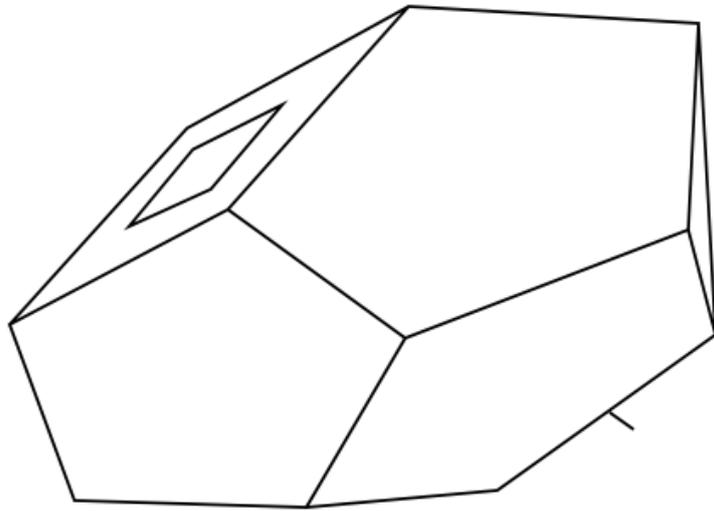


The Elite BBS Presents:
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

ANARCHY RISING

THE HPA SAGA



Volume

1

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Side Project

[Norman Mosser]

Norman grimaced as he met the pirates face-to face on board their vessel. Out of necessity he was wearing a pressure suit as his current body was lacking the gills that he needed to survive in the watery living quarters of the Moray.

Most of the human population of the galaxy were ignorant of this aquatic race's existence, and tended to forget or misinterpret the origins of the Moray Starboat, but the fish-men bided their time and kept themselves out of the public eye and out of the news as a means of survival. This made them excellent thieves, as they were capable of completely covering their tracks and avoiding making the ripples that would attract unwelcome interest.

The leader spoke, an aquaphone taped to his throat. His voice echoed over the commlink in Norman's helmet.

'Ssso Norman, you sseek to make a deal with ussss?'

'Indeed. I wish to obtain a weapon'

'What isss the nature of the weapon that you sssseek?'

'A Huge Plasma Accelerator'

'That Norman, isss a tricky item to obtain. It will be very cossstly'

'How cosss - costly?'

'We will require a ssertain item. Ten millilitresss of a ssssubsstanssse you know assss black. And Five Million creditssss'

'A reasss - reasonable price. Agreed'

'Exsssellent. We will contact you when we have the weapon'

Norman was ushered out of the Moray and into the airlock of his own ship. The airlock mechanism complained as it was forced to extract all the water that had come across with him. Once back on board and in dry clothes, Norman poured himself a glass of an Altair red wine and mused. Soon he would have both a ship and a gun worthy of it.

He looked into a handy mirror and began practicing his maniacal laugh.

[Commander Jake Somersby]

Jake leaned back in his chair, frowning slightly as he read the security reports for the Southern Habitat section of Longhaul. There was no doubt about it; the illegal Hand Weapons ring was growing in business. Jake muttered under his breath as he picked up a bottle of Riedquatian Ale with his other hand, and sipped it. He'd have to put more officers undercover to crack that ring.

The door chime rang suddenly, and Jake looked up. Through the glass panel doors, one of the station communications officers stood. Reaching under his desk, the S.C depressed a button with his thumb, allowing the doors to slide open smoothly.

The man stepped forward, with a datapad in one hand. "Sir, we got a personal transmission for you half an hour ago."

Jake sighed. "I'm really busy, Frank. Who's it from?"

Frank glanced at the 'pad. "It's from your Uncle Peters."

Jake looked up sharply. "Let me have that." He took the console from the comm. officer, and waved him out. Closing the doors, he accessed the message.

=====

TO THE CHIEF OF SECURITY, LONGHAUL OUTPOST - HIS EYES ONLY.

=====

Recent information leaks suggests weapons smuggling ring already discussed about to take delivery of H.P.A (Huge Plasma Accelerator) in Riedquat. Be reminded that H.P.A is registered only for use within this organisation's navy.

Request you find out information to support leads.

Uncle Peters.
Executive President
The Corporation

=====

Below was a readout of names related to the ring, and some photos. Also was there last recorded positions.

Jake then memorised the information, and through the pad against the other wall, before drawing a hand laser, and disintegrating the 'pad. He then tapped the intercom.

"Sally, tell the technicians to ready the ship in Bay Six."

"Bay Six?" Sally's voice sounded surprised. "You know I need clearance for that..."

"How about clearance from the S.C." Jake said. Then, he added. "And make sure the military lasers are charged and ready."

Jake took his finger off the button, and slipped on a jacket with his name, pilot registry, and a single tag on the left chest pocket.

=====

FER-DE-LANCE
TOR - 166
"SHOWDOWN"

=====

[Commander Lief Ericson]

The Asp was coming about to a vector on Le Soeur du Dan Ham, after a profitable run to Lave with some rather dubious looking pharmaceuticals, now all I needed was to get to the station with as little damage as possible, unless some profitable bounty hunting came up

"Jamie check out the traffic will you, see if there's anyone worth worrying about incoming"

"Sure boss" my co-pilot said checking the long-range scanner "Nothing on an intercept course, but I have a group of ships on course to intercept a single small craft."

"Check them out then, there might be some bounty on them." "most of them are clean, but they have an imp explorer with them that has a decent sized bounty on him."

"OK, now tell me bout there target, I'm not going to give a pirate a hand just cos he pissed of some other lot of scum"

I prepared to change course anyway, since it sounded like it might be profitable and I needed the cash to pay off the loan on this Asp.

"Uh, Lief he's clean, but he's in a Fer-De-Lance, aren't they illegal?"

"Yeah, have been for donkeys years. Now this I gotta see. Jamie power up the shields and weapons."

I brought the ship to its new heading "Computer contact that Fer-De-Lance"

"Commander of Fer-De-Lance TOR-166 this is Lief Ericson Commander of the Asp Explorer Rocinante, be advised you have a large unfriendly contingent on an intercept course, do you require assistance?"

"Right Jamie lets see what he says, are all systems powered up now?"

"Yeah boss, what if he doesn't want any help?"

"Oh, that's not really an option. He's getting it whether he likes it or not, I was just being polite so he didn't try and fry us"

"If you say so Lief"

"Besides, I know that De-Lances were top flight in their day but, even so, he's gonna be hard pressed to fight off that mob on his own"

With a slight glow from the shields the Asp powered its way through the dark of out-system Riedquat.

* * *

[Nomura]

Nomura, on the bridge of his personal Imperial Courier, sat back and contemplated the comms traffic he had just intercepted.

Hmm, he thought, I think I should get involved.

Nomura hailed the Fer-De-Lance "Jake, This is Nomura do you require assistance or back up?"

The comms link crackled back, "Hey Nomura come along"

Nomura laughed and said "On my way", setting the ship to red alert, raising shields and charging lasers.

Nomura opened the comms channel and breathed into the mike "*cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war*"

[Commander Jake Somersby]

Jake grinned as he watched the white blip of Nomura's Courier line up alongside him, and the ASP off to starboard angle around to attack. He opened a comm. channel to them both. "Okay, people, let's kick some!"

He pulled back on the control stick, and the ancient Fer-De-Lance pulled over in a half-loop, before rolling level with the incoming ships.

There was a slight shudder through the craft as the Imperial Courier shot passed, fusion engines blasting at full. The ASP joined the Courier's wing as all three ships bared down on the approaching group.

Jake tapped into the computer, and smiled. They definitely did build these things well. A pity they were outlawed...

Jake primed the military lasers, and after a short moment saw the lights on the HUD go green, and a message appear saying MILITARY LASERS CLEARED FOR FIRING.

Jake slammed the throttle home, and felt the *Showdown* shudder as the powerful engines to the aft propelled the vessel forward. Ahead were 6 large white blips, and they were going to be in visual range any second...

[Commander Lief Ericson]

"Right Jamie, keep an eye on those ships, if one looks like its gonna get behind us fire the missile at him, that should keep 'im busy for a little while."

"Sure, boss"

I punted the Asp out of the oncoming bogey's firing plane and turned off the fly-by-wire, then I angled the *Rocinante* up towards my intended target and waited with the comforting whine of fully operational shields hovering just out of earshot.

Sure enough a few seconds later the Fer-De-Lance fired at the foremost Imperial Explorer and got a good hit.

"Jeez boss, he's got some top lasers on that old ship"

"Well yeah, what did you expect?" I said as I watched the explorer peel off with one of its engines smoking "That fool didn't have any shields up. He's either stupid or overconfident. Jamie, keep an eye out for any other ships coming in."

I drew a bead on my chosen victim, who was just trying to get me back in his sights and as I came up to him I fired and watched with satisfaction as his shields started to drop, then failed entirely.

Off to starboard the Imp courier was making short work of his first adversary as the port engine pod of my targets ship blew up.

"Boss, one of them is trying to get behind the fer-de-lance"

"Well nail him with the missile then, idiot!"

I looked round with satisfaction, two dead one crippled and one nearly gone "They weren't expecting much of a fight were they Jamie?" as I manoeuvred my Asp to target my next opponent.

* * *

[Commander Jake Somersby]

WARNING: LASER OVERHEAT

"Damn!" Jake slammed his fist on the panel angrily. Well, he couldn't blame the ship; she'd been in storage for years. Looks like the Laser Cooling Booster couldn't handle the military lasers.

Looking around, he saw with a grin that all but two of the opposing group were ever destroyed or disabled. The Courier was just destroying an enemy Cobra MK III, and the ASP was targetting the last Imp Explorer.

Soon the battle was over. The three vessels lined up, and cruised towards La Sour du Dan Ham. Jake called the others.

"Listen, thanks guys. Drop by any bar, and say Jake Somersby said have a free drink. They know who I am."

The ASP acknowledged, and moved off. Suddenly, Nomura's face appeared on the screen.

