

DEATHWREAKER

THE RETURN OF THE AZURE SUNSET

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 6

by
The Elite BBS Collective

November 2006

Based on Frontier: First Encounters by Frontier Developments
All Rights Reserved. Elements of the above intellectual property are used without without permission, not for profit and with all rights reserved to the owner of the intellectual property.

CONTENTS

We Did It!	2
Frell Grenades and Rag Dolls.....	4
Clean up Detail	6
Thus Spake Maegil	7
Cup and Ball	9
Memorandum Illusion.....	11
Fanfare and Pandemonium.....	15
Back to Back, They Faced Each Other	17
Duel at ‘<i>Sunset</i>’	20
High Noon.....	23
Showdown at MED CEN1	25
Sunset	29
The Good, The Bad and The Virgin.....	30
OK Computer.....	32
Big Boy’s Toys	35

We Did It!

[Spartacus Brotherhood]

The Last Spartacus Brotherhood ship to leave Williamson Base did so amidst the first clash among the fleets' fighter escorts. As agreed, Mr. Duran began announcing in all frequencies about the orbital station having been returned to Quexcean control, and its neutrality. Poor defence that is if those two really go to war, thought Smith. If they'd at least listen... On the other hand, they might! They just might still listen to reason, if they're not yet too blood-crazed! Being a Falcon, it was immediately targeted by the Imps, and having the wrong IFF ID, also by the Feds. worsening the situation even further, both fleets' capital ships had entered jump jammer range after several other ships escaped the system. The SB pilot found himself in dire straits to evade the incoming fire from both sides; his passenger being no-one less than Admiral Curtiss Smith himself only gave him more reason to worry. Of course, the Admiral had earned the deepest respect of every Brethren for insisting on being the last man out, and his demise would be a tragedy, but that wasn't what was concerning him; he was far too busy to be worrying about that kind of thing. No, his problem with the Admiral was that he was pushing him out of the seat while trying to get the comm amidst the tumbling Gs...

"All Imperial and Federal forces, this is the Spartacus Brotherhood. Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire! I repeat, this is the Spartacus Brotherhood, cease fire, cease fire!" the Admiral cried desperately once he managed to grab the comm, and was thrown headlong over the pilot on yet another close call.

"Hold on, sir!" mumbled the pilot as he tried to manoeuvre with his charge sprawled on his lap, over the controls.

"All Imperial and Federal forces, this is the Spartacus Brotherhood. Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire!" tried the Admiral again. Finally the message got to the fleet's commanders and the fighters parted to their respective sides. Two messages were received, one just after the other:

"Power down and prepare to be boarded. Any resistance will be met with total force. You have ten seconds," the Federal commander said curtly. The Empire tried the mirthless "Surrender now and you'll be given a fair trial and a reasonably painless execution."

With about two or three million Terawatts' worth of weaponry trained at them, things were MUCH better than they were just seconds before. After all, even if they shot the little fighter, the war was - if not yet completely averted - at least postponed. "I'm sorry, but I'm Admiral Curtiss Smith of the Spartacus Brotherhood and I cannot afford to be taken alive. HOWEVER, before you shoot me, I must inform you were about to begin a war thanks to a setup, the first destroyed Courier launched out of the station and WAS NOT an Imperial vessel."

"Liar! That was Duke Albert... <mumble mumble> Oh?! <Mumble, mumble>" and the Imperial signal was cut.

"Spartacus Admiral Smith, your claim was verified and checked out true. Explain what happened now." said the Fed commander in his clone agent impression.

"It is unclear at this time, but it appears a third party tried to cause a war between you and blame it on us. It was all a setup, cease fire."

The Imperial commander came back, "And why should we take the word of bandits? Can you provide evidence?"

"We have the records, the Spartacus Brotherhood is innocent in this matter." said another voice on the comm. Bless your dear heart, Julius!

"And who might you be?" asked the Fed, and Duran told him. "Also, I'm willing to receive a delegation from both sides if you wish to discuss matters in neutral ground," he offered.

There weren't many options after this, both sides agreed to a cease fire pending negotiations or their government's decisions; we made it, the war was averted. However that didn't mean I was on the clear. "Spartacus Admiral, you are wanted for criminal conspiracy, terrorism, banditry, espionage and other charges. You are still our prisoner." The Feds didn't seem too sympathetic to us either, they didn't threaten us but also didn't turn off their jump jammers, the bastards. The Federation likes to gloat about the Falcon being the fastest ship in the universe, but they certainly weren't capable of outrunning a missile - much less some five hundred of them! Escape wasn't a viable option. Not that being captured was an option, anyway; the latter could be the end of the brotherhood when - and not "if" - he was made to talk...

"There is no further SB military presence in the system and we have stable relations with them. The Admiral has diplomatic credentials recognized by the Quexce Chamber of Commerce, and is presently still on Quexcean space.

I'm sorry, but any action against the Spartan ambassador in our space will be considered as an extremely serious diplomatic incident," Duran came to the rescue in the weakest excuse for a bluff I ever heard.

Nevertheless, before the Imps could respond, the Federals cut their jammers and pledged their help in maintaining local sovereignty. They were really giving the Imps a come on; should war come to be it would be blamed on the Empire now, not on the Federation. The Imperial Commander considered his options. While starting a war with the Federation in retaliation for a Duke's death would be worthy of praise in the Empire, the same war just to capture a terrorist would be counterproductive, even criminally reckless.

* * *

After a mis-jump, the tiny ship jumped to an unmarked point in deep space several light years away from Quexce, and from there to yet another one. Smith was smirking as a maniac as he carefully prepared his report. Things will hit the fan when he reports to the Elegia!...

Frell Grenades and Rag Dolls

[Jannah Berihn]

I really enjoyed the sound that the arming pin made as I loosened it from the frell grenade and lobbed the segmented high-impact grenade into the midst of the advancing party of scavengers. In fact, I'm sure that I yelled out some pretty insulting commentaries too, including one about 'Eat plutonium death you rat fucking sons of bitches,' as you see I consider insults a forgotten art, just like melee weapons are pretty much a lost art, except in the Empire where its customary for every Imperial officer and well-to-do to learn how to use one of those pig stickers, although to be honest I've never actually seen them employ them in combat, as they much prefer to use small arms, blazookas and heavy artillery. At least that's been my experience, up close and personal on more than occasion. The grenade went off with an equally satisfying 'whomp' and the sight of bodies flying through the air accompanied by screams of anguish and pain was music to my ears. I shouted back at them by way of reply, "Do you like that? Do you want some more of that mother fuckers?" That was when I discovered that I was clean out of grenades for where I thought I had at least two more I suddenly realized that I must have dropped them in the confusion.

Oh frell.

How I had gotten myself into this mess is beyond me but here I was in a back street at three in the morning in a built-up industrial sector in the heart of Old Dodd City on Reidquat with a half-dozen heavily armed gun smugglers all out for my blood. Well, they weren't going to get it and I had every intention of doing them twice as fast as they intended to do me. I fell back on Plan B, which basically consisted of whipping out my blaster, screaming as loudly as I could in as aggressive a manner as I am capable of and laying down a barrage of suppressing fire until I emptied the chamber, and at which point I kicked it out and slammed in a fresh power pack before ducking down and waiting for the reply. Yet it never came. Either they were getting smarter and were planning a trap, which seemed unlikely as they had been tracking me for the last five blocks across some of the nastiest neighborhoods in Old Dodd City, where even the house pets go out at night with small anti-personnel weapons mounted on them to prevent cat-napping.

Could it be that they were all dead?

I decided to try a tried and trusted technique for confirming this supposition and called out "Is anyone alive back there?" No reply other than some guy leaning out of the window of an apartment some levels above who shouted back 'will you shut up down there, we're trying to poison our neighbours.' Zippo. The way I figured it, if they had been alive they would have groaned or made a noise or put up a white flag or something, but nothing out of the ordinary happened. I decided to let the guy in the apartment live. After all, the effective range of my guns didn't extend that far. Nobody tried to fry me alive or even curse at me, so I broke cover and dodging back and forth between the garbage in the alley way I quickly made my way to the last spot I saw them and stuck my gun over the top and opened up with the thing, emptying the clip in a spraying motion before looking over the top and checking the area for unfriendlies. It was a charnel pit - they were all pretty fucked up to say the least and my gunfire had done little to improve the scene as there were body parts all over and the wall nearest me was decorated in a shade which I'm tempted to call 'shade of brain'.

Smiling, I thought rack up another point for me: Berihn nine, bad-guys: no survivors. Then I heard a groan and then a voice. Quiet at first, but it got louder, and it said, "Will you get off of my frakking arm ... for Heston's sake lady, you weigh a ton!" I saw no harm in kicking in hard in the ribs for the comment about my weight, and then with the gun planted firmly in his groin I knelt down and decided that he was alive enough for my purposes to give me some answers. "I'm looking for Norman Mosser." I informed him.

"Which one?" He asked, and he had a point.

"What do you mean 'which one' - the original, idiot!"

I decided to dig the business end of the blaster into his groin and succeeded in dislodging his sense of self-preservation. He began to sweat, which wasn't pretty and he peed himself, which just made the barrel wet. "I'll ask nicely this time. Where is Norman Mosser?"

"And I'm telling you lady, I have no idea!"

"Then you're of no use to me," I pulled back the guard on the trigger and pointed the barrel at his head. He peed himself again. The curious thing is, most people when looking down the barrel of a MaxiKill Z-92 have a tendency to tell me anything that I want to know. It's terrific for that last minute grocery shopping as well and works faster than Disoian Express - a card that I don't have any reason to bother with anymore. This guy was no different. He informed me in great detail that there was a planet in Imperial space where Mosser was hiding out. I asked him to

confirm this fact, which he quickly did and added that Mosser was hiding there because of all of the people that were after him, the Imperials seemed the least likely to give him any trouble. "You realize that if you're lying, I'm just going to blow your head off?" I informed him.

"Yes ... I got that much lady."

"Well, I figure that you will say whatever it takes to get me to spare your life, so I'm going to save myself a trip and just do it right now. That okay with you, cuddles?" A moment later I had to wipe my hands off with his sleeve and make a face at the mess. Standing up, I wondered who these scumbags were and why they decided to pursue me all the way across town just because I asked to speak with Norman Mosser in some crapped out little bar out in the Alco District. I had a long trip ahead of me, with the possibility of many interesting adventures along the way. Whatever the case, I had a date with a certain Norman Mosser. I just hoped the little prick didn't get himself killed before I had a chance to do it, as I really don't enjoy wasting my time of pointless pursuits or in cruising across Imperial space in a Panther, as they have a tendency to shoot first and try to board me later, which is generally not good for my insurance and is hell on my ammunition and shield generators.

Clean up Detail

[Kane Scott]

Kane Scott slumped into the chair exhausted. the top brass had finally left him alone. Fuck, he was in trouble. the Battle of New Rossyth was becoming synonomous with AAAI, publicity that no one in the company wanted. "Damn Dev," he mumbled, thumping a fist on his Oak desk. "What the hell is going on?"

Transferring the Saker to de Havilland hadn't been a problem, he was a temporary contractor and in good stead with the company, and it was all above board. But now it appeared de Havilland had turned rogue. And was hanging around with the one and only Norman Mosser.

His first thought when he read the article from Quexce was disbelief. de Havilland couldn't have become a pirate. Impossible - that man didn't have a crooked gene in his body! But the evidence was stacking up against him. An AAAI shipyards registered Saker blasted its way out of Williamson Base and broke out of a Federation Blockade. There were rumours of a new powerful laser onboard this AAAI Saker. More publicity that linked pirates back to AAAI. Yes, he was in trouble. All he had done was help a friend in a time of need, and that friend had stabbed him in the back. What had happened?

He found himself in Chris Viet's primary computer room. Looking for advice from a technician?? Scott laughed at himself. Yes, that was exactly what he was looking for.

"Don't believe it chief," Chris replied after Scott had relayed everything that had happened.

"There has to be an explanation."

"How can you be so sure?" Scott asked the computer nerd.

"I know Dev. He hasn't turned to piracy. He couldn't. Not that he wouldn't, but he couldn't. His brain would short circuit if he tried."

