

Drift Conditions Forecast

Compiled by the Independent Drift Observatory, Cloud Archipelago, NE V00;
spot reports courtesy of the Auremelion Merchant Marine

Valid: End 1st Quarter, Cycle 1,844, IDO Datum

General Synopsis

Instability NW D30 moving SW V45, becoming broader later.

Primary Route Forecasts

Great Union

Moderate, becoming poor towards Auremelion. Heavy ship diversion in place at 1388 K due to expected small reality collapse; follow radiobuoy directions.

Independent Cross-Drift

Good, occasionally moderate. Vessels to monitor Cloud Archipelago Control for local advisories.

Underline

Long-term causality protection closure enforced by Guild. No passage for merchant vessels. **Extreme risk of unplanned causal displacement.**

Seamship Spot Reports

Frigate-Disruptor Gales of Boreas, reporting E D12 at 230 K

Drift conditions clear, good scan visibility through sector. Escort uneventful past quarter, no logged engagements.

Freighter Radial Distortion, reporting N V78 at 1,830 K

Typical instability at sector edge, otherwise clear. Intermittent comms RX difficulties due to local spontaneous emissions source. Per sector control, lingering to monitor and report.

Pleasurecraft Stationary Traveller, reporting NE V00 at 0 K

Still docked at the Archipelago. Do we really need to keep sending these reports?

– Authorised for general distribution –

Trade Routes Administration, High Spire, Cloud Archipelago
Merchant Admiralty, Auremelion

Ilyar sat on the corner of the bar, nursing a glass of brandy in one hand and cradling his head in the other. On the stool beside him sat Bentley, resting their head gently against his arm.

“I’m bored out of my mind here, captain,” Bentley grumbled, kicking their boots against the bar. “When do we get out in the Drift again? The ship’s probably forgotten me by now.”

Ilyar shot a glance out across the mostly empty bar. The pink-purple glow of the Drift bled softly in through the windows at the far end. It had been almost a month since they arrived back at the Cloud Archipelago, and despite his best efforts he had yet to find any jobs worth taking. He looked down at the raccoon, who was now spinning on the barstool. “Where are Solivane and Quartz?”

“Quartz is down on the promenade, something about a new sidearm? Sol is—” Bentley stopped spinning facing the door. “—here.”

Solivane strode towards them, immaculate white robes drifting gracefully behind them, and dropped an envelope on the bar in front of Ilyar. “This was delivered to the ship. The messenger was most insistent that you read it immediately.”

Ilyar opened the envelope and extracted a carefully folded origami hare. Before he could unfold it, it fluttered gracefully onto the bar and began hopping around with a trail of purple sparkles. Bentley stared at it with unconcealed glee. After a few hops and a rather impressive somersault, the hare flattened itself out into a small square letter with an ornate gilded edge and glistening purple script. Ilyar picked it up and began to read aloud.

Captain Ilyar of the Stationary Traveller,

Your presence is most humbly requested this evening in the High Spire. I have a matter of the utmost importance to discuss. Come with discretion, and bring your officers.

The letter was signed with the seal of the Cloud Archipelago, and a large handwritten signature: Kyrie.

“Officers? There’s only us!” laughed Bentley. “Who is this Kyrie? Beautiful penwork, whoever they are.”

Solivane cleared their throat. “Kyrie is the closest thing the Cloud Archipelago has to a leader. She controls most of the arms trade across the charted Drift.” They looked out the far windows at the shimmering purple. “We shall either leave with a job to do, or in body bags.”

Ilyar drained the last of his brandy, flicked a few shiny silver marks into the empty glass, and stood. “Well then, we shouldn’t keep her waiting. Sol, fetch Quartz and meet us back at the ship; we ought to make a good impression.”

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Bentley sighed. “You look fine, OK?” Ilyar side-eyed Bentley in response, slopping another handful of water onto the fur between his ears that refused to lie flat. Messy, always messy, he thought, it knows when I need it to be tidy and gets even messier.

