

JAKUB WISZ



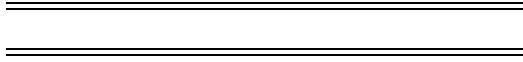
*A young woman
defies her father in
search of treasure
among the stars...*

INCITATUS

APHELION SERIES BOOK ONE

INCITATUS

Incitatus



Jakub Wisz



Double Proficiency

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Proficiency

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Prologue

The distant Solar System's lights reflected in the coffin's glassy, tear-shaped surface as the body continued the slow journey towards the stars. The gaunt, dried face gazed peacefully into the infinity with unseeing eyes, almost as if the deceased was merely resting after a long day.

Tap. A pulse of light touched the coffin—once, then again, and soon the pulses increased in frequency as the distant instrument realized it had found something. A long-forgotten longing awoke within the tomb at the gentle prodding of a ladar. A spark flared inside the golden crown of implants protruding from the mummified corpse's skull, then turned into a song, reaching out in pulsating waves of an electromagnetic greeting.

The Wanderer stirred.

1

Shao had been off-world before—Jupiter, Neptune, even Earth once—but nothing had prepared her for this view. Hollowed out and turned into a floating megacity housing nearly a billion people, Pluto-Charon Spaceport bristled with the frantic activity of the last port before the Frontier—the vast Lethe Bridge spanning between the tidally locked planetoids. The sight took her breath away as the distant Hydra Waystation powered its multimegawatt laser, sending ships towards the Great Beyond in a flash of brilliance. She exclaimed quietly with every burst of light, consumed by the spaceport's seemingly chaotic business.

The quiet hiss of opening doors and a familiar smell announced Mai's approach: industrial soap that almost succeeded in masking machine grease residue.

'Nice view, ain't it?' Mai asked, sitting next to Shao and embracing her.

'Yeah, it's mind-boggling. I mean, I've read all about it and saw it on vids but being here... It's almost too much.'

'You said it. I always thought the Titan's Crown is big, but this is something else.'

'Just looking at it makes my head spin, you know.' Mai giggled and ruffled Shao's hair. 'You can't even look up without falling over.'

'Not everyone was born in a spacesuit, swinging from antennas.'

'Swinging from antennas? You're thinking monkeys, love.'

'Monkeys, floaters, same diff.'

Mai put up her hand in a theatrically offended gesture, but her cybernetic eye flickered with joy. 'Oh yeah? In that case, I'm not telling you what I did to the Sōngshǔ.'

'Now that's just not fair! You didn't break anything?'

'Not unless you think overclocking the main drive is breaking.'

'You did it!'

'Sure did. Told you the specs are a load of drivel. Now we can race with the best of them.'

'Won't the capacitors overheat?'

'Maybe with sustained thrust, but on a race track, she's golden.'

'A race track?'

Mai winked, her eyes flickering from blue to pink. 'What, you wanna just look at the Styx track from a distance?'

Shao jumped to her feet excitedly, stumbling in low gravity before her magboots caught the floor with a click. 'Hell no, I'm booking us a spot. I'm sure Dad won't mind.'

Mai hesitated. 'Wait, just like that? Won't that figure on the travel expense listing?'

'Sure, sure, it's gonna be fine,' replied Shao absentmindedly, already opening the augmented reality window in the air before her and sharing the image with Mai's HUD. She compiled a message with the pole position lease request to the Styx arena through the Pluto CommNet node in a heartbeat.

Mai glanced at the display, and her face sunk, eyes dimming into pale orbs. 'Looks like

the home office couldn't wait until we arrive.'

Shao sighed at the incoming stream notification's sight but didn't pick up the call. 'We won't be staying long enough, I bet. Bummer. I always wanted to run the Styx.'

'They're gonna run us through the hoop before we even set foot on the mothership. Prolly should cancel the lease.'

'Maybe we'll get shore leave. We just need to make sure to tie everything up to the last button, so they let us off the hook.'

Mai leaned over to Shao with a mischievous smile. 'Oh really? What about this button right here...'

Shao paid no heed to the Sōngshǔ for a while as it continued its landing pattern on autopilot, directed by the NaviNet's guidance system. When she and Mai looked back at the vidscreen, the jumper already maneuvered between the traffic. Sōngshǔ weaved its way between freighters waiting for permission to dock or depart and swarms of smaller service ships hawking their wares on broadband comms.

