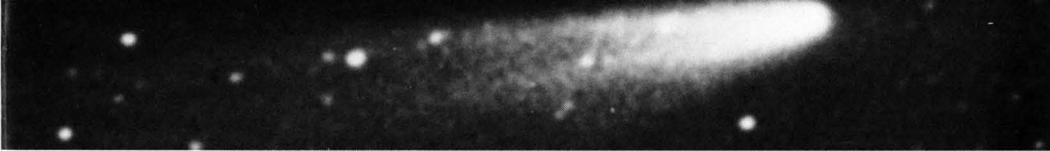


# Stars of Opportunity

By Neil Shapiro



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## **The Stars of Opportunity** **by Neil Shapiro**

My father is a jeweler famous throughout the Far Arm for precious settings. He can bring out the luster of a Denbian Zil pearl or gather in the light from a Sigurian flame diamond and send it in bright bursts to the eyes of a dazzled beholder. My family's been in the jewelry business for years, and my father dreamed of a time when his only child would join him in the workshop, learning how to fashion cabochons and necklaces. But I wanted none of it — I wanted to go into space.

This nearly broke my father's heart, but he supported me in a future he could not imagine for himself. He even paid my entry into the Merchant Guild. And many's the night he would indulge me in my fascination with space. He always found the time to stand with me in the Arcturian twilight as I peered through my telescope and regaled him with obscure facts about the Far Arm.

On one such night, I centered the scope so that the star Deneb shone in the middle of the field.

"This is the home of the Duchess Avenstar," I said, moving away from the telescope so father could look. "Deneb used to be the wildest system in the Far Arm — the place used to be swarming with pirates. She tamed it, she and her Imperial Guardsmen. Now only the Scarlet Brotherhood dares approach. And even they think twice about it."

Father looked up from the eyepiece and shifted restlessly from foot to foot on the hard, pebble-strewn ground of our estate, but I continued.

“Avenstar’s as tough as her cousin, Emperor Hiathra, was in his prime. But unlike the Emperor, Avenstar is genuinely concerned about her people. That’s because she’s blessed with psionic ability and knows their innermost needs. I wonder if that is truly a blessing...but here, look again.”

“I don’t know why you’re so fascinated by all of this,” father said. “I hold stars in my hand every day — you dream about those you can never touch...” Sighing, he bent over the telescope once again, but I saw him shoot a guilty look toward his workroom. His work called to him as the stars called to me and I knew that I would soon be alone under the stars of the Far Arm.

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Some time later, my dream of a spacefaring life became a reality. Father drove me to the starport and we stood together in the boarding area beneath the prow of the trading vessel, Princess Blue — my first ship! He wore the old-fashioned formals that the jewel-buying public thought so grand. I was in my new merchant-marine uniform.

Father placed his hand on my shoulder and then smiled.

“This is what you want,” he said. “Who knows? Maybe some of the things you learned in our shop will help you out there among the stars.”

Then the ship’s klaxon sounded and I hugged my father before shouldering my kit bag. Stepping onto the Princess Blue’s autoramp, I was whisked into the ship.

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Now, adrift in space, my comrades gone, I stare blankly at the main viewscreen of my small scout vessel.

The stars swim outside, diamonds scattered on a black velvet cloth. I wish father could see them. Then, he might understand what drove me here.

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The Princess Blue was a good ship to start a career upon, with a good Captain and crew. Her powerful Hawking Drives thrust her effortlessly from one end of the Arcuturian system to the other. The vibration of those drives was ever-present, like a heartbeat, permeating everything aboard ship. We ate, we drank, we lived and we slept to the sound of the engines.

Then, the sound stopped.

At first I was alarmed — the sudden silence was unnerving. Then I realized that the Captain had simply shut the Hawking Drives down in preparation for a hyperspace jump — my first jump!

