

THE CURRENCY OF WAR - PREVIEW CHAPTER

THE IMPERIALS, BOOK 4

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THE CURRENCY OF WAR

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In Association with Prince of Cats Literary Productions. Originally published by
Titan Books 2019

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Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-952825-24-8

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-952825-25-5

Cover design by Kind Composition

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Interior layout and design by Kind Composition

Prince of Cats Trade Paperback Edition 2021

Published by Stealing Fire Productions, Inc. in Association with

Prince of Cats Literary Productions

New Jersey, USA 2021

1 THE TRUMPET'S CALL

Don't know when I'm ever going to get to sell these," BK Bower was saying as he watched his assistant load the crates of luxury goods onto a flitter van. "With a war on, nobody's much interested in Sidone jeweled handbags and fans."

Jahan Sirani, now captain of the trading vessel *Selkie* since the departure of her human captain several weeks before, glanced down pointedly at her credit spike holder.

Bower sighed. "Guess it's not your fault that I ordered this shit just before a war started, and you did haul it here, so ... would you consider giving me a discount?"

"Let me check with our accountant," Jahan replied. She stepped aside and radioed Jax, the plantlike Tiponi Flute who kept them running at a profit. She relayed the request and heard all of Jax's fronds shivering so hard they were probably creating a breeze.

"Tell him we can knock twelve percent off the cartage fee," came the response.

The transaction was concluded and Jahan decided that they had enough fuel to wait until San Pedro to refill. Prices were better on that station than here on Kronos, which was the financial hub of the Solar League. Especially now that the League was

at war. The big cargo ramp was whining closed when her nephew Kielli's voice came over the ship's intercom.

"*Tia* Jahan." He was her sister's middle son and he never called her aunt unless something was wrong. Jahan felt her fur begin to stand up on end. "I just intercepted a message from the orbital buoys that unknown ships have just emerged from Fold. They're light-minutes out from the planet." He ended on a bit of a squeak.

Jahan didn't wait for the lift to take her to the bridge. Instead, she raced up the access ladder using all four appendages and her tail to increase her rate of climb.

On the bridge she took the command chair from Kielli, who jumped into the comm and scanner post. Panicked radio chatter filled the airwaves. Apparently a lot of other civilian craft were also eavesdropping on the *Orden de la Estrella's* communications, for there was a sudden scramble of ships trying to lift off without authorization.

The intercom was still on, so the remainder of the crew heard the frantic messages from the port authority to the ships whose engines had started. Too many ships and too many engines. Even inside the skin of the *Selkie* they could feel the ground shuddering.

"Well, this ain't gonna end well," Ernie Gantz, their new engineer, grunted.

Jahan jumped to the navigation station and bought the engines on line. Her nephew was monitoring the commands she was inputting to the computer.

"You're only taking us up two kilometers?" he asked in disbelief.

"Watch and learn," Jahan snapped back.

They got into the air just as Ernie's words proved to be prophetic. Two ships collided before they reached the mesosphere, and the resulting explosion had fiery debris raining down across part of the city and the port, destroying more ships who

were still trying to lift, thus doing some of the work for the attackers.

There was no dodging in the chunky, unlovely little ship. Jahan just had to hope nothing big enough to hurt them hit them as she guided the ship toward the enormous lake around which the capital city of Olympus had grown. Several of the graceful skyscrapers were on fire, and one building began to collapse as alien fighters burst through the cloud cover and began firing on the city.

Jahan knew the wash from their engines was burning the buildings beneath them. The only good news was that the port was surrounded by warehouses and machine shops rather than houses, apartments, and businesses. She just had to hope that the stevedores had heeded the blaring alarms and gotten away or into basements knowing the spaceport would be a prime target.

The ship was wallowing, listing from side to side as she used the maneuvering jets to try and steer them. She sent up a prayer that the vessel would hold together. Spaceships were designed to keep air inside, so adding pressure outside wasn't a great choice, but it wasn't like they were going all that deep. They just had to hunker down until the bombardment ended and hope the invading enemy force didn't scan all that closely or wasn't bent on occupying the planet. *And please God let the engines restart*, she added in a hurried afterthought.

