

DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 3

by
The Elite BBS Collective

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Unleashed

[The Spartacus Brotherhood]

In transit

Liabefa (-2,-3)

The comm beeped. Nervously, the pilot opened the haling channel, but instead of the pre-programmed "Surrender or die" he expected, it was a video message. "Incoming message from SB!201".

"RD-552, this is a Spartacus Brotherhood patrol. Our bioscan detects more life forms in your ship than your standard crew, therefore we respectfully ask permission to board you and perform an inspection. Do not change your course and speed, I repeat, this is the Spartacus Brotherhood..."

"We respectfully ask permission?! What the heck?!". Aboard the Lion Trader, Lawrence Morgan was quite relieved that the two Asp Explorer and four Vipers MkII weren't pirates after all, but who were these guys anyway? "Well, they're too many to fight them, and at least they did ask politely. Jonesy, comply with them while I go to the airlock and see what this is all about. Spartacus Brotherhood, eh?!".

Jonesy pressed the comm button. "Roger that, Spartacus Brotherhood patrol, this is SD-552 acknowledging your order. We'll comply."

The six ships closed in and took positions covering their pray. As they approached, the pilot observed their strange markings: they represented a fist holding a sword and a piece of chain hanging from the wrist. He could have guessed they weren't pirates from the transponder with a military registration, but these days you never knew, and the best thing is to stay away from any odd formation - if you can outrun them, that is. Besides, if they were some sort of military, he sure never heard of them...

In a few minutes the Lion was boarded by an officer leading ten heavily armed soldiers. Their dull gray uniforms resembled the imperial slave's but for the golden insignias. "Hello, Sir. I'm Major Simmons, and I would like to know if you're carrying slaves aboard."

So, that's what they're after, slave runners. "Slaves? Why, no, Major. Only two passengers and live cattle bound for Edwards Depot.", said Lawrence, very relieved that at least this time there were no slaves on the cargo list... he'd be in trouble had he been boarded on his previous trip!

"Very well, we need you to call all your crew and passengers for a quick interview, and check the hold to see the cattle, if you please."

Each person aboard was questioned in private to verify they weren't slaves, and the cattle counted. After the inspection, each person was given a leaflet and a dreamware, and the boarding party went away apologising for the trouble and thanking for the cooperation.

"Whew, that sure was strange, Sir.", said Jonesy when his commander returned to the cockpit. "That was the politest inspection I ever saw. Wonder what's this..." and unfolded its leaflet.

It read:

"The Spartacus Brotherhood

The Spartacus Brotherhood is a fraternity of people rescued from the clutches of slavery, and aims at rescuing others from the same faith. We have no other specific allegiance other than freedom, and no other foe than slavery itself and its worse proponents: slave hunters altogether, the more sadistic of the slave drivers and generally speaking the worst kind of scum mankind has to offer: those who revel in gratuitously abusing helpless people.

We do not aim at overthrowing the Empire or any other political system; our struggle is to end the scourge of slavery wherever it may be found - which also means antagonizing any government or organization that supports it until it stops doing so. Neither do we enjoy killing people or imprisoning them - freedom is the prize we fight for. Since slavery is frequently a cultural matter, We have a re-education system that induces slavery profiteers and users to voluntarily abandon their foul practices; failing that we may have to, in extreme cases, euthanize people too cruel or stubborn to correct their ways. Naturally, all vehicles and facilities the Brotherhood rescues people from, as well as any weaponry found in the aforementioned, will be apprehended and added to the effort, or destroyed to prevent its further use by slavists. Since the main

purpose of slavery is a reduction in wage expenses, these material losses represent yet another aspect of our struggle, and a anti-economic punitive measure to the slave owners.

The Dreamware supplied with this leaflet is a blander version of our re-education ones, and may be safely used by most people over 18 of age. Please dream it and pass it forward to someone that you may know to be involved with slavery.

(NOTE: The use of this Dreamware under influence of psychotropic substances may cause psychosis, multiple personality disorder, depression, recurrent nightmares, sexual impotence, reduction of self-esteem, sociopathic and destructive behaviour, anorexia, bulimia, sleep disorders and/or suicidal tendencies among other common slavery-related psychological disorders. Although we softened slavery in this presentation in order to protect the dreamer from slavery's full brunt, heavy drug users, minors and sensitive people should refrain of dreaming it. Nevertheless, it does have a happy ending.)

To maintain our struggle we need financial support, and all donations are welcome. Please deposit yours to the account #3390-1938-5883-3402 of the Fifth National Bank of Miphize.

Thank you!"

"And the disk... Let's see, hum, it's called 'The abomination of slavery'. Can barely wait to dream it - NOT! I don't need other people's nightmares! Assholes!" He started off to the waste disposal unit.

Meanwhile Lawrence inserted his copy in the cockpit's dreamware player and put it on play... along with some of the other occupants on the ship. When it was finished, Lawrence couldn't help the shivering. Oh, the horror of his abduction and of his family; the brutality and helplessness of captivity; the feeling of vindication of when The Spartacus Brotherhood's ships came from the skies and vaporized the slave driver that was bullying him; the joy of being rescued from the experienced horrors of slavery, of being reunited to his wife; and the hope of one day maybe, just maybe finding his still enslaved boy... "I'll never carry slaves again, you know?"

Jonesy was just sitting on the co-pilot's station beside him, with a smirk in his face. "Was it a nice piece of propaganda? I didn't want to say this, you know, but I told you so", he taunted.

"Shut up and don the dreamer or you're fired."

* * *

*Ashfield's Camp
New world
loququ (3,-4)*

The Imperial Explorer touched the landing pad, and its four nondescript escort Ospray X escort broke as if to queue for landing themselves. Only, without warning, they started firing missiles at predetermined targets: one struck the control tower, turning it into a smoking chimney; one entered trough the roof of the police pilot's lounge and two were aimed at the local military garrison. After the bombardment, two of the fighters turned to strafe the ground defences while the others kept over the starport, giving air support for the ground assault teams disembarking from the capital ship.

Armed men backed by armored arachnid combat robots started running to the police hangar and the slave pens near the landing pad. Showing good planning and training they quickly overcame their opposition on both targets and got what they came for: the 21 police Vipers MkI and II, and over 500 slaves. While the spaceport was under attack, other squadrons struck the nearby farms and rescued many others. In less than 30 minutes they were gone from the system, and in close pursuit went a contingent of the VII protectorate that happened to be in the system. The attack plan took them in consideration, and they were never heard of again.

* * *

The same things happened in other systems. The Sparacus Brotherhood was unleashed...

Me, a spy?

[Col. Emu Maekawa]

"Me, a spy?", I asked the lieutenant. I had just returned from a three-month imperial pirates hunting expedition, and hadn't had even time to take off my jumpsuit when I was called to his office.

He was adamant. "Yes, these are the orders, colonel. I've received this orders just yesterday while you were already arriving, so I didn't bothered to call you. Apparently you are to go to Sol and meet a FMIB operative."

"But I'm a combat pilot, I've no intelligence training! Besides, sir, I'm starting my vacations tomorrow and you know how the admin people are picky about R&R and not having tired pilots on duty and all that. Last year I was ordered to abandon fleet action just before battle because my vacation were overdue, and now you give me this?! Someone made a mistake!"

"Sorry. Of course you'll get triple pay and rescheduling, and the admin boys can cry as much as they

want. Dismissed.", he said almost sympathetically, handing me a datapad. This meant I wasn't going to be able to meet my love. I left his office and, resigned, I turned the datapad on.

It read:

/CLASSIFIED ORDERS EYES ONLY - A

CO 431159703

From: Covert mission controller 48652

FMIB-RS HQ

Eta Cassiopeia

To: Col. Emu Maekawa

Combat Squadron 271

Delta Pavonis

There are reports of the possible presence of Norman Mosser on Earth, Sol(0,0). He might attempt to encounter a previously known accomplice at an yet unknown location. You are reported to superficially resemble this accomplice.

- **Requisition a Falcon fighter to the Delta Pavonian Federal Military vehicle pool;**
- **Report to Mars High FMIB HQ;**
- **Take your luggage and wear tourist clothes when making contact the operative waiting for you at military hangar 17;**
- **Follow his instructions.**

Your ship will be returned to Delta Pavonis.

Memorize and delete this file immediately.

/END CLASSIFIED ORDERS"

RS? Restricted Services? Oh, boy, that's the Black Ops Division... OK, so not only I'm missing the date I wanted all my life; I'm also the bait to catch the biggest criminal in the entire human space, Norman Mosser... And most likely an expendable bait, too! And if I actually survive, I don't get the reward, or even to gloat to the rest of the squadron. That's the military for you... At least I'll get to shop in Earth with my triple wage. I hope.

* * *

"Traffic control, CA-361 request permission to land."

"Roger, CA-361. Proceed to military bay 2"

The trip was uneventful, and all I could do for the whole time was to think. To remember how we met again at my brother's funeral; how we didn't fell in love then because we had always been in love; about all the years I feared - and he respected- daddy too much for us to take control of our destinies and seek our happiness together; and how we finally decided to go on vacation. Well, without daddy knowing, of course.

And finally, about Norman Mosser. If he had just told the FM he was going to try and blast Prince Harry and half the 1st Protectorate with the HPA, I think we'd even let him have the thing, but nooo...

On the other hand, the simple thought of that pirate with an HPA gives me the creeps! He's been pestering us for an eternity already, and I've no idea of why he turned against the Empire. Which means now he's just a loose cannon on deck, and it's just a matter of time until he comes rolling back our way. No, it's better for everyone if he's stopped, and I'll be proud to do my duty. A shame about the vacation, though.

* * *

Curious eyes followed me as I walked by, as a nice looking girl in a shimmerware floral dress is bound to attract male attention. Specially if she's on a restricted area of a military installation and everybody else is in uniform, but those were my orders, never mind the proverbial spy discretion. Then again, we all know that military intelligence is a contradiction in terms.

I arrived at the Hangar 17 a little before the time, so I had to wait a little. "buzz precisely at 12:00" were the orders left for me at the counter of the FMIB HQ. I waited a few minutes, buzzed, and the door slid open after a few seconds, opening to an closed berthing. As I walked in, I was presented with the most horrible excuse for an Asp MkII I ever saw. The ship's harmoniously smooth lines were broken by add-ons, pipes, missile emplacements, strange sensors and external whatsthatthing, you name it. It's like if someone didn't know were to fit the equipment and just welded it outside. And the control thrusters, what were those, from a Tiger? What kind of a maniac would fly this... this thing, I was asking myself as I climbed the open gangway.

"Hello?" There was nobody in sight. "HELLO?", I shouted louder. There was the smell of food.

"I'm in the kitchen, come on.", a voice answered. A familiar voice. It couldn't be... I walked into the kitchen.

"Hi, honey. Had a good voyage?"

"Maegil!!!!". He was in red shorts, a sleeveless colourful shirt and a... pink(!) apron where it read

"Kiss the chef", pouring bolognese sauce over a tray of pasta and smiling at my stupefaction. "12:00, and just in time for lunch."

"What's the meaning of this... I mean, What... how did..." I was completely at a loss for words.

"You look beautiful!", he said, and pecked my cheek while taking my backpack . "Now sit down before it gets cold.". He took the apron off and unfolded a metal chair. "To answer you: the meaning of it, it's just that I love you; as for the what, it's called a double vacation on Earth with all the expenses paid; and as for how, well, a Black Ops commodore can set up operations with very little superior control and even less paperwork."

As a perfect gentlemen, set the chair for me to sit, and I gladly did. "But... And what about Norman Mosser?", I asked.

"Just yet another Mosser sighting report", he said, unwrapping a bottle of red wine ", none of my concern. I'd even like to talk to him, but he's probably hiding in Bedaho or something like that. Anyway, I took the opportunity to set you up."

Ah. I couldn't help but to smile, and he returned me the smile. "Set me up?", I asked as he poured the wine in plastic glasses and gave me one.

"Why, yes! You see, I intend to make you sweat, and maybe even scream a bit..." he winked and blew me a kiss. I sipped the wine to hide my blushing. "Now, do you want to start in Sydney or New San Francisco?"

