

Admiral's Tribulation **a Spineward Sectors Novel** **Book Three**



Joshua Wachter

Admiral's Tribulation - A Spineward Sectors Novel: Book Three

by Luke Sky Wachter

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For my son Luke, who always believes.

First thanks go out to my brother, without whom this book could have taken much longer to see Amazon e-print. Thanks are also in order for Paynesgrey, superpsycho and all the rest of the Beta Readers who helped make this story as good as it is. You've been wonderful, guys.

But most importantly, I would like to thank my fans. It's weird actually saying that possessively: *my* fans, but without you, I couldn't do what I love. I can confidently say that you truly have no idea how much your continued support means to me, and I want you to know that I do my best to satisfy your insatiable appetites. I hope you all continue to enjoy reading these stories as much as I enjoy writing them! With Murphy as my witness, we're just gettin' warmed up...

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Prologue: Escaping Easy Haven

“You have your government’s deepest appreciation as you embark on your patrol, *Admiral*,” Rear Admiral Yagar said through the main screen, before terminating the feed with a smug nod.

As the star field replaced the pompous man’s features, I felt my shoulders relax slightly before I slumped back in the Admiral’s Throne. That man was utterly insufferable.

The last of the perishables had been loaded hours earlier, along with some badly needed ordinance. The cargo had been stowed within the holds, but we were still taking on shuttle loads of new crew.

As my crew made preparations to point transfer out of the system, Rear Admiral Yagar and his pair of squadrons continued to stalk us like a pack of eagle-eyed scavengers, eager to pounce at the first sign of weakness.

“Maintain a steady course, Helmsman DuPont,” I said severely. “I want no deviations, just a straight line drive towards the hyper limit.”

“Of course, Sir,” DuPont responded with a tense nod and no sign of irritation at what must have been my second reminder in as many minutes. He was a good man, despite our earlier... disagreements. I looked around the Flag Bridge at my loyal officers and crew, and I knew that they were.

“Notify me the moment there are any significant changes in either the speed or formation of the 25th Sector Guard!” I barked at the Sensor Pit, grabbing the arms of my Throne and adjusting myself deeper into the back of the seat.

We still had a dozen shuttles moving back and forth between our ships, as well as two armed freighters ‘gifted’ to us by King James, which bestowed their cargo and fresh crew on us like a leper does his plague. So while I was fairly confident they wouldn’t attack us until that transfer was complete, my confidence was based on an assumption that all involved parties were sane and intelligent. To date, I was unconvinced that Rear Admiral Yagar displayed those particular attributes which kept me on my toes.

Grimly, I stared at the main screen.

All around me the bridge felt on edge, all the officers and crew — even Tremblay — stared at either their consoles or the main screen with increasing attention.

“Leaving supportive range of the Easy Haven defensive network in thirty seconds,” Warrant Officer Laurent, my chief Tactical officer reported in crisp and carrying voice.

I nodded but refrained from saying anything. I feared that if I did, it would only be because of my own nerves and not because it was what a real Admiral would do. So instead, I sat on my Command Throne and did my best to look like a stone-faced senior officer.

“The two Corvettes sent to escort us to the edge of Wolf-9’s extended firing envelop have finished decelerating and are beginning to come about,” reported one of the Sensor Operators.

Around the Bridge, the men and women of the crew exchanged significant looks and shoulders tightened, as if expecting a blow.

“We are now outside weapons range of the Wolf-9 defensive complex,” Laurent reported stiffly, his arms and hands behind his back as he strode up and down the line of trainee Tactical operators.

“Steady as she goes, Helm,” I ordered, deliberately injecting a smoothness into my voice.

~~“Yes, Admiral,” DuPont said from where he was hunched over his console, fingers poised for the slightest twitch from our potential adversaries.~~

On the main screen, the little icon representing the Lucky Clover moved outside the blue region representing the firing arcs and overlapping weapon coverage of the various defensive turrets and battle platforms of those Confederation Forces stationed at Easy Haven.

“Good luck, Commodore LeGodat,” I whispered under my breath and then stiffened my back, correcting my posture until it was once again something that would do my tutors and royal trainers proud.

The next tension-filled half hour passed in relative silence. The Guard Squadrons slid smoothly into position behind us, one slightly to the left and the other slightly to the right, as if they were an escort rather than a pack of jackals looking for an easy kill. They deliberately left enough room between us that they were outside of my Battleship’s turbo-laser range, as well as the heavy lasers of the Merchant Conversions.

“What are they waiting for,” Tremblay muttered loud enough to be heard by half the Flag Bridge. No doubt from his expression, he had intended a less carrying voice.

I turned to glare at him, my eyes delivering a silent rebuke.

Tremblay flushed and gave an embarrassed nod before turning away. Arguing at this juncture would be counterproductive to the best interests and general welfare of this ship, so I quietly let the moment pass. Even though I wanted nothing more than to yell at the First Officer and blow off some steam of my own, I knew that it would only distract the crew and hurt morale.

Another tension filled forty-five minutes ticked by until many people (including myself) had begun to relax. Nothing had happened so far, and hopefully nothing would happen for the rest of the trip to the hyper limit.

“The 2nd Squadron has increased its speed, and is now moving from a sphere into a diamond formation,” Laurent’s voice shattered the relative calm like a sonic grenade tossed into an otherwise quiet room.

“Their most likely objective?” Tremblay demanded hurriedly.

“They are bearing down on us, and are now starting to pass between the Caprian Freighters,” Tactical Officer Laurent replied urgently.

“Make sure our weapons are hot and ready to fire,” I ordered firmly. Looking at the main screen it soon became clear that only the 2nd Squadron of the Guard was making a bee-line for our battleship. The other Squadron, the one with the Light Destroyer personally commanded by one Rear Admiral Yagar, was still in relatively the same position as before the 2nd Squadron rapidly increased its speed.

“Our gunners have been primed and ready for the past hour and a half,” Laurent assured me in a firm, professional voice.

I nodded slowly, my eyes darting between the icons on the main screen representing the various warships before reaching a decision.

“Hail the approaching squadron of Guard warships,” I instructed the Communication Tech, “and kindly request to know just what they think they are doing.”

“Aye aye, Admiral,” acknowledged the Tech, looking relieved that there was something she could do before turning to speak urgently into her microphone.

After half a minute of back and forth, the Tech looked back at me with an odd expression on her face.

