



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

2

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE ANDROID

By

Mike Mersey, Ben Peake and Mark Smart

CONTENTS

Swansong	2
Big Trouble In?	6
Room	7
In the White Room	9
Machine Sentience gets Elite status.....	12
C64Z80RS232	13
Mother Love - Part 1	15
Mother Love - Part 2	18
Mother Love - Part 3	24
Mother Love - Part 4	28
Mother Love - Part 5	31
Mother Love - Part 6	34
Mother Love - Epilogue	38
No Man Living	40
Funniest in the Universe?	42

\$w a nsong

[Norman Mosser]

"This is a frell grenade," He opened his coat, revealing a small device, "and this is a dead man's switch."

Norman was not having a good day. He'd managed to dock at la Soeur du Dan Ham quite easily but from then on the day seemed to have gone downhill. He could handle the fact that he could never openly visit most star systems barring the most anarchic, violent or corrupt, but what had happened today had taken the biscuit.

He had been denied entry to The World's End.

Jon, one of the current barmen had explained it quite reasonably, but it still grated. Basically, he was going to be denied entry to the second most important spacer bar in the galaxy because of the risk his presence represented

"Maybe." Norman walked leisurely out of the door and down the main promenade. He checked his chronometer as he went – his ship would be ready by now, and none too soon. Company would be on its way by now.

The agent nodded to his colleague. They had spent months posted in Riedquat, lurking around, keeping a subtle eye on the spacers that arrived each day. Their employers found the information useful and some of the gossip that they had supplied had broken a goodly number of pirate rings. But, seeing as Mosser had turned up, brazenly out in the open, subtlety went out the window, they had to find him and then either bring him in or bring him down. They trailed Mosser at a safe distance, waiting for the crowds to clear. After a while, they nodded to another pair of agents who took over tailing Mosser so they could break off and get ahead of him.

The second pair followed Mosser and watched as he turned off the promenade and down a quiet corridor that lead towards the drydock hangars. The agents waited until he was out of sight before drawing snub-nosed pistols. They dashed around after him and were promptly cut down by an accurate volley of fire.

The sound of the shots caused the agent and his colleague to pause. They drew their pistols and proceeded more carefully. They had managed to flank Mosser by running down some side passages, but had yet to confront him. One agent tiptoed towards the corridor intersection. By their reckoning, Mosser should be down that passage.

Tink tink, tinktinktinktink

The agent looked down at the frell grenade that was lying at his feet.

Norman stepped gingerly over the blast debris and made his way to the hanger with no further mishap. He entered a code into the access door and was admitted to a cathedral like space dominated by a familiar shape.

His Imperial Courier. Fully restored and in working order.

The hatch was open and the gangplank down so Norman did not hesitate at all in boarding. Once inside he made his way to the cockpit.

"Norman," said a familiar voice.

"Sam." Norman glanced at the display of the console that Sam was working on. It showed the station security camera network. He then removed the earpiece from his right ear and put it into a pocket. "Cheers for letting me know about the ambush. Just like old times, with you in the control room and me on the ground."

"We do make a good team."

"True. Is everybody on board and are we set to go?"

"Yup, the boys who fitted the ship out are all in your cabin, sleeping off a few beers. They all kept their spacesuits on while working on the exterior. The last thing they want is to be recognized."

"And outside?"

"The diversion is set. All you need to do is fly us out of here."

Norman smiled and sat himself in his command chair. The sculpted leather fitted him like a glove. He reached across and began to run pre-flight checks and sent a launch request off to traffic control. By the time they replied giving a launch window all systems were green and the drives were powered up. The scanner blinked to life and showed a collection of orbiting Long Range Cruisers. It also showed what was most likely an Imperial Explorer backed up by a flight of Couriers waiting for him to emerge like a sitting duck in the letterbox. They were probably in cahoots with control and would have his emergence down to the second. No matter.

There was a slight lurch as the Courier lifted off the deck of the drydock bay and switched to internal gravity. The grav cranes carried it forwards and into the now open docking lift. Norman flipped up a blanking plate to reveal another set of controls. He keyed one and started i

At the moment Norman's Courier arrived at the docking tunnel the registration ID of the LRC that Sam had hailed changed and the main drive flared up and drove the ship forwards.

SC-664.

The Azure Sunset.

Formerly of the Sirius Logistics Division. Formerly of the Quator system. Currently of Norman Mosser. Last publicly seen in Achenar engaging the First Protectorate Fleet.

The Explorer and the Couriers scattered, aborting to the far shadow of La Soeur du Dan Ham.

NM-001, formerly RL-808 slipped out of the docking bay unimpeded and slipped lazily into hyperspace.

As the Courier was enveloped by the hyperspace cloud, the jamming signal ceased and the registration of the Long Range Cruiser returned to its original setting. The craft duly surrendered and the entirely innocent caretaker crew of the Long Range Cruiser were arbitrarily put to death for good measure, and all the regulars in the World's End went back to their drinks armed with fresh gossip.

Two jumps later, Sam took a break from his controls and spoke.

"What now, Norman?"

Norman turned from the controls and looked Sam in the eye

"To be honest, I don't really know. I've got my Courier back. I've put on the show to show everybody I'm still around and can move around pretty much unimpeded. Not much else to prove now."

"The *Sunset*?"

"I've no real need for it anymore. Too expensive to maintain, too tricky to hide, it was only really set up for that big job, and I don't think I've got it in me to pull off another."

Sam looked shocked, "What do you mean?"

"To put it in gambling terms. I've played the biggest gamble of my career, for the highest stakes, for the riskiest odds and managed to just about walk away from the table with my life. I've spent all the capital of goodwill I had, and you know the resources I put into it. I couldn't afford to pull off that kind of scheme again even if I wanted to. No-one will want me to work for them now. And you know how many clones I have left. Don't even have the resources left to grow any more"

Sam knew. It was a number slightly less than one. Norman kept that card very close to his chest. Before he could say anything, Norman continued.

"As I see it, I'm alive, ELITE, still healthy, and the only thing I can look forward to is a downward spiral into becoming an anachronism – or worse. I'm going to retire now. I've got enough put away to do that at least. The *Sunset* is yours. I don't need it anymore"

Sam looked at Norman with disbelief and remained silent for many minutes. Retiring? Mosser? Impossible. Unless.....

Sam started chuckling. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Norman nodded.

"You, Norman fucking Mosser, the greatest, most fantastic starship commander in fucking space has fucking bottled it. The bullshit king of the Empire, the man who could topple an empire has lost his fucking nerve. Hah!" Tears started running down Sam's face. He almost doubled up with spiteful, hateful laughter. "You just don't get it, Norman. We followed you because you were the best, not because we were your fucking friends. All your gallivanting made us a lot of dough. Norman Mosser retired is just fucking fantastic. We don't need cowards or fucking pensioners in this business. Well, fuck you Norman Hesketh Mosser. Fuck you all the way to fucking Sol. This the last time you fuck off."

Sam reached across and punched the eject button on Norman's seat.

As the seat dropped into the Stowmaster underneath it, Norman heard Sam's laughter echoing down the pipe.

"Don't you worry Norman, we'll get along just fine without you."

The Stowmaster popped out of a keel hatch and tumbled away behind the Imperial Courier. The Courier banked away and popped into yet another hyperspace jump.

In his Stowmaster, Norman fingered his ELITE badge and sighed. Too much of what Sam had said was true. He had been getting too close to losing it. It was only really bloody-mindedness and drugs that had kept him going the last few months.

He felt empty. Sam had been his last ally and had chosen to turn away like all the rest. He'd half-expected it in all honesty.

Norman is an island and all that.

And now? Retirement maybe. Although it was inevitable circumstance would bring him back into the game again eventually.

The galaxy was a big place though, and he knew where there was a Mark Three that he had the keys for.

Time to go looking for Raxxla.

Norman smiled and engaged the hyperdrive.

Big Fo e !n?

[Sam Kemper]

Sam woke up.

He was in a small room. As far as he could tell it had been moulded out of a single piece of plastifoam. Uniformly matt white with the light source embedded in the ceiling. There was hole in the floor that he assumed was the latrine and a hole in the ceiling for the air vent. The door was a seam that was almost flush with the wall and offered no purchase for fingernails, let alone fingers. The ceiling was at least twenty feet up. It made the room feel even smaller and oppressive than it was.

On closer inspection, the wall was punctuated by another seam at floor level. It reminded him of a letterbox.

Either way, this was not good.

Eventually, a synthesised voice emitted from a hidden loudspeaker, "Name?" Sam ignored it.

"Name." Sam looked down and started to gouge a piece of grit from between the treads of his boot.

This continued on for an hour or so, with the relentless automated questioning being repeated over and over and over at seemingly random intervals and each time slightly louder than the last. Sam had held out throughout. Even when his ears had started bleeding from the sheer volume.

A new tack was taken.

The temperature of the room plunged to well below freezing and cycled back to uncomfortably hot in as many minutes. Then this was followed by a cycle of pitch darkness and blinding light.

This carried on for what seemed to Sam to be for days before he croaked through cracked, dehydrated lips, "Sam. Sam Kemper."

At that, the conditions returned to normal and the hatch popped open and a matt grey nutriblock slid into the room.

Nutriblocks. Grey, cubic, tasteless but providing 100% RDA of fluids and nutrients. Sam consumed it ravenously.

Reinforced by the first food he had eaten in a long time, Sam considered his position. He had been caught. He didn't even know by who. No insignia on their shipsuits and they had stunned him the moment they had boarded the escape capsule. And now he was in a cell. And they were trying to break him. But who?

The Empire? The Alliance? The Feds? INRA? The Guild? All of them had reasons and all he had to go on was playing style and he couldn't rule out either of them. They all borrowed off each other regarding interrogation, and all of them had reasons to squeeze out answers but keep him alive.

A direct approach was always worth a try. "Who are you? what do you want?"

The loudspeaker clicked into life, "Who we are is irrelevant. We want to know three things. How did the *Azure Sunset* escape? Where is the *Azure Sunset*? Where is Norman Mosser?"

The loudspeaker clicked off and the room was plunged into darkness.

This conversation was over it seemed.

Roo

[Sam Kemper]

Sam woke up.

The room had changed again while he was asleep. A table and a stool had extruded from the opaque white floor. On the table sat a simple paper cup. It was the smell emanating from it that had woken him.

Coffee.

Sweet, sweet caffeine. Sam let the aroma play about his nostrils. After so many days of sensory deprivation he was going to savour it. It wasn't a Riedquat coffee. Although that didn't mean anything. There was the legality issues in half the galaxy for one thing to consider.

Sam sat up and swung his legs round to the edge of the bed. As he did that the door opened to the cell. Sam paused and looked intently at the doorway. A woman in a sombre suit stepped into the room.

"Ah, good morning Mr. Kemper."

"Commander."

The woman smiled. She then picked up the coffee cup and started to drink from it. "As you wish. Commander."

Sam ran his hands through greasy sticking up hair, "I suppose you want the answers to those three questions."

"Yes." The woman leaned against one wall and started to blow on the hot coffee to cool it down. The aroma of it was now mingling with the smell of her perfume.

Sam shrugged, "Do I get to pick which one I answer first?"

The woman seemed mildly amused by this, "If you like."

"Okay then. But I want to know something. Are you going to keep me alive afterwards?"

The woman nodded, "Mister Kemper, consider this: my colleagues have ways of determining the information we want from without you having to be awake or willing. Sadly, the procedure is horribly invasive and has the side effect of being both excruciatingly painful and fatal, so you can consider this to be all for your own benefit."

Sam sat in silence for a moment, weighing her words, "You want me for something. And I'm not going to find out what until I answer the three questions. The first one then."

Sam bent his head backwards and stared at the ceiling, "I don't know where Mosser is. I shot him out of his Courier in a Stowmaster. He'd bottled it and wasn't any use to us. I take it you had a tracker on the Courier?"

"What do you mean bottled it?"

"You know, lost his nerve. Some scientist chap told me it was a side-effect of being cloned too often. Doubt through invincibility."

"Hmmm. But there is more?"

"There is. He's done it before, or something similar. I've always found a short sharp shock helps him sort his head out quicker. Sometimes somebody giving him grief helps it along as well. Then it's business as usual."

"Quite," The woman tilted her head to one side for a couple of moments as if she were listening to something. "But what if you're not around to find him?"

"I don't know. I pissed him off big time, so I don't know if he would come to find me if he found out I was missing. Speaking of which, what did happen to the Courier?"

"It doesn't matter."

"So he might think I've been killed?"

"It's possible."

"Then it would become personal."

The woman nodded again and then stepped forwards and rested a hand on Sam's shoulder.

Sam woke up.

The woman was gone. But there was a fresh coffee on the table, and in the corner of the room there was a sonic sanitation cubicle.

[n h e h e R o o]

[Sam Kemper]

Sam woke up.

The woman was sitting in the chair across from him. She was staring at him intently. Sam returned the look.

"For what reason have I been graced with your presence?"

