



Presents

A collection of Frontier / Elite Universe fiction  
bridging the gap between the HPA Saga and the return of the *Azure Sunset*

# PAST PROLOGUE

VOLUME

# 1

# WINSTON

By  
Dylan Smith

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# PROLOGUE

3 years before the HPA was stolen...

## Profile: They Got Uncle Jim

[by Simon Lattery, Frontier News Senior Political Editor]

The biggest talking point of the last couple of weeks has been the audacious capture of the AJN's Turner Space Combat Academy chief, James Winston. Everything from news commentary, parliamentary debate, accusations of lawbreaking and bar-room brawls have been started in the wake of this event. News from Barnard's Star has indicated that Boston Base was literally besieged by traders protesting the Federation's actions. However, by all accounts, James Winston is safe and well - being held at Cpt. Tanya Benedict's pleasure - and not by the Barnard's Star authorities. Unobtainable as he is, the focus has fallen on his nephew - particularly amongst the tabloid press. Thrust into the limelight, Mack Winston has shied from the press, and little is known about the man. The tabloid press have resorted to calling him a "recluse". However, by good fortune, I managed to obtain an interview with him - to find out why he has become as much of a media focus as his captured uncle.

Mack invited me to join him on his ship, just a few hours before he left Boston Base. I always treat these interviews with some caution; Frontier traders are often rather jumpy, and more than one journalist has come off the worse for wear after trying to interview a reluctant trader who has spent too much time alone in deep space, trying to stop the endless pirates from taking their cargo. I arrived at his ship - an unassuming Cobra Mk.3 that has seen better days - on foot, from Boston Base's main atrium. I was rather surprised when just as I was about to request entrance to his ship, he walked up behind me and greeted me.

He turned out to be rather younger than I expected - a slightly undernourished looking man in his early twenties, dressed like a typical trader: a baggy pair of tan flight trousers with more pockets than you'd know what to do with, a black shirt, and a slightly moth-eaten black fleece. His rusty brown hair was cropped short, obviously out of convenience, not out of style. Unlike the normal human blue, greenish or brown eyes, his are charcoal black, flecked with grey - a trait that seems to be unique to those who are descendents of the original Phekdan settlers.

He opened up the ship and led me on board. His ship is an study in austerity, as is common amongst Frontier traders. There are no luxuries on board: the interior is all bare metal - painted with nothing but light green zinc-chromate primer. Most of this has worn thin, too, exposing the dull lustre of bare duralium. He uses the latest in compact defences and drive technology, giving over most of the internal space to cargo. The extra money spent on the more exotic technologies: a modern military drive of AAAI manufacture, shaped shield generators to fit in the otherwise unusable areas - eventually pay for themselves in the form of less damage by pirates, and better profits by carrying more goods. The flight deck is a tight fit, the flight controls showing evidence of thousands of hours of action. The ship itself is three times Mack's age - and the modern equipment it has been fitted with can't hide this. The countless light years weigh heavy on its duralium spars.

We eventually sat down in his small living quarters, containing nothing but a bed, a small desk containing a solitary datapad and a disorganized pile of DSUs, and an art-deco chair with a wobbly leg that Mack says he picked up at a star-boot sale. Like the rest of his ship, the walls are zinc-chromate green. The floor is covered with a non-slip rubber matting. A solitary fluorescent panel lit the scene, making it look like a prison cell. His unmade bed was an incredible contrast to the austerity of the rest of the ship - on it was a luxuriant duvet with a rather interesting cover depicting a large cartoon bear. "Sleep is very important to me," he told me with a slight touch of defensiveness as I stared at it with an obvious look of surprise. The smiling image of the teddy bear on the duvet cover seemed to betray the reputation of a Frontier tradesman as the hard-bitten no-compromising wheeler and dealer.

Mack offered me the chair. I sat down on it, and it creaked alarmingly as it took my weight. He briefly fished around in one of the desk drawers, and produced a packet of something I'd never seen before. He then fiddled around in a small cabinet I hadn't seen on entering - pulling out a coffee maker, and pouring the contents of a bag marked "Riedquatian Ultra Coffee" inside. While the coffee-maker made suspicious noises, he carefully unwrapped the plastic packet he had taken out of the desk. "Twinkie?" he asked, offering the contents of the packet to me.

"Thanks," I said, and took one. I discovered the object he offered to me to be a sugar-saturated cream filled piece of spongecake. By the time I had finished it, my teeth all on edge, Mack had wolfed the three remaining in the packet. He then proceeded to contentedly pour the coffee, now feeling more in his element. He offered me one. I needed something to wash the disgustingly rich Twinkie down with.

"I always find it's good to wash Twinkies down with Riedquatian Ultra Coffee," he said, needlessly.

I took a hearty swig of the coffee. It was very strong, but not unpleasant-tasting. I seem to recall having this type of coffee before, but it was years ago. It had the most surprising effect - I felt "wired" for a full four hours after having

that single cup. During the interview, Mack drank two cups of the stuff - all I can say is that he must be used to it. I think if I had two, I'd be belting around Boston Base as if I was being chased by an errant missile...I'm sure Riedquatian Ultra Coffee must be illegal in many systems.

We finally got down to business. Mack slouched on his bed as we spoke. I started to lean back on the chair, but it made an ominous creaking sound and wobbled dangerously, so I decided against it. First I asked him about his background. I needed to know what made him tick.

It turns out that his life is mixed with chance and tragedy, as is the life of many Phekdans. He is the youngest of all the Winstons - an only child, but with two older cousins who also lived at the farm. He was born on the family farm just like the rest of the family had been for countless generations. His parents, Damon L Winston and Heloise McNamara, were not farmers. Instead, they ran a small ship-sales yard near Newtown starport. About once a month, the pair would ferry a ship to a distant customer. It was during one of these ferry missions that tragedy struck. Mack was only nine years old when his parents went on a ferry mission, but failed to return.

At that time, his uncle, James Winston, was a new Admiral of the Alliance Joint Navy. The age of peace and prosperity was upon the Alliance, and James was spending most of his time at AJN Headquarters, Edinburgh, Alioth. Although James was still a bachelor with a long term off-and-on relationship with Pam Gilmour (a woman every bit as space-hardened as James), James's parents convinced him that he should look after Mack. Phekda at the time was still a dangerous place, and James's parents were still full time farmers, and they felt at their age they would be unable to give their grandson the attention and protection he needed.

Mack bears no malice to his two cousins, who have remained in Phekda, and not been apparently around Barnard's Star supporting their uncle. "My uncle is more of a father to me. He brought me up. He trained me in the art of space combat. He passed his wisdom on the galaxy down to me. I feel I ought to stick up for him. My cousins barely know him. However, I consider James and Pam to be my parents," he finally said, with emotion.

With James Winston and Pam Gilmour's past, I found it a little surprising that Mack had become a trader, and not a pilot in the AJN or even a bounty hunter. I half expected that James would have insisted that his adopted child join the AJN Academy. Mack explained that neither the military nor combat held any appeal for him. "I get by," he said. "I make sure I can keep the pirates off, but I wouldn't want it to be my life". In keeping the pirates off, he has reached the Elite Federation rating of Competent.

However, I sensed there had to be more to it than the desire to make money. If all he wanted to do was make easy money, he would be currently droning away between Barnard's Star and Sol - probably the most profitable and safest trade route in inhabited space. Instead, he flits from one Frontier system to the next: systems as austere as his ship, often needing the combat skills he denies having any interest in. He then revealed his goal in life. It turned out to be very simple. "All I want to do is see the galaxy. I just figured that I could keep going by trading."

It also turns out that he tried to join the Alliance Science Council as a mission pilot, but they were requiring a lot more experience than he had. "It's still my eventual goal. I dream of going to those places marked 'Unexplored! Enter at your own risk' on the starmap. I often spend hours at the astrogation console, flicking through starsystems hundreds of light years away, dreaming of what might be hidden there," he told me with a glint in his eye. He talked more of space exploration - pulling out DSUs from the pile, many packed with data he had downloaded from the ASC's Deep Space Probe network. He became increasingly animated as he showed me what some of the ASC's probes had seen, culminating with the recent discoveries of the LRA, and brand-new close up images of Betelgeuse's supernova. He then started going through pages of data, excitedly pointing things out. "Look at this radiation spike! Glad I wasn't near that one," he said, stabbing a finger at a huge block of data on the pad's display. Now I know how he whiles away the hours of space travel between trading destinations. He then showed me some images his own ship's sensors had picked up. One day he had got as close as he had dared to a white dwarf to observe it accreting material from its companion star. "I'm glad that I had plenty of hyperspace fuel. In my haste, I misprogrammed the autopilot, and instead of putting me in an orbit around the white dwarf, it was flying me into it at full speed. The hyperdrive saved me that time," he said with a wry smile.

I eventually managed to break through his side-track: he was getting carried away, and was just about preparing to show me the whole universe. I looked more closely at the piles of DSUs on the desk - there must have been exabytes of astronomical data and images liberally piled over it, some spilling onto the floor. There's no doubt he is committed to his simple goal: to see the galaxy. I felt a little envy. My life is full of publishing deadlines, zipping from place to place chasing stories, interviewing truculent politicians, and being abused by yet more politicians, and above all, stress. All he has to do is somehow scratch a living, and see the galaxy. He is answerable only to himself.

I guessed that his goal had to cause some friction between his uncle and himself. With trepidation, I asked. He told me about the day he bought the Cobra Mk. 3 - the ship he has now owned for four years. "I had trained hard for my pilot's certificate. I think Uncle Jim had thought that I was then going to join the Academy - he did suggest it at

frequent intervals. I was a bit worried about disappointing him. I managed to get a loan and bought the best ship I could for the money - this one. I then went home to Edinburgh to tell him I was leaving home."

I asked whether this was prompted by a rift between him and his uncle. Ever since the beginning of time, hot-headed young males have fought with their parents and guardians - often striking out against their will. I expected Mack to then regale me with a tale of family strife and stern lectures, or give me a story about running away from home with James Winston in hot pursuit. Images of James's Asp grappling Mack's Cobra floated through my mind.

"It didn't turn out like that. I told him what I was going to do, and he looked me in the eye. He told me if that's what I really wanted to do, then I should do it. I was expecting a fight. He frightened me a bit, in those days. But for the first time I began to understand my uncle a bit better. He gave me a little bit of advice, told me to keep safe, and then gave me enough credits to add two additional shaped shield generators in the lower hull. I left the next day, feeling a little bit guilty to tell you the truth"

I then remembered reading James Winston's background. He had also suddenly departed for space, and could therefore understand his nephew's wishes. He had already been there.

Finally, I asked him why he was so shy of the press. It had taken days of careful coaxing for me to arrange this meeting with him. Undoubtedly, the tabloid press would never have any luck with their rather less subtle approach. This brought a little rant on. "You know, I find the press incredibly irritating. I'm a private citizen! I don't want to be chased, hounded, stories about my lovelife exposed or the rest. When I refuse to suck up to the tabloid press, they call me a recluse. Damn them all to hell. Sorry. If I meet them in space...well...never mind," he said, shaking his head in annoyance. "No offence intended," he added, sheepishly, remembering that I was a representative of the press. "The Frontier News hasn't hounded me," he added, after a pregnant pause, "so you guys are all right"

We talked a little more about trivial matters, and finally, about his uncle's case. I knew he had seen his uncle and met Captain Tanya Benedict. I pressed him for details, but he told me, "I gave them my word that our meeting would be strictly confidential. Please understand - I can't talk about it". Respecting his wishes, I finally departed his ship, having been educated about one more Frontier trader. I tried to invite him for lunch with the rest of the Frontier News staff currently hanging around Boston Base, waiting for the next morsel from the "Winston Case". He thanked me and declined, explaining he had to leave for Phekda more or less immediately. He didn't hang around. When I passed the bay only two hours later, his ship was gone.

# Fallout

[Mack Winston]

So, there it was. The latest epic episode in the life of a frontier trader turned bad guy ended.

To be honest, I couldn't wait to be shot of the HPA. Had I known all that time ago it'd have caused all this trouble I'd have stayed away from that little device I was asked to courier for a big sum of money. I never did get paid.

All I had was this lousy spaceship, liberated from the Federal agent who'd tried to take me in. Not that she'd be needing any more, considering where she had gone.

The weeks had passed into months, and I'd been wandering alone in the ship, nicely de-identified by a dodgy ship dealer I knew who was infamous with the police for 'cut and shut' jobs. The wanderings had been aimless and cargo-less, bringing nothing but the odd skirmish with pirates who should have known better to attack an empty ship (or judging by their lack of combat ships, probably not), and a rapidly dwindling supply of cash. I had been keeping a low profile, to the extent of not even contacting my uncle, James Winston. Well, having been away with the HPA saga, I had never found out what had happened to him until much later.

Critically short of cash, I spent the last I had on a few bags of mild narcotics I thought I could trade over the counter with the rich Imperials who'd holiday in Homeland, Beta Hydri. The Impies were always after drugs. After all, they were legal at home. They weren't legal in Beta Hydri, and the minor Imperial princes who'd holiday there never risked being caught bringing it in. A healthy trade in black market narcotics had built up. No one ever dared bring a tonne canister of the stuff in their hold - the Federal police would check your hold thoroughly, rather they'd just take a few packets in the cabin.

Sure, it was a risk going to Beta Hydri. I was very much wanted in any Federation system, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

I needn't have worried. The police never bothered searching my ship, and the Dickens starport had plenty of rich Impies all going away for their hols. So what's an outlaw to do?

I waited in one of the upmarket cafes in the big Dickens shopping mall. I tried not to look out of place, my well worn clothing clashing with the surroundings. Then I saw my target.

A young, abundantly female woman, obviously Imperial Princess material took a seat at a nearby table. I fingered a small packet of Achenarian Weed in my pocket, and strolled over to her, and sat down opposite her.

She said nothing. Her face said it all - her smooth features screwed up into a look of disgust as I slouched into the chair opposite her and smiled slowly. I discreetly showed her the corner of the clear packet by poking it between my curled fingers. Her look of disgust melted and was replaced by mild revulsion. She deigned to speak to me.

"So, how much?" she asked quietly.

She was obviously an amateur, never done this before. Before she could blurt anything else out and give the game away to any nearby policeman, I hissed "Not here!" under my breath. "Don't look suspicious. Drink your coffee." In a loud voice, I yelled "Waiter!"

A young man of obvious breeding sauntered up to the table. He didn't try and hide his obvious disdain for me.

"Sir?" he asked, managing to make it sound like an insult.

"Riedquatian Ultra, make it strong," I ordered.

"Yes, Sir," he sneered, and smoothly walked away. Seconds later he reappeared, and deposited the treacle-like drink in front of me.

"Thank you muchly," I said, smiling sweetly. I turned back to the Imperial woman. "Don't think he likes me," I remarked.

"We prefer not to see Phekdans around here," she said, wrinkling up her nose. "You're all the same with your strange eyes and," - she looked at me - "lack of dress sense or decorum."

"Fair enough. But where would d you get your, um, enjoyment if it wasn't for us?"

"You should all be slaves," she said, and took an unladylike gulp of her coffee.

I chuckled quietly, and took a sip of Ultra. The coffee made up for the waiter's attitude. "And you should all be given a dose of reality," I replied easily. "Just look around you. The Empire is doomed. You've got more terrorist attacks from the VLA than you know what to do with, you've lost control of the Vequess mines at least twice in the last ten years, and the Alliance is trouncing you in technology. The Empire is an anachronism. Just like BSD, it's dying."

She fixed me with a steely look. "I'd rather be an anachronism than a bunch of philistines like the Alliance".

We lapsed into silence, and I finished the Ultra. My senses sharpened, I thought how ironic it was that in most of the Empire, Riedquation Ultra was illegal, but here it's perfectly legal, but smuggling Achenarian Weed will get you ten years inside. "Come on, I've got something to show you," I said. Begrudgingly, she followed as we went into the back alleyways of the sprawling spaceport.

I pulled several packets of Arcweed from my jacket. "I've got five of these on me, and more back in the ship. How much do you want?"

The look of an Arcweed addict came onto her face. Good. I liked a desperate one. "I'll take those five," she said.

"I'm doing an offer. Just a grand for those five." She made a strange choking sound. "Coffee went down the wrong way?" I asked her.

"A grand? You really are as stupid as you look," she said.

"OK, no Arcweed for you then," I said, pocketing the drugs. I turned on my heel and started to walk away, leaving the pretty young thing behind, my steel capped boots clattering on the hard concrete.

"Wait!" she said. I smiled to myself. "Nine hundred!" she blurted, desperately. Ah, a true addict.

"No, a grand. Nothing less. I don't do haggling."

"Okay, okay," she said. "I suppose you want it in hard credits?"

"Yup." She fished in her handbag, and gave me ten hundreds. I noted she must have had at least three grand in there. "Nice doing business with you. Name's Mack by the way, if you want more, well you know where to find me," I said.

"This will do for now," she snarled, pocketing the five packages.

"Your attitude really doesn't complement your looks," I added. She looked like she was going to hit me, but backed off. Fortunately, nobody was around to see anyway...hold on...

Nobody around?

Minutes earlier, this back alley had been busy with the usual traffic, people taking short-cuts, arguing couples, a busker, the lot. I'd chosen the passageway because it was busy, and two people haggling wouldn't look out of place. It had emptied whilst I'd been doing business with Miss Impy. "Um," I said.

"What?" she said sullenly, rolling her eyes at me.

"I think," I said carefully, "that you might want to stick around with me a little longer."

"Why?" she demanded, pointedly.

"All the people are gone. There are probably Police congregating at each end of this thoroughfare," I said quickly and quietly. I knew they had probably realised who I was. If they were going to bust us for the narcotics, they'd have just got on with it. It was almost certain that I'd been recognised, and there'd be a sniper somewhere on the roof, a bunch of armed police at each end and a guy with a megaphone just dying to say "Mack Winston! Come out with your hands up!". There was always the guy with the megaphone. I had to make Miss Impy believe that they were after her, not me. I could use her help... "They've probably seen the deal. They'll be wanting you, think what capital they can make when they catch a rich young Imperial buying narcotics," I hissed.

"I did nothing wrong!" she squeaked.

"Yes you bloody well did."

"But I'm related to the Emperor"

"No wonder they've emptied this place out." I looked around nervously, trying to spot the inevitable sniper. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of the barrel of a stun discharger.

"Get down!" I hoarsely whispered at Miss Impy. I grabbed her, and dragged her across the hard, concrete floor and across to the other wall. A shot rang out, a burst of energy sizzling past Miss Impy's left ear and cannoning off the smooth floor. She whimpered. I now had full compliance.

"Run!" I shouted, grabbing her. Two more shots rang out, one just clipping my jacket, leaving a slight smouldering hole in the shoulder. I screeched to a halt, as we were brought up short by a dozen Police...

"Down here!" I shouted, grabbing Miss Impy by the shoulders, and bodily hurling her slim body through a narrow entrance to our left. I piled in after her.

Predictably, the sounds of pursuit began. As did the man with the megaphone...



## Bravely Chickening Out.

[Mack Winston]

I crouched in the thick undergrowth, in the border of the forest that backed up onto Dickens Starport. Miss Impy - I still hadn't asked her name - the unfortunate customer of mine, was close beside me. I peered through my small pair of binoculars, and scanned the spaceport landing pads, wondering how to get my ship out of parking without being seen by our pursuers.

