

Incident on a Small Colony  
by  
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The receiving dock stank of berries.

*Raspberries, I think.* Jani Kilian stared at the bright pink mess that spilled across the floor in front of her. *With a hint of. . . what?* Battery hyperacid, judging from the bitter tang. Add to that the melted plastic odor of evaporating sealant, backed by the ever-present undercurrent of stale station air.

*Dammit.* Above her, the dock alarms whirled like dervishes, sending wave after wave of red light breaking across the walls and ceiling.

Red.

Jani struggled to concentrate as, around her, the very air seemed to throb with color. *Six hours for the paperwork. Another day and a half to get it all signed off.* All that work for one shattered fifty-kilo drum of flavor concentrate. *But it's Family-licensed, and all the containers are tagged.* Once you acquired a reputation for losing Family shipments, you could pretty much kiss your business good-bye.

"As if this place had any business to kiss." *Pearl Way Lading of Victoria Colony—We Cover the Commonwealth.* A bit of an overstatement. Judging from their records, they covered only the six worlds that made up the Pearl Way, and thanks to competition from other companies, both human and Haárin, along with general incompetence, their share of that market had been dropping steadily for years.

*It's going to drop even more after word of this gets out. Trashing Family shipments—not the way to build business--* Jani paused to wipe away tears with her coverall sleeve, then switched to breathing through her mouth. The muddled stench had made her eyes water, seared the inside of her nose.

"Timas?"

Red. Everywhere she looked, all red—

"Timas?"

Jani bent at the waist and stared at her black boots, their surfaces too scuffed and worn to reflect the pulsing color.

"Timas! You deaf or what!"

*Shit--!* The shout slammed Jani like a blow—she straightened as though someone had jammed a knee in her back. Timas was a new name—she hadn't gotten used to it yet. *Andree Timas. Documents technician.* She pushed a hand through her cropped hair, felt the slick sweat that coated her scalp. *Sing yourself to sleep with it, moron.* "Just trying to figure out the best way to clean this up."

The stevedore stepped in front of her. Royson, his name was, a baby-faced redhead of the sort who turned up at other people's accidents. "Va-cu-um. In-cin-er-ate." He waved a hand in front of her face and enunciated in a slow singsong as though

speaking to a child, the cadence accentuated by his New Indies lilt. "Even a paper-pusher should be able to figure that out."

Jani ignored the insult. It was standard dock abuse, and Royson had been lobbing it at her since her arrival three days before. Given some of the things she'd heard on other docks over the past five years, it almost qualified as a compliment. "The stuff's already stained the topcoat." She pushed at the edge of the gelatinous muck with the toe of her boot, revealing the telltale darkening of the floor beneath. "And the crate was a controlled shipment, which means triple the paperwork." She pressed a hand to the back of her neck as the alarm continued to flash, felt the muscles knot. She couldn't turn off the beacon—she hadn't been coded into all of the company systems yet, so she didn't have clearance. *And I can't ask Royson to do it.* He'd just insult her again, and given her ramping anger, she might not be able to hold back. *I hit him, I'm gone.* And she'd only just settled in. *I can't screw up this job.* She needed the money. A place to hide.

A little peace.

"Boy, Maintenance is going to love you." Royson maneuvered between her and the spill, veering in close enough to force her to step back. "The bosses got to get informed and you get to walk upstairs and collect their signatures." He clapped his hands. "Well, better go get those fancy forms out of the drawer and start filling them out." He grinned, his teeth colored pink by the alarm light. "Most action you'll see for the whole week. You might even break a sweat ridin' up and down the lift."

Jani sighed. *Three days—guess the honeymoon's over.* Time to challenge the new tech, get in her face. See if and when she flinched, how much she could be pushed around. *And Royson's the chosen attack dog.* She wondered if he'd lost a bet or won it, glanced over her shoulder toward the office compartment in time to see three heads vanish around the corner. *We even have an audience.* The dispatcher and Royson's two partners on the firstshift floor team.

*Turn me loose.* A little voice in the back of Jani's head, sensed rather than heard. *No one will ever bother you again.* The berry stench seemed almost pleasant now. Softer. Less pungent.

"Let's go! Come on!" Royson clapped again, right under her nose, the sound sharp as a shooter crack. Then came the echoes, as though they stood in a cave.

*Hit him.* The voice whispered, softly as a lover. *Make him bleed.*

Jani looked into her designated tormentor's eyes. She didn't have to look up to do it—she and Royson appeared matched at about one-eight. As happened with some men, Royson's lack of height advantage seemed to bother him. She watched as he tilted up his chin, furrowed his brow. That first murmur of doubt, rearing its ugly little head. Time to push back.

"Why bother?" Jani shrugged. "I'll let it slide. What's one less accident report? One less ride up and down the lift? Maintenance will ask for their copy when they come to recoat the floor, but hey, I'll lie. Tell 'em it's stuck in sign-off." She took a step forward, then another, forcing Royson back until a wet *smack* announced the fact that he had stepped into the spill.

"Fuck." Royson edged sideways, dragging the edge of his boot along the floor in an effort to scrape off the pungent mess.

"That's what Maintenance will say when they realize that I lied to them about the report." Jani kept moving forward, jostling against Royson with a knee or a shoulder

when he tried to hold his ground or veer to one side or the other. "After a few comport calls, which I'll ignore, and a few visits, which I'll dodge, they'll say 'hell with it' and bump it upstairs to the Transportation annex, which will send an investigator to check and see what happened. That's when they'll discover that not only didn't *we* file—it becomes the company's fault by that time, not just mine—not only didn't *we* file the accident report, but *we* didn't investigate the spilled drum."

"You have to investigate cargo damage." Royson spouted automatically, a point from his training module disgorged on command. "It's the law."

"Screw it." Jani moved to one side, blocking Royson as he again tried to dodge around her. "Failure to investigate is just a Class 4 violation. So what if they send out an auditor from the ministry annex on Padishah? That makes it party time—it'll take a whole station-week for them to get here."

"Wait a minute." Royson stopped in his tracks. A flush as pink as the flavor concentrate crept up his neck. "If we're under investigation—"

"—you don't get paid. Because as a documented employee of Pearl Way Lading, whose reputation would have to rebound into the stratosphere to qualify as crappy, you're part of the 'we,' and we would be under a ministry-ordered shutdown until the auditor completed their investigation." Jani glanced past Royson's shoulder, caught sight of the dock wall a bare stride away, and took one last step forward. "Hope you have another job lined up."

Royson's head jerked as he hit the wall. The flush had claimed his face now, making his cheeks as shiny and pink as candy. "Just because it needs to be done doesn't mean it isn't bullshit." He pressed against the coated concrete as though he wanted to push through the slab to the other side.

*Must be my charm.* Jani backed off half a step, just enough to give the man a little room to breathe. "Bullshit it may be. But it's bullshit that guarantees you a paychit, so why don't you just keep your opinion of my job to yourself and leave me to get on with it?" She turned and started to walk across the dock toward the office, then stopped as the red walls continued to spin. "And while you're at it, make yourself useful and kill that goddamned alarm."

"All you paper-pushers think you're so hot." Royson slipped past her to the control panel, palmed it open, and smacked one of the pads with his fist. "Two-bit tech, never gets her hands dirty, acts like she's a friggin' examiner." The alarm light stopped.

The red . . . ceased.

"Bitch and moan, bitch and moan." Jani resumed walking, eyes fixed on the floor at her feet. The light might have stopped, but her head—*Why is everything still moving so slowly?* "Is someone going to own up to this spill, or do I blame it on the redhead?" Her voice reverberated inside her skull. She glanced over at Royson, who glared back at her, his fist still pressed to the alarm pad. "I'll be going to my cube in case anyone wants to talk. Confession time starts in—"—she checked her timepiece—"fifteen minutes." She veered away from the office, heading instead for the dock exit that led to the station innards. "I'll be there with my beads and my holy water and whatever else you think might help you to unburden yourself." She needed a few minutes alone in the dark. Just had to find someplace empty. Quiet.

"Timas?"

