

# **Tionisla Rising**

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# About this story

The story starts off with James Winston finding himself in his crashed spacecraft somewhere near Manchester Starport in Tionisla. It's not a pretty sight. His investigations lead him to discover something rather unpleasant (as if crashing wasn't bad enough). Eventually it leads him to meet up with some old friends and to go rumble.

The story is written in the first person, in the form of a diary. It's another writing style experiment. I think it's more successful than "An Expensive Trip", but once again, I'll let the reader be the ultimate judge.

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Suggestions about this or other stories from alioth.net are welcome.

[0] This may be wishful thinking on my part

# Part One

*Editor's note: We used James's diary verbatim for this account, since it tells the story better than it could be rewritten, and preserves the confusion he felt when he came around, not knowing who he was or where he was.*

## 8th January 3265

Today has not started well. In fact, the unpleasant start of the day is what has prompted me to start this journal. I have bad amnesia, I am stranded in a hot, stinking jungle with only the wreckage of an Asp I presume I was commanding at the time. There is no sign of my copilot. I am keeping a diary in case this happens again so next time I can at least figure out where I am. The only thing I know for sure is the date, since my antique clockwork wristwatch tells me that. The last thing I remember is leaving a space station – although I can't remember where. It must have been on New Year's Eve because I can remember something about a significant quantity of rather nasty beer being consumed. I came around about five hours ago, with a splitting headache. I was still strapped into my seat in complete darkness. After groping around and releasing myself from my harness, I managed to pull out my Maglite. I shone it around the bridge and it didn't look good. The shape of the cabin was deformed, and there was debris everywhere. I also noticed that my left arm was hurting and swollen, and I was covered in blood. I think I've got a broken bone in my forearm. The first thing I did was stagger over to the first-aid cabinet and get a painkiller and an emergency splint to try and stop my arm from getting worse. I then went to the weapons locker and picked up a small hand plasma pistol just in case I needed to defend myself...

Once the painkiller had taken hold, I left the bridge. The corridor to the living quarters was a mess, partially crushed with daylight coming in through a large gash in the top of the hull. I wrenched open the door to my quarters, and stared at myself in the mirror. The reason for my headache and amnesia became apparent. Something had hit me on the head quite hard, and my hair was a matted mess of dried blood. I didn't look very good at all. At least I found out my name at this stage. I wear a dogtag all the time, probably something to do with my past military activity. It simply says "CDR JAMES K WINSTON" and a serial number. Looking around the rest of the room, I saw that at least my berth was intact, so I have somewhere to sleep tonight. I decided to leave the ship at this stage and try to find out where I had come down. I exited the ship through the aft airlock, past the drive section. I saw that the drive core had broken free of its mountings and had collided with the shield generator deck, presumably during the impact. At least the waste containers didn't appear to be breached since the waste products of the reactor are highly radioactive. There was nothing left of the aft airlock. I just left the ship through the hole where it used to be. I decided to climb on top of the ship to get some sort of vantage point.

From the top of the wreckage I could see the path which the ship had taken whilst it crashed. A large swathe had been cut through the forest, leaving a muddy path scattered with pulverized timber. That means that the ship must have been moving quite quickly when it collided with the terrain. The ship's top hull was covered in dirt and debris, so my assumption at this moment is that the ship must have rolled inverted on the ground at some point. The damage on the top hull seems to certainly indicate this. I decided to examine the rest of the top hull, and found some deep score marks which look suspiciously like strikes from a laser weapon. So to add to my problems, someone was trying to kill me as well. I decided to walk along the impact path of the ship, since it was cleared of jungle and much easier to hike along. I climbed down off the ship, being careful not to hit my left arm on anything, and jumped down onto the churned up ground. It wasn't really a pleasant walk – the damp, heavy soil stuck to my boots and made walking slow and tiring. After about half an hour's walking over what must have been only about 0.5 km, I came to a shallow river. Just beyond the river, I could see where the ship had first impacted the ground. The trees here were scorched, presumably from interacting with the still live shields. This posed a question. Why would I have crashed with

the shields still operative? If it were simple pilot error, surely my copilot would have noticed this? I sat down by the river and contemplated my future. I decided to at least wash the blood out of my hair – it might make my immediate future a little less uncomfortable at least. I decided that tomorrow I will try and see if the ship's battery is still any good, and if so, see if I can at least start the FDR and find out where I am and what happened. I will also search for any sign that my copilot went looking for rescue, but I have a nasty feeling he thought I was dead and left me where I was. I trudged back to the ship as darkness started to fall.

It's been a bad day. Maybe with a night's sleep, I can do something about figuring out what happened. If I can sleep. This place is as hot and humid as a gorilla's armpit.

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### 9th January 3265

Not surprisingly, I had a very disturbed night's sleep. But as I make my journal entry, at least I have had some success! The ship's battery is fully charged and the FDR worked, so I've found out mostly what happened, but the big question still stands – where did my copilot go? At least I found out who my copilot is. The FDR really jogged my memory. I now know that I had just hired a new copilot, and it was his first mission with me. My previous copilot was Pam Gilmour, who left to buy her own Saker Mk III and go her own way after working with me for quite some time. I had to hire a complete stranger who had never been in space before. He seemed competent enough from his sim training anyway, despite being from Earth and only 19 years old. His name is Martin Nguyen, and I have his pilot certificate ID so at least I can find the bastard and give him some serious grief on the end of a 4MW beam laser for leaving me in this wreck and going and getting his own miserable life saved! Typical Earthling. Arrrrh!

Enough of my ranting. The FDR was very interesting. It shows we left the Sol system three weeks ago, bound for the frontier. We arrived at La Soeur du Dan Ham station in the Riedquat system with surprisingly no pirate attacks on the way in. I remember now why I went there – every year, myself and a bunch of bounty-hunter friends get together and lie about our exploits the previous year just prior to getting very badly drunk on whatever the local lethal alcoholic brew is. It must have been a very good party, because the internal cameras on the ship show myself, Martin and a bunch of buddies entering the ship and collapsing in various festering heaps all around the ship along with a group of rather nice looking female pilots who were also slightly the worse for wear.

My friends left, leaving myself and Martin. We undocked from La Soeur du Dan Ham station and hyperspaced to Tionisla. The whole trip was uneventful until we were well within the atmosphere of New California. I flicked between the cameras that the FDR records, and saw trouble on the horizon once we were quite close to Manchester. Whoever attacked us has some guts. The police usually protect areas this close to a surface spaceport, even in systems like Tionisla. We were at an altitude of only 500 meters above the jungle, and the scanner recording on the FDR showed the normal ship movements around a spaceport... quite nicely blanketing the fact that five Sidewinders were closing from the 7 o'clock position. I watched them on the rear-view camera recording. They were closing fast. All of a sudden, all hell broke loose as they opened fire. The ship started manoeuvring rapidly. I switched the FDR to show the bridge camera view at the time. It showed me with my hands and feet full of the manual control system trying to put on an evasive manoeuvre. Martin was being completely useless and was panicking. Pat did a really good job of running the weapons in a conflict and as a team had helped us stay alive, and no doubt we would have prevailed had we'd still been together...but with my new copilot... well, some further education was needed. Evidently the simulator training didn't do everything. It was obvious with my copilot's panic that all I could do was evade. Then the FDR showed that the main thrusters took a direct hit and very shortly afterwards, the Asp pancaked inverted onto the forest and the recording abruptly ended. The whole fight lasted less than ten seconds.

I checked the radar mapper records which were stored on the FDR. It showed that the Sidewinders did not have hyperdrives. They were kitted out as carrier-launched vehicles, and extremely deadly. I also found my

handheld GPS. It means I can never get lost on a populated planet. It showed that we had crashed only three k's from the outskirts of Manchester Starport. Even through this jungle, I can make that distance. For the first time in my life, I felt really alone and far from home. I felt as though I needed to spend a good holiday at home. The trouble was that my homeland is Nirvana in the Phekda system, some 95 light years away, and I'm without a working ship for the first time in seven years.

I decided to remain on the ship one more night because it had been raining for the past ten hours and it was showing no sign of letting up. My cabin was at least dry, despite the water pouring into the corridor through the breached upper hull. Tomorrow I will get to the city and get fixed up, and take a space-liner trip back to my hometown, and visit my brother's shipyard to try and get a replacement for the Asp.

### **10th January 3265**

It's been a long day. I write my diary from a hotel room, and I have had a startling revelation. I think I must be too trusting.

It started off early this morning. At least the 26 hour daily cycle of this planet helped me get through the jungle during daylight hours. I first grabbed my old backpack I used for hiking on Nirvana when I was a teenager. I filled it with a couple of changes of clothing, the fire axe from the bridge to hack through the undergrowth, my shotgun that had given me such sterling service a few years ago (you never know what's trying to eat you in these places) and the hand pistol I use for self defence, plus plenty of ammunition for the shotgun. I pulled on my pair of Federal Navy hiking boots that I bought from a surplus store from someone on the BBS at Eta Cassiopeia. However, I had run out of painkillers, and my left arm was in a great deal of pain. My priority was to get to a doctor as soon as I reached civilization. I then started to hack my way through the jungle. It was very unpleasant. The humidity was unbearable as the sunlight beat down on the rain-soaked forest. Stinging insects attacked me from all angles, and I was soon soaked through. The temperature had reached an unbearable 40 degrees Celcius. After about two hours of hacking through the jungle, I came to a large, grassy clearing. My GPS showed me still two kays from Manchester. It had been slow going. At least the clearing was a bit of a relief from hacking through the jungle. Or at least I thought.

I walked out into the clearing. After a few paces, and without warning, the ground suddenly caved in despatching me into a festering mixture of mud and water. What I had thought was ground was just a thick carpet of grass-like aquatic plants. With horror, I now felt something snakelike wrap its way around my leg. Moving like a gazelle in crocodile season, I scrambled to escape the muddy lake and get the hideous creature off me. I then sat panting on the edge of the quagmire assessing what my immediate future was. I decided that skirting the clearing would be the best bet, but it still wasn't easy. The rain sodden soil was often knee deep, and it kept sucking my boots off. It brought back the worst memories of working on the family farm when I had to spend days in these sort of conditions. The "clearing" which I had initially expected to cross in a few minutes took nearly an hour to cross. I felt and looked like something the cat had dragged in.

My second humiliation came scant minutes later, but at the time I thought I really was dead. Finally away from the festering lake, I trudged through the forest. I was walking down what looked like some sort of animal track, which at least made my passage much easier. Then suddenly I felt something grab my ankle. Within an instant I found myself hanging upside down from a rope trap. Taking in my new inverted position, with my head dangling nearly two meters from the ground, I wondered what to do next. I noticed that I had dropped my fireaxe. The trap was very effective.

Two hours later, I was starting to get rather depressed with my situation. I had exhausted myself trying to undo the piece of synthetic rope that firmly gripped my left ankle. I couldn't slip out of my boot. I bitterly thought how easily the mud could get my boots off, but when I really wanted them off, they were well and truly stuck. Just then an angry shout pierced the forest and my thoughts.

"Aww hot damn. Look at that! We've caught another friggin' biologist. What a waste of a trap!" shouted a man's voice.

Two women and two men came stumping angrily through the undergrowth towards me, all dressed in hunting camouflage. The front man stared at me angrily. He looked as if he could bite the heads off a dozen chickens and still be angry.

"You lot are always here, setting my traps off while you pounce on down from your Federally funded luxury cruisers looking for your bleedin' frogs! Next time I'm gonna leave you up here for a week to teach you a lesson!" he snarled at me.

I felt utterly pathetic, swinging gently from my left foot staring at the man's angry face. A piece of wet dirt fell off my shirt and rolled down my face, just to complete the picture.

"Look, I'm not a biologist. I'm a pilot. I was shot down and crashed a couple of miles away," I said plaintively. I hoped that he would understand my position at least. He seemed to calm down a bit.

"Cut him down" he said quietly.

One of the women hacked the rope off while the others stopped me from crashing two meters onto my head. I sat on the ground and nursed my ankle. I'm surprised it didn't cut the bloodflow completely off.

"Look I'm sorry about your trap," I apologised.

"OK, don't worry. You look as if you need to go to the hospital with that arm," said the hunter. He had calmed down quite a bit fortunately.

We walked to their small tracked vehicle, and took off down a narrow road. I sat quietly in the back, still nursing my foot and feeling a bit sorry for myself.

"I see you found the lake," said one of the women, laughing. I just grunted in response. I didn't really feel like talking about it much. I then felt I was being rather antisocial.

"Oh I'm Jim Winston, by the way. Thanks for rescuing me"

"OK sure, we pick up a lot of basket-cases like you in the forest". The woman introduced herself, and then introduced me to the other hunters.

They turned out to be a family – her sister, husband and brother-in-law. Unfortunately, I have a bad memory for names and can't remember who they all are. They were all in business capturing luxury furs and meats – a trade illegal through much of the galaxy, but anything goes on the frontier. I gave them my own potted life history to pass the time. They seemed quite intrigued – I don't think they've met many people from off-world. They certainly hadn't seen my copilot when I gave them a description.

I was dropped off at the hospital. Fortunately, they let me get cleaned up and changed before seeing the doctor. The doctor applied a quick-heal splint on my left arm, which had a fractured bone as I suspected. It would be another couple of days before the device could have it fully healed. The doc also examined my head injury. It was at this stage, things became clearer about the events after being shot down.

"You shouldn't be picking fistfights – they'll get you in trouble" he said unexpectedly.

"Uhhh? I told you, I got hurt when my Asp crashed"

"Your injuries are not consistent with a collision. You have been hit across the head with a piece of wood. Evidently you tried to deflect the blow with your forearm and that's why it's broken."

"How did you work that out?"

"Well the splinters I pulled out of you were a dead giveaway as to the weapon used against you. You were very lucky. If your arm hadn't got in the way, your skull would have been pulverized".

The treacherous, cheating bastard. My copilot had tried to kill me. I suspect he used the cricket bat I got as a soevenir when I was in the Sol system.

The full scale of Nguyen's treachery became apparent when I checked into a hotel room and got down to making my insurance claim for my wrecked Asp. The insurance system rejected it. Claim already in progress. I snarled angrily. Not only had he tried to kill me, but he was trying to steal my insurance, and probably my credit too. I decided to go immediately to the office of the insurance company and sort it out personally. I got down there suspecting fully what the story would be. I gave my details to the geeky looking clerk sitting behind the desk. He looked at me very suspiciously.

"Look, I am Commander Winston. Check my id." I was very insistent. I showed him my military dogtag. I gave him my id.

"Well it's very strange. Commander Winston came with his copilot and all the details yesterday and saw me personally", said the clerk.

Evidently, Nguyen had not been able to break into my accounts via the computer system and went to pull the wool over this clerk's eyes to try and get the claim rolling.

"Did you check his id?"

The clerk sheepishly admitted that he'd only quickly glanced at it, and not run it. I made him run mine, just to prove a point. Of course it all checked out fine.

"Did this person look anything like this?" I said.

I then pulled out the FDR and showed a still-frame image of Nguyen staggering into the bridge after our night of drunkenness a few days previously. The clerk confirmed that it was my backstabbing ex-copilot who had visited him only hours previously. I felt like dragging the clerk over the desk and giving him a good hiding for not properly checking my ex-copilot's id. I would have had I been Nguyen's age, but being a few years older than that had at least taught me some sense in dealing with people you're trying to get information out of. The clerk revealed that the salvagers were coming out tomorrow. And my ex-copilot will be there. The clerk restarted the claim with my correct id, so at least I could get out of this place and make plans for what I'm going to do when I get my hands on Nguyen. As I was leaving, the clerk said a few more things.

"You know, he was quite personable and genuine...I really didn't suspect..."

"Yeah, genuine enough to smack me over the head and give me a genuine broken arm and a bad headache," I responded quietly.

"You're not going to cause any trouble tomorrow...are you?" pleaded the clerk.

"Of course I won't".

And he's a gullible fool if he believes that. I am now extremely tired. I will decide what to do with Nguyen tomorrow. My only worry is if all the Sidewinder people turn up with him.

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## 11th January 3265

After the last couple of days exhaustion, I slept rather well last night, and was refreshed for the confrontation to come! I now sit here, putting together my journal on my last night in Manchester. It has been a successful day. I got ready early, and equipped myself with a small Ingrams hand pistol. I set it to a medium setting, so I

could conserve power and take him alive if I did need to open fire. I then checked that the power pack was charged – I was fully expecting all the Sidewinder friends of his to appear. I also packed a quick-lock capture system so I could easily take him prisoner. I wanted him alive – I had questions I wanted answering.

I got to the office, and sat in a quiet corner. The clerk was the same person who had served me the day before. He looked pretty worried too, I think he got a glimpse of the quick-lock which is not the most compact of restraining devices. I waited about two hours. The office was a quiet place – very rarely do people have problems making claims or arranging insurance online, so only one person came in, who went off with a salvage operator a few minutes later. Eventually, Nguyen walked through the door. Alone! There was no wonder that he conned the clerk. Instead of the impoverished looking crewmember I had picked up in the Sol system, he was now well dressed and bristled with confidence. Every bit the Asp commander despite his age.

"Hi, I'm Commander Winston, is salvage in yet?" he asked the clerk.

To the clerk's credit, he didn't let on that I was getting up and quietly walking up behind Nguyen.

"Hello Martin", I said calmly.

