

*Sail on, sail on, by star and sun.
We ride through the black with a belly full of rum.*

*A purse of coin for every hand.
We earn our keep for every man.*

*And if there's a man who won't abide,
A visit to the black will be his prize.*

Sail on, sail on, sail on.

The crew had been in space approaching four weeks now and the signs of desperation were beginning to show. The fresh provisions were but a fond memory now, and they were left with only ration cans of undescribed meats and over-boiled vegetables. The alcohol was gone as well and if there was one thing worse than a hungry crew of pirates, it was a sober crew. Hungry voyages like these were starting to happen more often but Captain Keele had promised them there was a ship en route, full of cargo to plunder. His sources were, in his own words, guaranteed.

And yet the last four drop points had found nothing but dust and debris from raids gone by. The next destination would be the last opportunity the Crimson Hound would have before returning to port empty-handed. There was a hush of anticipation on the bridge as the ship emerged from hyperspace and dropped sail at their destination. Keele called for a scan of the region. He shared a private, nervous look with his helmsman, Bell, as a crewman gave word.

"Three ships, bearing three three zero mark three five, 900 kilometres heading away, Captain."

The captain gave a roar of excitement. *"I told you boys. We'll have our holds full within the hour."*

The crew cheered in reply. Their silent prayers had been answered. It was barely over the din that Keele heard the words from the crewman on the scanner. *Gunships. Commonwealth.* The crew fell frightfully silent. The young sailor repeated himself.

"It's some kind of cargo freighter under guard by two Commonwealth gunships. Currently on course towards the nearest base."

The Hound was not a meek boat. Years of refits and modifications had created a ship that was both brutal and beautiful at the same time. In a one-to-one fight against a Commonwealth gunship, with a crew as good as she had, she'd stand an even chance. But against two she would be torn to shreds in a moment.

Bell broke the silence as death seemingly waited for them all on the screen ahead. *"Have we been scanned?"*

"No sir." Confirmed the crewman. There were better eyes on the Hound than any fleet boat would have.

Bell turned to the captain, hoping to sway him into some common sense. *"Orders, sir?"*

Unfortunately the grizzled old man had gone too long without a half-decent prize. This wouldn't be the first time the Hound would have to arrive home empty. Nor the second, nor the third. Desperation was taking over.

"Full power to engines. We go in fast. Prepare forward cannons and have all available hands ready to reinforce the hull."

There were nervous looks all around as the captain just stared intently at the faint dots they were advancing towards. The captain had given his orders but Bell felt the need to speak up.

"Captain-"

Keele turned to him with a scowl preempting the young man's defiance. But Bell had something else to offer. Before he could start to argue, Bell came closer to the captain and whispered privately.

"Remember the Agamemnon?"

The old man's growl turned around into a smile that then grew into a violent laugh. He got onto the intercom to the quartermaster. *"Mr. Toms, we're raising the sails! Get your gunners ready and tell them to steady their stomachs!"*

The entire crew was in motion now. It was instinct for them. All the preparations went without questions or instructions, like a well oiled machine, preparing the hound for her graceful dance. While the gunships may have the weapon strength in their favour, they were left travelling in normal space through the system while they towed the derelict freighter. The Crimson Hound, however, was free to outmanoeuvre them in the currents of the hyperspace. As her wings unfolded from her body the delicate nature of those amber sails unfurling almost disguised her deadliness as a bubble of space warped around her and she disappeared into the aether.

Navigating hyperspace accurately was considered next to impossible, with a good chart most could arrive within a hundred kilometres. Now they planned to emerge within a few hundred metres. And yet the crew were not as unnerved as many would be, as they had a helmsman like Bell, a wayfarer's son, with the sight of the hyperspace in his blood. The Crimson Hound glided softly through the effervescent eddies, gently, stalking a target that could not be seen by anyone, except Bell. The young man stared into the swirling currents, gently guiding them through. The crew, ever-faithful to Bell, waited patiently.

"Ready the starboard cannons, danger close." He said, his voice quietly lost in concentration.

