

Rieger Mortis

By Kevin Christley

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Dedication

For Matt, whose infinite patience in helping me flesh this beast out in my head before ever writing a word during countless hours arguing over way too much coffee at the now defunct Kaffee's.

To all those who knew I was sitting on this book and convinced me to get it out into the world. I don't know if you're ready for it, but here it is...

Kev

The earth has not dragged me into the abyss, nor has the tempestuous sea engulfed me.

I have fled from justice, from the arena, I have stained my hands with blood, to end up here, banished and abandoned. - Fellini, Satyricon Act 1, Scene 1.

Armand Rieger walked slowly down the over-crowded and noisy promenade of the bustling metropolis. His steel-grey eyes gazed downward as he walked, not attracting the least attention from a fleeting glance. It had been some time since he had walked openly among the common peoples of Lakul.

He concentrated on the injustice of his situation, focusing all of his attention to the task at hand. It would not be long now, he thought to himself. Not long at all. Rieger crossed the narrow alley, where he saw the familiar sign of Sanctum.

Opening the wide doors, he was respectfully greeted by a short, red-robed monk of the Order of the Sun.

"What is thy calling, my son?" Inquired the monk.

Rieger rubbed his chin, pondering if he should tell the truth. He dared not look the monk in the eyes, for they were indeed windows to the soul.

"I've come to speak to the Archbishop Sancto." Replied Rieger, as he fought to keep his intense hatred of the man under control.

"This way, please." The monk replied. He then turned and proceeded down the hall. Rieger followed him, mentally noting each potential exit he could see.

The monk led him throughout the winding passages within the dark and cavernous interior of the Sanctum. Rieger could see the "illuminated ones" giving worship to the red holographic deity known as "The Noan", that seemed to fill the middle of the large sanctuary.

The monk's chanting echoed throughout cavernous the room, with the followers of Noan bowing at the end of each refrain. Cattle, he thought. They'll follow their god to hell and back, but couldn't have a care in the world about what's happening outside their order. The monk suddenly stopped at the end of a long hall. Rieger looked around at the neo-gothic architecture. What a work of excess, he noted to himself.

"How may I announce you, my son?" Requested the monk. Rieger was certain that it was just in his training to seem polite to all callers.

"You may announce me as Armand Rieger." He said with a slight grimace.

The monk raised his hood slightly with both of his hands to see if it was indeed Armand Rieger and saw the end coming. From under Rieger's cloak was pulled a bladed weapon of which he had never seen before. Or ever see again.

"Oh my god, no!" Screamed the frightened monk.

"You'll see him soon enough, my friend." Said Rieger as he amputated the monk's head off with one quick stroke of the blade. The blood seemed to glimmer in the dark lighting of the sanctum, but it's warmth felt good on his hands.

"You know, brother. A human head can remain conscious for up to four minutes after being separated from the body." Rieger said as he dropped the head to the ground. "I want you to hang on until I get back in four minutes. I swear to your Noan that I'll try not to be tardy."

The monk's eyes rolled within their sockets, following Rieger's path as he proceeded down the long hall to the doorway.

The doors to the Archbishop's throne room crashed open as Rieger broke into the private chamber. Unshaken, the Archbishop turned away from his concubines, ever so slowly.

"Rieger, my old friend. You always did know how to make a truly grandiose entrance."

"Cut the pleasantries, you bastard. I've come to settle our score, once and for all."

The Archbishop waved his right hand ever-so-slightly, and the concubines slowly began to disperse, except for one. She was truly no ordinary concubine, as she wore a long, flowing red robe and carried a staffed blade in her right hand.

"Have you met Melina, my newest acquisition?" Exclaimed the Archbishop, who did not even give the respect of getting dressed. "You two really should meet. She's from the Michbar tribe of Crontos. They are fierce fighters, and even more protective of their owners."

Melina took one step towards Rieger then slowly dropped her robe. She was captivating, even to him. Her shimmering blonde hair nearly reached her waist, and swayed with each and every step. Then Rieger noticed a blinding glimmer. Rieger dodged quickly, but there was nothing he could do to avoid what was coming. The blade!

A deep burning feeling shot from Rieger's pelvis all the way to his breastbone. He quickly glanced down to notice that the new armor had not protected him as well as it should have. He looked up in shock at the female bodyguard. Her steel blue eyes were as cold as stone. She smiled weakly back at him, and spun her pike in her hands.

"Now you know why I acquired her. Her beauty is equally matched with her skills with the staff. Now, be a dear. Stop playing around and dispatch this infidel!" Said the Archbishop, leaning back in his seat to enjoy the show. "I do like to watch an artist at work."

Rieger quickly took a stagger step backwards and produced a small metallic orb. He tossed it towards the Archbishop and it fell into his bare lap as he made a sloppy attempt at catching it.

Long tendrilous spikes instantaneously protruded from the orb, impaling his waist, then a blue arc of electricity as it stunned him. His eyes glazed over from the pain, but he was none the less still conscious.

"First I'll take care of your guard-bitch, then I'm coming back for you!" Said Rieger as he cracked a rare smile.

He turned towards Melina, who looked on in horror at the result of the stunner. Rieger slowly pulled his blade and walked confidently towards her. He wouldn't let himself be surprised by her again.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Melina- That's your name, right?" asked Rieger. She shook her head in acknowledgement. "Now, Melina. You were supposed to protect him from that. Weren't you?"

Melina angrily turned and charged towards him, twirling the staff in an arc of destruction. The putrid smell of ozone crackled from the blade as it cut through the air. She narrowly missed several times as Rieger ducked and dodged her every parry. Rieger countered with a few swift kicks to her pelvis and she crumpled to the floor in pain.

Melina pulled herself up, brushed her hair from her face and grabbed the staff once again. This was going to be a fighter who almost had the skills of a trained assassin such as Rieger, but she would prove no match for his experienced fighting prowess.

Rieger fought off a brief stabbing attack of the staff using his blade, then deftly tumbled out of the way of the oncoming staff.

Melina managed a brief smile as she lunged the staff forward, narrowly missing Rieger's head and gouged a deep hole into a dark marble pillar. Rieger quickly made his move and severed the staff in half before she could react. Now the staff was bladeless.

"So much for cutting me again. You'll not get another chance."

Tossing the bladeless staff aside, Melina made several quick kicks to Rieger's groin that sent stars to his eyes. He managed to grab her foot and twisted it sharply, breaking her leg at the knee.

Melina fell in intense pain with tears in her eyes, unable to support the weight of her body with a useless leg. Rieger noticed that she was attempting to drag herself to safety. There was no safety to be found.

Rieger grabbed her other foot and brought the full weight of his body crashing down at her waist, breaking her leg at the pelvis. She was now laying in a huge pool of blood from the intense complex fractures. She was very close to death now, yet Rieger knew there was still some fight left in her.

"Come on, honey. Don't die on me yet! I love to watch a professional at work too!" Said Rieger as he slapped her in the face several times to bring her back into consciousness.

Her eyes opened, and he could see the anger in her current situation. She clawed her fingers at his eyes as he slowly twisted her arms from their sockets. Her eyes clouded over, yet somehow she managed to stay alive. Rieger felt a little pity on her, left her for a moment and walked over to the Archbishop.

"Watch this, honey! I'll kill your master while you lay dying on the floor." He said.

Rieger took his blade and pried the stunner off the Archbishop. It careened across the floor and hit a wall where it exploded in a cloud of blue flame. He turned back to the once great man who lay prostrate before him. Vile, corrupt, indignant, and in final repose, just another weak old man who looked up at him for compassion.

"Archbishop Michanos Sancto, time to meet the almighty creator."

Before the Archbishop even had a chance to blink an eye, he heard the light-blade fire up. Rieger grabbed the Archbishop by his hair and made one quick slash across his throat. The world as he knew it had come to an end.

Rieger held the Archbishop's head so that he could look directly into his dying eyes. The Archbishop choked and gurgled as if he had tried to spit out some last words, but it was too late. The headless body arched for a brief moment, an involuntary reflex, then the body just slumped to the floor in a massive pool of his own blood.

"Gee, it seems you guys are zero for three today." Said Rieger as he rolled the head of the Archbishop over to Melina's immobile body. She looked in revulsion at her master's estranged head.

"Kill me... Please kill me." said Melina as Rieger walked over to her.

There he stood, gazing down at her beautiful, yet undeniably broken body. She gazed deeply into his eyes.

She knew that she had attached to him in some subconscious level of his mind. Maybe she could appeal to some last bit of kindness in him. "Kill me!"

Rieger looked down at her for a brief moment, then produced a short pike from beneath his cloak. Melina closed her eyes and weakly smiled to await the final blow. It never came.

Rieger sank the pike into the floor right above her head and impaled the Archbishop's bloody severed head upon it. Blades opened internally within his skull and scrambled what was left of his brains. She opened her eyes in horror.

"Kill you? No. I believe the order will gladly do that for me. Bye-bye now! It's been fun!" Said Rieger as he walked out the door. Rieger stopped at the body of the dying monk. The monk's eyes rolled to track his attacker.

"See. I told you that you could manage to stay with me until I returned."

Rieger bowed his head in a sarcastic prayer. "Bless me father, for I have indeed sinned," he said with a small smirk on his face. "You know, I've always wanted to say that." Then he pulled out another stun ball, and gently set it on the monk's forehead.

Three small claws appeared from the sides of the orb, grabbing into his head. The ball started spinning as it tunneled its way to the monk's brain. The acrid smell of burning bone turned Rieger's stomach. He still couldn't get used to it.

Hearing the clatter of footsteps down the long hall, Rieger could see the security force coming his way. They sure wouldn't be happy to see him. Red carpets for assassins seemed to be out of vogue this year. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a concubine shivering in fear half hidden behind a curtain.

"Don't worry, lady," said Rieger with a quick wink. "There's a very good reason for all this. Trust me."

He untied his cloak and depressed a small button on his belt and vanished into thin air. The security force arrived and turned to see the Archbishop's head on the pike. His now lifeless eyes looked down at the naked beauty below him. Then they saw her. Melina screamed.

A green cloud surrounded the body of Armand Rieger. He could move, but it seemed strange to him. As it always did. A hiss of air and the sound of machinery permeated the biotube. He waved his hand in a semi-authoritative manner and the green cloud dispersed. Gieger appeared before him as the tube opened with a dull thud.

"So. Did all go well?" Gieger asked, as he handed Rieger a towel to dry the slime off his injured body.

"I believe so. The mission was accomplished with a minimal of anomalies. The Archbishop is dead."

"And what about his head? What of his head?"

"His head was impaled and scrambled just as you asked it to be. We will not be hearing from that bastard again."

"Excellent. The Emperor will be pleased, as will the Senate."

Rieger dried himself off, and threw the towel back at Gieger. Then he pulled his blade and held it at Gieger's throat.

"What the hell were you trying to pull, you sniveling little bastard?" Said Rieger. The electronic hum of the blade filled Gieger's ears.

"What do you mean?" Whispered Gieger, careful not to extend his larynx into the shimmering void of the blade.

"Cut the crap! The armor you gave me was useless against that bitch's staff. You said it would hold!"

The blade inched closer by millimeters as Rieger's rage grew. Gieger knew how anger effected Rieger. In fact, it was Rieger's prime motivator.

"What I said was that the armor should hold against a minimal attack, not a sustained, unanswered attack. I told you that his bodyguards were captivating. Perhaps you found her a little too captivating, eh?"

"You bastard." Said Rieger, as he dropped the blade from Gieger's throat. "Don't put this on me."

"I could have sent anyone, and it'd still have the same effect on them also. I wanted you, because I knew you were stronger. At least, I had hoped so. You see, the Michbars have this funny little trick they can use. Their appearance changes to become arousing to anyone."

He continued. "If you are a man, they become the most beautiful woman that you have ever seen in your life. If you're a Karrn, they do the same for them also. You see, they're chameleons. They can become anything you want them to be. Anything you desire."

Rieger looked at Gieger, then sat down. He turned to take a long look at his battered body in the mirror. The healing gel had done well, but he ran his fingers down the length of the wide scar. Nothing would get rid of this... Ever.

Gieger threw the comm pad in front of Rieger. It contained a full video of his mission, as prepared by mission ops. Every step he took was recorded in all it's digital splendor. He replayed his brief encounter with Melina. He felt the pain all over again.

"Rieger, you need to report to the Senate." Gieger said.
"Immediately."

"OK, just let me get fixed up first."

"You have two minutes," said Gieger. "They're expecting the best. Give it to them." Gieger turned, waved at the door, which opened with a soft hiss, and walked out of the room.

The door closed with another soft hiss, then Rieger was alone in the darkness. Alone to contemplate his actions. And what he was to do next.

"Damned it all." He said to himself. "What the hell have I become?"

Rieger walked slowly down the long hall lined with the Imperial Senate's sentries. One by one, they looked at him with discord. Each and every one of them knew that he was the number one assassin for the Imperium, and few of them wanted him to prove it directly. They fingered the triggers of their pulse rifles, waiting for the day that he'd do something stupid.

Rieger just grimaced. He knew every punk in the galaxy was after his spot. Until he failed a mission, the place was his. He owned it.

He reached the huge black metal doors of the Senate Chamber and placed his hand to the controls. It vibrated for a second. If he was truly not who he is supposed to be, a thousand volts of energy would incinerate him to a crisp in front of such an eager audience. Today would not be their day.

The vibration stopped and the huge doors creaked open unveiling a plume of white steam. He walked into it, and the massive doors creaked shut. Alone in the near darkness, he proceeded forward to the dais in the cavernous room. He stood silently with his arms at his side.

"Place your arms out at shoulder length for a weapons check."
Said a booming, sinister voice from above.

Rieger complied. A thin band of blue light ran across his body twice, first up then down, then across. The blue light disappeared, and a spotlight was placed on him from above. He could barely see anything in the room.

"You may be at ease." Said the voice again.

Rieger resumed his stance, arms at his side.

A grinding noise was heard behind him as the catwalk that connected the doorway to the dias was lowered. He was left alone on the dias, three hundred feet above god knew what. He was truly at their mercy now.

One by one, he could see the holo-projectors begin to kick in as the images of the Imperial Senators appeared in their appointed stations. The room remained silent for moment, then the Orator materialized.

"All hail the Emperor Goth, leader of all the sentient worlds."
Cried the Orator.

"All hail Goth! All hail Goth! All hail Goth!" Each of the senators called forth.

A huge doorway opened in the middle of the chamber. Out of it came a small procession of six Imperial Guards attired in black, who stood aside as the Emperors throne slid out of the narrow opening.

"Impressive," muttered Rieger under his breath. But a little overdone, he thought.

As the Emperors throne slid to a stop, Rieger snapped to attention as usual.

"The Emperor Goth would like to know the result of your mission." Said the Orator.

"The mission was accomplished as planned, my highness."
Replied Rieger.

The Emperor leaned over from his massive throne and whispered quietly to an aide. The aide then approached the Orator, and handed him a microcard. The Orator placed the card in a slot in his console, and a cloud of mist appeared in the center of the room above Rieger.

With a soft crackle, a familiar face appeared, projected upon the mist. Rieger looked up, but could not place a name to the face.

"Is that so, number one?" Exclaimed the holographic face.

"Yes, it is so. There were no problems encountered on the mission." Said Rieger.

"I do not believe it to be so, number one." Said the face. "I believe you got a little sloppy on the execution."

A resounding silence filled the room, as a puzzled look came over Rieger's face. What was he talking about. The mission went well, he thought. All the objectives had been met.

The Emperor leaned over once again. He whispered to the aide, who spoke to the Orator. The orator turned towards Rieger.

"Are you positive that the Archbishop is quite terminated?" He inquired.

"I am." Said Rieger.

"Then how do you explain this?" Said the holo-face. A brief flash appeared on the projection screen. It showed the Archbishop giving a mass in the Sanctum. He turned to the screen, and the volume was raised.

"A great injustice has been done today, my followers." Said the Archbishop. The crowd of illuminated ones quieted to a mere whisper.

"One man has dared to try to assassinate me, the one true messenger of God." He continued. The crowd began to boo and jeer at the assassin. The Archbishop slowly raised both his hands and motioned to quiet the crowd. He regained control quickly.

"This man must not be trusted, and must be hunted down like the dog that he is. Bring him to me, alive, for I alone can show him the true path to salvation."

The crowd once again cheered, then silenced as a picture of a man appeared. Below it was a name. This face was very familiar to Rieger. It was, of course, his.

"This man, Rieger as he is called, is a religious fanatic of the Black Sun Order. They do not want you to get the message of god through me. They want you to believe in their own perverse cyber-god, called technology. As you can see in this hidden camera video of the assassination attempt, Rieger used the outlawed weapons of the past to kill a monk and a defenseless woman, before trying to kill me."

Rieger turned uneasily. He could not, did not want to believe what he was seeing on screen. He knew he had killed the man, so why was he still alive.

The Archbishop started again. "To the man or men who bring this renegade to justice, I will offer true salvation. Guaranteed for them and their families. Thank you, and may God bless each and every one of you!"

The view screen went dark, then the holo-face appeared again.

"So, you completed your mission, number one?," said the face. "What do you make of this then?"

"It's a lie!" Exclaimed Rieger. "I have the tapes to prove it!"

Rieger dug into his pocket and produced the mag-tape. An aide descended from the throne and collected the tape from Rieger. He handed it to the Orate, who began playback of the tape.

The scenes were just as the Archbishop had described.

"Someone has tampered with the tape!," cried Reiger. "This is not how it happened at all!"

"Quite the contrary, my dear number one. I believe you so completely botched the mission that you forgot to erase the tape." Said the holo-face.

"No! This is not true! The Archbishop is dead, and I killed him!"

"Then what have you to say about the Archbishop's address to the Sanctum? It was broadcast live." Inquired the Orator.

"I know what I did, and I know what I saw!" Exclaimed Rieger. "This is subversive propaganda by the Sanctum to make you believe the Archbishop is not dead!"

Suddenly a new holoform appeared in an empty senate station. The figure turned slowly, then spoke.

"My dear, poor Mr. Rieger!"

"It can't be!" Rieger cried out as he gazed at the image of the seemingly resurrected Archbishop Michanos Sancti. Rieger slumped and fell to his knees in disbelief. All his world was about to end, and there was nothing he could do about it. He was either set up, or betrayed by the Senate. Either way, he was a dead man.

"Of course it is. Do you think that you could possibly kill me so easily?" Said the Archbishop. The Archbishop turned to the senate, then to the Emperor himself.

"This man is guilty of the ultimate of crimes against the church and state." Said the Archbishop. "I demand that he be turned over to the Sancti immediately for Inquisition!"

The Emperor turned to the aide, who relayed a whispered message to the Orator.

"The Grand Emperor Goth agrees with the Archbishop. Rieger shall be turned over to the Sancti immediately." Said the orator.

The Emperors throne receded back through the massive doors, and one by one, each of the Imperial senators' images vanished from sight. Except for the Archbishops image.

"It'll be nice to watch you die, Rieger." Said the Emperor as he made the sign of the Sancti. "I've been looking forward to it for quite some time."

Rieger looked up in disbelief as a field appeared around him and he was transported from the dias. Rieger screamed in horror as he realized his betrayal.

"Don't worry, my son," said the archbishop. "It won't hurt forever!"

With Rieger successfully transported, the image of the Archbishop also disappeared. The senate chamber was once again dark and silent, except for the echoing screams of one soon to be late assassin-to-be, Armand Rieger.

Slowly, Rieger awakened from the transportation. He found that he could not move a muscle. Looking down at himself, he discovered that he was restrained in some sort of huge execution chair. His arms were bound by huge metal cuffs, as were his legs.

An excruciating pain shot through his temples. His head was restrained by two bolts that had pierced his head. It felt like they reached into his brain. He could look up or down, yet not to his sides. He struggled for a moment, but realized it was pointless. He wouldn't be going anywhere for quite some time.

A point of light appeared in the distance. It grew to such intensity that he couldn't look at it any longer.

"State your name for the record." Echoed a booming voice that seemed to surround him in the massive chamber.

Rieger simply remained silent. He knew that they knew his name. A swift shock echoed throughout his body, causing him to involuntarily twitch. He lost control of the motor skills below his shoulders.

"Resistance is ill advised." The voice encouraged. "We shall ask you once more. State your name for the record."

All remained silent for a moment, as Rieger counted his precious few options.

"Armand... Armand Rieger." He said after deciding to cooperate, lest he should get another jolt of their reality.

"Very well then. Let the record state that this man is Armand Rieger. We shall proceed."

The sound of whining machinery filled Rieger's ears. Another chair was rolled out in front of him. He could see the faint form of a man strapped into it, but it clearly was no man. It had no definition of features.

No eyes, mouth, fingers, or hair. Only a dull grayish blob. It moved, but was similarly restrained like him. Struggling against the bonds, it also received a shock.

"Armand Rieger. We ask that you cooperate fully with us, and we promise no further harm shall come to you." The voice announced.

"Who are you?" Rieger replied.

"That is not important right now. You have but one chance to reply, or face your fate. Will you cooperate fully with us?"

"Well, seeing that I'm a little at your mercy at the moment, I guess I'd better say yes."

Another shockwave shot through Rieger's body. This time he could not swallow. So much for sarcasm, he thought as he drooled saliva down his chin. It's hard to be a wise guy when you're a slobbering fool. The voice remained silent.

"OK," answered Rieger. "I'll do whatever you want."

"Very well." The voice announced. "Armand Rieger, prepare to die."

A circular blue holo-field appeared around both Rieger and the other life form's restraint chairs. Rieger regained enough feeling in his hands to dig his fingers into the arms of the chair.

The pain was intense, and shot from head to toe, tensing every muscle and synapse in his body. Finally the pain was too great, and he lapsed into the infinite unconsciousness.

His life passed before his eyes, as he thought of things, places and people long forgotten. All this was gone now. He seemed to feel as if he was drifting in a void, although he could cloudily see himself strapped to that damned chair, struggling to the last.

Finally the struggle ended, and he saw his body collapse. He looked upon himself in an almost sad way. It was not the way he had wanted to die, but it was not altogether unexpected. He was, after all, an assassin. A relatively successful one at that. Now it had all come to an end.

Rieger waited for the light at the end of the tunnel, as that's what he had heard from tales of the dead or dying. Wait for the light, then walk to it. He waited. The light never came.

He opened his eyes to find he was still looking at the slumped form of his own body, as if through a dream. He tried to speak, but found his vocal cords hurt, and all he could do was pass air like a strangulated baby.

Why is there pain after death, he thought to himself. From what he had heard from the mages, there was supposed to be only blissful peace and tranquility. So why did he hurt so damned much?

Suddenly, he saw the light appear. It grew brighter and brighter, then dimmed. He opened his eyes, and could see that his body was now gone from the chair. But why was he still here? Had his soul remained behind?

His wrist hurt. He looked down at his arm. He was still here.

"What the hell is going on!" Rieger cried out.

The voice remained silent, but then a door slid open and a sole figure walked into the room.

"Who are you?" Asked Rieger.

"I am your ultimate saviour in death, Mr. Rieger. Or do you prefer Number One?" The figure replied.

Confused and dazed, Rieger looked at the figure with great animosity. "I didn't ask what you were. I asked who you were."

"I am Sangra Dom Nictus." The figure answered.

Rieger thought to himself. The name puzzled him. He knew the name, but not the figure of the man who stood before him. Suddenly, the head restraint was removed. The bolts slid out of his cranium with a sickening sound.

He could now turn his head. He found himself surrounded by several robed figures, going about their own business operating some terminals. They were oblivious to his presence.

"You know of me, Number One?" Nictus inquired.

"I know of the name, but not of you." Rieger replied.

"Of course, you do." Nictus answered. "The body is but a shell of the individual, but the mind remains constant."

Rieger thought for a moment. What the heck was he doing here?

"You are doing my bidding now." Nictus replied.

Rieger had forgotten. The members of the Order of the Black Sun were telepathic. It was a fact he wouldn't forget again. He set his mind to a blank so that Nictus couldn't read it any longer.

"Blocking your mind from me is but a futile gesture, Number One. I have glimpsed into your mind, and have gained all the knowledge I need from you."

"Great." Replied Rieger. "What the hell does the Black Sun want me to do?"

"Die." Nictus replied with a slight grin. "Right now, you are being executed by the Order of the Sun for your crimes against the Archbishop. Or so they think."

Rieger was confused. Nictus caught that confusion. Damned telepaths!

"Do not be so angry with yourself, Number One. Bare emotion is one of the most powerful things in the galaxy. Do not waiver from it. Following one's emotions can bring about great results."

Rieger looked down at his hands. His fingers had left permanent indentations in the arms of the chair, and he was covered in sweat.

"Let me out of this damned chair!" Exclaimed Rieger.

"Soon enough, my friend. Soon enough." Nictus replied. "When I can trust you, I shall, but until then, you will remain under control. I have seen you in action, and I'd like to ensure that the justice that you delivered upon the late Archbishop does not befall upon me as well."

A medical droid appeared from behind the chair. It scanned Rieger for a moment, and then placed a disc on his forehead. It pricked his skin for a moment, and he forgot all. His eyes shut momentarily, then re-opened. The droid left the room and the chair's restraints were released.

Rieger was clearly no longer Rieger. He couldn't recall anything about himself or of his surroundings. A strange man faced him. The man placed his hand on his shoulder, like a father would to his son. Rieger turned to him, looked up and spoke. "Who am I?"

"You are who ever you may want to be, my son." Nictus said.

"Who are you?" Rieger inquisitively replied.

"I am Sangra Dom Nictus, head of the Black Sun Order. The order of the one true god." The man said. "Come with me, my son, and all shall be revealed, in it's own time."

Kiersten Dulak looked up from her comm terminal in the great city. She was a data administrator for the Imperial Senator Rickbos Liedo.

Liedo was a young and upcoming senator, and Kiersten had followed him on his blazing trail upwards through the murky politics of the world. She gazed out of her window into the depths of the dark city. It was almost one a.m.

She watched the ant-like people of the world scurry on the streets below. She wondered if one day she would be one of them. She rotated her chair back to the comm terminal and continued to monitor the events unfolding on Garn.

The assassination attempt on the Archbishop had been foiled, and the assassin had been executed in front of the joyous crowd. There were worldwide celebrations planned, and most were just beginning.

Kiersten brushed aside her jet black hair, fingering a strange medallion that she had worn since she was a mere child. It glowed luminously, even in the faint light of the room.

"Lights on, please." She called forth. The room lit up to reveal an expansive office. She got up from the chair and walked to the holo-comm.

"Call Abram Brosh." She said.

The holocomm cycled for a few seconds, and a weary man appeared in her viewscreen.

"I hope this is important." Said Brosh. "It's after one, you know."

"I know, Abram." Kiersten replied. "I'm sensing something is not quite right on Garn."

"We've been through this before, Kiersten." Brosh answered. "It's probably nothing at all. Go back to sleep and call me in the morning."

"That's just it. I can't sleep. Something's really bothering me tonight. I just can't put a finger on it."

Abram Brosh appeared visibly disturbed. "Wait a moment, so we can speak more privately."

Abram motioned to a figure that was in his bed. The woman got up and put on a robe. She blew him a kiss, then walked out of the room. Abram returned to the comm.

"Who's she?" Kiersten inquired.

"Nobody. Nobody at all." Brosh replied. He could tell he'd catch hell about this in the morning. But that could wait.

"Didn't look like nobody to me either, Abram." She smirked. "Going to secure channel now."

The holo-com crackled for a second, then beeped. A logo appeared at the bottom of the screen telling them both that the channel was now secure.

"Now what's really bothering you, Kiersten?" Inquired Brosh.

"Well, when I first heard word of the Archbishop's assassination attempt, I thought something was strange. Do you know the amount of security that man would have to circumvent to pull this thing off? I mean, nobody just walks into the Sancto and offs the Archbishop. A thing like this requires massive planning."

"Agreed." Replied Brosh. "But what if it was a determined individual. Who knows what kind of nutcases are out there today. Most of them are quite brilliant."

"This is true, but from the tape, it looked too easy. I spent some time examining the frames pixel by pixel and I've found some disturbing idiosyncrasies. It looks as if someone has tampered with the digital imaging. I think somethings really rotten about this."

Brosh seemed to frown at the thought. "What's the difference. Everyone saw this guy get executed on the evening vid. Hell, I'm half glad they caught the bastard." He answered.

Kiersten noticed the disturbed look on Abram's face. "OK, maybe I'm just looking too hard for answers to this whole thing."

"Perhaps not. Send me what you have and I'll take care of it in the morning." Said Brosh.

Kiersten looked at the tape, then back at Brosh. She had that weird feeling again, but quickly brushed it off. Brosh had been her investigative contact for years. Fingering the tape, she looked back at the holo-com, and inserted the magtape. It uploaded her results in seconds, and then she pulled it back out.

"Got it, Kiersten. I'll take a look at it tonight and see you first thing in the morning. Good night, now. Get some sleep, Kiddo. We have a long day ahead of us." Brosh replied.

"Right. Oh, see you then, Abram. Good night." Answered Kiersten. Brosh waved bye, and the holo-com went blank. Kiersten walked back and laid the tape on her desk.

She turned towards the bed, when something began bothering her again. The crystal on the end of the necklace began to glow. She looked down at it, and the glow disappeared. Looking back at her desk, the tape stood out in the light. It was the tape.

She walked back to the desk and loaded the tape back into the vid and pressed play. Nothing happened. She pressed play again. This time, the vid reported that the tape was empty.

"Empty? It was just about filled up a minute ago." She said to herself. A commotion caught her attention outside. Sirens began to blare as the people far below scurried to get out of the way of some emergency vehicles.

Must've been some accident down there, she thought to herself. She'd get it all sorted out in the morning. Time to sleep now.

"Lights out." She called out, and the lighting in the room was extinguished. She walked over to the bed, and disrobed. Setting her alarm for the morning, she climbed between the sheets.

All she needed was a good night's sleep, or at least a few hours worth. She held the crystal once again. This time it felt white hot. Something's wrong all right. But now wasn't the time.

She took the necklace off and set it on the nightstand, plumped up the pillows and laid her head down to sleep. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, she thought as she lapsed into unconsciousness.

She awoke when the room was bright again. Looking at the alarm, she saw it was not ten minutes since she had shut her eyes.

"Lights out, I said." The lights did not respond. She saw a shadow outside the window. A shadow, she thought. But I'm on the fortieth floor. Suddenly the window blew in with enough force to knock her from the bed. A shadowy figure raced up beside her before she could depress the alarm.

"Shut up and do what I say, woman." Said the figure.

"What the hell is going on?" She replied.

The figure slapped her across the face, drawing a thin stream of blood from her lip. She looked up at him, and spat.

"I said shut up!"

The figure walked over to the desk and grabbed the tape. As he turned back to the woman, a shot rang out. The figure slumped to the floor.

Kiersten had pulled a stungun from between her mattress and turned it on him. She walked over to him and kicked his body to make sure he was unconscious. His hand grabbed at her ankle, and pulled her down.

The stungun shot out again, and a pellet of energy imbedded itself into her holo-screen. This started a small fire, and the fire protection equipment began to spray foam throughout the apartment.

The figure grabbed Kiersten by the neck, and choked her enough to stop her from struggling.

"Listen to me, bitch! I'm trying to save your life. Now put some clothes on and come with me!"

"Trying to save me from what? Strange men who crash into women's rooms at night?" Kiersten smirked.

The figure pushed her aside. "Just do it, lady. We don't have much time!"

Kiersten got up from the floor and suddenly realized that she was nude. Grabbing a sheet, she wrapped it about her body like a sarong.

She reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the necklace. The jewel was illuminating the room, not the lights. They were out.

Both of them turned when they heard an urgent knock at the door.

"Emergency team, open up immediately!"

"That's our exit sign, lady!" Exclaimed the figure as he grabbed her by the arm.

"Help me! I'm being kidnapped!" Kiersten cried out at the top of her lungs.

"OK, bitch. I've had all I can take from you!" Replied the figure, who withdrew a small hypo and injected her in the neck. As she lost consciousness, she saw the door break inwards, and a mob of security men come rushing in.

"Help me, Please..." Kiersten whispered as she reached her hand out towards them. Then a blinding flash and nothingness surrounded her.

The figure moved swiftly while everyone in the room was knocked unconscious by the stunner. With meticulous precision, he placed his gun at the base of the skull of each member of the security team and pulled the trigger, dispatching them quickly without even breaking a sweat.

He walked over and grabbed Kiersten by the back of her collar and dragged her to the open window, where his hovercar was waiting.

"God, you're a little hefty for a Kalhern." He said to himself as he tossed her limp body into the vehicle. He turned quickly as he heard approaching footsteps.

They definitely wouldn't be knights in shining armor to save a damsel in distress. A cautious head peered through the open doorway. Armand Rieger fired off a few quick shots, blowing a hole through the inquisitive head, taking out his backup who was directly behind him.

"Two for one kills, one day only!" Rieger laughed to himself. He was having one hell of a twisted night, alright. Turning back into the darkness, he stepped off the ledge into the waiting hover car.

The cockpit sealed itself with a short hiss, and he turned the car out into the breaking storm with Kiersten sleeping by his side.

Kiersten groggily opened her eyes. She wiped the haze from her eyes. Suddenly she was very thirsty. She turned, almost startled to the figure beside her.

She noticed that she was in a hovercar that was skimming precariously close to the buildings above the vast metropolis, obviously trying to avoid detection by the traffic net.

"Who the hell are you?" She asked, trying to sound brave and forceful, although she thought she may have wet herself in the process.

"My name is not important, but what the hell, I'm in a good mood tonight. I'm Gregory Rieger, brother of the assassin of the late Archbishop."

"But the Archbishop's still alive, so apparently that's not a fact to be proud of." She said. At least she could sound confident.

"Maybe that's what you'd like to believe, but I know for a fact that the Archbishop is very, very inanimate at the moment."

She looked towards Rieger with an air of disdain. Not only was he arrogant, but also very ignorant. "Well, if you know it all, Rieger, if that is your real name." She quizzed, hoping to get a rise out of him. "How do you know?"

"Because I was there, babe. I saw the poor slob lose his damned head. Something you didn't see on the tape that was broadcast to the Imperial Worlds. That's why I need you."

"Why do you need me at all? I'm not anyone. I'm just a damned analyst for god's sake. What can I do?" She replied.

"You, my dear, hold the one true piece of evidence that I need to open this damned conspiracy right up. The tape, if you would. Rieger held his hand out to her, awaiting the tape.

She thought for a moment. Why should I give this guy the tape? She decided to play stupid. "I don't have it. It's back my room." She said.

Rieger withdrew his hand, then slapped her across the face, bringing stars to her eyes. She buried her face in her hands.

"You broke my nose, you bastard!" She cried out.

"That's not all I'm gonna do to you if you continue to play this game with me. He placed his hand into his pocket and withdrew a small control pad. "Examine your new necklace, my dear. Just a small gift from me to you."

She looked down and noticed a black device around her neck. A small green light flashed in the center of it. It was like a metallic choker.

"What the hell is this?" She asked as she fingered the small device.

"I wouldn't play with it too much. It's a Mylock training choker. If you disturb it too much, it'll put out a shock that'll really knock your socks off." Rieger said with a grin when he saw the pained look on her face.

"You bastard!" She attempted to slap him, then a bolt of electricity shot through her neck. Blood poured from her mouth, as she realized she had bit into her tongue. She shook off the pain, and spit onto his face.

"Pretty damned effective, don't you think?" He did all he could to keep from busting out into laughter. She attempted to scratch him with her long fingernails, but then withdrew them when he placed his thumb on the control pad.

"Nope, I didn't think you wanted to do that."

She slumped back into the seat, and began to cry.

"Now you listen to me. I'm going to say this just once. I am in control. You will comply with each word that I say to you, or I will hurt you. I don't know what you're used to, but I am not a nice guy. Now, please give me the god-damned tape."

He held his hand out once again. This time, she could see the deep fire that raged in his eyes. It was if he could see right through her. She dug into her robe and pulled out the tape.

"I hate you!" She exclaimed as she began to cry again.

"I'm not trying to win any popularity contests here, babe."

She just stared out the window of the hovercar as she wondered what was going to happen next. She was abducted from her own apartment, shot at, and then forced into this damned training collar. She knew that Mylock women were very obedient to their partners, in fact, obedient unto death. Now she knew how the bastards did it.

Rieger placed the tape into his vid-com. He watched intently as the events unfolded before his eyes. "Pretty damned convincing, isn't it?" He said to her.

She turned to him. "Yeah, it is. Your brother deserves what he got from them."

"Well, look what happens when I apply this filter." He pressed a small button on the screen, and the images were lit in a blue aura. Except something was there that was not visible before. Kiersten looked closer at the screen. Rieger could see she saw it too.

"Magnify." He said.

The screen complied, and she saw it more clearly. It was a figure. The dark figure of a man sitting beside her.

"What the hell. You were there." She was lost for further words. He told the truth. He was there.

"Yeah. I saw it all happen, the version that you didn't get to see on the 'official' vid. But as you can see, they didn't know I was there, so they didn't think of re-editing me out of the vid. It never would have occurred to them. But you saw the flux lines when you analyzed the tape, didn't you?"

She was still lost for words. She knew that there was something wrong with the tape, but she never would have thought of this.

"How did you manage to conceal yourself?" She asked.

"That's not really important, now is it? What's important is that the whole story is a lie, a cover-up for what really happened. It seems a lot of people don't want you to see the real truth."

"But this isn't going to bring back your brother. They still killed him." She said.

"Who said he was dead? If they could fake the vid, can't they fake my brother's death also?"

"Well, they'd kill him if they thought he was the only witness to the whole thing. What would happen if he told his same story?"

"To whom? Who's going to believe this. You were scheduled for execution because of it."

"By whom?" She asked. "Nobody wants to kill me."

"That's what you think. There's a contract out for your head, and I was sent to deliver it, signed, sealed and delivered."

She looked at him again. He did not waiver. That cold look was still in his eyes.

"Who wants me dead?" She asked.

"The Senate, the Emperor, the Archbishop, Who cares? All I know is that they all want you silenced for good for what you saw on that tape."

