

The *Karachi*

by Hamish Spiers

The orbital docking rings of Keplar 186-F can challenge even seasoned pilots. The world that I've called home for the past five years is one of the earliest Terran colonies and its facilities, while adequate, are often antiquated and the docking rings are so much so that they are almost incompatible with modern vessels. As such, most visiting ships' agents will pay a small fee to have a local pilot dock their precious freighters and transports for them. For the operator with a ready supply of good pilots, it's good money. Especially when the large freighters come in as so happened that day.

With most of my other pilots otherwise occupied, I sent out Johann, a newer pilot on my staff but a man who had shown a real aptitude for the work. He was a quiet man, always keeping his own company and, for a fresh-faced youth at the peak of his physical health, he seemed oddly withdrawn, eschewing the pleasures and pursuits of others his age. I wanted sometimes to break him out of his solitude – but for his sake, not mine. I never held it against the man.

That day I watched on my viewscreen as Johann brought this particularly large vessel in, hooking it up with docking clamps with deceptive ease. A less sure hand could easily have breached both the hull of the ship and the walls of the docking rings but seeing Johann as he came back into my office to collect his commission, I doubt he broke a sweat. I watched with no small measure of pride as he left, thinking that here was a pilot with a promising future, when I saw another man just entering the office, watching my own gaze and then glancing at the retreating object of it.

To my amazement, I recognized the new arrival and I extended a hand in warm greeting. "Bernard. I didn't know you were the ship's agent."

He smiled. "And I didn't know you sent the pilot, Philippe." He glanced over his shoulder in the direction that Johann had gone. "Have you had that man long?"

His tone gave me pause. "Why?" I asked, feeling somewhat on guard. "Was there any problem with the docking? Was he rude to you in any way?"

Bernard frowned and shook his head. "No. No, I can't say there were any problems. I have no complaints but I do wonder for *your* sake. We go back to the academy, you and I, and although we've clearly taken our careers in different directions..."

"But we've both squandered our piloting skills," I said, smiling.

Bernard's frown faded for a moment too. "Yes, we've certainly let them go to rot, haven't we?" The levity, however, didn't last. "But I think you don't know who that man *is*."

"I know enough," I said. "His name is Johann. He's a good pilot. I've never had a problem with his work and I've never heard a bad word about him." I gave my friend a measured look. "And I still haven't, I might add. What exactly have you heard?"

"He was one of the *Karachi* boys," Bernard said, as though that handful of words should have explained everything.

However, the only *Karachi* I knew of was an old Terran city, little more than a name from an increasingly distant – and increasing irrelevant – time in the Terran colonies' collective history.

"The *Karachi*'s a ship?" I asked, hazarding a guess that it was something named after the city instead.

"Well, yes," Bernard replied, giving me a puzzled look. "Didn't you see the case in the news?"

I shrugged. "I'm afraid if the *Karachi* made the news, it didn't make the news *here*."

“These old worlds really *are* away from the hustle and the bustle of things,” Bernard said. He appeared to reflect on this for a moment and then added, “Perhaps that explains what Johann’s doing out this way. He can’t show his face where it might be recognized so he goes somewhere where it won’t be.”

“Now, see here,” I said, and I could feel emotion getting the better of me. “I don’t know what this *Karachi* business is all about but if it was in the news, as you say, then it certainly would have got the attention of the authorities ...”

“Of course,” Bernard said, looking taken aback; and if he was, it was certainly understandable. I don’t know what possessed me to come on so strong. I didn’t know Johann well but this attack on his character, coming so suddenly and from such unexpected quarters, brought out all my protective instincts for the young man.

“There was a trial,” Bernard told me. “It ran for the better part of a week.”

“Then that’s the end of it, surely?” I countered. “Or at least it should be. If Johann is here as a free man, then it stands to reason he was either acquitted of any wrongdoing or he’s already paid his debt, whatever form it took. So what should I care of some past indiscretion? We all make mistakes.”

