

Chapter 1

The Honest Pirate



There is a certain kind of person out there that simply cannot follow the set way of the universe. So many lines and channels to fall into and drift along and for what? To arrive at the same destination as everyone else? For Lorian Vance, this was a fate worse than eternal torture.

The trade lanes around Venus-Beta shimmered like braided light, a thousand vessels moving in orderly chaos. Cargo haulers, refinery barges, patrol cutters, each one following a path plotted by the Authority's central logistics net. To anyone watching from afar it might have looked harmonious, almost beautiful.

Vance saw only opportunity.

The Audacity drifted among them like a shark sniffing out a single drop of blood. Its hull bore a clean registry signature, the markings of an independent freight operator licensed under the PanTerran Nutritional Authority. That was, in a strictly legal sense, true. Vance did operate under that license. He had just never paid for it.

He sat in the pilot's chair, eyes on the soft amber readouts. His hair caught the light from the forward screens, turning almost white at the edges. The rest of him moved with unhurried confidence, the kind that came from never admitting you were doing something wrong.

A tall man, Vance stretched out his legs, crossing one over the other, his toes just touching the forward edge of the helm. This was his usual posture when piloting The Audacity, but only when it was a casual flight.

As they got closer to the freighter, however, he pulled his legs

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under the pilot's chair and leaned forward.

"Target in range," Pip announced. The android's voice was perfectly calm, pitched somewhere between exasperation and worshipful efficiency. "Freighter designation PNA-Echelon Seven, vector stable. Shall I begin handshake?"

"Gently," Vance said. "We're pretending to be respectable today."

Pip's ocular sensors flickered. "I've cross-referenced the credentials from our last respectable day. They were revoked."

"That's the beauty of recycling," Vance replied. "No one looks at the old tags. They just see the badge and salute."

Pip moved smoothly over to another panel, placed a metallic hand over a connection plate and stiffened slightly as a part of his mind took control of the communications system of their ship.

Vance waited a moment and then, silently counting down on his fingers, accurately cued Pip's next announcement. He mouthed the words as they issued from the android.

"All systems ready. All credentials ready. Everything is a go."

Behind him, Juno emerged from the maintenance shaft, covered in carbon dust and irritation. "If anyone salutes this ship, they need new eyes," he muttered.

The stocky Haxian engineer dropped into a seat and began tapping commands into a secondary console. He rubbed a gritty hand over his red beard and said, "Are we running a clean copy or a dirty one?"

"Clean," said Vance. "Let's not scare them before dinner."

Juno continued tapping away at the console with his thick fingers.

It always amazed Vance how good Juno was with intricate work like typing, fixing small devices and working in tiny panels. There were places his fingers simply wouldn't fit, and yet somehow...

Almost as tall as Vance himself, Juno's shoulders were at least twice as wide, and his arms were as thick as Vance's legs. For all the man's elegance in handling intricate work, he could bend a steel rod in half.

"Juno?"

"Yes, Captain?"

“Was your father an erabus?”

“What the hell is an erabus?”

“Come on, you know what an erabus is. You shot one that was about to sweep me off my feet, and not in a good way.”

“Oh, yes, an erabus. You mean that huge, hairy beast that was eating all the livestock over on Haran Primus?”

“The very same.”

“Then, to answer your question: no. My father was not an erabus. He was a regular man like you and me.”

“I doubt that he was regular.”

“I’m going to choose not to take that as an insult to my heritage.”

In contrast, Vance himself was lean and muscled, but not thick. His face was clean-shaven, giving him a boyish charm that was only enhanced by the mischievous twinkle that so often played across his eyes.

Throughout his short but lively twenty five years, Vance had been plagued by an inexplicable procession of women who seemed to be interested in him. They would tell him it was his white-blond hair, or his grey eyes, or some other such nonsense. One woman even called him “irresistibly charming.”

