

BATTLECORPS

Echoes in the Void

By Randall N. Bills

Voidjumper III, Quetzalcoatl-Scout-class JumpShip

Triangulation

24.631 LY from Manotick

15.662 LY from Gibraltar

9.739 LY from Silver

Abbey District, Free Worlds League

6 July 3066

"Just cannot be right. You go on an' check it again." The deceptively soft voice breathed across his neck, reeking of Tamarind dorch-jerky.

Colt wondered if Cap might be going senile. Serve him right; Colt couldn't stand the smell of the acerbic jerky, much less the way it made Cap sweat vile from every pore. (Colt never did figure out how the stuff could survive the air scrubbing so well.)

Then again, Colt just couldn't stand Cap, jerky or no.

He turned and did as ordered. After all, whether plying the waters of ancient Terra, or the black voids of space, a ship captain was god incarnate. And on the *Voidjumper III* that couldn't be more true.

No way would Colt Stevens be "accidentally" walkin' out an airlock!

He tapped on the pilot's console for almost five more minutes, the sounds echoing through the small confines of the JumpShip bridge. He turned to Cap, subservient look painted large.

"Captain, just not here," he said.

Could've been a funeral service for the sounds coming from the rest of the crew on the bridge. In his peripheral he could see James and Teddy upside down above him in the microgravity, hunching until they practically kissed their monitors, while Jiptom and Santora, to his left and right, pretended as though they saw something more than endless blackness.

In the center of the bridge, Cap sat—a bloated spider jerking the strands of his web to keep his prey leery and scrambling for survival. The Lyran merchant fleet uniform he wore could've come out of the Second Succession War. The fabric was soiled, half-heartedly mended and coming apart at the seams. His numerous jowls

filled with dirt, sweat and who knew what else, were in sharp contrast to his almost boyish curly brown hair and pudgy hands—the right grasping onto a hank of jerky like an oxygen mask during decompression. On top of it all, cunning eyes lurked, dark and beady, emotionless, dead.

Colt swallowed. Tried to imagine a cool breeze moving through the stale, regurgitated air of the star ship.

“You been lied to,” he said. Not a flicker on the Cap’s face. Colt stiffened his resolve. This had to be it. The opportunity he’d been looking for. The Cap had screwed up too bad this time. Time to walk (no, roll!) the bastard out an airlock.

Colt licked his lips. He’d won a poker hand to get on this ship and a silent tip to local authorities two years back had dumped the previous pilot into a rat’s hole and him into this seat. One more bid...he could do this, right?

“Captain, there’s no long lost ship here.”



“I tell ya, you had to see you face.” Jiptom busted up laughing for what seemed like the tenth time.

Colt tried to ignore the moron, glanced at the controls of the long-range shuttle craft that entombed them. He trimmed the thrust and began another long-range scan of near space. The usual, comforting sight of myriad stars in the void, distant scintillating pinpricks awash in the blackness, did nothing for him now. He tried not to think about the absence of a burning ball of gas taking up a good portion of near space.

“You thought you going to get hot n’ heavy with an airlock. Right? I tell ya, I did. So did the rest.” The guffaws filled the small cabin to bursting.

Glancing around at the cramped cockpit, feeling his flesh pushing against his bones, he couldn’t stand it any longer. Colt flexed his ass and tried to push feeling back into flesh smashed into the tight fitting shuttle cockpit for too many hours.

“I’ll tell you, Jiptom! You keep flapping and you’ll be the one shagging with the airlock...and you can bet I’ll like the peepshow!”

The small, wiry man turned off his laughs and smiles like a c-bill run out on a trideo game. The too big eyes in the sallow face looked like a kicked puppy.

Damn, was he going to cry?

"Look, Jiptom, sorry man. You know how I get around Cap." He glanced down at the small device he clipped (hidden from Jiptom's view) to the under-edge of his pilot's seat. The warm green glow said no electronic listening devices were in play. Never could tell with Cap; he shivered at the idea he'd been sold a faulty device. Course, he'd have been cold and dead long before if that were true.

