

MICHAEL'S STORY



Drew Wagar

Dedicated to Michael Brandon Holyland
15 April 2004 – 22 May 2019

Per aspera ad astra

Thanks

This story was created for the saddest of reasons, to give a young boy a measure of joy in the last days of his life.

It exists because of the dedication and love of his family, the work of video game developers, managers, community representatives, writers, voice actors and sound engineers.

And more than that, it exists because of the worldwide community of video game players, who, in their hundreds, did everything they could to help. The art assets that come with this story have all been provided by that community, along with uncounted expressions of support and sympathy.

Michael touched so many lives. The Elite Dangerous community remembers him as the fearless adventurer of the void, CMDR Michael, pilot of the fighting vessel *Melma Predatrice*.

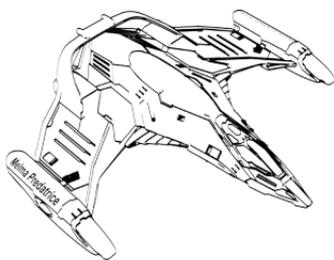
And this is his story.

Michael's Story

By Drew Wagar

In a galaxy of 400 billion stars, there is not a day that goes past without heroism, without adventure, without tragedy. Traders, Explorers and Combat pilots all know the risks of venturing out into the black. Some seek the solace of the darkness between the stars, others the credits that can be earned ferrying things from here to there. Still more take a darker path, preying on others. Most adventures go untold, lost in the chatter of a trillion souls.

But just occasionally, through chance or lucky happenstance, some stories do get told, a few make it back from the void. And thus, legends are made and heroes are remembered...



A sleek vessel stood on the docking pad at Fort Gonzalez Orbit Starport in the Phekda system, its bright white paintwork resplendent in the bright lights that illuminated the interior

of the station. Keen ship spotters would have immediately recognised the trim profile of a Saud Kruger Orca, a stylish passenger transport.

Two figures could be seen through the windows of the expansive bridge; an older man, wearing the stripes of a Captain, and a younger woman, sitting in the co-pilot's seat, gesturing at a holofac display.

'You got the cargo manifest?' the man said.

Grant Jenner was the captain and owner of the *Rising Moon*. He'd spent his career racking up the lightyears, ferrying people and cargo all across the bubble.

Carla Ross was his newest crew member, a swift replacement when his previous co-pilot had opted to retire. She was a fresh cadet, young, and rather too enthusiastic. She made him feel old. Retirement couldn't come too soon.

'Sent it to you already, Cap,' Carla replied. 'Everything is onboard, checked in and stowed.'

'You've already done the admin?'

'Course. It's easy,' she shrugged. 'Used to file the universal cartographics and the trade data for my grandpa. He liked everything neat and tidy.'

‘Fuel?’

‘Topped up the moment we landed,’ she said, primly. ‘My grandpa always said it was best to refuel the moment the docking clamps engaged, just in case you had to make a swift getaway.’

‘Your grandpa had a lot to say for himself, didn’t he?’ Grant muttered.

‘Used to fly a Cobra mk3 back in the old days, you know, before the frameshift drive? Long haul stuff back then, not like all this luxury. Real seat of the pants flying.’

‘I heard no complaints about my Orca when you signed on.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, it’s a beautiful ship, all sleek and sassy like... but all this automation, flight assist, docking assist, cruise assist... it’s not exactly exciting is it?’

‘Exciting is that last thing you want in space,’ Grant replied. ‘Trust me.’

He sighed, looking out beyond the cockpit. He could just see the darkness of space beyond the rectangular exit dock of the station. Out there was death and danger in equal measures.

Carla was still chattering away.

‘Yeah... but lasers, missiles, blasting ships to pieces...’ She sighed. ‘The stories my grandpa used to tell, sounded a lot more fun back then.’

‘Yeah?’ Grant scoffed. ‘Well you can keep it. The only good thing about the good ol’ days is that they aint now. What’s your grandpa doing these days anyway?’

‘Not much, he’s probably still in orbit about Riedquat 6, what’s left of him.’

Grant stared at her for a moment.

‘Wow... hey, I’m sorry...’

Carla shrugged.

‘He knew the risks, thought he’d make one more run. Turned out to be his last.’

‘Hence you’re here, I guess.’

‘Gotta earn some credits,’ she said. ‘Get my own ship one day. My parents hate space, think I’m nuts to follow in grandpa’s footsteps. I plan on taking on those Thargoids, give them a good kicking.’

‘What, with your amazing admin skills?’ he chuckled. ‘Bet they’ll be terrified of you.’

'I'll get a ship, one of those Vultures, or maybe an Imperial Clipper... you'll see.'

Grant laughed.

'Yeah? Well, you got a ways to go yet. Ships aint cheap to buy or run. Finish off what is left of the departure prep.'

Carla was already checking the holofac display.

'We need a little maintenance,' she said with a frown. 'Ship stats say the integrity is down twenty percent from optimal.'

'How much do they want to fix it?'

'Twenty thousand.'

Grant snorted and spluttered.

'I'm in the wrong job. Stuff that, we'll wait 'til we get to the other end. Where are we going anyway?'

'Some place called Tianve.'

'Never heard of it.'

