

WHAT'S A NICE CORPSE LIKE YOU

DOING IN A COFFIN LIKE THIS?

The corpse's left eye squinted at me from mere centimeters away. Decomposition lent her face an increasingly inscrutable expression; the first time I'd regained consciousness, when I found myself tied to her, she looked like she had died in terror. After a while, she started leering at me, as if she had reached the place where I was going and took perverse pleasure from the thought that I would join her there soon.

For a while, when I'd been hallucinating, the corpse had talked to me. She'd whispered that they would come back and throw me out an airlock, into the hard vacuum of deep space; that my vile mother was stalking me; that I could never run hard enough or far enough to find freedom—that death would be my only freedom. But my mind was clear now. No hallucinations. No talking corpses. Just me and horrible pain. Fire stabbed through my right side, a fire that burned hotter and more horribly with every breath I took. Whoever did this to me had fractured most of the bones in my right ribcage. My right hand throbbed, and when I tried to move it, the fingers didn't respond. My broken right leg twisted backward at an angle.

I wondered if Badger would ever find me. I didn't think he would find me alive. Not anymore. But I didn't want him never to know what had happened to me.

I hadn't wanted to die, and I really hadn't wanted to die at twenty-eight, beaten, shoved into a locker with a snide corpse, and deprived of the chance to make twenty million ducats.

That money would have let me pay off the loan on my ship, and all I'd had to do for the money was find a missing yacht, named Corrigan's Blood...

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To Jeannie Dees

Thanks for being there when being there mattered.

Chapter One



The corpse's left eye squinted at me from mere centimeters away. Decomposition lent her face an increasingly inscrutable expression; the first time I'd regained consciousness, when I found myself tied to her, she looked like she had died in terror. After a while, she started leering at me, as if she had reached the place where I was going and took perverse pleasure from the thought that I would join her there soon. Now, having had her moment of amusement at my expense, she meditated; beneath thousands of dainty auburn braids, her face hung slack, bloated and discolored, the skin loosening. Threads of drool hung spiderwebbish from her gaping mouth. Her eyes, dry and sunken and filmed over beneath swollen lids, still stared directly at me.

For a while, when I'd been hallucinating, the corpse had talked to me. She'd whispered that they would come back and throw me out an airlock, into the hard vacuum of deep space; that my vile mother was stalking me; that I could never run hard enough or far enough to find freedom—that death would be my only freedom. But my mind was clear now. No hallucinations. No talking corpses. Just me and horrible pain and aching, tantalizing thirst and a stench that even several days of acclimatization couldn't minimize; the stink of decomposition, of piss and shit, of the gangrene that I suspected was starting in on my right leg. Me... and all of that... and the body of the young woman who had waited on me during my business dinner with Peter Crane in the members-only club Ferlingetta.

I think it's important not to overlook her. She and I, after all, were sisters of a sort. Kindred spirits. She was dead, and I was almost. We were bound together by our plight, and by flexible molebond-braid wrist restraints that had been spot-grafted to our skin. And I figured we were where we were because we had something more than that in common. I didn't know what, but something.

I guessed that I had been without water for almost three days. I could see the shifting of the station's light cycles through the slats in the narrow metal door against which my rotting companion and I leaned. I recalled two separate spans of darkness and two of light. Two days that I knew of, plus whatever time I'd spent unconscious, and that felt like a lot. The gag in my mouth—permeable to air moving in but not to air moving out, so that I wouldn't suffocate as long as I could exhale through my nose—didn't prevent my tongue from turning into an enormous ball of hot sand. The worst thing was that my thirst didn't distract me at all from my pain.

I hurt—but such plain words cannot convey the depth of my agony. Fire stabbed through my right side, a fire that burned hotter and more horribly with every breath I took. I'd had broken ribs before, and I had them again. Whoever did this to me had fractured most of the bones in my right ribcage. My right hand throbbed, and when I tried to move it, the fingers didn't respond. Perhaps my attackers jumped on it until they felt the bones give way and grind themselves into pulp. If that wasn't what they did, it was what it felt like they had done. A million needles buried themselves deep in my thighs; my lower legs throbbed as if they had swollen beyond the capacity of the flesh to stay together and as if they would now burst. My left leg was bent so that my knee jammed into the metal wall behind the corpse, while my broken right leg twisted backward at an angle so acute the shards of my lower femur poked forward from above where my kneecap should have been like fingers trying to claw their way out my swollen, tattered flesh.

I wondered if Badger would ever find me. I didn't think he would find me alive. Not anymore. But I didn't want him never to know what had happened to me.

I beat my head against the metal door jammed up against my right side, and listened to the booming echoes thundering away into a cavernous, uncaring silence beyond. The first time I came around, I'd pounded myself into a stupor trying to get free or to get someone's attention. But whoever had grabbed me had made sure I wasn't getting out on my own... and equally sure that no one would wander along and rescue me.

My attempts at screams for help came out as throaty little whimpers, my thunderous head-banging left nothing but unbroken silence in its wake, and finally, with my head throbbing and flashing lights whirling behind my eyelids, I gave in and let darkness descend.

Giggling woke me.

The corpse was staring at me, but now she was awake, too. The warmth of our tiny cell hadn't done her any good.

"You're dead," she told me. "Just like me. Now that we're both dead, they're going to come back and break your bones and suck out your marrow. They're going to eat your body, and drink your blood, and beat drums with your bones."

Delightful. It was so nice to have company.

"Nobody's going to rescue you," she told me, and her grin grew wider. "It's too late for that. You and I will never tell our secrets."

I knew all about my secrets; I hadn't planned on telling them anyway. But I did wonder what hers were. I tried to ask her—subvocalized around the gag, but she just laughed at me.

"That's why we're here. We had such juicy secrets."

I hated being dead. I hadn't wanted to die, and I really hadn't wanted to die at twenty-eight, beaten, shoved into a locker with a snide corpse, and deprived of the chance to make twenty million rucets.

That money would have let me pay off the loan on my ship, a refitted single-crew fantail corsair with a full-sized cargo hold and berths for twelve, a ship I'd named Hope's Reward.

And all I'd had to do for the money was find a missing yacht, Corrigan's Blood, that had belonged to Peter Crane, the owner of Monoceros Starcraft, Ltd., and bring it back.

The corpse flashed a wide smile; it kept growing wider as her face started to rip. The bones bulged out, and her jaws came at me, teeth gnashing. I heard them whirring and clicking and thumping... clicking... thumping... whirring...

I beat my head against the door again. Pounded it hard, trying with all my strength to break free from the hungry, grinning corpse, fighting with everything in me...

Whirring... clicking... thumping... whirring...

Outside of our cell! Those sounds came from outside of our cell. They were the first I'd heard in days. A

bot. That wasn't her teeth, it was a bot. I pounded my head harder, and was rewarded with the sound of metal tapping on metal. The bot's sensors had picked up the noise, and now it was investigating. I could hear its arms working the latch that held the door closed.

It beeped and whirred and tapped and scraped, and nothing happened.

Too late anyway, of course—I was already dead. But at least Badger would know what had become of me.

I kept making as much noise as I could. Moments passed, while the bot sat outside the locker, grumbling to itself and tapping and twisting at the latch. And then I heard the sound of running feet. Human feet. Someone had looked up when the auto-bot reported a problem with one of the lockers, had heard the sounds my struggles through its sensors, and had come to help. I hoped.

"Oh, my God! What a stink!" a male voice said.

I beat my head against the metal and made such noises as the gag allowed. From the other side, I heard tools working on the door. "Shit. Hold on," he said. I stopped beating my head on the door, and was surprised how much better that felt. Tiny lights flashed behind my eyelids and a red haze of pain throbbed inside of my skull. The man added, "I'll get you out. Someone has... spot-sealed the metal... but I can break the seals." I could hear him straining in between words, fighting the door.

Then something clanged, and the door flew open, and bright light and cool clean air blew across my face and my friend and I flopped sideways onto the floor. Hard floor. Why didn't anyone ever make floors soft and spongy? The pain in my arm and leg and ribs and head got a lot worse when I hit.

When I twisted left, I could see my rescuer standing over me. Metallic bronze Melatint skin, wave-cut Chromagloss silver hair, gold-flashed teeth, coppersheen eyes. Very stylish. Badger would approve, I thought. My rescuer held the collar of his worksuit over his nose and mouth with one hand, and worked at the flash-grafted gag in my mouth with a laserclip he held in the other.

When he pulled the gag free, he lunged back and leaned against the lockers some distance from us, and puked on the floor. The bot clicked and chuckled its annoyance at him and cleaned up the mess as he made it. It had been shoveling out the floor of the locker until his accident; when he finished, it went back to its previous work.

"Who are you?" he asked. He kept his face tucked behind his collar, and his cloth-muffled voice sounded weak and thready.

"We're dead," I told him, but even without the gag, the words didn't really come out. "We're dead," I said to my pal the cadaver, and she stared right through me, her bones once again inside her skin and her grin gone. She was pretending she couldn't hear me, and I was annoyed enough with her that if I could have kicked her, I would have.

The dockworker watched my lips move for a moment, then shook his head. "Never mind. Reju on the way." His eyes were watering; the tears that rolled down his cheeks were normal-looking. I was disappointed. I'd almost expected him to cry gemstones.

I heard the approach of a reju, and the voices of men who would undoubtedly be space port controllers: spores. And I heard Badger's voice raised over theirs. Good old Badger. He'd been searching for me. Hadn't given up. Probably had links up to all the official corns, doing a little unofficial listening. When the

report of bodies in a locker flashed across his compac, he came fast.

While the spores took care of my friend, the reju attendants loaded me into the long, sleek gray portable cellular rejuvenation unit: the medichamber. I kept telling them not to bother, that I was dead already. They weren't listening. Nobody listens to a corpse.

I saw Badger leaning over me, asking me things I couldn't answer; heard him tell the officers that this was his captain, Cadence Drake; saw them nod and point from me to the other corpse... and then the reju lid came down over my head and I felt the needles and tubes snake into place.

Can't reju a corpse, I thought.Can't.

Can't.

Liquids flowed through my veins. Sprayers washed my skin, and replaced the unspeakable stink with a sweet scent that I recognized from too many previous reju stays as Meadow #2. I preferred designer washes like Talisman or Savage Lust, but at least the stacker hadn't filled the spray tank with Lilac. I don't know what a Lilac is or was, but anything that stickily, sappily sweet ought to have been consigned to deep space, along with whoever made it.

My head cleared. The hallucinations went away. I wasn't dead after all; I'd hung on long enough; I had beaten my abductors and I was going to live.

Since I was going to live, I thought it might be nice not to feel like the inside of an afterburner. I kept hoping for a shot of zorphin, which would have made me groggy and happy and would have chased away the pain, but the spores would want to talk with me... and zorphin would make that process difficult.

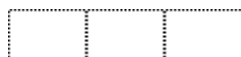
Badger leaned over the reju and smiled through the faceplate at me. "I'm glad you made it, Cady.Really glad. I thought I'd lost you." His voice crackled through the speakers, but even with the distortion, I could feel his emotions.Fear, relief... maybe love.

"You aren't going to lose me," I told him.

Badger worried the inside of his lower lip with his teeth for a moment,then nodded. "What happened?"

I gave him as much of a grin as my cracked lips and battered face would allow, and said, "We got the job."

Chapter Two



Three whole days I spent in that reju unit; healing the first two and law-sealed the third. Three days while my quarry ran further and further fromme and the trail grew colder. I spent most of those three days lying to the spores.

I was lying to protect my client, but I couldn't tell them that, of course. What I did tell them was that I

didn't have any idea why I had been attacked, though I suspected it was because I was carrying a fair stack of rucets—originally, rucets were Regulated Universal Currency Exchange Tokens, but now that everyone knows there's no such thing as a universally acceptable currency, they're just rucets; that I didn't recognize the body in the locker with me, though she did seem a little familiar; that I was docked at Cassamir Station to replenish my personal biologicals stocks and to have the origami unit on my ship updated. This last was true, but certainly not the whole truth.

I wasn't entirely honest when I described the people who attacked me, but what I did tell the spores was true enough. My usually-sharp memory got very fuzzy when I tried to bring my three assailants to mind. I said I could only remember that they were of indeterminate color, of average height and weight, and of ordinary appearance. . . . except for their eyes. I described their eyes; pale and burning with a feverish, hungry intensity, eyes that had spent a good deal of time contemplating death and liking the images such thoughts conjured. Those eyes haunted my dreams and in my waking moments sent little chills across my shoulders and down my spine. I told the spores the truth about those eyes, but they weren't impressed. I didn't tell them that one of my three assailants was gene-damaged; that he'd been a giant. That single tiny bit of information I kept to myself. I wasn't sure what I intended to do with it, but knowledge is power, and I wasn't in favor of giving away mine.

I think the spores would have kept the lock on my reju until I eventually broke and told them everything, except that my client came to my rescue and through a third party bought them off. Space stations are like that. They are the fiefdoms of the men and women who put up the capital to construct them and who run their businesses in them. Most stations are the result of private enterprise, and none that I know of answer to any planetary government. They have too much independent power to kowtow. As such, they can be benevolent havens or regimented hells.

Cassamir was neither, but somewhere in the middle. It was the communal property of Disney Starward Entertainment, Whithampton-Trobisher Ore Processing, Cassamir Biologicals, Kayne Fantasy Sensos, McDonald's, Monoceros Starcraft, Ltd., Huddle House Intergalactic, and The Eburgi Group. Because of its corporate ownership, it had a corporate personality, which I don't like, but which does mean that the spores know where their paychecks come from and remember that fact when pressure is applied. Even when murder is involved.

If you want justice, don't get killed on a space station. This was an old rule of mine, and one that I'd come too close to breaking.

Badger showed up late on the third day, bringing a few of my belongings for me. I first knew he'd finally come for me when his ugly face filled the reju faceplate, and at last that face was grinning. When I'd seen him the day before, he'd looked fairly normal—at least for him. Now, though, his skin was the most hideous shade of metallic green, and he'd had his irises done in iridescent purple and his hair statted, copperflashed, and illuminated, so that it glowed even in bright light and every hair stood away from every other and all of them crackled with sparks when he walked. I wish to hell I could keep Badger away from the bodyart shops. He has dreadful taste.

"You ready to go home?"

"Days ago," I told him.

He waited while the spores removed the law-seals and helped me out of the reju. He'd brought a mini-holo for me and some clothes. I pulled on the jumpsuit, then flashed myself with the holo. The image took a second to build in front of me.

I felt the eyes of the spores on me while I stood there. I'm used to stares; after all, I am a Maryschild. My mother was the founder of the Marys, that short-lived movement 'that she ostensibly started to eliminate racial tension by creating raceless children. When she started the movement, she purchased three fathers for me from a memorial sperm bank, all as physically different from her type as she could find. Then she insisted that the geneticist who cut and spliced her genes with those of the three dead donors double the recessives and remove the dominants so that my features would clearly reflect the "pure" influences of each of my parents.

They do. From my mother I have my coffee-with-a-touch-of-cream skin and full lips and straight teeth. From one of my fathers I have high, sharp cheekbones and slanting almond-shaped eyes with a pronounced epicanthic fold, though the eyes themselves are a vivid and startling blue, the gift of another father. My hair is straight and the color of amber, my nose is long and thin. My body is long and angular. I look like what I am—an outdated fashion statement.

I am a living flag who was born to be waved in my mothers little war; her purpose in creating me was anything but benign. She wasn't looking for peace or harmony or even a kid she could love; she was looking for power, trying to create a sweeping army of angry women who would bear their children and sit them at her feet so she could indoctrinate them into bitterness and plans for revenge against a universe she despised. And everything she taught was a lie.

Race doesn't exist.

Skin color exists. Hair and eye color are real. Body type varies from individual to individual, as does tooth shape and color, the form of fingernails, and the amount and texture of body hair. But "race" is a phantom conjured up by people no different from each other than purebred cocker spaniels are. Race is a lie, and the people who conjure by it, no matter their color or their politics, are liars.

The image finished building and I saw that the reju had reshaped my face again, making the jaw slightly rounder. It had also skinned out the little fat I had and stripped off a lot of muscle. Reju is supposed to return you to your genetic peak, but I don't know of a single place that hasn't set its units with local body fashion in mind. On Cassamir, skinny with big tits was the look, and I was going to have to spend additional time in my private unit to get back the muscular, small-breasted body I preferred.

"Looking sweet," Badger told me.

"Go dock a bot, you pervert."

He laughed; I grinned. Alive felt wonderful. Free felt even better.

We took a gravdrop back to our ship, and the entire trip, I tried to remember when I had been attacked and where... and how. But it was all gone.

When we were inside and the privacy fields were up, Badg turned to me. "Do you still have everything?"

I grinned. "They didn't have any idea where to look."

"Perfect. Let's have it."

I reached into the right front pocket of my jumpsuit, undid the pressure-seal closure at the bottom, and stretched my hand through to the inside of my thigh. I pressed against my fleshtab. The fleshtab was the result of a black market breakthrough in reju technology on an ugly little private planet that circles the

F-class star Tegosshu. The living skin separated and I pulled out two infochips. The first was a standard chip that Peter Crane had given me to help me get started on his job. The second was a dopplerchip I had taken of our meeting.

I handed Badger the dopplerchip and he dropped it into the holoplayer.

There was a soft hum; then the rec room became a gray-on-gray replica of Ferlingetta. Peter Crane and I took shape: solid-looking charcoal-colored three-dimensional forms seated at a gracefully filigreed gray table surrounded by gray plants and the increasingly less solid shapes of decor, staff, and other diners. Badger and I watched my double's hand move away from the pressure point on my abdominal wall that had started the doppler recording.

"—to be so cautious, you must have made some ferocious enemies." Peter Crane templed his fingers in front of his chin and smiled at the recorded me. The corners of his eyes crinkled.

Badger made a face. "My, oh, my. I wonder how he figured that out."

"Shut up and watch."

Peter Crane was one of the five most powerful people on Cassamir Station; the sole owner of Monoceros Starcraft, Ltd., and according to rumor, the biggest stakeholder in Cassamir Station itself. Sitting across from him, I had felt neither the weight of his wealth nor the subtle demands of his power. Easygoing and friendly, he wore his straight black hair in a casual cut and his skin natural. His clothes were tasteful, hearkening back to Old Earth styles without slavishly imitating them. He was a fifth-generation stationer, a direct descendent of Athabaskan Eskimos who invested their tribal earnings in space technology and made a fortune doing it. "If you're as good as Lize says you are, I'll make you twenty million rucets richer," Peter Crane said.

Badger paused the recording. "Which Lize?"

"Anelize Daredwyn," I told him. She was a former client—a good one. She had given Crane my contact information, and given me her recommendation of him.

The funny thing was, if Peter Crane had found me without having someone to vouch for him, I might have taken him on anyway. I rarely like my clients... but I liked him.

I restarted the recording and my imaged self smiled at Crane. "I'm that good," the image assured him.

"You're that cocky," Badger said, grinning at me.

I damped down the hum of conversations in the rest of Ferlingetta and refined the sound of my conversation with Peter. I didn't bother to answer Badger. He knew I was good at my job.

I call myself an "Independent Reclamations Specialist;" I find things—expensive things—things stolen from their rightful owners. I return these things for fifteen percent of their retail value. I deal primarily with corporations because corporations are where the money is. I occasionally accept employment from a private customer, if the missing item or the manner in which it disappeared interests me; the money is never as good as corporate money, though.

"Good," Crane said. "I admire skill above all things."

A woman sauntered down the manicured grass path to our table; she was small and lithe. My memory supplied the absent details of red hair, ivory skin and freckles.

I hit the pause button and turned to Badger. "That's her."

He squinted and looked uncertain. "The corpse?"

"Yeah."

"You want to go back and track her now?"

I thought about it, then shook my head. "Not yet. Let's finish this first, then focus on her and see if anything interesting comes up."

Badger resumed the holo, and the waiter flipped her hair back, and the thousands of tiny braids swung over her shoulders. "Mado Crane?" Her gaze passed over me as if I were invisible; she focused entirely on Crane. "How may I be of service?" She ducked her head in his direction when she said it. She didn't acknowledge me.

"A bottle of my private stock, please. The Gorland Harvest '46." Crane turned to me, pointedly forcing the waiter to acknowledge my presence. "And would you like anything else, Mada Drake?"

"Please... it's just Cadence... and no, I'm fine."

"The desserts are all excellent."

My doppelgänger shook her head. "Really. Old Earth cuisine is much richer than anything I'm used to. I couldn't eat another bite."

"Holy hell," Badger said. "You passed up Old Earth dessert at a place like that? I wouldn't have. They probably bring in the stuff from planet-side. I'll bet they don't use any reconsta at all."

The little things got to Badger.

Crane waved the waiter off.

"What do you want me to find for twenty million rucets?"

He stopped smiling. "A man named John Alder, acting as a purchasing agent for a financial concern called the Winterleigh Corporation, acquired from me a ship—the best private yacht Monoceros builds, our newest model. He said Winterleigh wanted it to permit its officers to travel quickly and in comfort when on business. I'd say fifty percent of my top-of-the-line ships are used for that purpose."

He paused, and my double nodded.

"That true?" Badger asked me.

"Mostly. Monoceros' corporate customers make up sixty-four percent of their business, but I think he was just rounding."

My imaged self was busy trying to look worthy of a twenty million rucet fee. "Your most expensive

private yachts sell for right at a hundred million rucets," the otherme said, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees. This posture change is supposed to tell my client that I'm earnest, eager, and attentive. Probably it doesn't say much more than that I have a hard time sitting in a chair for more than an hour. But I try to give a good impression. "My fee is fifteen percent of the retail value of whatever I can collect. Fifteen percent of the retail price of the most expensive ship you sell is fifteen million rucets. You could do a lot of things with the extra five million, Mado Crane." The otherme smiled, trying to look relaxed. I recalled distinctly that I hadn't been relaxed. "Or I could."

"Trying to lighten the situation with humor?" Badger asked.

"Trying to figure out why he wanted to overpay us so heavily."

Crane looked past my shoulder and up; he was watching the cold expanse of space showcased by the enormous window that made up most of Ferlingetta's far wall. I saw my image turn to look at the window; in the doppler holo it was a flat, shiny gray expanse.

"What's he looking at?" Badger wanted to know.

I had to think for an instant. "A convoy of freighters was docking."

"The station's private club could give its patrons a clear view of the origami point, and they chose the docks?"

"It's about money," I told Badger. "The rich don't want to see beauty. They want to watch their money coming in."

Crane's image turned away from the window. "The fifteen is your fee. The extra five million is a bonus for you, because this is personal."

"You were a friend of..." My double paused for a second. "... John Alder?"

"No."

"You've dealt with Winterleigh before?"

"No."

The doppelgänger pursed her lips, and I felt my own follow suit as I watched the conversation replay. "Five million rucets is a lot of personal."

"Yes. It is. But the Corrigan's Blood is a lot of ship."

My other self waited.

Crane sighed, leaned forward, rested his arms on his knees. Sincere, intent... or else his butt was getting tired, too. "likemost of our best ships, the Blood has transfold navigational capability. The Blood has a new model of TFN unit, however, that permits on-the-fly course changes while in hyperspace, and the detection of origami points from within hyperspace."

The doppelgänger's mouth dropped open. So did Badger's. "Midcourse changes?" I heard myself ask, sounding stupidly breathless. I was going to have to work on that.

"Almost instantaneous."

"And point recalculation."

"Absolutely. It will even predict new points. I've found several in my trial runs."

"My God," my image and Badger said in unison.

Badger stopped the holo and backed the conversation up. He replayed the last portion of it, then paused it and sat staring forward, as if he could see through the ship's walls to our own TFN.

If you've never ran a ship through hyperspace, you cannot imagine what Crane's innovations mean. Hyperspace is convenient but damnably unfriendly. The math makes sense but the place itself doesn't. As far as I know, no one has ever understood enough about it to do more than figure out a way in and a way out. And those lines from origami point to origami point—the fold-points in our three-dimensional universe—were rigid. A drone watching a ship's speed and trajectory as it entered a point could calculate the ship's exact destination. Traffic control has always made use of that capability; interstellar surveillance drones called Spybees were stationed at the periphery of every point to keep records of ship ID, speed, trajectory, declared destination point, and calculated actual destination. The drones send that information to central intelligence-gathering stations, which analyze the ships going through and look for correlations to crimes committed within the relevant time frames. Space travelers had less privacy than the planet-bound; but governments insisted there was a payoff. The Spybees were responsible for catching a number of serial killers, and were supposed to be a preventative to piracy.

With the new Monoceros ships, the Spybees would become worthless.

Badger turned to me and said, "I want one of those ships. Even if we have to steal it, I want one."

"That's evidently what Mado Alder thought, too. Which is why we have a job. "

Badger looked at me and sighed, and slowly reached out and started the holo again.

"This was a prototype unit, then?" my image asked Cranes.

"No. It was one of our early production units."

I watched myself tip my head to one side; my puzzlement was obvious. "I can understand your desire to get your property back, but I'm afraid I don't understand why you're paying a bonus when you've obviously registered the technology and secured your rights against other manufacturers."

Cranes image looked into my image's eyes, and for a moment his face looked like it had never worn a smile. "I trusted John Alder. I've built much of my business on my ability to judge the characters of the people who come to me. I misjudged him badly... and if word gets out, I'll find more like him waiting in my showrooms every day. This one mistake on my part could cost me everything I've worked for."

He stared out into space again. Unmoving, his gray holo image seemed to transform into a statue for one long moment.

Badger and I watched me say, "Then both speed and discretion are essential."

Crane looked back at me and nodded slowly. "You can't tell anyone who you're looking for or why. They cannot know you work for me. Not under any circumstances. I'm paying you well for your discretion. I demand that I get it."

"I understand. Do you know why Alder or the people who hired him to steal the Corrigan's Blood might have wanted the ship?"

Crane raised his eyebrows and smiled. "I can think of a hundred reasons, but I can't suggest one which might be more valid than any other." The other me looked disappointed. Crane shrugged and smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. Knowing a motive might save me a few days... and then again, it might not. It won't change the outcome."