"Hey Jake, what's all this top secret stuff? I thought you were an Imperial."

Somersby chuckled as he tapped into the console. "In spirit, my friend, in spirit. I work for something bigger than all of us."

Nomura smiled slightly. "You mean this Organisation? Is it really as big as the rumours say?"

Jake leaned forward. "Nomura, The Organisation's origins predate both the Empire and even the Federation." He turned a dial, and the interior lights brightened. "Which the Organisation has a lot of influence in."

"The Federation or the Empire?"

Jake grinned. "Take your pick." He turned the ship. "See you around, Nomura. I suppose you have to report all of this."

Nomura laughed. "What's that Jake? Your transmission has been disrupted beyond hearing for the past 5 minutes." The screen went blank, and Somersby sighed, shaking his head with a grin. Then, he fired up the Jump Drive, which suddenly through the vessel to lightspeed.

* * *

[Commander Lief Ericson]

"Well Jamie, what do you make of that then?" I said as I leaned back in my chair in the World's End and enjoyed my Riedquat ale.

"I dunno Lief, but we made a nice profit on this trip."

"Yes, especially since someone found Thurber as intensely irritating as I did and decided to kill him, that was quite handy. Now don't just sit there, go and get us some more beer!"

While he was gone I wondered what a former Imperial operative was doing in Riedquat in a ship that had been illegal for fifty odd years and attracting what was, even by Riedquat standards, a rather unfriendly welcome.

"Boss, have you heard, someone's nicked a huge plasma accelerator!"

"Really, that is most interesting, I wonder which particular madman has the cash and the ship to mount one of them? Bit careless of the Feds to lose it though, they don't exactly slip behind a pilots couch do they?"

"Do you think its got anything to do with that guy in the Lance?"

"No Jamie, Somersby isn't dumb enough to get involved in something like that, unless he's trying to find it again, anyway that's none of our business"

"So you're going to start poking your nose in anyway aren't you?"

"Now, Jamie I resent the implication that I meddle in other people's business, WE'RE just going to make a few discrete enquiries to see if there is anything going on that might be worth getting involved in."

"So where do we go, that Somersby guy left the system ages ago. We'll never get a lead on him now."

"We don't need to. The last I heard he had taken up a post a LHO, a little indie station in Diso, so that's where we'll go, plus its very discrete and we might be able to pick up some goodies to trade as well."

"Whatever you say boss, shall I go and prep the ship?"

"Nah, we got plenty of time, lets stay here for a while, I think this is your first proper Riedquat run so you might as well get drunk."

I sat back and watched the other patrons of the bar coming and going and wondered what the hell was going on around here.

Cover-up in Federation Quartermasters

[Random Intergalactic Gossip]

We, at RIG are honoured to break to you the news that there has been a cover up in the Federal Navy's central stores in Eta Cassiopeia.

RIG investigators posing as prophets from the church of KumByar were able to infiltrate the facility and discovered documents that suggest that they have managed to misplace a rather large piece of equipment. Loss of equipment is not a major issue, as many items are misplaced or stolen in a facility that stores everything from fuses to fusion reactors. This particular item however raises serious questions of the competency of the Federal Navy's employees.

They have managed to lose a Huge Plasma Accelerator.

For those who don't know, a Huge Plasma Accelerator or HPA is a weapon so large and powerful it, like military lasers is not sold on the open market. It weighs more than a Panther Clipper and can only be mounted on superlarge craft such as the Lynx, LRC or a naval warship.

We at RIG are astounded that they have managed to lose one. Their records show that it should be in hangar 32, row 12, shelf 32. Instead there is a two thousand tonne gap and no-one seems to want to admit nothing is there. At the time of writing the employees are obviously attempting to hide this loss from their superiors. Alas, the cause of news insist that we expose their subterfuge.

Next week: Priests and Private Property - how easy is it to penetrate perimeters pretending to be priests?

* * *

Galactic News

Federation messes up raid on HPA thieves - wrong location

Reports have come through from Eta Cassiopeia after the Federation raided a corporation warehouse - and came back empty-handed.

The Federation special forces PAT (Planetary Assault Troops) Regiment 12 was dropped via the FBS *Kennedy* onto the surface of Trojan at 0800 hours this morning.

After the exposure of the missing Huge Plasma Accelerator. They reportedly raided a corporation warehouse in the city of Manchester, belonging to the well-known R3 Corporation.

However, it was an embarrassment after the regiment found the warehouse contained nothing but parts for the Corporation's space fleet.

The R3 Corporation has yet to comment, but earlier today the Federation issued a statement placing the blame on the *Kennedy's* captain, Peter Toldan.

The statement says that it was a "miscommunication of orders" and a "judgement call on the Captain's behalf."

A spokesman for the Federation refused to answer any questions, saying that the matter "would be turned over to a disciplinary committee."

=====

OTHER NEWS

=====

Jake Somersby spotted flying an ASP - praises the fighter.

Jake Somersby, an independent commander and recently Chief of Security to Longhaul Outpost, was spotted earlier this week boarding an ASP Explorer. Our reporters caught up with him, and questioned the commander about this.

Commander Somersby, who has a C100,000 Bounty on his head placed by the Federation, cheerfully praised the Explorer.

"I'll admit to having no love for the Federation of any kind whatsoever, however I have to say that their military engineers make a good fighter. The ASP is no Courier, and therefore cannot pack as much of a punch in civilian outfit, but she turns a lot faster, and can be lethal even with a 5 Megawatt Pulse Laser."

At that point, the commander excused himself, saying he needed to urgently leave for Longhaul.

=====

BUSINESS NEWS

=====

Epsilon Corporation set to buy Cobra MK IV

The Epsilon Corporation has announced it is to place an order for 500 Cobra MK IV's.

The Corporation, recently involved in redesigns of the Fer-De-Lance to make the vessel once again space-legal, is to buy 500 of the new ships when they are built.

The Cobra MK IV was revealed earlier this year, and is the latest state-of-the-art ship. It is in final testing now, and is expected to be released for sale sometime in the next few years.

A spokesman for the Corporation said, "We have great confidence in the MK IV project, and are placing an order to buy 50 vessels to refit our light frontier trading fleet. This will help ensure we can get goods to where they are needed in on the Frontiers of the populated galaxy in a quicker time than before."

John Franklin, Galactic News.

A Trade Too Far

[Someone]

So I was sitting there, in my rusty old Cobra Mk.3, watching the news.

I paid much more attention to the news, ever since the Guild got busted. A hair-brained story from RIG sort of added up one time, and I decided to avoid going to the guild master's place in Eta Cass. to pick up the next assassination job. It was too bad. The guild were good, and many of us had been able to carry out the most lucrative jobs actually on space stations and in cities without getting caught thanks to their help.

All that was gone. Busted by the Federation. A huge police sting operation had simultaneously busted every guild branch in Federation space. I was forced to change my identity. At least they couldn't take away the things the guild had taught me. Too bad it was now too dangerous for me to see my family back in Phekda or my uncle in Gateway. They probably thought I was dead, a not-unusual fate for the frontier trader (of course, they never knew the shady reality of my existence).

I had reverted to being a frontier trader, flying my trusty but battered Mk.3. I had picked up a particularly lucrative custom shipment from a buddy in Tionisla. I had to go all the way back to Eta Cassiopeia, and risk the Feds finding out who I really was, but the cash was worth it.

I shivered when I heard the news of the theft of a Huge Plasma Accelerator. Naah, this shipment couldn't be anything to do with that. Besides, an HPA won't fit in my cargo bay. Not even a SPA would fit in there.

So my partner in crime comes up to the bridge. It was his turn to take the helm and mine to get some sleep.

"Hey, I think you oughta check this out," he said, poking his head through the door of the flight deck.

I turned, just making out the slight concern in his expression in the dull lighting of the astrogation console. I slipped out of the seat, and followed him out into the dimly lit corridors of the Cobra back to the cargo and equipment bay.

"Look," he said, removing a panel off the side of our shipment.

"Hey, you shouldn't open the customer's goods!" I admonished quickly.

I looked inside of the panel of the container, which filled our entire cargo bay. There was the data plate of whatever it was we were carrying.

PLASMA IGNITION REACTOR Ser No 000133
Property of FEDERAL MILITARY, ETA CASS.
MFG: LANCE AND FERMAN WEAPONS SYSTEMS, MARS, SOL.

"Oh shit. Dude, you know what this is?" I asked rhetorically.

"Yeah, it's a damn spark plug and trigger for a huge plasma accelerator!"

"Sweet mother of the planets. If anyone finds us carrying this thing, we're over our heads in doo-doo"

"Why the hell didn't they ship the whole thing intact?"

"Beats me. Damn, we need to get this thing offloaded as soon as possible"

We made our way back up to the flight deck, and tried to settle in. There was a gas giant nearby, it'd save us a docking and we could speed our trip. We headed towards it, to hopefully save a bit of time. It'd suck if customs in some crappy frontier world looked into our docking bay...

"I tell you why they broke the thing up," I said, "it's because they only want the whole thing to come together in the right hands. Or they want to withhold the trigger from whoever gets it until they get paid. Or a number of other reasons. The huge plasma accelerator is useless without this part."

We continued in silence for a while, watching the news bimbo go on about some storm-in-a-teacup about some journalists getting arrested trying to get weapons through security at some Alliance spaceport.

"I tell you what," I said. "I think I'm gonna call my friend Norman Mosser, he owes me a favour. If he's nearby, his Courier sure would be useful to have around"

"Who?"

"You know, remember that dude who boarded our Asp during that messy business with your half-sister"

"Oh, him. Yeah. Erm, don't we owe him a few favours?"

"Hey, don't spoil a good idea. I'm sure I'll think of something."

"Wouldn't surprise me if he was involved in all of this," said my accomplice, with a wry smile...

I quickly typed a message to Norman Mosser, encrypted with his public key, and broadcast it. The GIN relays would take over. Hopefully, he was somewhere in the region, and hopefully, he could help me make this delivery. Of course I couldn't really tell him what this delivery was - it'd get us all in trouble. It'd get us in double-trouble: once for carrying it, and once for opening the shipping container and finding out what the curious huge object in our docking bay was...