"But what I saw was you! What would happen to you?"

"They'd kill me too. But only after I delivered your head to them on a silver platter." He replied.

"But how did you know?"

"I didn't. Not until I saw the tape. It was only then that I really knew. If I could hack the tape with my limited means, just think what they could do with all the technology at their disposal. It was just a matter of time, and unfortunately for you, you're just an innocent pawn in their game."

It all made sense to her, but why did he still need her? Couldn't he just drop her off somewhere and make her for dead? Or did he want to kill her because she could reveal his existence.

"Where are you taking me?" She asked.

"I'm not taking you anywhere. I'm going to see a friend. Maybe he can make some sense of this whole thing."

Rieger slowed the hovercar to a halt over a crowded street. The shabbily dressed crowd parted under the descending car. It set down, and Rieger popped the hatch. He looked over at her.

"Stay close to me at all times, and don't say a word unless I tell you to." He said. "I've got my thumb on the control pad at all times."

Kiersten looked at Rieger playfully dangling the control pad in his left hand, then down at the sinister collar around her neck threatening her continued existence. There was no point in arguing. She wearily nodded her head in agreement.

A lone shuttle appeared over the twilight sky on Zantram. It skimmed the dominant plazas and superstructures that covered every inch of the dark city far below.

Traffic on the streets was minimal, but in the sky above, all was clear. A storm was quickly approaching, and the pilot desperately wanted to get to shelter before it struck. It'd be a long way down if the craft was hit by a stray bolt of static lightning.

The shuttle was quickly dwarfed by a huge, oblong pyramidal structure of black marble and steel. It rose like a pinion to meet the moon floating far above.

"Shuttlecraft EA-11. Please enter your security code now."
Commanded an authoritative voice over the cockpit intercom.

The pilot obediently passed the security codes, and huge cylindrical doors opened, bathing the shuttle in bright white light. The craft flew inside the landing bay and the huge doors shut quickly.

Landing the craft, the pilot shut down the engines quickly. He knew that his passenger was expected to present himself without haste. He left the cockpit and approached the lone passenger, who was gazing silently out the window.

"Mr. Gieger. We have arrived." Said the pilot.

Geiger looked up for a moment, and then stared out the portal to gather his thoughts. "Very well, then." He leaned over and picked up his attaché. This would not be a good trip, he thought to himself.

The imperial guards led him down the long corridors of the palace. Gieger had never noticed the opulence of the place before. Huge arched windows of plexisteel displayed the expansive city below.

The guards stopped at an oval dais in the floor. Gieger placed his hand on the scanner as the security device checked his I.D. and scanned his body for weapons. He was clear in both departments.

The dais suddenly lowered him down into the floor, and the opening was quickly sealed by a pneumatic door. Gieger's eyes adjusted to the darkness, as he could see a slit of light before him.

He walked towards it, then a hand was placed on his shoulder. He turned, startled to face Zex, the Emperors private aide. The sight of the withered grey humanoid alone would startle a man, but to be grabbed in the dark like that was worse.

"The Emperor has been expecting you, Gieger." Zex said with a reptilian lisp.

"I know. I have a full report at his disposal." Replied Gieger, nervously fondling the attaché.

Zex turned to the light. "I hope the report is favorable. The Emperor has not been pleased with much lately."

Zex led Gieger to the Emperors private throne room. Wet-wired into the throne, he could monitor as much information as he could personally process.

He rearranged holoscreens with a wave of his hand, each displaying a myriad of data and video images. He paused when the Zex approached, and looked sternly at Gieger.

"You may excuse yourself now, Zex." Declared the Emperor, and waved him off with a flow of his hand. All the holoscreens shut down as Zex walked from the room like a wounded dog. Gieger didn't feel much better.

"Emperor Goth, I'm afraid I don't have very good news at the moment." Said Gieger.

The Emperor turned in his throne and raised his withered hand. A laser cut through the air from a hidden portal and cut Gieger across his cheekbone.

"Only when I ask you to speak will you be permitted to do so." Said the Emperor.

Gieger raised his hand to wipe the blood that was streaming to his chin. It was a slight wound, but enough to keep his attention. The Emperor leaned forward in the throne.

"Do not forget your place, my dear Gieger, or next time it shall be your head that falls to the floor. Blood can be replenished, but the head cannot. I understand the problem at hand, and I am not pleased. Where is Rieger's brother, and why has he not delivered the head of the girl to me by now?"

Gieger looked over to the portal. The laser was still tracking him. He hesitated, trying to out think the Emperor.

"You may speak freely now." Said the Emperor. The laser stopped tracking.

"Rieger has escaped our detection, my lord. But I believe he will be found soon." Reported Gieger.

"Fool!" Exclaimed the Emperor. He waved his hand again, and the laser started to track again. It lit up and cut Gieger across his hamstring. Gieger fell to the floor like a crippled rag doll, grabbing at his leg.

"My lord, what I say is true. We electronically tagged his car. If he comes in contact with the aerogrid, we will find him. I swear!"

"You shouldn't have lost him in the first place, you fool." The Emperor maneuvered his throne around and hovered it over the crumpled body of Gieger, who looked upon the emperor knowing he was in deep trouble.

"I understand this, my lord. But he has been trained well. He knows all of our tricks. It's just a matter of time until he slips up." Said Gieger, favoring his leg.

"Let's hope for your sake that he slips up soon, because my patience in this matter is becoming very short indeed." The Emperor steered his throne back to the holocom area, and the screens lit up once again. "Zex!" Cried out the Emperor. "Take this fool out of my sight."

Zex appeared and placed his hand on Gieger's shoulder. Gieger attempted to get up, but collapsed again under the intense pain.

"My lord, he cannot walk!" Exclaimed a startled Zex. He struggled to put Gieger on his feet, but failed miserably.

The Emperor turned to face his aide, and Zex could see he was in trouble.

"Then drag him out if you must!" Commanded the Emperor.

The Emperor turned his attention back to the screens as Zex struggled with Gieger's huge mass, moving him only feet at a time.

Gieger would have better news next visit, for sure. He had the full cooperation of the Imperial assassins at his beck and call. Rieger could probably best most of them, but sooner or later his head would fall. That, he was certain of.

Rieger walked confidently into the crowded nightclub with Kiersten two steps behind him, as a Mylock concubine should be. She followed her master carefully, as one wrong step would send a jolt of electric obedience through her body.

She truly felt a deep disdain for Rieger. If the moment ever posed itself, she would kill him with her bare hands. And take great pleasure doing it.

They wove through the crowd until Rieger stopped at a table where a man sat with three beautiful, yet scantily dressed women. The man waved them off, and Rieger sat down at the table.

"Rieger, my old friend!" The man said with a slight twang. "How the hell are you doing?"

"Cut the crap, Nix." Said Rieger. "I've brought the proof that you required."

Rieger withdrew the tape from his jacket and set it on the table. Nix looked at it, then leaned forward. Kiersten could see a symbol burnt deep into the man's forehead. It was a triangle within a circle. It was the sign of the Brotherhood of the Black Sun.

"Then it's true?" Said Nix, slowly rubbing his chin. He pulled the shroud from his face, revealing his eyes. They were both opaque.

"Of course it is. Now tell me where I can find my brother." Said Rieger.

Nix reached out for the tape. Before he could retrieve it, Rieger pulled his blade and planted it clean through Nix's hand, deep into the table.

Nix attempted to scream in pain, but Rieger clasped his hand over the Wanot's open mouth, muffling the screams until they became but a whimper.

"I said tell me where I can find my brother." Said Rieger as he removed his hand from the whimpering Nix's mouth.

There were tears in his eyes as Nix began to speak. "He's being held at the Temple of the Black Sun. He's heavily protected, and it won't be easy to retrieve him."

"I don't care if it's easy or not." Exclaimed Rieger. "He's my brother, and I'm going to free him. Just keep your part of the bargain, and everything will be fine."

Rieger pulled the blade out of Nix's bloody hand. Nix looked up, and held his hand gingerly. He grabbed the tape with his other hand.

"Your brother is being held at the citadel of the Black Sun." Said Nix. "He's very secure."

"Then I suppose you'll aid us in his release, then, won't you?" Said Rieger.

"Oh no. No way, Rieger." Said Nix with that certain look of fear in his green eyes.

"Nix. Don't fail me now. You've got us this far." Said Rieger, who spun the knife in the palm of his hand, the reflection of which gleamed on Nix's face.

Nix pondered his situation. On one hand, he did possess the tape that he was sent to retrieve. What if this was part of the plan? He didn't know.

"I need to make a call." Said Nix.

"Don't go far, my friend." said Rieger. "I'm keeping more than my eye on you."

Rieger slammed the blade of the knife back into the table, and leaned back to enjoy the nightlife in the club. Kiersten stayed by his side, her eyes constantly on Rieger.

Nix got up out of the booth and walked to the holocomms in the back. Stating the name of his contact, the area was illuminated in a blue haze. A solitary figure appeared.

"What is it, Nix?" Said the figure.

"I have the tape." Said Nix.

"Throw it to me." Said the figure as he reached out, readying to catch the tape. Nix thought this was strange, as there was no way he could give the tape to him through a holo transmission. But then again, the brotherhood had ways with technology, ways that he failed to comprehend.

What the hell, Nix thought to himself. He tossed the tape forward. A burst of static, then Nix saw a ripple occur in the holoscreen as he did so, and the tape landed on the floor, sliding to a rest beside the figure's feet. The figure leaned over to pick up the tape.

Then a bigger sound of static filled the room. A huge ripple filled the screen as Rieger leapt into it, tucked and rolled. He came up on his feet, holding the startled Nix by the back of his neck. They now faced the figure.

"Rieger, I presume?"

"Correct. Sangra Dom Nictus." Replied Rieger as he held the blade of his knife at Nix's throat. "Now, where's my brother?"

Nictus held the tape in his hands. He turned to Rieger.

"Go ahead, kill the Wanot. It won't change a thing." He said. Nix's eyes widened, as Rieger brought the blade to a sliding halt through his neck. The Wanot fell to the floor, his body still jerking involuntarily.

"I never did like him anyway." Said Nictus, oblivious to the violent end of Nix. He turned to face his desk. Rieger leapt forward and attempted to tackle Nictus, who dodged stealthily out of the way.

Nictus pulled his sword as Rieger recovered from his ill-timed attack. Then Rieger noticed a figure against the wall. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that it was his brother, Armand.

"Now you have found your brother. Oh, how I love family reunions!" Exclaimed Nictus, wiping a fake tear from his eyes. He turned to Armand. Rieger feared what he thought Nictus would say next.

"Now kill this man." He said as he pointed to Rieger. Armand dug his hand into his coat and pulled out a short dagger. Then proceeded to attack Rieger, his own brother.

Rieger recovered quickly, dodging the attack, then thrusting his blade at his brother's hands. If he could disarm his brother, he could figure out a way to solve this predicament.

Both of the fighters faced each other on pretty even terms. One would not kill the other, yet the other wanted his opponent dead. Armand was close enough to his brother to try a rolling attack. Gregory readied himself for anything. Then he thought of something. What if...

Armand swung the blade down hard, narrowly missing Gregory. Gregory swung around and slammed his blade into his brother's leg. Inflamed at the sight of the blade in his leg, Armand looked deep into his brother's eyes.

"I will kill you. This you know to be true." He said.

Gregory dug into his coat. He had one more trick up his sleeve. "Give me your best shot, bro!"

A small crowd of the brotherhood had now gathered to watch the ensuing battle. With each lunge and parry, they cheered. It was a battle they'd rarely ever see again. Two of the Imperial Senate's assassins facing off against one another. Better yet, they were brothers!

Anger swept over Armand's face as he missed yet again. His brother was good. "Damn you! Hold still for once and die like a man!" He said.

Gregory decided enough was enough. He pulled out a stun orb, and held it out over his chest. Armand took the pause to bring his blade down upon his brother. There was a blinding flash. The crowd covered their eyes.

A plume of blue grey smoke ensued to fill the room. The crowd dispersed quickly. Nictus remained steadfast. "Armand!" He cried forth. "Make sure he is dead. I want his head!"

A lone figure rose from the smoke and ashes. It wiped the soot from its face as it approached.

"I've taken care of my brother, my master." Armand said. "He's no threat to you now."

"Very good, Armand." Said Nictus. "I'm very proud of you, my son." Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Gregory emerge from the smoke. "What the hell?" Exclaimed the dumbfounded High Priest of Technology.

Gregory stood beside his brother. Then Nictus saw that the control disc on Armand's forehead was arcing sparks. Armand placed his hand upon it and ripped it off. It fell to the ground, where Gregory mashed it to pieces with his boot.

"You bastards! You'll ruin it all!" Cried out Nictus as he called forth for his guards. They would not heed the callings of their master. Nictus turned to see their splintered remains scattered across the floor.

"But how? You should be dead, Gregory!" Nictus said.

"I used a modified stun orb. It uses sonic waves in tandem with octal stimuli to incapacitate it's victims. I've practiced with it, and can withstand a direct flash." Gregory said. "Can you?"

Nictus's eyes widened as Gregory tossed another orb at him. Instinctively, although stupidly, he caught the orb. He closed his eyes and turned his head to try to escape the oncoming blast.

Nothing happened. Nictus opened his eyes, and dropped the orb to the ground. "Why?" He asked, looking at the two brothers standing before him.

The hatred in their eyes revealed that they both really wanted him dead. After all, the Archbishop himself had always preached 'let no man stand between two brothers'. They looked at each other, then at him.

"Because you are worth more to us alive than dead." Said Armand after a long silence.

"But that doesn't mean that we consider you indispensable." Said Gregory. "We will kill you should you choose to ever doublecross us again."

With these words, Nictus fell to his knees and began to weep. Armand picked him up, and slapped him across the face.

"Now you have a minute to recall your agents from killing me or Kiersten," Gregory said. "And to offer us any assistance we require."

Nictus began to shake uncontrollably. Gregory had set the stun ball back into his hands, and pressed a small button on it. A countdown appeared and the numbers were scrolling by quickly.

"I cannot! The events are now unfolding out of control. Not even I can stop them." Said Nictus. "I am but a lone part in the conspiracy against the two of you."

"Then you will die." Said Armand, as he pressed his control pad and spidery tendrils extended from the orb, winding a tightened knot around Nictus's hands. He struggle to free himself, but it was no use. The brothers began to turn around and walk away.

Nictus forced a smile. "Perhaps I can do something for you without any undue repercussions."

Armand and Gregory turned to face Nictus. "Recall the agents, or pay the consequences. You have thirty seconds." Said Armand. His brother Gregory placed his fingers in his ears to try to muffle the oncoming boom. Nictus was not amused by his petty antics.

"Allright, damned it." Nictus replied. "I will do as you wish. Now will you please disarm the weapon?"

Armand pressed his pad, and the countdown stopped. "Now this is what we want you to do." He said, with a twinkle in his eye. Nictus was probably going to regret his decision for the rest of his life.

Kiersten was not pleased. Gregory had left her alone in this seedy nightclub with all its assorted deviants for more than an hour now. Where in the hell could he be?

Compounding the wait, she had this damned Michbar shock collar around her neck, and couldn't move a muscle without getting shocked. This made it very unpleasant to ignore the various riff-raff that decided that having a Michbar woman of their own might be a good thing. Even if they had to steal her from her present owner.

"Hey, sweet thing. How about coming back with me? Said a potential suitor.

"Now there's a line I really like." She said without looking at him. "Get this damned collar off me, and I'll show you a night you'll never forget."

"No, the collar's gotta stay," He said with a grin. "I happen to prefer my women docile and obedient.

Kiersten glared over at him, and spat in his face. He wiped the spittle from his crusty face, and then slapped her. Her movement triggered the collar, and a blue arc surrounded her convulsing body. Then it dimmed and she slumped to the floor with a dull thud.

The man recognized that this was his chance and began to pick her catatonic body up from the floor. Suddenly there was a blade at his throat.

"Set the lady down gently, and just walk away." Exclaimed a voice behind him. He set Kiersten's limp body to the floor, and fell backwards. He observed his mystery assailant. It was Armand Rieger. Gregory strode over to Kiersten and tended to her.

"She's ok, Armand." He said after checking her vitals with his comm pad.

"Good." Said Armand. "We need her, my brother. She can help us." Armand looked into the eyes of the man who had tried to abduct Kiersten with great disdain.

"You look just like that guy who tried to kill the Archbishop!" He exclaimed.

"I am that guy." Armand said with a slight twang, mimicking the poor dialect of the to-be kidnapper.

"But you're dead! We all saw it on the vid!"

"Just back on my resurrection tour, I guess. Seems you all didn't get enough of me the first time around."

Kiersten slowly started to stir again. Gregory turned to her and said, "Glad to see you could join us."

She shook her head, and grasped at the neck restraint. "Please let me out of this thing, Gregory!"

"Not yet, baby. I still need you around for a while." Said Gregory.

Kiersten buried her face in her hands and began to cry. She was beginning to attract a crowd.

The man quickly turned and tried to run away. He took five steps forward, then clumsily hit the floor. As his head slowly rolled over, everyone saw a shim imbedded in the back of his neck.

The man was not yet dead, but he couldn't move a muscle below his head. The crowd began to recede into the darkness from where they had come. Gregory had pulled a stunner orb to keep them all at bay.

Satisfied that his brother was sufficiently covering his back, Armand walked over to the man and looked him in the eyes.

"This is shim protruding from your spine controls your neural pathway to the rest of your body." Armand said to him calmly as the man began to turn blue from lack of taking a breath. "If you would like to breathe, blink your left eye."

The man blinked his eyes furiously, as his lips turned from blue to white. Good for a Trinn in the mating season, but not for a human.

"I said your left eye." Armand repeated.

The man blinked his left eye, and Armand pressed a button on the shim that permitted the man to breathe again.

"Very good. I knew from the moment I saw your crisp Imperial uniform that you must be good at following orders." Armand said with a slight grin. "I'm rarely wrong about these things."

The man shook his head in nervous agreement. Kiersten saw that the color was slowly returning to his face.

"Let him go!" Said Kiersten. It was bad enough that the Riegers were ruining her life, but for all that poor soldier had done to her, she at least could forgive.

Rieger kicked the man, who rolled over and began to cough up blood.

"Get up!" Yelled Rieger to the man. "You're coming with us."

Armand Rieger pushed Gregory aside and grabbed Kiersten by the hair and proceeded to drag her out the door as Gregory parted the crowd to let them pass freely. The man obediently followed them.

His eyes were bloodshot and sunk back into his skull. He had the dejected look of a condemned man. Somehow, or another, this would most likely be his last night among the living.

Armand stopped before the hovercar. "Where is your vehicle docked?" He said to the soldier.

The soldier thought for a moment, then pointed to an olive drab transport shuttle.

"I guess it'll have to do." He said. "You guys go on ahead of me. I have some unfinished business to attend to."

"But where are we supposed to go?" Inquired Gregory.

Armand walked over to his brother and conferred with him. Kiersten tried to make out what they were saying to one another, but try as she did, she couldn't make out a word.

Gregory walked back to them as Armand stepped into the shuttle and flew back towards the metropolis center.

"Where in the hell is he going?" Kiersten asked.

"Mind your language, lady. Where my brother goes is none of your damned business," Gregory replied. "Just get into the car."

They both hopped in the awaiting hovercar, and quickly ascended into the curtain of smog and pollution that covered the metropolis.

"Where are we going now?" Said Kiersten, "And why do we need him?" She glanced back at the soldier, who wheezed to take in each and every breath. She had a feeling that he wouldn't last too much longer.

"We have a date with the devil." Said Rieger, who continued flying on into the night. "And he's not gonna be overjoyed to see us."

Armand floated around the outskirts of his old workplace, the Citadel, amidst a massive lightning storm that stood looming menacingly above.

In this military transport, he would merely be another official vehicle entering the compound. Once inside, he would be on his own. He edged the nose of the vehicle into a parking space at the bottom of the huge tower.

From here, he was going to have to go about his business the hard way. He grabbed an equipment pack from the rear of the transport and proceeded to look for a clear route up the grey steel structure.

A snap of a twig alerted him to the fact that he wasn't going to be alone for long. Armand pulled a shiv, and tossed it into the forehead of a curious guard.

"Sorry buddy." He said. "This is a private party." The man fell to the ground with a sickening thud, burying the shiv even deeper into his cranium.

"Man," Rieger commented to himself. "That had to have hurt!"

He dragged the body to a nearby bush and covered it with some brush. It'd be discovered when they made their checking, but that should give him enough time to get down to business. He grabbed the guard's comm unit and programmed it to monitor the security channels.

Armand proceeded to scale the large structure, careful to avoid the spotlights that cut through the night sky. The stolen comm unit remained silent. So far, so good.

It was cold, and the wind whipped Rieger around as he carefully ascended the monolith. There were motion sensors all around the building, but he jammed them with his own comm, disabling them one at a time.

"This had better be worth it." He muttered to himself, cursing the cruel wind. The guard's comm unit began to rattle with electronic chatter. They knew something was wrong, but hadn't pinpointed the problem, he thought. He was already thirty odd stories above the ground, but he still had a long way to go.

A commotion on the ground caught his attention as he neared the fiftieth story. He carefully perched himself on a nearby ledge, and monitored the guard's comm unit. Some sentries had discovered the hidden body.

"Damn!" He angrily said to himself. This would complicate things a bit. He smashed the comm against the wall, knowing they could track him via triangulation of the signals. Now, the searchlights were scouring the external edifices crack by crack.

He heard the sound of two hovercars quickly approaching in the distance. Armand prepared himself. Digging onto his gear, he pulled an orb. He programmed it with his comm, configuring it to track.

The leading hovercar spotted him, and shined a spotlight on him. The forward guns began to track his position. The jammer kicked in and was working well enough, that they couldn't get a bead on him by computer tracking. They'd have to gain this kill manually.

The gunner flipped a switch to aim by hand. The turret shut down for a moment, then came back to life with manual tracking. It shone a laser pointer on his forehead, as the gunner dropped a bead on him.

Strange, thought the gunner, as he looked into the face of the intruder. Armand had a smile on his face as big as the world. The gunner looked down at Armand's hand. He released the orb.

"Pull out! Pull out!" Screamed the gunner as he suddenly realized what was about to happen. It was too late. As the hovercar pulled about to retreat, the orb came screaming in with a high pitched whine.

It had followed the path of the laser pointer home. The orb punched a hole into the side of the car, then the vehicle lurched as a small explosion ripped the side of the craft off kilter. The gunner was thrown free from the vehicle and screamed as his flailing body fell to the ground. Rieger laughed as he thought if the guy flapped his arms a little faster, he probably would have flown.

The second hovercar fell back a bit, fearing another explosion. The hovercar's auto gyro kicked in and the vehicle stabilized for the moment. Rieger seized his chance. With a huge grunt, he leapt from the precipice to the hovercar. Almost didn't make it. He grasped the undercarriage with all of his might and dragged himself inside. The pilot began to gain consciousness, and was readying to pull his gun.

"Time to go outside and get some stench blown off you!" Rieger said as he slapped the gun out of the pilot's hand and pulled him from his seat by his helmet. The pilot struggled for his life, flailing like a madman, but in the end Rieger won out.

The second vehicle saw the pilot get thrown from the hovercar and plummet to the ground far below. It drew a bead on the hovercar and began to blow holes in it with its 30mm cannons.

Rieger hit the deck as the rounds slammed home, tearing the small craft apart. He rolled to the open side of the car. Maybe getting in this thing was a bad move after all.

The hovercar's autogyro started to steady it, but then lost power. Armand could have sworn he heard the engine scream as the craft began its plummet, but knew it was probably just the gyros kicking it, trying to compensate for the sudden loss in altitude.

Rieger decided it was time to abandon ship. One desperate leap, and he fired his grappling hook into the night. In a rare stroke of luck, it careened off the side of the building, and shot over to the underbelly of the second hovercar, where it clamped on. He clung on for his life as he watched the first hovercar begin to lose control.

It dropped from the midnight sky like a stone for what seemed to be an eternity, but its decent ended with a huge blast of twisted metal when it met with the hard ground below.

Armand grinned with cold satisfaction. But he was never one to rest on his laurels. Apparently, he was in the clear, as the hovercar never saw him eject. He climbed the wire up to the car as it began to move.

Pulling himself up, he mounted the hood. The surprised pilot stared at the madman through the windshield. Rieger planted a claw into the hood, and clipped himself on.

The co-pilot pulled his gun and began to fire round after round at Rieger until he emptied his clip, barely putting a few pockmarked cracks in the windshield. The idiot blew a hole in his own head as the bullets ricocheted throughout the cockpit.

"This is really getting old, guys!" Said Rieger, in an adrenaline rush, as he fanatically punched a hole through the windshield one blow at a time and grabbed the stunned pilot by the collar.

He struggled to get away, but there was nowhere to run within the close confines of the chair. He was still strapped in.. Rieger slammed his fist into the pilot's face, shattering his nose. Blood poured in a cool, steady stream down the man's chin as he fought to keep conscious.

"That's for completely fucking up my night."

The dazed pilot clawed for the hovercar controls and attempted to shake Rieger off the car. Rieger buffeted around the hood of the car, but the restraining claw held firm. Rieger felt a fierce rage come over him. With his last ounce of energy, he drew back, and slammed his fist into the pilot's face, this time killing him instantly.

"That's for pissing me off, you fucking bastard!"

He reached into his pack and pulled out three more orbs. After configuring them, he released them into the howling wind. They screamed their way out of sight. He wouldn't be bothered by other hovercars for a while, at least. Rieger regained his composure, then kicked in the windscreen, then threw the bigger pieces of it overboard. No time to fly like the present. He threw the hovercar into reverse and steered it from the hood.

"Damn, these things fly like a brick even when you're not in the cockpit!" He said as he fought the controls, clumsily maneuvering in and out of the way of the buildings many outcroppings. It was hard to steer, but a hell of a lot easier than climbing all the way up.

On the ground, the troops regrouped and began to infiltrate the building. It had been an hour since he had started his ascension when the storm released its fury, and began sheeting down rain. Rieger wished he was in the cockpit warm and dry instead of flying from the hood, getting soaked to the bone.

Armand smiled as he reached the 90th floor. He maneuvered the hovercar around the external docking pylons, then put it into auto-hover mode. He unclipped himself from the hood, and stood up.

Planting a small device to the mirrored window, he ducked out of the way as the blast ripped a huge hole into the building. Below, small arms fire came zooming in on him as he dropped in to visit an old friend. If he was indeed still a friend.

Gregory gently steered the hovercar up to the huge black pyramid that was the Sancti. The Order of the Sun knew of his existence, yet strangely they had not done anything about it. Parking at the lower entrance, he turned to Kiersten.

"Stay here, touch nothing, and wait!" He said. She was too exhausted to argue anymore.

Rieger popped the hatch and dragged the soldier forward into the enclave of Illuminated Ones. Passing into the building as a man helping his friend get to weekly confessional, they were interrupted by a red robed monk.

"May I help you, my brethren?" He eagerly asked Rieger, who was struggling with the weight of the lethargic soldier.

"My friend here is deaf and lame. I'm trying to get him to confessional." Said Rieger.

"Then let me assist you."

"That would be very kind of you. Bless you!" Said Rieger. The monk grabbed the soldier by the arm, and helped lead him through the crowd. They turned a deserted corner, and Rieger stopped. The monk looked at him.

"I'm sorry, father, but my friends weight is quite a load to bear. Forgive me while I rest a moment."

"That's quite alright. Let's set him down on this bench for a moment." Said the monk. No sooner had they set him down, Rieger pulled a garrot and proceeded to choke the life from the monk. A couple passed by them, and Rieger fell to his knees, holding the monk's semiconscious head between his hands.

"Father, I beg for your forgiveness for all I have done. I am a good man, and wish to regain favor with the lord, my god." He paused a moment, then shook the monk's head up and down in mock acceptance, as if to appear to have gained the holy favor.

Rieger looked to the couple with a tear in his eye. They both smiled at him, then made the sign of the order and went on their way. When they no longer were in sight, he snapped the monk's neck like a twig.

"What I have to accomplish no longer requires your services, Padre." Rieger grumbled under his breath. The monk's eyes went blank, and then he slacked to the floor like a limp rag doll. Rieger removed the dead monk's robe and put it on.

"This thing is really quite comfortable." He said as he put it on. "I could really get used to this." Rieger thought as he adjusted the fit of the robe.

He sat the body of the monk on the bench beside the reclined soldier, and positioned him as if he merely had fallen asleep, at peace within the house of god. Rieger took a quick look around.

Noticing a nearby funeral litter, he grabbed it and hovered it back to the bench, where he placed the slowly stiffening body of the monk on it. Rigor mortis was quickly setting in. He turned to the soldier.

"I'll be back in a moment," He said to the comatose soldier.
"Don't go running off anywhere."

The soldier continued to drool down his collar. Rieger laughed quietly to himself. "Nope, didn't think that was going to be a problem either."

Rieger turned back to the hovering funeral litter, and coasted it down the hallway. When he found he was sufficiently lost, he walked over to a comm terminal to get directions to the crematorium.

"Down the far hall, and to the left." It said in a mechanical voice. For all the technology used in this place, Rieger thought they could have spent more time getting a more utilitarian voice.

They passed through the droves of bereft brethren as they meandered their way to the crematory chamber. The massive arched doors parted to reveal what was to quickly become the monk's final resting place.

"Ashes to ashes, brother." Rieger jested.

The room was a behemoth multi-story sphere that pulsated with an odd electric arc at the core. Swirling round about the arc in a slowly decaying orbit were the wrapped bodies of the dead, awaiting their final incineration by the arc.

Every now and again, the room would flash with a scintillating blue light and people lining the balconies would cheer and clap as the dead transcended into a better place. Or a burnt crisp, as Rieger knew it truly to be.

He was too jaded by reality to believe all the romantic bullshit that the sancti churned out on a regular basis to make the common people feel better about their place in this world.

Rieger moved the litter to an open balcony, and unloaded the monk. An apparatus descended from the ceiling and expeditiously shrink-wrapped the monk in an opaque white plastic.

A pre-recorded eulogy began with a metallic, inhuman voice. Rieger hated this part. He smashed his hand into vidscreen, and it popped off with a brief flash and a string of white smoke.

Rieger pushed the eject button and the sarcophagi slid off the platform, joining the other wrapped bodies in the floating swirl within the crematory chamber. Another monk noticed the puff of smoke coming from the damaged vidscreen and walked over to confront Rieger.

"My brother, why did you violate this station?" He said, looking at the smoking vidscreen. "I shall have to report this to the superior."

"I wouldn't do that, If I were you." Said Rieger, not looking up from the crematory sphere.

"I must do as it is commanded, my brother. Violating the sacred sanctity of this rite of passage cannot be tolerated." The monk pulled out a compad and began to send an alarm.

Rieger stepped over to the monk, grabbed him by the neck and belt of his robe and threw him over the edge of the balcony.

"I guess you'd better report yourself, also." Said Rieger.

The mortally frightened monk let go of the pad, which swirled around the edge of the chamber. His limbs waved about, as if he tried to swim against the tide of a whirlpool, but it was to no avail. There was a brief flash, and the crowd cheered again.

A group of monks headed in his direction, encircling his position. Rieger jumped onto the ledge of the balcony. A monk leapt for Rieger's feet, trying to knock him from the ledge, but Rieger dodged, and the monk's momentum took him over the edge. He grabbed for the rail, but Rieger put his foot on his grasping fingers.

The others stayed at bay, not wanting to provoke him. Rieger removed his hood, and smiled at the monk, who was hanging by one hand over the edge.

"Sorry, Padre. It's nothing personal, just business." He crunched the monk's fingers with his boot, and the monk let go of the rail. He floated off to the crematory arc, kicking and screaming all the way.

The remaining monks charged in on him, and he cut them down with his staff. One by one, monk bodies began to float down from the balcony, some more complete than others. The horrified crowd began to evacuate from the crematoria, causing a general panic within the halls.

It's just what Rieger needed to divert their attention. Taking out an orb from his pack, he programmed it with a short countdown, and tossed it into the crematoria.

Time for a hasty exit, he thought. He dashed out the huge doors and became one with the panicking crowd, who ran for the nearest exit. He ducked into a small enclave and plugged his ears for what seemed like an eternity.

A resounding explosion ripped through the Sancti, throwing debris throughout the hallway, shortly followed by the moans and cries of the injured. A recovery team ran down the hall, followed by a procession of high priests. As they passed, Rieger recognized one of them.

It was the Archbishop, guarded by a small security force. In the confusion of the disaster, Rieger ran up to him. He was stopped by the security force, but they let him pass, thinking he was a monk. Thanks the gods he had grabbed that robe. It made what he was about to do a whole lot easier.

The Archbishop turned to the monk. "What has happened here, my son."

"Someone planted a bomb in the crematoria. He said something about trying to kill you, by holiness."

The Archbishop laid his hand on the monk's shoulder. "No why in the world would someone try to kill me?" He said.

"Maybe it had something to do with you killing his brother, Archbishop."

The Archbishop paused for a moment, then a great fear washed over him. He lowered the monk's hood, and gazed into his stone cold eyes.

"Rieger!" He said as he began to back away. "You crazy bastard."

"Apparently not as crazy as you, Michanos!"

Rieger pulled his blade and began to cut his way through the Archbishop's security force. The Archbishop turned to run, but realized there was nowhere to hide.

"I thought your brother learned that I cannot be killed. Kill this vile infidel!" Sancto cried out to his well armed security force."

"I saw you die, but this time, you're mine!" Said Rieger as he continued to hack it out with the dwindling security team. He quickly dispatched them, one by one, and then turned his full attention to the Archbishop.

"Care to dance with the devil, Archbishop?" He asked.

The Archbishop was not amused. He pulled an energy staff, and pointed it at Rieger. Rieger ducked as a bolt of energy flew over his head. He rolled, and came up behind the surprised Archbishop.

"Time to die." He whispered in the old man's ear as he grabbed his wiry grey hair and slid his blade deftly across the Archbishop's throat.

There's a certain satisfaction gained in the death of one's enemies, and Rieger savored the moment to it's fullest extent.

The old man's limp body collapsed to the floor leaving Rieger holding his disembodied head. The archbishop's eyes rolled in their sockets. Something strange began oozing out of his neck. It was clearly not human.

Rieger dropped the head and a small purple creature not unlike a squid came slithering out of it. Small tendrils grasped for a hold, pulling it out inch by inch.

Looking up at the startled assassin, it chirped a few short clicks, and then began to skitter across the room.

Rieger threw his blade, and it impaled the creature's body, pinning it to the floor. Rieger walked over to it, wondering what in the hell it was. It chirped some more, then began to attack.

It spit out a strange yellow venom at Rieger's face, but he shielded his eyes. His face was covered with sticky mucus. Rieger struck at it, knocking it to the floor again and held it down with his boot.

"Damned! What ever you are, you really stink!" He said as he picked up the writhing creature, punched it into unconsciousness and put it in his pack. Another security team was rounding the corner.

"Guys. I'd really love to stay and play with you, but I've got a beautiful woman waiting for me in my hovercar."

He tossed an orb, and it exploded, leaving a mess of blood and sinew. He took the remaining orbs from his pack, released their tendrils and tied them together. Setting up a cascade timer, he turned to the inert bodies that lined the hallway.

"With that, I bid you adieu!" Rieger tossed the orbs into the arcing crematory chamber, and then hastily made a retreat to the exit.

Once outside the Sancti, he quickly ran back to the hovercar, where Kiersten was still waiting for him.

"Where's the soldier?" She asked.

"He had to rest." Rieger said as a tremendous explosion ripped the Sancti apart from within, collapsing a huge portion of it upon itself.

"Rest for an awful long time." Rieger shot the hovercar up like a rocket, reaching the limits of it's engines.

"Hang on to your seat, this ride's about to get pretty damned rough."

As the car continued to climb upward, a huge explosion unlike any she had ever seen completely destroyed the remainder of the Sancti, and a few city blocks beyond it. The shockwave tossed the tiny craft like a juggernaut. Rieger fought to regain control before the car would stall and plummet to the ground.

"Come on, baby! Gimme all you got!" Rieger yelled.

The turbines screamed as they performed far beyond their ratings. The craft listed on its side for a moment, and then Rieger managed to straighten it out until another shockwave rocked the small craft.

The sun was beginning to get blocked out by the huge dust cloud raised by the explosion. Rieger looked in awe at the huge crater left for ten city blocks. It must have been a mile and a half across, easy.

"What the hell did you just do, you stupid arrogant bastard? Blow up the Sancti?" Exclaimed Kiersten as she held on for dear life, shaking violently through the resulting shockwaves.

"Jeez! Well, it used to be the Sancti, but now I'd call it one hell of a big hole!" He grinned in satisfaction of a job well done.

"Why did you do that? If you wanted to kill the Archbishop, you didn't have to take out half the city in the process!"

Rieger had no answer for her. He just looked out the canopy at the massive fires and destruction below.

"Damn it, Rieger! You just can't do things simply, can you? Can you?" Kiersten wondered what was going to become of the Sancti now.

She wasn't particularly religious, but she felt for them. What would become of the families of the dead? "Ever hear of a thing called moderation? Everything has to be overkill with you, isn't it?"

"Moderation isn't in my nature, woman! I'm frankly getting tired of hearing your ultra sensitivity bullshit! Shut up, strap yourself in, and hold on."

"Where are we going now?" She quizzed, still angry with Rieger. Rieger finally had enough. He depressed a button on the control pad and sent an immense shock through her nervous system. She jerked stiff for a moment, then sank flaccidly into the seat.

"There! Are you happy now? Maybe I'll finally get some peace and quiet out of you." He punched in a few coordinates into the hover autopilot controls and reclined his chair to finally get some well deserved rest.

"Some people just don't get it." He said to himself as he crossed his arms behind his head and began to slumber off.

The hovercar slowly changed it's course and aligned itself towards the dark horizon. It was going to be a great day, indeed.

