

TIDES OF WAR

THE HPA SAGA PART 3

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 3

by
The Elite BBS Collective

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Homecoming

[Emu Maekawa]

Fortress Wagner countryside
Homeland, Beta Hydri (0,-2)

"Lieutenant Emu Maekawa, what a pleasure!" After a short but warm hug, Daigoro Maekawa's smile was curtailed by his daughter's abrupt change of demeanour.

"Father, I... have news," she gravely declared.

"Something bad, it seems?"

"Depends on your point of view. For me, there is grief."

"Then it *is* bad. Tell me over some tea," he waved her in with a hand gesture.

"Am I just a visitor, or your daughter? I'll make the tea - I trust you haven't moved the things?"

"Well, at least allow me to be the man take your bags in," the old man scoffed, but was secretly beaming in pride for her manners.

"Please do, but leave the sword bag. It's relevant to the talk."

Despite his failing health Daigoro managed to lift the weight with barely a grunt - to show his daughter he still could - and took the travel bag to her room.

In the kitchen, Emu braced herself again to tell her father the truth she was allowed. She took the tea gear, microwaved the water and joined the old man. Both sat in silence while Emu prepared the infusion with practised skill at the ancient ritual, and served her progenitor.

After a sip, Daigoro finally reintroduced the matter at hand. "What are these grievous news you bring?"

Emu nodded, more to herself than to the man, and picked up the blue edged white linen sword bag that she had brought. Flipping it open, she exposed a daisho - a pair composed of the 'Winter Moon' katana long sword and its 'Little Moon' wakizashi companion.

"The *Commodore* to whom these belonged... fell in battle against overwhelming odds." She swallowed a sob and presented the swords to her father.

The man frowned as he took the swords and partially drew the longer blade, as to examine it (even though he immediately recognized the items). "I remember these... Commodore, you say? Hadn't Maegil chickened out as a Lieutenant?" The sword guard clapped loudly on the sheet, expressing his displeasure at the mention of the swords' owner.

Emu was hoping for the opening. "Sir, I am not at liberty to discuss classified *military intelligence operations* or its agents' *cover stories*," she forcefully stated with theatrical formality, but still putting emphasis on the message.

Daigoro stared at her in surprise as he absorbed the revelation. When he regained his composure, he calmly sipped his tea and, after a long, pregnant pause, chastised her. "Which is to say you already spoke too much," he said with a hard edge, "and though I'm your father and an officer - I do not have the clearance."

"Yes, father."

"But I do appreciate the, ahem, slip of the tongue, daughter," he added more softly. "If I've spent over ten years unjustly disowning him, and he couldn't clear himself because of his position... I am ashamed."

"Don't be. He understood, father, and it served a - classified - purpose. By the way, I was awarded the Intelligence Maser recently... I'm allowed to wear it, but the citation is also classified."

"You've been busy." The girl was obviously trying to tell him a story between the lines of what she could actually say, and the general picture started to grow on his mind. "What *are* you allowed to tell me about his end?"

"His was a real bushi's death, like the cherry blossom that lived to fall and give way to the cherry. It was truly magnificent, father," she used the old formulas, badly disguising the grief.

Daigoro was dumbfounded. "To fall and give way... Are you pregnant?"

"Noooooo!... The metaphor's meaning is in a more... idealistic... sense, which I can't develop on. I'd love to be, but we were taking precautions, at least until... You see, some time before his death he got in a situation, he went against, erm, that's classified, but then we hadn't the chance" After a moment, she added, "he left a haiku - it was openly broadcast on his final moments, so it's not classified," and she recited it.

"It smells of victory;

Rest, my tired warrior's bones

Over a mountain of bodies."

The girl's thought pattern was difficult to follow, but the image was now pretty solid. "I see... It is a truly dreadful piece of poetry, but enlightening."

"Father!"

They had been under cover on the Rocky Fields, Maegil died there performing some heroic single-handed charge on the enemy, and defeated many before his end. That Mosser escaped was inconsequential - the bushi valours courage and intent over skill or even actual accomplishment. By itself, this could have completely redeemed Maegil

in Daigoro's eyes, even if he had left service to begin with, which wasn't the case.

The old man gave her a tired smile. "Just to fill an old man's lurid curiosity, for how long had you been going out together behind my back?"

The woman lowered her head in shame; the fat tears that had been accumulating on her eyes tipped over and fell. "Forgive me, father... I've been disobedient for ...eight months..." Composure has limits, and Emu reached hers, barely managing to put the tea cup down before breaking in pitiful sobs.

"Don't be ashamed of it, daughter, I blame myself. You didn't know it either, but still your heart was his. For all these years, it held true and never leaned to another man -and now, my only remaining daughter is an unwed widow, and our line is to end - this is what I've done. Indeed, your news are grievous..."

From there, the meeting's mood reached even lower depths, and afterwards Emu considered if she hadn't just dealt her father the final blows that'd lead him to his death. On the other hand, it was only fair to them all to do what she did - for all the pain, the old misunderstandings had to be undone.

Finally, Daigoro called her to the family shrine, and they both prayed for Maegil's soul in the quality of Emu's posthumous husband, followed for more prayers for her brother Akira and mother Keiko.

At night, she laid sleepless on her old bedroom's soft bed. The tears had helped to somewhat suppurate the abscess on her soul - it still hurt, but considerably less. She still felt lost, and didn't had anybody she could talk to - none of her friends had clearance for the things that afflicted her and her two sessions with military psychologists had shown them better suited to deal with battle traumatized and cyborged casualties than her problems, compounded by the fact that they also didn't had clearance to know any details either. The only person with whom she had been able to confide somewhat was Dev... He had comforted her, and he knew... If she accepted the new assignment, she might meet him again someday.

There were things she couldn't tell her father. For instance, with her promotion, she'd be reassigned. Where to, she should have had another couple of weeks to decide, until the end of her enforced vacations, but after her report she had been invited to transfer to the FM Intelligence branch, Restricted Services section - the Black Ops. Apparently someone high up decided that the Federal unofficial position should be that if Mosser can't be killed because there is always another Mosser, then Mosser could be redirected away from the Federation and put to good use against slavers (destabilizing the slave market, and thus the Empire), plus each HPA shot reminding the Empire of the Federal technological supremacy.

Thus, due to her recent contacts, she had the best chance of working as an unofficial liaison and semi-official spy on the Spartacus Brotherhood - if they agree to it (or Mosser might just shoot her on the spot). Also, the HPA modification schematics raised interest in their technical capabilities - Mosser couldn't have repaired the HPA, or even the AS for that matter, without some serious engineering infrastructure.

She could do all these things...

...if she survived the initial contacts. But then again, thanks to Maegil, Mosser already knew her (even held her at gun point) and she was still alive, and she did had the coordinates and proper IFF to go to the Spartans, so there was a chance...

Her mind was trying to avoid Maegil's name, but the memory stuck her again, and all she had in her mind right now eventually led back to him...Because of the vacations, she was denied the blissfulness of routine, where she could engross herself with work, training, rookie instruction... anything, even paperwork would be welcome!

Lost in these thoughts, she found it was almost dawning already. She got up, readied herself and prepared her father a hearty breakfast as she watched the sunrise.

Eventually she made up her mind; after her father finished the meal, she said her farewells, adding with a lump on her throat:

"Father, I can't tell you why, but it may be that we won't see each other again."

"You needn't say more, I know those eyes... the grief of loss is still there, but today I see mostly the eyes of forlorn hope."

Though Emu wanted to take solace and cry on her father's shoulder as she hadn't done ever since her childhood, and tell him everything, she couldn't - but he did seemed to understand. "Yes, father."

"That's what it means to be a warrior - you may be terrified, but you endure and do your duty. I'm proud of you, and I'll always be, daughter."

Emu found herself at a navy base to ask for a ride back to Delta Pavonis, but there wasn't any; being still on vacation, she couldn't requisition one for 'official use' either.

Finally, she decided for a civilian liner. Since her last few months' pay were tripled, she could afford a luxury trip -

plus chocolate ice cream and lots of double layer chocolate Tim-Tams.

Auction Day Part 1

[Norman Mosser]

Norman sipped his coffee. People moved and jostled around him. Contracted auction staff adjusted their equipment up the front of the gala room. The dozen and a half bidders milled around the seats, talking, drinking and doing last minutes credit rating calculations. Only a few had taken their seats as Norman had done.

And in between them all, New Rossyth Staff hurried back and forth keeping the bidders happy. It was organised chaos.

Norman breathed deeply, sucking in the coffee vapour. Reiquatan Ultra may have had the reputation, but Phekdan coffee outshone it quality. The rich creamy texture massaged his throat as he drank. He couldn't have dreamed of anything as satisfying.

Then a man walked through the door, shattering any visions of paradise Norman had.

Kim Stenson.

Norman mentally cursed, but his practised façade remained rock still.

Kim stood in the doorway for a moment, hands on his hips, surveying the crowd. His eyes focused on Norman for a moment before continuing past. He carried his obviously rented suit well, but he still had 'COP' written all over him.

Norman chuckled. You could take the man out of the policemen, but you couldn't take the policeman out of the man, even when supposedly undercover.

Kim stepped forward, flanked by two other men. They wore black, anti flash sunglasses, had trim, almost crew-cut hairlines and wore plain, non-descript suits.

INRA. They looked so plain, they stood out more than Stenson. They took defiant stances at the door and tried to disguise it by leaning on the coffee counter and looking thoroughly bored. Kim took the seat nearest the door and stretched out as if he were digging in for the long run.

Norman pursed his lips. The room's only exit suddenly seemed along way away.

Aloysius Grant strutted into the room. Norman's eyes widened. Why hadn't Sam taken his place? Norman worked his jaw as he extrapolated through events to their horrible conclusion: If Sam hadn't succeeded, he must have been captured. What the hell had gone wrong?

Aloysius tilted his head and itched his moustache. He paused mid action before joining a group of laughing businessmen.

Norman sagged forward, sighing in relief. Sam had taken Aloysius's place. The lump in his stomach instantly dissolved. Faking a cramp, he limped over to the coffee. He focused on the brew; it might have been paranoia, but he could feel Stenson's hawk-like eyes boring into his back.

Norman laughed at his nervousness. A first year Imperial Agent would be showing more resolve than this. He had planned everything out to the nth degree. Nothing could go wrong.

He shook off the veil of uncertainty and filled his cup. He poured slowly, taking his time, keeping his eyes on the coffee. Wandering eyes could create suspicion.

"I hear you're from Terra Conquera Mining?" said someone behind him.

Norman turned. Sam stood behind him, eyebrows raised in question. Norman nodded. "That's right." He extended his hand. "TK Dover."

"Aloysius Grant," said Sam in an unrecognisable voice. He pushed past to grab the percolator.

Norman narrowed his eyes. Something didn't feel right. Could he have imagined the Sam's signal earlier?

Sam's eyes weren't giving anything away. People were moving behind him. Sara checked her watch and signalled to the doormen. Things were about to start.

Norman clenched his teeth. If he had to abort, he needed to know now. He risked the code phrase. "I'm not sure

this coffee is doing the trick for me."

Sam sipped the brown fluid and sloshed it around his mouth. His eyes lost focus.

Norman's blood boiled at Sam's impudence. The seconds ticked away. What was Sam playing at? Norman stared at Sam exasperated, waiting for an answer.

The door men moved toward the back; Sara the front. People sensing a change drifted toward their seats.

Norman sucked in a deep breath. The plan was dependent on Sam. If he did not give the go ahead, Norman would have to get out, fast.

Finally, Sam swallowed the coffee and sighed. "Putrid is the word I would use. I've drunk better coffee in a Vequess slave mine café." He seemed to draw the words out, as if it hurt to form them.

Norman had to hide his smile at the key words: putrid and Vequess. Too crude for Aloysius, but part of Sam's regular vocab. The loose strands of the plan were finally in place. So why did Sam have such attitude? Norman hoped he hadn't lost his nerve; He needed him now more than ever, but couldn't allow anything to endanger this mission.

He would have to keep an eye on Sam.

Sara cleared her throat from behind the dais. The room collapsed into silence under her amplified voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, the time is now eight o'clock." She nodded toward the back. "The door's are now closed. All latecomers will be barred entry. We shall begin the bidding in five minutes. Please take your seats."

Only now did Sam's eyes carry a twinkle. Norman knew Sam intimately. The man couldn't help being who he was. When the game started, he would play all-in until the end and would love every second of it.

Norman drifted to his seat. Only three quarters of the seats were taken. He had hoped a few more would have had incidents delaying them, but he hadn't done too badly, considering the time frame. It had been expensive to organise; he hoped it would end up worth it.