Nguyen spun around in astonishment, and emitted a strangled and suprised noise. It wasn't surprising to me he sounded strangled because my hands were now around his neck, pushing him up against the wall. I had made a mistake, I should have locked him down without any niceties, because he wriggled free and ran for it. I wrenched out my pistol and fired a quick volley. However, I'm not a very good shot with hand-weapons, and I missed him, leaving a few scorch marks on the wall. I ran after him in hot pursuit as we burst outside. Unfortunately, months at a time in deep space had taken its toll on my general fitness level, and after about a minute he had started to pull away from me. I fired a few more shots at him as I ran, and out of pure chance I just got him a glancing blow. It didn't stun him, but the pain flooding through him made him shout out and he lost his footing. I quickly caught up and tackled him to the ground as he tried to continue running away. I slammed the quick-lock into his back, and with a loud crack it wrapped him around the arms and midriff with a thin layer of tough polymer, at the same time injecting a sedative into his bloodstream. He soon stopped struggling.

I dragged him to his feet. The sedative was in full effect now, so I had to support him as we walked with him semi-concious back to my hotel room. I thankfully anchored the quick-lock to the climate control system, and tied up his legs and put a product that has been produced for over a millenia over his mouth...a piece of duct tape. I decided to fill in the time while the quick-lock sedative wore off Nguyen's system by booking myself onto a spaceliner flight to Phekda. A quick search revealed that a large cruiser left once a month, direct to Phekda via Sol, and takeoff was tomorrow from Manchester Starport. I booked myself on, at the phenomenal cost of 3,250 credits for a seat in steerage. The trip was going to take over a month, most of it in hyperspace with the stopoff at Mars High in the Sol system. Of course, it would only seem like about eight days due to the time compression effect of travelling through witch-space. It would have seemed like less if they fitted these things with stardreamers. Unfortunately, with the flight leaving tomorrow, this didn't give me time to mail off a note to my brother that I was coming since the liner would actually overtake the mail which took numerous stops before it got to Phekda. I also notified the police, who by now were aware of my downed Asp. I sent them a copy of the FDR records, and they agreed to pick Nguyen up later in the evening on charges of piracy and attempted murder – capital charges on a frontier system like Tionisla.

A little later a groan in the corner of the room told me that the sedative was wearing off Nguyen. I went over to him, and pulled the duct tape off his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he simply said.

I was now so furious that I had passed the point where you shout or commit bodily damage to someone. I was in that calm oasis of rage that is like the calm wind filled with birdsong after the passage of a particularly violent thunderstorm, my fury only betrayed by the brittleness of my speech and the vein that always seems to pulsate in my neck when I am particularly angry. I decided to start with the friendly approach.

"OK Martin, Why?" I said quietly. I was now having a little difficulty controlling my fury.

"Sorry, I can't tell you," he said. His voice was about an octave higher than it normally was, indicating that he was extremely nervous. I could sense that it wouldn't take much to get him to spill his guts out with the full story.

"OK Martin, here's a deal for you. The police are going to pick you up in four hours or so. The punishment for piracy and murder in this system is death, and the Judicator here doesn't mess around."

I paused to let this tidbit of information sink in. He was looking nervous. I knew at this point that he wasn't a professional pirate. I suspected that some piracy ring had hired the naive teenager to do their dirty work.

"Now if you tell me truth, I will ask the Judicator to commute your sentence. You won't die if you tell me the truth. If I later find out you are lying, you will die by my hand. Do we have a deal?"

I smiled mirthlessly at Nguyen. I could see he was facing some internal turmoil. I suspect that he was thinking about the consequences of betraying his Sidewinder friends.

"I can't," said Nguyen nervously. Evidently he feared these people more than being executed on a frontier planet. He didn't sound very sure of himself though.

"To help you tell the truth," I continued, pulling out my Ingrams pistol and setting it to the maximum level I could get without stunning or killing him, "I will refrain from shooting you with this on its maximum pain setting if you begin to talk." I experimentally pointed the pistol at him so he would get the point.

"I'm sorry, I can't," he said.

I think he actually believed that I wouldn't use the gun on him. He was wrong. Half a second later he screamed in pain as the bolt hit him square in the chest. My fury had finally receded back to the violent thunderstorm stage.

"Tell me all the details NOW or I'll shoot you with this thing till the police arrive!" I shouted at the top of my voice. This was enough to get him to teeter over the edge and start fearing me more than the Sidewinder people. I continued in a calm, but angry voice.

"Do not mess with me, Martin, because I shall make you wish you had never been born. And by the way, they use the electric chair here. Very barbaric and painful." I added the final little fact to make sure he was well over the edge and not even considering silence on the matter.

"OK, I'll tell you!" he squeaked. I was beginning to get some sort of perverse enjoyment from the interrogation.

"Carry on. Now tell it from the start. From the time we first met on Gorby."

Nguyen then explained in detail the events that had brought us here. It turned out that he had always dreamed of owning his own spacecraft, and had left Earth on his nineteenth birthday to look for a crew position at Gorbachev space station. Gorby Station as it is known by most people, is where most crew recruiting occurs in the Sol system. He rented a bulletin board space and waited. He was then approached by who I have been calling the Sidewinder people. To put it simply, they made an offer he couldn't resist. His own Mamba plus 10,000 credits for stealing an identity. My identity. The pirate group would get my credit rating, currently standing at 87,500 credits, and the insurance payoff for my Asp. It was the pirate group who had guided me to Nguyen when they detected me viewing the crew hiring bulletin board. The self-styled group's name were the "Sirius Templar". They were a group of pirates who had been successfully raiding people's identities in this

style for long enough to afford a Panther Clipper equipped to carry the Sidewinders within its hull. An impressive ship, indeed.

His story revealed that I have got too complacent in recent times. The Sirius Templar had followed us from Sol, just outside of my short-range scan. I would have seen them easily on the system scan, but I hadn't checked.

I put my pistol away. Nguyen looked relieved. I thanked him for the information and swivelled around to the small computer terminal with the intention of seeing if I could track down the Sirius Templar. I only found a couple of references, but unfortunately no id on the Clipper. The Federal police were currently offering 80,000 credits for evidence of their destruction, so they were obviously a group taken very seriously. My thoughts were interrupted by Nguyen sobbing in the background. I turned around and he looked at me. I think he was embarrassed that he had let himself go like this.

"I'm just going to die anyway," he moaned quietly when he saw me looking at him.

"No, the Judicator will commute a death penalty if the victim requests it, so don't worry" I said. Living on the frontier, I had a reasonable handle on crime and punishment on the Edge.

"No, the Templar will kill me! I've betrayed them!"

"They won't know. Besides – by the time you get out of jail, I will have nailed them myself," I said.

He revealed that he feared that they would kill him in jail. However, the Tionisla prison system is very secure. I tried to reassure him. However, the Templar had assured him that if he failed in his mission and did not return to the Templar's ship to take on a new mission, he would not live to regret it.

I filled in the time waiting for the police by checking my insurance. My wrecked ship had been recovered, and the credits had arrived on my credit rating. Attached was a three-d picture of the wreckage. It looked a sorry state. I prepared a message to the Judicator requesting that Nguyen not be executed and sent it. I showed Nguyen so that he would see that I was indeed honorable. The police arrived a short time afterwards, and removed Nguyen without fuss.

I now know what my next mission will be.

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### **12th January 3265.**

I left the hotel, then got on the shuttle to the spaceliner at Manchester Starport. I have decided that I'm not going to keep a journal entry of each day on the spaceliner unless anything interesting happens. It is usually extremely dull travelling this way.

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### **15th February 3265.**

I was right. The spaceliner trip was the most boring journey in space I have ever experienced. Looking back on it, it was a welcome relief. The ancient Chinese had a curse. "May you live in interesting times" it said, and I had certainly been living in interesting times, so a few days of sheer boredom was in fact quite welcome. The shuttle dropped me off in my home town of Newtown on Nirvana. It felt good to be home. The air was pleasantly warm. The sun was high in the sky, and Phekda 6 was just setting. Despite the system being in a generally anarchic state, Newtown is a pleasant place to live. You had to be on your guard around any off-worlders who landed here because they were usually murderous pirates, but the townsfolk are quite welcoming despite this. I decided to walk the short distance to my brother's business, so before I disembarked I changed into some lighter clothing and slung my backpack over my shoulders. I walked the two k's across the Newtown Central Park towards his ship sales yard. My plan was to spend some time at home before

finding yet another copilot and resuming my normal life. I decided as I walked across the park that this time I would find someone from Nirvana to be my copilot.

I got to my brother's sales office and strolled inside. "DAMON WINSTON, CERTIFIED NEW ROSSYTH SPACECRAFT SALES & REPAIRS", read the genuine brass sign on the door. I couldn't find Damon though. I dropped my backpack in one of the rooms, then walked through to the rear of the office and into the shipyard itself. A line of five new Saker Mk III's were lined up, and behind that, the used spacecraft lot. I assumed that Damon must have been out with a customer. Little did I realise that this was the prelude to yet more interesting times.

To kill time, I decided to look around the used ship lot. I took a long hard look at an Asp parked there. I sure wanted one again – my last one had served me very well. I walked along the first line, past two Cobra Mk III's, the hulking hull of a Lion Trader, then a Viper with its entrance ramp extended. I surmised that Damon must have been in there. I thought I would leave him until he had finished wheeling and dealing, and continued to check out the Asp. It was a well used, but beautiful ship. The data plate showed that it was of Lance and Ferman manufacture, built on Tyne shipyards in the Wolf 359 system in 3199. My old one had been a Hawker, built in Jovian Heights shipyard in the Sol system two years before this date.

I noticed that Damon was still nowhere to be seen. I thought it couldn't take that long to flog an old Viper, so I thought I would see what was happening. I entered the Viper, noticing the interior lighting was switched on. I walked back to the equipment deck, and was brought up short by a burst of gunfire that missed me by millimeters. Adrenaline pumping, I scrambled for cover behind the crew compartment door.

A couple of seconds later, the equipment deck door started to open. I realised that I had foolishly left my own weapon in my backpack, and now someone was trying to kill me again. I got up, and sidled towards the equipment bay door, pausing to detach an access cover to use as a weapon. The door finally opened fully, and I brought the access cover back, ready to swing at my foe. I then saw who it was.

"Jim?" said Damon, in a surprised voice, his head cautiously peering around the doorframe from the equipment room. I lowered the access cover.

"Y-e-e-s?" I answered slowly.

"Oh am I pleased to see you!" He grabbed hold of me and hugged me for dear life. This was very unusual behaviour. I didn't know him to express wild bursts of emotion.

I am his "little brother", and he always treated me as a little brother, but now instead of the self-confident type who was always trying to mother me (which is the reason I left Nirvana when I was 17 years old – to get some time away from Damon ruling my life), he had thrown himself emotionally onto me. I decided it would be best not to ask at this moment about buying the Asp on his lot.

"Look, we'll go back to the office. Tell me what's up" I said.

I was deeply concerned, and it turned out that I had a good reason to be concerned. I quickly glanced into the equipment room of the Viper to see three dead bodies lying there!

"I don't know what I'm going to do!" he wailed on the way to the office. He sat me in front of a computer and pulled up a bulletin board listing from the Barnard's Star system.

I read it with astonishment.

WANTED: ALIVE FOR 100,000CR, OR DEAD FOR 50,000CR – DAMON LIAM WINSTON OF NEWTOWN, NIRVANA, PHEKDA.

I was astounded. That was serious money. Someone wanted him very badly, and alive. I looked at Damon.

"Three of them have come so far," he said.

That explained the dead bodies that he was putting in the Viper. I continued to read, horrified. Of course, I had seen my name on death lists before, but I was an accomplished combat pilot and it didn't really worry me that some two-bit pirate was after me. In any case, all they ever offered for me was a couple of thousand. Never 100,000 credits! I was surprised that every bounty hunter in the galaxy wasn't breaking the door down. The other trouble is that Damon hasn't got a clue how to fly a spaceship, despite the fact he's sold them for five years. He long ago hired a professional pilot to supervise test flights. I followed a link to a news item. It seems like Damon had done nothing more than sell a run-out Clipper to a group in exchange for the very Asp I was ogling only fifteen minutes earlier. They had packed the Clipper full of explosives and used it to take out a Mafia boss named Sioul Maldaeno. However, they had missed him, but killed his entire family. The explosion had laid waste to a large proportion of the small terraformed planet it was detonated on. Maldaeno was understandably annoyed and had decided that Damon was at least partially responsible. We have to get out of here, I thought to myself.

"What happened to your head?" asked Damon quite suddenly.

In all the drama, I had forgotten about Nguyen's treachery. It was only two weeks earlier in real-time that he had tried to kill me with a cricket bat. The doctor hadn't really done anything about my head since it was a superficial wound, and the bruise clearly showed through my short military haircut.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you when we get out of this place" I said. "We'll take the Asp".

"What?"

"We have to leave now! In short order, every bounty hunter in the galaxy will be coming here!" I explained.

"Every minute we spend here is a minute closer till things get really ugly", I added somewhat unnecessarily.

"Where are we going?"

"First, Alioth. You need to learn how to be a weapons officer and copilot. Then we'll go to Riedquat to get you really well trained."

For once in my life, I was not being bossed around by him. He seemed to have accepted that I had a lot more experience with dealing with the dregs of humanity than he did. He transferred the title of the Asp into my name and put my profile in so that I could open it up.

"How much did you give for it?" I asked, trying to gauge how good the ship was.

"It was a straight swap."

I was astonished. This must be some Asp.

"Oh the Clipper was very run-out", he explained, when he saw the look on my face.

"But even the scrap value of the duralium in a Clipper is worth more than my old Asp!" I stated incredulously.

We came to the Asp. I opened it up and went inside, pausing to drop my backpack just inside of the entrance.

"Get some kit and a survival pack, I'll check the ship out", I said to Damon. "Oh and take this."

I handed him my Ingrams pistol from my backpack, and set it to full power. I decided to check out the equipment first. I walked down the short corridor, pausing to peer into the crew quarters. There was not a lot of difference from my old ship – a small room with two bunks. An Asp is a very functional ship, not a luxury

cruiser. As I entered the equipment deck, it was clear why it had traded for a run-out Clipper. It was decked out like a true fighter. I walked down the metal walkway, examining the banks of shield generators. There were sixteen in total. My old Asp only had 12 – that's all I could fit and still have room for fuel. Looking through the mesh flooring of the walkway, I could see an energy booster unit and the core of a Teledyne LaserSystems 4MW beam laser, linked to a cooling array. I continued into the drive section, where it became apparent why so many shield generators could fit in the ship. The drive system was half the size of the Class III military drive fitted to my old machine. I looked at the dataplate on it, and the spec was impressive. It was a brand new type of Class 3 drive out of New Rossyth, half the size of current military units. They cost a great deal of money, so were rarely seen. The prime-mover unit that powers the ship's thrusters was installed underneath, also manufactured by New Rossyth. I powered up the drive engineering panel to check it all out. The internal tanks were full, so at least we could make a quick start, but we didn't have any additional fuel for hyperspace. We had space for 11 tonnes of fuel.

I came out of the equipment room door just as Damon came on board with the last load of supplies.

"I can almost see why you did the swap", I said with a smile.

"Did you go to the lower equipment deck, under the laser?"

"No..."

"Let me show you"

I closed up the ship. The sun was low in the sky, as evening drew in. I followed Damon into the lower equipment deck, and my mouth literally fell agape at what I saw next. Now I understood the exchange that Damon had made! Here was a piece of equipment I had only seen in a very wealthy man's ship. A fighter launcher! It contained four, small robotic craft. These craft are charged up by the impulse reactor, and can be launched and fight for approximately 10 minutes in space (depending on how much manoeuvring they have to do), or 5 minutes in a standard atmosphere. They contain a 1MW quickfire pulse laser. Standard procedure was to manually control one from a remote control station, with a number of others following as automatic wingmen. They are extremely manoeverable, and despite the small laser, deadly in the right hands.

"They are controlled from the copilot station. Oh and you'll like the bridge" he said.

We went up to the bridge. It was time to leave before any more bounty hunters turned up. We were relatively safe so long as they didn't spot us leaving. The bridge is a bit of a pompous term to use for the cockpit of an Asp. It is very cramped, and this one was no exception. With everything powered off, it was also rather uninspiring. The external view blinds were open, and the setting sun shone through the windows. However, usually the Asp is flown on cameras, with the real windows closed up. I closed up the windows, and strapped myself in. Damon awkwardly put on his harness. I was pleased to find that my seat had the full set of helitype manual controls installed – I preferred to fly on manual. Some ships only had a single stick system which I disliked intensely – it gave too much control to the computer. Then I powered up the instrumentation, and I'm glad I had strapped myself in, otherwise I would have fallen out of my seat.

My old Asp had the standard display – a high quality, holographic projection. It stretched to 120 degrees of view horizontally, and 45 degrees of view vertically, switchable between any of eight outside views. However, the display on this Asp knocked that into a cocked hat. When it powered on, all of a sudden I found myself, Damon, the controls and the instrument panel seemingly floating ten meters off the ground. I released my shoulder harness and pulled myself forward in the seat. I could look between my knees and see the ground. I had heard about the 360 degree view systems, but I had never had the chance to experience them. It was simply incredible.

"Good, eh?" said Damon.

I nodded silently. I had fallen in love with this machine. I clipped the shoulder harnesses back in, then powered up the rest of the instrumentation and put the impulse drive online.

"OK, first stop, the spaceport. Need some military fuel."

