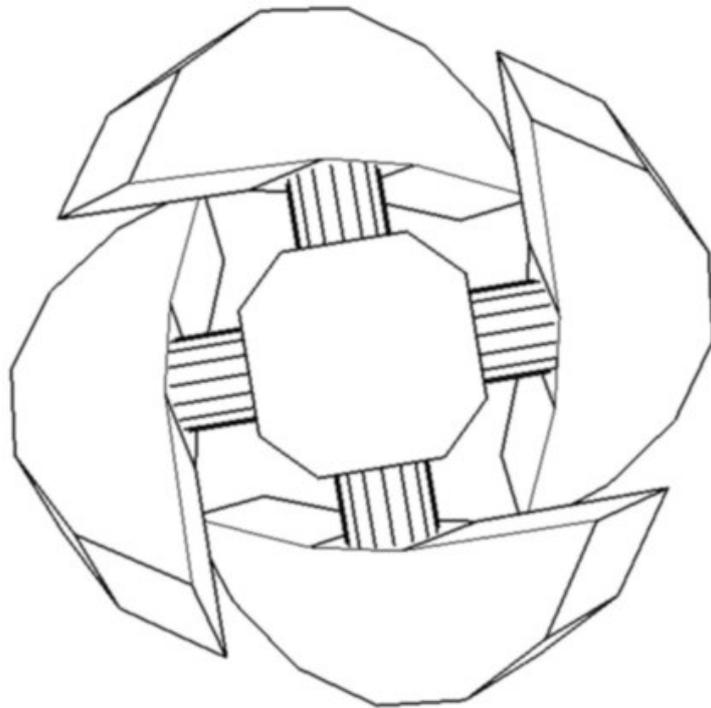


The Elite BBS Presents:
A Frontier Elite Universe Story

ACHENAR BOUND

THE HPA SAGA



Volume
6

CONTENTS

Preludes.....	2
To catch him in Achenar.....	8
The Interrogation	11
Cry Havoc	16
Into the White Fire	28
Fort Donalds.....	38
Lazarus	45

Preludes

[Commander Red Ravens]

The Crown Prince's Imperial Spokeswoman yawned and scratched her stomach with her nails. Her secretary and handservant slave looked up from her pedicure duties. The Spokeswoman shook her head and languidly waved a hand, heavy with jewels all set on heavy platinum rings. The slave sighed and went back to her filing. They were travelling in a luxury shuttle up to the Fort Donalds station above Capitol.

The Spokeswoman was reviewing the script she'd been given for the BIG press conference. Her big, surgically enhanced green eyes were tired from the effort. The convoy was departing in six days time and the Crown Prince had informed her that she would be expected on the Convoy for the next three months. At least she'd be getting regular exposure on the news shows. She sighed. Although she had no illusions about being the next Empress, the position of the Crown Prince's mistress had its rewards as well as its trials.

The speechwriters had already produced a month's worth of scripts, tailored for each of the systems and worlds that they were about to travel to. The spokeswoman gave a small, perfectly formed sneer. She loathed it every time she was forced to leave Capitol. Even the Crown Prince's occasional holiday jaunts to Exioce felt like trips to the Frontier Systems.

The huge, ugly shape of Fort Donalds loomed in front of the ship. It was an ugly Axe-blade style station, without the graceful curves and parabolas that characterised the photo spreads the Spokeswoman used in her press conferences.

The shuttle landed on the station and the Spokeswoman strutted out, her heels clicking on the Duralium of the bay. It was the Imperial Docking port, so there were no paparazzi waiting to snap her image. She felt queasy at the low gravity on the station, and even more annoyed by the fact that there was no one trying to photograph her. Instead, an anxious looking major-domo greeted her. He was right to be anxious. The Crown Prince would be setting foot on his station and even the slightest of mishaps could see him removed from his position. Possibly by extreme force.

"I'm sure everything will be in order by the time His Imperial Highness arrives."

"Yes... maybe." The taller Spokeswoman kept her strides long, and the major-domo had to scuttle quickly to keep up with her. "When was the last time the outside of the station was scrubbed?"

The major-domo blanched. The surface area of the station was massive, and would take weeks to clean!

"See to it, will you?" The Spokeswoman said absently. The major-domo swallowed heavily and re-aligned his understanding of reality to the appropriate parameters.

"You've been coordinating the defence of the station with the Admirals, I assume."

Although it wasn't a question, the major-domo was quick with a reply.

"Of course, ma'am. The station will look like it is inside a ring of duralium."

The clicking footsteps stopped and the major-domo nearly tripped over himself trying to halt. The tall and impossibly beautiful spokeswoman looked down her nose at him. Her voice, when it came, was cold as the dark side of a moon in the system of a dead star.

"That is entirely unacceptable. This is a mission of charity, not a military campaign. We want the cameras to focus on the waiting LRCs of Mercy, not Imperial Battleships! Push the cordon back to at least 1AU away from the station. Only allow LRCs and small ships that have been identified AND checked through to the station. Keep an honour guard within range of the station. Eight to Ten Explorers, along with the Crown Prince's personal Dreadnought should be sufficient." The Spokeswoman started strutting forward again and the major-domo had to jog forward to match her speed. "I understand your desire to keep His Imperial Highness safe, but even royalty must take risks."

The major-domo gave out a sigh of admiration. The sacrifices the Crown Prince was making were stunning. For the Crown Prince and Heir Presumptive to the entire Empire to be reduced to a mere honour guard of ten heavily armed Imperial Explorers and his own lethally equipped *Achenar's Son*... it was... breathtaking.

"My Lady, shouldn't we identify and cross-check the LRCs as well?"

The Spokeswoman hissed softly in disdain. "No, we need them to pass so we can keep bringing in the Narcotics. Besides, we don't want this convoy to interfere in Achenar's commercial flow any more than is necessary. Now... did the clone crowd arrive safely?"

"Yes My Lady. We'll defrost them forty eight hours before the Crown Prince arrives and program them with the chants you specified."

"Excellent." purred the spokeswoman, "This convoy is His Imperial Highness' triumph. Nothing will be allowed to interfere with it. You understand me?" she finished with something more like a tiger's growl. The major-domo nodded carefully. At its best, the Empire worked on a very lucrative scale of rewards and punishments. Success could see wealth and (more importantly) prestige beyond imagining. Failure however...

"Of course, My Lady. The Crown Prince does not need to worry about a thing. This convoy will be the start of a brave... er... bright new era."

The door to the inner station hissed shut behind them.

*

Thomsen braced himself. He was perched inside a bulkhead just outside the depressurised bay. Haynes had been stupidly caught a few hours previously, and Thomsen realised that his time was limited. They'd been scoping the mystery zone for a while now, and hadn't found any safe way of sneaking into the area. Most of the airlocks had been welded shut and even if they'd been able to break down two airlock doors there was still the matter of the several hours it would take to properly pressurise the area. Which, of course was if they even had the gasses necessary to pressurise the huge cargo hold, which they didn't. Which supposed that no one on the command deck would notice the sudden atmospheric pressure in a secured area that supposedly had no more oxygen than the vacuum outside the ship, which they would.

Haynes had lost patience and decided on a frontal assault on the one unwelded airlock. He'd managed to kill the guard on duty, but had been sprung over the body. Thomsen had barely escaped without being seen, and the squeal of blaster fire behind him as he ran had answered the question of Haynes' fate. Thomsen was now the only one left.

In the absence of a better plan, he'd stolen an EVA suit and set a small explosive charge on one of the retaining walls around the area. He'd chosen a fuel switching pump as the unfortunate 'cause' of the 'accident'. While the sudden lack of wall would be detected and quickly repaired, by the time a maintenance crew got to it, hopefully he could get into the secured area.

Thomsen pressed a stud on the arm of his suit. He counted to four and turned his face to the wall. A huge wind came rushing along the corridor from the site of the explosion, washing over his EVA suit. Almost as quickly, the hot gas was sucked back as the vacuum of the hold was exposed and exerted its effect. Warning lights began to flash and pressure doors at either end of the section hissed shut.

Carefully, Thomsen made his way back to the hole. The edges were still hot and jagged, so he had to be careful not to tear his EVA suit. A dark hole greeted him, with only dim emergency lights illuminating small pools in the cargo hold. It looked a long way down, but fortunately the gravity in this area wasn't anywhere near 1G. Thomsen leapt from the hole and landed on bended knee on the floor of the hold. Taking a few big steps to get used to the gravity, he scuttled away to the nearest cover. Back at the hole, torchlight could be seen. The repair crew hadn't wasted any time. After a few minutes, the hold was closed over and he was sealed in.

Thomsen swallowed. This had been the part of the plan he'd been uncomfortable with. He wasn't entirely sure whether he could get out of the hold, and the EVA suits would only support him for half-a-day, at best.

Getting a hold of himself, Thomsen switched on his lights and began exploring. In the visible spectrum, their helmet light only gave off a weak glow. Behind the goggles, however, it became a brilliant illuminating beam. He started to reconnoitre.

Half an hour later, he returned to the point he had begun and sat down. His head was spinning. The equipment he'd seen was astonishing. He hadn't seen anything like it since his tour of the Propulsion Labs as a Cadet. The massive coils and generators looked made him feel like he'd been miniaturised and put into the ship of a giant. A factory plate on one of the chambers had revealed that it had been manufactured in the Military Workshops on Eta Cassiopeia, but Thomsen didn't need to see that to know that this was some serious Military Hardware. In fact, he had a sinking feeling that this was perhaps *the* Military Hardware. The Huge Plasma Accelerator, in fact. And Mosser had it and it appeared to be in full working order. He had to destroy it. But where to start on something this

size? Thomsen caught a flicker of light in his peripheral vision. A viewscreen on a nearby wall had sprung into life. Thomsen walked over and looked at the screen curiously. Maybe it was a crew announcement.

A test pattern faded to reveal a black background. Text suddenly appeared on the screen.

DON'T LOOK NOW

What? Thomsen scrunched up his brow at the cryptic message. The screen went black again.

BUT YOU'RE IN A SHITLOAD OF TROUBLE.

Thomsen didn't hesitate, but ran towards the nearest patch of shadow. But suddenly there was no shadow, as all the lights in the hold came on full, and what had been a shadowy forest became a bright, glaring plain. Two men ran towards Thomsen, carrying clubs. Enough to beat him unconscious, but not to breach the EVA suit. Thomsen held his arms out in a gesture of surrender. The two figures before him paused. Then one of them drove the end of his club into his stomach. Thomsen tried not to vomit, as he could easily suffocate if his faceplate filled up. He felt himself being bundled into what felt like a bag and begin to be dragged off.

In the darkness inside the bag, Thomsen wondered whether the clubs meant that they were meant to be captured alive, or whether it was just because they didn't want to damage any equipment. He didn't bother to struggle, as all that would invite was another beating, which might rupture his EVA suit. He felt himself dragged for five minutes or so, and none too gently. He was then lifted up for a moment, which he assumed was over the rim of an airlock. This assumption was proved correct as he felt atmospheric pressure build on the outside of the bag. He was then dragged out for a further ten to twenty minutes along spaceship corridors. Then, he felt himself lifted. He had a moment's warning before the mouth of the bag was opened and he found himself unceremoniously dumped out of it. The impact took the wind out of him, and he didn't bother to resist as two pairs of hands cracked his helmet seals and wrenched it from his head.

A spotlight was shining full in Thomsen's face and he brought around a gloved hand to try and shield his eyes. All around him was dark. A large shadow moved into the beam and bent down menacingly towards him. In its hand was a bulbous pistol which appeared to be vibrating slightly, as if eager to shoot.

"I think I can guess your mission. Get onto Mosser's ship, find him and take him in for questioning... well... two out of three 'aint bad. But I think some questioning might be in order, anyway...later!"

The figure leaned forward and the pistol thudded into Thomsen's temple, depriving him of consciousness.

*

The two of us stared unblinkingly at each other. The shock had worn off, but there was one more thing we needed to do. It was a stupid question to ask, but someone had to ask it. I've never been afraid to *look* like an idiot, so.... "What does this Marcus guy want, anyway?"

"To be Emperor of course!" Catherine snapped. "The only question is how the hell using the HPA will get him there."

"Where is the *Azure Sunset* going?" I asked.

Catherine spent a minute or so looking up the files we'd downloaded from Preston's datapad.

"Achenar." She said, her voice puzzled.

"Achenar." I repeated. It confused me too. What were they planning to do? Aim it at the palace and blackmail the Emperor off the throne? No. That trick never works! The Emperor has about forgotten more about treachery than a whole armada of pirates will ever hope to know. Even Norman Mosser was a naïve farmhand by comparison. It would have to be a bit more subtle. Of course "subtle" and "Huge Plasma Accelerator" were hard to string together into a coherent sentence.

"So what's in Achenar that would help Marcus become Emperor?" I asked.

"The question is more," Catherine said, in ominous tones. "what obstacle is he going to remove that's currently stopping him from becoming Emperor?"

"Not... the current Emperor?" I said, shivering involuntarily. Whatever criticisms you had of the Empire, Duval was still the most powerful man in the universe.

"I doubt it. I imagine the Crown Prince would have something to say about someone who murdered his father and wanted his throne." Catherine pointed out practically. "Besides, if this portrait is correct, Marcus would have to fight through quite a few of his siblings to claim the crown. The Emperor names his successor, but it would be bloody unusual to name a bastard over his legitimate Heir."

I felt a tickling inside my head, as if something had blown softly over my exposed brain.

"Not if the legitimate heir was dead." I said.

Catherine paused a moment. "Close." She murmured. "But... you're on the right track, but I don't think they want to kill him. Just because they've got a HPA doesn't mean that they'd definitely be able to kill the Crown Prince. The security around the Prince would be incredible. But... you don't need to kill him to remove him from the succession."

"Sounds a pretty effective way to me." I commented.

Catherine made a clicking sound with her tongue. "Stop thinking like a bounty hunter and try thinking like a politician. You don't have to assassinate your rival to eliminate him from the race."

"You embarrass him?" I said, remembering the rather vicious local politics back on my home planet. Interstellar diplomatic warfare is nothing when you've got a divided local council arguing about a toilet block.

"Exactly. And the Crown Prince is currently- "

"Shit, the convoy." I said. It was like watching a shattered window fly back into place, time reversed, the long jagged shards fitting neatly into each other and smoothly liquefying into a clear unbroken pane of glass. And through it, all was clear. "But... how many ships could he destroy before he had to Hyperspace out of there... the convoy... a HPA would chew through LRC's pretty quickly but..."

All through saying this, I was getting up and moving quickly over to the pilot's seat. Sitting down, my hands flew over the controls, performing preflight checks. We had enough fuel to get us to Achenar, and the two shiny new NN500 missiles that nestled beneath the ship were checked and primed. We wouldn't beat the LRC to Achenar, but LRCs are even slower moving through a system than they are in moving through Witchspace. With a little luck, our Constrictor could still win the race to Capitol.

"... not quickly enough. Come on, sit down. I gotta ask for clearance and I need you in the hot-seat."

"But the convoy's not the only target in the system. There's also - "

"DE-013 requesting permission to depart. Pilot and co-pilot both seated and ready"

"- where they've stockpiled all the narcotics before loading. The main space station above Capitol, Fort Donald. If I wanted to totally sabotage the mission and humiliate the Prince, that'd be my target.

I paused in the midst of the startup sequence, my fingers poised above the panel. I stared at Catherine in horror.

"How many people would usually be on that station?"

"Usually, about five thousand. But given the convoy, there would be closer to twenty." Catherine's voice was flat, but I saw anger sparkle in her eyes.

We didn't speak for a time. Grimly, I fired up the Constrictor and piloted it out into space. I took us about three hundred K from the station and brought our velocity down to zero. Blank with anger and disgust, I stared at the screen for a minute or two.

"Red..." Catherine began, but I made a soft shhh sound.

I wriggled out of my shock webbing and stood up.

"Program the Witchspace Governor for the quickest route to Achenar. Stay here, no matter what you hear. Bec and I need to have a few words."

I walked over to the spare cabin door and tried the handle. Unsurprisingly, it was locked. I stood before the door for a moment, working myself up.

My first kick only made the door shiver on its hinges. The second snapped the cheap-arse lock we'd bought in Beta Hydri and the door slammed inwards. Warned by my first assault, Bec was already on her feet. She looked like shit, with unkempt hair and dishevelled clothes. Sulking is NOT sexy, and I've always been surprised by those who find it so. She was also pointing a gun at me and had a very determined, angry expression on her face. Now THAT is sexy.

"Bust down the door, why don't you? Oh, I forgot, you did! Now get out!" she snarled.

"We've found the target for the HPA." I said, with soft sibilant menace. I was waaay past anger now, in that twilight zone where you're on top of a black plateau on an airless planet.

"Oh congratulations, well you and spy-girl can go off and save the universe now. Piss off." Bec gestured menacingly with the pistol. I wasn't worried. She wouldn't use it on me. Not yet.

"It's a space station. A lot of people are going to die." I said, keeping my painfully reasonable demeanour despite Bec's attitude.

"Off you go. Go save them." she snarled.

"Quite probably people you'll know. It's in Achenar. Fort Donalds."

"You -" Bec began a hot retort, but then her brain took in what my mouth was saying. As I watched, her angrily intent eyes went round with shock. She'd always seen the HPA affair as a jolly lark at best, a horrible chore at worst. But she'd never seen it as something which could touch her personally. The pistol dropped to the ground. A tiny part of me gave a massive gasp of relief. The rest of me was still bent to the task. "Fort Donalds?" I continued relentlessly. I couldn't give her time to organise an argument. "Who goes there? It's an important trade centre. Does your mother go there on business? Your father? Both. How often are they there? The convoy's leaving soon. It's an important social occasion... what chance is there that they -"

"My brother, OK? My brother works there, he has an office. My parents visit him all the time." Bec shouted at me. The anger had returned, but this time it wasn't directed at me. It was directed at the cruelty of an infinite universe, boxing her into this a very finite set of options. Be dragged back into duty, and responsibility, or lose people she cared about. Her face hardened.

Bec charged forward, and I stepped aside. She stormed past, out into the main cabin. She didn't look to either side, but walked deliberately over to the pilot's chair. *Her* pilot's chair. Beside her, Catherine watched apprehensively.

"Voice command - Load Pilot preferences: Bec."

The computer bleeped in compliance. In front of Bec, the screens cleared and reformed into a far more familiar layout of screens and controls. I raised my eyebrows at Catherine. Catching my drift, she silently vacated the co-pilot's seat and scurried back to her Intelligence station in the corner of the cabin. I quietly strapped myself into the vacated seat. Next to me, Bec was re-familiarising herself with the ship.

"The Governor's already programmed for the first jump." I said carefully. At my words, Bec turned to me.

"Red. It's over. As soon as this is finished, we're finished." Bec spoke emotionlessly. She then closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. Without looking, her hand stabbed out and engaged the Hyperspace control. Her eyes opened again, and they were clear of anger. She even directed a sad smile my way and then her face went back to the viewscreen. Normal space soon swam back into view. It was a halfway point, as we hadn't been able to do the single jump to Achenar.

Bec turned to the Witchspace Governor and reprogrammed it quickly. Watching her was painful, every quick and expert movement reminded me of what a team we'd been, what friends we'd been. This, apparently, was all over now. This would be our last adventure together. There was so much I needed to say to her, but this wasn't the time. Whether there would ever be a better time weighed on my mind. Bec engaged the Hyperspace control again, and Witchspace filled the forward view. For a long, long time there was silence. I shot furtive looks at Bec, who seemed to be holding back intense emotion. Bec's not good at hiding her feelings. The most accurate read I could get on her was... grief.

"Bec, I..." I began. On cue, we re-entered normal space. Right on time to interrupt. We were here. Achenar. I tried again. "Look, Bec..."

The proximity alert sounded, the wailing siren shattering any further attempts.

“Bogeys!” I reported automatically. Sentiment and survival can co-exist, but not at the same time. Instincts took over. I glanced at the board and my stomach did a queasy roll. There was an awfully familiar sight on the scanner. Multiple returns, with a very large and very well-equipped ship in the middle of the formation. “Incoming message.” I continued, putting it through the speaker.

“You rotters are certainly predictable. I’m so glad you were able to make this appointment. Your next meeting, with the devil, is being scheduled as we speak.”

Preston! Again with three accompanying Osprey Xs, this time there would be no friendly saviour coming to our aid. This time, Preston had no need to hold back with the awesome firepower on board his Imperial Explorer.

There was the warmth of flesh on my hand, Bec patting it comfortingly. I turned to her, confused.

“Don’t worry, Red. If there’s one character trait I’ve picked up from you, it’s your violent aversion to dying.”

To catch him in Achenar...

[A bounty hunter]

The hyperspace exit cloud pulsated with increasing intensity before them.

In the darkness of Achenar system space floated two Asps. They belonged to one of Zaonce's most respected bounty hunters, a hard-bitten man named Norman Binks. His assembled team numbered four including himself. Binks prided himself over the military precision of his missions. His team were hand-picked and discipline was strict. It was what enabled him to get contracts.

He never failed. He may occasionally have been late, but he and his team never failed to find their target. He also made a point of playing clean. He made the best effort to take out only the target, and no one else (unless they too had a criminal record and some money could be had).

He had finally caught up with his latest target, and gave his final briefing.

"Greetings gentlemen. This is our final briefing for the mission. The four KL-760 mines have been laid in the most likely exit vector from the hyperspace cloud. The plan is that the mines will disable the target's ship. Our target has given us an extra complication. When he left Riedquat, he did not do so in his own ship, but boarded a Harris fighter along with a female. This female is clean as far as we can tell, and that's why we can't just destroy the ship."

Binks paused for a moment.

"We also suspect that the female has an involvement with the Federal Naval Intelligence Bureau, but we can't be sure. We must ensure she remains unharmed. Team A, comprising of Maloney and myself will board the ship by forcing open the conventional entry hatch. Team B will cut through the upper hull with a thermic lance. It is important that we all wear pressure suits as our target is likely to depressurize the ship to cause us inconvenience. A word of warning - the target is an accomplished marksman and all precautions must be taken as he is likely to put up a fight. His marksmanship skills were acquired in the Guild, and it's what has ultimately put six contracts on his head worth in total over 120,000 credits. Any questions?"

Frankston, on the other Asp spoke up. "How do we tell them apart? They'll be wearing pressure suits too, presumably."

"The target is ten centimeters taller than his companion", Binks replied. "If you see them together, shoot the tall one. If they are not together, capture, identify, and if it is our target, shoot."

Jones was the next to speak up. "Can you show us a photograph of the target one last time to refresh our memories?"

Binks obliged, and brought up an image on the ship's computer. It showed a young man, with short cropped hair, who looked slightly malnourished. His distinctive eyes made it obvious he was from the planet Nirvana in the Phekda system. The photograph was from a press article about his involvement with a family member's criminal case in Barnard's Star.

"Well, if there's no more questions, his ship is due in fifteen minutes. Make one last equipment check and man your stations."