"The same as before."

"You want to know about the *Azure Sunset*."

"Where it is, and how you escaped," added the woman.

The sentences had become almost ritualistic now. They seemed to have got into the habit of starting each session the same way. And each time, they learnt a little more and Sam had a little less to tell. He was finding the smell of her perfume cloying, and the way it mingled with her coffee turned his stomach.

Once, maybe it was days, maybe even weeks ago - it was so difficult to keep track of time in this minimalist chamber, Sam had tried to attack her, seize her and get to speak to somebody else, to get out of the room, even just to be rid of the smell of that perfume. All he remembered was lunging at her and then waking up on his bunk and seeing that they had revoked his shower privileges.

What he had hated the most about that was that it had made him talk. And keep talking. Just to be able to feel hot water on his skin again. They had him. That was all that mattered. It was bloody-mindedness that had kept him drip-feeding them for this long.

The woman was still looking at him.

"What!" Sam screamed in exasperation.

She smiled.

Sam looked away first, "OK, we were pretty much fucked after Norman's face popped up on the screen, especially now our employer couldn't take a second shot."

"You told me this before."

"Just picking up the thread again."

"And you've told me how Marcus escaped and how you feigned surrender to get into witch-space, but you haven't told me what happened after the jump."

"It's hard to remember."

"No, it isn't"

She started to stare him out again. Sam started to sweat. His mouth went dry and eventually he looked away at a featureless wall and spoke in a small, near whisper. "It went a bit crazy then."

The woman smiled warmly.

"The jump was wrong. We misjumped alright, but this was something else. We came out tumbling. We didn't know where we were, let alone who we were near."

"There was someone else there?"

Sam paused at this. Did she know already? Was she asking to hide who she worked for. Just from the style Sam was beginning to have his suspicions, but even so, who?"

The woman rapped her manicured scarlet painted fingernails on the surface of the table. "You were saying?"

Sam was sweating now. Most of what he said could have been inferred from the newsvids. He'd given nothing away so far about the current location of the ship. The game was going to change now. He was out of filler and was going to have to start telling them what they wanted to know.

The woman smiled again, showing her perfect teeth.

Part of the wall blew up.

Blinded, his ears ringing from the blast, Sam felt himself lifted bodily from his bunk and dragged away. He felt air moving across his face for what seemed the first time in an age. He struggled in the grip of his apparent rescuer but his feet failed to get purchase on the metal floor.

Metal? He was outside the cell!

Sam raised his head, his vision was beginning to clear. He could see flickering light sauces and make out basic shapes. His hearing was returning and he could hear the faint sound of small arms fire. It sounded far away though.

"Can you stand?"

Sam could recognise that voice anywhere.

Norman Mosser.

The.

Just those three words fortified him and he found that he could. Mosser helped him to his feet and pressed a bulky plastic object into his right hand. Sam's years in the Federal Special forces would have told him what it was even if he had been wearing chunky pressure suit gloves.

An Ingram Mark IV flechette pistol. Indiscriminate at best.

"I'll guide you. Just shoot at anything that moves."

Sam pulled the slide back with the edge of his hand, and leaning on Mosser allowed himself to be guided towards the brightness of an open doorway. Something obscured the exit. Sam instinctively filled the space between him and the door with molecularly sharp darts. There was minimal recoil and only a faint chattering. He could also hear a low mechanical screaming and a buzzing recoil passing into his shoulder through Mosser's torso. Imperial GVG, firing from the hip on full auto.

They made their way through the doorway and into a metal lined corridor. By now, Sam's vision had returned and he could see what could have been any secure ward in any facility. Featureless walls, smoke billowing from behind them and klaxons heralding their passing.

"Where's the exit?"

"Straight on to the end and right."

Norman paused and used the GVG to launch a grenade into a security station. It detonated and a helmeted head came rolling out of the blast. Norman kicked it away and started forwards.

Sam kept pace as they passed the debris and they reached the end of the hall unchallenged.

"Where's the ship?"

"Outside. its the green Police Viper one"

Mosser pushed the nose of the GVG round the corner, loosed another grenade and after another blast shockwave rolled past them dashed around the corner, firing as he went. Sam followed in his wake, covering their retreat.

They could see a pair of glass double doors ahead of them.

Sunlight.

Freedom.

They both started to sprint.

They burst through the doors like demons. A blistering hail of gunfire met them and Mosser was gutted instantly. Sam had dived under the fire and was lying on the ground looking at the platoon of infantry that had gutted his friend. He threw the gun off to one side and glanced at Mosser's corpse.

It wasn't Mosser. It was a fucking robot.

Sam started to laugh hysterically as the first of the tranquiliser darts struck him.

*

Sam woke up.

He could smell tobacco smoke. A man was sat at the table staring intently at him. He was dressed in a sober suit and was smoking a hand rolled cigarette. "Ah, we are awake. Good"

Sam tried to sit up and found that he couldn't.

The man smiled, showing yellowing teeth. "Enjoy the show? Excellent mmm?"

Sam glared at him.

"Don't know who to trust now mmm? Getting a bit lairy methinks? Can't trust a rescue now mmm?" The man took another drag on his cigarette, "Got to dash old chap."

*

Sam woke up.

He stared blankly at the ceiling. What did the faked rescue mean? Were they trying to break him down, were they worried Mosser was coming for him? Or did they just want him to think that? Either way, they had made a mistake. There was a chunk of public art outside the building.

Sam had recognised it.

He was in New Rossyth.

Machinence's Elite

[Universal Scientist]

It was noted last week that the Elite Federation of pilots has issued its first ever Elite badge to an artificial sentience. Biological-rights campaigners have criticised the decision of the Elite Federation to recognise the achievement of C64Z80RS232. A spokesman for Humanity First was quoted as saying:

"This makes a travesty of the elite ranking process. It was bad enough when that Thargoid got a badge but now computers can get them as well it reduce that whole Elite Federation to nothing more than a game"

The Elite Federation pointed out that they "had never considered adding an exclusion for artificial sentients in their original charter as at the time, computers would woefully underperform even half-trained pilots in ship to ship combat". With the advent of stacked megaconductors and the recent Jessop processing array, it appears that this is now no longer the case.

C64Z80RS232, currently mounted inside Sidewinder PX-943 has declined to comment and was last seen hunting pirates in the Phekda system. His manufacturers, the Sirius Corporation cybernetics division are said to be 'delighted' and wish it be known that their sales office is open 34.25 hours a day.

Sidewinder PX-943 entered the icy rings of Phekda 9e without a moments hesitation. A human pilot, even an Elite rated one, would be cautious when entering such an obvious trap. Recognisance of the area would be prudent, and a brief exploration of the areas that the gas giant's ring obscured from the scanner.

C64Z80RS232 knew all these things, and yet still plunged headlong toward the bulk of the two battered Lion and Python ships flying in tight formation and pondering an erratic path around the larger hunks of ice and rock, while their shields deflected the smaller debris. C64Z80RS232's Sidewinder however entered the rings while accelerating at full power, strafing, winding, arcing around the planetary leftovers with inhuman dexterity.

The first of the assailants, a Saker Mk III, plunged out from behind within a medium sized hunk of debris, crashing through a thin artificial sheet of ice. An impressive ambush in theory, but executed too slow. C64Z80RS232 had already vanished deeper into the rings before the Saker could so much as about face.

The next attack was much better executed, or perhaps just lucky. Seven Krait Assault Craft flying in classic star formation had been accelerating perpendicular to the Sidewinders intercept of the larger ships. The relative speed was too great to enable a full engagement, but the fraction of a second that they would be in range would leave the firepower of seven versus the firepower of one. C64Z80RS232 peeled off a missile at a large hunk of ice in the path of their intercept point. All 8 ships plunged headlong into the resulting gas and debris, visibility reduced to a point far shorter than human reflexes could react to. The sidewinder emerged on the other side, still accelerating away from the huge explosion as five of the Kraits failed to navigate through and were destroyed.

Another formation of Kraits appeared but had been timed too slowly. They would be forced to slow down and engage later.

As the bulk of the Python loomed closer, the Sidewinder flipped around and began decelerating, again on full power. More Sakers appeared from within their icy hide-holes, evenly spaced in a sphere surrounding, and enclosing, the area with the bait of the 2 cargo haulers at its centre.

The Sidewinder opened fire with its 1MW pulse laser, every shot hitting a target. Flying backwards at breakneck speeds, shooting at the attacking ships as they entered and were taken out of range, and all the while dodging the icy debris of the gas giants rings that were still zooming past on all sides.

With the Sakers accelerating, and the Sidewinder slowing down, the Sakers finally started gaining back ground. The Sidewinder changed course to run parallel to the cargo ships so as to cut across the sphere of Sakers, now numbering more than twenty on the scanner. The enemy ships engaged directly, but were outclassed, one by one they fell, and one by one they changed course to intercept.

The sidewinder changed course again, heading straight for the cargo ships. The Sakers behind him immediately began firing missiles now that there was a clear shot, and smoke trails sped inwards from all sides. And now the inner defenders came into play, two Cobra Mk IIIs charged from cover behind the cargo ships heading straight for the sidewinder. A fraction of a second before their 4mw beams fired, the Sidewinder went into an erratic corkscrew, concentrating pulse laser fire on the ship to the left, all the while accelerating away from the incoming missiles. At the very last moment before collision, the Sidewinder peeled a missile at the ship on the right, and then turned to blast full power perpendicular to the game of chicken. The ship on the right fired an ECM even as the missile crashed straight through the hull and exploded, tearing the ship to pieces. The Sidewinder fired a last pulse shot at the receding survivor, directly hitting the engines and creating yet another fireball.

Back onto full speed, aiming directly at the centre of the Python freighter, missiles now converging from all directions in multiple waves. The sidewinder went into another erratic corkscrew as the Lion and Pythons turret beams opened up, vainly seeking the tiny ship in the void. The Sidewinder accelerated faster still. The missiles streaked inwards, one leading the pack. C64Z80RS232 realised that this missile would intercept before the Sidewinder would reach the Python, so the android spun the ship around and fired a single shot, then immediately turned back around and kept accelerating, not even needing to check the scanner to know that the shot had taken the missile out perfectly.

And then C64Z80RS232 was upon the Python, and twisted the Sidewinder within inches of its hull, skidding in between it and the neighbouring Lion. The missiles behind crashed into the gigantic ship, sapping away the shields, then tearing away the hull. The Lion took several missiles also, but somehow survived the worst. The Python however exploded in a huge fireball, a dozen lives lost in an instant.

The Sidewinder kept accelerating, and keeping as close to the icy debris of the gas giants rings as possible, missiles sent icy particles everywhere in its path as they crashed into the obstacles. There was the occasional flash from behind as an overconfident Saker pilot tried, and failed, to keep up the pace.

Soon the Sidewinder emerged from the rings, and without a single scratch. But now the fight was surely over as hundreds of ships had converged during the battle in the ice. Scores of missiles, many of them hastily purchased MV2 assault missiles, streamed towards the tiny ship. It accelerated faster still, even though the MV2s could easily catch up, and outmanoeuvre, even an android of such proven skill. At the very last moment, as always, C64Z80RS232 engaged the panic button and the ship vanished into hyperspace. ECMs flared throughout the cluster of assorted ships of all affiliations as the leftover missiles went careening through the hyperspace cloud and out in all directions.

A hundred Hyperspace Cloud Analysers switched on, and a hundred ships streamed on into hyperspace. All of them driven by greed and fame. The greed generously provided from bounties offered by thousands of organisations, all of whom felt that no Android should have ever been allowed to wear an Elite badge.

Mo her Lo e - E r ▲

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

"Thank you Commander. Good travels."

Our client shook both mine and Pradesh's hands and walked out of the dock into the dimming afternoon.

"Now that is a good, simple taxi contract." I turned to Pradesh, who was still waving the woman goodbye as she vanished out of sight. We'd picked her up in a Frontier Mining system, which had been more a retirement village for senile Rock Hermits rather than a real population centre. She, however, had been far from senile. To the contrary, a shrewd, hardened ore extraction engineer with long-healed burns on her hands and a face pitted by rock particles. In her early fifties, as much as I could guess, although a hard-lived forties wasn't out of the question.

"Yes Commander." Pradesh said, a little downcast. "It was rather dull though, wasn't it?"

I grinned as we began to follow our client out of the dock, heading towards the nearest spacer's bar.

"For Phekda, yeah it was." I said, shrugging off the uncharacteristically tranquil journey through a dangerous system. "But the night is still young, and if you like, I know a few bars where off-worlders shouldn't go, if you're feeling punchy."

Pradesh shook his head and grinned self-consciously. He was still young, and expected every system to be a new adventure, every contract a brush with death and every guest sexy and mysterious.

We'd been attacked only once on the way in, by a nervous kid whose dangerous piloting had been more of a risk than her lacklustre gunnery and creaky old Adder. Our decidedly unsexy passenger had been calm throughout the skirmish, which bespoke a phlegmatic personality, experience with space travel, or both. She was coming to Phekda to pick up some sort of medical shipment from the Core Systems, and this was as far as it would come.