I gently raised the lift lever and felt a slight rumble as the bottom thruster engaged, raising nearly 150 tonnes of Asp of the pad. The view of the world shrinking away on the viewsystem was incredible. I "ruddered" the ship around in the direction of the starport, and obtained landing permission, then rolled on a little thrust. The ship responded nicely. I couldn't wait to depart for space to give it a real run. A minute later, we touched down on pad 2 of Newtown Spacedock. "Welcome to Newtown. The landing fee of 1.5 credits has been deducted. Enjoy your stay" came a voice over the comm.

We picked up fuel, then departed into the night. I thoroughly enjoyed the takeoff and departure, as I wound on full power and we were pressed into our seats. We soon reached orbit. I instructed the autopilot to get us into a stable orbit so I could show Damon the wonders of space. I also wanted some time to look at Nirvana with this view system.

I turned off the G-generators, and we were now weightless. As we orbited for a while, I watched the day/night terminator come up in awe. I had never seen it like this before. I also realized how tired I had become. Since I didn't really have a copilot, I decided to call it a night, and docked with the space station. We should be safe here for tonight at least. And for the first time in my life, I think I have actually gained Damon's respect.

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### 7th April, 3265.

Finally, Damon is trained to my satisfaction. I finally feel more confident that we will make it to Riedquat alive. We left Alioth nine days ago according to the chronometer, but it was only minutes in hyperspace. We were tested as a team for the first time today, as we entered the AC+903888 system, headed for Fort Diamond for military fuel. My suspicions were first aroused as we exited hyperspace in a flash of blue light. Very near our exit point, there was a fresh hyperspace entry cloud, just like ours. I was curious about it.

"Damon, see that entry cloud?"

"Yes."

"Target the hyperspace analyser on it, let's see who came in so close to us."

Damon targetted the analyser. It showed something with a mass of 134 tonnes arrived only fifteen minutes ago. Perhaps I was being paranoid, but I was concerned.

"Bring up the long range scanner", I requested.

The scanner showed numerous ships in the system. However, 18840 k's away was a ship showing no relative movement to us.

"OK, battlestations," I said.

Damon was breaking into a cold sweat. He realised that this command meant that he was going to enter battle for the first time in his life. He selected and prepared the fighter launcher for action, and I switched the console mode to combat mode, and disabled the safety on the trigger for the 4MW beam laser. I gently rolled on the power, and watched the unidentified ship appear on the short-range scanner. The auto-targetter set an aiming reticule over the ship. It was a Harrier.

Bing! "Incoming message", said the ship's computer.

"Accept!" I said to bring the other commander online.

"I am Commander Winston, pass your message." I said, rather formally.

"Hand him over, and there will be no trouble" said the unidentified voice at the other end in a thick accent that was common around Federation systems.

"Hand who over?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Commander. We know you have Damon L Winston on board. He is a wanted man. Hand him over or else we will destroy your vessel!"

I noticed that Damon was crosschecking the id on the other ship to find who we were up against. Harrier VH -5578 registered to Commander K Zetlik, rating Competent. Co-pilot; Not registered. Criminal record: piracy and murder. Bounty: 400 CR. I flicked my gaze up to the radar mapper output quickly. Less shielding than us, and we could get some credits for this.

"Unable", I said simply, and flicked the comm offline.

"Engage!" I shouted.

Damon grabbed the interceptor controls and launched the tiny ships. I rolled on the power, and pointed the Asp straight at the enemy craft, and pulled the laser trigger. The Harrier opened fire at the same time. We scored several direct hits on each other. I could hear the sound of the shield generators absorbing the tremendous energy of the enemy's 4MW beam laser.

"Shields seventy percent" said the computer in a calm voice.

As I brought the Asp around, I saw the four interceptors come around behind the Harrier in a tight arrow formation. They all opened fire simultaneously, striking the hull of the enemy's ship. The radar mapper showed that his shields were depleted.

"He's taking hull damage, keep on the guns!" I shouted.

The Harrier had turned around and opened fire on us again. I had made a mistake, and had been distracted whilst watching my brother's progress with the interceptors. The Harrier had us right in his sights. "Caution, shields depleted. Systems damage.", warned the computer, utterly calmly as the Harrier's beam laser tore its way into our hull.

Pumped with adrenaline, I wheeled the Asp around to face the Harrier, and opened fire. Simultaneously, the interceptors screamed down from the Harrier's "above" direction, and the enemy ship's drive exploded with a blinding white flash, its nuclear reaction no longer contained.

"Message from the Elite Federation: The bounty for this kill is four hundred credits."

Damon slumped back in his seat, drenched in sweat. I watched the interceptors return to their launcher.

"Four", he said simply.

"What?"

"That's the fourth one."

He meant the fourth bounty hunter who had come to collect on him. They must have spent some time tracking us down. I swore quietly under my breath. We should not have taken on any damage, they were inferior pilots in an inferior ship. I had made a bad mistake by being distracted in the heat of the battle. I

requested a damage report. Immediately, the console displayed a schematic of the Asp, and the computer began reading out the damage, highlighting the areas on the display.

"Hull section seven breached, hull section three, light damage. Upper hull number three longeron separated. Combat computer inoperative. Autopilot servo actuators destroyed. Laser cooling booster, inoperative. Report ends"

Damn. I didn't really care much about the useless combat computer, and I could fly fine without the autopilot. However, the laser cooling booster was an essential piece of equipment. Hull section three was right over the equipment deck, and it would mean I would have to wear an awkward EVA suit to check out the damage and see if we could patch it up.

I left Damon to hold the fort whilst I suited up and checked up the LCB. At least in microgravity it wasn't hard to get around, and once I was in the equipment section, I propelled myself gently towards the LCB. I held onto something solid, and looked towards the penetrated hull. I could see exactly how the laser strike had come through the ship. It had broken through the top of the hull, through a structural longeron, a walkway, and had finally dissipated in the LCB's power supply. Gobs of recently solidified metal floated around the equipment deck from the melted power supply, occasionally colliding with other parts of the ship. I didn't have a spare power supply to hand. It would have to wait until we docked.

Back on the bridge, I aimed the ship back towards Fort Diamond, and manually calculated the speeds and deceleration points, then rolled on the power.

"Well, I hope we don't get attacked again, the LCB's toast until we get to Fort Diamond."

I wondered how Damon would take it after his first combat experience. He just grunted in agreement. I had expected more of a reaction, but thinking back, I can remember how my first combat experience had physically and emotionally drained me. I then punched up the stardreamer to pass the time.

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### **10th April, 3265.**

We had spent the last couple of days with the stardreamer running. Fortunately, we were not bothered by pirates or bounty hunters for the rest of the journey. The ship was repaired and we took on fuel, passing the time mostly in one of the bars on Fort Diamond orbital station. I also spent some time searching the bulletin boards. Damon's name didn't show up on any of them, which was a relief. Perhaps as we went further south in the galaxy we would get further away from the bounty hunters. I wondered to myself what had happened to the shipyard in Damon's absence. Hopefully my father would have figured out something was wrong and taken care of it. It didn't really matter to Damon, there was no way he could safely return to Newtown anyway. It probably wouldn't be prudent for me to return either, since the word had probably got out that he left with me.

The next piece of research I did was on the Sirius Templar. The only new news it turned up was a small newspaper report from the 36 Ophiuchi system where they had apparently assassinated a company executive who had just arrived in the system. I wasn't really surprised I couldn't find much on them, piracy was so rife in many parts of the galaxy that it had become commonplace. It probably only showed up because of the proximity of 36 Ophiuchi system to the safe Federation and Imperial worlds. I knew I needed to formulate a plan to find them. Perhaps my friends at Riedquat could help me – I had been away from the bounty hunter's grapevine for far too long.

*[Editors note. Winston's diary for the next few weeks only contains his itinerary, since nothing of significance occurred until he reached the Quince system. His routing took him from Fort Diamond, to M. Gorbachev*

*(Sol), Thompson High (36 Ophiuchi), Richardson Base (Liabefa), and finally into the Quince system destined for Simpson Town. Winston's diary continues.]*

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**20th May, 3265.**

Chronologically, today is my 29th birthday, but due to my time spent in hyperspace, I am just under 27 years old in real-time. Piracy and murder seemed to be my birthday present. The last two days have been spent fighting our way from our entry point to Simpson Town. Damon has become much more proficient at handling the interceptors in during this time, and has discovered an intense dislike to being jerked out of the stardreamer. This is not very surprising. I don't know anyone who has really got used to being jerked awake when the stardreamer kicks off. It feels like being woken up by having a cubic meter of iced coffee dumped on you.

The excitement began straight away. I had barely had time to set the navigation computer to bring us to Simpson Town, when the computer picked up the energy spikes of four ships powering up their weapons systems. I swore loudly.

"This time we run!" I yelled.

I rolled on full power, and the Asp's structure creaked under the acceleration. The flight deck inertial dampers hummed loudly, as they protected us from being crushed flat by 22 g's of acceleration. Even with this aid, we were experiencing nearly 4 g's acting on our bodies. I could now see the approaching ships on our scanner. Two Sidewinders, a Cobra I and a Cobra Mk III. Part of staying alive in frontier systems is knowing when to run, and this was definitely a good time to run. The ships were coming in from the opposite direction, so at least they would overshoot us and hopefully be unable to catch up. To remain in formation with the Cobra Mk I, they would not be able to accelerate at the same rate as we could, and that meant that we could stay alive one more day.

"Launch the interceptors, target a Sidewinder, do not hit the Cobra Mk I!" I yelled.

Our energy was much better focused on the Sidewinders, since these were the only ships faster than the Asp. If we could not make a quick kill, we could at least break up their formation if they went after us since only the Sidewinders were the only ships actually faster than us. I decided I would try and do some damage to the Cobra Mk III since it was the most dangerous ship, and it may have been able to catch us up if we were slowed down by anything else on the way in. If we could damage the Cobra III and one or both of the Sidewinders, they'd be less tempted to break formation with the Cobra I and go after us.

The interceptors raced out of the hull. This time I didn't make the mistake of watching them. I could see the ships breaking their tight formations. The Sidewinders had started to accelerate, and the Cobra III was coming straight at us. The Mk I pulled up. As the ships came into combat range, the auto-targetter highlighted all four ships. I selected the Cobra III. Radar mapper idents quickly appeared on all the targets. Unsurprisingly, all the ships were armed to the teeth.

"Incoming missile, bearing three two zero mark three five", said the computer.

I quickly shifted my view upwards and to the left towards the Cobra I. I could see an insignificant-looking glint which was the missile detaching from the ship. The first weapons had been launched! Damon quickly stabbed the ECM. Nothing happened for agonizing seconds, then the missile detonated. Light poured forth from the Cobra III and our ship, as we both opened fire. The sound level on the bridge grew with the combined sound of the inertial damper and the shield generators as they both absorbed the tremendous amount of energy being unleashed. The Cobra Mk I also opened fire on us. Our shields were rapidly draining.

Collision seemed inevitable as the Mk III hurtled towards us. We were playing a deep space game of chicken. I knew I couldn't let off the power, and I didn't want to change course since this would slow our escape. I flinched just as I believed collision to be certain, and in that instant, the Cobra disintegrated. Wreckage pounded into the hull of the Asp making a deafening noise as the broken duralium struck the shields and vapourized in blinding blue flashes. It was very spectacular on the 360 view system.

"Caution, Shields depleted."

I glanced at the scanner. There was a lot of clutter, but the Mk I was clearly visible above us. I looked up at the ship as we raced past in the opposite direction. It was out of laser range and I didn't want to let off the main thrusters to go in for the kill since our shields were out. I looked back at the scanner and could see the interceptors in echelon formation, returning to the ship. There was no sign of the Sidewinders.

"They turned tail and ran, I inflicted hull damage on both of them, but one of the interceptors lost a bottom thruster" said Damon, excitedly.

"Well the three is toast. The Mark One seems to be running away also. Damage report."

"Shields depleted. No damage. Report ends."

That was a relief. The shields would charge up over the next hour or so. Long range scanners showed nothing in the vicinity, so we were safe. I set the autopilot to take us towards our destination.

"Message from the Elite Federation. The bounty for the kill is 750 credits."

A good bounty, too. Most pirates don't fetch that much – they generally don't live long enough. I hadn't yet told Damon that the battles we had got ourselves into were easy ones. When you reached a Dangerous or above rating, the normal run-of-the-mill pirates tend to start avoiding you, regardless of the cargo you carry as bait. You start running into the protection racketeers, bounty hunter killers and other undesirables. In many anarchic systems, pirates who have hit the money or have combat skills cruise around looking for bounty hunters to take revenge on. Others look for us because we hurt their illicit trade. In some systems, you can no longer make a living because you have got a reputation, and all pirates worth anything know to give you a wide berth. This had already begun to happen to me in Riedquat, and I was relocating to Tionisla when the Sirius Templar cut my plans short.

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### **21st May, 3265.**

I felt the iced coffee feeling pour over me as the Stardreamer performed its emergency wake up call. I looked over at my brother, who groaned. I rapidly shifted my scan over the console. Right on the edge was a large, white blip indicating something very large had come into range in a threatening manner. I hoped it was just an asteroid on collision course, but when I glanced up at what was coming, I realized that trouble was afoot again. This time, in the shape of an Imperial Explorer.

"Incoming message."

"Online!"

Before I could say anything, the other commander spoke – a female voice loaded with threat.

"This is Commander Kamov. Surrender or die."

The transmission ended without giving me a chance to respond. My best guess is that they were after Damon. While they were still out of firing range, we got as much information as possible. Commander M Kamov, rating Average. Record: Unlawful discharge of a weapon, failure to pay fine. Bounty 50CR. Rating Average? She must be in the money to afford a ship like that. The radar mapper showed it to be mostly cargo space with not many more shield generators than we had. That would almost certainly provide insufficient

shield coverage. However, the radar mapper was picking up something very dense in the core of the ship – probably a plasma accelerator. If it hit us we would be dead. It was trivially easy to remain outside of the weapons range of the Explorer.

Damon launched the interceptors, and flew them up close behind the Explorer and started harrasing it. I felt I must have been missing something. I was missing something – four somethings to be precise, shaped horribly like Eagle long– range fighters. It seems as though the group knew about our interceptors, and had deliberately got us to use them on the Explorer. They had now been out for at least five minutes, so their remaining power was limited. As I watched to see what the Explorer would do next, the sound of lasers hitting our hull almost wrenched me from my seat.

It took me several seconds to find them. They had streaked off and split formation. The small size of the attackers meant I couldn't really see them – all I could see was the targetter box. I swung the Asp around. Damon had broken off pursuit of the Explorer.

"Just pick a target and kill! Fast!" I yelled.

I nearly twisted the powergrip off in an attempt to get full thrust. I kicked the ship into a sidestep manoeuver and spun it around to pick up the nearest target. Eagles might be fast and small, but they are very vulnerable to a 4MW beam laser. My laser hit one, and it disappeared in a flash of light. In the confusion of the attacks I had now unfortunately drifted into weapons range of the Explorer.

"Incoming missile, bearing zero seven six mark negative two five".

The ECM was triggered. Nothing happened. This was quickly turning into a bad situation. I spun the ship around to try and shoot the missile, but the NN–550 was very fast. It struck the lower hull square on.

"Shields 32 percent. Incoming missile, bearing one one seven mark negative seven zero".

I spun the ship on its axis and simultaneously pushed the nose down to try to get the missle, but once again, I was too late. With a deafening explosion, the second missile struck the hull.

"Caution, shields depleted, hull breached".

I could barely hear the computer over the sounds of our dying ship. Then out of the corner of my eye, I could see a blinding blue plasma charge bearing down on us from the Explorer. I desperately wound on the power. The ship wasn't responding correctly to my control inputs, but at least we were accelerating, and managed to pass the Explorer as it ponderously turned to try and shoot us down. I looked for the three Eagles that remained. I saw a bright flash as an Eagle closed in on one of the interceptors and destroyed it. The interceptor that had been following it collided with the Eagle, mortally wounding both small ships without actually destroying them.

"I'm out!" yelled Damon. He was returning the interceptors back to the ship. Or the two of them that still remained, at any rate.

I looked at the scanner to try and get my situational awareness back, but the scanner was blank. I swivelled my head around, looking for the remaining attackers. I saw the two Eagles bearing down in formation, coming to finish us off.

"I'm not ready to die!" I yelled angrily to nobody in particular, and hauled back on the stick to attack the incoming Eagles.

I opened fire. I was surprised at my own accuracy, as my laser cut both Eagles down in less than five seconds.

"What the hell are you doing!" yelled Damon as I reversed course and headed straight for the Explorer. "Remember what you said about running away!" he shouted.

However, I was now in a berserker rage and could barely hear his words. I came up behind the Explorer and targeted its engine nacelles with my laser, and opened fire. The Explorer's shields blossomed as they deflected the energy, but just before the beam laser overheated, it depleted the shields of my nemesis. I saw a tiny speck – presumably the escape capsule – leave the Explorer just before it disappeared in a white hot ball of flame, sending fragments of glowing alloy radiating out into space. One or two pieces of the wreckage clanked against our hull.

The damage report was not pretty. The computer reeled of an expensive list of repairs that we needed to make.

"Hull sections twelve through fifteen compromised. Structural crossmember seven and eight separated. Avionics bay two and three destroyed. Radar mapper inoperative. Scanner inoperative. Shield generators six through nine destroyed. Number one main thruster destroyed. Left manoeuvring thrusters destroyed. Autopilot inoperative. Electrical generators one and two destroyed. Accelerations exceeding four gee not recommended due to structural crossmember damage."

