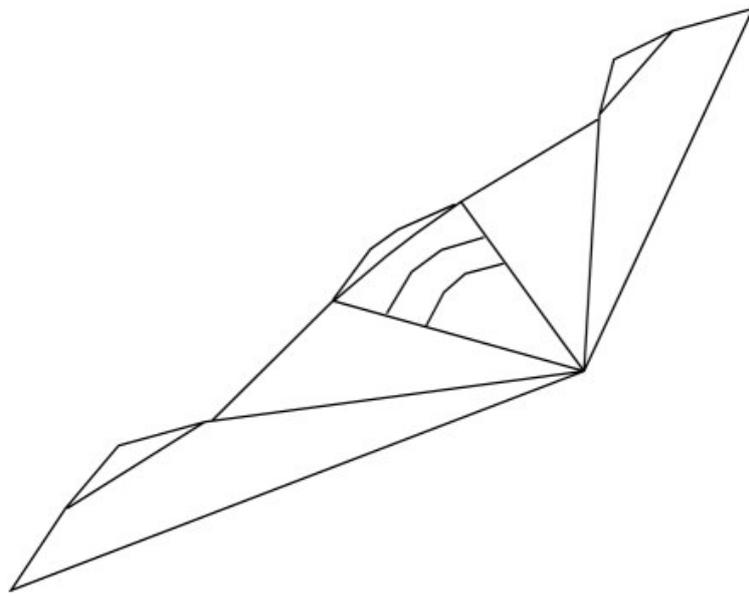


The Elite BBS Presents:
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

SHARK, PIRHANA & RAVEN

THE HPA SAGA



Volume

2

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An Interesting Proposition

[Frantic]

The *Inlander* moved deftly under jump drive around the viper patrols and came to a halt near LHO.

Frantic keyed the comms and said "Hello LHO control, your automatic docking request system seems to be down. This is a GalNET *Taipan*, registration number GN-7291 requesting docking clearance."

After a short delay a controller came on the line. "Uhh, hello 7291, I remember you from last time. Unfortunately we are currently under security lockdown and cannot dock your ship, please proceed to the next star port."

"Our business is specific for this star port, how long are you likely to be under security lockdown?"

Another short pause "Another day, maybe two."

"That's fine, we'll wait outside the grid" Frantic said, a little too quickly.

This pause caused sweat to form on all three crewmembers foreheads. "Please hold at these coordinates and pay a 12cr external berthing fee."

After keying off the comms, Tracey said "I'll tell Ericson stage one is complete," and got to work encrypting a message.

Frantic keyed in a 12cr transfer, and then asked Honza if all was okay.

"Yep, it should work fine."

A short while later they all completed their remaining on board tasks and settled into positions. All they had to do now was wait, and what they were waiting for could happen at any time in the next few days. After stabilising their position, they could now power down the engines, and the sound of the engines winding down just made the start of the wait seem more eerie.

*

14 long hours later something finally happened, aside from the controller bragging about the pictures they took of them in Reidquat to win the 30,000cr prize. A gun turret on LHO turned around then declined to aim right at them. A mere second passed then a missile launched from the turret and headed right at them.

"LHO control, what the hell is going on!?" yelled Frantic across the comms.

Just as the engines started powering up the controller replied in a worried voice, "Not an authorised launch 7291, please wait for advice." and clicked off.

Frantic yelled back "Bugger whether or not it's an authorised launch, it's heading at my ship, I'm getting the hell out of here!"

A second missile launched from the turret, then a third.

Just as the first missile had nearly reached the *Inlander* the engines finished powering up and the ship lurched forward, head on to the missile. It then pulled up and turned in a sharp 180 degree turn and headed back down along the axis it pulled up along. Just as the ship was pulling out of the dive the first missile passed under the belly of the ship and was collected by the fuel scoop, at the same time a proximity mine launched inwards from the starboard engine unit and exploded under the ship, causing the shields to flare brightly.

Tracey punched a comms button to broadcast an encrypted message to Ericson.

"Damn it, we're hit" Frantic yelled to the controller across the comms one last time before hitting the button to jump into hyperspace, an emergency mis-jump.

*

Honza finished cutting through the missile's hull and stood up, then kicked the top half off the missile. They had seen no movements whilst cutting the hull, and had heard nothing since retrieving the missile. However a fully conscious Norman Mosser looked up at them smiling and said, "Permission to come aboard commander?"

"Permission granted, thought you were dead in there" replied Frantic. "I take it you received our message."

Norman didn't reply but crawled out of the missile and struggled into a sitting position. He was bruised all over and said slowly "Ever go through a hyperspace jump with a broken rib?" This remark made all present cringe in understanding without experience.

"How did you manage to do it?" asked Frantic.

"I'll tell you later" said Norman and passed out.

*

"Really nice ship, but are we safe?" Norman asked after having his injuries tended to, cleaning up and having some soup.

Frantic took a seat next to him. "Lief Ericson is covering our tail in an Asp. Knowing the trouble you're in we figured the people after you wouldn't think twice to send a few ships chasing our mis-jump. A few did, but Lief will take care of them, he's a good commander. He'll also lead others off our tail if necessary."

"Sounds like you planned into this a lot, what's your angle in this?"

"Don't worry, you'll still get to keep your toy, but we do want to make a deal."

"I'm listening" said Norman, non-committal.

"We send you a group of engineers, Honza here amongst them. They assist you to put your huge plasma accelerator back together, and you let them look it over completely and make blueprints to take home. You let them pull anything apart they want and run tests as they need."

"And what do I get?"

"Well, aside from probably saving your life, our guarantee on your cooperation will be that when we successfully make our own copy, you get to own a Taipan class ship. We'll put you first on the short list to buy one." finished Frantic, leaning back and waiting for the reply.

"I'll have to think about it" Norman said...

The Proposal

[Commander Lief Ericson]

The shields failed on the Cobra 3 that we had been sparring with for the past minute or so and in a brilliant flash of light it disintegrated

"Gotcha, ya bastard!"

"Now now, Jamie, no need to be vindictive. Has Fran's hyperspace cloud faded yet?"

"Yeah it's gone now"

"Right, time to be off I think," I said as I initiated an emergency misjump.

When I awoke from the Stardreamer, Jamie was already sleepily checking the navigation data. "OK, where are we now, Jamie?"

"Etharin, Boss, do we want to land and pick up some fuel?"

"Yeah take us to the nearest port. What's it called?"

"Perry Landing."

"Right, we can do some repairs there as well."

As Jamie took us in to land at Perry Landing I started plotting a course for Alioth, which I guessed was the ultimate destination of Mack Winston from the signals I had got from the tracker before they had finally managed to shut it down.

Once we had refuelled and had all the repairs done we left and started heading towards AIS space. After stops on Tivea and Barnard's Star to refuel we finally hyperspaced into Alioth after a largely uneventful journey.

"Course is set for New Rossyth on Argent's Claim. Lets hope that Winston's there."

"This is New Rossyth control, Landing permission granted."

As the Asp settled on the pad at New Rossyth I got out after telling Jamie to have a look at the upgrades and equipment on offer, but not to buy anything. After a bit of searching I found the local AJN offices, so I walked in and went to the reception desk."

"Is Admiral Winston available at all?"

"I don't know sir, I'll just check if he's in port, who should I say is looking for him?"

"Tell him its Commander Ericson, he should have some idea who I am."

I settled down to wait as the Desk Sergeant used the intercom.

"Sir, Admiral Winston is available, he is sending down an escort to take you to him."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

As I turned to go and sit down again a young Ensign appeared "Commander Ericson?" I nodded "If you would follow me." After going up a few floors the ensign led me to an office and showed me in.

"Admiral Winston?"

"Yes, that's right. Why have you come here and how are you involved in this HPA mess?"

"I'm involved in this HPA mess because I'm curious about who has the wherewithal to steal the Feds' newest toy from under their noses and hawk it around, nothing more, I don't even particularly care who gets it in the end."

"Hmm, I'm not sure I totally believe that, but go on."

"I want to propose a deal to you, now at the moment the HPA part that your nephew was carting about is in AIS custody, and it would be very embarrassing if the feds were to find out that you have it, they'd probably try to pin the whole affair on the AIS as a plot to destabilise the region, or some such crap."

"Yes I would agree with that, so where do you come in?"

"Well, you could let your nephew and his associate cart it off to whoever, but if they get caught it going to be awfully embarrassing for you personally and could still have some repercussions for the AIS. What I propose is that you give me the HPA part and I cart it off after your techs have had a good look at it."

"What exactly would be in it for the Alliance if we let you spirit away this vital part of the HPA?"

"Well, it's not being held on an Alliance base and if I get caught by the FIB then it's no skin off your nose because I have absolutely no ties with the AIS. However, if I get through and find out who it is that pulled off the theft and how they operate I will let you know so that you can safeguard your own navy's biggest toys from them."

"It's an interesting idea. I'm not sure if I trust you but I'll pass your plan up and see what happens."

The Ship

[Norman Mosser]

'This venture should definitely prove fruitful I think'

'Indeed'

Norman and Frantic enjoyed cups of coffee aboard the bridge of the *Taipan*. Also with them were a group of technicians and engineers who had been rounded up for the purposes of the task at hand.

'It couldn't be better. GaINET gets HPA technology, and you get your one up and running'

'Not forgetting access to the *Taipan* in the future'

'Of course'

The *Taipan* was currently en route in deep interstellar space courtesy of the unbounded hyperdrive that it possessed. It was travelling to a set of co-ordinates that Norman had only provided once they were on board. Frantic had been cagey about this, but Norman had pointed out that seeing as he was in possession of what could be considered proscribed - and stolen technology, prudence was necessary in terms of security.

Tracy, who was doing her turn at the command console, spoke, 'We have some traces on long range scan - look like fighters'

'If it isn't too much trouble, may I have access to the communications system?' asked Norman. 'I haven't announced our arrival, so they are probably slightly cagey'

Frantic gestured his consent, and Norman opened a channel. Eventually, after a heated conversation, the fighters stood down and formed an escort.

Two hours later they arrived at their destination. A Long Range Cruiser surrounded by a number of attendant craft of all sizes. Frantic counted a good number of small fighters, a Python, a Tiger Trader, an Imperial Explorer, and of course, Norman's own Courier.

'To be honest, I've never had all my ships in the same place at the same time before' said Norman.

'You own them all?'

'Yep. I buy them, and hire people to fly them for me in return for a percentage of profit. And loyalty of course. Who else do you think pulled off the raid at LHO?. Come on, dock with the Cruiser and I'll show you what your techs have got to work with.

The *Taipan* docked, and after the airlock sequence was complete, Norman led Frantic, Tracey and some of the technicians along a series of corridors until they came to a large bulkhead hatch.

'In here.' Norman opened the door, and beckoning them through entered. It was one of the Cruiser's massive cargo holds. Along the length of it, but curiously not dwarfed were the components of the HPA. Frantic looked around at the sheer number of parts. A crate attracted his attention.

-- HPA PRIMING REACTOR --
-- AND TRIGGER MECHANISM --

'I thought that Winston kid had it? How did you get it back off him? I heard he was going back to Alioth with his uncle.'

'He never had it. He was the patsy with the decoy. The real one was delivered to me last month. Of course, he didn't know, and thought he had the genuine model and acted accordingly. Distracted everybody, including the intelligence boys. It helped that hardly anyone knew what one looked like. I wonder when they'll realise that all they have is the reactor from an Interplanetary Shuttle painted a different colour and a pile of air processor parts'

Norman grinned smugly. They joined him.