His image looked at mine—just a single penetrating glance, but even watching it secondhand that glance felt like being dissected alive. Sitting in the safety of my own ship, I could still recall it. With his stare fixed on me, I had felt his wealth and his power as a physical presence; a weight in the air I breathed. For that instant, I had not liked Peter Crane... because he frightened me. But then he turned away, and when he looked back, he was just my newest client again.

The intensity of that glance reached Badger even at second hand—Badger, who could be dense as a dwarf star where subtle human interaction was concerned. "I would hate to have him as an enemy," he whispered.

"Me too."

Crane smiled gently. "So you'll take the job," he said at last. Not a question. A statement.

I watched myself nod and sit back in my chair. It was time to talk money; for this, I leaned back to demonstrate confidence in my own power. Plus it was another excuse to move. I decided that I looked pretty good—pretty convincing. "I require twenty-five percent of my fee in advance. For operating expenses."

Crane didn't even blink. "I know. I will have deposited three million seven-hundred fifty-thousand rucets in your Interworld account by the time you get back to your ship. Twenty-five percent of your actual fee. I'll add the five million in bonus money at the end, when you return the Corrigan's Blood and complete this job with the discretion I desire." He smiled slightly. "Additional incentive, you know."

Usually my clients feel the need to quibble about the up-front portion of the fee. I found the fact that Crane didn't a pleasant change.

Crane said, "This will help you get started." He handed me a small, thin crystalline square: a high-density infochip. "This contains the background checks I did on Alder and Winterleigh, plus everything I found out about them after the Blood disappeared. You'll also find details of the transaction, and the people involved in that. And in the 'Ship' file, I've included specs and telltale codes to allow you to identify the Blood, as well as the ship's last known heading." He laughed bitterly. "As if that were worth anything anymore."

The other me took the chip and slid it into my pocket; at least, that was what Crane saw. The tiny movement that opened the pressure-sensitive pocket and slid the disk into my fleshtab was undetectable. I told Crane, "It doesn't matter. I'll bring back your ship." We shook hands, and Peter Crane smiled

again.

I reached out and stopped the holo.

Badger said, "Don't you want to see what he does when you leave?"

I wanted to see what the waiter did first, but Badger was right. I needed to finish watching Crane first. Always do only one thing at a time. This is another of my rules, and the only reason I had to make it a rule was because I broke it so often.

Badger pressed the resume button, and set the focus to stay on Crane as I walked away. We watched Crane sip his wine and watch me leave. His image got a little less distinct as I moved around the corner of the private dining room, out of sight. The braid-mopped waiter returned..

"Follow her," Crane said. "If she goes anyplace at all but back to her ship, notify me." He handed the waiter something small.

Badger and I both hit the freeze button at the same time, with the result that the image kept moving. He held his hands away from the control panel on his holo-chair and I backed up the image, froze it at the moment when the object was most clearly visible, and said, "Shipcom—enlarge and identify the holo target."

The rest of the holo disappeared, and the flat oval and a fragment of the hand that held it expanded until the oval was the size of a door. It hung in the air in front of us. The shipcom factored out the hand, which had begun to take on godlike proportions; then it began peeling away dopplered layers of the image, studying the areas of lesser density that remained. "Outer skin, five layers of moleibond."

The holo image had changed. Now it was a mesh of tiny threads; even at its enormously enlarged size, those threads were only slightly thicker than silk strands. The shipcom rotated the image, and areas of it lit up as the computer followed the threads and discerned their purpose. "The image is at maximum usable enlargement," the shipcom said at last. "The object is a credit chit for fifty rucets."

"Store the image," I said, and the shipcom's enlargement vanished. The frozen holo reappeared.

So he'd paid her to follow me. I wondered why. If it was just that he wasn't sure he could trust me, well, I could live with that. If he had another agenda, though...

And whoever had beaten me had killed her. Again, why?

Badger sighed. "We ought to go a little more in-depth on Peter Crane. Fifty rucets to have the waiter follow you seems a little steep if she was a waiter. If she wasn't a waiter, then why was she waiting tables and why would he pay her?"

"His actions don't seem to make sense."

"No." Badger studied the frozen images of the waiter and Peter Crane. "They don't. Let's see what we can find out about both of them."

The shipcom said, "Your image is stored and cross-referenced."

And Badger glared up in the direction of the shipcom's voice. "Why don't you get a personality for that

damned thing? It never jokes, it never says, 'You look terrific,' when I get dressed up, it never offers any opinions on anything. A real personality wouldn't be all that expensive, and we could afford it now." He gave me his best "I'm adorable; humor me," grin and added, "The place next to where I got Melatinted had some terrific shipcom personalities. Jenjer. Dorite. Hank, if you wanted to go male." His eyes dared me to go with a male personality.

I gave him a fixed stare and said, "The Hope's Reward already has as much personality onboard as I can stand. If I bought a personality for the ship, I'd have to get rid of you."

He laughed.

I resumed the holo, and the waiter walked away from Crane and toward the front door of Ferlingetta. The image vanished.

Badger stared at me, disbelief clear in his eyes. "You stopped recording?"

I stared back, defensive. "Well... yes. I stopped recording as soon as I stepped out of the club. I only wanted a record of the interview."

"Brilliant move," he said.

Not particularly.

Chapter Three



Strebban Bede, born Dante Beddekkar, had been Badger to me since I was eight and he was twelve; he was the only friend I had in the world. The only family, even though the two of us shared no genetic ties. He represented the only stability I ever knew, and I would have done anything for him. Nonetheless, he was the most annoying human being who ever lived. I came to this conclusion not only from my own unbiased observation, but from taking into account the comments of the majority of the clients for whom we worked, and the majority of people who had the pleasure of Badgers undivided attention for more than five minutes.

"Okay, my favorite genius. Let's watch Braids now," Badger said, and started backing up the holo.

"We already know what she's doing," I said, feeling like an idiot for having thought the information I could glean from the interview had ended when I left. Now I wished I'd started recording the moment I walked into the club. The internal doppler recorder was new to me, however, and I still wasn't used to the idea that I could capture the conversations of all the people in an area at the same time, before I even started doing what I'd come to do. In my own defense, I also wasn't sure how completely I could saturate a chip before it stopped accepting data.

"Let's watch her anyway," Badger said.

When he backed up the dopplerchip to the point where the waiter first appeared at Crane's and my table, Badger marked her. With the holo focused on her, he finished backing it to the beginning.

Now we watched the waiter carrying a tray to a table, asking if the people seated there needed anything, walking around the edge of a stand of plants and heading toward our table.

"That was enlightening," I said, intentionally digging at Badger.

He shrugged. "It might be pointless."

I just smiled.

She had her conversation with Crane again, where she pointedly ignored me, then walked away, moved to the very edge of my recording device's range, and slipped beyond it. We sat staring at gray haze for five minutes, while I watched Badger, sardonic smile firmly in place, and he stared at the mist as if life-and-death secrets resided therein.

When she returned, she was carrying the bottle of wine. She brought it directly to the table. I didn't even bother to rib Badger this time. She walked to another table, cleared off the plates that were there, carried them back to the place where she'd vanished before.

Gray mist, this time only for a minute or two.

She reappeared, carrying a tray full of food.

I drummed my fingers on the armrest of my chair and rolled my eyes. I yawned loudly.

She wound her way through the tables, carrying the enormous tray, settled it on a stand next to three diners and began unloading food.

I leaned back in my chair and stared up at the ceiling of the holo-room, noticing for the first time the elaborate designs that had been carved into Ferlingetta's ceiling. I was impressed that the doppler got them.

"She's with him now."

"Thank you," one of the diners said, and at the same time Badger said, "What was that?"

I sat up and watched her walk back the way she'd come, carrying an empty tray.

Badger backed up the holo.

The waiter put dishes of steaming food on the table. I found myself fascinated by the fact that even the steam appeared as a gray mist.

The waiter said, "She's with him now."

The diners looked at her, smiled, looked at their meals... and as one said "Thank you," another slipped a packet into her hand. Without acknowledging the packet, she turned and walked away.

Badger backed the holo up again, to the point where the holo showed. Then he rolled his eyes and yawned. "I'm sure you don't want to see this. It's undoubtedly a waste of time."

"Always gracious in victory," I said, inclining my head in his direction. I know the smile I gave him was strained. "Rub it in, Badg."

"Thank you. I think I will."

We watched the shipcom peel the cover off the packet and enlarge the contents.

"Another credit chit," Badger said, beating the computer to the identification by a tenth of a second.

"How much?"

The shipcom traced the circuitry, then said, "The value of this credit chit is ten thousand rucets."

"Ten thousand rucets," Badger said. He gave a contented little sigh and leaned back in his seat.

I paused the holo. "You aren't surprised by this, are you?"

"No. Not a chance."

"Why not?"

"Because she's dead. If she'd done what she was supposed to do, whatever that was, she would still be alive." He bared his teeth at me, skinned his lips back in a poor and gloating imitation of a smile, and said, "Now all we need to do is watch the people who gave her the money."

I hadn't really looked at them. Seated, in the same flat gray as everything else in the holo, they had failed to catch my attention. I guess they were trying to avoid being attention-worthy, anyway. But when I really looked at them, I realized I'd seen them before.

I gasped, and Badger's smile grew even more condescending. "Let me guess," he said. "Those are the three people who attacked you."

"I can't be certain about two of them... but him..." I rose and walked to the side of the man who had been seated in a booth with his back to me. His hand was frozen in midair. I held mine up beside it, and my own large hand was dwarfed. It looked like a child's hand next to his.

Badger's smugness vanished. "Is the scale on this holo right?"

I stood beside the waiter; she'd seemed taller in the locker but only because we had both been crammed in face-to-face. In fact, though, she was as petite as she'd seemed when she stood by our table. "Scale's right. The only solid detail I've been able to recall about the three of them is that one was a giant."

We watched the holo through several more times: studying the waiter; following the three men at the table as they rose without eating their meals and stalked out into the corridor beyond the club aimed for the docks; looking for signs that anyone else might be involved. We didn't get any other immediate information.

"Here's the way it's going to go," I said. "I'll get as much information on the girl as I can, and then I'll see what I can get out of Crane regarding why he was paying to have me followed. And then I'll drop the little bombshell on him about his helper's other friends and see what that gives me." I stood for a moment, considering. "Meanwhile, you find out everything you can about the three men. Everything. We'll keep that

information to ourselves."

"Deciding you don't trust Crane?"

"No." That was the funny thing. I did trust Crane. "I just want to have a few extra cards to play later in this game."

Badger grinned at me, then instructed the shipcom to give him complete vital statistics on the three men whose images we had captured. When he had them, he settled in with the worm to see what he could fish out of the station records on Cassamir Station.

I followed the same procedure with the waiter. I had to assume that everyone else knew more about what was going on than I did. I had to assume that all of them had reasons for doing things that I didn't know anything about... including Peter Crane, whom I was loath to include in my list of people with hidden agendas; I so rarely like anyone, and I did like him.

Badger and I didn't have a lot of advantages, but I intended to get the most out of every one we had. The doppler holos were my first advantage. The waiter's murder; my near-death experience; Crane's wish to have me followed: all of these were related to the stolen Corrigan's Blood, and before we left Cassamir Station, I intended to figure out how.

Chapter Four



The waiter's name had been Sarah Idalto, and she hadn't been a waiter. She'd been Crane's niece by marriage, the troubled rich-kid daughter of Crane's wife's brother, McTavish Idalto. From her extensive rap sheet, I could see that she'd spent more than a little time in what Cassamir Station spores euphemistically called the "entertainment-for-pay" sector, and that she had occasionally augmented her income by "reallocating client funds." That, again, from the spores' reports. Had she been someone other than the niece of Peter Crane, her sheet probably would have referred to her as a whore and a thief, but perhaps I was only being cynical in thinking such things.

So Crane had hired her to follow me and report on my movements. But why? And the three men who later beat the living crap out of me had hired her to... what?

And somebody had killed her, but who had that somebody been?

I spent the next few hours digging through the data on Crane's infochip. I read the information he had uncovered on Winterleigh, and I watched the holo interview with their front man, "John Alder." Alder was superb. He walked rich, he talked rich, he dressed perfectly, and he dropped names in casual conversation that made Crane relax. I saw it happen. If I'd been doing the interview, I would have believed Alder was who and what he said he was.

I watched the recording of that interview three times. I was left with the sense that I was dealing with a master. Either this man was as rich and confident as the character he portrayed, or he was one of the finest actors I'd ever seen. Considering what was at stake, I was willing to consider either hypothesis.

I copied his voice print into the shipcom and linked that file to the microphone in the compac on my wrist; I set the shipcom's voice recognition feature to alert me if it ever heard Alder. What were the odds? I wasn't going to hold my breath; if I ran into him again, though, I wanted to know it.

I went over the specs for Corrigan's Blood, and spent some time with my desk holo, trying to figure out ways that I would hide her if I'd stolen her. I've been blessed with a criminal mind. I thought of half a dozen things I could do when the soft chime of my comlink pulled me away from my work.

As I reached for the comlink, a voiceover said, "For your security, this call has been scrambled by Gen-ID, the leading provider of security calls in the Verzing Community. Please offer your cell sample now."

I hate Gen-ID calls because they hurt, but at least my new unit uses very small laser samplers. I stuck my finger into the ID unit on the comlink, and felt the sting of the laser. My vital signs read out across the screen, and after the genotype matching of DNA from skin cells, it verified my ID information. The screen flashed from gray to green, then cleared to project Peter Crane's holo into the space above it.

"I'm glad to find you looking so well," he said.

"Me too."

He laughed. "Yes. I suppose you are. I assume the money reached your account?" A slight upward inflection on the end of that question, but his face said he knew perfectly well it was in there.

"It's all there."

He paused, looking worried. "I was expecting you to leave port soon in pursuit of the Blood, Have you experienced setbacks?"

"Aside from running into the people who tried to kill me?" I arched an eyebrow and tried to look coolly amused, but I suppose the squeak in my voice ruined the effect.

"I understand your concern with them—"

I thought "concern" didn't quite describe my feelings toward the experience of almost dying, but I didn't say anything.

"—however, I don't feel that the attempt on your life is related to the work you're doing for me. Some of my people are investigating this with the port controllers, and I'm told they have excellent leads. The people who hurt you will be brought to justice, for your sake and the sake of the girl they killed."

It was time to fish for a reaction. "Yes. Your niece. You must be very upset."

His lips thinned and he nodded. "Her parents and I have always feared this would be the way she ended up." He studied me, emotions hidden. "I was careful to keep Sarah's relation to me secret. I'm surprised you discovered it." He didn't look surprised.

"Finding out secrets is my job," I said. "And I'm good at it. Speaking of secrets. . . "Time to try my bigger bait. "Why did you pay her to follow me?"

"How the—?" He paled. I saw his eyes go blank and hard for an instant—only an instant, and then he

was charming Peter Crane again. "Your people were very good. I never saw them."

"If they weren't very good, I wouldn't work with them." I smiled. Let him think I got my information from an informant. "Why did you have her following me?"

"Why did you have someone watching me?"

Touché, I thought. "I don't trust anyone."

He shrugged and smiled slowly. He didn't have to say a word; his gesture told me that my answer was also his. "Perhaps you will understand that I am finding it much more difficult to think well of people I don't know, since this incident with John Alder. I had to know I could trust you."

"And can you?"

He chuckled. "You didn't sell the information I gave you to one of my competitors. I'll take my chances with you."

"Fine. Then there's something else you need to know. Sarah was also working for the three men who tried to kill me."

He was silent for perhaps thirty seconds. In thirty seconds, I can take my ship through an origami point from one side of the universe to the other. Thirty seconds can be a long, cold time. "You're certain of this?" he asked at last. His voice was icy cold.

"Yes. She pointed me out to them when you and I were having lunch. They paid her."

"This is very specific information. How can you be sure?"

"I have a voice recording of the conversation and a picture of her taking the payoff."

"You have holographs of them?"

"No," I lied. "Rather poor-quality digital microtwo-D's." These were the industry standard for surveillance work, though certainly nothing at the cutting edge of technology. "They're fuzzy and monotone. I'm afraid they wouldn't be useful for a legal ID. They were only useful to me because I knew what I was looking for."

"You've enhanced them."

"As much as I could."

"Send me copies, please. Even if they are of poor quality, they will be better than nothing at all."

"I'll send them over. Gen-ID?"

"Naturally. I do hope you'll be able to begin looking for my ship soon."

"I have an angle on it already," I said.

I didn't mention that my angle was so bad it would make a billiards champion weep. I nodded and

signed off.

And then I went back to thinking about the Corrigan's Blood. Unlike other ships, the Blood could go anywhere while leaving only false trails behind it. And I had to weed through those false trails, uncover the real trail, find the ship, and bring it home. New technology screws up as much as it fixes; I've long believed this, and have never been proven wrong.

Under normal circumstances, someone with a stolen ship who couldn't reconfigure the ID would stay in-system until the search cooled off, because if that ship went into hyperspace, the Spybees would tag it and give a neatly packaged map to the first authority who asked. If I were Alder, though, I'd take the ship and run like hell with it, going through every origami point I could find. I would change course in hyperspace, come out at some "impossible" destination, go back in, change course, come out again. I would render any records my pursuers got useless; even if they could get data on every point I'd passed through, they wouldn't have anything. They could try piecing my trail together by sequencing times, but the clocks on those Spybees are always a little off. We can't synchronize them once they're in position, because communication through hyperspace is, so far, beyond our technology. Sometimes they're as much as a couple of minutes off. Compared to the infinity of space, a couple of minutes on a clock doesn't seem like much. But it would be enough for Alder.

I stood staring at my comlink and considered what I could do in that time, if I wasn't going to pay attention to the legalities of logging myself in-system, filing my flight plan, and waiting for clearance.

In two minutes, I could take my ship through four origami points, including turnarounds to jump back in. If I did that for ten minutes, always coming out at a place other than the destination the Spybees predicted, I would log twenty entrances and twenty totally unrelated exits. With all of the clocks recording slightly different times, the resultant snarl would have me arriving at a place before I'd left the previous one, and could show me in several locations simultaneously. When I finished, I could stop anywhere. My trail would be the same as no trail at all.

I smiled. There were, however, better and worse places to stop, and I knew exactly the sort of place I'd try to find.

I keyed in the link to the navigation deck, and Badger's face floated in front of me. "Any luck?" he asked.

"A fair amount. I have an idea on where we can start looking for our client's ship. We need to get ready to run. Meanwhile, have you gotten any information on the holos?"

"The strangest information of all," he said. He looked weary and frustrated. "Whoever the three men were who came after you, they had the best security I've ever seen."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because according to all official records, none of the three of them have ever been here."

"What?!"

"Never. I've run the worm through every databank on Cassamir Station, and pulled the data stream from every security monitor. Hell, I located the security cam that shows the view of you and Peter Crane having lunch. It also shows the table where the three of them sat while you ate."

"So use that."

"You don't understand. They aren't at the table."

I felt my mouth drop open; I knew I looked like an idiot. Still, no one underrated the magical art of making yourself disappear more than I do. "You mean someone has completely cleared them out of every record in the station?"

"Yes."

"My God. That's impressive."

So the three men who had killed Sarah and who had nearly killed me had someone on Cassamir Station covering up for them. Someone well-placed enough to gain access to every security file on the station that included the men, and talented enough to erase the men from every record without leaving signs of tampering. "Could you do that?" I asked Badger.

"Not a chance."

I nodded. I couldn't have done it either. "Connect into the VeCRA system and see if you can find any records on any of the three of them there. If they don't show up in VeCRA databases, we can spread out further."

VeCRA is the Verzing Community Regulatory Agency, the bureaucracy that keeps tabs on the loose coalition of settled planets in this sector of space. The other sectors have their own agencies that work with VeCRA; and the nonallied planets usually have their agencies (and those may or may not cooperate); and the fanatical confederacy, Öoslong Legion, has its slew of agencies. Even if we searched through all of those databases, we still might not find our people, because settled space is too damned big for bureaucracy to keep under its thumb. There are scores of settled planets that opt for anarchy—they don't keep records; they don't pay dues; and they don't answer anybody's questions unless they want to. If our thugs were from one of those places, we would probably never run them down. Still, we had to look.

"Before you start the VeCRA search, though, I need you to make me some fuzzy, ugly, digitaltwo-D's from the doppler images, and I need them fast." I told him the shots I wanted, then added, "Mess them up some when you print them. Make them look like we got them from a... oh, a Clarion MicroSure-Shot digicam, and make them look like we've enhanced the hell out of them." I paused for a second, thinking. "Be consistent with the angle. Something that someone could have obtained from long-range, or at least from outside the dining area, if that's the best we can do. I have an idea; find someone in Ferlingetta who could have taken them, and create the series from that person's viewpoint."

Badger grinned. "Invent an insider, huh?"

"Yes."

"I'll do it."

"Send them via Gen-ID to Peter Crane as soon as they're done ... and time is important, here. I told him they already existed. While you're doing that, I'll file our flight plan."

"Right."

I went back to Cranes infochip, and spent a few unhappy minutes searching it for one single tidbit of information that I desperately needed—information which wasn't there. I thought about having Badger try to worm it out of Crane's records without having anyone the wiser, but decided in this instance forthrightness wouldn't hurt. I called Crane.

Crane appeared, looking happier than he had when we'd last talked. "Thank you for sending your two-D's so quickly. I'm sure they'll be useful."

I nodded.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"How many of the new ships have you sold so far?"

He didn't even have to think. "The Stardancers? Twenty-seven."

"Have you ever used the new hull configuration on other ships in your line?"

"No. The enhanced TFN required a leaner shape and more area in the dispersal fins. Those twenty-seven are the only ones out there."

I'd wondered about that. The Blood could never have been mistaken for any ship I'd ever seen. An in-system ship without TFN capability can look like anything, and usually looks like stacks of metal boxes loaded on to each other. TFN ships have always looked like pregnant guppies sculpted by the Art Deco god. Hope's Reward was a perfect example of that look. Crane's Blood, though, was as lean and sleek as new-minted sin, and just looking at holos of it had made my fingers itch for a chance to take it for a run. I was pleased to know that gorgeous body only came with the real thing inside; I think I would have been brokenhearted had I known everyday ships were masquerading in beautiful skins they hadn't earned. "Can you send me registration information on every one you've sold?"

"I can," he told me, "but it won't be as helpful as you might hope. Quite a number of the ships have already traded hands."

This was an odd bit of news. "Really? Have the original owners experienced problems with them?"

"Quite the opposite. The ships are so popular that my earlier buyers have been able to resell them at a considerable profit. I've raised my own prices and my orders are still far outstripping my supply."

"Send me what you have," I said.

He smiled. "You'll have it as quickly as I can send it."

"That's good. If I'm lucky, I'll have my flight plan filed an hour after you send me the registrations."

Now Crane positively beamed. "That's tremendous. Well, in that case, let me go and collect everything for you. And good luck in your travels. Or perhaps I should say, happy hunting."

His image vanished, leaving me staring into empty space.

Happy hunting. Hunting Corrigan's Blood.

I had the shipcom look for current and historical references to anyone named Corrigan, cross-referenced with any mention of blood. I gave the search an "all databanks" field and a moderate-level priority; with that priority rating I would probably wait a standard week or two before I'd get any useful answers. I didn't want to tie the shipcom up with a full-priority search, though, when I might get nothing back for the trouble. After all, the name could be purely fanciful.

But every ship I knew bore its name for a reason. Alder had named the ship, and the name was unconventional enough that I couldn't believe he'd chosen it at random or named it after his wife. And if Alder had a reason for the name, I wanted to know what it had to do with me.

With that done, I sat and thought about the three men, their hidden ally, the dead Sarah Idalto, and me.

Sarah Idalto could be dead for two reasons. One, they intended to kill her. Two, she happened along at the wrong time and they killed her on the spur of the moment. I had no way at the moment to prove what they wanted or didn't want with Sarah. I moved on.

What about me? I was still alive for only one of two reasons. One, they thought they successfully killed me, but were wrong. Two, they didn't want me dead.

That was a little easier to figure. With all the damage they did to me, they hadn't done any of the things they did to Sarah. They hadn't ripped out my throat, or torn open the arteries at my wrists. They hadn't broken my neck or stabbed me through the heart. They hadn't compromised my vital organs in any way. As effectively as they had killed Sarah, I had to assume they weren't incompetent.

If they wanted me alive, there was only one reason for that. I was doing something they wanted me to do. And the only thing I was doing was looking for the Corrigan's Blood.

Assume, then, that these three men and their secret assistant wanted me to find the Corrigan's Blood. They weren't working with Crane, and were almost certainly working against him. Sarah's death seemed to demonstrate that. And they weren't working with Alder; I could think of no reason why Alder, having stolen the ship, would want someone to find it.

So they were a third party or that third party's representatives.

What did this third party want?

They attacked me after I talked with Crane. They took my clothes, my shoes, my compac, my underwear, my toolbelt, and my ID pouch. It stood to reason that they didn't do that just for their own amusement. I was unconscious when they undressed me; it is damned difficult to undress an unconscious person. I wasn't a threat to them; I was just lying there. So they weren't looking for weapons. That left the information chip that Peter Crane had given me. And they couldn't find that because it was hidden in the fleshtab in my right thigh.

So now I was alive, I still had the information chip, and I was going after Crane's ship.

I had to do several things to make sure I stayed alive a little longer. I had to eliminate all of Crane's sensitive data from the shipcom. I had to hide his infochip someplace secure.

And then, while I was searching for the Corrigan's Blood, I needed to watch everyone I met, looking for the person who had a reason to want Crane's ship and Crane's information, and who was, perhaps,

Crane's enemy. I was willing to bet that sooner or later, just such a person would come looking for me.

Chapter Five



Badger wasn't smiling when I stepped out of the corridor into navigation. A worried little rat began to gnaw at the inside of my gut.

"I have the course set and I filed our flight plan," I told him.

"That's terrific," he said, but his eyes didn't match the enthusiasm the words implied, and his voice sounded strained.

I would have asked if anything was wrong, but over the years, I've developed a sort of second sense about when to ask Badger what's bothering him and when to keep quiet. Now that second sense kicked in and I said, "Have you done the pre-check?"

