

# The Pirates of Pan

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James Dick

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**T**he command center was silent but for the singing of the computers. No human voice dared speak as we passed into Saturn's shadow. It was ridiculous and illogical, but superstition is a hard thing to train out of people who exist upon the knife's edge of life and death. *Arviat* glided ghostlike through airless, sunless wastes. The five of us were strapped tight into our seats, our hair drifting like seaweed in the null gravity, silently hoping we could complete the final leg of our voyage without being set upon by pirates.

On my screen I beheld a great black absence. A circle had been cut out of the sequined cloth of the galaxy. Occasional flashes flitted across it, creating chiaroscuro smudges of clouds. *Those lightning bolts are thousands of kilometers long.* It was an abstract thought. The events transpiring down in the depths of Saturn were utterly removed from human experience. Intellectually, I could grasp them, but they didn't feel real. We might walk on any moon, touch any grain of dust, but that cloud deck was a boundary we would never cross. Beneath it lay a truly alien place: a world with no surface, no solid ground, only endlessly increasing degrees of

pressure, distorting matter in ways we could not fathom. No one had yet designed a probe that could descend more than a few hundred kilometers before being crushed. *The sailors of old must've felt the same about the sea: its surface defined them; its depths baffled them.*

Through a ventral camera, I could see the portion of Saturn's rings that were in sunlight. The planet's shadow fell across the rings, slicing them in half more cleanly than a scalpel. It was like a road that suddenly ended over a vast abyss of stars. With a tap on my monitor, the image switched from true color to infrared. The rings suddenly appeared, whole, pristine, in lines of blue and violet. The false-color backdrop would make spotting drive plumes from pirate ships easier. So far, we'd been lucky, but luck tends to desert you the closer you get to the finish line.

There was no sense of time in the shadow. The clock on my screen told me only twenty minutes had elapsed since we crossed into it, but it felt like hours. It *would* be hours before we saw sunlight again.

A flicker of red appeared in the Encke Gap. I leaned forward, hair dancing. "Thermal

anomaly," I said, surprised at how hoarse I sounded. My throat was very dry.

"Checking," said our commander, Jack Massey. A light on my screen told me he was mirroring my monitor.

"Natural outgassing," Hub Nelson, our pilot/astrogator, muttered. He was seated to my left and had radiated hostility toward me since I reported aboard, fifty days ago. It was understandable. I was not the designated fire control officer of *Arviat*, merely a substitute. This was not my ship, not my crew, much as I would've been honored for them to be so. I was slated to serve on *Ennadai* when she came off the slipway in three years. *Arviat* was a temporary posting. Yet another similarity with the armed traders of old: crews became families, and families became leery of outsiders.

I often wondered what the sailors of old would say if I told them a Second Golden Age of Piracy would play out among the moons of Saturn, with weapons of light and electricity instead of gunpowder and steel, where the ultimate prize was food and water instead of gold and jewels. They might have been astonished. Then again, maybe they wouldn't have. The means of piracy change, but never the goal: to obtain that which, whether by price or distribution, is scarce.

I sensed Protá Achenbach, *Arviat*'s purser and communications officer, stir behind me. "Jack?" she prompted.

"I think . . ." said Massey tactfully, ". . . Hub's right."

"Sure?"

"No one's crazy enough to try to fly between the rings," said Hub flatly.

"Just because it's never been done . . ." I began to say.

"Stow it," said Jack gently, and we were back to silence.

True, the rings were a no-fly zone because anything that passed through them was shredded by their particles. They were eternal, imperturbable, but there were gaps between them, carved by the shepherd moons. If someone ever mastered the trick of flying inside those gaps, they would have the perfect lair.

*And we're flying right overtop of them. . . .*

Three more thermal plumes appeared on my screen in the Encke Gap, right where the

first one occurred. "Multiple anomalies!" I announced.

"JRH! JRH!" Protá shouted.

The Jolly Roger Handshake. This was it: my first real pirate encounter. Encounters always followed a five-stage process, of which the JRH was stage one: a request for conversation. I mirrored the comms feed on my screen. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Hub do the same. A dialogue window opened, a Skull and Crossbones flag washing black across the blue screen. A cursor appeared beneath and populated the window with text.

*I AM WITHIN A HALF MILLION KILOMETERS OF YOU AND HAVE A LASER LOCK ON YOUR VEHICLE. I KNOW YOU CARRY CARGO OF FOOD STUFFS. I REQUIRE 1/16TH OF IT +1 LASER CORE + 4 ENGINES. CAN WE MAKE A DEAL?*

I was in disbelief. Why were they asking for our laser core and engines? Traders couldn't surrender those. It would be like asking a sailboat to dismast herself. *A very unusual request. This has got to be a bargaining tactic.* I settled in for a long negotiation.

Jack hissed through his teeth and typed a reply: *CAN SURRENDER 1/28TH OF OUR FOOD. MUST KEEP LASER CORE AND ENGINES. WE ARE THE ONLY SPACECRAFT SERVING OUR MOON. I'M SURE YOU UNDERSTAND.*

Surrendering *any* portion of our food was a dicey proposition. It had been dearly bought from Administrator Elvor Islington on Iapetus, who'd been hiking food prices for years. Siarnaq was already operating close to the limit of its calorie budget, and we were expecting eight new babies to be born next year, including mine. I thought of my wife, just two months pregnant. If she was short-changed on the food rations, she might lose the baby, and who knows when we'd be approved to try for another?

*Surely these raiders won't take much. Pirates are almost always reasonable.*

The raider's rejoinder came swiftly: *APPRECIATE TIMES ARE HARD. CURSE ALL FAT ADMINS! WILL FOREGO FOOD BUT MUST ACCEPT LASER CORE +4 ENGINES. FINAL OFFER. DO YOU YIELD?*

I heard the crew suck in a collective breath. This was highly irregular; pirates never softened on a food demand and never ever insisted on taking hardware like weapons and engines. No ship could be expected to disarm and cripple herself.

Jack tried them again. *CAFA INDEED! WILL YOU TAKE 2 ENGINES AND 0 CORE?*

*LASER CORE +4, FINAL OFFER, DO YOU YIELD?*

"Guillaume," said Jack, a hard edge in his voice, "plot firing solutions."

And so we moved to stage two-of-five: warning shots.

"Aye, sir," I replied. I watched my hands move of their own accord over the console in front of me, switching on our laser core and angling the targeting bounces.

"Vik," said Massey, "can we afford any more engine burns?"

Vikram Chia-Ramachandran, our engineer, said, "Not unless you don't plan on stopping when we get home."

"All right, we'll just have to keep them from getting behind us. Guillaume, can we assume those thermal plumes inside the Encke Gap are our pirates?"

"Direction of the incoming transmissions confirms it," I answered.

Jack sighed. "How they ever managed to get there . . . Hub, defensive posture, please!"

"On it." Hub got to work.

My seat pushed me at weird angles as *Arviat's* spearpoint body whipped around to point at our pursuers. This alone was answer enough to the pirates' demands, and they sent a final message.

*UNFORTUNATE, HOPED TO KEEP THIS CIVIL.*

Jack typed furiously. I saw his reply. *NOTHING CIVIL ABOUT DISARMAMENT. I WILL LOOK FOR YOUR WHITE FLAG.*

*I WILL LOOK FOR YOURS.*

Klaxons screamed.

"Hot spots!" Vikram called. "Eight total, hitting armor only. No physical damage."

"Pay them in kind, Guillaume," Jack ordered.

I selected the three bright spots surging at us from the Encke Gap. "Aye, sir. With interest?"

"Half again what they gave us."

"Half it is." I adjusted the yield and pressed FIRE.

Deep within the heart of *Arviat*, our single laser core emitted a stream of angry photons. They bounced throughout the ship, hitting mirrors that passed them to prisms that divided them up and passed them to yet more mirrors before finally being directed at the pirates. Pulsed lasers were drills of light; they hit with

enough force to cut through solid matter. Mirror armor, tilted at an angle, could direct that force away into space, but some amount of heat was always absorbed. So, when I saw the bright marks on my screen grow brighter, I knew I'd scored direct hits. The thrill of success was undercut by the sobering knowledge that I'd just shot at human beings.

"Seems you're actually good for something," Hub said dryly.

"Hub, kindly shut the hell up and give me some spin," Jack said.

"Aye, sir. Sorry, sir."

Blood rushed to my head as Hub rotated us, shifting the contact points of the enemy's lasers against our hull to give our cooling systems a chance to shuttle the heat to our radiators.