'Ah, anyway, if your people, after they have looked at it, poked it, prodded it and all that could wire the thing up and mount it on a ventral turret on this beast, I would be most happy. By the way, we jump out in twenty minutes. Time to move on I'm afraid. Can't take the chance that someone knows where we are.'

There was a pause.

'Right then, who wants coffee?'

Beer and Crisps

[Commander Red Ravens]

“DE-013 requesting to dock at Lave Station.”

Bec was exhausted, but performed the rigamarole with her usual efficiency. Lave had been the third system we had fled to. The little device I had lifted off the dead spacer had attracted six vessels so far. Our initial misjump had been enough to throw them while we docked and used our decreasing amount of hard-earned money to repair and refuel. My ribs still hurt, but Bec assured me that as long as I didn't try anything heroic again in the near future, I should be right.

After we sorted ourselves after the misjump we realised we were in Leesti. Nice quiet corporate state. We pulled into George Lucas without too much trouble. Set the repairers to patch up a bit of this and that and lay on some fuel. We thought we'd lay up here for a few days, maybe get someone to look at the device. We'd been there about seven hours before someone tried to break into the ship. We were in one of the George Lucas' bars, which was a bland commercial recreation of what used to be called an "Irish Pub". You know the type. Small, decked out in psuedo-wood with the most inane folk airs on the PA. The beer came in three varieties – thick, very thick and semi-solid. The consistency was about the only difference between them. I'm somewhat of a mutant in bounty hunter circles. I far prefer spirits to beer, as the chance of awful-tasting spirits is usually balanced by their high alcohol content. The Barnard's Star vodka was surprisingly good here. They must be watering it down with decent comet ice or something. Bec however, is a connoisseur of bad beer. The worse it is, the more she likes it. And they think I'M the mutant.

The two of us were drinking silently, somewhat morosely. The circle of debris around the one dead ship had shaken us. Big powers were moving, and we had the nagging feeling that we might get crushed between them. “Y'know... they were all Imperial ships...” Bec pointed out.

“Ospreys and the Imp Explorer. Yeah.” I shrugged.

“You're not convinced?” Bec gestured for another half-litre of beer.

“They're all Imperials, but they're also bloody good ships that anyone could use.” I downed the BS Vodka in one and gestured for another. Like many spacers, Bec and I didn't just like to *drink* when we dock, we like to get *plastered*.

I rested my head on my arm while I waited for my Vodka, so had the perfect position for my wristchrono to screech the burglar alarm in my ear. Bec's went off at the same time, but at least she didn't fall off her bar-stool.

Bec picked me up off the floor (over my protests) and we staggered over to the Bar's GalNet terminal. Among their other uses, they can be linked to security cameras (if you have the access). We linked in to the main cabin camera and were rewarded with the sight of a black-clad figure (geez, hadn't we had enough of THEM in the past week!) waving some sort of detection device around the cabin. In the dark, we could only make him out dimly. She seemed to be wearing goggles, maybe light enhancement.

Bec growled beside me. She hates the idea of people going through her personals. Hell... she even hates it when I tidy up the cabin! I swore and reached down for the comms button to get security on her arse, but Bec's hand clamped down on mine.

“What the...?”

“Red. We'll hand her over later. I think WE should handle the INITIAL questioning, don't you?”

There's a certain tone of voice that my co-pilot uses that puts me in mind of Dreamware villains. But it's far scarier in the flesh, even when you know it's not going to be used on you.

We left the bar quickly, and not entirely steadily, and moved as quickly as we could down to the docking bay. There was an uneasy moment when we passed a security guard who gave us a cursory examination (two drunken spacers guiltily trying not to giggle as we passed him), but we made it down to the ship. I checked the dockside GalNet, and she was still in there, looking increasingly frustrated down in the (sadly almost empty) cargo hold. If she really wanted to hunt through the poor quality Krostide Fillet steaks, she certainly could. I hadn't been game to leave the device on the ship, and had it safely in my breast pocket.

Bec bounded up the gantry stairs righteous with anger and alcohol. I followed a little more sedately, slowed by injury and a nagging worry. Bec and I weren't into guns, as a rule. I'd salvaged the two hand weapons from the

dead spacers, but they were stowed under the control console. I didn't trust myself not to shoot my own toes with it, either. If she was still in the cargo hold, we MIGHT have an opportunity to race into the cabin and get the guns, but she would have a chance to escape. Bec was at the door when I hissed at her to wait.

"Bec, you keep an eye on her in the cargo hold while I get those guns from the cabin. She might be armed."

Bec looked at me dubiously. "And if she comes out? What'm I s'posed to do? Ask her nicely if she'll wait while you come back with a gun?"

I considered this. Bec asking nicely has a certain arresting quality, but I didn't even know if our intruder was that way inclined.

"Just run screaming. That should get security here pretty quick." Besides which, I reasoned, with luck Bec could probably beat the crap out of her before she even unholstered her weapon.

Taking off my standard-Bounty-Hunter-Standard-Issue-Heavy-Space-Boots I tiptoed into the flight cabin in my Bounty-Hunter-Standard-Issue-Socks. The room was still dark and I didn't want to turn on the lights. I began to feel my way across the cabin. I got as far as the control panel I had a sudden, terrible feeling that I'd misjudged where the intruder was. My sozzled senses were telling me I wasn't the only one in the room.

"Bec? Is that you?"

In answer, I felt one of the metre-long Gateway Salamis we'd hung in the cabin smack across my shoulders. We'd been curing them for a couple of months, and they were now quite hard. Fortunately, the darkness must have made her hit my shoulders rather than the back of my head. I went sprawling with a crash and a loud yell of extreme pain.

The figure didn't wait around to finish me off, but raced for the hatch. Suddenly the light switched on and I heard Bec shouting.

I sprang to my feet (well... painfully levered myself upright) and reached under the counter for the laser pistol. I didn't want to take any chances, we were still unarmed and this might be a fearless, trained killer!

"Don't move you piece of undercover slime, or else I'll spread your innards over the control panel. Hell, it'll take ages to clean, but I don't take very kindly to scum who whack my co-pilot."

It seemed odd that Bec was saying that, as I was the one with the guns. I turned around to find my assailant being covered by... Bec's spud gun? I had to admit, she looked ferocious and deadly pointing the small metal object at my assailant, who appeared to be a nondescript young woman with a wary look of near-terror on her face. She dropped the salami, which landed with a thud, and slowly raised her hands above her head.

Don't move, or I'll fill you full of starch! I thought, but didn't say.

We didn't have a quicklock, so I was forced to scrounge in the maintenance locker for some cables to tie her up. This I did, pulling her arms up behind her back, with a little bit of petty, slightly drunken cruelty. She stiffened but did not cry out. Hey, my ribs hurt and I'd just been clobbered by a piece of smallgoods that I'd been looking forward to enjoying. I'm allowed to be a little vindictive.

"What now?" I asked Bec, who was still pointing the spud gun at our prisoner with an odd and rather disturbing expression on her face.

"I think we should get out into space. Deep space. With no other ships and no one to disturb us." She said, lightly emphasising the last word. I realised that her act was for the benefit of our prisoner. At least I hoped it was. We put our prisoner in the sleeping cabin (for our occasional passengers) and locked the door (we got that put in after we had this one passenger who... never mind).

Thoughtfully, we'd refuelled before we'd started drinking, so were able to get out of the Leesti station pretty quickly.

"DE-013 reque... requesting to depart from George Lucas," I slurred my words a bit talking to mission control, sending Bec next to me into a giggling fit which fortunately was soft enough not to be heard.

"Permission ... is there something wrong with your comm DE-013, I didn't hear that last bit clearly."

Bec's decibels rose by about half, but I managed to keep a straight face.

“No... quite all right, Control... just eager to get to the... to get into space.”

My anxiousness was real. If they breathalysed us they could make us pay quite a large fine for FUI and detain us for several days. Not particularly attractive when you've a prisoner that's being detained in your ship whom you might later wish to flush into space!

There was a long pause, when even Bec stopped giggling.

“Permission granted, Commanders, safe journey. I hope your cargo brings you profit. ”

I turned off the comm and Bec and I laughed long and hard.

An HPA too far

[Mack Winston]

We were approaching the station. It was just a place, way out, where we wouldn't arouse any kind of interest. The Cobra Mk.3's docking computer manoeuvred the craft onto final approach to the ancient Coriolis station, halfway between Riedquat and Alioth.

I looked over at my uncle, Jim Winston. We had exchanged few words on the journey so far.

"Well, why do you want that HPA part anyway? I thought the Alliance had developed an HPA already?" I asked.

In the darkness of the flight deck, I saw my uncle turn slightly towards me, just the silhouette of his form in the light of the planet below.

"How did you know the Alliance had one? That was supposed to be top secret," he replied, matter-of-factly.

I shrugged. "I have my sources," I said in the end. It was something I heard via the Guild before they got shut down. My uncle said nothing for a few seconds. I suspect he suspected that the Guild must have been involved. We'd had a little talk about that, already. Or rather, a little shout. Well, a big shout followed by lots of arguing - which to my satisfaction ended with my uncle yelling "Don't argue!" which was a sure sign that he had admitted defeat, and I'd won the argument quite completely.

Uncle Jim decided to reveal a bit more. "Well, the initiator is the hardest part of the HPA to get right. Your cargo hold is full of the Federation's HPA reaction initiator. The AJNIB is simply interested to see how the Federation did it. Comparing notes, so to speak."

We didn't say much more as the ship finally docked, and was transported deep into the bowels of the Coriolis - bay 17, deck E to be precise.

"Well, I fancy going to Chick-O-Rama for lunch," I said, as we walked to the airlock.

"You eat that junk food?" my uncle asked, slightly disgusted.

"It's not that bad," I replied.

We crossed the concourse towards the fast food joint. I tried to tease more information out of my uncle about the HPA - did the one the Alliance build actually work? (He said yes.) Did the Alliance suspect the Feds of nicking their design? (He did the neither confirm-nor-deny routine). Then something - or rather, someone - caught my eye. I just caught a glimpse of someone ducking behind a pillar. He or she (I couldn't tell which) had evidently been watching us, and hid when I looked around. I pushed open the door of the Chick-o-Rama "restaurant" and we walked in.

The place was brightly lit, with those menus above the counters. It must have been lunchtime. There was a queue five deep, and the auto-shuttle bay had a line stretching around the back of the outfit. "Hi, welcome to the Chick-o-Rama Drive thru, how can I help you?" I heard drift across the general hubbub of conversation, beeping fryers, and macrowave ovens. My uncle grumbled about how the food never looked like it did in the holos above the menu. Still, they served Riedquatian Ultra with the combos so it wasn't all bad.

As we came to the end of the queue, I got ready to place an order.

But the world was about to turn upside down...

I looked over the counter, and saw an autoshuttle pull up to the drive-thru window. The man in the auto looked straight into my eyes, and made a gun shape with his fingers, and pointed it at me. And grinned horribly. I looked around. I caught a glimpse of someone with some kind of weapon hanging around outside the Chic-o-Rama. Then I realised who they were...

I grabbed my uncle. "Run!" I yelled, and pushed through the queue, towards the toilets.

"What the f..?" shouted my uncle.

"Mafia! I'll tell you about it later!" as we barged through the door, flattening a spotty teenager in Chic-o-Rama uniform carrying a sani-bot and a container of detergent in our frantic bid to escape via the porcelain room.

I looked up at the ceiling. Removable tiles. My uncle could clearly see my train of thought, and started removing tiles to find a way out to the deck above. I started to work on the other end of the men's room.

Suddenly, I heard a loud "crack", like a bullwhip.

