



Preambles: the history behind the legend

Part IX: the Anti-Raider and -Pirate Intelligence Agency

Section Alpha

The civilian Starbridge was twelve years old, and starting to feel like it. It was cruising through the starry sky in a star system devoid of all activity. Inside the ship were five people, five small-time traders in their late twenties trying to earn a living. It was just another small courier job, no risk involved. Two tons of data-cubes were all there was in the back of the ship. For 50.000 credits, this was going to be a very easy job...

The radar picked up a signal, and after ten seconds, panic started to fill the place.

“Ernie! Ernie! Wake up, man.”

“Hm... What is it, Ekrid?”

“We’ve got a frikin’ Valk Class IV on our tail, that’s what’s happening!”

“What? Darn it!”

“Two AU away, and closing in fast. Get moving!”

The man, who was once sleeping, rushed to the pilot's seat, disengaged the autopilot and tapped down a dozen buttons at once.

"We're too close to the sun! We'll never be able to do a jump!"

"Engines?" asked the one who awoke him.

"All is ready," came the answer from the engineer through the intercom.

"Weapon systems?"

"Active, Ekrid."

"Ekrid, we don't stand a chance," said the communications officer. "I'm not getting any response to the distress signals."

"I know, Charlie, I know."

The captain of the vessel closed his eyes for a moment. The Pirate Valkyrie class IV was one of the deadliest foes one could encounter. Its speed, manoeuvrability and weapon array made it a jewel among the different ship variants, and a favourite among the pirate groups. The old Starbridge was no match for it. Where was the Association when it was needed? There were only two options for the captain...

"Ernie, put the engines to fifty percent power."

"Are you mad, Ekrid?" protested the pilot.

"Consider this an order. Bundres, put the weapon systems on standby apart from point-defence. Jimmy, get over here."

Once Jimmy had arrived from the machine room, Ekrid faced his friends.

"We will be torn to pieces by the Valk if we try anything. They will be maximum twenty people inside, minimum ten. What we can't manage in ship combat we can manage in hand-to-hand combat. All I ask of you is to act when I say so, not before.

"Now get your blasters ready, and put them in an easily accessible place. Hide them from view all the same."

Within a few seconds, the ship was under fire. The point-defence system started firing, and was met by heavy fire.

"Point-defence system down, Ekrid," said Bundres.

"Okay, they'll be contacting us any minute."

Indeed, after a few more shots, a communication arrived.

"Stop your engines or else we will disable them ourselves!"

Ernie looked up to Ekrid.

"Do it," said the captain.

"And beware: if you do anything suspicious, you will all be killed!"

A long, silent minute followed, and by the end of it the five friends could see the dark hulk of the pirate ship closing on them. A moment later, a loud metallic sound arose as the two ships made contact, and the first dark figures entered the Starbridge.

"Hands up," shouted one of the pirates.

The crew complied.

"It's okay, they are all there," he shouted to someone in the Valkyrie.

Ekrid was surprised at the remark. How could the pirate know they were only five?

They had come straight from Altia, where they had received the cargo, no stops on the way because of their fuel capacity. These people must therefore have known where the Starbridge was headed, Fermia in this case.

Something truly fishy was going on.

And I thought the Association of Free Traders still lived, he thought. The Association used to have one ship in almost every system, with its ears open to every distress signal. It also used to stop entire fleets of pirates from even entering Federation space. Now, instead of the Association protecting us, there's the Associated Guild of Free Traders persecuting us.

This needs changing, he said to himself.

The captain of the pirate vessel had entered the bridge by now. He was a member of the Guild, judging by the coat.

"Who is the captain of this old piece of junk?"

"I am. Ekrid Malrow, free trader."

"Oh... a free trader, I see. That comes as a surprise: I didn't know there still were some." His thugs chuckled at his humour.

"So, anyway, I haven't come here to talk about the current political and social situations, but for cargo. I trust you still have those two tons of data-cubes..."

"Why would data-cubes be of any interest to you?"

"Gosh is this guy stupid and honest. Like all other free traders, in fact," he said to his boys.

"Listen here, boy: you should learn to take a look at what you're carrying. Just for your info, before you die, these data-cubes contain lots of very valuable stuff: military weaponry and outfitting plans, names of people who could become a threat to us of the Guild, hypergate access codes and more.