The previous half hour had been a frantic blur of running, ducking and diving for cover. Apart from a small bruise on Miss Impy's upper arm, somehow we'd got away unscathed. After we'd got away from the sniper with the stun-gun, we had dashed into a small side entrance, across a seemingly twisty maze of passageways (which all looked alike) until we were nearly outside. The sound of pursuit echoed around, and Miss Impy was getting more nervous by the second. Finally we reached a junction leading to a wide corridor not far short of the starport's main exit. "Quiet," I said, "Let me just take a peek around the corner, we're not quite home and dry yet."

Miss Impy just moaned quietly.

"I expect I'll be called by my other name soon," I said.

"Which is?" she asked, curiosity breaking through the surface of fear.

"There-he-is-get-him."

Miss Impy let out a quiet, nervous laugh.

I shuffled towards the junction and poked my head around. I looked in both directions. No one was to be seen. "This way," I whispered hoarsely. She started to follow.

"THERE HE IS, GET HIM!" yelled a voice.

"Told you so," I said with a shrug. "We better start running," I instructed, and broke into a sprint.

"MACK WINSTON COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP!" bellowed the inevitable man with the megaphone.

Miss Impy turned out to be quite a good runner. We almost crashed through the exit door, which the idiot Police hadn't thought to turn off. We darted down some side streets, through the air-conditioning plant, then out into the undergrowth behind the spaceport and into the forest. Carefully skirting the spaceport, we moved to the front where I could watch the ships. It didn't take long, and we were soon watching the spaceport, as Beta Hydri began to sink below the horizon.

As I scanned the scene with the binoculars, it all looked quite peaceful. Even the policeman pacing around the apron looked at ease.

"What's going on?" asked Miss Impy.

"Seems like the Police are patrolling the port. Here, take a look." I passed her the binoculars. She studied the scene intently.

"Nice evening for a night outdoors," I remarked.

"What do you mean outdoors?"

"Well, we're going to have to stay here all night at least, we certainly can't go back there," I said, indicating the spaceport with my thumb.

"I demand you find me a hotel."

"Demand all you want, luv," I said casually, "but I'm staying here until they are gone, and you ought to as well if you don't want to go to prison or worse."

"My name is Maria Hesketh-Duval, not 'luv'," she retorted with a nasty edge to her voice.

"Well, Maria, the point still stands."

Maria sat and fumed silently. The crickets chirped in the undergrowth. A distant thunderhead started collapsing on the horizon, lit up a deep crimson by the setting sun. On top of the spaceport control tower cab, the rotating beacon lit up, flashing white and green hypnotically.

"Didn't think I'd spend a night outdoors with a relative of the Emperor," I remarked, "even if only a distant one".

"Fifth cousin." She scowled.

I had been crouched down for too long, and my thighs were beginning to ache. I cleared a patch in the undergrowth, fortunately clear of nasty stinging things. It made a rather nice soft cushion of vegetation. Sitting down, I reached into my jacket pocket, and pulled out some rations.

"Here, have this," I said, giving a 'Power Extreme' bar (Recharges Your Day!) to Maria. She took the package, and looked at it suspiciously.

"Those things taste a bit gross but they've been lifesavers several times," I remarked. "That one's blueberry, hope you don't mind them."

She muttered thanks, and carefully unwrapped the bar. Her hands looked awfully dainty, not like the slaves ordered into the Vequess mines had. I looked at my own fingernails, still with some grease from having had to fix the cabin air diverter valve on the way in.

I reached into one of my numerous trouser pockets and pulled out another power bar, and a small insulated flask.

"Where did you get those awful trousers from? They look like they belong to the Army," asked Maria pointedly.

"They did belong to the Army," I said. "The New Phekdan Army to be exact." I was rather proud of my acquisition. The New Phekdan Army really was new, having only been formed a year previously. Getting hold of one without a soldier attached to them was rather tough.

"So where are you from?" I enquired between mouthfuls of the foul power bar.

"Capitol. Achenar."

"Still live there?"

"Yes, I just came here for a holiday."

"Bet you didn't expect this much excitement," I said, grinning. I thought she was going to slap me.

"If I knew I would be spending a night in the weeds with a man from Phekda, I wouldn't have come."

"Oh come on, think of all the stories you can tell to your friends, how this young, handsome -"

"Hah!"

"- handsome man rescued you from the marauding Federal Police, and gave you, a, err," I started to falter.

"Foul tasting energy bar, headache, and overcharged me for a few measly packets of arcweed!" she ranted, completing the sentence.

We both fell into silence again.

"Beautiful sunsets they have here," I said. She didn't reply. I scanned the spaceport with the binoculars again, turning the night vision on. The police were still patrolling dutifully. "So what's it like growing up in the Empire?" I asked, trying to coax some conversation up.

"It's the best place in the Galaxy," she said without a hint of irony.

"You reckon?"

"Yes."

The distant thundercloud let out one last dying flash of lightning. About a minute later, the faintest rumble of thunder washed over us.

"You do know the Empire is dying, don't you?"

"You said that before. You're wrong."

"Oh?"

"How can you, a common Phekdan, know what goes on in the Empire?"

I gave her a slight smile. "Because I'm not in the Empire. Look, it's quite simple. Emperor Hengist Duval is how old now - he's been dying for longer than I've been alive. Yet the doctors are keeping him alive because they know as soon as he dies, the Grand Vizier will kill them - "

"We don't have a Grand Vizier."

"You do, except he's called the Lord Chamberlain. Now because the Emperor is hanging on, probably pretty much forever given medical technology, he's a bit of a fruit loop. Any bad news reaches him, not only does the messenger get their head sliced off, but most people down the chain. And your exam question for today is what does this result in?"

"Obedience."

"That for one. But what else?"

Maria scowled in the dying light of the day.

"I'm going to have to hurry you or pass it to the panel," I said, mimicking a popular quiz show.

"Well," I continued, "it results in no one daring to give the Emperor bad news. No one does. The Emperor thinks it's all going swimmingly. All the Emperor's henchmen also think this too because no one will dare tell them the truth either. And so on. So the only people who know what the bad news is are those who are at the front lines, and of course the entire Federation, Alliance and every Independent out there."

"But it is going well," she bleated.

"Exactly. That's what you think. But it's not. The Feds have cottoned on to how to leverage this against you. Do you know that the ore produced at the slave mines of Vequess is four to five times more expensive to mine than if it was mined by commercial means?"

"But Imperial ore and manufactured products sell for so much less than Federation ones!" she cried, indignantly.

"Yes, they do. And what happens if you sell the ore for a fifth of what it costs you to get up out of the ground, and manufactured products for about a third of what they cost to make?"

"That's obvious, you lose money."

"And what happens when your whole slave economy is doing that?"

"There's commerce as well," she said defensively.

"Sure there is. About 30% of the Imperial economy. The rest depends on slaves. Particularly for raw materials."

"Well, I'm sure the Emperor will fix it."

"He doesn't know. No one will dare tell him the bad news, because he's nuts and instead of fixing it like he might have done when he was younger, he slaughters the messengers in interesting ways. Do you remember what happened to the Earl Pohl? He was doing his duty in protecting the Empire. I know his assassin too. He was a particularly high profile one. But there are many others."

"Well, I'm sure something can be done."

"Oh it certainly can, and by the Feds too. You know what they are doing? They are responsible for slave labour costing so much more than normal paid labour these days. Guess who's been stirring up all the riots in the Vequess mines?"

"What riots?"

"The ones your Imperial lapdog press won't tell you about, but which every sentient being outside of the Emperor hears about on a weekly basis."

"Then we'll use our military might to put the Federation down."

"What military might? The Feds have long learned that there is no point engaging your militarily, that's why they stopped doing it. Instead they are exploiting your biggest weakness, over-reliance on slaves who can easily be stirred up to act against you. Who needs military action when you've got millions of slaves who can slowly but surely make an entire economy slide into oblivion? By the time the Emperor finally croaks, and the new guy actually finds out what's going on, it'll be too late because your centuries old civilization will have collapsed overnight."

"Well I'll tell the Emperor, then."

"Good luck. Earl Pohl tried to as well. I wonder if he regretted it as his body literally fell apart in front of his guests?"

We both lapsed into silence.

"Still better than being Phekdan," she retorted, pouting.

"Well, have it your way," I sighed, "but I'm going to get some sleep."

I lay down on the soft undergrowth, throwing my jacket over my face to block out the regular flashes of the spaceport's beacon. I heard Maria trying to make herself comfortable.

I think she might have been quietly crying.

## Oh, What a Lovely Surprise.

Mack Winston

What really sucks about sleeping outdoors, I thought to myself as dawn's early light shone through the undergrowth, is that if it's humid you wake up covered in dew. You would have thought the body's heat would stop the dew from condensing - well, it does on your hands and face, but your hair and clothing is always slightly moist by the time the morning comes.

Miss Impy, or rather the rather pompously named Maria Hesketh-Duval lay a couple of feet away, face down. I tried not to disturb her as I sat up and fished around for the binoculars. I switched them on. I think I woke her up when I cursed harshly. I had forgotten to turn the night enhance off, and the light streaming through the binoculars made me pull them away quickly.

"Fuck," I cursed, and switched the night view on. I heard Maria groan behind me.

I stared through the binoculars at the starport. Nothing much had moved during the night, apart from the Police. A few low scuddy clouds scraped the top of the tower. Everything looked particularly moist.

"Eugh...I'm...all...wet," Maria said behind me, slowly.

I just shrugged. "Aye, it's humid out here."

It felt almost like her eyes were boring into the back of my head. I turned around. Maria looked at me in disdain. "This was no dew," she growled.

I must admit the effect the water she had rolled into when she woke up had made her white top rather translucent. I tried not to look too hard. It would only cause trouble. "Oh," I said. "Looks like you, erm..." I said, indicating a shallow pool of water concealed by the undergrowth, "sort of fell in."

"If you were a gentleman," she said stiffly, quickly regaining her Imperial oh-so-superior posture, "you would stop staring at my breasts and lend me your jacket."

Surely she must have been paranoid about what I was looking at. Well, maybe not. Feeling the soft, comfortable material of my beloved and well-worn fleece, I reluctantly took it off and handed it to Maria.

"Thank you," she said with slight surprise. I don't think she had expected me to do anything. I felt a little sorry for her too, I realised it was quite a lot colder when you're just wearing a thin short sleeved shirt. She wrapped herself up in my jacket, which was too small in some dimensions and too big in others.

I went back to looking through the binoculars. I spotted a small knot of people, two were obviously Police, and a woman looking down at some kind of device. I zoomed in some more. The woman looked terribly familiar. I crouched up, planting my elbow against my knee to try and hold the binoculars a bit more stable and zoomed in to the max.

The device was an IR finder. Shit.

The woman was... she glanced up for a moment. Oh no. "I don't believe it," I hissed, "what's *she* doing here?"

My stomach started to churn involuntarily. I looked through the binoculars once again, almost as if I hadn't believed what I just saw. "We've gotta get out of here," I concluded, looking back around at Maria. "And fast. Come on, let's go!"

"Wait," she said.

I grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her up.

"But I haven't done my..."

"Do it later, trust me," I said with urgency. Keeping down low, we made our way through the increasingly thick undergrowth.

"Who is she?" asked Maria.

"Pam Gilmour," I replied.

Maria just looked puzzled. "Some kind of head Police?" she asked, shaking her head.

"No, worse. She's my aunt!"

"What?"

"My friggin' aunt. I stole her spaceship a few months ago and I think she might be annoyed." Understatement of the decade, I fear. Pam Gilmour could kill a young man with her tongue. Let her lay her hands on you, no matter how strong you think you are and you might as well say bye-bye. Especially if you nicked her spaceship whilst she was doing you a favour.

"Isn't that your problem?" Maria retorted.

I had to admit her logic was spot on. I frantically thought of a way to keep her in the chase. She had my jacket after all, and she might come in useful later. After all, she was an Imperial Princess of sorts.

"Only if we don't get away," I replied.

"Hold on, why should I be running away?" she replied queriously.

"Because Pam Gilmour is a straight-laced Imperial basher, and if she lays her hands on you, you'll go back there, do not pass Go, do not collect 200 credits," I hissed, pointing in the general direction of the spaceport jail cells with my thumb. "Remember you're a suspected drug criminal now?"

I continued to beat back the undergrowth which had not only got thicker, but got a lot spikier. The thorns on the greenery were not particularly good for my hands and arms. I tried kicking it away with my heavy boots instead, and the thorns started to catch on my trousers. Maria wasn't doing a lot to help.

Fortunately, it looked like salvation of some sort was in sight. Half buried in the foliage was a narrow concrete pipeline, which appeared to snake back towards the spaceport. It evidently appeared disused - the top broken off, and further back towards the spaceport, entire sections missing. It then disappeared into a small hillside. It appeared mostly dry inside, but very very dark. I clambered over it, with Maria close behind me. I peered down the pipe towards the spaceport, hoping for a way back in to get my ship.

No such luck. Shining my light down it revealed that the roof had collapsed as the pipe went into a small embankment that blocked our view of the spaceport. I shone the light up the other way. Of course, the pipe was completely undamaged in the direction we didn't actually need to go. It was turning into a typical day, really.

"Come on, let's go down it, it'll at least stop them seeing us on the IR imager," I said, crawling into the pipe. It was big enough to take me on my hands and knees without too much trouble.

"But it's dirty!"

"Not as dirty as jail," I said, exasperated. Why couldn't she just do as she was told? It wasn't that dirty. There was a little bit of dried mud on the bottom, but that was all.

"I'm not going," she said obstinately.

"Your call," I replied, crawling down the dark tunnel.

For someone who didn't like me, she seemed to be fairly eager to stick with me. I heard her grumble, then start to follow as I crawled down the pipe.

We shuffled along for several minutes, and then came to a section that had partly collapsed. I lay on my stomach and pulled myself along, dragging bits of dried soil through from where it had come through the top of the pipe. I could feel a tree root scrape across my back, betraying the creator of the hole. I shone the light back down at the narrow hole, and watched Maria try to pull herself through. Certain bits of her anatomy were making the job much harder than the one I faced. I grabbed her arms, and pulled her through. I sat down, resting my feet against the pipe wall.

"Here, have one of these," I said, reaching into one of my pockets and pulling out another of my hideous but energy-giving Power Extreme bars. She took it silently.

"Thank you," she whispered, as if it hurt her to be civil to me. To be fair to her, it wasn't every day that she met a man who insisted she sleep outside, fall into a puddle on waking up, and then have to fight through brambles only to crawl through a narrow tunnel that stank of something suspicious.

"Now you see why I have these Army trousers, instead of your useless pocket-less things," I said gently. In the darkness, I felt her scowl at me. We sat eating the chewy energy bars in silence. I often wondered whether it took more energy to eat these things than they gave. It was like trying to eat a bicycle tyre.

In the end, it was Maria who spoke up.

"What about Phekda? How did you grow up?"

I thought of replying something smart-alecky like "I didn't", but thought better of it.

"Bit like this pipe, really. Dark, musty, smells of something suspicious."

"I thought the star was a type F blue? How could it be dark?"

"Well, not dark in the sense of no light. Dark in the sense that the general population sees no hope, or at least when I lived there. I was one of the lucky ones, too. Lived on the farm with my grandparents." I remembered wistfully the smell of late harvest time, the whine of the combine's power plant and the smell of the freshly cut barley. Or the early season - the cattle herds snorting out clouds of steamy breath in the magenta dawns. "The city was just a shit hole," I said regretfully.

"Which one?"

"Newtown. Little in the way of order. Full of shacks built on the nuclear blasted rubble that had lain silent since the war hundreds of years ago. The filth, lack of sanitation, poverty. I hope I never have to see that place again."

"Is that why you left?"

"No, I'd still be at the farm now if my parents hadn't been killed. Ironically, it was the slowly returning order that resulted in their deaths. After a couple of false starts, an interim government managed to last long enough that we had some kind of law and order, so my parents set up a ship yard. They'd been running it for a while actually, but they were both killed delivering a second-hand ship to a distant customer. We don't know where exactly, other than the jump out of Alioth was the last one they made."

"Then what happened to you?"

"Well, I was only a little kid at the time. About nine years old or so. My grandparents, busy with the farm, couldn't look after me, so my uncle took me on. Him and Pam Gilmour. You may have heard of my uncle."

"Who is he?"

"James Winston. He'd just become an Admiral in the AJN at that point. He's now commander of the TSCA," I replied.

Then there was a slight pause. I'd discover its significance later, but I just put it down to Maria trying to remember who Adm. James K. Winston was.

"James Winston? I thought he was..."

Foolishly I talked over her. Perhaps it was a good thing. "No, we saved him from that."

"You mean he's not...?"

"Of course not. The Feds might think they are smart, but they are not that smart."

"Oh," she said, looking a little confused.

"But anyway, James and Pam looked after me, until I left in my own Cobra Mark 3 as soon as I was old enough to get my pilot's certificate. My great ambition was to be a researcher in the Alliance Science Council, but they wanted you to have a degree or experience, preferably both, even to just be a pilot. I didn't pay much attention at school. Failed most of my exams." I smiled wryly in the darkness.

"Why?"

"Laziness. But I thought I could work for myself as a frontier trader, and that would keep me in the low population systems away from the core. I could use it as experience, and eventually join the ASC."

"So what went wrong? Why are you here?"

I sighed. "I dunno. The thing is, as a frontier trader, you do a lot of things that are borderline illegal at the best of times. I started getting into fights. Not only that, I kept seeing a guy called Norman Mosser who if the truth be told wasn't a particularly good influence. Somehow, I ended up with an assassin's rifle and then in the Guild, well, till the Federation smashed them. To be honest, I only did small jobs, but the adrenaline was addictive. After the Federation arrested most of the Guild, I soon turned to other crimes, mainly larceny. Then came the big one. I helped a certain Mr. Mosser obtain parts for the HPA." I smiled again in the darkness, remembering the thrill of the chase, "but it got me into rather a lot more trouble than I'm usually in. Almost fatal trouble. And now I'm here."

"What did your uncle think of all of this?"

"Haven't seen him in years. I imagine he's not too happy though. He did know about the HPA thing. The Alliance spies were watching. He wound up getting involved himself on behalf of the AJNIB. I probably shouldn't be telling you that, though."

"It probably doesn't matter now anyway," Maria responded slightly sadly.

"You're right. The whole thing went spectacularly wrong. I was glad to escape with my life, let alone a complete space ship."

"Have you been back to Phekda recently?"

"Only once since they joined the Alliance. Newtown is still pretty depressing. Nuclear devastated rubble never makes for great architecture. At least you're only likely to get mugged instead of killed if you're an outsider."