I just hoped he could help. We were flat-out broke since the Guild got wiped out, and needed this shipment to even get scheduled maintenance done to our ship. If this failed, we'd end up grounded...

His Patriotic Duty

[Commander Red Ravens]

Tim Collins sat nervously at his desk and waited for his boss to arrive. Ms. Kong was never late, she'd ticked him off about it often enough. He had a nasty feeling that things had come to a head.

It had seemed like the perfect job when he'd gotten it. The Eta Cassiopeia system had been in a recession for nearly a decade now, and jobs were hard to find. "HPA Concepts" was the name on the door, although Tim was still a bit fuzzy on what the company actually did (three months after starting). He had some idea that it involved the security systems at the Federal Naval Base, as he'd had to courier a lot of packages there by shuttle, and a lot of the invoicing came from security firms, DNA typing labs and passcard manufacturers.

Ms. Kong had been very specific that he was not to open the packages. She'd insisted on an All-Systems Police check when he'd started, which wasn't a problem, as he'd never left Trojan in his life.

Tim got up and made himself an Ultracoffee. The office was small, but at least it had the necessities. He'd never met another employee other than Ms. Kong, whose title was Facilitation Officer. There had been that meeting several weeks back, with those large and rather rough-looking spacers. The lead spacer had been a rather intimidating individual, with a full black beard and an Imperial Accent.

"Hold all my calls, Tim."

"Should I come and take minutes or bring you all some Ultracoffee?"

The lead spacer had laughed rather menacingly.

"Boy, you could come and take minutes if you like, but then we'd have to kill you."

Ms. Kong had smiled frostily at this, as she was a very strait-laced woman, and didn't appreciate such jokes. At least he hoped it was a joke.

Tim had been rather surprised at the lead spacer, not thinking that too many Imperial citizens worked for the Federation, let alone for the Navy. The four of them had disappeared into Ms. Kong's office and stayed there the rest of the day. At clock-off time, Tim had gone to the door and knocked softly. In the room there was a great crashing of chairs and hisses of surprise. Tim waited until all that had died down before opening the door.

"Ms. Kong, I just wanted to..." Tim stopped, as hovering before his face was an L & F .01MW Pulse Laser. "...say goodnight."

The four spacers were on their feet, pointing a variety of weapons at him. Ms. Kong was still sitting at the table, calm and collected, her hands folded.

"Thank you Tim. Please lock up when you go."

Tim had left the room feeling somewhat shaken. These Navy Security Types certainly were jumpy!

The next week had gotten very busy, with bills for expensive custom alterations to a variety of vessels and advertising on BBS for freelance spacers. Tim had smiled and tapped his nose when Ms. Kong had told him about the 'Farm Machinery' shipment and had received a ticking off.

"This is an important operation worth more credits than you will earn in your entire life, with security implications for the entire Federation. There is nothing to joke about. If you breathe one word about this operation, you will be arrested and jailed, possibly for life. Are we clear?"

Tim had nodded and ducked his head. She was right. It was his patriotic duty to keep his head down and do the work, without making fun of it.

"But why freelancers, Ms. Kong? Shouldn't Navy ships courier this material?" Ms Kong had looked more kindly then, and patted him on the head (only a little patronisingly).

"Less conspicuous. It's better that no one knows what's being carried. Not even them." Tim had felt better after that.

But where was she? It was almost ten... she was never THIS late. Tim sat back down at his terminal. He glanced at the screen and cursed. It had gone blank. He tapped a few keys and tried to reboot it.

NO DATA FOUND. PLEASE REFORMAT

Damn! Tim tapped the phone to call Tech Support. There were no lights on the phone, either. Had everything broken down? He got up and went to the door, hoping to use the phone next door. As he came to the door, Tim became aware that there a shadow behind it. Finally! Ms Kong was here. He reached for the door, but before he could open it, it burst inwards and Tim was thrown to the floor. Before he could react he felt something crack across his back. A Quicklock! Tim had never seen a Quicklock outside of Dreamware, and felt himself become nauseous as the sedative took effect.

When Tim awoke, the office was filled with black clad figures examining cabinets and his still dead computer. He was propped up in a chair on the opposite side of the room. Before him was the a shiny ID and Shield.

“Marcus Olowayo, FIB. Where is the HPA?”

Tim blinked, trying to focus on the face next to the shield.

“Uh... on the door. That’s the only HPA I –“ Tim’s head snapped back as an unseen hand struck him across the face.

“We don’t have time for this, Collins. Where is Kong Pak Soon?”

“Ms. Kong? I don’t know... she should be in by now. I don’t know what’s going on here, please don’t hit me again.” Tim cowered from the unseen hand.

“Easy, Len. We don’t want to hit you son. Important Navy equipment has been stolen. Ms. Kong is involved.”

Tim shuddered. This was like a bad dream. Ms. Kong a criminal? It couldn’t be! And what the hell was a HPA, anyway? Was it some sort of weapon?

“The computer is fried, Marcus. A virus plus a thermal charge.” The officer working on the computer stood up, disgusted.

“It was working when I walked in this morning.” Tim ventured. Marcus looked at him, with a mixture of pity and annoyance.

“Take the Quicklock off him.” Tim was pulled to his feet and he felt the pressure on his back abate. He pulled his arms free and rubbed them to return some feeling.

“Do you have a key to her office?”

Tim nodded “In the left desk drawer, “ he said, and moved over to get it. Before he moved more than a couple of steps, his arm was forced up behind his back.

“I’ll get it.” The officer working on his computer opened the drawer and pulled out the collection of pass-cards. “Which one?”

“Let him do it.” Marcus said quietly.

Tim caught the tossed collection of pass cards and slowly walked towards the door. He could feel the space behind him fill up with heavily armed, black-clad bodies. He fumbled the cards, aware of the heavy breathing just behind him. He’d been counting on this job for a reference, too! He finally selected the right one and slid it through the lock. The door clicked and he pushed it open. Aware that no one was moving behind him, Tim stepped into the office and switched on the light. Before him was Ms. Kong’s usual bare office. The only difference was the cylindrical object on the conference table. A light began to wink on its surface. Tim walked over to examine it. Maybe it was a going away present from Ms. Kong?

“Plasma mine! Run...” Marcus screamed behind him.

Tim looked back to see the flurry, so didn’t see the deadly light blossom in the heart of the mine. His last thoughts in this reality were wondering whether Ms. Kong had thought to send him his severance pay.

Ace in the Hole

[Commander Jake Somersby]

=====
DOCKING IN PROGRESS
=====

The message lit up on the Fer-De-Lance console, and Jake sighed, leaning back for a moment while the station's antigrav cranes pulled his ship deeper into Longhaul. He was glad to be back.

As the *Showdown* was dropped into Bay 6, he stood and waited for the security systems to open the airlock, before heading to his office.

The door chimed at the Security Chief's door, and Jake looked up to see Frank, the comm. officer, with a sense of *deja vu*. He pushed the button to let him in, and smiled. "What can I do for you, Frank?"

Frank had a grim expression on his face, and gave Jake a datapad. "This just got down from Customs."

Somersby took the pad, and read it. He then took a quick breath in, and leapt up, heading out of the door.

"Over here, sir." One of the security guards said as he saw the SC approach. Jake turned, and walked over to where the group of guards were standing. "Well, where is it?"

One of the men turned, and stepped through the airlock onto a Boa Freighter alongside them. Jake followed, looking around the typical drab scene of a typical independent freighter.

"Customs found it while checking out the Leestian Brandy they've brought." The security man said as he lead Somersby through the ship. "They found a false floor. These guys are real amateurs at smuggling."

Jake arched a brow. "How can you tell?"

Well, the false bottom was easy to see; it was covering the complete bottom half of the hold."

Jake laughed. These guys definitely were real amateurs at this.

Sliding down a flight of steps, the guard stopped outside a door marked HOLD - GROUND FLOOR.

As it opened, Jake was met with a complete surprise. Sitting in front of him was a largest laser cannon barrel and ammunition chamber he had ever seen. It was enormous, and took up most of the hold.

Jake stepped up to the giant piece of weapon, and brushed some dust off the side, accumulated from storage in the tatty freighter. He then found the bronze title plate.

=====
Huge Plasma Accelerator #22467
PLASMA ACCELERATION CHAMBER AND DISCHARGE BARREL
L & F MIL LASERS. Serial no. 3573
=====

Jake arched a brow, a slow smile forming on his lips as he recognised the manufacturing number. Sitting in front of him was basically the barrel and loading chamber for the missing Huge Plasma Accelerator.

And he had it.

"Impound the ship." Jake called, turning. "Put guards around all of this on 24 hour watch. Arm them with handheld 5 Megawatt Pulse Rifles."

He walked out, hearing the guard barking out orders, and smiled. The Organisation would be pleased that he had recovered a part of the weapon. They had done a brilliant job in hushing up the Federation from announcing it was missing in the first place. If only RIG hadn't found out...

No matter, the SC reflected. What mattered right now was the fact that whoever needed the HPA would have to come get that part from him, and then he'd know who.

[Commander Lief Ericson]

The Asp approached Longhaul outpost from the back, if it weren't for the ship's electronics you would hardly know it was there starless and black as it hung like a hole in the sky. As I came round the station I called traffic control.

"LHO control, this is the Asp Explorer *Rocinante* requesting permission to dock."

"Granted, please use a standard approach."

As we were taken to our docking bay I turned to my co-pilot "Jamie, I want you to stay on the ship for the moment, make sure that no-one comes round fiddling."

"Kay Lief"

As I left my ship and made my way to the commercial decks I had a look around, everything was efficient, but a little shabby around the edges, but it was an indie station not run by a government or corporation. Just as I got onto the commercial decks and turned on the main concourse I spotted a security guard. "scuse me, do you know a decent bar where I can have a beer without being bothered?"

"Yer, just go down the main drag, it's the third one on your right."