Of course, the pirates could practice the same tactic, which I saw them do now, and it made our lasers slip off them. The targeting computers reacquired them.

"Guillaume," said Jack, "build a profile on these guys. I want to know what their vehicles look like and what we have to aim at."

I nodded and tasked my system with the project. The images the computer returned were of three knife-shaped spacecraft: long blades of angled armor up front, banks of radiators in the hilt. "Small, fighter-size craft," I described. "I would say crews of three, but they've probably got boarding teams crammed into every available inch of habitat." I squinted at the images. "I see phased laser arrays along their hulls."

"Make those your targets for now. Take out enough of them and they'll be disarmed."

Prota chimed in: "Any sign of ballistics?"

I shook my head. "I don't think they have space for them."

"Jack," said Vikram, "if they're heavily armed with phased arrays *and* have boarding crews, their thermal budget is going to be very, very low. They might not be able to afford losing even a single radiator."

"I think I can confirm that," I said, looking at the onrushing ships. "They're not shedding heat very fast. I think a maximum power blast on each ship on their radiators will retire them. But they've got to be close for me to do it; right now, our lasers are dispersing too much by the time they hit."

"How close?" Jack asked.

“Less than a hundred kilometers.”

“I can’t maneuver fast enough to stop them from hitting *our* radiators at that distance!” said Hub.

“Aye . . .” said Jack, and I could hear the gears turning in his head. “But we can afford to lose one or two. They can’t.” He drummed his fingers on his chair’s arm. “All right, here’s what we’re going to do. Guillaume, slowly increase the power level on our lasers as they gain on us; make it look like we’re still trying to discourage them. Hub, as soon as they get under a thousand kilometers, fire our retrograde RCS thrusters to close distance with them. Guillaume, when that happens, you tune our lasers to maximum power and hit everything aft of their armor.” Jack turned to Vikram. “Get our heat sinks ready, Vik. We might have to jettison a few if our radiators get hit. Lastly, Prota, you watch our comms. Let me know the minute they strike their colors. Is everyone clear on what they need to do?”

A chorus of “ayes” filled the command center.

“Good.” He took a deep breath. “Let them come.”

And so, we entered stage three-of-five: shooting vital systems.

It was a dance: they hit us, we spun; we hit them, they spun. Balancing laser inputs, hull feedback, and analysis of the pirates’ ships strained my brain to the limit. Altogether I was observing and reacting to the behaviors of four ships, including ours: four sets of weapons systems, four thermal patterns. The computers helped, but it was still down to me to make judgment calls about when and how we fired. Amidst all this, I somehow managed to forget that this was a potentially life-threatening situation.

I was soon reminded. One of the pirate ships ceased firing and began to drift off course. Looking at it through the infrared cameras, I saw that it was hot in places it shouldn’t be. “Commander . . . ?” I said.

“I see it,” said Jack.

“Must’ve maxed out his thermal budget,” said Vikram. “Had to shut down.”

“Prota, did he strike his colors?”

“Negative,” Prota replied. “No surrender’s been transmitted.”

Jack grumbled and stared at the drifting fighter. “Strike, damn you . . .”

We waited. The other two pirate craft closed.

“He might think he can fix the problem,” said Vikram. “It may not be a serious overload.”

“Guillaume,” said Jack, voice flat. “Activate ballistics.”

The atmosphere in the command center grew cold. My heart climbed into my throat. I watched, like a stranger in my own body, as my hand floated toward a console that read BALLISTIC SUITE—LETHAL ARMAMENTS. I pressed *ACTIVATE*, and our guns and missiles awoke. A targeting reticle appeared over the disabled spacecraft.

“Fire control,” said Jack in that same monotone, “will you destroy that pirate?”

This was the fourth stage of a pirate encounter: use of lethal force. No commander can order the destruction of another spacecraft—they can only *suggest* it. It is a choice that only the fire control officer can make, and there were always strong reasons for and against. A pirate killed today was a pirate you didn’t have to deal with tomorrow. Plus, the death of any human being reduced the strain on the Saturnian food system. Calories were precious, else pirates wouldn’t raid ships to get them. On the other hand, pirate squadrons were communities, in the same way moons and armed traders were. If they watched you destroy one of their ships, killing all those aboard, they might want vengeance, which led to the dreaded stage five: battle to the death. Pirate encounters almost never got that far, for the simple reason that no one wants to die. But as we Saturnians had learned in our War of Independence, the side that escalates first wins, and I had to decide whether to make the ultimate escalation.

I stared at the disabled ship. My unborn child might be guaranteed a meal in the future if I pulled the trigger. After all, these pirates had forced our hand. They’d demanded things we weren’t prepared to surrender and ended negotiations when we’d refused to surrender them. But if I destroyed the ship and the pirates *weren’t* deterred, and persisted until *we* were destroyed, my child might not be born *and* Siarnaq would lose its only operational spacecraft. The whole colony would be in jeopardy.

*And anyway, why are we being made to*

*fight and steal from each other? There are enough resources for everyone around Saturn. It's only the administrators of the inner moons who board them all. Like our pirate friend said: Curse All Fat Admins! CAFA!*

"No, Commander," I said. "I will not destroy that pirate."

Jack glared at me a moment. "Stand down ballistics," he said finally.

I obeyed happily.

"Coward," Hub growled.

"You can't tell me I'm wrong," I shot back.

I returned my attention to my screens just in time to see something jettison from the disabled spacecraft: a canister of some kind. *Probably a heat sink*, I thought. But . . . no, it started moving on its own trajectory: toward us.

"Is that a . . . missile?" Prota said, her voice a rasp.

No . . . it *couldn't* be. The pirates wouldn't use ballistics on us, not when we hadn't used ours on them. They wanted our armor and weapons; what good were either of those damaged?

My computer warned me of a target lock, possibly from a self-propelled warhead. It *was* a missile.

"Countermeasures!" Jack ordered.

I started to turn my laser bounces to fry the warhead, but at that moment, the other pirates accelerated massively and began hitting the bounces, scattering the beams. I had nothing with which to cook the missile, and no time to bring the ballistic suite back online.

I watched, helplessly, as the missile popped open, vomiting twin clouds of shrapnel at our unarmored stern.

*Eirinn.*

The shrapnel shredded four of our six radiators—two on either side of the propulsion block—without passing through our hull proper. With our laser core firing at full power, we overheated in seconds, and the emergency shutdown kicked in to save us from being cooked. All my screens went from blue to red.

When it finally sank in that we were still alive, a collective sigh went up from the crew, me included.

"Well, that's just fucking *great*," Hub said. He wanted to kill me; I was sure of it.

"Status?" said Jack.

"Nothing left of radiators two, three, five and six," said Vikram. "Swiss cheese. Aside from that and minor thermal damage across the coolant systems, we're healthy. But we have zero thermal budget to use lasers."

I tried to tally up how much it would cost to fix *Arviat* and knew it would be in the billions. Only one place to get new radiators from: Iapetus. And I could only imagine how badly Islington would gouge us once he learned our need.

"New signal from the pirates," said Prota.

"I see it," said Jack. So did we all.

*DO YOU YIELD?*

Jack sighed heavily. I heard his fingers tapping on his console and saw his reply a moment later: *I STRIKE MY COLORS.*

The pirate response was instantaneous.

*PREPARE TO BE BOARDED.*

The airlock door swung open, and the pirates boarded us wearing armored spacesuits—a precaution in case we tried to kill them by venting atmosphere, as I'd heard some traders attempted in the past. There were twelve of them, armed with every kind of nonlethal weapon imaginable, as well as a few that might do permanent damage if employed correctly. There was nothing roguish or unpolished about them. If anything, they displayed a military level of discipline.

Two pirates, a man and a woman, glided toward Jack. The man: tall, lithe, and sporting a trim black beard behind his spacesuit visor. The woman: short, sharp-cheeked, with strawberry-blond hair and her right leg gone below the knee—no impediment that, living in zero-g. If their bearing alone didn't mark them out as the leaders of these pirates, the insignia on their suits' cuirasses sealed the deal.

"Jack Massey," said our commander. "This is my ship, *Arviat*. I offer you our surrender."

"Arthur Doidge," said the male pirate leader. "Commander of *Piranba*."

"Jaroslawa Skorupa," said the woman. "Commander of *Moray*. We accept your surrender."

Jack frowned. "Why do I know those names . . . ?"

Doidge smiled sadly. "Formerly of the Outer System Space Force, Saturn Command."

