

1: SHIPPING IN

The *Half Moon in a Puddle* was a busy place at the best of times. When there were several ships on stopover in the relatively safe harbourage of Merkat Three's commercial space dock, it was even busier. Most of the time the locals paid little attention to the comings and goings of the regular and irregular clientèle, apart from a rapid visual appraisal to see if they looked as if credit might be extorted from them, but when Captain Cinnabar Ahxenta and her first mate, Tallica Apnis, pushed through the light-veils of the holo-door one evening, a great many eyes swivelled over. Most stayed there.

Captain Ahxenta was a tall woman, her first mate scarcely less so. They had to be: in their line of trade it paid to look intimidating unless you were very well versed in self-defence or packed an arsenal that would make a small battalion run for the nearest hills. As it was, the two women covered both additional bases. In their business, self-preservation and advanced military capability were almost requisite.

"The *Arianrhod* must be in then," one toper at the bar whispered to his companion as he took a sip from the mug he was nursing. "I heard a rumour that she was due – damage from some clash with the Coalition out near the asteroid mining station at Dryssicon Minor."

"That's bollocks," his friend said firmly but quietly, lest the newcomers overhear. "She's not the only PSS in: the *Tallulah* and the *Green Comet* both got here yesterday, for refit so they say. For an overhaul of their armouries more like. Something's up, I'll bet."

"As long as it's nowhere near here, Jurry my lad, that's all I can say," the first replied.

The two withdrew their eyes from the pair when they realised that their stares were being returned with an intensity that bored through to their very souls. It was unwise to upset the captain and first mate of a Private Starship, especially one as well-known as the *Arianrhod*.

The Private Starship *Arianrhod* was a fairly familiar sight at Merkat Three's massive space dock, she being a sizeable craft and Merkat Three being an open port which anyone could use without let or hindrance, questions rarely being asked as long as docking fees were paid up front and a cursory glance over ship's manifest indicated nothing illegal, dangerous or politically unwise. *Arianrhod* was ostensibly an independent trading vessel operated by a motley crew of merchant spacers who obtained cheaply and distributed at pecuniary advantage various cargoes across several galactic zones and sectors. She and her several sister ships were known throughout both local and distant star systems as Pirates, the common flag of the Trades Alliance, under which they flew, being a discrete skull and crossbones in a delicate shade of shell-pink that was widely and facetiously referred to as the *Jolly Rowena*, for various reasons that had been swallowed up in the mists of time.

Captain Ahxenta strode to the *Half Moon's* sturdy bar and ordered a couple of pots of ale for herself and her mate. The bartender lost no time in fulfilling the requisition: he knew with whom he was dealing. Not so the burly stranger who considered himself first in the queue.

"Hey, who are you to be pushing in here? We're waiting!"

"So I see," the captain responded dryly. "Put it on the tab," she added to the barman.

"Aye, aye, Captain," he responded, adroitly moving a couple of empty glasses out of range.

"Let's find a table over yonder," Jurry whispered to his buddy. "I still have the bruises from the last one."

The two gathered their drinks and scuttled over to a handy booth where they could watch any fun that ensued in relative safety.

"I said we were here first!" pursued the annoyed customer, indicating himself and the two behind him, who were nodding.

"No you didn't; you said you were waiting," Ahxenta contradicted, eyeing the three of them with faint derision as she picked up one of the mugs of fizzing brew that had been placed before her on the counter. "Thanks," she added to the barman.

"You're welcome, ma'am."

"Just a sodden minute, lady!" the brawny stranger interrupted, poking the captain on the arm. "What kind of joint is this that you

can waltz up and shove people out of the way and this bozo here let's you?"

"You hadn't ordered," the bartender pointed out.

"I was about to when this bitch pitched in. Hey, you!" he called to Ahxenta's back view as she ignored him and stalked off.

The captain stopped in her tracks and handed her mug to Apnis with the instruction to find them a table. She turned.

"You and your friends got some sort of problem, mister?" she enquired genially.

"You're the one with the problem, lady. We were here first!"

"So what do you want me to do? Put a plaster on your hurt pride for you?"

"You'll pay for our drinks," he told her, stepping forward and prodding her arm again with a large fist.

"Or you'll pay," added one of his friends with a leer.

"Sorry about the mess, Ally," Ahxenta called over to the barman as she drew back her arm.

