

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

AN INFINITY CHRISTMAS STORY

BY

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For some, it was about being in space. Every almost a third of the passengers of a Circular at any given time were first time space travelers, and the observation decks of the Circular, or the special restaurants, or the cafes and shopping concourses were all built to provide the best views of deep space and to appeal to the space curious and their geist-wallets. Travelers could take pictures of space, could interact on Maya with designations that indicated they were in space, could send their relatives detailed holographic images with space backgrounds and specialized 'stickers.' The shopping concourses sold passable imitations of flight suits and the sort of body suits that various crew and space professional wore every day, or singlets or even tee shirts indicating that they had been 'in space.'

For others, space held no particular romance, and they tended to sit in different bars or cafes or restaurants. There were quite a few with no views of the stars whatsoever. The circulars were huge -- vast spaceships on the endless rounds of their pre-determined courses, like railroads from the ancient age of steam, running on fixed routes, except that no train in the history of Earth had ever carried thirty thousand passengers and a million tonnes of freight at the same time.

Today, Circular L505 had six linked 'ships,' called 'sections,' each capable of running independently; each the size of a large town on old Earth; and there were dozens, if not hundreds of smaller craft docked to them, from the slim and deadly needle of an O-12 Starmada escort to the

pearlescent glow of a rich man's space yacht being transported to a new system. Like the trains of old Earth, every circular was 'made up' by controllers in each system on route, and the link 'section' ships were added or taken off as circumstances demanded. C505 was running outbound from NeoTerra; she'd already left the Neoterra Orbital Spaceport, the largest spaceport in Human Space, and had passed the Vila Booster which flung her on massive magnetic rings outward en route to her insertion for Sol; old earth herself.

And deep in the middle ship of the train, far from viewing platforms or even screens showing the vast emptiness of deep space, sat two priests, drinking coffee.

'I'm bad at it,' she said. She was tall, heavy with muscle, her face carved in the harsh angles of Northern Spain or perhaps Mexico. Her short dark hair was cut close, the way people kept their hair when they wore helmets too often for fashion, and the skin around her eyes and down the right side of her face had the perfect smoothness of a recent regrowth. She wore a black singlet, the sort of thing people wore under combat armour and EVA suits; the sort of thing that the tourists on deck seven paid to copy. All that showed was the collar and the extendable cuffs, because over it, she wore a long brown robe marked with a white cross.

She played with the comm plug on the turtleneck of her singlet. 'Their sins are so fucking petty. They are...' she raised her coffee. 'They're boring. Pointless.' She looked away. 'I know what I

sound like.'

The other priest smiled. 'Sure,' he said. He wore conventional dress of his creed; a black shirt and black trousers so old that the dyes had faded, leaving them a sort of black-brown. Over the back of his chair hung an ancient jacket, the cuffs mostly threadbare; there was a small pin on the collar. He wore the traditional collar of his calling, and he had curly white hair and a mustache and bright blue eyes. Too bright, some might say. He leaned back. 'But they're all God's children.'

She shrugged. 'I know,' she said. 'I'm very good at killing them. I'm just not as good at understanding them.'

The other priest nodded and scratched under his chin. 'I'm guessing that someone sent you on this trip for just that reason,' he said.

She winced. 'Oh, touché, Father. And here I thought it was just the shakes,' she said bitterly, and drank off her coffee. It was passable, and came in a bulb; another affectation based on their being in 'space.' She looked at her hand, which shook slightly. She pretended to herself that it was just too much caffeine.

She glanced at him. 'I'm sorry, Father. I'm just a thug, really. And a bad priest.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Everyone's a bad priest waiting to be a better one. But confession is... essential. All you need to do is listen,' he said. 'The rest is as the spirit moves you. I'm sure you have lain in ambush, waiting for some enemy to step into your sights and die. You must have patience?

Discipline? So use it. Listen. If you have nothing to offer, tell them to do a cycle of prayer. Prayer never hurt anyone.'

She looked at him, eyes unblinking. 'Ouch,' she said.

He shrugged. 'Tough love,' he said, and that made her smile.

'Today, a man, a perfectly nice man, a journalist. He came and made his confession, which was...' she shrugged. 'Detailed and dull. And then asked me what his chances of resurrection were. As if I, as a priest, kept his numbers.'

Father Padraig leaned back again. 'Ahh, yes,' he said.

'As if all of religion is no more than a scorecard to resurrection!' she said.

'So you *do* believe,' he said.

'Of course I fuckin' believe,' she spat. 'I'm a Mother-Knight of the Order of the Hospital, Father.'

He shrugged and smiled. He was a very handsome man, for an older priest, and he had the kind of face that made people want to talk to him. She had. She'd been in the queue for coffee and he'd been ahead of her, and he'd turned and smiled...

He nodded. 'It's so common,' he admitted. 'There are many in the church who would argue that owning the resurrections is the best thing to happen to the Church of Christ in a thousand years, and there's just as many who think that we've become a shill for Aleph, a soulless machine.' He smiled. 'I prefer to imagine that we're the same church. One

church.'

She looked away.

He laughed. 'Too close to the bone for a Hospitaller, Mother?'

She looked back. Shrugged. 'We all know what happened to the Templars,' she said quietly. 'Too much time with the soulless.'

Father Padraig smiled, but he look became suddenly intent. 'You know the Templars?' he asked.

She looked away. 'I was there when we... took their... fortress.' She shrugged. 'Not a pleasant memory. And I don't even pretend to judge them.'

'Have you read Hans Kung?' he asked.

