

PIRATES OF DRINAX:

LIBERTY

PORT



TRAVELLER

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INTRODUCTION

The people of Sperle are more or less dominated by the General Development Corporation, and are weary of it. They turn to the Travellers to help them create a route for commerce – some would call it smuggling – that bypasses the GeDeCo-controlled starport. Setting up a smuggling route is one thing, but ensuring it is not eradicated by GeDeCo security personnel is quite another. Eventually, the plan spirals out of control, resulting in an armed confrontation that threatens to take many lives.

THE SETTING

Sperle is a water world; there is virtually no land above sea level. Its ecosystem is fairly primitive, with few animals larger than clusters of a few cells. There is a fair amount of sea-based plant life however. The population, numbering some ninety million, is clustered on several small island chains and in settlements on the seabed between them. The majority of transportation is by means of submarines and surface ships, with heavy-lift dirigibles used for most air travel. These are highly efficient due to Sperle's dense atmosphere and well suited to long voyages over open ocean.

Higher technology is available, mainly to a social elite that manages and owns the world's aquaculture industries. A fair amount of seabed farming is undertaken, providing food for the populace plus a modest surplus for export, but the world is primarily known for the harvesting of a creature known as the Sperle Whale. These are in fact huge amoeba-like clusters of single-celled organisms which can be processed into a variety of useful biochemicals.

'Whale' harvesting is not a glamorous occupation. It is undertaken by driving remotely operated or manually piloted submersibles through a whale and filtering the organisms into holding tanks aboard whilst expelling water through the drive system. When full, a filter-sub returns to its parent vessel and pumps out its tanks before returning for more runs until the whale is too dispersed to be of further use. Normal practice is to leave a dispersed whale alone and allow it to not only coagulate but grow back to a size where harvesting will not destroy it.

The only part of the whale harvesting business considered particularly exciting is the searcher mission. Searchers pilot small wing-in-surface-effect craft at high speed across the ocean looking for signs of whale activity. These craft are fast and relatively cheap to operate, but can only fly a few metres above the surface at most. They are at grave risk in bad weather, since the air pressure effect that keeps them airborne is disrupted by a choppy sea. If a searcher cannot make it back to his parent craft he will be forced to land on the water surface. The craft will float, but is a terribly small vessel to be at sea in during a storm.

The whale harvesting business is owned almost entirely by the General Development Corporation, mainly through various subsidiaries or businesses in which GeDeCo owns a controlling share. Similarly, GeDeCo more or less owns the starport outright. It was built as part of the GeDeCo remit to foster trade and commerce in the region, and now ostensibly owned by the planetary government. However, the government owes so much to GeDeCo for the port that essentially the corporation now also owns the government.

The port is quite busy, with local trade as well as ships moving through the Voidsedge Cluster to and from the Aslan Hierate. However, most profits go to the owning corporation, making it hard for the world government to reduce its debt to GeDeCo.

THE PATRON

The Free Sperle Society is something of a laughing stock in the local region. Its members are noisy malcontents who talk tough – often tough enough to get themselves arrested – but rarely do anything about freeing their world from dominance by GeDeCo. When they do act, the Free Sperle Society cannot even manage to organise a protest march. People go to the wrong places, start at the wrong times and generally fail to achieve anything. This actually suits most of the members; a free Sperle would be a leap into the unknown and things are not really all that bad. To these people, the Free Sperle cause is an outlet for disaffection and a chance to have a good grumble over a few beers.

There is, however a segment of the membership that is deadly serious and has a plan. The general incompetence of the movement suits their agenda, too, since it allows them to operate more or less openly without getting into trouble despite a high Law Level. Led by Armandie Kern, a veteran searcher pilot who is something of a legend amongst the harvesting community, this segment wants to find an alternative route offworld for some of its produce. The money this brings in will fund further operations and perhaps a legal buy-out of some of the harvesting firms.

Armandie is proposing illegal means to obtain funding for a Freedom for Sperle campaign. She is vigorously opposed to violence and bloodshed – ironically enough, she sufficiently abhors violence that she has been known to punch people who propose it. She is fine with pilfering, smuggling and all manner of other criminal activity if undertaken in a good cause, but will not condone the use of force under any circumstances.

Armandie will maintain this stance even in the face of violence against her people, up to a point. She urges non-lethal self-defence at most, and insists her people treat their opponents with care and courtesy. However, if serious casualties are taken she will go to the other extreme, calling for violent retribution and even being willing to cause collateral damage. If this occurs, she will be extremely and obviously unstable, but riding a wave of popular support for her extremely aggressive stance that will make her hard to resist or remove from leadership. Ultimately, Armandie will suffer a breakdown if she goes down this path – but not before causing immense damage to her homeworld and its people.

