

WORD ON THE STREET III: SHIP HEIST

by Michael Chumblen

The man known as Frankie “Twice Pipe” Whitaker waited in a run down section of the Persephone spaceport silent as a ghost. His hand rested on the butt of the cut-down shotgun that was the source of his nickname as he watched a young man approach. The new arrival looked around, oblivious to Frankie’s presence, trying to keep up a brave front despite not seeing his contact anywhere. He took up a reasonably defensible position near some solidly built crates and waited.

“Good spot young ‘un,” Frankie said aloud. “I’d say you’ve got a future in the business, but that might make ya’ll’s head bigger than it needs ta be.” The young man smiled; if he was surprised, Frankie was impressed by how well he hid his reaction.

Used to some of the older man’s idiosyncrasies by now, the newcomer walked over to Frankie’s hiding place and wordlessly presented a small bag. Frankie knew the young man wasn’t the cheating type and pocketed the bag with only the slightest pause to verify its weight.

“As I said last time,” Frankie said, “Gettin’ predictable is a good way to get dead. Since our little conversation tonight’s gonna be about ships, I figured that meetin’ at a less-traveled part of the spaceport would be the best place for this here palaver. I know ya’ll is runnin’ in that Wren-class freighter *Babylon* docked in Gamma Twelve...”

Frankie’s client twitched in shock.

“Son, ya gotta stop lookin’ so surprised when I knows stuff about ya. It’s my job to ken stuff ya know. Anyways, not that there’s anythin’ wrong with a Wren—and I’d never go insultin’ a man’s boat—but even ya’ll has to admit, something a mite larger would be nice. The upright thing to do, of course, is to earn enough coin to buy into a bigger ship. But that there’s the rub, earnin’ enough coin to buy into somethin’ nice usually requires a nicer ship to begin with, puttin’ ya’ll in a right vicious circle it does at that.

Moving Up to the Big Time

“Okay then, up ‘til now, we’ve just been two folk jawin’ about how some of the seamier things in the ‘Verse go. Tonight, what I’m about to tell ya, will set ya on a course that will make yer bones or break them, in the business of

less-than-honest livin’. I need to know that ya fully understand what sorts of things can be on that road a’fore I will continue. Cause, may the Buddha be my witness, I ain’t tryin’ to talk ya into nothin’ what might go get ya killed or in the Dyton Colony prison, but if’n ya know how, there are ways short of buyin’ what ya’ll can use to ‘upgrade’ to a prettier boat.

“However, the first thing to ken is that folk’re mighty attached to their boats. Damn thing could be the biggest rustbucket since the invention of rust, but to the owner, that boat’s the most beautiful thing ever to take to the Black and folk will kill ya over their boat. Never forget that or ya’ll will find yerself real dead real quick *dong ma*!”

Choosing Your Mark

Frankie waited until the young man nodded in understanding before continuing.

“All right, now that ya ken the nature of the beast ya’ll is dealin’ with, let’s get down to brass tacks. Boostin’ a ship is mainly about pickin’ the right target. Ya gotta ken yer target’s schedule better’n they ken it themselves. It’s always best to pick a boat what ain’t got no one aboard to raise up a fuss. This means casin’ the port and seein’ if ya can spot a boat run by a rookie or a *daigua*² what leaves his boat unattended. [1]

Getting Inside

“Once ya got a ship tagged, they’re not all that different from homes when it comes to gettin’ inside without the permission of them as what owns ‘em. Just like ya need the right tools to fix a busted compression coil, ya gotta have the right tools for a ship job. The first thing y’all need is the very best set of electronic lockpicks ya’ll can get yer hands on. Ya see, modern locks needs modern tools. The things are a bit spendy, but tryin’ to slip inside a ship without a good set of picks is guarantin’ a hard burn trip to an Alliance cell with a large and over-friendly cellmate. Now if ya’ll can find them, a set o’ quality ship-picks is the real deal, ‘cause they are as rare as hen’s teeth and the dang-blamed things will run ya five times as much as a regular set, but they are specifically designed for ships and are the sweetest thing on the shadow market for boostin’ a boat. [2]

1 Understand?
2 Fool

"The real trick to gettin' yer hands on a boat what ain't belongs to ya, is knowin' where to look and yer best option's a repair yard. See, the mechanics gotta be able to work on the boat. Most of the time that means if the ship's got special security it's gotta be turned off. Word o' warning, though—just cause a ship's in a repair yard ain't no law says the security has to be turned off.