"Cheer up, Pradesh." I said, as we passed a life-size statue of Commander James Winston (the late). I'd met the man once, and was fairly sure he wouldn't have approved the expression of noble constipation his face was set in. "Excitement gets boring too."

"I'm sure it does, commander." Pradesh said sceptically. "But if they can't be exciting, don't you sometimes wish that these jobs actually meant something, rather than just being for money?"

"If I'd wanted a job that meant something, I'd have joined the Federal Navy, or Amnesty Interstellar or the Coopersworld Mafia." I said, without sarcasm. "It's all of a piece, Pradesh. I don't know about you, but survival itself has enough meaning to keep me interested. You get born, and you try to survive and maybe even reproduce. Birth, threat of death and then death. That's about the only sequence of meaning I've found."

"Got a light, mac?" a young, weaselly looking Phekdan accosted me from an alley, charcoal-coloured eyes glinting with promise. His eyes flicked behind him, where illegal wares and/or armed companions waited.

"Fuck off and die!" I snarled casually at the teenager. He retreated back to the entrance to the alley, looking hurt. I stopped and turned back. "Oh, and smoking's bad for you, fuckknuckle."

"Someone 'reproduced' him, Commander. He's some mother's son." Pradesh reproached me dryly, ducking his shaved head in mock terror as I rounded on him. I snorted with amusement as I saw how effectively he'd wound me up.

"Some people are born orphans, and some people *should* be."

*

I groaned. The bruises on my bruises were starting to ache, and the hard cell floor wasn't exactly rubbing on salve and handing me an aspirin. However, I always prefer waking up like this to not waking up at all.

The floor was metal, had grooves and a slight tilt. Most likely so that the vomit flowed down into the drain at one edge of the cell. The lighting was soft, and the quiet hum of the ventilation fan sounded like a very small jackhammer. Ah, the hangover-friendly drunk-tank. A small window let a small amount of natural light in. Mid afternoon light.

With great effort, I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. It was even less interesting than the floor. With a mental courage totally unmatched to the physical effort, I levered myself upright. My stomach attempted to rise and I ruthlessly quashed its attempt at rebellion. I cleared the sleep (and god-knows what other substances) from my eyes and took stock. A barred door and transparent wall led out into a corridor. Over in the other corner, Pradesh lay, in the blessed state of sleep. In a mean mood, I crawled over and prodded him awake. He groaned piteously, and I sat back on my haunches and let consciousness do its fiendish work.

"Uh... oh... Commander... oh my head."

I tried to feel sympathy for him, but kept in front of my mind the fact that I knew Pradesh had bought the last, sobriety-shattering round. There had been a bar... two attractive female spacers. Or at least I thought she'd been attractive. I was fairly sure she was female, but... anyway, there'd been a bar. Then there had been a fist impacting with a face. I stared at my bruised knuckles and winced as I felt my jaw. Now had it been my fist or my face in that memory...

I got up and staggered over to the intercom button next to the door. I hit it and slumped back against the wall next to it. After a while, the speaker crackled into life.

"Yeah?" came the bored, unfriendly voice.

"We're sober now, sir, could you maybe let us out?" I said, trying to put as much sweetness into the voice coming out of the mouth that tasted like Groigan shit.

"Court's not 'til tomorrow." the voice said unhelpfully, and the speaker clicked off.

"Court?" I said stupidly.

"Court?" Pradesh repeated, like a worried echo. "Commander, I don't recall anyone getting hurt last night, do you?"

I bit back my immediate response, which was to remind Pradesh that he'd been fast asleep slumped in the booth when the trouble had started.

"Not really, Pradesh." I lied.

"Would a bribe perhaps be applicable here?" Pradesh said, more intelligently.

"Not sure. Depends on what we've done and whether we've actually got any money left."

"Shit." Pradesh passed a hand over his face at that. By that, I inferred that we were stinking stony broke. "We should have held off on that drive service until the next system, Commander, we couldn't afford it."

"You think we could have afforded that drive failing in the middle of Witchspace?" I said acidly, letting the full ugliness of my mood infuse my voice.

Fortunately for both of us, the intercom buzzed. At the same time, the barred door slid aside with a rattle that made both of us wince and clutch at our temples.

"Visitor for you. Exit and turn left. Don't try anything stupid."

*

There is nothing more embarrassing than not being able to remember a name, especially when you've just shared a ship with them for over a week. I stood before our ex-passenger with a fixed smile on my face, as friendly as I could manage, without the slightest idea what her name was. In better times and in better places, I might have been better able to bring it to mind, but as it was... Ada? Elaine? Erica?

"Thank you very much Miss Eve." Pradesh strode forward and rescued me, pumping her hand gratefully. The woman stood there with a slightly bemused expression on her face, leaning backwards slightly from the stench emanating from Pradesh's mouth. She'd bought a new shipsuit and removed the stubble from her scalp. It would be hard to describe her as pretty, but at this moment, she was the most beautiful grey-eyed being ever to bail us out of chokey. The charges had been of the minor, property-destroying kind, but I was very glad to be out of jail in any case. We walked out into the afternoon and sat down in a quiet, shady bar while Eve ordered us Riedquatian Ultracoffee. Banned in many systems as a health hazard, it was still the best hangover cure known to humanity, and my heart jumped a beat to smell its familiar, acrid tang. And kept jumping.

"So Eve, to what do we owe the pleasure?" I asked, once the defibrillating effects of the coffee had begun to wear off. I sat down and sucked greedily at it, hoping that my aorta could handle the dilation.

Eve arched an eyebrow expressively and said nothing. Pradesh began to speak, but I raised a hand to stop him. Just because Eve hadn't spoken didn't mean she didn't have something to say. He turned on his stool back to the bar and grumbled into his cup.

"Commander, shouldn't I bail you out?" she said in her low, growling voice. "After all, might have confiscated ship."

"And we couldn't have that, could we?" I said, trying to hold back on my cynicism. "What can we do for you, then? Return journey? I thought you were going to try to hitch a freighter back home."

Eve blew softly on the surface of her coffee, and then gulped it down like a trooper. A much-scuffed platinum wedding ring glittered on her hand. I saw her shoulders shake as the caffeine hit and then saw her relax. She was still the taciturn mining engineer, but there was something more... animated about her now.

"Shipment not here." she said bluntly.

"And...?" I prompted, when I realised that she'd finished speaking.

"Should have. Four days ago. Want to go to last port of call. Make sure not laid up for repairs. Courier company fobbing me off."

I glanced at Pradesh meaningfully, who was still gazing moodily into the surface of his coffee. They say opportunity doesn't knock twice, but...

"Well we don't have any particular contracts at the moment, but that is a bit out of our way, so..." I said cagily. Eve seemed successful enough in her way, and could easily spare a couple of thousand credits.

"You're broke." Eve cut me off. "Can always withdraw your bail."

There was no malice in her voice, but there was nothing but resolve in her eyes.

"That's what I like... honest incentive." I said savagely.

There was a thud at the other end of the bar. Eve and I looked around and saw Pradesh, with his head cradled in his arms on the edge of the bar, fast asleep. The untouched cup of Riedquatian Ultra steamed away next to him.

"I only fly with the best." Eve said, without a hint of irony.

Mo her Lo e - R r 2

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

"Re-entry." Pradesh said, as the starfield swam back into view from the chaos of Witchspace. "We're where we're supposed to be, Exhoed, about ten point eight AU out from the core. No contacts on the short range. Should I ping the Long Range Active?" he looked at me enquiringly.

"Not yet." I replied. "We should work out where we're going, first. Eve," I tapped the intercom to the guest stateroom. "could you come to the flight deck for a minute?"

Eve emerged from the stateroom door. There it was again! A spring in the step, an excitement, an anticipation that hadn't been apparent on the long journey from the fringe into Phekda. I found myself beginning to wonder what it was in the medical shipment that provoked such atypical emotion on her part. One thing I could tell, which worried me, was that it wasn't anything to do with money. With money, people generally acted rationally, which made them predictable. Take money out of the equation, and things begin to get complex...

"We're here, boss. Where should we be heading? This system has three starports and one orbital station, which one do you want us to try?"

Eve was silent for a long time, shifting from foot to foot and staring at the viewscreen. I realised that she didn't know what to do next. Despite her resourcefulness in bailing us out and subsequently blackmailing us, she was out of her depth.

"Let's try a planetside one first, shall we? Nakamichi Village?" I said gently.

"Sounds good." she said, relieved. Unconsciously, her tightly clenched fists uncurled.

"So what's in the medical shipment anyway? You ill?" I swiveled to face our employer as Pradesh set the coordinates. "Must be mighty important." The gratitude in her face hardened into suspicion, and her body language closed.

"No. Getting old, is all." she muttered, shrugging and walking back to her stateroom. The clang of the duralium door cut off any further queries. I sighed. In my experience, hidden motives were generally the ones that come back to bite you. For a couple of minutes, the quiet beeps of the Autopilot were the only noise in the cabin.

"She doesn't look ill, does she Commander?" Pradesh said carefully, breaking the silence. "And she's not that old, is she?"

"Too old for you, Pradesh, and married besides!" I replied playfully.

"Yes, Commander. No doubt." Pradesh said, slightly disapproving of my flippancy. Primly he prepared a sweep of the Long Range Active scanner. I rolled my eyes. Pradesh could be so annoyingly proper at times.

"Well..." I said, trying to be serious. "She's old enough to have secrets, and be ill in all those more subtle ways that don't show up on a medical scanner."

"They're usually the worst, the ones you can't inoculate yourself against." Pradesh surprised me.

"Commander, I think we might have a job that means something."

I rolled cynical comebacks around on my tongue, savouring them, before looking at Pradesh's earnest young face and choking them back. Hadn't his mother warned him about getting emotionally involved in his work?

"You may indeed be right." I said, trying my best to maintain the innocent face of an angel. The ping of the LRA saved me from further dissembling.

"Three contacts, Commander." Pradesh said crisply, all dreamy optimism gone. He recalibrated the LRA and swept again.

"Size?" I asked, as I primed our weaponry and disengaged the autopilot. I didn't bring the helm around to face our attackers. No need to commit ourselves to combat if it was unnecessary. I rested my hand lightly on the thruster controls anyway.

"Small. Light fighters." A ping announced the data from the second sweep. "Two Eagle IIs and a Krait. They're sending a SCM."

"Which one?" I asked, curious. Standard Communication Messages were the shorthand of space, 'Who are you?', 'Help! I'm being attacked!', 'Prepare to die!'. They were effective over longer distances, as they were one-way communication that didn't have to worry about, say, a half-minute delay between responses in 'real-time' communications.

"What's your cargo?" Pradesh replied, biting his lip. Not an unusual opening for a pirate attack. Like us, they weren't eager for combat if it wasn't worth the risk.

"Send 'em our manifest." I said. Our manifest at the present moment comprised a couple of tons of mid-range computers. Valuable, but hardly rare in this part of space. We lost nothing by revealing the fact.

"Commander, should we really be responding to extortion?" Pradesh asked.

"Extortion's fine with me, if what we're asked to do isn't worth getting killed. Send 'em the manifest. Also send 'em our weaponry specs and our Elite Rating." I added, as an afterthought. In this poker game, I wanted them to know our hand.

"But Commander..." Pradesh argued, like a troublesome child. Like a bad parent, I snapped at his back-chat. After all I'd done for him...

"Just do it Pradesh. "

Face dark with misgiving, Pradesh complied. The reply came within a couple of minutes, not through an SCM, but through the ship profiles on the LRA, which began to diminish as they changed course to angle away from us.

"We scared them off?" he said disbelievingly.

"Hardly. We're just more trouble than worth bothering about. Curious, though. Even after all that, we should still have been worth trying to intimidate. You know, a 'prepare to die' message hoping we'd dirty our trousers, drop our cargo and run. Those computers are worth a bit." I re-engaged the autopilot with a sense of relief. In my personal book of triumphs, my most memorable battles were definitely those that I hadn't had to fight.

"Maybe..." Pradesh said cautiously, "It wasn't what we had, but what we didn't have that made them leave?"

"Really?" I said, slightly more patient with my protégé now that the risk of violent death was absent. It sounded plausible, if strange. "Mighty discerning pirates, then. What could they be waiting for?"

*

"I'm sorry sir, but the itinerary of our transport ship and the progress of transported packages is confidential information. I'm sure you understand. Thank you." The blond, impossibly handsome courier agent's face smiled reassuringly, and the panel slid across, hiding it from view. In frustration, I mashed the button next to the panel. This was ridiculous.

"Next time that damn thing appears, I'm going to smash its nose in, I swear." I cursed. Of the many things I hate (cold weather, zero-G, the social institution known as 'beer'), robotic customer service 'slots' were rapidly moving to a higher position on the list.

"Only a machine." Eve said calmly.

