

## The Virtuous Misfortune

Nothing good ever comes out contracts worked out in a bar. Nothing ever good. I had ample time to reflect this in the police cell, of course. The first time in the cells in at least a year, I mused.

It had all started innocently enough. Well, innocent by our standards. We'd docked our battered Python-class cruiser, "Virtuous" (named with no hint of irony, I swear) a few days ago. It hadn't been a particularly easy run, we had been harassed by bounty hunters who had left some nice new scorch marks in the paintwork. I decided that we should all have a day off, and dismissed the crew.

The crew. A motley one if I'd ever seen one. Crewing a ship like mine, nibbling at the edges of legality, wasn't exactly most people's idea of fine work, especially since as a direct result all of us had frequently seen the inside of police cells. We had a reputation. Some people even used that not unfortunate word "pirate" to describe us. We weren't pirates - honestly (well, not much, we hadn't shot at a trader in at least a month and anyway he had started it). But let's say, the words "finders keepers" didn't exactly wash well with GalCop. The crew was of course the quality you'd expect from a low-rent operation like ours. We had at least become fond of each other. It made my job a lot easier if I wasn't having to arbitrate their arguments, too.

The crew. Just five of us rattling around on a Python class cruiser. There was Jamie, hopelessly vain – when not supervising the various droids that ran errands around our ship, he could be found staring at a mirror, trying to look pretty. Why bother, I thought – The Virtuous couldn't care less about how its crew looked. Then the engineer, Kim, a middle aged woman who probably could have done with a bit of vanity. On an old crate like ours, she was normally up to her elbows in various lubricants, or with coils of fibre optic cables over her shoulders. She was strangely attractive despite being just a tad overweight and having layers of grime caked under her fingernails. Mike on the other hand was an intense young man, built like a whippet. His fine skills as a weapons officer had kept us alive for the past two years. Then Aaron. It had been Aaron who had talked me into buying The Virtuous. I'd met him five years ago when I'd originally arrived in this galaxy. I could swear he had some feline in his ancestry, he seemed to have so many feline traits. They had kept us out of trouble (mostly) so I was glad of it. We had quickly become friends after meeting in some forgotten Anarchy, and eventually bought our first two-crew ship together to try to start a business that'd make a reasonable profit . . . and somehow had slid into the murky boundaries of pushing the edges of the law without really realising it. He was a much better pilot than me, so he always took the helm.

Then myself. Commander Damon Winston. Nobody would ever believe my story if I told it so I'm not going to. I tried to tell them about mis-jumps when I had arrived. They didn't believe me. Instead they fined me for having a ship with illegal modifications, and then confiscated my ship – which I discovered was one of a kind in this region of space. I found paying the fine rather difficult with no

records of my own existence, nor a credit rating to my name. They fined me again for not having a proper identity when I complained. It left me a bit bitter about GalCop. Well, it could have been worse. Local folklore has it that hyperspace problems often end up turning you inside out.

Our most recent dubious task had started out in Sorezaqu, a desperate system even by our standards. The bar was grimy – that was a given – and the space station filled with disrepute. The quality of the beer wasn't up to much either. I wasn't expecting we'd find work here, I was just expecting to leave after the crew had recovered from their hang-overs, and head over to the wealthy system Texeare with a cargo of anything cheap that was likely to fetch a good price on a wealthy planet. I was only half way through my fourth beer when Aaron began tugging at my sleeve.

"Hey, we've got a job!" he yelled over the racket of the bar.

"A job? Here?" I yelled back.

"Yes, a good one!"

I reluctantly disengaged myself from the good looking woman I was trying to make some headway with. I made some vague apology, but right now with the state of the ship, money for once took precedence over lust. I followed Aaron into another dark corner of the bar. Three human strangers were seated around a table, along with the rest of my crew. They struck me as being very well dressed for this corner of Sorezaqu – their clothing had no tears at all, and hardly any grease. The three men watched me poker-faced as I arrived.

"Captain Winston!" yelled the first man over the din.

"Can we go somewhere a bit quieter?" I shouted back.

Two minutes later, we found ourselves in what passed for the gents toilets. Quieter it may have been, well, if the occasional sound of vomiting in one of the stalls didn't distract you. The burliest man of the three kicked the door open, and dragged a woebegone creature from within, ejecting it out back into the bar. He then blocked the door with his considerable bulk.

"Captain, we have a job we can't do ourselves. It's an easy one, but it needs a big ship like yours," the first man started.

"Wait – I don't even know who you are," I stated.

"Oh sorry, I'm Clare Clark, boss of Clark Trading," he said, "and these are my two associates, Rafe and Henry," he said indicating the other two. They just grunted. I took that as a friendly greeting, especially from Rafe. I'm not small but he had to be twice my size.

"Isn't Clare a ..." I began.

"Damon..." hissed Kim, giving me dagger eyes, having anticipated my usual deal breaking saying-the-wrong-thing-at-the-wrong-time move I'm so famous for.

"Sorry. Your proposition."

"Well, last week, we lost a Python in Texeare, and regrettably one of the ship's crew as well. The cargo is rather valuable and we'd like someone with the right equipment to unload it. Kim was explaining you have all the ship to ship transfer droids needed, as well as an extended cargo bay, and that makes you the best candidate we've seen to do this for us. We'll of course make it worth

your while."

"What sort of shape is the ship in?"

"According to the crew it's still intact. I'm afraid we have no idea whether the hull is like a colander or whether it'll hold in air, let alone whether you can hook power up to it and get gravity back."

"How worthwhile?"

"How about six thousand?"

"Only six? We could make that on a trading run if we filled our holds without any risky ship to ship transfers from some wreck," I counted. "No less than ten". Clare winced.

"Nine"

"Ten"

"Nine and a half?"

"Ten"

Clare sucked in the breath through his teeth. My crew watched me standing there with my usual arms folded I'm not gonna budge attitude.

"We have to make a profit too," Clare complained.