Kane smiled. True enough. Maybe Chris was right. Maybe Dev could explain the whole thing. "Where's the Saker now?" he asked.

Chris shrugged, but turned to a computer console and loaded up a program. hands dancing over the keys, he turned back to Kane after a few moments. "Just some random empty system. Federation space."

"Can we send him a message?"

"Sure."

"Ok," Scott said, clearing his throat. "Ready? Begin."

Thus Spake Maegil

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Ioenin (-6,-3)

Asp Explorer Tenchu

120 Km from the Azure Sunset

0.3 AU from Ioenin C1

1.7 AU from incoming hyperspace clouds

Things were going really awry really fast. Instead of disposing of Mosser, Mack was now sitting with him in the galley, having a nice chat over probably Riedquatian Ultra... I couldn't believe Mack would have any illusions that Mosser would let us live after having completely humiliating him! Secondly, Obie told me Mosser's ship had begun a transmission when I briefly deactivated the jammer, but it wasn't finished when I turned it back on. Meaning that if the signal ever gets picked up by a relay, another Mosser might be activated - only with incomplete memory! A barrel full of monkeys, really. Finally, a cluster of hyperspace clouds had just appeared, abnormally close to the planet. When asked to explain, Obie explained that it must be a freak malfunction of the AS's jammer caused by lack of servicing added to a theoretical hypothesis with 28% of probability. "Theoretical hypothesis?!" I asked.

Obie developed a bit further, "The jump jammer caught hold of an inbound ship's hyperspace tunnel that was already arriving too near of the AS and Ioenin C1's gravity well and transferred energy from it, attracting it even closer in time-space. In turn, the first tunnel interacted with yet other incoming tunnels - much further away, draining them in turn and attracting them also nearer. The date of departure is unstable, and the arriving ships must be subjected from light to severe hyperspace ripples in arriving order, Maegil."

"Explain 'unstable date of departure'," I asked, and Obie obliged... Oh, boy, we were pulling in ships that could or could not have yet departed; the day was turning out to be even messier - or in the case, Mossier - than I... No, not so bad. Finally Mack decided to do his move, and Mosser laid in the floor with a big ouch in his abdomen. I decided I didn't want to read the bioscanner's damage report on Mosser, and concentrated on Mack who just left him to his final moments.

Mack rushed through the Courier's bridge and into the airlock, returning to my bridge, his face a terrible grimace of hate.

"Mack, How are you feeling?"

"One down, two to go. It's been... enlightening, you know; all the Mossers are the same," he said in his death rictus grin.

"He who fights with monsters should see to it that he himself doesn't become a monster,' I quoted. "I wish I had read Nietzsche before I embarked in my personal descent, but now I can tell you from personal experience this: 'When you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you'. Beware, Mack, beware!"

Mack looked at me in puzzlement. "Nietzsche?" he asked, and begun chuckling. He threw himself into his chair and broke into a helpless laughter - much to my amazement. Just when I thought I had managed to bring him back to sanity, he breaks down like this. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he started to compose himself. "Sorry about that, but the last time I met Carstein we discussed philosophy. He even gave me a book to read!"

"'Straw dogs', I presume, and then you killed him?" I started giggling myself. "Good for you, kiddo, that's what he got for being a nihilistic asshole... I can even imagine him, trying to convert his own assassin, that Shar loving idiot! What about Mosser, did he try to sell you anything?"

Mack became dead serious. "Yeah, and it cost him his life. If I were you, I'd be very careful with philosophy around me."

"Good. You're learning to think, and that's just what "philo-sophia" means: love of wisdom. But don't worry, I've already told you I want to help you."

"Either I like it or not. Sure, Dr. Freud," he said in an unexpected allusion to one of the major ancient quacks - the others being Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. The boy really is promising. "You know, I simply cannot believe you're doing this just out of gentleness, or pity. What is the price?"

Now, Mack had finally kick-started his rationality, and it awoke in a mistrusting mood to say the least. "None whatsoever, or your soul. only your own your choices can answer that, not I."

"But you, Y_O_U, what are you going to ask in payment of your 'services'?"

"Nothing, believe it if you want. I'm really doing this 'out of gentleness, or pity' as you said."

"Don't give me that crap, I want the truth. I got your allusion to role playing games when you called Carstein a Shar lover, and I won't believe that Paladin part you're trying to play on me."

"Well, that's your problem, really, but know this: there are still good-doers on this universe."

"A covered in blood one, by your own words."

I sighed, this was costing me more than I expected, but my wounds were a burden I had already grown accustomed to. "Remember what I said earlier? "He who fights with monsters should see to it that he himself doesn't become a monster'? Nietzsche's words are an important caveat and a credo to the Spartacus Brotherhood. As for me, I looked into the abyss for so long the vertigo made me fall. When I woke I was surrounded by blood-lusty demons, and I was one of them. In my search for revenge, revenge had become my life until I did it too many times it just lost sense; and it was from the bottom of the abyss I had to rebuild myself. Now, I see you falling, how can you expect me not to try to stop your fall? No, I'll help you to carry out your revenge to the bitter end, and as fast as possible so you don't stare into the abyss for too long and doesn't lose yourself into it."

"Oh, fuck, you ARE mad!... If that's what philosophy does to people, I think I'll give it a wide berth!"

"We'll discuss it later, now there's a job we have to finish. I'm going to take a DSU with Obie's "worm" and download it into Mosser's computer so we can shut down the comm jammer and see what he's been up to."

Mack looked at me in a strange way. "You just can't control yourself, can you? Do you really have to bug everything you touch?"

"Hey, knowledge is power. Besides, I'm not the only one; that woman that bugged you did the same to Kevin." Mack got a bit worried, but I pressed on just a little more, as if I hadn't caught up with my mouth. "It was in the... hum, pants he was wearing... when... hum..." He gulped, bravely holding himself together. It hurt me to see him like this, but he was already out of the dangerous phase, and what he needed now was to get used to the idea that Maria was dead. gently, though... "Anyway, I got the frequency and sent it in a message to a friend, the same one that handled your own letter. By now that lady will be running to the edge of known universe, and good riddance."

"Yeah, now I'm sure you're a spy. Spartacus Brotherhood, eh?"

I whistled as I made a mock innocent's retreat and went to my business.

* * *

After half an hour, the Obie personality mole hadn't finished convincing the Courier's computer I was Norman Mosser, and it would take a while longer to sort it out and cancel the personality transmission before I could turn the jammer off. However, Mack came to the engineering section where I was with news. Without air to conduct sound and the jammer on, we had to resort to writing, and he reported that a witchspace tunnel had just closed in a small explosion, but no ship came out of it. I left the mole to work and we went past Mosser's body as we returned to the *Tenchu*. "Obie, what's up?"

Obie put an image on-screen. One of the holes had opened, but no ship came out... there was something strange about it, though. "Obie, centre over the cloud and magnify." There, directly in our direction from the cloud, a well defined silhouette. "Obie, identify."

"The visual ID is confirmed as a Saker MkIII, but no scanning is possible while the transmission jammer is still on, Maegil."

Oh, boy. It seems our crazy physics accident just brought something from the twilight zone: that had to be an anti-matter Saker... And other, normal ships. One, another one spinning, a third really tumbling and a Lanner almost breaking up... Ouch!

Cup and Ball

[Norman Mosser]

In the Alliance and the Federation, full medevac would be called - the Alliance would grow clone limb replacements, the Federation providing bionics. Both would give you a pat on the back, a medal and return you to duty. If you were an Imperial Officer, your bodyguard would ensure you received treatment and protect you from ambitious subordinates. Medical care was supplied at your own expense and you ensured you got some cosmetic scarring. On the frontier, where medical care is patchy, the most common remedy was a single lead pill, administered orally. If you were a grunt in the Empire, they wouldn't even waste the ammunition on you.

Norman Mosser was on his own, so he would have to sort this out himself.

His neural lace was displaying a rainbow of red and amber symbols and asking him awkward questions. A timer was counting down, informing him how long he had until brain death. Thankfully, the lace was releasing its stored reserves so he could keep going for a while yet. He could also feel a fizzing sensation as the moisture in his mouth boiled into space. That wasn't for the first time either.

First up, damage report. Most of the sensors south of his ribcage had failed utterly and between display glitches, he guessed that the situation was 'messy'. He still had control of an arm, although using it would deplete his limited blood/sugar/oxygen budget.

Next - make a plan. The Stowmaster would keep him alive. But, the Asp was still connected to the ship. If he moved, they would come back and finish the job. Disconnect the Asp. Distract it. Get to the Stowmaster. Get to the *Sunset*.

Simple really.

The timer jumped downwards as he tried to smile.

---Attention---
---Hostile Code Detected---

Bugger. They were trying to hack the ship. Hopefully the remains of the bridge computer would fend them off for a while. He needed time to think.

Two minutes ticked by as he considered tricks and techniques. Some required him to be able. Others required him to move - and be shot too early. Others would result in the loss of the Courier with him inside, most just wouldn't work. More minutes passed as he wrestled with ideas - each becoming more frantic and less feasible. Eventually, despite himself, he let his mind wander and ended up thinking of his travels in the edge systems. Back when he was at peace for a time. He thought of a cargo of luxury goods he sold on a newly-opened world. And then he thought of one of the toys in the shipment.

The timer jumped downwards as he grinned.

It gave him something to work with. And the idea led to other ideas. Eventually he had a scheme. The worst bit was that he could do nothing straight away. He had to prepare slowly and carefully. Norman used his lace to log onto the engineering computer and started making calculations. Adjusting settings. Scripting. Recalculating. Refining. It took another twenty minutes before he was done. He'd had to play cat and mouse with the worm running through the system to protect his workings. It had taken over the weapons systems and he'd had to manually reroute their controls through the autochef.

Norman ran the command to start it all off.

The autochef dispensed a plastic cup. The missile rack dropped a naval missile out of the belly of the Courier. The Courier clutched/declutched one of the drive gyros and the Courier/Asp barrel rolled spectacularly. The missile now sat alongside the clamps attaching the Asp to the Courier. The missile detonated - destroying the clamps and further damaging the Courier. There was just the monofilament tether now. Another group of gyros crash clutched/declutched and the retros flared, followed by the main drive. The Courier bucked and flipped the Asp over and forwards. The tether held it in place and it ended up lying over the front of the nose of the Courier.

The autochef poured boiling water into the cup. The 20MW beam laser fired, cooking the top hull of the Asp. The Asp disengaged the tether and flew clear. Norman Mosser grinned.

The artificial gravity shut down and a group of manoeuvring thrusters glowed. And then another group. And then another. This very carefully lifted Mosser into the air, carried him across the deck, through the wreck of the bridge hatch and hovered him over the command chair. The gravity restored itself and dropped him into the command chair. His left arm reached down, flipped a cover aside and pushed a button.

With a whoosh the chair dropped into the floor and down into the Stowmaster. A medical collar attached itself and stabilised his life signs. His neural lace started to feed him input from the combat computer he had fitted to the capsule. It launched and inserted him into space. The Asp was waiting now, between him and the *Sunset*.

Norman paused before starting his run. The Asp was faster in a straight line and an Iron Ass. All he had was smallness, agility and a 1MW pulse laser. And that pilot was good. Norman powered up the drive and started his run. Almost immediately he was dodging laser fire. As he closed on the joust he returned fire and discovered the shields of the Asp - now recovered - were almost contemptuously shrugging off the hits.

The Asp winged him with the laser and the combat computer informed him that another hit would compromise the hull integrity. Norman responded by dodging ever more randomly. He wasn't even past the Asp. Let alone half-way to the *Sunset*.

As Norman went to pass under the Asp the pilot dipped the nose and flipped it over to chase him down. As that happened, Norman engaged full reverse thrust and dropped back behind the Asp.

When facing an Iron Ass, aim for the brown eye.

Norman fired. The shot went perfectly on target and bullseyed the main drive. Asps were renowned for having temperamental reactors and the energy spike forced the failsafes to shut the engines down. By the time they wrestled the engines back online, the Stowmaster was out of range and docked safely with the *Azure Sunset*.