I turned around, just in time to see my uncle stagger, wrapped up by a Quick-lock! A tall man, dressed in an immaculate white suit, let go of the quick lock handle.

"Well, young Mister Winston," he said in a sepulchral tone, "it looks like your friend here won't get to witness your execution".

The man pulled out a knife that must have been 30 centimetres long. And incredibly sharp. He advanced on me. I stood, paralysed with fear. I'd never faced this kind of situation. The man continued to walk slowly towards me. He grabbed me by my throat, raised the knife, and plunged it towards me...

The adrenaline kicked in. Involuntarily, my knee had risen up and caught the man square in the groin, and hard! I suddenly felt my left arm go numb as the knife plunged into my left shoulder. My attacker staggered, letting go of the knife! I tried to move, but the huge knife had impaled me and stuck into the wooden panelling of the men's room!

The mafia man stood up, and gave me an evil look. Helpless and pinned like an ornamental butterfly, I could not do anything as he came up to me, and wrenched the knife out of my shoulder, and closed in for the kill. Through luck, I managed to grab the man's wrist, and kick him hard. I was not a fighter, and my blows were the random strikes of panic, not the well co-ordinated attacks of a fighter. My left arm dangled uselessly, blood soaking my shirt. Part of my mind was surprised that I was not in pain...

Finally, my wild blows connected with my assailant's knee, and he fell to the ground, dropping the knife! I grabbed it, and struck randomly, burying it into the man's throat. But I had a new problem. I was losing blood, and starting to feel weak. With the last of my strength, I unlocked my uncle, and tried to drag his unconscious body back into the main part of the fast food joint.

Pushing the door open, I was confronted with a scene of chaos, and three white suited men.

One was wielding a sword.

I just had enough time to think about how incongruous a curved scimitar was in the 3300s, just as it sliced into my body...

"Shit," I thought, and passed out.

Big Guns, Englishmen and Fallen Companions

[Norman Mosser]

'Norman, I want to talk to you about the HPA'

'Have you got it working yet?'

'Yes, but there's a problem'

'What?'

'The initiator'

'What about it? I went to a lot of trouble to get hold of that thing, and if it isn't working...'

'Don't worry, it does work'

'What's the problem then?'

'Its crap. John, the plasma specialist, reckons that it is a bad copy of a real one'

'What do you mean a bad copy? It's got the Federation stamps on it'

'Yes, it is genuine Federation hardware. It just seems to be a genuine Federation copy of a proper initiator. It works, just not very well. The field stabilisation is crap and only allows you a five second burst before the field collapses, and the graphite catalysts burn out after two minutes use. And they should last for seventy hours of continuous fire. Credit to the Feds though, they did include a reloading hopper for the catalysts'

'Well, I did hear rumours that there were teething problems'

'Slightly. It still kicks out a mean wattage when in use, but its woefully unreliable. And it all falls on the initiator. The rest of the kit is just a bigger version of an LPA. The initiator manages all the wave harmonics and drives the plasma stream - you know, the complex stuff'

'Can you compensate?'

'Maybe. If we saw a proper initiator - maybe the one from the original design, not this bad Federation copy, then we might be able to work something. John reckons he can improve performance a bit by knocking up some kind of widget to put between the initiator and the primary coil, but you still have the same problem'

'Cheers anyway, try it and keep working. Now its up and running, keep it online though, something makes me think that we might need it soon.'

'Yeah. Good job you'd already fitted those SPAs for insurance'

'Insurance? All part of the plan my friend'

Norman smiled and turned back to the long range cruiser's specifications. Caroline, his command second, got his attention. "There's an encrypted message coming in for you. It's a bit corrupt, but I can clean up most of it."

"Fine, send the text through to my comms pad." The pad beeped, and a message appeared on the little screen.

Norman finished reading the transcript of the message. He frowned thoughtfully.

'Is he dead?' he asked Caroline.

'No-one knows yet. The message was quite garbled. Apparently the alarm was raised quickly and the guys had to flee'

'Who were they?'

'The Maf - I think. The wearing white suits and the swords is a bit odd though. Maybe a triad?'

'Maybe. I told the guys who were going to supply the initiator to leave him alone, and I don't reckon it was them'

'It could be. And it could be that we find out where they live'

'And pay a visit?'

'They deserve it. Even if it were for trying a hit as dirty as that'

'Indeed. Probably some new boys who haven't learned the way things are done. Unless....'

'Unless what?'

'Well, I've been paid premiums for doing it bloody and public. Maybe he had seriously offended the wrong person and they decided it was appropriate'

'Maybe. We should look into this. There is more here than meets the eye'

An HPA too far - II

[Mack Winston]

Whiteness.

Endless whiteness.

I drifted into and out of vague consciousness, hearing words I couldn't understand. Occasionally, shapes would form in my vision.

I had the vaguest feeling of time but no coherence. I felt neither happy nor sad, nor hungry, nor fearful. Just vague white consciousness, which occasionally went dark.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the whiteness began to resolve into shapes. A white room. Bright panel lighting above. Hushed voices. Bodies being wheeled by vaguely human shapes, dressed in white. I strained to focus, and saw a shape above me.

A female shape, dressed largely in white. I stared, trying to resolve the female shape.

"Mack, I'm just going to take a blood sample," said the shape. I felt a dull sensation.

Finally, the world around me began to focus a little.

"Are you awake?" said the shape that now had resolved into a middle aged, but very attractive woman wearing a labcoat. She was holding what looked like a data pad. I tried to reply, but merely groaned. She made a note on the datapad.

"Mack, do you know where you are?" she asked.

I swivelled my eyeballs. My consciousness was rapidly returning to more-or-less normal, but I didn't feel like moving. The room looked roughly hospital wardish.

"I think," I started, the attempt at speech making me gasp for air, "I'm in some kind of hospital."

"You're a very lucky young man, Mack Winston," said the woman, disapprovingly.

"What happened?"

"You were apparently involved in a swordfight, except you weren't armed. You were very seriously injured. You had a collapsed lung amongst other injuries. The healers have almost done their work on the parts we could repair," she added.

Finally, I could resolve a name badge on her lab coat. "Dr. Eileen Zetter", it said in black writing on the white badge.

"My uncle, is he OK?" I said, remembering more about the battle.

"Your uncle is fine. We will call him and tell him you regained consciousness."

"What other injuries did I have?" I asked, as the "parts we could repair" bit of what she last said finally sunk into my mind.

"You lost your right arm," she said, altogether matter of factly.

With effort, I looked down, and tried to shout, but it came out as a groan! Where my arm had been was now an intricate contraption of stainless steel, plasti-muscles, electrodes and various other bits of plumbing I didn't recognise. A prosthetic arm!

I laid back, and groaned again. I suppose I should have been grateful to get anything out in a frontier hospital, but they could have made it a bit more life-like. But what about limb-growth incubators? I thought all hospitals had that kit now! They could grow any severed limb, and it was routine to take some DNA from the patient, grow a new one, and use an automicrosurgery suite to attach it...

"Thanks for the new arm," I said weakly, "but I thought you could grow new ones now?"

The doctor shook her head sadly.

"Only if the court acquits you will we do that, it's an expensive process. We always use prosthetics in cases like yours in case you are convicted."

"Convicted!?" I almost shrieked.

"Yes, you're in a secure ward. You are accused of assassinating a relative of those nice mafia types who attacked you. If you're found guilty, you'll be executed. It's expensive to use the limb-growers, and in cases where the patient will probably be executed, we use prosthetics as once you're dead, we can use them on someone else," she replied curtly.

It looks like at least SHE had found me guilty already by the tone of her voice.

The thing that hurt was that she was right. I was as guilty as the proverbial puppy sitting next to a pile of poo. Not that I was about to admit it, of course. Actually, I had assassinated three people on this very station. How they had found out it was me, I have no idea since I was always exceptionally careful.

"I didn't do it, it must be mistaken identity," I replied weakly.

"Well, I hope you've got a good lawyer. The picture of the assassin looks just like you and the DNA matches," she snapped. "The specialist will see you later to calibrate your new arm, you have to be able to sign the court papers."

I collapsed back on the hospital bed, still feeling extremely groggy, and now hopeless. I fell into a fitful sleep.

A while later, the specialist turned up. He didn't say much. Just "Squeeze your hand. Relax. Lift your arm". He poked and prodded the prosthetic. I felt everything from soft warmth to sudden pain. "Squeeze again. Move your thumb to your palm". It went on for about an hour. His manner was kindly enough, and he didn't mention anything about the court case.

"Well, it looks like you're all set," and packed up his boxes of equipment. "Try writing."

I pulled myself up in my bed, trying to lodge the autoheal on my injured left shoulder on the side of the bed. He gave me a datapad.

With wonder, I picked up the pen with my fake right arm. It felt odd, but it seemed to work just like the one the swordsman had relieved me of. The sensation didn't feel quite right. I wrote on the datapad, scruffily, but somewhat legibly.

"I'll leave you this pad. Practise, you'll get better with time and the sensation will feel more real," the man said, with a faint smile. He carried his boxes off.

And then my uncle arrived. He sat beside me.

"I guess trouble runs in the family," he said, at last...

Lifeless corpses? Tautology!

[Commander Red Ravens]

The ship nosed into George Lucas slowly, expertly. The hands guiding it were rated Elite, and were veterans of countless close-shaves as well as countless training runs with novice pilots. They didn't see combat too often nowadays, but the reflexes were still there, the confident play over the controls.

The co-pilot simply sat back and watched his superior. It was an honour to serve with this living legend, even though he was not quite the awe-inspiring two-metre hunk that the Dreamware had led him to believe.

The Asp nudged into the docking area and the engines were powered down. Drones came out to drag the massive ship into a bay. The ship had seen quite a bit of service, but seemed to be well maintained with up-to-date components. Even the most hard-bitten bounty hunter usually had a soft spot for their ship.

"OK Boss, what're we doing here?" The co-pilot knew not to ask before they'd docked, as his commander could be cagey with information, even through weeks of travel-time.

"One of our agents has disappeared."

"So? That happens occasionally, doesn't it? Who was she?"

"She was one of the Port Control techs. She has a 'buddy' agent here who said that she spotted an interesting reading on one of the ships that came into port."

"So?" The co-pilot wasn't expressing doubt, just encouraging his commander to continue.

"This close to LHO, I thought it might be worth checking out. Mosser seems to have all the cards, but I can still hope. We'll find out, anyway."

"How?"

A moderately evil grin came across the Commander's face.

"First we talk to the buddy agent. Then a certain uh, acquaintance of mine could brute-force the security on the sensor logs. See if we can spot what intrigued our agent."

"If we're caught, the Leesti-ites will have a sense of humour failure. A terminal one."

The Commander laughed.

"Cross that bridge when we come to it. Let's get out of here"

The hiss of the hatch opening drowned out his chuckles.

*

We waited until we were at least a couple of AU out until we started to interrogate the prisoner. Well... Bec interrogated her, I just stood by and tried not to be appalled.

"Listen to ME you useless piece of pig-meat... I will CHOKE you to DEATH with that damn SALAMI if you don't start to talk! I mean it! I'll shove it down your throat until you DIE."

Bec had a lovely imagination for these matters. I was just concentrating on breathing so my ribs didn't hurt. She hadn't responded yet to a variety of threats, varying from flushing her into space and watching her eyeballs pop (a popular myth not supported by reality) to strapping her to the prime mover while we went into witch-space. This hadn't worked particularly well, and Bec was now graduating to physical violence.

"Federalist running dog!" she slapped the woman lightly. No response from those dark eyes. "Imp-loving deviate!" A harder slap, causing a few tears, but no weakening. "Alliance..." Bec struggled for insult.