'Wasn't he a heretic?' she asked. 'Father, you're a Jesuit. While you were reading heretical theologians, I was learning to fly spacecraft. Or maybe it was throwing grenades.'

Father Padraig smiled again, and his brilliant eyes flashed. 'True for you,' he said. 'Alright then, never mind the sins of the various AIs. What were your pilgrim's sins? Were they so very dull? Will they keep him from God?'

She smiled slightly. 'I wouldn't break the seal of confession for something so...' She paused. 'Keep him from God. That's good. I'll pray on that.'

He laughed. 'And what did you tell him?'

'I told him that Jesus loved him as he

was, and that the lessons of Jesus Christ, not the rules of the resurrection machinery, should be his guide.'

Father Padraig nodded. 'See? So you know exactly what to do.'

She met his bright blue eyes with her flat brown eyes. 'I feel...'

'Like an imposter?' he asked.

'I'm very good at close quarters fighting,' she said. 'Put me in a TAG and I have no doubts. Show me a Morat and I'm filled with the Holy Spirit. I'm not really good at dealing with *people*. On Paradiso...'

He leaned forward. 'Yes?'

'I lost so many people there that I stopped...' she shook her head. 'Someone once told me that faith wasn't about *being*. It should be about *becoming*.'

A very long silence ensued.

He took her hand. 'I'm sure they were good people,' he said. 'But you don't honour them by cutting yourself off from all the rest of humanity. God is love, Mother.'

She narrowed her eyes, and she barely heard him. 'You know what they tell us when we do our caravans, Father?' she asked. 'The last stage of training, when we go out into the field? They tell us that it's possible that we go to Hell for our use of violence. And that we're sacrificing our eternal lives so that others may go to Paradise.'

Father Padraig played with his coffee bulb. 'Sure,' he said, in a tone that suggested that he was anything but sure.

She nodded. ‘So sometimes, I think I’ve already crossed the line. What I’m *becoming* is a brute.’

He shook his head, utterly sure. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You can’t let that be true. It’s Advent; the time when we wait for Christ. All of us are waiting to become... better.’

She got up. ‘I hope so, Father. I’ve been waiting for a while.’

#

She regretted the impulse to unburden, and walked rapidly away from the cafeteria, the caffeine in her bloodstream making her jittery.

Just listen.

Well, that was fair, and no sane person went to a Jesuit for comfort, except that deep in her heart she *was comforted*. On the other hand, in her mind, a resentful voice tried to shout that he wasn’t a combative and had no *fucking* idea what her real life was like, but Mother Agada Solis was an officer of the Order, and as such knew when criticism was accurate.

Just listen.

All of us are waiting to become...

She took the lift to the passenger deck. She was traveling in the ‘Citizen’ class, which was a polite corporate fiction for the cheapest cabins,

usually shared, available to demogrants and other customers at the bottom of the economic ladder. Or, to be more precise, at the point on the ladder where they could just *barely* afford a trip through space. Her pilgrims occupied the next forty cabins on either side of the long, slightly curving corridor. It was neat and clean, the woven black carbon-fiber on the bulkheads hiding casual damage and preventing easy vandalism.

She had her comlog in her hand and she raised it towards the door and the door opened.

‘Good day, Mother Agada,’ the room said. ‘I do hope that you are enjoying your voyage on the Circular. A tour of the engines begins in nine minutes in Delta 904; a real spacewalk is available...’

She closed the door and turned off the messaging. She had a double to herself, and her kit-bag lay open on the lower acceleration couch, which was really just a bed, a bunk-bed like the ones she’d slept on since she was a small child. Richer passengers got panoform cabins with furniture that could be tailored. Pilgrims got bunks.

Her comlog beeped. It was the beep the indicated that she had more than ten messages waiting, and she made a face. She looked at it; requests for confessions, personal meetings, an offer of dinner.

She sighed. Then she knelt and prayed for a while, and then she rose, unzipped the hard-shell of her kit bag. Her hand hesitated by the holster of her sidearm; but she resisted, and took out an old leather case which opened at a touch to reveal

a beautiful silver communion set; a chalice, a paten, a neatly folded purificator, a small crystal bottle of wine, a pyx.

She laid them out reverently on her side table, and then frowned.

Selfish. She'd been about to celebrate a private mass, which she was allowed to do. Liturgy steadied her; ritual was often more healing to her than medicine.

'James?' she said to the air.

Her geist replied, 'Yes, Mother?'

'Schedule mass for my pilgrims. Find me a chapel, or a meeting room. Let's say 1600 ship time.'

'I can have the second deck chapel for 1615 or I can get a wood-paneled meeting room that seats sixty on third deck for 1600. I have eleven other choices not quite as suitable.'

She smiled. '1615 is fine, James.'

'Very well, Mother. Notifying your pilgrims. I have... seventy one responses.'

'I'll need more wine,' she said. She already felt better.

##

The ritual of mass settled her, and she shared with her pilgrims the little liturgical intricacies of a Hospitaller mass, and led them in praying for her

brothers and sisters on Paradiso and elsewhere. It was the first day in Advent, and she didn't have the vestments for it, but she had a Marian blue shawl and she wore it, and she reminded them in her sermon that in ancient times, Advent had been a time of contemplation, almost a second Lent, rather than just a run-up to Christmas shopping. A time of waiting. She thought of the Jesuit.

It wasn't a bad sermon., and it lit them up, she could tell. So easy, to reach out and touch their lives. To make them feel like they were part of something larger, just by leading their prayers for her comrades. No different, really, than leading troops.