"If you don't get your cargo back you make a big loss. Even if my price makes it a small loss, it's still better than a big one. It's a risky job especially if the hull is so compromised we can't turn the grav back on. Then we're sitting ducks for any bounty hunter, pirate or cop to come and pick off". I realised I'd made a mistake by adding the word 'cop' to that sentence.

"Cop?" Clare exclaimed. "You know if you're wanted, you can hardly bargain the price up, because - "

"Perish the thought," I responded quickly. I didn't want to explore that avenue of conversation. "But the Police in Texeare often shoot first and ask questions later, and it will look an awful lot like we're looting the wreck, because I'm sure this cargo is a little bit dodgy and you won't be able to tell the Police that we're legitimately recovering it," I said with a wry smile.

Clare paused for twenty seconds or so.

"OK, I'll give you ten."

"Half now," I said triumphantly.

"What kind of a sucker do you think I am? Ten when you bring the cargo to the station at Texeare and not before."

I sighed.

"OK, deal."

I held out my hand. Clare looked at it as if it was a fish.

"Shake on it?"

"What?"

Aaron chimed in. "It's a human custom, apparently."

"Never mind," I said.

With some relief, we left the gents. The smell was getting to us all.

I briefly scanned the room for the woman I'd been making conversation with, but predictably, she was gone.

"OK!" I yelled over the racket, "we leave in six hours sharp. Be back on the ship within the hour, I want us all recovered in good time to leave"

The rest of the crew nodded their assent. I decided to go and find somewhere quieter to finish my rather sour beer. I pushed my way through the sweaty crowds until I came to the back of the bar, and then found myself in a small dimly-lit room with only two others. Some relief at last. I flopped in one of the deep seats and set my beer on the table, and let out a long sigh. However, I didn't even get thirty seconds to myself. Aaron arrived and looked at me through narrow eyes.

"That was a bit easy, don't you think?" he asked, seemingly to no one in particular.

I just grunted.

"Usually it takes half a day of haggling spread over four days for a haul of that size", he added by means of explanation.

"And when it does it's hardly ever worth it," I said with a shrug.

"Who was she?"

"Who?"

"That woman earlier"

"Didn't catch her name"

"Oh."

We lapsed into silence, and I tried to drink a bit more of the awful beer. It seemed somewhat less awful without the bass thump of music in my left ear.

"We need this job to go smoothly," I said at last. "Business has been pretty awful recently. We only just covered our wage bill last month"

"We did?"

"Yeah, after we had to repair the ECM, there was barely enough left over to pay everyone."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"You've enough to worry about without dealing with the financial minutiae"

"We are partners you know, you've gotta tell me"

I sighed. "I just did"

"No, but earlier," he said, more concerned than angry. "I've got my life savings sunk into this operation, too"

"Yeah yeah, I know," I said with an air of resignation.

"Sorry," he added. "But please, just tell me?"

"Yeah yeah."

Silence again. We hadn't even started on this new job and I was already feeling drained. Perhaps ten minutes passed, but in that darkened room it might well have been an hour. My comm beeped. I pulled it out.

"Instructions," I said, flicking through the information. "Seems our target ship is a bit out of the way." I turned the comm towards Aaron who examined the images critically.

"Quite a bit off the corridor. They had to be smuggling."

"Yeah, and I'm kicking myself. They settled with our supposed good haggling so quickly because we're suckers, I suspect. Bet we could have gotten at least 20 for this job."

"Still, ten's not to be sniffed at."

"You're right, it'll at least get the generator sets overhauled." I had noted Kim's look of almost pleading as we had named our price. "I can guess who's going to be head of the queue when we get paid"

"How long are they overdue?"

"Five hundred hours on the one"

Aaron frowned.

"Could be worse," I added. "The other's twelve hundred over"

His frown changed to a look of shock which he rapidly tried to conceal.

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps you oughtn't to reveal these minutiae. Gaacck, I ran that thing to 110% the other week when we had that rather unfortunate incident."

"I know. I was sweating bullets," I said deadpan. "I was just listening for the thing exploding, but well, Faulcon deLacy build 'em tough I suppose"

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Six hours later, I was back on the ship. I couldn't stand hanging around the bar any longer, and to be honest I wanted to get away from the crew for a while and brood by myself about the appalling state of our finances. Kim had gone back to the ship to do some PM, and had given me a laundry list of spares we needed. A quick trip to the scrap yard, or 'recycling centre' as the sign on the wall euphemistically said, had me now equipped with a heavy box full of small parts, all of which turned out to be surprisingly expensive.

It was time for the roll-call. Everyone but Kim was around.

"She wants to see you," Jamie informed me.

"Well, she can come up here,"

"Now. She had that look on her face"

"But I'm the captain," I said, my voice trailing off.

I traipsed on towards the generator section. I just knew that's where she'd be. There was this sort of atmosphere around the place if anyone said 'generator' in Kim's presence. She never said anything, but I could feel the waves of disapproval beating upon me. As I neared the entrance to the generator section, I could feel that reassuring thrum through the metalwork of the ship that told me everything was powered up and ready to go.

I grabbed a pair of ear defenders off the wall. Out here, there was nothing more than a faint background hum. On opening the door to the prime mover and generator room, that all changed to a deafening roar which was somehow made all the more unpleasant by the high pitched scream of a few dozen megawatts of generating capacity. The door closed behind me, I put my ear defenders on.

Kim's voice sounded in my ears.

"You know why it's so noisy in here?" said her disembodied voice.

"It's always noisy in here!" I replied, testily.