Jani spun toward the voice. "*What?*" She closed her eyes when she saw who had spoken. *No, you don't want to give him a reason to wonder about you.* "I'll write up the incident report as soon as I get back."

"No rush." Delmen, the dock lead, started to back away from her, then stopped. "You OK?" He cocked his head, voice soft with concern.

Jani hesitated, then nodded. "Just working out some ground rules with the gang." She forced a smile, her facial muscles fighting every twitch.

Delmen grinned. He was young for a lead, no more than thirty, his face unlined, brown skin ashy from the months spent working at the station, four hundred kilometers above the Victorian surface. "Yeah, I heard." His voice was gravelly, but quiet. How he got the stevedores to listen to him was anyone's guess. "So." He looked around Jani toward the spill. "Insurance?"

Jani tried to nod, stopping when the walls started to pulse. "Filed the updated applications yesterday."

"Then we're covered?"

"Maybe." *Just breathe.* Jani focused on the skin on the backs of her hands. Dark brown, darker than Delmen's, the darkest thing on the dock. *Except for Delmen's eyes.* They were brown unto black, his pupils almost invisible. *But I can't stare at him.* He'd think she was after him, and Royson would sniff that out like the dog he was. *He'd spread the word that I was after my lead.* That always did wonders for one's reputation. "You were two quarters behind with your premiums. I let the company know that it was a case of simple oversight—your last tech had ignored the cancellation notices. You've had no incidents up to this point. The company should accept my explanation, but I have the appeal forms lined up in case they don't. I just need to run up to Transportation and grab some supplemental—" She glanced up to find Delmen staring at her, his hand pressed to his forehead as though his head ached. "What?"

"How do you know all this stuff?" The man let his hand drop and shook his head. "Just wrangle it any way you have to—I'll sign off." He started to walk toward the office compartment, then stopped and turned back to her. "You've been here three station-days. I can see the tops of the desks again. The stacks of paper are disappearing. The comports aren't bleating every ten minutes with an angry somebody or other on the other end." He smiled. "I don't know how we managed without you."

"I don't—" Jani swallowed, felt the blush creep up her neck despite her disorientation. Thank Lord Ganesh for dark skin and bad lighting. "It's my job."

"Maybe." Delmen shrugged, then turned and resumed walking toward the office. "Thanks for doing your job."

Jani watched him walk. Trim build, almost wiry. Nice shoulders. *He's shorter than I am.* By half a head, at least. *He likes my work—I can't mess that up.* She felt attracted to him—she could admit that as long as it stopped there. As long as it went no further. *Dark hair.* She could imagine lacing her fingers through it while Delmen worked that gentle voice, telling her whatever he thought she needed to hear.

She shook herself aware. Delmen had joined Royson by the control box—he did all the talking while Royson stared past him in her direction. Their eyes met. His brow furrowed.

*Dammit.* Jani strode across the dock, smacked the exit doorpad with the flat of her hand, then shouldered the panel aside when it failed to open quickly enough. The door

array bleated in protest. Heads emerged from doorways up and down the corridor. A voice blared from an office at the far end. "*What the hell's going on!*"

Jani pushed the door closed, then hurried down the hall, past the general mail drop into the women's locker room. That door opened quickly, closed quietly.

*Thanks for doing your job.* Jani leaned against the wall just inside the door and pressed the heels of her hands to her temples. Anyone seeing her would think she fought a headache, which was as good an excuse as any.

*Get a grip.* Her eyes stung. How many things had she heard over the years that should have grabbed her heart and twisted, yet hadn't?

*I love you.*

*We're going to die here, Captain.*

*You're alive, Jani.*

*This won't hurt for long.*

"Thanks." Jani opened her eyes slowly, then blinked. Despite the welling tears, they felt dry, as they often did. Gritty, as though someone had blown dust into them. *I should check them, just in case.* She walked to the bathroom entry and scanned the room, then checked the stalls. *Empty.* Not unusual. Few women worked at dock level.

Jani walked to the nearest sink and activated the tap. Savored the spill of warm water over her hands. Activated the soap, lathered, and rinsed. Counted to three, then looked in the mirror.

Her eyes stared back. Green nearly as dark as Delmen's brown, green unto black, the color of the bottom of a well.

She bent closer and examined the shiny white sclera. *Still white.* No gaps. No splits. Not much of anything, really. *No blood vessels. No shadows.* Fake white, to match the fake green. *Eyes from a bottle.* She reached into her pocket, held her breath as she felt for the vial of filmformer, exhaled slowly as her hand closed over it. Her shield. Her security. The one thing that allowed her to maintain a pretense of humanity.

"Hello."

Jani flinched. Straightened slowly, then turned.

The girl stood in the entry. Ten years old. Maybe twelve. Short and delicate, pale blond hair and blue eyes heightening the impression of extreme youth, as did her baggy black trousers and blue pullover.

*Like she just emerged from her mother's closet.* But something wasn't right. *Eyes. There's something wrong with her eyes.* A little too bright and opened a little too wide.

Jani could see that the girl watched her. *But what does she see?* Nothing in this world, if previous experience held. "Are you looking for someone?" A parent, she hoped. A guardian. Somebody responsible. "Are you lost?" She pitched her voice low, and spoke slowly.

"What's your name?" The girl cocked her head as though distracted by a distant sound. "Everyone has one."

"Ja—" Jani stopped the sound just before it emerged. "Andree Timas." She edged away from the sink, taking care to keep both hands open and visible. "I work here."

"Andy." The girl bounded forward and grabbed Jani's left hand. "Andy, are you handy?"

Jani fought the urge to pull back, and managed to remain still as the girl squeezed her hand, then shook it, two hard pumps that rattled up her arm. *Is she trying to hurt me?*

Jani couldn't tell. She could detect pressure with her left arm and hand, but not pain. Same with her left leg. *My old war wounds*. They complicated her life at the damnedest times.

"I'm Annalise Couvier." The girl smiled, teeth dead white in the harsh lighting. Then she dropped Jani's hand as though it burned, wheeled, and darted out of the bathroom, through the locker area and out the door.

"Shit." Jani bolted after her, pushing through the gaps in sliding panels and triggering safety alarms. More bleating, cut off in midyap as she freed herself and broke through into the hallway.

The empty hallway.

"Where the hell—?" Jani stilled. Listened for the pound of shoes against hard flooring, a cry or a shout.

"If you don't stop playing around, I'm going to report you."

Jani spun toward the voice. It belonged to an older woman, a clerk for one of the other shippers. Sour face and a tatty coverall in clashing shades of brown. "Did you see a girl run out of the locker room a few seconds before I came out?"

"All I've seen is you making an ass of yourself." The woman looked Jani up and down and sniffed. "It's all I've heard, too." She pulled herself up straight, the top of her clipped hairdo barely reaching Jani's shoulder. "Some of us have work to do." With that, she brushed past Jani and keyed into the locker room.

Jani waited a few moments more, until a door at the far end of the corridor opened. and a pair of men emerged. She turned her back so they wouldn't see her face, walked to the dock entry, then stopped. She couldn't handle Royson yet. Her heart still beat slow and steady. Sounds still seemed to echo inside her head. And now . . .

*Augmentation has its benefits, Lieutenant Kilian. You'll find that under conditions of panic, you will remain calm. Any wounds you suffer will heal more quickly. You will be able, under certain conditions, to exhibit controlled bursts of greater than average strength.*

That had been the good news.

*However, augments exhibiting your particular brain chemistry might hallucinate under certain conditions.*

The Service doctor had made it sound so innocuous.

*—extended episodes of extreme stress, for example—*

What would he have considered extreme? The near occasion of death? Years spent hiding, lying, stealing?

*—sensitivity to the color red—*

Less said about that, the better.

*—at those times, the implanted gland itself may require resetting in order to maintain proper function. I'm sure you've heard the word 'takedown' around the place. These need to be performed periodically, otherwise—*

*Otherwise . . .*

*Bless me, Doctor, for I have sinned. It's been—*Jani counted on her fingers—*five years since my last takedown*. She walked back down the hall and reentered the locker room. Into the bathroom, and the stall two doors removed from the one currently occupied by the scolding clerk. *Assuming she's in there*. Assuming she wasn't another artifact of a neurochemical cascade gone haywire.