And an inner voices protested that they could never, ever understand, and they weren't part of her Order, and...

She silenced the voices and used her cabin for confessions, allowing James to schedule them throughout the next week. A little advent penance.

She did her best to listen. One woman's confession took the form of confessing her perceptions of other people's sins; another, a man's, was a carnal catalogue of real and fancied sexual activities. Mother Agada was sure that he wouldn't have told such tales to a male priest. And she didn't think they were even true.

None of it roused her from lethargy. Nor did the possibility of a return to earth; to her home in Asturias. Her *home*.

Christmas, she thought. *Christmas on Camino*.

Nothing.

Home was her people on Paradiso. Home was freeze dried food and a hasty mass in a trench in the jungle. Home was the inside of her armour.

#

She awoke to *Spem in Alium*, played at an increasing volume, and stretched.

‘You have a call,’ James said.

‘Fuck,’ Solis said. She tapped her comlog. ‘Give it to me. No video.’

‘Mother Agada?’ a voice asked. She was muzzy with sleep and it took her a moment.

The Jesuit. Father Padraig.

‘I’m sorry to catch you in your sleep cycle, Mother,’ he said. ‘But I need a favour.’

She was fully awake by the time she rode the lift up to the command deck. Far up in the bow; a lift ride of almost six minutes, and then a security station with retinal scan and four armed and armoured corporate guards, and a Knight of Santiago.

He saluted her crisply, checked her comlog, scanned her retinas, and then compared her to a holograph.

‘Thanks Mother,’ he said. ‘We’re being very careful these days.’

‘Good,’ she said. There were rumours

on Paradiso; rumours of Speculo-Killers throughout the Human Sphere. And other rumours.

She checked herself for a flash of envy; he was gleamingly well-armoured in one of the new ORC Armiger MkIV suits, and she wore a frayed brown gown over her black singlet, and only the eight pointed cross in white on her left breast suggested that she was anything but a lay religious or a Franciscan sister.

But she kicked her envy hard and instead favoured the young Father-Knight with a smile. 'Any idea why I'm here?' she asked.

Even in armour, the knight could shrug. 'The Lord moves in mysterious ways,' he said. He motioned to an officer of the TransEtherea Corporation, who looked like he might be a Starmada officer in a holodrama; a perfectly fitted deep blue uniform. 'Lieutenant Mpono will take you to the bridge.'

She nodded and followed the lieutenant.

She passed the knight's station; all four of the knight's corporate security professionals stiffened to attention. She smiled at the implied compliment and swept past into the corridor that ran to the bridge of the great Circular. She passed an airlock, unobtrusively set into the corridor in matt black, and half a dozen non-airtight doors; watch offices, perhaps, and the Captain's day and evening cabins. Mpono said nothing.

They came to a second security station. This one was manned by a single woman in

armour, with a multi-rifle. She glanced at a display. Mpono put his identity card through a reader and then had his retinas scanned and he handed her a white card, apparently blank.

‘Bridge visitor,’ he said. ‘Follow me, Mother.’

She clipped the white card to the neck of her singlet.

The bridge was magnificent; a cathedral of space-faring. The entire bridge was under a duracrystal dome, so that the whole vista of space could be seen in every direction. A large holotank filled the center, and there were rows of acceleration couches, each with its own controls and screens. The captain sat on a raised dais behind the holotank, from which he could see every station.

The captain was a small woman whose face and hands suggested that she’d come through several rejuvs. She smiled; a tight, business smile.

Mother Agada wanted to salute. Instead, she bobbed her head. ‘All the equipment is for the tourists?’ she asked.

The captain’s smile widened. ‘You’ve been on a real bridge, I see. Yes; all the actual command is done in VR. But an empty bubble is bad publicity.’

Mother Agada nodded. ‘How can I help you, ma’am?’

‘Mother,’ she said. ‘I have a problem. And I’d like you to fix it.’

Mother Agada nodded, her heart beat-

ing a little harder.

Behind her, Father Padraig was escorted onto the bridge.

‘Father Padraig,’ the captain said. ‘Lock down the bridge. No recording. Do you here me, there?’

‘Aye, aye, ma’am,’ a synthesized voice said.

The captain spun her chair to face the two priests. ‘Well?’ she said.

Father Padraig nodded. ‘There is a ship--a yacht. It appears to be derelict.’ He looked at the captain and she nodded. ‘It is crossing into the shipping lane.’

‘A Circular is very difficult to turn after boost,’ the captain said. ‘We’ve hailed the damn thing and we’ve demanded that it turn away. In about six hours, we’ll hit it. If we don’t, it will be very close.’

Mother Agada glanced at the Jesuit. ‘There’s a Starmada escort remora’d to section four,’ she said. ‘And a Knight of Santiago just down the corridor. Surely they can sort this out.’

Father Padraig looked apologetic. He cleared his throat. ‘I believe...’ he smiled shyly. ‘I believe that this might be a... matter for the Holy See.’ His smile was uncertain. ‘I believe that you mentioned that you are a pilot?’

###

She was still running the pre-flight check on the pinnacle that the Circular had authorized her to take to intercept the yacht. Father Padraig, now in a black flight suit as old as his trousers, was strapping in to the second seat.

This was a craft so new that she found a sheet of plastic film over the sensor suite display and peeled it off. She looked up, checking another display that showed the status of fuel and the umbilicals that attached them to the belly of section three of C505, which had proved to have a hangar bay.