He glanced back to his left. Realized Pup-man would be under his command soon. Had to keep the masses contended, not just scared, Cap! Doesn't take much to content us. Couldn't even do that!

"Jiptom. Okay, yeah. Thought Cap might be taking me for the long walk. Just uptight. You know I hate gravity."

The smile burst on his face like a zit; a relief but not pretty. "No problem. I tell ya. No problem." He waved his hands almost frantically, and Colt could almost see his tongue wagging. Pup-man indeed.

"Hey, you stood up to him. Told him what we all thought. I tell ya, ballsy. You know it straight. Take us to danger, no sweat, but make it pay off. We treasure hunters, right." The mad laughter again. "Always got to make a haul pay off. Or the cold-kiss for you. Yeah, ballssyy."

Colt rubbed his ear, slapped Jiptom on the shoulder companionably. The return smile and bobbing head looked more puppy than ever. A sickly itch crawled through his head at such subservience; tried to ignore what had just occurred on the bridge of the *Voidjumper* with Cap.

But never forget men like him were useful.

He glanced back to the console and tried to ignore his current situation. Closed his eyes momentarily. Tried to imagine the bulk of the *Voidjumper* around him, not this twenty-meter long delta-shaped craft of death; tried to feel the luscious lack of gravity, the floating sensation he'd signed on quick as you like with a passing JumpShip to always enjoy; to feel the climax of sex in zero-g (when Santora would give it up, bitch!); couldn't do it. Cap stuck him in

this Long-Range Shuttlecraft hunting down his non-existent ship cause he'd spoken out. Never mind a half dozen other long range craft from the *Voidjumper* were swimming the darkness, hunting for a hint of metal in the great void. He was pilot, and Cap had to show him a lesson! Nothing he could do about it.

Yet.

The hours crawled by. Pup-man tried several times for conversation, but Colt didn't want it. Not only did he hate gravity, he had a case of claustrophobia. He knew grounders might laugh at him, considering he'd lived most of his life on a JumpShip. He didn't care. He knew the difference between a JumpShip and this pop-can, and right now he had one mother of a headache coming on like a Canopian whore looking to score.

"What's that?" Pup-man said.

"Uh?" He'd almost dozed, trying to escape hell.

"Something on the radar. I tell ya. Saw something." Dirty, almost scabrous fingers twitched above the radar screen. The slightest hitch showed for an instant, could've been a smudge on the screen. Colt didn't think so. He leaned forward, stretched, craned his neck until it popped loudly, and concentrated.

He finally patted the man on the shoulder again; adoration eyes. Pup-man maybe stupid, but he's got a good pair of eyes in that thick skull.

Re-triangulating the scanners to focus on that particular quadrant, Colt's hands moved smoothly to the controls. Cutting off his main thrust, he used the latitude thrusters to nudge the tail end of the craft up off its current axis. He rotated almost ninety degrees horizontal and forty-five degrees perpendicular to the plane of current movement, overcompensating for the bleed off of inertia needed in their present direction. Grimacing, he fired a strong burst, pulling the craft out of its heading and shooting it in a round-house arc towards the new destination.

A small smile touched Colt's lips. He was still a damn fine pilot! Light-years better than Cap had ever been before he'd seized control of the *Voidjumper*.

Course, the Cap's information had been right—he gave that up grudgingly. Still didn't know if the money he paid for these coordinates would be worth it.

Another long hour passed; the blip grew larger. They pulled out past a quarter-million kilometers from the *Voidjumper*. Normally such a distance from his womb would've spiked his headache, but the excitement grew. Not having the ship here would've been better. But having the ship here, and so far outside of detection range he actually might board it first and sack it before turning the info over to Cap? Yeah. Could work all by itself.

The hours passed and the long-range shuttle closed to within a kilometer. The radar images simply hadn't made any sense, so they'd closed, decelerating across the torturous three hours, sore backs and sleeping muscles making nerves taunt and tempers fray.

