



*The Pandoran Age
Chronicles*

No-Deal DePaulo

And The Core Pirates

"No-Deal" DePaulo and the Core Pirates

For Gabe
and Dominic

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–Dante D’Anthony

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...They were waiting for us when we dropped out of hyperspace, I could sense them then, a dirty little swarm, and sickeningly the most frightening thing was they had once been human.

Klaxons hammered my ears and my empathic senses were then overwhelmed--the strange Marauders minds, with their ugly snake eye stares hammering my mind, then the sudden tussle of twenty hard core air men their adrenaline and training kicking in with a slam.

"This is not a drill!" Coco-butter Parsons howled but the air men's boots were already banging steel, half of them at their guns.

We were sitting ducks and there were a dozen Marauder ships, easy. Particle beam fire slashed away at our ship, the KanaaFutura. The Marauders doubtless had never seen a Caldris Royal Navy warship here at the Galactic Core, even through their snake infected minds I could sense a huge wave of surprise come back as we took their fire and the mighty KanaaFutura rose through the maelstrom of ionized particles and maligned atomic clouds her guns announcing payback.

Nobody missed and the Marauder shielding, magnetized ore layered over their giant ramjets, began to strip away in a fireworks show such that the demonic, snaky victimizers were revealed for the devil they were, squealing and riding fire with the hellish super-massive black hole and its light-years of swirling accretion disk as their background.

Still, no one stopped firing on either side and we rode the streams in a twirling death volley of destruction. Hammerstein, impossibly, was cursing and longing for a gun port...

Three weeks earlier...

*Gabriel Montagudo*

1

A covert op

My name is Winteroud Sole and I am twelve standard Caldris years old. It is that I am an Empath, registered, certified, and bonafide psychic that the Royal Detectives-officer Hammerstein, a huge manly and deadly old ex-Naval man, and Officer Tokushima, soft and lovely beyond words--and also deadly, both

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ex-Royal Navy, well, it is that I am an Empath that they have brought me in on a case of which I will relate many details in this journal.

I am also, now I am told-an Archaeologist Aristocrat adventurer, many things for a young man you say? You shall see, the proof was in the pudding, as they say. The detectives came to family's estate, I was taken to the royal palace library and I sensed a great number of things, most importantly that the young princess of Caldris had been kidnapped--A great evil as well.

We were attacked by assassin bots while our aircars made across the Tangerine Sea-importantly I sensed them ahead of time, awoken from a dream as I slept in the cool confines of the Detectives craft. This was my first use of my empathic gift that saved us.

CSI has not been able to provide any clues as to the source of the bots but their class and technologies indicate most probably corporations or governments involved in the absconding of the princess-you see she had discovered an intact ancient warship whose technologies have been secreted by the Transhumans at the Imperial Capitol at Deneb IV and kept out of the mainstream of use by various other governments in the galaxy.

We set out to a Naval outpost in the Oort clouds, unimaginatively and ingloriously named "Fort Oort" where Officer Hammerstein felt we would be safer, and where he had an old friend "Candy" (a CSI and Forensic expert of some repute...yes, yes-I know "Candy" not very impressive a title, but college nick names sometimes haunt us a lifetime).



We were, in fact, attacked again-this time a devious, dastardly, and rare use of wormholing-which, again, I was able to sense their intent moments before their evil act and our pilot-a young Buck by the name of Justin Parsons, who goes by the name of “Coco-butter”-saved the day. His enormously annoying gunner, a true piece of rabble, well, he turned out to be a rather competent shot and slammed them with a gravity bomb right down the center of the centrifugal storm as they readied a second wormhole attack.

Their use of the wormholing, which I had sensed with my ESP, they felt quite gleeful and devious about (before Coco-butter’s gunner dispatched them into oblivion), well, the wormholing proved their undoing. Hammerstein was a veteran of many years and personally knew the Naval master of wormholing combat.

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The dreaded "Herbivore." Herb had retired to a lawless little corner of the Galaxy and thus, once again, our investigation of the Kidnapping of Princess Maggio of Caldris made its way across the void between the Orion and Sagittarius Galactic Spiral Arms to Langley Stay.