"Thanks, oh, and is your boss around, Jake Somersby?, if he's not too busy he might want to pop down, he owes me a drink anyway."

"If you say so."

At that I followed his directions and just as he said I found a nice discrete looking establishment. I got myself an ale and settled myself into a corner. A couple of hours later Somersby walked in, I nodded to him and he walked over.

"Right, who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm one of the guys who gave you a hand on Riedquat, and I met you in a bar on Bebece just after you quit the Empire. Anyway that's not why I'm here, I'm just a bit of a troublemaker really and I'm having a nosy round just wanted a quick chat."

"OK, make it fast, and if I catch you messing about on this station I'll slam you in the brig faster than you even know."

"OK, I'm going to make a few suppositions, you don't have to say anything, just listen. Your trip into Riedquat: it wasn't routine was it? Short notice, I think, and I guess you got a tip off or something. Could it have been faked at all?" Jake frowned "Right, and you trust the source implicitly, they wouldn't find your death expedient? But those guys were expecting you so someone had to have told them to be there ready."

Jake intervened "That would mean that someone would have had to tell them I was on my way"

"Yes exactly, and someone quick on their feet too, with enough pull to put together a scratch team as well equipped as that at short notice. I would guess that someone, probably in your security team, is supplementing their pay somewhat."

Jake leaned back in his seat "Interesting. Go on "

"I think that it's in someone's interest that the security team on Longhaul lacks a chief, cos then some things would fall through the cracks or be ignored, even better if they have someone of their own running the security force. Probably some type of smuggler who is in danger if anyone knows about their little trade, even somewhere as laissez faire as Longhaul. I'd be a bit careful if I were you. I also notice that the Feds seem to have lost an HPA I doubt that's got anything to do with it, but it might."

Jake got up "That's all very interesting, but what are you going to do now?"

"Sit back and watch what happens. There's not much point in turning over stones if you don't wait and see what crawls out from underneath, is there?"

"That would depend really." Jake turned on his heel and walked out of the bar, now all I had to do was sit back and wait. I caught the barman's attention, got another drink brought over to me and lit a ciggie.

Investigations - Part One

[Commandress. J.A. Berihn]

"Security Chief Somersby ... I would like a word or two with you?" Jake turned as he walked down the busy corridor, his grim expression changing as he took in the colourful robes that SysOP Jannah Berihn was wearing.

"Nice outfit, ma'am."

"Thanks. I'm going through my grow-up and lose it phase; but that does not alter the fact that we have to speak."

Jannah drew Somersby to one side and then, indicating with her hand, she looked back and forth before stepping through an open hatch into an otherwise empty storage chamber. The hatch closed. Jake turned to Jannah as she smiled ever so slightly and shook her head lightly as if trying to shake off her humour.

"Okay, where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"Word has it that you have something in your possession which may be of terrific importance." Jannah indicated.

"I really have no idea what you're talking about, Ma'am?" Replied Jake, a puzzled look crossing his face.

"Okay - play it that way for the moment, but try and remember, you've got a free hand in as far as security and the defence of the station is concerned ... but where the ultimate safety of this outpost is concerned, MY word supersedes yours."

Jannah turned, moved past Jake and then pressed the activator to open the hatch. The hatch shot into the ceiling as she turned back towards him once more. "Make your play but get if off of the station before somebody decides to show up with a battle fleet. That's all I'm asking. That's all."

Precious cargo...

[Someone]

So there we were, one jump away from our destination, with a cargo hold full of the massive plasma igniter for the Huge Plasma Accelerator.

I struggled out of my small berth, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, and got ready to face what the universe had vomited onto my plate today. I found the shower heater wasn't working, and faced an icy cold shower. It woke me up, but I can't say it was really pleasant. Dried and dressed, I slid up the gravity well to the flight deck level to see what my partner-in-crime had been up to these last twelve hours.

"It's been quiet," he said.

"Good."

We had deliberately chosen the quietest, least-travelled route. I didn't want to face pirates or nosy police. We had avoided docking - instead, scooping fuel from gas-giants. The latest gas-giant filled most of the forward view. We were approaching for a couple of hours worth of fuel scooping, then off to our destination to deliver this hot potato.

"But there's something odd. Look at this," he said.

He was bringing my attention to the long-range scanner display.

"The passive scanner picked these up," he added, pointing to three or four marks on the display, "and then two hours later, these."

The later scan showed the same four marks, but apparently closer to the ship. The marks were all spread out in a closing arc. "Did you try an active scan?" I asked. They could be ships on silent running, the odd energy spike betraying their presence...or it could just be background noise...

"The active's down. Seems to be a transmitter problem."

"Hang on up there for a bit longer, I'll go back to the equipment deck and plug in the test gear. See what's going on."

I left the bridge and stalked down towards the aft of the ship. I had expected to have heard from Norman Mosser by now. Of course, I hadn't told him what we were carrying - I have a feeling that Norman would have wanted it himself if we did, and there was no way I could disappoint my customer. Perhaps Mosser had died, or had been arrested. But he was rather good at not dying and not being arrested. Perhaps he just wasn't in the area.

I paused to get a steaming cup of Riedquatian Ultra, then grabbed the test kit and threw the lighting on in the equipment deck.

And then I felt something. Just the slightest displacement of the ship. I hit the intercom. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?" came the response.

"Never mind."

It comes from a lack of caffiene I dec...

There it was again. I looked at my coffee, which I had placed beside the racking. The surface rippled from the vibration.

"How about now?"

"I'm getting a main airlock open indication," said the disembodied voice of my partner-in-crime. "I just closed it".

"Make sure the seal-offs are armed. I don't want to have to be wearing a pressure suit for the next couple of days"

"Already done. It was just the outer door, the inner has remained closed"

All we needed now was a faulty airlock. These things were supposed to fail safe. It was going to be a long day...

Sale of the Century

[Norman Mosser]

As Norman's Osprey X hurtled itself through witchspace he was quietly swearing to himself. It had been a trying few days. Most of the shipments had got through and been delivered. In fact the majority of the parts had already been assembled in the hull he had and all he was lacking was a priming reactor and the actual acceleration coil and emitter. The trouble was, was that the accelerator coil was currently in lockdown on board LHO, and merely waiting to be claimed. And the priming reactor was 'lost in transit'

Hanging round in LHO waiting for an opportunity to recover the component would have drawn too much attention to himself so he jumped at the chance when he got a communiqué from an old friend who was having a spot of bother. Technically Norman was still owed big time for some assistance he had given him earlier but it did mean that Norman could leave his Courier in LHO. His crew then had an excuse to be there, as they were waiting for him while he concluded some 'business'. Quietly sitting, taking in all that could be noted on the rumour mill, but not directly enquiring.

The Osprey popped back into realspace with a slight shudder caused by the insertion of a large jumpdrive into a small ship. Bringing up the navigation systems, Norman located and targeted the tatty Mark Three that belonged to his associate. Using its speed and heading, Norman extrapolated its likely course - to a local gas giant it seemed and plotted an intercept.

Seven hours later, Norman's stardreaming was disturbed by a bleep from his detection system. Apparently Norman wasn't the only person following his friend. There were two craft following the Cobra as well. Closing for an intercept under silent running. It was luck that Norman could spot them at all, as he was behind them and could pick up the drive emissions. His friend would be completely oblivious. Just as the Cobra's tails were to him. Norman altered his course to intercept them.

His suspicions were correct, the two ships were running on radio silence. He ripped the first one apart with his laser without them even knowing he was there. The second may have caught some of the noise from the explosion, but could do nothing or discover nothing without giving its position away. He closed with the second and dispatched it just as quickly.

The Osprey drew alongside the Cobra without triggering a blip on its scanner, and Norman suited up and spacewalked to the Cobra's airlock. Norman smiled. He liked winding the kid up. The outer door opened using the external manual controls and he was inside the airlock. He cycled the airlock after running a bypass on the control panel ensuring that the bridge wouldn't detect what he was doing. Once on board, he had to pass through the hold to get to the bridge.

He noticed two things. Firstly, his friend entering the hold holding a toolkit. Second, what appeared to be the ignition reactor for an HPA. He broke into a wide smile.

'Norman?'

'The very same. I must show you this trick sometime. I gather you needed some help'

'Well, yes,...'

Norman listened as his friend explained what was happening. As they shared a coffee and talked it soon emerged that the part in the hold was the one Norman was waiting for.

'Right then, this is what we'll do. I can contact the people you are delivering to, who are handing to me and sort it out their end so you don't need to worry about that. Next, I need you to take that part to Riedquat and place it in storage there - I can't take it myself as I don't have room'

His friend thought for a moment.

'There are shipping costs. I can't do it if it leaves me out of pocket'

'Yes, but you owe me. Here's the deal. I teach you the trick of sneaking up on people, and pay for your ship to be given a decent service once you get to Riedquat'

'Done'

'Good. I'll show you the trick now, and then once you fix that scanner we go to Riedquat'

The Message

[James K. Winston]

It had been a long day.

I walked into my office, in a full flight suit, after finishing administering the third checkride of the day, clanking as I walked, undoing the various belts and harnesses. The first guy had been so-so, but I could give him a passing grade. The second guy was damned near perfect. But the third guy was so bad I almost reached for the RemLok at one point. He couldn't fly manual formation if his life depended on it (and it nearly did). I hated writing out the pink failure tickets, but occasionally it happened.

I was surprised to see Ken Davies sitting in my office. He's a high-up in the AJNIB, although not a lot of people know that. Intelligence branch people are very discreet. I slipped my RemLok and survival pack off onto my desk, finally free of the belts and buckles, and slumped into my seat.

"Hi Ken, I haven't suddenly got a bunch of grey hair, have I?" I asked, with a sigh.

"Tough day with the students?" he asked, with a slight smile.

I buried my face in my hands, then looked up at Ken. "Oh god, I'm really gonna have to have a word with the last kid's instructor. He nearly got us killed. Twice!" I groaned.

"I don't envy you," he said, and handed me a couple of sheets of paper.

I pulled off my flight gloves and felt the soft material of the paper. "Dead tree format? What do I owe this rare pleasure to?" I asked.