Colt had been around the block once or twice, seen just about every type of JumpShip out there, even that funky *Hunter* they'd run into up Falcon way.

But this...

"Uh, that not right, Colt. I tell ya. What we looking at?" For some reason the man reeked of fear. Out of the corner of his eye Colt could see the whites of Pup-man's eyes almost engulf his pupils.

The actinic glare of the forward bank of lights bathed a small portion of the...thing. He supposed it had to be a ship. But more like a mega-DropShip, or perhaps even a weird WarShip. His pulse quickened. A WarShip! What he couldn't do with...the idea died before fully forming. No weapon ports he could see. The armor configuration all wrong—too spindly.

No, whatever it was, it was no WarShip.

He massaged the controls and inched the shuttlecraft closer, turning it at an angle and slowly moving back along the ship.

The front of the vessel had the bulbous, cylindrical look common to most JumpShips, Though two large bay doors up front ruined a perfect fit, Colt still found it recognizable enough. The rest of the ship simply looked like nothing he'd ever seen. No long, smooth tapering lines. In place of what he expected to find, five mammoth cubes marched in a line, each slightly larger than the last; a massive cylinder ran from the front (what he assumed was the bridge), skewering the blocks, holding them in a straight line.

Colt punched in a quick code and the bank of lights swiveled slowly back and forth, revealing nothing but metal. No port holes,

no bay doors, nothing. Even queerer, no docking collars. Just metal. He suddenly looked again, punched up the magnification.

Pitted. Cracked. Scoured. Almost crumbling away, as though ravaged by some horrible, metal-devouring virus.

"The metal," he began. Stopped. Licked his lips with what felt like a scrub brush. Started again. "Jiptom, the metal."

The Pup-man looked at him, looked at the screen and back again.

He's got good eyes, but not much behind them. "Look at how pitted it is. How weathered."

Like a child, understanding slowly seeped in. Pup-man whistled. "Damn. I tell ya. Damn. That some old metal."

"Yeah. *Voidjumper's* what. Three hundred years old?"

"I guess."

"Just about three hundred Jiptom, and she looks like she just had a bottle smashed on her prow compared to this thing," he finished, pursing his lips in the direction of the ship.

As the light crept onto the final cube—Colt shook his head at the sheer size of the monster—some things immediately began to make more sense. His queasiness did a flip flop as 'Mech-sized butterflies started dancing a jig.

"There's no jump sail array," Jiptom whispered in a hoarse voice.

Colt slowly swiveled his head towards Pup-man—perhaps not so dumb after all—swiveled back at what could not be.

The final cube was fully twice the size of the first, with three mammoth nozzles jutting out the end—interplanetary drives—something that only existed on a WarShip. Yet he'd bet his next haul's portion it wasn't.

Twin gaping wounds hove into view—told of death for this beast—mammoth holes that covered most of one section of the cube. His uneasiness expanded as it dawned on him the jagged sides peeled out, not in: internal explosion.

Course, all this he might swallow. After all, they were treasure hunters, pirates to some. He'd seen about everything you could

lay your eyeballs on. But his JumpShip pilot mind couldn't tackle this one. Jiptom's words vibrated in his skull.