“What is it, Comm Tech,” I said mildly, when all I wanted to do was beat the information out of her as quickly as possible.

“I am informed that Commodore Druid and the 2nd Squadron of the 25th Sector Guard intend a close in flyby, which they’re calling ‘a gesture of respect and admiration,’ as we prepare to embark on what could be a grueling anti-piracy mission for the good of the entire Sector,” she said in the sing-song voice of someone simply repeating what she’d just been told.

“Grueling!” snapped Tremblay, “what an insult.”

“A gesture of respect and admiration,” Laurent scoffed in agreement.

“Warn them off,” I hotly ordered the Comm Tech.

The technician proceeded to speak urgently into her speaker.

“The 2nd Squadron is about to enter our firing range, Sir,” the Tactical Officer said tightly, “targeting them now.”

“Fire only when fired upon,” I instructed, hating myself even as I gave the order because the simple math of the situation hadn’t changed one bit. If we got into a fight with the forces belonging to Rear Admiral Yagar, we would lose.

“We can knock any number of them out, if they’re not expecting it,” Laurent fired back.

“And just how likely is it that they aren’t ready for us,” I asked dryly as the Squadron of Corvettes inched ever closer.

“Not likely,” he admitted, “but if we wait we lose whatever advantage we might have!”

“Steady on, Tactical Officer,” I spoke firmly before turning to the Comm Tech. “Open a channel to this Commodore,” I said urgently.

“They say to not accept the honor would be an insult!” cried the Tech, not yet even having the chance to relay my message.

I ground my teeth, my resolve not to fire the first shot wavering in the face of this blatant aggression. Then my eyes widened as an idea came to me.

“Mr. Laurent!” I said quickly.

“Yes, Admiral,” he replied, speaking fast as the Corvettes entered our firing arc, “just give the word, Sir!”

“Doesn’t the SDF have a tradition of offering salutes to passing ships of other Navies, Fleets and SDF’s,” I asked urgently, ignoring his offer to blow the interlopers into atomized particles, or at least give it the honest Confederation try.

For a moment Laurent looked nonplussed before understanding dawned. He bared his teeth in my direction.

“Are you thinking a 12 gun, a 24 gun or a full broadside salute, Admiral,” my Tactical Officer asked with a rapidly widening smile.

“I think it would be a major failing if the MSP failed to give this new Sector Guard organization every respect and honor possible,” I replied, clenching my right fist eagerly as I turned to the Comm Tech.

“Inform Commodore Druid that we are honored by the presence of his Squadron and are prepared to do them a signal honor in return!” I ordered, snapping my elbow to my hip with the fist still clenched.

“Yes, Sir,” I heard her say faintly behind me and in the foreground I could see Officer Laurent speaking rapidly into his hard line microphone down to the Gun Deck.

The Tactical Officer gave me a thumbs up signal and before I had a chance to reply, Commodore Druid’s squadrons split into two rows of three corvettes each, the formation of three corvettes behind and to our right, ever so slightly ahead of the other line of three as they each zoomed in on our

Battleship from either side.

“They’re lining up to cross from left to right and right to left over the bow of our ship!” Laurent informed us in a loud barking voice.

Then, just as the Comm Tech finished relaying our message to the Sector Guard Commodore, the first little warship came zooming along the side of our much larger battleship at close range.

“Salute!” yelled Laurent into the speaker to Gunnery, just as the first Corvette was about to begin its close in pass, and every beam weapon on the right side of the ship activated.

Whether the Guard intended a series of quick firing passes, or just to get as close to our hull as possible for a series of rapid deep scans, we might never know because no sooner had the order left Laurent’s mouth than our trigger happy young gunners down on the gun deck ripple-fired every weapon on the starboard side.

In a few cases the beams passed within meters of the first Corvette’s shields as the Lucky Clover blazed away. It was an official gesture, and I figured that if I had been on the receiving end of a battleship’s broadside in nothing larger than a little corvette, an officially terrifying display of firepower.

The first corvette was so honored that it broke off from its intended course, pulling a sharp ninety degree course change as it bobbed and weaved in an evasive course away from our battleship.

Meanwhile the next Corvette in line on the left flank of our ship also turned away.

“Commodore Druid is protesting this aggressive action as a flagrant violation of the code of peaceful space conduct!” reported the Comm Tech.

“Inform the Commodore we are simply returning the great honor he has insisted on bestowing upon us by offering his Squadron a full broadside salute in return,” I drawled easily, working to suppress a hard-edged grin from crossing my face, I’ll admit that although I tried, its true I didn’t try very hard.

By this time, four of his ships had shot away from our ship at full burn, the little corvettes taking evasive actions for all they were worth. By now, I was no longer attempting to hold back my smile.

The last two corvettes, one on either side of our ship, wavered before their course steadied.

“I read two corvettes continuing with a close pass firing run,” Laurent relayed with rising concern. Then an alarm sounded from the tactical section, “we’re being pinged!”

My smile withered and disappeared entirely as the pair of corvettes came screaming across our bow, first one with its sensors pinging for all it was worth, and then the second.

Only after the two suicidal corvettes had passed within meters of our shields and crossed our bow did I realize I’d been unconsciously holding my breath and clutching the arms of my Throne in a death grip.

Seeing the corvettes swooping in a wide arc to the side and away from the Lucky Clover without firing a shot in reply to our full on broadside salutes, the breath whooshed out of me in an explosive release.

Only after my mind registered the fact that the corvettes were turning to join the respective halves of their squadron mates did I let go of the Throne.

“Well, that was a nerve wracking experience,” I bared my teeth, absolutely refusing to allow the shakiness I was feeling to enter my voice.

Looking up I saw Officer Laurent give himself a shake and then look over to meet my eyes. One corner of his mouth turned up in response.

“None of our gunners got trigger happy and hit the good Commodore’s ships, while two-thirds of his ships failed to cross the T,” he reported with an ever deepening satisfaction as he talked.

I blinked.

“So what you are saying is that we looked better than they did?” I asked, wondering why I felt surprised.

“Better?” Laurent lifted his eyebrows, “I wouldn’t want to be in the shoes of the officers on those corvettes that ran away when their Commander gets his hands on them. Because when we never actually attacked them, they made their Commodore and his Squadron look like a gaggle of flighty dilettantes with twitchy hands on the Helm.”

This didn’t quite compute to me.

