse behind the door.

Sam pulled the SIG Sauer P338 'Wasp' from his jacket. He raised his arm.

The door opened.

Sam pulled the trigger. Twice. In quick succession. The laser blast made a faint thump, but the silencer filtered the typical screech.

The look of confusion was frozen on the man's face as his heart melted into char. He collapsed in a heap.

Sam stared blankly at the body. He stepped over the body and closed the door. He strode through the rooms, looking and listening for any one else.

The suite was empty. He holstered the weapon and emptied the briefcase on the table: a scanner, a micro auto-doc, a hypospray and a 3d printer. The kind of kit regular people saw in spy movies, but which Sam knew to be real and had an intimate knowledge of. This was what he had done as a job before joining Norman's crew. He turned to the body on the floor – billionaire Aloysius Grant, who wanted both LRC's – and hauled his face up to the scanner.

Sweating and trembling to hold the body still, the scanner took a three dimensional map of Grant's face. Once the scanner beeped, Sam grunted and lifted the body even higher until the scanner was looking at Grant's voice box.

The scanner beeped again. Done. Sam dropped the body and wiped his hands on his pants. The scanner sat on the information for a few seconds before sending instructions to the auto-doc. As the auto-doc spun and buzzed, Sam swapped clothes with Grant. They were about the same size, fortunately.

The auto-doc finished and ejected a capsule holding a blue gel. Sam fed it into the hypospray, and forced the nozzle of the spray into his chin.

He took a deep breath, settling himself. He closed his eyes and activated it.

Pain ran like lightning forks of torture across his face, following every vein through his flesh like a river delta.

When he came to, he realised he was on the ground. Echoes of the pain spasmed through his facial muscles as he tried to groan. Carefully, he got to his feet and found a mirror.

His face was distorted beyond all recognition. He wasn't Sam anymore. He wasn't even Sam dressed up as James Bond with a hint of Norman Mosser.

He was Aloysius Grant. Without a moustache.

The printer was already remedying that. It was polymer based, but it looked real enough. Sam applied some sealant and attached the moustache to his upper lip.

The printer then used its store of semi conductor material to make a small circuit board. Sam pressed it against his own voice box. A fuzzy feeling ran through his neck. He said a memorised quote then played a recording of Grant saying the same quote. The PAD recognition software compared the voices. It gave a 95% chance the voices were the same.

Pretty good, Sam decided. Good enough to work, but enough doubt for anyone studying him too closely to look closer.

Just as Norman wanted.

Sam pulled a pair of plastic bags from his pocket. He had one last job to do before any of Grant's minions returned. Then he would just have to practice acting like Aloysius. The auction was tomorrow after all.

Sam advanced on the cadaver.