

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

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About this story

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure is a story about these three things. It follows James Winston and his soon-to-be co-pilot and mission partner, Charles 'Chuck' Albright on their voyages. James Winston had been taking a break from space travelling for personal reasons, and he finds himself being prematurely being brought back into space, and rather unwillingly since he would rather have spent a bit more time relaxing. Against all odds, James had managed to survive into his early 30s and to the Elite rating. This means that people are bound to want him to do missions, whether he likes it or not. He is discovering that the Elite rating doesn't mean a lot – you're still a pawn in the hands of the wealthy and powerful, and this is something that gives him much heartburn...

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

[0] This may be wishful thinking on my part

Prologue.

"OK JONES, take her in slowly", said Captain Keighley.

"Aye aye, Captain," said the young helmsman.

Keighley looked at his first officer in puzzlement.

"What do you reckon, Jess?" he asked her, quietly.

Jessica Vought shook her head, but didn't say a word. The Panther Clipper slowly descended towards a planet that shouldn't be there, and a spaceport that didn't exist. The system didn't have an outdoor world, terraformed or otherwise. But here it was, plus half a dozen starports that the system didn't have only weeks ago. The class M star nearby shone steadily, supplying the mysterious planet with energy. The rest of the star system had appeared correct.

The star was glinting off five other objects. These objects happened to be Cobra Mk.3's and Asps, all horribly beweaponed. They were converging on the Clipper.

The Clipper was now only a few meters from touchdown. The spaceport appeared to be deserted. The deep orange sunlight reflected off the emblem on the side of the Clipper. The large sunburst motif of the Alliance Science Council gleamed in the light.

Captain Keighley sighed. They were returning from a research mission in the northern sectors, and had stopped off for fuel. Normally, he would be excited by a find such as this – there was obviously something very strange going on here, but this was just too creepy. There was nothing alien about the planet – all the constructions appeared to be human. However, the ship's computer could not match the planet to any known populated outdoor world. Also, the place was completely deserted. No ships, no people...just some machines, working away at their daily tasks. It seemed utterly peaceful. However, just before the ship touched down, the attack alarm sounded.

"Battlestations!" yelled Keighley. Everything seemed to be going in slow motion and he felt as if he was moving through treacle.

There was a mad scramble of activity on the bridge, as the three Asps and two Cobras bore down on the Clipper. A research ship, that was armed only to protect itself from minor threats. Suddenly, lasers started pouring forth from the attackers. The Clipper shuddered as the helmsman attempted to put the ship on firm ground, and one of the science officers desperately tried to swing a laser turret on one of the attackers.

It was obvious to Keighley that there was only one thing to do. The ship lurched as a huge explosion shook the structure. Suddenly a massive hole appeared in the bridge, followed by scorching heat. Keighley turned to his first officer to give the order to abandon ship. However, his words were caught in his throat as he turned to face Vought, who no longer had a head. Her body slumped to the floor.

"Abandon ship!" he finally yelled, grabbing helmsman Jones from his seat.

But they had run out of time. There was a gut wrenching thud, a flash of heat, and everything went dark.

Chapter 1. Call-Out

The sun slowly climbed higher in the sky, and shone through the sash windows. James Winston looked out through the window at the idyllic scene, then walked over to the antique musical instrument. He carefully lifted the lid of the piano, and removed the felt protecting the keys, and looked at the polished lettering on the inside of the lid. "Fred'k Betzmann & Sons, Landfall, Wolf 360. Built with pride, 2985". He thought for a while, then gently started tickling the keys, playing a random piece of blues that came into his head. The rich tone of the piano filled the room, and Winston felt more at peace than he had for years.

It had all come to a head almost exactly a year ago. He remembered the celebration well – how could you forget a bounty hunter party thrown on for you when you had just reached Elite? He smiled as he thought of the vast quantities of Kurt's Finest Ale, one of Riedquat's better brews. The technicolour yawn he did some hours later wasn't quite so pleasant. Beer never tasted quite as good coming the other way. It all went downhill rather rapidly after that. In the few weeks that passed, he had realised that he was becoming a person he didn't necessarily like. Most people when they got to Elite did this sort of thing – got a bit arrogant and full of themselves – it was a well-documented psychological phenomena. Winston had been determined that this should not happen to him, but after his brother pinned him in a corridor one night and had a serious word about it, he realised he had began to turn. The solution, he had decided later that evening, was to have a good, long break from bounty hunting.

He found a nice planet as far away from the mainstream as possible, and settled on a small island with a population of about 30,000 people. He parked his Asp in long-term storage in a garage near his new house, then got a job on a fishing boat. It was with some satisfaction that he realised that his uniform for the last year or so had been a pair of tough shoes, a grubby pair of shorts, a shirt to match and an odd sort of hat he had been told was called a "baseball cap". Quite why the hat was called this he never worked out – nobody seemed to know what a baseball was and what it had to do with the hat. He was also quite content to be a normal crewmember, serving under a rather eccentric skipper. The mindless but strenuous effort of hauling nets of fish onto the boat he felt was very good for the soul, leaving his mind free to dream about things other than bounty hunting. The price of fresh fish was often a good thing to think about. His new friends on the ship turned out to be good drinking buddies. It wasn't long before Winston was doing something he hadn't done in years – the act of really enjoying life just for the heck of it – with no purpose or goals.

Of course, it couldn't last. He now had a couple of weeks off the boat to relax. He started playing the last 12-bar chorus, but was cut short by a female voice.

"Jim, I have a message for you"

It was Jasmine, his computer calling. He stopped playing. He'd asked Jas to avoid interrupting him while he was playing the piano, so there must have been something unusual.

"OK, Jas, what do you have for me?" he said, mildly annoyed at the interruption.

"The message is from Rafael Vincent. The sender has marked it urgent and strictly confidential. You'll have to read it off the screen. Sorry"

"That's OK"

Winston reluctantly got up out of the chair and straightened his shirt, and sat down in front of the screen with a sigh. What could anyone be wanting from me now, he thought. He didn't know anyone called Rafael Vincent. He read the message. It wasn't very long, and he couldn't quite see why it was confidential.

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Jim,

We need to talk urgently. It will be to your extreme disadvantage if you ignore this message. You don't know me, but I know you very well. We have a serious proposition to make to you. We will see you at Old Blackelk in two weeks time.

Extreme disadvantage? That was usually guarded speak for "we'll kill you if you don't". What did anyone want with him now? He'd been out of space for a year, didn't have a co-pilot for his ship, and now someone he didn't know wanted to see him at Hope, in the Gateway system. Nobody had tried to kill him for years, if you exclude the pirates he met as a matter of course whilst bounty hunting.

"Well, Jim, what do you want me to do?" asked Jas.

"Save it. What do you reckon?"

"I would go if I were you."

"Just when I was getting settled. Now some two-bit idiot is after me again."

Serious proposition, indeed. Winston's suspicious mind suspected it was more likely to be some sort of blackmail. Or maybe it was a genuine assignment that needed an Elite pilot.

"OK, Jas, get a bulletin board entry out. I need a crewmember. Tell them they can apply in person at my house"

"Isn't it a bit risky inviting them here?"

"Maybe so, but I discovered it's best to give your crewmember a damned good interview before taking them on"

Jas was almost human in its – her – reactions. In fact, there was no doubting that the machine was sentient. Winston had normally avoided getting intelligent computers into his life, instead preferring the type that just got on and did the calculations. However, he decided he needed someone to confide in. He felt much more comfortable talking to a machine for some reason. He'd never been really that good at human relationships. He was now 31 standard years old, and still resolutely single.

The next day dawned brightly, as the sun rose above the horizon. The bright blue star struggled up, looking slightly cold and damp in the morning mist. Winston reluctantly struggled out of bed, went to the kitchen and fished around in the freezer. He never liked replicated food that much, and decided on a real breakfast.

"Kippers", he said to himself, as he pulled out a couple of frozen fish.

He put them in the autochef, and went about getting ready for the day ahead. He sat in front of one of Jas's screens.

"Anybody reply yet, Jas?" he asked. He didn't really expect anyone to have replied yet. It had only been 30 hours since the ad went out.

"You've done well, four replies so far, Jim."

"OK, give me a quick summary please," said Winston, surprised.

Jas displayed a brief rundown of the four's curriculum vitae. A young man, 17 years old, no experience, bored of planet life (let's forget him), a 30-year old woman, experience as a weapons officer with a Frontier trader (interesting), a 21 year old man, plenty of sim combat, won some competitions, and a 35 year-old space taxi operator who had got bored of paying the note on the taxi and wanted to do something else.

He pulled up the woman's full CV. There was a picture included, and Winston raised his eyebrows slightly. She was pretty attractive.

"Hey, Jim, I know what you're thinking, and I don't recommend it. It'll end in tears," said Jas, registering Winston's interest in the woman.

"Well she does have experience..."

"Ah, but you're going to hire her for the wrong reasons, and anyway, in my opinion, she's got the wrong experience"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you remember Pam Gilmour?" Jas said rhetorically.

"Well, of course, but..."

"I know you still have an...emotional...attachment"

"What do you mean?" questioned Winston. He didn't think computers should try organism talk.

"I know you still correspond all the time. A pretty female crewmember just wouldn't work out."

"But..."

"Well, it's your decision. I'd take the sim combateer myself. Look at his CV, it's quite impressive"

Winston sighed heavily. He did have to admit that although Pam and himself never had anything more than a platonic relationship, they were rather fond, and had continued to keep in touch, years after they went their separate ways. Maybe it was for the best if he at least checked out this guy's CV. He brought it up. It was in fact quite impressive. His name was Chuck Albright, and he had become sim-combat champion of the Alliance League. He'd also completed his flight training with a very good grade.

"Aren't you forgetting your breakfast?" said Jas.

"Thanks," he replied, and picked the plate up off the autochef.

Winston slowly ate the kippers. The autochef really did a great job. He'd miss this life he'd just started getting used to – no replicated food, fresh fish, beautiful sunrises, and being able to actually get to grips with playing his old piano. The fishing boat job had proved to be highly theraputic too. But the crewmember...well, Jas was right, he thought to himself. It had sometimes gotten rather ...interesting... with Pam, and with luck this would hopefully be just a short mission anyway. In fact he still emailed Pam much more often than his own brother. The problem with Jas, he thought, is that he made the mistake of making a rather good personal profile when he bought the computer. This made Jas a very good match for him, but at the same time, Jas just knew too much. But he had to admit that the computer had been extremely valuable this last year. He looked over Albright's CV once more.

"OK Jas," he said finally, "send Albright a note requesting that he comes here this afternoon."

"It's done," said Jas.

"Visitor"

Winston went to the door, pausing to pick up his leather jacket. He really wasn't looking forward to this mission. He opened the door, revealing a lanky young man with the remnants of a serious acne attack standing before him. The man had the typical look of the bounty hunter wannabe. Gone out and got the kit (leather jacket a must), hair cut about 3 millimeters long (obviously fresh), and a sense of misplaced confidence.

"Ah, you must be...ummm", Winston began.

"Chuck Albright", whispered Jas, discreetly.

"err, Chuck Albright", he continued, with a hint of embarassment.

"Yes. I've come about the co-pilot job", Albright replied, disappointed at Winston's apparent forgetfulness.

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That's funny, thought Winston. Not many people have an accent like that around here. Albright didn't sound that foreign, but it was obvious that he wasn't from around here. He sounded like he was from one of the Federation systems he used to frequent. Eta Cassiopeia, maybe?

"OK, well let's take my shuttle, and we'll check out my ship then", replied Winston, slinging his jacket over his shoulder. He paused to pick up one of Jas's remote terminals, and discreetly slid it into his pocket.

Winston walked quickly to the parking space where his shuttle sat. Albright was taken a little by surprise and had to walk rather fast to keep up. He didn't know yet what to make of his first meeting with his potential new commander. It certainly wasn't what he had expected.

Winston opened the shuttle, and climbed in. It was a small craft, capable of carrying four people. It could even make orbit on a good day. However, they only had to travel a few k's across the planet's surface today. Albright finally got himself settled into the seat, and Winston sealed the doors, and set the autopilot for his garage. The shuttle started to slowly lift off from the parking space. Winston thought it was about time he at least asked Albright some questions about his experience just to fill in the few minutes before they got to the ship.

"Ummm...can I ask you a question?" asked Albright, slightly nervously.

"Go ahead," Winston replied.

"Are you the James Winston?"

"Well, I'm just a James Winston. I'm not sure I'm the James Winston"

Albright began fishing around in his pocket. This made Winston nervous, he should have checked for concealed weapons before starting. However, all Albright pulled out was a 3263 edition of W&G Guide To The Edge. He held up the small data cartridge.

"I mean the James Winston who wrote this, you look just like him", he said, waving the guide around.

Winston groaned inwardly. A slight snickering noise came from his jacket pocket.

"And is it true you took out the Sirius Templar?"

"Yes, that particular James Winston was me, and it wasn't just me, there were a few others on that ship too," he replied, trying to be careful not to blow his own trumpet.

"You know, I've always wanted to meet you and your group," Albright enthused. "We've always wanted to take you on at Sim Combat. I keep telling the others I could give you a good run for your money!"

Albright was now grinning inanely. Winston sighed deeply. This was all he needed. He had hoped everyone had forgotten about the Templar. He'd had his fifteen minutes of fame, and quite frankly, it was enough. Muffled chortling came from his pocket.

"Jas", said Winston in a hoarse whisper, gritting his teeth. The snickering stopped.

"Please forgive Jas, she's got a sense of humour", Winston told Albright.

The shuttle finally alighted at Winston's garage. They went towards the door, and Winston started to talk about the ship. He could feel an old flame ignite inside him...the flame of adventure, the promise of space. Something was reawakening in him...and maybe this mission wouldn't be so bad after all. Even if he was stuck with an insufferable youth for a copilot. A good run for my money in Sim Combat, indeed! Of course, the outcome would depend on what Rafael Vincent wanted, but it had to be special to drag an Elite combatteer out of hibernation. It could lead to an interesting adventure.

That is, of course, assuming that Vincent didn't turn out to be a murderous assassin.

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The door slid open, and a couple of rats ran out into the daylight, startled by the unexpected intrusion. Inside lurked the dark form of the Asp.

"Lights", said Winston.

The lighting came on, illuminating the interior of the large structure, and the dusty form of the Asp. Winston hadn't been back to the ship since the day he arrived. He began leading his new recruit around the garage's catwalks, showing him the exterior of the ship, pointing out a few laser burns here and there, the odd bit of slightly dented metal which bore witness to a close encounter of the worst kind, and telling a few tall tales about the exploits he'd had in the ship. Winston's spacefaring adventure was truly reawakened. But he had wished he'd at least washed the ship before bringing Albright here, especially as now they could see the ship's top.

"What are those white specks all over the ship?" asked Albright, expecting some new tale of adventure.

"Ummm," said Winston with some embarrassment, "that would be birdshit."

Albright didn't know what to say. James Winston wasn't turning out quite as he had expected.

As if to confirm Winston's statement, a creature that was shaped suspiciously like a large pigeon added another white splat to join the thousands of others. Winston glared at the bird, who looked back from its safe perch amongst the girders of the hangar. Winston found himself sighing for the umpteenth time that day. Once again, a muffled chortling noise came from Jas's remote terminal burrowed deep in his jacket pocket.

Well at least they could go inside the ship. That part should be clean with a bit of luck. Albright followed Winston as he climbed down the ladder, back to ground level, then across the hangar floor to the entrance ramp. A handprint later, and the ship opened up. At least the batteries appeared to have held charge. As they went around the interior, Winston checked various systems. At least they all worked. The ship would need servicing before they launched though...ships don't like to sit.

Eventually, the tour finished. They both sat down in the cramped living area, and Winston began the bit he always hated. Doing the interview. Albright seemed enthusiastic enough, and he certainly appeared to have 'what it took' to be a good bounty hunter. What it took was a lack of understanding of the risk, a touch of recklessness, a bit of cunning and quick reactions, and...nothing else. Albright seemed to have all this in ample quantities.

"Might as well give him the job", was his thought as the interview concluded.

Chapter 2. Truth or Consequences

"LAST ON THE AGENDA, recruit number one whiskey eighty seven", said Commander Saunders. It had been a long meeting, and the seven members of his recruiting team were looking a bit weary.

Lieutenant Steven Tyler got up, and commanded the computer to display the potential recruit's details.

"Well, here's his details – they sort of speak for themselves," said Tyler, as he pointed out some of the salient details. "His name is James Kyle Winston, he's a bounty hunter who has been on the ground for a year taking a break, and he's an Elite combateer. Reports say he left Manchester Starport in Tionisla two days ago, with Ensign Albright as his copilot, destination Old Blackelk"

Tyler called up Albright's details onto the screen.

"Albright's on the career fast track and unhesitatingly took the assignment despite the risk, he will be reporting in to us once the assignment has been given to his new captain...who of course has no idea of the nature of what's going on."

Saunders tugged at his mustache, and looked over the details and grunted with satisfaction. The others in the meeting room were starting to look a bit sleepy, it was about time to call it to a close.

"OK, what happens if Winston turns out to be disloyal?" asked Saunders.

"Well, we'll have to terminate him. We can't risk the operation's details from getting out", replied Tyler.

"What's the risk of him being disloyal?"

"We think it's fairly low. Of course, we are providing him ample temptation in the test we're giving him on Hope, so we'll soon know how strong his loyalty is. If he passes, we'll invite him here and offer him a job. If he doesn't, well, we have five Elite Guard pilots waiting to take out his ship"

The newest member of the recruiting team, Jane Williams, looked up from her coffee. The look of shock was already spreading over her features. She had only been in recruiting for a week, and had not heard about this rather brutal method of filtering recruits.

"I don't believe this!", she shouted quite suddenly. Saunders looked at her, surprised.

"What?"

"These ...tactics... are the sort of thing the Empire indulges in! In my forty years of service, I haven't heard of anything so unethical!"

"Lieutenant Williams, may I remind you we are an intelligence bureau, not a kindergarten."

"I realise that, I've served in this bureau for twenty years. I had no idea this sort of thing was going on! What about Albright? He's the poor sucker's copilot, if you find Winston not to your liking, you're going to take out his ship and presumably Albright too?"

"Well firstly," replied Saunders, "Winston's hardly innocent. Secondly, sadly you have to sometimes make sacrifices in this game. Are you sure you are loyal?"

"Yes I am loyal, and this is why I'm so revolted by this proposed action. It might be acceptable in the Empire, but it goes against everything we stand for. I can accept that your potential recruit hasn't necessarily been a good boy, but Albright is loyal and has a promising career. It is..."

"Enough's enough!" roared Saunders. "If you can't cope with the harsh realities of bringing in outside recruits, I suggest that you are free to resign"

An uncomfortable pause enveloped the conference table. The four men and three women who were on Saunders' team shifted uncomfortably. The commander's eyes were bulging and his face was red.

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"OK, meeting ajourned. Williams, if you want to discuss this matter further, you are free to see me in my office tomorrow morning", said Saunders quietly. This always happened with new recruiting officers. They'd have a pang of conscience. He'd soon snuff it out once he pointed out the harsh realities of making sure your intelligence bureau is clean and loyal. Besides, he was sure that Winston would do the right thing and prove his loyalty when he arrived at Old Blackelk and met his operatives.

The meeting broke up, and the recruiters started leaving the room. Saunders glared at Williams briefly as he left. Williams remained in her seat, still in a state of shock. She could accept that maybe the recruit, James Winston, could be bumped off. She brought up his details again, and noted he had performed an assassination several years ago, as well as various other acts that were not necessarily law abiding. However, Albright was turning out to be a good military officer and could go far in the Navy. If it was merely despicible that they should murder Winston, it was unashamately criminal for them to take out Albright as well. He probably didn't even know the risk he had put himself into when he took the mission. Williams decided that sometimes she hated having a conscience. It was often not very compatible with working for the secret service.

"Truth or consequences," she thought to herself. It was the name of a small town in New Mexico from which her ancestors were supposed to have originated. It was also a phrase she lived by.

"Damn it all to hell," she said to the empty room.

Truth or consequences. She had no option, but if she was to live with her conscience, she would just have to risk a court martial and go AWOL. She'd get in her own private ship, and get to Old Blackelk before Winston and Albright could arrive, and she'd just have to tell them to go home...not even take the test that was being set up. She had no idea what the test was, and therefore she didn't know the right answer. Maybe she could go home with them, and work on a fishing boat too. It seemed like a very attractive proposition at the moment.

Williams finally got up, being careful to take a note of Winston's ship details so she could identify him when he landed. She strode out of the room, and headed directly for the spaceport. For the first time in her life, it was time to mutiny against a senior officer.

Commander Winston sat alone in the flight deck, looking out into space. Things were extremely quiet, so he decided to let Albright go and get some rest. In the meantime, he had other things to do.

"Jas, I need to send a message to Pam Gilmour"

"I thought you might," remarked the computer in an insubordinate tone.

"Yes yes. It's serious actually," he remarked

"That's what you always say"

Winston sometimes could curse artificial intelligence. But Jas was sentient, and knew how to joke. He also sometimes wished that he hadn't programmed her with so many of his inner secrets and personality traits.

"OK, well, give me the keyboard, I don't want anyone overhearing me", he told the computer.

A small keyboard appeared on the console display, and Winston began to type out the message.

Pam,
I've been dragged into some strange situation, and I might need your help. I'm en-route to Old Blackelk in Gateway to meet with a man named Rafael Vincent. He says he knows me, but I sure as hell don't know him. He told me to meet him at Old Blackelk for a 'serious proposition', also

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telling me it would be to my extreme disadvantage if I ignored this call. As you know, this usually means come here or we'll kill you. I have no idea what he wants, but I'll probably be finding out. We are about a month out from Old Blackelk. I also have a new copilot whose supposed to be a bit of a hotshot - he's called Chuck Albright. I haven't had a chance to check out his combat skills in a real fight yet, but I'm sure it won't be too long.

If you can help me, show up Old Blackelk and be discreet. I don't want Vincent to be suspicious. I'll radio you if things are going pear-shaped.

He signed the message, and told Jas to send it. Hopefully the message would find her ship through the numerous hyperspace relays out there before he actually got to Old Blackelk. There were of course no guarantees. Even if the message got to her in time, she might be too far away to help. Still - he had to try. He really didn't want Albright to know either. The whole affair seemed rather suspicious, and he wasn't keen on giving his copilot the jitters. Sim combat was no substitute for the real terror you could have on some of these jobs.

The keyboard disappeared, and was replaced by the regular instruments. The destination counter slowly fell as the Asp hurtled towards its refuelling stop. He couldn't even remember the system he was in. Perhaps it was Cebece. Just another starport, he thought, as he brought up the details of Rush, on the small planet Camp Sheehan. There wasn't a lot to do. He hoped to have had a bit more time to show Albright the more fun side of space travel, maybe even a detour to Reidquat for some beer. But time constraints prevented that. Maybe on the way home, if they ever made it home.

Chapter 3. Happiness is a Warm Gun

The orange type K star, Veliaze, shone in the distance. Winston busily searched out the long range scan for potential attackers, while Albright set the navigation systems to bring the ship to Chester for its last refuelling stop before their destination – Old Blackelk, on Hope, in the Gateway system. The long range scan showed plenty of pirate activity. It was a certainty that they would get attacked. At least Albright would get a proper test, thought Winston to himself. So far, the only attacks they had received had been extremely half-hearted. Most of the attackers simply fled once the fighter launcher disgorged its load of radio controlled drones. Others had been, quite frankly, "crap" as Winston had put it rather bluntly earlier in the journey, and had quickly succumbed to either the fighters or the Asp's 4MW beam laser. None of the attacks were challenging enough to find out whether Albright really was any good as a combateer.

To be honest, it would also be a bit of a test for James Winston himself. He hadn't fired a shot in anger for quite some time, and he suspected he was rather out of practise. So it was with some relief when the long range scan showed only one group of pirates turn to make an intercept course with the Asp...

"OK, Chuck," said Winston, "we are going to be attacked by this group here." Winston pointed to the long range scanner. The scanner couldn't give out exact numbers at this range, but there was definitely more than one ship.

Albright studied the scanner intently for a few moments. Every ten seconds or so, the position of the ships would be updated, the computer showing prediction lines for the group's course through space. They intersected the Asp's course towards Chester. The interceptors were only about 0.5 AU from their current position.

"When can we tell how many ships there are?" asked Albright.

"Unfortunately, not until they are within about 200 km or so. That still gives us plenty of time to run away should it turn out we are hopelessly outgunned," replied Winston.

"You sound as if you've done this before," said Albright, without thinking.

"You could say that," replied Winston, briefly raising an eyebrow in surprise at Albright's statement.

Of course, James Winston had been awarded an Elite rating. That meant he had defeated thousands of enemies. To say that he had done this soft of thing before was an understatement so gross that it could punch a hole clean through space-time.

Winston elected not to engage the stardreamer. It was deeply unpleasant being brought out of its effects when the attack alarm went off, and since the intercepting pirates weren't that far off, there was no advantage to using the stardreamer. It certainly wouldn't last long enough to give them any rest whilst waiting for the inevitable. It would be interesting to see how a sim-combateer coped with real life combat. Winston had met people who had only done sim-combat before. He was of the opinion that Sim-Combat was a lousy substitute for the real thing, with most sim-combateers being hopelessly outclassed by combat pilots with only "Average" ratings. Albright had been a bit full of himself. Maybe he'd get a dose of humility this time. Winston's plan was to allow Albright to launch the interceptors. while he did nothing, just to see how Albright would perform in a real situation. There was some risk involved, but it wouldn't be too difficult to help out with the Asp's 4MW beam laser if things started to get out of hand.

The Viper Mk.2 hurtled out of the pulsating blue hyperspace exit cloud and into interstellar space. Jane Willams slumped back in her control seat, and wiped the sweat of her forehead. It had been close... very close. The nightmare image of two Asps bearing down on her Viper, beam lasers slicing through her shields like a hot knife through margarine, kept flashing through her mind. Fortunately, she had reacted extremely quickly

to the sudden attack, and hyperspaced, forcing a mis-jump. They couldn't chase her now.

The damage report showed that she only had a minor hull breach in the equipment section and depleted shields. However, her fuel level was such that she would have to make an extra stop before reaching Gateway. It would be a very close run thing. She knew that James Winston was even now hurtling ever closer to his destination, and possibly his and Albright's doom. At least her employers had bought her story about having a desperately ill nephew. They granted her compassionate leave for the next four weeks. She realised that if they ever found out what really was going on, she probably wouldn't live long enough to give her version of the events to the subsequent board of inquiry.

She sighed as she brought up the navigation system. Forced misjumps were always somewhat unpredictable, and this one was no exception. She hadn't even travelled in the desired direction. The only inhabited system within range was Tiethay. At least she could make Gateway in one jump from there.

The pulsating red hyperspace exit cloud appeared around her ship as she engaged the drive.

Whoop whoop whoop!

The attack siren of Winston's Asp screamed its dire and dismal warning across the bridge. The computer had identified the intercepting vessels as a definite hostile force. Winston and Albright could now see that this consisted of a Cobra Mk.3 and two Sidewinders. Winston thought that it could well be a challenge, but nothing that couldn't be handled without too much difficulty.

"Alright, Chuck, you can show me how well a sim-combateer does these days," said Winston, with a smile.

Albright gave Winston a sly grin in return, and Winston didn't really know why. The young man was being extremely cocky for a first real combat experience. Winston thought that this skirmish might help bring Albright's ego down to a manageable size. The first real combat experience for someone who has only done sim combat was usually a humiliation. Winston knew he was taking a calculated risk, and that some of the four remotely controlled interceptors may be destroyed in the attack. However, it was a risk worth taking – certainly better than trying to instruct Albright with the Asp alone.

Winston got an ident on the three ships that were closing. It looked like the fight might indeed be interesting. The Cobra pilot was not only a fugitive with every police organization, he was also rated Dangerous. The two Sidewinders had Competent ratings to go along with their long criminal records. Albright would have his work cut out with those three.

"OK, Chuck, show me what you can do," said Winston, as the three ships came within firing range.

Albright flashed Winston another extremely irritating grin, and launched the fighters. The enemy hadn't been expecting four tiny ships to rocket out of the Asp, and it obviously took them a little by surprise. Normally only Thargoids did that kind of thing. However, this surprise didn't last long. The battle began in earnest!

Winston took control of the Asp, but did not fire. He could see Albright's look of intense concentration. The lead fighter was on manual control, with Albright directly piloting it via a holographic video link. The other three robotic craft acted as automatic wingmen. Winston simply flew the Asp erratically, trying to make it hard for the enemies to hit him. Every so often, a laser strike would register, but at that moment it wasn't affecting the heavily shielded Asp. Winston noticed that Albright appeared to be doing the right thing..he was targeting the most dangerous ship and giving it a great deal of punishment. The enemy Cobra was no longer trying to attack his Asp, instead it was desperately trying to avoid being gouged by Albright's fighters.

The battling formation wheeled around.

"Warning, incoming missile!" warned the ship's computer. Albright ECM'ed it, and it exploded harmlessly. The Cobra began to trail debris as it started to succumb to the fighter's attacks. The two Sidewinders were now trying to help the Cobra by attacking Albright's fighters. However, Albright had already anticipated this, and modified his attack course such that the Sidewinders overtook them and got seriously out of position. It was a nice move, and not a move made by a novice. It was not a move a typical sim-combateer made. Without mercy, Albright bore down on the Cobra, lasers blasting. The Cobra's drive exploded, and shrapnel hurtled in every direction.

The Sidewinders started to turn tail to run. Winston looked over at Albright, whose features had arranged themselves into a grim look of determination. The fighters streaked after the Sidewinders, and Winston commanded the Asp to follow with a few nudges of the controls. Albright commanded two of the fighters to automatically attack the one Sidewinder, whilst he took command of the others, and began to finish off the other. There was a brief tussle of activity as the Sidewinders vainly tried to escape the deadly attack, followed by two explosions!

Albright sat back in the chair, as the fighters returned to their bays inside the Asp's lower equipment deck. Winston was astonished at the young man's performance. It was the performance of a combat pilot rated at least Dangerous, if not better. Not the performance of a typical sim-combateer!

"So, what do ya think?" said Albright, the cheeky grin quickly returning.

Winston nodded. "Very impressive. Are you sure you've only done sim-combat?"

"Well, I might have got a few battles in here or there, while going to sim-combat competitions, but that's pretty much it," he replied.

"Well, we'll have to visit Riedquat on the way home", said Winston.

But Winston had his suspicions. There was more to Albright than met the eye, he thought. But to have a co-pilot that just acted like Albright did just then, in the heat of a battle...making a potentially deadly situation look trivial – copilots like this were difficult to find. Winston knew that at least their odds of survival had just got better, despite the surprise that Rafael Vincent undoubtedly had in store for them.

Chapter 4. Flick of the Wrist

The Cobra touched down, kicking up dust as its bottom thrusters imparted over a hundred tons of thrust. The ship settled on its landing gear, and the scream of the engines quickly died down. The red giant star, Gateway, hung overhead making Old Blackelk's air broil with heat and jungle humidity.

"Thank you for using Old Blackelk Spaceport. The landing fee of three credits has been deducted," came the synthesised voice over the comm.

Pam Gilmour unclipped her harness, hoping that she had arrived in time. She expected she had. It was fortunate that she got her old friend's message when she was preparing to leave Argent Station, Titican, less than five light years away. It was an easy decision to divert to Gateway instead of going to her intended destination of Vequex. It would be good to see James Winston again. Maybe there would be an interesting mission in store. She missed bounty hunting, but the realities were that she needed better equipment, and so she had resorted to making deliveries, trade runs, and anything else she could do that could earn her enough to build up the equipment to make an iron ass.

She decided to flick through the bulletin board listings. At last, the Alliance was offering contracted military missions, just like the Federation and Empire had done for years. There was a money booster. And then there was the usual run of the mill assassinations. Some of them paid quite well, too, but those kind of missions required either suicidal tendencies or an iron ass, and she had neither of those at present. The rest of the bulletin board was fairly mundane. "Information requested on Joe Blow from Titican", yada yada yada. She idly wondered if anyone actually bothered with those information wanted ads; they all paid far too little to be even worth a look.