Jack's eyes widened in recognition. "Ocean Squadron!"

“That would be us.”

I wasn't surprised. This was yet another parallel with the bygone age that I'd studied in school. Warrior-sailors frequently took up lives of piracy following a war, because armed combat at sea was the only profession to which they were suited. The same was true out here. The War of Independence had created an entire class of person trained solely for space combat, and Ocean Squadron had been one of the craftiest collections of said individuals.

“Tell me something,” said Jack. “Your friend in the other ship—”

“Tsuyoshi Kanegawa,” Doidge supplied, “Commander of *Angler*—who, by the way, has a weapons lock on us right now, in case you were thinking of trying anything—”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Jack said quickly. “But that burnout he had . . . that was a feint?”

“It was.” Doidge cocked his head. “We noticed you power up your ballistics, but you didn't use them. Who's your FCO?”

Jack looked at me.

I felt my face burn as the pirates turned my way.

“*Kurwa*,” Skorupa cursed. “What is he, a barely fertilized egg?”

That was a bit unfair. I may have been young for a crewman, but I knew my duty.

Doidge chuckled. “Not many gunnery captains would show the restraint you did. You have my thanks. Tsuyoshi's a phenomenal warrior, would've been a pity to lose him.”

I wasn't sure what to make of a compliment from a man who was about to rob us.

Speaking of which, Doidge presently turned his attention back to Jack. “You made us work for this and undertake a dangerous *ruse-de-guerre* that might've cost us a ship and her crew. Ordinarily, we'd take extra from you for that. However, since we've done considerable damage to you and we're taking critical components from your vehicle, we'll keep the tithe to the laser core and four engines we requested.” He rattled the words off as though they were an oft-repeated litany; there was no malice in them.

“You're leaving us defenceless,” said Jack, “and underpowered for spaceflight.”

“And for that I'm sorry. I know this is unusual, but our need is great.”

Vikram, who until now had been watching the exchange with a puzzled expression, said,

“What good would our laser core and engines be to you? They're too large to be equipped on your spacecraft, and you're operating at the limit of your thermal budget anyhow.”

All the pirates turned their heads and stared at Vikram. A prickly silence passed.

“That's our business,” said Skorupa softly. “Not yours.”

Vikram met her gaze steadily for several seconds, then shrugged. “You're going to need someone to help you detach the engines.”

“Are you that someone?” Doidge asked.

“I am.”

“Then get suited up, you're with me.” Doidge looked at me. “Are you rated for transshipping weapons systems?”

“I—uh, yes, yes I am,” I stuttered

Doidge turned to Skorupa. “Slawa?”

Skorupa pushed off Jack's chair and floated toward me. “I'm assuming that your entire crew is mustered in this compartment,” she said to everyone and no one. “If not, and if those in hiding have arranged any surprise for me . . .” She drew a small CO<sub>2</sub>-powered pistol and displayed it for all to see. “These rounds are lethal at short range.” She pointed the barrel at my ribs, and I felt my hands begin to sweat.

“Wouldn't be a loss . . .” Hub, hovering just above his seat, muttered.

Jack rounded on our pilot. “You will sit down, shut up, and speak only when spoken to.”

Hub's eyes widened. “But, Jack, he's—”

“The next two words out of your mouth better be ‘Yes, sir.’”

Hub's mouth was hanging open; presently, he closed it, swallowed hard, and said, “Yes, sir.” He pulled himself back into his chair and strapped in, staring black hate at me the whole time.

Doidge, whose eyes had been flitting across all our faces throughout this engagement, said, “Clearly this has been a very stressful day. I think the best thing for all parties is if we get this unpleasantness over with as quickly as possible and go our separate ways.” He looked to Jack. “Wouldn't you agree, Commander?”

Massey unclenched his fists and breathed out heavily. “Yes . . .” he said. “Yes, I agree.” He rotated and faced Doidge. “I'll render whatever aid you need.”

Doidge nodded. "Slawa?"

"Hjalmar, Xavier," said Skorupa, "you're with me. Eyes open and stay alert." She looked at me. "Let's go."

I found the nearest handhold and pulled myself toward the companionway.

*Arviat* was approximately eighty meters long, twenty meters wide, not counting the radiators and armor protrusions. Standard size for a Saturnian trader. Big enough to get lost in, certainly. I felt the pirates scanning corners as we glided past them.

"Small crew for such a large craft," Skorupa observed. The hard edge in her voice was gone, and she no longer kept her pistol aimed straight at me. "We were expecting ten to thirteen of you."

"*Arviat's* never run with that many," I said and immediately wondered how much I should tell her. I'd heard most interactions between pirates and traders were civil, but these didn't seem like ordinary pirates. But when you got down to it, the difference between a pirate and a trader was that one has a home and the other doesn't. That was all. "Our astronaut corps is less than a dozen members total, me included. Besides, with less crew, we can pack more food."

"That's an awfully thin margin," said Skorupa. There was genuine concern in her voice—at least it sounded genuine. "How many craft are you distributed across?"

"Just the one." Some instinct warned me to say nothing of *Enmadai*. As we floated aft, my eyes strayed to her stump.

She caught me staring. "Parting gift from a failed cutting out expedition," she said, shaking what remained of her leg.

"On . . . ?"

"*Fortune.*"

My eyes went wide. "That was you? Ow!" Her words distracted me so that I collided headfirst with the mid-internal airlock door.

Skorupa stifled a smile. "Yeah."

I remembered hearing about the attack. It'd happened a year before Eirinn and I were cleared to have a baby. Pirate raiders had tried to steal one of Elvor Islington's quarter-kilometer-long freighters off a slipway in orbit of Iapetus. The attack had been repulsed, and one of the four pirate craft had been destroyed, the other three heavily damaged.

"I'm . . . sorry you lost someone," I said.

Skorupa's smile fell. "Let's keep moving."

Most of the aft section of *Arviat* was unpressurized, so I had to don a spacesuit myself before using my security clearance to open the way. The compartment that held the laser core was a thin space that ran from one side of the craft to the other, with doors at port and starboard that opened to space. This allowed for easy removal and repair or replacement of the core. The core itself was a tube seven meters long and one meter wide, anchored to the ship and slotted into a plug at the bow-end of the compartment. It looked, oddly enough, like a cannon from an eighteenth-century merchantman.

I started to pull myself toward the diagnostic station, but Skorupa stopped me. "Wait a moment." She kicked off the wall, gliding the length of the core and disappearing around the opposite side of it. A few moments later, she came back. "Yeah, it's the right class," she said to her crewmates. Then she nodded to me. "Okay, check its vitals."

I went to the diagnostic station and worked, doing routine checks on the health of the laser. It hadn't been damaged during the action. I instructed the computer to retract the anchor points and prepare for a manual removal. "It's green. Are any of your vehicles repositioning to transship it?" I asked Skorupa.

"Just yank it and toss it," she said. "We'll use an arm to grab it."

I opened the starboard doors. Beyond, Saturn loomed. Lightning flashed through its clouds.

One of the pirate craft (*Maybe Kanegawa's . . . what'd they call it?* Angler?) hovered in sight. A spindly mechanical arm unfolded from its side and stood poised before the compartment doors. With the help of Skorupa's men, I shifted the laser onto the magnetic tracks, and, at low speed, sent it sliding into space. It rolled free of *Arviat*, and the arm caught it in its claws and pulled it close to the belly of the pirate ship.

"All right," said Skorupa. "Let's get back to the command center." She waved her pistol, gesturing for me to take the lead.

I watched with my crew as the pirates burned away from us toward Saturn, our laser core and engines strapped to their hulls.

"They'll pass between the rings and the

planet itself," Hub reported, reading their trajectory. "My guess is they'll change course once they break line of sight with us and coast toward their final destination."

"Somewhere between the rings, maybe," said Protá. "That's where they came from."

Jack sat hunched over his screen for a while in silent contemplation. Then he said, "Vikram, how are we looking for our braking burn at Siarnaq?"

"We've enough thermal budget to use our engines," Vikram replied. "But I wouldn't recommend turning on anything we don't need."

"Full safeties on the reactor?"

"Already in place."

Jack reclined in his chair and addressed all of us. "There's no point in recriminations," he said, his eyes landing on Hub. "Nor is there any point in questioning what we could've done differently. This has been the most unusual pirate attack I've ever heard of, but mercifully, our consignment is intact. Everything we've lost can be replaced. Above all, no one has been killed. I want after-action reports from every quarter, and then I want you all to get some rest. We still have a long orbit ahead of us, and there's plenty of repairs we can make along the way. Our task now is to return this spacecraft to Siarnaq in the best condition we can manage. If anyone is unclear on these orders, you can speak with me in private. Hub, would you please line us up for our braking burn?"