A change in tack

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The alarms started screaming as they burst into the elevator. Scott frantically pressed the button for the basement, then slapped the close door button to speed things up. With a lurch the doors finally closed and the turbolift began sinking earthwards, at a speed at odds with its name. There were sirens inside the elevator as well, and they continued to ring the emergency alarm, forcing the men to cover their ears.

"Warning: There has been an attack on the starport. All personnel are commanded to proceed to the safety and evacuation zones immediately." A cold, almost computer, voice from the siren. Scott slipped a card into a slot in the lift wall, then retracted it immediately.

"Override," he explained. "We don't want frantic employees slowing us down. This building is far enough from the starport to be safe anyway." de Havilland looked up at the siren, wishing he could see what was happening outside. When they had left Scott's office, it had looked like his ship was being searched by the police. Who would be attacking the starport? It had to be a coincidence. No one knew he was here...

The elevator came to a sudden halt and the doors parted in the middle, allowing the three men to race out. They found themselves in a large open span area, ferrecrete walls and roof, a long dark passage which disappeared into the depths of the abyss itself.

The area was huge, but it wasn't empty; ships lined the walls, all of them in various states of repair and build. Nonetheless, it still looked dark and foreboding, like they were walking into the abyss.

"Part of the emergency procedure is cutting down on unneeded light," Scott explained. He turned and entered a code into a pad by the elevator door. All the lights blinked on as one, temporarily blinding them as their eyes adjusted to the ultra bright light. "This way!" commanded Scott, who charged off at pace. The two pilots followed him, but de Havilland stopped mid stride.

"Did you feel that?" he asked the men. The other two stopped and waited, listening. The ground beneath them quivered slightly, a low rumbling passing through their shoes.

"Those must be pretty big explosions to reach down this far," Veruz commented. Scott replied by getting back up to speed, disappearing down a side corridor. The other two sprinted to catch up, just seeing him duck through a door. They followed him through-

-coming face to face with a Saker Mk III.

It didn't look like anything special. Just a regular ship, seen around most inhabited systems. As de Havilland examined her more closely, he realised there was something different about this one. The gun looked like something from out of this world. But it wasn't. It was something he had played a significant part in designing.

A Nano Plasma Accelerator.

It bore a resemblance to normal plasma accelerators, albeit at a fraction of the size, but there were significant differences too; the coolant and plasma routing systems were all redesigned from the ground up. The injector looked alien also. There were some fancy materials used as well. Regular superconductors just would not work on the scale of a NPA. de Havilland just hoped it work as Scott has promised. On a ship as small as a Saker, the difference between life and death was a good gun.

And a good pilot.

He wondered again what was outside. He was still in the dark and it was frustrating him. He hoped his piloting skills were up to the task. He had survived the attack outside the Azure Sunset, just. It was his first tangle with true professionals, and he hoped it would be his last. He turned to his old employer who was plugging commands into a wall console, powering the ship up and opening the roof so they could escape. The sound of rolling gears and pinions filled the small launch bay as the men yelled at each other over the noise.

"Ok Dev, she's all yours. You're working for me free lance now, so look after her and I expect an engineering report in a week!"

The price for a free ship equipped with the baddest weapon to grace human space. de Havilland shrugged.

"It'll be in the mail!" he yelled back, before ushering Veruz up the boarding ramp. Shock waves and explosions erupted through the hole in the roof as they raced into the bowels of the ship.

"Let's get out of here!" de Havilland yelled over his shoulder. Veruz was desperately throwing circuit breakers and shorting circuits behind him in the cockpit hall, trying to bypass or at least speed up the warm up process. Every second that ticked by served to convince de Havilland that the fight above was about him and the stolen Krait. He wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, but an incorrect warm up came with a greatly increased risk of shattered turbine blades, the last thing he wanted to think about right now.

"Ok, take us up!" Veruz yelled back at his commander. de Havilland engaged the VTOL thrusters, pushing the Saker straight up into the air. Delicate application of the engines saw them rise above ground level-

-Into absolute chaos!

The sky was filled with the blue glow of engine exhaust and laser beams arcing across the sky. There were ships everywhere. de Havilland swallowed hard. Holy shit-

They were sitting in what was effectively a coffin. No shields or armour, just one big fuck-off gun.

No they weren't going to stick around. He pulled the flight stick towards him, throwing the Saker skywards. He slammed on the prime mover to full power. The inertial compensators struggled momentarily, throwing de Havilland into his seat. A sprawling yelp came from behind him, but he tuned out the distraction.

Time to fly and time to fly hard. He kept it straight and true, finger down on the accelerator, urging the ship to continue upward, while keeping a wary eye on the scanner. It was thick with green, red and orange blips, some above him, some below him. But they were all huddled a few kilometres distant. Over the Starport. Yes. They might get out of this alive. He checked the altimeter. 5000m. Half way there. He checked the hyperdrive. Coordinates were locked in.

6000m.

Then the blips began to move. Towards the centre of the scanner. Towards them.

"Get up here Michael!" de Havilland yelled. He checked the distances. They were too close. If he continued to fly straight up, he would never reach 12000m in time. So he eased up on the stick, choosing a forty five degree angle to the ground, flying away from the incoming ships. Then the sound he feared the most rang through his ears.

The warning siren of a launched missile.

But it didn't sound right. It was echoing in and out, like a beat, rising and falling in tempo. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw more than ten missile signatures on the scanner. That was why the alarm sounded wrong: there were ten of them ringing at the same time.

His mind began racing: What the hell are you going to do? His eyes flicked to the altimeter. 8500m. Time to impact with missiles? Five seconds. There was nothing he could do. This was a test ship, not an Iron Ass. There was no ECM, no chaff, no defence. The air allowed him more manoeuvrability, but he couldn't outmanoeuvre ten missiles at once. They were screwed. All this flashed through his mind in a millisecond. Then the cockpit speakers were filled with the random static indicative of a large electromagnetic discharge.

An ECM!

Half the missiles around him exploded instantly. He wrenched the controls around, diving back for the earth as he brought a rear view up on the small screen in the console. Half the ships chasing him had activated their own ECM systems, obviously fearful some of the missiles were aimed for themselves. The remaining missiles had gone completely AWOL - out of control and not going home anytime soon.

So they weren't working as a team then. That was encouraging. So what were they? Pirates? No, pirates were team players. Had to be mercenaries or bounty hunters. But why would they be after him? He had never done anything illegal in his life. Except murder countless Imperials on the battle field. But killing in wartime was legitimate. No, the only thing he had done was steal a Krait.

A Krait belonging to the Azure Sunset.

His mouth gaped open as he made the connection. He was still being chased by that group who had found him at the Azure Sunset. Then another thought hit him: How the fuck had they followed him here? They were one step

ahead of him. He fought a sudden feeling of helplessness and pulled back on the stick to send the Saker skywards again. Veruz struggled up to de Havillands side, a cut on his forehead.

"You in a rush, Cap'n?" Veruz said wearily. de Havilland replied with another cut to the flight stick, whacking the Saker sideways as a laser beam burst through where the Saker had been a split second earlier. de Havilland had the flight stick to hold onto, but Veruz wasn't that fortunate and went flying for a second time. The ships were right behind him now. He jerked the controls back and forth, but trying to keep his vertical angle the same. Laser beams encircled the little Saker as de Havilland desperately flew through the maze of death. Then another ping appeared on the scanner. But while the others looked like L's, meaning they were below him, this one looked like a T, which meant it was above.

Directly ahead.

The ship opened up with its 1MW beam laser, slicing through the air, moving to intercept the Saker. I have to keep him facing me. If I turn away and he gets behind me, I'll be screwed. Knowing what he couldn't do, he did the only thing he could do. He aimed straight for the approaching ship. As it got closer, he could make out the distinctive arms of a Gyr. A mid range vessel, more than a match for a Saker. More than a match for a normal Saker anyway. As the enemy laser beam tracked across the sky towards the Saker, de Havilland lined up his own weapon. The enemy was either super confident or totally arrogant, flying in a straight line towards the Saker. With a grin, de Havilland fired.

WHOOSH!!

The sky, already light from the powerful Alioth sun, appeared to explode another few magnitudes in brightness. The pale blue beam, expanding to almost as wide as the Saker itself, tunnelled through the air towards the approaching Gyr at trans-light speeds.

BOOM

The Gyr didn't stand a chance. The plasma beam continued on as if nothing had happened until it dissipated its energy in the upper atmosphere. A fiery explosion, then the Saker rocketed through the debris cloud, as shrapnel rained down on the city below. A glance at the altimeter: 11000m. They were so close now. Just a little bit extra. Veruz managed to claw himself back into a position behind de Havilland, clinging onto the pilot's seat.

"We're almost ther...", yelled de Havilland as the Saker suddenly bucked, throwing de Havilland from the seat. The world momentarily went black, as he hit the roof above, slamming into the sensors and dials above. He felt another impact. Below him. He was probably on the ground. He knew he was in a life or death situation, but couldn't force his body to react. Come on. Roll over! He commanded his body, forcing himself to move. Slowly he got to his knees, then peered through his blurred vision to the pilots seat.

It wasn't empty.

Veruz-

It felt like his body had suddenly realised it was no longer needed and gave up the fight. As he blacked out, he saw Veruz, bloodied and bruised, slam his hand down on the controls.

He awoke with a start, his mind still fearful for his life. No, he wasn't dead. Or if he was, God had a sense of humour. His surroundings were neither hell or heaven orientated. Just the standard fittings for a pilot bunk room on board a typical Alliance engineering starship. Probably the modified Saker, his mind realised, struggling to catch up with what was happening. The furnishing below him was soft, but a bit too narrow for his frame. There was no sign of any damage back here.

A good sign.

He slowly rotated to bring his feet to the ground, then pushed off, landing with a thud. Mind still shaky, he set off towards the bright light ahead. Pushing the door aside, he found himself in the cockpit of the Saker, with Veruz in the pilots seat. He immediately turned to face his commander, his face going red. "Sorry Cap'n. Hope you don't mind," he said, referring to the pilots seat.

"No No," de Havilland assured him. "Thanks for saving us. What happened?"

"One of the rogue missiles exploded just off to starboard," Veruz explained. "Knocked us both around, but I went backwards into a bulkhead, instead of up into the roof. I got hold of the controls and pushed the hyperspace controls down."

de Havilland looked mortified. "Did you..."

"Yes, I forced a mis-jump. They won't be tracking us."

de Havilland looked out the cockpit window. The hypnotic blue swirls of hyperspace were calmly spinning around them, forming a tunnel of light. Somehow, who ever was chasing him had known he would go to Alioth. Had they tracked him there? Or did they know him so well that they knew he would go there? I hope to god it's the first option, he thought. The idea that someone knew him inside out like that was not just disturbing, it disgusted him. His life was his own, no one else. No one else should know it that well. And he had never thought of himself as predictable before. It shocked him to the core. Am I that obvious? His expression turned grim. Time to change that.

"Ok, we have a small ship with a big gun. We have a bunch of bounty hunters after us, as well as some secret organisation. We have the current and future coordinates for the Azure Sunset in our hands. What do we do?" He leant against the door, eyes closed, trying to envisage his next step. Silence filled the cockpit for several moments.

"You're the Captain, Cap'n" replied Veruz, concentrating harder on the controls in front of him.

He's just as lost as you are. He wants you to tell him what to do. He wants you to Command him. Sure. He could command. He had been a project leader at AAAI, but relatively speaking, that wasn't very important. This was life or death stuff. When push came to shove, he had either been surrounded by his comrades, following orders, or on his own, only looking out for his own skin. Now he was forced to look out for another. Michael was, for all intents and purposes, in his care, and it was his job to make sure he didn't get dead. Responsibilities! His mind screamed, but he gave himself a quick slap on the head. Think like a soldier. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Just get it done! de Havilland cleared his breath. "Well, we need to do something with this data. We need to give it someone who can protect us. That's what its about now. Staying alive, getting through the shit we've found ourselves in."

"Sounds good Cap'n," Veruz replied, turning to give a smile of encouragement.

"So who wants to know where the Azure Sunset is? The Alliance? Probably a passing interest if any. The Empire? Definitely. The Federation would be equally keen to find out, but would they help us, or would we get buried below bureaucracy?"

