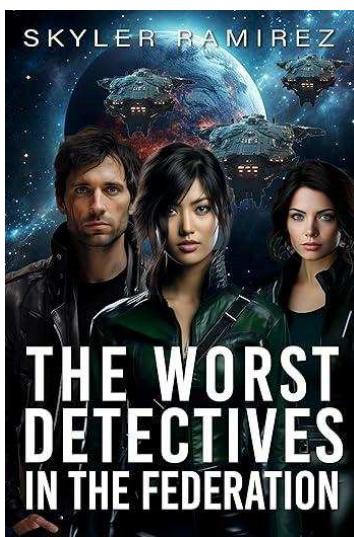


DUMB LUCK & DEAD HEROES



Books by Skyler Ramirez, Jump by Aehriman

Brad Mendoza is an *idiot*.

This is a fact universally agreed upon by virtually anyone to interact with him. Last year, the Butcher of Bellerophon torpedoed a promising career as a starship captain when he blew up a ship full of refugees. Admittedly, they were on a ballistic, collision course with the military station he was defending, no lights, no IFF and no response to hails. Not that the press, or Brad himself, cares much for these details. He gave the

order to fire, it's his responsibility. The court martial may have let him off, but that was as much or more for the Navy's sake than the facts of the case.

Compounding his issues, he drove his wife, Carla, into the arms of another man, convinced she was better off without him but unable to bring himself to end things. Now he is being posted to the most harmless, out-of-the-way command the Navy can find him, system patrol boat *Persphone*. The *Phony* is an eighty-year old, no FTL, scarcely armed ship maintained half so the service has a leper colony to send disgraced spacers to, with a back-then experimental drive that didn't work out and only works half the time.

Except... the backwater system he is sent to turns out to host the motherlode of indestructible stellarium, the most valuable material in the universe. The Empire has been keeping it quiet while they set up to exploit it, but the commander of the station turned her coat and leaked the info. So the *Persphone* discovers two enemy ships exploiting a hole in their patrol route and is forced into battle. Should you not intervene, through a convoluted circumstance, Brad and his XO, Jessica Lin, will be able to fake their deaths and start over as independent spacers, stumbling into and out of every crisis for the next twenty years with snark and an awareness of how thoroughly in over their heads they are.

You start the day Brad gets his orders chit. Have **+1000 cosmic points** (cp) to get started.

ORIGINS

Navy - You're a soldier of some variety, at least. Generally, that means a space navy or system defence force.

Noble - Only the Prometheans have a formal nobility, but even in the Leeward Republic, there are families of great wealth and connections serving as a de facto aristocracy. You may also be an elected official.

Spy - You're an intelligence operative, likely for a nation, like the Confederate Guard or King's Cross, but possibly a freelancer.

Mercenary - Like a soldier, you fight for pay. Unlike a soldier, you owe no particular loyalty to a single government, don't have to follow orders except as specified in your contract. You are, in a sense, more free. But you're also responsible for your own expenses, and don't control when jobs become available or what they entail.

Pirate - Or possibly a rebel, definitely an outlaw. You reject the authority of the major powers, and live on your own skills.

Detective - As an expert in finding people and things, you'll never want for a work in a setting where a whole fleet was lost for weeks.

STARTING LOCATION

Pick one, or roll a d6 for +100 cp

- 1) **Gerson** - The most remote outpost of the Prometheans, little more than a trading station and a couple patrol craft, no habitable planets. A motherlode of super-rare stellarium is about to put this place on the map.
- 2) **Prometheus** - Throneworld of the one star kingdom in the series, with a king and a hereditary nobility and everything. The heroes' home, for the most part, though one that quickly shakes any allegiance they may have had.
- 3) **Jewel** - An independent trading hub between all the major powers. Excellent place to find work, or a ride anywhere on the star map.
- 4) **Carter's World** - A pastoral planet being menaced by pirates for several months.
- 5) **Hudson** - A disputed world claimed by both the Prometheans and the Kotaran Confederacy. Open fighting hasn't broken out, yet, but the whole system is a powder keg of epic proportions.
- 6) **Koratus** - Homeworld of the Koratan Confederacy.

AGE, RACE, SEX, ETC.

Change it if you like, or keep it. Whatever makes you happy.