'One of the old worlds I think,' Carla said. 'You know, part of that old trading block around Lave, Leesti and Tionisla.'

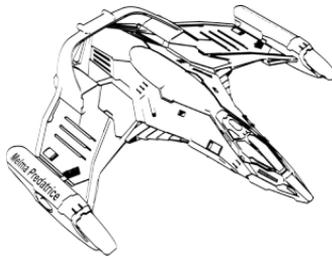
‘I don’t need a history lesson from you,’ Grant replied. ‘Who do we have on the passenger list?’

‘Just one on this run. Luxury cabin though, paying a pretty price. Some big-wig opera star I think.’

Grant read the name out.

‘Dame Hilda Gregory-Smythe,’ he muttered. ‘She sounds like a right case. Tianve’s about ten jumps from here. Get the ship ready to depart. I’d better go welcome her aboard.’

Grant stomped off the bridge, his magboots clicking on the metal flooring.



A few light-years away, two ships were racing forward. They’d just left Smith Landing in the Amber system. One was small, fierce and aggressive, twin nacelles jutting out at jaunty angles. The other had a dark-hued hull, angular and blocky. Both were blasting forward, trailing bright glowing plumes of fire. An unlikely pair – an Imperial Fighter called the *Melma Predatrice*

and the Federal Gunship *Walrus*. The smaller ship was pulling ahead, streaking through the stars.

Aboard the Imperial ship the pilot hit the boost and pointed at the speed readout as it continued to climb. He was laughing.

‘Ha ha! That’s insane!’

Commander Michael Holyland could hear his uncle’s voice over the comms link, crackling with static from the overcharged engines.

‘What have you done to that thing, Michael?’

‘Can’t keep up, eh, uncle Mat?’ Michael called back with a smile. ‘Dirty drives, G Five mods, lightened hull, what haven’t I done?’

‘Just trying to stay one step ahead of your brother, right?’

Mat’s voice was full of fondness, but Michael knew he’d be rolling his eyes.

‘Ha. Nathan’s got nothing on this,’ Michael said. ‘I reckon it’s the fastest Imperial Eagle in the whole galaxy.’

‘You’re probably right, want to throttle back so I can catch up?’ Mat replied. ‘I’m pushing 400 metres a second here and you’re leaving me in the dust.’

Michael pulled back on the throttle, and the Imperial Eagle slowed from its headlong charge.

‘You chose that Federal Gunship,’ Mat said. ‘I told you it was slow, even when you’ve beefed up the drives you’re never going gonna be proper fast, that thing is waaaay to heavy.’

‘Bet the *Walrus* can hang in a firefight longer than you can. This thing is a tank.’

‘I don’t need to hang,’ Michael said with a shrug. ‘I can pick and choose my fights. Bet I get to Elite quicker than you – and you had a head start.’

‘Yeah you probably will.’ Mat replied. ‘You heading back to the station to polish that shiny little ship of yours a bit more?’

‘No, got a mission to run. Nothing much, just some encrypted data for the Imperials.’

‘That’s what you get for having no cargo space.’

‘They’re paying, I’m flying.’

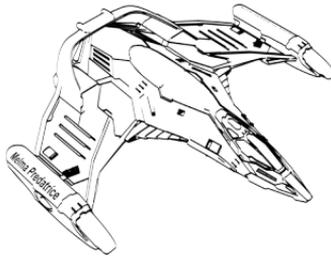
‘Yeah... just watch those Imperials,’ Mat said, his voice low. ‘Snooty lot, don’t trust ‘em myself. Sort of folks who can stab you in the back whilst shaking your hand.’

'I'll be back before you know it,' Michael replied. 'Probably beat you there given what you're flying.'

'Ha ha, very funny. Fly safe.'

'Oh seven, uncle.'

Michael pushed the throttles forward again and toggled the hyperdrive controls. The ship buzzed around him and hurled itself into the void.



Captain Grant blinked. Dame Hilda Gregory-Smythe liked to make an entrance. She had two enormous maglocked suitcases which truddled up the boarding ramp under their own power. Both were bright pink, with enormous fluffy handles. Dame Hilda was drawing even more stares, clothed as she was in an vast glittery sequined purple gown that floofed out in all directions. Grant thought she looked rather like a brown dwarf star, but declined to say so.

Dame Hilda took a look along the flanks of the *Rising Moon* before stepping aboard.

‘They sent an Imperial Interdictor for me last time,’ she huffed. ‘Gravity in the carousel don’t you know, darling. Quite the thing.’

‘This way ma’am.’

Grant led up from the boarding ramp to the passenger reception and then on to the portside cabins. The doors slid back and he gestured inside.

‘Is this my cabin?’ she intoned.

‘Yes... Ma’am... er... Ms... er... Gregory...’

‘Ma’am will do,’ she replied. ‘Dame Hilda at a stretch, but nothing more. Double barrel surnames are such a bore, inherited it from my late husband, along with oodles of cash of course.’

‘Of course,’ Grant said, stifling a cough.

Being a luxury cabin it was vast; an enormous bed, imperial style chaise-longue, desks, settees and additional rooms for toilets and showers. The windows were the main feature, huge panoramic viewports which looked out from the side of the vessel, commanding an astonishing view.

Hilda looked around it with a sniff.

