

ESCAPE VELOCITY

NOVA

Preambles: the history behind the legend

Part IV: Pirates

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Section Alpha

It was a cold evening in the early twilight. The light from the rising moons filtered sullenly through the soft drizzle that mixed in with the dust of the road, turning it into a wet slurry. Hover vehicles went about their business in a brisk fashion, and no one lingered long out of doors. No one, that is, except for a large man in a long cloak. He moved down an alleyway with surprising speed for a man of his size and his obvious age was betrayed by his flowing locks of grey hair. He had an unusual rolling gait that a seafarer from two thousand years ago would have found strangely familiar. In his arms he carried a bundle of dark cloth.

Here and there he paused briefly to glance over his strong shoulders. Seemingly satisfied, he would continue down the alleys, ducking from overhang to lintel, lintel to walkway, constantly moving to the next piece of cover. All the way along he carefully sheltered his bundle from the falling rain, minding not his own discomfort.

Eventually he reached a steaming grate under an arched bridge. Illuminated by the working half of a bank of streetlights that also lit the lurid graffiti in the archway, the man reached down and, with a grunt, lifted the grating with one powerful arm. He set it down gently, and placed the bundle he was sheltering onto it while he manhandled the sewer's ladder up into position. The bundle showed slightly restless in the wan lighting, moving slightly on the damp metal. The man made a soothing sound, and brushed the covers lightly with his palm. The bundle ceased its wriggling, and went back to sleep. The great grey-shouldered man picked up his burden again and climbed down the manhole, only pausing to drag the grating back into its home above him.

Once again, the alleyway was silent.

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The small man with the eyepatch bounced the baby on his knee, making silly faces as the wain gurgled and laughed at his antics. His good eye was round and big, and his pockmarked face was making strange goldfish motions, much to the delight of the infant.

"Ha-doop-doop-doop! Whosa baby, den? Whosa baaabyee? Eh, eh?"

Sitting next to him at the table was the grey haired man, toweling off that same grey hair with a black pullover that had seen better days.

"He's the image of his mother, there's truth. But there's something of Morgan about the eyes, look you!" He bent over to tickle some tiny toes, provoking another bout of wriggling.

The man with the patch looked up at his older companion, with a more somber look in his eyes.

"Did you see it happen, Olaf?" he asked.

The grey-hair shook his head.

"Not me, Raif. I was in engineering." His face turned skyward. "I felt the impact, though. Damn near tore the ship in half."

Raif spat.

"Devil take that traitor McGowan. If I should meet up with him..."

The big man stopped him short with a firm hand on his arm.

"Then you'll do your duty by Morgan, and run like the wind. If McGowan or his Federation masters get a'hold of any one of us then the rest are lost. The Bureau's too good at making people talk." He loosed his hold, but kept his friend and shipmate fixed in his gaze.

"You're a good man and strong, Raif Rhysson, but no man can last long against the Bureau's torturers. Not even such a one as yerself," he grinned, tousling the younger man's hair.

Raif had the good grace to look a little sheepish. He looked down at the infant, who was now fast asleep in his arms.

"So you've got to raise this one, eh?" he sighed. "Why the devil Morgan didn't send him and Lella away when he had the chance, I'll never fathom." Olaf glared into space.

"He didn't know he'd been betrayed. None of us did. Not until the Federation ships had us surrounded in all three axes," said Greysoulders, biting off the words as he stared at his feet. After a moment, he straightened a bit, and turned back to his one-eyed shipmate. "Thanks for the shelter, mate, and thanks for the food. Me an' the lad had best be going, or we'll be bringing trouble down around your head. They're still looking for us," he owned.

"You won't stay? A night's rest won't hurt nothing," said Raif, his expression betraying the fears he held for the big man's safety. Olaf Greysoulders shook his head.

"Not tonight, Raif. In a while, maybe... but not tonight. You should get clear, too. They'll have tracked me here, never doubt!" He gathered up his small charge in a large arm, and draped his great-cloak across his shoulders with the free one. "Say a prayer for us, Raif." He paused at the door to the small hideaway, turned his head and said "See you again. Stay well!" With that, he was out the door, and gone into the night.

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A little later, an actinic glare lit the night as a small, old shuttlecraft clawed painfully up through the sky, and into the starry beyond. Raif lowered the hand he had raised against the glare, and muttered old seafarer's blessings as the tears streamed down his battered face.

"Keep that boy safe, Olaf, and raise him well! There's a reckoning coming, and he'll need to be ready."

A thought struck him then.

"Mind you," he murmured with a slight smile on his face, "if that lad runs true to his blood, it'll be McGowan who'll need to be prepared!"

After casting a last look up at the dwindling glow of the shuttle, Raif Rhysson made his way back down to his hideaway, and started to pack his things.

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Section Beta

This is space. The dark monotony is broken only by the gentle lacework of stars, spilled out like so much fairy dust across the black satin sheet of eternal night. Here and there can be made out the shape of a planet or comet, resplendent in their glory as they bask in the light of their sun.

Not all things here are of natural origins, though. A shadow passes across the starfield, and reveals itself to be an ancient hypergate, still and quiet. There's a stirring of light across the surface of the giant ring, now, that wasn't there a moment ago. It brightens to a horrendous intensity in the centre of the edifice, until it looks like spacetime itself is about to be torn asunder... and then it is. Through the swirling maelstrom a ship is becoming more and more visible, as it comes through the white haze from a great distance. Eventually it solidifies entirely as it exits the maw of the hyperspace shunt, and the hypergate collapses back into its torpor.