"Now the downside of tryin' to steal a boat outta a repair yard is the yard has usually got some sort of security and more importantly, them as what own the boat brought it to a yard for a reason and ya'll will look right stupid tryin' to lift in a ship what don't run. Gettin' info on ships in a yard requires a bit of talkin' with the right folk. Mechanics and ship crews are a loose-lipped bunch and for the price of a few drinks, ya'll can usually find no shortage of information. Ya find the right guy and for the right 'consideration' they can be talked into leavin' doors unlocked or to be lookin' in the wrong direction when ya makes yer move. Just make sure ya ain't stingy with the coin, 'cause anyone that flips one way, is usually more'n willin' to flip back if they don't think they is gettin' their due. [3]

Getting Out

"Regardless if'n ya got the ship from a port or a repair yard, gettin' the thing started depends on the owner. Ya find a paranoid type and ya got a problem, 'cause Buddha alone knows how many ways there are to lock down a ship's computer or engine, but the other side of the coin is, if'n ya finds a chump, you're shiny as the King of Londinum's hat. This is where yer mechanic, if ya got one as a partner, or them engineerin' data disks, if'n you're in this alone, earn their keep. Best stick to ships what got made the most, 'cause they are the easiest to figure out. Tryin' to suss out a limited run boat usually takes too long and, at this point, time is not yer friend. The best tool for tappin' into a ship's computer is called a spike and they don't come cheap neither. A spike is kinda like a SubKelvin, costs twice as much, but works ten times better. Slip the thing in and let the spike do the work. As soon as the computer unlocks, it's time for the most important part of the score, gettin' the hell away. [4]

"Couple things up front what ya should ken about ships if'n ya don't know already. First, any commercial ship that runs the Black has got two things what the Feds can use to track her: One is a doodad called a pulse beacon what identifies the ship. Ya gotta find it and pull it,

'cause unless the hun dan³ ya stole it from can't go to the Feds due to bein' too hot their own selves, ya can bet that the ship's pulse beacon will get tagged as stolen and get Waved all over hell and gone. Second thing is the Nav-Sats what ya gotta use for navigatin'. Ya can't pull that, so here's where spendin' some coin up front will more'n pay for itself. Buy as many decoy missiles as ya afford, cost ya about fifteen credits each and the more the merrier, they are each worth their weight in platinum as it will confuse anyone tryin' to track ya long enough for ya to go to Hard Burn. [5]

Making the Sale

"Now comes the final and most dangerous part of ship-jackin', unloadin' the goods. First thing to ken about a hot boat is the closest thing to a friend ya got is the Rim. Times are always hard on the Rim and ship's registries is less well regulated out there. If'n ya got the right contacts, ya can sometimes make for a Border Planet, but that is somethin' ya gotta have set up in advance. No fence worth the name will take a chance with a hot boat brought in by somebody what they don't already ken.

"Main thing to know if'n ya boost a ship is, are ya plannin' on keepin' it or are ya gonna sell it? If'n ya keeps it, ya gotta get it registered. This is a two part deal. Ya gotta get a new pulse beacon and ya gotta get new ship's papers. Reprogrammin' the beacon is actually fairly easy, any mechanic can do that, just takes awhile. It's gettin' new papers that's the tough part. Ya either gets some forged or ya bribe some *mei yong de*⁴ Fed into givin' ya a legit set. [6]

"If'n ya wants to sell the boat, ya gotta find a buyer and since ya can't go sendin' out a Wave, ya gotta start poundin' the pavement. Since ya's too new to have the contacts, kid, this is where things can get dicey. Ya gotta trust yer gut and watch yer back at the same time. Talk to spacers, they usually know someone that knows someone. If worst comes to the worst, ya can always take the ship to a dealer, but be prepared for a painful hagglin' 'cause if'n ya go to them *gon cao de*⁵ pirates ya'll be lucky if'n ya break even. [7]