It was like religious ritual, and she chanted her preflight checklist, asking and answering like one of her pilgrims saying matins in her cabin. ‘Maneuvering thrusters? Maneuvering thrusters all fueled and green. Avionics? Avionics green and green. Auxiliary power? Auxiliary power at 92% and climbing. System? I have a system.’

Father Padraig squirmed a little, and then sat quietly.

‘Charlie Five Zero Five this is...’

Her comlog beeped and she received a confidential message from the ship, and she thumbed it straight into the Pinnacle’s small onboard computer with its sub-AI. She received a set of mission codes and recognition signals and a callsign. Responding to James’ prompt in her earbud, she said, ‘This is Beta Exray 05021, over?’

‘Beta Exray zero five sero two one, roger, I have you loud and clear, over?’

‘Roger, Charlie Five Zero Five. Ready for breakaway.’

‘Roger, Zero Two One. Stand by.’

She glanced at Father Padraig. ‘Care to tell me what this is about?’

He smiled. ‘There’s a yacht adrift...’

She sighed. ‘Are you really a member of the Society of Jesus?’ she asked.

He looked offended. ‘Of course I am,’ he said.

She shrugged, which was hard, in the harness of the cockpit’s ejection seat. The pinnacle was *almost* a military craft; it certainly had big engines and a mysterious board for a third position that looked as if a gunner might direct it. The cargo pod was empty. It would be fast.

‘I really don’t have to do this,’ she said. ‘I could just walk away.’

‘You have a vow of obedience,’ he said.

‘Not to you,’ she snapped.

‘Bravo Exray Zero Five Zero Two One, this is Charlie Five Zero Five Control over?’

‘Roger 505.’

‘You are clear for launch with a sunward turn off your initial breakaway. Putting it through now.’

‘Roger Charlie Five Zero Five,’ she said. She hunted the console in front of her. Mostly fly by wire, off a single screen and a pair of joysticks; much less complex than the shuttles she’d trained on. She found what she was looking for on the touch screen that holo’d out of her control panel. Nothing but the best and latest.

She toggled the red ‘control’ button to green.

The huge circular above her took control of her craft through the computer and she felt the *cluk* as the umbilicals separated, and then the heavier vibration as the airlock seal let go. Immediately she felt differently, and that was before her maneuvering thrusters began to fire...pop pop, popopop.

And they were away.

‘Okay, we’re off,’ she said, her eyes scanning her instruments. her gloved left hand swept through the holodeck that was projected into her lap, and she located the tagged object, the yacht, and told the ship’s system to match course and velocity. She looked back and forth between options.

‘Can you take two gees?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he said.

She chose the faster profile, tagged it, and sat back.

‘James, how long until we’re docked with the yacht?’

‘By Yacht, Mother, I believe you mean the derelict spacecraft tagged in the display as ‘Zeta One One.’

‘Sure do, James.’

‘One hour and seven minutes, Mother.’ The geist sounded aggrieved.

She turned to look at the other priest. ‘Need to pee?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Good,’ she said, and tagged the ‘engage’ logo.

The little ship rotated on its thrusters, the vastness of the circular steadily replaced with the more staggering vastness of space.

BAM.

Like being punched in the gut. The acceleration was immediate, The C505 fell away, first 'behind' and then 'below' as the ship changed vectors.

She made sure her head was cushioned between the two foam supports meant to cradle it, and then said, 'So, Father, you have an hour to tell me what we're doing.'

'We're investigating a derelict yacht that is perilously close to the main transit lanes.'

'That's a perfectly normal pastime for an overweight Jesuit and a Mother Knight of the Hospital,' she said. 'We investigate space derelicts all the time.'

He glanced at her but didn't say anything.

'Father, there's a Starmada escort docked with the C505. In addition, there's a detachment of Knights of Santiago; a Bureau Hermes office, complete with their own ship; I checked. And, just in case, there's a Yu Jing Imperial Agent, Crane rank, in first class, and she has an escort of her own police, all Bao troops, and a corvette, also docked with the hull.'

He said nothing.

'The difference between them and us is that all of them have jurisdictional roles in the investigation of a derelict spacecraft in operational

range of a circular,' she said. 'Not to mention training to deal with such stuff.'

'I told you,' he said. 'It's the business of the Holy See.'

She smiled thinly. It was hard to smile any other way, at two gees of acceleration. 'Really?' she asked. 'How would you know?'

He sighed. 'I was supposed to meet the... pilot,' he said. 'And escort him...'

'Escort him?' she forced her self to take a deep breath. The two gravities were beginning to have the effect she hated most; shortness of breath.

'That's all I can tell you,' he said. 'Really, it's more than I should tell you.'

She looked at him. 'Why not the Knights of Santiago, Father?' she asked. 'It's their business. They're good at it.'

She could only think of two reasons why he wanted her, and one was that she was expendable; if she died, no one would notice for weeks. The pilgrims would, but her own Order would not be notified for months.

The other was just as dark. He wanted her for sex. It happened, out on the front lines, or in space. Chastity was the hardest vow for many.

Or... he needed a killer.

'Are we going to a fight?' she asked.

'I have no idea what we're getting into,' he said. 'But I don't want Santiago in this. It's... political. Within the church.'

'Christ,' she said.

'You curse and use causal blasphemy

far too often,' he said. 'I would think that a woman as disciplined as you are would avoid such petty stuff.'

She resisted the temptation to answer in kind.

'Political how?' she asked.

He turned his head. Under acceleration, everyone looked older, and Father Padraig suddenly looked like death. His skin was grey, and stretched in a way she didn't like.