He checked out each of his remaining competitors, recalling their names, faces and bios from his neural lace. Quite a few of the significant threats were missing, but Aegean Corporation, Centrix Division and Obertex were still in attendance.

This time Norman did allow himself a half grin. Sam sat three rows back and to Norman's left. Stenson hadn't moved from his seat by the door. His cohorts were still hovering, more interested in the bidders than the bidding.

The auctioneer stood up to the dais. He tightened his tie, cracked his neck and tapped his wooden gavel against the block. "Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to another P&O auction.. The first item tonight is the modified Long Range Cruiser *Ajax*." He paused as the screen behind him came to life. A dot in the centre grew into a fully detailed LRC, which spun around its centre of gravity in both planes. A list of specifications and details appeared down the right hand side of the screen. The auctioneer ran through his required spiel, explaining the main variances of the ex-military ship over the civilian version.

Norman watched the others as they studied the graphic display. Their expressions varied for mild interest to jaw gaping excitement. Norman knew the *Ajax* was the mid life crisis cure that many of the bidders were looking for. Probably not for the two women though. Norman knew little of them, but women in positions of wealth and power were often more unpredictable and dangerous than men.

The auctioneer finished his blurb then smacked the gavel down. "Who'll give me a quarter of a billion credits?"

A half dozen hand thrust into the air, but a tuxedo clad man claimed the opening bid. The rest of the hands fell as the auctioneer continued. "Who'll give me point three billion credits? Quarter of a billion credits bid, now point three, now point three, will you give me point three?"

Norman sat back and watched with interest. With no desire for the *Ajax*, he had the luxury of studying the competition. There were several other bidders sitting back, seemingly uninterested in the *Ajax*.

To Norman's dismay, one of the women, a grey haired lady in a pressed suit kept her hands down, not even holding her numbered paddle, idling looking around the room with bored eyes.

The auctioneer's cry began to slow but his hands continued to thrust out toward the bidders, the gavel swishing

through the air. As the price climbed, the number of bidders dwindled. "Who'll give me a three quarter billion? Half billion bid, now three quarter, now three quarter, will you give me three quarters?"

Only three bidders were left at the billion credit mark: one of the women, Mr Costello from Aegean Corp and the representative of Riverdance Industries. Riverdance fell out at the one point five mark. Tuxedo was frantically whispering to an aide, who had a calculator in hand. The lady fell away quickly after.

"Who'll give me two billion credits? One seven five bid, now two billion, now two billion. Will you give me two billion?"

Silence descended on the room, punctuated by the rustle of papers and a muted cough. The auctioneers head bobbed around almost desperately, pleading the bidders to continue. "Who'll give me one eight five? I'll take one eight five."

The crowd stayed silent. The Mr Costello's face of unadulterated glee contrasted with the auctioneers. He was clearly on commission. He drew the bidding out, lowering his asking rate, but no one took the bait.

"One seven five going once, one seven five going twice," the auctioneer voice was laced with doom. With a defeated shrug, he raised the gavel high, dramatically above his head.

"One Eight zero."

The room froze as three dozen sets of eyes turned to the door. Kim Stenson had his arm held high, still, unwavering.

The auctioneer stared wide eyed before gathering himself. "One eight zero bid, now one eight five, now one eight five, will you give me one eight five?"

Tuxedo shot his arm up, piping Aegean by a split second. Aegean twisted around, eyes narrowed to slits as he tried to stare Tuxedo down.

The auctioneer didn't give him the chance however as he returned to his chant with renewed vigour. Tuxedo and Aegean went head to head, raising the price past two billion, while Stenson sat back, arms folded, a grin weaved into his face.

Norman raised an eyebrow. The cop was planning something. But what? Norman gave him a glance, but didn't stare. He couldn't raise attention to himself.

It took ten minutes for the bidding to ease. The auctioneer smacked his gavel on the board, relief in his strained voice. Mr Costello shook hands with his aide, a triumphant smile on his face. The auctioneer made notes in his book as Sara knelt down to whisper to Mr Costello. Norman couldn't hear the exchange.

Sara stood up and moved to the dais. "Excuse me ladies and gentlemen. With the conclusion of the first sale, we shall take a quick fifteen minute break. Please remember that the doors are to remain closed for the duration of this auction."

The hum of human noise enveloped Norman as he made his way back to the coffee station. The caffeine wasn't doing his jittery nerves any favours, but he had a feeling he wouldn't get another chance to savour the Phekdan brew.

Stenson stretched, stood up and went over to his INRA friends. Sara made a beeline for Norman.

Norman sucked in a breath. What did she want? He didn't have time for an in depth conversation. He risked a glance at Sam. He was playing with his moustache. The final signal.

"Mr Dover," Sara said. "Where's Mr Bond?"

"Ahh," said Norman. In truth he had been waiting for her to ask this question, but he couldn't appear that way. "He had to return planet side. The spinning of the space station plays havoc with his equilibrium."

Sara nodded. It was less a nod of belief, but more of not having time to follow through. She changed tact. "The Ajax didn't hold any interest for you?"

Norman shrugged. "I told you I wanted the *Repulse*. I wasn't kidding."

Sara regarded him, hands on her hips. "The ships are identical in all but name, Mr Dover."

Norman gave a toothy grin. "You're not a 'ship' person, are you Miss Douglass?"

Sara paled. "Excuse me?"

Norman shook his head, an old timer regaling a child with a tall story. "A name can make all the difference. I'll bid on her, Miss Douglass, and I'll win her. Don't have any doubt of that."

Sara straightened her suit jacket and gave a satisfied humph. "Excellent." She nodded and disappeared into the throng of people.

Norman sipped his drink and moved around the room. Feeling eyes on him, he looked up to see Stenson staring straight through him.

Norman almost coughed up his drink. Alarm bells rang through his head. Stenson suspected his identity. He had to. Norman tried to nod casually, but knew it looked like the nervous bob of a pigeon's head. He raised his cup in acknowledgement to strengthen his case.

Stenson pursed his lips and turned away, but he continued to scan the crowd. Sara suddenly appeared beside him. Stenson almost back-pedalled, clearly surprised by the ambush.

Norman couldn't hear their conversation over the room noise, but Stenson fidgeted as if on a sugar rush. Norman smiled and took another sip. *See how you like it, bud.*

The auctioneer drummed his gavel on the board and called people to return to their seats. Norman checked Sam for what must have been the fiftieth time. He looked ready. The butterflies worked their way up Norman's stomach, but he channelled the nervous energy to his mind and arms, where he needed it the most. Their plans required perfect timing. If anything went wrong. . .

The auctioneer started with the preamble for the *Repulse*, a repeat of the one for the *Ajax*. No one appeared to listen too hard.

With the preliminaries done, the auctioneer ran into his chant. Norman thrust his hand up to claim the opening bid. He wanted to make a statement of intent more than anything else: he meant business this time. He hoped his lack of interest in the *Ajax* would strengthen that image.

A flurry of arms waved through the room as every single bidder wrested for the top spot. Tuxedo and Riverdance, who missed out on the *Ajax*, seemed hungrier than ever.

The price sky rocketed. Past one billion, then past two. Bidders faded away, but ten people were still in the game at three billion.

Norman kept up with the bidding, but didn't needlessly push it higher.

The auctioneer's face grew redder as he cry continued unabated. His eyes were shining bright however, under the vision of his commission.

Tuxedo dropped out at four billion. The two women followed soon after.

Mr Costello pushed the price to five billion. Did he need both, Norman wondered, or did he simply not want anyone else to have them? Costello's aide whispered animatedly into his ear. Were they over their limit? Norman hoped so. He didn't want it to go much higher.

"Who'll give me five six billion? Five five billion bid, now five six, now five six, will you give me five six?" The auctioneer licked his lips, the vision of money clearly streaming past his eyes.

Sam raised a hand, eyes misted over, face relaxed, like a bored student answering the teacher's question.

Norman raised his hand to counter. The auctioneer turned to Mr Costello, greed overpowering his regular protocol. Costello leaned toward his aide, mouthing something inaudible. The aide shook his head. Costello dropped his shoulders and ran his finger past his neck. He had reached the end of his rope.

Norman turned to Sam. They were the only two left. His hands and legs tingled. He could almost taste the sweet nectar of victory.

Sam edged the price to six billion. He lowered his hand, an almost malevolent grin on his face. The auctioneer turned to Norman, eyes wide, mouth agape.

Norman frowned and mouthed a curse he had learnt during his military days. He raised his head, locked eyes with the auctioneer and slowly shook his head. He couldn't go any further.

The auctioneer's eyes dropped and he puckered his lips, but he checked the crowd with misplaced optimism. The room stayed silent.

The auctioneer wouldn't give in. "Six Billion going once. I'll take ten thousand increments. Six Billion going twice." A long pause. The hammer swivelled past the crowd one more time. "Sold!"

Norman flinched as the gavel slammed down, ringing through the room. The bidding war had drained him, yet the real action was about to start. He tensed his legs and clenched his fists. He checked Stenson's position. Two rows back, five seats across. Two rows back, five seats across.

The auctioneer gathered himself up to full height, his greedy eyes replaced with a condescending aristocratic air. "Congratulations Mr Grant. You are the new owner of the *Repulse*."

Sam jumped up, arms thrust into the air. "Yes. Victory!" He pumped his fists again.

Then his moustache fell off.

Auction Day Part 2

[Norman Mosser]

The fake moustache flopped to the ground, the noise amplified in the deathly silent room. No one moved, frozen still by the sight.

Kim jumped to his feet. "It's Mosser!"

The spell broke. The crowd erupted in screams of terror as they scrambled away from Sam. Everyone had heard of Mosser's reputation as a cold blooded pirate. Sara waved and gestured, yelling for calm, while the auctioneer dived behind his dais.

The INRA men were already moving, hands reaching into their jackets.

Norman held his ground against the wave of terrified people, focused entirely on Stenson, tracking his movements.

Sam finally reacted. He didn't run, he didn't tense, he simply clapped his hands together.

The back wall of the room exploded. Flames gouged out wall bonding and spread through the room like tongues of death.

Norman hit the deck. Wall fragments blasted through the room. The INRA men disappeared beneath a pair of fireballs.

Then the lights went out.

Norman jumped to his feet. His neural lace gave him superior night vision, but he didn't need it. He had already memorised the distance and obstacles. He leapt onto the nearest seat, hurdled the next, turned right, took a step and dived.

He collided with a body. They crashed to the ground. Hands grabbed for Norman's face. Footfalls rang through the floor, their bass thud accentuated by the mortal screams surrounding him.

Norman found Stenson's face. Before he could retaliate, Norman rammed his fist into Stenson's jaw then reeled backward. He raced down the aisle and dove over the seats, collapsing into a heap.

Dull red lights ignited, illuminating the room. Norman stayed down, hands over his head. He could taste the plaster, caking his mouth and clogging his nostrils. His right fist throbbed. Stenson had one solid jaw.

"No body move!" yelled a deep voice. Not Stenson.

Norman, spitting plaster, rolled over and edged himself to a sitting position.

A gun muzzle jabbed into his face. "I said don't move!"

Norman reeled back, more surprised than hurt, and blinked to get his eyes back in focus. One of the INRA stooges stood over him. His hair and face were singed, but he still looked ready to fight. Norman forced a quiver into his lips and started shaking and murmuring quietly to himself.

The stooge withdrew the weapon, seemingly satisfied Norman's act of cowardice posed no threat. He ran his pistol over the remaining scared people.

Norman pulled himself upright and cracked his neck and shoulders. The room was a total mess. The rear wall was missing, as well as sections of the roof.

Sam was gone.

Norman's stomach almost flipped. It had worked, even better than he had hoped. Sam still had to escape the station though, so they weren't out of the woods yet. He just had to stay quiet and everything would fall into place.

Stenson knelt by Sara's side, shaking her and calling her name. He yelled out to the INRA men, asking for help.

Norman had to hand it to Stenson. Even if he was working with the arrogant and self serving group INRA, his policeman instincts still held sway. Protect and Serve: Stenson had principles. Perhaps the two of them had more in common than first thought.

The door, hanging by a thread to its hinges, burst inward, crashing to the ground as paramedics rushed through. They scanned the room without stopping and picked out a pair of bidders close to the destroyed rear wall.

Sara coughed, startling Stenson, but he recovered and pulled her up to her feet. Stenson gave her what had to be a rare smile and moved onto the next person. The INRA stooges were animatedly discussing something in the corner.

Norman sat back down on his chair. He felt like someone had pulled the plug out of his toes and all his energy had drained away leaving a dry shell. Absently, he reached for his coffee cup but it shattered shards no longer held any drink. Sighing, Norman stretched back and waited for his with the paramedics.

Stenson swore as he slammed the door to the backstage area. Norman frowned and turned back to Sara. Her hair was a mess and dried blood graced her scalp, but her internal fire, visible through her eyes, was as bright as ever. "You were saying?"