Veruz didn't reply, but continued to focus on the controls, checking various readouts, engine stats probably. "Norman Mosser," Veruz finally spoke up.

"What about him?" de Havilland queried.

"He wants to know where it is. He'll pay big money for it. Enough to pay off our bounty."

"Or he will kill us and take the information. And will he be able to give us protection from this... organisation'?"

"Of course he can. He has people, contacts. He can hide us away. We'll disappear."

Too right we'll disappear. "I don't deal with criminals," de Havilland replied. Veruz shrugged and went back to his work. No, he didn't deal with criminals. Criminals were scum. He was not. They did not mix. But he could not work out a better alternative. The object was to stay alive. But would the chances of that be any greater around Norman Mosser? Then doubts swirled up into his mind again. If they have a profile on me and worked out I would go to Alioth, then they probably know where I would run and hide. Thoughts of letting Veruz run things entered his mind. If they went where Michael wanted, instead of himself, they may have a chance. Of course they will have a profile on him too. He sighed. There was only one thing he could do: the last thing he ever wanted to do. Another sigh. Well, you're about to cross a line here Vasquith. Still, he thought, better on the other side than dead. Surely?

"Ok then, so how do we get in contact with Norman? You know some of his contacts do you?" de Havilland asked, only half serious. It wouldn't have surprised him if Michael did know a few people.

"We don't need to know anyone. We have the perfect broadcasting tool available." de Havilland's brow knotted as he tried to understand what Veruz was getting at. The only broadcasting tool he could think of was the Holonet.

No...

"You want to advertise our information on the bulletin board?" he asked incredulously.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Because everyone will be able to trace where we sent it from and come after us, steal the information and kill us."

"Then lets go to Reidquat. That's the biggest hive of pirate of low lives this side of known space. If we broadcast from there, it wont mean anything, especially if we transmit from a public booth."

A public booth... The engineering side of his mind was already whirring away, working at the problem. He had to go see if he had any tools out the back. "Start heading for Reidquat, Michael. I'll be out the back."

* * *

"Ok, bring her to a halt," de Havilland called over the comlink.

"Roger Cap'n."

de Havilland was standing in front of the sensor array control console in the engineering bay. On a ship this size, it was small and simple, but he could still use it to detect where holonet signals were being bounced around the cosmos from. A hyper-net relay station, sitting pretty in the outer reaches of the Gateway system. Michael brought the ship to a rest and set the engines to standby. The constant whirr of the prime mover, reverberating through the engineering section, settled into a more soothing hum. de Havilland reset the sensors then locked onto the relay station. They were picking up information. Encrypted, but information nonetheless.

Now it was time for the second part of his plan. He turned around to face the communication console, the one used to send signals away from the ship. He checked the small device hanging out of the input port. It was a Piggy-back Instigator. It was roughly built, de Havilland scavenging from what was around the Saker, but he was confident it would work. He focused the aerial on the relay station. He would broadcast his message, then the Instigator would latch the signal onto the encrypted signal beaming between the planets. It would continue to hitch a ride until it met a Reidquat station, which had specific modulations in its relay signal, releasing itself into the local data stream. The signal contained the standard publication request header for the Intergalactic Bulletin board, so if everything went fine, the Reidquat bulletin board would pick up the released signal and publish it. If anyone tried to trace it, they would find a dead end at the Gateway relay station.

Hopefully.

There were a lot of if's there. And he still wasn't sure if the Instigator would work. He was copying someone else's design, not something he was ever happy with. Still, it was their best bet. "Ship ready to make the move to Reidquat?"

"Ready and waiting, Cap'n"

Ok. Time to do this. de Havilland pressed the Send button.

* * *

Message Received:

Origin: Unknown

Data packets: 20

Signal Type: Bulletin Release.

Message body:

"Information for Sale: I know the current and future coordinates for the gloriously large and beautiful Sunset. NM and all other holiday makers should drop by the Worlds End."

Message End.

Check Mate

[Mack Winston]

Kevin moved the bishop. "Check".

I smiled gleefully. I knew he'd do that.

"Didn't see that, did ya," I said, as my rook took his queen, neatly getting me out of check.

He didn't say a word as he moved his rook. He paused. "Checkmate, I think," he said without emotion.

"Wha? Oh..."

I bet the Mossers didn't have this problem when they played each other at chess. I looked over at my very convincing double, and shook his hand. A good win, although enabled by my stupidity. I glanced out of the window at the Darkes residence, noting a figure opening the door. It was Darkes himself, arriving as he usually did after the day's business. "Darkes is back," I muttered.

"When's this Mosser dude supposed to show?" Kevin asked.

I shrugged. Waiting for Mosser could be a long drawn out affair. Meanwhile, plenty of Mosseresque happenings had gone on all over the continent, but as Maria and I picked over the evidence, we could quickly throw out any Mosser initiation of most of these events. There were a few that could well have been Mosser. We were certain Mosser No. 2 had touched down and wreaked some roadside havoc already. It was just seeing when he'd deign to show his face in New San Fransisco. It was a matter who he'd visit first - us or Darkes. Of course both Mosser 2 and Mosser 3 would be well aware we were out to get them as they'd all made the same offers as Mosser 1. It wouldn't be hard for them to deduce that each Mosser had made the same offer. The only uncertainty was which job had been accepted.

But in the meantime, Kevin and I had sat at our new 'home' and watched and waited, and mostly got bored. I had probably assembled and reassembled the gauss rifle and recalibrated its telescopic sight probably a hundred times. I had sort of grown to accept my "twin", although he was just an actor, although it had been very strange at first.

My musings were interrupted as Maria burst in. "He's in New San Fransisco!"

"Who?"

"Mosser you idiot!" she shouted, in a state of..excitement.

"Yeah, I know, which one though?"

"I'm certain it's Mosser 2. Everything points to it being Mosser 2 going on the location and travel history we were given. Incidents indicate he's headed this way! Now whichever one of you is Kevin, we've got to go!"

I watched my double rise from his seat opposite the chess board. I called after them as they left. "Just make sure you get him within two hundred yards, and make sure I can see something worth shooting!"

Now We Play the Waiting Game...

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The man crashed backwards into the table with a yelp, spilling the two drinks onto the floor. de Havilland flew to his feet and lunged at the drunken man, grabbing him by the collar of his jacket. He brought the man up so their eyes were mere millimetres apart. "Get lost," de Havilland hissed, eyes narrowed to slits. The man nodded drunkenly, then took a step toward the bar. Suddenly, he spun back around and flung his fist at de Havilland's head. Trained instincts took immediate command of his body, his left arm blocking the pathetic attempt at a punch, then launching his right straight at the mans face. His nose exploded in a spurt of blood and a sickening crunch. He followed it up with a second for good measure. then pushed the man backwards, who went stumbling into the bar before collapsing to the floor, his face a bloody mass of cartilage. He looked down at the man with a slight sense of pity. He hadn't meant to hit him so hard. But the scum that inhabited this bar were getting him on edge. The poor drunken man also acted as a warning to anyone else who thought they were men enough to take on the new comers. Standing in the centre of the room, he looked around, making eye contact with anyone looking in his direction.

Dominance.

There! Some young kid was looking at him with a smirk on his face. He strolled straight up to the lad, stopping a foot away. The kid hastily stumbled out his seat to fend off any attack. de Havilland didn't move. He stood rock still. A heartbeat. Another. No movement. silence. Then de Havilland thrust his left hand out and grabbed the man tunic by the bottom. A fist full of cloth, he pulled back towards him. The kids eyes doubled in size, then a split second later his fists came up in retaliation.

But de Havilland was already wiping the blood off his right fist. The kid quickly realised he wasn't in any physical danger...unless he wanted to be. He wisely decided to let the situation blow over, returning to his seat when de Havilland had finished. That should prove the point, de Havilland thought smugly. Turning, he took three steps over to the bar, motioning the bar-keep. "I'll need another couple there chap," he said, waving his e-card.

de Havilland returned to the table, complete with tipped glasses and spilt beverage, and passed a new drink to Veruz. "What do you call this stuff?" de Havilland asked, taking a sip of the beverage.

"Brown."

de Havilland moved the mug away from his face to analyse the fluid. "Fair enough," he replied, downing another mouthful. Wiping his mouth, he placed the mug back on the table. "I really hate this place. These people freak me out." He told his copilot.

"It shouldn't be for too much longer cap'n," Veruz replied. "When someone who is truly interested in our information, not just for money, but for his true goals, walks through that door, we will know."

de Havilland took another gulp. the brown fluid certainly went down a treat. It was refreshing without the burning associated with heavy spirits. And he was getting a little drunk. "I hate the waiting game."

M3

[Norman Mosser]

Norman Mosser sat at one of the rear tables in the stim bar, reading a newspaper. It was one of those Old Earth activities that smug rich people enjoyed so much and really wound up the environmentalists. It was also a pleasant way to spend his time waiting for Mr Darkes to get home and loading up on whatever cocktail of performance enhancing chemicals that was currently in vogue in the Sol system. He signalled to the staff for another hypo. One of the attendants looked in his direction and shook his head, "Sorry, we can't prescribe any more to you today sir."

"I think you have me mistaken for a previous customer."

The attendant glanced down at his screen. "So we have. My mistake. New customers get their first hit for free - red or blue?"

Mosser smiled. Everybody had their price.

* * *

Twenty minutes later Mosser rose and made his way to the street. The reds had left him slightly paranoid and he kept glancing around to look for possible Mossers. That would result in a spot of shooting. He glanced down at the pocket in which the handgun rested. No Deathwrecker today, but menacing enough to aid 'negotiations' with Mr Darkes. The metal case he carried was the snafu insurance - Mack's silence was worrying him. An autotaxi pulled up and Mosser boarded. He instructed it to drop him a block from Darkes' front door. Ideally, this should be as simple as a stroll, an awkward chat and a stroll off again. It probably wouldn't be - there were too many Mossers in the equation.

As Norman's taxi drove into Darkes' neighbourhood, His expectations were rewarded as he spotted what appeared to be Mack, Maria and one of the other Mossers talking on a street corner. The little shit.

He had done a deal. With a competitor.

Mosser snarled and nudged the taxi around a corner and stopped it at the kerbside. He placed the case he carried on his lap and opened it. Mostly it was a toolkit, but in amongst the power tools and spanners were a number of beaten, filthy components. A few minutes work and he had deftly slotted them together and attached one of the powerpacks for the drill. Good old frontier tech. It was crude, sturdy, powered off domestic power cells and would throw laser beams at things. Some wag had stamped "made in Phekda" on the side and the stock incorporated a bottle opener. Not a Deathwrecker, but good at killin'.

Mosser opened the door and stepped into the street. Unhurriedly, he started walking towards Mack and the doppelganger.

Against All Odds

[Cmdr. Maegil]

We'd arrived to New San Francisco in the afternoon, and requested clearance to land at the military base. The ship's new manoeuvring thrusters (from a Tiger) were too strong and didn't allow for fine tuning, so I ordered the local mechanics to remove them and return the original ones, doubling them with a redundant set from a Viper, as they were before -to the mechanic's horror. Emu, on her turn, kept making fun about my ship, calling it "Aspenstein", "Lump-a-lot" or "Millennium Falcon". Oh, well, let the heathens talk... Tomorrow, when it's ready, again it'll be the most manoeuvrable Asp in the Federation.

We left the base in a hovertaxi to the Belvedere Park Hotel where a uniformed servant opened the door while other came with a cart to take our luggage. The hotel's lobby was something lavish. The dominating jewelled vitral, the glistening white marble, the pearly silk over yellow velvet, the bronze and crystal chandeliers, the paintings, everything designed to make wealthy beings feel at home and to awe those not so wealthy. We were on the awed group, but since I wasn't paying for it, oh well!

After registering we were shown to our suite where I signed a big tip to the waiter. As we unpacked, Emu commented on how empty the drawers were and how he should go shopping. Finishing that we connected our datapads to the hotel's net and found some mail. "Look, dear, I've got a message from FM Delta Pavonian HQ. I've been promoted to Lieutenant for my last mission."

"That's nice!. On the other hand, that means that for this one the best you can get is a medal."

"A medal for what?"