"The information's top secret. We don't want to risk any electromagnetic radiation giving the info away. Read it carefully."

I read the first page. The AJNIB was reporting that one of the Federation's huge plasma accelerators had been stolen.

"Huge plasma accelerator? How big's that?" I asked.

Ken gave me a run-down. It turned out that the HPA was three times the size of the largest Large Plasma Accelerator (as fitted to ships like the AJN Fearless). Only three HPAs exist. The Federation has two, and AJN Research at New Rossyth has one. Or rather, the Federation HAD two. The problem, it seems, was field stabilization in the HPA. The AJN decided that for now, it was cheaper, easier and more effective to simply bolt three LPAs to capital vessels instead of one HPA. But for smaller ships - an HPA may be useful. You could squeeze one into a Panther Clipper for example.

"I suggest you read on," Ken continued, looking a little grim.

It wasn't long until I found out why. If having a student try to kill me twice was bad enough, this just capped off a rotten day.

"Are you sure it was him?" I asked, looking up at Ken.

"We are absolutely positive."

I shook my head.

Damn you, Mack Winston! Seems like you're pushing the definition of frontier trader a bit far!

"I'm afraid we had to do a full investigation of you, too," Ken continued. "You know, family tie like that, big piece of Federation equipment walking. You came up clean, as far as we can tell you haven't spoken to your nephew in at least a year."

"I understand," I said. "But why the investigation, I mean, it was Federal equipment that walked?"

"Well, the Federation is going to come looking, and we had to make sure you were clean. They'd make the link. All we need is another diplomatic incident with you involved," said Ken.

I shrugged.

"There's more, I'm afraid. Your nephew has also been involved with Norman Mosser."

The name rang a bell.

"Sounds familiar. Who is he?"

"Remember the group who tried to spring you from the Federation's clutches during that nasty incident at Barnard's Star? Well, Mosser was the leader of that. That made us more suspicious of you, but it seems like that link was merely coincidental. We discovered that you've never spoken to or met him."

"I've got a lousy memory for names, I probably wouldn't remember if I did."

"Well, seems like your nephew has a much better recall in that department. They keep meeting up at opportune times. We believe Mosser is deeply involved in the huge plasma accelerator heist. In fact, we are certain that it's him who's trying to procure it for his own vessel. He intercepted Mack's ship as he was going to Tionisla. The pair diverted to Riedquat, according to our sources."

I groaned.

"Is there any more?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"I'm afraid there is. Your nephew spent about a year working for the Guild."

"Didn't they get busted recently?"

"Yep. By all accounts, your nephew was lucky to escape capture. Fortunately for you I expect, the Federation never worked out who he was, but had they got him the press would have had a field day. Another Winston in trouble for assassinations! He had become a bit of an expert at bumping his targets off on space stations, it seems." Ken paused. I think for effect. "I wonder who his role model was?" he added rhetorically.

I groaned again. It just got worse.

"Oh yes, and his partner in crime is the half brother of Jannah Berihn."

I looked up at Ken.

"I hope that's everything," I said.

"Well not quite. He also ended up in the slammer for a week when he was caught smuggling Riedquatian Ultra Coffee in the Empire. Well, he wasn't really smuggling, it was just his own coffee machine, but the stuff's illegal in the Empire."

Damn my dysfunctional family. Mack's dead parents would be turning in their graves right now (wherever that may be).

I picked up my datapad, and looked at my calendar. Well, after this week I was free, and had some annual leave to use up. I blocked out enough time to hopefully find my nephew.

"Well, I'm going to find him," I said to Ken, putting my datapad down, "and give him a damned good bollocking. Then buy him a beer to congratulate him for managing to stay alive for so long."

"Sure you can find him? Need some help?" asked Ken.

"I still have a bunch of bounty hunter contacts. If I need to find someone I usually can, but thanks anyway. I really wouldn't want to use Alliance resources on this," I replied.

"Fancy talking over a pint?" asked Ken.

"That's the only good thing you've said to me all day," I replied.

We got up, and left for Hangar 21, the local TSCA beer drinking hangout. I felt I might need a little more than a pint...

The Plan

[Norman Mosser]

The three of them were sitting in one of the observation lounges on La Soeur du Dan Ham drinking copious amounts of coffee while talking and watching the spacecraft arrive and depart. The youngest of the three was starting to get impatient.

'So tell me again, what are we doing sitting around here? people are going to be looking for us'

'Waiting.'

'For what?'

'The right moment.'

'To do what?'

'I think you can guess.'

They exchanged glances.

'But they know you are coming. Its madness, you'll be caught.'

'I have a plan.'

'Great. A plan. And where exactly do I fit in?'

The third member of the group interjected. 'And what about me, she's my cousin. She'll be quite pissed if you try it.'

'Well then, its entirely up to you whether or not you want to be in or not. I could use the pair of you. Especially you, you have a good gun-arm.'

The second man nodded, 'I leave it entirely up to you.'

'It's still a daft plan. You won't pull it off.'

'I can.'

'Bull.'

'A pint says I can do it.'

'A round says you can't!'

'Agreed. And if I manage to pull it off without killing anyone, you buy a round in every bar on this station.'

'Norman, we are talking about cousin Jannah here.'

'Alright, if I can pull it off with some job losses, and one person being nailed upside-down to the main throughfare of the south sprawl then.'

'You're on!'

'Done.'

They shook on it, and then watched as the fleet of lifters that had been shuttling goods to one of the Long Range Cruisers that was orbiting the station retreated back to their hangars. The massive craft powered its drives up and began to pull away from the starport. After a short while, a huge exit cloud formed.

'Norman, it's your turn to get the coffees.'

Norman nodded and stood up. 'Can I have your decisions after I get back? It's getting close to the time that we'd have to go.'

As he walked to the bar, he turned and smiled at a pair of pilots sitting at one of the tables. They looked particularly uncomfortable and got up and left.

'Spies' muttered Norman under his breath. It was of no consequence. They just knew that he knew now. They would probably get a dressing-down for being picked out of the crowds.

He ordered the coffees and waited while the attendant prepared them. he lounged against the bar and watched the room. As he looked, he saw a familiar face enter the lounge.

'Frell. Admiral James K Winston himself' muttered Norman

Reaching into his pocket, he placed a ten credit coin on the counter.

'You can keep the change if you take them over to the guys on that table'

Norman turned and sidled out of another exit. Hopefully, he hadn't been seen. He managed to make his way back to his ship and launched without challenge.

'Oh well, probably for the best' he mused

Norman hit the other red button and initiated a forced mis-jump.

Funny Business at the Longhaul Freeport

[Commander Lief Ericson]

"OK Jamie, can you go and prep the *Rocinante*? It's time we left."

"Sure thing Lief, why are we going?"

"Cause there isn't too much going on here at the moment and I want to check out some of the other systems for info, you never know there might be someone with a bigger mouth than brain at Le Soeur"

Jamie went down to the docking bays as I did a mental inventory of what I had gleaned from gossip and my probably inadequate reasoning. Firstly that there was a traitor in the outpost's security department, someone disenchanting who was in the pay of an individual who had something to gain from the messy death of the previous security chief and wanted Jake Somersby dead as well; secondly that the security personnel had been unusually tight lipped recently, and finally that a couple of patsies had been caught smuggling something, which had been locked down by Jake but no one knew where it was now.

Probably irrelevant was the fact that Mosser's crew had been on the station for several days now 'sorting out a refit' and their boss was nowhere to be found, it was time to leave the station to see what dirt could be uncovered elsewhere and to figure out how I could turn it to my advantage.

I strolled down to the docking bays after sorting out the tab at the bar, and complimenting them on finding such good but unusual beers, Jamie was waiting when I got back to the ship, which was ready to go.

"Jamie take us out and set the next jump point to Riedquat."

"Alright boss? Why are we going there though? That's where we just came from."

"Because, Jamie" I said in my most condescending tone "If the flotsam of the galaxy doesn't wash up here it tends to wash up in Riedquat. At least it does if you are in this part of the galaxy."

"Right," said Jamie, not looking totally convinced.

"Anyway we can make a few credits just getting back to the station. We are leaving Longhaul. Do a check on the inbound and outbound traffic will you?"

"We got a new ship type impounding an Osprey X"

"Right, bring us in close to those ships but don't interfere, that must be one of those new patrol cruisers the customs officers have been crowing about, they're a bit big to mess with without backup. Can you get an owner ID on that Osprey Jamie?"

"Yeah, its registered to one Commander Mosser"

"Damn! Should have known he would be involved somewhere down the line. I think we've got to assume that this is all mixed up with that HPA theft now, cos whenever Norman Mosser gets hassled by security its cos they are worried and something is going down."

"You think that's what that impounded ship is carrying then?"

"No, it'll just be carrying something small but vital, cos whoever stole the HPA has to be very powerful and devious, so they'll assume that the buyer is too and hold something back to guarantee payment. Lets go to Riedquat, there will almost certainly be something of interest there, I hope."

Lockup, Lockdown

[Norman Mosser]

The cell was beginning to become boring now. Especially after the guard had entered and taken the chunk of plastic he had peeled off of the still-new bench away from him. Now he was left to idly attempting to turn one of his socks into a puppet.

'Well, Mr Sock, when do you think Jannah is going to let us out then?'

The door opened. A guard entered and snatched the puppet off his hand and left again. It had been the same with the loose change, the boots, the cravat, the badges, the concealed knives, the frell grenade, the reproduction of a certain copy of Playcommander that Ms Berihn wanted suppressed and the penny whistle. Jannah knew him too well.

Norman sighed and leaned back against the wall. He had been in the cell for some hours now, after LHO security picked him up on suspicion of causing or planning mayhem. He had expected it, but not quite so soon. They had deliberately speeded up the rollout of the patrol craft by the looks of it. Indeed, this one still smelt new.

The door opened again. Two guards entered and lifted him bodily up while another applied a quicklock to his back. Just enough muscle relaxant to subdue him, but not so much as to turn him into a vegetable. They frogmarched him to the bridge.