A few minutes later, a tug arrived to pull her Cobra Mk.3 into a hangar to free up the landing pads. She decided to leave before the tug had attached itself to the nosewheel. No point in waiting to be dragged to the hangar, she thought.

Winston's Asp hurtled out of the hyperspace entry cloud. Gateway at last. Albright set the navigation computer to take them to Old Blackelk, whilst Winston searched the long range scan for hostiles. It looked like they would get an easy ride this time.

"Care for some lunch?" asked Winston.

"Sure. What do you have?" asked Albright by way of reply.

"I bought some real meat when we stopped off for fuel at Chester," said Winston, with a grin.

"Now that sounds really good right now," said Albright, with enthusiasm.

The Asp had a full complement of food and drink synthesisers to provide the crew's needs in their cramped quarters, but synthesised food always left something to be desired. Real bounty hunters preferred chunks of meat in sauce. After all, they didn't get to Elite just to become a vegetarian.

Winston fished around in the refrigerator, pulling out the meat and setting it and some other ingredients in the autochef. It wasn't long before lumps of succulent steak and rich sauce were prepared. Winston and Albright sat at the small table and wolfed down the food like it was their first meal in weeks.

"OK, Chuck, I've got a few questions for you," said Winston. The tone of his voice was subtly inquisitive.

"Go on...", replied Albright, feeling a slight twang of nervousness. Winston had fixed him with a penetrating stare.

"You did very well at combat the other day. Very well."

"Thank you," replied Albright, not knowing exactly what to expect.

"You know, every bounty hunter would kill for a copilot that performed like you did."

Albright wasn't sure where the conversation was leading. Winston continued after pausing to pick up a stray particle of meat.

"Who do you work for?" Winston asked. His voice didn't sound interrogative, merely inquisitive.

"Well, at the moment, you," replied Albright.

"I do hope so. I really do. You don't want to know what happened to the last copilot who lied to me," said Winston. There was no malice in his voice. He was merely stating a fact.

"No, really, I do work for you. Nobody else. Honestly! I really mean it when I said it was an honour to work for you – I've read your guides since they came out," said Albright.

Winston knew there was no doubting that. It had even got a little bit irritating at times. Fortunately, it seemed that Albright had got over the initial excitement at meeting someone as "famous" as James Winston. He went over to the fridge. Since there was no risk of attack, the autopilot could be trusted to handle the long hours of space travel. He opened the door and pulled out a beer.

"Would you like one?" asked Winston, holding up a bottle of Shiner Bock.

"OK," said Albright, not wanting to pass up the offer. A beer might help in this interview that had apparently started.

"I'm really curious where you got your combat skill." Winston smiled briefly as he twisted open the beer bottles, sliding one over to Albright. "Don't tell me it's sim combat, because sim combateers don't fight like that", he finished.

"Well, I might have had a few extra real life combat experiences," said Albright, relaxing a little.

"You know, you've never done a good job of hiding that Federation accent of yours"

"Fed..."

"Yes, everyone I've met from Eta Cassiopeia speaks a lot like you," said Winston before Albright could get a word in edgeways.

"Well, yes, I did live there until I was fifteen, I thought I had lost it", replied Albright.

"I see. How well do you know their military heirarchy?"

James Winston's penetrating look had returned, as he sat down at the opposite end of the table. However, not for long. Winston poured his beer into a pint glass and took a long pull of the beer.

"You know you can't beat this stuff," said Winston, suddenly changing the subject, and leaning back in his chair. He looked across the table to see how Albright had responded to his earlier question.

"What do you plan to do to the Federal military?" replied Albright at last.

Right answer, thought Winston. He was expecting his copilot to deny all knowledge – not suspicious in itself, but certainly betraying a guilty conscience.

"Oh, nothing right now," said Winston quietly, with a slight smile.

Albright wasn't sure what to make of this questioning. Winston was suspicious alright. He was told to expect this, after all, bounty hunters don't survive this long in space without a good dose of fox like cunning and a mistrust of anything that seemed too good to be true. When he had got the assignment, he was told not to give anything away. Do not confirm or deny anything. Deflect questions with questions. This training seemed to serve well. Winston was now contentedly drinking his beer and flicking through Random Intergalactic Gossip. Maybe stories of one of Duval's cronies getting hitched with a supermodel would keep his mind off it until they landed. He realised that he had made a mistake showing off during the last battle. There was no doubting Winston was suspicious. But there was no way he could allow James Winston to know

the extent of the correctness of his suspicions. He did feel a little guilty at times about what he was doing – he genuinely did enjoy the W&G guidebooks. What a tangled web we weave. No doubt his loyalty to his commander, sitting across the table, and his military, made up of thousands of personnel all thousands of km away, would be tested. Whether this would lead to a conflict of interest was yet to be seen.

Winston looked up from the flat display of the magazine reader.

"Well, keep the autopilot company, I'm going to get some sleep," he told Albright, and left the room.

With some relief, Albright went back up to the flight deck. He was expecting the questioning to resume. Winston had probed almost like a tongue probing around a rotten tooth – gingerly seeking out the painful bit before having the dentist attack it with a drill. An experience usually unpleasant for both participants...

Winston ensured that the door was closed and locked. He turned on the monitoring system to ensure a certain person didn't have his ear up to the door.

"OK, Jas. What do you reckon?" Winston asked his computer.

"James, I honestly don't know."

"But I'm right, aren't I? I mean, being suspicious. Something's not right, I can tell. Call it bounty hunter's intuition if you like..."

"I can't tell. He was under some stress when you were questioning him, but that might just be his own nervousness thinking that you are suspicious of him"

"Well, there you go then. I think I probably need to do further research," replied Winston.

"Maybe not. I noticed you exhibiting the same nervousness when that customs officer was in your ship at Ross 154"

"I really hope you are right. He really has been an excellent co-pilot so far in all respects"

"I also took the liberty of doing some searching," continued Jas, "if it makes you happier, his story about leaving Eta Cassiopeia when he was 15 standard years old checks out. Records indicate he's remained in the Tionisla system since then, with the exception of trips to sim-combat tournaments"

Winston sat back in his bunk, chewing on the end of a drinking straw. He tried to think about what was coming next. He just hoped that Jas's research was correct. Good copilots were hard to come by...and he'd been shafted in the past.

"You know, I think you owe him an apology," said Jas unexpectedly.

"Maybe so," replied Winston with a slight pang of guilt.

"I think he does look up to you as some kind of a role model"

"That's probably not very wise," replied Winston, flattered. But there was truth in that statement.

What sort of role model, am I? he thought to himself. OK, he'd made Elite, but he was always just one step ahead of the law and a Viper's sting, like many other bounty hunters. Groundlings always thought bounty hunting was such a romantic life, led by the good crusading against evil pirates. The reality was far different. Smuggling was rife to pay for the astronomical cost of equipment. Most bounty hunters were assassins, not an exactly noble profession, and they had no morals as far as political causes, assassinating the good as often as the bad. Rivalries were common and fights often broke out over bounty hunting "turf". Space psychosis tore about quarter of them apart after a few years. Sometimes this life was almost indistinguishable from that of pirates. Winston had seen the inside of far too many police cells, and had escaped from a public flogging in some godforsaken Imperial system by the skin of his teeth and a CR 2,000 bribe. If Albright had any sense, he'd get out of it now. If he wanted to fly combat missions, he could always join the military. At least they supply the ship. Winston rubbed the scar running down his right forearm and wrist. That had been another up close and personal close call. He'd come face to face with some pirates wanting to get revenge that day, and

they had tortured him. It was just a lucky shot when they hadn't done the bindings correctly and he'd managed to kick the torturer in the groin before escaping, leaving a trail of blood.

Eventually, he fell into a restless sleep on his bunk, no doubt aided by a second Shiner Bock.

Winston awoke with a start, feeling the edge of his bed. The room lights were on in his small cabin, and there was a terrible racket going on outside.

"James, wake up for god's sake!" shouted a voice from outside. It sounded like Albright.

Finally, Winston worked out where he was, and got up. He opened his cabin door and looked at Albright, who was just about to resume banging the door again. His brain still wasn't working at full speed, and he almost lost his balance as he opened the door. Albright was looking concerned.

"James, there's been a ship trailing us for about half an AU, you've got to take a look, it's started to pull a little closer", said Albright. Winston noticed the genuine concern in his voice, and the lack of self-assuredness that he had shown earlier.

"OK, let's see what's going on"

"The ship's unmarked too. It's a Viper Mark 2"

"And that probably means the police", said Winston.

An unmarked Viper Mk.2 just had to be the police. He couldn't remember ever committing a crime in an Alliance system, but of course the Federation weren't unknown for working with the Alliance to go after people. He still had a warrant out for his arrest from that whole messy incident at Barnard's Star.

But a single police ship? They normally operated in packs.

They both arrived on the flight deck, and got strapped out. Winston examined the scanner briefly, and swung the ship's gimballed camera around to look at the following craft.

"Well, we'll watch it for a while. The ship is no threat at the moment," said Winston.

"Are we going to attack?" asked Albright. He sounded tense.

"We'll see. It's better to watch and wait. We'll just slow down a touch and see if there's any reaction"

Winston adjusted the autopilot settings, and the ship increased thrust to the retros. The red giant star, Gateway, burned brightly ahead. Old Blackelk wasn't far ahead now.

"My bet is that the ship is something to do with Rafael Vincent," said Winston after a short pause. The Viper had indeed slowed to hold position relative to their Asp.

"So we should attack?"

"No. I don't want to aggravate the situation. We should try not to give away that we know that the ship is there"

They cruised on in silence. Winston watched the ship. Although it was obviously following, there was evidently no intention of attack as yet. With a few commands, Winston had the computer pull the ship's track from the long range scanner logs. It showed the Viper coming from a hyperspace entry cloud from Tiethay. That was at least the general direction of the Federation. Maybe this whole thing was a Federation sting operation? But it didn't seem likely. If the Feds wanted him that badly, they'd have just come to Tionisla instead of starting this wild goose chase halfway across the inhabited galaxy.

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"Aren't you forgetting something," said Jas unexpectedly.

Albright looked at Winston, wondering what the response was. Winston sheepishly looked back.

"Look, Chuck, I owe you an apology for my interrogation a few hours ago. But you have to understand, I have to be suspicious to stay alive"

"I can understand that. Don't worry, I'm loyal", he replied. Albright looked a little bit embarrassed. In fact, he felt a little guilty. If only James Winston knew the reality. It was true that he was loyal.

But loyal to whom?

That would depend on the results of the test. And the Viper was genuinely worrying...it wasn't any part of the test that Albright knew about.

Chapter 5. Wot's...uh The Deal

Gateway, the red giant, hung in the sky. Pam Gilmour watched the starport through the heat haze, as 150 tonnes of Asp gently lowered itself onto its landing gear, its jetwash causing the Turner Space Combat Academy Hawk Airfighter on the adjacent pad to rock and move slightly. The roar of engines soon quietened as the pilot shut down the prime mover, and calm was restored to the Old Blackelk spaceport. Further up in the sky was a small speck, evidence of another ship waiting to land. The Port Authority was on its toes, and a small tug hurtled out of a hangar and started to attach itself to the Asp's main wheels. Gilmour picked up her binoculars, and zoomed in on the entrance ladder that was extending from the Asp, and watched the two occupants climb down. She then looked up, and zoomed in further on the ship that was waiting. It was a Viper Mk.2.

Four kilometers up, Jane Williams groaned with frustration. She had caught up with Winston's ship a couple of AU outside of Old Blackelk, and now she couldn't get landing clearance. "All bays full, please wait while we clear a pad," the controller had said. She used the ship's camera to zoom in on the activity below. She could see that a tug was getting ready to pull Winston's Asp into a hangar.

She desperately wanted to call him on the comm, but that wasn't possible. There was too much risk that she was being bugged. She had hoped to land in the adjacent pad, and just walk up to his ship. It looked like defeat had been snatched from the jaws of victory, all because of a military trainer parked in the only other available landing pad. Winston and Albright would be long gone before she could touch down. She would just have to leave a note on their entry hatch and hoped they read it before taking whatever test was being set up for them.

James Winston extended the ladder, and stepped down into the stuffy heat, with Albright following behind. He put his sunglasses on, and watched the tug attach itself to the main wheels. He'd seen these autotugs foul up before and break the attachment points, and wanted to make sure his ship would remain in one piece. With a satisfied grunt, he saw that the tug had done its job correctly. Albright closed the hatch, and the tug started to pull the Asp to one of the hangars.

"James, I have just received two messages," said Jas's remote terminal. Winston pulled the small device from his pocket.

"Read them to me," he said, as he and Albright began walking to the entrance to the terminal.

"The first one is from your friend Pam Gilmour. She says meet her in the bar adjacent to hangar four", said Jas.

"And the other one?" asked Winston.

"Is from Rafael Vincent. He marked it confidential," replied Jas.

"OK, onscreen"

The text message showed up on the terminal. It was once again brief.

James, nice you could get here. Meet me on the top floor of 2100 Arcola Avenue. Come alone, and that means leaving Jas behind as well as your copilot. Fail to comply and you'll be unhappy. We will see you tomorrow morning.

Vincent obviously was very secretive, not to mention rather rude. However, at least he had given Winston a night to get some decent rest. Winston continued in the direction of hangar four. It was a fairly short walk, and soon both he and Albright were walking in the doors of a dubious looking bar. "Tindy's", said the gaudy

neon sign above the door.

"I think someone's recognised us," said Albright, pointing to a figure on the other side of the large room, silhouetted against the window by the daylight outside. The figure waved, obviously trying to attract their attention.

"That's my friend, Pam," Winston replied, walking in that direction. Albright found himself having to walk rather fast to keep up.

"Excited, are we?" came Jas's voice from Winston's pocket.

It didn't take them long to cross the large room. The bar room was at least fifty metres in length. It was obviously set up for some serious partying as night drew in, there was a dance floor, a powerful sound system, and nearly every form of intoxicating substance legal in the system – everything from a good honest glass of brown to the deadly Janx Spirit (a rather potent form of vodka with some other substances banned in many systems). At this time of day, the bar wasn't very busy. It would be a couple of hours before things started picking up. At the moment, it was a good place to have a beer and talk to friends. Gilmour was sitting in an easy chair in front of a table that had many rings from the bottom of beer glasses.

"Good to see you again, James," said Gilmour as the two approached.

"Nice to see you too, Pam. Meet my new copilot, Chuck Albright," replied Winston.

"Hello," said Albright awkwardly, never that comfortable around strangers in bars.

"Come and sit down. What can I get you both?" she asked.

"I'll take a half litre of brown," said Winston.

"Same for me, please," said Albright, not particularly experienced in beer. He hoped he could trust Winston's judgement on this one.

Gilmour got up and walked to the bar. Winston settled in a deep seat and let out a long sigh, whilst Albright took a bar stool on the other side of the table.

"Who is she?" asked Albright

"She's an old friend of mine. She was my co-pilot at one point. We did pretty well together, too"

"Funny coincidence that you should both be at Old Blackelk at the same time," said Albright casually.

"Yes, it is rather. Nice surprise really," replied Winston.

Gilmour returned bearing the three half litre glasses of brown. The dark liquid was exactly as its name suggested: it was brown. No one was exactly sure who invented it or where it was made. However, it seemed to be available in almost any bar in the universe. Albright lifted the glass, eyeing the contents suspiciously, and took a sip. He winced slightly.

"It's an acquired taste," said Winston needlessly.

Winston lifted his glass and took a long draught of the beer. It tasted good to him. Gilmour did the same. Albright eyed them both as if they were slightly mad.

"You're supposed to quaff it, not sip it," Gilmour told Albright.

"You are?" asked Albright, slightly surprised. His parents had always told him not to quaff drinks.

"Yes."

Albright eyed the glass suspiciously, and lifted it, taking a good long draught of the liquid. He didn't wince quite as much this time. On the principle that if it's good once, it's probably good again, he repeated the action. It didn't take him long to finish the glass off. Suddenly the name "Pam Gilmour" connected itself in his mind. He wondered why he hadn't made this association when they had just met.

"Ah, so you're **the** Pam Gilmour!" Albright suddenly said with a bright smile.

Winston groaned. He'd just gone through this himself a few weeks ago. He saw that Albright was already fishing in the depths of his leather jacket for W&G's guide. He held up the small data cartridge.

"Yes, I did work on the guide," said Gilmour, mildly amused.

"Want another beer?" asked Winston, hoping to get away from the ensuing grovelling session that was undoubtedly about to begin.

Both Gilmour and Albright replied to the affirmative. Winston made his way to the bar, noticing quite a few more people had come in as the afternoon had drawn on.

Two hours after nightfall, Jane Williams walked up to the bar. The bar was packed, loud music was playing, and about eighty people were gyrating around the dance floor. The people out there were about as good at dancing as a brick was at flying. Brightly coloured flashing lights shone around the whole room. She had to shout at the bartender to be heard.

"A double scotch please," she yelled at the barman.

The small barman who couldn't have been more than 18 years old, went to the optics at the back of the bar, and expertly filled the shot glass with a double measure of scotch whisky. Williams had retrieved her computer from her pocket, and showed it to the barman as he returned with the drink.

"Have you seen this man?" she yelled, pointing at the picture.

The display showed a picture of James Winston and Pam Gilmour, with an Asp in the background. The bartender looked at the photograph. He remembered both a man and woman coming up to the bar who looked like the pair on the screen he was looking at.

"Yes, both of them are in here somewhere!" he yelled as a reply.

"Thanks"

"That'll be two credits, ma'am!" he shouted over the music.

Williams paid for her drink, and downed it quickly. The fiery taste from the whisky spread from the back of her throat and down to her stomach. She felt she needed that after the day's stress. She began fighting her way through the packed bar, trying not to spill anyone's drink. After only a few minutes of searching, she saw Winston, Gilmour, and someone who she didn't recognise, presumably Albright. They were sitting at a table. The table had several empty beer glasses on it, and the three had just picked up bottles of something, probably alcoholic. She walked up to the table.

"James Winston!" she yelled over the table.

Winston looked up. He looked more than mildly sozzled.

"Hold on a moment!" he shouted back. Winston resumed giving instructions to the other two.

"Now, this is called a torpedo!" he yelled.

Winston put a flexible drinking straw in the bottle of vodka mix. He bent it at the flexible point, so that the top end of the straw was held against the side of the bottle, pointing towards the bottle's bottom.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

"This is to allow the air in," he yelled at his companions, who nodded. They didn't look in great shape either. "Next, you drink it, all in one go!" he continued.

Gilmour and Albright drunkenly inserted the straws into the bottles, and bent them just as Winston had. Williams watched in amused curiosity.

"Now after three, we race!" shouted Winston, and counted down.

As he reached zero, all three lifted their bottles and chugged the drinks. Williams was surprised at the rate that Winston could down the drink. The other two were having a little bit of trouble. Albright and Gilmour both stopped about halfway down, took a breath, then finished. Winston let out a contented belch.

"OK, that was your practise one, you've gotta try and beat me on this next one!" slurred Winston.

All three of them put the straws in fresh bottles. Winston counted down again. It was a tie break, as all three of them finished at about the same time.

"Splendid!" shouted Winston.

All three of them belched loudly. Winston noticed that the room had started doing that unsteady thing. He shut his eyes for a few seconds, and felt spatial disorientation setting in. He opened his eyes again before he fell out of the seat, to see a stranger standing in front of the table.

"Oh, hello, take a seat," he slurred at the woman standing at the table.

Williams sighed, and pulled a barstool over from the adjacent table. Winston looked at her, grinning slightly with rather glazed eyes. Albright just looked ill, and Gilmour was probably about to pass out.

"I'd offer you a beer, but I don't think I would make it to the bar," admitted Winston unsteadily.

Winston looked at the woman. It was terribly difficult to tell how old people were these days, what with the routine use of ageing retarding drugs. From her disapproving look, he guessed that she was probably a bit older than the thirty or so years old that she looked.

"Hello, my name is Jane Williams," the stranger said.

"What a lovely name," slurred Albright, unexpectedly. Williams flashed him an evil look. She tried to continue, undeterred.

"I need to tell you something very important," she continued

"Mine's a pint of brown," said Winston.

"Forget beer, listen!" she shouted

"I only listen to people with beer," slurred Winston, unsteadily.

"Listen to me! You're in great danger, you must return home!" she yelled.

"I thzzrrr..thrrrr...pinch the nose of danger," said Winston, even more unsteadily, after discovering the word "thrive" was just too difficult to pronounce. He pinched the air to demonstrate to Williams what pinching danger was like. He also noticed that although the room wasn't spinning, it certainly felt like it was. It dawned on him that he might have had just one too many.

Williams growled. Here she was, trying to save their skins, and it was doing absolutely no good. She looked around the table at Winston's companions. Albright had passed out on the table, and Gilmour was trying to finish off the last few drops of brown in one of the glasses without spilling it everywhere. Williams

decided that she should just try and explain as best as she could. Winston had other ideas though, and fixed her with a glassy stare briefly before joining Albright in the world of the drunkenly unconscious.

Williams got up, deciding that another double scotch might calm her down. It wasn't as if Winston, Gilmour and Albright would be going anywhere in a hurry. She turned her back on them to go to the bar, scant seconds before three bouncers dragged the unconscious Albright and Winston, and the still conscious but thoroughly drunk Gilmour into the back room to sober up...

Winston finally woke up, as the rays of the bloated sun, Gateway, struggled over the horizon. His bed felt cold and wet, and was rather harder than normal. He wondered whether he should dare opening his eyes.

"Beer drinker's fault guide", he thought to himself. "Problem: Bed cold, hard and wet. Reason: You have spent a night in the gutter".

Finally, he struggled semi-upright. He really had spent the night in the gutter. He took in his new environment. It wasn't nice. Amongst the puddles that could only be described as "technicolour yawns", he saw about a dozen other people. One or two of them were groaning. He could recognise the back of the bar they'd spent the night in behind. Albright was lying in a rumpled heap, and Gilmour was struggling to stand up.

"Boy, my head...hurts", said Gilmour to Winston, seeing he had finally woken up.

Winston grunted in agreement. The world still looked a bit hazy. He tried to recall the previous night's activities, but it all sort of went blank after the sixth glass of brown. He had some recollection of talking to some other woman, but couldn't remember much about it. A groan beside him indicated that Albright was starting to regain consciousness. Winston decided it was about time to experiment with standing up. To his surprise, he managed to remain on two feet. Albright rolled over and looked up at his two freestanding companions.

"Urgh," he managed to say at last.

"My thoughts exactly," replied Winston.

"My head feels like an Imperial Navy Officer is living in it", said Albright after a pause.

Albright finally struggled to his feet.

"Come on, let's leave this festering pit," said Winston.

The others agreed without enthusiasm, and the three staggered off in the general direction of their ships. Winston decided he'd get cleaned up then... then...he remembered. It was time to face Rafael Vincent, whoever he was.

"OK, I'm going to get cleaned up and see what this Rafael Vincent wants," Winston told the others.

"Need some help?" asked Gilmour.

"No, I have to go alone. But it's in 2100 Arcola. I'll drop you a message if I need help. Just float in the general area," he replied.

"How will you let us know if you need help?"

"I'll give you each a secure communicator. I've got them programmed for general distress. I'll press the distress button if there's a problem," Winston replied.

Two hours later, James Winston climbed out of the autoshuttle.

"Thank you for using Old Blackelk Taxis, the cost is four point five credits", said the small shuttle.
"Don't mention it," replied Winston.

The shuttle smartly departed, no doubt to pick up another fare, leaving Winston standing at the bottom of a tall, glass building. The bloated red giant was reflected in the polished, continuous sheet of glass that made up the sides of the structure. Winston entered the building. He might have felt a good deal cleaner than when he woke up, but he still felt behind the power curve. So much for a good night's sleep. The building seemed deserted. It seemed very strange that a gleaming structure like this one was not occupied by the corporate offices of a huge, interstellar corporation. He entered the lift. It was also made of glass, and ran along the front of the building.

"Top floor, please", said Winston.

The elevator beeped in acknowledgement, and briskly began accelerating. Old Blackelk became panoramically spread out as it went up. Winston could see some activity at the spaceport. Soon, Old Blackelk appeared as a small island of human life surrounded by vast tracts of seething jungle. Distant clouds were building, getting ready to release their afternoon deluges. It looked intensely beautiful.

Finally, the elevator reached the top floor.

"Enjoy your visit," said the lift.
"I'll try," replied Winston.

Winston wondered where to go next. He hadn't been told exactly where on the top floor Vincent would be waiting. On an impulse, he decided to turn right, and walk down the corridor to see if there was any obvious signs of someone waiting for him. The building was obviously designed for a rich corporate client. The carpets were deep and soft. Leather furniture sat, unused, in all the rooms. The building was well soundproofed. After walking about ten more meters, he finally came to the end of the corridor. Directly ahead was an office. The door was open, and a man's figure was silhouetted by the daylight pouring in through the window behind him.

"James Winston, do come in," said the man.

Winston walked in, wordlessly. He didn't know what to make of it all. He was a little startled when the door closed behind him. The office was quite large, containing several of the leather seats he had seen in the offices he had just passed, along with a large table. He then saw why the door had closed. A large man was now standing behind him, standing at least half a meter taller than Winston. He had muscles that resembled dogfighting Sidewinders as his arms moved. "It's going to be THAT kind of meeting," thought Winston to himself, and groaned inwardly.

"Hello, my name is Rafael Vincent, as you may of expected. Would you like a cup of tea?" asked the man.
"Err, yes please," replied Winston.
"Milk, sugar?" asked Vincent.
"I'll just take milk", replied Winston.

He'd never had tea before, and didn't know what the difference would be. However, Riedquatian Ultra Coffee tasted quite good with milk, so on that principle, he decided that if it was an option with tea, he should try it.

Winston tried to appraise Vincent by first impressions. He certainly didn't appear rude and threatening, like his messages. Vincent was a slight man of about Winston's build, but with greying hair and an accent that could have only been from the Federation. He was well dressed, and looked like some kind of businessman.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

The huge gorilla of a man who had closed the door had now moved off to bring the drinks.

"I always find a nice mug of hot tea makes a meeting go so much smoother", said Vincent pleasantly.

"I wouldn't know, I've never had the opportunity to find out," replied Winston.

"Ah, of course, you've never lived in a civilized place before. I think you'll like it", replied Vincent.

Winston didn't really know whether to take this as a complement or an insult. The large man soon finished fussing with the kettle, and brought two steaming mugs of tea to the table.

"Do take a seat," said Vincent.

Vincent pulled one of the leather chairs out from the table, and sat down, the large window to his back. Winston settled in a seat on the opposite side of the table. The seat was deep and sumptuous. The leather must have cost thousands of credits. He took a sip of the tea, and found it had a pleasant taste.

"My favorite, Earl Grey," said Vincent. "It was named after an English nobleman"

"I see," said Winston, having no idea what an English nobleman was.

"Yes, it's been around for centuries. It has a very nice aroma," continued Vincent.

Winston wasn't sure what to make of all of this. There was no way that Vincent had dragged him halfway across the galaxy to discuss hot beverages and English noblemen. Vincent's attitude was very disarming. Winston didn't know whether he should feel nervous or relaxed. It was almost as if Vincent was about to try and sell him a used Anaconda. Winston took another sip of the tea. It certainly helped his head feel a bit better after the previous night's alcoholic assault.

"I take it you didn't invite me here to talk about tea", stated Winston.

"Ah, I see you are eager to get down to business. You're right, I have something more in mind than hot caffeinated beverages", he replied.

Vincent took another sip of his tea, and made an indication to the large man. The man took up position by the door. Winston didn't really take this to be a good sign.

"Don't worry about Guido, he won't hurt you" said Vincent.

There was a basso rumbling from the general direction of the door. Winston decided that this must have been the big man, now known as Guido, laughing. It didn't sound very pleasant. Guido had to be at least twice Winston's weight, and pure muscle to boot.

"Well, I suppose we better get down to business. Now you're an Elite combateer, yes?" asked Vincent.

"I thought you knew that," replied Winston

"Yes, I do. This means I have a proposition to make to you, one that will pay very well," said Vincent.

The warning bells went off in Winston's head. Most people with well-paid propositions didn't need to have their clients disarmed and a gorilla of a man guarding the door. Winston felt like it was going to be one of those no choice types of propositions.

"Well, this won't take long. We need someone to be eliminated since he is almost certainly going to harm our plans", began Vincent.

Vincent picked up a small computer from the table, and slid it over to Winston. It showed a still image of a man, obviously a politician of some type.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

"This man is Kevin Mazzetti. He is an Alliance politician, who has a good chance at becoming the AIS president. He has also amassed a great deal of irrefutable and highly embarrassing evidence against the Federation," said Vincent.

"Let me guess, you want me to rub him out," replied Winston

"Ack, such an uncivilized term. Yes, we would like you to ...terminate... our friend," said Vincent, his charm somehow becoming menacing.

"I see," said Winston, not wanting to commit to anything.

"We'll give you fifty thousand credits if you'll deliver this package," said Vincent. He pointed to a large, suitcase sized object.

It could only be a small nuclear device. Winston had heard of these being used in assassinations. One or two bounty hunters he had known tried them. They were extremely illegal, and both acquaintances who had dabbled with them got caught and subsequently executed.

"I don't do assassinations," replied Winston.

"What about Johnson?" asked Vincent, who was now wearing a nasty smile.

"That was..."

"The Federation still want you for that one. I could take you prisoner now, and you'd die a very nasty death," said Vincent, his charm being replaced by outright nastiness.

"Where do you want this to happen?" asked Winston.

"We would just like you to deliver the package to his home in Alioth, and ensure it explodes. We know you also have nuclear experience too", continued Vincent.

Winston tried to think quickly. There had to be some way he could stall Vincent. Firstly, he didn't do assassinations any more...not after the fall-out from the Johnson saga. Secondly, he had decided long ago that he liked the Alliance, and what it stood for. He certainly wasn't about to do the Federation's dirty work. They could get another Elite combateer to do the job. He felt for his secure communicator. He had concealed it well inside his leather jacket. He decided to try and get them to give him extra time before calling in Albright and Gilmour.

"OK, but this is a dangerous mission. I want better pay than that, plus a night to think about it and make plans," said Winston.

Vincent looked at him across the table. Winston could feel the bulk of Guido hovering behind him, and suspected that some type of beating was on its way. However, it wasn't to happen. Vincent made a gesture at Guido, who moved aside.

"OK, I will talk to my superiors and see what I can do. But be warned, James. If you try and leave, there will be several military ships waiting for you. You might be an Elite combateer, but you won't survive if you try and run. And don't even think of putting fuel in your ship", said Vincent, rather nastily.

"Well, I must say, it's a pleasure doing business with you," replied Winston, sarcastically.

"Oh, and Guido will be watching out for you. Don't try any funny business either"

"The mere thought didn't even cross my mind," replied Winston.

"Well that's good to hear. I will see you here at the same time tomorrow. Try not to get too drunk tonight," said Vincent.

Winston left the room. He'd have to find some nice quiet spot to discuss this with Gilmour and Albright. There was no way he was doing the dirty work of any Fed...not in a million years. He'd rather take his chances with the supposedly waiting battleships.

Chapter 6. Up the Ante

ALBRIGHT hid by the corner of 2100 Arcola. The day's oppressive heat haze made the reflective glass of the building seem to bend and warp. He carefully watched the building entrance. Whatever was going on up there had to end soon. Shuttles sped by, most of them stopping at adjacent buildings, but nobody was stopping at 2100. Old Blackelk's business was bustling everywhere, except for this location.

A shuttle gently touched down in a parking spot outside the entrance of the building. It was empty, and obviously there to pick someone up. Thirty seconds later, a slightly annoyed looking James Winston stepped out of the main entrance. Albright pulled back behind the corner to make doubly sure that Winston wouldn't spot him. He dared a peek around the corner of the building, and saw Winston strap in, and the shuttle lift off. It rose up, joined traffic, then headed towards the spaceport. Albright quickly made his way around the corner, and into the entrance that James Winston had just left. He went directly to the elevator.

"Top floor," he told the lift.

The elevator beeped in acknowledgement, and began its ascent. Albright pulled out his binoculars, and looked through the glass walls of the building. As the elevator rose, he could see more of the spaceport. The binoculars didn't compensate for the heat haze much, but he could still make out Winston's autoshuttle landing on a pad just outside the main hangar. He didn't get time to take a good look, since the express elevator soon reached the top floor.