PERKS

Space-Age Education (free all) You know how to function in interstellar society, having a solid education, knowing all the languages, having had all your shots, etc. You can function perfectly well in zero-g and aren't confused by three-dimensional space. In future Jumps you have a decent background knowledge, are immune to local diseases, and speak the most common, let's say five languages.

Professional (-100 cp, free Navy) You have extensively trained in the maintenance and operations of starships. You know how to plot a basic course, use all common equipment, are EVA-rated and qualified to perform damage control. Your combat training makes you at least competent in hand-to-hand combat and ensures you won't panic when everything is going wrong and people are dying.

Gave Up On Giving Up (-200 cp, discount Navy) You just don't know when to quit. Even on a crippled ship with the enemy closing in, with a gun held to your head and a hostage back planetside, you don't despair, you *plan*. And when the blackest days come and you can't save everyone - or even most people - it will never break you either.

Barracks Lawyer (-400 cp, discount Navy) You have an encyclopedic knowledge of laws and regulations, and in any hierarchy understand how to manipulate it for your ends. Exactly how much to kiss up to your superiors to advance without being a lickspittle, exploit rivalries or shift blame. Your meteoric rise is all but assured.

Master & Commander (-600 cp, discount Navy) You command not just a ship, but the loyalty of your crew. When you take charge of a navy vessel, it feels *right*. You have

the strategic and tactical chops, and the excellent charisma to build a ramshackle rabble of spacers into a fleet the envy of the Fringe.

Weighty Name (-100 cp, free Noble) You're not one of the common clay, you're somebody *important*. Your name opens doors and shields you from consequences. There's definitely a point you can push this too far, but in most cases people treat your feelings and opinions as having undue weight.

Cutting Wit (-200 cp, discount Noble) You're the master of the clever put-down, the veiled threat, and all the wordplay games of high society. The perfect comeback always comes to you in the moment, not later when you're rehashing the conversation, and it's trivial for you to make anyone look buffonish or unstable in a social setting.

Two-Faced (-400 cp, discount Noble) You can't succeed in most of the governments here without some expertise in blackmail, spying, sabotage, and other dirty dealings. You have the expertise to win these shadow games with ease. Yet there is a second part. Your own reputation is proof against slander, rumor-mongering and blackmail. Only ironclad proof of wrong-doing actually done by you can stick, and even then, expect the media and authorities to be reluctant to pursue action.

Architect of Empire (-600 cp, discount Noble) Your skill at politics and statecraft is exceptional, era defining, even. Greater than Richelieu, greater than Metternich or Bismarck. You don't just play political games, you forge history in your image. Whatever you want, reform, peace, war, you have not only the skills, but a powerful luck lining things up for your goals like inevitable destiny.

Mask (-100 cp, free Spy) You're very good at being unobtrusive, disappearing into a crowd or subsuming yourself completely in a role, becoming a social chameleon. You know how to stand, move and speak to convince people that your presence is entirely normal.

Something's Wrong (-200 cp, discount Spy) You have an instinct for when you're being watched, when ambushes are being prepared, when the defector seems twitchy or something just isn't right about a situation. Listen to that voice, and you're a lot more likely to survive.

Ghost Protocol (-400 cp, discount Spy) Modern forensics and surveillance make it really hard to get anywhere unseen, and not be traced after. This isn't a problem for you, though. You leave no prints, no hairs or usable DNA samples. Nor can scanners or cameras notice your presence, digital ghost that you are. You're also really good at hacking and falsifying records.

Shadow of a Doubt (-600 cp, discount Spy) You may be the most silver-tongued devil to ever grace the human species, such is your ability to manipulate others and turn any situation to your advantage with a few words. You can easily seduce others, or plant the seeds of destructive paranoia. You are incredibly perceptive to what others are thinking and feeling, and how to steer them in the direction you want.

Void Rules (-100 cp, free Mercenary) You have a code, and you are always aware when you're coming close to breaking it. If you act fairly with others and keep your word, they'll feel a powerful urge to do the same. Though some of the most sociopathic won't be bothered, on the whole, you'll find a lot less employers willing to screw you over if you keep your code.

Ship-handler (-200 cp, discount Mercenary) You're an expert pilot that can pull off maneuvers flatly impossible for other humans. You can tell exactly what maintenance your craft need, and even if shot down, will always be able to limp your ship to safety and jury-rig some repairs.