—*augmentation psychosis*—

Jani dragged the cubicle door closed, then slumped against the cold metal wall. *Did I just hallucinate?* The girl, the woman, the men at the end of the corridor? Fellow augments had always told her that if you thought you were hallucinating, you weren't hallucinating, but she had always chalked that up to wishful thinking. *If you think you might be crazy, you're not crazy.* No. If you thought you might be crazy, you needed to see a medico. *Except that I can't.* Because if she ever walked into a hospital, they'd never let her out. *Except to transfer me to the nearest Service brig.* Because the Service had been looking for her for a long time.

*Five years.* That long since she'd worn a uniform. Snapped a salute. Five years since she'd answered to the name she'd been born with. Jani Moragh Kilian. Born in the city of Ville Acadie, Acadia Colony, twenty-nine Common years before she had taken to seeing girls who weren't there and hiding in station bathrooms to assess her sanity.

From two stalls down, the stopped drain sounds of a flushing toilet. Coughing, followed by muttering about the workload.

*Would I hallucinate the sound without any visuals?* Jani knew augments who had, but they were rarities according to the Service doctors. Of course, it had occurred to her more than once since that time that the Service doctors had lied through their collective teeth.

The sounds of the stall door opening. The workings of the sink. Footsteps, followed by the opening and closing of the bathroom door.

Jani counted to ten, then pushed open the door to her stall. Walked to the sink, washed and dried her hands. Ignored the mirror, catching only the barest flashes of her short, black hair, her brown skin. Then one more time, out of the bathroom to the locker room, the locker room to the corridor. Sounds seemed duller now, colors less sharp. Her heart tripped, then sped into its more usual rhythm. She'd feel tired as hell in an hour or so. As soon as she got to the office, she'd make coffee strong enough to etch metal, then wait for someone to confess to the spill. After that, she'd file, clean, run errands. Anything to keep moving, keep from falling asleep. The last thing she needed was for Royson to catch her snoring at her desk. Royson, her new best friend. There always seemed to be one at every dock, an inevitability she could have happily done without.

She checked the company's slot in the mail drop, collected the thin bundle of paper missives resting within. Palmed through the dock entry, and walked out onto the floor to find Delmen supervising the spill cleanup. He'd commandeered Salay and Boudamire, the Rodent Twins, Royson's partners in crime. Royson himself was nowhere to be seen, which meant only one thing.

"Oh, hell." Jani drew alongside Delmen and watched the two stevedores shovel berry muck into a rolling trash bin. "He's in my cube, isn't he?"

Delmen grinned. "He confessed right after you left." He edged closer and lowered his voice. "I don't know if he really did it or if he drew the short straw, him being the new guy and all. I don't really care, either." He looked at her, the grin wavering. "You feeling OK?"

Jani shrugged, tried not to look him in the eye. "I just needed to get away from the stink."

Delmen sniffed. "I think my nose has gone numb." He pointed to the shoveling stevedores. "I'll take care of this. Go take confession."

"Yeah." Jani started toward the office compartment, a prefab rectangle that ran along the dock's far wall. *A coffin with windows*, Delmen had called it during her interview, which had proved the most perfunctory she had ever experienced. *Take a good, hard look around. If you can control your laughter, your cube's in the back.*

Jani walked past the leaky watercooler and pushed through the old hinged door, which had put up a valiant fight against the olfactory onslaught from without but came up short. *Even so, I've worked in worse places.* She walked past the shelves crammed with smashed cartons, rolled-up clothing, cups, and baseball caps.

*That yellow pullover's still here.* The broken receiver. The hand ratchet with the faulty stop. Lost lambs all, liberated from lockers with expired leases, breakrooms, and broken packing cases. Given that all but the most beat-up items found takers before they even made it to the shelves, the pickings were slim unto skeletal.

The yawning jag hit just as Jani passed the coffee table. She laid claim to the cold dregs from the brewer, adding a scoop of sugar to counter the bitterness. Walked to her cube, and entered just in time to see Royson close her desk drawer and start riffling through a stack of manifests. "Looking for something in particular?"

Royson barely glanced at her. "A stylus. Del gave me this form to fill out." He held up a form inscribed on old version Transportation Ministry parchment, tan with a dark green border.

"You can fill it out directly in Systems." The urge to yawn struck again, and Jani covered it by taking a swig of coffee. "It means you have to deal with questions from upstairs that much sooner, but it's what they prefer. Especially when the paper form you have is out-of-date." She swallowed more sugar-saturated swill. Her brain felt wrapped in fog, her eyelids, heavy.

*Shovels.*

The word dropped into Jani's head as she edged past Royson to her desk and sat down. Once there, it rattled around. Stamped its feet. *Shovels—they're shoveling the muck into a bin.* She tried to recall if she'd heard the low hum of the vacuum when she stopped to talk to Delmen. *No, I didn't hear a damned thing.* She glanced at the penitent to find him slumped in the visitor's chair, arms folded, sullen glare fixed on an image of a vase of flowers that had been clipped from a magazine and tacked to the partition by some previous occupant. "Low man acts as lookout."

Royson blinked lizard-slow. His brow creased. "What?"

"They're not vacuuming the spill, they're scooping the stuff into a bin. When they're finished, they'll hand off the bin to someone who'll portion it out and sell it downstairs." Jani pointed to the floor, which at that time of the station-day faced Victoria. "I guess the only question is, was the accident really an accident, or did a fence place an order that needed filling right away?"

If Royson felt any discomfort at having been sussed out, he buried it beneath a fair imitation of boredom. "The lift stalled just as I began to hoist the drum. When I started it up again, the whole thing went nuts"—he held up his hands, curved toward one another as though ready to close around the nearest neck, and shook them hard—"and the drum slipped out of the brace. Hit the floor. Splat." He tucked in his arms again and remained slumped. He had yet to look her in the eye.

Jani nodded. "How high was the drop?"

"Two, three meters."

"Those drums are rated at ten."

"Well, this one flunked, didn't it?" Royson brushed at dirt that smudged the knee of his coverall, then tucked in again, the very image of the sulky scapegoat.

Jani powered up her workstation and accessed the incident report template. "Tell Delmen that someone needs to fill out the vacuum log to account for the time it would have taken to suck up the junk. Incinerator time needs to be logged as well." She started inputting, at the same time watching Royson out of the corner of her eye. "It would be better if they sacrificed part of the spill. Verifiers have been known to check vac function and incinerator scans to see whether something was actually sucked up and burned during the time in question."

Royson turned slowly toward her, like a tortoise roused from slumber. "Is that what you used to do?"

Jani shook her head. "I was never a verifier." *Not officially, anyway.*

"Boudy thinks you are. He says you watch too much."

"Like Boudy does anything worth watching." Jani transferred data from Royson's personnel file to the incident report form. *First name's James. Middle name's . . . Newark?* Just the sort of tidbit one could file away for use at a later date. "You could tell him and Sal to be more careful when they sneak their girlfriends into the storage room during breaks." She tapped on the wall beside her. "Stuff's not as soundproof as they might wish." She added Royson's description of the spill, affixed her systems signature, then pushed back her chair. "It's better if I know what's going on so that I can cover with the right paper. Otherwise, loose ends start to fray during routine audits. Next thing you know, you're up to your ass in auditors general."

Royson took his cue, stretching across Jani's desk and keying in his own sig. When he sat back, he put his hands in his pockets, his shoulders sagging as the tension seeped away. "I don't know how you do that stuff all day." He leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "Where are you from? You sound Felician sometimes, but it comes and goes."

"That because I've been gone a long time." Jani inserted a sheet of current Transportation parchment into her imprinter and transcribed the report, then tapped her touchboard and sent off the Systems copy to its new home in the gaping ministry maw. "Accent starts to fall by the wayside after a while." She spoke enough Felician Spanish to get by, and made the effort now to trill her r's and lisp just a little to reinforce Royson's guess.

"I passed through Felix Station once, on my way to somewhere else." Royson cocked his head. "Nice shops along the concourse."