'Feel like snacking?' asked Mai nonchalantly.

Shao shook her head. 'Nah, I already did.'

Mai giggled, blushing. She opened her mouth to reply but froze up awestruck as their craft skittered past a freighter, revealing the Lethe Bridge's enormous spire spanning twenty thousand kilometers across looming above the jumper.

Shao's eyes raced between the megaconstruction, its docks and dome habitats, and hundreds of ships swarming around it—seemingly tiny in comparison.

'It's pretty big, eh?' uttered Mai finally.

Shao chuckled at the absurdity of her statement. 'Yeah, quite.'

'Where's our dock?'

'I don't know, give me a moment.' Shao brought up the course information onto the screen, putting it in a side window in a practiced motion. 'Here it is.'

The vidscreen rushed across the Bridge's length towards a scaffolding erected a distance from its structure. Inside it, the Yusan mothership anchored, its hull far too expansive

to fit inside any of the docking bays, yet still dwarfed by the spire behind it. The escort frigate, Jīnlóng, loomed near it—a sleek and dangerous white and gold wrath.

'Ever been aboard?'

'Once, when it was built. Dad took Mom and me with him to see the decks when it arrived in the Crown.'

'Must've been quite the sight then.'

'Yeah, I was scared it'd fly off and take me away. What, I was seven, don't laugh at me!'

Mai covered her mouth to hide the smile. 'You were right, though.'

'About?'

'It is gonna fly and take you away. Just a bit later than you thought.'

Shao laughed, but the feed from Sōngshǔ headed towards the Jīnlóng's shuttle bay caused her stomach rise to her throat. The jumper looked like a speck of dust compared to the hundred and fifty meters long warship. Sōngshǔ slid inside and vibrated gently as it landed in a designated space between angular boarding shuttles and drone racks, holding a

small army of fighter drones and armored insertion bots intended for boarding actions.

Shao took her time putting on the white and gold jumpsuit adorned with Zhengdao insignia.

'You're not changing?' she asked, seeing Mai slipping back into her work fatigues and a worn leather jacket.

'Nope. If I have to stand and listen to the committee's drivel, might as well be comfy.'

Shao sighed. 'Wish I could do the same.'

'Nobody's stopping you, love.'

'If only.'

They exited the craft through a vertical airlock. It cycled slowly, giving Shao an extra minute to make sure the uniform is impeccable—Dad hated sloppiness more than anything. The airlock hatch slid open with a hiss, letting in a breeze of fresher air—an improvement over the jumper's pump but still carrying the arid quality of sterilized atmosphere. Shao stepped onto the white docking bay deck and fought not to roll her eyes ostentatiously at the sight of three security guards in white and gold Zhengdao uniforms led by a black-haired man

with golden eyes, wearing a two-piece black suit with golden finishing.

She brought up a comm window with Mai on her personal HUD, adjusting its augmented reality display to hide the conversation from others. 'At least they didn't bring the red carpet.'

Mai giggled nervously and affixed her jacket as she caught a disapproving look from the man in the suit. Her cybernetic eyes changed color from blue to deep purple, reacting to her mood change, but she withstood the glare.

The rush of anger reddened Shao's face. Arrogant bastard. She coughed quietly in her hand, which the suited man mistook as a sign to speak.

'Good day, esteemed Shao Zhenya. My name's Jin Sun, your father's aide.'

'Hi there,' replied Shao through gritted teeth.

She zoned out to a private chat with Mai as Sun continued the welcoming speech as if Shao's occasional nods and half-words were an epitome of protocol. Sneaking away to the arena will be much more difficult from the

Jinlóng than it would be from the busy mothership, that's for sure. She could always count on Dad being too busy to watch her, but his aide seemed determined to hold the fort until the old man's arrival.

'She wasn't alone, you know.' Mai's sharp tone caused Shao to focus back on reality.

Jin Sun smiled briefly at Mai. 'I wasn't made aware of that. Although I'm glad esteemed Miss Zhenya had the foresight to bring along an underling to pilot the jumper back to Titan.'

Mai's now crimson eyes flashed as she glared at Sun. 'I'm nobody's underling, you slimy...'

Shao stepped forward, raising her palms defensively. 'Mai Wren is a first-class software specialist assigned to the Yusan. She's not going anywhere, and by the way, neither is the Sōngshǔ!'

'My apologies,' he stated unapologetically. 'It is my mistake to assume one's role in the corporation based on their demeanor.'