We Want You (-400 cp, discount Mercenary) Incompetence and treachery seem the doom of any honest merc - well, any except for you. You always hire the most trustworthy, most capable people imaginable, whether you're looking for a fixer, a

cook, a mechanic or what, you meet the right people almost by magic, and usually in a situation where they'll be favorably inclined towards being recruited. So find your nakama and have a grand adventure!

Dumb Luck (-600 cp, discount Mercenary) Your luck is really something else. You keep stumbling into trouble, but also keep stumbling through it and winding up better off. You roll with the punches through a combination of the ability to spot opportunities, and never getting down on yourself.

Fighting Dirty (-100 cp, free Pirate) You don't fight fair. From pocket-sand to sucker punching to ambushing from an asteroid field, you have an encyclopedic knowledge of underhanded tactics to win with.

Pirate King (-200 cp, discount Pirate) You know how to rally criminals of all kinds to your banner, or at least your wallet. Wherever you go, you quickly and easily develop a shady network of contacts.

Black Flags (-400 cp, discount Pirate) These days, it's more like an IFF ping that makes a cool logo. Still, a pirate lives and dies by their reputation, and you find it very easy to manipulate your PR, spreading your legend. You will quickly find people surrendering or flocking to your flag.

No Chains (-600 cp, discount Pirate) You cannot be held by any prison, but will find a way to escape in a day or less. You cannot be chained, or controlled. Whatever else, you will live and die free.

I'll Ask The Questions (-100 cp, free Detective) You're an ideal interrogator, easily able to build a narrative, earn a subject's trust, seize on the smallest inconsistency and of course, spot a lie. You can coax out details that people don't even consciously remember.

Inference Engine (-200 cp, discount Detective) You can spot the smallest clues, doing better in one casual examination of a crime scene than most full forensics teams.

Follow the Money (-400 cp, discount Detective) In an advanced society, everything leaves a record, some trace, even a suspicious absence of records. You are a master at tracing and researching all forms of records - electronic, bureaucratic, criminal. You can easily find deleted files and connect transfers between multiple proxies.

Everything is Connected (-600 cp, discount Detective) You notice fine details, and can tell instinctively which ones are *important*. See deeper connections: serial patterns, behavior loops, or even thematic symbolism in criminal actions. Unravel high-level political conspiracies just by walking down the street or reading the news.

FRIENDS

Friendship is a treasure beyond price, so everything here is free.

Old Friends - Import as many Companions as you'd like, each with 800 cp to spend. Companions cannot take drawbacks for more points.

And New - Feel free to recruit anyone here to join you in future adventures.

Brad Mendoza - A recovering alcoholic and nerdy starship captain.

Jessica Lin - Somewhat traumatized XO, but kicks all kinds of ass.

Gunny Quinn - A big scary ex-Promethean Marine. Has strong dad energy. Will massacre your enemies in a bloody fashion, then hug you and tell you it'll be okay. Then have a tea party if you want, nobody with his combat record is insecure about their masculinity.

ITEMS

Discount one item at each price tier. 100 cp discounts to free.

Implant (-100 cp) A secure brain-chip that gives you a HUD and... basically everything a cell phone can do, including the ability to watch videos or scroll through forums while stuck in boring meetings.

Gun (-100 cp) Better materials science, but the basic concept hasn't improved much from the 21st Century. Never has issues or runs out of ammo.

EVA Suit (-100 cp) A spacesuit. It's also proof against radiation and better body armor than anyone on 21st Century Earth had.

Forged Papers (-100 cp) you have a dozen identities with ID, bank accounts, and a detailed paper-trail that will hold up to scrutiny.

Credit Chit (-200 cp) You have two million credits, enough to buy a single starship grade missile, or support a modest lifestyle for forty years and a luxurious one for four. Think of this as about \$6 million in today's money. In future worlds this adapts to local currency. Can be taken multiple times, each adding a zero.

Starship (-200 cp) A way of getting around. By default, a tramp freighter like *Wanderer*. Pay an extra hundred cp (undiscounted) to upgrade to a destroyer. Two hundred more for a cruiser. Four hundred extra (600 total, or 500 discounted) will get you a Dreadnought like the *Bismarck*. There are also a number of potential add-ons:

- **Vampire:** (-100 cp) Your ship is extremely stealthy.
- **C-Drives:** (-100 cp) Your ship can make micro-hops inside a system and jump much closer to celestial bodies. The risk issues are fixed, but pushing things to the limit will entail a certain amount of risk.
- **Q** (-100 cp) Your ship, if upgraded, still looks like a freighter.
- **Carrier** (-100 cp) Your ship carries a number of fighters appropriate to its size. Just a few for the smallest ships, up to a hundred for the dreadnought.