HIRING ON

The Travellers are approached by representatives of the Free Sperle Society, who seem like the typical membership – earnest, slightly inept and highly self-conscious. They have a proposal which they openly state is a little bit illegal. Some of them actually giggle at this. They need people with access to starships to help them sneak ‘stuff’ on and off Sperle without going through the starport, and ideally they need help to set up a small port of their own.

The port will be set up on a remote island. It has a good natural anchorage for maritime vessels and only a very small population. Most of the people dwelling there are in favour of a free Sperle, at least to some extent. If the Travellers can show the Free Sperlists how to set up a rudimentary starship-loading facility at the island, they can begin smuggling goods offworld and bringing in weaponry to fight for their freedom.

It is at this point that Armandie intervenes in the discussion, quite forcefully. She delivers a tirade about peaceful liberty and condemns anyone who wants to create a militia. However, she is willing to concede that a token armed force will be useful – after all, some people using it will be of low moral standards – and that a show of strength will deter any attempt to dislodge it. She seems quite certain of this – a few guards with small arms will be enough to ensure GeDeCo will not attempt to use force. More worldly-wise Travellers might realise that Armandie is a little blinkered about this subject. She is so determined to avoid violence that she has created a fantasy in which there is no possibility of it occurring. Nevertheless, she does have a reasonable plan and this is a good chance to make some money from smuggling.

THE FREE SPERLE SOCIETY



ARMOUR

FRONT 10

REAR 10

SIDES 10



SPERLE SEARCHER

TL	7
SKILL	FLYER (WING)
AGILITY	+2
SPEED (CRUISE)	HIGH (MEDIUM)
RANGE (CRUISE)	1000 (1500)
CREW	1
PASSENGERS	1
CARGO	0.5
HULL	3
SHIPPING	4 TONS
COST	CR200000

TRAITS

None

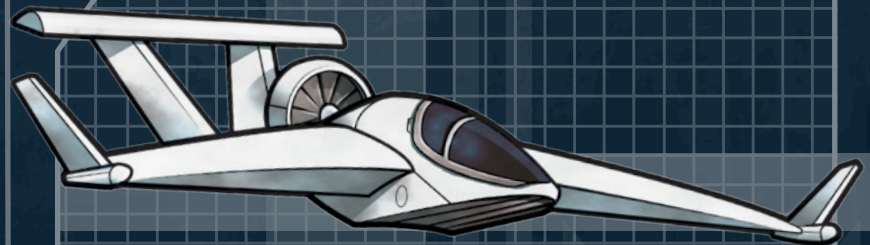
Autopilot (skill level)	1
Communications (range)	50km
Navigation (Navigation DM)	+1
Sensors (Electronics (sensors) DM)	+2
Camouflage (Recon DM)	-
Stealth (Electronics (sensors) DM)	-

EQUIPMENT AND WEAPONS

Autopilot (improved), Communication System (basic), Control System (improved), Ejection Seat, Floats, Life Support (short term), Navigation System (basic), Sensor System (improved, increased fidelity)

DESCRIPTION

The searcher is a surface effect vehicle capable of high speed travel across an ocean at a maximum altitude of just a few metres, typically for maritime reconnaissance duties or as a component in a search and rescue team. Others are used to hunt wildlife, taking advantage of the integrated sensors to locate animals for research or consumption. Such craft are noted as being fragile and their use is not recommended on rough seas.



LIBERTY PORT

The Travellers will need to get hold of some pretty heavy equipment if a workable port is to be created. Most would not know where to start, but pirates and smugglers do this sort of thing on a frequent basis. One of the keys to not getting caught is the ability to set up a cargo-handling facility on some remote rockball or distant corner of a sparsely inhabited world, and break it down again when it is time to move on. Even if the Travellers have not done this for themselves, they will be familiar with the concepts and some of the shortcuts that can be taken.

The first requirement is going to be cargo loading equipment. One simple solution is to use robots, as many small merchant ships do, since this allows the vessel to take its cargo handling facility everywhere it goes. Robots are not as efficient as a semi-permanent crane system but a facility using them would be quicker and easier to set up. It would also be rather hard to conceal a freight handling system whereas robots can be driven under cover in a matter of moments.

The Travellers may come up with an alternative setup, but the simplest and probably best way to create a workable port is to buy, steal or otherwise obtain a number of cargobots plus some basic prefabricated buildings to serve as warehouses and processing plants. The Free Sperle Society also wants weaponry – no matter what Armandie says, they feel the ability to resist interference is a necessity. Small arms are the most pressing requirement but the society would also like to obtain a few heavier weapons; perhaps something that could be mounted on a searcher craft or used to defend the new port from maritime vessels offshore.

