

TIDES OF WAR

THE HPA SAGA PART 3

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

Volume 4

by
The Elite BBS Collective

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One Last Card Trick To Play Part 1

[Lucky]

Lucky's breath ran ragged in his lungs as he raced down the endless corridors, wall after wall flashing by in an endless blur.

Anders and Wafturn ran ahead, Scatterguns up, searching for targets. Anders mumbled something, but Lucky couldn't hear him past the blood rushing in his ears.

Battle. They were running straight into a fight with people that for all Lucky knew were professional soldiers. And even if the *Sunset* was friendly territory, they were still on enemy ground; surrounded, unable to escape, regardless of what happened in the next few minutes.

Wafturn stopped at a ladder, dropped to one knee, swivelled around, scanning the corridor with the gun, while Anders slipped his gun over his shoulder and flew up the ladder. Lucky stopped at the ladders base, trying to regather his breath. Had these two been practising this move while he'd been busting his ass fixing the ship?

"Get up there, Lucky," Wafturn hissed. His cheeks were flushed, but his voice was calm, flat.

Lucky nodded and scaled the ladder. The rungs were cold, stinging his fingers. Or maybe he was hot. He felt a million degrees and sweat drained down his face, but he knew it had nothing to do with the atmospheric control settings.

Anders pulled Lucky up the final step. Wafturn immediately turned and swam up the ladder. At the top, he whispered, "the control room's one sector that way. Shall we all hit that or should we check the HPA first?"

"The control room is more important. The HPA is nothing without it. If we don't have any joy there, we'll check the HPA," Anders said.

For once, Lucky agreed. "Let's go."

Their run grew to a sprint. Lucky struggled to keep up. The megaweed in the late hours wasn't doing him any favours. He fell behind, regardless of how hard he breathed. His mind was surprisingly blank of fear or thought, just a robot pilot pushing one leg in front of the other. The adrenaline, he reminded himself.

The HPA control room door was wide open, but he couldn't see anyone inside.

Wafturn charged in, scatter gun up, through the open door.

Someone yelled. A thump echoed out the door as the room flashed bright.

"Fierfek," Lucky said, reaching the door a step after Anders. Wafturn appeared, scattergun smoking. Lucky didn't need to see the body to know Wafturn had just aced someone. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"They're turning on us, Lucky, what did you want me to do?"

Anders snorted. "Weak stomach."

Lucky gave them an exasperated look. "You don't know that for sure. I thought we came down here to trap them and find out what they were doing, not kill them."

Anders rolled his eyes and stepped into the control room. Large glass windows covered the far wall, looking down on the cargo bay which housed the HPA. "Frak's sake, they're all over it."

Lucky pushed past Wafturn and followed Anders gaze. The HPA was a large mess of steel, ducting, lenses and other stuff Lucky didn't understand, but it didn't look wrong. . .

No, there was a small light moving around the top section. It took him a moment to figure it out.

A headlamp.

He spotted another, and another. Anders was right. People in EVA suits were crawling all over the HPA, doing who knew what to it.

"We've got to stop them," Lucky said, firming the grip on his weapon.

He moved for the door.

"I'm coming," Anders said. "Lock the door after us, Wafturn. If anyone comes to talk to your dead friend. . . you know what to do."

Wafturn nodded. His face was white, but his eyes were narrowed, as if it was his first kill and he had enjoyed it, and couldn't wait for the next..

Lucky didn't think he understood anyone any more.

Anders zipped up Lucky's pressure suit. "Don't fuck this up Lucky."

Lucky bristled, but didn't react. "You just worry about yourself, Sparky." Anders never liked his electrician nick name.

Anders jerked Lucky up as he closed the zip.

They passed through the airlock and into a narrow passageway that fed into the cargo bay. The HPA loomed before them, stretching up beyond sight, filling the gargantuan chamber like a twisted amalgamation of engineering. As Lucky's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he spotted a roving light just as Anders' arms flicked up and his scattergun boomed.

Or fizzed. A little flame burped from the end of the barrel, but nothing else happened.

Anders tossed the gun aside. "We're in a vacuum," he said, voice laced with anger, likely at himself.

Lucky didn't say anything. He had forgotten scatterguns required oxygen too. He held onto his gun though – it could also work as a club. He activated his radio. "Plan?" Anders was the last person Lucky wanted to ask that question, but they could be spotted at any moment and were currently outgunned. He'd rather ask Anders for advice than be killed.

Anders's head twisted side to side. "How many exits to this chamber?"

Lucky rubbed his chin. It had been awhile since he last looked at the ship plans. "Half a dozen doors, but probably twice as many access passages."

"Let's lock 'em in."

Lucky immediately thought of four problems with that idea, the biggest being the rest of Frantic's crew coming to the rescue. If it did come down to a fight, they needed the odds to be as even as possible.

A figure walked around the corner into the passageway. He froze.

Lucky stared at him, equally frozen. The man's eyes were wide, but his mouth was moving. Warning his friends. Lucky swung the gun up before he even realized it.

The man pulled a pistol from a suit pouch.

Lucky slammed the gun butt into the man's head. He dropped without a sound; the cargo bay had gravity but no air..

Anders dived for the man's pistol. "Good work Lucky. Now we can—"

A laser bolt smashed into the wall above his head and they both ducked down. "Fierfek they've found us," Lucky cried.

Anders dragged Lucky to the far wall, out of the sight of the HPA. He leaned around the corner and fired back. He pulled back to the wall as laser bolts flashed past. "We're screwed. Get back to Wafturn, tell him to lock the cargo bay down, it'll buy us some time."

"What about you?"

"I'll keep them occupied. Just don't lock the door on me."

Lucky nodded. If Anders wanted to play the hero, he was welcome to it. He raced into the airlock.

"Come on, come on," he urged the system as air brought the room back to normal pressure. He wiggled out of his suit. The door released and Lucky sprinted out. He'd never taken the ladders so fast in his life. The walls raced past in a disorientated blur, spots flashing before his eyes. He reached the control room and banged on the door until it opened. He collapsed into Wafturn's arms.

"Cripes, Lucky, what's the matter?"

Lucky gasped for air as he pointed down at the HPA. "Down," he sucked in another gulp of oxygen. "Lock down."

"All of it?"

"The whole room," another gulp. "Seal it."

"Where's Anders?"

"Seal it!"

Wafturn cringed but turned to the controls and locked the room down. A series of green lights turned red until the whole board had changed colour.

Lucky turned to the glass. The headlamps were fleeing the HPA, probably trying for the doors, but otherwise everything looked the same. "I hope Anders isn't still in there."

"He's not," called Anders from behind him. Lucky actually smiled. Anders was still wearing his suit, but with the helmet off.

Wafturn's eyes never left the control screen. "Now what? The electronic locks won't keep them in there forever, and Frantic is going to realize his men are missing at some point."

Anders threw his hands up and paced along the control room. "I know, I know. Let me think." His face wrinkled up as if the sheer power of his thoughts was shrinking his head. Anders was out of his depth, but Lucky didn't have a clue either. He was a career criminal with a background in astrogation, not warfare.

"Look we can't guard every entrance to the cargo bay. We have to assume we are going to lose it at some stage. But this control room only has one entrance."

Wafturn looked around, as if he had never actually sized the room up before. "We can hold it. The HPA won't run without these controls. Disconnect the computer from the bridge and the HPA is effectively useless."

Anders rubbed his chin. He stared at Wafturn's scattergun. "We should have brought more weapons."

"There's a lot of things we should have done, Anders. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we've got," Lucky said. He pushed the door closed. "Let's find something to brace this." The room was small, originally designed for a single man to oversee cargo loading. The room had been messed up after the last battle and bent structural girders had been cut out during repairs. They leaned up against the far corner, waiting to be removed. Wafturn and Lucky shimmied the girders behind the door and wedged them in under the control panel.

Lucky stood back and studied their handiwork with disdain. Their plan was getting worse and worse as continued to react. "We're kidding ourselves if we think that's going to keep anyone out of here."

Wafturn shrugged his shoulders as if to say that either scenario was equally boring to him and he had other things of more importance to attend to. Lucky was seeing a whole new side to the engineer.

"Now what?" said Wafturn

Anders sat in the control chair. "Now we wait."

One Last Card Trick To Play Part 2

[Lucky]

It didn't take long.

A face materialized on the communication console. His skin was dark and weathered and anti-flash sunglasses covered his eyes.

"Frantic," said Anders, crossing his arms in his annoyed-school-principle way. "I was wondering when you'd call."

Frantic's face was unreadable behind his sunglasses. The corner of his mouth twitched but little else moved to indicate the image was of a human being. "What's going on, Anders?"

"You tell me. Your boys are all over the HPA. I thought we had an agreement regarding the *Sunset*. You'd repair the ship, we'd look after the HPA. But if you're going to renege on that deal. . ."

Frantic removed his glasses, revealing icy blue eyes. He looked down for a moment, his cheeks reddening, and looked back up at the screen.

An act, thought Lucky, but he couldn't be sure.

"This is quite embarrassing to admit, but those men weren't working under my authority. They're rogue," Frantic said.

"Likely story," Lucky said, pushing close to Anders so Frantic could see him. "Your boys tried to kill us."

Anders glanced at Lucky, his teeth grinding, but he kept quiet. Frantic spread his arms, palms up. "I can't tell you what they were thinking, but perhaps they thought you were there to attack them."

"Interesting how you have such an insight into men that you have no control over," Anders said. His voice was as low and controlled as Frantic. Perhaps Anders had been a negotiator in a previous life.

Frantic's mouth twitched again. He must have known he was had. "It was a good move, hunkering down in the control room. You have full control of the HPA."

Anders nodded, but Lucky bit his lip. Frantic's tone smelt of false camaraderie. Lucky almost braced for the hidden attack to come..

"But my men control the *Sunset*, which means we control the atmospheric systems."

Lucky's blood went cold. Frantic's threat read loud and clear. He was going to kill the carbon dioxide scrubbers or something equally rotten and suffocate them out.

Nice.

Anders grinded his jaw briefly before reaching for the communication controls. "We're done here," and he killed the link.

The silence of the control room roared in Lucky's ears. Things had snowballed and now they were out of control and heading straight into oblivion.

"Jesus Lucky, they're going to kill us," Wafturn said, hands wringing together.

Lucky's eyes settled on Anders. He was still wearing his suit. "There must be spare oxygen in that," he said.

"Shared three ways? It won't help much," Anders said. He got up and searched the room high and low. Lucky moved out of his way. He didn't know what Anders was looking for –spare air tanks, an instant solution to their problem- but he hoped he found it.

"Maybe we should just surrender," Wafturn said. His face was still white, but the cavalier look to his eyes had been replaced by a quiver. Fear. "Norman can sort this out when he gets back."

"That Frantic is a psycho," Lucky said. "He just threatened to kill us. Did you see his eyes? There was nothing there. He's a killer. We surrender and we're dead."

Anders stopped looking under the console and stood up straight. "Lucky is right. We're stuck in here now. We've got no choice. We have to wait it out until Norman comes back."

"Freks sake," said Wafturn, collapsing into the chair.

The background whir slowed and died. Lucky craned his neck back. The roof air duct was still and quiet. His mouth dried as he imagined the stream of air drying up. His heart raced at the thought of each breath bringing him closer to death, one lungful at a time. He was both torturer and torture at the same time. He backed into a wall and slid to the ground. "Jesus. Jesus." His heart beat faster and faster, speeding up his breathing, quickening the build-up of carbon dioxide.

And that thought made his heart beat faster until he was panting, head between his legs and he was six again, back home, trapped, unable to breath, knowing he was about to die—

Anders lifted him off the ground and slapped him in the face. "Control yourself. You'll kill us all."

Lucky stared at Anders, not entirely sure what had just happened, but his heart had slowed and he nodded numbly. Anders let go and Lucky slid back to the floor.

Wafturn hissed at Anders. "Leave him alone Jon, freks sake, you know he's no good at this."

Anders just shook his head and turned away. "Norman had better hurry then. We don't have much time."

The Janus Man

[Sam Kemper]

Sam stood before the control array on the mezzanine of the *Repulse's* bridge, staring through the far viewpanes to the swirls of hyperspace outside. The deck below was empty and dark; he could barely make out the astrogation and navigation consoles.

The bodies of Stenson and the INRA men were still behind him, soaking in a pool of their own blood. They wouldn't move of their own volition and Sam sure as heck wasn't touching them.

The control console beeped softly. The *Repulse* was tracking to the right slightly, like a hovercar with uneven power to its anti-grav panels. He entered commands into Norman's remote control system.

The hum of the engines shifted slightly. A minor hyperspace adjustment. The remote control wasn't really designed for that detailed a level of control however.

Control screens filled the mezzanine, but the majority were dark. When operational though, the sheer amount of sensor data would make future battles much easier. Yes, it would be fun getting the *Repulse* running at one hundred percent. Once equipped with the HPA, it would be superior to the *Sunset* in every way.

Sam rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes for a moment. Sleep had called and left a message, and now his head ached. He couldn't leave the controls while the ship continued to drift in hyperspace though. He'd had enough of those bed time stories when he was a kid.

He logged onto the medical bay mainframe. It registered one patient in critical condition, in a drug induced coma.

Sam nodded to himself. Norman had got as close to death as one could get before Sam had hauled him into the medical bay.

He would live long enough to reach Frantic's base. If his infamous luck stayed with him. Frantic had spare clones. He'd borrowed Norman's high fidelity clone patterns and promised Norman spares.

Sam made another slight adjustment. Military spec engines huh? They were so far out of alignment they might as well have been on different ships.

He chuckled. De Havilland had talked up Alliance engineering every chance he had. He'd hate to see Alliance tech done on the cheap.

Or was the problem something else?

His head pounded like a tribble in a cargo container. He could probably step away for a moment to get some water. He logged off the medical mainframe. Even if they got Norman another clone, they were only delaying the inevitable. Time would catch up with Norman. Unless his enemies got to him first.

He was just delaying the inevitable.

Sam knew this more than anyone. He was on borrowed time himself, ever since his capture by AIS.

The pounding grew louder and harder, doubling Sam over. His memories were going too; he couldn't even remember how he'd escaped from Alliance Intelligence to meet up with Norman at the start of this whole adventure.

It was too hard to think. He pushed the thought aside. The *Repulse* was drifting again. He tweaked the trajectory, hoping that each change wasn't the last manoeuvre he could make with the remote control.

The headache began to fade.

There, he just needed some clarity of thought. The past was the past. He had a job to do now, in the present.

His mouth moved to an unfamiliar tune and he whistled easily, as if the song was not coming from him but a record player; a song he had known all his life yet had no memory of.

Then he recognized it.

The Alliance Military March.

The Oracle Array – Part 1

“But since Victory of glorious name hath come to us, with joy responsive to the joy of Thebe whose chariots are many, let us enjoy forgetfulness after the late wars, and visit all the temples of the gods with night-long dance and song; and may Bacchus be our leader, whose dancing shakes the land of Thebe.” - Sophocles

Pablo stroked Bec's hair for a few minutes, while he caught his breath. Bec just rested her head in the crook of his shoulder and felt Pablo's heart. Each beat one was precious, as come the morning they would be parsecs away from each other. Eventually, Pablo recovered enough to speak.

“Wow, Bec. I mean WOW. That was just so... WOW!”

Bec sighed and inclined her head towards Pablo's face. Of all the things she loved Pablo for, being articulate was not one of them.

“Yeah.” She replied, trying to keep the conversation at the same level. She kissed his shoulder and rolled out of bed. Pablo sat up in bed and watched her get dressed. Her dress trousers took a while to be found, but Pablo kicked them out from under the doona at the foot of the bed. Bec looked blackly at him for kicking them on the floor then reached over and pulled them on.

Even after two years she wasn't yet used to the Imperial Navy uniform. The epaulettes on the shoulders gave her rank as Viscount, but Bec was canny enough to realize that this rank was a sweetener for giving up the bounty hunter's life rather than a real indication of her worth in the eyes of the Empire. Throughout her induction, she'd been careful not to delude herself that she could give orders to real officers.