Hub, in a subdued voice, replied, "Aye, Jack."

All of us set to work and brought the ship down from its former state of readiness. Jack, after a time, retired to his quarters to write his confidential report for the Siarnaq council, leaving Protá in charge. I expected to take a good deal of abuse in his absence, but Hub and the others were silent.

*I acted according to my judgment, I told myself. I have no reason to be ashamed. Bloodshed is nothing to be proud of. Even if I'd destroyed Angler, we probably still would've been taken, and the pirates might've repaid the deaths in kind. The others have no right to criticize my choice.*

Once I'd ensured all our lethal weapons were powered down, I began drafting my report for the council. At some point we emerged from the shadow of Saturn. For most crews,

the return of the Sun was cause for celebration, but not for *Arviat*.

Elvor Islington was a fat man in a society where people do not get fat. He wore the deep crimson robe of the Iapetan merchants. His head, neck, and fingers were jewel-encrusted to the point where, when he moved, he scintillated. He squatted in his garden, which was the greatest indicator of his wealth: in a place where life was the rarest, most precious resource, only the truly rich could afford to grow plants for no other reason than aesthetics. Islington, his red robe surrounded by living green, smiled beneficently at the camera.

"Honorable councilors," he purred in his liquid baritone. "I was most aggrieved to hear of the attack on your spacecraft. Pirates are such loathsome parasites. I do believe these raiders were the same ones who tried to cut out my *Fortune*. It is fortunate," he smiled at his own pun, "that in both attacks, no innocent lives were lost."

*No lives that matter, you mean.* I thought of the Ocean Squadron ship, which I learned was *Mako*, that had been destroyed in the failed *Fortune* cutting out expedition. It occurred to me that there was a bravery in choosing to prey upon the strong rather than the weak, and I had to wonder if, given the choice, Ocean Squadron would've preferred to continue going after Islington's freighters instead of small traders like us, but the fat admin kept his merchantmen armed to the teeth.

"Anyroad," Islington continued, "regarding your request for replacement radiators of the size you require, I would be only too happy to supply you them. Supplies being what they are . . . ahem . . . there's been a not-insignificant markup in prices. I could perhaps sell the radiators to you at a rate of thirty-two-billion USC per panel." He looked as if he'd just taken a bite of one of the big, juicy apples hanging above his shoulder.

I clenched my jaw. The atmosphere in the command center tautened.

Islington opened his bejeweled hands. "Contact me again if these terms are acceptable." He wagged a finger. "But don't wait *too* long. Buyers of large-scale radiators are never in short supply."

Islington's face was replaced by that of Sian Vance, First Councilor of Siarnaq.

"We signed for the radiators," she said. "But the purchase of them has depleted our treasury to the point that, if we miss a shipment on our next trade run, Siarnaq will go bankrupt."

"CAFA," Hub swore, swirling the liquor in his drinking bulb.

"The position of the council," Sian's message continued, "is that you all did your duty to an exemplary degree. We find no fault with any of your actions." A pregnant pause followed. "We've made the decision to cannibalize *Ennadai* for the purpose of restoring *Arviat*'s components."

A cold fist slammed into my gut.

"We can't afford to run on only a partially operational trader in hope of getting *Ennadai* off the slipway. We need you at full strength. It's lucky that *Ennadai*'s propulsion block was completed last year; you'll have your pick of the new engines. Her laser core is slated to come out of the workshop one week after your return." Even though Sian could've had no idea where I'd be sitting when she recorded her message, her eyes somehow found an angle that lined up with my fire control station. "FCO Petrou will have to remain part of your crew for the next few months. You all know why."

My crew shifted in their chairs; Vik and Prota sighed.

"Our teams here are analyzing the data you sent on the pirate craft. They are indeed space superiority fighters from the War of Independence—specifically three of four that went missing from Mimas after the peace treaty was signed. We've also confirmed the identities of the pirates based on the footage from your internal security cameras. They are exactly who they claim to be. Their military hardware and training may go some way to explaining how they can fly through the ring gaps. At this time there's not much more to say except 'come home safely.'"

The message ended.

"CAFA," Hub repeated, and downed the last of his drink.

Siarnaq was a distant retrograde moon so far from Saturn that the gas giant appeared smaller than a fingernail. She was part of the Inuit

Group, named for a goddess who ruled over all the creatures of the sea. I learned in history class that the Inuit were people who dwelled in Earth's northern hemisphere, in houses made of ice called igloos, traversing frozen deserts on sleds pulled by canines. They seemed like a people out of a fantasy novel, stranger even than the voyagers who used canvas and wood to traverse oceans of water under unroofed skies. Their stories had captivated me, and now I was returning to the sea goddess's embrace.

*Arviat* coasted into a cavern cut into the arrowhead tip of the triangular moon, coming to a rest in its berth beside the partially completed *Ennadai*. The latter was little more than a skeleton, with only its aft propulsion section being completed. We'd been working on her for nearly ten years.

*She'd be finished by now if the inner moons didn't gouge us.*

The docking arms grabbed *Arviat* and drew her close to the wall. The space dock extended its gangway, which mated to *Arviat*'s airlock. An all-clear whistle sang from the command center's speakers, marking the end of our three-month cruise. We were home.

Egressing silently, we coasted down the gangway into the space dock. The stevedores gathered to meet us and patted us on the backs as we slipped by. There was no fanfare, no celebration; this voyage, while successful in one regard, had been disastrous in another. We left them to unload the food in *Arviat*'s hold.

Jack called a halt in the passage that led into the colony proper. "I'm going to report to the council," he said. "You're all on leave for tonight. Go be with your families. The council will send for you one by one tomorrow to interview you. Night, everyone."

No handshakes, no congratulations, just an awkward exchange of looks and a wordless leave-taking.

I glided into the warrens of Siarnaq and made my way to Blue Zone, the habitat sector, which possessed a modicum of gravity from a rotating drum installed within. Here was where most of the six hundred members of our community lived, including me. Deep within the rock, Blue Zone was well shielded from both cosmic rays and the radiation from Saturn. Many of the doors I passed sported

CAFA slogans: “Curse All Fat Admins!” “Islington’s the Real Pirate!” “Mis-*Fortune*.” I came to my apartment and rang the doorbell.

My wife opened the door.

Eirinn had let her blond curls grow out in the time I’d been away, and her belly had taken on a noticeable bump. Her green eyes lit up when she saw me, and before we knew it, we were in each other’s arms, hugging, squeezing, shaking.

She’d dealt with pirates before, of course. Seventeen times, three of those involving exchanges of fire. All the incidents had ended without her powering up ballistics. Now this year, when *Arviat* had come closer to destruction than at any point in our colony’s brief history, Eirinn hadn’t been at her station. I think the encounter with Ocean Squadron took a greater toll on her than me. It’s hard watching your loved ones fall into danger while you’re stuck at home, helpless.

Eirinn ran her hand through my hair and pulled. The pain anchored me, made this moment real. For a while we just stood there, holding each other.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

“Having a one-legged pirate wave a pistol at me isn’t my idea of a Saturnian voyage.”

Eirinn’s baby belly bumped me rapidly as she laughed.

We fumbled with each other’s zippers and buttons. We came together like colliding planets. Only once we’d burned away the fear and the anguish with sex could we find words again.

“I made dinner.” Eirinn waved indifferently to a protein brick on a plate atop the dining table, drizzled with an amber glaze. “It’s cold now.”

“I’m starving.” I got up naked from the bed, sat down at the table and took up my fork. The brick was bland, but the glaze was sweet.

Eirinn sat across from me and clasped her hands atop the plastic surface. I noted the tablet she’d left open on the table and would’ve bet my dinner she’d been looking at our after-action reports. “What do you think?” I asked, pointing at the tablet with my fork.

“I think you did everything right,” Eirinn said.

“Hub wouldn’t agree.”

“Oh, fuck him. He doesn’t have to make the hard choices.”

“Good pilot though.”

Eirinn shrugged. “He’ll do till something better comes along.” She was joking. I knew she was. She loved her crew, her ship. I tried not to think about how much it killed her not to have been on *Arviat* when the pirates came calling.

“CAFA’s making a comeback,” I said, changing the subject. “Saw the slogans.”

