

# ARISTEIA

Revolutionary Right

BOOK ONE



Wayne Basta



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**REVOLUTIONARY RIGHT**

**BY WAYNE BASTA**

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*To Erin and Connor*



*"This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."*

--Abraham Lincoln



## CHAPTER ONE

Maarkean Ocaitchi felt an unsettling sense of nostalgia wash over him as he moved down the corridor. Despite the passage of more than a decade, he still vividly recalled his time serving the Alliance Navy onboard ships like this one. The dull grey walls were like those he had seen many times before, and he could almost imagine that he was back in the old days. When the door he was approaching opened, however, the illusion was broken.

Though it still had the name 'Ready Room,' it bore only a few similarities to its original purpose. The dimly lit, crowded room was filled with a varied collection of beings; the many smells from the different species hit Maarkean's nose, and nausea replaced the feelings of nostalgia. He was on an Alliance military carrier, but it no longer served as such.

Adjusting to the dimmer light of the room, Maarkean surveyed the people and located a dark-haired Terran male. He carefully worked his way through the crowd and managed to reach the man without disturbing any of the other clientele.

The Terran at the table looked up at Maarkean, a sly smile on his face. The man surely knew how much meeting here annoyed Maarkean.

"Joss," Maarkean said, refusing to let his feelings show as he took a seat across from the other man.

Josserand continued to smile. "Always good to see you, Maak. How's your sister?"

"Still not interested in you," Maarkean said.

"Pity. Despite the horns, and the fact she's related to you, she is a fine-looking woman."

"You Terrans, always focusing on the differences between species."

Josserand smiled suggestively. "Oh, trust me, I truly appreciate the aspects of your sister that are similar to Terrans."

Trying not to let the man get to him, Maarkean tried to change the subject. "I hear you have a job for me."

Surveying the room, Josserand said in a noncommittal tone, "I may have a job. Whether or not it's for you remains to be seen."

Maarkean took a breath and tried to keep desperation and annoyance from creeping into his voice. He had worked for Josserand several times before and had always performed better than any of his other contractors. Times had been tough recently, and he needed to get this job if he was going to keep flying.

"Of course it's for me. You want it to get where it needs to go and not into the hands of an Alliance official."

Josserand gave him another sly smile. "That is true. You do know how to be slippery when it comes to the Alliance. It's almost as if you know how they think."

Ignoring the barb, Maarkean remained silent, waiting for Josserand to accept that he wasn't going to be baited this time. Josserand had succeeded many times in the past. The man enjoyed getting Maarkean to react, giving his bodyguards an opportunity to show how intimidating they could look. Every time he had succeeded in getting Maarkean to do or say something in anger, he had still been willing to hire him – at half the going rate. Maarkean hated working for the man and avoided it when he could.

"You must be in a bit of a financial bind to come back to me looking for work," Josserand said with a slight smile.

How the man knew the predicament Maarkean and his sister faced, he didn't know. They had arrived on the *Black Market* several days before and had not yet found any jobs. Ever since the smuggling ring they had worked with had run afoul of some pirates, they had been experiencing a dry spell in job opportunities. Jossierand was his last hope.

"What makes you think that? Maybe I just missed working for you?" Maarkean said, trying to sound relaxed.

Jossierand let out a chuckle. "There's no need to lie. We don't like each other. But you do have a fast ship. I'll tell you what: to help you out, I'll take her off your hands. I'll give you a great price on her and even drop you off on any planet you want to go to."

This was not the first time Jossierand had tried to buy Maarkean's ship. The *Cutty Sark* was old, but the Swift class was no longer produced, which made her a classic. Plus, few made it this far from the homeworlds, which made them rare.

Maarkean had no doubt Jossierand would indeed give him a good price, but selling the *Cutty Sark* was not an option he would ever seriously consider. She was his home and his livelihood.

Jossierand finally dropped his smile and pushed a data pad across the table. "I see you've turned down my offer yet again. If you weren't so good at what you did, I might take it personally. Very well, twenty thousand, if you can make the rendezvous. Nothing if you're late. And you owe me if you get caught."

"Five thousand up front, and if the cargo's not waiting at my ship when I get there, I get to keep the advance, even if I'm late."

Jossierand's eyes narrowed.

Maarkean was pushing hard. Desperation was making him take a risk in demanding the advance, but he had never missed a delivery. He could only assume that was why

Josserand kept hiring him, despite the animosity between them.

A tense moment dragged on, and Maarkean began to think he had pushed too far, before Josserand said, "I like the new you. Confident, calm. Very well. Five thousand in advance. The cargo will be onboard your ship before you get there."