Jani concentrated on labeling a documents slipcase with Royson's name and the incident number. *He's trying to trap me.* Fortunately, she'd once passed through the station on the way to somewhere else, too. "They're like anything else, nice if you can afford them." She pushed the transcribed document across her desk. "Initial this, and I'll file it." She bit out the words, a busy woman with too much to do to spend time talking about another colony's station.

Royson leaned over and scrawled his initials on the bottom of the document. Then he braced his elbows on the edge of the desk and watched Jani tuck it into its slipcase. "Guy I used to work with told me it was the idomeni's revenge. We went to their home world, got stuck in the middle of one of their stupid wars, and that's how those

marble eyes paid us back. Showed us how to bury ourselves in paper." He clucked his tongue. "I'd go nuts if all I did all day was shove that stuff around."

"Then you're lucky you don't have to." Jani twisted her chair so that she faced her workstation, leaving Royson with a view of her back.

"Just tryin' to make conversation." Chair ergoworks squeaked as Royson pushed to his feet. "Bitch."

Jani waited until she heard the office door open and close. Then she eased back, cold coffee in hand, and pondered the day so far.

*Pearl Way Shipping sells off damaged shipments.* And if nothing turned up damaged over the course of the station-day, they did the deed themselves. *Oh well.* The only ones inconvenienced were whichever Family members owned the shipment. Nothing wrong with that. Every one of the eight Families could be inconvenienced as much as possible, as far as she was concerned.

*And I caught Royson searching my desk.* Could've just been meanness on his part. She'd embarrassed him in front of his teammates. As junior member, he'd be a long time shaking that off. Maybe stealing was his flavor of retaliation.

*But he gave me a geography quiz, too.* Because he and the others thought she was a verifier, a Commonwealth spy. *Here we go again.* One of these days, she'd have to stop giving a damn about her job and give incompetence a try. *In the meantime, I better watch where I walk.* Accidents happened all the time on the docks.

#

"Del wants to see you."

Jani looked up from her report to find Royson standing in her cube entry.

"Something happen?"

"He just sent me to get you. I don't ask questions." Royson started back down the narrow corridor. "Not like some people."

Jani walked out on the dock floor to find Delmen waiting.

"I can give you a cashcard at the end of the week." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the warehouse. "Or you can pick out something you like." A bare hint of a smile. "Within reason. Don't go trying to walk out with a sports skimmer or anything."

*Which degree felony do I have to cover up to get one of those?* Jani bit back the question. She would have meant it as a joke, but certain brands of funny didn't play well at times like this. *I'm being gauged.* Watched for any slipup, any hint that she wasn't what she claimed to be. "Thanks."

Delmen started toward the warehouse entry, then beckoned for Jani to follow.

"Thanks for the tip about the incinerator." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Not that it mattered much—we had to burn almost three-quarters of the spill. It had already skinned over and started powdering around the edges. You can't use it once it dries out."

"If it happens again, throw a tarp over it. It'll keep the moisture from evaporating, and help contain the smell." Jani stifled a cough and wondered how long it would take the ancient ventilation system to clear the air. "You could spray a little clear oil on the contact side of the tarp, too. That'll keep any skin from forming."

Delmen wrinkled his nose. "Clear oil's a machine lubricant."

"It's no worse than the stuff they used to make that flavoring." Jani gauged the warehouse, as she did every time she entered the place. It was smaller than most. A soccer field in size, maybe, and only two floors high. No vast depths that one could be

led into, never to return. Only wide rows of half-filled shelves, with plenty of gaps to allow for good visibility and clear lines of sight.

And, built against the far wall, a cage.

Jani's heart tripped, as it did every time she caught sight of the metal-link walls. She breathed deeply, concentrated on relaxing her tightened throat, on sounding interested, but not too eager. "Anything good in the cage today?"

Delmen grinned. "So, she's human after all." He cast a skeptical look at Jani's coverall. "Sure you wouldn't want some clothes?"

"I'd rather have a receiver." Jani stepped aside just in time to avoid a collision courtesy of a dour warehouseman with a hand truck. "The com system in my flat isn't very good, and the owner won't upgrade unless I kick in half the cost."

"A receiver?" Delmen shrugged. "That's easy." He led her to the cage door, pressed his palm to the pad, then stilled so the lock mech could scan his eyes and ears.

As that went on, Jani looked through the links to the cage shelves. She could see a variety of receivers, as well as a Transportation Ministry imprinter, seals still intact. *Oh, the fun Pearl Way Lading could have with one of those.* A few busy weeks, and they'd all have enough money to retire before the ministry realized what was happening. *But then the price on our heads would prove damned attractive to somebody, and we'd be rolled up within a week.* Which was as good a reason as any to stay small-time. *Never steal enough to be interesting.* Words to avoid getting shot by.

"We have all the latest models." Delmen dragged open the door while Dour and another warehouseman watched. "Some come with subscriptions to PearlNet special programs . . ."

While Delmen continued his spiel, Jani checked out the cluttered shelves that stretched from the floor to a gridwork ceiling an arm's length above her head. She wondered how many of the cage security systems had fallen into disrepair, if they had even been installed at all. Shelf sensors that sounded when someone removed an item from its niche. Continuous inventory. Imaging monitors. *I'm sure.* The last thing anyone in this place wanted was a functioning security system. She wondered what the repair logs stated, if they were kept at all.

"This might be what you're looking for." Delmen patted a palm-sized receiver that was barely visible amid the junk. "It even comes with its own stand—"

As he rattled on, Jani checked out the contents of the closest shelf, ever mindful of the warehousemen who still watched them. The box of foil packets didn't attract her at first. The box bore no markings of any kind, and the packets' labeling had been stripped. But then the format of the engraved coding along the top seam of the foil gained her attention.

She edged closer. Let her gaze flick over the packets, like a poker player gauging her cards under her opponents' eyes.

Her heart skipped.

*Update 7.5.3.* Not the latest scanpack update, but newer than what she had. *A complete kit, with tools and everything.* She saw the warehousemen turn their attention to the workings of the hand truck. Delmen began a description of another receiver.

Jani leaned on the shelf, eyes fixed on Delmen's back. *Don't look at the box—don't look—* Working by feel, she reached into the box, grabbed a packet, and with a light push of her fingers, tucked it up inside her sleeve. Then she bent over and tugged at her

pant leg, making as though the cuff had caught on her boot. As she did, she let the packet slide into a pocket she'd long ago sewn into the seam. Brushed her hand over the opening, sealing it closed. Stood up just as Delmen turned back to her. *Four seconds, tops*. Possibly even three. She'd had a lot of practice.

Delmen held out his hands toward the shelf of receivers, Father Beneficent at the end of his pitch. "Well, which do you want?"

"I'll take that one." Jani pointed to the small receiver she'd seen first. "I don't have room in my flat for anything bigger."

Delmen frowned. "It doesn't come with any subscriptions," he said as he plucked it from its niche and handed it to Jani.

"Can't afford those anyway." Jani made a show of hunting down an empty carton and placing the receiver into it. *Nothing in my pockets. Nothing up my sleeves*. "Thanks." She walked across the warehouse to the dock to the office, sensing stares all along the way. Only after she sat down at her desk did she breathe normally. Her hands shook. A thin line of sweat trickled down her back. Her augmentation, so lately expended, had abandoned her utterly.

*Coffee*. She stood, braced against her desk until her legs steadied, then trudged to the coffee table. As she passed the lost lambs' shelves, she checked them for anything new. The yellow pullover had finally vanished, probably into the trash. She had tried it on herself her first day on the job—the sleeves had hit her midforearm, while the hem barely reached her waist. No go, not even for someone who didn't care about clothes.

As usual, no one had seen to the brewer since the morning, so Jani rolled up her sleeves and commenced cleaning up. She was halfway through the first purge cycle when she heard the door open and sensed someone move in behind her—she turned to find Delmen perched on the edge of a nearby desk, empty coffee cup in hand.

"Don't mind me." He smiled more brightly than usual, a flash of teeth and glint of eye that shaved years. "You know, I can't recall that last time that thing was purged."