"Rectal-Leech?" I supplied helpfully.

“Alliance Rectal-Leech!” Bec nodded approval at me as she swung, this time with a closed fist. The woman rocked back on her barrel. She spat blood to one side after that hit, but just continued to stare at us both as unemotionally as she could.

I gestured with my head, we went out to the main cabin, closing the door behind us.

“She’s not going to crack. She’s a professional. We’re just bloody amateurs at this.”

“Wimp! All I need to do is start fulfilling some of these threats and she’ll be peeing her pants and telling us her life story.” Bec said with the utmost confidence.

“Do you really want to kill her?”

Bec looked at me with a pained expression on her face. She’s the one who’s always encouraging me to vaporise escape capsules. Thank God I’m in charge of the weapons rather than her. But then again, thank god she’s that much better a pilot than she is a weapons officer!

“Well if we let her go, is that really going to help? This woman is an operative, a trained killer. We let her go today, then she might be on the other end of a 4MW Lance and Ferman tomorrow.”

On cue, the proximity alarm went off. The two of us raced to our seats and strapped ourselves in. I felt a brief spasm of pity for the woman perched on the barrel. Hopefully she’d have the brains to crash onto the floor before she was thrown onto it.

Bec brought the Long-Range scanner on line. It wouldn’t fire up, spewing out ‘module coercion’ errors into the void. I groaned and tried to gather some information from the passive scan. Two ships, one giving off an ominous yellow signature. The other was small, a green, what we liked to call a pirahna... harmless alone, deadly in packs, a Krait or Sidewinder.

“Pirates?” I asked hopefully.

“Incoming message.” shrugged my co-pilot.

I punched it up with a sigh. No visuals, just an audio message from a voice that seemed to belong to a space-capable neanderthal.

“Prepare to be boarded! We know what you have and you either give it to us now or we pry it from your lifeless corpses.”

“Lifeless corpses? Tautology!” muttered Bec, bringing our heading around to face towards our two attackers. I primed the ignition sequence on the front laser, and brought the Targetting computer on line. We’d be able to get an active lock as long as they were within a couple of hundred K, thank god!

I wondered if we could maybe get away with a bit of bluff. I tapped the sequence to send a voice transmission.

“We have your agent on board, you want to pick it off HER lifeless corpse?”

I flicked the “end” button with a certain raffish swagger and grinned at Bec, who returned my wolfish expression. A return came back almost instantly, and the Neanderthal seemed slightly non-plussed.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. Surrender or Die!”

Bec laughed.

“If you could see your EXPRESSION.”

As we got closer, we began to slow. Amateurs shoot past their targets. These two were obviously amateurs, as they zoomed past us at high speed, firing their lasers wildly. However, we were already performing a flip manoeuvre, turning the ship round to use the main engines rather than the weaker retros to reverse our momentum and power after them. They were close enough to lock onto now, and I liked what I saw. A Gyr and a Hawk Airfighter, for God’s sake. The Hawk shouldn’t be used out of Planetary Atmosphere, it is that poor as a space-based fighter. The Gyr is a decent pirate’s vessel, but is a single-seater. Call me snobbish, but I like to have my co-pilot’s eyes and mind looking out for the ship as well as my own.

The Gyr pilot was Competent, but the Hawk was only Above Average. Interestingly, both had much higher bounties than their ratings would indicate. We guessed that both had more extensive criminal records dockside or planetside. We were still over 20k away when the Hawk fired both its missiles at us. Bec just piled on the thrust as I ECMed them. The tiny blossoms of light far ahead of us signalled their detonations. As we closed, the two ships diverged trajectories, the Hawk soaring 'above' us while the Gyr maintained course, while slowing as well. This is an old pirate's trick, tempting us to chase the fast-moving piranha while the Gyr got us in its sights. Bec kept us on course for the most dangerous ship.

I always like to let the other ship fire first. It's a game of 'chicken' (though I'm unsure what a 'chicken' is... a small Terran mammal? Or maybe it's an Eta Cass native). The Gyr fired at us with short, intense bursts. The telemetry indicated it was a pulse rather than beam laser, and a 5MW to boot.

"Careful. This one fancies himself a marksman." I said, my hands flicking off the safety. I pressed the button and was surprised to hit immediately, the Gyr's shields flaring and depleting. We only had a 1MW, but the pilot seemed unaware of the meaning of "evasive action" so we began to chew through their shields. The fitful stabs of fire from the other side only hit once or twice, which our shields easily absorbed. We had his shields down to 20% when a burst of fire on our top shields announced the arrival of the Hawk.

Bec spun the ship expertly to face the Hawk, without altering our course or momentum towards to Gyr. This exposed our belly to the Gyr, but allowed me to lob a missile off towards the Hawk. Our telemetry spiked on all channels as the Gyr tried to help his wingmate by ECMing our missile. However, the NN500 isn't particularly bothered by such piffing concerns. Our ship shuddered as the Gyr returned its interest to us. The 5MW got a couple of shots in, and I cursed as the shield strength began to plummet. Bec brought the nose back to face the Gyr. Above us, the Hawk was darting about in a futile attempt to dodge oncoming doom.

"Missile!" I shouted, as a fiery streak came towards us from the Gyr, now a mere couple of kilometres away. But to my astonishment, it zoomed over our heads, off towards the Hawk.

"What the hell?" Bec muttered, "Is he trying to shoot his own ship down to make sure we don't get credit for the kill?"

"Nothing so petty. The canny bastard is trying to save his wingmate by shooting down our missile!"

I triggered the ECM and the telemetry spiked again as the enemy's missile exploded. Our own NN500 powered on inexorably.

Twenty, fifteen, five percent. The enemy's shields evaporated before the barrage. Soon we would be cutting through his hull.

"Incoming voice message!" I grinned, punching it up.

"Surrender or die! You punks don't know what you're dealing with!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Bec broadcast back, "Generic Dreamware bad-guy speech Number One-Three-Five-Two. Go become a scriptwriter."

I triggered the laser and methodically punctured his left hull. For a moment, his ship seemed to shudder, the thrust from the prime-mover seeming to cough, and then the hydrogen fuel tank ignited.

"Message from the Elite Federation. The bounty for this kill is two hundred credits."

A few seconds later the status display on our missile winked out.

"Message from the Elite Federation. The bounty for this kill is one hundred credits."

I powered down the Laser and let out a deep breath. I don't care how easy it is, combat always makes me incredibly tense. Bec, however...

"Oh bay-bee! Rockin' the house!" Bec stabbed at the section of the console that I dreaded. Loud Achenar samba music blared through the cabin as Bec danced around in her own little celebration. I sat in place and winced. Victory has its price.

*

"Do you think they know?"

“What it is? Maybe. Maybe not. Their records don’t indicate that they’re real players. Penny-ante bounty hunters. It’s a real trip down memory lane.” They were back in the Asp now, reviewing their findings.

Their findings consisted of discussions with the buddy agent and a few other station personnel, and his Commander’s AI computer brute-forcing the station’s sensor logs. The Commander had been quite polite with the stand-offish Leestians, but he’d traded there for many years prior to his military service.

“They have the device. It’s a rather important little piece.”

“Not if they don’t know what it is or who to go to.” The Commander stretched out his thin frame and yawned. The HPA had the intelligence services of all three powers running around trying to pick up the pieces. He’d been short of sleep for almost a month now. “Other than that it’s just an esoteric little device that could be anything. A scrap merchant wouldn’t give you fifty credits for it if they didn’t know what it was used for.”

“Do you think they’ve killed your agent?”

The Commander looked sad for a moment. “The woman might have. Her psych profile isn’t too pretty. The man’s a bit softer, but the two of them operate as a unit.”

“She might be their prisoner, or might have stowed on board, hoping to hi-jack.” The Co-pilot tried to be encouraging.

The Commander stood up and went over to start the pre-flight check.

“Either way, we have to erase her from our calculations, follow them and act appropriately. We need to find them before the opposition does.”

“Her husband seemed pretty cut up back there.”

“She knew it was a risk when they got married. There’s a good reason I’m single.”

The Co-pilot frowned. The man’s distress had been real, and wasn’t the kind of thing that got mentioned in the training courses.

“Bloody superpower games.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” The Commander turned around. A slight twinkle had returned to his eye.

“Why not?”

“If it was the Imps or the Feds, there’d be a lot more blood and a lot fewer loose ends. This feels more like an operation by well-resourced amateurs.”

“And if it’d been the Alliance?” the Co-pilot asked slyly. For a moment, he thought he might have offended his Commander. Then his Commander gave a short and mirthless laugh.

“Then it never would have got out of committee. Let’s get going”

The Asp moved slowly out of George Lucas, and sped off into the system, the Prince in pursuit of the Paupers.

Piranhas and Whales and Witchspace, Oh My!

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

We took our time after the battle to eat some horrible overspiced Gateway pies that we'd been saving for a culinary emergency. I went in to give something to our prisoner. I should have worked out that something was wrong from the way the light source in the room had been covered by a bedspread.

This time, fortunately, I didn't get whacked with a salami. I ducked and threw the plate of pie in my would-be assailant's face. Fight food, with food is my motto. Well... at that moment it was.

She'd worked her way free of the cabling and had armed herself with a rather bizarre-looking lamp that Bec had picked up in Veliaze. She dropped it as the hot over-chilli-ed meat mix began to eat it's way into her sinuses. It smashed on the floor and I felt relieved, a) because I would no longer have my skull stove in; and b) it was a REALLY ugly lamp.

Suddenly a dark shape was rushing past me and I heard a nasty, hard smack of hi-impact plastic on bone.

"Don't... attack... my... friend!" Bec shouted as she pistol-whipped the cowering figure.

"Easy Bec, EASY..." I shouted, heaving back on her clobbering arm. I wrestled the gun from her (with some difficulty) and shoved her away. I didn't particularly want this woman killed in front of me.

"Sit down!" I shouted at her, pushing her towards the one comfy chair we had on the ship. She collapsed onto it, and stared with a good degree of menace at the bleeding figure on the floor. I turned to the figure and realised I still had the gun in my hand. I tossed it to Bec, who caught it and pointed it unwaveringly at the prisoner.

I leaned over and helped the woman up. She shrugged my hand the first time, but I grabbed her shoulder again and levered her to her feet.

She stood and leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. She had a couple of nasty cuts across the face and some red areas that looked like they would turn lovely shades of purple and gold over the next day or so.

"Look, mate. Neither Bec nor I are particularly good jailors and you are NOT a particularly easy prisoner. I've already earned enough bruises from this damn venture and I have no particular desire to earn any more."

She looked at me with guarded curiosity, her gaze flicking over to Bec with the gun occasionally. Bec's expression was still stormy, but that was OK. When she began smiling, I would begin to worry.

"Look... we'll leave you untied and have the run of this room. We'll feed you and won't ask you any questions. We're going to go to Lave Station and we'll drop you off when we're about to leave. Bec, don't bother!" I said quickly as Bec rose to her feet and began to mumble something regarding large-quadruped manure. "In return, I don't want any trouble from you."

There was a silent moment, and the woman nodded. My shoulders relaxed.

"If there is any trouble, I'll personally clean up after anything Bec does to you." I smiled, to show I was serious. I may be soft, but I'm not stupid. We'd bodysearched her, so she was unlikely to be carrying any deadly instruments of death (her use of the lamp also hinted she was unarmed). And as long as she stayed in the spare cabin, I didn't see a problem.

"Is there any of that pie left?" the woman's quiet voice startled me.