The doors that covered the ship’s glassine nose drew back slowly and I viewed space directly rather than through an electronic viewscreen. Much of the crew was gathered here to watch as we made our approach. The view we shared was like a gigantic, living painting that stretched from floor to ceiling and wrapped around the curving walls of the foredeck. I felt for a moment as if I were falling into the star-strewn expanse of space

There was a Malir Gate somewhere out there and, though I couldn't yet see it, I knew that the Princess Blue was drifting toward it like a spear thrown at a target. The Second Mate looked at me, smiled, and pointed straight ahead.

There," he said, "where the stars shimmer and the light bends and colors change. If you squint your eyes, it'll soon come into view."

I gazed for several minutes, searching for a glimpse of the still-distant gate. I knew that in space the stars shone like beacons, undisturbed by cloudy atmospheres, but the stars dead ahead of the Princess Blue twinkled like the stars at night on my own MiCon II. That made me think of the nights with my father and the telescope. Now here I was at last.

"I see it," I whispered. "I see the Malir Gate."

The Second Mate turned and raised his glass of Zedian champagne to me. The lights of the fore-deck had been dimmed, but the starlight streamed in and reflected rainbow spectra from the sparkling liquid. Colorful ribbons of light flickered on the walls around us.

"To your first gate," the Second Mate declared. The crew of the Princess Blue raised their glasses and echoed him. The crystal goblets shone like the stars shimmering beyond the gate.

The Princess arrowed closer and closer until the stars around the gate seemed to move — as if a God had lit a celestial fire below them hotter than their own nuclear flames. They shuddered like firefly lights in the heated air from a bonfire.

In the center of this maelstrom, the Malir Gate tumbled like a huge, six-sided cylinder. I imag-

ined the Captain of the Princess Blue, with the First Mate standing beside him, huddled in the ship's Go Room, his fingers dancing along the control panel. Then, the drives cut in again as the Captain made last minute course corrections. Knowing that we were seconds away from the gate, my throat went dry — a nervous dryness that even the good Zedian champagne could not quench.

The Princess Blue maneuvered so that the open-end of the cylindrical gate faced us. At this angle, I could see the gate's pulsating heart of orange, flaming energy. We were so close to the gate the stars were cut off from view by its sides. The gateway to the wormhole pulsed and flickered and the Princess Blue inched toward it like a moth to a brilliant candle.

"To the Captain, may he preserve us all!" the Second Mate cried in a toast no less sincere for all of its ceremony.

Even as he spoke, we were out of the universe of N-space and into hyperspace. We were in the wormhole, falling between the stars. In place of the stars, the wormhole surrounded us with immense rings of light, hoops through which the Princess Blue dove and weaved under her master's guidance.

If the Captain went too fast or misjudged the convolutions of the hyperspace trail, we would return to where we had entered the gate, our fuel depleted. If he did not travel swiftly enough through the three-dimensional maze, then the strange, corrosive atmosphere of H-space would eat its way through our hull — we would smell the sweetness of the gas with our last breath.

Passage through the Malir Gates is tricky, and I was glad the Captain was experienced in the ways of hyperspace travel. My senses reeled as we tumbled in a controlled spiral through the corruscating hoops of the Malir Gate's H-space wormhole. Then, as I shuddered at the time it was taking, the hoops vanished and the normal universe reappeared. We emerged from the jump unharmed and with plenty of fuel. Then and there I made a vow that I would become as accomplished a Malir jumper as the Captain of the Princess Blue.

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In the year to come, all of the gates linking the Far Arm network of nine planetary systems would become familiar to me. Unlike other gates, familiarity with a Malir Gate breeds neither contempt nor contentment.

The gates are the cornerstone of human space. They are as necessary as ships themselves, for without these gates our ships, with their limited speeds, would be unable to traverse the vast reaches of space. The Hawking Drives push our ships to almost unimaginable speeds, but the speed of light is a barrier we cannot yet pass on our own.

Luckily, there are networks of interconnected Malir Gates throughout human space. Each net has from nine to twelve interconnected gates which enable starships to travel rapidly from star to star. But each net is almost totally isolated from all other nets — while some LongSleep ships move from net to net without benefit of the Malir Gates, it can take such

a ship many years, even generations, to make its journey. It is hardly a surprise that the Emperor Hiathra himself has offered an imperial Baronetcy to any Captain who discovers a gate linking one net to another.