“My favorite is ‘We Were Robbed Twice.’”

“Well, we *were*.”

Eirinn sighed. “Seventeen pirate engagements, and never once did I feel resentment toward them. To tell the truth, I was always glad to give them food.”

“I know.” I chewed my brick slowly. “That’s why it’s so weird Ocean Squadron didn’t ask for food.”

“That’s the only thing I’ve thought about since the incident,” Eirinn said. She pushed her tablet toward me. “I think I have it figured out.”

I paused mid-bite. “What’s this?” I asked, glancing at the screen.

“Look at it, tell me what you think.”

I put down my fork and took the tablet, flipping it right side up. A series of pictures, taken in the infrared spectrum, depicted Saturn’s rings—specifically the shepherd moon Pan in the Encke Gap. The edges of A Ring on either side were rippled and wavy from Pan’s passage, distorted by the moon’s gravitational wake.

I looked at Eirinn, uncomprehending.

“The first few photos are from the tail end of the war,” said Eirinn. “The rest were taken after. I pulled them all from the observatory records. Flip through them, tell me what you see.”

I obliged her, starting from the beginning. The first seven photos just showed the ravioli-shaped Pan happily skipping along through the Encke Gap. And then I got to photo eight, and I nearly dropped the tablet.

There, circling around Pan, were four motes of light. Drive plumes.

Eirinn was smiling at me. “Keep going.”

I did. Over time, the motes flitted to and fro around Pan, and then, after photo forty, one of the motes stopped appearing. I looked at the date. It was one month after the failed *Fortune* cutting out. I opened my mouth to speak.

"Yes," Eirinn said, pre-emptively. "I already compared the spectral profiles. These are Ocean Squadron."

I reached the end of the series and let the tablet fall flat on the table. I'd completely forgotten about my food. "This explains a lot."

Eirinn nodded. "Including what they wanted the engines and laser core for."

"Did you show this to the council?"

"Not yet." She leaned forward, her nipples brushing the surface of the table. "I wanted to ask you what you think we should do."

I raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

"Well, it's your ass that's going to be in the FCO's chair for the foreseeable future, so it's your ass that'll be in danger if these pirates strike again. More importantly, you met them face-to-face. So, I want to know . . . if it were up to you, what would you do with this information?"

"Fine work, Eirinn." Sian finished flipping through the images and set down the tablet. "Now." She looked across the assembled faces. "The question is 'what do we do with this?'"

Sian, her co-councillors Cheyla Jenaris and Jae Chong-Miranda, and the crew of *Arviat*, including me and Eirinn, were gathered in the council chambers.

"We could sell the information to Islington," said Cheyla. "Maybe bargain for better prices . . . he *is* the only one with the power to directly strike at the pirates."

Everyone else looked nauseated at this suggestion, but it was a valid course of action, and someone had to put it forward. I was proud of Cheyla for doing so.

"Or we could give it to the system at large," said Jae. "Warn everyone at once to beware the Encke Gap. Although that won't result in any immediate material returns, which are what we need right now . . ."

"The pirates could also change their address if we did that," said Jack. "They've proven flying between the rings is no issue for them."

"I'd be willing to consider blackmail," said Sian. "Ransom the information for our engines and laser core."

I looked at Eirinn. She gave me a small nod. I cleared my throat and raised my hand. "Uh, councillors?"

All eyes turned toward me.

"Yes, Guillaume?" said Sian.

"Why not make an alliance with the pirates?"

The chambers fell so silent that, for a moment, the only sound was the rattle of the fans in the wall vents.

"You want to walk us through your thinking?" asked Protia.

I coughed a second time, finding my mouth very dry. "Well . . . what's the root of piracy? The acquisition of goods that you cannot buy or make yourself. The pirates could've taken our food, but they didn't . . . so Eirinn and I are inclined to think they're able to grow their own. They took our engines and laser core, but both are far too large to equip on their space fighters. And we now know they're based out of a shepherd moon. Our theory," I nodded to Eirinn, "is that Pan isn't just a hideout. They're trying to establish their own colony, and they're currently in the process of constructing their own armed trader."

Another silence as everyone weighed my words.

"But . . . armed traders can be built legally," said Vikram.

"Only if you have the money to buy parts and the population to assemble them," Eirinn countered. "With Elvor Islington hiking prices to line his own pockets, who can afford to pay for that? Moreover, I don't think the pirates have a large population. If they're ex-military, then their entire population probably consists of just the fighter crews and their families, so it would take them decades to build a trader out of resources they've mined. Guillaume and I think these soldiers are speed-running the colony-building process, using piracy to get an armed trader off the slipway as fast as possible."

"And why," asked Jae, "would we make an alliance with them?"

Eirinn allowed me to deliver the coup de grace. "Because we would have a food-producing partner and military asset at the heart of the Saturnian system. In return, we supply them with weapons and engines. We would still have to buy hardware from Islington, but at least he wouldn't be gouging us on food anymore."

One by one, the councillors' and crew's eyes lit up as they grasped the enormity of what I was proposing.

“An alliance with pirates has never been done,” said Sian.

“But we have every reason to be friends with them,” I said. “All pirates are just trying to survive, like we are. The only difference between traders and pirates is that we got one or two more breaks than they did.” Feeling emboldened, I pointed back toward the chamber doors. “I passed two dozen CAFA flags on the way in here. People are sick to death of being preyed upon by those who have everything and yet want more. You want to really curse greedy administrators? This is the way to do it.”

One by one, the councillors and my crewmates’ faces began to glow. They saw the possibility of what we could do here, and they were rapidly coming around to the idea.

“If we were to contact them,” said Cheyla, turning to her co-councillors, “what would that look like?”

“We couldn’t send a message from here,” said Jae. “Our signal—and their reply—might be intercepted, and we can’t encrypt it since they wouldn’t be able to *decrypt* it.”

“We’ll have to go down there,” said Jack, looking up through the oculus in the ceiling at a fingernail-size Saturn. “Transmit a message in the clear at close range.”

“*Arviat’s* got no laser and four less engines,” said Hub, glancing my way. “If we get jumped—”

“Also,” Prota interjected, “we need *Arviat* to sell our minerals to the inner moons. If we miss a cargo run, Siarnaq—”

“We know the situation,” said Sian gently. “And yet . . . I’m still inclined to take the risk of contacting the pirates.” She looked to Cheyla and Jae.

Cheyla nodded. “I concur.”

Jae chewed their lip for a moment, then nodded as well. “As do I. It’d be nice to have a friend down the well.”

Sian looked at Jack. “How soon can you fly?”

*Arviat’s* new radiator configuration made her look like a squat dart. With fewer engines, we’d have to take a much longer trip down toward Saturn, but we would get away with fewer and shorter engine burns as well, reducing our chances of detection and saving enormous amounts of fuel. Hub had done his homework and found us an excellent course

to rendezvous with Pan in the quietest manner possible.

“I don’t feel comfortable getting too close to the rings,” said Hub, talking us through it in the command center. On the screen behind him was a 3D image of Saturn. Our course was a blue line that arced over the planet’s north pole and down to the rings on the far side. Pan was highlighted. “We enter station keeping above the plane of Pan’s orbit and make our greeting.”

“I’ve rigged the transponder to project a narrow beam confined to Pan’s dimensions,” said Prota. “So the pirates’ll hear us, but no one else will.”

Jack looked at me. “Full safeties on all ballistics at all times,” he said. “I don’t want them frying us with a meson beam just because we left a gun port open.”

“Aye, sir,” I said.

Eirinn entered the command center. She wasn’t coming with us on this voyage, but had worked closely with the dockyard teams to shorten our turnaround time. “Special cargo is secure in the hold,” she said. “Hope they appreciate it.”

“Me too,” Vikram sighed.

“Okay,” said Jack, “I think it’s time we got underway.”

Eirinn drifted over to me and put her arms and legs around me. She kissed me on the lips despite her crew being all around us. “I think I like you.”

I hugged her tight. “I think I like you back.”

“Bring my ship home in one piece.”

“I will.”

Eirinn looked over her shoulder at her crew. “Bring my husband home in one piece.”

“Depends how annoying he is,” said Hub . . . but he was grinning.

Eirinn disentangled herself from me and headed out the door to the space dock.

“All right, everyone, take your stations,” said Jack, buckling into his chair. When we were ready, he put his headset on. “Space dock, *Arviat*. Cut us loose.”

The whole ship lurched, and with a puff of our RCS thrusters, we drifted out the mouth of our Siarnaq onto a sea of stars.