“And if we’d actually been shooting to kill,” I replied looking at him strangely, “what would he have thought of them then?”

Laurent shook his head wryly.

“Why, then they’d have been hailed as the sort of heroes every SDF or Fleet need, Captains and Helmsmen who have the sort of instinct and feel for combat that every Officer should strive for,” he said with a straight face.

“That hardly seems to be fair or make sense,” I commented as I considered the unfairness of such a situation. On the one hand you were either a gross incompetent. On the other, you were a hero with the instincts of a burgeoning military genius and the twitch muscles of shark or velociraptor all rolled into one. It didn’t seem right.

“The military is rarely fair and doesn’t always have to make sense,” Laurent observed with a shrug.

“Victory or Death,” I muttered under my breath. It seemed these kinds of situations applied to Sector Guard Captains just as they did to former College Students pretending to be Admirals. Although in my case, dead meant actually dead and for them, it might mean anything from career death to actually shrugging off this mortal coil.

“Sir,” Tremblay asked looking at me speculatively. Perhaps he’d been eavesdropping when he had better things to do than listen to his Admiral’s private utterances.

I gave him a cold look. “Notify me at once if there are any sudden changes from the Guard, or if they fixate on another attempt to ‘honor’ us with a close firing pass,” I instructed hotly, turning to bestow my attention on the Sensor Pit.

“Yes, Sir! Admiral, Sir!” replied the lead Sensor Operator with such an excess of words and enthusiasm that for a brief moment, I wondered what it was like to work on a bridge made up of nothing but fully trained, complete professionals.

Then I shrugged it off; I had work to do.

“Just monitor the Guard,” I ground out and then turned my full attention back to the main screen.

Other than one attempt by Yagar to rattle us by bringing both of his reformed squadrons up just outside the edge of our firing range and then backing off abruptly, the next couple hours passed in intense nail-biting (but ultimately uneventful) edge of our seat monitoring.

Frazzled and red-eyed from the strain of watching every little tick of the screen but triumphant, I knew I wasn’t the only one who was intensely grateful the moment our ship crossed the hyper limit and the dozen ships comprising Rear Admiral Yagar and his Rump Assembly’s 25th Sector Guard turned around to head back in system, no doubt to continue harassing Commodore LeGodat.

I felt bad that the former Confederation Commander and now Commodore of the entire Easy Haven System would soon be bearing the brunt of the Rear Admiral’s attention, but not that bad.

Chapter 1: New Beginnings are Old Beginnings, done all over again

“Coordinates are locked, Admiral,” Navigator Shepherd shook his head with disapproval, making sure to catch my eye so there was no chance I misunderstood him.

I quirked a smile to hide the sudden grinding of my teeth and ignored the man by looking past him at the main screen instead.

“If I may remind the Admiral,” he said pointedly, “we are only one hour away from Point of No Return, and the personnel transfer is still in process,” he said pointedly.

“Thank you, Navigator, your input is greatly appreciated,” I said, causing the Navigator to smile. When my appreciation failed to produce any tangible results (like new orders to abort the spin-up of our hyper drive) his newfound smile turned into a frown.

“Please make sure the two armed merchant conversions that will be accompanying us are aware of the rendezvous coordinates,” I reminded him.

“Yes Admiral, that’s already been done. Double-checked and triple-checked, then checked all over again,” he all but muttered, a dark expression creeping over his face.

It was obvious he was unhappy. Well get in line, because I was unhappy too. Fortunately for me a mere Admiral outranked a high and mighty navigator such as himself and he was just going to have to live with his unhappiness like the rest of us.

“Sir, we’re being hailed by one of the merchant ships,” reported a communications technician.

When a look in her direction failed to produce the desired result (i.e. elaboration) I suppressed a scowl of my own. Was it just me, or was the bridge dragging their heels every step of the way here?

Sweet crying Murphy, did none of these motherless sons and daughters realize how much was riding on getting out of this system in time? I didn’t need everyone and their cousin working against me! Speaking of Cousins, thankfully mine was no longer on the Flag Bridge. One could only hope she had taken this opportunity to transfer to the next ship bound for Capria; the very same ship carrying those of my crew who’d refused the call to continued confederation service.

“Put whoever it is through to the command chair,” I grunted.

The next sight to greet my eyes failed to fill me with joy.

One of the new replacements from Capria appeared on my screen; he looked like an officer.

“Vice Admiral Montagne,” the other man nodded a greeting, “My name is Jim Heppner, Captain Jim Heppner of the Caprian SDF, and I understand you’ve been running without a full command staff.”

I stiffened.

“We’ve managed,” I said refusing to confirm or deny anything at this point. This was all I needed; a Captain, a real Captain onboard this ship.

Heppner narrowed his eyes ever so slightly and one side of his mouth lifted. “My orders are to transfer to the Lucky Clover along with my command team and assume command of the Battleship, so that you can continue to direct the fleet, without the burdensome distraction of ship command at the same time.”

“I’m far from distracted,” I said coolly. This was a power play plain and simple, and I wasn’t about to let them pull a fast one.

“Nevertheless, I and my men have our orders, Sir,” he said evenly.

“We’ve got a well-oiled machine over here and there simply isn’t room for a second command team on the Flag Bridge, Captain,” I said with a wry smile, to take the sting out of it, “I’m afraid the dictates of our current mission…” I trailed off shaking my head sadly.

The middle aged Caprian Captain looked at me quizzically.

“There’s no need to displace your men, sir,” he said slowly.

“Oh,” I quirked a smile of my own, feeling smug.

“Indeed, I wouldn’t expect you or any of the men on your staff to change the way you are doing things over there,” he said with a shrug.

“Then it’s settled,” I said happy for once to be able to head off a maneuver at the pass, so to speak.

“Of course, Sir. My men and I will be more than comfortable on the ship’s Command Bridge, there’s no need for my team to take up space in the fleet command center,” he said evenly.

My smile froze. We had a Command Bridge? I didn’t know we even had a second bridge, let alone one entirely separate from the Flag Bridge. That there were two such places on the ship was news to me.

Space rot! I clenched my fists outside the range of the cameras. Suppressing a flash of pure rage (mainly directed at myself) I forced a patented Montagne smile, one that felt more than a little stiff around the edges. Once again my military incompetence had risen up to bite me on the hind end. This was a complete and total disaster, and I’d been foolish enough to put my foot right in it.