I walked out onto the narrow gantry, a latticework footway high above the bowels of the engine room. The gantry ran between the two electrical

generators. Below, I could see two more walkways, and finally, deep in the bowels of the Python Class Cruiser, the main reactor. Consuming a trademarked fuel called Qurium, the main reactor provided power for everything on the ship – including the raw energy to turn the two generators which provided the ship with the prodigious amount of electrical power that it consumed with a voracious appetite. The generators themselves were a marvel of engineering – filled with high-temperature superconductors, they only had to be kept a little below the freezing temperature of water to work at maximum efficiency. Four large refrigeration units provided not only temperature control for the life support systems, but cooling for the generators. Up above me was another two levels of latticework walkways, and finally a set of power transformers and power controllers. All controlled by a computer, power was routed from here to the rest of the ship's systems.

Down a level, I could see Kim. I swung down the nearest gravity well, and up the level 2 gantry. She was at a workbench at the nose of one of the generators.

“See this?” she said, holding up a large ring shaped piece of metal.

“Very nice. It looks, umm, polished,” I said.

“It looks fucked, more like,” she replied in a slightly hostile tone. “It's the nose end main bearing of this generator,” she said, stabbing a finger towards the offending piece of machinery. “This is what happens when things are let to go twelve hundred hours over their overhaul periods”

“Ah”, I said, looking at it. It looked nice and shiny to me.

“It's spalled, look,” she said, pointing out some tiny black pits that had developed.

“Ah. Spalled,” I said. I must have looked awfully blank.

“Do you really have no clue, or are you just trying to play dumb?” she asked.

“Hey...”

“Captain, this is deadly serious. The CSD keeps that thing spinning at thirty thousand RPM. Do you know what happens when a bearing collapses when the thing that's inside it is rotating at thirty thou?”

“It blows up?” I hazarded.

“You're damned right it blows up. There's almost no clearance between the armature and the generator housing. If the bearing goes, the armature hits the generator casing. That energy all has to go somewhere,” she gestured expansively, “Make a real nice mess of this lovely engine room”

“Well, we've got another one? This ship's quite happy on one generator. Reassemble that one, and we only use it if we have to”

“That's what I'm doing,” she replied. “But you know all this noise?”

“Well, it's always noisy in here.”

“Not THAT particular noise. THAT noise is of the nose bearing on the other generator. It's just as bad. I only got done inspecting that one an hour ago. I could have sworn someone's been running those generators at 110%, but then I realise it's good 'ol Captain Winston's shoestring maintenance budget at work again”

I started turning slightly red. “Well, there may have been a little bit of hard running, you know, we needed to keep the shields charged in a little incident last week,” I stammered.

"Ahhhh," she said, mirthlessly. "So you're coming clean now?"

"Hey, I'm the captain!" I retorted.

"I'm your engineer, and I'm telling you that if you treat ol' Virtuous like this, bad stuff happens"

I sighed. There was no winning today.

"Look, a little secret about our finances. They aren't good. In fact, they are very very bad."

"They'll be a lot worse if one of these generators let go"

"Yeah, I know, that's why when we collect payment, all the profit goes to the maintenance budget immediately".

Kim's creased face softened for a moment.

"Well, if you give me half an hour, I'll have this bearing back together and we can go".

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So, half an hour later we were indeed ready to go. The Virtuous slid from her berth like a seal slipping into the ocean. Her huge shark's teeth visage emerged from the station in a satisfyingly predatory fashion. I sank into the decadent leather captain's seat, and watched the planet below on the giant viewscreen which wrapped all around us. Traffic control buzzed with activity, and Aaron steered us off the arrival path, pointing the nose at the planetary horizon. I watched with mild interest as the imposing bulk of an Anaconda emerged slowly from the Coriolis, navigation lights winking in the harsh shadows. Two police Vipers cruised on by – it was obvious they were checking us out. I gestured subtly at the nearest status display and seruptitiously checked our legal status. Only 'Offender' today. Perhaps the Vipers had bigger fish to fry.

But they continued to lurk.

"Aaron, are you watching who I'm watching"

"You mean those Vipers?"

"Yes"

"This time we don't shoot. If they shoot, run"

"We're nearing FarAway anyhow. We can let them beat on our shields for a bit if they want", he replied in a disturbingly absentminded manner. I glanced over at Mike. As usual, his face gave nothing away. It was an expression that served him well during the weekly poker game.

The Vipers suddenly darted away. I started breathing again.

It always seemed like the time between leaving the station and getting to the FarAway safety zone took forever. It was always about now that some random snippet of nervous conversation would show up if we were going anywhere remotely dangerous. Today was no exception.

"Thargoid sightings are up," Mike said, unprovoked.

"Thargoids are overrated," I retorted. Mike looked at me. In the darkness of the flight deck I could make out a slight look of astonishment.

"Well they are," I continued in an impatient voice. "Look at the stats. The typical Thargoid encounter with a trader reveals that a Thargoid isn't really any worse than the bounty hunters we sometimes have to deal with. Well, except they don't run away"

"They come in multiples"

"Probably in cereal packs too. That's what energy bombs are for"

"Cereal packs?"

"No, blowing up multiple Thargoids. Or multiple anything really. You're the weapons guy".

"I heard they couldn't be destroyed by an energy bomb"

"That's a myth. You've been hanging around in seedy spacer bars for too long. You wouldn't have much trouble seeing them off."

"Well, the day we're ambushed in witch space .... "

"You believe that rot?"

"Rot?"

"Yeah, that Thargoids can interrupt witch space. Yet another spacer legend."

"You're the Captain," Mike said, finally. He always said that when he wasn't convinced.

A Cobra Mk.3 vanished into a blue, pulsating sphere. Ripples formed on the surface of the sphere. It glowed intensely as the following Sidewinder Scout Ship disappeared into its surface.

"FarAway," commented Aaron, and the hyperspace countdown began.

"At bloody last," I commented acidly.

The stars spread out.

The ship shuddered slightly.

Reality winked out.