Great. So not only were we facing a big repair bill, we were potentially a sitting duck with reduced shields. No wonder the ship was not handling right – no left thrusters meant we couldn't turn correctly or perform a right slide, and losing a main thruster meant we had asymmetric thrust to add to our problems. We had also lost both generators so we were now relying on the battery for electricity. We had to get to port within 30 hours or we would lose all our remaining electrical systems, which would make us into nothing more than an expensive asteroid. Fortunately, we were only ten hours away from landing at Simpson Town. The rest of the trip passed slowly. I was quite relieved to encounter no other ships. However, landing at Simpson Town was quite a handful. I had no autopilot to help me out, and I had lost some thrusters. We landed somewhat heavily but in one piece. I was so tired and frankly relieved to be still alive, I hardly noticed when the message arrived.

"Message from the Elite Federation: Congratulations on achieving the combat rank of Deadly."

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### **4th June, 3265.**

We docked at La Soeur Du Dan Ham on Riedquat. Much to my relief, we only encountered a few minor skirmishes on our stop off in Tionisla, where all my troubles had begun in the first place. The pirates still avoided me in the Riedquat system. The first thing we did was to go to the "World's End" Bar. I needed a few stiff drinks. I also needed to see some of my bounty hunter friends. Riedquat is well known for its bars and alcohol. Almost 800 years ago, when the first practical hyperdrives had been developed, adventurous members of the various nation states that existed on Earth at the time went on deep space exploration missions, often starting colonies on habitable planets in far flung systems. Riedquat was colonized initially by a group called the "English", a nation notable for its affection for good beer. To poke fun at one of their near neighbours at Leesti, settled by a group known as the "French", they named the planet "Waterloo". The French had apparently been famous to losing a battle of that very name. An additional poke at Leesti was made when they named Reidquat Station "La Soeur du Dan Ham". Apparently it was a joke about the rotund form of the governor of Leesti's sister. I explained this to my brother, so he could better understand the attitude of some of the locals.

We walked into the bar. I was quite surprised to see the surviving four commanders from my combat class were all at a group by the bar. They all looked astonished to see me. Oh no, I thought, another nasty surprise seems to be brewing.

"Commander James Winston?" said the barman, in surprise.

"Hi guys...what's up?" I asked cautiously.

It turned out they were all there to mourn my death! Our combat class had been a tight knit group. We started at originally thirty members and were now down to five. Each time we heard one of our members had died in combat, we held a ceremony in their honour. Afterwards, we would drown our sorrows at World's End. They were just about to start. They hadn't seen me since January, when I announced I was going to pick off pirates in Tionisla. Commander Mischa, one of my four comrades-in-arms, had discovered the wreckage of my ship in an orbital junk yard two weeks ago and had assumed the worst. I introduced them to my brother. The four commanders were Commander Joan Mischa (Dangerous), Commander Jean-Claude DuGalle (Dangerous), Commander Yves LaRoche (Deadly) and Commander Mike Baxter ( Dangerous). And of course, the barman who had always been there, Paul Miterrand. I then told them of the whole sorry affair, starting with the treachery of Nguyen right up to our arrival at Simpson Town.

"Look, since we are all here, why don't we celebrate my reaching Deadly rating!" I announced.

This resulted in this day's diary being updated a day late, because I don't remember a lot after this.

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### **5th June, 3265**

I woke up with one of the worst hangovers I have had in a long time. It was dark all around, and somewhat uncomfortable. I dragged myself up in the darkness. I could sense some dull movement in the room. After finding out how to get some lights, I discovered that we had all spent the night in the bar, and basically had crashed where we had passed out from an excess of alcohol.

A few hours later, when we had all mostly recovered, we were sitting in the small central-station cafeteria, trying to coax our appetites awake.

"I have a plan that will make us a good amount of money, and improve our ratings," I said.

Bounty hunters are mostly interested in those two things. My friends looked much more awake now. I pulled out my computer and read out the entry about the Sirius Templar. It had actually been updated to say 80,000 credits per capital ship, or 500,000 credits if we took out the base as well! So there was more than one unit operating.

"Miterrand was talking about those guys last week," said Mike, quite suddenly. I didn't expect a barman to have heard of them. "He was talking about them being the new threat to bounty hunters", he continued.

We all went to Miterrand's to find out what he knew.

"Ah yes, the Sirius Templar", he said, when we asked him.

I pressed him for details. He had picked up quite a bit from passing bounty hunters. From his information, they were not based in Sirius as you might have thought from their name, but from a base in a system called Edurce, way out on the Edge. They had apparently taken over Peter's Terminal in that system. A formidable group that had approximately three dozen Clipper class craft operating in the same configuration as my attackers, plus a planetary defence and security system that had already claimed the lives of a number of

bounty hunters who had tried to hit the jackpot by taking the entire group out. They operated by extracting a protection fee from pirates in a number of systems, and in return, they destroyed bounty hunters. I thought about this. The bounty from eliminating this group would be handsome. However, to get through their defences would be a very risky proposition. We talked amongst ourselves for about an hour, but it seemed that there was a marked unwillingness to actually take on their headquarters. Not surprising, after Miterrand had told us of the torture they had inflicted on any outsiders they found in their system.

But then Damon had come up with the master stroke. It surprised us all, coming from a rookie co-pilot.

"Mafia." he said.

"What?"

"Mafia. The Templar operate Clippers. Remember what those people who bought the Clipper from my yard did with it? We disguise a Clipper as one of theirs, load it with nuclear explosives, and we can obliterate their entire base and probably most of their equipment too."

There was one snag. All of us put together could no way afford a Clipper to sacrifice to the cause. But then we almost simultaneously all came to the solution.

"We hijack one of theirs!" I said.

We now needed a detailed plan. We could net at least half a million credits between us if we could take out their base on a busy day, and eliminate a menace to our kind.

# Part Two

12th June, 3265

I gently lowered the ship onto Bay 2 of Manchester Starport in Tionisla as the rain poured off the hull. As the landing gear touched, I ran the shutdown checklist, and we were ready to disembark.

Our destination was Manchester Jail. It was visiting time, and it was time to pay a visit to a certain "friend" of mine, now rotting somewhere in the cells. Damon followed me as we opened the hatch, and strode out into the pelting rain. We dashed quickly across the concrete to the main starport buildings.

I was quite relieved to find that Manchester had a shuttle system – I really didn't fancy going to the other side of the town on foot. We strapped in, and the autoshuttle took Damon and myself to the prison.

"Thank you for using Manchester Taxis", said the autoshuttle. "The cost is 4.5 credits. Have a nice day". It sounded rather too cheerful on this damp afternoon.

We walked into the visitor's building, and we were greeted by the prison guard.

"Greetings gentlemen, who are you here to see?"

"I'm here to see Martin Nguyen"

"Aaah, lets see..." said the guard, consulting his computer. "OK, number 47783... I'll just get him. Ident here for me"

We gave the officer our idents, and he checked them. With the security test satisfactory, we followed him into the secure visiting area. It was a drab, grey concrete room. A small amount of natural light was allowed in via a couple of high windows. The rain lashing against them and the overcast sky added to the generally depressing feeling of the place.

"So, I'm going to meet the guy who nearly bumped you off then?" said Damon, casually.

"Well, I hope so. That's assuming the Templar haven't seen him already"

"I'm surprised you let him live"

"You know, I do have some compassion! I thought he deserved a second chance, I think he was just duped into joining them, he's just a kid"

"Do they really use the electric chair here?"

"Fraid so. Still doesn't seem to deter the pirates though"

We sat in the room for a few minutes. It was very quiet. The visitor's building was separate from the main jail. After a while, I could hear some shouts in the distance.

"Sounds like someone's trying to escape," I said.

The shouts resolved into intelligible speech as they got closer.

*"They'll kill me for sure! I'm not going!"*

*"They will not hurt you, the area is secure"*

Finally the sound of feet scrabbling around on the floor approached the room we were in, plus a great deal more shouting. I could now hear two other voices. Suddenly the door flew open and two prison guards burst in, almost falling over. They were dragging Martin along. A third prison guard was making sure he didn't

escape back down the corridor.

"Martin, you can relax, it's me and I'm not here to hurt you", I said calmly.

Martin spun around, and stopped resisting. He looked at Damon and myself in slight disbelief. He was sweating a lot, and had the look of sheer fright and panic to him. The guards firmly held onto him, just in case he tried to make a run for it.

"Come on, sit down over here, meet my brother Damon, and let's have a little chat," I said, hoping to not alarm him and also introduce him to the stranger I had brought. I didn't want him to think Damon was going to smack him one. Damon's about twice my size and sometimes has a bit of a mean look about him.

"Martin, I've got a little proposition to put to you," I began.

He sat there whilst I made my request. It was quite simple – he clues me in about Sirius Templar recruiting, and he'd be safe when he got out of prison. Plus he might get to own a Sidewinder for his troubles.

"I can't" he said.

"Oh come on, let's not start this again. You've got a choice – in five years time, you get out of jail. Should the Templar find out where you are..." I let the words hang in the air.

"I just can't risk it. I don't think you can take them out...no one can take them out, I've seen their defences", he replied.

"Ooohh–kay, let's put it this way. You're obviously worried about them finding you, aren't you?"

"Not really," he lied.

I have no idea how he thought he could get away with such a blatant lie. Such is the ignorance of youth. I remember trying to worm my way out of trouble like that when I was his age. I learned it never worked, especially a lie as blatant as that one.

"So, if you're not worried about them finding you, why the struggle with the guards?"

He didn't really have an answer for that one. He looked at the two guards sheepishly.

"You know, I could always help the Templar find you too. Or maybe I can have the pleasure myself of waiting outside the gates with a fully loaded Asp when you get out". I knew he would crack fairly soon – it hadn't been very hard to get him to spill his guts last time.

"And you know, I did save you from the electric chair, I think it's only reasonable that you help us now", I added.

He shifted nervously, and flashed a look at the guards again. I think he was desperately hoping that visiting time was over. No such luck, we still had half an hour to burn. The prison guards didn't seem to be minding our full and frank conversation either.

"If you do help us", I continued, "we will help you when you get out. As you know, I keep my word"

He looked around at the guards once more. Nobody spoke for a couple of moments. He looked panic stricken – I don't know why, even if we didn't succeed, it probably wouldn't make a scrap of difference to him. I'm fairly sure that the Templar already knew about his sentence length and would be waiting for him, regardless of whether they found out that he spilled his guts to us or not. Damon had started drumming his thick fingers on the table. I knew this was not a good sign – when I was just a kid, this usually preceded a beating of some sort. I didn't want Damon to lose his temper – the guards looked as if they would have an

instant sense of humour failure if he did. Martin looked at Damon and caught a wicked look. If looks could kill, as the old cliché went.

Finally, Martin decided that he had less to lose by giving us the information we wanted.

"It's like this", he said. "I was recruited in Sol. There's a listing on something called The Underground Bulletin at Mars High. Make initial contact there. Then they interview you."

"Go on..."

"They make you ident. They only take people who haven't been in space, they don't want infiltrators"

"I see..."

"Well, then if they find you acceptable, they ask you to call back when you find someone looking for crew. Then they check the guy you're going to crew for. See if his ident is known to them, if it is, they tell you not to go with him because they might be infiltrating. If the guy checks out OK, they let you go. Then they warn you about what they will do to you should you fail to carry out their orders. Once you're on your way, it's your job to make sure that the commander doesn't see them following. They tell you exactly when they will attack. It's then your job to incapacitate the commander"

"You mean, like smack him over the head with a piece of wood?"

"Yeah, that's one method."

"Pity for you it didn't work then", I replied. "Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"Yes – they only want Asp class or bigger"

"Well thank you. You're free to go. I'm sure you'll hear of our success."

He looked a little worried as the guards led him away. I don't think he's aware of the sort of resources that the bounty hunting community has, especially my friends at Riedquat. It seemed all rather simple. Of course, the idents would be a problem – I was rather hoping they'd hire one of us, but it would be difficult to forge a Sol ident. Maybe we can find another method for obtaining one. The interview could also be a tricky spot. Maybe one of my friends has someone in the Sol system who owes them a favour.

We left the prison, and returned to our ship as darkness began to fall. The rain still hadn't let up, and the odd flash of lightning surged across the sky. It was going to be a rough launch.

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### 18th June, 3265

We had an uneventful trip back to La Soeur du Dan Ham. A handful of pirates had attacked us on the way in, and none of them were a particular challenge. The canister of Gem Stones we picked up from one of them helped the bank balance a bit. I went back to World's End Bar, and found it quite lively. World's End is kind of the main bounty–hunter hangout – pirates know to stay clear. I saw Mischa, DuGalle, LaRoche and Baxter sitting at a table, having a bit of a joke. Damon and myself arrived on the scene loudly.

"Hey, good to see you back Jimmy. Hi Damon!" said Joan Mischa loudly.

I made a wild lunge for the bar, and bought a round of drinks. Damon and I collapsed thankfully into the easy chairs. It was good to be back at what I considered my second home. Pint in hand, I reported the news of our meeting with Martin in the prison. We sat down mulling it over.

"We can get fake id quite easily" said Mike Baxter.

"Go on..."

"Well, Sol's a safe system. Security within the station isn't high – between the five of us, we can easily take an id–station hostage for a few minutes while they make us up an id of my choice."

The others looked interested.

"So, Michael...how do you propose to get weapons onto Mars High? They've got good screens...", said Joan. "I was just coming to that."

Mike looked at me. The others swivelled around to look at me. Oh no, I had a bad feeling about this. I could guess what they had all just thought of.

"Oh no, not the shotgun! I nearly got killed the last time! Isn't there a better way of coercing them?" I asked. Joan grinned at me.

"Sorry, this one's up to you Jimmy. The Sol authorities are well known for refusing bribes, they're absolutely incorruptible", she replied.

"OK, OK, we'll do the shotgun thing"

"What shotgun thing?" asked Damon.

"What, I haven't told you?"

I then had to tell the whole story about the nasty meeting a certain Phekdan pseudo-ruler had with my shotgun, and the ensuing chase through the station's ventilation system. I had never told Damon about it, and was hoping I never had to. But now I had – in fact, I had been surprised that no bounty hunters had been after me for a while – perhaps I had finally shaken off the last remnants of that little episode in my life. Damon looked at me in awed horror, just like he did when I had to admit to him I was a bounty hunter on one visit home. This time instead of lecturing me on the dangers of bounty hunting, he just shook his head in shock. He still doesn't realise that he was just scratching at the surface of the near misses I had when I first started in this game. Finally we got back onto the topic of conversation – how to get a false Sol ident.

"Right, well who is going to masquerade as the newbie copilot then?" asked Wes. Wes LaRoche was the most combat hardened of all of us.

"We have a small problem there," I replied.

"Oh? Go on..."

"We're all...well, to put it mildly...to old for the job. I'm the youngest of all of us, and I'm in my late twenties. They are looking for kids – naive teenagers they can quickly blind with greed. They won't even go near one of us," I looked around at my audience. "We are going to have to find someone to help us out here."

I gave Joan a sideways glance. Her brother was just about to turn nineteen years old and had every bit of cunning required to survive out on the Edge.

"No, I can't let you do that", said Joan, sensing what I was going to ask. "He'll just get himself killed. I'm trying to stop him from getting into this game until he's done some copiloting and learned the rules"

"Well – "

"Sorry, I know this is important, but he's not doing it. He'll screw up, believe me"

"Anyone got any suggestions then?" I asked.

We all took a collective pull at our pints while trying to think of somebody who could help us. Plastic surgery? No, that never works. It's something they'd been messing with for thousands of years, but it never did any good. Perhaps we could find someone at Sol who could help us. However, I didn't trust Earthlings. I think we all wanted someone who was at least our kind – someone we could have a reasonable degree of trust in. Someone who knew what life was like on the edge – people of Sol were too insulated from the harsh realities.

I watched some people leave the bar whilst I contemplated what we could do to solve the problem. Then something happened that made me think that maybe...just maybe, the Deists could be right about some sort of divine being. In walked a fresh-faced youth. He was dressed like a typical bounty hunter – black clothes, a black leather jacket and short cropped hair. All he lacked was the slightly worn look the rest of us had. He walked up to the bar. I could see the rest of the group had seen him too. We watched intently as he tried to

figure out which beer to buy. It was quite obvious that this was his first trip to Riedquat. The other bounty hunters in the bar were paying no attention to him, so it must have looked very strange the way our group was staring. He hadn't noticed us though. We watched as he carried his pint to a table. He proceeded to wearily collapse into an easy-chair. It looked as though he might have had a bit of a tough run in.

"OK guys," I said quietly, "I'll talk to him. Surround the table and make sure he doesn't take flight".

I remembered being his age, just starting out. I was always quite nervous of groups of people, especially once I had a price on my head. I didn't want to scare this guy off. I stood up, picked up my pint and walked towards his table in what I hoped was a casual and non-threatening manner. He looked up as I put my pint down on the opposite side of the table and turned a chair around, and settled down. At least he didn't look like he was going to run.

"Let me guess," I started, grinning at him like a madman "you've got a loan shark on your trail and you're trying to figure out how to pay him back before he breaks bits off of you"

I think I had hit the nail right on the head. He looked distinctly nervous. I think he was about to try and make a run for it, but Damon's heavy hand suddenly fell on his shoulder. Damon's grin looked rather mirthless, but Damon always grins like that. The rest of the group pulled up their chairs and beers. We now had the poor kid surrounded. I was sort of enjoying myself, but I felt rather cruel.

"I've got the money! It's OK! Just let me go to my ship – "

"Don't worry, we're not coming to collect," I said. He looked at us nervously.

"Well what gives?" he asked.

