

Far Out, Baby

Book 1 of The Rogue Trader series

Written by John Hallam

© John Hallam March 2013

1. Oberon

Ellis Hunt felt a faint shudder run through the ship and cast an anxious glance at his panel, as warning sirens suddenly blared out. His orbit was starting to decay and the ship was starting to spin! While Oberon, the gas giant he was orbiting, appeared to remain the same his instruments told a different story. He quickly fed power to engines 2 and 4. Instead of the surge of power he expected his progress into the gravity well only slowed!

"Damn", and he fed more power to the engines; still no reaction. A glance at his panel showed he had about 10 minutes before his descent became un-recoverable and he would die, sucked into the maelstrom of gases below.

Instruments showed that one of the storage tanks was losing pressure. He toggled external monitors and watched the coupling to storage tank 2 stream gases into the thin atmosphere surrounding the ship. The forces from the escaping gases were making his flight eccentric and pulling him down into the gravity well. Sweat beaded his brow and he knew he was in serious trouble - the terminal sort! His only chance was to jettison the storage tank to stabilize the ship. He slid over to the secondary instrument panel and tripped the safety interlocks on tank 2, setting off another warning siren and more flashing lights. Override, quick, press the 'Uncouple' for tank 2. A quick glance at the aft monitor, no change. Back to the main panel, full power on engine 2 only and he felt a tremor run through the ship and watched as the coupling to tank 2 started to glow. A dull roaring grew in strength and his feet felt a vibration through the floor. He quickly pulled over his safety harness, clipped in and hit the power switch for engine 3, full power. Spinning, now, the force causing his chair to compensate wildly, then the roar became a scream and he groaned as he felt himself slip into unconsciousness.

2. Awakening

Hunt groaned and forced open his eyes. The dark of space surrounded him, with stars spinning, not slowly.

"Wow, I made it!", he said in wonder. His head ached and the spinning stars were hurting his eyes. The console clock showed that he'd been out for over 6 hours and he realised that while he'd been unconscious his body had decided to catch up on some much needed sleep. Apart from the hum of the recycling system, ever present, there was little noise in the cabin. A few lights slowly blinked and he saw that he was out of fuel on engines 2 and 3, while nav showed him to be a long way away from any familiar object in the system.

On the plus side, no current emergencies, nothing demanding his attention, way out in the middle of nowhere. "Hell", he said, "it could be worse, I could be dead! Best get something to eat and see what I've got to deal with".

He brought a pre-pack and drink back to the console and sat to worry over what he'd got to work with. He was on the very edge of the system, about 1 light out, the planets barely visible from here. Belgar, the system sun, was a distant point of light. His nav-com showed him to be way out on the fringes, his position relative to the system distant and out of the normal plane. Spinning like a corkscrew, enough to make him regret his meal, and moving at a good velocity. 2 fuel tanks empty, 2 three-quarters full. On the plus side he was still alive, had enough food, water and air to last him a few weeks, and, to cap it all, he wouldn't have enough fuel to get back!

"Right, one problem at a time", he said.

Even though he could ill afford the fuel he needed to stabilise the ship before moving on to the next problem. It took him some time, and some valuable fuel, but he eventually managed to stabilise the erratic spin. His cadet pilot training helped immensely, he doubted he'd have had the skills otherwise. A pity he hadn't completed the training, he thought once again, ruefully, he wouldn't be stuck out here grafting his life away for Mining Corp.

"No point in dwelling over my mistakes", he thought, "I should have made better choices at the time".

Now that he had some degree of control he took stock of his options. He was still heading out-system faster than he wanted, so he had no choice but to use valuable fuel to turn the ship around, to re-orient it back towards the Belgar system. The problem was, his fuel was getting lower and he would be struggling, now, to make it back anywhere near to the system. Also, the longer he waited, the worse it got!

"One more step, my lad", he muttered.

His skills on nav-com were all down to his aborted cadet training as well, so he took stock of his reduced mass and balance and plotted a course for nav-com to loop around over the next few thousand clicks and locate the gas giant he'd been expelled from. He checked external monitors and found no obvious problems with the ship, then transferred his calculations to op-com, instructing the computer to carry out the tasks, lock on to Oberon, then wait for further instructions. He was going to sleep, he was totally bushed. The med-kit had pain killers for his throbbing head and something to help him sleep, so he struggled of to bed and collapsed gratefully on to it.

He awoke to the pre-set op-com alarm. He'd managed 4 hours sleep and felt well. He felt even better when he'd showered, the sonic wash massaging his skin and relaxing him. He was alive, at least, and it wasn't in his nature to be downbeat for long.