He said, "Yes. Everything checked out," and shook his head "no" emphatically at the same time.

What the hell did he mean by that? "Okay? Great. Are you ready for the full pre-detach?"

"Let's go," he said, looking relieved. We rarely did a full pre-detach, since we and only we lived aboard our ship and we therefore kept up daily with the ancillary systems. He acted like he thought someone was listening. I have superb security systems installed on the Reward, but I am the first to acknowledge that security can be breached. Badger was acting like he thought ours had been.

"Cargo bay," I said, tapping the monitor that showed us the cargo bay onscreen. It was fairly empty at the moment.

"Masses balance, all secure."

"Deep Deck: lights and wires."

"Check."

"Masses."

"Check."

"Stowage."

"Check."

"Cabin sweep, port to starboard." My monitors flicked from my cabin, first to port, around the arc of the deep, or number four, deck, to Badger's cabin to far starboard.

"Gear stowed, masses balance, all secure."

"Your room matches your face," I blurted, getting my first look at a new decorating scheme I didn't realize he'd installed.

He laughed, genuinely pleased. "Isn't it wild?"

It was worse than wild. It was nightmarish. "I couldn't sleep there."

"When we're in port, I don't," he told me, and his grin was suggestive.

I laughed in spite of myself and moved on to the next item of the pre-detach. We went through the power core and the redundant navigation room on Three Deck, skipped the redundant weapons and shields since private ownership of such weapons was illegal in this sector of the Verzing Community and if anyone was listening, I didn't want to advertise my noncompliance. I kept waiting for Badger to tip me off about what he'd found that had him spooked, but he did the checklist without indicating any problems. We moved to Two Deck and the air plants, the recreation areas and gym and library and galley/dining room and holo room, moved again to Top Deck and the medical room and the navigation room that we sat in. Badger and I overlooked the main shields-and-weapons room, too.

We're heavily armed. A lot of private ships carry battle armament. Space is, after all, enormous beyond measure; it is the ally of people who want to hide and the enemy of people who want to find them. And the governments can talk all they want about the effectiveness of the Spybees in preventing piracy, but I've seen the little asteroid belts of dead passengers left hanging around empty planets after someone voided them out the airlocks. Dozens, hundreds... in one terrible case thousands of people hanging in slow, horrible orbit; crew, passengers, parents and children. They're out there, and so are things even worse. The Spybees do a good job of eliminating the privacy of law-abiding people, but when pirates change their ship registration and telltales before they ever leave a system, the Spybees have no way to tell that they aren't more of those fine, law-abiding citizens; they let them go. I've slipped through the hard white veil of stars feeling the secretive eyes watching me. I've felt the clammy hand of fear grab the back of my neck, and known I was facing my own death. And I've lived to walk away.

If you want to survive, you do what survivors do.

Badger was waiting for me, vertical frown lines furrowed between his eyebrows. With the index finger and thumb of his right hand he pinched up a flap of skin on his left arm and held it there.

"Skin?" I said, and realized suddenly that this was the part of the extended checklist he'd been waiting for. The ship's hull is extruded of layered compressed moleibond, each layer a single molecule formed of atoms artificially bonded and compressed to take up one one-hundredth of their uncompressed space. Moleibond is incredibly dense, almost indestructible... our hull had a "Family Warranty," which stated that if the owner or any offspring of the owner ever had a problem with it, the hull would be replaced free by the company. If I had children and they had children and so on, any generation of my offspring until the end of time could collect on that warranty if the company was still around to make good on it. The hull would still be around.

"Skin," Badger said, and flipped on the outside scanner.

We never did a skin check. No one in a TFN ship did skin checks. So why had Badger, and what had he found when he looked?

I waited while he transferred his image to my monitor. The holographic edge of the Reward's bulbous

nose slid beneath me, and then stopped moving. On Badger's screen, the scan kept moving as if nothing of interest had occurred, but in front of me, numbers ticked off to indicate enlargement of the image I was seeing... though because it was a molebond hull, enlargement offered no detail.

Then suddenly it did. A tiny edge outlined a bit of a curve, though a huge one. The image was immensely magnified.

Badger superimposed a dopplered image over what I was looking at, expanded both further, then did a doppler peel on both so that I could see inside the ovals.

Spiderweb circuits hung in front of me. The... thing... was incredibly complex. It had no visible source of power, though. So it was something passive, not active. A tracking device? A listening device? An explosive?

I mouthed, What does it do?

He shrugged, pointed to the shipcom unit, and shrugged again. I read his lips. He said, We don't know.

The clearance chime rang on the deck—notification that our flight plan had been approved and that we were now requested to undock. I wondered if I ought to cancel my flight plan until I could have the device removed...

Then I thought, Better the enemy I know. This was most likely a gift from the third party, the one who was working against both Crane and Alder. Whoever this was, I would bet if I had it removed he would find a way to hide another one somewhere, or else he would take other steps to accomplish whatever surveillance he felt he had to have. If I knew about this device, perhaps I could find a way to control it, or even use it to my advantage.

I tapped the comlink and said, "Hope's Reward, Carolmas registry, ready for departure. Standing by for coordinate feed to origami point." The shipcom lit up and hummed for an instant as somewhere inside the station, someone fed me my outbound coordinates.

Badger brought the engines on line and we detached from our dock, and the Reward headed out toward space. As always, I felt the tiny delicious/risson of freedom trilling beneath my ribs. The air smelled fresher, the ship sounds sang to me, everything became suddenly more alive, cleaner, clearer, better.

Even Badger's green face and dreadful hair seemed improved.

The Reward slipped into her place in line, swimming through space like a fish freed from its aquarium. The traffic ahead of us was heavy—heavier than I remembered from our trip in. Badger noticed it, too. "Wonder what the hold-up at the point is."

I thought the first thing that everyone thinks when there's a problem at an origami point—that this time, the impossible had happened and a ship going into hyperspace had collided with a ship coming out. We waited while the line of outgoing ships crawled forward, and then our shipcom lit up with a boarding demand from a Cassamir Station long-range pursuit cruiser. We signaled our agreement and felt the jolt of the cruiser's ship-to-ship mating with ours; the spores made a less-than-graceful docking, but I wasn't going to complain.

Badger and I went aft and watched as two big, armed officers with drawn weapons floated down the gravdrop into view. We waited, and they slowed and kicked to the door. When they stepped through

into our artificial gravity, they winced. We keep the gravity at two G's, which would make them more than twice as heavy as they were accustomed to being while on Cassamir Station. We were waiting, hands up to show that we didn't intend to shoot and wanted to cooperate.

The men looked from one of us to the other, then said, "We need quick Gen-ID's, and we're going to have to search your ship to verify that you two are the only people aboard."

I said, "An unwarranted search is outside of VeCRA law."

"It's warranted," one of the spores said, looking when he said it like he hoped I'd try to give him trouble, just so he could prove how much of a warrant he had.

His partner was pulling out one of the little Gen-ID Portable Veri-Stat kits that law enforcement of every stripe seems to love so much.

I took a deep breath. "May I see the warrant?"

The spores gave each other annoyed looks, said, "We're in a hurry and we have a lot of ships to go through," and then, when they saw me tap the compac on my wrist, one growled and pulled out an infochip and slapped it into the wall unit that existed by the gravdrop in every ship built in the Verzing Community in the last twenty-five years, for just this sort of occasion.

"These officers are warranted and decreed to carry with them the full powers of authority of Cassamir Station, and may use such means as are necessary to bring to justice the killer of Sterline Eamonds of Cassamir Station. They will identify this killer by Gen-ID comparison of the killers genetic material as found on the body of Sterline Eamonds with the genetic material of all persons on all ships leaving Cassamir Station, and that person whose genetic material matches will immediately and without fight submit to custody or be killed outright."

They don't screw around with polite ways of saying things on Cassamir Station.

Badger and I held out our hands and gave our tissue samples for the good of Cassamir Station, and breathed sighs of relief when the green "all-clear" flashed. And when the spores returned after a long search to report that we weren't harboring any dangerous fugitives, which we already knew, we were feeling good enough to ask what had happened.

And they were feeling good enough to tell us. "A dregger killed one of the big men on Cassamir today in full view of three witnesses, then got away. The victim was third in line at Huddle House Corporation. Not on Cassamir Station, but universe-wide. They're tearing the station apart trying to find the guy, and we're going to search every ship that leaves, and sooner or later, we'll get him."

"Then what will happen?" I asked.

"We'll try him, we'll sentence him, and we'll send him out an airlock."

Ah, justice. I was suitably impressed.

When they left, Badger leaned against the wall, and suddenly I noticed that he was pale.

"You sick?"

He nodded."Sort of. Sterline Eamonds... I just remembered where I heard that name."

I waited.

"You remember you said to invent an insider? To use somebody who was in Ferlingetta when you were there and who was in a position to have taken the pictures?"

I nodded.

"I did that. And I was just kind of curious. After I did the angles and everything, there was only one person who could have taken the pictures. He was in the right position to see both you and Crane and the three men. So I did the pictures from his point of view and sent them over to Crane. And after I sent them, I got his vital statistics and ran an ID on him."

"Sterline Eamonds?"

"Yes.Coincidence?"

"Probably not."

Chapter Six



We got our turn, and our clearance. I approached hyperspace with the same dread I always do, wondering what I would find out about myself this time that I didn't want to know. The trip through is instantaneous; no time passes on shipboard instruments and from every test we've been able to devise, no time passes in our universe... but perceived time in hyperspace is long and can be hellish.

"I'll take the helm," I told Badger, and he nodded and left the bridge. He would fight his fight with the dark realm alone. So would I.

I spoke our destination to the shipcom,then waited until it brought up our insertion path; I double-checked its coordinates against the ones I'd worked out earlier. We were heading for Galatia Fairing, the world that sold the Spybees and was the central repository for all records from them. It was a routine destination, and the insertion paths for it were as clear and time-tested as any have ever been, but I still checked. No one has ever, to my knowledge, become trapped in hyperspace, but I'd rather die than be the first.

The coordinates checked out. I filed the information with the Spybee, received my final clearance from Cassamir Station, and blanked my viewports.

Over the shipcom, I said, "Origami insertion in thirty seconds." I switched the TFN to automatic, settled into my seat, and braced myself. My hands clenched and unclenched on the padded armrests. The ship's voice continued the countdown I had begun. "Twenty-five... twenty-four... twenty-three..."

I took deep breaths, focused my attention inward,closed my eyes.Calm.Soft and blue and green, the murmuring of waves rolling up onto warm white sand.

"Eighteen... seventeen..."

Space, still and silent and serene, filled with stars that promise everything. Everything. Think of the perfection of space, the glorious swirl of a nebula splashed against the velvet dark—

"Six... five... four... three..."

I am Cadence Drake, captain and owner of the Hope's Reward.

"Two."

I am strong. I know who I am.

"One."

I know what I believe.

"Insertion."

I was no longer alone. In my chair, in my head, I could feel the rest of myself, the multidimensional self that takes its mundane shapes as an infinite number of Cadence Drakes in an infinite number of universes connected by the fact that we are one. Infinite. Of a magnitude with the heavens. And we are more than infinite mirrored and fragmented parts; we are also a single whole. An Entity. We touch, we mirror, we remain Me through that portion of our self, or perhaps I should say Self, that has its home in hyperspace. A part of me can look infinity in the eye and not flinch. A part of me is enormous and magnificent and beyond the pain and the suffering and the despair of my infinite mirrored fragmented mortal three-dimensional lives; is so beyond my limitations and weaknesses and frailties that it regards the infinite parts of me with some tenderness but also with mild, superior amusement.

I am small, puny, insignificant. Mortal. Human. A creature of limited flesh and limited intellect, for a burning expanse of non-time forced to see myself not only as I am, but as I could be in all my infinite capacity, knowing that when the moment ends my sudden wisdom, my godhood, will be stripped from me and I will be thrown naked and shivering and frightened and mortal back into the domain of death.

And the infinite frightened fragments of my greater Self clamor in my head. I am a doctor, on my way to a new world, armed with hope and knowledge, but now with fear, too, for I have never taken this shortcut through the stars. I am a dancer; and I am a thief; and a renegade and a lover and a mother and I am old and young and I have a thousand faces and a thousand names a million names a billion names and I know them all all all all and every detail of every life that goes with them and they are nothing nothing nothing because these fragments of my true self are nothing these tiny mortal scraps are meaningless are nothing but I am Cadence Drake I am' Cadence Drake I am Cadence Drake—

"—I am Cadence Drake—" My voice, ragged with the strain, broke. I was alone inside my skull again. Hot tears wet my cheeks. "Oh, God," I whispered, and rested my face in my hands. I was mortal again, a shivering ape-woman crouched by her fire, staring up with terror at the stars. But I was still myself. I had not given up my mind or my will to the aching beauty of infinity. This body, this fragment of me, would not die drooling and gibbering in an institution because I had lost myself inside hyperspace. Not this time.

Aching with the loss of all that I had been and could never truly be, weighted with a lingering sense of profound desire, and still shaken from my over-self's bombardment of my identity, I rose and signaled my

route to the Spybee. Then I set my course for Galatia Fairing. We had a two-day trip through standard space to reach the traffic information clearinghouse. Due to the nature of the origami points, which occur at the universe's natural folds and which therefore are never near massive objects but always located at central points between them, planets are far less convenient than stations.

I sent my hail to Galatia Fairing and with it my request for records clearance; by the time I got there, everything would probably be waiting for me. Galatia Fairing sent me an inbound route and docking assignment. Once I set my course, I dropped into my seat and stared up at the stars through the now-clear ports. And I tried to shake off hyperspace. I went down to the holo room and got an infochip out of my private entertainment collection... one so old that the material on it wasn't even in full-density holo, but instead looked gauzy and sounded thin.

I slipped the chip into the reader and settled back.

Isas Yamamoto appeared before me, sitting in a soft chair in a brightly lit room. A pale-skinned, dark-haired child sat on his lap, kicking her legs rhythmically. She looked up at him from time to time, her expression worshipful. She was his daughter, about four years old at the time the holo was taken.

"This is my daughter, Akiko," he said, smiling at the person recording him. "And I am Isas Yamamoto, the inventor of the first successful hyperdrive engine, which other scientists are now installing into spaceships so that you and your children and your children's children will be able to travel to the farthest star."

I looked at his face. It was so kind. So caring. When he glanced down at his daughter I could see his love for her. I'd first watched this holo when I was seven; when I knew the truth about my fathers, when I was beginning to understand what I was, and when I first suspected that my mother would never love me. I saw this holo, and I made Isas Yamamoto my secret father.

Because of him, I longed for the stars even though I had never seen the stars, or even the sky. I dreamed of flying, soaring, escaping. I dreamed of freedom; because when Isas Yamamoto spoke of space, he believed it was a place of magic and wonder, and so it became that to me. A place of freedom.

"I figured out the key to breaching hyperspace while I was making Akiko a paper crane—like this one." He held up an origami crane. I sat in my holo-chair, an adult woman with tears welling in my eyes, listening to his voice and having him tell me once again the child's version of the story of the beginning of humankind's eruption out of the tiny system that had bound it in from the instant of its birth. I was like a child holding on to the blanket it long ago outgrew but could not leave behind. I knew my behavior was childish, even ludicrous. I didn't care. Without Isas Yamamoto, humanity would not have reached the stars. Without him, I would never have been free.

"Akiko wanted a crane," Yamamoto said, smiling down at his little girl. "And I was folding it for her—like so." He handed the finished crane to his daughter and took a sheet of paper from the little carved table beside him. He lifted it, up and made a crease in the paper, and then another. While he folded it, he talked. "It occurred to me that the nature of origami, that is, the art of folding paper, was very much like the problem humanity faced in reaching the stars. Origami is folding two-dimensional paper into three-dimensional objects. Space travel through hyperspace is the folding of a three-dimensional universe into four spatial dimensions to shorten the distances between points."

He held up the partially finished crane. It didn't look like much yet. "You see—I am taking something that was in essence two-dimensional, and I am changing it into something three-dimensional." He told a quick story about the Flatlanders, the fictional two-dimensional people who were bound to their

dimension, but who could be lifted free by a three-dimensional hand. He said he considered the argument that, just as no machine the Flatlanders could build in two dimensions could lift them free of their dimension, because it suffered the same constraints as they did, so too no three-dimensional machine could lift three-dimensional humanity into hyperspace.

"I do not believe people are creatures of three dimensions," Isas Yamamoto said. His voice remained soft, but now it gathered intensity. "People are more than their height and their width and their depth. They are more than the machines they build. Life is not a thing of three dimensions. It is not limited by up and across and back. Life encompasses space, and time, and it goes beyond that. It touches infinity. You sit watching me right now, and in another probability, another child who is also you sits watching another me. In another probability, another child who is also you sits where you are sitting, but that child isn't listening the way you are. In an infinite number of probabilities, an infinite number of children who are also you do an infinite number of things, and none of them can see or hear each other. So how can all of these yous do similar things? You are linked together through hyperspace. The infinite number of three-dimensional yous are all part of a single meta-you, whose home is hyperspace."

He smiled. "We believed hyperspace existed for a very long time. But people were certain that the only way to reach hyperspace was to blast into it with enormous amounts of energy, and no one thought humans could harness that much energy."

He held up the unfinished crane by the fingers of two hands. "We were trying to move beyond our dimension by blowing a hole in it and hoping the hole took us where we wanted to go." He poked at the folded paper with a single finger. Then he shook his head and smiled sadly. "There is no control in this method. The entire approach is wrong. Humanity doesn't want to make a hole in space. It wants to fold space into useful shapes."

He put the beginning of the crane down, and held out his hands, fingers spread. "And how do we fold a crane out of paper?" He wiggled his fingers. "Watch."

First he tried to fold the crane using only one finger. "This doesn't work." He tried it with a finger and a thumb, and then with one hand. Finally, shrugging and smiling, he said, "We don't need huge amounts of energy to make our crane. But we need two hands... many fingers... precise small amounts of energy applied from all sides to shape two dimensions into three." He creased, folded, tucked, and the square of paper became a serene white crane, wings spread. "And we must have the same many hands and many fingers, the same small precise amounts of energy applied to all sides of the three-dimensional universe to fold it into hyperspace."

"We have those hands. When I built my little, weak hyperspace engine, which I designed to apply pressure to one part of our universe, an infinite number of other Isas Yamamotos built their small engines. Each of us built a finger; together we built the hands; and with all of us working together from our own probabilities, we folded space and time into a shape we could use."

"Now we will have the stars," he said. "They're waiting for us. We'll touch them in my lifetime, and spread out into them in hers." He hugged his daughter.

The tears that had filled my eyes broke free and rolled down my cheeks. I stopped the interview; it was over and in the next part a scientist narrator told about Yamamoto's method for plotting the locations of the origami points—the thin places in the fabric of the universe where space and time could be most easily folded. Then it told of the first manned hyperspatial flight.

Isas Yamamoto had been right about humanity settling the stars in hisdaughters lifetime. He'd been

wrong about Old Earth's people reaching the stars in his own. He was a passenger aboard Alice's Looking-Glass, the first hyperspace ship.

The Looking-Glass successfully traversed hyperspace without requiring the predicted impossible amounts of energy. It followed the same short path Yamamoto's probes had taken, from one side of the moon to the other. The course was preprogrammed: go out, broadcast a prerecorded message, and come straight back. The ship slipped from one side of the moon to the other, sent its message, and returned, making Isas Yamamoto a hero whose name would live as long as men breathed.

But Alice's Looking Glass returned from her short journey incomprehensibly twisted and mangled. The four explorers inside lived long enough to babble about having been gods. Then they died, leaving hyperspace to long emptiness until we created a hull strong enough to withstand the enormous reshaping forces hyperspace applied.

I sat in the darkened holo-room, looking at the man I had chosen as my soul father. When I was ten, his story sang to me with the glories of invention and martyrdom. By the time I was fifteen, I yearned to follow in his footsteps. At eighteen, a terrible thing happened in my home, and my mother accused me and put a price on my head. I ran away, stealing some of my mother's money and taking Badger with me; my home city in my home planet still listed me as wanted for murder, kidnapping, extortion, thievery, and a swarm of lesser crimes. Death waited behind me for the woman I once was, but I reached my stars. And if hyperspace humbled me with the fact of my own insignificance, still I survived.

I was Isas Yamamoto's spiritual daughter, and I had followed my dream. I'd won the stars he desired. I had my own life, my own ship. If I was insignificant compared to my infinite, all-knowing meta-self, still this mortal iteration of me had not let the universe pound me into submission.

I sat up straight. This job for Peter Crane was going to pay off my ship, and leave me accountable to no one but me.

"I thought I'd find you in here," Badger said, and the lights in the holo-room came up.

"I'm too predictable." I rose and turned.

We hugged, and in that hug there was the wistful tenderness of one-time lovers who cannot be lovers anymore. "You aren't predictable at all most of the time. But when it has been a bad crossing, I know where to come."

"I survived it." I tried to sound invincible when I said it, but I don't think my intended air of invincibility came off too well. After the humbling fist of hyperspace, I yearned for Badger and for his human touch with a hunger akin to pain. I did not let myself see the kindred hunger in his eyes. I loved Badger, but I carried too many scars on my soul to give myself to anyone. I tried once, and I made both Badger and myself miserable. So I smiled a bright, false smile. "And how about you?"

"I'm still myself," he said. "I keep hoping that one of these days it will get easier."

We laughed together. We both suspected it would get easier when we died. Not before.

We walked down the corridor into the galley, and Badger told the shipcom to begin his meal. By the time we reached the galley, the reconsta unit, an old Berliner Reconsta-Chef, was humming to itself. While it built his meal, he leaned against the unit and his voice dropped to just above a whisper. "I have some interesting news. I created a tiny little passive steady-level trace to keep an eye on that... um..."

patch on our hull..." The chime dinged softly and he retrieved his meal from the unit. He settled into a seat so he could watch me while I ordered up my own food. "... I just wanted to see what it was doing, you know. It obviously is designed to use energy but it has no internal source of energy and isn't hooked into a visible external one."

He paused, waiting, and I gave him an encouraging nod. My own meal—Steaklite and Potatoline, Cornjoys and a steaming cup of Tea Magic—finished cooking and the Chef called to me in a less-than-compelling voice. "So... what did you find out?"

When I sat, he leaned across the long table, his face so close to mine that I could feel the warmth of his skin. "My probe reports that when we hit hyperspace, the patch came to life; it drew an unholy amount of power from the dispersal fins and used it to gather data out of the shipcom, digging through all sorts of private places and taking I-don't-know-what-all. It didn't leave any tracks. If it had known about my watchdog and had avoided it, it would have been the perfect security breaker. And when we came out and the dispersal fins started draining off all the accumulated energy from the crossing, the spy sent off a huge burst of data."

"Where? To whom? Surely it didn't beam the information back to Cassamir Station. It would take a hundred years to get there."

Badger said, "This was a tight burst transmission, very narrow beam. And in-system. Someone is already here ahead of us, and now whoever that is knows we're here, too."

Chapter Seven



A Galatia Fairing Port Authority security controller met me at the debarkation gate, did my security scan, and punched my temporary clearance badge into the palm of my left hand. It stung for a second. The dermabadge would work for my entire stay at Galatia Fairing. When I left, the security system would burst a short self-destruct message into it, and it would reduce itself to biodegradable components and flush itself out of my system through my kidneys.

Galatia Fairing guards its data.

Mydoppler didn't set off alarms, though it was the first device I've ever tried to smuggle through the Port Authority that made the trip. I ran it constantly, leaving it hooked straight into shipcom via a mole Badger tricked into the Port Authority power grid. I didn't want to overrun the memory of the dopplerchip, and I didn't know how long I would have to search for what I needed.

Long, painful hours, as it turned out. I ate three erratically spaced meals over twenty-four hours in the PA Commissary, finding them even more tasteless than the reconsta my own Chef served up. Between meals, I took stims to keep myself going and ferreted through databases, trying to account for all twenty-seven Stardancer-class ships.

I eventually achieved a headcount for all of them, but I lost six to convoluted routes and unmet destinations, and I had to wonder why the percentage of ships that wished to hide their destinations should comprise such a large part of the whole. This was precisely the scenario I'd hoped to uncover, but

I was hoping to uncover it with only one ship, not six.

I set the downloader to flag arrivals of any Stardancer ships at any destinations, unrelated to point of departure, and with that done, went for my fourth dreadful meal.

While I was forcing down Fishims and High Carbohydrate Concentrate, a woman came to my table.

She looked at the reconsta-dreck, made a face, and said, "Mind if I join you?"

Mydoppler was running. I didn't mind a bit.

"I've seen you in here three times since yesterday; we're evidently set on the same station-cycles, but I'm sure I've never noticed you before. Were you transferred?"

"I'm not on station cycles. I'm a spacer; since I arrived yesterday, I've worked straight through."

Her eyes widened. Pretty, friendly eyes. "I don't think I could do that. I'm a slave to sleep; if I don't get my six, I basically shut down."

I found myself telling her, "I'm captain of my ship. I have to be awake when things need to be done, and those things rarely fall on ordered hours."

"I don't suppose they do." She laughed. "I'm honored to meet you. Ships' captains always eat in the VIP Lounge. They have real food there. A captain who eats reconsta... you're the rarest bird who's flown through here in a long time."

Between shoveling in mouthfuls of the station sludge, I said, "Perhaps I'm the poorest, too. Until I own my ship outright, every rucet I save goes to make my payments."

"You own your ship?" She seemed stunned, and very admiring. "Is it a real ship? I mean a working ship. I thought corporations owned everything but pleasure yachts."

"Most of everything, but a few independents are out there. I'm one of them." I was flattered that she was so intrigued by what I did, but I was wary, too. I held out a hand to her. "My name is Cadence Drake. And you are...?"

"Unforgivably rude." She laughed and took my hand and shook it. "Fedara Contei. I'm one of the poor wretches whocollates data."

A gift from the gods, I thought. Here was someone who did for a living what I was doing clumsily and part-time. I wanted to spill my story to Fedara... and it was that desire that chilled like a block of ice in my gut and made me back off. Why did I like this woman so much? I never told anyone anything; currently I was being paid an exorbitant sum of money to keep my secrets, which certainly made not telling all that much more attractive. So what was it about her that made me feel I could trust her... that we could be such good friends?