Her performance during the battle of Rocky Fields had significantly solidified her standing, however, and the nods of greeting from her peers had become significantly more sincere. Pablo was a Viscount, too, although he'd actually earned his rank through nearly a decade of service. That was the reason he had this quite nice apartment in one of the leafier suburbs of Camp Jameson and a snazzy private autoshuttle, etc, and so forth. Bec cast an indulgent eye back to the bed as she buttoned up her top. Pablo was vain, good-natured, generous and charmingly self-unaware. He also had a knockout body and an eagerness to please. That, and flowers for her sitting on the table whenever she came over. Although not stupid, he was neither intellectual nor reflective and philosophical uncertainty tended to wash over him. All in all, he was Bec's perfect mate.

“You know how long you'll be away?” Pablo asked wistfully.

“Duke Zheng didn't say. From how he said it, I reckon it'll be a bit of a jaunt. Maybe he just wants an experienced pilot to take him somewhere. I'm not sure.”

Bec reached for a brush, not that she really needed it. Being in the military still meant short haircuts, even in this day and age.

“What about you?”

Pablo stretched and then bounded out of bed.

“Still on shore leave for another three weeks. Then a two month stint doing the escort milk-run between Sohoa and Tilala.” Pablo said lightly, swinging his arms and beginning some calisthenics.

Bec's eyebrows rose. Tilala was one of the most unsettled systems in the region. The system bristled with pirates and rogue political factions, and a fat Imperial Convoy would be a badge of honour as much as it would be a rich payday. He would probably be commanding the escort wing. Action was inevitable, quite probably against serious opposition. And Pablo described it as a 'milk-run'.

She moved closer and gently laid hand on his bare abdomen. Pablo stopped his twists and looked at her curiously. The skin was cool from evaporating sweat, and Bec fought the urge to caress it.

“Don't take it lightly, lover. None of us can predict the future.”

Pablo grinned and pushed her back over onto the bed. Bringing his face up to hers, he kissed her lingeringly and long. Bec wriggled with pleasure for a moment, then began pushing Pablo back (with mixed success).

“I'm... mmph... serious... mmmn...”

Panting, Bec finally pushed the naked man off her.

“Bloody hell, this is going to need more ironing.” She groused, then squeezed Pablo’s hand as she saw his face fall. “Look, anything can happen out there.”

“Hardly! I know how good my wing is, I know how good I am.” Pablo preened a moment. “We can handle anything short of a full wing of Federal heavy fighters. And even then, by the Emperor, we’d have a damn good chance!”

Bec shook her head as Pablo resumed his exercise. “One bad turn, one 4MW-armed fighter with decent aim, one proximity mine you miss on the scan. You can predict, but you can’t guarantee.”

“So why worry, then?” Pablo said, dropping to the floor for a series of one-handed pushups. Bec turned her face away from this pleurably distracting sight.

“I suppose you’re right.” Bec replaced the brush on the dresser and stared in the mirror above it. She wished that she had Pablo’s certainty.

“The rest is automatic. You don’t need to lift a finger. The machine is in perfect order; it has been oiled ever since time began, and it runs without friction.” - Annoilh

The Imperial Courier Bec had was one of the most luxurious she had ever seen. The flight deck was decked out in gold-trimmed leather, for the Emperor’s sake, and the controls were polished brass. Bec fought the urge to immediately wipe the controls with a cloth after she used them, lest she be accused of spoiling their sheen.

The other two pilots also seemed overawed with the opulence of their surroundings, but seemed competent, if not veteran. The three of them had met first at the airlock where Duke Zheng had given them instructions to immediately go straight to the bridge, to gain clearance and take off, to reach hyperspace altitude and to initiate a jump to coded co-ordinates already in the Witchspace governor. That was all. He then retired to his cabin, leaving the three of them to carry out his instructions without question. The taller one, Squire Hashem, seemed a fairly colourless character, much given to painful detail over routine tasks - “Main engines cycling at eighty percent at a frequency of twelve gigahertz...holding steady with a variation of...” - and the like. The other one, Squire Bellen, showed a little more personality, with a few snarky comments that bordered on (highly amusing) insubordination. But all of them became extremely solemn when the occupants of the observation deck made themselves known. The observation deck was a mezzanine overlooking the flight-deck, taking advantage of the oversized cockpit window they’d fitted on the ship.

“Damn it, Zheng, haven’t you brought any fan-slaves on this ship? I’m roasting.” came a voice, made thunderous by age (and possibly lack of hearing) and querulous by inconvenience.

“I’m sorry Marquis, flight crew only, for reasons that will become apparent.” came the deceptively calm and unassuming voice of Bec’s superior officer. Zheng was a high flier in Imperial service, whose rank had been earned through service, rather than patronage. This held its own dangers of course, and left him politically vulnerable. A single military defeat (or something that could be presented as such) could see him suffer the ultimate indignity, banishment from court, and without patrons to secure his re-entry, he’d be doing parade-grounds for the remainder of his career. The military rank of Duke was barely worth a Barony to most of the nobility, unless there was a compelling reason to take the title seriously. Which, Bec supposed, was the entire point of this exercise, whatever it was.

“Tell me, at least, you’ve brought some soporifics and alcohol.”

“Of course, my lord. The poppy pipe is to your left.”

Bellen discretely dialled up the security camera for the observation deck.

“Bellen...” Bec said warningly. It was distinctly improper for junior officers to rubberneck whilst on duty, especially on the affairs of their betters.

“Purely as part of my duties to monitor the ship, Viscountess Chong.” she reassured Bec, with nary a twinkle in her eyes. Bec relented, partially because she wanted to know too.

“The Emperor’s TEETH Lady Chong,” Squire Bellen said, contravening the laws of physics by managing to squeal whilst whispering, “there’s Marquis Bossi and Duke Zheng and Marchese Oppenerman AND Princess Telford AND...” Bellen’s voice trailed off as she lost count of the luminaries.

Bec studied the screen for a moment. The Squire was right to be awed. Duke Zheng appeared to have brought out a fair sprinkling of the core system command corps. Bec quickly checked the key ship readouts. Ensuring that this lot got back to Achenar safely was now a matter of Imperial security.

"Squires. A full check of your systems if you will. Report to me in thirty seconds."

As the two bent to their stations, with obvious reluctance on Bellen's part to drag her eyes away from the gathering, Bec's mind worked furiously. Although it was not beyond even a military Duke of Zheng's standing to commandeer a ship and pilots to enjoy a piss up with their friends, he'd never struck her as being that petty. And there was also absolutely no reason for Bec herself to have been chosen as commander of this flight crew. Although she was certainly under the Duke's command if you went down three or four levels of rank, she was not one of his proteges and had little enough influence to be worth buying.

A dull ache of anxiety misted into existence behind Bec's eyes. She glanced at Bellen and Hashem. And them, why had they been chosen?

"All core life support and propulsion systems operating to optimum levels." Hashem said neutrally.

"Weaponry and avionics are green across the board." Bellen piped up.

"Good." said Bec, turning to survey space in front of them. This system was absolutely innocuous, with a couple of rocky and entirely inhospitable planets near the primary. It was uninhabited and almost unvisited. Zheng had still insisted on a triplicate scan to detect any activity as they'd emerged from Witchspace. Suddenly apprehensive, Bec ordered Bellen to repeat the scan and (finally) to stop watching senior officers embarrass themselves. With a barely subaudible sigh of regret, Bellen complied.

"Contact." she said, somewhat surprised. Bec's eyes narrowed. "2.3 Astronomical Units away, a re-entry tunnel is forming."

Bec bit her lip. Like a whale breaching, ships emerging from a hyperspace jump telegraphed their arrival with ripples on the surface of reality, until they exploded back into the classic three dimensions with a gentle explosion of gasses from whatever passed for atmosphere in Witchspace. Analysis of these ripples had become a fine art as practiced by the navies of all the great powers, and given enough time they could estimate the tonnage and arrival date of any emerging ship. To have emerged since their last scan, it must be arriving from a very close distance (in an interstellar sense).

"Bellen, do a targetted active scan to try and estimate time and size. Hashem, if you could quietly reset the co-ordinates for our last point of departure into the Witchspace navigator. I'll have a word with His Grace."

On this remodeled Courier, a ship's ladder led up to the mezzanine, ringed by a brass observation rail staring out over out of the observation window. Bec mounted and began to climb, her boots clanging on the metal rungs. Halfway up she realised that her presence in such opulent company was unlikely to do her any favours. A mere Lord was as important to these nobles as a gnat might be to an elephant. She took a deep breath as her head rose above floor level. Ahead on a variety of couches, divans and deep chairs sat eight or nine men and women, glasses or hookahs in hand, looking at an elderly man the colour of milky coffee telling what appeared to be a particularly ribald joke. Although no one was rude enough to interrupt, the expressions on some of the faces seemed to indicate that no one was appreciating the joke quite as much as the teller. However, Marquis Bossi had a huge array of contacts at court, and a positive joy at using them to forward his own interests, and occasionally those of his friends.

Zheng appeared to be the youngest of the group, in his early fifties. Although in a military sense he outranked most of those present, several of them outranked him in the far more important realms of birthright and political patronage. This wasn't to say that they were stupid or incompetent, simply that military leadership was not their chosen path to power, and indeed for many would have represented the soft option. Zheng spotted her, nodded briefly to the speaker and arose from his chesterfield, circling around the outside.

"Your Grace..." Bec began, but the Duke interrupted her smoothly.

"Viscountess Chong, if I may presume? You have spotted a hyperspace entry cloud for a large ship. It will enter in approximately two point five hours and will maintain position at entry-point. Please set course for it and advise me by text based message of the Estimated Time of Intercept. Do not attempt communications or conduct active scanning."

The Duke's voice was cold and his instructions (as always) were formal and precise. Bec saluted.

“Yes, Your Grace.” However, something in the Duke's posture warned her not to turn back to the ladder to the bridge.

“Additionally, My Lady, at T-minus fifteen minutes, set the autopilot and join us up here. Inform the crew to return to their bunks and to remain there until further notice. Only speak when you are spoken to, but be personable. Take a single drink and do not touch the opiates.”

Bec nodded, but her mind was already working furiously. “Yes, Your Grace. May I ask a question?”

“No, My Lady, you may not. Dismissed.” Zheng took a moment to arrange his face in a pleasant, personable expression and turned back to the party.

Bec turned on her heel. Although she had no right to expect the Duke to reveal anything, she still felt annoyed at his tight-lippedness. The excessive secrecy didn't bother her as much as the fact that the Duke appeared to feel it necessary to partially include her in his confidence. She was way out of her league in this company, and the Imperial Navy had a grand tradition of individual blame for systemic disasters. Success had a million fathers, but failure had only the single scapegoat to keep it company in the gulag.

As she descended the ladder, Bec could feel the stares of her crew burning holes in her back. As she turned around, she put on her most quelling look.

“Squire Hashem, set course for the entry-point. Squire Bellen, if you have any active scans underway, cancel them. Passive scans only. As soon as possible, Hashem, give me an ETA.”

“My Lady...” Bellen began, a slight wheedling tone in her voice.

“Enough.” Bec said, her voice suddenly loud and harsh. A distant boozy laugh echoed down from the mezzanine. Bellen's face was frozen in a slightly shocked expression at Bec's sudden transformation into a disciplinarian. Hashem watched her guardedly, then turned back to his panel and started to input the course to the entry point. Bellen had no such task to seek refuge in, so was had to face Bec's sudden tirade. “This is not an opportunity to gawk at your superior officers, this is a military mission. You are both Imperial officers and will serve the Emperor in whatever manner he and his court see fit. If either of you seek to advance in His Majesty's service, or even to avoid piloting a garbage scow for the remainder of your career, then you will be silent, be diligent and not enquire into the affairs of your betters? Is that understood?”

Bellen gawked at her like a kicked puppy for a moment, then her mouth snapped shut and she nodded twice. Bec kept staring at he until she saw Bellen's mouth form a tiny “Yes, My Lady.”

Bec returned to her station behind and above the two junior officers and sat down. Although her roasting had been well within the 'mild' band of Imperial Naval reprimands, she still felt slightly sorry for Bellen, who'd done little wrong except fail to read her commanding officer's mood. However, Bec reflected, this was one of the most important skills in all the Empire, and anyone who couldn't master this probably deserved a reprimand. “ETA, Hashem?”

There was a pause as Hashem completed a sequence. “Two hours, fifty one minutes and twenty seconds, Viscountess.”

Bec nodded. “Engage.” Bec stared out the front at the swirling stars as the ship began to rotate, ignoring - as best she could - the way in which Bellen's shoulders were slightly shaking.

The Complex Revenge Of The Painted Lady – Part 1

The clone woke screaming. Most of them did that, unless you sedated them to the edge of unconsciousness when you revived them. The woman on her chair in front of the pod watched emotionlessly, resting her chin on her hands. You could reintegrate a clone's memories slowly, over a period of weeks and months, gently bringing them to self-awareness. She and her backers could not be bothered with compassion, so had merely rammed the memories into the clone's brain as soon as the body had been grown and had revived it with brutal quickness.

The screaming continued for some time, as a lifetime of emotions played through the clone's head in the space of a few minutes of resurrection. The woman on the chair yawned. Eventually, the spasming limbs stilled and the great weeping breaths quietened. The clone's eyes opened, and her mouth began to twitch, trying to form words.

The woman rose from the chair and walked over to the pod. Still in their restraints, the clone's arms weakly waved in front of her as the other woman approached. Briskly, the other woman grabbed the clone's arm and pressed a derm into it.

"Just relax and let the drugs do their work."

A croaking sound emerged from the clone's throat, but already her eyes were focussing more sharply on the face in front of her and her movements became more controlled.

The woman lifted a squeeze pack of water from the floor and put it in the clone's mouth. The woman clamped her lips around it and sucked greedily.

"Don't drink too quickly. That stomach has never been used."

After a moment, the woman removed the tube from the clone's mouth. The woman sucked pathetically on thin air for a moment. The woman popped an elliptical tablet into the space vacated by the tube.

"Throat lozenge. Your larynx must hurt like hell."

While the clone sucked on the lozenge, the other woman unstrapped her arms and legs and helped her to her feet. The rapidly strengthening clone staggered but did not fall. The other woman grabbed a medical gown from the back of the chair and helped the clone into it, then seating her on the chair.

"Keep sucking that lozenge and listen to me. Don't speak. Your name is Mary Darkes. You are a career criminal, late of the Azure Sunset. I'm saying this not because I'm worried about your memory implantation, just to let you know that I'm aware of who I'm dealing with."

Mary nodded. She hadn't really thought about who she was until that moment. The sound of her name brought self-awareness crashing through her mind, sparking a million questions and resentments. She held her tongue.

"Look behind me. You know what that is." Instead of obeying her instruction, Mary instead studied the woman asking the question. The woman was shortish, with a neat bowl-cut and a sober grey business suit. Her face had the impassive, unworried look of someone who knew what made the universe go round. An Operator. She also radiated impersonal authority, like an official with the whole Empire standing behind them. Only after Mary had committed her to memory did she turn to regard the clunky piece of technology in the background.

"A clone chamber." Mary croaked.

"Exactly. " The woman stood a moment. Mary waited for her to continue. Then the simple logic hit her.

Mary had emerged from a Clone chamber. Clones came out of Clone chambers. Mary was a Clone. Mary brought her left hand up in front of her face. She was unsurprised to find it shaking. She looked at her ring finger. Just above the first joint, there should be a scar, where she'd cut herself as a child. She looked at her arm. The freckles were in the wrong configuration. She ran a finger down her thrice-broken nose. A smooth and unbroken line. Who was she?

Mary felt an alien in her own body. Her mind was hers, but what was this THING that she was in. Grown in a vat, it had never known the pulsing thread of dance music, the sharp bite of cold toes or the malty taste of Riedqat Brown rolling over her tongue. She had the memories of these experiences, but this body had never experienced them.

Mary looked up and locked gazes with the woman, who was regarding her without sympathy.

"Am I dead?"

"Yes." the woman said calmly.

"Who killed me?"

The woman smiled, without warmth. She turned and began to walk away.

"There's some breakfast in the next room. We'll talk after you've acclimatised your body to Ultracoffee."