Stellarium (-400 cp) The most valuable metal in the universe, found only in trace elements in a few asteroids, gold but slightly off-looking in color, formed from the

rarest of stars, stellarium is completely invulnerable to all energy weapons, and about as good, pound-for-pound, against purely physical attacks as the best armor. Not that enough stellarium exists to armor even the smallest starship... until now. You own a twenty ton chunk of the stuff, which weekly regenerates whatever you remove, along with tools for the normally fiendishly complicated task of cutting, refining and shaping the metal.

System (-400 cp) Your own planet. Not one of the great metropolitan jewels, but it's still home to tens of thousands of people with abundant resources.

DRAWBACKS

Brad Mendoza Chronicles (+0 cp) The option to start early, if you prefer the prequels.

Peace Out (+0 cp) Except for the first book, which is about three days, each book takes about a month in-universe with travel times. If you want to split in 7-8 months or after the Jutzen are defeated and the three hundred year cold war between Prometheus and Koratus is concluded, feel free.

Long Stay (+100 cp) Or, alternatively, add a decade to your stay. This can be taken up to four times.

Blonde (+100 cp) Forget the race options, you look like a perfect Jutzen - pale skin, blonde hair, blue eyes and fine 'Aryan' bon structure. This will be a problem for you, because everyone else hates and are suspicious of the Jutzen, for excellent reasons.

Known (+100 cp) From King's Cross to the Confederate Guard, the head of every intelligence service in the galaxy gets a file on your abilities and past exploits. Soon, several people will get the full-time job of monitoring and analyzing your behavior to work out your intentions.

Stupid Series (+100 cp) A few years before you arrived, someone produced a series of tacky novels about a hero like you, your own escapades, translated through a pulpy lens. There have been three films to date. The association will be very embarrassing.

You're An Idiot (+100 cp) Your name is associated with a great scandal, like the massacre at Bellerophon. You can overcome this reputation eventually, but it'll take a lot of work.

Blackmail (+200 cp) Someone has major blackmail material on you, as good as Jessica getting sixty fellow spacers killed. They'll want favors from time to time, but the choice is ultimately yours.

Flat Broke (+200 cp) Your Warehouse is sealed up, and your various items from past Jumps unavailable.

Pirate Bait (+200 cp) Everyone knows the Fringe is full of space pirates, but you seem cursed to draw at least one attack every couple of months, no matter how secure you should be.

Wanted (+200 cp) You are a fugitive from one major space nation. While their reach can be curtailed in each other's borders, space is open as the sea once was, and agents may take shots at you as a target of opportunity. A generous reward has also been posted for your capture or death. This may be taken twice.

- **Most Wanted** (+100 cp) Forget target of opportunity, the intelligence services of the hostile space nation are now pursuing you with highest urgency.

Just the Worst (+400 cp) There's no plot, no intrigue, incipient war or 'exciting' event in this 'verse that you won't end up stumbling over. Your stay here will be an interesting one, to say the least.

More Heat (+400 cp) There will be a war between two major powers during your stay. No matter how hard you try to foil or escape it, you will fail.

Power Lockout (+400 cp) No perks from beyond this Jump, no superpowers or magic or psionics. You do keep knowledge and skills, though.

END

What now? Settle down, go home, on to the next adventure?

Notes:

1) *Worst Ship in the Fleet* - Brad Mendoza has hit rock bottom. Once a rising star in the Promethean Royal Navy (PRN), he became the Butcher of Bellerophon last year when he vaporized a ship carrying 500 refugees. To be fair, they were on a sneaky, unpowered and zero-emissions ballistic course for a naval station he was protecting and not answering hails. A court martial cleared him of wrongdoing, but he very much holds himself accountable and drove his wife Carla into the arms of another man to not drag her down and embraced alcoholism to cope. Well, the Navy has a time-honored solution to useless officers who can't technically be punished, exile to a distant posting where they can do no harm. So Brad is given command of HMS *Persephone*, a barely armed, not FTL capable eighty-year old frigate kept in service specifically as a leper colony, with a then-experimental drive that stalls out half the time. No matter how bad life in the navy gets, everyone but Brad and his dozen or so subordinates can say "at least it's not the *Phony*."

