

Death on the Crosstime Express  
by Chris Roberson

The airship which hung between the docking pylons, tethered fore and aft, was painted a dark shade of blue and trimmed with gold, the colors of the Crosstime Line. But even if one didn't recognize the coloration, the sheer size of the craft alone would have been enough to signal its importance. It dwarfed the other airships drifting at anchor in the Texican National Airfields on the outskirts of Waterloo. The smallest of the other craft, neither equipped with translocation engines nor rated for underspace passage if they had been, were locals, carrying passengers and freight to the Anglo-American Confederation, or across the seas to the French Workers Concordat or the Russian Czardom or Chinese Collective. Slightly larger were the intercontinua airships which traveled to and from neighboring alternatives, spending hours, days, or weeks journeying through underspace to translocate into other worlds. But largest of all was the blue and gold immensity of the Crosstime Express, the pride of the line, which weekly made the journey from here to Helium and back again.

Vivian Starkweather checked the time. Slipping her watch back into its vest pocket, she held a lit match to the cigarillo clenched between her teeth.

"Don't worry, darlins," she said to the young women standing beside her at the base of the gangplank, jeweled bindis twinkling brightly in the morning sun against the dark skin of their foreheads. Starkweather expelled a stream of smoke from the corner of her mouth, and hooked her thumbs through her beltloops. "I expect we'll be boarding directly."

The Indian princesses didn't seem much to mind the delay, though, hardly noticing Starkweather's assurances, too busy making eyes at the younger members of the crew in their crisp white jackets and peaked caps, and especially at the ship's young steward, supervising the loading of comestible provisions onto the blue and gold craft.

Aside from being the site for the Crosstime Line's terminus, the only other item of interest about the alternative was that it was home to the Pinkertons, the private security firm routinely contracted by intercontinua businesses and governments alike. Many a smuggler, freebooter, or suspect fleeing prosecution had come to dread the baleful open eye which was the symbol of the men and women who lived up to their motto, "We Never Sleep."

Most of the intercontinua craft anchored around the airfield had come here for the same reason, ferrying passengers from neighboring alternatives, who now stood ready to mount the gangplank to the blue and gold airship. Travelers from neighboring alternatives, they had made the journey here to catch the Crosstime Express, which would continue on to Helium, seat of the League of Worlds and hub of all intercontinua commerce in this region of the Myriad. A journey of less than three days, which shorter range vessels might take weeks or even longer to complete.

If the two young Indian women in their silk saris and silver bangles weren't bothered, though, there were others less sanguine about the delay. A pair of Russian monks in heavy cassocks shifted uneasily, their gaze darting back and forth nervously as they held their hands against their round bellies. And the mandarin whose ruby button atop his hat indicated the highest level of service to the emperor, in some distant alternative dominated by the Chinese throne, seemed ill-at-ease, as though uncertain the correct protocol in such situations. But the most distressed by the inability of the passengers to board the ship were the trio of white-skinned men in their wool suits and

bowler hats.

"This is intolerable, I say," blustered the man with the bushy mustaches and red cheeks, who was evidently the leader of the three. "The agreement drawn up with the Crosstime Line clearly states that we are to have ample time to examine the security arrangements before departure."

Behind him stood a short, round man with a sheaf of papers in hand, and a slender man with a long nose and piercing blue eyes.

"I assure you, Mister Engel," said Captain N'Diklam, soothingly, "it will be only a momentary delay. We have had to take on relief crewmen, and it is simply taking longer to get them squared away than anticipated." The captain smiled, teeth white and even against this dark brown skin, and turned to confer with the bosun who had just ambled down the gangplank.

The three men were clearly not satisfied, but evidently saw little to be gained from pressing the issue at this point, and turned to walk away. They moved in concert, with almost military precision, the mustachioed Engel in the lead and the other two following at his flanks like a vanguard of birds in flight.

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In the end, it was less than a quarter of an hour later before the gangplank was opened and the passengers allowed to board the Crosstime Express. Vivian Starkweather was one of the first onboard, to the consternation of the trio in their bowler-hats, who were evidently some sort of security detachment that had booked passage to make preparations for another who would be joining them at a later stop on the journey. Starkweather, for her part, pretended not to notice the three men who glared daggers at her back, but had let her hand casual rest on the hilt of the Bowie knife hanging from her belt, as though to show that she was not without resources of her own. Rumored to be in the employ of one of the wealthier Texican gas-mining concerns, Starkweather was said to be journeying to Helium to negotiate an extremely lucrative trade agreement, but no one knew for certain.

In her mid-thirties, Starkweather was, if not classically beautiful, then at least ruggedly handsome. A few inches shy of six feet in height, with a mass of brown hair worn up in a bun at the back of her head, she had striking green eyes, a long nose and strong jaw-line. She seemed to favor riding costume, trousers and matching jackets, with dinosaur-hide boots on her feet, a luxury item from an alternative far off in the Myriad where the terrible lizards never died out, a popular destination for wealthy hunters.