It didn't taste any different. Mary was surprised. She'd thought that Ultracoffee would make her inexperienced tongue swell up like a bowling ball or corrode away or something of that ilk. Instead, it just tasted like Ultracoffee. The synth-swine strips tasted just like synth-swine strips too. Everything was the same. Mary looked at her hand again. She found herself missing even the tiny little burn marks and scars that she didn't even remember getting but could now visualise as having belonged to the old body, to the old hands.

She ran a hand over her scalp. The hair was gone, as was usual for Clones. She felt her eyes. Even her crows' feet were gone. It was a young body, without experience or blemish. She wasn't sure whether she liked it or not, but at least she was getting used to it.

"Everything is to your liking, I hope."

The woman returned, and tossed a plastic packet on the table. Alongside it she deposited a pair of lightweight boots.

"Get dressed and then we'll talk." She turned and began to walk out again.

"Wait. Stay here." Mary reached for the packet. "Nothing here you won't have seen before."

"As you wish." The woman sat on the chair, arranging her arms and legs into a tight, neat package, like a spider on its web.

"When did you take an impression of my mind?" Mary asked, tearing off the plastic to reveal a plain black shipsuit. She fluffed it out.

"What's the last thing you remember?" The woman answered a question with a question. Mary paused, one leg into the shipsuit.

"I remember going to meet one of Norman's business associates... where was it... Isveve? A dark haired man. Michael? Mark? I remember getting roaring drunk and then..." Mary shook her head and resumed pulling on the shipsuit. "But I wasn't drunk, was I? I was drugged by you and your friends, then laid out on a slab and had my brain copied."

"The considered opinion was that you were worth preserving. As it has proved, it was a wise medium-term investment."

"And what return do you expect on your investment?" Mary asked, buttoning her front. She sent a hard look towards the woman and received an equally unflinching stare back.

"Who do you think killed you?" the woman said, uncrossing her legs. Mary's eyes narrowed. In a blinding movement, she leapt, her chair clattering on the floor. The woman looked up at Mary serenely, admirably ignoring Mary's hands around her throat.

"I'm tired of games. I'm tired of being treated like a child that needs to be educated. I've been awake for less than a half-hour. Much longer than this and I'm just going to HAVE to kill someone, or I'll get out of practice."

"Your reflexes are better than they were. You'll find our improvements to this body helpful." The woman said calmly. Mary's hands tightened in warning.

"As best we can gather, Norman killed you. You plotted against him and it failed." The woman's voice got husky as Mary's fingers dug deeper into her throat.

Mary was furious with Norman. After all she'd done for him, cleaning up after his messes, dealing with his disappearances, running half his operations and Captaining the Azure Sunset for long stretches while he gallivanted around the universe raising merry hell. True, she'd been planning to usurp his authority and run the Guild herself, but that didn't justify that bastard actually KILLING her.

"It had nothing to do with us. Now let go of me."

"Why?" Mary snarled.

In response, Mary felt an object press gently into her midriff. She risked a look downwards, and was rewarded with the sight of an efficient looking handgun. She snapped her gaze back to the other woman's face. Her expression hadn't changed.

"I'm not into melodramatics. Don't forget, we've already got a copy of your brain, and clones are easy enough to come by, if expensive. You are expendable. Now let go of me and sit down."

For the space of five breaths, they sat poised there, each other's lives in their hands. Then Mary slowly released her grip and walked back around to the other side of the table. She righted her chair and sat on it, folding her arms. She looked back at the woman and saw that the handgun had disappeared into a pocket in her suit.

"What do you want?"

"What you do best."

"Who's the client?"

"Us."

"And who are you? Feds? Imps? Mafia?"

The woman smiled coldly. Mary shrugged. She hadn't expected any other response.

"Who's the mark?"

Silence stretched out. Mary began to get impatient anew at the guessing games, but caught herself. So the woman wanted her to work it out. Fine. Mary had been a talented assassin, but you could have bought five assassins for the amount it cost to grow and imprint a clone. What made Mary so special that they had to reincarnate her in this new body? What special skills or knowledge did she have that –

"Ahhh... Norman."

"You have the inside knowledge, both of his operations and of the inside of his head. You are one of the few people we believe can kill him."

"Why do you want him dead?"

"Current circumstances require it."

Mary mulled the idea over.

"How much?"

"I'm sorry?"

"How much will you pay me?"

Mary finally saw a genuine smile break out across the woman's face. Gentle amusement that Mary was still capable of keeping her priorities even in a situation like this.

"Operating costs. And of course, your new life."

Even Mary had to admit it was a fair offer.

"So will you kill him?" The woman asked.

“No I won’t.” Mary said distinctly. A deadly silence settled over the room.

“It’s been done before, and it only slows him down. What I will do is destroy him utterly.”

Visibly relieved, the woman stood and touched a stud on her wristcomm. A panel opened on one of the doors, leading outside. A blast of arid heat came through the door, as well as a blinding shaft of sunlight. “Just over the first dune is a fully equipped Merlin with a couple of tons of High-Quality Gemstones in the hold. There’s a datapad in the cockpit that contains all the galactic news that you need to catch up on since we copied your brain, as well as everything that WE have on Mosser. I’ll be in touch in a week or two, when you’ve had the chance to do some preliminary research on your task.”

Mary stood as well and walked out the door, shading her eyes with her hand. Her feet sunk deep in the sand and she felt perspiration begin to bead on her brow. Struck by a thought, she looked back.

“What do I call you?”

“Call me Ms. Kong. Good luck, Mary.”

The door slid shut, and Mary felt a rumbling beneath her feet. Looking to either side, she saw that what she’d just emerged from was an exit from a huge Boa freighter, just casually parked upon the sand. The vibrations she was feeling were...

Legs pumping, Mary ran as the ground thrummed around her. Mary had seen the bodies of people caught in the wash from spacecraft takeoffs, and she didn’t want to die so soon after being reborn. Mary felt the heat behind her grow from scorching to burning, and the wind of the wash began to envelop her. The lip of the dune approached, but Mary could feel the trailing threads on her shipsuit begin to melt. With a final, despairing heave, Mary threw herself over the edge. Predictably, she then began to tumble down the long slope on the other side. After a minute, she came to a rest. Exhausted, she lay back and watched, as the Boa rose from its landing place and lifted from the sand. Little sparkling bits of dirty glass fell from the thruster housings as the massive nose lifted skywards, and it began to ponderously struggle to escape the planet’s gravity.

Mary watched as the ship rose and slowly receded out of visual range. Getting to her feet, Mary made her way to the battered looking Merlin sitting behind her.

“Firstly, Mosser. Secondly, Kong.” She muttered to herself. “You either kill me or resurrect me, you better be prepared to pay for it. I’m nobody’s bitch.”

The bladelike wings of her new ship cast long, thin shadows across the sand, reaching towards Mary like inviting fingers. Mary gave one granite-hard look to where she’d last seen the Boa and trudged towards her new ship.

The Complex Revenge Of The Painted Lady – Part 2

Mary just doesn't know what to make of herself. Fortunately, she can pay someone to do that for her.

The slot slid back on the door, and a watery pair of green eyes stared out. More accurately they stared out from a small, closed circuit comm screen.

"We don't want any, he doesn't live here, my soul's not worth saving and I gave at the office." The old man said in a bored, grating sneer. The slot slid back with a click.

Mary looked on, nonplussed. She'd travelled over twenty light years since picking up the Merlin. During the journey, she'd read extensively in the Journals about Marcus and Norman's failed firing, as well as the subsequent debacles of multiple clones and pitched battle with multiple Naval fleets, although all parties concerned were doing their best to obscure the truth. She'd felt disappointment that the grand scheme had failed, along with a deep, satisfying, malicious pleasure. The Journals were vague on the reasons for the failure and Norman's subsequent travails, but Mary doubted that it would have happened had Norman refrained from killing her.

She rapped again on the metal door. This door had been hard enough to find in this dim, dark corner of an obscure, rusted mining station. Despite the skills honed through a life (one, and counting) of criminal enterprise, this man behind it was still an unknown to her. What he could do for her was another matter, THAT was the stuff of legend. The hatch snapped back with an annoyed clang.

"You deaf or wha-" the voice changed as it spied the huge diamond Mary was holding before the slot. It was as big as an orange and cut into over twelve thousand facets. Even in the dim, malfunctioning corridor light (deliberately malfunctioning, it was true) it writhed and twisted the flickering radiance into a hundred intermittent, coruscating rainbows, colouring the watery eyes even greener with avarice.

"This, just for opening the door, regardless of whether we reach an arrangement." Mary said casually. The hatch snapped shut and a deep groan and series of clanking noises echoed through the corridor. The door finally slid open, revealing darkness beyond. Mary stepped through and tried not to start as the door slid to behind her, leaving her in darkness.

"OK, get yer gear off!" cackled the unseen figure. Uncertainly, Mary divested herself of the two handguns and stiletto, placing them on the floor in front of her. She had just finished straightening when the voice spat out at her again from a different direction.

"No, yer GEAR. Clothes, coverings, apparel. I'd hate to think someone stupid had managed to get past my door!"

Patiently, Mary stripped down to undergarments. The man was either paranoid, eccentric or a pervert. None of which were mutually exclusive, she realised uneasily.

"Oh come on!" leered the voice, this time from directly below her. Mary fought not to jump. "If you're here for what I think you are, I'll be seeing it all soon enough.

Mary mulled the thought of killing the man behind this audible leer, either before or after he'd worked his magic. She filed the pleasurable idea away at the back of her head and removed her underpants and brassiere. Naked as the child this body had never been, she stood in the darkness, which was absolute. A dim blue light began to shine from her left, and she turned to face it.

"A bit closer, my lovely. I need to have a close look at just WHAT what I'm working with."

Fighting anger, Mary walked towards the light, which illuminated some sort of medical scanner, like a giant praying mantis standing against a wall. Mary cursed her imagination.

"Clo-ser, clo-ser! Oh don't you worry my dear, I've seen the insides and outsides of more attractive women than you and still kept my hands to myself. I am a professional!" the man's voice devolved into a cackle.

Mary moved up right up to the light, which on close inspection looked like an insect's compound eye. As she came within a meter soft clicks, hums and whirrs began.

There was blessed silence for a minute or so whilst a variety of laser lights blazed across Mary, and strange sounds vibrated through her, leaving her nauseous. At one point a wet spray crossed her face and she growled with annoyance.

“Hoo... someone's spent some money on you already, haven't they, love? Well... now I know who you are and how you were built, let's have a chat, shall we.”

Lights began to glow into life around what Mary realised was a nondescript metal room. Of the door she had entered through, there was no sign. In front of her...

In spite of herself, Mary took a step back.

The “praying mantis” was actually a tall robotic form, about three metres tall, with four spindly, claw-ended feet. In front of her was the blocky torso, surmounted by the blue globe of the sensor. Above was a forest of thin metal arms, festooned with a variety of saws, fine manipulators, cauterisers and clamps. In the middle of this assembly was a sight that made Mary's jaw drop. An ageing human torso sat suspended above the main body of the robot. Mary could see where the legs had been sheared off and a variety of tubes and servos had replaced them, like a parasite's growth on a host. Further up, the arms were missing and a curved metal plate mounted each shoulder. The bald human head was crossed by a mask that covered – or more likely, replaced – the human mouth and nose, but above it Mary could see a pair of familiar watery green eye, surmounted by wisps of greying hair on a liver-spotted skull.

She stilled her panic. Appearing weak here could be fatal.

“Yeeeeees... not as pretty as I once was, not that I was anyone's prize even in my prime.”

The voice crackled from speakers on the wall, not from the mouth on the... remaining elements of humanity on the cyborg in front of her.

“Well.” Mary surprised herself with the businesslike tone she was managing, “what can you do for me?”

The cyborg chuckled. “Ahhh... no pleasantries first? No comments about how well I'm looking? Not a word about how much weight I've lost? No?”

There was silence for a moment.

“I'm here fore a reason.” Mary said calmly, but with a hint of insistence. Now that this was a negotiation, she could push the visceral disgust she felt at the sight before her to one side. This was business, and she'd dealt with people far more repulsive by deed than this one was merely by appearance.

“Well then, lets step inside my parlour then, fly.”

The cyborg's legs extended, and it began a scuttling progress towards a far wall, its feet clanking and scrabbling across the rough floor grating. As it neared, the dull metal surface of the wall flowed like water to reveal an opening large enough to accommodate its body.

“Come, come.” the cyborg's crotchety voice boomed from invisible speakers. If there was one thing Mary felt disquiet about it was the disembodied, decentralised voice, which made her feel as though she was strapped fast inside the dark silken web of this madman's dream. Mary gave one longing look to the pile of her clothes, her handguns, and her dignity, then strode purposefully after the cyborg.

The place they scuttled into was like many labs Mary had been into, but not limited to a human's height and reach. The walls and the high ceiling were covered in displays, workbenches and strange machinery not built to be operated by human forms.

“So is this your first clone, my dear?” the cyborg's voice lost some of its leer and became almost conversational.

“Yes.” Mary said, determined to offer as little information as possible. She supposed it was obvious from the scan that the body she was in was not as old as it should be.

“Ahh... very few multiple lifers seek me out after their first time around. They tire of playing god with their own bodies so easily. I, on the other hand, never tire of being the mortal deity of little vat grown creatures like yourself. I can play with the same flesh over and over and over and always find new ways to improve it, to alter it, to adjust those restrictive phenotypical expressions, oh yes. Was it grown from your own flesh, or is mind and body of different stock?”

Mary shrugged irritably as they approached what looked like a giant sarcophagus. Around it stood tanks, tubes, servos, drills and clamps. In that she would be taken apart, DNA-strand-by-DNA-strand. It was what she was here

for. So why did it still look like a receptacle for the dead.

"It's the face I remember. Does it matter?"

The cyborg cackled, and the human torso twisted around with a whirring of gears. The green eyes were dancing with amusement and laugh lines crinkled up from the eyes visible above the metal mask.

"Oh, not for our work, my lovely, but for the sake of your soul, you'd better take note of it. The mind will live well enough in another's body, but it chafes, is irritated, gets cranky. Yes, it's definitely your first clone. Transhumanism isn't for everybody, my sweet. Start on that path, and you may find yourself wanting all sorts of perversions. At the end, you get to be like me, if you're lucky."

"My soul?" Mary's voice dripped with sarcasm.

The cyborg turned in place and sat down with a clang.

"I am bored with this conversation. Let's turn to the work. A woman does not seek me out for beauty, or for youth, or for trivialities. These petty alterations can be carried out by any number of shallow minds with shallow skills. A woman seeks me out to pay me a large amount of money for the gratification of my pleasures knowing full well what those pleasures are. And like any artist, I want a broad commission, not a description of how each brushstroke should be done. What picture will you be, pretty? And do you care if you're still pretty by the end of it?"

For a moment, Mary was taken aback. She had a shopping list in her memory of what she wanted the cyborg to do, but Mary walked closer to the cyborg, ignoring the instinctive fear the monstrous chimera that stood before her. Irrationally, the fact that she was naked bothered her, although the beast above was no more capable of sexual congress than was a space station or mining machinery. She tilted her head upwards and stared into the cyborg's eyes.

"I need to defeat someone who's smarter than me, whose cunning is the stuff of legend and whose savagery is a thing of beauty. I already know how to kill him, and I might even be able to do it if the right opportunity arises and I get very, very lucky, but I need the physical and mental tools to be able to go beyond that, to disintegrate his empire and to make people forget his very name."

The boldness of her own statement shocked her. Her hatred of Norman had been something she hadn't articulated to anyone since her revival. To voice it, to make it corporeal, to let the baseness of her hatreds ring like bullets off the walls, well she felt as if the universe around her had just pivoted around, with her own words as the fulcrum. She felt tears well in her eyes and laughter well in her throat as her purpose crystallised.

There was a moment's silence. Then a bark of laughter emerged from the speakers on the cyborg's midsection.

"Ah, so you aspire to evil on a large scale, and you seek for me to make flesh your malice. Oh my dear, that's a commission I will gratefully accept. Even to fail in your quest would be so dreadfully entertaining. And you will fail, regardless of my work, if the soul beneath my crafts is not tempered by experience, cunning and low-level sociopathy. Are you set on this path, my dear? Is your pretty, pretty form so dominated by a need to destroy someone, even should your own sense of self be forfeit?"