"A fact reflected in the quality of the coffee." Jani concentrated on buttons and switches and the fine art of backflushing an ancient brewer, mindful all the while that Delmen watched her every move. *Maybe he likes me*. She barely caught her smile in time. *Maybe he's the one who told Royson to search my desk*.

"You ever have real coffee?" Delmen switched his gaze to the empty recesses of his cup, a bright blue thing adorned with a Victoria & United football sticker.

"A few times." Jani unwrapped a fresh brick of coffee infusion, broke off a larger than usual wedge, and tossed it into the basket. "You?"

Delmen sighed as softly as he spoke. "Right after I graduated prep, I worked for a landscaping company on Padishah. We spent weeks on this Family estate—one of the al-Muhammed daughters—planting a forest's worth of trees and shrubs and putting down lawn by the square kilometer." His shoulders sagged as though the mere memory of the labor drained him. "On the last day of the job, she threw us a luncheon. Little sandwiches and pastel cakes and coffee in those miniature cups." He rested his head against the wall and stared at nothing. "It was the real thing, all bitter and foamy. You could've shoveled sugar into it until you wore out your arm, and you'd still know you were drinking the real thing." His gaze slowly sharpened as he eased back to the present. "When did you have it?"

Jani dawdled over the brewer, repositioning the chunk of infusion in the basket, then tweaking the water flow and temperature. "Someone I . . . worked with once used to make it." She glanced at Delmen to find him eyeing her expectantly. He'd opened up a little. *Now it's my turn.* She activated the brewer and the contraption gurgled to life, expelling the first whiffs of synthetic coffee to do battle with the stubborn remains of synthetic berries. "He used to make a ceremony out of it. He had a special pot with gold-coated fittings. A special grinder. First he'd grind the beans to a particular particle size, spread them out just so. Then he'd heat the water to just the right temperature and pour it over the grounds at a carefully calculated rate." Jani mimed a careful decantation. "Cream, he'd allow grudgingly, but if you tried to add sugar, you'd get an earful." She closed her eyes for a moment as sense memories surfaced. A deep voice murmuring in her ear. Long-fingered hands moving over every part of her. "He was a scientist. Very precise. Everything had to be just so."

"You liked him. I can tell." Delmen patted his cheek. "Your face is all mushy, all . . ." He feigned examination of the ceiling, shit-eating grin firmly in place. "Never mind."

Jani flexed her left hand, watched the fake joints work beneath the fake skin. "He meant well."

"That's a strange thing to say."

"He was a strange man." Jani let her hand fall. "But he knew how to brew coffee." She grabbed a cup from the shaky pyramid someone had constructed to pass a few dull minutes and filled it to the brim. "So how did the cleanup shake out?"

"Nice way to change the subject." Delmen pushed off the desk and stepped up to the brewer. "It wasn't a bad haul. Payroll's covered for the next two weeks." He plucked a couple of sugar packets from a bowl and waved them in front of Jani's nose before decapitating them and dumping the contents into his cup. "Would've been nice if we could've sold the whole spill, though. That would've carried us for three, maybe four months." He sloshed a few fingers of coffee atop the sugar, swirled his cup, sniffed the steam, and frowned. "Oh well. Better than nothing."

"Thanks a lot." Jani took a sip and reached for the sugar as well. "Have you talked to the owner about working it so this shipping company could meet the payroll by actually, you know, shipping cargo?"

"Our dutiful owner?" Delmen laughed, a harsh, low bark that didn't match his voice. "Some woman on Padishah. Met her once. I stopped bugging her about finances long ago. I think she's letting the place go to hell so she can write off the loss."

*Or she's using it as a means to ship personal properties as commercial goods and avoid higher cartage taxes.* Jani swallowed that item along with her coffee. No sense letting anyone in on the fact she knew her Commonwealth tax laws as well as she knew insurance forms.

"Not sure if this place is worth the fight anymore, to tell you the truth." Delmen dug through the community cooler and liberated a couple of mummified doughnuts. "Rumor has it that Haárin are expanding their presence in Padishah Station. Instead of two docks, they're going to ten. Marble-eyed bastards are taking over. They'll be here before you know it." He tore a chunk off a glazed ring and dunked it into his coffee.

Jani blinked. Her films felt tight, as usual. Grainy. She'd freshen them in the evening, just to make sure. "I'm surprised Shèrá is letting them work outside the worldskein."

"Worldskeins. Idomeni. Born-sects. Haárin. Who can keep all that shit straight? I thought the reason Haárin were Haárin was because they didn't listen to their born-sects? Outcasts, aren't they? Criminals and apostates? The bad seeds?" Delmen walked to the door and stared out the window toward the dock, where Royson and his buddies raced forklifts across the length of the floor. "Yeah, they'll be building a whole separate wing with shiny new docks and altar rooms and special kitchens and all that other crap they need. And Chicago will stand aside and let 'em do it because they can't be bothered to give a damn about their own colonists. Well, let 'em have the last dregs of the business around here. See how far it takes them." He dunked, bit, chewed. "Don't mind me. Bad day." He jerked his chin in the direction of his three stevedores. "Slow afternoon."

Jani looped her finger through the other doughnut, biting back a comment about clear oil and the composition of cheap sugar glaze. "It'll give me a chance to work on the backlog."

"Better make it last. May be all you see for a while." Delmen set down his cup with a bang. Stuffed the last piece of pastry into his mouth, then keyed open the door and headed toward his gang of forklift racers, clapping his hands along the way. "*Knock it off*--unless you want to pay the goddamned charge station rental—!"

Jani topped off her coffee, then walked back to her cube. Set her coffee on the desk, set the doughnut atop the cup to soften in the steam, then headed to the locker room to divest herself of her new hardware.

The women's locker area proved empty. No angry clerks. No hallucinated blondes. Jani maneuvered around trash receptacles, uniform hampers, and benches to her locker, a corner unit chosen because it allowed her a clear view of the door. She opened the finger lock and removed the sole contents, a small, battered duffel that contained all she owned. She tried to keep it close as possible at all times, either on her person or in the locker. If spooked, she could bolt and not worry whether she had left anything important behind.

She set the bag atop the bench in front of the locker, popped the fasteners, then removed just enough clothing to expose the semirigid bottom panel. Working one finger between the edge of the panel and the side of the bag, she pushed down, then pulled upward. The false bottom, scanproof and damage-resistant, gave way with a soft ripping sound, revealing an array of objects wrapped in a thinner, more flexible version of the shielding material. Her old Service shooter, its case the dull blue of an uncut gem. Her scanpack. Finger-sized scanners and sniffers.

Jani hitched the bag over her shoulder. Adjourned to the bathroom, and closed herself into a stall.

*Always look a gift horse in the mouth.* She dug into her bag and pulled out one of the sniffers. Ran the device over the receiver in a sweeping motion. Front first, then back, then sides, top, and bottom, in search of tracer elements. Then she checked the accessory carton. Pulled the update packet from her hidden pocket and scanned that. Finally, she checked her hair, the soles of her boots. Satisfied that Delmen hadn't stuck her with anything intrusive, she tucked everything back into their appropriate compartments.

*I don't think these guys are hard-core.* Suspicious as hell, maybe, but not organized professionals. Professionals would have known how to handle spilled flavor concentrate. They'd have had someone in place in Utilities to jazz the vacuum and

incinerator settings and readouts. *Hell, they wouldn't have even bothered staging a spill. They'd have simply diverted the sealed drum as soon as they unloaded it.* Only problem at that level was that they'd need a crooked document examiner in place to alter the bill of lading and other documents.

*I haven't had to stoop to that yet.* Her hands were still clean with regard to her former profession, however grimy they'd become in every other. She still had some standards left.

Jani shouldered her bag and slipped out of the stall. Washed her hands, then turned to leave—

—and collided with an hallucination.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry!" Annalise backpedaled until she struck the wall. She clutched a candy wrapper in one hand.

"It's OK." Jani massaged her right shin, which had suffered a head-on assault by an adolescent kneecap. *So I wasn't seeing things after all.* Which the nasty bruise she could feel developing would no doubt confirm within a minute or two.

"Wasn't watching where I was going." Annalise edged away from the wall. "I need to stop that." She straightened out the wrapper as she sidled up to the trash receptacle, giving the inside a quick lick before tossing it. "I'm Annalise."

