

TWILIGHT IMPERIUM

THE
FRACTURED
VOID

TIM PRATT

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The
**FRACTURED
VOID**

A Twilight Imperium Novel

BY TIM PRATT

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TWILIGHT IMPERIUM™

*A brave starship crew are drawn into the schemes of interplanetary powers competing for galactic domination, in this epic space opera from the best-selling strategic boardgame, **Twilight Imperium***

Captain Felix Duval and the crew of the Temerarious quietly patrol a remote Mentak Coalition colony system where nothing ever happens. But when they answer a distress call from a moon under attack, that peaceful existence is torn apart. They rescue a scientist, Thales, who's developing revolutionary technology to create new wormholes. He just needs a few things to make it fully operational... and now, ordered to aid the scientist, the Temerarious is targeted by two rival black-ops teams intent on reacquiring Thales. Can Felix trust Thales? Or is this a conspiracy to tip the balance of power in the galaxy forever?

CHAPTER 1

Felix waited in the darkness on the lower deck of the *Temerarious*. The only illumination came from faint guide lights running along the floor, pulsing in the direction of designated exits. Carefully, silently, he began to move, confident that he wasn't being watched, at least for the moment. He crept along a corridor and moved past unoccupied crew cabins, converted to storage for emergency relief supplies. He moved slowly, looking into each crowded room for a moment before moving on, listening for the faintest whisper of sound, and feeling for minute disturbances in the stale air.

Felix was *hunting*.

He considered taunting his prey, trying to provoke an error he could exploit, but it was a risky move, and better tried when he was in a more defensible position. He paused at the end of the corridor, with open doors on his left and his right. In a more demanding posting, the cabins on either side would provide housing for two crew members; instead, the cabin on the left held pallets of potable water, while the one

on the right, for some reason, held crate after crate of signal flares. The mysteries of military procurement were doubtless baffling in all societies, but in the Mentak Coalition they were even stranger – the various supplies the raider fleets pillaged had to end up somewhere, and an overstocked quartermaster had taken the opportunity to cram the *Temerarious*, with its whole deck of unused space, full of odds and ends of no great use to anyone.

He ducked into a side room and crouched behind a pallet of shrink-wrapped air purifiers, listening hard, but the only sound was his own breath. He jostled the pallet and gasped, short and swiftly cut off, as if he'd injured himself and made an involuntary sound. He immediately, silently, moved to the far side of the room, waiting to see if his bait would be taken. There was no movement, no sound, nothing. He might have been alone down here, in the dark, but he knew better.

Felix crept back out into the corridor, carefully scanning for the most minute shift in the shadows, the slightest disturbance in the air. Nothing. His quarry was elsewhere. He considered the T-intersection before him: if he went left, he'd reach the deserted lower galley, and if he went right, he'd reach a workout room full of unused training machinery. There were more hiding places in the galley, but–

Something clattered in the cabin on his left. It sounded like a water bottle jostled by mistake, bouncing off the frame of a bunk, and skittering across the floor. Felix immediately spun and faced right instead. There was no way his subtle and deadly prey would make a sound like that by accident. The little monster was trying to distract him, which meant the ambush would be coming from the *other* side –

In fact, the attack came from above: a weight crashed down on Felix's neck and shoulders, driving him to his knees, and a slick smooth limb he couldn't see snaked around his throat. Felix was bigger and heavier than his opponent, though, and he threw his weight back, hoping to crush the attacker between his own body and the wall, or, failing that, at least dislodge her. Instead, she slithered around his body, shifting from his back to his front, so all he did was rattle his *own* spine on impact.

"Die, scum!" a voice hissed, hot breath on his face, but there was no *face* there, just a sort of shimmer that made his eyes water if he focused too hard, and strong thin fingers wrapped around his throat—

The overhead lights came on brightly, and the voice of the ship's security officer, Calred, purred laconically from hidden speakers all over the deck: "Captain, if you and Tib are finished playing hide-and-seek, we have an urgent message from one of the colonies."

The shimmer stopped shimmering and resolved into the round green face of Captain Felix Duval's first officer Tib Pelta, her yellow lamp-like eyes shining as she smiled, showing all her teeth. The rest of her body, dressed in the uniform of the Mentak Coalition navy, came into focus a moment later. The Yssaril ability to hide from sight — "fading" — wasn't technically invisibility, but functionally there wasn't a big difference. As an infiltration specialist, her uniforms and spacesuits were woven with rare fabrics that could bend light and augmented with devices that stymied detection of heat signatures and other life signs.