Shao raised her hand toward Mai, who had stepped forward, clenching her fists. The

guards averted their eyes when she glanced at them.

'You'll know better in the future. I believe you were about to make introductions, yes?'

'Indeed I was, esteemed Miss Zhenya. Please, meet your father's chief of security, Sarah Lowe, and her best men...' Sun paused.

One of the soldiers, a short-haired blonde woman with a strong jawline, stepped forward and bowed slightly. 'Tommy Leng and Henry Thompson,' she said, saving Sun the trouble of learning their names from the ship's database. 'Pleasure to meet you both.'

The soldiers saluted with a stone expression, though Shao noticed both blushed awkwardly. She felt for them; second-hand embarrassment caused by the stiff, "casual" protocol used by Zhengdao Corporation's higher echelons was known to her all too well.

'Likewise, Miss Lowe. The pleasure is only slightly marred by its unexpected nature.'

Shao smiled when Mai's eyes' red glare softened to a mild green as she composed herself. She was sure Mai would learn to ignore

the buffoonery displayed by corp executives soon; Zhengdao rank and file living and working in Titan's Crown kept to the same informal language as the outsiders they interacted with more than with the corporate elites. She faced the adjutant again. 'So, where's Dad? Too busy to come say hello?'

'I'm afraid the most esteemed captain is, as they say, swamped. Allow me to assist you in assigning quarters and giving you a tour of the port in his stead.'

As if I had a choice, Shao thought. 'Are you sure your busy schedule allows the time for babysitting?'

'I made it a point to make room, just for you,' replied Sun with an ingratiating smile. 'It'll be my treat to guide you...'

'And Mai.'

'And Mai, around. What would you like to see first?'

Shao glanced at Mai who shrugged slightly and rolled her eyes. 'How about an arena?'

Sun smiled charmingly. 'Sounds like fun, esteemed Miss Zhenya. Please allow Miss Lowe

to take you to your quarters so you can freshen up while I arrange for the tickets and transportation.' He motioned as though he wanted to add something else but nodded and walked away instead.

Lowe dismissed the troopers and led both women through Jinlóng's sterile, white and gold corridors.

'Sorry about Jin Sun, Miss Zhenya,' she said. 'He means well, but meet-and-greet isn't in his job description.'

Shao shrugged gently. 'I liked Miss Kovalev more; too bad she retired.'

'Captain's Zhenya's old aide? I never met her. So, where would you like to start the tour?'

'Wherever,' replied Mai sheepishly. She cooled off after the confrontation, and her eyes raced between high-tech gadgets splayed on the decks.

'As long as you adopt a strict no-esteemed-whatever policy,' added Shao.

Lowe grinned. 'Yeah, I can do that. So, how about we start with the bridge? Captain Powells will be glad to meet you.'

Shao clapped her hands. 'Uncle Ed is here? Finally, some good news.'

'I'll take you right there, then, and tell you all about the ship on the way. You won't be staying here long, but you know,' replied Lowe and saluted theatrically.

'Aye, aye!'

Shao idly listened to their guide's methodical explanation, supported by maps, images, and video projected to their HUDs by the ship's computer. Mai, on the other hand, was consumed by the data. Good, Shao thought. Tech and relaxation, that's better.

Lowe guided them through the decks, bringing up the frigate's technical details to their HUDs to support her explanations.

Mai interjected eventually, 'That's nice, but where are the toilets?'

Lowe smirked. 'Your quarters have all the amenities, Miss Wren. Sorry, I always forget that not everyone is in love with military tech.'

Mai shrugged with a devilish smile. 'Who said I'm not in love with it?'

Lowe let out a short laugh. 'Fair enough. Anyway, your temporary quarters are just around the corner. You can freshen up and get something to eat before meeting Captain Powells if you want. You'll be assigned a station on the Yusan once we're en route, but for now, our humble abode will have to suffice.'

'I'll take what I can get,' said Shao simply. 'Please let my dad know we've arrived.'

'Oh, he knows. I imagine whatever delayed his arrival on the Jīnlóng couldn't wait.'