I gulped the last bit of my reconsta and, bleary-eyed and muzzy-headed from lack of sleep, rose and smiled. "I wish we had more time to talk," I told her, and my voice sounded beautifully sincere. "I need to finish my search and get back to my ship, though. I owe my crew their pay by the week, and on the days when we're stuck in dock, they don't earn their pay."

Disappointment flickered in her eyes, but she hid it well. "If you have any time at all before you have to leave, here's my address. I'd love to have you stop by. Maybe I could even help you with your records search."

I took the datacard she handed me and was astounded to see that it was full-access. I could scan the card into the transport and it would deliver me to her door. Unless I missed my guess, I could scan it into her door and walk inside. I raised an eyebrow.

She smiled again. "Chemistry," she said, and her face, beautifully enigmatic, became beautifully seductive.

I swallowed hard and pocketed the card, but did not put it in my skinflap. If someone searched me, I didn't want the card to let out its "find-me" whistle. I was afraid I'd lose a leg that way—and one of my best secrets. "I doubt that I'll have time."

She pouted.

I don't click with women, and I still felt the pull of that pout.

"Just try."

"I'll try," I told her, lying like Hell's fiends and at the same time appalled that part of me wanted me to be telling the truth. As we parted company, she rested her hand on my shoulder and I fell into the deep, perfect pools of her eyes and didn't come up for air until I was entering my cubicle.

I stopped in the cubicle door, feeling lost. I didn't remember walking there. I didn't remember leaving Fedara. I looked at my com but I didn't know what time I'd gone to eat, so I didn't know how long I'd been... sleepwalking?

"This is ridiculous," I muttered. "I've got to get back to the Reward. I have to have some sleep. If I hadn't been so tired, I wouldn't have reacted so oddly to Fedara Contei."

I know I'm tired when I start talking to myself.

I put a seal on my work and on my cubicle and went straight home, annoyed with myself for reacting so oddly to a stranger who was obviously trying to pick me up.

Badger stood staring at me through the faceplate of the MEDix. And how the hell had that happened? I distinctly remembered going to my quarters when I got back to the ship. My quarters in no way resemble a MEDix. I mentally retraced my steps: the Galatia Fairing cubicle, the cafeteria, back to the cubicle, then to the Hope's Reward, and finally to my quarters. At no point in that itinerary did I detour through the medichamber.

I had a good memory, an excellent memory, and I resented the fact that it had suddenly quit on me. First details of the beating on Cassamir Station, none of which I could recall. The descriptions of my attackers, reduced to a giant and three pairs of compelling eyes. Then wandering from the cafeteria to the cubicle without remembering getting there. Now this. I shook my head, disgusted with myself.

"What happened?"

"I carried you up and plugged you in after I reviewed the doppler data in the shipcom." Badger looked like the ass end of a starship collision. I hadn't seen him so weary or so scared since we ran away from home. "I've been over every minute of that data," he told me. "I did stim and ran it at one-hundred speed so I could get through it. Cady... you stepped into something bad."

I waited.

He lifted the clamshell and helped me out of the MEDix. I was starving; I told the shipcom to make me something hot and filling, and when it said, "Your meal is ready," I pulled some very bad lasagna and a decent crosti pie out of the med room's wall unit.

"Bring that with you." Badger was heading for the door. "We need to go to the holo room now."

"So what's the big mystery?" I hurried behind him. "It's the woman I met in the cafeteria, isn't it? Fedara Contei? She's a member of the third party."

"The third party?"

I realized I hadn't told Badger about my conclusions. I quickly described the assumptions I'd made about the three men and the fact that I felt whoever they were working for would have to try to contact me again.

When I finished he said, "It fits. The woman who is pretending to be Fedara Contei is another representative."

"Pretending?"

"Fedara Contei is what she called herself, but that isn't who she is."

"Who is she?"

His lips pressed into a thin, hard line. "I can't find that out anywhere. She's erased every record of her original self from every database I can find. She's as invisible as the three men."

"If her cover is perfect," I said, "then maybe she's Fedara Contei." I didn't trust her and I still wanted to like her. Dammit, that didn't make sense. I didn't know why I had found her so compelling, and I couldn't imagine what might have made me want to bare my soul to her, but I couldn't deny that I wanted to find out she wasn't lying to me. Maybe I was hungrier for a human relationship, for human touch, than I'd realized.

"No. You'll have to see the doppler holo. You'll have to see what she did to you." Badger stared into my eyes, his own more troubled than I had seen them since we fled our homeworld.

My stomach knotted and ice crystallized in my blood. "She did something to me?"

He didn't say anything.

We dropped through the grav-chute to Deck Two and took the first right off of the central corridor. Badger already had the dopplerchip set up, with action paused at the moment where Fedara Contei and I got ready to leave the Commissary. The holo-room projected a life-sized tableau: me and the woman

who was perhaps not Fedara Contei posed amid dozens of non-players. In the glossy charcoal gray of the projected images, I didn't look so tired, and she didn't look so beautiful. I perched on the edge of my favorite chair and got ready to see myself turn and walk away.

That wasn't what my image did, though. It took a step forward and wrapped my arms around Fedara's waist, and Fedara dragged her fingers down the line of my spine and kissed me. I slammed my hand onto the chair console and the image froze. I stood and turned to face Badger. "That isn't what happened."

"Sit down, Cady," he told me, his voice soothing. "It happened, and it isn't the strangest or the worst or the most unlikely thing that did."

"No," I whispered. I probed and prodded at my memory, trying to bring the scene before me to mind. I might as well have been fishing in deep space; I wasn't going to get any bites.

"Sit, love."

I sat.

"Come home with me," Fedara said, and I watched her fingers trailing tiny circles around the small of my back.

My image smiled at her, and nodded, and leaned forward to kiss her. "I can spend a little time with you," it said.

"I didn't do that," I told Badger. "Dammit, dammit, dammit! I went straight to the cubicle where I was working, and then, because I was so exhausted, I came home."

He shook his head, face grim. "Keep watching."

I kept watching. I watched myself follow the stranger home. I watched her sit me on a chair, as if I were an automaton, and then I watched a slender, graceful young man step out of another room. I sat in that chair, staring zombielike at nothing, and the man said to Fedara, "You got her."

And Fedara said, "I told you I would," in tones so bitter and angry I expected the man to recoil.

Instead, he smiled. His smile was sweet and innocent, as beautiful as any I had ever seen. "My beautiful love. You'll do anything for me, won't you?"

"Go to Hell."

"I am the Prince of Hell, my darling. I bring Hell with me."

"I brought her to you. Are you going to let me die now?" Fedara asked him.

He laughed. "Only when you're a good girl. You're going to do something else for me, and when you have done that, if you do it exactly the way I tell you to, I'll let you die." He leaned against a wall, ankles crossed, hands shoved into pockets, unshakable smile on his handsome face. "She's going to fall in love with you, and she's going to take you aboard her ship. You'll go with her wherever she goes, and you'll do whatever she wants you to do, and when she completes her task for Crane, you'll go back with her. You'll kill Crane, and then you'll kill her. And then I'll set you free."

"Why make her fall in love with me, Danniz? She doesn't go that way and neither do I. Why not find some man to do what you want? Or do it yourself?"

"This is much more amusing for me." He left the room and returned with a small syringe.

Fedara hissed. "That isn't—?"

"Of course not." He cut her off, his expression disgusted. "I don't need to compound my problems. This is simply a larger dose of the drug you gave her. It will make her suggestible for the next forty-eight hours. Within that length of time, you should be able to insinuate yourself aboard her ship." He leaned over me and injected the drug, and I sat there like one of the brain-dead. "You are going to fall in love with Fedara Contei," he told my double, and my image's head bobbed up and down in agreement. "You are going to bring her aboard your ship because she needs a job, and because you love her. You are going to keep her with you for the rest of your life." My head kept bobbing. Yes yes yes yes yes.

I stopped the holo. Now I knew why Badger looked so scared. "How did they drug me the first time?"

"Fedara either slipped the drug into your food or administered it through skin contact when she touched you. Perhaps it happened when you shook hands. I found traces of the drug in your bloodstream when I did a complete scan on you. I had the medichamber cycle your blood and I nanoscrubbed your tissues so none of it is left. You should be free of the compulsion he tried to implant in you."

"How would she have kept up the charade once the stuff wore off? Drugs like that don't effect permanent changes."

Badger gave me a disgusted look. "Think, Cadence. She would have been living with you. She would have been your lover. She would have kept you drugged, you idiot."

"Wouldn't you have said something about me being with another woman?"

"Of course I would have. That's why I suspect Fedara would have taken her first opportunity to kill me."

And I thought, yes. That's how it would have gone. Badger would have died, I would have spent the rest of my unnaturally short life as someone's malleable, unsuspecting slave, while I led her to the man who had hired me so that she could kill both of us. "He wanted her to kill me. And Crane. Badger, she's going to be waiting for me when I get back to my cubicle, and when I don't react the way she expected—"

"You aren't going back to your cubicle," he told me. "I explained to the woman who gave you your credentials that you were poisoned while eating in their commissary. I provided the original of your medichamber readout, which very clearly indicated poisoning, and then I showed her your pass record, which proved that you didn't leave the records compound until you returned here and collapsed in my arms. When I told her I intended to take the incident public, you would be amazed at how willing she was to get me the information you wanted, in spite of Galatia Fairing's unbreachable security precautions."

"You're a shit, Badg," I told him, grinning. I hugged him. "And I love you."

His eyes were sad. "I know. And I love you too, moron..And now we have all the information on Stardancer ships that we're going to get, so before Fedara Contei and her friend Danniz come looking for us, let's escape."

Chapter Eight



Badger and I spent two days analyzing the regions where the suspicious ships had appeared. From that list, I made up what we called the Short List: the subset of planets in the vicinity of any of the ships' appearances that did not belong to any sort of planetary alliance or government; that emphasized local autonomy and the rights of individuals rather than the rights and needs of government; or, that had a reputation for providing cover stories and false papers.

Our Short list wasn't all that short, but it was manageable. There were twenty-seven planets on it. That meant a lot of jumping through hyperspace; a lot of getting personal with parts of myself I didn't want to know. I figured it would take us two or three weeks to make the jumps, talk to people who would recognize a Stardancer-class ship, and determine which ones had been visited and which ones hadn't. From that point, tracking down the right ship would probably be tougher. But if I had a hot ship with brand-new fake papers, I would make sure to be a model citizen with that ship for a while, so that I didn't set off anyone's alarms. I figured at least I'd be able to revert to tracking by Spybee.

Badger and I went first to Contessa, an ugly terraformed planet in a marginal orbit around the star Gadmiration. Contessa didn't allow any physical contact between itself and the outside universe. It guarded its privacy with unreasoning violence, and though Spybees watched its origami points and tracked the ships that passed through its domain, it kept their information to itself. I had Badger, however. He used his worm program and extracted the log data from both Contessan Spybees. A Stardancer had been through but had been refused docking and sent on its way. With relief, for neither of us relished dealing with the virulently insane Contessans, we crossed their warped little planet off our list.

From Contessa, we went to Up Yours, a beautiful habitable planet which had been settled by Libertarians and which maintained its anarchistic way of life in spite of tenacious buyout attempts by the nearby Beatrix Corporate System, a repressive hell-in-space if ever there was one.

We were marginally luckier on Up Yours. A Stardancer had just been through, though it didn't match any of the registrations Crane had given me. The name it had given on entry was the Mystic Dove. Badger wormed its destination information out of the Spybee; then we docked, hopped a shuttle, and dropped into Up Yours's main spaceport town, Freeport. I wanted to see if I could track down anyone who might have done alteration work on the Stardancer. I was hoping to find anything that could link the Dove with Corrigan's Blood.

Badger and I went through Customs, which consisted of one cheerful man checking our baggage for plants or animals that might destroy local crops or herds, and giving us a quick briefing informing us that the government of Up Yours wouldn't extradite its citizens for acts committed against offworlders. We were advised to keep quiet if we didn't know what was going on, to avoid fights, to carry weapons, and to watch our manners. We'd been informed of the weapons requirement before, and so were both wearing heavy-duty stunners. The Customs official tested both weapons to be sure they worked, then gave them back to us.

"That's to be sure that you won't be able to say you weren't armed and warned when you came through Customs," he said. "Just in case anything happens to you."

And then we were through and carrying our bags, heading for one of the two hotels the customs official had said was both clean and cheap. Freeport was pretty, but archaic. The houses were primarily built of wood, or sometimes of sand-brick, or rarely of stone. Nothing was molebonded. Steam cars crowded the narrow brick streets, growling and honking at each other. The walkways weren't moving walkways. They were made of brick, or sometimes concrete, or even packed earth. And I smelled wood smoke in the air, and saw it rising from chimneys in the houses and shops; and a man passed me, pulling a wagon full of wood cut into short lengths, shouting that he had dried wood for sale.

The men and women and children I saw wereworking, and most of them appeared to me to be working hard. Physical laborers toiled over the streets, the buildings, the vehicles, everything. I saw no bots. Few machines, and those simple.

The settlement worlds often opt to survive on their own resources rather than taking out loans from some of the larger planetary investors; this gives them unheard-of autonomy. But the people of these worlds often burn trees and walk on packed dirt.

UpYours was a world where everything was available, and everything was legal. I would have said it was like my homeworld in that regard, but when I thought about it I realized it wasn't entirely true. Neither personal vehicles, nor private weapons, nor political information was available legally on Cantata. My home deals in leisure and entertainment, and in decadence. UpYours dealt in something else, something that had an air of stoicism and integrity about it.

The people walked with a relaxed, confident gait that I had seen before only in spacers, people who could leave the petty rules of the worlds and stations behind. Most people wore some form of projectile weapon strapped to a hip. A few didn't, but I didn't assume they were unarmed; only that their weapons were of other, less obvious varieties. Still, though I saw plenty of weapons, I saw no action that made the need for weapons obvious.

I realized I'd been expecting rampant anarchy; mobs of people screaming through the streets; mass hysteria. I wasn't expecting the well-ordered traffic and overall sense of purpose and industry I found. The calm prosperity of the place clashed violently with everything I had been taught about the importance of relying on government intervention to maintain social order.

Following directions, Badger and I turned the corner at Wilkes Street and found the Espulin Hotel. It had obviously been a luxurious place at one time, but it looked like a woman who had worn the same lovely party dress for ten years; it was a very fine woman who had known better days.

We went in, bags slung over our shoulders, and asked for two rooms.

The desk clerk gave the two of us a little half-smile when we signed the register. "So how are things in the universe beyond?"

Badger laughed. I sighed. We were so obviously off-worlders. I said, "They're about the same as ever."

"Glad I'm here then," the man said, and chuckled. "If you got captain's registry or crew pass, you save ten percent."

I fished my registry chip out of my travel pack and Badger produced his crew pass. The clerk nodded and recorded our information. He gave us the rate, which was very reasonable, and took our money. "Off-worlders get more interesting-looking every day," he said as he handed us our door-cards. His Interworld Standard had a strong accent, but he was understandable.

"Bodyfashions change quickly," I agreed. I didn't see any point in taking offense. Maybe he didn't know about the Maryschildren. Maybe if he did the fact that I was one didn't matter to him. The more regressive settlement worlds don't do much with gengineering, so someone like me stands out worse than usual, but he didn't seem to be mocking either of us—only commenting. And while I was the way I was through no fault of my own, Badger's look was designed to be shocking in the heart of the fashion universe. In the settlements, he might as well have been an alien. He would have been disappointed if no one had noticed.

"Get many off-worlders here?" I asked.

The clerk shrugged. "The usual, I suppose. Traders, settlers, people looking for a place to hide. Freeport isn't a busy place. Grown a bit since I settled here. That was fourteen-fifteen terrayears ago, but it's still small enough to be likable. People know each other, watch out for each other." A little frown played across his face as if something bothered him about that last statement. He didn't add anything, though.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and fingered my door-card. "It's quieter than I expected."

"Was for me, too. Thought I'd see gunfights in the streets and have loose women throwing themselves on me the minute I set foot on the ground. Found out most people here just want to be left alone. Anyhow. What are you looking for while you're here?"

"Information on some people who left before we arrived," I told him.

"Depending on the type of information, I might be able to point you in the right direction."

"I'm trying to find out what a ship registered as the Mystic Dove was doing here."

"Sea or space?"

"What?"

"The ship. Sea or space?"

My blank expression made him laugh.

"I meant, was the Mystic Dove a sea ship or a space ship, but from the look of you, I'd say I probably already know the answer to that."

"Space," I told him. "I never considered ships in the seas." I grew up in a world without seas, a world claimed from the wastes of space, a world of tunnels hollowed out of rock and filled beneath the frozen, inhospitable surface with teeming, clawing life. Surface-based cities still felt alien to me, and the new idea of ships floating through vast stretches of open, uncontrolled water gave me the shivers.

"Space ships are easier," he said with a smile. "We have a huge seaport, and if you weren't lucky, you'd have to track down officials for half a dozen lines to find a sea ship. Space ships, you go to Space Registry. Corner of Bright Street and Fifth. You'll have to go there anyway to get your own departure clearance. When you go in, ask for Lucy. She can help you go through the records."

"Lucy," I repeated. I couldn't shake the picture of ships that sailed through water, threatened by gravity and storms, by reefs and winds, where the captain and crew worked out in the open, not separated from

the elements that could claim them without warning. I promised myself that I would see a sea ship someday.

Evidently my distraction showed, for Badger stepped in. "Thank you," he told the clerk, and added. "We'll look up Lucy." He tucked his arm into the crook of mine and led me away.

Our rooms connected through a central door; 318 and 320 at the end of a long, narrow hall. We passed two older women pushing a cart in front of them; the cart was full of used linens and cleaning supplies. This hotel, too, used human workers instead of bots. I wondered if all of them did.

The human workers did a decent job, though. Our rooms were clean and pleasant; they smelled of fresh air and laundered sheets. Neither offered any amenities beyond a bed, a bathroom, and a locking door, but I didn't need any amenities. All I needed was some information and then I could get on my way.

I'd set my agenda for my own convenience; I put the least developed worlds first, because they would be the most bother and I figured they wouldn't keep records as well as the more progressive worlds. Old trails were more likely to dry up and disappear altogether in such places. I hoped that after two or three more stops like this one, Badger and I would be able to do the rest of our investigating via shipcom from the comfort of the bridge.

Badger threw his bag in the closet in his room, then joined me in mine. "Still don't think there's any chance we'll find what we need today? I hate the idea of spending a night here."

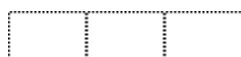
"We'll be here the night," I said. I wasn't optimistic about getting the details on the Mystic Dove in just a few hours, but spending a day on Up Yours and in the small, quiet city of Freeport didn't bother me; I'm less dependent on entertainment than Badger. I'm always willing to brood if I don't have something better to do.

"I'd offer to stay here and break into the com system while you went out, but there's no com system to break into." He walked to the side of my bed and tapped a green box atop which rested a handset. The handset was attached to the box by a twisted cord. A round dial with ten holes in it and numbers beneath each of the holes completed the thing. "This," he said, "is the local excuse for a com system. No computers at all. If you pick up the handset, a person answers on the other end. It transmits sound by changing the vibrations of a diaphragm into electrical impulses."

I winced. I was willing to understand Up Yours's unswerving pursuit of independence, but I wished that pursuit didn't interfere with my convenience.

"We'll find out what we need to know," I said. "It might just take us a while to figure out how."

Chapter Nine



I'd expected a graying matron with thick ankles and a thicker skull. Lucy turned out to be in her very early twenties, bright, and energetic. She was short, slender and delicate-looking, with skin of a natural medium brown, long straight black hair, and surprisingly light brown eyes. I noticed Badger noticing her, and wasn't surprised. She wasn't the sort of woman I associated with him, but there was something

compelling about her; it suggested she was deeper than her perky smile and her unremitting cheer.

We spent the half hour we needed on paperwork and got our return validations cleared so that when we were done on Up Yours we could go back to the Reward. Then I said, "The man at our hotel told us we ought to see you about a ship we're trying to locate."

"Where are you staying?"

I told her.

"That would be Mike, then. Isn't he nice?"

Badger and I both agreed that he was.

She smiled. "Well, Mike's right. I'm the person you need to talk to. Until a week ago I had a supervisor, but one day she just quit without notice; ran off and disappeared. She'd talked about some man she'd met—I guess she decided he was a better deal than this place." A shrug, that suggested she could sympathize with her ex-supervisor.

"I got an unofficial, unpaid promotion, which is to say I got all of the work but none of the rewards." Another perky smile, this one saying, Aren't I bearing up well under all this responsibility? "Since then, I've handled the records on every space ship that deals in Freeport."

I thought, That's more than I wanted to know about your life, Lucy. I wasn't overwhelmed by her suffering, either. The whole time we'd been in the office, the phone hadn't rung and no one else had come in. I'd worked harder in my sleep. Still I said, "That sounds difficult." Then I asked her, "Can you tell us about the Mystic Dove?"

I saw sudden curiosity in her eyes. "The Mystic Dove? I remember that name. The ship just left a few days ago."

"I knew we didn't miss it by much."

"Friends of yours?"

I considered lying, but claiming friends you don't really have can get you into serious trouble. "No. This is just business."

"Oh." She nodded, apparently satisfied, but I could tell she was still curious. She said, "Let me see what I can find." Her smile to me was polite, but the grin she flashed at Badger indicated more than simple manners. She tucked a few stray strands of hair behind her ears and walked to her file—a box filled with paper. Over her shoulder, she said, "That Melatint is a good look for you, Strebban. It's a little startling at first, but it emphasizes your perfect bone structure. Before I came to Up Yours, I used to love to be Melatinted." While she talked, she thumbed through stacks of paper cards. "My homeworld imported some of the best looks from Meileone and New Paris. Have you seen Starburst? I had that... metallic cobalt blue with these little light things the artist embeds in the skin. They flicker and sparkle. It was absolutely rush! The best look I ever got—I wore all my seethroughs with it and everybody was just stunned."

She shoved the drawer she'd been digging through closed and pulled the one beside it open. "I must have put the Dove's file back in their first arrival date instead of moving it forward to its most recent visit.

Give me just a second; I'm sure I can find it." She glanced at Badger again, then returned to her rummaging. "And your hair is terrific. Don't you shock yourself when you wash it, though?" She didn't seem to expect an answer. "L, L, L, M! Right. M-A... M-E... hmmm. M-U... M-Y... And here it is. Mystic Dove." She pulled several cards out of her file and looked at them. "Cargo of agricultural bioenhancers. Nanoinjections for local crops... genetic diversifiers for herds that have become too dependent on a limited number of bloodlines..." She looked up and said, "Nothing really interesting there. Is there anything else you needed to know?"

"Dates the Dove was here?"

She told me. The Dove had fit the parameters of my data search on Galatia Fairing because it had been to Up Yours within the time frame I'd specified, but it had also been there a month before the Corrigan's Blood was stolen. So it wasn't the ship we were looking for.

Badger and I could have left right then. We knew what we needed to know. But the Dove had taken pains to hide its route, and it was a light luxury cruiser with a listed cargo of agricultural supplies usually sold in bulk—and that bothered me. So instead of leaving I said, "Would you mind giving me the names of the captain and main crew... and the brands of the bioproducts they were selling if you have that information available."

"I can give you crew names. Those are a matter of record. Captain Janna Bell; crew is Kite Harrigan, Ti Demont, Paley Kotak." She wrote the names down and handed the slip to Badger. I didn't recognize any of them when she said them, but I would have been considerably more surprised if I had. When she finished, she said, "The brand names of the Dove's bioproducts cargo you'd have to get from people who bought from them."

"Do you have any record of who those people might be? Or any idea how I could find them?"

"I could call a friend of mine from the Farm Bureau. He'll know who farms. He might even know who bought from your people. Let me just phone him."

She made the call. "Kenjon Deel, please." She waited for a moment. "Ken. Hello. This is Lucy Zabada... Oh, fine... no, she hasn't shown up yet... I hope so, too. Look, I have a favor to ask you. I have some folks over here who need to speak to you about the Mystic Dove... Mmm-hmmm. Business. They need to know something about the cargo... The bio-stuff... No. No. I don't think so. Seems pretty low-key." She laughed. "Yes, you can. So you can see them in an hour? Thanks, Ken. I owe you."

She hung up and beamed at both of us. "You're all set. Kenjon Deel, who is the head of the Farm Bureau, will see you in an hour." She wrote down the address for us on another sheet of paper, and handed that to Badger, too.

He glanced at the paper, then frowned. "What's this?" he asked, pointing to a number written along the bottom of the sheet of paper.

Lucy blushed. "My phone number," she told him. She met his eyes and her expression became intent. "I'd love to take you around and show you Freeport this evening. Call me if you get the time."

I was waiting for Badger to say, "I'm sorry, we're going to be working," but that isn't what he said. His eyes went round and his breath got faster and he began to nod. "Yes," he said. "Yes. I'll call you. I'd love to see Freeport with you."

He'd accepted? A date with her? I wanted to break his kneecaps. I contented myself with elbowing him hard in the ribs, which he didn't seem to notice. "We have a lot of work to do if you're going to keep your date," I said, and damned if Lucy didn't grin at me like she'd just gotten one over on me. There are, of course, women in the universe whose sole interest in men stems from getting one up on the women those men are with. I hadn't picked Lucy out as one of those. I decided I wasn't as perceptive as I needed to be.

Badger finally came to his senses and I dragged him out the door.

We flagged down a steam taxi and asked the driver to take us to the Farm Bureau. The midday traffic in the narrow streets was nose-to-tail, moving at a ridiculous crawling pace; it made me long for worlds where all transportation was public and regulated. The idea of unlimited numbers of private vehicles driven by people who weren't professionals bothered me almost as much as the idea of ships in the seas. But I couldn't allow myself to be bothered by traffic.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"What?" Badger said.

"Accepting a date with Lucy."

"What? I wasn't going to, but then..."

"But then your flagpole raised the flag and the rest of you stood at attention because your poor old brain couldn't think, right? God, Badg... we were going to work tonight."