Tib let go of her captain's throat, straightened his collar,

and patted him gently on the cheek, before hopping off him and heading for the elevator.

“Acknowledged, on our way up,” Felix said. Then: “We weren’t playing hide-and-seek. We were conducting tactical training exercises to keep ourselves sharp. That’s really something you should be organizing, as security officer.”

“My job is to keep you from getting killed, and to prevent this moderately valuable ship from getting blown up,” Calred said. “Not to keep you entertained.”

“I won,” Tib said as Felix fell into step beside her, though she had to take two steps for every one of his. “Current score is seven hundred and five to me, one hundred and twelve to you.”

“It’s one-thirteen to me, Tib,” Felix said. “You always leave out that time when I was fourteen, and I tracked you through the ventilation system to the station administrator’s secret wine store—”

“That doesn’t count, and it will never count. I wasn’t trying to hide from you, so the fact that you found me is not a win – it’s just you being nosy.”

“You were going there in secret, hoping to sell the wine for yourself, so you were hiding from everyone, and by extension, therefore, you were hiding from me.”

They continued the old argument – which was less a real disagreement after all these years, and more a pleasant exercise in call-and-response – as they took the lift up to the command deck. Not that it was much of a command, Felix thought; he was in charge of himself, Tib Pelta, Calred, and a bunch of drones. The drones obeyed instantly without arguing, which was nice, but they were otherwise terrible company. It was

hard to radiate the effortless aura of mastery Felix wanted to project when your crew consisted of your best friend since childhood and an unflappably competent and unimpressed Hacan soldier. The ship was nice enough, if nothing special: the *Temerarious* was a Freebooter-class cruiser, a lightly armed ship built for speed, meant to strike fast and disappear – the sort of vessel that played a crucial support role in the Mentak Coalition’s military fleet, and made up the bulk of its unofficial raider forces.

Of course, in this remote posting, there was little need for speed or armaments, light or otherwise. The *Temerarious* was stationed here to “defend and lend material support” to the three coalition colony worlds (two planets, and one moon orbiting a gas giant) in this system. Felix and Tib had grown up on a shipyard space station near the core of the Coalition, and being way out here on the fringes was teeth-grindingly dull. This posting was both a punishment *and* a promotion. Felix had been first officer on a ship in the raider fleet, and had acted with great daring and courage in a raid, winning glory (and also riches) for the Coalition... but he’d also ignored orders from his captain in order to commit said daring act. The fleet commander had been impressed and pleased with the results, but Felix’s captain had been understandably furious about the method, and after some consultation a compromise was reached: in recognition of his service, Felix would be promoted to captain of his own ship and as punishment for his insubordination, he would be assigned to the backwater Lycian system, home to a scant million inhabitants scattered over three worlds, who produced a minimal quantity of resources that nobody back home much wanted anyway.

The unstated but clear message for Felix was: show that you can obey orders by being a good boy out on the edge of everything for a few years, and you'll be welcomed back to do something that matters. The arrangement had seemed reasonable to Felix at first, but after eight months of making a slow and pointless circuit of three colony worlds, he was bored. The colonies were small, scattered, and rural, and none of them had much of a nightlife, so even R and R was in short supply – though there was a cute medic with great legs on one of the planets, and an enjoyably burly gas-extraction engineer on the moon, so Felix wasn't entirely without entertainment, even discounting the running game of hide-and-seek – no, damn it, *tactical exercises* – with Tib.

Mostly Felix fantasized about something *happening*, some occasion he could rise to, some world-shaking challenge he could overcome or disaster he could avert, thus shortening his penance and returning to the fast track. He wanted to sit at the Table of Captains one day, and help guide his polity to ever more greatness. The beautiful thing about the Coalition, this pan-species nation founded by prisoners of the old Lazax Empire's most brutal penal colony, was that *anyone* could rise to the greatest heights, no matter how humble their origins, if they demonstrated the wit, the speed, the daring, the ingenuity – all qualities that Felix, unburdened by false modesty, knew himself to possess in ample supply.