Yuan Zhenya closed the file and shut down the mental link to Yusan's computers. The corner of his HUD still blinked with a growing number of notifications to address; all marked as "urgent"—they're going to have to wait. He got up from his desk and stood in front of a wall, commanding the ship's computer to switch the AR display into a mirror. Sun reported that Shao arrived, and Zhenya wanted to look good when he greeted her. Zhenya examined his reflection—preparing for Yusan's journey kept Zhenya up the last forty sol hours, but stims and biosculpting made sure he was sharp as a razor. There were days, like today, when he did feel his age—he was nearing fifty, after all. At least he made sure to reroute Shao's ship to the Jīnlóng; the last thing he wanted was for his daughter to wait in a docking queue

with service crews and common employees. Now, with all actually urgent matters taken care of, Zhenya thought, I can relieve Sun and meet Shao.

He brought up an itinerary onto his HUD, and double-checked a prepared plan of activities before Yusan's departure—restaurants, sports events, a tour, and racing, can't leave without having a go with a rented speedboat on Nix.

He got up to head for the shuttle to the Jīnlóng, and as if on command, a comstream request appeared on his HUD.

Zhenya sighed heavily and brought the message upon his AR display, moving the queries aside for a moment to make room for the stream. To his surprise, the footage he received was a full HD video feed from a drone cam deep underwater. Rays of light streamed through the liquid, illuminating icy walls, and a small flock of bioluminescent fish swimming by the drone. Half a second later, an Outer woman drifted in front of the lens, scaring the fish into a panicked retreat.

She didn't wear a scuba mask, and Zhenya could see her bright blue eyes and fluorescent hair standing out on the background of her light-gray skin. She wore a blue diving suit with stabilizers allowing her to remain in the camera's view once she got there. 'Greetings, Mister Zhenya,' she said, bubbles escaping from gills in the sides of her neck. Water distortion made her voice sound hard to comprehend, but the drone's audio synthesizer made up for the audio loss. Zhenya could barely notice the lip sync being off by a fraction of a second. 'It's a pleasure seeing you this lovely day.'

'Greetings. I will reserve my opinion of the feelings' mutuality until I know the purpose of the call, Miss...?' Zhenya sent his reply and minimized the comm, filing away the overdue messages while awaiting a response. It's a good thing Sun volunteered to keep Shao busy when she arrives, he thought. It doesn't seem I'm getting out of the office yet. He resigned himself into the chair. Whoever the woman was, she opted for enduring the wait between

comm pulses instead of sending a single concise message, so she obviously wanted something. I, too, can play the long game, Zhenya thought and opened a broadcast in a different corner of his HUD. A sweaty, emaciated floater talked at the cam drone about the mysterious lights she saw while spacewalking on the Bridge, while an amused reporter nodded vigorously.

Eight minutes later, the response arrived.

'Delacroix, Mister Zhenya. And the purpose is business, naturally.'

Zhenya smirked and shook his head. 'Why else would you hail me from Nix without an appointment?'

Delacroix's eyes widened in theatrically overdone surprise before disappearing in a cloud of bubbles. 'How did you know where I am?'

Zhenya frowned with feigned impatience. 'Really, Miss Delacroix, where else would there be open water within one AU from Pluto?'

'I could have been in a ship.'

'With ice walls? Please, don't waste my time,' responded Zhenya sharply. 'It would cost you

so much cred; you might as well have bought off my shares and approve whatever it is you want instead of talking to me.'

'Well deduced, Mister Zhenya.' She hesitated before continuing. 'I am, in fact, on Nix. I only aimed to impress you with the display, nothing more. I'm comming you with a very profitable proposal if you find time for me in your busy schedule.'

Amateurs, thought Zhenya, hiding his curiosity under an expression of feigned disinterest. The Outer woman fell for it; she deduced he was hiding interest in her unusual methods and quickly began her pitch. 'The Helikaon refinery currently contracts me to fit and dispatch one of your firm's mass transit haulers, the Incitatus, headed for the System. As I'm sure you're well aware, the hauler is over a quarter empty. I wish to buy space on the ship, which I would fill with my cargo, twenty thousand TEUs, to be unloaded during the slingshot maneuver around Jupiter. Are we talking about price?'

Zhenya grinned like a hungry wolf. The hauler could carry a hundred thousand TEUs of cargo, twenty-five tonnes each. The reports he received just a few hours ago did indeed indicate that only sixty percent of that in raw materials were harvested this decade, as increased pirate attacks and bad luck kept the mining ships from filling their quota. If he could fill that ship up with the woman's cargo, it could be the pinnacle of his career. He'd tie up the project he spearheaded and oversaw from inception on a high note, bringing billions of unexpected revenue to the company. Not to mention also skimming the added cred to his secret bank accounts and retiring, supporting Shao's ascent to the board from behind the scenes. 'The offer does sound tempting,' he said with polite, nonchalant interest. 'The question stands on the nature of the cargo, and of course, the price.'