At the first punch, the burly man's head snapped back. His momentary lack of balance was enough to topple him when the captain's leg caught the back of his knee. She ducked as the other two waded in. In moments the space before the bar was a mêlée of legs, arms and unbreakable crockery as gleeful locals joined the fray. The burly man had regained his footing and, eyes aflame, searched out Ahxenta. With a snarl he grabbed the nearest stool with the intention of braining her. It was a grave error. As he made a futile grab for the seat, she gave him such a kick in one kidney that he collapsed in a heap. He had made the classic mistake of assuming the furniture was mobile. It was not. In fact it was securely attached to the floor: the *Half Moon in a Puddle* had seen this sort of action before and was quite prepared for it.

"Break it up, break it up!"

The roar of the *Half Moon's* security team could be heard from every amplifier as they pushed their way in. Ten minutes later and peace was restored, clothing reordered and sweat and blood wiped away. A few strays were rounded up and hauled off to the lockup. The hefty individual who had begun it all had levered himself into a sitting position against the bar, supported by one of his mates.

"You'll pay for this!" he snarled up at Ahxenta, who was calmly dusting herself down.

“I already have: look at the state of my uniform. You’re lucky I don’t send you the cleaning bill.”

The friend of the injured man made a pull for something in his chest pocket. Before he could even abstract the weapon he felt a cold jab at his right ear and looked fractionally around to see the business end of a very large phase rifle just millimetres from his eye.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” Tallica Apnis advised him gently.

The man moved his hand slowly out from his body, palm open, but with his left hand he flicked out something from his belt. There was a flash and he crumpled to the floor, the small sidarm skittering away, to be gathered up and removed by a quick hand among the crowd.

“They never learn,” Apnis said coolly to her captain. “Come and get your drink before it warms up.”

She holstered her weapon and strolled through the milling throng, the onlookers making way without a murmur.

The man who had started the brawl sat stunned, stroking the prone form of his friend.

“Don’t worry,” Ally the barman soothed. “He’ll wake up in a few hours with a headache but that’s all – Commander Apnis never sets more than level three when she’s out relaxing.”

He called over one of his circulating acolytes and ordered him to collect the scattered glasses and mugs. Reaching beneath the counter, Ally hauled out a bundle of small packets. “Hand round the complimentary ship’s biscuits; they’re fresh in today from the bakehouse. And tell Ahxenta they’re on her tab. I’m not made of credit.”

“Tell her yourself,” the young man retorted. “I want to go home later with both my arms.”

“You’ll go home without a job to come back to if you don’t do as you’re told,” his boss threatened. “Get on with it.”

With a little trepidation the waiter carried out his manager’s injunction, keeping a safe distance. The captain to his relief responded “whatever” and carried on drinking, keeping a weather eye however on her surroundings.

“A few troublemakers in tonight,” the erstwhile barfly said to his mate from the safety of their small booth.

“Always the same when the Pirates heave-to in force, Malty, and given there’s three at least in the Web, we can expect more. Don’t

know who stupid-shorts is, though. Never been here before, that's for sure. Nobody around this place would tangle with the captain of the *Arianrhod*. Somebody should tell him."

"Won't be me. Drink up, Jurry boy, and I'll order us another: I made a pocketful of credits out of a bunch of tipsy trippers from a luxury cruise liner on stopover from Mellifly to the Cygilla Prime Resort-Dorm," Malty bragged.

"What line did you use? Buy these trashy souvenirs or my kids will starve? I'm an ex-officer of the twenty-third injured in action and trying to make a living to top up my pitiful pension?"

"No, I told the truth," said Malty smugly. "I'm an ex-spacer of the mercantile that lost my job after a freebooter vessel took out the cargo drones of three company ships and our business went under."

"Bet you didn't tell them that you were one of the crew of the freebooter and the company that lost the cargo drones sent the marines in after you to put a stop to your mercantile activity."

"Course I didn't, what do think I am, stupid? But look you, Jurry, that's Captain Fleetskup of the *Tallulah*: what's he want?"

"From what I hear of Murmur Fleetskup, an eyeful of Tallica Apnis," snorted Jurry. "He's not the only one, she's a looker. But it seems he's expected as he's not been given his marching orders. Something's in the wind."

"Aye, they've set the privacy shield," Malty noted with a hiccup, sliding his eyes sideways to view the other table. "But keep your eyes on your ale, mate, or you'll find them spooned out and served to you on a plate."