The hare stood naked before the tall mirror in the captain’s quarters on the *Stationary Traveller*, a cosy space of dark wood parquet and brass-panelled deep purple walls, much like the rest of the ship. He lifted his arms and twisted slightly to the left, examining the reflection of his lithe grey-brown form; *mother always said I should eat more*. He sighed, patted down his unruly tuft again, and turned to Bentley, gesturing for his underclothes. The raccoon, already preened and dressed, was staring again. “Knock it off, it’s nothing you haven’t seen before. Clothes, now.”

Bentley raised a hand and dramatically pushed their head aside, averting their gaze. “Oh, my dear captain, how frightfully obscene of me!” They passed Ilyar his bundle of fresh clothes, bowing as if presenting him with a crown. A grin spread across their face. “Not like I can see it when it’s in my mou—”

“Bentley!” Ilyar snatched the clothes off them, trying not to laugh, and sat to dress.

Bentley caught their reflection in the mirror and did a small twirl, their long brown coat fluttering gently as they went. They tweaked the fit of the waistcoat and shirt beneath, jiggled the waist of their trousers into place, stomped their boots gently, and finally adjusted the blue ribbon round their straw boater hat; with the tip of their umbrella, they nudged their hat’s brim to a perfectly jaunty angle. *Procyonid, perfected*.

There came two sharp knocks at the door, and Bentley hurried over to answer. Solivane stood there, the coati resplendent in fine fresh white robes covered in intricate, shimmering geometric patterns; their immaculately groomed fur rippled with bands of deep blue, lavender and grey, the subtly shifting stormlight tones that made an effortless statement. They fixed Bentley with a steely, unreadable gaze.

“Sol! You’re looking... severe,” Bentley said buoyantly; Solivane nodded curtly, accepting the compliment that anyone else would consider backhanded. “Where is Quartz?”

Solivane stepped aside. Behind them in the hallway stood a fennec fox, her golden-brown ears rivalling Ilyar’s in scale; she was leaning idly on her hand against the wall, her leather jacket, covered in the patches of a dozen or more Drift crews, pulled high enough to reveal the holster strapped to the toolbelt around her cargo pants. Sandy brown flight boots and beat-up multispectral goggles perched between her ears completed the look. She nonchalantly dusted down her jacket and regarded Bentley with a smirk. “Scruff. Call yourself an engineer dressed like that, old man?”

Bentley put on a playful scowl and eyed her up and down. “Where’d you find this one, Sol? We don’t need our ductwork doing, thank you!” With a cackle they darted out into the corridor past Quartz before she could respond, verbally or physically.

Ilyar appeared in the doorway and cleared his throat. His great slate-blue coat sat neatly and for once uncreased atop a dark leather jerkin and shirt; he had even clipped a set of epaulettes on the shoulders, meaningless but adding a certain air of seniority that he leaned into. He adjusted his dark blue trousers, tucked into turned-down tall brown leather boots. Round his neck hung a shining silver crescent moon on a necklace, positioned perfectly in the centre of his chest. He smiled, an assured and confident smile. “Are we all ready?”

Quartz gave a thumbs up. Solivane nodded approvingly. Bentley gave a wolf-whistle, to which Ilyar shot them a glare. Together they made their way towards the dock.

“We clean up well, for a bunch of...” Bentley struck a pose with a giggle. “... Pirates!”

Solivane sighed an amused sigh. “We are not pirates, Bentley, we are *freelancers*.” Bentley rolled their eyes in dramatic contempt.

Quartz grinned at Bentley. “What’s the difference, anyway? Pirates probably get paid better.”

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The glass-walled elevator car made its way slowly up the side of the High Spire, the luxurious crown perched atop the *Cloud Archipelago*’s expanse. Inside, the four members of the *Stationary Traveller*’s crew stood waiting. Though they tried not to show it, the tension was palpable.