Bringing his fingers together into a bridge in front of his face after sending the message, Zhenya smirked with delight. The woman didn't seem very bright, thinking she could fool

him with the comm delay, the exotic locale, and using water to distort her voice so that he couldn't gauge her reactions during the bargaining. She was using all the advantages she could muster against him, thinking her masquerade was so sly, but she did, unknowingly, betray her ineptitude.

Taking such extreme measures meant she was aware of being outclassed. Showing that to a trade partner was a rookie mistake. All he had to do was pretend to have fallen for the ruse, fumble on purpose, read her reactions wrong. Delacroix will unquestionably believe her ploy worked and become confident. Overconfident, if he had any say in it.

A live comstream request appeared on Zhenya's HUD. 'What seems to be the problem, esteemed adjutant?'

'Your daughter has arrived on board the Jīnlóng, esteemed captain.' Jin Sun's tone was an example of etiquette, as always.

Zhenya nodded, gauging his aide's smooth face and golden eyes. The adjutant was vying to advance in the corporate society, high enough

to see the top but not yet ready to reach for it. Always ready to serve and always willing to use any information given to him as a tool... Or a weapon. Zhenya always needed to be wary of every word when his aide was around. 'Very well, esteemed adjutant, thank you.'

'If I may, esteemed captain, I see from your schedule that you are extremely busy today, and your daughter would like to see the local attractions—'

'Yes, I'll join her as soon as I can.'

'By all means, esteemed captain, perhaps I could personally escort the young miss on her tour. That would allow you the time to finish with your duties for the day before seeing her.'

'That would be most kind of you, esteemed adjutant, but I cannot expect you to go beyond your duties—'

'Oh, it would be my pleasure, esteemed captain. You have so many more important things to deal with today; it would be a shame if they distracted you during quality time with the family, would it not?'

Zhenya started thinking of a reason to say no, but a reply notification started blinking on the Delacroix window. What harm could it be to work just a few hours longer and be sure his daughter wasn't bored? 'You would know, esteemed adjutant, you arrange my schedule.' Zhenya paused. 'Very well, please make sure Shao has fun.'

A weaselly smile spread across Sun's face. 'Naturally, esteemed captain, I will do my best.'

As the call disconnected, Zhenya couldn't shake the feeling his aide had outmaneuvered him somehow, but the matter would have to wait. He turned back towards the conversation with Delacroix, bringing her stream window back into his HUD.

Shao will understand.

The battered raider struggled to slow down before approaching the station. The recent skirmish had left its ugly hull pockmarked with burns and impact craters; its shielding peeled in places, revealing the metamaterial beneath.

The station was an old, angular model; its central ring made up of a haphazard collection of various modules attached to a central, rotating spine like grapes to a vine. The outer ring was nothing more than a hexagonal rim of scaffolding with several blue-lit docking bays and service modules attached.

Milosh doubted more than fifty people were living there.

Inside the raider, the comms sounded, insistent, demanding that the ship identify itself.

'Shut that bloody thing down,' demanded Milosh. 'It's breaking my concentration.'

Muldoon, the red-haired mercenary piloting the ship, showed him a finger without turning around. 'You do it, I'm busy trying not to crash us.'

'And I'm doing a sudoku.'

'Can't you finish later?'

'No, I wanna get it done before we land. Or crash, either way.'

A third mercenary, an Outer known only as Chatty, reached out and swiped the tablet from Milosh's hand. It immediately flew backward and slammed into the rear segment wall, the screen cracking into a thousand pieces.

'Oopsie daisy,' he said cheerfully. 'Am I clumsy today or what?'

Milosh glared at him. 'The hell did you do that for? I almost had it.'

'Stop crying, you found it on the shelf. Easy come, easy go.'

'That reminds me of someone,' added Muldoon.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

The comm station rang again demanding the craft to identify itself.

'What are we gonna tell them?' asked Muldoon. 'We won't get clearance to land if we don't respond.'

'Nothing, what are they gonna do?' asked Milosh. 'Cry themselves to sleep?'