"I know." Jani gave her shin one last rub. "We met here a few hours ago."

"No, we didn't, did—?" Annalise's eyes widened. Then came a smile, forced and fleeting. "So many people around here. I can't remember them all."

Jani watched her walk along the wall, one hand pressed to the tile as though she feared losing contact. "What are you doing here?"

"My mom works here. A company down that way." Annalise waved in the direction of the hallway. "I come in with her sometimes and help her out." She reversed direction, backing along the wall until she came to the opening to the locker room. "I have to go." She wheeled, then slipped through the door. "I think she's looking for me."

"Wait a minute—" Jani passed through to the locker room in time to see the door to the hallway close. She stared at the door for a time, then stashed her duffel back in her locker, all the while fighting a growing disquiet. *She didn't remember me.* Did that matter? *I'm on the run, right? Not being remembered is a good thing.*

Jani reentered the dock office to find it still empty, her coworkers nowhere to be seen. She sat at her desk, activated her workstation, and reached for her cof—

"What the hell?" She stared at the place where her cup had rested. Pressed her hand to the plywood surface, and felt the residual warmth. "Some son of a—" She stood and held her breath, listening for muffled laughter. "Is anyone in here?"

The office door swung open, and Royson walked in, his face reddened and slick with sweat. "Who you talkin' to?"

"Did you see anyone come in here in the last few minutes?"

"Yeah, the Transportation Minister. She resigned and asked you to take over."

"Go to hell." Jani edged up the walkway, checked the interior of each cube. Then she stood in front of the lost lambs' shelf, and studied the spot where the yellow pullover had lain. *Too small for me.* It would fit a young girl just fine, though. As long as they weren't too fussy.

*My mom . . . a company down that way . . .*

Or if they were in trouble, and didn't have a choice.

*Andy, are you handy?*

*Yes, I am.* Jani touched the place where the sweater had rested. *And I'm apparently not the only one here who can make that claim.*

#

Jani expected to be followed home that evening, and she wasn't disappointed.

The tail proved to be the dour warehouseman, whom she'd christened Mopey. He didn't bother to hide. Jani saw his reflection in every shop window as he tracked her along the pedestrian walkway, never straying more than ten or fifteen meters behind. When she boarded the tram, he did as well, standing in the rear of the car and watching her with the sullen dullness of a beaten animal. By the time she reached her flat block, she still hadn't decided whether he had revealed himself on purpose in order to intimidate her, or if he really was that inept.

*Probably a little of both.* Jani keyed into her flat just as he appeared at the end of the hallway. She could sense his dead eyes on her as she closed the door.

"So now they know where I live." Which meant that she would need to move after payday, even if it meant forfeiting half a week's rent.

"Do they welcome all newcomers like this, or am I special?" Jani set her new receiver atop the wall-mounted polywood board that served as both desk and dining room table in the one-room flat. Next to it sat the unit that came with the room, a battered cube from which a Mozart sonata emerged in a weedy stream of sound that reminded Jani of chattering rats.

*Yes, it still doesn't work.* And yes, the building owner had told her that she'd have to pay half the cost of an upgrade or repair. *I bet that Mopey is in the building office now, following up on just that issue.* On Delmen's orders, of course. Jani doubted that he had the smarts to think of doing so himself. "I don't lie if I don't have to." She spoke aloud, as she sometimes did, a ploy to fill the solitary silence. "Especially about anything that can be checked. Makes it easier to keep my story straight." One of life's lessons, learned the hard way, as most of her lessons had been.

Jani activated the new receiver. Within moments a high, thin trumpet filled the room. She fiddled with the volume until she felt sure the strains of the Vivaldi concerto wouldn't disturb her neighbors and lead to any visits by the manager. She had work to do. She needed to avoid the near occasion of interruption.

First, she lowered the room lighting. Then she flipped up the climate control panel next to the table and reset the temperature to the lowest setting. Ten degrees—not great, but the best she could manage. She jacked up the circulator to move the air more quickly, then dragged her duffel over to the table and sat down. Once again dug through clothes and other gear and cracked the scanproof barrier, this time removing a rolled length of antistatic fabric, the stolen update packet, and, finally, her scanpack.

She unrolled the antistat first, revealing an array of instruments nestled in separate slots. Her initials, JMK, had once been etched in metallic scrollwork in the lower right corner of the cloth, but she had burned them away years before, a faint crosshatch of scorch marks the only reminder of their existence.

*Your toolkit,* their first idomeni instructor had told them, her attempts at English garbled by her Laumrau accent and her agitation at having to address humanish in one of their own languages. *It is your connection to your reader and should be treated as such.* Reader. The idomeni term for scanpack. As was usual, the idomeni called the device

what it was. Humans, again as usual, dressed up the name and snuck in the manufacturer's appellation to boot. SCAN, the acronym for four of the Commonwealth's eight ruling Families, which combined with NUVA to make the complete set. *Neumann, Ulanova, Van Reuter, Abascal, Scriabin, Cao, al-Muhammed, Nawar*. Every citizen knew those names as they knew their own. *But unlike other citizens, the Families know my name as well*. Which was why she currently lived in a weekly rental under an assumed name.

Jani plucked an antiseptic pen from its slot and activated it. The beam shone purple in the dim light, reflected strange pale blue off the surfaces of dust motes. *Someday I'll do surgery in a clean room again, and my 'pack will go into shock*. She stuck the other end of the pen in her mouth to free her hands, then removed a small bottle of nerve solder from its slot, opened it, and poured a few drops into a heat cup she'd freed from another recess. The solder looked like molasses and smelled like nothing until it hit the surface of the cup. It thinned immediately, its characteristic meaty aroma tickling her nose and making her mouth water. *I should've eaten something first*. Unfortunately, nothing she had in her cooler smelled as good as the solder.

Heart thumping, Jani removed her timepiece and set it down on the table so that she could see the face. As the nerve solder warmed, Jani cracked the fasteners of the scuffed black case and removed her scanpack. The surface of the oval document-reading device had once shone like a black mirror, but hard use and age had rendered it as tired-looking as its owner.

Jani set the scanpack on the table in front of the timepiece and pressed her hands against the sides. The cover ID'd her prints and sprang open to reveal a fist-sized mass, its grey color discernible beneath the pink membrane that sheathed it. The brain of her scanpack, grown from her own farmed brain tissue, wrapped in a protective layer of fibrous dura mater.

Jani shone the antiseptic light on the brain as soon as she removed the cover. The tissue shuddered as the room air brushed over it, a gelatin ripple that slowed as she reached beneath the device for the master touchswitch and set it to "chill." With that, the battery that pumped nutrient through the brain shut down. The pink color of the dura mater remained, but the brain's trembling slowed, almost stopped.

Jani tore open the update packet and shook out the contents onto a corner of the antistat. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four* chips is all, standard updates for your average documents examiner with midlevel security clearances, each encased in a stiff poly envelope on which its insertion instructions had been printed. She sorted through the envelopes, lining them up according to placement and difficulty of insertion. In a real clean room, she could have taken her time and installed them individually, but here, with the antiseptic pen the only defense against the unseen impurities and infective agents that filled the air, speed was her only recourse. Hack, slash, and sew. Battlefield surgery on the microlevel.

In a saner world, Jani would have clamped only the oxy feed line to whichever octant region of the brain she chose to work on first. Now, however, she shut down the feed system at the source, cutting off oxygenated infusion to the entire brain. She then disabled the nutrient web and watched as the brain's movement slowed to irregular spasming, then ceased completely.

*Four minutes.* Like a human brain, that of the scanpack could survive without oxygen for four minutes. After that time, the cell death began. Within eight minutes, the device would be damaged beyond hope of salvage.

Jani took a scalpel and set of microforceps from the toolkit. Heart still tripping, she slit the dura mater from top to bottom. Peeled back one side, then the other, and anchored them to the sides of the scanpack with butterfly clamps.

She glanced at her timepiece. *Seven seconds.* A new Jani Kilian pack-hacking record. *Three minutes fifty-three to go.*

Before her, the surface of the scanpack brain glistened pearl grey, eight raised frecklings of nerve bundles and old chips marking the octant sites.