Relief washed over Maarkean; he struggled to keep it from showing. He simply stood up and nodded his head to Josserand. "A pleasure doing business with you, as always."

As Maarkean entered the main hangar deck, sound immediately bombarded his senses. The maintenance deck of any carrier was always a cacophony of noise as ships were moved, machinery was used to make repairs and people went about their business. On this ship, these sounds were magnified by the wide range of species, personalities and types of docked ships.

Making his way across the deck proved difficult. While the hangar would have been cavernous if it were empty, every available spot was packed with ships and cargo. Massive freighters that had never been designed to land in a hangar bay were crammed next to small courier ships, with cargo filling all the spaces in between. Load-lifting robots laden with crates moved between the ships at surprising speeds.

The ship he was on was a Victory-class command carrier and had once seen service in the Alliance Navy. Rumors ran rampant as to how it had come under the private control of a shadowy crime lord known only as the Fox. The stories ranged: some said the Fox stormed aboard with a commando team and stole it from a dry-dock; others said he bought it as it was about to be decommissioned; other stories covered everything in between.

The Alliance denied that one of its carriers was in civilian hands. This merely added fuel to the rumors. Each story said it was a different ship that had been taken. That left Maarkean not knowing what ship this had once been, or if he had ever served aboard her. She was known now simply as the *Black Market*, which gave no hint to her past.

These days, the place was crowded with groups of people with short tempers and quick trigger fingers. If you were to take any two of these people and stick them this close together in any other place, there was a better than average chance the result would be bloodshed, but the Fox, kept everyone in check. The *Black Market* was a potential gold mine for thugs, criminals, smugglers, and semi-reputable businessmen. This prospect of profit kept most of the visitors on their best behavior, and, more importantly, violence onboard resulted in banishment from the ship – sometimes without a space suit.

Knowing this didn't ease Maarkean's mind much. Violence still happened occasionally. The people who came here to do business came expressly because they held little regard for the normal rules of society.

Maarkean moved through the bay, following a group of tough-looking Dotran. The Dotrans' scales were a shiny bronze color, which meant they were of the type that would likely take the touch of an inferior species as a grave insult. As a pilot for the Alliance, he had not had much face-to-face contact with Dotran, but his time on the fringe had taught him to avoid the bronze and gold ones.

Treading lightly, Maarkean made his way past them without incident, and finally caught sight of his destination: his *Cutty Sark*. Despite the faded paint, worn hull, and other signs that the ship had seen better days, he was always pleased with the sight of her. She was *home*.

As he got closer to the ship, he saw his much younger sister, Saracasi, standing at the bottom of the ship's cargo ramp. Her ponytail of red hair at the back of her otherwise bald

head was always instantly recognizable. From the back, when clothed, Braz and Terrans looked similar. It wasn't until they turned around that you got a good look at the small circle of cranial bone ridges on their foreheads, referred to as horns by most non-Braz, and the markings on their faces.

The violet screfa clan tattoo on Saracasi's left cheek matched the color of her eyes, which were fixed on the robots moving the crates up the ramp. The screfa matched the one on Maarkean's face; it marked them as members of the Ocait clan. As she was his younger sister, they were also both members of the Chi family.

Maarkean had the same color eyes, and the pattern and shape of the cranial horns was similar enough to suggest a relation. Those were all common traits for family members. Unlike his sister, Maarkean was completely bald, as were almost all Braz males. He stood head and shoulders taller than Saracasi and was much bulkier, though less of that bulk was muscle than it had once been. Compared with her pale skin color, his was much darker. This gave her a sharp contrast between her skin and screfa, which was considered an attractive feature among Braz. Pale skin, red hair, and violet screfa and eyes – she made a compelling picture.

The sight of the cargo being loaded was a mixed blessing for Maarkean. It meant that he wouldn't get to keep the advance if the delivery was late or didn't happen. He had been hoping to get that, as the advance would keep them flying at least long enough to find their next job. However, there would be no delays in their departure.

After a moment, Saracasi noticed him approaching and smiled. The sight of his sister caused his stress about their financial situation to ease. Years ago, when their parents and his wife had died in a tragic vehicle accident, she had become his responsibility to raise. Because of their age difference, twelve standard years, they had previously not been close. The tragedy had brought them together, and now he was more of a father than a brother to her. When she'd gotten

herself in trouble years later, even though she was fully grown and on her own at a university, he had responded as a father would and did what was necessary to protect her. That was why he was here living at the edge of destitution on the fringes of society. But it was all worth it.