"We found out what we needed to know. You're doing something unrelated to our investigation now."

"Maybe. But I think the Mystic Dove's behavior needs to be looked into. It isn't precisely our case, but it's a ship that is acting the way the ship we're trying to find would act. I just don't want to come here and not follow up on the things we're finding, and end up missing something we needed to know because we weren't thorough. You can never have too much information."

"I know all of that!" He snapped at me, then turned and looked out the window. "I knew all of that when I said I'd go out with her."

"Then why did you say it? It isn't like she's the woman of your dreams."

"I don't know why I agreed to go with her," he said. "I really don't. I can't even say it seemed like the right thing to do at the time; I knew I wanted to say no, but I said yes. She's pretty, but I can't remember the last time I heard someone talk so much."

"Fine. So you can cancel then."

And Badger turned on me, his face twisted with a fury I'd never seen in him before. "No!"

I sat for a moment staring at him, unable to think of a thing to say. "Are you feeling well?" I finally asked.

The fury drained from his face, replaced by an expression of bewilderment. "I don't think so. No. I'm not. Something's wrong with me."

I nodded, feeling like I was treading on land mines. "Do you want me to help you?"

He nodded.

"Do you want to go with Lucy tonight?"

Badger did the strangest thing. He shook his head, a vehement no, but he said, "Yes."

I started to get scared. I didn't know why. The whole incident seemed trivial. A man accepts a date with a woman; nothing to it. But my gut insisted that whatever was going on with Badger, it was something bad.

"I'm going to figure out a way to help you," I whispered.

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

The taxi driver was sliding his vehicle up against the curb. "Farm Bureau," he said.

"Thanks." I paid him, and the driver looked at me for a moment, worry evident in his eyes. "Watch your friend," he said. "What he's doing... he looks sick to me."

"Me, too."

The Farm Bureau was an ugly building on a street of ugly buildings. It was squat and square and built entirely of yellow brick. A few tall, narrow windows punctuated the otherwise smooth surface, their black glass sheets reflecting warped images of the two of us back at us.

I could see Badger staring at his reflection, while I trailed a few steps behind with one hand on the metal rail.

Five steps from the top, Badger stopped watching himself. He stopped on the stair and rested a hand on my shoulder, so that I stopped, too. "She's out to get me the way the way Fedara Contei was out to get you."

My hand tightened on the cold metal handrail. The statement hit hard as a gut punch, and my breath slammed out of me even as my stomach flipped with sudden nausea. We hadn't been careful enough, perhaps because I felt that when we eluded Fedara Contei, we eluded our problems and the "third party." I'd forgotten that we would be recognizable to anyone who wanted to find us on this world of plain-faced, plain-skinned people.

I thought of the pieces of paper Lucy had handed to him. What if one of those two slips of paper was merely the vehicle for the same contact drug that had changed me into Fedara's slave?

Had Lucy touched him? I couldn't recall a touch. That didn't mean it hadn't happened.

"I'm fine for this, anyway." He looked at me, a frown creasing his forehead. "We'll go back to the hotel when we're done. And then I'll... I'll figure out what I'm going to do."

We went into the Farm Bureau building and asked to speak to Kenjon Deel. The young man who took our message came back out and told he'd be with us in a moment.

Kenjon Deel turned out to be about my height but twice my weight, with all of it carried in dense muscle. He looked like a heavyworlder or a bodysculptor; he had a hard, mean face and cold eyes. "You're late," he said, and his tone of voice was neither welcoming nor polite.

I felt Badger stiffen beside me. I smiled, though, and held out my hand. "The traffic was terrible. I'm Cadence Drake." Deel didn't take my hand, and after an instant I let it drop.

Badger nodded. "Strebban Bede." He didn't offer his hand.

Deel said, "Tell me what you want." The rest of what he was thinking seemed to be, "then get out of my office." He didn't say it in words, but I swear I could almost hear him think it.

"We're looking for the brand names and lot numbers of some agri-bio products some of your farmers might have bought from a ship called the Mystic Dove." I added the request for lot numbers because a convenient and basically uncheckable lie was forming in the back of my mind.

"Why do you want the information?"

"The nanovirus designer who supplies agricultural nanoviruses for a number of agri-bio producers has reported a programming error in some of its products," I said. "These products received wide distribution but affect only a narrow band of any producer's supply. The designer, who wishes to remain anonymous, has sent out product warnings to its customers, but in order to limit its own liability, the company has also hired investigators to track down those shipments." I smiled.

Deel thought about that for a moment. "Oh," he said.

"The Mystic Dove took on cargo at about the right time to have received contaminated shipments. However, we have been unable to reach that ship, which apparently has a new form of origami drive and which has proven nearly impossible to track. While we would prefer to deal directly with the traders, in this case we have contented ourselves with trying to locate the cargo before it can do any damage."

"And that's why you came here?"

"Yes."

Something went out of Deel's face—the edge of suspicion or hatred I had seen there, perhaps, or the fear of outsiders who might come in to make him look bad. I didn't know what, precisely, but he had changed his opinion of us. Now he was on our side.

"We maintain records on cargoes brought in from offworld for just this reason," he said. "If you'll wait a moment, I'll gather the records."

He was back fast, carrying a tan folder full of loose pages. "Our dealings with the Mystic Dove," he said, and started spreading out sheets on his desk. "These are the ones from its most recent visit." I glanced down the first cargo sheet. Purchase description, amount, lot number, identity of local buyer, and down at the bottom of the sheet, origin of the product and name of the producer.

Cassamir Station. Cassamir Biologicals.

I flipped through the next page, and the next, and the next.

Cassamir Biologicals.

Every single sheet listed the same origin, the same producer.

When I finished looking through the purchase records, I smiled and handed Deel his papers. "Well, this visit was a waste of our time," I told him, "but of course that's good news for you."

"Our purchases are safe?"

"Cassamir Biologicals isn't on our list," I said. "They didn't receive any of the contaminated nanovirus." I held out my hand again and this time Deel took it and shook it. We exchanged smiles. Badger shook his hand, too.

"Thank you for your time," I said.

And Deel spread his arms expansively. "Thank you. If there had been anything wrong with our purchases... well, out here, we would be the last people to know."

Badger and I left the office quickly after that. I had the feeling that Kenjon Deel had been hoping we would stay and chat, but something about him made my skin crawl.

Badger said, "Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

"That the ship and the cargo are from the same place? That someone would use what is supposed to be an executive pleasure cruiser as a transport for agricultural goods? That most freelance traders carry a range of goods from different suppliers but this one had products from only one company?" I wrinkled my nose. "Or was there another coincidence that occurred to you?"

"That pretty well covers it."

I looked around for a taxi. The fresh air was making me nervous. I hate weather; I hate equally the feel of sun on the back of my neck and the feel of rain on my skin. I don't like the brush of the breeze, whether it is warm or cold. I don't like open sky above me or spreading vistas in front of me. Up Yours was full of weather, and vistas, and wild animals that ran down the streets and flew overhead. I was not used to animals, and they frightened me. I watched birds lighting on the Farm Bureau roof and taking off and I reminded myself that people had lived with such conditions for as long as there had been people. Reason didn't help. I was a creature of closed-in spaces, and I didn't want to change.

I finally saw a taxi and waved it down. When we were seated and the taxi was on its way back to the hotel, I said, "It strikes me as strange that this ship's registration doesn't check out, and that the Mystic Dove is going to a great deal of trouble to hide its trail, and that its cargo is something as mundane as agricultural products."

"Doesn't make sense."

"No. It doesn't."

"They're selling something else," Badger said after a long pause.

"I know. Something illegal."

"There isn't anything illegal on Up Yours."

"Then they're selling something that's worse than illegal. Something that's dangerous, or subversive, or..." I ran out of ideas.

"Something that isn't our problem," Badger said. "Our problem is the Corrigan's Blood, which hasn't been here. We found out that the Mystic Dove is up to something that doesn't make sense, but we don't have any reason to look into it any further. So just let it drop."

The traffic back to the hotel wasn't as bad as it had been. Late afternoon sunlight slanted off the low roofs and turned every wooden wall to gold. I admired the trees; unlike animals, trees never chase anyone, and they don't bite. And the scattered trees that adorned yards were tall and stately and verdant; sun-splashed, they looked like medieval monks had been at them with endless sheets of gold leaf.

Mike was in the lobby. "How did it go?" he asked us, smiling.

I wasn't sure how to answer. "Well... we found out that we wasted our time coming here." I shrugged and tried to look nonchalant, and at the same time studied him to see signs that he'd set us up. "The Mystic Dove wasn't the ship we were looking for."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I didn't see any sign of interest in his eyes.

"I'm starving," Badger said. "Are there any good, inexpensive restaurants nearby?"

"I thought we were going to get room service," I said, stepping on the arch of his foot and digging an elbow into his side again.

"The hotel's restaurant is good," Mike said. "If you want to eat in your rooms, I'm sure you'll be satisfied with the food. There are places outside that I can recommend if you'd like to try them, but there aren't any that are as good and as cheap."

"Room service sounds good." Badger pulled away from me and rubbed the arch of the foot I'd stepped on along the back of his other leg.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Call down when you're ready to order. You'll find menus in the nightstands."

We went to my room and ordered an inordinate amount of real food that turned out to be better than the food at Ferlingetta. I decided I was going to hate going back to reconsta.

We sat at the table in my room and stuffed food in our faces, and I began to hope that the problem with Lucy had passed. But as the sun set behind the buildings to the east of our building, he pulled the paper she'd given him out of his pocket and began fingering it.

In the next room, the phone began to ring. Neither of us moved to get it. Badger played with the paper; I watched him.

"What are you doing?"

"I ought to call her," Badger said. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"We're going to work. We can at least com in the names of the captain and crew to the Reward so that

the shipcom can initiate a search on them."

"I ought to call her."

"You're going to tell her you can't make it tonight?"

He got a stubborn expression on his face and stared down at his hands.

"You're going to call off your date," I said again when he didn't answer me.

And he said, "I have to go." His eyes were haunted.

I'd spent some time thinking about what I was going to do if he insisted on going. I slid my hand over my stunner, strapped to my waist, and drew it on him. "You don't want to go."

The phone in Badger's room had stopped ringing, but it started again.

His head was shaking, no, no, no, but he was still standing. "I'm going." He drew his own stunner.

I shot him and he dropped to the floor, unconscious.

"Damn it." I stared at him, lying sprawled on the carpeted floor, eyes only partly closed so that I could see a line of white between the parted eyelids. I kept my stunner pointed at him and reached out with a toe to kick his stunner out of his reach. When it was directly beneath me, I squatted and retrieved it, never taking my eyes off of him.

Then I sat on the bed and tried to figure out what I ought to do next.

The phone beside me rang. I picked it up and figured out which end was for listening and which for speaking. "Yes?"

"This is Lucy Zabada. I'm trying to reach Strebban Bede. I called his room but he wasn't there, so I asked Mike to ring your room." She sounded so friendly, and so perky.

Dissemble, I thought. Dissemble. If she doesn't suspect that you're on to her, she won't be able to do anything to hurt Badger or you. And you can get out of here and back to the ship alive. I smiled and said, "He's going to be so sorry he missed your call. He was getting ready to go out, and realized he didn't have a few things he needed. He just left to look for a store. He'll be back soon; I'm sure he'll call you as soon as he gets back."

"He went out?" She sounded disbelieving.

"Yes?"

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a long, uncomfortable moment. "He shouldn't have been..." She cut off whatever she'd intended to say. She was silent again. "That's not pos—" Another, briefer silence. "I'll drive over," she said, and I could feel resolution in her voice. "I'll be there in half an hour. Less, if traffic goes my

way."

Chapter Ten



He was lying on the floor, unconscious; I'd hit him hard, with the stunner set all the way on full, so he wasn't likely to come around any time soon. When he did move on his own, he was going to feel like hell.

Lucy Zabada was on her way to our hotel. She'd called both of our rooms; I couldn't assume that Mike had put her through to them without telling her which rooms they were, or, if he had kept that information to himself, that he would continue to do so once she arrived. Even though we would have had to find her eventually in order to get our return passes validated, he was the one who had recommended we speak to her about the Mystic Dove. Maybe he had ulterior motives for doing so.

So I couldn't go to him for help.

I couldn't hide in my room and wait for morning.

Unless I wanted to chance a fight with Lucy that would be on her home ground, with the rules leaning in favor of her because she was a local, and because she knew what the rules were, while I had no idea, I couldn't just stay put and face her down.

I had to run, taking Badger with me when I did. I had to figure out some way to keep our exit from looking suspicious. And I had to come up with something fast.

I re-stunned Badger and opened the connecting door between our rooms. I grabbed his bag, which was not yet unpacked, then my own. Then I called down to the front desk.

A woman answered.

I said, "Is Mike there?"

"He left about an hour ago," she told me. "He works the day shift."

And I thought, Yes !One lucky break. "Could you please send a grav pad up to my room?"

"We don't have grav pads. However, if you'll tell me what you need, I'm sure I can find something that will work."

"I need to take my friend to a hospital. He acquired chronic gastrocomestosomes on Brighton Five and he ate somethings at supper tonight that aggravated the condition."

"Acquired chronic gastro—Ishe contagious?"

"No."

"Does he need medical attention immediately?"

"Yes."

"What did he eat? Do you know?"

"Something from the kitchen here."

"Oh, God! I'll call an ambulance for you."

"No. A taxi will be faster, and they won't be able to do anything for him in an ambulance that I can't do in the back seat of a taxi."

"All right, then. I'll bring a wheelchair up myself. You're in room 318?"

"Yes."

"I'll be right there."

She made excellent time, and the two of us dragged Badger into the wheelchair, a rickety-looking contraption that had none of the safety features of a grav pad. "Are you sure he'll survive the trip in a taxi?" she asked. She was young and nervous; I guessed she didn't have much experience with either hotels or emergencies.

"I'm sure. The disease is serious and he needs to have someone look at him as soon as we can get him to a hospital, but he won't stop breathing on the way."

"And it was something he ate from our kitchen?"

"That isn't the main issue right now. There are certain types of foods that set his disease off, and he avoids those foods, but evidently one was used as an ingredient in something else. It probably won't be a problem for your hotel." I didn't try to reassure her—she would ask fewer questions and remember fewer details about us and what we did if she were frightened.

"Oh, God," she said again.

The elevator ride and the trip through the lobby, with her carrying my bag and me carrying Badger's bag and pushing the wheelchair, was a nightmare. I kept expecting Lucy to pop up, take one look at Badger unconscious in the chair, and do something terrible.

And what did I think Lucy Zabada was going to do? Standing there hanging on to Badger in the wheelchair—Badger who was unconscious because I stunned him, no less—I found myself trying to see Lucy Zabada as a threat. She was six inches shorter than me, eight years younger, thirty pounds lighter. And the thirty pounds I had on her was all in muscle. What was she going to do? Attack us in the lobby? Pick Badger up and drag him away from me? Talk us to death?

As the hotel manager ran out to flag down a taxi, I almost convinced myself that I was being an idiot.

But if Lucy Zabada wasn't convincingly sinister as the villain of our drama, the events of the past few days made it impossible for me to ignore her as a threat. Badger had mentioned a possible connection between what Fedara Contei had tried to do to me and his reaction to Lucy, yet he had pulled his stunner on me because I tried to get him not to go out with her. Granted, I'd drawn first, but only because he was

doing something I knew he didn't want to do, and he didn't seem able to stop himself.

And maybe there was no connection between Lucy Zabada and the woman, Fedara Contei, who had been hired to drug me, insert herself into my life, and then kill me. It didn't matter. If there wasn't any connection, I was willing to err on the side of caution.

The night manager waved to me; she'd caught the attention of a taxi driver.

She, the taxi driver, and I all lifted Badger into the back seat. I grabbed my bags and crawled in beside him.

"Saints Hospital is closest," the manager said.

The driver glanced at me. He was the same driver who had taken us from Lucy's office to the Farm Bureau.

I gave him a noncommittal nod.

He pulled out. "You don't look like you want to go to Saints," he said when we were moving.

"Spaceport," I said. "The manager was trying to be helpful, but you're right. I need to get him to our ship. We have what he needs to make him better onboard."

"Uh-huh," the driver said. "Doesn't look like much wrong with him to me, but whatever you say."

I wasn't in the mood to talk. I was trying to watch behind us without being too obvious. I hoped there would be a shuttle leaving soon; I hoped it would have seats; I hoped I would be able to get Badger into the MEDix and get whatever Lucy had done to him out of his system. Mostly I hoped I was overreacting and being an idiot and making a fool out of myself over something that was nothing.

The driver helped me carry Badger into the lobby of the spaceport and put him on a seat. "You look like someone in trouble to me," he said.

"Yes. Well." I started rummaging through my bag for cash. "I'm probably not. Everything is probably fine, and I'm being completely paranoid and ridiculous."

"Maybe not. There's been some trouble around here lately, and a lot of it has come to offworlders," he added. "Lots of offworlders found dead. A few accidents, some ugly murders, people going where they had no business being and ending up corpses because of it."

Ice crystallized in my gut. Those weren't the words I'd been longing to hear. I looked at him. I waited.

He shrugged. "I have reasons to look into this. I've uncovered some interesting facts."

"What kind of facts?"

"Twelve offworlders who registered at your hotel in the last ten months didn't survive to go home. None of them died at the hotel, and no one at the hotel appears to have been involved in any way. Causes of death have been various and frequently ruled accidental. A maid ended up cleaning the rooms of three of the people who died, three months in a row, and had to deal with offworlders each of the three times. It struck her as being strange. If she hadn't come to the police with it, I don't know that anyone would have

suspected a problem. The police didn't link the hotel... The signs always pointed in other directions. We don't get very many offworlders here and they don't attract much notice... but to lose twelve of them is unheard of."

"Just my hotel?"

"No. One other, as well."

"So why is a taxi driver looking into something like this?"

He smiled and arched an eyebrow. "I'm not a taxi driver." He flashed some sort of ID badge at me. "Stephen deGuerres. Plainclothes officer, Freeport city police." He put his badge away. "I've been driving a taxi and hanging around the hotel, hoping to get lucky. Something tells me I just did. So. Get your tickets. The next shuttle won't leave for forty minutes or so. In the meantime, I'll stay with you. You can tell me what you're running from, and I can make sure whatever it is, it won't be a problem." He patted the weapon at his hip.

So I got the tickets. I watched him, I watched Badger, I watched the door. The man who sold me the tickets asked, "What's wrong with your friend?"

"Sleeping off too much fun," I said.

"Oh. Well, you seem awfully nervous."

"I had to take care of him while he was having too much fun. I'm tired and in a bad mood." My voice was sharp and cold. I was sick of people looking at me and seeing inside. Where was the Cadence Drake who never showed emotion, never lost her composure, never gave in to nerves? Wherever she was, I wanted her back.

I rejoined deGuerres.

"Any problem?"

"He was nosy. That seems to be my biggest problem today. Everyone is so damned nosy."

"I'm not going to break your streak. Who did you see while you were here?"

I told him. He took handwritten notes on paper. I thought the process looked slow and impractical, but I also know that some of the things I do aren't entirely efficient. And I found a certain pleasure in watching the even flow of bold black lines from his pen.

When I finished, he repeated the names back to me. "Mike, last name unknown, the assistant day manager of the Espulin Hotel. Lucy Zabada, the assistant director and, because of bizarre circumstances, director pro term of the Freeport Department of Spaceship Registry. We found her manager's body yesterday, incidentally. A particularly brutal murder that someone went to a great deal of trouble to hide. We're investigating that now, but haven't made our discovery public yet. Kenjon Deel, the Offworld Acquisitions manager for the Farm Bureau. Anyone else you can think of?"

I shook my head.

"How did you choose the Espulin Hotel?"

"The man in Customs recommended it and one other when we asked him what was cheap and clean. It was the one within walking distance."

"Customs man," he said, writing that down. "We shouldn't have any trouble finding him. Any chance you remember the name of the other hotel?"

I thought hard, but came up empty. "No."

"Could it have been the Daydreamer Inn?"

It had been. I nodded.

DeGuerres pursed his lips. "That's the other one where we've been losing people. And you say every single one of these people passed you on to the next?"

"I didn't think of it that way at the time. They all seemed very helpful. But..." I nodded again, then told him about Lucy and the phone number, and Badger's response, and everything else I could think of, right up to the phone call from Lucy and the fact that she had been on her way to the hotel. I left out only my reason for being in Freeport.

When I was finished, deGuerres smiled slightly and shook his head. "Shot him to keep him from going."

"I just stunned him."

"Still a ballsy thing to do. Effective, too."

"But it leaves me without my backup, and with a hundred-plus kilos of dead weight to haul around. And I don't imagine Lucy is going to be fooled by the hospital story for very long."

"I don't suppose she'll be fooled for a minute. The question is, what is she going to do when she figures out you're on to her and you ran. As for your friend being backup, if he couldn't keep himself from running to her, he would be worse than dead weight. He'd be a liability."

DeGuerres looked at his chrono and said, "If she's fast and smart and lucky, she could be here at any time. You have another fifteen minutes before your shuttle boards." He frowned. "Let's get both of you out of sight."

I nodded.

DeGuerres commandeered another of those rickety wheelchairs and we strapped Badger into it. Then he led me out of the lobby, down a short corridor, and into a small, roped-off waiting room. "This is reserved for VIPs and private flights. We qualify as VIPs because I say so." He grinned at me.

Nerves and all, I managed to grin back.

I put Badger's and my bags down and dug through them. From mine, I pulled out a detachable watersilk hood. It was navy blue, and if I tucked the ends of my hair inside the back of my jumpsuit, pulled up the collar, and attached the hood, my hair would be impossible to see. Then I wouldn't be a dark-skinned, golden-haired woman, of which there seemed to be none in Freeport. I would simply be a dark-skinned woman, and there were plenty of those.

I found Badger's hood in his bag, attached it, and pulled it down so that it covered most of his face. I leaned him slightly forward so that no one would be able to see that he was vivid green, put his bag in his lap and tucked his hands beneath it, and hoped that the little wheelchair belt wouldn't break.

DeGuerres gave me an approving smile. "Good idea. You aren't so obviously offworlders now." He pulled out his weapon, opened the cylinder, checked to be sure it was full of projectiles, then snapped the cylinder shut again and slipped it into his holster. "This is merely precautionary. If the girl is smart, she won't come here after you... but I like to know I'm ready. What kind of armament are you carrying?"

I showed him Badgers and my stunners.

"Just stunners?Shit." He gave me a disgusted look. "I'm going to give you a little advice you didn't ask for and that you probably don't want. But one of these days it might save your life. People have shields for stunners. They have little turnarounds that will bounce the shock back on you—and if your own stunner takes you out, you're going to be in a hell of a fix. Get a real weapon." He tapped his own pistol. "Get something that will kill; something that will blow a hole in the person who is coming at you."

I made a face, and he sighed.

"You don't want to kill anybody, and that's fine. Nobody who is any sort of a human being does. But you don't want to die, either. So you get a deadly weapon, and you learn how to use it. And then you follow these three rules. One: never go for your weapon unless you or people around you are in deadly danger. Two: never draw except to shoot. Three: never shoot except to kill. Don't yell, 'Stop or I'll shoot.' Don't try to wound your attacker."

I rested my hand on top of his and said, "I appreciate your concern. But I've been in a dangerous line of work for close to seven years now, and I've never had to kill anyone, even though people have tried to kill me. That's important to me... that I can do what I do without taking human life."

"Then you've been lucky. And if you don't face reality, one of these days your luck is going to run out." He glanced down the corridor. It was clear. He looked back at me and said, "There's no sense in my giving you one of my weapons right now. Even if you were willing to use it, you haven't had any practice with it, and you couldn't shoot it with any accuracy. Keep your stunners ready. If we're lucky, you won't have to use them. And when you get home, get yourself something real."

I nodded. I was sure he believed what he was telling me, and was convinced that he was doing me a favor. I appreciated his concern. That didn't make him right.

"Shuttle Flight Eight is now boarding. Ticket holders, please report to the main gate. Shuttle Flight Eight is now boarding. Ticket holders, report with your boarding passes to the main gate."

The fifteen minutes had passed quickly. I smiled at deGuerres and shrugged. "So that's that. Either the terminal was too public, or she was never after us to begin with. This could all have been a lot of nerves and a lot of worry for nothing."

He smiled. "I didn't mind waiting with you—in fact, I enjoyed it. And maybe something good will come of it. Until you, the only leads I had were corpses. If any of the names you gave me are related to the murders, we're going to be way ahead in our investigation."

I slung Badger's and my bags over my shoulder again and started pushing the wheelchair down the

corridor. DeGuerres walked beside me. "Thanks for helping us out," I said. "Not being alone made waiting here a lot easier."

"It's a shame you aren't staying... I've been hoping to meet a woman like you for a long time." He looked down at Badger and chuckled again. I liked the sound. "Stunned him for his own good. Ballsy."

We stepped out of the corridor into the main lobby. To my right, about forty people stood over by the main gate, forming a ragged queue. Flight assistants checked boarding passes. People chattered.

In the center of the lobby, families said good-bye. Hugged. Cried.

To my left, a few people walked toward the broad doors that led outside. I glanced at them, then away. Pushed Badger toward the main gate. And inside of me, something clicked.

"That was them," I whispered.

DeGuerres, who had been casually scanning the lobby, didn't flinch or show any external signs of having heard what I'd said. But so quietly that I almost couldn't hear him, he asked, "Where?"

"The door. Lucy, and Mike, and Deel."

"The three of them together? That would seem to indicate a conspiracy." He didn't seem to look anywhere but at the gate in front of us, yet he managed to identify them. "The blue dress, the red jacket, the long black coat?"

"That's all three of them."

"They stopped by the doors. Looking around. Keep a little in front of me; I'll shield you."

We walked at a steady pace. He dropped a step back and rested a hand on my shoulder. Not his gun hand, I realized.