"Let's see where I am now", he said to his usual audience, himself. He made his way, hot drink in hand, to the op-com chair. Even though the scoop-ships were designed for more than 1 crew the pilots for Mining Corps were expected to manage single-handed, cutting down on 'unnecessary costs'. They were all 'in the same boat', literally, with debts or favours to pay off, or wanting the solitary life, but at least they earned half-decent money. Even so, working an average of 4 days on, straight through, and 2 days off meant there was little time for recreation.

"Mmm, pointing the right way, anyway", he muttered, "but a lo-o-ng way out. I'll check through the journey log, make sure there's no gremlins waiting to spring more surprises".

He set nav-com to fast-forward the last 4 hours on a split-screen, showing 3 rear ship views and 1 forward view.

He sat for the best part of 10 minutes checking the integrity of the 4 engines, couplings, remaining storage tank, occasionally glancing at the forward screen and elapsed time display. He was almost to the end of the playback when something caught his eye. A shadow had moved across the forward view screen and he caught it just as it left the screen. He thought a moment.

"Mmm, nothing else to do", and he replayed the last 5 minutes. Then slowed it down and replayed it again. Something dark was definitely there, moving across his screen as the ship swung around on its recovery flight. It wasn't a natural gap in the constellations and there shouldn't be anything there.

He considered his options once again, with this new factor.

"Can't get back in-system with my remaining fuel, anyway, so may as well have a look".

He checked his position of the anomaly against his current position, it wasn't too far away by stellar standards. Instead of arcing around again, as his forward speed had dropped off, he slowed and stopped forward motion, then used his lateral thrusters to rotate the ship until nav-com mirrored the previous heading. He engaged one engine on slow forward checking the 'blob' vector readings against his current position. 20 minutes later and the same dark image crept slowly across his view screen.

"What the heck!", as he slowed the ship even further, then re-centred the shadow. Just a dark blob, stars all around it, no stars showing through.

"Not a dust doud, then", he muttered.

He pinged radar at it, nothing, no echo, although by his nav readings he was within a few hundred kliks of it. So, he had to find it on visual.

"Only one thing for it", he mused, and engaged a gentle forward speed, sitting back to observe.

15 minutes later and the image started to drift off-screen, so he re-centred. Another 5 minutes

and, again, it slowly started to drift off-screen, so he stopped forward motion.

He sat pondering and again the object wandered off-screen. Checking he was at full stop himself he reached a conclusion.

"If I'm not moving either that is, or it's moving me!".

Still no echo on radar and the object was the same dark blob, visible only by the fact that it left a hole in the star field behind it. If the display of stars had been more sparse he would never have seen it, but luckily the Mingla galaxy was a superbly bright sprawl of stars across half the field of vision.

He checked nav readings, running correlations and comparisons between the here and there. Again, a "Mmm" came from his pursed lips, "Let's see how close I can get", engaged a slow forward, still on the one engine, while using thrusters to keep the blob centred. A few minutes of this and he couldn't keep it centred, it insisted on floating off. His attempts at correction were becoming more erratic so he backed off a bit, stopped engines and left the blob centred.

It was a lot, lot bigger than his ship. His ship was only 70-ish metres long, made up of engines at the rear, gas storage containers and fuel tanks, and the gravity wheel, incorporating living quarters and control centre.

He guessed that he wasn't too far away, now, within a few clicks. His suit and thruster would get him that far, and back. He couldn't get any closer with the ship and, above all, he didn't have anything better to do at the moment. And he hated leaving a puzzle unsolved!

There was no point in sending out any messages, they'd take too long to reach anywhere civilised enough to help him. He suited up in the storage airlock access and checked his equipment. Spare thruster packs, flexi-rope, a few radio/flash beacons, all he'd ever used in the odd eva repair he'd had to undertake in the last 2 years. On a thought he slipped his mini-com into one of his suit pockets; no-one would ever believe him if he found something and didn't have proof!

"Well, no point in hanging around", he said, and cycled through the airlock. As he made his way outside he tripped a ring of beacons around the storage entrance bay, thinking, "It wouldn't do for me to get lost and not find my way back!".

3. Discoveries

He activated his recorders, visual and audible, and set off towards the Blob.

His mind, as it often did in the quiet times between jobs, flashed back unnervingly to his disgrace, his so-called friends, the drink, the drugs, the fight which had left him in disgrace, court-martialled out of the Sharm System Force; the 'cadet with potential' bumped back into civilian life. If not for his skills as a pilot and navigator he would be at the bottom of the scrap heap, probably hacking rock in one of the mines; or maybe even dead, he'd been that low at one point. Even so, he'd had to make sacrifices and tie himself to Mining Corps on a 4 year lease on his ship. He still had 2 years to do before he had any hope of buying a share in a 'tub', or keeping his lease on his gas-scoop. He shrugged, "All history, now".