"There's a lovely piece of it cooling on the floor." said Bec savagely, jostling me as she crashed past into the flight cabin. I sighed and looked at our former prisoner, now passenger. Generally, Bec was an easygoing co-pilot, but her occasional rages made it difficult.

"Yeah. It's barely worth it, it's horrible. I'll get you some water, too." I said, going out into the main cabin. Bec was sitting in the pilot's chair with a spud in her lap, tormenting the mini-robot again. The poor thing was lying on its belly waving its legs and Bec was STILL pointing the spud gun at it.

"It's bad form to shoot something when it's helpless." I pointed out.

Bec turned to me and smiled. Unlike her usual evil grin, she was genuinely smiling this time. There was also what looked like... was it?... RELIEF?

"I didn't really want to kill her, anyway. Sometimes it's wiser, though."

Bec turned back to the robot and as the thing flipped over and began to stand up, she sent it flying with a well aimed pellet.

"I can't argue, but look, it's no more than a day or two at the most, isn't it?"

Bec looked at me with an exasperated expression and drew a finger across the skin from one ear to the other.

"There are eighty six thousand, four hundred seconds in the standard spaceborne day. It only takes one of them to slit a throat."

With that rather disquieting statistic, Bec began to set the controls for a hyperspace jump to Lave. I went over to the Autochef and reheated some of the pie. Carrying it back to the spare cabin I found the woman sitting on the bed staring at the wall.

"There's some Dreamware over there in the corner if you want it. Nothing recent I'm afraid."

I didn't quite know why I was being hospitable towards a woman who had twice tried to clobber me over the skull, but if you ignore the fact that I'm a weapons officer killing pirates on a daily basis, I'm not really a very hostile person. I'm the opposite to Bec, which is probably why we work so well together as a team. She provides the testosterone and I provide the level head.

The woman neither smiled nor thanked me; she simply nodded and continued her Advanced Wall Study practise. I knew it would take a couple of minutes for Bec to finish programming the destination, as our Witchspace Governor was prone to resetting itself whenever you tried to lock in a course.

I righted the barrel and sat down.

"I suppose you'll be glad to get back to your husband or wife." I said.

THAT got a reaction. Her head snapped around and she looked at me in pure shock. Maybe she thought her cover had been blown.

"Er... you've got a plain gold ring on your finger. That's still traditional most parts of the galaxy."

"Oh." she said. She thought for a few seconds longer and then turned to me, something like hatred in her eyes. "Now my cover's blown, I might never see him again."

I mumbled something and went back out into the flight cabin. My attempts at light conversation usually ended like this, totally embarrassing/upsetting everyone involved.

"OK, ready to go?" I said to Bec, hurriedly sitting down.

Bec grinned at me. "Our guest particularly pleasant, was she?"

In reply, I reached for the engage button and slapped it, watching the viewscreen ahead of us blur into the coruscating vortex of witchspace.

"Well what do you think we should do after we drop her off?" I asked.

Bec shrugged.

"Much of a muchness, really. Until we offload this damn thing to *someone* we're going to be chased for it. Maybe set up a BBS ad and circulate it throughout the galaxy."

I looked dubiously on this idea. Unless we worded it so carefully that nobody could understand it, we would get every two-bit pirate, bounty hunter, assassin and secret service agent out to get us. Even if we arranged a meeting on Mars High or Duval City we'd still have an armada of ships waiting to blast us into dust, Vipers notwithstanding. "Hmmm... maybe we should try and contact one of the Navies... Imps or Alliance. Maybe if they get it, they'll..." I trailed off under the obvious conclusion.

"... probably kill us to make sure we don't talk." Bec finished cheerfully.

"Maybe we should just leave it on the table in one of the bars on Lave. Let someone else get hunted down." I said, bleakly. This little trinket seemed to be a bit of a harbinger of doom.

"Only if we can get really drunk first!" Bec giggled, then squeezed my hand. "It's not that bad. We'll live."

I let out a deep breath. There were only a few more minutes until we exited Witchspace. After that, we'd speed to Lave, refuel and replace our spent missile, and then get the bloody hell out of there as soon as we can. Where to? Probably we should just shoot through to one of the frontier systems until the whole thing calmed down. Even the most avaricious of bounty hunters will hesitate to travel for months to the outer limits to find a speck of sand on the beach (which was what we were). It wasn't as though we wouldn't get attacked, it would just mean fewer of the buggers.

"Out of Witchspace in ten... five, four, three..."

Bec chanted down the numbers as per usual. Our Constrictor groaned softly as it returned to the world of conventional physics through a cloud of coherent plasma. There was a ping as the sensors re-oriented themselves to normal space... and picked up four ships waiting for us within fifty clicks.

"Shit!"

"Damn!"

Bec and I simultaneously swore / blasphemed. Bec slammed on the Active Long Range and bless its little electronic heart it fired up the first time.

The news it brought was bad. Three Osprey X-es and... oh shit, an Imperial Explorer. I had the horrible sensation of terminal déjà vu.

"Bec..."

"I know."

"... are they..."

"I know."

"...the same?"

"Just shut up. Yes!" Bec snarled at me as she laboriously began to reset the Witchspace Governor. I kept an eye on the scanner and watched as the fast little Ospreys began to close. They were quick little craft, a good 7G faster than our Constrictor, so if it came to a running dogfight I gave us the same chance as an anarchist on Achenar (i.e. none!). More ominously, the hulking mass of the Imperial Explorer crawled towards us. Nibbled to death by Piranhas or devoured whole by a Whale! I really hoped that Bec had been mistaken about that LPA she'd seen vaporising the corpses of ships back at the debris circle.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Bec smacked the control panel, almost crying with frustration. I had seen the bloody thing take twenty minutes to program, and that was under calm conditions.

The Ospreys were within 10km now. I slapped Bec's hand away from the Witchspace Governor.

"Evasive action, Bec. Hey, you, get in here!" I shouted over my shoulder as Bec fired up the Prime Mover. The first stab of fire crackled into our shields as the Laser fire peppered our slowly moving form. The ship shuddered, but Bec smoothly accelerated and moved us out of the projected course of the Ospreys. They were flying in close formation and appeared to be good pilots, concentrating their fire on us while maintaining an oblique approach pattern that would be difficult for us to match.

Our prisoner emerged from the spare cabin and stood at the door passively. I risked turning my head as I prepped the weaponry.

"Three Osprey X-s and an Imperial Explorer. These guys are not your friends, right?"

She looked at the displays with a quick glance that showed she knew her way around sophisticated telemetry and a look of concern came over her face.

"No friends of mine. They mustn't get it. What can I do?"

“Program the Witchspace Governor. If it goes dark just re-set it by hitting it with your fist and start again.”

A blast of laser fire rocked the ship I glanced down and saw the shields were at eighty percent. Bec was doing her best but needed help.

“Where to?” she squeezed in between Bec and I so she could (barely) get her hands to the controls.

“Anywhere!” Bec and I shouted simultaneously. The woman winced at our stereo assault.

“Incoming message...” I muttered.

“Chaps, you’re outnumbered, outgunned and your rickety little craft doesn’t stand a chance outrunning our ships. Power down your ship and surrender now and we won’t treat you too badly... (maybe sell you as slaves or some such) ... resist and I don’t think you’ll enjoy it... I really don’t think you will. That’s all...”

The nasal voice had a well-bred quality that immediately got up my nose. It was also a very Imperial accent.

“Very polite, really...” Bec muttered, winding on the power. “Arsehole!”

“I hope neither of you has a violent aversion to dying?” I asked rhetorically, my finger poised over the firing stud. A shaft of blue traversed the cosmos, shearing past our nose. A well-directed warning shot from the Explorer, followed by the smaller but far more accurate needles of light from the Ospreys.

“I’VE got a violent aversion to dying.” I thought to myself, desperately.

The Unjammable Housebrick

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

The man was dressed in bounty-hunter black, but of good quality, not shabby and worn. His dark beard was neatly cut and combed framing a face that seemed vaguely related to the picture on the wall behind him. The relative (if that's what he was) looked down forbiddingly on the man as he read an old paper book. The cabin around him was not sumptuously appointed, but there were occasional touches that betrayed a more prosperous background. An exquisite brass tea-set on the table. An old rosewood box with intricate gold-leaf inlays. The frame of the portrait. Heirlooms kept as a reminder of glory once held and yet to be regained.

A knock came on the door.

The man continued reading for a moment, testing his subordinate's patience. Then, with a sigh, he closed the book and set it aside, taking care to be gentle with the book's ancient spine. "Enter," he said quietly. The door opened, revealing Dreyfus, his most trusted aide. A short, corpulent man, Dreyfus was a genius when it came to anticipating his master's needs and plans. No sooner would he hear the broad outline, he would work like a demon to fill in the details and then to bring the whole scheme into effect. He balanced this with oily diplomacy and quite savage ruthlessness. There was no more dangerous man under his command.

"I've received a message from Viscount Preston, Marcus. He's found the ship carrying the missing unit."

Marcus frowned at the news. Although he was a loyal servant of the Empire, he found certain individuals in its government a trial, at best. Preston was a fop and a sadist, who brought disrepute on the very CONCEPT of the nobility. However, he was also a Deadly rated pilot with a well-equipped Imperial Explorer. Such assets were hard to come by at this time. Once the plan was complete, though such men could be disposed of and a sense of honour returned to the Empire. Until then, men and women such as Preston had to be cultivated and supported. "He knows to take care in recovering it?"

"Indeed. I informed him that his entire stake in the plan is dependent on successfully retrieving the unit and delivering it to its destination. I also told him we would double what we have already promised him."

Marcus grunted. "Appealing to his greed? Surely not much of a challenge for your skills, Dreyfus."

"Not really, no. Apparently it has fallen into the hands of some common bounty hunters. As far as we are aware, none of the main players have a clue about where it is or who has it.."

"Good." Marcus reached for his book. "The rest of the plan is proceeding appropriately?"

"Of course. The stockpiles are almost at the trigger level and Mosser has been sending us regular updates as to the attack plans." Dreyfus rather distastefully spoke the name. He regarded Mosser as a grubby little profiteer and avaricious commoner, participating in the plan for monetary gain rather than for the Cause. Marcus himself had a more sympathetic view, seeing him as a man determined to seize what he wanted through boldness and strength of arms. A kindred spirit, almost.

"Excellent. Tell me when the Viscount has completed his delivery."

Dreyfus bowed and withdrew. For a moment, Marcus looked pensively at the portrait on the wall. "Soon," he murmured, "soon there will be an Empire worthy of you."

He returned his interest to the book and read aloud the passage he had underlined.

"And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams..."

*

"Shields down to twenty..." I shouted, vainly trying to nail the Osprey X streaking past the nose of our Constrictor. I'd landed a couple of hits, but all three Ospreys were still strafing us. They had an uncanny knack for getting on our six, strafing us as a pack and then streaking away in a "crazy" pattern so we couldn't concentrate our fire. It was proving a deadly and effective tactic. We had one missile, which would probably account for one of our tormentors, but after that, we would have no card left to play.

The Witchspace Governor was being especially tetchy today, which was exacerbated by the inexperienced person trying to program it.

“Almost there... DAMN!” the woman in black between us was quickly learning how frustrating the thing could be. Bec was a picture of concentration, her hands flying over the controls, adjusting this thruster then that, changing thrust, attitude, pitch and yaw in an effort to evade. All the time she was trying artfully to guide us further away from the lurking Imperial Explorer with its frighteningly powerful LPA.

“Missile.” Bec muttered tightly as she threw our craft into a dizzying spin.