“Clear of space dock,” said Hub.

“In that case,” said Jack, drawing a deep breath. “Set course for the Encke Gap. Destination: Pan.”

\* \* \*

Saturn once more filled my screen. We were high above the North Pole, and the hexagon was bathed in sunlight. This weird, geometrically perfect, color-changing cloud pattern always brought a smile to my face. It was cute, insouciant, a perfect shape where perfection ought not be possible. The first time I saw it up close on our last voyage, I'd had to stifle a giggling fit. I don't know why, but it amused me terribly.

My enjoyment of the hexagon was interrupted by radiation pings on my monitor, which I announced to Jack.

"Analysis?" he said.

"Light anomalies," I replied. "Consistent with weapons fire but not directed at us."

"Where?"

"Half-million kilometers away—looks like a battle happening above the Maxwell Gap."

Jack mirrored my feed on the big screen.

The battle was an argument between fireflies, with the flashes coming faster and faster.

"That's way too many to be engine burns," Prota observed.

"They're using ballistics . . ." Vikram breathed.

"A lot of them," I said, reading the data. "High-explosive missiles. I'm seeing debris consistent with a destroyed spacecraft."

"Pirate or trader?" Hub asked.

"Can't tell."

"Probably pirate," said Jack. "Traders don't convoy like they used to, so there'll be only one, and if the fight is still continuing . . ." He left the rest unsaid. All of us could see this for what it was: a stage five pirate encounter. One of the pirate craft had been destroyed, and the rest were going to avenge her. "Are these *our* pirates?" Jack asked.

"Uh, stand by . . ." I pulled up the drive profile of the Encke Gap ambushers and pinned it to my screen. Then I waited for an engine burn from one of the raiders in front of us, profiled it, pinned it, and compared the two. "Negative. The drives aren't the same. These aren't the pirates of Pan."

"Oh!" Vik exclaimed.

There was one huge flash on screen, a few flickers, and then nothing. The fight was over.

"Who won?" Hub asked.

I looked over the data. "Not the trader."

"What do you think they were carrying?" Prota breathed.

"If it was worth killing for," said Jack, "we'll probably find out tomorrow."

We did.

The trader was the *Snorri* out of Ymir, the largest moon of the Norse Group, population two hundred twenty-seven. Well, two hundred twenty-three, now. She was the only trader the colony had, and she'd been carrying food.

Ymir had declared an emergency and requested immediate relief from Iapetus, the only moon with ships to spare. Elvor Islington was willing to divert *Prosperity*, bound for Rhea, from her normal route, *if* Ymir could cover the cost of the delivery of metals she'd have to cancel as a result. Ymir was trying to negotiate. Mimas, Dione, and Titan said they could send space tugs with food to Ymir, but the tugs were unarmed, so most of them would be scooped up by pirates. If Ymir didn't get help, their population would be dead inside a year.

We keenly felt the plight of the Ymiri. Like us, they were a distant retrograde satellite, dependent on trade to survive. We could've *been* them, if we were just a little less lucky.

My crew began to look at me differently after the death of the *Snorri*. It wasn't hard to guess why: like me, *Snorri* had a fire control officer, and, unlike me, that person had made the wrong call. They'd taken the burden of executioner unto themselves and been executed in turn. If there was any doubt I'd chosen well in our battle against Ocean Squadron, *Snorri's* death erased it.

But the knowledge didn't erase the pain we felt at seeing fellow traders suffer. Throughout our history, twenty Saturnian colonies had folded due to starvation. Now, without substantial, immediate help, Ymir would be number twenty-one. A sense of urgency grew among us. Privation and strife were becoming rampant across Saturn, and the only people who could do something to ameliorate the situation were busy fattening themselves on the chaos.

*We cannot go on like this. Something must give way.*

The klaxon woke me. I fought free of my sleeping bag and pulled myself to the hatch.

Hub was gliding past, shirtless, still pulling his pants on, when I emerged. "What's going on?" I asked.

"No idea, man," he said over his shoulder as he hurtled by.

I followed.

Jack and Prota were at their stations when we got to the command center, and Vikram arrived just after us.

"Commander?" I said, strapping into my seat.

"I managed to angle our armor at them," said Jack, "but they have good firing lines on us." He looked to Hub. "You have control."

"I have control," Hub confirmed, taking hold of his stick and throttle.

"Are these our pirates?" Vikram asked.

"No," I said, studying my screens. "It's the raiders who hit the *Snorri*."

Hub rotated the *Arviat*, trying to get a better angle of deflection against their lasers. "What did their handshake say?"

"There was no handshake," Jack replied.

That threw us all. "What?"

"It's true," Prota said. "No handshake. They just started shooting."

"Has everyone gone crazy 'round the rings?" Hub asked. "God *damn* you, slick sons of bitches . . ." He grimaced as he pitched and yawed. "They definitely got the weather gauge of us, Jack. They've spaced themselves out so that one of them always has a shot at our radiators, no matter which way we pivot."

"Fire control," said Jack, "how many targets you got?"

"Three," I said, "Intermediate size spacecraft. Looks like Titan fuel shuttles that've been outfitted for deep space. Jack, I'm throwing out all our electronic countermeasures, but without our laser core, there's not much I can do." I paused before asking, "Do we activate ballistics?"

"Negative," Jack replied. "I'm still trying to query these guys—got something!" He shared the message with all of us.

*STND DWN PREPAR T BE BOARD*

The message was clear, if poorly written, and Prota commented as much. "What's wrong with them?"

A bunch of warnings flitted across my screens. I tried to parse them, but they didn't make any sense. "Vik," I said, "I'm getting a lot of readings on these ships I don't understand.

Can you take a look?"

"Show me," said Vik.

I mirrored him my screen.

He was quiet for several seconds, then . . . "Oh dear God . . ." He sounded shocked. He *never* sounded shocked. "Jack . . . their ships have taken major structural damage. I'm seeing radiation spilling from their internals."

I looked over my shoulder.

Jack had gone white. "Their reactors are melting?"

"That's what it looks like."

"They want to dump their ships and take ours?" said Hub.

"*Arviat* can only support five bodies," Prota said. "There's gotta be a lot more than five on each of those shuttles."

"They don't know that," said Jack. "And once they find out, they're going to throw us out the airlock and take *Arviat* somewhere they can get more air. And they'll have the docking codes for Siarnaq."

"They'd never make it to Siarnaq!" Vikram protested. "They'd starve or suffocate!"

"Some of them might. They might kill each other, whittle themselves down to five, and then use *Arviat*'s ballistic suite to hold Siarnaq hostage. We can't let them do that." I saw the indecision on Jack's face. His eyes flitted left to right, looking at the air, as if he were reading some screen visible only to him. "Guillaume," he said.

"Aye, sir?"

"Activate ballistics."

"Aye, sir!" I powered on the ballistic suite and opened all gunports. There was none of the same trepidation as the first time I turned them on, none of the anxiety about taking a human life. If these pirates took *Arviat*, Eirinn and our baby would be in danger.

"Prota," said Jack, "I want you to start broadcasting our special message toward Pan and add that we're under attack and if we die, Ocean Squadron gets nothing."

"Aye aye."

"Loop it so there's no chance of them missing it." Then, to me, "Guillaume?"

I looked at Jack. "Yes?"

"Will you destroy those pirates?"

I drew a breath and nodded. "Yes sir, I will." I turned back to my console, placed the targeting reticles over the three oncoming shuttles, and pressed FIRE.

Buzzing, as of the wings of giant hornets, came from every corner of the command center as the *Arviat*'s chain guns spat tungsten at the pirates. Small jolts rocked the ship as she vomited missiles; on my screen they streaked toward the pirate ships, bobbing and weaving. But shortly before impact they spun out and flew in random directions.

"Enemy countermeasures operational!" I announced.

"Retaliation?" asked Jack.

"Negative. No ballistics. I don't think they want *Arviat* damaged."

"They've got no problem burning out our coolant systems," said Vikram. "I'm getting constant alarms on our radiators. We're about to hit the red line."

Jack turned to Vikram. "Disengage the automatic shutdown protocols."

Vikram stared at Jack. "Sir—"

"Surrender isn't an option this time, my friend."

Vikram's face trembled, then hardened. "Aye, sir." I heard a chirp from his console, and he said, "Protocols disabled. Heat climbing."

Jack turned to Protta. "Any reply?"

Protta shook her head.

"Guillaume?"

"I'm using a combination auto- and manual fire," I said. "No effective hits."