It was time to put him out of his misery. We introduced ourselves. As a show of good faith, I offered to buy him the next beer.

"So, anyway, you know who we are, so who are you?"

"I am Maxwell Jackson, of Planet Lave", he said. It sounded a bit pompous.

"OK, Maxwell. We have a deal for you which will not only pay off the loan shark, who is even now cruising through Riedquat system space to meet you, and then more on top. If you join our group on this mission, you'll get a start in life you'd never otherwise get" I explained.

He seemed receptive. Actually, he didn't really have much choice (even though I had made up the bit about the loan shark being on his way). I found out a bit more about our new friend. It kind of brought me back to my teenage years. Seventeen years old, sick of life at home, looking to the stars. Except he got a Krait instead of a Saker. This was his first successful run into Riedquat, and it was successful only because he didn't get attacked much. I thought I'd let him out of his misery, and told him that I had been making up the bit about the loan shark. We drained our beers, and as I promised, I got the next one in.

"So, what's your rating? You must be doing well to come to Riedquat," said Wes. Maxwell sat a little taller. We were all ears.

"Yes, I'm Mostly Harmless"

I nearly choked on my beer. Mostly Harmless! He had survived Riedquat in a Krait, with a Mostly Harmless rating!

"Mostly Harmless?" said Wes in a highly surprised tone.

"Well, I got that rating just now", said Maxwell, positively buzzing with pride. We all looked on aghast. Even Damon realized the gravity of the situation.

"What's wrong...?" said Maxwell, looking at our disbelieving stares.

I simply smiled gleefully and chewed on the end of a drinking straw I had picked up.

"You know, you'll be ideal for this mission. Welcome to the team", I said.

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"...but he's a complete nutter!" exclaimed Wes. I shrugged.

"So? Aren't we all?" I replied slightly insolently

"But he obviously doesn't think! Everyone knows you don't just jump into Riedquat space with no combat experience!"

"We don't *need* him to think, so long as he can follow instructions, he'll go a long way. The military has loads of people like that who do well", I replied.

I couldn't quite see Wes's problem. It was well after closing time, and just Wes LaRoche, Paul Mitterand, and myself sat at the bar discussing our plans. Wes was getting a case of cold feet over the eighteen-year-old Maxwell Jackson who we had chosen to be our infiltrator. As far as I saw it, anyone who had the guts to make his first jump Riedquat would be perfect for the job. It was insanely dangerous for all of us. We had been arguing about it for about fifteen minutes.

"Paul, you be the arbiter of this. Am I right or not?" I said, hoping to break the deadlock that seemed to be forming.

"Hey, don't pull me into this, I just serve beer!"

Usually, Paul was always very eager to give advice to any bounty hunter that crossed his bar. It looked like he was getting cold feet about the whole thing too.

"Look – we should do it. How about this: it's going to take us some time to get to Sol anyway. We'll have plenty of opportunity to see how the kid gets on along the way, and we can abort if it looks like it won't work out. Deal?"

Wes's jaw jutted out. We sat in silence for a few minutes. He knew that none of the others had objected. However, he was undoubtedly the most experienced out of all of our group, and the others would probably go with his advice, especially after having a night to sleep on the idea.

"Where's your brother?" he said.

"Went back to the ship, I think he had one too many beers"

"OK, well...we'll talk to him in the morning. I'm in on one condition. The kid rides as your copilot so he can learn something on the way. Damon takes his Krait."

That didn't sound like a great deal to me! Damon was just getting the hang of combat, and we were surprisingly working well as a team. I thought about it briefly. I guess we'd all be in formation anyway, so between four ships we could shake off any pirate attack without any difficulty. It could be worse.

"OK, you've got a deal."

"I'm still not very happy about it...any sign of trouble with this kid of yours, and I'm bailing." Wes seemed to be trying to slightly disassociate himself from the whole plan. Kid of yours, indeed!

"OK. Well, let's meet in the tap room tomorrow and discuss strategy," I said.

"I'll have the tap room ready for you tomorrow then – it'll be all yours. Just drop in when you're ready", said Paul.

"Thank you."

At least we would get some privacy to discuss our plans. Hopefully Wes would become less skeptical. I felt confident I could at least guide Maxwell onto the right track with this one.

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**19th June, 3265**

We managed to come up with a plan today which I think has a very good chance of succeeding...should we get our way. There are some high risks involved, but with a little thought and good execution, we should be able to overcome these. However, the day didn't start very smoothly. It started about an hour before we were going to discuss our plans. I was sitting in the observation lounge having a cup of Ridgeback's Ultra Coffee. I had successfully talked Damon into going in the Krait. I was idly talking to Damon about life in general, when I spotted Maxwell entering the far corner of the observation lounge. The lounge is pretty much the biggest room in the station – the entrance was around 50 meters from where we were sitting. Maxwell hadn't got more than three or four paces into the room when...

"There he is! Get him!" shouted a burly looking man who was sitting at a table. He and the rather well-built woman he was sitting with suddenly jumped up, and started running in Maxwell's direction. Maxwell stopped briefly, and saw what was happening. He didn't waste any more time, and turned on his heel and bolted out of the room.

"Shit! Don't let them catch him!" I yelled. Both Damon and myself sprinted after Maxwell's pursuers.

The man pulled out a weapon of some sort, and fired it at Maxwell, who promptly collapsed. I had got quite close to the man, and I dived for his legs. My tackle was successful, and we both crashed to the floor. The man kicked me viciously, and I had to let go. Suddenly, I twisted around to see Damon catch the woman. The man aimed the weapon he had used on Maxwell at me! Before I could move, searing pain flooded through my body. I was knocked senseless, and flailed hopelessly on the floor. I dimly recall the sounds of struggle, and something heavy falling on me before cool darkness passed over my body. In my semi-conscious state, I could perceive shouts, and I could feel dull jerks as I was dragged away. Finally, I settled into a deep sleep.

I awoke with a splitting headache. I looked up blearily, fearing the worst. Instead, I saw Joan Mischa's concerned face looking at me. The rest of the room started to resolve into the familiarity of the World's End bar.

"You were lucky, he just stunned you", she said.

"Where's Maxwell?" was all I could ask. I hoped they hadn't done worse to him, it would sink the mission before it was even started.

"He's over there", said Joan, and nodded her head in his direction. "He hasn't come around yet, but he'll live".

I looked up to take in my surroundings. I saw Wes. He looked at me disapprovingly. Maxwell was laid on the floor. Damon gave me a mug of coffee. I thanked him for the thought. It might make my head stop hurting, anyway. That was the first time anyone had successfully stunned me with one of those weapons. It was an experience I could have done without.

"I'm getting a sinking feeling about this whole thing you know", Wes said slowly.

"You're not going to bail, are you?"

"No, but you better have a damned good plan"

"Who were those guys anyway?"

"Oh, some two-bit loan shark's heavies. Your brother did an admirable job of beating them up."

That figured. I looked at Damon, who grinned at me. I guess I owed him one now. Perhaps I shouldn't have made that joke last night about the loan sharks being in Riedquat. It obviously turned out to be true. Well,

Maxwell would have no right to complain – if it wasn't for us, he'd be having bits broken off him by now.

Eventually he came to, and we went into the tap room to discuss our plans. We had quite a long discussion, and I put my idea of a plan to the rest of the group. We'd go to Sol, and spend a bit of time on Earth to find out how the Earthlings live and behave, so at least Maxwell could be reasonably convincing. We then hold up an ident station, and get the operator to forge a Sol ident. This was obviously quite a big risk. Maxwell then gets in touch with the Templar, behaves like a naive kid with a deathwish (which he seems to be doing admirably anyway without any help from us), and gets on the payroll. He then picks some unsuspecting commander who is looking for a copilot. Just like Martin Nguyen had done with me. Using a portable secure communicator, he'll tell us who he's got, where he's going and any other information and we'll follow. And once he gets the order to jump the commander, he radios us, and we pounce on the Templar's Clipper once they've emptied it of the Sidewinders. I will go after the Sidewinders since I have the best equipped ship (with Damon once again as my co-pilot), whilst Joan, Wes and Mike go after the Clipper, board it and deal with the crew. In the meantime, Yves LaRoche will be stealing nukes from the Feds at Eta Cassiopeia. We all meet up again at Tionisla, and turn the Clipper into a giant bomb. Yves knows someone who is rather adept at bomb-making who lives in Manchester, Tionisla. We then make our way to the base in Edurce. Once in Edurce, we get the Clipper in a good position, make ourselves scarce in the Asp, and boom! No more Templar. Of course, we've got to get photo evidence, so we'll have to stick around long enough to see the fireworks before leaving.

It looked all very neat in principal. In reality we all knew it was risk-laden from the moment we got the Sol id forged. It wouldn't be long before the alarm was raised, and then the Feds would be after us. Yves has a reasonable rank with the Feds, and will take on a few bombing runs to obtain the nukes. This will of course mean that the Federal Military will demote her, but she doesn't intend to work for them again so it's a tradeoff she's willing to make. Of course, the other big risk is Maxwell. We have to make absolutely sure that he won't betray us to the Templar. I'm fairly confident he won't – in many respects he's just like I was a few years ago.

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### 15th July, 3265

We had a very uneventful journey to the Sol system, so I didn't keep much of a journal. Maxwell seems to be turning out alright – with a little careful instruction, he got the hang of handling the Asp. He even got a kill or two to his credit with the Asp's fighters. Wes is still rather concerned though – he made a point to grumble at any opportunity. We spent about a week on Earth, trying to see how the average person there lived. It was rather an interesting visit.

Earth is an odd place. They insist that all visitors have something called a "visa" on their ident. I've never heard of these. As you land, they add it to your ident. If you don't leave the surface within three months of landing, firstly, they fine you, then order you off the planet and never let you back on again. I think the Earth authorities are worried that too many people will come and live there for good if they don't. I'm not sure why they think that – to be honest, I prefer Newtown (but maybe I'm biased). We flew down towards the George Bush Intercontinental Spaceport in a place called Houston. I kind of insisted that we go here, because this is one of the places that was involved in the human population of space. We came down during the late afternoon, dodging thunderclouds that rivalled the ones that would soak Newtown from time to time. We all landed in formation like some sort of rag-tag mob: there was my Asp, Maxwell's Krait, Wes's Cobra Mk.3 and Joan and Mike's Constrictor. Control had us all touch down on the same pad, since we were all in formation. The Earth authorities are very picky. Not only did they have to issue a visa, but they also searched our ships. It was a good job we all jettisoned our radioactives in deep space...they are illegal in Sol. Finally, after half an hour of questioning about what we were all doing on Earth, they finally let us go. Stepping out into the festering, humid air made me feel at home. Just like Newtown with a bit more gravity.

We rented a planetary shuttle so we could get around easily. The first port of call was to check out the town. We went to somewhere near the centre of town, and took a look around. Quickly we discovered that

there was no way any of us could afford to live there. Prices for everything seemed extortionate. It was also extremely crowded too – our shuttle got bogged down in traffic – something I've never seen. We had to park in a large, multilevel building devoted solely to parking shuttles. We also started feeling out of place. It turns out that the people of Earth have a rather bright dress sense. We were all in our typical bounty-hunter attire where black was an important colour.

I also had a look around the bulletin board during the nights, which we all spent on board our ships since lodging on Earth was ridiculously expensive. After a little searching I found what we were looking for.

"Here it is!", I said.

"What?" said Maxwell, who had been sitting at the table in the Asp's small living room.

"The Underground Bulletin. Martin told me about it. It's where the Templar recruit."

Maxwell came over and looked over my shoulder at the display. I looked through the listings. It was some kind of black market trade centre by the looks of it. There were a large number of listings. Half of them seemed to be from people offering to forge Earth permanent visas. There were more for illegal radioactives processing, and yet more still for a variety of other goods and services which would otherwise have the Police Vipers chasing you out of the system. I called the others, and told them the location of the Underground Bulletin, so they could join the search for the Sirius Templar's advertisement. There was rather a lot to wade through, and I had a feeling that the Templar's advertisement wouldn't be all that conspicuous. Indeed, a search for their name brought no results. We spent the next day searching – it was time well spent. An unlikely looking ad for "scrap metal in exchange for a ship" took us to the Sirius Templar's recruiting information. It didn't really tell you what they wanted you to do...only that if you were interested in their offer, contact their office at M.Gorbachev Station in Earth orbit. We all got together in my ship that evening.

"OK, it's clear what we need to do." I said. I glanced at Wes, who at least looked relatively relaxed today. I think a holiday did him some good.

"We will go to Columbus first. It's only a small station, so we shouldn't have too much trouble getting them to fake an ident for us. Then we head on for Gorby Station, get Maxwell looking like one of these people we met on Earth, send him to the Templar's office and wait. Any questions?"

"Well – won't they come looking for us after we hold up the ident station?" asked Joan. It was a perfectly reasonable question. Wes broke in before I could answer. It was clear that he's been doing some very careful research.

"No. Information I've read on the rather interesting Underground Bulletin suggests that a little cash in the right place can keep them quiet. We might not even need to use force," he said.

"Right. In that case, we should all show up there, and offer payment. I'd rather not have to dodge the police while we wait for Maxwell to get in with a commander," I said.

We left that day. Our flight of four took off, headed out over the Gulf of Mexico then climbed up into space. The trip to Columbus was uneventful, as you'd expect in somewhere as safe as Sol. The view of Io and Jupiter was awesome as we docked with Columbus. Io is highly volcanic, and glowed strangely in the darkness. We all settled down for a few beers. This would be the last night before everything started getting rather exciting and unpredictable. From the next day on, danger would be lurking.

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## 16th July, 3265

"What can I do for you folks?" asked the ID station attendant.

"Well, what can you do for us for a couple of K?" I asked quietly.

The young man attending the id station looked around furtively. The fact he was doing a minimum wage job and could do with any additional credits weighed heavy on his mind. The couple of thousand credits were

calling to his normally incorruptible Federal mind.

"Look, let's talk inside", he said quietly.

We all went in. It was quite crowded with the six of us plus the attendant. A secure ident terminal and issuing system was prominent in one corner. They obviously didn't get a great deal of use out here. We also looked a bit bizarre – there was Joan, Mike, Wes, Damon and myself looking pretty much like your standard moth-eaten bounty hunters, and then Maxwell, outfitted like a typical Earth teenager. The colour clash was rather startling.

"OK, we just want a Sol id for this nice man here," I said, indicating Maxwell.

"Are you out of your mind? Do you know what the penalty for forging idents is here?" came the attendant's rhetorical question

"I don't really care. I don't normally live in Federation space. Besides, you have to get caught to be fined", I answered evenly

"But I do! I have to live here! These things have an audit trail!"

"OK, well how about you say we coerced you if they ask? Will four thousand credits be enough?"

I could see that old, ugly, but very useful human emotion stirring in him. Greed. If I could wheedle his lust for money, he would crumble. His inexperience was working against him. If I were in his position, I'd certainly not accept...but I had experience of how greed gets one in trouble. It was obvious that he did not have this experience to fall back on. There was a pregnant pause while the attendant fought an internal battle between Greed and Conscience. If I could just tip him over the edge...

"You drive a hard bargain. How about five K?" I asked.

The attendant looked around furtively. The station was very quiet at this time of the day – the station's artificial morning had only just begun. He licked his dry lips.

"OK, I'll do it. Just be quiet. Don't hang around the station"

"Thank you very much. OK, Maxwell, give him your details"

Maxwell went forward, and gave his details for the fake ID. His new name was Robert Austin. His new birthplace, San Marcos, Earth, Sol. He kept his date of birth. Within minutes, he had a shiny new ident, and the ident station attendant was five thousand credits better off.

"It was good doing business with you Sir," I said to the attendant.

"Good luck, wherever you're going" he replied.

We left the ident station and made our way to the station's bar. We found a quiet corner away from prying ears. I pulled out the case I had been carrying and opened it. Inside were five secure communicators, which I had bought from a black market trader in Eta Cassiopeia some years earlier on the hope they would be useful some day. I had configured them on our trip out and made sure they could talk to each other. I handed them out to everyone in our party.

"OK, here's the plan. Maxwell, be very discreet and keep us updated. Let us know every move that your commander is going to make so we can follow. Try and dig up as much as possible about what the Templar are going to do. The rest of us will just have to do our best to keep up", I said.

"OK," said Maxwell. He was looking a bit daunted. He looked at his communicator.

"You can no longer travel with us either. Catch a ride with a freighter down the Gorby, and we'll follow at a discreet distance. Good luck Commander Maxwell Jackson. May your mission be successful. Call us when

you get a ride."

Normally I wouldn't use such pompous, flowery language, but I thought it would make Maxwell feel a little bit better. I certainly wouldn't like to be going alone at this point. We watched Maxwell leave the bar. I think we all felt a little bit guilty sending him to his fate like this. Joan looked at me. She had that "I don't like this one bit" that I recognised so well.

"What are we going to do with the Krait?" asked Wes.

"Heck, I hadn't thought about that! How about we land it rough on Pluto and come back when the mission's done?" I said, panicking slightly

"Why not just leave it here? A month of landing fees will pick up much less suspicion than someone leaving a ship on Pluto. They monitor this system pretty good you know" said Joan.

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking. I need a coffee to wake me up"

We spent a few hours hanging around Columbus. I watched the awesome view of Jupiter and Io from the observation lounge, trying to quell my feeling of discomfort over the whole mission. The others were sitting around at a table in the lounge, quietly discussing the weeks trivia from Random Intergalactic Gossip. I normally enjoyed the stories in RIG, but somehow I couldn't get into it today. I was longing for a nice cool beer in the comfort of World's End Bar. This was no good I thought – I have to snap out of it. I walked over to the table. Maybe being sociable would help stop me from worrying about the mission. Then all of a sudden, the communicator came online.