‘Rather compact and bijou I see... well it will have to do. Luggage over there if you please. Beggars can’t be choosers can they?’

The luggage trundled into the cabin without supervision and stored itself neatly against the wall below the viewing window.

Grant clenched his fists, but maintained his composure.

‘Indeed, not. Fujin tea, Ma’am?’

‘You don’t have anything a little stronger?’ she asked, with a not very subtle wink.

‘Can’t serve alcohol in the dock I’m afraid,’ Grant replied, matter of fact. ‘It’s against regulations.’

‘Oh... But they’d never know would they?’ Hilda said with a smile. ‘A drop of Anlian Gin, Lavian Brandy... or what’s that other delightful little tippie? Leestian Evil Juice... now there’s a drink.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he replied. ‘We’ll be departing in the next few minutes, so please secure your flight harness immediately.’

‘Strapping me down like some old piece of cargo,’ Hilda said indignantly. ‘Well, if I must I must...’

‘Safety first, zero gravity you see. If there’s anything else you need, just let me know.’

‘Oh, I intend to, don’t you worry.’

Grant turned and rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath.

‘Oh, fabulous,’ he muttered.

He stomped back up to the bridge. Carla was already strapped into the co-pilots seat and was starting the pre-flight sequence.

‘Did I ever say I hate carrying passengers?’ he said, dropping into his own seat.

‘You did,’ she said. ‘In fact I think you do every single flight. We’ve only got one, what’s the problem?’

‘Wait ‘til you meet her, then you’ll understand,’ Grant muttered. ‘Let’s get moving. The sooner she’s off, the better.’

‘Aye, Captain.’

Carla reached over to the external comms.

‘Saud Kruger Golf Romeo Alpha, requesting permission to depart.’

The response from docking control was immediate.

‘Saud Kruger Golf Romeo Alpha. Clearance granted.’

They both watched as the ship was rotated around on the pad. The faint clunk of the docking clamps disengaging echoed through the hull. Grant applied a little upwards thrust and the *Rising Moon* was on its way.

The ship glided through the station’s docking slit and into the bright glare of Phekda’s star. Grant pushed the throttles up to full power.

‘Right, get me that hyperspace route,’ Grant snapped. ‘And no messing about with neutron stars either.’

Carla already had the charts up.

‘Fast route plotted,’ she said. ‘No need to refuel. We can do it on one tank.’

‘Good. Nice and quick. Let’s get this over with.’

Grant activated the frameshift drive and the ship’s engines charged up for the hyperspace jump, throbbing with increasing power.

‘Here we go...’

Space outside vanished, replaced with... we’ll, no one really knew. The strange dimension that ships used to traverse the void was known as ‘witch space’. Some said it was haunted, haunted by the ghosts of ships that went in... and never came out again. Strange shapes blurred past the windows, flickering points of light that might have been stars, or galaxies... or something else.

There was a dull thump from somewhere behind. The ship vibrated, as if jolting over something. A red light flickered on the console.

Carla looked up from her controls.

‘What was that?’ she said, her voice high with alarm.

‘Don’t know... maybe we should have taken that maintenance... check the...’

Grant’s command was cut off in mid-flow. Both yelled as a huge shock crushed them back into their seats. Then their bodies were flung to one side, their harnesses straining to hold them in place. The ship was rolling, spinning, lurching this way and that, totally out of control.

Warnings flashed on the holofac display before them.

Hyperspace Conduit Unstable! Frame shift drive malfunction!

Neither Grant or Carla could reach the controls; both were straining against the force that was pinning them into their pilots' chairs.

They couldn't speak. Carla was desperately trying to reach the controls, but before she could do anything the ship tumbled out of hyperspace, stars whirling around the cockpit windows, the vast sphere of an angry looking star swelling with terrifying rapidity before them.

Carla was able to jab at the controls. Heat blazed through the cabin. Sparks flew, smoke venting out around them.

Warning! Taking heat damage!

'FSD is jammed,' Carla yelled. 'Hold on, we're going to...'

Grant yanked on the controls and the *Rising Moon* nosed upwards, the burning sphere of the star fell away below. More warnings flashed up.

Thruster Malfunction!

The engines were straining, the ship creaking and groaning about them.

'We've got to set down!' Carla shouted above the rising din.

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere!’

Ahead they could see a planet. Small, rocky. Low G. Better than nothing. Carla pointed at it.

‘Aim there!’ Grant said, pointing out of the forward viewport. ‘We can set down and see if...’

But the ship refused to steady. Grant and Carla both struggled with the controls, trying to keep the *Rising Moon* on course for the planet. Something was wrong with the frameshift drive, the ship bucking and yawing no matter what they did. The planet grew before them.

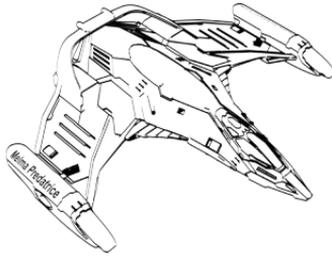
A glowing arc shone around the planet, it had been impossible to see as they approached, now it was right in their path. Grant yanked on the controls.

‘Rings!’ Grant yelled.

It was too late.

Proximity alert! Too close! Dropping!

