

# TIDES OF WAR

THE HPA SAGA PART 3

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 1

by  
The Elite BBS Collective

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# The Long Walk Home

[de Havilland/ Mosser / Stenson]

The *Azure Sunset* fell from hyperspace with a crash and a bang. The bridge floor rumbled, quietly at first, then louder until it threatened to split like a volcanic rift.

De Havilland squeezed the arm rests harder as he rode out the waves of stress riding through the body of the Long Range Cruiser. His hull inspections through last week had not instilled him with confidence. He kept his heart rate down with slow, calm breaths. The old girl had been through a lot, but she had a little more up her sleeve, he knew. That didn't stop him from sweating however.

The vibrations died away, leaving the ticking rumble of an unbalanced prime mover underneath his feet.

"Let's not do that again," de Havilland said quietly, looking over at Norman in the command chair.

Norman pointed to the viewscreen. "We won't need to."

De Havilland turned to the screen. It was completely black, save small flecks of space dust, distant stars and a ringed gas giant. After a moment, a corridor of green squares focused on the planet.

He looked closer. The squares were slightly off centre, focused on a moon or space station, he decided. "Are you sure this Frantic fellow will be friendly?"

Sam chuckled. Norman gave him an annoyed look and turned back to de Havilland. "He will be."

"Why didn't we just come here to start off with?" Veruz asked from his station to de Havilland's left.

Norman pursed his lips for a moment. He turned to Veruz. "Frantic's help won't be free."

De Havilland frowned at the undertone to Norman's words. He got the feeling the cost would be greater than mere credits. He yawned and got this feet. He knew he should go and check the hull for damage; that drop out of hyperspace hadn't felt good. He hoped the ship wasn't going to break apart. "Inspection time." He walked out the nearby door. Lucky sniggered. "Inspect what, I wonder?"

Wafturn laughed, then turned serious. "I hope we're ditching the passenger here, Norman. I don't feel comfortable with . . . loose ends.

Norman looked after de Havilland. "No, I don't either."

\*

The dry dock was as massive as the one they abandoned in the asteroid field, de Havilland decided, but a whole lot more advanced. Where the last one had been devoid of life or new technology, this one was full of people, robots and activity. Piles of steel girders lay in groups around the floor, while high intensity lights lit up the kilometres long dock, disappearing into the distance in both directions. It looked purpose built for an LRC.

"It was." De Havilland spun around to face the speaker. He had short dark hair and anti flash glasses. He had a rugged face, like an angler. This wasn't some bureaucrat; it was a man who earned his living the hard way.

"What was?" de Havilland asked.

"It was purpose built for a Long Range Cruiser. Alliance Surplus. Sold off after they upgraded from the LRC based Valiant class to the newer Victor class."

"Interesting," he said. *And how the hell did you know what I was thinking.* "Frantic, I assume?"

"That's what they call me around here," he said, resting his hands on the hilts of the swords dangling from his belt.

de Havilland folded his arms across his chest. "Do you have a real name?"

Frantic straightened slightly. "Yes I do."

The two stared at each other for a moment. Neither of them moved a muscle.

"Come on now de Havilland, don't be rude to our host," said Norman. He moved past de Havilland and grabbed Frantic's shoulder. "We have a lot to talk about."

Frantic nodded. "Yes, we do." He motioned to a woman who approached from the glass building embedded in the wall of the enclosure. "Get repairs started please." The woman nodded and Frantic gestured forward. "This way."

They passed through the door of the building and took a lift down several flights. The doors opened into a brightly lit corridor. They took the second door on the left, which led to a conference room.

De Havilland was last through. A round table took up the room. In the centre of the table, a holographic projector cast a three dimensional view of the galaxy. Frantic was at the head of the table, still wearing his glasses. Norman sat to his right, a grin on his face. Then Sam Kemper, frowning about something, Roj Warfturn, John Anders and 'Lucky' Wal. On the other side sat Michael Veruz, de Havilland's co-pilot and Emu, Maegil's girlfriend. There were a few faces missing: They had never found Benzedrine Moore, the mechanic. Anders suspected he ejected himself from the ship in a fit of space madness. An Interpol agent had killed Annalise Berihn, much to the chagrin of Sam. The Mack Winston kid had borrowed a Krait and never come back. And Maegil had been killed in the recent battle.

De Havilland took the spare seat by Emu and gave her an encouraging smile. She returned the gesture, but he knew it was forced; she was still chewed up inside. It would take months, maybe years, before she would be ready to smile properly. He felt an urge to hold her, to help her. She needed it.

But he held fast, clenching his arms so they stayed by his side. He may be colluding with pirates and criminals but he still had a sense of ethics.

"Ok," said Frantic, standing to get everyone's attention. "Let's get started, shall we?" He clicked a remote fob and the view of the galaxy zoomed in. de Havilland didn't recognise the stars until labels appeared an instant later. Sol was in the bottom right corner. Miacke, the Thargoid home world, was in the opposing corner. De Havilland tried to find his bearings. They were looking at the north east quadrant of human space...and beyond. A blue arc splashed across the right side of the display, while a red arc covered the left.

"Blue is human space," said Frantic. "Anyone care to venture what red is?"

"Thargoid space?" said Veruz.

Frantic grinned. "Close. No, this is actually INRA controlled space."

De Havilland gave a small gasp, but others seemed to mutter or just rub their chins. They were obviously more seasoned in INRA matters, he decided.

"My sources have confirmed that the ships that were tagging the *Azure Sunset* and the ones that chased you, de Havilland, to Alioth belong to INRA's 55th Attack wing. They call themselves 'The Zerstorers, The Destroyers'"

de Havilland narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists. *The Destroyers*. Now he had a name and a face to throw his anger against.

Reality flooded back; he wasn't going to get revenge. Not against them. Not if half the rumours he had heard in spacer bars were true. There was no hope in hell for him. They had unlimited resources, but he was just one man.

He was fucked.

"I'm going to cut to the chase," said Frantic. "Our organisation wants to take INRA out."

De Havilland perked up. Was it possible? If INRA were gone, he and Veruz would be free to return to normality. "How?"

Frantic frowned. "The *Azure Sunset*. The HPA on the LRC is the only weapon not under the control of INRA that can destroy our target. That's why I ordered Norman to get her back."

All faces turned to Norman, who went a little red. "What?" he asked the crowd, but he was staring straight at de Havilland.

"Nothing. I just didn't take you for someone else's bitch. I thought you were your own man," de Havilland said in disgust. He wasn't even sure why. What did he care? Jesus, was he coming to respect Norman? God, he hoped not.

"At least I'm not cosyng up with a girl, whose fiancé has been dead two seconds," Norman retorted.

De Havilland felt his cheeks burned. He locked his eyes on Norman, not daring to glance at Emu. "Yeah, that's the same. Eye for an eye right there, Norman."

"Stop bickering, for fucks sake," said Frantic. "Jesus Norman, what kind of crew are you running?"

"I'm not part of his crew," de Havilland spat, acid dripping from his tongue.

"Apologies. You just look the part of a two-bit pirate," Frantic retorted.

De Havilland was on his feet before he knew it, arm outstretched, aiming the old revolver between Frantic's eyes. The air in the room felt charged; everyone leaned back. No one breathed. Frantic didn't move. He slowly moved his hand up his face and removed his glasses. A pair of narrowed, aqua blue eyes peered back at him. de Havilland had to force himself not to shudder; the eyes showed intelligence, anger, and hidden deep, the signs of a monster. Not a good combination.

"A .45 Peace Maker, I believe," said Frantic. "A wild-west favourite – the infamous 'six shooter'"

"That's right," nodded de Havilland. He took the gesture for what it was: a peace offering. Maybe he had been wrong about Frantic. A man who knew a bit of history had to be a little cultured. He swung the weapon back to his belt and tucked it back in place. He sat down. "You were saying?"

"I was saying that Norman brought the *Azure Sunset* back under his control for the next stage of our operation."

"The first stage being?" said Sam.

"The first stage being that we made a copy of Norman and used him to stage a fake raid on our INRA target, thus keeping INRA attention focused on Norman and the *Sunset* and away from our preparations," said Frantic. De Havilland swore the man looked proud of himself.

"You son of a bitch!" roared Sam as he jumped to his feet, but Norman restrained him.

"Easy, Sam. We got through it ok."

Sam shot him a look that could kill. "Not all of us did."

Norman shook his head. "Look at the big picture, Sam. Yes, it is unfortunate, but we have a purpose here greater than the individual."

Sam grumbled, but sat back down.

"I'll explain more about our target later. First, preparations. We have gathered what ships we can without raising any flags. The cornerstone of our attack will be the *Azure Sunset* however. The Huge Plasma Accelerator is the key. The ship and weapon need to be in battle readiness before we can begin." Frantic paused. "And as you have probably guessed, we are on a schedule here. Things beyond your knowledge have been in motion for many months. We have been planning this since Mosser first stole the HPA." He turned to Mosser. "My people are going to fix the *Sunset* so she is like new. Judging by her condition however, more than 90% of the hull will need replacing. The gun herself is your problem. We don't have the spare manpower or the technical expertise to fix her."

Norman turned to de Havilland. "I have a specialist."

De Havilland snarled. "Why do you think I'm going to help you fix that weapon of mass destruction? I'm only here because of INRA."

"And once you destroy INRA, you'll be free, de Havilland," said Frantic, as if it were a matter of a simple equation.

De Havilland chewed his lip to quiet the retort. Frantic had a point though. As long as the HPA was trained on INRA, he didn't really care what happened, and if INRA had to be destroyed before he was free, then so be it. They had earned it, as far as he was concerned.

It was what they aimed the HPA at after INRA that worried him. Of course, that was far down the track. He could always take certain measures to make sure that didn't become an issue. . . "You're right. I guess I'd better look into getting it repaired."

Frantic clasped his hands together. "Excellent. You should all get some food, drink and sleep. Once we've completed our damage reports, we can reconvene to go over the details."

De Havilland stood and marched out the door. He strode toward the lift.

"Vasquith!" It was Emu's voice; high pitched and coming up behind him, fast. It made him lose a step, but he kept moving.

"Vasquith!" She grabbed him and pulled him around. De Havilland kept his head up, eyes straight. He didn't want to see the betrayal he knew he would see in her eyes.

"Vasquith de Havilland," she murmured. She pulled his head down until he was looking directly into her eyes. There wasn't any pain; just loneliness, and hope.

She leaned forward, closed her eyes and kissed him.

De Havilland's mind went blank; his body moved on autopilot; he kissed back, hard, passionately, forcing his lips to weld to hers.