“Sounds like you have it all figured out in advance then,” I said lightly trying desperately to recover my balance but knowing it was too little, too late. I’d been blindsided and the damage was already done. Now… if I threw Captain Heppner and his ‘command team’ directly into the brig without passing go, they wouldn’t be manning any Command Bridges anytime soon.

Ultimately though, I just had to force a smile and nod. “Of course, my Flag Bridge crew will continue to direct ship operations until such a time as you and your team have had a chance orient yourselves to the way we do things around here,” I said deliberately, forcing the grimness I felt out of my voice. “We can discuss the handing over of specific duties after you and your men get up to speed.” I needed to come across as a reasonable Admiral making the best of a bad situation, not some power-mad empire builder angry someone else was moving in on his turf.

The Lancers would just have to be the iron fist inside my velvet glove for the right now, at least until I could get a better feel for the way these new winds of change were blowing. Thank goodness for Akantha and her native recruiting drive; without my Lancers I would have already been finished several times over.

Captain Heppner frowned, “Understood, Sir,” he said unhappily.

And that as they say was that. We both left there feeling unhappy, but I had to figure in the long term he’d come out ahead. What was more, I was certain he knew it.

Chapter 2: Point Transfer out of Easy Haven

“Threshold exceeded 52 minutes ago. The countdown is now five minutes until point transfer,” said the First Officer sounding more irritated than usual.

“We were unable to slave the computers of the Merchant Conversion to our own,” the Navigator said disapprovingly. “Since they don’t share our jump range, they’ll just have to play catch up with us as we cycle our Star Drive,”

“Good work Mr. Shepherd,” I said putting a smile on my face and an upbeat note in my voice. That he and my First Officer weren’t very impressed with my decision-making process, had already been made more than abundantly clear by this point, but for some reason they were unable to get over it. It was beginning to get more than a little tiresome, which only made me want to appear all the more cheerful and unruffled, if only to irritate the space rot out of them and any secret sympathizers hidden among the rest of the bridge crew.

“We limited our range and jumped in convoy back when we were operating alongside the Medium Cruiser,” grumped Lieutenant Tremblay.

“The situation with the Hydra was completely different,” I said breezily.

“I still think-” started Tremblay as the timer hit zero, cutting him short as the ship transited into hyperspace.

Thank the Maker, I don’t know how much more of their caterwauling I could have taken. At least now it was too late, spilt milk and all that.

“Point Emergence,” reported the Navigator, sounding like he was officially back on task once again.

“Extending baffling and lighting up the main engine,” said the Helmsman.

“Step lively, bridge crew,” snapped the First Officer, “if we don’t have them right now, then by next transfer at the very latest we’re going to have a team of highly trained parliamentary officers watching our each and every move. Let’s do ourselves proud.”

Heads nodded and shoulders stiffened as the men and women on the Flag Bridge manned their consoles with a renewed attention to their jobs. I was surprised, my First Officer actually managed to strengthen their resolve and inspire a renewed attention to duty. Admittedly, with a pro-parliamentary dig thrown in at the same time, but that was only to be expected of the former intelligence officer.

The main screen started to populate but thankfully the System appeared to be just as advertised completely uninhabited by man or marauding space beast.

“Point Resistance?” asked Lieutenant Tremblay, narrowing his eyes at the science officer.

“I read an estimated 48 gravities of resistance, First Officer,” grunted the Science Officer staring at his console with a forlorn expression, “if anyone was foolish enough to be standing outside the hull and our shields failed, they’d be crushed.”

Tremblay frowned at him, “Only a suicide...or a civilian could possibly be foolish enough to pull a stunt like that,” he snorted dismissively at our distinguished Science Officer who’d been forwarded to us directly from the University of Capria. He was originally here exclusively to work on his thesis paper as it regarded the cost benefits of slave rigging our old battleship with a series of automation designed to reduce the manpower needed for our crew-intensive manpower hog.

“Where are my engine numbers,” Tremblay demanded, turning on the helmsman.

~~“Main Engine at 15% of maximum,” said DuPont, fingers flying over his console, “lighting up secondaries... now.”~~

“Shields modulated for the gravity sump,” reported the man at shields, “our new shield generator continues to perform as expected. We are ready for a slide, First Officer.”

“Let’s get moving, Helmsman,” said Lieutenant Tremblay.

“Engine increased to 25% of maximum, Sir,” reported DuPont, “both secondaries coming to 25% in three seconds... Three!... Two!... One!”

“Shield strength at 95%, and holding,” said the main Shield Operator.

The ship gave the barest shudder.

“Exiting the sump now, Admiral,” reported the Navigator, and just like that we were free.

“Good job, team,” I projected my voice so it could be easily heard all the way around the bridge. It was more important than ever to foster the sort of team spirit that would help me survive the unholy mess I’d landed in. Thanks ‘Uncle James,’ I thought facetiously, using a familiar form of address in the privacy of my own mind that was just as misleading as it was accurate. ‘Uncle James’ was our brand spanking new ‘King James,’ and a lot closer to my age than you might imagine. On top of that he’d tried to pull a fast one and get rid of all my loyal crew by bringing them back to Capria for some well-deserved shore leave, saddling me with a bunch of parliamentary holdouts and ‘royalist marine’ minders in the process.

He had failed inasmuch as most of my original crew hadn’t gone back to Capria, and his four thousand plus Marines were still on board the two armed freighters he’d sent to ‘reinforce’ my fleet. Unfortunately in just about every other particular, he had succeeded.

The sad fact was that my ship was fully crewed for the first time since the Imperials Withdrew from the Spine, which would seem to be a good thing. The problem was they were the untrustworthy parliamentary type, instead of the scarcer loyalist royal version.

His Majesty, likely trying to rid himself of them himself, had ever so benevolently sent these people over to his cousin Prince-Cadet Jason Montagne and the Confederation Multi-Sector Patrol Fleet; a fleet that I was holding together with little more than my two bare hands and half a roll of space tape.

Regardless of the official line, I had my suspicions as to who was pulling King James’ strings. I dreaded to find out what the real story behind these crew replacements/reinforcements was, which was why I now had my Lancer force stationed at key points throughout the ship.

“Admiral, I’m receiving a request for a private conference,” said one of the Communication Technicians.

I frowned at him; he wasn’t the one who normally handled External Communications. Then I remembered we were in an uninhabited system.

“Who is it?” I inquired, smoothing my face into a pleasant royal mask.