With another horrifying shock, the *Rising Star* hurtled into the rings of a forlorn rocky ice world, spinning and tumbling end over



Michael's Imperial Eagle dropped out of witchspace. He angled the ship to refuel, circling the star at a discreet distance. The fuel scoop activated, sucking plasma down greedily and turning it into fuel. He looked at the long range scanners out of idle curiosity.

'Never hurts to have a look around,' Michael said to himself.

It was a pretty dull system. The star obviously, a couple of asteroid belts, half a dozen rocky ice-worlds. So far, so ordinary.

One other ship showed up on the long range scanner.

'Let's see what you're about.'

He locked the scanners on it, seeing the familiar shape of an Orca passenger vessel. He frowned.

'What are you doing?'

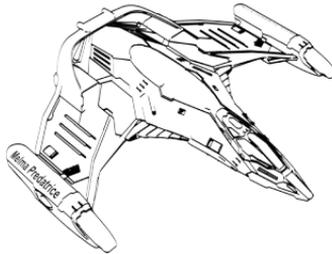
The Orca was spinning, tumbling end over end. It was close to one of the planets. As he watched the scanner lost contact.

His console beeped and a message appeared.

Fuel Scooping Complete.

‘The ship must have dropped out of frameshift... better just check that out.’

He turned his ship around, thrusting away from the star and headed towards the planet.



Another vessel was hiding in the system, equipment shut down, its signature cold and invisible against the blackness of space. Its hull was painted with an aggressive ‘shark-tooth’ livery, the panels scored with laser blast wounds from many encounters.

A Python.

And not just any Python. A pirate's Python, heavily engineered for the task of plundering other ships. This one had a fearsome reputation. Few escaped from under the guns of the *Falchion*.

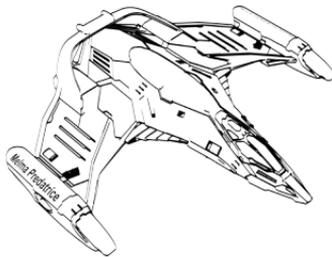
Like its reptile name snake, it waited for prey to wander close... then it struck... and killed.

Its pilot had managed a scan of the Orca before it dropped out of range. A passenger liner, potentially stocked up with all sorts of interesting cargo.

And once Jezebel Shim made up her mind, nothing could change it.

She licked her lips.

'Harvest time.'



'What in space kind of luxury transportation do you call this?'

Dame Hilda had somehow found her way onto the bridge of the *Rising Moon*.

‘Ma’am... if you would just...’ Grant began.

‘Don’t you dare Ma’am me!’ Hilda replied. ‘I paid good money for a safe and pleasant trip, not to get shaken around like a cocktail in cheap bar. Explain yourself.’

‘We’ve suffered a breakdown...’

‘You’ve suffered a breakdown?’ she cried. ‘What about me? The stress! I have a concert to give. I’m the leading lady you know, they can’t start the show without me, you do realise what’s riding on this don’t you? Tickets have been sold, Captain. Bums on seats! People are expecting a show at the Tianve Extravaganza and I have to be there. And how long will we be delayed?’

‘We’re trying to work out what’s happened...’ Grant said, wearily.

‘Then, hurry up then!’

Grant turned to Carla. She looked pale.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘Something blew on the hull, Captain,’ Carla replied. ‘Can’t see what, external cameras aren’t working either. Engines are offline and life support is looking flaky too, but the AFMU can take care of that. Hull integrity is down to forty percent and we’ve got a major fuel leak... no pressure in the tank. Orbit isn’t stable either, we’re proper stuck.’

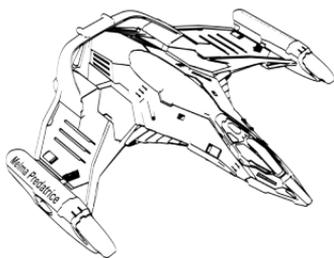
Grant swallowed. Hilda leaned in.

‘So...?’ She demanded. ‘Are we going to be late?’

‘Ma’am, right now, we’re going to be lucky to get there at all,’ Grant said.

Grant turned back to Carla.

‘Send out a distress call,’ he said. ‘Let’s hope someone is listening.’



The comms panel in Michael's ship lit up with a contact. He turned his head and the holofac display showed him the detail. He squinted at it, reading the text aloud to himself.

'Orca class ship, *Rising Moon*, distress call.'

His Imperial Eagle was heading towards the planet where the signal was coming from. He pushed the throttles up as far as he dared, watching the indicator rise to the top of the blue zone.

'No loop of shame for me...' he chuckled.

He toggled the audio to listen. A woman's voice sounded over the speaker, high-pitched and alarmed.

'To anyone in this system,' the woman said. 'This is Carla Ross of the Orca class vessel *Rising Moon*, we have major damage and are unable to navigate. Engines are dead, life support compromised, orbit decaying. Please assist urgently! I repeat... to anyone in this system...'

Michael activated the comms unit, ready to respond. As he did so, static crashed across the display.

'Orca *Rising Moon*,' he called into the voicecom. 'This is Commander Michael of the *Melma Predatrice*, acknowledging your call and I'm on my way. Do you copy?'

The only answer was static.

