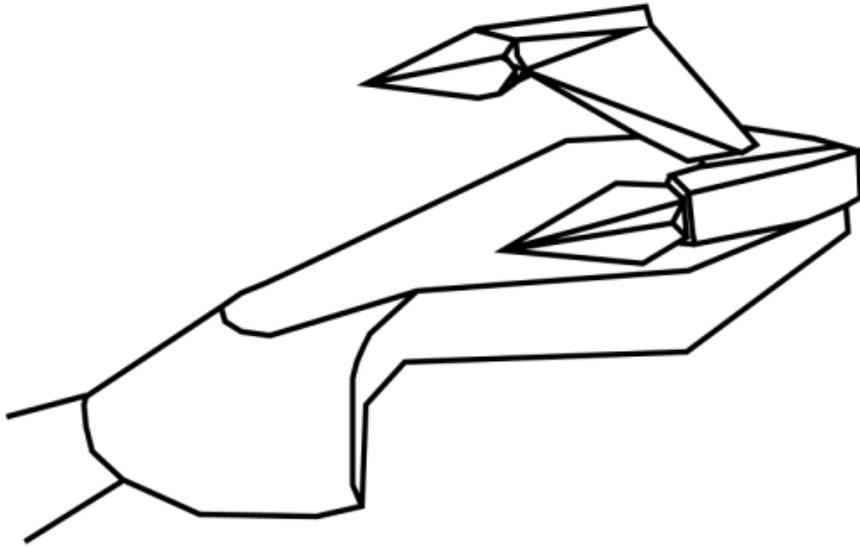


The Elite BBS Presents:  
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

# PRINCES AND PIRATES

## THE HPA SAGA



Volume

5

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## Fencing with Shadows

[Commander Red Ravens]

Cracking Preston's datapad was easier than we thought. Catherine had barely been examining it when she let out a short laugh. "Fingerprint! This fool has a bloody fingerprint lock on it!" It was a simple locking system, but I didn't quite see why she was so jubilant.

"Well this may sound stupid, but I didn't actually bring any of Preston's fingers with me. Silly me!"

Catherine made to throw the datapad at me and I ducked. "Silly you! His fingerprints are all over the damn screen if nothing else."

So Catherine cracked the datapad and downloaded the Viscount's files. I wondered why he hadn't encrypted it better. Catherine shrugged and said that he probably never envisaged that anyone would ever be in a position to take it from him. There was a mountain of data, stretching back at least six years, including a large selection of pornography nasties and a history of financial fraud so complete it would have made Norman Mosser green with envy.

Catherine metaphorically took a deep breath and plunged into the filth.

We hung in space for the next two days while Catherine worked on the data. Ever so often she'd fire off a sequence of queries to the databanks at AJNIB HQ and would go back to work, not having time to wait for the replies. I helped wherever I could, as well as doing lots of little maintenance things that I'd been meaning to do for AGES. In other words, anything to keep out of Bec's way.

By common consent, she'd moved into the solo spare cabin while Catherine had moved into the double cabin with me. Some kinds of silence are almost impossible to bear. The encounter with Winston had summoned a black cloud that descended over Bec. She stayed in the cabin with the door closed and ceased making conversation. Not necessarily that Catherine would have had the time, but I would have appreciated her talking to me, her co-pilot / co-owner /... friend!

She rejected any approaches with morose statements like "I can't really help you" or "Why? Does it really matter?". It almost frightened me how this sulking little adolescent had replaced the ebullient, alive figure of merely a day or so before.

Thankfully, pirates attacked us once during this period. Bec was in the seat and pointing us towards our assailants as soon as the klaxon went off, but there was a decided lack of crispness to her course corrections and her face betrayed a distinct lack of passion. I know how wet that sounds, but bounty hunters have to have passion, for staying alive if for nothing else.

"Surrender your cargo or face the consequences! We will not hesitate to destroy your ship!"

To our relief, the ships proved to be run-of-the-mill pirates with no particular links to anyone in particular. A pair of well-armed Spar fighters against our single Constrictor might have been a challenge at any other time, but after the hectic past couple of months, it represented more of a break in the tedium than a serious challenge. After an initial examination of the odds, Catherine returned to her data analysis.

They were predictable, if nothing else, zooming past us in a burst of sustained laser fire that probably came close to overheating their lasers. When it comes to the velocity-matching part of combat, why bother even firing? Despite her lethargy, Bec engineered a perfect approach, making our path as random as possible so that the two of them couldn't get a clean run at us and still remain in formation. We closed on them and began firing short bursts to break them up. Two 4MWs can make short-work of almost anyone's shields in fairly short order, so we had to make sure they couldn't bring them both to bear at once. They tried to remain united for a while, perhaps seeing our less powerful weapons as being worth the risk of a few hits. Unfortunately for them, I'm a good shot, and managed to deplete their shields substantially. Finally they relented and diverged. Bec dove at the nearer one and I began firing in earnest.

We were on our foe's six and we'd split the two craft so that his wingmate wasn't in a position to decelerate and offer immediate assistance. Due to the economy of our previous attack run, the laser was cool enough so that we were able to home in on our prey in a long gouging burst. I saw pieces of engine housing flake off and told Bec to pull up. The craft didn't explode, but the thrust from the main driver decreased to nearly nothing and smoke was pouring out of a variety of hull breeches. Bec ignored me, and if anything accelerated towards the stricken ship.

"Bec, it's dead in the water, let's go after the other one."

“Destroy it Red. It’s your duty.” She said bitterly, lightly emphasising the last syllable. Our velocity was such that we couldn’t avoid a collision now, so I triggered the laser and annihilated the ship. We passed through the explosion, and bits of debris sparkled as they deflected off our shields.

I looked across at Bec with equal parts anger and concern. It didn’t take long to destroy the other ship, after which Bec left the controls and went back into the spare cabin, closing the door behind her.

“Red.” Catherine said softly to me.

“I know.”

“This could be a problem.”

“I know.”

“She’s becoming a liability.”

“No she’s not!” I said with more heat than I’d intended. Catherine flinched. “She’s not a liability, she’s my friend, goddammit!” I realised I’d risen from the pilot’s seat. I sat back down rather sheepishly and closed my eyes. “Look, she’ll be OK. Once we find the HPA and know what we have to do, we’ll be OK.” Catherine’s lack of reply was eloquent. She cleared her throat and went back to her analysis. I obsessively repeated a maintenance check that I’d done not three hours previously. Silence settled over the ship. The kind of silence it was impossible to bear.

\*

Preston’s Explorer was a crew-member short. The unfortunate crew member had been silly enough to be three minutes late for shift on the bridge. He had then compounded his sin by trying to excuse himself. Preston had challenged him to fencing practice. The nearby crew-members had immediately thought about how to contact the crew-member’s family.

All off-duty members were required to attend fencing practice. Normally it was good value for money, too, with the ship’s fencing master (yes, Preston insisted on a ‘Fencing Master’ being a salaried member of the crew) giving a very good account of himself before the more or less obvious error allowing the Viscount the inevitable victory.

When a crew member was called on, however... the practice blades were put away and the real things came out. What made it worse was that the Viscount was genuinely a good swordsman, and the recruitment process for the crew tended to exclude people with talent in that area. What made it even WORSE was that the Viscount had his most trusted gorilla (trans: the Security Chief) ready with a handgun behind the opponent. The fights tended to be long, drawn out, humiliating and fatal.

Now the Osprey pilots tended to go on long patrol within tight cockpits in preference to recreation time in the Explorer’s opulent staterooms. A miasma of self-preservation hung over the ship, with everyone paying obsessive detail to their own jobs in the hope that if they kept their head down, it wouldn’t be literally lopped off.

As for the Viscount, he seemed to be above it all, spending his days privately with his ‘Maseusse’ or in the SimSuite indulging in the Emperor knew what. The Viscount’s huge ship was hovering on the outskirts of the Target system, waiting and patrolling. Each new Hyperspace cloud that appeared in the system was eagerly examined. A few possibilities were examined by the quick little Ospreys, and quickly dismissed as targets. The frequent Imperial patrols in this system were given a wide berth, as there was no reason to pick a fight. The wrong fight, at least.

Outwardly, the Viscount seemed unbothered by the wait, but those who had served with him long (and survived) saw small signs of strain. The Viscount wasn’t the most patient of men, and his men wondered what fearsome power kept him on sentry duty.

“Keep your position... keep your position. What does that dashed fool Marcus know about true leadership!” Preston paced in his cabin, raving at the latest missive from the heir. He slapped a riding crop against his hand. The riding crop, needless to say, had never been used for riding. Marcus had informed him that they were aware of the money Preston was spending trying to track down the bounty hunters. He went on to say in no uncertain terms that regardless of what his spies reported he was not to leave the Target system until the mission was complete.

Viscount Daniel Preston was ordered about by no man, save the Emperor! And at this point in time, Marcus had no authority over him... so he’d better watch what he said! Preston *would* have tried to be patient about the bounty hunters, but the loss of his datapad had turned the issue not only personal, but important as well!

He could be declared outlaw in *all* jurisdictions at least ten times over for what was in that pad. Worse, many of his assets were vulnerable to exploitation by a clever operator with the information within it. They could read all they liked about his conquests of the opposite / same / indeterminate sex, but his personal finances were strictly off limits. He would have *liked* to have kept them alive, but the destruction of them and the datapad was now an absolute priority.

If they had any idea what was good for them, they would keep well out of his and Marcus' way. Preston was confident that they weren't bright enough to do that. That, of course, brought on the terrible conundrum as to whether they were bright enough to discover the plot and blunder into Preston's own brilliant plan.

Impatiently, Preston crossed to the comm unit and brought up his 2IC.

"Well... have you done it yet?"

"Which uh... particular task, your lordship?" The voice on the other end sounded nervous. There was a killing mood in the air.

"The Osprey modifications, you dashed ninny!" Preston thundered, bringing the crop down with a THWACK onto the desk. The chips of varnish scattered over its surface were testament to the popularity of the manoeuvre. Why were these fools so unable to grasp such simple concepts as knowing their master's mind?

"Yes your lordship... I... no, your lordship, they haven't been completed yet. We have to remove a lot of equipment to fit the modifications you specified. The safety testing alone will take another..." the silence took on an ominous quality. "... so we should have it within another six standard hours sir."

"Four, you fool... I expect it in *four*!" Preston shouted, and killed the connection. He began to pace again.

He would remain in the system until the Target was destroyed. He had no choice, he didn't need Marcus hunting him. And if the bounty hunters were as foolish as he thought they were...