"He managed to escape," Stenson interrupted. Steam erupted from his ears. His face looked like a bright red balloon.

Norman let the man vent. He knew Stenson's anger was focused internally, for letting his arch enemy escape again. *You're standing right next to me and you can't even recognise me*, thought Norman.

Sara gave her stock standard business smile: slight curvature, the top row of teeth visible, but no real warmth. "He didn't get escape in the *Repulse* however. And none of the invitees were seriously hurt," she added, almost as an afterthought. She waved the auctioneer over from the corner stall where he and his colleagues were working through the transaction they had just completed with Mr Costello, the Aegean representative.

Norman idly examined the room while the auctioneer loped over. Housed at the far end of the bidding room, there was little damage to indicate there had been an explosion next door. Sam had calculated his explosive requirements perfectly.

Sara cleared her throat in what was becoming an annoying routine. "Mr Dover, you were the next highest bidder for the *Repulse* with a bid of five point nine billion. Are you interested in completing the purchase at this price?"

Stenson's jaw dropped. He slammed it shut and charged forward. "You can't be serious," he said. "Mosser clearly rigged this auction. The results can't be trusted. You'll have to start again."

The auctioneer straightened upright and looked like he was about to slap Stenson, but decided against it at the last second. "No one rigs P&O auctions; our processes are pure. This Mr Mosser character bid like everyone else and followed the auction rules." He stamped his feet together. "This auction is valid, sir."

Sara signalled the auctioneer back to his seat then said in her schoolmasterly tone, "Mr Stenson, NRS invested a lot of money in this auction. My job is to ensure that this sale occurs, and that it occurs as quickly as possible. If Mr Dover wants the *Repulse*, it's his."

Stenson threw up his hands with a curse and stomped to the far side of the room.

A warm glow spread through Norman's chest. The Alliance had just offered him the perfect platform for the HPA on a silver platter. They wanted him to have it. He wanted to savour this moment. He had learned a lot about planning and manipulation over the years, but this had to be one his crowing achievements. But he couldn't gloat; that wouldn't befit his character. Instead, he smiled. "Yes, please, I will buy the *Repulse* at my bid."

Sara stood up and extended her hand. "Then we have a deal. Congratulations Mr Dover."

Norman shook her hand, standing to match her. She nodded to the auctioneer and they swapped seats.

Norman glanced at Stenson as the auctioneer organised his datapad. Stenson was stroking his jaw, patchy purple from Norman's sucker punch. His eyes bored into Norman, as if he could feel the fist imprint on his face and tie it back to him.

Norman resisted a shiver. He put the paranoia down to the high stakes of the game. Stenson wasn't that amazing. Talented perhaps, but not superhuman.

The auctioneer's bald head was caked with blood, but he gripped his datapad with steady hands. "I just need to go through the payment options with you, if you please Mr Dover. It'll only take a moment."

Norman nodded. The sooner they were done, the sooner he could get out of Stenson's sight. "Please."

The paperwork was drawn out in triplicate. With a final thumb print, Norman handed over nearly six billion dollars. His hand tingled with the thumb scan, senses heightened by the precariousness of his position. If Stenson were to suddenly figure everything out. . .

The detective was still studying him inquisitively. The two INRA stooges barged through the door and whispered to Stenson. He nodded and left the room with them.

Norman breathed a sigh of relief. With Stenson off his back the tension drained from his face. He felt free again.

The auctioneer grunted in approval at his PAD. Sara leaned forward. "Everything complete?"

"Both transactions have been concluded. The money is now in the designated account and the title deed has been transferred to Mr Dover's records."

"Fantastic. NRS thanks you for a job well done."

The auctioneer bobbed his head, like a well trained dog receiving a treat. As he moved away to pack up the rest of his equipment, Sara stood up. "Would you like to take a walk, Mr Dover?"

Norman's heart skipped a beat as his instinctive mistrust kicked in. Was this an innocent request or had Sara managed to see through him? He would have to play this carefully. He stood and offered her the crook of his elbow. "I would be delighted."

Sara glanced at the arm, as if it were a bug attempting to crawl onto her boot. "A business conversation if you please, Mr Dover."

Norman didn't have to fake the disappointment on his face. 'Business' could only mean one of two things. And one of them was bad. He gingerly fell into step with her as they left the back room. The auction room was charred black. Smoke lingered in the air. Emergency services worked to clear the wreckage. The doorway had been cordoned off. Forensics were already analysing the bomb fragments.

Good luck, Norman thought. You're going to need it.

"Have you put any thought into your next steps Mr Dover?" Sara asked as they cleared the ring of bystanders inspecting the damage.

Norman chuckled inside. Yes, as a matter of fact, he had thought about it. He tried to feign embarrassment. "Honestly no. My focus recently has just been on acquiring the ship. Now that I have it, I need to get it back home somehow, don't I?"

"Indeed. Additionally, as the owner of the ship, you'll be paying for the berthing fees."

Norman gulped. He shuddered to think what that cost would be. "That won't be cheap, will it?"

Sara snorted. "No. That's half the reason we needed to get rid of them."

There was less foot traffic than usual through the station. Perhaps people were staying at home, still shaken by the 'Norman Mosser appearance'. Thinking back, he hadn't made nearly enough appearances in Alliance space.

"I'm sure you're aware of the required crew compliment for a Long Range Cruiser?" Sara said.

Norman nodded. Although the advanced automation systems of the *Azure Sunset* allowed her to operate on one to two people, a regular LRC didn't have the same luxury. "A few shy of three hundred?"

"Two hundred and eighty six," Sara said, nodding. Her schoolmaster tone was back. "Do you know where you are going to find that many people?"

Norman shrugged. "We have some volunteers back at headquarters, but I may need to find some. . . local talent."

Sara shook her hair. "I thought you might. I've already started preparing a list of possibilities for you. Just part of

the service.” She gave her business smile again, but this time, Norman felt she meant it.

They stopped outside the local NRS offices. Sara leant on the door. “Why don’t you go get some food and come past in a few hours? I should have something to show you by then.”

“Sounds perfect.” Mosser paused. “Although I would like to have another look on board the *Repulse* if that’s ok.” The last words sounded meek in his throat, like a submissive child asking a parent to play with a toy. His heart thrashed in his chest as he waited for the reply however. Everything depended on Sara’s reply. He stared at her mouth, transfixed, silently pleading.

The seconds passed, torturing Norman’s heart.

Sara reached for her Pad. “Of course Mr Dover. You now own the ship, after all. I’ll upload the access codes and command prompts to your PAD now and you’ll have full access.”

Norman wanted to sag forward in relief but held himself rigid, instead simply nodding as if her decision were inconsequential.

Sara tapped her PAD. Norman’s beeped in response: data received. “Have fun,” said Sara. “I’ll see you soon.”

Norman couldn’t hide his grin. “You bet.”

As soon as the NRS supplied shuttle left the space station, Norman jumped into action. He activated his wrist chrono’s countdown. Ten minutes. He deactivated the shuttle’s autopilot and manoeuvred the ship to head for the *Repulse*’s bow. Once aligned, he pushed the engines to their maximum. Satisfied with the course correction, he leant down and untied his right shoe. He removed the sole and bumped out a single button dongle. He retied the shoe and checked his chrono.

Nine minutes.

He pressed the button on the dongle.

Nothing happened. Eight minutes thirty.

The back of the *Repulse* brightened until engine wash illuminated the rear half of the ship. Ever so slowly, the *Repulse* edged forward, drifting away from the station.

Eight minutes.

The *Repulse* began to move across the shuttle’s viewport.

The radio waves ignited in panicked cries as hundreds of people reacted to the *Repulse*’s sudden activation.

As pilots scrambled out of the way, polluting the airwaves with curses, a strong voice broke through the noise. “NRS Shuttle NR-70, change course immediately. Your course will intersect with the rogue LRC in seven minutes.”

“Six minutes and thirty seconds,” Norman said to himself. He didn’t reply. There were enough voices out there to swallow his whole anyway.

“Shuttle NR-70, do you copy? Change your course immediately. You are on a collision course with the rogue LRC.”

Norman kept quiet, attention shifting between the view screen and his chrono. Six minutes. Space had collapsed into pandemonium as ships flittered back and forth, barred entry to the station so traffic control tried to gain control of the situation.

The airwaves went silent. Not only traffic control, but all the other ships too. The whole area had been blanketed under the station’s jammer. Or just his ship had been targeted.

Norman grumbled. Either way, it meant that traffic control were so suspicious that higher powers had been called in to control the situation. He had no doubt his shuttle was high on their priority list either.

Five minutes. Time to turn the shuttle around for the deceleration burn.

The station's main door opened. Two Viper Police ships raced out. Their engine was twisted into an arc as the ships altered course to bear down on his shuttle.

Norman swallowed the lump in his throat. Dread picked its way up his spine, clouding his vision. The police had responded far quicker than he had anticipated. Neither the Empire of the Federation could have responded so fast. No wonder the Alliance had won its freedom.

He was out of options. If he turned around now to decelerate, the Vipers would catch him up and turn him into stellar dust.

The *Repulse* lumbered forward, building up speed as its military engines pushed the million tonne ship forward.

Four minutes thirty.

If he didn't turn around now, he would smash against the side of the *Repulse* and be turned into stellar dust.

Killed by a cop, or killed by his own ignorance of physics. Neither option appealed. But he had to choose one. He spun the ship about. He kept the engines maxed out.

Four minutes.

The Vipers screamed closer. The *Repulse* filled the rear view. The locked docking bay door sat to the left, ridiculously small and blending in against the surrounding cliff of steel.

Time to open the doors. Norman linked his PAD with the ships antennae and broadcast the lock code to the *Repulse*. The bay door slowly retracted. Artificial light glowed from inside.

Norman clenched his jaw as he handled the controls. It would have been easier to pick out a solitary pixel on a high resolution datapad. Sweat dripping from his face, he corrected his trajectory by over compensating, aiming for the *other* side of the bay doors.

Three minutes.

The shuttle's rear fins dragged around in an arc, as if pushing through treacle, but as the ship slowed, the speed vector evened out and the turn accelerated.

Two minutes thirty.

The Viper's were almost in range. The shuttle came in line with the edge of the docking bay doors. Norman tweaked the controls and with the final dregs of sideways momentum, the shuttle lined up perfectly with the open doors.

Now he just had to turn the shuttle around and decelerate from his currently suicidal speed. But he would cross that bridge when he got to it.

Two minutes.

His time ran out. The Vipers fired, twin beams of coherent light lashing out across space like talons seeking their prey.

Norman jerked the controls instinctively as if struck by lightning. The shots went wide, but the Vipers were still at maximum firing range.

Every second that passed would improve their aim. And he couldn't manoeuvre. No matter how good a pilot he was, he still had to obey physics. He couldn't fly through the narrow bay doors while flying at random angles and going backwards.

The laser beams scythed closer, pulsing with amplified heat.

Norman exhaled a deep breath. The equation was simple: He wasn't going to make it.

So he changed the equation. He spun the shuttle back around. He killed the main engine and fired up the retros. They had even less acceleration, but at least now he could manoeuvre with a hint of survivability.

One minute thirty.

The *Repulse* filled his entire forward view. Its size was monstrous. His insignificance next to LCR's still got to him, despite his familiarity. The bay doors were still open, the artificial light inviting him in, tantalisingly close.

The ship bucked. Norman held on for dear life as the shuttle dipped and twisted from the blast.

His luck had run out. He twisted the ship around, bringing an aerofoil out of the laser beams path. He throttled the controls, mirroring the violence outside as the shuttle danced between red blades of death.

One minute.

The bay doors drifted to the right as the shuttle's manoeuvres became more desperate. Norman tried to correct, bringing the shuttle around sharply, as a laser burst flashed past the cockpit window.

The shuttle groaned at the close shave. The rough treatment and high gee's were taking their toll on its fragile frame. Norman urged it to hold together a while longer. He ripped the controls back around to line up with the bay doors, but his sideways momentum continued to thwart him, pushing him out of alignment.

Norman cursed. It was like chasing his own tail. A monstrous thump rang through the shuttle body as it lurched downward. The lights dimmed; klaxons blared. Acrid smoke filled the cockpit.

Norman coughed as he checked the damage readout. His shoulders sunk. The engine was toast. The ship was out of his control now. It was just a lump of fast moving steel, a prisoner to its momentum.

With Norman inside it. Heart filled with dread, he looked out the viewport. The bay doors were dead ahead, reaching out to swallow him.

Fifteen seconds.

Laser beams narrowed in on him from both sides. Norman growled in frustration. He couldn't do anything except rue his bad luck. To have come so far, only to lose metres from the finishing line, was not how he wanted to end.