The bridges of the two Asps were a hive of last minute checklists and activities. The four bounty hunters were suited up, and armed with the Lance and Ferman LF-8 light assault rifle. Ironically, it was this exact model of rifle that the target favoured during the height of his career as an assassin. Not particularly powerful, but light and compact, and extremely accurate in the right hands. It was just the weapon you needed to storm a small ship.

The crew settled down at their stations, and watched the timer count down the last minute on the hyperspace entry cloud they were watching. A line of four mines was laid out in front of the cloud - the mines designed not to destroy the ship, but kill its engine and render it ineffective.

Exactly on cue, the ship emerged, and slammed into the four mines. It was all going as planned. Binks checked the target ship with the radar mapper. Its prime mover was indeed destroyed. The ship was dead in space.

"Target ship disabled, board immediately", Binks ordered curtly over the comm. The two Asps closed on the hapless Harris fighter like a spider scuttling towards its hapless prey, ensnared in the web. Both ships grappled the Harris, and attached with their docking clamps...moments later, Binks and Jones were on board.

It was all going rather easily. Frankston and May from the other Asp had quickly cut their way into the undefended Harris Fighter's hull. Both teams moved swiftly through the equipment racks and towards the ship's living quarters. All four carefully laid themselves against the wall, sidling towards the cabin entrance, expecting the shooting to break out any moment. Frankston adjusted his weapon, and shot off the door lock, and cautiously opened the door with the muzzle of his rifle...

Binks made a hand-signal to the others to indicate he'd go in first, alone. He slid carefully along the wall, and into the main living area. It seemed to be deserted. Binks tried to silence his breathing, which sounded deafening in the confines of his pressure suit helmet. He waved to the others to follow him.

Jones saw the movement above them first. Suddenly, a figure wearing a pressure suit crashed out from the ceiling! The person was armed with nothing more than a baton, with which he mercilessly beat Binks's helmet. Binks reeled under the blows and tried to escape. The last thing he wanted was his pressure suit helmet to split open. Suddenly, another figure burst in from the bridge, and shot at Jones with a plasma rifle! The shot was wide, and blew a neat hole in the wall only inches from Frankston.

Binks managed to struggle away. The target needed to be killed quickly - but under the reflective visors of the pressure suits, it was impossible to tell which one was the man they wanted dead, and which was the woman that they had to avoid killing.

Then the target made a fatal mistake.

He stood close to his female companion.

"Ten centimeters", thought Binks, seeing Frankston raise his rifle. Frankston fired, and hit the target right in the chest. Jones followed up with a brief fusillade from his rifle. The target exploded as the plasma rounds tore into his body. His upper body was thrown across the living quarters, and his lower body was obliterated...

His female companion quickly surrendered.

*

Marsha McLeary pushed the door open. Mack Winston was sitting on the floor in the corner of his cabin, where Marsha had kept him locked up during the journey. He didn't look particularly pleased to see her.

"I've seen an odd energy spike on the scanner," she said. "I'd like your opinion."

"Well perhaps if you'd like my opinion you ought to not keep me like a prisoner on a slave transport, hmm?" Mack said, looking up at Marsha. Despite her treatment of him, he found her figure silhouetted in the doorway to the cabin strangely attractive.

"For god's sake Winston, stop sulking. You've got six contracts on your head worth 120,000 credits to some bounty hunter, and I'm going to get all of that ...removed... once you've lead me to Mosser. I think it's in your interests to help me out if you want to stay alive. Or shall I just turn you over to the Zaonce authorities and be done with it. I believe they were going to execute you?"

Winston reluctantly got to his feet, muttering darkly under his breath. Mc. Leary caught the sound of a word that sounded like "itch". She decided to ignore it.

"Stop", she said, and checked Winston for weapons.

"Look, where am I going to get weapons from?" he grumbled. "You took them all off me. And they cost 850 credits!" "I'm not taking any chances with you. Now come on"

They went towards the bridge.

"Do you think that's anything to do with Mosser?" she asked, as they entered the bridge. Winston looked at the sensor logs and shrugged.

"Looks like some poor bastard's been mined. Common assassination technique. Compute the exit vector of your target ship, lay out a few mines, ship exits, bish bash bosh bang, collect ten thousand credits," replied Winston in a bored manner. "Not exactly Mosser's style. You should know that," he added acidly, scowling at Mc. Leary. "Zoom in, let's see what poor bugger's got it in the neck this time," he added.

McLeary operated the controls of the sensor array, bringing the melee into view.

"Ah, a Harris fighter, just like ours. Two Asps as well. Looks like they boarded the Harris. Perhaps it was pirates, but it looks a bit sophisticated for pirates," Winston said.

"Why wasn't the ship destroyed?"

Mack shrugged. "Don't know. Don't particularly care. Probably pirates trying to make sure all the cargo survived." He paused briefly. "If they boarded my ship they'd all be dead by now," he added matter-of-factly.

"OK, well, we're done for now. I shall send for you again when you're needed," McLeary said brightly.

"If you think you're going to lock me in that cabin again, you can go to hell," Winston growled.

Mc. Leary swung her seat back, and quickly set the ship to silent running. There was an LRC to catch up with, and she didn't want their Harris to be seen.

"You know, you're really sexy when you're angry," replied McLeary, with a broad smile.

Winston snorted.

"You won't be thinking that with that fireaxe buried in your skull," he thought to himself bitterly, eyeing the emergency supplies cabinet as she frogmarched him back to his cabin...

*

Frankston had repressurised the stricken Harris fighter. Binks sighed, and tried to let the strain of the last tumultuous few minutes drain from him. He'd rather kill his targets from the bridge of his Asp, not personal like this - but sometimes, it was necessary. And worth it when 120 grand was in the offing.

He removed his helmet and felt the impression made in it from the beating it had received a few minutes earlier. He set the helmet down, and moved over to the decapitated corpse of his target, and removed his helmet too.

Suddenly, he got the cold tinglies - that creeping sensation when you know you've just done something horribly wrong...

Instead of looking at the face of a young, dead Phekdan, he was looking at the face of a middle aged, dead bearded man, with the name "FAGAN" stamped into the metal dogtag around his neck.

"Frankston, go to the bridge and do a local scan," Binks demanded in a brittle voice.

Silently, Frankston complied. He came back half a minute later.

"Nothing more than another Harris fighter and a long range cruiser".

Frankston moved over to the corpse on the floor. "Oh no," he said, seeing what was making Binks so worked up. "I hope this man has a bounty on his head, or we'll have one on ours..."

"Yes. We got the wrong bloody Harris, didn't we!"

The Interrogation

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens, Winston]

Thomsen felt the chair he was tied to begin to topple over with the force of the blow. He braced himself for the second impact, but hands caught the chair and returned it to the upright position. Thomsen would almost have preferred it to fall, as he would have been harder to hit on the ground. On second thoughts, though, they would still have been able to kick him. No, better to be beaten when seated than kicked when prone. Thomsen spat out a tooth and refocused on the intimidating figure in front of him. Mosser didn't seem the squeamish type and seemed to relish a hands-on style of leadership. More accurately, fist-on.

The body of Haynes was lying at the feet of the chair. Norman had already interrogated him thoroughly, to judge from the bruising, and had blown his head off in front of Thomsen just to make a point. Thomsen hadn't flinched. He'd liked Haynes, but there was no use grieving over a man who was dead already.

"How many... times do I have to tell you... we spotted you testing the weapon and boarded your ship at Ackdati..."

"You see," said Mosser, pulling up a chair made of recycled duralium tubing. "That's where I stop believing a word you said. We misjumped from the system we tested the HPA in. There's no way you could have followed us."

Thomsen ground his remaining teeth. He wasn't about to admit that the Alliance now had equipment capable of tracking ships through a misjump. Unfortunately, the only option this left him with was to lie unconvincingly.

"We were part of a large group. We split up to search the surrounding systems. We just lucked out when we got to Ackdati. That's all."

Norman gave him a cold, dead stare that appeared to lack all humanity, shook his head and said in a quiet voice 'No.'

Thomsen had a moment of clarity. Mosser was not going to let him go or ransom him. He was going to be killed, his body most likely dumped in space. What Thomsen was bargaining with now, was the manner of his dying.

"Don't lie to me, you fool. You had information. Someone on the inside, wasn't it?" Mosser was now in his face, all humour gone, his voice dropped to a soft hiss, his eyes boring into Thomsen's. Thomsen was a hardened veteran, so he stared right back. Norman's eyes changed again to a look of sickening decadence and self-gratification. Norman leaned further forward and ran his tongue up Thomsen's cheek. Disgusted, the prisoner almost shuddered at this, but controlled himself. Norman retreated a bit, looked thoughtful and then spat, his saliva striking Thomsen on the forehead. Thomsen flinched at the assault, even more than he had at the beating.

"You taste disgusting, you know." Norman commented, wiping his mouth and standing up.

Thomsen felt the saliva roll down his eyelid, revolted.

"Now *who* told you... *who* betrayed me... *who* is the maggot I'll have to kill?" Norman resumed the less subtle torture, his fist striking Thomsen expertly again and again, designed to cause minimum injury with maximum pain. Thomsen willed himself into unconsciousness, but Norman seemed aware of his efforts and resorted to slapping.

"Norman." came a voice from the shadows. "There are other, even more important questions."

Norman paused mid strike. His face was red from exertion.

"Like what?" he sneered.

Marcus stepped forward into the pool of light. His expression was mild, but his brow appeared slightly tight, indicating his dislike of the scene before him. To Thomsen, he almost appeared a Dark Angel of either sweet death or cursed damnation. One thing was certain, he was a player. Not many people spoke to Norman like that and lived more than ten seconds.

Marcus stepped past Norman, who (to Thomsen's surprise) moved aside and let him through to the prisoner. Marcus reached out and took the prisoner's chin. His hand was warm and his grip gentle. Thomsen felt the blood ooze from his face onto the other man's fingers and his heavy, ornate bracelet.

Oh, thought Thomsen wearily, *the good cop's turn*.

"I would far prefer to end your pain." Marcus said evenly. His voice was reasonable, even sympathetic, but there were enough edges of hardness to indicate the reality of the situation. "Norman wants to know how you found us. So do I. I also want you to tell us who you informed about us. It doesn't really matter at this stage, but we'd like to know who will challenge us down the stretch. Who knows, we could even come to an arrangement... you've got family haven't you? I can tell you're a family man. You would *like* to see them again."

Thomsen felt himself starting to soften. The man's voice was insidious! He fought to control himself. Salvation came in the sight of the still-tense Norman Mosser over Marcus' shoulder. The man was paranoid, which wasn't surprising when everyone was after you. If Thomsen could play this right, he might be able to...

"We... we sent a confirmation to the AJN, but they never replied... maybe they -" Thomsen broke off and tried to look nervous. He saw something spark in Norman's eyes.

"Maybe they what?" Mosser strode forward, shouldering Marcus aside. "And *confirmation*? They know about us, don't they? They've known for some time!"

"Norman, please..." Marcus said mildly, using a cloth to wipe the blood from his hands.

"Stay OUT of this, Marcus. You two, get out of here." Norman gestured to the two guards / assistant-torturers to leave. They looked like they were about to protest, but a look at Norman's face dissuaded them. They scurried, the door clanging shut behind them. There was a silence while the echoes died away off the metallic walls. Norman, Marcus and Thomsen were alone together.

"Now, how long have they known you *worm*!" Norman snapped a blow at Thomsen, opening a cut above his eyes. Back to Bad Cop's turn.

"I don't know... my rank isn't high enough in the Project -" Thomsen tried to put a horrified expression on his face for his own indiscretion. His creativity was working overtime now, it would probably be his last performance, so why not?

"Project?" Norman leapt on the word.

"He's side tracking us!" Marcus replied in a carefully bored voice. He made a point of sitting down in recycled chair and crossing his arms. Norman was undeterred, to Thomsen's relief. He was almost at the pitch of anger that was required. He surreptitiously spat, to clear his mouth of blood.

"I... it's an anti-piracy project which involves -" Thomsen tried the obvious lie and was cut off by Norman stepping forward menacingly, over the dead body in front of Thomsen's chair. There was a crunch as Norman's duralium capped boots crushed one of Haynes' hands. Fortunately, he was far too dead to feel it.

"Lie to me again and you'll be crucified next to the reactor. Radiation poisoning's a nasty way to die, especially without every second finger and toe... *and* carrion fly eggs implanted in the wounds. Do you know how long it takes carrion fly maggots to devour your hands?" Norman said pleasantly. The rhetorical question was chilling, because Thomsen knew he was capable of finding out the answer. Then he remembered a footnote in Norman's AJN file. His eyes widened. Norman caught his gaze with eyes that were entirely dead. He leaned in closer and whispered delicately in Thomsen's ear. "I know. The agony is so intense that all you want to do is scream. But your vocal chords give up and all you can manage is an impotent hiss. If you are lucky and we don't nail you down properly, your convulsions will snap your spine. If you aren't, you are stuck with the relentless gnawing, gnawing, gnawing as the flesh is stripped from your arms and legs until the radiation delicately slow roasts your brain. Just before the end though, the pain stops and you get a brief respite before death. Unless we decide to heal you and run you through it again"

Norman smiled now, and Thomsen had a chilling insight into the murderous madman that lay hidden below Norman's usually light demeanour.

"I don't know much." Thomsen exaggerated. He knew absolutely nothing, in truth. "Only that the plan won't work, and that a scapegoat has been selected."

"Now he's lying outright." warned Marcus, with a hint of steel in his voice. In response, Norman whirled and threw an epithet so foul at Marcus that even HIS eyebrows raised. Anger slowly began to infuse his features, like a spill slowly soaking into a sponge.

"A scapegoat? Oh, three guesses who that would be? And if you said 'The Heir' then go to the back of the class."

'The Heir'? Thomsen wondered what that was about.

Violence was in the air, now. With only Marcus and Norman in the room, things could get interesting. Thomsen didn't plan to leave his seat, regardless of the fact he was tied there.

"Norman, we've come so far. Let's not fall out now, over nothing!" Marcus moved closer to the smaller man, his manner solicitous and comradely. Thomsen watched Norman grow tense, and shift his weight to the balls of his feet.

"Oh no!" sneered Norman, "you at least have to wait until the strike succeeds, so you can hand me over to the Imps. The perfect scenario. Your brother loses his grip on the throne, you arrive back on Achenar looking like a hero, having killed and returned the body of one N. Mosser, responsible for the vicious attack on Fort Donalds! Oh VERY clever." Norman's hand began to twitch, sneaking towards the massive handgun holstered on his hip. Thomsen read 'Deathwrecker' on the side. The radiation leakage on those things was said to be astronomical. Mosser probably died so regularly that none of his clones really had any time to develop side effects.

"Norman. Please, for once can we TRY not to kill each other?" Marcus said, an impish smile drifting across his face, his bearded features looking strangely innocent. It was an excellent act, which failed miserably.

Norman roared and leapt at Marcus, who nimbly danced aside. He came to a stop a few metres away, in a combat crouch. Norman directed a dirty look at his erstwhile partner, and drew a wicked looking knife from a pocket in his shipsuit. Marcus looked concerned at this, but undid the bracelet around his wrist and shook it. To Thomsen's surprise, the length of chain doubled, and tiny blades extruded from the side of the last few links. It was a whipknife, which was an extraordinarily rare piece of personal armament. Few were able to use it without slicing off their own knuckles. Thomsen perked up. This might turn into quite a show.

"Norman, could you just -" Marcus leapt forward, scything a blow at Norman's hamstrings. Norman shimmied sideways, kicking at Marcus' head. Norman caught him a glancing blow on the shoulder, and Marcus rolled to one side, out of reach. He remained on one knee, moving one arm around to test its movement. From the wince that passed over his face, Thomsen assumed he had very little.

"Could you just *die*?" Norman countered, pressing his advantage. In response, Marcus lashed the whip straight upwards, into Norman's path. Norman staggered back, clutching his face. He recovered in time to counter Marcus' follow through leap with a clumsy cross-bladed slash. Marcus dodged the blow, and returned to the ready position. Norman removed his hand and Thomsen saw bone gleaming under the downlights. Having said that, it was a minor, if bloody injury. Norman gave a quick laugh and returned to the attack, the point of his knife jabbing at Marcus' eyes.

In response, Marcus wove a net of metal with the whipknife forcing Norman to withdraw the attack. The two circled each other warily. Both made a couple of feints, that their opponent studiously ignored. Then Norman surged forward, free hand chopping at Marcus' neck. Marcus contemptuously batted the blow aside and was almost fatally surprised as Norman dropped the blade in his other hand and grabbed Marcus' whipknife. The blades must have hurt like hell as they dug into his hand, but Norman seemed impervious, jerking Marcus off balance while his knee sped to Marcus' stomach. But Marcus accepted the momentum of Norman's throw and spun around like a ballroom dancer on the end of Norman's arm. For a moment, the two of them stood at either end of the whipknife, eyeing each other. Then Norman released the whipknife and drew back his bloodied hand, wincing.

"Looks nasty." Marcus observed, "You might have sliced a tendon, I'd get it seen to." He finished helpfully, twirling the whipknife.

Norman didn't respond, but bend down to pick up the dagger in his good hand. His face took on a mean expression, with the rivulets of blood from the forehead wound making crazy patterns down his face. He attacked Marcus, using both the knife and both feet, high kicks skimming Marcus' nose. Marcus side-stepped the move, snapping his weapon at Norman's feet as they flashed at eye level. He struck, but the chain bounced harmlessly off the heavy boots. Norman's injured hand swung around, delivering a stinging backhander that staggered Marcus. He stepped backwards, and shook his head, to clear it. Norman paused to laugh maniacally. Marcus' expression changed to one of anger, he weighed the whipknife in his hand then threw it at his opponent. Norman's laughter cut off abruptly as the weapon spun towards him. Faster than Marcus dreamed possible, Norman's injured hand shot out to catch the whipknife, hilt end first. Marcus looked on in frank astonishment.

Norman grinned. "Neural implants. Speed and pain suppression. After the first few clones, I began a course of self-improvement. You, however, are just an unimproved throwback from a bloodline that did its best work over a century ago."

Norman tossed aside Marcus' weapon as being too hard to use and changed the grip on the knife. Marcus looked around for a weapon. There were none, in the bare chamber. Do or die. He charged at Norman, knowing that every one of the man's limbs was a lethal weapon in its own right; forget the knife!

Thomsen watched in astonishment. He'd only ever seen fights like this in Dreamware, a contest of blow and counter, thrust and block. Two masters of hand-to-hand combat, primed to kill. The two's injuries cancelled each other out, Marcus not having proper movement in his right shoulder, Norman's left hand being nearly-useless. Marcus had to prioritise his defence, however, knowing that the knife in Norman's hand could end the fight with a single blow.

The door clanged open, flooding the room with light from the corridor. Marcus' attention wavered for a bare second, which was all Norman required. Marcus might have deflected the blow, but his right arm was moving slower because of the shoulder injury, and only grazed Norman's arm as he drove the knife into Marcus' stomach. It was not a fatal injury, but the follow through would be. Marcus fell backwards and crumpled to the floor with a groan. His eyes were wide with shock.

Norman's glee was demonic from behind his mask of blood. Finally!

"Don't worry about it." He said to whoever it was who'd entered, "I'll look after the Heir. I'll look after him all right!"

"Norman?" came the polite enquiry from behind. Annoyed, Norman turned his head. Dreyfus.

Norman spun around, blade flashing, while a punch flew from the other direction. The punch seemed quite gentle to Thomsen, but the placement was phenomenal, connecting with Norman's chin, sending his head spinning back in the opposite direction to the way his body was turning. The human spine wasn't designed with that much flexibility in mind. There was an audible crack and Norman's limbs all went floppy. Before his lifeless body could slump to the floor, a hand reached down and removed Norman's Deathwrecker from its holster, and was followed by a kick which sent the body flying across the room and into the far wall.

"Marcus!" Dreyfus hurried over to his friend, barely able to suppress his panic. His most basic directive was to protect the Imperial Family, and if Norman had landed a killing blow...

"I... will live, my friend. Ahhhh..." Marcus hissed as Dreyfus probed the wound. "Norman was good, but he would have liked to see me suffer far too much to kill me outright."

"Thanks for the compliment!" came the sneering voice from behind. Dreyfus turned to find Norman covering the two of them with a smaller concealable version of the Deathwrecker from the opposite wall, well out of reach. His neck still appeared to be bent unnaturally, but the cunning eyes staring out at them seemed very much alive.

"Self-improvement?" Marcus laughed weakly, then fell back, unconscious.

"Reinforced spinal column and redundant nerve conduits. The repair bill for this will be murder, but what the hell... murder is my stock in trade. Goodbye, guys." Norman's smoothly fanned the Deathwrecker, the safety snapping off. The weapon softly screamed as it worked its way to killing mode. He carefully aimed it at the crouching Dreyfus. Business before pleasure. The charge time from safety-mode was 2.002 seconds, according to the manual and he felt far enough away to feel pretty confident. Norman blinked from a loud clang, and when he opened his eyes, was shocked to find Dreyfus' standing directly in front of him, and a dent in the metal wall where he was standing an instant before. Nothing human could move that fast! He tried to bring the small Deathwrecker round, but Dreyfus' iron grip was around his wrist.

The unassuming Dreyfus' gaze was calm and meditative as his hand improbably tightened further. Norman winced in pain as the pain-dampening effect of his Neural Implants neared capacity. Frantically he brought his wounded hand around to batter at Dreyfus. Dreyfus seemed not to care at the blows battered at face, chest and throat. Norman began to chop away at Dreyfus' trachea, the blows not even making him flinch. Blood began to drip down Norman's hand as the bones began to crack like dry spaghetti. Norman looked into Dreyfus face with sudden realisation.

"Call your android off, Marcus! Get this damn machine off me! MARCUS!"

"Shhh," Dreyfus said softly. "He's unconscious. Don't wake him."

Dreyfus slowly forced the mini Deathwrecker round, heedless of Norman's pain, until the red dot of the targeting laser rested in the middle of Norman's neck. Norman was in so much pain that he barely felt his wrist being broken. Norman tried to put a friendly, reasonable expression on his face.

"Dreyfus, surely we can come to some sort of arrangem -"

The loud retort of the small Deathwrecker rendered any reply superfluous. Thomsen winced. Norman's head and chest were gone, and a rosette of char had been burned into the wall and floor behind him. The wound had been cauterised cleanly, and there was no blood, but there were cooked bits of flesh spread out on the floor behind the body. A few wisps of smoke drifted up from the lungs, where the blast had leaked down to crisp his internals.

Dreyfus let the body fall to the floor, but relieved it of the small Deathwrecker. He turned to Thomsen and walked over to him.

"I'm very sorry for what I have to do."

"No problem." Thomsen said, unable to think of anything else to say.

Small hatches in the metallic walls opened and a small fleet of service robots came into the room, scuttling around and scanning the mess. Moving in unison, the cleaning robots began gathering the scraps into a pile for removal, and began polishing the floor. Other slightly larger repair robots gathered around the new holes in the floor, beeping at each other in surprise and making plans for fixing them up.