I thought back to my first memories of Newtown. My mother had brought me with her - no idea why, it must have been safer at home - when we needed to get more ammo to defend the farm. The smell is what I remember. The smell of unburied corpses and sewage. Newtown lacked proper sanitation, and the bodies of murdered people littered some of the back alleyways. The decaying buildings, slimy with mould growing in the humid atmosphere. The town was still in a state of spasmodic battle, hundreds of years after it had been obliterated by several thirty kiloton air bursts. War was all the brutalised population knew. Generation after generation of warlike savages had grown up, the city becoming a shambling set of about five warring tribes. I think those who lived there must have had some sort of blood-lust that kept them in the city, waiting for the next raid against the neighbouring tribe. My family had long ago cultivated a relationship with one of them - food in return for weapons with which to defend the farm. Unidentified vehicles approaching the farmstead tended to be on the receiving end of an RPG. My family had learned the hard way many years ago that nothing good came out of that godforsaken city. In all honesty, I can understand why so many non-Phekdans are still suspicious of us to this very day. We just aren't trustworthy. My own life bears this out.

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"No, smells quite different. Sewage smells like Newtown. This doesn't. Hold on a second."

I turned the torch off. We were plunged into darkness, but up ahead, I could just make out some grey light. I let my eyes adapt some more. It looked like there was a slight bend in the pipe, and somewhere afterwards - the light at the end of the tunnel. "It would be about now that the roof caves in," I said.

"What?"

"Well, the light at the end of the tunnel. The roof always caves in when the bad guys are trying to escape."

"Hey, you're not saying that -"

" - you're one of the bad guys?" I said, finishing her question.

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose you're one of the bad girls."

She frowned.

"It wasn't me who was trying to buy illegal drugs," I said, shrugging. "Come on, let's get out of this place." I finished.

The remainder of the pipe seemed to go on for a surprising length of time. Finally, we came to a badly corroded grille at the end. Somewhere below, I could hear running water. Peering through, I could see enormous quantities of tangled vegetation, but not a lot else. A little sunlight streamed through the canopy of trees overhead.

I pushed the grille around with my hands. It creaked dismally, but went nowhere. The slime in the pipe was about 10cm deep, and made it almost impossible to get any traction against the grille.

"The good news," I said, "is that this grille is so badly corroded it will come apart with a good shove. The bad news is that it's almost impossible to give it a good shove."

Maria said nothing. I crawled back a little way, rolled over onto my back, and spun around, so my feet were facing the grille. I slid on my back right up to it and kicked it, hard. Good old Newton and his equal and opposite reaction sent me sliding into Maria, who looked at me disdainfully as my head cannoned into her lap.

"Let's try again," I said. "This time, hold onto my shoulders while I kick at it. Your weight might allow me to get more force against it."

"Okay."

I slid back up to the corroded metal. Maria gripped my shoulders with surprising strength. I brought my feet back and slammed the heavy soles of my walking boots into the grille. With a suddenness I hadn't anticipated, the rusty metal cannoned off the end of the pipe. I heard it falling through the vegetation below. It sounded like it fell quite a long way. Gingerly, I spun around and poked my head out of the pipe.

It was a good twenty feet or so to the vegetation below. The pipe was sticking out a little way from the side of a sheer drop - a greenish moss covered cliff, which ended some way down with a muddy, reed-covered embankment which disappeared into the trees below. Above, the tops of the giant forest trees towered. There were a few creepers clinging to the cliff. I tried to reach one, but it felt like I was going to fall out to whatever unknown fate lay below.

"Grab my feet. I need to hang out here and see if I can get hold of some of these creepers," I said. It was probably one of the most foolish things I'd end up saying all day.

"What's out there?" Maria asked.

"A long drop."

I felt her hands clamp around my ankles. I shuffled forwards, sliding over the nicely lubricated pipe surface. The words 'nicely lubricated' made their significance known as I leaned right out, bending my body at the waist. The slight downslope of the tunnel, combined with my successful attempt to grab a creeper began the slide.

"Uh oh," I said. It was a slight understatement. I heard Maria shriek as the rest of my body exited the pipe. To her credit, she tried to hang on. It was definitely a bad move on her part as she'd now started an uncontrollable slide of her own. I felt her let go as she desperately scrabbled at the slick tunnel sides.

I fell away. It felt like slow motion, as I realised that I had vastly underestimated the strength of the creeper. I watched with wonder as I saw Maria's body slide completely clear of the end of the pipe, her white clothes slick with the dirt that had made the tunnel so slippery. She was screaming at the top of her voice. I always find it fairly odd that as you fall you have an awful lot of time to think. At least it seems like a lot of time. I had enough time to wonder about the beautiful arc that Maria's body described as she fell, and how I was staying a more or less constant vertical distance from her. I thought of how the leaves stripped off the creeper, as the powerful grip of my artificial right hand first stripped the bark and leaves off, then snapped the creeper altogether. I got to think about how much this was going to hurt when I finally hit what was hidden by the treetops.

Back to reality. I crashed through the branches of the lower trees briefly before I heard the sound of Maria doing the same. Something caught me in the small of the back and spun me around. I crashed through the branches, and found to my relief that there wasn't much further to fall, as I slammed into the muddy embankment. I then realised that I was about to become a rather handy cushion for Maria as she crashed through the branches. She hit me right in the abdomen, and cannoned off, and disappeared out of sight through some more vegetation. I slid down myself, unable to breathe, finally falling into a shallow river. I lay there gasping, trying desperately not to drown. My world had become one of pain.

After doing a very good impression of a beached fish, I managed to sit up. "Maria?" I croaked.

I heard some cursing from behind a pile of rocks which was concealing a small calm pool in the river. It sounded most un-Princesslike.

"You okay?"

"What do you fucking think!" she shouted, throwing a rock at me. I instinctively covered my face. The rock splashed into the water next to me. I stood up soggly.

"Come on, let's get out of here," I said tiredly, and clambered onto the bank. I pushed my real hand through my soaking hair. I pulled it away and found a little blood mixed in. It could have been much worse.

But then my blood turned to ice. "Mack Winston, you can run but you can't hide," said a familiar voice behind me. I slowly turned my head. What a surprise. It was Pam. She was wearing that mirthless smile she tended to reserve just for me.

"Oh, hello," I said wetly.

"Right. Well you and your girlfriend better - "

"I'm NOT his girlfriend," Maria growled with a level of malevolence that even surprised me.

" - companion," Pam corrected, "better come back with me. I think you might just have some explaining to do, young man."

I looked at Pam's complete dryness and lack of dirt with some envy. A wave of relief that it was all over swept over me.

We squelched after Pam. I could see an autoshuttle parked a little distance away in a clearing in the forest. I tried a little conversation. It probably wasn't wise, as Pam was using that brittle voice she reserved for When Mack Got Into Trouble.

"How's Uncle Jim?" I asked.

Pam stopped so suddenly that I almost walked right into her. She turned slowly. A shadow passed over her face.

"What?" I asked, sensing trouble. I think she was having a hard time realising that I hadn't heard. The damned HPA affair had kept me out of the loop for so long. She seemed to be fighting for words.

"Mack, your uncle's dead," she said finally.

## **Dead? Surely not.**

[Mack Winston]

I stood soaking and dripping, looking at Pam Gilmour in disbelief.

"What do you mean he's dead?" I asked.

A painful expression crossed her face. Maria Hesketh-Duval watched us sullenly, gingerly trying to wipe the mud off her face without much success.

"Just that," answered Pam, with a hint of exasperation.

"Who did it? I'll ki..." I started, the semantics of the word "dead" finally coming home to roost like a nightmare flock of Phekdan buzzards.

"No one did it," she replied, talking over me. "It was an accident."

She turned on her heel and stomped off towards the autoshuttle. I had to run to catch her up. Maria squelched wetly behind me.

"But how?" I said, trying to keep up with Pam as she strode with an unladylike pace. She ignored me, and climbed into the autoshuttle, which was parked in a small grassy clearing. She turned around and looked at me.

"You and your companion ought to get in. The Police will be here soon if you don't."

We got in.

I was starting to get cold. Pam turned on the air conditioning full power, making my soaking clothes chill me to the bone. She might not have liked me, but Maria was also going blue. It was a bit unfair on her.

"Your uncle was checking out a crew before a flight test. There was a control failure. They crashed into the asteroid over which they were supposed to be doing a simulated bombing run," Pam said, finally answering my question.

I felt empty. I hadn't seen him for so long it seemed, and now he was gone. Just like that. Not chasing pirates down in Riedquat, not commanding an AJN defence against INRA. Just an accident on a routine training mission. A faulty control system. My uncle, the legendary James Winston, was gone and that was it. All I could do is sit in silence and shiver. I watched the forest fall away as the autoshuttle climbed high into the air, and then pointed upwards towards the orbiting space station.

I didn't say a word during the entire two hour trip up to the station. My mental numbness of the news had managed to block my feeling of cold and discomfort, and by the time we disembarked the autoshuttle and boarded Pam's ship, I was merely damp. When I got to the little cabin in her ship that I had shared with my uncle on occasion, my emotions got the better of me, and a searing feeling of loss, pain and sadness suddenly welled up uncontrollably inside me. I tried desperately to conceal my sorrow and grief from Pam and Maria, but I'm not sure if it was particularly effective. Pam pointed Maria in the general direction of the bathroom and the wash suite, leaving me to stew in my grief. I felt and looked like a wreck, my hair crusted in dried blood from my earlier fall, my clothes dirty and damp, and my mind shattered by the death of James K. Winston.

# **The Wrath of Mack**

[Mack Winston]

They say Phekdans are feisty. They say Phekdans have problems with anger management.

I have to concede that there may be a bit of truth in this somewhere.

But I think anyone in my situation is likely to feel angry. In hindsight, maybe it was all self-inflicted, but sitting locked in a small cabin, being fed food you don't like twice a day - left with nothing but your thoughts after being told your uncle had been smeared over an asteroid months previously. I don't do grief well at the best of times. It was why I was packed off to Alioth as a child - after my parents died, my sullenness intermixed with white hot flashes of rage made my grandparents realise they couldn't run the farm (with all its problems) with me around. Now I had lost my next father figure, my uncle Jim.

Pam Gilmour never liked me from the day my uncle took me home. As I grew older, she liked me less. I don't think I really helped matters when I stole her ship. Uncle Jim always said she had my best interests at heart. Whenever he said that, as predictable as night followed day, we'd have a heated "discussion". By the time I was in my late teens, the amount of invective was enough to make an Imperial Starship Captain blush, let alone an Alliance one.

I've never worked out why Pam Gilmour keeps coming to "rescue" me seeing as she hates me so much. Maybe this time because I'm her last living link to her life long lover, my uncle.

The door opened, and broke my sullen thoughts. Pam appeared, and wordlessly deposited a plate of...of...scrambled eggs. She knows I can't stand them. Last night it had been canned tomatoes and black pudding. I just couldn't take it any more.

"Fucking bitch Gilmour! You blow goats!" I shouted after her, as she closed the door.

I then felt rather stupid. What would it achieve? Not a lot. I tried to hold my breath as I ate the vile blobby mass on

It was therefore with a great deal of surprise that when I closed the door, I found myself standing in front of an Imperial Clone Agent with a broken nose.

"Er, hi," I said weakly.

He shot me.

"Bugger," I thought to myself, and passed out.

## Meeting a Prince

[Mack Winston]

It just wasn't a good day. Not that any day recently was a good day. Good days weren't the sort of thing that happened when you were a slave in the Imperial mines in Vequess.

I set the MX-21 mining system in motion, and signalled to a fellow slave to shunt the hopper over to the output chute. Minerals immediately started clattering out of the machine, and I watched under the bright glare of the sodium lighting as the pulverized rocks started filling the 100 tonne hopper. One or two rocks missed, and I was careful to pick them up and hurl them over the sides of the hopper before a slave master saw that one had missed. I repositioned the chute slightly, risking life and limb as jagged boulders hurtled from the machine at what seemed like a supersonic speed.

Running the MX-21 was one of the least unpleasant jobs. Sure, it was dusty, and my shirt was drenched in light oil and brown with the dust of the minerals which adhered so well to the oil, but it didn't involve too much physical labour, other than rounding up the odd lump of bauxite that missed the hopper. It gave me a chance to sit down and pull off my boot. I had an unbelievably bad case of athlete's foot, and I desperately needed to scratch my burning toes to try and bring some relief. I knew it was fruitless, it'd feel good after scratching for maybe five minutes, then the burning itch would return with a vengeance. I had to count myself lucky - a couple of days earlier, a hopper had broken down and five of us had tried to reposition it manually. It got away from us, and ran over our feet. I was the only one with steel-capped boots. The other four had their feet broken, and after minimal medical attention were forced back to work. Why the stupid Imperial masters didn't supply all the slaves with proper protective equipment was beyond me. They didn't supply any footwear at all - it was just lucky that when they'd abducted me I was wearing steel capped boots to start with. Couldn't they figure out that if the slaves were kept free of injuries, they'd work better?

I pulled my grubby sock back on, slipped my abused boot back on, and tightened it. My oil-drenched sleeves kept sliding over my hands, and with frustration, I rolled them up again. With a horrific rending noise, suddenly the MX-21 above me jammed. It didn't sound good.

"Fix that machine!" yelled a slave master, who'd spotted me putting my boot back on. He strode over towards me purposefully, electric whip extended in front of him like a bizarre fishing rod.

I didn't speak back, I just crawled to my feet, and shuffled to the work face. My feet had already started burning again. I pulled the safety cut-out on the machine so it wouldn't start again with me inside of it. The slave master yelled at me again. They didn't like the safety being enabled as it'd take a whole extra two minutes to get the machine going again. I turned around to face him.

"How long will it take you to get this machine online again if I'm mashed up inside? How will your superiors take it when a valuable machine is out of action for half a day while they clean my body parts out of it?" I yelled, trying to put it in his terms, as if I was using the cut-out to save his skin and not mine.

He glared at me. I'm not sure he was used to a slave actually speaking back to him. He was about to whip me, but decided against it. "Just fix it now, you have ten minutes!" he bawled in my face.

I pulled open the cover, and caught a sight of myself in one of the polished machine parts inside. I was filthy with mineral dust. My own reflection surprised me - I felt like I was 100 years old, but beneath the layer of grime, I saw I was still a young man. I just wished my knees and back agreed with that assessment from time to time.

I quickly found the problem. Somehow a small fragment of rock had jammed itself tight into the machine's final drive, all because the Empire was too cheap to replace the seals on the front of the machine. I pulled out a small screwdriver from my tool belt, and flicked the stone out. The machine suddenly roared back into action, and I leaped clear, scared out of my wits as half the internals tried to mash me to a pulp. The slave master was sitting by the controls, snickering. The fool had disabled the safety whilst I was working. I reached down and picked up a nearby piece of rock, and threw it at his head. With satisfaction, I scored a direct hit, and knocked him off the machine's catwalk to the ground ten feet below.

Suddenly, there was a shrill alarm. The world went white. I hung onto the machine's railings for grim life.

The world started to resolve itself again. Except, this time I wasn't in the slave mine. I was sitting in some kind of room. Undoubtedly, they'd stunned me and now I was going to be punished. I looked across the mahogany table. Seated at the other side was some Imperial looking man who must have been "of good breeding". Next to him was a Clone Agent.

"So, Mack, how do you like the slave mines?" the Impie asked.

"They suck," I said truthfully. "Why don't you kit us out properly, I mean, look at me! No protective clothing, my shirt is soaked with oil that's probably carcinogenic, I just had some idiot of a slave master turn the machine on that I was trying to fix - you'd get more out of us if you'd at least make the environment a bit safer."

"Look at yourself," he said, with an amused smile.

I suddenly realised that I was clean. My clothes were the colour the manufacturer intended. My feet weren't burning with some horrible fungal disease. My knees even felt fine. I must have looked very confused. I reached up to my head, and felt something fixed to it. My hand probed further up what felt like a large skull cap. On the top was a cable. I traced it with my hands. It dawned on me that I'd just been experiencing a virtual reality system that knocked the best of Jjagged Bbanner into a cocked hat.

"You were never in that mine. We just wanted to make a point," said the Impie. He walked over, and gently released the skull cap. I felt my head where it had been. They'd cut all my hair off. I was as bald as the Emperor himself.

"My hair," I observed weakly, "has all gone."

"It'll grow back to the length it was within a couple of weeks," the Impie replied, "but if it makes you feel better have this," he said, tossing a baseball cap over the table at me. I looked at the cap. It was navy blue with a small Imperial Navy crest on the front. I curved the bill to its proper shape, and put it on. The brass buckle on the back felt cold on my freshly shaven head.

I still had no idea what they wanted with me.

"Why am I here?" I asked.

"You are to do an important job for us."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Prince Henry Burton-Riddick. This is my Clone Agent, number 34."

An Imperial Prince. Someone must have deemed me to be important. Quite why anyone in the Empire would suddenly deem me important, I don't know. Oh yes, Maria Hesketh-Duval, a minor princess. My heart sank. The whole VR thing was probably showing me how they were about to punish me.

"Look, I was trying to stop the Federation arresting Miss Hesketh-Duval!" I said loudly. "I got her back in one piece, didn't I?"

Prince Burton-Riddick started to laugh. "Don't worry about the Princess, she's quite safe and sound and we're willing to forget that you ripped her off. Free markets, eh? There's one very important job you need to do for us."

"Which is?" I asked, with a feeling of dread.

He didn't beat about the bush. "Kill Jay Carstein."

"What?"

"Kill Jay Carstein," he repeated.

He talked over me. "Do you even have an IQ of 100?" he asked insultingly.

Having never taken an IQ test, I really didn't know. I decided it'd be best not to let the Prince's insults make me angry. "I don't care what you think of me, Burton-Red-Neck," I growled rebelliously, "I'm not doing it, alright?"

Burton-Riddick immediately stopped smiling or making any pretence of joviality. "You don't have a choice."

"There are professional assassins out there you could use, what's the point of using me, especially as I'm so thick?" I asked, laying on the sarcasm towards the end of my question. After going on about how stupid I was, the Prince didn't seem to have a sense of irony. It was probably a good job, too.

"You know Carstein. Carstein knows you. He would probably meet you, and since he believes you are a friend - after all, you shared the same ship for six months - you stand a much better chance of getting close enough to kill him," the Prince replied.

"That's why I won't do it."

The Prince smiled without mirth. Bared his teeth, really. "I think you will. If you don't, you're going to Vequess to experience what you just did for real."

"You think you can catch me?"

"We just did," he said, pointing out the obvious. I'd walked straight into that one.

"I'm good at escaping."

"Here's what Pam Gilmour has in store for you if you do manage to get away from us," he answered. He turned a datapad around to face me. It was showing some video.

Pam Gilmour was trying to negotiate a price deal with a man over CSP service. She mentioned my name at least twice.

"What's CSP service?" I asked, as the video played.

"A CSP is a Corrective Service Practitioner. You spent your formative years on a Phekdan farm. Remember seeing the horses getting broken? Well, a CSP does the same for humans, turning them into nice little Imperial citizens in the process. She's hiring one to break you," the Prince replied unemotionally. "The best CSPs can be very unpleasant," he added.

I watched about a minute more of the video, and cursed under my breath. "Bitch," I whispered as she skilfully negotiated a couple of grand off. "I can give her the slip too without too much trouble," I snarled belligerently.

"You've not been too successful so far," the Prince observed.

I sat in silence. No, I didn't have a choice. It's not if I really liked Jay Carstein that much anyway. The only trouble was that he was very good at killing. The Empire must have been desperate. "What's in it for me if I succeed?"