“Gone.” I said, engaging the ECM. The readout on the display winked out and I caught a tiny pinpoint of light in the rear viewscreen. Thank God they didn’t have NN500s! Our ECM was probably the newest, best maintained piece of avionics on board, but as far as it was concerned, an NN500 was about as jammable as a house-brick.

“The middle ship...” the woman between us muttered.

“What?” I said. If she had any ideas short of a suicide pact, I was certainly open to it.

“The middle ship. It’s not as good a pilot as the others. It has a predictable pattern when it breaks formation, a steep climb followed by a turn to port.”

“You’ve been taking time to look at the scanner? No wonder we’re still here. Bec?” I asked, hoping that she didn’t still bear a grudge.

“Let’s do it. Hell, she’s tried to kill you twice, we might as well give her a third try.” Bec smiled crazily.

The three Ospreys came screaming towards us, a triple-pronged fork of light stabbing down on us as they approached. Bec gave us a lot of lateral movement, trying to zig-zag between the tines of the fork. The ships approached and we caught a couple of hits, forcing us down to eight percent. The destruction of one ship might not matter much.

Then the ships were past us, the lights of their engines blinding, then turning to fading flares of plasma. Except for one.

As Bec wound on the power chasing the middle Osprey, the woman standing between us staggered backwards from the acceleration. Bec and I were in our shock-webbing and barely noticed. To her credit, she fought against the G’s to the Witchspace Governor and gamely tried to complete the sequence.

The pilot of the Osprey hadn’t seemed to notice us matching his manoeuvres and was blithely going through the same evasion pattern that our sharp-eyed prisoner had noticed. We were almost close enough as he reached the ‘top’ of his climb, Bec looked at me expectantly.

“Anticipate the turn, Bec.” I whispered, my eyes locked on the targetter and my finger poised on the firing button.

Bec swung the nose around to Port and, on cue, the Osprey turned into my firing arc. I stabbed the laser control and watched as the beam began to shear through the Osprey’s wing. The pilot finally realised that they were in my sights, and fired its retros and tried to dive backwards. Bec easily matched the move, and I used the extent of the gimbal on the laser to keep the pressure on.

Osprey Xs are one of the larger of the small fighter class, robust and well-engineered vessels without any faults or weaknesses. But under our 1MW, it didn’t hold out for long. I saw a large bit of debris separate from the fuselage. After a moment, I realised it was one of the Osprey’s four wings. I stopped firing, and watched as the Osprey X disintegrated.

“Message from the Elite Federation. The bounty for this kill is one hundred and fifty credits.”

Bec immediately wheeled around to face the other two Ospreys. There was no jubilation in the cabin at the explosion, only grim satisfaction. The odds on our survival had shortened, but not considerably. The Imperial Explorer was close now, within firing range for the Large Plasma Accelerator. If that beam honed in on us, our life-expectancy would be measured in milliseconds.

“They’re talking a lot.” Bec pointed to the communications scanner. The transmissions were encrypted, and we couldn’t break that code, but the short bursts of comm traffic indicated that they were having a decent old chinwag about us.

"How you going?" I asked the woman between us.

"If they don't attack for another three minutes, I think I can do it." She said, her face screwed up in concentration.

"Well the Ospreys are holding back." I said uneasily, knowing full well that the hammer hadn't been pulled away, only suspended above us. I had an eye on the shield panel, where the Energy Booster was reintegrating the field strength. I saw the indicator inch back over ten percent when the console beeped with an incoming message. Our well-heeled friend was back. I targetted the Explorer and checked the transponder readout. My heart sank. The Explorer was a well-equipped dream of a ship, and the pilot was rated Deadly. He may have sounded like a ninny, but he had the blackened shells of over 3000 ships behind him.

"Look... I thought I made myself perfectly clear to you. I *told* you that I'd treat you chaps quite decently if you surrendered, but you've gone and been stubborn about it. I just don't know how chaps like you get into space when you're so unreasonable about survival and those sorts of things. Well... that's it... I'm done being reasonable... if you've got anything to say to each other that you otherwise wouldn't have said, declarations of love or enmity or things of that sort, I'd say them now..."

"I'm close." The woman next to us whispered. "So close. Keep him talking."

"How?" I whispered back (not knowing why, as the microphone wasn't actually on).

"Think of something!"

I tapped the sequence for an audio send.

"We'll destroy it! I'm holding a Lance and Ferman to the side of it as we speak. I'll melt this damn thing into slag if you don't back off. I want to be rich, but I'd rather live." I tried to put a bit of hysteria into my voice, to convince him I was ready to do it. By the way my colleagues turned and looked at me curiously, I think I might have overdone it. There was a long moment of silence, only broken by the feverish tapping on the Witchspace Governor. The shields crept up above twelve percent. The Ospreys lay poised about ten clicks away, while the Explorer hung ponderously at about the same distance in the opposite direction. If they decided to close on us, it would be the hammer and the anvil.

A full thirty seconds passed before the console beeped with an incoming message.

"That was awfully clever of you chaps, but I've been talking with some experts in the field that I happen to have in my entourage and they've informed me that there's enough radioactive material to kill you in not-very-many minutes should you puncture the casing. So I think you must be bluffing old chap. Very impressive. Goodbye."

On one side of us, the forms Ospreys blurred into fast streaks of plasma while on the other side, the Explorer moved slowly forward like an asteroid with energy weapons. I expected Bec to power off on an oblique course to try and exploit the speed differential between the whale and its' piranhas. Instead, she directed us square at the Explorer.

"Bec, have you gone blonde on me again? Remember? Explorer, LPA, bright blue beams of deadly plasma?" I shouted. Bec ignored me. Once our course was set, she looked me straight in the eye.

"If they were going to use that on us, they would have, not sent the Ospreys at us. They don't want to damage the 'unit'. They want to kill us, not blow us up. The Ospreys can pick our eyes out safely, the Explorer doesn't have that flexibility." Bec spoke with certainty. She'd calmed down since we'd destroyed the Osprey and taken the opportunity to ask questions of the situation. Bec isn't introspective, but *can* think laterally, especially when our lives are on the line.

"Well that's assuming that they don't have..."

"Missile!"

I hate it when reality completes your sentences for you. I pressed the ECM button, as there were only twelve seconds to impact and there wasn't much time to prevaricate. I kept the burst going for five seconds, in case they'd fired more than one. Once the static cleared from the scanner, the missile was still coming.

"Oh shit... an NN500 housebrick!" I yelled, which caused both women to look at me strangely, for the second time in a minute. "Grab her, Bec." I said, and reached across to grab the shoulder of the woman next to me. The woman yelped as both Bec and I pinioned her.

I've always loved NN500s. They have speed, endurance, are immune to pretty much all ECM, can outwit / outmanoeuvre / outthink all but the craftiest of pilots. They also pack a massive punch, which was decisively demonstrated by the one that hit the front of our Constrictor, sending our craft spinning round in a full-circle, the systems unable to compensate.

Despite our ironclad grip on the woman's arms, her body shot forward on impact and struck the viewscreen quite hard. She then fell back with a moan. Bec and I were both thrown forward in our shock-webbing our heads bouncing around. Eventually, when the stars in my head stopped filling my eyes, I looked at the viewscreen (now with a nasty red bloodstain) at the stars outside the ship. Along with some bright things that were not stars.

Bec looked weakly across at me and shook her head. By common consent, we dropped the limp figure between us so that she fell with a *relatively* soft thud. From the way she was groaning, it was unlikely that she was seriously injured, but she was unlikely to be much help in the short to medium term.

I tapped the code for a verbal Damage Report. I didn't like the computer's voice, but I was still feeling a bit groggy and didn't want to misread the screen.

"Damage Report: Shield Integrity Breached: Field recharging; Hull breached in Section 1; Hull Breached in Section 3; Hull Breached in Section 12; Front Retro – Damaged (60% of full capacity); ECM – Offline; Autopilot – Offline; Front Beam Weapon – Offline; Missile Guidance – Offline; Atmospheric Shielding – Breached; Long Range Scan-"

"Stop." I said. The computer beeped and complied. I looked over at Bec, who looked utterly defeated. The litany of faults put our petty complaints about the dodgy autochef in perspective. I leaned over to check the Witchspace Governor, but the panel was filled with static. I banged it with my fist, and the static cleared. A tiny line of text printed itself on the screen: "To Start: Please Enter Interstellar System Co-ordinates For Pending Hyperspace Jump"

Damn. And she'd been close. I knew she'd been. Bec looked on the point of tears and I felt my eyes grow hot too. We were about to die without ever knowing what we were dying for.

I looked up at the scanner and saw that one of the Ospreys was approaching. A klaxon announced that a missile had been launched. Probably only a normal one, but without our ECM we barely had a chance. I looked over at Bec, who was staring morosely at the scanner. I leaned over and punched her hard.

"Goddamit, let's not make it easy for the bastards." I roared. I leaned over and slapped the control for the Prime Mover, which roared into life, unaware of the devastation at the front of the ship. Like the ace pilot she was, Bec grabbed for the controls and brought us back onto an even course.

"Why bother?" she said, while at the same time plotting a course to try and evade the missile. It didn't turn quite as tightly as the NN500 and wasn't quite as wise to the tricks that an experienced pilot like Bec can pull. Thankfully, apart from the retros there wasn't much wrong with the ship's rockets.

Meanwhile, I targetted the stationary Osprey that had just fired the missile and lobbed off our final offensive weapon, the last NN500. The ship started moving mighty fast, once they realised that we'd fired on them. It must have been like a squashed fly rising up to bite the hand that swatted it.

The estimated time to impact on the screen fluctuated wildly, along with the effectiveness of our evasions. Ten. Twenty Four. Eleven. Six. Eighteen.

Suddenly a flare of light screamed past the rear. The Osprey X that was still free was trying to slow us down so that the missile would hit us. Bec ignored it. The lack of retros, however, robbed Bec of some of her flashier moves. The missile was consistent and relentless. The Osprey pulled away as our doom became obvious. The Estimated Time of Impact counter began to decrease, regardless of what Bec did.

Eight. Six. Four. Two. Four. Two. I reached over and clasped Bec's hand and closed my eyes.

The sound of explosion was expected. The total lack of impact was not. I opened my eyes and looked at Bec questioningly.

"Incoming message." The computer chirped. I'd forgotten to take it off voice mode.

"Just keep out of reach. We'll take care of your friends."

The voice was masculine, friendly and totally relaxed. If I had to face two Osprey Xs and a well equipped Imperial Explorer, the last thing I'd sound would be relaxed. I transferred my attention to the scanner. There was an expanding ball of gas behind us where the missile had been. Our 'friend' had obviously been kind enough to ECM it for us.

The ship was an Asp Explorer, pilot rated... Elite! Well, well... we might survive this yet. The Asp seemed to be fitted with a 4MW and was homing in on the free Osprey. As for the Osprey being chased by our missiles...

"Message from the Elite Federation. The bounty for this kill is two hundred credits."

We watched as the Osprey danced, all its thoughts of return fire abandoned as it twisted and turned trying to avoid destruction. The Imperial Explorer lurched towards its endangered wingmate, spewing blue plasma at the much smaller Asp. If that was designed to make the Asp back off, it only served to sharpen its aim. The Osprey exploded in a ball of fiery gas and the Asp looped round to try and get on the Explorer's six o'clock position. The Explorer anticipated the move, and strained to keep up with the faster Asp. It seemed to be succeeding in this when it was attacked from the bottom.