Commandress Berihn was reclining in the command couch, attended to by her current retainers. She was frowning.

'I want a word with you.'

'I gathered that when you grabbed my Osprey.'

'Well, that was because we suspected you were up to something. Now we know.'

She gestured at the viewscreen. A retainer reached over and pushed a button on the console. A series of video streams from LHO's security system spooled up.

The first showed a tatty Python freighter moving from its hangar into the docking tube as it launched. At the moment its drives should have engaged, it suffered a power failure and stopped moving.

The screen split into two halves. The first still showing the Python, the second half splitting into a set of internal camera images. They all showed corridors in the freight storage sector. All had people carrying heavy packs walking along them. Acting in unison, they opened the packs, removed canisters and hurled them down the corridor. The canisters all burst open into rapidly expanding foamy masses.

'Emergency hull sealant foam. Creative,' interjected Jannah.

'Your people knew what they were doing by sealing off the links to the rest of the station.'

The video continued with the Python ejecting a cloud of such canisters. They burst against the door to the Viper hangar, effectively sealing it. Inside the facility, the raiders had grouped together and launched an attack on the security staff who were guarding the HPA component. Sealed off from getting reinforcements from security they were quickly overcome and stunned. The raiders placed them in a decompression shelter, put spacesuits on and pumped all the air out of the storage hangar. They then connected the HPA part to a Lifter, opened the bay door and used the Lifter to manhandle the HPA part into the Python freighter.

The view cut again. An Imperial Explorer was swooping in towards LHO from deep space. Just before it reached the outer ranges of LHO's Plasma Accelerator batteries it sloughed the entire contents of the hold at the station. It then veered off and entered hyperspace.

'Five hundred tons of chaff. Completely blinded the sensors and targetting system. Too much stuff to see clearly enough to aim optically either,' added Jannah.

The Python launched through this cloud and quickly cleared the station enough to engage the hyperdrive.

'A forced mis-jump, naturally.' She paused for dramatic effect. 'Well Norman, what do you have to say for yourself'

'Never seen them before in my life. I assume this happened while I was in lockup? In which case I must point out that my crew had already left the station in my Imperial Courier - which I discovered first hand when they hailed me as they left. Check the logs in my Osprey if you aren't sure. I have nothing to do with it.'

Jannah frowned again. And then smiled in a nasty predatory way.

'Well then Norman, it just so happens that I'm afraid you are going to have to stay with us a little longer. You see, your Courier only had two crew on board when it left, and you need three to launch. Since they did anyway, they must have bribed one of my staff, which is an offence. Which means that as the ship's master you are ultimately responsible. Guards, take him back to his cell'

* * *

[Nomura]

In the level ten holo bar Nomura sat wondering what they wanted Mosser for. He sighed, then went to the comm link. Pressing the button he said "Jannah, could I possibly have a word with Norman Mosser, I promise not to attack him or vaporise him."

Jannah replied "Sure Nomura, just make sure you hand over all of your personal weapons to the guard, and I mean ALL of them."

"Sure Jannah," came the retort. "Nomura out."

Nomura walked to the bar and ordered some Riedquatian Ultra to take out, paid for it and headed for the lifts. He punched the level 16 button for the containment cells. Shortly he arrived and presented himself to the guard.

The guard said "Sir, please hand over all your weapons."

Nomura unclipped his belt and two holsters and took various other weapons from his pockets and boots and sleeves. "Hey," he said, "d'you mind if I take the prisoner some Riedquatian Ultra?"

The guard replied "I'll have to check with the boss."

"OK" said Nomura.

The guard came back with a hand scanner and passed it over the flask. "OK" he said, lowering the scanner and motioning Nomura towards cell 18.

Nomura paused at the door and sighed. Too bad it had to wind up like this.

The door hissed open. Mosser's eyes widened in surprise at his unexpected visitor!

Nomura said "Mind if I come in?"

"If you want," Mosser replied warily.

Nomura entered the cell and took a seat. "So what happened?"

"Top secret old chap," Mosser replied, trying to suppress a smirk.

Nomura said "Fair enough. I just want you to know that I class our feud as being over. I'll leave you alone if you do the same for me."

"I'll think about it, replied Mosser, "and let you know if I ever get out of here."

"OK then. Anyway, have this flask of Riedquatian Ultra."

"Gee thanks. I'll treasure it in my hour of darkness."

Smiling, Nomura stood and suddenly called for the guard in a panicked voice, rising to stand behind the door. The door opened and the guard rushed in, Nomura sidestepped and slashed the guard across the neck with his Laser Ring. He fell to the ground without a sound, blood flowing freely from the gash in his throat.

"Well, what are you waiting for," Nomura said, smiling at Mosser's stunned expression, "freedom awaits. Oh, and by the way don't drink the coffee, it contains a hidden security pass. On yer way, son."

* * *

[Commander Jake Somersby]

"Good," Jake said, handing back the security report pad to the technician. "Very good." As the technician walked off, Jake leaned against the door to his office once it had closed, and shut his eyes, exhaling. What with the HPA incident, and losing some of his officers in that Python Escapade earlier, he was getting a little tired.

The intercomm on his desk bleeped, and Jake moved over to activate it. "Yes?"

"Sir," said a person on the other end, probably one of his officers. "It's about Mosser."

Somersby frowned. Mosser had been transferred to a cell on LHO after initial capture by one of the new Security Cruisers. "What about him?"

The guard on the other end hesitated. "He's escaped."

The S.C muttered under his breath. "Well, why the hell didn't you tell me in the first place?!"

He cut the link, and walked swiftly out into the main security office. "Listen up, people!" He said, causing all the Security Division Commanders to look up. "Mosser has escaped from his Cell on level 16. I want all guards armed, and on a station-wide search. Every craft docked here, every room, every shop, every bar, and every broom closet. Find them!" He then turned, and paused. "And somebody tell Jannah!"

As the people flurried into action, Jake walked back into his office, and produced a set of old-style keys from his pocket. Tapping a button on his desk console, a small key lock was revealed on the desk under a small sliding panel. Inserting the key, Jake twisted it.

Immediately the lighting turned red, and an alarm went out on the station, along with the audio voice of the computer.

"Attention, Attention. This is a Code Double-Red Alert situation. Longhaul Outpost is now under complete Security Lockdown. All airlocks are now sealing, all docking berths are under complete system shutdown. Head immediately to the Security outposts around the station and report into the Longhaul onboard roster for verification."

As the computer's voice continued to repeat the message a few more times, Jake picked up a 0.5MW Laser Rifle from under the desk, and loaded a power cell. Turning, he walked out of the door to find the escapee.

* * *

[Commander Lief Ericson]

I sat in the World's End at Le Soeur du Dan Ham sipping a mug of Ultra and scanning the latest news, Apparently there had been an audacious theft on Longhaul not long after his departure and Norman Mosser was being held despite being in detention at the time.

Jamie came running in, "Lief have you heard? Longhaul has been put into lockdown, and Mosser's Imp Courier is here, but he isn't around."

"I could've told you that Mosser isn't here 'cos he's still in detention on LHO, but they've gone into a full security lockdown have they, interesting."

I got up, it was time to try and get my hands on James Winston's nephew without the admiral being around, if I was lucky the Berihn boy would be there too. "Jamie, have you found those two guys I told you to look for?"

"Yeah boss, that was pretty easy want me to take you to them?"

"Lead on Jamie. Got your pistol?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, keep it hidden. I don't want them to overreact when we have our little chat."

Jamie led the way to a little bar on one of the seedier levels of the station and pointed out two young and distinctly worried looking men.

"Has Admiral Winston had a word with them yet Jamie?"

"If that's the guy you described to me he's had several words, and those two in the corner seem to be keeping an eye on them for him."

"Jamie take that table next to the door"

I walked over to where the two men were sitting and sat myself down ordering an ultracoffe on my way over. "Right, which one of you is Mack Winston?"

"I am, who wants to know?" the one sitting on the left said.

"Just another interested party who want to know what exactly Norman Mosser wants you to do, and which part of the HPA you've got onboard your ship."

"How did you..." shouted Berihn before Mack shut him up.

"Well the part about the HPA was a complete guess, thanks for confirming it for me, by the way your cousin is holding Mosser so if you are waiting for him to get back then you'll be here a long time."

"So, What do you want now?"

"Well Mack, I think that you may be parted from your cargo sooner than you might think so I want you to put this tracer on the component. If it gets stolen it will help me figure out who has it and where it's gone. If it doesn't get stolen then all to the good: you can take it off. After that I want you to do whatever you were going to do anyway, which I gather is to stay put until you are told what to do. Are we agreed?"

"I guess so," Ash Berihn nodded looking decidedly peevish.

"So let's go fit this tracer and then you can get back to drinking coffee and being shouted at by Mack's illustrious uncle."

We made our way up to the their Cobra 3 and after a bit of swearing and whistling in appreciation at just what they had in their hold I had the tracer fitted and had shown them how to disable it, temporarily of course. As I left the dock, and they made their way back to the bar I chucked them a couple of hundred credits and went back to the World's End to wait for Jamie.

"Well, did those guys report to Winston or the Feds?"

"They went straight to Winston. The Feds have backed off those two a bit and are scratching around in other places."

"Good, lets wait and see what happens then. Is the ship fuelled up and ready to go?"

"Yeah"

"Well go and get me some coffee then!"

I sat back and waited to see what would happen now.

Time to be scarce

[Someone]

It was all going to hell in a handbasket.

First of all, my uncle showed up. Looking for me. This couldn't be good. I knew he wouldn't approve of my recent activities (or that business with the Guild, know what I mean, being dead-set against assassinations since he was useless at them) so I decided to make myself scarce.

Of course, I only found out he was on the station when Mosser vanished all of a sudden, and in he came, into the bar, looking around. I had dived under the table. My accomplice had given me a funny look, but I managed to convince him to act kinda nonchalant.

Hiding under a table in a bar in Riedquat turned out to be not a good thing.

It attracts the wrong kind of attention.