Preston stalked over to the chair, where his fencing costume and rapier remained where he had thrown them. He unsheathed the sword and was disgusted as a wet piece of flesh plopped onto the carpet. He would have to be far more clinical during his fencing matches with the crew. The dry cleaning bill was murder.

## **Latecomer to the Party**

[Count Rowan "The Rowan" Weston]

Pacing around his richly decorated office, Count Rowan Weston looked at the datapad in his hand for the third time that day and then slammed it down onto the Achenarian Mahogany desk with such force it chipped the datapad's plastic edge.

"Look at this!" he shouted. "Imperial Intelligence has a lead on where Mosser is, and you refuse to let me go after him?"

Across the room, the thin-faced Clone Agent was unmoved. "According to your records, you are considered psychologically unfit for combat duty. Contradicting medical orders is a crime punishable by twenty years' imprisonment according to Imperial Navy Regulations, volume 7, section 14, subsection 103, paragraph..."

"I know that, you blasted mechanical man! However, I also know that the reason my file has "unfit to fly" on it is because of my hatred for Mosser. Let me repay him for this," Rowan said gesturing to the freeze-burn scar which disfigured the right-hand side of his face, "and I'll be back to combat status by the next psych. evaluation."

"Nevertheless, I cannot allow you to take part in this operation. I realise that you believe it was Mosser's group who attacked you at GenShip 261, but-"

"Believe? I know it. I compared the sensor logs to other incidents involving his squadron and the tactics matched almost perfectly. If it wasn't for – " There was a buzz as the door chime sounded. "Yes, come in!"

The count's aide, Master DeLaine, opened the sliding doors and saluted. "Sir, with all due respect, you have to be on the shuttle for the Fortress Cambridge University graduation ceremony in the next five minutes."

"Thank you" said Rowan, and DeLaine scuttled out of the room. Rowan then turned to the agent and pointed. "We can continue this on the flight. You're coming!" he said, before turning and walking out of the office towards the upper shuttle bay.

### **--Two Days Later--**

Despite his continuous arguments with the agent, Rowan had had no luck whatsoever with persuading him to reinstate flight clearance. For the last six hours, the agent had been sat in his cabin reading intelligence reports. 'He probably hadn't even noticed the Hyperspace jump to Achenar' thought Rowan, as he lay on his bed in the starboard stateroom of the modified Viper 2 which acted as the 13th Protectorate's official diplomatic craft. Opposite his stateroom was the agent's cabin, on each side were minor officials from O'Rourke's colony and his own staff officers, forward the corridor led to the cockpit and aft to the Engine room and common area. For the fourteenth time, Rowan vowed never to come to Achenar in such a small ship again. The Viper was one of the fastest courier ships in the Imperial Fleet, outfitted as this one was with a Class 3 Military Drive, but with this many people on board it was beginning to get a little close on the long run in from Achenar's distant Jump Point. Sighing, he lay back and flicked through the entertainment system's library, wondering whether to watch another of the sitcom repeats that were all ABC seemed to be putting out these days.

As he reached for the fold-away screen, the ship suddenly lurched under him and he tumbled out of his bed. He leapt up from the floor as a conduit in the cabin wall started to vent black smoke and the wailing clamour of an alert siren burst from the corridor outside. Flicking the screen to "Cockpit Intercom", he was met with a scene of the pilot blackened from electrical discharges, with sparks shooting from overhead consoles. The pilot wasn't moving, and Rowan had no doubt that he was dead. Running over to the door, he pushed the 'open' button and it ground open halfway. He squeezed through the gap and into the red-lit corridor, turning right and heading for the cockpit. He reached the cockpit door and punched 'open' but, as was standard practice, the door was locked. He was starting to unscrew the control panel when from behind him came a booming voice:

"Unlawfully entering the cockpit of an Imperial Naval Vessel is punishable by death under Imperial Naval Regulations, Volume 2, Section 18, subsection - "

Turning to face the clone, Rowan saw that the agent was holding a 15mm Gauss Pistol. Although only a clone could handle the recoil of the weapon, it could make an impressive mess out of anything it hit up to solid duralumin hull plating. "Look, agent!" he shouted, "we're under attack! If someone doesn't take command of this ship we're all under penalty of death." As if to emphasise his point, the ship shuddered again with the sound of a shield generator failing. Seeing the clone stumble, Rowan seized his chance and rushed him. The clone dealt him an almost contemptuous blow, knocking him to the ground.

Looking up, Rowan saw that the clone's pistol was pointed squarely at his head. "Assaulting an Imperial Agent is punishable by Death under the Imperial Security Act of 3172, section 32, subsection 4." The ship shook again as another shot slammed into the failing shields. "However, that sentence is temporarily suspended." The agent brought his pistol up and fired three rounds into the cockpit lock. The door slipped and hung loosely off its hinges.

"There you go sir, now we could do with some piloting," said the clone as he helped Rowan up. Rowan dashed into the cockpit and pushed the pilot's shrivelled corpse out of the chair. Strapping in, he ran his eyes across the displays left working. Three Eagle II's were attacking, all armed with 1MW pulsers. The first hit on the cockpit must have been just a lucky fluke shot - any decent pilot could hold these ships off with any weapon he chose. Weapons... Rowan ran his eyes across the panels - no weaponry control. 'Very well,' he thought, and watched as one of the Eagles slowly approached the Viper's rear end. Apparently, the pilot was going to try and board to take any perishable cargo and passengers - 'Which must mean he thinks we're dead in space,' thought Rowan.

The Eagle edged to within two metres of the Viper's back end, with his squadron mates covering him, before Rowan slammed the throttle forwards. Even with the dampeners on full, he was still pushed back in his seat, but the long tongue of plasma flame had burst through the Eagle's cockpit and fried its pilot instantaneously. The two remaining Eagles blasted away at the suddenly accelerating Viper, knocking chunks off the hull plating, but Rowan threw the ship into a corkscrew that dodged out of the enemy targetting systems and most of the shots went wide. Spinning, Rowan brought his low-profiled front round to bear on the second Eagle fighter, then gunned the throttle. Laser light lanced harmlessly past the Viper's hull, then the pilot decided that running was better than being rammed by a mad Viper commander and jumped into Hyperspace. Through the departure cloud came the third Eagle, firing pinpoint laser shots which came perilously close to the Viper's vital systems. As the Viper tried to alter course to follow the swifter fighter, one beam drilled straight through the engine room. The hyperdrive was turned to slag, and the in-system drive escaped annihilation by a mere metre. thrusting out of the way, Rowan hit the "Jettison" button to evacuate the Engine Room and put out the dangerous chemical fires. As he did so, the hyperspace engine ripped loose from its mountings and crashed through the rear hull, straight into the Eagle's path. The pilot tried to evade, but couldn't correct in time to avoid ploughing into the melted wreckage which ploughed through his ship from nose to stern. Rowan flicked on the Autopilot - one of the few systems still working - and slumped back in the chair.

**--Four Days Later--**

The University's band finished playing the last note of the Imperial Anthem, and the new graduates threw their hats up into the air. Rowan started to head back to the shuttle to greet those students who had newly been accepted into the Imperial Navy, but was stopped by the clone agent. The agent reached into an inner pocket, saying "For your actions on the shuttle, I have this for you." Expecting a summary execution, Rowan turned and closed his eyes, but the shot never came. Instead, the agent offered a sheet of paper (real paper!) marked with the Imperial Navy crest. Rowan took it and read:

-----  
To: Count Rowan Weston  
From: PHQ, X Protectorate  
Due to evidence received during recent combat, your flying privileges are hereby reinstated. You are therefore ordered to use whatever force necessary to hunt down the renegade commander Norman Mosser and his unit.  
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Within the week, Count Rowan Weston was on the bridge of the ISS *Alberto Knox* leading his task force off after the man who every system in the known galaxy wanted to arrest.

## Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers

[Norman Mosser]

Marcus had been getting increasingly annoyed with Norman's side of the operation over the past few days while they waited for the fuelling tenders to return from the gas giants. It wasn't just one thing, it was a number of little niggles.

The first was the rather erratic approach Norman took to the gravity generation system on the newly christened LRC *Azure Sunset*. On some decks, Marcus while walking from one place to another discovered that the artificial gravity had been turned off completely and the off-duty members of Norman's crew were enjoying a particularly competitive game of zero-gee football. On others, he discovered that the gravity had been cranked up to almost two gees. Norman claimed it was to acclimatise his crew to varying conditions and ensure they were better prepared for a fight. It didn't inconvenience Marcus, nor the android bodyguards he had with him, but it was plain annoying.

Then of course there was the fact that at the moment, Norman was going through a phase of not taking anything seriously at all. It was as if some weight had been taken off his shoulders, and that it had given him more leeway to behave like a nutter. Norman's crew had no problem with it, and when Marcus tactfully enquired of one, they just told him that as long as Norman provided them with adventure and a healthy profit, it didn't bother them.

It had come as a relief that there was still important work to do. The first firing in anger of the HPA had revealed a few flaws. Firstly, the targetting system was still a bit temperamental, and secondly that the weapon was just so powerful that it seriously leaked radiation whenever it was fired. One of the technicians reckoned that efficiency of the beam was down 30% just through energy bleeding. So work had gone on refining the firing controls and decontaminating and shielding the lower hull. Then, they had to ensure that the atmospheric shielding on craft that were likely to remain in close proximity to the HPA when it was fired was in top condition to protect from the inevitable flood of radiation on firing.

The arrival of the fuelling tenders heralded the start of the final progression of the mission. As the fuelling commenced, Marcus and Norman's time was taken up in making final preparations for the next jump. The communications team had reported that shortly after the last time they fired the HPA, they had picked up what might have been a ping bouncing off the hull. That meant that it was possible that they were being watched. As a precaution, Norman and Marcus agreed that it was worth doing a mis-jump to throw their pursuers off the scent. They were going to point the Hyperdrive towards a Federation world, as Norman's MO would imply that he was likely to launch a strike there, but once the mis-jump was complete they were going to head into Imperial space and start moving towards their target system. Safely forcing a mis-jump in a ship this big was no easy task, and the already overworked technicians had been employed to ensure that the *Azure Sunset's* systems would be able to cope.

Now though, the fuelling was complete, the preparations were complete and the *Azure Sunset* was ready to go. Both Norman and Marcus stood in the bridge in readiness for the jump. The attendant ships that had clustered around the Long Range Cruiser were now standing off and once the LRC had jumped would disperse. None of the crews knew the specifics of the plan, and after a healthy payoff would play no further part.

The last thing to attend to was the disposal of the Krait fighters that had been clamped to the hull of the *Azure Sunset*. They were too conspicuous to be seen in Imperial space, and having been stripped, they were to be used as target practice to test the modifications made to the HPA rig. Norman started the process.