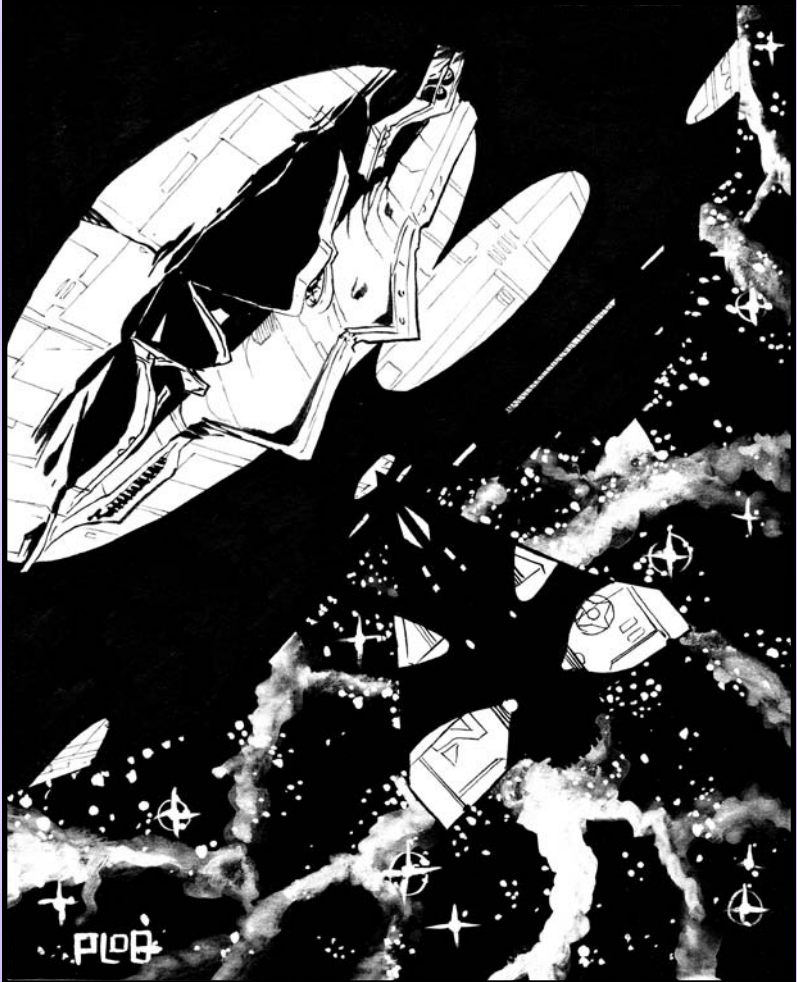
No jump sail array.

Not having a jump sail, he could buy that. The ship had been here a long time and if it sustained that jab in the can, the sail likely tore away. But not to have a jump sail array in the first place...

What the hell JumpShip didn't have a jump sail?

He rubbed his temples as the headache continued its spike, eased back into his seat and tried to think. What were they looking at?

Did he still have his weapon to unseat Cap, or had this just grown beyond him?





If the shuttle created a sense of claustrophobia, the spacesuit defined the reality of it in hard edges; spikes which sank painfully into Colt's ability to concentrate. It didn't help matters in the slightest when the head-mounted lamps actually managed to make it *more* difficult to see anything. They'd both switched the lamps off for a moment, to see if that would help. The horror which engulfed them had them snapping their lamps back on before three terrible intakes of breath past.

It started bad and only got worse. Much worse.

"Man, Colt, we got to go back. I tell ya. Back. Got to go back." Even through the electronically reproduced sound, Pup-man's terror could be felt. If Colt ever had a nightmare as a boy about entering the belly of some unimaginably large beast, he lived it now. This second.

Damn Cap for making me do this. Making me have to overthrow him. Bastard.

"Pu..." he began, then cut himself off. "Jiptom, no sweat, here, right," he started again, rattled he'd almost let slip what he thought of the whiner. "You can make it happen. Bring it home. Think of the prize. Got to be something here to rock your world."

Jiptom's helmet stopped swiveling in fear and turned towards him. Nodded after a moment. "Okay. You bossman. The prize worth this danger?"

"Course it is." Damn well better be.

The two of them entered through the holes torn into the aft of the vessel, after anchoring the ship to the outer bulkhead. EVAs usually didn't bother a shipper. However, when the stars looked like pin pricks in the blackness and you realized how many light years away from a star and supposed safety you were...not many could survive that. Colt always laughed at such comments. After all, get a leak in your suit, lose your safety line or run out of fuel and it didn't matter if you were hugging an atmosphere or plugging in the void, dead was dead.