'Are you going to be all right?' she asked. 'You look bad.'

'As you commented so acerbically, this isn't my usual job,' he said.

'Want me to take her down off two gees?' she asked.

'No,' he said. 'I want every second I can get aboard that yacht.'

'Why?' she asked.

'You don't have the need to know,' he said.

She put a finger on the engines kill switch. 'I can kill the engines and coast, reprogram and take us back to the Circular. I'm sure you can find another pilot.'

'I prefer you,' he said.

She shook her head -- only a little, because of the two gees. 'No way,' she said.

He reached into the zippered pocket of his flight suit. The motion was slow and strained, and she worried he was pulling muscles to do it. He withdrew a leather bill-fold; an antique affectation,

she thought, and then he flipped it open.

Inside was a badge in the shape of a golden rose in full bloom. At the top, in gold letters, it said 'Athleta Christi.'

She let out a breath, and her hand fell away from the controls. 'Oh,' she said.

He tucked the credentials away. 'I was hoping to avoid this,' he said.

'So now I'm the pilot for the Pope's secret police,' she said. And then, suddenly, 'Jesus wept, father, you mean you don't trust the Knights of Santiago?'

Gravity pressed them both against their seats, as if each had another person sitting on their chest. Finally, he spoke. His voice was very soft. 'You have been tempted, and have not fallen,' he said. 'It is not that I don't trust the Knights of Santiago. It is that I do not wish to put them in the way of temptation.'

#

Fifty-seven minutes later, she was docking with the yacht. It was in excellent shape; she couldn't see any obvious damage to the hull or the engines, and she had James take them in to dock at the airlock while she put on a full EVA suit and wished for her armour.

'Airlock is saying "no," she said.

In zero gee, her passenger was look-

ing better. He unclipped,. floated up to the view screen, and then settled back into his acceleration couch and began to work his comlog. ‘That should do,’ he said.

‘Yep,’ she agreed, as the other ship’s airlock responded to her SCADA request. ‘Green and go,’ she said.

‘Can you fly the yacht?’ he asked.

‘Isn’t it a little late to ask?’ she said. ‘Probably. If you can unlock the controls and the mainframe.’

He nodded. ‘You have a weapon?’ he asked.

She thought of various replies, but settled on the obvious one. ‘Yes,’ she said.

He nodded. Then he kicked off with more expertise than she’d expected, went down the tube to the crew locker, and got into his own EVA suit. She watched him on a monitor, and saw his shoulder holster.

Interesting.

While he was stripping, she said, ‘You could just tell me what this is about.’

He grunted.

She stripped her sidearm, reassembled it, and checked her ammunition , round by round. She changed her clip for a clip of sub-sonic non-penetrators; heavy slugs with pure lead tips that wouldn’t go through a spacecraft’s bulkheads, if you were lucky. They’d mushroom.

She put the heavy pistol back into the holster and clipped it to the outside of her suit, low on

her right leg. She took a single grenade; a flash that gave off a single, blinding flash of light; they were especially useful when your opponent was wearing I/R equipment or a multi-spectrum visor.

Then she went over her air lines and her helmet seals, and then said an *Ave Maria*.

Now and in the hour of our death.

Amen.

Father Padraig spoke to the camera on by the EVA suits. 'I'm going to the airlock. I want you to come in behind me. If my... companion... is alive, I want to talk to him alone. If he's not alive, I'll want a witness.'

'Nice,' she said. 'Tell me you set this up so that I can get an adrenaline rush and feel better about myself.'

She heard something between a grunt and a genuine laugh. 'Absolutely,' he said. 'It's all about you.'

'And if someone shoots you?' she asked.

'Shoot back and get out,' he said. 'And never mention this to anyone ever.'

'Oh,' she said aloud. *Been here before.*

The Templar sergeant as she cut him down...

She blinked. She hadn't thought about that in a long time.

He got into the small airlock and she saw it cycle. It took several seconds, and then the inner lock door on the other ship opened. He'd closed

and dogged the hatch on their own little ship, so that there was no atmosphere contamination. Good practice. But cautious; some people would simply have left both sets of hatches open so both ships were in effect, one, joined at the airlock.

She keyed a subroutine into the sub AI manually, and then dropped down the companionway to the lower 'deck' and the airlock. 'Did you copy that, James?' she said.

'Yes, Mother.'

'You take the ship home if I don't come back,' she said. 'Stay in the ship.'

'Yes, Mother,' the geist said.

'Don't worry, James,' she said. 'While I have a moment; what's the best guess origin for the yacht?'

James took a moment, which suggested that a great deal of math was happening.

'I can rule out NeoTerra and the orbitals,' James said. 'Anything further would be speculation.'

'Speculate,' she said. She was in the pinnace's airlock, but her hand hovered above the green touchplate.

'Launched by Sari Han Vila Booster in Bourak,' James said. 'Thirty-nine percent probability. And that's three times the next most probable event, wherein it was undocked by a passing warship.'

Bourak was, in fact, one gate away to spinward. She sighed, because suddenly time was passing.

‘Elaborate?’ she asked.

‘Location is commensurate with probability cone originating in transition of the Bourak Gate; orbital geometry, timing, and velocity all consistent with a boosted vessel from Sari Han Orbital.’

She pressed on the pad, and the air vented, and the airlock door opened.

She waited, cycled again, and waited while the yacht’s airlock filled with air. She watched the pressure gauge on her helmet screen and on the wall. The yacht was very modern; an expensive toy. She thought again of the ageing Order assault boats on Paradiso.