'Okay, release the Kraits and put some distance between us and them.' One by one, the Krait fighters were released, and the powerful drives on the LRC hummed as the *Azure Sunset* drew away from them. Once they were several kilometres away, Norman gave another order. 'Fire control, when you're ready.'

The HPA began licking out brilliant flashes of white, each shot completely erasing a Krait from existence. One of the bridge crew reported

'The radiation shield is holding fine.'

'And the targetting is functioning perfectly.'

They were now down to just four Kraits. 'HPA temperature up a bit.'

'Keep firing.'

Three Kraits.

Two Kraits.

One Krait.

'Sir, we have a problem, we've lost the HPA. It looks like the field has gone down.'

'What's the matter?' Marcus demanded.

'Don't worry, probably just a glitch, we'll sort it out after we jump' replied Norman

Marcus bristled, but acquiesced 'Very well.'

'Roll her over, use the SPA's and then let's make like birds and get the flock out of here.'

'That wasn't funny.' interjected one of Norman's crew

'Hey! I'm in charge, I'm allowed to make shit jokes with no comeback, now just get on with it.'

The Long Range Cruiser lazily rolled over, destroyed the last remaining Krait almost as an afterthought and slid gracelessly into Witch-Space.

## Insurance and Seduction

[Commander Red Ravens]

"Insurance? That's the best you can find?" I was slightly incredulous. Catherine had been analysing Preston's datapad for just on two days. I appreciated that it was a huge task, but really!

Catherine glared at me irritably. Six hours ago or so she'd been forced to take a Safe-T-Amphetamine to stay functioning, and the side effects were showing. Though working through Preston's intimate affairs must have been a fairly nauseating task. "Look, I'd love it if Preston kept a data file named 'Nefarious Plots' but it doesn't work that way." Catherine let out a long breath.

"You remember what I was saying about the spending patterns of Preston and his friends? Upgrading their ships first and then starting to stockpile narcotics?" I nodded. "Well when it comes to the Marquis' capital assets, spacecraft have risen about eighteen percent. However, his insurance premium was only up thirteen percent. Same insurer, same policies, same prices. But he's paying less insurance."

I began to see Catherine's point. I'd done a fair amount of financial fraud in my pre-space days and understood that when the numbers don't add up, someone's usually raking it in. "So what... he's either been sloppy updating the value of his fleet with his insurer or...?" I let the question hang. Catherine didn't leave it dangling long.

"I set the Alliance hackers to raid the insurance company's records. It's all above board. Everything on the policy matches the ship profiles I've got on the pad. However, he's left something off."

"A ship?"

"Yes. A ship."

I sighed. This didn't sound like much. "What kind of ship?"

"A Long Range Cruiser."

Now she had my attention. LRCs were the mainstay of the bulk cargo trade and were the largest commercial craft available. They were complex and prohibitively expensive. Maintenance was usually in the region of three million credits a year. But they were able to carry astronomical amounts of cargo and repaid their owners many times over in profits. They were usually accompanied by fleets of escort ships and most pirates didn't even bother attacking them. Even so, hijackings were not uncommon and only the most foolhardy or financially pressured of shipping magnates would have not insured them to the gills. "Any evidence it was financially motivated?"

Catherine shook her head. "His accountants are very good and very crooked. If anything, he's a lot more secure than he appears. Everything is tax-writeoff this and negatively-geared that. And from what I can find, one of the trusts he set up is actually in the name of his pet fish!"

"Goldfish?" I asked reflexively.

"Hardly." Catherine contradicted me dryly. "It's written down as Reginald P. Ranha"

We shared a brief, semi-hysterical chuckle and then looked guiltily towards Bec's cabin. Laughter had become somewhat unpopular within the ship over the past couple of days. "I'd understand the fraud part of it if it was insured," Catherine mused, "but how does *not* insuring it benefit Preston?"

"And more practically," I added, "How does it help us find the HPA? How do we even know that they're connected?"

For that, Catherine turned to her station and brought up a text document. It was an order from Preston, dated a couple of months ago, arbitrarily cancelling all shore leave for the crew of the '*Abraham's Son*' until further notice. I looked questioningly at Catherine. It was an unusual piece of small-minded pettiness, but I couldn't see the significance. "The date. Look at the date."

I did. My look of puzzlement did not abate. Patiently, Catherine pointed out that it was the date that the HPA was reported stolen. "What's on the manifest?" I asked, although I already had an inkling.

"Narcotics." We said in unison

"Along with a full load of Agricultural Machinery and Air Processors," Catherine continued, "but there were still over two thousand tons worth on that ship. A large proportion of Preston's stash. Joy Bulbs, Ice Infusers, Endaio Black

Essence. Some of this stuff is so potent it's even banned in Imperial space, let alone the Federation and Alliance. The question is why in the hell Preston would have all of this sitting in an uninsured ship apparently a long way from where the HPA action is. Look at this."

Catherine brought up a starmap. I was beginning to be dazzled by all the facts and figures that Catherine was bombarding me with, but manfully tried to focus on the map. A series of overlapping lines jumped from system to system, like a game of dot to dot repeated ad infinitum. There was a single 'trunk' out from which came a couple of small 'branches'.

"Uh... the LRC's trade routes?"

"Gold star for the Coopersworld boy! Over the past ten years, the *Abraham's Son* has had a very predictable trade route. For three months of the year, it diverts for seasonal produce to these systems here and here." Catherine pointed to the two 'branches'. "The rest of the time, it carries manufactured goods and metal alloys through these mineral worlds to the Imperial core systems."

Ah, so that explained the 'trunk'.

"This is important because... there's been a deviation from the pattern, hasn't there?" Catherine smiled grimly and nodded. "The itinerary in the datapad shows...?"

"That they're making a short stopoff here at Ackdati to refuel, even though the tank is only half-empty. There's no rational reason for them to stop there. They'll probably lose over two thousand credits for the delay. Hence I'm suspicious."

I rose and stretched. It seemed a fairly thin thread to base our hopes on, but we didn't have anything better to go on.

"Will we catch up with it in time?" I asked, rapidly calculating dates and the speed of our ship.

"Probably not. If they are there for what they say they are, they'll go to Cousins Terminal, stay there for a six to eight hours for refuelling and maintenance, and then go to their next destination point which is... Achenar. We'll miss them by 18 to 48 hours by my reckoning. Still, if we go and sniff around, there might be some clues."

I shrugged. Why not? As far as wild goose chases go, it was pretty much our best bet. Something bothered me though. The Grand Convoy that the Crown Prince was running had been the talk of the spacelanes. Lords had been getting their stockpiles confiscated left, right and centre and the 24-hour coverage afforded the Boys-Own adventure story bullshit was truly nauseating. It really seemed to make no sense that Preston would send his most valuable narcotics into a situation where they would possibly be taken without any promise of restitution from the Imperial Throne.

"When does the Crown Prince's 'Grand Convoy' leave?" I asked.

Catherine thought for a moment. "I see your drift." She admitted, "Preston's being suspiciously public spirited by sending his contribution. But we don't have any more evidence, so let's just file that one away until we get more data."

I went over to Bec's door and knocked. I got no response. I opened the door slightly and spoke through the crack.

"Bec. We're going to be hyperspacing soon. If you don't want to pilot, that's fine." There was a pause, and I fancied I could hear breathing. "I know you don't want to get involved, Bec and I think I have some idea as to why. But to keep us alive, I'm going to have to go through with this..."

No answer. Not that I'd really expected one.

Catherine was already up from her station and over on my co-pilot's seat. *Her* co-pilot's seat, I corrected myself. I sat down in the Pilot's seat and fiddled around with the controls for nearly a minute, lengthening the armrests, adjusting the headrest and generally fidgeting. I could sense Catherine getting impatient next to me. I looked across the control panel. I'd sat next to the flight controls for years now, but from this angle they looked complex and intimidating. I reached over to the main ship's computer input and typed LOAD PILOT PREFERENCES: RED.

The computer beeped in response and the panels and touchscreens in front of me flashed and reformed themselves to my long-unused Pilot's Profile. Bec had been so obviously a superior pilot to myself that I'd barely flown in the time we'd been together. Hesitantly, I powered up the prime mover. "I'm going to have a bit of a fly around first. You never know who's on the other side of witchspace." I explained to Catherine.

We spent the next hour doing clumsy basic flight manoeuvres. I felt like a novice, it was ridiculous. I was heavy handed with the thrusters. Eventually, it began to come back to me. The inertia-less turn, the flip, the bank. I also ejected one of our canisters of hydrogen and ran Catherine through the basics of operating the 2.2MW Laser. She was a quick study, and I saw in her face the same kind of childish glee I'd had when I'd first destroyed a practice target.

We weren't in any shape to compete in a serious combat, but hopefully if we were in danger of our lives then Bec would come out of her funk. I hoped.

I prepped us for the jump to Ackdati and looked over at Catherine.

"Does it bother you?"

Catherine gave a long, slow grin.

"Being your co-pilot? Well I have big shoes to fill." Catherine's sarcastic quip failed to get a response. I was too tense.

"No, I mean the fact that we're effectively out of the game. Not that I doubt your Intelligence Analysis skills, but this could just be a secondary thing that might not even be directly connected to whatever they want to do with the HPA? What I meant was whether the futility bothers you?"

Catherine's smile fell. She leaned back in the chair and considered. "Of course it does. But the history of intelligence is one of coincidence. Allying the tiniest of facts with the hugest of coincidences is the methodology of success. Along with working to a lot of tight timelines and exploring a lot of dead ends. I suppose in the end it's all about the leap of faith. The futility doesn't bother me, because as long as I'm trying to make a difference, I don't see it as futile."

High minded words from a high minded woman. They rang pretty hollow bouncing around in my skull. I forced a smile regardless and stretched out my hand to the Hyperspace control. My Hamlet act was over. We were set on our course, be it futile, fruitful or suicidal. The Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune didn't bother me. The HPA of Outrageous Fortune however, was another matter.

My hand closed on the Witchspace Governor.

"And a-one and a-two and a..."

\*

Special Agent Farouk Naib was annoyed.

He had assembled a crack team of Imperial Secret Police agents to oversee the 'Grand Convoy Charitable Narcotics Appeal'. The Prince's spokeswoman had launched the appeal, accompanied by glowing publicity. Farouk had been no doubt as to the coercion which would be required to make the major hoarders give up their stash. He'd expected a series of daring raids, requisitioning private stashes all for the greater glory of the Empire. And that was how it had been during the first week. His crack team had kicked in doors and terrified Major-Domos, brusquely brushing aside Lords and lackeys alike.

Then the donations had started coming in.