The other passengers who mounted the gangplank, after Starkweather and the bowler-hat trio had boarded, included an ambassador from the Reformed Dynast of Heliopolis and his slaves, from an alternative where the pyramid-builders still held sway; a group of Berber scholars from an Andalusia on an alternative dominated by a Mohammedan caliphate; the pair of Indian princesses in their finery, their luggage carried on the back of a miniature automaton elephant, steam hissing from its joints with each cumbersome step; a group of Maori from an alternative on which Polynesian princes ruled both hemispheres, though with their fearsome moko tattoos it was impossible to say whether they were diplomats or warriors; the ill-at-ease mandarine; an Aztec warlord in linen suit and tastefully garish waistcoat, with jade plugs in his lobes and a labret through his lower lip, traveling with a silent, unsmiling woman whose hair was cut in a bob and died purple, her hands and feet hennaed in sinewy patterns; and finally the pair of Russian monks in their heavy cassocks, whose nervousness seemed to vanish as they stepped onto the gangplank.

Starkweather, Engel and his security detachment, and the two Russians were the only passengers of European extraction in the first class berths, with the rest riding in economy or steerage. Fair and even slightly tanned skin was something of a rarity onboard altogether, in fact, with only a bare handful of Europeans onboard at all, and most of those either servants to other passengers or low-ranking members of the crew, like the sandy-haired steward who had so captured the attention of the Indian princesses.

The captain, Mba N'Diklam, was a follower of Sunni Islam, and a subject of a Jolof Empire whose reach extended far beyond the shores of western Africa. He smiled often, teeth straight and white against skin so dark it was almost black, and peppered his speech with words and phrases from his native Wolof. The rest of the crew in their crisp white jackets and peaked caps, on their lapels the blue-and-gold rosette of the Crosstime Line, were a mix of Malay, Tamil, Dayak, Athabascan, and European.

After the passengers had all boarded, and the luggage had been stowed, chimes sounded throughout the ship, signaling their impending departure. At the captain's invitation, the first class passengers gathered in the drawing room to watch the launch through the heavily-shielded portholes.

From takeoff through to the next scheduled landing, the Crosstime Express would remain sealed and pressurized, against the airless vacuum of underspace. The sound of the hatches being closed and sealed rang through the ship with an air of finality, and a few of those gathered in the drawing room seemed unsettled by the sound. Or perhaps merely unsettled by the thought of leaving the sane world of three dimensions behind when the translocation engine was engaged, and moving into the less sensible realm of underspace. The security detachment, in particular, appeared novices when it came to intercontinua travel, hailing from an alternative which had only recently learned of the Myriad and of the countless alternate worlds stretching out to infinity. But the two young Hindu women, as well, seemed somewhat unsettled, and huddled near one another on a low divan, talking in voices so low they could scarcely be heard.

Elsewhere, deep in the heart of the airship, the navigator cleared her thoughts, and set her mind on their destination. A seer, one of those rare souls able to peer beyond the fabric of the world, into and through underspace into the worlds beyond, the navigator was arguably the most essential member of the crew, as without her to guide them, once the translocation engine was engaged the ship could easily be lost forever, adrift and directionless in underspace. Almost equally invaluable, though, were the ship's defenders, senders able to broadcast their own thoughts into the ether; there were creatures who made underspace their home, monsters of pure appetite and sense-defying shape who swam in that strange region like sharks prowling the seas, and since conventional weapons were of little use against the creature's diamond-hard skins, the only way to repel their voracious attacks was at the level of thought.

With a seer to guide them and a sender manning the defense, the ship required only an engineer to man the translocation engine, a pilot to man the helm, and a captain to command them.

When the Crosstime Express slipped its moorings, the captain ordered her elevated some three-quarters of a mile into the air. It was safest, when moving from world to world, to translocate from high up, to account for variances in elevation and geography from one alternative to the next. Translocation displaced the matter occupying the volume of space a vessel enters, and if the matter is merely empty air, the result will be little more

than a brief flash and an audible bang, as the molecules of the atmosphere are excited, forced out of the way of the incoming vessel, nothing more dramatic than a bolt of midday lightning and a peal of distant thunder. If the vessel were to translocate into any material denser than water, though, the mass at the target couldn't be displaced quickly enough to accommodate the incoming vessel, and the craft would be compacted on arrival. An only relatively dense material like sand would likely only damage a vessel, not destroy it, but with a sufficient dense matter like rock or metal, an entire vessel could be compacted to only a fraction of its original size, with disastrous results for anyone onboard, and for any living things in the nearby space. Naturally, most intercontinua craft were airworthy, as a result, and it was only the most reckless of souls who translocated while anywhere near ground level.