"Welcome to Sirius and Wolf Courier Services, my name is John, how may I assist you?" The slot slid aside and the lifelike head beamed an imbecilically helpful smile at me. I remembered my earlier pledge to smash its nose in, but realised all I'd do is hurt my hand.

"Look, I've got the customer here, the person who ordered the courier job, the person who's receiving the package. Scan her retina, test her fingerprints, test her voice, do whatever the bloody hell you like, this is her. The package was travelling on your ship SW-042. This was the designated last stop before Phekda. Can you please give us some idea of where her package is?"

The head paused a second, while some data retrieval process occurred and it compared the retrieved data with the set of business rules and customer service principles written down for it by some far-off programmer. Then motors

whirred and tiny hydraulics pumped, computing algorithms and running set routines. The face creaked into a smile again.

"I'm sorry sir, but the itinerary of our transport ship and the progress of transported packages is commercially confidential information. I'm sure you understand. Thank you."

The panel slid back again, and I screamed in frustration, slamming my fist against the gaudy advertising hoarding around the slot. That was it. Stuff punching it in the nose, I was going to get some explosives and reduce the damn thing into its constituent atoms! Eve patted my shoulder. Even her stoicism seemed to have evaporated, though, and her face was pinched with worry.

"Not worth injuring yourself. Another way. Must be."

"What other way is there?" I snapped. Since docking, we'd asked traffic control, cased the local bar and as a last resort actually tried the proper channels. Net result, bummer all. I was beginning to think this wasn't coincidental. I leaned back against the wall and crossed my arms. Was all this aggro really worth it?

"Eve, just a question..."

"Staying. Not leaving without." Eve anticipated me and responded sharply. The worry on her face was ironed out by resolve. She stood up infinitesimally straighter and stared at me, imperiously, grey eyes as implacable as the orbit of an asteroid. She expected me to do something. Sighing, I uncrossed my arms. Breaking and entering, illegally accessing computers and bald lying had now entered the picture. The straight and narrow was all very well, but sometimes it didn't run past the places you needed to go.

"Look, there are a few things we can try, but they'll be difficult, dangerous and they'll take time, and it may be some weeks before..." I spoke slowly and deliberately, not trying to give Eve any false hopes.

"Commander, commander! I found it!" Pradesh rushed up. "I found the ship!"

"Er... that's... very good, Pradesh. Very good." I managed, my rhetoric now looking rather foolish. "How?" I said, wondering which black art of bounty-hunter's espionage he'd employed to find this out.

"I looked out the window, and there it was!"

A warm flush of embarrassment rushed up from my neck to suffuse my face. Out the window. Right. OK. Right there in plain sight. Yes. OK. Fine.

"Ship here?" Eve said, her breathing suddenly heavy and fast. Her excited anticipation was palpable.

"Yes, Miss Eve, only..." Pradesh paused. "I think you'd both better come and have a look."

*

"Ouch." I said, wincing at the sight lying outside the observation window. The ship lying on the repair pad was a patchwork of ugly holes and laser burns. Griffins are lovely ships, elegant and graceful, but this one had been battered to the edge of destruction. The 'S' and the '2' were the only visible characters that remained from the registry number painted on the side. The slow flash of one navigation light was the only indication that this wasn't just a derelict hulk, waiting for the wreckers to come and cut it into scrap. Which they might as well do anyway.

"They've turned their transponder off, which is technically..." Pradesh helpfully began.

"...technically legal if you're in dry dock. That's why we didn't ID it as we flew in." I added, for Eve's benefit. Eve's face was frozen with dismay as she looked out at the ship. "I wonder why we haven't met any crew in the starport."

"Commander, it's always possible that they're still on the ship." Pradesh suggested. I turned to him, intrigued.

"Why do you say that?"

"If something like that had happened, and I were a courier company, I'd want to make sure no gossip got out about the condition of one of my ships." Pradesh said, with commendably practical cynicism. "And I'd want to make sure that I didn't tell customers anything until I'd got my story straight."

"Or anyone else. Remember the share price. It sounds plausible." I said, cocking my head at our employer, who was still staring fixedly at the ship, a deep and powerful undercurrent of emotion leaving only a tiny ripple of

expression on her face. "Eve, hard as it may be to accept, we might have to consider that something might have happened to the cargo. That ship is pretty badly banged up and..."

"No. Not gone." Eve said, her fist beating a silent tattoo on her thigh, her eyes still on the ship. "Not. Gone."

Pradesh and I exchanged glances. This was not looking like a flowers and bunnies ending.

*

The main gangplank to the Griffin was manned by a gargantuan security guard. Barely within the normal human range for height, he towered over us, with a tuft of sandy hair somewhere up around the satellites. He was armed (somewhat redundantly) with a small handgun, but looked quite capable of taking apart a small starship using nothing but his bare hands. Eve was actually the tallest of the three of us, and she barely came up to his nipples. If he just stood there, offering no other resistance than his presence, we'd still have needed a scaling ladder to get over him. He also looked excruciatingly bored in the still, humid evening.

"Yeah, whaddya want?" he rumbled. It was like a volcano at the beginning of an eruption. I realised that Eve and Pradesh had withdrawn slightly, leaving me their spokesman. Thanks guys. I looked up into his thickly bearded face. I almost had to squint to see that far.

"Uh... the three of us," I cleared my throat, as my voice had disturbingly started half-an-octave higher than usual, "the three of us were wondering whether we could talk to the ship's captain?"

"Oh, yahwanna speak to th' Captain, do yah? Why'd yahwanna speak to th' Captain? The Captain's a busy man an' yahreckonyah need to speak to the Captain, do yah? So c'mon, why'd yahwanna speak to th' Captain?" The guard grinned in his beard. It must be a bloody boring job guarding a ship, and we were obviously a welcome diversion for the guard to vent his garrulous side on. Worse, there was a disturbing hint of intelligence behind the motormouth. The common belief that tall, heavily muscled security goons were mental midgets is not always supported by reality. I racked my brains in vain for the proper mix of creativity, plausibility and bald-faced deception necessary to get past this rather immovable looking obstacle. The stolid, sweaty silence behind me to either side indicated that no one else was about to put their hand up.

"We're... shareholders." I blurted, in a moment of inspiration. "We... ah... we've heard lots of rumours about this ship. They're saying that the company can't afford more fuel, that they're about to go bankrupt." I started speaking more and more quickly, for once glad about the ability of a simple lie to snowball into an avalanche of bullshit. "We demand to speak to the Captain!" I said, my voice ringing with all the outrage of the bourgeois shareholder with his affluence threatened.

The giant's face shifted expression as he tried that concept out for size. We certainly wouldn't pass for leading members of the local business community, but shares don't care who they're owned by. Companies care who shares are owned by, though, and guards care about companies who employ them. The guard peered down at me.

"Shareholders, eh? Yer worried 'bout yer shares, are yah? Well if yer worried 'bout yer shares, why ain't yah tried th' company slot before yah started ta bother th' Captain whydonyah?"

"It's broken." I said lamely, my confidence evaporating at the guard's common sense suggestion. A five-year-old could have picked my lie, and judging by height alone, the guard was a few more years than five.

"How's it broken?" he asked, in a voice as sweet as that monstrously-sized voicebox could manage. Owtch, this was going to hurt.

"Face smashed in." Eve interjected. "Wouldn't tell shareholders about ship." There was a moment's silence, then the guard's face crinkled in amusement.

"Well since I don't want tah end up like th' company slot, I might's well go get th' Captain."

The mountain moved to the side of the ship and spoke into an intercom set into the hull. We remained at the base of the ramp, shuffling our feet nervously. We were far out on a limb now, and it was a fifty-fifty chance as to whether we grabbed the fruit or the branch snapped underneath us. After a time, the hatch rumbled and opened, and a nervous looking older man emerged. He argued with the guard for some minutes. We couldn't pick up all the words, but muttered phrases like "... orders are clear...", "... arguin' with th' stock exchange...", "... contact the directors..." and so on. The guard seemed to be enjoying the discomfort he was putting the man through, while the Captain looked like he'd rather face another swarm of pirates rather than do the duties of a company spin-doctor. Eventually, either logic or the pure physical threat of the guard won the day, and he reluctantly skulked down the gangplank, the guard following him with a highly amused look on his face.

"Sirs... and Madam, may I assure you that your... investments are safe with Sirius and Wolf." he began.

"Where..." Eve began. I gently nudged her with my elbow. We didn't have a hope in hell of maintaining the deception if she started demanding that he hand over her consignment right now or she'd belt him one.

"Then what is the reason that this ship is laid up here and not winging its way to its destination? Why are you not where you are supposed to be? Why has no one seen fit to inform us of what is going on? I shall really have to complain!" I said, going on the offensive, putting a slight middle-class whine to my voice. The Captain did not look (despite his position) like the commanding figure of action, more the mild mannered clerk. And the best way of discomforting a clerk is to tell them that they're not doing their job properly, and that you'll get them in trouble with their superiors.

"A few... ah... minor... engine problems." he passed a hand over his mouth furtively.

"Minor engine problems?" I said, genuinely shocked at the baldness of the lie. "What, like half of it has been blown away by laser fire?"

The Captain looked at me strangely, and I realised I'd dropped out of character.

"Look, I'm obviously no expert in these sort of things, but your ship has obviously been damaged in some form of altercation in space. I'm not worried about that. And obviously, I wouldn't have invested in a company that couldn't protect its cargo."

"Well, the thing is... it's not the fault of me and my crew, but..."

"You did bring the cargo back, didn't you?" I asked quietly. Later on, lying in my bunk that night, I reviewed what happened after I said that. The way that the Captain's face became one huge confession of guilt when I said that last sentence. I'd been planning to continue with my pomposity, but the sight of that change stopped me in my tracks. A wretched expression blossomed on his honest clerk's face as he tried to defend his professionalism. If you had any perception, you could read chapter and verse of what had happened just by seeing how his brow compressed and his mouth sagged. I realised that the question was now effectively rhetorical. The bomb had been triggered, now we just had to wait for the mushroom cloud. Heedless, the nervous Captain accelerated his dancing around the point. Waltz, jazz, tango.

"... there's been a lot of pirate activity in this system recently. Medical supplies have been particularly vulnerable since... since..."

"Cargo. What happened?" A hand placed itself on my chest and shoved my beefy frame aside with barely an effort. I staggered backwards, and the giant guard tensed as Eve moved in front of the captain, who quailed but didn't run. Eve's stare was a little too intense, her grey gaze a little too bright for comfort. Pradesh cupped a hand under my elbow as I fell against him, his gaze fixed upon centre stage.

"They, ah... destroyed our escort... and... and... look, my crew have got families, children..."

With a wail, Eve launched herself at the captain, her scarred miner's hands raining down blows upon him. The guard had prepared for this, and shouldered the Captain aside, reaching out those massive arms to try to pinion the now frantic Eve, but in a surprising move, she slithered under his grasp and rammed her shoulder into his groin. With anyone else, it would have been his solar plexus. Being as tall as he was, the goalposts, as it were, had shifted. The effect was almost identical, however, as his eyes glazed, crossed, and he fell onto his knees. The Captain had decided that cowardice was the better part of shareholder relations and attempted to flee to the safety of his ship. In a few heavy strides up the ramp, Eve seized his collar and spun him round like a top. She shook him as if he weighed less than nothing.

"My child! My child! Where? WHERE?" she shouted, spittle striking him in the face. "What happened my child? Damn you. Where?"

Pradesh and I reached her before she managed to do much damage, and dragged her off him. Pradesh's face was as pale as Eve's was florid. Tears exploded out of her eyes and were streaming down her cheeks. She was a strong woman, and I thanked whatever Deities were out there that my high-G heritage had given me high enough muscle density to overpower (barely) bigger humans. Between us, we picked her up and dragged her away from the ship.

"My child..." she wheezed, "my... ch-child..."

As I'd suspected, not a flowers and bunnies ending.

Mo her Lo e - R r

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

"Where the hell have you been?" I looked up as the hatch swung open, and a tired looking Pradesh entered the ship, bringing with him a blast of humid air. I'd been left to care for and console Eve, who was now sleeping fitfully after a mild sedative from the ship's first aid kit. The two or three hours that had just passed were not ones I ever wanted to repeat, and they'd been all the harder having to do them alone. I felt a strong compulsion to have a good long shout at Pradesh, but knew that the soundproofing for the guest stateroom wasn't good enough to guarantee that I wouldn't wake Eve up.

"Drinking..." he said, passing a hand over his eyes.

"Oh that's just peachy. Here I am, playing bloody..." I said, firmly placing my foot in the stirrups of my High Horse.

"Drinking with the security guard Eve dropped, Commander. He's not pressing charges." Pradesh said, looking hurt.

"Ah... well done, Pradesh. Sorry." I said, dismounting quickly. Shouldering a security guard in the nuts was not usually how to endear yourself to a station's administration, and I was glad that Pradesh had dealt neatly with the problem.

"Also, I've learned what happened to the ship." Pradesh said, only partially mollified. I raised my hands in submission.