So begins a dismal patrol of the backwater Gerson system, a single refuelling station that exists more to show the flag than because anyone is passing through. He meets his new XO, Jessica Lin, is threatened by a rating, PO Nedrin Jacobs, whom he is horrified to learn is regularly raping Jessica, as was the previous captain, Clancy Jessup. She refuses any offers of help or to talk about it. Acting on her suggestion, Brad varies their scheduled patrol route, and they stumble over two cruisers of the Koratan Confederacy, a deadly rival state. Getting the drop on one, they manage to destroy it, before being crippled because... the ship's drive is extra temperamental in

battle. Jessica comes up with a wild plan to destroy the ship: first they fake a Death Cry, a theatrical (and probably fictional) bit of lore about the Promethean intelligence service, King's Cross. A transmission sent out just before death, half 'I salute you, worthy opponent, well-played.' and half 'I'll be avenged. Have fun looking over your shoulder.' Second, they fake a failed self-destruct and start hap-hazardly launching life-pods, in the hopes that the hope of capturing a King's Cross agent and whatever they were going to die to protect will lure the ship in close enough to be killed when the *Phony* self-destructs for real. Brad is willing to go down with his ship, though not before making a recording detailing PO Jacobs' crimes. But one of the engineers clocks him with a wrench and stuffs him inside a life-pod, dying in his stead.

On waking in the Gerson Station infirmary, Brad is debriefed by an actual King's Cross agent, Heather Kilgore, who fills in a lot of the blanks. The Gerson system was recently found to have the largest recorded deposit of the hyper-rare and valuable metal stellarium, which was then classified at the highest level. The station commander, Brad's nominal superior, was a traitor whom Heather was investigating and who planned the patrol routes and gave the Koratans the schedules so they could search for the stuff untroubled. The traitor has since ceased to be an issue.

What remains an issue is PO Jacobs and Brad's final log. See, he provided proof that Jacobs is a filthy rapist, but Jacobs is the king's beloved nephew. Heather would really rather not have to kill the heroes of the hour to fulfil some royal fit of pique, so it'd be a lot more convenient all-around if she could report that the captain and XO died heroically in battle. And wouldn't you know it, she just so happens to have left her ship, *Wanderer*, unlocked in bay 13, with fake IDs all ready and waiting in her go-bag of credits. Funny how life works out, she'll probably be mocked for ages for leaving her ride unlocked in such a rough, crime-ridden part of the sector.

2) *Worst Spies in the Sector* - Brad and Jessica are officially dead and living free... for certain values of free. Sobering up is rough, and while both are experienced spacers, neither has a lot of experience with the logistics side of operating a ship without a Navy base and the taxpayers picking up the tab for fuel and parts. Also, their new

identities didn't really come with piloting or commercial licenses, deed and title to the ship, inspection certificates, permits, travel papers and a dozen things needed to operate an aboveboard independent freighter. So sketchy jobs where no one asks for permits it is!

Their first client, Owen Thompson and friends, needs some cargo moved without a lot of questions. When they arrive in the Fiori system, the clients seize Jessica and implant a bomb in her skull to force the two to go along with their real objective: search an orbiting casino station for a PRN defector, George Peterson, with valuable intel. Turns out, Peterson is selling the precise coordinates to the stellarium asteroid in Gerson to Owen, a middle-man for the Koratans (but actually, having been hired by Heather to get to Peterson first). This will be a whole *thing*, with people repeatedly targeting them for the stellarium. Not that Peterson has the coordinates with him, those he stashed on a drive in a ventilation shaft of an asteroid mine, where Brad is able with skill and luck to overpower and kill Owen and associates without getting Jessica's head blown off, helps when one of them, Harris, switches sides.

Heather shows up to save them, and is nice enough to sort out their paperwork woes so they can go legit. In a cliffhanger ending, as they prep to leave the system they are stopped by a battlecruiser belonging to a third polity, the Leeward Republic, and are hailed by Jessica's father.