Mary stared up unblinkingly into the face of the monster who would make of her a monster, and would help her kill a monster greater than both of them.

"I've died once. It's not as bad as I thought it would be, and I wasn't afraid of it much to begin with." she said, ignoring the wetness on her face.

"That's not what I asked, but so be it."

Mary felt a sharp pinch in her upper arm and felt her new body fall to the floor for the last time.

The Oracle Array – Part 2

Something is demonstrated, but not everything is clear.

“For Zeus utterly abhors the boasts of a proud tongue; and when he beheld them coming on in a great stream, in the haughty pride of clanging gold, he smote with brandished fire one who was now hasting to shout victory at his goal upon our ramparts.” - Sophocles

At T-minus thirty, Bec fished out her makeup kit from her shipjacket and began to apply it, using the bridge cameras (which showed her face in somewhat unflattering detail) as a makeshift mirror. Hashem seemed oblivious, but Bellen caught sight of that camera feed in one of her idle checks around the ship (although Bec was pleased to note, not once did the mezzanine camera feed come up on her screen). Bellen turned and seemed about to say something, but shut her mouth and turned back to her station. Bec smiled grimly. Maybe Bellen did have some ability in reading her commander's mood.

At T-Minus twenty, Bec finished what she supposed was a minimum standard of makeup and ordered Hashem and Bellen to their berths.

Hashem surprised her by asking a question.

“My Lady, it takes approximately twenty seconds from crew door to bridge. Should a full flight-crew be required urgently...”

Bec interrupted gently “Squire, several of the officers above have distinguished operational service. His Grace has an Elite Federation of Pilots rating of 'Deadly', I believe. We should be able to cobble together a quite reasonable flight-crew in short order, should it be required.”

Should their venerable and slightly pickled bodies be able to scale the ladder in time, Bec added silently.

“Squires,” Bec stopped the two before they headed for the hatch leading to their quarters, “this mission is not over yet. I have a feeling that the Duke may have chosen us for reasons other than our sparkling personalities. Stay alert. Glory may yet await us.” Bellen perked up noticeably at the pep-talk. With Hashem, who could tell?

At T-minus seventeen, Bec put a hand on the ladder and took several deep breaths. As the daughter of nobility, she'd been to dozens of these social gatherings in service of her mother's eternal hunger for the esteem of her peers, new insane heights of wealth and suitable marriages for her children. Childish manners would, however, not do her any favours in this company. The experience of five years bounty hunting and a further two of Imperial military service in the legendarily dissolute Imperial officer's corps had roughened her edges considerably, and she would need her wits as well as her courtesies about her.

The ribaldry of her last visit had descended into fairly earnest and somewhat sozzled talk about Court politics. Bec collected a drink and tried studiously not to listen whilst looking appropriately attentive. Knowing the wrong things about court politics was an easy way to get you killed.

“So, you were once a bounty hunter, Viscountess Chong.” came an elderly female voice from Bec's left. Bec turned and tried not to spill her drink.

Before her stood an emaciated figure, surmounted by a pair of piercing brown eyes, only slightly dimmed by the extreme age of the body in which they resided, surmounted by impossibly dark hair. Princess Telford was one of the most senior twenty officers in the Imperial Navy. A distant relative of both the Emperor and Bec herself, she was one of the grand old fixtures of the service, well into her hundred and fifties and the solid, unshakeable source of reactionary military tradition. Rumour held that court martials were her special pleasure, and that she went out of her way to make sure there were enough regulations and codes of courtly behaviour to ensure her ongoing entertainment at such events. She leaned forward, her breast pocket a blazing display of pretty much any Imperial medal which had ever existed during the Princess' long lifespan.

“Yes, Your Highness.” Bec managed, keenly aware that the next ninety seconds could make or break her career, if not her entire life.

“Becoming an Imperial officer must have been a rude shock when you were accustomed to... that lifestyle.”

Bec could almost see the tongs which Her Highness had used to pick up the words 'that lifestyle' and noted with significant concern that the words had the air of a challenge, a concern that the glint in the Princess' eyes did nothing to dispel.

"In terms of battle, Imperial tactical innovations are certainly very much superior and take some familiarisation, Your Highness." Bec opted for what she believed was the safer option.

"But? Your mouth speaks certainties, My Lady, but your eyes betray UNcertainty." Princess Telford nailed Bec's momentary hesitation. Bec fought the urge to play dumb, which would do her far more harm than actually answering the question.

"They... are highly effective in squadron to squadron combat or assaulting capital vessels..." Bec realised she was in a hole, and fought to choose her words, "but in asymmetric situations, individual pilots against squadrons can take advantage of certain tactical patterns, Your Highness."

Princess Telford raised an eyebrow. "Operational experience, My Lady?"

Bec blanched. Telford was implying that in her bounty-hunting days Bec might have fallen afoul of an Imperial patrol or two, which was effectively an accusation of treason. "Some pirate groups use Naval formations, probably led by ex-Naval pilots, Your Highness."

There was a moment's silence as the statement was digested, the Princess looking as if what was digesting was bad meat. Bec felt panic rise. She had impugned the honour of the Navy twice. First by suggesting firstly that anyone ever left the service of the Emperor and secondly by saying that if they did that they would join the ranks of pirates. "Or are excellent students of Imperial tactical supremacy." she said, unable to entirely suppress her desperation.

Princess Telford gave a rattling laugh. Bec was not mollified. What Her Highness found funny could very easily prove to be deeply unpleasant for Bec.

"Well played, Viscoutness. Quite right, quite right too. A skilled and innovative pilot can find weaknesses in any formal tactical pattern, which is well known. War, however is not a matter of the one against the many. The many against the few, perhaps, but that situation is well dealt with in tactical training. Reality doesn't always follow training narratives, however..."

Princess Telford trailed off into personal reverie for a moment. She returned quickly, all frivolity gone. "You were commended in the Battle of Rocky Fields, I appear to remember. A Golden Spike?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Bec self consciously brushed a hand over the stylised stitching on her breast pocket which was the only remnant of the genuinely hideous medal which she'd been awarded for screaming the right thing into a communicator at the right time. It hid in her underwear drawer these days.

Princess Telford gave the breast pocket a derisory glance and harrumphed. "Giving out medals in defeat is a silly business, especially in that... debacle. Gives the rank and file ideas that all they need to do is survive and they'll be rewarded, whether or not the Empire triumphs or falls, and the Emperor's honour be damned."

The Princess looked sideways at Bec. "Is that what you did, My Lady?" she said, in a voice like an antique dagger. Bec would have broken out in a cold sweat, but her pores had already clamped shut in terror. Princess Telford had the rank and the pull to assign her to transporting radioactive waste for the remainder of her life, and scuttlebutt had it that she was quite capable of doing so if she felt someone needed 'a lesson'.

"If my life had been necessary to achieve an Imperial victory, I would not be here speaking to you now, Your Highness."

The Princess looked at her for a moment, her eyes darting over Bec's face as if a flaw in her argument would be written on her face in tiny script on some obscure patch of skin. Then she looked down, disappointed, and nodded to Bec. "Good evening, My Lady."

"Good evening, Your Highness." Bec fought the urge to do a most un-military curtsey, as well as the urge to start hyperventilating.

Duke Zheng took advantage of the opening to move in for a few quiet words. He had been watching their exchange closely, which had added to Bec's anxiety. "I see you've had the pleasure of Her Highness' attentions. I trust you managed not to embarrass yourself."

"I believe so, Your Grace." Bec managed.

"A pity. Her Highness does love to watch junior officers squirm. We are on schedule?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"No communications have been attempted?"

"No, Your Grace."

"The weaponry on this ship is functional?"

Bec's brow furrowed. Was the Duke expecting combat? Should she summon Bellen and Hashem? Bec caught herself and fought not to double-guess her superior officer.

"Yes, Your Grace, the main armament has been checked at least three... four times since boarding and the 6 missiles are greenlit."

Zheng nodded. "Time to get moving, I feel. Hand these out."

The Duke handed Bec a box of SBR-UP alcohol neutralisers and moved to the centre of the circle.

"Honoured colleagues, My Lords, Graces and Highnesses, if I may have your attention?" The conversations dimmed. Bec went among them, discreetly handing out the dermal injectors that would render their users sensible to whatever the Duke had to say. "Although I rejoice in the company of so many who bask in His Imperial Majesty's favour, I have another reason for inviting you here."

"Don't tell your wife that, Zheng!" came the raucous call from someone who Bec had yet to get to with the drugs.

"I indeed have not, Marquis Bossi." said Zheng, undisturbed, "I generally do not invite my wife to field test exercises." A murmur rose and spread across the gathering.

"If Your Grace would be so good as to elaborate." the crackly voice of Princess Telford held a hint of impatience. Duke Zheng took the hint.

"Shortly we will meet the rendezvous point with His Imperial Majesty's Ship Revelation."

"That's not a capital ship." interrupted a grossly overweight woman with the twitchy eyes of a predator. Marchese Opperman commanded the naval shipyards, and probably knew all the Navy's capital ships by sight, if not engine signature.

"It's..." she paused a moment to consult her internal lists, "... scientific research. A modified Imperial Explorer, I believe."

"Your memory is prodigious, Marchese." Duke Zheng inclined his head. "Professor Tevez has been heading up a project team for an absolutely remarkable military development which I believe deserves your patronage. If development, manufacturing and deployment can be managed in reasonable secrecy, this would provide us with a First Strike capacity allowing us to destroy up to fifty percent of the Federation's small ship deployment and up to ten percent of its capital ship deployment without risking a single one of our own capital ships."

A murmur of pleased surprise passed across the company, punctuated by a voice dripping with bored contempt.

"Oh please, Your Grace." drawled Earl Rudakovich, ever the professional cynic underneath typically arched eyebrows, "every new gun, ship or missile that the boffins come up with makes claims like that. I'm sure the first caveman who brandished a rock bragged about how the tribe on the other side of the mountain would be decimated, a boast that lasted until halfway through the first engagement when the other tribe picked up their own. And your glorious, sight-unseen technology is different because of...?"

Duke Zheng didn't flinch at the challenge, or the insult to his honour.

"Your skepticism does you credit in the eyes of the Emperor, My Lord. I hope to allay it with our little demonstration."

On cue, Bec's data pad chirruped as the engines of the Courier changed key, returning to an idle state. They had arrived, and the autopilot would hold them at their current position in the absence of further instruction.

“Viscountess Chong, Baron Chatterjee?” Duke Zheng nodded.

A dark-skinned naval officer who had been lurking at the rear of the group stepped forward. He was slender, with a posture that (to Bec) didn't come from the parade ground or capital ships, but from time spent on small and decidedly unmilitary craft. On closer inspection, Chatterjee was actually quite young, only a little older than Bec. His eyes made him look far older, however, a positively ancient stillness lying behind them like a lightless, underground rockpool. He regarded Bec with a quick glance, then nodded slightly, as if seeing her had filled in a check-box.

Zheng had called him a mere Baron. He had as little place in this company as Bec did, unless, of course the Duke had plans for him as much as Bec had resignedly concluded he had for her.

“If I could request that everyone move to the window, I will show you why I believe this project shows such promise.”

There was a groaning and a shuffling as the assorted dignitaries defied their vintage joints and age-heavied frames. Not waiting, Zheng led the way to the ladder with Bec and Chatterjee following closely. On reaching the bottom, Zheng headed for the command seat and Chatterjee for the weapons station. The left Bec to man the helm, which she did, quickly bringing up her own pilot profile. The screens blinked into view. The short-range scanner showed the huge blue cloud of a Witchspace entry point less than ten clicks distant, accompanied by the hulking shape of the Revelation. Bec zoomed the camera in and examined it with interest, as it was clear that the ship had been significantly modified, the graceful lines of the three engine nacelles disfigured by various emitters, scoops and antennas, covering it like tumours. Jutting out of the main body was a large rectangular slot, on which the telltale oscillating landing lights of a spacedock winked. Bec was struck by a sudden foreboding. She suddenly knew what the Duke wanted her for.

“Your Grace, the Revelation is hailing us.” Chatterjee reported. His voice had a strong Achenari accent, but as before, there was a nuance somewhere that spoke of someone who'd traveled widely, and not just as a liner passenger.

“Acknowledge and give them a standard Naval go-ahead signal, My Lord. My Lady, please bring us within a click of the Revelation.”

“Yes, your Grace.” Bec and Chatterjee chorused.

Bec brought the helm about until the graceful nose of the Courier was pointing directly about at the misshapen form of its larger cousin and gently brought the thrusters up. A spilled drink could easily doom any chance at the Duke gaining the patronage of those above, and Bec wasn't the soon-to-be-ex-Naval Officer who would bring that about.

As they continued, a small light flashed on the screen. A second contact had appeared, right next to the Revelation. Chatterjee wordlessly targetted and scanned the second contact. A Lifter. The small and unlovely craft were the busy workhorse that drove interstellar commerce by ferrying goods from the massive supercargo ships to waiting space stations. By design, they were barely spaceworthy and Bec would rather give up her pilot's license than be tasked to fly one.

Bec chanced a quick glance backwards. The assembled brass were all at the lip of the mezzanine, leaning on the rail. The expressions were interested, but not fascinated. The attention span of old power in relation to new ideas was typically limited. Bec hoped that Zheng's grand display would be both swift and impressive.

“Combat readings on the glass, my Lord.” Zheng instructed. Chatterjee touched a button and a heads-up display was reflected up on the window for the brass to review. Bec did too. An unarmed drone, without weapon or distinguishing feature. Except... the Lifter had been fitted with a shield generator, which much have taken up much of the existing cargo space inside. The shield strength was... indeterminate. Chatterjee had picked up on it too.

“Your Grace, there's an anomalous shield reading. Permission to re-scan.”

“I'm aware of it, My Lord, but please do.”

The HUD display flickered, then resolidified, still with that anomalous shield reading. Was this the Duke's innovation? New Counter-Electronic Warfare? A cloak to mislead the opponent's ability to make tactical assessments?

The Duke's voice came again, this time echoed by the speakers flanking the mezzanine.

“Those of you with deep space experience are probably very aware of the capabilities of the current generation of military technology, both our own and that of the Federation. This ship is fitted with a standard 4MW Koch and Toro

nitrogen cooled laser. Whilst not a particularly heavy armament, it is easily enough to deal with the ship before us, I'm sure you agree. My Baron Chatterjee, please eliminate this ship so that the test can continue. A five second burst should suffice."

"Yes, Your Grace." Chatterjee said smoothly. Bec could feel the trap coming, as she was sure Chatterjee could. But Bec had checked the specs for the laser herself, it was absolutely standard issue.

Chatterjee pulled the trigger handgrip jutting out of the control panel and the bright orange beam lanced out from the front of the ship, causing the sparkling shield to flare with the coursing energy. A second should have been enough to vapourise the shields for the tiny ship in front of them and an additional half-second (at most) to punch through the hull of the Lifter. With mounting incredulity, Bec watched as two, three, four seconds passed, and the beam finally winked out. The shield strength was still... indeterminate, but the ship before them was rude proof that the shields were still in existence. There was a low, uncertain murmur from the assembled audience. It was far from pleased, and indeed there were undertones of insult, as if the Duke had played a tasteless practical joke.

"My Lord, it would appear as if the ship has not been destroyed. How remiss of you. Could you please repeat the five second burst."

"Yes, Your Grace." Chatterjee said grimly. Bec could have sworn that he was almost amused.

The second burst had no more effect than the first, although Bec paid more attention this time to make sure the beam was hitting the Lifter straight on. It was. This time, the murmur was excited, with an air of approval.

"This is a trick, you fools." the icy voice of Rudakovich cut above the hubbub. Showing more agility than most of his peers, he scaled the ladder like a monkey and strode over to Chatterjee's station.

"Out of my way." he snarled. Chatterjee gave a quick glance back to Duke Zheng, who nodded imperceptibly. Chatterjee vacated the chair. The Earl tapped uncertainly through a few controls.

"Missiles... missiles... check the payload... LV III standard... right!"

Slow and uncertain as the Earl was, compared to a combat pilot, he still got there in the end, arming the missile and slamming his hand down on the launch key. He grinned maliciously back at Zheng, who went so far as to raise an eyebrow in response, more expression from him than Bec had ever seen before.