Originally, it had been a couple of big donors, arriving in his office with protestations of loyalty and patriotism. Farouk had initially been suspicious of their motives, but then the ships had began flying in from the far corners of the Achenar system. *Hundreds* of tons of high quality narcotics had come through his door. The bookkeeping and organisation of the bounty had taken up so much time it had slowed the rate of seizure that could be organised. None of the donors were particularly wealthy or powerful, but each had (apparently) limitless supplies of both drugs and nationalist fervour.

The Crown Prince had been tickled by what he saw as personal tributes and had taken it upon himself to personally thank (or at least personally send an emissary, which was *somewhat* personal) each of the donors.

Farouk had no doubt that some serious brownnosing was going on (totally unrelated to the Brown Nasal Dust from Phekda), but the pure scale of the donations overrode his suspicion. Regardless of their motives, the Grand Convoy would depart on schedule, improbable as that possibility may have seemed.

Then came the second stage of the Appeal, which was causing Farouk the greatest amount of annoyance. The news stories that had focused on the mass donations (the actual donors had been reluctant to appear in the spotlight for some reason) had brought out the giving spirit within the citizens of Achenar. Grannies had started to totter up to the warehouse they'd set up as a front and depositing thirty years of hoarded Duval's Finest Moondust on the front desk. That had been the tip of the iceberg. Day by day the donations increased and the daily shuttles to the stockpile on the Fort Donalds space station far above Capitol.

Farouk had been forced to take trained killers and put them on the front desk, the phones and the loading bay. The Crown Prince had insisted that Farouk continue to be in charge of the operation, despite the fact that he and his unit were trained killers with more blood on their hands than a psychic surgeon with a full schedule. They were meant for daring operations and high risks, not watching some thirteen year old half-wit declare her undying love for the Empire while placing her mother's stash of Ju Ju Specials on the counter.

Farouk longed for someone to kill. His smiling muscles were all worn out from thanking people for their donations, while his killing muscles were atrophying. It was a tragedy! Most of his men were feeling the same. One or two actually seemed to be enjoying their new roles. Farouk made a mental note to have those people either disposed of or reprogrammed. An agent capable of both Charity work and Secret Police work was a contradiction in terms.

Farouk had begged his superiors to be put into the Suppression Squads, Antipiracy Brigade, Undercover Prison Unit. All to no avail. He was *sure* the bastards were smiling as they told him that he was too valuable in his current role to be wasted on 'wet work'.

They refused him the opportunity to kill or intimidate *anyone*. To Farouk's mind, that betrayed a *distinct* lack of charity.

\*

Ackdati swam into vision and I breathed a sigh of relief. Not that I was that worried about my ability to use the idiot-proof Witchspace Governor, but just because... I wasn't used to being in the pilot's seat. The navigation computer pinged into life to show the ports available in the system. Cousins Terminal was the most likely destination for the *Abraham's Son*, so I picked the target and engaged the autopilot. Catherine was all for going back to research some more on the approach, which would take about thirty hours or so. I persuaded her to get some sleep and let the amphetamines be flushed out of her system. "Since there's only the two of us, when we get to Cousins Terminal I need you to be able to back me up, which you won't be able to if you haven't had any sleep!" I pleaded with her. I do pleading very well. It's a speciality.

"I'll just take another pill... I've operated like this before." Catherine was doing the brave-little-soldier act. I could see the bags swelling under her eyes as I watched.

"How about a compromise?" I said.

"What?" Catherine looked at me suspiciously.

"Why not take a datapad and review it in bed? You could take a brief nap whenever you got tired." I thought I was being very obvious, but Catherine regarded me as if I was being convincing.

"I suppose... being hunched over that panel all day *is* bad for my back, isn't it?"

With me nodding agreeably, she wandered out towards the bed. By my guess, she didn't last to the end of her first line of text. We cruised through space towards the orbital station and I engaged the StarDreamer, for the first time in ages, and let my perceptions of the universe outside slow into treacle.

Cousins Terminal was an entirely unexceptional station, of a decent size to handle Long Range Cruisers as well as the smaller traders and privateers who visited Ackdati. Home to more of the Empire's notorious slave-run deep mines, the system was an uninteresting place to visit, and as our trouble free run in had indicated, wasn't particularly flush with pirates either.

Primed for boredom, we were surprised to find the air around Cousins Terminal thick with a variety of small, dilapidated craft, as if most of the system's ne'er do wells had suddenly decided to hold a clapped-out rustbucket convention. We had to wait several hours for a docking berth to open up. Catherine asked me sarcastically whether I intended to show off my magnificent piloting skills by docking manually. I ignored her and engaged the autopilot.

Once the ship docked, Catherine and I disembarked and walked towards the docking bay exit. At that point we had our first disagreement. I wanted to go to the bar and find out why all the asteroid beltters and minor scavengers had

suddenly come to the Station. Catherine wanted to go to Traffic Control and hack her way into the Sensor Logs for the *Abraham's Son*.

I eventually won by the argument that the Sensor Logs would remain in storage while the pilots would not remain around the station forever. Catherine grudgingly agreed and we set off for the bar. It was the first time in absolutely ages that I'd approached a Space Station bar without my real co-pilot at my side. I almost felt like an unfaithful lover, having Catherine looking out for me rather than Bec.

The noise coming out of the Station's main bar was deafening. It appeared as if the entire population of the bar had decided there was no tomorrow.

"I doubt we'll be able to make any meaningful enquiries in *there*." Catherine said distastefully. I tended to agree. Fortunately, there was a more convenient option in a thin and grizzled old spacer slumped ten metres up from the opening. He was giggling softly to himself. From his hand I picked a dermal injector. I read the label and stood up in disgust.

"Whittle's Synthetic Mescaline. Top of the line giggle juice. Where'd this old soak get it from?"

Catherine got a faraway look in her eye. "The *Abraham's Son* had quite a bit of it on their manifest."

I snorted. "I'm sure they would have given it to this tosser for gratis!"

"He could have stolen it." Catherine pointed out. "And given the rest of the case to his friends." She pointed to the bacchanalia inside.

"One way to find out." Normally, I'm not into intimidatory tactics, but the man beneath us was off on his own trip. If he was to pay any attention to us, we would have to turn his trip bad. I leaned over and picked the old man up by the lapels and raised his feet off the floor. He weighed almost nothing and I tried to be careful in the way I slammed him against the wall. He looked like he'd spent too long in Low-G environments and his bones were very brittle.

"Listen to me, you pig! Where the hell did you get that derm!" He made to speak, "Don't lie to me you *worm!*" I lifted him fractionally off the wall and slammed him back again." The man's mouth worked but no sound came out, I'd winded him. Realising he had to be allowed to draw breath, I relieved the pressure on his ribcage and fixed him with an evil stare. His eyes rolled wildly. The Whittle's Mescaline must have been potent stuff.

"Noooooo... I know you commander... I know what you are, you and those serpent/thargoid crossbreeds. INRA are my friends, they will PUNISH you - "

I gave him a light slap, at which he stopped raving and instead started shrieking at an earbusting pitch. Catherine uh-huhed approvingly at my violence. As for myself, I felt a little shamefaced, but continued shouting at him.

"*Where* did you get that derm... *WHERE?*"

The man tried to raise his arms in a gesture of supplication. But not, as it turned out, to me. "It was a gift... a gift I tell you," he pleaded, "a gift of witchspace."

"How?" I asked, unprepared for mysticism.

"It was just floating there. Ask anyone... just canisters upon canisters floating in space. There was enough for all of us. It was a gift I tell you... a gift!"

Catherine touched my arm. I looked at her and nodded. Giving a final gimlet glare, I dropped the poor old spacer and watched him scuttle off. He got to a safe distance and turned back, pointing a long, calcium-deprived fingerbone at us. "The curse of witchspace be upon you! Fools!" with a final drug-addled cackle, he weaved his way around the corner and disappeared.

I raised my eyebrows at Catherine and she gave a chuckle. "Roundabout, but informative."

"How so?" I asked, wiping my hands on my trousers. I'm shithouse at cryptic crosswords, but if Catherine had been able to glean any information from the ramblings, then my little bullying would have proved worthwhile.

"That the cargo canisters were floating in free space when they were found."

"I didn't exactly think that he was a master pirate." I said dryly.

The retort of a beam weapon made us both jump. The noise in the bar increased by half.

“Let’s talk elsewhere. I think it’s time to leave.” I mused, as a panicked mob began spilling out the door. “Some people *really* just shouldn’t take drugs.”

Catherine gave a breathless laugh, and started running. I followed; desperately trying to keep a few metres away from the encroaching tidal wave of hopelessly stoned spacers.

\*

Norman was busy dozing in his bridge chair, when a wet thump in front of him made him crack open an eyelid. He saw a dead body. He heard the hum of his guards powering up energy weapons and reluctantly opened his eyes fully. He’d been in a nice dream involving the late Commandress Berihn in a Lifter and himself in the *Azure Sunset* with the HPA powered up, bearing down on her.

“Was that really necessary, Marcus? You could have just cleared your throat meaningfully.”

Marcus looked furious, and Dreyfus looked equally black humoured. The body was rather mangled, and it took a while for Norman to recognise it. Limbs were twisted at unnatural angles and his skull appeared to be concave in places it should have been smooth. “Tewkes, isn’t it? Michel Tewkes?”

With a wary look at the two Imperials, one of the guards bent over the body and made the overly obvious statement. “Yes, it is. He’s dead, sir.”

“Thanks for that, Corporal... my eyes might have suddenly decide to explode while I was sleeping and I mightn’t have known that.” Norman remarked.

“Norman. I appreciate your frustration, but I really have to ask you to respect my person.” Marcus said, with a voice that was the absolute epitome of calm. Norman felt a momentary spasm of fear. Norman wondered whether it would be wise to make an excuse. He thought better of it. If things went pear-shaped, he could always kill them. No need to embarrass himself unnecessarily.

“We only have a few more days we have to be nice to each other. And if you would be so kind, I’d *love* it if you could refrain from trying to kill me *or* trying to obtain the unit. If you don’t, I’ll be forced to terminate our otherwise profitable relationship in the bloodiest and most vengeful manner.”

Norman made a distinct effort to remain relaxed in his couch. The guards seemed eager to shoot this upstart, and Norman didn’t have any immediate plans for dying. Crossfire was a very unlucky way to die. Also, Norman saw the look in Dreyfus’ eyes, a look that welcomed Death, as long as he brought friends along. For the first time, Norman noticed that Marcus’ hands and clothes were clean. It was Dreyfus who was bloody to the elbows.