The Imperial Senate building was still bustling with frantic activity in the aftermath of the explosion. On all the vids were tuned in to reports coming in from all around the galaxy. The tremendous explosion at the Sancti had caused quite a stir.

Angry mobs ran through the streets, causing chaos in the normally ultra-orderly capitol. Senate aides were busily gathering the latest reports and compiling them for damage control briefings. Holocomms were crackling with personal accounts, some of those from apparent charred and smoking survivors of the blast.

Gieger turned angrily in his chair and looked out at the dirty metropolis below. A smoky haze had enveloped the city.

"Damn it!" He exclaimed as he slammed his fist onto his desk. The sound startled several aides, who dropped their work to see what was happening. Gieger gave them a cold stare that they had never seen before.

They quickly resumed their business, afraid to attract their boss's wrath. There was going to be hell to pay, and not one of them wished to be on the receiving end of it. They scurried about, trying to keep out of Gieger's way.

Gieger turned to his comm terminal and began to type up a report for the Senate. He would have to stand before them and brief the latest events. Turning on the holocomm, he called out a name, and the screen crackled into action.

Lycanos Moravi turned toward his personal vid. He was a scrawny figure of a man, who rode upon a hover life support chair. He had been paraplegic since an accident years ago, but still managed to maneuver the chair with a certain degree of skill. He pulled beside his holocom.

His eyes widened as he looked at the disheveled figure that appeared before him.

"Gieger. It's been a long time since I've got a call from you." He said as he took a pause from reviewing data coming from the global web.

"I apologize, Lycanos. I've had a lot on my mind with my new responsibilities." Said Gieger, wiping the sweat from his wrinkled brow.

"Frankly, you look like hell. What can I do for you, Gieger?"

"Well, the reason I called was..."

"The over gratuitous bombing of the Sancti?" Lycanos interrupted. By the way Gieger reacted; he knew he had guessed correctly.

"Oh, yes. The recent events there disturb me greatly."

"I bet!" Lycanos swung his chair around, as he went over to the counter to retrieve his beverage. A mechanical tentacle reached out for it, and brought it to his lips. He took a few healthy gulps, then the arm set the cup back down, and he returned into view.

"I need your help, Lycanos."

"My help? What could I possibly do for the great Gieger that he can't accomplish himself? You have the aide of all your assassins."

Gieger shook his head, and recomposed himself. Lycanos was clearly touching on some raw nerves here. Tying with Gieger, and enjoying every bit of it.

"Now you listen here, you crippled bastard. I'm asking for your help now." Said the enraged Gieger.

"Oh, yes. Back to the crippled bastard routine." Lycanos exclaimed with a gleam in his eyes.

"As I remember it, it was you who placed me in my particular situation. No, I don't recall me owing you any damned favors. My slate is clean to you. In fact, you still owe me a great deal."

Lycanos turned from the holocom for a moment, so Gieger couldn't see his face. He grinned wildly with a deep enjoyment. So now Gieger wants his help, of all people. He turned back to the screen and resumed his poker face. "I don't need to help anyone."

Gieger looked into the man's eyes. "I'm sorry, Lycanos. I've tried to do all I could to help you. Please, just listen to what I have to say. We have quite a problem on our hands with this situation. One of my agents has gotten a bit out of hand."

"Oh really." Said Lycanos as he began to laugh. "I'd say that was the major understatement of the year."

"Very funny." Said Gieger. He could see Lycanos try to hold back the tears in the middle of hysterical fits of laughter. "Damned it, I need access to some of your intelligence resources."

"Very well, Gieger. I'll try to lend you a small hand."

Lycanos turned away to a comm terminal, where he opened up several virtual holoscreens. "But it will cost you dearly, my friend."

"I don't care what it costs. The next head to roll will most probably be mine."

"That would be most unfortunate for you, Gieger. At least my head is still attached to my lame body." Lycanos resumed his fit of laughter.

Gieger was getting very impatient dealing with this man. Although Lycanos probably couldn't be trusted as far as you could throw his support chair, he had been one of the most obedient agents that Gieger had dealt with until he was retired after his unfortunate accident.

He felt he was getting through to the man, and even if Lycanos still felt a deep hatred for the Empire, he'd probably help them if the price was right. At worst, it would most probably turn out to be a deal with the devil.

Lycanos turned back to the holocom. "What do you have for me to look at?" He asked.

Gieger looked back at Lycanos, not knowing whether he could truly trust this man. Then again, he had nothing to lose at this point, except his head. Better to concede.

Gieger placed a disk into the reader, and it transferred all the data to Lycanos's terminal. Lycanos began to scan the data, stopping to look at the briefest of details.

He was very meticulous about his work, and knew that even the most minute of details could open up a world of possibilities previously obscured by media fluff.

Gieger looked in amazement at the way Lycanos worked without apparent disability although he was almost totally paralyzed from the neck down.

He remembered that Lycanos had had his legs amputated when they had degenerated too far beyond repair.

Despite his adversity, Lycanos was still very brilliant, although Gieger was increasingly troubled by his alleged ties to the dark underworld of the Empire.

Lycanos paused for a moment, and looked at Gieger through the holocom.

"The work of this bomber looks very familiar to me." He replied after a brief pause.

"He is definitely one of your agents, as he utilized what appears to be several re-configured cluster orbs, possibly put in a cascade configuration to give them a bigger bang for the buck. Do you think it could possibly be Armand?" Lycanos asked.

Gieger shook his head. "I'm not sure. Our records indicate that Rieger was assassinated by the Archbishop for attempting to kill him, and we haven't heard of him since."

"Something tells me that you had a slight part in the orchestration of the attempt." Said Lycanos, grinning wryly.

"Why would you say that?" Quizzed Gieger, attempting to disguise his involvement in the matter.

"Anyway, the book has been closed, and I don't feel that even Armand could have survived the execution to pull this one off, no matter what his hatred of the Archbishop."

"But the Archbishop has been missing and presumed dead since the explosion."

"This is true." Replied Gieger. "None of his followers reported seeing him after the blast... that is the few of them that survived the explosion."

"Then let us presume that the Archbishop is indeed deceased. Armand is not a suspect, although I do not believe that you are telling me everything you necessarily know about this incident."

Lycanos returned to work at the terminal. His mechanical tentacle arms moved like a blur, pushing aside screen by screen of data.

He brought up a display on the main viewscreen a brief background on another agent, thinking for a moment, and then he turned to Gieger.

"What about Armand's brother, Gregory?" He asked.

"That is a very distinct possibility. We've been looking in his direction for quite a while now but have turned up nothing."
Said Gieger.

"Well, it seems to me that you have two unaccounted for agents, with a distinct hatred for the Sancti. It would appear that you, as an administrator for the assassin corps, do not even appear to have control over your own agency."

Gieger writhed in his seat. The veins in his head looked as if they were about to burst. "How dare you tell me how to do my job, Lycanos." He screamed.

"On the contrary, my dear Gieger. You know it to be true. Those who can no longer do the job are destined to be pawns of the game. Your usefulness to the Imperial Senate seems to be coming to an abrupt end."

"Shut up! Shut up!" Screamed Gieger, although he knew the words to be probably true. He still limped on the leg that the Emperor had excised his disapproval on. God knew what the Emperor would do to him now.

"Now Gieger, I believe that it most probably was Gregory, in retribution for his brother's apparent death at the hands of the Sancti. Why he accomplished it in such a big way is not understandable, but it clearly fits his profile."

"I tend to agree with you." Gingerly replied Gieger, who clasped his hands into a ball.

"Well, then you'd also have to agree with me that he probably doesn't like you very much, either."

"That thought has crossed my mind. But I don't think he'd risk the exposed danger to come after me. After all, I was his boss." Said Gieger.

Lycanos stopped interfacing with the terminal, and stared at the screen again. "I would not underestimate this man. He could be a thorn in your side for quite a while."

"We are tracking him down. Sooner or later, he'll slip up, and we'll have him right where we want him. Dead."

"I'd watch your back in the meantime. Let me examine the data a little further and I'll get back to you." Said Lycanos, still concentrating on the data spread out on the screens before him. With his neural enhancements, he could process five times the amount of data that an ordinary human could.

"OK, I'll call you back within the hour. The Imperial Senate thanks you." Said Gieger, in an almost sincere manner.

"Oh, I'll require more than thanks, my friend." Replied Lycanos, who abruptly terminated the holocom transmission.

Gieger slumped back into his chair. What had he brought in to this? He turned to look at his aides, who had stopped to wonder what he would do next.

"What the hell are you looking at?" He screamed. "Get back to work!"

Obediently, they scurried back to work, and Gieger resumed working on his report. It was bound to be a triple sedative day.

He reached into his desk and pulled out a sedative disk. He applied it to his neck, on top of the two that were already applied there. He rolled his head from side to side and cracked his neck, vertebrae popping from the stress.

It provided a minor, temporary relief but he was certain it would tense up soon again. He still had to face the Senate. First things first, he thought. It was time he exacted some revenge. He called an aide to his side.

"Get me Brant Sulcorse. I want him in front of me in ten minutes." He said.

The aide quickly ran off to fetch the assassin. Sulcorse had always hated the Riegers. Now would be his chance to do something about it.

Armand cautiously made his way through the hole he'd blown into the Citadel. Programming the hovercar controls with his datapad, he watched as it screamed upwards, then halted as the engines stalled.

It began to slowly plummet to the ground like a rock, then explode off the side of the Citadel, causing a small fire several hundred floors below.

He saw a fire control team begin to fight the blaze. That ought to keep them busy for a while, he thought to himself. Maybe they'd even think that the dead pilot was the intruder. That would certainly buy him enough time to accomplish his task at hand.

Rieger looked at his surroundings. He was obviously in an administrative office of some kind. He noticed a holocom at a nearby desk.

"Perfect." He said, as he called the Emperors secretary. The screen went blank for a moment, and then brightened as a figure appeared.

Zex answered the holocom. He instantly was startled to see the late assassin Armand Rieger over the transmission.

"This must be some sort of a joke." He said with a puzzled look over his face. "You're dead!"

"Nope. Sorry to disappoint you, Zex. I'm very much alive."
Said Rieger.

Zex attempted to shut off the holocom, but Armand jammed the channel open, and stepped through the screen.

"How did you do that?" Said Zex as he stepped back several feet, putting as much distance as he could between himself and Rieger. "You haven't the clearance to access this level of technology."

"You know what they say about ghosts. We can do anything." Said Rieger as Zex began to shake violently from fear of the man.

Armand grabbed Zex by his scrawny neck and looked into his eyes. "Now let's go see your boss, the Emperor."

Zex struggled to shake himself from Rieger's grasp, but it wasn't working.

"I can't do that! You know I can't." Zex said. Rieger pulled his blade and sliced through Zex's reptilian tail. He screamed in agony.

"Now I think you will, or you'll wish you were dead. A Sylanx can always grow back his tail, but not his head." Said Rieger, holding the blade at Zex's throat.

When Zex saw the blade at his throat, and the tail writhing about on the floor, he suddenly became very agreeable.

The holocom flashed to life, and the image of the Emperor appeared. "Rieger! Leave poor Zex alone. Now!" He commanded.

Rieger turned to face the holocom. "Just the guy I wanted to talk to." Exclaimed Rieger as he dropped Zex to the floor. Zex slithered off into a dark corner, watching as the two men faced off.

Rieger attempted to jump through the holoscreen, but clumsily bounced off of it instead.

"Sorry Rieger, but I've disabled the transport feature." Said the Emperor as Rieger pulled himself off the floor. He appeared to have dislocated his shoulder in the process and smacked it back into place using a nearby wall.

"We need to talk. Alone, my Emperor."

"Very well. Zex. You may leave us now!" The Emperor commanded. Zex quickly bolted out the door. He didn't have to be told twice. The door hissed closed, and the two men were alone.

"Now, Armand. What can I do for you?" Asked the Emperor.

"First of all, you can apologize for turning me over to the Sancti." Rieger said. The Emperor saw the immense hatred boiling up inside of him.

"That was not my idea, Armand. In fact, I kind of like your work." Said the Emperor.

"Then who decided to give me up?"

"Your old friend Gieger decided that it would be in the best interest of the Empire if we turned you over. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"So, it was that rotten bastard. I knew something was up when I came back to brief the Senate."

"This is true. We thought you had also succeeded on your mission, but were surprised to get a call from the Archbishop Sancto right after you transported back."

"He may look like Sancto, but I doubt it is him, unless he cloned himself beforehand." Said Rieger. "Because I did kill the man."

"You may have killed him, but that is why we specifically ordered you to scramble the man's brains. We knew he might come back to the living if you didn't do it."

"Then how did he survive, Emperor? I know I killed him!"

"I do not know the answer to that question. What I do know he is most probably dead now."

"How?" Asked Rieger.

"My sources tend to agree, and I among them, that your brother, Gregory, personally dispatched Michanos Sancto, one hundred thousand of his flock, and about a mile and a half of prime religious real estate in the process."

"Way to go, brother!" Armand exclaimed.

"Yes. I was pleased as well. That man has been a thorn in my side for far too long. I had no choice in giving you up, as we were caught red handed. No offense, my dear Rieger." Said the Emperor.

"None taken, Emperor. I probably would have done the same." Said Rieger. A puzzled look came over Rieger's face. This was all too easy.

"Something is troubling you. I can feel it." Said the Emperor.

"Yes, my lord. This is entirely too easy."

"What is?" Quizzed the Emperor.

"Me talking to you. It should have been more difficult."

"Difficulty is often determined by circumstance, number one. I have foreseen this, therefore I allowed it to happen."

"Then you knew if I was alive, that I'd come after you?"

"Oh yes, my dear boy. You would come. Perhaps to exact revenge, but most clearly to gain some answers."

"Then why aren't you afraid I'd succeed in killing you, because your answers aren't exactly forthcoming?"

The Emperor turned on his throne, looking Rieger straight in the eyes. "You may succeed sometime in the future, but now is not my time to die. In fact, I thought you'd figure it out that Gieger had set you up, and you'd kill him first."

Rieger looked down at himself. The Emperor had it all figured out, down to the last detail.

"Rieger, I have always known how and when I would die, but my bloodline shall live on forever." Said the Emperor.

"But there is an order to the galaxy and several events must pass before it is my time. As far as answers to you questions, I can only say that when you have them, I will know. Goodbye."

The holocom suddenly went black. Rieger was alone again within the room.

Gregory was awakened by the perimeter alarm in the hovercar. He was nearing the destination. He shut off the autopilot, and began to guide the hovercraft over the outskirts of the badlands.

He glanced over at Kiersten, who was still out from the shock to her system. He reached over to check her pulse. She was still alive. That was fortunate, because she was the only proof that justified his actions.

She moved in her sleep, lips pursing, as if trying to form words from her subconscious. He gazed at her sleeping body. She was really quite striking, he thought. He reached over and felt her hair flow through his fingers. Her head turned towards him, and she quickly opened her eyes.

"What?" She asked of him, defensively pushing herself back.

"Nothing. I was just wondering if you were still alive." He said.

"No thanks to you, you bastard. Where are we?" She asked, looking out at the desolate wasteland below. She had never seen anything like it.

"We're over the badlands now." He said, guiding the craft down through a small canyon.

Suddenly, a huge expanse of brilliant, shimmering blue ocean was revealed from horizon to horizon, as they passed through a small opening. It seemed to glow in an almost neon blue shade, waves appeared to roll to and fro.

"It looks like a vast ocean." She said.

"It's a post-nucleonic wasteland. The blue is a result of radioactive interference with the silicate. It lumeneses blue, looking harmless, although a few minutes out there will fry you."

"Certainly nobody could live out here?" She said.

"Well, almost nobody. Except for the mining operations personnel and the drifters, nobody would want to come out here because of the radiation."

She shuddered to think about it. The peaceful tranquility of it all made it look so harmless. Gazing out of the cockpit window, she saw the burnt out skeleton of a huge behemoth creature. Rieger, noticing her interest, dipped the hovercraft down and flew slowly through the ribs.

"How morbid! Why did you do that?" She asked.

"Just to show you the scale of the beast. It used to be a Coraset. The primitives once used them to pull their sand skiffs. Now they're extinct, because of the great war." Rieger maneuvered the hovercraft out of the bowels of the burnt out Coraset. He was right, she thought. It was indeed very massive.

She had never left the confines of the metropolis before, and never wanted to see the badlands, even though she had heard about them as a small child.

All she knew about it was that there was a great war a millennia ago that had turned this part of the planet into a radioactive desert. Nobody dared set foot within the badlands without permission from the Senate.

As they passed through the canyon, a great deserted city appeared before them. Huge, burned out monoliths rose from the stark desert sands to greet the burning sun above. She gazed upon the dead civilization in awe.

"What is this place called?" She asked.

"This is Amagegnon, the old capitol city of the Empire." He answered.

"Why is it deserted?" She asked.

"Because all life here was destroyed a thousand years ago in the Great War."

"Why have I never heard about it?" Kiersten asked in disbelief.

"That's because some things are better left forgotten." He answered.

They flew out of the shimmering blue desert, encountering what appeared to be normal desert terrain.

"This place is safe. We'll stop here for a little bit to stretch our legs."

Kiersten agreed it was about time to take a rest break. You could only spend so much time in a hovercraft before the perpetual whine of the turbines drove you insane.

Rieger captured a glimpse of a small river that cut through the great city. He guided the craft down, and landed the small craft along side it.

"Time to get out and stretch your legs." He said as he opened the canopy. The sweltering heat quickly engulfed them, making it hard to breathe.

"Are you certain that we're safe here?" Kiersten asked. She checked her skin for signs of radiation poisoning.

"Yeah." Said Rieger, who was fidgeting with a dosimeter on his padd. "The rads are well within human tolerance. Just don't hang out in the sun too long."

Kiersten got out of the hovercar and walked over to the bank of the river. She removed her robe and waded into the almost clear water. It was a slow current, and the cool water felt good to her skin.

"Aren't you going to come in?" She asked Gregory. He just sat on the bank, gathering in the hot sun.

"No. I'm fine here." He said.

She bathed in the cool water, almost forgetting all her problems. She had never seen so much water in her entire life.

"Why don't they have rivers in the new capitol city?" She asked.

"They do." He answered. They're in the aqueducts below the city. But you'll never see them."

She looked up at Rieger and wondered how he knew so much, yet let out so little. He held a rifle in his hands, pointed at her. She froze in fear.

"Don't move!" He said.

"What are you doing?" She cried.

He fired a shot that just missed her head. As she ducked, he fired another shot, striking her in the arm. She went down, and a large cloud of blood began to fill the water.

Rieger dropped the rifle on the bank and dove into the water. He pulled at her body as it began to sink to the bottom. Dragging her to the surface, he made his way to the shore. Kiersten coughed up water, shaking from shock.

"What the hell are you doing?" She asked.

"Trying to save your life." He said.

"You have a funny way of doing it, shooting at me."

Then Kiersten looked across the water to where she had been bathing. A huge, grey serpent-like creature was writhing in the water, wounded by a shot between the eyes. The creature snapped at the air with its huge dorsal mouth. All Kiersten could see was teeth. Many rows of them.

"It's a Carran. They're attracted to the vibrations in the water. One of them could skin you to the bone in less than a minute." Said Rieger, who took the rifle and shot it a few more times in the head.

Then it lurched and bobbed under as the water around it began to boil into a froth. It was being eaten alive. Blood foamed all around it, and then all was still.

"Oh my god!" She cried. She buried her head in Rieger's arms. He tossed the rifle into the sand.

"It's alright. I saw it coming up behind you, but I didn't want you to panic. That would have attracted more of them." He said.

Grabbing her robe, he draped it over her shaking body. He walked to the hovercar and picked up the medikit. He bandaged her arm carefully, and applied a stim-disc.

"This will help dull the pain." He said.

She looked up at him and grabbed his arm. She pulled him down to her side and kissed him on the cheek.

"What the hell are you doing?" He asked as he instinctively pushed her back, temporarily losing his balance, jerked backwards, and almost falling on his behind.

"I'm trying to thank you." She said, covering herself up.

"Just try to stay alive. That's thanks enough for me." He answered. He got up and walked back to the hovercraft, throwing some dead brush over it.

A huge mining transport slowly appeared in the distant horizon. It lumbered across the sky, heading for the new capitol city with its cargo of metrallian ore. The sound of the engines grated on their nerves as it slowly passed overhead, and vanished into the distance.

"Stay here." Said Rieger. "I want to make sure they didn't see us."

"Sure. I'm not going anywhere." She said, still shaking from the encounter with the Carran.

Rieger dashed up over the dune of sand and out of sight. He pulled out his binocs and took a closer look at the transport. It had no markings. Strange... Clearly, it was of Imperial origin.

What the heck was an unmarked transport doing in the wasteland? He watched as the distance between them grew, and then the lower cargo bay doors opened once it was over the blue sands.

Pulse bombs dropped into the desert, blowing up huge plumes of radioactive dust. "What the hell are they up to?" He thought to himself. Strafing the sand with pulse bombs did nothing but kick up dust here. They have no useful purpose in mining, certainly not here.

As each bomblet exploded below the transport, an electrical arc rose from the desert surface and seemed to tickle at the belly of the transport. Rieger focused at the desert surface. At each explosion, he seemed to see shadows within the blast. He pulled the binocs down and wiped the sweat off his brow.

Clearly, he needed some more rest. The transport now looked like a speck on the horizon. He was content. If they had detected the hovercar, they most probably would have turned around to investigate. Putting away the binocs, he trekked back over the dune to rejoin Kiersten and tell her the good news.

As he stepped over the apex of the dune, she seemed to be enjoying the sun. He gazed at her semi-nude body for a moment. She really was a sight, he thought. Maybe in another circumstance, he could have enjoyed having her around.

He stalked up behind her, hoping to surprise her. As he got within mere feet of her, she suddenly turned around. The look in her frightened eyes sent shivers up his spine. It was only then that he suddenly noticed the gag in her mouth.

Gieger tapped his fingers impatiently. It was now two hours since his conversation with Lycanos Moravi, and he was no closer to getting a report done now that he was before.

Another bound report was delivered to his desk, and he slid it over onto the pile with the rest of the useless information that his analysts had gathered.

Fodder, he thought. There's no way he could make an intelligent report to the Imperial Senate with this garbage. He needed Lycanos.

Turning to the holocom, he retried to link up with Lycanos. Again no answer. "Where the hell is he?" Geiger thought out loud. Then the holocom crackled to life.

"Thank god, Moravi. I was beginning to get worried about you." Exclaimed Gieger. When the image appeared, his glee turned to fear. The image of the Emperor appeared.

"Looking for wisdom from Moravi, I see." Said the Emperor, finger tapping ever so rythmically upon his wrinkled forehead. "Although I solemnly feel that even he cannot pull you out of the chasm that you have dug for yourself this time."

"Uh, he is assisting us in our inquiries, my Emperor. Simply acting as an analyst." Replied Gieger.

The Emperor paused for a moment, then leaned forward in his throne. "I trust that you have a report ready for the Imperial Senate. We shall convene very shortly."

Gieger let a look of fear slide over his face, but shook it off quickly. "My liege, I have it right here." He said, grabbing the bound report off the top of the pile data.

The Emperor sat back in his throne, and smiled. "For your sake, my dear Gieger, I hope that this report is favorable. I do not like surprises."

Geiger ran his hand down to his scarred leg. He instantly knew what the Emperor was implying. "I shall not fail you, Emperor. My men are hard at work as we speak."

"And what of the Rieger problem." The Emperor asked. "I have yet to see any amount of progress with them!"

Gieger dropped the report. A bead of sweat fell slowly down his forehead. "Progress has been slow, Emperor. But I do have some good news, at least. We have captured the renegade Gregory Rieger and the woman within the confines of the badlands. They will be here shortly."

The Emperor raised his brow. "Really?"

"Yes, Emperor. They were apprehended about a half hour ago."

"Then I shall expect their presence in front of the Senate, along with your report, within the hour. Do not fail me, Gieger. This time I will not be so sympathetic to excuses."

The Emperor signed off, and the holocom went blank. Gieger slumped into his seat. He spun the chair around and looked out his huge bay window at the city far below.

Would this day ever end, he thought to himself. He gazed at the dark metropolis, and the smoky haze that still blanketed the skies. There surely would be hell to pay, and he certainly wasn't going to be the whipping boy any longer.

He turned his chair around and punched in a number on the holocom. It crackled to life, revealing a battle-scarred face.

"Go secure, channel XZ7100." Gieger commanded. The scarred man nodded, and then the holocom went static for a moment and cleared up again.

"Done. Please authenticate, B100." Said the scarred man.

Gieger looked up the countercode with his cryptopad. "V-A-9-1-E-X" He called forward.

"Very well. Gieger, What can I do for you?"

"What is your progress tracking down Armand?" Said Gieger.

"Armand is quite stealthy, but a little sloppy. I am close to his trail."

Gieger leaned forward, with a great look of disdain. "I want you to be more than close to him, Jobe! I want him found and brought to me within the hour!"

Gieger slammed his fist onto the desk. The holocom blanked out for a moment, then stabilized. Gieger stared coldly into the eyes of the scarred man. "Is that clearly understood, Jobe?"

Jobe stepped back from the holocom. He fingered his pulse rifle that hung at his side. "Yes, Gieger. I understand and obey."

"Good. Just do it, or I'll have your head to present to the Senate instead!" Gieger terminated the transmission.

Jobe pulled up his rifle and shot out the holoscreen with overkill. Sparks and a few lit cinders fell to the ground, and Jobe crushed them out one by one with his boot.

He put the rifle back into his holster, then walked down the short hall. It was a time to kill, and he would be victorious. Soon, he would be number one, and nobody would stand in his way. Not Rieger, not Gieger, not anyone.

Noticing a wanted vid of Rieger on the wall, he punched his fist through it. "Yes, my dear Armand. You will be mine!" He said quietly to himself with a devilish grin. He walked away as a custodial maintenance droid arrived to clean up the mess.

Armand had thought over his conversation with the Emperor. Clearly, he was still being led down a path, as he had always feared. This whole episode was just another move on the galactic chessboard of life.

No matter what he did, or what he failed to do, it always played favorably into some unknown persons favor. He grew weary of playing the game.

A call came in over the holocom. He walked over to it to answer it, but stopped in his tracks. Something was coming through the screen. He grabbed for his saber, and ducked in a defensive stance. The screen burped, and a small parcel fell through the screen onto the floor, then the transmission ceased.

Cautiously, he approached the parcel. It was a small leather satchel. Scanning it with his pad, he was assured that it contained no bomb or mechanical device.

He grabbed the bag and opened it slowly. A small grey tentacle met his fingers, then a sharp pain ran up his arm. Instinctively, he pulled his hand back and the satchel fell to the ground.

Rieger noticed that his hand was bleeding from what appeared to be a bite.

"Damned thing! You bit me!" Reiger cried out.

His pain turned to rage, and Rieger kicked the satchel across the room. Losing his balance from the swift kick, he stumbled backwards as the creature slowly crawled out of the bag.

It slowly, but methodically made it's way over to where Rieger had spilled his blood on the floor, and began to feed off of it.

"What the hell are you, you bloodsucking bastard?" He asked.

The creature appeared to stop feeding for a moment and looked up at him. It opened its mouth and just emitted a few brief faint chirps.

One thing was for sure, thought Rieger; the creature was dying. The color of the creature was getting paler by the moment.

Rieger walked cautiously over to the creature and grabbed it by the tentacles. He had never seen such a creature before, during all of his travels with the Imperial Army, nor on his missions to other worlds as an assassin for the Imperial Senate.

Even if he didn't know what it was, didn't mean it was unknown. Rieger walked over to his bag and pulled out an orb.

He programmed the orb with his control pad, and the orb released it's own tentacles which ensnared the creature. Content that the orb would hold the creature, Reiger walked over to the holocom and dialed up an old friend.

The holoscreen remained blank for a moment, then flickered to life. The image of Lycanos Moravi appeared.

"Rieger! Of all the people I'd most like to not see at the moment." Exclaimed Lycanos, with a surprised look upon his face.

He knew there was a chance that Rieger would call upon him, just as Gieger had done, but he didn't think Rieger would slip up like this.

Rieger returned the pleasantries. "Yeah. Glad to see you too, Lycanos."

Lycanos shook his head. "You know that the Imperial Senate has half their forces looking for you and your brother Gregory, don't you? Do you think it was wise to contact me, of all people?"

"You're right, Lycanos. As usual. But I of all people know of your true hatred for the system, regardless of your allegiances to the Senate and the Emperor."

"That is true, but you'll never hear me admit it again. Why did you call? After all, you know they are probably tracing this call as we speak."

"Not any more." Rieger said as he depressed a button on his control pad. The holocom became a little fuzzy, as the signal acquired a different data route each millisecond. Rieger smiled, as did Lycanos, when he realized what Rieger had done.

"Ingenious! And all this time I thought I was the only one who had done business with the Black Sun. You must be really in trouble to have trust in them." Lycanos replied.

"I don't trust them. That's why we make such good partners." Said Rieger. "But I guess you have to, after what the Senate did to you after your accident."

A frown came over Lycanos's face. He was being reminded of a period in his life that he didn't want brought up again. Rieger had known him when he was number one and Rieger was number two. But now the tables had turned, and his allegiance to the Empire was purely symbolic.

He had a good life now, despite being paraplegic, and had put his alternate abilities into their full use.

"The Empire treats me well, but alas, the Black Sun has more than made up for the Empires failures to rectify my current situation. I do well as an analyst."

Rieger reached down and held up the small creature entangled within the tentacles of the restraining orb. It chirped when it saw Lycanos, and tried to frantically free itself. The orb just tightened it's grasp with each struggle by the creature. It finally stopped fighting.

Lycanos instinctively jerked his head back, as if he was trying to hide from the creature. "Kill that damned thing! Right now!" He commanded.

"But what is it?" Rieger asked his mentor.

"Kill it, I said! Now!" Lycanos screamed. The veins in his head seemed as if they were about to burst from the hatred he had for the creature.

Rieger dropped the orb to the floor and the creature began to screech. The orb spun wildly as the creature resumed it's struggle, realizing the orders that Lycanos had issued.

Rieger pressed a button on the orb control pad, and a bright flash appeared as it began to electrocute the creature.

The creature writhed in pain, screeching louder until the flash ended and all was still. The orb had fried the creature from the inside out. The smell of burning flesh quickly filled the room.

Rieger held back the nausea pretty good, but his stomach still churned. It was a smell that he had never gotten used to, despite his many battles in the Imperial Army.

Lycanos had regained control of himself, and now maneuvered closer to the holoscreen. "Where did you get that thing?" He asked.

"It was sent through the holo to me. I don't know who sent it." Said Rieger as he checked the log of transmissions through the holoscreen. "It was sent from the badlands."

"Could it have been your brother?" Lycanos asked.

"I don't know. Maybe." Rieger quit the search, knowing that it would probably be fruitless. "If it was my brother, he would have at least sent something about it. Rieger searched the satchel.

It contained a strange necklace, which had a crystal in it. The crystal began to glow with the contact with the artificial lights.

Rieger's eyes widened as he instantly recognized it. It belonged to Kiersten. The necklace she never removed from her neck.

"What is it, Rieger?" Inquired Lycanos, noticing the disturbed look on Rieger's face. "Hold it closer to the screen so that I may see it."

Rieger held the necklace to the holoscreen so Lycanos could get a better view.

"That's something I have not seen for quite some time." Lycanos said while rubbing his forehead in deep thought. "I thought the last of them had been sought out and been terminated by the Sancto."

"Who had been terminated? This belongs to a young lady that my brother had been scheduled to terminate. But not by the Sancto. His orders came directly from the Imperial Senate."

Lycanos turned his hover support chair away from the screen to pull up some data on his terminal. Rieger couldn't see what he was examining, but he knew Lycanos didn't like what he was seeing.

"That damned bastard!" Exclaimed Lycanos as he returned into view. Rieger knew that he had stumbled into something he was probably going to regret.

"What is it?" Rieger inquired.

"If the orders came from the Senate, and that necklace is what I think it is, then you are in very deep trouble, my friend."

Rieger laughed out loud. "Like I'm not public enemy one already! Tell me another one."

Lycanos remained calm. A stern look fell over him. He was dead serious, thought Rieger.

"Think about it for a moment, and take a look at the big picture. The truth is your beliefs in a set of certain known facts. If you do not know all the facts, then the truth could be actually the ultimate lie. Think about it. Why would the Senate want this girl killed. Kill an innocent? Someone with nothing to be gained by her demise."

Lycanos turned in his chair, then continued. "Think about it, my friend. I don't believe the Senate contracted this action at all, Rieger. I believe that the order to terminate her came from but one man."

Rieger thought to himself for a moment. He was no closer to solving this thing now that he ever was. In fact, he was getting more and more confused as the events unfolded before him. "Who issued the order then?"

He asked.

Lycanos inched closer to the screen. He thought for a moment, then shook it off. It could be only one man. "I believe it was Gieger."

"Well that wouldn't surprise me one bit, but how could he do it without being caught by the Senate?" Rieger asked.

Suddenly, Lycanos noticed an anomaly on one of his monitor screens. "Enhance J-104." He commanded. The screen widened and took up the size of the full screen. "Interesting. Very interesting."

"What is it?" Rieger inquired. He was disturbed by the puzzled look that had washed over the stern face of Lycanos. Lycanos pressed some more buttons on the console to gather some additional data on the screen, then turned to Rieger.

"They have captured your brother and the girl." Lycanos replied.

"Who has?", Rieger asked.

"This channel was set up to intercept transmissions to the guild. It's cloaked within the signal bandwidth to trigger a burst transmission to me when it fits the criteria that I have configured it to respond. This proves it, my friend. b Gieger is behind the whole thing!"

Rieger slammed his fist onto the table, startling Lycanos. "That damned bastard! I will kill him. I swear!"

"Easy, Rieger. This is exactly what he wants you to do. You'd be playing into his hand, and that could prove quite unfortunate on your part. He's trying to elicit an emotional response from you, and I fear it worked, although you're not supposed to know of this event at this time."

"But I need to rescue them before that bastard can do anything to them. I owe my brother that much." Rieger replied.

Lycanos leaned back in his hoverchair and maneuvered to face Armand. "This is true. Let's discuss an alternative before you go out on an all-out rampage. Just listen carefully to what I propose..."

A huge mining transport slowly lumbered its way over the fierce desert terrain. The temperature was nearing one-fifty, and sweat dripped by the bucket load from the ragged crew.

A lone figure stood behind the pilots, watching their progress over the wasteland. The mission to capture the renegade Gregory Rieger and the girl had been overly successful. Gregory had never known what had hit him.

Jobe was indeed pleased with himself as he gazed at the endless sea of sand. Having sent the report to Gieger, Jobe slowly turned from the cockpit and walked down the isle to greet his new guests.

He approached Gregory, who was still unconscious from the stun probe. He drew a fist and gleefully slugged Gregory hard in the face, drawing a thin bead of blood down from his eyebrow.

"That was for dragging me out of the city into this god-forsaken wasteland." Gregory remained unconscious, which made Jobe even more aggravated at the entire situation.

Jobe drew back once again and kicked Gregory squarely in the crotch, yet nothing as faint as a wheeze came from Gregory's lips.

"Damned you, you worthless sack of shit!" Yelled Jobe. He turned to the guards who were watching over the prisoners. "I thought you guys said this mission was going to be a challenge! Right! This is entirely too easy." He turned back to Gregory and spat in his face. "Some challenge you are!"

Kiersten straightened up in her restraint chair. "Leave him alone, you bastard!" She felt nothing for him personally, yet all of this extreme violence was getting to be a bit too much. "Who are you guys, anyway?" She asked.

Jobe looked at the girl for a moment and smiled to himself. "Oh, so you speak after all." He said. "Who we are is of no importance, you stupid bitch."

He walked over to her, grabbed her head and slid his wet tongue slowly across her cheek. Kiersten tried to turn away in disgust, but Jobe's hold was too strong.

"Oh, what fire burns within your eyes!" He exclaimed with glee. The guards laughed, and she sank back into the chair as Jobe loosened his grip on her. She began to cry. Jobe wiped the tears from her cheek in an act of mock pity and smiled.

"Don't waste one bit of worry about your friend, my sweet innocent pawn. His life on this world is soon to come to an abrupt end." Kiersten's eyes widened as Jobe then wiped his slobber off her cheek.

"Rather," He added, "You should be more concerned what I am going to do to you!"

She began to squirm in the chair, trying to work her way loose to slap him, but it was useless. She was securely bound, and no amount of struggle was going to get her anywhere. She resigned in useless despair.

"Don't bother, my dear. You're not going anywhere for a while. Just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Shaking off the intense pain that racked his body, Gregory slowly opened his eyes as to not draw attention to the fact that he was conscious. He felt his bindings. These guys were quite good, he thought.

He could see five armed guards, all of whom were pre-occupied with watching one of his captors play with Kiersten. Gregory instantly knew the voice of his captor and he could guess where he was being taken to. Suddenly a sharp jolt of energy shot through his spine to his brain.

Blood squirted from his dry mouth as he involuntarily bit his tongue. The jolt ceased and Gregory's body relaxed into the chair. Jobe turned from Kiersten to see that Gregory was conscious.

"Ah, you have discovered our neural-shock restraint!" Said Jobe, obviously pleased with himself. "Welcome back to the living, Mr. Rieger! Although, this time I feel the visit will not be long."

"Don't underestimate me, Jobe." Rieger replied. "Remember what happened the last time you did that!" He looked at Jobe's right arm.

Jobe looked down at his arm then rolled up his sleeve to reveal his mechanical arm. Rage raced over his face as he remembered their last encounter.

"Oh yes, Gregory. I do remember." Jobe grabbed Gregory by the larynx and picked him up, chair and all. Gregory struggled under the force of Jobe's grip. "I remember all too well.", said Jobe.

Gregory's face began to turn blue, and his bloodshot eyes strained from their sockets. Just when Gregory had stopped kicking, Jobe dropped him.

Gregory wheezed in air in huge gulps, trying to catch his breath. The color slowly returned to his battered face.

Jobe smiled at him. Gregory returned the smile to spite him. A frown came over Jobe's face, then Jobe smashed his fist into Gregory's smiling face, breaking his nose.