As the ground fell away beyond the portholes, Starkweather chatted amiably in Spanish with the Berber scholars over cups of strong Turkish coffee, spicing her own liberally with a splash of Tennessee whisky from a flask she pulled from a hip pocket. A few moments later the ship's physician joined them, an older woman named Ortiz who was a Guanche native who spoke Castilian Spanish with the slight accent of the Canary Island, her coffee so flavored with milk that it almost matched her tawny skin.

The Berbers, like Starkweather and all the other passengers onboard, were bound for the seat of the League of Worlds and hub of intercontinua trade, Helium. Knowledge, like wealth and natural resources, was something which the Heliumites had in abundance. And while the streets of Helium were not paved in gold, they may as well have been, as the alternative was rich in the lighter-than-air gas which gave the city-state its name. The gas helium was found in most all alternatives, but only a scant few, like Helium herself or Vivian Starkweather's native Texico, had the resources necessary to mine and refine it. And though only the most trusted diplomats could penetrate to the heart of the League of Worlds headquarters itself, all were welcome in the public areas of Helium, and so it was not uncommon to find natives of all imaginable histories jostling cheek-to-jowl in the markets and thoroughfares of Helium, including elfish or brutish men from alternatives where different strains of humanity came to dominate, or even some who, while they walked and talked like humans, were derived from other animals altogether, lagomorphs and lizardmen and talking apes from alternatives where species other than man rose to sentience and dominance.

The ship's steward entered the drawing room, a young man of European extraction who was no more than twenty years old and spoke with a faint Eton accent. He introduced himself merely as Patrick, and said that he'd been sent to see to the passenger's needs, and that the captain would be joining them shortly.

When the airship had reached a suitable altitude, the chimes again rang throughout the ship, this time signaling that the translocation engine would momentarily be engaged. A short while later a brief, high-pitched whine sounded in the drawing room, followed by an almost imperceptible juddering, and then faded almost, but not entirely, away, the whine persisting just at the edge of hearing, the vibration only barely perceptible in the faint ripples in the coffee within their cups, or the gentle shake of the feathers the purple-haired Aztec woman wore through her headband.

Once the ship was underway, propelled by jets of air from nozzles mounted on the outer hull, the propellers useless in the airless vacuum of underspace, the captain joined the first class passengers in the drawing room.

Before Captain N'Diklam had made it two steps into the cabin, though, the three men of the security detachment, bowler hats now clutched in their hands,

put themselves in his path.

"Captain, we need to discuss the security precautions you've taken for our empress's impending arrival." Engels blinked his eyes rapidly, punctuating his words with little stabs of his free hand, the fingers of the other wrapped tightly around the brim of his hat.

"And so you shall, gentlemen," N'Diklam said with an easy smile. "We won't be stopping at your alternative until late afternoon, the day after tomorrow, and I assure you that we will have everything settled to your satisfaction well before that time."

Behind Engel, the little round man and the other with the piercing blue eyes exchanged glances.

The tall African looked down at the smaller white man still blocking his way. "But in the near term, I would very much like a cup of coffee and a chance to speak to the other passengers," N'Diklam said, gently but with steel beneath his words. "If you wouldn't mind...?" He made a short motion with his hand, as if miming opening a door, and raised an eyebrow, waiting a response.

Engel, flustered, clenched the brim of his hat tighter, but with a final harrumph turned to the left and moved out of the way, his two companions following precisely at his flanks, as in a carefully practiced maneuver.

As the captain moved to mingle with the rest of the passengers, introducing himself and giving the assurances of himself and the whole Crosstime Line that their journeys would be pleasant ones, the three men of the security detachment drifted to the nearest porthole and, peering out with open-mouthed expressions of wondered, gawped like rustics at the unsettlingly shifting colors and strange geometries of underspace beyond.

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That evening, after dinner, Captain N'Diklam, Starkweather, and a few of the other passengers gathered at the card table in the smoking room, while in the salon the ship's steward played a seemingly endless series of romantic airs on the aluminum grand piano for the entertainment of the Hindu princesses.

The Russians, with small glasses of vodka at their elbows, urged for a few rounds of durak, but the notion of a game with no winners, only a single loser for each round, soon wore on the other players, and another game was called for. N'Diklam exercised a bit of command authority and led the way with a hand of primero, which proved too complex for simple enjoyment but with stakes too low to be of much interest. When Starkweather instructed the others in the basics of Texican hold 'em, though, the group seemed to have found its proper tempo, and a number of hands followed.

Starkweather had the button, and was sitting on a pair of queens in the hole, when the bosun burst in, eyes wide and white in his dark face.

"It's the navigator!" he blurted out, rushing to the captain's side. "She's been murdered!"

And that signaled the end of the evening's entertainments.