There were no opportunities to demonstrate those qualities, though, because nothing ever happened out here. Sometimes there was a storm or a flood, and in those cases Felix delivered food and blankets. He was also responsible for picking up and delivering cargo from the colony worlds

to supply ships, and bringing back medical supplies and trade goods. Not exactly the intended use for a fast warship, but the Coalition had lots of cruisers, and this one had plenty of empty room for crates.

Felix and Tib stepped from the lift onto the bridge, a semicircular room dominated by a large viewscreen that currently showed nothing but the empty star field before them, the brighter glow of Alope standing out in the lower left. Alope was the next planet on their circuit, a world rich in timber, ore, mildew, mutton, and bristly predators called wolferines, who were still delighted by the sheep and goats the colonists had introduced to the ecosystem decades earlier.

Tib went to the comms and navigation station, not that there was much navigating to do, since they more or less just went around in circles. Felix dropped into his command chair: best seat in the house, even if the house wasn't all he might wish. "What's the problem? Did a sheep wander off? Are we urgently needed to help with a barn-raising?"

Calred, an immense Hacan with braids in his mane, shook his leonine head. He stood at the tactical board, which was even less use here than the navigation controls. "Something stranger than that, and my requests for clarification have gone unanswered."

"Show me."

"The message is audio-only." Calred manipulated the board, and a crackling voice blared out from the blank viewscreen:

*- unknown - landed outside settlement - jammed -
boosting as best we can - immediate assistance - armed*

The message ended abruptly. "Where's it from?" Felix said. There were scores of communities on Alope, from small

timber camps and mining towns to the relatively booming trading city and sole spaceport Solymi, home to a whole fifty thousand souls (and that cute medic Felix liked to visit).

“A small farming settlement on the northern continent,” Calred said. “Doesn’t even have a name on the surveys, though I gather the locals call it Cobbler’s Knob.”

“Do they really?”

“So I’m told,” Calred said. “The message came from their emergency distress system, which is probably the only communications apparatus within a hundred kilometers powerful enough to get a message this far.”

Could this be it? Felix thought. Could something finally be *happening*? Probably not. It was probably a prank. Felix thought about how bored he was, and extrapolated out to how bored a teenager living in a place called Cobbler’s Knob must be. But then, if it were a hoax, you’d think they’d say something more dramatic: “We’re being attacked by alien invaders,” maybe, or at least, “Help, a wolferine ate my mother.”

“Let’s get down there,” Felix said. “It’s probably nothing, but it’s not like we were doing anything else.”

Calred nodded. “With my amazing tactical prescience, I anticipated your order. We’re already heading there at speed. Does that count as insubordination? I hope not. I’d hate to be assigned to some remote posting as punishment.”

“We’ll call it the sort of initiative that befits an officer of your stature.” Felix had no idea why Calred had ended up on this ship, but he must have annoyed *someone*. The Hacan would only say, “I go where I’m assigned.” He was competent, gave the impression of being effortlessly deadly, and was

completely unflappable, not that they encountered many things worthy of getting into a flap about out here. In a storm last year, though, Felix had seen Calred wade into a surging river that had burst its banks, rescuing a young boy who would have been swept away, and returning him to his tearful family. Calred had done it as matter-of-factly as Felix might take a bottle down from a shelf. He hadn't known Calred anywhere near as long as Tib, but he'd already come to depend on him.

The planet grew, a greenish disc in the corner of the screen. "Something's moving," Calred said. "Looks like a shuttle, coming from the vicinity of Cobbler's Knob, heading into orbit."

"That doesn't make any sense," Felix said. "Where's it going?" A shuttle didn't have the range to make it to one of the other colony worlds, and there was no space station. "Is there anything in orbit for the shuttle to rendezvous with?"

"There isn't," Calred said. "Maybe they're just sightseeing."

"Or," Tib said.

"Or what?" Felix said.

"Or there is something in orbit, and we just can't see it. Let me see." She bowed her head to the terminal, and the screen shifted through various false color arrays, visualizing discrete pulses of sensor data. "There it is," Tib said, voice a throaty murmur. "A ship, orbiting Alope."

Felix leaned forward. The screen was back to true color, and there was no orbiting ship to be seen, though the shuttle was highlighted, a silver lozenge rising from the planet's surface. "Show me."

"I can't show you. The ship is using some sort of stealth technology – I think it's a variant of light-wave deflection."

“Then how do you know it’s even there?”