This time around, however, for once, the pressure built, until he couldn't ignore it. Couldn't ignore this strange ship; couldn't ig-

nore how far out of normal traffic lanes they were, with no safety net of a standard solar system; couldn't ignore trying to instigate a mutiny. Along with the claustrophobia, it almost made it more than he could bear.

Cap.

Only that word kept it all at bay. Allowed him to crawl over twisted, metal teeth and down into the beast's gullet. Course, having someone to browbeat helped.

Now, almost an hour later, after dropping some two dozen blinkers to light an escape route, the corridor simply seemed to go on forever. Three more hours and they'd have to head back. No air.

They trudged on, time stuck between ticks, interminable. Finally, they came to a new hatch. New type, different metal. Colt could tell immediately a new section of the ship would begin here. The last block to the next? They already passed that point? He simply couldn't tell.

"We going in there, bossman?"

Colt could get used to that word. "Yup. Need to get to the front of the ship. Or captain's quarters. Something to tell us what the hell this ship is."

"Yeah. I tell ya, cap's quarter. Most ships have 'em in the same spot, right bossman."

"Except this isn't most ships." He didn't mean to bring back the unease they both felt. "Let's do this," Colt barked.

Grasping the wheel, he wedged his feet into the corner and threw his muscles into action. For several long seconds, nothing happened.

"Little help."

"Oh, course. Sorry man." Pup-man got on the other side, wedged his own feet and both poured it on. Once again, nothing for several long seconds. Then, with a screech that brought to mind ghouls and banshees in forgotten graves, the wheel cut loose and slowly began to turn. Forcing it the entire distance, it finally un-dogged; another giant chore getting the hatch open as well.

Panting with the exertion, Colt stepped through and played his wrist-mounted lamp around. "What the—"

They stood on a catwalk—one of several dozen marching horizontally up the bulkhead—which ran around an immense chamber, might well fill this entire cube section. Though the high-powered light couldn't penetrate the dimness to more than half way, he could just make out the massive cylindrical structure that pierced the center of the cube, passing into it and out of it; the Kearny-Fuchida drive?

Damn, damn big drive, though. What the hell? Has to be three times the diameter of the *Voidjumper's*.

Around the jump drive, a mammoth latticework rose, around which hundreds of colossal tank-type structures hung, like grapes on a vine. If they'd been on a catwalk above or below, there would've been no seeing the center, would've been blocked by the tanks which marched along the lattice work, all the way to the bulkheads, in every direction.

"I tell ya. That is one hell of a lot of fuel tanks. Why they need so much fuel?"

Colt jolted. Anger blossomed. How could he miss it? Course, he consoled himself, this room held a thousand times or more as much fuel as their own ship. Had to be hydrogen fuel. For the destroyed reactors they'd seen in the engine cube?

An idea began to form.

Couldn't be. No way.

He turned to look at Pup-man. Slowly patted the man on his overly-padded shoulders. "Good call on the fuel. Didn't see it." Unlike Cap, he could admit a mistake when it didn't cost a thing and further tied Pup-man to him. He smiled. Laughed out loud.

"Thanks bossman. Just called it like I saw it, I tell ya."

"Sure did. But I got a feeling coming on. Coming on strong. If this is what I think it might be, well, we just might make all the money in the world...by not touching a stinking thing."

"Uh?" Those confused puppy-eyes were back.

"I'll explain. Come on."

"I tell ya, bossman. Don't matter what this is. Cap ain't gonna let you leave it alone. He gonna sack it, no matter what."

"I got that covered. Money comes in all forms, Jiptom. And you don't always have to steal it to get it."



"I tell ya, bossman. Don't get it." Colt wondered if the man might be a closet savant, or something. Showed brilliance now and then, but most of the time Pup-man seemed to run around with faulty sensors.

Standing outside the cap's quarters—stupid Pup-man couldn't bring himself to enter it—he smiled triumphantly. Held up the captain's log and tapped it, very carefully, against his gloved hand; never knew if it might just fall apart. And he needed it. Needed it to convince the rest of the crew.