As he approached The Blob his helmet light picked up a layer of dust and pebbles, stretching away into the distance on either side. It seemed to be his day for "Mmm's" and he described it on his recorder before pressing on. As he reached the furthest patch of dust, he felt a slight resistance, but was able to push on through the barrier. He turned and looked back towards the ship and could just make out the flashing beacons, so he dropped another one where he was and set it flashing.

The Blob loomed in front of him, getting much, much larger as he sped towards it. He slowed as he started to make out some indistinct details, seeming angular lines and dark, shadowy spaces where even starlight didn't reach. A few minutes later and he made out a much darker patch, seemingly rectangular in shape. He veered towards it, his light just managing to reveal an opening descending into the depths, surely not natural!

"In for a penny", he muttered, and passed through into total, inky blackness. He paused to take stock, his light revealing little in the darkness. Gradually, though, after a short time, the darkness began to lift, turning first to a dark grey, then a lighter grey, and he began to make out indistinct shapes in the dim light. He realised that the cavern like space was becoming lighter, and he began a slow drift towards the floor 6 metres below, where he eventually settled. The light was now a dull yellow and the shapes in the distance were a little clearer.

"Wow", he said, "It's a ship, or a habitat!", he said to himself, and suddenly became anxious, as his interest in the blob now became a fear of the unknown. 'Artificial' meant life, and life meant threat. But there was no movement, nothing happening now that the light had stabilised; no background noise just complete silence in his pick-ups.

He checked his suit status and found he had a little time to explore, but he wanted to leave a margin of safety to get back - he really didn't want to be pushed for time, air or fuel! He looked to the nearest shadowy shape, squatting about 60 metres away and decided to hop across to investigate. He dropped a beacon and jet-frogged across in a series of leaps, rapidly covering the ground. He stopped as the shape loomed above him and took a deep breath.

"Good Lord", he breathed, "it's a ship!".

And ship it was; long, much longer than his scoop ship, high at the outward end, tapering slowly far to his right. He could easily see forwards to where it expanded to a bulbous front so he jetted down its' length, a good length, to where it straked out at the back to about half as wide again.

As a ships pilot, where size matters, prestige comes with how big your ship is, and this was easily twice as long as his own Corporation vessel. He moved around the stern, again, twice the size as his own and saw that he had been on one side of a crescent shaped ship, the bayed front and other arm sweeping away in front and to the side of him, with connecting 'corridors' across the arms.

"Incredible", he breathed. It was totally different to his own ships design, like no other he'd seen, similar lines to the military class of ship he'd trained on but not so harsh, the lines softer and more aesthetic - designed to please the eye rather than fit-for-purpose.

His alarm beeped - time to be heading back. He was now on the opposite side of the ship to where he'd first approached so he jetted around the second arm and peered through the dim yellow light into the distance. He shivered, his eyes widening; he could just about make out another ship! Now his heart really hammered in his chest. That would give him something to think about, and he dropped a beacon as he headed back.

The journey back was a repeat of the journey out. Although his brain was buzzing with excitement and wonder he did take time to notice that, when he approached the ring of dust this time he was gently pulled towards it before being ejected past the dust. "Mmm". He left

the beacons behind him, inactive, for when he returned.

4. A Toe in the Water.

Back in his cabin he sat for a long time thinking about what he'd seen and all of the implications, and he grew more sober. One thing was clear to him, he'd reverted to every boys childhood desire: "I want one!", but how to get one was another matter entirely.

His family were merchants, localised rather than between systems, and his opportunity to join the SSF cadets had only come about because of a tragedy - his parents had been killed in an explosive de-compression aboard Sharm Station. He'd thought it the perfect opportunity to escape the future he'd had planned for him but, when he looked back, as he often did, he could see that he'd led a comfortable life up to the death of his parents. At 16 he had been far too young and unprepared for the change in lifestyle that joining the SSF entailed. But he had never lost his love of flying, particularly throughout the system. He had held a vision, once, of being able to pilot bigger ships between systems, through the Jump Gates, to other human worlds and systems, but that dream seemed long gone. "Ah, well", he shrugged.

Now, though, he had some decisions to make and actions to take. He considered what he knew: a giant of a space vessel, probably a transport, containing some very space-worthy looking craft; possibly a gravity generator, as he'd settled to the floor in the huge hanger; and maybe a force-field, that had kept his ship and system accretion out for heavens knew how long. All pointing to astounding new technology not available on any human worlds in any of the few Confederation of Space systems. As no other sentient races had been discovered, it pretty much covered the entire human sphere.

On the debit side, he needed to get back to the here-and now. He needed to check his ships integrity; he hadn't enough fuel to get back in-system; if he had the fuel the explosive acceleration of his flight had propelled him far out of the system, so getting back by normal means was out of the question. He had some ideas about that, but he knew it would be a risk.