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It was long past the hour when the passengers might have been expected to retire for the evening, but most of them lingered in the salon, waiting to

hear word about the poor navigator. The Aztec woman, her purple bob somewhat ruffled, was uncharacteristically chatty, and reported passing the crewmen carrying the body through the companion-way to the medical bay, the blood seeping through the linen sheet which swathed her lifeless form. Her companion, in only his waist-coat and shirt-sleeves, tapped one of his jade earplugs and scowled, muttering something beneath his breath about the unseemly waste of so much blood.

There was some concern over what would become of the ship, without the navigator to guide her through underspace. Would the Crosstime Express drift helpless in that strange realm, never to return to the sane security of space-time, much less their intended destination? Those fears were quickly put to rest, however, when more seasoned intercontinua travelers among them explained about the standard practice of employing second navigators in the event of emergency. All agreed that brutal murder was likely not one of the anticipated emergencies, but were nevertheless relieved the protocol was in place.

A few of the crew mingled with the passengers, as the captain had evicted all but Doctor Ortiz, himself, and the bosun from the medical bay for the duration of the autopsy, and the crewmen were just as unsettled by the unexpected and brutal slaying as the passengers. The steward made a desolatory attempt to lighten the mood by playing music hall tunes on the aluminum grand piano, but abandoned the attempt in moments after catching a sharp glance from Starkweather.

Finally, the captain returned and gave a full accounting of the situation to the others. It appeared, he said, that the navigator had been assaulted at her post by an unknown assailant, and stabbed repeatedly with a slim blade. Nothing further was known about the incident, but the captain assured the passengers that the crew would be conducting a thorough investigation, and that on their arrival in Helium the matter would be remanded to the Crosstime Line and the authorities to investigate fully. In the meantime, however, the passengers should sleep soundly in the knowledge that he had increased the ship's onboard security, posting armed crewmen in all of the companion-ways and public areas day and night, and that he would allow nothing to threaten the safety of the passengers.

At the captain's side was a man of middle age with a double chin and tufts of hair sticking from his ears, who had the sigil of a seer emblazoned on the blue-and-gold rosette pinned to his lapel.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Mr. Tanacre, our ship's second navigator," the captain said. "You have my complete assurances that Tanacre will be able to guide our course successfully through the remainder of our voyage."

Some of the passengers evidently harbored concerns about the man's qualifications, but it was Engel who stepped forward to give those concerns voice.

"How do we know that this tub of guts has the stuff to get the job done?"

The second navigator seemed flustered by the brusque and outright rude manner of the man, but with a glance to the captain he calmly explained. "Well," he began, his voice quavering slightly, "while my own mastery of the talent of seeing is not nearly so powerful or refined as that of the late navigator, still I am confident in my ability to fulfill my duties."

Engel narrowed his eyes. "Just what do you mean, 'no nearly so powerful'?"

"Well," the navigator explained, with mounting confidence, "the late navigator was so powerful a seer that she might even have been able to read another's thoughts if she so chose, and at the very least could have detected any extremes of emotion or distress onboard the Express." He paused, then humbly added, "I, on the other hand, am able merely to peer through underspace into other worlds, helping chart the Express's course through this tumultuous region."

"Thank you, Tanacre," the captain interrupted. "And thank you," he said to the passengers, "for your patience and understanding in these unfortunate circumstances. Now, the second navigator is needed at his post if we are to reach our off-route stop tomorrow."

Captain and navigator excused themselves, and then singly or in pairs the passengers drifted away from the salon and back to their individual cabins for the night.

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The following day passed quickly, with most of the passengers seeming to prefer the solitude of their cabins to the exposure of the public spaces, and so it was not until the evening meal that most of them were gathered together again. At the captain's insistence, the first class passengers had joined him at the captain's table, which had been expanded by additional leaves for the occasion.

Whether by happenstance or design, the three men of the security detachment had been seated as far from the captain as possible. And when Engel began to belabor the captain about the failure of the crew to locate the killer, it wasn't hard to imagine that the placement had been by design.

Starkweather found herself seated next to the two Indian princesses. Chatting amiably over appetizers and aperitifs, the young ladies with the former and Starkweather with the latter, it eventuated that the two Hindus were wealthy heiresses from an alternative dominated by South Asia, and were on one last grand voyage together before one of them went off to university and the other got married. They hadn't traveled far at all from home before, and were almost as wide-eyed at the wonders of the Myriad as the backwater security detachment, though the young ladies handled it with considerably more grace.

Still, there were some realities of intercontinua travel that came as a surprise to them. For example, one of the two mentioned having been accosted back in Starkweather's Texico by a young man who insisted that he knew her, when the young lady knew for a fact that they'd never met. The young man had pressed the issue, referring to some intimate history that they'd supposedly shared, and it was only with the assistance of passing Texican Ranger that the young lady had been able to extricate herself from the man's grip.