Norman smiled. He was blind, crippled, vacuum burnt and sustained by life-support - but he was home. Now all he had to do was get himself from the Stowmaster to the clone lab and grow a replacement body.

Easy.

Memorandum Illusion

[Jannah Berihn]

It was good to be home again. Even if this wasn't technically home, as Longhaul Outpost, the station that I spent so much time making respectable was now a floating collection of cooling debris, pock-marked by meteorite strikes, picked over by scavengers and the police, and toasted by the occasional pot-shot fired by teenagers with nothing to do and in their daddy or mommy's old Cobra, Sidewinder or Gecko looking for some kicks nine astronomical units out from Diso's primary. Was it really nine years since that happened? It seemed longer, possibly because it was a subject that obsessed me. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection surface of the monitor as I turned to shut off the engines and smiled to myself - yes, the detox and anti-aging treatments really worked well! I was amazed and thankful that they did, and that I was as lucky as I am to look as good as I did, considering that I'm one hundred and seventy-seven and thanks be to surgeons, didn't look a day over fifty now. What was it that Mack Winston once said about me in an edition of RIG? 'Rough beauty,' was the expression that he used. Well, I'm sure that it was him as despite the anti-aging drugs, surgery and time spent in the detoxifying chamber, my mind, as sharp as it used to be, wasn't anymore and I was finding it harder and harder to recall even the smallest of details. My body was betraying me and I hated it for this. Not that I could do much about it ... or could I? Just recently I had been on Riedquat, and before that I flew out synthetic love dolls to some nameless shithole that was now a blur on my memory but during which I should have been killed. Sometimes I wonder why I wasn't, and why, despite all of the odds, plus my advancing years, I was still alive. I mean, I made Elite when I was twenty-three and that was after seven years in space earning my points and racking up kills - and during that time I had come pretty close to being killed more than once. Anyway, I raised my hands to the heavens, palms up to a non-existent god who refused to believe in me, as much as I refused to believe in him or her and deployed the ramp on my Saker and glanced up at the old girl as I stepped out into the dusk of Watson's World.

"Gas her up and check the windshield for Thargoids," I commented to the technician who arrived on the ramp and gave me a snappy salute. I'll say that for Imperial planets - at least they still hold on to the old values!

"Yes, ma'am."

I know what happened now, but at the time I wondered if it was the detox ... possibly the drugs, but for some damned reason I collapsed and the next thing that I knew, I was staring up at the ceiling in some white room with a woman hovering over me, her face upturned and speaking but the life of me, I could not make any sense of what she was saying as it was all coming to me as though through a foggy distance.

"She's awake - get the recovery team in here and check her vitals."

"Yes, doctor."

"And while you're at it, somebody check her records ... she looks familiar, but I'm not sure why."

I heard the last couple of sentences, although they came to me disjointed and louder than they should have been. Whatever the case, whenever I tried to move I found that I was locked down - and it looked as if they had a localized force field over the hospital bed. "Water," I asked and received it as a tube was pushed into my mouth and I sucked hard on it in order to receive its life giving qualities.

"Do you think that you can answer some questions?" One of the voices said.

I could barely make out a shape, probably human, but my vision was so foggy that it was difficult to tell. "I'll - I'll try." I stuttered suddenly feeling much worse. A series of blinding explosions were taking place behind my eyes and I didn't like the spectacle that was unfolding in my brain. Listen; there is a time and place for painkillers and this was it. "Painkillers - something for the pain." I asked weakly.

"In a moment," Came the reply. There was menace in the voice and I didn't like it one bit.

"Dammit, I want painkillers!" There was a commotion in the room as somebody else entered. I distinctly recall the sound of heavy boots, military boots if I'm any judge. I was beginning to dislike being so helpless. I felt a presence then, leaning over me. "Painkillers ..." I demanded weakly.

"And you'll get them when I have the answers," replied a new voice.

"What the frell are you talking -" I began and then started coughing violently, which didn't help things and psychologically put me in the inferior position.

"Where is Carstein, Berihn?"

I must admit - had they asked me about smuggling or slaving or any other such subject I could have lied through my teeth like the professional that I am, but this one stunned me. What the hell did they want with my half-brother. The last I knew of him, he had fallen in with Mack Winston, and after that Winston and I had met up - if that description can be applied, in an Imperial cell. Actually, I still owed Winston for that. Bastard put a scar on my scalp that wasn't easy to hide and there is only so much that foundation can do to conceal. I well remember a time when the name 'Mosser' was spoken without fear and people whispered the name 'Berihn', or more properly 'Carstein' for fear of retribution. My, how time changes us all and how the mighty had fallen - I'm a great example of the original hard-luck story! I tried to get up and somebody pushed two pillows under my back and my head, which I appreciated. Still, the force field remained, pinning down my arms and my legs. "I honestly do not know. You might want to ask somebody called Mack Winston."

"We would if we could, but he is currently unavailable."

"Unavailable! Then why ask me? I don't know anything."

"Then you won't mind our psychic looking you over then, will you?"

Psychic! The word was electric - I have never trusted them, and I really didn't want anyone digging around inside my brain. There was too much baggage in there to begin with without somebody taking me on a guided tour of it all. "Try it and I'll kill you!"

"From there, under the restraining field? I don't think so, Ms. Berihn."

I continued to complain, and even made a few pithy threats but my heart really wasn't in it at all and besides I felt weak. Weak and ... afraid. Fear washed over me, all consuming fear that threatened to reduce me to a screaming, thrashing wreck of a woman. I tried to remain dignified, to be resolute and to present a face of perseverance. All fakery. All fraud. I was terrified of the mind-bender - there is no other way to explain it. Then I felt fingertips placed on my face and on my temples and I tried to thrash about but the creep wasn't having any of that. Hard hands grasped me and restrained me as somebody forced a soft ball into my mouth and that dealt with my cursing. Muffled and terrified and with my eyes wide open and looking into the eyes of a young blonde man, he closed his eyes and I felt the faint stirrings of his influence in my body's energy field and tendrils of raw probing energies in my brain.

GET OUT

I shouted the words in my head, translating language into pure thought and as loudly as I imagined I could produce it for dramatic effect. The bender didn't do anything other than begin to breath loudly and deeply as his fingers pressed down lightly on my skin and images began to come to me, one at a time at first and then faster and faster as more and more than were sifted and thrown aside. The bastard was sifting through my brain - categorizing and analyzing my memories. I began to think about all of the darkness inside, and hoped that I could cloud his search.

"She's fighting me," He commented to somebody else in the room as more images poured through my synapses. I quickly began to understand the concept of mental rape - to be violated by another's mind and knew now why it was so illegal and why these people were so feared and hated. I tried to create shields, to visualize barriers and to activate confusion in my mind but the efforts as quickly perceived as they were acted only to slow him down slightly as he dissolved them away and dug deeper, segmenting my mind layer by layer until aspects which I had not seen in years came bubbling to the surface. Some happy, some sad. Some terrifying and some ... simply beyond description.

First kill. The Worm vaporized into shards of debris as light polarized through its shattered hull. I saw the hatch on its side blasted outwards into space from its internal pressure as my laser blast penetrated its engines and then a heart stopping moment as its momentum carried it forward but I failed to perform the pull-out and ran nose first into the expanding debris field, which clattered loudly off of the hull of my Cobra MK III. It was a coward's kill - a soft target left behind by a Python that I was pursuing, but which had sacrificed one of its crew and the Worm class landing craft as a distraction. Then without a moment's notice my ninth birthday. A moment from hours spent looking out of the window at the rain which falls so readily on Diso, doing nothing, expecting nothing and counting the hours not expecting anything but somehow missing it nevertheless and feeling cheated for some indefinable reason. Then another place and another time, a kiss, long and passionate and private but open now to the bender. I could see him in my mind's eye, watching me from across the room inside my mind; the strobe lighting strangely not effecting him when it illuminated the others that were present. I wondered if I could change events and scream at him to leave me here - to allow me privacy but I was still engaged in that kiss, unable to alter a single aspect of that moment captured for my lifetime in my memory, in the soft tissues of my mind. They say that nothing truly dies until the last person who remembers it dies also. I wondered for a moment if that once young man was still alive, if

he lived and if he remembered me, remembered that kiss and the passion that followed it. If he survived me, would he even spare a thought for me?

"Nothing here yet ... she's still fighting me."

"And ... I'll ... continue ... to ... do it." I said finding it hard to make myself understood around the ball in my mouth which was causing me to salivate wildly.

Norman Mosser. His face came up in my memory. I was standing in the command center at Longhaul Outpost, looking over displays and speaking with somebody when Mosser swept into the room, looking very dramatic and frankly, very masculine. He might have been considered plain, possibly ugly to some people, but to me he was manly and desirable which made working with him ... hunting him difficult at best. Without any protocol or respect and very loudly he demanded that I move his quarters to another deck as his neighbors were driving him crazy. I knew about this already, as I was the one who put them there just for this purpose. Maybe I'm a sickie - which is extremely likely given my background, but I really enjoyed torturing Mosser this way. We argued, he cursed and then he reached out and grabbed me and sweeping me up he embraced me roughly and our lips met and I tried to consume him, my mouth a hungry tiger eager for him. I didn't recall it happening that way and the shock of seeing this repulsed me and attracted me at the same time.

What the hell was going on here?

The bender was there as well, just out of my range of vision, standing next to an command center operative who was checking figures on a screen and he had a look on his face that probably matched my own - a moment later he vanished and I felt the release as his hands came away from my face.

"We're not going to get anything out of her, sir." Reported the bender as somebody plucked at the line attached to the ball in my mouth and drew it carefully out. I was too stunned to say anything, which is unusual for me and I just lay there, my eyes open, unblinking and replaying the image of that kiss with Mosser in my mind as he continued.

"Why?" Came back the reply from the interrogator.

"It is my perception that she has been programmed with false data to confuse the situation. Whatever the case, its unlikely that she even knows that she has had her memories altered." He noted then surprisingly he turned to me and said "Sorry." Before turning back to his master.

"What happened?" I asked and wished that I hadn't.

"You don't have the information that we want, Ms Berihn and because of this you're of no use to us." Replied the interrogator as he and the bender began to walk away. He turned to one of the nurses as he did, and added, "You can release her now."

And then they were gone. By the time the force fields had been released and I was helped up into a sitting position, I was beginning to think that I had gone mad somewhere and not known about it. Images kept poking at me from my subconscious mind, climbing out of dark corners that I didn't even know existed and shouted BOO at me. Things, places, events and people who I had not seen in months or even years and so many memories that it began to become a jumble. Eventually I asked the doctor what the hell was going on.

"In as far as I can tell you, very little. I was informed that you were known to Imperial Intelligence and that there was a standing order that should you land here, or anywhere else in the Empire that you were to be detained for the IIC."

"What?"

"The Imperial Intelligence Committee. You know that this is one of the fleet's main bases?"

No, I had no idea that it was and how stupid I felt now. I only landed here because I was running short on fuel and I had no wish to be lost in space, so when a nice blue planet showed up on my charts with two spaceports, I jumped at the chance of landing there. Big mistake and one that I didn't plan to repeat again because there were others in the Empire who had questions of their own and a few who actively wanted me dead; among them a man named Tarkin Buenventure, of the Imperial Space fleet on Topaz. Sitting up I tried to take the chart from my bed and look it over to find out why I collapsed. It was quickly taken from me by the doctor who grimaced at me with that look that says 'are you certified to practice medicine' and then she examined it herself. "I would love to know what I was admitted for, other than interrogation that is."

"Liver failure."

"You're joking."

"I wish that I was, and if you don't believe me, see for yourself."

She switched off the force field and I was able to move my legs once more. I pulled up the bedclothes and examined the fresh line of the micro-thin scar across the right side of my abdomen. "So, what have you done about it?"

"Put in a synthetic one of course. You will be glad to know that it's a reliable model and that it's colour-coded to match your stomach, intestine, kidneys, spleen and lungs. Curiously, your heart and other organs seem to be in fairly good shape considering your age and medical status."

"I'll say thanks for the first-class job on my liver, but my other organs are nobody's business."