Ilyar, his grey-brown fur brushed smooth and the brass buttons on his coat shining, fixed his gaze on the soft glow of the Drift outside. Bentley stood to his side, running their fingers through the fur on his hands in an attempt to soothe their anxiety. Solivane, meanwhile, was explaining the etiquette of meeting an arms dealer feared across the Multiverse to Quartz, whose ears were twitching with excitement.

“Let the captain do the talking. Speak only when you are spoken to, and always address her as ‘Lady Kyrie’,” Solivane explained, adjusting their robes to geometric perfection.

Bentley looked round. “Really? Are we meeting a merchant or a god?”

“On this driftstation Kyrie may as well be a god, Bentley,” said Solivane sharply, “Please do not let your big mouth get us into trouble.” Bentley winked conspiratorially and made a zipping motion across their mouth.

Quartz smoothed down her ears with a paw; they sprang straight back up. “Everyone on the station knows who she is, but very few ever get to meet her. We’re lucky, I guess. Lucky, or in a lot of trouble.”

The elevator car came to a smooth stop, dinged, and the doors slid open almost silently. “Stick close,” said Ilyar, stepping forward into the lobby.

This was a very different place from the utilitarian grime of the station promenade. A deep red strip of carpet ran over the black marble floor from the elevator to a grand set of stained-wood doors on the far side, flanked by two ermine guards with pristine white fur. Ilyar strode confidently across the carpet, his crew following; Bentley kept tight by his side,

always a step behind. In practised form the guards pushed open the huge doors as they approached.

Inside the red carpet continued, flanked by colonnades of glittering black marble. One side of the grand office was a continuous wall of glass, looking out on the shimmering pink-purple majesty of the Drift. Ilyar and his crew walked up the avenue of columns, at the far end of which was a great table of pure white stone. Behind it, reclined on a chaise-longue and watching their progress intently, was the slender figure of a female dolphin. As they approached she stood, her emerald green dress flowing resplendently over her body and onto the floor. She fixed Ilyar with a steely gaze as he came to a stop a short distance from the table, flanked by his crew.

“Captain Ilyar, I presume,” she intoned in a voice much louder and more imposing than her frame suggested. “It is my pleasure to welcome you to the High Spire.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Kyrie,” Ilyar replied solemnly, and he bent over his arm into a deep bow. Solivane and Quartz did likewise; Bentley, briefly distracted by the view from the window, snapped back to attention and joined them.

Kyrie snapped her fingers, and the ermines by the door stood sharply to attention. “Leave us. No visitors.” At that the guards hurried from the room; the great doors closed behind them with a definite click, and Kyrie returned her gaze to Ilyar, her serious expression breaking into a disarming smile.

“Formalities over, folks. Relax, please. One in my position has to keep up appearances, you understand.” She gestured towards a circle of pouffes by the window. “Make yourselves comfortable. We have much to discuss.”

They settled down on the pouffes; Bentley sat cross-legged on one, their attention returning to the view. “I never get tired of looking out there, it’s so beautiful...”

“Nor do I,” added Kyrie softly, a hint of sadness in her voice. She gazed out the window along with Bentley. “The endless expanse of the Drift calls to the wanderer in us. Every reality out there is a fresh adventure waiting to happen. You are lucky, friends, to be able to venture into it. Sometimes this station feels so suffocating.” Her eyes turned back to Ilyar.

“‘Friends’. I hope I am not being too presumptuous.”

Ilyar smiled. “We’re always glad to make a new friend.” He looked at each of his crew in turn. “Solivane, my navigator.” Solivane bowed their head politely, adjusting their robes. “Quartz, my... everything else. She’s new, we haven’t settled on a role for her yet.” Quartz gave a small salute, stifling a giggle. Ilyar looked finally at Bentley, adoration in his eyes. “And Bentley, my engineer, my helm, and my Engine.” Bentley moved swiftly over to Ilyar’s side and sat on the floor by his leg, beaming with pride.