"I'm glad you see that this is your only rational choice, despite your obvious mental handicap," the Prince said insultingly. "Your freedom. A complete erasure of all your criminal records in the Empire. If you're really good, we'll even let you work for us for money, maybe make you a minor Lord if you excel yourself and show us loyalty."

I saw the Clone Agent's face twitch. I don't think he particularly agreed with the idea of rewarding me that much. "Where is Carstein?" I asked.

"We last saw him on Fort Donalds, and our agents believe he's still there. We'll supply you with transport up there. We have a ship waiting to take you up now."

"I need weapons."

The Prince reached under the table, and lifted an item out. It was the biggest knife I'd ever seen. The razor sharp blade was as long as my forearm. It gleamed a shimmering grey colour under the room's harsh fluorescent lighting. The duralium blade started as a needlepoint, widening until it was a couple of centimetres wide at the hilt. He pushed it across the table. I lifted it carefully. It was exquisitely balanced. I turned it over, the deadly blade which glinted in the room's overhead light. The blade was incredibly thin, and incredibly hard. I held the knife by its perfectly designed hilt, and discovered a small button by my thumb. I gently squeezed it. Suddenly, two small side



daggers flicked out at 45 degrees to the main blade. They were about 10cm long, serrated and obviously designed to inflict terrible damage when the knife was withdrawn from the unfortunate recipient. It was the pinnacle of personal, face to face, up close murder technology. My bowels felt weak - they expected me to take Jay frigging Carstein on in hand-to-hand combat.

It was doomed to failure, too. I laughed nervously. "How about a gun? I'm a sharp-shooter, not a knife wielding maniac. Have you seen how much bigger and stronger he is than me? I'll never get close!"

"There's no way we can give you a gun. You'll just have to try your best. I suggest you hug him - after all, you've not seen your friend for a year - and then plunge it into his back. No one will call you a coward if you do."

The Vequess mines were already losing their sting. Something in the back of my mind suggested that perhaps a lifetime underground wouldn't be quite so bad. Another part of my mind disagreed, and commanded my arms to gently stow the side blades, then slip the knife into its holder, and attach the holder inside my jacket.

## **We have our target, or maybe our target has us**

[Jay Carstein]

"Good morning, Jay," the spy said as he settled into his chair.

"You look as if you're dying to tell me something," Carstein said, as he watched the Federal spy shift in his seat uncomfortably.

"Yes. Remember last week, we saw your erstwhile student?"

"Mack Winston? Yeah, I'd forgotten."

"I wouldn't forget too hastily. There's been developments," said the spy, enigmatically.

"Developments that affect me?" Carstein asked. He wished these spies would just get straight to the point instead of all this cloak-and-dagger stuff.

"Yes. As you requested, we've been watching him, but I don't think he'll be doing you favours any time soon."

"Why not?"

"He's on his way up here now. He will try and make contact with you. I would strongly suggest that you don't meet him."

"Why?"

The spy passed a datapad to Carstein. It was playing a grainy piece of video, obviously taken by a sub-miniature camera that an enterprising FIB spy had secreted into the room in question. Carstein could make out three people, an Imperial prince who looked like - who was it - Burton-Riddick? - a clone agent, and Mack Winston. Carstein strained to hear the poor quality sound recording.

"Kill Jay Carstein," said the Prince.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Mack Winston replied.

"Yes I do," replied the Prince, getting straight to the point.

Carstein smiled. "These Impies have never beaten about the bush, have they?".

"There's more," said the spy.

Carstein continued to watch. The Impie was obviously threatening Mack with the slave mines in Vequess, and then showed him what the Gilmour woman had in store for him. Coercion at work - the bread and butter of Imperial persuasion methods. With some surprise, he saw the Impie hand Winston a vicious looking dagger. Mack lifted it as if it would electrocute him, and carefully turned it over almost at arm's reach. He then gripped it, and suddenly two side blades flicked out. Mack jumped as if the knife had bit him. He was clearly very ill at ease with the weapon. Carstein rewound the video, and played the threats bit again. Yes, the Impie was quite clearly threatening him with a lifetime's hell in Vequess. Oh, and then offering to reward him if he did the killing. Stick and carrot. He watched Mack then tuck the side blades back in, and gingerly sheath the weapon. He then paused, and put the weapon inside his jacket and left the camera's field of view, along with the Impie and his Clone Agent friend.

"I think I will meet him, as a matter of fact," Carstein said. The Fed spy looked as if he was about to have an apoplexy.

"I think that's...inadvisable in the extreme," the spy replied.

Carstein smiled. "If it's hand to hand combat, I don't think my friend poses much of a threat. He's a good sharp-shooter, he's not a fighter. He won't be hard for me to overpower if he tries anything."

"How are you going to defend yourself from that dagger? It's not as if we can arm you: that'd set off the detectors straight away"

"Mack's only chance was to have the element of surprise and stab me first. He doesn't have that element of surprise any more. Besides, I think I can make him a better offer than what the Impie did."

"Still, the risk is too great - "

"No, I'll use my comm as a pager. I'll set it off if anything breaks out. Have some of your people stay within a discreet distance to come to my aid should things get out of control. I'm confident that they won't though. The first thing I plan to do is disarm him, I know where his knife is. If he tries hand-to-hand combat without that thing - well, I'm about twice his weight and it ain't fat." Carstein flexed his well-honed muscles to make the point.

The spy didn't look convinced. "Well, have it your way, but it's against my advice," he said, getting in the last word.

Carstein smiled. "Most things I do are. But keep an eye on our young friend here. It would be helpful if there aren't any additional surprises when I do meet him."

"We'll keep you up to the minute. I have a team of spies watching him."

# The Day of Reckoning

[Mack Winston]

My "handlers" left me alone almost the instant I got off the small shuttle that had taken us from Duval City up to Fort Donalds. I had the feeling that I was being followed, and I'm sure my instinct was right. At the time I didn't realise quite how many people were now taking an interest in my activities.

My first stop was deep into the heaving orbital city. First, I went to a large superstore, and found myself a decent sized backpack. Then I went off to a spare parts store, and spent a happy twenty minutes rooting around for what I needed. What I needed was a way, if possible, to avoid hand-to-hand combat with Jay Carstein. The reason was simple - if I tried it, I'd lose almost immediately, and I really didn't fancy the prospect of the awful knife I had sliding between my ribs. I found the first thing I was after within a couple of minutes - a chunky looking transformer of unknown origin. Nice thick primary coil, lots of secondary windings. A bit more rooting around got me a good sized capacitor and a high current thyristor. Then a touch switch complete with a battery, a small plastic reel of solder, and a soldering iron. I took them to the counter.

"Hobby project?" the shopkeeper asked in his quirky Imperial accent.

"Yeah, you could say that," I replied. The shopkeeper momentarily looked at me suspiciously, hearing my obvious off-world accent.

"Power supply for a homebrew laser?" he asked out of idle curiosity.

"Yeah, it's for a power supply," I replied. "Wish they would supply them whole, it'd save me a lot of time."

I briefly reflected on how fortunate the shopkeeper was to have never had to live on a farm in Phekda, where spare HV parts were hard to find and always needed to keep the outside lights on and the electric fences electrified. There had been no time to use this sort of stuff in the pursuit of hobbies. Keeping several kilometres of electric fence live was hard work - not so much to keep the animals in but to keep the undesirable humans out.

He was a good salesman, and tried to add some other things to the sale. "We have laser tubes too. And dye. Did you know you can make vodka lase if you pump it hard enough?"

I didn't know that. "I'll have to try it some day."

"All sorts of things will lase with a good enough flash tube," he continued.

I paid him, and left. I didn't want to be drawn into a long conversation, I had enough to do as it was.

My second stop was in the business district. I needed to rent a small meeting room for a few hours. I had a look on what was on offer, and one of the less expensive and obviously Spartan rooms fit the bill. The receptionist looked at me with disdain. I wasn't wearing the normal highly fashionable business suit. Still, my credits were as good as anyone else's, and he gave me a keycard for the room. The room was rather expensive, but this was Achenar. Fifty credits for four hours! I suppose it was worth it - someone was going to have to get the blood off the floor. I just hoped it wasn't going to be mine.

I went to the room, and unloaded the parts from my bag. I picked up my comm, and had a brief search around the bulletin boards for any evidence of Jay Carstein. Not surprisingly, there was none. I sent a message to his last known id.

"Hi, haven't seen you for a while, need your advice on something - I'm on the station", I wrote, and sent it.

I then got the soldering iron out, and made a makeshift circuit using the components I'd bought. The smell of the solder flux brought strong memories of my grandfather teaching me how to repair tractor start circuit power supplies. In my mind's eye, I could see his old hands carefully holding the soldering iron, whilst the warm air, scented with a strange combination of ripening fruit and cow shit drifted through the draughty shed he did the work in. I paused briefly remembering what it was like to be a young child - free from the threats of Vequess mines. I decided not to dwell on it. If I did, the fear driving me on to complete my task may have waned.

My comm beeped quietly, alerting me to an incoming message. It was from Carstein. "Sure, when?"

I sent a reply. "About an hour, Duval Square."

I then got out a screwdriver, and carefully removed the door's metal panelling, and completed my circuit. I replaced the door panel, and hid my makeshift circuit under my bag, hiding it and the wall socket, making sure the switch was off. I left the room, locking it behind me.

I killed some time by going to a nearby cafe and having a strong coffee. I needed plenty of stimulation. Sadly, they lacked Riedquatan Ultra Coffee - it was apparently illegal here. Achenarians didn't know what they were missing. I tried desperately not to dwell on how I was going to kill Carstein. I went through several scenarios. My mind's eye kept treacherously conjuring up images of Carstein turning the blade on me. I could almost feel it piercing my internal organs, and the final, searing pain as the side-blades ripped through my lungs, and the taste of my own blood filling up in my mouth. I tried not to be gripped by fear, but it wasn't much use. Had anyone touched me at that moment I'd have probably lost control of my bowels. I left the cafe, and headed towards Duval Square to meet my fate, trying to put it all out of my mind. Carstein would certainly notice if I was acting nervously. Having the coffee had possibly been a bad idea. Instead of stimulating me, it made me feel panicky. My first instinct was to run away when I saw Carstein nonchalantly leaning against the statue of the Emperor that dominated the city square. He appeared to be alone, and hadn't seen me. I took a couple of deep breaths, and then walked over to him.

"Hi Jay, long time no see," I said.

He smiled, looking pleased to see me. "Likewise. So you need some advice, huh?"

"Yeah, it's a bit embarrassing really. I've rented a meeting room back in Sharpstown, if you don't mind. I sort of need the privacy."

"You're not going to suddenly tell me you love me or something?" Carstein replied with an evil grin.

"No, erm, not quite, err, no. Definitely not." I replied, nonplussed. Somehow, it seemed to break my internal tension a little.

We set off back towards my small rented meeting room. It was only a short walk away from Duval's rotten statue, but Carstein insisted on conversation nonetheless. I wasn't really in the mood.

"So what you up to?" he asked.

"Just the usual, being chased, shot at, mugged, that kind of thing."

"Nice Imperial Navy cap by the way. Who cut off your hair?"

"Some fucker who wanted to treat me to a very unpleasant VR experience," I replied. It was the truth, after all. Carstein could easily tell if I was lying. I remember that much from our time cooped up on that ship.

"Actually, it's useful that you've turned up, I might have a job for you."

"I doubt it," I replied, hoping not to sound too prophetic.

"I think you'll prefer it to the alternatives," he said, ominously. I'm sure my mind was just playing tricks on me, but it was like Carstein knew what I was up to.

"I think I'm going to go back to frontier trading," I said. "Life was much simpler then."

"I'm not sure you'll be able to refuse my offer," was his reply. He sounded altogether too cheerful.

I tried not to get drawn into any more conversation until we were in the privacy of the meeting room. I picked up the pace.

"You seem a bag of nerves," Carstein observed.

I didn't reply.

"Must be something serious," he added.

"You wouldn't believe how serious," I replied. "I'm shitting myself," I confessed.

This time he didn't reply. I hoped that he'd just shut up. I felt like I was under the glare of a spotlight, with one of the Emperor's best interrogators about to get to work on me. Any dangerous branch of the conversation could force me into a corner I couldn't get out of without having to confess what was really on the agenda. What was worse was I'd

forgotten how big Jay Carstein was. He had to be twice my mass, and all muscle. If it came to a knife fight...my mind helpfully inserted an image of the knife sinking into my chest to complete the picture. We hadn't even got to my planned place-of-murder and it was starting to go pear-shaped. No wonder he was always so bloody relaxed.

Finally, after an agonizing ten minute walk, we were in the office complex and at the meeting room's door. The door automatically unlocked, as it detected the keycard in my pocket. I went in first. Carstein followed.

"After you," I said, indicating a chair at the table.

He went in, and as he pulled the rather comfortable looking leather chair out from the table, I closed the door and kicked the switch on the socket hidden behind my bag. I then walked around the table, and took the opposite seat.

"Smells like someone's been soldering in here," Carstein observed. I nearly squeaked.

"Um, it does, doesn't it. I'll get the AC on," I croaked.

"There's no need." There was an uncomfortable pause, and I shifted uneasily in my seat.

"OK, here's the deal - " I started. Stupidly, I'd made up the guff about wanting advice off him on the spot, but not thought about what I wanted to talk to him about. It didn't seem to matter anyway, because Carstein cut me off.

"You are here to kill me," he said calmly, leaning back into his seat.

"No - " I began fruitlessly.

"Don't bother trying to conceal it, Mack, the VLA has a network of spies and we saw what Prince Burton-Riddick did to you."

"Oh," I replied weakly. A wave of calm suddenly swept over me.

Carstein got up, and walked around the table, and stood over me.

"OK, where is it," he said, and he started patting me down. He paused as he felt the hard metal under my jacket. "Ah, it seems to be here."

He reached inside my jacket, his tall frame towering above me. I sat frozen to the spot. I wondered if he was going to pull the knife out and plunge it into my chest. My plans were now working against me - I had trapped myself in this room. He pulled out the knife, and walked back to his seat. I relaxed slightly - I was at least still alive.

Carstein turned the knife over in his hand, feeling the weight of the weapon and its exquisite balance. He thumbed the button. The side blades flicked out with a vicious click. "Ooh, nasty," he said, wrinkling his brow. He carefully closed the blades and put the knife on the table halfway between us.

"Well, if you're going to kill me, get it over with then." He folded his arms, and looked at me, a very slight but conceited smile on his face. Fear gushed over me again as my adrenal glands decided they wanted their say in the matter for about the tenth time that day. Part of my mind screamed at me to just do something. My motor neurones decided that activity at this point was probably fatal, and promptly went on strike. I went rigid with terror.

"Can't do it, can ya?" Carstein asked, totally relaxed. "You know I'd win. You were hoping to stab me in the back, weren't you?"

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I thought it might be something like that. Right now, I didn't want to be coerced into anything more, and I knew the Prince would get me. There was probably at least three clone agents waiting outside. "I just want freedom," I whined.

"Really?"

"Look, Jay, don't you realise that even if you've stopped me, the Imps are like colorectal surgeons, and will get you in the end?"

Carstein burst into helpless laughter. I don't know what in my terrified mind had inserted the bit about the colorectal surgeon, but it seemed to slice through the tension in the room.

"You come up with the oddest expressions. I've always liked the way you do that," he said. "I would have gone berserk with some of the dour old wasters of students the Guild managed to drag up, all lost in self-importance. I'm so glad you were assigned to me," he said with a broad grin. "Come on, join the VLA. We need someone like you. Too many people take it far too seriously. We need someone who can make us laugh."

It wasn't an option, of course. I could say yes, and join the VLA. But I had at least three Imperial clone agents keeping tabs on me. I could no more take Carstein's offer seriously than I could pass myself off as a cardiologist. I'd be off to the slave mines within the day if I didn't carry out my terrible assignment. I tried to head his offer off. "Look, let's forget the whole thing. I'll go back to frontier trading, and I'll be on call for you, but I'm not doing it full time," I said.

Carstein looked dissatisfied. "Isn't it funny," he mused, "how so many people think they have control over their lives. Have you ever read any philosophy, Mack?"

I was a bit surprised at Carstein's sudden change in conversation, and didn't immediately see the relevance. "No, not really," I replied. My fear was beginning to ebb a little bit, but sooner or later, I had to take the vicious knife which was lying on the table between us. The trouble was I'd be dead the instant I did. The Vequess slave mines seemed a far off problem I could deal with later. The pain of the knife ripping through my flesh was a far more pressing matter.

"You should do," Carstein continued. "It might give you some enlightenment to your condition. I read a very interesting philosophy book recently - fascinating because it's so right, yet was written over a thousand years ago." He paused for effect. "Have you heard of John Gray?"

"No."

"Pity. He wrote a book called 'Straw Dogs' which had the subtitle 'Thoughts on humans and other animals'. A large part of his thesis was that humans were no more capable of controlling their fate than animals, but thought they were. He went on to give very compelling demolitions of earlier philosophers work, people like Nietzsche, who you've probably not heard of either. He not only attacked religion, but atheism. A remarkable work. Remarkably accurate. You think you are in control of your destiny, but it's down to fate."

This was starting to get a bit bizarre. I was supposed to be murdering Carstein, not get into lectures on philosophy. He continued.

"You know the believers in Randomius Factoria sort of have it all right. That's one Goddess that John Gray would be able to approve of. Lady of Fate we adore you and all that. You're a victim of fate. You have no more control over your life than the farm animals you grew up with. You can no more kill me than you can drink the Kayser reservoir dry." He looked at me sympathetically.

"I could just walk out."

"You can't do that either because you're too scared to end up in the slave mines. You have no choice. You will join us. I said I was willing to forgive you, and I am. You were forced here under duress. You're a good sharp-shooter and we could do with your help. You'll be paid, you'll have somewhere nice to live, you'll have protection from the Empire's cloned thugs. You'll be able to afford a proper pair of leather gloves, rather than that cheap vinyl tat you're wearing." He laughed ironically. "Fancy the Empire forcing you to use the best assassin's knife they have, but wear cheap plastic gloves when you do it."

Perhaps Carstein was right, and that I had no choice. Perhaps my fate was decided. If I accepted, both of our fates would be decided - the three clone agents would get us both. Carstein might have been a giant of a man, but the clone agents would rip him to shreds. Perhaps I was just dispensable, and the Prince had used me merely to get Carstein boxed into a corner where the Clone Agents could finish him off. They were undoubtedly watching us now,

preparing to pounce on us as soon as we left if I didn't carry out my terrible task. It was ironic that Carstein was talking of how my life was railroaded by fate, when the same fate dictated that he would himself be dying within five minutes. My gloves might have been plastic tat, but plastic tat is a much better insulator than leather.

Carstein seemed to be waiting for me to reply.

"I'm sorry Jay, but I'm going to have to murder you," I heard myself say. It sounded ridiculous.

"Go on then," he said. He watched me from his side of the table. "You can't, can you? Give up - your fate is decided," he said.

The knife sat in the middle of the table, glinting evilly in the overhead light. I looked at it, then at Carstein. He picked the knife up.