"Hello, this is Maxwell. I'm on my way to Gorby on a Python with the Barnard's Star registration VR-823"

The message was simple and to the point. The others had seen it on their communicators.

"OK, let's go", said Damon.

"Right, keep your distance from this ship – we don't want to arouse any suspicions" I reminded everyone.

"Leave the station, separated by at least an hour. We'll go to Apollonius City – Wes, you go to Abraham Lincoln, and Joan, go to Li Qing Jao" I said.

With everyone briefed, Damon and myself boarded the Asp. We would leave ahead of the Python, hopefully. The others would be following behind. We wasted no time exiting the station, and travelling at our best speed to Apollonius City on the Moon. It was going to be a tense wait. I know why I felt uneasy – none of us were in control of the situation any more. We just had to hope that the Templar wouldn't reject Maxwell. We also had to hope that the Sol authorities wouldn't find out about the faked ident until it was too late.

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## 17th July, 3265

Things have happened rather quickly today. The Templar don't hang around. Just before midnight standard time, after a day of exploring the Human Spaceflight Museum on Apollonius City (a fascinating exhibit containing the first vehicles and equipment put on another planet by mankind), we got a message on the secure comm from Maxwell. He sent us a brief video message. He's already been interviewed and placed! He had been there less than a day. His act obviously must have been convincing to the Templar (lucky for us, and even luckier for him).

Like the old cliché goes, there was good news and bad news. The good news was of course that he's leaving tomorrow with his new (unsuspecting) commander. The ship he's in is an Imperial Courier – quite a nice ship. He pointed the comm's camera around his new quarters. The commander is obviously really kind to his crew: the quarters were better than anything I'd had even as a commander myself!

The bad news? You may know that a Courier is a three-crew ship. This wouldn't normally be a problem, except that he's been paired with another of the Templar's willing gang. Another Earth teenager who has already done two jobs. This could well mean that Maxwell's mission receives some interference to put it mildly. To top it all, Maxwell already doesn't get on with the kid – a crotchety 19 year old female, it turns out. Notwithstanding empirical evidence that says the male of the species is usually the most likely to be the violent one, apparently this young lady is likely to go a long way in piracy circles. Hopefully Maxwell can find a way of dealing with her. Apparently she's all sweetness and smiles whilst the Captain is about, but starts abusing Maxwell as soon as the hapless commander is out of earshot. I think Maxwell already wants to do something nasty to her by the tone of his voice.

The other information is that the Courier will be headed for Delta Pavonis. They are going to York City on Reagan's Legacy. This is in range of all of our ships with one jump, so we'll have no trouble following. Where the Templar's Panther Clipper will catch up with all of us is something we'll just have to try and anticipate. However, something that big should be easy to spot (especially its hyperspace entry cloud). I had a long-range scanner fitted at great expense for tracking pirates: it may just pay off extremely well here.

***MAXWELL JONES recalls, in conversation with the editors:***

James Winston was certainly not exaggerating with what he reports. The Templar interview was actually quite easy – I was only in there ten minutes. The false ident worked fine, and they were convinced. I think they do the interview to check they weren't getting an infiltrator. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I think they were an incredibly naive organization. They were all off-worlders, so they couldn't see through my horrible attempt at doing the regional accent of where I was supposed to come from.

The nightmare began of course when I met Alice Lee. She was rather good looking, and I was actually quite strongly attracted to her. I thought it was my lucky day as I met her and Commander Vlad Jensen. However, as soon as Jensen had left us alone, she started giving me orders. She had already got two confirmed kills for the Templar, and she made it quite clear that if I stepped out of line, I would be the third. This made me more nervous. I would now have to dispatch her to complete the mission, and even I could tell she had a rapier sharp nerve. It would be like trying to sneak up on a pack of hungry lions whilst wearing hobnail boots.

***Winston's journal continues...***

The others had got Maxwell's message too. We had a brief discussion about what we'd do next. Wes had already taken the initiative and was in orbit within easy range of Gorby station. As soon as we saw Courier QV-322 leave the station and hyperspace, we'd do the same. Wes would check with his hyperspace analyser that the Courier was going where expected. We'd beat the Courier into the system, so the plan was to hang around at a discreet distance and wait for him to come through.

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**24th July, 3265**

After spending a couple of rather dull days, punctuated only by a minor attempted pirate attack (they turned tail and ran as soon as Damon launched the fighters) we had a great deal of excitement. We did not expect so much to happen so quickly.

Wes saw the Courier leave, and confirmed he was indeed going to Delta Pavonis. We left early on the 18th July, arriving late on the 21st July. We started by forming up about 100 km from the hyperspace clouds. The hyperspace analyser showed our cloud remnants, and a cloud with the mass signature of a Courier. However, to our surprise, it also showed a nearby cloud from Sol with the mass signature of a Panther Clipper!

## Tionisla Rising

None of us had seen a Clipper in the vicinity of Gorby, so they must have just been loitering about somewhere in Earth orbit, assuming that this was the Templar. The long range scan showed a few other hyperspace entry clouds scattered about the system which of course were from places other than Sol. There was the odd exit cloud too, but not much more of interest. The Courier was due to arrive on the 23rd at 21:30 standard time. The Clipper was due to arrive just over two hours afterwards. It would be interesting to see what happened. They followed me all the way to Tionisla, so in all probability, we would just be tagging along for now. It was now time to just wait for them to arrive.

"OK, I'll follow the Courier, you follow the Clipper", I said over the comm. "Copy" came the terse reply from both Joan and Wes.

The Courier's emergence was only a minute or so away. I looked over at Joan's bright purple Constrictor to the left of me, and further left, Wes's grey Cobra Mk.3. Blue light flickered over their hulls from the two hyperspace entry clouds. It was an eerily beautiful sight against the backdrop of the stars. I thought back to Apollonius City on Earth's Moon and thought of the wonder that the first space travellers would have thought about the scene I was now witnessing. Of course, in those days, the mere mention of hyperspace in scientific circles would have had you laughed out of the room. Twelve hundred years later, it was all a matter of course. The Courier hurtling from one of the clouds interrupted my musings. It appeared as a tiny dot, heading towards Reagan's Legacy.

"See you folks later, good luck", I said on the comm as Damon and I started to trail the Courier.

It was trivially easy to keep up with the Courier. The Asp is a much faster ship. We kept a distance of a couple of hundred km – I didn't want to spook the commander. Hopefully Maxwell noticed us, and hopefully the other two on the Courier had not. After two hours of trailing the Courier, the secure comm came online. It was Joan.

"Sweet mother of Zeus, the Clipper came through and immediately launched four Sidewinders! They are heading on an intercept with the Courier!" she yelled excitedly.

"OK, copy that. We will strike today in that case"

"What's your plan?" came Wes's voice.

"When the Sidewinders catch me up, we'll attack them. Hopefully we just look like another trader to them and we'll get them by surprise. On my word, you try and take the Clipper. In the meantime, tail the Clipper at a comfortable distance."

"Understood. We will be waiting for your call", said Wes.

We dropped back a bit further from the Courier, and Damon pulled up the long-range scan. Sure enough, we could see four Sidewinders in close formation accelerating on a direct intercept course with the Courier. About 45 minutes later, they were getting close enough to show up on the main scanner – about 100 km away.

"OK, Damon, ready the fighters"

"They are fully charged and ready for launch. Pity we've only got three left"

We hadn't managed to find a replacement for the one we lost a few battles back. But three plus the Asp should easily be enough, especially since we would have the element of surprise on our side. Tension grew in the cabin as the four Sidewinders closed up on us, and started passing about a km over the ship. I zoomed in on them, and watched them as they passed directly overhead.

I keyed up the secure comm to the other ships...

"OK, NOW!" I yelled unnecessarily loudly.

"Copy!" came the reply.

The ship vibrated as the three fighters hurtled out of their bays and wheeled around to intercept the Sidewinders. At the same time, I violently rotated the Asp and twisted on full power. I opened fire with the 4MW beam laser and quickly melted one of the Sidewinders before they could figure out what was happening. I targeted another Sidewinder and launched the Asp's only NN-550 missile. Damon was concentrating on one Sidewinder, myself on the other, whilst the missile chased the third. The third Sidewinder desperately tried to ECM the missile, but the weapon kept tracking. I saw the explosion as the missile detonated. The Sidewinder didn't explode, but the radar mapper showed its prime mover had been destroyed. It was now powerless and unable to help the remaining Sidewinders.

"Mayday, we've been energy bombed", came Wes's frantic voice over the secure comm.

"What's your status?"

"Joan and Mike ejected, my ship is badly damaged, but I can still fight", came the reply.

This was not good news. We absolutely had to take the Clipper. The Sidewinders were now bearing down on us, and we were being hit quite hard.

"Caution, shields depleted," came the computer's calm voice.

I continued to fire on one of the Sidewinders, whilst Damon's interceptors wheeled around in formation and started firing on the other. Both enemies were however firing on us, and we were taking hull damage. I managed to get the laser zeroed in on the one Sidewinder, and it quickly exploded. However, the other one was still bearing down on us, with the interceptors in hot pursuit.

Suicide run! He was headed straight for us! Our rate of closure was now enormous. The Sidewinder was still firing.

"Caution, hull breach, equipment section three. Laser cooling booster inoperative"

The laser overheated. I tried to avoid the Sidewinder, but suddenly there was a deafening crash as the small ship collided with the bow of our ship. The power went out, and we were momentarily plunged into darkness until the emergency electrical supply kicked in. There was a loud screaming sound coming from somewhere. I looked over at Damon, who was about to return the interceptors to their bay.

"Kill the disabled Sidewinder first! If he gets back, we'll be rumbled!"

"I'm on it!"

I always feel very guilty about having a disabled ship bumped off – I never think it's particularly fair. But in the case of the Templar, it's vital that it doesn't get back to them that they've lost a ship. This was rather far from my mind at this point, there was something desperately wrong with the ship.

"Caution, cabin pressure falling"

I pushed the emergency flight deck isolate. Nothing happened. I got out of my seat and pulled the manual lever. I heard the airtight hatch slam closed outside of the flight deck, but we were still losing air.

"Damon, we're losing cabin pressure! The flight deck is breached somewhere! I'll grab the EVA suits!"

"OK, I've got the Sidewinder, and I'm returning the interceptors"

I frantically pulled the supplies cabinet open and pulled out the two EVA suits. They were quite heavy and clumsy. To add to the panic, the ship's gravity system chose that moment to fail and I found myself flailing in mid air, trying to keep a hold on the two EVA suits. I propelled one of them to Damon, and started getting

mine on. It was quite a struggle in microgravity, and I was starting to feel euphoric and lightheaded, a sure sign of the onset of hypoxia. The air was leaving the cabin at an alarming rate.

"Danger, cabin pressure falling below safe levels"

Finally, I clipped my helmet closed, and the suit pressurized. My hypoxic symptoms quickly cleared, and it was obvious Damon was in a lot of trouble. He was still trying to get his arms in his EVA suit. I pushed myself over to his seat, and stuffed his arms in as he lost consciousness. I clipped his helmet on, and saw his suit pressurize. Hypoxia clears relatively rapidly, and he was soon awake again. Finally, the last of the air left the cabin, and we now might as well have been in the vacuum of space. I looked at the chronometer – the whole tumultuous event had taken less than ten minutes.

"Damage report," I said on the suit's small radio.

"OK, looks like we've lost the laser cooling booster, and...holy cow!" came Damon's voice from my suit radio.

"What?"

"The hyperdrive reactor is overrunning! The emergency system hasn't shut it down!"

Damon's hands flew over the console. The suit gloves made the work rather harder.

"It's shut down now, but it's inoperative"

"What about the hull breach?"

"Looks like we've lost a large part of the lower hull pressure bulkhead, that's where all the air escaped. The flight deck leaked through there," said Damon, pointing to a crumpled section on the far left rear of the cabin which had been masked by the 360 degree view system.

"What about the prime-mover? Are we stranded?"

"The prime-mover is fine"

"What about the others!" I suddenly remembered we weren't the only ones fighting! I keyed up the secure comm. "Wes, do you copy?"

Silence. We were only about a light second away from where the Clipper was, so I didn't wait long before transmitting again.

"Wes, I repeat, do you copy?"

Still no reply. This was bad. Our ship was now incapable of hyperspace, and we couldn't risk losing the Templar's Clipper now we had revealed ourselves. Of course, Maxwell might not have revealed himself... but without Joan or Wes, the mission was in serious danger of complete disaster. I hoped that Wes was just in the heat of battle and too busy to reply – instead of being charred particles drifting through space. Suddenly the secure comm came to life.

"James, it's me, Maxwell, do you copy?"

"I hear you fine. What's your status?"

"We were ordered to disable the commander. Unfortunately Alice got to him, but I took her out before she could kill him"

"Good job. What did you do with her?"

"Shoved her out of the airlock"

"What's the status of the commander?"

"He's not doing very well at the moment, he's unconscious"

I was momentarily taken aback. Maxwell obviously had the cold cunning it took to survive as a bounty hunter, and had dispatched his enemy with extreme prejudice. It also meant we now had a Courier at our

disposal.

"OK, Maxwell – form up with us, and we'll get the Clipper next. The Clipper energy bombed the others, and Joan and Mike had to eject. Haven't heard from Wes and I'm fearing the worst"

"I'll follow you, but I'm still trying to master this ship. By the way, it's equipped with a 20MW beam laser", he replied.

Flying a Courier solo was a tricky proposition for a rookie. Hopefully he'd be able to manage enough to survive. A 20MW gun would certainly come in useful though. We had a little time, so I pulled up the long range scan. My fears were confirmed when it only showed the Clipper. Wes's Cobra was nowhere to be seen. The long range scanner couldn't pick up something as small as an escape capsule, but on checking the emergency channel, I couldn't locate any escape capsule beacons. I hoped to at least see Joan's. With the Courier aiding us, hopefully we could still disable the Clipper. We didn't want to destroy it – the mission depended on us capturing it. This could turn out to be rather awkward. All I could do is have Maxwell distract them and deplete their shields, whilst Damon and I rammed open their docking bay with the Asp. The interceptors would be helpful too in the process of keeping the Clipper crew occupied. I was a little surprised that they had not already hyperspaced out, but it quite likely that they didn't have enough fuel to do so. In any case, we had to stop them from docking at all costs – they would inform the Templar of what happened. I watched closely as we drew forward. Suddenly, the regular comm came alive. The commander of the Clipper was about to address us.

"Greetings James Winston" said the voice.

"Er, hello," I said uncertainly. How did they know my name? Suddenly the voice changed. A voice I recognised.

"It's me, Wes."

"Wes? Huh?"

"Had you going for a moment there! The hijacking was successful!"

Suddenly I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. That explained where Wes's ship was – he must have managed to dock with the Clipper. It still didn't explain what happened to Joan and Mike's escape pod.

"What about Joan and Mike?"

"Unfortunately..." trailed Wes's voice...

"We made it too!" came Joan's excited voice.

"OK, that's enough surprises! We've still got the rest of the mission to go...tell me all about it when we land"

I was extremely elated that we had all survived, even if our ships had all been heavily damaged in the process. In fact, Joan and Mike's Constrictor had been destroyed and Wes's Cobra Mk.3 was pretty much reduced to scrap. My own ship wasn't very far from being scrap either, judging by the amount of hull damage we had taken. At least we could relax now. Tired of being cooped up in an EVA suit, we carefully guided the Asp into the cavernous hull of the Clipper. The docking port was barely big enough for the Asp, but we could fit. Damon picked up an EVA jetpack and flew over to the Courier to help Maxwell out, and I went to help Joan and Wes with running the Clipper. Just as Maxwell had finished off his contingent of the Templar, Wes and Joan had terminated the entire crew of the Clipper. It was now quite likely that we would be able to get the Clipper into Edurce without the Templar knowing what had happened. Of course the main lesson is... never underestimate the power of surprise.

# Part Three

30th August, 3265

I stood alone, in the vast cargo bay of the Panther Clipper, stroking the duralium superstructure. I took in the sight of twenty disassembled nuclear missiles, deftly stolen from the Federation, all wired up to explode on command. Yves had done a good job to obtain so many. My Asp was loaded up into the Clipper's internal docking bay, freshly repaired from the damage it had taken during the capture of the big trade ship. I felt a certain sadness that we were going to deliberately destroy this machine – the Panther Clipper is normally a gentle trade ship, with no bad habits. I felt almost as if the Clipper was becoming a sacrificial lamb to our cause.