Starkweather, taking pains to reassure the young women about the safety of the streets of her native Waterloo, explained how worlds which were nearest one another in the Myriad, whose histories diverged in the relatively recent past, could produce nearly identical duplicates of the same person, one in each alternative. But while the two duplicates might resemble one another physically, sharing a common point of origin, their own personal histories would diverge as much and as quickly as did the histories of their world. Such misunderstandings and misidentifications as the young women had encountered were actually quite common in intercontinua travel. With a sly smile, Starkweather confided that she'd pretended to be her own duplicate, on several different occasions, just to avoid uncomfortable reunions with her own past

associates.

Later, after the first course arrived, conversation around the table turned, as it often did, to politics. There was some dissention around the table about the League of Worlds, and particularly its noninterference accords. The League, to which the native alternatives of most of the passengers and crew belonged, worked to prevent the disruption of developing worlds, in the hopes that worlds unaware of the existence of the Myriad might not be exploited by their more technologically advanced neighbors. However, as others around the table were quick to point out, the noninterference accords were only enforceable among member alternatives. Others, and in particular the Tenth Imperium, an intercontinua power which dominated nearly as many alternatives as belonged to the League of Worlds, in particular had a long history of interference. And, in fact, it was a customary tactic of the Imperium to offer intercontinua technology to worlds which had not yet discovered the principle of translocation or yet developed the Talents, in exchange for their allegiance to the Tenth Imperium.

The ambassador from the Reformed Dynast of Heliopolis, who had remained silent through most of the discussion, raised a grim specter when he suggested the possibility that the differing philosophies of the League and the Tenth Imperium might one day lead to armed conflict between the two bodies. It would be regrettable, the ambassador insisted, but seemed to him to be an inevitability. Something of a pall fell over the table, as the ambassador's dire assessment settled in.

It was at this point, rushing to fill the silence, that Engel switched from opprobrium, directed at the captain and crew, to self-aggrandizement, directed at himself and his people. He boasted about how scientists of his own nation-state had independently discovered translocation the year before, and made contact with other worlds in short order. And that his own island nation boasted a disproportionately high number of Talents, or so he believed, including a member of his own detachment. He indicated the man with the piercing blue eyes, and explained that he had been found to have some ability to send, though understandably undeveloped and untrained.

Starkweather seemed unable to resist deflating the man, as puffed up as he was. She pointed out, casually, that in her own alternative it had been less than a decade and a half since William James pioneered the development of psychic abilities, fortuitously just in time for Nikola Tesla to complete the translocation engine. And yet with only a few years head-start, her own alternative was rapidly becoming a key player in intercontinua commerce, while his home was still barely dipping their toes into the shallow end of underspace.

Engel blustered, cheeks puffed and red, but failed to mount any effective retort, and when the next course arrived on the table, the conversation drifted on.

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After dinner, Captain N'Diklam was joined by the bosun and the cook's mate in an impromptu recital. All three men hailed from the western shores of Africa in their respective alternatives, and had brought onboard sabar drums crafted from the wood of the baobab tree; though they came from widely divergent histories, the rhythm of the drums seemed to cut across the Myriad. While he was the commanding officer of the ship, in their informal ensembles N'Diklam played the Lambe, the squat barrel-shaped bass drum, letting the cook's mate set the tempo with the tall, slender Sabar N'Der, leaving the bosun to play the tenor Talmbat.



The rhythm of the sabar drums reverberated through the ship, and for a short while, at least, the tense atmosphere of the past day seemed to lighten, if only a little.

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On the way back to her cabin, Vivian Starkweather nearly collided with Doctor Ortiz, who was visibly upset. With the promise of a nightcap of Tennessee whisky and a fine Virginian cigarillo, Starkweather lured the woman to her cabin, and there got from her the reasons for her distress.

The doctor's report about the late navigator, it appeared, had differed in significant detail to that relayed by the captain to the passengers. Rather than being stabbed to death, the doctor explained, the amount of blood found on the navigator's body suggested that the woman's heart had stopped pumping long before she had died. In other words, the navigator had been dead before the knife had ever been plunged into her body.

"A sender," Starkweather said, nodding.

"It isn't unheard of," the doctor answered, plainly distressed. "A powerful enough suggestion could convince the mind to stop the heart's beating."

Starkweather took a long drag of her cigarillo, thoughtfully.

"What I don't understand is," the doctor went on, both hands wrap tightly around her mug of whisky, "if the killer was a sender, why stab a body that's already dead?"

Starkweather threw back the rest of her own whisky in a single shot, then wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. "Darlin', that's a fine question."