"On my command do a hard kill of the engines," she called down to engineering.

"What? Why?"

"Just do it!"

"When?"

"Now!"

She dropped them into the lake.

“Quiero pastel Amarillo,” Prince Cyprian Marcus Sinclair Amadeo de Arango lisped as he made his preference known to his father. “With chocolate icing,” he added.

Beauregard Honorius Sinclair Cullen, Vizcondé Dorado Arco, Knight of the Shells, Shareholder General of the Grand Cartel, the 20th Duque de Argento y Pepco, Consort to the Empress, and father of the heir to the Solar League, Prince Cyprian Marcus Sinclair Amadeo de Arango, hugged his son closer. The child’s pale brown hair tickled his chin. “I don’t think there is a yellow cake, *cariño*.”

The little boy’s face screwed up for a massive howl, and Boho reminded himself that his son wouldn’t always be two. In fact, his third birthday was fast approaching. But in the meantime he had to learn to behave. Boho pushed Cyprian off his lap and held him at arm’s length. “Is that how a prince behaves? Hmmm?”

A small sob like a hiccup escaped, then Cyprian said, “No,” so quietly that Boho barely heard it.

“All right, then. We’ll go over to the buffet and see what kinds of cake are available.”

They were in the palace gardens where fountains dotted the sweeping lawn. In addition to those elegant waterworks there were two bouncy castles, a large swing set, slide, and jungle gym, an aboveground pool and water slide, a carousel, and, for those who preferred the real thing, ponies from the royal stable saddled and waiting with their grooms to offer rides. Some of the older children had started an impromptu *fútbol* game.

Hayden McKenzie stood on the sidelines watching the play. At thirteen he was coltish, but he had clearly inherited his mother’s beauty. More than a few of the older girls were eying him, but he was oblivious to their scrutiny. He also had an expression that was too somber for a boy. Understandable considering that he had survived the alien attack on the star base commanded by his mother. He had witnessed the death of his father and sister, his mother’s injury, and her subsequent refusal to see him. The

royal family had taken him in and Cyprian had immediately attached himself barnacle-like to the older boy. Boho thought about calling him over, then decided Hayden might like a break from his royal shadow. Cyprian adored Hayden and followed him about like a puppy.

A large pavilion held an outdoor kitchen where hamburgers and hotdogs were grilling, french fries were boiling in grease, and human servants stood ready to fill plates with coleslaw, potato salad, fruit salad. The alien servants were relegated to emptying trash cans and bussing tables. A table held a giant sheet cake and a smaller cake with eight candles. There was a table off to the side with culinary choices more to the taste of the parents, predominately mothers, who were chasing, scolding, and comforting their children who flitted across the greensward like brightly colored butterflies.

Boho felt like the troll at the fairies' ball. The only other man apart from servants who was present was Yves Riccardo Petek, Duque de Telqual. The hot August weather had him sweating, and his prodigious belly was bouncing as he tried to keep up with his six-year-old twins. Like every other FFH child under the age of twelve and still present in Hissilek, they had been invited to the palace to celebrate the birthday of one of Cyprian's royal cousins.

The little girl, daughter of Mercedes's half sister Dulcinea, was turning eight today, and in addition to the children of noble families several more royal cousins littered the palace grounds. After the attack on an O-Trell spaceport and the near destruction of the Blue fleet, Mercedes had gathered her sisters and their children close. Those who weren't in prison for having taken part in a coup attempt three years before or those currently serving aboard military vessels, anyway. Which left Boho with five sisters-in-law and their spawn who were too young to be either at the High Ground or already aboard a warship.

Personally, he thought Mercedes was crazy for bringing them

all together. He had argued stringently that they try to find a hitherto unknown planet and retreat there to safeguard the succession. Granted, it wasn't easy to find a Goldilocks world, but they could put a number of ships onto the task and find a safe haven. Mercedes had vetoed it in a most unpleasant fashion, saying they needed ships to fight, not find a royal bolt-hole. Boho had thought about commandeering civilian vessels for the task, but decided he would wait until after Mercedes had left. For leave she would. It was required that the ruler of the Solar League be a military leader, and that wasn't going to change now that the League had its first Empress. Which would leave the Consort and the heir behind on what had to be a prime target for the enemy.