The other dilemma was: what to do with his find? He could go back a hero, pass the location of

The Blob on to the authorities, and someone else would come out here to investigate, most probably one of the two SSF ships, Millpool or Anderson. He'd be credited with the find, get a medal, blah, blah, get his 15 minutes of fame. He had an idea that he didn't want that as his future. He also knew that, human politics and ambitions being what they were, someone would try and make capital out of his find, either monetary, political or military. Did any one of the Confed systems deserve to be the sole beneficiary of this find? He didn't think so. To him it was a clear-cut case: either all would benefit or none would! And, he wanted one. Badly!

He spent 2 days checking his ships hull, mechanical connections, engines, tanks, couplings. He discovered meteor pitting around some vital couplings involving fuel and storage tanks, and could easily see the combination of circumstances which had 'fired' his ship. He ate, he slept, he thought. He couldn't do any more about The Blob, he needed to be better prepared and equipped to undertake a more thorough exploration.

"Give it time", he thought, "I'll think of something".

5. Plans

Another day and he'd reached a decision he believed he could live with. First, see about getting back. He knew some engineering, both practice and theory; you had to, to be able to pilot a gas scoop, and he also knew he had to take a risk, the only chance upon which his survival depended. He spent some time in main comp library, studying engine theory. He researched the composition of gas giants, particularly the 2 in Sharm System. Being typical of gas giants the atmosphere of Oberon comprised roughly of 75% hydrogen, 20% odd of helium and oxygen, the rest trace gases and elements. It sounded a pretty explosive mix and, he suspected, was the reason he'd been boosted (or booted!) out of the system. He checked his eva equipment and limited supplies of working materials, drew up equipment and job lists. Until, finally, he said to himself, "Get a grip, you've got it to do, so get it done, you'll never get back otherwise!".

Working to a schedule of 6 hours 'on' (eva), 2 hours off, 6 hours sleep and prep, he managed to transfer the storage tank of Oberons atmosphere into his 2 empty fuel tanks, giving him a pressure of about 20 bar. He didn't know whether it would be enough, but he was working with what he'd got, he couldn't do any better. Next, as his 2 remaining fuel tanks contained fuel at a pressure much greater than 20 bar, he used the equaliser valves to back-fill from one fuel tank to the mixed tanks, to about 150 bar, thoroughly mixing the contents. He then firmly isolated the 2 sets of fuel tanks, 2 with fuel, 2 with mix.

"Looks good on paper", he joked to himself, "just see what it's like in practice!".

He'd worked hard, far harder than he was used to, for 4 days, and he resolved that, should he get back, he was going to get himself into shape; and catch up on his studying, as well. He'd just about abandoned his education when he'd had to leave the academy.

With the physical work completed, and hoping that the scratch theory would back up his efforts, he spent a full day manipulating the nav-com recordings. He superimposed 'grabbed' star patterns from the Mingla Galaxy background onto The Blob, effectively concealing it but still keeping a continuous time line through the recording. He then carefully deleted his journey to The Blob from his mini-com, ensuring no questionable data remained, although it was his own property and shouldn't be handled or scrutinised by anyone. Then, he carefully fixed and recorded his position, using far scan to locate Belgar, the system sun, along with prominent stars in the Mingla Galaxy, and triangulated these with the Jump-Gate. He now had a set of data that, when triangulated, shouldn't be too far out from his present position. His earlier readings were pretty good, his position was just about a full Light out. Then he memorised the long list of co-ordinates and encoded a copy onto his min-com as part of a personal message, before deleting all evidence of his workings. His final task, just in case he was in no condition to do it himself, was to instruct nav-com to locate system identifiers on his journey back, lock on to Oberons position, estimate distances then slow and shut down the engines before reaching it's proximity. He settled back, "Phew!".

Finally, exhausted both physically and mentally, he tried to rest before setting his plans into motion. No rest came, only 'what-ifs' and 'should-I's', so he decided to get on with the job, there was no reason, now, to delay the inevitable. He jumped into the pilots chair, strapped in, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen please fasten your seat belts and prepare for the ride of your life!".

He shunted pure fuel to engines 1 and 2 and fired them up, moving forward slowly, then quickly changed over the fuel feeds to the mix of gases. The ship picked up speed, "Wonder of wonders", he said, then picked up more speed, accelerating quickly now.

"Yippee", he yelled, "we're on our way!", and went for the ride of his life.

He thought.

6 Back on the job.

He'd been back on the job now for about 3 months, back into the same routine as if nothing had happened. He'd been picked up drifting, out of fuel but broadcasting, on the edge of the planetary system, by SSF Anderson. It was galling, as he knew some of them from his time in the cadets, and they knew him. They had some fun at his expense, "Jock pilots getting lost...", etc. but he took it, bit his tongue, smiled sweetly back, kept his peace. (Dark, crescent shape under a dull, yellow light). Coping was easy!