Kyrie smiled at the sight, leaning back into her pouffe. “A pair of bonded seam-walkers is a beautiful thing to behold. Anchor and Engine in perfect harmony.” She clasped her hands in her lap. “I am not gifted with the art, however much I would like to be, but...” She glanced around the palatial office. “... I have cut another path through the Drift, perhaps just as dangerous.”

Solivane cleared their throat. “Lady Kyrie, I understand there is a matter you wished to discuss.”

Nodding, Kyrie stood up and walked over to the window. “My people have been observing you during your stay here on the Cloud Archipelago. You seem a capable crew for a small... errand I require.” With a wave of her hand, the space inside the circle of pouffes burst into a cloud of glittering green particles, which coalesced into a holographic map of the charted Drift. Two points floated up from the mass of detail; one the Cloud Archipelago, the other a seam far away near the edge.

“I have a freight consignment that urgently needs to move from here—” She pointed at the tiny Cloud Archipelago, “—to there.” Her hand moved across the map to the seam, “Passenger-382-C. It is a mining colony we operate jointly with the Guild of Seam-Walkers. Not without tension, of course, but it is stable. One of our less troublesome realities.”

Ilyar nodded, staring into the shimmering map. “What is the cargo?”

“The smart captain does not ask,” Kyrie said quietly. “It will pose no danger to you or your ship, I promise. The Guild, however, will certainly take an interest. I will have a suitable cloaking system installed on your ship,” She looked into Ilyar’s eyes, a faint smile on her lips. “If, of course, you accept.”

“What about payment?” Quartz asked. Solivane glared at her, a sudden panic in their eyes, but Kyrie laughed. “Business-minded. I like that. Fifty thousand marks, plus expenses. There will be plenty more work for you if you want it. My books are busy.”

Bentley’s eyes went wide. “Fifty thousand? Captain, that could buy a fleet! We could refit the ship! Refurbish the crew quarters! En-suite bathrooms!”

Ilyar chuckled and ruffled Bentley’s neck scruff, turning his attention back to Kyrie with a smile. “We accept. I will make preparations to depart immediately.”

Kyrie raised a finger and, slipping back over to the great table, retrieved an ornate glass bottle and a set of crystal tumblers from a drawer. The deep purple liquid in the bottle shimmered and glowed softly, as if mimicking the Drift itself. “You depart tomorrow. Please, stay for a while tonight.” She poured each of them a glass from the bottle. Ilyar sniffed at the liquid; it smelled herbal, with a hint of lavender, and a heady alcoholic tang that made his nose tingle.

Kyrie sat back down with her glass and raised it, a broad smile across her face. “To a job well done.” Ilyar, Bentley, Solivane and Quartz clinked their glasses against hers. “And to new friends,” Bentley added, sipping their glass and breaking into a coughing fit from its sheer potency. “Quite right,” Kyrie laughed.

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Solivane walked through the main corridor of the *Stationary Traveller*, thinking it was unusually quiet for a departure morning. A deck below, the hold buzzed with the chatter and rattle of dockers loading crates of provisions and Quartz complaining about the scrapes they left on the floor. Up here, however, the air was too still.

“Good morning, I trust we are making good time—” Solivane stopped just inside the bridge door, surveying the scene with surprise. Ilyar was seated on the captain’s chair, tilted back as far as the mechanism would allow, with a towel draped over his face. Off to the side Bentley lay sprawled across the drive console, their hat pulled down over their eyes, groaning softly. Solivane stepped up behind Ilyar and lifted the towel; he whimpered feebly and moved his hand to cover his eyes from the light streaming in through the bridge windows.

“Ow... Turn off the light... Please...” Ilyar whined, rolling onto his side in the chair.

Solivane sighed and sat down in front of the navigation console. “Captain, it is morning. We are due to depart shortly. Quartz is below decks finalising the cargo manifest. I am about to plot our course to Passenger-382-C. You and Bentley are... hungover. Do you think this is acceptable captain-like behaviour?”