“I see you managed to get Joss to give us a job,” Saracasi said by way of greeting.

“I finally agreed to sell you to him. Shipping this cargo was his price for taking you off my hands.”

Turning away from her to examine the next crate due to go onto the ship, he barely glimpsed the tongue she stuck out at him. The cargo crates were nondescript rectangles of heavy black plastic, giving no clue about what was contained inside. Maarkean preferred it that way. Ignorance was bliss, as the saying went. As long as the cargo wasn't inherently dangerous, he was just fine with not knowing.

On the other hand, not knowing drove Saracasi crazy, because she worried about whether the cargo might potentially be harmful to someone. But she accepted the arrangement logically as the way business was conducted. Maarkean thought she had a disconnect between rationality and emotion. She liked to have all the information, but then her response would be hasty and based more on emotion than facts.

They also held opposite opinions about their criminal activity. While Saracasi worried about the moral implications of the cargo, she was unconcerned that their smuggling broke the law. She saw the trade restrictions that made them smugglers as unjust and, therefore, not worth obeying. But Maarkean had spent his youth defending the Alliance and all it stood for, so breaking Alliance law bothered him as much as not knowing what they were carrying bothered her.

The last crate was placed onboard the *Cutty Sark*, and the loading robots rolled down the ramp. They disappeared into the sea of other robots and people without any paperwork for them to fill out. That, at least, was one thing that did ap-

peal to him about a life of crime: no paperwork. Paperwork was evidence that led to arrests. If the goods were not delivered on time, Josserand wouldn't need a signature to track him down.

The two of them started up the ramp into the ship as soon as the robots rolled off. Without a word, they started the task of securing the cargo and sealing up the ship. The robots had done a good job of placing the crates and strapping them in and went quickly. Within thirty minutes, they moved up to the flight deck and brought the ship to life.

Saracasi activated the communication system and said, "*Black Market* control, this is *Cutty Sark* requesting clearance to depart."

"*Cutty Sark*, stand by. You are third in line for departure," came the reply.

Leaning back in her chair, Saracasi turned to Maarkean. "Well, looks like we've got a bit of a wait."

Maarkean grunted in reply as he finished the ship's start up sequence. The crew of the *Black Market* was very efficient in cramming in as many ships as possible. This came at the expense of speed in departure. With so many inside, there was little room left for taxiing to the elevator that would take them up to the launch deck. All ship movement inside was done by tractor beam emplacements, which were kept running non-stop.

"You going to tell me where we're going?" Saracasi asked impatiently.

"As soon as I know, I'll tell you," Maarkean replied, which got a sigh from Saracasi.

"You're still insisting on not knowing where we're going? Last time, we nearly missed our drop because of the time we wasted on your false course."

"Late's better than dead," Maarkean replied.

Before departing for any illicit delivery, he always plotted a random hyperspace jump. He would never look at the

real destination until they were safely in hyperspace and away from any watching sensors. He didn't want that knowledge to affect his false course. The biggest business on the *Black Market* was information, and knowing where someone was headed with a potentially valuable cargo was always worth something.

Their last random jump had, by pure bad luck, taken them in the opposite direction of where they needed to go, nearly doubling the overall length of the trip. They had made their delivery by a narrow margin, only after pushing the engines beyond the recommended limits.

"There are very few ships out there that are faster than the *Cutty Sark*, and most are military craft. Even if someone knew where we were going, they couldn't get there first," Saracasi argued. This was an argument they had had several times before.

"As proven by the *Black Market*, not all military craft remain in military hands. A packet ship could beat us easily."

"Who would ever think we're worth the cost of sending a packet ship?"

Comm systems that made long-distance communication possible only moved at the speed of light, causing delays even within a single solar system, and decades-long delays between solar systems. Travel across light-years of space took days, weeks, months or even years for most space craft. This necessitated the development of packet ships: specially designed craft that were essentially just powerful hyperdrives. They were expensive to operate and had no room for cargo or luxuries, but they could get across the expanse of space in half the time of any other ship.

"Probably no one," Maarkean conceded. "But, regardless, if anyone does try to beat us to our destination, letting them know where our cargo goes can be a danger to our clients, the recipient, or even us."

This point was ultimately the only reason Saracasi ever agreed to the plan. The desire not to put anyone in danger overcame her misgivings. She did not object to the delay or disagree that the plan made logical sense. The truth was that she did not trust their clients to have set enough time for them to make the delivery and did not understand how this did not worry Maarkean. Their clients would stab them in the back for a credit. She could not fathom how he took it on faith that they wouldn't try to screw them out of their fee by giving them less time than was necessary.