Mining Corps had, if anything, been even less excited about his return, being more interested in the return of the scoop ship than in how he'd managed it, and even tagged him with an extra 6 months on his contract for the loss of the storage tank! They'd offered him some time off, but he'd refused and gone back to his 4 on, 2 off routine; he had a lot to think about anyway. He'd downloaded a library of information and learning onto his mini-com and he made a point of studying and exercising every day.

He was on-station one day, his scoop ship, which he'd decided to name Far Out, Baby, was at the docking hub being emptied of gases, serviced and stocked, ready for his next run. He had time to spare and was at a loose end.

"Rec room? No". "Library? No". "Station Mall? No". "I'll go and find the gym", he decided, and followed the nav on his mini-com.

It wasn't a big place but seemed well equipped, treadmills, weights, punchbags. He stood waiting for someone to come to him and, before long, a medium build but muscular man approached him.

"Want to join up for sweat and pain", the man grinned, "I'm Marcel Descaux, at your service, welcome aboard".

"Ellis Hunt", he replied, "Yes, I want to get fit not fat!".

He filled in the forms, debited his account for the subscription and sat with Marcel to discuss his training plan and schedule.

"We get a few off-shifters in", Marcel said, "keeps us in business, but all of the gym staff hold down day jobs as well, so you have to take us as you find us".

And that was that. They'd come up with a plan rather than a regime, based on his time on station and what he could do on the ship. He enjoyed it, the exertion, the self-release, lifting, running, punching out on the bag. It made life feel better, and they were a good bunch of guys. Marcel was there quite a lot and became one of his few friends.

About a month after his joining one guy, Alain, set him to work out, then started a series of slow, majestic moves, moving with grace and balance. When he'd finished Hunt approached him.

"Hi, do you mind if I ask what you're doing?"

"Ta'i Ch'i", replied Alain, "it's a sort of slow martial arts, designed to focus the mind and strengthen the inner self. I'll show you a few moves if you want to have a go".

That was the starting point of his mental as well as his physical training. While he felt physically fitter Ta'i Ch'i made him feel more at peace mentally, which was just what he needed. He downloaded articles on martial arts and martial history to his mini-com, useful for when he was out at Oberon with time to spare. He found an old, fascinating treatise on The Art of Warfare by a Chinese general, Sun Tzu, written about 600 years ago, and he could see correlations between this work and the problems of everyday life. He wished he'd found his current mental climate years ago, "But", he thought, "We learn by our mistakes!".

That was 5 months ago and he was back at the gym, the day before he shipped out. The place had a good few people in so shifts must have coincided, and he was watching Marcel and Alain sparring through some karate moves, all fluid grace and sudden bursts of activity. He practiced karate and T'ai Ch'i himself, but he was still only a novice.

A commotion in the corner of the room made him turn. One of the women members, Leanne, was on her knees, struggling to hold back sobs.

Marcel approached her and asked, "Leanne, are you OK. Can we help?"

"It's gone!", she sobbed, "Millpool, it's been destroyed!"

A murmur ran through the gathering crowd.

"But that's one of the SSF ships", Marcl said, "how could it have been destroyed?"

Leanne stuttered an answer, "W-we were expecting a diplomatic mission from Sundown, a system about 140 lights out, and SSF Millpool was despatched to the Jump Point as escort.

They fired on her as they came through. I've just had a tight beam FYEO, instructing SSF Anderson to stand down or she'll be destroyed as well. I'm to wait for further instructions, keep quiet and don't panic station people. But my friends on Millpool, they've gone!"

She continued sobbing as another murrer ran through the crowd, and some headed for the exit.

"What about the station and mining plants?", someone asked.

"The Sundown expedition will occupy the entire system, not just the station", she stuttered, "mines, station, refinery, ships everything. They'll strip it bare and move on".

"And the people?", asked Alain.

"Re-deployed, security confinement or they just go missing, incorporated into the glory of Sundown", she said.

Hunt felt his stomach muscles tense and his heart started hammering in his chest, his dreams were slipping from his grasp! Some of the gym members were running out in panic, others seemed too stunned to move.

"Can we get away?", he asked.

"There's nowhere to run to", she said, "they've secured the Jump Gate and the whole system is held to ransom".

"No!", said Hunt in desperation, "we can't just sit here and do nothing!".

The remaining people in the gym looked at him blankly.

"Nothing we can do", said one, as he and a few more headed for the door.

"How long?", asked Alain.

"Expect scouts in about 30 hours, to secure submission, then the main ship the day after", Leanne replied.

"That's it, then, folks", said Marcel, "nothing we can do here. Back to our nearest and dearest, heads between our legs and wait for what's to come".

A few more headed for the door, heads down.

"Wait", pleaded Hunt, "I can help".

"There's no way", sniffed Leanne, "we're totally helpless", and her eyes watered again as she reached for a tissue.

"I can take us out on my ship", a desperate Hunt said.