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Klaxons sounding in the middle of the night disturbed the slumber of the crew, and even woke most of the passengers in their sound-proofed cabins. It was a familiar sound in intercontinua travel, and hardly a cause for serious alarm, but even the seasoned travelers like Starkweather found it difficult to go back to sleep while the ship was under attack.

Beyond the pressurized hull of the Crosstime Express, the strange denizens of underspace swarmed, intent on consuming the ship and all within her. From time to time one ventured near enough that their diamond-hard hide brushed against the outer hull, sending vibrations rattling through the ship, setting teeth and nerves on edge.

Though virtually indestructible, the monstrous creatures of underspace were thinking beings, even if those thoughts were concerned only with their endless appetites and boundless rages. And since they thought, the creatures were susceptible to the talents of a sender. Like all the ships of the Crosstime Line, the Express numbered a sender among its crew as defender, on hand to project negative thoughts into the alien minds of the underspace dwellers, driving them away.

A quarter of an hour after the attack began the klaxons sounded the all clear, and the passengers and crew returned to their beds.

The next morning at breakfast, Starkweather overheard the ship's steward chatting with the pair of Hindu princesses at the next table over. The steward

related that he had heard the ship's defender say that, while she was in the process of repelling the attack, that she sensed someone else assisting in the defense. At that hour, though, the second defender, who was her normal backup in such circumstances, was below decks and insensate with drink, and in no position to conjure thoughts within his own mind, much less project them into someone else's.

As he passed by her table, Starkweather asked the steward to fetch her a fresh cup of coffee, complaining that the one from which she'd been drinking had gone cold. And if the steward noticed the tightly folded piece of paper which Starkweather had tucked between the cup and saucer she handed him, he gave no indication.

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Under normal circumstances, the Crosstime Express made no stops between the terminus on the one end and Helium on the other. On this journey, though, an off-route stop had been announced in advance, to retrieve the security detachment's sovereign. It seemed that, having only recently made contact with other worlds, having just mastered the principle of translocation and the rudiments of the talents, this new alternative's application for admittance to the League of Worlds had been accepted, and the sovereign would now be journeying to the headquarters of the League to sign the charter. It was something of a signal honor, since only delegates from member worlds and their personal security retinues were allowed within the walls of League headquarters itself.

The stop was scheduled for later in the afternoon on the second day of the voyage. In midmorning, the passengers lingered over coffee at table while breakfast was cleared away. The only first class passenger not present was the member of the security detachment with the piercing blue eyes, who appeared to have slept late, and joined his two companions at the table looking bleary-eyed and squinting. A few moments after the blue-eyed man sat down, the ship's steward Patrick entered the room, and then in full view of the passengers collapsed to the deck with a pained expression.

While Patrick was being helped to the medical bay for examination and treatment by the Berber scholars, a klaxon began to sound on the ship, which most of the passengers mistakenly took to signal another incursion by underspace denizens. Starkweather and a few of the others quickly pointed out that the sequence of notes was all wrong, and that it signaled another danger instead. Fire.

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There was, in the end, only one fatality, though several more of the crew were injured in the blaze. The fire had broken out in the cargo hold, and since the hatches had all been closed and secured, only a single compartment was affected. A crewman had been caught in the blaze, and not discovered until after the fire had been completely extinguished. And while he was badly burned, all of his clothing and body hair scorched off, he was quickly identified as one of the relief crew who had boarded at the terminus, shortly before the passengers. He had been a solitary figure, with a bushy beard, who kept to himself with his eyes down and his mouth shut. None in the crew could remember exchanging more than a dozen words with him, and those only related to his work.

The fire appeared to have been the result of a dropped match, a careless mistake that had set alight a bolt of inflammable material, part of a shipment of dry goods bound for Helium. What the crewman had been doing in the cargo

hold was unclear, but it was assumed that he had sneaked off from his supervisors to smoke some illicit substance or other, the use of intoxicants being not unknown among ship's crew, though most such substances were contraband throughout League worlds.

A second death, following so closely on the heels of the navigator's murder, was unsettling to some onboard, but it wasn't until the dead man's effects were examined that any connection between the two was suspected. However, when a thin-bladed knife, still darkened with the navigator's blood, was found in the dead man's trunk, along with a handwritten letter apparently in the navigator's own hand, rebuffing the crewman's crude and unwanted advances, an apparent narrative began to emerge.

The crewman, it would seem, had been a spurned lover, who in a fit of jealous rage had stabbed the navigator to death, when she refused to return his affections. When he had in short order been caught in an unexpected conflagration, it has been simply a matter of just desserts.

The captain considered it a fait accompli, and the case closed, as he explained once he'd gathered all of the passengers into the drawing room.

But not everyone was convinced.

"I'm sorry, captain," Vivian Starkweather said, setting her reticule down on a chair and stepping forward, "but the second death does not solve the mystery of the first. It only compounds it."