Gregory sneezed blood several times, then looked back up at Jobe, whose face was as crazed as any madman he had been sent to assassinate.

Gregory smiled at him once again, and Jobe struck him several more times. This time, as hard as he tried, Gregory could not block out the intense pain. His eyes rolled back in their sockets, and he passed out.

"Stop it! Stop it now!" Kiersten screamed.

Jobe just continued to pummel Gregory's face until the guards began to pull him away. "Let me go!" Jobe screamed to the guards, who had tackled him to try to subdue him, but Jobe just threw them off like rag dolls.

A man came out from the shadows, and pressed a button on a small pad. Jobe was knocked back from the neural pulse, and fell back onto his hands.

The guards regrouped and encircled the assassin. He grabbed his head in pain, and then slowly calmed down. The figure walked over and knelt before him.

"Jobe, my son. I understand your pain and hatred for this man." He said. "But I cannot allow this senseless violence to continue. Mr. Rieger is to be delivered alive and well to the Imperial Senate. After all, orders are indeed orders."

Jobe sat up and grabbed the figure by the neck. The startled figure depressed the button on the pad once again, throwing Jobe back into the wall of the transport.

Jobe remained there, drooling down his chin, in a semi-comatose state. The guards backed away from him as they saw him foaming at the mouth with a crazed look in his eyes.

The figure turned to Kiersten, who was in shock over the entire episode. She backed away from him as best she could.

"Don't worry, my dear. You're quite safe as long as I remain in control of this idiot. You're time is coming, but not as soon as I would wish it to be." The figure turned to the guards. "As you were."

The figure receded back into the shadows where she could no longer see him. Jobe remained comatose by the wall as the guards tried to clear up the mess as best they could. Kiersten gazed back at Rieger.

Her only hope was with him, and he was in no shape to do anything right now. She bowed her head in self-pity and began to cry once again. It simply would not be her day.

The rainforests were not hospitable this cycle. Sweat dripped in a steady stream from Armand Rieger's forehead as he watched the communications expert, hard at work.

A small insect began to burrow into his sweat-soaked arm. He grabbed it by the tail and squashed it between his thumb and forefinger. It struggled for a moment, then burst with a sickening pop.

"Damned bugs! Let's get this over with so we can get the hell outta here."

"I'm working on it." Replied his accomplice.

Alexi Triborov furiously completed the satcom uplink to the Citadels main spy satellite, floating in an asynchronous orbit high above the homeworld.

"I'm in, Rieger. We don't have long before they triangulate our position, though." He said matter-of-factly as his fingers quickly ran over the keypad, dancing as if to some insane rhythm.

"We don't have long at all. Four minutes max." Alexi turned to Rieger. "Where do you want to point the bird?" He asked.

"Put her over the Manturican Desert." Replied Rieger, who impatiently continued to observe the countdown on his chrono.

"But there's nothing out there but wasteland and mining colonies?" Said Alexi, with a look of discontent.

"Just do it! Concentrate on anything larger than a hovercraft on a vector for the capitol."

"Ok, I'll see what I can do." Alexi replied. "How much time left, Rieger?"

"Three minutes, fifteen seconds remaining until termination."

Alexi returned to his fury at the keypad. The small uplink comm shifted the secret spy satellite in space ever so slightly, then it began to probe the desert for any signs of movement. Several large orange dots appeared on the screen.

"Well, I've isolated anything larger than a hovercar. Do you think it's wise to go this big?" Alexi asked with a look of confusion over his face.

"Yes. An operation of this magnitude would most certainly involve quite a few craft, and the resonance of this satellite can't disseminate smaller craft travelling in a convoy."

"They'd show up as one big blip on the screen to us. Pretty smart thinking. But why would they travel so close together in the first place?"

"So they can mask their true numbers. The military knows they're being watched as well as they watch others do their dirty work."

"Huh?" Alexi looked puzzled. Rieger turned to him. "We just lost a blip..."

"Switch to heat signature recognition, for shits and grins." Said Rieger.

Alexi flipped a virtual switch on the pad. The blip showed up once again, but this time it took on a deep purple shade. "What the heck is that?"

"Probably just a sandburrer. They get pretty big out there." Rieger looked back at his chron. "Two minutes left."

Alexi returned the satellite to search mode. "They've begun a tracer on us. I'm gonna start up a ghost."

He quickly turned to the comm pad and punched up a new screen, initiating another uplink, this time from within the capitol city itself. "This should confuse them for at least thirty seconds."

Rieger remained concentrated on the first screen. He looked long and hard at it, trying to pick the right object. It was like trying to pick out a needle from within a haystack. So many signals. "Damned those miners!"

Alexi looked at the screen. "Forty-five seconds left, buddy. We gotta make a decision now! Pick something."

Rieger pondered at the vast myriad of signals and slowly sunk his head into his hands. Suddenly, he had a burst of inspiration. He quickly turned to Alexi. "Wait a minute, Alexi. Pull up vector data on anything moving abnormally fast."

Alexi worriedly glanced at the chrono. "Fifteen seconds... The ghost has faded! They're on to us!" He quickly pulled up telemetry and speed readings. "I think we got something! Quadrant B-104. It's moving towards the Capitol."

"That's got to be them. It has to be. Get me an impulse signature, now!" Rieger looked at his chrono. "We're out of time!"

"I think I've got it..." Alexi muttered as he furiously tried to get the impulse signature of the convoy. "This isn't gonna be easy! I need more time!"

"Five..." Rieger began to count out loud.

"Just a few more seconds..." Said Alexi, as he furiously pounded at the keypad. "Come to papa, baby!"

Rieger continued counting down. "Four... Three... Two..."

"Got it! Terminating uplink... Now!" Said Alexi, who shut down the uplink with a wide smile beaming across his bearded face.

"Did you get it?" Rieger asked?

"But of course, my friend." Alexi replied.

"Then why the wide grin?" Asked Rieger.

"Well, with two seconds to go, I uploaded a two-kilojoule power spike, effectively blinding them for two hundred kilometers. They can't pinpoint our position for at least five minutes until the satellite dissipates the energy."

"Good." Said Rieger, who had already begun packing up the uplink dish. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

"I'm with you, buddy!" Said Alexi as he helped load the hovercar with the remaining ear. The sooner the better."

Gieger remained impatiently at the vidscreen. His workers continued to collect data for dissemination to the imperial senate, and he still awaited word from Lycanos.

Finally, he could wait no longer. Punching up the data, he dialed the consultant. Lycanos stared blankly back at the screen.

"Lycanos! What the hell is going on? I'm still waiting for your report!"

Lycanos never returned a word. Gieger suddenly noticed a thin stream of blood coming from the consultant's forehead.

Gieger leaned forward in his chair to get a better look, to no avail. "Magnify." He commanded to the vid.

The vid switched to magnify mode, and Gieger pointed to Lycanos's forehead and the enhancing software began to kick in.

The screen blinked for a moment, then stabilized. Gieger could clearly see a hole neatly drilled straight through his head. Only one weapon could be so precise. And only his people had it.

"God damn you, Rieger!" Gieger flew into an extreme fit of rage, slamming his fists into the screen. It crackled, then shattered into a thousand pieces. Gieger looked down on his bloody, glass-encrusted hands.

"Shit! Somebody get me a medkit!" He yelled to his frightened workers. A sheepish man in his early twenties appeared with the kit, attempting to bandage Gieger's hands. He was failing miserably.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to kill me, you brown-nosing suck-up!" Gieger slapped him across the room with the back of his hand.

The shaken man slowly got up, favoring a very bloody nose, and hung his head low.

"Get out of my sight, you fucking imbecile!" Gieger yelled. "And clean up that mess. You're dripping blood all over my new carpet!"

The distressed man mopped up the mess as best he could, then hurried off out of the room as Gieger began to pull the long glass slivers out of his hands one by one.

Everyone looked on in awe, as Gieger never once winced from the intense pain he must have been feeling. Gieger, after a time noticed the silence surrounding him and glanced up from his self-performed surgery.

"Don't all of you have more pressing matters to attend to?" He barked. The minions obeyed and returned to their previous flurry of activity. Gieger, content with their resumed action, returned to pulling the glass out of his hand one painful shard at a time.

An aide slowly walked up to Gieger's desk, almost like a dog with its tail between its legs. He looked at Gieger pulling the glass out of his hands, afraid to say a thing.

Gieger looked up at the sheepish aide. "What the hell do you want?"

"Sir, there is someone to see you." Replied the aide.

"Tell them to make an appointment like everybody else, you fool. Go away and don't bother me again!"

"But sir. I don't think you understand."

Gieger looked up slowly. The aide could see the veins popping out of his skull. Gieger's face grew red, then he exploded.

"I thought I made myself quite clear! Get the fuck out of my office now!"

A withered grey hand was set on the bowing aides shoulder, and it slowly moved him aside. The aide retreated quickly, so not to face further torment at the hand of his boss. Gieger looked at the small grey humanoid, then bowed his head.

"Zex!" He exclaimed. "What a pleasant surprise."

"A surprise, Gieger? I should think you had expected me from the previous tone in your voice." Zex looked at Gieger's hands as he tried to hide them from view.

"What can I do for you, Zex?" Gieger inquired. Obviously, he was not here for a V.I.P. tour of the facility.

"I should think that you already know. The Emperor is anxious for his briefing on the current situation. As it stands at the moment, the galactic peace is volatile at best. The outcome may soon rely on your success in this matter. What word have you?"

Gieger leaned back uneasily in his chair. He wiped his brow nervously for a short moment, and then pressed a key on his desk.

A large holoscreen dropped from the ceiling, and the lights dimmed. A static image projected itself, then it stabilized. A man turned to face Gieger and Zex.

"Ah, Gieger... and Zex! What a pleasure to see you once again. Checking up on me for the Emperor, I see!"

"Cut the crap, Senator." Replied Gieger with a stern tone. "What's the situation with our guests?"

"Well, they are doing quite well at the moment, but I'm having a bit of trouble controlling your men. You see, some of them were quite devout followers of the Archbishop. When Rieger blew him and their center of worship in the known universe to kingdom come, they definitely want a piece of him."

Gieger buried his head in his hands and silently growled to himself. Zex turned to the Senator.

"Liedos, you and your men are on strict orders from the Emperor. The captives must not be harmed in any way, shape, or form. This is imperative!"

"I understand." Said the Senator. "But you must also realize that it is getting quite difficult to restrain these men."

"Then let them understand this." Said Zex. "Justice shall be served."

"So be it." Replied the Senator. "The Emperor shall unequivocally reward my efforts in this matter."

"Certainly." Said Zex. "Rewards beyond your wildest dreams."

The senator smiled at the screen. "Very well, Zex. Would you care to see our esteemed guests?"

"I would very much would like to do exactly that." He replied.

The holoview changed for a moment, then settled on two lone figures in restraint chairs. Kiersten looked up at the camera.

"Why are you doing this to me? What do I have to do with any of this?"

Zex looked at her for a moment. She was truly as becoming as he had been informed. "All shall be revealed, my child. All shall be revealed."

"But I don't..." Kiersten was suddenly cut off by Gregory.

"Gieger! I might have known! Just wait until I see you face to face again!" He screamed.

Gieger turned slightly in his chair. "I'm afraid that shall never happen, my friend. You see, the next time I see you will be at your State funeral."

A look of surprise washed over Gregory's face. Gieger continued.

"Oh yes, there will be a State funeral, and anybody who's anybody will be there. Including our mutual friend Zex, here."

Gregory looked up at Zex, who could not bear to look him in the eyes.

"Zex! You know that the Emperor will not stand for this! I was ordered to do what I did!"

Zex finally looked up at Gregory. "I know not of what you were ordered, nor by whom. But not even the Emperor himself can save you now. It is out of his hands, as you are out of mine."

Gregory looked back at Zex, then over to Gieger. "Shit! You know. All this time, I thought I was on the right side of things, but the more I see of you guys, the more I begin to wonder." He looked over at Gieger, stonily staring him in the eyes. "I will kill you, you fucking bastard! Believe this fact."

"I'm sure." Sarcastically replied Gieger, who then pressed the button on his desk and the holoimage faded away. The office lights came back on and Zex continued to stare into space.

"Well, there you see it, my friend." Said Gieger. "All is well, and taking shape by the minute."

Zex turned slightly, and walked towards the door. As he passed through the doorway, Gieger heard a faint reply.

"Be careful what you wish for..." Zex made a slight wishbone shape with his left hand. With his right hand, he made a slight 'T' shape, and continued. "It may come true." And with that, the small grey humanoid vanished out of sight around the corner.

Gieger simply stared at the doorway for a silent moment, and then shook his head. "Damned aliens." He said to himself as he returned to his work.

Armand Rieger glanced out of the armored hover assault craft at the swiftly passing desert far below. He'd been flying this skimmer for over three hours, and still felt that they weren't getting there fast enough. He punched the speed control lever fully forward.

The turbines opened up with a high scream, bulleting the craft forward at a blistering pace that made the sand dunes below blur into a flurry of light as he kept a steady eye on the tach.

It was a good thing that he still had friends who were willing to help him in a pinch. Behind him, Tiberov Nastrict, a combat tactical assault tech, was readying the gear for the planned assault.

He packed the bags carefully, not overlooking anything that could prove useful, should they need it. To his right, Alexi was working on the satcom tracker, trying to get a fix on the convoy. He turned to Rieger.

"Do we really need to go this fast?" He asked with a slight tremble in his voice. Tiberov looked up for a moment, then looked at Rieger, silently awaiting his reply.

"It's my brother." Armand replied, not taking his eyes off the swiftly changing horizon.

"Well, I can comfort in the fact that if you don't smear us into the desert first, they probably will!" Alexi still had a sense of humor, even though he didn't laugh inside for long. Tiberov smiled, then went back to his work packing the gear.

It was true, Armand thought. The plan was to stop the convoy, rescue his brother and the girl, then get the hell out of there. If only things were so straightforward, he thought to himself. As if anything ever went as easily as planned.

Alexi looked up from the datapad. "I think we've finally got a solid fix on them." He paused for a second to check his data. "Yep! They're just ahead, vector 389.2, coming at us full speed."

"Good. Relay the coordinates to the others." Armand tightened his grip on the controls. This wasn't gonna be a joyride, facing a fully armed juggernaut. Screw it, he thought to himself. "No guts, no glory, baby! Hang on to your ass, we're going in the hard way!"

Alexi looked at Armand, and noticed that his eyes had the look of a madman on a rampage. "Damn it! I knew I should have stayed behind in the jungle. Someone would've picked me up sooner or later." He muttered under his breath.

Armand turned to him and smiled. "What? And miss all this fun?" Armand laughed out loud while Alexi checked his seatbelt one more time.

The hovercraft quickly rose over a tall dune, then they saw it. Shimmering black and closing on them fast. Tiberov saw it first, pointing out a dark shadow drifting over the sand.

"Jeez, it's huge!" Tiberov uttered to himself.

"Don't sweat it! Everything has a weakness. All we have to do is discover it." Rieger responded.

"What? You mean we're not just going to slip aboard?" Alexi asked. "That was the plan, was it not?"

He looked back at Tiberov, who just shrugged his shoulders. "What do I know? I just go with the best game plan." Tiberov replied. They both looked at Rieger, waiting for an answer. Any answer.

"Nope, guys! The plan has changed. We're gonna have to bring this beast down!" Armand slammed the ship to a hard left as the behemoth craft realized it wasn't alone anymore and sent out a few warning shots.

The comm came alive with a crackle. "Attention! You are in restricted airspace. Leave now, while you still can."

Armand smiled, and then replied. "Ooooh! You really got me shaken now! You guys really need to come up with a better warning than that!" He pulled the hovercraft into a tight spiral then fired the full force of his forward guns at the cockpit of the dreadnought.

The pulses knocked a huge hole in the side of the craft, and thick black smoke billowed from her innards.

"Now they know we're serious!" Said Armand. Alexi squirmed lower into his seat. "This is not what I bargained for!" He exclaimed. Tiberov began to lock and load the aft guns.

"Nothing ever is, my friend." Armand replied with a grin. He inched the hovercraft up and over the behemoth's stern, then pulled back.

Tiberov began to drill away at the huge craft with the rear rail guns. They were doing little damage to the hard armored plating. Just enough damage to piss them off.

The small assault craft was taking on full fire now. Pulses and frags flew over the small craft like a dance of fireflies. Obviously, they weren't going away with a few warning shots over the bow.

One pulse came in too close for comfort, rocking the hovercraft. Armand took evasive action, pulling the craft up into the path of the speeding escort craft.

"Damn!" He exclaimed as he came to the realization that he'd made a big mistake. The small craft was buffeted with small caliber fire, knocking out the stabilizing rotor. The rotor slowly died with a long, prolonged squeal, then seized. Small shrapnel was propelled through the cabin.

"What the hell was that?" Alexi yelled out.

Tiberov pulled a chunk of metal out of the back of Alexi's seat. It sizzled as it burned his fingers. "Shit! It's still hot!" He yelled out as he looked at the metal shard laying on the cabin floor. Instantly, he recognized what it was from.

"It's a turbine blade!" He looked over his shoulder to watch the remnants of the turbine fall down in a terminal dive to the desert floor. He looked back at Rieger. "Can you still fly this thing?" He asked.

"I don't know, but I'm gonna try! Hang on to your lunch, guys! This is gonna get really rough!" Armand exclaimed.

Alexi looked back at him, and then jacked into the controls to see if he could improvise a quick fix.

The craft shuddered and took a swift nose dive downwards towards the desert floor. "Oh shit!" Alexi screamed as he involuntarily wet himself.

"Hang on, we're gonna hit!" Rieger commanded. Alexi and Tiberov checked the straps on their seat restraints, then placed their heads between their legs.

The hovercar seemed to pull up in the nick of time, but it skipped off the surface of the desert like a stone off water and bounced back up into the sky.

Alexi looked over at Rieger, who was still fighting the controls, and grabbed his shoulder. "You're fucking crazy! You know that?" He screamed.

"You think that was crazy? Watch this!"

Alexi looked out the cockpit window, then screamed. They were barreling head-on in the flightpath with the behemoth craft.

The huge craft didn't veer from it's path one inch as the crippled hovercraft surgically punched a hole through the cockpit.

The resulting blast instantly killed the flightcrew as they were sucked out by the explosive decompression through the gaping hole, one by one. Rieger pulled his bloody head off of the steering column. He was gonna have one hell of a headache when the shock wore off.

"We're docked." Replied Armand as he wiped the blood from his face. Are you guys ok?" He called out. No reply came. He looked over into the seat beside him and grabbed Alexi's arm. He pulled it, trying to shake him awake.

No chance of that. He suddenly noticed that Alexi's head was in the back seat, decapitated from the shoulders up by a fragment of metal.

"Damn!" Armand needed him alive. "Oh well. How about you, Tiberov?"

Tiberov pulled himself up, wiping Alexi's splattered guts off of his jacket. He held back the waves of nausea as he fought to get free of the seatbelts. "This was definitely not part of the plan! Definitely!" He looked back at Rieger.

Then he noticed the fire. Armand pulled at his seatbelt, but the buckle was a mangle of twisted metal. He reached into his leg pocket and pulled out his blade. He sawed furiously at the belt until it let him free as Tiberov tossed the gear bags into the cockpit of the behemoth.

Rieger jumped out of the hovercraft as the cockpit was engulfed in flames. "We have get this thing out of here before it sends this whole rig up! Give me a hand, Tiberov."

Tiberov ran over to Rieger, who was trying to push the carcass of the assault craft back out of the gaping hole. Tiberov struggled, but couldn't get a good enough hold.

"It's too heavy, Rieger! I can't get a good hold on this thing with this turbine in my way." Tiberov cried out.

Rieger stopped pushing as a light went off in his head. Turning quickly to Tiberov, he pulled out a pair of cutters.

"Get out of the way. I've got an idea."

Tiberov gladly complied with the order, though he had no idea what Rieger had up his sleeve. Rieger popped the screws off of a maintenance panel on the turbine, and ripped the cover off, revealing a twisting mass of cables.

A look of horror washed over Tiberov's face as he realized what Rieger was about to do. Rieger severed two large cables and pulled back their thick insulation, revealing bare wires.

"Hold on to something anchored down. This isn't going to be very fun!" Yelled Rieger as he tied himself down to a support pole. Tiberov clipped into a floor anchor, then ducked and covered his head with his arms. He connected two bare wires, and the turbine slowly came to life.

Within five seconds, a savage whirlwind engulfed them both as the blast from the turbine reached out to them, sucking the breath from their lungs.

Sluggishly the assault craft pitched and buffeted as it pulled out, inches at a time, sending up a shower of sparks as bare metal scraped against bare metal. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the assault craft pulled itself free and disappeared from sight as it fell to the desert floor.

Tiberov finally caught his breath and unclipped himself from the anchor. He looked up at Rieger, who had taken some shards from the turbine blades. He watched in amazement as Rieger pulled them out one by one, without grimacing from pain. He

discarded the twisted fragments of steel in a small pile on the floor.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Tiberov asked.

"Pain is relative to life." Rieger replied. "When you fail to feel it anymore, you're probably dead."

Tiberov shook his head. "What a load of crap, my friend. I'd much rather lead a pain-free life, myself."

Rieger turned from his self surgery and looked Tiberov in the eyes. "Then I fear you're in the wrong business, buddy."

Tiberov looked at Rieger's cold stare. He couldn't decide whether he was joking or not. The stare persisted. Probably not, he thought.

Rieger turned his cool stare into a small smile. "Don't worry my friend, the fun is just beginning." Rieger threw Tiberov a comm-pad. "Get the link up so we can bypass security on this beast."

"But I've never used one of these before in my life!" Tiberov argued.

"Well, then you've got exactly one minute to become quite the expert. Get to it!" Rieger replied.

Tiberov had no idea what to do with the lap-pad. He opened it up, and the luminescent holo-screen greeted him with a faint chime. "What now?" He thought. Too bad this damned computer didn't come with built-in instructions.

He tapped into a jack in the cockpit, and began to initiate the linkup. Rieger pulled out a few orbs from his bag and began to program them with his pad.

"Rieger. I think I'm in." Tiberov looked up and smiled.

"Don't get cocky, kid. Just do it, and quick. We've got company." Rieger replied as he looked up at a monitor above the door. "I don't think these guys want to welcome us to the neighborhood."

Tiberov began to frown, and then furiously tapped in command after command into the keyboard. Nothing was working.

Rieger braced himself against the door as the armed security team began to breach the door. Rieger slipped an orb through the widening crack, and then pushed the door back shut with all of his might. The door reluctantly closed as the security team discovered the orb and they began to flee.

"Too late, guys!" Rieger said to himself as he pressed the activation button on his pad. Through the small monitor, he watched as the orb hovered to life and took up chase against the security team.

The soldiers didn't have a chance in hell. The orb overtook the frightened team, who huddled in a small mass on the floor as they threw down their weapons and raised their hands in the air. The orb simply waited in a hovermode over them.

"No retreat. No surrender, gentlemen." Rieger said as he pushed the attack button on his pad. The orb immediately split open and expelled short rod projectiles from itself as it spun faster and faster around in a tight circle.

The vid from the monitor was obliterated by the carnage as the rods ripped through flesh and steel. The security teams armor held up like tissue-paper, and their rabid screams soon subsided to nothingness.

"What the hell was that?" Tiberov asked after viewing the bloodbath.

"I simply put the orb into hypermode, and it ripped itself apart as it realized that it couldn't possibly spin any faster." Rieger said with a slight smirk. It quickly turned back into his normal grimace. "Did you get in yet?"

Tiberov stared back down at the screen. "I can't seem to bypass their security."

"Give me the pad!" Ordered Rieger.

"But I'm getting closer to getting in."

"I don't care. I'll get us in." Rieger replied.

Tiberov handed the pad over him, and Rieger yanked the cable out of the wall jack. He took one instantaneous glance at the control pad, nodded his head, then tossed it straight out through the gaping hole in the cockpit.

"What the hell did you do that for!" Tiberov shrieked as he frantically dived to try to save the pad, to no avail. Rieger didn't reply. Instead, he took another orb from his pack and pressed a button on its side. The orb split in half, unveiling a control jack.

Rieger plugged the orb into the jack in the wall and stood back. The orb melted down in a shower of sparks, taking out the security system with it.

The lights dimmed momentarily, then came back to their normal luminance. Rieger walked over to the door, and pressed the release button. The huge metal door slid open with ease.

"Do you always have to be so destructive?" Asked Tiberov.

Rieger paused for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever works. That seemed to do the trick, now didn't it."

Tiberov couldn't argue with the logic. "That it did, Rieger. That it did. What now?"

Rieger snatched his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Let's go get my brother." He tossed a small assault rifle to Tiberov, who fumbled to catch it.

"I've never used one of these." Tiberov whined as he slowly looked over the strange weapon, trying to make some sort of sense of it. "I'm not trained for this."

"Don't worry, you'll learn quickly." Rieger said sarcastically. He aimed the weapon for Tiberov, and pointed at a small indented button on the dorsal side of the rifle.

"Just point it at anything that moves and press this trigger." He turned around and began to walk down the hallway. He stopped halfway, and pivoted around. "Oh, and one more thing."

"What's that?" Tiberov inquired, checking out the weapon.

"Accidentally shoot me and I'll kill you on purpose!" Rieger said as he turned back around and proceeded down the hall. Tiberov looked back down at the weapon in his hands, then grabbed his equipment bag and followed Rieger.

"This is going to be bad. Really bad." He thought to himself.

The lumbering craft was suddenly violently rocked by a blast, throwing Jobe across the room. A security klaxon began to wail. Jobe picked himself off the floor and wiped the dirt from his jacket. Kiersten looked over at Gregory, who shook his head, indicating that he didn't know what was up.

"What the hell was that?" Jobe yelled into his wrist-com to the pilot compartment, trying to talk louder than the siren. It was no use. The cockpit failed to respond.

"Someone shut that damned alarm off, now!" Jobe yelled. Jobe took one disgusted look at the prisoners, and glanced to the small security detachment assigned to guard them.

"Guard them with your lives. I'm going to find out what's going on here." Jobe said as he walked to the doorway. He stopped, then turned to Gregory, who looked up and smiled back at him.

"Keep on smiling, dead-boy! I'll settle up with you in a moment, whether Gieger condones it or not."

Gregory simply laughed back at him, and replied, "I doubt you'll get the chance, Jobe."

"Why is that?" Said Jobe, quizzingly looked back at him.

"Because you have the look of a dead man, Jobe. Six feet under... Pale and blue."

Jobe, furious at the latest taunts, had finally had enough. He pulled a blaster from under his jacket and pointed it at Gregory's chest. Gregory didn't budge, but Kiersten began to scream. "What the hell are you doing? Didn't you hear what Gieger said to you?"

Jobe fired a blast beside Kiersten's head, burning some of her hair. A stream of blood poured from her right ear as she struggled to shake off the pain of a burst eardrum.

"The hell with Gieger, you bitch! This has gone on long enough." He looked back at Gregory, who had realized that he royally screwed the pooch with this nutcase. Gregory looked over at Kiersten, just long enough to see her pass out.

"You're a dead man, Rieger!" Jobe yelled, as his finger wiggled on the trigger of the blaster.

"I'll see you in hell, Jobe!" Rieger replied. "Really soon!"

Jobe pointed the weapon at Gregory's chest, then pulled the trigger. Gregory gasped a quick breath as a drop of blood ran down the side of his mouth, then slumped over in the chair.

The momentum of his body sent both himself and the chair to the floor and a dark pool of blood streamed from Gregory's body, gathering in a small puddle.

"I doubt that!" Jobe replied. Jobe turned around to the startled security team, who still couldn't comprehend what the hell had just happened. "Now you guys are with me. Come on!" The security team gathered up their weapons, and followed him into the corridor.

Armand and Tiberov snaked their way through the labyrinthine halls of the huge ship. As they rounded a corner, they began to take small arms fire.

Armand reached into his pack and quickly pulled out an orb. He programmed it with his pad and sent it screaming down the hall towards their attackers.

Upon seeing the orb, the security team attempted to shoot it down. A few lucky shots sent the orb careening into a wall, where it cracked in half and fell to the floor.

"There's five of them." Said Rieger, looking back at the vid sent from the orb before it was destroyed. "Two behind a support console, the other three in the open."

Looking at his pad, Tiberov nodded in agreement. "I see them."

"Then you take the three in the open. I've got the two harder kills." Commanded Rieger.

"Roger." Tiberov replied. He checked the safety on his rifle, then tucked and rolled across the hall. The movement drew fire from the security team, just enough time for Rieger to set off a smoke grenade.

He crawled down the hall while the security team fired blindly into the smoky hallway. Tiberov followed, firing back intermittently.

Rieger stopped halfway down the hall and pulled a blaster pistol from his pack, and set it into overload. He motioned to Tiberov, who nodded in agreement, then they scurried for cover.

The blaster exploded in a bright, but impotent blast, taking out a supply conduit, showering the hallway in hydraulic oil and gas. The small arms fire ceased, and the security team advanced to check for the kill.

Three of them passed Tiberov, who silently let them pass before cutting them down to shreds. Rieger quickly rolled down the hall, and met the team leader of the security force, bowling him to the ground.

Before the team leader could react, Rieger drew his blade in a wicked arc across the man's throat, silencing him forever.

The last remaining team member began firing wildly at Rieger, who took refuge behind the dead man's body. He grabbed the team leader's rifle and fired back, aiming just above the man's head.

He hit some energy conduits behind the soldier that arced and set the man on fire. As the soldier ran down the hall, trying to beat the flames out, Rieger took one final shot, placing a hole in the middle of the man's forehead.

He fell over in an incendiary blaze, then laid very still. Rieger walked over to him, kicking out the remaining flames with his boot.

"I'm beginning to think you're crazier than your damned brother, Armand." Exclaimed Timerov, who turned his head away from the smoldering carcass in the hallway.

"I must have taught him well." Replied Rieger.

Tiberov looked down the hall, then checked his proximity detector. There was no sign of motion.

"According to the orb, I think we got them all." Exclaimed Tiberov.

"Nah." Replied Rieger. "That was just the first contingent. There's going to be more where they came from." Rieger glanced down at his rifle and said, "Check your ammo."

Tiberov looked down at his rifle and pressed the indicator light. The display lit up momentarily, displaying the ammo level. "I'm still at $\frac{3}{4}$ power." He called back to Rieger.

"Great. Try to conserve it." Said Rieger. "It definitely gets worse from here on in."

Tiberov frowned in disapproval, but it felt good to him to finally get to see action after all his time with the corps. As a combat analyst, all he got to see was the after effects of his work. Now he had direct control over the mission's destiny. No sims, just life and death, cause and effect.

Rieger looked down at a hole in the floor. "It looks like we're standing on a suspended floor. Give me a hand with this panel."

Rieger pulled out his toolpack, and began to remove the floor panel. With Tiberov's help, they slid it off to the side. Rieger dove down into the hole, then turned on his wristlamp.

The underside of the floor continued for quite some distance, hopefully free of the sensors that would impede their progress through the ship. "Come on down." He yelled to Tiberov.

Tiberov gripped his weapon confidently, and followed Rieger down the hole. It was indeed big enough to maneuver through with ease. Rieger pulled Tiberov aside and slid the floor panel back into place.

"Now, let them try and find us." Rieger said with a smile.

Gregory groggily rolled himself over and opened one eye to see if the coast was clear. It was. He checked his chest plate. It had absorbed the full blast of the shot. He ripped it off, and threw it across the room.

It would be of no further use to him now. A huge bloody bruise on his chest made it hard to breathe, but it was manageable. Certainly, he had broken some ribs though.

He crawled his way over to Kiersten and put his ear next to her nose. There was a puff of breath. Thank the gods. She was still alive.

He grabbed his right thumb and cracked it quickly, disjoining it from his hand. He winced from the pain, but the cuffs slid off easily now. He pulled them off and reset his thumb by smacking it back into joint. "Shit, that hurts!" He said to himself.

"I'm sure it did, Gregory!" Exclaimed a voice from behind him. He rolled over to see the cloaked man pointing a blaster at him.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Gregory replied. Shaking his head, he slowly grinned. "Now it's just you and me, pal!"

"Not quite. It's you, me and this weapon that I've got pointed at you!"

Gregory looked long and hard at the weapon, then smiled at the cloaked man. "Weapons don't do much good to you if you don't know how they work."

"All I know, my dear Gregory, is that if I pull this trigger, you become a piece of bloody meat." He replied.

"Well, if you're quite the expert, then pull it, you bastard!"
Exclaimed Gregory.

The cloaked figure grinned as he snapped the trigger, but nothing happened. He looked down at the blaster, then frowned as he realized that the safety was still engaged.

Before he fully comprehended his gross error, Gregory leapt over and tackled the man, sending him crashing onto the floor.

The brute force of the attack knocked the weapon from his grip and it tumbled across the room. The cloaked figure deftly made a last ditch attempt to retrieve the blaster.

Gregory sent his heel crashing down on the man's hand just as he was about to reach it, breaking his fingers in several places.

The man howled in intense pain as Gregory slammed his bloody fist into the man's face several times, then ripped back the man's hood, revealing his face at long last.

"What do you know?" Gregory said as he instantly recognized the man.

"Senator Liedo, you really should stick to politics. You'd make a shitty assassin!" Said Gregory.

The Senator slowly brought himself to his feet, and wiped the blood from his pummeled face. "Gregory, I really don't think you realize the implications of your actions."

"Oh, I realize them alright. Ever since the Senate set up my brother, you've declared a personal war on the Rieger family. I'm considering it my personal mission to kill every one of you."

"That's where you'll fail, Gregory." Liedo replied. "This thing is bigger than the both of us can possibly comprehend. You can come along for the ride, or just be swallowed up like the rest of them."

Gregory picked up the blaster from the floor, flipped off the safety and placed it at the Senator's head.

The Senator looked down at Kiersten, then back at the barrel of the blaster.

"Go ahead, Gregory. Kill me." The senator calmly replied with a cold look in his eyes. "I would've killed you in a second."

"Yeah, but you seem to forget that I lead a charmed life, and I know how to use these weapons. The irony of it all is that you paid for my training." Rieger said with a smile. "I'm more valuable alive, otherwise you'd have killed me by now. On the other hand, Senator, you are very expendable."

"This may be true, but you'll be making a grave mistake, my friend." Liedos replied. "I have friends in higher places than you can possibly imagine."

"I'm sure you do, Senator." Replied Rieger. "But they're not going to save you now."

Gregory's finger glided over the trigger as he looked the Senator coolly in the eyes. A bead of sweat dripped down Liedos's brow as he slowly closed his eyes to greet death with some semblance of dignity. The look didn't pull off very well, because he began trembling violently.

Gregory swung the weapon off and to the side of the Senator's head then pulled the trigger. A loud flash went off next to the Senator's head, sending the stench of burning hair and flesh throughout the room. The Senator fell hard to his knees, screaming and clapping his bleeding ears.

"Don't worry, Senator." Rieger said. "I set the blaster for a concussion burst. It won't kill you, but it sure hurts like hell."

Gregory silently stood over Senator Liedo, who was squirming in intense pain. Rieger smiled in pleasure. "I know you can't hear me right now," said Rieger, "But sometimes even when you think you win, you still lose!"

As Liedo looked up in confusion, with his ears bleeding, Gregory held the blaster high, and then brought it down swiftly. The Senator took the attack square in the forehead with the butt of the blaster, knocking him out cold.

Kiersten began to moan in pain. Gregory ran over to her and removed the mylock collar. He held her in his arms as she began to open her eyes.

"What happened?" She asked.

"We're free at the moment, but not for long." Gregory said.
"Can you walk?"

"I can barely hear you." Kiersten replied. "But yes, I think I can."

"Then get up, because we have to get the hell out of here before the guards return." Gregory said.

Then they both heard a voice behind them. "They won't be back. They think you're both dead."

Kiersten looked behind Gregory, and she saw the Senator. "Senator? What are you doing here?" She asked.

"I think you'd better ask Gregory." He replied.

She looked at Gregory, who did not answer, then quizzingly back at the Senator. Gregory got up and grabbed the mylock collar from the floor. He placed it around the Senator's neck, then keyed it. A red light appeared on the collar, indicating that it was now armed.

"Get up, Senator." Gregory commanded. The Senator resisted once, but the shock compelled him to comply with the request.

"Now tell us where the closest exit is." Gregory asked Lieder.

"You'll never get out of here alive." The Senator replied.

Rieger got a disgusted look over his face, and smacked the butt of the blaster into the side of the Senator's head. Kiersten tried to intervene, but Rieger pushed her aside.

The Senator rubbed the side of his head. Tears of pain swept down his cheek, but he conceded. "The docking bay is down the hall."

"Very good, Senator. You're a quick study in pain." Gregory replied. He turned to Kiersten, who was still wondering what her boss was doing way the hell out here in the desert.

"Gather together some supplies from those packs over there. We may need them."

Looking at the arsenal of weapons in a locked compartment, Rieger blasted the keypad, which opened the lock. He turned to Kiersten, who was startled by the blast.

"Best key that I know of." Gregory said.

"Can't you do anything without destroying it?" She asked.

"Yes. But it worked, didn't it?"

Kiersten shook her head in reluctant agreement. Sometimes Gregory had his moments, she thought. Not very often, but he did have them. She returned to packing up a few survival items in a bag as Gregory pillaged the armory compartment.

The Senator began playing with the mylock collar. Gregory stopped for a moment. "I wouldn't fidget with that collar too much, Senator. I set it to explode if it is tampered with.

A look of horror washed over the Senator's face as he realized that trying to remove the collar was going to be a bad idea.

Gregory laughed, and slung the weapons pack over his shoulder. "Just kidding, Senator. The worst you could've done was take a massive jolt of plasma."

The Senator frowned. "I am not amused, Rieger." He said. "What is it that you plan to do with me?"

Rieger did not reply. Kiersten turned to Rieger. "Yes, Gregory. What do you plan to do with the Senator. You can't just keep him like this indefinitely."