“It’s Captain Heppner, Sir, and he begs a few moments of your time,” said the Communications Operator.

Think of the devil and his plots against your interests and he immediately tries to rope you into a conference call, I thought with ill humor.

On the outside though, I quirked a superior grin.

“By all means,” I told the Communications Technician, “Please inform the Captain I’ll be taking his call in my ready room, if he’s interested in holding on for a minute.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the Communications Operators said sounding relieved.

I stood from the Admiral’s Throne and made my way to the ready room, and sat behind the

Admiral's desk before activating the screen.

—“Captain Heppner, to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure,” I asked as soon as I reached for a cup of tea.

“Vice Admiral, thank you for taking the time so soon after a point transfer,” replied Captain Heppner with a nod.

I returned the nod but didn't respond verbally.

“I was hoping to firm up the schedule for the transfer of duties from the flag staff to the ship's command team,” continued the Captain after an awkward pause.

I took a small sip of tea before setting the cup aside, and looking at the Captain I steepled my fingers.

“My men and I have things well in hand, Captain,” I said as mildly as possible.

“It's my understanding that you've been operating this ship with critical shortages in both trained officers and crew,” he said, his dark brown eyes piercing.

“As I said before, we've managed more than adequately out here, as even the Imperial Navy can attest,” I said shrugging off his concerns with a wave and a few empty words, “the First Officer and I have things well in hand.”

“You just hit on one of the issues, Admiral,” Heppner nodded sympathetically. “Not only has Capria assigned me as your new Flag Captain, but they've also assigned an entire command team including a new Executive Officer, one Commander David Murdock, a man I've served with for over five years and who I trust implicitly.”

“Lieutenant Tremblay's done a fine job on the Flag Bridge,” I said obtusely, “he has earned my absolute confidence.” It was far from the truth, but I had to circle the wagons, and quick.

“I'm sure he has,” Captain Heppner said, sounding even sharper as he drove his point home, “however, despite his great service to the crown in this tumultuous time, a junior Lieutenant from Intelligence simply can't fulfill the duties of a position as important as that of Executive Officer. Especially when every other officer in the chain of command is a trained line officer, and he's a staff officer.”

“Are you implying that Tremblay has been less than effective in his current position,” I arched an eyebrow and allowed my voice to harden slightly.

Heppner pursed his lips, “Unfortunately, Capria requires more from an officer than willingness; he must also be properly trained if he's to fill a position one heartbeat away from command,” the Captain held up a hand, “I'm not saying he hasn't done a stellar job for you so far, but he simply doesn't have the training he needs to continue doing such a job indefinitely.”

I nodded slowly, seething inside at the roundabout dig at my own lack of training. “Well,” I continued with a shrug, “while I'm not sure I entirely agree with your assessment of the situation, I don't see the need to argue: you can have your First Officer, and I'll have mine.”

The Captain blinked, then hesitated. “I'm sorry Sir, but did I understand that you want this ship to have two XO's,” he asked, sounding unexpectedly dumbfounded.

I knew I'd stepped in it somehow, but I wasn't entirely certain of the misstep. “There are two Bridges on this ship, along with both a Captain and an Admiral, so why not two first officers,” I explained with a winning smile.

“Only Captains have First Officers, Sir,” he said almost, but not quite shortly, “Admirals, on the other hand, have a Chief of Staff. A 'First Officer,’” he said the title derisively, “takes command of the ship if and when the ship commander — usually a Captain, although sometimes a Commodore or mere Commander — perishes.”

“Certainly,” I agreed after this latest in a series of military blunders, “in the end, there can be

only one... I mean one First Officer, of course. Just so there's no confusion, I'll inform Tremblay of his new title as soon as I see him."

"Thank you, Vice Admiral," Captain Heppner replied formally, "now, about the transfer of duties."

"Let's not be hasty, Captain," I subtly scolded, "there's no need to rush into things precipitously. You and your men will have plenty of time to settle in, settle down and learn the ropes. I can assure you that when everything's ready to go, you'll get what you've been asking for."

The Captain looked grim and unhappy, but once again nodded his acceptance.

Sometimes it was actually nice being an Admiral.

After the Captain signed off I opened a channel to the Communications section.

"Hello, Admiral, how can I help you," asked one of the operators.

"Please call down to the Brig and let them know I desire to have one of their prisoners brought up to the Flag Bridge immediately and then contact the Lancer Colonel and inform him I want said prisoner escorted up here and monitored every inch of the way from here to the brig. It's long past time I had a heart to heart with a certain uplift."

It was time I spoke with Primarch Glue.

Chapter 3: A Cunning Plan vs. The Slippery Slope

The proposed meeting in my ready room grew from just myself, Glue, and the Tactical Officer, into a conference of the entire Command staff. Naturally, Akantha was present as well.

Well, the entire 'original' Command staff. I'd be keelhailed and dumped in cold space before invited a gaggle of parliamentary loyalists masquerading as our ship's new reinforcements into my confidence just because they informed me that 'King James' told me to.

Apparently, word had got around that I was holding a big meeting of some sort, causing everyone and their sister to start showing up on the Bridge. It got to the point that I signaled my eventual defeat and decided to officially send out the summons to the rest of the ones who hadn't yet made it up.

I purposefully hadn't included Captain Heppner and his 'Command team' for this quasi-interrogation, and didn't much care if he and his men went so far as to park themselves right outside the door to my ready room and stood there until their legs cramped up. There was no way those men were getting into my private meeting but then he and his people were still getting settled, which was why they never even bothered to show up... that and they probably figured what their reception would have been and knew better than to try.

Besides, I was sure one way or another, our 'new' Command team would learn everything about this meeting of the 'old' Command team at a later date.

I deliberately didn't look at Officer Tremblay as I thought this. Despite my public words of support for the former Intelligence Officer, I still didn't trust the man.

"What's this meeting about, Sir," asked the Lancer Colonel once we were all gathered in the ready room, looking professional and unhurried. But while he was certainly the very model of the first, I very much doubted he was the second.

Before I had the chance to answer, Science Officer Jones broke in. "I'll tell you what this is about," he said, looking red in the face. "It's all about political upheaval back on the home world and high-handed royal maneuvers now that they are back in power," he all but snarled, his face slowly turning purple.

I stared at the man nonplussed. This was outside the M.O. of our normally peevish civilian officer.