I tried to imagine shooting through this crowd. Families... parents and grandparents and children. Lovers. Friends. It would be disaster. Complete horror. I didn't look back, but I discovered I could see the door behind me reflected in the long bank of windows in front of me. The same windows through which I could see the shuttle that was, I hoped, going to get me out of there. Lucy, Mike, and Deel still stood by the door. Watching. Looking from the crowd of people heading toward the gate, to the road up which latecomers would have to drive to reach the terminal.

All three of them. I wondered where the Customs official was, and wondered if he was in on this.

The three of them were in conference. Heads close together, glancing around the lobby, out the door, around the lobby again. Deel pointed in our direction. Mike and Lucy nodded. Deel leaned against the door. Mike and Lucy split up and started working their way through the lobby, looking at people.

"The three of them are out here because you got close to something," deGuerres said. "They're taking risks; somehow you pose enough of a threat to them that they're willing to be seen together, and willing to come after you in a public place."

"I only asked them about that one ship and what it was carrying."

"I know. I know where to start looking now. I didn't before. But before I can start looking, I need to be sure you're safe." He frowned and slipped behind me a little farther, blocking me from the view of Lucy, who was working her way toward us.

The line moved forward. I shoved the wheelchair forward, bumped the calves of the woman ahead of me. It was just a fight bump; I was nervous and not paying close enough attention to the wheelchair. She turned and glared at me and said, "Watch where you're going." No one offered to let me move forward with Badger. No one did anything that might help us.

Lucy was behind and to the right of us. Mike was behind and to the left—still looking the wrong way. The line was ragged, the families stood close, we moved steadily toward the door, they moved steadily toward discovering us.

Closer.

Closer.

DeGuerres shifted, gave my elbow a quick squeeze, and slipped away. I couldn't watch him directly without turning so Mike could get a good look at my face. Nice Mike. Right. So I watched deGuerres's reflection in the glass. He hurried to the main desk, where a bored attendant was busy selling a late ticket to an older woman who appeared to be in a big hurry. He pushed past the woman, flashing his badge. Said something to the attendant.

The line moved forward. Three people stood between me and the corridor to the shuttle.

Lucy disappeared down the side corridor that led to the VIP area where the three of us had waited. Mike kept coming toward us. He studied every face he passed. He was looking for Badger, looking for me. A woman stopped him, thought she knew him, and in the instant before he smiled and shrugged a genial smile I saw something hard and cold and evil in his eyes. For just that instant he was someone I had a reason to fear. I slouched to make myself shorter, tipped my head a little further forward so the hood draped over more of my face, and rested my hand on my stunner.

And I thought, This is the other part of why I carry a stunner. If I have to shoot him, I know no innocent bystander is going to end up dead from a stray bullet or the bounce from nerve disrupter fire.

I watched him in the glass. He was looking directly at the line. Not at me specifically, but at the line, and he wore an intent expression on his face.

"Attention, all visitors. Attention, all visitors." I jumped a little; I had been focusing so hard on getting to the gate that the sudden loud announcement startled me. "Anyone who does not have a boarding pass must leave the lobby immediately. I repeat—anyone who does not have a boarding pass must leave the lobby immediately. All passengers board quickly and quietly. All passengers board quickly and quietly! Clear the lobby. Clear the lobby." I caught sight of the attendant waving at the man who was checking boarding passes. It was a frantic wave, that said, "Get them onboard now!"

Suddenly we were being waved aboard, while behind me I heard the words, "... bomb in the building..."

And then we were on the shuttle and the shuttle doors were sliding closed behind us even as the shuttle engines whined and the shuttle pulled out and moved away from the terminal as fast as it could go.

The attendants helped me get Badger into his seat. The moving shuttle threw us around a little, but no one got hurt. And I dropped into my own seat, sweating and relieved and scared all at once. That had been close. Too close, and potentially lethal—and I didn't know what it was about. If deGuerras hadn't come up with the bomb threat story, I might not have made it to the shuttle seat. I stroked the rough red cloth of the seat and stared out the little window, at the receding terminal, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

Chapter Eleven



I had most of our next course entered into the shipcom when the MEDix released Badger and he returned to the bridge. My first sight of him took me back to the time when I was fifteen and he was nineteen. He'd been a poet then, quiet and withdrawn. He'd had a lot of talent, and I'd loved to listen to the poems he created, and I had loved the fact that we shared a deep understanding of the pain of being different.

He was as much of a freak as me; not a Maryschild, but a genetic misfit just the same. He was an albino—it was something the prenatal gene scans should have picked up but didn't. He wouldn't have been born if the technician had been a more careful, I suppose, and I was grateful for that single small error. Without Badger, my entire life would have been empty.

Standing beside me, his skin was so luminously white the bridge's lights made him seem to glow. His hair was white, too, and coarse. He squinted at me, pink irises raw-looking.

When the two of us were lovers, he left his skin natural. It was a sign of the way things were between us; we didn't have anything to hide. When I almost got him killed and realized that the reason I hadn't been sufficiently careful was because my attention had been on him instead of on the man we were dealing with, I broke off the romantic relationship. He tried to convince me for a long time that the incident hadn't been my fault. I knew it had been; he finally gave up trying to patch things up between us; and the next thing I knew he was Melatinted and Chromaglossed and eye-sheened, and beneath that colorful shell, the quiet, poetical boy I knew and loved was gone.

I liked the new Badger. He was fun and funny and flip. With his Melatinted armor, he could let himself be anyone, and he did. I think his heart became invulnerable.

But I loved the old Badger, and at that moment the old Badger was close enough to touch.

I didn't touch him, though I longed to. Instead I asked, "How did the tests turn out?"

"Clean as the day I was born. Cleaner, probably." He shook his head. "There wasn't a trace of any sort of drug anywhere in my system. I went over the MEDix readouts and checked for anything anomalous. I brought printouts for you to look at—sometimes I see things in hardcopy that I miss on a screen. But I haven't missed anything."

"Then what happened? What did she do to you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I still feel it a little—the compulsion to call her."

"We can quit this. We'll get another job, find another way to pay off the Reward."

"No we won't. We're going to keep this job. We are simply going to look for what we're supposed to be looking for from now on. No more peripheral investigations, no matter how interesting they might be." He leaned over my chair and rested his cheek against mine. It was the pose of lovers, not friends—but I didn't pull away from him. I still loved him, and no amount of rationality could change that. I loved him; I just couldn't let myself have him.

I said, "You're right, I guess. It wasn't looking for the Corrigan's Blood that got us into trouble that time."

He gave me a little squeeze. "Exactly. Cadence?" His breath was warm on the side of my neck, and he smelled faintly of Field and Forest, which was the scent he kept in his MEDix.

"What?"

"Thanks for stopping me. I think you saved my life."

I leaned against him and sighed. "I'm glad you aren't angry with me."

I finished programming our course, and sent it to the station. When I got the go-ahead, I put the ship on auto with a ten-minute warning before the origami crossing.

"We're heading for Smithbright's World next," I told him. "If you'll take us through the point this time, I'll head down to my quarters. I haven't had any sleep since we left the ship."

He kissed the top of my head. "Get some rest. I'll come down and check on you when we're through."

"Fine. Keep an eye on that spy-patch on the hull, too, would you? I wish we could get somewhere to have it removed." I wanted to know if the device sent any more messages.

Badger muttered to the shipcom and a holo of the device began spinning above the shipcom display. "Done."

I heard the warning over the com as I was settling into my bunk—the countdown to the origami point. I braced myself, futile as that always is...

And then I was infinite. I touched all of time and space, and my problems and fears became nothing. Eternal and godlike, I was beyond the reach of my fleshself's pain. I saw my pasts and futures, my frail and feeble strugglings in myriad lives, and I, as my greater Self, was both sympathetic and slightly amused—to watch my hungry, desperate mortal selves strive so hard and achieve so little.

And the me who was Cadence Drake fought to swim in the powerful current of immortality, to keep my head up and to keep free of the seductive undertow of absorption into the Self. It was so beautiful to know that I would go on forever, and so terrible to know that the part of me that fought through the pain of existence as Cadence Drake would never be only Cadence Drake beyond the few brief, flickering instants that my fragile fleshself survived. I would be absorbed into the greater whole and would cease to exist.

While those truths seared and scarred me, the Reward broke through the origami point back into "real" space.

Badger came down from the bridge after a while and found me calm and in control of myself. He, too, had gotten rid of the residue of his fall from immortality. We greeted each other calmly. "I put her on auto," he said. "The bug didn't do anything this time. Maybe it was only designed for the one use, though I think we should still have it removed the next chance we get. And when I wormed the Spybees, one of them said a Stardancer called the FireEater had been here. Exactly the right time frame to be our ship."

I said, "Good. So we haven't wasted this trip."

"The FireEater may not be our ship, but it's one we have to check. Before we get to Smithbright's World, would you mind helping me do my tint? The last time I had to do it myself, it turned out hideous."

I remembered that time—after an emergency trip to the MEDix, Badger decided to do himself over in Wingun's Black Cherry Pearl. He came out looking like a cherry with a bad disease. I said, "I'll help."

Home Melatinting always turned out splotchy, but I did a better job of it than he did. I could reach all those hard-to-get-at places. He needed to have his eyes redone, but that wasn't something either of us could do. He was going to have to wear light-shield lenses for a while; they would protect his eyes, but they weren't a comfortable alternative to sheening.

In the rec room, he pulled his supplies out of one of the lockers, and started digging through tints. "Shimmer blue?" He held up one mela-inject unit for my inspection. "Or a high-refraction metallic gold?"

"Brown."

"Brown? But that's so... ordinary."

"Smithbright's World is a little more backward than Up Yours," I told him. "From what I've read, the culture is completely different. I scanned info from the shipcom, figuring that we were probably going to have to go to the surface. The world was founded by political and religious Luddites who followed a woman named Teresa Smithbright. She believed in the union of church and state and the elimination of personal freedom for the good of the masses. She was also, from the little I could find about her, a big believer in sin, and evil, and serious punishment for sinners." I thought about the articles I'd read—from her history, I had to believe that the woman had been a dangerous lunatic.

Before the bans on outside reporting, she'd ordered members of her society executed for a list of "crimes" that ranged from adultery to cheating on income taxes to practicing sorcery to being vampires to not having enough children. She had apparently gotten more paranoid and psychotic with every passing year, and just before Smithbright's World ejected all United Worlds observers and shut down communication with the rest of the universe, her own people had marched her out to the square she'd used for public executions, and had burned her at the stake. I didn't think Smithbright's World was the place where we wanted to look like outsiders.

"I hate looking drab," he said.

So I told him the details of what I'd read.

"I'll be drab. Maybe things have gotten better since they cooked Mother Smithbright, but why take chances?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"You don't look like a natural woman... So... you going to lighten up so your skin matches your eyes and hair, or are you going to do the eyes and hair to match the skin?"

"Eyes and hair. I don't want to get into anything complicated."

"Makes sense. Do me in... oh, CalaSkin's Nonreflecting Medium Almond Number 3, I suppose. That's about as boring as color gets. Hair in Kasai's Blended Dark Brown. What about my eyes?"

"Wear the hazel lenses. They won't stand out."

He sighed. "Promise me that when we finish this job, we'll go to the best bodyartist in the universe. I want something spectacular to make up for this."

I laughed. "I swear on my heart and soul. The very best. Who is the best, by the way?"

"Claudia Caldwell. Old Earth. She just won the IGABA's top award, the Derma. She's expensive, but worth every rucet."

"IGABA?"

"Inter-Galactic Association of Body Artists."

Badger would know a thing like that.

"I've been wanting to see Old Earth anyway," I told him.

I got to work; the process was long and complex enough that we were almost to our destination by the time I finished. Badger looked... well. If you knew what you were looking for, you could tell that he'd had a Melatint applied by an amateur. If you didn't know about Melatinting; if, for example, you lived in a culture that didn't go in for body art, Badger simply looked like a man with slightly blotchy skin. I'd seen a pale woman who'd been exposed to the rays of her planet's sun and who had received second-degree burns from the exposure who had looked much the same... although pieces of her skin had been peeling off. That had been disgusting.

Badger looked at himself in the holo, turning his image from front to back and side to side. He made faces but he didn't complain out loud. Since he was done and I wasn't, he handled the incoming requests for ship identity and the docking while I went down to my quarters and changed my hair. I gave myself deep brown eyes and glossy black hair to match my coffee-brown skin. I hated the feel of the lenses in my eyes. Still, I was doing this for the Hope's Reward. I kept reminding myself a little discomfort in the present would pay off with incredible freedom in the future.

Then I inserted a new chip in the doppler recorder beneath my fleshtab, packed my kit of weapons-that-didn't-look-like-weapons, because Smithbright's World didn't permit anyone not in the military to own weapons, and had the shipcom cut me a credit chit for a few thousand rucets.

Smithbright's World was still young and thinly settled. It had one country, five major cities, and only one spaceport. Kerrill Station supported that spaceport, but as stations go, it was nothing. It had a place to eat, a place to do paperwork, someone who was willing to take our money and exchange it for the utterly worthless local currency, and a few shops with shoddy goods and dreadful prices. We picked up local clothing that would be appropriate for our trip down to the capital city, Pincada. The fabrics were

stiff and uncomfortable, the colors drab and muddy. The shirt I bought, a gray stretchy affair with long sleeves and a flocked inner surface, itched and made me sweat; but the saleswoman assured me that the weather in Pincada was cool and drizzly this time of year, and that I would appreciate the warmth. The pants she sold me were a dreary shade of blue; the material was so thick and unworkable that the makers had clamped bits of metal at the corners of the pockets and seams to hold them together. "Durable," she said of the pants. "They last forever."

I could believe it.

She completed my outfit with a heavy pair of boots made of animal leather and soled with hardened tree gum, and thick socks "to keep you from getting blisters on your feet until you break the boots in." I didn't take her up on her offer to outfit me in local-style underwear. I wasn't intending to become friendly enough with anyone on the surface to make the cut of my panties an issue.

Badger came out of his dressing room wearing clothes that were, if possible, uglier and coarser than mine. "You're sure people dress like this?" he asked. "It isn't a joke to make us look ridiculous when we arrive?" His mediocre skin job looked right with his ugly clothes. He wore what the saleswoman called a "sweat" and a "dungaree," and he looked miserable.

The saleswoman's smile was strained. "These are work clothes. You said you were going to work, and that you wanted to look like everyone else as soon as you arrived." We both nodded. "Then you'll be fine."

We didn't feel fine.

We boarded the shuttle to Pincada. On it I saw four obvious offworlders. Two sales reps from Huddle House Intergalactic, their hair done in matching silverflash and their matching executive uniforms holoprojecting the spinning claws of a spiral nebula overlaid with the HHI logo, whispered to each other and subvocalized into their compacs. They were selling quality dining to the universe but they were obviously representatives of a culture the people on Smithbright's World had willingly left behind; I wondered if they would have any luck.

Two young men in the primitive clothing of their religious sect—stiff white shirts, black pants with sharp creases, and bits of black cloth that dangled around their necks—looked out the shuttle windows, silent. I recognized them as Mormons, one of the sects that had spread as quickly as civilization itself when humankind went into space. Perhaps they would find a home on Smithbright's World.

The rest of the people were dressed much as we were dressed. I was relieved. We blended nicely. These people had the weary faces and tired walks of people returning home from long, hard journeys. One young couple settled into their seats, rested their heads against each other, and were asleep before we left the station. Two men, both big and brawny, tapped the infosccreens built into the seats in front of them, catching up on the events that had happened near their homes while they were away. I caught a few bits about a gory murder linked with a series of similar crimes, the scores of some team sport, and a political advertisement extolling the virtues of one candidate while brandishing the vices of another. The touch-screens were a bit more technologically progressive than I'd expected, but the contents on those screens fit the profile I'd begun to make of Smithbright's World.

These were the sort of people who depended on news. UpYours had been a hotbed of news, and so was this backwater hole; personally, I thought news was despicable. It was publicly supported gossip, invasion into the lives and sufferings of strangers, and the love of it represented an unconscionable desire to destroy the privacy of people whose lives had been thrown into turmoil. Civilized worlds eliminated or

downplayed news, replacing it with various forms of entertainment that didn't prey on the sufferings of the less fortunate.

I turned my attention to the last two passengers on the shuttle, a mother and a whining child who sat at the back. The woman bounced the boy on her knee and sang a song to him in a minor key, soft and plaintive and eerie. The words of the song were no doubt intended to quiet the boy, but in combination with the unsettling melody, they made my skin crawl.

"Hush, now, hush, for night is falling.

All outside is dark and queer,

Hush, child, listen, spirits calling

Beckon those whose words they hear.

"In the dark and in the silence

Come the ghosts who night roads roam,

Whispering, 'Come meet us, meet us,

Follow us, we'll take you home.'

"Hush, boy, hush, for if you're quiet,

Ghosts won't creep out of their tombs.

They don't steal the quiet children

From warm beds and from sweet rooms."

The boy was irritable and tired and that song didn't make any visible impression on him. Maybe he was too young; maybe he'd heard the song before so many times that he'd ceased hearing it at all. But I tried to imagine being a child and going to sleep thinking about ghosts that would come and steal me out of my bed if I made a noise.

God. I hadn't even reached Smithbright's World and already I wanted to leave. Badger, sitting in the seat beside me, gave me a look that said he'd pay to join me.

I wasn't any more impressed when, after a long, rough shuttle ride, I got my first look at Pincada. We had to step out of the shuttle directly into weather. The air smelled of ozone and sulfur and a dozen chemical smells I couldn't recognize, and of wet earth and animal waste and rot. Cold wind and drizzling

rain ate through my "sweat" and my "dungaree" and straight into my bones. I wished instantly for even heavier, stiffer, uglier clothes if only they would keep me warm.

All of us walked across the paved landing pad to the Customs terminal, up slick wet metal steps that rang and creaked as we ascended them, and into a large gray-painted room lit poorly by an insufficient number of bare glass balls. Water dripped through the ceiling in the center of the single large room, forming a small, mud-tinged, oil-slicked lake in the center of the floor. There were no chairs in the room. There were four doors, two of them glass: the one we'd come in, and another that led out to a high wire fence topped with rolls of spiked wire. The other two doors were solid, and were on the side of the building that had no windows. On one door was painted the word "Office" in Standard and half a dozen other languages, on the other, "Interrogations."

I had the feeling this was not going to be the same sort of carefree pass-through I'd experienced on Up Yours.

A soldier in a black uniform stood glaring at us from behind a large, dirty table that was the only furniture in the main room. A second soldier, also in a black uniform, though without the decorations or black braid worn by the first, leaned against the wall in a position that let him watch all of us at the same time. He cradled a weapon—some form of energy cannon—in his arms. A line had formed on the opposite side of the table, curving to miss the lake and the dripping ceiling. Badger and I were at the back of the line.

The men who had been unloading the cargo from the shuttle when we'd disembarked now brought it in and dumped it on the floor beside the table. One of the two went into the office, but the other one stayed. He lifted the first bag in the pile onto the table. It was glossy and obviously expensive. I was betting on a Huddle House executive to claim it.

"Thanassa Tang," the decorated soldier said.

The female Huddle House rep stepped forward.

The soldier took her papers and went over them carefully. When he finished, he nodded and handed them back. "In order," he said. Then he opened the bag while she watched, and started spreading things out on the table. He didn't say anything else until he came to a portable holoplayer. He held it up to her. "What is this?"

"A holoplayer," she told him. Her back was to me, but I could hear the smile in her voice when she said it. She was being bright and perky, trying to project the image of Huddle House even in this festering backwater of civilization. "I use it for my presentations."

"Not here you don't," he said. He tossed the holoplayer to the man who'd brought in the baggage. That man turned without a word and started to carry the device toward the office.

"I see," the woman said. She took a breath. When she spoke again, her voice was still perky. "May I have a receipt for that, so that I can pick it up when I leave?"

"You forfeit contraband," he said. "You don't get it back."

My stomach started to twist.

"But," she said, and I wanted to stuff my fist in her mouth to keep her from saying anything else. The

soldier against the wall had straightened up when her mouth opened again, and his attention had focused on her. She didn't see it. "You didn't have anything in your literature that said holographic equipment was contraband."

"In our literature? Since when are we required to explain ourselves to the universe? Did we ask you to come here?" the soldier asked softly.

Just say you're sorry and shut up, I thought at the woman. Or don't say you're sorry—but for God's sake, shut up.

"No," she said, oblivious to the tension in the room—oblivious to everything but her determination to make her stupid point, "but it seems that if you permit people to travel to your world, you should tell them—"

I saw the decorated soldier's eyes flick right, to the soldier who waited by the wall. I saw the soldier on the wall nod slightly and begin to step forward.

"—what they are and are not permitted to bring with—" Her voice cut off with shocking suddenness as the second soldier grabbed her by the shoulder, shoved the butt of his cannon into her ribs, and said, "Move."

He marched her toward the interrogation room while the rest of us watched. I saw her colleague shift his weight, and I heard him clear his throat, as if he were getting ready to protest. Behind me I heard the unmistakable click-scrape of a projectile round being cocked into the chamber of a weapon. I turned my head very slowly, and found that another soldier had taken up position behind us, and his weapon, primitive compared to the energy cannon but still lethal, now pointed at us.

The churning in my stomach worsened.

The woman said, "Wait! I'm not going to make an issue out of a piece of equip—" and the soldier slammed his fist into the side of her head. She dropped to the ground, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, and he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her through the Interrogation door.

In the brief, awful silence that followed, one of the local men who had been reading news from a long sheet of paper turned in line to the other one. "Offworlders," he said, and his voice was full of scorn.

The soldier at the table said to all of us, "When you come to our world, it is your responsibility to know what you can and cannot bring with you. If you carry contraband, I will confiscate it. If you question my legal right to do my job, you will wish you hadn't."

The baggage handler threw all of Thanassa Tang's things back into her bag and carried the bag to the Interrogation room. When he opened the door to toss it in, screams poured out. "—oh, God, please don't! I'll give you anyth—" The door closed again. In the utter silence that followed the closing of the door, my heart could only hear the echoes of her screams.

The baggage handler returned and placed another bag on the table, this one plain and thin and threadbare. "Glory-With-Us Anders," the soldier said.

The woman with the child walked forward, the little boy trailing a few steps behind her. In her movements I saw no fear... no empathy for the woman in the interrogation room... no distress at the insanity of what the soldiers had done... at what they were doing. "Brother," she said, dipping her head.

He nodded. "Welcome home, sister." He said this without any trace of irony, and she accepted it in the same manner. He gave her papers a cursory once-over, then began going through her bag, carefully unpacking the clothing in it and laying each item neatly to one side. When he finished, he replaced things in the same manner. "Is someone waiting for you or will you need to call?"

"Family waiting," she said. The little boy tugged at one leg of her dungaree, and said, "Momma, I gotta pee."

The soldier smiled down at the boy, handed the woman her bag, and said, "Toilet is out the front door and first building to the left."

"Thank you." Mother and son strolled away as if nothing had happened. As if this were the way worlds ought to operate.

Badger's hand slid into mine and I laced my fingers through his and held on tightly. We'd brought nothing with us but a change of clothes each, a few light weapons disguised as personal items, and the compacs that we wore around our wrists that kept us in touch with the Hope's Reward. I hoped the sleeves of our "sweats" would keep those hidden, or that they looked enough like the timepieces I saw on the wrists of the local men that they wouldn't occasion any notice.

"Cadence Drake," the soldier said, and I walked forward, feeling my mouth go dry and my heart start to pound in the back of my throat.

He looked at my papers; he took his time with them. Then he looked at me. "Ship's captain?"

I nodded, not saying anything.

"You look sensible." He opened my day-bag and pulled out the toiletries and clothes I'd brought. "You aren't selling cargo?"

I shook my head. "Trying to trace cargo someone else sold."

He raised an eyebrow and waited.

"Agricultural goods. The manufacturer found that one lot was contaminated. The goods got out before they discovered the problem. The manufacturer hired me and a number of others to track down the bad lots."

He nodded. "What do you do when you find them?"

"Pay double to buy them back, offer the manufacturer's apology and an equal lot of replacement goods for free," I said.

He considered that for a minute. "That's more than fair. You do good by my people, so I'll do good by you." He stopped returning toiletries to the bag and my heart rose in my throat. A stunner and a nerve disrupter lay beneath his hand, disguised as a comb and a depilator, and I wondered if he'd discovered my duplicity. He didn't look at the weapons, though. His face grew both concerned and somehow kind, and he said, "You listen, now. This isn't your world. While you're here, keep to yourself. Don't try to be anybody's friend, especially if someone wants to be your friend. Don't go anywhere you don't have to be. And don't go out at night."

I nodded and took my bag, thinking about how this man had sent a woman to be tortured, had smiled at a child, had offered me advice that he seemed to feel would ensure my safety. I felt like Glory-whatever's kid. I had to pee, and if I thought about it too much more, I was going to have to throw up, too. I said, "Thank you," because I was too much of a coward not to, and I stood there and waited while the soldier checked Badger's bag and cleared him.

We walked together out into the stinking, frigid rain; I couldn't stop wondering what had happened to Thanassa Tang.

Chapter Twelve



We were assigned to a rooming house called The Travelers Ease, which lay close to the spaceport. To say it was misnamed was to say that pathological liars sometimes stretched the truth. My boots stuck to the filthy floor and pulled away with little squelching sounds as I walked up to the desk. Smells of rancid food and wood rot and unwashed bodies and backed-up plumbing and mildew filled the lobby. The walls were covered with patterned paper, but years of layered dirt had obscured the patterns until they had become unidentifiable blotches no more becoming than the water stains that streaked the walls, in some places from ceiling to floor.

The woman who came out from the back room matched her surroundings; she was dirty and slatternly and scrawny and smelled like she didn't know a human body could survive the touch of soap and water without disintegrating. After years of bathlessness, perhaps her body wouldn't have.

There was nothing that would offer ease or comfort in the place, and the only traveling anyone would voluntarily do related to the place would be to travel away. We couldn't have gotten a better room in all of Pincada, though—not because such rooms didn't exist, for they did, but because we didn't have citizen cards, and were therefore eligible only for "Assigned Offworlder Housing." We would have had to sign a Statement of Intent to Settle before we could have gotten a room in someplace dry and clean and sweet-smelling. And in fact when the woman passed us the registration book, she passed us two grimy sets of settlement papers. I looked them over and said, "We aren't intending to stay."