3) *Worst Pirate Hunters in the Fringe* - An Admiral Walters on the *Dauntless* that stopped them tries to grill them for what's so special about Gerson, but isn't willing to go too far. She even lines up a job for them by way of apology. On her ship is Kayla Carter, daughter of President Carter of Carter's World, which has democratically elected only members of the Carter family since a Carter first discovered it. Carter's World has for most of a year been blockaded and harassed by particularly bold space pirates, and she'd be ever so grateful if they could help. Or at least transport some Republic guns under the table, which Jessica's dad set up.

The whole trip to Carter's World is spent with Kayla flirting with Brad.

In the Carter's World system, they get jumped by pirates but lose them in the upper atmosphere of a gas giant. Kayla directs them to a farm well outside any of the cities, where they arm and train a militia to take the fight to the pirates. After just a week of training, they manage to transport the militia to and storm the pirate base. They're pretty generous to the locals when splitting the loot, taking basically a finder's fee, and a destroyer they name *Persephone II*.

It's only while flying the militia back in *Wanderer* while Jessica handles the *Phony II* that Brad smells a rat, A quick call to Carter's World confirms that their president looks nothing like the guy in the back, and has no daughter. Kayla is really a mercenary after the stellarium for her employers. The pirates were some convenient deniable catspaws who were getting too big for their britches, so she figured she'd kill two birds with one stone. She easily captures Brad and triggers a bomb on *Phony II* that Jessica just barely survives, but is critically injured after throwing it out an airlock. Kayla and co. escape with Brad.

4) *Worst Rescuers in the Republic* - The real President Carter is happy to fix up Jessica and her ship, and is disbanding the defence force since the pirates are gone, a few people sign up with her. Her one lead is her dad who set up the job with Kayla. So back to Fiori, where she hires Gunny Quinn Boyd and his squad of ex-marines to help her storm her dad's executive offices.

So the big thing we learn is the shameful secret that Jessica has, how PO Jacobs and the previous *Phony* captain were able to blackmail her for sex. It seems she accidentally leaked some intel to her dad, who sold it to the Republic, and sixty of her comrades died as a result. Much like Brad with Bellerophon, she is extremely resistant to the idea that some fault may lie with others. Which, I mean, yeah, terrible infosec. Her dad doesn't know who Kayla works for, having only a comm code and a dead-drop in the Kate's Hope system. Surveillance of the drop site doesn't turn up anything. But Jessica does stumble over a cheerful hacker and 'freelance intelligence agent' named Hayley Uvalde (secretly a Koratan asset, but that doesn't come up for a while) who is able to track the comm code to the Capaldi system.

Turns out, Kayla is working for the Jutzen Collective, literal space Nazis who want to build the Fourth Reich and spread it across the galaxy, and hope to build a *wunderwaffen* fleet of invincible golden ships with the stellarium. They've been torturing Brad this whole time, but he's borne up admirably. He gave fake coordinates for the stellarium after a believable interval, and when they sent a ship to check it out, Heather Kilgore followed it home, but she is captured by a second group of pirate auxiliaries. Under truth serum provided by the Jutzen, she gives up the real coordinates.

The rescuers manage to defeat a pirate ambush, and evade a Jutzen battleship to board the right station once Hayley finds it and rescue Brad & Heather. Brad even confesses to falling in love with Jessica while under the influence of truth serum. However, the *Phony II* is badly damaged and the Jutzens are boarding the station. Ultimately they blow up the ship to destroy the station, taking life-pods down to the inhabited planet, Christos, where they recover the *Wanderer*. Kayla also escapes with the coordinates, rescued by the Jutzen.

The crew mostly agree to stick together on the freighter/principled mercenary thing and rebuild their lives. On their first stop, Kate's Hope, they are contacted by Brad's ex-wife Carla in another cliffhanger.

5) *Worst Detectives in the Federation* - Carla has a problem. Her new man, Horace Clarrington, has vanished - along with the rest of PRN Task Force 32. Weeks later, she got a transmission from him in this sector, the opposite side of the kingdom from where the task force was deployed, cryptically telling her to get Brad and have him find Ricardo Jimenez, a retired Koratan admiral that Brad once had a kind of 'worthy enemies' semi-friendship with.