"Well, if the scars that you've obtained are anything to go by, and they are extensive, you're lucky to be alive."

"Thanks for the second opinion. I'll seek my own counsel if you don't mind."

I then asked for my clothes and the keys to my Saker. I had no wish to remain here any longer than was necessary and saw to it that while I was dressing they processed my medical expenses through their terminal and indebted my account accordingly.

Fanfare and Pandemonium

[Lt. Emu Maekawa]

LRC Azure Sunset
Near Ioenin C1

When Maegil gets back, I want his baby! Kevin and I saw them shoot out of the *AS*, watched the battles hopelessly without ways to communicate until Maegil turned the jammer off, and then Mosser pulled off that miracle escape. We ran to the hangar airlock to wait for Mosser at GVG point, as the *Asp* wreck made it impossible to use the lifter and move ships to the pressurized hangars. Oddly, Mosser also didn't rush out in an EVA to man a turret or something, just stood there...

We jumped into EVAs in the locker beside the airlock - or rather I did, and then had to dress Kevin too - and cycled off into the vacuum. As soon as the door opened, we started running in opposite directions, and Kevin took position where I told him to. I approached Mosser's Stowmaster with Kevin covering from the behind some debris, silently hoping that he had dreamed enough war movies to know about friendly fire incidents, but there wasn't time to put him through boot camp. I approached the little ship and peeked through the canopy. Here was Norman Mosser, in his escape pod, and what a beautiful duel they had. Twice, and incredibly they were both still alive. Well, just barely alive in Mosser's case, but still capable of piloting like that! I gestured to Kevin to approach as it was all clear, and we cycled the airlock. The inner airlock door opened and we took our helmets off. "It stinks in here," commented Kevin.

"Yes, Mosser is wounded," I explained. The air did had a sickening stench to it... it was the smell of burnt flesh and of blood mixed with faeces that assaulted our olfacs, the kind of odour that derives from a nasty abdominal energy weapon wound. Specially if it was vacuumed and re-hydrated by atmospheric moisture; I had seen this kind of thing before when recovering battle survivors, but it was always censored from Dreamware - it's one of those things just too real to be truth. I moved ahead as Kevin decided to put the helmet back on and rather breathe the suit's recycled air than this.

The living wreck that was Mosser seemed to perceive our presence and turned its head to us, moving its mouth and emitting rasping sounds as if to speak, but the voice came from the PA. "Oh, bugger!" he said...

Kevin was already disgusted by the smell, but became utterly appalled by the sight of his back: a vacuum-dried blood-encrusted head showing beyond the chair's back, with its one remaining arm operating the chair's controls to swivel it around to face us. "Do you have got the guts to dare finishing me off?", he snarled in menace as he presented himself fully to us.

The still attached desiccated, shrivelled intestines and liver remains were fallen over his own lap - in turn connected to the torso by nothing but a bit of mummified flesh and skin. The poor boy went "Aw Gad!" and fainted, just dropped off his feet as a puppet whose strings were cut. Oh, well, at least he didn't vomited inside the EVA...

Norman seemed to chuckle even in his condition, and PA'd. "Not him, by the look of it. Good, I'd hate to be killed by an amateur. As for you, either shoot me or get out of my face, but be aware that I'll come for you if you kill me," he threatened, and in Mosser's case that is known to have happened before. I realized he must be using the internal camera to see us. Even with the jammer on, Mosser was somehow still communicating with the computers: he really couldn't be overestimated...

His tone was getting on my nerves. I raised to the shoulder the GVG we took from Mosser's armoury and was about to put him out of his misery, but thought better of it and changed my mind. He seemed to be already anaesthetized if fully conscious, and I feared Mack's wrath if I took his revenge from him. Instead, I let the rifle hang on its strap and got Kevin to a sitting position; it was better to wait until the boys get back. "Wise choice!", he said.

A noise from the airlock made me turn around with the weapon ready. It cycled and opened, and one of the *AS*' service robots came out of it carrying a pressurized stretcher. The robot was putting him in the stretcher when I heard a voice behind me... "Hello, Norman!"

I turned around to see Norman Mosser standing in an *Azure Sunset* embroidered work suit and pointing a GVG at me. "Drop it!" he menaced and I had to obey; he must have found a way to approach and boarded the *AS* undetected and cycled through the airlock along with the robot!

"Hum, hello, Norman?", sounded the PA.

"I need your memories and I'll take my Elite badge too, if you don't mind," said the complete Mosser.

"And what gave you the batshit idea I'd give you either?"

"Oh, come now! You know there can only be one Norman Mosser at any time, and look at you! I'm your replacement," he growled. "So don't make it any harder than it already is; you called for me but only gave me a few hours' worth of memories. Now I've got a two year gap in between, and I need the bloody rest!" he continued as he kicked our weapons to the farthest corner; the guy seemed in a lousy mood to say the least. "I want to know who was that assassin out there in that Asp that did... THIS to you - you seemed to know him and associated him with a 'Spartacus Brotherhood' I don't know anything about. I'm also curious from whom I was stealing my own ship from, and I especially need to know what was it that I've done big enough to justify the Feds and the Imps sending those doomsday fleets to get me back there in Quexce." He paused for some seconds in thought and added "By the way, did you found out when was it that Winston got married and why does the bitch wants me dead?"

I was in shock, my jaw simply fell! Maegil was involved with those guys who took over Quexce?! Noooo!... I guess someone had to infiltrate them and it fell onto the Black Ops' hands, and Maegil's... That must be it, sure, but it still didn't explained why is it that he's so interested in Mosser, or Mack, for that matter. I mean, I'm a naval officer and I know about the need to keep secrets even from your closest person, especially when intelligence is concerned and I have no right to ask, but it was all highly disconcerting ... Enough to raise doubts about this operation's legitimacy; on the other hand, illegitimate operations are precisely Black Ops' field... Kevin also seemed to be coming around.

The new Mosser saw my amazement and put the rifle in Kevin's face. "And who the fuck are you two? You'd better start talking because I just woke up and I'm morning grouchy; you don't want me to lose my patience, do you?" he smiled.

Kevin's eyes went wide in terror. "Aw, Gad!" he blurted again, and enthusiastically passed out a second time.

Mosser tested Kevin with his boot, and shook his head in dismay. "Bugger, what a wimp! So much for the value of youth... What about you, are you going to talk or do I have to fill you with holes?" he asked me. Just great, I know nothing except that Maegil wanted to talk with Mosser, it was ...good?... that he never told me anything! It could also result in a slow and painful death if Maegil didn't arrive soon! "Look sharp, the first foot is getting toasted in three, two..." he started counting.

"You don't need to do this, you'll get all your answers once you've got his memories!" I tried, but to no avail.

"You're wrong. You see, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun, and this will make feel much better," he said with a malevolent grin. "Continuing, two, one...", and the robot bashed him in the temple.

"This body is going to be useful, I'll take it," sarcastically sounded the PA, and the robot gave the fallen Mosser's gun to the half Mosser. "Shall we be going?" he asked, "You're a heavyworlder and can carry these two in the AS's Gs."

Mosser left me and Kevin in the brig and went on to do whatever Mossers do, and I feared for when Maegil tried to return....

Back to Back, They Faced Each Other

[Vasquith de Havilland]

Masterful. Well plotted, correctly timed. Orchestrated by a true champion director. Vasquith de Havilland couldn't help but feel admiration for the pilot of the Stowmaster escape capsule. Norman Mosser.

Everyone aboard the Saker had watched in stunned silence as the Imperial Courier/Asp Explorer duo performed a dance of pirouettes and twists, bucks and flips, resulting in their separation and an explosion. The release of the Stowmaster. Then, the fight had begun. And against all odds, the Stowmaster had won. The Asp, powerless, could do nothing but watch as the Stowmaster made berth within the *Azure Sunset*. Safe. For now. De Havilland gunned the engines. They roared through the gaping, missile-induced hole in the side of the *Azure Sunset*, retros on full power. He had carried too much speed going in, and they were overshooting their target. Norman's advice. He expected an ambush. But there had been none. Just a Stowmaster capsule, quiet, dark, inert, lying on the flight deck. And another Asp Explorer. But this one looked the worse for wear. Nose crumpled in, landing gear bent, distorted, shredded to pieces. She wouldn't be flying again. "Whose is that?" Sam Kemper asked as de Havilland halted the Saker and lowered it down for a landing.

"Mine," replied de Havilland.

They disembarked the Saker, space suits on. They didn't have much time. It seemed everyone wanted in on the action. Firstly the Stowmaster. They had to watch out for the Norman Mosser from inside. Secondly, the disabled Asp. Norman had been keen to destroy it while it was defenceless, but de Havilland had refused to partake in outright murder, so they had just flown past. They might repair the ship, they might not, but the players within were still in the mix, so to speak. They would find out the hard way whether they had left anyone inside. Finally Norman's crew. Who knew who they would support when they finally arrived and docked with the *Azure Sunset*. So it was a race. Whoever got control of the AS first would win. De Havilland removed his helmet, breathing in the fresh air. The AS's air scrubbers had been working at full tilt since he and Veruz had messed around on the bridge. He turned to say something to Norman, stopping as he realised the criminal had something on his mind. They looked at each other briefly before de Havilland continued. "I need to get some...items off my old ship."

"I need to make a stop at the medical bay," Norman replied with a twinkle in his eye.

De Havilland turned to Sam and Michael. "I guess you two should head up to the bridge then."

Sam glanced at Norman, who gave a brief nod. "Ok," Sam said in a neutral tone, clearly not happy with being given orders. He turned to Veruz. "Come on kid." The team split up.

De Havilland returned to the vacuum and climbed aboard the Vagabond. She was just as he had left her. Crippled and alone. It almost broke his heart. Reaching the cockpit, he fell back into his pilots seat and just sat. The Saker was visible to the extreme left, perched tall and proud, and with hardly a scratch on her. "Don't worry about her," he soothed the Vagabond, stroking the controls. "She means nothing to me. We'll get you fixed up. I promise." Sighing, he spun in the seat, stood up, and unlocked the hidden cache of weapons. "But first," he said, pulling out a pair of rifles and equipment, "I have some business to attend to." He imagined he looked like a robot with the amount of weaponry strapped all around him. He could barely walk, but it wasn't ALL for him. He would share around most of it. If they needed to repel boarders. Satisfied, he left the Vagabond.

Sam and Veruz raced through the ship. There was someone up ahead. Two sets of footsteps. One was long and heavy, the other short and light. A man and a woman. Sam urged Michael on, but put a finger to his lips. Be quiet. In saying that, they were making so much noise with their running, it was probably a moot point. The decking rang out as their feet slammed down on the floor boards, loose, clanging. They arrived at a T intersection. To the right was the bridge. To the left, the noise of retreating footsteps. Sam paused, then made a decision. He ran to the right. They made good time and found the bridge deserted, but with the lights on and all systems go. Sam ran around the bridge, then up the ramp to the mezzanine portion over looking the main floor of the bridge. The bulk of the main controls were up here, though most were slaved down to the various stations below. "I'm going to get this baby ready to rock. You keep guard," Sam called down to Michael, throwing him his laser pistol. Michael looked nervous, Sam noted, as if he had a bad experience on the bridge of an LRC before. Shrugging, he got down to work.

De Havilland burst through the door to find a laser pistol barrel in his face. "Woah, point that thing somewhere else!" he cried, moving out of the way.

Michael breathed a sigh of relief then got out of the way. Then he realised what de Havilland was carrying. "Holy crap, Cap'n, you preparing for another war?"

De Havilland shucked off the ordnance onto the ground, then looked around. "There are too many people interested in this thing. Thought we might need them." He searched the bridge again. "Where's Norman?"

"Hasn't showed up yet," Michael replied nonchalantly.

De Havilland frowned. "Sam?" de Havilland asked. "Can you find out what's going on in the medical centre?"

Sam nodded, then moved to access another computer terminal. After a few moments he frowned, scratching his chin. "That's odd. The security camera's aren't working." He looked up to find de Havilland. But he was already gone.