A flame lit in the dark recess of his mind: Kissing Emu was wrong. He pulled away. Her lips were moist, her eyes closed. She looked like a goddess. She opened her eyes and rocked back onto her heels.

They stared at each other. Days, months, years slipped by.

"I shouldn't have done that," she whispered, before turning and running away, leaving de Havilland with a sweet taste in his mouth and a poisonous stench in his heart.

\*

"So is piloting as far as your ambition goes?" de Havilland asked Veruz as they floated by the number one nacelle of the HPA.

"Well I've had a crash course in weapon mechanics recently. Maybe I should become an engineer?" he said teasingly.

De Havilland raised an eyebrow. "Sure, you can never have too many engineers, these days."

Veruz shrugged. "Piloting is all I have ever been good at. I was never good with math."

De Havilland pursed his lips. "Stick with what you know, as long as you can make a living on it."

Veruz laughed. "By the way, you owe me a few months of wages."

De Havilland shoved him playfully, sending him spinning away. His zero gee suit quickly stabilised him. de Havilland ran his eyes over the frayed and tortured exterior of the nacelle. "Make an expense claim to Mosser. I hear we're working for him now."

"You were wound up pretty tight in that meeting, cap'n. Did you make a promise to your mum not to be a pirate?" He laughed.

De Havilland stayed silent for a moment. "Something like that." He heard Veruz exhale through the radio, but the kid didn't say anything. He gave the nacelle a final look. "Let's move onto the next one."

\*

"I can't believe it," Sam said, throwing the data cube across the room. It bounced off the wall and thumped to the ground.

"Sam, look at me," said Norman. "How long have you known me?"

Sam shrugged. "Too long."

Norman chuckled. "So it's fair to say you know me quite well? That you know my personality inside out?"

"Better than anyone," he said.

"So perhaps you should trust your instincts and be quiet," Norman warned him.

Sam frowned. "What are you saying?"

Norman's face went blank. "I'm not saying anything Sam."

Sam pursed his lips as his eyes darted around the room, searching for a webcam or microphone. They would be extremely well hidden of course; likely microscopic in size also. "Indeed."

"Don't forget we owe these people, Sam. They installed those Imperial drives into the *Sunset* and provided us with those Thargoid pattern replicators, which we are still reliant on."

Sam rubbed his chin. "We wouldn't have got far in that last battle without either of those."

"de Havilland has gotten to know the HPA quite well recently. I wonder if he has any ideas for a more permanent option; those Thargoid replicators fall apart after only a couple of shots."

He sat down at the table and took an apple from the fruit bowl. "Real fruit, Sam. It's been awhile." He took a large bite, feeling the skin snap beneath his teeth, felt the juice flow over his lips. He swallowed the bite and wiped his mouth.

"I hope you still have the schematics for the *Sunset* up your sleeve."

"Sam rapped his wrist with a knuckle. "Never left me."

"Good. There's a few things I want to have a look at.

\*

Frantic tossed the half dozen datapads on the conference table. "In summary: How the hell did you survive? It looks like the *Sunset* was hit by an HPA blast."

De Havilland snorted. "It was."

Frantic grimaced. "Well I'm glad you managed to hold her together. I don't know how you did it, but you're here now and we can affect repairs."

"So what are we waiting for then?" asked Norman. "Don't we have a schedule to keep, Frantic?"

"Look at the damn report," Frantic told him. "The ship has been shot to hell. My people say it would be easier to get a new LRC and transfer the HPA to it, than fix the current ship. It is just too far gone."

The group sat in silence as they absorbed the news.

Norman gave a laugh, which sounded forced. "You know, I've kind of gotten used to that old girl. It'll be a shame to see her go."

Frantic's eyes gleamed. "Excellent, then we agree. While my people disassemble the HPA, Norman, you should head back to civilisation and find another LRC. De Havilland," he said, turning. "As Norman said, you're the sole surviving 'expert' of the HPA. I'll need you to go out and find replacement parts to repair the gun."

"I have the contacts, Dev. I'll come with you," said Sam, but when he sat down, Norman whispered something in his ear.

"Wait a minute," replied de Havilland, waving his hands across the table. "The instant I go back to inhabited space, INRA will pick me up and I'll be a goner. That's why I'm agreeing to help – to get rid of them. I'm not going anywhere until I know I'm safe."

"Don't worry about it," Frantic said soothingly. "They managed to keep tabs on you by tracking your hyperspace cloud movements. They can't track you here. We have . . . techniques to ensure our isolation. We'll provide you with a ship, an Ident card and credits. You just need to fly and buy."

"What kind of ship? I don't want to be defenceless out there."

Frantic moved his lips, but paused. "Ok, fair enough. We'll get your something that can fit the cargo, and fight its way out of trouble. Happy?"

De Havilland pursed his lips and folded his arms. "As much as I can be, I suppose." But something didn't feel quite right.

The meeting broke up; de Havilland grabbed Norman and discreetly pulled him aside. "Do you have a bad feeling about this?" he asked Norman.

Norman gave a derisive snort. "I never noticed that yellow streak before, de Havilland. Get a back bone will you?"

de Havilland frowned, insulted. "Not that. Notice how Frantic has gotten us all away here. Besides from your crew, that'll leave him all alone with the HPA. What if he means to take it from the *Sunset* and put it in his own ship. What if we get back here and he has abandoned the whole place? He could be setting us up."

Norman paused, but shook his head. "Frantic is an old friend. He wouldn't do that."

"Well at the moment, he thinks he is your boss. What if he thinks you are a disposable asset?"

Norman's eyes tightened. He was about to say something but stopped. De Havilland felt a presence behind him. Frantic, no doubt.

"You two alright?" said Frantic.

"Just super," muttered de Havilland. He turned around. "Have you found a ship for me yet?"

Frantic beamed. "You're going to love this: An Imperial Courier. Have you ever flown one of those? They're exquisite. The one thing the Empire got right."

"Ok, sure, why not."

"We're pulling it from the fleet. We can shuttle you up to it whenever you are ready."

"Ok, good. Norman and I have a discussion to finish first," he said darkly. Frantic took the hint and left with a smile.

de Havilland lowered his voice. "Maybe we need to stop him from removing the HPA entirely. Insurance to make sure we aren't left behind."

"Organise it," said Norman. "I'll keep Frantic busy."

De Havilland nodded turned to leave. Norman reached out and restrained him. De Havilland turned, confused. Norman's eyes danced side to side, then he reached into his belt and pulled out a data crystal.

"While you're back in civilisation, see what you can do about this. We're looking for something a little more permanent," said Norman.

De Havilland automatically assumed it was an engineering problem. It sounded intriguing. He discreetly tucked the crystal into his pocket and gave Mosser a final nod.

He found Veruz talking to Emu. He walked over and cleared his throat. Emu looked up and immediately turned away.

"You keen to come along?" he asked Veruz.

"Excuse me," said Emu, her voice barely above a whisper.

"As long as you let me do the piloting," Veruz said with a grin.

De Havilland slapped him on the back. "See you on the flight deck in half an hour? I have a few things to tidy up first."

"Ok cap'n."

De Havilland forced himself to walk out the door. Once clear of the conference room, he sprinted down the corridor. Emu was closing the door to the lift.

He squeezed his arm through just in time. The doors beeped and retracted, allowing him in.

"Hi Emu," he said meekly.

"I can't do this," she mumbled. "I can't. I'm sorry."

De Havilland took her two little hands in his. They were soft, warm, delicate. Treasures to comfort. "Forget about that. I just need you to come with me, back to civilisation."

Emu tried to pull away, but de Havilland held fast, keeping her close. "No, I can't."

De Havilland leant forward to speak into her ear. "I don't trust these people. I don't trust them with you. I want you where I can keep you safe." He paused. The next bit would be the hardest to say, but also the most necessary. "I can take you back home. You need to be with your family while you grieve." He continued babbling. He didn't know what he was saying, but right then, with her in his hands, he felt whole and he didn't want it to change."

Something changed in her eyes. They had been soft and tender, but now they took on a hard edge. "Ok, take me home."

\*

de Havilland jogged down the boarding ramp from the *Sunset* to find everyone waiting for him, including Frantic.

"Just had to get some things. Ready to go," he said with warming cheeks. Frantic nodded, but didn't say anything. Veruz and Emu stood together, while Sam and Norman stood a few metres away.

"Dev," Sam called, intercepting him. "I think I'd better go with Norman. Here are all the details you need. My authentication is in the datapad. It should be enough."

De Havilland shook his hand. "Ok, Sam. Thanks"

They said their good byes and the two groups boarded separate shuttles.

De Havilland watched through the viewport as the shuttle took off and approached the Imperial Courier. It looked like an upturned V, with huge engine nacelles at both ends and a large command module in the centre. His mind went back to a dark day on Dallos. He shivered.

He shook it away. He wasn't a federal marine anymore; he was a rogue on the wrong side of the law. And he was getting deeper.

The cockpit had several crew stations but he knew they were designed to be piloted by one person, if need be. De Havilland took the command chair, Veruz the pilot chair. Sam took sensors and Emu took communications. De Havilland knew nothing of her life before they met, but she seemed at ease by the control consoles.

They were ready to go. He checked the datapad for where they were going. "First stop was Williamson Base."

\*

Stenson heard noises. He was bathed in light. He struggled to open his eye lids; they felt glued together.

He finally pulled them apart. He was staring at a white ceiling. He craned his neck around. White walls, white medical beds white medical equipment. A hospital.

Memories flooded back; Witchspace; screaming, blinding pain, then darkness.

Now he was here, wherever that was. He couldn't move his body. He looked down to see restraints on his chest, arms and legs. He pulled again, but they didn't budge.

He was a prisoner.

*Where the hell am I?*

## Alliance plans another sell-off of Valiants – **The Frontier News**

ALIOTH -- The AJN naval starships, Ajax and Repulse, are up for sale.

The fate of the two ships has been in the balance since their withdrawal from service earlier this year. An inspection by New Rossyth shipyards subsequently showed they were spaceworthy, and so the AJN top brass decided to demilitarize and sell the ships rather than have them cut up for scrap. AAAI were commissioned to remove the military equipment, and refit the cruisers with the latest model of hyperdrive - and turn them into some of the best cargo haulers a bulk transport company can lay its hands on. The AJN have said that a couple of offers have already come in, and the ships will be sold to the highest bidder.

Although the ships are relatively old, they aren't the normal run-of-the-mill LRC - significant structural upgrades were made for their military role, and these upgrades remain in place. The latest civilian large ship drive has been fitted, freeing up additional space for cargo when compared to the stock LRC. "It'll make a great bulk transporter for someone", an engineer from AAAI told the News.