Rieger sternly looked back at Kiersten, then pointed at her in an indication to zip her lip. She instinctively reached for her neck, but found the mylock collar was no longer around her neck. She faintly smiled at Rieger, who returned the smile.

"Senator. I'm taking you back to the Senate." Gregory replied. "After making a short stop to visit a friend. Now get up and come with us."

With the mylock collar around his neck, the Senator was in no position to argue with his captors. "You're a real bastard, Rieger. I should have killed you when I had the chance!"

Rieger turned to the Senator. "Yes, you should have." He nonchalantly replied. Rieger opened the door to the hallway and looked briefly down it. The coast was clear.

"Come on." He said to Kiersten and the Senator, who followed him out the door. Strange how deserted this place suddenly got.

They proceeded down the deserted passageway and arrived at the docking bay door. Rieger turned to the Senator.

"You may do the honors, sir." He said with slight sarcasm. The Senator accessed the keypad and the door moaned open with a hydraulic hiss.

The docking bay was huge. A myriad of hovercars lay at their disposal. Kiersten began to enter the bay when Rieger grabbed her by the arm and swung her back.

"What?" She asked.

"Not so quick, babe." Rieger replied. He analyzed the situation quickly in his head. "This is way too easy!"

Sure enough, a plasma bolt ripped past their heads. The Senator ducked for cover, but Rieger grabbed him by the back of the neck.

"You're not going anywhere, boss. How many sentries are there?"

The Senator shrugged his shoulders as another bolt ripped past them and disintegrated in a shower of sparks when it hit an energy conduit.

"Fine. Be that way. Typical senator!" He said to Kiersten. "Doesn't even know what's going on in his own back yard."

Rieger punched a hole into a nearby cable raceway and yanked out a cable. Stripping it with his bare teeth, he exposed the wire, which he jacked in to his pad.

The display went static for a moment, then an image of the docking bay appeared.

"What are you doing?" Kiersten inquired.

"I just jacked in to the surveillance monitors. Let's see. One... Just to the left. Rieger pulled his blaster and aimed it through the doorway.

He fired a test shot. It exploded wide, as the display showed he missed. He adjusted his aim and fired again.

This time it was a direct hit. He saw the soldier fall to the ground. He pulled his blaster out of the doorway as they attracted a volley of small arms fire.

"One down, three to go." Rieger said with a slight grin.

"How can you be so cocky in a situation like this?" Kiersten asked.

"I don't know." Rieger replied. "I'm just kind of funny that way." Kiersten frowned. She just couldn't figure this guy out.

"Here, take this." Rieger passed Kiersten the pad.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" She asked.

"Damned you, woman. You ask way too many questions for someone who's getting shot at. Just aim me."

Rieger pulled his other blaster and aimed them both through the doorway in opposite directions. He fired a volley of shots, and looked back at Kiersten.

"Left... I mean right."

"Which is it, babe? Pick a direction." Rieger commanded.

"Right. Definitely a little to the right." She replied, shaken but determined.

Rieger fired a few more shots. He looked back at Kiersten. "You missed." She replied. She looked at the display for a moment. "They're behind a big thingy."

"Thingy? What the hell is a thingy?" Rieger inquired, almost afraid to ask. "Gimme that!"

He grabbed the pad from her grasp and looked at the "thingy". A wide smile crossed over his face. He aimed the blaster through the doorway and fired. A huge explosion ripped through the docking bay, sending a fireball straight towards them.

Kiersten and the Senator dove for cover, but the doors closed in just the nick of time. The heat from the blast began to scorch through the door, but it soon subsided as a strange hiss was heard. A faint, nauseating odor began to make them gasp for air, but it was just a nuisance.

"What the heck was that?" The Senator asked.

Rieger looked over at Kiersten. "That "thingy" of yours just happened to be a refueling pod. Jeez, those guys are stupid."

Kiersten frowned. "I'm sorry we can't all be as bright and destructive as you!"

Rieger paused for a moment, then replied, "Well. We are the live ones now, aren't we?"

Gregory quickly felt the door, and it was indeed cool to the touch. Gregory grabbed the Senator's wrist and held it before the keypad. "Let's see what's behind the scorched door this time."

"But isn't there a fire?" The Senator inquired.

"Nope. That hiss and the nasty smell was the fire suppression equipment kicking in. It should be well squelched by now."

The Senator shook his head, and punched the code back into the keypad. Once again, the huge doors opened, but this time the room sucked in air like a vacuum.

Rieger looked at the pad, then poked his head through the doorway. Satisfied that all was well, he proceeded inside. Stopping before a pile of ash, he turned to Kiersten and the Senator.

"Well, it looks like the coast is clear, except for a few crispy soldiers." Rieger reached down and picked up the charred remain of an arm.

"Say, Senator. Do you like white or dark meat?"

The Senator fell to his knees and threw up on the floor. Rieger tossed the arm at him, and he threw up again in disgust.

"Sorry, Senator. It all looks dark to me." Rieger began laughing in hysterics.

Kiersten reached down and helped the Senator to his feet. He waved her off, determined to salvage some semblance of his dignity.

"You're one sick bastard, Gregory!" Kiersten yelled to Rieger. Rieger just continued laughing as he sorted through the ashes, trying to salvage anything he could use.

Satisfied that there was nothing left to find, he got up and walked over to a flashing comm terminal. Rieger stopped to view the data scrolling past on the display. "Level four. Intruder alert." He said out loud.

"Does that mean us?" Kiersten asked.

"Nope. Someone broke into the ship from the outside." Rieger replied.

"That would be quite futile." Said the Senator. "We are quite well defended."

Rieger laughed out loud. "Yes, you are. Hell, you couldn't even keep us prisoner on this damned crate." Rieger thought to himself for a moment.

He accessed the terminal and pulled up the security vid. Sure enough, he saw what he had wanted to see.

Kiersten looked over his shoulder at the picture. "It's Armand!" She said to herself.

"Yes." Gregory replied. "But why rescue us here. It would be far easier when they transfer us."

"Maybe something came up." Kiersten said.

"Yes... Maybe."

Gregory keyed up his wrist com, then paused. This would be tricky, he thought to himself. He could contact his brother, but the transmission could possibly give away both of their positions. On the other hand, it could help them both a great deal.

Armand and Alexi had struggled their way through the dusty vast underbelly of the craft, numerously hitting several dead-ends. They were both at their wits end.

"Damn!" Alexi said, wiping a drop of sweat from his brow. "This is beginning to seem like a really bad idea, Rieger."

Armand stopped for a moment, and then turned to his disgruntled accomplice. "At least we're not getting shot at, Alexi."

"That's true," Alexi conceded. Although ducking and diving about the underfloor struts was not his idea of smooth sailing, he didn't even want to think about what it would've been like to fight their way through the ship. Maybe Rieger would've liked that option; Alexi was content to play it safe.

"Where are we?" Alexi asked as they stopped for a moment.

"You sure do ask a lot of questions, Alexi." Rieger replied, setting his bag down.

"No, really. Where do you think we are?" Alexi followed Rieger's lead and put his gear down to take a breather.

"I have no idea," Rieger replied.

"I'm not impressed by your lack of direction," Alexi said with slight sarcasm. "You mean to tell me we've been crawling through all this shit down here for almost an hour and you have no idea of where we are? What part of your brilliant plan did I miss?"

"Ok! Enough already!" Rieger yelled. "I thought I knew where we were headed, but I guess we took a wrong turn somewhere."

"Oh, great!" Said Alexi.

"Gimme a minute to get my bearings and I'll tell you exactly where we are." Said Rieger.

Rieger focused his light to and fro for a moment. The visual observance of his surroundings didn't help a bit. This place looked the same as it did when they first climbed down here.

He then placed his hand on a nearby conduit. The metallic hose vibrated with a slight hum. He looked up at the nearest floor panel.

"Gimme a hand, Alexi," Rieger commanded.

"Sure. Whatever you say, chief."

Armand began to unscrew a floor panel when Alexi looked at him in horror.

"What are you doing?" Alexi cried out.

Rieger turned to him. "Well, you've been bitching up a storm about how I don't know where we are. I thought I'd just take a quick peek."

"But won't that give away our position?" Questioned Alexi.

"Yes, it will," Said Rieger. "But, at least it'll get you to stop whining. Now shut up and give me a hand lifting this panel."

Rieger and Alexi took care in sliding the panel aside. Bright, blinding light poured in from above, illuminating the tight crawlspace. It took their eyes a moment to adjust, but soon they could see again.

"Do you want to stick your head out first?" Rieger asked Alexi.

"No... Hell no!" Alexi yelled.

"I didn't think so," Armand said with slight disgust. He grabbed Alexi's blaster and put it firmly in his shaking hands. "Cover me!"

Armand slowly poked his head out the hole on the floor. It looked like a long hallway, and thank goodness it was deserted. For the moment at least.

Alexi squirmed, finger on the trigger of his blaster. "What do you see?" He asked.

"A hallway," Rieger replied.

"Any indication of where we are?" Said Alexi.

"Give me a minute," Said Rieger as he pulled himself up and out of the hole. "Stay here!" He pointed back at Alexi. "And don't shoot me when I come back down!"

"No problem!" Alexi said. "I'm staying' right here."

Armand took a quick stroll down the hall. He arrived at a small comm terminal and tapped in. The screen scrolled by a couple of times, then paused over a map of the ship. A bright yellow triangle appeared over a section of the floor diagram, marked 'You are here.'

"Engineering," Rieger said to himself. "We're in Engineering."

Then he noticed that his wristcom was vibrating. "What the hell?" He asked himself who would be calling him now. He thought he had turned the damned thing off, but apparently he just muted the beeper.

He looked down at the alpha display and it showed the characters "EA-211". It was a code that only two people in the galaxy could know about. Only his brother Gregory and himself. Unless they had managed to beat it out of him.

Alexi poked his head out of the floor and saw Armand looking at his wristcom. "What is it?" Alexi asked.

Armand looked back at him with a puzzled look on his face. "I don't know," He replied. "Someone is trying to call us."

"Well answer it." Alexi said. "What's the big deal?"

Armand looked back at the wristcom. "Well, if I answer it, they can triangulate in on us with a pretty good deal of precision."

"Do you know who it is?" Alexi inquired.

"Yeah. It appears to be my brother." Replied Rieger.

Alexi thought about it for a moment, and realized the conundrum that they were in.

"Screw it," Exclaimed Rieger. He depressed the answer key, expecting the worst. The display cracked with static for a moment, then Gregory's face appeared on the screen.

"Hey brother," Gregory said.

"Glad to see you alive." Armand replied. "We were mounting a rescue operation for you."

"We're just fine, although an old friend of ours is currently on the warpath for you." Said Gregory.

"Who?" Asked Armand.

"Our old pal Jobe. He thought he killed me, but he just wounded my pride a little." Gregory said. "He should be coming your way any minute."

"Gee, thanks for the input, bro!" Armand replied with a smirk. "Can you get out of here?" Armand inquired.

"Yeah. We've seemed to have stumbled across the docking bay." Gregory said.

"Then get the hell out as fast as you can!" Armand commanded, and then a smile washed over his face. "I've got a plan."

"What is it?" Gregory asked.

"Just get a hovercar and be waiting outside the Engineering section in five minutes." Armand said. "And be ready to provide cover support."

"Sure thing, big brother." Answered Gregory. "See you in a sec."

Armand terminated the call. "Get up here, Alexi," He called back to his aide. "We have something we need to do."

Alexi crawled out of the hole in the floor and began to slide the floor panel back into place.

"Forget about that," Rieger yelled out to him. "Help me figure out how to get this door open."

Alexi left the floor open and ran over to Rieger. "That's easy," He replied. Alexi grabbed the toolkit from Armand's gear bag and began to go to work on the keypad.

Jobe was getting increasingly frustrated over his situation. He had a breach of security on the ship, no pilots and several dead security team members. He had one thing in his favor, he thought with a grin. At least Gregory Rieger was out of the way. Now he'd finally get to take care of Armand.

The Security Chief ran over to Jobe, carrying a comm-pad. "What is it?" Jobe asked him.

"Sir, we've just intercepted a transmission from within the ship." Reported the Chief.

"Great," Jobe replied. He grabbed the pad and examined the display. The transmission had originated in the docking bay and ended in main engineering.

"Do we know who it was?" Jobe inquired.

"No sir," Answered the Chief. "It was on a scrambled channel."

Jobe put a finger to his chin, and then shook his head. "Chief, it would appear that we have a mole on our ship. Send a team to the docking bay. I'll take another team to engineering. It's about time we end this thing once and for all."

"Should we try to bring the informer in alive?" Asked the Chief.

"No," Jobe replied. "Terminate with extreme prejudice."

The Chief simply smiled then called out a team roster from his detachment. The men fell into line and checked their weapons, then dispatched to the docking bay. Jobe assembled the remaining security team members.

"Let's get it on, gentlemen. I've got a date to dance with the devil and I will not be late." Jobe yelled out.

Jobe began the short run towards the engineering section. He locked and loaded his weapon. It would be truly a great day for him. Two dead Riegers in one day. How could one man be so lucky? He could hardly wait.

The team arrived in the engineering section and began to fan out, checking the area slowly and thoroughly door to door.

"I think I found him, sir. Door B100 just closed down the hall, sir." Called out a team member over his mike.

"Do you have a lock on them?" Jobe called out.

"Negative, Sir." The team member replied. "But I'm pretty sure it's them."

"How can you be so sure?" Jobe replied. After all, they had avoided detection for well over an hour, he thought to himself.

"Because there's an open floor panel nearby, sir."

"That's them! Move the team into position!" Jobe barked. That's how they did it. "Rieger, you're one slick bastard." He said to himself. "So sly, but so am I."

The team assembled in a flanking position to the doorway. Jobe approached the comm terminal by the door. He accessed the terminal, pulling up the security camera inside the room. Sure enough, he saw who he wanted to see.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend Armand Rieger. How are you doing, pal?" Jobe said.

Armand let out a small smile. "Jobe, you bastard! What a surprise!"

"Well, Armand. It would seem that I have you behind a rock and a hard place. You wouldn't happen to be a good boy and give yourself up, now would you?" Said Jobe.

"You know, Jobe. I thought about it, but I really just want to fuck you over just one last time." Rieger replied.

Jobe looked at the monitor and began to laugh. "You crack me up, Armand. I'm giving you ten seconds to give yourself up before I get really pissed and come in after you."

"That'd be fine by me. Oh, by the way. Did you happen to notice this nice big piece of equipment behind me?" Rieger said.

Jobe looked at the monitor. He had no idea what Armand was talking about. He motioned to one of the security team members to take a look. After a moment, he realized what it was.

"Well, what is it?" Jobe asked the man.

The man's face washed over in horror. "Sir... It's the primary fusion reactor core." He replied. He stepped back a few steps from the monitor.

Armand put his hands in front of his body, proudly displaying an orb. Jobe enhanced the display to check it out. Sure enough, it displayed a countdown.

"You bastard!" Jobe yelled as he began to beat at the door.

"Now, now." Rieger said. "I'm willing to die just to see you die. Care to join me?"

Jobe input the code into the door, and it slowly slid open. The security team stepped back, allowing Jobe to enter the room. Suddenly, the room was rocked by a small explosion to Jobe's left, and the door quickly slid shut.

The security team attempted to open the door, but there was a hard lockout in place. Nobody was getting in or out of there without blowing the door out. With a fusion reactor in there, none of them was man enough, nor stupid enough to try. They looked at the monitor to watch the events unfold.

Jobe picked himself up off the ground, and looked at Armand. Armand was not fucking around. He had set a charge to close the door at just the right moment, knowing that Jobe would never pass on a deal to kill him. Jobe realized this fact also, although he was just a little too late.

Jobe watched in horror as Armand pressed a button on his control pad, and a small blast jettisoned the reactor cyclone. The huge piece of machinery fell through the floor, leaving a gaping hole in it.

Jobe could feel the hot desert heat on his face. Armand just smiled. He pointed to the reactor pile, and then tossed the detonation orb to Jobe as a hovercar pulled up through the hole. Jobe looked at the countdown, and could see that there was just ten seconds left on the display.

Alexi ran over to the awaiting hovercar, and opened the hatch. Inside the car, Jobe could see the Senator, Kiersten, and to his amazement, Gregory.

"I killed you!" Jobe fanatically screamed. He almost threw the orb at the hovercar, but realized what it would do. Armand waved goodbye as he hopped in the hovercar. Gregory lowered his window and spun the car around to face Jobe for the last time.

"Jobe, I just have to say one thing." Gregory said. He flipped Jobe the finger, and said: "You're number one!"

Jobe was not a happy guy. The hovercar lowered from sight and the cyclone doors closed, sealing the room back up tight. He watched as the countdown hit zero, then closed his eyes to await the end.

It did not come. Jobe opened his eyes after a moment, then saw that the orb had indeed hit zero, but nothing happened.

"You bastards!" Jobe screamed as he threw the dud orb as hard as he could at a nearby wall. He watched it hit hard, then fall to the floor. Jobe fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands as the security team figured out a way to pry open the door. The team dispersed through the room, and one man picked up the damaged orb.

He brought it over to Jobe. "Sir?" The man asked.

"What is it?" Jobe replied without lifting his head.

"Is this thing supposed to still be counting down?" The soldier asked.

Jobe slowly lifted his head and looked at the orb. The orb had indeed resumed a countdown, and had but one second left. Jobe's pupils widened as the orb exploded in a bright flash.

Gregory and Armand put on their shades as the behemoth craft rocked violently, then went supernova, turning the radioactive blue silicate into glass below it.

The shockwave rocked and tumbled the small craft as Kiersten, Alexi, and the Senator huddled in the back trying to avoid getting fried by the explosion.

As the shockwave passed, and all the passengers felt it was safe to sit up again, Armand turned to Gregory.

"That was kind of cool, huh?" Armand asked.

"Poetic justice. He probably figured it all out just a little too late as usual." Gregory said. They both just laughed as Gregory steered the hovercar off to the western hemisphere.

Gieger proceeded through the long dark halls of the Citadel carrying his datapad. He had a meeting with the Emperor in less than an hour, and he still had no more information prepared than he did when this whole fiasco started.

He silently shook his head in disgust about the situation. Two of his own agents were single-handedly knocking down all that he had been preparing for.

This should have never occurred at all. They had been hand picked... Everything had been planned out to the letter. Any and all blame that the Emperor felt fell squarely upon his shoulders. That did not make him a happy man.

He rounded a corner and bumped into a man carrying a small attaché. The attaché fell to the ground and burst open, spraying equipment and data cards all over the floor.

"Watch where you're going, you imbecile!" Gieger barked to the subservient man as he scrambled to reassemble the contents of his case. "Yes sir. I'm sorry sir." The man replied. Gieger looked down at the pile of scattered junk, then ground a comm pad to pieces with his foot and smiled.

"I bet you will," Gieger said as he carried on his way, satisfied that that guy would stay out of his way for a very long time. He rounded another corner and arrived at the transport tube.

"Insert identification card, please." A mechanical voice bleated forth.

Gieger searched himself with both hands, checking all of his pockets for his I.D. card. Somehow, he was having a hell of a time trying to find it. Then he remembered something that washed a feeling of horror over his face. He looked at his hands and realized that he was no longer carrying his commpad.

"That bastard!" He yelled as he ran back down the hallway to where he had collided with that jerk. He arrived at the spot, and the attaché and its contents were still scattered all over the floor. The man was nowhere to be seen.

Gieger ran over to the nearest comm panel and sent out a general alarm. A security man appeared on the holoscreen.

"Mr. Gieger. What is the problem?" He asked.

Gieger shook his head for a moment, then looked up at the man. "We have an intruder on level one-eleven. Find him and terminate with extreme prejudice."

"Yes sir. Dispatching a team right now." The security officer replied. The holoscreen went blank as loud alarms started to go off all over the Citadel.

Gieger pulled his blaster and slowly searched the area in an attempt to find the man. A security team rounded the corner to meet him. The team chief stepped forward and began to brief Gieger.

"All the exits have been sealed, sir. Nobody is getting out of here until we find this guy."

"Good," Gieger replied. "I want this man dead."

"It will be done, Mr. Gieger." The chief turned to face his crew. "Fan out and search every egress point. This man will be found and terminated. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir!" The security team barked out in unison. They began to snake their way down the hall, searching every possible place that a man could fit. The chief turned back to Gieger, who was trying his best to shake off a massive migraine.

"Don't worry, sir. We'll find him." The chief said.

Gieger began to laugh, and then raised his blaster to the security chief's head. The chief looked in horror as he watched Gieger's finger slowly tap on the trigger.

"Oh, I'm not worried Chief," Gieger replied. "You should be. Because if this man isn't found in five minutes, I'll spread your brains so far across this wall that they won't be able to ever clean it all up."

The Chief looked Gieger in the eyes and saw that he was not joking. The Chief raised his commpad and pressed the transmit button.

"You guys have five... Er, make that four minutes to take this guy out. Make it happen!" He barked.

"Very good, Chief," Gieger said. "Let's just hope they're as good as you hope they are."

The Chief took a long, hard gulp. A bead of sweat dripped down his face as he stared at Gieger's blaster pointing straight at his nose. "I hope so too." The Chief replied. "I hope so too."

Nicholas Tremont inserted the datacard into the main access terminal at the desk. The office had been vacated, and he felt it would probably be the last place they'd check for a while. He had thrown a couple of wrenches into the machinery here at the Citadel, so he had a little time at least to get what he needed to accomplish.

The holo-display came up, and he began transferring files from the mainframe to comm pad. He brought up another screen so he could watch the security team's progress through the building.

"These guys kill me." He thought to himself. He knew they probably knew he was in the system, but in Gieger's office, they were effectively blind.

Hell, even Gieger himself probably didn't think that the man who stole his datacard and pad would have the balls to be in his own office. He was banking on it.

The console beeped as a message came up confirming that the data transfer was successful. That was good. Nicholas began to send the data from his pad to his host network. This should take just a few minutes.

He reclined back in Gieger's chair. He could get very used to this office, he thought. Pretty cozy digs for a departmental head. He looked around the office at the sparcity of it all. What a massive office. Totally utilitarian, but with a sharp sense of style.

A beep went off on the console again. Nicholas looked up at the screen and saw that someone was attempting to access Gieger's terminal. He thought about denying access for a moment, but realized that it might raise an alarm or two. He decided to let it slide, but set up another screen so that he could monitor the access.

The intruder brought up some miscellaneous data that didn't seem to mean anything, but soon realized that they knew pretty much all of Gieger's access codes.

Interesting, Nicholas thought as he straightened up in the chair. He quickly typed a few commands into the terminal, echoing a data copy to his pad. Perhaps it was Gieger himself, trying to get back all the data that was contained in his stolen pad.

After a moment, Nicholas knew that was not true. They were deeper into the system than Gieger had stored his data. They were accessing information from the system that even Gieger didn't have access to.

He watched as the display brought up some old machine code, and a data diagram of some sort of crystal. He manually magnified the display. He had seen this object before. He thought about it some more, but couldn't place it.

Nicholas turned the chair and accessed the holo-term. He masked the call with a scrambler, and he was soon greeted by a familiar face.

"I assume that you are presently in the system, Nicholas."
Lycanos Moravi said with a quaint smile.

"Why, yes sir, I am!" Nicholas replied. "But I have a question. I'm going to mirror this terminal to yours. Stand by."

Nicholas scurried to bring up a mirror echo transfer. It wasn't too hard, but he had to ensure that it could not be traced. As each data packet would be sent, the transfer path would terminate and open up a different path for each subsequent packet. This way, they might trace one path, but hit a dead-end when the next scrambled packet would start to be sent.

"I have it on screen now." Lycanos said as he began pouring over the massive amounts of data that scrolled over his screen. He paused the display at the same point that Nicholas had. It was the green crystal. "I see. This is the same object that Rieger had shown me earlier today."

"What is it?" Nicholas replied.

"I haven't been able to ascertain that to this point, but it appears to be some sort of mass data storage device." Said Lycanos.

"You mean like a datacard?" Nicholas inquired.

"Sort of, but much more than that." Said Lycanos. "The problem is that I can't get it to interface with any of our computers. I really don't think I'll be able to."

"Why is that? I thought you could do anything with these machines." Said Nicholas.

"Machines, yes. Bio-engineered computing devices, no." Lycanos replied.

Nicholas shook his head for a moment. "What the hell are you talking about? Bio-engineered computing devices?"

"Exactly," Said Lycanos. "You see, these crystals come out of living beings, not computers. Look at the display matrix. The neural pathways are like our own brains."

Lycanos nervously shifted in his chair and continued. "The problem is, we are carbon-based, but these beings are made of silicon. They are capable of processing more information that we could ever dream of. And do you want to know the scary thing about this whole thing?"

Nicholas shook his head. "What's that?" He replied.

"They look just like us." Said Lycanos, with a slight pause. "Except for the fact that they are silicon based."

"You mean you've seen one of these things?" Asked Nicholas.

"Oh yes, my friend. I have seen one." Replied Lycanos. "The bad thing is that they may have infiltrated our society to the point that it may be difficult to eradicate them all."

The console beeped again, telling Nicholas that his data transfer had been successful. He terminated the linkup with his pad, then looked at the other screens. "Uh oh." He said.

"What's up?" Inquired Lycanos upon seeing Nicholas's puzzled look on the screen.

"I've got a problem." Nicholas replied. "Our friend here had access greater than Gieger and unfortunately so do I. I've been traced."

"Get the hell out of there! Terminating vid-conference now."
Said Lycanos. The screen went static, and then it collapsed into nothingness.

Nicholas stared in wonder at the beauty of the trace. "Damn. You're good." He said to himself. Then he saw a brief explosion before his head was splattered over the desk.

His limp body slid from the chair and fell with a dull thud on the floor. Gieger stepped from the hidden doorway and walked over to the body.

He bent over and picked up his stolen pad and plugged it back into his terminal. Analyzing the data on the pad, he suddenly realized that all the memory had been transferred.

"Damn it!" Gieger screamed as he slammed his fist into the pad, shattering it into a hundred little pieces. He looked down and then picked up Nicholas's head and looked him directly in his cloudy eyes.

"Nicholas. Of all people..." Gieger said to himself.

He dropped the head to the floor and pushed his body out of the way. Looking at the data scrolling over the screen, he shook his head and sat down. The new security chief Roland Estrickt walked into the office and saluted Gieger.

"Good work, Chief Estrickt." Said Gieger as he assessed the damage that had been done through his system. The Chief saluted once again, then exited the office, leaving Gieger to himself.

"Nicholas, my old friend. What have you done to me?" Gieger asked himself. It would only be a matter of time until he figured it out.

Dusk was quickly approaching over the horizon as the small hovercar sped its way over the arid Manticuran desert. The Senator sat quietly staring out of the window, contemplating his future. Kiersten glared at him, after Gregory informed her of his role.

"How could you do this to me?" She asked for the fifth time. Still no answer came from the great Senator.

Kiersten began to get infuriated at his lack of understanding, and began beating on the man with her fists. He remained as calm and collected as a Senator should be, yet the pummelling was breaking his regal concentration.

"Let it go, Kiersten." Gregory said to her as Armand grabbed her flailing arms.

"Let me go, you bastard! You started all of this!" She cried out.

"No, Kiersten. I didn't start this. It was your good Senator and all of his friends in high places." Explained Armand. Kiersten settled down and began to cry.

"It's not fair! It's just not fair." She blubbered.

"Life is not fair, Kiersten. You can be like cattle and follow it where it takes you, or you can forge your own unique destiny. Unfortunately, others will strive to deny you this, but it is possible to overcome it all." Replied Armand.

Kiersten sat back in her seat, unconsciously pushing herself away from the grateful Senator.

"Thank you, Armand." He said.

Armand Rieger drew back and punched the Senator as hard as he could in the face, breaking his nose in the process. The Senator was out cold, blood streaming from his nostrils.

"Thanks for nothing, asshole! She was right." Armand said. He looked over at Kiersten, who was beaming with joy.

"Thanks, Armand." Said Kiersten with a small wink. Although she rarely approved of his methods, this time he was right on the mark.

Armand smiled back. "Don't mention it, kid." He replied. He turned to his brother, who had totally enjoyed the exchange, and laughed.

"Sorry, Gregory. Now where were we going?" Armand inquired.

Gregory pulled up a map on the holoscreen and pointed to the old capitol.

"I thought we'd hide out here until things blew over for a while." Gregory replied.

"Sounds good. There should be little interference from the guild." Said Armand.

Kiersten sat up straight for a moment. "But I thought the old capitol was radioactive? Won't we die of rad poisoning if we go there?"

Armand turned to the girl. "Kiersten, the ancient capitol hasn't been radioactive for at least a hundred years now. You've just fallen for one of the biggest conspiracies that the Imperial Senate has to hide."

"But why would they lie about it? Everyone knows at least someone who's died because they tried to go there." She replied.

"That's because they were killed. Killed because they were a threat to exposing the truth about the lie." Said Armand.

A beep came from the holocom. Gregory looked at Armand. "Who could that be?" He asked. Armand pulled up the I.D. display.

"It's Lycanos," Armand replied. "And it's urgent."

"Patch it through." Said Gregory. The image of Lycanos appeared on the screen. He did not look happy.

"Good evening, gentlemen." Said Lycanos. "I think I've discovered something that you'd really find interesting."

"What's that?" Armand replied.

"I can't discuss it over this unsecured channel." Lycanos said. "I think we'd better meet together to discuss what I've found. Meet me at the old capitol data center."

Lycanos's image faded from the screen as the call was terminated. Gregory looked at Armand. "What do you think he's up to?" He asked.

"I don't know," Armand replied. "But Lycanos doesn't go out much these days."

"Could it be a trap? Maybe he's gone over to their side." Said Gregory.

"I doubt it. If you knew him as well as I do, that's an extreme impossibility. His ties to the Black Sun are far greater than his allegiance to the Imperial Senate." Armand replied.

"It's decided then. The old data center it is." Gregory punched the control lever forward, propelling the hovercar forward to the new destination.

Armand looked to the horizon. "I wonder what's going on." He quietly asked himself. Somewhere the answer would be revealed, and he'd be damned if he didn't find it.

The small hovercraft skimmed over the edges of the ancient capitol city. The harsh desert sandstorms had taken their toll on the edges of the city, engulfing the outermost buildings in mammoth dunes of blue sand. They wound their way through to the inner city, where things began to take shape.

Monolithic skyscrapers dominated the inner city, although the desert vegetation had consumed most of the ground floors. Armand looked out the cabin window and thought. Where there are plants, there is also water. They'd better get to some quick, because their limited supply was running out fast.

"Where's the old data center?" Tiberov asked as he steered the craft through the dense underbrush of vines, fighting the controls to keep the craft aloft as it careened into vegetation.

Armand pulled up the scanner. The satcom map appeared with a yellow triangle, slightly off center. "It's a little further to the right." He said.

Tiberov looked at the scanner and agreed. He veered to the right, taking the craft through some vines. The craft buffeted for a second, then cut it's way though.

Gregory suddenly woke up startled. "What's going on?" He asked.

"Nothing, little brother. Tiberov decided to fly this thing the hard way." Armand replied.

"No. It's just that we can be tracked if we fly too high. The Citadel has sensors in place all over the old capitol. If we fly in here nonchalantly, we're surely not going to get far." Tiberov said.

"It's ok, Tiberov." Armand said. "We trust you. Just get us there in one piece." He sat back in his seat.

Tiberov veered further left to avoid a particularly nasty overgrowth of vines, and rounded a corner. A massive lagoon in the middle of the city came out to greet them. The yellow triangle on the satcom map sat directly over it.

"Well folks, this must be it." Tiberov exclaimed.

Everyone in the craft sat up and took notice of the lake. It continued on as far as the eye could see.

"This can't be it," Kiersten replied. "Why would they put a data center in a lake?"

Armand turned to Kiersten. "The computing power of a thousand years ago generated a massive amount of heat. Water dissipates the heat, protecting the components."

"But this thing would corrode with the old technology. It couldn't possibly still work after all these years." She exclaimed.

"Well, the old technology worked with gel cylinder memory packs. The computer may not be able to operate now, but the gel packs should be ok, as long as they were submerged in water." Tiberov replied.

Gregory looked out the window and saw a few lights skimming over the water. "Is that them?" He asked.

"I don't know," Tiberov replied. He looked at the small convoy that was obviously patrolling the lake. "Let's check it out."

Tiberov veered the hovercraft over the water towards the lights. As they skimmed the surface of the lake, and approached the lights, Armand reached over grabbed the helm.

"What's up?" Tiberov asked.

"Shut everything down, now!" Armand barked. "We have company."

One craft from the convoy that they were observing had broken off from the pack and was quickly approaching their position.

Tiberov swiftly reacted, frantically flipping off all the switches in an emergency shut down. The hovercraft violently spun down and splashed down dead in the water.

The emergency lighting flickered to life, bathing the cockpit in an eerie reddish glow. Armand rapidly mirrored the controls to his station and began to submerge the craft slowly. As it sluggishly dipped below the water surface, the surveillance craft slowly flew over their position.

"You mean that isn't Lycanos and his team?" Kiersten asked.

"Nope. Not even close." Armand replied. "Lycanos doesn't work well with others, and there are too many people out here."

Armand reached over to the satcom terminal and brought up a display. He magnified the heat signatures over the lake, and ten red triangles appeared, two of them fading a deep orange.

Armand pointed to one of the dim orange triangles. "You see this one? This is us."

He pointed to the other orange triangle, positioned on the other side of the lake that was quickly fading to black. "I assume that this is Lycanos. He must have seen us fly in." He drew a circle around the red triangles. "But these guys, I have no idea. If Lycanos is shutting down his heat signature, then it was probably a good thing that we did so too."

"Then who are they?" Tiberov inquired. He didn't understand what was going on, although he had a bad feeling about it all.

"I don't know, but we're going to find out soon enough." Armand replied.

The scout craft hovered slowly over the rippling surface of the lagoon. The pilot leaned towards the fogged cockpit window and wiped it with his hand to get a better look at the murky water below. His gunner began targeting below the surface, hoping to draw a bead on the renegade craft.

The pilot clicked on his intercom to make the report. "Sir, this is Echo One. I've got no sign of the intruders. Repeat, no sign of the intruders."

The intercom buzzed with static for a moment, then an answer came. "We had a reading from your position a moment ago. They must have submerged. Drop a sonar drone and see if you can flush them out."

"Roger that, control. Releasing a drone now." The pilot replied. He flipped a switch on the tactical control and brought up the console. He sorted through the options and executed the command.

A door opened on the dorsal side of the craft and a small probe drone fell from the craft and splashed into the water. The drone's motors started up, and it began the process of acquiring a target. It zipped through the water, attempting to make a hostile contact with the renegade craft.

"Sir, we have not acquired a target as of yet," The pilot reported as he watched the holodisplay. "The drone is still acquiring."

"Give the drone a minute, Echo One."

The drone stopped suddenly, and then quickly took off like a bullet, heading to the surface. The pilot smiled. "I think we acquired a target, sir!"

The gunner set the aft weapons to auto-acquire. Although the drone had found a target, he still couldn't get a lock on it manually. The aft guns swung mechanically from side to side in a figure eight pattern. If the target did surface, it would be cut to ribbons instantly.

The pilot sorted through the tactics display to view the object that the drone had targeted. There it was, he thought to himself.

Sir, it's an Esper-class assault hovercraft. Similar to the one's we are using."

A beeping alarm went off on the console as the sonar drone locked on target and began to arm its on-board weapons.

"We've got a lock. It's got to be just under me. Rising to cruise altitude."

The scout craft swiftly rose to about three thousand feet over the lagoon when the target craft rose like a bat out of hell from the water's surface, with the sonar drone in hot pursuit. The aft guns attempted to lock on target, but they were right underneath them, and the guns lacked the range of motion to follow it.

"Get us clear so we can get a lock on it!" Yelled the gunner.

"I'm trying," screamed the pilot as he wrestled with the controls. The hovercraft was failing to respond.

The pilot watched in horror as the other craft bumped his underside, then killed their engines and plunged back down into the surface. The probe droid did not follow them. It was solidly locked on target. His craft, the pilot realized to his horror.

The pilot quickly attempted evasive maneuvers, but it was already too late. The sonar drone ripped through the assault craft, then exploded upon penetration. A brief fireball lit up the twilight sky, and then it disintegrated in a flaming shower. The debris fell like a fireball down to the water, where it continued burning as it descended to the farthest depths of the lagoon.

The command craft watched as the scout craft disappeared from the radar. The commander turned to the comm and addressed the remaining scouts. "Dispatch a team, now! I want that craft found and destroyed!"

The remaining scout crafts dispersed and attempted to hunt down the intruders. It would be a futile search, for a while, at least.

Armand dipped the hovercraft deeper into the murky depths of the lagoon, heading towards Lycanos's last known position before he dampened his engines. Navigating the masses of underwater vegetation, he managed to swing the craft out into a clearing. He brought the craft to a rest, and paused for a moment.

"This is where he should be." Said Armand.

Armand examined their surroundings from the submerged craft. They were about fifty feet from the edge of the lagoon, and they could just barely make out the edge of the lagoon.

"Armand, we're running low on air." Said Gregory as he examined the console. "We have about a minute left in reserves."

"That's gonna have to do us." Armand replied as he checked his chrono.

"Do you really think they're still here?" asked Kiersten.

"Yes. There must be a docking port down here." Armand replied. "Because they never surfaced."

The Senator turned slightly in his seat. "Maybe they were destroyed."

Armand turned to the Senator. "You know, you're really beginning to annoy me."

"Then why don't you either kill me or let me go. I'm getting sick of all your crap too."

Armand reached back and grabbed the Senator by the throat and squeezed. "Maybe I'll do both!"

The Senator gurgled as he began to turn blue. He squirmed furiously for a moment, then his eyes began to roll into the back of his head.

"Armand! Let him go!" Yelled Kiersten as she fought to free the Senator. Armand slapped her back into place. Then he felt a blaster at his head. He turned to face it head on.

"She's right. Let him go, now!" Commanded Gregory.