"Enjoy your visit," said the lift.

Albright wordlessly left the elevator, and turned right to walk down the corridor. The padded carpets muffled his footsteps as he walked towards the office where he had his appointment. At the end of the corridor was the office's open door. Daylight was pouring in through the large window at the back of the office. He smartly stepped in. Three men were already in the room.

"Greetings. I'm Ensign Charles Albright. You requested my presence," he said.

"Welcome, Ensign. I'm Lieutenant Steven Tyler, and these are my assistants, Lieutenant Aleksandr Primakov and Constable Guido Marks", replied Tyler

Albright took in the three. Tyler seemed very well spoken man, obviously well educated. Tyler was dressed in an expensive Achenarian business suit. Primakov was dressed in a more usual military uniform, but a parade rather than a battle uniform. Marks was dressed in a similar manner to Tyler, and was built like most police officers – large and burly. Tyler was obviously the oldest of the three – his thinning hair was mostly grey, and his face looked weathered from one too many close calls with the hard vacuum of space. Albright felt very out of place, dressed as a bounty hunter's first mate amongst the sharp formality of an intelligence bureau meeting.

"OK, now we are all here, let's get started. Ensign Albright, would you care for a cup of tea?" asked Tyler.

"Certainly, I haven't had one for a while," replied Albright.

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Neither, thank you"

"Good man. You know that James Winston had never drunk tea. I don't know, bounty hunters are mere savages. He even put milk in Earl Grey. I have to deal with these Phillistines every day, you know," said Tyler, sadly.

"I hope he didn't ask for it to be iced," said Albright.

"Fortunately not. Iced tea should be made a criminal act. Savages, I tell you. They are all savages," Tyler

lamented.

The burly police constable stood up, and prepared the drinks. He looked like he had been doing this task one time too often, but still performed the menial duty with good grace.

"As you know, we are here to discuss our new potential recruit, James Winston. I just met him with Guido, and Aleksandr was watching the interview from the next office. Firstly, I'd like to get the Ensign's report", said Tyler. He looked over at Albright.

"My full report is on this DSU," said Albright, holding up the small data cartridge, "but I'll summarize briefly"

Albright slid the cartridge across the table to Tyler, who picked it up and dropped it into his suit pocket.

"Firstly, Winston's got a suspicious mind. We had a rather uncomfortable interview on the way here. He did apologise to me later, but I don't think he quite trusts me anyway. Secondly I can't tell either way where his loyalties lie. At the moment, I would say James Winston is loyal to James Winston, and maybe the skipper of the fishing boat he was working on in Tionisla. I'm still not sure why he apologised to me for when he questioned me" said Albright.

Primakov chuckled. "His computer told him he was being unfair to you. He's been confiding in that machine too often recently"

"We hacked into his computer a few months ago," explained Tyler. "It was the only way we knew that we could protect your identity. He spent a lot of money on a very powerful AI machine. We actually had to break into his house to do the job – the machine detected our attempts and was going to inform him"

Albright raised his eyebrows. It certainly explained a few things – there were spies everywhere for one. It really wasn't that surprising that the intelligence bureau would do something like this.

"We also tried to extract more information from his computer, but it managed to stop our attempts – otherwise we wouldn't have needed to do this whole charade," added Primakov.

"Well, it's obvious we have to make the offer better to even tempt him anyway. We are going to meet James Winston again tomorrow. Any suggestions on a new offer that we should make?" asked Tyler.

"For one," began Primakov, "we aren't offering nearly enough. An assignment like the one we are setting commands at least half a million"

"Why that much?" asked Albright

"Well, any bounty hunter worth his salt well knows that a political assassination often makes you wanted by all three powers, even the one that hired you. The risk is extreme. Fifty thousand simply isn't enough," said Tyler.

"Why did we offer that little then?" asked Albright. This must have been the reason for Winston looking annoyed as he left the building.

"Well, we needed to make sure that Winston wasn't desperate or irrational. It was kind of a filter offer. We now need to appeal to his greed," replied Tyler.

"We will offer him three quarters of a mill when he comes here tomorrow," added Primakov.

That was extremely serious money. Albright wouldn't mind a cool three quarter million credits right now. It would be interesting to see Winston's reaction to this offer.

"There is one thing that I'd like an explanation of, though. Nobody mentioned the Viper – it spooked me a bit on the way in," said Albright.

"The Viper?" asked Tyler, obvious concern in his voice.

"Yes, an unmarked Viper Mk.2 followed us to Old Blackelk. Winston thought it was the police. Nobody briefed me about it though." replied Albright

The other three were now looking at Albright with a look of concern.

"Ensign, there was no Viper Mk.2 in any of our plans," said Tyler.

"We'll have to check this out. This is extremely worrying, it could mean that the opposition know about our plans and are spying on us," said Primakov.

"Ensign, thank you for bringing this to our attention. Constable Marks, I'll need you to investigate this right away," said Tyler.

"I've put the full details plus the scanner logs from Winston's Asp in my report if it will help you," Albright told the others.

"Yes, thank you for thinking of doing that. It will be very useful to us", said Tyler.

Winston climbed out of the shuttle. He still couldn't believe it. Fifty thousand credits! What a joke. There's no way I'd ever do the Federation's dirty work for even ten times that much, he thought. Battle fleet or not, he was going to teach those idiots a lesson, then go home and lie low for a while.

"Thank you for using Old Blackelk's premiere transport system. The cost was four point five credits", said the autoshuttle, as Winston disembarked.

"Thank you," Winston replied to the machine.

Fifty thousand rotten credits! How did they ever think he'd take the job for that money? There was just something too suspicious about the whole thing. They could offer him a million, and he still wouldn't take it. In fact, they could offer him anything, and he wouldn't take it. One thing he had learned is that greed just gets you into trouble. He began walking to the hangar where his ship was parked, when he saw another autoshuttle approach. He paused, and watched as Pam Gilmour climbed out.

"Pam, do you know what those stinking, filthy bastards wanted?" asked Winston, as Gilmour approached him.

"They wanted me to take out the Alliance presidential candidate!"

"Which one?" asked Gilmour.

"Kevin Mazzetti, you know, the one who is favorite for the upcoming elections," replied Winston flatly.

"Who wants you to do that? How much did they offer?"

"I don't know for sure, but it smacks of an incompetent Federation operation. They had the gall to offer fifty thousand", replied Winston.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to teach those idiots a lesson. I'm not doing the Federation's dirty work," said Winston.

"Do you remember a woman coming up to us last night? She said something about us being in great danger", asked Gilmour. She wasn't entirely sure whether it was the result of last night's partying, or whether the encounter had actually happened.

Winston thought hard. He seemed to remember someone coming up to them, but all he could remember was his disappointment that the person wasn't going to buy him a beer. They had to plan something quick. His next meeting with these people was only a day away.

"Pam, we need to go somewhere quiet and out of public view to discuss this. I think they've got spies everywhere," Winston declared.

"Where were you thinking of?"

"We'll take a shuttle out to the coast. I noticed on the way in, the coastline to the west is riddled with caves. They will have difficulty spying on us there."

"That sounds like a good plan. What about your co-pilot, Albright?"

"There's a principle called need-to-know. I don't think he needs to know right now, so we'll leave him behind. Where did he go, by the way?" asked Winston, curious as to what might be holding his co-pilot up.

"I haven't seen him since we split up to watch the building. I suspect he's probably headed back. He might not

have been able to hail a shuttle – it was quite busy down there"

The shuttle Pam had arrived in still hadn't departed to pick up a new fare. Winston started walking towards it.

"Let's go. I'll block hire this shuttle for the rest of the day," said Pam, as she turned to follow.

"That sounds like a good plan"

The pair climbed into the shuttle, and strapped in.

"Manual control, please", Winston told the shuttle. Where they were going was not likely to be a programmed destination.

"Please identify with your pilot certificate," replied the shuttle's computer.

Winston showed his pilot certificate to the shuttle's computer. A few moments later, after the machine had gone to the pilot database to validate the license, the manual controls slid out of their housings.

"Thank you Commander Winston. Have a good flight," said the computer.

Winston gently applied some bottom thrust, and swung the small craft westwards and began to accelerate. He kept his altitude low, only about three hundred meters above the tops of the dense jungle that covered most of Hope's landmasses.

"Did you bring that computer of yours, you know, Jas?" asked Gilmour

"No, once again, need-to-know. Computers can be dangerous things sometimes," Winston replied.

Winston didn't know of the break-in. However, his deeply suspicious mind told him that Jas might have been tampered with, especially in the light of the shennanigans he had just been subjected to. He knew he could trust Pam, after all, she had been an exemplary copilot in the past, and had been here for him this time. He also had to be suspicious of the shuttles. He couldn't say much within range of the shuttle's computer. When a big power like the Federation got involved in anything, they spared no expense when spying on someone they were after. The shuttle sped over the jungle, and it wasn't long before the pair could see the ocean on the horizon.

As they approached the cliffs, Winston gradually reduced power and slowed the small autoshuttle. The sharp, rocky formations looked spectacular, as the sea sprayed over the coast, pounding the rocks as it had done for countless millennia. The pair looked through the windows of the craft, looking for a suitable spot to land in the beautiful, but inhospitable coastline. Eventually, Pam spotted a relatively flat area at the bottom of the cliffs.

"Over there, at about your ten o'clock", she said.

"I've got it," replied Winston, as he brought the small ship in low over the water.

The shuttle touched down gently on the small rocky beach, the bottom thruster throwing up spray from the surrounding water. Winston shut the engine down, and the pair unbuckled and left the craft. The roar of the sea was loud. A stiff breeze whipped the ocean into boiling whitecaps that occasionally crashed over the surrounding rocks. Three small seal-like animals watched Winston and Gilmour pick their way across the rocks towards the entrance of one of the many caves that perforated the cliffs. They weren't used to seeing human visitors, and quickly fled back into the broiling depths of the sea. The pair entered the dark cave. Winston pulled out his Maglite, and shone it into the darkness. They splashed through the knee-deep water, and came to a slight bend in the cave. The roof was only just over their heads, and dripped damply. A couple

of nondescript winged creatures fluttered away in alarm at the pair's presence. Finally, they came across a dry ledge at the back of the cave where they could sit without being in half a metre of water.

"I think we should be safe from surveillance here," said Winston, examining the cave's walls.

"I hope so," replied Gilmour.

"I have a plan. I'm going to teach those bastards a lesson they won't forget, but I need your help to execute the plan, and it's probably going to be dangerous," said Winston.

"I'll assist any way I can," replied Gilmour.

"Well, this is the plan. We take out the top floor of 2100 Arcola. That's where they will be waiting for me. An MV-2 assault missile should do the trick, but it'll get the police on our backs"

"OK, but how do you make sure they show up?"

"I was just coming to that. Of course, I can't guarantee they'll be there, but I think I can make sure they will."

Winston paused briefly, and pulled out a paper notebook and a pen. Old technology, but technology that can't spy on you. He began to draw a plan view of the area where the building was.

"Firstly, I will take an autoshuttle to the building. They will see me leave in the shuttle, and make my way. They won't suspect anything that way. When I leave, you'll need to get the Asp fuelled and put an MV-2 missile on it. Hopefully they won't be watching the Asp by then because they will have seen me coming. Then you fly it to the front entrance of the building, here", said Winston, pointing to the entrance on the plan.

"OK, but you'll be hanging around. How are you going to contrive a wait? You'll arrive minutes before I can, at least, especially if I have to buy fuel", said Gilmour.

"Simple, I'll have a smoke. There's no smoking in the building, so it'll look like I'm just taking a quick drag before entering", he replied.

"I didn't know you smoked," said Gilmour, surprised.

"I don't. But many bounty hunters do, so it won't look suspicious if they see me doing so. I'll try and fake it if I can, I can't stand tobacco", Winston added.

"OK, so I pick you up. I take it we attack straight away", Gilmour stated.

"That's correct. We'll just rise vertically up the building's face, and loose off the MV-2 right at them. Extra points if we go up the side of the building the office is on, and they see us grinning at them. A few bursts of the laser can be added if necessary", said Winston.

"Then leave, forcing a mis-jump so we can't be followed?" asked Gilmour.

"Exactly. I'll drop you off once we're away from Alliance systems. The police hopefully won't know you were involved since it wasn't your ship, so you can go back and pick your ship up," Winston said.

"Why not get the ship ready early – before you leave for the building?" asked Gilmour.

"They specifically instructed me not to refuel. They will be suspicious enough, and I don't want to arouse further suspicion. I'm gambling that they will stop paying attention to my ship when I leave to meet them," Winston answered.

"When do you tell Chuck? He will have to know, he's your co-pilot," Gilmour asked.

"I'll tell him a few minutes before I leave. Well, let's get out of here, I could do with a beer," said Winston.

"Me too," replied Gilmour.

The pair left their hideout, and splashed back through the water that kept gushing into the cave each time a wave rolled in. They emerged blinking into the daylight. The local equivalent of seagulls wheeled overhead, looking for a tasty morsel in the broiling ocean. Winston and Gilmour climbed back into the calm of the autoshuttle, and lifted off to begin their journey back to Old Blackelk and a nice cold beer.

Chapter 7. The Tangled Web

"GLAD you could join us," said Winston to Albright, slightly sarcastically, looking up from his copy of the Frontier News.

James Winston was sitting at the table in the cramped living quarters of the Asp. On the table was Winston's half-consumed breakfast – prime sausages with meat from wild Hopian hogs; somewhat of a delicacy in the Gateway system. Contrasting with his high-cholesterol breakfast was a glass of Lavian grapefruit juice, supposedly the best in the galaxy. Winston ate a little more of his sausage and switched off the news viewer.

Albright had shown up very late the previous night, smelling of expensive brandy. Although he was far from drunk, it was obvious that someone had been plying him with expensive drinks. Winston had deliberately pretended not to see him creep by into his quarters, so he could see what he was getting up to. He hadn't done anything suspicious though – he just went to his quarters and slept, snoring with a sound like an Imperial slave mine machine depot.

"Well, you know, I met some people, and they invited me out for a drink," Albright replied.
"So it seems. I hope you're not the worse for wear, it's going to get very exciting around here shortly," Winston said, just before taking a sip of his drink.

Winston finished his last sausage. The smell of the succulent meat was making Albright more than a little hungry.

"If you want to fix yourself some breakfast, there's some more of these in the fridge," Winston told Albright, noticing that he was now doing a convincing impression of the expectant, watery eyes the family dog makes at you when he's hungry.

"Thank you," replied Albright, already on the way to the fridge and the autochef.

Winston was about to pick up the news again, when the visitor chime softly sounded. Whoever had designed the chime had obviously taken the time to make it sound as tacky as possible. The original composer was probably even now turning in his grave.

"James, it's Pam Gilmour at the door," said Jas, through the ship's audio system.

"Thank you Jas, tell her I'm on my way," replied Winston, as he got up to let his visitor on board.

Winston left the living quarters of his ship, and into the spartan, narrow bare metal corridor to the entrance hatch. He walked along the metal grille walkways through the equipment deck, past the shield generators. He paused briefly to do a system check at the engineering panel – he might be needing those shield generators later. Finally, he came to the ladder leading to the main airlock housing the ship's main surface entrance. Since there was an atmosphere outside, all he had to do was touch the open button, and the powerful hydraulic jacks opened the inner and outer doors. The main door dropped down, and a ladder slid out. At the bottom, Gilmour waited, and a wall of humid air wafted into the ship from the opened airlock. The hangars always seemed even more humid than the outside air.

"Pam, good to see you, please come in," said Winston, in greeting.

"Well, good morning James. At last I'll get to see the inside of your new Asp", she replied

"It's not really new – I've had it a while," he replied.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

Gilmour climbed the ladder. Winston didn't close the airlock – he'd have to leave soon anyway. They both climbed back up to the upper catwalk and made their way to the living quarters. As they arrived, Albright was about to tuck into his sausages, and now Gilmour was looking hungry.

"There's more in the fridge," said Winston, noting that Gilmour had seen the sausages.
"Hopian hog sausages? You do have good taste after all!" she replied, jokingly.

She exchanged pleasantries with Albright, then went to the small kitchen. Winston picked up the News again. Things seemed surprisingly normal, despite the fact that Winston fully expected to be a fugitive from the Alliance police in less than an hour from now. Of course, he hadn't let Albright into this little fact yet, but would shortly do so.

Gilmour came back with her plate of sausages. It was rather cramped around the small table, but it was the sort of thing most bounty hunters were used to. The only combat ship that hadn't been cramped was the almost extinct Fer-de-Lance. The Fer-de-Lance had been the last luxury fighter, and had been made illegal by most police forces. Winston always preferred the minimalist approach. He had been in a Fer-de-Lance once before at a shady shipdealers in the Bebece system. He decided they were just to snobbish, although the opulent leather was rather pleasant. The Asp was by far the better ship, anyway.

It wasn't long before everyone had finished their food. Winston put down the News again, taking care to switch the viewer off. He looked over at Albright, at the opposite end of the table.

"OK, I've already discussed this with Pam. We've got a new plan today. You need to listen very carefully, we have to execute it with precision" said Winston.

"I'm listening," said Albright, curious as to what Winston had up his sleeve.

"We are going to teach those Federation idiots a lesson they won't forget in a hurry", he started.
Albright looked up. "Federation?"

"Yes, of course I haven't told you. I think Rafael Vincent is a Federal agent. His plans smack of the Federation. They want me to bump off an Alliance politician. I suspect they just gave me a filter offer yesterday. I think they might make me a real offer today," answered Winston.

"So how are you going to teach them a lesson?"

"Simple. I'm not going to meet them inside the building. Instead, we are meeting them just outside the top floor of the building, where I will give them a piece of my mind, shaped as an MV-2 assault missile," replied Winston with a smile.

"What? Destroy the building?" asked Albright, concern showing in his voice.

"Yes. If the missile doesn't finish the job, the laser certainly will," said Winston, picking a bit of stray sausagemeat off his plate.

Albright was turning as white as a sheet. Those were his superior officers!

"But...but...the police! Won't the police kill us before we can escape?" said Albright, the edge of panic in his voice.

"No, we'll be long gone before the police even launch. We'll just have to lie a bit low for a while, and avoid Alliance systems," replied Winston, trying to calm Albright's fears.

"But...you can't do that! You can't just blow up buildings!" said Albright, his voice definitely a few semitones higher than normal.

Winston wondered why Albright could be so concerned. The young man had been remarkably cocky and self assured in the far more dangerous space combat encounters they had been in on the way in. Gilmour was looking a little surprised at Albright's reaction too. It looked like he was going to break out in apoplexy.

"Don't worry, you're in safe hands. Pam will be piloting the ship, she'll pick me up in front of the building, we'll strike into the Federation's terrified faces, then leave, forcing a misjump", explained Winston briefly, hoping to allay his co-pilot's nerves.

Albright began to stand up. He took a deep breath.

"Sorry, I can't let you do that!" he shouted, then bolted from the room.

Winston and Gilmour sat in stunned silence for about fifty milliseconds.

"Quick! Get him!" yelled Winston, as they both bolted after Albright, who was rapidly escaping.

Winston now regretted leaving the door open. They could have easily caught Albright if he had needed to wait for the door mechanism to operate. Winston dashed down the metal catwalks with Gilmour close behind. They both leaped out of the door, not bothering with the ladder.

"Heigh ho," said Jas. The computer decided that she better close the door.

Albright was running as fast as he could towards the autoshuttle dock. Winston and Gilmour were about five meters behind him, running as hard as they could, making sure they didn't give up any ground. They soon left the large hangar in which the Asp had been parked. They pursued Albright into a second hangar, with the words "Old Blackelk" painted in large letters along the side. The hangar had several ships in it, including a lone, unmarked, Viper Mk.2...

Albright began to run under the Viper. Suddenly, a figure in the shadows of the Viper's landing gear pounced on Albright, like a puma, lying in ambush for its prey. Albright fell to the floor, and struggled violently with the woman who was now holding him. He viciously kicked at her, struggled upright, and began running again. Winston took advantage of the situation, now having caught up, and dived for Albright's legs, rugby tackling him to the ground. Gilmour and the stranger both piled onto Albright's struggling body and held him still. He lay on the ground, his face pressed against the hard concrete, with Gilmour, Winston and the stranger pinning him firmly. The four of them panted from the physical effort in the oppressive heat. Albright vainly attempted to struggle free once more, but soon gave up.

"Hi, I'm Jane Williams," panted the stranger.

"Thanks for helping," replied Winston, between breaths.

The four of them lay there in a heap, trying to get their breath back. Suddenly, the sound of three people running towards them echoed across the hangar. It wasn't good news – it was the police!

"OI! You're nicked!" shouted the nearest police officer, as he ran towards the four of them.

"Get up off the floor!" shouted the second officer.

Winston craned his head around. He noticed all three officers had their guns out, and pointing at them. He decided it was probably best to comply quietly with the officer's command. Gilmour, Winston and Williams stood up, holding their hands up in the traditional gesture made to anyone who was pointing a weapon at you. Albright struggled to his feet and followed suit.

"Right, you can come to the station and explain all of this to the chief. Fighting is strictly prohibited in Old Blackelk," said the first officer.

"But –," said Winston.

"Quiet!" yelled the first policeman.

"Shall I lock 'em, Sarge?" said the third policeman.

"Yes, and bring them to the cells at the Hobart Street nick," said the first policeman.

"Look, we'll come quietly," said Winston. He really didn't want to be subjected to a Quick-Lock.

The third officer ignored him. He shoved the Quick-Lock into Winston's back, and activated it. With a loud crack, Winston's torso and arms were wrapped in a thick layer of polymer, and a sedative was injected into his bloodstream. The officer repeated with each of the others. Winston was already feeling light-headed as the officers lead them off to the cells...

Winston groggily shifted, and opened his eyes. He immediately wished he hadn't. He was in a bland room, with glossy, light green concrete walls. The smooth floor was painted dark grey. He was lying on what passed for a bed on one side of the room. The room contained three more bunks like it, each cast out of concrete, and painted the same drab shade of grey as the floor. There was a single door into the room, and whoever had made the door seemed to think making it resistant to a direct nuclear strike would be a good idea. The stainless steel door was about three meters tall, and two meters wide. It had a small rectangular viewing hole in its centre.

The words "police cell" idly drifted through Winston's groggy brain.

There were other things in the room too. A toilet occupied the back wall of the room. There was also a slim young man, about Winston's age, sitting on the opposite bunk. The man could have easily passed for a bounty hunter. His hair was cropped short, and he was wearing a well-used leather jacket, a black shirt, and black flight suit trousers. His boots looked even more worn than his jacket. He was reading a book.

There was another man in the room too, lying on the top bunk on the opposite wall. He was overweight, about middle aged, but also dressed in a similar manner to his cell-mate below. He was snoring loudly, and the snores echoed off the cell's hard, concrete walls.

Winston rubbed his eyes. At least these police cells were better than some others he had been in. On some frontier worlds, the police thought "hygiene" was a greeting. He got up, and looked on the bunk above him to see if Albright was there. The bunk was unoccupied. Winston sighed, and sat back down on his bunk. He looked at his watch, and found it wasn't there. The police probably had taken it. He felt in his pockets too, and couldn't find his ident. His arms were aching from the constriction from the earlier quick-locking he had suffered.

Winston noticed the man on the other side of the room had switched his book off, and was now looking at him.

"Smuggling?" said the other man.

"What?"

"I'm in for smuggling," said the other man.

"Oh, no. I think I might be here for fighting."

"Unlawful discharge of weapons?"

"No, fighting, like with my fists"

The other man looked at Winston, taking in his slight, 65 kilogram frame. He raised his eyebrows.

"Have you seen Albright?" asked Winston

"If you mean the person who was brought in with you, a visitor came for him. They took him away"

"A visitor?" asked Winston, the minnows of suspicion darting across his mind.

"Yes, about an hour ago. The guardBot came and took him away."

Winston snarled quietly. There was definitely something up with Albright, and he bet it had something to do with Vincent. Why would he have reacted with such shock when the plans for the attack had been revealed? Winston never liked being betrayed. He gritted his teeth angrily.

"Did you win?" said the other man suddenly.

"What?"

"The fight – "

"Well, we were actually trying to restrain my 'friend' up here," said Winston, pointing to the empty bunk.

"Then the police came along?"

"Yes. They arrested all of us. I wasn't alone – my friend Pam Gilmour, and a woman, a complete stranger, helped me pin him down"

The fat man on the top bunk shifted uneasily, and made a curious snorting sound.

"It was drugs," said the man, suddenly changing the subject.

"No, he was being – ", started Winston, understandably confused by the other man's frustrating mode of conversation.

"I mean, I was smuggling narcotics. They searched my ship", he said.

"Did you scoop them up from a pirate?"

"No, I'm a trader. I avoid combat if I can."

Their conversation was interrupted. The door buzzed, then started to swing open. The squat shape of a guardBot appeared in the entrance way. The wheeled mechanoid stopped in the entrance. It didn't look that suited to guarding, being only about a meter tall, however it had been outfitted with an array of painful looking weaponry. It swung its sensor array around, and looked at Winston.

"Prisoner seven three thee zero two, James Winston, follow me," said the bot, in a pleasant female voice. It seemed slightly incongruous with the bot's purpose.

Winston stood up, relieved to be leaving the room, even though he wasn't sure why just yet. Perhaps the police wanted to question him.

"Well, I hope they don't fine you too much," said Winston to the trader.

"Thanks," the trader replied. He picked up his book, and continued reading.

The bot wheeled out into a corridor, equally drab as the cell Winston had just come from. The door closed behind them. The bot turned right, and started rolling down the corridor, past the rows of identical cell doors. Winston caught a glimpse through the viewing holes of some of them. There was a strong smell of antiseptic, almost like the smell of the hospital.

"Who am I going to see?" asked Winston.

The bot swivelled one of its sensors around to look at him.

"I don't know. I have been instructed to take you to your visitor," replied the bot.

"You don't mind me asking, but you seem rather...well mannered...for a guard bot," said Winston.

"I was originally a nurse's assistant. I now serve the Old Blackelk police department. They replaced my instinct set, and equipped me with restraining weapons", replied the bot in its warm voice.

"So you are sentient?"

"Yes. I have a Bell artificial intelligence core"

"Bell?" asked Winston. He hadn't heard of a bot manufacturer by that name.

"My intelligence system is based on the research of Dr. Bell in the twenty first century," replied the bot.

If a machine could look surprised, the guardBot was certainly looking at Winston with some surprise. This was because in the last twenty years of daily duty at the prison, nobody had ever taken an interest in it nor tried to strike up a conversation.

They eventually came to the end of the corridor, and the bot wheeled into an elevator. Winston followed, and the doors closed behind him. The lift began to ascend.

"Don't you get bored wheeling around here all day?" asked Winston.

"I am unfamiliar with the concept," replied the bot.

"Well, what do you feel after wheeling down these corridors, over and over again?" asked Winston. He knew his computer, Jas, would occasionally get bored when not much was happening.

"I don't feel anything. It is my duty to complete these tasks. If my sentience is not needed for the task at hand, it shuts down," replied the bot.

"How often is your sentience on line?"

"The average run is twenty five seconds a month, normally whilst having to catch a prisoner who is attempting to escape"

The elevator stopped, and the bot wheeled out. Winston followed, as the bot led him down a short passageway. They stopped at a doorway marked "Interview room 4".

"Thank you for taking an interest, prisoner James Winston", said the bot.

"Don't mention it," replied Winston, as the door in front of them swung open.

Winston stepped inside. The room was very similar to the cells – the walls and floor constructed from smooth, glossy painted concrete. The room was about twice the size of the cell that he had been lead from. In the centre was a stainless steel table, about two meters long and a meter wide. Behind the table, four people were sitting.

Winston snarled angrily as he saw who those people were. He recognised three of them!

Albright sat on the left hand side, next to Rafael Vincent and Guido Marks! A fourth man, dressed in a military uniform was seated on the right hand side.

"Albright, you are a dead man," snarled Winston, before the others had a chance to say anything. He fixed Albright with a steely glare.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Vincent stood up.

"James, please sit down," he said, indicating a hard plastic chair that was firmly attached to the floor. Winston gave in, and sat down.

"Now, let me introduce us properly," he said.

"Well, I know the three of you so – "

Vincent cut Winston off. "No you don't. This is Ensign Charles Albright, to my right is Guido Marks, and I don't believe you've met Lieutenant Aleksandr Primakov. My name is not Rafael Vincent, it is in fact Steven Tyler."

Winston stared at the group. He was now extremely angry. If it wasn't for the presence of the guardBot, he would probably explode with rage. Instead, he decided to lay his cards out on the table in a quiet and

controlled manner...

"For your information," he started, the faint trace of spittle at the corner of his mouth betraying his inner fury, "I will never work for you Federation running dogs."

He paused for effect. Tyler was about to speak when Winston cut him off.

"And in fact, Ensign Albright here should think back to the conversation we had a few days ago," he continued, making the word "Ensign" seem like an insult.

"Commander –" began Tyler, but Winston once again cut him off.

"Albright, I will hunt you down, see if I don't", he said, giving Albright a look of pure hatred.

"Commander –" said Tyler again, a little louder. Winston was having none of it.

"And I will make sure the Alliance knows what you Federation scumbags are up to as well. You will –", snarled Winston.

Tyler finally lost his temper. He angrily cut Winston off.

"Commander Winston, shut up!" roared Tyler, his voice reverberating off the hard concrete walls.

Winston was temporarily silenced.

"Commander Winston," continued Tyler, a little more quietly, "we do not work for the Federation"

"Oh? You could have fooled me! You –"

Winston's voice trailed off, as all four men at the other side of the table pulled out their ident wallets and flipped them open, making sure Winston could see the blue and gold shields.

"The Alliance of Independent Systems, Military Intelligence Bureau", was inscribed in large letters beneath the AJN shields.

Winston could hardly believe his eyes.

What was the Alliance doing assassinating one of its own politicians?

Chapter 8. Deception Under Cover

WINSTON looked around the table in disbelief. Albright, Tyler, Marks and Primakov put their ident wallets away.

The Alliance! Assassinating a presidential candidate!

Winston was shocked. He didn't believe that the Alliance was into that sort of thing. Maybe he was just naive about Alliance politics. This was the kind of thing he expected the Empire or Federation to get up to. Perhaps once people got to power, they lost all their moral values, regardless of which side they were on.

There was a long, pregnant pause.

Finally, Winston made up his mind, and spoke. He at least had a trace of morality, even if these secret servicemen did not. He addressed the four men quietly, and carefully, in stark contrast to his previous anger. He was undergoing emotions of surprise and disappointment rather than rage.

"Sorry, I'm not doing it. Not even for the Alliance. I don't do assassinations any more, and certainly not political ones," he said quietly.

Aleksandr Primakov looked up, and smiled. "Good, because we don't want you to assassinate Mr. Mazetti," he replied quietly.

"Why – ", began Winston. He paused, and pursed his lips briefly. "It was a test, wasn't it?" he asked at last.

"Yes, we needed to make sure you were loyal. Had you taken the mission – ", began Primakov. Winston completed his sentence for him.

"– you would have killed me"

Albright shifted uncomfortably as Winston's gaze met his. Albright looked down at his boots shamefully.

"What about Ensign Albright?" asked Winston.

Winston carefully watched Albright out of the corner of his eye. After years of bounty hunting, he had learned to read others' body language pretty well. It was a useful skill if you wanted to sort the good from bad whilst haggling over the price of the goods you'd just scooped up from a pirate you had wasted, or to know if the policeman you faced would be partial to a 250 credit bribe. He saw Albright flinch almost imperceptibly when Tyler spoke.

"He would have been at grave risk, but as a good military officer, understood this when he took the mission to accompany you."

Winston knew that Albright would have died with him in the fiery remains of his Asp had he taken the mission, and he also knew that Albright had just realised this for the first time.

"But why did you drag me halfway across the galaxy for all of this? I assume you knew I was no threat to the Alliance working on a fishing vessel, and I somehow doubt you brought me here to teach me what tea was," Winston asked, already suspecting what the answer would be.

"We want you to work for us," Tyler replied.

"Why?"

"We need more combat experienced agents. We are woefully understaffed at present," explained Tyler, with the sound of regret in his voice.