Bentley stirred, their hat still covering their face. “Shut up Sol, this is what happens when you can handle a drink,” they muttered, rolling off the console and onto the floor with a thump. “Don’t go thinking we’ve forgotten the cider incident.” They clambered up to their feet, dusting off their coat and adjusting their hat.

Solivane shot a glance at Ilyar, who was now looking at them and grinning through the pain. “Regrettable. I was informed it was just apple juice. I like apple juice.” They looked down at the navigation console and began plotting. “Let us move on. Quickly.”

Quartz appeared in the doorway, offensively cheerful to the suffering raccoon and hare. “Headaches all round, is it? At least one of us knows to stay hydrated.” She looked at Ilyar, suppressing a giggle. “Cargo loading complete, captain. Kyrie’s armourer has just signed off on our new cloaking system. Drive signature projection tech, state-of-the-art. Very expensive.”

Ilyar nodded, sitting upright, though he still cradled his aching head in his hand. “Great... good work, Quartz. Get us a departure vector.” He turned to Bentley, who had shaken off enough of their hangover to sit upright at the drive console looking almost respectable. “Get her warmed up, Engine.”

Bentley grinned and cracked their knuckles. “Let’s see if the old lady remembers me.” They laid their hands on two softly glowing amber pads on the console. The ship shuddered suddenly, a deep hum emanating from the floor as she came to life. “Oh yeah, there she is. Easy, girl, easy...” Bentley leaned back in their chair comfortably, eyes now glowing faintly amber; connecting with the ship seemed to have sapped the hangover out of them instantly. “Ready for departure, captain.”

Quartz took her position at the radio console and sat the headset over her ears. The radio crackled to life as she hit the transmit key. “Cloud Archipelago Control, this is Stationary

Traveller requesting clearance for departure, vector for—" She checked her notes for the direction of Passenger-382-C, "—Two-six-zero, exiting sector."

A pause, then another crackle. "Pleasurecraft Stationary Traveller, Control. You are cleared for departure, disengage clamps at your leisure. Vector two-six-zero reserved for you to sector edge. Report when clear of station space. Fair winds to you."

Quartz turned to Ilyar and gave a thumbs up. "Ready to go, captain."

"Solivane, navigation ready?"

"Course set and ready, captain."

Ilyar moved over beside Bentley and laid a hand gently on their shoulder. "Ship status?"

Bentley nuzzled at the hand with a smile. "Doors secured, thrusters ready, Narrative Drive idle. We are go for departure, captain. Are we really still registered as a pleasurecraft?"

Ilyar nodded, returning to the captain's chair and settling down comfortably. "What else would we be? It's good cover for strange jobs. Like this one. Go for launch." His finger came down on a small button on his armrest. Click.

An almighty rumble shook the ship as the docking clamps disengaged and dropped away; simultaneously the ship's thrusters roared to life, holding her steady in the docking bay. Bentley gave a minute twitch of their hands, and the ship slowly began to move backwards away from the dock. She gradually turned to face towards the open Drift, shimmering in the view from the forward windows.

"Vector alignment is confirmed, captain," Solivane called. Ilyar gave a thumbs up, and turned again to Bentley. "Engine, take her to sea."

"With pleasure, captain," Bentley acknowledged, leaning forward into the pads. The ship pushed away from the Cloud Archipelago on her thrusters. Once she reached a safe distance, with a subtle twist of Bentley's wrists the thruster rumble was replaced with a tremendous, pulsating roar. "Narrative Drive engaged!" Bentley yelled over the noise, pushing their weight into the console. The ship lurched forward sharply, pressing the crew back into their seats for a moment, before the Narrative Drive's bubble stabilised and the interior of the ship became quiet and placid once again.

Ilyar stood up and stretched dramatically, a grin crossing his face. “Well that was exciting! Now the dust’s shaken off, I think it’s time for tea. Sol?”

Solivane was already halfway to the door. “To the galley at once, captain.”

Bentley and Quartz followed behind them. “Why did he say ‘take her to sea’, anyway?” Quartz asked.