Prices are under wraps. "It's a confidential business deal between the customer and the AJN. Naturally, we want the best deal for the Alliance taxpayer. The buyer can be assured that their ship will last the rigours of being worked hard for many decades," said the AJN statement.

The AJN Ajax and Repulse are due to be replaced by the new Victor-class ships, Collingwood and Invincible, the latter "arrogantly named", according to critics of current AJN policy.

## Battleship Sale Questioned – **Federal Times**

By Dimity Arundle

Leading military theorist Professor Buckley Malthouse has slammed the move by the Alliance Joint Navy to sell two decommissioned Valiant-class warships commercially on the open market.

"This displays the irresponsible mercantilism of the AJN at its fullest and provides an extremely worrying move for the rest of civilised space." Professor Malthouse said from his office in Mars High Station (Sol, (0,0)). As the key architect behind the reinvigoration of Federal military shipbuilding, Malthouse represents the closest thing to a public voice of Federal High Command.

"To simply call them decommissioned is ridiculous." Professor Malthouse is scathing. "The AAAI shipyards would have to work for YEARS to properly restore them to a civilian configuration. These ships remain a magnificent weapon platform."

Professor Malthouse is adamant that the superstructure and essentially un-demountable fitting of the ships remain military-standard. Well-known ship-broker Tam Westaway of Beta Hydri Unlimited agrees.

"As bulk cargo haulers, they will be exceptional, but due to the advanced age of the spaceframes, you'd have to work them extremely hard to recoup your capital investment within the projected life of the ship. This increases your recurrent expenditure as maintenance costs would skyrocket. They'd be a high-risk investment. However, if they were outfitted in a less... innocent configuration then the investment makes a lot more sense, as the capabilities of the ships as battleships are essentially unavailable on the civilian market. Ironically, battle can actually be a lot less wearing on a spaceframe than cargo haulage."

Ms Westaway estimates a military fit-out of the Ajax or Repulse would cost from 10 to 15 million, but that the resultant weapon platform would be a lethal craft for either non-State military forces or criminal organisations.

All of the analysts we've spoken to agree that only danger to a Capital-class ship is either another Capital-class ship or overwhelming odds. Two or three squadrons of even heavy fighters can be easily handled. And if the Capital-class ship has a support squadron of it's own to disrupt co-ordinated attack runs, then only a well-planned and sustained attack by a large group has a good chance of success. Professor Malthouse and his colleagues at the Federal Naval Academy for Interstellar Geopolitics estimate that over twenty militant organisations have the financial clout to secure and equip one or both craft. However, Professor Malthouse is cynical that the market is a truly open one.

"I see this as deliberate transfer of Military Technology to specific militant groups. A one-credit shelf company operating out of Miphize will buy the craft and be mysteriously destroyed by a large explosion the next day. The Alliance is contravening the Treaty of Miagre, and I would expect that both the Federation and Empire will make strong diplomatic representations on this matter."

The AJN did not respond to requests for comment, but unofficial sources strongly indicated that the sale will go through regardless of external pressure. AIS President Fuchs has agreed in-principle to the expansion of the navy's capacities, but his parlous governing coalition has neither the political capital nor the policy urgency to expedite the funds. The estimated 30-40 million credits reaped from the sale represent a small but valued means of offsetting this expense.

## Commentary-Slaughter or Shipping? - **Frontier News**

The recent brouhaha between the Alliance and Federation over the sale of the former warships, which are former civilian long range cruisers, and now once again are, according to the AJN and AAAI, civilian long range cruisers, is but a storm in a teacup - according to our politicians.

The issue was debated in parliament earlier today, and a number of facts were revealed which perhaps puts the entire kerfuffle in a different light. The sale of the AJN's retired Valiant class ships is considered the routine way to dispose of spaceworthy spaceframes by the AJN. Indeed, it's nothing new: the AJN Fearless - the former flagship, no less - was sold back into civilian service back in 3272 and has been working hard for Lawgrey Logistics Inc. ever since. Following the Fearless was the Vincent two years later. Then AJN Bell, AJN Hunter and AJN Ramsgate. The only retired Valiants not to be sold were the San Tropez, which was found to be suffering from faults that would cost too much to put right - this ship was turned into the first AJN museum, where visitors can get an idea of what life is like serving with the Navy. Seamus, Bounty and Enterprise were scrapped when they were found to be suffering from severe fatigue problems. Notably, these three ships were laid down at the same shipyard, one after another. The Ajax and Repulse were laid down some six and nine years later than the three scrapped ships - and have numerous improvements in their design to prevent fatigue problems.

Needless to say, the vessels that have been sold to date are all still operating reliably with bulk shipping companies. These companies have taken advantage of the upgraded structure - combined with engines of the latest technology. This equals more cargo room. More cargo room with the same crew and fuel loadout, and maintenance costs - an ex-AJN ship with brand new engines, running costs are so close to a completely new LRC, the difference can be considered 'noise' - leads to a very desirable ship for the shipping companies. It's not surprising that no sooner than the AJN announced the sale of the Ajax and Repulse, two buyers were already kicking the tyres given the proven reputation of the ships sold to date. These are serious prospective buyers, according to New Rossyth Shipyards, who are handling the sale on behalf of the AJN. It's likely that several more potential buyers will visit the shipyard within the sale period - buyers who would otherwise be in Barnard's Star visiting the Catterick Spaceyard, where long range cruisers are currently built to order.

According to the defence secretary, the decommissioned Ajax and Repulse are no more of a threat than any long range cruiser. The only 'military spec' part that remains are the structural upgrades, which allow for the carriage of more cargo. If a criminal wanted a large ship like this, then the remaining hard points for the external plasma accelerator turrets would not take a long time to fit to any LRC. You only have to look to see how quickly the AJN retrofitted these ships to their earliest military standard to see how fast it can be done. The Federation would of course argue that the structural upgrades were done later and took much longer (which they did) - but a stronger long range cruiser does not a weapon make.

A criminal is hardly likely to show up at New Rossyth shipyard with a suitcase stuffed full of used hundreds; the Police would be swarming over them in seconds. A criminal is much more likely to buy any number of (much cheaper) second hand long range cruisers. A criminal can only make limited use of an LRC in any case; pirates are much better served by a swarm of small ships rather than one large one. Of course, the Federation might be worried that a huge plasma accelerator could fit into the extended cargo bay - well - in that case, they shouldn't have lost one to begin with. The particular individual who liberated it is reputed to already have a ship to mount this big gun in, so why would he want another, and risk exposure, arrest (and under the Federation/Alliance Criminal Justice treaty, extradition to face trial) in buying such a high profile ship?

As in any large ship sale - customers will be vetted; New Rossyth shipyards need to make sure the potential customer actually has the money to buy the ship.

The seeds of the current discontent can probably be found in the succession of sales of the AJN Bell and Hunter (and possibly Ramsgate which followed not long afterwards), all of which allegedly cost a certain shipyard in a certain superpower three Long Range Cruiser orders worth a significant amount of money. So, protectionism is once again rearing its ugly head. The executives of the shipyard (which will remain nameless, but given there's only one that builds Long Range Cruisers, it's not hard to guess who) may have leaned on Federation politicians to kick up this fuss to try and encourage the AJN to scrap the ships. There are already documented cases of this particular shipbuilding company bending the ears of Federation politicians.

Perhaps the executives of this company, knowing that further Valiant class ships will be demilitarised and sold, leaned on Federation politicians to prevent the loss of more sales? The AJN isn't going to hold onto the remaining Valiants for very long - they have already disposed of one of the maintenance facilities, replacing it with a new maintenance dockyard for Victor class starships.

Then we get onto the good Prof. Malthouse's shrill complaints - in trying to put an academic shine on these likely protectionist moves, he hurts his own credibility. The Federation have also been parading a ship-dealer whose claims that the Ajax and Repulse would be too expensive to run as cargo haulers can be instantly deflated by the

experience of the operators of the ex-Valiant class ships that have been operating for years - the ships have proven every bit as reliable as a brand new long range cruiser thanks to the fitment of new engines and the beefier structure, all while carrying more freight. We have to wonder just how big the pay-off was to Prof. Malthouse and Tam Westaway was - two people who ought to have known better given the evidence that's already out there.

## Consequences

[Melinda White]

She couldn't believe it. It was impossible. One hundred percent physically impossible.

"How the hell did they escape?" roared Melinda. The officer that delivered the report stood rock still against the verbal assault. His eyes focused on a point above and behind her.

How could the *Azure Sunset* have slipped past *both* the Federation and Imperial fleets?

The officer still hadn't moved. Frozen stiff with fear? She had half a mind to throw the useless man out an airlock.

She breathed deeply. It wasn't his fault. She was in charge. She made the decisions. But where had she gone wrong? She dismissed the man with the wave of a hand and fell back into her chair. She rubbed her temples.

"A total disaster," she mumbled. Without moving her hand from her head, she called to the sensor officer. "Any read on the *Azure Sunset*? Have we detected any witchspace vibrations?"

"Data is coming in," replied the officer. The ticking of the ventilation system bridged the silence. "We're tracking fast movement through witchspace. Size indicates an LRC."

Melinda looked up excitedly. "Bearings?"

"oh-nine-five— it's gone!"

"What?" Melinda was on her feet instantly, stomping over to the sensor station. "Did they exit hyperspace?"

The officer stammered. "It was an abrupt stop, not the usual damped oscillation of a standard hyperspace exit."

Melinda narrowed her eyes. What trick was Norman playing? She racked her brains. "What were the last coordinates you recorded?"

The officer rattled off a series of numbers, which meant little to Melinda, then he summarised. "Deep space."

She raised an eyebrow. A commercial hyperdrive couldn't target deep space – they could only jump between solar systems. Of course the *Sunset* was using stolen Imperial military drives, but they were still linked to a standard navigation computer. She sighed. Mosser could easily have found a way around the restriction; there didn't seem to be anything he couldn't do.

"We need more information," she said as she turned to the captain. Send in a recon squad. Tell them to operate under full stealth; we don't want the *Sunset* to know she is being spied on."

\*

It was the one time in her life she had hoped that empty space wasn't empty.

The universe had let her down once again. She slammed her fist into the console, bouncing the datapad.

There had been no more witchspace vibrations from that area of space, so the *Sunset* hadn't returned to hyperspace. Yet when her ships arrived, there wasn't a single ship within 500 AU of the given coordinates.

There was only one explanation: The *Sunset* never dropped out of hyperspace.