The doors to the medical centre refused to open. Apparently he had to be Norman Mosser to enter this particular medical centre. He took a step back, then taking a page out of Norman's book, fired his carbine straight at the door! BOOM! The door exploded inward, billowing black smoke pouring out of the crater. He took two steps in and rushed to the side, in case someone was waiting for him. The smoke cleared. He saw Mosser. And another Mosser. And then the automatic air controllers sucked out the rest of the smoke. De Havilland groaned. There were three Mossers. "What the hell is going on here?" he mumbled.

"This is private business," one of the Mossers informed him. De Havilland just stood there in shock, still trying to comprehend what he was seeing. Two Mossers were facing off against each other. One of them, a bit older than the other, looked like his Norman Mosser. The other, the one who had spoken, was younger, and wearing a strange jumpsuit. The third looked half dead, guts hanging out, head half blown off. Actually, now that he had looked closer, yes, he was in fact dead.

Two Mossers then. That was noticeably easier to deal with.

"Shoot that usurper, will you de Havilland?" called the older Mosser, gesturing to his doppelganger.

"Umm?" de Havilland replied.

"Me? The usurper?" My memories are all up to date and I'm younger and faster than you. Time for you to retire, old man," rebutted the younger Mosser.

"I have the badge, punk. This is my show till I say otherwise!" The older Mosser reached into his pocket to withdraw the badge, but the younger Mosser swung his arm up, a tiny pocket pistol embedded in his fist. He couldn't miss from that range. The old Mosser went flying backwards, head snapping back violently, an audible snap filling the medical centre. De Havilland's hands were moving the instant he saw the younger Mosser move, but Mosser was fast. Faster than de Havilland. By the time he had brought his weapon to bear, the younger Mosser had already moved his weapon around to face de Havilland. De Havilland closed his eyes as he fired. BANG! BANG! Then he hit the ground.

"Wake up," he heard a voice whisper. De Havilland grunted. His body began to shake.

No, someone was shaking him. He opened his eyes. And gasped in surprise. The older Mosser, head twisted back at a grotesque angle, big black hole through its centre, was on the ground next to him, arm shaking his body. "Holy Jesus Fuck!" de Havilland cried, rolling away and clambering to his feet. His hands instinctively went for his body. Lightning pain ripped up his side. He pulled his shirt up to find a nasty laser burn just above his hip bone. Nothing there but fat and skin. Lucky. He turned to the young Mosser. He was leaning against a medical bed, thrown back at least two metres by the blow to his chest. A neat, black hole lay where his heart should have been. The face was set in a smile, but the eyes were vacant. Was he dead though? It was a good shot. Without a heart to pump blood, the body would surely die.

"His brain is still active. He has a neural lace," the older Mosser cadaver explained. De Havilland eyed both 'dead' Mossers. A Neural lace. He had heard of them. Forbidden technology. Banned under the Cassiopeia Protocol, along with genetic enhancements and alterations. Still, it wasn't surprising that Mosser had one. Nothing that man did surprised him anymore. He bent down and retrieved his carbine. He took aim at the younger Mosser. Brain still alive huh? He lined up a head shot. He would use the entire power pack. Just to be safe. "No, I need the body. That's the only spare one," the older Mosser called. De Havilland stopped, trigger half depressed. He held his finger still, past the first point of resistance. It would only take a micrometer of movement to fire the gun now.

"Explain," he said calmly.

"This body is dying. It takes time to make a clone. That was my backup, but someone woke him up early and he thought he was the real Norman Mosser and so he tried to take back what he thought were 'his' memories. That's why there should only be one of me at a time."

The older Mosser explained the procedure to run the automated medical equipment, and de Havilland jacked up both bodies to the central cloning station. He didn't pretend to understand what was happening, but apparently the younger Mosser's body would receive medical attention and get a replacement heart. At the same time, the memories from the older Mosser would be transferred into the younger body, thus giving him a new lease on life. As he stood watching the automated machinery do its thing, his comlink beeped. "de Havilland."

The reply was sharp and straight to the point. "We've been boarded."

Duel at 'Sunset'

[Cmdr. Maegil]

Ioenin C1

Near the LRC Azure Sunset

Asp Explorer IL-351 Tenchu

"Hydraulic jack," I said to the EVA helmet's comm, stretching my hand behind. Nothing. "Mack?" I asked as I crawled backwards from the opening we had to cut through the molten and solidified duralium and G-twisted piping. "Mack?" I asked again as I turned around... to find him bonked out. The stim decided to kick out just when I needed some help, but no harm done, I was almost finished burrowing an access to the stern to reach the engineering section. Anyway, he shouldn't be out for too long as it was only half a dose and he hadn't exerted himself, but still would be binned for at least two hours, I'd say. Mosser really mossered the *Tenchu*, and it was for a hair he didn't cut her in half. Well, a little more than a hair, but not much! Anyway, I just took the jack and went back to work. Afterwards, I'd have to throw the engine safety switches, restart the drive and dock with the *AS* without port thrusters and only the Viper redundant aux top and starboard thrusters. Just like those old ships before the invention of yaw thrusters, but still slightly manoeuvrable - just enough to get whooped by a Stowmaster... Damn!!!

* * *

There! "Obie, status report."

"Maegil, no new damage was detected. Caution, multiple diagnostic sensors failure," informed Obie. Well, that meant I was in deep shit if I needed to fight my way out of a furball, and it was amazing the first arriving ship didn't blow us up. Still, I couldn't leave Emu and Kevin, so I'd have to go in alone. "Obie, autopilot," I ordered, and got a negative - damaged or destroyed. Oh boy, my poor *Tenchu*... I pointed at an intercept course in low speed, and went to the armoury. I hung an Ingram 350 on the shoulder, clipped a couple of plasma grenades to the belt, put the "Diplomat" on the right side and my diamond-edged duralium daisho on the left. I was taking both the "Winter Moon" katana and the "Little Moon" wakizashi as I could have to fight in tight quarters where a smaller sword would be more versatile. I also got a personal shield as I'd be no good dead, picked up some extra power packs and of course a couple of knives to complement. Hum, that plasma spreader rifle was smiling at me... I took it just in case! Also just in case, I took another couple of grenades. This took me back to the days when I was still on the Special Forces and made me sigh in nostalgia, but that was the wrong mood. Returning to the bridge I could already see the *AS*. "Obie, bioscan," I ordered, but it was yet another one of the many pieces of bloody expensive equipment Mosser destroyed - or what was left of him, and after half an hour of vacuum! Damn! Damn! Shame on me! Erm, that's another wrong mood... I took a hand bioscanner, hung it to the belt and plugged the data input eyepiece from the damaged gimbal targeting system on it.

On manual control, the ship creaked and groaned dangerously, even louder now that I wasn't busy fighting... Nearly every top longitudinal bulwark had been cut by Mosser's miracle manoeuvre and the bottom ones weren't taking well the torque I was stressing them with. GRwooOOooiiiIINK, she went as I fainted to evade any defensive fire during the final approach. Oh, boy... SCRiiiiunCH! Hold yourself together, baby, and I promise you a nice long overhaul on *Eta Cass*... She did, and shuddered to a halt as it touched the floor without being fired upon. It was up to me, now. If I was still in the FMSF, it'd be like this:

Primary objectives

- 1) find Emu and Kevin;
- 2) take the *AS* and defend it, or
- 3) evacuate before the arrival of reinforcements.

Secondary objectives:

- 4) scout and evaluate the enemy forces;
- 5) bring Mack Mosser's head on a platter.

I told Obie to simultaneously open then close all the airlocks to prevent any ambushed enemies from knowing where I was coming out. I activated the shields and jumped out the starboard airlock, landed already running and zigzagged, but there was no-one to shoot at me. I started by checking the ships: lots of blood on the Stowmaster and black paint in the Saker. Blacker, actually, or even its absolute superlative, but it was still only paint, and no crew in it either. Opening the *AS*' airlock, I waited a few seconds before rushing in full speed, only to find still nobody waiting - could they be busy hunting down Emu? If so, wasn't she my woman and I'd even wish them good luck; as she is, if they as much as touch a hair of her and I won't leave anyone alive in here! I might go as far as to tell the dormant mole I left on the *Azure Sunset's* computer to take over the controls and overload the drive. Actually, that wasn't a bad idea, I could use it as a dead man's switch to gain an upper hand on any negotiations;

only, for that to work I mustn't kill any of them lest the rest decide to get even. Tricky, but feasible. "Sunset Obie, Delta Oscar Zulu Lima, activate," I said and gave my commands.

"Attention: authorized personnel list modified. Hyperdrive primed to overload in T minus 30 minutes. Please transmit annulation code", echoed the AS' PA. It was done, the Sunset Obie was in control of the ship. I took the comm and added "This is your temporary captain speaking; all hands to the mess hall, and no shooting, please."

* * *

"Where's Mosser?" Sam Kemper and two wrenchmen came to meet me, but not Mosser. "Changing himself?"

"That's none of your business. Now, are you going to abort that countdown or do I have to make you?"

The younger wrenchmen raised his weapon, but the older one shook his head and he put it back down. "Now, Mr. Kemper, my business is precisely with you boss."

"Oh, there you are!", said a female voice from another doorway. "You call this a rescue, calling the bad guys out for a nice chat? You took your own sweet time, didn't you?" Yup, that's my dear, assertive Emu... "Hey, dude, glad to see ya in one piece! Where's Mack?" said another voice, Kevin. Now the wrenchman raised their weapons, as did my people.

"Mexican standoff," said Kemper. "Now, give me back the control and I'll let you leave."

"Not quite, I wouldn't put it that way - it's more like 'we leave, you live' kind of situation. You have now 25 minutes for us to get out of here and override the self-destruct, and yourselves have no means of escape; the airlocks will only open on my command."

"We just need to cut them down, big deal!"

"I wouldn't recommend that..." I said nonchalantly.

"And why would that be?", asked Kemper.

"If I tell you, you might call it a bluff, so... Sunset Obie, explain."

"Sam, the self destruction is connected to the ship's sensors. If they detect any kind of decompression, the *Azure Sunset* will self destruct," said Obie in his warm way, and Kemper went red.

"And who gave you permission to call me by my first name!?" he exploded.

"My apologies, it is part of my program. Will 'Mr. Kemper' do?"

"Better!" said Kemper, and turned his attention back to me. "Cute, this AI of yours. Did it come in a chocolate egg?"

"Yes, as did my 'Major Mayhem'(TM) official fan club badge," I replied levelly. "Now where's Mosser?"

"Right here!" said Mosser from beyond Kemper. The baddies were perplexed by his appearance, they surely didn't expect to hear from him so soon.

"Hello again, Mosser!" I hissed. "Sorry but Mack couldn't make it to the party, so it'll be me who's going to finish you off..."

"You've got the wrong Mosser, I'm the one who hired Mack."

"You expect me to believe you with that 'look mum, I'm fresh out of the vat' bald look? Yeah, right, take me for stupid."

Mosser seemed at a loss "Look, it's serious, I've no idea who the fuck you are, but the other Mossers are all dead. I'm the real Norman."

"Is the great Norman Mosser chickening out on me? First I disarmed you, and you disarmed me; then I got your Courier and you returned the favour on my Asp. This tennis game advantage point thing is getting on my nerves, I'd like to know who's the best warrior once and for all!" I said as I unbuckled the belt, tossed the weapons and drew the 22cm blade combat knife. "Your ego must also be itching to find out, and you don't have a choice, so..." I smirked in a menacing way.

A death silence fell upon the room. Emu looked at me passionately, Mosser's eyes flared in rage; as for everybody else, 'appalled' would be the best word to describe their faces - they never thought someone could be suicidal enough to speak to Mosser like that. "Very well, you talked me into it. We'll see if you can live up to your mouth. As I said, I'm the wrong guy, but you're just begging to be killed," he smiled back, drawing his own blade.

"Hey, wait! What about the countdown?", asked the younger man. "How are you going to stop it if you get...", he stopped under Mosser's icy gaze, thought better and re-phrased, "I mean, what'll happen when Mr. Mosser Kills you?"

"My AI knows them and will allow them access, they just need to take my body away, and it stops."

