

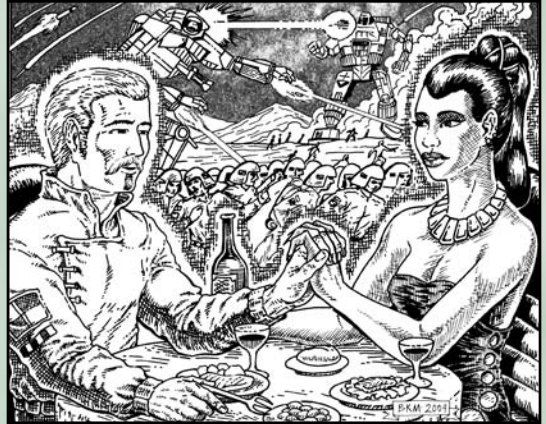
Commerce is All

By Steven Mohan, Jr.

Canopian Pleasure Circus Bacchanal
In orbit about Trondheimal, Illyrian Palatinate
January 5 3033

Captain Douglas Berg stepped into the Hook-Up, the first outer-ring bar on the Canopian Pleasure Circus *Bacchanal*, and felt his jaw tighten.

The bar's cheap sound system transformed the pounding music into one long screech punctuated by a back beat so deep that Berg felt its throb in his teeth. The bar was dimly lit except for occasional flashes of blue-white light that left him blinking away bright afterimages. The air was filled with a foul, blue haze and the mingled smells of tobacco and marijuana.



Sweat and desire.

He'd been on less chaotic battlefields.

How'd he let Sully talk him into this?

Thank God the Hook-Up was located in the outer ring where the DropShip's spin was maximum. After seeing how weird this place was, he had no desire to visit one of the zero-gee places.

He turned to go and felt a strong hand clamp down on his arm. "Not trying to get away, are you?"

Berg turned to see his good friend Lieutenant Jason Sullivan staring at him, a broad grin stretched across his ugly face.

"Who me?" Berg asked innocently.

"C'mon," said Sully in a slurred voice that told Berg the infantry officer was already well into his cups, "Might as well 'ave a good time." He sobered for a moment. "If Little Bob has his way it'll be your last."

H. R. "Little Bob" McIntyre was the ruthless dictator of the Circinus Federation, a gang of thieves, cutthroats, and rapists

dressed up to look like a real government. The latest intel indicated that the Circinians were mobilizing troops and assembling DropShips. All signs pointed to a Federation invasion of the tiny Illyrian Palatinate.

And if that happened, Berg, Sully, and the rest of the mercenaries in Thor's Army would be in the middle of the fighting.

But that didn't mean that everyone in the Periphery had to know about it.

"This is not the place," Berg hissed.

"You think they don't know?" said Sully, pointing at the crowd with his glass. "The whole *sector* knows."

"All right, stop it," said Berg sharply, grabbing the other man by the tunic.

"Why do ya' think the circus is in town," asked Sully fiercely, "if not to collect our last few coins before the invasion comes?"

Berg slowly let go of his friend. He didn't have an answer for that. It was rare for the Canopian pleasure ships to range through the Periphery as far coreward of the Magistracy as the Palatinate and here was the *Bacchanal* hanging in orbit about Trondheimal.

Sully grabbed him around the back of the neck and pulled Berg's face close to his. "So 'ave a good time, Dougie." Then he let go of his friend and stumbled off into the semi-darkness.

Berg glanced around the room and sighed. Little chance of that. He waved for a drink without bothering to tell the 'tender what he wanted and a glass of something appeared before him. He took a sip. Bad vodka. Good enough.

There was plenty of skin on display here at the Hook-Up, a good time for the asking. Long, platinum hair. Or white-blonde. Or red. Blue eyes, violet eyes, emerald eyes. Heavy breasts barely bound by shimmering silver tops that accented rather than covered.

It was crass. It was obvious.

It was boring.

Berg had promised Sully he would come to the bar and he'd come. He downed his vodka in one quick toss, turned to go.

And saw her.

She was nothing like the other women in the bar. She wore a dress the color of midnight that somehow managed to be sexy and classy at the same time. It hugged the curves of her slim body, which were nice without being overdone. Her skin was the color of rich mocha and set off nicely by gray-green eyes.

Berg tried to swallow and found he couldn't.

She reached the bar and summoned the 'tender with a look. He set a drink in front of her that Berg bet wasn't bad vodka.

He stepped forward and slapped a C-bill down on the bar. "For the lady."

She frowned. "That's really not necessary," she said coolly.

The 'tender sat down a second drink to match the first.

"But it would be my great pleasure," Berg said. "Perhaps there's someplace we could go. And, uh, talk," he said quickly.

Her gaze flickered to the MechWarrior insignia on his collar and then back to his face. "I don't think you and I have anything to *talk* about."