"I didn't want to believe it was true—" The ship's Science Officer continued, only to be cut off.

"Royal politics are going to be the least of our worries," the Chief Gunner growled, giving him a look that froze the purple faced Jones in midsentence.

The Gunner then turned his gaze on Tremblay and held it there, his eyes like the targeting array of one of his tubolasers.

For his part the First Officer all but smirked. No, I take that back, he was definitely smirking. The amused look he sent back the Chief Gunner's way was more than I would have expected. It seemed Officer Tremblay was starting to find his spine. I wouldn't have wanted to be on the receiving end of that Chief's burning gaze.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," Helmsman DuPont said hesitantly. Shepherd the ship's

navigator nodded in silent agreement beside him.

“It’s true that we’ve been out here a long time,” said DuPont, looking over at the ship’s Science Officer, then he shrugged and turned his hands palm up, “but I mean, if you’re so upset with the personnel transfer, why didn’t you just go home?”

Jones pounded the table in response to DuPont’s eminently reasonable question, “Some of us weren’t given the option of going home. Some of us were told our efforts on board the Lucky Clover were vital to the welfare of the Commonwealth at large and were put right back on the very same shuttle we tried to transfer out on!” cried Officer Jones.

Eyebrows went up around the table and more than one set of eyes turned toward Tremblay, including those of one very irate Science Officer.

“Don’t look at me,” Tremblay said raising his hands up in the air as if in surrender. “If anyone had asked my opinion I’d have told them to put you on the first hyper-capable ship headed home and not let you out again until the ship arrived back at port.”

Jones flushed, and the naïve pair that directed the ship in normal and hyperspace, the Helmsman and Navigator, actually looked surprised.

It was time to reclaim control of this meeting.

“If anyone had bothered to ask my opinion on the subject,” I said pointedly, looked over at Jones and then sweeping the table with my gaze, “I’d have made sure the transfer went through. However, as I wasn’t consulted until *after* we’d already point transferred away from Easy Haven...” I let the silence linger. I couldn’t admit I was powerless to send him home, and neither could I appear as less than large and in charge of this ship, which most definitely included controlling who came and went aboard her. Blaming Jones for jumping ship without permission, when all he had to do was ask, now that was a horse of a different color.

“Nor was I,” agreed Tremblay.

I narrowed my eyes but restrained from frowning at this little sidebar.

“Now, about the reason I’ve called this meeting—” I trailed off at the sight of individual little conversations springing up all around the table despite the fact that their Admiral was about to enlighten them all as to why they’d been summoned to this meeting of mine in the first place. A meeting they’d essentially barged their way in on.

“I Doubt that, Mr. First Officer,” Bogart said with a sneer, his voice rising loud enough to catch my attention and interrupt my speech.

“If you’ve got any accusations to make, now would be the time, Mr. Bogart,” Tremblay exclaimed, clearly attempting to goad the Chief Gunner into something.

The Chief Gunner leaned back and the expression on his face could have been a pleasant one, if his eyes hadn’t been so very hard. “We have our own way of handling problems down on the Gundeck, Sir,” he said a hint of a growl creeping into his voice, “we rarely find a need to get all official with such matters.”

“Yes, as we all saw down in sick bay,” confirmed Tremblay. “So if you have nothing further to say, perhaps—”

I hated to break up this little set to between the parliamentarian Tremblay and my old royalist Gunner Curtis Bogart, especially when it was starting to get to the interesting part. Unfortunately, it seemed everyone here needed another good lesson in why the words of Vice Admiral Jason Montagn were to be hung upon as if their very lives and futures depended on it.

So I took my holdout blaster pistol and pounded the desk with the hilt. Whether it was the sound of said pounding or the sight of a loaded weapon in my hand, the side conversations cut off with drastic and satisfying quickness.

I was about to continue my display, but fearing it was more the blaster than a true desire to listen to my words, I turned to the Lancer Colonel instead.

“I think it would ease the minds of many in this room, and help focus our attention on the main topic at hand, if we addressed a few side issues first,” I said, sounding grim even to my own ears. “A brief overview of your efforts over the past few hours Colonel Suffic, if you please,” I instructed him with my eyes making it clear that this was not a request but instead a politely worded order.

“Of course, Admiral,” he nodded as he turned to the rest of the table. “Over the past several hours, the men and women of the Lancer Contingent have taken up key positions throughout the ship. We now control the flow of crew from deck to deck and department to department,” he reported sounding professional, official and entirely in control of both himself and his heavily armed men.

“You have equipped yourselves with power armor?” I inquired, even though I already knew the answer. This little bit of theater was for the benefit of the rest of the people in this room, not for my own education.

“Of course, Sir,” he said.

“Excellent work, Colonel,” I congratulated him. “Make sure to pass along my compliments for a job well done as well as my personal thanks for your Contingent’s unwavering attention to duty,” I said, grateful that most of the Lancers in the ship’s Lancer contingent were Tracto-ans. They considered themselves personally sworn to me as their Warlord first and foremost, and not some Officer appointed over them by an unfortunate bureaucratic mistake.

“I will, Sir,” he said with a nod in my direction. “The men will be thrilled to know the Little Admiral takes such interest in their work,”

For my part I covered the clenching of my jaw by giving a big smile quickly followed by a nod of my own. Oh, how I hated that nickname. I could just spit, the ‘Little Admiral’ indeed!

This latest report had caused a number of smiles to break out around the table. I glanced at Officer Tremblay, of all the people at this command meeting, he was one of the few who now wore a frown.

“Is there some reason to believe we need the entire contingent of lancers posted around the ship,” he asked pointedly, glancing around the table to make sure his point wasn’t lost on anyone with two brain cells to rub together, “A threat or other specific worry we should be aware of, Admiral.” This time he was looking straight at me.

“No. Nothing of the sort,” I replied smoothly, shrugging off the implications he was so brazenly trying to insert into the minds of the command team.

“This is merely a training exercise,” I laughed to put the lie in Tremblay’s very accurate assertions.

“A training exercise,” he said disbelief dripping from his mouth.

“Of course, whatever else could it possibly be,” I asked rhetorically, puzzlement etched across my forehead for all to see.

“Dazzle us with your brilliance, Admiral,” Tremblay said sardonically, “convince us how this should all be considered a mere training exercise and not a blatant attempt to hold onto the ship through force-majeure.”