Vance caught a glimpse of his reflection in the forward glass of the ship, and unsurprisingly he only saw Lorian Vance. As Juno had so eloquently put it, “a regular man.”

Adventurous, yes. Brash, absolutely. But otherwise, just a regular man.

He swiveled his chair toward Juno and leaned forward.

“Juno.”

Juno sighed.

“Yes, Vance. What is it?”

“Was your mother an erabus?”

Juno pulled a small wrench from his belt and tossed it at Vance’s head. Catching it, Vance stood and walked over to him. Proffering it to the large man, he gave him his most winning smile.

It was so winning because it was always so genuine.

“I’ve met your mother, Juno. She’s a lovely woman. I saw no

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evidence of her being a big, hairy beast.”

Cassian, the ship’s cook and self-appointed holy man, chose that moment to drift in. His white robes were tucked loosely into a flight harness, and he was holding a steaming mug of something that could only legally be called coffee.

He was a little older than Vance and Juno, but not by much. Certainly not by enough years to treat them as his long lost sons, which he often did. He also had never specified which religion or god he followed, describing himself only as “spiritual”.

“Bless this enterprise,” he said solemnly, “and deliver us from paperwork.”

“That’s my line,” Vance said.

“No, Captain,” Cassian replied with mock offence. “Your line is usually, ‘Get us out of here before they notice.’”

Vance gave a short laugh and took the cup from Cassian.

The coffee and the banter between the crew members helped keep nerves down. It was almost standard operating procedure by this point.

On the main screen, the freighter Echelon Seven loomed closer, an immense slab of industrial elegance, half a kilometer long and filled to bursting with mineral-rich nutrient gel bound for the inner worlds. Food for the empire’s bureaucrats, soldiers, and citizens. The kind of cargo that never went missing, except when someone like Vance happened by.

Pip handled the comms flawlessly, as usual. “Docking request accepted,” he reported. “They’ve authorized us for compartment G-12. They think we’re a sanitation tender.”

“Then let’s clean them out,” Vance murmured.

Walking back to the pilot’s chair, he sat down and took control of The Audacity.

He guided them in with feather-light precision. The freighter grew larger and larger as they moved toward the docking station at compartment G-12. Moving slowly along the side of the freighter, Vance could see scrapes, burns and other marks on the surface of the hull which acted as a sort of ship’s log for its travel through space.

After a few minutes, Vance guided them through an opening in

the side of the freighter marked with an illuminated lamp that was blinking green. He pulled the Audacity in and set her down on the docking platform.

Magnetic clamps locked, pressure seals hissed, and for a moment everything was still. Beyond the airlock lay the universe's most lucrative mistake.

Over the last couple millennia of expansion, mankind's supply line was stretched to a breaking point.

The first colonies beyond Terra had been founded with the optimistic assumption that wherever people could breathe, they could eventually grow something to eat. It was an assumption that killed a great many optimists. Some worlds had soil that poisoned anything planted in it. Others had abundant plant life that provided little a human body could use. Even on the planets where Terran crops survived, the harvests were often missing essential minerals, proteins or microbial cultures. A person could eat until their stomach hurt and still slowly starve.

Space presented an even simpler problem. Stations, ships and orbital settlements had no soil at all, and hydroponic systems required water, power, seed stock, fertiliser and a constant supply of replacement parts. A single failed shipment could leave thousands of people measuring their remaining lives in meals. During the worst years of the expansion, entire colonies were abandoned after crop failures, while others collapsed into riots over cargo that never arrived.

The PanTerran Nutritional Authority had begun as an emergency organisation tasked with preventing that from happening. It coordinated harvests between planets, standardised agricultural equipment and developed nutrient gel from crops, algae, proteins and mineral compounds gathered across dozens of worlds. The gel was cheap to transport, difficult to spoil and complete enough to keep a person alive almost indefinitely. It did not taste particularly good, but your options were bland food or death. Most people weren't so keen on the "or death" option, so they sucked down the gel with enthusiasm.