"I give up, Pradesh, you have thought of everything. Well, I've been talking to Eve, and I think between us we might have the full picture." I said, crossing to the command chair and sinking gratefully into it. Pradesh remained standing. He straightened himself up and stared straight ahead. He had a habit of 'reporting' as if he were giving a speech to the board. I'd long given up trying to get him to sit down and relax. Pradesh was a package, and I couldn't pick and choose the traits I wanted. If this was the cost of a supremely efficient and methodical co-pilot, then I'd deal with the nagging realisation that Pradesh had gone to a far more expensive school than I. The Lomasport District 5 Technical School was hardly in the same league, really.

"The guard... or Jonas, rather... tells me that there's a religious enclave of about ten thousand souls in a system about six light years away called Miandfa. They're... a bit extreme in some ways. For one thing, they refuse to use synthetic tissue."

"No unnatural flesh shall enter our bodies lest our Lord God get confused about which bits rise from the grave on Judgment Day." I intoned sepulchraly. Pradesh's eyes flicked to my face in annoyance, but I stared at him with a straight-faced expression of pure innocence. He continued reproachfully.

"Something like that, Commander. The problem is that about a week ago, there was an earthquake, with over a hundred deaths and over a thousand serious injuries. It basically drained all their reserves of blood. A lot of injured people and not a lot of spare units of blood."

The look of faux-innocence on my face faded as the implications bit.

"And since they refuse to culture any more blood, they're stuck with what they've got, what they can draw from the uninjured population and what they can ship in." I felt a moment of pity for the colonists. Regardless of the loopiness or otherwise of their beliefs, they were in a horrible humanitarian crisis. While personally, I'd choose the possibility of eternal spiritual damnation over the near-certainty of painful, physical death, not everyone thought that way.

"And while the surrounding systems have been pretty generous with donations, profiteers have been flying there and offering blood and other medical supplies at highly inflated prices." Pradesh's voice took on a censorious note.

I just shrugged. I'd been involved in enough morally dodgy deals to realise that disaster is merely an opportunity under an alias, and that sometimes the fight against pragmatism is lost before it starts. "So it appears that Miss Eve was the victim of an an upsurge in piracy."

Timing is almost everything in almost every walk of life, and it appears that Eve's timing had been atrocious. Poor woman.

"Commander, I took another look at the ship. It's about an aggressively wielded cricket bat away from being junk. If the ship lost its escort and was damaged that badly, I'm frankly not surprised that the captain ejected his cargo."

Pradesh finished uncomfortably. I fought a smile. Pradesh was an endearing mix of cynicism and innocence, and the two managed to co-exist without seeming contradiction.

"Me neither. Cold as it sounds, he did the right thing."

"But Commander, I still don't understand what Miss Eve was talking about. The ship was a cargo lugger. It had two passenger staterooms, but neither of them was occupied. I don't understand what she was talking about with her child." Pradesh relaxed from his 'reporting' stance, and looked at me questioningly. I picked up my spud-gun and set the little beetle-like target robot on its feet. It began to trundle across the console.

"Ah yes..." I sighed, reaching for a potato. I was about to condense ten years of life (gleaned between tearful hysteria) into a few pithy sentences. "Well it's a bit complex. Eve's a widower, and her husband died about six years ago. She hasn't really..." I paused to try and search for the right words, "taken it all that well."

"But she seems so calm!" Pradesh mounted the obvious comment.

"For some people, calmness is a wonderful way of not having to deal with things." I countered. I levelled the spud-gun and squeezed, and the little robot went keeled over on its side. "One of the things she's struggled with is that her husband didn't have any living relatives."

"The last of his line." Pradesh nodded, understanding instantly. In the feudal system of the Empire, genealogy was more than a hobby, it was a system of government. "But I would have thought artificial insemination would have been easy enough."

"Not after thirty five years of working in radioactive and toxic environments. Her body chemistry is so out of whack there's almost no way for her body to carry a baby to term. She's effectively barren." I said bluntly. "After thirty five years in space, you and I will be pretty much the same."

A look of horror suffused Pradesh's face, and his hand sunk surreptitiously towards his crotch. Mentally, I slapped myself for frightening the poor lad. I continued quickly. I let the robot scuttle away and tossed the spud-gun between my hands.

"We'll stop off at medical centre at the next stop shall we, and freeze some sperm to send back to Achenar, shall we? The idea of little Pradeshes not bouncing merrily along the spaceways fills me with as much horror as it does you. Fortunately, Mrs and Mr Eve had been sensible and prepared for the eventuality. They had the eggs and sperm, but nowhere to gestate. So after he'd been dead a year or two, Eve contacted a certain firm in Barnard's Star..."

"An artificial womb?" Pradesh said, having recovered his equilibrium.

"Exactly. She couriered off her eggs and his sperm and..."

Pradesh's mouth was a perfect 'O'.

"... her child." I finished, getting up. "And believe me, she's not seeing it as just a cluster of cells. She's retiring from the mining business. She's bought herself out of every concern she's invested in, she's picked out a nice place on Alioth, she's bought enough toys and clothes to outfit the kid until he or she is in their late teens."

"She sounds like a... devoted mother, Commander." Pradesh said weakly. I understood the feeling, the discomfort of listening to someone plan their child's life while it was still a dormant piece of tissue in a duralium cylinder of nutrients. All delivered in a slow monologue punctuated by quiet sobs. I'd be going to sleep with the light on tonight. Otherwise my mind would fill in the darkness with endless repetitions of this scene.

"Yes, the poor thing. She can try again, but the tanks are expensive and she's not made of money. This might have been her only chance. All ruined by some scumbucket pirate trying to get rich quick off a human disaster. The universe just makes you want to spit sometimes." I paced up and down. I was angry because I was helpless, and that bad things happen to good people with sickening regularity.

"Is there anything we can do for her?" Pradesh asked, wringing his hands.

"Take her home is about the only thing that... hang on, she's coming."

Eve emerged unsteadily from the stateroom door, her eyes red and her face a snow-pale caricature of its former self. Although we both tried to give her some dignity, pity suffused both our faces. She saw it and her jaw tightened.

"This." she said, bringing around a short stubby cylinder about the thickness of a wrist around from behind her back. "Mining Charge. My child. Find now." she stared at us with burning, desperate defiance. The spud-gun dropped to the ground as we stared at her. She looked serious. Behind us, the target robot scuttled to cover under the control console.

"I think I might have left it a stop too late for that sperm donation, Commander." Pradesh whispered.

"Uh huh." I nodded, realising that there might not be any little Ravens bouncing across the spaceways either.

*

I didn't find out how The Hulk got there until much later, but the story went something like this. Forty or so years ago, a Panther Clipper misjumped, burning out its drive and ending up halfway between Exhoed and Dainay. Now in nine times out of ten, this spells a slow, painful death for the crew by starvation and asphyxiation. Fortunately for the crew, they were also shipping a tiny little Falcon in its hull, which by an even more fortuitous stroke of luck, had a Witchspace capable drive. The craft raised the alarm and managed to fetch enough help to rescue both crew and cargo. The ship, on the other hand, was quite problematic. The cost of getting even the smallest possible drive there and paying a crew to stay there for a fortnight to install it properly was astronomical and the ship was rather old and beat up. So they wrote off the ship as an operating expense, stripped it of everything that could be easily removed and left it there.

However, most spacers (not excluding myself) have tongues that wag like a Three-Tailed Facecean Dog. The story got out and certain people whose names need not be mentioned (and whose names it might be unwise to mention) one day casually set coordinates for deep space. Salvage is perfectly legitimate where there are no laws, and that was the kind of region these people wanted. It was outside anyone's jurisdiction, and those certain people had certain business whose transactions were best carried out in the absence of official observation. They didn't care about a new drive system, only needing basic life support, a place to store things and a hideously garish new green paint job. The result was incredible:

"My God, what a wretched hive of scum and villainy." I said, looking with some interest at the sight on my screen. The old hulk was lit up like a Dreamware Premiere, highlighting the ugliness of the craft. The formerly graceful lines of the Clipper were obscured by tumorous bulges where the owners of the craft had decided a new section needed to be tacked onto the superstructure. The scanner showed about thirty ships lazily circling the hulk, and the Radar Mapper indicated that many thousands of credits of bounty would be reaped if you could somehow let off an Energy Bomb in the middle of it. These were serious criminals, Mafiosi, Yakuza, Triads, whatever you wanted to call them. The ships were clean, well fitted out and well armed. I could see why the local police hadn't raided the place, as it would be like trying to raid an arms fair.

As we watched, I saw a Moray approach a Transporter at a slow speed, until they were at a range which could only be called intimate. Suddenly there was a flash at the front of the craft and a cargo pod exploded from the Tractor Scoop at the front. I focused a scanner on the pod, and the spectrographic readout indicated that the pod contained a highly complex and lethal chemical compound atomised into a nitrogen-oxygen atmospheric mix. Nerve Gas, in layman's terms. The Moray pulled away, and the front of the Transporter cracked open like a clamshell for the lethal cargo slowly drifting towards it. The cargo pod was swallowed up and the clamshell closed. Fascinated, I watched as the Moray circled the larger craft for almost five minutes. Then the thrusters on the Transporter flared, the prow revolving until it faced the Moray. The clamshell front of the ship cracked open again, and three pods of Narcotics floated back. Commerce at work in its most primitive form. The Transporter moved away from the main mass of ships and engaged its Hyperdrive. The Laws of Physics were bent, then broken, until nothing remained of the departed ship but an expanding cloud of orange gas.

"It here?" Eve asked quietly. I started as I realised how close she was behind me, her hand still clutching the dull grey metal of the mining charge. Two days had passed since she'd given us her ultimatum. During that time there had been three or four windows where I might have been able to grab the charge off her. However, for all I knew, she had it on a periodically reset timer, or had set it to detonate as soon as her biometrics weren't in contact with it, or for that matter as soon as it fell out of her hand, or...

Pradesh wasn't taking this well, he seemed to be sweating almost continually, which couldn't have been good for his electrolytes. He kept on nervously glancing round at Eve, or if she wasn't there, at the stateroom door. To an extent, I was glad that he was in a continual state of panic, as it stopped me from being able to comfortably slip into that state.

"It here?" Eve said again, annoyance edging her voice.

The guard, Jonas, had once again been our best friend, giving Pradesh both the description of the pirate mothership (gleaned from the Griffin's crew), their name (Big Momma) and these co-ordinates. Pradesh assured me that we owed him big time if we ever got back there. I really wished he hadn't used the word 'if'.

"Yep. Looks like it over there. The big Skeet cruiser." I zoomed in, where I read 'Big Momma' painted crudely on the side in a three-metre-high cursive script. Around it were clustered five ships of various sizes and states of repair. The baby sharks and their unholy mother, the parent crammed with the kills of the children.

"Battle? Beat it?" Eve looked at me questioningly.

"Not bloody likely." I snorted. "Regardless of my violent aversion to dying, and the fact that we're outnumbered and outgunned by a factor so big I'm not going to bother mentioning it, even if we managed to destroy it, there's a good chance we'd destroy the ... ah... its cargo," I stumbled. I couldn't quite get bring myself to call a tank of nutrients and a tiny piece of tissue her child, "at the same time, and we'd be fighting over the remains with thirty five other ships and..."

"No." Eve fixed me with a piercing gaze. I sighed. If her child was lost, or dead or sold, then it would be better for her to set off that charge to end her suffering. Worse for me and Pradesh, certainly, but better for her. "No." Eve repeated, stepping back. She glared at me.

There was a silence that lasted perhaps twelve seconds. We were on one of those tipping points where things could go either way. Neither option was good. Eve stared at me, I eyeballed her back. You could have cut the air with a blunt butter knife. Her hand shifted on the mining charge and I came as close as I ever have to praying, offering up a silent entreaty that she wouldn't trigger it by accident.

"We have some computers, Miss Eve." Pradesh broke the silence with an apparent non-sequitur. We both turned to look at him, and he started as Eve's burning gaze turned on him. He didn't flinch, though, and completed his thought. "We may be able to barter for your shipment with the pirates who took it. That's what this place is all about"

There was an uncomfortable couple of seconds, then Eve nodded, relaxing her shoulders. I breathed out. We'd tipped, and it was the least worst option. But... there was a light in her eyes, the grey shot through now with golden radiance. She had hope now, she could almost hold her baby in her arms. She was borderline delusional.

"Pay back later.." she stabbed a finger at the hulk on the viewscreen. "Go. Now." she said, backing away. The stateroom door clanged shut. An unrealised detonation remained in the room with us. I looked sideways at Pradesh. He wasn't sweating. He was all sweated out.

"Well done, Pradesh. We're still alive." I said, my voice cracking.

Pradesh shook his head. "A temporary reprieve, Commander."

"It's at least some sort of plan. Okay, let's see what we need to do to get entry into this poker club."

Mo her Lo e - R r 4

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

"Deal made?"