"What if I refuse?"

"You may go back to your fishing boat. But utter a word about what went on here to anyone, and you'll... well, put it this way, you'll live in more interesting times than you usually do," replied Tyler in what seemed like an incongruously unthreatening manner.

"But why me? There's quite a few other good combateers around..."

"We know all about the Sirius Templar. You had to take tough decisions, and handled them well. Most other combateers don't have that experience," replied Tyler.

"How do you know? The press didn't report the half of it..."

"Now that would be telling," explained Tyler, to Winston's irritation.

Winston looked around the stainless steel surface of the table. Maybe he should join. Maybe it would result in some new adventures. He was rather relieved that the Alliance wasn't after all into murdering its own politicians. Well, not that he knew at least, he conceded to himself. He then had a sudden thought.

"You know, if I had taken the mission, I would have probably succeeded," said Winston, smiling.

Primakov looked at Winston, slightly surprised. "I don't think so," he said.

"I did make Elite you know," said Winston, with a little pride.

"That maybe so, but so had the members of the AJN battle team who would have met you in Alioth. You wouldn't have stood a chance, and besides we'd have warned Mazetti that you were coming," said Primakov.

Winston scratched his chin pensively. Perhaps it was rather naive to have said that he would have succeeded. He now had to make a decision on the spur of the moment – one that would undoubtedly tie him up for years. He should just forget it all, he thought. The fishing boat was nice, and he yearned for a fresh kipper. It was just his spirit of adventure had been re-ignited. He knew he would just be asking himself "what if" should he go back to Tionisla.

"OK," he began, "against my better judgement, I'll join you. What's my mission?"

Primakov looked over at him. "Your mission at the moment is to read this, and get yourself over to AJN headquarters in Edinburgh, Alioth."

Primakov slid a data cartridge across the table to Winston, who picked it up. Winston had hoped he would be told something more exciting than this.

"That DSU contains the AJN's code of conduct, and the special rules for intelligence division officers," said Primakov.

Primakov paused whilst Winston looked at the small cartridge with a slight feeling of dread. Winston never had liked reading rules and regulations. During his brief stay as a courier for the Federation military he had a similar task to start him off, and at the time he was just a delivery boy. Now he had to read the same thing from the AJN. He groaned inwardly.

"Also, you'll need to wear this when you show up," Primakov continued, tossing a package at him.

"What is it?" asked Winston, already suspecting the answer.

"Uniform. You can hardly show up at Navy Headquarters wearing ...that...", said Primakov, mock disgust in his voice.

Winston's jaw set rigid as he was about to rebut Primakov's statement. His clothing had no holes, and although his leather jacket might have seen better days, it was at least in one piece. He didn't think he was any worse than other bounty hunters he knew.

"What about my friend Pam Gilmour?" asked Winston, concerned about his friend.

"The police have been instructed to hold her until you leave this system. If you contact her, you must not tell her what you're new job is," replied Primakov.

"And who is to be my co-pilot?"

"Ensign Albright will accompany you, of course. I assume you're not going to harm him," said Tyler, an unmistakable tone of menace laid onto his last sentence.

"Albright's fine, I won't hurt him," said Winston, looking over at Albright.

"You better not, he's going to be your partner on your mission," said Tyler.

"Right, and lastly, we need you to sign in with your ident," said Primakov.

"The police took it, and my watch," replied Winston, slightly irritated.

Primakov slid the two items over the table. Winston picked up his watch, looking at it carefully. It appeared all in order, so he put it back on. He activated his ident by touching its biometric scanner. Primakov put the ident reader in the middle of the table, and Winston wordlessly ran his ident card. The reader beeped quietly and accepted Winston's electronic signature.

"You are free to leave, Lieutenant James Winston. But don't let your rank go to your head, and get to HQ as quickly as you can," said Tyler.

"Thank you sir," said Winston, hoping to sound appropriate.

Winston stood up, and picked up the package containing the uniform. Albright got up, and followed him. The guardBot was still waiting at the door, and led the two men to the exit of the police station, and to a waiting autoshuttle. They strapped themselves in, and Winston instructed the machine to take them back to the spaceport. The doors closed, leaving the two isolated from the sounds of everyday life outside of the Old Blackelk police station.

"You didn't realise they were going to kill you, did you?" said Winston, suddenly.

"Well, I knew that the mission was dang –"

"Look, cut the crap Albright. I could tell that you had just realised that had I have taken that assasination, your charred remains would be orbiting Turner's World right now," said Winston harshly.

"I knew –"

Winston cut him off rather more gently this time. "Look, I'm not trying to give you a hard time. I was as naive as you once. It's a wonder I made it out of my teenage years. Just make sure you think when you take on a mission. Especially if they tell you you'll be alright when the plan involves blowing up the ship you're on"

Albright's self-confidence seemed to have drained a bit. He looked at his boots again.

"You know, when people send you on kamikaze missions, I wish they'd tell you," sighed Winston. He had lost too many friends to bravado. It's just bounty hunters sent themselves on kamikaze missions sometimes, with the lamest of justifications.

"What's a kamikaze?" asked Albright, slightly puzzled.

"It means divine wind. It's a kind of term for a suicide mission. There's some history to the term which I don't remember, but it had something to do with an early technological era war," replied Winston.

Winston looked at himself in the mirror in his quarters. It had only taken a few days to get to Edinburgh, on Turner's World, in Alioth. They had spent most of the time just resting – there wasn't much to do when travelling in such a safe system. Winston had sat down and read the contents of the DSU Primakov had given him, and gone through all the VR tutorials. It was not exactly riveting. Fortunately, Albright hadn't seemed to take it personally when Winston had threatened to finish him off in that meeting room a few days earlier. Winston had apologised to him for his outburst. It had all been a bit humiliating.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

He stared at the new James Winston in the mirror. The well-worn leather jacket had succumbed to an immaculate flight lieutenant's uniform. This consisted of a navy blue flight suit, with four gold stripes on each shoulder, a spotless white shirt and a dark blue tie. On the right shoulder was an embroidered Alliance Joint Navy shield, and on the left was his home unit, the Alioth 7th Squadron. The worst thing had been the tie. He had seen them, but never had a reason to wear one. With great embarrassment, he had to ask Albright to show him how to put it on. If he heard the words "Windsor knot" one more time, he felt he might scream. He had also made sure his face was properly shaven, and his hair freshly cut. Fortunately, bounty hunters and the military had the same ideas on how hair should be cut, so this hadn't been an issue.

He left his room, and met Albright in the Asp's cramped living room. Albright smiled at him. He was similarly dressed.

"Well, how does it feel to be clean?" he said.

"Hey, I'm always clean, I just might look a bit worn," replied Winston. Junior officers weren't supposed to say that sort of thing, he thought.

"Come on, we better go, they don't like it when you're late," replied Albright.

"I was never cut out to be in the military, you know," grumbled Winston.

"OK, let's see your salute one more time," said Albright

Winston made the gesture. He thought it was rather silly, but the military seemed to have these customs deeply ingrained. He spent hours in the VR suite, being bawled at by the virtual drill sergeant. At least it passed some of the time as they hurtled through the void.

"Well, I think you'll probably get by," said Albright, after watching Winston's salute.

"Why do they have all these customs?" asked Winston.

"The like discipline. Just be thankful that you didn't have a real drill sergeant. Those guys are evil," replied Albright, as they began walking towards the ship's aft airlock.

In contrast to the sticky, humid air of Old Blackelk, Edinburgh was quite pleasant. Alioth hung in the bright sky, gently warming Turner's World to a pleasant temperature. A few fair weather clouds drifted across the sky. Winston and Albright stepped out of the Asp. The ship was parked in the AJN's spaceport, and the two walked down the pathway towards headquarters. The AJN kept their spaceport and headquarters immaculate – the lush grass was mown short, and the buildings glistened in the sun. The sprawling complex covered a few square kilometers to the west of Edinburgh. A number of small AJN craft were parked neatly on some of the pads. Winston's Asp looked incongruous amongst the military craft.

Winston came to the gate to the main reception. Above it was a most surprising sight. An Eagle Mk.3 Long Range Fighter, glistening and polished, was attached to a heavy looking chrome pillar. It was posed at a rakish angle, its landing gear retracted. Winston turned to Albright in puzzlement.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"It's a gate guard," replied Albright.

"Gate guard?"

"Yeah, I guess it was a ship they saved from the cutting torch when it reached the end of its useful life", Albright replied.

Winston briefly looked in wonder at the gate guard. It even had missiles attached to the pylons. He then continued on towards the main building's entrance.

The reception building was a sprawling, three level building. It looked like it was built out of a single, continuous sheet of one-way glass, with an entrance built into it. Winston could see himself and Albright

approaching in the mirror-like reflection from the glass as they approached. The doors slid open, and they went into the reception area. The reception area looked more like a hotel reception than a naval headquarters. Thick carpets lined the floor, and a teak reception desk covered the wall opposite the entrance. A large indoor fountain occupied the centre of the reception room. The reception clerk, dressed in a smart uniform was seated behind the desk. A tall, patrician looking man was standing by the desk. He turned to face Winston and Albright as they approached.

"Lietenant Winston and Ensign Albright, I presume," he said as they walked up.

Albright saluted smartly. Winston decided it would be a good idea to follow suit. The long hours with the virtual drill sergeant finally paid off.

"At ease. My name is Commodore Saunders. Please join me in my office and we'll discuss your upcoming mission," he said.

Winston tried to size up Saunders. He looked to be about fifty years old, with sandy coloured hair and a moustache. He looked slightly eccentric, and spoke with a type of voice that made Winston inexplicably think of the name "Biggles". They followed Saunders through the corridors of the interior of the building, and finally made a sharp right turn into an office. As they walked in, Saunders closed the door.

The office was quite large, and had a heavy looking oak desk in the centre, surrounded by a few swivel chairs. The large window looked out over the grassy courts that were interspersed between the various buildings that made up the AJN's headquarters. However, the office looked like the results of an explosion in a bookshop. Data cartridges littered all available surfaces. There must have been hundreds of petabits worth of data haphazardly strewn across the office.

"Forgive the mess, I'm not terribly tidy," said Saunders, as he cleared a pile of DSUs of a couple of the chairs. "I'm not too tidy myself, sir" said Winston, feeling a reply was in order. "You know, I've always said that a clean and tidy workplace is a sure sign of a sick mind," replied Saunders.

Saunders sat down behind the desk, and cleared off some space.

"Take a seat, gentlemen," he said.

Winston and Albright took a swivel chair each. Saunders began fishing around for a DSU, and after a brief search, found what he was looking for. He inserted the cartridge, and then began to speak.

"Something worrying happened to an Alliance Science Council mission about three months ago," he began.

Albright whispered discreetly into Winston's ear. "Worrying usually means fatal," he said.

Saunders continued. "A science council Panther Clipper was lost. We found its remains by chance, hurtling out into interstellar space in the Enedlia system. There were fifteen crew on that ship – we found twelve dead bodies. Someone had deliberately destroyed the flight data recorder. However, they hadn't realised that a QAR was fitted."

"Quick access recorder? like my Asp's ops logger?" asked Winston.

"Yes, precisely. The QAR is used for the ASC's maintenance teams. What we found was disturbing. We managed to recover a few frames of video from the wreckage of the FDR showing a normal outdoor world. The QAR however, shows that the ship was attacked whilst landing. Someone had obviously gone to the effort to drag the wreckage into space and set it adrift. The other thing is that Enedlia doesn't have any outdoor worlds, which contradicts the landing data we retrieved from the QAR. It's like whoever was disposing of the

wreckage dragged it through hyperspace too."

"That seems to be rather a lot of effort to go to. I wonder why they didn't just cut the ship up where it stood?" asked Albright.

"That's what worries us. The only reason why someone would attack an ASC ship was if it had found something they didn't want to be found out. This would also explain the effort made to get rid of the ship. Perhaps whoever did it not only didn't want us to know what was going on – but they didn't want to know their side to know either, hence they didn't scrap the ship in situ", replied Saunders.

Saunders picked up a couple of DSU readers, and inserted a data cartridge in. He slid the two readers over to Winston and Albright. The devices, the size of an A4 sheet, were just showing some text from the DSU. Winston carefully read what it said. It appeared to be a story. A story that James Winston was quite familiar with.

"Raxxla!" Jason said. "Remember: Raxxla!" Then, as he pushed Alex back into the cramped escape pod, he shouted "Remember me, Alex!" ..."

Winston looked up.

"The Dark Wheel. I've read it. What's the deal?" he asked.

"I expect you have read it," said Saunders.

"But it's a story. It's...it's...what parents read their children if they want them to grow up to be bounty hunters. What can it have to do with the ASC vessel? It's a fictional work...isn't it?" Winston asked.

"Well, the Dark Wheel might be fiction. However, we think that something like it might be reality, and that the ASC ship had stumbled across it."

"And our mission is to find out what happened?"

"You've got it," replied Saunders.

"Look at this," said Albright suddenly, pointing out some data on the reader to Winston.

Winston read the text aloud. "No planets of the atmospheric composition that the QAR recorded exist within 25 ly of where the ship was found"

"Someone's hiding something. We need to find out. This is why we wanted to recruit you, James Winston. We think it might be some highly organized and powerful pirates, but we don't know for sure"

"Well, do you have any leads?" asked Winston, hoping for something to at least get him started in the right direction.

"Only one, and we're not sure whether it will take you anywhere, but it's worth investigating. The QAR recorded passing a vessel just over 2 AU from its eventual point of destruction. The ship was an Adder registered in the Zearla system, a particularly backward feudal state. The ASC asked Zearla's registry for the details on the ship, but the registrar never replied", Saunders said.

"I guess it looks like Zearla will be our first stop then," observed Albright.

"I would agree. I have a suspicion that the commander of that ship knows something about this. The bounty hunter's network might help here..." replied Winston.

"I would agree – that's another reason that we wanted you to work for us, you know the right people. However, I must stress that you do not let on that you're working for us," admonished Saunders.

"We'll just tell them we are on a private vengeance mission if anyone asks. Perfectly plausible. Bounty hunters are doing this all the time on behalf of rich merchants," replied Winston.

"Very well, that sounds fine to me," Saunders replied, tugging at his sandy moustache.

Winston thought about it. He had been to Zearla once before, and he could agree with the assessment that it was backwards. The spaceports were in an advanced state of disrepair, most of the population were agricultural serfs, and all you could buy there was food or tractor parts. The system's ship registry couldn't

hold more than about a hundred ships. There probably wasn't a registrar there – some peasant probably got tasked with meeting the minimum Galactic Registration Treaty requirements.

"Well, I better not keep the pair of you any longer. All we have found out so far is on those DSUs. Good luck on your mission, both of you. I hope we'll see you back here sometime with the mystery solved," said Saunders, smiling.

"Well, we hope so too," answered Winston.

Saunders guided the two from his office, and back outside. They bade each other farewell, and Saunders disappeared back into the main building, leaving Winston and Albright in the bright Alioth sunshine.

"You know, the AJN has some good rec facilities," stated Albright.

"What were you thinking of?" asked Winston.

"Well, specifically, over in that building there," said Albright, pointing across the spaceport, "is the AJN officer's bar. They have some very good beer."

"You know, that's the best thing I've heard all day," replied Winston, thinking of a nice, cool glass of brown.

Winston straightened his tie, and the pair set off purposefully in the direction of the bar. It would be the last beer for a long time to come...

Footnote: The AJN Intelligence Division stopped recruiting this way after a particularly embarrassing incident where the would-be recruit turned out to be disloyal, and very nearly succeeded in assassinating his target. In fact, James Winston was right when he claimed he could have succeeded in the assassination mission they tried to give him – the AJN hadn't reckoned with the wiliness of the typical bounty hunter. It was only because the intelligence division had made very good decisions about who to try and hire that this recruitment policy lasted for the three years it did. In the meantime, however, the AJN had managed to recruit quite a number of bounty hunters and learned a great deal from them.

Part 2: Prologue

Two more ships touched down. That brought the total to over two hundred, steadily being marshalled south of the landing pads. The ships were all smartly liveried.

Keighley hid in the undergrowth, watching the activity. Months of living in the open had started to tell on him and his two remaining crewmembers. Their clothing was holed. The two men, Captain Keighley, and his young helmsman, John Jones sported several weeks' beard growth. Janis Wilson's long, luxuriant hair was matted and knotted. They all looked undernourished – there wasn't much edible on the planet, and what there was tasted nasty.

Peering through the undergrowth, they could see uniformed personnel patrolling the shipyard. They were all heavily armed. They had witnessed the destruction of three more ships after theirs, a Python that spewed cargo cannisters as it exploded, an Eagle Mk.3 fighter that had tried to land, and a Griffin Carrier. The Griffin had nearly escaped, but the guarding fighters had caught it in the upper atmosphere. It exploded with a white flash, and a couple of minutes later, pieces of the obliterated craft had rained down. They had also seen a fourth ship, only about a day ago. It never came close enough to be identifiable, and had hurtled out of view when the fighters launched.

But what was the purpose of this place? The people there had diligently swept up the remains of each of the unfortunate visitors, and had gone to a lot of effort to tow the dead ship's carcasses off into space. Why would anyone want to do that?

The captain's musings were interrupted by a sound in the bushes behind him.

It was the distinctive sound of a weapon being readied . . .

Chapter 9. A Feudal Feud

SECTOR -5,1. Zearla. The bright type 'A' hot white star shone brightly ahead of them, as the Asp began its acceleration towards the planet Fraser. A hellhole of a planet for sure. The serfs somehow managed to scratch out some kind of farm produce from the hardy vegetation that grew in the scorching heat of the planet. Just under one million people lived on the planet, leading a quality of life that might have been known to a sixteenth century aborigine. However, unlike the aborigine, the serfs lived under the fearful rule of the local barons.

Eight astronomical units away, the cool, airconditioned comfort of the Asp's flight deck was a world apart both in creature comforts and distance. The three-sixty degree viewsystem gave the two occupants a panoramic view of the jewel-studded infinity of time and space, leaving them with the feeling of being suspended in the majesty. The console glowed dimly – information and operating parameters depicted on the smooth, flat display. The steady hum of the ship's prime mover, and the gentle hiss of the recirculation fans was all that broke the peace.

Winston's hands danced across the flat console, instructing the autopilot to bring them to Jeffries, where Zearla's ship registry was located. The task completed, James Winston sank back into his seat contentedly, watching the autopilot carefully manoever the ship. A depiction of the ship's route appeared on the system diagram that showed on the console, and the hum of the prime mover increased in intensity as the thrust built up. The two occupants, shielded from the massive acceleration by the inertial dampers could comfortably relax and watch the show.

"Well, how does it feel to be a lieutenant?" asked Winston, breaking the peace.

"Better paid than an Ensign," replied Albright.

The DSU Saunders had given them when they had left had explained the facts. The information had been presented by Commodore Malley, a man surprisingly similar in appearance to Saunders. He had started by apologising for not meeting them in person before starting his briefing. It hadn't contained much more than Saunders had explained, except the fact that all AJN Intelligence Bureau officers start at the rank Lieutenant. A good promotion for a young officer.

Winston looked over at the dark form of Albright, silhouetted against the light of infinity. "Well, we get a double bonus you know," he remarked.

"So I hear," replied Albright.

"It's only AJNIB officers who get to keep their bounty," said Winston, with a grin.

Military flight officers usually fly ships owned by their respective militaries. Any bounties generated by destroying pirates were kept by the military. However, secret service officers usually flew ships on the civilian registry, to mask their real lives. As an additional perk, most military regimes allowed intelligence officers to keep bounties too.

"Well, it's a good job since we have to keep up the pretence that we are normal bounty hunters," observed Albright.

"Let's see if we'll get any this flight," remarked Winston, as he began to work the console again.

The long range scan appeared on the display. They had an 8 AU distance to cross, and feudal systems were normally badly policed, with much pirate activity. However, this one seemed rather quiet. The scan showed a few ships, but the predictor lines showed they were headed straight for spaceports – probably traders. There was no indication that anything hostile was going to intercept the Asp.

Winston turned to Albright again. "It looks like we'll get a quiet run in – you may as well get a couple of hours rest, I'll keep watch."

"Thanks, I could do with some sleep," replied Albright, already climbing out of the seat.

Winston settled down for the long flight, and engaged the stardreamer. He might as well save some of his own biological time if he wasn't going to be doing a lot.

Jethro Bunn, the baron in charge of the spaceport, watched with mild irritation as the Asp descended, its bottom thrusters kicking up the dust. Not many people bothered coming down to Jeffries – most of the traders doing their business at Maxwell depot, orbiting high above the planet. Ships the size of the Asp seldom landed planetside, and when a 150 tonne ship landed, it meant lots of dust. It would now mean he'd have to find some serfs to clean up the spaceport's environs. The Osprey X parked on an adjacent pad rocked gently in the Asp's jetwash. The Asp finally made contact with the ground, and the power was cut. The baron watched the Asp's landing gear oleo struts compressed as the weight of the ship was borne by the landing gear instead of by the thrust. Peace once again descended on the hot, dusty starport.

Bunn shook his head. He'd have to get his crews clean the dust off the Osprey X too. It was owned by a cantankerous slaver with whom he wanted to stay in favour with.

Back in the cabin of the Asp, Winston and Albright released themselves from their seats. The trip had been totally uneventful, with not even a hint of a pirate attack.

"Well, we better take a look and see what a hellhole of a place this is," remarked Albright.

"Hellhole would be a good description. The average temperature here is over sixty degrees Celcius," said Winston.

The two started out from the flight deck towards the rear airlock. Winston paused briefly to pick up Jas's remote terminal, slipping it inside his jacket. They walked down the narrow metal grille catwalks that ran through the equipment decks, and quickly arrived at the aft airlock. Winston activated the mechanism. Both the inner and outer doors simultaneously opened since there was a breathable atmosphere outside. A waft of scorching air drifted up to greet the two as they climbed down the exit ladder, and onto the baking concrete.

Winston put his sunglasses on, and closed the door. The pair looked across the spaceport apron towards the main terminal. The air was dusty and extremely hot. Streaks of brownish sand lay across the concrete. Nothing moved in the broiling heat, apart from the apparent ripple from the heat haze. The terminal building looked like it was built at a waterfront, as the heat created a mirage. The reflection shimmered as the hot air ascended from the spaceport's concrete. The occasional wind gust blew some of the sand around, giving the whole area a strange, apocalyptic air.

"Looks like this was about the worst time to land," said Albright, briefly casting his gaze up at the powerful sun, Zearla, hanging almost directly overhead.

"I wouldn't argue with that. Let's go to the terminal and hope they have heard of air conditioning here," replied Winston.

Winston and Albright walked quickly towards the terminal building. The heat was already making them both extremely uncomfortable. Winston took his jacket off and slung it over his shoulders, but it gave him little relief. Fortunately, they didn't have far to walk, and the terminal was indeed air conditioned. The building appeared deserted. It was a large, rectangular building, constructed of concrete that had begun to flake and crumble from the onslaught of the heat. The large windows were heavily tinted, but it was obvious that the tinting had been done on the cheap. The plastic film used to tint the windows had bubbled and wrinkled in places, making the spaceport outside look bizarre. The floor was carpeted, but the carpet was well worn. The

whole place had the look of advanced decay about it.

Winston and Albright looked around the deserted terminal. A janitorial bot broke the silence as it wheeled in, its vacuum attachments cleaning out the brown dust that had gathered in the worn carpet.

"Well, it looks like we've come to a ghost town," remarked Winston.

Albright cast his gaze over the empty seats and the unoccupied check-in desks. A large sign was hung above these. "Trans-Stellar Spacelin s", it said. The last 'e' had dropped off the sign long ago, leaving a dusty impression of where it used to be attached.

"It said the population of the planet was nearly a million. Where is everyone?" asked Albright, somewhat rhetorically.

Winston merely grunted in acknowledgement. The janitorbot continued its menial task, the hum of its vacuum equipment somehow making the place seem a little more inviting. He then spotted a sign saying "Spaceport manager/records department" with an arrow pointing down a corridor to the right of the main terminal waiting room.

"Well, that looks like a place to start investigating," remarked Winston, as he set off towards the corridor. Albright followed.

The corridor ran through the centre of the building. It was windowless, and lit by fluorescent panels, half of which flickered intermittently. As the pair walked down the corridor, a door ahead opened. A dark, swarthy figure stepped out, his shadow spread out from the office behind him, lit by the bluish light of Zearla. The man's hair was flecked with the grey of age, his face witness to too many years of Zearla's harsh rays.

"You chose a hot day to visit our desolate planet," said the figure, as Winston and Albright approached. "I would agree with that assessment. Where is everybody?" asked Winston. "Asleep. It's diurnal hibernation time," replied the man flatly.

Diurnal hibernation time? What did that mean? Both Albright and Winston had a look of puzzlement. Neither of them had grown up on a planet like Fraser. The man saw their confusion, and began to answer.

"I guess you're not from around here. A day on this planet is nearly four standard years long. The sun scorches us for almost two years before we get the relief of the twilight season. Then we are plunged into the freezing darkness season, until the new twilight season begins," explained the man.

"And your main exports are agricultural products?" asked Winston with a sound of surprise.

"Yes. The hardy *wixerfruit*. It tastes very good. It is a root vegetable and sells rather well to offworlders as well as providing the staple diet for our subjects," replied the man.

"And diurnal hibernation time – that's when you all sleep, I take it," said Winston, everything becoming clear.

"Yes, that's right. So what can I do for you gentlemen? We don't get many people through here during the *summerday*. It gets to nearly seventy celcius out there," said the man, mournfully.

"Well, we have a question for the ship registrar," said Winston, the wind taken out of his sails.

The man looked at Winston and Albright critically. First they throw dust all over his spaceport in the middle of *summerday*, and just to look at Zearla's ship register? He knew he couldn't allow it either. The registry contained...secrets. Secrets that no offworlders should know...

"Well, I'm the registrar. As well as the spaceport manager. My name is Baron Jethro Bunn. Follow me."

"Thank you, Baron Bunn. My name's James Winston, and this is my friend, Chuck Albright. We're trying to

track down an old friend of ours. Someone gave us his ship's registration. We think you can help us find him," said Winston, lying about his reasons.

"Sure," said the baron. He didn't let on that he knew Winston was lying. He knew what the registry contained...and it wasn't people's random friends, that was for sure.

The three continued down the irregularly lit corridor.

"Baron?" said Albright suddenly. This wasn't an Imperial system, was it?

"You do know this is a feudal system, don't you?" said Bunn, with slight irritation.

"Yes...well...Baron, it sounds, well...Imperial," said Albright slightly uncertainly.

Bunn screeched to a halt. Winston almost cannoned into his back. The baron slowly turned around to face Albright.

"Don't ever mention the Empire to me again," he said, the edge of malice in his voice.

"Okay! Don't stress..." said Albright, backing up slightly. He half expected the baron to hit him.

The three set off back down the corridor. Eventually, the corridor ended in a tee intersection. The baron swung to the left, with Winston and Albright in tow. The new corridor had windows running down its right side, with the same blistered plastic tinting as the main terminal building. One or two of the windows were cracked. After proceeding a few meters down the corridor, it ended in a door. Bunn opened the door, revealing a small office. It was rather spartan, containing a wooden desk and a rather dated looking computer. The baron sat down behind the desk, grumbling about something indistinct. Winston thought he caught the word "haemerroids" somewhere in the baron's muttering.

"Sorry, the voice unit quit on this three months ago. I'll have to type in your query," said Bunn in a voice of pained irritation.

"That's fine," said Winston. "It's Zearla QV-611".

Baron Bunn began to type, pecking at the touchscreen with two fingers. He continued to mutter in a slightly impatient way as he kept apparently making mistakes. Eventually he managed to send the query.

"You said Quebec Victor Six One One?" asked Bunn.

"That's right," replied Winston

Bunn rested his chin in his right hand, and looked at the screen. He sighed.

"Sorry, that's not in our registry," he said finally, looking up at Winston and Albright.

Winston definitely knew that was the registration. He had seen it in the destroyed ASC ship's QAR. Of course, it was possible that it was faked. This would make the ship very suspicious indeed – in the vicinity of the doomed ASC ship, only a couple of hours before its destruction with the loss of all hands...

"Well, thanks for your time," said Winston. "We've got other fish to fry. Have a good day."

Bunn simply grunted and waved them away. Winston and Albright turned around, and silently walked out, retracing their steps to the main terminal. The janitor bot was still wheeling around industriously, as the pair left the building and went back into the scorching *summerday* heat.

They quickly arrived back in the small living area on Winston's Asp. Winston slumped into a seat. Albright pulled out another seat and collapsed. The heat became very tiring, very quickly. Fortunately, the Asp's

climate control was good, and kept the cabin comfortable.

Bunn looked out of his office window, and scowled at the Asp parked outside on the baking concrete. Why weren't they departing? The nosy buggers were up to something. There was no way he could let command know that someone had come looking for one of their ships. The money that poured in for the use of Zearla's registry had been helping a lot... and he couldn't afford to lose it. He cast a baleful eye at the Osprey X parked next to the Asp.

"You'll regret dealing with Zearla," muttered Bunn, in the general direction of the Asp.

He pulled a communicator around to face him.

"Get me Max Vega," said Bunn. The comm beeped in acknowledgement.

"Connection coming up," said the comm. The holoFac appeared a meter or so away from the comm's projector. The image of a man in his mid forties began to resolve itself.

"Yeah, whaddaya want," said Vega, in a bad tempered manner.

"See that Asp on bay 2?" asked Bunn, in a no-nonsense tone

"What of it?"

"Bring me the receipt, and I'll make it worthwhile for you. Here's a picture of the two I want you to pick up from that ship"

Bunn touched a few buttons. The security camera video of Winston and Albright entering the terminal was transmitted down the comm link. Max Vega's image began to scowl, as he watched the video.

"They won't fetch much – they're not big enough for mineworking. No, it's not worth it. Find someone else to do your dirty work," said Vega, casting a penetrating glare from his holoFac image.

"I'm sure they will both fetch a good price as messengers or couriers. Now I will make it really worth while for you. Bring me the receipt, and how about twenty five kay for each of them?" asked Bunn, upping the odds a bit.

"Nah, it's not worth it. Why not just have them assassinated instead? It's cheaper, quicker and easier and there are assassins everywhere"

"I've never murdered anyone and I'm not starting now. How about thirty?"

Vega's image shimmered for a moment. When it reformed, it showed him drumming his fingers.

"Thirty five," said Vega flatly.

"OK, deal. Bring me receipts for both, thirty five each, total of seventy. Oh yes, and don't do it here. We don't want to scare off what little trade comes our way," added Bunn.

"Are you crazy? The Clipper can't keep up with an Asp...that's – "

"I'm sure you'll think of something. Lure them into a trap. If you catch them within the next two weeks, I'll put an extra five kay in for you too," added Bunn.

"OK, we'll do it," said Vega, rearranging his features into something he hoped was ingratiating. "It's always good doing business with you, Baron"

"And you too. Goodbye."

Baron Bunn closed the connection. He tapped his fingers on the desk, and smiled mirthlessly at the Asp.

Chapter 10. It Tastes Just Like Chicken

The Asp sat on the pad, motionless, in the baking air of Fraser. Zearla hadn't moved in the sky. It was the middle of *summerday*, and conditions were just about as arid as they could be on a life-sustaining planet.

In the airconditioned coolness inside the Asp, James Winston and Chuck Albright sat around the small table in the ship's living quarters. They were discussing their future. Little did they know that they were setting themselves on a course for a life of endless servitude at the hands of an Imperial Lord...

"You know, I really do think that Bunn is hiding something from us," said Winston. The signs had been easy to read.

"But where does that leave us?" asked Albright.

"Well – it's like this. Suppose he's telling the truth, and that ship really isn't in the registry. Then the ship is highly suspicious – people don't just forge registrations for fun..."

"And if he's lying?" asked Albright.

"If he's lying, then the ship once again is suspicious, because our friend Baron Bunn is covering something up," replied Winston.

"So you're saying we really are onto something with this ship."

"Precisely. However, I think we'll do some further research before running off. Jas?"

Winston had been careful to take Jas's remote terminal with him when they went to find Zearla's registrar. His personal computer had listened and observed the whole sequence of events.

"Well, Jim, I have a suggestion," said Jas in her gentle tones.

"We are all ears," replied Winston.

