

Many Paths

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The familiar sounds of the undocking procedure told Jerzy they were separated before the readouts told him they were clear of the docking arm. He moved the control yoke and the Spider-class tug Luck Now turned lazily toward open space as he nudged the ship away from the station using manoeuvring thrusters only. He'd performed the procedure hundreds of times before, usually with a feeling of reluctance to be leaving the comfort of a station. But this time he felt like he couldn't get away from it fast enough.

"Take it easy, will you?" Came the familiar voice over his left shoulder. "You don't want to get us stopped for speed violations before we even leave port, do you?"

"What's gotten you so jumpy all of a sudden?" Jerzy said. "We haven't even broken three hundred, and they never..."

"Just keep us under the limit until we're free of the port STC zone." Genovesi barked.

"Alright! Jeezus!" Jerzy conceded sarcastically. "Whatever you say, boss." There was more tension in the captain's voice than usual. Jerzy turned around from the helm controls to look at Genovesi directly. The glow of the main bridge readouts made the stocky captain's face look even more bloated than usual. There was something more than tension in his expression. Jerzy couldn't identify it immediately, but it looked like Captain Genovesi was feeling smug about something he was keeping secret. {mospagebreak }

"Look Jerzy, I don't need the attitude right now, OK?" Genovesi said impatiently.

"We've got a tub full of new hires, with only you, Leto and Aboud I can trust, and a tight schedule. So just cut it, and fly nice."

"Fine. But since we're on the topic of trust," Jerzy said, knowing he was pushing it. "Maybe you'd be willing to share with me your reasons for leaving that hole in such a hurry without cargo or contract? Last credit statement transmitted to my board before we undocked showed more than just docking fees and a few supplies. We are even further in the hole than when we started. I'm all for getting away from that place as quickly as possible...it positively stank of criminal activity, but what...?"

"...What, and why, and how, are my concerns." Genovesi replied forcefully. "Flying the Luck Now is your concern. And since I pay you, you'll fly her exactly like I tell you. So take it ...easy."

"Aye, Captain." Jerzy gave up probing, content to be putting distance between himself and the disreputable station they had just left. "Is there a course you'd like me to take, or are we just going out there somewhere?" He gestured out the forward viewport with a flip of his hand.

"We're going to the Saladin L-point." Genovesi said, turning to leave the bridge. "I'll send one of the new lads up with Leto to give you a hand. Show him the ropes, and bring him up to speed on the peculiarities of

our port dorsal engine, will you? Then you can take a break.”

Jerzy took a breath and tried to let it out slowly, but he couldn't wait. He spun around in the pilot seat and called after Genovesi before he could close the bridge hatch. “Captain. One last question, if you don't mind.”

There was a longer than usual pause, as if Genovesi was considering ignoring the request and claiming he wasn't able to hear it out in the access corridor. His puffy unshaven face appeared around the edge of the hatchway with an unwelcoming expression on it. “What is it?”

“uhh...” Jerzy stammered, as if trying to come up with a question worthy of the interruption. “I'm not sure how to put this, but... I'm more than a little worried about this run. A little information from you would really help reassure me that I'm going to survive long enough to collect a paycheck.”

Genovesi looked back down the corridor to where he had been heading, as if considering how to respond. He looked down at the lip of the hatchway glide track for another moment before stepping fully back onto the bridge. His answer came in a conspiratorial whisper. “I was going to tell you once we got to the L-point anyway. Meet me at the entrance to the main hold as soon as Leto gets up here. Keep it between us for now.” He turned and was gone without another word.

Twenty minutes seemed like as many hours to Jerzy while he waited for Leto to relieve him. He tried not to leave too quickly, but as soon as the hatchway closed behind him, he scurried along the maindeck corridor, swung himself past the lift door choosing the stairwell instead so he could lift his feet and slide with his hands on the hand rails between the landings. He clattered along the last stretch of corridor and skidded to a stop as he rounded the corner to the main hold access. Genovesi was standing there waiting for him.

“For Chrissake, Jerzy, I said ‘keep it between us’,” Genovesi complained. “The whole ship probably thinks we're under attack with all the racket you made rushing down here.”

“Sorry,” Jerzy panted. “I just didn't want to keep you waiting.”

“Nevermind.” The captain said looking over his shoulder. “Check this out. You're going to love this.” He opened the hatch to the main hold and walked over to a stack of four large covered containers sitting in the middle of the hold's deck. He threw back the tarpaulin and pointed at the containers.

“What?” Jerzy shrugged. “Aren't they the navigational computer components and materials we were going to drop off at our next stop? Selling that is barely going to pay for the fuel for this run.”

“Take a closer look.” He flipped a latch on the side of the container, where there shouldn't be one, and opened a hinged panel where there shouldn't be one, to reveal an entirely different cargo inside the container.

Jerzy stepped nearer to look at the contents more closely. His eyes searched back and forth for a moment before he spoke. “Have you completely lost your mind!?”

“It's great isn't it?” Genovesi beamed. “It's worth a fortune.”