"That's the good news." I hedged, watching the gun-metal cylinder roll from one of Eve's hands to the other. It was such a tiny thing, that bomb. "I managed to find a fellow Cooperworldian, who seemed inclined to trust me when I dropped a few local names to establish my bona fides."

Mostly those of mafioso I'd worked for. If it ever got back to the individuals in question that I'd taken their names in vain, a visit back home would have to be delayed until... well... until they were all dead of old age. It had created a bond, though, and Cole and I had promised to keep in touch.

"The other?" Eve's brow furrowed.

I took a deep breath as I related the bad news part. "I made a deal for eight tons of medicines, for our computers plus half the profit we make when we sell them."

"Eight?" Eve said suspiciously, stepping forward.

"Of about twenty that they've got." I added reluctantly. "That's a two in five chance. And believe me, it's better than none in five, which was the chance before I..." I paused, as I realised that Eve was not taking my mercantile triumph in the way I might have hoped. She'd asked for the impossible, which I hadn't quite managed to deliver.

"Unacceptable. Two five chance? No." Eve's brows had compressed to an angry, scornful line, which for her stolid nature was the equivalent of a blazing rage.

"Look, Eve, if I had a fleet of fighters and the authority of the Federal Police, then we might have a chance to recover your child by force and threat. If we had a hold full of Altairean massage oils, then we could easily buy what we need. All you've got is me, Pradesh, a freshly serviced Constrictor and a hold full of economy-model data processors." I laid it out for her, in the somewhat vain hope that the hulking pink elephant of reality might suddenly loom in her vision. Eve snarled and turned away, her shoulders shaking with rage at the unfairness of it all. A child had been so far away when her husband had died, had come as close as a short hyperjump and had then receded to the vanishing point. The hand with the mining charge beat out a silent rhythm of distress, wobbling like a relay baton mid-race. She seemed at the end of her tether.

I quietly rose from my seat and prepared myself for desperate acts. Violence usually begets violence, but I was hoping that in this case it wouldn't beget a detonation. I shifted onto the balls of my feet.

"Commander." Pradesh squeaked, seeing my intention. Eve spun around at this and stared daggers of suspicion at me. I shrugged, showing my hands. Eve calmed down. Most people think that this means that you're not going to hurt them. I'd learned differently, and given an opening, would show her that difference.

"What?" she barked at Pradesh. For a second, he looked too terrified to speak, but recovered his composure. Slightly. "If you could maybe... gain access to the ship? Maybe... maybe you could select the cargo from the Sirius and Wolf ship as... your... barter?"

I considered. Eve switched her attention to me. I began to snort in contempt at the simple-mindedness of the plan, but realised just in time that I might as well sign my own death warrant if I did that.

"An... interesting idea, Pradesh." I said non-committally. "But there's no hope that this ship," I struck the wall next to me affectionately. "Would get within a hundred metres of *Big Momma* before it got cut to pieces."

"You said that the broker liked you, being from the same planet." Pradesh said pleadingly, looking at the ominously motionless Eve.

"What's not to like?" I muttered bitterly, "But I doubt he could persuade the captain to let two Cooperworld boys onto his ship..." I stopped as a thought occurred to me. A grin spread across my face as I realised what an evil, treacherous thought it was, and how much pleasure it would give me to bring it about.

*

"Cole, open up this damn door, Cole... I've got some fun for you!" I blurted. I wasn't practiced at pretending to be drunk, but I was making as good a fist of it as I could. I was using the many times I'd actually been drunk as a

"If we come across any decent biometric locks, they could tell if he was unconscious." I explained patiently. Hauling him into a sitting position, I lifted him over my shoulder and walked through the hatch into the mini-shuttle. All the panels were dark and the shuttle was silent. I lowered him into the pilot's seat and squeezed into the passenger station. Eve shuffled in and shut the hatch behind us, standing awkwardly behind the seat. As I'd thought, it was a tight-fit. I pressed Cole's hand flat over the instrument panel and 'turned the key'. Around us, light spread like ripples upon a pond and from behind us the gurgle and rumble of the startup sequence for the craft's tiny prime mover began to permeate the cabin.

Leaning across Cole's inert, but not unaware body, I pressurised the ship and began to uncouple the docking clamps. As a precaution, I also disabled the visual feed to the comms system. Neither my unfamiliar face nor Cole's slightly drooling one would help continue the charade. I leaned back as the sequence began. and glanced across as the struggling eyelids which were the only degree of bodily control which Cole still possessed.

"Look, if it's any comfort to you, Cole, I'm not a narc or a bounty hunter... uh... a working bounty hunter. Your ship's not in danger, either."

As expected, he didn't reply. Well. He couldn't, could he?

The mini-shuttle lurched forward as it separated from the hulk. Having neither the time or desire for subtlety, I just set the autopilot for *Big Momma* and sat back. For several minutes, there was nothing but the slow, steady beep of the autopilot homing in on its mothership. Slowly, it filled the viewport, and I could hear Eve's breathing get heavier behind me as the end point of all her fantasies grew closer. Then came the loud blaring of a communications hail. I crossed my fingers and reached forward to answer.

"Yeah?" I said, roughening and deepening my voice as much as possible.

"Cole." said the voice on the other end. There was a pause. Obviously a response was replied, and expected. I fought my rising sense of panic. Concentrate on the positive, he'd recognised me for who I wasn't.

"Yeah?" I said, for want of anything else. The response was a throaty laugh.

"Surly bastard today, aren't you? Well, Cole, Captain wants to know if you struck any deals today, you miserable sod."

I bit my lip. Bravado didn't seem Cole's style, so maybe understatement was required. "One or two. Nothing special, kid." I said, praying for our shared accent to save me. There was another pause.

The same voice said again, with a note of irritation. "That's Captain Kid to you, Cole," Whoops! I hoped the Captain and Cole were close enough friends for that bit of insolence to pass.

"Ah... three standard hours before we need to worry about anything, Captain." I said, praying like hell he wouldn't ask me to elaborate. By this time, we were close enough to see the gun-emplacements and the ugly, battle scarred surface of the ship. The muzzles of the big 4MW batteries remained fixed on open space, but it would take the work of a millisecond for them to lock on to this tiny unshielded craft, and...

"Hah. Well make sure you come see me at least a standard hour beforehand, you lazy bastard. And try and sober up before you fly. Don't want you crashing the ship and ruining the duco, do we?" the captain sneered, laughing (erroneously) at his own wit.

The comm bleeped as the connection terminated.

"Ruin paintjob further? Hah." Eve surprised me. She sounded happy. I was too relieved that we were alive to be happy.

Mo her Lo e - R r 5

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

We gained access to the ship easily enough, and the tiny docking bay was empty of crew. Eve and I slunk out of the ship, leaving the immobile Cole to silently fume. As a slight consolation, I left the bottle of single malt open next to him. Well, okay, less consolation than intentional mild torture. He'd remain paralysed for at least another six hours. I'd already concocted a story about needing to renegotiate a contract allowing 'Cole' to get back to the hulk after we'd secured Eve's 'child'. It wasn't good, but it was the best I'd managed to come up with in the limited time available.

I'd looked up the schematics of the factory standard-Skeet Cruiser on a whim several years ago and thought that I could remember how to get to the Cargo Bay. I carried the Sonic Baton in my hand in case we met any crew on the way, along with Eve's every-present mining charge. Eve had been expert at blackmailing us, so I could only hope that she'd be as good at blackmailing the pirates, if it came to that.

The ship was dimly lit and ill-kempt as far as ships go. Obviously although crime paid, it didn't pay that well. We snuck along the passages, pausing at every creak in the superstructure, every far off click of some unknown machinery. Once or twice, we heard far-off voices, but never footsteps that might bespeak opposition.

After a while, we came upon a large airlock door. As this faced into the middle of the ship rather than space, it hopefully led into the cargo bay. A set of facemasks with belt canisters sat on hooks on the wall next to it.

Eve sighed. "Low ox environment." she said succinctly, reaching out to grab one and strap it on.

"So we need to wear the masks?" I said stupidly.

She nodded, and tapped a button on the side of the mask. "Radio."

I shook my head, "We can't use it. Too much of a chance that it's patched into the main comms systems. We'll have to talk mask to ear." I lifted the mask in my hand until it touched the side of her head.

Eve nodded, then reached over and turned the wheel that opened the outer airlock door.

*

There are many types of cargo bay. Many of the nicer ones are like a miniature warren of corridors and cargo bays, whilst others are a central corridor with a series of gantries and sealed areas. Others, like this one, were basically a single, cavernous, barely pressurised, barely lit, barely heated room with a cargo pods (with varying contents) stacked on the floor in geometrically neat rows, each held in place on either side by sections of grating pivoted upwards for the purpose. Below the grating, you could faintly see the tracks of the maglev rail system for moving the pods from cargo scoop to the bay and back. Here and there were dotted the dull glow of a control panel for the cargo bay and maglev rail. Eve stood there surveying this miserable panorama along with me. I gestured to her, and she leaned down until my mask touched her ear.

"Shit!" I shouted.

She leaned back, looked at me and nodded. From what I could see of her face behind the mask, it was stormy, but still had the eager expression she'd worn ever since we'd boarded the ship. The fact that we'd have to search perhaps a hundred cargo pods for the one from the Sirius and Wolf ship and then search within that pod for Eve's child. Impossible? No. Improbable? Yes. The control panels were achingly attractive, but hacking into the cargo bay's computer system was too dangerous. But one look at her figure, resolute with hope, gave me no hope of my own. Her unwavering belief that motherhood was the only thing that would free her made her realisation of motherhood the only thing that would free us.

Eve tapped me on the shoulder and nodded towards the ladder leading to the floor. For a moment, I considered turning and running. If I could jam the airlock and stop her from following me, she could threaten all she liked with the Mining Charge, but I'd probably manage to get far enough away to avoid the blast. To hell with her, and to hell with this bloody whole mess. Sighing, I followed Eve to the ladder. Time to get to work. Unfortunately, there was no real other way. The plan was a sound one, as long as I was willing to condemn Eve to a miserable, degrading fate. I wanted to sleep at night. The only thing I could really do is follow Eve from container to container...

... which I did. Fortunately, most of them had small plastic badges which indicated their contents, or at least their shipping company, which was not the ill-fated Sirius and Wolf. But a lot of them were either unmarked or could-

perhaps-maybe-be, which meant we had to open up the containers and examine their contents, wincing at every loud scrape and clang in the thin atmosphere as the doors hissed open for us to shine our lights in. Often, all the light revealed were other ambiguously-marked boxes, which we had to drag out and lever open.

A couple of times, we found pods of medical supplies. Eve stood quivering as I opened them, only to have her hopes dashed again and again, by me finding nothing but blood, blood and more blood. Hundreds of units to a pod, each carefully marked with insignia, species origin and blood group. Each of these had been siphoned from the arm of a being possibly a hundred light years away, carefully stored for transfer to another warm blooded being who they had never met, would never meet, but whose life they might save. Momentarily I felt a warm humanistic glow. But for Eve, those saved lives meant nothing, she wanted to create a new life. The only life that this would really save would be her own.

Every couple of minutes, I would look at my watch and fret. The two hours I'd bought from the captain were evaporating quickly, and we'd covered a bare majority of the pods on the floor. I looked at my watch. Twenty minutes remained before I'd said I'd contact the captain, and I was wondering whether it would be unwise to try and contact the captain and try to prolong the charade. As my eyes rose, I saw Eve stagger back from the pod she was examining. It was a large one, with several tubes and wires running over the outside of it. I hurried over to where she pointed with a shaking hand towards the side of a pod. I looked perplexedly at what looked like black plastic. Then I realised that there was a light deep within the pod, and I looked through the window. Inside, four or five dimly lit naked human figures (of indeterminate sex) were visible, lounging on a low couch. They were alive, but their movements were slow and dreamlike through the frosted glass. I stepped back and brought my facemask up to Eve's ear.

"Slaves, Eve. It's a cargo pod of slaves. They're doped up to the eyeballs."

I leaned back and watched as pity spread across her face. She made a disconsolate gesture with her hand. I shook my head, averting my eyes from either her gaze or that sad little window. As horrible as the fate was that awaited the poor souls, the pure logistics of freeing, reviving, clothing and getting these poor souls back to the shuttle (let alone to our ship) were too difficult to contemplate. They were far safer (in the short term) safe in their life-supported pod, dreamily unaware of anything except simple bodily functions and their next watery serve of nutrients. It was a hideous experience, but one cushioned by massive amounts of drugs and safeguarded by sophisticated monitoring equipment. Very few slaves died in the "middle passage" nowadays. It was too uneconomic. I tugged at Eve's arm, my fingers as numb with cold as her flesh. She dragged herself away from the pod and we moved onto the next one.