The ship shuddered slightly as the missile ignited and detached from the hull. Instinctively, Bec activated the missile camera, bringing it up as an inset on the main screen. The stars wheeled as the missile calculated the quickest path to the target and plotted its course. The LV III missiles were crafty beasts which Bec had tried to outrun before, and a stationary drone was an insult to their considerable abilities. A distant blue dot appeared on the missile camera, rushing up to meet it as the missile accelerated. On the main viewscreen, there was an explosion as the missile detonated and the missile camera whited out.

"Right..." the Earl said confidently, only to do a double-take as the gas dispersed, leaving the Lifter hanging in space, shields turned a frazzled red by the continued assaults, but still intact.

The Earl's mouth gaped for a moment, then snapped shut. He shot a venomous look at the Duke, who stared back, implacable as a sphinx.

"Thank you, Earl Rudakovich, for providing such a rigorous test of the new technologies. Professor Tevez will shortly be crossing from the Revelation to provide you all with a more academic briefing as to the capabilities of the technology. I will join you at this briefing. Until then, I encourage you to resume enjoying the hospitality of the ship."

The noise above increased, then receded as the crowd moved back to the chesterfields and fainting couches, suddenly abuzz with excited speculation. The Earl rose from the pilot's seat and moved to the ladder, his expression now more thoughtful than malicious.

The communications system chimed with an incoming communication. Bec studied the panel for a second.

"Your Grace, a party from the Revelation requesting to come aboard."

Zheng nodded, and let out a long breath.

"Clear them to board, greenlight the docking clamps and join me in the briefing room, My Lady. You too, My Lord. The time has come for some plain speaking."

Return Of The Old Guard Part 1

[de Havilland]

The lift opened with a rusty scrape and de Havilland stepped out into Sector Seven, a sense of déjà vu overtaking him. The same dingy, dirty, industrial streets. Wisps of steam curled up from the grating on the sidewalk before dispersing into the air. There was a smell in the air, an artifact of cheap carbon dioxide scrubbers, that wrinkled his nose. The artificial sun was near its zenith, but its light barely seemed to penetrate this far down, as if sector seven were beyond its reach, eternal dusk where any number of dodgey deals could be spun.

He walked fast. He didn't run. With the stations security systems on alert, running would be flagged by any security camera algorithm. So he strode as fast as he could, because he was sure the police would be coming, but not so fast as to bring attention to himself. A blood vessel throbbed on his forehead. It felt like a glaring neon sign, broadcasting his guilt to all and sundry.

The few people walking the metal streets were drifting back to work from a lunch break. They all wore their overalls, bright orange and blue. De Havilland sub consciously pulled at his brown pants and black jacket. He couldn't have looked more out of place. He sped up, not wanting to be out in the open any longer than needed.

The familiar curved roof of Robquee jugged up above its neighbours. De Havilland crossed a road and turned the corner to find the main doors closed and all the office lights off. A flicker of doubt made him pause. He turned back the way he had come. He could still see the odd person in orange and blue overalls. He hadn't imagined them. He checked his chrono. It was definitely a Tuesday. People were supposed to be working. He glanced next door. It was also dark and closed, but it was a catering company, and de Havilland imagined it would only open up on appointment.

Eyes and ears peeled for trouble, he trotted up the short path to the front door and gave it an experimental tug. Locked. There were no signs on the glass door, no 'sorry – closed', no explanation for the sudden closure, just his darkened reflection looking back at him, its expression as puzzled as his own.

He stepped back and looked up to the second floor. He couldn't see any movement or lights. The hairs on his neck rose. Something wasn't right here. He couldn't buy the coincidence of Robquee mysteriously shutting down the day the cops put out an alert for him. Despite his dire situation, he found his focus changing from getting help to getting answers.

He knew the haulers had brought the condensate in through a service entrance so he wandered around the block and found a truck entrance on the other side. Pre-fabricated walls bounded the gate with an overhead arch displaying a smaller version of the Robquee sign and logo.

The gate was open. De Havilland slipped through and into the workshop yard. Large walls with flaking paint enclosed the yard on both sides. Welding jigs and other square and round constructs lined the eastern wall, while scrap and recycling sat against the west wall.

Steel clicked behind him and de Havilland jumped a foot in the air. He turned, eyes wide, knees bent and fists raised, ready for an attack.

But the yard was empty, the only thing moving his hammering heart. He forced a laugh to try and wash away the tension and adrenaline. Still, he was painfully aware that the yard only had two ways in and out: the way he had come, and the locked building in front of him. He'd be in trouble if the police showed up anytime soon. He searched through the scrap for a makeshift weapon when he heard a real and distinct sound of keys rattling.

De Havilland crouched down behind a large square jig. It had gone rusty from the moisture in the air and helped blend. His brown pants would hopefully blend in. He cautiously pulled himself around the edge of the jig.

Henry Bigelaar was locking up the egress door set into the main truck door. He hunched his back over as if trying to hide the keys from view.

De Havilland felt a flash of anger. He clenched his fists and strode forward, uncaring if Henry heard his footfalls or not. He got within two paces when Henry spun and gave a surprised shout. "You."

"What the hell is going on here, Henry?"

"Nothing," Henry stammered, fingers playing with his set of keys. His eyes darted side to side, as if de Havilland had a pair of wingmen with clubs. "Nothing's going on."

“Why are you acting so nervous?”

“No reas. . . I’m not acting nervous. I’m fine. We’ve just had to shut down. A death, yes, someone died in the workshop. We’ve had to shut down until OSH complete their review.”

De Havilland licked his lips as he considered the story. It sounded legitimate from the outside, but there were just too many coincidences. Besides, de Havilland had been involved in a workshop OSH review before. “Surely if the place was closed for an OSH review they wouldn’t let you in in case you disturbed evidence?”

Henry’s fidgeting doubled; his whole body trembled, as if he were *mortified*. “I, ah,” Henry dashed past de Havilland’s right side-

His military reflexes were a little rusty, but de Havilland managed to swing out an arm and Henry bounced back before de Havilland grabbed his arm. Henry’s eyes were wide, pupils dilated.

“Henry, talk to me. What has you so spooked?”

Then de Havilland heard the sirens. They blasted through the confined streets, echoing, seemingly filling the whole sector 7. Henry relaxed slightly, and de Havilland understood why Henry was so scared. “You called them?” he shoved Henry backward against the door, making him cry out.

“You double crossing piece of shit. Greed? Did we not give you enough money? I thought you were Sam’s friend.”

Henry pushed himself upright. A sneer sneaked onto his lips. “Sam and I go way back, but I’m a proud citizen and I don’t condone terrorism.”

de Havilland shoved him against the door again. He opened his mouth to berate Henry, to explain he wasn’t a terrorist, but he stopped. What had he expected Norman to do with the gun once it was complete? He hadn’t thought past the mission to take down INRA. He had to remind himself that Norman was a criminal, a monster, a homicidal manic. Michael had told him about the failed plot at Achenar. Millions of innocent people would have died. Norman was a terrorist, and de Havilland by association was a terrorist too.

No. No, he wasn’t. He wouldn’t let Norman do that. Once he and Veruz were free, he’d find a way to disable the gun. He wouldn’t have left it in Norman’s hands. Or Frantics. A chill ran down his spine.

The sirens grew louder. They echoed off the crete and steel surroundings, dimming their higher frequencies until they sounded like the dying wail of some hideous spectre. It was coming from all directions, closing in, trapping him in the yard of a corrupt engineering firm.

He refocused on Henry, realizing the man’s story was bogus. “I note you were more than happy to take our money and build the parts we needed. You would have called the police a long time ago if you were such a patriot.” He banged Henry against the wall again, a lot harder this time. “What’s changed?”

A sob escaped Henry’s lips, but nothing else, so de Havilland shoved him back again, harder. Henry cried out. “I don’t know her name, I swear. She knew you would be back. She promised a lot of money if I kept you on the station.”

De Havilland’s eyes widened in recognition. There were only two females he could be talking about, and he doubted Emu would play things this way. She was direct, a warrior. She’d proven that. If she wanted him, she’d come down here and take him herself. He reached into his pants pockets and pulled out the business card he’d received in the Delta Pavonis system. He flicked it over and read the name: Melinda White, I.N.R.A.

The sirens throbbed in his ears, deafening him. He had to leave now, but he wasn’t going to get trapped in this yard. He released Henry and the pathetic creep slid to the ground, crying. De Havilland fought the urge to kick him and instead grabbed the keys. He spun the various keys around the ring until he found one that looked like the door lock. With the sirens reaching rock concert noise levels and his hands shaking, de Havilland opened the door and burst through. He left the door open and raced through the workshop towards the office. Once he was back on the street, he’d have places to run, holes to hide in.

A security door sat snug in its frame, a faint red light glowing from the lock. De Havilland slid to a stop. The door had a card reader, not a key. He spun on the spot, scanning the workshop for something he could use.

An oxy-acetylene torch hung around its oxygen and acetylene bottles, both sitting on a sack barrow ease of movement. He raced forward, unwound it, opened the valves on the bottles and sparked the welder into life. A long

bright flame snapped into existence and he wound the knobs until the flame became short and blue. Nice and hot. He dragged the welder toward the door and plunged the flame into the lock. The metal darkened, sizzled, then cracked. The latch released with an electronic squawk and the door opened slightly. De Havilland dropped the torch and kicked the door open. It led to the hallway adjacent to the meeting room with its photos of engineering feats, all of them infected with Henry's corruption. He raced down the hall into reception. The big glass doors stood resolute before him. Blue lights strobed outside.

De Havilland didn't slow. Old reflexes were well and truly in control now. Reflexes that had been smashed into him by his NCOs, reflexes that had prepared him to kill first, but more importantly to survive. He grabbed the receptionist's chair and with fear and adrenaline fueling his muscles, lobbed it at the right glass window. It shattered and de Havilland jumped through. He staggered to the footpath among a sea of broken glass, still tinkling over the rough ground.

De Havilland swung his head left and right, listening, looking. He was near the middle of a straight, tee-intersections in both directions. The buildings across the way were illuminated and open. People were moving around inside, though some of them were coming outside to see what was going on. Witnesses, just what de Havilland needed.

An Interpol cruiser swung onto the road to his left, siren screaming, lights flashing, wheels scrabbling on the pavement. It straightened up and the engine revved, its throaty roar echoing off the stone building facades.

De Havilland ran.

He didn't know where he was going, but it didn't matter for the moment, as long as it was away from the cop. The surrounding buildings were all multi storied and sheer faced, creating an artificial canyon around de Havilland. He could feel the cruiser closing behind him, its blocky face punching a hole through the air. Company logos and signs whizzed by: engineering, service, caterers, recyclers, utilities.

Utilities. De Havilland turned, an idea forming in his mind. It was an air conditioning sub-station, part of the greater system controlling air quality on the station. There would be ducts leading to all the different sectors of the station. He ran across the road and barged his shoulder into the wooden door by the lock. It burst open, the door jam splintering and crashing to the ground in front of him. Pain flared up his arm but he ignored it and staggered forward into the darkened room. A low thrumming sound emanated from in front of him. His eyes adjusted and he made out a door straight ahead. The plant room. To his right a contractors peg board hung above a rack of safety gear – hard hats, coveralls and hi-viz vests.

The cruiser screamed to a stop outside, its blue lights illuminating the entry room. The peg board was blank. De Havilland grabbed a set of coveralls and a hard hat, pulled a random peg across the board and dashed into the plant room.

The whine of a dozen screaming fans assaulted his ears. The noise was so loud it felt like a physical presence pushing on the sides of his head. It was like standing next to a space ship when it took off. Each fan had a circular duct going in the front and a square duct out the top, ranging in diameter from forearm to small car size. De Havilland scanned the walls, found the emergency stop and slammed it down. All the fans immediately began to wind down. The physical relief on de Havilland's ears almost made him collapse, but he kept himself moving.

The siren began to swamp the fan noise. A shadow moved over the strobing blue light from outside. He ducked through a side door into a service room and donned the overalls and hard hat. There was a row of lockers on one side and a rack of screwdrivers on the other. With foreboding warning him to stop, he grabbed the longest and biggest one he could see then turned and stepped back out the door.

The Interpol Cop was two metres away, standard issue pistol up at shoulder height, aimed straight at him. "Freeze."

De Havilland rose his hands, screw driver still clenched in his right fist. "What's going on?" he asked, allowing a quaver of fear to enter his voice.

The Cop stepped forward, gun unmoving, his face an unreadable mask of concentration.

Another step, thought de Havilland, but the Cop stopped tantalizingly out of reach. His eyes were wide, concentrating on his aim. The radio on his shoulder buzzed with cop talk. The fans had slowed enough so de Havilland could hear individual fan blades chopping past the casing outlet. Chop, chop, chop.

The stared at each other, neither of them moving an inch. De Havilland counted each precious second, debating his next move. There would be more cops on the way, but how long until they got here? Was there a sector seven precinct, or did Interpol operate out of a central facility? He tried to recall the layout of sector seven, its size, the

street layout. He had to assume this cop's backup would only be minutes away.

"Drop it," the cop commanded, gesturing to the screw driver with his gun. His movements were slow and steady. His back foot skidded forward slightly, squeaking on the clean floor.

De Havilland crinkled his brow in confusion. He followed the cop's gesture to look up at the screwdriver and gave a little start, as if to say 'Opps, look at that, I didn't know I had that in my hand still, I was just working innocently on some fans and you scared me.' But he wasn't a good actor and the cop's expression confirmed his fears.

He suddenly felt ten years old again, trapped in the school cafeteria, backed into a corner by Billy the bully. Billy had a baton that he'd stolen from somewhere. He'd waited until everyone else had left. The serving area was deserted, the chef outside having his 1pm smoke. The other children were rushing back to class, leaving just de Havilland and Billy. The first time Billy had cornered him it had been about lunch money. De Havilland had fought him off. This time it was about pride. Billy didn't want lunch money any more. He wanted to make de Havilland hurt. De Havilland had heart, and he thought he was pretty brave. But he didn't have unarmed combat training. He didn't have the skills to take on an armed opponent. He'd been beaten to an inch of his life. He'd had fifteen bones broken, metal pins strung throughout his body and half the year in hospital, but most importantly he'd learnt to never ever, ever be that weak again.

But as the cop grinned at him, perhaps in victory, perhaps in arrogance, de Havilland couldn't help but remember the painful lesson. Of course this time, de Havilland was armed too, and he wasn't going to be beaten to a pulp. He loosened his grip, allowing the driver's handle to spin in his hand, slack. He lowered his arm as if to throw the driver away, a show of compliance. The cop, eyes filled with dreams of heroism and medals, of pulling in the 'terrorist' single handedly, of the stories he could tell the girls at the saloon the next night, was thinking like a flawed human man instead of a trained professional policeman, and when he took the next half step forward, de Havilland struck.

He stabbed the driver forward with every ounce of strength he could muster. He'd started in an awkward position, but the driver was sharp and his aim true. He punctured the cop's chest between the lower ribs, forcing the driver in right up to its handle. The cop froze as if he were in a holoivid that had been paused. Time stood still for a moment as the pain took a moment to register. Then his jaw dropped. Blood flowed down and around the handle, at first dripping to the floor but quickly turning into a flood.

The cop staggered back, eyes wide in disbelief. He collapsed to his knees, dropping his gun to cradle the screw driver. His face went white and slithered onto his back, chest rising and falling in little shallow breaths. A cold sweat formed on his forehead.

De Havilland watched him fall, a maze of emotions racing through him. First success, and a thin grasp of freedom, then disgust at what he had done to another human being, an innocent one at that and finally horror at what his survival instinct had done. He shrugged off the shock and knelt down next to the fallen policeman. He was trying to sit up, but every time he clenched his stomach muscles blood squirted out faster. He fell back for a final time, gasping, then crawled his fingers up his torso until they grasped the screw drivers handle and he tried to pull up.

"No, don't," de Havilland urged, placing his hand on the cops own. "It's plugging the gap." He removed his overalls and ripped them up and pushed the material in around the screwdriver. It quickly turned pink then red, collapsing as blood filled the fabric. He grabbed the cops shoulder radio and depressed the message button. "Officer down, I repeat, officer down." He scanned the walls for any identification. "Haywards Pumping Station, Sector Seven. Officer down." He'd just told every single policeman where he was, and likely sealed his fate by doing it, but dammit, he wasn't a cold blooded thug like Veruz seemed to think he was. "I'm sorry," de Havilland said to the now shivering cop. Then he turned and got to work.