“Eh, some old tradition,” replied Bentley with a shrug.

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Bentley lay awake, staring at the ceiling. It was sometime in the dead of night and the lights were off, letting the gentle glow of the Drift illuminate the walls of the captain’s quarters. They carefully untangled themselves from Ilyar’s arms and slipped out, throwing on a dressing down on the way.

They found Quartz sitting on a crate in the hold, the fennec wrapped in a blanket and nursing a steaming cup of coffee. She glanced up at the sound of their footsteps approaching.

“You won’t get any sleep drinking that,” Bentley said quietly, sitting down beside her. Their breath drifted away as silvery vapour; the air down here was frigid, without the benefit of the climate control in the habitable areas of the ship.

“Couldn’t sleep. This is the next best thing,” Quartz replied. “What about you?”

Bentley fixed their gaze on the two containers that sat isolated from the others in the centre of the hold, wrapped in plastic and protected with Kyrie’s own seal. “Mind full of worries, kid. I don’t like having unknown cargo on the ship.”

“What do you think it is? Guns? Bombs?”

“Whatever it is, the Guild wants it, and that means it’s trouble. That drive signature projector costs far more than we’re making for this delivery.” Bentley leaned back with a deep sigh. “If the Guild want something you’ve got, they’ll go straight through you to get it. They don’t do subtlety.”

Quartz placed something on the crate beside Bentley with a soft click. “They can try.”

Bentley looked down. It was a small weapon of some kind, a handgun. They picked it up. It felt heavier than it looked, and its cold metal tingled against their skin. “This is that new sidearm you mentioned?”

Quartz smiled, taking the gun from their hands. “‘Sidearm’ is an understatement.” She pulled back a slide on the side, and Bentley saw a soft purple glow emanate from inside. “Rel-pistol, special order. Illegal in Guild territory. Took a lot of digging to get hold of this bad boy.”

“Rail-pistol?” Bentley asked, confused. “Those are a mark a dozen—”

“Rel-pistol,” Quartz corrected with a laugh. “Relativistic pistol. It has a tiny piece of contained Drift inside, uses that to fire a slug at three-quarters the speed of light.” She lifted the pistol and aimed it at some pieces of scrap crate-wood sitting by the wall further down the hold. “Watch.”

She squeezed the trigger, and instantly a beam of purple light shot from the barrel directly into the wood scraps with a loud crack that reverberated around the hold. Where it hit there was now a smouldering ring of purple-glowing wood pinned to the hold wall; the rest of the scrap was a fine dusting of ash scattered on the floor. Bentley walked over cautiously and inspected the remains; inside the glowing ring was a perfectly formed bullet, undamaged, suspended in the air. After a moment, the glow faded and the bullet clinked to the floor.

They looked back to see Quartz reloading the pistol, a satisfied grin on her face. “The bullet stops instantly, exactly where it needs to. All of its energy passes into the target.” She holstered the weapon. “One hit, and there’s nothing left to bury.”

Bentley walked back over to her, their expression now suddenly stern. “Quartz... This isn’t a warship. We don’t just kill to solve our problems. Does the captain know you’ve got that thing?”

Quartz looked directly into their eyes, her bright blue irises shining in the dim light of the hold. “He approved it. Last resort. Just in case. Besides, Bentley, you’ve had to fend for yourself before. Haven’t you caused just as much harm?”

Bentley recoiled from the weight of the question, staring Quartz down. A faint flicker of amber fury ignited in their eyes. “Seam-walkers don’t blow holes in people! We don’t kill!” They took a step forward, pointing an accusatory finger at Quartz. “We defend ourselves with elegance. We rewrite weapons to be harmless, we convince the multiverse to work in our favour. If it comes to it, we rip open a seam and drop you into another reality. We don’t harm!”