"Good that you know what'll happen," said Mosser starting to approach to fighting range. "Now, die!"

We cautiously circled each other, both knowing the opponent wouldn't be easily defeated, and Mosser made the first move - far slower than what he had shown on Earth. I deflected the move with ease, expecting a second, faster strike that didn't come. My turn, and Mosser responded so poorly that my feint actually cut his sleeve. "Oh, come on! Stop underestimating me like this, you can do better than that!" I said, but Mosser's face was a mask of concentration. "If that's how you want it..." I said, and attacked again. Mosser went into a defensive stance, blocked my knife in a much better speed, and countered in a sequence. He was still holding back, and it was getting on my nerves.. Just to make him liven up, I parried his knife, grabbed the wrist and gave him a good yank as I moved to him, hitting him with the elbow fully in the chest to take the air out of him... a wet snapping noise came from his ribcage, and Mosser collapsed at my feet. "What the fuck?...", I exclaimed, and noticed that Mosser's chest had caved in. I kneeled and went for his knife, but he was waiting for me and weakly tried to stab me. I blocked, disarmed him, and put the blade's tip on his stomach, sliding it upwards. Ziiiiiiip, I cut his jump suit open... The bastard had just came from a full cardiac surgery, and still tried to take me on!

"Hurry, we have to take him to the medical facility!" I said. "Don't you die, you prick, this fight didn't count!"

"WHAT?!" said everybody in a choir. "You're not bloody serious, are you?" asked Kemper.

"Bloody hell I am, it didn't count. I wanted to fight Mosser, not some hospital runaway!" I shouted back.

High Noon

[Vasquith de Havilland]

"Who is this guy?" Veruz asked de Havilland. The two were sitting, at gunpoint, at a mess hall table.

"I don't know," de Havilland replied, "but he is reading a 9.0 on my 'Fucking-Psycho' meter."

"Can you believe the nerve of that guy?"

"Hard to believe," de Havilland agreed. "I don't know anything about psychology, but something deep within him is reacting to another alpha male. It's like he has a built in need to prove to everyone, including himself, that he is the best"

"Sounds like Norman," Veruz replied quickly. De Havilland's brow wrinkled.

"Yes," he said, pausing. "This is a very unstable situation."

"So what do we do?" Veruz asked, clenching his fists.

What the hell could they do? De Havilland asked himself. The girl, Emu, had thought it decent to relieve him of his carbine and the spare laser pistol tucked into his belt. Fortunately, she hadn't thought to keep checking. The Peacemaker was still snug in the back of his jacket. A trick he had picked up from Mosser. What kind of sick person would carry three weapons anyway? Still, the Peacemaker wasn't going to get them out of this situation by itself. They still had a large cache of weapons, now hidden, on the bridge. They could in useful later. He looked around the room. Emu was across the table, standing, weapon trained on his heart. He wasn't fooled by her good looks. Ha! Who was he kidding? He knew she knew how to use that weapon and wouldn't be afraid to use it. But somehow the whole picture looked wrong. "It seems a crime a woman as beautiful as yourself has the need to use a brutal weapon such as that," he said quickly. THUMP! A laser blast flashed past his right ear, ripping into the wall behind them. He didn't even have time to flinch before he was pelted from behind with wall fragments. His right ear rang like a choir. Wrong tact... "For some reason, that actually turns me on," de Havilland replied, readying himself for another shot.

"You sick pervert," she spat at him.

de Havilland tried his most leering look. He barely controlled himself from laughing. He had never leered at a woman before. He hoped it came out right.

Veruz began to get the idea. "I like the way you hold that shaft, baby," Veruz replied, oozing sexism. De Havilland smiled inside. Veruz had had some practice then. Excellent. Veruz kept talking, the filth coming out his mouth even more insidious than the last. De Havilland threw some hip movements in for good measure. He began edging the Colt Peacemaker out onto his lap, covered by the table while Veruz kept cracking out line after line. He surely hoped they weren't his pickup quotes. Then Emu suddenly had had enough. She turned. De Havilland threw his seat back. Emu heard the noise. She began to turn. De Havilland lifted the Colt up from his lap, fingers around the wooden grip, one finger reaching for the covered trigger, the other for the hammer. Emu brought the weapon back to bear. De Havilland's finger reached the hammer. He began to pull back. Emu had the weapon at her hip, pointing straight at de Havilland, finger curling around the trigger. The hammer hit its stop. De Havilland pulled the trigger. The mechanical operation of the six shooter took several milliseconds for the hammer to hit the bullet, ignite the gun powder, then get the bullet up to speed down the barrel. The laser carbine took several nanoseconds. It would prove to be the edge Emu needed.

THUMP!
BOOM!

Lightning pain flared through de Havilland's chest as he went flying backwards, colliding against the wall. He saw stars. Fuck it hurt! Getting shot never got easier. Where was he hit? He felt around while he writhed around on the ground, swearing till the pain subsided. His shoulder. He breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing there but bone and muscle. Stuff that can be replaced easily. His left arm was now useless, he discovered as trying to get back to his feet. He got unsteadily to his feet. Veruz now held the Colt Peacemaker, aiming straight at Emu. As he looked over the table, de Havilland realised she was on the ground. But where the laser wound in de Havilland's shoulder had cauterised itself, limiting the damage it would do, Emu was on the ground, bleeding. Badly. Luckily for her, de Havilland's shot had also missed its mark, his aim affected by a laser shot entering his shoulder. A big gooeey red mark stained her right breast. A puddle was forming behind her head. She was going to die soon.

"Cap'n?" Veruz asked, the Colt still aimed at Emu.

De Havilland looked from his co-pilot to the beautiful woman he had just butchered. You bastard. He ran across the mess hall, left arm dangling by his side, to the serving counter. A quick search through the cupboards revealed a first aid kit. He brought it back out. Kneeling down in front of the injured woman, he put a cauterising tool over the wound. "This is going to hurt," he warned her. He activated the tool. Emu screamed.

* * *

De Havilland got to his feet and applied a synth skin patch to his own wound. It would ease the pain, but wouldn't magically fix the muscle and tendons within. He looked down at Emu. She was conscious, but was away with the fairies. Veruz grabbed Emu's laser carbine and passed the Peacemaker back to de Havilland. "What do we do now, Cap'n?"

de Havilland was still looking at Emu. He had stabilised her, but she had lost a lot of blood. Her right lung was for all intents and purposes, dead. The drugs were keeping the shock away, but she needed medical attention. He did as well. The rest of the part, Sam, Kevin, Mosser and the crazy samurai had all gone to the medical centre. "I guess we go to the infirmary," he replied casually.

Showdown at MED CEN1

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The twisted, jagged remnants of the medical centre doors groaned and sparked. De Havilland paid them no heed, forcing the woman ahead of him as he charged into the hospital room. It was an interesting sight before him. A man, crazy by anyone's standards, stood in front of a man he had sworn to kill, watching him inside his cocooned medical bed, healing from closed heart surgery. Meanwhile Sam Kemper stood to one side, an equally concerned expression on his face, but while Maegil wanted Norman better so he could have a 'proper' fight, Sam just looked genuinely concerned for his friend. The kid, Kevin was it? Held a weapon at Sam, but he didn't look like he knew how to use it. He briefly wondered how Norman could become close to anyone. But it wasn't the time for thought. It was a time for poker.

Emu stumbled forward, looking like she was drunk, dazed out of her mind, a jagged, cauterised hole in her right breast. The Colt Peacemaker had done a lot of damage and she was going to need serious surgery if she was going to survive. But she wasn't going to get it while he held a 1300 year old weapon to the back of her head. All the heads in the room turned to the door. Kevin looked surprised, Sam devilishly happy and Maegil a mixture of unbridled horror and rampant anger. It was enough to give de Havilland pause; should he have gone to the bridge first, consolidated their position? It was too late though; he was committed. "Step away from the criminal," de Havilland ordered Maegil. The other man glanced over to a table, not more than two metres away. It held a pair of swords.

"I wouldn't think about it, mate," Veruz yelled, taking a step forward, pointing his carbine at Maegil.

The man looked like he was about to scream a curse, or mutate into a beast and rip someone's head off. For a body so prepared for action, leaking adrenaline, the response felt rather meek: "I am going to kill you for what you did to her," he said softly.

"Ahhh," Veruz stammered, "It was him," he gestured towards de Havilland with this carbine.

"I will use your heads as desert bowls," came the calm reply.

"Yes, but you have forgotten one detail. You have to travel 3 metres to get to me. My index finger only has to travel half a millimetre," de Havilland looked him square in the eye. "Do you think you're that fast?" All eyes turned to Maegil who looked like he was seriously considering it. A growl emanated from his lips. Several moments played out, though de Havilland knew they must have felt like hours to Maegil, torn between his heart and his mind. You can't help her now. Don't be dumb, he thought to Maegil. The man finally un-tensed his body and took a solitary step away from the medical bed where Mosser lay. "Keep moving, hero," de Havilland ordered. "This is one situation you can't cut yourself out of."

Maegil kept moving till he was against the far wall. Sam, now holding Kevin's weapon, manoeuvred himself around to face Maegil. He aimed the barrel at his chest. "I'm sure Mosser would be pissed off he couldn't do this himself, but it's best to look at the big picture," Kemper said, with only a hint of pleasure.

"Sam," de Havilland warned.

"The ship is still armed for self destruction," Maegil replied quickly. Sam took a step back, glanced at de Havilland... -then hit the ground head first. He rolled away almost instantly.

A blur of motion. Maegil was on his feet, Sam's weapon in his hands, the barrel pushing into Sam's forehead, right between the eyes. "Now gentlemen, I think it's time we renegotiated. To your feet," Maegil instructed. Sam obliged slowly. The two groups mirror imaged each other: One hostage taker, one hostage directly in front of them, with a second man on their right. Balanced. "Release Emu now, or I will shoot Sam," Maegil instructed, sounding out Kemper's first name slowly.

De Havilland chuckled. "Go ahead!" he yelled back at Maegil. Maegil frowned but recovered quickly. "I'm not with these guys. They're not my friends. I have a business deal with Mosser. That's it. I couldn't care less about Kemper!" de Havilland boasted, fronting his most cocky expression. Sam's face went from shock to anger.

"You pretend to be so high and mighty, de Havilland, but you're no bloody better than us. You're the real criminal!"

"Take that back!" de Havilland yelled. He motioned to Veruz, who nodded, then shifted his aim from Maegil to Sam.

"Wait!" Sam stammered, unsure of what was happening.

“What am I, Mr Kemper?”

“You’re a fucking pirate!”

De Havilland glanced at Veruz.

“Michael. Shoot him.” Veruz glanced at de Havilland, who gave him an imperceptible nod.

Veruz fired.

Maegil spun in disbelief as his hostage collapsed on the ground in a scream of pain. He turned back to face de Havilland and Veruz. They both had their weapons trained on him. They stood facing each other in silence. De Havilland’s heart thumped in and out. Keep cool, he warned himself. Could they hear his heart? It thrummed in his ears, blocking out all other sounds. Maegil was saying something. By the time de Havilland managed to concentrate on the words, Maegil had dropped his weapon. De Havilland smiled. “Veruz, shoot him.”

* * *

Sam limped over to a spare medical bed, rolled on top, then sighed in relief. De Havilland winked at him, examined the cauterised laser wound in his right thigh, then turned to look at Maegil. He had a similar wound, but unlike Sam, he was now unconscious, leaning against the left wall, next to his girlfriend. Both of their hands were shackled around an air conditioning pipe. “We should have killed them,” Sam winced. The ADoctor, having sensed a patient on the bed, had begun an analysis of the body and was already administering repairs.

“You don’t understand me at all do you?” de Havilland shook his head. “That’s what separates me from you.”

“If he ever gets free, he will kill you.”

“That’s not a good enough excuse to kill a man,” de Havilland replied.

“Bloody hell man, it’s called self defence!”