"Well, I'm leaving. I will call you again in an hour's time, give you some time to think." He pulled out a small datapad. "You can read this too, it's John Gray's book," he said sliding it over the table towards me. I watched him balefully as he stood up and turned towards the door, the vicious knife in his left hand. He looked down towards my bag, and carefully kneeled down, and pulled it back a little. He turned to face me. "Electrified door handle. You really though I'd fall for that one, didn't you," he said, shaking his head sadly.

He unplugged my transformer, and carefully replaced the bag, covering up my makeshift contraption again. "Winston, I thought you'd do better than that," he said in a mocking tone.

I watched with horrible satisfaction as he made the last move of his life. He reached out for the door handle with his right hand, grasping it firmly.

The touchpad switch activated momentarily after his hand closed on the door handle, its internal battery supplying a small current to the gate of the thyristor. The thyristor began to conduct, completing the circuit. The capacitor dumped its entire charge through the thick primary windings. Magnetic fields surged and collapsed, inducing current into the secondary windings. The pulse of electricity surged up the wires to the metal door handle. Carstein's body made a circuit between the floor and the door handle. Twenty five thousand volts coursed through his body in a short, sharp shock. Plenty of volts and sufficient amps - indeed, enough to kickstart the fire in our old tractor's biofuel turbine. He seemed stronger than most - it should have been enough to kill, but instead the sudden belt of electricity threw him to the floor, his head making a thud as it hit. The knife flew from his left hand and stuck into the wall. Michael Faraday had just ruined his whole day.

I got up, and pulled the knife from the wall. Carstein lay on the floor, dazed from hitting his head so hard.

"My name is Lord Winston," I said quietly, as I knelt over him. I leaned my weight on the blade, forcing it between his ribs. His eyes opened wide in disbelief. Blood flowed freely from the wound.

Lady of Fate we adore you...



## **Empire's No. 1 Bogeyman assassinated**

[Frontier News]

By our Imperial Correspondents, Capitol, Achenar.

The Empire's most wanted man, ironically a clone of their own creation has been found assassinated in a business suite on Fort Donalds orbital city, Achenar. The man, Jay Carstein, has been a thorn in the Empire's side for some time, publicly leading the Vequess Liberation Army.

Yesterday, Carstein was found dead in a hired Sharpstown meeting room, with a single stab wound to the heart. In addition, a makeshift electrocution device was found wired to the door handle. The assassin appears to have foolproofed the electrocution device by making it store a charge, meaning it would be effective even if it was removed from the station's power.

The Empire's new security chief, Prince Burton-Riddick told the News, "We want leaders of terrorist groups to know that they are targets." When asked if he had authorized this assassination, he refused to comment on this specific case, although he did say "other people in the VLA hierarchy should be very afraid".

Police on the station are following up the event, and have appealed for witnesses. The operator of the 2-Meet business complex said that a man in his mid-twenties had rented the suite for four hours. The man's identity is not known, and it appears that he gave false credentials when renting the meeting room. An electrical parts store nearby also reported a man meeting this description buying the parts that the police found in the meeting room.

The search continues, however, if the assassination was officially sanctioned, it is unlikely the Police will do more than go through the motions and (unsurprisingly) find no more evidence

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## **James Winston's death not an accident?**

[Frontier News]

EDINBURGH, Alioth - The relatives of David Kiethson, the captain of the Imperial Courier which collided with asteroid 77-3304 in orbit around Hope, Gateway, are tonight claiming that the crash was no accident; it was an assassination. They claim, through their lawyers, that a booby-trapped part in the ship's control system was added by engineers, and triggered once the commander of the TSCA, James Winston, was aboard the ship.

"It is most regrettable," said AJN-AIB office Pete Jones who headed up the crash investigation, "that Dave Keithson's family has reacted this way. Our final investigation is nearly complete, and we've found absolutely no evidence of foul play". Gateway Police told the News that they plan to work with the AJN-AIB to absolutely rule out foul play. James Winston only boarded the spacecraft to stand in for an instructor pilot who had been injured earlier in the day, when his student misjudged the entry angle to Dublin Citadel's docking port, and collided with the side wall.

"I think it's highly improbable that there's any foul play at work here," a spokesbeing for Gateway Police told the News earlier today.

Meanwhile, the lawyers for the Keithson family remain unconvinced. However, it must be noted that compensation payouts for deaths from assassination are much higher than they are for mere accidents, especially when sloppy maintenance procedures can be implicated in how the assassin got their bogus part into the ship in the first place.

# An investigation

[AJN-AIB]

Mike "Ditch" Mackay read the preliminary accident report. It was something he'd hoped he would never have to do - a fatal accident not only involving the TSCA, but involving a personal friend. The AJN Accident Inquiry Board prelim was as clinical as it ever was. He'd read hundreds in his career. He flicked on the datapad.

**AJN-AIB Identification: GW00FA052. The docket is stored (offline) in the AJN-AIB imaging system.**  
**Accident occurred Tuesday, Jan 15, 3303 near DUBLIN CITADEL, GATEWAY**  
**Spacecraft: Imperial Courier FGA.2**  
**Injuries: 3 Fatal.**

*The spacecraft departed approximately two hours earlier, on a simulated bombing run. The target to be used was asteroid 77-3304, orbiting Hope at an altitude of 47,855km. The combat-rated captain and combat-rated first officer were to be prepared for their six month check by the instructor pilot. The scheduled instructor pilot was not available, owing to an earlier incident involving the mishandling of a manual docking by a student, and the senior IP decided to take the flight approximately an hour before the scheduled departure time.*

*The Dublin Citadel autocontrol system had suffered a temporary failure, and the duty controller had taken on space traffic control in the vicinity as traffic was light. Once the ship had cleared Dublin Citadel, the controller cleared it on an initial course towards the asteroid. The crew told the controller that they would remain on his channel, and would be returning in three hours. After four hours, the controller became concerned that the ship was overdue, and called the Hope SD&D cell. A Quest E.4 in the vicinity discovered traces of the pulverized wreckage embedded in asteroid 77-3304 two hours after the controller reported the spacecraft overdue.*

*The flight data recorder and quick access recorder were destroyed by the severity of the impact. The last few minutes of cockpit voice recording were recovered by AJN-AIB specialists. The cockpit voice recording indicates that the crew were having difficulty with the left main engine thrust control valve. Shortly after repeated attempts to cycle the valve, the crew lost control at low altitude over the asteroid. The crew attempted to blast away from the asteroid by opening the bottom thruster divert valve manually, but the CVR indicates that they had insufficient time to prevent the collision. The ship collided with the asteroid at 77,000 km/h, leaving a fifteen meter deep gouge in the asteroid's surface in the direction of the object's orbital path. Approximately thirty percent of the wreckage, including the flight deck, remained embedded in the asteroid. The remainder of the wreckage has not been found. The remains of the crew were identified by DNA testing, and all toxicology reports indicated negative for substances that would degrade performance. A moderate quantity of Riedquatian Ultra Coffee was discovered in the instructor pilot's remains.*

## CVR TRANSCRIPT

Terms:

IP = Instructor pilot

CPT = Captain

FO = First Officer

CAM = Cockpit Area Microphone

OPWS = Obstacle Proximity Warning System

ATC = Dublin Citadel area traffic control

COM = Other spacecraft over com channel

14:34.03 <unintelligible> off.

14:34.05 IP: that, ah, seems satisfactory. Do the low-alt run, and we'll call it a day. I don't think I'll have a problem recommending you for the check.

14:34.17 CPT: thanks. set up for, ah, the low-run, spread three, fifty metres.

14:35.01 CAM: (sound of weapon armed chime)

14:35.15 COM: Dublin Citadel, victor uniform three zero seven, with you

14:35.17 FO: Speed seventy thou, spread three.

14:35.21 CPT: affirm

14:35.22 ATC: victor uniform three zero seven, good afternoon, fly direct TURNR, reduce speed eight hundred.

14:35.27 CAM: (sound of master caution)

14:35.29 IP: I'll handle it, ah looks like the left thrust valve is sticking again.

14:35.35 CPT: I think it's um a design fault.

14:35.39 IP: imperial ships are, ah, overrated, I don't know what the Alliance sees in them, if it was up to me I'd dump 'em.

14:35.47 ATC: Turner three seven seven, contact Curie approach on channel two seven, good day.

14:35.48 FO: *they seem, er, no less reliable than other designs to me*  
 14:35.51 COM: *three seven seven, curie approach on twenty seven, good day.*  
 14:35.55 IP: *seems to have cycled ok, hopefully it won't stick again, I'll have the engineers look at it when we get back.*  
 14:36.07 CAM: *(sound of rumble)*  
 14:36.09 CPT: *target solution set, altitude fifty.*  
 14:36.14 CAM: *(sound of master caution)*  
 14:36.16 IP: *bugger it*  
 14:36.19 CAM: *(sound of power increase)*  
 14:36.24 ATC: *turner zero two two cleared for docking.*  
 14:36.26 FO: *weapons ready, release point set.*  
 14:36.27 COM: *zero twenty two, cleared to dock.*  
 14:36.33 IP: *I can already see it now, I'll ah be filing maintenance forms in for the rest of the day.*  
 14:36.39 CPT: *maintenance division needs a good talking to if you, um, ask me.*  
 14:36.50 CAM: *(sound of master caution)*  
 14:36.53 FO: *approaching target, can you handle it?*  
 14:36.57 IP: *no problemo*  
 14:37.01 ATC: *three zero seven turn left twenty degrees for sequencing.*  
 14:37.05 COM: *twenty for sequencing, three zero seven.*  
 14:37.08 FO: *final run*  
 14:37.10 CAM: *(sound of master caution)*  
 14:37.12 IP: *it's uh, stuck*  
 14:37.14 CAM: *(sound of master caution)*  
 14:37.15 OPWS: *Obstacle! Whoop whoop! Thrust right!*  
 14:37.19 CAM: *(sound of master caution)*  
 14:37.21 CPT: *I'm uh having real control problems*  
 14:37.24 IP: *working on it*  
 14:37.26 OPWS: *Obstacle! Whoop whoop! Pull up!*  
 14:37.27 IP: *it's ah, overrunning, open bottom thruster valve*  
 14:37.29 CAM: *(loud rumbling noise)*  
 14:37.31 CPT: *I've got it, ah, this is it*  
 14:37.32 IP: *Ah shit*  
 14:37.34 *recording ends*

Ditch flicked the datapad off. It'd be a while before the AIB decided on a probable cause, but it looked like James Winston of all people had ignored the warning signs and decided to continue the exercise anyway. The irony of it all was that it wasn't even James's flight, he was just filling in for an instructor who had himself ignored the warning signs and allowed a slow-developing student to prang his ship into the side of Dublin Citadel. He wondered how long the AJN could keep it quiet that James Winston was dead, not to mention a promising bomber crew. The AJN's policy with accidents was to always tell the relatives first, and they'd been unable to trace James's nephew. If they couldn't find him soon, they'd reveal the accident details to the press. He'd had to tell James's elderly parents about the accident personally, at least that'd be better than hearing it on the news which is what'd happen to his nephew if he didn't turn up soon.

James Winston *dead*, he thought. He still couldn't quite believe it. Not in deep space, not in battle, not in any number of extremely close calls - but running into an asteroid when he could have just called the training flight off as soon as the master caution lit up. "Ah shit" had become Winston's epitaph.

\* \* \*

# **I Am The Real Thing**

[Mack Winston]

It turned out that murdering my old friend, Jay Carstein, might not have been the hardest thing the Empire had in mind for me.

It's been a couple of months since that shocking event (pardon the pun, although it was quite intentional). Prince Burton-Riddick made good on his promise to reward me - sure enough, I became Lord Winston shortly afterwards. However, my real reward - my freedom - was a request that was turned down.

Perhaps Jay Carstein had been right about humans being no more able to control their destiny than dogs. I still had his datapad, and I was reading that book - John Gray's "Straw Dogs". Most of it I didn't really understand, not being of a philosophical bent, but some of the salient points were certainly driving themselves home. Especially after Burton-Riddick told me it was either the Empire, or the VLA would get me. Or Pam Gilmour would get me. I wasn't sure which was worse.

They set me up with a nice home in a middle-class suburb of Duval City, Capitol, Achenar. It was the highest standard of living I'd experienced - a spacious single-story house, with a large back garden, palm trees, high-performance land car in the driveway, respectable neighbours. People often think the Empire is a dreadful place to live, but really, it isn't. The Empire (well, certainly Achenar) has a large and burgeoning middle-class - the Empire being a fundamentally capitalist society. Those who live in it don't care that the only information they get from the outside universe is what the Imperial news-agencies feed them - they've never had anything different, and they are comfortable and well-off. The main gripes about the Empire seem to be limited to people moaning about how much taxpayer's money is spent on the minor nobles - which now included me. I didn't pay a single credit for housing or food, and had a small allowance for discretionary spending.

Soon enough, I met my new neighbours. Since I didn't think it wise to reveal that I was an unlikely assassin, coerced into working for the Empire, I told them I was a stock adviser. To make sure I wouldn't be rumbled, I started playing the stock market. It wasn't as if there was any risk, since the Empire picked up the tab on my living expenses. It was also the only legal gambling in the Empire. To fit the image, I was also becoming the modern-day metrosexual, spending time in front of the mirror, and using Empire expense-cheques to buy only the best clothing. I realised I was making a strange transition when I bleached my short, normally jet black hair and started working out at a local gym.

My neighbours did think I was a little strange though. I didn't have the lilting (and sometimes hard to understand) accent that everyone else in Duval City had. The guidebooks usually say something about Imperial citizens shunning those without the "quirky accent". Well, it's not quite true, but they definitely look at you funny until they get to know you better. Since I generally prefer my own company to anyone else's, I didn't see the neighbours frequently, and so they were always a bit suspicious of me. I wondered what they'd think if they found out I was Phekdan.

The Empire didn't exactly load me with work. They had me do one trivial job since I moved in, and that was to finish off some shmuck who'd killed a slave that belonged to some Lord up on Fort Donald's. I brought the knife with me which I'd used to dispatch Carstein, then found the slave-killer, and walked up behind him and plunged it through his back whilst he was looking for his ship.

The rest of the time, I gambled on the stock market, pushed weights, or if the weather was nice, went paragliding off the nearby Xavier ridge.

But I'm sure you're not reading my journal to listen to the dull details of everyday middle class life in a boring Duval City suburb. A strange twist in fate was almost upon me.

The call came from Prince Burton-Riddick. Another assassination, this time, one Lord Richard Pearce of Duval City. I wondered briefly what I'd done to get up the seniority list so fast to be getting jobs on the dignitary. As in the last job, I got the target's name and some other details like subject number. A quick search brought up the man's address. This time, Prince Burton-Riddick never told me what Lord Pearce had done to gain the Empire's ire. I just assumed whatever it was, it must have been serious. Perhaps he'd killed one of the Emperor's slaves, or even worse, told the Emperor he was a jerk. (Remember what I said about the Empire dying? Well, given the opportunity, anyone who could see the truth would be justified in telling the Emperor that).

I jumped into my land car, and instructed it to take me to the address, over on the north side of town. It was a 20-minute journey over Duval City's high-speed freeway, and into a leafy suburb. It didn't appear to be the kind of place nobles might live - green it might have been, but it was also a bit run-down. The land cars in the driveway

weren't so expensive as at my end of town, the houses were smaller even if they were all situated in large gardens with a generous lawn. My car turned into the worn plasticrete driveway of the house I was visiting.

I stepped out into the warm outside air. The sun was shining brightly, and a faint smell of lilac permeated the air. Birds twittered in the trees. I put on my 300-credit sunglasses, and my long top quality leather jacket. I felt the reassuring weight of the dagger in my pocket, then swept up the driveway like the Grim Reaper himself.

I walked up to the house. I heard a doorbell go off somewhere as I entered the front door's proximity. I leaned against the wall and waited for someone to come.

The front door opened, and a woman, probably in her 40s (although it's difficult to tell with all the anti-ageing treatments that are consumed daily in Duval City) looked at me. I was surprised she opened the door wide open, but then again, I wasn't in Newtown. The police ruled Duval City with a rod of iron, and Trouble Wasn't Tolerated.

"I'm here to see Lord Pearce. I've been sent on Emperor's Orders," I said officially.

The woman blinked, noting my obviously foreign accent. "Are you involved in the investigation?" she asked.

What investigation? I decided this wasn't a good time to ask. "Yes, ma'am, I'm working with the Police."

It was a good bet to guess the Police. Around here, they were the only ones doing any investigating.

"Come in. Can I make you a cup of tea, Mr - ?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Jamison," I replied. It was a pseudonym I had always used when carrying out illegal trading activities.

"Jamison," she finished.

"That would be most good of you," I replied deferentially.

She took me through to the kitchen, then walked out calling, "Ricky!". I was alone for a couple of minutes, and took in the qualities of the house. Although the exterior of the house looked slightly ramshackle, the kitchen was well-equipped, with all the best culinary devices installed. The tiled floor was spotless. Soon there'd be a pool of blood or two - at least no one would have to get it out of the carpets. I looked outside onto an expansive, and slightly wild back yard. A fly buzzed against the window, trying to seek an exit. Thunk, thunk, thunk, it went, slamming against the window. I reached out for the fly, closing my hand over it. I carefully lifted it to the opened pane, and let it fly out. Most people would have squashed the fly, but I squash people, not flies. Some people would call that sociopathic behaviour.

The woman returned.

"He's just coming," she said, pouring the water into the teapot, making sure it was absolutely boiling.

I heard a patter of feet, and a child ran in. It must have been their son. On seeing me, the child clung shyly to his mother's leg, and cowered behind, peeping out at me like small children often do when they see a stranger. I thought to myself that this time the kid had it right.

The woman then said a short, but simple sentence. It was a sentence that almost caused me to stop breathing.

"Ricky, this nice man has come to see you, don't be shy," she wheedled. The boy again peered out nervously from behind the woman's legs.

I had been sent to assassinate a six year old boy!

## **Some are blue, some are green...**

[Mack Winston]

I looked at the infant lord. Inwardly, I groaned. It's not as if Lord Richard Pearce would be hard to kill physically because he was quite clearly a six-year-old child. Psychologically, even sociopathic Phekdans have hangups about killing small children. The weight of the brutal knife in my jacket - the same one that had been used on Carstein to such great effect, felt like a lead weight against my soul.

"I'm sorry, he's been very shy since being orphaned," said the woman, as the child clung to her leg and hid behind her.

My mind was racing. Orphaned? The woman continued. "It was lucky I was looking after Ricky, otherwise he would have died in the attack, too."

I crouched down so I was about level with the kid's head. He nervously peeked out at me. I reached into my jacket pocket, and pulled out a small plastic bag.

"Jelly baby?" I said, offering the open end of the bag towards the kid.

"Mummy always told me not to take sweets from strangers," he said looking up at the woman.

"He's not a stranger, dear, he's Mr Jamison," the woman said, and the child reluctantly appeared from behind her. He took a jelly baby at arm's reach, and ate it. I looked in the bag myself, and was just about to pull one out when I noticed that the kid had dropped a bogey in there. I quickly changed my mind. I then took off my sunglasses, and the kid went back to hiding as soon as I made eye contact with him.

I stood up again.

"He's very shy," I noted, not being able to think of anything else to say. My mind was racing as to what to do next. I could hardly assassinate this defenceless child, but if I didn't I might as well fall on my knife. Decision: The kid lives and I go to the Vequess mines, or the kid dies and...well, I continue to live this comfortable middle class life with the odd bit of bloodshed for good measure.