Stories about the terrible perils of witch space persisted. Stories about misjumps, about the perils of departing with a badly maintained drive, about arriving turned inside out or in some prehistoric time. Of course, in these enlightened days, nobody believes a word of these stories. Drive failure or a misjump just dumps you in interstellar space. Of course, the fact that you weren't turned inside out by a misjump is cold comfort if the nearest star is 3 light years distant and you only have two light years worth of fuel. A drive could go really wrong, or as mechanics say 'undergo violent disincorporation', or possibly 'dynamic disassembly'. But there is nothing mysterious or supernatural about the energy from several tonnes of exploding Quirium destroying the ship and everyone on board.

Somewhere in the aft end of The Virtuous, several tonnes of Quirium had been annihilated and turned into a colossal blast of pure energy. This pure energy, focused into a tiny point, punched a short-cut through space-time. A tunnel through which a ship could pass. This short cut is what's better known as witch-space. It was only seconds, yet the better part of 24 hours had gone by in the world outside. Once the witch space tunnel transit was complete, the Virtuous was spat out of the tunnel and back into real space. Real space several light years distant from the starting point.



Reality winked back on again.

"Texeare", the ship's computer said in a monotonous tone.

"The world Texeare is a dull place", Aaron added.

"Well, let's make sure it stays dull," I said, quickly thumbing through the information on the captain's astrogation console.

"Long range scan indicates nothing powered between us and the coordinates we have. The target ship is in quite a dense asteroid field," Mike said.

"ETA?"

"It's only 25 minutes away at hyperspeed."

"Set a course for the target. I'm going to get some food, Aaron, you've got the bridge"

I got out of the decadent comfort of the captain's seat. There was a mild vibration as the short-range hyperspeed kicked in and we rode the warp wave. I left the bridge and went into the deserted common area. I rifled through the fridge for anything appetizing. The selection could have been better; one of those disgusting drinks that Mike insists on, a half-eaten sandwich of unknown ownership, something unidentifiable that should have been thrown out weeks ago that inevitably belonged to Jamie. His vanity didn't extend to house keeping skills. I pushed past something with 'SlimFast' on the side. Finally, I discovered something edible – a small packet of 'ready to eat hot chicken wings'. I complimented it with a mug of tea from the drinks dispenser, and sat down at the table by the observation window. I gestured at the room in general and the lights dimmed. In the far distance, I could make out what looked like the flashes of battle. Who knows who was fighting for their life out there – hopefully that bounty hunter who shot at us last week and caused us to have to run the generators so hot. But probably not. People that good are usually on the giving end. The rest of us are fleeing with our witchdrive fuel injectors.

Space travel gave you a lot of time to think. It was eerily quiet – the ship's power systems had good sound insulation, and all I could hear was a very faint hum from somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship. I mused back to the first time I had been attacked in space. It had been very bizarre, almost surreal – swinging around in silence, with the occasional jarring blow accompanied by ever such a slight noise. The ship's computer had to generate sounds to alert you that bad things were happening. Of course, when the ship finally began to disintegrate or get seriously holed, then it'd get noisy and rather more frightening. There was nothing like the sound of air rushing out into the cold, hard vacuum of space to get the heart pumping.

But there was no one nearby. We were just hurtling through space on the silent, inertialess wave of the hyperspeed system.

A reflection off the inside of the observation window caught my attention. I turned. In the dim light, Jamie was sitting down by the observation window opposite me.

"What's our ETA?" he asked casually.

"Only 20 minutes or so. How's it holding up in engineering?"

"Well, at least Kim's calmed down a bit."

"Oh?"

Jamie hesitated.

"Well, perhaps I...never mind."

I sighed. "Look, if there's a problem, let me know, I'm not going to throw you out of the airlock".

Jamie drew a deep breath.

"Well, you're not exactly popular with Kim."

"Oh?"

"Put it this way, the language she was using about you when checking those generator bearing stripped the paint off the engine room walls."

I smiled wryly in the dim light. I might have been Captain by title, but I think we were all subordinate to Kim. We were infesting her beautiful ship. We were responsible for getting the beautiful ship dented, and failing to allocate a sufficient budget for maintaining said beautiful ship.

"Her usual I-didn't-go-to-engineering-school-for-this rant?"

"Well..."

"That's alright, she ranted at me at some length earlier. This job should give her some budget"

"I hope for your sake it goes OK then."

"Changing the subject completely, that thing that's got all the fur on in the fridge, and is even now evolving to such an advanced state that it will soon have its own nuclear deterrent – it isn't yours, is it?"

"Ummm..."

Guilty as charged.

"Well, if you don't mind doing something with it, I risked annihilation when trying to get my chicken pieces," I said, holding up a half-eaten drumstick.

Jamie got up guiltily and headed fridgewards, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Another succession of distant flashes. There must have been quite some battle going on. I was quite glad we were somewhere else.

"So what's the plan?" Jamie asked from across the room.

"Survey the target ship, see what state it's in, dock with it and take a couple of caddies across and pull the cargo out. Should be pretty simple so long as the hull is still holding air. If it's not, then you can go with Kim in EVA suits and manually eject the cargo, we'll hang back and suck it up with the scoops"

I tried to avert my eyes from whatever it was Jamie had started to eat. I was sure it wasn't too good.

"Why not just eject it anyway?" he asked between mouthfuls of whatever vile substance he had found in the fridge. I just hoped my eyes had deceived me when I saw him apparently scrape the mould off something.

"We want to be careful with the cargo – it could be damaged or fragile, so I'd prefer to caddy it off if we can. Besides, if we can board the ship we can check it out and find if there are any bonus items."

“OK”

I paused.

“That's not that mouldy thing?”

“Don't worry, I scraped it off”

“That's what I was worried about.”

Well, at least it wouldn't be in the fridge any longer.

I sat and stared out of the window for what seemed like forever. More distant flashes, then a really bright one which briefly lit the room with an eerie blue light. That just had to be a Q-bomb detonation.

Suddenly there was a shout from the bridge.

“Silent running!”

I got to my feet ran up to the bridge. I quickly jumped into my seat and fastened my seat belt and shoulder harness.

“What's going on?” I asked whilst clicking the belts into place.