*

Marcus came to just as Dreyfus was elbowing the door shut. Dreyfus was carefully carrying him out of the torture room in one arm, while dutifully wielding the smaller Deathwrecker. The corridor was empty, its well-lit expanse stretching over a hundred metres either side. Dreyfus began to move him carefully in the direction of the quarters.

"Mosser?"

Dreyfus looked down at his master and smiled.

"Dead. You will be fine, though. We'll just get you to your stateroom and I'll fix you up. I'm sorry if I'm jostling you, but we need to move quickly."

"But... the body... the prisoner? What did you do with them?"

As if on cue, behind them came the sound of a loud explosion. The door of the torture room blew open with a gout of flame and the sprinklers on the roof began to drench the area. Dreyfus staggered, but soon regained his footing. He looked down at Marcus and shrugged ever-so-slightly. His thinning hair was beginning to plaster to the top of his head.

"Deathwreckers are notoriously dangerous weapons. I suppose Norman's must have overloaded."

Marcus found the strength to smile.

Cry Havoc

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens, Winston]

Bec's first instincts were accurate, she gunned the engines and sent us off on a crazy course, designed to end us up AWAY from the Imperial Explorer. On cue, the brilliant blue beam of the Explorer's Large Particle Accelerator sprayed from the front of the massive craft, seeking to contact us with its massive power. Even a fleeting exposure to the beam would strip our shields and destroy us in an instant. Up became down, port became starboard, we spun, dove, weaved, veered... anything in fact, to avoid a predictable path. Then the beam winked out, the temperature obviously having peaked and ceasing fire to allow the cooling systems to work.

"Very nice flying chaps... my commendations to Ms Chong. Perhaps one day you might even attempt to obtain your Pilot's License. I hear after the first twelve attempts, it's quite easy" came the snide voice over the comms. "Mr. Ravens, I see you're doing nothing... given your abilities as a combat pilot, that's probably the best course of action."

Bec muttered something unflattering and wiped her forehead with her hand. It was hard, physical work making so many course corrections and making so many complex manoeuvres in such a short space of time. If there had been any cobwebs in her technique stemming from her prolonged sulk, they were well and truly blown out now. And just as well.

"Here come the Ospreys." I said, as they streaked past the recharging Imp Explorer and charged at us. Preston could afford good pilots, and this batch were easily the equal of the three we'd faced on our first encounter. They turned crisply, and their firepower was concentrated into a small area, i.e. US! I scoped out the ships, but didn't lock on or fire our missiles. If we acted in haste, a crafty commander like Preston would have us bleeding and praying for mercy. Not that he'd give it in any case.

The formation tried to match our speed and keep us in their zone of fire, but Bec twisted us around that if they slowed down they would be looking down the barrel of our 2.2MW. For a moment, the three ships filled the front viewscreen, their lasers winking at us with deadly coquettish gazes. Then they were past us and out of our frame of vision, splitting off in spiralling patterns which split them apart so we couldn't return effective fire.

"Red... why didn't you fire at them?" Bec spared a very short glance at me to query my hesitancy.

"Just keep moving away from the Explorer!" I said, "that's the one we've really got to worry about. The only thing these three want to do is make us slow down enough that chuckles can catch up with us with the LPA. We were lucky, or he was just giving us enough rope. He's Deadly rated, he won't miss a second time if they herd us towards him."

Grim-faced, Bec complied, ignoring the re-forming Ospreys, and thumbed the overload lockout on the panel. The ship seemed to jerk forward as the thrust from the prime mover went past the manufacturer's design specifications and began accelerating us away from Capitol. Preston had cleverly placed himself directly in between Capitol and ourselves. We couldn't get there without going through him or by plotting a long course to circle around, which could easily delay us by days. It was designed to make us Hyperspace away in disgust or embark on a frontal attack.

"Shit." Catherine said, to no one in particular. "We need to get going back towards the centre of the system or Fort Donalds is as good as a couple of million tons of rubbish. I think we'll beat the *Azure Sunset* there, but I'd hate to be caught out here when *it* is approaching Fort Donalds. We need to finish this *now*."

I shrugged. We needed some sort of brilliant strategy. Married with brilliant tactics and brilliant luck, we had an excellent chance to miscalculate by a fraction and still be blown to shit by Preston. We continued on for another couple of minutes before the Ospreys caught up with us again. Once again, Bec refused to engage them, evading as best as she could while keeping us pointed generally away from Preston's Explorer. We took some hits, and some heavy bursts of fire depleted us to about seventy percent shields. They broke away, reformed and attacked. Fifty five percent. Again. Forty two percent.

On their next approach, I muttered quietly "Sod this!" and flicked off the laser's safety. Bec nodded at me and instead of us evading directed us right into their teeth, our Prime Mover still on overburn, but heading back towards them. Their lasers whined and our shields flared as they cut into us. But their fire was not as concentrated as it might have been, as they seemed somewhat startled that we weren't running like rabbits.

Primed by adrenaline and frustration, my initial burst swung wide across their bows, contacting one but doing little damage. Refining my rage, I focused my effort on the one that to my mind looked the shiniest and newest. There's still quite a bit of the teenage vandal in my psyche. More through luck than skill, I managed to slice off the edge of

one wing. The damaged Osprey broke formation. It wasn't a mortal wound, but would impair any further attempts at fancy manoeuvring. Then the other two were past us, out of our line of vision, looping back around to come at us again.

Bec brought the engines back to 95% thrust and cocked her head at me in question.

"Go for the wounded one?"

I shook my head. She knew the way my mind worked, and was merely eliminating that option from consideration. The damaged one would only become a risk to us if we were a sitting duck. I wasn't going to waste time on it, when we were really in danger from the other Ospreys and the Imp Explorer.

"Distance to the Explorer?" I called out to Catherine. Unable to help directly with the fight, she was hunched over the readouts, keeping tabs on all scanner contacts, analysing performance, combat habits and possible weak points.

"Three - eighty seconds until we're in range of their LPA. Don't stop to admire the scenery."

With a groan Bec pointed our nose back to a course directly away from the Explorer and disengaged the Prime Mover's safety again. The two undamaged Osprey Xs were still a fair bit faster than us, even with our engines bursting their reaction chambers, but they were more annoying than deadly. The primary threat was still Preston himself in his large, ponderous, almost invulnerable behemoth.

"Again." Bec muttered, as the two Ospreys swooped in on another pass. The top of the ship shuddered as their lasers cut into our shields. Our shields dropped to quarter strength. They were *very* good pilots. So was Bec. She snapped off the Prime Mover and thumbed the retros on full. On the bad side, that rocketed us back towards the advancing Preston. On the good side, the Osprey's attack pattern had been predicated on us steadily accelerating in mortal fear of their mothership. Our sudden slowdown had them at a disadvantage. Bec smoothly brought the attitude of the ship up to where I had a (brief) window of fire as they streaked past, their own retros flaring. I didn't miss, carving through metal, plastic and fuel tank. The one on the left shuddered a moment, flame bleeding from the jagged gash along its rear section. Then the remainder of its fuel ignited. The one on the right streaked past us, escaping doom for the moment. It was now in more danger from us than we were from it.

Instead of looping back for another attack, it zoomed ahead of us.

"Cunning bugger." I observed, "It wants us to chase it so we don't reach Capitol. Shall we ignore them?"

Bec nodded at me solemnly and brought our heading about 180 degrees on the X axis to head us straight back towards Achene's primary, closer towards the core. Yes. And closer to the Imp Explorer. On the Y axis, Bec aimed us about 45 degrees 'above' the Explorer.

"He's wise to us." Catherine reported from her station, "Preston's ceased forward acceleration and is bringing himself round on an intercept course. The Osprey trying to lure us away from Capitol has come around too. They'll catch us in a minute or so."

"Bugger that!" I muttered. Quickly I locked on to the Osprey and launched one of our two NN500s. I wasn't too concerned about conserving both of them for Preston. On something that size, with that many shield generators, the impact of the fearsome NN500 wouldn't even make the bastard spill his drink. The released missile engaged, engines firing, and plotted a long curve around until it pointed behind us at the pursuing ship. Incredulously, I watched as the pilot accelerated towards the missile, lasers firing. The cocky bastard was trying to shoot it down, in one of the most knucklehead bits of arrogance known to pilots. (Yes, I know I'd done it not a week earlier, but...) He was either cocky or desperate. Talk about fear of failure! (Well... possibly fear of failure and the ensuing punishment and torture from his boss)

"Owtch." I winced as I saw the cloud of gas recede in the rear scanner. It's never nice to watch someone fatally overestimate their piloting skills. That left us with only Preston to deal with.

I winced at the thought. Preston had a better than even chance of blowing the shit out of us. The LPA would need (by my estimation) about .01 seconds of contact with our ship to annihilate us. A pilot of Preston's rating wouldn't have too much difficulty in tagging us for that duration.

I looked over at Bec. As always, she was unruffled by the odds. For myself, I was sweating like a pig. I didn't want to die out here. Not without having at least a final leisurely drink with Bec. We really needed to talk. Her hands were off the controls (we were on a set course, not flying evasive patterns) and she had a thoughtful look on her face.

"Any ideas, Red?" she asked.

"Not enough variables to work with." I said unhappily. Space is nasty in these kinds of circumstances, as there aren't many natural features that can help even up the odds. "Can't go around, gotta go through. Where's the injured Osprey X?"

Catherine replied "Flying formation with the Imperial Explorer. Right now it's about as manoeuvrable a clunker, so that's about the only thing it can fly formation with."

"No chance of magically summoning an Elite-rated Asp with a fighter launcher this time?" I said sadly.

Although I was facing away from her, I could *feel* Catherine give me a look.

"Even if we weren't close to dying, I wouldn't laugh at that."

"Even though we are close to dying, I wouldn't expect you to."

"I've got an idea." Bec interrupted our maudlin attempts at humour. I looked at her and felt a surge of ... what... confidence? hope? pride? I could see the sparkle of mischief in her eyes. Usually, this meant that someone was about to feel extremely embarrassed. I hoped this time it would be our opponent. "We'll need to time it, though. Red... can you calculate missile speeds. I want you to fire a missile so that it contacts its target a second before we pass the Explorer."

I thought this was a bit of a dubious idea. One missile wouldn't make a dent in the Explorer's shields, OR distract Preston. He'd anticipate the impact and vaporise us without as much twitching his moustache. Regardless, I punched in the calculations. To my shame, my hands were shaking. I'd been close to death before, but never with this frightening degree of certainty to it. I slammed my fist against me head, once. Dammit, where was my bravado when I most needed it, when I most needed to distract myself when our chances were bleakest? I forced a grin onto my face. I felt like I'd jacked my face up with ship cranes.

"Got it. Given rates of divergence and all that jazz, we'd need it only about six seconds before we entered the kill zone. That's not a lot of time to change plan."

Bec leaned over my shoulder and made a correction. My eyebrows rose. This was certainly from left field.

"Oh... that target. Um... still six seconds, give or take point two five. Bec, is this actually a *good* plan? 'Cos if it's not, this is the time to tell me. You know... before we die."

"It's a good plan." Bec said, not even bothering to smile. Gallows humour goes only so far before it's a hindrance.

"Let's go then. We're in visual range." I flicked a few scanner settings and the Explorer popped up on the long range. I magnified and enhanced the image until it filled the screen. The tiny flare of the jets from the back of the ship was matched at the front by the barely visible glow of the Particle Accelerator's maw. I swallowed. Bec had been *so* eager to see one in action. The two lights bookended the darkened mass of the ship, groaning towards us like a harvester across fields.

"Anything to add, Catherine?"

"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

"Contact time thirty seconds."

"...is my shepherd, I shall not..."

"Approach pattern OK. Prime the missile, Red."

"...who maketh me lie down in green...."

"Twelve seconds. Shields at sixty eight, not that it matters... target locked and..."

"Back to 100% thrust... can't run at overload forever..."

"...be done, thy Kingdom come, in space, as it is..."

"Missile away! Preston's locked on...!"

"Here goes nothi-"

"Amen."

*

The missile spat from the mounting on our belly like a spitball from a straw, blasting ahead of us. I'd selected the 'dumb' mode on the missile. All speed, no tricky moves, no cunning. As we came within reach of the Imperial Explorer, a scintillating sapphire beam knifed out from the ship, joined by the far punier scalpel from the Osprey, huddling like a baby Plains Sloth beneath its mother. At first blazing wide, Preston's beam honed in on us with frightening rapidity. He was a Deadly rated pilot, in a custom-built Iron Ass and a gun that wouldn't have been out of place on a Cruiser. We were toast.

Then Bec's moment of genius came. As I'd predicted, Preston ignored the missile, not even bothering to fire his ECM. Just before the missile struck its target, Bec faked a climb, the jets flaring dramatically. Preston's aim anticipated the move, 'wobbling' as it sought to anticipate. Then, the missile struck the Osprey X nestling below the Explorer and detonated, rupturing the fuel tanks and instantly turning the small ship into a small but brilliant fireball. Bec ceased the climb, and raced to get beneath the Explorer's arc of fire. Having been half-fooled by Bec's feint, the larger ship wheeled back, only just keeping us within line-of-sight of the LPA's mounting. Only now they were turning into the expanding cloud of gas that had been its wingmate. I'm sure that if Preston has his time again, he would have instantly changed to instrument targeting, in which case he would have had us on toast. But the visual confusion and light of the explosion confused him briefly, and the LPA's beam winked out while the gas expanded to the point he could see through it. By this stage, we were less than a K from the Explorer, still within the cone of fire for its frontal weaponry. Preston began shooting again, tracking our flightpath. At this range, the LPA's beam was huge, pulsing like a river as it exploded from the huge mouth of the weapon.

With a wild and particularly triumphant whoop, Bec took the ship *underneath* the Explorer. For less than a second, the huge mass of the ship blocked out the light from Achenar's sun. Then we were out and our course was back towards Capitol. I punched up the rear view and saw the Imperial Explorer turning, every thruster blazing, vainly trying to pirouette around to catch our fleeing craft. But regardless of the quality of the pilot, physics and momentum can only be argued with, not contradicted. By the time they were in firing position, we were out of range. They couldn't catch us.

Catherine and I shucked out shock webbing and ran over to nearly crush Bec with our embraces. We showered her with compliments and slaps on the back. It had been the flying equivalent of putting your head in the Lion's mouth and accusing it of being vegetarian. Bec weathered this chorus of praise for a while, then wriggled her shoulders to get us off.

"We've still got a job to do, remember? One final task." she said sadly, her triumph dampened. The smiles on our faces flattened out. Mine almost turned upside down into a frown. I'd forgotten, for a moment, that Bec was leaving. For one brief, incandescent moment, I'd forgotten.

"Yes. We have." I said, trying to put a smile back on my face and recapture some good humour.

Catherine achieved this with a well placed splash of acid. "If I had one wish in this instant, it'd to be a fly on the wall of Preston's bridge right now!"

*

It was as if someone had died. It was likely someone was about to. The silence on the bridge seemed to block out all speech and thought. What made it worse was that the Viscount had taken over the helm and firing controls himself for the final approach. He was the only one responsible. Which was not the same thing as being the only one who could take the blame. The Constrictor was now well out of the range of the main armament.

Several of the crew shot furtive looks towards the Viscount. Those who had survived longest in his service kept their eyes forward on their stations. For his Lordship to take note of you in this circumstance was neither a good career move, nor a good life move.

The Weaponry Officer (who was new) raised his hand slowly. He had been a hard-bitten pirate when he'd joined the crew, but after only a few months service on the Viscount's ship, he was ready to turn merchant pacifist. The man put professional psychopaths to shame. Still, while he was here, he might as well be doing his job.

"My Lord, if we fire four of our NN500s now, we might at least slow them down enough to get close enough to -"

The Viscount languidly raised a hand, flicking it dismissively. The Weaponry Officer snapped his mouth shut and turned back to his station, his ears burning.

The Viscount leaned over the panel for his long glass of Thompsonsworld Sauvignon Blanc. He had decided that it was indeed a shit wine. But it was a shit wine with hints of blackcurrant. He was annoyed that the Constrictor had survived, but hadn't been particularly surprised. Though he hated to admit it, the bounty hunters were a potent team, despite their inexcusable lack of pedigree or proper manners. After all, the lower orders were good at survival. They had to be good at something, he supposed. But intelligence and breeding would win out in the end.

"Launch the Special Osprey X, would you old chap? I think that it will finish things a sight quicker than a few missiles, what?"

Looks were exchanged across the bridge. It was common knowledge that the Osprey X had been undergoing radical changes in the ship's dry dock. Rumour had run wild as to what the changes had been. When the selected pilot had come out of the confidential briefing, he had looked a combination of proud as punch and frightened as shit. He had volunteered nothing.

Like a pregnant beast giving birth, a small winged shape was expelled from the belly of the Imperial Explorer and came to a stop in front of its parent. No one dared speak. For nearly ten seconds, the universe seemed poised.

"What in damnation is that man doing?" Preston snapped, drumming his fingers on the panel. "I'll have him for Fencing Practice if he doesn't get moving."

The Communications Officer listened intently to his earpiece, then relayed it to his captain.

"My Lord, he's asking whether the ship was preflight-checked, especially the... uh... special equipment?"

The Viscount's expression didn't change, but the carefully controlled way he put down the wineglass was enough indication. Moving slowly, he assumed manual weapons control and sent a sizzling fusillade across the bows of the smaller ship. Like a fly feeling the wind of the fly-swatter, the Osprey X leapt forward, trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and his mother-ship. Viscount cleared his throat and reached for his glass again. "I'll show him preflight checks. Righty-ho, track his course and set us after him. We still might have some clean-up required after the plan is enacted, so we'd better not dawdle. Chop chop."

The bridge was suddenly busy, released from the spell, with everyone endeavouring to look busy. Preston sampled the wine again and dabbed with a napkin at his lip.

"Yes... definitely blackberry." he murmured. His mouth twisted as the aftertaste caught up with him. "And most definitely a shit wine."

*

We had a good thirty minutes acceleration before Catherine alerted us to the new contact on the Long Range Active, far behind us. We were past the initial ecstasy at having survived and had moved on to restrained smugness.

"Single small ship. Probably another Osprey. The Explorer must have been carrying it in its hold. That wouldn't cause us any trouble would it?"

I looked at Catherine and shrugged. I made a mental effort to throw off the smugness. Pride goeth before a death.

"They're a fair bit faster than us, which is their strong suit. Osprey's just not big enough and doesn't carry enough firepower to be a threat on its own. The only thing I can think of is that they've put their best pilot in the ship, and they're hoping we can be tempted to dogfight long enough for the Imp Explorer to catch up."

"Would that work?" Catherine was curious.

"Not unless it had an Elite pilot, in which case we could be in trouble. But Elite pilots are awful hard to find, very expensive to employ, and we would probably have faced them long before now."

"Well, " Bec interrupted, "twenty six minutes until intercept, so we've got some time to think about it."

Bec and I discussed tactics for a while, while Catherine kept an eye on the scanner. Every so often she would tap the panel, trying a new Anti-ECM cipher to get some more information about the ship.

"It's been modified somehow." she said, at Contact-minus eight minutes.

"Modified how?" Bec cocked her head.

"It... I'm not sure. It doesn't appear to have a weapon mounting on the front. I mean, it COULD be concealed, but why bother?" Catherine sounded confused. Her heart-shaped face was one big wrinkle of concentration. "I mean, there doesn't seem anything else that's being powered in it's place."

"But it's still the same mass as the other Ospreys?" I queried. As long as it wasn't any bigger than its brethren, I felt fairly confident.

"Yes. But I'm not sure what's taking up the space for the frontal weaponry. Our shields are at max aren't they?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "For the last thirty five minutes, yes. Relax Catherine. One Osprey isn't going to kill us. Better to start thinking about how the hell we're going to stop the *Azure Sunset*. Preston's not our problem any more. He's back there gnashing his teeth and working out another variation on 'I'll destroy you, next time we meet! Don't think you've seen the last of me!'"

"Well... strictly speaking, we haven't. Let's just deal with this ship and then I'll be happy, OK?"

I let out a long breath of exasperation at her pessimism. But to keep her happy, I prepped the 2.2MW and did a quick check of the ECM.

At C-Minus two, we were all feeling tense. Despite my cavalier attitude, Catherine had infected me with her caution. Once a Bounty Hunter thinks he or she can be inoculated against caution, it's time to give it away or they'll have their caution taken away from them by a Pirate who plays the odds better. "Should we give him the first shot or should we turn and fight?" I asked Bec.

"Kill 'em quick!" Bec was unequivocal. I couldn't argue with her. Bec cut the engines and smoothly performed a flip manoeuvre. We were still hurtling towards Capitol, but we were still facing towards the pursuing craft. I locked on to it. The craft did look a bit misshapen, but I couldn't put my finger on the difference. Oh well... we could pick it up from the remains. Catherine muttered to herself in her niche, intently perusing the readouts.

"C-minus One Thirty." I reported. Bec gently tapped the thrusters, gently slowing us. "C-minus thirty seconds." I reported the change.

"Incoming message." sighed Bec. "Do they really think we're impressed by these dumb macho threats? I dunno. I blame the parents. "

"My Lord Preston has a message for you." The voice was male, relatively young and borderline terrified. I became even more confused. This was a kid, not some veteran hot-shot pilot. And why was *he* frightened? "Die!"

"I know what they've done!" Catherine suddenly burst out. There was panic in her voice and our heads snapped round. "Shut down, shut down all systems!"

"What? That's absurd, we'll be sitting ducks-" I said, trying to work out what she was talking about.

"Do it now!" Catherine screamed at us. Her voice was wild.

Less inquisitive and more trusting, Bec's hand slapped at a swathe of buttons. The ship shuddered as system after system powered down. The panel in front of me went dark, and the cabin lights winked out, to be replaced by dull, battery-operated emergency lights. The drive shut down. And although I couldn't see it, I could *feel* the shields evaporate, the protective barrier around us vanishing. I twisted my head around to glare balefully at my crewmate. "Catherine, what the hell are you doing?"

There was a light in Catherine's eyes and I was at a loss as to why she was being so damn gleeful. Catherine's eyes shone, but I realised suddenly that it wasn't from triumph. It was a reflection.

I became aware of light flooding the cabin, a sudden, brilliant, explosive light. The only place it could come from was the cockpit window. My eyes snapped forward. The light came from an explosion far ahead of us. Suddenly, the cabin was filled with popping and a few sparks as the Electromagnetic Pulse hit, and shorted out whatever systems were still residually active. The lights flickered, then restabilised.

I turned back to Catherine, with far more respect.

"Thank you for saving all our lives." My voice cracked as I realised we'd missed dying by a matter of seconds.

"No problems." Catherine sounded shaken as well.

