

About the Author

DIANE DUANE was born in Manhattan in 1952, a Year of the Dragon. She was raised on Long Island, in the New York City suburbs. She wrote her first unpublished novel when she was eight, illustrating it herself in crayon. After many years of study in struggle, she stormed into the science fiction world in 1979 with *The Door into Fire*, published by Dell Books.

Duane now lives with her husband in County Wicklow in Ireland, along with four cats and several seriously overworked computers. A Campbell Award nominee, Duane is the author of nineteen acclaimed novels of science-fiction and fantasy. Five of these were from the *New York Times* best-selling *STAR TREK* novels. She also authored a popular "Wizard" series of young adult fantasies published by Delacorte/Dell.

In her spare time, Duane travels (Switzerland being a favorite destination), studies German, dabbles in astronomy, and spends time weeding the garden.

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For T.R. and Lee . . . because Marines do more than drink coffee

STORM AT ELDALA

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When Heaven is about to confer great office upon a man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil: it exposes him to poverty and confounds all his undertakings. Then it is seen if he is ready.

. .

Meng-Tse, Sol, 6 B.C.

Chapter One

STRUGGLING INSIDE *Sunshine's* fighting field, Gabriel Connor flung himself and their small ship through space while the plasma bolts of their pursuers arrowed past on either side of him, so close he could have sworn he could feel the heat straight through the hull. He stared frantically around him into the darkness, but there was nowhere to go. They were surrounded.

This time, for sure, this time we're going to die.

We cannot keep this up much longer, Enda's seemingly disembodied voice came to him from somewhere on the other side of the field. She was handling gunnery, having a talent for it, but the gift seemed not to be serving her well today.

There are too many of them left, she said, *and we are running low on power.*

Gabriel glanced at the power readouts inside the gunnery field. They were down to ten percent on both sets of weapons. His big gun, the rail cannon on top of *Sunshine*, was recharging, but not quickly enough. It wanted another thirty seconds, and whether it was going to get them was uncertain.

Gabriel tumbled the ship to make sure of the field of fire. One of the little ball bearing ships that had chased them out into the depths of the Corrivale system came plunging through his sights. He took aim with the plasma cannon and fired.

Clear miss.

He cursed, the sweat running down his back and tickling, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Slow down, Enda cried, *make them count!*

He saw her take aim and fire at another of the ships as it plunged past them. She scored a hit, but not a killing one. The ship arced away, leaking atmosphere in a ghostly silvery veil, but its engines were untouched.

How many now?

The targeting software says sixteen, Enda said.

Gabriel cursed again and tumbled the ship once more, wishing that he did not have to handle piloting as well as firing. The attack unfolding around them was a standard englobement with ten small vessels at the vertices and six stitching in and out of the defined space. The enemy craft held *Sunshine* at the optimum locus of the englobement.

There were tactics for this kind of engagement, and Gabriel had tried all three kinds. He had used the "place holder," where you shoot from optimum locus because it's the best position. That had worked only as long as the gunnery power was at optimum power. He had then tried the pattern-breaker approach in which you killed enough of the englobers to make the number of ships at the vertices ineffective. Unfortunately, *Sunshine's* weapons had begun to run low just as this approach began to work.

There were still sixteen of them and no realistic hope of reducing the numbers to the critical eight or below. There was nothing left but the rush-and-break, the set of moves enacted simply to escape. This Gabriel hated, first because he suspected these little ships could outrun them; second because he suspected they would chase *Sunshine* straight into the welcoming field of fire of the big ship that had dropped them out here in the distant dark of Corrivale's fringes.

Also, he hated to run. Marines didn't run. They fought.

But you're not a marine any more.

Surprising, still, the access of fury that simple statement could provide him. He was not one of those people in whom rage clouded the vision. For Gabriel, things became clear—entirely too clear.

Three of the ships holding the vertices closest to Gabriel moved closer together to stop the break, but he could see that one of them was slightly out of alignment. He twisted *Sunshine* off to the left, and the enemy ship followed.

Mistake, Gabriel thought, as he flipped without warning, coasting backward on his inertia and letting the nearest ship have it with the forward plasma cannon. Enda, warned by who-knew-what touch of fraal precognition, was already firing that way. She hit another of the little round ships as Gabriel hit a third. From all the targets, metal cracked and splintered outward; vapor spit out under pressure and sprayed away as snow. More sluggish materials slopped out, went rigid and tumbled away in frozen lumps and gobbets with the shattered remains of the vessels that had emitted them. It was Gabriel's first close look at the destruction of one of these ships, and it confirmed what he had thought earlier.

Undead. The pilots had been people once. Humans, fraal, sesheyans, weren . . . The important thing was that they weren't those people any more. This killing was a kindness.

Gabriel!

He barely reacted in time as the set-of-three came diving at them. The englobement had been reduced to thirteen and was less viable than it had been, but it was still all too effective. The ten vessels holding aloof were defining the interior again, this time on the vertices of paired pyramids.

There were more places for *Sunshine* to break out; the faces of the solid were wider now. Gabriel spun *Sunshine* on her longitudinal axis, raking all around with the plasma cannon. The set-of-three dived away but still in unison.

Got to break that up, Gabriel thought and glanced hurriedly at the indicator for the rail cannon. It was

only up to sixty percent. It wouldn't even fire until eighty,

Enda was firing. Gabriel fired too, his plasma cannons down to twenty percent now. Bolts from their adversaries shot right past him, blinding and scorching him. Gabriel preferred to work with the ship's sensors acting like his own nerves—there were times when the effect could mean the difference between being alive and dead. We'll see if it's enough this time, he thought. Maybe, just maybe—

The rail cannon was up to sixty-five. Just a few minutes, he thought. Come on, *Sunshine*, just a few minutes more—

It all happened at once. The three ships broke formation, two to the right and above, one below and to the left. Enda concentrated on the two. Gabriel fired at the one but missed. He felt the scorch raking up *Sunshine's* underbelly, and then he felt another bolt hit. He yelped, the ship lurched upwards, possibly saving them both from being killed right then, but another bolt lanced down from above, hitting the rail cannon.

It blew. Gone, the rails twisted all askew; it wouldn't fire anything now.

The englobement dissolved as the other little vessels registered the destruction of the one weapon that had been keeping them at a distance all this while. It was gone now; they could swarm in and take *Sunshine* at their pleasure.

Enda was firing nonstop. Gabriel was firing at anything he could see, and the fury was helping again. Along with the utter terror, he was burning with the knowledge that they were both about to be killed. It was amazing how life became not less intense at such a time, but more so, a fury of life, ready to burn itself out but not give up.

One hit, then another, blowing up so close to *Sunshine* that the entire ship shook, but it was not going to be enough. More plasma bolts came stitching in from behind, and Gabriel cried out in agony and rage as one of them hit the engine compartment.

Then came an intolerable glory of light off to one side, a burning pain all up and down Gabriel's side, as if someone had thrown burning fuel on him. He rolled *Sunshine* away from the pain. He had just enough power left in his emergency jets to do that. The first light had just been the "pilot" detonation. Now came the secondary one, and Gabriel squeezed his eyes closed tight.

The little ships were fleeing in all directions, but six of them were caught together as the squeezed nuke went off. The remainder knew they had no chance against *Sunshine* even damaged as she was. They kept running.

Space grew still and dark, and in it *Sunshine* drifted, tumbling gently and losing power. Gabriel sat there gasping in the darkness of the fighting field as the power ebbed away, the weapons losing what little charge they had left.

"Okay," said a gravelly voice from out in the darkness. "That went pretty well, I thought."

"Helm," Enda said sternly. "You were *not* supposed to do that."

"Aw, Enda, you're too rough on the two of you."

Gabriel knew what the words meant, but he found them hard to believe at the moment. It's the software,

he told himself. But his brain insisted that he couldn't let down his guard, that something terrible might still happen. Those little ships were only fighters. They could not have come all this way by themselves. Somewhere around here was the fortress ship or dreadnought that would have dropped them. It could not be allowed to find Gabriel and Enda, not alive—not even dead and in one piece. The pilots of those little ships were reminders enough that there were some fates worse than death.

"All the same, we cannot be constantly relying on overarmed allies to come sweeping in out of the darkness to save us!"

"I thought that was what you kept me around for."

Even through the fear, Gabriel had to grin. "He's incorrigible," Gabriel said, still gasping for air. "You should know that by now."

"Maybe I should," Enda said with a sigh. "Meanwhile, let it go now, Gabriel. This has been enough exercise for one day. Shut it down."

Gabriel reached out in the fighting field to the glowing collection of virtual lights, indicators, and slider controls that appeared within his reach. One slider well off to his right was pushed right up to the top of its course. He reached out and pulled it down.

Reality ebbed out of everything. The blackness of space melted away to the virtual gridlines of the system's training mode . . . and it was all a dream. Gabriel's muscles unknotted themselves for the first time in about five minutes.

"Better?" Enda said.

"Much."

"Then come out of it, now. I do not see why you feel you must drive yourself so hard, just for an exercise."

"It's a human thing," he said, taking another breath for the appreciation of it not being his last. "You wouldn't understand."

He could sense Enda putting her eyebrows up. A couple of moments later Gabriel was alone in the field. He took his time about getting out, shutting down instruments, making gunnery safe, and checking the pieces that purported to have been made safe. It was not that he didn't trust Enda, but partners checked one another's work when weapons were involved. Besides, said that nasty hard-edged part of his mind, someday you might have to do all this yourself. Get used to the possibility now so that when it catches you by surprise, you will survive. She would want it that way.

He finished his checks, then made the small movement of mind that folded the fighting field away from him. A moment later he was sitting in the normal lighting of *Sunshine's* narrow cockpit looking over at Enda.

"Helm," she said as she unbuckled her restraints, "do not change the subject."

"I got tired of fighting for their side," Helm said. "Besides, you were winning."

"You should have let the business take its course regardless," Enda said. "That is the purpose of these

exercises, so I am told." She glanced over at Gabriel, who was wiping the sweat off his face.

"How did we do?" he said to the air.

"Twenty-six minutes," said Helm. "You should be pleased with yourself. It's precious few engagements that run much longer than fifteen these days, especially with numbers like that. You're getting a better tactical sense, that's certain."

"He is also running himself ragged," said Enda, watching Gabriel mop himself up with the cleaning cloth that he had started to keep by his seat for these exercises.

"Are you all right?"

"I was nearly dead, I thought," Gabriel said, still finding it hard to talk without gasping for air. "*Boy*, is that real. It's worth it, even if I do hate it more than anything."

"Well, you were the one to discover how effective it is," Enda said, levering herself out of the left-hand seat and standing up to take a good long stretch. "It is not my fault if the 'deep limbic' implementation of the fighting software deprives you of any sense that this is a simulation. If you have a problem with that, take it up with the programmers at Insight."

"They'd probably just say that there's no difference between a simulation and the real thing if the simulation's real enough," said Helm. "Like to see some of them out here testing the software under conditions like this."

Gabriel made a face.

"It might be amusing," Enda said to Helm. "Anyway, I do not see that it makes the experience of fighting any less useful for Gabriel if, during the fight, *he feels* as if is real. Surely that should sharpen one's reactions. The more frequently that particular reaction is sharpened—the terror and coping with it—the easier it should get for you, or so it seems, from what I know of human habituation training. Am I wrong?"

"Not in the concrete sense," Gabriel muttered. "I just don't like to have to do the laundry after every session."

"You do the laundry after every session anyway," Enda said, wandering out of the pilot's cabin and back toward the little living area, "whether we work out in limbic mode or not. Sweat, you keep telling me, is something no marine can ever put up with."

"The problem's not the sweat," Gabriel said, more or less under his breath. Then he laughed and pried himself out of his seat.

Even though he had been using the fighting field every day for six months now, it still sometimes came as a shock to Gabriel how cramped the cockpit felt by comparison when he came out. The beauty of the Insight "JustWadeIn" weapons management system was to make you feel as if you *were* the ship—moving freely in space with your weapons available to you in the form you liked best.

At any rate, Gabriel was becoming more expert with *Sunshine's* gunnery software all the time. He thought he would probably never master the cool grace-in-fire that Enda displayed. It constantly bemused him how someone so peaceful and serene could be so very good at gunnery.

"Guns are the soul of rationality," Enda had said to him late one night. "They have a certainty of purpose, and they fulfill it— when they don't jam—and like any other fine weapon, they pass on some of that certainty to their users, if the user is wise enough to hear what the gun has to say to him."

To hear this coming from a delicate ethereal-looking fraal who might mass forty-five kilos if she put on all the clothes she owned, turned Gabriel's brain right around in his head. What guns mostly said to him was, *Shoot me, shoot me! Yes, oh yes!*— with various appropriate sound effects. Nonetheless, Enda's communion with her gunnery was something to be envied, and Gabriel occasionally listened to see if the guns had anything further to say to him on the subject.

He walked down into the living area and found Enda already ensconced in one of the two fold-down chairs in the sitting room, talking to Helm again over comms and looking as fresh as if she had not been in battle for the better part of half an hour.

"How do you do it?" he asked her.

She looked at him with amusement. "I pull the chair down, like this—"

"Never mind," Gabriel said. "When did he say he was coming?"

"Twenty minutes. We can finish debriefing as soon as you're done playing with the new hardware."

"Good," Gabriel said, grinning, and walked on down to the little laundry room to get rid of his present shipsuit, which smelled as if it had seen better days.

Gabriel shoved his clothes down the chute, clamped the hatch closed and hit "Cycle." Straightening, he looked at the newly installed shower cubicle and dallied with the idea of a real water shower. Might as well do it while we're close to someplace where water's cheap. If it ever *really* was, when you were part owner in a spacecraft, when mass cost money to lift, and noncompressible mass twice as much.

Finally, he opted for a steam-and-scrape cycle, with ten seconds of water at the end. Gabriel punched the options in, let the machine get itself ready. To save time, he stood over the sink, wet his head, and took a squirt of shampoo out of the in-bulkhead dispenser.

Getting grayer, Gabriel thought, scrubbing for a few moments in front of the mirror. And why not? The last six months would probably be enough to gray anybody out a little bit. Still, his father hadn't gone gray this fast, and he couldn't remember his mother ever saying anything about early gray running in her family. Gabriel had never thought about this before, but now that he was interested, there was no way to ask—or maybe no one to ask. He hadn't heard from his father since before . . .

The shower chimed, letting him know it was ready for him. Gabriel got in, closed the door tight, and hit the control for the steam.

After a few minutes, through the ship's structure Gabriel could feel the very faint bump and rock, which meant someone was at the airlock. He's early, Gabriel thought, turning to catch the steam. Probably wants to chat with Enda without me in the way.

The steam stopped. Gabriel lathered up in a hurry from the scrub dispenser set in the wall and peered through the steamy glass at the mirror where he could see nothing. He knew what would be visible there. He was looking more lined than he ought to at twenty-six. The stress. We've been through a lot in the last half-year. When things even out, when we find work we like better, when the money settles down to a

steadier income . . .

When I find out who framed me.

That was the underlying problem, the one not likely to be solved any time soon. That was what they were probably already settling in to discuss out in the sitting room, Enda over a tumbler of kalwine, and Helm over something stronger.

Gabriel shook his head, scattering water and lather. The water spat down from the shower head above, and he started counting so as not to be caught with soap all over him when it ran out. Every drop would be recycled, of course. It had not been like this on his old ship, which had water to spare. Whole bathtubs full of it, Gabriel thought. Hot. You could splash it around. There had been times over the past six months when, while hunted from one world to the next, shot at, driven into hiding, kidnapped and attacked with knives and guns and God knew what else, the thing that had *really* bothered Gabriel was that he couldn't have a real bath.

The shower warning chimed. Gabriel scrubbed frantically, turning to rinse himself. *Bang!* The water valve slammed itself shut, unforgiving. Gabriel stood there, steaming and wistful, trying to see over his shoulder whether he had gotten the last of the soap off his back.

He got out, pulled a towel out of the dispenser, dried himself, and put the towel down the chute as well. In the delivery-side hatch was his other shipsuit, rigorously clean and a little too stiff for his tastes. Gabriel shook it out, slipped into it, stroked the seam closed, and did a couple of deep knee-flexes to let the fabric remember where he bent. He paused before the minor to make sure the nap of his hair was lying in the right direction before walking out.

The place smelled of hot food—something Helm had brought over from *Longshot* with him.

"I swear," Gabriel said as he came up the hall, pausing by one of the storage cabinets to get out a tumbler, "I don't know where you get that stuff from. It's not like you don't shop in the same places we do. Why does your food always smell so terrific?"

"It doesn't dare do otherwise," said the rough gravelly voice in the sitting room. There was Helm Ragnarsson, sitting immense in the foldout guest chair, which had extended itself valiantly to its full extent in both dimensions but was sagging under Helm's massive and muscular bulk, originally engineered for heavy-planet and high-pressure work. "Here you are finally," Helm said. "Still wet behind the ears."

"Yeah, thanks loads," Gabriel said. "I'm going to have to fix that thing again, you know that? We should make you bring your own chair." He turned to Enda, picked up the kalwine bottle sitting by the steaming covered casserole on the table, which was now folded down between the chairs. "Refill?"

"Yes, thank you, Gabriel," she said, and held out her glass.

Gabriel poured for them both, then lifted the lid of the casserole. "What is this?"

"Eshk in red brandy sauce," Helm said.

"Now you did *not* buy that at the package commissary at Iphus Collective," said Enda. "Helm, confess. You *cooked* it."

Helm grinned, and the look made Gabriel think that the top of his head might fall off. There was always something unexpected about this huge, near-rectangular brick of a man with his meter-wide shoulders and his iron-colored hair, suddenly producing one of these face-wide grins. It was the kind of smile you could imagine a carnivore producing at a social gathering of prey animals. "And if I did?" Helm said.

"Then I think we should eat it," Gabriel said. "Plates?"

Enda reached under the table. "I have them here. Helm, tongs or a fork?"

"Tongs, please."

Gabriel went and got the third freestanding folding chair from his bunk cubicle, came back, set it up, and fell to with the others. There was not a lot of discussion during this period, except about the sauce, which had even Helm breaking out in a sweat within a matter of minutes.

"I thought you said humans developed a resistance to this kind of spicery," Enda said, looking from one

to the other of them.

"Eventually," Helm said.

Gabriel was unable to speak for the moment and resigned himself to suffering in silence and drinking more wine.

Finally the edge of their hunger was blunted enough to talk over the afternoon's simulation, its high points and low, and the ways in which Gabriel and Enda's reactions could improve to deal with the combat situations—particularly those little ball bearing ships that had been attacking them. Ships of the same kind had pressed Gabriel and Enda here in Corrivale and over in Thalaassa as well. All this side of the Verge was buzzing with rumors of them now, ships of a strange construction, appearing from nowhere, vanishing again. Nothing more had been seen of them around here, but this did not make Gabriel feel any better about the area or their prospects in it.

"You didn't call me in for this practice session so close to our last one without reason," Helm said, wiping his mouth with a paper cloth and folding it carefully.

"No," Gabriel said. "I think we should be thinking about leaving."

"I suppose it will come as something of a wrench for the locals," Enda said. "They have been coming to depend on our custom . . ."

"And on us paying their outrageous prices," Gabriel muttered. "Well, no more."

"You have decided, then."

"Since when is it 'I'?" Gabriel asked.

Enda leaned back and sighed, giving him a look that might have translated as affectionate exasperation.

"Gabriel, I have been wandering around this part of the worlds for a long time. My opinion about where we take *Sunshine* is simple. I don't care. I am delighted to defer to you in this regard. Where shall we go?"

"Someplace with work," Helm said. "I mean, there's not much money in staying here. If work were the only problem, you'd have angled your jets and moved right after we got back from Thalaassa, since I don't think you want to work in this system any more. Well, about time, is all I can say."

"I'm surprised you haven't said anything about it before now," Gabriel said.

"Before you made up your mind?" Helm said as he put his feet up. "No point. You're still a typical shiphead—all strong-and-silent stuff until it's actually time to move. Then get up and do it with no warning. Which is smart. The best starfall is the unadvertised one."

"A masterly summation," Enda said. "Perhaps, Helm, you will tell us as well what Gabriel now has in mind, for this has been a matter of interest to me also."

Helm snickered. "I'd go into futures trading if I could do that." He leaned back and looked at Gabriel.

"What's the word?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I haven't found out anything further here about the people responsible for getting me cashiered," he said, "and the money in this system isn't worth the trouble of staying. At the same time I hate getting too far away from the Grid, but it's also occurred to me that the need to be close to the data had obscured a possibility . . . and I thought we might look into doing some infotrading."

Enda bowed her head, a "thinking" gesture. Gabriel glanced at Helm.

"Big profit margins there," said Helm. "Big risks, too. You have a software or hardware crash while you're transiting with live stuff from a drivesat relay, or you run into some kind of transportation problem, miss a starfall, drop the data, and suddenly there are people suing you from here back to the First Worlds."

"Not somewhere I'd been planning to go at this point," said Gabriel.

"Not someplace you'd ever go again," Helm muttered, "if you lose a load of data. Lawyers . . ." He shivered. "But the profit margins . . ." He looked as thoughtful as Enda. "Twenty to fifty percent on a load, if you pick somewhere just opening up. 'Course places like that are dangerous too."

"I had thought," Gabriel said, "about hiring some armed backup."

Helm grinned from ear to ear. His ship was full from core to shell with weaponry of all kinds. But then Helm was a mutant, and unless you were a mutant who was also tired of life, armament out in these less than perfectly policed spaces was a good idea. Too many humans considered being a mutant some kind

of treason against the human genotype to be punished in any way that wouldn't get you caught. Helm clearly did not intend to be caught assisting anyone in this kind of rough justice by lacking the kind of hardware that would dissuade them.

"Where were you thinking of going?" Helm said. "Got to consider fuel, victualling—"

"Terivine," said Gabriel.

Enda nodded sidewise. "It would make sense," she said. "Terivine has become a common enough waystation for ships doing the runs between Corrivale and Aegis, and Lucullus as well, but the place is not heavily populated . . ."

"That's not a huge problem," Gabriel said. "Besides the colonists, there's a considerable presence of scientists studying the riglia, those avian sentients they found. They need to move their data back and forth at something better than the crawl they'd get from using unscheduled infotradars. Tendril and Aegis both have to move administrative information pertaining to their colonies there. It looks like a good small market for a beginning infotrading business."

"You have obviously been doing your research," Enda said, "so you will know what kind of competition is there."

"Not much," Gabriel said. "Two firms work the system at present. One's native, a one-ship company called Alwhirn. Another is a licensee, Infotrade Interstellar Aegis."

Helm's eyebrows went up. "Isn't Infotrade Interstellar a subsidiary of VoidCorp?"

"These days, what isn't?" Gabriel said wearily.

"Us," said Enda. She pursed her lips in an expression that made her look unusually like a disapproving grandmother.

"You think they don't know it?" said Helm. "But here you sit in the system, bold as brass plate, as if they didn't dare touch you."

"They do not," Enda said, "for the moment. Not after we put so sharp a thorn in their side at Thalaassa and Corrivale, and Gabriel became the hammer to drive it in. They would be eager enough to repay him the trouble. The Concord would be quick to lay that at their doors if they tried that now. However, once we move elsewhere ..."

That was always the problem. Since the vast expanse of the Verge began to reopen, the stellar nations had been moving in with various degrees of eagerness, acquisitiveness, or plain old-fashioned greed. Trade was opening out again, or for the first time. The wars that had cut off the Verge from the rest of humanity for so long had kept major trade routes and infrastructure from being established. Now what should have happened a quarter century earlier was beginning to happen again and in a rush. Every stellar nation or multistellar-national with the funds to spare was expanding into this area, hunting markets to master and resources to exploit. Systems that were backwaters ten years ago had become trading crossroads of considerable wealth and power. Through such systems, like Corrivale, Terivine, and Aegis, the huge cruisers of the stellar nations passed, both to trade and to find ways to extend their own influence. Mutual-assistance treaties, joint-use agreements for planets or whole systems, "understandings" and "gentlemen's agreements" could result in a world becoming the property of a stellar empire or company based thousands of light-years away. VoidCorp was probably the least principled of these. Once a software company, VoidCorp was now an interstellar power with many systems under its domination and many more becoming increasingly entangled in its web of interlocking corporate affiliations, treaties, and licensing agreements.