Melinda stared at the datapad. The answer was right there, but she couldn't admit it to herself. *Someone is blocking our satellites.*

Who could it be? Who would have the gall? Who would even know how the satellites worked? She gasped. *Division 5*. Was it possible?

She fell back into her seat, eyes glazed. She wanted, *needed* the HPA kept within her reach. If instead *Division 5* got control of it, things could would get messy. She grabbed the datapad from the console and brought up a galactic map. Areas covered by the satellites were shaded grey, while those that weren't were clear. The grey cut a thick line through the map, top to bottom, encompassing all of inhabited space and the northern and southern frontiers. The east and west only had splotches of grey however. Then *Sunset* had been moving east when someone had blocked their satellites.

Was there a secret base out there? Surely Mosser was running out of places to hide? It would be like looking for a power cell in an Imperial warehouse, but she knew she would have to look anyway. Her superiors didn't like excuses.

She took a deep breath, forced the stress out. She tidied her hair and stood up. Yes, she was going to have to call headquarters. But first, she would get the search started.

"Captain, I want all active fighter wings to do a grid by grid search of this area of space," she said, highlighting an area of space on her datapad.

The ship captain glanced at the datapad then took a second look. He was about to speak when Melinda cut him off. "I know the size, captain. The sooner you start, the sooner you finish."

"Even the ships without stealth suites?"

"All wings, Captain," she said sternly.

The captain saluted. "Right away ma'am." He turned to a console and got on the comm. to the Wing Commander.

"I'll be in my office. Let me know the instant you get news." *Unless of course I'm about to get demoted.* It was going to be an enjoyable conversation with headquarters.

The *St Helens* drifted through the void. Melinda turned from the stars to examine the officers on the bridge. Loyal, hardworking and above all, understanding of the measures necessary to protect humanity against outside threats, and itself. They wouldn't fold under the pressure. They were a good crew.

"Have any of the fighters reported back?" she asked with a ray of hope.

"No ma'am, nothing yet," said the sensor operator. Melinda gave a silly smile – what had she been expecting? – and collapsed into her command chair. Her datapad flashed. She yawned as she leaned over to grab it, eyes hazy as she opened the report. INRA operatives had flagged a *Frontier News* report:

"Alliance plans another sell-off of Valiants"

Melinda sat up straight and shook her weary head, tossing the cobwebs aside. She read through, faster. The Alliance was selling ex-military LRC's. New Rossyth shipyards had removed the weapon hardpoints, but left the structural upgrades and fitted them with high performance commercial engines.

Her eyes widened as dots connected through her mind. The reports indicated the *Sunset* took an HPA blast in her midsection. She was lucky to survive. It was possible the ship was too far gone for repairs. Would Norman go looking for a replacement ship to house the HPA? The coincidence sounded too good to be true.

"Captain, get the stealth engines warmed up. We're moving out," she commanded.

"Destination, my lady?"

"Alioth." She rose to her feet. "I'm going to go talk to our guest."

\*

Stenson lay back, eyes closed, listening to the ship, feeling its vibrations. At least it felt like a ship. A very smooth, highly tuned ship. It wasn't a commercial or Interpol ship, that was for sure. Which left one of the three major powers. They had some nerve taking an Interpol detective prisoner!

He heard the door whiz open. He craned his head up to stare at the door. The corridor beyond was dark. He focused on the woman as she walked closer. She was encased in a dark grey uniform; no markings of rank, position or flag. She was middle aged, but had a look of business about her. A cold fish.

"Release me," Stenson commanded, though his voice felt raw from lack of use and water.

"Ahh, Mr Stenson, you're awake. Excellent. You and I have a lot to talk about."

## Commentary-Swords or Ploughshares?: The New Rossyth Blues

by Timothy Zhang

The recent sniping between the respective mouthpieces of the Federation and Alliance has been a fascinating display of astropolitics and commercial power play. The fate of the decommissioned AJN Capital ships Ajax and Repulse hangs in the balance, with AAI shipyards at New Rossyth making noises that indicate their discomfort at the unwanted publicity. Sources have indicated that they have communicated this with the AJN and the government, indicating that they are willing to walk away should the dispute escalate.

The Parliamentary airing of the matter, under Opposition pressure, presented a typically slick performance from the Defence Minister. At the press conference the next day, however, the beleaguered President was less than impressive. Declining to reveal commercial-in-confidence terms is a shoddy evasion at the best of times, and President Fuchs resorted to crude Federation-bashing, which remains as effective a populist measure as ever and provided the President with immediate cover from the militarist parties in the Parliament.

Professor Malthouse's interperate, and more importantly, inaccurate attack was immediately countered with self-righteous indignation about protectionism from the Frontier News. The editorial in question ended in a welter of ad copy, but still made the important point that there was considerable precedent for the sale. The truth in this matter is somewhat hrader to get to, and reflects the concerns of both parties.

There have been no official responses from either the Federal Parliament or the Imperial Court as yet. Even the reliably bellicose Imperial Herald has been silent, without even a velied gloat. This is usually a reliable bellweather of Imperial policy, and would seem to indicate that this is indeed a beat-up by self-interested parties in the Federal Miliary-Industrial complex. Or it it?

Firstly, Professor Malthouse has a reputation in academic and defence circles as a fine analyst and innovative theorist, if somewhat volatile. His hobby horse of limiting Alliance military expansion is shared by Federal High Command on Trojan, even if he is quite plainly ahead their current policy. He also has a propensity to place his conclusions well in advance of his evidence, and to do so in public fora. However, to describe him as a shill for Federal shipbuilding is unwarranted ad hominem.

Tam Westaway is a different story. A respected ship-broker, she is still a financial player, sensitive to market movements and to that most fragile of things, a commrcial reputation. In the hours after the story was available in the Alliance, AAI dropeed over eighty points on the Alliance Central Stock Exchange on Gateway. It is still over twenty points down on its previous high. This has happened DESPITE the shipyards only be responsible for conversion of the spaceframes to civilian standards and the installation of new engines. Ms Westaway can therefore be considered to have an ulterior motive, given that her career depends on being able to manipulate markets.

The Ajax and Repulse have plainly been demilitarised. With the exception of the engines, all the avionics are industry standard, and the massive banks of shields and LPA batteries have been removed. So IS this a massive beat-up, designed to shore up Federal ship-building? Not entirely.

The history of the denilitarised Valiant ships is a chequered one, and by no means an unqualified success if you're considering the ships as premier cargo-carriers.

The ex-flagship AJN Fearless has been operating successfully for many years now, but not as a bulk carrier. As it was one of the first ships demobbed, it actually maintained significant military-grade avionics on board. It is now operating as a control-and-direct station for Lowery Logistics, who have been hiring it out for rapid-mining operations out on the Western rim. This demanding role requires significant communications rig and astrogation facilities, which the Fearless maintins. On one level, acting as a glorified traffic signal is a bit comedown for the decorated old girl, but underscores an important point, which is that to separate the ship's operational history from its present and future roles is not as cut and dried as the Frontier News will have you believe. The Fearless was an important lesson for the Alliance, and later demilitarisations were done far more rigorously.

The AJN Bell, in contrast, was originally a carrier ship. At the request of the buyer, the docks were left intact, and the ship curretly operates as a mobile-dry dock for Tomicron Servicing. It has been spectacularly successful in this role, being a regular sight in the mining systems of the southern Empire. These systems being far too small to warrant a spaceport, the Bell operates quite profitably as a service station, partially due to the configuration bequeathed by its military role. Of the remainder, the oldest craft, the AJN Vincent was retired, cannibalised and cut up in 3302 after a very profitable twenty eight years service for Xiao and Murphy Associates. This ship comes closest to meeting the Frontier News' spiel for profitable cargo carrier. The other three ships, the Bell, Hunter and Ramsgate remain in service.

The Ramsgate has been running significant maintenance bills and downtime over its thirteen years of service with Pierson Minerals, operating out of Ross 248 (0,1). However, it should be noted that given the vessels age and second-hand status, this is not unusual. As Ms Westaway mentioned in the previous article, buying craft like this is a risk.

AJNs Bell and Hunter were also bought by Xiao and Murphy Associates. Although X.M.A. declined to provide flight and manifest details for the craft, anecdotal evidence indicates that the craft are being run on a very heavy schedule. As a business decision, given that the ships are a rapidly depreciating asset, it makes sense to maximise the margins on the capital invested. Given the recent profit statements on X.M.A., they're being run quite successfully, contributing 12% to the company's income last financial year. Despite the rumours that many ship systems are being run at 110 percent there is no indication that either ship has demanded or required treatment any different from any other bulk carrier of their usage and mileage.

Which brings us to the Ajax and Repulse. Both ships were configured as frontline forward defence ships. As such they were the main shield of the Alliance, as well as the main dagger pressed to the throat of the Federation. These two ships have subtle differences which, although seeming somewhat arcane to the casual observer, can lead them to be being treated as distinctly different cases to their predecessors.

As alluded to in the Frontier News article, the ships had their superstructures significantly upgraded with military-grade alloys to cope with their new roles. The next generation of LRCs off the pads will probably have comparable superstructures, but are still five to ten years from launch. This gives the Ajax and Repulse agility and strength not available to their peers. These superstructures also have hardpoints for military-style turrets. These turrets would have significantly better strength and fields-of fire than their civilian counterparts and are extremely difficult to retrofit to a civilian-standard superstructure.

Lastly, the installation of new prime movers and propulsion systems well ahead of the standard for this vintage of ship gives an unusually quick, if not nippy LRC, with substantial range and independent operating capacity, far lessening their chance of ending up like the Ramsgate due to overwork of aged power systems. This is smart commercial practice by AAI, as it extends the "warranty" period of the spaceframes substantially.

Taken individually, these modifications would appear to be little news for concern, which the Imperial disinterest in the situation would confirm. The AAI and AJN will doubtless conduct rigorous due diligence and probity checks on any potential buyer, and Professor Malthouse's hysteria about one credit shelf companies is absolutely uncalled for. Taken all together, however, it can be seen that these two ships have significant advantages over other second-hand LRCs on the market, both as bulk cargo carriers AND as potential capital-class warships. Whilst militant organisations like both Norman Mosser, the Altairean Freedom Alliance and the Spartacus League would give at least one bodily appendage to get their hands on (as they see it) a ready-made weapons platform, commercial concerns all across the northern crescent will also be readying the surgical knives to obtain the same platforms for commercial purposes.