Energy Bombs are large, complex, ridiculously expensive and banned in most jurisdictions. Essentially a Nuclear Weapon with an antenna, they were ejected from a ship and exploded, releasing a massive pulse of electromagnetic energy into the surrounding area of space. In a craft as riddled with complex technology as ours, the effects would have been catastrophic and almost instantaneously fatal. Our shields would have vanished like smoke from a blown-out match and the fuel tank would have ignited from a myriad of tiny malfunctions. We probably wouldn't even have had time to realise what had hit us before we were dead.

The only possible defence against the weapon was to shut everything down so that no juice was going through the ship when the EM Pulse struck. We'd managed it with bare seconds to spare.

The idea of placing such a weapon in a craft as small as the Osprey X was positively stupid. There would barely be room for the engines and essential avionics after the bomb was installed, and the craft would be little more than a missile guided by a pilot. Preston had a diabolical turn of thought, and if it hadn't been for Catherine's paranoia, his scheme would have worked.

Ahead of us, a far smaller explosion briefly lit the starfield.

"I think that was our Osprey X." Catherine said, regaining some of her composure. "Apparently the safety mechanisms didn't activate correctly before the Energy Bomb was ejected and their systems got fried by the EMP. Now would our Viscount Preston *really* have been so careless with the lives of his minions?" Catherine had also regained some of her dry sarcasm.

I unstrapped and walked back to her station. I grabbed one of her hands in both of mine and held it for a long, long moment. I sought her gaze and held it, too.

"You're not careless with our lives, and that's far more important. You're our safety mechanism. Thank you, Catherine. "

Catherine had the grace and poise not to blush. Not even in the slightest.

*

We still had a problem. Under normal circumstances, it takes from twenty to forty minutes to properly prep and check a ship. You can manage it in ten if you're a lazy sod and don't mind risking death from your slipshod habits. To do it in a vacuum, with almost every system in the ship requiring a manual re-set, well...

And behind us, coming closer and closer was Preston's Imp Explorer. The relatively puny thrust for the huge mass of the Explorer was still accelerating it towards us, while we remained at a constant velocity. He'd take a while to catch up with us, but unless we could get the engines back fairly soon, he'd catch us as helpless as a floating log in the river.

We split up. Catherine stayed in the control room and tried to reboot all the electronics. Bec donned an Oxy mask and dived into the nether regions of the interior to re-set weaponry and life-support. I on the other hand had the responsibility of the engines...

I think I've never hated EVA so much as those grim minutes. The suit took forever to don, and when I climbed into the airlock, I realised that since we were powered down, I'd have to manually wind it shut to depressurise, which took me over a minute of hard, physical grunt work. Once I'd done that, I tethered myself to the wall and initiated emergency explosive decompression. Bolts popped audibly in the door leading to space and the big suck of air out into vacuum made me grab at the tether. I swore and cursed, but realised that the suit was still trying to feed into the ship's main comms system, which were still off line. Until they re-booted, I was alone in space.

Many spacers have written of the terrible crystalline beauty of going EVA in a vacuum, of having no ship walls between you and the infinite. Poets have rhapsodised about the immenseness of space and the seductive attraction of being so far from other life that distance becomes a total attraction.

I hate EVA, I hate infinity. I love seeing a readout on a screen which tells me plainly how far it is to the nearest port and how long it takes to get there. I love walking on the surface of a planet, knowing that gravity will keep me there. Walking in space was a deadly and onerous chore as far as I was concerned.

I clambered along the hull, safety line firmly attached, until I came to the rear of the ship. Given time, I'm sure we could have managed a cold-reset from the cockpit, but we couldn't wait for each system to re-set consecutively, one after the other. We needed them to start up concurrently, or Preston would have our intestines on the point of his Stripsword.

I prised a small handle from the surface of the hull, and slid open a panel, revealing a depression forested with levers, graced with buttons and populated by a variety of displays and lights. I pressed a button, and the battery powered display came on-line, painstakingly listing the instructions. The type was tiny, and the page was one of many. I winced, and continued.

There is no easy way to do a lot of complex sequences of button pressing when you're in EVA gloves, but I managed, only taking three tries and twenty minutes. When I pressed the final "Engage" button, I felt a deep rumbling come through my EVA suit from the hull beneath as liquid hydrogen gurgled towards the reaction chambers. I gave a wild whoop and slammed a fist down on the hull. Looking back along the hull to the mouth of the Prime Mover, I was gratified to see the glow of the engines illuminate the aft of the ship.

"Now wait a minute..." I muttered to myself, "Should I really be seeing them on?"

The next moment, the engines coughed, engaged briefly and I was thrown from the hull. The lifeline stopped my movement with a bone-jarring jerk. I swore profusely again, and this time was answered from the cabin by Catherine. The comms systems were back up. "What's the matter? Have you got the engines working again?"

My response was a stream of obscenity, with an affirmative in between. At this point I was some fifteen metres from the hull of my ship. Fortunately, lifelines are hard to break. I began to haul myself hand over hand back towards the ship.

"Weaponry and shields coming back on line!" there was a note of triumph in Catherine's voice that I shared. Engines, weaponry and shields might get us through this... shields?

I looked back towards the ship and saw the barely-visible sparkling around the emitters that signalled that the field strength was building. I redoubled my efforts trying to get back to the hull. I was still six or seven metres away, and if I remembered the specs properly, the distance from hull to shield was a hundred and seven centimetres. Already, I could see the lifeline vibrating as the shield coalesced around it. Eventually, it would shear through, leaving me outside the shield and without anything keeping me close to the ship.

"Red, how you going?" Bec, this time, she'd made it back to the cockpit.

I didn't bother breath talking to her. The shield was still soft and I could force my way through it if I could get there in time.

"Red... answer me, will you? The engines are on line. Preston's about four and a half minutes away, so I'd really like to get going. Can I engage the engines and get the hell out of here?"

"No." I allowed myself, panicked by the thought of Bec engaging the Prime Mover. I was now only about four metres away. The lifeline was now shuddering as if it were on the verge of dying. If it did, there was a fairly good chance that I would, too.

"No? What's the matter? The Engines look fine from here... we don't have time to run a diagnostic... did you restart them or not?"

"Yes!" I said, limbs flailing desperately.

"Good, I'll turn the ship then..."

At that moment, the lifeline snapped. Ahead of me, the shield closed over and became whole. My momentum carried me forward, but the shields gently caught my body and just as gently sent it spinning back the way it had come. I was loose. For a terrible moment, I was paralysed with terror. I was travelling at about the same velocity as the ship, a nearly parallel course, but definitely, absolutely, *outside* the ship. Then, about six or seven metres down the hull, a manoeuvring rocket fired, on Bec's command. The entire ship rotated, turning back towards Capitol. The aft of the ship passed through my field of vision and I found myself with a tailgater's view of the Prime Mover's exhaust ports, slightly behind and to port of the ship.

I felt like screaming. I didn't. A calmness descended over me. The careful course corrections and velocity changes required to pick me up again would slow even a pilot of Bec's ability. Preston was too, too close for that.

"I'm inside Bec. Go for it."

The Prime Mover flashed, blinding me with the incandescence of its thrust. The wash span me around, and I could feel the suit began to heat up. It was a good, tough suit though and I shook my head in despair. I'd survived. The ship was gone. Here I was, a piece of organic flotsam adrift on an endless sea. A tiny speck of carbons and plastics in a vast space with only occasional hydrogen atoms to break the monotony. I was going to die out here. How was still up to question. The only person who had the ability to influence that approached in an Imperial Explorer. I wondered whether he's bother to kill me, or whether he'd just leave me to die, suffocating as my air supply gave out. That's if he even spotted me, while thundering past in his massive warship. The HPA would be overkill, but...

I grinned, bleak amusement suddenly appealing to me. It would be just like Preston to waste time manoeuvring to reduce to constituent atoms a lone human floating in space. My own hoarse laughter echoed loud against my faceplate. It would probably be the last human sound I would ever hear.

"Shut the fuck up, you moron!" Bec's loud, angry voice boomed through my helmet speakers, frightening the crap out of me. Huh? Was I hallucinating this soon? It sounded so much like Bec. "We've only got one shot at getting you back in the ship in one piece, and I can do without you going all hysterical!"

"What're you doing back here? Get away from here, Preston's coming!"

"Just shut up and stay there," there was a pause, within which I could almost hear the sardonic humour building. "although it's not as if you've much choice in that."

My revolutions continued, as there was nothing to stop me spinning around. I'd keep spinning until something stopped me spinning. I couldn't tell from which direction the ship was coming. From which either ship was coming.

"Look, Bec... be reasonable. You can't power down the shields and get a line out to me, wait for me to climb in the airlock, repower the shields and get out of here before Preston comes... I mean, now he must be only... um..."

"Three minutes and five. I agree with Bec. Shut the fuck up." Catherine rejoined. She sounded equally furious with me, but there was a distracted edge to her, as if she was busy doing something else. "We're going to use the Tractor Beam Cargo Scoop to haul you in."

"But won't that crush me like an egg?" I asked. Tractor Scoops are designed for Cargo Canisters, which are armoured and reinforced to hold a ton of cargo in perfect safety. I, on the other hand, was a mere ninety-odd kilos of heavy-worlder flesh, which would be ripped to bits by the strength of field used by the tractor scoop. And it would probably be painful enough that I would have wished for Preston to vaporise me.

"Catherine's working on that. Now shut up and let me plot the approach. We've only got one shot at this."

I went quiet. They were committed now. Catherine would either get it right first time or I'd be crushed like an egg. Bec would either get the approach right first time or Preston would catch us. I no longer had any influence on events. All I could do was continue spinning in space until I was either saved or damned.

"Bec-" I said.

"What?" Bec sounded peeved at my continued kibitzing.

"Please don't turn off the comm. Don't leave me alone out here."

There was a pause while Bec examined my statement for irony. Then I heard something I'd never expected from her. Warmth. "No worries, Red. We won't leave you alone."

For a few moments there was no sound, except for the beep of flight controls, and Catherine's soft muttering while she tried to reconfigure on-the-fly something that shouldn't even be touched while the ship was in space.

"Preston's two minutes thirty." she said presently. "And we need to approach at a relative closing speed of 100 to minus one. Any faster and he'll be Jameson's Liquefied Chicken. I know it's slow, sorry. "

Bec merely grunted. The beeping of the controls sped up, and Catherine stopped muttering. I was dying to ask what was going on, but if I did, I might just end up dying. Then I heard the distinctive chime which announced incoming communications. The beeping stopped momentarily, then stumbled on and regained speed. There was only one person in the vicinity who would be sending us a message, and he wouldn't be saying anything pretty.

"Should we answer?" Catherine asked.

"No!" I gave my two cents worth.

"Might as well. I'm done." Bec said. She sounded exhausted. "The approach is set. Contact minus forty one. You done?"

"Yeah. I'll need to manually guide the fields, though. You want to open the scoop hatch?"

I tried to visualise what was happening. I knew the button Bec was pressing, it was a deep sapphire blue oval. If I'd been in a position to see, I would have seen the fore shields mist and dissipate to allow matter through. I knew the small pair of doors which glided open on the underside of the ship, and the powerful focusing dishes which generated the tractor field. I'd serviced them a month ago and wondered silently whether I'd done a good job or whether I'd been wool gathering and had daydreamed my way through it.

"Missiles!" Catherine said, alarmed.

"How many?" Bec said coolly. Until they picked me up, they couldn't alter their course, not by one degree. The field and doors were very narrow. If they veered even a small distance, I'd be smeared across the hull.

"Two... three... four... Four of the bastards! And I think they're all..."

"NN500s." Bec and I chorused. The ECM wasn't any use to us now. No more games from Preston. The comms channel chimed again. Preston wanted to gloat.

"Don't answer it!" I snarled. "Fuck him." If I was going to die, I'd rather not have to have that bastard's voice being one of my last memories.

"Time to contact?" Bec was more practical.

"Thirty Eight."

"Time to Red?"

"Twenty two."

"Shit!"

"I changed my mind!" I volunteered. "leave me!"

"Shut up! Eighteen seconds!"

I could see glimpses of the ship now, as I whirled. Half-a-second's view of salvation every rotation. It crawled closer, agonisingly slowly. I began to feel the Tractor now, a slight feeling of gravity, sucking at my skin. It was fantastic, it allowed me to orient myself, the pull like a compass point. Catherine and my sweet, prodigious Bec were the source.

"He's off line, too high on the X-axis!" Bec sounded furious, on the edge of self-control.

"No he's not." Catherine said, frazzled. Then she thought again. "Compensating. Thanks Bec. Shut up."

The pull became more distinct, and it wasn't one pull, but four. They waxed and waned in strength as Catherine pulled me in, gently, carefully. Extracting a butterfly from a spider web. Pull too hard in the one direction and...

The mass of the ship was large in my vision now, blocking out the sun. My spinning was slowing down as I got closer and if I concentrated, I could see the dark opening in the hull that my crewmate was trying to funnel me into. It seemed so small. I crouched into as small a ball as possible, which made me spin faster, but would make it harder for me to smash into the edge.

"Five, four, three..." Catherine chanted.

The darkness enveloped me. I was inside the ship. I passed through a point of grace, and then the pulling became a pushing, thrusting me to the back of the scoop. I landed with a bit of a thud, breaking out of my crouch to lie spreadeagled in the scoop, pinned by the Tractor. I could see out into space, once more beautiful to look at now I wasn't in it. I also saw a tiny dot of light, growing brighter by the second. One of the missiles.

"Shut the scoop! Shut the scoop!" I shouted. "Get us out of here." The doors in front of me started to slide shut, but I could still see the missile rushing closer. It was moving fast, faster than the doors. Against the gravity of the tractor, I lifted my hand to cover my face plate. If I was going to die this close to rescue, I didn't want to watch it happen.

There was a clang as the scoop doors closed. I felt the ship leap like a grasshopper and felt a deep vibration thrum through the superstructure. Bec had fired half the manoeuvring rockets on the ship in order to avoid the missile. In the darkness of the scoop, I felt a sudden terror. If I died in here, would I notice the difference?

"Bec! Catherine! What happened? Has the missile -"

The ship leapt again, this time from the impact of the missile. The explosion bobbed me about in the scoop, my helmet bouncing on the deck, arms and legs jerking about. I felt like a marble at the bottom of a jar. Eventually, I came to rest, feeling bruised and battered. That felt good, I felt alive. The engines rumbled far away at the other end of the ship, on overburn again.

"Bec?"

"We're alive Red. Deity knows how, but we're alive." Bec's voice was croaky from tension. "One of them got us, and we're damaged, but the others missiles won't catch us now. Catherine's coming down to pressurise the scoop. We're free Red. We're free. I'll see you soon."

"Bec..." I began.

There was an audible click as Bec terminated the link. I sighed and settled down to waiting for Catherine. My thoughts, however, returned to Bec. She's saved my life again. Shouldn't that be enough for me? Why wasn't I satisfied? What more did I want?

*

Preston was not responding well to his setback. He'd already shot the weapons officer and was looking bleakly at the helmsman, with a grip like death on his handgun. His shade had shifted from his usual healthy pink to the florid red of excitement, followed quickly by the white of shock and the rising purple of rage. The expensive wineglass was already dashed upon the main viewscreen. The crew members beneath it tried to avoid cutting their fingers on pieces of crystal as they nervously tapped out commands.

Preston paced the bridge like a caged predator. For he was caged now, regardless of his choices. If he stayed, and tried to warn Marcus, he could be tagged for annihilation by the Empire. If he fled, Marcus would take out a few contracts on his life, at least a few of which would actually be serious attempts. And he had no faith that those dashed bounty hunters would hold their tongues about his involvement, they would likely turn Emperor's Evidence as soon as they got the chance.

Preston's nose wrinkled and his dark moustache twitched. The scent of burnt flesh was beginning to get oppressive. He gestured peremptorily to his most-trusted gorilla.

"Get that damned fool out of here. Just because he's dead doesn't mean he gets to take up unproductive space on my ship." The security guard paused a moment before moving to comply. The Viscount's expression darkened further. Even the dumbest and most loyal member of the crew was being insubordinate. They would all have to go. However, he would have to attend to that later, after replacements had been procured. As the body was dragged from the bridge, Preston forced a bright expression onto his face.

"Right. Well I've had quite enough of this damned business. Set course for my estates in Andzeho, will you. I feel in the mood for a bit of a cruise."

Andzeho was also an obscure frontier world on the other side of civilised space. It would take months to get there, further months for any assassins to be sent after him. The system was nominally independent, and the New Africa Chamber of Commerce (being the only ruling body in the system) was also frightfully amenable to a bit of under the table inducement.

Preston sat back in his command chair and let out a long breath. He felt light-headed from relief. All this responsibility had been a strain. It would be a relief to stop being so self-sacrificing and devote some quality time to himself.

"What's taking you so long, man?" he barked irritably at the helmsman.

"Almost there, sir." the helmsman sounded odd, and Preston noted that he was sucking his finger.

"Cut yourself, did you?" Preston asked pleasantly.

"Yes my Lord... the wineglass was all over the controls and..." the helmsman stopped in horror as he realised he was trying to excuse himself.

"Well we can't have you being so clumsy now, can we? Report to Fencing Practice when you've finished your shift, will you old chap? I think the crew could do with some instruction on the danger of sharp objects. Engage the Hyperdrive now, there's a fellow."

Preston leaned back and reached for the wine bottle. There were always a few misjumps in the great journey of life, but those with proper breeding would get back on course and prosper from the diversion. Preston reached for the glass, only to realise he'd smashed it. He shrugged, and raised the long neck to his lips, drinking thirstily, crimson streaming down his chin onto his expensively tailored shirt.

Into the White Fire

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens, Winston]

"Looks like I found the Constrictor Fran, it's been having a bit of a battle by the looks of it" said Tracey working the passive scanner. They'd only jumped in a few minutes ago, and had been searching around trying to pick up the trail of the Constrictor again, while trying to remain hidden.

"Ok, lets go take a look," said Frantic "but I hope they don't draw too much attention. We'll never find Mosser if the Imps come snooping around where we're trying to hide." Being a fugitive in the Empire had its drawbacks, but he was used to them.

Suddenly, the lights went off in the cabin and the scanner readout went fuzzy then died.

"Whoah!" exclaimed Tracey as she jumped back from her console with a numb electrocuted hand. "EMP surge, big one."

"Are we ok?"

"Thanks for the personal concern" replied Tracey, trying to rub feeling back into her hand. "We're far enough out that the capacitors could handle it."

This was confirmed by the lights coming back on, and the scanner slowly coming back to life.

Frantic's hands worked over the console. "I'm pulling back to half thrust just to be safe. Can you double check our emergency hyperspace target?"

"Righty ho." said Tracey.

*

When they arrived in the area, the scene was not good. The Constrictor was fleeing from a lot of debris from Imperial ships, with an Imperial Explorer on its tail.

Tracey started working scanning systems "Fran, got an Imperial patrol coming in. Eagle Mk IIIs by the looks of it, 5 of them. Seems like that EMP wave attracted a lot of attention." The Imperial Explorer seemed to register this also, and for some reason vanished into hyperspace.

"Hmm, you read the profile on the Ravens fella. You think he'd bite an Imperial patrol?"

"Not unless they fired first. He's done bounty hunting, but not piracy or military that's known of."

"Well, that patrol's not going to see it that way, and this place'll be swarming with Imps after that."

"Our cloaking isn't good enough to hide from active scans, we'd better scarp. Then again, it's going to mean leaving them up shit creek... Hey Fran, whatever they're planning, it's probably with good intentions. Either way, we're not gonna be able to hang around hidden for long."

"Are you suggesting we take some time off for a bit of mischief?" Tracey smiled and Frantic continued "Right then, lets go upset Achenar again. I don't like running decoy for anyone, but it's been a while since I had some good dirty fun."

Tracey rubbed her hands together, then fired up the weapon systems and ran an active scan.

Frantic powered the engines up to full thrust, and switched on the transponder.

*

The Eagle Mk IIIs arrived in the area and immediately noticed the destroyed Imperial ships. At a command from the wing leader, they fanned out and prepared to attack the Constrictor.

A new ship arrived on the scene and fired a few 4mw beam shots across the bow of the Constrictor. "Bounty on that one Sir, huge one, ex Fed merce-" began the pilot on his left wing, but was cut off as two 4mw beams disintegrated his cockpit from long range.

The wing leader keyed in his own radar mapper and confirmed the data, as he began his own evasive manoeuvres. An Elite rated pilot too, this kill might make his career worthwhile. Another Eagle fell from his left wing before the Taipan Mk II broke off its attack and gunned its main engines. As they came up on its tail, a mining laser shot out the back of the Taipan and took out the Eagle on his extreme right.

He locked on two naval missiles and fired both of them immediately, then gunned the main engines to take him off on a tangent and flank the slower ship. He ordered his remaining wingman to do the same. The Taipan ejected a load of chaff to take care of the first missile, and allowed the second one to plough into the rear shields. Before the explosion could clear, it engaged its jump drives and disappeared ahead.

"Damn" said the wing leader and set in a course to follow. He then sent out an alert to base and transmitted coordinates and an expected course for them to scan. This fugitive was dead meat, and since he hadn't tried to enter hyperspace must be out of fuel and heading to a gas giant. They'd meet him half way and finish him off.

The open comm channel barked out with "Hey, where are you guys going? There's pirates around here, what kind of system defence you run around here?"

"Continue on course, Constrictor," he replied "we'll take care of your pirate." Procedure was one thing, career advancement in the Empire was another thing altogether.

*

Sam ran his hands through his now greasy dark hair and sighed. They were now just so close to their final destination and the culmination of the grand scheme that everybody was on edge. There was literally nothing left to do apart from check and recheck everything and the crew were continuously coming to him with niggly little problems that would normally have been sorted by themselves but because of the tension and the desire to not be responsible if it all went wrong these problems just kept on being referred higher and higher up the chain of command until they landed on Sam's desk.

If it wasn't for the fact that Norman, Marcus and Dreyfus had managed to distract themselves with alternately mutilating and shouting at the prisoner in some secluded corner of the ship, Sam knew full well that he would be passing the same petty queries and requests even further up the chain of command. As it was, he took comfort in the fact that Norman had made sure that the command chairs were all upholstered in leather and were Very comfortable. He resigned himself to the fact that Norman and Marcus were going to take their time with the prisoner, if only so they could evade all of the mundane shit that filled the minutes between the action. And of course relegated Sam to dealing with it all and staying on the bridge.

As Sam reviewed yet another datapad screen of petty requests, the main commlink bleeped. It was Marcus calling from his stateroom. Sam frowned and then picked up the call. Marcus' face appeared in the display on Sam's datapad. It could have just been the lighting, but Sam was fairly certain that Marcus was deathly pale. Sam spoke first, "Heir?"

A few of the bridge crew glanced at Sam for saying this. When Sam said "heir" on a private channel to Norman, it would be cynical, jovial, sometimes even sarcastic, but this was respectful which meant that Marcus was on the line. A glare from Sam sent the bridge crew back to reviewing diagnostics and keeping an eye on the sensor readings.