Last Thoughts

"I know I got yer head spinnin' 'cause I done give ya a lot to chew on at once and I can almost hear the gears a'whirlin'. I think ya got it in ya to be a real operator in the business, but ya

3 Jerk
4 Useless
5 dog humping

gotta be sure that's the life ya want. Ya'll needs to sleep on what ya learned tonight, so don't go makin' any half-cocked decisions tonight, 'cause there ain't nothin' wrong with the *Babylon*. If'n ya decides that ship-jackin' ain't yer idea of fun, when ya comes back, maybe we can talk about simple smugglin' what ain't as simple as ya think. See ya next time kid."

The younger man shook hands with Frankie and slipped away. The older man could tell that the lad was deep in thought as he left just by the way he held his head.

"Poor kid is havin' a tough time right now," Frankie thought. "But he'll be back, his eyes had that gleam in 'em that all but screamed 'Look out 'Verse, I'm on my way' and the thing is, he's right." This thought made Frankie smile before he noted it was almost time for his next appointment and he vanished into the shadows of the Persephone spaceport.

Notes

1. Successfully observing the operations at a busy spaceport requires a HARD (11) Alertness + Covert / Surveillance action. Spotting an unattended ship is the purview of the GM, but Crew can spend 8 Plot Points, with GM approval, to find a ship that is unattended.

2. Bypassing the security on a ship can't be done without electronic lock picks. Ship-picks are a refinement of basic electronic lock picks and give a user a +2 skill step to Intelligence + Covert / Open Locks actions, but only when used on ships; they confer a -2 skill step when used on any other type of lock. Locating these specialty items can be an adventure hook all by itself, but at a minimum, they require a FORMIDABLE (15) Intelligence + Influence or Covert / Streetwise action. In addition, they are highly illegal and if caught by authorities while in possession of a set of Ship-picks, the crew faces a trial and if convicted, two years in a penal colony.

3. Finding a contact aware of a vulnerable ship in a repair yard requires Friends in Low places and an expenditure of 5 Plot Points or a HARD (11) Willpower + Influence / Appropriate Specialty action and sufficient Credits. Actually bribing a repair yard worker to assist in the theft is an additional FORMIDABLE (15) Intelligence + Influence / Persuasion or Willpower + Discipline / Intimidation action and a bribe of no less than one percent of the ship's value.

4. A Spike is an illegal computer disruption device that adds a +2 skill step to the user's Intelligence + Covert / Disable Devices action and is as difficult to locate, using the same Skills, as the Ship-picks listed above (and just as illegal).

5. Removing a ship's pulse beacon takes a COMPLEX AVERAGE (35) Intelligence + Technical Engineering / Communications Systems action with each roll representing three minutes. Escaping a planet or ship that is actively seeking the stolen ship is an Opposed Roll pitting the crew's Intelligence + Technical Engineering / Sensors or Hacking Skill versus the tracker's Skill, and each decoy missile deployed gives a +1 skill step bonus to the crew's skill.

6. Reprogramming a pulse beacon is an AVERAGE (35) Complex Action of Intelligence + Technical Engineering / Communications Systems roll with each roll taking an hour. Forging ship's papers is a HARD (11) Agility + Covert / Forgery action, or Friends in Low Places and 5 Plot Points. Bribing an official for legitimate papers requires either a HARD (11) Intelligence + Influence / Streetwise action, or Friends in Low Places and 5 Plot Points. These difficulties are for the Rim; increase the difficult by 4 for a Border Planet and 8 for the Core.

7. Finding a fence requires a HARD (11) Intelligence + Influence / Streetwise action, or Friends in Low Places and 5 Plot Points. These difficulties are for the Rim, increase the Difficulty by 4 for a Border Planet and 8 for the Core. Negotiating a price is an Opposed Roll of Intelligence + Influence / Appropriate Specialty versus the fence's Willpower + Discipline / Mental Resistance; Success earns 15% of ship's value, an Extraordinary Success earns 25%, a Failure earns only 5%, and on a Botch the fence won't buy the ship. Dealers only give 5% on a Success, 15% for an Extraordinary Success, and will refuse to buy on a Failure or Botch.

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