Both Bec and I looked in disbelief at the scanner at the four small craft strafing the bottom of the Explorer with their lasers. They were tiny little things that couldn't possibly have come this far on their own steam. But here they were, flying in a tight formation and if they weren't doing serious damage to the behemoth they were nibbling at, they were certainly causing consternation on board the vessel. The ship seemed to pause in mid-manoeuve, which was the opening the Asp required to turn and open up with the 4MW Beam laser. But the Explorer was an Iron-Ass and wasn't going to be destroyed by such tactics. The pilot also knew when he was at a disadvantage. The Imperial Explorer was slower than both of our ships and without the Ospreys it couldn't slow us down enough to make us a target for their superior firepower.

"We're still alive?" the woman behind us was propped up on her elbows and looking dreadful, blood covering her face from the cut on her forehead, along with a lump that would have done an Altairean Elephant's tumour proud. I got out of my seat and helped her up. She couldn't stand so I plopped her in my seat while I went to the back of the cabin to get the first-aid kit.

"An Elite-rated Asp Explorer and these freaky little fighters came out of nowhere and saved our arses..." Bec said in awe.

"An Asp? Fighter interceptors." the woman seemed to be concussed, for she started to laugh softly. Tears fell down her face and suddenly she was crying, seemingly from relief. Bec looked concerned at the hysterics and expertly took out an ampoule of mild sedative from the kit. Bec's caring side doesn't come out as often as her vengeful one, but her professional medical training hasn't been completely abandoned.

"Incoming message." the computer chirped again. I *really* hate voice mode.

"You chaps appear to have won this round. But don't worry, we'll get what we want. You can't stop the march of history, don't you know?"

And all that was left of the Imperial Explorer was an expanding and fading red-spectrum hyperspace cloud. The Asp approached to about a klick and stopped. We were at their mercy if they tried anything, despite their friendly demeanour.

"DE-013, how badly are you damaged?"

"We should make it as long as you can escort us to Lave Station." I sent back. "We're sitting ducks as far as hostile activity is confirmed."

"We'll escort you... and your cargo... to Lave Station and we'll work things out from there. Don't try to run, though... I'd hate to destroy your ship after having had to save it."

The tiny fighters clustered underneath the bulk of the Asp and I realised they must be docking. A fighter launcher! I could see that this pilot was Elite in more ways than one, with an expensive piece of equipment like that in his bays.

"And I'll probably be pretty annoyed if you've killed my agent, too." The man said, his voice staying mild while radiating partially concealed menace.

"She's alive!" I hastily reassured him, "She got a bit injured when the missile hit, but she'll live. By the way, can we ask who saved us?"

“Me? I’m Commander James Winston. I’m in the Alliance Joint Navy. You, on the other hand, are in a heap of shit up to your shoulders. See you in Lave Station!”

And with that jaunty farewell, the transmission ended. Bec seemed cheerful as she sedated our soon to be ex-prisoner.

“So... Deadly in an Explorer or Elite in an Asp... which one’s the better way to die?”

Akvavit Spiked with More Akvavit

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

“So who was it?”

Marcus never displayed fury, it was unbecoming, but Dreyfus could read the anger in his master’s hands, which seemed unnaturally still sitting on the tabletop.

“Preston says it was an Asp with a suppressed transponder. But I think he’s lying. He let slip something about tiny fighters, so it’s an Asp with a fighter launcher. There aren’t too many of them about. He lost his entire escort and has to flee the scene, so evidently he was up against a superior pilot, probably Elite.”

“Winston!” Marcus rose, agitated. His forces had done an exemplary job evading the combined security forces of the three powers. While small pieces of the plan had been uncovered, like that greedy speculator on Vequess, the full, far-reaching architecture remained secret. The speculator had been quietly killed in custody, before she could be fully interrogated. While the loss of the speculator and her buying power, had delayed the stockpiles reaching trigger level, the main plan remained on-course. Or had, until this body blow.

The HPA was the only element of the plan that was absolutely essential. The strikes needed to be quick and seemingly random. The HPA was the only hardware that allowed them to destroy the final target without a prolonged battle. One of the targets would be destroyed by a bomb and another by a carefully planned insurrection (which was absorbing the majority of the available finance and personnel). Marcus did NOT have military resources and could not afford to run a prolonged campaign. The strikes needed to be swift, surgical and effective.

“Marcus, I don’t think there’s need for concern yet.”

“No need?” Marcus rounded on Dreyfus, his eyes blazing. The smaller man did not flinch or turn away. “The entire plan hinges on the HPA, and now probably the most critical player in the Alliance Intelligence services possesses the most essential component!”

“Marcus, think for a moment... the Alliance has never shown interest in developing large-scale energy weapons before. What would they do with the component, even if they knew what it was?”

Marcus sat back down and closed his eyes, practising the concentration ritual he had learned in his youth. His breathing slowed. Then stopped.

Dreyfus shifted his feet uncomfortably for nearly a minute. He hated it when his master did this, slowing his heart rate and halting his breathing. He said that it enabled him to be calm and still, which was important in a man as passionate as Marcus was. But Dreyfus didn’t like it. It wasn’t healthy, it wasn’t natural.

“It is in Winston’s interests to keep the component in play? That’s your conclusion?” Marcus said rhetorically. Dreyfus smiled in relief. He’d been concerned too, before he’d had a chance to analyse the consequences. Without waiting for an answer, Marcus continued. “Of course it is. Winston is known for favouring a risky strategy, whatever the stakes. He’ll leave the component out in the open as much as possible to try to uncover as much of our scheme before he interferes.”

Marcus stood and went over to the portrait.

“Sadly, my friend, we still have a use for Viscount Preston.”

“I thought so,” Dreyfus said unhappily, “he’s the only lead that Winston has, isn’t he?”

Marcus turned back from the portrait, and his expression was grim. “The plan continues. Once trigger levels are reached, we continue the plan, regardless. There is no fallback position for us, we must continue, come what may.” Dreyfus saw that his friend was falling into the black fatalism that consumed him at times.

“My Lord,” he said formally, “our plan is only threatened, not thwarted. We are strong, in spirit and mind as well as in force of arms. You WILL assume your rightful place. As long as I have movement in my members I will work towards this.”

A ghost of a smile crossed Marcus’ face. “Your loyalty is nearly the best thing I have, Dreyfus. Leave me now, I must think.”

Dreyfus gave a short bow and exited, his concern equally divided between the plan and the spirits of his master. One, at least, was not beyond his power to influence.

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We were standing outside the ship looking at the damage when Winston caught up with us. Winston had insisted that we dock first, and even though he was in no position to threaten us with Lave Station's Vipers ready, we still considered complete subjugation as being the better part of valour. We had a good fifteen minutes to look and curse at the state of our ship. The missile had made a mess of our nose and most of the systems inside. We were somewhat in despair at the damage and didn't immediately notice the arrival.

"... look the ECM might be salvageable. It's mainly the junction box with the transmitter that's damaged."

"Yeah, Bec, but look further along at the transmitters themselves."

"Nasty. But we might be able to jury-rig –"

Bec stopped, as we became aware of someone standing behind us. Two people, actually. We turned around and saw two people. One was the grey kind of personality that usually worked in Naval Intelligence. Young, competent, ambitious and completely free of any distinguishing features. His hand also hovered disturbingly close to his hip, where a concealed holster probably lay. The other figure was more interesting. He was short, slight and had a quizzical expression.

"Commanders."

"Uh... hello." I said, feeling like teacher had come to scold us.

"I'm James Winston. Where's my agent?"

His face took on a grim cast, but before I could either reassure him or make excuses, we were interrupted.

"Here, Sir." came the weak voice from the gangplank. Our ex-prisoner was there, clinging determinedly to the edge of the airlock. Bec looked at me and winced. The woman looked terrible, with bruises on her face (care of Bec) and a huge lump and ugly cut on her forehead (care of collision with our viewscreen). Winston gestured to his companion, who jogged up the gangplank and assisted the woman down.

"She's still a bit wonky from when I sedated her." Bec explained hastily. There was a pause as the statement was digested, "because of her head injury.", Bec hurriedly clarified. Another pause, "because of the *missile*, for gawd's sake. We don't have three flight couches in the cockpit, she just got thrown forward! Anyway, it should have worn off by now."

"I think we need some thorough debriefing of you two." Winston said balefully. "And I think we need the best truth drugs available to humanity."

Bec looked like she was considering a run for it, while I just tried to stare down cruel fate in as dignified a manner as possible.

"There's a bar near here that stocks some decent Riedquat Brown, and I think we could all use a drink... assuming you're up to it, Agents?"

The two others grunted their agreement, whereas Bec and I just stared. Where the potential of horrible drug-driven interrogation had stood, here was a fellow bounty-hunter (well... a retired bounty hunter) inviting us for a quiet drink.

Winston headed off blithely. We stood like stunned mullets for a moment, until the grey Naval Intelligence type nudged us gently in the back.

"I don't like it when my Commander drinks alone." he said quietly.

We stumbled forward, as we realised that his hand was still hovering anxiously next to the concealed holster. We broke into a brief jog as we fought to catch up to Winston.

"Some good moves there, outrunning that missile." Winston said conversationally, "You've got the makings of an excellent pilot."

Bec doesn't take well to being patronised, even by the well-meaning.

"I AM an excellent pilot." She said, without heat. Winston was leading us through a series of stairways and gangplanks. He appeared to know the station like the back of his hand.

"True enough. But when this is all over, though, I'd certainly be willing to enrol you in an advanced course at the Turner Academy if you like."

I piped up. "Is there a specific one for when you're outnumbered by three faster ships and an LPA-Equipped Explorer and your Witchspace Governor is on the fritz?"

Winston looked askance at my gallows humour.

"I teach space combat, not divine intervention."

We soon arrived at the bar, a cosy little place called "The Eagle II", with holographic dogfights taking place overhead between vintage spaceships. We settled at a rather obscure table on the far side of the room. It was a long way from the door, which I noted with some unease. If things turned nasty we'd be fighting through the crowd to get to the door. Not that it was too much of an issue. Our ship wasn't going to be capable of serious running-away for quite a while.

They didn't have any BS Vodka, so I had to be content with Sirrocco Station Akvavit. I saw a ripple of disgust pass over Winston's face as I sat down with spirits. *Everyone* else was drinking Riedquat beer.

"I'm going to talk to my agent privately later, but I want some answers from you two now. I've done some research on the two of you." He said, fishing out a datapad.

"Rebecca Nilson Chong. Born on Conversion in Achenar. Daughter of Duchess Chong Li and Hamish Chegwidde. Heir to the Chong holdings, which consist of various agricultural enterprises scattered across the Empire including a couple of rather impressive spreads on Conversion itself. No pre-space criminal records and you were placed a few times in the Achenar Stellar Point-To-Points Race." Winston looked up to see if Bec would react to the pocket bio. She kept a stony-faced silence. I was rather tickled, myself. I'd always thought Bec had the traits of a rich girl gone bad, and it was nice to be right once in a while.

"Harvey Patrick Raven, AKA 'Red'." I sat up straight in my seat. Here was the nasty bit. "Born on Coopers World in Aymiy." Winston looked me up and down, noticing the heavy musculature of someone born on a high-G world. "Son of Christia Raven, father unknown. Extensive pre-space petty criminal record. You're rather distrusted by the Federation for your role in –"

"Yes, yes." I said hurriedly. I had no particular desire to be reminded of THAT particular episode.

"The only other notable thing about you is that you won a Province-Wide Maths competition when you were fourteen."

Bec suppressed a laugh.

"I should have kept at it... numbers are safer." I sighed.

"Judging from your profile, you would have found yourself *running* numbers sooner rather than later." Winston corrected me tartly. "Now the two of you aren't players on the scale of this little enterprise, so I want to hear how you got involved. I want the whole shebang, from go to whoa, and deceiving me would be HIGHLY unwise."