Boho tried to comfort himself with the thought that Ouranos was well guarded with O-Trell ships and missile batteries and there was a deep, heavily shielded bunker beneath the palace, and more being built elsewhere on the planet. But it was a toss-up which would be worse: being aboard a warship likely to see combat with this new and deadly enemy, or waiting for hell to rain down on the planet he was presently occupying. He tightened his grip on his son's shoulder enough that Cyprian gave a small mew of protest.

His present situation as primary caregiver to his child was galling, given that Mercedes was off holding high-level military meetings. Boho didn't particularly want to fight, but he did want to be included in the planning for those upcoming battles.

Before they reached the outdoor kitchen, Cyprian was distracted by the carousel and he ran off to ride one of the painted ponies. Boho lifted him onto the horse of his choice—a black one with a tossing mane. Yves was seated on a bench alternating between fanning himself with a handkerchief and wiping sweat off his round face. His twin boys were just ahead and leaning off their horses to punch each other. Boho joined the other father.

"I just got the first set of them out of the house and now I'm starting all over again," Yves said mournfully, watching his sons.

"You didn't have to breed again after your divorce," Boho said.

"Alan wanted a family," Yves said. "And I had thought it might lessen the tongue wagging if I did my duty."

"I gather it didn't work." Boho had to raise his voice over the jaunty calliope music.

"Hardly. The kids I had with Michelle weren't happy that I married Alan after I divorced their mother, but it was the boys' birth that left them apoplectic."

"So who is the mother?"

"We found a surrogate who looked a lot like Alan. My sperm, of course. After all, I'm the Duque." Yves gave a sigh that seemed deep enough to dislodge his soul.

"You going to stay on Ouranos?"

A headshake. "Alan is scared. We're thinking Earth. It's a backwater with nothing to recommend it. Maybe it will stay off the alien's radar."

"Just the home world of humanity. If they wanted to make a statement about humans, they could burn it to a cinder."

"Thanks, Boho, I really didn't need to hear that," Yves said as the music and the carousel slowed, the ride ending.

"Just making sure you consider all the options," he replied.

They went to recover their respective offspring, and Boho reflected on a culture that was built around children and the idea that the humans had to outbreed the aliens under their rule. A daunting task since there were more alien species than there were humans. All of which made it tough for humans to outbreed them in a demographic arms race.

The pressure to breed meant birth control and abortion were illegal, childless or single-child families were fined, while subsidies were paid for every subsequent child after the first born to a family. Even the priests and nuns bred. It meant that a gay man like Yves was under tremendous pressure to stay in a hetero-

sexual marriage. The pressure was even more intense since Yves was not only a member of the FFH, but of high nobility.

As Boho lifted his sole child off the carousel horse, he wondered if he and Mercedes were being fined for failing to add to their family. Considering it had taken them twenty-four years to get one kid, they weren't likely to get another. And would the office of Taxation and Revenue really be willing to fine the crown? He chuckled at the thought, and Cyprian gave him a questioning look.

"Daddy have fun?"

"Yes, Daddy had fun."

"Cake now?" Cyprian asked hopefully.

"I think we can do that."

Her prayers had been answered. The ship hadn't been crushed, Ernie had managed to get the engines back on line, and they rose from the lake like a breaching whale trailing water plants, mud, and a couple of confused fish.

Olympus was burning, as were many other cities on Kronos, and the royal governor had sent out a desperate call for doctors and medical supplies. The ones on the planet who hadn't died were struggling with a deluge of patients.

Jahan had informed the frightened young clerk who had taken over the port authority that she was taking her ship to New Hope where hospitals and medical care were the primary industry, and they would return with doctors. He had shakily approved their launch.

Now they were docked at the orbital station above New Hope, and shuttles were on continuous turnaround from the surface below, delivering people and supplies to the ships and, once empty, returning for another run. A big troop transport ship had also arrived to augment the bevy of trading vessels who had volunteered to bring help to Kronos.