Gabriel sighed. "If we try to force ourselves into a position where we don't go *anywhere* that VoidCorp goes, we won't have a lot of choices. I don't like them any better than either of you do, especially considering that some part of VoidCorp Intelligence may have had something to do with setting me up. There are millions of VoidCorp Employees scattered across space who've never heard of us, won't have a clue who we are, and even if they're told, they may not care."

Enda frowned. "I would not be too sure. We only liberated about a thousand sesheyans that the Corporation is sure should be Employees. That the Concord declared them not to have been so is fortunate, but it will not count for much with VoidCorp."

"I.I. Aegis is just a licensee," Gabriel said, "local people running the business with VC equipment and

contracts. It's a common enough arrangement, and licensees don't necessarily agree with the Company's overall policies."

Enda nodded. "It is too easy, I suppose, to become paranoid, and see Corpses hiding behind every asteroid, plotting our downfall. Have you done initial price-estimates as well? We would have to make alterations to the hold. The armoring we installed for mining work would need to be removed, and the new data storage facilities would not come cheap."

"Depends where you get them," Gabriel said and reached out to touch the part of the wall that hid the display for *Sunshine's* Grid access. It came alive with imagery from the ship's internal Grid handling computers—a vast green plain rippling with some kind of long grass, a favorite image of Enda's.

"Data trading," Gabriel said, and the display flickered into an image of many rows of text and columns of figures.

"Oh, brother," Helm said, reaching down under his chair. "Half a moment while I get something to strengthen me."

"Why, Helm," Enda said, "surely so acute a businessman cannot look on a sight such as this unmoved."

"Yes I can," Helm said. "Wake me when we get to the weapons allocations."

Gabriel threw a sidewise glance at the bottle Helm now held. "How can you *drink* that stuff?" Gabriel asked, for the bottle was one of those squat square ones that Bols Luculliana came in.

Helm poured out two fingers of the thick clear stuff and shrugged. "It clears the mind. Want some?"

Gabriel shuddered at the thought and looked at the screen again. For a few minutes he went over the figures with Enda. She looked cautiously at the ones for the installation of the data tanks, which Gabriel suggested should be done by a small independent firm at Diamond Point on Grith.

"It is close by," Enda said, "and would be convenient for maintenance on return runs, but the firm has not been in business for long "

"It comes with good recommendations," Gabriel said. "Ondway told me about it."

Enda blinked at that and smiled. "Indeed. He would have some interest in seeing that our money is well spent, and in distributing business to the local community."

Gabriel nodded. They had met Ondway in Iphus Collective. The meeting had been an unusual one. In these spaces where VoidCorp's influence was strong, it was almost unheard-of to run into a sesheyman who did interplanetary work and was not an Employee. Ondway had put Gabriel and Enda in the way of some unusual business opportunities and also had given them hints about conditions on one of the supposedly uninhabited planets in the Thalaassa system—hints that had led Gabriel to investigate farther and get them into trouble. After the dust settled, Gabriel and Enda had been awarded a small public bounty from the Concord civil liberties fund. What had amused Gabriel immensely was the notion that, while one arm of the Concord government wanted him imprisoned, another was giving him grants for catching VoidCorp with its Corporate pants down. However, there had also been a less public award, not so much a bounty as a thank you from a sesheyman interest group of which Ondway was a prominent member—a group of native activists profoundly moved at Gabriel's single-handed rescue of more than a thousand of their kind from the Thalaassan world where VoidCorp was attempting to quietly exterminate them. Gabriel had insisted that there had been nothing single-handed about it. Enda had been in the thick of things with him, and he had merely been well positioned to intimidate some people whom he loathed. The sesheyans were not interested in his excuses, and they insisted on crediting *Sunshine's* expense accounts with a considerable sum. Between these two awards, Gabriel and Enda were in a position to live less marginally than they had when they first went into business together.

Then had come the question of what to do with the money. Their first indulgence had been a shower for *Sunshine*, and there had been no argument about that, but such a small luxury had not made much of a dent in their new funds. Enda, conservative as a fraal in her second century might be expected to be, was all for investment of the rest. So was Gabriel, but there had been little agreement about the kind of investment to do. Now, though, Enda was looking interested.

"All right," she said. "I concede that installation may as well be done on Grith. But the general risk still gives me pause in comparison with, say, mining." She reached out to pour another glass of kalwine. "A cargo of ore does not go stale, nor does it have value until one delivers it to the processor. This kind of

cargo is more sensitive and needs to be better protected."

Helm looked up at that. "The weapons allocations," he said.

"We need more guns," Gabriel said, "or upgrades on the old ones."

Helm grinned.

Gabriel brought up another page of price lists, and Helm commented at length on the virtues and vices of the weaponry available in this part of the Verge.

"I have my own preferences," he said, "and you don't have to go all the way to Austrin-Ontis for decent weapons any more. You should think about upgrading that rail cannon, at the very least. It would be even better to get rid of it. What I'd *really* like to see you get would be a mass cannon, but—"

Gabriel laughed. "Oh, sure, let's just stop the next passing Star Force cruiser and pull one off!"

"Some day," Helm said, "the cost of the things will drop so that people who aren't military can get their hands on one." His expression suggested that he intended to be the first. "Meanwhile, those upgrades. I have a friend who knows where you could get a discount."

"Delde Sota," Gabriel and Enda said in chorus. Enda chuckled. "Helm, is there *any* business in this system that mechalus does not have her braid or her brain plugged into?"

"You want good machinery," Helm said, "go to a mechalus. Who would know it better? The good doctor collects favors from everyone she fixes up. She put me onto somebody who's done fairly well by me.

Any more figures?"

Gabriel looked over at Enda and said, "I don't think this is a decision I should make by myself, no matter how you insist that the things I did got us the awards that would make this possible."

Enda merely produced one of those demure little fraal smiles.

"You were a marine too long," Helm said to Gabriel. "You were good at taking orders, but now you have other problems— staying alive, mostly. That means making decisions, not taking orders."

"What made it hard," Gabriel said, "was the prospect of moving too far from where my trouble happened."

"You haven't had much luck with tracing the ones responsible, have you?" Helm said.

"Not much. The trail leading back to 'Jacob Ricel,' or whatever his name was before he boarded *Falada*, is cold. There's no way for me to go where it might still be warm without being arrested. The marines have never been happy with the outcome of my trial. They'd prefer to do it again their way."

Gabriel shook his head. "Grid information's cold as well, or getting that way, and getting at it is expensive."

"Whereas if you were hauling data," Helm said, "you would have periodic access to the drivesat relays from which you were hauling . . . *and* hauler's discount on data access, while spending a lot of safe time away from the Conkers."

Gabriel nodded. He had no desire to spend time closer to Concord space than he had to. There were bounty hunters who would be willing to turn Gabriel in for the reward. Yet outside of Concord space there was no resolution of his problem. Sooner or later, Gabriel would have to go back with what evidence he was able to garner and take his chances with Concord justice.

"As regards 'riding shotgun' for us," Enda said, "would you be available?"

When Helm looked up from pouring another splash of Bols, there was an odd expression in his eyes.

Gabriel thought it looked like gratitude, but it sealed over quickly into the old no-nonsense humor.

"Been waiting for you to make up your mind. My schedule's wide open. When do we leave?"

"About a week," Gabriel said. "Getting the data tanks installed will take most of the time."

"And arranging to see what kind of first load we can acquire," Enda said. "I will see to that."

"I'll talk to the doctor in the morning," Helm said. "Meanwhile, I could use a nap, and I have to clean up after myself. Cooking!" He stood, looming over Enda, huge and amused. "I did it with an autolaser. In a pot."

"You do most things with an autolaser," Enda said mildly. "The pot was doubtless added in a moment of inspiration."

Helm laughed, picked up his bottle and put it on the table for them, and went off down toward the airlock. "Call me in the morning," he said to Gabriel, "when you get your schedule sorted out."

"I will."

The airlock cycled shut behind Helm, and Gabriel got up to help Enda clean up after their meal. It was something they were both punctilious about—a ship in which some parties are tidy and some are sloppy soon turns into a little hell. Once the table was uncovered and folded away and the plates and utensils were washed and stowed, Gabriel folded a chair down and just sat there looking at the screen, which had defaulted to that view of the green field under some alien sun, the long grass rippling silkily as water in the wind that stroked it.

Down in her cubicle, Gabriel could hear Enda moving around, putting her bed in order for the night. A year ago he had known nothing of her, known no fraal at all and precious few aliens of any kind. Now he could hardly imagine a world without her—a world circumscribed by these scrubbed gray walls and floors—the fire of starrises and starfalls, some new primary burning golden or blue-white or green through the front viewports, the tierce sky-blue of Enda's huge eyes.

Once the world had been different, not gray-walled but white-walled, the color of marine country in a Star Force ship. Life had been simple, explicable, neatly circumscribed. You went where you were ordered—or were taken there. You fought who you were told to, and you cleaned up afterwards. *Ready to fight* . . . He had been, but the nature of the enemies had changed overnight, and the conflict had become difficult to understand. Too difficult for the marine he was then—and Gabriel had found himself cashiered, cast loose on a world he didn't know, alone and friendless.

Then Enda had turned up. There were aspects of their first meeting and their subsequent dealings that Gabriel still did not understand. But he was certain that it was a better world with her in it, and that he owed her most of what he had now. He was partner in a ship, half of a business, and had come through some difficult times getting used to it. He had survived, but there was always the question of how long he could keep on doing it.

"You are thinking harder than usual," Enda said.

Gabriel glanced up. "Does it show?"

"I heard you. You are still unsure . . ."

Gabriel chuckled. "Mindwalkers. I can't even brood without being overheard any more."

She pulled down the chair opposite him. "I have had much less training in the art than most. However, if you think loudly, I cannot help it. You also must not think I desire to pressure you in any direction. If I have been doing so, you must tell me so."

Gabriel shook his head. "You misheard me. You can be pretty forceful, but not that way. In fact, it's hard to get you to tell me what to do even about little things."

"Perhaps I refuse to be lured into a role that you would accept too easily," Enda said. "Gabriel, is your choice firm?"

"Yup. Let's get out of here."

Enda tilted her head to one side, one of the fraal versions of the human nod.

"We had not discussed how we will leave. Do we make starfall to Terivine by ourselves, or hitch a ride with some larger vessel?"

"Maybe not on the first leg," Gabriel said. "If you set out on your own, sometimes people assume you're going to keep going that way. If we picked up a hitch *after* we make our first starfall ..." He shrugged.

"This deviousness," Enda said, "suits you well enough, you who were such an innocent only six months ago. Beware lest you lose track of who you are beneath all the twists and turns."

She smiled as she said it, but Enda's look was more than usually thoughtful. Gabriel had never had a living grandmother to look at him in this particular way. Now it occurred to him that this was how one might look if she were about a meter and a half tall and so slender that she looked like you could break her in half like a stick.

"There are times," Gabriel said, "when I've considered that."

Enda blinked at him. "What exactly?"

"Losing track, of who I am, or was. A little discreet cosmetic surgery, maybe ... a change of look, a change of name. Let Gabriel Connor have an accident somewhere. Change the name appearing on *Sunshine's* registry. Become someone else . . ."

"It would be a logistical problem to change our registry," Enda said. "Not impossible, but expensive, and it *is* impossible to do such things without leaving an electron trail. Additionally, for those who are determined to know where you are, and who you are ... I question whether the stratagem would work for long."

"More to the point," Gabriel said at last, "is whether I really want to hide. I don't want to throw away my name. I want to clear it."

"But you are finding that hard," Enda said, "and potentially harder as time goes on."

"Without the evidence I need to prove I didn't kill those people willingly, yes."

"The frustration," Enda said softly, "can wear a soul down, if allowed to do so."

"Even a stone wears down under water," Gabriel said. "Every time someone hears the name 'Gabriel Connor' and looks at me that way—'Oh, *that* Gabriel Connor, you were on the Gridnews, you murdered your best friend and got away with it, some legal loophole or other. Aren't you proud of yourself?' Every time I see that look, it's another drip on the stone. Is it so strange to wish it would just stop?"

He tried to look steadily at her. Even now, even with half a year of time between him and the deaths of his comrades in that shuttle explosion, it was hard to talk about it, even with someone as coolly compassionate as Enda.

"It is one of your people's sayings," Enda said, "long ago I heard it. 'When Heaven intends to confer great office upon a man, it sheds disaster upon him and brings all his plans to naught; reduces him in the sight of the world, and confounds all his undertakings. Then it is seen if he is ready.'"

Gabriel laughed. "That's all very reassuring if you know that you're intended for some 'great office.' Otherwise, it just seems delusional, a way to rationalize the act of the universe doing what it usually does—crapping on the ordinary guy."

"In this then," Enda said, "plainly there is universal justice. The great and the lowly are treated the same. Perhaps what makes the difference is in how they react to it."

Chapter Two

A STARFALL AWAY FOR a big ship, or five or six starfalls off for a small one, a Concord cruiser slipped massively through the outer fringes of the Lucullus system. If no one in the system was sure what its business was, that state of affairs well suited one of its passengers.

Lorand Kharls sat quietly in the room he had occupied since arriving aboard the cruiser. It was very bare, for he did not have time to go in for much decoration. His work required him to change residence often, and he disliked having to pack much more than a change of clothes and a box of reference works, books and solids and so forth. He had come far enough along in his job that this was more than enough to help him get his business done—that, and hours of talking and listening.

There was a soft knock at his door. "Yes?" he said, and his assistant, a tall young man wearing mufti and a complete lack of expression, slid the panel aside.

"She's here."

"Thank you, Rand. Ask her to come in."

The door slid wider, and a dark-haired young woman walked in. She wore a Star Force uniform with Intel pips at the collar, and an expression pleasanter than his assistant's, though as neutral. She would never have been able to manage anything like his assistant's fade-into-the-veneer quality. Her face had too much character—a stubborn forehead, strong chin, and those large brown eyes that somehow made the rest of her face seem insignificant.

"Aleen Delonghi, sir," she said, saluting him.

"You're welcome. Please sit down."

She did, in the one other chair that the room contained. There was nothing else in the place but a table

with some data solids on it.

"The captain tells me that you've been asking your superior for a chance to speak to me regarding the mission that brought me here."

"Yes, sir."

"This suggests that you think you know what should be done about the situation."

"I think so, sir."

"After, of course, having gone through all the salient information that we have spent the last months collecting and collating."

"All of it that has been made available to me, sir, yes."

Kharls looked at her. She was experienced enough at what she had been doing over the past few years. The administrative department that had sent her to him along with several other Concord Intelligence operatives had spoken highly of her talents. Now he would see whether they were justified in doing so.

"Very well. You've seen the subject's statements on the matter, and you've seen Intel's recommendations regarding the situation so far. What is your opinion of them?"

She took a deep breath. "I think they look like a pack of misdirections and lies from beginning to end."

"Any ideas as to *whose* lies?" Kharls asked.

She said nothing.

He sat back in his chair. "You know," Kharls said slowly, "there was a time, a culture—a human culture, mind you—in which, if someone accused you of lying, they had the right to try to kill you. Right there. Isn't that fascinating?"

She paled, and her eyes slid to the tri-staff that leaned casually against the wall within Kharls's reach.

"They called it 'giving someone the lie,' " Kharls said, "or 'the lie direct'. What a busy time it must have been, human nature being what it was and is."

"Administrator Kharls," Delonghi said, sounding much more cautious now, "maybe I should rephrase that."

"Maybe you should."

"Your behavior as regards this . . . asset, if that's the word I'm fumbling for—for he looks more like a liability every time I consider him—your behavior regarding him is undermining a genuine Intelligence priority. How is Concord Intel—or Star Force Intel for that matter, since that's my cover at the moment—supposed to find out anything useful when you allow other assets to contaminate him?"

"'Allow?'" He looked at her with surprise. "That suggests that I know in advance what they're going to do."

"Of course you—" She stopped.

Kharls looked at her hard from under those bushy eyebrows. "Miss Delonghi," he said. "Forgive me if I do not take you entirely into my confidence at the moment. I have a very large remit, as you may know—"

"You are a Concord Administrator," she said, with the air of someone trying to cut straight to the heart of the matter, "and probably the most powerful being in these spaces."

He leaned back again, though not with any look of being flattered or mollified. "Would it shock you,"

Kharls began, "if you knew that my main purpose, as so powerful a being—let me for the moment adopt your language—was to create the conditions in which my job description, and my job, became unnecessary?"

Her eyes widened. Kharls did not smile at her, though the temptation briefly crossed his mind.

"You won't believe me when I say as much," Kharls said. "What sane being would? Who would want to put himself out of a job in which planetary governments take his lightest word as the equivalent of enacted primary legislation, in which he can exercise what used to be called 'high, low, and middle justice'— the powers of judge, jury, and executioner? Would you believe something like that? Of course not. So I can make such outrageous statements and get away with it. Not being believed is a tool of considerable utility when one exercises it with care." He waited to see if she would at least react to the irony. Not a flicker, he thought. It will be a while yet before this one has come along to where I want her. "At any rate, I have not sent this particular asset out into the night to remain uncontaminated."

"There are those who say he's contaminated enough as it is," said Delonghi, trying unsuccessfully to restrain an expression of scorn.

"So they have and will," Kharls replied. "That's all to the good, for the moment. If the situation changes, I will judge it accordingly ... but not before."

"You're telling me that you've purposely sent this operative out to make contact with enemy intelligence organizations—"

" 'Enemy' is such a narrowing term," said Kharls. "Who knows in what relationship the Concord will stand within, say, twenty or thirty years to any of the stellar nations that presently are not part of it? Or how matters will stand in the Verge? And even inside the Concord, as you well know, there's considerable difference of opinion about what nations and issues are most important. Nearly *infinite* difference of opinion." He smiled grimly. "Fortunately, my job is not about reconciling opinion, which is just as well, since that would be impossible. My job is to make things out here in the Verge work as well as they can for the moment, and to figure out how to make them work better still for the people who'll come out here to live, and those who are here already. In particular, my remit charges me to look out toward the edges of things, the unpoliced and untravelled spaces all around the Verge where situations are not as clear-cut as they are in toward the First Worlds—much less structured and more chaotic. The textbooks don't do much good out here for even the best-intentioned agent, ambassador, or ship's commander. One learns to strike out into the dark and try techniques that might seem foolish elsewhere." Kharls sat back again, looking at his folded hands. "I have no scruples about using agents who may seem tainted or chaotic to the textbook types. If that conceals such agents' true value, so much the better, for valuable assets, unfortunately, tend to be killed the most quickly. As regards the object of our discussion, however, you need to be clear that *I* have not sent him anywhere. He is one of the very few genuinely free operatives I manage—if manage is even the word, since he completely rejects any idea that I have any such power over him."

"Then he's a fool," Delonghi said.

"Possibly, but he's also right."

Delonghi kept her face still. Kharls watched this exercise with interest. "See that," he said, "you *still* don't believe me. I wonder if the ancients had an offense called '*disbelief direct*'?"

He got up, stretched, and stepped around to the big viewport that was the room's only other indulgence. "If he draws the attention of other intelligence assets," Kharls said, looking out into the starry blackness, "that is all to the good. He is a lightning rod, Delonghi. He is being held out into the dark specifically to see what forces he attracts. But he is not to be seen as having no value simply because he is being used as a lightning rod. In the old days, the very best ones used to be made at least partially of precious metal."

Kharls turned away from the viewport. "Now, obviously you want to go out and have a personal look into this situation ... and meddle." Her face did not move at the word. "Well, you were a talented meddler for some years, which is why you're here with me and my people at all. I suppose we can hardly blame you for wanting to revert to type."

He sat down again. "In short, I've decided to allow you to do so. I am instructing you to go and examine this situation personally." Her eyes narrowed. Badly concealed triumph, which for the moment he declined to notice. "With the following conditions. You are not to interfere in any way with the subject's free pursuit of his own objectives. You may try to determine what they are or what he *thinks* they are. I require you to report to me regularly on the details. You are to pay particular attention to the attempts of other intelligence organizations to interfere with him. You are not yourself to interfere with those attempts."

"Even if they kill him?"

"They may look like they want to," said Kharls softly, "but I assure you, they do not. They *will* not either, unless someone fumbles badly. They are eager to find out why *we* are so interested in him. As eager as *you* are, I dare say."

At *that*, she did have the grace to blush. Kharls did not react to this either. "You are to keep your own head down. Do not be noticed by them. For our own part, I want to know the sources of *their*

interest—the motivations of whoever you find watching him or trying to affect him. No one spends so much time watching someone merely to discover what he knows that they don't. More often they watch to see what he knows that *they* know too ... and what they fear for anyone else to find out."

She nodded.

"You will return on recall," Kharls said. "Consult with the colonel and the captain about your equipment and cover. Otherwise, go do your work."

"Thank you, sir," Delonghi said.

"I wouldn't," Kharls said, "until you come back with your job successfully completed."

She turned to go.

" 'Middle justice,' " Kharls said softly. "I always wondered about that one."

He glanced up again. Hurriedly, she saluted him and left. The door slid shut behind her, leaving Kharls alone in his office.

She had her own agenda. Well, he had no interest in agents who didn't. The truly agendaless ones were too dangerous to trust with anything. It was always a risk, sending an operative out on really difficult business—especially since it was difficult to tell exactly how he or she would react. As he had said, he did not scruple to use the tainted or skewed asset when the moment came right. His job required him to use his tools—the lightning rod or the gun—with equanimity, to use them as effectively as their structures allowed, and to destroy them if necessary ... and not to count the cost until the job was done. For Lorand Kharls, as he felt his way toward the secrets of the deadly and dangerous things that were slowly beginning to reveal themselves at the edges of the Verge, that would most likely be many years. For the lightning rod . . .

... he would have to wait and see.

* * * * *

Gabriel was desperately busy for a week and a half. Arrangements had to be made with the data tank installers on Grith, and while that happened *Sunshine* had to be landed at Diamond Point and kept in bond, with all the nuisance that entailed—signing in and out every time you came aboard and executing a full "incoming" inventory. Then came provisioning and victualling, with all those supplies having to be delivered to a different part of the bond facility, every box opened, every piece of replacement equipment checked. Then for the weaponry installation, *Sunshine* had to be taken out of bond again and trucked over to one of the unsealed parts of the port. Gabriel had laughed at the description of the area as "low security." He didn't think he had ever seen as many discreetly disguised missile launchers and energy weapons arrayed around a shipchandler's yard as he saw here.

This part of the work was easiest for Gabriel, for Helm came into his own here—never leaving the shipchandlery while anyone was working on *Sunshine*, hanging over the mechanics' and engineers' shoulders, seeming to watch everything at once. They swore at him, but not too often. Everyone there knew that Helm was expert with weaponry, and though he did not seem to be "carrying," this impression could be a mistake.

"I never shot anybody for an honest mistake," he'd joke with them. The installers would laugh and keep a close eye on Helm while he checked the installation schematics against the circuit-solids that were going in.

The gunnery work—a very hush-hush removal of the old plasma cannon energy conduits and their replacement with new ones and new software to match—took three days. It might have taken four if Gabriel had allowed what Helm wanted, the removal of the rail cannon, but at the last moment he decided to keep it. Helm argued the point, but not hard, perhaps detecting that Gabriel had something on his mind. He did, but he couldn't explain it and refused to try. He was nervous enough about the work being done on the plasma cannons. They were not legal and were being carried "concealed" with flap ports typical of much more innocuous weapons covering them. The thought that someone whose silence had not been paid for might drop a word about those guns into the wrong ears was one that recurred

more frequently to Gabriel the longer they stayed.