"You're in the middle of a big operation, laddie. All this information has been stolen and kept secret for a few weeks, until recently when we decided an innocent civilian would bring the cargo near our space station so that we could make it all disappear without a trace..."

He then took his pistol in his hands.

"And now, you will all die."

"Now," shouted Ekrid.

The pirate fired at Charlie, who dropped dead straight away.

The other three civilians reached for their hidden blasters, and Ekrid watched Charlie fall to the ground.

Hate built inside, and Ekrid let go of his rage.

All of a sudden, the blasters of the pirates fell to the ground. They looked down then looked at Ekrid and his crew, who were already firing in their direction.

Then the pirate captain fell to the ground, his hands holding his head, his face twisted with pain.

His thugs just stared in horror before realising that this Malrow guy was the one causing all these weird events.

Five minutes later, Ernie came up to Ekrid.

“They’re all dead. All of the pirates are dead.”

He then let go of his tears, and added that Bundres and Jimmy were dead.

“I know, Ernie. I know. But we now have to go. Straight away.”

They transported the data-cubes through to the Pirate Valkyrie Class IV using a few machines and put all the dead pirates in the old Starbridge. They then took the bodies of their friends into their newly acquired ship and left the Starbridge with a note of warning for whoever would find it first.

Pirates and Raiders, beware! Though the Association may have become a ghost, its spirit lives on. Soon you will pay for your crimes...

They then blasted off. As they left the system, Ernie Bardrien asked Ekrid Malrow the question that had been on his mind ever since the fight.

“How did you do it, Ekrid?”

His blood brother and only friend thought a little before answering.

“I don’t know, Ernie. But I can assure you I won’t forget it.”

“So, now, where do we go now?”

“New Babylon. We’ll start a new Association over there with what we now know we have...”

Section Beta

Diary of Captain Joseph McGrawly, as translated from the original English into modern Basic

1st of January 3392 (3392 AD, approximately year 610 of the New Calendar)

Well, a new year starts, and so does a new adventure, or so it would seem.

Major Hector Corrop called me to his office. I know it may sound weird like that, but in truth, I’ve only been called to my chief of staff’s office twice beforehand...

Anyway, the Council is interested in exploring the galaxy a little more, and has decided to send out two exploration teams. One to explore the Galactic South beyond the furthest known systems, the other to find out if there are any planets in the Galactic North. The latter task will become mine, according to Major Corrop. And the other captain will be J-J.

“Captain Jay Jorgan,” Major Corrop said, “you will be in charge of the ‘South Team’. Captain Joseph McGrawly, you will get ‘North Team’ going. I want reports every single time you spot something special. A special comm. channel will be set up, ‘North by South’. Yes, I know, it’s a terrible name, but that’s how the people from the top floor decided to call it.”

Later on, J-J and I had a laugh about the high standards, grand ideas and bottomless originality of the top floor.

Back on topic, we don't get to choose our own team. We have received a list of the number of experts from each field we have to take along. Looks pretty scientific and boring to me...

Well, tomorrow I'll be rounding up the team.

2nd of January

Today I spent all morning on the phone, trying to get in contact with each different team member. 76 people in total to call, imagine that...

At first, I was really joyful because I started with a really nice guy and a girl with a truly sexy voice. But then came old paps, who really wasn't happy to be leaving on an exploration mission. He didn't stop bothering me by telling me that in his youth he never bossed older people around!

On top of that, for some awkward reason, only three of the women are good looking, or so it would seem from the people I met early afternoon. Well, I've got my eye on the one with the sexy voice, Sarah.

Tomorrow and the following day we'll be gathering all the material needed for the mission: enough food to keep us alive for 2 years, a little construction equipment should we need to build a temporary base, enough fuel to last us more than 50 hyper-jumps, and a whole load of scientific analysis equipment. This means we're using all the 60 tons of space allocated to us by the Navy, who gives us a mighty Goering Bulk Class X freighter. That ship is such a beauty! Never thought I'd see the day when I would fly one myself...