‘Orca *Rising Moon*, do you copy?’ he said, trying again.

Still no answer. The static buzzed and hissed.

‘That’s a jamming signal...’

Then another voice broke out across the communication link. A woman’s voice, slow and sure.

‘This is Commander Jezebel Shim of the Python class vessel *Falchion*. I have heard your call and I am on my way. I will... deal with your situation. Make no further calls.’

Frowning, Michael searched for the source of the new transmission.

‘Not showing up on scanners,’ he murmured. ‘That’s just... ah... there it is.’

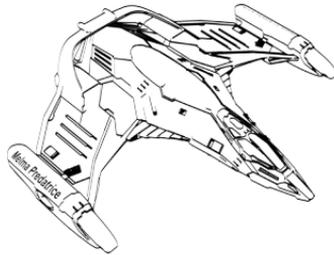
The Python was already between him and the Orca. Its scanner readout was pale and difficult to see. Michael managed a lock. The news was not good.

‘Python – *Falchion*,’ he whispered to himself, before his voice rose in alarm. ‘Jezebel Shim. Elite. Wanted. A pirate!’

He did the calculations in his head. A Python vs an Imperial Eagle. The Python was a big mid-range ship. He knew the stats. Five hardpoints, three of them large. Likely engineered in a hull or shield tank configuration. An ability to mass-lock anything up to the biggest ships. An Elite pilot too.

Impossible odds.

‘I can’t win that, there’s no way...’



Jezebel Shim couldn't believe her luck as she dropped the *Falchion* into the rings. The Orca was drifting, a sparkling wake of frozen fuel behind it. The ship was dead in the water.

The comms crackled. The woman's voice again.

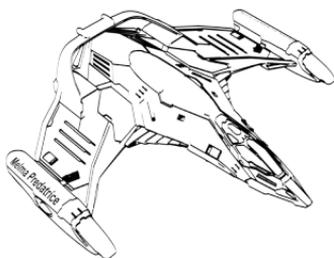
‘Thank you so much for coming to our aid,’ she said. ‘We need a hull repair and refuel. Can you assist?’

Jezebel didn't respond, but toggled the manifest scanner aboard the *Falchion* to confirm the contents of the other ship's cargo hold.

'Thirty tonnes of luxury goods,' she said to herself. 'A good day's work.'

She switched comms over to wideband.

'First, let us discuss payment. Drop your cargo and I will ensure that help is sent to you.'



Captain Grant had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

'What did she say?' he asked

Carla was looking at him.

'She wants us to dump the cargo. She's just scanned us.'

'Scan her back.'

Carla did so, whispering her report back to the Captain.

‘An Elite pilot...’ Carla said, her voice rising in alarm. ‘Wanted! She’s a pirate!’

‘We’ve got to do what she says,’ Grant said. ‘That ship’s a war machine...’

Grant was pushed aside as Hilda, in her purple gowned glory, pushed her way forward.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ Hilda snapped. ‘Those are my sets, costumes and jewelry. I’ll not have some jumped up floozie making demands just because we’re in a tight spot. Never give in to bullies! Didn’t they teach you that in simschool?’

Before anyone could stop her Hilda had grabbed the commlink.

‘Now listen here, you space prima donna.’ Her voice was loud and theatric. ‘I am Dame Hilda Gregory-Smythe and you will get word to the appropriate authorities on my behalf right this minute. Otherwise you will be held fully responsible for ruining my premiere at the Tianve Extravaganza, what say you to that?’

The answer was immediate.

The ship crashed and shuddered about them. The Python had opened fire. Beam lasers skittered across the shields of the *Rising Moon*.

Carla and Grant watched as the shields flared, struggling to repel the fierce fire power.

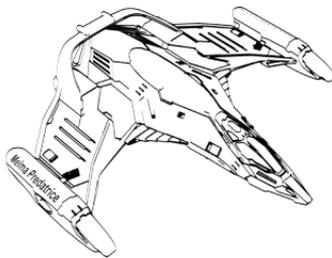
The laser fire stopped.

The comms crackled.

‘Drop your cargo,’ Jezebel said, her voice crackling across the link. ‘Or I will destroy your ship and all aboard.’

Carla punched the comms again.

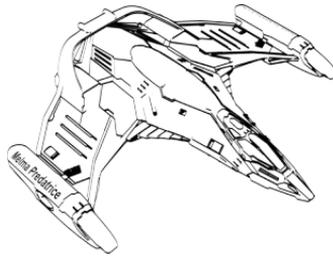
‘Help us!’ she cried. ‘We’re under attack!’



Many question the value of the combat ranking system enforced by the Pilots Federation. Some say it rewards violence and destruction, others that it's just a measure of survival. Can you

measure bravery? Making the right choice? Fighting on behalf of others when you could turn away? What of honour and courage?

The greatest Commanders are known, not by their rank, but by their deeds...



Michael's hand was clenched on the controls of his ship.

The comms crackled. The woman's voice again. He heard panic and alarm.

'Help us!' she cried. 'We're under attack!'

She was desperate, scared. Without thinking further he turned his ship about.

'Not having that,' he said, wrenching the flight controls around. 'Not on my watch.'

The Imperial Courier dropped out of frameshift drive into the ring system. Before him he could see the Orca and the Python. As he approached, the Python opened fire on the defenceless vessel.