On the morning of the fourth day, they took *Sunshine* over to the other side of Diamond Point to a little private pad. There they left her under the supervision of guards whom Helm had hired while the data tanks were installed. All their shopping was done, so Gabriel had a day or so free—indeed, Helm told him to get lost, and Enda was nowhere to be found, still busy with lining up their infotrading contracts. Gabriel therefore spent a happy day doing tourist things, finally climbing up to the observation platform on the hundred-meter-high bluffs, a spot he had once visited as a marine and once again as a tourist a few months ago. Now he stood there in silence around sunset, watching as the huge reaches of Grith's tidal sea started to fill with the daily inrush. Despite all the activity in which he had been involved over the last few days, Gabriel's mind felt oddly empty, as if waiting for something to happen.

He reached idly into his pocket and began to turn his luckstone over in his fingers. In some ways, the little stone was the last remnant of the life he'd led before being held for murder. Everything else from that pre-life was gone now ... his uniforms, the notebooks for his studies, the various bits and pieces that a young man on active service picks up over a tour of duty. Only this remained, a token given him as a "lightening exercise" by a buddy who was going home and happily giving away every possible ounce of freight. Sometimes Gabriel thought he should get rid of this too, but the little thing was too evocative of the last of the good things about being a marine—the companionship, the sense that there were things worth fighting for and friends to fight beside. At first, he had not been able to think much about those friends. The screams of the ones he had killed echoed through his dreams for weeks. He still heard them, but not as often. Gabriel thought as he looked down at the ten-kilometer-long waves of the shallow tidal sea, when will I stop hearing them altogether?

Will that be a good thing if I *haven't* found out who killed them?

There would be time for that. He would not stop looking. In the meantime . . . better to try to get on with some other kind of life.

He made his way back to the ship that evening to sleep aboard. The next morning, the installation crew unceremoniously roused Gabriel out, telling him not to come back until lunchtime. When he did, he heard a voice echoing down *Sunshine's* middle corridor. Gabriel paused—then realized with a jolt of happy surprise whose voice that was.

"Delde Sota!" he called.

She turned toward him, smiling that cool wise smile of hers as Gabriel stepped out. "Greeting: looking well, Gabriel."

"So are you," Gabriel said.

It was true, for she was quite handsome, even when you reckoned her looks by strictly human standards. Easily two meters tall, Delde Sota had long dark silvershot hair pulled straight back from her high forehead. Around shoulder level her shaggy mane was braided, the silver sheen of the cyberneural fiber and custom-made prehensile fibrils weaving in patterns through the hair as the braid tapered and became more complex. Finally, there was only a slender silver tail at the end, which might lie still or part itself again and weave itself into many-fibrilled patterns while the doctor considered something. This was most of the time. Delde Sota was not one whose mind was long inactive, and she seemed to consider it part of her business to keep you thinking, too.

Enda was there as well, which surprised Gabriel. He had expected her to spend another day out in town, but here she was chatting with doctor, who was dressed for travel in the usual mechalus *rlin noch'i*, the simple utilitarian one-piece garment that covered the body from neck to feet—a soft gray-silver, in Delde Sota's case. Over this, she wore a long, wide-sleeved, floppy overcoat of some soft fluffy charcoal-colored material, a marked contrast to the slick gleam of the *rlin noch'i*. Gabriel was bemused by how pleased he was to see the doctor. It was not merely that she had been a great help to him and Enda—she had. There was a peculiarly cheerful quality to her that made the power and complexity of her personality pleasant to be around.

"Doctor, what brings you over this way?" Gabriel said. "I'd hoped we'd see you before we left, but I didn't think it would be here."

"Agenda: business," said the doctor. "Also have been in touch with Helm Ragnarsson about your plans."

Suggestion from him: desired in-depth system check of your ship's software with an eye to—shall we say?—tampering. Have found none."

She paused as if to give Gabriel a chance to say something, but the silence was a comment. There were indeed some devices aboard *Sunshine* that enabled the ship to be monitored from outside. They were there at Gabriel's sufferance, for the time being, and he only thought about them when he chose to.

Gabriel simply blinked at Delde Sota, and the end of her braid wreathed about and tied itself into a brief knot before undoing itself again. "Thank you, Doctor," he said.

"Query: departure time?" Delde Sota said.

"Response: uncertain as yet."

Gabriel looked over at Enda. She gave him a smile that, for its intensity, was unusual.

"We have no more business to do here after our tanks are full," Enda said, "and full they will be. The response has been better than I had hoped—far better. We now are only delayed by the remaining time that the tank installation will take. When that is done, we may download from the planetary Grid and be away immediately."

"Reaction: congratulation," said Delde Sota. "Propitious start. Wish that your business may continue so." She gave Gabriel a look, suggesting that she was referring to other aspects of his business as well.

"If you'd like to check the tanks when the loading is finished," Gabriel said, "also with an eye to 'Tampering,' I would appreciate it."

"Statement: would appreciate it myself," said Delde Sota, her eyes glinting with amusement. Data tanking was usually proprietary hardware—something into which a mechalus was always delighted to get her wires with an eye to simulating it for her own purposes. "Query: this will not violate any end-user agreements?"

Enda bowed her head "no" and said, "Obviously you may not examine the data itself, which lies within confidentiality seal and encryption, but as for the tanks—"

Delde Sota smiled. "Statement: know something about confidentiality myself," she said. "Ancillary statement—"

She broke off. Gabriel smiled, hearing a mechalus joke. Computer circuitry and software were part of the physical world through which Delde Sota moved, almost an element, like air or water, and part of her own being. As a skilled former Grid pilot, no level of encryption would long have kept Delde Sota out if she had her mind set on making her way through it, but she did not. Her ethics were as hard and dependable as the circuitry she had weaving through her.

"How long will you be with us, Doctor?" Enda said. "Will you have time for a meal before we leave?"

"Reply: numerous," Delde Sota said, turning away from her brief attention to the Grid access panel across the hall from them. "Information: I will be accompanying Helm Ragnarsson on *Longshot to Terivine*."

Gabriel's mouth fell open. "Wha— Delde Sota, that's wonderful! But what about your job on Iphus?"

"Clarification: have taken extended sabbatical," said the doctor. "Requirements for service at Iphus Collective, medical, medico-mechanical, have dropped off nearly thirty percent over past two months. Assistant physician complaining of boredom." She grinned, a briefly fierce look. "Conjecture: no more complaints for the immediate future."

"Why the drop-off, do you think?" Enda said.

Delde Sota gave Enda a thoughtful look. "Theory: pressure from VoidCorp against independent mining operations on Iphus Collective increasing. Theory: VoidCorp pressure also being exerted against Collective facility proper, with a view to forcing closure."

"They have wanted that for a long time," Enda said. "Do you think our recent activities might be responsible for this increased pressure?"

"Reply: uncertain," the doctor said. "Agreement: action has been in train for some time. Speculation: other influences may also be responsible."

She turned to look over at the Grid access panel. "Extenuating circumstances: any job grows wearying with too much time in a single place. Medicine may be practiced anywhere. Oaths pack small and light. Other equipment requires more time." She glanced sideways at Gabriel. "Phymech on Helm's ship has been upgraded to high standard. Query: has yours been serviced lately?"

"Not since you last looked at it."

"Have closeout deal on new upgrade pack," Delde Sota said. "Twenty percent off. Twenty-five for old and trusted customers."

Enda laughed and covered her eyes, a gesture indicating that the fraal who made it could not cope with present events and was considering taking up the contemplative life. "Another of your discounts! Gabriel, take her somewhere quiet and negotiate with her, or push her into the tank hold and lock her in, whichever you please."

"Twenty-three percent," Delde Sota said over her shoulder as Gabriel guided her away, "for insufficient show of enthusiasm."

They walked down *Sunshine's* hall to look through the round port in the door that gave onto the main hold. Once the hold would have been a large empty space. Now it was filled with rack after rack of data storage facility, the "tank," a series of ceiling-to-floor frames filled with heavy-duty data storage solids and their holding and processing shells. Occasionally a fraal or human technician could be seen squeezing among the racks, always with arms full of more solids. Closer to the door, another technician was installing the high-speed upload and download channeling transmitters that would allow the carried data to be dumped to a system grid or planetary facility on arrival.

"Very impressive," Delde Sota said, peering through the heavy glass, and the end of her braid twitched. "It'll be another couple of days before they assign us our system address and bring the automatic router online," Gabriel said. "They have to finish the local network testing first." He sighed. "A whole new set of software to learn and no room to maneuver if a mistake gets made."

"Opinion: software not all that complex," said Delde Sota, "and will be within call if you need assistance." Gabriel leaned against the wall. "What brought this on?" he said.

"Statement: have dealt with that issue," said Delde Sota, but her neural braid was wreathing again, tying itself in a small tight knot. "Addendum ..." She looked through the window. "Sense of things moving. Generalized shifts in political stances, of balance of power among stellar nations. Feeling . . . that there might be wisdom in relocation elsewhere while situation settles down."

Gabriel nodded. "I was going to ask if you'd be willing to act as a recipient for some data for me, but since you're coming with us ... Do you have anyone remaining in Corrivale that you trust to receive sensitive material?"

"Response: Ondway, certainly. Query: type of data?"

"I have some Grid searches underway for old personnel information on the man who called himself 'Jacob Ricel,' " Gabriel said. "The search material is coming to our local Corrivale-based Grid address. But with *Sunshine* now designated for infotrading, she'll get a new address and routing codes, and the old ones can't be carried aboard her any more—the infotrade authorities won't permit multiple addressing for haulers. I was wondering if someone in the system could hold anything that came in for me till we pass this way again."

"Solution: pass keywords to Ondway," Delde Sota said. "Research materials safe with him. Query: manage for you?"

"I'd appreciate that," Gabriel said. "Come on through and you can take what you need out of the ship's Grid system."

She wandered back up the hallway with Gabriel and leaned against the bulkhead in the sitting room while her braid insinuated itself into the fold-down control panel that serviced the ship's Grid access. Gabriel leaned over the control panel and touched in his password.

Delde Sota raised her eyebrows. "Result," she said, "system configuration and keyword material found. Store?"

"Please."

She nodded and straightened up. "Secure. Intention: will pass this information to Ondway this evening. Satisfactory?"

"Absolutely. Thanks, Doctor."

"Mission statement: mental health requirements not to be ignored in favor of physical/infrastructure needs," said Delde Sota as Enda came back in, carrying the small plastic water bottle that she used to

water her pet plant. "Body, mind, dichotomy illusory/false. Query: plant sprout yet?"

Enda gave her a look. "There is no point in hurrying something that is not ready," she said. "Some would say that owning a *Gyrofresia* is simply a disguised exercise in the art of patience."

"Opinion: too much patience bad for the bile ducts," said Delde Sota, and turned toward the lift.

"Intention: completion of errands. Helm will contact me when departure imminent." Delde Sota waved a hand; she vanished into the lift, and her braid followed a moment later.

Gabriel sat down. "You said we were going out full?"

Enda nodded, putting the *Gyrofresia* bulb in its little ceramic pot onto one of the service ledges. "We have done unusually well for a first load," Enda said, pouring water carefully on the bulb.

"You mean we had a lot of help."

"From Ondway and his connections in Diamond Point . . . yes."

"Connections that would not otherwise have given their business to a first-time operation," Gabriel said.

Enda tilted her head to one side. "Goodwill, as they call it, is worth a great deal. We have a lot of it aboard, and we must do what we can to repay it. We must make this first run with all due speed. Some people will be watching carefully how we perform."

"And some to see how our performance can be interfered with."

Enda sighed. "Unquestionably. For the meantime, doing our job with care will be the best defense."

She went down the hall again, leaving Gabriel to sit and wonder whether it would be enough. Still, with Helm along to help with defense and Delde Sota there for computer and medical problems, we're as well prepared as we can be.

Gabriel sighed, got up, and headed off to the utility closet down the hall. If he was going to worry, he could at least scrub something while he did it.

Chapter Three

THREE DAYS LATER, *Sunshine* departed Grith. The day before departure was the tensest because of a bureaucratic problem. The ship's infotrader routing address, the complex set of passwords, encryption routines, and system information that would identify it to planetary grids, had not come through from the nearest assigning authority on Aegis. That information itself was coming in on another infotrader, since Corrivale had no drivesat relay of its own. Without that address, there was no point in *Sunshine* leaving the system at all. Yet much of the data she was carrying was time-sensitive. The guarantees under which the data had been embarked in *Sunshine* specified that most of it had to be dumped at Terivine within fifty-five days. If the guarantees were broken, the fees for the data haulage had to be first discounted, then refunded if the delay was more than a hundred and twenty-one hours past the designated time of delivery.

Gabriel and Enda spent the day worrying in their respective styles. Gabriel paced up and down outside the ship, since he had already cleaned everything aboard that could be cleaned. Enda sat still, looking at her favorite vista of grass flowing in an alien wind on the Grid access display.

"At least," she said to Gabriel, "I will find out quickly enough when anything happens."

Two hours later, everything moved into high gear as the other infotrader made starrise in the system, cleared Grith landing control, and dumped its data to the planetary Grid. The access panel chimed, then lit up with all manner of bizarre error messages.

"Oh no, something else has gone wrong," Gabriel moaned and ran back to the hold.

"Gabriel," Enda called from the sitting room, "is the holding system set to 'active'?"

"How would I know? They didn't—" He stared at the control panel set against the near bulkhead wall on the inside of the hold. "Oh," Gabriel said, finding himself staring at a blinking telltale buried in the black

plastic of the control panel, while out of the blackness next to it, the words *Go to Active?* came burning up.

He touched the words. *Active*, the panel said, and then immediately after that, *Storing waiting inload* . . .

The inload process took a half-hour or so, while the system loaded the waiting information, checked itself, checked that the storage was secure, and then encrypted everything. By then the hum of in-system drivers could be heard as *Longshot* came to rest on the pad beside them.

Gabriel was already in the left-hand pilot's seat, running *Sunshine* through her pre-starfall checks. "I thought you were meeting us at the spaceport," he said to Helm via audio comms.

That gravelly laugh came rumbling back. "You don't go nowhere unescorted," Helm said, "now that you're carrying. Let me know when you're secure and we'll make our last stop."

It took another ten minutes for the infotrading system to convince itself that the data destined for *Sunshine* had been safely loaded.

"Delde Sota was right," Enda said, looking over Gabriel's shoulder at the new sets of telltales flashing in the master 3D control display. "This software leaves little to chance."

"It would be nice if it would let us take off," Gabriel muttered. Finally the readouts said, *Secure. Clear Ready for transport*.

Enda strapped herself in. They made the quick jump into the spaceport's bond area and admitted the usual port reps, an officious and very well spoken sesheyman named Se'tali accompanied by several assistants. They confirmed the supplies now going into *Sunshine's* cargo hold. Their procedures required electronic signatures, spot-card payment for port services, and last of all, sign-off on the ship's registry documents. Gabriel provided all these as requested.

Se'tali said something polite and wedged himself into the lift. His assistants followed. Several of them winked at Gabriel, a gesture they had adopted from humans. Somehow, it looked more impressive than usual because of all the eyes that sesheyans had to work with. The last of them exited the lift, which retracted itself into *Sunshine's* girth and locked up.

"You were mentioning good will," Gabriel said, checking all the indicators to make sure everything was closed tight for space. "We seem to have a lot."

"May it follow us," Enda said. "Helm?"

"Ready."

The port clearance control flashed permission-to-depart to their console. Helm lifted clear first, the scream of his engines dwindling upward and away. Gabriel touched the system drive into life and followed. The furious golden fire of Corrivale on Grith's green and violet surface dropped away beneath them, glinting blindingly but briefly on the girdling turquoise-violet tidal seas. Behind the curve of Grith, growing smaller now, the vast red — and — ochre striped bulk of Hydrocus loomed up over the thin bright band of atmosphere as it grew and dwarfed its jungle moon.

"Out of atmosphere," Enda said. "Ten minutes on system drive to the exit coordinates. Is the stardrive ready?"

Gabriel checked the readouts three times, making sure that the coordinates matched the hard copy in his personal data pad. "We're set."

"You ready over there?" Helm's voice came down comms.

"Yup. Check your info against ours?"

A pause.

"On the nose," Helm said. "Weapons ready."

Gabriel's were ready too, but he had not brought up the fighting field, not expecting to need to do any shooting at the moment.

It was at the other end of the transit that his concerns lay.

Enda too was looking at the gunnery readouts. "Are these latent energy readings supposed to be this high?" she said softly.

Helm chuckled. "The readings are fine. We'll play with the new toys when we get where we're going. Meanwhile, coming up on the tick—"

Gabriel had his eyes on the countdown. Ten seconds. He cut out the system drive and brought the stardrive to standby, watching the status indicators as the gravity induction coils and the mass reactor wound their waveforms into synch. Five seconds. The coordinates for the drop-out point at Terivine system converted into a third set of waveforms interwoven with the first two. Two seconds. One— Blue fire sheeted up over *Sunshine* in tendrils and waves, obscuring the burning gold of Corrivale as *Longshot* dropped into drivespace with a flare of crimson off to one side. Like liquid flowing upward, blue light webbed over the front viewport and fell into the pilot's cabin as *Sunshine* dropped into starfall. It was dark again, the unrelieved blackness of drivespace clinging all around them.

Enda checked her instruments. "A new beginning for us, then," she said, "and well begun. Gabriel, when did you last eat?"

His stomach growled at him. "About a year ago," he said, "or at least it feels like it. Let's see what the new catering packs look like."

* * * * *

Some light-years away, down a Grid commline that was as secure as a large amount of money spent could make it, a conversation was taking place. One end of the conversation was on Iphus in the Corrivale system. The far end of the conversation was in a small secured cabin of a large and well-armed ship presently orbiting Grith.

The tall, thin man sitting in the thick-carpeted office on Iphus was leaning forward on his elbows at his big polished desk, looking down into the small tank that he preferred to the large flashy 3D displays of some others on this floor. The things leaked signal, for one thing. That was wasteful, no matter how secure you thought your comms were. The big displays were tasteless as well. He had no desire to imply that his communications were unimportant enough to let just *anyone* who walked in see them. That was not the way to get ahead in the Company. Perception, if not everything, was a substantial part of it.

". . . don't care what they think," said the woman at the other end. "There's been a lot of comm traffic from that end. I've dumped it to your location. They're getting ready to move."

"Where?" he said. "If they take themselves anywhere there's a significant Concord presence, there's no point in it."

"They won't," the woman said. Her expression was scornful. "They don't dare. He's wanted. There's a reward out now, thanks to us, enough to arouse interest. Sooner or later, somebody is bound to fit the face to the offer and pick up on him."

"Is it one of those 'dead or alive' things?"

She sniffed. "You're living in the wrong century. What point is there in just letting someone kill him? Due process has to be followed if you're going to make any kind of example that will stick in people's minds. It would be too obvious ... not to mention creating problems at *this* end."

"Well, when it comes to problems," he said, hunching down lower, "we've got some at this end."

Her eyebrows went up at that. "What kind? After what that bunch of traitors and renegades did to you at Thalaassa, I'd have thought everyone would have agreed about what to do for a change."

He laughed. "You know how big this company is. Everyone with a letter higher than J in front of their ID thinks they're entitled to an opinion, and some of them *act* on them, the misguided idiots. Discipline has been going to hell around here lately. That shuffle up high three weeks ago—"

He stopped himself. Some topics it was unwise to discuss, no matter how carefully you thought you had secured your comms ... always remembering that the people who had installed your lines in the first place were also Company and might have agendas of their own.

"Never mind." He sighed. "Our Intel people are apparently involved again."

She looked suspiciously at him. "Why?"

"They think they missed something the first time. Apparently Concord Intel is after him too, and they want to know why."

She swore. "They dumped him the first time as waste, and now they—" She broke off, shaking her head.

"Do you seriously think they might be onto something?"

"I have no idea. If you think I can get anything significant out of our own Intel people about this, you're mistaken. They're all creeping around in hush-hush mode. The *only* thing that's certain is that somebody whose ID starts with X or Y has had his nose pushed right off his face by this hashmash at Thalaassa. Action has to be taken to calm his or her ruffled temper, and this probably means exposing the subject as Intel from the other side."

"He's not," she said fiercely. "We know that."

"As if that matters! If they have their way, they'll make him look as if he is, and then either side can chuck him away into whatever jail they like to waste the rest of his days away. The example will be taken by those who need it, believe me. Unless certain others get their way—"

She shook her head. "You lost me."

"There is a strong line of opinion in some offices up here," he said, "and not Intel—the *Enforcement* offices, I mean—that he should just have an accident. Safer, quicker, less trouble in the long run. What he did was a one-off, they think. Crazy guy, thrashing around for some kind of vengeance, took it against the nearest target—if he even knew that much of what he was doing."

She swore again. "There's got to be more to it than that."

He let out an annoyed breath. "I know. They're simplistic. *Yes*, the guy needs watching. We'll see if he really needs to be killed. He might find out something useful about the other side, and if he does ... fine, then let the mouse run a little farther. We've got all the time in the world, and we have him outnumbered. The minute he's no longer useful . . ." The man's thin hand came down, clenched clawlike, on the shining desk. "For now, wait and see."

Then he chuckled. "Yes, why not make life as interesting for him as possible in the meantime? There are all kinds of possibilities."

"As long as none of them are pleasant for him," she said, "I can cope with that for the time being."

"I'll be in touch," the man said. He reached out to cut the connection. "Don't let them move without us knowing."

"It's handled."

He killed the comms circuit and sat back in his chair. When the mouse had run for the last time, she might have to be taken care of as well. It would be unfortunate if her knowledge about this line of action should become public.

Well, time enough to think about that. Meanwhile, he had other business. Within a few days, there would be more data to help him work out what to do. He slipped a long finger into the tank display, touching the dumped data into life. Columns and figures, rows of text scrolled by, and he smiled slightly.

Interesting times, he thought. Yes, those can be arranged. Intel can just deal with it the best they can.

* * * * *

Just over six weeks later, *Sunshine* and *Longshot* made starrise at Terivine.

Terivine A and B, the two main stars—a pair of G-class yellows—had been too close together at only ninety million kilometers to allow any exception to the no-planets tendency of binary systems. When the Verge started to open up again, transiting vessels had used a spot outside A and B's rotational locus as a target for starfall and rested there for recharge before moving on. No one bothered with the little cool orange dwarf, Terivine C, orbiting a hundred AUs out.

Ten years previously, the Alaundrin freighter *Desert Wind* had a navigational accident—the computer involved with calculating her path through drivespace dropped a decimal place in the coordinates due to a power fluctuation. When she made starrise, *Desert Wind* was no more than two million kilometers out of the little star's atmosphere. They were lucky to have come out no closer. When the ship's crew got their composure back, they had reason to lose it again. There, orbiting the star no further out than forty-five million kilometers, was a Class 1 planet that no one had ever noticed.

As *Sunshine* made starrise in a down-sliding sleet of trickling white fire, Gabriel looked out on the little

system and tried to imagine what that first crew's reactions must have been. No one looks for what they don't expect, and no one had ever expected a planet around a star so small and possibly so old.

Argument was still raging as to whether the little world, eventually named Rivendale, was a capture or the remnant of a natural formation. In any case, the planet had suffered from tremendous tidal stresses and volcanism while it was forming. Its crust was unusually strong on the light elements and thoroughly faulted so that even the world's older mountain ranges were spectacularly shattered by time and tidal spasms. The younger ranges were labyrinths of splintered basalt needles and pinnacles, spearing upward over valleys torn deep between them, rearing above oxide-streaked canyons kilometers deep and cliffs kilometers high. All these features might have been expected of a low-gravity world, but in Rivendale's case, it was as if someone had attempted to produce a particularly extreme example of the class. There were other oddities, again due to tidal effects. Terivine's unusually powerful braking effect on so light a planet had left Rivendale with a rotation period nearly seven days long. Fierce heat and numbing cold alternated on a weekly basis and grew worse with the turning of the seasons. The initial surveyors had looked down at this dramatic and intimidating landscape and had been sure that, whatever future settlers might talk about on a regular basis, one topic would always be the weather.