The ship dropped out of hyperspeed – mass locked by another ship's drive.

“Several ships just launched from a rock hermit at the edge of this field. I think we might just have blundered into a pirate base,” Mike said quickly.

“OK, all emissive systems off. Brige to engineering, silent running!”

What slight hum there had been died away. We were now drifting slowly through space.

“How close are we to our salvage target?”

“Not far. It's probably only about 100 k's off now. We can just drift there if necessary.”

I watched the tiny dots in the distance, glinting in the light of the light of the sun.

“Mike, what do you reckon?”

“It ain't looking good,” he replied. “At least five targets, a Fer de Lance, a couple of Asps, a Mamba and a Python.”

“Well let's hope they don't see us. What are our options?”

“At this stage, hope they haven't seen us – we should easily be lost amongst the clutter with the drive powered down. If they do, I suggest launch all four missiles, target on the Asps, the Mamba and the Fer de Lance, take the Python out with the front laser”.

“That sounds like a good plan.”

We sat in silence, watching for signs of activity from the distant specs. I could swear one of them was getting larger. The scanner was off for silent running, so

I couldn't really tell. Not yet, anyway.

Agonising moments passed. One of the glints was now definitely closer – it had resolved itself into the shape of an oncoming Python. I realised I was hardly breathing, as if breathing ultra-quietly made a difference.

Silent running was an exercise in risk trade-offs. To run silently meant you might be able to sneak on by, but it also meant if you could be seen – you were a bit of a sitting duck. The energy banks stayed charged of course – and within about two or three seconds of ordering the power back on, things like the ECM would operate and missiles could be targeted and fired, and the lasers would shoot. But it took about 15 seconds before you could maneuver. All those heavy machines in the engine room had to crank up before you could get any thrust. Or, for that matter, keep charge in the shields and energy banks which would quickly deplete under fire.

We all intently watched the Python silently approach, and now we could clearly see the shape of its escorts. It started to pass over our ship.

Something detached from the Python.

“Missile!” shouted Mike.

I hit the comm. “Full power NOW!” I shouted with unnecessary loudness at engineering. That unconvincing hum started up again. Aaron jabbed at the ECM which had so far refused to power up.

A thin whisker of blue plasma fired from the back of the object that had detached from the Python. Then another. Then another. The object turned from a thin line into just a tiny dot as it pointed head-on towards us.

The scanner came alive.

Five red lollipops. Three blue ones. Lots of white ones.

“It's gonna be close!” shouted Mike, his voice about an octave higher than normal.

“Get those damned missiles targeted!” I shouted back, watching the three missiles speeding our way in a spiral path. They were approaching frighteningly fast.

Suddenly the ECM kicked in.

“Brace for impact!”

I turned away from the inevitable. There was suddenly a deafening crash as the first missile smashed into our shields! The bridge lit up with a blinding light as the ECM finally destroyed the other two. The impact of the first jarred our drifting ship. I heard things in the common area smashing against the walls.

“AaaarrggHH!” came a shout. I couldn't immediately tell who it was from.

“I can't see!” Mike shouted. “I'm flashblinded!”

He released himself from his seat and staggered around the bridge. "Aaron, get those missiles off now!" I shouted, and bodily heaved Mike across the bridge. I strapped him in the captain's seat.

"Aaron?"

He hadn't been quite strapped in properly, and his head had hit the console. Blood ran freely from a gash in his forehead.

"Jamie, Kim, one of you get up here fast. Mike's flash blinded and I think Aaron's badly hurt". The comm acknowledged with a click.

I strapped into Mike's seat, noting all four missiles had a target lock. I fired them all off in quick succession. Fourteen hundred credits worth of hardhead missiles streaked off into the darkness. Enemy ECMs fired uselessly.

I grabbed the controls but they still weren't responding. In the background, I heard Mike groaning. I quickly checked the damage report. The escape capsule was glowing red – we had to make this count or we were toast. Jamie arrived on the bridge.

"What's going on in engineering?" I asked.

"No damage, well, none that we saw anyway. The reactor start sequence was progressing. Kim was almost brained by a flying wrench," he replied. I could detect a tremor in his voice. My own hands were sweating.

There was a flash somewhere ahead, and the Mamba simply disappeared. The ship started to finally respond to my control inputs. Jamie was heaving Aaron's body from the pilot's seat. I watched the IFF scanner; the Fer de Lance and two Asps were completely occupied by the missiles following them. The lumbering Python was lining up to rake us with his front laser.

But we were there first.

Fire licked from the nose of The Virtuous, and spread across the Python's front shields. Our military laser tore into his energy banks, then overheated. The Python still came on.

"What's he doing?" I hissed.

"I dunno."

More missiles. Jamie hit the ECM. There was a series of white flashes as they disintegrated. There was a more distant flash as one of our hardheads caught an Asp. The Asp didn't explode, but I could tell by the flickering of its engine and the plasma spilling into the void that it wouldn't be joining in. I turned The Virtuous around to have a go at the Python with my aft laser.

A red beam shone from the nose of the Python. Its laser started cutting into our depleted aft shields.

There was that awful groaning noise of duralium being sliced away. I noted

more red appear on the status display – I tried to ignore it as I lined up the Python in our rear gunsights, and let forth a volley of laser fire. Eventually it stopped as both our laser and our adversary's lasers both overheated. I turned the ship around again to pound at him with our front laser. I could see the Python doing the same.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered. “We'll be at it all day”

Jamie didn't respond. He was busy with something on the engineering panel, hopefully directing the hull repair system to fix the new holes we had.

I started pounding at the Python again. Abruptly, the Python stopped responding. Its lollipop turned white, and another white lollipop appeared on the scanner and started to drift away.

“He's abandoned ship!”

I lined up for the coup de grace. A quick volley of laser fire and the Python exploded, spilling cargo into the void.

“How's the scoop?” I asked.

“It still works – just,” Jamie responded.