I paced around the interior of the cargo bay, halfheartedly inspecting the welds and fasteners that held the huge ship together. I sat down on a crossmember, and thought over the events of the last few days. Hopefully the news hadn't got back to our enemy – the Templar – that one of their ships had been captured. Shortly, the most dangerous part of our mission would begin, and I had been selected to be the captain by my bounty hunter cohorts who would crew the ship. I'm not entirely sure why they chose me over Wes, who had been in space for much longer than me. Come to mention it, Wes had looked a little uncomfortable at ending up under my command. I knew for certain he still thought of me as an unruly kid, not fit to command a Lifter. It would be interesting having him as a first officer. To add to this, I had a number of brand new crew who we had recruited from the bounty-hunting hangouts in Manchester, Tionisla. I looked over the crew manifest that we had drawn up. A motley crew indeed:

James K Winston: Captain (27 std. yrs)  
Wesley LaRoche: First Officer (43 std. yrs)  
Joan Mischa: Chief Engineer (33 std. yrs)  
Yves LaRoche: Chief Defensive Systems Operator (29 std. yrs)  
Maxwell Jackson: Defensive Systems Operator (18 std. yrs)  
Mike Baxter: Weapons systems (31 std. yrs)  
Jean-Claude DuGalle: Weapons Systems (55 std. yrs)  
Damon L Winston: Helm (35 std. yrs)  
Martin Smith: Helm (22 std. yrs)  
Eileen Patel: Engineering (19 std. yrs)  
Yan Mikleson: Engineering (21 std. yrs)  
Viktor Ilyushin: Engineering (17 std. yrs)  
Quentin Jones: Engineering (27 std. yrs)  
Lisa Simmonds: Signals and Communications (25 std. yrs)  
Aryana Kamov: Signals and Communications (18 std. yrs)

The manifest might have been a motley crew, but it was a little daunting. The biggest command I'd ever had was having a copilot on an Asp. To have fourteen crewmembers would be quite interesting. Everyone in the list from Martin Smith downwards was a complete stranger – and most of them with only the minimal experience we need for the job. And tomorrow, we launch to meet whatever fate meets us at Edurce...

And that's the next dilemma. Due to the risk of the mission details leaking to the enemy, the new crewmembers don't actually know what the mission is. The other interesting thing will be escaping in the Asp. Fifteen people squeezed into an Asp is something I'm not looking forward to.

My musings were interrupted. Joan had entered the ship, and walked across to where I was sitting.

"You don't look terribly happy there. Loneliness of command getting to you?" she asked.

"Well, in a way. I'm feeling rather sad about what we are planning to do with this ship, this gentle machine deserves better than this"

"You don't say that about the pirate ships you blow up on a regular basis!" she said, looking surprised.

"Well, that's different. They are trying to kill me!"

"It's only a machine, and it was used to try and kill us. I worry about you sometimes, you know"

"Oh, I know. I'm not having second thoughts – it just seems tragic to look around the precise and beautiful engineering that went into this craft, and to think we are using it as a giant bomb"

We both looked around the superstructure in silence for a few seconds. The ship was indeed beautiful. It may have been just a box on the outside, but the shapes described by the duralium beams and crossmembers, the walkways and equipment racks, all precisely engineered...it just seemed a shame to destroy the ship – the representation of the pinnacle of human technological achievement. I could see that Joan understood me.

"Go and get some sleep," she said. "You're looking a bit tired".

"OK. Well, I will see you and the others at eleven thirty for launch."

I went up to my quarters, in the Clipper's living area. I now had the luxury of having my own room. A captain's stateroom of sorts. Just like my Asp, the quarters were extremely functional, and there wasn't a great deal of space, but I did at least have a room to myself now. I felt I might be needing it from time to time on the journey that was to start the next morning.

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### 31st August, 3265

The day of our launch. The crew all came on board, and we all met as a group in the small cafeteria area of the ship. I had to give my first briefing as commander of the ship. I carefully explained as to not let on what was really happening that we had a very special delivery to a system on the southern edge of populated space, and the dangers involved. However, I could feel the subconscious waves of disapproval being emitted by Wes, my first officer. He had been rather uncomfortable since the mission started on my methods. To add to this, I knew he felt that he should have been the commander of this vessel. I'm sure it wasn't a case of jealousy at not being put forward as the commander by the rest of our group (he somewhat reluctantly approved my selection after everyone else had their say) – rather, he didn't like my methods. He thought I took needless risks, and events since we hired Maxwell had only continued to convince him of this case.

The launch went smoothly. The Clipper's powerful engines lifted us off the pad of Manchester Starport into clear skies. The ship vibrated with energy as we climbed out into space. Our first shift was on call – not all 15 crewmembers are needed at once on the Clipper. Myself and seven other crew were on duty. It felt odd to me commanding the ship but not having my hands on the controls. This was delegated to the helmsman on duty. Even then, the ship's control was vastly different to a small fighter. Instead, the helmsman's job was to program our trajectory into the computer, which controlled the ship all the time. Manual control of the thrusters could be obtained, but there were rather a lot of them, so it was far more efficient to just delegate it to the ship's computer. Although the entire crew including myself were highly inexperienced in this kind of operation, things were going smoothly enough. In fact, it was quite pleasant to just take in the overall progress of the flight with the crew taking care of the minutia.

Joan had her engineering department scurrying around monitoring the ship's systems, Yves and Maxwell kept an eye on the short and long range scans, watching traffic to note any signs of hostility. Damon was at the helm, monitoring our progress against the flightpath he had programmed. Mike was ensuring the weapons were configured in case of an attack notification. I watched him experimentally swing the laser turrets. Finally, Lisa Simmonds was communicating with traffic control as we departed the area. Myself and Wesley watched the operation with quiet satisfaction as we left the atmosphere in preparation for our first hyperspace

jump towards our destination. The planet below us filled most of the external view, displayed on a 180-degree holographic display. The defence and weapons station both had their own viewscreens from which they could look in any direction they chose.

We were all sure that we were once again going to be living in interesting times after the first jump. However, I was confident that with a good crew, we could deflect any trouble before it threatened to engulf us. But pride cometh before a fall, as the ancient saying went.

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## 25th September, 3265

The thing about space travel is that it can be extremely quiet. Since we launched, we had encountered no attackers. I had deliberately planned the safest route possible. This was quite a trick, since Edurce, in sector 2, -9 was way out on the edge. I was thinking to myself that we were fortunately about to start the final stage of our mission...the journey to Peter's Terminal in Edurce. I was starting to have a problem with crew boredom. It was difficult to keep the crew occupied, and there had been one or two personality conflicts. I had already had to break up a catfight between Aryana Kamov and Eileen Patel: they were both trying to make advances on Viktor Ilyushin. And that itself had led to a fight between Maxwell and Victor, since they both had the hots for Aryana. Relationships between all the new crewmembers had been slightly strained. Fortunately, our core group (i.e. myself, Wesley, Joan, Yves Mike and Jean-Claude) knew each other well enough that we still worked very well together. I only wished keeping the rest of the crew on speaking terms had been as easy.

However, we now sit in interstellar space at some indeterminate point between Liabeti and Edurce. Sooner or later, we knew we would be attacked. The trouble is, when you're attacked by your own kind who are convinced that you're part of a pirate group with a massive price on their head, there is a conflict of interest. Do you shoot down the bounty hunters, even though they are really your comrades? Or do you let yourself get shot to bits by them because they think you're a pirate and you don't want to bump off your brothers in arms? Or can you come up with something else that will spare you both? And then what do you do to keep your first officer from starting a mutiny in the aftermath? Not long after hyperspacing into Liabeti, we had to answer these questions.

Our standard procedure had been to scoop up hydrogen fuel from the atmosphere of gas giants. It wasn't to save money, but rather to avoid drawing attention to ourselves. Liabeti 4 was our largest available source, so we set a course for the planet. We were nearing the planet when it became evident that trouble was afoot.

"I think we've got trouble", said Yves suddenly. "Five ships have shown on the long range scanner, accelerating towards us".

I pulled up the long range scan on my console. Sure enough, at just under a range of 1AU was the mass signature of the ships. Every 30 seconds, the display updated, showing them closing.

"Kamov, try and ident those ships"

"I'm on it"

Kamov began working the communications console to try and discover who was following us. At short range, identifying was easy – the ship's systems would just do it automatically. At long range, however, you had to target it more carefully. It would be fourteen minutes before we found out anyway, and that's if our suspected pursuers hadn't done something aggravating to their transponders. We'd at least be able to find what sort of ships were following us. In the meantime, I had the computer work out when they would intercept us. The news was not as good as I hoped – they would catch us up just as we reached the fringes of Liabeti 4. This meant we wouldn't just be able to escape by forcing a hyperspace misjump...we wouldn't have the fuel. In fact, we had very little fuel, so hyperspacing anywhere was not an option until we had started scooping.

## Tionisla Rising

I wanted to make sure they really were following us before making any rash decisions in any case. The time for the ident scan to come back seemed to go rather slowly, as I watched the ships continue to accelerate. Judging by their closing speed, there was at least a Cobra 3, Asp or Harris in the formation.

Finally, the ident came back. The news was not good. There was actually one more ship that the long range scan hadn't found. They were powerful ships too – six Asps decked as pure fighters. We had their registrations too, and the information we found was not comforting. The commanders all had a bounty hunting profile, and the lead ship's commander was Elite, the rest of them Deadly. I looked around the bridge, and decided it was time to go to alert condition.

"OK, we're going to battle alert. Get all the crew to their stations", I told Aryana. She would now broadcast the alert around the ship and have all the crew at their station.

"Now hear this! We are now at battle alert condition. All crew report to your positions! That is all!"

The announcement seemed a little stuffy and formal, especially amongst our normally informal crew. We were far from a military organization. Half of our crew was resting too. It wasn't the best time to have to go to battle alert, but it usually never is. It wasn't long before Wes was on the bridge. He had obviously been woken from deep sleep.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Look", I said simply, pointing to the long range scan on my console.

He looked at the information quietly. I could see he was slightly shocked. We thought we were the team when flying formation, hunting pirates. However, what he could see made our group of bounty hunters look like a neighbourhood watch convention.

"Holy crap, we've got to get out of here, fast", he said

"We can't, we don't have the fuel to go anywhere. We're going to have to try and hide in the atmosphere of Liabeti 4 until we've picked up enough fuel"

"We'd have a better chance trying to fight them off! We have quite good weapons"

"Maybe so, but I'm not killing other bounty hunters"

Wes didn't seem to like that last statement. His jaw jutted out. I could almost see the words "James Winston takes stupid risks" floating around in his mind. But there was no way I was going to shoot down my own kind, despite the risk. One day we might need a favour from these people. They probably hung out at World's End at Riedquat too. My thoughts were that we could hide in the atmosphere of the gas giant whilst we picked up fuel, although that would be difficult. We would have to go dangerously deep into the atmosphere. It would be a few hours until intercept, so the crew would at least have plenty of time to prepare for the unpleasantness that would follow.

"OK then, why don't we message them and tell them who we are? We can send our idents. Maybe they can help us" said Wes.

"No way – we can't risk letting the truth get out. Should it get back to the Templar who are now only a few light years away, we are really in trouble!"

"Look, do you really think we can hide from them? There's an Elite combatant amongst them for heaven's sake!"

"It's our best chance. If we have really no option, we'll attack, but I think we have a good chance if we go deep enough into the atmosphere"

Wes was obviously not satisfied, but he hadn't challenged my command yet. It looked like he'd at least let me continue. I was a little worried that he might try and replace me. I don't think he's ever really trusted me, and I really don't know why. However, I really needed him to trust my judgement now. After all, there had to be a reason why despite having twice the experience as a bounty hunter, he only was Dangerous, yet I was rated Deadly.

"Helm, program a flip manoeuvre," I said

Damon selected the manoeuvre. It was a simple way of speeding your journey – instead of using the retro thrusters to slow us down, we'd thrust for longer, then point the ship the other way, and use the more powerful main thrusters to slow us instead. It would get us into the atmosphere of Liabeti 4 before the fighters caught up. All there was left to do was to wait. The crew had become rather tense. The new crewmembers had never seen combat before, and the more macho amongst them tried to hide their fear, whilst the others obviously showed it. The rest of us were rather uneasy. None of us had quite been in this situation – we had pretty much always been the hunters, not the hunted. This led to an atmosphere around the ship you could stand up a spoon in.

A couple of hours later, Liabeti 4 pretty much filled the rear view completely as we started to descend through the upper atmosphere. We left a brilliant plasma trail as the atmospheric shielding tried to deflect many megawatts worth of kinetic energy. However, our pursuers were now uncomfortably close. It would not be long before they opened fire on us.

"Fuel scoops operational," said Joan.

"How long until we can go?"

"Thirty minutes"

This would be enough to get to get to Edurce and have a 50% reserve. It was standard procedure to do this in case of mis-jumps. Wes was looking at me. He started to speak.

"We should forget the reserve, let's just get the hell out of here, there's not much of a risk of a misjump"

"No, we need the reserve. We're going to force a misjump," I replied.

Wes didn't say any more, but I could see what he was thinking – and he obviously didn't agree with me. However, I suspected at least one of our pursuers would have a hyperspace cloud analyser. They'd overtake us in hyperspace, and jump us as we arrived. They couldn't follow us if we forced a misjump. We had no time for debate anyway, our pursuers were starting to show on the short range scanner. They were now only 50 k's away and closing fast.

The ship had automatically started to level off for the fuel scooping. I was now about to test the integrity of the atmospheric shielding and the hull.

"Helm, take us deeper, another 10 k's please"

Damon obliged. This would put us at dangerous levels. Not only would the atmospheric shielding be severely tested, but the hull strength too as the pressure started to try and crush the ship. Not to mention the gravitational pull. We would have to slow down and we would be right on the edge of going so far in that the main thrusters wouldn't be able to overpower the planet's gravity. Meanwhile the bounty hunters were closing fast. A sudden burst of electromagnetic radiation in the planet's atmosphere suddenly caused so much interference on the scanner so that our six pursuers were blotted out. Hopefully it did the same to our pursuers.

The atmosphere of the planet was intensely beautiful, as we started descending into a cloud layer. At least that would mean we couldn't be seen visibly. Suddenly, all the ship's avionics shut down. The electromagnetic interference had become too great.

"Aryana, scanners on passive mode," said Joan.  
"Switching"

Joan's request made good sense. We might be able to keep the passive scanner online. It was designed for use in adverse conditions. However, it showed mainly noise. Occasionally, we'd see spikes from our pursuers scanners which were still on active mode. We were now deep enough in the atmosphere that we should be well hidden.

"Missile launched! They've seen us!" shouted Maxwell from his defence station.  
"ECM inoperative! We've lost the antenna!"

The atmospheric shielding was under so much stress that we had lost the ECM antenna, and could only wait to see if the seeker head of the enemy missile had a lock on us.

"Take us deeper", I said.

"James, we're at the limit," said Joan.

"Can you get the engines on 110% for a while?" I asked.

"For about 10 minutes," she replied.

"OK, Helm, take us to a depth where 110% will hold position. Engineering, override the engine controls and get us 110%"

The bridge was lit an eerie pink colour by the planet's thick atmosphere. We continued to descend. Suddenly, the missile struck the hull of our ship, but it failed to explode. We had just got lucky. I wasn't sure whether the hull could take the pressure it was now bearing plus a missile strike, despite our shields. To add to the drama, the hull had now started to creak. Occasionally, the scanner would pick up evidence of our pursuers. It looked like they were having a lot of trouble finding us, which was fine by me.

"The filthy bastards!" exclaimed Yves. "Beam scanner!"

I knew bounty hunters who had these things. They were normally used as a medium range search scanner, to hunt out prey who had shut everything down to become invisible to normal electronic detection means. They could also be used to search through difficult mediums...like the atmospheres of gas giants. Their scan attempts were showing up on the passive scanner. Sooner or later, they would find us, and then the fun would begin. We could go deeper and make it harder for them to find us. However, we were at the limits of how far we could go. We were already in quite a lot of danger just from the planet's atmosphere.

Fortunately, we remained well hidden despite the hunters attempts to find us. The fuel was accumulating at a rapid rate due to our atmospheric depth. We would be able to leave in only a few minutes time – we would have to anyway – the main thrusters wouldn't be able to take 110% for too much longer. We were also now in a position that the only way we could escape from the planet was to hyperspace. The ship couldn't provide enough thrust to escape. Our pursuers on the other hand had a huge power to weight advantage over us, and so could easily escape the planet's gravity. Fortunately, we didn't see any more spikes from the beam scanners as we waited, seemingly forever, for the tanks to fill.

"Number two prime mover is starting to overrun, we've got to leave soon!" shouted Joan over the increasingly loud groaning of the hull.

"Keep it at 110% for as long as possible"

"We have enough fuel in two minutes. I don't know if number two will hold out that long!"

The Clipper has four prime movers. If number two, and its associated main thruster failed, not only would we not have enough thrust to maintain position, but the ship would abruptly tumble out of control due to the asymmetric thrust.

"It's going down – it's fallen to 109% and we're starting to sink!"

"OK, we'll have to risk not having enough fuel. Hyperspace, force misjump procedure"

"Hyp..." said Damon, his words abruptly cut off by the sudden gutwrenching jolt.

Number two suddenly had gone to 50% power as the safety systems prevented it from breaching its containment system. The grim reality of asymmetric thrust had asserted itself, and the ship started to roll over in the powerful gravity field of Liabeti 4. Fortunately, Damon was strapped into his position and managed to regain his composure to initiate the hyperspace procedure. Suddenly, the dim blue glow of witch space travel replaced the screaming of the hull. I noticed that everyone had literally collapsed back in their positions, relieved. It had been a very close call. Whether we had enough fuel to complete our journey or not was one thing we would not know until we emerged in interstellar space.

A few minutes of our time, but a couple of days of real time, we emerged in interstellar space. We had to discover our position and hope we hadn't lost the mission. We wouldn't be marooned if we lacked fuel – the Asp which we carried was fully fuelled and ready to go, but the mission would have to be abandoned. It would be incredibly cruel after what we had been through. As engineering initiated our position check, Wes unstrapped himself from his seat and came over to me.

"James, could we have a word?"

"Sure, go ahead," I replied.

"In private."