"Time to start getting creative, people," said Vikram. "We just exceeded our thermal budget."

I glanced at Pan in the corner of my monitor. *Come on, where are you?* I felt a breath of warm air on the top of my head. The ship's heat was starting to spill into the atmosphere. At this rate, it would be oven-hot in the command center in ten minutes.

"There's nothing more I can do to block their shots," said Hub. "They have a perfect crossfire on our radiators."

Jack shook his head. "I'm waking the self-destruct program. If things don't change . . ."

"Better to blow up than bake," Hub muttered.

I thought of Eirinn and my child. I looked out at Saturn, at the stars. There was no one else who could help us but the pirates of Pan, and they didn't seem interested. "I'm sorry, everyone," I said.

Hub looked at me. "It was a good idea, man."

Jack tapped on his console. "Arming self-destruct."

It was getting hot in the command center.

"Setting timer—"

"WAIT!" Protta roared.

We all froze.

"JRH!"

I looked at my screen. There, staring at me, were the Skull and Crossbones, except the background wasn't black.

It was red.

I remembered what that meant from my hours spent in the Siarnaq library, reading about the Golden Age of Piracy. A red flag flown by a pirate ship meant no quarter would be given. As far as I knew, this was the first time such a flag was being flown by Saturnian pirates.

There, just above Pan, three spacecraft were racing toward us.

"Safing self-destruct . . ." Jack said.

"Message incoming," Protta announced. "It's . . . it's addressed to Guillaume." She passed it to my screen.

I read it.

*KEEP YOUR FINGER ON THE TRIGGER.*

Our attackers lit up like the sun on infrared. "Massed laser volley!" I said, looking at the readings.

Suddenly, it began to grow cooler in the command center.

"The shuttles have stopped firing . . . I think they're dead in the water."

"Guillaume," said Jack, "will you—"

"Missiles away," I interrupted.

I watched the three warheads streak away from *Arviat* at constantly increasing velocity. They split and went on different paths. They impacted their targets at the same time.

The shuttles ceased to exist.

*I am now a killer.*

*You shouldn't feel guilty, Eirinn's voice said in my head. Those pirates could've given up the attack on Snorri when it became clear she'd fight to the death. They could've let her go after their comrade was destroyed. Instead, they murdered the Snorri and put Ymir at risk of starvation, and they would've murdered you, Jack, Hub, Protta, Vikram, and who knows how many others. You did the right thing.*

"Power down all nonessential systems," Jack ordered. "Vik, restore safety protocols."

“Already done,” Vikram said.

“Ballistics safed,” I said. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

It was Hub. “Glad you were with us,” he said.

I put my hand on his, drawing strength from him.

“New message from *Piranba*,” Prota announced, her voice trembling.

“Let’s see it,” said Jack.

It popped up on my screen.

*CLOSE CALL! SHALL WE HAVE A CHAT?*

This time, *Piranba* and *Angler* docked with *Arviat*, and Doidge was joined by the commander we’d not yet met: Tsuyoshi Kanegawa. He was a tall, powerfully built man with an expressive, friendly face, on which he wore a bemused smile. The two pirate leaders were accompanied by eight of their armed boarders, all dressed in armored space suits.

“Welcome aboard,” said Jack. Despite having just been in a battle to the death, he was the very image of composure and civility. “Can I offer you some refreshment?”

“Perhaps later,” said Doidge, taking in each of us with his eyes before settling on Jack again. “Your message was . . . very interesting.”

“Comes with the best wishes of Siarnaq and her councilors.”

Doidge smiled beneath his beard. “So, this is to be a formal exchange?”

Jack spread his hands. “Commander, if we had guessed wrong, would you have rescued us? Would you be here right now?”

Kanegawa chuckled and looked at Doidge. “He’s got us there.”

“Hmph.” Doidge scratched the bristles on his cheek and contemplated Jack. “All right. Let’s talk. But first let’s have a link set up with Slawa. I’d like her to be in on this.”

“By all means. Using our comms?”

“No, ours will do.” Doidge reached into his pocket and withdrew a tablet, folded into quarters. He unfolded it and angled the screen so the camera on the border picked up the entire room. A few taps of the screen, and Jaroslawa Skorupa’s face appeared. She nodded to me.

“Good to see you again, FCO,” she said.

“You as well,” I replied.

“All right,” Doidge said, and to my astonishment, he removed the helmet of his spacesuit. Kanegawa did likewise. “I’d like to hear it from your mouth, Commander.” Doidge stared hard at Jack.

Jack did not falter. “It’s simple. We think you’re trying to establish a colony, and you need an armed trader to keep it alive. Problem is, you have neither the bodies nor the resources to build one, so you’re pilfering bits and pieces of other traders in order to construct it.”

“If that were so,” said Skorupa from her screen, “why wouldn’t we have just taken your ship?”

“You already tried to seize a trader, but the cutting out of the *Fortune* didn’t work out. You’re going to be a part of the Saturnian community in a few years, so you can’t afford to burn bridges. More than that, I don’t think your consciences would let you deprive any of the small moons of the ships they need to survive. So far, you’ve played by the rules, albeit bending them to a significant degree while you’re at it.”

The pirates didn’t react to this barb.

“Why do you want an alliance with us?” Doidge asked.

“I can answer that in one word: food. You have a way to grow food, otherwise you’d have taken some of ours when you raided our ship. Food and water are two resources we don’t have on Siarnaq. Water we source from Enceladus, and food from Iapetus, but we’d prefer not to deal with Islington if it was our choice. We’d rather trade with you, if your stocks allow.”

“In exchange for . . . ?”

“Engines,” said Jack. “And weapons, if you need them.”

“Those are critical goods,” said Kanegawa, still with that bemused smile. “And our need is immediate. We already took some engines from *Arviat*, and your laser core. I don’t see that you have more to spare.”

“Not *here*,” said Jack, grinning.

The expressions on the pirate’s faces changed. “You have our undivided attention,” said Doidge.

Jack rotated in his seat. “Prota?”

“We’re building a second spacecraft,” she said. “Bigger than *Arviat*. Her name is *Ennadai*. When you raided us, only the propul-

sion block and weapon systems were complete. We are willing to offer any and all components from her in exchange for an ongoing relationship between our two moons. As a token of our goodwill, we've brought one such engine with us, and we're prepared to give it to you *gratis*."

The pirates looked like we'd just handed them the answer to their prayers.

"That . . ." said Skorupa, hardly able to speak. "That is quite the offer."

"Siarnaq's population is six hundred, right?" asked Doidge.

"Six hundred and eight, soon," said Prota, glancing at me.

Doidge stroked his beard and looked at Skorupa. "Would our food cover that?"

"With calories to spare," Skorupa replied.

Doidge looked back at Jack and Prota. "And you speak with the full authority of your government?"

"We're empowered to conclude any trade deal that does not exceed our available resources," said Prota. "Would you require any armor plating for your spacecraft? That would take time to manufacture . . ." She trailed off, for the pirates were chuckling.

"I think," said Kanegawa, "we should show them the ship before we discuss things further." He looked at Doidge. "Don't you agree?"

"Oh yes," said Doidge, beaming. "Yes, I think that's wise."

It was made of ice.

Its shape was the same as an ordinary trader—a spearpoint—but instead of the many mirrored plates of armor common to our ships, its vitals were sheathed in a single contiguous piece of ice.

All of us—Arviats, Piranhas, Anglers, and Morays—hovered in an observation lounge just off the Pan space dock. The space dock was relatively small, big enough only to fit the fighters and the ice ship. *Arviat* had to be parked outside.

"There was an idea," Doidge explained. "One of those outlandish notions that occurs only in wartime. It became painfully clear early on that the outer system couldn't match the industrial capacity of Earth. Engines, mirror armor, weapons—there was no contest. They could beat us. So, one idea that was floated was that we instead build

spacecraft out of the material of the Solar System itself."

"Ice is everywhere," Skorupa added. "Moons, comets, Saturn's rings—ice ships could replenish their hulls as they flew through the system."

"But the idea was never followed through," said Kanegawa. "The OSSF outflanked Earth, parked nukes in orbit, and forced them to the peace table in the second year of the war. All military projects were placed on hold and the OSSF disbanded Saturn Command and returned home to the Jovian System."

"It's very logical," I said, thinking of the Inuit and their igloos as I studied the weird ship. "Humans have been building homes out of ice for thousands of years."

"After we were discharged," Doidge continued, "a bunch of us decided to make a go of it on Pan."