Jahan waited for the *Selkie* shuttle to dock. It was carrying their friends Doctor Michael Engelberg and his wife Kathy. Because of the League's resistance to women in positions of authority, Kathy was officially designated a nurse. In truth, she was a brilliant researcher. With them were three other young doctors for whom Engelberg had vouched, saying they wouldn't cavil at traveling on a ship run almost exclusively by aliens.

Jahan's fur still felt like it was standing on end in terror even though they had escaped from the death and destruction on Kronos three days before. Just before they had entered Fold Jahan had sent a message to their friend Doctor Michael Engelberg telling him of the attack and asking for help. Jahan had not been alone in making the request. Mercedes Adalina Saturnina Inez de Arango had also put out the call for ships to bring medical personnel and supplies to the ravaged planet and its suffering citizens. As expected he had mobilized the hospitals and now help was on the way.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, the doctor stepped through the door of the shuttle. The heavy duffel he carried gave him an odd swaying gait like a sailor just returned from a long stint at sea. His significantly younger wife was right behind him with an even larger duffle. The three young male doctors carried even larger duffles. It was an increase in scale that seemed based on age and gender and the seemingly universal male need (even across species) to measure dicks.

Jahan hurried forward and, after a brief tug-of-war, took the duffle away from Engelberg. He frowned down at her from his six foot two height. Since she wasn't quite five feet tall, the duffle rested on the ground even with the strap over her shoulder.

"You going to drag my delicate medical equipment?" Engelberg growled. "And where's Oliver? Tell him to get his lazy ass out here and help."

"Right. Oliver. That's a long story. So we'll save it for later. As for your delicate equipment ..." She swung the bag up until it rested across her shoulders like a power lifter partway through

a clean and jerk exercise. Her smile bared her canines and Engelberg just shook his head. "Shall we?" She jerked her head toward the gangplank leading into the *Selkie's* cargo bay.

"What about the big stuff?" Kathy asked.

"Jax had the stevedores alerted; they'll have it loaded in the next thirty minutes." She glanced over at the three young doctors. "I'm Jahan Sirani, Captain of the *Selkie*." That made their eyes widen and she took a perverse pleasure in their reaction.

Inside the cargo bay, the rest of her crew was waiting to assist in settling their passengers. Jax held a tap pad in two of his fronds while a third held the stylus so he could check off items as they were delivered. Kielli was grinning, his fangs bright against the darker red fur around his face. The golden fur that covered his body was pretty much covered by his utility coveralls. Jahan gave a mental sigh; her nephew was still at the age where he found tumultuous times to be exciting. Dalea, their ship's doctor, was a Hajin. Taller even than Engelberg, she had a black and red mane that owed more to the bottle than nature given her age. The final member of the crew was a human, a grizzled old veteran who was too old and infirm to be called up back to active duty. Ernie Gantz was short and bandy-legged with a prodigious paunch. He was also a wizard when it came to mechanical equipment and he had the *Selkie's* engines purring. He moved forward immediately to take Kathy's duffle.

"Ma'am, welcome to the *Selkie*. We've got you and your hubby in the captain's cabin." His eyes raked the three young doctors who were staring at him with the air of shipwreck victims spotting a rescue vessel. "You *vatos* have our cabins."

"We don't want to put you out of your rooms," Kathy objected.

"It's fine. I sometimes sleep in the engine room anyway and the pony here"—he jerked a thumb at Dalea—"will bunk in the infirmary when one of us is bunged up so she don't care. That

just leaves the squirrels, and they can hang a hammock and fuckin' sleep *anywhere*."

Jahan noted Kathy's flinch as Ernie casually threw around the speciesist slurs. She patted the human woman on the arm. "It's okay. We know Ernie is a bigoted asshole, but he's *our* bigoted asshole."

Forty minutes later the supplies were loaded, they were cleared to disengage from the station, and were boosting toward a safe Fold point. Engelberg set the young docs—Gregory, Ethan, and Cyrus—to organizing the crates. They had just thrown together supplies and Engelberg wanted quick access to whatever might be needed. Dalea joined in to help.

"Okay, they're out of the way," the human doctor said. "Now get me a coffee and tell us what the hell happened to Oliver."