"And go where?", asked Leanne, turning towards him, "there's nowhere for us to go where they can't follow, or they'll come hunting us, it's a game to them, now. By the time they've finished many of us won't even be around to tell the tale!".

"Trust me", he said, "there's a chance we can help this to get better, but you'll have to trust me!",

The few remaining gym members started to drift towards the door in shocked silence, alone with the thoughts of their impending fate. Hunt knew he was losing them and he couldn't manage without their help, the stakes were now too high and everyone had too much to lose.

"I've found some advanced fechnology", he blurted out, "almost out of the system. There's nothing we can do here and there's no point in hanging around, waiting for what's coming".

"Advanced technology?", said Alain, "what sort, where from?"

"I got lost, out-system", he replied, "and stumbled across this ship, about 1 Light out. It's big and, in a way, scary, but I came away".

The rest of the people in the room looked at him strangely, some shaking their heads.

"You expect us to believe that?", one of them asked.

"No", Hunt said, "just trust me now, judge me later. Has anyone else got anything better?".

The man held his eyes for a moment, then looked away and walked out. Hunt looked around the few remaining people.

"I'm going", he said, "and going alone if I have to. I'd sooner die out there trying than stew here waiting for it to happen".

6 people now surrounded him, looking at him closely to see if it was a joke.

"I'll come", said Leanne suddenly, "my days are numbered here, anyway, being military".

2 of the remaining 6 shook their heads and walked out of the door, leaving Marcel, Alan and one other guy, who joined Leanne, the guy holding out his hand, saying, "Mike Adams, ex-military, I'm in".

"Us too", said Marcel, "Ellis, we're in your hands".

"I won't let you down", said a suddenly nervous Hunt, "grab some bags, any supplies you can get hold of, meet me at the docking hub in 2 hours".

7. Escape

Panic was starting to spread through the station as Hunt returned to his apartment and collected his personal items. He looked around, committing it to memory, then quickly left, heading for the Mall, which was relatively crowd free for a change. He bought as many supplies as he could manage for a long haul and headed out to the hub.

Leanne was there, waiting, as he arrived, and gave him a thin smile.

"I was packed and ready to ship out", she said, answering his look, "and I've packed an extra med-kit with the food I've bought".

"I never thought of an extra med-kit", Hunt replied, a little sheepishly. "I want to prep the ship, can you wait and send the rest up as they arrive? Far Out, Baby, at L19 on the docking hub".

"Far Out, Baby", she laughed, "I'll send them up".

"It'll all become as clear as mud", he laughed with her, "soon as you can, though", and he was off.

He saw the Port Master, Douglas Hargreaves, who he'd chatted with often on his way backwards and forwards from the ship.

"Have you heard the news?", he asked him.

"Some", Douglas replied, "but it sounds like a lot of rumour, to me, there's been nothing on news vid yet".

Hunt explained the situation, and its reliable source.

"Damn", the Port Master said, "so what are you going to do?".

"Running out-system with some friends, giving it some distance and time. Fancy coming along?", he asked.

"Can't", Douglas replied, "sorry, but I'm on duty for another 6 hours and I've got ships coming and going like one of the old fireworks displays. And I've got family I would n't leave", he added softly, "but thanks for the offer".

"I'll press on, then", said Hunt, "prep for out and wait for my friends. Is that OK?".

"Irregular, but then the times are irregular at the moment, the whole station will be upside down soon. I'll let them through, though", he replied.

"By the way", asked Hunt, "have you any spare eva suits I can scrounge, I've only got one on board?".

"Sure, you'll pass the service stores at the end of the ramp, pop in and tell them I sent you and that it's OK, grab what you want".

"Thanks, and good luck, then", said Hunt, shaking his hand, and heard a "Good luck to you", in reply, as he went on his way.

Hunt made his way quickly up to L19 and was joined by Marcel and Alain, both loaded with various bags and boxes, so they carried on together.

Hunt hailed a service engineer, "How's Far Out, Baby, Ian?".

"All but ready, just one fuel tank to finish filling", he replied.

"How long, the stations erupting?".

"Half an hour, all systems go".

"Thanks then, Ian, good luck and keep your head down", which was all he could offer.

They piled their belongings at the foot of Far Out, Baby ramp and he took Marcel and Alain to the service stores, where a harried engineer pointed them in the direction of the suits locker, and they came out laden. By the time they'd ferried the equipment up the ramp and on board they'd been joined by Leanne and Mike Adams, so he left them stowing gear while he went to the control cabin. He checked over his panels and status reports, then contacted Flight and announced his departure. They weren't too happy, with the chaos kicking off on-station, but they understood, also, the alternatives. Hunt closed up the ship after making sure everyone was on-board. Deck crew disengaged from dock and he set the ship on a gentle float back, clearing the dock to an unusually clear transit area, before using thrusters to rotate and align on an outward-bound heading. By this time he'd been joined by the rest of his assorted crew.