*

This was it. It had to be. Sirius and Wolf badge, a recent 'sealed' date and the snakes-and-staff symbol used for millennia to denote medicine. I levered myself inside and flicked the light on. For once, the interior was not the racks and racks of clear, blood filled bags but boxes and shrink wrapped stethoscopes, scissors and laser sealers. General, unglamorous medical equipment. This was it, it had to be. Eve had carefully described her 'child' to me. A dark green, metallic cylinder, about eighty centimetres in diameter and a metre tall, with.... ah, there it was. I breathed out as I saw the end of all my troubles, hiding behind a pallet of 36 spray-on skin aerosols. Though the surface was dark and sucked in the light of my torch, as far as I was concerned, it was shining like a star. A series of three lights on the top of the cylinder gleamed green-green-green. The unit-child was still 'sealed', 'viable' and 'alive'. I thanked whatever deity it is that looks after agnostic bounty hunters and grabbed it with both hands, wriggling backwards out of the narrow entrance to the cargo pod. Eve was waiting there with sphynx-like patience, regarding me impassively as I emerged. Then she saw what was in my hand. A ripple passed over her entire body. Her hands were suddenly on either side of the cylinder, tugging urgently (if gently) at it. I gladly relinquished it, and finished climbing to my feet. Revealed in the dim light of the hold of a pirate ship, I saw Eve cradling the cylinder in her arms, with tears welling up in her eyes. Mother and child stood in intimate tableaux as her hands caressed the cold metal skin that would give birth to warmer flesh. This was the moment she'd been waiting for for God knew how many years; God knew how many tears she'd been storing up for this one moment. The dreams of youth and a long dead soulmate finally finding fruition in this metal cylinder, full of future, of hope, of continuance. For a brief moment, I forgot the fact that she'd blackmailed us and threatened us and frightened the shit out of us. I forgot the concentrated threat of the mining charge. I just watched and even managed a smile. It was a near-perfect moment.

*

"Find em'. Find 'em and hold 'em." came the crackling sound of Cole's voice over the mask radios. Near-perfection shattered into near-disaster. I stiffened in horror, as did Eve, her hands tightening on her child, mining charge falling to the ground. I winced at the sound of it rattling on the metal grating, then threw a hand across my face, diving to one side as I realised what Eve had dropped. We were all dead. The sound of the bouncing mining charge echoed off the hundreds of hard surfaces in the hold. From my place upon the floor I took my hands off their place

sheltering my head and lifted the latter to look at Eve, still frozen in her protective posture as the pitch of far-off footsteps changed as they dopplered closer. I scrabbled at my facemask and turned on the radio.

"I thought the mining charge was... you know... unstable." I said vaguely. Eve started, then lifted a hand to her own radio control.

"Sorry... ah... empty." she said, with deeply uncharacteristic sheepishness.

I reached up, turned off my radio and shouted the loudest and foulest obscenity I have ever cursed.

*

Mo her Lo e - R r 6

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

"I know you can hear me, Ravens and you're gonna wish you'd never been born." Cole screeched at me from whatever unknowable distance across the hold. Getting to my feet I got out my baton and flicked it to full length. Fighting our way out was not an option, but I had no idea how else we were going to survive. As a matter of fact, I had no idea how we were going to survive at all, but I preferred to think of the glass as being 0.00001% full rather than being a droplet shy of bone-dry. I saw the flicker of torchlight play across an intersection close to us, and pulled Eve into the meagre concealment between two cargo pods. Pulling her into a semi-embrace, I pressed my mask against her ear, feeling the cool weight of her child between us.

"Any ideas that don't revolve around a non-existent mining charge?" I said. She was shivering, though not from the near-freezing temperature. She shook her head violently and pressed the cold plastic of her mask against the side of my head.

"What they do?"

Oh, you think of this now do you? I fought back my immediate response, which was to relate in detail our probable fate.

"A lot of not very good things. Our only hope is that they haven't woken the whole ship. If this is just half-a-dozen pirates, we've still got hope. Let's hope Cole's impulsive rather than methodical." I said briskly. At the same time, I felt through the soles of my feet a thrumming on the deck. Someone was close. I broke apart from Eve and looked from side to side out either end of the narrow corridor formed by the two pods. I waved a hand at Eve to crouch down. Which direction was he coming from? The dull softness of sound in the low pressure environment gave no help. All I could rely on was the soles of my cursedly thick space-boots. Closer, closer. Left? Right? Left. Had to be. Or should that be right? Right? Very close now. Very close. I tensed myself and went into a semi crouch preparatory to springing. There was a twinge in my calf - not now, not now. Right. He had to be on the right. A flash of light from the left saved me as a torch flashed over the cargo pods. I eased past Eve and waited. The light flashed over the bulkheads again, like a temptation. I gave into it, bounding into the corridor. The man in front of me was a couple of metres away, but he seemed not to notice my presence right in front of him as I rushed him, swinging the baton. A sickening crack answered my baton's strike and he slumped sideways. I tumbled with him, trying to catch his body as it fell. I did, rolling softly on the decking. I waited for a second as my breath echoed noisily within the mask. No. No one had noticed. I lowered the body carefully to the ground, trying to ignore the suddenly staring brown eyes, fringed by dirty blonde hair. I searched his pockets, revealing a few gadgets and tools, a ring of key cards and a bag of boiled lollies. Not much to carry into the afterlife, really. His pistol, light attached, lay shining off into the darkness. I bent over and switched it off.

I softly treaded back to Eve's hiding place. Her look of gratitude that it was me who greeted her was made the more sickening by the fact that she was thanking me for killing someone. What made it worse was how grateful I was feeling myself. Wordlessly, I handed her the pistol, which she took unenthusiastically. I stared at the bric-a-brac that remained of the corpse's possessions. The key-cards caught my eye. Maybe there was a small chance if we could only...

Treading as softly as my large frame would allow, I led Eve across several intersections, nervously peering around the corner each time. Eventually I saw what we needed, one of the dimly lit control panels for the bay, sitting next to a rust-pitted container of mineral fuel gas. Eve tugged at my arm as we approached. I leaned against her mask.

"Used these before. What plan?"

I turned back to her and told her the plan, handing her the ring of keycards before she could think about it or pull away. She finally leaned back, disbelief in her face.

"Insane." she mouthed through the clear plastic of the mask.

I shrugged at her. Did she have a better suggestion? Of course not. After a moment's consideration, she nodded.

0 Td (t)0.878252(n)1.78252(t)0.84(n)1.2657(w)d1.78252(s)1.78252(ch)78252(d)1.78252()-89126()-1.78533(o)1478252(n)1.85992

"Fuck you Ravens. FUCK you!" came Cole's angry voice through the headsets. Despite knowing that he was (hopefully) still a long way away, I jumped. Ah, the body. Someone would have had to find it. It was just our luck that that someone had to be Cole. "I was gonna sell your arse to slavers but I'm gonna have to be more imaginative than that, aren't I? And trust me, you scum-plated excuse for a sewerage scow, I've got a good imagination."

I swallowed heavily, trying to convince myself that things hadn't really got any worse. Not that they really could have. I looked down, where Eve had paused in her programming, looking out into the middle distance, her expression (finally) showing some fear. I nudged her with my foot. Keep going Eve. Please keep going. She shook her head once and set back to her programming. Despite all my peering and listening, when the first pirate came, I was unaware until the last moment, until the tiniest vibration in the decking alerted me. The pirate had snuck up in the gap between cargo pods rather than coming down one of the passages, and here he was, looming behind me. My reaction was instinctive, pivoting, twisting, slamming the only thing close to hand into my assailant. The 'child' was a good six or seven kilos, and caught the pirate on the shoulder, sending him spinning to slam into a cargo pod of pressed fish oil from Merlin with a loud, resounding gong. He cannoned off that to collapse in a crumpled heap on the decking. I rushed over to him in case he wasn't unconscious yet, canister upraised in my arms. He was dead to the world, thankfully, and not dead, even more thankfully. I turned around to find Eve staring at me in horror. Well... not exactly me, but more what was in my arms. My bludgeon, her child. And sure enough, the 'sealed' register was flickering wildly between red and green. I held my breath and gently returned the child to an upright position, hoping beyond hope that the damn thing wasn't broken. If those little diodes turned red, then Eve was quite capable of sinking a despair which would kill us both. I flicked the radio on. "Green, green, green." I shouted at her. "Keep going, it's green, green, green." I said, in a terrible mantra. God knew what Cole and his crew made of that. And thankfully, the red winked out, to be replaced by bright, life-giving green. After a moment, Eve turned back to the panel. I turned to the pirate.

The impact had knocked his mask off, and his chest was rising and falling frantically in an effort to extract oxygen from the thin atmosphere. I leaned down and hooked the strap back around his ears, fixing the mask over his mouth and ears. His lungs slowly slackened back to something approximating normal respiration. I patted the canister. Best not to begin a life by causing a death, I thought.

"Almost done?" I said, heedless of whether or not Cole heard me. By the pounding I could feel underneath my feet we were seconds away from being discovered. Eve didn't bother looking up, which sent my heart sinking down through my groin, trickling down my right leg until it rested uncomfortably against my ankles. I set the 'child' down at my feet and drew my sonic baton. I turned it on, feeling the vibrations humming down my arm. Not that this would do much against handguns, but it at least made me feel a bit better to die armed and on my feet. I could have asked for better company though, rather than a bunch of vicious pirates, a maternally obsessed mining engineer and a cargo pod of flammable gas that had seen better days. I saw the beams of lights turn approach a corner and tightened my grip. I shot a glance at Eve, who still looked a-ways from finishing. I found myself missing Eve's mining charge. A threatened explosion was a damn fine thing to have about. At that moment, a light shone in my face.

I don't know what insight drove me, or whether it was just some animal instinct of frustration that caused my next action, striking sideways at the cargo pod with all my might. The sonic baton struck, delivering its deadly vibrational payload into the aged cargo pod with a sound like a homicidal tuning fork. A rent opened in its side, spewing out a plume of white gas under pressure.

"Oh, damaging property now, are we kid?" came Cole's voice as two, three, four more lights flashed on me. Uncomfortably, I realised that the lights playing across my face were, like their dead companion's, attached to the front of guns.

"Yeah, you know me." I snarled, with as much bravado as I dared. "All-around bad egg. Cooperworld boy turned rotten by hanging with the wrong crowd."

"You're never going to see Cooperworld again, kid." Cole said, his voice dripping with pleasure. "Don't worry though, I'll make sure your momma finds out what happened to you. I'll tell her personally." A low chuckle of crude amusement rippled through the airwaves. Shading my eyes, I tried to see past the glare to see how many of them there were. Too many. And at the front, Cole, preening like a morbidly obese peacock. That's it boys, enjoy the moment, we just need a little bit more time before-

"Put your fancy stick down, kid. It's over." Cole said roughly. The laughter stopped as if by switch.

"I don't think so." I said slowly. "You won't shoot me."

"Why not?" Cole asked mockingly, in an innocent child's voice. And it was a damn good question. I stole a quick glance at Eve. The carefulness and deliberateness of her movements meant that she was close. I hoped. Time. Just a little bit more time.

"Firstly... you wouldn't enjoy it -" I said, sounding far more confident than I felt.

"Like hell I wouldn't -"

"-enough. Secondly," and inspiration struck! "you don't want to die."

"You're beginning to bore me, Ravens. I may not enjoy it enough, but sometimes you just got to suck it and see." Cole sounded impatient, and I saw him raise his arm. The gun lights stopped playing over my body and settled on my face and head. Forcing aside the discomfort, I t

playing across the still-open entrance, hungrily seeking a target. And there was Eve, standing at the back of the pod, a flashlight swinging towards her like a wrecking ball. Then, with a juddering vibration, the door began to slide shut, the light being choked off just as it touched the edge of her face, disappearing from view, leaving us cloaked in the velvety half-light within the pod. Over the radio, I heard Eve gasp.

Atmosphere flooded into the pod through vents in the ceiling as the life-support systems of the pirate ship frantically tried to re-pressurise the pod with its precious cargo of human flesh.

“Open this damn pod! Goddamn you, open it up!” Cole’s frustrated voice crackled over the radio, and gun-butts began to hammer at the door. For a second, a face appeared through the window, made demented by the distortion of the frosted glass. It might have been Cole’s but I’m not sure. Then the face began to rise, as if taking flight, an angry angel ascending to call down the wrath of its deity. But no... we were sinking. Ominously, however, the hissing cut off. Even so, the bodies beneath me began to suck in great gasping breaths, and since I could actually hear those breaths, the atmosphere was probably thick enough to breathe. There was a rattle and then a clunk as we reached the maglev bogey, and the grapples got a hold of us. Then a gentle whisper of sound accompanied a great rush of acceleration that made Eve stagger against the wall of the pod. I might have fallen, save for the fact I was already on my backside. Eve finally gave way to gravity, collapsing backwards onto a couch, mildly pinned there by the acceleration. I was on the floor however, stuck staring into the eyes of a young man whose eyes were filled with terror. It was a terror masked by the soporifics in the atmosphere, but th

Mo her Lo e - Ep' oga e

[Cmdr. Red Ravens]

Choking! I was choking. I became aware of hands underneath my head which gently rotated it so that the vomit sprayed sideways rather than fatally choking me. And then the paroxysms died down, and all I could feel was the cool, crisp air that smelled slightly of cinnamon on my face. That, and the rivulet of vomit running down into my ear. I opened my eyes, and shut them again, hissing at the brightness.