The shuttle passed through the bay doors. The light blossomed though the cockpit as the shuttle zoomed into the bowels of the ship. The walls raced by in a blur.

Norman eyed the left wall. It inched closer and closer as the *Repulse* continued to accelerate against the static velocity shuttle. He clenched the arm rests tight and tried to brace himself in the seat. He had a bad feeling about this.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Impact. Norman's whole world shook and imploded as the shuttle crashed into the wall. He went flying. Metal shrieked and cried. Alarms sounded then died strangled deaths as he struggled back to the seat. The speed readout raced downward.

The floor buckled and crinkled. Norman's eyes widened in realisation. The ship was coming apart. He clamped down on the arm rests, holding on for dear life as the ship drifted to the floor.

The shrieking metal filled every cilia in his ears, like tiger claws raking through his brain. The end of the docking shaft was coming up fast. Norman began to wonder what would kill him first; exploding ship or pancaked ship.

The vibrations began to ebb and the ship jerked to a stop. Norman flew into the viewscreen with a yelp.

He came to. A hissing noise broke through the haze. Thoughts and memories swirled through the maelstrom in his mind before snapping into focus.

The ship was leaking air! He had to get out, now. He struggled to his feet and staggered out of the cockpit into the lounge. The hissing intensified. Mist and cobwebs choked his thoughts as he pushed to the back wall, groping for one of the space suits.

His fingers tingled at the lack of air pressure. His face was numb, his mind blank, but his body ran on autopilot, reflexes trained into his muscles after years of emergency exits.

He couldn't remember zipping up the suit, but as soon as the helmet clicked into position, everything smashed into focus like a brick to the face. He slumped to the floor in relief but sheer will power got him back to his feet and into

the airlock.

He cycled through and stepped out of the ship. The docking corridor stretched into infinity. A massive gouge lined the near wall, black with carbon scoring and distorted from the heat.

His heart panged with sorrow. He had owned the ship less than an hour and he had already damaged it. Not a good start.

Movement caught his eye from the end of the docking shaft. Were the Viper's flying in after him? He didn't want to wait around to find out. He lugged his heavy suited legs forward to the nearest airlock. His brow furrowed as he marched forward, determination borne of survival pushing him on. Sweat nucleated across his skin, but he sucked in deep breaths and kept moving.

The airlock was ten metres ahead. Renewed, Norman pushed harder, stumbling as he grabbed the airlock door handle. With his last burst of energy, he pulled the door aside, stepped in, closed the door and began the compression cycle. He collapsed to the floor, feeling the fire in his limbs ebb away.

The light above the inner door turned green and Norman hungrily removed his helmet and gulped in large breaths of clean air. He crawled through the door and collapsed again, panting, soaking in the enormity of what he had just done. He had survived, but only just. He needed to get a new supply of clones; he couldn't keep risking his only life like this.

The rear bridge doors opened to reveal a dark and empty expanse, with a few consoles providing the only lighting. Norman ran to the engineering console and turned on the lights. The next step was to get direct control over the override he had planted several days before. Once ready, he entered in the memorised coordinates for the meeting place with Sam.

The scanners beeped, piquing Norman's interest. The Vipers were still outside, buzzing around like angry but toothless hornets. He wondered why they hadn't tried to land inside. Not that he minded. Several other ships and shuttles flew nearby, but nothing that represented a threat.

The hyperdrive dial blinked. The engines were fully powered. Norman entered the final coordinates and engaged the drive.

The hull plates murmured and rattled beneath his feet as the ship jumped into witchspace.

The ship jerked still a split second later; a microjump, to take the *Repulse* to the edge of the Alioth system.

"Base, this is Bond," said Sam over the radio almost immediately. "Preparing to dock."

Norman didn't reply. They agreed he would stay silent unless there was a problem. Instead, he worked on getting more engine control routed to the bridge. The override he had installed had just the single microjump preloaded. He would need direct control over the engines to get back to Frantic's base, something he would struggle to organise without a standard crew or some advanced automation. And with the Alliance Navy no doubt bearing down on the *Repulse*, Norman knew he had to move fast.

The bridge door opened behind him. Norman grunted approvingly. Sam hadn't wasted any time getting on board.

Norman froze.

It wasn't Sam standing before him.

It was Stenson and the two INRA stooges. All three had their guns trained squarely on him.

Norman's heart went into overdrive. How had they gotten on board? The shuttle from earlier, he realised. He had written it off as harmless, not even bothering to check its trajectory. A rookie mistake. And likely a fatal one.

Norman straightened up to face his adversaries. Scenarios and plans rushed through his mind, simultaneously evolved and discarded as he reached for options. He had to stall, soak up time, until Sam could surprise them.

A chill drifted through his gut. Did Stenson know Sam was coming? If so, Norman might as well have given up right then. Trying to hide his true feelings, he sneered at Stenson. "The cop."

Stenson didn't reply. Didn't move. None of them did. Memories of the old spaghetti westerns flashed before Norman's eyes: The opponents staring at each other, watching, waiting for the clock to strike before they could draw.

The INRA stooges cracked their necks, shoulders and knuckles, eyes staring straight through Norman.

This is your last clone. There are no more spare clones. The thought exploded into his head, blowing away all others. If he died now. He would be dead. Permanently. Where the hell was Sam?"

Finally, Stenson spoke. "The evil clone who has killed millions, destroyed billions of credits of property and caused nothing but chaos and misery."

Norman blanched. Even when facing death he still had professional pride. "That's a bit unfair. I made a lot of money at the same time."

Stenson narrowed his eyes, skin folding into wrinkles. The grey hair didn't fool Norman. Stenson had already proven his dangerous capabilities. "Norman Mosser, you're under arrest for crimes against humanity."

The INRA stooges advanced, passing Stenson's flank.

Norman clenched his teeth. He still didn't have a plan. Three on one, and two seconds to crunch time. Not good.

One moment the INRA stooges were reaching out for him, the next they were both on the ground, their backs a mess of charred flesh and clothing.

Stenson stood with gun arm outstretched, smoke drifting from the barrel. The gun snapped back to Norman.

Norman stared at Stenson, mind whirring to work out what he had just witnessed, but another thought overrode all others: the odds were now one to one.

Stenson grinned. "I wanted you all to myself Norman. I couldn't share you. Not after what you did to me." Stenson stepped forward, tilting his head to show the scar. His eyes grew wide and dark, as if a cloud had passed over his soul.

Norman instinctively stepped back. Something ominous wriggled down his spine, something he hadn't felt in a long time. True fear. Stenson was clearly insane. And that made him unpredictable and dangerous. He could snap at any second. Stenson hadn't come for an arrest, no matter what his police oath said. He had come for blood.

Stenson stepped forward, licking his lips, no doubt salivating at some perverted fantasy of torturing him. He spoke in a deranged voice, dark and stretched, as if strangled out of the doors of hell. "I would have waited an eternity for this. It's over, Mosser."

Norman had to act now. He couldn't wait for Sam.

This is your last clone. This is your last clone. This is your last clone. The mantra banged through his head, fogging his thoughts. He focused on Stenson's weapon. An Investigator Special, a slightly more powerful version of the Detective, with the typical stubby barrel for easy concealment. The power, range and fabrication specs pulsed out of his neural lace and were projected onto his vision. But the data didn't tell him anything useful.

Panic clawed its way forward into the centre of his thoughts. *This is your last clone.*

The stubby barrel! Good for concealment, bad for accuracy. It was his only chance. Norman knew what he had to do.

When he had faced himself in the infirmary in the *Azure Sunset*, he had moved faster than De Havilland. But was Stenson faster than De Havilland? As the inevitability of his death crushed down on him, Norman knew that there was only way to find out.

This is your last clone.

Norman moved.

He dived backward, pulled out his Deathwrecker and fired at Stenson.

Norman's head snapped back as he smashed into the console behind him. His vision darkened as he slid to the

ground. The Deathwrecker slid from his numb fingers as he edged downward.

Stenson lay on the ground, unmoving, smoke issuing from his chest.

Elation surged through Norman, but stalled as he looked down. A ragged charred crater stared back at him from his chest. His heart shivered and spasmed as adrenaline tried to combat the damage. Electricity flooded his chest as his neural lace desperately tried to keep his heart ticking over. For all intents and purposes, he was dead.

This is your last clone. This is your last clone.

Norman waited. He couldn't move, couldn't breath, couldn't think. He had taken one risk too many and now his grand adventure had ended. He thought he would have been angry. Instead, he just felt sad. No more adventure, no more risks, no more feeling alive. He knew he would miss that most of all.

As the bridge began to darken, the rear door opened. More of Stenson's friends? Norman would have smirked if he could have; they couldn't do anything else to him. They were too late. A small pleasure he could take with him.

A blonde man stepped through. He looked familiar. Lean, medium build and carrying a Deathwreaker.

Sam.

He raced onto the bridge, gun outstretched. He aimed at Stenson as he kicked the body. He checked the INRA stooges before stopping before Norman. The dark emptiness of the barrel stopped inches from Norman's head.

Sam's face was unreadable in the fading light. The guns buzz of unreleased energy echoed around the bridge.

This is your last clone. This is your last clone.

Everything went black.

A Date at Delta P

[Vasquith de Havilland]

Dev stared at the stark desert stained orb of Reagans Legacy on the viewscreen. They were close enough to watch it grow before them. He relaxed back into the captain's chair. An easy flight in. A good omen?

The planet stretched, the horizon flattening out across the viewscreen. The northern continent came into view. A small blur of grey and white shone from the surface.

"Traffic control has granted our landing request," said Veruz from the pilot's chair. The kid's voice had lost its humour after Williamsons Base. He hadn't appreciated being told off. Dev hoped he would get over it quick.

They landed on pad 5, the touchdown barely discernible, if not for the hissing of coolant and the spooling down of the engines. Dev stood and gave Veruz a slap on the back. "Not bad, Michael." *Not bad at all.*

Veruz nodded, eyes averted and strode for the bridge doors.

Dev sighed. Typical teenage angst. Whatever, he'd get over it. Right now, they had a job to do. Of course he'd been telling himself that for a while now. One day his life wouldn't be about survival. It'd be about living.

Dev followed Veruz down through the ship. The boarding ramp dropped to the landing pad. A dry hot wind rushed into the ship, sapping the moisture from his mouth. He stepped off and stopped, feeling the sun heat his face and arms. Gulls squawked in the distance. He smiled. Yes, he enjoyed flying, but nothing felt better than a yellow sun overhead and brown earth below.

Veruz had already walked ahead. Dev quickened his pace to catch up. A transport blasted off from behind the central starport hub. It passed overhead. Dev looked up, shielding his eyes.

He gasped. His pulse quickened, the lettering on the ship's belly burning into his retinas.

Fed Mil Federal Military.

Dev spun, searching for anything out of the ordinary; a person out of place, the reflection of a sniper scope, anything to tell him they'd been spotted.

Veruz had stopped by the hub doors. He turned, lips drawn into a tight line. "What's wrong?"

"Fed Mil. They're here."

Veruz frowned, his angry pretence fading "They know we're here?"

Dev's heart pounded in his chest as paranoia flooded his mind. "Let's get inside." They scampered through the hub doors.

Thousands of people milled around the crowded concourse. A blast of conditioned air encapsulated them as they stepped in.

Dev looked for security cameras, but they were too well hidden. He gestured Veruz forward. "Blend in. Let's find a terminal." Veruz pushed through the crowd, rougher than appropriate for 'blending'. Dev didn't say anything. He had to pay attention to their surroundings. He wanted to be ready for a hidden attack or plain clothes officer.

They made it to a terminal safely and Veruz logged on. He went to the stock listings.

"Ceramics," Dev whispered.

Veruz scowled but scrolled down the list. He opened the ceramics section. He searched the list but came up empty. He tried again.

"It has to be here somewhere," said Dev, leaning in closer. "There!" He tapped the screen:

ZiSCRO2 Ceramic (Condensate) __ T available.

"They're all gone," Veruz growled.

Dev swore under his breath. "That can't be right. Where are they?"

"Veruz turned to Dev, jaw clenched. "Someone got here before we did."

Dev couldn't stop himself looking back at the crowd. The back of his mind buzzed, the feeling of being watched tickling like an itch.

But how could anyone know they were here? Dev shrugged it off. They had to continue on. "We'll have to go to the source itself. Straight to the company which manufactures them. Pull up the details, will you?"

Veruz downloaded the address to a hard copy. "Now what?"

Dev showed Veruz several of the cred-coins that Norman had given him and smiled. "We have to look the part. It's time to go shopping."

Dev stepped from the booth and twirled around. The quality of the material left a lot to be desired, but it clung to his frame well. It looked good enough. "What do you think?"

Veruz barely moved a muscle. "Fine. Can we go?"