So we told the story, as best we could remember. Winston listened avidly, occasionally sending his Naval Intelligence flunky off to get subsequent rounds of alcohol. Our ex-captive listened too, her head cocked to one side and her eyes staring into the middle distance. Her occasional nods were the only indication she was still paying attention. It was only after the first half-hour that I realised that Winston was only on his second beer, while Bec and I were on our sixth round. I then realised what a cunning fiend we were up against. I didn't bother trying to deceive him. Despite anything else, we didn't know enough for it to be worth doing.

"So he says that if we give up he'll be nice and sell us as slaves and if we don't then he'll get nasty."

"Charming. And totally in keeping with his reputation." Winston nodded.

"Who was he? We weren't paying attention to the radar mapper." Bec asked.

“Viscount Preston... I only know him by intelligence reports. We hadn’t considered him as a player. He’s too personally ambitious to be much use in intelligence work.”

“The rest, you pretty much know. We destroyed one of the Ospreys, but then the Explorer got involved. We’re pretty lucky to be alive. Your... agent was a big help during the dogfight.” I tried brownnosing.

“Agent Beaumont?” Winston looked for clarification to his agent.

“Pointed out a tactical weakness and tried to plot an escape course on their useless bloody Witchspace Governor. Their craft is a danger to shipping.” She indeed clarified, with a rather gratuitous insult. The insult stung the more because it was fairly accurate.

“We may have to do something about that.” Winston said nastily. I had a faint idea what he meant, and it worried me.

“Anyway... do you want it?” I asked.

Winston blinked at me.

“You have it ON you?”

I reached into my breast pocket and retrieved the cause of all our troubles. I placed it on the table in front of us. Everyone except Bec leaned forward.

“That’s IT?” Agent Beaumont muttered in disgust. It looked small and inconsequential. Fluff from my pocket dotted its surface. It was only four or five centimetres wide and two deep. The dull grey, high impact plastic was hardly impressive. It hardly seemed like something worth destroying ten ships over.

Winston picked it up and put it in his pocket.

“I’ll have a look at this and get it back to you.”

Bec downed her beer. “Keep the damned thing. It hasn’t brought us anything but heartache, and a repair bill that makes me want to go and buy another drink.” Bec then rose somewhat unsteadily to fulfil that vow.

I was a little more interested, semi-sozzled as I was. I had a horrible suspicion that someone had spiked my Akvavit with more Akvavit. The fact that I was even thinking that way should give you an idea of the stage of drunkenness I was at.

“What exactly is it? What does it do?”

Winston smiled inscrutably at me.

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“Commander, what does that thing actually do?”

The three Alliance personnel were back in Winston’s Asp, clustered in the flight cabin.

“I only wish I knew. I’d love to take it apart, but I wouldn’t know where to start.” Winston looked at the disappointed faces around him. The limitations of being a living legend were fairly frequently shown up by his lack of omnipotence/omniscience.

He tapped a few buttons on the screen and brought up the sensor readings that had allowed this tiny unit to be tracked through the vastness of space. It wasn’t a tracking device, but it might as well be as far as the distinctiveness of the signal was concerned. It was also relatively “hot” in terms of radioactivity. Ravens had been a bit of an idiot to carry it on him.

“Any ideas? Lieutenant, you’re the Navy weaponry expert.”

The Lieutenant shrugged.

“An energy weapon that size is incredibly complex. There are any number of important components that it could be, but we can scratch most of those as being either replaceable or non-essential.”

“Considering the amount of resources Preston and ‘chums’ have marshalled to get this - do you BELIEVE what those two said about a ten ship boneyard? – I think we can safely say this is an essential component.”

Beaumont looked quizzically at her boss.

“So what do we do with it now we’ve got it? Run for Alliance space, give it back to the Feds? What?”

Winston leaned back and stretched until his back cracked. His subordinates waited impatiently.

“If we do that, we’ll never know who took it. I think our two two-bit bounty hunters could still be useful. We need something to flush the bigger fish out, and the only thing we have that’ll get them to commit themselves is - ”

The Lieutenant made a strangled sound, breaking military protocol as well as interrupting.

“Commander, surely you’re not serious? You’re going to leave the key to a functional HPA unit in the hands of two untrustworthy bounty hunters with criminal pasts and Imperial connections? Have you lost your mind?”

There was a moment’s silence. Which stretched. And stretched. The Lieutenant went white, realising that he had insulted his superior officer, in fact THE superior officer.

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do, Lieutenant. And remind me later to review your permanent record.” Winston said coldly. He turned his face slightly to Beaumont and winked solemnly.

“I... sir... I’m sorry sir...” the Lieutenant said, totally crushed.

“You certainly will be if you keep thinking in terms of playing the percentages. The key in this game is to be unexpected. Leaving the component with these two will NOT be what they’re expecting. And if we monitor who comes to chase them then we’ll learn a lot more than if we just gave it back to the Federation.”

“There’s always the chance they could be caught and killed.” Beaumont interjected quietly. Winston considered this for a moment.

“They’re marked for death, whatever happens. It’s better they die helping us than die just running away. I only hope they appreciate the difference.”

"We *are* hocked to the edge of the galaxy." I confirmed, sadly. Winston had already shown us enough charity by saving our lives and then letting us live. This brand new Iron-Ass was payment for services to be rendered. But still...

"You bitch!" My head snapped around. A dishevelled Bec was in the doorway, looking like murder. Beaumont rose from her seat like a cat. "You – touched – my ship!"

Bec rushed at her, and a lot of things happened quickly. Beaumont leaned to one side and grabbed Bec's wrist, while slamming her hip into Bec's midriff. There was a strangled 'whuf' as the air left her and surprise on her face as she rose into the air, propelled by a combination of momentum and Beaumont's muscle. Beaumont didn't slam onto the deck, but didn't exactly lower her, either.

When it was done, Bec was looking up with an expression of pain, surprise and (grudging) admiration.

"Try and attack me again and I will respond with lethal force." Beaumont said evenly, then helped Bec into her Pilot's seat. Bec sat there gasping a while.

"OK Agent Beaumont," I said, trying to ignore what had just happened. "since we seem to be working for Alliance Naval Intelligence for a while, care to tell me what the hell we're doing and why you're still here?"

"All right. Currently we're about three AU from Lave Station, and the Witchspace Governor - the *new* Witchspace Governor - is set for Canayze. The people chasing you are going to be easier to track down if you're there to tempt them out. And if they're not tracked down, they'll track you down as well. Viscount Preston wasn't the nastiest person they could throw at you, so think of your current mission as enlightened self-interest."

Neither Bec nor I bothered to interrupt or ask any questions. We were in the gun and knew it. Bec had recovered from Beaumont's throw and was fidgeting resentfully in her seat. Bec was used to being harassed, threatened, ogled and cajoled, but being used had not been part of her life experience. "We're going to head to Achenar, taking it nice and slow. We see who comes out to get us and we keep our ears and eyes open."

"Where's Winston?" Bec asked, "Sodded off back to Gateway for his next flight-class?" Beaumont didn't blink at Bec's definite 'tone'. I really hoped Bec could put aside her dislike of this woman. For one thing, I LIKE Bec as both a friend and co-pilot and wouldn't want to replace her for reason of her own horrible death.

"He's off doing the same thing, only he's looking for trouble, not waiting for it like us." She allowed herself a grim smile.

"And after all, we're more expendable than him." I pointed out, "Which certainly doesn't explain why you're set up over there." I gestured towards her station, which had the nasty look of PERMENANCY. She wasn't here for a lift, she wasn't here just to make sure we understood our orders.

"I'm here as an intelligence analyst. You two will likely be busy keeping us alive, so I'm going to have to be watching who's shooting at us and why."

"How'd you catch the assignment?" I asked, curious. "I would have thought you'd want to get back to Lave Station."

Beaumont made a face. "By being the nearest trained operative who didn't need to be brought up to speed. And... my Lave Station assignment has ended." I nodded. We'd blown her cover rather badly by abducting her. If she went back, there would be many questions. Even if she answered the questions, the cloak of anonymity was gone and she would be remembered, which for an agent is death. Delayed death, perhaps, but death nonetheless.

"Why Achenar?" Bec asked. It was her home system, after all, and there were probably reasons she was a bit shy to return.

"Tell you when we get to Canayze." She replied cryptically. "Witchspace beckons. Commanders?"

There was a moment's silence. "Psst! Bec! She means you."

"What? Oh yeah." Bec turned around and pressed the engage button, sending us out of the Lave system.

*

Security Chief Olaf Nordstrom wrinkled his eyebrows. What had appeared to be a small disturbance in the market section had graduated to a full scale riot. He'd been serving his Emperor for thirty years on Dickens Base and he'd

never seen anything like this. Even during the Vequess Liberation Army uprisings, nothing had ever spread to the station. It had now!

Olaf switched between cameras. While all seemed to be chaotic, Olaf could see the deadly purpose in it, gaining the strategic points in the market that would allow them to invade out into the administration and engineering sections.

"It's not looking good, Chief." said the 2IC grimly. "None of the outer units are responding, I think our communications system has been compromised."

Olaf estimated how much longer the overwhelmed security forces could hold on. Whoever these other forces were, they were expertly using the mob as cover to eliminate as many of his officers as they could, aided by rabble rousers exciting the crowd. The prognosis was grim unless he could slow their advance markedly. The nearest forces were on the ground below, and they would take hours to mobilise.

"Depressurise the market section!" he barked.

His 2IC blanched.

"Sir there must be at least two hundred people in there, you'll kill them all!"

"Don't depressurise it TOTALLY. Just down to half-pressure. That'll quieten the mob, at least, even if that rebel scum have breathing apparatus. Our lads have low-oxy packs so if nothing else it'll turn it into an even fight!"

The 2IC smiled at his commander's innovative scheme. "Sir, that's brilliant! In fact, it's so brilliant that I can't possibly let it succeed."

"What - "

The scream of a hand weapon eliminated anything else he had been about to say.

"Too much planning has gone into this to let it be a fair fight." The 2IC said to the smoky room, quietly letting himself out of his Commander's office. Using his pass card, he let himself through three security doors and four checkpoints. The human sentries on duty saluted him as he passed, unaware of the fighting in the market area. Dreyfus' plan had been well conceived, especially the use of Vequess' native malcontents along with the plan's own agents. The rebellion would certainly succeed now, and the station would be blocked off to shipping and commerce. With luck, the Imperial Navy would come running to the defence of their outpost and blockade the station. He came to the room where his men were staying.

"Ready?"

There were three there, all willing participants and would be well rewarded when it came off. They nodded and checked their weapons. The party moved out, moving closer and closer to the market section. Soon they could see the fires and flashes of weaponry reflecting down the corridors. Soon they came to the dock, where the 2IC's personal Harrier sat.

"Should we do it before we go in the ship?" The leader of his guards asked. On the 2IC's nod, he levelled his weapon, aimed it carefully and fired, hitting the 2IC in the arm with a medium power burst. A sure way to advance in the Empire was to be wounded defending it.

They stayed for a moment to doctor the wound, and then piled into the ship. The 2IC was still a bit woozy from the sedation, so one of the others piloted the ship out of the station, crawling out of the private dock.

"Open a distress call on an all frequencies," The 2IC muttered thickly. This performance would be recorded for posterity, so he'd practiced it in the shower several times over the past week.

"Mayday! Mayday! All Imperial forces please respond! Dickens Base in Star System Vequess has been taken over by hostile forces. The security forces have been overwhelmed. All Imperial forces please respond. Long Live the Emperor! Mayday! Mayday..."