“Be careful, Junior Lieutenant,” I warned, surprised to discover exactly how angry I was feeling. “you tread on dangerous ground.”

“Forgive me, Admiral,” he bit off each word, “but let’s call this hastily slapped together, bloated abortion of a hover bus, a Murphy-be cursed Hover Bus and not some fancy new fangled, yet surprisingly over large, racing model,” he finished breathing hard.

There was sudden silence in the ready room as everyone focused on our conversation, some with

phlegmatic calculation, others (like DuPont and Shepherd) with widened eyes.

“Let me be clear,” I raised my voice to carry, even as I met Tremblay stare for stare, “no one is getting thrown under the bus, not on my watch, and not as long as we’re all riding,” I paused for dramatic effect, “my fancy new Speed Racer,” I said with ringing finality. Then I abruptly cracked a smile, one that failed to reach my eyes, but no one except Tremblay was able to see that part.

Around me a couple guffaws broke out. As hoped, I’d managed to break the tension my First Officer had managed to create all on his lonesome. Something had to be done...then I smiled. Revenge: it is sweet.

“Unfortunately, while no one is getting thrown under the bus, there will be certain changes,” I continued after they’d all had their laugh.

At this, faces closed and the brief laughter faded away like a summer wind.

“Sir,” asked the Chief Gunner, his eyes searching.

“While Captain Heppner and his team won’t be moving up onto the Flag Bridge, instead choosing to set up shop on the ship’s Command Bridge,” I paused as I noticed the nods going around the table; it was clear they had expected something like this. Was I the only idiot on the ship unaware we had two bridges?

“They will eventually,” I said stressing the last word, “assume some of the less critical duties which we’ve been handling from up here.”

“What does that even mean... Sir,” Tremblay inquired, the barest hint of an expression on his face, equal parts mixed smirk and disbelief.

Even as I could feel my eyes hardening, I had to suppress a cold, shark-like smile.

“Despite your own exemplary performance and in recognition of your steadfast service in this seemingly never-ending series of crises, Captain Heppner has informed me that you will no longer be required to fulfill your recent duties,” I said keeping the satisfaction I felt at being the one to give him this news off my face.

“What?” asked Tremblay sounding surprised and trying to hide it.

“After consulting with the new Captain, it was decided that the ship really couldn’t have two First Officers running around gumming up the chain of command,” I embellished, “instead you will be getting a brand new title,” I said, deliberately drawing out the suspense. From the set of his shoulder I could tell Tremblay was starting to squirm on the inside, which was no less than he deserved after his recent behavior.

“You will no longer be the ship’s First Officer; instead you will officially be my new Chief of Staff,” I said with ringing finality. Tremblay briefly grimaced and then nodded his acceptance, sitting back in his chair at the news.

“A staff officer again,” he muttered under his breath.

For myself, I rather liked this new turn of events. It was better for all involved if Tremblay’s status on this ship lay entirely with the Admiral he served, as it removed another motivation for the man to assist in the removal of said Admiral. Namely me. After all, how could he be a chief of the Admiral’s staff if there was no admiral still in command of the ship? Now if only he’d see things in the same light I did, because if there was one thing I’d learned about Tremblay, it was that he didn’t always see things the same way I did.

Sliding a glance over at Akantha, who’d been surprisingly silent during the whole affair so far, saw a look of icy contentment on her face. I hoped she continued to let me run things without putting her oar in, as I was feeling more than a little pleased at the result of my little verbal back hand to my former first officer. Nothing less than he deserved, of course, after that little attempt to throw this meeting under his Saint Murphy averted ‘hover bus.’

“Now, if there are no more strident calls for alarm, or hover buses, and our need to deal with them,” I said abruptly, turning to my assembled officers, “I would like to continue with the real agenda for this meeting,” I finished glaring at my assembled officers.

Calls of, “Yes, Sir,” and, “Yes, Admiral,” swept round the table.

“Good enough then,” I said sweeping the table with one last steely gaze. I couldn’t have them get into the habit of questioning me, or being allowed to derail my meetings. Constructive forward output, that’s what I needed from these gentlemen and women, not running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Thank the angry gods of cold space for that lancer contingent.

I felt compelled to turn and give Akantha a smile of gratitude at the thought of her kinsmen. Her forehead furrowed and she looked slightly perplexed but that didn’t matter. I was reluctantly thankful all the same.

“Very well then,” I said and pressing a button on my desk, I signaled for the Lancers outside to escort in exhibit A for my presentation.

On the outside I was the image of calm and control, on the inside I could feel myself clench up. This was a crucial part of my plan; if exhibit A didn’t pan out, it could all fall apart and leave me scrambling.

The main doors to the ready room slid open and a pair of battle armored Tracto-ans escorted my main exhibit.

“Ah, Primarch Glue,” I rose from behind my desk and gave the creature...or rather, man, a formal half bow, “so good of you to join us.”

I gestured to an empty chair I had instructed brought in but had deliberately left unfilled.

“Please have a seat,” I said, utilizing my royal training to its utmost to project a sense of unruffled civility and manners.

Eyebrows raised and in a few cases crashed back down thunderously.

Glue stared at me with those big, dark eyes set in a grayish black face for several seconds before moving around to take his seat. Backs stiffened as the gorilla man maneuvered around behind several of my command staff to reach the chair I’d indicated.

Tremblay opened his mouth, no doubt for another one of his bigoted ‘monkey boy’ comments, but I was wise to him by now.

“You have something to add, Chief of Staff,” I asked, my tone making it clear that if he valued his new job he’d better not, especially after the way he’d been so ‘helpful’ thus far.

He slowly closed his mouth and shrugged as if the matter was of little importance to him before leaning back in his chair with a martyred sigh.

As soon as Glue was seated I struck while the iron was still hot. I pulled out a standalone holo-projector not connected to anything else in the ship except a power outlet. I then handed Glue a data jack with a universal adapter.

There was a muttering of unrest among my staff as they watched the Primarch first plug the jack into the holo-projector and then the other end of the cable into the side of his head.

“Never thought I’d see such a sight, unless I was busy trying to put a stop to it with a blaster pistol,” growled the Chief Gunner. He was greeted with muttered agreement from around the table.

“We’ve opened Pandora’s box,” Science Officer Jones said his voice rising.

It was time to nip this little side chatter in the bud.

“For reasons of operational security, other than the coordinates for the Pirate Lair — which I have personally memorized — the entirety of the digital information we currently possess on our target is contained within the Primarch’s head and will continue to be so,” I said my voice rising.