They took the lift up to the central level on the ship, which housed the med bay, galley, and cabins. Engelberg and Kathy sat at the table while Jahan prepared tea for herself and Kathy and strong coffee for her husband. Jax came rustling in and settled into his soaking pool.

"Oliver Randall was a made-up person," Jahan said as she handed out the beverages. "His real name was Thracius Ransom Belmanor, and he was a disgraced O-Trell officer."

"What had he done?" Kathy asked.

"Nothing. In fact, he was the living embodiment of the old adage that *no good deed goes unpunished*," the Tiponi Flute said.

"So what was the good deed?" Engelberg asked.

"It's a long story. Bottom line, he protected a bunch of half-alien, half-human kids—yeah, yeah, we know that's illegal, but it happened—and Oliver ... uh, Tracy, he opened fire on the human troops sent to kill them." Jahan realized her claws had extended when she tried to spin her mug. She retracted them quickly, not wanting to alarm the human guests.

"The crown wanted to cover it up, so they buried him under bogus charges and cashiered him," Jax continued.

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain where he is *now*,” Engelberg growled.

“Hello? Big ugly aliens? Well, I guess they’re ugly; we haven’t seen any of them yet. Anyway, they’re attacking us. Trained military officer, graduate of the High Ground. Of course they pardoned Tracy and recalled him to duty,” Jahan said.

“He’s now—”

“Captain Thracius Belmanor requesting permission to come aboard.” The title still felt strange in his mouth. The *fusilero* guarding the access tube snapped off a salute which Tracy returned. The collar on his dress uniform seemed suddenly too tight and he quashed the impulse to run a finger around it. This was the first time Tracy had said *Captain* himself while wearing an O-Trell uniform. Others had used the title as he had made his way to Hellfire where he was to take command of his ship. Each time he’d had to curb his desire to look around and see who they were talking about. Now he had spoken the rank out loud and the sense of being an imposter had not lessened by one iota.

The only thing that didn’t feel surreal was the *lanza de fuego fragata* he was about to board. As the big transport ship had glided past the station in orbit above Hellfire, Tracy had been able to observe the elegant beauty that was his fire lance frigate. Her name was emblazoned across the side in shimmering blue—*Swiftsure*. There had been a clutch in his chest as he’d observed her. Heavily armed and blindingly fast, the fire lance was the most advanced warship in the imperial fleet. The one downside was that to achieve the speed she was relatively lightly armored. And as every League citizen now knew, particularly the inhabitants of an O-Trell star port and the citizens on Kronos, their enemy possessed fearsome weapons.

Tracy had been in Fold when the attack on Kronos had

occurred. Paranoia had fleet headquarters on Hellfire ordering every arriving ship to drop out of Fold on the outskirts of the system, which meant it took several weeks to actually reach the planet. Tracy supposed there was some logic in that the enemy (he really wished the high command would come up with a damn name for the bastards, not that the rank and file troops didn't already have plenty of vulgar and scatological terms already) tended to drop into real space deep inside a planetary system. Having military vessels on the outskirts might be helpful for a flank attack, and avoided any chance of friendly fire, but it did make for a long damn time in transit.

His musings were interrupted when a young woman with nearly white blonde hair and dark blue eyes stepped forward and saluted. Her uniform looked as new as Tracy's, but she seemed to wear it more comfortably. "Sir, Lieutenant Lady Christina Flintoff. It would be my honor to escort you to the Captain's Mess. Commander Marquis Valada-Viers has assembled the officers to meet you."

"Excellent. Lead the way, Lieutenant."

As they moved through the corridors personnel stepped to the side and saluted. Tracy began to wonder if just leaving his hand at the bill of his hat would be simpler and less wear on his elbow.

"You don't have a batBEM, sir?" Flintoff asked him.

"I didn't have time to employ one prior to reporting."

"There are a number on Hellfire whose officers have been killed or wounded and are unable to return to duty for the foreseeable future. We can arrange for you to interview some before we Fold."

"Excellent, please do so."

"Do you have a preference as to species?" the young woman asked.