So far, no Imperial Barons have been made through this offer. Each net of stars stands alone and nearly all of mankind's worlds lie close to a net.

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The Second Mate nudged my elbow as the stars, now in different patterns and designs, flickered and then steadied as we left the influence of the gate. I coughed, reddened in embarrassment, as I remembered my ceremonial duty and lifted my newly-filled glass to toast the stars just outside the Princess Blue.

"To the universe," I said somberly, "to the stars, to the Malir to whom we owe so much, to the Captain, to the crew, to the good ship Princess Blue." My heart beat faster as the rest of the crew, in one great roar, closed the ceremony of my initiation as a spaceman with their full-throated, chorused reply: "To the Princess Blue!"

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The ship is a memory. It tumbles through my mind in a crazy pattern of regret and longing that twists and weaves more than ever did a wormhole highway. I remember the Princess Blue and her crew. I will not forget her.

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It was during my twelfth month on the Princess that the derelict ship was spotted. I was on the watchteam as we swung toward the Malir Gate in the Karonus System. We had just sold some exotic pets to the crew of Imperial Starbase Hiathra and had realized quite a good profit. I was already thinking of the trip home and six months of leave, but my reveries were interrupted by the Watch Officer's strident voice:

"Manchi ship ahoy, Captain!"

Instantly, all eyes turned toward the ship's computer viewscreen. The Manchi had been preying on ships in human space for the past few months — no one knew why. Though a merchant ship, the Princess Blue was decently equipped. We were hardly a warship, but a merchant vessel must be prepared to defend itself. We were nervous, but ready.

Then, curiously, the Manchi ship passed us by like a huge ghost. Our sensors tracked it as it left visual screen range but, finally, even the sensors could no longer detect its presence.

The Second Mate breathed a sigh of relief and pushed his chair away from the sensor control console. The Captain's hands relaxed from their grip on the ship's throttles and the First Mate leaned back from the Targeting Acquisition Computer console.

"Secure from General Quarters," the Captain announced from the Go Room.

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In the Go Room an inertialess shield protected the Captain from the effects of the Princess Blue's maneuvers. Beside him, the First Mate sat at the combat TAC. During high speed maneuvers the weapons systems would be under his command, safe within the Go Room from the forces that would batter the rest of us.

This kind of shield works only on a limited area, the exact size of the area determined by complex quantum math. Some scout vessels are small enough that their entire interiors can be protected by such a shield, resulting in great maneuverability; not so the Princess Blue.

As part of my training, I had spent days in the Go Room learning how to fly the Princess manually, using both her Cruise Flight Mode and her Newtonian Flight Mode. In cruise mode the pilot only has to worry about the ship's direction and speed. In newtonian mode, the engines thrust only dead ahead, and course changes, while swift and sure, must be made by rotating the ship and firing the engines. It's rather like doing vector mathematics in your head. Like most new pilots, I preferred the cruise mode.

The Captain of the Princess Blue actually preferred newtonian flight because of the increase in maneuverability. The thought of doing so much vector addition and subtraction gave me a headache. Only after many months of practice was I able to swing the Princess Blue in a clean 180-degree turn in anything other than cruise mode.

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"The Manchi has left sensor range," the Second Mate reported, "but there's another ship, just coming into range now!"

"Manchi?" the Captain asked.

The Mate looked at the image forming on the viewscreen.

"No," he said, "it appears to be an independent — a scout ship." He threw a toggle switch. "Automatic hailing frequencies opened." A pause as he checked his console. "No reply."

"Keep sending," the Captain said, "and I'll maneuver to within 300 klicks. Shields to max. Go Room to take control of weaponry."

On the electronic screen a small blue dot grew closer and assumed the sleek, wedge shape of a scout vessel. The scout appeared to be adrift but undamaged. The Second Mate confirmed this via his instrumentation.