Nor did it take long before the settlers began to arrive. Rivendale's discovery attracted the inevitable attention from the nearest stellar nations. Alaundril, located in the Tendril system, and the Regency of Bluefall, based around Aegis, got in first and settled their claims in 2492, splitting the colonization rights 70-30. It was only a few years after the first colonization parties arrived that a completely unforeseen complication arose. Rivendale turned out to already be inhabited by intelligent life.

Gabriel had checked this aspect of the planet with some care. His acquaintance with Enda had made him more curious about alien life than he had been during his marine years, and he had not been surprised to discover that it had been a fraal xenobiologist who stumbled on the truth. Riglia had been known since Alaundril and Bluefall's Regency conducted the first joint precolonization survey. Long, graceful, translucent creatures, gossamer-thin, like ribbons of shimmering air, they excited some brief interest. Though avian, they were very unlike other avian species so far discovered. They spent their whole lives in the air, subsisting on airborne algae and plankton native to the high mists of the Rivendale mountain chains. The fraal, who with various other scientists had come to study the unique Rivendale ecosystem, had looked up at a passing riglia, glinting and wreathing its rainbowy way past in the warming sun of early noon, and had thought, *Cousin, you are fair*. The fraal had not expected the chilly and pragmatic response, tentative but clear. *You are no cousin of mine, but you are right*.

The fraal, a mindwalker as well as a scientist, had gone to the authorities and explained that they had a problem. The riglia were fully aware that their planet was being colonized—or from their point of view, invaded—and were furious. The Alaundril and Regency authorities were annoyed but also sensible enough to be cautious. There was no chance of reversing their own plans and removing the colonies. That would have constituted an unacceptable loss of status for both nations, but they stopped further colonization, citing concern about the local ecology.

Gabriel, during his investigations, had reason to smile at that. It was not the Rivendale ecology that was in danger. Humans and fraal who lived on that world literally had to hang on by their nails, suspended more or less between heaven and earth in a realm where air pressures could range from near vacuum to nearly three bars down in the deepest canyons.

The one city, Sunbreak, perched precariously on a nine-kilometer high col between two fourteen-kilometer high mountains. There, two thousand people lived—breathing deeply, Gabriel thought, and being very careful where they put their feet. Some intrepid homesteaders had struck out into the surrounding mountain range to make themselves small farms, terracing some of the less intractable, lower reaches and collecting water from the warmweek mists with condensers. It was a dangerous life. The riglia regarded any damage to their environment, no matter how minimal, as damage to them and were likely enough to attack solitary humans simply out of pique. There were other creatures, like spidermist, that would strip the flesh off you right down to the bones without pique being involved.

"Hey, *Sunshine!* Everything all right over there?" Helm's voice came over comms.

"No problems at all," Gabriel said. "You two have a quiet time?"

Helm chuckled. "When Delde Sota is around, you wouldn't ever describe anything as 'quiet.' She reprogrammed my entertainment system somehow—"

"Correction: did no such thing," came a sharp voice from the background. "Augmented gamma correction for imagery player. Long overdue."

"All the colors of every thing are strange now," Helm muttered. "I liked my playback the way it was."

"You have brought this on yourself, Helm," Enda said, unstrapping herself from her seat beside Gabriel.

"It is a mechalus's business to seek perfection in the machinery around her, as well as the machinery which *is* her, unless you desire the doctor to reshape her personal ethics while riding with you."

"Don't start with me," Helm said, though there was humor in his voice. "Got a hail from Terivine control down in Sunbreak. They've got a spot ready for us at the port."

"Good," Gabriel said and checked his coordinates. "Not a big place, that. Are they going to warehouse us somewhere else after we land? They can't have more than a few acres of active space down there."

"I know. It's like landing on a dinner plate. No matter. You just follow me down."

"Helm, have you been here before?" Enda said.

"No," said Helm, "but I'm here to ride shotgun, which means I go down first and impress everybody. Stay back a couple kilometers."

They rode their system drives in toward Terivine then let the planet's gravity well pull them in. This was one of the few parts of piloting that still made Gabriel nervous: waiting for the feel of the air to make a difference to *Sunshine's* flight characteristics. It was not that she was a tricky or difficult ship to manage in atmosphere, but the speed with which atmospheric densities varied sometimes made for a rocky ride until Gabriel could work out which attitude the ship preferred on the way in. Terivine, with a "sea level" pressure much higher than most worlds', could produce problems during landing if the sequence wasn't carefully managed.

The problems did not materialize, and Gabriel followed Helm down through the banks of mist—almost too thin to be thought of as cloud—which layered the upper atmosphere. After a few minutes, they broke out of these and into an intermediate layer of clear air above the highest mountains. Gabriel shook his head at the broad, jagged, green and cream streaked landscape below them, all warm-tinged from Terivine's orange-yellow light. On the milky, misty horizon lay wave after wave of fiercely jagged mountains, like a frozen sea. Fog lay far down between them in most of the valleys, hiding greater depths. "Forbidding" was one word that immediately occurred to Gabriel at the sight of the place. Too much vertical and not enough horizontal!

It was a beautiful place as well. Gabriel liked mountains and mountainous worlds. He liked to stand and look up at a landscape that was far too big to be conquered, a kind of reminder that humans might be a great power among the worlds, but single beings still had to fight their own battles with the physical universe. And the physical universe sometimes had them completely outclassed.

From *Longshot*, Helm grunted and said, "Deep valleys down there. Full of those . . . what did they call them . . . Rigla?"

"Riglia," Gabriel replied. "Very annoyed people, if I got the right impression. I wouldn't waste my time trying to have a friendly chat with the natives."

"Wouldn't normally have been on my list anyway," Helm said. "All they've got are little cilia, if I remember what you told me before we left Grith. Can't pick things up, except with their minds . . . Don't think they'd go in big for arms sales."

Gabriel gave Enda a sideways look as they dropped deeper into the atmosphere. "Think you might make some sales down here?" he said.

Helm chuckled deep. "There are humans here," he said. "No matter where they live, these days, what human ever feels really secure?"

Gabriel had no quick answer to that one.

"There's our port," Helm said. "About ten degrees to starboard. Watch your approach as you come in. We've got to follow this valley, and it twists."

He dropped into a broad valley that wound between two huge mountain walls. Gabriel nosed *Sunshine* down after him. There was less striation among the mountains here and more volcanic rock. Here and

there, you could pick out a peak that had clearly once been a volcano, now shattered or undermined by the pressures of other local formations against it. The colors were darker—browns and blacks, mostly, old basalt, faulted in massive square or hexagonal blocks, or shattered to pinnacles by millions of years' worth of lateral pressure.

Away ahead of them two great peaks soared up, high and narrow, angling away from each other like the horns of a bull. There was a pale patch on the yoke of stone that connected them.

"That's it?" Gabriel asked.

"That's the spot. Five degrees to the right at the back of the settlement—"

"I see it," Gabriel said. His 3D display crosshairs the spot for him. As spaceports went, Sunbreak's was nearly nonexistent—you could have dropped the whole of it into one of the service yards that surrounded the port at Diamond Point.

Helm led them down, the golden light of Terivine on *Longshot's* hull going out like a snuffed flame as he dropped between the mountains and descended toward the spaceport. It was still warmweek, but not for long. There would be no direct sunlight on the city for another ten days, until coldweek was past and the new warmweek was coming.

If city is the word I'm looking for, Gabriel thought. The pale patch had resolved itself into a scatter of buildings, some large, some small, a jumble of locally quarried stone and caststone edifices. The place certainly could not house more than a couple thousand people.

In front of them, Gabriel saw Helm skirt around the high back of the yoke between the two mountains, coming at the port beacon from the back side. He came to a halt in midair, hanging on his system drivers, not even engaging his attitudinals as yet. Showoff, Gabriel thought, getting ready to cut in his own landing systems, but he had to admire the featherlike way Helm settled himself down on exactly the tiny scrap of light-bounded tarmac. He came down so slowly that there was no way that anyone could have missed the size, orientation or number of his gun ports.

Enda's smile was small and prim. "Art comes in strange forms," she said, looking down at *Longshot* half a kilometer beneath them. "Helm? Shall we follow?"

They saw a tiny figure exit and walk around *Longshot*, looking carefully at the surroundings. The shape was carrying something that looked like a twig at this altitude and was probably capable of making a hole in a Concord cruiser.

"Yeah," Helm said, "you might as well. The locals are all looking out the windows now."

Gabriel brought *Sunshine* in and down—perhaps not with the same expertise, but in the manner of someone unconcerned with the locals' opinions. He grounded her about three meters from *Longshot*, where the smaller ship's main guns covered her, and powered the drives down.

"Sunbreak control, good afternoon," Gabriel said, reckoning that it would safely be afternoon for another day and a half yet. "We have an infotrade cargo for you. Can we conclude port formalities and get the material away?"

"Formalities have already been concluded, *Sunshine*," said a man's voice down station comms. "We're not big enough to need much in the way of paperwork here: the detectors told us you were coming." Did his voice sound uneasy? Gabriel glanced at Enda. She reached into the 3D display between them and touched the "privacy" light.

"It is to be expected," she said. "Any world so isolated would normally have the best starfall detection hardware it could afford. They would have known the time and location of our arrival nearly as soon as we departed."

She slipped her finger away from the control-light, which dulled. "Thanks, Sunbreak," Gabriel said. "Then we'd like to dump, if you would pass us your authentication protocols. The dump addresses we have already."

Enda shifted the infotrade control systems into the front display. It filled with lines of code, as the two Grid systems—Rivendale's planetary-level one and *Sunshine's* local portable Grid—acknowledged one another's bona fides. The code display dissolved, leaving them with the message *Discharging cargo*. They watched the words blink. This was the part of the process that Gabriel dreaded—when the machines were in control, and being built by mortal beings in a universe where entropy was in force,

could conceivably fail. If that happened, no one would blame the machines. It would be Gabriel and Enda who would be responsible. They could sue the people who installed the machinery and might someday recoup some of the losses they would have had to pay out of their own pockets for the lost data.

The display went black. Gabriel swallowed.

Darkness followed, for several seconds. Then, *Discharge complete*, said the display. *Receiving facility backup complete and confirmed. Cleaning cycle begins.*

Gabriel sat back in his seat and said, "Look at me. I'm wringing wet."

He had never been clear about whether fraal sweated. Enda breathed out one long breath, and said, "It is nice when things work. Shall we go out and see about a meal?"

"Not until I shower," Gabriel said, unstrapped himself and went down the hall.

* * * * *

Some while later, Helm was coming up in the lift, and Gabriel was stretched out in one of the chairs in the sitting room in a clean singlesuit, while Enda looked over the local Grid access channels. They were spare—a few music channels, some solid or 3D entertainment, most of it stale.

"You could make some money," Gabriel said, "just bringing entertainment material in here."

"If we had cargo space to spare," Enda said, distracted by the list of local amenities, which was also brief. The lift door opened. "Look, there is a fraal restaurant here."

"Feeling the need for home cooking?" Helm said.

"Sweet heaven," Gabriel said. Helm was in a costume that could only be described as full battle armor—tunic and breeches and boots and armlets and greaves of dull refractory materials, shiny in places but mostly scarred with use, and huge pistols on both hips. "Helm, you look like a tank, but better armed."

"I always wear the armor on my first night out on a new planet," said Helm, grinning that innocent grin.

"Saves me having to wear it later."

Enda laughed. "As for home cooking, I eat that every day; *Sunshine* is my home. I would simply be interested in seeing exactly *how* 'fraal' the cooking here is. Such a tiny settlement is not the kind of place you would expect to find cosmopolitan ingredients. For real fraal cooking, you would need such.

We never saw a cuisine we did not borrow from."

She and Gabriel got up. "What is it like out, Helm?" Enda said. She too had chosen to wear a singlesuit, a plasma-blue number in which Gabriel had first seen her long ago, and which picked up the vivid blue of her eyes startlingly well.

"About nineteen. A little breeze."

"No need to bother with a wrap, then. Let's lock up . . ."

They met Doctor Delde Sota on the blacktop at the bottom of the lift. She was standing and looking around her at the spectacular ebony or cream and ebony striped mountain vista, all gilded in the orange light that surrounded them.

"Opinion: gravity level enjoyable," she said.

It *was* lighter than usual: about six tenths of a gee, and there was a slight tendency to bounce until one got used to how to put one's feet down. "I wouldn't overeat in this climate," Helm said, as they walked toward the port buildings and the road into town. "Don't think it would stay down long."

Laughing and talking, they made their way into the heart of the settlement past the port buildings. Those were stone, but the business and leisure heart of the settlement was a mixture of stone and prefab. The little blocky apartment houses and shopping clusters were set amid carefully maintained but minimal landscaping, on ground which was little more than bare stone. They did not see many people—a few humans and some fraal, walking in small groups or heading home with bags or parcels of shopping from the local stores. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful, but also lonely—the influence of the terrible jagged peaks looking down from all sides, even in the subdued, prolonged afternoon light, was somber.

It couldn't much affect Gabriel's mood, though. He was too relieved. "It was easy," Gabriel said as they slowed down, hunting for Enda's fraal restaurant, which was supposed to be on the Main Thoroughfare. "The software really did handle it all."

"That was just one run," Enda said. "I would not be inclined to class this work as 'easy' just yet. We may have come out full, but will we go back that way? If we do not, the fine fat-looking profit we have made on this run will be undermined. If the message traffic we have brought with us from Grith does not generate some in the opposite direction, there will be no point in continuing this particular run. We will have to look elsewhere."

Gabriel nodded. "I know, but it's too soon to think about that. We just got here! Let's see what tomorrow brings."

The fraal restaurant turned out to be attached to one side of a kind of community center for the local inhabitants, a long low stonebuilt edifice, quarried from black basalt blocks and boasting a wide shallow-peaked roof of some other dark stone split in thin layers. Inside, there was light and talk; large round lights hung down over a great number of trestle tables spread over a wide expanse of stone floor. People, humans and fraal and a mechalus or two, glanced up with interest and bemusement from their meals or drinks as Gabriel, Enda, Helm, and Delde Sota came in and looked around.

From off to their right came the smell of something aromatic frying. Gabriel thought it smelled like ginger. Dining tables were gathered there around a circular counter, and Enda sniffed the air with delight. "I swear, that *is* delya," she said, heading off in that direction. "What wonders the worlds hold!"

The others followed her and found a table. The fraal gentleman who was doing the cooking came out to greet them, and he and Enda began a long conversation in their own language, with much bowing and waving of hands. After a moment the chef went off, and Enda looked at them all, slightly abashed.

"He will be happy to bring you menus if you want," she said, "but I think we are onto something excellent here. Will you let me order for you?"

"Everything but the booze," Helm said amiably.

"That I leave to you with joy," Enda said.

Shortly thereafter, they had bottles of kalwine, and small metal dishes began arriving, full of portions of cooked vegetables. At least that was what Gabriel thought they were. It became plain that the dinner was going to be one of those at which you eat a great number of unidentifiable but delicious things and are never afterwards clear about exactly what you had or how to get it again.

The laughter and the talking at their table got ever more cheerful and seemed to spread as the evening drew on (though the light outside didn't change) and the community center around them filled with people eating, drinking, talking, and laughing. Gabriel found himself enjoying the good cheer, though he wondered if there wasn't a slightly nervous cast to it—as if practically the whole community of Sunbreak was gathered in this large room, making a brave noise against the vast silence of the world outside, a world beautiful but essentially inimical, a world very much alone.

The second time the thought came up, Gabriel shook his head and poured himself another glass of the kalwine, turning his attention to Delde Sota, who was in the middle of some mechalus joke that she was telling Helm for the second time. "—couldn't find his head. Result: the captain says, 'Screw its eyes out and see if they work better.'"

"I still don't get it."

"Semantic problem," Delde Sota said, lifting her glass with her braid, while propping her chin up on both fists, her elbows on the table. " 'Head' is—"

"Excuse me," said a voice off to the left. They all looked up.

Standing by the table was a small man, dressed in the kind of long tunic and baggy breeches that some people from Bluefall favored. He was plump and round faced, with little eyes looking at them dubiously.

"You the people who landed those two ships up the port this afternoon?"

"Yes," Gabriel answered.

"Infotrading?" the man said.

"That's right," Helm said.

"Well, I run the infotrading company here. Alwhirn Company. I'm Rae Alwhirn."

"Yes, we've heard of you," Gabriel said and got up to extend a hand to the man. "Pleased to meet you. Gabriel Connor—"

"The pleasure's not mutual," Alwhirn said, and looked at Gabriel's hand as if it were dirty. Then he darted a glance at Helm, and quickly away again. "Not at all. We don't want your kind here."

"What exactly would 'my kind' be?" Gabriel said.

"Speculation: competition?" said Delde Sota.

The man glared at her, then at Gabriel. "You think we don't read the news we carry? We know what you were up to in the Thalaassa system. First murder—then union-busting—"

Gabriel stared, and laughed. "*Excuse me?*"

"Those sesheyans you were hauling all over space were Employees," Alwhirn said. "You were in the middle of that big Concord PR exercise to make them look like 'free' sesheyans, poor oppressed people who got the wrong end of the stick somehow." He sneered. "The same way you did, huh? I suppose you're going to try to tell us someone set you up to make it look like you killed all those marines, your own buddies, that someone framed you—"

Gabriel was silent for a moment. "Were you there?"

"What? I read the—"

"*Were you there?*"

"Of course I wasn't there, I have a job to do, unlike some people who try to come in out of nowhere and take my business away. If you think—"

"What we've brought into the system is new business," Gabriel said, "from Grith and Iphus. Business you never went out of your way to find. You've been bringing in data from Aegis and Tendril and not much else. Now if I wanted to—"

"See that," Alwhirn growled. "You come to spy on us and—"

"Your business here is a matter of public record," Gabriel said wearily. "If you—"

"So is yours," Alwhirn said. "*Murder*. Get out of here before you regret having come in the first place."

Gabriel took a breath. "If I *was* a murderer, you'd be asking for trouble. A good thing that there are witnesses to the statement."

Alwhirn glanced around the table then turned away. As he went, he muttered something. They stared after him, but he was out the front door a few seconds later. Other people turned to watch him go, then looked at Gabriel and the others. Not all the looks were friendly.

Gabriel sat down again, and looked at the glass of kalwine in front of him, just refilled. All of a sudden it had lost a great deal of its savor.

"*That was strange,*" he said.

"Granted," Enda said. "What do you make of it?"

Delde Sota shook her head. Helm, for the moment, was looking toward the door and windows. "Bad news travels fast," he said under his breath.

"It's Infotrade Interstellar that I would have expected this kind of thing from," Gabriel said. "Not the local independents!" He pulled his glass close again. "What's the matter with these people, anyway? It's not as if we're taking food out of their mouths."

"I have seen much human behavior in my time," Enda said, "but I do not consider myself a specialist. Though the likeliest answer would seem to be that, for some reason, they feel threatened. As for I.I., they sent us a very pleasant message."

"*What?*"

"It's in *Sunshine's* Grid mail center—it came in while you were showering. It is nothing fulsome. They acknowledge our presence here and wish us luck."

That piece of news made Gabriel shake his head. "As for the rest of that, the idea that VoidCorp's Employees have a *union*—"

"Very likely they do," Enda said. "Probably it seems, superficially, to have the same kind of rules that other labor unions do, though membership is probably mandatory . . . as Employee status remains mandatory."

Helm was still looking around, watching the people who were watching them. "No great interest," he said

after a moment. "I think we're safe for the moment."

"Query: later?" Delde Sota said softly.

"There is no way to tell," Enda said, sounding rueful. "With the active opposition of some of these people, our business may not be pleasant."

Gabriel frowned. "We'll see, but as for Alwhirm—does he think he owns this system? I don't want trouble with him, but if he wants to start it, he's going to get some back, possibly more than he bargained for."

A silence fell at that. Then Delde Sota said, forcefully, "Dessert."

They had dessert, a flambeed concoction that drew applause from some of the tables around them. They paid their bill, said "good evening" to the people around them, congratulated the fraal chef, and then walked back to the ships, making little of the uncomfortable incident during dinner. Gabriel did his best to sound untroubled as they went. He was tired and that helped him. One issue kept rearing up at the back of his mind to be dealt with.

Terivine had no drivesat relay. All its data came to it via infotradars. No information could have come to Rivendale about Gabriel's arrival before today.

How did this guy know so quickly that I was here and who I am?

Helm and Delde Sota went off to *Longshot*. Enda and Gabriel headed back to *Sunshine*, secured her, and turned in. As Gabriel lay down and spoke his light out, the thought hung in the darkness there with him for a long time, all too clear.

So much for my new beginning ...

Chapter Four

THE NEXT MORNING was still the same afternoon, although the orange light of the sun came in at a lower angle. Light slid in long golden rays between the peaks and tangled in the mists that were starting to rise to higher levels now, filling the invisible valleys below like water. Warmweek was fading, that leisurely afternoon tarnishing down to a brassy orange pre-sunset hue, a light with color but progressively less warmth.

Gabriel stood on the cracked gray tarmac outside *Sunshine* and looked across at the fanglike peaks serrating the horizon on all sides. The landscape well suited how he felt at the moment—hemmed in and unable to escape the atmosphere of silent, low-level threat, no matter how far he went. And not so low-level, he thought, thinking of Alwhirm's angry, frightened face last night.

How did they find me?

It was a good guess that someone at Diamond Point had been spying on *Sunshine* and her crew, watching to see where they were going. That information would have been no secret for a day and a half before their departure when they filed their starfall/starrise plan. Someone gets into a ship, Gabriel thought, and hurries here with the news that we're coming and what we're coming for. He recalled again the edgy sound in the port controller's voice when they had come in. "The detectors told us you were coming."

Yes, Gabriel thought, and who else?

Who would have the funds and inclination to send someone all the way over here in a ship when a holomessage could have done as well? We could have been carrying a message like that ourselves, Gabriel thought, and we'd never have known it. It would certainly have been cheaper.

But there had been a couple of hours between their arrival and Alwhirm's appearance at their table. Am I just being paranoid? Gabriel thought. Did he receive a message about us in the same load we brought in, or did he just hear gossip about us from the port people? In a place this small, a new infotrader suddenly turning up in the system would be discussed.

Gabriel sat down on one of *Sunshine's* landing skids and gazed out at the morning — cum — late

afternoon. He hadn't slept well. It had been another of *those* dreams last night, a repetitive conflict of light and shadow. Flares of brilliance lashed out against some inward-pressing darkness, all of it haunted by unexplained feelings of fear and excitement. Gabriel took these dreams for some kind of obscure message from his subconscious, though he had no idea what the message might mean.

Something to do with starrise and starfall, he thought. He was not yet sufficiently inured to them that the excitement of a jump failed to move him. While living in a Concord Cruiser that carried the marine complement of which he was part, Gabriel had gone through starrises and starfalls without comment. They were pilots' business, an insignificant artifact of getting where you were going. Now that Gabriel flew himself, suddenly drivespace was a serious part of the day, and he listened to whatever Helm or Enda might say about the fables and rumors of starfalls—what caused the differing color, which ones were supposed to be lucky ... Gabriel shivered.

The sound of the lift coming down distracted him. Amazing how noises that would have been completely lost in the rumble at Diamond Point now seemed louder among the peaks and rolling mists. All sound fell into that moist quiet as if into a sack where they were dampened and lost. That silence seemed to say, *There are very few of you. We can wait. Some day you will be gone.*

"What a beautiful morning," Enda said. She walked out to join him, looking around at the swirling, churning mists and hugging herself against the cool dampness of the morning.