I nudged the ship towards the wreckage, and watched the cargo vanish into our holds. Two tonnes of narcotics, 50 grams of Platinum, and five tonnes of Luxuries. It wouldn't pay for the repairs, but it might help. I checked the scanner. The remainder of our attackers had left. I still didn't want to hang around, and so gunned the power up to full and pointed the nose back towards our destination.

“Jamie, look after the helm for me,” I said, getting out of my seat.

Aaron was laid out on the floor in a pool of blood. I was fearing the worst, and was just about to check he was still alive when he started moaning.

“The missile...” he groaned.

“The attack's over. Mike, how are you doing?”

“I can almost see again,” he said wearily. “I was looking right at that damned missile when it went off”

Aaron tried to stand and promptly fell down again.

“I've got to get him to sick bay, Jamie, you hold the fort.”

I supported Aaron, and we staggered off the bridge. Sick bay was only just behind the common room, and I deposited my friend on one of the couches.

“I think you headbutted the console pretty hard,” I said, as I fired up one of the auto-meds.

“Tell me about it,” he said unsteadily, pawing at his head.

The auto-med whirred over to him. It beeped like all machines do.

"Wounds superficial, concussion. I recommend rest..."

"And plenty of fluids," I finished in unison with the auto-med.

"I'm going to have to leave you in Doctor ... umm ... Doctor Silicon's careful hands, I'm afraid, since it looks like you're going to live," I said.

He just groaned in reply.

"So much for Texean being dull," I muttered, and headed off back to the bridge.

"...is down," I heard from the comm, as I arrived on the bridge.

"Well, the captain's here now, you can tell him," Jamie said.

Kim's disembodied voice came over the bridge comm speakers.

"One of the generators is down, the refrigeration unit got hit by laser fire and the generator burned up before the thermal cut-out could shut it down"

That's all we needed. "What about the other?"

"Well, if you can ignore the loud screeching noise from the worn out nose bearing, it's fine. I can swap the bearing out with the one from the dead generator, I mean the other bearing isn't great, but at least it doesn't sound like it's on the verge of collapsing."

"Hull repairs?"

"They are at least proceeding nominally, the bots have already got to most of the holes"

I looked back at the scanner.

"How many survived?" Mike asked.

"We got the Python and the Mamba for sure, dunno about the Fer de Lance, and I saw one of the Asps limping away heavily damaged. In theory, if the Fer de Lance was hit by our hardhead, it wouldn't have stood a chance".

"So probably two damaged Asps and maybe a Fer de Lance to contend with."

Mike swung the captain's chair around and peered at the astrogation console.

"How's the vision?"

"I think it's going to be alright," he said, ordering up a long range sweep. The results started to appear.

A debris field.

Something unpowered, drifting away.

Another debris field drifting away. In the distance, a flight of four ships headed roughly in our direction – tagged as 'GalCop'. I moved the cursor over the targets. ETA was thirty five minutes. I winced.

"More problems, we need to be fast with this job. All this fighting has attracted more unwelcome attention."

"You mean the Police won't help us?" Mike responded, ironically.

"Depends whether you mean help by taking us off our damaged spaceship and bringing us safely to the station and housing us in a nice guest house with bars

on it for the next month. And not the type that serves drinks”

“That's our target,” Jamie said, as the derelict Python started to expand in our forward view.

I watched for a few seconds as we drew closer. The Python wasn't even scratched. I had expected a wreck with chunks missing.

“That's funny,” I remarked.

The bulk of the silent craft drifted over our ship. It completely filled the front view. We made a brief survey. Externally, at least, there was nothing wrong with the ship.

“I'm going to the astrodome, I'll guide you in,” I said, and left the bridge. It was only a short way to the astrodome – through the common area, past the crew quarters, and then a gravity well. I ascended this, and reached a small room of which almost half was a transparent bubble. I settled into the small seat there, and looked at the bulk of the Python only a few metres above us.

“OK,” I said into the comm. “The cargo loading hatch looks OK to me, extend the docking tube halfway”

“Halfway,” replied Mike's voice. A door on the top of our ship opened – above the cargo bay, and a flexible tunnel began to emerge.

“Ahead, slow, about fifty metres,” I said.

I looked up as the belly of the Python slid past above me. Its lower docking port passed.

“Full stop there. Now up, ever so gently. Extend the tube fully.”

Our ship drifted slowly upwards, then connected to the Python with a slight judder.

“Lock!”

I saw the docking tube wriggled as it tried to locate the mating connectors on the bottom of the Python. After five seconds or so, it abruptly stopped moving. The umbilical snaked out of the top of our ship, and probed the Python until it found the correct socket.

“We're docked. Set the autopilot for station keeping”.

“The computer reports that the ship's atmo seems good,” Mike remarked back.

I climbed down from the astrodome. The others met me in the common room. All apart from Aaron, who was getting plenty of rest and fluids care of the med-bot – whether he liked it or not, it seemed.

I sighed.

“Right, we're one down, so we're going to have to trust the autopilot. Mike, you come with me – we'll check this ship out and try and find out why it's apparently



drifting undamaged. Jamie and Kim, check out the cargo bay and get the cargo set up so we can pull it off with the caddies."

The four of us marched off to the aft cargo bay airlock.

"Why did they abandon it?" I wondered out loud. "It makes no sense. No signs of battle, no signs of damage – but they abandoned it"

"Who knows, let's just get the cargo off and get out of here before the Police show up," Kim suggested.

We entered the darkness of the airlock. Pressure equalised. The doors opened, and we drifted weightless through the docking tunnel. I tried not to think of how many tonnes of air pressure the flexible tunnel was holding back from the hard vacuum of space – the ship we were boarding was disquieting enough.

We were through the Python's airlock. It was extremely dark.

"Can we get any lights on in here?"

"Hold on," Kim said, opening a panel. "If we just throw this aux power selector here" (click) "for the umbilical, The Virtuous will supply us with what we need"

As if to respond, the lights flickered on. It was extremely cold in the Python. Our breath froze on the icy air.