"No sign of Hawking energies," the Mate read out. "Main reactors appear functional, however. Shields are down. I get no indication of bio-electricity." He tapped a few of his console's switches. "None at all."

"Keep on the hailing frequencies," the Captain replied. "We'll move to two klicks. Put a remote on the screen."

The Second Mate threw another switch and the viewscreen showed us closing in on the scout, courtesy of one of the cameras aboard the remote sensors that hovered like a loose cloud around the Princess Blue.

"A Manchi kill?" the Captain asked.

"No, sir." The Second Mate shook his head.

"Sensors indicate no damage to the hull or interior systems. Whatever happened to the scout probably wasn't the result of combat."

"Your opinions, gentlemen?"

"I don't like this," the First Mate responded, "not so soon after stumbling upon a Manchi ship..."

"You think it might be a trap?"

"I don't know..." The First Mate leaned forward in his cocoon chair, checking the status of the Princess' onboard weaponry. "If it is a trap, we can hold our own against two, even three, bug ships long enough to dive into the Malir Gate and get away."

"It's true, Captain. The bugs aren't about to follow us there," the Second Mate chimed in. A grim smile accompanied his words as he added, "I've seen what happens to the bugs if they try to Gate. There isn't much left of them afterwards that isn't liquid."

"Moving to one klick," the Captain said. Almost imperceptibly, the Princess inched forward. "Anything?" he asked.

The Second Mate checked his console again.

"No, sir. Still no life readings, no attempt to communicate or acknowledge our communications. It seems to be abandoned, sir. Either that or the crew is dead."

"All right, thank you," the Captain answered. "Who has EVA duty?"

I cleared my throat, "I'm on the duty roster today for extra-vehicular assignment," I said.

The Captain glanced at me. For a moment I feared he was going to question my competence, but all he did was nod. "Suit up and get over to the derelict," he said. "Check it out and report back."

"Yes, sir! Permission to leave the watchroom?"

"Granted."

I tore down the corridors to the engineering department and suited up. Trying to ignore my sweaty palms and dry mouth, I locked the suit's permaglass helmet into place.

This would be my first solo mission, but I had trained for EVA. I determined that I would be as quick and professional as possible.

Suited up, I made my way to the airlock. As soon as the airlock doors opened, I jetted toward the scout ship. The derelict grew larger and clearer as I approached. I felt as if I were falling toward it, although up and down were, of course, meaningless.

Then, I noticed something.

"EVA Unit One to Princess Blue," I called. "I have a good visual on the scout vessel. Her name is Jolly Roger and..." I squinted to be sure. "She looks intact. No sign of damage or obvious malfunction."

"Carry on with your mission EVA One." The Second Mate's voice filled my helmet. "Enter the Jolly Roger and report back. I've conferred with the Captain — if the vessel is not manned it falls under the laws of salvage." He laughed. "That should make the Princess' owners happy and increase all our shares as well."

Above me the Princess Blue floated. She dwarfed the tiny scout ship. I imagined that I could feel her gravity pulling me to her, but any pull was simply that of longing to be home again with my mates.

Then, I heard a shrill voice: "Manchi!"

I glanced involuntarily around but the

shouted voice was, of course, coming through my helmet radio — it was the Second Mate.

"Princess Blue to EVA One," he said, his voice strained and hurried. "Sensors show Manchi ships closing in, armed and ready. ETA...within minutes. No time for you to return before shields are raised and battle alert is sounded. The Captain says ride it out in that scout. The bugs'll be targeting us. It's unlikely they'll bother a derelict. We'll pick you up right after. Going to radio silence. Acknowledge!"

"Acknowledged," I replied, "and godspeed."

"And to you." The Second Mate's voice was a whisper. "We'll tilt a few when this is over. This is the Princess Blue to EVA One — out."

I rushed through the airlock and into the Jolly Roger. The doors slid closed behind me. The ship's sensors picked up my presence and automatic life-supports began humming throughout the ship. A moment later, my suit gauges showed breathable air had been restored so I removed my helmet. Whatever had gone wrong onboard Jolly Roger, it was not mechanical, for which I was very grateful.