Three broken fingers, one sprained wrist and a twisted ankle later (none of these belonging to me, naturally, all of them belonging to the interfering fools who tried to find out what was happening) and we scarpered from the bar, to the shouts of, "Oi! Get him" and other such pandemonium.

We didn't look. Trouble was best forgotten about and left behind. On the positive side, I don't think my uncle clapped eyes on me.

Well, that's what I thought.

A few minutes later, we were launching. I just wanted to be rid of this Huge Plasma Accelerator part. Someone else had got involved, some sly characters whose name adorns many telephone. Commander Ericofon, or something like that, and some other guy called Jamie. My accomplice in a fit of insanity agreed to let the dude stick some kind of tracking device to the HPA part.

We raced out of the station.

"I'm going to eject this sucker into a nearby star, I think," I told my accomplice as we hurtled into the void.

"I think we should just make sure Mosser gets it, and be done with it. Wonder why he didn't take it off us in Riedquat?"

"Oh, he has his reasons. He ALWAYS has his reasons," I replied with a shrug.

We cruised on in silence for a few moments. I selected Diso on the astrogation console, and engaged the hyperdrive.

"Well, it's your watch, I'm gonna catch some sleep," said my accomplice, as we sped through witch-space.

He left the flight deck. I was alone with my thoughts. I turned the lighting out. It seemed calm with nothing but the illumination of the instrument panel.

Suddenly, I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. I jumped.

"Ack! Don't do that to me, Berihn!" I yelled at my accomplice.

Except it wasn't my accomplice.

I was looking into the cold eyes of my uncle!

"Er, um...hello, er, I didn't expect to see you here," I said, trying not to sound too surprised. It wasn't really working.

In the darkness, I could only imagine his cold, appraising look. That look he always gave me at school report time, when that hoity-toity school in Alioth would write and say how little work I had done in the last year.

"You and I need to talk," he said.

"Well, it's, um, nice to see you, and all that, sorry I didn't make it last New Year, but you know how it is," I replied, not knowing how to start.

"About the HPA part you have back there"

"Ah. The HPA. Yes."

"We'll talk about the guild and all your other exploits later," he added nastily, "but for now, I think it's my duty to get you out of the mess you've got yourself into."

"Mess?"

"Yes. Half of the Federation Intelligence Bureau is after you."

"Oh," I added, lamely.

"And you need my help."

"I do?"

"Yes. You think you can take on the FIB all by yourself?" he asked, sardonically.

"Well, I've got practise dodging them."

"I know," he added darkly. "But you need my help. And then you're coming back with me, to Alioth. The AJNIB has questions it wants answered. More importantly, / have questions that need answers..."

Homecoming

[Frantic]

It was always a good feeling to get back to the base, even just jumping in. The system had about anything you could possibly want, stars, gas giants, multiple asteroid belts, various types of small planets, mining resources and a nice temperate planet where you could breathe unaided, not to mention a good way from the inner systems and completely unknown and unspoiled.

In fact, they had made a point of keeping it that way as much as possible. Space charts showed the system as one lacking in even basic minerals. Of the few people that had ever explored through it enough to find out anything, a couple had been pirates searching for a place to setup bases and had been disposed of, a few had been successfully recruited, and one fiercely independent explorer had been sworn to secrecy upon threat of boycotting his trading career if he ever revealed it's location. Luckily, he had kept his promise and the system remained unknown.

Frantic dearly hoped it stayed that way for as long as possible. Eventually expansion would mean that they would lose its secrecy one day, it would become an official base and the operations that went on here would have to go the way of the other operations and be always moving from system to system so as to always remain secret. While it lasted, it would be made worthwhile, they would never again find such a good system elsewhere at the right distance from the inner systems. The only disadvantage was that, being such a large system, you often came out of hyperspace a good 50 AUs out and it took months to do anything around the system without jump drives.

They were just refuelling at one of the gas giants on the way into base as a last atmospheric test, when they were told to proceed to base with at once. The *Inlander* pulled away from the gas giant at full thrust, upsetting the already angry atmosphere. Even with full forward thrust from the oversized external engines, it took several minutes to get far enough away from the gravity of the gas giant to engage the jump drive.

Being such a large system, a direct approach to base would pass too many planetary bodies and upset the jump drive, so they had to detour around and over a few planets and asteroid belts to reach their destination. Such manoeuvring was not a setback for anyone who liked to view such things, as the view was always changing as the ship passed around and over its obstacles then as its destination loomed up ahead and grew in size till the jump engines cut out and the ship went back to normal thrusters to travel.

The *Inlander* ploughed through the atmosphere at a speed that would not be allowable for a well-populated planet. As it was, they had a continent sized area of the planet just for atmospheric entry so it would not deafen anyone. The *Inlander* levelled out at 5,000 metres, and then began a slow decent closer to the surface. The *Taipan* series was designed for multipurpose roles, except as a trading vessel, and thus its usability as a planetary strike ship was given due consideration. Its solid but streamlined features allowed it to handle extremely well in an atmosphere at high speeds for a ship of its size. The ship sped across the surface of the planet, hugging at low altitudes to hills, mountains, forests and plains on its course. It turned to follow a line of mountains, then sped across a small plain to hide alongside another one. To anyone standing at ground level up ahead, the *Inlander* would be hidden below the ridges of mountains and would not be seen until it came out the end. When the end of the mountains came, the *Inlander* sped very low and fast across a flat sun baked plain before coming to a wall of mountains forming a ring. It sped up the slope of the mountain wall, came down the other side, banked steeply, dropped its external engines into the landing position while halting its speed and came to rest on a waiting platform. A waiting group of engineers let out a loud cheer as the engines wound down and several champagne corks flew into the air. They had been watching the approach through mounted cameras along the way and were happy with their ship. It had taken them a lot of arduous work and testing to get the ship to be able to do that, and it had just done it after a long trip to the inner systems, not on a controlled test run.

Frantic, Tracey and Honza left through the hatch. The waiting partygoers were disappointed to see Frantic and Tracey shrug their shoulders and hurry on through. Frantic grabbed an offered champagne bottle, chugged a few mouthfuls and handed it back, "sorry, got an urgent meeting". Honza had received no such orders, at least directly, and veered off happily towards the party.

"Hi Tracey, hi Fran. Hope you two brought her back in one piece?" Said Rafe as they entered the room.

"Nice to see you alive and well too. What's getting you goat?" Snapped Tracey as she took a seat.

"Just got a communiqué from Eric, seems he's found a couple of people hauling the ignition reactor of the huge plasma accelerator that got stolen from the feds. Not only that, but LHO is on security alert and full lockdown, it appears someone deliberately messed things up in there and managed to steal something that they were holding in storage under heavy guard. Anything to do with you two?"

"Uhh, no not us. We did show off the *Inlander* there, but I'll tell you about it later" said Frantic.

"Ok then, well it seems that they have also arrested Norman Mosser on LHO, and that he's somehow mixed up with the HPA theft or its disposal. Eric seems to think that he pinched a part of the HPA from LHO." Said Rafe.

Tracey was getting impatient, "Nice drama and everything, but where do we fit into this?"

"Well, I don't think we need to be bloody involved at all, but Eric seems to think there's something to gain from it and he's getting in over his head by himself. He asked if you could return to back him up."

"What, now?" came a double reply.

"Honza." no response.

"HONZA!" still nothing.

"Here Fran," said Tracey handing over a bucket

"Hehe, thanks" said Frantic and upended the bucket over Honza's head.

Not completely alien to such awakenings, Honza merely sat up and said "Hmm?"

Frantic held his head up and said "Honza, sober up and get your team together. We're taking out the *Inlander* again and we want her serviced and ready to go ASAP"

Honza started laughing hysterically, then stopped suddenly when he realised it was no joke, swore, stood and ambled off towards the ship muttering "Go fix some damn vibrations, heh". Even blind drunk, he was a fabulous engineer and wouldn't let them take off in a rickety crate.

Noticing most of the rest of the engineers as much the worse for wear, Tracey said "Perhaps we'd better down a bottle ourselves, then start checking over the systems."

Frantic said, "I think we should have made that approach safe and boring instead."

A few of the engineers were on duty when they arrived, thus were still sober, and were going around gathering up the rest of the gang. The ship was going on her first actual mission, and all the test gear was being stripped.

"I hope Eric gets us into trouble" said Tracey.

"Yeah me too" replied Frantic. Nothing would be worse than spending a couple of days to get back to the core for nothing, and Reidquat was fresh out of pirates.

A Particle of Evidence

[Cmndr. Red Ravens]

“What good is an HPA anyway, Red?”

The question was so inane, I had to glance across. My co-pilot was a young woman, albeit with a vicious streak that belied her naivete. We'd been following the HPA saga in the RIG and via our various email networks. It seemed like a knock-down drag-out which had half the security forces in civilized space wanting to eat their own Quicklocks.

Familiar names like Mosser, Winston and Berihn were buzzing about like blue-arsed flies, mostly chasing their own tails. The FIB had already searched our ship once at Ethsoess. Geez... one mission with the Imps and suddenly you're every FIBber's master criminal. Not that I was involved in that malarkey any more. Not since... well... anyway. “Why do you ask?” I asked nonchalantly. Bec was far from stupid, although she could turn on the ‘I'm so blonde, yay!’ charm when she wanted something.

“Well short of a capital class ship, what's the point?”

“Well... a Panther clipper could –“ I began patiently. We had the time to talk. We were bounty-hunting in our battered old DE-013 Constrictor, and had bugger all to do but crawl enticingly towards Longhaul Outpost in the hope of attracting some lowlife scum whom we could brutally annihilate. Yes, we practise moral relativity on an ongoing basis in space.

“But why bother? For the amount they must be paying to acquire the thing, they could outfit a much smaller ship to be just as deadly.” Bec reloaded her spud gun and squinted at the tiny robot she used for target practice. She struck the poor thing, which fell over on its side and began waving it's legs, while the projectile flew up and onto the board in front of me.