*Two-eighths, seven to two—three-eighths, six to three—six-eighths, five to one, and six-eighths, two to four.* One chip to insert in the second and third octants respectively, and two in the sixth, each linked up to a series of nerves that would provide power to the chips and relay the information contained to the brain for processing.

*Three minutes forty seconds.*

Jani pulled the laser knife from the toolkit and activated it. With a series of wrist flicks, she excised the four old chips, then plucked them out with the tweezers.

*Three minutes twenty seconds.*

She drew nerve solder into a syringelike threader, then focused on the second octant region. Working the threader like a fine paintbrush, she ejected a filament of solder, attached the end to the seventh nerve bundle, then drew up to the second nerve bundle and closed the circuit that would power the chip. Using the knife, she etched a square pattern of microholes in the tissue near the second nerve bundle, sending minuscule streams of smoke emanating from each new hole. She held her breath to avoid inhaling the grilled-meat smell of the solder as she picked up the chip and tweezered it into place, slipping the hair-thin anchors that radiated from the underside into the etched holes. She then drew another solder line, melding one end to the line that connected the nerves and the other to the chip, baking them into place with touches of the knife.

*Two minutes thirty seconds.*

She then moved on to the second chip. Thread. Loop. Etch. Drop and connect.

*One minute forty-five seconds.*

The third chip.

*One minute five seconds.*

The fourth.

*Thirty-seven seconds.*

Jani reactivated the nutrient lines. The grey color of the tissue took on a faint pinkish cast as life-giving carrier spread through the circulatory system. She then touched the laser knife to each chip in turn, breaking their seals—they flashed green as they activated, then faded into the tissue surrounding them.

*Twenty-five seconds.*

Jani removed the clamps and sealed the incision in the dura mater with a thin line of solder. Eased open the oxy lines, then reached beneath the scanpack and reset the touchswitch to "normal."

*Ten seconds.*

Jani held her breath until a shiver rippled through the brain. In her mind's ear, she heard her old surgical dominant screaming mixed English and Laumrau at her as she worked. *Too fast—damned humanish—too fast—the solder has not set!*

So many memories.

*Fastest hands in the Academy, Jan. The Laumrau don't like it that you're showing up the home team.*

*Where's the fire, Lieutenant?*

*How long will you be, Captain? The Consul General needs you in there now.*

Jani reseated the cover and snapped it into place. Took the antiseptic pen from her mouth and clicked it off. Pressed a hand to the back of her neck and dug in with her fingertips, working away the knots that always formed whenever she performed surgery.

After allowing a few minutes for her scanpack to stabilize, she once more reached beneath it and activated it. The indicator light shimmered green, then flickered as the unit ran through its self-check sequence.

As the scanpack ran through its paces, Jani stashed her tools. Dumped the leftover solder down the sink, then ran lots of cold water to prevent the stuff from coagulating in the drains. Grabbed a juice dispo from the cooler and savored the cold sweetness.

A Tilani piece played now. A newer composer, his music too jangly and atonal. Jani switched to a news program, then sat down on the daybed, the only other piece of furniture in the room. Listened for any noise in the hallway outside her door, and pondered whether Delmen distrusted her enough to kill her. Wondered which out-of-the-way hole her young doughnut-swiping scavenger had found to hunker down. Drank juice and wished for bourbon, and waited for post-augie fatigue to lull her into some semblance of sleep.

#

The next afternoon, Jani ran into Annalise again.

Jani was just entering the locker room when she saw the small figure dart out of one of the offices and across the hall into the vend alcove. She crept along the wall and peeked around the alcove entry to find the girl crouched in front of the sandwich machine. She wore the yellow pullover. The same black trousers, rolled up at the ankles.

Jani watched her insert a vend token into the machine's reader slot. The token must have been empty or corrupted—the girl ran it through the slot over and over, slapped at all the buttons in turn, then checked the delivery chute. Her strikes grew more agitated with each failed attempt until finally she kicked the machine, which squealed in protest.

"Your token's empty," Jani said.

Annalise wheeled. "I found it on the floor." Yesterday's calm had shattered, leaving narrow-eyed edge and the stench of desperation. "Out there, on the floor." She pointed toward the corridor. "It was just lying there."

*You stole it from the office you just ran out of, but ask me if I care.* Jani took a step closer, hands raised and open so Annalise could see them. "May I try?" She remained still, letting the girl make the decision to walk over and hand her the plastic card, which she eventually did.

"See?" Jani pointed to the grooved region along one edge. "It's so scratched up that the reader can't scan it." She slipped it through the slot quickly, slowly, backward and forward. "It's shot."

Annalise crossed her arms over her stomach. "I'm really hungry."

Jani took in the girl's dull skin, the dark circles under her eyes, then reached into her duffel and dug around before she remembered that she was just as broke. "Don't go anywhere. Stay right here." She walked out into the corridor just in time to spot Royson emerge from the men's locker room. *Oh well. Beggars and choosers.* "Mister Royson? Do you have a spare token?"

Royson stopped, mouthed "Mister," then rolled his eyes. "Yeah." He made no move toward his pockets. "Why?"

Jani held out her hand. "You'll get it back on payday."

"Like I can say no." Royson glared at her as she drew close. "Like you wouldn't accidentally erase my file from the system or redirect my pay to the Outer Circle or something." He pulled a token from his pocket with the grudging slowness that inspired nicknames like "Fishhooks." "Payday—that's the day after tomorrow."

"You are kindness itself." Jani plucked the token from his fingers and headed back to the alcove.

"Day after tomorrow." Royson fell in behind her. "Maybe you should fill out a form or something. Add a note about how eager I am to help my wonderful doc tech."

*Oh, spare me.* "I won't forget." Jani tossed over her shoulder. "Newark."

Royson slid to a stop, the flush moving up his neck like the tide. "You stink, you know that?" He shot her one last look of disgust, then turned with a grumble and trudged back to the dock.

Jani watched him, waiting until he palmed through the dock entry and the door closed after him before reentering the alcove. "Here." She handed Annalise the token. "There's enough left on it for a decent lunch."

"Thanks." The girl squeezed the plastic card as though she feared she might drop it. "Be nice when payday finally gets here, won't it?"

"Always is." Jani followed Annalise to the sandwich machine, then watched over her shoulder to make sure she bought something decent. *Fake tuna fish.* At least it was better than the fake chicken salad. "Where does your mom work?"

"Across the hall."

"Doing what?"

"You want her name? Don't you trust me?" Annalise stiffened. "I said I'll pay you back."

"With what?" Jani leaned against a nearby table, setting herself so that she could block Annalise if she tried to bolt.

The girl's small hand hovered above the drink selector. "I told you. My mom—" She flexed her fingers, then slapped the selector pad.

"Does anyone know you're here?"

Annalise shivered. "I hope not."

#

The utilities chase that ran between the commercial and passenger concourses had the same pieced-together look as the rest of Victoria Station. Conduits in mismatched colors snaked along both sides of the narrow corridor like patchwork veins. Storage cages cropped up every ten meters or so, some empty and gaping, others filled and alarmed. The ceiling was low, the lighting emergency-level, thin and purplish and as cheering as a funeral.

Jani closed the gate to an empty cage. The lock snapped into place with a sound like a blade being pulled from a sheath. "How long have you been here?"

"I've lost track." Annalise sat on the floor between the cage and a utilities-switching terminal. The place was her base camp, such as it was. A rumpled blanket, with yesterday's pullover folded into pillow. A plastic sack that contained whatever else she owned. "A few weeks Common. A month." Her voice emerged soft, lost amid the darkness and the metal. "Ricky got money out of one of their desks, and we split it up."

*OK.* Like most stories, this one would emerge piecemeal and scattered. *My job is to fit it all together.* Jani let her duffel slide to the floor, then lowered next to it. Sniffed the air, and winced. All chases seemed to stink of poor ventilation and slowly aging junk. "Who's Ricky?"