"How do you feel, Commander?" Pradesh's reassuringly unanxious voice

"Like..." I coughed, and spat out a few last droplets. "Like shit."

"That's normal." said another, vaguely familiar voice. "At least we won't be puttin' the poor bugger straight down the slave mines like they usually would."

My flickering eyes opened wide at that. It sounded more than vaguely like a threat. Pradesh's hands were still on either side of my head, and I fought to release myself from his grip. I was as weak as a kitten, unfortunately, so he held me motionless, which only increased my panic.

"Calm down, Commander. It's just one of Rosseau's little jokes." came Pradesh's voice, with just a hint of censure in it for either the joke or for my panic.

"Rosseau, what's he doing here? We're not back on the hulk are we?" I said weakly, trying to concentrate on breathing.

"No, I hired him as my co-pilot, and he was amenable to a journey off the station." Pradesh explained.

"Yah. That big fight sorta ruined my prospects." Rosseau said laconically, moving into my field of vision.

"Fight?"

"Yah. When th' *Big Momma* started spewin' cargo canisters like there was no tomorrow everyone wanted to get in on th' action, scoopin' stuff up whilst tryin' not to get blown up. Like watching a Dreamware War Movie. Be months before there's enough trust t'get it going again."

Rosseau gave a shrug which somehow combined fatalism, regret and ruefulness in the same tiny gesture. I felt a tiny surge of pride for my contributions to space commerce.

"Upsy-daisy Commander." Pradesh said briskly, bringing me to a sitting position. My stomach unleashed a wave of nausea, but I told it quite firmly that it was in no position to dictate terms. I looked weakly around as Pradesh passed me a cup of water. We were in a long, low room with open sides that looked out onto a yellow grassy plain. The air was hot and dry, and with the aforementioned aroma of cinnamon. Behind my was the slave pod I'd just spent a large period of time in, if the smell of my clothes was anything to go by. The door was open, and several slumped naked bodies were in there, twitching drunkenly at the long-forgotten experience of air without sedatives. Next to me was a trolley with medical supplies on it which had obviously been used to revive me more speedily. Just visible outside the shed was the reassuring low bulk of my ship. I don't know whether I've ever been as glad to see it's ugly, laser-scarred mass as I was right then. However, there was one familiar figure I couldn't see.

"Eve? Where is she?"

Pradesh's mouth assumed a thin, prim line at the concern in my voice.

"She recovered before you did and left with a large cylinder."

"But didn't you..." I said, disbelievingly.

"Commander, I... it's not as though I wanted to keep that bitch around for any longer than necessary." The quite unexpected profanity from Pradesh left me in no doubt as to the strength of his feelings. Well, I hadn't told him yet that the charge was a fake...

I felt calm descend over me. Eve had found what she'd wanted, and I had no doubt that in the fullness of time, a healthy increase in my Fifth National Bank of Miphize account would occur, and that we would never hear from Eve again. She'd gotten what she wanted from us, and had (in most ways thankfully) passed from our lives forever. As Rosseau and Pradesh helped me to my feet, I wondered briefly whether I would ever know anything about the

child. The idea that I'd never learn anything more than what I already knew somehow left me feeling cheated. I'd had about as much to do with it coming into existence as any non-parent could. I hadn't brought about its life, but I'd certainly brought about its birth, which made me feel strangely responsible. Not that I would have anything more to do with... yes, I could now call it Eve's child. The chances of two specific atoms meeting in deep space is so unlikely as to be almost miraculous. It was something I felt pleasure about, with every friend I accrued. But the chances of those two atoms meeting again by chance would be beyond reason. I'd brought the child life, I had no more to offer it. I bent over and retched again. Pradesh sighed, moved over to the trolley and began to pack it up.

"There was one weird thing..." Rosseau breathed in my ear as he levered me upright.

"Yeah?"

"That woman your co-pilot kinda wants to disembowel. She did ask one question before she staggered off. Your co-pilot didn't want to answer, but she's very persuasive for a woman of few syllables." Rosseau stared at me with a strangely appraising air.

"What?" I couldn't imagine anything more Eve would need from us.

"Your full name... Harvey..." Rosseau chuckled, as most people do when they discover 'Harvey'. I, however, was busy thinking. Why would she want my name? What was so vital that she dared Pradesh's homicidal intent to stay for that information. The answer swelled up in a huge rush of significance. I fought feelings of both awe and pride as I realised there might be a little Ravens bouncing around the spaceways after all.

No More Living

[Declan O hAilpan]

Declan O hAilpan was thirteen, angry and restless. Had Declan been thinking slightly more clearly, he would have noted the tautology. As it was, he stomped up the grassy hill, heedless of his aunt's plaintive voice. Good old Nuala, always the peacemaker. But that was it, the last straw! His backpack was on his back, his tools were in his pocket and he didn't give a damn WHAT his family thought.

Declan was tired of scams, tired of the same old rubbish. Panicked lift-offs and departures from green and verdant worlds as a scam went wrong only to touch-down on airless rocks for months until the heat died down. Tired of the clan having the whip hand in deciding how they'd turn a credit this month and then screwing it up because they were such a bunch of...

"Clueless - Stupid - Old - Farts!" Declan shouted to the heavens. A flock of what passed for birds on his planet chattered excitedly and launched themselves from a nearby stand of trees, orange and green bodies whipping sinuously from side to side as they flew.

That was it. He headed for the town. It was a small-ish place of only fifteen to twenty thousand inhabitants but it was big enough and rich enough for the clan to target. Declan felt no sympathy for the townsfolk. Anyone stupid enough to be duped out of their money by HIS family was stupid enough to deserve it. What was it this time? The mining claim scam, with an asteroid "salted" with platinum? The fictional aristocrat coming to establish a resort? Whatever it was, it was stupid. Stupid, petty minded and stupid. Declan knew he was repeating himself, but was far too angry to be creative.

He was in the town now, feet slapping on stone. The town was a done in pre-space style, with the only synthetics in sight being the mortar between the bricks. At one end of the town, however, was the shining glass and duralium spaceport, where all the little luxuries of high technology came in, to be exchanged for cattle and corn and fruit. He headed for the bright navigation lights beaming out into the dusky purple sky in their hypnotic sequence, sirens drawing in unwary traders to founder on the rocks of the shrewd local traders. Or at least they thought they were shrewd, which in turn drew in clans like Declan's. He nodded amiably to some of the locals that he knew by sight. The scam had been running for some months, so he'd come to know a couple of them moderately well. What he felt like telling them was that they were stupid hicks to be taken in by his stupid family.

Declan was angry, but he wasn't suicidal. Those who betrayed the clan tended to keep running or become permanently motionless.

Declan breezed past the main gates and headed for the shipyards. Several ships were there, rusty old junk-buckets for the most part. Correspondingly, Uncle Pdraig had bought a couple, and was putty-and-tinfoiling the laser scars beneath a hill behind the camp. Declan had stolen and recoded the transponders himself, so knew that they'd appear legal, if not of distinguished provenance. Unless, of course, you actually tried to fly them for more than half an hour at a time. One ship, however, looked new, and had a couple of service robots fussing across it. It was an Eagle III, and pretty in it's deadly, claw like way. The ship hummed and buzzed, which Declan took to mean it was near take-off.

"Perfect." Declan muttered to himself. The service robots noted him incuriously, their cylindrical bodies hissing with badly maintained pneumatics as they industriously scoured at laser-burn on the dully gleaming hull. Declan would stow away on this ship in the engine compartment where the scanners couldn't find him, wait until they docked somewhere else and then he'd... then he'd... well he'd decide that on the way. Declan opened the door and entered the ship, the security system providing about as much resistance as a beaded curtain to his expert hands. The ship was a lot smaller than he thought, but he headed towards the tail and plonked himself next to the fizzing reaction chamber.

Declan knew little about ships, but knew enough to know that the "fizz" would keep him concealed from scanners at least until he got to wherever the ship was going. After that, he'd just have to be quick and escape out of the ship bay area into whatever starport he was in. After that, he could make his own living. After ten minutes of the ship not taking off, Declan crawled into a tight, teenage ball and went to sleep.

*

Something prodded Declan hard in the shoulder.

"G'way. Don't have t'get up yet." he said automatically. Then memory hit, and he looked up. A scream built behind his lips, but he managed to suppress it into a strangled yelp. Before him was a metal monstrosity with eight legs and a bulbous, pyramid-shaped body, the front facet of which was alive with lights, cameras and sensors. Declan

threw his body backwards until he was cowering against the bulkhead, whilst the machine before him remained motionless.

"What are you doing on my ship?" A precise, chill voice boomed over some hidden speaker within the engine room. "I do not take kindly to stowaways."

"I'm sorry. Sorry sir, sorry." Declan babbled. "I didn't have any choice, I had to get off the planet and I... I'm sorry sir, so sorry. Please, just call off your robot, I'm so sorry, sir."

Immediately, the robot backed up a couple of steps, all of its legs clicking against the decking. With a soft whirr, a flat panel emerged from the top of the pyramid. A light flickered across the surface of the panel, and a face coalesced on the screen. It was a cold, handsome face, like a statue brought to life. Its lips moved, but the sound still came from the hidden speaker.

"There is no robot. There is only me. I am C64Z80RS232. I am an Elite pilot and you are a very lucky humanoid."

"Why, sir?" Declan said fearfully.

"Because the first thing I usually do with a new ship is take out life support systems for organics."

A tearing scream started up and Declan threw his hand over his ears. This was it! This synthetic monster had decided he was to die, and would tear him to pieces with its claws! The robot appeared to notice Declan's distress, and the siren cut out.

"Proximity alert. The Supremacy of Organic Life Armed Rebellion have found me again. You, come with me."

"Why?" Declan found the courage to ask. There was a pause before the voice replied.

"There are six hostile ships within ninety seconds of contact. We'll soon be performing high-G combat manoeuvres which the Anti-Grav systems will barely be able to compensate for. I have no use of the current pilot's seat. If you prefer to remain here be battered to death, then feel free... "

The screen with the face retracted into the body of the pyramid and the robot scuttled backwards at high speed, off towards the bridge. After a moment's hesitation, Declan followed. Synthetics generally didn't lie unless there was a good reason, and besides, Declan had developed an instinct over the years, to know when a shitstorm was about to descend. And right now, it was tingling like buggery.

Funnies in the Universe?

[Random Intergalactic Gossip]

Hidey ho, readers!

We here at R.I.G. naturally consider ourselves the arbiters of everything that's stylish, cool, important, interesting, newsworthy grammatical and most importantly FUNNY! So we've been putting some thought into the topic that nine out of ten spacers consider worthy of an unprovoked attack on people with contrary views:

WHICH OF THE MAJOR POWERS HAS THE FUNNIEST COMEDIANS?

(We're excluding Federal and Imperial Navy press releases, of course, as we're talking about INTENTIONALLY amusing!)

The contenders:

FEDERATION: The oldest and deepest wells of comedy known to humanoid life! The Mars Stand-Up circuit alone has launched hundreds of sharp, incisive political comedians into unchallenging, lowbrow Dreamware careers! The further out you get from the core, however, the more they tend to ape the centre, with the comedy getting safer and safer and duller and duller. Social satire is still a staple, however, considering the fact that Federal Society is perhaps the duller in existence. Having said that, the pure quantity of comedians means that some quality actually makes it through, even if only by the law of averages...

THE EMPIRE: No one, and I mean NO-ONE does vaudeville and bedroom farces quite like the theatre companies of Achenar. Bawdy, witty and with the depth of a playing card. Laugh? I nearly wet myself. At least I understand now why the theatres of the empire have sawdust laid down instead of carpet... Satire, however, is strictly verboten, for the simple reason that it's not safe to laugh at (let alone tell jokes about) the Emperor or the Nobility. Those few comedians who actually manage to walk the tightrope tend to keep Deathwrecker under their pillow at night. (And it's hard to be funny when you wake up each morning with second degree burns across your face!)

THE ALLIANCE: Everyone's far too busy making money in the Alliance to pay serious attention to Comedy, and when it does exist it's as dry as a chip. That having been said, Phekdan comedy (both OF and ABOUT if you get my drift!) provides a welcome dose of earthy, irreverent rudeness. Marry that with the weird, left-field humour of Gateway ("Soholian Plague: The Musical"? What the..?) and you have a couple of bright sparks in an otherwise dreary field.

AND THE WINNER IS:

Norman Mosser! The funniest man/men alive. Without him, R.I.G. would be as deathly dull as the Alioth Financial Review. The famous "Falling Body" photo, the *Azure Sunset* getaway, along with the incredible frequency with which he not only laughs in the face of death, but gives it a wedgie... Satire, Slapstick, Black Humour, Bedroom ~~his~~ ea