Dev ran his tongue around his mouth. Veruz's attitude grated, but the constant fear and suspicion was wearing him down too. He'd let it lie. He turned to the salesman. "We'll wear them out, thanks."

The salesman's wide grin never faltered. Dev handed over a coin and they left.

The sun had reached its zenith, beating down on them with an intensity rivalling Alioth. Dev's skin was tightening already. Speeders zipped back and forth overhead, occasional horn blasts interrupting the melody of their engines; lorries lumbered between shops making drop offs. There was enough foot traffic for them to blend with.

Veruz stood at an info terminal. "Jesus, the companies on the other side of the city."

Dev exhaled. He wouldn't have minded the walk, but time was critical. He strode to the nearest taxi beacon. He pressed the button, illuminating a green light atop the twenty metre tall pole. Three overhead cars fell from the sky, seemingly on a collision course. One pulled back, leaving two aiming straight for each other and Dev.

"Ahh. . ." Deep backed away from the curb. The taxis seemed destined for a collision but at the final moment one of them pulled up and away, leaving one car to skid to the curb, burnt rubber wafting from the landing gear. A side door opened and a face leaned over the front seat.

"Where you heading?"

Deep blinked several times, waiting for his heart to slow. "Ahhh, Tolken Industries."

"No kidding, I was there a quarter hour ago. Hop in."

Dev's heart quickened again as foreboding rustled at the edges of his mind. He climbed in, Veruz packing in after him. Dev tried to contain the quiver in his voice. "Another passenger?"

"What?"

"You took a passenger to Tolken?"

"Yeah, just before. I haven't been to that side of a town for a week, then I get two at a time. Crazy eh?"

"Dev checked for a tail. It couldn't be a coincidence. He fingered the Diplomat in his belt. The cool metal eased his nerves. "Yeah, crazy."

Veruz looked straight ahead, seemingly missing the connection. Dev leant over and whispered, "Keep an eye out."

Veruz nodded, but didn't react otherwise. The driver babbled on about every second building he passed, as if Dev had asked for a tour guide instead of a taxi driver. Thankfully, it was only a ten minute drive to Tolken's headquarters.

The building stood three stories high, modest by Earth or even Alioth standards, but it looked new, clean and seemed to serve its purpose. The only thing that counted was what he found inside, however.

They stepped through the main door under a curtain of cool air, retuning moisture to Dev's skin. He sighed in relief.

The receptionist looked up and smiled from behind her counter. "Welcome to Tolken Industries. May I help you?"

Her attentiveness warmed Dev's heart. She looked caring and interested. A good sign. He had had enough of corrupt companies, that only cared about their under the table incomes. Actually, he was sick of all engineering companies. He thought he had left this life behind?

He leant over the counter. He couldn't use their real names. Not with all the coincidences stacking up since their arrival planetside. "Hello. I'm Dev Sidestep and this is Micky Cross. We represent, ah, Frantic Avionics."

Veruz rolled his eyes. The receptionist's eyes widened in apparent recognition. "Ah, yes, of course."

Dev blanched, but recovered. Did such a company exist, or was she just polite? "Yes and we're looking for some ceramic condensate."

"One moment please." Her pupils disappeared behind a silver sheen and her mouth moved to unspoken words. The sheen disappeared, bringing back her regular green. "Someone will be out to meet you shortly."

Deep blinked away the shock. "Thanks." He sat at a pair of seats with Veruz. The kid didn't respond. Dev shrugged and turned back to the receptionist. She must have had some neural nanite package, like a cut down - and legal - version of Norman's neural lace, good for organizing data, and phone calls. Apparently.

A man in a suit walked down the stairs and shook both their hands. He guided them down a hall. Dev's spirits dropped as they entered another board room -he'd had enough of them recently - but sat down at the table as the suit organized drinks.

"Megan said you were interested in our ceramic condensate range?" The man leant forward, hands clasped together, a classic salesman smile wedged into his face.

"That's right," said Dev. He waved to Veruz. "We're doing some in-house prototyping and heard you were the best in the business."

The salesman chuckled and even went red at the accolade. "We have quite a range. Is there a particular type you were after?"

Dev nodded to Veruz. "Micky?"

Veruz cleared his throat then pulled out his datapad. "Twenty tones of Zinc-Silicon-Cromate."

The salesman's eyes rolled upward for a moment and his lips pursed.

Dev's head drooped. *Oh oh*. Not a good sign.

The salesman exhaled. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we just sold the last of our stock not more than half an hour ago."

Dev's heart sunk. It hadn't been a coincidence. Someone had just bet them here. Someone who knew what it could be used for and who was trying to stop them from getting it. His feet tensed, ready to move; the Diplomat grated against his back. He felt like a mouse in a cage, toyed with by his captors until they lost interest and ended the experiment, permanently.

He forced a calm breath and even struggled to apply a smile. "Ain't that always the way? How long till you have another twenty tonne available?"

The suit consulted his PAD. "All our machines are currently setup for a long production run of another ceramic. I'm afraid it won't be for at least a fortnight."

Dev puckered his lips. "Can you tell us who you sold the condensate to?"

The salesman shrugged. "An independent cargo hauler came and picked it up. It had been arranged earlier through another company." He pulled out a small piece of crystal flimsy - a business card. He turned it around and

slid it across the table.

*Melinda White
Research Manager
Ionian Nuclear Research Amalgamated.*

Dev jerked as if electrocuted, his fingers digging into the table, feet kicking against the chair.

"You alright?" asked the salesman.

"I'm fine." He wiped the sweat from his brow. He palmed the card and stumbled up out of his seat. "Thank you for your hospitality. We'll have to try our luck elsewhere."

The salesman stood and guided them out of the building. "Good luck."

Once they were out of sight of the building, Dev pulled Veruz into a side street.

"What the hell's wrong with you cap'n? I thought we were trying not to bring attention to ourselves."

Dev shoved the card in Veruz's face.

Veruz's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Ionian Nuclear Research Amalgamated. Notice anything familiar about the name?"

"No."

Dev growled. "What's the acronym?"

Veruz just shook his head. "What?"

"The first letters. They spell INRA."

Veruz's eyes widened but then he snorted. "That's too obvious. INRA would never be that stupid. A secret organization wouldn't get too far if that's how it kept secrets."

"Maybe they're trying to make it so obvious that no one would believe it. They're letting us know that they are watching us, that they're on our tail. They know the HPA is damaged. They know what we need to fix it, they know who we are. I bet if we checked all the condensate suppliers across the galaxy, we'd find were all sold out."

"That's crazy. If they were onto us like that, they would have captured us by now." Veruz peered down the street. "They could be closing the noose right now."

"Jesus, don't talk like that, you're freaking me out. Besides, they couldn't possibly know which of the suppliers we would go for. They probably just hit them all at once to cover their bases."

"It's the closest supplier to Williamsons Base. It won't take them long to make the connection."

The realization punched Dev in the stomach, making him sink. He grimaced and grabbed Veruz "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Then what?"

"Worry about that later."

They raced down the street, heading for the distant air control tower. A taxi was too risky - the confined space could be a problem if they were caught. They were better off on foot.

Sweat drained from every pore, but the relentless sun dried it almost instantly. Dev chastised himself. His drill sergeant would be spewing if he could see him now. Dev pushed on, adrenaline numbing his pounding heart.

The starport entrance loomed ahead. They zig zagged through the traffic. They entered the hub to a breath of cool air and a thinning of traffic. Shops lined a narrow walkway which opened into the concourse. Dev sped up, pulling

up on Veruz. He didn't bother keeping an eye out. Too late to worry about that now.

"Dev!"

Dev spun, recognising the voice. His eyes widened. He desperately scanned the crowd. And stopped. He skidded to halt. There she was. The woman who had possessed his heart and his mind since she first put a gun to his face all those months ago. "Emu. What are you doing here?"

Veruz screamed behind him, voice ragged. "Come on!"

Emu stepped forward. Dev reciprocated, unsure if he should hug her or not. She wore a mask of cold carbonite, eyes of inanimate crystal.

"Business." The curt reply slapped in the face. Why was she like this? What had he done wrong? Too much time to reflect, time to become angry?

Dev swallowed to hold back the shiver. "Not in the ceramic condensate business by chance?"

Veruz's footfalls disappeared behind him. Hopefully the kid would get the ship ready, but Dev still had to hurry. People milled around, oblivious to the standoff, their chatter deafening him to his own quaking heart.

"I'm in the intelligence business," she said.

Dev frowned. What kind of business- *Shit*. His life crystallized to this single moment of time, dark, still, cold. His breath froze in his chest.

Emu smirked, a smile so tight and vicious it pierced straight through to his heart. "That's right," she said, almost as if she were enjoying herself. "We've been tracking you, Norman and the *Sunset* for months. Your illusions of freedom are nothing more than that. We can have you any moment we like. We know everything."

A tear ran down Dev's cheek. "That's not true."

Emu waved her delicate hands through the air. "How do you explain the ambush at Rocky Fields?"

"What?"

"That's what the media is calling it: The battle of Rocky Fields, where the Federation and Empire nearly destroyed the *Azure Sunset*."

Her words rang true in his ears. How had the superpowers known their location? Someone had tracked the *Sunset*. But Emu would have died in the attack if he hadn't rescued her. She couldn't have been part of it, could she? And didn't Maegil have a tie to that Spartacus Brotherhood?

Something didn't add up.

Emu looked carved from granite, emotionless, immovable, inhuman. "Vasquith de Havilland, you're under arrest."

"You'd better arrest me then."

The surrounding hum and chatter died away, Dev's conscious focused solely on her. Neither of them moved. Her eyes flickered - just for a second - but enough to give Dev hope.

She was conflicted. Maybe she still cared, maybe she didn't, but he held onto the doubt. "I'm going to run now."

"And I'm going to chase you." Her voice hadn't wavered.

"Ok." He paused. He had to tell her, even if she didn't care anymore, no matter how much it hurt. "You know I love you."

Then he turned. And he ran.

He reached the bridge out of breath. "Take off! Now!"

Veruz was already pulling back on the controls before Dev finished speaking. The large ship groaned, slowly lifting off, struggling against gravity.

"Up up up! Get us out of here. Take us out system."

Veruz grunted as he fought the ship. He pushed the engines to full burn. A weight momentarily crushed against Dev's chest before the dampeners re-established.

The ship levelled out and the whine of the engines dropped fractionally.

Veruz looked back to Dev. "What was the bloody holdup?"

"We have a problem."

"What?"

Dev swallowed. He didn't want to say it aloud, because that would somehow make it more real. He desperately wanted it to all be a lie.

"What's the problem?" Veruz's voice rose an octave.

Dev clenched and unclenched his jaw several times until he managed to open his mouth. "Emu's a mole."

Veruz spun around completely, dropping the controls and drawing up on Dev. His eyes widened; Dev could see the thoughts racing behind them. Then they narrowed to slits. "You took her back to her home base and she reported to her superiors about everything. Now they know where Frantic's base is and they know what we're doing and everything else about us. We're fucked."

Dev dropped to the captain's chair, head in his hands. The guilt streaming out of Veruz bit deep, but it paled in comparison with the betrayal in his heart. "I know."

Crossing The Line

[Vasquith de Havilland]

Silence consumed the bridge, crashing into Dev like waves of pain. Veruz just shook his head and sat back at the controls.

Dev peered out through his fingers. His heart ached in sync with the cycling of the air conditioning. Wrong. Everything had just gone wrong.

But those eyes. He remembered Emu's eyes. She loved him. She had to. There would be a logical explanation for everything. It would all come together in the end.

He put the thought aside. One problem at a time: they still had to find the ceramic condensate.

"So where are going?" Veruz asked.

Dev stood and strode to the scanner station. Several freighters flew behind them; no hyperspace clouds lay before them. He pursed his lips. What to do? Look elsewhere, or try to find the ship that just stole the condensate from under their noses? At this stage of the game, both options had equally unacceptable amounts of risk.

Veruz's voice grated through his thoughts. "Cap'n where are we going?"

Dev straightened up. Time to make a choice. "Can you out-fly Fed Mil in this thing?"

Veruz snorted. "I can do anything in this thing."

Dev scampered back to his chair. "Turn us around."

Veruz activated opposing retros and main thrusters. The ship twisted around and shot back toward the planet.

"Get us close in to each freighter. We'll scan their cargo holds," said Dev.

Veruz pushed the Courier within grazing distance of a Griffin carrier. Its captain filled the comm with expletives. Dev killed the speakers.

The scan came up negative.

They zigzagged between the other freighters, exhaust plumes buffeting between the ships. The scans all came up negative.

Veruz glanced at the scanner. "Vipers coming in."

Dev cursed. Police. He'd hoped they wouldn't be so quick off the mark. "Keep going."