"Sam, there has been a development with the prisoner. I need to broadcast through the entire ship."

"Anything I need to know about?"

"Everybody needs to know this."

Marcus' face looked deadly serious. Sam thought for a moment and decided to grant his request. "Do you want video as well?"

"Of course, the crew needs to see who is speaking to them."

"Stand by," Sam looked up and called one of the bridge crew, "Smith, Put Marcus' stateroom AV channel on ship-wide broadcast"

"Okay." Smith tapped a few commands into his console and the main viewscreen on the bridge switched from a rather useless image of space flying past the nose of the *Azure Sunset* to Marcus's pale visage. All through the mighty craft, the same thing was happening to non-essential displays. A slight whine of feedback sounded through the ship-wide PA to let people know that an announcement was coming. Marcus began his announcement.

"My allies, I bring you terrible news. As you know, we have had a pair of prisoners on board this ship. Spies from the AJN. Norman and myself took on the necessary, grisly task of interrogating them to discover who they were and what their intentions were. We succeeded in finding out. They wanted to learn of and foil our plans, and also to assassinate myself and Norman. While we were interrogating them, one of them detonated a suicide device that must have been implanted in his chest and had evaded our scanning equipment. Norman took the brunt of the blast and I watched him blown apart before my eyes. Dreyfus here saved my life by dragging me clear before Norman's Deathwrecker, damaged by the use of such a cowardly weapon overloaded and detonated as well."

There was a snigger from the bridge. Sam glanced at its source. The two resident gamblers on the bridge had obviously had one of their many wagers come to fruition. Just before Sam returned his attention to the speech, he had a moment of clarity. Norman probably was dead and this was a play for control of the ship before he had time to prepare. And it would work. And he had let Marcus do it. Bugger.

"As we all know, Norman is, or was, extraordinarily resourceful and cunning. He may have prepared for such an eventuality and has some clone or other ferreted away. Or maybe he had not. It is too close to the fruition of our grand plan and also foolish for us to worry ourselves with these uncertainties. We are so close to winning and claiming the glory and the power that is due to us to stop now. It would be an insult to Norman or his memory to stop just because one of our number has died working to protect us from discovery. But we cannot continue without leadership, or uncertainty over leadership because that will tear us apart more effectively than any Federation, Alliance, or dare I say it, Imperial weapon or plan. As from now I will assume full command and responsibility for you. My allies. My friends. My crew. Should Norman show up again I will gladly step aside and let him take command of this ship that he claimed for his own and fitted out with the aid of you people. Our plan will succeed. We are on time, on course and we have a Huge Plasma Accelerator. Only two words can really express this. We. Rock."

The speech was inspired. And as Sam had expected, it had the desired effect. Whether it was true or not was irrelevant. Marcus the seducer had played his art again and judged his audience perfectly. Well, nearly all of his audience. Sam's eyes drifted towards the bulkhead door that separated the bridge from the rest of the massive ship. A quarter of a mile away down the corridors and passageways was the infirmary. And in the infirmary would be a stasis unit.

But first, to matters at hand. The crew present on the bridge had begun talking amongst themselves. There seemed to be two prevailing factions - those who thought Norman was dead and would accept outright Marcus' leadership, and those who assumed that Norman would stroll onto the bridge shortly, whistling dream hits and twirling his Deathwrecker in the palm of his hand. Whether or not they would obey Marcus' orders would be what Sam had to discover.

"Okay people, you heard what Marcus said. Does anyone have a problem with it?"

Sam unbuttoned the flap on his holster that covered the butt of his pistol. It did not go unnoticed. For the moment, the only reasonable course would be to play along with whatever Marcus' game was. Partly because any disorder at this point would be disastrous and also because he would have to stay trusted - and alive long enough to start defrosting Norman.

One of the gamblers spoke, "I do. Sam, you know Norman better than any of us. My buddy owes me big because Norman is dead. He says that he isn't as he'll have a clone kicking round, or be jammy and still be alive. As I said, you know him, so is he dead or alive?"

"I'm going to head down to the sickbay to find out. I've seen no corpse yet."

"It's in the sickbay now," came a cultured voice from the corner of the bridge.

Marcus.

He stood by the now open bulkhead hatch, as pale as he was when he appeared on the video screens earlier. Dreyfus lurked behind him, glowering over his shoulder. "Most of it, that is," he said with a slight smirk.

"You look pale," observed Sam

Marcus shrugged nonchalantly. For a moment Sam wondered if he was putting on some of Norman's mannerisms to put him on a more sympathetic level with the crew. He wouldn't put it past him. "I got a sliver of metal in the gut. Dreyfus has patched me up and I'm fine"

Smith spoke, "Are you all right, my lord?"

"I'm fine. Glad to see that you are all performing your duties admirably. Norman trained you well and would have been proud of you all."

"You seem to assume that he won't be coming back."

Marcus frowned and stared at the source of the voice. One of the gamblers, "I've seen his body and I know of no other clones. Do you know otherwise?"

"I do not, sir."

"Unfortunately I cannot rely on the myth of Norman for him to arrive just in the nick of time to finish up with style. We live in a cruel universe and I have to work with pragmatism. I must assume that he will not turn up and must carry on the grand plan regardless. I would like him to but must assume he will not. I hope you all share my beliefs, both in this, and in our great project."

The words and the personal touch worked. The doubters were silenced. "Sam, I do need to discuss a few things with you. Details about running the ship and so on."

"Right."

"In private."

"Right. Smith, you have the bridge"

Sam walked towards the door and followed Marcus and Dreyfus into the corridor beyond. There was a cabin nearby that was virtually an office and was used for "private words" and the like. The three of them entered and stood in the centre of the space looking at each other.

At first, nothing was said as they all tried to read the other's expressions. Sam started to sweat, the situation was uncomfortable.

"Commander Kemper, I believe you have an access key? May I have it so I can run this ship?"

Sam nodded and reached into his shipsuit. Dreyfus watched him intently the whole time. He slowly withdrew a chain that was hanging around his neck. On it hung two electronic keys. He detached one and handed it to Marcus. Throughout the handover they maintained eye contact.

"And the other?"

"For personal use. The one I gave you will let you into all the systems."

They stared at each other in silence once more. "Personal use?"

"Yes." They continued staring at each other.

"And the initiator?"

"In Norman's cabin. The key will let you in."

"Good"

Sam paused before speaking again, but he needed to check something, "I'm not happy about what you did."

Marcus raised an eyebrow, "What?"

"You didn't consult me about Norman before going to the crew. I am second-in command of this ship, I needed to know."

"And I told you. I apologise if I acted a little impetuously, but we are mere hours from the most critical part of our plan. I had to make sure that there would be no uncertainty about who is in charge. Things like that cause problems. You do understand don't you?"

They locked gazes. Sam looked away first, "I do."

"I apologise if I harmed your ego, but it is for the good of the ship"

"It was."

"Excellent. Now, while we are here, there are things we need to discuss..."

Forty minutes later and Sam's mind was beginning to wander. They were now seated and Marcus and Dreyfus had been asking non-stop about details involving the running of the ship that they should have known. He impatiently glanced at the chronometer on his wristpad. He realised then that at that point they had been talking for so long that even if he left now and went straight to the infirmary, it would be impossible to defrost Norman so that he would be back on the bridge before they were due to fire the HPA. A shiver ran up his spine as he considered whether or not Marcus had been merely stalling him and had manipulated events so that he had both the ship and no chance of Norman interfering. Which would mean...

"Sam? Are you alright, you trailed off halfway through telling us about the Stowmaster, you know, the one under Norman's command chair?"

Sam floundered a moment before replying, "Yeah, you just lift the panel on the left armrest and bring your fist down on the keypad. Simple really. Anyway, I'm afraid I have to run, I have to - uh, make sure that the techs are recalibrating the HPA properly."

"Recalibrate? I thought it was working fine"

"It is," Sam realised his error and tried to catch it. It must surely sound like complete bullshit. "Yes, but you do admit, it is tending towards indiscriminate. The focus tends to go after a few shots so it needs tightening up."

"Surely the techs can sort it themselves?"

"They can, but, uh, you know how everybody is nervy as hell at the moment, well, even if I just turn up they will feel more confident about it, and I will feel more confident, and they will be less likely to fuck it all up"

"I see," Marcus' eyes narrowed and then he nodded "in that case, you had better go."

Sam stood up and left the cabin. As the door was closing he was half certain he heard the beginnings of a chuckle from Dreyfus. Once the door had shut, Sam sprinted down the corridor towards the infirmary. Two and a half minutes later he was standing by the wide double doors, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for the airlock that separated the sickbay from the rest of the ship to cycle. Eventually the portal was opened and he stepped into the medical bay. Professor Hartley, Norman's pet scientist, wanted for practising "bad science" in seventeen systems, was waiting to greet him. "Commander Kemper, I've been expecting you for some time."

"I got held up. Can you defrost Norman any faster than normal? We need him before the HPA fires."

Hartley sucked air through his teeth. Sam restrained himself from punching the man who was responsible for so many of Norman's clones. Despite the fact that they provided such a pivotal role in aiding Norman, they both hated each other's guts. Hartley replied cheerily "No, I can't. But, seeing as you are nearly always late, when Marcus made his little speech I decided to take the liberty of starting to defrost Norman straight away. I reckon you will have five minutes to spare."

Sam's fist clenched at the excessively smug tone Hartley had used. Especially when he flourished what Sam assumed to be an exact copy of the "unique" electronic key needed to start the defrosting of Norman's clone. Behind the professor, the stasis unit containing Norman hummed to itself as the correct proportions of chemicals required to reanimate his moribund form were fed into the system. Annoyingly, in Sam's opinion, there was not a viewing window to see what was going on, merely some incomprehensible medical monitors that pinged every now and then. And a door. Professor Hartley then continued.

"But anyway, we finished fixing Norman's heart-lung system - with a couple of improvements of my own, but unfortunately we did notice some irregularities with the corpse of Norman that we recovered from the detention cell."

"Such as?"

"Come, see for yourself," The professor beckoned to Sam and led him over to a gurney. The form on it was covered with a sheet. The trolley next to it had a dish sitting on it and in the dish was a slightly melted and sooty ELITE badge, the remains of a Deathwrecker and a spider's web of tiny wire filaments. "We recovered what we could - his badge, the remainder of his gun and some of his neural lace. But we have been hampered somewhat."

Hartley whipped the sheet covering the body away and Sam gagged when he saw the soot blackened, shrapnel riddled and headless corpse. Hartley grinned evilly.

"In our examination of the corpse we have surmised that Marcus lied about what happened during the interrogation in his little announcement. The injuries suggest that Norman was shot in the face with a high-energy weapon at point blank range after a sustained fight in hand to hand combat."

"And then blown up?" added Sam

"Give the man a prize" replied the professor sarcastically.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, due to the nature of the injuries, we are unable to supply a reconstruction of Norman's memories since the last impression was made"

"So you are telling me that in the five minutes after Norman wakes up, we have to get him up to speed on what has been going on for about the last month or so as well as get him to the bridge before the HPA is due to fire."

"Yes"

Sam shrugged his shoulders and sighed. It wouldn't have been so bad if it wasn't for the fact that this wasn't the first time he had had to brief a freshly defrosted clone of Norman in a short period of time. Still, at least he knew in advance what Norman would need. He tutted and began the task of getting things ready.

*

Mack Winston examined the passive scanner log on the datapad he had just been thrown. He weighed the datapad in his hand and considered whether or not it would make a good weapon if thrown accurately. Too light, and with a surface area great enough to be deflected by a blocking arm.

The scanner log itself was interesting. There'd been a large EMP wave detonated, followed by a large ship hyperspacing. McLeary had approached silently to investigate, and found an adrift Constrictor, a lot of ship debris, and an Imperial Explorer closing in on it. After several confusing events, the Constrictor had managed to get away intact and the Imperial Explorer had hyperspaced. Another ship of undetermined type had arrived on the scene as well as an Imperial patrol of Eagles. There'd been a short scuffle, and it seemed like half the system had set course to chase down the mystery ship.

The Constrictor seemed to be continuing on unabated towards Fort Donalds. While the less interesting choice of a path to follow, it did not lead directly towards detection by patrols. He tried to voice this opinion, but McLeary had her mind set differently.

"We're here to gather information, and to track down Mosser. If there's a small war starting up, he'll be behind it."

"But that's just not Mosser's style" Winston said. "Look, we're not going to lose a mass of patrols converging together are we?"

"No."

"And it's probably best to hold off a bit while they get clear of the area right?"

McLeary was starting to get suspicious, and replied slowly "I guess..."

Winston kept on before she could voice doubts. "So lets tail the Constrictor for a while as the patrols move off to see what it's up to. If nothing's happening we can still move off and see what's going down with the patrols. In my experience it pays to investigate all you can before fixing to a decision. Regardless of what you decide, you need me in the cockpit to help tail whoever we go after as silently as possible."

This all sounded plausible, and Winston obviously had valuable experience in tracking people down, so why not? McLeary started to voice agreement, then stopped herself short, cursed, and left the cabin locking the door behind her.

"Never let a prisoner talk you into something," she recited inside her mind. Mr Mack Winston was trying to buddy up, assert his knowledge over hers, show initiative to help her on the mission, gain trust, get a little leeway and

control of the ship, then BANG, end of prisoner captor relationship. She strongly suspected that Winston really didn't care whom they chose to chase after, but was just using the situation to try and show he knew something about what they were doing, so that she needed his help.

She did need him to pilot the ship though, but she would have to be extra careful every step of the way.

Marching back into the cabin, she pointed her hand laser at Winston and shot him on low power, enough to stun him for a few seconds during which she stepped over and slapped a quicklock onto his back. She slowly turned the setting down on the quicklock till Winston could just sit up and talk. "OK, we're going to do things your way as long as I'm satisfied you're doing a good job. Mess up, or try anything funny, and you come back to the cabin. Agreed?"

Winston muttered acceptance, fury raging inside him. He rolled his shoulder and found that his robotic arm was not affected by the quicklock. Quickly stopping the movement, he decided to keep this fact a secret and try to play as if he couldn't move it.

Staggering onto the bridge, however, McLeary caught his involuntary glance to the emergency supplies cabinet. She pushed him into the commander's chair, then started pulling out everything in the cabinet. Triumphantly pulling out the fireaxe, she placed it next to her chair, then threw all the stuff back into the cabinet. Even through the relaxed muscles of his face, the look of disappointment was visible on Winston.

*

After tailing the Constrictor for a while, McLeary was just about to order Winston to break off and head towards the Imperial patrols when the Constrictor abruptly changed course. From the curvature of its course, the ship seemed to be taking a very wide berth around the area ahead of it at top speed.

"I'd say they've noticed something on their active scanners that they don't want to go near." commented Winston. "Wimps."

They coasted along on silent running straight ahead on the Constrictor's old course, until the passive scanner picked up a Long Range Cruiser with an escort of Imperial Couriers.

Winston frowned at the scene. "That's strange, they usually don't bother to escort anything as large as a cruiser."

"The Imperials are planning some goodwill narcotics drive or something for publicity. I guess they don't want to risk shipments."

McLeary began getting more information from the passive scan, and made an ID on the cruiser. The *Abraham's Son*. For a moment she thought they'd found Mosser, but realised the mistake. *Abraham's Son*, *Azure Sunset*, AS. Surely they wouldn't be crazy enough to disguise one ship under another ID, yet have the same initials? Yet, the chances of a coincidence were too extraordinary to pass up as anything less than a double bluff.

Winston watched as McLeary programmed a new algorithm into the scanner data processor. After a few minutes she exclaimed "Ha! Gotcha!"

Winston looked at the meaningless band of background radiation that McLeary seemed so excited about. "You've lost the plot babe, why don't you go take a nap while I take over here and go catch us Mosser, eh?" The sane stare that came back at him confirmed that this ploy had not worked, so Winston switched to listening attentively while plotting the next chance.

McLeary explained, "The HPA gives off several different types of radiation, one of which escapes as seemingly random background radiation, but which you can detect if you know what you're looking for amongst the mess from the ships engines. Whatever the ID of the cruiser ahead of us, it's carrying the stolen HPA."

In her excitement she brought up the comms and began encrypting a message to Federal command. The distraction was all that Winston needed. Faster than the quicklock would allow his real arm, his robotic one reached across the control panel, overrode McLeary's StarDreamer control, then threw her into a maximum time acceleration overdose before she could react. The last thing she heard was Winston muttering in a snide voice "At least you finally proved useful," before slipping into unconsciousness. She would easily be out cold for several hours.

Dragging himself across the floor by the one arm, he grabbed the axe and used it to wrench the quicklock off his back. He stood up and raised the axe, then thought better of it. Despite being a lying, spying, blackmailing bitch, she'd be better used as a decoy than a chopping block.

Winston checked the setting on the StarDreamer control to ensure that she'd stay out of it no matter what happened. When she woke up she'd be in for a nasty surprise. He then plotted the necessary course, and prepared to eject the escape capsule.

*

"Incoming message from the escort," reported the comms officer as the console indicated the message.

"Acknowledge," said Marcus, cool as ice.

"Attention *Abraham's Son*, we've just picked up an adrift Harris on the scanner intersecting our course."

"Tell them to send a ship to investigate," Marcus spoke, and the order was carried out.

A couple of minutes later the response came in "Appears to be adrift, one weak life sign. All systems down except basic life support, no IR signature transmitting."

"Great, more problems" thought Marcus. "Get them to run active scans for bombs and such, and then have the Harris tractored into the docking bay. Tell them that we claim salvage over the vessel and occupant." Marcus nodded to Dreyfus, who in turn left the bridge in the direction of the docking bay with the intention of extracting information from whoever had been stupid enough to interrupt their party.

With the assistance of one of the Imperial Couriers, the Harris was tractored in for a rough landing without landing gear on the docking bay deck. After a couple of engineers pried the hatch open, Dreyfus stormed up the ramp, Deathwrecker in hand. The obviously Federal interior was empty except for a woman plugged into an overdose of stardreamer drugs. The word 'SPY' was written in ration pack contents over her forehead. There was also an escape capsule missing from the ship, indicating that the other crewmember had mutinied and escaped.

After monitoring vital signs, it became apparent that the woman would be conscious for questioning in several hours, and would probably respond to aggressive stimulant drugs in a few hours. This didn't leave enough time to interrogate her before their arrival at Fort Donalds, so Dreyfus ordered her kept locked in the infirmary for later, then returned to the bridge.

*

With the engines shut down, and all systems except emergency life support switched off, the Harris Fighter went adrift.

After a cursory search of the cargo hold, he found the storage bin that McLeary had stored all his weapons in. He dragged out the ammo belt and plasma rifles and set them aside. Amongst the remaining hand guns, he pulled out a long black leather bag, which he dumped on the floor and opened

He pulled out a black EVA suit that light just seemed to fall into, and put it on. He then pulled out a similarly black utility belt, which he clipped on. Then a harness that he used to strap one of the plasma rifles to his back, with a black flap that covered it up. Next came a 30cm long metallic Cylinder that he clipped to the belt. Crouching down, he plucked several of the plasma packs from the ammo belt and concealed them in his utility pockets.

Turning the bag inside out revealed an inner mirror like surface, which he used to look himself all over and ensure there were no exposed reflective surfaces.

Within a few minutes, he was out of the airlock and standing on the hull underneath the bottom starboard wing. The course he had set the Harris adrift on would take it drifting just past the Long Range Cruiser from the side and slightly behind it at a high relative speed. As the cruiser was already turned around and breaking towards Fort Donalds, this was the only logical approach as passing behind the mammoth thrusters of the cruiser would be suicide. Thus he had had to get in front of the cruiser before setting the course.

Winston placed the metal cylinder upon the hull of the Harris and pressed a button on it - then, taking a last visual look of the trajectory of the Harris and the location of the cruiser jumped carefully back towards it, changing his body's trajectory for a close pass. Seconds later, the timer triggered on the cylinder, and it began to act as a small rocket, slowly setting the Harris into an uncontrolled spin for a few minutes before detaching and drifting off into space.

The Harris started slipping behind him, as it was tractored into slowing down by the Courier. It was too late to abort now, as he wouldn't be able to get back to the ship.

A black figure moving across the blackness of space, Mack Winston removed a purely mechanical, spring-loaded harpoon from his utility belt. He did this slowly, lest a sensor somewhere notice anything changing in the background of stars.

He waited as he passed just by the cruiser at a high relative speed, until he could see the opposite side of the ship clearly. Had he hit the ship at this speed, he would have been quickly dispersed into a thin red layer of paint across the duralium surface.

Aiming the harpoon carefully, he fired the device towards the centre of the face of the cruiser now receding behind him. A small magnet sprung out of the harpoon attached to a micro thin elastic cable. The magnet hit the hull and held fast, as the elastic line playing out to its full length.

As the slack ran out in the cable, it became taut against Winston's belt where it was attached. As it stretched against his weight, it began dropping off his speed relative to the cruiser. Finally his relative speed was zero, and the line had stretched as far as it was going to with him attached to it. He let the line spring him back for a few seconds, accelerating him as it did so, before cutting the line off at his belt.

This time he was approaching slowly from the opposite side, and had curved around somewhat to be passing in a thin oval around the cruiser. Just before he made his second pass, he fired a second harpoon at the hull, this one with a shorter and less flexible cable. It held fast onto the near side just as he passed, becoming taut as he came around the other side, and swinging him inwards over the opposite face.

He came down feet first onto the duralium hull, and cut the second cable before it could pull him back off the ship. Pulling out a third harpoon, he secured himself to the hull underneath him before he could drift off, and switched on his magnetic boots.

There was no sign that anyone had seen him approach and make contact. He'd been accurate on the jump, and cables so that he hadn't needed to risk detection by using air jets for course corrections. Also, no-one ever looked for a human sized object trying to sneak through your scans with a non reflective EVA suit and non reflective mechanical equipment.

A little too proud of himself, Winston un-harnessed his compact plasma rifle from his back, and assembled it. Taking one last look around, he armed the rifle and made his way over to the nearest airlock.

*

"There goes the last of the chaff!" yelled Frantic as another missile impacted the shields.

"Taking damage back here!" Tracey yelled back as she desperately tried to pick off the incoming fighters with the mining laser faster than they could arrive in the area.

Frantic took the Taipan into a steep dive to evade another fighter wing attack, just as an incoming jump signature warning blared. Tracey yelled from the rear of the ship "Looks like the Navy's arriving, Fran."

"Bugger!" Frantic yelled back and brought the Taipan out of the dive, aiming head on at an incoming wing. Leaving one hand on the flight controls, he placed the other hand on the hyperspace control panel and rested it there, then began firing at the enemy indiscriminately.

A couple of explosions rocked the enemy pack, but a lot of fire was incoming and the Taipan rocked under the bombardment. Increasing thrust to maximum, Frantic kept firing while keeping a close watch on the shield indicator. 31%.....24%.....17%.....a yell rang out "Fran!".....8%.....lining up an Osprey X in his sights, Frantic emptied the last of the laser temperature into it, causing the enemy ship to explode into pieces, then quickly he lifted the safety flap and punched the mis-jump button on the control panel.