After another twenty minutes, the communications panel chirped to life. Saracasi reopened the link to the docking master, who said, "*Cutty Sark*, stand by for tractoring."

The warning was immediately followed by a vibration through the ship as a tractor beam locked on. The *Cutty Sark* lifted up off the hangar deck and was slowly guided to one of the few open areas. Coming in behind them, another ship was lowered into the spot they had been occupying.

After they were suspended in the open space for a few moments, another tractor beam activated above them. The first one shut off, and they were pulled upwards into a large airlock. The door below them sealed, and then the exterior door above opened. The tractor beam pulled them up through the opening and onto the launch deck, which was currently open to space.

Using maneuvering thrusters, Maarkean lifted the *Cutty Sark* off of the launch deck. With short bursts, he flew through the opening and out into deep space. When they were clear, Maarkean powered up the main sublight engines and left the *Black Market* behind.

With a rush of escaping air, the concealed door panel on the cargo crate cracked open. Carefully, Zeric Dustlighter eased the door open and examined the room. His view was partially obstructed by other cargo crates, but there was no

one he could see. Slowly, he squeezed just far enough out of the crate to get a better view.

The cargo bay contained little other than crates similar to the one he was crawling out of. Compared to the total darkness Zeric had experienced inside the container, the dim lighting of the cargo bay proved more than adequate. The cavernous space was only partially filled, leaving him little to survey.

After pausing for several moments to listen, Zeric felt reassured no one had seen or heard him coming out of the cargo container. He reached back inside and pulled his pack out. Opening the bag, he pulled his gun and holster, strapping them around his waist. He then drew out the ball cap he always wore. It was emblazoned with the logo of the Ba'aar Razors, his favorite hockey team. He placed the cap on his head, covering his close-cropped reddish-brown hair.

Zeric then turned his attention to examining the other containers. It took him a few minutes to find the ones with the telltale mark. The first one was easy to get open, revealing a tan-skinned Liw'kel male, Gu'od Dos'redna, who crawled out and took his own survey of the room without saying a word.

Externally, the Liw'kel were similar to Braz and Terrans, aside from a set of antennae that they used for limited communication with one another, no body hair, and a few other minor differences. The biggest difference was that they had a wider range of skin colors, from tan to purple to red. While those colors were a dull shade, not bright like the scales of a Dotran, they did stand out next to the limited range of tans and browns of Terrans and almost universally pale cream of Braz.

Gu'od himself was well muscled and slightly taller than Zeric. His strong jaw and powerful arms were similar to what you'd see on any male in an advertisement. Zeric considered himself quite attractive, but always felt inadequate if anyone were to compare the two of them side by side. He was more

of an everyday type, unlike Gu'od, with his powerful, athletic look.

Together they found the final container, but when they did, Zeric let out a curse. The container was packed in tightly next to another container. The way they were aligned prevented the secret hatch from opening. More containers were packed on top, which made moving them slow and difficult.

“What do you want to do?” Zeric asked.

With a determined expression, Gu'od turned away from the container. “We stick to the plan.”

“But Gamaly...”

“Would tell us to stick to the plan. We'll get her out later.”

Zeric shrugged and drew the AY-19 pistol on his hip. “All right, she's your wife.”

With a final look back at the container, Gu'od turned to follow his friend toward the set of stairs at the back of the cargo bay. Zeric trained his pistol up the stairs while Gu'od began moving up them with slow, quiet steps.

While Gu'od climbed, Zeric shifted his weight nervously. He tried to keep his pistol steady and aimed up the ramp. This part was what always made him nervous. The insertion with the cargo, the long wait in the dark, the constant chance of discovery -- none of that fazed him. Anything that went wrong then was outside his control. But in this moment, it all came down to him. The confrontation with the ship's crew could go many different ways. Despite their planning, many things could go wrong. There could be more crew than they knew about, or the crew could be better armed than they expected. Anything could result in their deaths or the deaths of the crew. While he had no problem with killing when necessary, and had killed before, he didn't like doing it.

Zeric had seen combat most of his adult life. He had joined the Alliance Marines as a teenager during the last few years of the Colonial War against the Dotran Confederacy. They said some of the battles he had been in had been some

of the worst the galaxy had experienced since the Kravic Invasion. Since there was no one in the known galaxy who had been alive when the Kravic had been in control, much less during the initial invasion, Zeric assumed that was hyperbole.