That raised a jumble of conflicting emotions, unpleasant memories, and a secret fear that Tracy had expressed to no one. Unconsciously, his hand went to touch the *Distinguido Servizio*

Cruzar, the League's highest military award, given for extreme gallantry and risk of life in combat with an armed enemy force. He had won it during his first year at the High Ground, and given it into the keeping of his then batBEM just before he had been arrested.

Donnel was a smart-mouthed alien who was a physical horror because he was a member of the Cara'ot, an alien race that delighted in trading in DNA and tailoring bodies to fit worlds and tasks. The batBEM had three legs, four arms, a round head that seemed to sit directly atop his squat body, and four eyes that gave him 360° vision. Donnel had been assigned to Tracy when he entered the academy, but had vanished with all the rest of his species on the day Tracy had been cashiered and convicted. Presumably the medal had vanished with him.

But then Tracy had found just such a medal sitting on his bunk back on the *Selkie* the day he learned he would be returning to active duty. Coincidentally, the Sidone Spider who had been a member of the *Selkie* crew had, like the long departed Donnel, also vanished. Since that day Tracy had harbored a secret fear that maybe Graarack wasn't actually a Spider, but instead Donnel in a new body with a new sex. Which implied that perhaps the Cara'ot hadn't actually disappeared, but had simply altered their forms and were living secretly within the League plotting God knew what.

Of course he hadn't dared to voice this mad idea even to his crew, much less central command, for fear of looking like a raving lunatic. Tracy tried to comfort himself with the thought that sometimes even very rare medals could be found in pawnshops, and this medal could not *possibly* be his *actual* medal. His crew had known about the award. This was probably just Graarack's way of wishing Tracy Godspeed. To believe otherwise would give him nightmares. *So why then had she vanished?* Unfortunately for the state of his sleep, he hadn't been able to shake the fear.

"Sir?" the lieutenant prodded.

“Sorry. I have no preference. Pick four or five who come well referenced.”

“Very good, sir.”

They entered a lift and Flintoff pressed the button for deck level three. “Flintoff. I had a classmate who I believe married a Flintoff. Sumiko—”

“Yes, sir. My foster mother.” There was an imperceptible emphasis on the word *foster*.

“Ah, yes, quite. That would make sense,” Tracy said, feeling awkward. He should have realized the girl was a child from a Hidden World just from her coloring. For generations, citizens of the League had been intermarrying so that now true blondes, blue eyes, and pale skin were rarities. Tracy himself with his dishwater blond hair, grey eyes, and dark ivory skin was a bit of an oddity.

As the lift rose toward the officer quarter’s level, Tracy mentally reviewed the personnel files he had been sent. Valada-Viers, Cassutt, Lal, Washington, and Noveck. All of them held titles ranging from caballero to condé to marquis. Tracy hoped the fact that the captain didn’t wasn’t going to become a problem. *You have the one that matters*, he reminded himself, *captain*.

He snorted faintly. The irony was that his false identity had actually been granted a title of nobility. Oliver Randall, late of the trading vessel *Selkie*, was a caballero, the title granted for his service to the crown. Once Tracy had resumed his *actual* identity he had gone back to being a mere *intitulado*. *Who is the captain of the most advanced ship in the fleet*.

He returned to his mental review. Cassutt had impressive scores in mathematics so it made sense he oversaw weapons and navigation. Afumba was the ship’s physician and had been educated at the medical school on New Hope, a powerful recommendation. Lal seemed to have found a way to coax three percent more speed out of the *Swiftsure* when they weren’t in Fold, which could make the difference in a firefight. Washington had seen combat during the attempted coup three years before.

He had held the governor's mansion on Dullahan. All in all, an impressive bunch.

The elevator sighed to a stop, and there was a moment of awkward dancing where Tracy tried to let the girl precede him and she tried to have the captain go first. He quickly realized his mistake and stepped past her, allowing her to hold the door. This deference was definitely going to take some getting used to. Once that nonsense was resolved, she took the lead again, and led him to the door of the Captain's Mess. Two *fusileros* flanked the door. Salutes were exchanged, the door was opened, and Tracy entered. Flintoff did not follow. The door slid closed.