"OK", he said, "I could use someone on op-com, nav-com and far-scan, anybody with any experience?".

Leanne and Mike piped up with "OK's", so he let them decide for themselves which to choose. To Leanne, on nav-com, "Set us a course for Oberon, if you would, a quick one, but not obviously racing".

"OK, Cap".

"Mike, on to far-scan, watch for any in-coming from the Jump Gate, let's find out where the birdies are".

A nod of assent, obviously a man of few words.

"Marcel and Alan, until we have more time to swap skill sets, can you find quarters or bunks for everyone, stow luggage, food and equipment, please?".

They picked up Leanne's earlier comment and grinned, "Sure Cap, no problem".

Leanne, "Ready with course data".

Hunt, "Transfer to op-com , please".

"Done".

He quickly looked it over, nodded, then initiated the journey, bringing the engines on-line, using only fuel tank 2, closing down the other 3. Far Out, Baby picked up speed and set off on the new heading.

He relaxed in his chair, "Well, we're away, first hurdle cleared".

"2 birdies approximately 12 hours out, inbound for station", from Mike.

"Thanks", he said, "can either of you pilot ths ship?".

"Not me", from Mike, "I'm comp-tech, strategy and equipment".

"Leanne?".

"I,ve done some basics, Ellis, but to be honest I haven't the experience that you have, or the reflexes. I thought you were just a tub pilot, if I'm honest, but I can't touch what you do".

"OK", he replied, "thanks for the compliment. I think. We'll work some shift and cover system out between us. To be honest, once nav-com has the details logged in the biggest job is monitoring that everything's OK. Put station output on speaker, please, Mike, background only".

Marcel and Alain joined them in control, "All packed and stacked", Alain said, "someone is sleeping on the couch!".

"Care to tell me what line of work you guys are in?", Hunt asked.

"I'm shift engineer on maintenance and construction. Alain is an installation technician on a different shift".

"Well, we seem to have a good cross-section of skills betwen us,"Hunt said, "we...".

"Care to fill us in now, Ellis, the details were a bit skimpy before?", Marcel asked, "Why are we here?".

So he told them it all, from being blown out of the gas giant to being picked up by SSF Anderson. The discovery of The Blob raised whistles and "Wows". The use of the upper atmosphere of Oberon as fuel was, if anything, as much a revelation.

"So we don't really know what to expect out at the AT site?", Leanne asked.

"Nothing", said Hunt, "It's there, it's at least partially powered; its contents could have huge

potential or it could be a dud. What we can do is go and have a look and make the best of what we find. If we don't it could be lost for a thousand years".

They were silent, watching him.

"How long to get there?", asked Alain.

"A day to Oberon then probably 2 days collecting the atmospheric gases. Then it's a bit harder to estimate but, if we allow half a day for making the mods then it could be another 2 days to boost out-system. Best I can guess at the moment".

Marcel spoke up, "If you guys are good for piloting us there and collecting the gas, Alain and I are dying to check the telemetry on your engines using the gases from Oberon, and maybe find some answers as to the 'why's and wherefore's' of your journey, see if we can't pin down the theory a bit more to help us boost out", looking at Alain for confirmation and receiving a nod, "and we'll provide meals and drinks, free you guys up a bit....Cap".

Mike and Leanne nodded in agreement.

"Before we go any further", said Hunt, "there's no need for the 'Cap', I'm only a scoop jockey on a run, you can call me Ellis, or Hunt".

There was silence, then Marcel spoke up, "I think I speak for all of us when I say that you're the one with all the moves, your experience of space and piloting is way ahead of ours. You've done all of this once, alone, and lived to tell the tale. This is your domain, your baby, and I for one am quite happy to keep calling you 'Cap'.....Ellis", and they broke up into laughter.

The tension, also, had been eased, and with a wave and a grin they went to their stations, leaving Hunt with a bemused expression plastered on his face.

They made good but steady time, trying not to draw unwanted attention to themselves. Hunt insisted on Leanne or Mike having a rest period and, after they'd ganged up on him, agreed to a 2 hour rotation of rest for all three of them. Marcel and Alain he left to themselves, for now.

Oberon spun lazily beneath them, clouds of orange, ochre and hues of many different colours spread beneath them, quite a beautiful sight when you were used to the blackness of space. He had Mike and Leanne with him, they'd insisted, and Marcel and Alain had turned up to watch. Hunt set the upper atmosphere position, orbit and elevation, then initiated the scoop sequence. His crew watched all of this with fascination and a degree of respect, which Hunt didn't see.

"How can we help with this?", asked Leanne.

"I'll show you", he said, "op-com will keep the ship in orbit and monitor the scoop, it'll fill the tanks and let us know when they're full. After checking the initial programme works, which I've used before, our job then is to sit and monitor the progress, keep a look out for any problems. It's what saved me before".