The captain of the *Tallulah* had indeed more on his mind than the charms of Commander Tallica Apnis. With a cursory glance around that took in most of the surrounding tables and their occupants, the majority of whom were trying to look the other way, he turned back to his two fellow officers, his mouth pursed up like a shut knife.

"Well, Fleetskup, let's hear it," Captain Ahxenta demanded, a little less than politely. "We haven't got all night. Sarie Jikelleli won't be in, the *Comet* needs urgent hull breach repairs and she doesn't trust the Dockers' Guild crews to handle it without a senior officer standing over them with a whip."

"She's got a first mate," Fleetskup responded sourly.

“He’s laid up in *Green Comet’s* medbay having his leg sown back on. Raiders, Jikelleli reckons, though raider attacks are getting too numerous to be believable. If you ask me, the Coalition is at back of a lot of the trouble out in the Belts. And elsewhere – I noted the Web’s docking fees were upped again. Extra security they told me in the harbour office.”

“Extra pay-offs more like,” Apnis interrupted.

Merkat Three prided itself on the level and quality of its Security Services. They were in place to keep the peace, more or less, and funding for their operations was paid out of docking fees. The vast web of interlocking structures that formed the mighty space docks of Merkat Three took some patrolling was the argument, and many officers and ships were perforce needed.

“That’s as maybe,” Captain Murmur Fleetskup rumbled. “I leave my exec to do the tallying-up, that’s what he’s paid for. But he comes across a few things here and there and he’s heard from an old mate that came in on one of the ore-runners from out the Dryssicon Major mining station that there’s been a spate of attacks on the larger ore-carriers...”

“That’s nothing new,” Apnis broke in. “The ore-carriers are often targeted on return from drop-off: their main payload bays are empty but their coffers tend to be full of stuff that’s mighty expensive to purchase on the open market – so the rumour goes, at least.”

“Let me finish,” Fleetskup continued self-righteously, raising a reproving finger. “You’re right about the empty payload bays on return, but several cargoes of *raw ore* have been blasted off more than a few of the carriers on the way out to their processing stations. It’s reckoned by my exec’s buddy that it has to be an inside job because the blast points are far too accurate for any fast-manoeuving raider fighters. The docking grapplers for the payload pods are targeted so that the pods can be released more or less in one piece and scooped up by the raider mother ship’s tractors. The carriers themselves are minimally damaged, so...”

“So they can be easily repaired and a new set of payload pods attached for the next run,” finished Ahxenta. “But where’s the point in stealing unprocessed ore? Unless you’ve got a large and very well-hidden processing plant, you’d be better off filching the processed stuff.”

“More security attached to processed goods and the processing stations are nearer to more densely populated areas,” Commander Apnis suggested. “So who are the raiders’ customers? They’re sure as hell not using the stuff themselves.”

The three looked at one another, their minds whirring as they digested the information. After a moment, Ahxenta gave a nod.

“Sounds like one of the Co-Scutters out to make some credit on the side,” she said in a low voice, stroking her chin with a thoughtful hand.

“You think, Cap?” Apnis asked, raising an eyebrow.

The Coalition of Systems Currently Under Treaty, or Co-SCUT as the confederation was sometimes termed, was a tight union of a respectable number of planetary systems bound by trade and trade-related non-aggression treaties to assist one another and to form a unified front against threats to sector stability from both within and without the galactic zones and sectors in which the Coalition operated. Many non-Coalition members were of the opinion that one of the main tenets of the inner circle of the organisation was the mandate to make life difficult for any system outside its sphere of influence or that of its main rival treaty organisation, the Interstellar Systems Protectorate. As a result, a number of systems operating independently of both found themselves obliged by circumstance to form their own looser union, the Non-Treaty Alliance, to guard against undue interference from the Co-Scutters.

“That brace of Friskianx frigates that tried to demand our cargo with menaces was certainly guided by other minds: the Friskianx on their own wouldn’t dare fire on a PSS without at least a fleet of drone back-ups,” Ahxenta declared.

“Maybe they had back-ups but they didn’t show,” Apnis shrugged, grinning. “They made one helluva mess of our aft shielding nonetheless and seriously scorched our hull plates, not to mention trying to surgically remove *our* cargo pods. We should sue them for damages.”

“So you *did* have a clash with the Coalition,” Fleetskup put in. “I’d heard the rumour. But good luck trying to sue any Co-SCUT member, especially the Friskianx; you’ll not likely win.”