‘Fuck,’ she said out loud. A venal sin. Swearing usually made her feel better.

She opened the inner hatch. the air smelled stale, and had a scent she didn’t like. The bay facing the airlock was lit with red emergency lights that through deep shadows. There were multiple red light sources, mostly behind stacks of crates, giving the airlock exit the appearance of the gates of Hell.

‘James, can you read me?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ her geist said. ‘You are surprisingly indistinct considering your proximity.’

The airlock opened into a compartment lined in up-to-date but very pedestrian red-lit shipping equipment, storage containers, and junction boxes. At a glance, she guessed that she’d just entered a rich man’s toy via the service entrance.

‘James, can you download a schematic of the ship from the yacht’s sub-AI?’

‘No, mother. The whole system is

down. I'd have to raise it, which might be...dangerous, from here.'

She nodded to herself and chinned her comms inside her helmet. 'Father Padraig?' she asked.

'Here I am, lord,' he said. He was out of breath.

'Where are you?' she asked.

'Climbing the main ladder well to the bridge,' he said. 'There's power, but everything is down.'

'Find your friend?' she asked.

'Not yet. I'm going to restore power and System from the bridge.'

Don't have a heart attack, she thought.

'Shall I join you?' she asked.

'Wait until I restore the lifts,' he said.

'Affirm,' she answered, and walked over to a control panel. It was probably the airlock/cargo panel, and usually all this would be handled by a spacer through their comlog, anyway.

'James,' she said. 'I need you to come here through my comlog and see if you can raise the system. Do not, I repeat, not, attempt this from our ship.'

'Do you want me to twin, Mother?' her geist asked.

'Yes. Leave *you* on the pinnacle.'

'Very well, mother,' James said, and then her comlog beeped.

'James Prime, try and raise the System,' she said.

‘Very well,’ her comlog said. ‘Oh. That was easy.’

The screen by her head flickered to life. The emergency lighting fell away, replaced by normal ship’s lighting. Hell became a perfectly ordinary cargo bay with containers from expensive food services, including a gigantic steel container labeled ‘Fortnum and Mason.’

‘What happened?’ Father Padraig asked.

‘I had my geist raise the System,’ Mother Agada said. ‘If you get clear, I can send you a lift.’

‘With pleasure,’ Father Padraig said. ‘I’m up on second level.’

‘James Prime?’

‘Lift on the way,’ her geist’s alternate said.

‘Get me one,’ she said.

‘I can pick you up here and then Father Padraig on Level Two en route the bridge,’ James Prime said. Was it her imagination that the alternate sounded a little more metallic, a little less... patronizing?

‘Perfect,’ she said. She looked back at the Fortnum and Mason container. It wasn’t out of place in a rich man’s hold, but it wasn’t stowed, either; it’s four hold-down’s weren’t tabbed against the deck or a bulkhead.

She picked up a laser tagger from the deck-compartment under the maintenance screen and shone it on the steel container. It beeped in her

hand, and the screen lit up, showing the container's provenance and contents.

Pickled herring. People ate the most remarkable things.

Bakunan. That's what had sparked her interest. It was a Bakunan marker on the steel container, and it had been loaded on the famous Nomad mothership.

'James Prime,' she said subvocally. To her left, lift doors opened.

'Here I am, Mother,' he said.

'What's the last known location of the Bakunan Mothership?' she asked.

'Asking James,' James Prime said.

She boarded the lift and the doors closed without her participation.

'Level Two,' she said.

The doors opened to reveal Father Padraig in a black EVA suit. 'I'm glad to see you,' he admitted.

She smiled. 'Something about this is more wrong than I expected,' she said.

The doors hissed shut again, and the lift rose in a surge of power.

Father Padraig looked at her.

'My geist is running the ship,' she said.

'You have a surprisingly powerful geist,' he said.

She shrugged. 'When the other guy is the EI,' she said, and traile doff as the lift doors opened.

The dead man was obvious. He lay, face up, on the deck of the bridge. the yacht's bridge was PanOceanan Hi-tech; a single seat, and an otherwise featureless dome, half of it transparent.

Father Padraig sighed and knelt by the corpse.

Mother Agada stepped out of the lift and looked everywhere, starting with *up*.

'James Prime, query the ship's log?' she asked. The corpse smelled. And explained what she hadn't liked about the ship's air.

'Mother, the last location of the Bakunan Mother ship...'

James Prime's voice was odd -- more accented, now. Definitely inhuman and metallic.

And slowing...

'...waaaas Bbboouuurrraaakkk
Sssyyyyyyssssstttteeeemmmmm...'

'James Prime are you under attack?'

Her comlog beeped.

'Shit,' she said. 'There was a daemon in the system and its attacking my comlog.'

The other priest looked up. He brought up his own comlog.

'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,' he cursed.

'Was this your contact?' she asked.

The other priest's eyes were concentrating on his comlog screen. 'It put a false system in front of a firewall, and now it's attacking your geist.' He shook his head. 'Mother of God, that was supposed to be me.'

She looked down at the corpse.

He wore a purple shirt and a pair of grey slacks.
'Bishop?' she asked.

'The Archbishop of Svalarheima,' the priest said. 'I hope.'

'You hope?' she asked.

'I shouldn't have said that,' the Jesuit said. 'You geist is putting up one heck of a fight.'

'What the hell is he facing in there?' she asked.

Father Padraig was watching on his screen. 'I don't really know,' he said.

She went to the command chair and found the one manual control that she expected. 'We should go,' she said.