"Nnnh," Gabriel said. He disliked pouring cold water on her pleasures, but in his present mood he had trouble seeing the beauty.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Not really."

"That dream again?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I think so, but I may be getting used to it now." Not that it was any easier to bear while he was inside it. At least it doesn't make me wake up yelling any more.

Enda nodded. "I am still thinking about our gentleman at table last night," she said.

"Not much of a gentleman."

"Well, his manners were not the best. His reasons for being angry with us did not ring particularly true, either." She sat down on the skid next to Gabriel. "I cannot help feeling that he was more frightened than angry, but of what or whom?"

Gabriel shook his head. "Don't ask me until after I've had my chai," he said. "Come to think of it, don't bother asking then, either. I'm still wondering how we're going to pick up any business with this guy out poisoning people's minds against us, and whether it's realistic to think we're going to get any business at *all* when the place is this small."

"I would definitely wait until you have had your chai," Enda replied. "You should also walk around and talk to people. Our business is to see exactly what the other firms have been doing here, then examine which parts of the local market they may have missed."

Gabriel gave her a cockeyed look. "You sound like some kind of sales representative."

She chuckled. "Well, so I was, once long ago."

Gabriel sat back against the upright of the landing skid and laughed at that. "I thought you were in suit maintenance."

"Oh, I did that too," Enda said. "Gabriel, when you live in a great spacegoing city, conscientious marketing is something you cannot ignore, especially when you tend to keep your contacts with other species to a minimum. You will not succeed if you go barging into established business relations between planets or between a planet and another free trading facility that serves it. Trade wars only make life harder for everyone . . . and eventually people die of them. One must rather work to become part of a network, a cooperative structure." She looked out across the mountains. "Life among the stars is too hard as it is—resources all stretched too thin over the terrible distances, and communication much too difficult and expensive to waste on attempting to destroy infrastructure that others have built. To compete without an eye to your competitors' continued success as well as yours is to court disaster."

Gabriel had to shake his head at that. "Enda, are all fraal as *nice* as you?"

Enda looked at him in some shock, then she began to laugh softly. "Many are far nicer. I have had my

failures, which is one of the reasons I do not travel with my own kind any more. I thank you, Gabriel." She looked out into the mist, then turned to him again. "Meanwhile, you have driven out of my mind what I came out to tell you. There is more mail for you in the ship's system."

"For me? Where from?"

Enda had pulled her hair down out of its long tail and began braiding it. To Gabriel, it looked like the braid Delde Sota used, which reflected the Sealed Knot of her particular medical profession—a four-strand braid with a strange sort of "hiccup" in its pattern.

"Some of the data we dumped came back to us through the local sorting facility," Enda said, weaving the long silver-gilt strands over and under one another, "at least, if I read the log files correctly. A good question whether I do. The software manuals are not exactly lucid, but certainly there is a packet of mail for you."

"Probably hate mail from our friend from last night."

Enda raised her eyebrows. "I hardly see why he would waste the money when he can deliver his hatred in person. But no. This was data we brought in with us."

"Huh," Gabriel said as he gazed over toward *Longshot*.

"No sign of them yet?"

Gabriel shook his head.

Enda shrugged. "After last night, I think that Helm did not care to sleep right away. He told me before we left Grith that he needed to do more work on his external security and surveillance fields. I doubt he would have felt comfortable about dropping off while his work was still incomplete."

Gabriel shook his head. "I'm still not sure I understand why he's doing this. Coming over here for no particular reason, watching out for us this way. . . ."

Enda looked over toward *Longshot* as she finished her braid. "I would not care to hazard detailed guesses," she said. "But this time I doubt he is repaying Delde Sota any favors."

"Think not?"

Enda turned away from *Longshot*, looking toward the eastern sky, which was gradually beginning to deepen toward something that would be dusk in another day and a half or so. "It must be a bitter life at times," she said softly, "being a mutant—having to hold your own worth like a shield in front of you, never knowing for certain what a 'normal' human might think. Friendship, even casual friendship that does not much touch the depths, could be a precious thing to someone in such circumstances." She gave Gabriel a look. "I would not say our dealings with Helm are all one-sided, or that we do not offer him something he much needs, though it might seem a light and easy gift to us."

Gabriel nodded. It was not a subject he would normally have discussed with Helm. He had a feeling that one of the reasons their friendship worked was precisely because he didn't think about Helm being a mutant. "You may have something there. As for Delde Sota . . . who knows why she does what she does? Though she *is* curious about most things."

"There was not much for her at Iphus, perhaps," Enda said, "even when it was busiest. Mechalus, too, have their problems with the world outside Aler and the Rignunmor sphere of influence, people who feel that it's wrong to meddle with biological life. The Hatire are only the most outspoken of many." She shrugged. "Perhaps Delde Sota sees it as a worthwhile challenge to be out among those who live another kind of life. Perhaps something else is on her mind. Certainly she will have a chance to explore other modes of existence besides the strictly virtual or mechanical. There is not much to keep a former Grid pilot busy here." She looked out at the mists, which had begun to billow up almost to the level of the yoke between the two mountains.

"Look," Gabriel said, gazing westward.

Enda followed his glance. Away off in the distance, in the high airs above the mist, they could see a few thin, twisting ribbons of translucence, writhing and weaving their way through the lengthening afternoon, catching the light of Terivine high above the mountains in brief gleams of tarnished gold.

"Riglia," Enda said, and shivered.

"They won't bother us," Gabriel said. "They avoid this place, supposedly. Too many well-armed humans and others."

"I would wonder," Enda said, standing up again. "I think I will have some chai myself."

"Wait for me," Gabriel said. "I want a shower, and then I'll have a look at that mail."

* * * * *

As it happened, the mail came first, and the shower was forgotten as Gabriel sat down at the Grid panel and touched the controls that brought up the mail. He keyed in his passwords and then took a quick breath as the package of mail de-encrypted.

"Altai!" he said. "It's from the research service."

Enda came to look over his shoulder, handed him a mug of chai, black as he preferred it, and stood sipping her own while Gabriel scrolled through the great blocks of text that suddenly began to spill out into the display.

"What is it?" she said. "They have used one of those hard-to-read tpestyles again."

"Ricel," Gabriel said. "They've finally turned up something on him."

"Ricel" was not the man's real name or his only name. He had served on board the Star Force cruiser *Falada*, to which Gabriel had last been posted. Ricel's position was ostensibly in engineering. Early on in Gabriel's assignment to *Falada*, he had been instructed by Concord Intelligence—to which he had been "seconded"—that Jacob Ricel was his shipboard contact, someone who might get in touch with him and have him investigate one matter or another. It had only happened once or twice. The problem was that the last intervention Ricel asked Gabriel to perform was the passing of a small data chip to someone aboard ship. The person in question was the assistant to the Ambassador Plenipotentiary dealing with the crisis in the Thalaassa system to which *Falada* had been sent to intervene. The data chip was not a message coded in solid form, as Gabriel had thought, but the trigger for a detonator in a shuttle transporting the ambassador and her party. Everyone aboard died. One of Gabriel's best friends, acting as marine security escort aboard that shuttle, had died.

The deaths had happened in atmosphere, so the government of the planet Phorcys demanded the right to conduct the trial, much to the annoyance of the Concord Marines. To their even greater annoyance, the trial body refused to convict Gabriel of the murders—though he had not been exonerated either.

Gabriel's insistence that Ricel had given him the data chip and that Ricel was his Intel contact aboard the ship had been rejected by the marine prosecutors. Elinke Darayev, *Falada's* captain, had insisted that Ricel had *not* been Intel, and she should have known. This left Gabriel with the question: who *was* "Ricel"? Apparently he was now dead, due to a space suit accident, but Gabriel could not let matters rest there. He needed whatever information he could find on the man if he was to clear himself.

Gabriel shook his head in combined annoyance and satisfaction. "I can't believe it. We spent six weeks with this stuff in our hold, and I never knew it. We have *got* to have a word with our sorting software."

"I am not sure the software was at fault," Enda said. "We left in a rush, and there was no time to de-encrypt or sort the material. Next time we will leave in a more leisurely manner and do our sorting first."

"You bet," Gabriel muttered. The display flickered, and several images, each tagged below with more text, came up.

Gabriel took a deep breath. "Look at these," he said.

Three images rotated there. They were all the same if you looked past superficial differences. One of the images was clear, the other two grainy, but this had not bothered the AI software that Altai had been using to hunt through public records in the systems it had scanned. Gabriel had paid extra for the image search facility. Now he saw that the extra investment was beginning to pay off.

"There were at least three of him at one time or another," Gabriel said quietly. "How many lives has this guy *had*?"

"Discovering that may take some time," Enda said, looking over his shoulder. "Does it not say there that 'Ricel' has died?"

"Yeah, well, I'm becoming suspicious about such claims when they're made about anyone attached to this

face." Gabriel shook his head. "Why doesn't he change it?"

"What?"

"His face. You'd think he would, if he really wanted to stay secret. Look at this one: a mustache, but that doesn't hide anything. And this one, the tattoos are a distraction, but take them off and it's still the same face. Why doesn't he have his nose done, or his hair color or skin color changed, or the hairline inhibited from 'life' to 'life'?"

Enda tilted her head to one side. "I have no answer for you, but it does seem to be the same man."

Gabriel studied the four précis. "These span ten years," he said. "What was he doing in between? Where else was he that hasn't shown up yet?" He sighed. "These results aren't bad, but Enda, the price!"

"You must not count the price," she said, "not while you are still hunting answers, not unless you value your peace of mind so cheaply. We are not without resources, and we made a healthy profit on this run."

"Will we make another, though?" Gabriel said, sitting back. "Any offers on the return-leg screen this morning?"

She tilted her head sideways again, this time more slowly. "Nothing yet, but there is no need for buyers at this end to be sudden, especially not with Mr. Alwhirn in his present mood. If anyone wants to ship data with us, well enough; but they would have shipped with Alwhirn or I.I. before now. No one in so small a place is going to rush off to give their business to someone they have never seen before. Time will be taken to study us. Therefore we should be out and about today. We should see about resupplying."

"With what? We're full up after Diamond Point—"

"You know that, and I know that, but the storekeepers here will not. Besides," Enda said with an amused look, "I want to find out where Oraan, our chef of last evening, is getting his vegetables. Canned they may be, but they are of high quality. If he is growing them, then we will be back here, infotrading or not."

Gabriel got up and stretched, thinking about his shower. Enda gave the screen one last look, then went down the hall. After a moment, she stuck her head out of her cabin door and looked at him. "I wonder about these dreams you have been having. They seem to be making you circumstantial."

"Maybe they have," Gabriel said, uncertain what she meant.

She came down the hall with the plant pot. "Good. Meanwhile, a little natural sunlight can do this no harm."

"You know what I think?" Gabriel said. "I think that thing's made of some kind of plastic. It's a joke on a poor human who doesn't know any better."

Enda smiled. "When I play a joke on you, it will be a better one than that. When you are ready, let us go into town and see about those vegetables and anything else we can discover."

* * * * *

They went out an hour or so later. By the time they finished their stops at the various shops and businesses in Sunbreak, lunch was starting when they finally got to the community center.

Enda sat down with a glass of the bubbling water and started making notes on the morning's discussions. Gabriel had chai while he gazed out the windows at the extraordinary view, row after row of serried peaks in the now-fading afternoon light.

Rather to his pleasure, they didn't stay alone for long. A couple of people came along to sit and chat with them. "Just curious," said the lady, an Alaundrin, who sat down with a tall mug of some pungent kind of hotdraft that Gabriel couldn't identify.

"Nosey," said the man who sat down across from her, a short broad man with a big nose and merry little eyes.

The lady was Marielle Esephanne. Her husband was still in the office taking care of some paperwork in his job as a secretary to the Regency Expansion Bureau, the department that oversaw infrastructure matters in Sunbreak. The man introduced himself as Rov Melek, cousin to a homesteader growing beef lichen and broadleaf maleaster on a small terraced farm just across the valley from Sunbreak on Black Mountain.

"But they're all black around here," said Gabriel.

Rov winked at him as he turned around his own glass of chai, waiting for it to cool. "Makes it easier to name them."

Enda looked up from her notes. "*You* are responsible for the vegetables. Let me finish this, then I want to talk to you about those."

Rov grinned. "We're becoming a gourmet's paradise," he said to Gabriel. "People come, oh, tens of light-years for our food, but it would be nice if more of them came back more than once. We get so many of these one-time charlies."

Gabriel chatted with the two Sunbreakers while Enda finished her notes. As he had suspected, it turned out that most people in the settlement worked for either Alaundril or the Regency of Bluefall. There was not a lot else to do here. However, the settlers seemed to consider one administration about as good (or bad) as the other, and Gabriel heard Marielle or Rov refer to "the government" and mean both sides of the colonial divide.

Maybe, Gabriel thought, it's because this place is so small and isolated. Making a big deal over one side or the other wouldn't get you far. They're all stuck here together, a long way from anywhere else.

They were eager enough to hear what news Gabriel had to pass on from Grith. Everyone in town knew about Rae Alwhirm's outburst of the previous evening, but no one knew what it was about or had connected recent events at Corrivale with them. Marielle and Rov listened without much comment to Gabriel's much-edited story of his visit to Rhynchus in company with Enda and Helm.

"That guy," Rov said in reference to Helm, "looks like he might own a gun or so."

Gabriel agreed. When he finished telling about their arrival at Grith and the standoff between a VoidCorp dreadnought, *Falada*, and a group of Concord cruisers, Marielle whistled softly. "There's why Rae got so upset. He's sure that VoidCorp's trying to shut him down."

Gabriel blinked. "But they were trying to shut *us* down. I'm not sure why he was angry at us for being on the wrong side of them . . ."

"Rae's got more conspiracy theories than a riglia's got cilia," Rov said. "He's always been on a hair trigger, seeing something hiding behind every rock. He's had a lot of trouble in his business. Bad luck, mostly. A power failure a while back cost him a lot in insurance; there were lawsuits. . . . Now Rae thinks everything that happens around here is aimed at him." Rov scratched his head. "Have to admit, I haven't seen him pop like that before. He must think you're out to get him in particular because you're infotraders."

"Did he treat the I.I. people the same way?" Gabriel asked.

"Frikes, no, they were here six years before he started. They've been trading in and out of this system, to Aegis and Tendril all that while, but you see the problem." Rov gestured around him. "We're so small here, and so quiet. Our Grid's so small you could spit across it. A lot of people don't like the idea of them," he jerked a desultory thumb over his shoulder, "the riglia."

Enda pushed her notepad aside. "Do you not like the idea of them either?"

"Don't see that they care about my opinion one way or the other," Rov said, "but they were here first. We didn't know when we came that they were more than dumb animals. A lot of us came a long way to settle here, got ourselves set up, and then what do we find?" He pulled his head down between his shoulders as if seeking protection from something. "Government shoulda checked things out more carefully before they let anyone settle here, before those fraal scientists came in and told everybody 'Guess what, you've got company.' " He sighed. "Sorry, lady. I know it wasn't your fault. Anyway, there are people leaving all the time. The feeling that you're being watched ... it gets to you after a while."

"I've felt that," Gabriel said. "An uneasy kind of feeling."

"That's right," Marielle said. "Well, it's the riglia, I suppose. They're mindwalkers, so they can do that. There are a lot more of them than there are of us." She sighed. "Some day maybe there'll be nobody but them here again, but meantime a lot of us have spent everything we had to come here. We can't just go. There's nothing to go *with*."

Gabriel nodded and took a drink of his chai.

"This isn't a busy part of space, anyway," said Rov. "No other well-settled systems are nearby. There are

some useless ones— stars but no planets, or planets that're just rocks, no point even in mining 'em. You hear stories, rumors about one world or another that got missed when they did the surveys, but you can't take things like that too seriously."

"They missed Rivendale that same way," said Enda, "when they first came through the system. No one thought so small a dwarf star would have a planet."

"Well, true enough, lady," Rov said. "It's rare, isn't it? Hasn't happened since, though you keep hearing stories and rumors. People go out looking for those places and don't come back." He dropped his voice lower. "And there are ships out there, too, that nobody knows where they come from—out in the empty spaces, the 'back of the Verge,' the Barrens. Nobody sensible goes out that way. Crazy explorers, *they* go, but you don't see them again. We had a couple through here," he said as he reached for the wine bottle, "had themselves an exploration contract from the CSS and everything. They were on their way to someplace out past Coulomb."

Gabriel looked at Enda. "What's past Coulomb?"

"Nothing that I know of"

"That's just my point," Rov said, "but they were going that way anyhow. Something called Elder? Caldera? Something . . . No, Eldala, it was."

Enda shook her head. "I have never heard of it."

"You're not alone. But off they went, she and her friend, and we haven't seen hide or hair of them since. Hair enough her friend had, too." Rov chuckled.

"Maybe," Gabriel said, wondering what Rov's last comment might have meant but deciding not to press it. "Were they just more of the one-time visitors you mentioned?"

"I wouldn't have thought so," said Rov, drinking the last of his drink and eyeing the glass absently. "The one lady, the human, she was real taken with this place. She said it reminded her of home. Wouldn't want to think what her home looked like, but she said she was definitely coming back." He shrugged. "Infinity only knows where she is now. And there've been others. A few went missing in transit to somewhere else—Aegis, Richards, Annahoy—and didn't turn up at the other end. They found one or two ships, but no sign of the pilots or passengers. *That* was weird."

"Where were the ships found?" Enda said.

"Just floating near their outward transit points. One of those was strange. The detectors said the ship had gone into drivespace, all right, but it didn't transit. No starfall."

"Bad coordinates," Gabriel said, "but nothing happens when you do that. You just pop out in the same place a few seconds later. You feel stupid—"

"This wasn't like that. The one ship, *Wauksha* its name was, should have come out at a halfway point on its way to Aegis. It didn't, though the detector showed it on its way. It turned up just out of system, over by Terivine A. They were lucky to have found it. The star would have pulled it in, in a few more weeks. The other ship was by its departure point, but it never left. They just found it, empty. . . ."

"That is very odd," Enda said.

Marielle shook her head. "Not half as odd as some things you hear," she said softly. "Remember the ghost ships, Rov?"

Rov nodded. Marielle looked over at Enda and said, "A few people have seen this, over—what—two, three years or so? They made starfall, were coming in on system drive, and saw something on the way in. Like a big ship that just came up out of drivespace, then went away again. Can't be a ship. A ship would have to recharge. But this thing, this big dark ghost, just comes bobbing up out of drivespace like a sat relay and sinks right back again."

Gabriel did not look at Enda, though he very much wanted to. "What was it?"

"No one knows," Marielle said, "but it gives me the jillies. I may not be on kissing terms with the laws of physics, but I don't like hearing about things that can just throw them out the door like that, either."

Rov nodded. "One guy—didn't hear this myself, a friend of a friend heard it—one guy who saw this said, 'I thought it was alive. It looked at me before it went off again.'"

"Ghost stories," Gabriel said.

"Oh, I know," said Rov. "Every place has them. Some of them are just that. People like to scare

themselves, but this is different. You won't hear people talking about these a lot. Maybe some folks here are a little superstitious. They think that these things might creep closer if you mention them."

It was a warning, however gently phrased. Gabriel nodded. "You're right, of course, but you were telling us about Rae Alwhirn."

The conversation veered off into good-natured gossip after that, though Gabriel had trouble concentrating on the chat after what he had just heard. He and Enda had seen just such a huge vessel come looming up out of drivespace at them before sinking away into the darkness again. A deep uncomfortable green color it had been ... very like the little green ball bearing ships that had come after them way out in the Thalaassa system, the ones with the pilots who had once been alive but were not any more. Gabriel reminded himself once more that he needed to talk to Delde Sota about what had come of the autopsy she had done for them at Iphus Station on the body of one of those vessels' pilots.

He stretched, turned to yawn, then froze as he caught a glimpse of someone off to one side of the room. Slowly Gabriel turned back forward again and leaned on the table.

". . . but it's been busy anyway," Rov was saying. "Unusual number of visitors for this time of year."

Enda looked at him, then briefly past him, with mild interest. "You mean you have a tourist season?"

"Not as such," said Rov. "Government pretty strictly controls the number of people who come in here. They're concerned about the riglia taking it wrong. You wouldn't have been affected. Infotradars aren't regulated, but a few ships came in over the past week. One was a tourist—another was a trader, bringing in entertainment solids."

"Oh really," Gabriel said, crossing another business possibility off an ever-decreasing mental list.

"Gabriel," Enda said then, "something occurs to me. I want to talk to Helm about plans for this afternoon.

Do you want to come back to the ship with me? It won't take long."

"Sure," Gabriel said. "Marielle, Rov . . . see you later?"

"This evening, maybe," Marielle said. "Here's my husband coming. Rov, talk to you later."

Gabriel and Enda went out. "Gabriel," Enda said quietly to him as they made their way up the street toward the port entrance, "did you see where I was looking?"

He shook his head. "It was behind me. I didn't want to stare. I thought you were looking at what I'd been looking at."

"Perhaps. There was a woman sitting away at the back of the room, having chai or some such. I have seen her before."

He gave her a look. "Where?"

"In the port offices at Diamond Point. She was going in as I was coming out."

"Interesting," Gabriel said, "because I saw someone here whom *I* saw back on Grith. Not at the back of the room. Over on the left side."

"What a small universe it's becoming," Enda said. "Listen, Gabriel, we have more important business. After that talk with the owner of the provisioner's this morning, I would definitely bring in a load of foodstuffs when we come again. They have little here except pre-packs and staples of the most elementary kind. You would get very tired of starch noodles if you lived here long. I think we would get good results if we brought in some of the simpler dried and preserved fish and fungus packs, vegetable dumplings and so forth—"

Gabriel went along with this, and they were well into the virtues of a major dried soup brand native to Aegis, and discussing where in the ship they would stow it by the time they got up into *Sunshine's* lift. When they finally got inside, Gabriel laughed.

"You are incredible!"

"In what regard?"

"Your ability to talk about anything but what's on your mind."

Enda gave him a dry look. "I assure you, I am thinking about the soup as well. Wait a moment" She stepped over to the Grid access panel and touched it for local network access. "Helm?"

"Wondered when you were going to call."

"I did not want to wake you untimely. Would you and Delde Sota come over? There are some things I want to check in our mutual inventory before lunch."

"Lunch," said Helm, immediately interested. "Be right over"

Enda turned away. "We may want an excuse to come back that does not involve data, if we are unable to pick up an outward data load or another Terivine-bound load from Grith. I am more interested in your sighting. Whom exactly did you see?"

"Like you, someone from Diamond Point," Gabriel said. "She was parked over in bond a couple of slots down from *Longshot*. Little brunette woman, maybe about fifty kilos, short, with pale eyes."

"Not dark ones?" Enda said.

"No. The eyes got my attention first. She was dressed as if she was from Austrin-Ontis—you know, those layered rigs with pockets all over them—not that that proves anything one way or the other. She was exchanging docs with a port official—I'm not sure whether she was coming or going at the time. She had a little all-purpose ship, a Westhame or something similar. Light haulage, possibly converted from a live-in ship." He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to see the vessel in memory. "Fairly new. I remember thinking a fair bit of money would have been tied up in that."

"Indeed. Now both of these people are here. What would you say the odds are of this being an accident, Gabriel?"

"Hard to say. 'What a small universe it's becoming.'"

Enda reached up and thumped Gabriel on top of his head. "I will take the imitation as flattery, poor though it be. Now we face another question: which of these is the spy you have been expecting?"

"Both of them?" Gabriel said.

Enda gave him a thoughtful look. "Well, why not? We know that the Concord has evinced interest in your movements ... if only through your friend Lorand Kharls." Gabriel snorted at the word "friend."