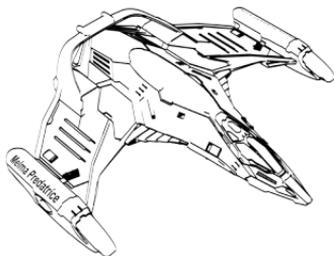
'It's crippled,' he snapped. 'That's not a fair fight!'

He adjusted his ships power configuration, putting all the available energy into the weapons before deploying them. A beam laser deployed on the hull-top amidships, supported by two multicannons hung beneath the fuselage.

He squeezed the triggers. He shouted out of the name of his ship as a battle cry.

'MEL MA – PRED EE TREE SAY!'

Laser fire and multi-cannon rounds ripped into the Python's shields.



Carla was pointing out of the *Rising Moon's* cockpit windows.

‘Look, another ship!’

As they watched a small vessel rapidly closed the distance. A beam of laser fire arced around, splashing across the Python’s shields causing them to flare. Multi-cannon tracer fire flickered in the darkness.

Grant squinted through the windows.

‘He doesn’t stand a chance,’ he said. ‘That’s just an Eagle, he’ll be blown to pieces. Whoever that is space crazy.’

‘We’ve got to help him,’ Carla protested. ‘Together...’

Grant was shaking his head.

‘Best thing for us to do is do what the pirate wants, dump the cargo.’

Hilda glared at him.

‘Uh uh,’ she said. ‘That’s mine, not yours. Let’s give that hoity toity madam the what for. You got any guns on this ship?’

Grant looked terrified.

‘Just a couple of mid-range pulse lasers,’ he stuttered. ‘Won’t do a thing to that ship. We can’t even move.’

Carla leaned forward.

'Better than nothing, he said with a grin. 'And we can turn.'

Grant didn't move. Hilda pushed him out of the way.

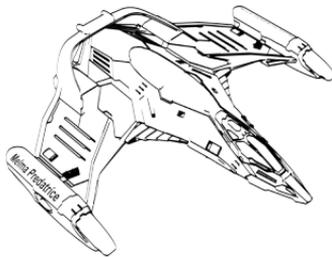
'Come on sister,' the older woman said. 'Let's do some pew-pew!'

Grant staggered back, furious.

'This is my ship,' he said. 'You can't...'

Hilda gave him a stare.

'Sit down and belt up. We're saving your life, have the good grace to be grateful!'



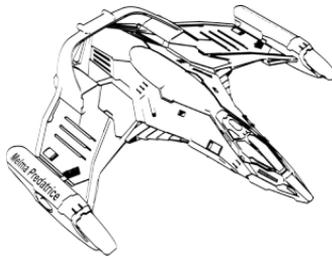
Michael saw the Python's drives flare, the ship peeled up out of the ring system with a speed that belied its size.

‘Yep,’ he muttered. ‘Definitely engineered.’

He slotted in behind it again, the beam laser blistering into the bigger ship’s shields. There was little point in wasting more of the multi-cannon ammo right now. With its shields up, the Python wasn’t even going to notice.

The nimble Imperial Eagle was able to stay in the shadow of the bigger ship, continuing to fire its beam laser repeatedly. The scanner was showing that the shields were slowing eroding away.

‘Only a matter of time,’ he said. ‘Maybe this won’t be so difficult after all...’



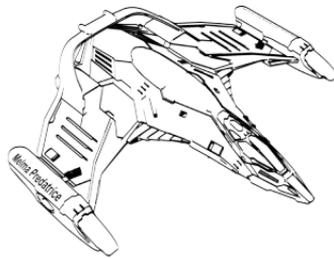
The laser strikes had come out of nowhere. Jezebel looked at the scanner only to see that another ship had appeared. It flashed red, indicating it was hostile. She triggered the drives and locked the scanner on target...

And laughed.

‘An Imperial Eagle?’ she said. ‘And just Expert rank? Well, Commander Michael. We will see what you can do. Let us play.’

The pilot of the Eagle had closed the range, slotting in behind, firing away with his tiny little weapon.

‘Come closer,’ she whispered. ‘Yes... that’s it. And... now!’



The Python’s drives abruptly shut down and the ship went into reverse. Michael pulled his ship into a steep climb away, desperate to avoid a devastating collision. Laser fire flashed around the cockpit, one beam striking a glancing blow. Sparks flickered around his view.

‘One third of my shields gone in one hit!’ he shouted in dismay.

The comms crackled. It was the captain of the Python.

‘Run away little boy,’ her voice called. ‘This is your only warning. Leave now, or die.’

Michael thumbed the communicator, turning his ship back down towards the rings.

‘I’m here to rescue that ship,’ he snapped back. ‘You leave and I’ll let you live.’

‘An empty threat,’ she replied. ‘You know it and I know it. Very well. Consider your death warrant signed.’

More laser fire, excruciatingly close.

‘Got to think,’ Michael said, under his breath. ‘I’m outgunned here, use my strengths!’

He pushed the throttles forward, pushing all power into the engines. The little Eagle blasted away down into the rings, the Python unable to keep pace.