'Not while that thing has the lifts...'

'We aren't taking the lifts, Father Padraig. If you are satisfied your boy here is dead, we're leaving. We're going to call in the Knights of Santiago and get them to blow this thing.'

'Your geist...'

'Not an immediate problem,' she said.
'Helmet on.'

The jesuit obeyed her, his eyes still glued to the battle on his comlog screen.

'Your geist is losing,' he said regretfully. 'You're right. We need to leave.'

He dogged the visor of his helmet. 'I have seal. I have air. Blessed be God.'

'Blessed be God forever,' she said.
'Take hold, now. Take hold!' and pulled the handle under the command seat.

It was an old-fashioned, manual yel-

low handle, and it had a mechanical coupling to a small charge that blew the transparent canopy off the bridge. The air vented, all together, taking the archbishop's corpse out into space, but both of them had hand-holds.

As soon as the air vented, they could move. Agada's boots clipped to the metal of the deck underfoot. She jumped for the top of the bridge, caught hold, and swung herself up until her boot clicked home on the transom of the outer hull.

'Jump up to me, Father,' she said.

He did. He was better in zero gee than she'd expected, and she didn't really have to catch him.

'James?' she asked.

'Here I am, mother,' he said. 'That ship was some sort of Faraday cage. I couldn't get a signal in cleanly after you left the airlock area.'

'Understood.'

'There is a human attempting to access the airlock,' James said. 'He doesn't have the code. He has tried twice to subvert me.'

Agada swore. 'Father Padraig!' she spat. 'The murderer is between us and the Pinnacle.'

'God's mercy on us,' he said.

'James, do not let that man aboard.'

'I understand, Mother.'

She was moving along what would have been the topside of the yacht, a forest of antennas. The yacht's width gave her a limited horizon and she could only see the atmospheric landing tailfin of the pinnacle sticking up to her right, because the pin-

nace had docked nose to tail with the yacht.

She moved even more cautiously, the hundreds of antennae like the forest of Paradiso, thickly clumped here, more open there. Most of them were black plasteel, crisp and new in the distant light of Tencendur. The system's star was far enough away that it was merely the brightest point of light in the firmament, but she could see well enough with her helmet optics -- well enough that when one of the antennae was cut in half, she saw the upper half sway, and then tumble slowly away due to the rotation on the outer hull of the ship.

'We're under fire,' she said. She risked a look at Father Padraig.

He was standing, feet linked to the outer hull, red blood billowing from his lower chest.

This was a situation she could understand.

She took him down to the deck as carefully as speed allowed, and slapped a field dressing, vacuum, onto the hole in his suit. The blood would eventually drown him, but that was minutes in the future.

She unclipped a flasher from her belt, put it on the Jesuit's body, and set it for thirty seconds.

Then she turned and began to run on her hands along the decking, going the *other* way around the yacht.

'Where is he, James?'

'Telemetry says he's topside moving above the airlock on the pinnacle,' James said. 'He

just tried another Quantronic assault on me. But he thinks I'm a ship's System.'

'Don't have too much fun,' she said. Moving with her hands allowed her to move very fast on a hull, while never rising more than half a meter above the hull's metal plating.

'Tell me you're sure there's just one, James.'

'I'm sure, mother.'

She came around the 'underside' of the yacht, back into the direct light of the distant sun. She couldn't see movement.

Whoever it was, was good. And cautious.

And hadn't expected a Knight of the Hospital.

A brilliant flash of light illuminated the airlock sides of both ships. She kept her eyes away, and then pushed off with hands only, 'jumping' to the pinnacle from the yacht.

She hit harder than she meant to, but landed on all fours and cushioned the impact, went flat against the hull.

'Target is now on the hull of the yacht,' James said.

She raised her head, picked him out in infrared; his back to her, looking down at the priest.

Probably blind, or near to it.

She took the three seconds to change clips, ejecting the sub-sonic non-penetrators and inserting AP rounds. Then, as he turned, she aimed, and shot him in the EVA pack. It blew on the second

round, but she fired a third and a fourth to be sure. He was trying to return fire even as his EVA pack burned.

A professional, as she'd expected.

Then she went back to the yacht, moving carefully across the top of the airlocks, her sidearm trained on the downed form all the way. The EVA pack hadn't burned long; hard vacuum had that effect.

He didn't move, and she rolled him over carefully and looked at his face through the gold-tinted visor. She stiffened in surprise, and then searched his EVA suit pockets, but aside from a good quality multitool, the kind of thing soldiers and rescue personnel carried to cut themselves out of crushed metal, she found nothing.

Not even a cube.

Then she picked up the Jesuit and carried him all the way back into the yacht's ruined bridge, into the lift, down to the airlock deck, and across. When he was in the auto-doc, she got in the pilot's seat, and thought for as long as it took her to say a dozen Pater Nosters. She said them on her rosary while looking into open space, and she said three more after her hands stopped shaking.

'James?' she asked hesitantly.

'Yes, Mother?' he said.

'Any idea what came after you? I mean, what came after your twin?' she asked.

'Something very nasty,' he said.

'Nomad, I think.'

'The dead guy was Black Labs,' she

said.

‘Interesting. How do you know?’

She made her decision, and looked up at the airlock controls. ‘I’ll be right back. If I’m not back in thirty minutes, run. Take Father Padraig to the C505.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Are you in control over there?’

‘My twin is dead. The Other thinks it is victorious.’

She found that it took an effort of will to go back to the airlock, and that she was more comfortable with her sidearm in her hand. That made her feel like a coward, and she clipped it back to her thigh and cycled through.