"Yes," Enda continued, "well, we know he has some interest in using you as a—'stalking horse,' your phrase was? Though from what you told me of your conversation with him, he was not forthcoming about what he was stalking." Enda pulled down one of the chairs and sat in it. "He could not come into this part of space without attracting considerable attention. So he has sent someone to keep an eye on you."

"Seems likely. The question is, who's the other one?"

They looked at each other.

"VoidCorp," Gabriel said.

"You would not have many friends in that camp," Enda said. "Nor would I. Nor Helm, not after Thalaassa. Even Delde Sota might have crossed paths with them. She was cautious enough about the possibility that they were monitoring her medical facility back on Iphus." She sighed. "Now all we must do is discover which of these people is working for which side."

"And do what then?" Gabriel could imagine what Helm would suggest. "Besides feed them disinformation."

"All we can," Enda said, "keeping the information as mutually contradictory as possible. Indeed, it might be wise to find some way to split away from Helm and Delde Sota, so we can see which operative follows who where." She smiled, a wicked look.

"I don't know if Helm's going to be wild about letting us go off on our own," Gabriel said.

"If we have no load to take back to Grith, that might change," said Enda. "Meanwhile we must let Helm and Delde Sota know about this. We should go into town again, seeing and being seen. If we see our spies, we should make common cause with them as fellow visitors. Buy them a drink and hear their lies so that we may more carefully shape our own."

The lift chimed. Enda moved to the lift column and touched the "allow" panel.

"What would you know about lies?" Gabriel said. "A nice respectable fraal like you "

"Only that, in life as in marketing, they have their place," Enda said. "Though you must be willing to pay the price afterwards."

* * * * *

The four of them went to lunch at the community center but didn't see the two people they wanted to see.

Instead, they had to console themselves with another meal of astonishing quality. Gabriel was amazed, for in his marine days he had eaten on much richer and well-visited planets, but rarely as well as he was doing here.

"It's not just the vegetables," he said to Delde Sota as they fought over the last few spoonfuls of something brown but ineluctably delicious. "Oraan is a genius."

Gabriel managed to come up with a second spoon to get the last of whatever was in the bowl, but Delde Sota's braid came up and took it neatly out of his hand and held it out of reach. The braid had brushed Gabriel's hand in passing.

Now, amid Enda and Helm's laughter, Delde Sota said quietly, "Query: adjusted electrolyte balance recently?"

Gabriel, confused, looked at her. She ate the last spoonful of sauce and put the spoon down.

"Analysis: body electrolytes are out of kilter," she said.

"Just stress . . ."

Delde Sota shook her head. "Negation: not the kind of shifts that are stress-related. Diet changes?"

"Not until we got here. I've rarely eaten so many things that I didn't know what they were. Not even on a marine transport"

Delde Sota looked wry as she said, "Intention: to run full enzyme/endocrine series on you. Premature gray in family history?"

That brought Gabriel up short. "No. You think they're connected?"

"Etiology: impossible to judge except on case-by-case basis. Insufficient data at the moment. Require more concrete information and analysis."

"You were a Grid pilot once," Gabriel said, thinking with some distaste about what that "concrete information" was probably going to involve—blood and tissue samples and the like. Gabriel had always been able to cope with the sight of his own blood in battle, but in a clean quiet office full of ominous-looking medical instruments, blood became a completely different matter. "Can't you just sneak into my old marine records?"

"Do not have to sneak," Delde Sota said with an amused glint in her eye. As usual when dealing with medical issues, her language started to contain less of the mechalus dialect and become more common.

"Copies included in your vehicle registry seals aboard *Sunshine* and in your present personal data and credit chip. However, that data is antiquated. New data is required."

Gabriel groaned. "Do I have to be conscious for this?"

"Preferable," said Delde Sota, "especially for extraction of brain tissue. Hard to know whether one is in the right spot, otherwise. You are unlikely to miss it, in any case."

Wide-eyed, Gabriel pushed back his chair. The end of Delde Sota's neurobraid came up and patted him on the wrist. She smiled at him and said, "Stress may actually be a factor. Unable to recognize joke when presented with one. Examination can wait, but not too long. Some concern about physical status."

"Uh," Gabriel said. "Uh, all right." He was having trouble with the concept of the removal of his brain tissue. He liked it where it was.

Helm was glancing around and drinking kalwine as if it was much later in the day. "No sign of them," he said. "Must have flown the coop."

"Must have. Helm, what's a 'coop'?" Gabriel asked.

"It's a small hangar," Helm replied. "Haven't seen our cranky guy here, either. What's his name, Alwhere?"

"Alwhirn," Enda said. "No, he too is conspicuous by his absence."

"Statement: no surprise, since departing plus minus twelve hours with data load," said Delde Sota.

Helm gave her a bemused look. "You been in their system?"

Delde Sota looked innocent. "Value judgment: hard to avoid," she said quietly, "since port scheduling system security similar to air in opacity and impermeability. Ship *Quatsch* in pre-loading cycle, purging tanks, overwriting data solids, usual security routines running."

Gabriel knew that some mechalus Grid pilots did not even have to physically touch a computer to infiltrate it, but knowing that in the abstract and being presented with it as an accomplished fact were two

different things.

"You could get in trouble for that!"

"Requirement: have to be caught first," said Delde Sota. She lifted her glass and drank.

"Well, one less thing to worry about," Helm said. "What about us?"

"I have been up one side of the main street and down the other," said Enda, "and have found no one willing to ship data with us. Now we know why. Indeed I can hardly blame them when there is a scheduled departure imminent, and the local hauler is probably offering them better than usual rates to keep us from taking his business."

"If you'd moved a little faster," Helm growled as he downed another drink, "we might not be sitting here with empty holds our only option."

Enda looked annoyed. "Helm," she said, "it was not *I* who slept in this morning."

"It wasn't *my* business to be up early. *I* was up late taking care of you-know-what. If you had been a little sharper off the pad, we wouldn't have to—"

"Wait a minute, you can't talk to her like that," Gabriel said.

"Who says I can't, you runty little—"

It got loud and relatively content-free after that, but that was how they had planned it. Lunch was over, and the community center was beginning to empty out, but that process stopped as the inhabitants paused to watch a fraal, a mechalus, a human, and some kind of mutant all shouting at one another. Even Oraan the chef stopped in the middle of scouring a pan to watch the argument scale up. Enda caught Gabriel around the arm and dragged him away from Helm. Delde Sota, in turn, grabbed Helm and hauled him out of range of the other two. People seemed generally impressed by how strong Enda was, to be able to control such a big young man. She pushed him out the front door and marched him down the street, yelling at him like an annoyed grandmother. Behind her, at a distance, came the doctor with Helm roped up in her braid while the mutant blared threats and imprecations.

The two parties went into their separate ships and did not stir for the rest of the afternoon. Later that evening, Gabriel and Enda came out to go to dinner. They sat by themselves, looking sour and pained. The locals noticed this and commented quietly to themselves. A couple of others noticed this as well. One was a small, dark-haired woman with striking pale eyes. Another woman, dark-haired as well, but with brown eyes, was petite and dressed like someone from one of the Aegis worlds. They sat on opposite sides of the room and took no notice of one another. All their attention was on Gabriel and Enda, eating their dinner stiffly and in haste, like people anxious to get something over with and leave. Finally, they left without a backward glance. Shortly thereafter—though not so soon as to arouse any particular notice—one of the women, then another, went out as well.

* * * * *

"And?" Enda said down the comms to Helm a while later.

There was a slight pause, due to an extra layer of encryption that Delde Sota had laid into the ship-to-ship network channels.

"Nothing new," Helm replied. "Both of them are at their ships at the moment. They haven't filed any plans with Joel at the port's systems. We'd know right away if they had."

"Well," Enda said and turned to Gabriel. "Now we must make our choices. We will not be getting any Rivendale-originating data to take with us on this run. Nor do I see much point in waiting here until our competition has left."

"Not when the I.I. ship is due to arrive in another two days," Gabriel said. He was sitting in one of the sitting room chairs with his feet up and his arms folded. "I don't see why we should linger with not one, but two, of someone's covert agents sitting out there and waiting to see what we do. We ought to hop and make *them* do something, if only to annoy them."

Helm laughed at that. "All right. Hop where?"

"I'd be tempted to say back to Grith," Gabriel said, "but that seems too predictable. Also, I've seen

enough of Corrivale for a while."

"You could do Aegis in three starfalls," said Helm. "It'd make sense, anyway. Once there you could see if there's any data for Corrivale or Terivine and haul it back out."

"It is not a bad idea," said Enda. "Unscheduled courier runs pay ten or fifteen percent better than the scheduled ones."

Gabriel was thinking more along the lines of how busy a system Aegis was, and how much easier it would be to lose a stalker or two there than here. "All right," he said. "Aegis in three starfalls, twenty light-years and some small change. Is there an established 'tween-jump recharge point?"

"There are a couple spots that people use," said Helm, "just out by themselves in empty space. Star called Mikoa on your second-to-last jump."

"Fine," Gabriel said and headed forward to talk to the piloting computers.

After checking the coordinates and the timings, he came back to the sitting room and said, "Helm, how soon would you feel like leaving?"

"Any time." He paused. "Delde Sota says nothing would keep her here except the food, but she's had enough beef lichen to last her a month or so."

"Well, then," Gabriel said, looking over at Enda, "anything else that needs to be done before we leave? Did you get enough canned vegetables?"

Enda sighed and said, "The ones I was interested in were not canned, and like Delde Sota, I think I have had enough of them for the moment. When we come back this way again under less pressing circumstances, I shall see about bringing some away with us. Meantime, let us go."

"Right," Helm said. "Four hours from now? Most everyone'll be in bed. No comms activity within an hour of the takeoff time. We'll do a fast heat-up to give them least warning. You'll want to program the preheat sequence for your system drive into the computer. Want a time tick?"

"Hold on and you can give it to me in the cockpit," Gabriel said, getting up to go forward again. "Wait. If we want our two ladies to follow us, shouldn't we give them plenty of warning?"

"We shouldn't give them too much of a warning," said Helm. "If they're any good, they'll catch up. In fact, how fast they catch up will indicate how good they are. If they're inept, I'd sooner find out this way."

Gabriel laughed and went up to the cockpit again. A few minutes later, *Sunshine's* departure time was set. They would warm engines for exactly three minutes, then take off and make starfall about twenty minutes later.

"This way you've got time for a few last errands," Helm said.

"I'm not leaving the ship," Gabriel said. "I've had enough of Rivendale for now."

He glanced over at Enda. She shook her head. "Let's get out of here."

Chapter Five

FOUR HOURS LATER, Gabriel and Enda were in the pilots' seats, strapped in and waiting for *Sunshine's* preheat cycle to start. Rivendale's long afternoon was finally shading toward evening. The sun was well down below the jagged peaks, and the eastern sky was slowly purpling.

Gabriel stretched in the straps and looked out the windows. "It's a pretty place," he said, "but it's trying. So much day gets to be a nuisance, and I wouldn't even want to think about a week's worth of night.

How can anyone live here and stay sane?"

"Obviously they manage," said Enda, "though I think I prefer shorter days myself."

The ship went *hhup* around them, a soft awakening hum, and half the system indicators that had been dormant or gray in the 3D display now began to show power readings as they slowly escalated. Gabriel glanced over at *Longshot*. With the sunset glancing off her windshield, it was hard to see inside; but he thought he caught a flash of motion—probably Helm giving him a thumbs-up. He returned the gesture and

looked around outside the ship.

At the port building, a male figure came out the front door, looked at them curiously. After a few seconds, another human, shorter and rounder than the first, came out and looked as well. The two looked at the ships. One of them pointed; the other gestured.

"Two minutes," Gabriel said.

One of the two humans went back inside. A few moments later, *Sunshine's* comms chirped. Someone was hailing them.

"Oops," Gabriel said, reaching out to kill the local network connection. "Another systems failure. We really ought to have that looked at when we make port again."

"Somewhere else," Enda said, smiling.

Another half minute ticked by, and another. The man who had gone in now came out, and he and his companion stood watching the ships. They made no move to come any closer.

"Thirty seconds," Enda said, reaching into the 3D display to touch one of the driver displays into "query" mode. The telltale folded itself into a wider display of ship's power levels, all showing 100% or better.

"Everything is as it should be."

"Good," Gabriel said.

He was looking around the field for any sign of activity, and also watching the street that led up to Sunbreak town proper. There was no sign of anyone. Am I. spoiling someone's sleep over there? he thought. Wouldn't that be a terrible thing?

"Ten seconds," Enda said. "Do you want to take her up, or shall I?"

"You have control," Gabriel said. "I'm going to get into the fighting field."

Enda put her eyebrows up as Gabriel reached into that part of the display. "No harm in that," she said.

"Five seconds."

The final countdown bled away, Enda said, "Now," and *Sunshine* lifted straight up, gracefully but with rapidly increasing speed. That was very much Enda's piloting style as Gabriel had observed it. Smooth acceleration, but plenty of it. Up they went, through layers of mist, over the rapidly widening terrain of jagged peaks, and up into Terivine's orange light again. With Helm pacing them off to starboard, they cleared the peaks and slanted low over the beautiful but hostile landscape. Gabriel perceived all this briefly as visual input while the fighting field was still settling over him. When it took as a schematic, bright lines and curves stitched against diagrammatic darkness with lines of galactic latitude and longitude.

"Out of atmosphere," Enda said.

Gabriel shifted his body in the seat to get the feeling of where his weapons were. The rail gun was reporting almost ready, and the plasma cannons were hot.

"That didn't take long," he commented.

"With their gravity, I would be surprised if it did," Enda said as she spun *Sunshine* on her axis to point away from Terivine and Rivendale, out toward the point where they had agreed with Helm they would make starfall. "Anything of interest behind us?"

Gabriel looked back at Rivendale in the fighting schematic and said, "Nothing coming, at least not at the moment."

He jumped then as the alarms howled. Something was coming, but not from the direction in which Gabriel was looking. The virtual display whipped around to show him the direction from which the threat now approached. Gabriel had instructed the display to disallow *Longshot* but to alert him of anything of unknown mass over a ton. Here came something, a small tight knot of light in the display with a "comet's tail" spread out behind it to illustrate course and speed.

"Another ship, all right," Gabriel said, and felt around him for the paired joysticks that were his preferred method for handling the plasma cannons.

The other ship was diving straight at him. "Helm," Gabriel said, "Company—"

"I see him. It's our friend *Quatsch*," Helm replied.

"You mean *Alwhirn*?" Gabriel said. "He wasn't supposed to be leaving for another twelve hours!"

"Damn," came Helm's voice, sounding more gravelly and annoyed than usual. "Plus minus twelve hours.' Sonofabitch must have sneaked right out past us while we were in the community center!"

"Even schedules can lie," said Enda. Her face set grim as she broke off to starboard. *Quatsch* came after them.

"He's not eager to try conclusions with *me*, that's plain," Helm said with some amusement as he curved around to match course with *Sunshine* again. "Let's see if I can—"

The first plasma bolts lanced by *Sunshine* much too closely for Gabriel's tastes.

"What's the matter with him?" he muttered.

"*Quatsch!*" he shouted over an open channel. "What are you doing? *Quatsch!* Alwhim!"

No answer.

"He's not in a mood to negotiate, I would say," said Enda. "Helm, one of us is going to have to do something about this poor creature, at least enough to make him break this off. I dislike the idea of harming him, and it would do our return business on Rivendale no good, but it is preferable to—"

She threw *Sunshine* to port as *Quatsch* dived at them again, firing. The bolts went wide.

"I'm not sure that his craziness isn't some kind of act he uses when it's going to get him somewhere with his friends," Gabriel muttered, getting his own plasma cannon ready. "Helm, if your sharpshooting's better than mine, you'd better do something about this boy, because I'm in no mood for him."

"Targeting," Helm said and fired. At the last moment, *Quatsch* tumbled aside, diving away from both *Longshot* and *Sunshine*.

"Let's not bother with this," Enda said. "Helm, is your stardrive ready?"

"Three minutes for prep," said Helm, "and we'll be— Uh-oh."

Gabriel's insides twisted as he saw what Helm saw. Another ship was accelerating toward them from Rivendale.

"Small," Helm said. "Not much bigger than *Sunshine*."

"Thanks loads," Gabriel said. "It's that Westhame. That's Miss Blue Eyes."

"She doesn't have much," said Helm. "One plasma cannon. One rail gun. No help; she's alone aboard."

"Doesn't make that much difference," Gabriel muttered. It was perfectly possible to fly and fight a small ship with the computer to help you. "Enda, get us ready for starfall."

"Here comes the rest of the party," said Helm. "Third trace. Must be your brown-eyed number, I think. My good gods in a bucket of ale, what *has* she got fastened onto that thing?"

Gabriel did not much care to hear this kind of language from Helm. "What *has* she got?" he asked, eyeing their stardrive energy level indicators. They were nowhere near ready.

"Too much. I want to know where she bought it," Helm said. Gabriel could hear more than a hint of gleeful awe creeping into Helm's voice. "Hell, I wish I'd sold it to her, what a commission I'd have—"

"*Helm!*" Enda said. "Details would be useful!"

"She's got that mass cannon we were discussing," said Helm. "Don't let her get within a kilometer of you. The results could be unfortunate—"

"Damn it!" Gabriel said as *Quatsch* dived at them again, firing. "*Quatsch*, stop it! We don't want to hurt you, but if you—"

Gabriel fired in frustration, intending to miss. *Quatsch* veered past as Enda threw *Sunshine* out of the way. "I'll shoot him next time," Gabriel muttered, "I swear I will." He punched the comms open again.

"*Quatsch*, that was the last piece of slack I'm going to cut you. Next time I'm going to put one right through your hold, and there goes your business. Get out of our way!"

"Go on and try," came a shrill response. "I don't care! You and your kind have tried before! You're just one more of them! Won't let a man make a decent living, you and the big companies, you're all the same—"

Gabriel could hear Enda breathe out. "He is unstable," she said, "but he might damage us. Maybe one through the rear hull would be the kindest thing—"

"Trouble," Helm broke in.

He flipped *Longshot* end for end and came streaking past Gabriel at great speed. He was firing hard and fast. Gabriel swung in the fighting field to follow where Helm was going and saw the third trace. The third ship, more massive than any of the others, swung from side to side in quick graceful curves, skillfully avoiding Helm's fire and firing something that Gabriel didn't recognize. There were no bright bolts of

power or clouds of projectile vapor, just a pale streak of cloudy fire that shot out, enveloped *Quatsch* and tore it to shreds. Not an explosion—though that followed, as all the air inside the craft flew out through a hundred suddenly formed gaps. *Quatsch* became a thousand twisted fragments, spinning away in all directions while continuing briefly along the same general course.

Gabriel stared. "She killed him," he whispered. "*Why would she have killed him ?*"

Enda was as shocked as Gabriel but had her mind on other problems. "Helm, where is that third ship?" "The smaller one? Away up in 'zenith' direction now. No action. Watching."

And listening, Gabriel thought. On whose behalf?

"Possibility," Delde Sota's came over comms. "Open communications with hostile vessel."

"What for?"

"Stall," said Delde Sota. "Pump for information. Have other business to attend to."

"Right," Gabriel said. He swallowed, for all this was his fault. It was not Helm or Delde Sota that these people wanted. He opened a clear channel and said, "Pursuing vessels, this is *Sunshine*. State your intentions or be prepared to face the consequences."

"There's no point in running," said a very cool, very calm female voice. "I can outrun you. If you make starfall, that won't matter either. I'll know where you're going sooner or later and find you there. Give it up now and resign yourself to being boarded."

"You can forget that," Gabriel said, furious. "Why did you kill him? No one needed to do that!"

"You were about to," said the cool voice, "not that it matters. Everyone's going to think you did, anyway."

A terrible shock of fear ran down Gabriel's spine like ice water. She's right. I'm the one who murdered a bunch of my best friends. Why wouldn't I kill a crazy man who gave me an excuse?

"You can just come along with me," said the calm female voice, "or suffer the consequences."

"'Come along with you.' For what purpose?"

"You know very well. There's interest in you that you've been avoiding with varying amounts of success, but the gameplay has to stop now. We're past that."

"Oh, are we?" Gabriel said. Delde Sota, whatever you're up to, get on with it.

"Don't try my patience. If you cooperate, things will be made a lot easier for you. If you don't. . ."

He felt a long tremor go through *Sunshine*, and all her displays and readouts wavered as if they had lost power for a fraction of a second. Gabriel shot a glance at Enda. She shook her head and threw *Sunshine* away in the opposite direction.

"I'm willing to disable you if I have to," said the cool voice. "You won't be dead, but you'll have a lot of repairs to make—and this poor little place isn't set up for them. When the rescue parties come up from Rivendale—if they manage to organize anything—and they discover what's happened to poor Alwhim—"

Enda kept running. Helm followed, not firing, possibly to avoid interfering with whatever Delde Sota had in mind. Gabriel slipped deeper into the fighting field, getting into synch with the rail cannon. If he could get off one well-aimed shot, even from a few kilometers away, she'd have a nasty surprise.

"Stop running," Gabriel told Enda.

"What?"

"Stop running. Let her catch us."

He felt her looking at him.

"Are you sure?"

"Just do it!"

"Gabriel—" came Helm's voice.

"No, Helm," Gabriel said, as forcefully as he could—trying to have him get the message that he was not to interfere, without saying so openly. "I'm not going to run. I'm through running."

"I wouldn't try anything at this point if I were you," said the cool voice.

"You idiot," Gabriel shouted, "you're not as delicate with that damned thing as you think you are! I can hear atmosphere leaking, half my weapons are off line, and my rail gun's been pulled right out of track. It wouldn't fire now if I got out there and hit it with a hammer! After I spent *how* many thousand dollars

having it replaced! You—"

He swore as creatively as he could under the circumstances. The woman laughed at him. Gabriel's anger made everything extremely clear for a moment as he reached for the large joystick that managed the rail cannon. For just a moment he had an image of how nice it would be to throttle that pretty little neck and watch those lustrous brown eyes goggle out. His fist tightened on the virtual control.

Slowly she came drifting in. He watched carefully, waiting. The ship was coming quite close now, less than half a kilometer away. Well out past it, *Longshot* was coasting away, watching. Closer and closer the other ship drifted. Gabriel saw the change. There had been cockpit lights. Abruptly, they went out. Power loss. Delde Sota got into her system over carrier—

Gabriel fired the rail cannon. He had not been lying; it had indeed been pulled out of alignment by that first ripple of force from the mass cannon . . . but not *that* much. The meter-wide ball of heavy metal hit the back of her ship and took it right off, but there was not the huge bloom of silvery air that he had been expecting.

"Gabriel—" Helm said.

"Don't bother, Helm!" he yelled. "We're all right! Just *go!*"

"Going," Helm said. Liquid fire streaked up around *Longshot*, veiling her in a ferocious electric blue; then she was gone.

Ship's comms suddenly filled with the sound of more cursing, from two different sources this time. Enda tilted her head in an evaluatory way as she activated the stardrive.

"Colorful language," Enda commented.

All around *Sunshine*, blue-black fire trickled and ran, obliterating the view of the space around Terivine.

Good luck, Gabriel thought distractedly. The best starfall there is, supposedly.

They vanished into the empty blackness of drivespace.

* * * * *

The next five days were as quiet as Gabriel had expected them to be, almost so much that he had trouble dealing with it.

He found himself wishing that he had more to keep him busy.

He could not rid himself of the image of *Quatsch* blooming into a thousand cracks with air pouring out of them, freezing as it came. Though he had not pushed the button, he was feeling increasingly responsible.

Whoever these people are, Gabriel thought, I don't mind them coming after me, but when they start taking out people who just happen to be in the neighborhood ... that's another matter. If this is anything to do with Lorand Kharls, I'm going to rip his head off when I see him next.