The captain cocked an eyebrow, intrigued, but Engel, under some stress over the impending arrival of his sovereign, was somewhat more agitated.

"And just who, madam, do you think you are?" he asked, red-faced.

With a smile, Starkweather reached into the pocket of her jacket, and produce a badge on which is embossed a stylized human eye and the motto "We Never Sleep."

Engel looked at the badge uncomprehendingly, but the other passengers whispered to one another in hushed tones, muttering the word "Pinkerton."

Starkweather flipped the leather wallet shut over the badge and slipped it back into her pocket. "What I am, as of now, is the law around these parts."

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"What business has a Pinkerton on my boat?" Captain N'Diklam asked, unsmiling.

"My outfit has been contracted by the Crosstime Line to ferret out a smuggling ring that seems to be using the Express as one of its principal conduits." She paused, and then almost distractedly, added, "You might want to find a third for your little drum group, captain. You should likely go ahead and take the bosun into custody, along with those two." She pointed at the pair of Russian monks. "The three of them are the main players in the smuggling ring, though there may be one or two others onboard that we haven't identified yet."

The captain didn't bother to question her, but snapped his fingers and ordered two of his crewmen to take the Russians into custody, and ordered them to locate the bosun and take him in hand, as well. The Russians, objecting loudly if unconvincingly, were dragged from the room.

"And you say that this smuggling ring is responsible for killing my navigator

and crewman?" N'Diklam asked, puzzled.

"Nope." Starkweather shook her head, then stuck a cigarillo between her teeth and struck a match on the edge of a table. "The smuggling ring's a coincidence, I figure. The killings are unconnected." She held the lit match before her face, her long nose and strong jaw in stark relief in the flickering light, giving her otherwise ruggedly handsome features a somewhat demonic aspect. "But we'll get to your killer soon enough. The way I figure it, the killer is one of the people in this room."

"This is outrageous!" shouted Engel.

"You reckon?" Starkweather smiled, and leaned over to pick up her handbag from the chair beside her, the cigarillo still clenched between her teeth. "Think maybe it's you?"

Engel opened his mouth to object, then slammed his teeth shut again, eyes wide and bulging. "I won't stand for this!" He motioned for his two companions to follow, and then turned to the left to leave. Before he'd gone two steps, though, he collided with the man with the piercing blue eyes, who had turned right instead of left and blundered right into him.

"There it is," Starkweather said with a smile. Snapping her reticule open, she reached in and pulled out a heavy Colt Navy revolver, which she cocked and pointed at the head of the man with the piercing blue eyes. "I'd ask you not to make a move, friend, not so much as a twitch, or I'm liable to pull this here trigger."

Engel turned to look at his companion, evidently expecting to see the same outrage and annoyance he himself felt at this poor treatment, but was surprised instead to find the man staring calmly at Starkweather, piercing blue eyes narrowed and lip curled in a sneer. "Barclay, what's this all about?"

The man ignored the other, but continued to stare at Starkweather. "If you know what I am, you know I could drop you before you even noticed a twinge."

"That's as maybe," Starkweather said with a shrug, "but you can only think so many thoughts at once. Drop me and my partner'll finish you off before you take another breath."

From the door to the drawing room came the sound of a revolver being cocked, and the passengers as one turned to see the ship's steward in the open doorway, a Webley revolver in hand, pointed at the man's head.

"Patrick Lightfoot Carmody," the steward said, flashing a badge like the one Starkweather had produced. "Pinkerton."

The blue-eyed man sneered, but remained motionless. After a long silence, he said, in an unfamiliar accent, "How did you know?"

"Wrong place, wrong time, friend." Starkweather slid onto the chair, crossing her legs but keeping her pistol aimed at his head. "We were after other fish entirely and you just fell into our lap. And if not for the knife, we might not have guessed a thing." She paused, thoughtfully. "What was it? Were you worried that a stopped heart not might not be assumed to be natural causes, but that someone might suspect there was a sending assassin onboard? So you make it look like a mundane murder, instead, which has benefits of its own."

"So he killed the navigator?" the captain said, jerking a thumb at the man.

"But why?"

"The navigator was incidental," Starkweather explained. "He planned to kill someone else, and the navigator being such a strong seer meant that she had a good chance of picking up on the crime. So she was eliminated to clear the way for another murder."

"The crewman," the captain said, nodding.

"But why would Barclay want to kill your crewman?" Engel demanded to know.

"No reason at all," Starkweather said. "The question to ask, rather, is why would that crewman want to kill your man?"

Engel looked at her, confusion evident, while the blue-eyed man beside him stiffened.

"See, that isn't Barclay," Starkweather went on. "Or at least, not the one you know. I think you'll find, if you were to quiz him, that he won't be quite so up on trivia about your home alternative as the man you knew."