At first, the PNA merely supplied food where local agriculture failed. Then it began certifying seed stock, licensing synthesis

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units and regulating the compounds used in agricultural domes. Worlds that grew their own crops still depended on Authority fertilisers, microbial cultures and stabilisers to make those crops safe and nutritious. Independent farmers found themselves competing against subsidised gel while paying the PNA for permission to grow anything that might threaten a planetary ecosystem. One generation later, most colonies had stopped trying.

By Vance's time, the Authority controlled the farms, the formulas, the dispensers and most of the ships that moved food between them. It had never conquered a planet or marched an army through a capital. It had simply made itself useful, then necessary, and finally unavoidable.

Which was why a freighter full of nutrient gel was worth more than anything else in the known universe, and why Lorian Vance was about to steal as much of it as he could carry.



Inside the freighter's cargo deck, the air was heavy with disinfectant and metallic tang. Rows of sealed canisters sat upright in pallets, each labelled with nutrient specifications and trace element codes. Vance moved between them like a connoisseur choosing wine.

Juno and Pip followed with anti-grav sleds, while Cassian stood watch at the hatch, muttering what might have been a prayer or a recipe.

"Two pallets from this row, three from the next," Vance said quietly. "Make it look like they just miscounted."

Pip's hands worked with mechanical grace. "Ethical theft is still theft, Captain."

"Ethical?" Juno snorted. "We're redistributing excess. That's economics."

Cassian smiled faintly. "The scriptures do warn against gluttony."

"Exactly," said Vance. "We're helping the Authority stay lean and pious."

They moved quickly but without panic. Every sound seemed amplified, the hum of the sleds, the soft click of magnetic locks

disengaging, the faint vibration underfoot that told them the ship's reactor was alive and listening. Yet no alarms sounded. And their welcoming party hadn't arrived yet.

They were always slow on these Authority vessels.

When they were done, five pallets floated in the transfer bay, tagged with falsified delivery codes that would pass inspection anywhere short of the Core Worlds. Vance checked his chrono. "Eight minutes ahead of schedule. I think that's a personal record."

"Perhaps we'll win an award at the next performance review," Pip said.

The android's sarcasm had evolved over time, an unintended side effect of exposure to humans. Vance liked to think of it as character development.

Back aboard *The Audacity*, the crew settled into the familiar rhythm of escape. Juno sealed the cargo hold, Cassian plotted a course to a neutral waypoint, and Pip erased the docking logs with surgical precision.

There were still no Authority staff anywhere to be seen, and Vance was just fine with that.

"Detach in three... two..." Pip said.

The clamps released. The freighter drifted away on its programmed path, never realising it was lighter than before.

Vance exhaled. "And that, gentlemen, and synthetic gentleman, is how you make an honest living in dishonest times."

Cassian raised his mug again. "To piracy with paperwork."

"To piracy with purpose," Vance corrected, almost automatically.



Hours later, *The Audacity* slipped through the outer lanes toward a rendezvous point hidden in the shadow of a gas giant. The stars here were fewer and dimmer, as if the universe itself respected smugglers' privacy.

Juno sat cross-legged against a wall in the mess room. He had a small device in his hands that would undoubtedly be in pieces on the floor within a few minutes.

"One day," he said, "we should steal something easy. Like art."

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Or oxygen.”

“We tried oxygen,” Pip reminded him. “You called it ‘History’s Most Underwhelming Heist.’”

Cassian laughed from the galley.

“There are simpler sins than nutrient gel theft, friends. But none that pay quite so well.”

Vance leaned in the doorway, arms folded. “Speaking of pay, our buyer’s expecting delivery by morning. After that, we take a week off. I’m thinking sunlight, air you can breathe, food that doesn’t glow.”

Juno grunted. “Dreamer.”

“Occupational hazard.”

The conversation drifted toward silence, leaving them all in contemplative thought.

Nothing melancholy, just being there comfortably.