Chips or daddy?

The woman smiled awkwardly. "He doesn't trust anyone new at the moment."

I couldn't say I blamed him. I wouldn't trust me if I was him. I didn't want to ask the woman what her relationship to the child was, as it'd probably blow my cover. I didn't need to - she revealed it to me.

"I'd only been Lord Pearce's childminder for a couple of weeks when it happened, and I'm the adult he really knows now." She smiled awkwardly.

I had a bit more of a think. "Can you both accompany me to Fort Donald's? There's an official I need to see up there about the case, and it would help greatly if you were both there," I said.

"Anything to help out." She gave another awkward smile.

I replaced my sunglasses, and summoned an autoshuttle to take us up to the station. Now the surprise was wearing off, it was being replaced by fury. Why would they send me to murder a small child? Ah, I have it. Probably one of these Imperial revenge things, a relative had probably got the ire of the Emperor, who then ordered his entire family be killed to teach him a lesson. Except they missed one. I think Lord Burton-Redneck needed a good talking to about this.

The autoshuttle soon landed at the house, and we left. As Duval City dropped away below us, I kept reciting what I was going to tell Burton-Riddick. No, I couldn't do it. I don't murder small children. It's one thing to finish off someone who's killed, connived, defrauded or murdered, but quite something else to kill an innocent child. You stereotype us Phekdans. We don't do that.

The flight up to the station didn't take long, and I gave the kid the rest of the Jelly Babies to keep him quiet. The childminder looked sullenly out of the window at the receding planet for the entire journey.

Prince Burton-Riddick's office is well guarded, but the Clone Agents are quite prepared to let you pass unhindered with the right ident. I had expected them to complain about the woman and the kid, but they didn't say a word. I was

thinking that possibly this was a bit of a flaw in Imperial Security. Trusting me for one was certainly a flawed premise, especially in the mood I was in now.

Prince Burton-Riddick was in the office, no doubt considering his next plan to murder every child under three in Capitol. I stomped up the corridor to his office, and pushed the lone Clone Agent out of the way that seemed to be guarding his door.

"He's busy, he can't see you mmmmmffff," said the Clone Agent, as I pushed him away by his mouth. I think the Clone Agent was just so surprised that anyone would do that to him, a fearless killing machine, that he didn't react until well after I'd stormed into Burton-Riddick's office. I told the childminder to wait outside with the young Lord Pearce.

Burton-Riddick looked up from his desk as I approached. If he was surprised, he did a good job at masking it. He then raised his hand, and waved away the clone agent who was just about to brain me with a metal baton.

"Yes, Mr. Winston, what can I do you for?" he asked.

"My latest assignment," I replied. I considered carefully what I was going to say next.

"I hope it's not too difficult. Has the target shown resistance?"

"No, not exactly," I said puzzled.

"What's the problem?" he asked, a dangerous edge of frustration in his voice.

"Why do you want me to kill him?" I asked.

"None of your business. You're supposed to carry out my orders," he said levelly. His voice strangely lacked menace.

"I'm not doing it."

"Why?" he asked, pronouncing the word in the way of someone who's going to rip the heads of chickens if he didn't get a satisfactory answer. Or more accurately, the heads of Mack Winstons. He pronounced the word "Why" almost as if the "W" and the "H" weren't silent.

"This is why," I growled, jerking the office door open. I went outside, smiled at the childminder, and gently pulled Lord Pearce by the hand. I stood in front of Burton-Riddick's desk, with the child now clinging onto my leg and trying to hide behind me.

"Who is this?" he asked, poleaxed, peering over his desk at the child that was cowering behind me.

Something in my mind triggered the fight-or-flight reflex. I had this instinctive dread that maybe, just maybe someone had made a mistake. Part of my mind tried to command my legs to start running before Burton-Riddick got over his surprise. The other part of me noted the Clone Agent who was standing poised for action.

"Um," I replied, looking down at the Lord, "this is Lord Richard Pearce".

They say the colour 'puce' is difficult to describe, but as soon as you see it, you'll know what it is. It's the colour that Prince Burton-Riddick's face turned at that moment. I don't think I've ever seen someone going from confused but calm to incandescent rage in such a short timespan.

"You blithering IDIOT Winston!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. The child began to cry. "It's the KILLER of Lord Pearce I wanted you to eliminate! Why over the body of the Emperor did you think we wanted to eliminate a six-year-old?" he ranted.

I stood there in silence, well, apart from the sobbing that came from below.

"Well?" he demanded at the top of his lungs.

"I, er - well, thought that, you know," I stammered.

"What? I know what?" he yelled.

"Umm, well," I ground to a halt.

Prince Burton-Riddick picked up a paperweight from his desk and flung it at me. Quickly, I shielded my head with my hands and ducked, but it was too late and it glanced off the top of my head and hit the back wall of the office with a loud thud.

"They said I was crazy to hire a Phekdan!" he yelled. "Oh no, I told them they were wrong, that you had just eliminated a scourge of the Empire and you should be rewarded, and THIS is how you pay me back?" he screamed at the top of his lungs. I didn't know what to say.

"Take him out," he said a bit more quietly. I stood still, expecting the Clone Agent to do just that, but Burton-Riddick was actually addressing me.

"Well, go on!" he shrieked, pointing at the child angrily with his finger.

I looked down at the sobbing child, and gently walked him out. The child turned to me, full of innocence as I let his minder have him back. "Have you been naughty?" he asked between sobs.

"Er, I may have been, yes".

Suddenly, the clone agent dragged me back into the room and slammed the door. Burton Riddick was now looking at his desk and trying to compose himself.

"Can't you read?" he hissed at me. "The message quite clearly stated the KILLER of Lord Pearce's family."

"I don't think so," I replied defensively. "Look," I said, flipping open my comm to the page of messages. "Oh," I said, all of a sudden feeling very hot, "you appear to be right," I admitted sheepishly. How did I miss that detail?

Burton-Riddick looked at the ceiling, as if trying to implore something up there to give him strength.

"Now Winston, since you got rid of Carstein for us, I'm going to give you another chance. Fuck up again like this and we will be keeping you alive in the slave mines for a long time," he hissed, his voice full of menace.

"Thank you Sir", I replied.

"It's your Highness. Now get lost before I change my mind!" he yelled.

I made an about turn.

"And find the killer in the next ten days or you're dead!" he shouted after me.



## **Oh.. So Quiet**

[Mack Winston]

It had been so quiet. Of course, I might have known all this quietness was going to come to a bone-jarring end.

No sign of Mosser(s). No sign of the VLA. Just the gentle autumn sunshine in Duval City.

Frankly, life in the employ of the Empire had just begun to get a little bit dull. I hadn't had a call from Burton-Riddick in months, and even if they were still paying me, frankly it sucked. And I couldn't leave. The Empire wouldn't let me. I was stuck in, well, a luxury prison.

It was therefore a bit of a surprise when I got woken up by my comm making an irritating noise. Just before

"What do you mean, 'you'?"

"I mean the person standing at the other side of my table, currently facing me"

"I don't understand!"

Burton-Riddick seemed to be getting exasperated. "How difficult is it to understand. You are their ransom demand. They want you. Yuh. Ohh. Uhh."

"No, I know that you mean me, but why me?"

"You killed Carstein. They will destroy another ITS liner, they haven't specified which - and there's more than 100 currently in transit within the Empire - unless we hand you over to them."

"Oh. So what are you going to do? You can hardly negotiate with terrorists."

"Oh yes we can. We're going to turn you over to them."

"What!?" I shrieked.

Suddenly, I was aware of several armed guards - clone agents - I hadn't noticed earlier. All watching me.

"It's too late to run Winston. You're on your own this time, and your morbid fascination with nukes might come in handy because you might just get to see a real one," he replied with a bitter smile.

"You bastard!" I shouted back, as the clone agents dragged me away.

## Square rooms on spaceships

[Mack Winston]

My uncle used to go on about how the space travel bit of space travel was boring. I never agreed; there was the majesty of the galaxy to see - I whiled away hours in the ship's small observatory looking at distant stars, thinking about how one day I might get to explore that place on the map marked 'Unexplored! Enter at your own risk!'

But this space journey was boring. Mind-numbingly boring.

The clone agents had bundled me off into a ship, and locked me in a small, windowless white-walled room. I felt the ship depart the station, and I was left hungry and cold (what was it with the clone agents and air con on max?) with nothing but a nauga-hide covered mattress against one wall. It didn't help I was dressed for a nice warm day on Capitol. I needed a ski-jacket to stay warm with the way the Clone Agents liked it.

They hadn't given me any food either. In short, life had quickly gone from boring and comfortable to boring and extremely uncomfortable with unknown terrors lurking at the other end of the hours of boredom.

I pulled the mattress out and lay on it, and tried to at least drift off to sleep to pass the hours. The cold made sure I didn't. After what may have been minutes or hours - I'll never know for sure, a clone agent burst in, with food. Well, what passed as food anyway.

"You've thrown me in this room, you could have at least rustled up some real food," I grumbled as the agent put down the tray. The agent paused to speak.

"Don't even say it!" I snapped. The clone agent was surprisingly speechless. After a while over which it must have been trying to figure out whether it should snap my puny body in two, it finally spoke.

"Say what?" with puzzlement.

"That thing about excess paperwork. It gets old real fast, y'know." I scowled. The clone agent just looked at me with that damn neutral look they always have, even after bits of their bodies have been blown off.

It turned on its heel and left. So much for a conversation.

I was so hungry I didn't particularly care that the food tasted like gash. I counted three meals before the ship seemed to shudder to a halt, so I was probably not in that awful room for more than 24 hours or so, even if it felt like a lifetime. That meant we probably never even left Achenar. I felt a twinge of nervousness and fear make its way through my body - I didn't know what to expect next. I didn't have long to wait.

Two clone agents burst in, grabbed me by the arms and dragged me to the airlock. They opened the door and threw me through - to my relief into another spacecraft.

"Augh. I don't believe it," I muttered as I looked up from my sprawled position on the floor. I might have known that SHE was involved...

"Mack Winston," said Pam Gilmour, glaring down at me, "I'm going to make you regret running away from me for the rest of your - " she paused for effect - "*short life!*" she bawled.

"Oh brother," I sighed with resignation, as two of her hired goons grabbed me roughly by the shoulders.

# The Nightmare Strikes Back

[Mack Winston]

I struggled to my feet, not quite believing who I was seeing. Pam Gilmour, my erstwhile "aunt", who I had possibly offended just once too often. I suppose stealing spaceships often offends. Well, and all the other things too.

"What...what are you doing here?" I asked, weakly.

"You're a complete fucktard, aren't you?" she replied.

I felt a shiver of fear run up me. She stood in front of me. Behind me, a closed airlock. Ahead, the not inconsiderable bulk of Pam Gilmour, who moved like a ship under full sail. She seemed to be really annoyed this time. "Er," I responded.

"I am going to make you regret ever being born, Mack Winston," she said nastily, "and this time you're not going to get away."

"But...but..." I stammered, "since when were you involved with the VLA?" I demanded, as two heavily armed VLA members strolled up to Gilmour.

"I've been a member for twenty years, you little shit!" - and without warning, she punched me in the side of the head. I thumped into the wall, then fell down nursing what I suspected would be quite a nasty bruise by morning. "Take him away," she barked at the guards.

I just resigned myself to my fate as the guard applied the Quick-Lok. My last memory was of being dragged down the corridor, my mind rapidly fading.

When I came around, with the familiar dry feeling that seems to be a hallmark of recovering from a Quick-Lok, I wasn't entirely sure I had. I was in total darkness, lying on a smooth floor. I shuffled along it, trying to find the edge of the room, and hopefully a light switch. I didn't need to. The lights flickered on, and the door opened.

Gilmour strode in, and dragged me to my feet. She then bodily threw me into a chair, and locked my arms and feet to it. Silently, she made a gesture to someone outside my field of vision.

"You'll be glad to know that the first thing we're going to talk about is your friend Jay Carstein," she said sweetly. Just like she used to talk to me when I was still living at home. "But let's get some ground rules established. OK, Cecil, do your stuff."

I wondered just how threatening someone called Cecil could be. When the man she'd called walked in, he didn't look that much of a threat. He was a tall skinny man, and he was carrying a bucket in one hand, and something that looked like a schitzu stuck on the end of a metre long pole in the other. He walked up to me and upended the bucket.

It was water.

Very cold water.

It tasted very slightly salty too. He made sure I was thoroughly soaked. I was still wearing the thin short-sleeved shirt I put on before leaving Capitol. It clung to me, and made me feel colder than I already was. I was hungry, afraid and cranky. At times like this, my natural defence is to let my mouth run away with me. "What the fuck are you doing?" I demanded wetly.

"Cecil, demonstrate," Pam replied with a mirthless smile.

Cecil flicked a switch on the pole. He then dipped the "schitzu" into the remaining water in the bucket. He lightly touched my chest with the thing.

Suddenly, I was gripped with intense pain combined with severe muscular spasms as the electricity coursed through me. "AAAaaaaarrrrrgghhh!" I exclaimed. "That fucking hurt!"

"Good. Now if you don't co-operate you'll get that again with a higher voltage. Oh, and don't swear, or you know what'll happen. Kind of poetic justice after what you did to Jay, eh?"

"You ba..." - the hairy thing on the stick was pointed towards me - "cruel person", I finished. Cecil lowered the stick.

"I can't believe you're so ignorant that you didn't even know of my VLA membership. Quite handy when the VLA leadership were looking to put Carstein's killer's head on a spike?"

I didn't bother replying.

"Well, so you've got an artificial arm, it's going to be difficult obtaining an artificial head," she taunted.

I remained resolute in my silence.

"Well?"

I tried to think of something that wouldn't get me the treatment with the schitzu on a stick. Obviously giving no reply wasn't going to work.

"Cecil," said Pam.

"AaaaaaarrRRRRGGGHHHHHHH!" I replied, as he gave me a good long poke on my left (quite natural human) arm.

"Will you stop f... just stop doing that!" I yelled.

"Well answer me, you insolent twit!" Gilmour replied.

"You're going to torture me and kill me anyway. I don't see why I should tell you anything," I said, mustering my bravado. The bravado didn't last. Gilmour made a hand signal.

"AAAAAaaaaaaaarrgghghhhhh!" I shouted again, as he gave my arm the treatment. Not satisfied with that, he then attacked my left shin. "GGggnnnngngnggggHHHHHH!" I screamed, as I felt the AC current tear through me. I immediately regretted my decision of a few days previous to wear shorts. Not that it'd have mattered since I was soaking wet with salty water anyway.

"Cecil is quite skilled at getting the current just right to cause the maximum pain without actually stopping your heart," Pam said conversationally, "so I'd cooperate if I were you."

"OK, OK!" I shouted "Stop fucking hurting me and I'll tell you!" She made a hand signal. This time Cecil shocked me for what seemed like fifteen minutes. It was probably more like five seconds, but it seemed to go on and on as he attacked different parts of my body with his torture stick. My throat was already getting dry from the amount of screaming in agony I had done.

"I said don't swear, didn't I?" she reminded me hotly.

I sat there, panting. Although I was sweating, I felt deathly cold and was shivering uncontrollably.

"I wasn't given a choice," I whimpered.

"A choice about what?"

"About Carstein. They were going to send me to the Vequess slave mines," I said weakly.

"In which case you were given a choice. If you had any principles, you would have gone to the Vequess slave mines. Jay Carstein could have quite probably saved you, too. You're not very intelligent, are you? You certainly don't take after your uncle," she growled.

I sighed inwardly. She had a point of course, and I hadn't thought of that at the time - but would she have thought of it, sitting in front of Burton-Riddick, being threatened with a (rather short) lifetime in the slave mines? She probably wouldn't. With Cecil and his stick next to me, I decided it wouldn't be a good idea to press the point. I gave Cecil a long, hard look. I was going to remember that face for when it came time for revenge. Oh, my fanciful mind! Revenge seemed about as possible as me becoming Emperor.

"So you had no choice, huh," she spat with contempt. "Why did you run away from me?"

"Wouldn't you want to get away if you were locked in a small room being fed food you didn't like?" I asked.

Cecil lifted his stick.

"No!" I yelled. "I didn't run away anyway, a clone agent came for me, it broke into the cabin you'd locked me in."

"Did he now. So that's why the door was almost wrenched off its hinges from the inside?"

"The clone opened the door as I gave it a good kick. I had hoped it was you on the other side," I said. "But it was the clone agent and I broke its nose with the door."

Pam looked curious at that. "So what did it do?"

"Shot me. I came around with a simulation of the Vequess slave mines being beamed into my head."

Pam sighed. Perhaps she was expecting something more of the story.

"My options weren't exactly good - run from the Empire and have both you and them hunting me down, you and your corrective service practitioner to mould me into a nice Imperial citizen." Suddenly the thought struck me. Why would she want to use a CSP to turn me into a model Imperial citizen the hard way if she was a VLA member?

"Why would I do that?" she asked, surprised.

"It was described as a process like breaking a horse," I added. "You wanted to break me. They showed me video."

"Faked."

"It's still in my personal datapad, if you can find it."

"Look, I'm a member of the VLA. Why would I have anything to do with an Imperial CSP?" she hissed.

"Perhaps you are a double-agent," I said. She walked into that one. Unfortunately, it meant I walked into Cecil's schitzu on a stick again. "Aaaaaarrggghhhh!" I explained.

"Leave him," she said softly to Cecil. "I think that's enough for the day. Let's find his personal datapad, shall we? I'm sure that given a little bit of electrical persuasion, Mack will unlock it for us," she sneered.

To my relief, she unlocked me. I tried to stand up, but suddenly felt weak, and slid to the floor. As soon as Pam and her pet torturer left, the lights went out, plunging me into my own private hell.

## **Believing Berihn to be Bombed**

[Mack Winston, Jannah Berihn]

"They got you too, huh?" Asked a all too familiar voice. I wasn't quite sure as to why the voice sounded familiar, but it did ... and that wasn't good news.

"I can't see - who's there?" I asked.

"I'm down here, shitwits; sitting on the floor." Came back a reply. "Up until eighteen months ago I used to be numero uno in the Diso System ..."

"Berihn?" I asked.

"One and the same. Heard about my brother ... heard about your part in it all." There was a pause, a long terrible pause. "Want to give me a good reason for not killing you?" She said.

I heard a sound of a footstep - evidently she was still wearing her shoes, and they gave me a sound to try and converge on! I swung the chair again, but it swooshed through thin air. Suddenly, something heavy connected with my back. "Oohyah!" I yelled, as the force propelled me into a wall. I collapsed, dazed. Self preservation and adrenaline forced me to relocate the chair. I held it up as a shield, fortunately just in time. Something heavy thudded into the chair nearly knocking it out of my hands.

I started violently swinging the chair again, and connected with something hard - presumably Berihn's selected weapon - at least a couple of times. Exhaustion was fast setting in. Once or twice, I felt the chair connect with something softer, followed by a shriek from Berihn. I swung the chair low, and I must have swept her legs from under her. I heard her fall to the ground. She roared with fury, and I raised the chair over the location where I thought she most probably was. I was going to bust her skull in if necessary.