We left the bridge. I could feel everyone watching us. The tension between myself and Wes had been a little obvious during the encounter we had just been through. I had a good idea that Wes was about to voice his opinions at me about the encounter. We went to my quarters, and I sat down at my desk. I indicated the seat on the other side.

"Take a seat," I said in a tone that hopefully sounded welcoming.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to relieve you of your command," he said.

"I don't think you really want to do that," I said.

My nerves were now jangling, I wasn't sure what he was going to do next. I carefully removed my Ingrams pistol from my desk in a way I hoped he wouldn't see. I placed the weapon on my lap, within easy reach should he try anything, and set the power level to stun. Even so, I really wasn't too taken on shooting someone I considered a friend, however much he disagreed with my methods.

"Well, I think the crew will agree. Your high-risk tactics just frightened them half to death, and we've lost an engine. I would advise you to just remain in your quarters whilst I complete the mission using more prudent means," he said flatly.

"Look Wes, I took the best option we had. We've not hurt our comrades who were pursuing us, it's almost certain we picked up enough fuel, and we haven't been found out. I think that's ideal, don't you?" I replied.

"No you nearly got us killed. Those bounty hunters could have been sacrificed to complete the mission.

You're just far too inexperienced to command this ship on a mission like this. We were nearly all killed just then!" he said, raising his voice slightly.

I might have been a good few years younger than him, and he may doubt my judgement. But there was no question about it, he was too cautious and that's what frustrated me about him. Unfortunately, this had been getting to me, especially since my combat rating was higher than his. Finally, the stress of our last encounter got to me and I exploded in anger.

"Less experienced!" I shouted. "You might have been out here longer than me, buddy, but just look at your rating!"

Wes suddenly cowered in shock. He'd never seen me get angry – it was something I didn't do very often.

"There's a reason why I'm Deadly and you're only freakin dangerous despite you being a bounty hunter for over twice as long as me! You're a bloody great yellow coward! If you so much as dare as try and take command from me, you won't live to regret it!" I shouted at the top of my voice.

I felt that I had gone a little too far, but now emotion had taken my senses over. My anger boiled on unabated and I continued to rant at Wesley, who continued to wear his expression of shock. I listed every little failing I thought he had in a rather cruel manner – something for which I feel very guilty about doing now. My ranting eventually dried up, and I resorted to giving Wes a piercing look over the table. At that point, the door started to open, and Damon's head poked around.

"James, we've..." he said.

I cut him off rather abruptly.

"Not now, please. Give me a couple of minutes," I said quietly. Damon disappeared and closed the door.

I looked back at Wesley. I wasn't sure what he was now going to do. He started to stand up. He straightened his well-worn leather jacket and ran his hand through his hair in a slightly nervous manner.

"Sorry, James. You're dead wrong on that. Despite what you say, I'm now relieving you of your command," he said, seething with insubordination.

That really was the wrong thing for him to say. He walked towards the door. I stood up, and carefully aimed the Ingrams at him.

"Don't make another move" I said.

He turned around to see the dangerous end of my handgun and stopped.

"You wouldn't shoot me, I know you too well" he said.

"Don't guarantee it," I replied.

I squeezed the trigger to its first pressure. It was now on a hairline. All I had to do is squeeze very slightly, and Wes would be stunned. He was quite right about me not wanting to do this, but I absolutely could not let Wesley command the rest of the mission. I could just imagine him aborting at just the wrong moment. I also didn't fancy having to explain to the rest of the crew that I just had to stun the first officer. Things were taking an inexorable turn for the worse. Wesley reached for the door to leave. Before his hand made it to the door, I had squeezed that trigger just a little bit more. There was a bright flash as the bolt of energy left the gun, and struck him square in the back. He silently collapsed to the floor. I walked over and felt his pulse to make sure I didn't have the gun set on too high power. Fortunately, he had survived the experience, but would be out of it for at least two hours. I would now have to face up to the rest of the crew.

I left my quarters, carefully ensuring the door was locked. I went to the bridge, and walked in. Everyone of course noticed that Wes wasn't with me, but they didn't say anything. They probably assumed he had gone back to his quarters – after all, he was off-duty when the attack had begun. I decided I would tell the senior crew (i.e. our bounty hunting group) about what had happened first.

"OK, senior officers, I need to talk to you all in private. Simmonds, you've got it"

Joan, Yves, Maxwell, Mike, Jean-Claude and Damon all got up from their positions. The ship would be OK for now – we were just drifting aimlessly in interstellar space anyway. We left the bridge, and I led them all to the ship's small cafeteria area.

"Something rather regrettable has just happened," I said.

I carefully watched everyone's expression. They could all sense that the news I was going to reveal was going to be fairly dire. I couldn't pussyfoot around what had just happened – I would just have to tell them.

"I'm afraid I've just had to put Wes out cold. He was about to try and start a mutiny and take command." I said, uncomfortably.

The others all looked gobsmacked. I just hoped they were in horror of Wes trying to seize command, not me stunning him. I didn't really feel that good about having to do that.

"He was of the opinion that I had done everything wrong in that last battle. He wanted us to destroy the bounty hunters because he thought it was less risky. Because of this, he told me he was relieving me of my command, and he was about to leave and lock me in my quarters," I explained.

There was a long, pregnant pause. Everyone was still slightly shocked, and nobody spoke.

"Well, if you don't agree, please speak up. If you think Wes was right, please say so now. I want to be working with you, not against you", I said. I felt that I had blown it.

"James, although I don't agree with you stunning Wes, I'm with you," said Joan.

At least with Joan speaking up, I was in with a chance still. I knew the others respected her. The others murmured their consent. They sounded sincere, at least. I sighed with relief.

"OK, well let's get on with it. What's our current status?" I asked. Joan spoke again, since she was the chief engineer.

"Well, number two is undergoing repairs now, it shouldn't take too long. We've got enough fuel to reach Erduce. It looks like everything has worked out well."

"Good. We need to tell the crew what the rest of the plans are. It's important we get everything sorted out. While we have the chance, we should check that the Asp is in good shape. Let's get back to work"

We all went back to our respective positions, but not after Damon had helped me put Wes in his quarters and securely lock him in. I was feeling really guilty about all I had done now, and in fact I had begun to lose enthusiasm for the whole mission just at the wrong moment. I hoped the feeling would pass.

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### 3rd October 3265

The events of the last couple of days have been a bit of a blur. I think I've had it for the time being with such piffling things such as crew insubordination, nuclear bombs that fail to go off, automatic triggers and packs of marauding Sidewinders. The whole event has been a bit trying, to be brutally honest, but at least the

mission is over. We just need to go to a Federation base now.

We arrived in Edurce a few days ago. The ship was fully repaired, and all four prime movers thrust us towards Peter's Terminal. We monitored communications – we wanted to see what they said to each other to make sure we can successfully pass ourselves off as being members. The actual journey in went unbelievably smoothly. It seemed too good to be true. The only disturbance was Wes hammering on his door and demanding to be let out, a request I did not grant. Things looked good – it certainly looked like the Templar hadn't heard about the hijack, since we didn't receive a welcoming committee (i.e. a horde of horribly beweaponed ships) as we approached Peter's Terminal.

We moved slowly towards Peter's Terminal. It showed up ahead of us as a bright pinpoint of light. Other scattered objects showed up on the scanner as parked Clippers. We counted a total of twelve. This pirate group was certainly burgeoning. It was time for the final crew briefing to ensure everyone knew what to do. Our lives literally depended on it. It was also time to enlighten the rest of the crew what our mission actually was. I had the entire crew summoned to the bridge.

"OK, this is the final mission briefing," I began. "I now must reveal to the new crewmembers what is about to happen since your lives depend on it. We are now approaching Peter's Terminal, our destination. We are not carrying cargo as I initially told you. This ship is in fact rigged as a huge nuclear bomb, and Peter's Terminal is a massive pirate base. We are going to collect the ultimate bounty and destroy the Sirius Templar once and for all".

I let this information sink in. Peter's Terminal was starting to get a little larger in the forward view. You could now see the shape of the station. Only 50 k's to go. I continued on.

"The plan is to wedge this ship in the mouth of Peter's Terminal and leave the area in the Asp that is parked in the cargo bay. Exactly two minutes after jamming this ship in the front of the station, a 20–megatonne nuclear explosion will trigger, hopefully destroying Peter's Terminal and anything within several km. To that end, we have to leave the area fast. However, we need evidence that we did this, so we cannot hyperspace out until we have recorded the explosion. This may be a very dangerous time."

The new crewmembers, all from Tionisla, didn't look that shocked. After all, bounty hunting and pirates were a way of life for anyone who so much watched the spacedock at Manchester Starport for a few hours.

"All non–essential crew is to go with Maxwell to the Asp and get strapped in. Only Joan, Damon, Yves and myself will remain on the Clipper."

Maxwell lead everyone who wasn't required for this final stage from the bridge. The four of us strapped ourselves into our positions. Damon set a course to dock with the station. Of course, a Clipper couldn't fit in the hole, but Damon overrode the computer and the autopilot took us closer.

"OK, no communications. We're just going to ram the door. Keep speed up to 200 kmh, divert shield power to the forward shields"

The station grew in the front view, with the planet New America in the background in its jewelled splendour. I was quite surprised that no one had attempted to contact us as the range fell below 1km.

"They are all asleep, I think," I said

"Looks like it. Normally, they'd be demanding what we were doing approaching without clearance," said Joan quizzically.

"Hope we haven't been rumbled – could be a trap"

We all felt extremely tense as the range meter quickly counted down. Soon, the closed docking door started to fill our view. Perhaps they really were all asleep. Perhaps they didn't bother with traffic control since they took the space station over. Perhaps they were expecting us to disgorge our Sidewinders for servicing – we just didn't know. And we never would know, either.

"Brace for impact!" I yelled over the ship's PA.

All we could now see was the closed docking door. A couple of seconds later, the bow of the Clipper collided with the door. We were nearly wrenched right out of our seats despite our restraints. There was a horrific sound of bending metal as the Clipper started to get wedged in the hole like a cork in a wine bottle. The sound of groaning metal continued as the Clipper ground to a halt, now thoroughly and immovably wedged into the space station's entrance.

"OK, Damon, leave the engines on manual thrust – set acceleration to 1G. Start the bomb timer. Let's get out of here!" I shouted over the sound of grinding duralium.

Yves started the timer on the bomb. We had only two minutes to get out of here. We ran from the bridge, down the main access corridor to the cargo bay. The Asp was waiting before us. Thirty seconds later, we had boarded the Asp at a dead run. I quickly checked the passenger cabin. To my satisfaction, it was crammed with my crewmembers. They had also brought Wes with them (to my relief). Everyone was accounted for. Joan and Damon squeezed in along with them, and Yves came along with me to the bridge. I needed her up there in case we had a problem with the nukes. We could trigger them remotely if necessary.

The Asp was ready to move. The Clipper's docking port opened in front of us. We only had 45 seconds to get at least 7 km from the area. I wound on full power. The Asp rocketed forth from the rear of the Panther Clipper at maximum acceleration. I noticed that if the Templar had been asleep when we arrived, they certainly were not asleep now. Several ships had launched and a Lifter was attaching itself to the Clipper. It looked like they were preparing to dislodge the ship. Well, if they were, they hastily dropped that plan when they saw our Asp hurtle out from the rear of the Clipper.

"They've seen us, four Sidewinders have peeled off and are pursuing!" shouted Yves.

I watched the scanner. It looked like the parked Clippers were also scrambling their Sidewinders. This could mean trouble. Yves launched the fighters. We had a full complement of four once again – I was careful to ensure that we had replacements for the ones destroyed on previous journeys before we started out. I glanced at the clock. Fifteen seconds left. I made sure that every sensor and camera on the ship was watching Peter's Base. The main camera had zoomed in on the base, and we could still see the Clipper wedged in the docking port, with its engines running. Even if the bomb didn't explode, it would eventually push Peter's Terminal out of its orbit and crashing down into New America.

Yves started counting down. "Five...Four...Three...Two...One..."

I watched the receding space station. Nothing happened. The Clipper remained resolutely wedged in but failed to explode. We now had real trouble. About two dozen Sidewinders were leaving their Clippers, and getting ready to pursue us. They would surely catch up – we would have to hyperspace out soon. There wasn't much time for troubleshooting.

"I'm going to manually detonate. This might take a minute..." said Yves, as she worked the communications system to send the detonation message.

"OK, we can't stay here for long, be as quick as possible"

I put the fighters on automatic control and instructed them to attack our four nearest pursuers. I kept our Asp's acceleration at full power. The further we could be away from the station, the better. That's if it exploded. The fighters engaged the nearest Sidewinders. That at least would delay them. It looked very spectacular from my vantage point.

"I've sent the message. I think they've jammed it or disabled the bomb. It did no good!" said Yves, near to panic.

"OK, we're leaving the system. Return the fighters to their bay"

So after all this, I thought, the mission was a failure. At least none of us got killed on the way. It was bitterly disappointing. I watched Peter's Terminal on the main camera display, and set a course to hyperspace back to Liabeti. I selected the hyperspace start on the console. Just before my finger touched the touch-panel, we beheld a most amazing sight.

Suddenly, the entire rear view went blinding white. The camera watching Peter's Terminal went offline, and a massive electromagnetic pulse rendered the scanner inoperative. Our rear shields suddenly were depleted as a vast amount of electromagnetic energy was deflected. I froze, and watched in amazement. Our pursuers had vanished. Peter's Terminal, which had been a large pinpoint of light in our rear view was no longer there, nor were the small pinpoints of light that showed the presence of the Templar's Clipper fleet. I brought the camera back online, and carefully checked for the presence of Peter's Terminal. The base was gone. The nukes had finally exploded, about two minutes late. I restarted the scanner to see if it would come back online. However, the receiver was damaged beyond repair. It was a good job we had watched the whole spectacle on a synthetic 360-degree viewsystem, or else we would have been blinded just like the scanner.

"OK, let's let the shields recharge, then get out of here," I said. We were no longer in immediate danger.

I got up, and went to the passenger cabin. I opened the door and saw everyone crammed up rather uncomfortably. All they had felt was the acceleration, followed by a slight jolt and a loud buzzing noise as the shields deflected the energy of the explosion.

"The mission was a success. The Templar are destroyed. We are going to make our way to Sol to collect our bounty. We have a good evidence recording," I said simply.

Everyone's spirit lifted, despite their discomfort. In fact, I managed to raise a cheer from the crew. Even Wes looked slightly happy despite the uncomfortable events of the last few days. I hope he didn't think I was making an "I told you so" speech. I didn't hang around – I went back up to the bridge to get ready to leave Erduce. We had no more business here.

## Epilogue – Looking back, two years later.

We presented our evidence of the destruction of the Sirius Templar to the Federation at Mars High. We were all relieved to get off the Asp, it had been quite a squeeze. Once we were out of immediate danger, I let the crew spread out over the whole ship. It still wasn't particularly comfortable, but it was better than being squeezed up in the single passenger cabin. The Federation had no problem in accepting our evidence – in fact, news of the destruction of Peter's Terminal had been relayed by several ships in the vicinity, and the people living on the planet New America could hardly miss the bright flash that had drowned out the mid-day sun. Fortunately, their atmosphere protected them from the dangerous radiation emitted.

So we were half a million credits better off. I distributed the money amongst us – the core group would of course get the lion's share, since we had done the bulk of the mission. The eight of us (myself, Wes, Joan, Yves, Maxwell, Mike, Jean-Claude and Damon) picked up 50,000 credits each. Unfortunately, I couldn't capture a Sidewinder to give to Martin Nguyen for giving us all the information (admittedly under duress), but I thought it would be fair to give him 5,000 credits. It'd help him start a new life at least once he got out of prison. The rest of the crew got 13,500 credits each for their troubles. The remainder went on patching up the Asp.

Despite our success, Wes never really forgave me for the events on the Clipper. I did try to talk to him about it, but he remained bitter about the whole event until he met an untimely end during a docking accident in Facece. The rest of our group stuck together: Damon continued as my copilot until he got the itch to get his own ship. The others made quite a few upgrades to their ships as the result of the 50,000 credits. Remaining factions of the Sirius Templar took potshots at us for some time, but with their central organization crushed, they were not noticable amongst the general bounty hunting battles that were a part of a bounty hunter's life. Yves was drummed out of the Federation Navy after they discovered that she had stolen the nuclear warheads, and so she never set foot in the Federation again. Martin Nguyen, the catalyst for the entire mission was eventually let out of prison, got work in Manchester and hasn't been in space since. We don't know what's happened to Maxwell – we haven't seen him for a few months. Unfortunately, we fear the worst. He was becoming quite a proficient bounty hunter, but one day he didn't return. Maybe he'll show up at next year's New Year's party at La Soeur du Dan Ham. Or maybe he suffered a fate worse than death and got married. We've not seen Joan for a while, but the news we've got is that she's given up bounty hunting and...well, opened a used ship sales yard in Titican.

Whatever happened, the event did give us all quite a reputation. All of us enjoyed a brief period of fame amongst bounty hunting circles. And I got my first taste of commanding a large ship. Maybe I should join the AJN or something – bounty hunting is starting to get a little bit old. Maybe when I reach Elite.

*[Editor's Note]*

We found out that Maxwell Jackson had indeed survived. His disappearance was caused by being marooned for five years in a remote island on New Africa in the Veliaze system after being shot down and subsequently crashing on the island. However, James Winston had joined the AJN's intelligence corps by this time (who concealed their operatives very well). Maxwell Jackson couldn't get back into bounty hunting, and ended up taking over the World's End bar in Riedquat from its previous owner, Paul Mitterand.

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