As to the question of whether the AJN is being irresponsible, however, this rather depends on from which angle you look at it. The spaceframes are in the process of being thoroughly demilitarised, up to the point that demilitarisation becomes unprofitable. The question of where that profitability ends and where the dissemination of military grade hardware begins is a line that is nanometers thick. The Alliance has crossed this line in the past, although far, far less than the other two powers, who have made hypocrisy an artform to defend this very valuable revenue stream for politically and militarily strategic industries.

The one question which has been answered definitively is an old one. Commerce remains a branch of warfare, and the branch with the most sophisticated form of espionage and the smallest number of rules.

(Timothy Zhang has shares in AAI, and has consulted for Freeth Logistics (Federation) and Gutamaya Corporation (Imperial). The views expressed are his own)

## Red Blossom In The Snow

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

“Why on earth do they call it a bridge if it's sitting over ice?” I whinged, my breath misting the air.

“Apparently it melts at midsummer. A bit.” Pradesh sounded as if this fact gave him comfort.

I was extremely uneasy. We were playing a huge game of 'chicken' with fate, here. We had four hours to pay the fine until that sour naval officer came to take our ship. Legally, they could take the whole thing without paying us a credit in compensation.

The Sangesch Bridge was on the edge of Greenhill Town and like almost everything on the planet was made of wood. And not just one type, but different grains, sheens and polishes. It amazed me how few artificial materials had been used in the the buildings. It was like going back a thousand years of human history. Everything was organic here, and not the faux-organic look of the wealthier style-seekers in the core systems. The native inhabitants of the planet appeared to be exclusively clothed head-to-toe, finger-to-nose in rough, dark-grey woollen garments from what I assumed were extraordinarily hardy sheep. Pradesh and I were wearing modern synthetic cold-weather gear and I felt oddly out of place. I was used to feeling like an off-worlder (given that on all but one planet in the cosmos, I was), but this was different. I felt like a separate species.

The neighbourhood was somewhat dilapidated. Like much of the town, appeared to have seen better days. An almost palpable feeling of decay and emptiness hung over the place. The few figures here scuttled across the snow without pausing to study us. Most wore goggles of dark glass. For some reason I couldn't picture human eyes behind them.

The lack of a facemask on our suits was brutal. The electric heating systems in the suits barely made up for it. Pradesh and I huddled away from the wind as best we could and waited for Rhys to arrive.

“So what will you do when you get back to Achenar?” I asked Pradesh, to make conversation. Pradesh considered the question for a second.

“I'm not entirely sure, Commander. I'm thinking of joining one of the interstellar NGOs.”

I raised an eyebrow. Aid agency work was low-pay and hardly worthy of someone with Pradesh's skills. Regardless of his rather moralistic personality, I hadn't pegged Pradesh as any kind of do-gooder. I had a mini-debate inside my head as to whether I was in any place to comment about Pradesh's life decisions. It was a short debate.

“Without wanting to be rude, Pradesh... why on earth -”

“Look around you, Commander.” Pradesh gestured to the surrounding squalor. “This planet has been through three decades of war and will probably be occupied by Federal forces for the next twenty years. That's half a century of oppression and violence. Whoever the people are and whatever they've done, they deserve more than this.”

I stamped my foot in the hope of restoring circulation to my toes.

“And how will handing out bags of food or blankets help that?” I said.

Pradesh made a grunt of annoyance and lightly punched me on the arm. “Aid isn't about helping people survive now, Commander, it's about helping people survive into the future. I did some reading on this planet whilst you were being sick on the way down here...”

“I was not!” I said indignantly.

“All right, Commander, whilst you were faking nausea to chat up that Federal journalist.” Pradesh said patiently.

I glared at him, but said nothing.

“This planet has had a rough deal since it was settled. The Duke who colonised it to mine for precious metals soon abandoned it for more lucrative planets. Most of its inhabitants are descendants of the original slaves.”

“They don't act much like slaves.” I commented. Imperial slaves didn't tend to take up arms and fight vicious civil wars amongst themselves. The even more vicious Imperial caste system tended to beat, torture, rape and drug them out of such tendencies after a generation or two.

“In the absence of a greater hierarchy, they developed their own.” Pradesh shrugged expressively.

“So that's what you're interested in, restoring authority?” I said sceptically.

“The rule of law. Some sense of order. You don't have hope without security.” Pradesh said firmly. I felt my hackles rise somewhat. Despite his good points, Pradesh was an Imperial patriot. His view of the cosmos was a sharp one, with the forces of justice, order and the Emperor on one side and the forces of oppression, darkness and chaos (which was to say, everyone else) on the other.

“What as, an Imperial Protectorate?” I said off-handedly. Whenever Pradesh and I discussed politics, one of us generally emerged red-faced and sulking.

Pradesh tsk-tsked me.

“As benevolent and just as the Emperor is, I doubt anyone at the court would see any strategic or political value in assistance to a place such as this. There are far easier places to extract minerals from and far less troublesome places to invest capital in. The Duke left, remember? I'd be interested in helping them survive without external assistance, either Federal or Imperial. But at the moment, I'd just want to help them survive full stop. Not everything in the universe is a matter of great powers clashing, Commander. Sometimes, it's just about people.”

“Worthy.” I said, heroically keeping sarcasm from my voice. Pradesh seemed to know his stuff, and his priorities. Then again, he always had. I'd long since realised I'd only be a footnote in Pradesh's glittering later career, but hadn't realised it'd be a footnote in the life of a saint. The thought made me smile briefly.

“Indeed it is, off-worlder.” came a shout echoing all around us. “Soon... we won't need your charity.”

I gave a start. It was the black marketeer, but we couldn't see him in the dusk. Every building seemed to have deep eaves, casting space-black shadows. I felt exposed, high up on the bridge over a river that almost never ran. Which, I suppose, was somewhat the point.

“You have the money, my lord?” Pradesh called out to the general dimness.

“Indeed.”

There was a moment's silence.

“Let's get going, then.” I shouted. I didn't like this one bit. Despite the chill, I could smell the urgent musk of my own sweat.

“Yes. Let's.” A soft crunch of footfalls on the snow behind us alerted me to Rhys emerging from one of the pools of darkness, which clung to the sides of the buildings like modesty screens. Unlike the suave man-about-town he'd presented himself to us as in the club, here he was another ghostly figure in heavy weather gear and a hat with a mask. He'd unstrapped his face plate and his face was set in an expression of neutral pleasantries. Contemptuously, he tossed down a heavy case and spat next to it. Pradesh and I shared a sideways glance. This was a man with issues. I knelt and popped open the case. Inside were literally hundreds of five-credit chips, glittering like ice crystals. Whilst I couldn't fault the attempt to avoid any attempt to trace these small denomination currencies, logistically it made our lives that little bit more hellish.

“Damn. This is going to take ages to count.” I growled.

Rhys took a step forward and in a single movement backhanded me to the ground. It wasn't a hard hit, but unexpected, and I saw a steaming droplet of my blood staining the snow. I was more surprised than angry or hurt. Pradesh, not having been struck, was angry and shaped up, raising his fists.

“You will have time,” Rhys addressed me, ignoring Pradesh. “you will be remaining on the surface.”

“Yeah? Says who?” I snarled. In retrospect, it ranks about thirty two on my list of 'Most stupid times to say stupid things'.

Mechanical snaps and clanks reverberated from several of the buildings surrounding the bridge. I tensed. These were the sounds of weapons readying. After a moment or so, the green and blue ready lights of weapons illuminated the darkness. I fancied I could smell the sharp ozone of the plasma bottles filling up.

“Wait a minute, let's not be hasty here!” I rushed, holding my palms out placatingly from my sprawled position on the snow. Rhys' face was still set in that same pleasant expression. I cursed myself for not having recognised it earlier. Rhys wasn't a black marketeer, he was a killer. When he'd looked us up and down at the brothel, he hadn't

been assessing our business credentials. Instead, he'd been running through the catalogue in his mind of ways in which we might be killed, should necessity dictate.

"Why should I be hasty? We've closed a deal and I can collect at my leisure." Rhys said, his face hard and as cold as the river beneath the bridge. He turned to Pradesh, leaving me sprawled upon the ground. "One of my men will accompany you back up to the station to bring our goods down. Your companion will remain here with me. If I do not receive information of the existence of these goods and of my satisfaction with them, then... ah... your friend here will have his survival skills tested."

Pradesh stared fixedly at Rhys. I was pleased to note that there wasn't a jot of fear in his expression. Rhys smiled on this defiance with the amusement of a wolf seeing a chipmunk bare its teeth.

I sighed. If Rhys played it straight, Pradesh and I might have a chance to come out alive at the end. However, Rhys was either a career criminal or a resistance fighter. Either would kill me as a simple matter of professional courtesy if anything went wrong. I stood up slowly and carefully.

"You be okay, Pradesh?" I asked. Despite his defiance he looked so helpless, surrounded by shadows filled with death. For all I knew, they were actually filled with old women rattling cheese-graters and flashing LED lights, but Rhys didn't feel like a man given to bluff.

"I'll be fine Commander. Fly carefully." he said, giving me the traditional farewell for spacers. It was too much to hope that he'd used the irony deliberately.

Rhys had already refastened his faceplate and stared at Pradesh, impatient. At least that's what I assumed, unable to see through the blank fabric and darkened circles of glass. Pradesh turned away from me and walked over the bridge back towards the glow in the sky that heralded the starport, followed by a fur-clad shadow without a face.

Rhys then turned to me and behind him, the green and blue lights in the shadows winked out.

\*

"So there aren't any slaves here any more?" Phyllis scribbled frantically on her datapad as she walked along the icy street. She felt the first stirrings of information overload.

"No. The conditions on this planet mean that everyone is on the knife-edge of survival as it is. Differential treatment in terms of resources would kill off a large proportion of a lodge quite quickly and..."

She would have been quite happy to conduct the interview in a nice warm office that didn't smell of urine and public poverty, but Semang had been insistent that she see some of the 'real' Veedze. She would have blown him off and sought another informant, but everywhere she went, the refrain was the same "Semang knows more about the people of this planet than they do themselves."

So here she was, skidding down an icy street in Greenhill Town, losing more heat with every steamy breath she exhaled, walking alongside a man who had gone native, despite the sky-blue uniform and the sidearm at his hip. He even smelled like them, a dense and compact mix of perfumed scents and unwashed body sweat. This small, olive-skinned man was a maverick, by all accounts. Specialist Lieutenant Alberto Semang - revered by Trojan High Command, barely tolerated by local troops, treated with a mix of suspicion and respect by NGOs working on this most difficult of worlds. His sympathies (it was rumoured) lay far more with the planetary inhabitants than it did with his comrades-in-arms. Given that, Phyllis was surprised he hadn't 'slipped on a patch of ice' and suffered severe-head injuries.