The Free Sperle Society will pay a good price for what the Travellers bring; even just buying the items they need will result in a profit, albeit not a very large one. If they can steal or scam what they need, the profit margins rise greatly. One possible source of both weapons and cargo handling equipment is a stash created by a rival pirate group, and indeed one exists just a parsec away in the Exe outsystem.

Enshaari's Spacers are the sort of operators that give piracy a bad... well, worse... reputation. Their name is a nasty play on words; they have a habit of taking people hostage then chucking them out of an airlock if the ransom is not paid. They are a small outfit with two

ships – a Subsidised Merchant and a heavily modified Far Trader. The latter is the actual pirate vessel; the Subsidised Merchant is apparently legitimate and used to take cargo to the marketplace. This requires a transfer of containers from one vessel to the other, which is undertaken at a temporary landing site. Enshaari's Spacers move their site frequently to reduce the chances of discovery, but at present it is more or less abandoned.

Enshaari's primary vessel recently tangled with a warship from the Imperial pirate-hunting squadron currently operating in the region, and suffered crippling damage. The survivors were taken prisoner and the other vessel made itself scarce. It will probably reappear with a new identity once the pirate hunters have moved on, but for now one ship is out of action and the other is far away. Enshaari's stash of weaponry and cargo handling robots is just sitting on the outer moon of Exe's gas giant, waiting for someone to come by and put it to good use.

Enshaari is not a man you want to cross, but is currently incarcerated in an Imperial prison vessel awaiting execution. There is a window of opportunity here, and if Enshaari somehow escapes – or is rescued by a band of intrepid pirates perhaps – then perhaps he will not find out who stole his equipment.

If the Travellers choose to go down this route they will probably expect trouble but actually the theft is pretty straightforward. There are not even any booby-traps to contend with. The only way this can go wrong is if the Travellers make some sort of major error. Otherwise, they can get what they need for almost no cost.

SETTING UP

The Travellers next need to help the Free Sperle Society set up their spaceport, which they optimistically name Liberty Port.

This is, on the face of it, a fairly simple task. All that is necessary is to set up the cargo handling equipment and show the port operators how to go about moving cargo from a maritime ship in the bay or holding facility to a starship on the makeshift landing pad, and vice versa. This would normally seem like a simple task. However, there are problems. The most significant of these is a segment of the local population who do not like what is happening at all. There is a real danger that someone

will report the operation to the world government, and even if they do not there are those who will persistently get in the way as a means of protesting against what the Free Sperle Society is doing on their home island.

The best way to deal with these problems is to convince the local population that the Liberty Port project is in their best interests. Selling the idea simply as a concept will be very difficult, but can be done with sufficient persuasion. Alternatively, a combination of inducement and intimidation might work. It is, as they say, much easier to take silver than lead. If the local naysayers can be offered a financial advantage to supporting – or at least not opposing – the project whilst showing them there might be consequences for betraying the project, most will choose to accept it.

Outright violence will alienate a lot of the local population – even some former supporters – and will ultimately be counterproductive. The Travellers will have to tread a fine line between hinting at threats and the chance of financial gain if they want the cooperation of the populace. Brute force methods, such as arming a defensive militia and imposing what amounts to martial law on the island might also work, but such actions go against the ethos of the Free Sperle Society. The society believes – with some justification – that its cause is just and has widespread popular support. Heavy-handed dominance of the local population is something the government and corporations do (at least according to the Free Sperle Society) and such tactics are not acceptable to more than a small minority of the membership.

The Travellers will thus have to contend with dissent among the locals and excessive idealism among their patrons as well as the difficulties of getting a port up and running. They will also have to convince some of the harvester ship captains to either hand over a part of their cargo or take it to Liberty Port rather than the usual destination. This will require some measure of deception, but is actually not that hard to achieve. Harvesting is a hit-and-miss business, with some ships making big hauls within days of setting out from port and others cruising around for weeks before finding a suitable whale.

It should be possible to convince sympathetic captains to take their first catch to Liberty Port and offload it there before harvesting again and taking that to the main port. A consistent drop in harvests will be noticed sooner or later, but what looks like a temporary downturn will not attract much attention. The smuggling operation should be able to function for several months before anyone notices something is amiss.