Bernard’s gaze drifted down, and it seemed he was avoiding my own. He inhaled a deep breath, nodded to himself as though he were making a decision, and looked back at me. “You may be right, Philippe. And you’re a better man than I am in giving the young fellow the benefit of the doubt. And he *was* acquitted at the trial.”

“Then what could you possibly hold against the man,” I asked, “if he’s innocent as you say?”

“I said he was acquitted,” Bernard replied. “I didn’t say he was innocent. Oh, maybe in the eyes of the law, he and his crewmates did no wrong but you’d be hard pressed finding a freighter captain, a ship’s agent or a pilot worth his weight in salt who’d agree. What your Johann and the other boys on the *Karachi* did was downright despicable. And men and women died because of their actions, or rather their lack thereof. You know the Good Samaritan law, don’t you?”

I frowned. “Of course. Every ship is required to provide what assistance it can in the event that it encounters a stricken vessel. You believe the crew of the *Karachi* broke that law then.”

“And most people on the interstellar lanes would agree with me,” Bernard said.

“But the law doesn’t?”

Bernard flung his hands to his side. “*They* say the vessel the *Karachi* encountered had a dangerous reactor breach. They say the crew of the *Karachi* had no time to act. They say that if they had attempted to rescue the survivors, they may have lost their own ship. But it’s all nonsense!”

I wasn’t sure if “they” referred to the people who presided over the court proceedings or the crew of the *Karachi* but I got the gist of what my friend was saying. However, I didn’t know the particulars of the case and Bernard appeared to have forgotten this in his outburst of feeling.

“I don’t know anything about the incident,” I reminded him.

Bernard sighed and put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Philippe. But I just get so worked up when I think about it. But here are the facts, the *indisputable* facts, of the case. The *Karachi* encountered a crippled ship just out of Herschel 6. The ship was sending out S.O.S. signals, which the *Karachi* received. The crew of the *Karachi* then debated and wasted precious time while the crippled ship’s emergency power and oxygen dwindled. They then abandoned the ship and its crew, citing readings of a dangerous reactor overload as their reason for doing so. They said they were afraid to bring the *Karachi* in closer in case of detonation. Then, when they reached the nearest relay station, they reported their find and

another ship was sent out to investigate. A proper ship, with a proper crew. Men who didn't flinch in the face of danger when duty called. And you know what they found?"

I shook my head.

"The crew were all dead," Bernard said. "Their oxygen supply had failed. But here's the damning thing. The ship was still intact, reactor breach and all." He then looked me straight in the eye. "Now you tell me, Philippe. If you had found that ship, what would you have done?"

"I don't know, Bernard," I told him. I spoke in all honesty but I saw that this wasn't the reaction Bernard was expecting.

"Come on, Philippe," he said. "I know you."

I shrugged. "That may be. But I don't know how I would have acted. How could I? Oh, it's easy to judge from the comfort of a cozy home berth or a station like this but if push came to shove, who knows what we would do? Maybe if another ship had found that vessel, the crew of the *Karachi* would be sitting on their high horses right now and condemning *their* actions."

"Philippe, Philippe," Bernard said, shaking his head. "I know you're just trying to be fair-minded and you want to look at the whole thing in its proper perspective but I was *there* at the trial. I saw those boys and there wasn't a single one who showed so much as an ounce of remorse for what had happened."

"Not a single one?" I tried. "What did Johann say in his defence?"

"He didn't say much," Bernard said. "That smug captain did most of the talking. But Johann was there alongside him."

"I don't know, Bernard," I said. "Are you sure you're not projecting your impressions of the captain onto the rest of the crew? Did Johann really have any say in the matter? What was he? First mate?"

"The captain said they all agreed on their course of action," Bernard said but his earlier certainty had dissipated.

Despite this though, I had to admit in my mind that the case against Johann seemed damning but all Bernard's talk of this arrogant crew in a distant court trial felt far removed from the quiet and modest man working for me. Then it struck me that maybe this whole incident with the *Karachi* explained why Johann was so withdrawn in the first place.