Michael killed the drives and flipped off the flight assist computers, his ship drifted in shadows between the vast rocks of the ring. They were all about him, silently spinning, a strange place full of hiding places and shifting safety.

He nudged the thrusters, tucking the Eagle in close to one of the rocks. With luck his heat signature would be masked.

'Hide and seek,' he whispered.

The Python had driven into the ring system. He could see it ahead, cautiously nosing its way forward. In here, its manoeuvrability would be limited and a rock could finish off a ship far more effectively than a laser.

He fired up the drives again, diverting power to the lasers. He unloaded almost a full distributor load of laser barrage into the Python's shields before it was able to elude him. By the time it turned again, he was hidden once more.

'Hit and run,' he said with a grin.

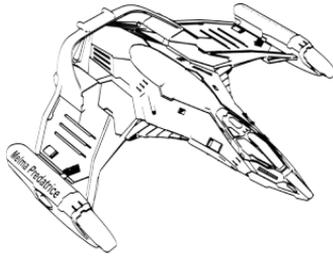
He managed it two more times before retreating behind the safety of the rocks once more.

The comms crackled into life.

'Very clever little boy,' Jezebel's said. 'But this is the coward's way...'

'She can't find me,' Michael said to himself. 'But I can't weaken her shields enough. All she has to do is sit there full power to shields... got to be more daring...'

He toggled the flight assist computers back on and chased after the Python.

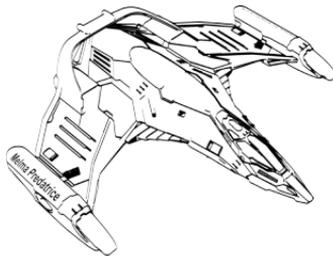


The Eagle's maddening attack resumed again. Jezebel tried to bring the Python around fast enough to get a bead on the smaller ship, but it was too quick, too agile. It ducked aside as the Python lurched from pitch into roll and then into yaw. It was too dangerous to use full thrusters in the rock field.

The Eagle pilot was achieving nothing, Jezebel's shields recharged between each attack. But it was giving the Orca time to make repairs. Perhaps that was the idea.

'Stalemate,' she mused. 'Time to change the board.'

Jezebel pushed the Python onwards and back out of the rings, heading back towards the stricken Orca.



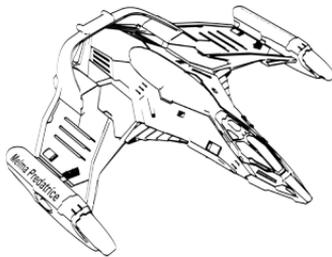
Carla and Hilda had watched the fight from the bridge of the Orca. Both duelling ships had vanished into the rings. Brief flashes of laser fire had given away their position before the Python had re-merged.

‘She’s coming back this way!’ Carla yelled.

Carla had managed to wrench the *Rising Moon* around. The ship was pitifully slow without its main engines, but the orientation thrusters were working. The two pulse weapons were gimbaled though, compensating a little for the lack of agility.

Hilda grinned.

‘The second act,’ she said. ‘Come back this way, we have a little surprise for you...’



Michael had no choice but to pursue. The Python was calling the shots.

‘I have speed and agility,’ he said. ‘There must be a way to use them here... just need... wait a minute!’

The Python had got within range of the Orca again, but the Orca responded with its own weapons. Michael could see twin pulse lasers pounding out in staccato beats from the lower hull. The Python veered aside, having assumed its prey was crippled, its shields flaring in response.

Michael saw his chance.

‘Computer, flight assist off,’ he snapped. ‘All power to weapons and engines!’

The Eagle rolled and yawed, its engines flaring. Michael tucked it into a rolling loop, pummeling the Python with continuous fire, pounding it with unrelenting energy. Every time the Python veered away to deal with him, he brought the fight back and the Orca swung around and brought its own firepower to bear.

The constant motion was making him feel dizzy, the star-field whirling outside. He couldn’t keep this up forever...

‘One more blast of fire...’

He triggered the beam laser again, watching as the temperature soared.

Warning! Taking heat damage!

But that was followed with

Target shields failed.

He grinned, grabbing the second trigger. The multi-cannons roared, spitting their incendiary wrath into the hull of the Python. Sparks flew.

The Python's had clearly had enough. Michael saw it trigger its boost, engines flaring bright as it roared away, trying to get far enough away to trigger its frameshift drive. It was heading through the rings, angling away from the planet.

Frameshift charged detected.

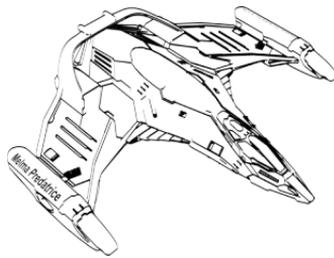
'No you don't...' he snarled.

He activated the scanner, clicked through the subsystems and selected the drives, firing the Eagle's boost as he did so. The Python grew large in the forward display as the Eagle swept up from behind.

Michael's fingers tightened on the triggers one more time.

Laser beams and multi-cannon fire converged on target. Even as it ran the Python's portside engine received the devastating barrage.

It shattered under the attack, spewing burning engine components in its wake and throwing the ship into an uncontrolled spin. The starboard engine was still at full throttle...