“Can’t blame a man for trying can you? Besides, Tewkes was a thief, not an assassin.” Norman said, as casually as he dared. Killing Marcus had been a secondary objective to getting the unit. Tewkes seemed to have been dumb enough to reverse his orders.

“The blood is hot that must be cool’d for this, yet can I not of such tame patience boast as to be hush’d and nought at all to say:” Marcus spat.

“*What?*” Norman hated Marcus’ classical allusions.

“The Heir means,” Dreyfus translated quietly, “that we are currently a week or so away from the target. We need to work together to achieve the Cause. But don’t push us like this and expect no reaction.”

“Norman.” Marcus said clearly. He strode closer to the command chair, and did not flinch as a dozen weapons trained on him. The air was tense and still. But no one broke the silence, with word, cough or weaponry. Finally, Marcus was near, and leaned yet closer, his lips brushing Norman’s ears. Norman felt a sudden vulnerability. Marcus was an expert in murder, nearly Norman’s equal. A well placed blade would render any medic superfluous.

“Norman,” Marcus whispered, “I *will* be Emperor, as is my birthright. Not today, nor tomorrow, nor next week. But in time, all save a few within the Empire will bend their knee to me. Few will be permitted to stand beside me.” Marcus lightly emphasised the verb. “And those who stand and do not kneel will be a force upon history. Now... isn’t that worth a bit of restraint? Isn’t that worth a week’s worth of restraining your natural tendencies?”

Norman pushed Marcus back and stood up ramrod-straight, with a murderous look in his eye that led to some of his crew exchanging glances. They'd seen him like this before. They'd been forced to watch. *Then* they'd been forced to clean up.

"You little *punk!* You try and intimidate me and push me around on my own damn bridge. You treat me like I'm some kind of fool who *works* for you. Do you really think I need *anything* you can give me!"

Marcus stepped back and smiled in the crazy way Norman had seen do him when they'd first met. Right before he'd thrown some poor sod out through a first floor window. He deliberately let his arms come to rest by his side, but his stance was full of poised grace, like a snake undecided on whether to strike or flee. "I can give you a name," he whispered. "Not just a reputation, but a name. You can do everything you're doing now, but with the honour of a name. Now, you can have everything you want except be yourself. Everything is disguise, subterfuge and self preservation. You can't visit a station without the fear of assassination ,or capture. I can change that!" By now, Marcus' voice was rising in volume. "I can change all that. Once I assume... my rightful position why not ... Prince Mosser, Commander of the XVI Protectorate? Or if that is not to your liking... why not Prince Mosser, Lord of Facece... or Exioce. Do you see, Norman? You're already in the Empire's history books. You're a footnote. I can't raise you up into the main text. The only thing that will do that is a name."

Norman had had enough. He whipped out his Vega Corporation Deathwrecker and levelled it to point between Marcus' eyes. The bulbous weapon gave a soft screech as Norman snapped off the safety and the capacitors charged. The small dot of a targetting laser appeared on Marcus' forehead, dancing crazily. Norman brought his other arm around to grasp the weapon in both hands and steady his grip. The laser dot stilled. Those behind Marcus scrambled out of the way. The Deathwrecker was far too powerful to be stopped by a single human skull.

"I - am - NOT - a footnote. You're the footnote. Right now, all the history books will record you as is a minor, bastard backwoods noble. You talk to me about names. What's yours? Can you claim yours?"

Marcus' face didn't change. Behind him, Dreyfus seemed to tense. Marcus raised a hand to stay him. "No. I can't claim my name without your help. You hold my name in your hands. You hold both our names in your hands." Marcus' calm eyes focused on the Deathwrecker.

"Oh, very good metaphor. Well done! But that's what you're good at isn't it?" Norman snarled. He was beginning to be *seriously* bored by Marcus. "Fine speeches, grand statements. All that bullshit that looks good in your precious history books. But it doesn't get people killed, does it? It doesn't do any of the hard sodding work that you need to get that sodding name you so want, does it? And that's what you expect *me* to do, without complaint? Fuck that!" Norman stepped down from the captain's dais. "The pattern replicator, *now!*"

Marcus' expression didn't change. Norman brought the Deathwrecker within half a metre, so that the sickly green light deep in the barrel shone on his face. "Don't - force - me!" Norman grated.

Without changing expression, Marcus spoke. "Give them the replicator, Dreyfus."

"But Marcus -" Dreyfus seemed almost frantic.

"Just do as I say, Dreyfus. That's an order." Marcus said, as if he was ordering another cup of tea.

His face screwed up, Dreyfus brought the unit out from some hidden pocket.

"Carlsson," barked Norman, "take that thing down and install it. Then booby trap it. Then put a guard on it. Then evacuate the oxygen from that section." Norman thought a moment, "and give the guard an EVA suit. You might have trouble getting volunteers otherwise."

The named tech timidly took the unit from Dreyfus and disappeared down the corridor. Dreyfus' still bloody fists clenched angrily.

"Now what, Norman?" Marcus asked.

Norman blinked. What was he going to do now? He was already ninety five percent into Marcus' plan. How much difference did this make? Shouldn't he just hyperspace out of here and dispose of Marcus in some distant system? Or why not right here? The Deathwrecker was humming in his hands, eager to be used. Why bother hesitating? He had the HPA and no one could take it away from him.

"*Now,*" he said carefully, "We sit back and complete the plan." an audible sigh of relief washed over the bridge and the guards lowered their weapons Norman lowered the Deathwrecker and flipped on the safety. The heavy

handgun gave a high whine as it dissipated its charge. Norman went back to his chair and sat down. He looked at Marcus and was discomfited to see the Heir smile.

"Thank you, Norman," he said, as if he hadn't lost a thing. "As long as the plan is executed, I don't care who's in control. Glory is not my aim."

Norman shot up in his chair and pointed a finger at Marcus, "You absolute bullshit artist!" he said angrily. The guards snapped their weapons back up to cover Marcus, but Norman's fury was already dissolving into laughter. "Talk about names! I know what they'll call you... Marcus the Seducer!"

For once, Marcus looked rather less than impressed.

## One of Them

[Patrol #347]

"So how does it work?" Haynes asked.

Thomsen sighed. "If I knew that, I'd be a hyperspace engineer. But from what I've been told, misjumps leave very faint echoes, which bounce back down the witch-space tunnel. And this new addition that the guys with the big foreheads at New Rossyth have added to our ships can make sense of that, and work out to within a few AU where the ship fell out of witch-space during the misjump."

The LRC crew had used the time-honoured misjump to lose Patrol #347. But what they didn't know was only two months before, the Harris Fighters in the patrol had been fitted with an experimental hyperspace cloud analyser. The flight of three Harris fighters had followed the vast ship into witchspace, and dropped out just over 11AU from where the LRC had misjumped to.

The only hyperspace exit cloud within light-years had been a dead giveaway to where the LRC had gone next...

Thomsen's flight was now following the LRC at a discreet distance. It wasn't hard to maintain silent running and keep up with the LRC - the huge ship didn't really accelerate very well.

"I'm told the bigger the ship, the easier it is to discover where the misjump arrived," Thomsen added. "They want to fit it to all the search-and-rescue Quest class ships to rescue those who have suffered an inadvertent misjump. But the AJNIB would have been crazy not to try it with their patrols."

"We going to call in the cavalry?" asked Haynes.

"Could be tricky. Imperial space beckons. If they discover us the Alliance will have a lot of explaining to do. We can hide easily. Half of the Titican Fourth Division along with a couple of Victors won't be able to be quite as subtle," replied Thomsen.

"What d'ya reckon they'll do with it?"

"Fire it, I expect. What at, I have no idea."

The two officers sat in silence for a few moments. Thomsen scratched his chin.

"Maybe we should try and board the LRC at the next opportune moment."

"When would that be?"

"Good question. But they have to stop for gas sometime," Thomsen drawled in his thick Olgrean accent. "And then," he continued slowly, "we must catch Mosser..."

## Bastards and Stowaways

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

I waited until we were onto our fifth service ladder before I asked the obvious question, while puffing hard. "Catherine... forgive my ignorance, but doesn't <gasp> Traffic Control have more <choke> people and flashing lights than... wherever the hell we are?"

Catherine stopped climbing ahead of me and looked down with small amusement. "Not the bits we're trying to get to. What... did you think we were going to go up and they'd tell us out of the goodness of their hearts? They'd pick you for a Federal citizen right off the bat, and they're not too fond of the Alliance, either. If we went up there and asked to see their sensor logs we'd be dead quicker than you could say 'Clone agent'."

I couldn't argue with that logic. And didn't have the breath to, even if I did. So we trudged on through the station's superstructure, up ladder and down crowded passageway, crossing narrow gangway over massive drop. Catherine seemed to know her way about, to which she replied that she'd been posted on this sort of station before.

Eventually we reached a small section that was to her liking. Catherine pointed upwards. "About thirty metres that way is traffic control. About a hundred metres THAT way," Catherine pointed to the floor, "is the Computer Core. This is the most accessible point between the two." Catherine pointed finally to the huge column rising in front of us. She knelt before the column and prised off a small access plate. Then she reached into her bag and brought out what looked like... well I'm not sure WHAT it looked like. It looked a little like a mechanical snake, but had an ugly head with a variety of clamps and claws attached to its side. To one of the clamps, she fixed a small device that looked like it was made out of (I had to look twice, but it definitely was) wood!. She then fiddled behind the creature's head and it began writing in her hand, the tools on its head waving frantically. With a small effort she controlled its movement and dropped it inside the access plate. I heard the thing writhing about in there for a while, before it slithered out of sight.

"Right." Catherine said, dusting her hands. "Give the bugger fifteen minutes and it will have sussed out the most vulnerable point in the network and attached the junction box. Once it returns, we pick it up and then go back to the ship and we'll be able to access their records from there. If a human being can't physically get to certain cables, they believe they're secure. Idiots!"

"What about the junction box?"

Catherine grinned. "It's biodegradable, infected with a virus that'll render it dust within forty eight hours."

I grinned back at her. Cunning.

We sat down to wait for the snake to return. After about ten minutes, we heard the unmistakable sound of boots climbing up the ladder that we had just risen from. This deep in the superstructure, everything was a hard surface, and the echoes carried with an eerie clarity. Catherine directed a worried look at me. I moved closer and whispered. "Doesn't sound like whoever it is is trying to be stealthy. Just a maintenance worker doing their rounds. With any luck, he won't come up here. Can we get out of here and come back later?"

"No." Catherine said. "If the snake is found, any chance of getting the info is gone for good." she visibly settled herself. "We sit tight."