The arrival of the first shipload of raw biochemicals at Liberty Port is a cause for great celebration. Once taken offworld and sold, the Free Sperle Society will have a source of reliable income which can be turned towards challenging the dominance of the world's government and economy. Of course, there are still those who want to arm for a violent struggle, but their voices are drowned out by those who truly believe their illegally-funded legal challenge will work.

TRIGGER INCIDENT

At first the project seems to go quite well. Shipments of biochemicals are brought to Liberty Port and sent offworld, and it looks like the authorities have failed to notice. This turns out to be a false impression, however, and leads to a fundamental change in the situation. If the Travellers are on-planet at the time, they hear about the incident as it takes place and might be able to intervene. If not, when they next return to Sperle they find that events have taken a violent turn.

After a few weeks the apparent downturn in harvest yields becomes apparent, and inquiries lead the authorities to realise something is amiss. Previously productive ships are now returning to harbour half full, or taking twice as long to deliver a full load. Enquiries get nowhere, so the authorities launch a surprise boarding of a harvest ship sympathetic to the Free Sperle Society. The boarding is carried out in a heavy-handed and aggressive manner, which causes anger among the crew, and after a scuffle the harvest ship's officers are arrested at gunpoint along with some of their crew.

Aware that something is happening but unable to find out exactly what, the authorities begin arresting harvest ship crews on highly spurious grounds, and confiscating equipment. The more militant members of the Free Sperle Society find this intolerable and call for action. Some ideas put forward are workable and unlikely to lead to escalation, such as a strike among harvest ship crews, but others take a more direct approach. Weapons are distributed and harvester crews declare their intention to resist further unlawful – as they see it – boardings of their vessels and internment of crews. The authorities respond with a declaration that armed resistance will be met in kind, and a confrontation rapidly develops between harvester crews and government.

Matters come to a head when a government-hired mercenary security force attempts to board a harvest ship carrying armed members of the Free Sperle Society. Shots are fired, and although no-one is seriously injured the incident marks a turning point in the dispute. The

vessel is pursued and soon forced to anchor close to an inhabited island, with government-paid mercenaries moving into the area.

The situation escalates to the point where the harvesters are told their ship will be fired on and sunk if it attempts to break out into the open sea, and there are obvious preparations to board the vessel and take its crew prisoner. There seems to be no resolution other than armed conflict or surrender and, despite Armandie's efforts to find a peaceful resolution, neither side has any intention of backing down.

The Free Sperle Society begins to split, with some members willing to fight or seeing no alternative – and many more talking as if they are willing to fight when they really are not – and others either hoping for a return to the status quo or some kind of diplomatic solution. Armandie turns to the Travellers in the hope they have some ideas.

It might be possible to convince the crew to surrender, which will at least defuse the current standoff, and there is an outside chance that some sort of deal can be negotiated. Failing that, the Travellers will have to get the crew out of their predicament and beyond the authorities' reach. A rescue will be difficult but not impossible, and an exchange of fire between the mercenaries and 'criminals aided by offworlders' will not have the same political fallout as direct conflict between the harvesters and the authorities.

At this point, Sperle is on the brink of a violent clash between the Free Sperle Society and the government. It might be possible to delay or defuse it, but there is no possible outcome that will not have consequences. What the Travellers choose to do will determine the course of subsequent events.

CONFRONTATION

The Free Sperle Society faces two problems. Firstly, its membership is heavily divided and may split into rival or even opposed factions. Many have quite unrealistic expectations – they want the society to stand by the surrounded crew and support them but without dragging the world into a conflict. If the harvester crew surrender they will be seen as having been abandoned, but if they are assisted in armed conflict, the Travellers and Free Sperle Society leadership will be accused of triggering the bloodshed. Secondly, the authorities are now certain something is going on, and will find out exactly what it is sooner or later. Once that happens, Liberty Port will be shut down and arrests will follow.

If the Travellers can negotiate a peaceful end to the confrontation, then the Free Sperle Society's project will fizzle out. There will be arrests but few will be charged with anything serious. Liberty Port will be shut down and the equipment there taken by the world government; that might have implications later if Enshaari manages to escape Imperial custody and goes looking for his stolen cargobots. There will also likely be some violence as individuals and small groups resist arrest or make ill-fated all-or-nothing attempts to trigger a coup. Overall, though, the Travellers have the opportunity to minimise bloodshed but only by causing the Free Sperle Society to fail.

If, on the other hand, the Travellers contribute to escalation – for example by staging a violent rescue of the harvester crew – then matters will quickly get out of hand. A gunfight between mercenaries and harvester crews is likely, and other crews will begin to resist arrest. The authorities, for their part, will want to board and search other harvester craft; conflict is unavoidable. Meanwhile some elements of the Free Sperle Society begin rabble-rousing and calling for revolution whilst others dissociate themselves or fight to oppose them.