"Learning how to fly through the ring gaps," said Hub. "Another military trick?"

Skorupa smiled predatorily. "Makes for great ambush tactics, doesn't it? The rings are death to anything passing through them. Why would anyone think to look for an attack from them?"

"We didn't plan on building this ship," said Kanegawa. "Originally, we wanted to use one of Islington's. No need to build a ship if you can commandeer one. When that plan failed, Slawa remembered the ice ship project, and we started it up here."

Vikram studied the ice ship closely. "There aren't any radiators, are there?"

"None," said Doidge proudly. "The ice cools our systems, and when it turns to liquid, we pump it back into the outer shell, it refreezes, and becomes armor again."

"Not a closed system, though, like our coolant lines. You'd lose a lot in boil-off."

"We lose it every which way. The ice is our armor, our coolant, our drinking water, our air, our fuel. Again, it's a question of economy: we can find ice anywhere. It's an unlimited resource."

"Essentially," said Skorupa, "we get the most expensive systems of a spacecraft for free."

This was revolutionary. This was game-changing. This spacecraft completely upended the Saturnian economy. "There has to be a catch somewhere," I said.

"You already know it," said Kanegawa. "The engines."

"Even though ice is less dense than metal," said Skorupa, "we have more ice on our ship than you have metal on yours. Your *Arviat* is a honeycomb of unpressurized crawlspaces and companionways, and you can get away with that because your armor *deflects*. Ours *ablates*, so we need more of it."

"What you see before you," said Doidge, tracing the craft from stem to stern with his finger, "is mostly solid ice. The only unpressurized part of the ship is the cargo bay. So we need twice as many engines as most traders. We think nineteen to twenty-one is the sweet spot."

Prota whistled. "How many do you have now?"

"Twelve."

"What about the gun ports?" I asked. "And the laser emitters?"

Skorupa pressed a button on the console below the window and a holographic overlay covered the glass, highlighting the weapons hardpoints in yellow and green. "Green are hardpoints that've been installed; yellow are those that have yet to be built." The hardpoints were so well embedded in the ice that they would be almost impossible to hit from the outside.

"Wow . . ." I exhaled. "I once saw the *Prosperity* in space dock over Iapetus. You're almost as heavily armed as she is."

"We could put up a good fight against *any* Iapetan freighter," said Skorupa with venom in her voice.

Jack, who thus far had stared at the ice ship with adoring eyes, said, "I take it your showing us this means you assent to an alliance?"

"Absolutely." Doidge grinned. "Underdogs should stick together—provided you can supply the engines."

"No trouble at all," said Prota. "If we can take *Arviat* beyond the rings, I can get a message to Siarnaq."

"I'll arrange it," said Kanegawa.

I felt a small pang. It was possible *Ennadai* would eventually fly, but it would be many years yet before we could replace the engines. And with the advent of this new kind of spacecraft, Siarnaq might scrap *Ennadai* altogether and start designing their own ice ship. I shouldn't have been surprised; *Ennadai*, after all, was named for a ghost town.

Speaking of names . . . "What do you call her?" I asked.

The pirates looked surprised. "We . . ." said Doidge, caught off guard. "We haven't decided yet. Felt like bad luck to name her before she was completed—if she was ever completed."

"She will be, now," Jack promised.

"Then she'll need a name."

Skorupa looked at me. "You have something in mind?"

All eyes turned to me.

"Tupilaq," I said.

"Tupilaq?" said Kanegawa. "What's that mean?"

"It's an avenging sea monster made from animal parts and human tissue—bone, skin, sinew, hair, teeth. An Inuit shaman would create it in secret and send it forth to terrorize a very specific enemy." I glanced at Skorupa's missing leg. "Usually another shaman who'd wronged them."

Everyone listened, and then they turned their eyes to the ice ship.

"*Tupilaq* . . ." Doidge breathed, and though his back was to me I could hear the smile in his voice. "Has a ring to it."

"Oh yes," said Skorupa. "It fits."

We hovered in silence for some time, looking at the *Tupilaq*, admiring her grace, her alienness, her lethality.

"You know, a thought just occurred to me," I said. "The moon Ymir still hasn't gotten any food, and come the beginning of next year, her colonists will start dying."

"We could run food to them, too," said Skorupa. "If you get us the engines."

"That's a good short-term plan, but I was thinking more long term. The fact is, they need a new ship, and they need it now."

The pirates looked at me with shock. "You're not suggesting—" said Doidge.

"No, not the *Tupilaq*," I said hastily. "I was thinking . . . who in the Saturnian system has ships to spare?"

I saw the revelation dawn on them, and both the pirates and my own crew began to smile.

"I believe Islington's *Prosperity* starts her annual trade route soon," said Skorupa.

"She does," said Prota. "Her course should take her over the Encke Gap in three months."

Doidge chuckled. “I think it’s time Elvor Islington learned to share.”

*Prosperity* was a Fortune-class vessel, two-hundred-and-fifty meters long to our eighty. She had the guns to match her size, too: multiple laser cores and many high-caliber ballistics. Her armor was first-rate. A sister in every way to the ship Ocean Squadron had tried to cut out above Iapetus.

But no single spacecraft, no matter how well armed, could hope to withstand a determined rush by a squadron of five.

We loitered in the Encke Gap, watching *Prosperity* transit above us, observing strict radio silence. All indications were that they didn’t know we were here.

“Weird being on the other end of this,” Prota observed.

I saw Hub nod out the corner of my eye. “Ain’t that the truth,” he said.

Nevertheless, I heard a note of excitement in their voices.

Elvor Islington believed his ships untouchable, and as long as Iapetus was the center of Saturnian trade, that might’ve been true. But now a new axis was forming, comprising the moons of Siarnaq and Pan. The technology of ice ships would soon transform spaceflight, negating the need for trade with Iapetus for hardware and food. Islington was about to find himself obsolete.

We understood this event would be broadcast throughout the system. No Saturnian trader had ever attacked another. Piracy was left to the pirates. And yet I didn’t think our actions this day would be ill received—certainly not by Ymir, who, if all went according to plan, would shortly receive a brand-new spacecraft.

“Ten seconds, everyone,” said Jack, keeping his eyes glued to the ship’s clock, awaiting the appointed time. “Three . . . two . . . one . . . now!”

The squadron beamed the Jolly Roger Handshake at *Prosperity*. She lumbered along her course for a few moments longer before sluggishly trying to angle her armor at us.

Hub started the engines, and we surged up out of the gap, followed closely by *Moray*, *Piranha*, and *Angler*.

“*Prosperity* is refusing to stand down,” said Prota. “They’re broadcasting a transmission.”

“Put it up,” said Jack.

A bejeweled man appeared on our screens, fastidiously dressed in the same crimson robe Islington favored. His face matched his robe’s color. “This is Commander Rhys Milton of the Iapetan freighter *Prosperity*. Do you have any idea whose vessel this is?!”

Prota grinned as she said, “Jaroslawa is responding.”

Skorupa’s face appeared next to Milton’s. “We do,” she said. “That’s why we’re taking it.”

I saw Milton’s red face turn white as *Tupilaq*, which hitherto had been drifting like an asteroid, suddenly sprang to frenzied life, hurtling out of the Encke Gap toward *Prosperity*. A new flag flashed across all our screens: a stylized Skull and Crossbones which, rather than a human skull, depicted a nightmare beast with four lidless, staring eyes and a gaping maw shelved with multiple banks of shark’s teeth.

“This is the sign of the *Tupilaq*,” said Skorupa. “Resist her at your peril.”

Jack joined the call, letting Milton see all our faces. “The children of Siarnaq send their coldest regards to Elvor Islington. We will be impoverished by him no longer.”

“CAFA, motherfuckers!” said Hub, slamming on the accelerator.

My chair squeezed me tight, as if *Arviat* were giving me a big hug. “All indications are *Prosperity*’s powering up her weapons,” I said. “I’m seeing massive heat blooms in her radiators.”

I heard a smile in Jack’s voice as he replied, “Guillaume . . . run out the guns.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The computers sang battle hymns as we went to take *Prosperity* for ourselves. ■

*James Dick is a Canadian actor, author, screenwriter and director. His stories have appeared in Analog, Andromeda Spaceways, The School Magazine, and many other publications. His novelette “EDIE,” published in Analog (January/February 2023), received critical acclaim in Locust Magazine. At Christmastime, he grous pointy ears and works as Santa’s elf, but is frequently mistaken for a Vulcan. He lives in Toronto.*