II

Langley Stay, Void's End



Steve Moore

Tokushima was at the helm when the Kanaafutura signaled Langley Stay system. At the edges of the Sagittarius Spiral Arm of the galaxy, the world was an anomaly among the Outworlds in a number of ways. It had been a spearhead settlement and various nations had settled the Arcturian Colonies, then Langley had too fallen into Imperial hands, and in a final twist won a sort of defacto independence after the Arcturian wars when the Imperials abandoned it. In the thousands years since, with the rise of the refugee Outworlds, now it was important again but it's culture was entirely untamed.

THE PANDORAN AGE CHRONICLES Dante D'Anthony

We were being hailed. Systems were responding to autoscans when holos of Security officers from their system police appeared. "Processing registrations" one of the holos said, with a sudden widening of the eyes when he realized it was a Royal Warship from Caldris.

"Caldris Royal Envoy." Tokushima informed him. "Officer Tokushima on official business."

"Yes, we see. Rather large warship, officer. What is the nature of your business in system, and what is your anticipated stay?"

"Two criminal acts of extreme violence against law officers-one at Caldris, and one near Fort Oort. We traced the vessel to a possible source and wish to confer with same in system" she replied coolly. "A week perhaps." I smiled.



Steve Allman

Police, they stick together no matter what star system they were from. An unwritten code-police were attacked, you have to let us hunt down the buggers.

"Registration confirmed, keep us updated weekly. The warship is to port at system security station main. You have shuttles down-world we presume

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She hesitated, "One Hammerhead."

Now they hesitated. The holos looked back and forth at each other, finally one shrugged-the cop code prevailed-"Yeah, well, alright, please confer any suspects before engaging fire."

"Absolutely." She smiled. Now she owed them one, but we were *in*.

In for a long docking protocol at the security station and finally after red tape, tidily winks, dirty looks, and berthing fees, they let us take the Hammerhead down-world with a bit of finger wagging and "if there is any untoward activity please...no interplanetary incidents!" Don't kill any bad guys, leave that for us. Hammerstein nodded and nodded and nodded and sighed and finally Coco-butter got his music playing and we were airborne over the bright arc of the planet, "Going down, baby!" Coco-butter informed us as if the whole brilliant planet in front of us was invisible.

"So we are...." Hammerstein smiled.

Coco-butter looked at him expectantly, "Any place in particular...Sir?"

The Hammerhead was heating up and I sensed Coco-butter Parson's flight instincts easing the gravity repulsion field to counter the pull of the planet. He played with the controls a bit and the craft turned into a huge spiraling corkscrew slowly down.



From Hammerstein came a flood of memories. Herb arriving at the fleet after the enemy wormhole massacre. Herb's glassy-eyed orders for the counter strike. Herb's surprising declaration after the counter strike's success, "All those men and women-one both sides, dead. For what? Some piss-ant real estate? Look around, kid. the universe is overflowing with worlds and resources.

At the end of the day, when people go about killing each other, it's because someone somewhere simply WANTS to. I didn't sign up to be a butcher for fools and monsters. I'm out, after this tour, I'm out...you can take the King's Navy and-"

Hammerstein's thoughts raced back across the decades to the present, "There, where the yellow seas meet the delta. Take the flight pattern over there. You'll find a city." They hovered over a vast spread of warehouse blocks serviced by canals, the fjords shouldering the sea. The city was built into the rock of the cliff sides, canals carved through solid stone bluffs. On the pinnacles of stone buttes, spires and domes proliferated. Air transports buzzed about, some in streams, others freely. A metropolis carved into and piled on the limestone crags.

We put down in an open fish market at the delta which included some flats with waterships dry docked, busy wharf and a number of small transports such as ourselves. We were in a culture that existed between cultures. Behind us, among the Orion Galactic Spiral Arm was CCCE space and the various Republics and

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Kingdoms. In front of us were the remains of the Arcturian colonies in the Sagittarius Galactic Spiral Arm, and beyond them the Outworlds, refugee civilizations formed after the Arcturian War.



Neil Thacker

Further on, at the Galactic Core, the Core cultures. Isolated after the Arcturian War, they were Outlaw cultures.

I reached out to the ether, as it were, in the here and now of Langley Stay. I sensed no malice or subterfuge. We were barely raising notice; Just another transport at a busy port. A felt a couple of the fishermen's thoughts take small ire at a military vehicle taking up space in their work areas but mere annoyance.