Suddenly, the door to the room flew open, and light poured in. A female figure - a slim female figure, so not Pam Gilmour - was silhouetted in the light.

I looked down, and with satisfaction, noted that I was accurately poised to strike. But I paused. Berihn wasn't the striding, rough beauty she once was. She looked like she'd been thrown in a ditch then pulled through a hedge backwards three times. Her clothes were torn. She had some obvious fresh wounds which I'd inflicted - none serious. It was obvious the VLA had treated her pretty roughly.

"I suppose you want to be rescued," said the figure in the doorway. Her voice seemed awfully familiar.

"Yes," snarled Berihn.

"Not you," I snarled. "Yes, if you'd be so kind," I added.

"Well hurry up, we have very little time," hissed the woman.

I stepped over Berihn's prone body, picked up my shoes from where I'd left them and padded over to the door.

"Maria Hesketh-Duval?" I asked, still not believing who was my supposed rescuer...



[Mack Winston]

"Well recognised," she said dismissively, "Now come on!"

"How...what...?" I hissed, still not believing that this fragile, hoity toity Princess had seemingly come to my rescue. I had a nasty feeling I wasn't being rescued at all.

"What kind of ship is it?"

"Long range cruiser. Lots of plasma turrets, guards, the works"

"How did you get in?"

As we rounded a corner, two men - absolutely identical, obviously clones - appeared. They weren't Imperial Clone Agents. They were both handsome, with a full head of hair, piercing blue eyes and would fit well in the role of dreamware mega-star.

"Your highness, we need to be leaving, I think we may have been discovered," one of them said.

"You heard what the man said," Maria said, as she turned on her heel. I jogged behind them trying to be as quiet as possible and not collapse from exhaustion.

"How far is your ship?" I gasped, between breaths.

"About a hundred metres from here," Maria quietly replied. "Come on, fast and quiet!"

"I've just been electrocuted a dozen times and beaten up. I'm a bit, you know, knackered?" I said in a sarcastic tone.

"Wait!" whispered one of the clones. I was glad for the rest. He cautiously peered around a corner. "Get back, quick!" he hissed. The other clone almost knocked me over in an attempt to back away from whatever it was that had caused the first clone to stop us. I felt a rough hand grab me by the shoulder and drag me into a small bay beside the corridor. We all crammed in there, trying to be as silent as possible.

Two men paced past our position, along the corridor that ran perpendicular to the one we were just in. They looked alert, and like the sort of people who were trying to find escapees. I noted they were both armed. With horror, I saw

"My, you're a mess," she said over the rumble of the engines. I felt the ship lurch and the familiar feeling of the start of a witch space jump. I looked down at myself, noting my white shirt wasn't white any more - rather it was filthy with some blood splatter for added effect, complete

I was woken suddenly hours later - the curtain quickly drawn aside, and the bright room lights shining into my face. I groggily rubbed my eyes. Maria was there.

"Come on, quickly, let's go"

"What? Where? Have we been attacked?" I said, struggling for my feet.

"No. There's not much time to explain now. I'm defecting. We've got to go before the twins get back. I managed to convince them that it was safe to leave me alone for the next ten minutes, and go off and get a cup of Riedquation Ultra before they re-entered Imperial territory. I'll explain when we've put a good few light years between them and us."

I scrambled off the bunk. Oh well, it looked like a whole load of new trouble.

"Wait, why are you taking me?" I asked.

The answer she gave was totally unexpected and it blew my mind.

"I... I...", she started, and stopped. She seemed to be fighting some internal struggle. "I listened to what you said."

"You did what?"

"About the Empire. All that stuff you told me."

I'd never actually been listened to before. It was a new experience.

"So I needed to find you, but it was rather difficult when you were in the service of Burton-Riddick. When they sold you out, that was the last straw. Come on, let's get out of here!"

Groggily, I followed her. I could have done with a large mug of Riedquation Ultra myself. I was horrified when I'd found out it was actually illegal in most of the Empire. But things were looking up. I was no longer stuck in the Empire, and someone had actually listened to me!

We left the spaceport area, and arrived in the main atrium of the station we were in. It looked familiar.

"Beta Hydri?" I asked.

"Yes".

"I might have guessed."

We wandered aimlessly around the main precinct for a few minutes.

"No sign of your goons," I remarked.

"They will probably be on their way back to the ship. I was rather hoping to find some way of getting away from here," she said, biting her lower lip.

"Have you ever run away"

"Defected", she said with a cough

"- Defected," I corrected, "before?"

"No."

"I have some experience in running away," I explained.

"We could get a spaceliner," she said.

"A spectacularly bad idea. They'll track you as soon as you pay for the ticket."

"What do you suggest? Steal a ship?"

"No, that'll just gain us attention. Hitch-hike."

"Hitch hike?" she said indignantly.

"Got any better suggestions?" I asked gently.

"Erm. No. Well, you're the expert," she said.

We went back to the docks, and lurked in a dark corner. I carefully watched the comings and goings to find a moment where we could make our move. Maria Hesketh-Duval looked at me dubiously.

"Aren't we supposed to hang around and stick our thumbs out or something?"

"Yes, that's what we're supposed to do, but the person who's gonna pick us up isn't supposed to know he has hitch

"Beggars can't be choosers," I said flippantly. "The ship only needs to stay together one hop, then we can leave."

Somehow that didn't seem to make Maria look any more comfortable. The thumpings from somewhere down below didn't seem to be helping her state of mind.

There was a jolt. "Feels like we're off," I observed. We could feel some mild jolts and accelerations as the dock machinery moved the ship out of the berth and into the elevator.

Suddenly, there was a loud hissing noise.

"Mack, they're depressurizing the engine room!" Maria shrieked. Indeed, it seemed that way. Briefly, I puzzled over this, then I came to my senses. Why? Who cares!

"Oh shit, let's get out of here"

I could already feel my ears popping as the pressure began to fall. That dubious piece of kit with the pipework had started whirring. We ran to the engine room door - a pressure door, but not an airlock.

"I can't open it!" Maria shouted, terrified.

We both grabbed it and pushed. I realised it was fruitless. The door opened outwards, and the pressure of the air on the other side would keep it shut. Already, the pressure on the other side, spread out over the whole surface of the door had made it impossible for any human to open...

## Out of Breath

[Mack Winston]

Princess Maria Hesketh-Duval looked on in horror as I vainly tugged at the door. I could feel the cold grip of panic beginning to set in. "How long have we got?" shrieked the Imperial princess, starting to lose control.

The air continued to hiss out of the engine room. I gave up tugging on the door, and slumped to the floor. "Two minutes, maybe three?" I guessed. I had begun to shake in fear. This was worse than anything - worse than facing Carstein, worse than facing the Feds, worse than that unfortunate accident with my arm. At least then there had been hope. Now there was...none?

"Quick, follow me!" I shouted. I could barely control my legs as I dashed down the metalwork towards the engine housing itself. A flash of inspiration, hopefully in the nick of time.

"What?" she asked. "Make it stop!" she begged.

"I hope this works!" I shouted, my voice shaking with fear as finally I got to the engine housing. Opening a control panel access hatch, I grabbed the main safety cut-out and pulled. The cut-out went across with a loud, metallic thunk.

The engine, being used to manoeuvre the ship into position for the Witch space jump stopped making any noise.

Our immediate position didn't seem to have improved much.

"Worth a try," I said, "if the engine's stopped, Captain Creeps up there will have to equalize pressure so he can go and fix the engine."

With enormous relief, I realised the exhauster had stopped running, and the pressure was no longer falling. "Come on, we've got to hide somewhere, then get out of here before he fixes the engine," I explained.

"Then what?"

"We make it up as we go along."

I thought about what kind of commander we were dealing with. Who the hell depressurizes the engine room? You might need to get in there at a moment's notice, without waiting for the place to fill back up with air. That's the reason why all engine rooms had life support! I eyed up the dubious piece of equipment we'd spotted earlier. Obviously, he was using it to divert the engine room's life support elsewhere. Why?

I heard the door open. I pulled Maria in close to me, feeling the warmth of her body against me as we huddled under some pipework, trying not to be seen. Once Captain Creeps had gone by to check what was wrong with his prime mover, I quietly extracted myself, and pulled Maria after me. We slipped through the open engine room door and into the main living quarters of the Asp. I looked around desperately for somewhere to hide away. The need became urgent as I heard the ship's owner return from his foray into the engine room.

I dived into the sleeping quarters, Maria following close, and rolled underneath one of the bunks. Maria disappeared under the other. We listened to the door close, then we could hear two men's voices, discussing the 'engine problem'.

"Dunno, it'd just tripped," said the first voice, with a thick Cassiopeian drawl.

"Odd, when was it last serviced?" asked a voice that sounded like it belonged to a youth.

"Two months ago. It should be good. . ."

The voices drifted off, and we heard a door close. "We can't stay here!" I explained. "We'll be found as soon as one of them goes to get some sleep."

"Where else can we go?"

I squeezed out from under the bunk. "No idea. I have a nasty feeling that we may have to do violence"

"What?" Maria almost shouted. I motioned to her to be a bit quieter.

"Well, give 'em both a whack on the head, tie 'em up then take their ship."

"But that's theft!"

"Well, not technically"

"What would you call it?"

"Relieving the captain of his command"

"Relieving...? I don't believe I'm doing this!"

"It was your idea to run away! It's not as if we're going to keep the ship, we'll just go to the next system, get off, thank the commander and be on our way"

I left the sleeping quarters, Maria following and looking disturbed about what she was about to have to take part in. I don't think she was quite prepared for life as a spacebound vagrant. I wasn't particularly enjoying it myself either. I looked around for something heavy and blunt, then heard a door open and voices again.

"Quick!" I hissed, grabbing Maria. I jumped down a hatch, not knowing where it would lead, and closed it up after myself. Floating down the gravity well, we quickly came to ... to...

The cargo bay.

It had full life support. It suddenly made sense what was going on in the engine room. Captain Creeps was too tightfisted to pay for proper cargo bay life support, and had jerry-rigged the engine room life support to the cargo bay. The cargo bay had a vaguely flatulent component, and as soon as I found the light switch, I discovered why.

The cargo bay was filled with farm animals.

We both stood on the decking, looking at a number of startled sheep, which had backed as far as they could into their pen. There must have been at least a hundred of them, climbing over each other and bleating. Another set of pens contained cattle, who appeared to be taking little notice of us. On the other side, a large, well-bred horse eyed us with brief interest, before going back to the contents of its trough. A bull with vicious looking horns dared us to make its day. We both stood in stunned amazement.

The horse snorted, breaking the spell.

The sound of the hatch opening above us added urgency to the situation. I scrambled into the horse's pen, and hid in the straw at the back, pulling myself in to the wall. I desperately looked around, trying to see where Maria had gone. She had chosen a pen with five dairy cows. I could just see her face peeking out from a large mound of animal bedding.

"Hey Joe, the light's on in here!"

"That stupid horse must have tried to chew the switch! I said it was a bad idea to put him in that pen!" came the gruff Cassiopeian voice, obviously belonging to Joe.

I could see the other man's feet moving across the deck. I couldn't tell what he was doing, I just hoped he was checking the food and water supplies. Then something happened which would have made me laugh out loud had the situation not been so serious.

Maria had elected to hide in the straw behind the cows. One of them seemed to deliberately manoeuvre its back end right over her position, then lift its tail. I saw the horror on Maria's face as she realised what was about to happen, and was unable to move in case she revealed her position . . .

The wet cow turd quickly covered her face. I could see her trying desperately not to gag and at the same time keep the liquid stream off her. She wasn't entirely successful. Fortunately, just as she threw up, the sheep started making a commotion, masking the noise. However, my mirth was short lived as the horse stepped backwards and kicked me, just where Berihn had smashed a chair over me scant hours earlier . . .

I waited for the man to leave.

"Aaargh!" I shouted, grasping my side and shaking myself free from the straw.

I heard some bitter cursing come from the cow pens. I didn't know Imperial princesses kept that kind of vocabulary. Maria stood up, and vainly scraped the cow turd off her head and tried to get it out of her hair.

"Don't laugh!" Maria warned viciously.

I sighed, feeling a bit drained.

"This is just the start of it," I said to Maria gently. I clambered over the side of the horse's pen, then sat against the far wall, absent-mindedly picking a scab halfway up my shin.

"What do you mean?"

"The reality is this. We'll have half the fucking galaxy after us now. The VLA will be after me. The Empire will be after the both of us. I'm sure the Fed police wouldn't mind joining in the chase. We can't spend any money, it'll be tracked to our idents."

"So what are you saying?"

"Tell me, did you think this through at all?"

"No, it was something I had to do," she replied.

"Why?"

There it was again! She looked at me, and I could see some internal struggle going on. She relaxed a bit. I tried vainly to figure it out. "The Empire's done. I looked with my own eyes. You wouldn't believe how close your little talk was to the truth."

In reality, it had all been a guess, and I thought I'd been wrong all the time when I'd actually settled in Duval City in a life as a paid contractor for the Empire. Well, not that they'd given me much of an option.

"Then they shouldn't have done what they did to you. You got rid of a very inconvenient enemy of theirs, and they sold you out."

I winced as I realised the scab was a bit too fresh to be picked, and a spot of blood started oozing out, dripping onto my sock. I was already covered in blood stains. Another would hardly be noticed. "I need a warm bath and a holiday," I lamented.

Maria said nothing, but it was obvious that she wanted a warm bath more than anyone in the universe right now. It probably wasn't a normal Imperial experience to have a cow crap on your head whilst hiding from the ship's crew.

"Tell you what, we'll have a couple of days before our pursuers catch up. How about we go to Phekda?"

"Oh. Great idea," she said sardonically.

"It's in the Alliance now," I reminded her, "and I've got family there. Haven't seen them in years, but we might just be able to get that warm bath if nothing else"

We fell silent for a while.

"You know, if someone had told me two days ago that I'd be a stowaway in a livestock ship, with a filth-encrusted Phekdan and covered in cow sh...dung," she corrected, seemingly only now remembering her Imperial manners - "I would have...oh, I don't know. But, but " - she trailed off.

"But what?"

She gave me that look of internal struggle. Again! "But. Oh, I don't know. Come on, let's take this ship over if we're going to do a proper job"



## Just Vicious

[Mack Winston]

"You didn't need to keep hitting him," I complained, as we dragged the unconscious bodies to the back of the cabin.

"I had to make sure he was out," Maria Hesketh-Duval said, brushing an errant lock of hair from her face.

The crew of the ship turned out to be a fat middle-aged man, and a pimply-faced youth who looked as if he'd made the unfortunate mistake of choosing this as his first job.

"Give me a hand with this guy," I gasped, getting a bit out of breath.

Grunting, Maria helped me drag the fat man into the cabin. We leaned up against the wall, panting and sweating from the effort. Making sure both crew members were securely tied, we locked them in their cabin. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?" I asked as we went up to the ship's small "bridge".

"No. It was awful," she said unconvincingly.

I shook my head, and entered the darkened bridge. The Asp's bridge was small, but it felt much more spacious once we'd settled in and turned on all the displays, giving us an all-round view of our surroundings. I checked the astogation console. "Could be worse," I muttered, noting we were in Eta Cassiopeia.

"Eta cass.. You don't sound very happy?" Maria mumbled.

"Well, at least it's in the right direction. The only problem is I'm sort of wanted here."

"By who?"

"The Police, who else?"

Maria sighed. I think she asked that hoping the answer would be something else.

"So not a straightforward refuel and go?"

"Depends whether they check who's on board, really. Trust Captain Creeps not to have fuel scoops."

I quickly flicked through the inventory. There was enough fuel to slow us down for the station, but not much more on top of that. Eta Cassiopeia couldn't have been these guys final destination unless they had breeding stock on board. Vague crusty streaks of cow shit in Maria's hair was a reminder of the cargo we had been forced to lurk with for far too long. Maria seemed to read my mind.

"I'm going to get some of this vile stuff out of my hair," she said, leaving before I could make further comment.

I relaxed. At least the system was safe, and the Empire almost certainly didn't know where we had gone. It was certain they were busy looking. I began to realise how exhausted I was, too. Getting up from the command seat, I rooted around in the small convenience locker at the back of the bridge.

Well, the crew at least had some taste. A packet of Drew's Riedquatian Ultra Coffee, some real cream and a couple of small packets of sugar were neatly stacked within the locker, along with a couple of mugs. "Fat and forty and feeling naughty!" was printed on one of them, in fake handwriting. I looked at it in slight wonder. I started to open the packet....

"Bing"

A sound from the scanner. I turned around. Probably just a trader overtaking us.

"Bing. Bingbingbing"

Five traders?

"Bing"

They looked like they were shaped horribly like Vipers. Forgetting my coffee for a moment, I vaulted into the command seat and started urgently querying the targets on the scanner.

System vessel. Police. Shit. A nice little arrow formation of the little buggers.

There was nothing for it. Stay calm. Act as if everything is normal. They were probably just a routine patrol. I didn't dare touch the controls just in case I drew attention to the ship.

Yes, a routine patrol, I kept telling myself. The more rational side of my mind kept screaming at the less rational side, trying to tell it that it was living in denial, those ships were definitely converging on us. The gap between our stolen ship and the police was closing. I felt a nasty chill as it became obvious they had matched my speed. The pointy end of the lead ship filled the rear view.

Then the inevitable next step.

"Incoming message."

"Yes?" I answered.

The screen filled with the visage of a young and keen police officer. He smiled but not with mirth. "I'm Officer Henley. The reason why we stopped you is that we have reason to believe you are carrying contraband. Do you agree to a search?"

"Y--e--s," I stammered.

Contraband? What the...?

"Prepare to be boarded by your lower airlock," the officer replied. His face flicked off and was replaced by the emptiness of space. Maria chose that moment to wander back, smelling of shampoo.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"The cops, we're being boarded," I said, jumping out of my seat and heading towards the airlock. Maria followed, tugging at my sleeve.

"Why?"

"He was going on about some sort of contraband. Who knows what Captain Creeps has secreted away on this old crate!" I said, getting a bit agitated...

## Another "Fine" Mess

[Mack Winston]

Maria and I arrived at the airlock just in time to greet the incoming police officers. Maria looked mortified.

"You could have at least got changed whilst I got cleaned up," she muttered, "you're not going to exactly make a great impression"

To be honest, I was too busy trying to get a coffee fix. I had to sheepishly agree. I was still wearing what I was when I left home in Duval City. Except now there was dried blood, a bit of muck here and there, and a nice tear in my shirt.

"Sorry," I said.

The airlock opened. The two policemen - both quite young - stepped through. The first gave me a long, appraising look.

"Good morning, Mr Turner," he said and paused. He looked at his datapad. "Well, our first problem is obviously you're neither Mr Turner or Smith," he said, turning to Maria. I hoped that Princess Maria Hengist-Duval wasn't a photo that was plastered all over the Fed boards in this system. Maria went to speak, but I quickly cut her off. I had a bit more experience of being on the wrong side of the law.

"We just bought the ship," I said, sheepishly. The

"Marriage."

"That's it. Dangerous cult."

The officer shook his head. "Please show me your cargo bay"

We walked back into the main intersection of the ship, and I opened the door that lead down into the bowels of the ship and into the cargo bay. Warm, flatulent air drifted out. I lead the officers down into the bay. The sheep ran around frantically. The cows laid more patties, and the horse looked on with faint interest. The officers, however, looked a bit puzzled. The first one looked at his datapad.