They swung past a Tiger Trader.

"Bingo!" Veruz killed the Courier's velocity and spun around, forming up on the Tiger's wing.

Dev activated the comm. "Attention Commander of the Tiger Trader. I'll buy your cargo for double whatever rate you are being paid."

The comm crackled with static. "Not interested, Courier. Now kindly vacate my personal space."

Veruz backed them away. "Police five clicks away," he whispered.

Dev ran his hands through his hair and grunted. "Tiger, I'm very desperate for your cargo. I'll pay triple the rate."

"I don't know what kind of business you are trying to run, Courier, but I have a contract and a reputation to maintain. I can't help you."

"I understand your position, Tiger, but this is literally a matter of life or death. I'll pay you five times the rate."

The comm went silent. Veruz glanced at Dev, who shrugged. Just as he opened his mouth, the Tiger disappeared in a flurry of pulsating orange and red stripes. Lighting played over the Courier's hull, dimming the lights and scratching noise over the speakers.

Dev punched his chair. "The son of a bitch jumped. Analyse the cloud. We can't let him escape."

Veruz had already activated the scanner. "But we're heavier than the Tiger. Can we beat him to his destination?"

Dev worked his jaw. "Maybe. The Tiger is a slow vessel." He paused. "Let's hope Frantic has made some modifications to this bird."

The hyperspace cloud analyzer beeped completion. The target system flashed on the viewscreen. Veruz programmed the hyperdrive.

The rear shields blared in alarm. Two Vipers sped past and around, coming back for another shot.

"Get us out of here Veruz," Dev said, eyes glued to the viewscreen. The Vipers twisted around, bringing their lasers to bear. . .

Then the Vipers and space itself disappeared, replaced with the familiar blue and white tunnel of witchspace.

Dev sighed and relaxed. "We have to stop this habit of last second escapes."

Veruz gave a quick snort. The chronometer scrolled forward in typical, but primevally wrong fashion, as the Courier cut through space and time.

The tunnel evaporated, spitting them back into the black. Dev slapped his hands together. "Ok, where is he?"

Veruz hunched over the local scanner, murmuring to himself. "Got him." He jumped back to the controls and eased the Courier forward and around. A small speck appeared in the distance, growing larger with every second until it became a pulsing blue exit cloud filling half the viewscreen.

The Tiger blossomed into existence. Dev clenched a fist and grabbed the comm. "Attention Tiger. Perhaps I wasn't clear earlier. My life is dependent on acquiring your cargo. As you spurned my generous offer, I have a new one: Surrender or Die."

The Tiger's commander sounded suspiciously smug. "I have a counter offer. Piss off, or be destroyed."

Dev snorted. "You and what army, Tiger?"

"This one." The dying hyperspace cloud pulsed brighter and larger and seven more ships suddenly appeared from within. They spread out, flying past the Courier, lasers firing.

Dev yelled out, but Veruz was already moving. He lined up a Sidewinder and fired. A crisp yellow beam erupted from the front of the Courier. It slammed into the Sidewinder, evaporating it.

Two orange beams intersected metres from the front of the Courier. Veruz engaged the retros but the ship couldn't stop and slammed into the beams. It bucked and shook; alarms rang through the bridge as the lights blinked out. Dev crashed to the ground but he turned in into a roll and ran for the scanner.

Veruz backed out of the trap and panned the ship sideways. An Asp Explorer weaved and turned, flying away at full burn. Veruz followed its flight. The crosshairs passed the ship and Veruz pulled the trigger.

The yellow beam spat out again. A cloud of smoke erupted from the Asp but they ship ducked out of range, trailing smoke and debris.

"Two Asps, a Gyr , a Viper, Harrier and a Mamba," Dev called out. He clenched his shaking hand. Six ships. Long odds, no matter the quality of the competition.

Veruz nodded, face tight and white, sweat dripping down his neck. Dev realized this was Veruz's first true dog fight. But he was doing brilliantly. Mosser-esque even.

Laser beams criss-crossed before the viewscreen as the six remaining ships tried to weave a web of death around them.

"Viper's on your six!"

Veruz swerved the Courier aside. It shook again and the shield percentage dissipated before their eyes. The

Courier finally pulled up, a red laser beam shooting past below them.

The Mamba roared past. Veruz locked on and loosed a missile and turned to the Gyr.

The bridge speakers crackled with static as an ECM ignited, destroying the missile.

The Gyr came in head first, laser firing. It launched a missile.

Dev ignited the Courier's own ECM just as Veruz fired. The Gyr vaporised.

"You got him," Dev yelled, but Veruz had already moved on, seemingly flying on instinct. *Damn, but this kid is good.*

Veruz slurred the Courier sideways, catching the Viper in his crosshairs, but it weaved and ducked, continually dancing around the crosshairs.

Veruz hunkered around the controls, spinning the stick back and forth to keep on the Viper's tail. Finally it passed the crosshairs and Veruz pulled the trigger. The Viper exploded instantly.

The scanner died. Dev frowned and tapped the scanner. The diagnostic screen was blank. Were they being jammed? He gasped. Ambush. "They're on your six again!"

Veruz increased speed. The Courier bucked. An explosion rang out behind them. Warning klaxons blared. The ship shuddered as if a giant fist had smashed down on one of the nacelles.

Veruz took the induced spin and pushed through it, building momentum. Orange laser beams spun ineffectively around them, missing their gyrating target. Then the beams started to flicker.

"They're overheating," Dev cried.

Veruz cracked his neck. "Got you now." He ripped the Courier out of the spin, sighted an Asp and fired. It broke into two pieces then shattered like a frozen coolant pipe.

He pushed the courier back toward the second Asp, racing away as fast as its prime mover allowed it.

Veruz looked on and fired. The laser beam lashed at the Asp. Its engines flared then died. The Asp began to rotate, faster and faster until it resembled a spinning top and exploded. The scanner burst back into life.

The Courier rocked. Metal tore and shrieked as explosions rang through the hull. The diagnostic board flooded with faulty symptoms, growing with every second.

"Get us out of here," Dev yelled.

"I've lost control," screamed Veruz. He pulled and tugged against the stick but the ship refused to move.

The ship rattled, shake and rock as the Mamba fired it pulse laser into the unprotected bowels of the ship.

"Shit shit shit, we're sitting ducks," said Veruz.

Dev shut him out. He had to think. The Mamba was a small ship. What did they have that could. . ."Fire the missile."

"He'll just ECM it again."

"The Mamba's too small to carry an ECM. It was someone else."

Veruz locked onto the Mamba and fired. The missile flew out in a wide arc then jettied back at the Courier.

Dev flinched as the missile flew in close.

It zoomed past.

The ship shook again. The lights went out; the control panels sparked and died. "We're dead," said Veruz. The Mamba's blip on the scanner disappeared. No noise, no shock, just like someone had flicked a switch off.

They sat in silence for several moments. Dev only then noticed his pounding heart. He wiped the sweat from his face. "Jesus kid. You just survived seven to one odds."

Veruz collapsed back into his chair, blinked several times and glanced around. He looked lost, as if just emerging from a trance. "ahh yeah, no problem."

The ship jerked to the right. Veruz automatically corrected. "It appears we have control again."

Dev checked the repair board. The damage list shrank before his eyes. "Must have an automatic repair system on board. Thanks Frantic."

Veruz smiled, the first Dev had seen in a long time, and turned to follow the fleeing Tiger Trader. The Courier quickly made up the lost ground. The Tiger continued on as if oblivious to the Courier's threat.

Dev growled. The Tiger commander's arrogance bristled. What the heck was wrong with that man?

"Tiger Trader, can you please reconsider my offer?"

"No."

Dev took a deep calming breath and cleared his throat. "Be sensible, man. You get five times the money and you have a tight alibi - you've been ambushed and lost your escorts. You don't lose face or reputation."

"Get lost asshole."

Dev growled and whacked the comm. off. Any normal commander would have taken the money. His cargo couldn't be worth dying for.

"The fucker is working for INRA," Dev spat.

"What?" Veruz's brow knotted. "You can't be serious."

"It's the only explanation that makes sense. Any regular person would have given up by now. They would have taken the money happily. He knows he can't win. He believes in a higher purpose. Dev leant over Veruz and targeted the ship. "Shoot out his engines. We're going to board her."

Veruz pushed Dev back and stood up. "What is wrong with you cap'n? This is piracy. You keep telling me how we have to stay on the right side of the law and here you are trying to raid an innocent trader!"

"He's not innocent, Michael. He's one of them. He's INRA."

"No cap'n, he's not. He can't be. You're being paranoid. We'll just have to try something else."

Dev snarled and pushed Veruz out of the way. He leant over the chair and grabbed the control stick, lined up the engines and gave the trigger a quick pulse.

Smoke and fire belched from the ship. It slowed, falling behind the Courier. Veruz shoved Dev aside turned the Courier around. Small explosions rippled along the Tiger's hull before it exploded with enough fury to rock the Courier.

Dev stared at the expanding cloud of debris, unable to comprehend, unable to accept what his eyes were showing him. "But, but. . ."

Veruz turned on Dev, finger at his chin, burning anger in his eyes. "You hypocrite. You fucking hypocrite. Fuck you." Veruz shook, rumbling like a volcano about to erupt. He leant back and swung, clobbering Dev in the head.

The floor slapped Dev in the head. He lay there, Veruz standing over him.

The numbing sensation dissipated, replaced with scary clarity. He had let this whole thing take over him, control him, own him. The fear, his quest to protect the two of them. It had tipped him over the edge, it made him one of them, a common criminal. He'd become the one thing he swore he'd never become.

Tears wetted his face. "I'm so sorry Veruz. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. . ." he didn't even know who he was apologizing to any more. The dead crew, his mother, the universe. It didn't matter. None of it did. Not any more.

All that mattered was that he had failed.

Walking The Line (Part 1)

[Vasquith de Havilland]

Veruz's jaw clenched and unclenched. He turned away from Dev, shoulders dropping. "Now that we've committed piracy, we might as well lay claim to the booty." He climbed into his seat and scooped up the surviving cargo containers.

Dev sat upright. The bridge felt dark, empty, dead, as if the air itself had turned against him. His throat tightened as his mind ran through the destruction of the Tiger over and over. It hadn't even been a high powered shot, just a glance on the engines. How could it have come to this? To murder? Veruz was right, an INRA agent wouldn't have throw their life away like that.

A proximity siren sounded. Dev ignored it, the doubt gnawing through him blocking out the noise.

But Veruz turned to stare at him.

Dev concentrated. "What?"

"Police."

Dev limped to his chair. "Get us out of here."

"Maybe we should stay and murder the police as well. That would fit in well with our new career choice, wouldn't it?"

The guilt cracked through his control. "For fucks sake, Michael, you know full well it wasn't intentional."

"Tell that to their families."

The words slammed Dev back into his chair. Veruz was right. Dev had screwed up. How many families would be destroyed because of that mistake?

He couldn't live with that thought. He would have to make up for it. But there wasn't enough years in the universe to make up for murder. He would just have to do his best.

Starting with Veruz.

But first, they needed to escape and regroup. "Just get on with it," he told Veruz. "Take us to Beta Hydri. We need to organize ourselves before going back to Williamsons Base."

"Right." Veruz's voice carried so little emotion it could have passed for a machine's.

Dev truly hoped he hadn't alienated the kid forever. That would be one failure too many.

"Landing outside the city will raise even more suspicion," Dev said, throwing his hands in the air. "Its best if we play innocent."

Veruz blew out a deep breath, but didn't break eye contact. Finally he looked away. "Fine. Whatever."

Traffic control allotted them landing pad 6, on the periphery of the port. Veruz brought her down perfectly and went through the shut down protocols as Dev went down to the cargo bay to open the bay doors.

Homeworld felt like warm summer rain after the desert of Delta Pavonis. He craned his neck back and pursed his lips. How many spy satellites were up there, looking down on him? They were on the Imperial border, after all. Perhaps it was a mistake coming here.

No, they didn't have a choice. They needed a high tech level world for their plan.

A roller door opened in a distant hangar and a pair of cargo haulers emerged, racing straight for the Courier. Veruz must have called them over the comm.

The two haulers stopped at the foot of the cargo bay ramp. The first driver got out. "Unload?"

Dev nodded, stepping forward. "That's right."

"Selling at the port?"

"No, no, I need you to take them into the city for me." Dev mentally cringed as he said it. Ninety nine percent of all merchandise was sold through the port. Would the driver get suspicious?

The driver smiled. "Sure. I could do with a drive. What's the place?"

"There's a storage facility the other side of town." Dev hoped his bluff worked. The only time he had been in the Beta Hydri system was during a stop over in his military days."

"Harrington's, sure. You have a lockup arranged?"