Tib rolled her eyes, and given the size of her eyes, that was very dramatic. “Felix. I have a particular interest in stealth, and no system is perfect. It can hide from sensors, and even bend light to avoid visual detection, and against a big expanse of empty black, that’s almost always enough. Against the backdrop of a planet, though, there are visual distortions, little shimmers and glimmers, and you can see them if you know where to look, kind of like we detect black holes by seeing the light from stars bend around them.”

Felix took her word for it. Yssaril were famed throughout the galaxy for their skill as spies – they’d taken their natural ability to fade, augmented it with technology and training, and spent centuries building their networks. The Tribes of Yssaril sold their skills throughout the galaxy, and doubtless used what they learned to pursue their own interests and imperial ambitions. Tib had never been within a billion kilometers of the Yssaril homeworld, but she had all the natural abilities of her species combined with the legacy of the Mentak Coalition, the descendants of thieves, renegades, smugglers, and *survivors*. The Yssaril members of the Coalition were the backbone of their clandestine forces, and Tib had vanished for a year once for “special training” that Felix assumed included plenty of spooky spy techniques. She’d certainly gotten even better at playing hide-and-seek afterward. “Who could it be?” he asked. “Why would anyone come out here in the first place, let alone in a stealth ship?”

“It’s not a dreadnought or something,” Tib said. “Not that those are really built for stealth anyway. The distortions indicate something cruiser-sized.”

“Don’t give them any indication that we’ve seen them,” Felix said. What *was* this unfamiliar feeling, like his blood was fizzing? Oh, yes: excitement. The thrill of the hunt. He’d missed it. Stalking Tib in the basement was a poor substitute for the real thing.

“My communications array just lit up.” Tib put the incoming message up on half the screen, the other half still tracking the slow ascent of the shuttle as it inexorably approached the big red question mark Tib had generated to indicate the location of the stealthed ship.

A dirty-faced woman hunched over a console in a small dark room appeared, her eyes wide and wild. “They took Mr Thales!”

“This is Captain Duval of the *Temerarious*.” Felix leaned forward. “Who took who?”

She ran a hand through her messy hair. “These soldiers, five or six of them, they wore armor and had these guns, they broke into his house and dragged him out! They took him and a bunch of his stuff – we asked what was happening, who they were, and they told us to shut up or they’d *shoot* us! I tried to call before but they did something, they jammed the signal or something.”

“I guess now we know who’s on the shuttle,” Tib said. “I’ve pinged the vessel, but there’s no transponder, and they don’t reply. No indication where it’s from or where it’s going.”

“Should I blow up the shuttle?” Calred said.

“There’s probably a kidnapped civilian on board, so no,” Felix said. “Can we move to intercept the shuttle, disable it, scoop it up?”

“Sure. Assuming we’re faster than the invisible ship, which

we might be. Also assuming the invisible ship isn't better armed than we are, which is more doubtful."

"Start moving that way. Weapons hot. Hail the shuttle again, Tib. Tell them if they don't respond we'll be forced to disable them." Felix returned his attention to the woman on the screen. As far as he knew there was nobody worth abducting in this system, at least not for conventional reasons like ransom. Felix had been furnished with a list of notable citizens when he came here, mayors and heads of local business concerns, and none of them seemed like targets for a heavily armed strike team with stealth tech and jamming equipment. Thales hadn't been on it anyway. "Why did they come for this Thales? Who is he?"

"I don't know," the woman said. "He moved here not quite a year ago. He mostly keeps to himself, and when he doesn't, you wish he had." She paused. "I mean, everyone here hates him – he's terrible, really – but I don't know why anyone would bother to *kidnap* him."

"Huh. Thanks for notifying us. We'll take care of things from here." He ended the call and watched the shuttle get bigger in the viewscreen as their courses converged.

"The shuttle just answered us," Tib said.

"What did they say?"

"Stand down, or die."

"Oh," Felix said. "I don't much like either of those options. Cal, you know that ship we can't see?"

"I am familiar with it."

"The shuttle is still pretty far away from said invisible ship, right?"

"It's outside the maximum blast radius, if that's what you're

asking.”

“That is what I’m asking. There you go, showing initiative again.” Goodbye boredom, Felix thought. “Let’s turn that invisible ship into a cloud of radioactive dust, shall we?”