The cry of the orders echoed down the decks.

As the gunships towed their precious cargo back to base the Crimson Hound emerged in all her glory right on top of them, her hull glistening in the crashing wave of iridescent eddies from the void. Neither ship had time to raise the alarm or any defense before the first volley of cannon fire hit the port-side ship. The explosions tore through it instantly, leaving nothing but a broken wreck that was slowly drifting away, aflame. The Hound wasted no time and had risen up, rolling like an evading bird over the downed gunship and freighter, and coming to rest on the starboard side of the remaining opponent with its port cannons ready.

But the gunships were not crewed by simpletons and those few seconds had been enough time to make ready. Their hull had polarised and deflected most of the shots away. The gunship's cannon ports began to open themselves. As their cannonfire started the Hound had already reversed engines to pull in behind the remaining two ships. A couple of knocks rocked the hull but she'd taken worse. Her best chance now was at the stern. Gunships had all their weaponry at the front, like the massive jaws of a rabid dog. And there was one more trick the Hound had ready.

As she lined up with the gunship's engines she fired, a prolonged beam of blue light struck the vessel and electricity arced around an explosion from the gunship's exhaust. The electromagnetic pulse had overloaded their engines and disabled their main power. Lights faded on the craft and they were left drifting aimlessly alongside the freighter. Cheers were abound throughout the Hound as she sped forward again, launching a tow cable to the bow of the freighter and setting off with them to a safe distance away. With one final flourish a shot came from the Wave's stern. The flame of a rocket streaked towards the darkened gunship and with a bright, silent flash they were gone.

Once they had moved themselves to a safe position the crew prepared themselves to board. There was finally excitement aboard that had been missing for weeks. The crew were singing and joking and looking forward to finally getting their hands on a decent cargo. It would have to be good, they all reckoned, what with two gunships as escorts. The captain and the head crew would go first. Keele, Bell, and Mr. Toms, plus the master gunner, Carter, the shipwright, Nadia, and the sawbones, Rigel, with some extra gunners in tow just in case some Commonwealth guards had been left who had more honour than sense. The two ships had been brought into position and boarding was ready to begin.

The air was stale, maybe even starting to get as ripe as it was on the Hound after a month in the black. The main deck was as you would find on a standard cargo freighter, only minus any crew. Odds and ends lay scattered about as if abandoned. Keele showed no concern as to what might have happened and marched onwards. The further they explored the ship, deck by deck, the stranger it seemed. All systems appeared to be working. There were no faults or damage. And yet it was clear the crew had left in a hurry. Food supplies and medicines had been grabbed, but a lot of the personal items had just been left behind. It wasn't until they all reached the cargo decks that it started to make sense.

It had been a caravan taking settlers and supplies to a new life and homestead, only to become the property of the Commonwealth instead. The space of the cargo room was no more than 200 square metres and yet a dozen families and whatever they could carry had been thrown inside and locked away. There probably wasn't enough crew on the gunships to man the freighter so they had just shut it down and dragged it away. Their carriage and home had now become their travelling jail. They cowered seeing the menacing, armed men in front of them now.

The captain stowed his pistol and strode forward. "Well now..." Barely a look fell on the people in front as he eyed the state of the possessions around him. "I'd say we've got ourselves a good haul. Let's load it up."

There was the unmistakable ***cl-cl-click*** of a cocking gun at the back of his head. He turned, without concern, to see Bell holding his pistol squarely not three inches from between his eyes. The rest of the crew drew their pistols on Bell almost instantly.

"So it's mutiny then." Declared Keele.

"We don't rob civilians, Captain, and we sure as hell don't take food from the mouths of starving babes." Bell spoke without hesitation in his voice, his aim not wavering a fraction.

"Maybe you haven't seen the stores in our hold lately, Bell, but we've got plenty of empty bellies of our own to worry about."