"Not yet. I'd better come with you."

The driver shrugged. He seemed pretty easy going. Just the kind of person Dev needed to be around right now. The guilt he felt around Veruz was suffocating.

The haulers had hi-ab loaders, allowing a quick lift and load. The drive through the city was brisk, a gentle wind invigorating Dev.

Harrington management was more than happy to have another client. Dev supervised the unload and rode back with the haulers.

Veruz was standing by the bay doors when Dev returned. The loaders loaded the next set of cargo containers.

"I've dumped everything that can trace the ship back to us," said Veruz.

"And the memory core?"

"Wiped. No one will ever know we were on this ship."

Dev frowned. "Except the Elite Federation of Pilots." Well that wasn't strictly true, but they would know that this ship had destroyed a civilian Tiger Trader. It couldn't be helped though.

"Nothings fool proof, Dev. I'm not a computer hacker. Who knows if I even did it right?"

Dev felt a pang in his heart at the lack of a title. Veruz had never called him anything except 'cap'n'. Now they appeared to be on a name-to-name basis. He did his best to smother any reaction. "You did your best. That's all we can hope for."

The loaders left for the final time, leaving an empty ship. A salesman from the shipyard drove up in a hover car. He got out and shook hands with both of them. "Grant's the name. You two wanting to sell this girl eh?"

Dev looked back at the courier, coolant venting from an orifice. He wiped away a fake tear. "It's time to move on."

"Well we're on the border, so we get quite a few Couriers. Demand is low, but. . ." The salesman paused as Dev gave him his best impression of puppy-dog eyes, "We should be able to find room in our yard for it. Let's have a look inside, shall we?"

Grant stalked up the cargo ramp, Dev and Veruz in tow. He pulled out a datapad and made notes as he walked around the cargo bay, muttering to himself.

Dev chewed his lip. He didn't want this man analyzing the ship too closely. Who knew what kind of surprises Frantic had installed in the ship?

The inspection ended at the bridge, with only a raised eyebrow signalling that Grant actually had human emotion. Back outside, he walked around the perimeter of the ship. "A bit of damage in the rear, but I noted some upgrades both inside and out. I'll offer you the standard rate for a Courier of this age."

Dev clamped his mouth shut to prevent a cry from escaping. It wasn't his ship or his money, but the rip off still hurt. The beam laser on the front alone should have raised the value by six figures.

He didn't have time to argue the point however - the sooner the ship was behind him, the better. "Ok, fine." He

didn't want the transaction traced to his account though - INRA would be looking at that. And asking for cash would send alarm bells ringing down Grant's spine. "I'll take store credit if possible."

Grant beamed like a child on Christmas morning. "That won't be a problem sir. I'll organize the paperwork and be back shortly."

"We'll be here."

Grant drove off. Veruz moved in closer. "This is going to piss Frantic off."

"Too bad for Frantic." Dev passed his PAD to Veruz. "Can you buy everything on this list? Take it to the lockup - the address is written down - and I'll meet you there."

Veruz snapped the PAD from Dev's hand. "Fine." He stormed off, arms swinging like he was edging for a fight.

Dev swore softly. Hopefully Veruz would calm down soon. He didn't need the kid causing them any more trouble than they were already in.

Dev leaned forward on the handrail of the mag cart as it whistled through the underground storeroom of the shipyard. Hundreds of ships littered the distant floor below, ranging from the stupidly small Lifter to the gigantic Panther Clipper, a ship more expensive than some colonies GDP.

Then Dev caught sight of a ship out of the corner of his eye. "Stop!"

The cart drifted to a halt, backed up and stopped on Dev's command. He leaned forward more, reaching out for the ship, pretending it was within reach.

Rust tinted its hull. Patches were clearly visible and it sure wasn't the Wayfarer, but Dev couldn't tear his eyes away from the Asp Explorer below. "I think we're done," he whispered.

Grant joined him on the rail, following his gaze. "Ahh, love at first sight. Well, who am I to get in the way of that?"

Dev signed the ownership papers as soon as they were topside. His fake signature looked too messy to be real, but Grant didn't appear to care - he walked with a spring in his step, clearly thinking of his commission.

Once the transaction was complete, they discussed upgrades, but Dev already had a list in mind. He signed over the rest of his credit to equip the Asp with the biggest Iron-ass he could afford.

"How long until she's ready?" Dev asked Grant as they walked back to the port.

"Not long. A day, maybe two."

"Good. I have some business in town, but want to get going as soon as I can."

Grant's salesman smile stretched across his face. "We'll be ready when you are."

Dev shook Grant's hand. "Well thanks for everything Grant. I guess I'll see you later."

Grant left Dev at the edge of landing pad 6, staring at a flat plate of tarmac that used to hold his Imperial Courier. He surveyed the surrounding area. The high rises of the city crowded in around the port, like a living creature, devouring and digesting prey. He clapped his hands to obliterate the disturbing image. Time to get back to work.

The sun had set by the time Dev arrived at the lock up, bringing with it near horizontal drizzle. Dev barged through the door then shook out of his jacket.

Veruz had already unloaded the ceramic condensate when Dev arrived at the lockup. A trucks worth of plastic and aluminium also lay in a pile by the roller door.

"Just delivered," said Veruz. "Everything you wanted."

"And the IDs?"

Veruz narrowed his eyes. "I'm just one man. I'll get them now."

"I'll get started on this then," said Dev, wondering how many more instructions Veruz would be willing to take. The kid slammed the door as he left.

Dev stood in the dark cold bunker of a building, staring at the closed door. He sighed and turned to the condensate. It came in sheets, which could be easily bonded together into layers then cut, producing any possible shape. The sheets glowed with an ethereal pale blue, shining through the nearly invisible crystal lattice of the condensate. Once an electric field passed through it, it would liquefy and glow like a lamp.

Dev rubbed his chin and squatted by the sheets. That glow had to go. He untied the aluminium sheets and spread them across the floor. He then placed several condensate sheets on one of the aluminum sheets, capped them with another aluminium sheet and ran titanium obrounds around the sides and bound the whole sandwich in a plastic mesh.

He stepped back to admire his handiwork then checked the corners and sides for any trace of the tell-tale blue light. But they were dark: the sandwich looked like bonded aluminium straight from the supplier.

Veruz arrived back just as Dev finished the fourth sandwich. The rain had doubled in intensity, crashing against the windows, furling through the door as Veruz sneaked through. The kid was soaking, but he made no move to dry out. He trudged over to Dev, leaving wet foot prints on the floor, and shoved an ID chip at Dev before moving back to the cargo containers..

"Ahh, thanks," said Dev, fingering the forgery but frowning at the back of Veruz' head. "Can you help me with this one? then I'll show you how to do the rest."

Veruz wandered back silently, wiping water from his face. He followed the instructions, working with a frenetic energy. Dev pursed his lips. Something was off. "You have any problems out there?"

"No."

Dev shrugged. Maybe some hard work would calm the kid down.

They finished in the early hours of the morning. Dev arched back, stretching his aching back, bones cracking as he twisted back and forth. He groaned. Age had a lot to answer for. Veruz didn't even pause between finishing the last sandwich and moving it back into the cargo container. By the time the last of the cargo containers were filled and sealed, the early morning traffic outside had picked up; breakfast time.

Dev called the cargo haulers back to return the containers back to the port. Veruz sat in the corner by himself while they waited, scowling at some point a metre inside the far wall. Dev left him to it and stood by the open cargo door, waiting for the Haulers.

He didn't know what to do. He had to make it up to Veruz, but he couldn't do that while the kid was still mad. He needed time. But time might make the rift impossible to fix. He'd never done this before. He'd never had to look after anyone else before. Even back on Alioth, his peers needed no mentoring - they were focused and trained and adults. Veruz was still young.

The internal struggle continued to wage until a Hauler nearly backing into him knocked him back to reality and he dived out of the way. He recovered and dusted himself off as the driver jumped down to the floor.

"Geez mate, sorry about that."

"No problem. Just load up these containers and get them back to Bay 6. It's an Asp now, not a Courier."

The driver nodded, a wide smile crossing his face. "Niiice. No problem mate."

"We'll meet you there."

Dev and Veruz left the loaders to do their thing, returned their security key for the lockup then headed back to the port via a breakfast bar. After a silent meal, they got back to the port to find the cargo haulers waiting for them.

Dev clicked his new security fob and the cargo ramp lowered. As the haulers loaded the cargo, Dev checked out the ship. The shipyard crew had installed all the new equipment over night. Grant must have put in extra effort.

Dev snorted at the idea that not all salesman were evil. Nice to learn something new.

They were ready to go.

Once the ship was secured for launch, Dev lead Veruz up to the cockpit and took the co-pilot chair. A small peace offering. Hopefully the kid would take it.

Veruz paused at the pilot's chair, worked his jaw and finally sat down. He confirmed clearance to lift off and cleared the port at speed, blasting off at full burn.

The gee-forces momentarily pushed Dev back in his chair until the dampers compensated. Once they were in orbit, Veruz dialled the engines back. They had a familiar hum and vibration. The cockpit felt like an old leather glove - slipping back into it just felt right.

Dev sighed and closed his eyes, a small smile crossing his lips. The weight on his shoulders seemed to lift and his worries faded to the back of his mind. Peace, for the first time in days. He decided he would enjoy it while it lasted.

Because he wouldn't get any where they were going.

Walking The Line (Part 2)

[Vasquith de Havilland]

The clattering, slamming and shouting blasting through the Williamson's Base docks mixed into the usual cacophony of freedom and commerce, warming Dev's heart. It actually felt good to be back. It meant progress, a step closer to normal life, away from the crime and fear.

He stepped off the boarding ramp. People ran back and forth. Refuelling rigs drove up and down and cargo haulers ferried containers to and from the ships dotting the perimeter of the vast docks.

Finally a spare hauler rolled to a stop outside the Asp. "You need unloading?" asked the out of breath driver.

Dev craned his neck up to see the driver. "Busy day?"

"Flat out. The governments finally gotten off its backside to sort things out. Traffic is up, but they're not hiring more staff."

Dev gave a knowing grin. "Story of my life, buddy." He'd had his share of bureaucracy and blindness of management from both his military and engineering days. A universal constant, it appeared.

The driver peeked at his watch. "So what are we unloading?"

"Five containers of aluminium for Robquee Engineering." Dev passed up his datapad with the address.

"Only five containers?" the drive asked as he swiped the address to his own pad.

Dev shrugged in a I'm-just-a-courier kind of way. "It's a special grade apparently."

"I bet those engineers wet themselves each time they make a new type of metal," he said, shaking his head.

Dev forced a chuckle. "Yeah, engineers."

"It'll take awhile to unload, I'm the only driver free at the moment." His face carried a silent plea.

Dev nodded in understanding, withdrew a deci cred coin from his pocket and flipped it up to the driver. "I'm sure you'll do your best."

The driver grinned and drove up the cargo ramp.

Dev drifted around the cargo ramp. He would watch from out here, Veruz from inside the hold. His heart thumped with nerves. He'd never tried to smuggle anything before. How gullible were customs? Would they buy it?

He paced back and forth to work off the nervous energy. Haulers seemed to slow as they drove past as if they could see into his lying heart.

Dev wrung his sweating hands together. Being a criminal was way too stressful. He forced a deep breath. They'd be fine once they were past customs. They'd be ok.

A hollow thump rang out from the cargo bay.

Dev's eyes widened. He sprinted up the ramp, a hundred possible scenarios running through his head.

A cargo container had crashed to the floor, spilling the condensate sandwiches across the floor.

A haunting chill crept down Dev's spine as he moved closer.

The façade had cracked on two of the sandwiches, the condensate's glow leaking through.

"Here," whispered Veruz. Hidden behind the rack, He crouched on top of a sprawled figure, his knee in the persons back, hands clasped around his arms.

Dev dropped to his knees. "Jesus, what happened?"

"The idiot dropped the crate and spotted the condensate. He tried to grab his comm. so I bagged him."

Dev cursed. "There must be an alert out for the condensate. That's not good."

"No shit. Do you think Robquee Engineering will back out on us?"

"They're too greedy. They won't let our money slip through their fingers."

Veruz ground his knee harder into the driver. "So what do you want me to do with him?"

Dev glanced from the driver, the Hauler and back to Veruz. "Get the crate loaded back up and take the loader to Robquee. We'll stash him somewhere."

Veruz released the driver and stood. "Ok." He used the crane on the Hauler to correct the container. They fed the sheets back inside and Veruz lifted the container onto the hauler.

Dev took the driver's security passes and heaved him onto the back of the Hauler. The engine roared back to life and Dev jumped into the cab. "Ready."