De Havilland pushed Sam back down on the bed, shaking his head. “The point is moot, Sam. We need him alive to deactivate the self destruct.” The latest warning had indicated less than five minutes until self destruct. An interesting lack of detail, de Havilland noted. He turned to Veruz. “Ok, better wake him up.” Veruz nodded and applied a small patch to Maegil’s neck. It was a simple stimulant.. Maegil gasped, then looked around disorientated. He found de Havilland, then shrunk his eyes to slits. If they were laser apertures, de Havilland knew he would surely be dead. “You need to deactivate the self destruct.”

“No.”

“If you want to be responsible for your own death, as well as your girlfriend’s, then fine. Otherwise, turn the fucking thing off.” Maegil, a quick look of surprise on his face, twisted around, saw Emu tied up next to him, and almost cried in relief. “I’m not a murderer, Maegil. The question is: Are you?” Maegil turned back to de Havilland, but remained silent. “If you die in the next five minutes, you’ll never get to duel Mosser properly. You will die never knowing who was the better warrior.”

One of Maegil’s cheek muscles twitched. De Havilland shifted his aim from Maegil to Emu. Maegil laughed. “You won’t kill her. You can’t. You don’t have the balls to kill a woman.”

De Havilland shrugged then nodded to Veruz. “You’re right. I’m pretty sure Michael does though,” he replied, as Veruz took aim at Emu’s forehead. “I’ve never actually seen him do it, so I don’t know, but there is always one way to find out,” he finished.

Sam grunted in the background, but otherwise the world was silent. Nothing moved. The two men held each others gaze, both refusing to back down. From what he had seen of his Maegil character, he knew the chances of him backing down from anything were absolute-zero low. He just hoped the man’s compassion for his woman would be enough to allow a crack of sanity enter his mind.

More Silence. Maegil just looked up at de Havilland, mouth shut, eyes like daggers.

The self destruct was still going. Maegil knew that. He was going to die. Was he really so spiteful as to kill them all just to save face?

Would he kill his girlfriend just so he wouldn’t be beaten?

No.

He was stalling.

Someone was coming...

His heart rate doubled instantly, and he lowered himself into a combat stance-

A smell...ozone? A weapon charging up! "Duck!" de Havilland yelled, throwing himself against Veruz.

"Oppffhh!" went his copilot as the two of them tumbled to the ground, just as a railgun charge sliced through the wall at close to the speed of light, screaming through the air where Veruz's head had been less than half a second ago.

De Havilland was back to his feet, in a crouch, clenching his teeth against the pain in his wounded shoulder, Colt Peacemaker secure in his opposite hand.

Carr-chunk! Pppsssssss.... Gas wafted in from beyond the destroyed door, billowing in large rolling swirls of dense grey smoke. *Time to move!* De Havilland yelled to himself. Whoever was out there knew how to make an entrance. More important, he knew how to handle his weapon – shooting a railgun through a wall with such accuracy was no mean feat. De Havilland got to his feet and ran straight into the gas clouds! Impact! He hit something. Something metal. A robot? Both of them went flying across the room into a pile at the periphery of the smoke. Arms swung out at his face, fingers clawing for his eyes. Adrenaline flowed through his veins, powering every move. His heightened reflexes allowed last second desperate grabs at the hands. But the other man, or android, was definitely stronger.

His head exploded in stars. It felt like a sledgehammer had just hit him. Barely holding onto consciousness, he rolled away, another big BAM! Slamming into the ground, narrowly missing his head. *I'm losing control*, his mind whispered. His feet striking something, he used every last ounce of strength to push himself forward, head down. He hit his attacker, straight in the midsection. A quick release of breathe. Definitely human then. So what had hit him before? He didn't have time for any more thoughts as he saw a shadow come straight for him. He dodged out of the way, making a sideways grab for the man's throat, but it didn't hold and the wraith disappeared back into the smoke.

He couldn't see anything. Where was his weapon? He had to keep moving. Arms up in a defensive posture, he took slow, measured steps through the smoky prison he found himself in -

- movement to his right. He dived down reflexively, hugging the ground as someone toppled over the top of him. He lunged and grappled with the man again. He rammed his head down and down again. He heard cartilage snap. He pulled his head back as another fist swung at him, but he wasn't fast enough. A glancing blow, but it still rattled his brain. That's a bionic arm! He went flying off the attacker, and shuffled backwards. His head hit something. A rattle. He got to his feet, turned and felt around. A table. Ouch! Cold, sharp metal. De Havilland grinned. A Katana. He found the handle and gripped tightly before turning back around. He backed right out of the expanding smoke clouds.

Veruz was where he had left him, but standing up, weapon aimed into the gas. "Out of the way, Cap'n" he screamed. De Havilland veered to the right, waiting for his attacker to reveal himself. A man stumbled out of the grey, blood oozing from both nostrils. He was a short little man, but de Havilland could see there was power buried within the man's frame. His eyes made him look Phekdan, but de Havilland couldn't be too sure. The Phekdan was holding a weapon. Nothing big, just a little laser pistol, but it was pointing straight at Veruz, even before he had left the cloud. This guy is good. Another few minutes, another standoff, thought de Havilland.

"You OK, Maegil?" the Phekdan asked.

"Kill them, Mack," Maegil replied. Veruz tensed, carbine butt buried into his chest, both eyes looking down the sight.

"Mack Winston?" choked Sam, half buried in the swirling fog of grey smoke, but still stuck on his hospital bed. "Norman's injured. We need help."

"He'll be dead when I'm finished with him," Mack snarled.

De Havilland took a step forward, knuckles white around the sword's handle. "Listen mate, I don't know who you are, but I have no quarrel with you. All I want is for Maegil here to turn off the self destruct. I also need Norman to

stay alive. Let's just say he's my life insurance. Now, what say you just turn around and walk away? We never need to see each other again."

Mack took a step forward, aim shifting from Veruz to de Havilland. "Giving me orders, old man? No one tells me what to do. Not ever again. Never!"

The room vibrated softly. Mack noticed it to. "Wha.." It happened again, sharper this time. "Fuck, are we under attack?" Mack wondered, the malice suddenly gone from his voice.

Another distant boom and shudder. Definitely felt like laser shots. "Self destruct sensors for airlock breach," whispered Sam.

Fuck! Ignoring Mack, de Havilland whirled to face Maegil. "Deactivate the self destruct! He yelled.

Sunset

[Vera Sinclair]

They'd tried to throw her off the scent, but she knew that the transmission was faked. So they'd found the tracker she'd planted on Kevin O'Connell, but they'd missed the tell-tale.

It had slowed progress, but an alert on the ship posted to the ALED had turned up results.

And now her little Saker was watching the behemoth in the distance. The *Azure Sunset*.

Getting killed wasn't going to help, she conceded, and backed off to the fringes of the system. There was a time and place to capture Kevin O'Connell and Mack Winston, and this wasn't it. She just hoped they didn't get killed before she could get her hands on them.

Perhaps she ought to go to the nearest AJN outpost and see if she could convince the brass to send in a couple of destroyers - but quickly dismissed it - the Navy had other fish to fry, and engaging the *Sunset* would surely become high profile ... for what? The capture of a couple of fugitives?

At least it seemed like the Feds hadn't noticed the O'Connell connection. The Feds had given her full access to the SFPD crime investigation database, since they knew she was after Mack Winston. They hadn't even noticed the surfeit of Mack Winstons during the assassination of one of the Mossers. They hadn't noticed the huge deposit into O'Connell's bank account. To them he was probably just an unimportant vagrant, scratching a living out of doing impressions of Hengist Duval.

She suspected he'd be a good source of information though once she caught him. But not now. Going anywhere near the *Azure Sunset* would be suicidal.

The Good, The Bad and The Virgin

[Cmdr. Maegil]

"Deactivate the self destruct!", de Havilland yelled at me in near panic.

"Sunset Obie, put the self destruct primed on scenario D protocol for *Tenchu* authorized personnel, shut down sensor detonation and delay countdown pending my confirmation every 5 minutes," I commanded.

"Scenario D? And just what trick have you up your sleeve now?" asked Kemper from his bed.

"I've just changed your bigger picture and activated a dead man's switch. If our present medical status goes worse, it'll immediately destroy the *Azure Sunset*, as it will if lose my patience and decide not to answer," I answered Kemper with a grin.

"You're completely bonkers, aren't you?!" he incredulously asked back. Kevin, shackled beside Emu, looked at me as if agreeing with him. "And don't you look at me like that - either they stop jerking around or we won't go alone." Mack snorted in a dead giveaway of his feelings about my plan, and found concerning the way he was really willing to die if he could at least take Mosser with him - but it wasn't time for that.

I turned to de Havilland with menace in my eyes. "I don't like to use this kind of a coward's weapon, but the circumstances call for it - so if I were you, I'd put Emu in that bed really fast! In case you didn't notice, we didn't come here to play with some wrenchmen; the big boys were having a nice peaceful chat when you two bozos decided to foul up the matters."

De Havilland went red and put the 'Winter Moon's tip on my throat. "'Wrenchmen'?! Take that back, or I'll..." he started before I cut him off.

"... personally commit suicide? Let your..." I nodded to his sidekick pointing a federal Medley 400 Carbine at Mack, "...goon apprentice there get you killed? It's on your hands now, so stop wasting my time! If you want me to even consider letting you live, take off these cuffs and I mean NOW!!!" I told him with all the authority I could muster on my position.

Our eyes clashed in dispute of wills, and I could see the tumult in him for being called a criminal. It made me wonder what could have happened to him that made an obviously honourable man go bad... but who am I to cast stones? Nevertheless, this knowledge could be important, so I put it away for future use. "I mean today!" I said raising my brow.

de Havilland was defeated and he knew it, but still seemed reluctant to stop confronting me, and it wasn't his ego either. This man is a fellow warrior, a person to whom bowing down to the enemy is an aberration, and someone I can respect... once I have my satisfaction! With a sigh, he resigned and lowered the *Winter Moon*. "OK, you won!" They dropped their weapons on the table and were going to let me free, but I told them to get Emu first; while they did Mack came to release me. "I thought you were supposed to be good", he teased me, and I scoffed to disguise the fact that I couldn't really respond, given my position and all). "Quit gloating and get these off me, will you?."

* * *

"Now, I will ask this only once. Was it you or your man who shot Emu?" I asked with all my fury on de Havilland's face.

He eyeballed me back in defiance for a moment before answering "It was me, leave Veruz alone." His crewmen beside him exhaled in relief.

I smiled and stepped back. "Either you are lying to save your crew, or proving to be an honourable man by telling the truth despite personal risk. I salute you!" and I did... "Kevin, shoot him".

"Hey, leave him out of this! We'll just drop him off somewhere, and," started Mack, but he saw my expression and found something he could relate to. "I see... Then I'll do it, but it was you who said to try to keep him pure!" he pleaded.

"No! If I strike at de Haviland after what he did, it'll be to kill; besides it's a good moment to complete this poor deluded ...tourist's!.... baptism of fire. If you want him to survive, that is."

"What do you mean?" asked Kevin in a growingly alarmed way.

"You thought this was all a great adventure, didn't you? 'Uau, Mack Winston, Norman Mosser, and a pint of Brown at the World's End after saving the universe - Far out!" I mocked, "but someone knows you were with Mack and took its time to bug you. I may have thrown her off track, but she'll have you cross-referenced and by now you can be sure you've been tagged as an accomplice, so welcome to the dark side. If you want to stay alive, you'll have to learn to fight your way out of a furball, and that means shooting people!"

"Kid, don't." Said de Havilland. "Don't let him turn you into an assassin!"

Kevin seemed lost in fear and confusion. "Mack, what should I do?"

Mack sighed sadly, but nodded. "He's right, it's too late... You're already holding a gun, so what do you want me to say?"

Kevin raised the carbine and shakingly pointed it at de Havilland... "I'm sorry!" he blurted, and fired with his eyes closed. "Ack!" and a thump of a falling body. "Damn, Cap'n, he shot ME!"

I snorted, and started laughing with genuine mirth. Mack scoffed once, twice, and was contagiated, followed by Sam and de Havilland himself, finally even the man whose leg he shot started laughing; only Kevin wasn't laughing. Trembling, he dropped the carbine, and fell to his knees. "I-it ain't fu-funny! D-damn it, t-this ain't fu-funny!" he stuttered, and we only laughed harder... And were still laughing when the boarders found us. "It's gas!", one of them cried, and Sam precipitated another general bout of hysterical cackling. "It AIN'T funny!", shouted Kevin, starting to laugh himself.

