

WORD ON THE STREET: SMUGGLER ESSENTIALS

by Michael Chumbler

“Ya know son,” Frankie “Twice-Pipe” Whitaker said to his young companion. “Based on yer last second decision not to go through with stealin’ that *Pride-Class* mid-bulk freighter last week, it occurs to me that smugglin’ might be more yer cup o’ mud than the shipjackin’ gig.”

The two of them sheltered in the lee of a warehouse near the Eavesdown Docks on Persephone from the fierce rain that was lashing the area. The rain made conditions unpleasant, but provided a welcome level of cover from any prying eyes that might be about to notice the two men hidden in the shadows.

“Stealin’ from or at least short-changin’ the Alliance is a lot easier on the soul than makin’ off with a spacer’s only source of makin’ a livin’. Makin’ ends meet on the other side of the law’s a tough life. Ya gotta know what lines yer willin’ to cross and more importantly, the lines ya ain’t.” Frankie went silent for a moment, replaying in his mind the Alliance blotter report he’d obtained, without his client’s knowledge, of the young man’s aborted theft replayed, unbidden, in his mind of the boy’s all too close escape and just how close he’d come to disaster. The lad had been smart enough to get away clean, but it had been a close run thing.

The Most Important Thing to Know

“The first thing to ken about movin’ goods without the blessin’ of our dear Alliance is that the vast majority of smuggled cargo ain’t illegal. In fact, most smugglers avoid illegal goods as the price for gettin’ pinched with somethin’ like drugs or guns is mighty high for them as what ain’t prepared to pay that price. Truth is, the most common things smuggled are actually legit goods. Folk just don’t like havin’ to pay taxes and tariffs and other Alliance *le se*¹ . . . puts a right fine dent in the profit margin it does, and most folk don’t cotton to payin’ more than what they gots to for goods what they want.

“Now I’m sure yer just a’brimmin’ with questions as to why we’re out here in the drivin’ rain rather than one of our usual meetin’ places. The real deal answer is, ya gotta see stuff with yer own eyes to really understand how things

work in this here ‘Verse of ours. Ya see, yer witnessin’ first-hand the most important trick what a smuggler uses to slip goods under the Feds noses, and that is, my young friend, make the gorram Feds work. They don’t like that much, as most are about the laziest bunch of *bun dan*² ya’ll ever see in yer life. Ya gotta move at night, bad weather, or anythin’ else what makes the life difficult of the Feds. Bury the stuff ya is smugglin’ in the center of a full cargo hold, slippin’ the goods ya don’t want found inside dummy Trojan packagin’, or even in an unflushed bilge. Not many Feds what would look real deep when the job gets tough. Cause if’n its hard or unpleasant to find, or the inspector has got his attention somewheres else, then ya can just about bank on gettin’ the goods through. That’s the number one trick of bein’ a successful smuggler. [1]

The Second Most Important Thing

“The number two tool of the trade is knowin’ the weaknesses of the inspectors what will be lookin’ over yer boat. Make a few straight runs through the port ya want to slip somethin’ into first. That way, ya get to talk to the customs officers what work there, be friendly like and get to ken ‘em. Ya’ll find all manner of interestin’ stuff, like that some will turn out to be on the take and all ya need is to offer the proper consideration and ya is shiny. Others will like the ladies, so make sure ya gots a honey showin’ losta skin for him to admire, if they is partial to eats, make sure to have somethin’ fresh and tasty for ‘em. Ya see, simple greasin’ the skids goes a long way kid, never forget that.

“Thing is son, just like the best defenses are in depth, so are the tools the smuggler has to use. Pullin’ several things at once gives ya the best chance of avoidin’ gettin’ humped in the process, ‘cause if’n the Feds manage to stumble through one of yer pitfalls, ya just make sure they gets tripped up by the next one. I know ya knows how to keep yer head or I wouldn’t be still dealin’ with ya, so just make sure ya remembers what old Twice-Pipe just told ya and ya’ll be shiny.[2]