"Fine", said Leanne, "we'll take turns".

Alain spoke up, "Interesting results from the gas analysis and engine performance data. It seems that when you off-load your gases back at Sharm Station they're processed, to strip out most of the inert gases and trace elements. We think there's a balance there in the raw gases, and the trace elements act as a catalyst between the Hydrogen, Helium and Oxygen. That explosive mix becomes even more explosive when the catalyst is present and produces a bigger 'boom'. It provides tremendous power when under pressure in the fuel lines to the engines, pretty much like the 'slow bomb' process, where a flammable material and fuel source can be burnt in a tight, enclosed space and has to go 'bang' to escape. But, mix it with the purified fuel and you get a bigger, but more controlled 'boom', which can be released through the engines".

"And you were lucky, we think", added a smiling Marcel. "But, it seems you've discovered a super-fuel. We think it would be interesting to build a new style of engine around it, given time. And peace".

They continued discussing the implications of the find for a while longer, then Marcel and Alain volunteered to check out the ships systems, plus put together a plan and equipment list to contra-mix the gases into one of the fuel tanks, which was fine with Hunt. His own experience had been a bit 'pick-and-mix',

A day later and a call came through to his cabin, all areas, from Mike, "Guys, the birdies have arrived at Sharm Station and they're shooting it up!".

The control cabin was full as they listened to reports out of Sharm, detailing the firing on docking bays and command centres, harrowing casualty lists and demands for the station to stand down. They were devastated.

"It's a softening up process", said Mike, "it'll be taken soon!".

Leanne spoke up from far-scan, "Captain, one of the birdies has turned this way and he's hailing".

"Put it on broadcast", said Hunt, "OK, guys, we need to be moving!".

He checked the storage levels in the gas tanks.

"How long until he reaches here, Leanne?"

"Less than a day".

"Marcel, can you and Alain back-fill tank 2 in about 12 hours time?", he asked.

"Yes", said Marcel, "should take us a couple of hours with both of us prepped and ready".

"We'll do that then. Leanne and Mike, plot us a course to get us heading out-system towards the co-ordinates I've laid out, but set the timing for when the birdie is on the opposite side of Oberon to us. Soonest, please".

"Cap", from both groups.

Hunt toggled the transmitter, "Far Out, Baby to Sundown ship, we have almost full storage tanks and will set course for return as we take our next swing around Oberon".

Silence for a while.

"Far Out, no tricks, we'll be waiting. Out".

His crew looked at him with admiration.

"Sneaky as well as modest", said Leanne.

It was 10 hours to the optimum orbital position most suited to their needs, but Marcel and Alain took 3 hours instead of 2 to effect the transfer of gases, and were pleased with their work. Now they were ready, all waiting excitedly.

Hunt fired up 2 of the engines, oriented the ship then quickly swapped to fuel tank 2. They held their breaths. A burst of acceleration hit them, Marcel and Alain stumbled, but hung on to seat backs, as Alain shouted "Yipee!".

They skipped away from Oberon, building speed.

"Impressive", said Marcel, "we'll make our fortunes out of this", and they all laughed.

"Enjoy the ride", said Hunt, "the fun is just beginning!".

As it happened they reached the general area of The Blob in just under a day, but then spent 6 hours sweeping backwards and forwards before they finally pinpointed it, it was so obscure.

"I'm glad it's still here!", exclaimed a relieved Hunt.

They homed in on one of the beacons from Hunts first journey here.

"Ladies and gentlemen", said Hunt, recalling his speech from his last departure, "we have reached our destination, welcome to the future and enjoy your stay", as his crew stared, wide-eyed, at Hunts dream.

8. Destination.

No-one would stay aboard the ship, they all insisted on going, and a grumpy Hunt sat in his pilot chair, moodily contemplating options and his great, rebellious crew.

"We can't all suit up and go eva through the barrier", he complained, "we need someone to stay on board as back-up!".

"Hey", said the normally quiet Mike, "if the field let you through it either recognised you, or your speed was slow enough to not pose a threat. So, why not take the ship in on dead-dead slow? It could be like the impact armour that troops wear, the harder or faster it is that something hits it, the harder it becomes, so backing right off on speed could help".

Hunt smacked his forehead, "Sure, it may just work!".

So dead-dead slow they went, and work it did.

They glided up to the portal and Hunt brought the ship to a dead stop. The crew, all of them, looked at him wide-eyed.

Leanne asked, quietly, almost fearfully, "What now, Captain?".

He looked at them, every one, and his heart swelled at what they'd done and how far they'd come. He stood and faced them, straight-faced and serious.

"Last one out of the air-lock is a cissy!", he yelled, and, whooping and hollering, they all ran pell-mell out of the cabin.