Witchspace enveloped them, and the enemy fire ceased.

The hyperspace tunnel drifted inexorably by until it seemed to tremor unexpectedly, and a series of concentric rings appeared dead ahead, spreading out towards them as if an explosion had been detonated in witchspace. The first of the rings hit, causing the ship to shudder and vibrate. The next rings hit with less force, as if riding over waves on an ocean craft.

The scene ahead changed abruptly, and the hyperspace tunnel bulged, twisted, and finally collapsed towards the source of the distortion. The Taipan was pulled towards it with ever increasing speed, as it began losing stability and began rotating as if adrift.

Lacking the resources to do anything about it, Tracey and Frantic held fast to their crash webbing and waited. The shield indicator dropped from the newly acquired 35%, slowly at first, then accelerating down to 0%. With a final lurch, the ship was pulled into the distortion and vomited out of witchspace, gyrating wildly.

Fort Donalds...

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens, Winston]

Dreyfus entered the bridge, and like a dog seeking out its favourite spot, turned to the command chair. It was empty. Around it, the crew of the *Azure Sunset* busied themselves with their usual tasks. There was no idle chit chat, but Dreyfus could attribute that to his own presence. He had developed a reputation amongst the crew, something between respect and fear. The main viewscreen showed the slowly approaching sphere that was Capitol. Above it, but not yet visible, was the target. Around them were myriad other ships of varying types. Dutifully, the helmsman was following the course given them by traffic control. Now was not the time to stand out. Soon, however, they would be in range, and the time for subtlety was ended. In the top right corner of the display, a large timer counted down the ETA for firing time. Thirty six, twenty four. Thirty six, twenty three.

"Tactical." Dreyfus said quietly. The named officer started. She was the nery type, but Dreyfus knew she was gifted in terms of spatial awareness. She was an excellent tactical officer, on a par with any in Marcus' own forces. Norman might hire borderline-psychotics and have a crew with an average social status of below pond scum, but he didn't hire fools.

"Yes sir." She said, twisting round, panic in her face. "Yes? What's the matter?"

"What're the closest ships with any firepower to the station itself?"

The officer checked her panels, her head flicking this way and that nervously.

"The *Achenar's Son* and escort. 10 Imp Explorers. But they're still outside the exclusion zone, and on the far side of the station. If they don't react until we breach that zone, they won't get to us in time."

Dreyfus nodded. All within the established parameters. As long as everything in the ship performed to its optimum level, he couldn't see the plan failing. The two gamblers were over muttering in their corner. It sounded conspiratorial. Then again, *everything* they did was their own little conspiracy.

Dreyfus strode determinedly towards them, his booting ringing out a tattoo of irritation on the deck. "Where's the Heir?" he demanded.

"Norman's stateroom." The shorter one said tersely. The other chuckled and beat a rhythm on his panel in appreciation.

"What's so... what was the bet?" Dreyfus said tiredly.

"Whether you or Sam would ask first." The shorter one fished an ingot of platinum out of his shirt pocket and handed it across to his companion. The ingot was filthy, and had probably travelled from hand to hand hundreds of times. Dreyfus bit back the acid responses that burned on his tongue, and smiled at the man.

"And where, pray, is Commander Kemper?"

The two exchanged glances. "Well, the two of us have a little wager riding on that..."

Dreyfus walked off towards the stateroom. The door was closed, and Dreyfus' soft knock brought no response. Frowning, he keyed in an override. The door opened to darkness, never a good sign. Dreyfus could still make out Marcus, sitting cross legged on the floor in front of Norman's desk.

"Lights." Dreyfus said, and in response, the room lit up. Marcus stirred from his position and looked up. He looked around, as if surprised to find himself where he was. He smiled at Dreyfus like the child he had been when Dreyfus had first been assigned to the young royal.

"An end, my friend. An end. We are close. We are so close I can taste it. After this, my life opens like a flower to the sun of the Empire." Marcus suddenly grinned again, but it was a more adult, rueful, knowing grin. "I'm sorry, Dreyfus. Of all the people who deserve to *not* hear my speeches, you are first on the list. How goes the ship?"

"I am surprised you have to ask." Dreyfus said tartly. While he didn't explicitly distrust the crew, he was uneasy about Kemper's disappearing act. Tracking him down would take too much time. Marcus needed to be there to quell dissent. Their control over the ship was too fragile to be toyed with.

"I... just needed a moment." Marcus looked away. Dreyfus was equal parts intrigued and concerned. He crossed to Marcus and picked up the book from where it lay on the ground, next to Marcus. It was hundreds of years old and very fragile, so Dreyfus opened it extremely carefully at the bookmark.

"As I intend to prosper and repent!
So, thrive I in my dangerous attempt
Of hostile arms! myself myself confound!
Heaven and fortune bar my happy hours!" Marcus recited, before Dreyfus had even opened the book.

"Richard the Third? Hardly an auspicious choice!" Dreyfus snapped the book shut in annoyance.

"Save his foolishness in making unnecessary enemies, he was an ideal king, don't you think?" Marcus answered a question with a question, reversing Dreyfus' habit. He climbed gracefully to his feet, wincing slightly at the still unhealed stab wound. Turning away from Dreyfus, Marcus moved over to one wall.

Norman's cabin was not to Marcus' tastes, Dreyfus knew. It was a gaudy shrine to the magnificent career, both legal and illegal, of one Norman Hesketh Mosser. Banners and medals from Norman's Imperial Service poked out from shell casings set on plaques and full colour holo reprints of his greatest escapades. Marcus stopped in front of one such holo, one of the Emperor personally awarding a very young Norman some gaudy monstrosity of a medal. Dreyfus recognised the photo, which was now illegal to possess or distribute within the Empire, on pain of death. The embarrassment of an Emperor can be a dangerous thing. Marcus tapped the surface of the holo.

"This is what is wrong with the Empire." he said absently. "We reward rogues as if they were heroes, merely because they dazzle us with glory. Yet I seek to make men and women worship me. I am of the old school of Empire. I am a Hero." Marcus infused bitterness into the word. "My bloodline stretches from Caesar to Napoleon to Hitler to Duval and then on to me. Heroes, butchers all. Marcus Toutarien! Tout a rien! All or nothing. I wish to be the last of these creatures."

"You will." Dreyfus said, with a force that made his friend look around. "The Empire needs you, not as its sword, but as its teacher. What we do is necessary, it is finite, it will end, and we will begin to build an Empire based upon nobility, not baseness. An Empire of human intelligence, not a dictatorship of animal brutality. There is little glory in that, but it is necessary."

"Necessary?" Marcus said, but Dreyfus saw him straighten his shoulders in response to the challenge. It was one of the few bodily tics that Dreyfus had not been able to drive out of his charge, and for now he was glad of it. "Maybe it is. How close are we?"

"Thirty odd minutes. The tactical projections have played out as we thought. We have a free run in."

Marcus strapped his holster back on again, the familiar ambiguous smile playing over his lips.

"I have set my life upon a cast, and I will stand the hazard of the die, What about Kemper?"

"Vanished. I suspect he's either plotting or sulking. Either way I don't think he has the initiative to act on his own." Dreyfus finished uncertainly. Sam's absence bothered him more than it should. Norman and he had seemed very close, and although Dreyfus didn't know of any other clones developed enough to be defrosted and imprinted, he was still uneasy.

"A problem?" Marcus had detected his nuance and cocked his head at the shorter man.

"I just worry that -"

A surprised shout penetrated from the bridge proper. In a single smooth motion, Marcus drew his pistol and leapt out the open door, the teacher vanishing in an instant as the panther reasserted itself.

*

An awesome sight greeted us as we came closer to Fort Donalds.

We'd been accelerating towards Capitol steadily since we'd escaped from Preston. While he didn't have a hope of catching us with his Imperial Explorer, we had to assume that he might have other ships out there, and try to get to Fort Donalds as quickly as possible.

After six to eight hours of acceleration, Bec called us into the main cabin. I'd been sleeping, but there's a certain volume and vocabulary that Bec uses that tends to override that.

"Get your hairy heavy-worlder butt in here, Red!"

"What? What? WHAT?" I groused, stumbling into the cabin wearing nothing but boxer shorts. I'd done it with Bec lots of times, but Catherine's raised eyebrows showed that it wasn't a habit I'd (ahem) exposed her to before.

"Check the Long Range Active. Check the registry."

By Catherine's calculations, we would beat the *Azure Sunset* to the station by between one and a half and two hours. If we knew the right people to talk to, we could get the Imperial Protectorate ships into place to protect the station pretty quickly. They'd be mincemeat before the HPA, but the *Azure Sunset* was still only one ship, versus dozens. The only problem was that we didn't know the right people to talk to. The right people to talk to were also the ones who would probably order our immediate execution should we burst in and start babbling about evil plots and heirs to the throne.

The first indication of action at Fort Donalds was the immense amount of 'chatter' in the area. Ships were talking to each other constantly, rather than the staccato exchanges of essential information which was more typical. On certain frequencies, it was white noise. Most of the transmissions were coded, and we had neither the need nor the time to decrypt them. As we got closer to Capitol, our Long Range Active began to ping as new contacts revealed themselves with each new sweep. First of all was the familiar return of a space station, Fort Donalds, our destination and the plotters' target.

Then came the weird bit. Other contacts began to pop up clustered around Fort Donalds. At this range only the largest ships would show, though new ones popped up as their profiles became visible and the IR's registered on the scanner. There were a lot of large ships. *really* large ships. The thirty LRCs were easily recognisable, although I'd never seen this many in the one place at the one time. The others took longer to identify. Imperial Navy Cruisers and Destroyers, massive ships, stuffed to the gills with all manner of lethal weaponry, including batteries of Nuclear Weapons capable of turning verdant worlds into lifeless rocks. These were attended by fleets of Imperial Couriers, like clouds of dragonflies around wedge-tailed eagles.

Alongside this fearsome fleet were Panther Clippers and Imperial Traders. This was the cream of the Imperial Merchant Fleet, billions upon billions of credits worth of craft. I felt like one of those sad bastard who sit watching space terminals, eagerly waiting the arrival of a new class of ship to mark down in their logbooks.

It was a sight as impressive as it was imposing. And it was also bloody impossible to park in. When we came within an AU, the Comms lit up as we were hailed by Fort Donalds. By this time, I *had* managed to get dressed.

"Before you go any further, DE-013, there aren't any berths available in Fort Donalds and there won't be any until the convoy leaves. I've knocked back bribes of five thousand already, so don't even try."

Bec and I exchanged glances. For an Imperial Official to publicly declare that they wouldn't accept a bribe was absolutely unheard of. These were extraordinary times.

"Don't worry... we're not interested in bribing you." Bec lied politely. "Can I ask a question, though?"

"No!" the thin and harried voice on the other end said, then coughed. She sounded like she was working on the very edge of her physical and mental limits. I wasn't surprised. Having the responsibility for Traffic control for the number of ships around the Imperial Seat, where the most minor traffic accident would be a public relations disaster and a potential personal death-sentence. I'd be feeling a little stressed in her position too. "All right, what is it?"

Bec smiled, and a wheedling tone entered her voice.

"The question is... is the Chong family port filled at the moment, I was just wondering whether the Duchess, my mother, was using it at the moment or whether-"

"Bioscan me an Ident and I'll think about it." The voice said tiredly. While bribery wasn't appropriate, the other great social lubricant of the Empire, rank, was still seemingly well and thriving.

Bec placed her hand flat on the panel, coded and sent the bioscan.

"Your family has a private *port* on Fort Donalds?" I was incredulous. Bec shrugged without a hint of shame. It was the way they did things in the Empire. Whatever could be sold would be sold, and however prestige could be rewarded, it would be.

There was no point arcing up about politics at this point, anyway. It seemed to have worked. A bleep came from the Comms system - a course and timing points, leading to a point on the station a fair way from the main entrance.

"OK fine then. Here's your entry window. Don't deviate from it unless you want to end up being worn by a Long Range Cruiser. And an exit window might not come up until after the Convoy Departs, so be grateful for what you've got OK... uh.... my Lady. Fort Donalds Traffic Control, out. " The traffic controller remembered her manners (or, more accurately, her class and the deference demanded to someone higher) and signed off with a strained courtesy.

"She's right about the course." I said thoughtfully. "With this many ships about, it'll take a long time to manoeuvre safely around them. The course we've been given takes nearly an hour."

"Which we don't have." Catherine said grimly. "We have no idea how we're going to stop the *Azure Sunset*, and little enough time to work with. Bec, you think you could halve the transit time?"

"Only if you've got a violent aversion to dying." Bec said grimly. "This course is based on the position that ships are *going* to be in over the next forty five minutes. If I try to fly it too quickly, I'll run into a ship that hasn't gotten out of the way or into a ship that's passing through our transit lane. Then, when we touch down, Traffic Control will try to have us arrested."

Catherine laughed, clear as a silver bell. "Hell, I *work* in Traffic Control. If you'd done something like this when I was on duty, I'd have you shot as you disembarked."

"What the hell?" I shrugged, "In for a credit, in for a megacredit."

What followed was the most exhilarating twenty minutes of my existence. Catherine monitored the long-range active scanner, I monitored the short. We kept up a constant stream of verbal indications to Bec as to where the ships were. For the first ten minutes, it was relatively easy, as only occasional civilian craft dotted the outer perimeter. Then it began to get hairy. We were going at least twice as fast as we should have been, and Catherine would barely shout out three contacts on the Active Long Range before I'd catch them on the short range and give Bec warning as to the location, velocity and course of each of them. She'd then adjust our course by just as much as it needed to avoid the ships, whilst not deviating too much off our course. Evading one ship would take us right into the path of another, and an even more desperate manoeuvre would be required to avoid a collision. The Comms beeped regularly with the shrieks of outraged captains. I couldn't blame them, but wasn't going to argue with them, either. I turned off the Comms.

The ships got bigger and the traffic heavier the further in we got. Before long we were skimming along the flanks of Panther Clippers and Imperial Traders and squeezing through holes with bare seconds between us and the prow of another ship. Catherine had abandoned the long-range and was now watching the top "hemisphere" on the Short Range. We worked to a rhythm, with Catherine shouting out her report, and me following a beat later.

"Two coming in ahead at 12 o'clock heading for 3, slow and certain."

"Three Imp Traders course eight going on two, coming fast and crazy."

"We're on an intercept course with a fat Panther Clipper, 10 and staying there."

"Guys, we have a problem." Bec interrupted.

"A swarm of Ospreys seven going five. They should disperse. What's the problem?"

"Still on course with the Panther. Yeah, what's up?"

"We're coming in too fast. I miscalculated. The retros won't compensate. We'll smear ourselves ... sorry."

Bec fore bore from speaking as she deftly swung the ship round the box-like shape of the Panther Clipper in front of us at high speed, the flare of our manoeuvring jets visibly flashing off their hull.

"... smear ourselves over the front of the station. I need to do a flip."

"Formation of Boas and an LRC swinging slowly 9 to 7. Hole on the port side of the formation. A flip?"

Flip manoeuvres are common as drunks on Riedquat, turning the ship 180 degrees and using the powerful Prime Mover rather than the punier retro rockets to slow the ship. Usually they're used when travelling on an

interplanetary basis, and where there is no change in direction, only velocity. The idea of doing a flip, then performing high-level evasive moves, all while facing *backwards*, gave me pause.

"Bec, are you... three Lions, coming six through eight... loose formation." was about the only chance I got to question. Bec was already stabbing at the controls, cutting all jets except those which brought us around so that our nose was facing directly AWAY from Fort Donalds. I felt the thrum of the prime mover vibrate through the ship as Bec fired it, slowing our hectic progress. It was still hectic, and we now had to totally reverse our perceptions, effectively thinking in reverse. Bec had it even harder. In fact, it was madness. How the hell do you literally reverse hundreds of hours of training and several years of experience while trying not to crash into a swarm of ships moving in seemingly random patterns, while still maintaining a preset course, all the while keeping in mind that if you were a trifle too fast, you'd end up as an interesting Constrictor-shaped paint job for a repair crew on Fort Donalds.

What followed was the most terrifying eight minutes in my life. Catherine and I had to squeeze our brains into our heads backwards to give Bec accurate information on where the ships were coming from and going to. The ship was going slower now, but the ships were larger and more closely packed together. Sometimes I thought we'd be ground between two LRCs, only for Bec to spin the ship like a coin and slot us through the gap. Her hands blurred over the controls and the soft beeps that announced each button press flowed into a soft drone of white noise.

I saw sweat streaming down Bec's arms, and her hands grew sweaty on the controls as the white noise rose a pitch. The hands themselves did not tremble, however, and the lines on her face were smooth and unfussed. She seemed not to be fazed by the fact that the axis of the ship had reversed and that every change she made was making the opposite correction to every fibre in her piloting brain. At the same time, she kept the Prime Mover burning bright. I watched the relative velocity meter crawl downwards, ever so gradually.

At some point, Catherine and I stopped speaking, as Bec had to rely totally on visual sighting, the fore, aft, port and starboard cameras being the only reference point she could rely on. The cabin became silent, except for the sound of Bec's suddenly loud breathing and occasional gasp at a close escape. Catherine had her eyes tightly closed and her hands gripping the edge of her console. I didn't blame her. I was busy distracting myself by keeping an eye on the performance specs of the Prime Mover. If we had problems with *that*, missing Fort Donalds, entering the atmosphere and being blown to bits by the ground-based defences of Capitol would be the most optimistic possible outcome.

"Will they scramble the Vipers?" I mused aloud.

"Probably not." Catherine said, without opening her eyes. "The last thing they'd need is more flying objects in the field of control."

"And we're *through!*" Bec interrupted us.

I raised my eyes to the main port, to be greeted by the prow of an ancient Anaconda stabbing at us. I shrieked and threw up my hands in front of my face. Then, I opened my eyes again. Bec had calmly lifted us over the ship. And... she was right. We'd made it into the exclusion zone around the station, where a handful of refuelling tenders chugged slowly out towards the massive fleet they were expected to service. Some of them might take days to properly negotiate and return the same course that we'd traversed in... twenty three minutes?

"Are we on line for the docking bay?" I asked incredulously.

"We should be. I followed the course they set for us. Yep, there we go. We're backwards, but we're on track."

Nodding, I reached for the comms control and tried to raise Fort Donalds Traffic Control.

"Fort Donalds Station, this is DE-013, do you -"

"What in the name of the Emperor do you think you are bloody doing, you morons? If you'd caused one accident with that little display, just one, I would have personally flayed you alive using the goddamn paperwork I'm going to have to fill out... no! I would have *smothered* you in it, no, I would have *crushed* you with the weight of it." The traffic controller was back, and the borderline sleepwalker of our last contact had been replaced by a jagged-edged, acid spitting demon! If nothing else, Bec's piloting had certainly woken her up. I could commiserate. After watching my life flash before my eyes, and then have time for a rerun, I didn't think I'd be able to sleep for a week.

"Thank you very much for your advice." I said sweetly. "We'll take it under consideration. Now I'd suggest you trigger the release for the Chong family dock, otherwise we'll end up ploughing the side of the station. That would make spectacular news footage I'm sure, but..."

"Doors are opening." Catherine muttered, amused. I glanced ahead and saw a square of light flicker into existence on the upper surface of one of the arms of the station as the door opened. Landing lights blossomed on the hull, guiding us in.

"... thank you ever so much, control. And while I'm here, could I take the opportunity to congratulate you on the excellent approach course you plotted for us. It worked like a dream." I could almost hear the controller gnashing her teeth. I was laying it on a bit thick, but I was giddy with having survived.

"Just. You. Wait." Said the suddenly calm voice of the controller. "No, I mean it. Wait in the dock. I'll be coming down... *personally*."

With that ominous statement, the controller signed off. Ahead of us, the lights of the station beckoned like a finger, drawing us in like temptation.

"Bec?"

"Yeah, Red?"

"Do you think she means we're in some sort of trouble?" The wounded, puzzled tone in my voice got the expected response.

"Ow! Bec, you didn't have to hit me so hard! I saw that, you threw something, Catherine, I saw that!"

*

Security on the ship was a shambles for some reason, thought Winston. Silently he lowered himself down to the floor from the piping above the doorway a couple of paces behind the passing guard.

Using the guards footsteps to mask his own, he kept pace with the guard till he reached the bridge door. The guard swiped his access key as Mack crept silently past behind the guard, and the door opened. The guard looked back up the corridor he had come down, and entered. Timing the move with the guard's second step through the door, Mack slipped his knife up and under the guards throat, and brought his plasma rifle to bear on the room under the guard's right armpit.

In the few seconds before anyone noticed anything wrong, he took a quick inventory of the bridge. No Mosser.

The first person to notice the shadowy figure hiding behind the frozen guard was one of the gamblers. He'd bet on Mosser still being alive, and thus had been keeping a close watch on all the exits. "Hey! It's Mosser!"

Before he could state his position or make any demands, Winston noticed two figures enter the bridge from a ready room. As he brought his rifle around, one of the figures was thrown roughly to the ground by the other, and the whine of a weapon being powered up sounded. Mack fired instantly, but the figure was already moving across the room and firing back. The Deathwrecker blast hit the guard square on the chest, burning through the thin armor, and threw the body and Mack to the ground behind a console.

The other guards on the bridge had drawn their own weapons as the crew scrambled for cover, and all the doors on the bridge were being sealed, including the one Mack had just entered by. There was something very dangerous about an enemy that would not hesitate to kill one of it's own if they got in the way. Mack sensed every second drifting by, and knew he had to do something fast.

Mack rolled over to crouch on his back, and dragged the guard's corpse up over him. He could hear the other guards fanning out around the bridge on the other side of the console. Propping the guard up with his legs, he shoved the guard up away from the door as hard as he could. Turning around as he did so he scrambled, then dove for the closing bridge door. Laser bursts came from all around the bridge, frying the already dead corpse as it sprawled past the console. All lasers except one, which nicked the bottom of Mack's boot as his foot disappeared out the door. Seconds later the door shut completely, and sealed itself tight.

Mack jolted to his feet and raised his pulse rifle, but the corridor was empty. He stamped out his smoking boot, and ran for cover, keeping one eye on the bridge door.

"What? No Norman on the bridge? It didn't make sense that anyone else would ever be commanding Norman's ship, let alone with the seeming approval of Norman's crew.

Mack reached a bulk head and pressed his back up against the wall next to it. None of this made any sense unless... oh no, Norman couldn't already be dead, could he? Mack swung his artificial arm and created a large dent

in the wall. DAMN! Mack waited until his arm stopped ringing from the blow. If Norman was dead, then he was either dead for good or... with new enthusiasm, Mack brought his rifle round and made his way up to the closest intersection. Norman had once casually mentioned a 'special' medical bay. Mack could only hope that this particular bay had more in common with resurrection than recuperation.