“Disgusting,” muttered the Chief Gunner.

I met his eyes with a hard stare and he returned my gaze stonily, but I wasn't about to surrender in this battle of will and after a moment he turned his glare on the table.

"At the moment the table isn't open for questions. We will all await the Primarch's presentation," I said grimly, "and let me assure you, any qualms you have about the presenter or his manner of presentation will seem like a comfortable little baby's blanket compared to how you'll feel after he's finished."

I was going to say more, but Glue took it upon himself to activate the projector and launch into the presentation.

"As you now visualize," the ape-man rumbled, pointing to a large cylindrical object that appeared in the middle of the table as it sprouted little arms with what looked like circular disks on the ends of them. "Omicron Free Port, or The Omicron as called by its inhabitants, is large Black Port five miles long and twice that in the wide." The Primarch popped his lips as he exhaled a long, deep breath, which seemed to rattle my teeth.

"She's huge," exclaimed our Navigator, "almost large enough to generate her own gravity field!"

Glue turned to stare at the Navigator. From my time with him I realized he wasn't intending to be intimidating, but Shepherd obviously didn't know this because he paled and his mouth snapped shut.

"Omicron Port is large repair and transshipment point, also has big Trillium reserve: sell to pirates, smugglers, rogue worlders and genetic variants who make port or call home," Glue answered still looking at our Navigator.

For his part Shepherd looked like he wanted nothing more than to sink into his seat and disappear.

"Excellent," I said clapping my hands together once, to draw the Primarch's attention back in my direction and away from my now pasty faced Navigator.

"Defenses?" I inquired when Glue turned to look at me with narrowed eyes.

The Primarch turned back to the holo-projector and the image soon filled with hundreds of flashing red icons.

"Dozens of ships in port at any time, and Omicron boasts several hundred point defense and large beam arrays. Heavy lasers, turbo-lasers, and Ion Cannons for capture pirates disturb the peace, Omicron also equipped with massive sensor arrays. Anything jump within point blank range immediately targeted and destroyed by automated turrets," growled the giant Primarch.

"Automated turrets," snapped the Chief Gunner incredulously.

"You can't risk fire-linking that many computers together," protested Tactical Officer Laurent, "What if they started going sub-AI during the middle of combat and suddenly crashed!"

"Intelligence taken from the Imperial Strike Cruiser, before it was destroyed," Tremblay said with a pointed look in my direction before continuing, switching his gaze back and forth between my Chief Gunner and 1st shift Tactical Officer, "would seem to indicate *they* have the ability to run everything fire-linked to the main tactical computer. I don't know about you, but my analysis of the Battle of Easy Haven would seem to indicate *they* had no difficulties with AI induced computer crashes," he ended with a smirk and derisive look in the direction of our head of Gunnery.

"Madness," growled Bogart, shaking his head.

The Tactical Officer opened his mouth for an angry retort but Glue headed them all off with a blunt grunt.

"Port Omicron been active almost fifty Terra-cycles," he growled, "they have two parallel system, only one is hard plugged in at same time. If it starts go AI, unplug network link, swap chips and go manual with second system. Takes twice the space but on big Space Station..." he shrugged.

It seemed to make sense to me. If an AI started to rise up, the Elder Protocols that had infected our computer networks ever since the fall of the AI's would activate and crash everything it was connected to. So if an AI started to form, simply unplug it and plug in an uninfected computer to run the battery.

My officers on the other hand looked like they'd tasted something foul.

"Well that's just bloody great," snarled my Chief Gunner, "pirates with a practical fire-link that encompasses over 238 beam weapons of varying sizes, that are all able to focus on a single target in the time it takes a human gunner to even realize there's a target. If they hit us with that kind of firepower, we'll be blown away in short order as our shields overload and our hull cooks off!"

Warrant Officer Laurent slowly nodded his head in agreement, "Although in fairness, they can only focus something like half of that on us at any one time."

"Not like it matters," snorted the Gunner, "Why I bet with a station of that size they've got the fusion power to fire every weapon continuously, as well as the extra arrays to swap the focusing crystals out when they overheat!" He frowned fiercely, "we've got what, 60% of our max fusion power and a third the broadside they can bring to bear?"

"What about shields," demanded Tremblay looking genuinely engaged in the conversation for the first time. Engaged and alarmed.

Seeing all my officers looking worried, I was also starting to feel a rising sense of concern.

Glue pointed at the holo-projector and several different areas were highlighted.

"It is having multiple shield generators; take out one and they still able provide coverage to the area until the backup generators come online," the Primarch grunted. If I didn't know better, I'd almost say he looked and sounded smug.

"Counting whatever ships are docked there, this pirate base is strong enough to hold off an entire squadron of battlegroups," Tactical Officer Laurent said shaking his head in negation.

"It would take an entire fleet to go up against this beast the conventional way," agreed the Chief Gunner, shooting me a knowing look.

I didn't like that look. It was a look that said he expected me to pull some wild rabbit out of my hind quarters, one that would hop all the way to victory. He of all people ought to know better; I was no tactical genius, as our last grand tactical session with the Imperial Cruiser proved. That, followed by the mostly failed Patrol for Pirates along the border should have illustrated the point clearly.

My navigator and helmsman were also looking at me with eyes that all but screamed their sudden confidence in my non-existent plan. I mean honestly, that was why I'd summoned the whole command team! To make a winning plan!

"Uh...how about we jump in close. I mean really close, right on top of them even, and cut loose with everything we've got? Take out the Omicron's broadside and shield generators on whichever side we appear and then send in the Lancers to take control of the station!" I said starting to get excited at the prospect of this plan. As far as plans went, it was simple. It counted on the element of surprise, something crucial in most of my battles so far and it ended with a rosy outcome, i.e. the pirate base neutralized and us standing triumphant over our enemies.

"It'd be hard, but we can pull it off!" I said, happy for once to have come up with something that didn't sound like a complete disaster as soon as it popped out of my mouth.

"If we've got precise coordinates we could get in close," Shepherd said looking excited, beside him DuPont nodded in agreement.

"A fool's plan," sneered Tremblay while at exactly the same time Officer Laurent shook his head. "You're all forgetting the massive Trillium deposits they use to supply their pirate customers. That means you can't make so much as a precision micro-jump from within the system itself, let alone

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