"Oh, so now you're turning on me too."

"No, I'm just bringing you back to reality, big brother. We're running out of air and you want to play torture the Senator. Cut the crap and focus on our task at hand!" Replied Gregory.

Armand looked his brother in the eyes, and knew he was right. He loosened his grip on the Senator's throat and noticed a glimmer in the water. The air was beginning to grow very stale as he stared out into the murky depths. The lack of oxygen began to cause the hovercrafts engines to begin to die. They could operate in low oxygen for a while, but not this long.

"What is it?" Gregory asked as he holstered his blaster. "We're running out of time here."

Armand still concentrated on the glimmer. It wasn't simply a reflection. It seemed to echo almost mechanically.

Gregory looked at his brother as he stared out into the water. He's losing it, he thought to himself. "That's it! I'm taking this thing to the surface." Said Gregory as he began to transfer the controls over to his console. Armand grabbed his hand firmly, and pointed towards the glimmering light.

"Do you see that?" He asked calmly.

"I don't see anything." Replied Gregory as he began to sweat heavily, a response of his nervous system to the lack of oxygen. "You're grasping for straws here, brother."

"I don't either," echoed Kiersten. The windows had begun to fog up, and they all began to gasp for air.

"I'm checking it out." Replied Armand. He swung the craft about and slowly approached the area where he saw the faint glimmer of light. As they got closer, the glimmer turned out to be an ancient transparent portal of some sort. Through the portal, they could see Lycanos and his team signalling them through the transparent airlock.

Gregory muffled a sigh of relief. "You pulled that one out of your ass, bro."

"So I did." Armand replied with a smile. "So I did."

Armand aimed the dying hovercraft through the portal, and was surprised to find that it quite easily absorbed the craft. The instrument panel began to flicker back to life as they hit a pocket of oxygen once again.

Armand slid the hovercar to a halt in front of Lycanos, spun down the engines, and opened the gull wing doors. The aroma of stale air blew into the craft.

"Glad you could make it, my friend!" Said Lycanos to the weary assassins and their guests. "I didn't think you were going to make it."

"Never underestimate the determination of a Rieger." Armand exclaimed. "Lycanos, this is my brother, Gregory, whom you already know."

"Yes, we've met when you were much younger." Replied Lycanos.

"And this is Kiersten Dulac." Armand continued.

"Ah, the young woman with the crystal! It is nice to finally see you face to face." Replied Lycanos.

"Likewise, Mr. Lycanos." Exclaimed Kiersten.

Armand shifted Lycanos towards Alexi, and continued. "This is my mission tech, Alexi Tiberov..."

"Tiberov... Tiberov... Where have I heard that name before?" Lycanos reached out to shake Alexi's hand. "Oh yes! But of course! Your father, Sergei was one of the best data brokers that I ever had the good fortune of trading with. My, what a long time ago indeed."

Alexi shook Lycanos's hand. "Why thank you, sir. I have heard many great things about you as well."

"Well, don't believe everything you've heard." Lycanos weakly managed a smile and winked in confidence to Alexi.

Armand pulled the Senator out of the car by his collar and tossed him to the floor beside Lycanos's hoverchair. "And this is Senator Rickbos Liedo, whom you already know as well."

"Looks a bit wiped out to me. Is he still alive?" Lycanos asked.

"Well, he was having a rough trip so I had to sedate him." Armand replied.

Lycanos looked at the Senator's jaw and noticed a black and blue mark. "Looks like you had to sedate him manually, my friend."

"You know the Senate. Always demands personal attention." Armand replied. Lycanos and Armand enjoyed a brief laugh together. "Well then, my friend. Why have you brought us here?"

"Armand, we have a grave situation on our hands. As you are already aware of, the Senate had sent a team out here to start to dismantle the ancient computer. I think they are trying to cover up some of their dirty work in the past."

"But why not just destroy it completely?" Armand inquired.

"Because they still need some of the data stored down there. Each gelpac holds almost a gigaquad of data. That's the equivalent to all the information generated in a day around the world. Because the computer has been inoperable for so long, they are unable to bring it back up and sort through it the easy way. Instead, they have to retrieve each pac and run it through their computer interface manually. It's a very slow process indeed."

Armand still looked puzzled. "But what does any of this have to do with us and our current situation?"

"Well, when I was analyzing the creature that Gregory sent us through the holo terminal, I noticed a slight discrepancy in the data archives. I got a strange error message that referred me back to this old computer. GP-AE311. A designation that only a few would recognize as an ancient gelpac memory storage unit. Problem is, how does the new computer know about the gelpacs in this one unless the Senate had access to them? And if they have access to them, why aren't they online and accessible?"

Armand noticed that the Senator was beginning to come around. He swiftly kicked him in the head, knocking him into subconsciousness once again.

"Damned it, Armand! Will you please cut that out!" Screamed Kiersten, who bent over to tend to the unconscious Senator. She examined him quickly and noticed a slight pulse. "Thank the gods, he's still alive."

"For the time being," Armand replied. "Get up and leave him be. We still need him, and I'd rather he stays out of the way."

Gregory walked over to Kiersten and pulled her up. "He'll be ok. Just do as Armand says."

"Gregory, sometimes your brother can be a real bastard." Kiersten replied.

"I know, but he's managed to keep us alive for this long." Said Gregory. He turned to Lycanos and his brother. "Is there anyway we can access the data we need from here?"

"I've had my team attempting to access the mainframe. To our best knowledge, it is pretty inoperable at the moment, but I think we can salvage the gelpac memory cells manually and interface them to our present computer terminals. With a little help from you guys."

"What does that mean?" Tiberov asked.

"We need someone to dive down there and retrieve the gelpac." Replied Lycanos. "Problem is, we can't use our equipment. We need to use these old diver-units." He pointed to a faintly lit walk-in compartment on the far wall.

They proceeded over to it to take a closer look. Lycanos released a switch on the wall and the hermetically sealed door slowly hissed open. A rush of air blew by them, smelling even staler than the air already was. They walked inside, following Lycanos's lead. It contained a row of several ancient metallic diver-units, which had probably not seen use for at least a thousand years.

Armand walked over to one of them and ran his hand down the cold metallic surface of a suit. "These things are so damned old. Do you think they still work?"

"They were made to operate under very high pressure within the tank itself. As far as we can make out, they probably still work." Lycanos replied. "Check out the back of the unit over there."

Armand looked more closely noticed a faded label on what appeared to be a cover lid and opened it. It contained a manual switch. He depressed the switch and the front of the unit slowly split open, revealing a one-man cockpit inside.

"Well, you seem to know more about these things than I do." Lycanos said.

"Yeah. I remember seeing one of these things in action at the technology museum. That's about all they were able to do with them." Armand replied. "I guess that makes me the guinea pig."

"I guess so," Replied Lycanos. "In my current position, I can't go, although I'd love to get a closer look at what's really down there."

"Tiberov, help me get in this damned thing." Armand asked. Tiberov hoisted Armand inside the diver-unit. It was a really tight squeeze. When Armand was fully oriented inside, a bladder began to inflate around him.

"What the hell?" Exclaimed Armand as he pulled a knife out to burst the bladder before it crushed him.

"No! It's supposed to do that to protect you from the extreme pressures within the tank." Said Lycanos.

Armand sheathed his knife as the bladder inflated, cushioning him inside the diver unit. It made it really hard for him to breathe properly.

"Any more surprises that I should know about?" Armand asked with a tinge of sarcasm in his stifled voice.

"Well, maybe one more thing you're really going to hate." Said Lycanos. "The unit will suck all the air out and replace it with a mixed gas gel."

"What? How am I supposed to breathe?"

"Just breathe normally. After a few minutes, it'll seem normal." Replied Lycanos.

"Yeah, right! Anyone want to go instead?" Asked Armand. The resounding silence within the group confirmed his destiny. "I guess not!"

"Well, if the suit fails to work properly, we'll be standing by to pull you out." Replied Gregory.

"Great... Just great, little brother." Armand slowly laid his head back in the headrest and the canopy lowered into place and locked with a slight hiss. He looked around slowly at the group as the stale air was displaced by a cold bluish gel.

"Shit! This sucks!" He tried to avoid smothering in the gel at first, but remembered that he should be able to breathe it. As it slowly reached his chin, he took a small swallow of the gel. It tasted like acidic metal.

"Are you sure this is ok?" He asked through the microphone. Lycanos answered with a thumbs-up sign.

Armand looked back at him and flipped him the finger. "Fuck you!"

The gel was now reaching his nose. As hard as he tried, he wasn't going to be able to avoid it for much longer. "Oh well. Here goes nothing!"

He leaned his head forward and took a huge breath of the gel. It felt really abnormal, and he immediately blew it out and began choking.

"Don't fight it, Armand." Lycanos replied when he noticed that Armand was struggling to breathe what little air was still left in the helmet canopy.

"But he's drowning!" Screamed Kiersten as she ran over to try to release the canopy.

Gregory grabbed her and held her back. "Let him go. We'll know soon enough." She still fought his grasp as the canopy was completely filled up with gel. Armand's eyes began to bug out of their sockets as he couldn't hold his breath any longer. He exhaled, blowing the last of the air from his lungs and inhaled a lung-full of the gel. It was cold and sticky.

He choked it in, blew out once, and sucked in some more. The metallic taste was no longer there. He breathed in and out a few more times to get used to it. It was a strange sensation, to drown and breathe at the same time.

As he regained his awareness, he flashed a thumbs up sign to the group. They let out a collective sigh and began to clap. The suit felt strange in a way beyond the obvious fact that he was sucking in gel instead of air. It was as if he was naked, and could feel everything that touched the external surface of the suit.

"This suit is amplifying tactile feeling." Armand called out on the mike.

"Yes, that is why they were so useful for the deep dives into the tank." Lycanos replied. "But there's a pain tolerance inhibitor built into the system. You can feel things like someone was touching your skin, but not the pain from being stabbed. Be careful. If you get hurt down there, you won't feel it at all."

"As far as I'm concerned, I'd prefer to come out of this without any more problems." Armand said with a slight grin.

"Now for the hard part. People, we need to lower him into the tank." Said Lycanos. "Tiberov, pull that lever over there."

Tiberov walked over to the lever and tried to pull it. It wouldn't budge.

"Let me help." Said Gregory as he grabbed hold of the lever. Together, they managed to pull it down.

Under the diver suit, an egress hatch opened up slowly, and water began to flow up through the tube.

"Now, let's lower him slowly into the egress tube." Exclaimed Gregory. Tiberov went to the other side of the diver suit and slowly lowered Armand into the water.

As the suit contacted with the water, a control panel began to light up in the suit and the exterior lights flickered to life. Armand studied the controls and noticed that they were really pretty basic.

Armand leaned back in the suit and the suit slowly traveled backwards in the tube. He leaned forward again, and the suit moved forward. He decided to try out the manipulator arms. They operated as if they were extensions of his own arms and hands.

"So far, so good." He called out into the mike. "I'm heading out."

Lycanos brought up the feedback from the suit. A monitor to their left slowly crackled to life. Video from the external camera filled the screen, much to their surprise.

"Armand. We have you fivers. We're receiving video from your external cameras as we speak."

"Great," Replied Armand. "If I drown in this damned thing, you guys can see it in all its glory."

"You'll be fine, my friend." Lycanos assured Armand, although he didn't sound as confident as he would have liked. "Head due south to the third gelpack tower. The pack that we're after is"

"I know... GP-AE311."

"Great. We'll monitor your progress from here. Lycanos out."

Armand switched on the suits external lights. A halogenic glow burned a path through the murky darkness of the tank, although it only seemed to reach out about fifteen feet or so, reflecting back ghostly images off the kelp that filled the tank.

"So much for visibility." Armand said to himself as he slowly clawed his way through the dense aquatic vegetation. There was something strange about this situation.

He half expected there to be some sort of life down here, but he kept reminding himself that this was no lake. It was meant to be a reservoir to cool the gel-memory packs, not to support life.

Armand suddenly felt a heavy clunk against his suit. He spun around to see a hand grabbing at his waist. Instinctively, he struck at it, knocking it back.

The hand remained in place. Armand then noticed that it didn't move, and regained his composure. Panic could be very deadly under water.

Better to keep his head clear and analyze the situation before his imagination got the best of him. As he looked closer, the hand seemed to be caught up in fronds of kelp.

He grabbed at the hand, and pulled it towards him for closer examination. It wouldn't budge. Focusing his light, he noticed that it was encased within some sort of hard gel.

"What the hell?" He thought to himself.

Gieger proceeded down the long hallway towards the Senate chamber, escorted by the new Security Chief, Roland Estrickt. Although Gieger had no particular hatred for the man, he knew that Estrickt had to be laughing on the inside about his situation.

He had tried everything within his power to solve the problems at hand, but the brothers Rieger had proved far more resourceful than he had ever imagined.

His datapad was in hand, although it had been drained of most of the current information that his aides had slaved for hours to compile, thanks to Nicholas.

He was no closer to a resolution to the current Rieger Brothers dilemma than he ever was, and there was nothing he could do or say to the Emperor that would convince him that he had. For once in his life, Gieger was truly and dually screwed.

They rounded a corner and began the long stroll past the elite guards. Gieger could hear them whisper, as they often did when a condemned man was about to go down. He stared coldly forward as he passed each armored sentry. Roland actually let out a slight grin as they proceeded to the entrance to the Emperor's Chamber.

Two sentries stood in conversation at the door, blocking the entrance in a small act of defiance to Gieger.

"Excuse us. We've been expected." Gieger said as he tapped one of the sentries on the shoulder so they could pass. The sentry glanced back at him for a moment, grunted something unintelligible, and then turned back to his conversation with the other sentry.

Gieger shook his head and looked at Estrickt. Estrickt just stared forward with a shit-eating grin on his face. Gieger reached slowly beneath his coat and produced a light-blade.

As he fired it up, the sentry turned around, and stared into the steel-cold eyes of Gieger as he quickly thrust the blade up and through the shocked sentry's pelvis. Gieger jerked the blade upwards, before anyone had time to react, and cut the fool in half.

The dissected sentry fell to the floor in a pool of blood. The other sentry pulled his blaster and leveled it squarely at Gieger's head, as did Estrickt and every other guard in the room.

Gieger shut off the light-blade, turned it around and handed it to Estrickt. "I did say excuse us, did I not?"

Estrickt grabbed the light-blade from Gieger, and put it in his empty holster. "That you did, Sir." Roland replied. Still levelling the blaster at Gieger's face, Roland turned to the sentry. "Scan him for any other weapons."

The sentry looked at the dead body of his friend, then produced a security wand. He waved it over Gieger's body, and then withdrew it.

"He's clean." The sentry reported to Roland.

"Good. Mr. Gieger, if you've finished killing the hired help, I believe we can proceed now." Said Roland.

"Let's get this over with." Replied Gieger, who kicked the dead sentry aside with his boot.

Gieger placed his hand on the door controls and held still as it scanned him. The scan ended, and the huge metal door slid open with a pneumatic hiss.

Gieger walked into the darkened chamber, yet Estrickt did not follow him. The door hissed once again and shut him inside. At the far end of the chamber, he could see the Emperor's throne, although it was turned away from him.

He took a few steps forward, as his eyes began to grow accustomed to the darkness. He jumped as he felt a hand placed on his shoulder.

"Shit, Zex! Why do you continually startle the hell out of people?" He whispered to the Emperor's grey-skinned aide.

"I do not try to startle you, Gieger. You're just naturally nervous, as you should be." Zex replied.

"I've got nothing to hide, Zex. Everything has been turned upside down by those two brothers. There's nothing I could have done to prevent this."

"I know that, and understand. Unfortunately for you, the Emperor does not. He's been waiting for you."

As Gieger and Zex walked towards the throne, Gieger watched as the gunports on the wall tracked his every move. They were very sensitive to movement, so he maintained as steady a pace as he could. One quick move in the wrong way would cut him down like a hot knife through butter. He smiled as he thought that at least he might not die alone. Zex was just behind him.

The Emperor turned his throne around and faced Gieger and Zex. Gieger looked at the floor as the Emperor looked him over.

"Mr. Gieger, I am very disappointed in your inept handling of this whole situation."

"I am truly sorry, my Liege. I handled it as best I could, but it would seem that they were receiving help from some of our allies."

A bolt of energy flew from out of the throne and picked Gieger up off the ground by the neck. Gieger's body involuntarily jerked from the shock as he realized that he couldn't breathe. He flailed his limbs about like a hung man, but to no avail.

"I did not want excuses from you, Mr. Gieger. I wanted action, and I wanted this situation at a close."

Gieger was beginning to lose consciousness, although he managed to shake his head in agreement. The energy bolt ceased, and Gieger fell to the floor like a ragdoll. Every joint in his body was on fire as he gasped for air, quite possibly for the last time.

Zex walked over to Gieger and attempted to help him to his feet. The Emperor sternly raised his hand to stop him, but Zex shook his head. Although Zex was the aide to the Emperor, he was also his most trusted advisor.

Gieger secretly watched this little power struggle, and it dawned on him what would happen to anyone else who directly disobeyed the emperor. They would certainly be killed in an instant for their lack of respect. Suddenly, it all became clear what he had to do to survive. Gieger looked at the gunports, and noticed that they were still tracking him. It would be a gamble, but either way, he'd probably be dead anyway.

Zex reached around Gieger's waist and attempted to lift him up. Even though Zex was just a small creature, he had amazing strength for his size. He lifted Gieger slowly to his feet.

Gieger spun around quickly with his last ounce of strength and grabbed Zex by the head with his left hand. The gunports spun to life, but didn't fire, as he had expected. With his right hand, Gieger pulled a neural shiv out and slammed it into Zex's upper vertebrae. Zex violently fell to the floor, but he was still alive. Gieger picked him up by the back of his collar and walked forward towards the Emperor.

"Put him down, now!" The emperor commanded.

"I don't think so, my Liege." Gieger replied as he confidently dragged Zex to the Emperor's throne.

"How dare you insult me this way! I should cut you both down right now!"

"I'm sure that if you'd wished that, I'd be dead by now." Gieger answered the challenge. "But somehow, I've always suspected that there was a greater connection through you and Zex than just Emperor to aide. Kill us. This is your final chance."

The emperor leaned forward in his throne and coldly stared Gieger down. He looked at Zex, noticing a strange foam gurgling from his mouth. The chamber fell silent, filled with only the sound of the whirring gunports, trying to get a fix on Gieger. Unfortunately for their design, they'd kill Zex in the process of mowing down Gieger.

"Kkk. Kill us." Zex choked out as best he could.

The emperor looked down in pity at his aide. The emperor waved his hand, and the gunports dropped silent and recessed back into the walls.

"I do believe that was a wise choice, my Liege." Gieger said as he punched in a few commands to his pad. "I've programmed the pad to kill Zex should I stop breathing again."

The emperor sat silently on his throne. He placed his head on his right hand, and then looked at Gieger, than at Zex. He was at a lack for words.

"What's the matter, my Liege? Can't think without your closest aide?"

The emperor remained silent and he began to stare at the floor. Gieger walked up to him and slapped him in the head, almost knocking him off the throne.

Gieger had truly done it. His suspicions were correct after all these years. Gieger grabbed Zex and threw his limp body on the emperor's lap. The emperor reclined a bit, then he looked down at the body of his aide.

Zex was falling in and out of consciousness, and Gieger could see that the emperor mimicked his every move. Not in compassion for the aide, but that it was if they were psychically bound in some way with one another.

Gieger smacked the shiv further into Zex's spinal column, and he watched as the Emperor also jerked up in pain.

"It would seem that I'm not going to die, after all. Doesn't it, Zex?"

Zex slowly turned over to look at Gieger. "You bastard. Do you realize exactly what you've done?"

Gieger looked back at Zex, then grabbed him by his collar and placed him face to face.

"I realize exactly, Zex..." Gieger replied with a sly grin. "Or should I call you Emperor?"

The Emperor looked up at Gieger as his image began to fade from view. The throne was now empty, and Gieger had inadvertently discovered the Achilles heel of the empire. The emperor was nothing but a puppet of Zex.

What Zex commanded, the Emperor commanded. All the fakery and the chagrin of Gieger's past had suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks. Now, he had the fate of the empire within his grasp.

Gieger dropped Zex to the ground and began to check out the chamber at closer range. He slid his hand over the throne, then admired the workmanship.

Zex looked up at Gieger. "What do you want from us?"

"Us... Or you?" Gieger replied, as he sat himself upon the throne. It was a big chair. Not to comfortable, but nice. "It would seem that the Emperor is dependent upon you in a big way, if he actually exists at all."

"He exists." Replied Zex. "But not as you'd want to exist."

Gieger looked down upon Zex from the throne. "What's that supposed to mean, Zex? What exactly is the deal between you two?"

"I have been the caretaker of the Emperor since his birth. Unfortunately, he is like you, with a frail body that survives but a short period of my long lifespan."

"So the Emperor is human?"

"That's correct. He eats, lives, and dies as you do."

"Then explain how he's survived for nearly a thousand years?"

"The current Emperor is the 10th clone of Maxillain Sinarus, the previous Emperor of Cynar." Zex rose to his knees.

"Unfortunately, as the clone is reproduced, it takes more and more of the original mass of the donor. This makes the donor host very unstable. There is almost nothing left of the original, that is in stasis under the throne."

Gieger jumped as the throne began to rise off the ground. He jumped off of it before it rose too high and looked at the actual body of the Emperor, suspended in cryogenic stasis gel.

"Holy shit!" Gieger exclaimed as he ran his hand over the stasis tube. The Emperor looked very dead to him. Gieger turned to Zex and smiled.

"Zex, my old friend. I do believe that we can work something out here." Gieger said as he tapped his hand on Zex's shiv sticking out of his neck.

Zex looked up at Gieger in extreme anger, but there was really nothing he could do. Gieger had him screwed, just as they had tried to screw him.

"I'd like that." Zex replied with a snarl.

"I'd like that. What, Zex?" Gieger smiled down at the suddenly powerless Zex at his feet. He searched Zex's robe and found what he was looking for. A lightblade. He twirled it in his right hand and kicked Zex in the back of his head, knocking him across the floor.

Zex pulled himself back to his knees and looked up at Gieger, with tears coming to his opaque eyes. "I'd like to... to work something out... with you, Mr. Gieger."

"That was much better, Zex. I think I actually felt true emotion in your words." Replied Gieger with a wide smile. It was beginning to be the dawn of a new era for Gieger.

Gieger turned back to the stasis tube and took a final look at the once great Emperor Sinarus. "So long, my Liege." He said as he activated the light-blade and thrust it through the stasis tube and buried it into the heart of the cryogenic emperor's body. A blast of steam from the hole in the stasis tube enveloped Gieger as he laughed hysterically.

Zex fell to the floor and buried his face in his hands, crying in grief for his dying master. Gieger turned to Zex, and noted his pain with another wave of laughter.

"Who's the master, Zex?" Gieger ran over to Zex and grabbed him by his chin, forcing Zex to look directly at him. Gieger yelled at the top of his lungs. "Who is the master now?"

Zex stared coldly at Gieger, tears streaming down his withered grey face, and gritted his pointy teeth. "You are, Mr. Gieger. You are."

Armand floated carefully down through the murky depths towards the bottom of the gelpac tower. He was beginning to feel confident about this diving thing, even though he felt like a fish in a can.

He was being especially careful not to raise a cloud of sediment that had settled on the tower over the past millennia or so. He'd learned his lesson well after accidentally disturbing it earlier and having to endure not being able to see his hands in front of his face for a long while.

Suddenly, he began to feel a little woozy. He adjusted his external flood lamp so he could check his oxygen/nitrogen mixture. He could barely see the gauge, and it looked to him as if it was getting really thin.

"Rieger to Lycanos. Do you read me?" He inquired over the mike.

"We still have you fivers, Armand." Lycanos replied after a short pregnant pause. "What's your status?"

"Well, I'm feeling a bit strange, as if the mixture is getting a bit thin."

"We're checking it now." Lycanos replied.

Armand could hear them discussing the situation, and heard his brother talking, but couldn't make out the words.

"Armand, this is Gregory. Do you copy?"

"Yeah, I can hear you now." Armand replied.

"Our best guess is that the suit is automatically adjusting the mixture as you proceed further and further down into the tank. It's probably normal, but just stay put for a moment while we check out the situation from up here."

"Roger that." Armand replied. It was bad enough that he had to be down here in this god-forsaken hole in the first place, but to have to stay put was another thing. He thought he'd better keep himself occupied, so he began to check out the gel pac tower at a closer level.

Maneuvering himself closer to the base of the tower, he began to notice something strange. A lot of the gelpacs were missing. Not just a few here and there, but a lot. As he traveled across the width of the tower, he saw that banks and banks of gelpacs were gone.

"What the hell?" He thought to himself. Then he noticed one gelpac that was still intact within the tower. He floated over to it, and carefully began to pull it out of its socket. It seemed to be stuck, but Armand twisted it a bit and it began to wiggle out of place.

As he pulled harder, he accidentally raised a small cloud of sediment, but it soon dissipated. He illuminated the pac with his floodlight, and began to wipe the mud from its casing. The pac was empty. That was strange, he thought. Nothing in it. Nothing at all. Then he noticed the hole.

He lost his grip on the gelpac, and it slipped from his hands and fell to the tank bottom, raising a huge cloud of sediment. He couldn't see a thing, but he dove down to try to pick up the pac. He wanted to see what had caused the gel to leak out of the pac.

As he traveled closer to the bottom of the tank, the sediment was beginning to settle again. At this depth, everything was heavy. That's when he noticed a problem.

"Lycanos. Can you read me?" He called out over the mike.

"Yes, we can still hear you."

"I think we have a problem."

"What's that?" Lycanos inquired with a sense of fear in his voice. At Armand's current depth, it would be impossible to reach him in time for a rescue. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. But you need to see this. Switch on your monitors."

Lycanos maneuvered his support chair over to the bank of monitors on the wall. The rest of the group crowded behind him to get a better look.

As the monitors began to warm up, Lycanos checked his chrono. Armand could only remain under the surface for another 15 minutes at best. The monitors began to relay the video from the tank bottom. What the group saw on the bottom of the tank dashed their hopes quickly.

"It looks as if our Imperial friends on the surface aren't in the retrieval business after all." Armand reported.

Over the monitors, the video revealed thousands of damaged gelpacs laying in a sort of ooze. The ooze was certainly the contents of the gelpacs.

"So much for trying to retrieve a couple of century's worth of data." Gregory replied as he looked at the shocked faces of the rest of the group.

"Yeah, little brother. I'd have to agree with you on that." Armand replied.

Gregory noticed that the face showing the most horror was that of Lycanos.

"My god! What have they done?" Lycanos said to himself. "Do they realize how much they've destroyed? We'll never, ever be able to get that information back."

"Well, there's still hope that the pac we need is still intact. It looks as if they arbitrarily destroyed the pacs, rather than systematically destroy whole towers at a time."

"This is true." Lycanos replied. "How do you feel?" He asked Armand.

Armand checked his mixture again. It still seemed a bit thin, but he didn't feel woozy anymore. "I think I've stabilized, as you guys thought. I'm feeling fine."

"That's great. Hopefully the gelpac is still ok as well. We're crossing our fingers."

"Well, I'll know in just a minute. I think I've located the tower." Armand exclaimed with a touch of excitement in his voice.

"I just hope it's still there." Lycanos prayed to himself. "Please be there."

Rieger maneuvered around the gigantic gelpac tower with ease, managing not to touch anything as the sediment clouds seemed to be thickening.

"Lycanos. I can't seem to see a damned thing anymore. Is there anyway I can adjust the spectrum of this visor." Rieger inquired.

"Just a minute, Armand. I'm checking on it right now."

Rieger held fast. He could barely see a thing, although he could make out some shadows amongst the cloud of sediment. He moved a little closer to get a better view of things. That's when he saw the droid.

The droid appeared to be extracting a gelpac from the tower.

"Cancel that last one, Lycanos. We have company." Rieger exclaimed over the mike.

"That's a roger, Armand. We've got two sentries on our scope." Lycanos replied.

"Two?" Armand swung the suit around to see another droid coming down on his position. With its extraction claw pointed at him.

"Shit."

Armand moved back, bumping into the tower, raising a cloud of sediment. The droid maintained its course and the claw began to spin. It was on the attack.

Armand looked around for a weapon of any sort. There was none to be seen. The sentry collided with Armand, knocking him in a backwards spin and attempted to drill through his faceplate with the claw.

Armand punched the sentries command module, but it was no use. As he continued to fall out of control, the droid clung to him like glue. They both hit the bottom of the tank, raising a plume of muck around them.

Armand was knocked free upon impact, throwing the droid a few feet away. It rose again, and set itself on an attack vector.

Armand quickly regained his composure and pulled a gelpac from the muck. The droid was heading at full speed now. He drew the gelpac over his head and brought it down hard on the oncoming droid's command module.

A ball of electricity shot around them as the droid began to spin wildly out of control. Armand was thrown backwards from the jolt and watched as the droid spun into an adjoining gelpac tower and exploded in a cloud of gas bubbles and shattered parts. Armand held up his hands to shield his face from the oncoming rush of shrapnel.

A sharp pain shot up his leg. Armand put his hand down and looked down to see that a long, sharp piece of shrapnel had penetrated the suit. The searing pain was unbearable. Instinctively, he attempted to pull it out, but realized that it might compromise the integrity of the seal.

The white hot shrapnel had melted the suit around it, and the suit didn't seem to be leaking that much. He pushed the melted material around the shrapnel to reinforce the seal on the suit. The shrapnel was cooling down fast, and Armand wanted no leaks to occur. He'd rather die from the wound than drown down here.

"What's going on, Armand?" Lycanos frantically called out over the intercom.

"I took out the droid." Rieger exclaimed between spasms of pain. "I took a minor hit, but I think I'm all right." Armand surveyed the situation quickly. "Where's the other droid?"

Lycanos checked his scopes quickly. "It's still in place, extracting a gelpac from the tower."

"Not for long." Armand replied as he shot up though the depths behind the droid, who continued to ignore him.

Armand watched as the droid meticulously attempted to extract the gelpac. It seemed as if it was having some amount of difficulty extracting the pac from its socket. Then he looked at the socket number on the side of the tower.

"It's our gelpac, Lycanos. It's trying to extract our gelpac." Armand reported.

"We can't let anything happen to that pac." Lycanos barked to his crew. He turned to Tiberov. "Alexi, can you hack into the retrieval team's data stream. They have to be communicating to the droid somehow."

Tiberov shot over to his data console and sat down. Gregory and Kiersten began to set up the portable antenna, and focussed it towards the retrieval teams position in the tank.

"They have to be using ULF, because I'm not picking up anything but comm traffic." Tiberov reported back to Lycanos. "I think I can ascertain their freq, but it's going to take some time, Sir."

Lycanos slammed his fist down. "Mr. Tiberov, time is one element that we do not possess. I suggest you find it, and hack it now!"

"Yes sir."

Tiberov furiously worked at the command console, searching the freqs for data. He skimmed through screens of static until he hit on a prospect.

"Lycanos, I think we have it." Tiberov reported as he enhanced the image data. It was a data stream, and a pretty basic one at that.

"Well, Mr. Tiberov. Do we, or do we not have it?" Lycanos barked.

All eyes were on Alexi as he tapped into the data stream, capturing the control key. Amazingly to him, it was really quite small at 1Gb.

"I've managed to capture the control stream. I think I can echo it to the droid's command module, then randomly encrypt the control stream at a one-tetracycle timebase so they can't regain control of the droid. For a while at least."

"Very good, Mr. Tiberov. Do it." Lycanos turned back to the command console. "Armand. We think we can do it."

"Roger that. Have it stop for a moment, and I'll let you know if it responds." Said Armand. He shined his spotlight on the droid.

"Shut it down for a moment, Alexi." Lycanos barked.

Alexi issued the new command and waited in anticipation for acknowledgement.

The sentry droid shut down as programmed and remained still, to Rieger's surprise.

"It stopped. Good work, Alexi!" Armand reported back. "Have the droid continue to extract the pac and return it to you."

"That's a roger, Armand." Lycanos replied with a smile. He pointed back to Alexi to issue the resume command to the droid. "Good job, Alexi."

Alexi smiled, and then punched the command into his terminal. "You're welcome."

Lycanos turned back to Alexi and stared coldly at him. "Don't get cocky, Alexi. We're not out of this yet."

"Uh, yes sir." Alexi replied. He hurriedly went back to work at the console.

Armand watched as the droid suddenly returned back to it's function of extracting the gelpac from it's socket. He advanced closer to get a better inspection of the pac as the droid extracted it.

"It looks as if the pac is intact. There appears to be no internal damage." Armand reported.

"That's great, Armand." Said Lycanos. "Mr. Tiberov, program the droid to return here with the pac, stat."

"Yes sir." Tiberov said as he issued the command from his terminal. He sat back in his chair as he watched the command flow through the system.

The droid extracted the pac and began to shoot off into the distance, faster than Armand could react.

"The droids on it's way. I can't keep up with it. I'll be back in a few minutes." Armand reported back.

"Roger that." Said Lycanos. "Mr. Tiberov, are we holding control of the droid?"

"That's affirmative. It will be here in about 30 seconds." Tiberov reported after consulting his console.

"Good. Get a team over there to retrieve the pac when it arrives. Now, people!" Lycanos barked. He turned back to his screen to notice a strange anomaly. "What the hell is that?"

Kiersten and Gregory walked over to Lycanos to see what the problem was. "What is it, Lycanos?" Kiersten inquired.

Lycanos seemed puzzled. "There seems to be some sort of an energy build up within the tank itself. The imperial retrieval team on the surface of the tank is retreating fast. They must know something about this that we don't."

Lycanos turned back to the console. "Armand, do you see anything unusual going on down there?"

Armand swung around to take a look. Hovering motionless in the water halfway up the tower, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, a huge ball of energy careening towards him.

"There's an immense energy ball coming my way. I'm attempting to evade..." Armand tried to move out of the way, but the suit's control circuits weren't responding at all. He threw his arms up to shield his eyes from the intense light, but there was nothing he could do. His pupils dilated and his veins began to swell up like a balloon.

"Get out of there, Armand! Get out now!" Lycanos ordered.

"Oh god! It's coming in too fast! I can't get away from it. It's on top of me!" Armand yelled. The energy ball moved in quickly and began to engulf Armand, the intense heat melting it's way through the suit and absorbing into his skin.

The team crowded around Lycanos to hear the final message from Armand. A prolonged scream, then just dead silence. Kiersten closed her eyes, put her hands over her ears to drown out the screams, then turned and fell into Gregory's arms.

Gregory held her as she began to cry, but stared blankly at the screen as it suddenly turned to static.

"It can't be." Exclaimed Gregory as he continued to stare at the static on the monitor, trying to make some sense out of it all.

"Armand, do you read us... Armand, do you read..." Lycanos continued to try to attempt contact, but then turned to the window to look at the interior of the tank. A searing light built up and cut through the window, producing heat like he had never felt before.

"Shield your eyes and get cover! It's gaining critical mass!" Lycanos barked as he covered his eyes with his hands and moved his chair away from the window.

A torrential blast of heat smashed it's way through the windows, sending a behemoth wave of water to come crashing into the control room. Everyone and everything in the room was caught up in the wave of cold water and thrown across the room.

Gregory struggled to regain his footing as the water quickly filled the room up. He grabbed for Kiersten, but missed her hand. He dove beneath the water, grabbed her by the waist and surfaced, trying to find an air pocket. As the air pocket quickly filled with murky water, Kiersten turned to look at Gregory for one last time.

"Kiss me." She said, and then closed her eyes. Gregory looked at her, not believing his ears.

"We're going to drown!" He exclaimed.

Kiersten opened her eyes slightly. "I know. Now kiss me once before we die." She closed her eyes again, awaiting the final kiss of a life cut short.

Gregory looked at her quivering lips, smoothed her wet hair back over her head, then kissed her. The water engulfed them as they remained locked in an eternal kiss. Kiersten began to struggle from lack of air.

Gregory opened his eyes to look at her face once more before death. She was so very beautiful, he thought. She looked longingly back at him for a moment, then her eyes began to roll back in their sockets. She expelled the last of her air as her lungs began to burn as if they were on fire. He blew his final breath into her, and then lost consciousness, sinking slowly towards the floor with her in their final embrace.

Estrict had stood in waiting outside the Emperor's chamber for at least a good hour. He'd never been this close to the Emperor before and here he was, memorizing every crack and swirling pattern in the monolithic black marble walls. The Imperial guards really had to be bored, he thought as he watched them holding sentry over the corridor.

Estrict was busy running over things in his own mind. He knew that Gieger was a dead man from the time he had entered the chamber. Gieger was innately ineffective, one of the failing old guard. Estrict was from the new breed. He certainly would not fail the Emperor, given he would certainly succeed Gieger as the chief of the Black Ops Corp.

Suddenly the door opened. Estrict and all the sentries stood at attention as the gap between the doors widened to it's full breach. Nobody exited the room. Zex appeared at the doorway.

"Mr. Estrict. The Emperor commands your presence." He said in a calm, unwavering voice.

Estrict moved forward inside, with Zex in a holding pattern closely at his heels. He had never seen the inside of the Emperor's Chamber before. It was quite stark, and utilitarian. He noticed several gun turrets along the sides of the chamber that seemed to follow his every move.

As he stepped forward into the abyss, he saw the Emperor on his throne, dimly lit by a lone spotlight from the ceiling. Zex tapped Estrickt on his shoulder, and he immediately fell to his knees, as was the imperial protocol. It was as his eyes fell to the floor, he noticed the crumpled corpse laying before the Emperor's throne, riddled with bullet holes.

Presumably, they were from the gun turrets. They had made quite a mess of his former boss.

"Mr. Estrickt." The Emperor spoke quietly, a little above a whisper, yet his voice commanded immediate respect and attention.

"Yes, my Liege." Said Roland as he lifted his gaze from the floor to meet that of his Emperor.

"Dispose of this corpse. Immediately." The Emperor commanded as he turned around and began to manipulate the glowing holoscreens behind him.