Mack checked the intersection, and started to move forward, but was brought up by a noise at the edge of hearing. Moving silently he shrank back toward the closest bulk head and disappeared behind it. Listening intently, he could hear voices coming down the corridor. One of the voices sounded like Norman Mosser.

Flipping over his pulse rifle, Mack made a tactical reload - swapping the slightly drained plasma pack with a fresh one.

*

Marcus stood and dusted himself off. He addressed Dreyfus formally, saying "Good work soldier". Taking the command chair he said "Smith, I want this bridge sealed tight. Assassination attempts do not bother me, but I will not let them interfere with our duties. Everyone, back to your posts and prepare to fire".

Marcus' scanner readout showed their unwanted Courier escort breaking off. And just in time too, as Fort Donalds was now in visual range.

*

Lazarus

[Frantic, Norman Mosser, Red Ravens]

I am Lord Norman Hesketh Mosser of Facece and I am ELITE. I am sixteen months old but have the memories of a lifetime inside me. I am a clone of a clone of a clone. I am merely a vessel for Norman Mosser, the assassin, the pirate, the mercenary, the man you hire to fight entire star systems and murder heads of state. I am only still in existence due to the fact that someone somewhere still has use of me. Either that or there still isn't anyone good enough to take me down. It is wise to consider the former true. At the moment I am in the process of using stolen Federation weapons technology to assist in the rise of a strong Emperor. Strong enough to collapse the Federation perhaps. It is entirely possible I have been brainwashed to want this at an early age, back in the first vessel for my sentience when the great and glorious Empire educated me and built me into who I am.

To the present though. I am in what my memories, fractured though they are tell me is a stasis pod. My last memory was participating in an impression of a clone. It could be me, it might not. No doubt someone will tell me when I emerge. I could have just suffered complications, or I may have died and someone is trying to bring me back. If that is true, then why have they not impressed me with my most recent memories? No doubt this will be explained as well.

I also have itchy nuts. I'm going to have to wait until this pod opens before I can scratch them.

Arse.

*

Due to a very slight miscalculation in our deceleration, we didn't so much *land* in the dock as have a sort of controlled crash. It made a pretty mess of the maintenance equipment, and Bec winced at the destruction to her family property. The front landing assembly crumpled like so many dry sticks, and the impact made our heads bounce around like Merlin Dancing Fish. But at the end of it...

"Right? All alive? Let's get the frell out of here."

We shucked our shock webbing and raced out the airlock. The landing gantry hadn't extended (probably due to the crash), so we had to jump down to the deck. I rose, dusted myself off, and was struck dumb with horror. The front of the ship was a mangled mess, suspended by a single strut on the landing gear from crashing to the deck.

"Oh shit!"

"Don't worry about the ship now, Red. We'll either have the chance to patch it up, or we're going to be blasted into liquid faux-bovine meat by the HPA. Not a worry. "

Bec led the way. This was her home system, her family's dock, and finally... her fight. Bec was a woman possessed. Bec dragged us into a walk in wardrobe which sat improbably next to the space dock. At first, I thought she was leading us into a secret passageway, but she had more important thing on her mind.

"In here. We need to change!"

Catherine protested. "We don't have time, Security will be here in -"

"And we'll be spotted in an instant if we look like a trio of raggedy-arsed bounty hunters. Shut up and pick a dress. On the left, near the back should be near your size. You too, Red."

"A dress?"

"Dress uniform. Right side front. My brother was an Imperial Cadet. Count yourself lucky."

We dressed as quickly as possible. It was easiest for Bec, who was used to pulling on haute couture and securing its myriad straps and buckles in no time flat. Catherine and I had come from poorer stock, and were making rather heavy weather of the accoutrements of nobility. I was poised on one leg, pulling on the other boot when serendipity struck. I was hopping around a bit in the helpless way you do when you're trying to pull on a boot. With a crash, the inevitable happened and I went arse over. Bec and Catherine rushed up. Both were almost fully dressed, Bec in a slick pantsuit, with alternating stripes of scarlet and tan. It looked expensive and fitted her like a prophylactic. She looked stunning, the opulence so obviously her birthright that it gave me a pang. Catherine was more sedately dressed in a dark blue dress with silver trim.

"What happened?"

"Hurry UP, Red! No time for your slapstick!"

"Not my fault!" I retorted from a prone position. "I tripped over something."

Besides, my pratfalls have far more to do with clumsiness than comic timing.

Bec advanced and looked at what I'd tripped over. I was surprised to see her face break into a childlike smile.

"Good God! Memory Lane, next three turn offs!"

I'd tripped over what looked like a battered looking box about one metre by point five with a pair of tracks underneath. Its surface was covered in dust and pitted with dents and scratches. A faded letter V in red paint adorned the side. The top had a variety of panels and joins, some of which seemed to be packed with dust. It looked as old as the hills. Bec laid a palm on the surface for a second, and I heard a set of four tones, spaced by a second and semi-tone each. A panel on the top jerkily rose up, raising the head clear of the top of the box. A scratchy whirring deep in the body indicated that long-unused servos were being forced (however reluctantly) back into life. The head was just a rectangular box with sensors on top and a speaker at one end. A servile, yet posh sounding voice issued from the robot, it's deep plummy tones indicating that while it may be a robot, it was still serving Quality.

"Systems check. Please note that software is out of date. For an upgrade, please contact your nearest Gutamaya Industries retail outlet. Mistress Rebecca, what a pleasant surprise!"

Bec bent down and (to our surprise) patted the head of the robot.

"Hello Vlad. Long time no see."

"By current station time," the robot cocked its head thoughtfully as it accessed the Space Station's systems "eight years, two weeks, twelve hours. A pleasure to see you nonetheless. How may I be of assistance this fine day (albeit with a 95% percent chance of mild precipitation within outlying areas of Capitol)?"

"Help us save the station." Bec said grimly. "We need to make it to Station Control very quickly."

"I can certainly guide you to that particular area." The robot dipped its head agreeably. The body language on such an inhuman frame was odd, but I saw Bec's lips twitch in a smile at the mannerism

"Vlad?" I asked Bec.

"V'alet and 'L'ight services 'A'ssistant 'D'roid. He'll be handy 'cos he knows the station backwards. He's been in my family for over a century."

"In fact, Mistress Rebecca, my exact in-service date was-"

"Er, that's all right, Vlad. These two are Red and Catherine. They're friends."

A few soft beeps issued from the robot as he registered our identities and probably set itself a reminder to not inappropriately offend such important associates of the Chong family. Even if an analysis of Red's voice patterns indicated that he was most likely a Federation Dog who was a sworn enemy of everything that Vlad was programmed to believe in and protect. Regardless, Vlad appeared to note Bec's apparent tolerance and most likely cancelled several plans of anti-terrorist action, both lethal and non-lethal.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintances sir and madam. How may I assist?"

A minute or so later, three well dressed young nobles inched carefully out into the dock. Their hair must have seemed strangely dishevelled for people of rank.

The shortest and most fashionably dressed one (Bec) nodded to the robot behind us. With a terribly unwell sounding clatter, Vlad zoomed out from the dock and started down a corridor. We followed, only to be pulled up as a sound like a stuck door mechanism filled the corridor. Vlad turned for no apparent reason and began to run itself repeatedly into a wall. After a few, very painful seconds, his movement motor drive stopped. We all crowded round, with Bec's face set in a mournful cast. The robot's head turned round and addressed Bec in tones of muffled embarrassment.

"I do apologise, Mistress Rebecca. My tracks do not appear to have been serviced in some time. The belt on my left track appears to be slipping somewhat. I appear to have deviated somewhat from our original course."

"Some help." muttered Catherine in disgust.

Vlad reversed and turned around "Perhaps these representatives of station security will be able to assist in getting me serviced?"

"Great, now he's hallucinating!" Catherine threw up her hands and turned away, only to gasp as she came face to face with the crude, unfinished features of an Imperial Clone Soldier. There were two of them, dressed in the hopelessly garish purple and orange livery of Imperial Domestic Security and armed with the standard rapid fire station sidearm. Both had their weapons drawn, though their arms were at their sides. While not pointing directly at us, the snub-nosed pistols were not for show.

"The Chief said we was to keep you here until she came down." said one thickly.

"Yes. That she did." said the other, identically ugly one in a similarly uninflected monotone.

"Then she said that we was going to help her hurt you." Clone One's dull eyes had started to glitter.

"Yes. She was very specific" affirmed Clone Two.

I gauged our chances. Not good. Clone Troopers are mass produced versions of the Clone Agent we'd met earlier, matured quicker and without the subtle genetic artistry of their cousins. However, they were just as strong, just as incorruptible and just as capable of sickening, inhuman brutality. They were also both armed, while all I had was the stupid ceremonial sabre that came with the outfit. There were three of us to two of them, but Bec's value in a physical fight was questionable. I exchanged glances with Catherine, who shook her head slightly.

"Gentlemen, surely we can come to some sort of -" I started to wheedle, but shut my trap as both weapons whipped up to point directly at my head.

"You sound like a Federation Pig-Dog." Clone Two took the lead this time, his voice suddenly coloured blood-red by pre-programmed, frighteningly intense hatred.

"We were grown to kill Federation Pig-Dogs." Clone One added, the glitter in his eyes suddenly a dull, roaring fire. "We like to do it, too."

Though neither Bec nor Catherine took a step backwards, I could feel them lean away from the field of fire. I spread my hands slowly, to indicate that I didn't have a weapon and wasn't suicidal. The two clone troopers took a step away from each other, so they could cover me from separate angles.

"Shouldn't you wait for the Chief?" Bec said nervously. "You wouldn't want to kill someone without orders would you?"

Without looking at Bec, Clone One answered "We've got Special Dispensation when it comes to Federation Pig-Dogs."

"He's right. Special Dispensation." echoed Clone Two. Then a thought seemed to strike him, "As well as for traitors and supporters of the enemy." The gun swung round to cover Bec and Catherine. "We've got Special Dispensation for them, too. Special Dispensation for Individual Discretion when it comes to traitors and supporters of the enemy."

"And for Federal Pig-Dogs." Clone One said, a bit miffed that that his original Special Dispensation was being displaced by the other's johnny-come-lately Special Dispensation.

It was like a display of deadpan comedy. Emotion was almost unreadable on the blunt, blocky faces of the Clone Troopers, and their voice didn't stray from the dull robotic monotone. It would have been quite funny if I hadn't been so sure that they were going to kill us, with or without the Chief.

I prepared myself for a desperate last assault, but was distracted by the deep, aristocratic voice of Vlad.

"Gentlemen, I believe I may be able to assist in the resolution of this impasse."

Everyone's eyes dipped downwards to the 'droid. He looked up helpfully at the two Clone Troopers. A pair of panels opened on the front of his body. The two Clone Troopers looked on in puzzlement. There was a brief moment of whirring and then a lot of things happened quickly. The popping of compressed air preceded a pair of

darts which flew out from Vlad's body, unerringly embedding themselves in the unprotected neck flesh of the two troopers. Neither trooper winced or was otherwise affected by this unexpected assault, and they responded by whipping their pistols around, preparatory to melting the droid. Then an almost-imperceptible sparking played on the visible end of the darts in their necks, and the two troopers began to shake. In an instant, the shaking was an uncontrollable jerking of the limbs and their eyes rolled back in their heads.

The sickening mixture of ozone and burning flesh began to reach our nostrils. Two bodies thumped onto the metal decking and the end of the darts stopped sparking.

"Do all valet droids have wireless tasers fitted?" I asked Bec in some disbelief. She shrugged, grinning.

"Hey, assassinations happen. It's good to have a droid capable of self-defence as well as ironing. Thanks Vlad!"

"My pleasure, Mistress Rebecca. I do, however, regret that I was forced to incapacitate two station guards. It is against the standard programming for Imperial robotic life forms." There was almost a hurt tone in the robot's voice, as if someone had requested him to perform a faux pas as a dinner party trick.

"I know. Thank God my brother Jiao disabled that load of old cobblers. How many directives have you got left that you can't get past?"

"The two hard-coded Imperial Imperatives. To serve my master and protect the Emperor and Royal Family." Bec grunted with satisfaction and patted the droid on the head. "In a rare occurrence, the two are in perfect accord."

*

Ping

Sam turned at this sound as he finished laying out a small assortment of equipment on one of the work surfaces in the infirmary. The stasis pod had finished the reanimation cycle. Professor Hartley and one of the medical orderlies were waiting by the hatch, ready for it to open. Harley was clutching a handful of hypodermics and the orderly was holding a big white fluffy towel.

The hatch opened, shifting upwards and then sliding backwards into the depths of the stasis unit. Norman, who had been lying on his back slowly sat upright and then slid both his legs over the side of the unit and rested his feet on the floor. As the orderly wrapped the towel around him, he scratched his groin absentmindedly.

"May I?"

Norman looked in the direction of Hartley who was proffering a syringe. Norman nodded half-heartedly and Hartley obliged and shot a small amount of stimulant into his arm. Virtually instantly Norman's eyes brightened and he looked up and focussed on Sam.

"Norman, we don't have much time."

"How much?"

Sam consulted his chronometer, "Seventeen minutes and forty two seconds"

"Explain."

"We are in Achenar, nearly in position and the HPA fires in seventeen minutes and thirty five seconds..."

"More stimulants," Norman interrupted

As Hartley obliged, Sam continued, "You were killed interrogating a spy. I don't know what happened..."

"You got in a fight, lost, got shot in the face and then blown up," interrupted Hartley as he supplied Norman with another injection. Norman raised an eyebrow.

"... but it seems to suit Marcus that you are out of the loop for the firing or maybe for good."

"Can you be sure of that? I trust Marcus and respect his judgment."

"What if you tried to abort?"

"He'd subvert rather than attack me openly. Violence isn't his style."

"Either way, we go to the bridge. Now. Don't forget it all goes to shit once we fire and we'll be in for a mighty scrap. Just having you up there will help the crew get our asses out alive."

Norman chuckled, "The myth of Norman Mosser."

"Exactly."

"Time to play the game then. I will need... A pair of trousers, a cup of really strong coffee and a gun."

Sam gestured towards the work surface at the side of the room and bowed, "I took the liberty."

As Norman donned the trousers, Hartley began getting together a selection of Norman's preferred brands of performance enhancing drugs. Norman turned and spoke to Sam, "Did you recover my corpse?"

"Yes, it's next door on a trolley."

Buttoning up his trousers, Norman stalked into the next room and to the gurney where, covered by a sheet his body lay. He whipped the sheet off and looked the corpse up and down. Noticing a piece of thin chain trailing out of the charred and exposed flesh of the body's chest, Norman grasped it and pulled. From deep inside the body's chest the chain pulled out the access card attached to it. Wiping the access card across the body's clothing to clean it, he stuffed it in a pocket. Then, from the tray next to the trolley he picked up his ELITE badge and clipped it to his belt. He glanced back at the corpse, "Shame"

Sam was the only person who noticed the moisture in Norman's eyes. It always happened when Norman saw his own body. For a brief moment Sam pondered as to what effect that would have on someone. Mind you, Norman worked hard at maintaining a semblance of sanity. Quite a large amount of Norman's drug intake was purely to stop space psychosis getting the better of him. Sam shuddered as he remembered the dark days when Norman deliberately left off the drugs. It still sickened him now.

"I'm missing a coffee here." Norman moved to the counter in the stasis room and systematically selected several ampoules and injected himself with a cocktail of drugs. His eyes hardened and his movements became more concentrated, more controlled, more graceful. Turning to the selection of guns Norman picked up a holstered Deathwrecker and clipped it to his belt. The orderly handed Norman a coffee and he sipped it eagerly, closing his eyes as he swallowed. When he opened the again he was fully poised. "How long?"

"Fourteen minutes."

"Right," Norman made for the door and swept out of the infirmary with Sam close behind him. They walked quickly up the corridor, making for the bridge, "Anything I should know?"

"The HPA works fine, we've used it in anger a couple of times. Marcus is subverting the crew and those bloody gamblers on the bridge are arguing over whether you are dead or not. Oh, and we tracted in another spy a few minutes ago apparently. She was unconscious in the command chair of her Harris."

"How did you know she was a spy?"

"Let's just say you could read it on her face."

"Her backup?"

"Wasn't on board. The ship was adrift."

Norman frowned and reached down to his Deathwrecker. It began to hum as it started to charge. Norman felt its languid warmth against his thigh. "Has anyone considered whether her backup has tried to sneak onboard?"

"Why do you think she has backup?"

"A hunch."

"Norman intuition, or merely bullshit?"

Norman smiled, "You know me too well, Sam. Let's just call it a healthy dose of paranoia. Just be glad I'm riding on enough chems to drop a Linglang. Otherwise I'd probably think you were in on the conspiracy too."

Norman's smile was the wrong side of psychotic to be disarming.

*

"Where is Kemper?" Marcus' voice was resonant with suppressed anger. While he was used to people trying to kill him, this latest attempt was coming at a really bad time. The bridge was a shambles, with bodies being dragged away and smoke from stray laser fire hovering like a blanket over peoples heads. They were still on course, at least, and despite the chaos on the bridge, it was excessively unlikely that Fort Donalds traffic control had the faintest idea what had happened.

"I doubt it was him," panted Dreyfus, apparently exhausted after his recent heroics. The subroutine that triggered the panting was there to make sure he displayed at least the symptoms of fatigue, even when his systems were still capable of 100% output. "That man wasn't a crew member. He wasn't looking for you, he was looking for Mosser. He looked straight through you when he saw you. Every member of the crew is fully aware of their Captain's heroic demise."

Dreyfus spoke respectfully and regretfully of the man he'd killed, the hypocrisy annoying, but necessary. Only someone who knew Marcus well would have spotted the creasing of the forehead that showed his amusement at the irony.

"Hmmm," Marcus considered, "unless he's alive and someone wants to kill him again so soon." There was excited whispering from the gamblers at this comment, which both Marcus and Dreyfus ignored. "But I think you're right. You're thinking of those Alliance stowaways?"

"Possibly. Or it could have something to do with that Federation ship we towed in. Either way, we have a problem while he's loose on the ship. If we can't find him and neutralise him, we need to isolate him."

Marcus nodded and closed his eyes. His breathing slowed, then stopped as he considered the problem. Around him, the bridge stilled as every eye trained on Marcus. Dreyfus looked around, curious that the mere act of someone closing their eyes could be of so much fascination to the crew. Marcus didn't only have charisma, he had mystique. Carefully cultivated mystique, it had to be said, but still impressive for all that.

Marcus' eyes snapped open, and a nasty looking grin spread over his face. "Fujiyama!" The security chief looked up. Despite the recent chaos, the man still looked calm and in command. In the wake of the attack, he'd been organising the force to pursue the assassin even before the echoes of laser fire had faded.

"Sir!"

"Recall the searchers. Get them into the HPA bay and make sure they keep it safe. I've got an evil idea."

"If you've got an evil idea, sir, it's my job to help you implement it. Also, my pleasure."

*

We followed the whizzing Vlad along what seemed like a couple of hundred metres of corridor, the droid only occasionally losing control and slamming into the wall. It was annoying, however as it usually took twenty seconds or so for him to recover himself from the high-speed prang and re-orient himself.

"I do apologise, Mistress Rebecca, this tread seems to be giving me a fair bit of trouble on this outing."

"When was your last outing?" I asked impatiently.

"Four year, seven months and two days. I was switched on by your nephew. Master Zhang may also have done some of the damage to my ambulatory systems I am afraid."

"A relative of yours capable of vandalism?" I raised my eyebrows at Bec. Bec opened her mouth to riposte but thought better of it and merely indicated for Vlad to continue.

"How close are we?" she asked tersely. As time wore on, she was increasingly beginning to worry about the *Azure Sunset*. If it got into range before we did... um... whatever it was we were planning on doing... we and a large proportion of the Imperial Glitterati were toast.

"When we turn left at the next intersection, there is one more corridor before the main staging area. After that it is a relatively short distance to the control room."

Catherine made an unhappy sound. "There will be security everywhere in a place that open, especially with the Prince due. We've just got to hope those two security guards haven't been found yet."

The named intersection came up and Vlad skidded around it. A screech from his treads came from around the corner, as if he'd braked suddenly. In response, I skidded to a halt, and put out an arm to stop Bec. She collided into my arm with a 'whuf' of breath exploding from her belly. Though she looked like she would have like to squawk, Bec remained silent, merely shooting me a dirty look. I listened intently. I heard Vlad's motors whirr briefly a couple of times as if he were shifting position. I drew the sword from its sheath on my belt. It was close to useless as a weapon, being shiny as a mirror and as blunt as a toilet roll. At least it would be good for frightening people, then running away.

"Oh dear, it appears that my navigation has not been entirely helpful."

This sounded sufficiently non-confrontational that we moved forwards to peer nervously around the corner. "Helloooo." Bec purred. A wall of masculine pulchritude greeted us, in the form of several semi-clad men with disgustingly well-defined six-packs. They were standing in a tight group, blocking the corridor, looking vacantly into the middle distance. Each was dressed in up-to-the minute Imperial fashions that were, it had to be said, on the skimpy side. Further on, there appeared to be women similarly dressed and... er... endowed. None of them acknowledged our presence. I looked to either side of me. A smile played across Bec's lips, from some private amusement. Catherine was blushing rather furiously. I supposed that the cultures she came from were perhaps a bit more prudish about the display of flesh.

"So who the hell are these people," I growled to Bec. I raised my sword in front of the three of us warningly. The himbos in front of us didn't seem to notice.

Bec laughed. "Jealous, are we? Don't worry, they won't hurt us. Look at their faces."

I lowered my sword and looked at the nearest man, and saw classical features, with neither blemish nor spot nor change of expression. The blonde hair was styled fashionably, but not faddishly. All in all, he seemed to be inoffensive and gorgeous.

It was like looking at an android that hadn't been turned on. The chest (waxed, naturally) rose and fell, which showed that it was at least alive (or, if an android, active). I looked to the next man. Same skimpy clothing, same classic features, black hair and lighter skin. No real other differences. I looked to the next, who had the *same* flesh-worshipping getup, the *same* classic features, red hair and darker skin. I quickly looked back over the other two.

There were slight differences between the three of them but...

"Clones." Catherine read my mind.

"Exactly. Crowd clones."

Catherine's mouth turned into an 'O' of understanding while mine remained the '~' of perplexity.

"Of course, defrosted and programmed for the visit."

"And warehoused next to the main staging area for easy access." Bec nodded at Catherine's quickness.

"Of course!"

I cleared my throat and raised my hand politely.

"Miss Chong! Miss Beaumont! I didn't understand what you said to class! Could you say it again?"

"Copy it off one of your friends after school." Bec fired back.

"So these are clones like the ones that Vlad decked?" Catherine sought more clarification.

"Same process, different purpose."

I pondered this briefly. "What? They were bouncers and these are shop mannequins?"