Each of the ducts had inspection hatches. Some were small, designed to check for blockages and remove product by hand if necessary. The others were designed for ingress by maintenance workers. De Havilland opened every single one of them. He put his fingerprints around them all and ripped his pants on the edge of one of them, leaving a few threads. He looked over his shoulder at the policeman. He was staring into space, on his way out. De Havilland hoped his backup arrived soon. He weaved between the fans and their ducts back to the service room he had gotten changed in. There was a row of lockers. He opened one, stashed its contents in another and* squeezed his bulk sideways into the locker and jammed the door shut behind him.

de Havilland waited.

It took less than ten seconds for the second Interpol cruiser to squeal to a halt outside, another ten seconds for footfalls to echo through the plant room. Sounds were muffled, but de Havilland heard alarm and panic in the voices. More sirens sounded. De Havilland hoped they were ambulances. He tried to picture the wound, visualize

the organs beneath, how damaged they would be. Critical injury or an excuse for convalescent leave? De Havilland felt sick in the stomach. He had done it again, putting the life of an innocent after his own. What gave him the right to do that? What made him think that his life was any more valuable than the cops? The man probably had a family, two point four kids, a house, a life. They probably went out on family picnics every Sunday, and sat around the table and ate dinner every other night. They probably sat and talked and enjoyed each other's company. He spent his days protecting others, adding value to society. His wife probably worked in the arts, the kids were probably top of their class, destined for great things under their father's guidance. Meanwhile de Havilland skulked around on a ship hiding from his own life, moonlighting as the engineer for a public enemy, fixing up his super weapons and generally keeping him and his ship running. For a past time he flirted with the girlfriend of a dead crazy Japanese swordsman. But survival was a trait he couldn't shake. He'd been born with it. It was in his blood. He'd proven it at school and the various battle fought there. Then once he'd join the army, it had been *taught* to him. Survival had been infused into his soul, more a part of him than anything else. Hard wiring and read-only memory. He couldn't deny that part of him either.

He realized that it had been nothing but luck that he'd lasted this long without the two parts of him coming into conflict. From that day he had left the AAAI and thrown every last credit into a rusty Adder, dreams of exploration in his head, he'd been walking a path which had lead him to this point. Now everything was coming to a head and he wasn't sure if he could handle it.

The door to the storage room opened and de Havilland held his breath. The hinges were old and un-lubricated. Metal squawked against metal. De Havilland counted the seconds, the unfamiliar sensation of asphyxiation beginning to build. The walls of the locker crushed against his chest and arms and legs. Heavy footsteps, a man's, probably, entered the room and stopped. As de Havilland continued to fight the urge to breathe, he worried why the man would be taking his time. It was a small room. A row of lockers, a set of screw drivers, minus one, and a floor and a ceiling and four walls. There was nothing to see, unless he knew de Havilland was in the locker and was tip toeing closer and closer, until he could swing the locker door open and shove a gun in de Havilland's face. His heart beat faster, using up even more of his stored oxygen. He tried to think of how he would take down this guy, and then he thought about the next, and the next and the next, knowing there was no way through, but not stopping until he thought of something.

The man took a step forward. De Havilland's muscles screamed. His lungs burned like a ball of plasma stuck in his chest. The desperate part of his mind wondered if he could take him down without anyone hearing. But he hadn't heard the door close behind the man so the room would be in clear view of anyone in the plant room.

Spots danced over de Havilland's vision, even though the locker was pitch-black. His legs suddenly cramped. He opened his mouth in a silent scream, channeling all his concentration into keeping still.

A footstep permeated through the mist of pain, registering in de Havilland's oxygen starved mind. The hinges of the door groaned long and loud and a faint click echoed through the locker.

De Havilland held his breath a little longer. He knew of the classic 'fake leave' from hours of holovids as a youngster. If the cop suspected someone was in the room, he would walk to the door, close it then stand perfectly still, hoping the person would reveal themselves.

It felt like he had been holding his breath for hours, but he was probably barely pushing a minute. When he was eight, he had flown up to the North Island with his best friend, who went up every holiday to be with his father. They had gone to a large swimming complex and spent the whole day competing to see who could hold their breath the longest.

De Havilland never won. But now he was playing for his life and he wasn't going to lose. Seconds stretched around him without passing, like he was trapped in limbo.

The door opened, footsteps, then the door creaked closed again. De Havilland exhaled and heaved in a fresh lung full of sweet, sweet oxygen. He sagged against the side of the locker, breathing as hard as he could within the restraints of the locker.

Silence filled de Havilland's world, punctuated by his rapid breathing. His muscles twitched and burned, under compression for too long. He wondered if he'd ever be able to stretch back into his normal shape again.

The police left in a loud raucous of activity. They'd obviously found something of interest and left to pursue it. De Havilland fell out of the locker and stretched every muscle as he lay on the floor. Fresh air had never felt better; his skin actually felt more alive.

The plant room still had the remains of a crime scene investigation – police tape, canvas, clean areas and the little pyramids used to locate something of note in holographs. There was a red stain on the floor where the cop had

fallen, but no white human shaped outline. De Havilland felt a twinge of hope. The cop hadn't died on the scene, but he would have had plenty of time to do that on the trip to the med centre. Hopefully they got to him in time.

He cleared his head and turned back to the fans. All the inspection hatches were still open. Hopefully Interpol concluded he had crawled to freedom through one of the ducts and didn't want the police to know which one. He hoped they found the thread from his pants. Whether they took it at face value or considered it a double bluff he didn't care, as long as they didn't figure out it was actually a triple bluff.

He tip toed out of the plant room, eyes and ears alert for any movement, not entirely sure he could believe his good fortune, but he reached the street front without incident. The cruiser of his victim hadn't moved, but its lights were off and its doors locked. The guilt returned, but he didn't have time to wallow in it. He'd lost the police for now, but he was still seven levels down and no closer to getting off the station. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes in silent prayer then set off down the street.

His face wasn't plastered across every holographic bill board. There weren't interruptions to general programming on the three-dee vision to tell the public to find him and dob him in. The old lady tending the trinket stall he was browsing had no idea he was a wanted criminal. He couldn't bridge the mental gap between the ferocity of Interpol's presence in Sector Seven versus the seeming apathy up on the main levels. All he could think of was them trying to lull him into a false sense of security.

As if on cue a policeman wandered past, eyes straight ahead, hand on his holster and de Havilland ducked behind a rack of little golden cats whose right paws were swinging back and forth. He watched the policeman through a gap in the rack, but the policeman continued on, none the wiser.

Not in the mood for another close call, de Havilland quickly found what he was looking for – sunglasses and a baseball cap – and flicked the old lady a cred coin. His personal credit would be useless, and if this Melinda lady was involved, the money from Norman would probably be frozen. The old lady's movements were slow, exacerbated by arthritis, and his legs itched to run, to flag the meager change he would get. He didn't want to give the lady any reason to remember him though, so he acted plain, normal, boring, waited without speaking, took the money and walked away at a steady pace.

His hair had grown slightly since he had last cut it and a seam of orange ran along his skull. He tidied all his hair in under the cap and donned the glasses. He checked himself in the toilet mirror and grimaced. Too much. He pulled the glasses down and his full blue eyes beamed back at him. Too little. He put the glasses back on and ditched the cap. Satisfied, he opened the toilet door and back into the bar he'd found on the Promenade. He hoped it was the last place a policeman would expect a wanted fugitive to hang out. But he'd worked himself into a knot second guessing and triple guessing what Interpol would do, so he just went with his gut. The place had several exits, all of which he'd mapped into his head for immediate use if required, so the place would do until he worked out his next move.

There was a single stool free at the bar. A dark skinned, short stocky man, definitely from a high-g world, sat to the right, and a young attractive blond sat to the left. He thought of Emu and wondered what she was doing at that moment. Was she shoving a gun in the face of any other guys, or was that something she reserved for him?

He shook his head and mounted the stool. The bar keep wandered over, but de Havilland didn't move or respond so he disappeared. De Havilland stared straight ahead, adrenaline replaced by the weight of all the emotions he'd put on hold for god knew how long.

"I know that look," said the dark stocky man. "God, how I know that look."

De Havilland dragged his eyes around to glance at the man. The man wiggled his finger at the bar keep and pointed down to his glass of orange spirits. He pushed his own toward de Havilland, who tried to nod despite the weight on his shoulders.

The dark skinned man leant over, hand out. "I'm Ravens, by the way. Red Ravens."

Return Of The Old Guard Part 2

[de Havilland]

de Havilland raised an eyebrow. "Red huh?"

"Well, Harvey to my mother." Red gave de Havilland a withering look. "And no one else."

De Havilland nodded without speaking, not entirely sure if he was serious or not. He let the silence hang between them for several moments. "Ship and co-pilot."

"Huh?"

"I've lost my ship and my co-pilot," de Havilland said, deadpan. It felt strange to utter the words, as if he had been hoping it was all just a long winded nightmare, that if he could just find a way to wake up he would find all was well, but once he said it out loud, he knew there was no escaping his reality. He shuddered under heavy shoulders.

Red half smiled and nodded slightly. "You were close?"

De Havilland shook his head to the question, but he kept on shaking it and couldn't stop. There was just so much wrong. "I lead him astray. It's all my fault." He should have been a prime example of righteousness and law abiding to Michael, an impressionable young man, but he had done everything arse-about face.

Red turned back to the bar and raised his glass to his lips. He took a long gulp that seemed to quench some need inside him. De Havilland wished he could find that kind of satisfaction.

"The road to darkness is always long," Red said. De Havilland wasn't sure if it was a quote from somewhere, but it felt apt.

"It all happened after we found that damn ship," he said. Red's back immediately stiffened and his jaw clenched. De Havilland realized that with all the galactic news abounding at the moment, there was one very important ship that been found recently.

"Ship?" said Red.

De Havilland knew he could stop before he gave away too much more. The smartest thing to do would be to climb off the stool and disappear into the crowd and find another bar. If this Red character was as switched on as he appeared, he'd be contacting Interpol as soon as de Havilland left. But at that moment he didn't care anymore. The weight of events were now too heavy to bare. He felt trapped deep below the ice, spun and tumbling around, no longer able to tell which way was up. He needed to relieve the load by sharing. And Red was as good a person as any. "Behemoth, more like."

A police cruiser rushed past outside, its blue lights playing across the mirror behind the bar, dousing the row of spirit bottles in ethereal light. De Havilland watched the cruiser disappear around a corner, then saw Red watching him.

Their eyes remained locked for a moment, then Red turned back to his drink and swallowed another mouthful. He placed his glass down and ran his hands over the bar and back to his drink. "What ship did you find?"

"I think you know."

"You need to say it."

De Havilland shrugged. "The *Azure Sunset*."

Red's eyes widened. In a single swift movement he downed his almost-full glass and smacked it back down on the bar. He reached forward and around the bar and came back up with a bottle of Spartacus League brandy. De Havilland opened his mouth to speak but Red raised a single finger, silencing him. Red filled his glass to the brim, spilling the orange fluid over onto the bar until the glass sat in a pool of expensive and pungent alcohol. He put the brandy back, and threw the contents of the glass down his throat. He shivered as the alcohol hit his system and he slumped back into his seat. He dropped the glass and it fell on its side, rolled along the bar, dropped to the ground and smashed into a million pieces.

The nearest patrons turned to the noise. They flinched away, probably expecting a fight. But Red didn't move, and de Havilland didn't move either. They sat in silence, one's eyes dimmed from despair, the other from alcohol. After several moments of inaction the audience lost interest and turned away.

Red turned to de Havilland with eyes moist from sudden inebriation. He leaned in real close, his poisonous breath billowing over de Havilland's face. He brought his hand up to his face and curled his finger at de Havilland, bringing him closer. He smiled. "Hey, can you tell me, can you see any bald men with empty looking eyes in this place?"

De Havilland gave the locale a discreet once over. "No."

Red nodded solemnly, the alcohol clearly messing with his head. "Imperial Clone Agents have a nasty habit of popping up when you're not expecting them, but then you have to idea what I went through trying to stop that ship." He fixed de Havilland with a glare equal parts hostility and pity.

"I chased that thing for half a year, almost got killed a dozen times, I lost her. . ." Red stopped and turned to face de Havilland, eyes narrowed, nose pinched. "And once the galaxy is finally rid of it, you go and find it again?"

De Havilland wasn't in the mood for the blame game. "Look it wasn't on purpose ok? Some old hermit had lost track of his MB4 and he'd paid us a small fee to go into this uninhabited system to find it. We jumped in and it was right there, like it had been waiting for us. Suddenly these mysterious ships kept popping up, chasing us, trying to kill us wherever we went. They blew up half of New Rossyth trying to get us."

Red sucked in a quick breath. "That was you?" he said, a hint of respect in his voice. "So to protect Michael and myself, we hooked up with Norman Mosser. He promised to solve our problem if we solved his and everything snowballed from there."

Red's face returned to its unimpressed stoney façade. "No kidding."

De Havilland cringed, thinking of his old co-workers at AAAI, his boss that had lent him the NPA armed Saker. That NPA was god knew where now, probably in the hands of AAAI's competitors. There were a lot of friends at New Rossyth that would never talk to him again. Some of them could even have been killed in the attack. He didn't know. "I don't understand how I got here. Every step felt justified, everything focused on survival. I was just doing what I had to do to get Michael and I out of this. I had a responsibility, Red. I'd taken this kid under my wing. I couldn't just abandon him when he needed me the most. But it kept getting darker and deeper and now it's all gone wrong. Now he's blaming me for everything and he'd ditched me, probably to sign up with Mosser and his band of pirates."

De Havilland ran out of words so just let that last word hang over them. He suddenly noticed the drink that Red had slid over. He grasped it hard and downed the whole lot. The liquor burned his throat, but it was reassuring to know that not every part of him was numb. He turned to Red and grabbed his arm, tears threatening to swell. "He's only 23, Red. He's just a kid, but it's like something inside him has changed, been twisted. I have to get him back. I have to make it right. I have to get him away from Mosser before it's too late."

Red looked down at de Havilland's hand and pulled his arm free. He fingered his drink for a bit, looking straight ahead, not saying anything. Applause and cries of 'howzat' broke out behind them, drowning out the commentary on the holovision.

De Havilland turned back to his empty glass. He was considering a refill when Red dipped his head. "Pradesh was young too. Imperial," Red gave an exaggerated grimace, "but OTHERWISE he was a great young man. I tried to show him how to fly a ship, smuggle goods, have fun and most of all how to survive. Looking back, I could have done a little better at that last one. Then some dumb shit insurgent on a frozen rock in the middle of a fucking nowhere system blew him and my ship up, right in front of me, for no good reason at all. One moment my ship was there, Pradesh on board, the next, fiery fragments of steel and armour were raining down all around me."

Dev closed his eyes and exhaled. "I'm so sorry Red. That's, that's. . ." de Havilland coughed. "I'm clearly complaining to the wrong guy."

Red chewed his lip. "No," he said, shaking his head. "My co-pilot is truly gone, but yours can still be saved."

De Havilland laughed a miserable, defeated laugh. "You mean find a miracle to get off this station, use this miracle to travel to the secret shipyard the *Sunset* is parked up at and if they've already moved on, track them through the galaxy to Norman's secret destination? I'm an ex-soldier Red, I know how to shoot people. I'm also an ex-engineer. I know how to fix things. But now I'm just a galactic vagabond who is clearly not good at anything. I'm not a detective. I don't know how to do this stuff."

Red shrugged. "I'm a bounty hunter, and it even sounds hard to me. I'm not sure if I can help you with all of that." He shoved a hand into his jacket pocket, fished around for a moment, then placed a strange object on the bar. It looked like a mechanical spider with five stumpy legs terminating in three-tined toes of gleaming antimony.

“What’s that?” de Havilland asked, but he was afraid he already knew the answer.

Red gave a boyish grin. “An article for defeating biometric locks. Any ships in the dock that catch your fancy?”