The clanging footsteps got louder and louder. Worse, we couldn't work out exactly where they were, because of all the echoing. A steady, low level stream of cursing also became audible. Male, old and very crotchety. Both of us stood up, slave to some primate fight or flight reflex. Out of a pocket, Catherine produced a small and deadly looking weapon. I bit my lip. I don't like casual killing. We looked around desperately from side to side, wondering which gantry or which passageway from which he would come. Catherine swung her weapon from side to side, ready to bring it to bear as soon as the maintenance man appeared.

Over Catherine's shoulder, I saw a rather ugly head rise up out of a ladder well. Catherine hadn't spotted it yet and I opened my mouth to warn her when inspiration struck. I leaned forward and kissed her, not grabbing her, so that she wouldn't pull away instinctively. Catherine didn't squeal in surprise, which was helpful (and she didn't gag in disgust, which was even more gratifying). But the tenseness of her body betrayed how uncomfortable she was. We disengaged and I moved my mouth closer to her ear.

"He's behind us." I whispered sweet nothings, "play along and we might not have to kill anyone."

In response, Catherine moaned convincingly and snaked a hand around into the small of my back. The hand with the weapon, so our friend couldn't see it.

We kept up this act for nearly thirty seconds, with groans, shifts of grip and much sucking of face. Then, to my relief, a dirty chuckling began and then started to recede as it got further away. After another fifteen seconds, Catherine pulled back and wiped her face with her hand. Her expression was halfway between amusement and outrage, with a tiny smidgen of enjoyment thrown in. "Well thought of. Do that again and I'll rip your balls off and stuff them inside your foreskin."

"Promises promises." I grinned. My grin fell as I saw sadness steal across Catherine's face. She sat back down next to the access plate and passed a hand across her eyes. It took me a moment to figure it out. False and exaggerated as it was, this was probably the first kiss she'd had since we kidnapped her. She was missing her husband, who still didn't know that she was alive and that she might not ever see again. I sat down next to her and squeezed her shoulder. She looked across and smiled, but it was a sad smile.

The dirty laughter was still receding when the snake returned, banging against the access panel. For a moment, Catherine and I exchanged horrified looks at the loud, dull banging that the snake created as it tried to return to its point of release. The dirty laughter ceased. I scrabbled frantically at the access plate. The slow footsteps returned, growing louder. Catherine watched my progress with the plate nervously. The footsteps accelerated as the lashing of the snake continued to the rattle inside of the panel. With a grunt of effort, I Catherine called out loudly "Ohhhhh Gaaaaawd." at the same time as I managed to prise off the plate. There was the snake, writhing mindlessly. I grabbed it in my hands and held it in the air, where its thrashings wouldn't make any noise.

There was a moment of deathly silence as her cry died away.

Then there was a bark of dirty laughter, subsiding into lascivious chuckling, which began to move away from us again. Catherine reached over and clicked a switch behind the head of the snake and the thing went limp in my hand. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well I'm glad *that's* finished." Catherine said, "it went deep into the core and deposited its load. Now we can sit back and relax. The big effort's over." Catherine paused as the impact of that statement sunk in.

"Let's get out of here." She said, sounding irritated. Fighting an immature grin, I followed.

\*

"Marcus, how could you DO that?"

Dreyfus seemed agitated as much as Marcus was calm. The two of them were walking through one of the *Azure Sunset's* cargo bays. Like most of the cargo bays on the *Azure Sunset*, it was crammed with illegal goods - in this case Battle Weapons.

"Because I had no choice." Marcus said easily. "Norman is not a man who will suffer frustration for long. If we had continued to hold out, he would have killed both of us. I erred, Dreyfus."

"Marcus!" Dreyfus seemed shocked.

"Confronting him was childish." Marcus said with a slight note of self-reproach in his voice. He hated his flaws far more than Dreyfus did. Dreyfus had been his friend and teacher for nearly twenty years, but Marcus had found that nothing taught perfection better than survival.

"He tried to kill you!"

Marcus shrugged, strolling over to examine a particularly vicious looking flechette launcher.

"Norman doesn't trust anyone. His greatest failure is that he considers himself the only trustworthy being in the universe. He's a man of few genuine friends."

"Small wonder!" Dreyfus snorted. He had never liked the pirate, and couldn't understand why Marcus did. Despite his long years of acting and behaving like a human, Dreyfus found organics impossible to understand. "We can't possibly trust him."

"To the contrary, we *have* to trust him. The target is only six days away. Our friends in the military and elsewhere are expecting us to meet the deadline. We've been planning this for five years. We can't throw it away on... pride! Norman has as much to gain as anyone."

“He’s already got that, *and* he has nothing to lose now.” Dreyfus muttered sourly. The scene on the bridge had made him feel powerless. His two main directives were to protect the Imperial Family and to serve and protect Marcus. The handover of the pattern replicator had stuck in his craw.

“Abide, Dreyfus, abide. Once our present task is done, Norman will probably leave us. Let him. If he believes that he will be more powerful alone, then let him suffer. We will be the ones standing together, more powerful than he can possibly imagine.”

Dreyfus ducked his head momentarily. He’d taught Marcus everything he knew, including rhetoric. Dreyfus knew he had been constructed as a protector and mentor to the young man and had been programmed to turn him into the paragon of nobility, the essence of Imperial service. It had been Marcus, though, who had realised that his Imperial service lay not in following, but in leading. From that moment onwards, Dreyfus’ every active calculation had been dedicated to the Heir and in fulfilling his destiny. Involving Mosser had been a risk, and Dreyfus wondered whether he’d used inappropriate logic in agreeing to Marcus’ plan. Dreyfus had not been programmed for love, but Marcus was the only reason for Dreyfus continued existence. The possibility of Marcus no longer being in the universe came close to causing fatal errors in all of Dreyfus systems. “If you trust him, Lord, then what can I do but trust him as well.”

Marcus came over from the shoulder cannons he was inspecting and grasped Dreyfus on the shoulder. “Don’t trust him. I want you looking out for me. Just abide, Dreyfus, abide. The time to act may come at any time, I just need you to be ready if it does.”

Dreyfus fought to smile.

The two moved off into a different section of the ship.

Above them, in the superstructure, two people glanced at each other. They were carefully ensconced in the maze of struts and triangles, above the complex net of security cameras that monitored the cargo bay.

“What was all that about?” Thomsen asked. His companion, Haynes, scratched his chin. He wasn’t used to a five o’clock shadow and deeply resented the lack of shaving facilities available to stowaways.

“No idea. Mosser doesn’t usually let his own crew talk that disrespectfully about him, so I’m assuming they’re visitors.”

Thomsen grunted. They’d been crawling around the ship for several days now, hiding from the crew and mapping the layout of the ship. Whatever mad impulse had driven them to board Mosser’s ship had long ago faded, leaving them ruefully wondering how they were going to catch the criminal with two men, armed with Standard-Issue Beamers, in the middle of the man’s own battleship.

They had no idea where the ship had Hyperspaced to, only that the ship and crew seemed to be taking great pains to pretend that everything was normal and were trying rather unconvincingly to act relaxed. In Thomsen’s experience, that meant that something big was in the offing.

“I think we need to get into that depressurised bay at the front of the ship.”

Haynes nodded agreement. The security around the forward section had been fearsome. Something BIG was in there, and they were fairly sure it had something to do with the ‘task’ that everyone kept talking about. The space was a bit large to hold a weapon system... so maybe it was for a custom built ship or a very large shipment of explosives.

Haynes gave a humourless grin at his superior officer.

“What the hell are we doing... we aren’t black ops officers... just ordinary AJN pilots playing out of our league!”

Thomsen didn’t smile, instead turning to the ventilation shaft they’d been skinning their knees on for the past few days. Turning his head slightly before inserting himself into the shaft, he commented.

“When a spanner goes into the works, whether it’s made of duralium or scrap metal doesn’t really matter...”

\*

We decided to review the ship’s system from the Station Bar rather than the ship. No records would lead back to our ship should our hacking be discovered, only to the bar’s Galnet terminal. It also allowed us to have a drink after a rather hard day.

I was recommended to try the local station rotgut, which I was assured was an real eye opener. Eye opener! It almost sent me blind! Catherine chose a less alcoholic drink and together we studied the logs.

“They stayed for less time than I thought, just over four hours. Let me just cross-reference the Traffic Control transcripts.”

Catherine studied them for a moment, and then let out a low whistle.

“About forty five minutes after the *Abraham’s Son* transponder comes into range, the refuelling tenders were pulled off servicing other craft and onto the *Abraham’s Son*. That’s unheard of.”

“Why?” I asked. The Constrictor was small enough to be encompassed within the internal bays of stations, which was impossible for something the size of a Long Range Cruiser. Instead, small robot craft with weak manoeuvring thrusters gathered in tiny swarms like wrasse around a whale, and ferried cargo and fuel between the station and the LRC.

Catherine sighed in frustration. “Look, I worked *in* Traffic Control. It’s first come, first serviced. There are explicit rules in the Station Operation Protocols that enforce it. Except for Military overrides there’s no way any competent Chief would ever authorise something like that.”

We pored over the transcripts and sensor logs. The captain of the LRC, Captain Reeso M. Namron, had argued for about half an hour about the urgency of their delivery, but hadn’t gotten anywhere. The queue was four hours, and they would just have to wait. There was radio silence for about thirty minutes.

“What’s that there? It looks like a docking authorisation, but I can’t see any reports of new ships being detected.”

Catherine nodded. “A shuttle from the *Abraham’s Son*. Now if all shore leave was suspended, who would have reason to come aboard the station, do you think?”

The shuttle docked, and about ten minutes later, the logs recorded non-crucial personnel in Traffic Control.

“In itself, that’s not too unusual. My husband visited me at work quite a bit. But every incidence is logged and reported to security.”

“Can we patch into the security cameras in Traffic Control? Wouldn’t they have recorded whoever it was?” Catherine worked on the terminal for a moment. She gave a curious snorting sound, like a moon hound catching a scent.

“Normally, I’d say yes. But the records appear to have been wiped. I could probably recover them, given a few days, but I’m more interested as to why they would have been deleted in the first place.”

We tracked the bridge visitors backwards from traffic control. Whoever had deleted the records had been thorough. Each camera had a missing segment just long enough to cover the movements of the visitors from the *Abraham’s Son*. We spent nearly an hour looking for a few seconds, even a frame, even a snatch of voice. Nothing. All that was readily apparent was that shortly after their visit to the bridge, the maintenance and refuelling tenders had been reassigned and there had been a series of outraged yelps from inconvenienced Captains. The complaints had been brushed aside with the radio equivalent of a hiss and a chop of the hand. No explanation, just saying that’s the way it is. The visitors had returned to the docking bay and had flown the shuttle back to the *Abraham’s Son*. After the tenders had done their job, the massive ship quickly vanished in a swirling cloud of plasma.