The talisman to force ol' fatman out the airlock. And walk away rich as well.

"Think Jiptom. No jump-sail array. How can you be jumping without a sail?"

"I tell ya, ya can't."

"No?"

"No."

"What about charging with the reactor?"

Pup-man clumsily bumped his hand into his helmet, as though he'd tried to run his dirty hands back through greasy hair. "Well, sure, you can do that. But you run out of fuel awful fast if ya keep it going too long."

"Exactly. But the fuel. You saw it first."

"Fuel?"

"The fuel, Jiptom. A thousand times what our ship's got. Ten thousand. Wouldn't run out of fuel too quick, toting around that much."

In the strange lighting of his head-lamp, Colt saw the beginnings of understanding flicker on pup-man's face.

"Still, got to have a jump sail," Jiptom insisted.

"Why?"

"Cause, a JumpShip has a jump sail. I tell ya. A JumpShip has a jump sail." He repeated, like a nursery rhyme.

"Only because it is the best way to do it, right?" Colt led him.

"Ya. Right."

"But if the ship didn't have access to a jump sail?"

"Uh. Bossman, you confusing me. What House or Clan don't have access to that when they build a ship like this? Big ship. Lots of tech here, though old looking. Ship even got's itself a whole cube for people to live in." He looked up, happy-puppy eyes. "Remember the mummies. Want to take me one of those."

Sick bastard. "Jiptom, stop thinking about the mummies. I told you, leave it alone. Worth more if we don't touch it at all. I'm only taking the captain's log to convince the crew of what we got here." He may have come to trust Pup-man a little, but no way was he spilling about pushing Cap out the airlock.

A beeper went off; both men almost jumped into the air, only kept to the ground by their boots. Colt glanced at his wrist-comp. Couldn't believe so much time had slipped by.

"Got to go, Jiptom. Oxygen burning away."

"Yea, thinking smelled too stale. I tell ya, too stale."

As they began the long trek back, Colt tried once more to make Jiptom understand what they'd found. Make him understand what it could do for them.

For him.



"WHAT!?"

Colt hated Cap, but he couldn't help be impressed with how much power the fat man could push into a single word. Course, had a lot of mass to push with.

He'd had almost a full day to think about what he would do on the way back to the *Voidjumper*, including tearing out a portion of the console to erase their flight telemetry. And a good thing too, since Cap ordered him straight to the bridge. You could only delay something like that so long, but felt he'd had enough time. Not all the crew knew, but enough. Key people. The smart ones. He'd laid the

groundwork for months, cinching it with the log. Now it was time to simply face the Cap down. Move him down and out and dead.

"I said we're not going to touch the ship."

Cap didn't move a muscle, didn't say a word. But Colt suddenly felt as though the man grew several sizes larger. Something about the set of his face. Those dead eyes. For a moment he almost wavered. Almost lost it.

Bossman.

The word echoed up. From pup-man, of all people. Might as well have come from a dog...but the trust he'd earned. That was something. Meant something. For the long years Cap ruled the *Voidjumper* with his iron, fat hands, not a soul on board trusted him. Yet in one outing, Colt did more than Cap managed in long years.

Colt smiled and this time, let it slide onto his face, a snake out of the grass, ready to strike.

The silence took on physicality and seconds drifted to minutes. Something shifted in Cap's eyes. Colt couldn't tell, but something. For once, a crewman stood up to him. Fear only worked for so long and Colt held the key. A dead ship, centuries old. And he wouldn't touch it. The smile grew into a grin, transformed his face. For a first, Cap broke the silence.

"You sure you be wanting to do this, pilot?"

Colt's smile turned predatory. Never use my name, just like I never use yours? This crew'll damn sure know my name. Say it with respect!

"You're through, Cap. Every dog has his day and yours, fat man, is over." A feeling he'd never experienced before surged. To face the man down, to unleash his pent up anger and frustration. It felt better than any food, any experience, any sex he'd ever had. It tasted like...

Victory.