Engel turned from her to the man beside him, and edged away, cautiously. "B-Barclay?" he said, disbelievingly. "Is... it is true?"

The blue-eyed man didn't bother answering Engel, but continued to glare at Starkweather.

"Thing is," she went on, "your Barclay wasn't really the point of all this, either, but just another incident means to an end. See, once your sovereign comes onboard, the next stop is Helium, and the headquarters of the League of Worlds. And nobody, but nobody, can get into the headquarters itself unless they're a representative of a member world. Unless..." She paused, significantly.

"Unless they're part of the diplomat's security retinue," the captain finished.

"Got it in one," Starkweather answered. "So the point of all of this was just to get someone in a position to walk through those golden doors uncontested, right into the midst of the League's ruling council. And if that someone had the ability to plant powerful suggestions in the minds of others, powerful enough even to help ward off underspace monsters when he thought his ship might get eaten en route, then I imagine implanting enough suggestions to stop the hearts of the entire ruling council wouldn't be beyond his abilities, and that he could do a considerable amount of damage before anyone managed to stop them."

"So who is this?" the captain asked, narrowing his gaze at the blue-eyed man.

"I imagine he answers to the name Barclay, just like Engel's late friend did," she said. "They're dead ringers and are both senders, after all. But I wouldn't be surprised if this version knew the Tenth Imperium national anthem back to front, and was no fan of the League of Worlds' notion of noninterference."

The blue-eyed man drew his lips into a tight line. "I admit to nothing."

"Figured you wouldn't. But I reckon the League has a seer somewhere that can get past those shields of yours."

"Shields?" N'Diklam repeated.

"I can explain that," said the ship's former steward, the young man who'd identified himself as Patrick Lightfoot Carmody. "I'm something of a seer myself, though I can't manage much more than a surface scan of someone's thoughts. This morning Viv slipped me a note, telling me about her encounter with Doctor Ortiz and asking me to scan the crew and passengers. I waited until everybody had sat down to breakfast, but as soon as I tried to see, I ran smack into someone's mental defenses. You don't get that kind of mental discipline just by accident. I knew then that the killer had to be someone in that room."

"When the supposed crewman was found dead, we were able to work out the motive, and narrow the suspects down to Mr. Engel and his friends. But we couldn't be sure which of the three was." Starkweather took a final drag of her cigarillo and then ground it out under the heel of her dinosaur-skin boot. "We just had to keep an eye out, and wait for one of you to trip up." She smiled, and then to the blue-eyed man said, "Literally, in your case."

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The Express was anchored at Engel's backwater alternative, which had only just discovered the secret of translocation. The suspected murderer had been rendered unconscious by a serum provided by Doctor Ortiz, and strapped securely to a gurney for good measure, and would be handed over to the authorities when the ship reached Helium the next morning. At the moment, though, the ship hung like a balloon over a muddy field, while a small brass band played a fanfare for an old woman dressed in lace-trimmed black.

Intercontinua craft always reentered space-time at the same coordinates that they left, so having entered underspace from one Texico, they had translocated to another. This one was part of a larger Louisiana, and subject to a British crown that ruled more than half of the Earth. This Louisiana, though, was as much a backwater to this Britannic Empire as the alternative itself was to the Myriad, it seemed, if the expressions of the sovereign and her retinue were any indication of their feelings for finding themselves here in the muck and the mud, so far from Buckingham Palace.

Carmody and Starkweather stood at the landing, watching the old woman mounting the gangplank. She was evidently used to more pomp than the Crosstime Express offered, and was clearly displeased to be treated so much like a regular passenger.

"I feel almost like I should bow," Patrick said, smiling around his Turkish cigarette. The young man was clearly relieved to be a passenger himself for a change, and not a member of the crew, but Starkweather had merely said that the experience had likely done him some good, forcing him to actually work for a change. And besides, as a steward he'd had an easier time pitching woo at the Indian princesses who had caught his fancy, as he seemed to have lost something of his allure now that they didn't see him as a mere menial.

"Why the devil would you do a thing like that?" Starkweather said, and took a sip of whisky from her flask.

"Well," Carmody answered, looking somewhat sheepish, "this alternative is more like my home than most, and when last I saw my England there was a duplicate of her on the throne there, as well."

"I don't know, Pat, I just don't much get on with kings and queens. In my alternative, we Texicans never had 'em, and the Brits got rid of them back in

the days of Cartwright and Paine, back even before the Anglo-American Confederation got started."

Carmody nodded. "Well, people back home had all sorts of strange notions. They figured that white skin was better than dark, that Britain was where the best white skin could be found, and that Queen Victoria was the best of the whole lot."

"Victoria?" Starkweather said, and cast an appraising eye at the woman. At that moment, the woman slipped at the foot of the gangplank, and fell sprawling into the mud. "I don't know, Pat, doesn't look much like victory to me."