Bell ignored him and spoke to the crew. *“What say you, Mr. Tims? Can you look these people in the eye while you take everything they own? Nadia? Sleep soundly enough with their food in your stomach tonight?”*

Keele spoke louder, trying to regain control. *“And what will you have us do then, Bell?”*

There was a pause, less out of hesitation and more clarification in Bell’s own mind. *“I call a vote. I call to remove the captain from his post for failure in his duty and I elect myself to replace him.”*

“You insolent-” Keele began before the pair of them began shouting at each other. Mr. Toms managed to quieten them down again.

Keele laughed. *“I’ve looked after the Hound for five years now. Took in all of you when you needed it. And if you think they’ll turn coat for a **wafer** like you.”*

The eyes of the others started to shift at hearing the slur that Keele had never dared to say before. But Bell held his composure.

“They won’t be doing this for me, Keele. It was never about me and it was never about you. You say you’ve looked after this crew but how many jobs have we had in the last year? How long have we been surviving job to job? You want them to take this cargo now and maybe they’ll live it down, but what about when things get harder? Will they follow you when you tell them to hunt down civilians like the raiders on the outskirts?”

Slowly, but surely, each of their guns began to drop away from Bell. The vote had been cast in all but words. Bell stayed fixed on Keele who still would not stand down. The old man had gone red in the face with anger at the betrayal.

*“I won’t let you get away with this, Bell. This is **MY** ship. **MY** crew.”*

“And you can leave her at the end of a dock or at the end of this barrel. Your choice.”

In the captain’s quarters, Mr. Toms arrived for a meeting with Bell once Nadia had completed the work to get the freighter back underway. There wasn’t much that needed doing to get her running again and the settlers were grateful enough to help restock the Hound’s food and drink supplies, plus a few extra rewards to get them back to port comfortably. Even without the promised haul the spirits of the crew were

raised again with having fresh food and alcohol once more. Mr. Toms had brought with him the official vote. *38 crew. 38 votes for Bell.* It would make the upcoming meeting easier.

The Hound broke free from hyperspace in sight of Port Arcadia, which had become the crew's refuge for many years, either with this crew or others. Arcadia was just a small lunar colony but it was one of the first "free" ports, neither controlled by the Commonwealth or the Outer Perseus Company, and by sheer luck and spite of authority over a dozen pirate crews allied themselves to form this safe haven. It was a pirate's paradise. But there was a code to be followed and, in the Hound's case, there were debts to be paid.

The governess of Arcadia was an old pirate named Maggie. She had gone by the name Mad Maggie back in the day but her mad days were behind her, so she told everyone. She did not seem surprised when Bell showed up at her door instead of Keele. Word travels fast, especially for the governess, and she invited Bell to sit down. She poured a measure of rum for them both as a courtesy and they toasted the Hound's safe return. She lit herself a cigarette and, with a long drag, started the ball rolling.

"So you've put an end to Keele, eh?"

"It's not that simple, Maggie, the crew had their vote."

She gestured to him to be quiet while she took another long breath of smoke. *"Yes, or no, Bell?"*

He nodded proudly. He knew he'd made the right decision and she had no time for games. Maggie smiled.

*"About damn time. That fucker was getting to be a waste of space. The Hound'll do well under you, **Captain Bell**, I'm sure."*

They toasted again. Then the talk fell to money. Ship and crew had dues to pay to Arcadia. Safe harbour was not cheap. Not to mention half a dozen other debts Keele had amassed from failed endeavours. Bell offered to make even in another way and pulled a damaged computer module from his bag.

"Two gunships in the sector are out of the way thanks to the Hound, and, on our way back, I thought to pick up this."

The module was a memory core, specifically it held the Commonwealth patrol routes for that sector for the next two weeks. Valuable intelligence for ships looking to stay off the radar.

"You're a smart boy, Bell. Consider us square. For now." A handshake sealed the deal, and that was that.

Bell left the governess' office as Captain of the Scarlet Hound. In the tavern below his crew were already celebrating. It was hard to believe where this voyage had taken them all. What they had done. What they had nearly done. But those were thoughts for another time. Bell cheered from the balcony as his crew held their tankards high and sang loudly. Tonight was a night to enjoy and tomorrow would be a brand new adventure.