Tracking Jimenez leads them to Hudson, a disputed system between the Koratans and the Prometheans. They recruit a local detective, Tom Gentry, and find Jimenez in an underground high-stakes poker game... just before ProSec (Promethean federal police) bust the party, also wanting to ask Jimenez about the missing task force. In the confusion, a sniper takes out Jimenez who uses his dying breath to tell Brad the task

force is in system XB-411. First though, the team is arrested by the ProSec, who are led by Brad's former XO. The team almost dies when a traitor on Kat's team lets in a kill-squad, but fighting for their lives together helps the cops and the *Wanderer* crew bond, and questioning the survivors reveals the whole scheme. It's the Jutzen again, they seized Task Force 32 to use the ships to launch a false flag attack on the Koratans and embroil the two major powers in a shooting war while the Jutzens secure Gerson and the stellarium, the Reich will rise, will to power, yada yada.

When the commander of Promethean forces brushes them all off, Kat hires the *Wanderers* to find hard evidence, even loaning them a cutting edge stealth ship, the *Vampire* to scout XB-411.

It takes some days to scan the whole system, but they find the task force... and the pride of the Jutzen Navy, the dreadnought *Bismarck*. Boarding the *Bismarck*, they plant a remote-detonated nuke and manage to free the handful of survivors and seize back a ship, the destroyer HMS *Bainbridge* before sinking the *Bismarck*. That said, the *Vampire* is taken out with Jessica almost dying again, and the rest of the stolen task force all jump to Hudson.

Racing back to base, the heroes expect to find a massacre and the start of a war... well, there was a massacre. Kat reached out to Carla, who was owed a favor by Duke Kipling, the kingdom's second ranking noble, and so was able to go over the local admiral's head and arrange massive reinforcements who were expecting Task Force 32, when it appeared, to be hostile.

ProSec still tries to arrest the crew. Duke Kipling lets them go, with the *Bainbridge*, even, but has a condition: he wants them to rescue his rebellious daughter, Larissa, whom he believes was kidnapped by Koratan spies.

Next cliffhanger, we see that Hayley has been a Koratan spy this whole time! (Dun Dun DUNHN!

- 6) *Worst Traitors in the Confederacy* - Brad and Jessica are divided on how to handle the 'Hayley is a spy' dilemma, and decide to wait and watch for now. Before trying a rescue mission for this Larissa girl, they want to get Gunny Quinn Boyd and his squad

onboard. Turns out, Gunny accepted a security contract for clients he didn't realize were Koratan drug lords, and he and the team are pretty unhappy. They go to ask if they can buy out his contract, but the person sending them 'where the boss went' maliciously didn't tell them the boss was at a summit of mob bosses from across human space, and they are unamused at sudden uninvited guests. Before they can get spaced, cheery Hayley suddenly *locks in* and does River Tam proud in the 'hundred pound murderblender' department, killing her way through half the mobsters (including Gunny's employer) and their security on the way to the exit. As they flee, Baron Dexter Hornsby, the biggest crime lord on Prometheus, shakes his fist and swears vengeance over the comms.

Well, they got Gunny and his marines, but the *Bainbridge* is swiftly disabled and boarded by a ship from the Confederate Guard, Koratan intelligence service. Their leader, Nido, confirms that Hayley works for them as an assassin and has multiple personalities including the murderblender 'Lola' persona. It happens that Nido wants them to recover Larissa, whom he understands came of her own free will to foment revolt against the Confederacy, and is willing to pay generously to get her outta here and even tell them exactly where she is. The only catch is, he wants them to keep Hayley on the crew as insurance.

En route to the Serenidad system, where Nido says Larissa is, they have a brief layover and pirate encounter in Santo Domingo where they rescue twin teenagers, Tina & Sam DeJoy, who join the crew.

Brad, Jessica and Tina infiltrate the fortified mansion where Larissa is being kept, by posing as rich buyers at an antiques charity auction being held there. They find Larissa, who says she's being held against her will. But Tina disappears just before security is alerted and they're forced to flee by... stealing a 1964 Ford Mustang from the auction block. Brad drops the ladies at a shuttle before leading the police on a high speed chase to buy time for their escape, ultimately wrecking the car and getting captured.

Well, it turns out Larissa was with her mom, Countess Charlotte, who is preoccupied with just how few peoples' heartbeats separate her family from the throne of Prometheus and was gathering foreign support for a *third* attempt at a coup, the previous two having been foiled by Brad when he was still in the navy (as detailed in a prequel series). Charlotte is a piece of work who is pretty happy for the chance to torture Brad to death, but Tina pops out of an air duct (her favorite for discreet travel and eavesdropping) and rescues Brad.