'Well, for one, they locked the defense turrets onto us.'

'Did you lock ours right back?'

'Yup.'

'Good.'

The raider shook with turbulence as one of the maneuver drives choked and died. It had been hit with a plasma discharge a few sols before when the mercs broke out from the Pan American Coalition's frigate, hijacking the craft on their way out. They swerved in a tight turn towards the docking bay's open door. The raider was severely outgunned, even against a backwater junker like this one. Milosh hoped whoever was in charge of the defense didn't know it.

Space stations, sporadically spread throughout the explored sectors of the Oort Cloud, were unilaterally armed to the teeth to ward off pirates and other vagabonds, but their gear was often in disrepair, and their supplies were short. They also needed the cred and barter that visitors brought with them, and, as such, were careful not to open fire on random travelers. Milosh was sure they wouldn't consider a small raider vessel to be much of a threat—and he wagered he was correct; otherwise, they would have opened fire by now.

The raider drifted into the dock, carried by inertia. Muldoon put her down gently in a free net, and the three mercs prepared to egress.

They geared up in a PAC Navy suits and railguns from the ship's armory. Milosh would prefer not to get into a scuffle with whatever security they have, but it never hurts to bring a gun.

They exited through the airlock and kicked off through the bay, floating ahead in zero-g,

moving through the blue-lit kelp-like forest of docking nets towards the passenger airlock.

They didn't have to discuss their entry plan; Milosh and Chatty took cover on both sides of the airlock hatch while Muldoon initiated the entry protocol. Milosh was willing to bet a welcoming committee was bound to attempt an interception, but they couldn't know how many intruders were inbound. Not unless the security cameras were functional, but that was a calculated risk. Maintenance in the Frontier was an art of balancing needs and available means. Internal security cameras were a low priority.

The airlock opened. Milosh watched Muldoon raise his hands and back out of the corridor. A zero, a human bioaugmented to survive accelerations far beyond a regular person's limits, in a brown duster long coat on top of an armored space suit followed, aiming an ancient slug thrower pistol at Muldoon. 'That's far enough, cowboy.'

Using his magboots to stand still on the station's wall, the zero stopped dead in his

tracks. 'Oh, no, you ambushed me,' he said phlegmatically. 'Who would 'ave thunk it.'

Milosh and Chatty stepped out of their cover, railguns trained at the man.

'Them's the brakes,' said Milosh. 'I take it your associates have their guns ready to blow us up?'

The man nodded. 'You betcha. The name's Jim, by the way.'

'Hi there, Jim. You can call me Stepan, and the two goons over there are Muldoon and Chatty.'

'Pleasure. You mind telling me what's your business here, and what's the fuss with the guns and the junk you flew in on?'

'It's a long story,' started Muldoon.

Jim shrugged. 'Make it short, then.'

'Aight. We stopped by for a drink.'

'Long as you keep them cannons holstered, fine by me.'

'Deal.'

Jim lowered his gun, prompting Milosh to signal the mercs to do the same. Milosh knew the locals were outgunned, but it was no

reason to escalate. Fragile as it was, the situation boiled down to them needing to fix the raider and get out. Antagonizing the locals was pointless; they already knew who held the cards.

They headed towards the airlock and into the station.

Jim, the station guard, was an impressive sight up close—scarred, angular facial features, massive, muscular limbs, and a barrel chest. Zeros' bones were grown to form a type of internal armor to support overgrown organs and genetically engineered muscles. Yet, the guard was clearly on edge.

From his perspective, they were a threat—a large merc with a handlebar mustache and mean eyes, a tattooed, red-haired Earther, and a grey-skinned Outer bruiser with a cybernetic eye, all armed to the teeth and armored to match.

We should be fine, Milosh thought. As long as nobody pushes a wrong button, everyone's walking out of here in one piece. 'We're not pirates, Jim,' said Milosh as they waited for the

airlock to cycle. 'We just need some repairs and a drink, that's it.'

Jim shrugged, his massive shoulders making the gesture seem threatening. 'I take you don't need questions asked, am I right?'

'Right.'

'In that case, let's make a deal. I won't ask you what gives or tell you to put them armatas in a locker. You stay in the bar and don't give us any shit, capisce?'

Milosh nodded, grinning. 'Works for me. We do need that engine fixed, though.'

'I'll send somebody over. Stay in the bar.'

'Yeah, yeah, heard you the first time.'