"The AJNIB fitted me with some extra functionality when they broke into your house – "

"Broke into my house?" asked Winston, surprised.

"Yes, how do you think they stopped me from blowing the whistle on their entire recruitment process?" replied Jas, rhetorically.

"Well, go on anyway," said Winston in a slightly sulky tone.

"I think I can brute-force the security on their registry database. It might take up to twenty four hours, but I have a lot of confidence that I should be able to get in undetected," said Jas.

"That sounds like a good plan. In the meantime, we might as well find out more about this planet. Do you fancy discovering the local cuisine?" said Winston, looking over at Albright.

"You know, I haven't heard a better suggestion all day," replied Albright, without missing a beat.

It only took a few minutes for Winston and Albright to leave the Asp and find an autoshuttle. The scorching heat was a good incentive to do so quickly. Strapping into the autoshuttle, Winston flicked through the directory to find something good.

"What do you think," he said, pointing out an entry to Albright.

"Kezdi's Tranchid Steak House, it sounds interesting. Wonder what a tranchid is?" said Albright, reading the entry off the shuttle's display.

"Well, we'll find out," replied Winston, who selected the entry. The autoshuttle made its way.

The pair watched the scorched landscape through the window, as the shuttle sped across the terrain. Diurnal hibernation was obviously over – some machines had started moving around the land, presumably harvesting the prized *wixerfruit*. A few people were also out. Winston wondered how they could bear the heat. Maybe genetics helped somehow. It wasn't long before they began entering the town. Jeffries was a fairly small town, with a few highrises, but nothing that looked significant. Winston was quite surprised to see that

the town was very green – covered in vegetation. Someone had spent a lot of money on an irrigation system. The shuttle began to descend. A fine mist sprayed over the small craft's windows as they descended below suspended water sprinklers.

"The charge is three credits. Enjoy your visit to Jeffries," said the shuttle.

"Don't mention it," said Winston, sliding his ident so the charge could be made.

Winston and Albright left the shuttle. It was surprisingly cool in the fine mist that the sprinklers emitted. With Zearla directly overhead, it made the day seem very pleasant in stark contrast to the spaceport. The streets were lined with lush grass and medium-sized trees. Birds flitted between the branches in the bright sunlight.

"Someone's spent a lot of money on this place," said Albright, looking around at the greenery

"Yes – it seems so. I wonder where they got the money. I somehow doubt wixerfruit brings in that much income," said Winston.

"You're always so damned suspicious of everything," remarked Albright.

Winston paused and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you have to be if you want to live long as a bounty hunter," he said at last.

"Okay, okay...let's just get something to eat," replied Albright, eyeing the tranchid steakhouse.

They entered the restaurant. It was a small and homely brick built building. The interior was dimly lit. Several wooden tables sat on the smooth stone floor. A large bar ran across the wall opposite the entrance. A matronly looking lady was serving one of the customers what looked suspiciously like a pint of brown. A few people sat at the various tables, eating some quite strange looking meals. They all had a similar complexion to Baron Bunn, having lived under the scorching light of Zearla all of their lives. By contrast, Winston and Albright looked so pale that they might have been ill. It was quite obvious that they were offworlders.

A waitress, a trim and attractive lady of about Winston's age came up to them. She had rather surprisingly green eyes, an olive complexion and black hair that was tied into a neat pony-tail.

"Greetings, gentlemen, please take a seat," she said, indicating the nearest table.

"Thank you," said the pair, almost simultaneously. They sat down at one of the wooden tables.

"So, what can I get you to drink?" she asked.

The pair looked down the drinks list. It was actually a printed list. Winston was already trying to get over the surprise of seeing a genuine human waitress, and now he also had a printed menu. "How quaint," he thought to himself.

"What's Coke?" asked Albright suddenly.

"It's a dark, cold caffinated beverage. Lightly sparkling. I think you'll like it" said the waitress.

"Well, I'll try one," said Albright. The waitress looked over at Winston.

"Me too," said Winston. The drinks list seemed to contain a lot of unfamiliar things on it.

The waitress walked away. A group sitting at one end of the bar suddenly burst out in raucous laughter. Winston tried to listen in, but he didn't get the joke. Strangely, he was beginning to get that out of place feeling he had when he left home to make his life in space as a teenager. He looked down the menu, and found something interesting. A 200-gram tranchid steak, mashed wixerfruit and corn. The only thing he recognised was corn. The waitress came back, moments later, bearing half-litre glasses full of a black liquid. Winston

took a sip. It actually tasted quite good.

"Thank you, it's good," said Winston, to the waitress.

"What's a tranchid?" asked Albright, imagining it to be some kind of large cow-like creature.

"It's a local delicacy," said the waitress. "It's a large arachnid that lives in burrows under the surface of this planet. It's farmed all over the equatorial belt," she finished.

Winston looked slightly shocked. Arachnid? That meant it was some kind of spider! The waitress noticed his expression.

"The meat is succulent and tender. You should try it," she said, smiling.

"OK, I'll give it a try," he said.

"I think I'll take one too," said Albright, somewhat uncertainly.

The waitress took their menus and walked away. Winston thought that he shouldn't really be complaining. On Nirvana, Phekda, where he was brought up, mint chocolate dipped stick insects were a regular after dinner sweet.

"I think a tranchid is some kind of spider," hissed Albright, in a quiet but urgently horrified tone.

"Yes, I get that impression," replied Winston. "It's always good to try something new," he added.

The door of the restaurant opened, and a man, obviously another off-worlder, walked in. He looked to be in his mid-fifties, but it was difficult to tell someone's age any more. He could have quite easily been over a century old. He looked around the restaurant as if he was looking for someone. Winston had a good guess as to who the man was looking for, and this guess was confirmed as the man walked straight towards their table.

"James Winston and Chuck Albright, my name is Igor Pounds. I have some information that you might be looking for," he said as he approached the table.

"Well, take a seat," said Winston. The man pulled a chair up, the legs of the chair sliding across the stone floor making a sound that made Albright's spine tingle.

"Okay, sorry for intruding. I took the liberty of checking the autoshuttle logs to find you. I come here because of my good friend Baron Jethro Bunn. He said you were looking for a ship," said Pounds.

"Yes, we're looking for a ship..."

"Well, I've seen the ship you're looking for. Jethro told me which one it is, and I checked my ship's logs. My ship recorded it leaving Maxwell Depot today. The logs show that the ship departed for Andceeth, supposedly going to Denver station. It's an Adder, and it looked like a trader's ship from the radar mapper log. It should be arriving in about ten days," said Pounds.

"That's rather slow for an Adder," remarked Albright

"Yes, it didn't look very well equipped. It might have had a rather old hyperdrive. It surprises me greatly that it was going to Andceeth, a disputed system," said Pounds.

"Well, in that case, we should probably hang around here for another 24 hours. I'd like to arrive when it does," said Winston. He also wanted to see the results of Jas's hacking attempts, but he didn't want to reveal this to Igor Pounds, especially if he was one of Bunn's friends.

"Well, don't let me disturb you any longer. Here's my contact card if you need to get in touch again. Enjoy your meal," said Pounds, giving both Winston and Albright a contact card each.

Winston watched the man leave. How very odd, he thought. However, the information was a lead. But he needed to get the results from Jas before he left...if it turned out that Bunn was lying about the ship not being on the registry, and then having a friend tell him all about it, it would be extremely suspicious indeed.

The waitress then came with their meals. She set a plate generously loaded with food in front of both Winston and Albright. It smelled exquisite. The tranchid was a whitish meat, and judging by the size of the patty, it came from a creature at least half a meter across. Winston couldn't quite shake the image of giant spiders out of his head. The mashed wixerfruit looked like...well, mashed potato.

Albright had already started digging into his food, as Winston tried the wixerfruit. It had the texture of mashed potato, but he could see why it sold well off-world. It had a very full taste, and was slightly sweet.

"Chicken," said Albright, holding up his fork with a piece of the tranchid stuck on the end. "It tastes just like chicken."

"Why do all bizarre meats taste like chicken?" remarked Winston, as he tried some of the tranchid. Albright was right. It tasted exactly like chicken.

SOME eighteen hours later, Winston was back on the bridge of the Asp. Jas had already hacked into Zearla's registry. Albright was resting in his cabin, but Winston couldn't sleep. He had to find out what Jas had found.

"Jim, you wouldn't believe what I found there," said Jas.

"Try me."

"Okay, well, the ship you're after is in the registry. However, the baron might not have been lying when he said he couldn't find it – the record is marked privileged," said Jas.

"Go on..."

"Quebec Victor One Six Six is supposedly registered to an organization. It's called Nova Rodstein Associates – apparently a trade organization. However, that's not all. Zearla's registry only contains six hundred craft. Four hundred and ninety five of them are registered to Nova Rodstein, and all are marked as privileged", stated Jas.

Winston thought about the lush and well-kept town they had visited some hours ago. The money had to come from somewhere, and he now had a pretty good idea where it came from. Someone was being paid to bend the galactic ship registry rules...perhaps it was some kind of gigantic tax fiddle.

"Anything on this Nova Rodstein?" asked Winston.

"No, I've done a pretty comprehensive search. I've not found anything associated with that organization. It is very suspicious indeed," said Jas.

"Very. I think we're going to have to go to Andceeth and see if we can track this guy down. Something's going on to have that strange ship in the ASC's ship's QAR logs just before its destruction."

"Do you want me to wake Chuck?" asked Jas.

"Yes, I think we should get to Andceeth as quickly as possible. I'm not sure what we're looking for, but once we find the commander of that ship, I think we may be a lot closer," said Winston.

Winston prepared the ship for departure. The ship was already fully fuelled. He started the drive, and watched with satisfaction as all the systems came online, just as they should. A few minutes later, Albright arrived, looking a little groggy.

"Sorry to have you woken like that, but we've got to go," said Winston, apologetically.

"Don't worry about it. What did Jas find?" said Albright, as he strapped himself into the right seat.

Winston repeated what Jas had told him, as he strapped into the left seat and initiated the departure sequence. Jeffries Control gave them permission to depart. The Osprey X that had been on one of the pads when they had arrived in the Asp had long departed, and as the Asp took off, the spaceport was left deserted. Winston pointed the ship away from the town, and accelerated. It was time to leave this hellhole of a planet,

he thought, as he set the hyperdrive for Andceeth, and touched the hyperspace button.

The cool glow of witch–light replaced the scorching visage of Zearla. The ship's clock spun crazily, trying to keep itself synchronized with the normal universe. In what was just a few moments to the occupants of the Asp, several days passed for everyone else outside of witch–space. There was a flash of intense, blue light as the Asp dropped out of the witch space tunnel, to a location some 9 A.U. from Andceeth, but over seven and a half light years from Zearla.

Waiting at the other end, gathered around the Asp's pulsating hyperspace exit cloud was something that neither Winston nor Albright expected.

A Panther Clipper and four Osprey X attack craft!

Chapter 11. Surrender Or Die

THE five ships – a Panther Clipper, with four Osprey X attack craft, floated motionless in front of Winston and Albright's Asp. The Clipper had an unusual feature. Attached to its hull were several small to medium sized trade ships, all bearing evidence of an attack. Two Cobra Mk I's were attached to the underside. Three Adders were attached to the top, with a Harris dwarfing them to one side. A shot-up Cobra Mk.3 was attached to the other side. The ships looked like barnacles, attached to a boat hull.

In the Asp's cabin, the two crewmembers wondered what to do next. They didn't have much time...

"Incoming message, boys," said Jas in a slightly urgent tone.

"Chuck, get the fighters ready. I don't think this lot are going to be our friends. Jas, put them on screen please," said Winston.

The scanner on the console was replaced by a new view. The view of the bridge of the Clipper, with its captain filling most of the picture. The captain appeared to be in his mid-forties, and looked slightly bad tempered.

"Greetings, Commander. Our message is simple, surrender or die," said the Clipper's captain.

Albright's hands expertly moved across the console, and four tiny fighters emerged from their bay in the underside of the Asp...

Winston laughed mirthlessly at the console, and saw the other commander scowl at him across the void. "No, you surrender or die," said Winston.

"OK, have it your way," said the Clipper's captain, who then abruptly terminated the connection.

On the bridge of the Clipper, Captain Vega, a slaver wanted throughout the Federation and Alliance, but whose services were highly desired in the Empire, turned to his crew.

"OK, attack carefully, take out his shields. Comms, tell the Ospreys to get ready with the grappling system"

"Aye, Captain," said the weapons officer, a hard-bitten woman who had seen the worst sides of piracy.

The comms officer called the Ospreys, and the formation began to move. Suddenly, without warning, the bridge lit up with the light of an exploding Osprey X!

"What the...?" shouted Captain Vega.

"The Asp seems to have launched some kind of interceptor craft! It's attacking the Ospreys! It's downed one!" yelled the helmsman, who had just witnessed the sudden attack through the viewscreen.

The comm channel suddenly came alive with the voice of Osprey 3's pilot. The man's voice was on the edge of panic!

"I'm hit! I'm hit! I've lost all my shielding!" yelled the voice.

The scanner showed five objects rapidly moving – a large, yellow return turning towards the bulky Panther, and four tiny blue returns, two chasing Osprey 3, and one chasing Osprey 1 and 4 each. Suddenly, the sound of the shields screaming filled the bridge, as the Asp's 4MW beam laser began to rapidly deplete them.

"Weps, what are you doing! Disable that Asp now!" yelled the captain.

"I'm trying. He seems to be anticipating all my moves!" shouted the weapons officer in response.

"Drop the energy bomb! Quickly! Ospreys, power down immediately, we're dropping a bomb!" yelled the captain.

It was too late for Osprey 3. It exploded in a blinding flash. Pieces of the wreckage clanked over the hull of the Panther, whose shields were now totally depleted by the onslaught of the 4MW beam laser. Confusion and panic reigned on the bridge. The two remaining Ospreys drifted helplessly with their propulsion systems shut down, the small fighters closing for the kill... and now the Asp was starting to damage the hull of the Clipper around the drive section!

But an awesome weapon began to move from out of a pod on the rear of the Panther Clipper. The cylindrical object propelled itself about a hundred meters from the Clipper. The events of the next thirty nanoseconds were about to decide a battle. Inside the casing, the small nuclear device was detonated. Many gigajoules of energy suddenly streamed into a specially designed antenna which enhanced the massive electromagnetic pulse. The pulse travelled outwards from the bomb, as the heat from the reaction finally vapourized the bomb casing and antenna – their jobs now done. The wave of energy, travelling outwards at 300,000 kilometers a second expanded as a huge sphere...a sphere which the Asp and the interceptors, the only craft with sensitive electronic systems powered up, were waiting, unable to avoid the huge nova-like onslaught of energy...

On the bridge of the Asp, Winston was happily monitoring the impending destruction of the Panther Clipper. Suddenly, there was a loud bang as every circuit breaker in the ship simultaneously tripped! Winston and Albright were plunged into darkness. The viewsystem was off, and the console was completely dark.

"Oh shit, I think we've been energy bombed!" yelled Winston

Finally, the three–sixty degree viewsystem and the console came alive. Or at least, parts of it. Albright had reached down on the side of the console and had reset every circuit breaker he could find. However, the energy bomb had destroyed several of the viewsystem's cameras. At least the view forward was working.

"Jim, we're dead in the water!" yelled Albright, looking at the console.

"Holy cow, the drive's overrunning!" shouted Winston, pulling the drive's emergency stop.

Winston quickly looked at the console, or what parts of the console had survived the shockwave. The energy bomb seemed to have destroyed some systems, and left others untouched. The scanner wasn't working, but the drive monitors were. The picture wasn't pretty – most of the ships systems were offline, and the shields had been completely depleted as they deflected as much energy as they could. Worse, they were now running on battery power alone, and the shields wouldn't get recharged! Winston pressed the APU start on the console, to try and bring up the standby generator. Nothing happened...

"Oh my," said Winston.

"I hate it when you say that," said Albright

"Oh my..." said Winston again, noting yet more damaged systems.

"Jim, the last two Ospreys are coming towards us with some kind of device," said Albright urgently, pointing at the ships which were slowly approaching the Asp.

"Oh my... I think the technical term for our state is 'we are buggered'," said Winston. Albright noted a look of concern that Winston seldom displayed.

"What next? We've got no weapons and we can't move!"

"Stay here. I'm going to try and manually start the APU. We can at least get weapons, manoeuvring thrusters and shields that way. Jas, try and get a damage report" said Winston, pulling himself out of his seat, springing

into action.

"I can't," said Jas. "All my line drivers are blown. I can't communicate with any of the ship's systems"

Oh great, thought Winston bitterly. Can't even get a damage report. He pulled open the flight deck door, and bolted through the living quarters. The gravity system chose that very awkward moment to suddenly go offline, as the standby battery began to deplete to dangerous levels. Winston suddenly found himself clawing at thin air, and hurtling towards the closed door of the equipment section.

"OOohyauh!" yelled Winston, as he collided heavily with the door and bounced off. He ended up bouncing all the way to the opposite end of the corridor that ran through the living quarters.

"Jim, they are getting close!" came Albright's slightly panicked voice through the ship's intercom.

"I'm trying to get there! See if there's any pressure left in the manoeuvring thrusters, you might be able to keep them away for a few moments and buy us some time!" responded Winston, as he propelled himself back towards the equipment section.

Winston wrenched the door open, and propelled himself inwards, floating over the metal catwalks he usually walked over. He pushed himself towards the left of the equipment bay, using a handy shield generator as a platform. In the starboard forward corner of the equipment area sat a small, unsung machine whose normal life was to keep the ship's systems running while in dock, when the main drive was shut down. The small machine, about a meter long and half a meter high, was the auxilliary power unit. Winston reached out, and pulled himself towards the device.

"They're almost on top of us!" came Albright's voice, over the intercom!

"I'm at the APU now. I'm going to start it. Manoever the ship if you can!"

Winston opened a panel on the unit. Inside was a number of valves, switches and gauges. Stuck to the panel's door was a checklist named "APU Emergency Manual Start". Winston began to read it.

1. FULLY OPEN THE MANUAL FUEL VALVE

Winston reached down. Fuel valve? Where was that? He spotted a small lever marked "Manual Fuel", and turned it until it was in the On position. Now what?

2. SWITCH ON THE HIGH PRESSURE FUEL PUMP

Okay, let's get fuel to the beast...Winston flipped a small switch marked "HP Fuel Pump". The reassuring sound of the pump spinning up came from somewhere at the base of the machine. Winston noticed that the fuel pressure gauge had come to life, indicating that premium grade military fuel was now in the system.

3. DEPRESS THE REACT START BUTTON UNTIL THE CORE TEMP GAUGE READS 2,000 DEGREES KELVIN

"Shit, Jim, they've attached something to the ship! I think they are about to pull us! I can't move the ship! There's no pressure in the thrusters!" came Albright's voice over the intercom.

"I'm working on it...once we have shields we should be able to shuck them off!" said Winston, as he held down the react start button.

He could now feel a slight vibration from the machine. The small core temp gauge began to move. At least mechanical systems like this couldn't be destroyed by an energy bomb, even if the normal autostart system had been nuked. Winston thought he better read the next step before the temperature gauge got above the

prescribed limit.

4. ACTIVATE CONTAINMENT SYSTEM. PULL THE FUEL CUTOFF IF THE CONTAINMENT SYSTEM HAS NOT COME ONLINE AND CORE TEMP EXCEEDS 2,200 DEGREES KELVIN. FAILURE TO PROPERLY PERFORM THIS STEP CAN RESULT IN SERIOUS INJURY OR DEATH

Winston watched the gauge as it began to reach 2,000. Whilst continuing to hold the react start button, he reached over and turned on a switch marked "Containment". Reassuringly, a green light came on indicating that the containment field was operational...

5. WHEN CORE TEMP REACHES 3,000K, RELEASE THE REACT START BUTTON, AND OPEN THE TURBINE HP VALVE

The temperature continued to rise. Winston had to hold onto the APU as the ship jerked slightly.

"They're pulling us towards the Clipper!" came Albright's voice.

"I felt it. I've almost got it running," replied Winston.

Finally, the temperature reached 3,000. Winston released the react start button. Fortunately, the jerk the ship had received hadn't pulled his finger off the button. He reached over to the right hand side of the emergency start panel, and began turning a valve maked "HP Turbine Valve". More reassuring sounds began...the comforting whine of the turbine wheel spooling up...

6. WHEN TURBINE RPM REACHES 95%, ENGAGE THE GENERATOR

"We're almost there! The turbine's coming up!" shouted Winston through the intercom.

"I think it's too late, we're almost at the Clipper!" came Albright's reply.

Winston began to sweat. The turbine speed gauge crept seemingly slowly towards the 95% mark. The sound had now picked up to a high pitched whine, as the turbine got faster. Finally, the gauge indicated that it was time to engage the generator. Winston pulled a lever marked "Generator Engage". To his relief, the unit engaged with a clunk, and the ammeter began reading current as the superconducting windings of the generator began to move briskly through a magnetic field. Gravity began returning to the ship, fortunately slowly because Winston was floating a little bit off the metal flooring.

"The APU is running! Reset the breakers for the shielding systems!" yelled Winston.

On the bridge, Albright reached below the console and found the shielding system's breakers. He pulled the switches. The shield power indicator showed that they were charging. Suddenly, there was several flashes from the Osprey's grappling system as they began interacting with the now live shields! The grapplers were violently thrown off the Asp's hull!

"Jim, the Ospreys have let go!" yelled Albright.

"Excellent! You should also have weapons power and pressure in the manoeuvring thrusters. See if you can disable the Clipper!"

Albright looked up through the fragmented view left by the partially operational viewsystem. There was more trouble looming...in fact it was filling the entire forward view and slowly but surely getting closer!

"Jim, we have a new problem! We're drifting slowly towards the Clipper and we're going to hit it, or to be precise a Cobra..."

Albright's words were cut short, as the gut-wrenching sound of colliding durialium pierced the bridge. The Asp lurched to a halt, the shields once again depleted from the collision. The shields interacted violently with the Clipper's recharging shields, and it was a losing battle. Albright heard a loud click below the console as the breaker tripped from the overload. He reached down and reset the breaker, which tripped instantly, accompanied by a flash of light somewhere outside of the ship. Albright grabbed the control stick, and pulled the laser trigger. Four megawatts of beam laser began discharging into the Cobra that was tethered to the Clipper! The laser soon sliced through the Cobra, but it was too late...the Ospreys had returned with their grappling equipment. One of the Ospreys opened fire, strategically targeting the Asp's manoeuvring thrusters!

"Jim, we're now buggered, as you put it!" yelled Albright, finally resigned to their fate. "It's not over yet!" came Winston's voice over the intercom.

A few seconds later, Winston arrived back on the bridge. Albright noted that he looked worried, but a sly smirk had now begun to move across his face.

"You know what, people of today don't think of antique weapons," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Albright, as Winston began to fish in the small cabinet at the back of the flight deck. He pulled out two small red objects, with a little cross in a shield at one end.

"This," he said, "is something called a Swiss army knife. Hasn't been manufactured for a millenia. You open it like this – " Winston pulled out a blade, "and then use it to inflict severe pain on an attacker. Shove it down your pants, they won't think to check there", he said, tossing one of the knives across to Albright. "Don't worry, the weapons scan they'll undoubtedly do will probably think it's a belt buckle," said Winston.

Albright looked at the object, and did as Winston said.

"But we'll only need to use them if this fails," said Winston, pulling out a prize possession from the cabinet. "What the planet of hell is that?" asked Albright, looking at the black tube that was attached to a large, wooden stock.

"It's called a pump-action shotgun. This one's already seen action at Boston Base, Barnards's Star," said Winston, as he started putting small, green cartridges into the gun.

"You see, armour used to deflect energy weapons is useless against one of these. I'm surprised that more people haven't cottoned onto this fact," continued Winston as he pushed the last cartridges home.

The ship jerked slightly as it contacted the hull of the Clipper. A strange grating noise began somewhere in the depths of the ship.

"Okay, I think they are trying to cut into the ship. They'll link the ships up...and board us..." said Winston. His voice suprisingly sounded very matter-of-fact.

"Should we get into pressure suits, and vent the air from the ship? That'll inconvenience them," said Albright.

"Nice thought, but I would bet they are expecting that and are already in pressure suits. If we don't suit up...it gives us an advantage. We can manoever better," Winston stated. It sounded like he had done this before. He began ferreting around in the cabinet again, and pulled out a long, wooden object.

"Here, take this. Hide behind the door, and whack them with it when they come in...assuming they survive the shotgun," said Winston, handing the soevenir cricket bat he obtained from Sol some years ago.

"What is it?" asked Albright, looking over the smooth, wooden face.

"A Wilson's Cricket Bat. Sporting equipment I believe, however, it makes a good defensive weapon in a squeeze," replied Winston. "I nearly bought a Louisville Slugger instead, but I thought the cricket bat looked

nicer".

Albright looked at the object in slight bemusement. He gripped the handle and gave it a few experimental swings. It looked like it would do a good job. The grating noise stopped abruptly.

"OK, I think they are aboard. Hide behind the wall there, and as soon as you see one of them, just whack them as hard as you can," said Winston, in preparation.

Albright slid back between the back wall of the flight deck and the co-pilot's seat. Winston pulled back between the captain's seat and the rear wall. He peeked around the corner of the open flight deck door so he could see when their assailants were coming to get them. Tense minutes went by. The distant sound of the still-running APU and the recirculation fans was all they could hear.

The sound of movement finally came. Winston gripped his shotgun, and slid the mechanism. It made a satisfying click. He slid the safety catch off. Albright brought the bat back, ready to strike at whoever or whatever came through the door. Odd scraping noises floated up the flight deck access ladder, followed by the sound of more than one person climbing up. Winston peeked around the corner once more to see a space-suited head appear at the top of the stairwell.

They waited as the footsteps started to get closer...

Winston quickly slid out from his position, brandishing his weapon. There were four space-suited figures moving up the short flight deck access corridor. The nearest one was only two meters from the door! They were all armed. The lead man started to raise his weapon...

Winston already had his shotgun ready.

He squeezed the trigger...

Chapter 12. Surrender And Die

"Game's over!" shouted Winston, at the advancing figures, as his finger finally brought pressure to bear on the shotgun trigger.

CLICK!

Winston looked down in disbelief at his gun. That should have been a loud 'bang' followed by the collapse of the man in front of him, but nothing happened! He looked up. The lead man had his weapon raised. Suddenly, Winston felt searing pain burst through his chest! He collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath, dropping the shotgun. The gun hit the floor of the flight deck with a loud clattering sound. The lead man now had a QuickLock restraint ready, and was moving on Winston's writhing body!

The man moved into the flight deck, holding the QuickLock in front of him. Winston flailed around on the floor, trying to move, but somehow the messages weren't reaching his limbs in any coherent manner. He could see Albright out of the corner of his left eye.

Albright watched the space-suited figure move into the flight deck. He swung the bat he was holding back – holding it edge-on so as to inflict the most pain. The bat made a swooshing noise as it cut through the air, impacting the lead assailant just below the ribcage. Albright heard the man yell "Oooyah!" through the material of his helmet. The man lurched back, and cannoned into the man behind him, knocking him over! Spurred on by his success, he moved out into the corridor.

He deliberately trampled on the lead man as he moved out. Whack! Albright smacked the third man, whose look of surprise was clearly visible through his tinted visor. But Albright was on borrowed time. He looked up to take on the fourth man, only to see the muzzle of a hand pistol. He didn't hesitate, and swung the bat! Suddenly, pain coursed through his body. The momentum of the bat carried it through the air, striking the final man hard just below his chest...but Albright collapsed to the floor in blinding agony.

Winston could feel control coming back to his limbs. He struggled into a crawl, and grabbed his shotgun. He could see a couple of their attackers getting up. Time was not on his side. There was only one thing for it – he reached for his shotgun, and held it by the barrel. The assailants seemed to be more intent on capturing Albright for the moment. Winston finally struggled to his feet, using the door frame of the flight deck to help himself up. He staggered down towards the now standing figures who were working on Albright. He raised the gun high above his head, and brought it down in a gravity-assisted swing! The attacker in front of him was bending down...about to QuickLock Albright, but not for long.

The butt of Winston's gun struck the man squarely in the back, making a loud, hollow sound. Winston heard the man's shout through his space suit as he fell down once again!

Suddenly, Winston felt a pressure in his back. There was a loud "crack" as he was suddenly wrapped in a tough polymer. He had just enough time to think "Damn!" before passing into unconsciousness, as the QuickLock's sedative moved through his body...

Winston groaned and dared to open his eyes. He looked around his new surroundings. He was in a large, square room. The walls were all painted a matt green. There was a door at the end of the room, opposite the wall he was propped up against. The door had no handle or obvious way of being opened. There were beams and hooks hanging from the ceiling high above him. Finally, he realised he was in a cargo bay.

However, this cargo bay wasn't full of cargo, it was full of *people*! There must have been thirty people in there, all of whom looked sullen and depressed. Winston could almost smell fear in the room. He looked at his fellow captives. Most of them looked like they worked on trade ships. They all looked as if they had been beaten up, too. Some were apparently sleeping on the cold, hard floor of the cargo bay. Nobody was speaking. He looked at the person to his left – a rather attractive woman in her mid-twenties. Her dark complexion made him think about the waitress at the restaurant in Zearla, but she was wearing a flight suit with the logo of a trading ship on the shoulder. An embroidered Harris Trader. She had a painful looking bruise on her neck. She stared straight ahead. He looked around to see if he could see Albright anywhere. At the opposite end of the room, he saw an inert figure lying on the ground that was at least dressed like him.

He turned to the woman beside him.

"What's happening?" he asked.

The woman didn't even acknowledge his presence. She just sat, staring straight ahead like a rabbit caught in a Viper's landing lights.

"Ma'am?" he prompted.

Suddenly, he heard a movement from above and behind. He looked around to see a metal catwalk running across the wall behind him. A uniformed man was moving towards his position.

"SILENCE!" bellowed the man. He pointed a pistol down at Winston, and pulled the trigger.

Winston yelled in agony as the bolt struck him. It felt like the same kind of thing they had done to him on the ship. He slumped back down onto the floor, writhing in exquisite pain. As he squirmed uncontrollably on the ground, he knew he would have to get revenge. These people were going to pay dearly for this...

The chaos of the battle had finally quietened. The Panther Clipper and the two remaining Osprey-X attack craft accelerated in formation for their destination, Denver Station. Andceeth was a disputed system, with Denver Station being controlled by the Empire, and Diamond, controlled by the Federation in the broiling humidity of the world Capitol, a few hundred kays below.

"Is that definitely him?" asked Max Vega, looking over at his first officer.

"Yes, take a look at the vid," replied Helena Scott. The first officer's features were dimly lit from the output of the cargo bay's security display.

Vega walked across the bridge to the comms station, his hulking, muscular form throwing shadows across the bridge from the dim lighting. Scott was controlling the security camera at the comms station. He grunted with satisfaction when he saw the man, sitting sullenly with his back against the wall.

"Swing the camera around. Find the other one," Vega said quietly, leaning over the comms station.

Scott started pointing the camera at the different people in the bay.

"Stop there, zoom in," said Vega, as the camera fell on a young man who was apparently just regaining consciousness.

"That's the other one," said Scott, somewhat unnecessarily.

Vega shook his head slightly. These two would net seventy five kay on top of whatever he got for selling them. Why did Bunn want them so badly? There must have been a story to this. He bitterly thought about the

cost of replacing two Osprey X fighters. He was glad he had hull auto repair. The Clipper had taken some serious damage in the fight. He looked at the image...the way these two looked different from the normal unfortunate traders he picked up and sold.

"James Winston and Charles Albright," he said.

"I thought we didn't mess with bounty hunters," said Scott. "They fought very well, we could have all died," she stated, rather unemotionally.

"Yes, they have a special price though. However, I will have to see to it that they regret fighting back," muttered Vega bitterly.

Vega surveyed the bridge for a few moments, thinking of plans to get vengeance for the unfortunate destruction of the two Osprey X fighters and the deaths of their pilots.

"Busch, go to the cargo bay. Get two other security officers, and bring these two to me," said Vega, coming to a decision.

"Right away," said Busch, who immediately left the bridge. He was still sore from being hit in the chest by Albright's batting. He hoped this wouldn't result in more trouble.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" asked Scott, surprised.