De Havilland sucked in a short breath. He looked from the spider to Red and back again. His hand reached forward. At the bottom of the barrel, so far into the darkness he couldn’t see out, he’d been thrown a life line, an arm to pull him out and back into the light. He could chase down Veruz, sort him out, fix all their problems, and everything could get back to normal, the way it was before the *Sunset* entered their lives. All he had to do was take this lock and steal-

He pulled his hand back. “No.” Not again. No more theft. No more crime. He’d crossed the line for survival, but this was something different. It wasn’t an instinct to keep him alive another few seconds. This would be premeditated. This would be the kind of thing that Mosser would do.

Red blew out a breath, clearly disappointed. He’d probably been looking forward to using the spider. Instead, de Havilland pulled out his cred card and placed it on the bar. He turned the dial and the display lit up, revealing what was left of Norman’s money. “I have a bit of money here.” He didn’t add that the account could be frozen - he’d cross that bridge when he got there. “Maybe we could buy a ship?”

Red’s eyes lit up and he straightened his back. His fingers itched and de Havilland got the sense that he was looking at a fish out of water, a true spacer, someone who was born to live between the stars. He wanted that ship, stolen or brought, as long as it got him back out where he belonged.

Red pulled his own card out and turned the dial. He almost had as much money as de Havilland. Red shrugged at de havilland’s inquisitive glance. “Insurance payout for my last ship. Not enough to replace it, but if we pooled our money. . .”

De Havilland smiled. “Partnership?” He extended his hand.

“Partnership,” Red said, shaking de Havilland’s hand. “Shall we take a walk to the shipyards?”

The Complex Revenge Of The Painted Lady – Part 3

Sam Kemper didn't really need the weapon practice. Life with Norman generally gave him enough practical experience with it that his skills never had a chance to get rusty. But he was annoyed with Norman to an unusual degree, so had relocated to the Azure Sunset's firing range with a Lance and Ferman LF-8 light assault rifle and an activation key for the target robots.

The firing range was not open, but had a variety of structures and obstacles. Above their heads in the cavernous hold was a crane that could be used to rearrange them at a whim. The lighting could be adjusted somewhat, but was currently poorly illuminated by four searchlights at each corner of the hold which illuminated well along the course of their beams, but left the rest in stygian darkness, a bright mark of x on the dull metal flooring. Sam lugged the androids onto the range, set them to maximum human-level evasiveness and stood behind the green fluorescent line that described the beginning of the firezone, listening to the droning computer voice count backwards from twenty. When it reached fifteen he absent-mindedly activated the assault rifle. The weapon was not a heavy hitter, but had almost zero spread over distance and had both accuracy and rate of fire over its more powerful rivals. It hummed under his touch, reassuringly, like the purr of a favourite cat.

As it reached ten, the featureless humanoid forms jerked into life, their movement becoming increasingly fluid as the evasive programs loaded. The three androids clambered to their feet quickly, and returned to absolute stillness as it counted down from three-two-one...

Sam snapped the longarm to his shoulder and opened fire at the nearest android.

Norman himself had been in a foul mood. He should have been on top of the world. He had the patronage of a powerful and secretive body who supplied them with equipment and seemingly asked nothing in return. Norman had claimed that Sam was being kept in the dark for his own protection, but Sam suspected that Norman had no idea himself as to who they were and what price they would exact for their support. And what was worse, they'd left him to his own devices until the day of reckoning.

The android squatted and let the bright blue slugs of energy pass harmlessly where its torso had been. The other two androids ran pell-mell for cover. They could only stay behind shelter a maximum of twelve seconds before their programming compelled them to break it and run for new destination.

That was the problem, he supposed. Nothing was currently forcing Norman to break cover, and the risks of doing so were significant. Norman had the deadliest ship in space not owned by an interstellar government, with a main armament that was bleeding edge technology, capable of toppling governments and devastating whole planetary societies. And what were they doing with it? Nothing!

Sam waited patiently for one of the androids to emerge from its current hiding place, which he identified as a piece of derelict spaceship hull. He was annoyed by his initial inaccuracy and even more so by the obvious inference that it was caused by his own anger with his best friend and partner. The android broke right, as Sam had expected, and started on a shuddering, jinking run. Sam waited, waited and dropped the android about three metres short of its next refuge, its chest sparking from the hole Sam had just put into it. Sam allowed himself a satisfied grunt.

Norman was perhaps the most feared individual in all space, with an entirely deserved reputation as an evil genius capable of surviving almost any situation by hook, crook, or preprepared clone. Norman was outlaw in almost any place where laws existed, beyond the pale wherever people thought themselves honourable. Recent events, however, had turned that distaste into active persecution. This limited their resupply options and meant that visits to old haunts needed to be secretive and fleeting.

One of the androids sought an alternative method of travel, and leapt from the top of the rusted old harvester which had been its sanctuary onto the top of a cargo canister. Sam was momentarily surprised, but opened fire, scarring the top of the canister with energy, but the unorthodox exit had been enough to slow his reflexes enough that the android had been able to scramble behind it.

"Deity damn it." Sam softly cursed. Far from being therapeutic, he felt himself growing more and more frustrated.

Just like Norman, really, whom circumstance had turned into a proud tiger in a cage, all teeth and fur and desperation. Where once he had possessed a monomaniacal drive to fulfil his grand and more than slightly diabolical plans, the past few months there had only been ennui. The crew had felt it hanging like a foul miasma over the ship. Already a few of the less reliable ones had deserted. In normal circumstances, Norman would have nodded grimly and kept on going with those left to him. This time, he had hunted down the deserters and summarily executed them, even exposing himself to the security services of the great powers to do so. Sam tried hard to justify to the remaining crew that Norman's paranoia was a by-product of their current circumstances. And so

they grew fewer, and more resentful, and had less and less to look forward to.

Sam changed positions. Keeping his rifle to his shoulder, he quickly sidestepped left. A large wheel slumped drunkenly against the side of a blackened hover-tank. Through a gap in the wheel a narrow head-high avenue which was one of the two directions through which the android would likely flee from the cargo cannister. Sam opened all his senses, and let his finger grow slack on the trigger. The androids padded like big cats and made little noise apart from the occasional scuff of a synthetic foot on a rough patch of decking.

The required gap between detection and reaction was minuscule, and the shot had to be perfect.

Sam didn't think, only reacted. The rifle barked once. Decisively. Reckless with adrenaline, Sam strode forward over the fluorescent line, ignoring the droning computer voice advising him that he was entering a live-fire area. Sam headed towards the last place he'd seen the final android scamper to. Sam walked in a half-crouch, rifle at his shoulder, all senses alert to sound, movement or any tiny vibration able to cross the heavy metal decking.

In this morning's staff meeting, Norman had thoughtlessly snapped at his closest remaining ally on board. Sam. It was over something minor about a repair to an ancillary system. The entire crew had simultaneously raised their eyebrows, but Norman was never going to show weakness in that situation and offer an apology. Sam had said nothing and had waited for the briefing to finish, before decamping to this remote corner of the ship to work off his rage in a controlled manner. There were tasks he needed to supervise, and people he needed to organise, but Sam knew better than to marinate in negative feelings for an extended period of time.

Away from the vantage point behind the florescent line he stalked amongst the wreckage. He heard footsteps pad away from him, but wasn't callow enough to run after it. Whomever had programmed these androids had given them a synthetic cunning equivalent to a very sneaky human. Sam wondered if the programmer had based them on Norman, who had an uncanny ability to sneak up -

Sam whirled around, only to confront empty space. Sam half-laughed at his paranoia. This program wasn't designed for ambush, only for flight.

Sam straightened up. He'd really taken too much time at this already. There were tasks he needed to supervise, and people he needed to organise. He flipped the safety on the rifle and listed to the steady hiss of the coolant recompressing into its tanks as he slung it onto his shoulder.

"Deactivate program." he spoke into his datapad. He waited a moment and listened for the thump and clang that signalled the deactivation of the third android. It stubbornly refused to come. Sam sighed, and moved to recover the first android. If the third one was broken, he'd have to try and fix it himself. They couldn't exactly invite a company technician onto the ship, and the precious few tonnes of single-use repair nanobots needed to be hoarded for critical use. The ship cost a fortune to run, and Norman hadn't been able to raise funds in his usual way (piracy, fraud, extortion, assassination) for some time. Sam knew the financial situation wasn't perilous, but was certainly unsupportable over the long term. Norman pretended that he was ignorant of anything to do with money outside of spending it lavishly on himself, but Sam knew that for a base lie.

The androids were only slightly lighter than a human, so it took some time to drag the first around the various bits of wreckage until it was back behind the fluorescent line and he was red with exertion once he set back for the second android. Sam grunted. He was getting out of shape. He was just rounding the wrecked hover-tank when the voice of the computer echoed across the firing range. The speakers were back behind the line, and Sam couldn't hear their message properly. He walked unhurriedly back towards the line, his brow creased.

"- to... minimum levels. Confirmed. Program changed from... evasion... to... hunt. Confirmed. Reaction speed reset to... maximum levels. Confirmed. Android speed set to... maximum levels. Confirmed. Safety interlocks... disengage. Warning. Android now capable of causing lethal injury, confirm? Confirmed. Safety interlocks disengaged."

The voice stopped and the echoes died away until the only noise left was the suddenly thunderous sound of Sam breathing. Some fool had re-set the android's behavioural parameters. Grimly Sam realised that foolishness was the best-case scenario. The worst was that someone was trying to kill him. Sam stopped in his tracks and slowly reached for the rifle. His hand came back empty. He'd left the rifle outside the range.

Sam quickly checked his position. He was still a good fifty or so metres from the line, beyond which lay his gun, and a manual override button that rammed blast shields down on that fluorescent line. Four or six major pieces of wreckage were in between him and it, as well as a brightly illuminated alley from one of the spotlights. He was fast, but the android was faster, especially since it was no longer limiting itself to what a human was capable of. The blocky hands didn't have fingers, but were entirely capable of crushing the life out of him in an instant. Calling for help appealed, but he wasn't sure he'd survive long enough for it to arrive. A metre-long duralium spar was lying

loose in the detritus left from a fuel pump previously belonging to a Mantis transporter. Sam picked it up and weighed it in his hand. It wouldn't hit hard, but something slow through the air would give the android too big an opening. Sam picked his path carefully. The android's leap earlier reminded him that he had to think in three dimensions. However, this didn't cause him anxiety, but instead caused everything else to recede into the distance, to become unimportant. All the tiny worries and existential concerns he'd been carrying were switched off in the service of his own biological survival, all senses made keen by the real and immediate prospect of death in the near future.

As quietly as possible, Sam picked up a large rubberised washer from a derelict gearbox and threw it as high and as far as he could. As soon as it was in the air, he started to move, padding quickly on an oblique route towards the line. After a second or so, a dull thud and a metallic clatter sounded from the far side of the hold. Sam stopped for a moment and listened, but heard no reassuring thud of receding footsteps. Either his ruse had been ineffective, or the android was moving so quietly that he couldn't hear it, even at full pelt. Neither was comforting. Bitterly, Sam promised himself that he'd stick a bell on each of those androids, like so many potentially lethal housecats. If, of course, he survived.

Only twenty five metres from the line, now. However, a large gap in the wreckage ahead beckoned, bisected by the illuminated highway of a spotlight beam.

Sam remembered creating these plazas as a means to test the urban warfare tactics of their security forces. Hired goons, the lot of them, and a tough and salty crew, so many of which were dead now either from enemies outside the ship or treachery and paranoia within it.

Against a human opponent, Sam might have picked his way carefully across it, keeping to the edges and hoping to remain unseen. However, with the android's safety interlocks off, its senses were no longer limited to puny human capabilities. It could very likely see his heat signature, or his form as it reflected off some obscure wavelength of light that illuminated the hold like a supernova.

So Sam just pelted forward, exploding out of cover like a rabbit from its burrow, in a direct line for the narrow alleyway that led to the front of the range. Sam didn't even attempt to listen for footsteps or pay attention to his peripheral vision. He either had the separation to get himself clear, or he didn't. Sam's footsteps echoed like a quasar's pulse across the hold, and Sam willed his body more speed. He was older now, and out of shape from the sedentary life of command, and he didn't have the explosiveness of his youth. He wasn't fast enough, his legs did not move in lockstep with his mind. He passed through the spotlight, his shadow dancing violently like a marionette on the far wall. The gap of the corridor entrance loomed before him, and he plunged into it, swinging the duralium spar in front of him blindly and emitting a warrior's yell. The spar bit at air, and he dived into the darkness. One more corner, and he would be mere metres from the line. One more corner. The last corner. It was always the last corner where the danger lay, where you were already safe in your mind, where you were already thinking about what you'd left behind rather than the short distance to travel.

Sam caromed off the wall in his hurried pace, head swinging from side to side. No android, no android. And the line, the line was so close. Past it, to his left lay the safety, to his right his rifle. Unerringly, Sam veered left, slamming his hand on the button. Above him, hydraulics hummed as the massive blast door began descending. Feverishly, Sam's hand fanned the lighting switches and the hold blazed with light as every floodlight, every downlight and every glowing floor plate illuminated the space. Sam scanned the space in front of him. No movement. The door edged downwards. Sam looked across the space to where his rifle lay, neatly propped against the wall. Keeping his eye on the descending door, Sam scuttled sideways past the three prone android bodies to where his – wait... three?

Sam leapt, but was too late as the rising android cracked a synthetic hand across his temple. The padded hand hit him a glancing blow, which was the only reason he didn't die or lose consciousness instantly. He sprawled sideways, groggy, his vision blurred by the force of the impact, the metal of the decking cool on his cheek contrasting with the burning patch on the other side of his head where the android had struck him. His mind screamed at his body to move, but his body replied back that dying was just fine as far as it was concerned. He did manage to roll onto his back, however, as the android loomed over him. Behind it, the door kissed the fluorescent line with a heavy, reverberating clang.

He was about to die. He was about to die. He was about to die.

The android's mannequin face stared at him blankly. It would kill him without emotion, without satisfaction, without regret. It moved forward, without haste, obeying whatever internal economies its designer had built into it to save battery life. Sam's limbs felt rubbery and boneless but he scabbled like a newborn baby trying to roll over, to make some sort of lunge for the gun. At least then he wouldn't have to see it coming. He lurched sideways and reached out his hands, which clawed themselves a purchase on the floor grating. He would not look back. He wouldn't give the damn machine the satisfaction.

“Sorry, Sam.” came a familiar voice. A familiar roar of plasma barked within the metal walls and a wash of heat bathed his back.

The Great Escape

['Lucky' Wal]

Lucky had never thought death would be so silent. The usual hum of the air scrubbers, a noise usually ignored, fading into the background of ship life, was gone, painfully loud in its absence. Somewhere, on some deck, there would always be a noise, pumping coolant, the whir of ancillary equipment, that would reverberate through to all rooms on a ship. Now though, the cargo bay control room that Lucky squatted in like a coward, was still and quiet. He couldn't even hear the breathing of Anders and Wafturn.

His eyes were closed, his head between his knees, slouched against the wall opposite the large window looking down on the HPA. Anders was to his right, Wafturn to his left, their postures similar to his. Sitting was a wise move. Sitting required less energy than standing. Energy needed oxygen, and that was the one thing they didn't have.

Lucky wiped his sweaty hands on his cargo pants. The floor was cold beneath him. The scrubbers were off, and although the opposing window backed onto the cold vacuum of the cargo bay, the floor and his wall backed onto warm, air-filled passages. Yet he still felt the steel sap his warmth, his energy, his will.

He opened his eyes and craned his neck so he could study the door. The only way in and out, twisted girders and damaged bulkheads stacked against it. He shuddered and closed his eyes again, subconsciously rubbing his left arm. He'd had a panic attack earlier, the sense of suffocation, the closeness of the walls throwing him back in time to the day after his sixth birthday. Someone, he couldn't remember now, had given him the latest space ranger action figure as a present, but after tramping dirty shoes through the house his father had taken it off him. Lucky had sneaked it back, his father had found him with it, and in a fit of anger broke Lucky's arm. Then he had picked up Lucky and pushed him into the linen cupboard. Lucky had fought and scratched and screamed, but his father was too strong and as the door latched behind him, Lucky had blacked out. He woke later, in darkness, arm throbbing, a towel in his face, lungs empty and unable to breathe. He thrashed and twisted until a thread of air entered his lungs and he used it to scream and scream and scream. A lifetime passed before a crack of light widened into full daylight and his mother scooped him up into her arms. He'd never seen his father again after that day, but he'd never forgotten that feeling of claustrophobia and pure unbridled fear. Now he had light and room to move, but the claustrophobia felt just as strong, just as paralyzing. Fortunately the oxygen deprivation had quieted the panic.