The yacht felt haunted. What had been waiting in the system? A rogue AI? Someone’s cloned personality? Powerful malware?

She went to the cargo computer display, but it wouldn’t even light up.

‘Give me the self destruct sequence, James,’ she said.

‘My pleasure,’ James said.

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Christmas Day in Santiago.

Mass at the great cathedral, with four thousand communicants and the magnificent smoke

of the Botafumeiro. There had been a dozen knights of the Order of Santiago, and she had stood in her old brown robe among her pilgrims, and tried not to be envious of their armour and their faith.

And after, she took her pilgrims to dinner on the Rua da Raina and feasted them on seafood and good wine, and they cheered her.

She'd come to think of them as if they were her troops on Paradiso. It was a bargain with her conscience; the more time she spent with them, the harder it was to ignore them; the better she knew them, the longer she listened to their confessions, or just their complains, the more they grew on her.

Just listen.

Not always.

But often.

The Neoterran journalist who had asked her on their first day in space to coach him on how to achieve resurrection -- he had become a leader, in the mountains of Asturias; checking weather conditions, helping others with their packs, repairing a nun's shoe. The woman who had tended to 'confess' things she thought other people were doing... had patiently, endlessly, refilled canteens and water bottles for other pilgrims; and on the last two days, she'd pushed a stranger's wheelchair.

She did all the things she'd do with her troops on Paradiso; praised them when they succeeded, punished carefully when they failed. As an officer of her order had once told her, it was an officer's job to take her troops where they could succeed... and then make damn sure they succeeded.

She did that. And as she succeeded, so she found the energy to try harder. Not all pilgrims go for good reasons. She dove deeper...

She thought of the Jesuit often. She'd gotten him back to the Circular alive...

The journalist interrupted her thoughts. The restaurant itself was in a building that had to date from the Middle Ages, and man had the skinny build of people who grew up on orbitals. He got to his feet, and raised his glass. In Neoterran Spanish, he said, 'Feliz Navidad, Peregrinos! Bebamos para la capitana!'

They all drank, most of them murmuring 'La capitana' and beaming at her.

She had to smile back. It was impossible not to do so.

She was still smiling an hour later when most of them were gone, wandering off into the abundant nightlife of one of Earth's great religious tourist destinations. For her part, she had a good bottle of *Rioja* and...

Father Padraig said opposite her, among the ruins of the feast. He found an uneaten scallop in saffron, ate it, and licked his fingers.

'Merry Christmas,' he said.

She poured him a glass of wine from her bottle. 'You lived.'

'Thanks to you, Mother.'

She drank some wine. 'Sure,' she said. 'Listen, will you be offended if I say that seems a long time ago?' She glanced back at him. 'I've been on Camino for almost a month.'

He looked at her with something akin to satisfaction. 'You look better,' he said.

She shrugged. 'I found I could become good at something besides killing,' she said. 'Same skills. Different outcome.'

He drank his wine. 'This is *good*.'

She smiled. 'I have some money,' she said. 'What else would I spend it on?'

He whistled. 'How old is this?' he asked.

'Older than me,' she said. 'You didn't come all this way to drink my wine, however good, did you, Father?'

He drank more wine. 'No,' he said. 'Do you have any questions, Mother?'

She raised her glass. 'Is there a God?' she asked.

He looked at her.

'The yacht came from Bakunan,' she said. 'The guy I put down was a Nomad. Nomad gear, Nomad skills. Nomad assumption that we didn't know how to fight in zero gee.'

Father Padraig leaned back.

'So I might ask what the Archbishop of Svarheima was doing on Bakunan. Or I might not.' She shrugged, and nodded towards the last knot of her pilgrims. 'I did some good for these people. Now I'll go back to Paradiso and die. You don't need to kill me to protect the secret. I don't really care what the secret is. It's not important to me.'

Father Padraig just looked sad.

'You really are a Jesuit, aren't you,

Father?’ she asked.

‘I really am,’ he said.

‘Only,’ she said carefully, ‘Only, the guy I put down? When I rolled him over, he had your face. Your face, exactly.’

Father Padraig nodded, his whole body rocking back and forth. ‘Ahh,’ he said. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘So,,, I;m guessing that it was a sting operation, and it’s whole purpose was to lure you far from other people, and then put a doppelganger in your place. The archbishop was just bait.’

Father Padraig swirled the red wine in his glass. It was dark, almost brown, and it left a film as it passed. Almost like blood.

He put his comlog on the table between them and pushed a button, and a set of law-enforcement credentials appeared. This time, they were not for the Vatican.

This time, they were for O-12. ‘Bureau Thoth,’ he said. ‘At least, right now. Seconded from the Vatican.’

She nodded.

He smiled. ‘I’ve come to ask you to work for us,’ he said.

‘Which us?’ she asked.

‘Both,’ he said.

She nodded. ‘And if I say no?’

He shrugged. ‘Then I’d be forced to ask how James, you geist, was able to overcome a rogue AI on it’s home ground aboard the yacht.’ His smile was dazzling. ‘Whereas, if you agree to work

with me, I'm Jesuit enough to simply look away.'

'You were after James all the time,' she said.

He shook his head. 'No. I was after an archbishop who may have been a double agent. I'll never know, now. And to ignore that James played an instrumental role in saving me would be irrational. So,' he held out a new, black leather bill-fold.

She opened it to find a Golden Rose.

'Merry Christmas, Mother Agada,' he said. 'Welcome aboard.'