The station was a typical Frontier outpost built from cheap components and jury-rigged to last. The corridors and streets were made from printer concrete slabs laid out on a cheap, steel mesh. There was no augmented reality overlay preset, no comm network. As far as Milosh could tell from cardboard and neon billboards, the modules housed a mechanic, a clinic, a casino, and a cantina.

The bar was a true staple of the Oort Cloud —printed plastic and metal furniture, faux-wood counter, a beaten-up jukebox playing country hits from a hundred years ago, and a row of AR gaming machines at the far end.

Muldoon's face lit up with boyish joy. 'Sweet! They have Astral Commando here.'

Milosh shook his head and smirked as the ginger merc immediately booted up the game. He and Chatty approached the bar, where an ancient drone "howdy pardner"-ed them and poured their drinks.

'Think we're gonna get outta here in time?' asked Chatty, sipping his white Russian.

'Not a chance. We'd be lucky if they're half an hour behind us.'

Chatty sighed heavily. 'I figured. Was just kinda hopin' you'd cheer me up.'

'Tough diddles. Best we can do is send the word out to the crew, and wait for the jarheads to come can us. Might as well relax until they do.'

'Still, I'll keep an eye on things.'

Chatty's cybernetic eye wiggled out of the socket, sprouted eight segmented, spidery legs, and crawled down the Outer's arm, making its way out to the station.

Milosh connected to the station's comm service using an ancient keyboard and monitor terminal and wrote a message to Gál Tibor, captain of the Hussaria mercs' mothership, the Querub, explaining their situation. He knew that the PAC Navy will search the hard drives and find the message once they're captured, but the fiasco on Sedna was too great; Tibor needed to know about it.

He sent the message through the CommNet system to one of the many relay beacons the company stowed in the sector, hoping they'll pick it up.

Before long, Chatty's drone pinged, displaying a meeting between a group of four PAC marines and Jim. The marines wore powered armor suits, turning them into hulking giants barely fitting in the station's corridor as they stormed towards the cantina.

'Let's get captured then,' said Milosh calmly, commanding his suit to slide the helmet on via internal HUD.

Muldoon turned off the game and took a position. 'Can't we just kill those bozos?'

'We sure can,' replied Chatty, collecting his eye, which slid back into his empty eye socket. 'What are you planning on doing next? Stealing whatever ship they came in on and running?'

'Why not?' asked Muldoon.

Milosh crossed his arms on his chest. 'Cause they didn't come here alone. Whatever they landed on, it came from a frigate, at least.'

Chatty chuckled behind a makeshift table barricade. 'Wanna punch a frigate, mate?'

'Watch me.'

The cantina's door blew inside in a fountain of shrapnel, followed by a grenade. Chatty slammed the canister with a table before it landed, causing it to explode in a cloud of caustic smoke. Milosh and Muldoon dove into the mist, dodging the stray bullet from a surprised soldier.

Milosh rolled over, aimed, and fired. The slug from his railgun pierced the marine's armor. Sparks, blood, and pieces of bone splattered across the concrete floor. The marines fired, their bullets ricocheting off their fallen comrade.

Muldoon wasted no time and charged the nearest marine, somersaulting over the raised gun, placing his own rifle on the soldier's chest, and pulling the trigger. The soldier's powerful metamaterial carapace did little to stop a point-blank supersonic rail. A bloody flower erupted from the exit wound.

The mercs scattered, disappearing from sight.

Milosh ran into the nearest side alley, knowing at least one marine was on his tail. He kicked the door in and dove, barely registering the thudding of bullets searing scars onto the metal frame above his head.

A terrified Outer woman in a pink toga ran screaming when he slammed into a slot machine, overturning it in a rain of sparks. Golden coins showered from the slot

accompanied by the virtual pirate's mad cackle. Milosh's boots slipped on the tokens, slowing him down a few seconds. He heard a blast behind him, and a powerful force slammed into his lower back. The armor withstood the impact, but the force carried his body over the coin-laden floor. He rolled over, aiming his rifle, expecting to see an armored marine but found Jim staring down at him; rifle barrel trained directly at Milosh's face.

'I told you not to start shit,' he growled, gritting his teeth.

Milosh smiled apologetically. 'We didn't start any, technically.'

'Trouble just so happened to follow you, eh?'

'Kinda like that, yeah.'