After a few minutes, Vance pushed off from the doorway and drifted toward the bridge. Outside, the stars stretched into silver lines as the drive engaged. Venus-Beta faded behind them, swallowed by distance.



When dawn came to their destination, a mining outpost carved into a moon of amber ice, the transaction was as routine as any trade between liars could be.

They’d landed in the ore loading bays at the back of the outpost, mainly because these bays were no longer used and provided a great place to offload illicit cargo without being in full view of curious eyes.

Pip and Juno unloaded the canisters out into the middle of an open area between piles of rubble. The plating on the loading bay itself was a little warped and hadn’t been cleaned of scorch marks in a very long time.

This place looked absolutely derelict.

After a few minutes, Vance heard footsteps coming from towards the domes of the main compound, which sat in the distance like dead jellyfish on a beach.

The footsteps turned out to belong to their client, a Parlese man named Grimlick. He was thick-limbed and well into his middle

years, with wings of grey at his temples that gave him an almost distinguished look that was forcibly removed from Vance's impression of him as soon as he opened his mouth.

"Ew long av you hadsss deesss crets?" he said in a thick Parlese accent.

His skin was a light blue colour, almost like a distant moon, and his eyes were so sunken into his head that they added to the effect by placing craters on the surface.

While the eyes weren't a typical feature of the Parlese, the skin tone was. Vance had never been there, but from what he'd heard the Parlese planet's sun was a red dwarf, emitting mostly ultraviolet and red light. Apparently, this caused them to evolve a pigment in their skin that absorbed mostly red light, reflecting blue light and giving them their signature hue.

Grimlick walked back and forth inspecting the canisters.

"We've had them for less than twelve hours."

"Ye's fast pirates," he said.

Vance smiled.

"We're no pirates. We're simply couriers for the omnipotent PNA who have generously sold you this cargo at a wonderfully low price."

The blue man laughed, although Vance wasn't sure Grimlick understood what had just been said. Vance himself wasn't sure he had understood the man fully in the first place.

Licking his fingers, Grimlick snapped them together rapidly in a *ratatata* rhythm.

Three other Parlese men appeared from behind a pile of rocks near The Audacity and came trotting over.

Grimlick spoke gruffly to them and seemed to be asking them how they intended to transport the canisters without anti-grav sleds. Realising their mistake, the three men ran off towards the compound.

"Well, I don't need to wait for them. Would you mind sorting out the payment?"

Grimlick seemed to understand this just fine, lifting his wrist display and transferring the credits.

All parties satisfied, Vance and his crew boarded their vessel

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once more.

Within an hour The Audacity was airborne again, heading back toward the shipping lanes. The crew dispersed to their stations, already talking about how they'd spend their shares. Juno wanted new tools, Cassian wanted new beans for his brewing ritual, and Pip requested additional memory for "self-diagnostic humour analysis."

Vance promised them all he'd think about it.

He stood alone on the bridge for a long moment after the others had gone. The moon's pale amber light spilled across his face, softening his already youthful features.

This was life. This was *living*.

He adjusted the throttle slightly, feeling the familiar tremor of power beneath his hands. The ship responded like a living thing, loyal yet untamed. For a moment he let himself enjoy it, the feeling of freedom, the quiet satisfaction of work well done.

"Course laid in," Pip said from behind him. Vance hadn't heard him come in and wondered how the android, who was mostly metal, managed to sneak around so effectively.

"Good. Let's go home."

"Define 'home,' Captain."

Vance smiled faintly. "Anywhere they haven't outlawed breakfast."

The stars tilted as The Audacity swung toward open space. The freighter job was already fading into memory, another line in the ledger of half-legal trades that kept them flying.

"How about the Cocky Pilot on Port Kestris?"

"Sounds good to me."

Vance leaned back in his chair as the engines purred, eyes on the endless scatter of light ahead. Out here, between worlds, everything seemed simple. He could almost believe it would stay that way forever.