1 garbage

2 jerks

The Art of Avoiding the Feds

“Now the very best deal when it comes to the art of smugglin’ is to avoid the Feds in the first place. If’n the Alliance can’t find ya, they can’t pinch ya. Sounds simple, but I know ya’ll knows what a monster the Alliance has become since the end of the U-War. Stayin’ off the radar is not easy, but there are a few things ya can do to keep the Feds off’n yer *pi gu*³. Here’s where havin’ a pilot what knows their stuff comes in right handy like. Plottin’ a course what will keep ya outta regular shippin’ lanes will make yer trip a long one, and I mean the turnin’ an eighteen hour trip into the better part of a week sort of long. Now the downside to ken about bein’ completely off the radar is if’n anythin’ goes south on ya, may the *ren ci de Fo zu*⁴ help ya, cause there ain’t gonna be no one else to help ya. Thing is though, if’n ya want to make it big as a smuggler, ya gotta be willin’ to take some risks, big risks. [3]

Helpful Gear

“Now, just like shipjackin’ had special tools for the job, smugglin’ has the same sorts of specialty items what makes the job run smooth. I already done mentioned earlier that ya can hides goods inside fake coverin’ what we in the business like to call Trojan packagin’. I doubt if ya ken the story of the Trojan Horse and I know ya ain’t here for a history lesson, so ya can look up that part on the Cortex later. Ya see, Trojan packagin’ is an old trick—old, but since it still works, folk keep on usin’ it. What ya do is take legit lookin’ crates and such, hollow ‘em out, and slide what ya is sneakin’ past the Feds on the inside of that right proper-lookin’ cargo. [4]

“As with everythin’ else, if’n the Feds never look at somthin’, they can’t suss out that it ain’t proper. The very first thing a smuggler needs to do is to look through his ship, and see if’n he can find parts of his boat what’s hard to get to or can be made that way while still lookin’ normal. And I mean damn hard to find, like under the deck plates, or sealin’ off a few cubic yards off the back of yer cargo bay with a fake bulkhead. Thing is though, ya gotta be careful with modifyin’ common boats like a Firefly, cause everybody has one and anythin’ too different is gonna stand out like a pile of *nin fen*⁵ on a ballroom floor. [5]

3 bottom
4 merciful Buddha
5 cow poop

“Last thing I’ll mention on tools and such is a wonderful little toy called a ‘cry baby’. These sweet little items are so simple to build, ya can put one together, usually outta stuff what ya already got on yer boat for less than ten in platinum. A cry baby provides one last level of defense if’n a job goes south on ya. Let’s say despite all yer tricks, some Fed runs a scan and finds ya where ya shouldn’t be. Ya sets off yer cry baby and just like the name, it starts cryin’ wolf about some upright citizens bein’ in distress and all. Since all the Feds got on ya at this point is ‘suspicious activity’ they will lose interest in ya and hare off to the rescue, givin’ ya a chance to bug out on Hard Burn. Thing about cry babies though, ya gotta be smart enough to have dropped ‘em before ya need one. So ya drop it on the way into yer meetin’ place and if everythin’ goes as smooth as Sihnon silk, then ya picks it up on the way out. [6]

Here’s To a Bright Future in the Shadows

“Son, smugglin’ is about as time-honored means, if one less than legal, of makin’ coin what dates back clear to Earth-That-Was. Hidin’ in plain sight is one of the best ways to slip somethin’ past the Feds and yer little *Wren-Class* boat the *Babylon* is one of those boats what Feds barely even notice cause they is so common, which ain’t no slight on yer boat young’un, just a fact, and when in comes to smugglin’ common and not bein’ noticed is exactly what ya wants and needs. I know ya ain’t asked me, but if’n ya did, I think this here little chat we had tonight is yer callin’ son. I know ya will go out and do great things in the business. Since ya done come to be what I like to call a regular client, I’ll put in a word for ya with some folk I ken that yer lookin’ for a cargo. I’m sure that will open a few doors what might be closed to ya otherwise. Now go on and git. When ya get back from yer first run, we can talk about a natural progression from smugglin’ and that would be the salvagin’ trade. Great gig if’n ya can get it, but ya gotta make sure to keep an eye out for them *qing wa cao de ju*⁶ from Unified Reclamation while ya do it.”