It seems we had arrived on world and none of the police at the station forewarned any criminals-a good sign they were an honest bunch.

Peering from a window I got my first look at Langley Stay for myself. It was as the stories said; everyone was wearing masks....

We made due with flight helmets. I felt quite ridiculous, Tokushima, Hammerstein, and myself making our way casually onto the wharf and open spaces...with flight helmets on. Not even the possibly stylish MERGE helmets, but second rate crash helmets.

"We need to buy masks." Hammerstein declared the obvious.

"Shopping! On assignment. At the edge of the Outworlds. This promises to be...different." Tokushima snarked.

Hammerstein's flight helmet turned and I didn't need to be a psychic to feel that vibe.

"Sorry, Sir," she retreated.

We did, in fact, look ridiculous.

As it turned out, not for long. Hammerstein quickly rooted out a shop of masks and what a shop it was-much to Tokushima's chagrin, the place was a wonder of fabulous items. I chose a Ripjackle mask-a particularly fierce beast from Opa-locka's world. Hammerstein selected one of Mercury, the Roman god of travelers, merchants, and thieves. Tokushima found one bearing a stylistic feel for Japan, and we made a quick return to the Hammerhead to lose the flight helmets and bore the weary look of Parsons.

He was wise enough, however, not to say anything.

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Then we were off along the canals again, masked and ready. No one spoke, Hammerstein trolling on sorting his distant memories against the realities of the present. Things are always smaller or bigger in our memories.

He was heading for a waterfront nightclub. The masks didn't cover one's mouth, so if we wished we could even eat and drink with them on, such was the custom of the place.

It wasn't long before the sight of a bare face would have been shock-when in Rome, as they say.

It was day so the club was virtually empty. There were all manner of arched and carved ways and rooms, decorative plants, hologram art. A bunch of screen with games from the Empire. Various hypercasts. It was a small galaxy, it seems. I knew some of the channels.

We sat and were promptly approached by a bejeweled and masked waitress. Supple-beautiful, and centuries old I realized-a cloner, this was her third clone incarnation. Somewhere behind her mask, and behind the frivolously attractive clone lay a personality of a woman from worlds away, and generations before.

I was, in my way, suddenly awed. Behind an ordinary façade, an extraordinary history.

"Welcome," she offered brightly, placing chilled water glasses and bread before us, "I'm Sasha."

The table glowed presently with images of food for us to choose from.

Fish, fish, and more fish.

Tokushima selected a bread soup.

"I'll have the fish" I said, "Caldrisian Salmon. With a garlic butter, and crab cakes on the side."

Hammerstein selected a steak.

We ate quietly. Waiting for something to happen.

When it happened, it was a balding slight of a man, dark skinned and masked with a strange golden happy Buddha face.

“Travelers from a far?” he hovered and swayed in a faux attempt at grace and light heartedness he did not feel. He was a trader, eager to overcharge tourists.

“Indeed. Indeed. Very far.” Hammerstein was always like a well oiled trap ready to snap.

“My name is Hugo,” he smiled behind the Buddha, “if there is anything I can do to assist while you stay here at...Langley Stay?”

He said it like a question even though it was an incomplete sentence that wasn't a question.

Now Hammerstein smiled beneath the Mask of Mercury, “Indeed. Indeed. We need an aircar. But not just any aircar, no, no. We require an exquisite ride of early model, retrofitted with the most contemporary appointments and technologies, security of course being no small issue for my wife and son.”

Tokushima blushed, but with a distinct pleasure at that. Sensing it, and all it implied, I too blushed, thankful for the mask of a sudden.

“Ahhh, yes, of course! Nothing but best!”

An impression was coming across then from the Buddha man. An older version of Herbivore. Hammerstein knew this gig like a well practiced drill. I was in awe.

“You know then where we may find such an aircar?” Tokushima asked coyly.

“Yes. I do.” He replied smugly. “And I shall be delighted to take you there immediately after your lunch!” He bowed.

Hammerstein showed his teeth in a forced smile.

“Thank you.”

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Now hit the road ‘till we’re done eating.