They rolled down the cargo ramp and into the docks. Dev rolled his tongue through his mouth. A lifting platform and airlock at one end, customs at the other, and ships all of sizes lining the walls between. Several full Haulers were driving toward a large gap of ships near the customs end. He nudged Veruz. "A cargo lift. Probably guarded. Stick close to the wall. We need a place to dump our friend."

Veruz idled the Hauler forward. Too slow for Dev, but they couldn't look like they were rushing.

As they neared the lift, a guardbox and armoured transport came into view.

Veruz paled. "We got security passes?"

Dev pulled the cards from his pocket. "Check. Import documentation is done as well." He passed over his pad.

The activity died down. They passed a line of dark ships. No one around to see or hear anything. Dev grabbed Veruz' shoulder. "Stop."

Veruz tensed but braked to a stop. Dev jumped out. Shielded from onlookers by the bulk of the Hauler, he hoisted the driver over his shoulders. He groaned and gasped as he staggered behind an Eagle MK III and lowered the driver to the ground. He rushed back to the Hauler. "I've got to move the ship, can't risk it being identified. Get the rest of the containers to Robquee. I'll catch up with you."

Veruz clenched his jaw and drove off.

Dev watched him go, the distance between them growing, physically and emotionally. He shook away the guilt and returned to the driver.

The dock walls were rife with dark nooks and shadows, but he needed something more permanent. There, a maintenance door in the shadow of the Eagle's wing. Perfect. Dev dragged the body through and into the back of the storage room. He found rope and tape and secured the driver behind a tool cupboard.

The driver stirred. His eyes opened, focused and narrowed, boring straight into Dev. He strained against the rope, a muffled moan escaping his lips.

"Relax," Dev whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not a thief, burglar or murderer. I'm just a businessman. I'll be gone in a few days. Until then you'll have to stay here."

The driver shook and screamed against his gag. Dev backed off, imagining the horrible curses aimed at him. "Sorry." He couldn't change what was done. The driver would just have to deal with it.

He walked back to the Asp. He would have to move it. He couldn't risk it being identified with a missing Hauler driver.

Veruz returned with the empty Hauler Dev explained his plan. Veruz barely nodded in acknowledgement before he loaded up two more containers and drove off.

Dev went back up to the cockpit, checking systems and keeping his mind occupied so he wouldn't think about the situation they were in.

After an hour, Veruz returned for the final two containers.

Dev was more than ready to go. "Permission to depart," he said to traffic control through the cockpit comm.

"AZ-7894, I have you currently unloading cargo. Please confirm."

"Negative, control. I have no cargo. Must be a glitch."

The voice at the other end of the line groaned and flicked a switch. "Apologies, AZ. Permission granted."

Dev lifted off slowly and drifted for the lifting platform at the far end. Once in place, magnetic grapples held the Asp in place as it went through the airlock. After several moments of ad splattered tunnels, the final door opened and the darkness of space beckoned.

Dev blasted out into space, flew the obligatory minimum distance from the station, then flipped the Asp through one hundred eighty degrees and headed past the station for the planet. He dropped the ship into a high speed orbit and sat back to watch the planet go by. It needed to burn off enough time so it wasn't the same operator welcoming him back that let him leave. Such a short trip could cause suspicion.

The tick of the air conditioning began to grate against the incessant doubt in his mind. He couldn't take it any more. It had only been two hours, but he would have to risk it. He turned back around and headed for the station.

"Back again AZ?" asked control. "That was a short trip."

Shit. "Ah, just trying out an upgrade. Haven't finished my business yet."

"I thought you didn't have any cargo?"

"I will as soon as you let me through."

The comm. Clicked off without another word, but the landing lights burst into light along the front of the station.

Dev shrugged and pushed the Asp down and in until the automatic station systems took over again. They spat him back out at the cargo deck and he found a landing spot as far from customs as he could find.

As the engines spooled down, he steeled himself for the next part. This had been the easy bit. He just hoped his luck held up.

#

Bigelaar was at Robquee's reception when Dev arrived. "Mr de Havilland, good to see you again." He pushed off from the counter and extended his hand.

Dev shook his hand. "Yeah, you too." The receptionist gave him a quick glance and tidied a hair strand from her face.

"I saw your materials in the workshop. Jason has already started on the emitters. We should have them ready tomorrow."

"Ok." Dev forced a smile. Today would have been better, but tomorrow would have to do. "I need to discuss the prototype with Mr Todd as well."

Bigelaar's smile dripped greed. Dev could almost see the credit signs flashing in his eyes. Bigelaar rapped the counter. "Arlene, page Jason will you?" Bigelaar waved Dev aside. "You remember where the meeting room is?"

Dev shivered at the mere mention of the room. "Sure. Can you do me a favour and let me know when my associate, Michael Veruz arrives?"

Bigelaar glanced at Arlene. "I'll send him through when he arrives," she said with a smile.

Dev paced the meeting room. He couldn't look at the photos of 'engineering brilliance' without seeing the taint of corruption and greed.

Maybe he was being too harsh. His experience of engineering involved the greatest shipyard in the galaxy, the centre of civilization.

Perhaps things worked differently outside the core. Life since the *Azure Sunset* had been a whole new world for him.

Jason Todd breezed through the door, red faced and breathing hard. He extended his hand. "Mr de Havilland, good to see you again."

Dev smiled despite himself. "Working hard in the workshop, Todd?"

"This job has been sitting around half finished for over a week now. We need the workshop space."

Dev chuckled. "I won't argue with that, I need the parts soon as. I actually wanted to talk to you about the prototype."

Jason sat and waved Dev to a chair. "Sure, I haven't had that much fun in years."

Dev tried to restrain his eagerness. He leant forward, knitting his fingers together. "You've come up with something?"

"Oh yes. Unfortunately, we could only source nuclear grade materials to build it. The exotics we wanted to use are quite hard to find outside of the fed mil." Jason trailed off, an eyebrow raised.

Dev blinked, stunned as if he had just been slapped in the face by a block of solid hydrogen. His suspicions were correct: Jason knew the purpose of the prototype. Two words echoed through his mind: Security Risk.

Kill him.

The sheer evilness of the thought shocked Dev. How could he even think that? He was Vasquith de Havilland. A good guy. An engineer, not a killer. That part of him lay buried and forgotten. Only vigilance kept the surrounding darkness and evil in check.

He hadn't responded in several moments so spread his arms wide, palms up. A peaceful gesture, sweeping Todd's comment aside.. "What were you able to do?"

"More or less what you wanted. It needs a significant cool down period between uses, but you shouldn't suffer any loss or degradation."

Dev worked the idea around his mouth. A long re-fire rate could be disastrous in battle, but the prototype would allow more, consistent shots. "I'm sure that will work out fine."

"We'll pack the finished items and the prototype back in the cargo containers and arrange Haulers to take them to the docks."

Dev stood with him and they shook hands. Todd escorted Dev to reception. Veruz still hadn't shown up. Growling, Dev left Robquee and checked up and down the road. Minutes dragged by. He eyed his watch for the tenth time. Where was that kid?

Finally, Veruz appeared. stumbling down the south road, hair matted with blood, wounds weeping on both arms., the blackjack in his right hand.

"Oh Jesus," mumbled Dev, rushing forward. "What the hell happened?"

Veruz stopped before Dev, eyes completely empty, even their recent defiant anger. "Burning off my frustration."

The kid's skin was white, his eyes dilated. Classic shock. Dev eased the blackjack from Veruz's fingers., caked blood flaking from the handle.

Dev stopped the lecture before he opened his mouth. Now wasn't the time. Instead, he just stared at the kid, unsure of what to do, but sure of the fact that he was failing him.

"Come on," he said. "We need to clean you up."

#

Veruz had gained some colour and complexion by the time Dev got him to the hotel. He left him to wash up and went up a level to the local drug

store. He returned to find Veruz staring into the mirror, body still as stone.

Dev coughed, eliciting a creak from Veruz' neck as he twisted around.

"Umm, to patch yourself up with," Dev said. He retreated to the door. The kid looked tiny, an infant lost in a man's world, a weight crushing his shoulders down into the dirt.

But that was life: full of questions and not many answers. Hopefully Veruz was beginning to learn that.

#

They arrived early at Robquee Engineering.. Workers were loading the containers onto the Haulers. Veruz inspected the cargo; Dev finished the paperwork with Bigelaar.

"I appreciate your fast work Henry. Thank you." That was true, at least. He appreciated their speed, just not their ethics.

Bigelaar shook Dev's hand. "A pleasure. Sam Kemper and his friends are always welcome at Robquee."

"I'll remember that." Dev nodded and strode outside. The building still made him feel dirty. He subconsciously wiped his hands on his pants.

The artificial sun was rose steadily, but its lacklustre glow did little to stem the foreboding in Dev's stomach.

It had been too easy. First Delta Pavonis, then Beta Hydri. Now an even dodgier locale and they had just breezed through as if they had a guardian angel. It didn't feel right. Was the stress making him paranoid? Could he be imagining problems where not existed?

The last Hauler blasted its horn as it passed. Dev climbed the steps to the cab and settled in next to Veruz and the driver.

"I can take you as far as customs," said the driver. "I have the export paperwork here. We'll be finished loading by the time you get through to the docks."

"I appreciate it," said Dev, hiding a cringe. Acting chummy with a driver one day, kidnapping another the next day. Could he become any more disgusting?

The Hauler stopped and let Dev and Veruz out. Veruz hunched his shoulders and shoved his fists in his pockets. The scowl and bandages gave him an air of merciless desperation.

The foreboding returned to Dev's stomach. He exhaled and straightened up. "Let's get going."

Veruz didn't move.

Dev placed a hand on Veruz's shoulder-

Veruz flinched away, locking a murderous gaze on Dev.

Dev's heart rate spiked; he stepped back, mind blank, lost.

Veruz continued to stare into him.

Dev blinked, unsure what to do. He threw his hands up. "Fine. Suit yourself." He marched off, slamming his feet into the street, trying to burn off the sudden adrenaline rush."

He passed the corner, finally hearing footsteps behind him. He sped up till he hit the main concourse. A queue chocked the main road, filing around the corner all the way to customs. The people looked bored and tired. They'd been there for awhile.

Dev's first thought was: problem. He stood on his toes, trying to see past the crowd to customs.

Veruz appeared next to him, voice gruff and short. "What?"

A commotion broke out at the front of the queue. Dev strained his eyes. A squad of police brushed through the crowd, datapads in their hands.

He gasped as he caught sight of one of the datapads. It showed a headshot.

His breath froze in his mouth. The cops were looking for him. There was no other explanation. Which meant. . .

"The dockworker must have escaped," he breathed.

Veruz sneered. "Should have killed him."

Dev didn't register Veruz's comment over his pounding heart. He'd been identified. And now he was trapped.

"Why don't you kill some civilians? You could escape in the ensuing mayhem."

Dev almost raked his hand back to slap Veruz but held back and just growled out the building tension. "Enough already. You haven't been identified, so you can go through and get the ship ready. I'll think of something and come join you."

Veruz stepped back. "Do your own goddamn work."

Dev couldn't hide his shock. "What the heck is wrong with you Michael? We need to work together here, ok? You're our only chance. Once we get these parts to Norman and Frantic, they can sort INRA and we can be free. We can get the *Wayfarer* back and start flying again. Flying free."

Veruz turned and stormed towards customs. "Fine. Whatever."

The police advanced down the line. The crowd's murmur increased.

Knowing it would look suspicious to leave the line away from the advancing police, Dev pulled out line, patting his pants for his ID. "I'll catch up with you," he yelled at the line then marched away, around a corner and out of sight.

He collapsed against a wall. How lame. The cops would see straight through his speech. He peered around the corner.

The police continued down the line, oblivious to him. Veruz moved up the line toward customs.

Dev watched and waited, hoping for the miracle plan to pop into his head. *Norman could figure this out.* But he wasn't a criminal; he didn't have that kind of experience. So what could he do? One thing was for sure - they knew his face. He couldn't leave looking like this.

Veruz disappeared through customs. Dev backed away. He had to get distance between him and the police, give him time to think. He found an information and communication terminal. Perhaps Veruz had come up with something. He dialed through the docking bay hub to the Asp, but couldn't connect.

A shiver crawled down Dev's spine. Had customs nabbed Veruz? He tried again. Nothing. Either Veruz wasn't there or he wasn't answering.

"No. He couldn't have. . ." Foreboding surged through his mind. He loaded the public traffic control listings with shaking hands.

He saw it. Exactly what he had hoped not to. He refreshed the page again and again, hoping that that would correct the horrible mistake.

But there it was, in black and white.

AZ-7894: Asp Explorer. Departure Time: 11:58

Dev staggered backwards, his world crashing around him. *No. No. No.*

Veruz had abandoned him. Left him alone, without help, without tools and without his only protection from INRA.