CHAPTER 2

The missiles Calred launched did not, in fact, turn the invisible ship into radioactive dust. Felix hadn't really expected them to. He had, however, hoped the mysterious ship would be forced to drop out of stealth in order to deploy countermeasures, and that's what happened: the empty space on the screen was suddenly full of spaceship, its countermeasures dazzling the incoming missiles with guidance-disrupting lasers, sending them spinning off on harmless courses to burn up in the atmosphere of the planet below.

"Looks like the Federation," Calred said. "A cruiser, built for speed, not violence."

The Federation of Sol, Felix thought with reflexive irritation. Sure, he was human himself, but he was from the Coalition, and he knew being human didn't make him particularly special – something his ambitious, expansionist cousins-by-ancestry didn't seem to grasp. The Coalition had decent relations with the Federation, insofar as their

interests ever overlapped, so what were they doing sneaking around and kidnapping people out here? This Thales must be pretty important to risk an act of war over. Unless ... “Are we sure it’s from the Federation?”

“Not necessarily,” Calred said. “We’ve even got a few Federation ships in our raider fleet, and they sell their old military cruisers sometimes.”

“There’s no transponder indicating that they’re an accredited diplomatic or trading vessel,” Tib said. “They’re running dark. It could be anybody. Anybody with the resources to field a snatch team and operate cutting-edge stealth tech, anyway.”

“Target lock the shuttle, and tell the big ship to stand down,” Felix said. “If we can see them, I assume we can yell at them.”

“Are we going to actually shoot down the shuttle?” Tib asked. “That would prevent them from abducting one of our colonists, the same way cutting off my head would stop me from sneezing.”

“I’m still thinking about it,” Felix said. “How long do I have to think about it, Cal?”

“In about five minutes, the shuttle will be close enough to the ship that firing on one will mean firing on the other.”

Felix considered. “If the shooting starts, would we win?”

Cal shrugged. “They might die of heatstroke before we die of thirst.”

Felix had served with Calred long enough to know that was a Hacan phrase that either meant it was a no-win situation or, more generously, that the fight could go either way. He almost asked for clarification, but both interpretations were bad, so he didn’t bother.

“There’s an incoming transmission from the ship of mystery,” Tib said.

Half the screen filled with a visibly irritated human woman’s head and shoulders. She wasn’t wearing a uniform, but she was wearing the sort of armor favored by the better class of mercenaries – and she wasn’t even part of the ground force that did the snatch, so who knew how they were outfitted? What Felix could glimpse of the enemy bridge (they had an enemy now – how exciting) was bare of insignia, flags, or other identifiers. She glared, but didn’t say anything.

“Hello,” Felix said. “Return the person you abducted, and we won’t kill you.”

“We’re capturing an escaped prisoner,” the woman said. “He’s not a citizen of the Coalition. He’s a fugitive from justice.”

“Assuming that’s true, we have diplomatic relations with the Federation, and there are channels for this sort of thing. You’re not allowed to drop in and kidnap people without turning in the appropriate paperwork first.”

“We never said we were from the Federation.”

Felix smiled. “I apologize for the assumption. Maybe you’re from Jol-Nar? Or are you from a faction we don’t have diplomatic relations with? In that case, I’m pretty sure this is definitely an act of war, instead of just probably. Do you want to reconsider this...” he waved his hand in the air. “... whole thing?”

She gritted her teeth. “We are independent bounty hunters.”

“Interesting. What crimes did Thales commit, and in what jurisdiction?”

She winced. She was clearly unhappy that Felix knew that name. Felix was just sad he couldn't play cards with someone who wore her emotions so clearly on her face. He quite liked taking money from strangers. "Phillip Thales is guilty of theft, murder, and destruction of property."

"Where did he do this thieving, murder, and vandalism?"

"That's classified."

Calred laughed out loud. "By whom? Let me guess. Also classified?"

Felix cupped his chin in his hand and looked at her. "Thales must have stolen something pretty big if you mentioned the theft part before the murder part. Cobbler's Knob is an unusual choice for spending ill-gotten gains, but to each their own, I suppose. I'm sure we can clear all this up. If you're bounty hunters, just send the credentials proving you're authorized to operate in Coalition space."

She worked her mouth like she'd taken a bite of something sour and couldn't decide whether to swallow it or spit it out. "Perhaps we could come to some other arrangement."

"Are you offering me a bribe?" Felix said.