"Now I could give you a fine on the spot for not only trafficking live animals in Eta Cassiopeia, and I could also fine you for not carrying valid idents for all crew members, and additionally fine you for not having the particulars of this ship transferred into your name. However, since this is apparently your first offence, I will just caution you. I will also tell you we will be watching this ship very carefully. If we see anything other than fuel being loaded onto the ship, you will be liable for all fines."

"Yes officer. Thank you officer".

The police seemed to have no other business with us, but I could tell that they were completely thrown by meeting us. They were after something else. They obviously weren't going to come straight out and tell us that they were expecting someone else and more importantly - expecting to find something else. But having had many brushes with the law, I knew when a police officer was puzzled. And I knew you didn't send six Vipers out to do someone for smuggling animals - especially a lone ship.

The officers left us, and I watched as they disconnected their docking tube and departed. I tramped back up to the bridge and instructed the autopilot to continue. Maria finally broke the silence.

"If that'd been in the Empire, we'd have both been in the slave mines by now," she remarked.

"Normally, the Fed police will bang you up for all that. I smell a rat."

"What, they'll do something more when we get in?"

"No, they were looking for something else. Specifically, something that Captain Creeps and his pimply faced friend were smuggling. The animals were just a smokescreen."

"What?"

"Buggered if I know. We can always ask the crew. After all it won't be that hard to remove the duct tape over their mouths," I remarked casually.

We got up and went to the crew quarters. Both the fat middle aged man and his pimply faced assistant were conscious. I could see fury in the fat man's eyes. I grabbed the tape that was over his mouth and pulled it away. He greeted me with curses. Maria did the same to his youthful companion.

"We just had a visit from the Feds," I remarked casually. "Care to tell us what they were after?"

"Why?"

"Well, we think they weren't interested in your animals. I think they are after something else, but left when they thought they hadn't caught you. We've just saved you from jail."

"Look, who are you - "

"Never mind who we are."

"Fucking pirates, what did I tell you," the pimply faced one said at last.

"So you think we're pirates? Well, think that if you must. But what were the Police after?"

"Why should we tell you?"

I had a think. Why should they tell us?

"I don't like violence," Maria interjected calmly. "I'm very good at it, but I hate myself when I do it."

I glanced over at Maria. I hadn't expected her to have a proper vicious streak like that. Even if she was just saying it, it was still a pretty threatening thing to say to two tied up people...

"I tell you what, let me visit your galley," I said.

I left the room, and went into the small galley-kitchen, and found what looked like a sufficiently sharp knife. A Chef's knife, no less - about 20cm long, with a nice sharp point. Going back into the cabin, I knelt in front of the pimply faced one.

"Let me put it bluntly," I said, looking at the point on the knife, "Or possibly sharply even." I looked at the fat man, "You tell me what the Police were after or your assistant has a burial at space."

"I can get another assistant any time. You think I've been this long in space without having to sacrifice a few?" said the fat man.

Hmmm. I seem to remember someone else saying that once. A relation of mine in fact. I looked at his assistant, who now looked terrified.

"You better hope your captain doesn't really mean that," I said, pushing the point of the blade into the young man's throat.

"I do. Why do you think I'd tell a couple of half-rate pirates?"

I pushed the knife a bit harder. The assistant squealed. A drop of blood formed on the knife.

"I'll tell you I'll tell you I'll tell you!" shouted the assistant, the frantic movement from his shouts almost causing his own decapitation.

"NO!" shouted the fat man.

"Fuck you!" his assistant shouted, obviously not best pleased with his captain's earlier remark about the replaceability of his crew member. "We've got half a tonne of Alpha Centurian Cannova resin under the false floor of the cargo bay! I beg you, don't kill me!"

I dropped the knife. *Half a tonne?* No wonder the Police were so disappointed to find us.

"Half a tonne?" I asked quietly.

Maria looked at me, "What?"

"Maria, half a tonne of that stuff has to be worth three quarters of a million credits!"

"Three quart...but what is it?"

"Only about the most powerful hallucinogen known to humanity," I whispered. "You could get half the Phekda system flying on that lot no problem. And it's illegal virtually everywhere. But three quarters of a mill will solve most of our immediate problems"

"What do we do with these two?" she asked.

"Tape 'em up. We'll have to think of something." I turned to the assistant. "Sorry," I said, as I put the duct tape back over his mouth, "but it's for the best".

"Bastards!" shouted the fat man, just before Maria covered his foul mouth.

We hurried back up to the bridge. "The thing is, we need to find out who they were selling to. Then get the stuff off without the Eta Cass police noticing, but we already know they'll be watching. I've got half a mind just to fuel up and get the hell out of there, sell the shit somewhere in Phekda, dump the ship and then lie low for a while."

"Will it sell there? Surely it won't get a good price somewhere like Phekda"

"It won't fetch what it would in Eta Cass, that's for sure, but I'm willing to bet half a mill. Let's not get greedy. How are you finding your new life of crime?"

Maria looked shocked for a moment, then relaxed a bit.

"Ask me that in a couple of weeks," she replied.

## **Remlocks and Quicklocks**

[Mack Winston]

I sighed.

"I really think we'll have to ask them, Mack," Maria said, the edge of desperation showing - not over the situation, but my stubbornness.

"We must be able to find them. There's a half a tonne of the stuff on board, I mean it's not like it's easy to hide a TC on an Asp"

"Well you haven't found them yet. I haven't found them yet. They either don't exist or are hidden"

We were of course talking about the drugs. The cann

"Captain Creeps has ejected. There is no longer a flight deck on this spacecraft. The entire flight deck is contained within the escape capsule. All there is holding the air in is this door, which is not built as a pressure door, and I don't think it's going to last. And if it goes, so do we."

"Mack, I'm stuck in mid-air!" she said. She was sounding alarmed. "I don't know how to swim in air!"

I could hear her arms whipping through the air as I passed by, over the scream of the air escaping around the door. I glided past, catching hold of the edge of the door to the sleeping quarters. The emergency locker was in its normal place, within easy grabbing distance of the bunks. I opened it, and to my relief found two EVA suits, two RemLocks, a jetpack, a first aid kit and an emergency hull perforation repair kit and two flashlights. Bizarrely, there were also half a dozen QuickLocks stored in the lower part of the cabinet. I threw the hull repair kit aside, it wouldn't be much good on a ship without any flight controls. I undid the straps holding the EVA suits in place, silently being thankful that an Asp was a two-crew ship. On a Cobra, one of us would have to be making a desperate decision right now. But an Asp had emergency provisions for two.

I pulled out the first EVA suit, and one of the flashlights. I turned on the light and placed it in mid air, pointing at Maria. The slight air current caused it to drift slowly towards the flight deck door, but it'd do for now. "Maria, stay still. Let me get this to you," I said, propelling myself across the room where she helplessly hung in mid-air.

It wasn't easy getting her into the EVA suit, especially as I could feel the slight grip of panic coming on. The air pressure was obviously falling, and the door just wasn't going to last. I kept seeing visions of myself just getting Maria's helmet on, then the door caving in, leaving me with nothing but a pair of shorts and a bloodstained shirt for protection against the hard vacuum. You get something like 9 seconds of useful consciousness when that happens, and extremely painful consciousness at that. Then it's all over.

Fighting the feeling of doom, I finally clipped Maria's helmet on. It was obvious she'd never worn an EVA suit. I passed her a RemLock.

"Whatever you do, and whatever happens to me," I said, "hang onto this thing for dear life. Press the big red button in the middle if that door blows before I'm suited. It'll activate an emergency beacon, you'll get picked up by a lifeboat or the Police."

She nodded. She looked quite calm. Then again, she was safely suited up and I wasn't. "You've got a light on your helmet, turn it on, it'll help me see what I'm doing". The light turned out to be pretty impressive, brightly illuminating the cabin.

I gently pushed myself off her, and drifted painfully slowly back towards the emergency locker. I slid into the EVA suit - a decent lightweight type, and with a great deal of relief, clipped on the helmet, and checked the life support. Fully charged. That was good. Systems all checked out. "Radio check, you hear me?" I asked.

Maria's voice crackled over the radio. "Yeah, you're clear. I don't think that door's going to la - oh shit!"

I heard the muffled 'whump' through my space helmet, and felt the rush of air. I just got to look around the corner of the sleeping quarters door in time to see Maria hurtle out of the gap, and recede rapidly into the distance. I could see something periodically glinting - the door, tumbling and reflecting Eta Cassiopeia's light.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"I think so, but I'm spinning and I think I might throw up."

I winced. Throwing up in a space suit wasn't a pleasant experience.

"I guess I can't stop it, can I?" she asked.

"Not without the jetpack. I'll come and get you. Try not to barf for god's sake"

I carefully clipped on the lightweight pack, and switched it on. Seemed to have a decent propellant charge. I also found a couple of short tethers in the locker, and clipped them to my space suit. I picked up the last RemLock, and manoeuvred myself out of the sleeping quarters. I turned on my helmet light and drifted towards the gaping hole where the flight deck door used to be.

"Well, I'll be damned", I whispered to myself, as I pulled myself through the door.

There it was. A nice, neatly wrapped container with half a tonne of cannova resin. Right under the escape capsule. The cheeky buggers.



I decided to take a calculated risk. I switched the RemLock onto beacon mode, programmed in a password, and firmly attached it to the drugs. It'd mean I'd have to find Maria, or I was dead, but she should be easy enough to find. A thought struck me.

"Maria, you've still got the RemLock, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yes, I clipped it to my suit".

"Good. Because you've got the only one. Activate it. Make sure it works."

Going through my suit functions, I found the RemLock receiver. It showed up Maria's position on the helmet display. I could see her helmet light appear and disappear, obviously as she helplessly spun in space. "If you stick your arms out, you can slow the rotation rate," I said.

"I already have. Don't you think they teach physics in the Empire?" came the slightly hurt sounding reply.

I got back to work. I grabbed a hand-hold on the container of drugs, and gently fired the jetpack, freeing it from the stricken vessel. I looked towards our destination, the planet Trojan, and thought what to do next. Orbital mechanics by guesswork it seemed. I gave a good long blast with the jetpack, and watched the ship slowly recede, as I pushed the half-tonne of drugs away. Acceleration was slow - the pack was designed to move one human, not half a tonne of contraband. All I wanted was for it to not pancake into the planet (or more likely, get destroyed as space junk by planetary defences). Once I guessed I had given it enough of a push, I turned around to face Maria. She was already 20km away.

I made one final check that the RemLock was on transponder mode and securely fastened to the contraband, then set the jetpack's autopilot to take me to Maria (closing speed 40 km/h). "I'll be with you in half an hour," I said on the radio. "Have you managed to avoid barfing?"

"I'm feeling really bad, I don't think I'll last that long," came her reply.

I increased the speed. It'd use more propellant, but then again, the pack didn't have enough even fully charged to stop us from getting a planet in the face in seven or eight hours so it didn't really matter that much. "OK, I'm going as fast as I can to still have some propellant left over, I'll be with you in about five minutes."

"Thanks. You don't know how much I'll appreciate it".

At least she sounded calm. Meanwhile, I turned around away from Eta Cassiopeia to face the majesty of the night. Seeing it in the 3D wraparound view of an Asp's flight deck is one thing. Seeing it for real through nothing but a thin piece of radiation-shielded glass is altogether another. You're seeing it with your own eyes, not through a camera. I wasn't overly concerned about our proximity to oblivion in Trojan's atmosphere - in a system like Eta Cass, a RemLock wouldn't go unanswered for long. I scanned the heavens for evidence of rescue, and could already see three tiny pinpoints which could only have been ships in formation. The lack of relative movement against the background meant they had to be heading this way.

The proximity alert went off, I was getting close to Maria and the jetpack was automatically slowing me. I set it to bring me to her with a relative speed of 2 km/h, slow enough to grab her spinning body. I set the pack's mode to stabilize, so the gyros and reaction wheels would be energised ready to soak up her rotation. I held out my hands to grab her as I approached. She was not only spinning on her axis, but slowly end over end. No wonder she wanted to throw.

I stopped just in front of her, and waited until her endwise spin had brought her more or less perpendicular to me, then gave a quick blast with the jetpack. I collided with her at low speed and grabbed hold of her. I could feel and hear the frantic whizzing of reaction wheels and gyros in the jet pack as they fought to stop her spin. "Is that better?" I asked.

"Infinitely." Through the tint of her visor, she looked positively green.

"It's beautiful out here, isn't it?"

"I would, on the whole, prefer to view it from a space ship, but I will grant you that, it is beautiful."

"See those three points of light? I think that's rescue."

"I hope so. I suppose you're about to tell me how in eight hours we'll get a faceful of planet if it isn't?"

"I'm trying not to think about it," I answered.

An hour later (which seemed like a lifetime, as the three dots didn't resolve into spacecraft shapes until they were quite close), I was discovering what it was like to be scooped up in a fuel scoop. Fortunately, attached to a Viper, not a pirate ship come to sell us as slaves. As the air rushed into the holding area of the police ship, I took off my helmet.

"Oh, I don't believe it," I muttered, as the two policemen came to see who they'd picked up. It was none other than the two who had searched us only hours earlier!

The policemen stopped dead in their tracks, too.

We weren't home and dry after all...

## Familiarity

[Eta Cassiopeia Police Archives]

Officer Paul Duncan and Michael Roberts faced each other across the table in the Viper's tiny interview room. Their suspects - or rather victims of some sort of incident - were being kept safely in the cabin.

Both officers were young but not stupid. Piracy was low in Eta Cassiopeia, and besides the two "victims" had obviously not had to bite hard vacuum in their escape from their stricken ship with its illegal cargo of live animals. And suspected cargo of drugs, which had been deeply suspicious by its absence. They had obviously had time to gather space suits, a jet pack and a RemLock. At the most, their departure from their ship would have been hurried.

"What do you think, Mike?" Paul asked.

"I don't believe a word of what they said. Just having bought the ship, right-o. The young man claiming to be 'John Smith' had obviously made that lie up on the spot. His ident is false in any case."

"What about the woman?"

"Imperial accent."

"The other thing I'm wondering about is when we searched the ship, it had an escape capsule. If they had a life-threatening problem, wouldn't it have been safer to use it? They never even mentioned it."

The table fell silent. Paul pulled out a datapad and vacantly doodled for a moment.

"You know what," he said at last, "I think we should call a Moray medical boat. The medics will want to check him out anyway when we arrive in Venice. I think it will be better if they are seen arriving in a Moray rather than a Police ship."

"You don't think we should just arrest them and question them?"

"No. I think we need to watch them. It will be a whole lot easier if they think that we're not particularly suspicious of them. I'm running a face check on both of them. Tell you what - ", Paul tapped the datapad again - "I'm also going to run a prediction on where the abandoned ship will end up and I think once our guests are safely loaded on the Moray, we'll check it out."

"And monitor for escape capsules turning up."

"Let's tell our guests that we have no further questions anyway."

Paul got up to leave, and then came to a sudden halt. He narrowed his eyes. "I know where I saw that man," he hissed. Flicking through the datapad, it was mere seconds until he had the front page of the Federation Times. He turned it round to face his colleague.

"*James Winston arrested by Barnard's Star authorities*", announced the headline stridently. More articles appeared. "*Nephew Mack Winston leads protest*". "*Traders begin one day strike at Barnard's Star station*".

Michael briefly skimmed some of the articles. "Norman Mosser!" he exclaimed. "Norman Mosser is a known Imperial assassin. Or at least now. He was the ringleader of these protests, at the time thought to be a trader, along with Mack Winston who looks suspiciously like our guest."

Paul nodded. "The woman doesn't show up in any of this though."

"No she doesn't. But she's definitely from the Empire with that accent."

"You think we should still let them disappear on a Moray?"

"Yes. Even more now. We also need to get the FIB involved."

## Venice on Land

[Mack Winston]

I was extremely relieved when the Police told us the Moray Medical Boat was coming to collect us. I was sure we were going to end up in a prison cell, but it seemed that either the Police were being sympathetic to our plight (after all, being picked up in space sans a space ship usually means you've had a pretty bad day), or were stupid.

The medics didn't take long to check us over. The Moray was a proper small spaceborne hospital, not a mere ambulance. There was even a real human doctor on board. Pity he took an instant dislike to me. I didn't think bedside manners were supposed to consist of muttered rude comments about Phekdan's.

We were taken to Venice on Land and allowed to go our own way from there.

"Well, what next?" Maria asked as we stood outside the starport's main terminal.

I had a think. We had no ship, no money, no place to stay, and probably a bunch of Imperial clone agents on our tail.

"I dunno, but I want to take a shower," I grumbled. I'd been in the same clothes for days, and the heat and humidity of the city were already taking their toll.

"We're not going far without money. Look, I'm going to withdraw as much as my ident will get me. Do you know how to launder money?"

"No."

"Oh."

"But get the largest value counters you can. Then spend them on small items and ask for the change in cash in small denominations".

"Why?"

"Monetary entropy. Your ident will scream 'Princess Maria Hesketh-Duval Was Here'. They'll then follow the cash you withdrew. Break all those big notes up on small purchases, and hopefully the change has been in circulation for a while and will stay in circulation for a while longer before hitting the banks. By the time they work out what you got in your change it'll be scattered all over the galaxy by hundreds of random people, so we won't leave a nice easy track for them to follow"

Maria went off to find a cash dispenser, whilst I loitered with intent at the starport. She was back within a few minutes. "I managed to get ten thousand," she said grimly. "Sorry, it's not a lot."

I looked at her astounded. "Not a lot? We could live on that for years!"

Now she looked shocked. I don't think she'd ever known the economic realities of not being in the Imperial Family, where disposable cash is scarce.

"Well in this case, this should be enough to get some clean clothes and a shower," she snorted, forcing a 100 credit bill into my hand. "I'll meet you - " she stared quickly at a street map - "at this cafe here, and I expect you to be clean."

She turned on her heel and strode off. I noted she was heading straight for the most expensive looking department store in the spaceport...

Half an hour later, I had new clothes and I'd found some public bathrooms. The shower is a great place to just mull things over. Realities of our situation:

1. I couldn't work Princess Maria Hesketh-Duval out at all. She acted as if she only barely tolerated me, yet had shown up as an unlikely rescuer.
2. The Empire would almost certainly be looking for us, and it would be no more than a couple of days before they saw her ident had been used to withdraw a large sum of money.
3. The Federation would be watching the Empire, and would probably find out I was involved and come after me.
4. There was a canister of drugs worth at least three quarters of a million credits floating in space.

5. We had no means of getting off the planet.

Well, 5 was easily solved. Cash equals transport. We could probably persuade someone to help us scoop up the drugs in point 4, and then take us to Phekda which would solve point 3 since the Feds wouldn't follow us to Phekda. Play our cards right and not leave a trail and 2 would be at least temporarily solved. 1 was insolvable. Oh well. Still, if we could get at least half a mill for the narcotics in Phekda, that'd buy an awesome ship and very good fake idents. Things were perhaps looking up. In any case, it felt nice to be clean.

Despite all these happy thoughts, something was bothering me. There seemed to be an awful lot of Police around...