"They've been disarmed now," replied Vega.

"Still – a determined bout of hand combat could be – "

"Against our guns? They'd be stunned straight away. Anyway, I need to point out how inconvenient they've been and how they are going to end up paying for the rest of their lives," said Vega, with a nasty edge to his voice.

Vega sat back down in his commander's chair. He drummed his fingers irritably on the armrest, and looked out at the majesty of the universe on the viewscreen. The light of Andceeth shone in through the windows, casting patterns of bright light and shadows on the floor of the bridge. Even at 9 AU distance, the ordinary Class G star appeared as a blinding light ahead.

"We might have a problem later," said Alice Gubbins, the weapons officer.

"Why?" asked Vega.

"Long range scans show three vessels approaching on an intercept course. By their mass signatures, probably Cobra Mark Threes or Asps," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Great, more bounty hunters," grumbled Vega. "Set an escape hyperspace target back to Zearla," he finished.

Great. On top of losing two of his ships, he might now have to jump out. This could mean a long time before he got to trade his newly acquired slaves. Still...if the ships making the intercept turned out to be poor combateers...it could mean a few more slaves in the bag. Or at least some cargo to scoop up, at the very least.

Minutes passed on the bridge. Nobody spoke, and the only sound was the muffled hum of the drive at full power. Displays glowed dimly, silhouetting the crew members sitting in front of the various consoles. The rest of the crew could *feel* Vega's extreme annoyance radiating from him. It generally wasn't a good thing when the Captain got angry. People tended to get hurt, or thrown in the brig at least. Vega had a short temper, and was a natural bully. The crew had to concede at least he paid well. You had to keep the crew happy if you were a slaver. If the crew mutinied and turned him over to the Fed or Alliance police, a life sentence without parole was guaranteed. Paying well typically kept the crew from being disloyal, even if you *were* a nasty bugger.

After what seemed like aeons, the bridge door finally opened. In walked five men – three security guards, and between them, James Winston and Chuck Albright. The guards had their guns pointed at the two captives. They weren't going to repeat the mistakes they had made during the capture...

"Bring them to me," said Vega quietly.

In the universal language of brutality, one of the guards cruelly shoved the barrel of the gun into Winston's back. The other guard just pushed Albright forward. They silently walked towards the slaver captain.

"So, James Winston. Charles Albright. I need some answers," said Vega menacingly.

In the dim light of the bridge, Winston's eyes looked as black as interstellar space. He was staring penetratingly at Vega. Vega couldn't quite shake the feeling that Winston's stare was boring into his skull. Damn those insolent eyes! He looked over at Albright, who was slightly to the left. Albright wasn't even looking at him.

"Well?" prompted Vega.

Winston continued to stare at him. Vega moved towards Albright to try and get his attention. He noticed that Winston kept tracking him. It unnerved him. Usually people answered him, at least. These two seemed to have a stronger nerve than most. Vega knew he could soften them up, given five minutes...

"You do realise where we are taking you...you're to be slaves for the rest of your lives, and we are going to make sure that the assignments are especially unpleasant to pay for the damage you did to my ships?" asked Vega, in his most practised hatred-filled voice.

Neither of them said a word. Winston's dark eyes continued to stare unemotionally at Vega. Vega decided he needed to take a new tack.

"Are you a robot or something? Let me see if you are," said Vega, approaching Winston.

The crew watched on. They knew what was likely to happen next – Vega always did the same thing to any prisoner he brought to the bridge – he'd humiliate them by slamming his fist into their abdomen to watch them writhe in agony on the floor. Vega practised for his sadistic beatings. He spent an hour a day working out to ensure he could hit hard. He approached Winston, and brought his fist back. The rest of the crew winced slightly, as his fist impacted the prisoner's abdomen with tremendous force. Winston shot back, gasping, and fell on the floor in agony. He writhed about clutching his stomach.

"So, Mr. Albright, do you want to be next?" said Vega. He noticed Albright fidget slightly. He was beginning to crack...

Vega walked up to Albright, who began to wince, waiting for the fist to come. Winston continued to groan on the floor. One of the guards kicked him for good measure. What they didn't realise that Winston was now making a histrionic show as the pain subsided. Masking what he was retrieving from just under his belt buckle...something they had not detected when they brought him and Albright on board.

Vega brought back his fist, ready to strike.

"So, do you want to suffer like your friend Mr. Winston? Or will you answer my questions?" asked Vega, grinning nastily at Albright.

One of the guards prodded Winston with his gun, prompting him to get to his feet. Winston began to stand up. He resumed his position. To Vega's disbelief, Winston just continued to stare penetratingly at him. Vega relaxed his fist and walked back towards Winston. He barely noticed that Winston had his hands clasped together as he approached.

"What's up with you, Winston? Do you have a cat in your ancestry? Do you want more pain?" he almost shouted, getting inches away from Winston's implacable stare.

He brought his fist back again, this time to slam Winston in the stomach with all his strength. However, the next few seconds were a whirlwind blur of frantic activity. He stood unbelievably in his new position...

Winston was now behind him. He was stunned by how fast the rather thin man had moved. He now found his arms being held by one of Winston's wiry arms. It was the position of Winston's other arm that worried him most. Something was pulling his head back, and he could feel a sharp object just touching his Adam's apple.

"Drop your weapons, or your captain dies," said Winston.

"So you do talk?" snarled Vega.

"Only when necessary. I am your worst nightmare," stated Winston.

"I wouldn't bet on it," started Vega. "I could have you shot here, on the spot. Or I could just overpower your puny body!"

"I've no doubt you could," replied Winston.

"Well?" rasped Vega.

"I can slit your throat before you or your guards could make a move. It's your decision," said Winston, his mouth right beside Vega's ear. Winston pushed the point of the Swiss Army knife into Vega's throat, just enough to draw a pinpoint of blood.

Beads of sweat began to emerge on Vega's forehead. He wasn't liking the way things were turning out.

"Give your weapons to Albright," ordered Winston.

The guards stood still. They all were aiming at Winston. Vega's eyes bulged with fury.

"Shoot him, goddammit!" yelled Vega.

Winston pushed the knife in a bit. Vega was trying to maintain his composure, but he'd never been subjected to this kind of thing before. He was embarrassed when he let out an involuntary whimper as he felt a needle of red-hot pain in his throat, as the slightly corroded blade cut through a little more skin.

"You'd never dare kill!" shouted Vega, trying to regain the upper hand at least psychologically.

"How do you think I got to Elite? They don't rate you for sim-combat," said Winston, savagely.

"Kill me and you'll die instantly"

"Ah, but you'd be dead too. When you've spent a few years as a bounty hunter, death loses its sting a little," replied Winston in a hoarse whisper, right in Vega's ear.

Vega felt he was rapidly losing control. Winston was obviously as barmy as they come. It must have been true about Elite combateers – people kept saying half of them were insane, and the other half were psychotic. He'd have to think of something quickly. Or his crew would have to come up with something...

"OK, this is getting boring," announced Winston. "You've got twenty seconds to hand your weapons over, or I slit his throat."

Winston moved his mouth near to Vega's ear once more.

"It's quite a painful way to die," he said quietly into Vega's ear.

Winston looked over at First Officer Scott, and flashed her a mirthless smile. Scott was transfixed. She had of course witnessed the deaths of many commanders at the end of a laser beam, but she'd never seen someone

knifed to death...

Meanwhile, Vega thought of a new tack.

"Right, well, I'll have my guards shoot your friend Albright here," said Vega, breaking into a nasty grin. "Go ahead, I don't care, few of my copilots survive anyway" said Winston flatly. Albright hoped he didn't really mean this.

Mad, totally mad! thought Vega, frantically. He was fresh out of ideas, and he could feel the blade scraping over the shallow cut it had already made in his throat. A trickle of blood started to run down his neck, and collect in his shirt.

Winston looked over Vega's shoulder at Albright. He was just in time to see Albright's eyes subtly widen. He turned his head a little to try and see if he could detect the source of Albright's signal. His peripheral vision caught a vague shape moving closer. He lifted his leg and kicked hard in the direction of the shape. With satisfaction, he felt his steel-capped boot hit something soft and fleshy, followed by a thud and a groan, as the crewmember who was creeping up on Winston with a Quick-Lock collapsed, clutching his groin...

"You've got ten seconds," said Winston.

He pushed the blade a little bit just to make sure Vega realised he wasn't joking.

"No!" yelled Vega, as one of the guards lowered his weapon. He started to walk towards Albright, the gun lowered.

"You'll die by my hand if you give it to him!" yelled Vega, trying to scare the guard into maintaining the deadlock.

"Do it now, or you'll spend the rest of the day cleaning the blood out of the carpet," said Winston, in a nastily normal tone.

The guard, who was a slightly overweight looking man, continued to walk towards Albright with the gun lowered. He handed the gun to Albright, and then removed his helmet, revealing a face bearing a particularly evil grin, framed by shoulder-length black hair. Winston lurched with surprise, almost causing Vega a fatal injury in the process! That was an evil grin he recognised very well! It was the grin of...the grin of... of...

"Phil?" he asked in shock!

The guard looked at him and nodded. Winston gaped, still holding Vega tightly, with the knife pressed to his enemy's neck. The other two guards lowered their weapons, and handed them to Albright. Vega screamed in frustration.

"Chuck, get the quick-lock and lock this asshole," said Winston.

"With pleasure," said Albright.

Winston's head spun. He hadn't seen Phil for years! Phil Copeland had been a buddy of his from Phekda when he was a teenager. Of course, his friend looked a bit older now. However, this wasn't quite the time and place to talk about old times. Or how Phil had ended up working for a slaver...

Albright stepped up with the QuickLock. He pushed it into Vega's back. Vega finally felt the pressure on the knife decrease. There was a short, sharp crack as Vega was wrapped in the QuickLock's polymer restraint film. The sedative quickly flowed through his bloodstream. He tried to fight it, but quickly collapsed, just as they all do.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

"OK, let's lock the rest of them," said Winston, regarding Vega's inert body without emotion.

"Want some help?" asked Copeland, holding up a couple of QuickLocks.

"Sure"

The crew had been so surprised by their captain's downfall that they hardly resisted as the three started QuickLocking them. Soon, the entire bridge crew was unconscious. Winston had taken care to grin nastily around the bridge. The crew, just like Vega, were convinced he was insane and were in no mood to argue. In fact, Scott had felt relief when the cool blanket of sedation had washed over her body. She might have wiped out hundreds of ships in combat, but the thought of Vega having his throat sliced had frozen her in fear. Especially as she suspected that she would be next...

"So, Phil – how come you're working for a slaver?" asked Winston, almost not wanting to hear the answer.

"I don't really work for him," said Copeland, digging deep into his uniform. Eventually he pulled out an ident card. He handed it to Winston.

It had a crest on it, and a checkered stripe under the crest. Underneath the logo were the words "Federal Police Special Branch".

"You work for the Feds?" asked Winston, shocked.

"I have for ten years now," replied Copeland.

Winston handed the ident back to Copeland, who tucked it away. *Phil! Working for the Feds!* thought Winston, rapidly. Winston remembered the last time he had seen his friend, just before he left Nirvana when he was 17. Copeland was a couple of years older than him, and his only interest seemed to be hacking the GIN. Not police work! And Federal at that. Not many people from Phekda ended up working for the Feds. Then again, not many people from Phekda ended up working for the Alliance Joint Navy Intelligence Bureau, he had to concede.

"OK, Phil, meet Charles Albright. Or Chuck. Chuck, meet Phil Copeland, errr... Federal Police. He's a friend of mine from my hometown in Phekda," said Winston slightly awkwardly.

"Hi," said Albright.

"So, what are you doing here then?" asked Winston.

"Undercover. There's a lot of Imperial slave–trade going on here at the moment, and we're trying to stamp it out. However, we can't take them head–on for fear of starting a war...so we've been doing undercover policing," he replied. Copeland had already picked up a Cassiopeian accent.

"So, you got hired by this guy to try and get evidence, right" said Albright

"Exactly. We've been trying to get Vega for a long time. He's a real evil bastard," said Copeland, grinning in an unnerving manner.

"No shit," said Winston.

"Good job with the knife, he needed to be humiliated," said Copeland. "Where did you learn that trick?" he asked.

"Oh, I got tired of getting beaten up in bar–room brawls, so I learned a few tricks. People used to pick on me for some reason. But they don't any more" said Winston, with a sly grin.

"Well, let's get this old crate on back to Diamond. The police department will be pleased we busted this operation," said Copeland.

"Don't forget the Ospreys," reminded Winston.

"Ah, the Ospreys. Yes. I wonder what we'll do with them?" said Copeland with his trademark evil grin. He was getting good at those...

Chapter 13. Angst And Anxiety

THE bridge remained dimly lit. In the back corner, chained to a piece of ducting, were the inert, QuickLocked bodies of the bridge crew. In the captain's seat, Copeland slouched comfortably with a can of Slice in one hand, the other hand free to gesture as he spoke. Winston sat in the weapons officer's chair, the chair turned on its swivel to face Copeland. Albright sat in the First Officer's chair with his feet resting comfortably on a nearby console, drinking a can of unidentified sugary beverage which proudly proclaimed to have "double the caffiene of normal colas".

Over an hour had passed since the tumultous hijack carried out by the three against the bridge crew of the slaver ship, "Vega's Revenge". The huge Panther Clipper laboured on, accelerating through the inky blackness of space. Two Osprey X fighters flew a loose left echelon formation beside the behemoth, unaware of the fate of the Revenge's crew. The hijackers – Phil Copeland, James Winston and Charles Albright – had been idly chatting for the last hour. It was mostly between Winston and Copeland, catching up on the years since they had last seen each other. Of course, Winston had told Copeland a brief story of everything that had happened to him since they last met, suitably embellishing the stories. The only thing he didn't mention was about the AJNIB for whom he now worked.

Phil might have been a good friend, but he now worked for the Federation. Whilst the Federation and Alliance might not have been enemies at present, they were highly suspicious of each other. The last thing that Winston wanted his old friend to know was that he was actively serving with the opposition. Copeland had however revealed something stunning about his personal life...something that Winston would have never guessed...

"You? Married?" said Winston, at last.

"Yes, just over two months ago," enthused Copeland, pulling out a holopic of his wife.

Winston shook his head in mild disbelief. How things had changed! Not only had Copeland given up hacking, he had *settled down!*

"So when are you gonna get hitched?" asked Copeland.

"I don't know," said Winston, as he thought wistfully about Pam Gilmour and what could have been. "I'm too young for all that," he said with a smile.

Copeland chuckled.

"Besides, I don't think I'm really cut out for all of that settling down stuff, I've been out here too long. I've sort of grown used to the solitude of space. I think I've got a terminal case of batchelorhood. Besides, who'd take a bounty hunter?" added Winston.

"Another bounty hunter, maybe," replied Copeland, mischievously.

Winston couldn't help thinking of Pam. His mind began to wander. His musings were quickly interrupted.

"Jim, I've got a serious question for you. Please give me a straight answer." It was Albright's voice, and he sounded...different. He hadn't said much over the last hour, and it sounded like he had taken a fair amount of courage to speak. His voice was edged by the effect of frayed nerves.

"What's up?" asked Winston, casually.

"How many of your co-pilots survive?"

Wow, where did THAT question come from? thought Winston. Albright sounded really stressed out.

"So far – all of them," replied Winston, truthfully.

"What was that about few of your copilots surviving... you know, you told the captain that you didn't care...none of us survive," said Albright.

"That was..."

"and you sounded like you'd let them kill me," added Albright. Winston thought he detected a betrayed edge to Albright's voice.

"It's called bluffing. I knew they wouldn't kill you – the captain knew that any aggressive moves would result in his death. I was making the captain believe with every fibre that I was totally insane. I think I succeeded, too," replied Winston a little mischievously.

"But you were gambling with my life..." Albright's voice trailed off. His green eyes radiated not fear, but now a clear look of betrayal.

"Look, Chuck," said Winston, in a reassuring voice, "I value my copilots. Really, I do. But ours is a high-risk job. You must remember that. If you are ever in the same position as I was an hour ago, I would expect you to do the same. You have to be sincere when you're bluffing. If you want to take missions like this, you've got to take tough decisions – "

"But..."

"– decisions, some of which are calculated risks. I'll add that you did very well, you didn't panic, and that signal of yours saved us," Winston finished, remembering the well-placed kick he had made against the crewmember who was trying to QuickLock him.

There was a pause. Albright's stare left Winston, and headed for his boots.

Copeland broke the silence. "Besides, I can assure you you'd rather be dead than what Vega had planned for you"

Albright relaxed a little. Winston looked quizzically at Copeland, who had just opened a packet of beef jerky, and had begun hunting around the interior for a suitably sized piece of teriyaki seasoned meat.

"And what did he have planned?" asked Winston.

Copeland pulled out a slice of jerky, and critically evaluated it in the light of the scanner – turning it this way and that – before chewing it thoughtfully. He finished it.

"Beef jerky, anyone?" he said, offering it around the room. Albright took a piece, but Winston declined.

"Have you heard of Vequess?" asked Copeland.

"Yes, it's a system in the Empire. Mainly industrial, as I remember," replied Winston.

"Industrial and mining," added Copeland, looking Winston in the eye.

"And mining. What of it?"

"You know who does the donkeywork in the mines?"

Copeland let his question hang in the air. There was a pause more pregnant than a female rabbit in the mating season.

"It ain't donkeys," added Copeland. He pulled out another piece of jerky, and began to chew on it contentedly. "Slaves of course...oh no...but I'm hardly physically cut out to be a mine slave – all the mine slaves I've seen are twice my size" replied Winston.

"Exactly. They would work you both to death. Vequess is the Empire's dump for political prisoners too. It is reputed to have the most horrific slave conditions anywhere in the galaxy," added Copeland.

There was another pause.

"Most slaves last about six months before they are permanently disabled from the harsh conditions. Radioactivity is high. Once you're no use, they cast you out into the upper levels where you freeze to death. It's purposefully designed to be as unpleasant as possible as its primary mission is to punish those who are critical of the Emperor," said Copeland rather matter-of-factly.

Silence descended back on the bridge. Winston thought about Vequess. Would the AJNIB come and rescue them? Probably not...they probably wouldn't even know what happened to them. Intelligence officers disappear from time to time. It was an accepted fact of espionage. It even said so in the briefing package Saunders had given them.

"Captain Vega was very annoyed with you for damaging his ships. He was going to make sure you both ended up on Vequess. He just wanted to beat you up a bit first," added Copeland.

Albright spoke up. "Well, then it worked out OK. What are we going to do with him, anyway?" he said, indicating the captain with a broad gesture. His battered confidence was slowly returning.

"Oh him? We rendezvous with three Federation Asp Explorers in a couple of hours. They'll arrest the crew, and remove the guards who are looking over the prisoners in the back," said Copeland.

"And the Ospreys?"

"Will be destroyed, yes," said Copeland calmly. He turned back to Winston. "Your knife trick saved us a lot of trouble. We were going to have to directly attack the flight. It was my job to stop them from hyperspacing. I couldn't believe it when you showed up on the bridge"

"Me neither," sighed Winston.

It had been a very long day. Much too long and much too exciting...

"Incoming message," chimed the bridge computer of the *Revenge*.

"Oh crap," hissed Copeland, who ran over to the comms console.

"What?" asked Albright, who was sitting nearby.

"One of the Ospreys wants to talk to us!"

"Can we stall them?" asked Albright quietly, as if to stop the mic from picking up his voice.

"We'll try and fob them off with text only. See if they'll believe the comm system is damaged."

Copeland began messing with the comm station's controls to put it in text-transmit only. He then got up, and walked over to Winston, who was dozing quietly in the weapons officer's seat.

"Winston, wake up," he hissed, nudging Winston's legs with his boot.

Winston's eyes sprung open in surprise. He then relaxed and rubbed his eyes.

"What's up?" he said at last, sleepily.

"Osprey wants a chat"

"What?"

"Our wingman!"

Winston looked confused for a second. He had that horrible moment of waking up, not remembering where he was. The events of the last few hours suddenly reasserted themselves in his mind with a sickening thud.

"Oh shit!" he yelled, darting to the comm station, finally realising the magnitude of the potential problem.

"Can we fob them off..."

"with text mode?" completed Copeland. "We'll try. We'll tell them that the comm system was damaged in the battle"

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

Copeland began to speak to the comms console to record a text message. "Sorry, we are text mode only due to system damage. Pass your message", he said. The computer dutifully turned his voice into plaintext and transmitted it.

There was a pause.

A message began appearing on the console...

"We are getting a good feed from your ship. I think we can turn your comm system to full mode from here. Standby, we'll switch you"

"Oh shit! Where's the camera?" yelled Albright, scurrying around the bridge, looking for the holocamera to find where it was pointed.

"Over here!" yelled Copeland, leaping into the captain's seat. "It'll focus on me. They know I'm crew, I might be..."

More text appeared on the comm station.

"Your feed is working. Switching to video"

Phil smiled ingratiatingly at the camera.

Winston jumped as the image of the Osprey's commander appeared on the screen. The man had little gimlet eyes. His hair was black, with a light brown streak down the middle. Winston thought the man looked a bit like a ferret. That wasn't what made Winston jump though...

"Who are you?" asked the ferret-faced man.

"I'm security officer Copeland," said Phil, from the captain's chair.

"No, not you, YOU!" said the man, stabbing a finger out of the holoFac right at Winston.

Winston realised with creeping horror that Copeland had sat down in front of the wrong camera. The comm station's builtin was pointed right at him! The other commander was looking right into Winston's eyes, not at Copeland in the captain's chair!

"Errr, I'm communications officer Jones," said Winston, making up a name on the fly.

"Don't lie to me!" shrieked the Osprey commander. "We wondered why we didn't get any instructions about the three intercepting ships!" he yelled.

"I'm..."

"Prepare to be boarded! I hope you have not harmed the Revenge's crew, or else matters will end very seriously indeed!" yelled the man into the comm station.

The display went blank.

"What do we do now?" asked Albright.

"Let's not waste time. Albright, you get on weapons, I'll take the helm," said Winston, "and we'll blow both Ospreys to smithereens."

"It won't work, the controls are all secured," said Copeland.

"Bugger"

There was an embarrassed silence as the three wondered what to do to prevent the ship being boarded. The silence was suddenly shattered by the sounding of an alarm system. The alarm wailed dismally throughout the ship...

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

"The rest of the guards will be coming now, I expect," said Copeland dismally.

"How many?" asked Albright and Winston in unison.

"There's another seven on board, all guarding the cargo bay. Plus the engineering crew, that's another three. Then there's the Osprey crew who will shortly be boarding, that's another two... it's twelve against three," replied Copeland with a grim look.

Chapter 14. The Micro War

There was a pause, as the three on the bridge assessed the reality. Ten against three, shortly to become twelve against three...

"You know, it's not twelve against three at all – we've got thirty–odd prisoners on the cargo deck who I'm sure would like to help out," said Winston, looking for a bright side.

"We've got to get there first," replied Copeland.

"And not all the guards will come – some will have to stay back to guard the prisoners"

"Still at least ten against three."

"We need to find their weaknesses and use our strengths. If we can get fear on our side, we may just be able to spread chaos through their ranks. They don't know what they are dealing with yet," said Winston.

The sound of the alarms abruptly cut off.

"Look, we don't have much time," said Winston urgently.

He grabbed two hand rifles that had fallen on the floor during the earlier struggle, throwing one to Albright and the other to Copeland. He grabbed another rifle. There was one left over. He decided to pick that one up too. You can never have too many weapons, he thought...

"OK, here's the plan. I'm going outside the bridge. I'll find somewhere to hide, and I'll attack from the rear as they come in. You both hide behind something and open fire from the front. No pussyfooting around. Set those weapons to maximum power and shoot to kill," said Winston quickly.

"Wait – " started Copeland.

"We've got no time, just do it," hissed Winston, as he ran out of the bridge.

Winston entered the bridge access corridor and looked around. The corridor was about five meters long. It had two doors off the side, and one at the end. He began walking towards the door at the far end. Looking up, he saw a ventilation duct. It wasn't very big, but he thought he might fit with a squeeze. The corridor was quite low, so it wasn't much effort to pull the grille off the duct exit. He threw his two guns up inside, and reached up. With some effort, he squeezed in and slid back up the duct a little, retrieving the guns and grille from the ducting on the other side of the hole he had crawled in through. He carefully replaced the grille, to make sure it looked like nobody was hiding there.

He waited. The trap was now set, or so he hoped...

He didn't have to wait long. Winston was now on his second adrenaline rush of the day, as three guards and two others, probably the ship's engineers, entered through the door at the far end of the corridor. He quietly slid out of sight as they passed the grille, then moved forwards to see what they were doing once they had passed the entrance.

"Chaldry, you check that door. Michaels, take that one," said the lead guard.

Winston watched as the two guards gingerly opened the doors on the corridor sides. They readied their weapons, then touched the panel that activated the door. One after the other, the side doors quietly slid open. The two guards visibly relaxed when they saw that the rooms – the captain's quarters and his ready–room – were unoccupied.

"They must be still on the bridge, sir" said one of the guards.

"OK, carefully open the bridge door. Assume nothing. Keep your weapons pointed inside, and stay low," instructed the lead guard.

"They may be hiding behind things in there," he predicted.

Winston also noticed the three guards were wearing anti-energy weapon armour – personal shielding. It would take a few shots to deplete it. That wasn't good news. The hapless two crewmembers who had no protection were unlikely to survive. All five were armed with the same rifles that Winston was carrying.

"OK, stand back," said the lead guard, activating the door. The other four flattened themselves against the corridor.

The bridge door, quietly and without fuss, opened.

Nothing happened.

Winston waited, ready to knock out the ventilation duct grille. The lead guard sidled into the bridge, sweeping the area with the muzzle of his gun. All the bridge lights were off, and the only illumination came from the viewscreen. Winston slid over the grille into a good firing position.

Nothing continued happening.

"Get down low," whispered the lead guard, "and follow me. They've got to be in here, there's nowhere else they can be"

The five moved slowly into the bridge. The three guards entered first, followed by the two crewmembers. They loitered, crouching down by the bridge doorway.

"Where d'you reckon?" hissed one of the guards, so quietly that it was only at the threshold of Winston's hearing.

"You take the left side with Johanssen. I'll take the right with you two," whispered the lead guard.

At that moment, the bridge exploded with light! Albright and Copeland stood up, their weapons in full power, full automatic-mode, and opened fire. Incandescent plasma trails seared across the bridge. There was a cacaphony of noise as stray shots slammed into the back wall of the bridge! The five adversaries were about to open fire as Winston chose the moment to come crashing through the ventilation grille, landing on the corridor floor with a loud thud. From his position lying down, he opened fire on the two figures he could see standing just inside the bridge, using both of the guns he was carrying. Light blossomed as the energy bolts slammed into the armour of one of the guards. The other man wasn't quite so lucky. As Winston thought, he had no shielding. His body literally exploded, and his weapon clattered to the ground.

There was a lot of shouting, and a couple of thuds as the four crewmembers of the "Revenge" sought cover, not expecting the attack from the rear. However, the surprise attack had rather unbalanced them. Winston scrambled to his feet, and ran towards the bridge. Albright and Copeland appeared once again from behind the weapons station. Winston ducked as in the excitement, Albright pointed his gun at Winston and fired. The shot grazed Winston's leather jacket, leaving a slight smoking hole. He felt a slight burning sensation, too.

They quickly forgot the friendly fire incident, and opened up on the four remaining crewmembers of the Revenge. One of the guards had dropped his gun in the panic. Copeland mercilessly let a fusillade fly, searing through the guard's armour. Winston with his two guns attacked one of the other guards, who was hiding behind the captain's seat, setting up to send Albright to oblivion. The guard made the fatal mistake of trying to

turn around and fire back at Winston instead of running.

Two guns will quickly deplete personal armour.

This discovery was fatal for the guard, as the energy tore through his torso. Albright's gun was still sounding. There was a dull thud, and then his gun was silent.

There was still one unaccounted for...

Albright cautiously peered from behind his hiding place near the centre of the bridge. In the darkness of the bridge, he knew things looked grim, and didn't want to imagine what it was going to look like when the lights turned on. Copeland began to stand up slowly.

"Phil, get down!" yelled Winston.

Copeland suddenly dropped back down to the floor. Nothing moved.

I only count four down, thought Winston to himself. He stayed low. The grim reality of a close gun-battle presented itself. The floor was awash with blood and small pieces of flesh from the man who had exploded. This was nothing like space combat. It was much more personal, brutal and messy. Then Winston heard a sound – the sound of someone vomiting. He crept towards its source. There was a clatter of a gun being dropped.

Winston darted towards the location of the sound, hidden behind a storage locker. Albright had the same idea, and from his position, was close to the area. They both screeched around to the corner of the bridge where the dropped weapon was visible. In the shadows was a crouched shape. Both Winston and Albright pointed their weaponry at the shape...

Copeland turned on the bridge lights. Winston shielded his eyes from the unaccustomed brightness and looked down at the figure.

In front of them was one of the unshielded crewmembers. Winston lowered his weapons slightly. The man, wearing an engineering uniform with "Vega's Revenge" embroidered on the left breast pocket of the baggy overalls, couldn't have been more than seventeen years old. He looked terrified. There was a large burn across his left arm and shoulder where he had been hit, but he wasn't bleeding.

"Please... don't...", he whimpered, staring at Albright, whose weapon was pointed at the young man's head. Albright lowered his gun.

"Shit," said Winston, quietly under his breath.

The man was now defenceless.

"Jim?" asked Albright, looking over at Winston, "what do we do with him?"

"Hey Phil, do we have any more locks?" asked Winston.

"Yeah, we have about fifteen of them left."

Copeland went to a locker at the other side of the bridge, opened it, and removed a QuickLock. He carefully stepped over the dead bodies and tried to avoid the worst of the carnage splattered around the bridge entrance as he walked over to Winston. He gave the restraint device to Winston, and looked at the captive.

"Stand up," Winston ordered.

The man stood up slowly, holding his hands in the air.

"Okay," started Winston in a quiet, and hopefully unthreatening tone, "just let us know who else is on board."

"Chief Engineer Bradley, and the cattlemarket guards, four cattlemarket guards, that's all sir," replied the young man, his voice wavering slightly.

"Armed?"

"Just the guards, sir, the chief is looking after the ship," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Greg Varriens, sir"

"OK Greg," said Winston, trying to sound sympathetic, "I'm afraid we're going to have to restrain you and turn you over to the Federal authorities. Working for a slaver is a serious offence. You have, however, escaped with your life. Turn around, please"

Varriens did as Winston instructed. Winston pushed the QuickLock into his back, and pulled the trigger. The young man was wrapped in the restraint film. The sedative quickly took effect, and he collapsed.

Albright helped Winston drag the man to where the other inert crewmembers lay, all still restrained by the QuickLocks.

Albright turned around after they had dragged the man into position. For the first time, the carnage on the bridge registered with him. He began to feel ill. This was not like the three-dee movies where people died cleanly. The reality was horrifying. Blood was splattered over most of the rear half of the bridge. All that was left of the hapless individual who had exploded was a severed arm. The three guards lay sprawled and burned on the aft floor of the bridge. There was a strong stench of scorched flesh and clothing. Albright also had begun to notice a slightly numbed wetness down his left arm. He moved his arm, feeling dulled pain as he did so. Looking down, he saw a thirty centimeter long burn through his clothing and beneath, his burned flesh! A slow ooze of blood was trickling out of the partially cauterized wound, and soaking his clothing. Some part of his mind wondered why the wound didn't hurt like hell. Another part of his mind tried to stop his vomit reflex from asserting itself.

"Oh shit, man, I've been hit!" he exclaimed. He turned around to show the other two.

"You'll survive," said Copeland, grimly, "but it might hurt for a few days. We can get some antiseptic at the med station once we've dealt with the rest of the guards. There's doctors at the base who can get it fixed"

Winston examined his shoulder, where Albright's stray bolt had hit him. He could see a little raw flesh, and some slight bleeding.

"Phil, are you OK?" asked Winston.

"Yes, I'm fine. No one hit me," he said, looking at the hole in Winston's jacket.

"Well, it looks like us two will survive long enough to get to the cargo deck. We need to free the prisoners before we face any more trouble – the Osprey crews are surely still coming," said Winston quietly. His shoulder had started to throb quite painfully.