An Occupation and Reconstruction mission was no place to sit on the fence. And as she'd been told, slipping on a patch of ice was one of the leading causes of injury here. Especially to prisoners and those of doubtful loyalties.

"So rather than being noble houses, the lodges are on an equal footing?" Phyllis interrupted Semang's exposition. This anthropologist may be military, but he had a most unmilitary and roundabout way of expressing himself. There was also a sourness to him that she couldn't quite fathom. His small, dark mouth tended to twist whilst he was talking, as if it would rather be saying other things to other people. He was also small and slight, from a lighter-G world than this, she was sure. If this was so, then why did he look so much at home here?

"Not at all." Semang said curtly. "Obligation and prestige still rule here. A favour incurred once can last through generations, and have a big effect on both lodges, even if it's never called in."

Phyllis began to form another question, but caught herself. They trudged side-by-side in the snow for a while longer.

"That, of course, is what made the civil war so vicious, and the peace so... contested." Semang continued, nodding hello to a passerby. How he could tell the locals apart, Phyllis had no idea. They all looked identical to her. She made a mental note to ask later on. A bit of local cultural colour never went astray in a piece like this. "Federation High command wants clan loyalty and enmity to just go away, which would be disastrous. If you try to wipe away centuries of debt and obligation, you radically change the power structure of the planet. Even if you succeed, you leave people gasping for something familiar, similar and reassuring. Something that makes order of the huge mess this planet is. It's a patchwork of clans, lodges, spheres of influence, levels of wealth and cultural groupings."

"Really?" Phyllis said uncertainly. This article was ending up more and more academic the longer she spent with Semang. Her editor didn't like academic, especially and was expecting something a lot snappier to justify the cost of this jaunt. Semang seemed to have read her mind.

"Really. Now for the benefit of your readers, would you like me to describe the natives as a whole as either bloodthirsty savages or simple, spiritual folk?" he finished dryly.

"Look, mister..." Phyllis said, feeling the hot flush of anger ascent from the base of her spine. The darkening sky matched her mood, even as the ridiculously cold air fought to chill her anger. This patronising, elitist bastard may have had a chip the size of Phobos on his shoulder, but that didn't give him the right to insult her intelligence.

"Lieutenant." Semang leaned back under an eave, watching Phyllis carefully.

"...Lieutenant Semang. Don't treat me like a R.I.G. reporter to whom one-syllable words are already a stretch just after a headline screamer. I'm here to write a properly researched story about how messy this planet is, how god damn difficult the peace is for everyone involved and how perhaps things aren't as cut and dried as the Naval press releases might indicate. I am not here to annoy you, to demean the Veedzi, or to listen to you bitch and whine about the failures of modern journalism, OK?" Phyllis flashed him a tight smile at the end, aware she may have gone a little over the top. Barely visible under the overhanging shadow, the specialist's face was unreadable.

Phyllis barely detected Semang changing mental gears, a change that must come easily after years of shifting between naval boardroom, refugee camp and Veedzi lodge. A switch seemed to flip and Semang's face lost some of its blankness and suspicion.

"I apologise." he said curtly, hiding his reluctance to do so. "So many people come to this planet with the assumption that low technology means a low level of cultural sophistication and seem rather hurt when I correct them."

"Accepted." Phyllis said gravely. "So what kind of culture do they -"

A concussion rolled across the town. Phyllis felt her entire body vibrate with the force of it, a rolling wave that shook every cell in her body before gently lowering them back into place. She doubted those nearer the blast had been treated with any of the same courtesy. Instinctively, both turned towards the source of the noise and saw a large blossom of flame expand into the dusk air, like fiery yellow blood spreading through still, limpid water. Fascinated, the two of them watched it as its petals faded to black and slowly scattered in the strangely windless sky. Phyllis turned to Semang, seeing both anger and sadness play across his face before that professional smoothness returned.

"That, unfortunately, has developed into quite an integral part of their culture." Semang's wrist chrono chimed with a new message. He looked at it distractedly. "We'd better cut this trip short." Semang tugged at her arm, pulling her back the way they came. "Off-worlders won't be especially popular once people start to think about this."

Phyllis broke into a jog. Her feet sank into the carpet of snow with a soft crunch, and Phyllis had the unnerving sensation she was climbing a sand dune.

"Surely the Navy wouldn't be blowing things up after..."

"There's a fine planetary tradition of angry mobs. Mobs tend to have poor reasoning skills. Besides, you're a journalist, don't you want to know what's going on?" The anthropologist seemed to glide across the soft carpet as if he were wearing snowshoes.

Phyllis gritted her teeth and pounded after him. It appeared that the transitional government was set for a difficult first hundred hours in office.

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"What the hell was that?" I said, swivelling my head towards the source of the blast. Whatever had caused that, it had a hell of a lot of explosive power. From my extremely sketchy mental map of the city, I placed it roughly in the region of the bordello where we'd met Rhys. People in the vicinity of the blast were either dead, dying or severely wounded. I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cold. The case of credits in my hand suddenly seemed heavier than uranium and I suddenly wished I hadn't let Pradesh persuade me to ship arms to this place.

Rhys had stopped also, and was staring impassively at the rising cloud of flaming gas. Even though I couldn't see anything behind those darkened circles of glass, interest radiated off him. I could almost see him sniffing the air to catch the barest whiff of smoke on the breeze.

"None of our concern, offworlder. Keep moving." Rhys said, his voice thick through the mask. We started walking again towards the nearest moneychangers. The credits in the case had to be translated into bank money before I could pay the fine. A very lucky gambling win to anyone who asked. Not that anyone would. A quick conversion at the moneylenders and I would pay the fine remotely and get the hell off this world. After delivering his guns, of course. The thought seemed to make the case in my hand gain even more weight.

Although I didn't note it much at the time, people tended to flow around us like stream leaves negotiating a rock. Rhys didn't shift for anyone, and passers-by seemed to know the danger of standing in his way. There were a few more people around now, scurrying a little faster towards their destination, some almost running. No one wanted to be on the streets any longer than absolutely necessary after the blast. I shared their opinion, but expanded it to the entire planet, if not system. There were few places in the universe that I wouldn't visit again, but this place was quickly setting new precedents. I hoped Pradesh was all right. Across a square ahead of us, I saw a powered sled skid to a halt. The gun mount on the roof and the blinking series of navigation lights identified it as part of the Federal deployment. A door slid open and a squad of armoured marines emerged, electrolaser carbines clutched tightly in metal-gloved hands. Rhys paused for a moment, assessing this new development. The soldiers pounded clumsily in a direction away from us and I saw Rhys' hands relax and move away from what I assumed to be the holster for his weapon.

I relaxed as well. Officially, the planet was no longer a theatre of combat, but the bombing and Rhys' ready cash and calm confidence in his own personal cause of liberty showed that it was still a world of easy violence and murderous resistance. A world filled with things worth dying - and killing - for. The only thing I was prepared to kill for now was a drink.

The houses no longer looked lifeless, every tiny window was alive with weaponry, radiating malice towards off-worlders. This was not something that changed suddenly but gradually, until every house was a fortress, with Rhys giving secret signals in the way that he walked, left-right-left-right-left. This unsettled me. I was used to xenophobic cultures, but the very planet seemed foreign. I caught myself before I started seeing a knife in every icicle, but I was powerfully aware with every crunching footstep of the way that Rhys and his kin saw the universe. Their environment was a fearsome enemy in its own right. How much must they resent offworlders coming to add to the burdens of their survival. I felt a moment's sympathy, which was quickly swamped by my own survival instincts.

"Ravens!" the shout from over my shoulder was female and vaguely familiar. I turned and saw the journalist, Phyllis, pounding quickly across the snow, accompanied by... oh dear... a naval officer,. She had a smile of recognition and a partially frozen sheen of sweat across her face. This changed to a grimace of horror, which I couldn't quite fathom until I felt the point of Rhys dagger dig into my back.

\*

"It is always inaccurate to describe a particular people as inherently violent. Instead, it is more useful to talk about boundaries, taboos and of the sanctions which are employed against people who transgress them. If these sound like weasel words to excuse the Veedzi, then consider this. A code of personal honour is often the only thing that different lodges have in common. Remember, since the Imperial abandonment there has been no functioning state or authority to demarcate the identity of individuals. Lodges are discrete entities. Few residents of any particular lodge have ever in their lifetime entered another lodge. Without such empirical knowledge of the way in which others live, there has to be something upon which to base interactions with the residents of other lodges. One of the cultural touchstones that is universally recognised is the honour code. This code, not an especially onerous one by our standards, consists of a few basic precepts. Never forget a debt, never forgive an insult, honour your lodge. However, the sanctions which are applied in the case of even an unintentional breach verge from the violent to the fatal..."

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To Phyllis' surprise, Ravens didn't die. Instead, he stumbled forwards and spun around, catlike, his hands snapping into defensive positions. Phyllis wouldn't have thought that large frame could move with such agility.

"There's really no need for this, Rhys." Ravens shouted. Phyllis noted that despite his placatory words, Ravens kept his gloved hands up against the huge serrated blade that the tall Veedzi carried. Rhys shouted something back, but it was mostly in the local dialect, which Phyllis didn't understand. She glanced to Semang, who grimaced at a particularly guttural utterance.

"This isn't good." he said, but made no move to draw his sidearm.

Rhys made a sweeping downward stroke with the blade, which suddenly morphed into an upward stab. Ravens leaned backwards and the point hissed out into the ether. One of Ravens' stubby legs whipped out, catching his opponent heavily in the side. Instead of (to Phyllis' mind) the sensible option of letting well be, Ravens leapt forward, his hand crashing into his opponent's wrist, the knife pinwheeling out of the Veedzi's hand out into the snow. At the same time, his knee sailed upwards. 'Rhys' staggered backwards, the expressionless mask at odds with the hiss of pain emerging from it. The darkened circles of glass regarded the fallen weapon impassively, flexing one injured hand, the other absently rubbing his stomach. Ravens had driven the knee in quite hard, but the thickness of Veedzi winter furs made them as protective as body armour.

"Rhys. Be reasonable. This isn't my doing!" the spacer said, and Phyllis was surprised to hear a desperate, wheedling tone in his voice. The fact that he had disarmed his opponent as easily as relieving a toddler of his rattle seemed to have passed him by.

"You betrayed me." Rhys cursed. His injured hand dipped inside his cloak, re-emerging with a sleek and compact little energy weapon. The shift from low to high tech weapon did not appear to have triggered any civilising instincts in Rhys, and he fumbled to fit numb fingers inside the trigger guard. He presented an easy target, but to Phyllis' shock, Ravens didn't take the opportunity given. Instead, he raised his hands, even before the weapon was pointing towards him.