The revolution, if it can be called that, is small and short-lived. There is simply not enough popular support among the people of Sperle for any chance of success. Any given pocket of resistance can be swamped, and pretty soon it becomes apparent that the authorities are going to move on Liberty Port. Depending upon how bad casualties have been, Armandie might still be preaching peaceful measures, or she may have begun advocating bloodthirsty vengeance.

Either way, her attitude hardens when a shipload of harvesters – who she knows were not involved with any previous incidents and were probably unarmed – are fired upon by nervous or trigger-happy government mercenaries. Armandie begins demanding an uprising, and comes up with a plan of sorts. This is essentially to vigorously resist the attempt to close down Liberty Port and present demands for concessions to the world government. Although angry, she is realistic enough to know the society cannot win a conflict, but it may be possible to salvage something from the situation.

Sure enough, when government troops begin landing at Liberty Port, Armandie's followers are ready for them. They have plenty of small arms and some support weapons fitted to searcher craft, enabling them to make fast wavetop-level strikes. Although determined and inspired by their cause, Armandie's followers are not very skilled and further impeded by a sharply divided

island population. Some of the locals want to assist the government troops so the fighting will be over quickly, or because they resent the Society for causing so much bloodshed. A few genuinely sympathise with the government.

Armandie and her followers will be able to repel the initial, overconfident attempt to capture their stronghold but cannot hold out indefinitely. Having cast the dice, Armandie can see only one possible outcome; fight to the last in the hope of inspiring others to rise up against the government.

CHOICES

It will be obvious to the Travellers that Armandie's plan will cause a great deal of suffering and bloodshed, and will probably not work. Even if it does, there is no real chance of an uprising doing more than killing a whole lot more people. Yet Armandie will not consider any other option. She is enraged that, despite all her urgings towards peaceful measures, the heavy-handedness of the government (as she sees it) has forced her into this extremity. In short, her attitude is a fanatical 'look what they made me do' and she will not countenance any talk of surrender. This is a very different Armandie from the one who passionately ranted against any thought of armed resistance. In some ways, though, she is the same. Just as passionate, just as determined, just as stubborn. Only now she wants blood and seems quite willing to get herself and her followers killed to make a political point.

The Travellers could simply make an exit from Sperle. Their involvement might not be common knowledge, and they might be able to pretend they are just interstellar traders who happened to get caught up in events beyond their control. On the other hand if the Travellers stay, they will have to make a difficult choice.

Armandie's insurrection is doomed, that much should be obvious. If the Travellers stay and fight they will get to take part in a glorious last stand from which they might be able to escape – perhaps with some of the rebels – in their starship. Getting out will require a well-timed decision to cut and run, which might face opposition from some of the rebels. Armandie herself might bless their escape or try to kill the Travellers for even considering it, depending on her attitude towards them.

The alternative is to betray Armandie and her hard core of supporters, which might be the best way to save lives. A betrayal could be relatively mild – for example just quietly leaving before things get too hairy – or extremely graphic. The authorities will pay well for information on the rebels and their numbers, leaders and so forth, and even better if the Travellers can capture key figures among the rebellion. They may also be able to persuade some of the rebels to surrender or at least not fight to the last despite Armandie's urgings.

The authorities are willing to negotiate with the Travellers; if they can bring a relatively peaceful end to this conflict then they will be pardoned for their part in it and offered a reward. Some segments of the population would consider them heroes and peacemakers; others will hate them forever. The important thing is that the Travellers will get out with full pockets and skins intact, and they can save a lot of people being led to destruction by Armandie.

There is some merit to this argument; the situation has spiralled out of control and people are getting hurt for no real gain. The rebellion has no chance of success and is really nothing more than a personal vendetta on the part of Armandie and others like her. Ending it is in everyone's interests, even if some will resent being saved.

One way or another the Travellers need to get out of the situation on Sperle. Their actions might have repercussions later, but at least they will be alive. If they stay, the best they can hope for is a long spell in prison when the island is overrun, and if they are linked to the machinery at Liberty Port they may well be executed as pirates. There would be a certain irony in that, since the proof of their pirate status may come from items they stole off a different band of spacegoing cut-throats. It is probably not an irony the Travellers will appreciate.

If they want to avoid this fate, the Travellers have to get out or end the conflict in such a way that the government lets them go. It may seem dishonourable to betray their patron, but what choice do they have? And in any case, the Travellers *are* pirates. Honourable conduct is not always guaranteed when you deal with those who make a living from robbery.