OK Computer

[Sam Kemper]

"It AIN'T funny!" shouted Kevin amidst Mack's fading smokescreen, starting to laugh himself... and picked up the carbine, intent on using it as a cane to help himself up. Roj Warfturn shot him on the spot with his GVG laser assault rifle.

"Self destruct activated," sounded the PA before Maegil could give any new commands to his AI, and every face on the infirmary filled with horror.

"Oops?" asked Roj, "Did I just made a mistake?"

"Destruct sequence self-aborted," the AI corrected itself.

Maegil seemed as surprised as everybody else, and Kevin groaned on the floor. It was de Havilland who finally asked "What happened?" and a general sigh of relief filled the room as people remembered to breathe.

Sam Kemper looked from Maegil to de Havilland and back to Maegil and with an aura of resignation leaned over the edge of the bed and typed a keycode into the lock of a cabinet.

"I don't know... Obie?" Maegil asked.

911, Sam dialled, and the cabinet slid open exposing two objects. The grip on the left was for a stunner. Sam grabbed the one on the right. "Out of time," he muttered and raised the gun.

Maegil saw the movement and jumped with his good leg in Roj's direction. Roj spun, pointing what was left of his gun to where Maegil should have been. Maegil had instead rolled sideways as he landed, flashing a silvery arc in front of Wafturn and cutting the GVG's barrel as he picked up one of the fallen weapons.

He even tried to roll to the other side towards "Lucky" Wal as he turned around raising his laser to Sam, but his wounded leg failed and refocused his motion-blurred figure into a prone person... Maegil tried to get up, and Sam was unable to hide a smirk of pleasure as he shot him in the chest.

Maegil jerked once on the floor and was still.

"Who the fuck was this mother?!" asked Roj in awe as he examined the cut in half gun on his hands.

"Three to one he was a clone agent?" called 'Lucky'.

Sam didn't answer, instead he looked up at the ceiling and addressed the ship.

"OK Kenobi, or whoever you are. This is how it works. Maegil is mortally wounded. Emu is going to die unless she receives medical attention. Maegil's criteria has mostly been met, he is defeated. I'm going to politely request that you disable the destruct. In return we'll feed your crew to the autodoc - you are probably well aware that that cupboard..." Sam gestured towards a cupboard marked 'Artificial organs', "...contains the necessary supplies."

Mack recovered and shifted his aim slightly and managed to succeed in covering Michael, Vasquith and Sam at the same time. Roj threw the useless stub aside, pulled another weapon from his boot, and he and 'Lucky' put Mack on their sights. "You killed him." growled Mack.

"Yes. I couldn't give him time to tell his AI to go to plan E, or whatever. It appears to have worked."

Veruz nodded at the soundness of the logic and started dragging himself to the medical bed; Mack kept his blaster pointing at Sam's eyebrows.

With his free hand, Sam gestured at his men, who nodded and carefully lifted the wounded, laying them on another pair of beds in the medical bay. The autodocs set to work, patching, binding, setting, and in Maegil's case preparing for the implantation of an artificial heart. As they worked, Sam spoke. "I won't expect a thank you, but I'm hoping that everyone will stop shooting everyone else and that we can go and grab a coffee and talk about this after putting them all into bed so the autodoc can do its thing," said Sam.

"What's there to talk about? Mosser got Maria killed, and now he's going to pay!"

Sam took a deep breath. "Look, I don't know what happened, but I'm sure he wouldn't do anything against you!"

"Well, he's to blame!", said Mack, and told Sam what had passed.

"Well, there is the incompetence - malice thing," explained Sam after Mack finished the tale, "Norman did not intend for Maria to die. Besides, there is the fact that I want to know what our dead ninja chap wants. Mosser, or the *Sunset*. It is all linked and if we don't sort it, we can still all die."

"Except Mosser," added Veruz.

"Except Mosser," added Sam with a wry smile.

"I think I know what Maegil was about, but... Who exactly are they?" Mack enquired, nodding at newcomers.

"A team that myself and Norman got together. Mostly former *Sunset* crew and ex-Guild people. The plan is to secure the ship and bring it back into commission.

My guess is that they are a little upset by the wreckage of the Courier. As I mentioned, one of them is a Berihn - Annalise. You worked with her uncle for a bit, if I recall correctly." Mack stiffened. He had worked with Annalise's uncle. For quite a while in fact. Anyway, if you shoot me or Mosser, they may overreact..."

Mack nodded "I could just shoot you all now and be done with it."

"You could, but that won't answer my questions."

Mack slowly lowered the pistol. Sam glanced over to his crew, who shook his head. Veruz lowered the pistol he had caught in the confusion. Sam rolled over and returned the gun to the cabinet, making sure he locked it again. De Havilland went to the katana and pulled it off the floor - its point had sunk into the decking, holding it upright. Vasquith deposited the sword back on the table. "I don't trust you," he glared at Mack on his way to one of the beds.

"Likewise."

"Good. We all have something in common," muttered Sam.

A whirring noise echoed down the corridor as a bulkhead cycled followed by the tramp of heavy boots; two more figures came into view through the medical bay's blasted door. They were also dressed in combat shipsuits and armed with GVGs, heavy packs hung on their backs. Benezdrine Moore lowered his weapon and called a greeting to Sam. "Hey Sam, you did make it. Where's Mosser?"

Sam jerked his head over to the medical unit.

"What happened?" asked Jonh Anders.

"Civil war. It's over now. Where's Annalise?"

"Armoury..." both newcomers answered with resigned looks.

Sam winced. "It must be genetics. Anyway, this is the situation, Moore. Those people in the beds are 'guests' of Norman, as is Mack. Don't hurt them as long as they don't do anything silly. Also, there's an hostile AI riding on the *Sunset's* systems and they rigged up the hyperdrive to overload using it."

"Not possible," replied Moore nonchalantly.

"WHAT!" shouted Vasquith from his bed.

"Not possible. I engineered them, there's hardware failsafes. Installed them when we had all that trouble trying to fit the Imp drive on the AS and it kept trying to self destruct." Moore wandered across the medical bay and started rummaging in one of the drug lockers.

"Hang on. You are telling me we were in no danger at all?" asked Vasquith in surprise.

"Nope!" Moore removed one of the containers and sniffed its contents.

"So does that mean that the AI didn't cancel it?"

Dissatisfied, he selected another, read the label and smiled. "Nope," he repeated with a giddy snicker.

"So it was a bluff?!" asked Sam incredulously.

"Yep!" he said with a now full-blown smile.

Vasquith glanced over at where Maegil lay, enveloped by a surgical cocoon. "Are you sure he isn't a Mosser?"

Sam groaned. "I'm gonna shoot that bastard again! Just you wait until he wakes up!"

"You guys, something odd's going on," said Annelise's voice on the PA. "A ship's just came out of witchspace at only 1000 Km away!"

"What? That shouldn't be possible! In this system, ships should come at some 40 AU from us," said Sam.

"It also happened to you, Maegil's AI said it was an... hypothetical thingie, a hyperspace-time singularity or something," smiled Mack.

"Can you pass the data to the MED CEN 1?"

"Sure! Another strange thing is that the ship's departure date is... tomorrow!" said Annelise with a concerned tone.

"Interpol registration! OK, people, battle stations. Kenobi, we can we use the weapons, can't we?"

"Of course, Mr. Kemper," replied Obie.

Big Boy's Toys

[Kim Stenson]

The tracker stopped moving in the loenin system. Bingo. Everything that had happened over the last few months added up to only one thing.

The *Azure Sunset*. Norman Mosser.

He held his palm around the miniature 3D graphic of the system. Then he squeezed his hand together, grinning. "Soon, Mosser. Soon."

The Interpol registered Eagle Mk I - accruing quite a few AU's as of late - drifted along near the Greessed primary, less than a light year from loenin. He almost pulled the hyperspace levers back the second he entered the coordinates for loenin, but his hand froze. Looking at his hand, he tried to peer into the future. What would be waiting for him on the other side of hyperspace? An armada? Even the *Azure Sunset* alone would be too much for his single ship, regardless of how badly he wanted Mosser. The inner voices yelled from one side of his brain to the other, his desire battling against logic. Grinding his teeth, he hesitantly pulled his hand back. He was playing with the big boys now. It was time to bring in the cavalry.

"What do you mean you can't spare any?" Stenson yelled, slamming a fist on the Eagle's control panel. The holographic image of the local Interpol Sector Director sparked, rumbled, then returned to normal operation. The image spread its hands outwards, palms upwards.

"I'm sorry Inspector. The Spartacus Debacle is still tying up most of my resources. We need to find them before they take root somewhere else. You don't know how close the Federation and Empire came to war! I don't have anything available to chase down your theories."

Stenson's hands gripped the control panel edges, his knuckles going white. "I'm not making this up, Chief," Stenson replied through clenched teeth. "I've been following this perp for over a month now. I know what he is doing and who he is meeting. Norman Mosser for Christ sake! This is our chance to nab him!"

The holographic image was silent for several seconds, but there was still movement: the hands returning to the images hips.

"Yes, I've heard of your...obsession. Perhaps you need to go over your deductions again. What if you're wrong and the forces you use and needed elsewhere?"

"I'm not crazy, Chief," Stenson groaned, fingers scratching at the Eagle's controls. He clenched his muscles. Shit he needed to smash something right now. "I'm here because I'm good at my job. Now are you going to let me do my job or hold my hands behind my back?" A corner of his mind balked at what he had just said to his superior, but it was too late to back out now. The image flinched slightly, reeling as if he were physically hurt. All or nothing. He maintained eye contact with the holo-image, face burning hot.

The holo-image broke contact first, head turning to look at something off image. A nod, then he turned back to face Stenson. "I've got two squads of Eagle's from Tiliala I can send you."

Two hyper-jumps away. They would take too long to arrive. Fucking bureaucracy! One chance to nab Mosser before he disappears forever and the brass were dragging the chain. Too afraid to commit resources. No backbone.

Stenson's eyes narrowed. "Tell them to go straight in," he said calmly, before killing the feed. The small holo-image disappeared. He wasn't going to miss this opportunity. Without a moment's hesitation, he leant forward and pulled back on the hyperspace levers.

* * *

He had already missed a fight. There was so much data coming in, he was struggling to interpret it all. An Imperial Courier. Cockpit exposed to vacuum explosively; the work of an escape capsule. The ships registration was NM-001.

He almost laughed. Having chased Norman for the last fifteen years, when he finally gets another chance, someone beats him to it. The Interpol sensors continued to analyse the wreckage and indicated the debris field was too large for just the Courier. Metal isotopes and arrangements suggested Federation manufacturing. On closer inspection, there was something extra attached to the Courier's airlock.

Stenson pursed his lips. Someone had boarded Mosser's vessel. And judging by the leftover's, the computer gave a 60% probability that the ship was an Asp Explorer or Mk II.

He used chemical rockets to navigate through the debris, arcing around the wrecked Courier, nose in, as the advanced Interpol sensors attempted to squeeze every last piece of data out of the debris.

Then he moved onto the LRC itself, sitting quiet and innocent, its dark look belying the truth of the monstrosity. But as he got closer, he could see the *Azure Sunset* itself had also been in the wars. A giant gaping hole with ragged, torn inward edges filled the space where the main door to the central landing runway/platform used to be. But it was what was inside which drew his attention.

The sensors went mad. There wasn't just one Asp Explorer within. There was two. And his invisible Saker. And a host of other ships, all parked within. "Having a party, are we Norman?"

Then the *Sunset's* guns came to life.

Orange, crimson and blue beams of light blossomed into existence, arcing, searching through the cosmos. For him. He absorbed the situation in a nanosecond.

His backup hadn't arrived. He would not be able to turn and get out of range before being destroyed; a single shot is all it would take.

Cheeks flushed with adrenaline, he realised there was only way he could go. He threw the prime mover to full power. Straight into the *Sunset!*

He just hoped there wasn't a welcoming committee.