Hayley has also infiltrated the mansion as a rescue mission, sent by Jessica, and proceeds to murderblender them a path to freedom. With a (sticky) red carpet, even. Recovering at a safehouse, they get jumped by Nido and the Confederate Guard, looking to tie up loose ends for their vague nefarious scheme. Hayley very pointedly chooses to fight her previous comrades for the lives of her friends, but they still all get KOed by a stun grenade.

To their considerable surprise, they wake up, and in the company of the Koratan President, Nanette Fourier, who thanks them for exposing a rogue intelligence operation and Duchess Charlotte's plot which would surely have drawn them into a terrible war. Fourier offers them safe passage out of Koratan space, which is good, because in orbit Jessica just beat two warships of Charlotte's and is threatening orbital bombardment to get her people back.

Halfways to Promethean territory, the ship is ambushed and boarded by Baron Hornsby's people. Apparently he was working with Charlotte, and with Larissa who called him for extraction. A third of the crew die, but Hayley is able to scare the gangsters into retreat. They deliver Larissa to the Duke's people, making it very clear she is a traitor and a flight risk. Jessica proposes to Brad, and they put in at Jewel for repairs and shore leave, a honeymoon for the two leaders.

The cliffhanger this time is Jessica being summoned away by a mysterious call.

- 7) *Worst Fugitives in the Star Nation* - Jessica gets a mysterious call and leaves. And doesn't come back the next day. Instead, she was arrested by Promethean Naval

Intelligence, by her former fiancé (before she made that slip-up) Jethro Jensen. A different intelligence agent, Jake Traeger, uses Jessica as a hostage to strongarm Brad and the crew into going after Baron Hornsby. Since the *Bainbridge* will be in spacedock for the foreseeable future, Traeger provides a Q-ship called the *Odysseus*. Harris & Hayley, investigating Hornsby, find the Promethean crime lord is manufacturing some kind of weapons parts for the Jutzen. Brad decides the best way to learn what the mark is doing, disrupt operations, and draw him out all at once is to intercept and steal the next shipment. That leads them to a factory station in the Zepha system, where Traeger appears to betray the group and turns Brad over to Hornsby.

Checking in with Jessica, it takes her about ten minutes to realize her ex is a petty, vengeful sort and is absolutely planning to turn her and Brad over to the king whatever happens on the mission. A mysterious bounty hunter in a helmet and black bodysuit (it's Kayla, from books 3 & 4) then kills Jethro and almost captures Jessica, who escapes with help from an old friend, Jetta, and a smuggler named Val. Unfortunately, their ship is damaged when escaping and they crash-land together on the desert planet Wake.

In Zepha, Hornsby comes by to gloat over Brad, which was the plan all along. Now Gunny Quinn's marines can secure the whole station and corral the crime lord all at once. They discover the weapons being built are a kind of specialized Jump drive that can make micro-hops more precisely and closer to large masses, letting the Jutzen bypass most traditional defenses. They're also unstable, but the Jutzen are just fine with factoring in a 5% casualty rate per operation. More specifically, they hope to use these for a tactical advantage in Gerson to secure the stellarium.

While they're figuring this out, the techs Harris & Hayley have been stripping out various scuttling charges and backdoors Naval Intelligence naturally had on the *Odysseus*. That way, when they get an SOS from Jessica, they're free to swing by Wake and rescue her over Traeger's now-powerless objections.

On *Wake*, Kayla gets to Jessica first, pursuing her into an elaborate cave system. She admits that PO Jacobs from the first book hired her to kill Jessica so she can never testify against him. That said, Jessica is able to distract Kayla with an echo and kill her, then is rescued by the *Odysseus*.

However, they get jumped again by a small system patrol squadron, sent by Jacobs and commanded by Clancy Jessup, Jessica's other rapist and Brad's predecessor as captain of *Persphone*. There's a pitched battle in which they are saved by some of the remaining crew turning up with the repaired *Bainbridge*.

Brad's fighter gets shot and spirals out of control, but he's rescued by his childhood hero, Billy Firebrand, who seems to not be fictional? Rather, he's the son of the author of the books, which were spun from dad's tall tales about his alleged space adventures. After the fight, Billy has an offer to come to the Leeward Republic where Admiral Walters has a job for them.

8) *Worst Mercenaries in the Border Systems* - I... have not read book 8 yet.