“Well it wouldn’t be violence, or we would have seen some signs of it when the Traffic Control cameras came back online.”

I shrugged. There were plenty of ways to hurt people without blood being spilt. But I agreed that this had the feel of persuasion rather than coercion.

“Well whoever it is appears to have been thorough. None of the station cameras have any record.” I said, “But...” The conjunction echoed. I looked down at the cloudy liquid in the glass. I’d barely been able to keep down the small slug I’d managed before. I shuddered and downed the rest of it in a single swig. I shuddered again and coughed. I found myself strangely aware of my own mortality.

“But?” Catherine looked at me expectantly while I recovered.

“Do we know which hanger they docked in?”

Catherine tapped out an enquiry and the answer flashed up on the screen. Her eyes turned expectantly to mine.

“Now, who else is in that bay, and how long have they been there?”

A graphical display popped up showing the ships currently berthed in that bay. Printed alongside each was their berthing date and how much they'd paid in docking fees. I ran my finger down the screen, muttering under my breath. Most of them had docked after the Abraham's Son had departed. Only three seemed to fit the criteria.

“Is this to scale? I mean... does the docking bay look even vaguely like this?”

“Pretty much.” Catherine said, amused. As I mentioned earlier, she found Bec and I total amateurs in terms of intelligence work.

“This one!” I pointed to my choice.

“What about it?”

“The cameras on this baby would have had a perfect view of them as they walked past.”

Catherine gave me a look of genuine admiration. The station's cameras may have been tampered with, but it was extremely unlikely that they would have gone to the trouble of breaking into the ships in the hangar. We should easily be able to break in and hack the records on the ship. Which we did.

Casually, we sauntered down to the docking bay and opened an access panel on the side of the ship, which was a decrepit old Transporter covered in burns and micrometeorites. Catherine connected her datapad and within a minute had the logs open for her perusal. My job was to nervously stand next to hulking mass of the ship and watch for anyone coming to board her. Fortunately, the wild scenes in the station bar seem to have led to a lot of grizzled old spacers being thrown in the drunk tank.

“Got it!” Catherine unclipped the lead and quickly closed the panel.

We made our way back to the ship as quickly as we dared. As we opened the door, I heard a bang come from the control room. It was the sound of the door to the spare room being slammed shut, as Bec retreated again.

Catherine sat down at her station and downloaded the shots from the datapad. We looked carefully at the images that had been salvaged from the Transporter. The images could only be enhanced so much, but they were clear enough to identify the three figures that passed briefly through the camera's field of view.

One of them was familiar enough to make us both gasp. It was an impish face made familiar by hundreds of newscasts. The one, the only...

“Mosser!”

Catherine's eyes lit up. Here was proof positive. She'd followed a hunch and been rewarded by paydirt. He looked younger than I remembered from the newscasts, the freeze-frame catching him midway through a sly grin that looked positively adolescent. He'd probably gone through another clone and this was the new, fresh-faced model. There was a spacer's old joke that while Norman's services were expensive, you could save if you bought him in six packs.

“Apart from Preston, he's the only one we know for sure is involved in this.” Catherine crowed.

“The short one... I know him... he's... *damn* what did he call himself? Dreyfus! The android on Exioce.”

Catherine looked extremely interested at this, as well. “The one with Preston. But the other one's not Preston is he?”

He most certainly was not. The third man in the picture was tall and muscular, with a neatly trimmed black beard and a quite handsome face that seemed vaguely familiar. He was dressed in a bounty hunter's standard get up of black leather, black leather, and a bit more black leather. Unlike Preston's prissy faux-military uniform, the faded black leather seemed appropriate. This man had the look of someone who had lived their life on the edge of a 4MW (as the saying goes).

Catherine set the face matcher to work. This incredibly powerful program analysed the facial structure of the target and then went through its massive archive of pictures trying to find a match.

While that ran, we talked about Norman Mosser. Though neither of us admitted it, it was a thrill to be involved with one of the premier criminals of civilised space. He had also been a media darling and I suppose for the two of us it was a brush with celebrity. "I'm struck by a nasty thought." I said, "Did you get any external camera shots of the LRC?"

Catherine nodded. "I uploaded the entire time period onto my datapad. Which bit are you interested in?"

"Just a look at it."

A still appeared on screen. I inspected it carefully. "Zoom in on those upper turrets." Catherine complied and I looked sceptically at the mountings. "Small Plasma Accelerators. Four of 'em. Pretty heavily and expensively armed for a trade clunker, isn't it? Especially one that Preston neglected to insure."

"What're you saying?"

"That's not the *Abraham's Son*."

Catherine looked at me strangely. "It's got the right transponder. It's an LRC. We know the *Abraham's Son* came to the system."

"I'll bet Duval City to a brick on that the *Abraham's Son* didn't survive an hour out of Witchspace."

Catherine's eyes widened as the penny dropped. "The narcotics. They weren't dumped, they were spilled from a destroyed ship!"

I nodded. "The *Abraham's Son* was sacrificed. That's Norman Mosser's ship, the *Azure Sunset*. They're flying under false colours. Could you zoom in on the front of the ship?"

Catherine manipulated the controls. The front surface of the ship was smooth and unbroken by weapon emplacements. But Catherine had caught the suspicion bug. She examined around the bulkhead.

"Fresh welds. That section's been put on recently. I would guess that behind that bulkhead is the H-P."

There was a ping from the face matcher. Catherine brought up the screen.

Before us was a large family portrait of about fifty people. The face that the program had highlighted was a younger one, by about fifteen years, but it was definitely the dark haired man we'd seen in the still. He was positioned near the edge of the picture, on the far right corner. Around him were all manner of nobles dressed in exotic finery. It was the face occupying the central position that made my jaw drop open. It was one that adorned every family home, every control centre, every military outpost. Hawkers had tried to sell us cameo portraits of him on Exioce. I checked the captioning.

'Marcus Toutarien– Family Friend.'

In Imperial-speak, that generally meant a bastard son or daughter of the patriarch or matriarch. One who would be acknowledged as family, but never accepted as such.

I looked at Catherine, who looked equally stunned. She cleared her throat and spoke clearly and carefully, as if she were afraid the words might shatter on speaking.

"Oh my God. Marcus - 'The Heir' - is the bastard son of Emperor Duval."

## Everybody stalking...

[Mack Winston]

Ever since I had taken on the identity of that Sirius Corp. salesman and plundered the expense account, my life had gone from bad to worse. It seems like he had a contract on him, and once he'd found out his identity had been nicked, was quite content in not trying to get it back. Meanwhile I was stuck with it. I was wanted under my real identity AND my assumed identity. On one hand, I had police and bounty hunters after Mack Winston. On the other hand, I had assassins and bounty hunters after the hapless Sirius Corp guy, whose name I had worked hard to forget in an effort to evade the brain scans.

It had now all come to a head.

The lights came on. I was in a room, in a chair. There were no obvious restraints, but I couldn't move. The room had no obvious exits and entrances. It was beige in colour, and about four metres wide and long, and about two meters high. Somewhere in the background, I could hear the sound of running water.

All hell had broken out sometime before. I don't know how long ago. I was fleeing yet another attempt on my life, and something heavy hit me. Everything had gone black. Now I had woken up here with no idea about just how long I had been out. I sat in silence, contemplating my fate. Whatever alternative I thought up, they were all pretty unpleasant.

A voice broke the silence. I was released from the grip of the chair I had been restrained in. I shifted a little to ease my discomfort.

"Sssso, Mack Winsssston," said the voice. The voice made me think of thick treacle dropping off a spoon.

"Er, yes," I replied a little lamely.

"A friend of yourssss hasss not paid up," said the voice simply.

"A friend of mine?"

"Yessss"

"So what hassss - has that got to do with me?"

"You will help ussss reclaim what isss owed to usss. Five million creditsssss"

Who would rip these guys off for five mil had to be pretty bold. I hadn't actually seen them yet, but obviously they knew what went on and who knew who. It wasn't a sign of the weak or misguided.

"What do I get in return?" I asked.

"We won't put you in our environment," said another voice, distinct - but with the treacle-effect of the last one.

"Who isss - is this friend of mine?" I asked.

"Norman Mosssser," the voice replied menacingly. I almost choked on my own spittle. "and I think you know what we ssssupplied to him and what he owessss usss for"

"No idea," I replied plaintively. "I'm hardly his keeper, in fact I don't really know him that well"

"You know him well enough, Winsston."

I racked my brains. What was Mosssss - Mosser's last project? Oh no, it was the HPA wasn't it...

"I think you know what we want back, Winsston."

"What if I fail? Or don't want to take on this mission of yours?"

"Thisssss"

Suddenly, a hatch above me opened. Water started gushing in! Within seconds, I was chest deep in the water and trying to swim.

"OK, OK!" I yelled back, but the water kept coming. Soon I was swimming with difficulty, my heavy boots making it hard work. The gap between the ceiling and the water's surface was barely fifteen centimetres.

The void was soon filled, and I took one last desperate breath...

Time seemed to drag on. I wondered whether I had blown it, and they were just going to drown me regardless. As I was fighting a losing battle against the urge to breathe the water in, suddenly the bottom of the room seemed to open up.

I fell out, and onto the hard concrete landing pad below along with a few tonnes of water. I lay soaking wet and cold, looking up at the bottom of a Moray Starboat's hull closing up.

I staggered to my feet, gasping for air, and trudged wetly towards the terminal buildings, hoping to get there before the sub-freezing air made me a victim to hypothermia.

"You will sssssucceed," came a voice in my head. "Or you will need to learn how to breathe water."

Another shout pierced the cold air.

"There he is, get him!"

The shouter looked horribly policeman-shaped.

It was time to run for it. Again.

## Discombobulation

[Mack Winston]

"Here's your weapons," said Jones, sliding three plasma rifles, two Lance and Ferman handguns and an ammo belt with 300 plasma packs across the table. "That'll be 850 credits". He didn't look like the typical arms dealer. No camouflage uniform - just normal civilian clothes, and a beer gut that must have cost dearly in Reidquatian ales.

I was just sliding my ident across the table, but Jones didn't let me go any further.

"Cash," he said with an uneasy smile.

I put the ident back, and pulled out a bag of credit counters. I slid eight 100-cr pieces and a 50-cr piece across the table. I had anticipated this, and made sure I had the cash in case he didn't take the normal credit transfer method. "Nice doing business with you," I replied.

"Aye, it is," he said. "Looks like you 'ave a one man war going on there," he finished.

"Not quite. I have to ask a friend to pay some debts to my...ummm...clients."