"Heat?"

"The life support should come on automatically," Kim said.

"It better hurry up before we freeze to death," I said, rubbing my hands vigorously and hugging my jacket around me. "Right, you know what you need to do, we're off to poke around the bridge," I said.

Mike followed me. Our footsteps clanked on the frigid metal footway that lead up into the living quarters. The interior of the Python was all dark grey, and it added an air of doom to the icy ship. I tried to keep the word "tomb" out of my mind.

"I really don't like this," Mike remarked.

"Neither do I, but there's ten grand at stake, and maybe Captain Creeps left some valuables behind in the safe"

"That's why we're going to the bridge?"

"It's the only reason. I don't care why this ship was abandoned, just so long as we can make a profit out of the salvage"

"What was that?"

"What?"

Mike had stopped dead. He was shining his light down through the walkway. I peered through the lattice work.

"Probably your imagination."

"No, it was round and fast-moving," he muttered.

We both peered down through the levels. There was a brief, but unmistakable

flash of two bright eyes in Mike's torchlight. It vanished before I could make it out.

"Probably the ship's cat got left behind," I said.

"Poor thing. We ought to take it with us"

"Well, if you can catch it, but we can't waste any time here you know?"

"Wonder how it survived so long"

"Thick fur coat, and it's not like there's not plenty to eat around here assuming the crew abandoned their normal supplies. Let's go"

We reached the deserted living quarters. Something had obviously got at the supplies – boxes, bags, cartons and pieces of food were scattered all about.

"Looks like Jamie lives here," Mike remarked, as we passed on by.

The flight deck was utterly silent, and all the instruments were utterly dark. I went over to the astrogation console and tried to power it up. Nothing happened. I tried to power up various instruments, but nothing was live.

"Forget this?" asked Mike from somewhere behind. I turned around. He opened up a breaker panel. "Hmm," he added, staring at a mass of shredded cables.

There was some control cabling leading up the back wall of the flight deck. Something had gnawed through it.

"That doesn't look like cat's gnawings to me," I said, "but I doubt that happened when anyone was on board".

"I don't know," Mike said. I could hear a tinge of horror in his voice. I shone my light over by where he was standing.

Wedged in the rear of the Python's ample flight deck was the body of a dead crew member, his neck obviously broken.

"I think you found the dead one our customer was talking about."

I knelt down. The dead man's hand had been burned by something. It wasn't hard to find the problem. Above him, a control panel was opened, and a bunch of charred cabling branched out. The un-charred pieces of insulation had definite teeth marks.

"I think I found the culprit," Mike suddenly exclaimed. He was holding something furry. It was about the size of a large cat, and roughly spherical with odd little suckers on what I presumed was its underside. It too was partially burned, but it was easy to see from the remains of its mouth that it had nasty, sharp teeth. The skin under the fur was extremely tough and leathery. It was a strange gingery-yellow colour.

"What the hell is that?" I asked

"I have no idea. It's like nothing I've seen"

"I can't imagine this little bugger forced them to abandon ship – it'd be relatively easy to repair the control box up there, and it seems like the rest of

the ship's systems are working alright off our umbilical"

"Well, there was another one. Perhaps its friend gnawed through enough other things"

"Maybe".

I started poking in the back of the cabin.

"Aaah, paydirt"

The ship's safe. I unclipped the little plasma torch from my belt, and set it to full power. It only took a moment to cut through the safe door – the standard safes that came with most ships were almost useless at keeping someone out. I reached in. Inside was a small box. Inside the box was a velvet bag.

"Diamonds are a girl's best friend," I said.

"Only if they are genuine natural ones," Mike said.

"Why else would they be in the safe? Has to be a few hundred credits worth in here at least". I pocketed the bag and tossed the box aside. Suddenly, my comm crackled to life.

"Damon, I think we have a problem," came Kim's breathless voice at the other end.

\* \* \*

We arrived out of breath at the Python's cargo bay.

"Don't open the door wide," Kim warned.

I opened it just a crack. Immediately, what seemed like a hailstorm of small furry bodies hurled themselves against the door. I quickly slammed it closed again.

"Holy mother of the worlds," I whispered.

I opened the door a couple of centimeters and looked carefully inside. In between the frantic bodies of ... of... small furry creatures, I could see the ship's cargo. One of the containers had been gnawed wide open, and food had spilled out all over the cargo bay.

"What are they?" Jamie asked, sucking a bloodied finger.

"Your finger?" I asked. I didn't like to admit I had no clue.

"One of the vicious little bastards bit me," Jamie responded.

"I don't know what they are. We found a dead one on the bridge, it had gnawed through some power cables and had been electrocuted, along with an unfortunate crew member. They must have teeth like tungsten carbide. I think we also spotted a live one on our way to the bridge, but we only saw its eyes so we can't be sure"

"Anyone bring a datapad?"

"Don't think so. We'll look them up when we get back on board. This ship seems infested"

"What's the plan?"

I thought for a few moments.

"OK, we have to risk damaging the cargo, but you and Kim suit up and then shut down this ship and let all the air out. That should kill them all off. Then just manually eject the cargo and we'll scoop it up with our tractor beam scoop. Then you can jet back in through the top airlock and we'll be away from here. Get a picture of one of those things, and we'll run a search and find out what they are"

We wasted no time getting back to The Virtuous. Kim and Jamie donned EVA suits and jetpacks, and re-boarded the Python via the docking tube. Once they had left, we disconnected. We watched the Python from the astrodome. A jet of condensing water vapour showed that Kim and Jamie were venting the ship's atmo. It went on for a surprising length of time. I was certain I saw a couple of spherical furry objects being ejected out at the same time.

"We're ready". It was Kim's voice on the comm. Mike and I made our way to the flight deck.