"Perhaps they did," I said. "But if it was only the captain who spoke at the trial, then it's only his word we have to go on."

"Well, your Johann didn't deny any of it," Bernard pointed out.

I turned the facts over again in my mind, attempting to look at them from various angles but mostly to find some way in which I could exonerate the young man working for me.

"Maybe he felt ashamed," I suggested.

"Because he went along with it," Bernard said.

I shook my head. "No. That's not what I meant. I meant that maybe he felt ashamed because he didn't speak up against the captain. And that's not the same thing as agreeing with the man. Perhaps he wanted to speak up but was too scared. That *has* to be it."

Bernard gazed at me as a physician might, or at least that's how it felt.

"I'm sorry, Philippe," he said after a long pause. "I think I shouldn't have brought any of this up. If you think he's a good pilot and you're happy with his work, then I suppose that's all that matters now. He's not going to do anyone any harm here, whether by his actions or the lack of them. Perhaps it's for the best."

For a while, I tried to convince myself that I felt the same way. I didn't say anything to Johann about the matter and I tried to act as I had always done around him. And I believed I did a good job of it for the most part. However, something in my eyes or my poise when he was nearby must have betrayed me because he noticed after a while that something was different. And about two weeks later, he came to see me in my office.

At no point in our prior working relationship had I seen the look in his eyes that he gave me that day. There was a mixture of grief and rising anger and he appeared to be under some strain holding both down.

"How do you know about the *Karachi*?" he asked me without any preamble.

He knew. And I'd met enough people to know when someone was at the edge of their tether and I knew that lying to the young man would make that taut line snap.

"A friend," I said in reply to his question. "He wondered why I had you working for me. He thought I must have known about the *Karachi* but I didn't. So he told me." Before Johann could form a reply, I hurried on. "At least he told me the *official* story. But I've tried to give you the benefit of the doubt, Johann. You were there. I wasn't."

Johann sighed and his arms that had appeared like wound up springs moments before now hung limp by his side.

"That's kind of you, sir," he said. "But it doesn't really matter now. I can't stay."

He wasn't looking at me as he spoke. His gaze was drifting to the side and, like a school pupil handing in a poorly written assignment to his teacher, he passed me a sheet of paper. "Here. It's a letter of resignation."

"Wait a minute, Johann," I said, stepping towards him. "You don't have to go. I've told you. This *Karachi* business changes nothing for me. You're a good pilot to have around and I'd be very happy if you stayed."

He shook his head, still avoiding my gaze. "It changes everything for me. I thought I'd gone far enough away but it looks like I'll have to go farther."

"But you can't run from this, Johann," I told him, deciding that perhaps a firm approach was what was needed. "You have to deal with it. And remember, it was your captain who had the final say in the matter, not you."

"I didn't speak up," Johann told me, his voice breaking a little with emotion. "I wanted to say something and I didn't."

"Well, let's say you *did* speak up," I said. "Would it have made any difference to the crew of that ship?"

With a jerk of his head, Johann looked straight at me, his eyes, moist and red, staring into my own. "It would have made a difference to *me*."

Johann left Keplar 186-F several days later but it bothered me long after that. To someone else, I would not have looked like a man with much cause to grieve. I had lost a good employee. It was sad but these things happen. People move on to other work or they need a change. One could hardly complain about that. However, in losing Johann it felt as though I had lost something more. There was a young man who could have used the guidance of an older man like myself, throwing away his opportunities in life because of one mistake. One mistake that, like a specter, hovered over his shoulder wherever he went.

Then I realized what it was that was eating away at me. I could have done more to convince him to stay but, faced with the strength of his resolve, I didn't try. And, as I realized this, I recalled his parting words with a pang of regret. If I had tried harder to convince him to stay, it may not have made any difference to him. But it would have made a difference to *me*.