"Aye, it looks like you're taking on Mr. Mosser there."

An accurate guess, I hoped. I really didn't want to take on Norman. In fact I just wanted to quit it all, but now I was painted into a corner. Wanted by the police, wanted by bounty hunters, wanted by assassins after someone completely different but thought he was me, and now wanted by these watery folk in the Moray.

I left the arms dealer's shack. I knew coming to Riedquat was a good idea. The guns were at the right price, and they had plenty of high power ammo. Now all I needed was a couple of other guys with a death wish to help me. At least then the mission would only be probable death, not certain death. Of course, I didn't look out of place either walking around La Soeur du Dan Ham station with three rifles over one shoulder and a huge ammo belt over the other. To say I was weighed down with weaponry was an understatement. In fact, after a few hundred metres walking, I had to find a place to sit down for a moment.

"Hey! Mack Winston!" came a female voice.

I immediately sprung to my feet, grabbing the ammo belt before it could slide off my shoulder, and started walking away as quickly as I could. In fact, I began breaking into a run. Lately, a mention of my name was usually swiftly followed either by gunfire or the words "There he is! Get 'im!".

"Wait!" came the voice again. I quickly turned around to see who my pursuer was this time. I saw a woman pushing past a group of people behind me. She looked vaguely familiar. I didn't draw any comfort from that and tried to run as quickly as possible. I grabbed one of my new handguns from my belt, and started to twist around. I was armed - I didn't have to run this time!

"It's me!" came the voice again. I stopped, turned around, with my new L&F ready in my hand.

"You do remember me, don't you?" she said.

I paused, as she drew up in front of me. She was not brandishing a weapon as far as I could see. Yes, I knew her. Red head with cobalt blue eyes, nice shapely figure... "Erm, Marsha Mc. Leary?" I asked. "We met at Urfaa one time, you sold me a tonne of military fuel..."

She smiled. "And that night in my cabin."

"Yes," I said. "That night in your cabin."

"You seem rather nervous," she asked.

"Look, let's go to your ship and I can tell you about it," I said anxiously. I really didn't want to stay in the open longer than necessary. Especially as she'd yelled my name. It only took one bounty hunter...

She had the same Harris that I'd seen in Urfaa almost two years ago. A nice spacious craft, and a good place to talk - better than my Eagle 3 for that kind of thing. We went to the living quarters. I sat down and slid the rifles off my right shoulder and the ammo belt off my left. It felt good to be rid of the weight.

"So what are you doing at the moment?" she asked.

"Just trying to stay alive"

"Oh come on, you're a Frontier trader. Why'd anyone but just the odd pirate be after you?"

I looked up at her.

"You are a trader, aren't you?" she asked quietly.

"I was, yes."

"Was?"

"Some...things...have happened in the meantime. Let me just put it this way, I've screwed up. I'm wanted for all the wrong reasons. I've been running for a month now, and I'm just about tired out. And now some sinister...things...who live in a water-filled Moray have given me an impossible mission."

"Tell me about it," she said.

And I did. All about what had happened in the intervening two years. Well, I didn't have anything to lose. There was a long pause after I finished my story. "I have some bad news, I'm afraid," she said.

"Oh great," I replied. "How unusual," I said with heavy sarcasm.

She showed me her ident. "Federation Naval Intelligence Bureau", it said, with the well-known Federation symbol.

"I might have guessed," I said acidly. "Whatever you do to me, I don't care because I'm dead already. If you take me away, the Moray pirates will kill me. If you do nothing, then the bounty hunters and assassins will kill me."

"Sorry, Mack," she said. "As we say in the business, you can run but you can't hide. I've been following you for two years now. Ever since you first met Norman Mosser. I'm not after you, I'm after Mosser, you see. But in the light of your confession, I ought to take you in. But I'm not going to. You're going to lead me to Mosser."

"And then what?"

"And then you're going to lead me to your watery friends. They stole an expensive piece of Federation property, so they're in trouble too..."

"And then what?"

"If you co-operate, I'm sure the Federation will be accommodating"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we won't put you in prison. Well, not for very long at least," she said with a wry smile. "Now I know you've sent a message to Mosser with his secret key asking where he is, and where you can meet him, as you've an important piece of information about 'his' HPA. We watched you doing that. Now I suggest you retrieve his reply, and we'll go there. In my ship."

"How do you know all of that?"

"We've been bugging your ship for two years as well. We know you'd lead us to Mosser in the end. You did lead us to the leadership of the Guild, so I think we can rely on you," she stated, with a sly look.

"Wha...?"

"Well, remember a year ago, when the Guild got busted? You only got away because we let you. You're so careless about security, you lead us right to them. I give you ten out of ten for marksmanship, but minus several million for security practises," she said, shaking her head sadly.

I didn't quite know what to say.

"And now you're going to lead us to Norman Mosser and our stolen HPA. And this time you will be discreet, and the...erm, Moray people as you put them are going to think I'm just helping you get them their money. And you might learn a thing or two about keeping secrets, hmmm?" she finished.

"Oh great, here's another fine mess I've got me into," I muttered under my breath...

## Achenar

[Norman Mosser]

'So, is everyone in agreement then? Are we all happy with what we have to do?'

Nearly everyone nodded. Marcus frowned slightly, as if the meeting was a waste of his time. Technically it was, as he and Norman had sorted out all the details in advance and he was merely there to present a united front to the crew.

'I have a question.'

Norman looked at the chief engineer, 'Go on.'

'What if it all fucks up? What if the Imps get wind of the scheme and come out shooting?'

'We do the same thing as if it works out. We leave sharpish and misjump our way to the edge. As long as everybody keeps to the plans, we will be home free.'

'Fair enough,' replied the engineer.

'Anything else?'

'What about Preston?' asked a bridge officer.

Norman turned to the black-clad man beside him. 'Marcus?'

'Preston is on station at the edge of the system as we speak. He is keeping a lookout for prying eyes, but as a precaution I have instructed him not to contact this vessel under any circumstances.' Marcus stood up. Dreyfuss, who had been standing behind him, shuffled back to make room for him. 'I must depart. I have things to attend to.'

This was taken as a cue for the meeting to break up, and everybody present made their way out of the briefing room and back to their own tasks.

\*

Norman made his way from the meeting room to a nearby airlock and considered how the scheme was progressing. He had misgivings, but he always did about his grander escapades. They always seemed to work out, and for this one they had taken every precaution possible.

He suited up quickly and deftly and operated the airlock controls with ease. The outer door slid open and he stripped out onto the hull of the *Azure Sunset*. Walking around the outside of his ship always gave him perspective and reminded him of how big the universe actually was. The sense of fragility in a spacesuit, even though he was protected by the shields and the inertial dampers, and the micrometeorite screens always invigorated him. He watched in a self-indulgent way as Dewey, one of the robots employed by the hull-autorepair system meandered across the surface of the ship testing for weaknesses and fractures in the duralium plating. It was an ugly robot, but pleasantly functional.

The head up display in the spacesuit reminded him of some important facts though. The escort was in range. The prince had decided that in the wake of the narcotics shortage, a Long Range Cruiser full of drugs was too valuable to go unguarded and so had dispatched an 'honour guard' to escort it into port. It was totally unnecessary as Achenar was the safest, most secure system in the galaxy and flightpaths were excessively patrolled. The escort was of no matter as Norman had completely powered down the HPA and shielded it so that if scanned the front 'hold' would show up as full of narcotics. When they got round to firing the 'fucker' as the crew had affectionately called it, Norman knew that nothing could stop them in time.

He smiled and began to work through a Tai Chi routine as the *Azure Sunset* cruised silently and inexorably to its final destination.

\*

Marcus and Dreyfuss made their way back to Marcus's quarters and once securely inside, Dreyfuss rounded on Marcus. 'He doesn't trust us any more. Let me kill him.'

'And alienate the crew? No.'

'He threatens the plan.'

Marcus shook his head. 'He will do what is necessary. Greed has him. He believes I can pull it off.'

'You nearly had the crew before. You can have them again. We don't need him.'

'Norman is the best man for the job. Have more faith.'

'But if he jeopardises the scheme?'

'I'll make sure he won't. Unless I say otherwise, even if provoked, do not kill him. That is an order.'

'I am conditioned to obey.'

'Indeed.'

\*

Sam Kemper hurried back to the bridge. Typically, Norman had sloped off to do something pretentious and left Sam to deal with the operational running of the ship. Sam did not begrudge this as Norman had done a lot of planning and made sure that everybody knew exactly what they were supposed to be doing while they were making the final run in. Most of it involved not drawing too much attention to the ship and being ready for anything at any time. There was of course the fact that both he and the crew knew that if it went up shit creek Norman would somehow drag them out of it. Alive if they were lucky.

Sam took a moment to reminisce of times past, back when he and Norman and the old gang had followed W&Gs guide using an Explorer. The ten of them that had done it were a disparate bunch at the time, but the experience had forged them together as a team and they expected to remain lifelong friends. Now, there were only four of them left alive. Al had been busted by the Feds and executed. Sandra caught Soholian fever after running bioweapons into a combat zone, Fink was taken down by bounty hunters. Seline was murdered in an effort to get to Norman, simply because they had been a couple at the time. Mary had betrayed them and been killed. John had joined her and been shot by the Winston kid. Of those who were left, Sarah was languishing in a cell in Ross 128 and Patrick had got religion and was circling the edge preaching fire and brimstone courtesy of a blessed SPA. And they had thought themselves to be invincible.

Sam decided to stop dwelling in the past and got back to the task at hand. Running a stolen superweapon undetected into the best defended system in space.

\*

The guard blinked slowly and lazily. It was halfway through his shift guarding the door to the HPA room and his attention was wandering. When he went off duty, he was planning to go to the rec room and track down the dubious delights of some of the more unsavoury dreamware that was onboard the ship. His cabinmate had promised him a complete Berihn slave experience with the dreamware tapes and he was quite frankly looking forwards to it.

A muffled clang echoed from further down the corridor. Curious, he leaned forwards to get a better view but could see nothing. He stepped away from the door and spotted a cover to some service conduit lying in the corridor. unholstering his blaster, he started to walk towards the cover.

Nothing else untoward happened so he moved closer and stuck his head into the now open conduit to see if there was any cause for spontaneous cover fallings off.

There was. A spanner thwacked him on the back of his head and he dropped.

The backup team, interested to discover why the guard had left his post spotted his supine body on the decking of the ship. Standing over him was a figure in a military shipuit, stained by grease and several days wear grasping an equally greasy wrench.

The barrage of stunner fire dropped the intruder effortlessly. The leader of the guards pushed a button on his headset

'Sam, we have a stowaway'