It was a delicious lunch. Then Buddha was back, sporting a long brocaded coat and an effected casual saunter.

He gave a momentary pause and Hammerstein didn’t miss a beat, “Five percent?”

“Done.”

An open aircab drifted down and we all piled in. Buddha leaned over to the driver, “Herb” was all he said and all that was needed to be said.



Gabriel Montagudo

We were aloft, below us the boat filled canals and shops suddenly falling away, above us security fields glimmering transparent. The sky was abuzz with all manner of vehicles. I traced very few traffic control guide

beams but there didn't appear any urgency or concern from Buddha or the driver.



Gabriel Montagudo

We careened about the city and then, finally, there was a large stone warehouse with numerous roof levels we arrived at. Rows of vehicles, servicemen and bots tending them, gleamed in the sun. A wonderland of styles, aircars from all corners and ages of the galaxy.

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My eyes widened beneath my mask, "Whoa..." I said stupidly and Tokushima chuckled a little at that.

We landed and Buddha took Mercury about the rooftop of a collection of aircars the like of which I had never imagined.

I began to wander when Tokushima took my hand, "SON!" she said, "Remember, Daddy is on business!"

She was so awesome, even when chiding me I took little notice of the chide. So were the aircars however, and I was getting my first taste of decadent luxuries in an exotic place. With a sporty female officer, and there was not even a peer on the planet I could flaunt it all in front of.



There was, however, a serious matter of a kidnapped princess-my princess, and I sought to pull my delight over the delicious design excesses of centuries of artistry back into some manner of perspective relative to the scenario.

I managed.

Herb had arrived. Older. I synchronized the images Hammerstein's memories had conveyed-Herb the mighty Navy officer, bane of star legions, with an ordinary appearing aircar salesman.

*Gabriel Montagudo*

Herb leaned forward toward Hammer. They recognized each other's jaw lines across the decades, even masked.

Soldiers forever.

"Hammer!"

"Herbivore."

Herb chuckled, "Herbivore...yeah. Long time ago. I'm assuming you'll need the best and all the special extras."

"Of course."

"The Altair. Comes with a droid. Seats seven. Can make escape velocity and will go a full parsec before you need to...refuel, dock, or die."

"Prefer to dock than die."

"Me too. You'll want the Altair."

"Done."

"No haggling, you always did have a certain class. But it tells me you're either rich as the Royals or working for them."

"The latter. Yes, I'm here on official business. Let's go inside."

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Herb signaled one of his men, “Get the Altair done up it’s sold.”



We moved into the warehouse proper and I saw Herb’s collection was not limited to the aircars on the roof tops. There were star yachts, dog-fighters, freighters-on and on. The quantum echoes of all these vehicles slammed at me with their histories and I found myself dizzy from the impressions.

I tried to follow the conversations. Hammerstein was asking Herb about wormhole equipment. Had he sold any recently?

Herb was resigned, not out of fear, but out of some strange moral code he operated by. He and Hammerstein were of a kind, they shared an experience that made Hammerstein...unique. When he needed information, Herb would provide it.

“Don’t get much call for it. Not many that can handle wormholing. Mostly they try, and mostly they die. Takes a special breed to ride that storm. This group-they looked kind of tawdry. Wannabees. But they could pay, and who am I to keep a fool and his money together longer than the fates would conspire?”

Hammerstein held back a grim snort.



Steve Allman

Herb continued, “I’d actually heard the name before-No-deal DePaulo. Supposed to be a bit of a player in Core. He didn’t look like much to me. Said he had a client, Imperial. Needed a wormhole capable frigate. We went over the equipment, he gave me the money, and he and the ship were gone before the suns set.”

“The core? He’s a core smuggler?”

“Galactic core-Tangeonprioc to be specific. Hangs out at the Corewinds Tavern.”

“He told you that?”

Herb’s grizzled visage smiled, “He didn’t have to—he was wearing the T-shirt, “Corewinds Tavern. Best Damn Bar in Tangeonprioc.”

It occurred to me then our entire investigation could have run into a dead end at Langley Stay if it weren’t for a slime ball smuggler’s choice of bad sentimentality of attire one day. Yet there it was.

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IN TANGEONPRIOC

"Thanks Herb. The Altair, she ready?"