"As you wish, my Liege." Roland answered. He began to pick up the corpse, but wretched from the incredible stench of the body.

"Not you! Have the guards to remove it!" Said the Emperor. "You are the new Assassin Chief. Your conduct is not to be a manservant any longer."

"Yes, my Liege." Estrickt replied.

"But..." The Emperor turned around again and raised his finger, pointing to the rotting corpse. "I do not expect you to fail me as Gieger did. Let him be a lesson to you"

Roland looked down upon the disfigured corpse. "Understood, my Liege." Roland acknowledged.

"Now get back to work. I want the Rieger brothers and the rest of the rebel traitors brought to me within the hour."

Roland shook his head in acknowledgement of the order. He bowed to the Emperor, then exited the room as quickly as he could without appearing to be in a hurry. Zex followed him to the door, and escorted the guards as they came to remove the body. The corpse left a slimy trail behind on the black marble floor as they dragged it from the room. Zex closed the huge doors behind them as they left.

Gieger let a moment pass once the doors had shut, then came out from the shadows behind the throne. He ran his hand through the holoimage of the Emperor and smiled as he realized that the plan was indeed working.

"It's a great day to be the Emperor. Don't you think so, Zex."

"Whatever you say, Gieger."

"Now that's not the spirit, Zex." Gieger said as he walked over to Zex and put his arm around his shoulder. They strode over to the holoimages displayed before the emperor and one caught Gieger's attention. It looked almost like an old space station, but Gieger knew that any space technology had been outlawed for at least a millennia since the anti-technology treatise at Balkuraat. He magnified and enhanced the image. Certainly, he thought. It most certainly was.

"What is this, Zex?" Gieger asked the deceased Emperor's most trusted aide and puppeteer.

"That is the Sky Needle. It's the Emperor's private space station."

"But isn't space-based technology outlawed?" Gieger asked.

"Yes. To the people of Lakul, it is and ever shall be. But to the Emperor and his forces, no. We have a contingent of assault craft in orbit around the planet as well."

"Interesting. I'm beginning to like the Emperor's forward thinking already."

Gieger turned from the holoscreen and walked over to a window panel that overlooked the capitol city. He knew he could not remain here within the city for much longer, risking detection by the Imperial Central Computer. As long as he remained in the Emperor's chamber, where the probes could not penetrate, he'd be safe.

But, if he left planetside and took up residence in the space needle, he could rule the planet without ever being detected. And what could be safer. Nobody on the planet could ever travel into space. He smiled to himself as he realized the ultimate plan was coming together, beyond his wildest dreams.

"Zex, my old friend. Let us go to the Space Needle." Gieger said with a smile.

Zex rolled his eyes as he fought to control the device that controlled him. Despite his greatest powers of self control, he was powerless to fight it.

A lone and very solemn figure sat at his control console at the Black Sancti. He uneasily shifted in his surround-chair as the flickering images from the holoscreen shifted and updated in real-time.

Changing his mind, he tapped in a few commands into the console, trying to predict the outcome, but alas, it was of no use or importance in the stream of data that was coming in.

A tall, dark humanoid turned from his security console. "Sir, visual sensors are coming back on-line. I think you'd better take a look at this."

Sangra Dom Nictos watched in semi-horror as the events began to unfold themselves before him on the giant holo-screen.

"Daackt! What the hell is going on here?" Sangra asked as he angrily turned to his aide.

Daackt, almost startled at the tone of Sangra's voice, dropped all that he was working on at the security console, and pulled his pad out to corroborate his data. He calmly, yet quickly walked over to Sangra's console and handed him the datapad.

"Sir. We've detected a massive power fluctuation within the center of the old capitol."

Sangra turned to his console, jacked in the pad and brought up the data. The numbers were running off the chart, then suddenly ceased as quickly as they had started.

"What the hell?" Nictos muttered under his breath.

"And that's not all, sir. Someone has re-activated the space needle." Daact said as he turned and pointed to a small, remote area of the screen. Nictos looked at the display, and the big picture was getting ever so clearer. Almost 1250 miles above the planet, the Emperor's private sanctuary was being re-activated for the first time in more than 500 years.

"The Emperor's Space Needle was put in hyber-mode more than 500 years ago. Why is the Emperor re-activating it now?" Said Daact with a puzzled look on his face.

"I don't know, Daact." Nictos turned back to the holoscreen and wondered himself. "I don't know, but I'm damned well going to find out. Wait a minute. What's going on here?"

Nictos enhanced the small satcom image of the old capitol, and noticed a small amount of movement on the surface. He further enhanced the imagery, displaying a small group of people on the edge of the old computing center.

"Hold on just a second. Center on that third figure from the left and enlarge." Daact interrupted.

Nictos enlarged the image. "What is it?" He inquired.

"I think I recognize this man." Daact pointing his thin finger towards a lone figure on the holoscreen, and brought up a data display.

"It's Rastra Nockt. He's a freelance black ops zombie." He quickly scanned the data display and found what he was looking for. "Last known contract was with Lycanos Moravi."

"Interesting." Nictos commented. "Lycanos, my old friend... What are you up to now? See if you can get a trace on Moravi's chair. We stashed a tracer on it when we constructed it for him."

Daact checked for some sort of a tracer signature from the chair. "Sir, I think we've got it, but the signal strength is really faint. I'm trying to filter out all the anomalous feedback."

Daact played around with the filtering software, and slowly but surely, the signal came in bright and clear. "I got it. There's no movement, and minimal lifesigns, but he's there alright! Wait a minute, sir. I'm getting some other readings as well. It's an Imperial Assassin's feedback unit. It's turned off, but I think I can reinitialize the hardware by remote uplink."

Nictos leaned forward quite uneasily in his seat. Moravi was working with an Imperial Assassin? What the heck is really going on here, he asked himself.

"I can't quite get through to the hardware. Some kind of ID code is required." Reported Daact.

Nictos thought about it for a moment. There was a few extreme possibilities, due to Lycanos's distrust of the Empire. "Try Armand Rieger's ident-code."

Daact checked the imperial database, and tapped in the code. "That's a negative, sir. It's not his unit."

"Damn!" Nictos pounded his fist onto the console. "Ok, one more remote possibility. Try Gregory Rieger's ident code." He settled back into his chair and awaited the answer.

Dacct entered the code, and turned to Nictos and smiled. "Bingo! We've got a winner."

"Thank god. If it wasn't him, we'd all be screwed by now." Nictos replied with a wry smile. He knew that the Rieger brothers had some sort of a fleeting relationship with Moravi, but all the intercepted Imperial intelligence had not put them in direct connection with him until now.

He paused a moment to watch what they were doing on the surface. Several of the Black Sancti members began to gather around the holoscreen, gazing in wonder at what appeared on the screen.

In the center of the old capitol city, a team appeared to be surveying the area. Nictos pulled back the display a bit, showing the full extent of the survey.

The ancient computing centers memory storage reservoir had been completely drained. Not exactly just drained, but both the water and the memory core towers had simply vanished into thin air.

Nictos turned to his followers. "Gentlemen... It would seem that our greatest fears are about to be realized."

He then turned to the members of his elite paramilitary force. "Commander Rastan." Nictos called forth into the group. The group parted and a tall woman in black body armor stepped forward towards Nictos. She looked at him for a brief moment before speaking, to try to guess what he thinking, but not long enough to raise suspicion or animosity. "How may I be of assistance, sir?" She replied.

"Commander. I want you to lead a well-armed retrieval team out there to assist them right away." Commanded Nictos.

"As you wish." She replied.

The commander smartly bowed to Nictos, and then promptly left the room, motioning to her subordinates. If she had any inkling of what was going to be ahead for them, she was at the very least going to be well prepared for the unexpected.

Zex and Gieger materialized slowly in the transport bay of the Emperor's Space Needle. Gieger took a quick, cautious look around to see if Zex had set a trap for him.

Zex slowly turned towards Gieger. "There is no need for such subterfuge. I acknowledge and am very resigned to my plight." He said.

Gieger seemed almost surprised for a moment. He'd forgotten about Zex's psi abilities, but then realized that it was what made Zex quite a valued asset to the Emperor. Gieger looked at Zex and smiled. "Somehow, I don't trust you, Zex. I'm sure that it will pass in time."

Gieger took in the expansive size of the transport bay. It was really quite megalithic, even to the Emperor's tastes. Huge, gothic metal arches stretched from one side to the other, dimly lit to give even more of an effect of lack of size.

He walked slowly across the black marble floor to the viewing port. As he wiped off the layers of dust that had accumulated over the past 500 years, he noticed the great view of the homeworld. It spun, ever so slowly below him, looking almost like a child's plaything.

Gieger turned to Zex. "I want this station fully operational within the hour. Is that understood?"

"Yes, master." Zex replied. He walked slowly over to a console and issued the commands to fully power up the station. Suddenly, the station lit up, section by section as Gieger peered out the viewport. What had been seemingly invisible by the dark blanket of space, suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Gieger strolled over to Zex as he checked out the operational status of the station. He turned to gaze down a long hallway. Waves upon waves of strange looking tubes.

"What are these, Zex?" He asked.

Zex turned the corner and joined Gieger. "These are the stasis tubes for the station's work force."

"My god... There are thousands of them!" Gieger exclaimed in awe.

He walked down the hall for a moment and looked more closely at a nearby tube. It was cold. He wiped away the frost, and it revealed the figure of a frozen humanoid.

There was a motion down the hall, as he noticed several robed figures began the daunting task of reviving the station's crew.

One by one, each stasis tube began to slowly slide open, awakening a being from each tube. They stirred for a moment, then gathered up into teams and began to disperse slowly throughout the station.

Gieger looked at them carefully. Not one of the workers returned a look at him. They just blindly walked off to their stations.

Gieger quickly stopped one of them and gazed into the face of the anonymous operator. It seemed to blankly stare at him, functioning almost as if he was sleepwalking.

"What's wrong with them? They look like zombies." Gieger asked as he released the worker and turned towards Zex for a reply.

Zex stopped for a moment. "They have been genetically altered to perform their tasks as efficiently as possible. They have no will of their own, just the willpower that we have given them to survive and to accomplish their purpose in life."

"So they're robots?" Gieger asked.

"No. I did not say that. They live and die, function, if you will, just as we do. They just know nothing more than what they need to know to do their respective tasks." Zex replied. He smiled at the simple explanation of it all. "It's really quite the model of efficiency, when you think about it."

This is really creepy, Gieger thought to himself as he watched the re-animated workers go on by with their programmed taskings.

He was surrounded by zombies who really didn't care who he was. They just did their job, and that's all that concerned them.

No happiness, no worries, not anything but what they were programmed to do in life. He was going to have to get some real people up here really soon. They were really giving him the creeps.

Ulrika Rastan double-checked her personal comm-pad. It was very important that this mission be executed down to the number, otherwise it would risk detection by the empire. She continued to run the numbers through her head. The main imperative of the operation was to retrieve Moravi & his team. The secondary imperative was to find out what the hell had happened down there, and bring back the data to the Sancti.

All of this had to happen as quickly as possible with minimal contact with the Empire. If they were discovered, they were to eliminate all forces with extreme prejudice, to leave no trace what-so-ever of their presence in the area. The reason was vitally critical. The Emperor had deemed the ancient capitol off-limits to all, especially the Sancti.

True enough, they had performed limited incursions into the forbidden zone before, but the results had been deemed failures, as not enough time was ever allotted to successfully retrieve anything of value.

This time, her team was going to be prepared. They had downloaded the most recent maps of the area, she knew her objective, and had the order to kill or be killed. Commander Rastan was not prone to losing a battle, and she definitely wouldn't this time.

Rastan looked up from her work for a moment to watch as the remainder of the five-man team proceeded to get fitted in their bio-armor. Fitted was not a suitable word, she thought. More like become vulcanized into it.

Each man proceeded to the armoring tanks, receiving their last minute hypoinjections by the field doc. Then they stepped into the tank, which sealed around them. If there was a time not to be claustrophobic, this was it.

The team member was instructed to breathe naturally as the tank began to fit the soldier with metal bio-appliances which would enhance muscle function to beyond super-human capabilities.

But these implements could not naturally bond without the bio-plastique. After they were held in place, the tube would blow the molten bio-plastic in thin webs around the soldiers body, which would both bond to his skin and the metal appliances.

After the spinning process was completed, the bio-armor would be cooled with a greenish gel that would help aid the stealth capabilities of the suit. Once entombed inside the bio-armor, the soldier would be almost unstoppable to all but the highest velocity of ammunition.

There was a limitation to all of this. The armor stopped the skin's ability to breathe, so once encapsulated, the soldier had thirty six hours to get back to base and get the armor removed, or he'd suffocate to death.

Strange, Ulrika thought to herself. What kept them alive was slowly killing them in the process. She quickly shook off the thought, and turned her attention back to the task at hand.

"Mastat," She called out to her second in command, noticing that the last man had undergone the bio-armor process. "Ensure that everyone performs an equipment check. We have less than 5 minutes to zulu."

Mastat, a huge mountain of a man, locked down his weapon and barked out the order to the team. He personally owed a debt of gratitude to the commander, and he was the best choice she could have ever had made for a Lieutenant.

Rastan looked around the room at her team, watching Mastat checking their equipment status.

They had been given the very best stealth power armor and the most advanced assault pulse rifles that even the Empire had not yet received from the Sancti. These newly developed rifles could spit out a stream of well over 1000 projectiles per second.

When Mastat had finished reviewing the team, Commander Rastan gave the signal, and he called the team to order. They all lined up in a row. Mastat then called them to attention and joined Rastan by her side.

"Gentlemen. We all know the objective for today's mission. We also know the price for failure. There will be no failure. Is this understood?"

"Yes, Commander!" The team echoed in unison.

"Good. Because if anyone lets my team down, I will personally see to it that they die down there."

The team did not flinch. They all knew the Commander's reputation for success, and they all knew the price of failure. It was an accepted risk. This was the moment that all their combined training turned into a well-oiled machine.

Mastat walked down the line of the team. None returned his icy stare. "Are we ready?" He barked out.

"Yes, sir!" They replied.

Mastat turned to the transporter operator, who was also a member of the team. "Commence transport on my signal, Chief!"

The team flanked into a protective triangle, with the point and the back corners locking their shoulder blasters into assault mode. There was no turning back now. Rastan and Mastat fell to the rear, and locked and loaded. Rastan nodded to Mastat, and he gave the signal to the transport chief.

The Chief manipulated his console, and a plane of blue light rose from the floor and engulfed the team. A second later, they were all gone. He checked the status of the transport, making sure the transport pulse would be undetectable to the Empire. His calculations were precise. Not a spike signature to be seen on the scopes.

The holoscreen popped up on the console, and the Chief saw that the team had been successfully transported to their objective.

He double-checked the biosignatures, and held his finger ready to pull them back the instant that their mission was completed. Now it was just a game of hurry up and wait.

Kristen was the first to stir. As she awoke, her head felt as if it was about to cave in. Every muscle in her body ached as if she had been hit by a hovercar. But she was alive, and that's all that mattered right now.

She shook herself back into shape, brushing the mucky debris from her body. She looked around, and saw nothing but utter devastation. Bits and pieces of the structure had caved in, entombing them all within the twisted metal and mud.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a foot buried within a mound of mud. She slowly dragged herself over to it and began to scoop the muck off of the body handful by handful until she uncovered the head.

It was Gregory. She looked at his chest and it appeared that he wasn't breathing.

"Rieger, you asshole! Don't you leave me stuck in this fucking hellhole," She yelled to his limp body. She reached down and scooped the mud out of his mouth, and began to give him rescue breathing. He wasn't responding.

"God damned it, Gregory! I fucking mean it! Wake the fuck up now!"

It was no use. He was gone. A flash of lightning went off, illuminating the area for a brief moment. She looked up to see what was causing it.

Above her head, a live wire was flaying around, arcing off the metal support beams of the wrecked control room. It swung back and forth in a wicked arc. She had an idea. A foolish one, but hell, it was worth a chance.

Kiersten stood up, wrestling with the pain that shot through every fiber of her body, and attempted to grab the wire. If she missed, she'd be fried in an instant. She lurched towards the wire, and missed. The smell of ozone permeated the air. Something was burning, she thought as she fell to her knees.

It was a sickening sweet smell, she thought to herself. Then she felt the heat. Her hair had caught fire from the arcing wire! She beat it out as best she could, then scooped up some mud and smeared it on the burnt hair, just to make sure it was totally out.

"There goes my good hair day!" She said to herself, slightly laughing at the self-inflicted sarcasm. The wire still buzzed around her head, arcing off the supports again. She psyched herself up for another try at it. She timed the swinging as it zapped back and forth. Gathering up all the strength that she could muster, she leapt at the wire once again.

This time, she timed it just right and grabbed hold for all that she was worth. The slack fell out of the wire, as she fell to the ground. She wrapped the wire around her arm so she could control it a little better and dragged it over to Gregory's body. Looking down at him, she wondered if she should really do this.

"Fuck it. He's dead anyway. What can it hurt?" She said as she jabbed the wire into Gregory's chest. The smell of burning flesh reached her nostrils as his body arched until she thought his spine would snap. She quickly yanked the wire back and jammed the business end into a mound of muck. It exploded in a quick arc, but the mud grounded it, and suddenly the sparks stopped.

She slowly bent over Gregory's body and put her ear to his mouth. She felt a little breath on her ear, so she looked at his face. He slowly opened his eyes and suddenly grabbed her head by the hair. He pulled her face down to meet his and began to whisper something unintelligible.

"Shhh! Catch your breath, Gregory. I can't hear you." She said. He reached out suddenly and grabbed her ear, pulling her head to his mouth and suddenly she understood completely.

"Don't ever fucking do that to me again," He whispered.

She pulled herself up, and smiled faintly. "That was for dragging me out here to the middle of nowhere." She said. She heard a noise to her far left and noticed that a few more people were beginning to wiggle themselves free from out of the muck. She looked back at Gregory.

"Don't move. I have to check on the others. I'll be right back."

Gregory tried to get up to help her, but fell back in extreme pain. "Don't worry about that. I'm not going anywhere." He said.

Kiersten ran over to a moaning mud-caked body. She quickly discovered that it was the Senator. "Senator, are you alright?" She asked.

The senator shook off the pain. "My arm is dislocated, but otherwise I feel alright."

Kiersten looked at his arm hanging loosely from his shoulder. "I think I might be able smack it back in place before it swells up."

She looked down and found a bit of loose plastic. She picked it up and handed it to the Senator.

"Here. Put this in your mouth and bite down on it." She said.

He looked at her in disbelief at what she was thinking about doing to him.

"Just do it!" She yelled.

The senator reluctantly complied. Kiersten braced the senator against the wall, grabbed him by the shoulder and smacked his arm back into the socket.

He cried out in pain, spitting out the bit of plastic to the floor.

"Are you ok?" She inquired.

"Yes, Kiersten." Replied the senator as he tried out his newly rejoined arm. "Check the others. I'll see what I can do to get us out of here."

Kiersten began to search for the others. The senator twisted his neck to get rid of the cramps. He looked down to see a strange looking device at his feet.

He picked it up and examined it. Rolling it around in his palm, he saw that the device was seemingly still active.

Then it suddenly came to him. He checked the back of his neck. He smiled weakly as he realized what the device in his hands was. His neck no longer had the control shiv in it.

He dropped the shiv into the muck and buried it with his boot. Now was his chance to alert the Empire. One of Lycanos's techs was beginning to wake up. The Senator rushed to his aid.

"Get up, man! We have to get this comm unit back on line!" He said.

The tech got to his feet and walked with the Senator over to the comm console. He pulled off an access panel and looked over the ancient circuitry. He noticed a stray wire, and began to plug it back into its proper socket.

"It looks like the rumble dislocated this wire, sir. There, I think we've got it." Replied the tech to the Senator.

"Very good. You've been very helpful." Said the Senator as he watched the console slowly spring back to life.

The senator placed his hand on the smiling tech's shoulder, as his other hand grasped a shard of metal and brought it quickly and neatly across the tech's throat.

The tech raised his hands to his throat as blood began to pour out from between his fingers. The startled tech looked at the senator, then his limp body slumped to the floor.

"Very helpful, indeed." Said the Senator as he began to initialize the comm unit.

The newly appointed Imperial Security Chief Roland Estrickt had begun to settle in his new office. The very same office as his predecessor, Gieger. He sat in the tall leather chair and swung it around to face the comm unit.

Pressing a few buttons, he brought up a display of the operational status of the Imperial forces. All of these were now at his disposal, thanks to the Emperor's swift dispatching of his old boss.

He placed his feet up on the desk. His desk. This was something that he dared not do before. But then again, why not? Now it was his desk and he could do damned well as he pleased. He leaned back, reclining the chair. Then he noticed a small smear on the black lacquer desk where his feet rested.

Shit, he thought as he brought the chair back upright and looked at the smear. It was bloody. He checked the bottom of his boot, and there it was. A chunk of flesh. Gieger's flesh, he presumed. Stuck between the tread of his left boot. He must have accidentally stepped in it in the Emperor's chamber.

He grabbed a scribe from his desk drawer and began to scrape it loose. It fell with a slight plop to the floor. It was a big chunk, and it contained a molar. Roland frowned in half-disgust. He picked up the chunk and placed it on his desktop.

It was strange, he thought to himself as he looked at the piece of flesh belonging to his dead boss. Even with Gieger gone, he still felt a strange feeling of uneasiness come over him.

It was almost as if nothing had changed since Gieger's death. His people still did their job, working hard as they always did. The only thing that had changed was the new-found respect that they all had for him. Or his new position.

The comm unit beeped insistently at him. He leaned forward, looking at the ID display and pressed the button. It was his aide. "This is Estrict. What is it?"

"Sir. We've picked up a strange energy burst in the old capitol." The aide said. "I'm putting it through to you now."

Roland waved his hand over the holo-screen, and it brought up the signature. This was not good, he thought, as he saw that it had occurred in the old computing center. "What's the status of our retrieval team?"

"We've lost contact with them since the time of the burst. We're attempting satcom detection, but something's not right with the system. It seems that all the space-based resources have been allocated to the Emperor's space needle."

"What the hell? Put me through to Zex. Now!"

"Yes sir!" The aide replied. He pushed a few buttons, the holoscreen blanked for a moment, then Zex's image appeared on the screen.

"What is it, Estrict?" Zex inquired as he momentarily looked at the screen before going back to work at his console.

"What's going on up there?" Estrict asked. "The Emperor hasn't activated the space needle for at least 500 years. Is there something I should know about?"

Zex paused from his work for a moment, and looked at Estrict. "No. The Emperor has decided that he will take up residence here for a while until things are taken care of on the surface."

Roland could sense some sort of hesitation in Zex's voice, but he continued. "I assume that you're aware of the situation in the old capitol, then."

Zex frowned for a moment, then he checked some data displays. It was true. Something was indeed happening down there. "No. We weren't aware. Send us your intel data right away. I'm sure the Emperor would like to be briefed."

"I can brief him in five minutes, Zex. After all, it's my job." Estrict replied. Besides, he'd like to see what the space needle looked like, as he'd only heard stories passed down in the academy.

Zex frowned again. "No, that will not be necessary. The Emperor doesn't wish to be disturbed at the moment. Just send me the data that your people have acquired about the situation, and I'll see that he is properly briefed."

Estrict stared at Zex in disbelief for a moment, not believing what Zex was doing. Zex knew that it was Estrict's job to personally brief the Emperor on all security matters, and Zex wasn't letting him do his job.

Zex stared back at Estrict. "Is that all, Mr. Estrict?"

"Yes." Estrict replied.

"Then I'll get back to my business up here. Zex out."

The holoscreen crackled, and the image of Zex and the space needle faded away. Estrict still couldn't believe what he had heard. Something was going on up there, and damned it, it was his job to find out what.

Estrict punched the comm button. The holoscreen came back to life, and his aide appeared.

"I want you to assemble a report for the Emperor, ASAP." Estrict commanded.

"Will you be away for long?" The aide inquired.

Estrict paused for a slight moment, thinking that if he said otherwise, it would appear to be a slight by the Emperor. Then again, he really didn't care what his people thought. It was their job to do what he asked.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. The Emperor doesn't wish to be disturbed at the moment." Estrict replied.

Estrict looked down at his desk and saw the chunk of flesh with the molar attached. A strange feeling crossed his mind. It had been bothering him during his brief conversation with Zex.

"And another thing. I have a sample that I'd like the lab to analyze. I'd like you to see to it personally."

"I'll be right there, Mr. Estrict." Said the aide.

Estrict terminated the comm link and fiddled with the molar a bit. It looked to be in quite bad condition, and he knew that Gieger

wasn't much older than him. That strange feeling was beginning to become an impatient nag.

Estrict reclined back in his chair and looked out the window at the dark clouds rolling in over the capitol city. Something was up with Zex and the Emperor. And he was going to get to the bottom of it, one way or another.

Ulrika and her extraction team materialized near the surface of the computer memory tank. The sun was coming up slowly over the horizon, and it was going to get warm really quick. In these suits, they wouldn't last long in the desert heat. Once she did a quick head count, she motioned a hand signal to Mastat, who led the team forward into the abyss.

He secured several lines to a nearby concrete pylon, and threw them over the edge. One by one, the team travelled down the lines, disappearing into the tank. Mastat clipped in, then followed them over. Ulrika pulled out her secure commpad, and checked in with mission control.

According to the display, the team was still undetected. They had fifteen minutes to accomplish their objective. Hopefully, she thought to herself, the mission data was correct for once. She clipped onto the line, and descended into the great abyss.

Mastat had formed an encroachment outside of the control room. He scanned the perimeter for movement.

"We have a few survivors." He reported.

"Good. You know what to do." Countered Ulrika.

Two members of the team stood on either side of the huge metal door and began to apply the detonator charges. Satisfied that they had been set correctly, Mastat called back his team to a safe distance and prepared to blow the door.

"On your command, Sir." He said as he looked back at Ulrika. She nodded as her men readied their weapons. From here on in, they were on their own.

A huge explosion rocked the door from its hinges, resulting in a huge dust cloud that filled the control room. By the time it took the dust to begin to settle, the team was already in the room, firing off shots at anything that registered on their motion detectors.

Kiersten had hit the mucky floor when the explosion rocked the room, but she managed to get up. She saw blurry ghosts of at least five people, going around the room and executing survivors, one by one.

She ducked behind a large console, and took a peek towards Gregory's position. He was nowhere to be seen. That's when she felt the tap on her shoulder.

"Gregory?" She called out, half relieved, as she turned around.

"Not quite. Nighty night, princess." Said the blurry figure of Mastat as he raised the gun to her face and pulled the trigger.

Kiersten fell back into a slump, and another member of the team picked her up in a fireman's carry and pressed his transport button. The two of them disappeared in a brief flash of light.

Mastat turned back to his mission and began to search out more survivors. They had orders to scan the individuals upon contact. If they were a host, they were to be exterminated on the spot, with extreme prejudice.

He gave a thumbs up signal to Ulrika, who searched the other end of the control room. She flashed a thumbs up right back, and continued her search.

She heard a quiet moan under a pile of rubble. She pulled out her ID scanner, and confirmed that it was Lycanos Moravi. She began to rip through the pile of junk, piece by piece, until she uncovered the immobile man.

Lycanos was in great pain, trapped under the heavy debris for what had seemed an eternity. When he opened his eyes upon hearing someone rescuing him from his entombed state, he was met with the vision of a ghostly woman. He raised his hands in terror as she began to scan him. Another ghost figure stood by her side, and pointed what appeared to be an assault blaster to his face.

"Please, don't shoot! I'm not one of them!" He cried out.

Ulrika examined the results of the scan. She looked over to her team member and shook her head.

"Take him out. Now." She ordered.

Lycanos tried to throw a piece of debris at the weapon to deflect the shot, but it went off, and instantly he slumped to the floor. The team member wrestled to pick up Moravi's body as best he could, then issue his transport signature. In a brief flash, they were both gone.

Ulrika looked back at her commpad. They had eliminated three of the survivors, rescued five, and there were but three more to go. One of them was Gregory Rieger.

Mastat was getting a signal from mission control. He quickly looked around as he realized to his horror that someone had activated a comm signal to the Empire.

"Commander, we have a problem." He called out into his wrist com.

Ulrika stopped her search. "What's up, Mastat?" She inquired.

"Someone's gotten off a comm message to the Empire. We're out of time, Commander." Mastat replied.

Ulrika thought to herself for a moment, then made the decision. "Abort. I repeat, abort the mission. Pull everyone out now and await my further orders."

Mastat signalled the remainder of the team. They issued their transport signals, and began to transport away one by one. Mastat checked the status, and it was just himself and the commander remaining.

"Now what?" He called out to Ulrika.

"Find and eliminate the source of the transmission. I'm going after Rieger." Ulrika countered.

That's all he needed to know. He began a search over the spectrum analyzer, and traced it to the far end of the command bay. As he rounded a large cabinet, a shot rang out over his head.

"Damned it." He said to himself. "No more Mr. nice guy."

He reached into his pack and configured a spike orb. He set the timer and then threw it to home in on the source of the shot. It screamed forward and exploded a second later. Shrapnel spikes rebounded in every direction. Mastat fell back as he took a few spikes in his shoulder.

"Shit!" He yelled as he began to pull out the short spikes from his arm. He reached down to his weapon and dropped and rolled to get a bead on his attacker. As he rolled to his feet, he finally saw him. It was an Imperial Senator. And he had a bead on Mastat as well.

Senator Liedos was losing blood quick, and he was pinned back to the communications console by the spikes from the orb. He saw the ghostly figure in front of him, and he could see that it had a weapon drawn on him as well.

"It would appear that we have a stand-off, my friend." The senator called out.

Mastat cracked his neck to relieve the pressure building up in his nerves, then pressed a button on his suit. Suddenly, he became visible as the stealth-suit revealed him to the Senator.

"Senator Liedos, I assume?" He replied.

"That's me." Replied the Senator. "What's the next move?"

Mastat looked down at his comm pad, still keeping an eye on the Senator.

"It looks as if your communicate has been received by the Empire. No doubt, they'll arrive at any minute." Mastat replied. He could see that the Senator was visibly pleased with himself.

"Well, are you gonna kill me," Inquired Liedos. "Or am I gonna kill you?"

Mastat flexed his finger on the trigger, and then threw the blaster aside into the mud.

"Actually, I'm going to kill you." Said a female voice behind the Senator. The senator turned in horror to see the business end of a blaster pointed at his skull.

"Oh, God! No!" He cried out as Ulrika pulled the trigger, spraying his brain all over Mastat and the communications console.

"There's no God where you're headed." She replied. Kicked the remainder of his head aside, and reached down to pick up a piece of the squid-like creature that had taken occupancy within the Senator's head.

"There'll be no god for you, either, you little shit." She said as she squeezed the creature until it's head burst, revealing a crystalline object. She threw the crystal to the floor, and shattered it under her boot.

"Is there any way to get the smell of these things off of you fast enough?" She asked Mastat as she threw the dead creatures body to the floor.

"You tell me," Mastat answered as he wiped the remainder of the late senator's head from his suit. "I'm still covered with that guy's brains."

He finished getting the last chunks of flesh from out of his dreadlocks as he saw a blur out of the corner of his eye. He reached for his blaster, but it was too late.

Ulrika had let her guard down for a brief moment, and Gregory Rieger had fell from the ceiling on top of her. By the time she had a chance to react, Rieger had a blaster at her throat.

"Welcome to the party, friends." He said calmly as he switched her stealth suit off. "What's such a pretty assassin like you doing way out here?" He asked her as he grabbed her into a headlock and drew a bead on the overly protective Mastat.

"You'll get them." Mastat replied. He pulled out his comm pad. "Three to beam out."

Gregory grabbed Ulrika by the breastbone on her stealthsuit as the three of them dematerialized and transported out of the memory core.

Gieger leaned slowly forward in his command chair, overlooking the expansive bridge of the late Emperor's Space Needle. From this high vantage point, he could keep an eye on all the action far below. Any information gleaned by the minions that was of any importance what-so-ever was passed up to his holoscreen.

He watched in semi-amazement at the speed that the ancient computers were able to achieve. He might even think that they were as fast, if not faster than the present day computers on the homeworld that seemed to cling by a string far below.

Zex, being his usual creepy self, slid up next to him, monitoring the data as well. Gieger hardly regarded his presence at all. He was getting used to Zex's posturing.

Gieger turned to Zex, and spoke with a quiet determination. "Zex. I'd like you to get a scrambling circuit installed on all exterior communications links as soon as possible."

"As you wish, Mr. Gieger." Zex replied.

Zex looked back at Gieger, quite puzzled, yet he fully understood the reasoning behind the request. Should anyone or anything attempt to pass through one of the station's holocom's, it would be de-atomized instantaneously. He thought that Gieger realized his vulnerability.

"Mr. Gieger." Zex said slowly. "I don't even feign to guess at what you are trying to achieve through the death of the Emperor. You know that it's not at all possible to keep up this charade indefinitely."

Gieger slowly grinned as he realized that Zex still hadn't figured it all out by now.

"Zex, my dear friend. My objective is not so self-centered as that. To the contrary, it's vastly more complicated."

Zex looked at him, as puzzled as ever. "What then, if anything, did you plan on gaining from this charade?"

Gieger slowly stood up from the chair, and gazed out the portal towards the planet. He grabbed Zex by the shoulders and pointed him towards the view.

"It's complicated, my friend, but vastly more simple than you could ever understand. Let's just say, a matter of survival of the fittest."

"A thousand years ago, during the last galactic war, or should I say genocide, the Emperor managed a last minute coup detat that managed to enslave a once brilliant race."

"I know of the history, but apparently you do not. The Damaskai were not only utterly brilliant, but they were also bloodthirsty for all that they did not control. Their methods were altogether too savage to comprehend."

"They overtly managed to take over a dozen worlds before we were able to eradicate them from the face of the galaxy." Zex replied. "In fact, all the leaders of the Damaskai were publicly executed after the war crimes trials at Galen 5."

Gieger laughed. "That's where you're wrong. The good Emperor did not eradicate our species. He just forced what remained of our most inventive leaders to go into deep hiding."

"But you're not Damaskai at all. Why help them attempt to resurge?" Zex turned to Gieger.

"On the contrary, Zex. I am." Said Gieger with a wry smile. He turned his back to Zex, and let down the collar of his shirt. Zex could see a blackish-red tendril squirming from his vertebrate. It crawled back inside his skin and wiggled deeper under the surface.

"Oh my god." Zex replied. He finally understood the dire situation that he was in.

"That's right, Zex. Now you understand. But not even your pale effigy of a god can help you now that I control the reins of this planet. I now have the ultimate power to determine the fate of the galaxy itself. You see, the Emperor is highly regarded as the figurehead of the new movement since the old war."

"It was he alone who decided the fate that has brought you to this precarious moment in time. If he had been a little more compassionate towards our dying race, we may have spared this galaxy our wrath, but not now."

"Not after the attempted eradication, or should I say genocide of our dwindling race. We had to adapt to survive. Luckily, when we discovered these creatures on Largos 9, we knew that we were on to something. Something wonderful..."

"Wonderful would not be the word of choice for me, I'm afraid." Replied Zex. "More like hideous."

Gieger laughed again. "Hideous, yes. But alas, it allowed us far greater freedom to execute our ultimate plans than we have ever dreamed. With this simple creature, we can manipulate any species, no matter how diverse or complicated. As long as it utilizes a central nervous system, we can control it to do our bidding."

"Interesting." Zex countered. Attempting to conquer whole worlds by employing an infesting, replicating parasite. I assume that you're aware that that thing will kill you eventually. Every parasite kills it's host, eventually."

"True, my friend. I don't have much time left to accomplish my mission, but it is almost done. All I have to do now is to contact the homeworld. Or they contact me."

Gregory Rieger flowed through the transport portal, still holding Ulrika by the back of her neck in a chokehold. As they materialized within the inner holds of the Black Sancti, he knew he was in trouble. Bad trouble, indeed. He looked at his body and saw lots of small red dots flowing all over his body.

Mastat and a garrison of not-so-happy Sancti troopers had a bead on him.

"If he so much as blinks, take him out." Said Mastat as he held his pulse rifle rock-steady with a bead on Rieger's forehead.

The team complied with his order. Not one soldier flinched as they jockeyed for a good shot. A quick termination shot. Rieger remained firm in his resolve. He didn't want to die here, but then again, here was as good as any where.

"Thanks for the warm welcome, but since I am not dead yet, I assume that you need something from me." Gregory quipped.

Mastat walked towards them, and locked his pulse rifle into auto mode. "Mr. Rieger. Release the commander this instant."

Gregory made a quick assessment of the situation. He slightly loosened his grip from Ulrika, but still held her by her hair.

"Mastat. I'd really love to put down the Commander, but I'd probable be correct in the assumption that your troops would cut me down where I stand."

Mastat laughed. "You would be correct sir. Drop her and we swear to kill you quick."

Gregory smiled back warmly, realizing that he was well and truly fucked. But all was not as it seemed. Gregory pulled his other hand from behind his back and produced an orb. He showed the display to Mastat, who saw that the orb was quickly counting down.

"Now I wouldn't I've been quite the asshole if I didn't bring something special to this surprise party of yours?" Gregory said.

"Withdraw now." Mastat ordered to his troops. They quickly evacuated the room, leaving them all alone to sort this problem out.

"That's much better, don't you think." Gregory quipped as he kept his thumb on the orb's trigger as he stopped the countdown. "Now, if for any reason, I release this trigger, we all go to meet our maker. Is that understood?"

Mastat shook his head in acknowledgement. He knew all too well what the effect of the trigger would accomplish in the short term. He slowly knelt down and placed his rifle on the floor. Rieger countered by finally releasing his grip on Ulrika.

"Thanks." Ulrika struggled to get a breath, but knew she couldn't escape this time. "We came to save your ass, Rieger."

"Funny. I didn't call the Sancti." Rieger replied. "Besides, I saw Mastat and the rest of your team take out everyone in the room."

"Not quite." Said Mastat. "We only exterminated the symbionts. The rest were transported back to the Sancti, safe and sound."