"Your loss," she said, and pulled the papers back.

"I can see that." I watched her from the corner of my eye while I signed the book, but she didn't get it.

As we finished registering, the man from Huddle House walked in. Alone. He'd been crying.

I caught his attention and shrugged my shoulders slightly, tipping the palms of my hands upward. Something about The Traveler's Ease, about Pincada, about Smithbright's World, made me leery of asking a question out loud.

He knew what I wanted to know, though. He gave me the barest shake of his head. "He said they'll release her today," he said as we passed. His eyes said he didn't believe a word of it.

I didn't believe it, either. I'd heard the woman scream. I'd never forget that scream. I didn't know what

they had done to her, but whatever it was, it wasn't something she was going to just walk away from in the same afternoon.

Badger's room was at one end of the hall on the second floor. Mine was halfway down the other end. My room matched the lobby in style and decor, and had the same ripe, lived-in smell. Furthermore, I heard sounds emanating from inside the walls that I suspected were biological in origin. The bed was flimsy, the mattress a single lumpy pad on top of bare metal slats. This room had neither bath nor toilet nor phone nor lock for the door.

I was initially glad I'd brought nothing of value with me; then I thought of the value of my life, and wondered if perhaps I should drag my mattress down to Badger's room to sleep on his floor. I wished we had been able to find out about the FireEater without ever setting foot on this ugly, miserable world.

Now, no matter how quickly we concluded our business, we would be here for two days. Our return trip paperwork, which we had filled out before we landed, would take that long to clear. I didn't even want to consider what would happen to us if someone decided not to grant the papers clearance. Such an idea had seemed inconceivable until I'd arrived here; but now my ship hung up above the clouds, beyond my reach without the cooperation of the Customs people. And they terrified me.

Badger and I said as little as possible walking back down the stairs to go outside and begin our search for information on the FireEater. I suppose I thought we'd talk once we were in private, out in the infernal cold wet stinking weather. However, a sallow, rat-faced man in a black coat stood from one of the chairs in a corner of the lobby and folded whatever he had been reading; he stuffed it into a pocket of his coat as we walked through the lobby and came out after us. He walked some distance behind us, casually, and he made a great deal of show out of not looking in our direction when he thought we might see him. He wasn't very good, though. I've been followed by people who make a good living at it. I have, over the years, become somewhat proficient at the art myself.

I didn't make any sort of sign to Badger. I knew he'd spotted the man, too.

Before we left the Reward, Badger had obtained a few names and organizations from the same databases I'd searched so ineffectively; they were places he thought might be able to tell us what the FireEater's official excuse for coming to Smithbright's World had been. Most of those places were in Pincada. A few were in the distant city of Celerity, which was in a different county or state or hamlet. I didn't know how Smithbright's World had divided itself politically and I didn't care to stay around long enough to find out. If we were lucky, a brief stay in Pincada would give us what we needed. We set out for the first destination he'd marked.

Across the street from The Travelers Ease, two black cabs sat, drivers hunched in slickers to keep the rain off their backs. Draft beasts stood with bored expressions in their animal eyes. I wondered what sort of beasts they were, and whether they were dangerous.

They were a deep green-gray color, slick-skinned, split-hooved, long-faced. While we approached, one cocked its tail to one side and shit. Badger and I looked at each other, and without a word headed to the other cab.

The bulky vehicles I had considered so primitive in Up Yours looked luxurious compared to those two wooden monstrosities. Before walking through Smithbright's World to our rooming house, I'd never seen an animal-propelled vehicle. This place had nothing else. And it smelled like it.

Badger and I hired the man in the second cab to take us to the places on our list. We'd gone only half a

block when the man in black reappeared, driving his own cab and following a few vehicles behind us. He kept out of sight pretty well. I only caught occasional glimpses of him, but we were never out of his sight. Except for the fact that I'd seen him follow us out of the lobby, I might not have realized he was there.

Half a day later, we crossed off the second of two places we could find that admitted to doing any sort of work on spacecraft. The first shop was hopeless. The second shop actually might have been able to handle the ID-switching procedure—it was advanced beyond anything else we'd seen on Smithbright's World. But the proprietor wasn't interested in gossiping about his work, and our attempt to get a look at his records resulted in our immediate ejection from the premises.

So we were on the move again... barely. Moving at draymus-and-cart speed, we weren't going to accomplish anything quickly. If the Corrigan's Blood had come here to get its work done, it had chosen its location well. It might take us months to find anything.

The next place on Badger's list, Offworld Merchandise, seemed likely to have records of ships that came through. At that point, we just wanted to find some record of the FireEater—if we could find someone who would admit to dealing with the ship, we might also be able to determine whether it was the one we were looking for. According to Badger's sources, Offworld Merchandise was a sort of warehouse and store all in one, where cargo that had been cleared to enter the world could be sold.

The sorts of cargo that were clearable in Pincada seemed likely to be limited. I doubted that a ship could sell bio-enhanced agricultural supplies, for example. These people had limited their world to animal power and some steam-engine technology on purpose. They weren't doing genetic engineering. They were barely doing engineering. I doubted that anything beyond simple mechanicals would get beyond the unfriendly walls of spaceport Customs.

The cold, wet air permeated the cabin of the cab, rain drummed on the roof, and we heard the steady clop-clop of the beast's hooves on the wet brick road and listened to the crack of the driver's whip. In this manner, we traveled through streets laid out in straight, ugly grids, jammed with buggies and wagons; past sidewalks covered with people walking; between rows of tall, narrow wooden houses painted in graying white and sullen shades of yellow, green and brown; in and out of districts of brick and stone businesses and public buildings that turned blank, unwelcoming eyes to passersby. Leafless trees overhung the thoroughfares and wires strung on poles draped from building to building. In all my life I had never seen such a paeon to ugliness as Pincada.

A broad expanse of mud-yellow brick pavement fronted Offworld Merchandise. A few buggies and cabs sat in rows, keeping themselves within lines laid out in black brick. Their draft beasts stood tied to poles, heads hanging. Our driver pulled into a space near the main doorway. "You want me to wait?"

"Yes," Badger said. "Please. We still have several other places we need to visit."

"So I wait."

We both nodded.

"Very good." He smiled at us. That smile stood out as much as a single ray of sunshine would have if it could have broken through the heavy clouds over the city.

We walked into the store and looked around, just to get an idea of what sort of offworld merchandise

Pincada did permit. The place, a huge high-ceilinged open box with shelves that ran shoulder-high in long rows, seemed devoid of human life. A few shoppers wandered the aisles, but they were dwarfed by the scale of the place, and by the scarcity of their numbers. In the aisles nearest the entryway, luxuries sat piled next to things I wouldn't have considered buying under any circumstances. Lespumi furs and Mandinkan songstones rested beside boxes of unfinished wood planks and cartons of paper and dreadful religious artwork. Most of the merchandise was at least quaintly outdated; some of it was stunningly obscure. I recognized the uses of, at best, a third of the items on the shelves.

Nothing really shocked me, though, until I saw a whole block of archaic medicines. Among them were febrifuges, hypnotics, antiemetics, emetics, antidiarrheals, antipsychotics—an entire pharmacology of chemicals that had been eliminated from use by nano-technology. Who needed a medicine for a fever if the nano-machines in his bloodstream didn't permit the illness that would have caused a fever? I felt like I'd come across people trying to cure cancer by singing, chanting, and sticking pins in dolls.

Then I saw the antibiotics. My stomach knotted and I felt queasy. Sitting on the shelves in front of me, were drugs like gerancillin, septimycin, and considactan; broad-spectrum nightmares that had been late entries in the ever-escalating war between drugs and drug-resistant diseases back on Old Earth.

Antibiotics had gone from being a life-saving boon in the early twentieth century to being a contributing factor in the last great plague wave at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Antibiotic-resistant diseases had become fiercer and more resistant, uglier and more tenacious, almost cleverer in their approach, until at last all the conditions necessary for disaster—urban overcrowding, severe sanitation problems, a global transportation network, and a viciously resistant, highly contagious organism—came together in one place. New York City. The result was Fulminating Pneumocystic Plague, which before it ran its course wiped out eighty percent of Old Earth's population. No antibiotic was ever found that could stop it, though medical researchers wasted plenty of time looking for one. FPP was the disease that finally forced the evolution of the medical nanotechnology revolution.

I wondered what sort of fools would shun or forbid safe, effective nanoviruses in order to revert to a technology that by its very nature made diseases more dangerous and more resistant with every use.

Antibiotics. They sat in their generic boxes, labeled with contents, with expiration dates, and with not much else, in row upon row upon row. No manufacturer had claimed these products; public prejudice against anything linked to the FPP plague would have made it insanity to do so. Yet here on Smithbright's World, the antibiotic was, perhaps, the single pitiful piece of armor against devastating bacterial disease. It was another reason to hate the loathsome place.

Slow genocide by government decree, I thought. Voluntary stupidity at its worst. Typical of bureaucracy everywhere.

I started to turn away, but something caught my eye. Not all of the drugs had been unpacked. A hundred-box carton of generic strobocillin nestled in a packing case with a fifty-pack carton of Sevannight Sleeping Elixir. They looked like they had been shipped that way from the manufacturer.

And Sevannight wasn't generic. The manufacturer's logo marked each package. Miltech Pharmaceuticals—Good Medicine for Good Health.

And down at the bottom of each box was a line of tiny print.

Distributed by Miltech Pharmaceuticals, a division of Cassamir Biologicals.

If the Sevannight was from Cassamir Biologicals, maybe the antibiotics were, too.

The hair on the back of my neck began to stand up. This isn't what we're looking for, I told myself. We're looking for people who stole a single ship, not for ships that are carrying weird Cassamir Biologicals products to marginal market worlds.

But what ship brought the drugs? Did the Corrigan's Blood carry them with it when it arrived? Did they arrive on the FireEater?

"It's not our problem," Badger said.

"It is if the Corrigan's Blood brought them."

"If the Blood was coming here to get an ID change, why would it carry drugs?"

"Let's find out." I picked up a bottle of the strobocillin and a bottle of the Sevannight, then reconsidered and put the strobocillin down. If the person I talked to knew how frantic people in the outside universe got about such drugs, he wouldn't give me any information on anything. Whereas I could ask questions about Sevannight all day long and not get near anything remotely uncomfortable.

Badger and I went looking for a manager.

We found one.

The manager's nametag said she was Kayda Ingram. She was stocky, short, bright-eyed. Her skin was halfway between Badger's Melatinting and my natural color, and she'd applied some sort of paint to her eyelids, cheeks, and lips. The paint had smeared and smudged, and some of it had rubbed off from her lips onto her front teeth; the paint did nothing favorable that I could see for her appearance. She said, "How can I help you?"

"I was wondering how you found Sevannight. I've been trying to locate this for years, and I've looked everywhere, and," I tried a shrug and an ingenuous smile, "I found it here."

"You're an offworlder?"

I nodded.

"Why do you need it?"

"Nanotechnology isn't as wonderful as people might tell you."

She thought about that for a moment, then smiled a sly little smile while her eyes focused off into a middle distance, looking at nothing. "I always figured as much. Figured anything hyped that much had to be half lies and the other half shit." She refocused on me and said, "Ship brought it."

I tried to look delighted, but also tried not to overact. After all, we were talking about a sleeping elixir here, not the wealth of the ancients. "You've dealt with this ship before? You have a regular supplier? Someone I could maybe ask to place an ongoing order for me?"

Kayda Ingram looked up at me, eyes calculating. "You not planning on staying here?"

"I can't. My work takes me all over the universe."

"So nonsense having me order it."

"That wouldn't work. I wish it would."

She pursed her lips. "I can get the name of the ship that brought it. It was a first run, but we set up a regular route with them. Don't see how that will help you, though."

"I can leave a broadcast message if I know who to leave it for. Until now, I simply haven't been able to find anyone to ask. I found this once on another world, and it was wonderful. I'd be grateful if you could help me find it again."

"Grateful?" Again that calculating stare. "I'll go find out who brought it. You think about how grateful you'll be, will you?"

She trudged off, the material of her pants making a shuss-shuss-shuss sound as her thighs rubbed together.

"Ship has never been here before."

"I heard that. Could be the Blood. How grateful should we be?" Badger asked.

"How much is twenty rucets locally? A bit over a thousand of the... the local money units? Quills?"

"Squabs or quabs or quails... something like that. A thousand is about right. I don't remember the exact rate of exchange."

"You think twenty rucets would be grateful enough?"

"I'd think ten would be as grateful as anyone needs to be, but buy a lot of her drug. Make sure our story holds up."

Our course of action settled, we waited. Then we waited some more. Then, to spice up our lives, we stared at the junk on the shelves and pretended we wanted to so that we wouldn't feel like we were still waiting. She was taking too long getting back to us. I started getting anxious, wondering where she was and what she was doing.

"You think she decided now would be a good time to go to lunch?" Badger asked. So it wasn't just me who thought she was taking too long.

"Something's wrong," I said, though I didn't know what could be wrong.

And then I heard the shuss-shuss of her pants rubbing together, and the heavy tread of her feet on the concrete floor, and she came around the end of the shelves where she'd left us waiting and said, "I'm sorry. I can't help you. We don't have that information here," and she was lying and I could see the lie in her eyes; but worse, I could see fear there. She hadn't been afraid before. Greedy, calculating, looking out for herself, but not afraid of me, not afraid of Badger, not afraid of anything. And now she was afraid.

I walked forward, went to step around her to look down the aisle behind her, curious to see if I could discover what it was that had her so frightened; she moved to block me but I'm fast and strong; I brushed

past her and caught sight of the tail end of a flapping black coat, a disappearing leg and dirty black shoe. The man who had followed us.

Someone didn't want us to know where the Sevannight came from. I hadn't even asked about the questionable drugs, the antibiotics. I hadn't asked for anything but the name of a ship that had brought a perfectly respectable, if mostly useless, sleep aid to an out-of-the-way planet. The man in black had decided this was dangerous information, and I had to assume that was because of the identity of the link, and not because of the cargo. The Sevannight was tied directly to Cassamir Station and Cassamir Biologicals, and maybe to the Corrigan's Blood. The agricultural bio-enhancers sold on Up Yours were linked in the same way. All the Stardancer-class ships came from Cassamir Station, as did Peter Crane.

Neither of the two ships was doing anything illegal that I could identify. I wanted to tell myself that what the ship back on Up Yours had been trading was not related to my search for the Corrigan's Blood. After all, that ship hadn't been stolen. It had been purchased from previous owners. Nothing tied it to the Corrigan's Blood except its point of origin and its sneaky behavior.

I'd been to three settled backwater worlds. All three had been visited by Stardancers acting in a highly suspicious manner. There weren't very many Stardancers in the universe yet. I thought it was beyond being simply unlikely to find three of them traveling to such unpalatable locations. And maybe I was jumping to conclusions, but I'd walked in blind, swinging a stick and trying to hit one particular rat, and instead I'd hit a couple of the wrong rats, and it was starting to occur to me that maybe they weren't the wrong rats that I was hitting. And I hadn't failed to notice, either, that the rats were doing their damndest to hit back. People on Up Yours had wanted to kill us. Someone here was following us.

Maybe Cassamir Biologicals was making a fortune trading exotic biologicals and antibiotics to backwater worlds. Maybe if we'd taken more time and had looked harder, we would have found antibiotics on Up Yours, too. The cartons weren't too big. If the price was right, maybe antibiotic trading would justify the expense of some of the most expensive private luxury ships in the universe. And maybe it made stealing them irresistible.

Easy hypothesis to test. I walked past Kayda and back to the aisle where the drugs sat. She shuss-shussed behind me. I picked up one of the antibiotic packages and tossed it into the air, caught it clumsily, and turned to see that she hadn't blanched. Usually if you take something tremendously valuable to someone and treat it recklessly, the person to whom it belongs will react. Try it with someone's baby sometime if you doubt me. Or one of the universes five remaining Ming vases. And I got no reaction. "How much does this cost?"

"I can't sell you anything," she said.

I sighed. "I don't want to buy it. I just want to know how much it costs." "Sitting out on the shelf. One of the most dreaded substances in the universe, rightly or not, just sitting on the shelf where anybody could walk by, pick up a box, slide it into a pocket, and make off with it. These people don't know how to run a market, I thought.

"If you can't buy it, why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious."

"You don't need to be curious. You need to leave."

Badger stepped beside her and stood very close. He looked down at her and she realized for the first

time how big he was, and how menacing.

"As soon as you tell me how much this costs, I'll leave."

She looked down at the drug in my hand. She looked up at Badger. She looked at me, and her face was tight. "Eighteen crullas and five," she said.

Which was essentially nothing. That translated to about five hundredths of a rucet. Nothing. These people might as well hand it out free on the streets. If they'd marked the product up any at all—and I had to believe they had, or else why were they in business?—then Cassamir Biologicals lost money producing it before they ever put it into boxes to ship it out.

"You're sure," I said. My voice squeaked a little when I said it, and Kayda caught the surprise. For a moment her guard dropped.

"Yes. Well, we might have it marked down to eighteen since we have so much in the back, but I think eighteen-five..." She stopped and frowned, realizing that she'd cooperated with me, had given me information, and she wasn't supposed to do that. "You need to leave now," she said again, and glared at the two of us and started walking toward the door.

I put the antibiotic back on the shelf and Badger and I followed her, and meekly allowed ourselves to be sent on our way.

The rain had started falling harder while we were in Offworld Merchandise. Now it poured steadily, while a bitterly cold wind whipped it sideways and sent it slashing up under eaves and against windows. Any pretense of daylight was gone. The timepiece on my compac said the local time was still late afternoon, but the black streets insisted night had fallen.

And to make our situation even more pleasant, our cab driver, not yet paid and owed a lot of money, had nevertheless left without us.

Chapter Thirteen



We slogged through the gullies and rivulets and puddles of the parking lot toward the street. "No chance she might let us back in long enough to tell us how to find another cab," Badger said.

"None," I agreed.

"Hell of a night for walking," he said.

"Yes."

"Be a lot more comfortable to stand up under the eaves of the store and wait for some of this rain to let up." Badgers voice had taken on a false casualness that I recognized.

"Certainly would."

"Could probably just stay out of the way and watch the doors; see who went in and who came out... maybe figure out a way to go in and have a look later. Might be a nice night for walking by the time we'd finished."

"Might be." I looked back at the store and saw Kayda standing behind the glass door, watching us walk away. "Of course we might need to hike around the block once, first. Make us appreciate getting dry again when we finally do."

Badger nodded. We put our heads down and trudged across the parking lot and turned left onto the sidewalk, hiked along the street that was almost devoid of traffic, turned left at the intersection so that we didn't have to cross any streets, turned left at the next intersection, and then left again.

By the time we walked back up to the front of Offworld Merchandise, no one stood watching us. The parking lot had only one buggy in it. We waited around the side of the building, stood under the eaves where we were sheltered from the wind, and blew on our hands and shivered and cursed Kayda Ingram until finally she came out of the building, turned, hooked a simple padlock onto the door and clicked it shut, and walked across the parking lot with short, nervous little steps. She kept her head up and looked around constantly. Afraid of the darkness, or of being alone...

My skin crawled, remembering Customs. Remembering the soldier. What he had said to me. He'd said, This isn't your world. While you're here, keep to yourself. Don't try to be anybody's friend, especially if someone wants to be your friend. Don't go anywhere you don't have to be. And, don't go out at night.

Don't go anywhere you don't have to be.

Anyone local and in authority would consider our reasons for waiting around Offworld Merchandise unnecessary. Unwelcome. Illegal. We couldn't make a case that we had to be there.

Darkness had overtaken us, and we were out, and not only were we out but we had a long, long way to go to get back to where we were supposed to be, and no real idea of how we were going to get there.

We weren't trying to be anybody's friend, but that was all we'd missed. Our first night on a planet where staying out of trouble might be our only chance for survival, and we were doing our best to get ourselves into trouble.

It sometimes amazed me what people would do for money.

Kayda untied her beast from its post, climbed onto the driver's seat, and eventually pulled out into the dark street and drove away, the tiny yellow beams of her headlights stabbing into the night only briefly before the rain swallowed them.

"Let's go," Badger said.

Finding things for people sometimes involves illegal activity. I've always justified this to myself by reminding myself that the people who took whatever was missing did so illegally. If they hadn't, I wouldn't have accepted the job of finding and returning it.

Peripherally, the missing ship Corrigan's Blood was related to breaking into Offworld Merchandise. At least I'd convinced myself that it was. So I could let my conscience take the evening off.

It wouldn't, though. Any time I engaged in criminal behavior, justified or not, I got queasy. Badger delighted in thwarting the rules; I'd have been happier staying away from places that had them. We were very different that way.

We were both good at what we did, though. We could both break and enter, both pilot ships, both surf the comnet. This time, I stood watch while Badger picked the lock. He stood for a moment, working with a tumbler gun that looked like a hairbrush when it wasn't broken down for use. When he pulled the trigger, the tumbler clicked softly. He gave a tug at the base of the lock and it popped open.

Badger and I walked through the door and moved out of sight of the street as quickly as possible, trying to look as if we belonged where we were while we did it. Kayda had left about a third of the buildings lights on, and we had been visible as silhouettes while we stood outside picking the lock. Once inside, in the light, we became easily identifiable people instead of anonymous black cutouts.

Badger waited until we'd moved behind the shelves to say, "Let's go through the whole place together before you check out the office. I want to make sure that we know about any other doors before you get distracted; I don't want any unpleasant surprises."

"You'll watch the front door while I go through the office."

He nodded. "But let's make sure we're secure to start with."

We went through the building cautiously. I carried my stunner and my nerve disrupter. Badger was similarly armed. We were in agreement; even in bad situations neither of us had ever killed anyone. That was always a point of pride with us. In spite what deGuerres and others like him said about self-protection, I considered my reverence for life a part of what defined me. Badger and I had discussed the issue at length. It wasn't that we didn't value our own lives—but what situation could possibly arise that the combined firepower of a stunner and a disrupter wouldn't solve?

The building was three times as big as it appeared from the front. The majority of the main floor was the display room; a small section at the back, with a single barred door leading out into the alley behind the store, acted as an unloading area. Storage was underground; two floors were stacked from floor to ceiling with crated merchandise. The long, jumbled rows meandered, lacking the regimentation imposed by the shelves upstairs. I couldn't see any sort of order in the arrangement of merchandise. I thought finding anything would be a miserable job.

Badger sighed when we finished our search of the second basement. "That took longer than I wanted. I'm glad to know we're alone in the place, though."

"We are if no one came through the front doors while we were down here looking around."

In the long shadows cast by the dangling lights overhead, his grin looked lunatic. "Charming thought," he said.

"The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we don't have to think such thoughts."

He started for the stairs. "By all means, let's get moving."

He left me at the office door, which was locked but which, again, proved to be no obstacle. He moved down the aisles to take up position where he could see the front door and any movement around it, but where no one would be able to see him.

The office light was out. I fumbled around until I found it; a toggle switch on the wall activated another of the dangling glass bulbs. Ugly illumination. Ugly office. A metal desk, a metal chair on rollers with a cloth seat and back, tall metal cabinets that lined one wall. Everything was gray, flat, square-cornered, slightly grimy. Nothing curved, nothing grew, nothing exhibited any signs of life or any appreciation of beauty.

I checked the desk first. Since I'd asked for the information, there was a chance that Kayda had pulled the file in which it had been kept, and had left it on the desk when the man in black interrupted her. Would save me time if she had.

But she hadn't. The papers in the folders were purchase orders from local companies. Not a word about Sevannight in any of them. No mention of any starships. I popped the lock on her file cabinet and started going through files. They weren't filed logically—at least, they weren't filed the way I would have filed them. I would have set up accounts by ship. Kayda, or whoever did the filing, had set up files by purchase item. There was a file for Lespumi furs and one for Braxmiller marble statue replicas; there were files for Cathnaralblackwood, for Sevannight, and finally, for strobocillin, though it took me a long time to find that.

The strobocillin file confirmed my suspicions but didn't answer my questions. The FireEater had supplied the antibiotics, but this had been its first run. So these records didn't eliminate the possibility that the ship was the Corrigan's Blood.

The person who brought them down, listed as second in command of the ship, was named Cal Basqueian. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was fumbling around in something bigger than a stolen ship.

I wrote down Basqueian's name. Then I put things back the way I'd found them, and left.

Badger hadn't moved. He turned when I slipped down the aisle behind him and said, "No problems. You find anything?"

"FireEater brought the drugs. This was its first trip; it might be our ship, or it might not. But it's bringing in something so bad that it's using antibiotic-trading as its cover, just as I think the Mystic Dove was doing the same thing, and that its cover was the high-tech agricultural supplies it was supplying to an essentially low-tech world. But what are they really smuggling?"

Badger frowned. "What could be so bad that they would use antibiotics as a cover?"

"Wrong question, but nothing that will ever bother you again," a voice said from above me. The man who had been following us dropped down from an opening he'd made in the ceiling by lifting a panel aside. He landed on the floor in front of us, on his feet, with impossible grace.

"Ceiling," I said aloud, to Badger or perhaps to myself. "We didn't check that."

"Bad oversight," the man said, smiling, and attacked.

The beams of Badger's and my stunners hit him simultaneously, chest and head. Two perfect shots. He should have dropped like a rock. He didn't even seem to notice the beams. He kept coming.

I shot him with my disrupter, thumbing the gain up to high.

Nothing. He kept coming.

There was one of him. There were two of us, and I had a couple of inches on him and probably a few pounds. Badger was both bigger and taller than me. The heavy gravity of our ship made Badger and me faster and stronger on worlds like Smithbright's World, where the gravity was a shade less than that of Old Earth. We were both trained fighters, and good ones. We should have cleaned the floor with the man.

Instead he threw me aside as if I didn't exist and lunged at Badger. I saw that he had a knife out. Badger dodged the knife... barely... and I got to my feet and charged from behind, leaping to land on his back. Except that in the split second it took for my feet to leave the ground in the leap, the bastard managed to move completely out of my range.