"She was ready before you left Caldris system, Buck. Don't forget who you're buying from-my hardware works."

"Yeah, well, I got that. Almost took us out-they hit us with the wormhole."

That brought a frown to Herb. "Sorry to hear that. You spank 'em?"

"Hard, but we got lucky."

"You taking the kid and the lady on a payback run? To the Core? To Tangeonprio?"

Hammerstein paused, I sensed he thought for a moment to explain, but didn't see any good would come of it.

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"Lot of Marauders in the core. Make sure that Altair is battened down good before you start shooting Marauders, aye Buck?"

“Will do Herb. We’ll make sure the Altair is safe and sound before the firing starts.”

“Good. Good. Don’t want to see any scratches on her when you come back and tell me how the story plays out.”

“Herb, if I can fly that Altair back to this...warehouse, I’m going to make sure there’s not a scratch on it.”



So went our visit to Langley Stay at voids end where we acquired a particularly well appointed luxury aircar of classic make from the Pleiades. We had a suspect-the notorious No-deal-Depaulo. Destination: Tangeonprioc. Sin city of the galactic core, smack dab in Marauder territory. Marauders, worse than the smugglers and the core syndicates, harbingers of a strange cult-rumored to be entirely mad and without ordinary human remorse, fear, or reason.

I was, however, distracted. One of the techs had brought up the Altair and it was one sweet ride. We hovered over the fishing port where Coco-butter waited. I could feel his surprise, and a bit of boyish excitement-and yes, as a twelve year old I DO

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recognize that it often lingers well into manhood-over the Altair.

"Nice ride, Sir." He quipped across the com.

Hammerstein contained a small glow of pride, then made a guilty glance at Tokushima. She realized the two gentlemen were having an "OH YEAH!" moment in the midst of a serious investigation and she looked away embarrassed for them both.

"Uhhh, yeah, well, yes it is. Necessary part of the game though-Herb had his price for the information and it was..."

"The most expensive class-A luxury aircar in an entire warehouse the size of a small city." Tokushima finished slyly.

Hammerstein gave her a dry look, "Anyway, the Intel was priceless-we have a suspect's name and location, so we need to get back to the Kanaafutura."

"Yes Sir."

The Hammerhead was already powering up. We hovered a bit more until it was airborne and the two craft made for the station.

The Altair's gravity bubble was a luxury unit-you could have set a crystal wine glass full of red on a white silk napkin on its console and it wasn't so much as going to ripple-no matter how hard the gees or tight the banks. I watched Langley Stay become a world again, the station a place (with annoying customs agents) all without the slightest sense of movement-though the world and station banked about me at the most amazing angles as Hammerstein ruminated at the wheel over lost years and his honor and career and the princess all at risk in the same unimaginable contest he now faced.

The old granite beast had two families from two marriages, I realized for the first time-so focused his thoughts were on his mission, so compartmentalized his mind-he had not revealed them. I took a frightful note

then; even with my psychic abilities there were important and central aspects of some people that could be put out of their minds. I realized why, too, at that moment why he did this-if the full weight of his concerns pressed in on him at any given time he would simply become catatonic. He managed his survival by stripping away from his thoughts whole aspects of his life and living in watertight time compartments.

We docked with the Kanaafutura, parked and locked down the Altair in its massive hold. Beside it Coco-butter spun the Hammerhead down with the natural flourish of daring do. The pressurized the hold and we also spilled out of the vehicles with a sense of "home" as it were for spacers-and how quickly that sense fills one up-like seawater into a spongy reef. The Kanaafutura was home.

"Forrr-maation! Droids at the helm. All human personnel in the hold!" Hammerstein's command voice was different from his detective voice. War and

Reason two realities that intersected, and yet War with its own creeping edge of Chaos ever at the perimeter. Hammerstein was now about to break protocol with the Royal police confidentiality. This was one of those moments when one understood command included risks and couldn't all be pulled out of the manual.

At length the platoon of Rangers took up a nervous formation in the hold. Coco, Tokushima, and I stood to his side none of us any more informed than the platoon at that moment. Something in Hammerstein's bearing changed; memories were flooding his mind and body now. Stances: attention, at ease, parade rest. His mind swept back through the years to a sun burnt lot and he