Quartz stood up and met Bentley’s gaze, every bit as fiery. “What happens to those you ‘drop into another reality’, Bentley? Do you know where they go? Do you know if it’s safe? Do you care?” She grabbed the pistol and held it in the air, making Bentley step back. “This kills, and death is final; you would rather pluck someone out of their world and leave them to suffer, just to satisfy yourself that you didn’t pull the trigger!”

“Cease.”

They both spun around to see Solivane standing in the doorway, their fur pulsating in bands of dark, furious colour. “I do not know what this is about, but it must stop.” They walked into the hold, standing between Bentley and Quartz, and looked at the pistol in Quartz’s hand. “If you fire that thing without cause again, I will have you jettisoned into the Drift.”

Quartz took a step back, holstering the pistol again. “Drift entities. You can’t understand death if you never die.” She turned on her heel and made for the door, leaving Bentley and Solivane alone in the silent hold. They exchanged an inscrutable look.

“It is late, Bentley,” Solivane said finally, with a heavy sigh. “Go to bed. I am keeping watch for another few hours.”

With nothing more to say, Bentley walked towards the door. They glanced back at the cargo once more. “It’s trouble, I know it. More than it’s worth.”



Morning came as morning could only come on a seamship, with the lights coming up on a timer and the Drift remaining as dark and empty as ever. Bentley was at the drive console, sipping a cup of coffee in a vain attempt to gain back some of the sleep they

missed the previous night. Quartz sat as ever on the far end of the bridge, pointedly ignoring everything around them, and for once Bentley was glad for it. Solivane, at the navigator's desk, was busying themselves with course corrections and valiantly pretending nothing had happened. Into the midst of this tension strode Ilyar, fresh-faced and stretching his back. He stood by the front windows admiring the Drift for a moment, then turned to address the room.

“Good morning, crew!”

Silence, save for the tapping of keyboards and the gentle, distant hum of the Drive. Ilyar looked around.

“Bad... morning?” He ventured.

Solivane cleared their throat. “We are approximately halfway to our destination, captain. Estimated arrival is early tomorrow afternoon, assuming Drift conditions remain stable.”

“Good, thank you Sol... Quartz?” Ilyar turned to the fennec, eyes silently pleading to give him something to work with.

Quartz glanced up for an instant, then went back to her console. “Short range scans clear. Nothing to report.”

Ilyar slumped in his coat. “Right, OK... Bentley? Engine?”

Bentley slid slowly down in their chair and onto the floor, almost knocking over their coffee in the process, and crept across the bridge to sit at Ilyar's feet. They looked up, blankly. “Ship's on auto helm. I'm tired.”

Ilyar stared at them for a moment, then back out the window. The tension on the bridge was too great to ignore, but nobody was giving him a clue. Finally he spun round, unable to take it any longer.

“OK, what's the deal? Did something... happen?”

The silence was broken immediately by a chorus of “No!”, almost simultaneously, from all three. They looked around at each other, blinking, for a split second, then went straight back to what they were doing before.

Ilyar threw his arms up in frustration. “Alright, well, if nobody has any other business, I’m going to the galley.” He marched towards the door, plucking a bottle of whisky from beside the captain’s chair on the way.

“Captain, it is ten thirty,” Solivane called after him.

“Time is fictional in the Drift,” he shouted back, his voice already disappearing down the corridor.

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Quartz had barely settled back into her seat on the bridge when an alert sounded from her console.

“Contact!” She yelled over the din, “Guild ship on long-range scan, looks like a small one but she’s got weapons signatures. Five hundred K and closing.”

Ilyar ran over to see for himself. “They’re still beyond visual range; Quartz, you know how the signature projector works?”

“I got a crash course before we left, I can work out the rest,” Quartz replied with a grin, her fingers flying across the controls. “We want something they won’t question too much... Right, got it!”

With a flourish she flipped up a molly-guard and toggled a switch; the ship shuddered slightly, the scanner displays reset, and a new larger blip replaced their previous indicator.

“As far as they know right now, we are a Guild heavy freighter. We’ll just have to hope they don’t want a closer look.”