He wasn't where he should have been, and instead of landing on him, I sprawled on the floor on my face. I rolled, sensing movement or feeling pressure in the air, found that he had closed again, impossibly fast; his knife slammed into the concrete right where I had been and the blade broke off an inch below the guard. He'd missed, but not by much. And I couldn't recover quickly enough from the awkwardness of the roll to get out of his reach a second time. His fist slammed into my right kidney with agonizing force.

I screamed from the pain and he drew back to hit me again, but Badger grabbed him around the throat and pulled him off. I got to my feet, but I was hurt and I knew it. I was almost sure I was bleeding inside. My vision swam. I wobbled. The man had grabbed Badger's wrists and pulled Badger's hands off of his neck.

I wondered fuzzily how he had done that. Tremendous strength, impossible strength. He couldn't be as strong as he was. When you're fighting, weight and size matter. A short, thin, light man can't be as strong as a big, heavily muscled man. He can be faster, but he can't be as strong. But this bastard was stronger. And not afraid of anything.

He twisted around, hung on to Badger's wrists while he did it, and suddenly Badger was on the floor with his face in the concrete, screaming; the man crouched down next to Badger's face and twisted one arm so that it looked like it was going to pop out of its socket. He looked up at me and grinned, and I saw that he had filed his teeth to needle points, and that he'd had a bodyartist extend the canines to make them twice as long as they should have been.

He said, "You're dead, bitch, but he's first."

I looked around for a weapon that might do something to him, and found a stone carving of a leaping cat slightly longer than my hand that stood on a heavy square metal base. I picked it up by the cat, swung hard at the base of the attacker's skull, and felt a sickening crunch as the metal base sunk through bone and into brain tissue. Blood splattered. The man went limp and dropped on top of Badger. Neither he nor Badger moved.

"Badger?" I was afraid he had killed Badger somehow.

The statue fell from my hand to the floor, and the stone cat shattered. Shards of green stone sprayed across the floor. I wanted to throw up. The bastard was dead and I'd killed him. I had to, but he was dead. Dead. And I'd killed him.

"Badger? Talk to me." I rolled him off Badger, and Badger groaned and lifted his head. I felt a twitch in the dead man's arm as I dragged him away; muscles spasming but no visible movement—the feeling of

life bleeding away from the corpse was horrible.

I grabbed Badger and pulled him to a sitting position. His face was bloody and he looked dazed.

"We have to get out of here," I said, and looked back at the dead man, who stared at me with unblinking eyes and a half-smile frozen on his face.

That was too much. My stomach lost everything in it. I leaned against the nearest aisle, retching. I saw blood in my vomit, and didn't want to think about where it came from. I was hurt, I was in trouble, and I had killed a man.

And Badger said, "Oh, shit," and I turned and saw the sallow-faced man, his grin broader, blink and start to get to his feet.

Impossible. Impossible. He was dead, had to be dead, I'd caved in the whole back of his head.

He wasn't dead. He said, "Good try. Not good enough."

Badger staggered to his feet and I reached for another stone statue, thinking as I did that it wouldn't do any good, that I had gotten lucky to get that one blow in and that I would never get a chance for another one like it; and the door to the parking lot opened and cold, wet air blasted into the store, and all three of us turned.

Fedara Contei stalked toward us. She looked at me and said, "You idiot. You've gotten into something you'll never get out of," and then she was past Badger and me and charging our attacker, and she had drawn a knife as long as her forearm.

"They're mine," the man said.

"I'm afraid not," she said, and stuck the knife into his throat.

Badger and I stood there, staring stupidly, unable to make sense of what we were seeing. She started hacking the man's head off with her knife, and he screamed and fought her while she did it. She snarled, "Take my buggy. Get back to your rooms and figure out some plausible lie for how you got hurt, damn you," without looking at us. The man's screams had become gurgles, wet and bubbling. Blood sprayed everywhere.

We hobbled out the front door and took the buggy. Neither of us knew anything about animals, but Badger was the less injured of us, so he sat up on the driver's seat and tried everything he could think of until the animal started forward. After some experimentation, he figured out how to make it stop. And we spent the next couple of hours finding our way back to our rooms.

Chapter Fourteen



I was awake again. I lay on the bed, pain-wracked, heart racing, panting and not getting enough air in, hoping I would be able to get back to the medichamber on the Hope's Reward before whatever the man

in black had done to me killed me. I tried to tell myself that I'd lived through thenight, that I was going to be fine. But my urine was blood-red and blood-thick and my tongue and nailbeds and the insides of my eyelids were dead-man pale. I was in trouble and I knew it.

Badger sat at the foot of the bed, watching me. Now that the muddy light of dawn trickled through the dirty windows, I could see the fear in his eyes. He'd managed to keep it out of his voice when he'd checked on me during the night. Had kept it out of his touch. But his eyes said I wasn't doing too well, and he was afraid.

When he spoke, though, it wasn't about how I was doing. "She followed us," he said. "And we didn't know."

I'd been thinking about that, too. Dreaming about it some when I wasn't dreaming about the bastard who wouldn't die. "She's used corollary origami points, come into each system from the other side or from a lot farther out. We've been using the closest and most convenient points."

"Maybe. Maybe there are other ways she could have done it. But we didn't even suspect." He looked worried. "I've been watching our backs. I wide-wormed the information from the in-system Spybees when we arrived and right before we left, every time we jumped. . . after the incident with Contei, anyway. I should have seen the repetition of the ship registration one of those times. It was exactly what I was looking for. So why didn't I see it?"

I'd spent some of my time on deck looking behind us, too. I didn't want to believe we'd been careless. And I didn't want to believe someone could be so much better than we were that she could slip in right behind us, follow us down to planetary surfaces and around cities, and never give any indication that she was there. "Maybe she just now caught up with us. Maybe we didn't miss anything because there was nothing to miss."

"Maybe." Badger looked as doubtful as I felt. We were dealing with more than we'd been prepared to handle, and he knew it, and I knew it.

Footsteps sounded down the hall, and something hit our door with a crash. We heard other crashes along the hall. Both of us jumped and froze; then Badger picked up the board he'd pried loose from the floor to use as a weapon, and with it clutched in both hands, advanced on the door. The sound of footsteps receded.

Badger braced himself and opened the door. "No one there," he told me. "Just this roll of paper." He crouched, still watching the hall for signs of an enemy, and picked up the roll. He kicked the door shut and came back to the bed. "There's a note attached."

He held it up and read it out loud. "Newspapers are provided for all guests as a service of The Traveler's Ease. You will be billed five crullas a day for this service."

"News." I wrinkled my nose.

Badger was curious, though. He unwrapped the newspaper and studied the front page. "Oh, no," he whispered.

I sat up. "What is it?"

He handed me the paper, and I immediately saw what he'd seen.

A headline in bold black type said, Offworld Woman, Unidentified Man "Bleeder" Victims.

I read the article out loud.

"Twobodies, badly mutilated and drained of blood, were found in the Westmarch District during the night. Both bodies fit the same pattern as twenty-three previous murders that have taken place in Westmarch in the last twelve months, all of which are considered the work of the so-called 'Westmarch Bleeder.'

"The body of the first of the night's victims, offworlder Thanassa Tang, was found in a blocked drain on Blackwillow Street at 23:40 last night by city officers Brian Karpovtsev and Alex Leetch. The officers were called to the site by municipal workers who discovered the body while attempting to prevent a blocked drain from flooding nearby homes; when the workers attempted to clear the drain, Tang's body caught on their probes and was dragged to higher ground.

"Identification was made by Tang's fellow traveler, whose name has been withheld. Tang was released on her own recognizance from the Customs Department of John Ardhal Memorial Spaceport following questioning at 15:30 hours, and was instructed to proceed to her assigned housing. Her colleague states that she never arrived."

"You know that isn't true," Badger said. "They didn't let her walk out of there. Those men killed her and dumped the body. And this Westmarch Bleeder made a convenient suspect, so they dumped the body there."

"I think you're probably right." I picked up where I'd left off.

"At 04:10 this morning, Westmarch taxi driver Lee Fan found the second body in the back seat of his carriage. He said he had been in an all-night eatery taking his break, and when he came out he thought for a moment that a potential fare had climbed into the back seat to wait for him. It was only when he asked the fare for his destination and the man didn't respond that Fan turned and discovered that the body had no head. Police are still attempting to identify the man, whose fingerprints are not on record."

"No head?" I said. "How many murder victims do you think lost heads last night?"

"You think the second body was the man who attacked us, don't you?"

I lay back, feeling weak and sick. "Yes. I think so. Why look for a complicated answer when a simple one will serve?"

"No reason at all."

"At least we know he's dead."

Badger sighed. "For what little that's worth. We don't know why he was following us, we don't know how he almost killed both of us... and we don't know where Fedara Contei is or what she has to do with any of this. That, I think, bothers me as much as everything else together. Why did she kill the man who was trying to kill us?"

"I think I know the answer to that, anyway." I closed my eyes. The pain was getting worse. My abdomen was so tender I couldn't bear to rest my arms on it, and it was beginning to swell, too. I tried to imagine what would happen to me if I ended up in a Pincadan hospital receiving the quality of medical care that would be available to offworlders. I would probably die. They would probably kill me on purpose. At least I didn't have to worry about getting an infection. Three cheers for nanoviruses.

"Well?" Badger asked. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me.

"Well, what?"

"Why did Fedara kill our attacker?"

"Oh." I'd drifted and lost my focus, and I was having a hard time getting it back. Bad sign. "Because if we're dead, we can't lead her to the Corrigan's Blood, and we can't take it and her back to Peter Crane so that she can kill him."

"That's true." Badger made a face that made me laugh, and laughing hurt so much that tears welled up in my eyes. Someone knocked on the door. Badger stiffened. He picked up the board, but this time was less panicked about it. "I wonder what complimentary service the rooming house has decided to charge us with now," he said, and walked over and opened it. And immediately slammed it shut and leaned against it, legs braced. "Fedara Contei," he said.

Even though he leaned against it, the door began to open inward. "I'm coming in," Fedara said from the other side. "I'm not going to hurt either of you, but I'm coming in, and nothing you can do can stop me. It's important that no one see me here; it's important to you as well as to me if you want to leave this place alive."

"Let her in," I told Badger.

He tightened his grip on the board and backed up. Fedara entered, shut the door behind her, and walked over to the single filthy window and pulled the curtains closed.

"You need to get off Smithbright's World now," she said. "I've pulled a few strings at Customs; your papers are waiting for you. But if you don't leave immediately, friends of the man I killed last night will track you down. There are people who know who you are, and who know that the man I killed was following you. When they identify the body, and they will probably do that very soon, his friends are going to put all the pieces together, and if you are within their reach, they will utterly destroy you."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"You don't want to know. Find your ship. Don't ask any other questions, don't look under any other rocks. The only way you'll live through this is if you don't find the answers to your questions. You'll have a better chance of that if you stop asking."

I gave her a fierce stare. "You know what the Stardancer ships are smuggling out of Cassamir Station,

don't you?"

Fedara's eyes widened slightly. She shook her head. The head shake was not, "No, I don't know," but "God, I wish you hadn't said that."

"You probably already know too much for them to let you live. If you want to have any chance at all, though, go to the Customs office now, tell them that your friend Colin Hawke has his private shuttle waiting for you, and that he called ahead to clear your paperwork. They won't ask any questions about your appearances, they won't inspect your luggage, and they won't detain you for any other reason. Do you have that?"

"Our friend Colin Hawke," I repeated back to her. "Private shuttle. He called ahead."

"Colin Hawke," Badger said. "That's a stupid name."

"It isn't a name," I said. "It's a code. Right?"

Fedara rolled her eyes. "You aren't going to quit, and you are going to die." She didn't answer my question, but she might as well have. I knew I was right. She said, "Go now. There cannot possibly be anything here as important to you as your own survival."

I tried to get to my feet, nearly passed out from the pain, and toppled forward. Badger moved to catch me, but Fedara got there first. Fast. As fast as the man who had tried to kill us last night. Possibly faster, since he was dead, and she wasn't. She appeared to be genuinely concerned for me. Odd, since she was supposed to kill me pretty soon. Thoughts faded in and out of focus. She wanted to kill me, but I wasn't afraid of her. Why not? Oh, of course. "You want us to live so you can follow us back to Peter Crane and kill him, don't you."

In her eyes, fear flared and found tinder and burned. "You can't have heard me talking with..."

Even with my thoughts fuzzy, I remembered the name. "Danniz. I heard."

"Oh, God," she whispered, staring into my eyes. "Oh, God." She lifted me as if I didn't weigh anything, handed me over to Badger, and took off out the door.

The movement, being lifted and carried, pressed against my swollen, rigid belly. Blackness shuttered my open eyes, and everything seemed suddenly very far away.

From down a long tunnel, a voice I knew that I knew said, "I hope she was right about things being ready at Customs."

The pain got worse, became bouncing, jostling pain. The blackness got a greater hold on me. "Just hang on," the voice said, a world away. "Just hold on."

Chapter Fifteen



I told Badger, "I've been thinking about the news sheets on Up Yours and Smithbright's World. You know, I think I was wrong about news." He'd just come into the holo room where I had been watching Isas Yamamoto.

"You? Wrong? Tell me more."

I didn't laugh. "I think news is the way human prey tell themselves the predators are among them. Along with all their garbage, the news sheets announce murders and robberies and cons and deceptions; I still think how they do it is exploitative and vile. But it has value."

"Civilized worlds have done away with news," Badger said. "The success of our civilization has proven that we don't need it."

I shook my head. "I have another, more sinister explanation for our civilized worlds. What if the places that don't have news are the ones where the predators are in control?"

Badger didn't have anything to say to that.

I didn't say anything, either. I was in a deep, despairing funk.

The bastard on Smithbright's World had ruptured my kidney, and I would have died if Fedara Contei hadn't pulled strings to get the two of us through customs and back to the Reward. The medichamber returned me to perfect physical health, but I was uncomfortably aware of my own mortality when I rejoined the world of the living. Uncomfortably aware that I had made a machine the sole link between me and death, and that I had let myself get too far from the machine. I didn't want to die, and now, if Fedara Contei was correct, I had people who were better than I was—stronger, faster, maybe even smarter—and they were violent and they were hunters and they wanted me dead.

And I didn't know why. Perhaps I was close to finding out the answer to that, but I didn't have it yet. I had another name—Cal Basqueian—but there was a good chance his name wouldn't give me anything more useful than I'd gotten from any of the other names. It was probably just another name.

I had a lot of questions, but I wasn't having much luck making sense of them, and I certainly wasn't finding any answers, no matter how close to the answers I might have been.

My biggest question, the one that wouldn't let go, was Why was the man who followed us so much better than me? Why was he so much better than Badger?

Restored to health, I was no longer whole. Every step I'd made since I was seventeen, I'd made based upon what I believed was the unassailable fact that I was capable of taking care of myself. I had done everything humanly possible to ensure that my self-confidence wasn't misplaced. All the training, all the fighting, all the heavy-gravity speed drills, all the meditation and education and focus on making myself ready for anything; what had it been for? Nothing. The pale man in the black coat dealt with me just as he would have if I'd been careless and sloppy and slow.

No, the voice in my head argued, if you had been careless and sloppy and slow, he would have killed you right there. As it is, you're still alive.

I was in no mood for inner rationality. I'd lost, and Badger, who trained as hard and long as I did, had lost, and we had been rescued by the enemy who was hired to kill us.

We were shamed and shamed again.

How? That was what I wanted to know. How?

Badger finally said, "I came in to tell you that we have some useful information. Cal Basqueian used his real name."

I switched off the holo and swiveled around to stare at him. "You're joking."

"His real name," Badger repeated. He handed me an infochip. I popped it into my compac and discovered that not only had Cal Basqueian used his real name, but that he'd made a mistake in doing so. He wasn't unknown, a model citizen, someone with no recorded past. Badgers query on him had yielded a list of sins that stretched from Tassamarkis to Old Earth.

Basqueian had been convicted of armed robbery, assault, and forgery; he'd been charged with both manslaughter and murder; he'd escaped from two prisons; and he had a list of known associates that read like a criminals' Who's Who. His whereabouts were listed as unknown. No surprise. We knew where he was, sort of. He wasn't a member of any known criminal organization. Most criminals aren't, so discovering that he wasn't shattered no hopes and gave no great disappointment.

He was, however, a member in good standing of the Universal Society of Antiquarian Gothicans, which I'd never heard of. According to the first report back from a query Badger ran, the membership was comprised entirely of people who liked to dress up in funny clothes and pretend they lived in early nineteenth-century London. London, according to the report, had been a dark, polluted city on Old Earth, known at that time for its foreboding atmosphere and for the suspenseful fictional stories set there.

That bit of information on Basqueian felt like finding out that in his spare time Attila the Hun grew pansies.

I reread the highlights of the report, then handed the chip back to Badger. I laughed, for lack of a more appropriate response. "The Universal Society of Antiquarian Gothicans, for God's sake."

"That was my response, too. I'd never heard of them, but maybe they can help us. I'm running a query to locate other USAG members. Maybe, since he's still listed as a member in good standing, we can find out something about him from another member."

"I doubt that his criminal activities are going to have been a major topic of conversation at USAG meetings," I said. I tried to imagine what a major felon would get out of playing dress-up with people who had obviously lost touch with reality. "The members who know him will probably all say that he's a wonderful man, and so dedicated to his vision of the past, and that his costume is fabulous, and that everybody likes him. People have a real knack for overlooking the criminals in their midst."

Badger burrowed his hands down into his pockets, and with them there, shrugged. "You're probably right, but I figured we might find something interesting if we looked."

"Oh, certainly." I stood and brought up the lights in the holo room. "Whether it helps us or not."

We walked to the grav chute together. I felt solid aboard the Hope's Reward—solid and strong and real. Gravity tugged at me and I tugged back. I always felt slightly false in lower gravities, as if I had lost part of myself. The mass was still there, regardless of gravity, but I missed the pull of weight. In weight resides a power, a presence that reassures, that has nothing to do with mass or muscle but with the sheer

joy of fighting gravity and winning.

I stepped into the grav chute, angled myself into the reversed stream, and floated upward to the first floor. Badger followed an instant behind me. Hope's Reward hung just above Maxwell's Station, a neutral location Badger had chosen that was well within the borders of the Verzing Community. I'd been unconscious and in the medichamber when he made the traverse through the origami point, and although I know I had to have been conscious at the time we went through the point—the nature of the omniscient overself makes that inevitable—I was unconscious both before and after the point, and therefore missed the usual angst associated with the crossing. He'd felt that we would be better off in known territory, in a place where we understood the rules even if we didn't like some of them, while we figured out what to do next.

Now that I was awake and healthy again, we were ready to do that figuring.

We settled into chairs and looked out through the long, curving ports at the station. Maxwell's was a gaudy little gem that hung among the stars, centered like the hub of a wheel between a circle of origami points, conveniently located within sub-light distance of an asteroid belt and two habitable and settled planets.

The station itself housed about five thousand full-time residents. It had rooms for twenty-five hundred visitors. Most of the time, there were very few rooms to be had. Maxwell's son ran a good station, as had his father. Kept it clean and honest and fair, made sure the people who worked there treated visitors well, insisted that the latest and best in entertainment was always available. The place made money for him faster than if he'd had his own mint.

We used it as an unofficial home base. We maintained rooms there, though we didn't list ourselves as permanent residents. We didn't have to pay a surcharge, because three years ago I found a secret little something of Maxwell the son's that went missing and I returned it intact. He liked the idea of giving us a place to stay better than paying fifteen percent of the item's worth, and we liked the idea too, so in a way we got a part-time home and a bit of family for ourselves that we wouldn't have had otherwise.

I wanted to go down to our rooms for a while. I wanted to forget about the Corrigan's Blood, and about unidentified people smuggling unknown items to backwater planets and thin, small, unkillable men who had almost killed me. I wanted to be pampered and fed good food and treated to entertainment.

I wanted, at least at that moment, to be unemployed.

I said, "We can drop this. It doesn't look like it's just a stolen ship. It looks like a conspiracy, and we have enough information on the killings on Smithbrights World and Up Yours that we can turn it over to VeCRA and be done with it. The links between the Stardancer-class ships and the murders are weak, but strong enough that I think we could interest VeCRA."

"We won't get paid."

"We won't get killed, either."

Badger's voice was soft. "Is that what you want to do—get out of this?"

"What I want to do..." I laid my head back against my seat and stared up at the ceiling. "What I want to do... I want to go find the Corrigan's Blood and turn it in and receive our reward. But you almost died down there and so did I. And I would have killed a man, except he didn't die when I tried. This isn't what

I want from my life. This isn't the way I intended things to be." I closed my eyes. "Every day, I've thought, 'I'm doing what I'm good at, and I'm doing it without hurting anyone. I'm not like my mother. I'm not a killer like my mother.' But I've thought about what happened down there, and Badger, I'd do it again. If it came down to killing someone or letting him kill you, I'd kill him. I would take a human life."

He sighed.

I opened my eyes and looked over at him and said, "And that isn't the person I want to be."

"So then we'll get out." He gave me a gentle smile. "We're no killers—and this is something that is going to end up with people dead. Whatever the smugglers are hiding, they're more than willing to murder anyone who comes close to finding out."

"It's settled, then. I'll get a message drone ready to send to Peter Crane explaining that we got into a lot more than what we're willing to handle, and you make one last pass through the comnet to see what other information you can gather together to give to VeCRA. Let's substantiate our claims as best we can. We'll leave Crane's name out of it, and I'll return the money we didn't use." I was giving up my shot at twenty million rucets and freedom, and I felt better. That was how I knew I'd made the right decision.

I put a sincere apology into the drone along with an account of the things that had happened to us and why we were dropping out, and transferred the credit from my account into a secure chit that would transfer it on to Crane's account when the drone reached Cassamir Station. Once that was finished, I decided to go up to the bridge and see how Badger was coming with his information download. I decided I'd include that in the drone to Crane, so that when he hired someone else to get his ship back, that person could start where we'd left off.

When I reached the bridge, Badger said, "You haven't sent the drone yet, have you?"

"No."

"Good. Don't."

"I was going to include all the information you were getting here."

"See what I found first. You aren't going to like it."

He brought up the first part of the search on his data screen. "This is what our query regarding the three men who had tried to kill you on Cassamir station yielded."

That search had come up with identities for two of the three men. The giant was Gainer Holloway. Information about him was sketchy. He was from Coronado, and he was a licensed ship mechanic. He had no record and it was only because he held an interstellar license that the query had picked him up.

The other identified man was Ejus Gambidja. He was a transport security guard for United Package Interstellar. Had a clean record, had been bonded by UPI, and so had eventually been identified in our exhaustive query. That was all I had on him. I had nothing on the third man; he was probably someone who'd never done anything to anyone, had a perfect record and a job that didn't require him to have ID information in an interstellar database.

A bunch of sweet guys, my first batch of would-be killers.

"Now this is what I got on the name Corrigan's Blood. The query will probably still generate information for a few more days, but this is what we have now."

So far the search had generated thirty-two famous Corrigan's, but only two that also met our second criteria, that of being associated with blood in some way. The first was a serial killer from Chezhizad named Paul Deine Corrigan who had died fifty-seven years ago. He had specialized in murdering small children, whom he had cooked and eaten after drinking their blood. The report indicated rituals that went along with this, and the psychotic conviction on the part of the killer that he was staving off the end of the universe with his actions.

The second blood-tied Corrigan was Dr. Haskell B. Corrigan, a brilliant researcher who had disappeared from his laboratory on Sprax while trying to develop a cure for old age. He'd been concentrating on altering the chemistry of human blood, and while no one felt that he was anywhere near a breakthrough—and though most people doubted that he was even looking in the right direction—his other contributions to medicine, most in the field of nanoviral design, had made his mysterious disappearance a tragedy and a loss.

"If it was either one of those two, let's hope it was the second," I said.

"Here's the last report—members of the Universal Society of Antiquarian Gothicans, the society Cal Basqueian belonged to. I cross-referenced the membership list with names that were already in the shipcom memory in any context, and with places we have been or were planning on going."

There were 38,478 names listed: Badger had evidently wormed directly into the organization's own membership database.

I glanced over his shoulder.

The computer had split up the results of its search into Places and People.

The Places list was a shock. Every backwater world we still intended to visit had a few USAG members on it. So did every one we'd been to. Every one. If there was a place with lousy communication, primitive living conditions, and backward social order, the members of USAG had found it and moved in. Cassamir Station had members, too. So did Old Earth. So did Cantata, my home world and one of the least primitive places in the universe. So did Galatia Fairing, the information world.

If the Places list was startling, the People list was worse. Much worse. I read down it and felt my pulse slam against the backs of my eyes and throb in my temples.

- John Alder, identity falsified, membership revoked
- Janna Bell, active member, Ten West
- Cal Basqueian, active member, Corollus Station
- Fedara Contei, active member, Galatia Fairing
- Ti Demont, active member, Searles' Planet

- Kite Harrigan, active member, Cassamir Station
- Dr. Haskell Corrigan, estate membership in trust
- Kenjon Deel, Planetary President, Up Yours
- Lashanda Elenday, Planetary Controller, Cantata
- Ejus Gambidja, active member, Cantata
- Gainer Holloway, active member, Cantata
- Paley Kotak, active member, Corollus Station
- Danniz Oe, Universal Over-President, no address given

I studied that list of names and started shaking. "That the same Danniz, you think?"

"Probably."

"Yeah. I think so, too."

I'd been handed the key to a door—a door that led to both Corrigan's Blood and the other mystery, the one that was tied to smuggling and attempted murder and perhaps the disappearance of a respected doctor.

And it tied in something else. My past.

My mother was Lashanda Elenday, and if she was a member of the Universal Society of Antiquarian Gothicans, then whatever they were doing had nothing to do with dressing up in funny clothes and reenacting dead history. The only thing that interested my mother, that had ever interested her, was power. How to get it, how to keep it, how to use it to make other people bend. She despised democracy and reason; she wanted to live in a universe in which her will was law. She would have only joined USAG because she knew it would forward her dream.

If my mother was a member of USAG, then USAG, or at least the part of it that she touched, was corrupt and dangerous and evil.

"We can't quit," I said.

And Badger nodded. "I know."

Chapter Sixteen