"Rent-a-crowd is maybe a better description." Catherine corrected dryly. "You know all those massively cheering crowds that you see in Imperial News Broadcasts? A couple of hundred years ago, the Imperial Propaganda

Department decided that real crowds were too unpredictable. They might be indifferent, or worse, boo the wrong person. So they decided to make these up in a clone chamber. Keep them on ice when they don't need them, reanimate them when they needed a crowd scene for a newscast."

I looked anew at the himbos in front of me, this time a little uneasily. They weren't human. They weren't even pseudo-human like the Clone agent, or the troopers, or even the android Dreyfus. All of the above had been designed on a drawing board, but the creatures in front of us hadn't been designed with a shred of self-awareness, intelligence or personality. They truly were mindless, and it made me feel uncomfortable to realise that these things had been given breath without any chance of life.

"Right." I said, trying to shake off my discomfort, "so they won't try to stop us, will they?"

Bec shook her head. "No. They won't. But they won't get out of our way, either. Unless you know what commands they've been programmed with, you can't get them to do anything." Bec moved over and picked up the arm of one of them and raised it in the air. She let it go and it swung back to rest by the clone's side. "Hey, Red, lift me up on your shoulders." Catherine and I looked at each other. Catherine shrugged, and I knelt as Bec climbed on my shoulders. I stood up, holding Bec's knees to support her. "Over next to the male revue, please!" Bec's kicked me gently in the side to direct me. I ruefully considered how much I wanted to buck Bec at this moment, then complied and moved so that Bec could see over their heads.

"Shit!" she said tersely. "I can just see the door, but it looks like forty to fifty metres of solid beefcake slash cheesecake." Bec hopped down off my shoulders, looking disheartened. "No way could we get through here. Even if we had enough weaponry to kill them all, we'd be ages clambering over the bodies."

"You'd kill them all?" I said, feeling a trifle sick.

"They're not alive, Red. Can't kill what's never been alive. Besides, even if they were, a couple of hundred lives are certainly worth the lives of everyone on Fort Donalds. Right?"

I swallowed hard and nodded. Bec was right, but her way of thinking still sickened me. Bec in Imperial Space was a different person, more ruthless and dismissive of life. A person I wasn't sure I liked.

Catherine knelt next to Vlad. "How long would it take us to go around this area?"

Stony silence greeted her query. Catherine sighed. "Bec? Could you tell this damn class-obsessed robot to answer my question."

"Tell her, Vlad." Bec said, with a hint of impatience.

"Approximately twelve minutes as we would have to retrace our steps for some distance." the robot replied immediately. I cursed silently. Time was not on our side.

Catherine walked up to the flesh-wall and began to kneel. I was a bit dumbfounded. Surely she couldn't be perving on... no! But she was staring into the forest of tight buns and tree-trunk thighs with a great deal of interest.

"We can't crawl through." Bec thankfully put a less sleazy interpretation on her actions. "I might fit, but the two of you would get jammed between a clone's thighs. That *would* be an embarrassing place to die, even though I know Red once expressed a wish for... anyway!"

"What about Vlad?" Catherine asked distantly.

"I could probably manoeuvre sufficiently to get through, if that can be of help." Vlad volunteered, after a warning growl from Bec.

"Do this then. Get through to the end of the corridor, open the door to the main staging area using your remotes. Then play the Imperial fanfare, loud as you can."

"Do it." Bec reinforced. "I think I know what she's up to."

"One of the clones' command triggers?" I guessed.

"I'm hoping." Catherine stood up, and watched as Vlad disappeared into the eerily silent and stationary crowd of clones, like a Coopersworld armourfiend sprinting from danger into a dense thicket.

"So when the Prince arrives, they all run out in a choreographed spontaneous expression of Royal affection, and we just file out with them. They'll be our cover. Clever. If it works." I rather thoughtlessly added. The two women shot me dirty, dirty looks. If this didn't work, we were most likely screwed.

We waited perhaps half a minute, then a faint scraping reached our ears. The door. Catherine looked pensive, so I reached out and squeezed her hand. She looked at me and forced a smile. The unmistakably bright and bubbly first notes of the Imperial Fanfare reached our ears. We looked at the clones, who remained obstinately inanimate. It hadn't worked. Bugger.

"Thargoid shit!" Bec cursed.

Catherine turned to me opened her mouth to say something when a perfectly pitched and modulated voice from near the door shouted out.

"Long live the Emperor! Long live the Prince!"

More and more of the clones took up the cry, a wave of sound came rolling back to us, growing steadily with every metre it travelled, until even the clones next to us were shouting it at the top of their lungs. Even more astonishingly, expressions began to blossom across their faces, rapturous expressions of joy swelling from within, like a flower opening at the touch of the sun.

I knew, however, that these perfect teeth and shining eyes had been designed in a lab, and that these things were incapable of feeling joy, however capable they were of feigning it.

Soon, the sound was painful enough I wanted to put my hands over my ears. We could feel the drumming of feet on the metal decking as the clones pounded forwards. Eventually, the clones in front of us began to move, running at some speed. We followed, getting closer and closer to the bright doorway that led into the main staging area.

We were almost at the door when Bec shouted out "Long live the Emperor! Long live the Prince!"

Remembering that we needed to use the clones for cover as long as we could, Catherine and I joined in the chant as we emerged from the door into the main staging area. I sneaked a glance over at Bec. To my slight concern, she seemed to be shouting it less out of disguise, and more out of genuine conviction. We charged out with the last of the clones into the brightly lit hold, and were greeted with an astonishing sight.

*

Mack could hear the voices getting closer, but far too slowly for his liking. Surely the bridge would be calling a search party after him, and his current position was not one ideal for remaining hidden on a ship. In one direction lay the bridge, in another the approaching voices. A third corridor led who knows where, but probably to a safer place than here.

There was simply no option, if he ran off to hide he'd as likely never get another chance at capturing Mosser. Without a doubt they were headed for the bridge, and they'd be sure to be on high alert after they got there.

Mack decided that heading off down the corridor towards Norman would reduce the chances of guards coming up from behind him, however this would be at the sacrifice of a sneak attack. Perhaps this way would be best anyway, he was sick of hiding and running. It was far more satisfying to be thinking about how much pain he wanted to cause Norman, and Gilmour, and those damn amphibians, and his damn uncle. All he'd ever wanted was to be rich and to have some fun. Now he was adding revenge to his stated objectives. His uncle had been right. He'd needed more life goals.

Suddenly a low, pulsing alarm signal echoed down the ship, and blue lights began to flash from every screen in reach. Hull Breach? Depressurisation warning? Shit! Mack looked down either end of the corridor, pressure doors were slamming down in succession. Blue lights and the echo of the alert came from everywhere he could see. Realising he was in a section with three doors, Mack raced back towards the bridge section, diving and rolling under the closing pressure door just before it slammed shut. Here at least, he thought, he would be able to put up a fight.

Silence descended, letting the feeling of being trapped sink in. Mack kept the rifle pointed at the bridge door, all the while waiting expecting someone to come charging through. But nothing happened. Mack started to get the sinking feeling that the people here had more important things on their minds and that he was merely a pest that would be dealt with in good time. He started to get impatient for someone to shoot at.

*

"All sections are airtight sealed and all pressure doors closed." Marcus preened slightly. It had been a good idea, to send a false sensor reading to trigger the blue alert. The Depressurisation Alert could be activated in any section, but fail-safes stopped it being lifted until the all-clear had been given by the bridge. The only option was to hotwire or cut through each of the doors to the bridge. Since there were pressure doors every thirty metres for safety purposes, that added up to a lot of time and effort.

"Close the bridge blast doors as well." he ordered. Fujiyama pressed a couple of buttons on his panel and the heavy reinforced blast doors slammed down. Designed to preclude hijacking, they would be very difficult to cut through for anything other than a plasma burner. Even with a Plasma Burner, it would take time, which was the resource that was most precious to Marcus at the moment.

"Unless he improvises a lot better than he did here, I think we can take our time dealing with our friend." Marcus smiled wryly. There was a shower of sparks from the navigation console and a shriek from a tech. Marcus' smile fell. The bridge was still a mess. Laser burn scarred the back wall and everyone was moving, out of their seats, uneasy on the verge of panic. A reassuring glance at Dreyfus calmed him though. His rock, as always, brought him back to the reality of the situation.

The unexpected variable of the assassin was excluded from the equation. No plan was foolproof, the trick was to bar the most gifted of fools from testing it. Despite his obvious cunning and audacity in evading detection and getting onto the bridge, the assassin obviously had had no idea what to do when he got there.

"Did anyone recognise him?" Dreyfus called out. While a face matcher program would do the job eventually, the pot-luck that was the recall program from memory of organic life forms occasionally retrieved the data quicker. The lack of people jumping out of their seats and shouting "Eureka!", however, did not improve the average. "He looks familiar." volunteered Fujiyama. Dreyfus snort showed how helpful he found *that* comment. "An old business associate of Norman, I think."

"Hardly a searching test for your deductive abilities," Dreyfus remarked acidly.

"The man had ex-Guild stamped all over him. Mosser probably trained him personally."

"Not just trained. They were close, I think he had a minor part in transporting the HPA." Fujiyama stuck to his guns, while Marcus smiled approvingly.

"Look through the lists of who we employed to transport it and see if you can find a match. Good work, Fujiyama! Norman would have been proud. As soon as we escape, we'll track this intruder down and punish him for the death of your man." Marcus walked over to the security chief and clasped his shoulder. A small smile appeared on the taciturn Security Chief's face. He was used to twisted, vicious smiles. Genuine emotion came with a bit more difficulty. It came, though.

Dreyfus glanced up at the timer on the screen, despite the fact that his internal clock kept better time than it did . Twenty one minutes and counting.

He looked around. The crew was in disarray, uncertain and confused. Fujiyama's dispatch of the security detail left only a few guards on the bridge. The lifting of the heavy guard locked around the bridge since Norman's death left everyone a little edgy. He saw a few of the less reliable ones looking around as he was, gauging the odds, whether of rebellion or escape he wasn't sure. Others appeared to be arguing with their team-mates. The gentle dream of Marcus' takeover of the ship had degenerated into a violent nightmare, quicker than any of them could have imagined. He needed to win them back, and quickly, before any opportunists did something stupid. There were only so many people that Dreyfus could kill before there became too few crew to man the ship properly. It was all a question of personnel management.

"If you have any brilliant speeches to inspire the troops, now would be the time, Marcus." he whispered into the taller man's ear. In response, Marcus reached down to Dreyfus' belt and unclipped the Deathwrecker. Flipping off the safety, Marcus raised the weapon above his head. The by-now familiar rising whine of the weapon being readied penetrated the bridge. Conversation stopped dead. Marcus pulled the trigger and a tremendous roar echoed across the bridge, along with a blinding shower of sparks from the sudden hole in the ceiling. A few spatters of molten metal dropped from the roof to land in front of Marcus.

The echoes of the blast died away, He levelled the weapon and swung it in a lazy arc across the bridge as the charge built up again. Dreyfus found it almost amusing to watch peoples faces as the targeting laser passed across them, turning whatever emotion had been on them previously into stark, unfeigned terror. Dreyfus stole a glance at Marcus' face. It was set in an expression of utter mildness, a calm and almost bored mask. It seemed effective on the crew.

Death wore a bland mask, and acted not from pleasure, or from fear. At the end of the arc, the laser came to rest on Fujiyama's chest. The man twitched, but did not flinch, and stared into Marcus' without paying any attention to the gun in his hand. Dreyfus revised his opinion of the man.

"I will kill - personally - the next person who interferes with the execution of the plan. Neither rank nor position nor friendship will get in the way of the cause."

Dreyfus kept his composure as Marcus brought the gun around to rest against Dreyfus' temple. The gun pressed into his artificial flesh, and Dreyfus could feel a slight heat on his skin from the plasma charge radiating out of the muzzle. Even Dreyfus' reflexes would not be enough to prevent the Deathwrecker from melting his head into so much slag, should Marcus pull the trigger.

"This man is as to a brother to me. I owe him my life. More importantly I owe him for my life having meaning and form. His is the *greatest* servant of the cause, even more dedicated and steadfast than I. Be in no doubt, I will kill him without a second thought if he interferes even in the slightest way with the cause. Do you believe me?"

No one spoke. Everyone seemed frozen, unable to move. Marcus looked around the circle with his most aloof, baleful glare. "Well?" He said, warning menace in his tone.

"I believe you." Dreyfus said quietly.

Marcus turned to look at Dreyfus and gave a crazy smile. The Deathwrecker shifted position as Marcus arm tensed. Several people gasped. Then Marcus flicked the safety and the handgun's charge began to neutralise, as gas began to vent from holes around the muzzle. Marcus lowered the gun and gave the bridge crew a long, searching look. Then he went over to Norman's command chair and lowered himself into it. He laid the Deathwrecker on the armrest and closed his eyes. Muttered conversation started up again.

"That's it, show's over, back to work." Fujiyama shouted shakily, stamping up and down the bridge. "We've got a job to do and we're allegedly the best pirate crew in space, so move it, move it, move it!"

"That was risky." Dreyfus muttered to Marcus. "You've shown them claws. It'll be a while before you have their love again."

"As long as they fear me for the next twelve minutes, their love can go to the devil." Marcus whispered savagely.

*

Norman and Sam exchanged glances. Every bulkhead between them and the main bridge had slammed shut and the depressurisation alarms had begun sounding. "A bit of a coincidence" remarked Sam.

"Slightly."

The pair of them stared at the pressure door that was in front of them and quite plainly, obviously sealed shut. Sam drew out a datapad and began tapping in a few commands. Norman leant casually against the corridor wall and ran his hands across the crude stubble that covered his head. It made a pleasant scratching noise. Another few days and would be in that annoying bit between being bald and very short that made you look like a refugee with nits. It always happened after a revival. Sam attracted his attention by sucking air through his teeth. "Hmm."

"Yes?"

"Diagnostics say there is no pressure loss anywhere on board ship. The last pressure change logged was when we took on board a ship into the docking bay. Other than that, nothing."

"No depressurisation?"

"No?"

"So, just an attempt to lock the ship down?"

"Pretty much."

"An amateur effort at best."

"Effective though."

"True."

"How long till we fire?"

Sam checked his wristpad's chronometer, "If we're still on schedule, twelve minutes."

"And six bulkheads and the bridge hatch to get past."

Sam moved over to the pressure door controls "Pretty much. We should be able to use command override and access the motors for hotwiring, then... uh oh."

"What?"

Sam repeated the sequence on the control pad, then punched it hard, "Damn! They've initiated bridge override on the door motors."

Quickly, Sam snatched Norman's Deathwreaker and fired it at a panel on the wall. When the smoke cleared it revealed a hole in the wall looking onto a heavily armoured motor box. The smoke glowed with the flash of the box welding itself shut.

Several blasts later Norman capitulated, "Now we're fucked".

"Not yet!" Sam remarked with surprise. "They've locked out all command interfaces, but emergency protocols should still be active. We never quite got around to centralising those to the bridge."

"What good is that to us? They only come into effect during real emergencies, and we've got normalised pressure in here...uh oh. You're not thinking what I think you're thinking are you?"

*

On the main viewscreen, Fort Donalds was now beginning to dominate the forward view. A flotilla of ships were flitting around, carrying out the final duties that were required for such a momentous and PR-heavy event as the arrival of the *Abraham's Son* and the absurd quantity of high quality narcotic goods that its arrival would present. There were also twice as many ships standing off around the station - Naval ships providing protection, Pleasure craft - mainly opulent Couriers and Explorers there just because it had been decided that it was where the great and good should lurk. There were even a number of trading vessels and independents - they of course, were standing off in the unfashionable berths. Traffic was particularly heavy, and it had all been cleared out of the way for the passing of what was arguably the most important vessel in imperial space.

Marcus smiled. The poor deluded fools just didn't know how important this ship would be, how it would be a herald for a new era of the Empire, of the beginning of an era of rebirth of the Empire, and the start of the last days of the Federation. And now, its time had come. Their time had come.

"Anything of note I should know of?" demanded Marcus of Fujiyama The reply was short and to the point. Orders were going to be carried out to the letter now. Marcus' recent speech and the tension of the moment had seen to that.

"Apart from the usual queue jumping nutters, no"

"Excellent. Navigation, start the course deviation, Fire control, charge the HPA, we are go to fire in T minus ten minutes. Comms, broadcast the warning to all crew. The future of the Empire starts now.

A hush fell across the bridge, as the crew began to carry out the plans and orders that Norman and Marcus had written so many months before. Despite their differences and backgrounds, when it mattered, the crew had been trained to work together like a well-oiled machine. Despite the fact that Marcus had been forced to kill Norman, he respected the bastard for managing a setup like that.

*

Sam and Norman stood up panting. Norman raised the Deathwreaker, "Last door. Ready?"

Sam pressed a sequence into the atmospheric controls then raced back across the corridor towards Norman. "Ready!"

An exhaust flap swung open to piping connected directly to the vacuum of space. The atmospheric controls immediately began cycling air back into the corridor to compensate, blasting tonnes of fresh air back in only to be sucked away.

Norman and Sam began taking fast deep breaths to store up oxygen. Norman raised the Deathwrecker and fired, melting the atmospheric controls into slag. On a distant part of the *Azure Sunset's* hull, an exhaust port sucked the remainder of their air out into space.

Left in complete vacuum unprotected, they wasted no time in launching themselves across the corridor again and hitting the door open release repeatedly. The door control panel lit up instantly and began a fast readout.

THIS SECTION DEPRESSURISED

ADJOINING SECTION DEEMED SAFE

SENSORS DETECT NO LIFEFORMS IN ADJOINING SECTION

PREPARING TO OPEN PRESSURE DOOR

ALL PERSONNEL IN THIS SECTION MOVE TO SIDES OF DOOR AND HOLD ONTO RAILS

Flaps swung open and hand rails popped out of the walls to the side of the door. Sam and Norman grabbed hold as tightly as possible.

A klaxon blared and a red light began flashing above the pressure door. A blast of air struck them as the door inched open and their bodies flailed in the wind as they hung on for dear life. The wind ceased and blissful vacuum returned. Using the handrails to propel them, they launched through the door and hit the emergency repressurisation button on the other side.

The door slammed closed and air began filling the corridor. Norman collapsed to the floor cursing, Sam collapsed to the floor and passed out.

Norman dragged himself up onto his knees and looked up to find a plasma rifle barrel pointing at his forehead. This came as a complete surprise in many ways. Mostly in the general surprising way of a barrel being rudely pointed at your head, but also that anyone was in this section in the first place and had recovered from the vacuum quickly enough to start taking hostages.

The answer to all of these came as Norman looked up at who was behind the barrel. The person holding it was wearing a non reflective, full agility space suit. This explained why the door opened in the first place, the suit evaded the sensors and allowed the emergency system to register no life forms in this section. If not for that, the door would never have opened and Sam and Norman would still be on the other side of the door sucking vacuum.

Norman's next feeling was one of annoyance, since non-reflective suits were a trick he had invented, and only revealed to one other person. "Mack! So good to see you."

Mack was definitely not willing to be wiled by such sucking up and responded with the butt of his rifle across Norman's forehead. Aware of Norman's abilities Mack edged back down the corridor to put space between them.

Mack lifted open his helmet visor, confirming Norman's suspicion. "You utter, utter complete fucking *bastard!*" yelled Mack as Norman slowly stood up "Hands up fucking now!"

"Listen, Mack" said Norman making no move to put his hands up, "this is not the time or the place for-" but stopped abruptly as a plasma blast neatly tore the end off his left pinky finger.

Norman slowly raised his hands and put them behind his head.

"Norman, because of you, those fucking lizards that you got your bloody HPA from have got my left nut, and the fucking Feds have my right. You dumped all this shit on me and at the moment the easiest possible way out for me is to take you down here and now and sell your cold dead corpse to the highest bidder!"

"You got caught then?"

"I got captured, sold out, locked up, shut up, charged with murder and the entire galaxy seems to have assumed that I can be used to get at you, and if I can't then they might as well kill me!"

Norman switched to a more placatory tone, "Mack, as much as I would like to sort this out, now really isn't the time"

"Why not, are you about to declare war against the Empire or something?"

"Lets just say that if I don't get to the bridge, things could go very wrong, very quickly."

"Norman, I really couldn't give a shit, no matter what it is. You've left me in the shit, everyone's left me in the shit, the whole galaxy can be about to get wiped out and I couldn't care because it's not my responsibility. If you have problems you can deal with them after I get what I want."

Above them, the lights flickered and dimmed slightly. It meant only one thing. The HPA was charging. Time was running out, Norman had to do something fast.

"Norman" said Sam regaining consciousness and noticing the dimming lights.

"I know Sam - Mack, we have moments left. All I can offer is that I will try and sort this mess out. I gather that the folks in the Moray are after their money?"

Mack nodded.

"Very well, once the shooting stops, I'll pay them."

"Shooting?"

"It's why I need to be in there."

"And the Feds?"

"I'll make sure they aren't an issue. If my plan works, they shouldn't bother me for a while."

"And I'm supposed to take your word for it?"

"Mack, that's all I can offer at the moment. I must stress though that this is entirely the wrong time to be discussing this. I need to be in there, not out here!"

Mack lowered the rifle slightly, considering. As he thought, Norman unclipped his Elite badge from his belt and wrapping the chain around his hand looked thoughtfully at it. He glanced back up and looked at Mack's eyes. Mack frowned slightly as he came to his decision. By the looks of things, he wasn't buying the story and they just did not have the time to be distracted by the kid and his troubles.

Quick as a flash, Norman used his drug-enhanced speed and agility to step forwards and around the reach of Mack's rifle. It caught the kid by surprise and the muzzle jerked upwards involuntarily. By this time it was too late and Norman's fist was already well on it's way to connecting with Mack's face. The shock of the blow caused Mack's finger to tighten on the trigger of the rifle and a single shot rang out, slamming harmlessly into the ceiling. Mack's head snapped sideways and he spun before dropping to the ground unconscious. On the side of his face, a red mark spelt out a mirror image of the word 'ELITE'.

"Well, so much for diplomacy," remarked Sam as Norman picked up Mack's plasma rifle from the decking, "Let's move."

Sam and Norman looked at the sealed and locked down door keeping them from the bridge. "So what now?" Sam asked. "That door is not going to open from this side, and you'd need a mining laser to cut through it!"

"Sam, Sam, Sam, you're forgetting something" said Norman shaking his head. Despite this apparent setback he was standing with total confidence, completely in his element.

"What?"

"My name is Norman Mosser..."

*

On the bridge, Fujiyama stared at the monitor with disbelief. An alert had flashed up reporting depressurisation in the locked down corridors leading to the bridge. He had brought up a view of the corridors only to see Norman and Sam busting through doors in a highly suicidal manner. Instinct made him switch the monitor to another part of the

ship. Some deep seated intuition warned him that it would best be wise if it went unreported for now. At best there would be confusion, at worst a full blown leadership conflict on the bridge at completely the wrong time.

Besides, the bridgewards hatch of that corridor was locked down so tight you would need cutting gear - or explosives to get past it. They'd never get to the bridge on time.