"For performing above and beyond the call of duty, engaging in close combat with complete disregard for your own personal safety. Now, come here... Lieutenant..., and let's celebrate your promotion!" I was already embracing her when something in my own datapad caught my eye. "Wait a moment, honey, there's something here."

She made a soft, lusty, mewling sound. "Not work, I hope... We're on vacation and you're all mine. You teased me and I want you now!...", she said, rubbing herself against me.

"Shush, my pussy cat! Let me see what this is..." It was a coded message, from the Brotherhood. It took me some time to decode, and Emu was getting ever more impatient, and ever more alluring. When I finally finished, it read:

**From: SB command
To: Spartacus**

**Preliminary assaults went as planned.
5 casualties, 2154 rescued, 69 new ships.
Phase 2 initiated."**

All good news. And now, there's a very hot Emu waiting for me...

* * *

After a huge breakfast in bed and torrid love-making, we decided to enjoy the beautiful sunny day. We went for a stroll on the tourist traps, lunched on the seaside, did more sight-seeing, and finally were on our way for some shopping with no credit limit (Emu specially insisted on it). We were having a wonderful time, walking hand in hand and kissing all the time (and the people there also kissed a lot).

"It's Mosser!", Emu said.

"Where?"

"There, on the corner, talking to that young couple."

"Young couple? Don't they look like Mack Winston and that so-said abducted imperial princess, whatshername?"

"I think we're getting a bit paranoid; I mean, what are the odds of us bumping not only into Mosser - the most wanted sentient being in human space- on Earth, of all places, but also the second most wanted? In our own so-called mission! And then again, look at this other guy coming our way with a... hairblower?!"

"Act natural because that's really another Mosser, with a gun. Let's jump him quietly when he goes by. I'll take him as he passes and you put his lights out; then take the gun and start ahead towards the others while I put him on this alley. Go around them to the other side of the street and wait, when I go for them it's likely that Winston and the girl will try to escape away from me, towards you. Prevent them while I take care of the second Mosser."

"Why not take the gun and threaten the second Mosser and the others?"

"Because I need to talk to the guy, so I don't want him pissed off at me."

"Just talk to him? Are you forgetting the Federation wants him dead?"

"Yep, that is our official position, but I'm black ops, babe... Now, he's coming..." Black hovercars started to appear from every intersection around the park, converging on the group and missing completely the Mosser standing only a few steps from us. The group broke up and started running, the princess and Winston went one way, Mosser tried to go the other way but didn't. A sudden spurt of blood on his back made him stop on his knees and stare in hate towards somewhere above and out of our line of sight. He was pulling a weapon from his back as the hate melted into a look of understanding, and he fell with a second shot through the head. Agents in FIB uniforms went after the fugitives while others opened cover fire against the sniper's position. The other Mosser looked bewildered for an instant, chuckled while shaking his head and slowly turned to go away.

I closed in with him. "Hey, Mosser!", I whispered. He turned in a feline movement, already raising his gun... not in his possession anymore, since I disarmed him by flipping the gun in his hand while moving to his back. "I just want to talk, that's all. Now, can we be civilized about this and avoid undue attention?"

He seemed upset about the ease I took the gun, but soon recovered his pose. "Who are you?"

"We'll do the introductions later. Made in Phekda?! How cute.", I said, handing Emu the gun. "Let's go, it's too crowded here. They caught the princess but it seems Winston got away and they'll soon come searching this way.

"And they are?..."

"Don't know, and don't care. Now, let's get going."

"You want to talk? Very well then, where to?"

Of Mice And Mosser

[Mack Winston]

The hotel roof wasn't bad - a raised edge to conceal myself behind if necessary, the same raised edge having a wide, smooth concrete top to place the gun's bipod.

"Mack" and Maria were making their way up the street. I could already see Mosser #2 converging from another, as he appeared between the buildings. The sun shone overhead. Birds sang in the trees. Mosser #2 converged with my companions and stopped. They were talking, but a couple of hundred metres off and the background hum of the city, it wasn't possible to make out the conversation. I made a final check to make sure the coast was clear. The fewer witnesses the better - there was just a knot of people further up the street, hanging around outside a grubby bar and the odd autotaxi speeding by, but other than that it was cl...

A sound below made me check the other side of the hotel - the face overlooking Darkes' place. My heart sank. I could only see the figure from the top, but that hairline and the shoulders of that suit could be none other than Mosser #3. He was carefully checking a gun - I couldn't make out the design from the rooftop, but only a Mosser could bring a weapon like that into New San Fransisco. This was not good. If I gibbed Mosser #3, Mosser #2 would hear the shot and probably do something unpleasant to Kevin and Maria. If I finished off Mosser #2, Mosser #3 would probably start shooting. I decided to bide my time, and see what developed - look for a more opportune moment. Neither Mosser had seen me, I could be sure of that. So I watched Mosser #2 through my scope. The conversation he was having with Maria and my double appeared to be very animated. I glanced down at the other Mosser. He too was biding his time, edging slowly towards the intersection.

Tense moments passed. I took some time to glance around the area. It seemed that the Mosser at the intersection was in no hurry to conclude whatever conversation he was having - then again, he couldn't see what I could see from my vantage point, and things were getting worse.

Six black vehicles worse.

It could only be the Feds. They had been more or less still, but the command to move must have come. The vehicles silently picked up speed and hurtled towards the intersection. It was now or never. I quickly double-checked the magazine, and placed a spare on the ground beside me. I zoomed in the scope to nearly full magnification - I couldn't afford to miss...carefully, I started to squeeze the trigger.

The vehicles arrived.

Maria and my double started to run. My finger squeezed a little harder. The gauss rifle recoiled. Mosser #2 looked around towards me, as he collapsed to the ground. It's doubtful he could have made me out for sure, behind the rifle, at that distance - but he knew all right. His face said it all. The second bullet went through his forehead and he collapsed. "So long," I said, and dove beneath the hotel roof's upper barrier, as the air became hot with laser fire. I risked glancing up, and I could see the Feds struggling with Maria. Looking directly below the hotel, I could see two other people confronting the other Mosser - they looked more like tourists than Feds.

But it was time to go. I strapped my rifle to my back and began to run, going down the hotel fire escape three stairs at a time. The metal clattered beneath my boots as I fled without finesse. I rounded the last flight of stairs, and jumped down the last five, landing heavily. Picking myself up, I began to sprint.

Promptly colliding with the other Mosser and the two strangers...

Mexico

[Norman Mosser]

Mosser considered his options as he was escorted down the back street. The guy who'd taken Mosser's gun was fast - clone agent fast? Possibly. He considered why they'd grabbed him - Feds would have had him Quikloked or dead by now. Job offer? amateur bounty hunters? Either way, not an offer he'd accept at the moment - he was busy. Probably best to find an exploit an opportunity and make a break for it.

As they walked Mosser realised that he hadn't even been searched yet. It was entirely possible that the guy had taken his gun to make sure he didn't do anything silly. That gave him an idea of how to try and regain the initiative.

"Can I have my gun back?"

"What?!"

"Can I have my gun back please?"

"Sorry?"

"Well, either you mean me harm, in which case you should just get on with it and try and claim the bounty, bearing in mind, I will kill you in the process, or you disarmed me to keep us both out of trouble and talk to me. In which case, you no longer need it and I will do in a short while so I would appreciate it if your..."

"Partner."

"...partner returned it to me"

The guy looked at him. "And give you both guns? - that bulge in your suit doesn't look wallet-shaped to me."

Curses.

At that moment, Mack Winston ran full tilt around a corner and into them, knocking everybody into a sprawling heap. Mosser and the male stranger were the first to their feet. They both dashed for the laser that lay on the ground and Mosser's foot just edged in to send it skittering away. He got a hefty punch in the kidneys for his trouble, but Norman spun away and pulled the man up short by pointing a handgun at his face. Mosser took a couple of steps back to clear some space. "Okay, get up and keep your hands visible"

Mack? and the girl stood up. Mack had what appeared to be a gauss rifle slung on his back. That would be the sniper then.

"Winston - They cloning you as well now? No matter. Rifle please."

Mack unslung the rifle, ejected the ammo clip and handed it over. Keeping one eye on his prisoners, Mosser raised it up and swung it hard against the ground, bending the barrel before letting it drop to the floor. "I'm guessing the other Mosser put you up to it. I'm disappointed. You should have dealt with me. Now listen carefully - do you have the locator?"

"No."

Mosser felt his hand buck with the recoil of the pistol and there was a sharp crack. Mack dropped to the ground and the girl screamed. Lowering the pistol, Mosser turned and ran, not bothering to scoop up the guns on the ground. The next few minutes would be tricky. The area was crawling with Feds and he had to get to Sam Darkes' place, get the locator and get out again. It was only a few streets away and hopefully the Feds wouldn't spook him. He might need to get out in a hurry, so it had best if he got ready now. As he ran along the backstreets, Norman vocalised the word "dust" into his neural lace. A signal was sent up to Abraham Lincoln. A certain Cobra Mark Three requested and was granted launch clearance. It exited the station smoothly and began to descend down to New San Fran. His ride would arrive in 67 minutes. A little too long for comfort, but workable. One thing reassured him. Winston wasn't a clone. He'd definitely hit metal when he shot him in the arm.

Federales

[Mack Winston]

"Fuck", I shouted at the world in general. I lay on the ground, not bleeding. The arm no longer worked after that bastard Mosser had shot it. I just hadn't anticipated that, and I had the initiative too. I looked at it. Synthi-muscle hung out from a nasty burned hole. The fingers wouldn't move and no sensation was coming back.

Lying on the ground wasn't going to solve much. Mosser was off for the locator. The other two he was with were nowhere to be seen. I sat up, dragged my damaged rifle over, and disassembled it with my remaining hand, concealing the parts in a bush growing at the back of the hotel I'd just fled. A new barrel was all it needed, expensive enough, but not a total loss. Scrambling to my feet, I peered down the alley that led eventually to the front of the hotel, and then to the street where Sam Darkes lived.

It was all going horribly pear shaped. The Mosser was making his way towards the apartment building. Maria was probably quick-locked in some Fed's ground car, and Kevin was nowhere to be seen - but judging by the attempts at loudhailer justice going on down the road, he was still keeping the Fed's busy.

Objectives...hmmm, yes, objectives.

One. Get the locator.

Two. Kill off the Mosser who'd just shot me and broken my rifle.

Three. Get Maria back in one piece.

Not necessarily in that order. Adrenaline can make you useless at thinking. I could feel a panicked response welling up. There was only one thing for it. I pulled out the hip flask from my thigh pocket. Riedquatan Ultra Coffee. The solution to every hard problem. I gulped the scalding fluid down, and came to my senses. I still had my Carstein killing knife - disassembled, of course, to make it harder to pick up on a weapons scan. Assembling it one handed was going to be a problem. I fished out my comm. "Sam Darkes."

"Locating. Found. Calling", came the soothing voice.

"Hello?"

"Sam Darkes, you are in grave danger," I said, mustering up every ounce of my Phekdan accent.

"Who...?"

"Do exactly as I say or you will be dead in ninety seconds," I said, interrupting his inevitable question.

"Wha?"

"No questions. In about thirty seconds, you will get a knock at the door. It is vital you do not answer it. Now remember the object your sister gave you?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Never mind what it is. Go and get it." I heard the sounds of movement. Something opening, probably a safe.

"OK, I've got it."

"Now exit your apartment from the rear lower window."

"It's on the second floor, are you crazy?"

"Do you want to live or die?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Never mind that. That knock on the door is coming now, ignore it. The door will get broken down in thirty seconds. When it does you are a dead man. You have to believe me." I heard the door chime over Sam's comm. "Now to the window."

"What do I do?"

"Jump onto the roof below. Hang from the window frame, you won't fall as far," I said, as reassuringly as possible.

I heard more shuffling. Somewhere up the street, I heard some gunfire. A grunt through the comm.

"Now do the same from the roof to the ground. Now you know the hotel just down the road? Meet me in the alley behind the hotel. Run like hell. Your apartment building is about to fall down. Run!"