"Rhys, please calm down. You're still in charge. The plan is still good." Ravens said. To Phyllis' eye, Rhys was already calm, and despite the effort it must have taken to keep the gun steady in his injured hand, his voice showed no strain.

In the distance, a deep bell began to toll. The curfew beginning.

"I will kill you with your own traitor's weapon and then... your friend will have his survival skills found wanting. As will every other offworlder on the planet..." he said. Phyllis had been threatened before, and this didn't feel like a threat, just like punctuation in a sentence. Their sentence. The mask left him as faceless as an android, even as his words dripped with an organic hatred, grown and nurtured in the fertile environment of a cold world warmed by invasion. Above them all, the deep chiming of the curfew bell washed over the city, a tide of calm, delivered at the point of a gun. Ravens stepped forward, ignoring the tightening of a gloved finger. He didn't look afraid, but that was okay, Phyllis felt enough for both of them. She stole a look sideways at Semang. He was watching the exchange with fascination.

"This is so unnecessary, Rhys." he said insistently, in a low voice. "They aren't with me. This is just a little misunderstanding."

"In the name of the Blessed -" Rhys began. The retort of an energy blast reverberated down the street. Rhys fell backwards, his face aflame, the tight and intricate stitching of his mask protective against the cold winds, but useless against weapon fire.

Semang stepped forward, aimed his weapon again carefully and drilled another shot precisely into Rhys' chest.

They all stood there in silent contemplation of the events of the past thirty seconds.

"I'm sorry I didn't act earlier." Semang said distantly. "But I had to be sure."

"If you hadn't been sure?" Phyllis said, amazed at the calm of her own voice. As if on automatic, she reached for her datapad. Something like this needed recording, somehow.

"Then I would have let him carry out his threat and arrested him afterwards."

"Well that's a comfort." said Ravens. The nervous laugh died in Phyllis' throat, as the curfew bell died away into silence.

\*

Samuz heard the chime in the middle of her briefing. The explosion had wrecked her evening, her week and her year. She felt anger consume her, and had to keep a conscious grip on her emotions.

"Tell him I'll be with him in half an hour, corporal." she snapped at the officer manning her office. Unperturbed by his commander's familiar anger, the corporal acknowledged and closed the connection. A silence fell across the conference room. Combat operations had been suspended over a year previously, and most of those present had begun the long wind-down into the routines of administration. The reversion back to a military footing had taken some of them by surprise. Samuz noted several buttons undone and rumpled sleeves. This was a staff meeting rather than a parade ground but she felt annoyed that discipline had lapsed. The explosion proved the dangers that lay in wait for laxity.

"Estimated casualties." she snapped.

"Could have been worse." said Gregson mournfully. "It was about twelve minutes before curfew so almost everyone who could have gone home had. Could have been a lot worse."

"That's not a number." Samuz fixed Gregson with a steady glare. He was a good officer, but tended to skirt around unpleasanties in a way that disqualified him from planetside postings. Gregson sighed and folded his hands.

"Fifteen, Admiral. It might go up, but it won't go down."

"Source." Samuz demanded. Silence was her only answer, and not a satisfactory one, at that. "Is this the best the Navy's finest can do?" Another silence stretched.

"Sorry Admiral, disaster services are still on-site." Patel finally rescued them all. "It's a single blast though. If it were part of an uprising, I would have expected a series."

"So there are unlikely to be any more?" Zhang asked from the other end of the long mahogany table.

"Depends." Major Patel replied, after a moment's consideration, her long face contemplative. "I've sent a squad down to protect disaster services and to establish a perimeter. This could just be something designed to gather a crowd."

"Can we rule out clan violence, Major?" came a voice from down the table which Samuz didn't recognise.

"We can't rule out anything." Patel emphasised gently.

Samuz watched her staff discuss the matter, masking her own rage. This was an insult, designed to humiliate the Provisional Government, her command and the entire Federation. The Provisional Government was still in its infancy, and someone was testing its ability to respond. No point launching a full rebellion if all friendly forces on the planet was still mustard keen. Better to test, to wait and to identify weaknesses and the calcifications that came with routine. This wasn't an isolated act of defiance or the burgeoning criminal gangs of Veedze flexing their muscle. Samuz could sense purpose behind the act.

Silence fell across the table. Samuz looked up, aware that she had been asked for an opinion. She stood up. It didn't matter whether she knew what her staff had been talking about. They looked to her for leadership, not management.

"I really don't want the rest of the mandate to be like this." she said. Samuz turned and pointed to the rear of the conference room, where a large window faced planetwards, illuminating the icy blue jewel that was the planet of Homeworld. "That place is still our responsibility. Any threats to it and its people must be crushed mercilessly, to the best of our ability."

"Like many of you, I've committed over six years of my life to this place. I can't say I hold the place in huge affection," Samuz said, with flinty humour. "but I can't stand the idea that some radical with the pedigree of a mongrel and the adaptability of a dinosaur come in and wreck all I've worked for, all that we've worked for. Too many good officers have died to let that happen."

There was a moment's silence.

Implacably the orb beneath them moved, the terminator line visibly racing across it, bringing night in its wake. It had already conquered Greenhill Town, but just visible to the naked eye were the lights of civilisation. The countryside surrounding it was dark. The lodges burned no external lights, as they were a waste of energy better used for heat.

"Commander. We'll find them and destroy them." said Gregson, with atypical blunt.

Samuz nodded and walked towards the door. She had an appointment to keep.

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“Are you a terrorist?” the short naval officer shifted the gun to train on me. His matter-of-fact execution of Rhys left me in no doubt of his ability and willingness to use it. The journalist looked at her companion in some surprise, but nodded in agreement as she thought about it.

“No.” I said, trying to look as innocent as possible.

“Terrorist sympathiser?” he said, his voice low and insistent. The weapon in his hand hummed and the red temperature LED winked out to show that it was ready to kill again with maximum efficiency.

“No.”

“Interstellar agent?”

“No.”

“Mercenary?”

“Not quite.” I said unwillingly. The officer stared at me intently, his eyes drinking in every part of my clothing, body language and expression. He nodded as he came to some internal conclusion and restored his gun to the holster.

Phyllis asked a question of him with her eyes. He shrugged.

“You don’t get Federal sympathisers for the Veedzi. He’s too obvious for an agent. He hesitated before killing this man, so he’s not a mercenary on contract. If he was a professional black marketeer, he’d be far better dressed. He’s a bounty hunter dabbling with contraband.” he said simply, and without judgement. I exhaled. Finally.

Phyllis looked at me and snorted. “Planet-leave. I must be getting old to have fallen for that one.”

“Are you going to report me?” I asked the officer. He looked back at me, calculating.

“What were you selling?” I hesitated, “and if you say fluffy bunny toys or leaves of bread you’ll be in the brig before you can blink.”

I sagged. I was at his mercy, and I didn’t really have any nervous energy left for a convincing lie.

“Hand weapons. Just energy pistols. Nothing big and nothing illegal... at least... not illegal until a couple of days ago.”

The officer looked at me for a long, long, long ten seconds. Then he nodded and moved over to Rhys’ body. I exhaled and finally felt myself relax, for the first time in almost an hour. Phyllis glanced sideways at me and shrugged. She had no idea about her companion’s mental processes either. She had her own question, though.

“By the way, why aren’t you dead? That man stabbed you square in the back.”

“Knife-proof vest.” I said, sheepish for some reason, “I’m a spacer. Planet-side means danger.” I walked over and knelt in the snow, trying as best I could to avoid the traces of Rhys’ viscera that were staining it.

“He was about to say something when you shot him.” I said quietly, as the officer unbuttoned the various flaps and pockets that Rhys’ coat contained. He dumped the results in a clear patch of snow next to the body.

“He was invoking the name of the Blessed Resistance. Before that it would have been a matter of personal honour or clan loyalty. After that, I could act in clear conscience by killing him.” he said evenly. I wondered if being killed for those reasons would have been more acceptable to him. I wondered whether it would be a faux pas to ask.

“Why couldn’t you act before that, Lieutenant Semang?” Phyllis asked for me, also kneeling in a cleaner patch of snow. She seemed unbothered by the gore that the officer had exposed. Obviously a working field journalist, then.

Semang’s hands stilled over the still smoking body. He sighed.

“Only a fool gets in the way of honour on this planet. And I'm not always in situations where the protection of naval force is believable, let alone helpful. But no clan would dare lift a hand in aid of the Blessed Resistance any more. The Navy has made clear the consequences of that.”

He wiped his hands on the snow to try and clean his gloves and examined the pile of items sitting next to the body. Even in the failing light, it was easy to see that there wasn't much. A few metal tools and what appeared to be coloured bits of string sat alongside a small medallion that looked religious in nature. A tiny corked bottle completed the sad bric-a-brac to accompany Rhys into whatever afterlife he believed in. If he was in Hell, I'm sure he at least appreciated being in the warm.

“No comm device? No datapad?” I said, somewhat disbelieving.

“Easy to intercept and easy to track.” Semang said, offhandedly. “There are more secure ways of communicating.”

“Worried about your colleague?” Phyllis asked, sensing the direction of my distress.

“A hostage?” Semang said, looking up.

“They... were going up to fly my ship down to the surface. Rhys said...”

“...that your friend would find his survival skills tested. I remember.” Phyllis said. “Can he handle himself?” I was somewhat touched to hear concern in her voice. Then I found myself wondering whether the concern was just a professional technique.

“Pradesh?” I said distractedly. “Yeah, more or less.” I was finding myself remarkably distressed at Pradesh's predicament. “But... when does the next shuttle leave... he might not have made the last one. How often do they go?”

“Two hourly.” Semang said. He was still pawing over Rhys' effects, and I heard him suck air through his teeth in surprise.

“What is it?” Phyllis asked.

“I don't know.” Semang plucked out a thin metal case from beneath a tangle of what looked for all the world like handkerchiefs knotted together.

“We'll look at it later.” he said, unconcerned. Removing a plastic bag from the pockets of his uniform, he swept the entire remnants of Rhys' life into it and zipped it closed. He stood up, turning away from Rhys' body as if it held no more interest than a fallen tree. He tapped a short sequence on his wrist unit and spoke softly into it. I couldn't hear any sounds emerge from it, but looking carefully I could see a flash of silver in his ear.