'Not gonna lie, I like your style. But you dragged pigs into this, and I gotta turn you in. I'll be sorry to hear about your execution. Might even shed a tear.'

Milosh looked around, wondering where his rifle fell. 'They won't kill us,' he said, hoping to stall for a moment longer. 'If they wanted us

dead, they'd have nuked us outta the sky hours ago.'

'Shame they didn't, I woulda had a pleasant morning instead of this.'

'Sorry to disappoint.' Milosh shifted his weight.

'Aight, enough of chit-chat. I gotta hand you over.' Jim motioned with his revolver for Milosh to rise.

Instead, Milosh pushed himself off the ground, knocked Jim down with a roundhouse kick to the knees, and slammed the falling guard with a knee to the face. Broken nose cracked, blood spurted on the golden chips. Milosh grabbed the revolver from Jim's hand and ran out of the casino.

He raced through the corridor towards the docking bay, knowing the other mercs would do the same.

Suddenly, he felt his body lift off the ground, pulled forward by a powerful gust of wind in the back. The module's ruptured, he thought. They decided to flush us out. Turning around the corner, Milosh saw the airlock was no

more; only a gaping hole staring into the docking bay remained and the black void beyond it.

Muldoon stood next to it, attaching his armor's magboots to the station wall. 'It was locked, and I had no time to look under the mat.'

'Understandable. And Chatty?'

'Already in.'

Milosh nodded and jumped into the docking bay. They headed through the web of docking nets, using them as cover during the approach. The crew inside had surely scanned the bay carefully, counting on a second of carelessness to get a clear shot and vaporize both of them, and yet, the shuttle didn't open fire; its twin laser turret remained cold and silent.

Chatty awaited them by the hatch, working on an open panel with his multitool. 'The bitch is locked tighter than a sailor's ass after a year-long cruise.'

'You can open it, though?' asked Milosh pensively. 'We can't stick around here.'

'Don't worry; I got this.'

The hatch eventually gave up, and they entered the shuttle, guns trained and ready to fire.

Empty.

Its jingoistic interior contained only the absolute necessities—four empty gel pods, weapon and armor lockers, cockpit, gunnery station. Not a soul aboard.

Chatty quickly got to work on the electronics, turning the system online and breaking any locked systems open, while Muldoon prepped the pilot station for departure. Before long, the shuttle burst out of the docking bay, heading towards the sleek corvette looming nearby as if it belonged there.

Milosh reckoned the marines probably had time to report resistance and casualties, but a few seconds of confusion would be enough to swerve to the other side of the station and hit the road. Milosh knew the PAC Navy wanted them alive, wanted them bad, and there was only so far the mercs could run. The marines were hunters, and Milosh the prey. That didn't mean he should make it easy for them.

The corvette launched a swarm of canisters to intercept the shuttle. Muldoon did his best to avoid them but to no avail. The shuttle drifted into range carried by its velocity and inertia, no matter what the merc did to maneuver away. As soon as it did, canisters released powerful EMP pulses, devouring the craft, and the station in an electromagnetic storm. Milosh shuddered involuntarily as the shuttle lights went off, and they were left in a dark coffin drifting through space. His mind went to the station's crew and civilians left without power without any warning.

'Looks like the jarheads want to play hardball,' he said.

'They sure do,' replied Chatty. 'Now it's nothing but waiting for them to pick us up.'

Milosh sighed heavily. 'And I left my sudoku in the raider...'

The mercs burst into laughter and laughed still when the shuttle hatch exploded, and the marines stormed in.

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Jakub Wisz

Author's Portrait

*Photo by
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Jakub is a Polish-born writer, living in the middle of a Finnish forest. He has been writing and ghostwriting for over a decade, with his short stories and articles published in books, magazines, and games. His debut novella, *Stars in Our Sails*, was published in 2018. He is always writing, telling stories, or reading.

Always a fan of adventures and imagination, Jakub works mostly in the tabletop roleplaying and board game industries. He designs games and helps others bring theirs to completion. His short stories and worldbuilding bring life into game mechanics, flesh out characters, and inspire others to write stories of their own.

When not writing, he follows his passions, including archery, ancient history, and astronomy. He enjoys connecting with other writers and giving back to the writing community with his *Wayfarer's Deck* project.

For more information about the new Double Proficiency projects, including tabletop roleplaying games set in the world of *Incitatus* and updates on the *Incitatus'* sequel, visit www.doubleproficiency.com