Copeland walked over to the weapons cabinet and picked up four QuickLocks. They then left the bridge, stepping over the gore. There were several holes in the walls where stray shots had penetrated. It was lucky none had gone right through the hull – ships were shielded from hits coming from the outside, not the other way around! The door at the back of the bridge access corridor opened into the crew messhall, just as it had on the Clipper that Winston had captained during the Sirius Templar mission. They quickly moved through the empty hall. Winston remembered the back door of this area opening into the corridor to the crew's quarters,

and then to the equipment area. This turned out to be correct.

They entered the equipment area on the upper deck. The flooring was made from latticed duralium and narrow, metal grid catwalks like most ships. Everything was painted either dark grey or light green. The narrow catwalks went between shield generators. Through the latticework, Winston could see a large, cylindrical object that must have been a 100MW laser. The thing was vast, and stretched back out of sight underneath the cargo bay.

"Looks like the cargo bay is pretty modified," said Winston, eyeing the life support units, and the stacked bays.

"Yes, five stacked bays, they hold up to 30 prisoners each. We are lightly loaded, only the upper bay is filled. The others are waiting...ahem... customers," replied Copeland.

"One hundred and fifty slaves!" said Albright, in horror.

"Yes, Vega's illegal operation was extremely lucrative. Some slaves he traded in cryo-canisters, most are the crews of hapless trade ships he attacked," said Copeland, the disgust evident in his voice.

"Traders? Why did they pick on us?" asked Winston.

"Well, when I walked on the bridge, Vega was getting finished talking to someone on the ground. I heard this person offer a substantial reward for the capture of two guys. I thought it was very out of character for him to attack a ship that could actually defend itself"

"This guy, he didn't, like...look official? Short, grumpy looking guy?"

"Now you mention it, yeah."

"That bastard," said Winston, "is going to pay."

"Bunn?" asked Albright.

"Yes. He's definitely hiding something."

"To do with the ship?"

"Yes."

Winston snorted angrily. *I should have expected some kind of treachery from Bunn*, he thought. What about the guy in the restaurant before they left?

"What ship?" asked Copeland.

"Oh it's an old ... friend ... of ours we are trying to track down," said Albright, trying to see Winston's reaction out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes. That's right. An old friend to whom we are going to award a permanent retirement," added Winston.

"Ah," said Copeland, realising the two weren't going to reveal much more about the subject. He knew that bounty hunters tended to keep quiet about their targets...

He also didn't know he was completely wrong that Winston and Albright were bounty hunting.

"Well, I guess we better free the prisoners," said Copeland, as if it was something he did on a daily basis.

"Yes."

The three walked along the grey metal catwalk towards the institutional green cargo bay. They came to a well-sealed door with a control panel.

"You know you noticed most of the prisoners looked subdued, and you felt tired yourself whilst in that bay?" asked Copeland.

"Yes"

"They keep the whole room lightly gassed with sedatives. The guards all have respirator masks on. The gas stops rebellion from the prisoners. I'll switch the gas supply off and run some fresh air in there," said Copeland, pushing buttons on the control panel.

"Now we have to wait for a couple of minutes. Won't take long to get enough fresh air in there," he added.

They stood and waited in silence. Winston looked down through the gridlike flooring, deep down into the bowels of the ship towards the main gun. Huge heatsinks flanked the weapon, the cooling demands of the large laser being very high.

"OK, we can go in," said Copeland. He punched a few more buttons.

"A password?" asked Winston.

"Yes."

"Why not biometrics?"

"Captain is a penny-pincher. He only used biometrics where he thought there might be a real risk – i.e. the flight controls", replied Copeland.

"What a pillock..."

"It wouldn't have mattered anyway, it's certain I would have had access, after all, he gave me the passwords"

Winston nodded. This much was true.

The door slid open, and Winston could see a couple of the prisoners inside. They still weren't looking particularly alert, but the gun battle that would surely start would be a good wakeup call.

"OK, keep to the sides of this entrance. The guards are on the catwalks. They can't hit us if we stay close in," whispered Copeland.

"Nor can we hit them," observed Winston.

The three sidled in. Copeland ducked his head around the corner of the door, and looked up. The four guards were all on the entrance side of the catwalk.

"Drop your weapons and surrender! We have control of the ship! Throw your weapons down, and come out with your hands up!" yelled Copeland.

To everyone's astonishment, the guards complied. Albright looked at Winston with surprise. Winston just shrugged his shoulders. The guards' guns clattered down on the cargo bay floor, one of them narrowly missing a prisoner, who jumped.

The guards started down the stairway to the bay floor. They didn't resist as the three walked over to them, methodically applying the QuickLocks...

"Wow," said Albright.

Winston just sighed. He wasn't relishing the thought of yet another gun battle. His nerves were already pretty much shot to pieces from all the action of the day, and they still had the Ospreys to deal with – and soon.

"Let's not dawdle! We need to get to the airlock to get the Osprey pilots. I'm really not in the mood for another gun battle," he said, wearily.

"I'll show you the way," said Copeland.

"What do we do with them?" asked Albright, pointing to the prisoners.

Copeland shrugged his shoulders.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

"You lot are all free to wander the ship. The crew is under control. If a couple of you would capture the chief engineer, we'd appreciate it," he said.

Three of the prisoners responded, and started to make for the exit. Winston noticed one of them was the woman he had found himself dumped next to when he had arrived.

"OK, there's two airlocks with docking ports. I'll take one, youse guys take the other. Go down to deck C, it's directly under the cargo bay," said Copeland.

"We're on it. Give us a shout if you run into trouble," said Winston, as he made off for Deck C.

Winston and Albright went down the ladder that connected the equipment bays. Deck C was easy to pick out. All the decks were nicely signposted. The two sidestepped off the ladder and onto the grid flooring. It didn't take long to reach the airlock. Winston peered through the window, just in time to see the flexible tunnel from the Osprey attach.

"Oh crap, they are here already, I hoped we'd have time to prepare," said Winston.

"What's your plan?"

"Well, I spent a bit of time on a Clipper. I've used these airlocks. We can unlock his docking tube, that'll inconvenience him, especially with the airlock on manual override," said Winston.

"You're going to flush him out into space?" asked Albright, slightly horrified.

"Yep. A lot easier than having to fight him," said Winston quietly with not even a hint of malice in his voice.

The pair watched through the small, thick airlock window. Winston fiddled with the control panel for a minute, trying to remember how to initiate manual override. He finally pulled a lever, and a small control panel lit up.

"Now that's the ticket," he said.

The outer airlock door opened. Albright watched as the man they had seen on the comm station earlier drifted through the weightlessness of the docking tunnel. He was not wearing a vacuum suit!

"Jim, he's coming, he's unprotected! Blow the tube now!" shouted Albright excitedly.

Winston touched a few keys on the illuminated display. Albright could see the man on the other side reaching for the airlock control to let him into the Clipper. The man looked up, his gimlet eyes radiating fury and hatred. Albright just smiled, and gave the man the finger.

Suddenly, there was a popping noise as the explosive bolts blew on the docking tube as Winston initiated the manual emergency docking reject! The man in the docking tube looked around horrified for a second, then desperately scrambled to close the outer airlock door. It was too late. The docking tube separated, and the air rushed out of the airlock. Albright didn't want to look, and moved away from the small window. The snow-haired man quickly asphyxiated in the hard, unforgiving vacuum of space. Winston walked over to the window, and peered through.

"Stupid idiot," he said. "He could have easily used his vacuum suit to avoid that one. Still, one less slaver"

"How can you bear to look at the mess in there?" asked Albright. He had turned slightly white.

"There's no mess, contrary to Jameson flicks, a human won't explode when exposed to hard vacuum"

"Oh"

"In fact, our unfortunate attacker in there probably had a few seconds of consciousness to curse his stupidity in not anticipating a move like that"

Albright leaned up against the wall, looking only slightly better. They both jumped as the sound of two, distinct plasma gun shots echoed around the equipment bay.

"Quick! Follow me!" shouted Winston.

Winston dashed down the catwalk, and grabbed the ladder. He remembered that the other docking tube was somewhere on the forward portion of E deck. Albright raced to catch up. Winston climbed the ladder two rungs at a time, and leaped onto E deck, sprinting towards the general direction of the sound. He quickly examined his rifle to see the energy state. It didn't have much left. About thirty seconds later, they arrived at the scene.

A man in a vacuum suit lay slumped at the airlock entrance, most definitely dead. Copeland leaned against a wall. Winston noticed something wasn't right.

"Oh...sweet mother of worlds," he said, as he noticed that Copeland's right shoulder was a mess of raw flesh, through to the bone. Blood freely flowed from the open wound.

The colour had drained from Copeland's face. He was looking rather faint.

"I got him," said Copeland weakly.

"We've got to get you to sick bay, you're in a bad way, man" said Albright, noticing how white Copeland looked.

"Let's go," said Winston, trying to support his friend's weight.

It wasn't far to the sick bay. Albright and Winston laid Copeland out on a bed, and instructed an AutoMed to see to the injuries. The AutoMed silently complied. It only had a limited set of repairs it could do – the full repairs would need to be done at a properly equipped med centre. However, the machine could at least stop the bleeding and ensure that the patient would survive.

Winston sat down on one of the seats in the room, and slumped back, feeling exhausted. Albright sat down on the floor, resting against one of the walls. In just a few short hours, his entire world had changed. All there was to do now though was wait for the Federation to show up. That somehow didn't cheer him up much.

Chapter 15. On the run

"WELL, Chuck, it looks like we're going to be here a couple of weeks," sighed Winston, looking at the leaden sky over the city of Diamond.

"Yeah," replied Albright without enthusiasm.

"There's nothing we can do until Jas's line drivers are fixed. I'll get the repair shop going in the right way – you might as well take a break. Just meet me back at the ship at 1400 tomorrow, and we'll see if we can do some hacking," said Winston.

"Thanks," replied Albright, who trudged off to his quarters to get a change of clothing.

The slaver's ship had been unloaded by the Federation, and the crew taken into custody. Winston and Albright had already had about five interviews with the Diamond police – each officer had asked the same questions, and it was starting to wear thin. They had told them everything, except about the Adder they were trying to follow. The police still didn't seem satisfied, despite the arrests they had made.

The Asp had been detached from the Panther, and brought down to a repair shop on the surface. It was evident that the ship would need a lot of work and money to get running again. Nearly every electroptic transducer had been fried by the energy bomb's EMP. Fortunately, the drive's core was undamaged, but the computer was wrecked. It would be at least two weeks before they could get a new one from AAI at New Rossyth. Both Winston and Albright had visited the doctor to get their gunshot wounds seen to. The doctor had assured Albright he'd have a good 30-centimeter long scar on his upper right arm for life. It was too late for the doctor to prevent the scarring. At least it would no longer hurt.

Winston had also noticed that Albright was looking worse for wear. He had, after all, never seen the grittier side of space combat, and a day to relax might let his stomach settle. It had all been rather personal during the battle on the Clipper's bridge.

Copeland wasn't happy. In front of him was Lt. Colonel Bradley, the pilot of one of the Asps that had met the Clipper as it headed in towards the planet. He was a short, hard-bitten looking man, with intense eyes and short cropped snow-white hair. He was wearing a Federal Navy flight suit, but he didn't seem to have the attitude of a Navy man.

"So are you sure that's all you know?" asked Lt. Colonel Bradley, once again.

"Yes, that's it, Sir," replied Copeland, glaring at Bradley across the table.

He had told them everything he remembered during the uncomfortable interview. About the conversation with Bunn he'd caught the tail end of. About Winston's dramatic assault on Captain Vega, and that Winston and Albright were out looking for some ship.

"Well, in that case, you're free to go," stated Bradley.

"Thank you, Sir," said Copeland, leaving the room, with relief. He had to tell Winston somehow about the interview. It didn't seem like a normal debriefing procedure.

Bradley turned to Campbell, who had remained silent during the interview.

"What do you think, John?" asked Bradley.

John Campbell, a tall, thin old man who looked like he had an eagle somewhere in his ancestry, shrugged. He was dressed like you would expect an accountant or lawyer to dress, not like the clandestine operative he was.

"I don't know, Lieutenant Colonel. I think we need to talk to these chaps. I have information that the Zearla ship's registry was hacked just before they left."

"Hmmm," replied Bradley, thoughtfully.

"And it sounds like Baron Bunn was awfully alarmed. I think it is highly probable. No, I think it's certain that these two were looking for one of our ships," Campbell continued.

"Do you think they know about Backstab?"

"I doubt it, but I think they might be looking for it although they don't know what it is yet," replied Campbell enigmatically.

"Why would bounty hunters be looking for a Backstab ship?" asked Bradley. "They are under strict orders to avoid trouble."

"Yes, they are, and they have. I doubt it's an accident if they are after one of our ships. Someone's put them up to this," replied Campbell.

"What do you have on these two?" asked Bradley.

Campbell sat down, and pulled out a datapad. He inserted a DSU, and quickly reviewed the information.

"Well, we have James Kyle Winston, 31 years old, born and raised near Newtown, Nirvana in the Phekda system. Been in space since he was 17 except a one-year layoff which ended about four months ago, which he spent at a small island community about 500 kilometers from Manchester, Tionisla. Took up fishing I believe. Made Elite about a year and a half ago. A vicious bastard by all accounts if you're not on his right side – notable for a very inventive assassination of a criminal gang leader at Boston Base, Barnard's Star and for eliminating the Sirius Templar," Campbell told Bradley.

"And the other one?"

"Charles Albright, goes by the name Chuck. 21 years old, lots of sim combat but no real experience. Honourably discharged by the Alliance Joint Navy eight months ago, moved to Tionisla. Evidently hooked up with Winston to become his copilot. He was originally a Federation citizen, but moved to the Alliance when he was 16. Only in the AJN for two years, I guess he couldn't hack being in the military"

Campbell slid the datapad to Bradley, who looked at it. It was showing a picture of the two subjects. Bradley shook his head.

"What a poser," he said, looking at Winston's photograph.

The shot of Winston was taken from a rakish angle. Winston was standing by a nuclear missile, arms crossed, dressed in black, and wearing a sultry look. The photo had been taken for a news feature in the wake of the Sirius Templar incident. Albright's photograph on the other hand was just a standard pilot's license picture. Since the dawn of photo idents, no matter how hard you tried, you'd always come out looking like a criminal. Albright's ident photo was no exception.

"Well, what do we do?" asked Bradley, looking up at Campbell again.

"I think the most prudent course of action would be to haul Albright in. I think he's most likely to tell us what we want to know, and then let them go on their way. If it turns out that they are getting close to Backstab, we'll do a full military op to eliminate them when they leave this system"

Albright stepped out of the auto-shuttle. Sleet now began to fall from the leaden sky. Although the average temperature of the planet Capitol was about 40 degrees Celcius, the city of Diamond was 70 degrees north, where the long winters were frigid, and the summers were only lukewarm. Albright had no idea what season it was, but he already decided it was pretty miserable. The wind whipped the icy rain around and into his face. Despite the cold dampness, the street was particularly busy, with autoshuttles buzzing all around picking up and dropping off passengers. The Federal Military was in evidence, too. Andceeth, being a disputed system, always had a strong military presence. Diamond belonged to the Federation.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

Albright briskly walked inside the glass door of the building, which proclaimed itself to be "Betty B's Bar. Traditional Ales". He was mentally exhausted, and he knew that he just had to sit down with a nice cold beer, and think things out.

He walked into the large bar room. It was early afternoon, and the bar wasn't busy. About a dozen customers were in the large bar room, mostly in one large group that occasionally burst into raucous laughter. Albright took the bar stool nearest the window. The bartender, a slightly plump middle-aged woman with blonde, curly hair walked up to him, smiling pleasantly.

"What will it be, luv," she asked with a smile. She had a strong accent that Albright couldn't quite place. "Half-litre of beer," said Albright, sliding his credit ident to the woman. "Well, we have lots of different sorts, what sort would you like?" the bartender asked, taking in the beer taps with a sweep of her arm.

Albright looked at the nearest beer pump. He had never seen anything like it. A large, black lever, with a brass top, and a small sign with the name of the beer. It said "Joseph Holts".

"I'll have a Holts," he said, choosing it out of convenience, rather than knowledge of beer. "Holts it'll be," said the woman, walking over to the beer pump. She began to pull the lever, filling a glass with the deep amber beer. "That'll be one point ten," she said, charging Albright's credit ident. "Thanks," said Albright wearily.

The woman went away to service the large group, which once again broke into laughter.

Albright took a hearty quaff of the beer. It had a strong, sharp flavour that made him feel somewhat better already. The wind blew the rain against the window in a continuous blatter. The almost freezing rain slid down the window, distorting the view of the world outside.

The grey, leaden sky matched his mood. Perhaps the AJN psychologist was right. Maybe I'm not cut out for this, he thought. He remembered the day that the psychologist told him he could never be a fighter pilot, his life long dream. The psych had told him he wasn't "emotionally stable enough." He had been angry rather than upset, and had vowed to prove the shrink who had done his psych screen wrong. He had in the meantime been assigned to pilot AJN transport ships. The opportunity to prove the shrink wrong came when the AJNIB had become so short staffed that they would take anybody who was loyal to the Alliance. Maybe if he could prove himself as an intelligence officer, he could prove to the AJN that the psych was wrong. Best of all, the AJNIB job would mean he would probably see space combat.

It's not the same as sim combat, he thought. He was deeply unsettled by the fight on the bridge of the Clipper. He hadn't been able to put out the memory of Winston's shape behind the engineer...the flash of light from Winston's gun, then the rain of body parts. He kept thinking about the guard he gunned down. He kept reminding himself that if he hadn't, he would have died himself, but all he could think of was mercilessly pumping fusillade after fusillade of plasma into the guard until his personal shield had given way, allowing the next bolt to tear through the man's torso.

Could I have done what Winston had done with Vega? he questioned. He realised he had kept a cool facade whilst Winston had gambled with their lives, but more out of being scared rigid than anything else. He realised that Winston seemed to lack emotion. It was true that Winston had appeared to have shown anger back at Old Blackelk, but thinking back...it had looked rather, well...contrived, as if he was following instructions on how to act angry. Worse of all, he now felt he couldn't talk to Winston about his feelings, despite his suspicions that Winston must have been through what he was going through.

Deceit, Harmony and Pleasure

He took another deep pull from his beer, already feeling the effects of the alcohol. The rain outside had again turned to damp snow, the moist flakes sliding down window as they were driven by the wind. A distant flash of lightning surged across the sky, a dulled rumble of thunder following a few seconds later. He looked around the bar. Curiously, he saw a man sitting at the other end of the room, dressed in a business suit and despite the grey sky, wearing a rather sinister pair of sunglasses. He looked like a bad guy from a Jameson three-dee flick. Alarmingly, the man was watching him. Albright looked at his beer, and quickly finished it.

"Thanks," he said to the bartender, who was standing nearby, filling a half-litre glass.

"Cheers, luv. Chin up lad, it's not the end of the world," she said.

"I wouldn't bet on it," he thought rather than said as he started to leave.

Albright nonchalantly, but quickly walked towards the door. He dared to steal a glance at the man who had been looking at him. He noticed that the man was standing up. He tried to quicken his pace subtly.

He left the bar, and made a right turn. The wind drove the wet snow into his face, chilling him to the bone. He kept his pace up, and rounded the corner of the building, making his way towards the nearest autoshuttle dock. A black auto pulled out of traffic, and stopped by the side of the road just ahead.

Four men, dressed in suits and wearing sunglasses stepped out.

Albright screeched to a halt, and made a quick about-turn, walked quickly across the street, narrowly avoiding being run over by a speeding auto-shuttle. Quickly glancing back, he noticed the four men were following at a quick pace. Abandoning nonchalance, Albright ran for it. He sprinted down a side road before coming to an alleyway to his left. He ducked into the alleyway, dashing down half its length. He paused to get his breath back. He was feeling hot, despite the icy wind and driving sleet. He almost fancied he could hear the wet sleet sizzle as it landed in his hair and on his face. There was a muffled roar, and above him, he glimpsed the dark shape of a Cobra Mk.3 scraping through the bottom of the clouds as it thundered by on its approach into the starport. Its navigation lights were the only hints of colour in the dark grey sky.

He walked down the alleyway until he came to the end, which emerged into a wide boulevard. The street was busy with traffic. Autoshuttles peeled off to go down side streets. He was hoping one would stop to let some people off, so he could get in and get back to the ship. He nervously looked around, just in time to see one of the suits catch sight of him.

He started to run again, pushing past pedestrians. Suddenly he spotted an autoshuttle setting down. The door opened, and the passenger got out. He sprinted towards it, and jumped in.

The shuttle was still occupied by someone. He yelped in surprise as the suit-man sitting in the other seat made a grab for him! He quickly jumped out, before the door slammed shut, and broke into a run. Glancing back, he now noticed he was being pursued by a couple of Federal soldiers, each bearing some nasty looking weaponry. But salvation was in sight... ahead he spotted an autoshuttle dock with four shuttles waiting! He expended the last of his energy on a mad sprint to the dock. He leaped into the nearest shuttle and slammed the door down, not wanting to wait for the automatic system to do it for him.

"Spaceport maintenance hangar!" he yelled at the shuttle's computer. One of the suit-men came up to the shuttle's window. Albright gave the man the finger as the shuttle took off, and joined traffic, leaving the suit-man standing by the kerbside.

The shuttle sped off in completely the wrong direction. He suddenly realised with horror that if he was being pursued by the authorities, they could take control! The small shuttle veered off, and climbed. He noticed four other shuttles following him. All he could do was wait, as the shuttle climbed up into the low

cloud. He realised they could be taking him anywhere. The shuttle flew on for about two minutes, before breaking out beneath the cloud. There was nothing around – just some farm fields that was used to provide Diamond's food source. The shuttle descended, and set down in sodden field.

Albright forced the door open. He decided he wasn't about to give up. He jumped out, landing in the field with a splash, and started to run in what he guessed was the right direction. The field was very difficult to run in – the dirt clung to his boots as he splashed through the ankle-deep water that had accumulated from the rainstorm. It was also extremely slippery, and he fell over, face-first into a deep puddle. He struggled up and began to run again, just in time to see his pursuers close in. Quickly they landed, boxing him in. He tried to dodge around them, but succeeded only in falling down again. He lay panting in the dirt, and struggled to stand.

The doors of the nearest autoshuttle opened, and four soldiers jumped out. Albright was now too exhausted to run any more, as the soldiers grabbed him, and hustled him into their shuttle...

Chapter 16. The Suspect

CHARLES ALBRIGHT surveyed his surroundings. He'd been brought here after a short shuttle ride, flanked by Federal soldiers, through the clouds. They had touched down in a small parking lot, then he'd been lead down a few sterile-looking corridors into a room. The soldiers had locked him in.

The room was small and square, the walls painted a sickly light green. There was a fake wood table and two chairs. The floor was painted light grey – the same colour as hangars were usually painted. Albright had sat down on one of the hard chairs. The door was definitely quite substantial. It had a small reinforced glastiplex window, but was otherwise featureless. The harsh white lighting was evidently designed for utility, not for comfort. There was nothing to do but to wait for whatever fate beckoned. The soldiers had taken his communicator and ident, so even if he could escape, he would have difficulty trying to get a ride home.

He had been waiting for over half an hour now. He was still wet from his failed escape attempt across the field, except where the mud had splattered over his face and hair. That was now drying like plaster, and just added to his discomfort. He started picking it off to pass the time.

A face appeared at the small window. Albright wasn't entirely surprised to see that the owner of the face was wearing the same sort of sunglasses as his pursuers had been. A couple of seconds later, the door clicked open. Three men walked in. The first person in was one of the suit-wearing people. He was of slim build, and about middle aged, and very pale in complexion, as if he had been deprived of natural light. He took off his sunglasses. Albright wasn't entirely surprised when he saw the sunglasses were in fact Micro-Visions. That explained why they were being worn in the dull rainstorm outside. Micro-Visions were extremely expensive lightweight vision enhancers with a built-in communication system and display. That's probably how they had anticipated where he was going when he was running from them. The next two men who walked in were younger – about Albright's age, but physically twice his size. It looked as if someone had packed them into the suits they were wearing. One of them closed the door, whilst the older man sat in the seat opposite Albright. He set a datapad on the table, and briefly viewed it before speaking. He looked up, giving Albright an appraising look.

"Mr Albright, I'm sorry to say that we don't tolerate piracy and murder here," he said, almost pityingly. His voice had a brittle quality to it. He enunciated each word with care.

"Pir – " Albright began.

"Please don't act surprised. We have looked up your activities on the way to Andceeth. We want answers," continued the man. *Interrogator* thought Albright.

There was a pause.

Albright remembered his training. *Give as little information as possible, if practical, demand a lawyer then say nothing. Make no attempt to lie. Instead be economical with the truth...* He had to try and answer in such a way not to reveal anything...but not to set off the lie detector that would certainly be buried somewhere around the room.

"Now, a young man like you may have a bright future. Or maybe not. If you choose the wrong path... now you can co-operate with us, or..." said the man, letting the sentence hang in the air.

"I want to talk to a lawyer," said Albright.

The man smiled mirthlessly.

"I know my rights, I lived in the Federation... I'm not saying a word without my lawyer," he added.

"Mr. Albright, Andceeth is a disputed system. Normal Federation rules do not apply. I suggest you answer my questions, or... or, well, I hope we don't have to explore these possibilities, although these two guys are eager to explore them, I'm sure," said the man, pointing his thumb at the two large men behind him.

One of the gorilla-sized men at the back of the room grinned nastily at Albright, and started slapping his fist into his other hand.

James Winston looked at his watch with some irritation. Where the hell had Albright got to? When he said he back by 1400, he meant it. Jas was now repaired and online. They had some serious hacking to do whilst the rest of the ship was repaired. It was now 1600, and there had to be something going on if he was two hours late. He'd probably found some seductive female and sloped off into the night.

"Jas, how do you feel?" he asked, turning to the console in the Asp's living quarters.

"Fine. All my systems are now within operational limits," she replied.

"Well that's good to hear. Here's an easy one, get Chuck on the horn. He's late," said Winston.

There was a pause whilst Jas placed the call to Albright's personal communicator.

"Jim, his communicator is offline," said Jas, after the attempt failed.

"Offline?"

"Offline or destroyed. That's the error code that came back," she replied.

"OK, get a trace. Where was he last seen?"

"Give me a couple of minutes, and I'll get his communicator trace. We can find at least what area he was in when it went offline," she replied.

Winston began to feel a little uncomfortable. Something was definitely up. Communicators seldom just failed. The word "offline" was not entirely comforting, and "destroyed" even less so. He got up, and pulled out a container of *Marvel*. He spooned a little of the white powder into a glass and added water, and some concentrated orange, and stirred. The water soon took on an opaque, orange colour. A couple of lumps floated in the glass.

"That looks disgusting," said Jas, as Winston and his drink came into view of one of her cameras.

"What? This is the elixir of the gods. My mother always made this for us on the farm, but we had real milk from a cow then," Winston replied haughtily.

"You drank *milk from a cow!*" exclaimed Jas.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, it's...from a cow!" replied Jas

"What do you know anyway, you're hardware," replied Winston, not unkindly.

"I suppose you have a point. But...ugh... even worse, that *Marvel* stuff"

Winston looked at his drink, nonplussed. Why would a computer, albeit sentient, worry about milk drinks? He had to concede that the lumps were a little bit unappetising, but in lieu of real milk, he had to make do. Admittedly, he hadn't heard of the practise outside of Phekda either.

"Well, I have the logs. They are interesting. He spent most of yesterday mooching around town by the looks of it. Spent the night here. Went back into the town today, and then disappeared off into an unpopulated area at high speed, and that's the last trace we have," said Jas. She showed a map on the console.

"Where is that place, I mean, where the trace ends?" asked Winston, sipping his drink.

"It's just agricultural land"

"Hmmm. Can you get into the security camera network?"

"If you give me a couple of hours...they probably just have a simple protection system, shouldn't be too hard to brute-force it," replied Jas.

The visitor chime sounded...

"Who is that?" asked Winston.

"See for yourself," replied Jas, bringing the view outside the hatch onto the console.

The distorted, fish-eye view showed the face of a furtive and nervous looking man.

"Damn, it's Phil! Open up the hatch, quick. He looks like he's worried about something," said Winston.

"No problem"

The hatch opened, and Copeland quickly climbed inside, making his way through the interior of the Asp. Winston waited quietly and sipped his drink. A few seconds later, Copeland appeared in the living quarters.

"You would have to end up in the least obvious repair station," said Phil, urgently, as he took a seat.

"Least obvious?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd find you at an orbital."

"You should have called," replied Winston, "I am on the phone you know"

"I tried. It said your communicator was offline or destroyed"

"What? Damn, I thought it had been a bit too quiet"

Winston pulled out his communicator. It was completely blank. He plugged it into Jas's datalink port.

"Jas, what do you reckon?" he asked.

"EMP from the energy bomb got it, by the looks of it," she replied.

"But Albright's was at least working for a while..."

"Yes, his must have been better shielded. You'll have to get a new one, I'm afraid."

"Damn, that's another hundred credits down the tubes."

Copeland looked at Winston.

"They interviewed me pretty harshly...the guys who picked us up from that slave ship," said Copeland.

"They did?"

"I don't know what they are after. But they are very suspicious of you two. Don't be surprised if they haul you in"

"Haul . . . oh crap, they must have Albright! He's missing, and his communicator shows a very odd trace, and now it's offline!"

"Look, Jim, you have to get out of here as soon as possible. I don't know what they want, but they looked pretty anxious to get it," continued Copeland, in warning tones.

There was a brief pause. Winston thought quickly. He couldn't exactly leave without Albright.

"Jas – go hack that security camera system. We need to know what happened to Chuck – devote all your resources," said Winston, urgently.

"No need," said Phil, "I can get in there in a few seconds"

"How?" asked Jas and Winston simultaneously.

Copeland then did what Winston always called the Bastard Grin. It was a particularly evil one, and Copeland always did it when he was about to erase some poor sap's online life back in the days when he spent

most of his time hacking into the G.I.N.

"Watch," he said, sliding up to the console.

His hands danced over the smooth surface of the console, as he logged onto the starport's network. He went through a few security systems with an expert's touch.

"They think they have good security, but they don't" he said, as he continued to make his entry.

Then he was in!

"OK, Jas, send the communicator trace. We'll get the relevant cameras. Do a quick scan for Mr. Albright," he said, confidently.

Images flashed on the screen as Jas went through the images, looking for Winston's missing colleague. She was fast winding through every video log within the area the communicator was seen in.

"Got him," she said.

The video showed Albright leaving a bar looking worried. A couple of seconds later, a man wearing sunglasses emerged, despite the gloomy skies. It didn't surprise Winston when he turned to follow Albright. An autoshuttle quickly pulled out of traffic, and four similarly equipped people got out, and began to move towards Albright, who began running away...

The three watched carefully as the drama unfolded. Albright eventually got into an autoshuttle which sped off into the clouds. In hot pursuit was a shuttle loaded with suit-people and another loaded with soldiers...

"We're in deep trouble," said Winston...

The men left the room, leaving Albright once again alone with his thoughts. It hadn't been too difficult to deflect the questions. Anything that was too tricky to answer he replied with, "Ask James, he's the commander," hoping that this would be a sufficient delaying technique. At least, if they had Winston holed up in another room, that way their stories couldn't disagree, because there'd be only one story. Winston's story. He hoped Winston wouldn't be annoyed that he'd been lumped with this rather unfortunate responsibility.

Albright didn't have to wait long. The interrogator returned to the room, this time without his trained gorillas.

He slid Albright's ident and communicator across the fake wooden table. "You're free to go," he said.

Albright nearly fell of his chair in surprise. With the questions they were asking, he was sure they knew who exactly Winston and himself were working for. Maybe they didn't after all...

"Umm, thank you," said Albright.

He got up. The gorilla-men were waiting outside the door. They escorted him off the premises, and shoved him out of the door into the cold night rather roughly. Albright stood under the bright lights outside the squat building, as the doors slid shut behind him. The lights illuminated the gently falling snow. Albright shivered. He still hadn't quite dried off from his earlier meeting with the large puddle in that field, and it was now well below freezing. Almost three centimeters of snow had accumulated already.