I was alone inside the cramped scout. Throwing myself into the driver's seat, I switched on the master control console. The console's electronic view-screen was functional and I toggled to a true visual — the Princess was so close there was no need for electronic enhancements. I gasped at what I saw.

The Manchi had arrived, and not just two or three — ten Manchi ships dove out of the distance to surround the Princess Blue. They spaced themselves all around the merchant vessel, their overlapping shields creating an impenetrable force sphere.

To maneuver directly into one of the Manchi shields would be suicidal. For the first time, I realized these were not mindless bugs, but sentient, and quite ruthless, beings.

I was just outside the Manchi encirclement. The Princess Blue was a goldfish trapped inside an invisible but deadly bowl.

Switching on the ship's Target Acquisition Computer, I found that the scout's missile bays were empty, and her weak garnet lasers would be totally ineffective against such Manchi vessels. I pounded my fists on the console and watched helplessly as the battle began.

The first Manchi ship fired her lasers directly at the Princess Blue. The Princess' bow shield flickered visibly as it absorbed the deadly beam. Then a second Manchi fired, and a third.

The Princess Blue twisted and spun, and I knew that the watchroom crew would be pressed hard in their seats as the Captain tried desperately to maneuver away from the deadly blasts, hoping against hope for some small opening in the globe of enemy shields.

Within seconds, all of the Manchi were firing their lasers at the twisting, helpless merchant ship. The Princess made a desperate attempt to fire her missiles, but it was far too late for that. Her shields flickered one last time and then gave out. All I could do was hold my breath.

Suddenly, all the Manchi fired directly into the center of their deadly sphere. With a tremendous release of energy, as if space itself had been ripped apart, the Princess Blue was transformed into a

roiling ball of energy, a miniature sun. Then the imitation sun cooled and vanished into dispersed vapors, molten chunks and scattered clouds.

The Manchi sphere pulled back, separating into its component ships. I braced myself for the quick assault I was certain would come. Instead, the Manchi ships turned on their drives and dove away through N-space leaving me alone.



For a time it seemed to me as if my entire world had died, but I have made certain decisions, taken certain actions. Under the laws of salvage, I have taken possession of the scout ship Jolly Roger in my own name and for my own purposes. She is a good, serviceable vessel, though I still do not know what happened to her Captain or crew.

I have spent the time since the Princess Blue's destruction studying my ship, learning her capabilities, her limits, her idiosyncracies. Onboard, I found a book, an owner's manual, complete with hand-written notes, apparently the work of the ship's previous owner. The manual has served me well as a course in the running of this vessel.

Now that I am the master of my ship, I will investigate why the Manchi did what they did — it makes no sense for them to have destroyed a merchant vessel and its cargo. I know that uncovering the meaning of any Manchi act will prove difficult. It may even be impossible, but I must try. My resources are limited, but there are ways to change that — an independent scout can thrive in the Far Arm if he uses his head.



There are numerous outposts and bases scattered amongst the nine systems of the Far Arm. As a member of the Merchant Guild, I will be able to buy and sell goods. The long hours I spent in my father's showroom as a child, watching him haggle with diamond merchants, listening to his sales banter with the customers, all will prove useful, I am sure.

I'll begin my career as a trader (and my investigations) here in the Karonus System. The Hiathra Imperial Starbase is nearby and will be my first port of call.

I have heard that the Imperium has placed bounties on the heads of some of the more notorious pirates. Perhaps I'll augment my income by becoming a bounty hunter. Then I will begin the refitting of my ship. Her missile bays cannot — must not — remain unstocked. Her garnet lasers must be replaced by more powerful beams. Once I'm better equipped, I can move on to the Gryphon-Arcturus trade run.

One way or another, I will survive and learn what must be learned, do what must be done. My path may be a long and arduous one, but I will follow it to the end. Survival is the only thing that matters now — if I do not survive, there can be no revenge.

The Princess Blue will be avenged. There are ghosts among the stars, and I will lay them to rest. I swear it.