Ilyar nodded, looking up at the empty expanse of Drift before them. “Sol, set a course to avoid visual range.” He glanced over at Bentley, who was hurriedly stashing away the snacks they had been eating and wiping their hands clean. “Sync in and take us around them, Engine; no tricks, you’re flying one of the least manoeuvrable vessels in the Drift now.”

Bentley laid their hands on the pads, and the ship began to yaw slowly to starboard. “Ah, she doesn’t like greasy hands. Sorry, old girl.”

The radio set began to crackle, and Quartz piped it out through the bridge PA. A faint, stern-sounding voice came over the noise. “Unidentified vessel, this is Guild Cutter *Grand Repose*. We read your signature but your transponder signal is unclear. Do you have a malfunction on board?”

“Shit, the transponder!” Quartz flew to work on the controls. “I’ve got her squawking a Guild reply code now, captain. Care to reply?”

“We cannot outrun a cutter,” Solivane added, studying the charts. “They must not come into visual range.”

Ilyar took the headset from Quartz and keyed up the transmitter. “*Grand Repose*, this is Heavy Freighter...” He glanced around in a panic, his eyes alighting on the crumpled bag stuffed under Bentley’s seat. “...Cool Ranch. Apologies, our transponder has been malfunctioning lately. We are carrying a volatile load bound for Passenger-382-C. Advise maintaining distance, our Drift wake is potentially dangerous to small craft.”

The reply came quickly. “Cool Ranch? Logistics Corp sure have run out of ideas. What is this ‘volatile load’? We have orders to inspect cargo in transit through this sector.”

Ilyar glanced down at Quartz, who quickly mouthed a suitable answer. He smiled, keying up again. “We are carrying fifty tonnes of Drift isolate. Our hold is locked down but I strongly advise against any attempts to scan it.” Bentley was watching from across the bridge, eyes wide with delight. Drift isolate, pure concentrated narrative energy, was just about the most unstable substance in regular traffic; the cutter’s crew knew as well as they did that one scan could blow the entire sector out of existence.

There was a long, tense pause before the next reply came, a much less confident voice this time. “... Cool Ranch, proceed on your route. We will maintain distance.” Another pause. “... Good luck.”

Ilyar signed off the radio, and Quartz looked up at him with unconcealed amusement. “They’re pulling back, captain, almost out of scanner range.”

“They’re all off changing their trousers!” Bentley cackled.

Ilyar strode back to the front windows, cupping his hands behind his back. “Full ahead on course, Engine. Keep the projector running until we approach Passenger.”

Bentley set the autohelm for full ahead, disengaged from the console, and retrieved their snacks from under their seat. “An inspired choice of name, captain, if I do say so myself,” they mumbled between mouthfuls. Looking across the bridge, they caught Quartz’s eye. A smile spread across their face. “Good job, kid. Well done.” Quartz just smiled back and gave a mock salute.

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Sitting alone in the galley, Solivane poured their latent anxiety into fervently stirring their tea. Into the vortex they dropped a sugarcube, and watched it swirl away under the milky brown surface. Beside them was a stack of papers, a printout of everything they could find about Passenger-382-C in the ship’s navigational database. It was not much. They glanced down at the introduction, sipping their tea.

PASSENGER-382-C

Stable terrestrial reality. Physical law deviation is unremarkable. Dense breathable atmosphere with elevated air oxygen content. Low surface temperature: cycle average 232 K.

Hosts a long-standing joint extractive colony centred around the settlement of Meltwater. Landscape comprises primarily permafrost tundra. Native flora consists of intermittent boreal forest, ferns, mosses. No native unintelligent fauna of note.

Solivane hovered over that word: *unintelligent*. They sipped their tea pensively.

Brrrring!

The abrupt sound shook Solivane sharply; a splash of tea slopped over the papers on the table. They leaned back with a sigh. “Yes, hello, what?”

Ilyar’s voice crackled over a speaker on the wall. “Sol, you’re needed on the bridge. We’ve arrived.”