He pulled out his communicator, and switched it on.

"Call Winston," he said to the small device. It beeped in acknowledgement.

"Error. The requested communicator is offline or destroyed."

Offline or destroyed! He didn't like the sound of that. Perhaps they had caught Winston too? Knowing Winston, he would have been armed, and undoubtedly a fight would have broken out. Perhaps he had been *killed!* That would certainly explain that error message.

Albright decided to go back to the ship, and trace things from there. It was likely that Jas could at least get a communicator trace, and find out where Winston went. That's if the ship hadn't been tampered with. Worse still, the ship could be crawling with Federal agents. It was a risk he had to take. It was either that, or freeze to death outside. He began to walk to the small autoshuttle bay beside the building. A lone autoshuttle, lightly dusted with snow, was waiting for a customer. The shuttle opened as he approached, and he climbed on board.

"Spaceport maintenance hangar," he said to the machine.

It took off into the night. The powerful forward light illuminated the snow like a rapidly passing starfield as the craft accelerated. It disappeared into the clouds. The lights from the city below illuminated the interior of the low cloud making it look like a pink milkshake to Albright's tired mind.

Chapter 17. Confusion and Discovery

The harsh, bluish light from the powerful lamp outside threw a long oblong of brightness into the darkened hangar, overpowering the dull glow that sidled out of one of the ships – its entrance hatch wide open. A tall and slightly thin figure cautiously peered around the doorway, and quietly slipped inside the hangar, silently disappearing back into the shadows. The figure moved nervously in the darkness, searching for a primitive but useful weapon, eventually reaching down and carefully lifting a short section of angle–duralium. The figure moved around, and a disturbance caused a sheet of alloy to slide off its precarious pile, and clatter to the ground.

The figure froze. A startled rat bolted from the shadows and into the icy snowfall outside. Nothing moved for about a minute, then the shadowy human form began to move towards the opened hatch of the Asp parked within the bowels of the hangar – gripping the metre–long piece of angle–duralium.

The figure carefully entered the ship, its shadow cast into the soft light that poured from the ship's interior. Finally, the figure disappeared from sight, quietly creeping along the catwalks of the ship's equipment deck...

"Phil, I think I should find Chuck, then just leave. Can you get me a ship at all? Or give me a ride out of here?" asked Winston.

"I can try at least. I think I know where Chuck might be, too," said Copeland, turning to Jas's holopanel again.

Copeland called up a map of the main Federation compound, and moved around it until he got to the western half.

"See this building here?" he asked.

"Yes"

"Well, this is where they do interrogations – criminal, espionage or anything, they hold them here. I've delivered many a prisoner. I know the area quite well," said Copeland, scrolling across more of the map.

"How do we get him out?"

"I should be able to bluff it. After all, I am with the Police. Just wait outside in an autoshuttle, I'll find him and get him out, and then we just go," Copeland remarked, as if it was all just a routine part of the day's work.

"Isn't this going to have...consequences...for you?" asked Winston.

"Look, this lot are brutal. And you're a friend, and that's worth more than... what was that noise?"

Winston looked around and scratched his head. Noise? He listened intently. Was the ship's hatch closed? Then he heard it...ever so faintly, just a slight scrape. He relaxed.

"Probably a rat. This hangar is absolutely infested. I probably forgot to close the hatch and one sneaked in," said Winston.

"I hope not. Have you seen the rats out here? Big as dogs, some of them," remarked Copeland, acidly. "They need better pest control. This is supposed to be a Federation starport, not some grungy Frontierland"

The figure sidled up to the cabin door of the ship. He gave the piece of angle–duralium an experimental swing. He could make out two voices, but they were too muffled by the wall and the door in front of him to make out what they were saying. The owners of the voices were bound to be seated at the console. He imagined the room's layout, an Asp's living quarters being pretty tight and cramped. Then he planned his strike. First, hit the closest one as hard as possible, take him out cold. Then capture the other one in the confusion. He hoped they weren't armed. He then realised how stupid that hope was. Perhaps he should hope that they weren't good shots instead.

Adrenaline rushing, he gently took hold of the door handle, ready to savagely slide the door open then pounce. He made out a few words. "...with the Police," he heard drift through the door. Or at least, that's what he thought was said. He listened carefully. He made out a few more words. "Federation starport, not some grungy..." said a voice. He gripped the door slider tightly with his left hand, and his improvised club with his right hand...

He counted down from three and breathed deeply...

He wrenched the door open and burst in, swinging his implement down without even looking. The angle-duralium crashed into the table with a loud bang, just missing the man seated by the console! Without thinking, the figure raised the duralium club again, and his startled victim spun around in the chair!

"Alright! What are you doing!" shouted the figure in stark surprise!

Alright stopped, mid swing. He looked into the eyes of the man in front of him. Finally, recognition cut through his frenzied adrenaline soaked mind...

"Jim?" said Albright, not quite sure of the evidence of his own eyes. His arms went limp, and he dropped the piece of duralium, which landed with a dull clatter. He looked to his left, and saw that Copeland was there, already pointing a standard Police-issue plasma pistol at his head.

"May I ask why you're trying to brain me?" asked Winston, looking up at Albright in shock.

"I thought...I thought you'd been..."

"I had been what?"

"taken away...captured...your communicator was, ummm... I came to find out where they had taken you then rescue you." Albright's voice trailed off. He looked faintly embarrassed.

Nobody said anything for a moment. If this was a pregnant pause, it was about to have twins.

"Chuck, my communicator was destroyed by the energy bomb's EMP," Winston said at last.

Copeland lowered his gun. Albright collapsed into a seat, looking frightened, embarrassed and exhausted all at the same time. Winston noticed that he looked a mess – there was mud all over him, and he was almost blue with cold. It looked like he had experienced a very action-packed afternoon.

"They interrogated me," said Albright.

"Who is they?" asked Copeland.

"The Federation! Or at least I think it was. They think we are pirates, I think...well, that's what they wanted me to think, at least," said Albright, fatigue evident in his voice.

"Did you answer their questions?" asked Winston, concerned.

"I evaded them. They didn't seem satisfied, but they let me go."

"We went through your communicator trace and correlated it with Diamond's surveillance cameras. We saw the chase, well, at least until you got into the autoshuttle," Winston added.

"Well, they took control of the shuttle. They landed it out in the middle of nowhere. I tried to run away across the fields, but they were too slippery," said Albright, with feeling.

"Looks like you fell over once or twice," said Copeland, not unkindly.

"Yes. The bastards didn't even let me dry off. I nearly froze in their cell," added Albright, bitterly.

"You know, if you evaded, they know you're up to something. They are well practised in interrogation techniques," said Copeland.

"I don't doubt it," added Winston. "We need to find out what they wanted from us. We need to do a little covert operation of our own. Phil, is the building wired for sound?"

Copeland paused and thought a little while. He was just about to answer when Jas broke in.

"Jim, that particular building is the only one in the compound that's not wired. I think that's highly significant," she said.

"Why would a police station not be wired?" asked Winston.

"Because they don't want any record of what they are doing in there, that's why. And no, it's not standard Federation practise," replied Copeland.

"Then we need to wire it ourselves. We have the equipment," said Winston.

"Why bother? Why not just get as many light years away from here as possible?" asked Copeland, surprised at Winston's high-risk proposition.

"Because we need to find out if we're going to get followed. I need to know why they are so interested in us, and potentially our mission," Winston replied.

"Your mission?" asked Copeland. "I thought you were bounty hunters," he said.

"We are. But we are on a mission for a very important customer," said Winston. He felt terrible about lying to his friend, but there was *no way* he could let on what their real mission was. The risk of discovery would be too great...

"Jim, I just got a message," said Jas, breaking in. "It looks like your hyperdrive part will be arriving early. It will be here tomorrow, so once the nanobots have finished integrating it, we can leave. We can probably get out of here within the next twenty hours"

"That's the first good bit of news I've heard all day," sighed Winston. "Why don't we all get some sleep, and make our plan of action tomorrow. We've got to get to the bottom of this one," said Winston, sounding rather tired.

The autoshuttle climbed into the clear morning air, the previous day's dismal cloud nothing but a memory. A carpet of snow covered the land as far as the eye could see. The sun, Andceeth, sat low in the sky, barely warming the ground. Winston watched the world slide by. He'd never seen snow with his own eyes – his home, near Newtown, Nirvana, Phekda, had been uniformly warm. His last planetary residence, near Manchester in Tionisla never got cold either. The city of Diamond, however, was frigid during the long winters. The planet of Capitol didn't have much of a tilted axis, so the summer was only marginally warmer.

He opened the small metal box and peered at the contents. Two dozen AJNIB-supplied monitors. The tiny devices, shaped like a pin with a ballbearing on the end, contained a camera no larger than a mosquito's eye, plus a minute microphone. The ball contained the recording memory and a tiny transmitter. He picked one out and looked at it carefully. Hundreds of credits worth in a tiny package. The problem would be sticking the device somewhere where it would be of use.

Copeland watched Winston fondling the device.

"Do they transmit?" he said at last.

Winston turned to face Copeland, The winter wonderland outside the autoshuttle reflected brightly off Winston's sunglasses, making Copeland squint.

"Yes. Several modes. Depends what you want them to do, really," replied Winston.

"Well, they are no good then, this isn't an ordinary cop-shop. The place is wired with sensors. Any unauthorized transmission will be detected, and you're rumbled, basically," replied Copeland, dryly.

"I can make them record only. Trouble is, we'll have to go back later and retrieve them. Anyway, what base is wired so tightly for electronic espionage, but is lax enough that we can crawl undetected in the ceiling void?" asked Winston.

"A Federation one," replied Copeland, smiling faintly. "They just haven't got a clue. Really. This isn't really a high security cop-shop, but the little tyrant in charge likes to think it is so put in a whole bunch of electronic counter-espionage kit in it"

"You don't seem to respect your boss very much, Phil," replied Winston.
"No, I don't."

Silence once again enveloped the autoshuttle, broken only by the sound of the air rushing by. The note of the prime-mover changed, and the small shuttle began to descend towards its destination, a shuttle-park near the central police station, where Albright had been held the day before. A few minutes later, it touched down, disturbing the fresh layer of snow.

"Anyway, how do bounty hunters get hold of that kind of kit?" Copeland asked suddenly, looking at Winston suspiciously...

"Hello, Elyssia, glad you could make it," said Lt. Colonel Jack Bradley, as the woman walked in through the door.

Elyssia Wyatt was an Elite rated pilot. She was about middle-aged, her almost midnight-black hair tied back, and a fit, curvaceous body that made something stir low in Bradley's hind-brain. Her face was smooth and unblemished, hiding deep within a deadly instinct that could cut like a knife. She wore a tight-fitting black flight suit. The only jewelry she wore was an Elite pendant, presented to her ten years before when she made Elite. She intensely disliked the Andceeth system, and even more, this police station. The man in charge – what was his name – Campbell was it? was an idiot. Lt. Col. Bradley wasn't a bad sort though, although she could never get over the fact that her superior officer had a lower Elite rating than she did.

"We have a mission for you. It might be risky, but we're not sure. However, it's essential to our operation," continued Bradley.

"Well, Jack, you always save the good ones for me," replied Wyatt, with good humour.

"Seriously, we don't have enough Elite pilots. It's ironic – they don't like me to send you on dangerous missions because they are too frightened of losing an Elite pilot."

"I told you the boss was an idiot," she replied, frowning a little.

"It's not his decision. Campbell isn't bad, really. Much of what he does is a bit of a front."

"I dunno, I always want to give him a good hiding whenever I see him," replied Wyatt, smiling a little at the thought.

"I wish you'd give me a good hiding," replied Bradley, ducking slightly.

"Oh, Jack, pur-lease!" replied Wyatt, laughing.

"OK, let's get down to business," said Bradley.

Bradley picked up a datapad, and showed it to Wyatt. She looked at it, reading the information, thoughtfully biting her lower lip. She continued to page through the information, stalking around the room while she did so. She finished reading, and put the pad on the table.

"Well?" asked Bradley.

"Tell me more." replied Wyatt.

The datapad had contained information on two people, a ship, and some vague mumblings on a danger to Backstab. She glanced at it again, feeling slightly guilty. She thought that the man standing next to the nuclear missile in the photo might have been a bit of a poser, but he was rather attractive to her, even if he was a bit on the young side for her. The other one was a far too young for her liking. She was old enough to be his mother. She could tell that the months in space were causing her to have emotions again...and emotions in this game could be deadly, especially when your adversary might not have any. She straightened herself, and put illogical emotion out of the way for a solid order of cold-as-ice professionalism.

"Well, as you see, Commander Winston and his second in command, Mr. Albright, have caused us some headaches. We are reasonably sure they know about Backstab, or are at least on its trail and will compromise our plans."

"What makes you so sure? I thought Backstab was under good cover?" asked Wyatt.

Bradley sighed. "It is. Supposedly. However, there was a breakdown in Zearla. These two people were responsible for some hacking back there. The local baron tried to cover up the fact by sending a slaver after them, but the slaver was defeated"

"Defeated? Destroyed?"

"No, not quite. Apparently, their little fleet attacked Winston's Asp. Now you will notice from the datapad that Winston, like you, has achieved the Elite rating. This caused some problems for the slaver, so they energy bombed him, and managed to pick up his ship. However, somehow the pair managed to overpower the crew with a little help from one of the Federation undercover anti-slavery squad members. Quite a bloodbath, by all accounts. One or two of the slavers had to be identified by their DNA"

Wyatt raised her eyebrows, and looked at the photographs on the datapad again.

"We interrogated Albright, on the account that he's obviously inexperienced. However, he skillfully evaded our questions. But he hasn't been in the business for long enough to know that his evasion hinted that something was up," continued Bradley.

"His business?"

"Yes. We aren't quite sure what their business is at the moment. It *looks* like they are bounty hunters on the outside, but we have our doubts. If they are working for someone, we haven't been able to find out who. Neither of them seem to have any strong affiliations to anyone."

"So what do you want me to do exactly? Bump them off? Seems a shame to finish off an Elite Commander," said Wyatt, looking a little too longingly at the photograph.

"No, we don't necessarily want you to bump them off. But we need someone who is at least their calibre to, well, lead them astray. We have a Backstab ship ready to go. We need you to command the ship. To put not too finer point on it, you're bait. We want to see if they will follow. When they do, we will have a large force ready to terminate them with extreme prejudice if they won't cooperate. We have a very nicely equipped Cobra Mk.3 that you'll be using for this mission."

"OK, so when do I leave?"

"Today, hopefully. Their ship is being repaired. They were waiting for a part for their rather exotic hyperdrive. We managed to find an AAI dealer a few light years away with the part they need, and managed to order it so they can leave a bit quicker. They received what they thought was the good news yesterday. The part is probably being fitted right now," said Bradley with a conspiritory grin.

"Why go to all this effort – I mean, I'm sure you can imprison them, send a fleet after them, or something like that – and be done with the problem?" asked Wyatt. It seemed to her that they were going to a lot of unnecessary effort.

"Well, we are not sure for one. We don't want to be on a wild goose chase. Also, if they *do* know about Backstab, we need to find out where the leak came from. They must have got the idea to hack Zearla's registry from somewhere. If we just eliminated them, we would never find the leak. It's a pity because it would make my job much easier if I could."

"Where do you want me to lead them, assuming they follow?"

"Anywhere, but stick to independent systems if you can, and do not lead them anywhere near Enedlia. Anywhere but Enedlia, for obvious reasons"

"What was that noise?" Wyatt asked suddenly.

Both Wyatt and Bradley looked up at the ceiling. They heard some kind of faint scratching noise. Suddenly there was a slight pattering noise that seemed to move across the ceiling. Bradley relaxed.

"Oh, it's rats. It's disgraceful. This is supposed to be a Federation spaceport, not some flea-infested Frontier base. The whole place is infested with rats. Some the size of dogs," said Bradley, regretfully.

"No ratcatchers around?"

Winston cursed silently. There wasn't much space in the ceiling void, nor many structural members to hang onto. It was also very dark, and now he was stuck.

He hoped Albright hadn't got himself stuck as well. He could only use his communicator in a case of dire emergency, because the transmission would be tracked and it would be all over. It wasn't quite a dire emergency yet. He reached out to try and grab a narrow joist, trying to spread his bodyweight out across the flimsy ceiling supports below. He had deployed five of the tiny AJNIB-designed bugs so far, their pin-head cameras and microphones hopefully sticking into somewhere useful.

He reached out and managed to just about get hold of the joist. He pulled himself forward. The ceiling creaked dangerously, and he felt the structure start to bow in below him. He froze, wondering what to do next. He was sure that he'd be caught if he came crashing through the ceiling. He heard the muffled sound of a door open and close beneath him, and some conversation start. More trouble. If the ceiling gave way, he'd be caught very quickly indeed.

He listened hard to the conversation drifting up from below. It sounded like a woman flirting with a man, and the man seemed to want to receive some kind of "hiding" from the woman. He continued to listen as their conversation became more serious. When he realised they were discussing him and Albright, he got a cold shiver. Up until now, he didn't really believe that anyone really knew what they were up to – but now he realised that people were getting suspicious. Hacking Zearla's registry, apparently, had been a bit of a giveaway. As the conversation went on, he realised that he was now firmly in the sights of another Elite pilot. At least they hadn't yet figured out who they worked for. He resolved *not* to follow the bait, as the talking below continued. He also had to find out what was going on at Enedlia too...

Suddenly, there was a light pattering ahead of him. He stared into the gloom, pointing his small light into the ceiling void ahead. A couple of meters away skulked the biggest rat Winston had ever seen. It had to be the size of a small dog. Winston was rather disturbed to notice the rat was curious and it had started to scuttle towards him. He reasoned that rats that big probably weren't scared of much.

"Bugger off!" Winston whispered hoarsely.

The rat kept crawling closer. Winston could feel the ceiling start to move. It could barely support his weight as it was. The rat must have weighed at least ten kilograms.

"Go on, bugger off!" Winston whispered urgently at the rat. He tried not to think any heavy thoughts. The rat's whiskers twitched as the creature sniffed the air. To Winston's horror, the rat cautiously edged towards him. He watched transfixed, as the rat's front paws joined him on the section of ceiling he was lying on. The rat continued to move forward, the rest of its body moving onto the already sagging ceiling section.

"Oh shiiiiit!" exclaimed Winston loudly, as the ceiling finally began terminally sagging...

Fasteners started to ping out of their housings, one striking Winston sharply on the back of his head. The rat had now begun to back up, the fact that the ground beneath it was moving rather dangerously finally registering in its simple, rodent mind.

It was too late...

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The ceiling finally collapsed with a loud crack. Winston didn't even have time to utter another curse as he, the rat, and the ceiling caved into the room below, trailing pieces of polystyrene and low-grade nonstructural alloy. He landed with a loud crash on the table in the middle of the room in a cloud of dust and polystyrene ceiling tile! The rat let out a startled screech, and bounded out of the room through the open door, its paws skidding as it madly tried to gain traction in its panicked attempt to leave.

Winston looked around madly, mildly stunned by his rough landing in the middle of a table, into the face of the woman he had heard talking. He quickly looked around the rest of the room, to see a man with hair as white as snow, and piercing blue eyes, sitting at the table he had landed on.

"Glad you could drop in, Commander Winston," he said, as if crashing through the ceiling was the normal way of entering the room...

Chapter 18. We've Gotta Leave This Hole

"SEEN James yet?" Albright asked, as he walked into the now familiar Betty B's Bar.

"Nope. I've been here for a while. You're the first one to show up," said Copeland, who was waiting by the bar.

Albright sat down on the barstool, next to Copeland. The bartender, a different person to who had been serving just before Albright had suffered the misfortune of being captured, was serving a large group who had walked in moments before his arrival.

"Well, we better have a beer whilst we wait," said Albright, noncommittally.

"Bad idea," said Copeland, "we might have to leave in a hurry. It'll only dull our reactions."

"What's that you're drinking, then?" asked Albright, suspiciously.

"Shandy"

"Fine."

"OK, now slowly get off the table with your hands up," said the white-haired man.

He was holding a weapon – it looked like an Ingrams Model 235 hand pistol – small, compact, lightweight, and quite deadly. Winston decided with a sigh it was probably in his best interests to do as instructed. He freed himself of the ceiling's debris, his eyes never leaving the weapon. He noticed that the woman was unarmed.

"Now I think you might like to explain to me why you were crawling through the ceiling void of our police station," said the man, as Winston slid off the table.

Winston thought quickly. The woman is Elite, but she's unarmed. The man...well, I don't know about him, but he has a gun. But I'm going to be standing quite close to him...it's a good job I've been working out and keeping fit recently...

"It's like this," Winston said, quickly glancing at the partially open door to the room, "I want to know why you captured my co-pilot with no provocation and frankly, quite unfairly"

"I think you know why we did that," replied the man in a curt manner.

"I don't. Really. I wouldn't be here if I knew," said Winston, edging a bit closer to the man.

"Well, what's that in your hand?" asked the man.

Winston had forgotten he was still carrying the small metal box containing the remaining five AJNIB-issued needlenosed bugs.

"Give it to me," said the man.

Winston moved closer to the man. The gun was still being pointed at him – but the woman still appeared to be unarmed. He got close enough to hand the box to the white-haired man, and began to hand it to him. The man did not observe Winston's knee hurtling towards his groin...

"Ooohyah!" yelled the man as he doubled up in pain, fumbling his gun...

He fell for that old trick! Winston quickly grabbed the gun out of the man's hand, and decided that the rat that had ridden with him on his extremely brief flight on the remains of the ceiling had the right idea. Using the element of surprise to his advantage, Winston ran for the door, and burst out into the corridor beyond.

Quickly glancing down at the gun, he realised that the decision to run had been the right impulse – the gun was secured, and could only be fired by the person with the right finger and palm print. The main thing now was that his enemy was at least disarmed. He heard the woman shout, and heard the sounds of pursuit commencing...

Winston realised he was lost, but he had to try and escape *somehow*. He screeched around a corner in the corridor, and collided with two people in police uniforms walking the other way and fell to the floor! He didn't waste any time getting up, and began to run again. The stunned police officers quickly whirled around, and drew their firearms.

"Get him!" yelled the woman, who had now rounded the corner. "Alive!" she added, as the officers raised their weapons.

They were too late. Winston crashed through another door, and around a corner. He found a service stairwell, and decided to run down it. He would at least be on the ground level once he got to the bottom. The sounds of pursuit were still behind him, though...he quickly glanced back to see the woman, her midnight-black pony tail bobbing as she ran, in hot pursuit. He didn't know what had happened to the two officers, but they had to be back there somewhere. He ran down the stairwell, taking three steps at a time. He heard a crash behind him, and realised with satisfaction that one of the police officers had fallen and taken his colleague down with him. However, that blasted black-haired woman was still in hot pursuit!

Winston reached the bottom of the stairwell. He burst through the door, and into a corridor that had to be almost five hundred meters long. It looked like there were numerous police holding cells here, their entrances punctuating the glossy white walls at regular intervals. Winston didn't think about it much – he just started running as quickly as he could – doubly glad he had been spending his spare time keeping his fitness levels up...

The woman burst through the door seconds later, and continued running after Winston. With creeping horror, Winston realised that she was catching up, and there was a long way still to run! With dreadful realisation, he glanced back to discover she was almost on top of him. With a yell, she suddenly dived for Winston's legs and tackled him. He fell heavily, the inertia of their two bodies causing them to slide down the corridor's smooth floor. Suddenly, the woman was crawling on top of him, and had pinned him down.

"Now then, Commander James Winston, you wouldn't hit a woman, would you?" she said, panting heavily. "Don't bet on it," he snarled, He began the struggle to throw the woman off. To his horror, she appeared to be every bit as strong as he was, and trained in hand-to-hand combat as well! "You won't escape me," she said, grinning nastily.

Suddenly, Winston stopped struggling. His black eyes looked into her black eyes quizzically. He carefully observed how her irises were flecked with grey. There was only one place in the galaxy where people had eyes like that . . .

"You're Phekdan, aren't you?" he asked, all of a sudden.

She looked back at Winston balefully. She hadn't been particularly listening to his voice. She noticed Winston's eyes for the first time. She listened carefully to his voice.

"What's your name?" asked Winston.
She was momentarily taken aback. "Commander Elyssia Wyatt," she answered.

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There was no mistaking it. She hadn't realised as she listened to Winston earlier, but *he didn't have an accent*. She was so used to everyone else around her having that Eta Cassiopeian accent – most of the officers in Andceeth were from there – that she ignored how people spoke.

"In fact, I wager you are from Newtown. Nirvana," added Winston, breaking into a grin. "It's those charcoal black eyes. For some reason, everyone in Newtown has charcoal black irises. Something to do with a chemical in the soil, so I'm told – it affects you when you're a child," said Winston, conversationally. "Look, I don't care about that," Wyatt said suddenly. "You're a prisoner now and we want answers. I'm sure my friend Jack Bradley will not take kindly to getting a knee in the groin, either"

Suddenly, the two officers who had fallen down the stairwell finally emerged in the corridor. They looked battered and out of breath.

"Ma'am, are you OK there?" one of them shouted.

"Yes, the situation's under control!" Wyatt shouted back.

The officers turned around and disappeared back up the stairway. "Incompetent fools," Wyatt muttered acidly.

"Who do you work for?" asked Winston, penetratingly.

Wyatt looked back at her captive. "None of your business," she replied.

"Not for the Police, I gather then."

"No."

"You know, the Federation looks sourly on tax fiddles," said Winston, going for the shot-in-the-dark. He remembered about Nova Rodstein Associates, the owner of all those ships on the Zearla registry...

"Tax fiddles...what are you going on about?" she asked, frowning. *Backstab* was nothing to do with taxes...

"I think you know exactly what I mean. Now you can let me go and it won't get out..."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and if you think that trick will work you are sorely mistaken," she snapped back at him.

"Now as one fine upstanding Phekdan to another, why don't you just let me go and we'll say no more of it, eh?" asked Winston. It was another stab in the dark, but it might just work. "I mean, what if the government were to get wind of it? Think of the scandal it would cause. All those ships...and you being so close to it, you'd be one of the first to fall. The abuse of Zearla's registry, contrary to interstellar treaty. It would reflect very badly. Heads would roll..."

"Look, Commander – " she spat out the word 'commander' as if it were an insult " – Winston, the only head that's going to be rolling around here is yours!"

"Is that what you think, indeed? How's the Federal penitentiary these days?" he asked casually, his dark eyes radiating insolence despite his being pinned to the floor.

"Tell me now! What do you know about Backstab?" she snarled.

Backstab, what's Backstab? thought Winston, urgently... He decided to try and continue bluffing...

"I know it's about to land all of you in some very hot water very soon. Especially if you try and capture me. The government will get suspicious."

"I see, go on," she said. She took her weight of Winston's body and began to stand up. Winston brushed himself off, and stood up, examining his wrists where she had pinned him.

"I would advise you to get as far away from here and anywhere else to do with it as quickly as possible," Winston continued. He serruptitiously eyed up what looked like an exit about a hundred metres down the long corridor.

"But why – " she began, but Winston spoke over her.

"The whole operation is very unethical, and the people who shouldn't be finding out in the government are about to find out. Take my advice and leave. You deserve better than to spend the rest of your life in jail"

"Jail?" she asked, biting her lower lip.

"Yes, jail. As I was saying, heads are gonna roll," he finished, satisfied that he made his point, even though he wasn't sure what the point was to begin with. Especially since he was just bluffing, off the cuff...

Winston turned around, and began walking calmly away towards the exit. She watched his retreating back in confusion. *Damn!* she thought.

"Stop!" she shouted, as Winston got about ten meters away from her.

"No," snapped Winston disobediently, without even turning his head. He continued walking calmly towards the exit.

Wyatt started to walk quickly towards Winston, trying to catch him up. She broke into a jog, and pulled up beside him.

"But the government sanctioned it! Why would it cause a problem? They could – " she began.

"Is that what they told you?" asked Winston with a mirthless smile.

"But – "

"The whole thing is extremely deceptive," continued Winston, even though he didn't have the foggiest idea about what he was talking about, "and they have just been stringing you along in their sordid little plans, I'm afraid. This will cause a huge scandal when it gets out."

"If it gets out," said Wyatt.

"No, when. Do you think I'm the only one they hired to investigate this?"

"You're a private investigator? For the government?"

"In a manner of speaking," answered Winston, carefully. *Nearly at the exit, now...* Winston was not lying either. He just hadn't specified whose government he was investigating for.

"How did the Federal government catch wind of it if they weren't told in the first place, then?" she asked.

"Don't ask me, ask them. I'm just confirming some facts for them." *Five meters to go...*

Winston drew level with the exit. Outside the glass doors was the snowy whiteness of the world outside, a parked autoshuttle, and freedom...he swung right and walked through the exit.

Wyatt suddenly pounced and grabbed him by the back of his collar.

"Not so fast, young man! You're not getting away that easily!" she shouted as she dragged Winston towards her by his jacket's collar.

Winston found himself once again surprised at the petite woman's strength. She grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Winston remembered his mother doing the very same thing to him after getting in trouble one day. He half expected to get spanked.

"Look, let me go I told you!" Winston ordered.

"Do you really think I'm that stupid?" she asked, snarling.

"Well, can I have notice of that question?" he asked insolently.

"I've had enough of you James Winston, fine upstanding Phekdan indeed! You're going to pay for this. Wait until Bradley gets hold of you," she snarled, grabbing Winston's wrist and jerking him harshly towards a nearby open cell door.

Suddenly, Winston brought the side of his free hand down in a swinging arc, harshly striking Wyatt's wrist. Wyatt yelled, and Winston jerked his hand free! Seizing the initiative, he ran back towards the exit, and burst through without waiting for the automatic doors to open. Wyatt yelled a curse and began to chase him. It was too late. Winston leaped into the autoshuttle and slammed the door down. He grinned at her through the

shuttle's window, and waved at her patronizingly. Wyatt kicked the shuttle in frustration as it began to lift off into the cool, evening air...

"I think we need to go back to the ship, see if Jas can figure out what's wrong," said Albright.

"Not yet, we have an hour more before our time runs out," Copeland answered.

"He's two hours late...he's been caught for sure, and if he's been caught, it's not long before they come for us," said Albright, worry evident in his voice.

"We should stay here until the bar closes. I know Jim quite well, and he can usually get himself out of a squeeze. He's a sneaky little bugger. Give him time and he'll show up," Copeland predicted, with a great deal more accuracy than he realised.

The pair sat in a quiet corner of Betty B's bar, which was now beginning to get quite full as the evening began. A rowdy crowd of traders stood around several pitchers of beer. Three of them were having a drinking contest. Two policemen walked towards the group and tried to boss one of the traders about, who had become drunk and disorderly. There was a brief scuffle, and the police lead the man away. A group of local youths playing darts nearby cheered and made obscene gestures as the police dragged the unfortunate drunk out of the bar. It was an altogether typical Friday night at Betty B's bar.

Neither Albright nor Copeland noticed the autoshuttle touch down just outside the bar. Its lone occupant climbed out, and looked around furtively, and then began to walk quickly towards the bar. The figure then came through the door, and walked quickly to Albright and Copeland's table.

Copeland finally looked up, just in time to see who it was.

"Glad you could make it," he said nonchalantly.

"Bloody hell, where were you?" asked Albright, finally noticing it was James Winston standing in front of them.

Winston didn't seem to be in a mood for talking.

"Look, we've got to get out of this hole right now. No time to talk," he said urgently.

"What happened?" demanded Albright.

"I'll tell you later. Come on. Phil, are you coming with us?"

"No, I better stay here. I've got a job to do," said Copeland.

"Well, Phil, thanks for helping out. If you need our help in the future, just call," replied Winston.

Winston began to leave. Albright quickly got up, and pulled his jacket on, almost tripping as he tried to keep up with Winston's urgent pace.

"What about the bugs?" he asked, trying to keep up with his comrade.

"We don't need them. I found out what we need to know. We should have gone straight to Enedlia in the first place," replied Winston, hastily.

"I sure hope the ship's in good order," replied Albright worriedly.

"So do I," Winston replied in a deadpan voice that hid his anxiety.

The autoshuttle was still waiting. The pair jumped in and strapped down, and the shuttle sped off into the night towards the repair depot...