5th of January

Planning day. Major Corrop gave our briefing in the auditorium this morning. We're leaving in two days! This is getting really exciting, and Sarah, our nurse, has taken a liking to me! This is really great. Hm... I'm under the impression I'll be suffering from some kind of aching during half the trip, heh...

Well, not so much time to write stuff down because of the whole preparation. I'm meeting my deck officers in one hour to discuss the course, to make sure we've got everything under control.

6th of January

Well, the meeting with the deck officers went well enough. They're nice people, especially my second in command, Jackie, she's adorable, and has incredible authority. Frungle is a nice chap too. It's just Biff I don't like too much. Oh, well, we'll manage. Today was "good-bye" day. I went over to mum and dad, who were in tears by the time I left, and who are now awaiting my return. Aw, I'll miss them. Dad gave me a box of homemade cookies, the kind I've loved since my birth, and mum gave me a new laser penknife should I need to do any kind of manual work.

I shed a few tears coming back home on foot, after leaving my TDX-2 Aston to them.

4 a.m.:

Joe and Grace held a good-bye party in my honour at Gunni's bar with all the guys and girls from uni and from the Navy. That was truly touching. It kept going all night, and I've only just come back home.

Man, will I miss this place...

7th of January

We're in space, leaving Nesre Primus behind us, as we get ready for hyper-jump. Gosh was lift-off a difficult order to give. I think that I'll only note important stuff in here from

now, since otherwise I'll have to pour out my innermost thoughts to keep the diary up to date, and as everyone knows, I hate to give away my innermost thoughts. Well, apart from that bit about Sarah... She cried quite a bit as we left the planet, so I took her in my arms. I don't know if she did mutter: "don't ever let go of me", or if I was just dreaming. Anyway, we'll see about that in due time. No need to rush things there.

Oh, and for the benefit of any fictive readers who don't know me, you may well be wondering what the point of holding a diary is if I don't pour out my innermost thoughts. This is a Birthday present from my great-aunt Martha whom I loved really a lot. She died on Christmas Eve. That's when I told myself I had to use her diary a minimum. There you go.

23rd of January

Well, this is our 17th day in space, and let me tell you that so far it's completely boring. But at least it's given me the time to speak to Sarah quite frankly, and today was D-Day. Told you I wouldn't rush it, well on this 17th morning, she kissed me good morning. Score!! Well, I really think that we're both completely in love, and so far it's been a good, pure platonic love like we like 'em today. I'm overjoyed!!! I don't know what I'm writing; this is pretty funny to watch unfold on paper...

Afternoon

We've spotted a wormhole! Yiline, the pilot, has now adapted our course, and the stellar experts have confirmed that we shouldn't be at risk. After all, wormholes have been used quite a bit lately, even though this one was not sighted beforehand.

We have sent a transmission to New Babylon, stating position, course and all the rest.

24th of January

Disaster. I can't believe what happened!

We were going through the wormhole when suddenly the whole thing started behaving abnormally, shaking us around like hell. We sent an emergency distress signal, but we were soon out of the wormhole, and it just collapsed, almost dragging us with it! The force it created tore up the reactor! But somehow, we survived, and suddenly, in front of us stood a planet. After a few minutes, we were caught in its gravitational field. Yiline had to use the side engines to bring us down, and we crashed on the surface.

Nine died in the crash. We are now without a pilot, a communications officer and a second nurse (Sarah is alive). I don't have any deck officers or space experts left, and we remain with three out of the five engineers.

But fortunately, the atmosphere is completely viable, according to the stellar scientists, and those we lost were not that irreplaceable when we're stranded on a planet (I know it sounds horrible, but it's the truth)...

We got out all the construction equipment and built what we could. The terraforming experts reckon the soil is good enough for agriculture. That comes as a relief. I guess we're stuck on this planet for good. But we're still 68 in total, with 36 women. If we are meant not to leave this planet, at least we can do our possible for future generations to live as well as possible. Maybe one day someone will find this planet...Let's hope they don't just find skeletons.

Since we have to work as much as possible on the planet and for our own survival, these will be the last words I write. We have decided upon one formula we will adopt for our new "civilisation":

I am Captain Joseph McGrawly, commanding officer of the Explorers. We live on the planet Cultura in the Resideo system.

We are trapped on this planet, but humans suffered the same condition a thousand years ago. We will survive.