The young man blinked in surprise as he realized that Frankie had come to trust him enough to make introductions. He shook his mentor’s hand vigorously before flipping up the hood on his jacket and vanishing easily into the driving rain.

6 Frog humping vultures

“Kid’s not weak,” Frankie thought to himself. “Might not have had the cut throat instinct for boostin’ ships, but he’s steely enough to be a right fine smuggler.” He shivered and pulled his coat tighter around him. “First thing I needs to do is to get these old bones outta this ruttin’ weather. Once I’ve got me a nice little hot toddy goin’, I’ll be sure’n send a couple Waves to Kaili the Hand, Monk, and Demetri. That’ll grease the skids for the boy and get him that run he needs to boost his ego. Yeah, this one is the one; next time I see that young feller, he’ll be a business man.”

Despite the heavy rain, Frankie took care to check for surprises—always a part of the less pretty side of the ‘Verse—before slipping silently into the gloomy night to make the connections he’d promised for his young client.

Notes

[1] Smuggling goods in a normal cargo hold is an Opposed Action of the smuggler’s Intelligence + Covert / Camouflage (or a new specialty: Smuggling) versus the searcher’s Alertness + Perception / Search. However, each layer of legitimate cargo between the searcher and the smuggled goods imposes a –1 Skill step. Every additional hundred tons of a ship’s cargo bay after the first provides enough room for one layer of legitimate cargo. There are too many other possibilities for place to hide cargos to list fully and it is up to the GM to specify, but, as a guide, other examples include: hiding goods in the ship’s bilge (–2 Skill step); hiding in the waste extraction tank (–4 Skill step).

[2] Casing the port before departing or scouting the route in advance with a legitimate cargo to learn the specific habits of inspectors at a given port requires an AVERAGE (7) Willpower + Influence / Appropriate Specialty test to gain the Crew a +1 Skill step on subsequent Influence actions against that inspector. An Extraordinary Success on the roll provides a further +1 step. Spending a Plot Point during the initial action uncovers a hidden weakness that the Crew can exploit for a final +1 Skill step.

[3] Plotting an ‘off the nav-sat’ course to avoid Alliance patrols is a FORMIDABLE (15) test of Intelligence + Piloting / Astrogation or Technical Engineering / Astrogation, but makes the course take six times as long. Such a course will be off of all shipping lanes and reduces the chance of encountering another ship, barring GM intervention or Plot Points spent on story

manipulation to the contrary, to essentially zero. If this roll is Botched, the GM may insert a serious problem en route: a collision with space debris; or a catalyzer on the port compression coil failing and leaving the ship on the drift.

[4] Constructing fake containers or ‘Trojan packaging’ requires minimal tools and materials. The Crew can purchase the crates or build them from scrap wood available ‘Verse-wide for one Gold Coin per cubic yard of material to be covered. The material can also be obtained by barter or even theft from any warehouse or port area. The test of the Crew’s workmanship is an Opposed Action of Intelligence + Craft / Carpentry versus the Alertness + Perception / Search of the observer. Creating the proper labeling on the exterior of the crates is a second Opposed Action of Intelligence + Covert / Forgery versus Alertness + Perception / Search.

[5] Creating a hidden compartment on a ship is as easy or as complicated as the GM wishes to make it. The Crew can spend Plot Points, hire a dishonest mechanic, or, if they have the skills, do the work themselves. A rough rule of thumb would be that for each 100 tons of cargo space, the ship has room for one hidden compartment. Building such a hiding place requires either an Opposed Action of Intelligence + Craft / Appropriate Specialty versus the Alertness + Perception / Search of the observer or, if the GM is feeling generous, a straight unopposed HARD (55) Complex Task of Intelligence + Craft / Appropriate Specialty with each roll taking four hours. However, any ship with the “Everybody has One” Trait applies the –2 Skill step from that Trait imposed on any Skills used to create such a compartment.

[6] A Cry Baby is essentially a home-built Distress Beacon from the Serenity Role Playing Game with a range of 75 miles and priced at €3. These devices are cobbled together from simple, readily available components and require only an AVERAGE (7) Intelligence + Technical Engineering / Communications action to construct.