I heard panting. I hoped he'd taken the point. Vince had given me enough explosive to blow two buildings, and I'd carefully packed it around Darkes' place the day we'd arrived. It was merely an insurance policy, and I was going to have to use it. If the collapsing building didn't crush Mosser #3 into a thin smear, it would at least have the bonus effect of distracting the Feds - and give me a fighting chance to get Maria back. It'd also make Sam Darkes realise that he really, really should be listening to me.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the slim detonator. A modified comm handset. "Sam Darkes please," I said into the handset. I peered around the corner again. There was a muffled boom followed by a deafening crash. The apartment building was a little out of sight, but the clouds of dust billowing through side streets confirmed its destruction...

"Sam Darkes, are you still alive?" I asked.

"My fucking house just fell down!" I heard him scream, over his running.

"Keep moving!" I encouraged. There was now a general scream of alarms. Sirens wailed as fire appliances hurtled through the air to the burning ruins. I definitely owed Vince one now. The Guild might have gone, but the support network certainly was alive and well. I heard feet approaching. I turned around.

Darkes. Slim and wealthy looking, like most New San Franciscans, he was dashing towards me. The look of terror was quite clear. That was very useful. A terrified Sam Darkes was useful. He'd be compliant. "Sam Darkes, I presume," I said as he approached.

"Yes," he panted.

"The item, please."

"No."

"Look, I don't have time for this," I said, sternly.

"Who ARE you?" he demanded.

"Never you mind. Just give me the item. You are being pursued by a Norman Mosser. He will kill you if you retain the item. Would you rather he killed you or tried to kill me?"

"Who?"

"Do you live in a cave? A Norman Mosser. He has come for that item you have."

"What is it?"

"That's irrelevant! Give it to me now!"

"No!"

I sighed. The panicked man was turning out to be rather more work than I had hoped. "Very well, it's your call," I said, turning on my heel.

"Wait!"

I stopped, and turned around.

"Tell me who you...", - his eyes were drawn to my wrecked prosthetic arm.. "android?" he added.

"Only a bit of me. The rest of me is human"

"Your eyes are weird, too"

"Phekdan syndrome."

"Wha..?"

"Never mind. Imperial Princesses find it sexy. Now are you going to give me the item?"

Darkes eyed me suspiciously. I held my hand out. More shouts at the road intersection brought me back to reality. "Oh fuck it. Come with me!" I shouted, half dragging the man behind me. Bewildered he may have been, but he wasn't going to give up the locator easily. I'd have to find an opportune moment to deck him and take it off him. But first, I needed his help. I half dragged him the remainder of the block. I took a quick look around the intersection. Maybe two dozen Feds were ranged around, most using their vehicles as cover. They were all concentrating hard on a clump of vegetation beneath an enormous palm tree. It wasn't hard to guess that Kevin was hidden somewhere in that region. It also meant the Feds all had their attention focused on the bushes, and not on the vehicles. "Stay there," I ordered.

I sidled down the street. The first vehicle I came to - a large, black interplanetary shuttle, looked like the best candidate. I looked through the open door. Sure enough, inside was Maria. Groggy and quick-locked. She moaned as I entered quietly. Unable to assemble the knife properly, I took out one of the blades that was sitting loose in its holder. Trying not to slice my left hand, I carefully cut open the tough plastic binding Maria to the inside of the vehicle. Maria groaned and fell forwards. At this point, alarms would be howling in the Fed HQ somewhere. There wasn't much time. I dragged her half unconscious body out of the shuttle, and motioned to Sam, who was standing at the street corner looking frightened and lost. "Help me," I hissed.

He grabbed one of Maria's arms, and we managed to drag her into the side street. "Now look after her. If you don't, you'll not only have Mosser trying to kill you, but me also. One of us will get you!" I then did an about turn, and walked out into broad view of the cops. "HEY PIGS, I'M OVER HERE!" I shouted.

I then ran like hell. Laser fire cannoned off walls. Sirens howled. Vehicles screamed overhead. The inevitable sound of pursuit began. I hurtled down an alleyway, and back through the intersection where it'd all began. I crashed through the vegetation, spikes tearing at me, and collided heavily with Kevin who was still hiding amongst the greenery. We forced our way through the undergrowth and fell headlong into the small ornamental pond on the other side, displacing three or four carp who flapped mournfully on the pavement. "You might have noticed that it's time to go," I yelled at my stunt double, as he lay on his back in the water, covered in pond scum. I tried to grab his arm with my right arm, having forgotten it wasn't working. I fell headlong again.

"Oooyah!" I yelled, the breath sharply forced from my body. Finally, we both managed to scramble to our feet.

"Where to?"

I looked back from where we came, and then roughly grabbed my double's head and forced him to the floor - collapsing at the same time. Laser fire hurtled over our heads, exploding the trunk of the rather unfortunate date palm behind us. Splinters and boiling tree sap rained down. "Down here," I yelled. We darted down a filthy back alley. "We've got to get Maria. And Sam Darkes," I explained between breaths.

We ran in clear view across the next street, and into the building - a high-brow clothing store of some sort - that I'd last seen Sam Darkes drag Maria off into. Desperately, I swivelled around, trying to think where they'd go and hide. "Sam Darkes," I said, trying the comm first.

"Fuck off and die," came the response.

"That wasn't very nice," I replied. "Where are you?"

"Just leave me alone," Sam moaned.

"Fitting room," I heard a groggy female voice add. Click. The comm went dead.

We darted over to the fitting rooms, just as Sam was trying to exit. He froze as we blocked the door. "Two of you?"

"Give me the item. Now!" I ordered.

"No!"

He pushed me. Kevin decked him. "Thank you," I said calmly. I strode over to his prone body, and reached into all the pockets of his clothing. There it was. Small, shiny, no buttons or keys - just a simple display. A sector in space. A star system. A planet. I pocketed the device and knelt beside Darkes. "Now do we have your full attention?"

He nodded, wiping his split lip.

"Assuming Mosser got extremely lucky, and survived your apartment falling down on him, he will be after you. I suggest you leave this town. Don't use your ident, don't use any credits. Hitch hike if you must. Go a long way away for a few days. Mosser will realise I have the device, and will start looking for me instead."

"I have to go to work!" he started to protest.

"Call in sick. Can't very well work if you're dead," I added without much emotion. "Mosser will kill you. He won't even care about killing you. He'll probably enjoy it, too. It's your call of course, but if I were you..." I stood up and turned around. I had a patient in need of some Riedquatian Ultra. A few sips, and Maria could at least move under her own steam - and we could get out of the shop before the Police arrived.

I only wished I could tell if the Mosser had been crushed by Darkes' collapsing apartment, but evading the Police was the main aim of the game now.

Prey

[Cmdr. Maegil]

I just stood beside the shop's fitting room door frame and waited. I had decided to give him manoeuvring room, but I regretted it bitterly. This little prick lost me Mosser twice already: once in the backstreet, the second when I almost entered the building he demolished on top of Mosser. Now he's my pray, and whatever this locator is.

Of course it was I who ordered the FIBs to let him go, I had to pull rank and give them my FMIB clearance. They courteously bugged Princess Hesketh-Duval, and then chase a bit to make it look real. All the time Emu had kept an eye on him while I followed Mosser, and now she's waiting by an unmarked car I borrowed. The FIBs are still around, just to be sure he doesn't get away, but won't be necessary.

Footsteps. I have him now... the sure steps behind, wobbling ones in the middle, so-so ahead, coming this way. I had to grin as I put my foot out...

PLOUFT!!!

The Winston kid fell headlong, and I removed the foot as not to trip the Princess, also. "Going somewhere, my boy?"

Winston turned, sat up and stared, surprised. "How the fuck did YOU find me?"

"You're easy to follow.", I said, partially uncovering the bottle opener handgun I had under a jacket on my arm, and putting it on his face. "Come on, let's go for a ride."

"Made in Phekda?! Not fair, don't make fun of me!"

"What are you talking about? This is Mosser's gun.", Yes, this was yet another one of Mosseresque Ironies... Anyway, I couldn't afford to lose the initiative so I waved the gun in the lift's direction, "Come, this way."

I could see the Winston boy looking to the sides, his corporal attitude tensing as they went ahead. He was trying to find a way out... "Don't. It's not only you, and you don't know who I am."

"That's what I'm worried about."

We took the lift to the garage level, and finally reached Emu and the car. "Sorry, but this won't hurt a bit.", I said as I knocked Winston's lights out, goosing my hand in the murk he was covered with. The Princess shrieked and stepped backwards, into the other Winston's arms. "Don't worry, he's OK., Your Highness. I've just put him to sleep."

"Y-yes, I know. I've seen it before, it's the same pressure point the Clone Agents use." After she entered I also knocked her out.

"You, get in the trunk, will you?" I said, addressing the other Winston. "I guess you won't complain. Too much, anyway.", and I did the same to him, searching him and putting him in the back seat beside the princess.

* * *

Unfortunately, I had to KO them, as Emu was driving us to the FM base where my ship was guarded, and I didn't want them to see where we were going. The small, black display pointed to another system, and that's where we'll go. Who knows if I get lucky and find Mosser. Another one. Again.

But first, we go to Sydney. Emu will kill me if we go away without the Tim-Tams.

Unleashed II - Power Moves

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

Quexce (-2,-2)
Williamson Base

Lucius Duran, the orbital trading post's CO, entered the traffic control room. "So, what's up, Jack?"

"We're in the eminance of having a battle on our system.", said Jack M'bende, the SC, pointing at the long range scanner. "Or, better said, another one. When we saw four hours ago the first cluster coming from Miola, we thought it was just an well-armed convoy. But now...", he added.

His mood hadn't been good lately, and just now it seemed to be improving, he has these news to make it become even worse. The ghastly light from the scanners also didn't help: they rather loaned to the CO's face the same sinister tones as those in his disposition. First there were the Feds trespassing and bullying around looking for Viscount Pavel's pirates, to the loss of many local traders and bars; now that they got a few and went away, these guys appear from seemingly nowhere.

"It's much worse than that quarrel the Delta Pavonis Feds had with the Pavel boys two weeks ago. This time we have two REAL battle fleets converging on our system.", said the SC as he tapped on the tactical Officer's shoulder.

"There are four clusters, sir, one coming from Cewaeth, another from Miola, arriving today and tomorrow.", the tactical Officer took the speech. "The other two fleets are coming from Zesola and will arrive in three days; one is not of any navy I know of, according to the Hyperspace Cloud Analyzer, the other is certainly Imperial."

"Irregulars, mercenaries or pirates?"

"Yes, sir, the mass of some of the larger ships is bigger than normal. I've run some projections and it seems they're piggy-riding a few fighters."

"Ok, I'm starting to get scared. And how many are they, after all?" There were dozens of dots bundled at only 8AU and six days away, at most. Counting them was difficult, so close they were.

"A Lynx, two Boas, three couriers, four Asps, nineteen Vipers and five 35 ton fighters. In tow, there are six more possibly Falcons. That's for the main group, plus each one of the secondary groups is composed of two Boas, four Couriers or Tigers, four Asps, twenty Vipers, six 35-tonners and possibly a few more fighters loaded in the cargo holds, nearly arriving in the other clusters."

The other is an Imperial fleet. It has a bit less than the standard TO/E allotment for an Imperial Expeditionary Force: an Duval class, an Achenar, two out of three Explorers, all three of the Cougar-Xs, four of six Couriers and twenty-six Eagle MkIII, Ospray and Ospray-Xs, which accounts for two thirds of the fighters. I'd say they already fought back there in Zesola and the Imps put the other ones on the run."

"That added up to thirty-seven to the Imps against forty of the others, they may have been in bigger numbers but are severely outgunned on the "heavies"", interjected the SC, "and still they beaten up nearly a third of the Imps before running."

"Another thing, there is a suspicious LRC that arrived six days ago, moved to the asteroid field doing Randomia knows what and now is also approaching the entry point. Again, it has a large escort, but not so much as to be noted. Certainly an early arrival."

Duran took a seat. "It might be that Spica Brotherhood thing. I heard a rumour they attacked Emerald on Cemiess..."

"I heard it too as Spartacus Sisters, but I took it for bar talk didn't gave it much credit. If they did, they're crazier than I thought, the Imps pay that kind of humiliation in blood."

"Yes, they'd send a fleet or two after them. So, these convoys are assembling to set a trap."

"They are too many, far too many! How did they get so many ships and managed to keep it quiet; and then there is the training, maintenance and all that cost of it? How did they do it?"