She shrugged. "Where I'm from, we have a saying: every Coalition ship is a pirate ship. The man we took is not one of your citizens, and none of your citizens were harmed in the course of taking him. We'd be happy to send you a substantial quantity of Federation credits if you'd agree to let us leave in peace, and refrain from filing any sort of official report. Everyone goes away happy."

"How substantial?" She named a sum. Felix went hmm. "What's the exchange rate right now, Tib?"

"One-point-five Federation credits to one Coalition credit."

So, not that substantial, but still. “Sure. Tib, send them the account info.”

The woman blinked at him. “Really?”

Felix shrugged. “Why not? I like money.” He almost said, “I’m Coalition. What do you expect? I’d sell my mother’s teeth if I could get a credit for them, right?” but decided that might tip his hand.

After a few moments, Tib said, “Transmission complete. From an untraceable account – very slick.”

“Thank you for your generous contribution to the Bereaved and Orphaned Benevolent Fund,” Felix said. “The Coalition will be eternally grateful. Now, release your prisoner, or we will fire on your ship.”

“We had a deal!” she shouted.

Now Felix shrugged. “I gather my people are famously untrustworthy. Shall I count to, let’s see, five? One, two–”

He didn’t get to finish, because the other ship fired on them, and the *Temerarious* had to deploy their own countermeasures. Felix was surprised. The *Temerarious* had the shuttle target locked, and surely the enemy ship knew they were well matched tactically, but they still chose to fight? Bounty hunters were all about balancing risk against reward: these weren’t bounty hunters. (Well, obviously. The amount they’d paid Felix was more than any bounty he’d ever heard of.)

“Do we return fire?” Cal said. The shuttle was so close to the ship now, it would inevitably be destroyed if the *Temerarious* fired back.

Damn it. Maybe Thales was a citizen – Felix wasn’t about to take the word of the people shooting at him on that – but

even if he wasn't, someone was willing to go to a lot of trouble and expense to abduct him, and that meant he was valuable. The Coalition really liked taking valuable things, and didn't like having them taken away. "No, pull back. Can we keep up with that ship when they run?"

"Unless their stealth technology is better than anything I've ever heard of before, yes," Cal said.

"Good. Then let them go, follow at a safe distance, extrapolate their likely course, and see if any of the raider fleets are in a position to intercept." There was no regular military way out here, but they weren't far from a shipping route, and there were often a few of the Coalition's irregular troops lurking in the dark between the stars, keeping an eye out for easy targets.

The *Temerarious* withdrew as the shuttle disappeared into the belly of the enemy cruiser, which rose out of orbit and accelerated away.

"They must know we're going to call for help," Felix said. "What's their plan?"

"I think their plan was 'don't get caught,'" Tib said. "It's a reasonable plan, way out here, where we're the only possible threat in the system. It's just their bad luck we happened to be passing this way. Otherwise, they would have been long gone by the time we heard about the abduction. Their new plan is probably 'run fast and hope for the best.'"

Felix nodded. That wasn't a good plan, but he didn't judge the humans too harshly: after all, they didn't have any other plans available. "See what we can find out about this Thales, would you, Cal?"

"I'm already compiling a dossier. It's going to be short,

though, I can tell.”

“Good news,” Tib said. “I’ve got Commander Meehves and a small fleet that should be able to intercept our new friends in half a day or so.”

“Good old Meehves,” Felix said.

“Oh, we can catch them.” Meehves slouched in a chair in her quarters, a drink in her hand, her grayish skin and blank eyes revealing her Letnev ancestry. Those eyes made her damnably hard to gamble against, as Felix had learned during officer training. Meehves taught tactics occasionally, with a special emphasis on surprise and misdirection, and had cheerfully explained that taking money from her students constituted teaching them a valuable lesson in her areas of expertise. “Do you want to lead the boarding party?”

“It would make a nice change from flying around in circles, if you don’t mind.”

Meehves waved her free hand lazily. “We’ve just been lurking out here waiting for a fat, lonely cargo ship to drift by. Thanks for bringing us something to do. I’m a bit baffled by the whole thing, though. Who is this Thales, anyway? Why would the Federation, or someone hiring a bunch of mercenaries, go to so much trouble to kidnap him?”