Mike settled into the pilot's seat, and began turning The Virtuous. I opened the cargo scoop. Mike rolled the ship over so our cargo scoop was facing the Python's cargo jettison door.

I keyed up the comm. "We're in position, start unloading". I turned to Mike.

"What's happening with the police?"

"They are only about ten minutes away, we're going to have to hustle"

"Kim, how much more left? The Police are almost on top of us!"

"This is the last lot," came her voice.

A burst of cargo flew from the belly of the Python and into our gaping cargo scoop.

"That's it, we're off."

The wait was agonizing. The blips on the long range showed the Police drawing closer on hyperspeed. But the jet packs were awkward to use, and you had to be careful to avoid thrusting yourself off into deep space.

"We're on," came Jamie's voice.

"Mike, full witch space injector speed"

The Virtuous shuddered into life, and we began accelerating away from the asteroid field. A couple of minutes later, Jamie and Kim arrived, panting and sweating, still in their EVA suits. They hung up their helmets.

"The Police, are they reacting?"

"Dunno, long range hasn't yet updated," Mike replied.

"Shit!" Jamie exclaimed.

"What?"

As if to answer my question, there was a very odd noise.

"Prrrooot"

"Oh no," I said, knowing the inevitable.

A yellow furry spherical creature was crawling over the astrogation console. I reached for it. It tried to bite me.

"There's more," said Kim, panic in her voice, looking back down into the common area. I left the bridge, and stood in astonishment.

"There must be twenty" - crash - as the fridge fell off the table - "of the little bastards in here! How did they get here?"

"Quick, find out what they are!" Mike shouted. Jamie was already on the ship's computer.

"What does the computer say?"

"It's still searching."

"How the hell did they survive hard vacuum?"

"Trumbles!" Jamie shouted.

"What the hell are trumbles?" I asked, turning to the nearest display. The computer began to read out the inevitable bad news in a quiet, measured voice. It was a surreal experience. Amongst the pandemonium as more trumbles arrived - knocking things over and devouring anything even remotely edible, I could hear snippets of the computer's calm voice..

"...metabolism almost entirely dedicated to asexual reproduction..."

"I can't get the little bastard off the scanner!"

"Do anything you can"

"It bit me!"

"...can devour a tonne cargo pod of food and produce dozens of offspring within hours..."

I heard the sound of Kim frantically trying to beat them off the instrument panels with the fire extinguisher. I grabbed the other extinguisher and followed Kim's lead. They were tenacious buggers and wouldn't let go. Suddenly, the trumble I was attacking lunged, and bit into the plastic base of the fire extinguisher. Foam started spraying out all over the bridge, adding to the general disorder and panic.

"...leathery skin, and can survive hard vacuum for up to half an hour. Thick eyelids and a strong muscular mouth ensures that no air escapes..."

"We've only got three EVA suits!" I yelled, as a trumble began gnawing at one of the space helmets.

"...evolutionary drawback is that they have much less tolerance to heat than a typical human, and will die if exposed to temperatures above 60 celcius for more than half an hour..."

"More problems! We're under attack!" Mike shouted above the din of trumble

induced mayhem.

"Yes, by trumbles!"

"No, other spacecraft"

"Who?"

"I dunno, I can't get this bastard off the scanner to tell!"

"Just shoot him!" I yelled.

Almost immediately, I realised that was the wrong order to give. Mike lined up whatever it was in the sights and began to shoot.

"This is the Police! Shut your engines down and do not attempt to dodge our lasers, brigand!"

"Witch fuel injectors!" I yelled.

"No fuel," Mike replied.

Finally, someone saw sense to slam the door shut to the bridge. At least that meant that we were only having to fight the eight trumbles that had decided to join us.

"Prrrooooot"

"Oh shut up!" I yelled at the vile creature. The trumble responded by shuddering a little and batting its eyelids.

There was a sudden flashbang and the bridge went dark.

"It's eaten through the cabling! Just like on the Python!"

"I think it's time to go!" shouted Jamie. There was a smell of burning. I could see the silhouette of Kim at the power routing panel. The lights came back on.

"The escape pod was damaged when we were attacked, we can't leave!"

"What now?" Mike asked, looking at me.

"Prrrooooooot!"

"We surrender. Comm the Police. Tell them that we are coming quietly," I said quickly.

"Aye, Captain," Mike said. Despite the turmoil on the bridge, I could tell it was an option he really didn't like.

"Virtuous to Police vessels, we fired on you in error. We surrender."

The comm was quiet. The trumble that had made itself at home on the scanner decided to scuttle off elsewhere. Finally, we could see that there were four police interceptors.

\* \* \*

So there we were in the police cell. The small shutter slid open on the door, and a pair of human eyes peered through the gap. The door opened. The police officer who opened it didn't look entirely satisfied.

"You're the captain of the Virtuous?"

"That's correct."

"Well, the magistrate has decided that we aren't able to prove you were performing illegal salvage, so count yourself lucky, you're off that hook."

I gave the officer a poker face.

"But you know what you were doing. I know you're a pirate even if I can't prove it just yet. We will be watching you very very carefully wherever you go."

I said nothing. The officer continued.

"You have a five hundred credit fine to pay for firing on a police vessel."

"Five hundred," I grumbled. It was hardly our fault.

"Count yourself lucky that we didn't blast you out the sky"

I met up with the rest of the crew. We duly received payment for the cargo, but our ship remained infested.

"What do we do?" Aaron asked, scratching the fresh scab on his forehead.

"Well, I had plenty of time to think in that cell. You know, I think we can turn those trumbles to our advantage."

"How?" Aaron asked. He looked skeptical.

"Well, they look quite cute when they are sleeping. Sedate the buggers, box them up nicely, fly a couple of systems away and flog 'em as pets to bounty hunters"

Aaron began to smile at my diabolical plan.

"How much?" he asked.

"Well, we need to sell 'em such that they are an impulse buy."

"Thirty credits each?"

"Thirty credits each."

## Acknowledgements

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