Berg blinked. He had to be the only man who could strike out in a pleasure circus. "Well, please take the drink anyway," he said slowly. "I insist."

She opened her mouth to protest, but a deep voice behind Berg said, "Thank you. I will."

Berg turned to see a Circinus officer reaching for *his* drink. The man's head was shaved except for a brown topknot that hung half-way down his back. The golden skull insignia on his black leather uniform made him a captain, though the indigo battle tattoos covering his face and neck suggested he was an extremely well-traveled captain.

"What are *you* doing here?" Berg snapped.

The Circinian officer smiled, a gleaming shark's smile. "Canopus is not party to the dispute between Illyria and the Federation. And my money is as good as anyone's, Captain . . ."

"Berg. Douglas Berg."

The Circinian smiled. And I am Car Negdren." He drained the shot glass and set it down on the bar with a sharp clack. "Thank you, Captain. Perhaps you'll let me return the favor some time."

"Sure," said Berg tightly. "If we run into each other again."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," said Negdren. The beast slipped his arm around the woman's waist like he owned her. "Ready to go, Arissa?"

"Quite ready." The pair turned to leave, but not before the beautiful woman named Arissa offered Berg a dismissive smile that cut him deeper than any wound he'd ever received in battle.



After the incident in the bar, Berg would've left the *Bacchanal* on the next Trondheimal-bound shuttle if not for his buddies. It was a warrior's duty to watch his comrades' backs, even on leave. Especially if there were Circs about. So Berg drifted moodily through the mutant freak-shows and the skin palaces and the gaming emporiums, partaking of nothing but the occasional drink and keeping his eyes open.

Unable to think of anything save the woman, and how she'd gone off with that pig, Negdren.

Sometime during his wandering he found himself at a small hatch labeled, "The Chapel of Stars." Berg was not a religious man, but he had a sudden longing to find a quiet corner in which to be alone. So he slipped a token into the lock slot and waited for the hatch to cycle.

He stepped into a dark space lit only by starlight. The chapel was a ferroglass bubble cast into the shape of a church's nave and thrust out from the ship's hull, so worshippers would feel that they knelt in the very palm of God. Berg shut the hatch softly behind him and took a careful step forward. Here, noise felt like heresy.

Slowly his eyes adjusted to the darkness and after a time, Berg realized he was not alone. A woman knelt close by in the thin light of the stars, head down, hands pressed palm to palm.

"Great Father," she whispered and her soft, clear voice startled Berg. *It was Arissa.* "Please look after little Katrina who fate long ago placed in your care. And give me the strength to do what must be done."

She's praying, Berg realized, mortified. "Arissa," he said softly.

She jumped to her feet and turned on him. "Are you following me? How dare you!" He could see the fury written on her face even in the darkness.

Berg held his hands up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

She reached out to slap him and he caught her wrist in his hand.

She jerked away from him. "Let go of me."

Berg instantly let go.

She rubbed her wrist and Berg saw a sneer twist her pretty lips. "The brave warrior," she said derisively.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "Did I hurt you? I didn't mean to."

"No," she said bitterly. "You never *mean* to."

"Hey," said Berg. "You don't know me."

"I know you better than you know yourself."

"Why do you hate me so much?" asked Berg.

"You're a mercenary," she said. "Men pay you to fight."

"What do men pay you to do?" he shot back.

This time she did slap him, hard enough to sting. Hard enough that he tasted blood. She stood with her legs apart, hands clenched into fists, breathing hard.

She was standing very close to him, close enough that he could hear the angry rasp of her breath, almost feel the rapid rise and fall of her chest, smell the scent of her: soap and sweat and rose petals.

"Look," he said as calmly as he could, "As long as there are men like your precious Negdren in the universe there need to be men like me, too."

She fixed him with a hard stare and then she stepped past him and stalked out of the space.



Berg was at a bar quietly nursing the pain with a low-rent bourbon when she found him again. He knew it was her even before she spoke, because she put her hand on his shoulder and leaned up against him so her mouth was right next to his ear. He felt the softness of her breasts pressing against his back.

"Hades Black Label?" she said lightly. "I would've thought a MechWarrior could afford better."

Berg didn't turn around to look at her. "My father always said, 'If you're gonna get drunk, no sense doing it on the good stuff.'"

"Sounds like a wise man," she said.

Berg didn't say anything. He just took a sip of his bourbon and stared straight ahead.

"I've acted badly," she said after a moment. "Let me make it up to you."

"Are you offering me a date or a business proposition?" he said bitterly.

"I'm offering you an apology," she said firmly.

Berg considered not answering, just sitting there until she went away, but her smell was on his uniform now, on his uniform and in his head. He thought about it for a minute, but there was never any doubt about what he was going to do.