“We don’t know much.” Felix flicked his fingertip and scrolled through the information Calred had scrounged up in the past several hours. “We don’t have any record of him on Alope until about ten standard months ago, when he showed up in Cobbler’s Knob—”

“*Whose* knob?” Meehves said.

“I had the same question. It’s just what the locals call their

little patch of grazing land, a river, some fields, and a few housing modules. Maybe it was founded by someone named Cobbler, or there's a mountain nearby that looks like a shoe or something. Anyway, this Thales immigrated, perfectly legally. Claimed he was from the Federation of Sol and, I regret to say, the security officials didn't poke too hard at his identity, or they would have realized all his documentation was fake."

"Doing deep background checks on colonists to remote worlds isn't a good use of resources," she said. "It's not like Alope is a prime target for terrorism. Most of the people who immigrate to places like this have shady backgrounds and no other options."

"Fair enough," Felix said. "He showed up in Cobbler's Knob looking for a place to live, and for some reason the good country people didn't just steal his money and throw his body down a well. Instead they fixed up an abandoned cottage for him, one with a big root cellar, which he was particularly pleased about – he said he could use the space for his work, without saying what that work was. He shut himself away and only came out to buy supplies, and to complain about the food, the weather, the hygiene of his fellow colonists, and every other subject imaginable. No one had any idea what he was doing there, and he didn't volunteer information. The locals thought he might be an artist or a writer, a reclusive genius devoting himself to his work, or else that he was hiding out from the law. There was some disagreement on that score, but everyone *does* agree that he's rude, unpleasant, and a total bastard."

Meehves sipped her drink, a perfectly clear liquid that

Felix suspected was highly flammable. “People don’t usually send stealth ships full of mercenaries to kidnap artists, and whoever came for him wasn’t the law.”

“The locals took the opportunity to snoop around his house after he was taken, and there’s no sign of any artwork anyway. They’re not exactly trained investigators down there, but they say it looks like the kidnappers took everything but the furniture with them. No documents, no personal effects, nothing.”

Meehves swirled her drink. “Maybe he was a fugitive, but if so, why not reach out to us through normal channels? Why risk a fight with the Coalition?”

“I was thinking about that. Maybe he’s a special kind of fugitive – the kind with a head full of state secrets the Federation, or whoever, is afraid he’ll give away. Or maybe he stole something they were really keen to recover?”

“Why not just kill him, then?” Meehves said. “They had the firepower. Honestly, they could have paid someone in Cobbler’s Knob two sheep to kill him, the way it sounds.”

“They need him alive, then, for whatever reason,” Felix said. “Maybe it’s not something he has, but something he knows.”

Meehves nodded. “So he’s not a brilliant artist, but he could be some other kind of brilliant – some useful variety. You hear about people kidnapping Hylar scientists sometimes, trying to get a jump on weapons research.”

“Or he could be a spy with intel that’s not recorded anywhere, or he was witness to something and they need his testimony, or, or, or. Suddenly I can come up with all sorts of scenarios.”

Meehves shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough. Unless they kill him when we try to board their ship, in the spirit of, ‘if we can’t have him, no one can.’ Unless they all choose death before dishonor, though, one of them will tell us what’s going on, anyway. We just have to ask them the right way.”

“Mercenaries don’t tend to sacrifice their lives for honor.”

“They do not,” Meehves agreed. “So let’s hope they’re mercenaries, and not some flavor of true believer. We should intercept their vessel soon.” She pushed herself out of the chair. “I’m going to make sure the guns are loaded and the boarding pods are prepped. Or, rather, tell other people to make sure of those things – the burden of command, you know.” She leaned down and looked into her screen, and through it, into Felix’s mind. “The money you scammed out of them for the Benevolent Fund. How much did you skim?”

“Only two per cent,” Felix said. “I’ll split it with my crew, of course.” No one expected an officer of the Mentak Coalition to be scrupulously honest – it would have been suspicious if they had been – but you didn’t want a reputation for being too greedy, either, or you’d lose out on crucial opportunities to profit in the future.

“Fair enough. Not many opportunities for plunder out in the territories, are there?”

“There’s plenty to steal, as long as you want to steal dirt or sheep,” Felix said. “Unfortunately, it all belongs to people I’m supposed to protect instead of profit from. I call first pick on any personal weapons we recover on the enemy ship. Carrying a regulation sidearm is so basic.”

“Spoils of war, eh?” Meehves switched off.

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