He kept staring at the door, fighting the urge to pull the girders down and throw the door open. Frantic's men would be outside, waiting for exactly that. And they wouldn't be looking for prisoners.

Where was Norman? He always knew what to do, had a plan for every contingency, seemed to know what the opposition were thinking and if he died, he came back to life, twice as pissed. Lucky wouldn't even be alive now if it weren't for Norman. But now, he was going to die because Norman wasn't here. What did that tell him?

The air duct rattled. Lucky's eyes focused, not sure if he had dreamed the sight or not. The noise had sounded distant, like from a distant radio or from memory. He had been reliving the linen cupboard just before, the rattle of the latch opening, his mother rescuing him. Oxygen deprivation did wonderful things to a mind, including hallucinations.

He heard the rattle again and knew it to be indisputably of the moment, not a memory and Lucky leant forward, watching. Anders and Wafturn looked up too, all three of them staring wide eyed.

This time the duct moved, he was sure of it. The sound echoed through the air grille again and Anders pushed up to his feet in what had to be a show of superhuman strength. He bent over and pulled up their last scattergun, his movements slow and sluggish, as if the carbon dioxide build up was thicker than normal air, requiring more effort to push through.

"Is the air coming back?" Lucky whispered, but realized a moment later how stupid that sounded.

Wafturn shook his head, slowly. Anders took a step forward, rolled from one foot to another, the scattergun tracing an arc through the air. He was trying to aim at something.

Or someone, Lucky realized. There was someone inside the duct. His first thought was to kill them, but his second was that the scattergun would use up precious oxygen when it fired, oxygen they couldn't afford to lose. Not yet.

Anders seemed to come to the same conclusion as he lowered the weapon, but not his gaze.

Lucky watched the duct too, waiting, listening. His heart began to race again and his sweating began again, so he lowered his gaze and tried to hum, something, anything, to distract himself. *You're a grown man for Frek's sake.* He'd been reduced to a child, the self-respect, the hard earned strength of life stripped away from him

by Frantic and his men and the injustice of it brought a single tear to his eye.

Anders stepped away from the duct. His eyes were half closed, his face too relaxed. The carbon dioxide was killing him.

Lucky didn't think he could even lift a limb any more, but he stretched forward, grasped Anders hand in his own, and pulled him down. Anders folded, collapsing against Lucky and Lucky fell back to his wall, a renewed pressure on his chest.

The man in the duct probably had a camera, fed back to that lunatic Frantic so he could watch and laugh. Lucky had only ever been on one bachelor party, for a distant friend, a fishing freak. The fish on their home world hadn't been worth catching, but that didn't stop them hiring a boat and fishing rods and spending the day on a fetid lake drinking Brown and reeling nylon wire in and out through the water all day. Lucky didn't catch anything, but a couple of the lads did. One fish was pretty big. Once they released it from the hook it slithered from the man's hands and fell to the deck, flopping and flapping back and forth, jerking so strongly that it herniated its own muscles, survival instincts in overdrive. Eventually it stopped, its mouth gaping open and closed, slower and slower, as everyone watched on, gulping their beers. Right now, Lucky felt just like that fish, slowly dying of asphyxiation as others watched on for amusement.

We're almost dead anyway Lucky thought. *Why don't they just break in and finish us, let us die like men?*

Silence smothered the control room, Lucky's stringy breath barely breaking the blanket of quiet. There wasn't a single echo from elsewhere in the ship.

The scrape of steel on steel punctuated the deathly gloom and the door groaned against the girders.

Lucky's eyes snapped open from whatever daze he'd entered. He shook Anders then dragged his head around to check Wafturn. Wafturn's eyes were open, but glazed. At least he wasn't dead.

The door shifted again, harder, banging against the girders. Anders jerked upright. The door banged again and again. A slither of light poured in through a gap and Lucky felt like liquid honey had been poured down his throat; the pressure dropped, only incrementally, but enough to give him hope.

Then the door closed. The clang of the latch echoed for a moment, sealing him back into the linen cupboard then the only sound Lucky could hear was the ringing of his ears.

He heard a new sound, a grainy scratch, repeated over and over and then a whoosh of a jet filled the control room.

Lucky had done a lot of time welding and suddenly knew what he'd been hearing: an oxy-acetylene torch igniting. Good for welding steel, and good for cutting steel too.

It only took a moment for a small circle of orange to form on the inside of the door. It was a simple, budget door, designed for cutting out the noise of the passages beyond so the storeman could concentrate on his work below. It had good acoustic seals and a solid steel core, but it wasn't designed to keep intruders out.

The metal of the door spat and sizzled as it liquefied, punctuated by the rush of the torch. Lucky edged backward into Wafturn. The heat of the glowing steel reached out to him, the heat of Hell, a sign of what was in store for him in a few moments. Because he had no doubt about what would happen to him and Anders and Wafturn the moment Frantic's men broke through.

The circle elongated, into an oval and then a line, travelling vertically upwards. Cutting with a torch was similar to welding. It didn't need the same precision, but still required the same arm movements, a similar amount of concentration. Welding upwards vertically was hard. Downwards was better, overhead was worse. Horizontal was the easiest. Lucky imagined the breaking of the steel bonds, the warping of the steel, the rough, flame hardened edge that would be left. He focused on the metallurgy, to keep his brain occupied and stop his hands from sweating, his arms from shaking.

The cut slowed, the welders' arm tiring. The start of the cut had already faded back to grey, but sporting a burnt bluish tint. The hole in the steel was only millimetres thick, but Lucky could feel the oxygen rushing through, filling the room, his lungs. The weight in his arms and legs halved and the fog lifted from his mind, like the rising sun banishing the early morning mist from the mountains. Time seemed to slow, the cackling of the flame on steel, his heartbeat, the passage of the orange glow, tracing a wavering line upwards toward the ceiling.

And then the glow turned ninety degrees to the horizontal and sped up.

Anders stood quickly, quicker than Lucky thought he could, but probably just normal for a man breathing properly again, and turned to Lucky and Wafturn. "Are we going to just sit here and die like babes?"

Lucky joined Anders on his feet, followed by Wafturn a moment later. The fresh air felt like a drug, strong enough to make him fast, invincible, able to do absolutely anything. "We should run out there, shooting, kill as many as we can." The last thing he wanted to do was die in a confined box. The very last thing.

Anders shook his head. "They're going to pound this room with grenades and laser shots the instant they break through. We need to make another perimeter inside."

With renewed oxygen came renewed panic at his confinement and Lucky's throat began to close. He wanted to scream and shake Anders, the fool, for wanting to stay another instant in their coffin. The logical part of his brain agreed with Anders but the panic was like a virus, fingers of cold dark nothingness spreading through his brain, quenching thought, replacing it with a single thought: Escape.

Lucky ran to the girders blocking the door and began to lift. He felt dimly aware of the strain in his arms, but his mind was gone, black, empty. The heat from the cutting torch was a beacon, a sun breaking through the mist that descended over his consciousness. The heat was the way out and Lucky had to get to it before he died, before the control room suffocated him. His heart raced and he stumbled, light-headed.

He felt an impact across his face and Anders appeared before him, rapidly flying backwards. Then Lucky hit the ground. His mind cleared. Anders and Wafturn stood above him, arguing. "Cripes, Jon, enough with the slapping. Luckys right. They aren't trying to break the door down, they're cutting through. Let's move the girders to the back wall."

"I don't think that is what Lucky was trying to do," Jon said through clenched teeth.

"Jon!"

"Fine, let's do it, quickly."

Wafturn pulled Lucky to his feet and the three of them lifted the girders as quietly as they could to the far corner, upturned the control desk and piled up the rest of the rubbish into a crude defensive screen. They huddled behind it, waiting.

The whoosh of the cutting flame filled the room. Anders gloves crinkled as he clenched their last scattergun. He had wedged it through a gap in their screen, ready to fire. Their boots scraped on the steel floor, jackets rustled, and Lucky's heart pounded like a war drum, loud enough for Frantic's men outside to hear.

Seconds that lasted days passed, each one sending Lucky's heart rate up another notch. He held the laser pistol they'd nabbed from one of Frantic's men earlier. It threatened to slip from his sweaty hands but he forced himself still, to not fuck this up. During his second panic attack his mind had been blank, but now it was also blank, but for entirely different reasons. There was nothing left to do, nothing left to think about. Their last stand was inching closer and closer and there was nothing they could do about it but wait and then go out swinging.

The flame cutter stopped and the sudden silence pounded in Lucky's ears. He looked at Anders and Wafturn, each giving an imperceptible nod. They were ready, at least as ready as they could be.

Steel groaned beyond their shield, shrieking as the cut out in the door tore away, bringing a sudden rush of air. The cut out hit the floor with a bang, reverberating through their screen, loose parts slipping away.

Lucky started to his feet, but Wafturn pulled him back. "Wait," he whispered.

Something steel hit the far wall, then bounced to the floor with repeated clinks, rolling back and forth before coming to a stop.

The whole room went white.

Lucky woke up on the floor, ears ringing, vision smeared and spotty. Anders and Wafturn were standing either side of him, firing over the defensive screen.

A *flashbang*, Lucky realized. He should have been completely incapacitated, but their defensive screen must have protected them. He shook his head clear and climbed to his feet.

Anders and Wafturn fired in silence, fire spitting from their weapon muzzles, mouths gaping open and Lucky figured

he'd been deafened. He pulled up his own laser pistol and fired without sound into the square of smoke pouring out of the hole in the door.

Laser beams and bullets flew from the smoke. Sparks flew across the defence screen and Lucky cringed away as something split his cheek. Hot wetness seeped down his face but he kept firing.

Sound returned.

Everything assaulted his ears at once, a cacophony so intense it felt like white noise. The report of Ander's scattergun, a howling crack that shook the control room, the more muted screech of Lucky and Wafturn's laser guns, groans from beyond the door.

"Fallback," came a voice through the smoke, just as a sphere flew through the room, a long, gentle arc, up to its zenith, then down, down, behind the defensive screen and in between Wafturn's feet.

The sphere was bright, metallic, a row of LED's on the side sequentially illuminating.

A grenade.

Lucky froze, but Wafturn was already ducking down, his fingers wrapping around the grenade. He straightened up, lobbed the grenade back-

-It exploded.

Wafturn collapsed to the floor, screaming, his left hand clutching his right shoulder, rolling back and forth, blood pooling beneath him.

Anders glanced down to Wafturn, back over the defence screen and back again. He kicked Wafturn's hand away and crushed his foot onto the wound.

Wafturn howled, like a coyote abandoned by its pack, not just physical pain, but mental anguish, a realization that this could be the end of the road. His face turned from red to white, but the blood slowed and he stopped shaking.

Lucky's gaze locked on Wafturn, his own face mashed in anguish at his slowness, at freezing for that crucial half moment that he could have used to throw the grenade back.

Wafturn's lips turned blue, his pupils dilated and Lucky knew his friend was running out of time. He tightened his grip on his pistol and swung it back over the screen.

The smoke had cleared slightly, now more a grey haze hovering below the ceiling, allowing him to see through the door. The door was at an angle to him, but all he could see was an empty corridor. Had Frantic's forces actually retreated or were they just regrouping for another attack? He glanced at Anders, face grim, mouth in a taught line, a frown lining his forehead. Wafturn's moans rose from down below, but even they were losing power and cohesion.

"Are they coming?" Lucky whispered to Anders.

Anders nodded. "course. Trying to lull us into a false sense of security."

Lucky had given up trying to understand Anders' intimate knowledge of such scenarios. In all the time he'd known Anders, the man had always just been a sparky.

A string of tapping sounds and the slip of feet on steel came beyond the far door and Lucky had his answer. *This is it*, he told himself. Wafturn was gone, dead if he didn't get to a med station quick, and he and Anders would be gone too if they didn't hold off this next attack. He was fighting for his life, which he distantly realized was stopping him worrying about his claustrophobia.

At least that was something.

Lucky sensed a blur of movement and fired through the door. Then a wave of laser bolts flashed back into the control room and Lucky flinched back behind the defence shield, firing blind over top. Smoke and screeching filled the air as a torrent of laser bolts assaulted their defence screen. It bucked and slipped and ablated and a laser bolt sizzled past Lucky's thigh.

He tried to shrink himself into a smaller and smaller ball, all his concentration going into pulling the trigger again

and again when the wall beside him exploded. Lucky fell across Wafturn, powder and smoke covering him. He rolled over to find a man in black standing over him, face hidden by a blast shield, another man crouched on Ander's back, a knee in the crook of his neck. Without the pressure of Ander's foot, Wafturn was bleeding fast again. His eyes were wide, his face white, as if all the blood had been drained from it. Lucky cringed with guilt. Wafturn had always been good to him, now more than ever, yet Lucky lay inches away unable to stop him from dying.

"How do you like it, boy?" boomed the man in black. He swung his scattergun down so the muzzle crushed Lucky's nose.

Lucky had to focus all his energy into retaining bladder control. *Don't give him the satisfaction* he ordered himself. He was going to retain some dignity into death, no matter what this punk did. "In the face or up the arse, you'll never get me grovelling to you, pal."

The man in black's head tilted and although Lucky couldn't see his face, was sure the man was smiling. "Oh, I'm going to make you hurt real bad," he said, slotting the scattergun in behind his back and withdrawing a knife.

Lucky's eyes widened and his lips parted and he instantly regretted saying anything. There were people in the galaxy who specialized in keeping people alive whilst making them hurt more than anything. He became aware of the dust choking his throat and his skin, the stillness of the room and of Wafturn beside him. There was something tangible in the air and it only took Lucky a moment to deduce its origin: failure, their combined failure to stay alive long enough for Mosser to rescue them. Mosser had his issues, more issues than most people, but if you were loyal to Mosser, he was loyal to you, and Lucky, Anders and Wafturn were the last of his original crew still alive.

He felt a weight in his pocket, his lucky coin, and felt a twinge of sadness that he'd never get to flip it again, never get to make another bet, throw everything on the table, ride the wave of luck he'd been renown for and see where life took him.

He'd never get to do that again because his life was over. He stared up the man in black, watching the knife move closer and closer. . .

". . .Kemper," scratched a voice over the black man's radio. "Connect me through to Frantic, dammit, this is Sam Kemper. We've got a new ship. I've got Norman, but he's hurt and needs a new clone. We're coming in hot."

The world seemed to stop for a moment, the man in black stiff above him, the knife frozen in time. Even the wafting smoke seemed to have halted.

Then the man in black tilted his head, looked up, at his comrades perhaps, then he stepped back, once, twice, then back through the hole in the wall he'd created moments before. The man on Ander's back stood and followed his comrade. Somewhere beyond the ruined defensive screen, Frantic's voice echoed over the damaged comm. "Sorry about the confusion lads. We'll talk later."

This time Lucky didn't freeze. He rolled to his stomach, pushed up and clamped his fingers around Wafturn's wound. Blood seeped through his fingers, turning them orange then red but Lucky just held on tighter. "Don't die, Roj." He put his ear to Wafturn's mouth. He thought he felt breath, but could have been imagining it.

Anders stood and shook himself off. He looked around, eyes wide and unseeing. Lucky felt a little thrill that something had finally shaken Anders.

"Do you think it's a trick?" Anders said, voice a little distant.

Lucky shook his head. "Give me your shirt."

Anders narrowed his eyes, looked down at Wafturn then ripped off his shirt and tied it around the wound. Lucky slipped his fingers off and then scooped Wafturn up.

"Where are you going? They could be coming back," Anders said, a hand on Lucky's shoulder.

Lucky didn't look back at Anders. He kept his gaze on Wafturn. He could already have been dead but this was one fight Lucky wasn't going to hide from. "I'm taking him to the med bay."