"Simple! Norman Mosser was pigging everyone's attention!"

"Ha, blame it on him...", the SC grinned. "Anyway, we're going to have a battle in space and we're probably next. What about the lookouts the Feds left behind?", he asked the tactical officer.

"One left as soon as the Imp's clouds showed up."

"So, they won't be too much behind. If the Imps manage to win, the Feds will mop up, but if they lose, there's no guarantee the Feds will help in our defence."

"We can't even evacuate, we don't have enough ships."

"Don't worry about that, according to what I heard, they're only after slaves. On the other hand, the LRC also has a good complement of Vipers, so they'll certainly chase any fugitives."

"Sir, there's another development."

"What is it? another fleet? The Feds coming so soon?", asked M'bende.

"Yes, sir, and I don't know yet... There are a lot of new contacts. Let me see..."

"More? Where are they coming from this time?" The TO examined the HCA display. "Uh, that's odd! They are four Boas and an escort of eight Cobra Mk IIIs, but... they're coming from Wainla!"

"Wainla? Where the hell is that?"

"Sector -4,-4, sir. 25.58 light years away, and they arrive tomorrow morning."

"Ai, ai, ai! Class 4 military drives, surely LPAs too, and shielding to the eye balls, I'd say. That must be their version of mobile heavy artillery." This was too much for Duran.

For a while, no-one spoke, each man to his own thoughts of bravery or surrender, until the CO sighed. "No chance. The Imps have already had it, or don't you see all the planning involved in an operation such as this? The Feds will just stand back and cheer; they'll even applaud while these guys come for our slaves."

"Let's call some help from the neighbouring systems, then. This organization is as much a danger to them as it is to us!"

"Nope. Look at the in-transit ships coming to the starports: only two ships, an Anaconda and an Imp Trader. Everybody else already jumped out, these are the fools who don't carry extra jump fuel for emergencies. Even IF they send some help, they'll have one look at the sheer tonnage of this complete fleet and bug off."

"So it's up to us.", concluded the SC, pessimistically.

"Very well. Warn Gomez's CO, SC and the Chamber of Commerce, and put the station's defences on yellow alert. Don't clear anyone for departure, just say that the traffic control is busy. If they are just passing, so much the better; if not, be ready to commandeer all the ships available. Also, I want to know about any transmissions made to and from the station and Gomez. Finally, call the press and charge them double the usual fee for these news."

Eight days, at most, and no chance of escape. It was futile and he knew it, but it was all Duran could do. He'd quit worrying altogether if he only knew the incoming traders contained an SB Marine Assault Regiment each...

* * *

Zeaex (3,-2)
(disputed system)

The appearance of the first cluster from Incanay found both power's forces already on alert, they were well under way when the Imperial Fleet's clouds also showed up. Immediately began the exchange of accusations about the Empire exceeding their quota on the system. A few skirmishes occurring every now and then and wouldn't normally snowball into a catastrophe, except that...

This occurrence was strange, an Imperial fleet pursuing a small fleet, or a large convoy. The Imperial Navy Local Command received an subspace message ordering them to detain or destroy the terrorist fleet. The Feds, on their

hand, couldn't allow the Imps to go about shooting at just anyone and stand back, so they went after the Imps to see what they were up to. Thus, both fleets arranged themselves close to the arriving clusters. The fugitives were faster and arrived sooner than the Imperial fleet. The Imps moved closer. A simple open broadcast let all mayhem break loose:

"Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is the Spartacus Brotherhood Imperial Explorer AZ!503 leading a convoy of refugees. We are under threat by the Imperial Navy, and request immediate assistance."

Upon that, the Imps fired a salvo of half their missiles on the convoy, who turned to run and deployed chaff. Some of the missiles hit their targets and the mayday broadcasts multiplied in an increasingly urgent tone, to outright pleas for help. Like a wolf pack smelling the blood, the Imps reduced the distance between them, coming in for the kill.

It was too much to the Federal commander. "Spartacus Brotherhood refugee convoy, this Vice-Admiral Newton on the FNS "Albion". I'm acknowledging your request. Can you jump from the system while we hold them for you?"

"Affirmative, Albion."

"Then just go and don't you worry about anyone going after you, son. We'll take care of these bullies on this side."

"Thank You, Sir, and God Speed!"

"Very well, then! All Federal ships, LET'S GIT THEM BOYS!!!"

The Federal fleet closed in fast, and the Imperials turned back to face them. As they approached, the Imps sent their second missile volley unskilfully too soon, allowing the Feds to put up an effective wall of chaff.

Out of missiles, the Imperial fleet charged.

The Fed fighters held back an instant for the opponent to get within 1500m, fired a missile volley at close range and followed the path of destruction it left, right into the Imperial fleet's vulnerable core. The heavier Imperial ships were exposed with their escorts in disarray and the following waves cut among them as a hot knife through butter.

While the Federals engaged the Imperial Navy, the convoy disappeared, replaced by departure clouds. The Imperial fleet folded to the rear, reformed its now thinner fighter screen, tried to fight back and was pierced again by the Federal spearhead's second missile salvo. Two wings of Federal fighters widened the gap in the screen, clearing the way for the Constrictor, Asp MkII and Tiger frigates to enter and do bigger damage. The Couriers and Cougar-Xs were taken on first by Falcons and Cobras, then by Asps and Constrictors at very close quarters, where their own turretless size became a disadvantage, or successively destroyed by the arriving Federal battleships.

The Federal fleet completely divided the Imperial armada into two smaller, more digestible chunks and the large ships started to enter firing range. Arcs of hydrogen plasma joined the laser's photons in the task of melting and cutting duralium, flesh and bone; pyrotechnical death sparing neither friend or foe. Soon, the Duval class "Harrold" was swarmed under prickling, shield-eating laser fire, with a Panther bearing into range from abaft. It tried to manoeuvre, too late to avoid the Panther's searing beam which nearly depleted what was left of Harrold's shields before one of the SPA turrets made the federal crew burn with their ship. It was just a brief star in the constellation that flared in the battlefield, but their action had allowed the fighters to finally be able to shoot and destroy the turrets.

The fighters and frigates kept swarming relentlessly the Imperial flag ship as the Albion itself barged in through what was left of the Harrold's escort accompanied by a Griffon on one side and a Panther on the other. The Federal flag ship's trio of bow-mounted in-line LPAs, finding no shielding, started to leave claw-like bright yellow molten duralium scabs as evidence of the passage of the beams. The battleships also joined in, and the fighters broke off and fled. Soon, a once proud flagship was turned into a battered and burning hulk, sprays of escaping atmosphere coming out like white plumes.

In seconds it was all over. The reactors were hit and the ship went nova, with the Duke and all hands. A Duval class ship's explosion blast radius is so great the Empire doesn't even bother to equip it with escape pods (the same going for some Federal ships) except for the occasional Stowmaster that MIGHT escape.

The Feds concentrated their attention on one of the Imperial pockets, and started to thermally disassemble it in a meticulous way. Due to the centralized nature of the Imperial Doctrine, the fall of the Duke threw the defenders into total disarray. The Federal Military even started well.

* * *

Aftermath

The Imperials won the day, overwhelming and destroying most of the Federal presence with the arrival of the second fleet.

The Federalists fought as long as they could, protecting with their lives the escape of the refugees by holding the enemy in combat for several hours.

It was a pyrrhic tactical victory for the Empire, though, for the Feds took a high toll for their defeat aside of holding them long enough.

The Federal pilots and crews who died did so in the certainty it was for a good cause, and for their few surviving comrades, they won. In their minds, anyone who is shot at by the Imps must be OK; anyone who is shot at by them while escorting refugees is a bloody hero, and they were able to lend a hand to these Spartacus Brotherhood guys.

Of course nobody told them an SB psychiatrist had predicted, and intended precisely that emotional response. Nor were they informed that the convoy that jumped out did so to a system where their backup awaited in case the Imps followed, and was in no real danger.

Posthumous medals were awarded to the Vice-Admiral, the Duke, the Marquis and many others, on both sides.

Planetside, ground troops started moving too. For some days the DMZ in Democracy was engulfed in the fires of war, with a few bright mushrooms from time to time. Despite the intensity of the combats, both side's defenses held and the battle eventually died out.

The diplomats are having to work overtime on this one. Nothing new on the Eastern Front... but for a new organization.

Kiddie Talk

[Lt. Emu Maekawa]

Sol (0,0)
Earth

Before they woke up, Maegil had shot the Winstons and the Princess full of barbiturates. We went to Sydney, that dear decided to make it up for me with a few boxes of Tim-Tams.

* * *

Liabefa (-2,-3)
In transit

After we left Earth, and Sol, we jumped to CD-46°11540(-1,-1) and then to here, where we have to get more fuel. Maegil stopped the real Winston's drugs to let him wake up and took him to the small, now nearly empty cargo hold... When he finally did wake up, he could barely move in the ship's artificial 1.8G that Maegil likes.

"Hello, Mr. Winston!"

"Uh, hello. Who are you?"

"I'm someone who did worse things than flattening an residential apartment building."

Winston got up with difficulty. "That doesn't answer my question."

"No... but it's the reason I let you wake up. I drugged the others so they won't disturb me until we arrive to the system in the detector I took from you."

"I don't understand."

"You wouldn't. You see, I've done things my conscience don't like. I have nightmares over some of the massacres I made, like killing completely unsuspecting, helpless civilians. As the 56 FAMILIES that were killed together with Mosser."

"So?"

"All the times I did those things, it was following orders. I didn't agree, didn't like them but they were ORDERS. I'm free of that kind of thing now, but still have to live with what I did. You, on the other hand, did it just because it was easy, with no regard for the consequences of your actions."

"Oh, so you're the talking cricket, my conscience, now?"

"No, I'm the guy who's going to punish you for your lack of basic notions of humanity!" Maegil delivered a stiff punch into Winston's stomach. Winston doubled over, but Maegil held him. "One!", he said...

After that, Maegil punched and kicked him 55 more times, counting each blow, and left him groaning on the floor, in his own vomit and blood for a while before patching him up. When he did, he started questioning the boy.

"Just for your information, I'm not going to kill you, nor turn you to anyone's cops. I just need Mosser, and you and this locator are my only chances. Now, what will I find on the system it indicates?"

"Fuck you!", Winston spat between his fat lips.

"I know ways to get all this info from you, and we have time. I'm sure neither of us will enjoy it, so please tell me everything."

Beaten and drowsy, Winston yielded "Ok, I believe you. I'm not sure, only Mosser knows that."

"But what do you think it may be?"

"It might be the location of the Azure Sunset, or another clue to find it, I'm not sure."

Maegil smirked in pleasure, "Thank you!", and drugged him again. "Now, you'll sleep. I promise to wake you up, even to let you roam free if you behave, when we enter the system."

"That, I'll believe when I see it.", said Winston between yawns.

Winston was soon breathing slow and lightly, and we dragged him back to the pantry where the others were asleep and well secure to prevent them from tumbling should Maegil need to dog-fight.

* * *

Me and Maegil were in bed, whispering endearments and cuddling each other. I was sucking one of the chocolate chips that fell on the sheets and melted on his skin, and the thing I wanted to ask him came back to me.

"Dear?"

"Yes, sweetcake?"

"What's this inside your arm?"

"Oh, what? This wart?"

"It's not a wart, it's not yours. It's... somehow artificial! What is it?"

"You could tell just by looking at it?!"

"Well, also touching and tasting a bit... Lacking a better term, call it woman's intuition, it just feels wrong."

"It's supposed to pass all but the most thorough inspection, and you spotted it without sensors. Women!"

"And?..."

Mmmmm... If I tell you, I'll have to shoot you."

"Again? That would be nice."

"Naughty girl!"

I cuddled into him, but he wasn't ready yet. I really hate that in men! He stroked my hair. I held his wrist and started picking the "wart", but he pulled it away. "Hey, don't do that. It might go off, and THEN you'll be in trouble."

"OK, now I'm REALLY curious! What IS it, after all?"

"Ohhh, just a little nothing I keep in store for those special moments..."

I slapped his arm. "You Bastard, stop teasing my curiosity and tell me already! Don't speak in riddles."

"Riddles? What if I tell you this is my Major Mayhem patch?"