The captain and first mate of the *Arianrhod* exchanged glances and wry smiles. Murmur Fleetskup had no more a sense of irony than a plastic shuttle.

“So that’s your news?” Cinnabar Ahxenta went on, trying to summon up a dreg of interest as she lifted her mug. “The spate of attacks on big ore-carriers heading to Dryssicon Major that look to be inside jobs carried out by raiders and backed by what might be one or more Coalition member worlds?”

“I don’t know if the Coalition *is* at the back of it,” Fleetskup frowned, wrinkling his brow. “That was your idea. But a lot of ore is being redirected somewhere that’s not the Dryssicon processing stations. What the Interstellar Trading Consortium will have to say is anyone’s guess. They *are* the biggest customers for processed ore.”

“Maybe whoever lifted the raw stuff will process it and sell it to the ITC at a better rate than they’ll get from the Dryssicon Ore Exchange,” Tallica Apnis suggested. “But why are we interested? We don’t deal in ore; it takes up too much space for too little profit for a start.”

“We *are* interested in what the raiders are up to,” her captain reminded her. “Especially if they’re linked to the Coalition. And if they have insiders at Dryssicon Major, where else have they got insiders? Always assuming your information is accurate,” she went on to Fleetskup.

“I just passed on what my exec found out. But Buntle’s no fool: he’s been my exec for years and I trust him implicitly. So if he reckons that this friend of his is on the up-and-up and his word can be trusted, then I believe him. And that’s not all...” The captain of the *Tallulah* narrowed his eyes and gave a furtive glance over his shoulder as he leaned closer to the other two. “I *have* heard, from another source, that the recent trouble out in the Belts is Coalition-managed, that they’re turning a blind eye to the increase in raider traffic and may even be supplying the raiders with ship-parts and information.”

“What’s your other source?” Ahxenta enquired sharply.

“That I can’t say,” the other responded. “But this I will say...”

“Please don’t,” Apnis murmured under her breath, but was swept aside as Fleetskup raised a finger conspiratorially.

“There are Coalition agents not a light-year from here that have their ears to the ground and their noses pressed up against every porthole they can find. I’ll tell you more at the meeting the day after tomorrow at orbital docking HQ. I have to go as my first mate is holding the bridge and I’m needed aboard.”

“As if Melly Goodsocks can’t look after the bridge without him on her back,” Apnis commented to the retreating form of Captain Fleetskup as the privacy shield reformed around their table. “And if these local Coalition agents have their ears to the ground and their noses pressed up against various portholes, they’re not going to be bothering us, are they? They’ll be too busy cleaning their ears and wiping the snot from their noses.”

Captain Ahxenta was examining her wrist communit, where a holo was pouring out across her hand. “It’s Sarie Jikelleli: their hull repairs will take all night and then some, so we won’t see her. She’ll call in tomorrow as she’s got something she needs to discuss. Her first mate’s out for at least a month and her crew is jumpier than a spot of spit on a hotplate. So what do you think to Tallulah Tommy’s information?”

“Maybe Tommy Buntle’s mate is a raider insider and he’s passing on rubbish to stir up trouble among Coalition and Trades Alliance members, not to mention the ITC and the Non-Treaty Alliance systems,” Apnis suggested.

“Buntle’s a lot savvier than Murmur Fleetskup,” Ahxenta pointed out. “And as the captain’s exec aboard the *Tallulah* he’ll be privy to a lot of information. And he gets out a lot – Fleetskup’s a lazy article at the best of times; he delegates his delegate to delegate the jobs he should be doing. So Buntle’s in a position to find things out and he has a lot of contacts.”

“So why would Buntle pass rumour on to Fleetskup?”

“Because he thinks there’s more than a grain of truth in it – and Fleetskup owns the ship, remember, so everyone aboard depends on him for their livelihood, including Tommy Buntle. Though I suspect Buntle’s been feathering his own nest for years at the *Tallulah*’s expense – why else would he stay on as exec?”

“Because he had a criminal record and nobody else would employ him. And let’s be honest, Cap, anyone who’s served aboard a PSS isn’t likely to be first in line for any job that comes up in a regular fleet are they?”

“You have a point, Tallica. But drink up, the locals are getting rowdy and Ally’s sent for reinforcements. And I for one am not up for another bout of fisticuffs this evening.”