He turned around to face her.

She stared down at him, those gray-green eyes locked on his, searching for something.

"Dinner?" he said gently.

She broke into a wide smile. "That would be nice."

Arisa picked a Polynesian restaurant whose bulkheads were wrapped in a hologram that showed silver moonlight tracing a path across a tranquil black sea. If Berg had been sitting on sand rather than a fine leather chair he would've believed he was actually on the beach.

Torches set at each table provided a flickering, yellow illumination, lending the illusion that they were the only diners in the restaurant. Arissa ordered for them: white wine, braised sea bass

on a bed of island vegetables, and for dessert fresh pineapple cut by the waiter right at the table.

For most of the meal they ate in silence, but afterwards, Berg looked over at her and said, "I kept wondering why you didn't like me. But that was really the wrong question, wasn't it?"

Arisa moistened her lips.

"The real question is, why don't you like soldiers?"

She looked down and took a deep breath. "I'm from Niue."

He looked at her blankly.

"It's a small world, barely bigger than a large moon," she said softly. "It's not even on most star charts."

And then something clicked into place in Berg's head. Some scrap of dusty intel about a little world chewed from top to bottom by two pirate factions each looking for a place to call their own and the innocent population that was caught in the middle.

Berg opened his mouth. "I'm—"

"What?" she snapped. "Sorry?" She shook her head and drew a deep shuddery breath. "No, strike that. *I'm* sorry. This isn't about you. It's just hard for me to remember that sometimes."

"Is that—I mean, when you mentioned Katrina—"

She looked up sharply and those gray-green eyes told him there were still some questions she would not answer.

That's OK, he thought. No more questions. He wasn't going to be just one more soldier that hurt her.

Gently he reached out and took her hand in his.



Sometime in the middle of the night his watch buzzed insistently, tickling the inside of his wrist. He swam slowly back to consciousness. Arissa was a lump of soft warmth pressed against his back. He took a moment to answer the summons, allowing himself the indulgence of remembering the brush of her lips against his, the feel of her body under his hands, the smell of her filling him up.

It was all he could do to make himself get out of bed.

He found his comm and flicked it open, read the message. One of his troopers, Corporal Toggleson, had been detained by Ship Security on a D-and-D.

Then he glanced down and saw something by the dim blue light of the comm's screen, something not right. The corner of a currency note stuck out from one of Arissa's dresser drawers. Curious, Berg slowly pulled the drawer open and picked up the note. Five hundred bones.

Circinian currency.

A currency that was useless anywhere but the Federation.

He glanced down into the drawer. It was hard to tell in the dark, but there was maybe twenty, thirty thousand bones in all. Far too much money for the pleasure of a woman's body. He glanced over at Arissa sleeping in the bed.

No matter how beautiful the woman.

What had Negdren said? *My money is as good as anyone's*. Berg remembered the man's combat tattoos. Tattoos that suggested Negdren should be a major, or more likely, a colonel. Now why would a Circinian colonel pretend to be a captain? Maybe because he didn't want to draw attention to himself while he was running an operative.

"What is it, Douglas?" Arissa asked in a slurred voice that told him she was still half-asleep.

He dropped the note back in the drawer and quietly slid it shut. "The ship picked up one of my men on a drunk and disorderly. Gotta get him out of the dock."

She sighed in her sleep. "Hurry back," she whispered.

Yes, thought Berg bitterly, *hurry back said the whore to the mercenary*. If love and duty could be sold like commodities, why not trust as well?



As soon as he had dressed and left Arissa's quarters, Berg pulled out his comm and punched in Sully's access code. It took eight rings before a groggy voice said, "Ye—"

"Sully, this is Berg. Toggleson's gotten himself in some trouble. I need you to go get him out of the dock."

"Look, Dougie, I don't think I can—"

"This is a red tactical tasking, Lieutenant Sullivan. Noted and logged. Berg out."

Red tactical tasking. That meant an automatic court martial if Sully failed to come through. Berg hated to pull rank on his friend, but he couldn't afford to have someone from Ship Security call Arissa's quarters looking for him.

Berg moved quickly to a staircase that led to a mezzanine that looked down upon the row of rooms where Arissa's was located. When he reached the top he ducked down behind the railing.

He didn't have long to wait.

Ten minutes after making the call to Sully, Captain, or rather, *Colonel* Negdren appeared at Arissa's quarters and rapped on the door. Berg's stomach clenched and his mouth tasted dry. So much for Arissa being half-asleep.

So much for a lot of things.

He slipped back down the stairs and hid behind the bend in the wall.

Negdren was only inside for five minutes. Not enough time for anything fun.

Only enough time for a pick-up.

The door clicked open and Berg stepped out from his hiding place. "Hey, you son or a bitch. What do you think you're doing?"