On consideration, he didn't think Kharls was involved. The man might be manipulative, obscure, and underhanded, but Gabriel felt certain he would not have countenanced cold-blooded murder. Nor, Gabriel thought, would he have sent out anyone likely to behave that way.

Now what? he wondered. What happens when we turn up at Aegis and someone says, "Hear you killed somebody else out by Terivine." I can tell them all I like that it isn't true, but I know what they're going to think, and whoever she is, she knew too.

Who *is* she?

Who was that other one—Miss Blue Eyes, who just sat there and watched it all?

Gabriel sat in the pilot's seat a long time that first day after they jumped, trying to work out what could possibly be going on in the larger world around him. Finally, he turned to find Enda leaning over his shoulder and gazing into the blackness.

"What's on *your* mind?" he said.

She sighed. "Food. Perhaps I was not as tired of the beef lichen as I thought I was "

Gabriel gave her a look.

"Well, more than that, of course," Enda said as she sat down beside him. "Poor Alwhirn. As for

Rivendale, who knows whether we will ever go back there now? What value the place might have had

for us will now be lost, no matter what the investigation into Alwhirn's death may reveal. The presence there of two different agents spying on us makes it plain that seeking out 'small quiet' markets in which to work is not going to work"

Gabriel shook his head and said, "Alwhirn might have been crazy, but there was no reason to just *kill* him like that. Whoever that woman is—I don't like her. We're going to have words if we ever meet again."

"I suspect it would be more than words," said Enda. She paused for a moment, then continued, "I wonder if she killed him because it looked like *he* might actually have been about to kill *us*?"

Gabriel stared at her.

"Well," she said, "granted, there are people out there who would prefer to see you dead. Elinke Darayev, the captain who was your shuttle pilot's lover strikes me as one of these. Doubtless there are others. Are there not, at the moment, also those for whom you are more useful alive than dead?"

Gabriel brooded over that for a few moments. "Some, but if this is typical of their protection, I don't think much of their methods."

"Insofar as they leave such people with another possible hold over you," said Enda, "I would agree." She frowned. "It is too easy a tactic, now, and one which you will have to guard against in the future."

"It's likely enough to be pretty effective right now," Gabriel said. "Is it even going to be safe for me to show my face in the Aegis system?"

"Well. First of all, we are riding the crest of that news, so to speak. No one will come to Aegis with it any sooner than we will, unless a much larger, faster ship than ours becomes involved."

"Not beyond possibility," Gabriel said.

Enda bowed her head in acknowledgment. "I would suggest, though," she said, "that under the circumstances, we should go straight to the authorities when we arrive there and file a report. First of all, that would not be the act of a guilty person. Second, it may put the people who were trailing us on the defensive— however briefly. If someone comes hot-jets behind us to accuse you of murder, you will have left them in a much weaker position."

The authorities. Gabriel thought about that. All his life, the authorities had been nothing that he feared, and in the marines, he had considered himself part of "the authorities." Now he routinely found it difficult dealing with the pang of discomfort that went through him when he heard the phrase. He knew that until he cleared his name—maybe for a long time thereafter—he was on the wrong side of that invisible line and had to consider whether it was safe to speak to the people on the "right" side.

"That would probably mean one or another of the embassies on Bluefall," Gabriel said, "the Alaundrin or the Regency, since they both have a foothold in Rivendale."

"And more to the point," Enda said, "the Concord one."

Gabriel threw her a quick glance.

"Naturally you would not have to file those reports in person," she added.

"*Especially* not the Concord one," Gabriel muttered. "The Regency may be running the planet as functionally neutral, but if I walked into the Concord offices there, extraterritoriality would function."

They'd arrest me as soon as look at me."

"Indeed. Well, you need not." She gave him a more thoughtful look. "Would you want to stop on Bluefall at all? That was home for you once. . . ."

Gabriel took a long breath and let it out. It had been years since he had been home—just after his mother died, in fact. As far as he knew, his father was still there, but lacking any answer to recent holomessages, Gabriel didn't know for sure and was becoming nervous of finding out. Do I want to walk up to him and have him reject me as a murderer? Gabriel thought.

"I don't know," Gabriel answered. "We don't need to, I guess, but also we don't need to decide right now. The first thing we need to find out is what data we can pick up at Aegis and where we'll go after that."

He stretched, leaned back in the seat again, and said, "It's just so unfair. I would never have killed him."

"Forensics will prove that you did not," Enda said. "We have no weaponry of the kind that destroyed Alwhirn's ship. The people who did our installations at Diamond Point will be able to verify that. There was certainly nowhere to get such equipment at Sunbreak—even if we could have afforded it."

Gabriel sighed. "I know that, and you know that, but will the people at Diamond Point testify? Who knows who might be getting at them even as we speak? Besides, considering some of the weaponry we had installed, their testimony might be more damning than helpful."

Enda got up. "I refuse to speculate in that direction," she said. "There is no point in imagining complications that may never arise. Besides, right now I am wondering how Delde Sota managed to interfere with that other ship's power."

"So am I," Gabriel muttered. "It's more like magic than anything else."

"I daresay she had a connection to comms through Helm's computers," Enda said. "Past that point, it certainly looks like magic to me as well—if by that you mean something outside natural experience. Let us just be grateful that it is being exercised on our side."

She went away and left Gabriel to his thoughts. If she was able to get into that ship's system, he thought, what else might she have been able to find out? That information was going to have to wait until they came out of drivespace.

* * * * *

The next morning, and again the morning after that, Gabriel sat down with the information about Jacob Ricel. He had time to try to work out what to do with it, but he found himself wondering whether it was really worthwhile trying to follow any of this. The information was all between five and ten years old ... all stale. If he went back and questioned the people who had known this man, what would he find? Eroded memories, more stale data leading . . . where?

He gazed at the three faces with the three different names and wondered what other lives Ricel might have changed the way he had changed Gabriel's? How many other lives had the man destroyed or altered out of recognition . . . and then just changed his name and passed on into other circumstances? What kind of person do you have to be to do things like that to people? And in the name of what, exactly? Intelligence . . . planetary or stellar-national security?

"Thoughts are free, they say," said Enda quietly from behind him, "but I would pay a small fortune for yours."

Gabriel shut off the Grid access array and let it relapse to Enda's green field again. "I sometimes wonder if this is ever going to be worth my while."

"What? Clearing your name?"

He nodded. "I think it would be nice to forget about it, to just go off and explore strange places where no one would know me or care where I'd been."

"Exploration contracts . . ." Enda said, sitting down across from him. "They are not lightly awarded. Nor are they cheap."

"Oh, I know. It's just something to think about." Gabriel stretched. "I remember—what was his name, Rov?—talking about that system—or was it a planet?—out past Coulomb. . . ."

"Eldala," Enda said after a moment. "Not a name I know, and I know quite a few."

Gabriel shook his head and said, "I don't know much about the details of survey methods. I know no one thought to look for Rivendale because Terivine C seemed such an unlikely primary. Could they still make a mistake like that? Miss an entire planet on survey?"

"Or misclassify it?" Enda shrugged. "In a hurry, one may make all kinds of mistakes. I suppose you would have to look at the survey information."

"Well, you know, I got curious earlier," Gabriel said, and pulled out the Grid access keypad again. He touched it in a few places, and the waving grass vanished to be replaced by a long, dry-looking page of figures and names.

Enda blinked at that. "Surely we do not routinely carry planetary exploration information in our own computers."

"In the raw form, yes we do," Gabriel said. "The compiled CSS listings are there under 'Standard Reference, Gazetteer.' There's nothing more involved than that. No graphics or descriptive detail. Look,

there's the name. Eldala."

"A system name," Enda said, leaning closer. "Goodness. That *is* a long way out." She squinted at the display. "Planets indeterminate. Distances indeterminate." She tilted her head to one side. "What kind of survey information is that?"

"All the listing says is 'Incomplete,'" Gabriel said. "They didn't finish. They left early for some reason. When we get at a drivesat relay, we can send off for the information and wait for it to come back."

"Morbidity curiosity," said Enda.

"Well, admit it. Wouldn't *you* like to know what happened?"

Enda looked doubtful. "My guess is that it is some kind of bureaucratic hitch. A civil servant made a mistake compiling the information. It would not surprise me if someone misfiled a whole planet."

The thought of the necessary size of the filing closet made Gabriel grin. "All the same . . . we could go find out, after we've done some more infotrading, enough to get ourselves supplied."

Enda leaned on the bulkhead, musing. "You might be able to convince me," she said, "but I would want to make sure we are well equipped with emergency stores and the like, and the phymech would have to be checked again."

"Of course. The idea of a whole planet falling between the cracks ..."

Enda shook her head. "It is interesting. Nevertheless, there is Aegis to think about first, and what may be picked up there. We will not have any difficulty finding information to haul. There are never enough infotradars to service all the deaf Grids and minor systems out this way, but we will have to consider where we might go besides Terivine."

Gabriel sat back and folded his arms. "Not much choice in the Verge," he said, "unless you want to go right back into the Stellar Ring. A long way ..."

"I don't think so," Enda said. "Nor, I think, would you desire to get too far away from your own researches into Mr. Ricel." She stretched, so that the blue crewsuit she wore shimmered, then steadied down into matte blue again. "Aegis, Tendril, and Hammer's Star are our opportunities. Aegis is most central. Tendril—"

"No, they're not," Gabriel said.

Enda looked at him, confused. "Have I missed something? In the Verge, there are only the three drivesats."

"There's a fourth," Gabriel said. "The *Lighthouse*."

Her eyes widened.

"At the time," Gabriel said, "I didn't think much of it. I had my mind on those three pictures of Ricel yesterday, but Altai routinely sends along a news package to its subscribers. I skimmed it and forgot about it. One of the stories says that the *Lighthouse* is passing through this part of the Verge. It's going to be stopping at Aegis on its way further out."

Enda shook her head. "Now, I feel foolish, for I have not thought about the *Lighthouse* in some time. It jumps about so . . ."

Gabriel chuckled softly, for Enda was understating again. Originally that massive construction, a kilometer and a half long, had been an Orlamu Theocracy space station called the *Lighthouse of Faith*. Now it journeyed through the Verge accompanied by several Star Force cruisers and various smaller vessels, bringing trade, news, and a semblance of armed security to the scattered worlds of the Verge. It housed the headquarters of the Concord Survey Services, which supervised and assisted independent exploration contractors through the Verge and beyond. It also carried large diplomatic and trading complements, a city's worth of permanent inhabitants, and numerous docking ports, repair stations, and cargo bays. It had a larger population than some planets, was better armed than many, and had the additional advantage of a massive stardrive that could take it fifty light-years in a single starfall.

There was one aspect of the *Lighthouse* that bore some consideration. It had a drivespace comms relay. Infotradars flocked to it to transfer data when it came into or near their systems.

"Certainly we can drop our data at either the *Lighthouse* or Aegis," Enda said slowly, "but after that . . . Gabriel, why stop there?"

Gabriel looked at her dubiously. "You're suggesting that we might hitch a ride wherever she's going?"

"The thought crossed my mind."

Gabriel considered that. The *Lighthouse's* provenance—originally it had belonged to the Orlamu Theocracy—meant that its status in Concord terms had become peculiar. The Orlamu had no problems with the Concord refurbishing their "great experiment" after it had almost been completely destroyed by a Solar raid into their space in 2461, but they had insisted—and so had others suddenly faced with the prospect of this behemoth turning up in their systems—that it should be considered strictly a neutral facility. The negotiations had gone on for a good while, but at last the station's neutrality had been accepted by all parties involved.

"Well . . ." Gabriel said. For his own part, neutrality was all very well, but he was uncertain how it would hold if a party wanted by the Concord was suddenly to turn up inside the place. "If we wanted to pick up or drop data there, I don't think there'd be any trouble with that. Actually piggybacking *Sunshine* onto the thing concerns me. I wouldn't like to test the facility's neutrality too rigorously."

"And have it fail, you mean," Enda said. "You also mean that there are marines there, a permanent contingent."

She said nothing more, only wandered back toward crew quarters. A few moments later she came out again with the squeeze bottle she used for her plant.

Gabriel watched her water the small brown bulb, of which maybe a couple of centimeters stuck up from the surrounding gravel. "Is there something that plant needs that it might be missing?" he asked after a moment.

Enda glanced up. "As regards its nourishment or its normal growth cycle? Not at all. It is behaving perfectly normally."

"How long is it supposed to stay like that?"

"As long as it likes," said Enda. "Rather like you."

Gabriel put his eyebrows up in a way that was meant to look ironic.

Enda turned to go down to her quarters with the bottle again. "I understand that you might find it uncomfortable to be within range," she said from down the hall. "You would have to decide whether the discomfort would be so unbearable as to put aside a useful business opportunity. As for dropping data at *Lighthouse*, the 'physical ingress' rules would matter only if we had no right of egress to begin with. As infotradars, we have such a right."

She came back up the hall again and folded down her seat by the Grid access panel. "As for hitching a ride, that depends on whether we pass the usual security check when we apply for space. It also depends on where *Lighthouse* would be going after we visited her. Her schedule varies without warning and is much affected by local conditions and the political requirements of the moment. Myself, I would not disdain a fifty light-year hitch in a useful direction, but we would need more recent information on where she is headed next."

Gabriel nodded. There was no question but that the *Lighthouse* could be useful. One long starfall instead of many small ones ...

"If you were serious about exploratory work," Enda said, "the Concord Survey Services are located aboard *Lighthouse*."

Gabriel shook his head. "Again, I'm not sure I want to just walk in there."

Enda shrugged. "It is not a decision that needs to be made now. We should deal with Aegis first." She glanced up the hallway into the cockpit. "We now have only a little over a day until we make starrise and recharge our drives for Mikoa. While doing that, we will want to discuss this with Helm and Doctor Sota, but first things first. When did you last eat anything?"

"Uh," Gabriel said.

"Precisely 'uh,'" Enda said, getting up. "It is a good thing the starfall/starrise interval is no longer than it is. You become philosophical and would waste away unless you were reminded to take nourishment every now and then."

"You're just trying to get rid of those prepacks you got on Rivendale," Gabriel said, "the ones you've decided you don't like after all." Nonetheless, he got up and followed her down to the galley.

The *Lighthouse*, he thought.

Why not?

Chapter Six

TWO DAYS LATER, *Sunshine* made starrise in the endless black between Terivine and Mikoa. This jump made Gabriel nervous, for he still hated jumping to a location that didn't have a planet or a star associated with it. Such approximate destinations, defined by agreement rather than by some physical feature, struck him as a perfect place to be ambushed.

"Paranoia," Enda said to him cheerfully after he had expressed this to her.

Nonetheless, when they were ready to come out of drivespace again, Gabriel had the fighting field down over him.

"Thirty seconds," Enda said. "Are you set?"

"As set as I'm going to be," Gabriel said, muffled in his darkness with the controls for the plasma cannons in his hands.

They waited.

"Five seconds now," Enda said.

Gabriel nodded.

"Starrise," Enda said.

Gabriel saw it rendered in the field. Light washed into the cockpit, a pale gold, trickling away to one side.

"Right," he said, tumbling the ship slowly and looking around him for another starrise, but there was none.

"Where's Helm?"

"I do not know," Enda said. "The detectors do not see him anywhere."

"What happened? We dropped into drivespace at the same time. The last time we went into starfall together, we came out together, tight as you please."

"The last time we went into starfall together," said Enda, "Delde Sota had not been doing something unspecified to another ship down *Longshot's* comm circuits."

She reached into the 3D display, touched one of the indicators, and the whole thing wavered and jumped as if there had been a power surge. Gabriel swallowed, starting to feel twitchy in his gut. It reminded him too clearly of what had happened when the mass cannon had hit them. She couldn't be here, he thought. I shot her butt off. Impossible—

Then his nerves steadied down, though his stomach was still burning him, a surprising discomfort low down on his left side. Gas pain? Cramp?

Who needs this right now? Gabriel thought, squirming.

The display jumped again.

"We have lost the mass detectors," Enda said. "Gabriel, how could that *happen?*" She started touching other controls inside the display, one after another, and Gabriel watched them go ash-pale and nonfunctional.

Ow. That hurts. The pain was becoming unbearable. After this I'm not going to eat within six hours of a starrise, I don't care how hungry I am.

"I have no idea," Gabriel said, "but how could anything Delde Sota did to that woman's ship have possibly affected Helm's stardrive?"

"I don't know," Enda said. "I would prefer to wait until Delde Sota turns up and ask her myself."

No one was there. Gabriel watched his in-field version of the main display flicker, waver, and then pale to nothing. *Everything*—ship's environmental energy levels, her fuel, all her stardrive readouts—faded and were gone.

Gabriel's stomach was churning. Without instrumentation, the ship not only couldn't fight, she could barely move. That burning was now like a coal, fierce and concentrated. That's not gas. Gas doesn't burn on the outside! What the—

Gabriel hurriedly unfastened his straps and jumped up. The pain slipped down his leg.

Not the stomach. My pocket—

He started to reach into it, then hurriedly changed his mind and grabbed the fabric of the pocket so that he could dump the contents on the floor.

The luckstone fell out. It was fiery hot and blazing with light. It bounced to the floor, lay still, and began sizzling itself a little hole into the supposedly indestructible plastic decking. The smooth oval stone, normally dead black, now shone with a greenish-golden-white light. The fierce little glow slowly pulsed bright to pale to bright again.

Enda stole a glance downward, and her eyes widened as Gabriel hurriedly sat back into his chair and began refastening his straps.

"It has never done anything like that before, has it?" Enda asked.

"What, try to burn a hole in me and then succeed in doing the same to my deck?" Gabriel said. "Now that you mention it, no!" He threw the luckstone a very annoyed glance. "What if it keeps on doing this? It's going to burn straight down into the personal cargo hold!"

"It may if it pleases," Enda said, reaching into the display again. "I have other problems. Oh!"

The display lit up again with a sudden flash. Enda scowled as if she didn't trust it. Gabriel busied himself with getting back into the fighting field, which still seemed functional for the moment.

"Everything is back again," Enda said, "and the mass detectors are up and running once more. What a relief."

"I'd be a lot more relieved if we knew where Helm was."

"Somewhere else, plainly."

Gabriel gave Enda a look. "Have I mentioned to you that the fraal sense of humor can be a little strange?"

"Several times," Enda said. "Similar claims can be made about the human one. That joke about the wire brush, now—"

One of the warning lights, the one that said EMERGENCY, grew to an alarming size in the 3D display and began flashing on and off.

Gabriel looked frantically at all the other indicators, but nothing seemed to be wrong with *Sunshine*.

"Enda?"

"It is not our emergency," she said, reaching out to the indicator. "Someone else's."

"Helm?"

"No. He is not here, but someone else is."

The display filled with data—not just text, for once, but a schematic.

"Small," he said as he studied the data. "A cargo ship?"

"Possibly. We have not seen this one before?"

"You mean, is this the other little ship that was at Rivendale? No."

"That," Enda sighed, "is a relief."

The emergency message now began to play in several different sets of characters, several different sets of colors, and one sound. "This is free ship *Lalique*, out of Richards, en route from Mantebon to Aegis. We have suffered stardrive failure and are near the Mikoa-Aegis transit point. Transiting vessels, please render assistance, or if passing through on emergency transit, please convey emergency message to nearest drivesat relay. This is free ship *Lalique*—"

"It's recorded," Gabriel said. "Still, I'm surprised we're the first ones on the scene."

"Assuming we are," Enda said, "and that they have not merely forgotten to turn off the broadcast." She studied the display. "Well, let us go see what we can do for them. This is a bad place to have a stardrive failure."

Gabriel nodded. They might have to take the passengers aboard and leave the ship here, then go for help. Aegis would be the logical place to take them, so Gabriel and Enda's own plans would not suffer much, but he didn't much like the thought of having strangers aboard *Sunshine*. He looked down at the luckstone, which was still glowing in the little socket it had melted for itself in the floor, though it no longer seemed to be working its way any further in.

"Have you got a fix on them?" he asked.

"Yes, no problem. They're no more than forty or fifty thousand kilometers away. They were probably using the same arbitrary starfall figures for the system that we were."

Gabriel nodded. *Sunshine's* system drive kicked in, and the two of them sat there looking outside for any sign of the ship and stealing glances at the floor between them.

"It seems to be quieting down," Enda said. "Are you all right, Gabriel?"

He touched the seam of the top of his shipsuit open and stared down inside, then frowned. "I got scorched. It burned right through the pocket material."

Enda blinked at that. "The material is supposed to be fireproof, I thought."

"Then that wasn't fire," Gabriel said. "I thought the decking was indestructible, too. Can we claim for repairs on the guarantee?"

"You would probably have to explain to them how you did it," Enda said, "and then they might ask you to reproduce the effect. First you will have to work out just why the stone behaved that way."

Gabriel shook his head. "Never mind. I'll just use some hull patching on the hole. It's just a shame. That's the first real scratch or damage that *Sunshine* has had. She was perfect until now."

"Ah. You mean, except for when the hold came apart and nearly fell off when you landed on Grith that time."

"Oh, *that*," Gabriel said with a smile.

Enda laughed softly. "Take a look in the field and tell me if that is the ship we're looking for."

Gabriel could see the gravity "dimple" of the vessel, drifting intact. At least the stardrive hadn't caused any structural damage to the vessel.

"*Lalique, Lalique*, this is free ship *Sunshine*," Enda said. "We are within two hundred fifty kilometers and closing. Can we render you assistance? How many are you, and are there any medical problems to deal with before the mechanical ones?"

There was a long pause. "*Sunshine?*" said a woman's voice after a moment. "Oh, what a relief! Thank you so much! There are just two of us. No medical problems, thanks. Can you manage airlock-to-airlock?"

"We have a collapsible tube, yes," Enda said. "I will squirt the tube specs and coordinates to your computer when you're ready."

"Ready now."

They closed in slowly and caught their first glimpse of the ship just a kilometer away. *Lalique* was obviously an old family-style ship. She was big, nearly twice *Sunshine's* length, and broad in the beam. Two pair of short wings, a little bigger than canards, just out from the cigar-shaped main hull. Four big cargo pods slung high, two and two, sat snug against the hull near the back.

"Nice," Gabriel said as they closed in. "Plenty of room in there."

Enda maneuvered *Sunshine* in close to *Lalique* until the two vessels were drifting at the same speed and in the same direction. The computer confirmed the match. Enda then triggered the flexible airlock tube so that its counterpart program on the other ship could lock the ships together.

This took several minutes. Gabriel stayed in the fighting field, looking everywhere for Helm. "Where the frikes *is* he?" Gabriel muttered.

Enda sighed and said, "He has probably popped out further out in the system where the mass detector cannot see him. Let us wait and see what happens."

There came a soft chime from the display. "This is working, at least," Enda said. "*Lalique*, our computer is showing the mating as complete and secure. Are you showing the same?"

"Yes, we are. Please come aboard," said the woman's voice.

"Five minutes," said Enda and cut the channel. "Gabriel, I think you can safely come out of that for the moment."

He nodded and collapsed the field, blinking in the normal ship's light. "I'll leave it on automatic announce, though," Gabriel said, unstrapping himself and heading down the hall to the arms and equipment locker. "I want to know when Helm turns up."

Enda nodded as they both paused by the locker to pick up hand comms and a sidearm each. "It's not like I don't trust them," Gabriel said, "but—"

"You don't trust them" said Enda approvingly. "Why should you? At any rate, this far out from anywhere, no one is going to be offended by anyone carrying defensive weaponry."

"Right" he said as he checked the charge and the safety of his pistol. He holstered it at his hip, and then reached down into the bottom of the locker for his roll of general access tools, the ones used to get into panels and under deckplates. The other ship probably had tools of its own that were suited to the fastenings its own hardware used, but Gabriel liked to have his tools with him.