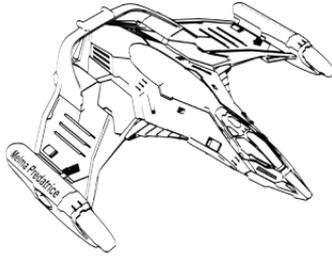
Elite combaters know when to run, even if it is humiliating. That's why they're still alive. The Eagle was too elusive, too fast.

Jezebel decided enough was enough. Without shields hull repairs and equipment damage costs would soon exceed any profit she might make.

She turned the Python, aimed it through the rings and activated the frameshift drive.

There was bang, a thump followed by a roar of noise. Alarms blared in the cockpit. The ship yawed abruptly to one side. Stars whirled outside.

A rock, close.



Michael saw the Python hit the rock. The impact crushed it instantly, the wreckage spinning away before disintegrating in a cataclysmic explosion. Debris flashed in the void and then was lost to the darkness.

Michael caught his breath, whispering.

'Killed it.'

He gasped, his voice louder.

'Killed it!' he cried. 'Killed it good!'

He turned his ship back to towards the Orca, pulling alongside. The comms flickered into life, he heard the voice of the woman who'd sent the distress call.

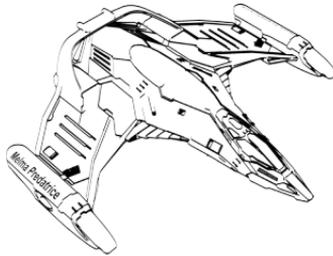
'You did it!' Carla shouted. 'That was amazing! Thank you so much, we owe you our lives!'

Michael shrugged.

‘You did your bit too,’ he replied. ‘That trick with the pulse lasers. Teamwork.’

‘Nice work kiddo.’ This time it was another woman’s voice, older and deeper. ‘Just shows what you can do when folks pull together, eh?’

Mich



System authority vessels eventually came to the aide of the *Rising Moon*, fixing the hull and topping up the fuel tanks. The Imperial Eagle stayed on watch until they came and then left, wagglng its wings in farewell. Carla looked back at Grant. He was slumped against the rear of the bridge.

‘You all right, Captain?’ Carla asked.

‘No,’ Grant replied. ‘Had enough of this. The black isn’t the place for me no more. It’s a place for the young. I want a nice beach somewhere planetside.’

Carla frowned.

'You scaring me now, Captain...'

'Gonna sell up. Sorry, girl. That's it. You're out of a job.'

'But I need this job. You know I need it! We can do this, look what we just came through!'

Grant shook his head, stood up and walked out of the bridge.

Carla sank into the co-pilot's chair, her head in her hands.

'Hey honey.'

Carla looked up at Hilda.

'I need a pilot.'

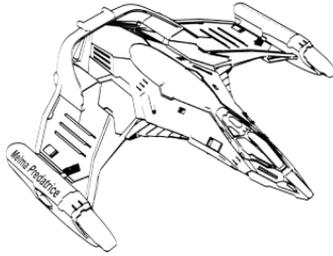
'But I haven't got a ship.'

Hilda flicked a finger towards the holofac system. Carla blinked in surprise.

Dame Hilda Gregory-Smythe. Credit Balance: 1.9B CR.

Hilda winked.

‘How about I buy you one?’ she asked. ‘What do y’fancy? I’ll even give you a thousand credits to get you started. Kind of interested to see how you get on.’



The Imperial Eagle flickered back into existence in the Amber system, drawing quickly towards Smith’s Landing station.

Michael flipped up the comms panel and requested docking clearance, angling his ship towards the spinning Coriolis station.

The comms continued to buzz for attention. Michael accepted the connection.

‘Hey Uncle,’ he said.

His Uncle’s voice cracked back across the link.

‘Get lost or something?’

‘Well, you know, did a little sightseeing along the way,’ Michael replied. ‘Tested out the ship, all seems good.’

'Uh-huh.'

'Do you like opera?'

'What?'

'I said do you like opera?' Michael repeated, trying to keep the grin off his face.

'I don't know, why?'

'Blagged us a couple of tickets to some gig in Tianve next week, if you fancy it.'

There was a long pause.

'What have you been doing out there?'

Michael grinned.

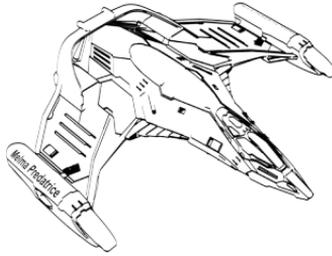
'Just doing what I do.'

There was one more comms message to review. He opened it up. It was a symbol, a stylised pair of wings familiar to every pilot out there in the black. The text below was short and to the point.

Good going, Commander. The Pilots Federation recognises your impressive number of registered victories and your combat rank is now 'Master'.

Michael nodded at the display.

‘Getting there.’



A great many commanders are ‘Dangerous’, a few more have earned the classification ‘Deadly’. Some even achieve the accolade of ‘Elite’.

But every commander has to blaze their own trail and find their own path. Some can be satisfied that they made a difference, made a tough choice, persevered when the odds were against them and the situation bleak.

Bravery and courage, unbowed in the face of overwhelming odds.

That’s the way of the truly Elite.

That’s Michael’s story.