“No, it's not great at all.” Jerzy stared at him, incredulous. “Do you have any idea what that is?”

“Military grade. Absolutely the best. Top of the line stuff.”

“You really have completely lost your mind!” Jerzy shrunk back a little. “This is serious contraband. Did you just forget that we're in the Sultan's space here? This is the kind of thing you get executed for; not fined, not jailed, executed.”

“Relax. They'll never...”

Yeah right! “They'll never find it.” Famous last words of many a dead smuggler. Jerzy grew angrier. “Look, when I signed on, I made it clear I was only interested in working for a clean and legal operation.”

“...Mostly legal” were your exact words. I remember them, because I thought it was strange that you'd say the word “mostly.” Genovesi corrected.

"Whatever! This…” Jerzy gestured at the containers next to them. "This is not what I agreed to. This is suicide.”

"You didn’t mind taking your share of extra profits we got from that little skimming job we pulled three months ago. Or that time last year when we all benefited…”

"Yes, I know.” Jerzy held his hands up. "It’s a slippery slope. But this is an entirely different category of ‘shady’. This isn’t just squeezing a little more profit out of a few cargo runs. This is plain old smuggling, pure and simple.”

"Don’t worry.” The captain smiled as he started re-sealing the hidden panel. "The customs folks will never think of looking past the manifest, or the code on the crates. Even if they open them up, the containers appear to hold mostly what they say they’re carrying. So we can claim deniability.”

"Deniability doesn’t matter to the Sultanate Customs goons.” Jerzy reminded him. "They are utterly ruthless, and assume that everyone is guilty. If I can smell that something funny is going on, they’ll catch a whiff of it too, and impound us just for the fun of it. They’ll strip every deck of the ship apart until they find these compartments. When they do, they won’t care how innocent we may or may not be. We’ll all be dismembered alive for the cameras as an example of their new customs policies to other smugglers. They don’t make fussy distinctions about responsibility between guilty captains and hired crew, either in case you were wondering. This is definitely not the time to be starting to play the smuggling game. They are seriously cracking down, and we’re just not experienced enough at this type of thing.”{mospagebreak }

"Which is exactly why our customers wanted to use us, and are paying so handsomely.” Genovesi went on. "Besides, there’s more to it than these containers.”

"More than that?!"” Jerzy pointed to the containers again. "How many different ways have you come up with to get us all killed?”

"Well…more than that anyway.” Genovesi nodded toward the crates, smiled and reached into his breast pocket to pull out a data chip. He held it up between them. "This is why our accounts are lower than they should be. I paid for a little extra insurance.”

"What kind of information is it?” Jerzy asked, calming a little. "An IFF hack? A Priority Pass? Shift change schedules?”

"None of the above.” The captain was enjoying himself. "There are many paths we can take to our destination. We have here the means of avoiding customs altogether. This my friend, is the navigational data that will take us through a jump route that is as yet, officially unknown. No customs, no where.”

"Oh Jesus.” Jerzy shook his head. "Now I know you’ve lost it. You paid for NAV data through an unstable jump didn’t you. We’re dead. They probably told you it would be a piece of cake, didn’t they? Approach the L-point like you normally would ‘cause customs on the outbound cue isn’t all that tight. Register the legitimate destination with STC until the clear is given. Start accelerating for the L-point when you are given the go, but substitute the secret NAV data just before activating the capsule drive. Exit C space somewhere off the grid, jump again into the grid somewhere well past the customs check, easy peezy. Right? Only they neglected to mention the fact that these secret unstable jumps are pretty much hell. Most ships never make the exit, and if they do, they’re so damaged they can’t make the next jump back to the known systems of our cluster. I wonder how many marks like you are drifting out there dead from asphyxiation or starvation, frozen in their little tug tombs because they couldn’t get anything working after that first jump? All you’ve done is open up a few more paths to our collective deaths.”{mospagebreak }

"Stop being such a pessimist.” Genovesi admonished. "I stocked up on parts and most of the new hires are repair specialists. Besides,” He smiled and clapped Jerzy on the shoulder as they turned to leave the hold area. "I have complete confidence in your piloting skills to get us through the whole Capsule space ordeal without a scratch.”

"There’s no way I can talk you out of this, is there?”

"Not a chance.” Genovesi winked. "Anyway, I’d rather face the odds you just described than try to tell the Droznics we decided we didn’t want to go through with the deal.”

"Droznics!?"” Jerzy stopped cold. "Holy…. You have truly outdone yourself in the ‘crazed-suicidal-spaceship-captain’ department. You might as well just put a couple of rounds in my head right now. We’re dead so many different ways we might as well just call it a day here and now”

“Would you relax! Stop being so melodramatic.” Genovesi said. “This is a one-time deal. We get this through and we don’t have to ever deal with them again. Plus, we get paid very well.”

“How well”

“We’ll discuss your raise once we’ve jumped back safely. Rest assured that you’ll be pleased with your cut.”

“This had damned well better be worth it!” Jerzy muttered.

“I’m with you on that.” Genovesi admitted. “Let’s get back to the bridge and get ready for that jump, shall we?”