Rieger tightened his chokehold on Ulrika. "I don't buy it." He said.

"Then fucking check my comm pad, you asshole!" Yelled Ulrika as she struggled to catch a breath. Rieger hit her sharply in the back of her head, knocking her unconscious. Mastat began to charge his position, until he brought out a blaster and pointed it into his face.

"Put down the weapon, Mastat, or I'll put you down." Rieger ordered. Mastat quickly threw away his blaster.

"Lose the orb-pack, too."

Mastat slowly loosened the straps of the orb-pack, and it fell to the ground by his feet. Obediently, he kicked it into the corner of the room.

"Now get down face first and spread 'em." Rieger ordered. Mastat begrudgingly obliged.

Gregory knelt down over Ulrika and pulled out her pad from the breast pocket of her assault suit. He kept the spread-eagled Mastat clearly in his sights as he checked the background data on the mission.

"Damn it!" He exclaimed as he realized that they were telling the truth. He still didn't trust them, though. His past experience with the Sancti had told him otherwise, even if they had saved his brother.

But now, as far as he knew, Armand was dead, and it was up to him to figure out what to do from now on. He replaced the pad back in Ulrika's suit, and focussed his full attention on Mastat.

"Now why are you really here?" Gregory asked.

"The pad told you everything that you need to know." Mastat replied.

"Not exactly everything. What made you even care about us out here?"

Mastat began to turn his head towards Gregory. "Moravi sent us one of the creatures that your brother had found to be analyzed. We discovered that it was a genetically bioengineered parasite."

"I know that they're parasites. But what do they do?" Gregory asked.

"They control almost every aspect of the host. The crystal within appears to be its brain, sort of like the crystalline memory cells within this old computing center's memory core. Which is why we assumed you'd be here in the first place."

"How'd you know it would be us?" Gregory asked.

"Because you Rieger brothers don't seem to know any moderation when it comes to destruction. It seems to be your signature trait for the moment." Mastat half-jokingly replied. "Now can we get out of here before the real trouble begins?"

Gregory looked at Mastat. Here was at least one man he had always known to be truthful, even if he didn't want to believe it himself. "I want more answers." He said back.

"Maybe I can help you, Mr. Rieger." Came a voice from out of the blackness within the room. Sangra Dom Nictus, the head of the Black Sancti stepped forward from the darkness. A thin spotlight illuminated his face. "Nice to see you again, Nictus. Even though you make a better bastard child."

"Thanks for the warm reception, Gregory. Although I have been watching your progress for quite some time."

Gregory remained unfazed. He had known that it was very possible to track him, albeit very difficult.. "If you'd been able to track my progress, we probably wouldn't be in this very situation right now."

"I stand corrected. I meant your rag-tag group's progress in trying to figure this whole situation out. I believe that we can square things up for once."

"I'm listening." Said Gregory. "But you'd better be a lot more convincing than the last time that we met."

Nictus pulled out a datapad and pointed it at a wall. A comm channel opened up to the Empire's new security chief, Roland Estrict.

"Nictus, I assume you have something for me." Roland looked carefully, and quickly made out the image of Gregory Rieger. "And you've found one of the Rieger brothers as well."

"Yes and yes." Nictus said. "You'll be happy to know that you did the right thing in not utilizing the Empire's official channels for your DNA test. I'm calling to give you the results of that test that we performed on the molar pith that you sent us."

"And that would be?" Roland inquired.

"It is not Gieger, as you had suspected. The DNA is an enhanced strand over 1000 years old. After checking the official and unofficial records within the Senate's computer database, we discovered that it belongs to the Emperor himself."

Estrict leaned forward in his chair. A wash of horror came over his face as he realized the doublecross. "Then Gieger is alive, and the Emperor is dead?"

"From your department's detailed report on the execution of Gieger, I would say, for the time being, yes." Nictus said. "But, all is not lost."

Nictus waved his hand, and a second screen appeared. The image of the Emperor appeared, attended to by some physicians and medical personnel.

"What the hell?" Estrict inquired. "What is he doing there?"

"I have an idea of exactly what they did." Gregory stepped forward from out of the corner of the room. He looked at Estrict, then to Nictus. "You guys managed to clone the Emperor from the DNA sample that Estrict handed you on a plate."

Sangra Dom Nictus nodded. "That's quite astute of you, my dear Gregory."

"Just like my dead brother." Gregory said.

"Not exactly, Gregory. We had the prototype clone already grown for your brother, but we still needed his knowledge and experiences to fulfill the clone's intended purpose. As for Armand's apparent death - that may or may not be true. We have no way to confirm or deny his death."

Nictos walked back to a nearby data terminal, and echoed the display on the holoscreen. "Our latest recon-data has been sketchy at best. What we presume happened is that some sort of immense energy surge, not unlike a big, and I mean big transport signal took the computing core, contents and all, from the old capitol." Nictos sternly glanced at Estrict, clearly expecting a reply.

Estrict shook his head. "Nictos, you know that we don't have the capability, nor the resources to accomplish something of this caliber. Even the Empire has its limits, since the banning of technology for the masses."

Gregory shook his head in agreement. "If they'd had the capability to do this, they wouldn't have sent a team to tear the core apart, gelpac by gelpac."

"Agreed." Nictus replied, but not totally convinced. He suspected that there was still a lot that Estrict was not telling him. "Even we don't have that capability. So it must be an off-world power."

"Why they just wanted the memory gel packs, and not the computer, we do not know right now." Nictus continued. "Obviously, they don't need a computer of that type to extract the data, which would mean one thing. They have one."

Rieger smiled for a moment and pulled the retrieved gel-pac from his bag. "Gentlemen... We may still hold the upper hand in this situation. I don't know what this gel-pac contains in its memory, or even if we'll be able to access any of the data. All I know is that my brother Armand may have died to bring this back to us, and I damned well want to find out what's in it."

Kiersten slowly stirred to find herself within the cold, cramped confines of a containment tube. She'd never quite seen one of these things before, only heard about them through her work with the Senate. Why she was in one, she didn't exactly know. All she could be sure of was the assault on Lycanos's team within the old capitol's computing core.

She had seen many on the team get cut down by these strange figures that never seemed to come out of the shadows. She slowly ran her hands over her body to check for wounds that should have been there. Thankfully, there were none, but her head felt as if someone had crushed it in a vice.

She looked around to see if she could see any other survivors. As she wiped the fog from the cold plexi surface of her containment tube, she could see a few shadows of people encapsulated within nearby tubes. She looked for any sign of her captors, but there was nobody around. From what she remembered about the known security levels of the containment tubes, there really didn't have to be any.

Then her world suddenly became dark. A thick blackness began to surround her as the plexi walls of the containment tube changed from translucent to opaque in a matter of seconds. She shuddered to think of what was next. She'd always hated the darkness as a child, and to be cramped in this small tube was no longer a laughing matter.

Kiersten began flailing her arms and kicking at the walls of the tube. Screaming for help, she noticed that a gel-like fluid had begun to seep in from the bottom of the tube, rising ever so slowly.

"Let me out of here, you bastards!" She yelled as she tried quite unsuccessfully to break her way out of the tube. As she yelled louder, and kicked harder, the gel just kept rising past her waist.

She'd watched Armand choke on that oxygenated gel within the diving suit at the computing core, and that was hard enough to watch, let alone experience. Somehow, she knew that this gel wasn't here to help her. She continued to pound at the walls of the tube until the gel had reached her neck.

"You god damned bastards! Let me out of here!" She screamed as the gel began to enter her mouth. She tried to step on her tiptoes to keep the gel from reaching her nose.

Then it stopped.

She was trapped in this dark tube, standing on her toes to avoid drowning, and the sound of nothingness filled her head. It was no use screaming anymore, because nobody seemed to care whether she liked her accommodations or not.

Time began to pass slowly, as she traced her fingers around the top of the containment tube, looking for an escape hatch that she knew in her heart would not be there. But she had to try.

To lose hope in any situation was to leave yourself at the mercy of your captors. That much, she had remembered from the anti-terrorist briefings at the Senate.

Her calf muscles began to burn as she continued to keep her head above the gel. Suddenly, a bright light from a spot above her head illuminated the tube. It was so bright, she could not see.

"Are you guys gonna keep torturing me, or are you gonna let me go?" She cried out.

Still, as always, there was no reply.

A blue arc shot out from the top of the tube, stunning her for a moment. She lost consciousness and sank slowly into the gel. The arc ran all over her body, pulsating as if examining her from head to toe. It ceased, and she awoke, coughing under the gel.

She suddenly realized that she was really drowning, and her lungs began to burn as she instinctively surfaced for air. She banged her head on the top of the tube as she gasped for a breath of air.

She grabbed her head with her hands, trying to stop the pain, and cursed as she spat the black, tarry gel from her mouth. Nothing she'd ever tasted had been this awful. It was all she could do to keep from getting nauseated by the taste of the stuff.

Once the pain in her head began to subside, she continued banging on the walls of the tube, cursing anyone who might be listening in. Still, nothing happened. Finally she just gave up. There was nothing else that she could do.

She strained to keep her head above the gel when she heard the voice. A familiar voice...

"Hold on! We're releasing you, now!" The voice said.

Kiersten grabbed a deep breath of air, then tucked down into a ball, slipping down into the black gel.

The tube separated, and slid back, dumping Kiersten and the gel all over the grated floor.

She coughed up some ingested gel, and wiped it from her face. A hand reached down to grab hers. She grasped it hard and looked up at her rescuer.

"Gregory! What took you so long?" She asked.

"Well... Actually, I've been here for a while." He replied.

Kiersten looked around the chamber and saw Lycanos Moravi and the remaining members of his team.

"Then why didn't you get me out of here sooner?" Kiersten asked, biting her lip.

Gregory had no answer ready for her. Lycanos slid his hoverchair forward, and answered for him.

"We had to ensure that you weren't one of them." He replied, very unapologetically.

Kiersten looked back at him with disdain, then lunged at Gregory. "You fucking bastard! you let them do this to me? I'll kill you!"

Gregory fought her back, then kicked her feet from out from under her. She hit the deck with a hard thump. Gregory landed on top of her, shifting his position so that he sat on top of her writhing body, holding her arms down with his legs.

She struggled for a moment, then realized that she was just as helpless as she was in the containment tube. She relaxed and looked at him, waiting for an explanation. This time, he had the answers.

"I didn't do this to you, Kiersten. In fact, I may have just saved your asses." He said.

Kiersten looked around the room, and saw that assault team that had cut down their team. They were still in their stealth suits, and still very much armed.

"But why? Why did they attack us?" Kiersten asked Gregory and Lycanos.

"They weren't sure about us- whether we were working for them. If we were, they were under orders to terminate us with extreme prejudice. Luckily, they found out that we were working towards the same objective."

Kiersten's eyes quickly darted around the room, as if looking for someone.

"Where's the Senator?" She asked.

Mastaat stepped forward, holding a green crystal in his hand. "He's dead. He was one of them."

Kiersten looked up at Gregory. "Who are they?" She asked him.

"I'll explain it all to you later. For now, I need to know if you're still going to kill me?" He said.

"Kill you? I'll do more than..."

She never completed her sentence. Gregory had leaned over and taken a kiss from her. She fought it at first, and then willingly participated with a zest of her own.

Mastaat looked at Lycanos, who just shook his head and laughed. Mastaat turned around and began to walk away. Lycanos swung his hoverchair about and began to follow Mastaat.

Mastaat stopped and confronted Lycanos. "Why are you following me, Sir?"

"No need to be so confrontational, my huge friend." Lycanos lamented. "I just wanted to know when you plan on doing the same thing with Ulrika?"

Mastaat looked at Lycanos in disgust, and spit on him. "Love makes me sick."

"I see that." Lycanos said as he wiped the spit from his non-functional legs.

"Do not insult me again!" Mastaat said as he resumed his pace and left the room.

Lycanos turned his hoverchair around. Gregory and Kiersten were still entangled in a passionate embrace.

"Come on, you love birds! We've got much work to do!"

Gieger sat back in the command chair of the Space Needle and looked at the 3D hologlobe in front of him. He began to reface the globe, engineering it to a watery world, far from its present appearance.

He smiled as he realized what he'd have to do to get the massive project done. He examined the specs on the Space Needle's superweapon. It was a massive laser, capable of burning up the entire atmosphere of the planet.

But that was not his plan. He meant to use it, much like a surgical laser. Cut out the bad parts, and reshape the planet as he liked.

The comm buzzer wailed incessantly. He turned the command chair to face the holoscreen. He looked at the ID signature and smiled.

"Open the channel." He commanded. A familiar face stared back at him through the screen.

"Ahh, Mr. Estrict. How very nice to see you again." Gieger said with a wry smile.

"I had a feeling that we'd meet again. That's why I had the corpse's DNA analyzed by the Black Sancti." Roland explained.

"Oh, the Sancti is involved as well. It seems that my plans must be moved ahead a little further." Gieger replied.

"And the Emperor's death? What about that?"

Gieger turned to Estrict and leaned forward. "Yes, Roland. God is dead... And I killed him."

Roland slowly smiled, and replied. "Ah, but therein lies the problem. God is not dead."

"What do you mean?" Gieger inquired.

"He's very much alive and well... And pissed." Estrict replied, reclining in his chair.

Gieger's face washed over in horror as he began to contemplate what it was that Roland was saying. In the end, he didn't have to explain at all.

Gieger could see that the Emperor was very much alive and well, standing behind Estrict's chair. He stared coldly at Gieger.

"Mr. Gieger. Being a living god is a very hard job indeed, as you have no doubt found out." Said the Emperor.

Gieger remained in shock for a moment. He was speechless. The Black Sancti had managed to clone the Emperor from the corpse he'd left on the floor of the Emperor's chamber.

A corpse that he'd hoped could have been passed off as his own. Apparently, he'd underestimated the intuition and investigative prowess of his second in command.

"Roland. You continue to surprise me." Gieger replied. "And Emperor... Your reign is over."

Zex had slipped into the command center and wondered what all the commotion was about. He stepped behind Gieger and wiped his eyes in disbelief at what he saw. He then quickly prostrated himself before the Emperor.

Gieger looked at Zex, and then slapped him hard in the back of the head, knocking him to the floor. Zex remained down there, holding his arms over his head to protect him from further blows.

"Get the hell up, Zex!" Gieger commanded. "You seem to forget the fact that you work for me now!"

"Yes, Master Gieger." Zex slowly resumed his composure and got up off the floor. He obediently fell into his proper place at Gieger's side.

"Forgive me, Emperor. I cannot help it." Zex said to the Emperor, perhaps in apology.

"I said you work for me!" Gieger said as he pressed a button on his pad and Zex fell to the floor in extreme pain. Gieger looked to the holoscreen and noticed that the Emperor remained unaffected.

"This isn't possible." Gieger exclaimed. "If you had indeed managed to perfectly clone the Emperor, he would have been effected by Zex's natural psi-link to him. The clone may impress the masses, but it isn't a threat to me."

"Yes. In the past, that would be very much true, Mr. Gieger. But we have greater grasp on technology than you have previously known."

"You see, with the new equipment, we can filter out the characteristics that we feel are unnecessary for the function of the clone." Moravi continued.

"Why do you think that the Armand clone did not struggle very hard before he was executed before the galaxy? Don't you think that this was pretty strange behavior for your number one assassin?"

Gieger was about to reply when the holoscreen suddenly blanked out into static. He looked over to Zex, who shook his head in misunderstanding. Just as quickly as it had happened, the image reappeared and stabilized. Gieger turned to Zex and whispered into his ear. Zex stepped back and left the room. Gieger turned back to the holoscreen.

"Gentlemen. Apparently our link is unstable. I do hope that you didn't attempt to pass anyone through the holocom. I've implemented a fragmentation filter in that eventuality."

"No, Gieger. Our techs down here say that we're hitting a period of intense solar flares from the sun. That's probably all that it was. Maybe you'd like to verify our data?" Said Moravi.

"No. I think our business has ended here. Goodbye." Gieger smiled and waved back in the holocom as he terminated the communications signal. He sat back in his command chair and swung it over to the observation deck.

"What are they planning?" He thought to himself as he gazed out at the star that bathed their world in light and warmth. He noticed a small glare coming from the sun from the corner of his eye.

"Maybe it's nothing." He thought. "But better to be certain."
Gieger raised Zex on the holocom.

"Were you able to verify their hypothesis?" Gieger inquired.

"Yes sir. There were several strong solar flares that could have knocked down all communications links." Zex replied.

"Hmm. Just to make sure, put us at full alert. I don't like surprises, Zex."

"Understood, sir."

"And another thing, Zex." Gieger said.

"What would you like me to do, sir?" Zex replied.

"Test the weapon on the Assassin's guild." Commanded Gieger.

"As you wish." Answered Zex as he instantly began preparations for Gieger.

Gieger terminated the communication as the lights on the Space Needle subdued to a deep red to echo his order for a heightened security status. If anyone was to try to attack him, he'd sure as hell be ready for it.

The plan had worked... For the time being. Gregory looked out of the protective faceshield of his spacesuit at the vast expanse of space beneath him as he watched the planet slowly spinning far below him. All that kept him from floating off into space was the electromagnetic seals on his gloves and boots, as he dearly clung to life on the exterior of the Space Needle.

Nictus had managed to shadow in a second channel encrypted within the holocom transmission to Gieger within the Space Needle. Lycanos had suggested that they offset the signal slightly, so that it never entered the Space Needle, but bounced off the side of it.

It was a risky prospect indeed. If Gregory failed to materialize at just the right microsecond, he might end up bounced off the space station and back into the atmosphere of the planet.

All he hoped was that he might gain the element of surprise upon gaining access to the station's interior. An airlock would be out of the question. That would raise every alarm within the station. But then again, Lycanos had suggested another route. Cross the bow of the station, and enter through the trash disposal. Hopefully, he thought, they'd open up before his oxygen tanks exhausted.

Life is a gamble, he thought to himself. This time, he had to play all his cards in one shot.

Luckily, his magnetic boots were actually beginning to feel comfortable. As he took step after step, his stride was improving. As long as he didn't look down, or up for that matter, he'd be alright. If he wasn't in a vacuum, he might be making one hell of a din out here, clanking as the EM-pads locked in as he finalized each step. All he had to do was just get to the trash disposal.

Time seemed to pass so slowly when you had to get somewhere in a hurry. This was definitely one of those times. Gregory blinked as something flew past his visor. He reached out his gloved hand and caught the next object. It was some sort of paper. He hadn't seen something like this in years, he thought to himself. Nobody used paper anymore, at least no one but the ultra-purists. Suddenly, he looked up from his catch of the day to see a barrage of junk heading his way.

Gregory fell to the surface of the station and held on for dear life as the barrage passed by slowly, tumbling dreamily out into the vast nothingness of space.

Damn it! I'm gonna miss the trash dump. He thought, as he picked himself back up and braced himself for the clunkiest run in history. If they were dumping the station waste, he had only 30 seconds or so to make it.

He could see the massive bay doors beginning to close. It was so very close, he thought. A mere three hundred feet from his destination. On the planet, with normal gravity, it wouldn't pose a problem. But with an enviro-suit and EM-boots, it was gonna be hell. He concentrated on even, long strides as he watched the doors slowly close in upon each other.

That's when he caught the sight of a sentry out of the corner of his visor. Just great, he thought. Gieger spared no expense this time. He felt just at home.

The sentry approached him cautiously. He was wearing a combat black pneumatic EV suit aided by backpack mounted boosters. The waist-mounted blaster was going to be a problem, though.

The station was made of a self-sealing titanium/molybdenum alloy that could self-repair if hit by passing space junk. Unfortunately for Gregory, his suit did not have the same capabilities. One hit, and it was well and truly over.

Gregory ducked behind a small antenna array as he watched a few sporadic shots float past his head. He glanced up quickly to get a bearing on his attacker, and he saw him alright. Just ahead, and cocky as anything. He could almost make out a face behind that black visor.

Gregory thought quickly, but was almost out of options here. He had no weapons close at hand. They were packed in his backpack. And it took at least a minute to get the darned thing off in regular gravity.

The sentry was beginning to get better with his shots. A burst came floating in, one particle nicking his faceshield. Gregory heard a small hiss as the pinsized hole began to leak air and begin to crack.

Shit, he thought. But this was no time to bitch. Gregory looked up and saw that the sentry was reloading the particle rifle. This would be his only chance, he thought. He grabbed the antenna stalk and broke off a four-meter section. He braced his EM-boots against the base of the antenna and tucked into a ball. Holding the broken antenna like a pole, he cut the power to his boots and pushed off the base towards the stunned sentry, who dropped his rifle at the sight of this crazed juggernaut.

Gregory had kicked off just a little too awkward. He thought he could simply spear the guy as he floated by, but he'd forgotten that you can't maneuver that fast in space. He started to float past the sentry and rolled over on his back as he watched the sentry bend over to pick up his rifle.

No way! I'm not gonna lose it yet. Gregory thought as he reacted quickly and hurled the antenna at the sentry like a javelin.

The sentry began to rise and aim his weapon when the antenna caught his squarely in the chest. Gregory reached out for a handhold, but his gloved hands slipped off. He'd forgotten to re-energize the EM-pads. He flipped a switch on his forearm, and the pads arced to life.

His faceplate was beginning to crack, as he looked as the small, hairline fractures forming from the outside surface of the glass. Just what I needed now. There was no longer any more time.

He was floating past a large piece of equipment as he thrust out his hand to catch hold. His fingers ran quickly over a vent and his palm slapped into place, jerking his whole body to a stop, almost ripping his arm out of its socket. He slapped his other hand to the surface and it stuck like glue.

Thank the gods, he thought. A rain of pellets floated by him as he suddenly forgot his own problems and remembered the sentry.

Gregory gazed through the cracks of his visor to see a fine, blackish mist erupting from the chest of the impaled sentry, who'd managed to recover his rifle. The sentry was still alive, but not for long. He randomly shot off rounds from the rifle with one hand as the other tried to seal the ever widening hole in his suit.

With a final, violent jerk, he stopped shooting and threw back his arms like a crucified man. The mist had congealed around the exterior of his suit, and the hole began to spew the poor guy's innards into space as vacuum won its battle with the pressurized suit.

Gregory had just a chance to survive. If he could reach the dead sentry in time. He strode as fast as he could, his EM boots clamping to the exterior of the station with each big step.

Reaching the sentry, he grabbed the man's helmet and began unclamping it from his suit. He could see the final look of horror locked into the sentry's dying eyes as he pulled the helmet off. Now for the tricky part. Gregory had a precious few seconds to depressurize his suit, lose his failing helmet and replace it with the sentry's one. If this even worked at all.

Gregory quickly blew out the last of his breath, down until his lungs could take no more, and shut down his air supply. He slowly unclamped his helmet, letting the air escape slowly, yet quickly.

The coldness of space hit him like a slap in the face. His skin began to swell as the air escaped, exposing him to the vacuum of space. He closed his eyes as he realized that they were about to be ripped out of their sockets from the change in pressure.

When he thought he could take it no more, and his lungs were about to explode, he quickly threw his helmet off and fumbled with the sentry's helmet, hoping it would fit. He violently struggled to get it seated correctly, but then realized he was beginning to lose it, not unlike a drowning man. He calmed himself for a second... The helmet snapped into place easily. He clamped it in place and then restored his air supply.

His suit inflated once again, and it seemed that everything was once again normal. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes once again. The inside of the visor was smeared with crystallized blood, and as the suit began to warm up, the crystals began to melt, and then congeal into small blobs. That's when he noticed the pungent smell filling his suit.

"Dead people. Always smelling the place up." He thought as he resumed his trek past the helmetless sentry towards the trash port, picking the rifle out of the sentry's hands. It just may come in use if someone came looking for him as he most certainly knew they would.

Gregory finally reached the door, and shook his head. Of course, in all the excitement, it had already closed. He banged his fist in anger at the damned door, but it did no good. There simply had to be another way in without raising every alarm on the station. Not that he cared, but it was easier to fight one guy off than it was to fight a whole squad. He quickly looked around, then saw a small ship come out of warp.

The ship slowly circled the station once, then docked at a nearby docking bay. That was it, he thought as he made his way towards it. It was a chance, but even a small craft like that would have evacuation pods. Gregory knew from his training with the guild that the pods had two egresses in case one failed. Hopefully, this one was within specs.

He clamped on to the small ship, and located the evac pod on the underbelly of the craft. He ran his hands over a nearby panel marked with the egress sticker, and ripped the lid off it's hinges.

There it was. The wheel that opened the lock. With both hands, he strained with all his might to turn the small metallic wheel, and heard the pneumatic hiss of the door beginning to slowly open.

A few more turns, and the egress hatch was open just enough for him to squeeze through. He pulled himself in, and turned off the EM field. He floated for a moment as he located the hatch button on a nearby control panel inside of the pod and pressed it.

The pod came to life, and the hatch sealed closed. The emergency lights flickered to life as he activated the pressurization switch on the control panel. The small pod pressurized quickly, and he fell to the floor as the grav field engaged. Gregory smiled as he removed the helmet from his suit.

It was good to feel solid gravity again, he thought. Now he'd have no trouble getting inside the station, even if he had to shoot his way in. He took a moment to get off the cumbersome suit, and pulled the pack off the back of it. Now he had all the tools to get the job done. He donned the pack, loaded his gun, and strapped the orb bag to his thigh.

On the other side of the pod, he found the shipboard egress hatch and opened it slowly. A huge, hairy hand reached in and grabbed him by the collar.

"What the hell are you doing on my ship!" Boomed a giant of a man.

Gregory struggled to break free from his grasp, but didn't get out a squeak as he was slammed into a wall, knocking the wind out of him.

The man held fast with one hand as he threw back a fist, readying a punch. Gregory ducked quickly as he struck and narrowly missed, hitting the wall.

The pain made him drop Gregory, and he took the chance to spin around and put a shot into the base of his head with the pistol.

The man's brains splattered all over the wall, like some sort of strange contemporary art, and he fell to the floor like a limp rag doll.

Gregory holstered the pistol, and turned the guy over. "Let's just say I'm not a safety inspector for the Empire" He said as he punched the dead man in what was left of his face. "And that's for scaring the shit out of me!"

Gregory left the dead man in a lump on the floor as he noticed something digging its way out of his skull. It was one of those damned symbionts, he thought to himself. As it emerged from the man's head, Gregory caught it under his boot and pressed down until he heard a sickening pop. He released his boot, and bent down to pick up the small green crystal from it's tiny head.

"I wonder who or what you are?" He asked himself as he examined the crystal, noticing the glimmering fire burning within it. There was no time to find out. He had a job to do. He continued down the corridor, pocketing the crystal for later examination. There was urgent business at hand. He pulled his blaster, snapped the magazine back and readied a round.

"Gieger, I'm really gonna make you pay!" He said out loud as he rounded the corner. "This time, you've gone too far, and I've come to collect."

In his private office at the Sancti, Chief Roland Estrict stared out the window at the sprawling capitol city far below. He privately wondered if it was truly better that the citizens didn't have a clue what was going on in the upper echelons of power.

An urgent buzz came from the comm unit on his desk. He wandered slowly over to it and pressed the receive button. The holocom crackled to life as the image of Gieger filled the screen.

Estrict sat down and reclined in his chair.

"What can I do for you now, Mr. Gieger?" He calmly inquired. By the look on Gieger's face, He'd soon enough find out.

"Estrict, I am truly displeased with your sudden lack of respect." Gieger replied.

Estrict began fumbling with the bone fragment that had been returned from the labs. "My dear Gieger, I don't have the foggiest notion of what's troubling you."

"Let me tell you then." Gieger said. "I know that you've been in communiqué with the rebel factions to try to bring me down. You may as well have been the one to aid them in sending Gregory up here to the Space Needle to try to assassinate me. Needless to say, you have failed."

Estrict turned away for a brief moment then produced a small comm-pad. "If Gregory is indeed on the Space Needle, then he has already served his intended purpose."

"What do you mean?" Gieger inquired.

"You see, when I helped the rebels to send him to you, I also planted a little surprise of my own. A remote detonator, just big enough to blow a hole the size of the Citadel in the side of the damned thing. I think now is as good a time as any to detonate it."

Gieger looked a bit uneasy at the sudden revelation, but he soon regained his composure. "Let me tell you something, my dear friend. Go to the window for a moment."

Roland cracked a brief smile. "Of course. The display of the Space Needle detonating should be quite a sight on a clear night like this." He wandered to the window and looked towards the sky. Then he saw the burning arc of light racing towards him, burning a swathing path in it's wake, setting the Capitol on fire.

"What the hell?" He exclaimed to Gieger, as he fumbled for the comm-pad to send the detonator sequence.

"It's the primary weapon of the Space Needle, as you already may have guessed. I've decided as the newly self-proclaimed Emperor, that a new world is in order. Out with the old, in with the new, as they often say."

Estrict tried to input the code as the beam cut towards him, but it was too late. He was incinerated within a flash.

The comm terminated, as Gieger stepped towards a portal so that he could more closely observe his handiwork. The place where the Capitol city had once lain was nothing more than a massive, burning scorch mark upon the surface of the world.

He smiled as he called forth Zex to observe the last glimmer of burning embers.

"This is just the beginning, Zex." Gieger exclaimed as he pointed his finger towards the world. "All of this will be mine."

Zex turned his head from the destruction far below. A tear flowed down his grey cheek as he began to stare at the floor.

"Don't worry, Zex." Gieger said as he placed his hand on his shoulder. "I'll build a new Capitol as soon as my kind arrives to begin the systematic extermination of all life upon this planet."

Zex remained still, not knowing what Gieger was truly planning. Indeed, he was very mad, but even more evil than he had ever dreamed. If he would ever get out of this, he'd see to it that Gieger would die a thousand deaths.

A commotion was growing in the hall. Gieger could hear the sound of blasters being fired.

"Ah, that must be Gregory. Always on time, as he was trained so well by me." Said Gieger as he walked over to a protective door. He pressed the release, and it opened slowly to reveal a royal dreadnought. Gieger closely examined the shiny black surface of the robotic bio-suit.

In a more romantic age, the warriors of the Empire had donned these massive bio-suits to conquer the great worlds of the galaxy. The dreadnought stood over five meters tall, and held just one occupant. That's all it needed. It greatly amplified the actions of the operator, and moved just as a person moved, only larger than life. The mere sight of one of these machines coming your way was enough to end hostilities in any fight.

Gieger pulled the release on the rusty cockpit hatch, and climbed in. He pulled the hatch back down, and listened to the hiss of air as the cockpit sealed itself. It had been some time since he'd operated one of these things, at least since the mine wars on Cronos. Then again, it'd be like learning to walk again.

He put on his headgear, and could hear that the volley of weapons in the hall had ceased. He looked towards the doorway, waiting for the arrival of his foe. Gregory did not disappoint. He strode headstrong into the doorway, followed by several orbs that flew by him.

One by one, Gieger manipulated the dreadnought, catching them and crushing them in the massive hands of the robotic suit. Some, he merely batted away with a swift backhand, as they exploded on contact with the wall.

Gregory looked up at Gieger within the belly of the robotic suit. He was not happy.

"Looks like I've joined the party a bit late!" Gregory exclaimed as the dreadnought approached him cautiously.

"It would appear so, my friend." Gieger replied through the mike as he grabbed Gregory, and held him to the cockpit window. "It will be a pleasure to watch you die!" Gregory struggled to release himself from the dreadnought's grasp, but he was held fast. The dreadnought pulled back, and threw him at the wall. He hit it like a ton of bricks, crushing some ribs in the process.

Gregory slowly pulled himself up, trying to get to his feet as the dreadnought approached. He pulled his blaster, and managed to get off a few shots, but as he thought, they had little effect on the dreadnought's armor.

The dreadnought picked him up once again, lifted him high in the air and brought him crashing hard to the floor. Gregory fought off the pain, as he had often trained himself to do. His legs were fractured in several places, and he knew that it was just a matter of time before the dreadnought would finish him off.

The dreadnought circled his position on the floor. No doubt, Gieger was thinking of how he could inflict the most pain without killing him. A final game of cat and mouse. This time, the mouse was crippled. The dreadnought just wanted to play.

It picked Gregory up by the neck and squeezed. Gregory struggled to remain conscious. Gieger pulled him close to the cockpit so he could watch his opponent's eyes bulge from their sockets.

"Not a very pleasant way to die, my dear Gregory." Gieger remarked as Gregory struggled within his grasp. "Indeed, I thought you'd put up a better fight than this!"

Gregory struggled to get loose, but he was losing it. He began to black out, as he noticed a blur on the wall out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head before he blacked out for good to watch the blur materialize into a familiar form.

"Mastaat..." He gurgled as he passed out.

Gieger giggled wildly as he threw the limp body of Gregory to the floor. Then he noticed the nubian.

"Come play with someone your own size!" Mastat challenged. "Oh, but I like to play." Gieger exclaimed. He walked the dreadnought over towards the warrior, and brought it into a defensive stance. "Although, I must warn you. I plan on killing you very slowly."

Mastaat pulled out a long chain, and began to swing it methodically. "Bring it on, big man!"

The dreadnought charged, and Mastat managed to rope one of the arms in the chain. He quickly swung around, avoiding the grasp of the massive robotic hands, and pulled with all of his might.

The dreadnought, feeling the chain wrapped around it's wrist, grabbed the chain and swung back around. It was too late. Mastaat quickly wrapped the chain around a pylon and the momentum of the dreadnought ripped the arm from the socket. The remains of the robot went careening into the window with a dull thud.

Gieger quickly regained his composure. This guy wasn't going to be a pushover. He adjusted the controls, compensating balance from the loss of the limb.

Mastaat pulled the chain back, and began swinging it in a circle, with the severed robotic limb at the end of it. "Come get some, motherfucker!", He taunted.

Gieger, incensed at the outrage, set the dreadnought full barrel towards its foe. Mastaat countered, bringing the full weight of the severed arm careening into the cockpit.

Gieger tried to duck as the arm crashed through the cockpit window and impaled him in the chest. He looked down at it for a moment, and weakly grinned.

Mastaat ran over to Gregory as the protective glass on the dome window began to slowly splinter. He grabbed Gregory by the collar, pulled out his comm pad, and began to engage the auto-return on the transporter.

Gieger looked up to watch them dematerialize as the window blew out, pulling everything in the room, including the dreadnought out into the frigid expanse of space. He attempted to scream, but the frozen vacuum of space quickly sucked the last breath from his lungs. His eyes crystallized as his last glimpse was that of debris flying past the crippled dreadnought, and floating past the Space Needle. Gieger lost his fight for life, doomed to float through space, eternally petrified in frozen agony.

Gregory awoke slowly, floating gently within the med-tube, still feeling the pain from his encounter with Gieger and the dreadnought. He opened his eyes to find himself enswirled with various tubes, feeding him with nutrients and medication. He pushed aside a bundle of tubes and wiped off the inner-surface of the med-tube. An all too familiar face greeted him.

Kiersten smiled as she pressed the comm-button, opening up a link to the med-tube speaker.

"Glad to see you're still with us!" She said, as she motioned to the others, who began to gather around the tube. They began to clap loudly.

Gregory smiled back. "By the way I feel now, I'd probably wish that I hadn't survived."

He was right. Almost every bone in his body had been skillfully re-knitted by the staff surgeons at the Sancti. They'd basically had one hell of a time putting him back together again. He noticed the tall nubian who had rescued him in the Space Needle.

"Mastaat, Thanks for saving my ass."

Mastaat slowly grinned, baring his white teeth in a rare smile. "No problem. Just next time, don't make me have to work so hard at it."

"You looked as if you were having so much fun."

Mastaat turned around and pulled the head of Michanos Sancto from his field bag, and thrust it to the base of the med-tube.

"That's the last time that either you or I will be set up on a mission. I guarantee it." Mastaat said.

Ulrika stepped forward to address Gregory. "We have another surprise for you, Gregory. While we were on-board the Space Needle, we encountered a faint signature of an old friend of yours."

A strained look suddenly washed over Gregory's face.

'Zex?" He inquired with a puzzled look.

"No," She answered. "Zex was killed when the Space Needle blew up. It's your brother... Armand."

She pointed to his right, and he wiped the film off the side of the tank to get a better look. Sure enough, his body floated in the next med-tube.

"He was hurt quite badly in the transport of the memory gel-pacs from the old central computer. It seemed that Gieger had transported everything from the computing center, and then sent back anything bigger than a gelpac. Fortunately, his unconscious body was buried under a ton of encrusted gel-pacs, and they never knew what had been beamed aboard."

"He's alive, but barely. It'll take almost 6 months of rejuv to get him back to the way he was. Thank god he was wearing the diving suit. It's systems had kept him alive."

Gregory smiled, but inside he felt scared. He'd lost his brother once, and he didn't want it to happen again.

Kiersten began to clear everyone out of the room. Once it was cleared, she began to undress, leaving her jumpsuit in a crumpled pile at the foot of the bio-tube. She slowly climbed into the tube, and Gregory held her in a tight embrace as they kissed.

The gleaming edifice that was once the Sancti had begun to be re-built. The aerial assault by Gieger had torn up the capitol to the point that most of the city would have to be rebuilt from scratch. The new Sancti building was not a sinister black, like it's predecessor, but a gleaming ivory tower that reached towards the heavens.

By the time the first general assembly of the new Imperial Senate had convened, you would have never noticed that anything had occurred at all, besides the fact that the ongoing purge of the aliens had been going on for over two years now. A great many people who were once in great power were now gone, replaced by a more democratic regime.

Gregory Rieger sat at the right hand of the Emperor, albeit his clone. The Emperor was now simply just a figurehead. Everyone knew that the real emperor had died, but had grown to accept his clone as a knowledgeable leader. After all, he had over a thousand years of leadership experience under his belt.

Gregory scanned the chamber slowly. His team would now work for the good of the empire, and everything now had to be done in the open.

Some day soon, his brother would fully recover, and they could begin their assault on the main planet of the invaders.

Revenge is a double-edged sword, someone had once said. Paybacks were a bitch, he thought to himself. And were they ever going to pay so very dearly. But ominously he felt that nothing had really changed except the truth.