I just hope I don't have to try to do anything really technical, he thought as they made their way through the hold to the airlock. If *Lalique's* stardrive was anything like *Sunshine's*, it was covered with alarming labels saying things like *No user-serviceable parts inside* and *Opening casing invalidates warranty*. Sometimes such warnings were just clever ways of making sure that the drive manufacturer and its licensees were not cheated out of the price of service calls, but sometimes they were genuine indicators that anything you did to the drive might cause you, it, and everything around you to suddenly become collapsed matter. The trouble lay in telling which was which.

They paused by the airlock port, and Enda touched the opening combination into the locking pad. The door hissed open, and the two of them slipped into the tube and pulled themselves along the cables down the orange-walled corridor.

Another hiss of air heralded the opening of the door at the far end. "Come in," said that female voice, sounding more cheery this time.

Gabriel was concentrating on keeping his stomach under control. He had never liked going rapidly back and forth from gravity to non-gravity areas, though it was something every marine learned to handle, if not enjoy. Mostly it involved keeping your cardiac sphincter shut by muscle pressure, and this meant single-minded concentration until you got back to gravity again.

Shortly he saw floor in front of him, or what would be floor in a moment. He braced himself against the cables and put his feet through.

A moment later he was upright and looking around at a kind of entrance hall with several doors and a corridor leading out of it. A hand seized his upper arm, steadying him.

"Welcome aboard," said the hand's owner, "I'm Angela Valiz."

Gabriel looked up and replied, "Gabriel Connor."

He looked at her closely as he said it, watching for any reaction, but there was no flicker of recognition in her face. She was a tall, strongly-built young woman, maybe Gabriel's age. Her fair hair tailed down the back of her neck rather the way Enda did her own. She was dressed in the baggy trousers, tunic, and soft boots popular for casual wear in most places of the Aegis system.

She looked at him curiously and asked, "Bluefall?"

"Uh, yes."

She nodded and said, "I recognized the accent." She turned to Enda, who had come in behind Gabriel.

"Respected, welcome."

"Thank you indeed. Enda, they call me." She made a graceful gesture with her left hand, a variant on the human handshake. Most fraal were left-handed, and this gesture showed that the hand was empty of weapons.

"You're very welcome, Enda."

Gabriel looked around him. What he could see of *Lalique* was handsome-looking. The ship's walls and ceiling panels were soft pastel beiges and blues. High ceilings and broad doorways gave the interior an unusually open and airy look.

"Nice place you've got here," Gabriel said.

"Thanks. It's been in the family for the last fifty years, but right now I just want to get it home safe." She looked down the hallway with a concerned expression.

"What happened, exactly?" Gabriel said.

"Come on down to the control room," Angela said. "You can look at the drive controls there. We made starrise here five days ago, recharged, and got ready to drop into starfall again, but the drive wouldn't engage. Everything else seems fine. The drive diagnostics report it ready to go, but when you hit the go button . . . nothing."

They came into the control room. It was genuinely a room, not just a large cockpit as in *Sunshine*.

Several people could crew the bridge at five stations arranged around a small circular array of panels.

The viewport ran three-quarters of the way around the circle above the panel array.

"Over here," Angela said and indicated one panel.

Gabriel sat down and studied the control configuration of the keypad for a moment. Fortunately it was one of the configurable control pads that the major manufacturers had been using for the last couple of decades, having finally realized that no one had to relearn the system every time it needed to be checked out.

"Right," Gabriel said, and started working his way down through the diagnostics tree to where the stardrive's inboard routines could be accessed.

The drive itself was a RoanTech, one of the ten or fifteen main manufacturers. Stardrive manufacturers too had begun to produce drives along broadly similar lines, partly so they could start dealing in replacement parts for one another's drives, and partly because it made sense—there were only so many ways you could put a gravity induction engine and a mass reactor together. Their diagnostic routines tended to look much the same these days for the same reasons as the control pads did.

Enda leaned over Gabriel's shoulder, watching him examine the drive's controlling software, and then looked at Angela.

"By the way," Enda asked, "have you been suffering any irregularities in the way your instrumentation works?"

"Yes we have," Angela said. "Right after we got here, all our displays and readouts started to act up. I was wondering if it had something to do with the stardrive. When *that* went, the instrumentation kept misbehaving, but don't ask me why."

"Well, at least it wasn't just us," Gabriel said, "but I can't think what might be causing it."

There was a noise from down the hallway through which they'd just come. Angela glanced in that direction. "Oh, here's my partner."

Down the central hallway was a door belonging to a lift that apparently serviced the lower level of the ship. The lift door opened, and he could hear footsteps in the hall. There was something odd about the rhythm. A second later, through the control room door, came the largest weren that Gabriel had ever seen in his life.

"Grawl, these are the people who answered our distress call," Angela said. "Gabriel, Enda, this is Grawl." Weren could be twice the height of a small human, and this one was. They also could be twice the breadth, and this one was. She was absolutely massive, with fur much more silver than was usual for weren. It had light striping that made Gabriel think of a pale gray tabby that one of his family's neighbors on Bluefall had owned. The neighbor's tabby, fierce as it had been on occasion, did not have ten-centimeter claws, three-centimeter tusks, or a very large gun slung on a baldric over its shoulder. This weren had all of these, and she looked at Gabriel and Enda with an expression of which Gabriel could make absolutely nothing.

Gabriel did not have much experience with the species. The marine contingent he had served with had not spent much time in the worlds where the weren had much of a presence. He knew enough about them to understand that politeness was much valued in their culture and likely to keep one's own head from being torn off in an excitable moment.

"I greet you," he said, "and hope that we are not intruding."

The dark eyes looked at him. "Welcome enough you are," the weren said in a soft rumbling voice, "here where any visitor is likely enough to be welcome, were he half your size."

Gabriel nodded noncommittally. He wasn't sure if she had complimented or insulted him.

"Cousin," said Enda, "well met on the journey."

The weren swept an arm low before her body. "Respected, starlight shine on your road as well."

Enda smiled. "A long road—nearly as long as yours. Kurg is far away indeed."

"Distance," said the weren, "is an artifact of the mind."

Angela chuckled and said, "Grawl and I ran into each other in

Alaundril about a year ago. We've been together since. She was traveling . . ."

"I was outcast," Grawl corrected.

Gabriel looked at her with surprise. "I can't imagine who would have had the nerve to throw you out of

anywhere."

She gave him a look that he hoped was a smile. "I was the daughter of warriors, the granddaughter of warriors," Grawl rumbled, "but I was a disgrace among my family."

"In what manner?" Enda said.

Gabriel looked at Enda in shock, but Grawl lowered her head to Enda's level—a good way down—and said, softly, "I was the smallest of my kindred, the weakest, the poorest fighter, last-born, last in regard, but there was worse than that to come."

Gabriel looked up at her, easily two hundred kilograms of muscle and claws, and could do little but shake his head. She saw the movement and turned toward him. Hot breath blew about him with a peculiar cinnamony scent, ruffling his hair.

"I am a poetess," Grawl whispered.

"Poetry is hardly an art scorned among the weren," Enda said. "What was your clan's objection with this?"

"There have been no artists of any note in my family for some generations," Grawl said. "My clan-sire felt that mine was an unsuitable calling for the daughter and granddaughter of warriors, and though the rest of the clan did not agree with him, he *is* our sire. When he said I had gotten the best of my brothers by skill and stealth and craft when I could not do so by force and fight, the other clan members dared not argue with him."

Then a sound came out of her the likes of which Gabriel had never heard. Weren laughter, the sound of a pot boiling, but a pot full of lava. "Get the best of them I did. None of them can wind words as I do. None of them could stand before me when I made satires upon them! I caused my eldest brother to go den-living from embarrassment, and my eldest sister to snatch her mate half bald, all by merely telling the truth about them in public, in meter, in the meeting-place of our people. Furious my family was, and they raged and shrieked in housemoot! They sought to tear me with their claws, but the claws of my words were sharper. They sought to blast me with their flintlocks, but the bullets of my scorn flew truer. Finally they gathered together outlawed me, and paid my way off planet." She smiled. The expression, even with those tusks, was surprisingly benign from such a massive creature. "Having received what I desired from them, I went out into the Old Night with a good heart and sought my hire in ships, doing security work. So we met, Angela and I, and we have done well together."

Gabriel glanced over at Angela during this. She had the expression of someone hearing a very familiar story.

"The meter is reminiscent of the sesheyian double-stave," Enda said, "though not as telegraphic."

Grawl's eyes went wide. "You too are an artist!" she cried. "Always and far and wide the fraal are known for their sensitivity and craft."

And flattery, Gabriel thought, keeping his face straight. "About your stardrive . . ." he said.

Angela looked at him. "Don't tell me you know what's the matter with it already!"

Gabriel laughed. "I wish. Does the drive have its own display panel?"

"Yes," Angela said, "though I would think that it would display everything necessary up here."

"So would I," Gabriel said, "but it doesn't. Can we go down and have a look at it?"

"Certainly," Angela said. "Come on."

She led him down the hall and to the lift again, while behind them Enda and Grawl began to discuss poetry. "How long have you been out with this ship?" Gabriel asked Angela as the lift door slid open.

"About a year and a half now," she replied. "I have a five year lease from the family. After that, if I can demonstrate a profit when I get back, I get another five years. Otherwise my little brother gets a turn."

They stood in the lift, and it sank toward the hold level. "Have you been back home since?" Gabriel said.

Angela shook her head. "Not a chance. I wanted to get the family out of my hair for a while . . . find out what life without constant commitments hanging over your head looks like." She sighed as the lift door opened. "It's been refreshing. A little hectic, sometimes, but I wouldn't give it up. One way or the other I'm going to make the best of these five years, not get tied down, and roam around a good ways."

Gabriel raised his eyebrows at that as she led him down a hallway that was twin to the one above them.

"So how was Eldala?" he asked.

She stopped and stared at Gabriel in complete disbelief.

"Eldala," Gabriel said. "Did you get there, eventually?"

"Where did you hear about that?" she asked, more surprised than suspicious.

"We were in the Terivine system the other day. On Rivendale."

She looked at Gabriel uncomprehendingly. "So?"

"So were you, apparently. One of the locals mentioned you and where you were going."

"Well, yes, we were there, but—" Angela shook her head, started walking down the hall again. "I don't remember telling anyone about Eldala."

"Little guy named Rov something," Gabriel said. "He remembered that moderately well, and he remembered *you* well enough to wonder where you were. They're worried about you."

Now, as Angela paused by a sliding door and touched a combination onto the face of it, she looked completely confused. "Why would they be worried?"

The door opened, and they went in.

"You're kidding, right?" Gabriel said, pausing to look around the room. "It's just a small town, that settlement. They gossip about everything there. You told someone you were coming back through, and then you never came back. They think you're lying dead in a ditch somewhere."

The room was small, square and empty. The sealed main drive array took up the entire back wall, and a black metal panel with

Qualified Service Personnel Only sealed the main access panel. Faired into the black metal was a big square panel of glass with a keypad at the top of it. Gabriel reached up, typed in the access command, and the entire diagnostic and drive system management directory rosette fanned out across the glass panel.

Angela leaned against the nearby wall. "It's so strange. I don't remember mentioning where I was going to anybody on Rivendale, although," she added, "we *were* partying a lot while we were there. ..."

"Ah," Gabriel said as he studied the directory rosette. They got blitzed, told everybody where they were going, what they were going to do ...

Gabriel was beginning to form some opinions about this girl, and they were not flattering. Rich, probably. Careless. Mouth like a ramscoop.

"Aha," he said, finding the spot he wanted on the rosette. Gabriel touched that petal, and it became the core of another "flower" of options, one of which was log play. He selected that one. His old friend Hal had been an e-suit engineer on *Falada*, and Hal's second rule—after the one about reading the dumb-ass documentation—was to read the dumber-ass logs as well. "If nothing else," Hal had said, "it makes you look like you know what you're doing, however spurious this impression may be."

Gabriel began working his way through the stardrive's logs. It had a diagnostic program to help him with this. The program looked at the logs, then at what they should look like, and then it finally showed any major differences it found.

Gabriel quickly scanned through the last several starfalls and starrises, and then started to read them with more care while the program was doing the same for the entire log. To Angela he said, "When they told me about this place you were going. I got curious. I'd never heard of it before. What caused your interest in it?"

"Well, it was a blank in the gazetteer," Angela said. "There had been some kind of accident when the original survey came through. Said they were having mechanical trouble. Anyway, they reported the planet as too cold and went on to their next stop."

"Too cold?"

"Bad ambient temperature," said Angela. "Eight C below zero, apparently."

Gabriel nodded. That would have been reason enough to pass on when there were hopes of finding something better in the next system along. Eight was a very low ambient, if he remembered the planetary climatic information he'd been taught as a marine. It suggested that even summer highs might not be much better than twelve C, which was bad for crops, even those that had been genetically tailored for chilly conditions. There was little point in settling a planet that was both far away and where food could not be successfully grown. You wound up having to bring everything in, and if there was no other resource there

to make the trip worthwhile, no stellar nation or company would bother investigating settlement any further.

He paused, looking at something the diagnostic program had flagged. "Let me look at that," he told the computer. "So you gave up on it?" Gabriel asked Angela.

She shrugged and said, "It wasn't what we had in mind. We got tired of being far away from everything . . . starfall after starfall, never seeing anyone, watching the same old entertainment over and over on the ship's channels . . ."

"You have Grawl to make poetry for you," Gabriel said with an absolutely straight face.

Angela punched him in the shoulder, more fiercely than Gabriel had braced himself to withstand. He rocked and barely kept from falling over sideways. "Don't mock her," Angela said. "She's had a hard time."

"She looks like she's survived it," Gabriel said, touching the panel again to focus the diagnostic's attention on what he thought he had found.

Angela folded her arms and stared down at the toes of her boots. "Survival isn't joy," she said.

Gabriel paused, glancing at her. "I wouldn't know a lot about what constitutes joy for a weren."

Angela gave him a resigned look. "How clear can any of us be about what goes on in an alien's mind?

Any more than any of them can be clear about what *we're* thinking? I just worry about her, that's all. I think she'd really rather be home on Kurg, getting involved in tribal politics and ripping out the occasional suitor's throat, but she's made the best she can out of her life." She scratched at a worn place on the decking. "It must have been awful," Angela said softly, "always being beaten up and sat on, having the food stolen out from under your nose and everything else worthwhile being taken away from you by the stronger ones, the faster ones. Grawl found another way."

Angela looked up again and said, "But is she happy?" A touch of familiarity there? Gabriel thought. "And you," he said, "you got beaten up and sat on as well?"

She gave him a look both indignant and amused. "Ah, an amateur thought-wrangler," she said. "For your information, I was one of two and bigger than my brother. As a matter of fact *I* beat *him* up whenever he needed it, which was most of the time. Brothers are always getting out of hand. If you don't show them the error of their ways early on, they run around making messes forever after."

Gabriel smiled at that. "I'll take your word for it. Meanwhile, look at this." He pointed at the log display in the glass and at the diagnostic program's suggestion of what should be present there. "I'm no expert, but this might be the trouble. I know our drive has routines to keep this from happening. Yours is enough like ours to suggest this is the problem. I think the synch between the two atomic clocks that handle the drive has been failing. See." He pointed. "The logs show them having gotten progressively more out of synch over the past few weeks. This one in particular, the gravity induction apparatus, looks like its clock has been speeding up. Not by huge amounts, but enough for it to start interfering now. Has this started acting strangely over the last couple of starfalls?"

Angela nodded. "Just after we left Mantebron." Gabriel stared at the diagnostics showing in the panel.

"All right. I'm going to try to reset it. You willing to have me do that?"

"Yes. I don't see that it can do that much harm."

I hope you're right, Gabriel thought. He backed up through the diagnostic program again and went down the tree to where the clock routines were. Touching a spot labeled *Synchrony*, he was rewarded by a message that asked, *Reset clocks to match?*

"Aha," he said. "That they have this particular routine makes it sound like this problem might come up more than infrequently." Gabriel looked sideways at her. "Have you missed a scheduled service, by any chance?"

"Uh . . ." She looked embarrassed. "Possibly."

"This may be one of the things they do on those routine services," Gabriel said, and touched the fork of the choice-tree that said YES.

DONE, it said a second later.

"All right," he said. "When we're off the ship, punch it and see what happens. We won't leave until we see you safely away. If you can't get out, you and Grawl come aboard *Sunshine* with us, and we'll get you to

Aegis so you can arrange a return-and-tow with somebody there."

"Seems fair enough," Angela said as she went out. Gabriel closed down the panel routines and went after her.

As they were walking back to the lift, Angela looked at him curiously. "Something leak in your pocket?"

"Huh? Oh." Gabriel glanced down at the pocket where the luckstone had been. "No, just a burn. I got careless with some equipment."

"Must have been some equipment. I thought those things were burn-proof."

"So did I," Gabriel said, thinking morosely of that spot on the decking. "Another of life's little surprises."

In the lift, Angela leaned against its wall, looking thoughtful. She glanced up at him then, and Gabriel thought, Oh, please, don't invite me to dinner; I just want to get out of here and get on with what we were doing.

"Eldala," Angela said. "Are you interested in it?"

Gabriel blinked. "Uh . . . why?"

"You mentioned it first. Plainly it must have stuck in your mind when you heard about it."

"Well," Gabriel said, "yes." He shrugged. "It hardly matters, though. You've got the exploration contract."

"I'll sell it to you," Angela said.

Gabriel stared at her as the lift door opened.

"Why?"

"It's no good to me now," said Angela. "If you're right about the drive clocks, I'll be glad, but I'm not going anywhere again without having this drive serviced. That may take me a while. By then . . ." She shrugged.

By then you may have found something more interesting to do with your money, Gabriel thought. Hmf. She looked at him as they walked back into the control room. "Are you interested?"

Gabriel looked over at Enda, who was seated next to Grawl. Enda, looking from him to Angela to him again, gave Gabriel a look that said, Should I ask?

"Angela's interested in selling the exploration contract for Eldala," Gabriel said.

At this, Grawl screwed her face down into what looked like a frown. Enda looked more than usually thoughtful. "The price?"

"Is negotiable, believe me," Angela said. "I just don't feel prepared to carry on with that contract at this point."

"You were there, I take it?" said Enda.

Angela nodded and Enda continued, "Not for long, though. Is the world habitable for humans?"

"Not without a lot of support, I think," Angela said.

"Low ambient, supposedly," said Gabriel.

"We landed, looked around the place, picked up some mineral samples and things like that," Angela said.

"Rocks, mostly. We ran assay on some soil samples for ore artifact but didn't find anything terribly useful."

"There was much snow," said Grawl. "Great white peaks that towered to the blue heavens. Snow bannered from them in the sun, and the winds blew the snow about—"

"Wait a minute," Gabriel said. "How glaciated was this planet?"

"A mighty polar cap straddled the world's nadir," Grawl said, "and a lesser one the pole which pointed toward the sun. Seasonal, we reckoned the difference, for the ambient temperature—"

"It was cold," Angela cut her off.

Gabriel looked at Enda.

"Well, cold is not sufficient to disallow colonization, as we have seen elsewhere," Enda suggested.

"Distance is likely to be more of a preventative factor. Still. . ."

The back of Gabriel's mind was caught in a noisy argument. One part of it was claiming that this rich girl was just trying to cut her losses and make some money off a wasted investment . . . possibly adding to this the amusement of selling someone something worthless. Another part of his mind was sure that she had missed something and that this might be a good idea . . . a very good idea.

"By the way," Enda said, "I did not have a chance to mention that Helm is in the system. He just got

within detection range."

"What kept him?"

Enda shrugged. "'Standard error,' he said. You know as well as I that there can be a considerable difference in arrival distance between vessels departing at the same time and from the same area."

"He's just got me spoiled," Gabriel said. "He's such a hot pilot. That's a relief, though."

He looked back at Angela, then. "How much money are we discussing here?"

"I'll give you a flat price for the whole thing," Angela said. "Half what we paid: contracts, exploration pack, the support software, all that."

"'Support software'?" Enda asked.

Angela laughed and said, "It's just a big reference library on survival in hostile environments, a translator, and some other stuff. I never even configured some parts of it. The manuals are terrible, and when we got there and realized the environment wasn't anything we couldn't handle with overcoats and common sense, and there wasn't anything to use the translator on ..." She shrugged.

"And you paid . . . ?" Gabriel asked.

"Seven thousand Concord."

Gabriel thought about that. "Refund guarantee? If we go to these coordinates and don't find a planet—"

Rather suddenly, Grawl loomed over him. "There *is*," she growled, "a planet."

"Grawl, I think he was making a joke," Enda said hurriedly. "It can be a strange thing, the human sense of humor. There is this story about a wire brush—"

"Contract becomes effective immediately on sale?" Gabriel said, refusing to move, no matter how Grawl tried to intimidate him.

Angela nodded. "The only thing that would affect the contract would be transmission time to a Concord Survey facility."

"Well," Gabriel said, "we're infotradors. We can carry the contract transfer ourselves, if you're comfortable with that."

"It's going encrypted, so it's fine with me," Angela said with a shrug.

"A deal, then," Gabriel said. They struck hands on it.

The remainder of the deal took little time. Gabriel had to go back over to *Sunshine* for his accounting chip. He brought it back aboard *Lalique*, and they recorded the sale in both ship's computers at the same time, passing the software and other files into *Sunshine's* databanks. Gabriel took possession of the "hard" documentation and software copies on solids, and then looked around one last time.

"Well, a pleasure doing business with you," he said. "I hope all this works out well for you."

"So do I," Angela said, "because otherwise we're going to need a ride to Aegis."

"Well," Gabriel said, hoping this wouldn't happen, "let's see what happens first. We'll break the ships' connection and stand away the usual safe distance—"

"Right," Angela said. Suddenly she looked anxious to be gone, as well. "Come on, Grawl, let's get her hot."

At least she walked them down to the airlock first. "Listen, Gabriel, Enda," she said, "if this does work out all right, our comms info is in the solids and the contracts. Get in touch when you make Aegis. We can get together."

"Certainly," Enda said. They slipped into the tube again, and the door closed behind them.

When they were on their side again, Enda asked Gabriel, "Is that what humans call 'impulse buying'?"

"Probably," Gabriel said. He looked down at the solids in his hands. "It was kind of a hunch."

"I think it was stress," Enda said. "Having things burn holes in your pocket seems to make money do the same."

Gabriel smiled, though weakly, and they made their way back up to the pilot's cabin. Gabriel paused by the door and reached down to gingerly touch the stone. It was as cool as it had ever been. "Weird."

"You do not seem terribly eager to put it in your pocket at the moment," Enda said as Gabriel stowed the manual and contract solids.

"No, and you won't see me acting eager until we're out of this system. Let it just sit there until I'm sure it wants to behave." Gabriel sat down in the right-hand chair and opened a comms channel. "Helm?"

"Hey, you're back. How bad was her drive busted?"

"Maybe not at all. We'll find out." He changed channels. "*Lalique?*"

"Here," said Angela's voice. "We'll be ready to test in thirty seconds. Hey, Gabriel, I meant it about dinner."

"Uh, thanks," Gabriel said. "Half a moment while we move out of range."

He backed *Sunshine* well away, then gave the system drive a two-second pulse, pushing them some kilometers away from *Lalique*.

"Good luck," Gabriel said.

"Thanks"

The seconds ticked by as they watched out the viewport.

"Please," Gabriel muttered, "please let it work."

Enda threw him an amused glance.

"Here we go," said Angela. "Five, four, three—"

She broke off. Gabriel swallowed, hoping desperately that their drive had not failed again.

Starfall light sheeted in brilliant gold all over *Lalique's* shape, and she vanished.

Gabriel breathed out.

From *Longshot*, Helm said, "Are they gone now? Can we talk?"

"There's plenty of time for that," Gabriel said. "A few days to recharge, then we'll get out of here. Come on over and we'll have dinner."

"Bring the autolaser," Enda said.