Even still, the battles had been intense. For a long while after that, he thought he could face anything without fear. Since the war, he had not been involved in anything that deadly, but he had still seen his share of firefights. The realization had eventually come to him that a fight was a fight. A major battle and a one-on-one shoot-out both usually resulted in the same problem: someone dead.

The difference was in scale. In a major battle, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, could die. Those fights usually involved thousands or millions fighting on either side, though casualty rates rarely went above 30%. But in a one-on-one fight, you were almost guaranteed a 50% casualty rate. Zeric had grown much more cautious when going into combat in the fourteen years that had passed since his Marine days.

Once at the top of the stairs, Gu'od looked down at Zeric, who tightened the grip on his pistol and nodded, trying to keep the nervousness from showing. He envied Gu'od's composed and calm demeanor. Not for the first time, he wished he could learn that trick.

At Zeric's nod, Gu'od triggered the door controls. As the door slid open, a slight mechanical noise rang like an entire symphony orchestra to Zeric's ears. As soon as the door started to open, Gu'od poked his head inside the room and then back out again. He then held his hand up and gestured forward with it. Before the door was completely open, Zeric charged up the stairs.

Reaching the top in a matter of seconds, Zeric dashed into the room above. The doorway led into a cramped living area with several dilapidated couches and chairs set around a table built into the floor. Sweeping his pistol to his right,

Zeric turned to scan the rest of the room. A small counter and kitchen area were to the right of the door he'd come through. There was a pot billowing steam from the stove top.

Zeric took all of this in and dismissed it just as quickly when he saw no people. He continued his turn to the right as he entered the room, which brought him to a view down the central corridor of the ship. There, he came face to face with a tall male Braz, a look of surprise covering his face.

For a second, they stood staring at each other. Zeric recovered a split second after the Braz and lifted his pistol up to get better aim. By the time he had steadied his pistol and commanded the Braz to get down on the ground, Zeric found himself also staring down the barrel of a gun. The Braz had drawn an SK-9 from his hip holster, and now Zeric found himself in a standoff.

Internally, Zeric cursed himself for hesitating. This was the kind of situation he always feared he'd find himself in. He considered his position. Gu'od was still behind him, but Zeric's position in the room blocked his ally from being able to help. Fortunately, it also prevented the Braz from seeing Gu'od.

"What are you doing on my ship?" the Braz asked. His voice was level, and he held his pistol steady, which was far more than Zeric thought he would be able to manage if their roles were reversed.

"This is my ship now. Lower your weapon, and no one has to get hurt."

"Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you," replied the Braz.

"Good, now that we've got that out of the way, how about we both lower our weapons, so no one gets hurt unnecessarily."

The Braz smirked at that. "Sounds good. You go first so your buddy doesn't get any bright ideas."

So much for that plan, Zeric thought. He considered just shooting and hoping the stun effect took the Braz down before he could return the shot, but he dismissed it as probably resulting in his death. Taking a second to move his eyes away from the Braz's, he tried to see if the SK-9 was also set to stun. Taking a stun blast wasn't fun, but he would feel a lot better about attempting to shoot if he knew failure wouldn't result in his immediate death. Unfortunately, at this angle, he was unable to tell the setting of the pistol.

Zeric returned to locking eyes with the Braz. They resumed their standoff for what felt like the second year. Time was on the Braz's side. The longer they stood here staring at each other, the sooner the other crew members could come to help. They had been told there were only two, but that information had been wrong before.

"Maark, what's going on?"

The voice broke Zeric's concentration and his eyes shifted. His eyes drifted off the Braz for a split second, and he saw a figure down the corridor. He only took a quick look, enough to see that it was probably a female and that she was not brandishing a weapon. He immediately shifted his gaze back to the Braz, but with a suddenness that surprised Zeric, the Braz leaped into motion and dropped to Zeric's left. Zeric pulled his trigger and saw the blast flash through the space where the Braz had been a moment before. His shot flew down the corridor, hitting the female. Then Zeric felt the sensation of his neurons misfiring, and the world went black.

For a moment, Maarkean stared at the limp form of the man he had just stunned. His body wanted to stay right where he was, but his mind knew the man wouldn't have been alone. He had no idea how anyone had gotten aboard while the ship was in hyperspace, but he couldn't think about that now.

Easing up carefully, Maarkean moved to the edge of the kitchen counter in a squat. Moving slowly, he tried to peer around the corner to see the door that led to the cargo bay. The moment he did so, pain shot through him. Thrown backward from the force of the blow to his head, Maarkean dropped his pistol as he fell. The last thing he saw was the blurry image of a figure towering over him.