

Tales from the Sorellian Sargasso

Brro grimaces.

“Heh. Long story.”

“I once worked as pilot for a salvage scow, cruising the edges of the Sorellian Sargasso for whatever drifted out. Eventually got credit for my own deep-penetration rig, so I could go right in. Riskier than running a scow, but the payoffs are bigger.

Deep-trawling the Sargasso is a lonely business. Quantum-gravitic flux means that most modern drives are unreliable, so you need some sort of Newtonian propulsion system. When your drive kicks out, you can be drifting for days before it decides to come back online – the NPS is just to keep you from drifting into things, because it can't give you the speed you need to get out.

“Found a real museum piece, right in deep – a prototype f-warp drive. It had hit the Sargasso, and dropped into realspace, and had been drifting for nigh-on three hundred years. Its grav-shield had held up well, so it was mostly intact. Sent out a sub-ethereal signal to the salvage companies, looking for bids, then spent three days in the dark as my engines cut out. When I reestablished communications, I had one expression of interest – a couple of guys offering a thousand or so Janninian credits. I'd never heard of them, but I looked it up in the stock exchange database – reasonable exchange rate against the Imperial, nothing special, not given to fluctuations, accepted most systems.

“Thing was, they wanted me to rendezvous at a point on the other side of the Sargasso, at an unmarked asteroid base. So I was either going to have to head back out by the closest trajectory, then head around in warp space, or plunge on through. Either way, towing the f-drive, and then coming back – this place was in the middle of nowhere – the profit would be negligible. I turned them down.

“Half a day later they'd doubled their offer. On the other hand, I'd had another bid from a collector on Torugall, just off my flight path home. I'd figured that, whatever these guys offered me, I wasn't up for the trip that'd take me so far out of my system, and word about the drive had started to filter into the archaeological community.

“Every 8 hours for a week they doubled their offer. I still had another few days before I could hope to get out of the Sargasso, but in the end they persuaded me – I'd have enough to pay off my ship, my house, the blood debt I'd acquired, all ten years ahead of my best plans. I turned the ship around. I got lucky, too. I found a flux-shielded channel – just charting that could have doubled or tripled my next year's earnings – and I was able to cross the Sargasso far more easily than I had any reason to expect.

“Thing was, they kept doubling their offer, every 8 hours, even after I'd accepted. I mean, I wasn't about to say no, but it was starting to make me nervous – either these guys were indecently desperate for the probe, or something really odd was happening. I headed to their base as fast as I could. I docked, and suited up for encounter. As I said, this place was remote – so I went in armed.

“This was when I found out that the Janninians use living currency. Properly sterilised, the credits are robust, uniform, distinctive – pretty much an ideal medium of exchange, if you can get used to it staring at you. When and how they are sterilised affects their value, which is shown by their morphology. Their unique genetics make them almost impossible to forge, and, once they stop

reproducing, their metabolism slows right down so that they barely need to breathe, let alone eat.

“On the other hand, if they're not sterilised, they reproduce like wildfire. And they eat. They eat pretty much anything. These guys – kids, really – had somehow acquired a breeding pair, and were planning on hitting it rich by letting nature take its course. Only problem was, once the credits had been taken out of the Janninian mint, there was no-one who knew how to control the breeding, or the value. I've been a trader for a long time, and that was the only time my payment tried to eat me.

“That one of them was a history nut pretty much saved their lives – if he hadn't have offered to buy the f-warp prototype, nobody would have even known about it, much less rescued them. I found the kids huddled in the control room as their profits devoured their base. I took them back to my ship, and shoved them in the f-warp's crew capsule – my ship was built for one, so they'd have to forgo their creature comforts for the trip back and stay in that antique. The life-support was nominal, and the original pilots didn't mind the company. Rations would be tight if I was sharing them with the kids – very tight – but the alternative just wasn't right.

“I set the base's power plant to explode – the database told me that, sterilised or not, these things were legal tender, and noted the catastrophic inflation that had occurred every time a breeding pair had escaped. That's one thing a trader doesn't need in his back yard. We got out of nova range just in time.

“A few hours later I found that a couple of credits had got into my ship, clinging to my pseudopace. I couldn't tell if they were breeders or not, but I wasn't taking any chances – I roasted them with my wave pistol.

“I ain't proud, and food was short. Truth to tell, the damn things are delicious.”

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