"The kiddie holo series?" He nodded. "And what does it do?"

Maegil stood up on the bed, made an mock hero pose and recited: "Well, it makes me 'SMAAAARTER than the magnificent EINSTEIN, FAAAAASTER than a speeding CHEETAH and STROOONGER than a ARCTURAN BEAR!!!" He finished and sat down, chuckling.

"I remember that. It's still on, on Delta Pavonis. how was the rest?... "Using his powers for GOODNESS and the FEDERAL VALUES protecting the weak in his never-ending struggle against the EVIL EMPEROR DeVill and his IMP CLONES!". And that's what we do as a living."

"Na, na! I still remember your favorite part. Keep going, come on!"

"Don't you dare call me your "sidekick". Don't you dare or I'll slap you!"

He was really laughing now, but still tried to say it. "With the assistance of..." Bastard! "...his SUPER SIDEKICK..." I slapped him, "...the SLY SPY and SAPPY SABOTEUR, ..." but he kept at it, "...SUZIE ... SURPRISE!!!" laughing even harder.

I bit him, he held me in his arms and pulled me to him. "I think it's OK if I tell you, it's a combat stim. Special stuff, too powerful to go around. The ones in the Special Forces are nothing compared to this."

"Mmmm... So, it improves your tactical thinking, neuromuscular systems and stamina?"

"No, those would be the Special Forces ones. This one overloads them. I see everything better and in slow motion, must speak vvvveerrryyy sssllloowwwlllyyy to be understood and can throw half a ton and worry about disk surgery later. For forty-five minutes after I have pinched and twisted it, I gain Major Mayhem's powers."

"And you say the troops can't have it? why?"

"Because, about fifteen minutes after it runs out... it's better that the user has already found a safe and cozy place, because it crashes the person. I simply drop off for half a day and wake up feeling terrible. Remember the discal hernia thing?..."

"I'm game!", I stated out of the blue.

"Uh?!"

"I'm..." My hand slid down his chest and abdomen to his groin. "...game!" Now, yes, he was getting there! I rolled to over him, facing him and pinned his arms. I kissed his lips lightly and let the fingers slide along his arms... "But I changed my mind. Today, and only today...", I wispered in his ear as I pinched and twisted the patch, "...I'll admit to be Major Mayhem's sidekick!"

He sat up in a jerk, throwing me off. His physiognomy changed. His voice gained a higher, faster pitch as he spoke. "I did warn you. Suzie Surprise framed me, and NOW you're in trouble.", and hurt me a bit as he grabbed my arms with too much force.

* * *

I got what I wanted, and more, until finally he started to get groggy and fell asleep as men do. Ouch! Mental note: listen when someone says not to put hand in fire. It was nice, though...

Obie, the on-board AI's voice sounded on the PA: "Hello, Maegil, please wake up. I have just confirmed that there are four incoming bogies running silent. Please take manual control."

Oh, boy! This can't be happening. Tim-Tams or not, what a greek present these vacations have been!

"Obie, TTG for the bogies?"

"I am sorry, Lieutenant Maekawa, but you do not have command privileges. Please wake up Maegil."

"We have curious "guests", so don't call me that. Just call me Emu, and Maegil is in a chemical coma from a combat stim."

"Yes, Emu. That impairs drastically our chances of achieving victory."

"Give me command privileges! I can fly you!"

"I cannot, Emu, not without his consent."

"Maegil grants me command privileges, don't you, darling?" I took Maegil's head and shook it up and down. He grunted and remained asleep.

"I am sorry, Emu, Maegil is in a state of chemical coma and is not accountable for you shaking his head."

"Look, can you fly?"

"Yes, Emu."

"Enough to beat four assassin's ships?"

"As well as the fitted autopilot, Emu."

"Are you sure you are an artificial INTELLIGENCE?"

"Yes, Emu."

Oh, boy. It's like trying to talk to a teller machine. In fact... "Obie, Have you ever been installed in an ATM?"

"No, Emu."

"Just checking. Isn't there, somewhere in your instructions, something that may, in any small, obscure way... or directly too, let's not forget, something in the sense that you should protect you owner or pilot from danger?"

"Yes, Emu."

"And what is the best way to accomplish this instruction, applied on this circumstances?"

"The present circumstances do not relate with the referred instructions in any way whatsoever, Emu."

This was going nowhere! "Obie, do you want me to re-arrange your data bank?"

"No, Emu. Please wake up Maegil, the bogies are approaching."

"And how do I do that? With the caffeine slurp they make in Riedquat that we took from the Winston boy?"

"No, Emu. The interaction of caffeine with the combat stim drug metabolic by-products would kill him. Please use the mild neurostimulant in the pharmaceuticals dispenser instead."

Finally!!! And to Hades with this entire contraption that Maegil has for a ship. I got up and ran to give Maegil the shot and drag him to the bridge. I had to do it in the ship's set Gs, not that I'm not used to it - I'm from a 2G world - but because Obie wouldn't reduce them on my orders. Maegil is a well built man, and wasn't easy. Finally I sat him in the co-pilot's seat and put the crash net on him. "Now, wake up already!". I shook him a bit, to no avail.

"Maegil, there is an incoming message.", said Obie

"On screen." Bastard! He's given the order still asleep, and I'm naked!

"Maegil Arvandor, prepare to be executed for your crimes against the... Nice view! You're not Arvandor!"

Thankfully, the bridge camera points only to the pilot's seat, like this I can win some time. I sat before the camera and started the charade: "No, and thanks for the compliment. Now, there must be a mistake, There's no Arvandor here."

"The registration fits."

"We - me and my hubby..." I leaned to the side again and shook him, "...are just wed and he bought this ship. Wake up, you wimp, and tell this imbecilic AI to accept my commands!"

As I leaned, the only part of me on their screens was... Yes, that part again!...

"That's a nice rump!"

"Eh, big mumma!"

"Her husband's a brute. She's bruised all over, I'll have his skin for that."

"Shut up, you low-bred animals! Behave in the presence of a dame."

"Yes, Baron."

At least this Imp has manners. "Thank you...Baron."

"Well, let us see him."

"Sorry, I can't, we had a little party and he is out cold... he's too heavy and the ship's AI won't reduce the Gs for me."

"Then we'll just board you and check." Damn. Even if I gain privileges, this ...thing's... controls are covered in buttons. There are buttons all over the sticks and even in the pedals!

"Baron, let's not waste the trip. Why don't we take them as slaves and sell the ship?"

"That's an idea. The ship, though, is a Fed one, and ugly too, I don't think we'll be able to sell it."

"There are the parts. Federal ones, but sellable in the Indie systems."

"And who's going to fly it? It doesn't even obey the dame!"

"Then we just take them and destroy that Federalist monstrosity."

Calm down, now. Jordan controls, that I can handle. Targetting ocular piece, very high tech. I once heard about it, but I never actually saw one, much less use it. Too many buttons, he seems to have centralized all the ship in these warted dildos he calls controls. "WAKE UP!!!", I shouted, shaking him as brutally as I could and slapping him. "I need COMMAND PRIVILEGES!!! Come on, dear, tell it to Obie."

"It looks like the dame wants to fight us."

"Ha! Just look at her, it's as if she could fly!"

"She flies! It's Major Mayhem who's telling you.", grunted Maegil, still asleep.

"Did you hear that, Obie? He just granted me permission!" It was bending what he just said, but who cares!

"Very well, Emu, you now have command privileges."

"Major whom?"

"See, the guy's FM."

"Major Mayhem is the Federalist corrupted version of the Duke of Earl, the guy's drunk.", said the Baron.

"I remember that! "Defending LAW, ORDER and the IMPERIAL RULE with the powers of NOBILITY and BIRTH RIGHT, the DUKE of EARL remains always alert against the EVIL PLOTTINGS of the FETID FEDERALIST FACOCEROUSES!!!"

"Facocerouses?!"

"That's "stinking Federal pigs" for you.", replied one of the assassins.

"I KNOW a facocerous is a boar, thank you. I was just disgusted."

I took the sticks. To manoeuvre the ship, no problem. The trigger is where it should, but there were two of them. And, which one is the target designator? Maybe it's automatic, I just need to look at it... I put the eye piece on. Missile selector? He has three missile positions instead of the Asp's normal single pylon. Argh! What a mess. Maybe if I... Obie's speech mode changed from that ATM style to an even more mechanical, laconical mode. "Bogies range 10000 meters-closing"

I know what to do! "Obie, control schematics on-screen."

I still had to win more time, I nodded to study them... "Hey, wait up!!! Before you come, let me show you something."

"What?", asked the Baron. "You're helpless and you know it, you can't fly! You're too scared for someone who can defend itself."

"Yes, I confess, it's true. But I was thinking that maybe, if I danced a little for you, you'd let us go?..."

"He, he... I knew it. Everybody, stop. Let's see what she can do, and I'll THINK about letting you go."

"Obie, put some dancing music, one track." Music filled the PA, and a good choice too. I started dancing, waving my body to the tune.

The imps had stopped, and I had to keep them that way for a while. I kept dancing, more and more alluringly - down to a positively pornographic way, always smiling to the screen until the music finished.

"That was very nice, indeed." said the Baron when I finished, "too nice to let you go, actually. Sorry, but we're taking you."

"Wait! Before you come, I'd like you to try and say something!"

"You're just trying gain some time but it is useless."

"If it's useless, you've got nothing to lose. Come on, play along!..."

"Very well, what is it?"

"Repeat after me: Suzie-Surprise-the-sly-spy-and-sappy-saboteur-sensually-suckered-silly-saps-into-standing-still-in-space-so-she-could-study-her-spouses-ships-stick-schematics. SURPRISE!"

One of them started, "Suzie-Surprise-the-sly-spy-and-sappy-saboteur-sensually..."

"Shut up, you moron! Suzie Surprise is Mayhem's terrorist sidekick! So, you think that will help you? You still can't fly!"

"Oh, but I can! You see, I'm a Federal Naval officer, and a pilot on top..."

The Baron got pissed off. "So you want it like that, do you, bitch?! Very well, men, let's kill the fetid federalist female facocerous FOR THE DUKE OF EARL!"

"No more "dame" treatment? How rude, you need a corrective! Suzie Surprise will save the day and defeat another dastardly plan of the Emperor DeVill's Imp Clone minions", I taunted.

"You'll pay for that!"

"Bogies range 9000 meters-closing", said Obie.

"Obie, combat mode." The bridge disappeared and was replaced by an hologram of the exterior. It was as if we were both floating naked in space... Kinky thoughts came to mind, but I put them away for later use. I had more urgent things to do. I put the main thrusters to full power and went for the Imps. The ship lurched forward. I waved the controls to get their sensitivity, and was surprised at how fast this "Frankenasp" turned. The eye piece' sighting was excellent, the lasers seem to be mounted on a limited gimbal and adjusted automatically within a 7° radius. It's probably accurate enough to shoot down missiles with, beautiful. The two triggers, one is for free firing, the other only activates the gun when the target is aligned. That spares the laser temperature and guarantees a hit. I love it! I still don't get it why is it that he also put the toilet's waste disposal control in the control stick beside the weapons selector, unless... No, that's too disgusting! Never mind, they're closing.

"Bogies range 3000 meters-closing", said Obie. I fired a missile at the Baron's ship, the Imps responded likewise.

"Incoming missile. Two three four incoming." I tried to NECM them, to no avail. No room to chaff, I'm going right at them. Oh, well, it's going to be the hard way. I kept accelerating and actually managed to hit one of the missiles with a single automatic shot before I banked to avoid the others. Weeee!!! The Baron tried to do the same, the key-word here being "tried". He ate my missile and his curses were heard in the still open hailing channel.

"Bogies range 1000 meters-closing", said Obie.

Red lines appeared around me. They started firing only when close, they know their business. I turned the ship around, kicked in the port, bottom and retro thrusters, and hit the extra retros button just to see what it did... Four bright flames appeared around the ship. Solid fuel rockets, that's what the pipes outside the ship are. When the Imps saw me turning, two of them tried to compensate as if I were trying to go back. Their mistake, and I took the opportunity. They entered the gimbal radius, I squeezed the auto fire trigger. For an instant, nothing happened, then the weapon discharged and kept firing until one of them disappeared in a cloud of fiery debris, and it stopped. Without releasing the trigger, I just looked at the other. He had broken away from his colleague and was out of the "death zone", and manoeuvred well. Worse, the missiles were returning... I chaffed and went for him, but the others finally caught up with me. Laser started eating my shields...