“Thanks.” Semang said, and let his arm fall to his side. “The shuttle had been going to leave in approximately sixteen minutes. If we run, we can catch them before they're any the wiser. Tower control will hold the shuttle until we give them the all clear.” A thought occurred to him. “This, of course, presupposes that your friend hasn't already been killed. I didn't think to ask for a passenger list.”

“Oh... I can think of about five and a half thousand reasons why they still want him alive.” I said, grimly patting the recovered case of credit chips.

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“One of the most distinctive things about entering a Veedzi lodge is the smell. An intense mixture of the fragrant, the sour and the downright noxious. The first time I entered a lodge it took all my training not to retch. Firewood is too valuable a resource to waste upon heating water for washing. For reasons which should be fairly clear by now, the Veedzi see warmth, rather than cleanliness, as the most important state of a body. Within the long winter, it's not uncommon to go months without even a standing bath. Indeed, to go unwashed is one of the key markers of masculinity in the lodge. If you'll pardon the pun, people are ranked by their rankness. Even so, even the Veedzi nose has limits, which is why perfumes form an important part of social interactions. The Veedzi conscious awareness of smell and scent ranks first of all the human groups I've studied. Some of my colleagues even see it a biological evolutionary adaption, although there have been no large-scale studies against Sol normal humans. Personally, I think it's socially adaptive rather than evolutionary, with perhaps a regressive nod to pre-human uses of scent to distinguish individuals and determine hierarchies. Fragrance represents a person's personal mana, their influence. In some lodge groupings, certain perfumes and unguents are actually reserved for certain families or ranks. Also very often, there are also specific scents for specific rituals and rites of passage. The fragmentation of Veedzi lodge societies cut short any use of particular scents as universal diacritical markers apart from one

particular exception. The one universal use of scent is more accurately the lack of it. When the Veedzi practice war, be it either aggression abroad or defending their lodge, they wash the accumulated scents from their bodies lest they provide their enemies with olfactory warnings of their coming. Initial Federal overtures were ineffective in ending the conflict, partially because the negotiators were far too clean to have peaceful intentions...”

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“Hamish, a pleasure to see you.” Samuz said curtly, sweeping into her room. After giving Hamish a searching glance, the Admiral's bodyguard left the room to stand outside the door whilst the Admiral seated herself on a low couch.

Hamish rose and gave a somewhat sketchy bow. He was still uncomfortable on the station, regardless of how kind its heated confines were to his aged bones. Even ignoring the frankly frightening journey up from the surface, there were too many doors here, too many private places. It was like hundreds of tiny lodges, hanging together in space. And the smell of metal and antiseptic cleanness made his highly trained nose water.

“Your Excellency, a delight to be here.” he said, trying to hide the nervousness he felt. The Admiral was far taller than a woman should be, and headstrong with it. When they had first met, Hamish had wondered what man would have such a one, but as time had passed he had realised that the Admiral cared not for the smell and presence of a man. Instead, she loved her work and her Navy with a passion and devotion that would have made his wife blush. If she had a clan, she did not speak of them. He didn't understand it, but couldn't help but admire her dedication.

Hamish's hand hovered over the long leather case that was the meaning for his visit. The case had been emptied and passed through the scanner, as on all his previous visits. And as in all his previous visits, he had been allowed through, cleared of being a threat. He certainly had no desire to threaten anyone. He particularly had a desire not to be a threat to his wife, which was why he had agreed to be here, carrying the innocent little bottle amongst all the others. He comforted himself that it couldn't be dangerous. The Federals were very careful about who and what they let onto the Federation Orbital Station Cromwell and they had the technology to ensure that nothing of harm could enter unseen. Especially not here, in the private quarters of the Admiral. Apart from a few austere statues of old Sol gods and a few hangings of muted, woven cloth, the quarters were absent of decoration. The plain duralloy table he had spread the red velvet cloth upon could have belonged to any ensign on the station. Hamish had to keep foremost in his mind the fact that he was the personal perfumer to the most powerful person in the system, for to look around there was little evidence.

“What have you for me today, Hamish?” Samuz said, her voice bound tight with wires of self-control. Hamish wondered what had happened, but caught himself. He was a merchant, not a spy.

“Ah, Your Excellency, you would not believe what entered my hands today off a freighter from far off Phiagre.” he said grandly, picking out a gaudily red-tinted bottle. His take on 'stunned disbelief' was off today, but the Admiral seemed not to notice.

“Mmmmm?” the Admiral forced her gaze to the bottle in question. Fortunately for Hamish, the Admiral seemed distracted today. Hamish removed the tiny cork and wafted some of the scent the Admiral's way. Samuz blinked as the scent hit her nostrils and Hamish was glad to see that she focussed on the scent, the suspicious lines of her face softening into the naïve innocence of olfactory assessment. She had a good nose for an off-worlder, but Hamish was far too diplomatic to tell her that his eight-year old apprentice Patrick easily outshone her.

“Mandarin... ah... honeysuckle. A little... faint.”

Hamish nodded at the mandarin, although to find honeysuckle in this crude mess was a flight of fancy. “Your judgement is exquisite as always, Your Excellency.”

“Nice enough, but you've given me this one before, I think.” Samuz fixed Hamish with a challenging gaze. Hamish rearranged his old face into a shocked expression of semi-senile innocence. “I... I don't think so, Excellency. But if this does not tickle your fancy, perhaps... perhaps this will.” Hamish made a show of fumbling, but his hands were always seeking that tiny bottle of dark glass. It was a simple, cylindrical bottle, with gold leaf painted on the rim as if as an afterthought. It was no creation of his, but he had smelled it and knew it for something exquisite. Had he not been given a precise description of his wife and children's fate in the event that he did not deliver it to the Admiral, he would have considered it a minor masterpiece. The delicacy of the touch of liquorice at the end and the sharp bite of mint lasting all the way from the beginning to the final limits of sensation was uncanny. And the way the musk throbbed underneath it all without once threatening to overwhelm showed a rare skill. But the threats he'd received soured the pleasure, both professional and sensual. However, it had passed the beeping, clicking field of the analyser, and he loved his wife far too much to quibble.

“This bottle has been with me a long time, but this scent is something I've completed recently. I... I believe it may be something Your Excellency may appreciate.”

Hamish pulled back the little glass stopper and handed the bottle over to the Admiral. Samuz leaned her tall frame over the bottle. Hamish's mouth was dry. Would she dislike it? Worse, would she detect the deception in his heart and order him taken and interrogated, guaranteeing the death of his family. The jackal god placed behind the admiral seemed to snicker at his terror. The Admiral's nostrils flared as she drank in the scent, her eyes closing in concentration. Hamish clenched his fist. He should come clean, throw himself on the Admiral's mercy, ask her forgiveness and her help to protect his family. She had been good to him, his most regular and lavish customer amongst the offworlders. She had invited him into her lodge, into the Federation's lodge, and he had betrayed her by bringing this tiny phial of coldness into her house. Hamish opened his mouth.

“Hamish, this is lovely. I'll take it.”

Hamish shut his mouth, suddenly both miserable and relieved. His hands trembling, he turned again to try to find something else. It would have seemed suspicious if he had only sold her one thing. His heart was gone, though, with a chunk of ice in its place.

Behind her, the jackal god seemed to roar with amusement.

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The sentry opened his mouth to challenge us as we approached the gate to the spaceport at a run, but the sight of Semang stilled the challenge in his throat.

“There's no waiting room, so they'll just be gathered around the shuttle.” Semang said, slowing to a jog as we left snow and reached frosted concrete. Mindful of the pilot's warnings about slips on ice, Phyllis and I did the same. I was suffering the after-effects of the long run. My heavy-worlder legs weren't really designed for a marathon.

“Come on Ravens, keep up” Phyllis grinned at me, as we both leaned against a cold wall to catch our breath. Semang, who had run across snow as effortlessly as a deer, was talking to a pair of guards who loosened their pistols in their holsters as he explained the situation.

“Oh why don't you...” I gasped, but was unable to think of an appropriate rejoinder. I instead devoted my energies to recovering my breath and thinking about the situation. The resistance fighter would already be extremely nervous, with his own survival in this Naval facility dependent on the slender thread of my status as a hostage. “Look... if they see me, they'll know that something's gone wrong. Pradesh knows you,” I indicated Phyllis, “can you maybe just draw him to one side without arousing suspicion?”

“Sounds reasonable.” said Semang, who had approached with 'Lars' and 'Mifune' (according to their name-badges). “The Blessed Resistance aren't generally given to suicidal last stands, so we've got a decent chance of capturing him.”

The guards looked experienced and tough. Guard duty was generally one of the lowest on the totem pole of navy jobs, but on this world, it was obviously taken a bit more seriously to judge by the keen, intelligent looks that both men were giving me.

“Let's go then.” Phyllis said lightly. I wondered if she really knew that she was going into a situation where she could easily come out dead on the other side. Then I caught a glimpse of the hardness in her eyes. The contrast with the blithe sweetness of her expression was jarring and gave me an unexpected jolt.

“Take care of yourself...” I said haltingly, “I'd hate it if you.. before...um...”

Phyllis smiled and gave a characteristic shrug. As she passed me, she patted my shoulder. “You too, bounty hunter.” She turned and started walking briskly up the corridor. The two guards followed her nonchalantly, trying as best as possible to pretend as though they'd individually decided that today might be a nice day to wander past the shuttle bay. I winced at their attempt. The three shadows grew larger and larger as they walked towards the bright lights of their destination. Although I knew full well why I had to keep away, I felt strangely cowardly.

“Don't worry.” Semang said, a small timbre of warmth entering his voice. “I know these people. They may look impulsive, but they're not stupid. When he sees there's no chance of escape, he'll surrender.”

I looked at him doubtfully.

"How is it that you know these people? You're Navy." I wondered aloud. A quick spasm of some emotion passed over Semang's face.

"Yes and no. I'm a naval anthropologist. It's my business to understand the people we fight with, or in this case, conquer." Semang packed a lot of distaste into the last word, and I couldn't quite understand why.

"You don't think the navy should be here?"

"Ideally, no. In preference to what there was before, yes. In the way in which they've chosen to do it, no." Semang said, enunciating each position in a flat, frustrated tone.

"That's a lot of opinions for the one subject." I said mildly.

"Who ever said it was one subject?" Semang said cryptically.

I opened my mouth to try and tease out a better answer when the sound of a weapon retort echoed up the corridor, then another, then another. Shrugging off Semang's restraining hand, I raced up the corridor as quick as my short legs could carry me. The idea of Phyllis, or Pradesh lying in a smoking pool of blood was unbearable. A figure appeared, silhouetted in the light, although I couldn't quite make out the face.

And then there was darkness.