Negdren looked up sharply and then a smirk stole across his face. "Well, what do you think I'm doing, Captain?"

Berg pointed a finger at Negdren. "She's mine. You stay away from her."

Negdren held his hands out in an expansive gesture. "She belongs to anyone who has the asking price." If possible, his smile grew even bigger.

Berg smiled back and then he kicked up and in, the toe of his boot contacting solidly with Negdren's groin.

The air went out of the Circinian, but the colonel was a tough old bird. He didn't go down as Berg had expected. Instead he came out swinging.

Berg blocked the first punch and the second, and then he staggered back, his ear ringing and one whole side of his face numb. Third time's a charm.

Berg delivered a long, sweeping kick, hoping to knock Negdren's feet out from under him, but the colonel nimbly danced away from Berg's boot and then hammered home with one of those round-house punches.

The world went black for a moment and when Berg managed to get his eyes open, Negdren knelt over him, his topknot draped over his near shoulder, an insufferable smile warping his tattooed face. "You shouldn't fight dirty with a pirate, Captain. We invented it."

Berg tasted the salty tang of blood. He groaned and half-closed his eyes.

Negdren leaned forward and whispered, "You know, Captain, she was beautiful. The best I've ever—"

Berg's hand snapped upwards like a striking snake, closing around Negdren's top knot and jerking down. The move caught the colonel off balance and unawares. He tumbled over and his head slammed to the deck.

Berg scrambled to his feet. Negdren managed to get to his hands and knees, his shoulders sagging and his head hanging down.

Berg hesitated. He wouldn't hit a man once he was down. Then he thought of Arissa and his steel-tipped boot lashed out and caught Negdren squarely in the face.

The colonel fell and moved no more. The stain of crimson against the white deck told Berg that he had at least broken Negdren's nose.

Berg glanced down the hall to make sure know one was coming and then he bent down and began searching the colonel's person, stopping only when he found the data crystal he knew had to be there.



In the end, there was no reason for Berg to go back. He had quickly copied the crystal and returned the original to Negdren's prone form. Negdren would wake to find his crystal still there and so would conclude that the fight had truly been about a woman.

On the eve of battle, Illyria would know the Federation's mind.

And there was no reason to go back for Arissa, now that he knew *exactly* what he was to her.

Then he saw those gray-green eyes, remembered the smell of her, and none of the logical reasons mattered.

An hour after the fight he found himself back at her quarters.

Arissa opened the door before he could knock. She wore a shimmering silk robe the cool color of dark grass. Berg couldn't help noticing that it barely reached her knees and that she obviously wasn't wearing anything else underneath.

She stepped aside to allow him in.

"Who is Katrina?" Berg asked, his voice hard.

"That is none of your--"

"*Who is Katrina?*" Berg roared.

Arissa's jaw set, but after a moment she said, "My sister. She was my sister. She was five." She swallowed. "When the pirates killed her."

"You were praying for strength," Berg said angrily. "Praying in her name. Strength for what, Arissa?" He held up the copy of Negdren's crystal. "Strength enough to betray Thor's Army and Illyria?"

"No," she whispered. "Strength enough to pretend I didn't want you. You know how long it's been since a man wanted to *talk* to me?"

Berg's heart melted.

And then he remembered her sleeping innocently in the bed. And Negdren arriving at her room not ten minutes later. "You tell a pretty story," he said coldly.

She tilted her head, an expression of hurt sketched across her face. "Please, Douglas—"

Berg's hand slashed through the air, cutting her off. "No. You came to me because Negdren sent you to me."

"It's true that Negdren wanted me to come to you. It's not true that's why I came."

"I have the crystal, Arissa."

"Have you read it yet?" she asked sharply.

Berg opened his mouth, but before he could say anything she bent down and retrieved a reader from the table. She thrust the hand device at him.

Berg slowly took it from her, attached the crystal, and began to scroll down the small screen. "I never told you any of this," he said slowly. "And . . . this is wrong. There aren't three lances of 'Mechs on Reykavis, only one. And there isn't a reinforced battalion on Trasjkis. That force is no more than company strength. And . . ."

He looked up. "These are all lies."

She nodded. "Lies that Negdren will believe. Because he thinks I got them from you."

"They make us look much stronger than we really are."

"Yes, they do," said Arissa tightly. "And so there will be no war. Little Bob will look at this intel and he'll think twice about attacking Illyria."

Berg swallowed. "I—"

"Don't bother to thank me," she snapped. "I did it for Katrina. Not for you."

He reached for her, gathered her into his arms. She pulled back for a second, then collapsed against his chest, her body shaking softly with silent sobs.

"It's OK," Berg whispered. "You sell your body and I sell my life. But there is a part of us—"

"Yes," she whispered back to him. "A part of us that cannot be sold."

The End