"Shields 83", said Obie, and I banked away from their sights... right into one of the missiles that went trough the chaff cloud, oddly not being destroyed. "Shields 31, surfing.", reported the AI as it actually stabilized the ship and

prevented it to go tumbling out of control. Wooo, I'm falling in love! The shock also threw me away from the Imp's fire arcs, and them in my sights... I squeezed the trigger, manoeuvred to stabilize one of them in the death zone and soon the 4MW beam was upon him. He tried to run, but was hit and destroyed by a missile!

How strange, my chaff seems to have had little effect on these missiles. They had just been confused, lost me and required... whomever was in their path, as they had been made to do! This was smart, NAVAL missiles are made to be fired in volleys at masses of ships, and some targets may have been already destroyed before they hit, so they just lock-on to any other ship in their path. Normal chaff prevents this destroying the missiles in the impact with its mass, but this chaff must be thinner and just made them loose their current target... Useless for fleet action, but excellent for a single ship against several opponents: it allows to turn the opponent's missiles against themselves. Nice! Very nice, but it might be tricky...

The other two Osprey-Xs fired their second missiles. I destroyed one again before avoiding the second. According to the data over the Baron's ship and its enlarged image on a corner of my visual field, it was only on IP drive and missing a wing, so he pulled back. The other one was still at 100%, so I closed in to correct that anomaly. The Imp was good, but he couldn't keep me in his sights. The Baron decided to come in and try to help, and the last missile was coming. I banked sharp, head-on to the missile, and tried to blow it up - without success. For very little I wasn't hit by it, but at least the manoeuvre threw the fighter from my six. The shields were raising above 60%, so I could very well just ignore the missile and finish the ships off. We feinted and weaved for a while, trying to get the other in a good position, but the Imp was too good... until I was hit by the missile.

"Shields 19, surfing." No problem there, as long as I keep out of this guy's sights. The Baron, seeing me almost shieldless and us both unable to finish each other, joined in.

"You want to play, Baron? Very well, you won't go to jail." I set my one of the two remaining missiles onto this bastard that had been giving me grief at an intimate range, watched the explosion ("Shields 19", said Obie) and turned to the Baron. He even tried to run, but his ship was too damaged. "Come now, dame, you won't shoot someone who can't fight back, will you?"

"No.", I said. He seemed to relax a bit. "But you can still fight better than I could when we first talked, so you're fair game!"

The Baron started to say something, but I'll never know what it was, and don't really care. An Orange beam curtailed his speech, and that was it.

* * *

"Hello, Suzie! Anything interesting happened while I was out?", Maegil asked when he eventually woke up.

"Naaa...I took care of four assassins who came after you, no big deal. Oh, and we've got only one missile left.", I said matter-of-factly. The way I did it will be my deathbed secret...

"How did you get Obie to let you fly it?"

"Ohh, female touch! By the way, I want your ship."

"Wasn't it my body you wanted?"

"Yes, that too..."

"Later, dear. The stim wrecked me. And... What happened with all that Millennium Falcon story?"

"Let's just call your ship an ugly duckling."

A Diplomatic Incident

[Mike "Ditch" Mackay]

The Foreign Secretary, the Right Honorable Member for Titican Region 17 was in Ditch's office, intent on ruining his day. The discussions had been dull and mundane so far - the usual weekly meeting between the Alliance's foreign secretary and the Head of Alliance Security, Adm. Mike "Ditch" Mackay. Ditch had been saving the bad news until last. "The last item", explained Ditch, "might be very serious. I've had our agents in the disputed system Zeaex report some real trouble"

"Trouble," said the Foreign Secretary, nodding.

"It's potentially very serious. The preliminary report says that a Federation and Imperial patrol group clashed in that system. Big ships, too. The Feds totally annihilated the Imperial patrol, it was quite a pitched battle. It's the first direct confrontation between the Federation and the Empire in years. Here are some images," Ditch passed the datapad over to the Foreign Secretary, who looked at them gravely.

"Hm. I had the Ambassador from the Federation in my office earlier today. He mentioned none of this to me."

"He probably doesn't even know about it. But this kind of bloodshed is something that could quite easily light the touch paper again and make the cold war turn into a hot war for a while," Ditch replied. "I suggest increasing the alert level of all our border patrols - one side or the other may try to covertly use Alliance space to plot ambushes."

"This could be a disaster for trade," the Foreign Secretary replied gravely.

"Or worse. Historically, third parties have always been the ones to take it in the shorts when the Feds and Imps start fighting. We just have to count ourselves lucky that Alliance space isn't sandwiched between the two of them, but given the military fuel supply routes from Phekda out to the Federation, it wouldn't surprise me if it does turn hot - if the Imps decide because we're selling fuel to the Feds, we deserve a kicking."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Well, for the time being, the AJN *Ajax* is just out of maintenance and fully crewed, we should station the *Ajax* in Phekda, along with the *Manchester* as a supply vessel. The spacecraft carrier AJN *Warspite* and battleship *Rochester* aren't too far away and should be diverted to Phekda immediately. I'll have a fleet command post set up - and we'll run it as a full battle simulation training mission. So if nothing happens we have a good cover story for suddenly moving four capitol ships to Phekda, and if something does happen the military fuel routes are adequately protected."

"Don't we already have a capitol vessel in Phekda space?"

"Yes. But four more won't hurt. We've got plenty of others to go around, and we try to keep them in good defensive positions. Just in case. Meanwhile, we're alerting our agents to keep a special lookout in Zeaex - and indeed anywhere else - for Federation and Imperial fleets that appear to be looking for trouble."

The Foreign Secretary looked thoughtful for a moment. "Makes the Ambassador's grumbles suddenly look rather trivial," he muttered.

"What was he going on about?"

"Oh, some Alliance citizen apparently wanted on terror charges, he was waffling on about a building getting blown up in New San Fransisco and something about an Imperial princess. Hold on, let me check my notes" The Foreign Secretary consulted his datapad. "Ah. Yes. It's all rather embarrassing. He was going on about it being the nephew of James Winston, who was apparently a rather prominent admiral in the AJN until he met an untimely end. I had no idea who he was until the Ambassador reminded me of the news events of a few years ago when he crashed."

"James Winston was a very good friend of mine, as it happens. Mack Winston was his nephew. Rather shy lad, if I remember right, but a typical deceitful Phekdan"

"Ah. Yes. Well, it seems that the Federation want him on terrorist charges. A few days ago, apparently, they almost caught him. It seems like he set a bomb up in an apartment building and flattened it. They think he must have links to the supposedly defunct Guild - someone's backing him, he was kitted out in such a way he managed to smuggle not only a considerable quantity of high explosives, but a powerful gauss rifle into the city. They want us to help catch him, then extradite him. Apparently, they tried to arrest him but he managed to escape."

Ditch snarled. It was all he needed - a potential shooting match between the Feds and Imps, and now this little puke had to start wasting his time by blowing up buildings. His uncle would be turning in his grave.

"There's more I'm afraid," the Foreign Secretary added. "Apparently, he's absconded with an Imperial princess."

"Oh, I know all about that. The Empire claimed he'd kidnapped her, but it seems from our intelligence that the Princess had taken rather a shine to Mack Winston."

"The Imperial Court won't like that"

"No, they won't. What's the Ambassador expecting us to do about him?"

"Well, he seems to be under the impression that we're likely to know his whereabouts, given the rather embarrassing family connection to a senior admiral."

"OK, I'll put a couple of agents on it to make it look like we're doing something, but I don't want to waste too much time on it given the Federation vs Imperial situation at the moment. That's far more important. I'd wager that Mack Winston is hardly a terrorist, blown up buildings notwithstanding. Indeed I wager this has a Mosseresque smell to it all."

Ambush in Quexce

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

*Quexce (-2,-2)
Flag ship "SBNS Shiva"
8 AU from the star*

When the ambush fleet assembly was completed, it was an awesome view. Of course any of the powers can put up not one, but several fleets of this size with ease, but only the wealthiest Independent systems could have a Navy so big. These were over half the Spartacus Brotherhood ships, with the purpose of making a display of force. These first few days are crucial to how the public will be biased to the SB, so we have to make a powerful first impression.

On the East Frontier, the show is already finished, a bit too soon. The Imps were so eager to get us that they forced the 2nd bait fleet to run too early to Zeaex, but it is of no consequence: by now, the Federal Military rank and file already decided we're with the white hats, no matter what the brass says. Soon the word will spread that we helped refugees out of the Empire, we're an humanitarian hand.

Here we intend to show the SB's other hand, the sword hand. Once we actually conquer a planet, no-one will dare take us lightly. The stakes are higher, failure here means disaster to the Brotherhood, and in Smith's opinion, success could also mean the same thing...

There's a reporter's ship coming from the station to record the Imperial fleet getting ambushed and broadcast it throughout the human space. The Empire will be publicly embarrassed, and will go into a frenzied rage for a while. It might go as far as to even mention our name in an official statement.

I'm with "Spartacus" even before he started being called that. I was one of the first to be rescued by him when "Spartacus" was still known as "Chief Scout" with those crazy pirates, the Billies. Back then his second-in-command was Big Billy, and it was he that showed up. And always had he stayed behind, letting others appear, but always coming up with new attacks and tactics and getting his hands dirty up to the armpits when the need arose. One thing I don't understand, though, is why this time he's taken the main callsign for himself. Maybe he just didn't want to have his name mixed with pirates, but doesn't mind when it comes to the Brotherhood, or something.

On the other hand, "Spartacus" often disappears off to somewhere for some time, only to return with no explanations. Big Billy once said he's an ex-Federal Military Special Forces and that he was kicked out because he killed too many people and went mad, and on this I can believe. But in the end, no-one really knows him, not even me who has him as a dear friend. It was him who trained a bunch of punks into capable pilots and successful pirates, and also freed slaves into free men and warriors for a just cause. The man is guided by some crazed sense of "honour" that gives him a strange form of majesty, seems to instinctively know everything there is to know about combat in any form and teaches who wants to learn. So, even with his peculiarities, "Spartacus" is the leader, and in his moment of glory he steps aside and remain hidden.

Therefore I, Admiral Curtiss Smith, am left to take the spot lights and perform for the audiences. The stage was being set. After the arrival of the 1st bait fleet we mined the Imperial's fleet arrival clouds.

Three minutes for the arrival of the last actor to our little drama. The encumbrance of the responsibility of command weighted heavily on my shoulders, I'd rather have Spartacus himself directing the play.

Two minutes.

One minute. There's no way back, now. As Cesar once said, *alea jacta est*, the dice are thrown.

Curtain. The show begins.

The Imperial fighters come out of witchspace right in the middle of the minefield. One after the other, they arrive and explode; arrive and explode; arrive and explode... Suddenly the large ships appear from the eye of their entry clouds, detonating several mines that do little more than scratch their shields.

With a sigh, I give the order to open fire. The main targets are the Duval class flagship and the Achenar battleship in an attempt to put them out quickly and behead their command on the beginning of the battle. The Imps came out of witchspace already on battle stations, by the book, but are caught unaware of our presence, believing the convoy they were after was all they'd have to fight again. Of course these double ambushes won't work forever, but it'll force the Imps to waste resources assembling large fleets every time they want to chase us, least we try and ambush them.

The two targeted ships, with their formation still not properly deployed and nearly without fighters, are easy targets. Incredible they fell for it twice already, the bait fleet ambushed them while they were after the wing from Cemiss back there in Zesola, and took out enough ships to soften them before running, still leaving enough of them to enter our show here. Easy, they said. I tend to agree.

There goes the Achenar. The concentrated fire of the four long range Boa LPAs made short work of it, and they turned their fire to the Duval my Valiant class flag ship is shooting at. Fish in a pond. I feel kind of melancholic...

The other ships are assembling around the Duval, trying to shake our attack off, but their flagship is already little more than a wreck. The battle is decided, there's nothing to see. I retreat to my quarters. Everybody knows their job, and I'm just a front anyway.