Quicker than he thought possible, Cap surged forward, his bulk actually undulating back in the micro-gravity as he tried to grab Colt. It almost ended right there. The crew might have believed him, but you had to face down your own trouble before they would step in. He didn't mind such an attitude. He'd had it himself and still had it. Face the man down, but know the crew would back the move when needed.

Colt flexed his knees, pushed up hard. He came free of the deck and drew himself up into a cannonball, as Cap practically flew through the space he previously occupied. His vile stench wafted after him. Did the man ever bathe? Ever!

Stretching out perpendicular to the approaching ceiling, he landed with hands stretched out behind him and legs bent back. Pushed off and shot towards the Cap's chair. Grabbed the edge as he neared. Expertly realigned himself and sank into its soft embrace. Santora couldn't match this feeling, this warmth, no matter how long she tried.

Cap hadn't fared so well. Fat and not nearly so agile, he'd tumbled into the jump computing console, his fat almost enveloping the precious machine, before rebounding slowly. The man happened to snag the edge of the machine at the last second, bleeding off excess velocity, but he wasn't going anywhere.

Colt tapped the intercom. "Security, this is Colt, the captain. To the bridge at once." He made sure to keep the com on.

The words were like climax. A quick tumble and then the finale. At this point, watching the Cap take the long walk would be anticlimactic.

Course, he couldn't help but rub it in. He had the right. Right? Colt used both hands to press himself into the seat, wiggled his back to readjust the dimples and folds to his own body, stretched like a cat settling in for the long haul.

"You see fat-man, you got to see other possibilities. Treasure hunting comes in many forms and you don't always need to rape something to make money off it." Those beady eyes stared back at him (they'd lost their power now!), but the man had enough guts to not say a thing. Not to babble. He'd sent enough of us on the walk, he better not show any wobbling knees or red eyes now.

Colt gave him a single nod for that—least he could do. Stretched his neck, continued.

"You see, we actually get to obey the law and make more money than we've taken in the last three years. See, what we got here is an archeological find. Yeah, say it with me, cause I'm sure you can't: archeological. That ship you heard rumors about. That ship no one seemed to be able to find? Well, it's not just an old JumpShip. It's ancient. One of the first. You probably never opened a damn history book, but I have. You see, according to the captain's log, that ship out there," he paused for dramatic effect. "That ship is

the *Liberator*, lost for almost a thousand years. Can't remember the date off the top of my head, but some time in the twenty-second century went missing. Twenty-second century!"

He looked around at the rest of the crew and saw some understanding. Many blank faces. Didn't matter. They'd all know soon enough. And he'd walk away with the ship, stronger loyalty from the crew than Cap could ever dream of, and the biggest haul they'd likely ever get.

He glanced back at the Cap, but couldn't tell whether he understood or not. Still that wall of flesh. No problem. He'd hammer it in.

"Fat-man, we put that ship up to auction and every House in the Inner Sphere will be frothing at the mouth to buy it. Heck, even rich nobles and mega-biz will get in on the action." He barked a laugh. "Hey, might even get to meet ol' Rhonda Snord, cause you know how hot-to-trot the Irregulars are about shit like this. Hear she hot too, even if she's over the hill." Several chuckles rumbled and he knew the job was done. Just then, security moved onto the bridge.

With a gesture he'd practiced in his dreams for too long, he waved towards the fat man. "Take him."

There were no brigs on this ship.

Before the man had even been taken off the bridge, Colt forgot him. Turned his attention towards the task of organizing his crew. Got to maximum the information taken from the *Liberator* without bothering it; too much contact would drop the premium price.

For a moment, he cocked his head, as though listening for laughter in the void. A pirate actually doing legitimate work? Could those mummies have a clue what would become of them? Did they know after a thousand years since their death in the black cold, he'd make a pile of cash so rich bastards could snap holo-photos of their sandpaper faces?

He shook his head and laughed at his own thoughts. Philosophy from him?

Why not? He was now the Cap, after all.