It's a handsome ship, this one. A full football field in length, it's sleek, dark and powerful. It's armored hull bristles with weaponry. As the residual glow from the gate dwindles back to nothing, the ship shimmers as if covered in water, and then vanishes from sight.

All is not quiet on board our mysterious spacecraft. On the bridge (which is neat, well lit and spacious), there's the sound of vigorous debate.

"I tell you, this isn't right, Morgan," says the man at the helm. He's a pugnacious little man, with a cast over one eye, and bright red hair.

The tall, handsome man behind him smiles reassuringly.

"It's alright, Hänsen. McGowan will be here on time. He's not been late yet."

This elicits a grunt from the little man.

"As you says. I'm just thinking his escape from that Federation prison was a bit easy. I've been there meself, remember?"

The tall man twitches an eyebrow.

"What is it with you lately, Hänsen? Kevin and you were like this," he crosses his fingers, "until the Feds got him outside Kaarn Prime. He got out, man, they didn't release him. You saw the scars."

"I don't know, Morgan. There's something changed about him. I can feel it."

This causes the tall man to frown, and he leans forward a fraction.

"Relax, Hänsen. Kevin can't be a danger to us anyway; we have picket ships on point at the meeting area, and we're running with the cloaking device."

The short man grunts, and says "That's as maybe, but I still reckon this is dodgy."

He leans down and taps a few controls. "I'm keeping her on silent running until I'm sure."

Morgan leans back into his command chair, and smiles again. "Sounds fine to me. No point in being stupid, is there?"

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In a very isolated area of space indeed, a small flotilla of hotrodged craft wait patiently for a rendezvous. Ships the size of Cargo Drones buzz around the larger ships that form the bulk of the group. All the ships seem to be armed in some fashion, even the shuttles. There are even some mighty Enterprise class cargo freighters in amongst the rabble.

Then, from out of nowhere, a series of pinpricks that look like new stars appear in the space surrounding the flotilla. The pinpricks rapidly turn into hyperspace exit points, and suddenly the group is surrounded by E-41 Destroyers and Patrol Boats. An enormous E-60 Carrier leads the taskforce of intruders, which begin methodically blowing every ship out of the sky.

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"Morgan!!!" screams Hänsen, "They've got company!" Hänsen pulls back on the yoke, and says "We need to get clear; they knew we

were coming."

"Belay that," barks the tall man. "Bring her about, heading zero four five mark one two eight."

Hänsen swivels to face his captain with a horrified look.

"You're not serious? They outgun us ten to one! We haven't a chance, and you know it."

Morgan smiles grimly, and says "Get all non-essential personnel to the lifeboats. Civilians first. We can't leave the others here, not like this. We owe it to them, futile effort or not."

The pug redhead grunts once more, and sounds the alert ship-wide. "Done. They'll be away in three minutes."

"Then let's get cracking, shall we? Shields up, bring weapons to hot standby and drop the cloak!"

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The flotilla has seen better days. The small armada of Federation ships has torn the convoy to pieces, with only a few brave ships still returning any kind of fire, effective or not.

Some game ships are attempting to make a run for it on ancient hyperdrives never designed for use without a hypergate. They're slowly being torn down by the wolfpack of Destroyers, which hound them mercilessly.

Just when things are looking their bleakest, Morgan's ship shimmers into existence between the Destroyers and the fleeing ships. It opens fire with a withering hail of cluster munitions that explode in amongst the E-41s, to devastating effect. The remaining Federation ships recognize the threat and immediately start pounding the trim little ship.

The black vessel skims left and right, up and down, always taking fire, but avoiding two thirds of what's being thrown at it, and always returning the favor with interest. It doesn't take long, though, for the black ship to be dead in space with six Destroyers moving in from all sides. In the background, however, we can see the remaining flotilla ships forming a shaky jump point, and leaping away from the conflict to parts unknown, leaving the Federation ships a little lost and very frustrated.

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There's no light except what's being thrown from a few broken terminals. After our eyes adjust to the dim, we can see that we're actually on board the bridge of Morgan's ship. The destruction and the dark hide most of the bodies, but here and there you can see them crushed under bulkheads, or impaled with pylons or I-beams. Morgan's here, trapped under a section of holographic monitor, dead. So is Hänsen, still sitting at the helm, his left hand resting on the annunciator, set to 'flank'. One man crawls through the wreckage, carrying a silent child in his left arm, and a dying woman in his right. He's a huge man, with broad shoulders and grey flowing locks.

The woman he's carrying slumps to the floor by Morgan, and hugs him to her.

"It's too late, Olaf. He's dead, and I'm dying." She bursts into silent tears as she hugs her dead husband. She looks up at the big man, and grabs his shirt, imploring. "Get away from here! Take the child, and run. Go, Olaf; now!!" She thrusts him away with surprising strength, and sinks back down into her husband's lap.

Olaf, jerking back tears, clambers away through the mess to the still-unused bridge escape pod.

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A panel gets blown off the side of the wrecked black craft. It reveals a small escape pod that blasts into the void with full power to the emergency blast-zone-clearance thrusters. It hurtles toward the hypergate at an unsafe speed, too fast for the point defense weaponry of the Federation craft. The hypergate, in response to some unseen signal, obediently opens to allow the pod to tumble away into the swirling vortices of hyperspace...

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