“Not quite. We've never been up against even a Small Particle Accelerator. By the time you've worked out what you've been hit by, you're already dead. A HPA would be able to wipe out Orbital Stations before they could even scramble their Vipers.”

Coolly I flicked the bit of spud off the weapons controls. Ever since that Zero-G accident, I had been somewhat disproving of my partner's habit, but then... she half-owned the ship so I manfully overlooked the inconvenience. I looked down again. There was a flickering on the long-range scanner. I wiped it with my finger to make sure it wasn't just potato pulp.

“Bec, could you bring the Long-Range Active on-line?”

“Sure. What's up?” Bec flicked the switch. Like most of the equipment on the ship, the active scanner was old, second hand and very patched up. Sometimes it stopped working midway through a scan, so we used it sparingly. The weapons, however, were quite up-to-date and serviced. Some things you can't afford to scrimp on.

It wasn't quite an asteroid, now I could focus on it. The contours were too regular. It wasn't a powered down ship, either. There were EM spikes coming out from it intermittently and it appeared to be rotating slowly. A derelict?

“Whaddya reckon?” I asked Bec. She sighed and set her spud gun to one side, reaching over to disengage the Autopilot. The robot got back on its feet, and tried to scuttle off to somewhere with cover.

As we approached the ship, we started to notice the debris. Lots of debris. A hell of a lot of debris. I spotted an Imperial Courier engine strut as well as an Asp engine plate. Though I lost count, there appeared to be nearly ten vessels whose final resting place had been halfway to LHO.

“JEEZ what happened here?” Bec exploded, after half an hour's patient scanning. She picked up the spud-gun again and played with it nervously. I knew what she meant. None of these ships looked like traders and were all (or had been) well armed and equipped. No rag-tag pirate group here.

The craft we were approaching was so close to dead that it barely mattered. It would never move from this place, and I was surprised it hadn't broken up yet. It would though, sure as sunsets. There seemed to be a little bit of power running through the internal systems, but even that was flickering and fading. The chance of survivors was nil to zero, and the chance of any sort of salvage was pretty low.

“Red... I sooo wish we knew what was going on here...”

Uh oh. The 'I'm so blonde' voice was back. She had an idea and I had a fair idea it involved ME doing more than her.

"Spill it, Bec." I said tersely.

"EVA over into that ship for me.... I'm dying to know."

I hate EVA. How much do I hate EVA? I HATE EVA! I hate the stupid suit, I hate the airlock, I hate the vacuum all around me and that I'm a thin synthetic membrane away from decompression and death. I hate Zero-G (see 'The incident' above) and I hate crawling around in a dead person's dead ship looking for some explanation of what killed them.

"I'm REALLY dying to know..."

"Oh shut up and manoeuvre us next to it." I said, rising and making my way over to the airlock. Couldn't she save that simpering, airhead act for that cretin on Facece? Or was he on Eta Cass? Bec presumed on our friendship sometimes. But I had to admit that there weren't many other options to find out what was going out. Maybe I could lay to rest the Imp-Lover rumours that came after one (One! I swear!) lousy mission.

I suited up and got into the chamber. Depressurising, I opened the outer door and clambered onto the hull.

Bec was a good pilot and had us within kissing distance of the bugger. She was having difficulty matching the rotation though, so I had to take a small risk. Disconnecting my safety line, I launched myself across the short space, magnetic clamp in hand. If this ship had a non-ferrous hull I would be looking silly and possibly feeling dead. "You right?" Bec's voice came through the intercom just as my body struck the hull, I scrambled desperately with the clamp, knowing I'd be thrown back if I didn't get a lock immediately. Fortunately, I felt a dull thud and I pulled on the clamp until my body rested on the hull. I then moved my shoes around until their magnets reassuringly clunked onto the hull.

"Uhhhhhhrrrrhhhhfffff..." I gasped back at her. "Pull the ship away, Bec. Pick me up later."

"You OK?" Bec sounded concerned.

"Just winded. Stay on the line, would you?"

I could have made my way round to the airlock, but the gaping hole in the bulkhead was equally as inviting. I found myself in an empty cargo bay. I opened the internal door and found myself in a long, cramped passage. There was quite a bit of jagged metal and quite a few exposed power leads around so it took me the best part of fifteen minutes to safely make my way up towards the dim light of the cockpit section. The mechanism was reluctant to work, so I resorted to the technician's special technique of banging it hard with my gloved fist. Sure enough, there was a hiss and the door began to open. A hiss? In a vacuum? I had a moment to brace myself before the air rushed out over me and down the passage out into space. As the cabin depressurised, my boots kept me from following the air out into the void. The gale was brief, and soon had expended itself. I had a moment's uneasiness. Had I just killed someone?

"Dead. Both of them."

"Not exactly a huge surprise considering the ship..."

"They shot each other. Death pact." Two pilots, still in their chairs, a gun in one hand, their partner's arm in the other. One even had a plasma grenade in their lap. It made sense. Adrift in space, no power, no hope of retrieval, slow death by freezing or slow death by asphyxiation. Better to die together looking into a friend's eyes. I hoped like hell that Bec and I would never be brought to that extreme. I thought of the spud-gun and winced.

"They're dressed in... what look like uniforms. No regalia or ID. Black Ops, maybe?"

"Feds, Imps or A-men? Maybe it's INRA!"

I lifted the hand of one of them. The gravity generators were failing, it stayed floating in the air.

"Bec, please don't joke about them... please?"

I peered closer at the hand. There was a scrap of plastic in there. I gently prised the fingers open and pulled it out. It was wrapped around a small electronic device. A communicator? A bug?

“Shit!”

I started as Bec’s voice blared in my ears. I crammed the plastic in a pocket on the space suit.

“What?”

“Three Ospreys and... oh Jeez, an Explorer!”

“Asp?”

“Imperial. Get out of there now!”

I looked around with a hint of desperation. There was no way that I’d be able to get back down that passage in the time required.

“How far away?” I said, lumbering over to the airlock.

“Not far enough. I wasn’t looking, let them get close.”

The ship’s last residues of power had The airlock was dead, and there was no way I’d be able to batter through TWO sets of doors before they got there.

“Look on the bright side, Bec, you might get to see a Particle Accelerator in action.”

“NOT funny, Red!”

No. It wasn’t. Neither was the probability that I was going to die. There had to be a better way. Yes! There was! Not much better, but...

“Bec... come around to the nose of the Harrier. And how far away are they?” I went over to the two pilots and gently liberated them of their Lance and Ferman 0.5MWs. I stuck one in the toolbelt and reached down for the plasma grenade. My timing would need to be spot on.

“Six minutes... maybe a few more...the nose... but that’s miles from the airlock!” But already I could see the beautiful laser-scarred, ugly gorgeous mass of my ship filling the big, beautiful cockpit window.

“Trust me... but if this doesn’t work... hyperspace out of here... find that cretin on Faece... or was it Eta Cass?... and be happy...”

“You’re talking shit, Red.” Bec seemed halfway between exasperation and desperation.

“I know... he’s not worthy of you... angle the belly towards me...”

“Doing it. He’s all right... just because the two of you couldn’t agree on either Marx or John Coltrane!

“Oh give it a rest. Love you heaps mate, whatever happens.” I tossed the grenade far down the passage behind me and started firing with both lasers at the cockpit window, with the magnetic clamp awkwardly hanging by my little finger. Fortunately, it wasn’t reinforced from the inside, and began to melt, in slow motion, big globules turning into perfect spheres as they flew through the vacuum. After a moment, I saw a great white light begin to shine behind me casting my shadow against the control panel, and a rising wind blow against my back. Still firing, I ran (in a space suit!) forwards, heaving myself off the deck as I hurled myself at the window. The plasma grenade may not have provided as large an explosion as if it had been in atmosphere, but the blast behind me was still sufficient to pop me out of that Harrier cockpit like a cork from a bottle. It also incinerated the two pilots in their final embrace and propelled me the distance to my ship. Granted, all I could do was scream in mortal terror and give Bec the fright of her life. Christ knows how I managed get the magnetic clamp into my fist before I landed. If the first inter-ship jump had been rough, this one was brutal.

“Red? Red? Are you there?”

There was a long moment of radio silence before I started swearing. Then... after the swearing stopped... I told Bec to start accelerating... slowly.

It took me eight agonising minutes to make my way back to the airlock, where my safety line was still mockingly waving hello to me. I crawled into the airlock and shut it behind me. I stabbed at the controls to repressurise and collapsed.

“Bec... misjump us out of here...”

And I fainted.

I suffered a cracked elbow and quite a few broken ribs from that jump. Bec trained as a nurse (from nurse to assassin/pirate/bounty hunter, not that big a step!) so was able to patch me up. She told me that from what she'd been able to see, the ships had started blasting at the debris once they'd arrived.

“Oh... that Large Particle Accelerator... I WANT one...”

“Who were they?” I asked, as Bec made another pass with the bandages around my chest.

“Uh... the Radar Mapper's packed up on us. I didn't get any Registry numbers.” Bec looked sheepish.

“Great!” I said, throwing up my hands (and wincing at the effect it had on my ribs).

“So we don't know anything more... at least we're both alive!” Bec gripped my knee and smiled.

“True, we don't. No... wait a minute.”

I limped over to the pile of blackened spacesuit in the corner and fumbled in the pocket. The scrap of sheeting and the device were still there. I unwrapped the device. It was a small black electronic... THING... neither Bec nor I had no idea what it did. Well... I'd ask the technicians on the next station we came to. I placed it on the bench and crumpled up the sheeting. I tossed it over my shoulder, but Bec snatched out her hand and caught it before it could reach the ground.

“Wait! There's something on it.” She began to unwrap it, smoothing it flat.

“What?” I peered over her shoulder.

The dead pilot had obviously scrawled something on the plastic before it was wrapped around the device. The skill of handwriting has survived the electronic age, Deity knows how.

BETRAYAL. THE BASTARDS.

I leaned back.

“Y'know Bec...”

“...we're in far too deep, Red.”

Bec looked at me. I looked at her. The anxiety in our eyes must have been a mirror image.