"He was my foster . . ." Annalise leaned to the side and rested her head against the terminal. "My foster fellow. Fellow foster. Refugee from hell house." The cave light greyed her skin, added a strange, dark gleam to her eyes. "My best friend." She sat up and set out the sandwich packet, a juice dispo, a packet of chocolate crackers. Took a bite of the sandwich, and stopped in midchew. "This is really bad."

"That's the best thing they sell, too." Jani's mouth watered. Even crappy food would have tasted good just then. "Eat it. At least it's calories." She waited until Annalise finished most of the sandwich and started on the juice. "So why were you in foster?"

Thin shoulders jerked. "My mom disappeared again. Usually she'd come back after a few days, but not this time. The flat manager figured something happened when the rent fell behind. I'm eleven, so he called Colonial Services, and they picked me up. Tried to contact relatives, but I guess I don't have any."

Jani watched as Annalise examined the juice dispo, pulled out the straw, and reinserted it over and over. Complete focus on the task at hand because it gave the brain something else to do. Because it kept you from thinking too much. "I'm sorry about your mom." She waited for a response, even though she knew she wouldn't get one. "So. They made you a Ward of the Colony and fostered you to hell house?"

"*They said we were expensive and had to start paying back.*" Annalise flinched as her voice echoed down the corridor. "Ricky yelled at them one day," she continued, more quietly. "He said that he had read the law, and Padishah paid them to provide us room and board and the money we earned was ours and we were supposed to go to school." Another shrug. "Two days later, they took us to the place. They said it was a hospital, but it was too small. Like a clinic, but it wasn't busy." She tore open the cracker packet and removed one, but instead of eating it she broke it into pieces. "Medical checkups, they said." Another cracker. More breaking. "I never saw them again."

"How long were you at the clinic?"

Annalise shook her head. "He told me we'd be happier. The doctor. He said that we'd never want to argue, and we wouldn't worry so much. Ricky told him that we weren't worried, we just wanted to keep the money we earned and go back to school." She brushed crumbs from her fingers, then picked up one of the cracker pieces, dunked it into the juice, and ate it. "They separated us after that." She looked across the narrow space at Jani. "We weren't there as long as I've been here. Two weeks Common, maybe." She pressed a hand to the back of her neck. "They did something to my head. They locked it in a cage."

"It's called a stereotaxic restraint." The hissing *click* of the cage mech sounded in Jani's memory, and she balled her hand into a fist. "You have to remain immobile during the injection process, or there's a risk of brain injury."

"My head *hurt*."

"Yeah." Jani worked a finger through her hair at the base of her skull. Felt her own tiny scar, the place where the cannula had penetrated into her ventricular system and pumped in the components that migrated to the area near her amygdala, took root, and grew. *They told me later that I shouldn't have been augmented.* A borderline case at best, who would require frequent monitoring.

"I knew something had gone wrong. A couple of days after, I knew." Annalise shook her head. The juice had been set aside, the crackers forgotten. "I'd be in my room, in bed. Then I'd wake up, and I'd be someplace else—the bathroom, an examining room, wandering the hallway. Once—" She looked down at her hands. "One time, I didn't have any clothes on." She remained still for a time, then wiped a sleeve across her eyes. "A week or so after that, I snuck out of my room and down a hallway they told me to stay away from. Found Ricky in one of the rooms." Her voice flattened. "They'd tied him down. He didn't know who I was. He'd done things. To his face."

Jani leaned her head against the wall and banged it lightly. *Oh, you bastards--you never learn, do you?* "He didn't recognize himself in the mirror?"

"He said that it wasn't his face, and he didn't know why it should be stuck to his skull. So, he'd tried to cut it—" Annalise sniffed, wiped her nose. "I went back to my room and pretended to be a good girl for a few days so they wouldn't watch me as close. When I went back to Ricky's room, he was better. He knew who I was. He said we had to get out of there. I untied him because even though he stopped trying to hurt himself, they still had him tied. He said he knew where there was money, and he told me to stay put while he went to get it." She pushed up her sleeves, then fussed with the rolled pant cuffs. "He came back with the money. Said he got it out of a desk, like I told you before." Her head came up, and she glared at Jani, as though daring her to question, to disapprove. "And we left."

Jani met her eyes. "They just let you walk out?"

"We didn't see anybody. Usually there was someone at the nurses' station, and a guard at the entry, but we didn't see anybody." Annalise stopped worrying her clothing and hugged her knees up to her chin. "We still ran—as soon as we were out the door, we ran all the way to the tram stop."

"No one noticed Ricky's face?"

"It was all scabby by then." Annalise mimed picking at her cheek. "We told people he fell off a skimcycle." A shadowed smile, that faded quickly. "We took the tram to the shuttleport. Ricky said we should split up, so at least one of us would get away. I bought a billet for the farthest place I could afford." She looked around. "I should have studied the schedule a little harder."

"No one's tracked you here. You did all right." Jani laid her head back and studied the ceiling, unpainted concrete the color of dirty ice. "Now we need to find you—"

"Andy! Hi!"

Jani's heart skipped. She slowly raised her head, tried to keep her expression calm.

"Andy, are you handy?" The brittle brightness had returned to Annalise's face, her eyes glistening as though from fever. "Hello. We met . . . somewhere." She pushed to her feet and walked to Jani. "I remember you. I scared you at the mirror."

Jani held out her right hand, and this time felt the squeeze, the light grind of bone. "Yes, you did." Looked at the fingers, and saw the bitten nails, cuticles reddened from picking.

Annalise's smile ebbed. "Where am I now?" She dropped Jani's hand as though it burned. "I was in a hallway with lots of lights, and now I'm here. The mirror's gone. It's gone. *The mirror's gone*. It's—" She let loose the scream with her next breath, a high-pitched shriek that seemed to ramp in intensity as it ricocheted off every hard surface.

*Shit*. Jani scrambled to her feet, dodged around the panicked girl, and grabbed the blanket from the floor. Shaking it open, she cast it like a net so that it enveloped Annalise. Then she closed in from behind, securing the blanket around the girl's shoulders and pulling her close, talking gently all the while even as the screams continued and she wondered how long it would be before station security found them. "*Paix. Paix.*" *Hush. Hush.* Acadian French unspoken for so long emerged as she worked her way atop the switching box and pulled Annalise onto her lap. Brought her legs up and crossed them over the girl's so that she kept her still. "*Paix. Paix. Paix.*" She rocked back and forth, keeping her voice low and soft as the screaming lowered, then stopped, and the small body sagged against her and shook with something that might have been crying but could just have been fear.

Jani waited. The rough blanket made the exposed skin of her right arm itch, but she didn't dare release Annalise so she could scratch. Instead, she continued to sit, and rock, and listen for the echoing of footsteps that would signal the approach of trouble.

After a few quiet minutes, Annalise stirred.

"My mom used to sing me songs." She sighed. "She said they were Hortensian songs. German. I didn't understand any of the words.

Jani shook her head. "You don't want to hear me sing."

Annalise sat still for a time, then started to squirm. "I feel like an idiot sitting in your lap like this." Her voice lowered. "Did something happen?"

"Yes."

A pause. "What?"

Jani hesitated. So many tiny changes, each one nothing in and of itself. *Put them all together, and you have a different person*. "Your eyes brighten. Your voice pitches higher, and you act twitchy. You call me Andy, and you shake my hand."

"That's all?" Hesitation. "I didn't try to take my clothes off?"

"You didn't touch your clothes." Jani listened for any remnant of the manic edge in Annalise's voice. When she didn't hear it, she loosened her grip and let her slide off her lap. "They come and go that quickly? The episodes?"

"Yeah." Annalise slipped off the blanket and started to fold it. "The doctor told me they'd ease up after a few days. He lied."

Jani counted to three, to four, to ten, then asked the question she didn't want to ask. "The doctor. What was his name?"

"I don't know."

"Did he wear a medcoat with a name tag?"

"No."

*Are you sure he was a doctor?* Oh, that it were as simple as fraud. "Did he have white hair?"

Annalise rolled the folded blanket against the wall and sat on it. "He wasn't old."

Jani held up her hands side by side and spread her fingers. They looked identical in the dim light. Length of fingers. Color of skin. "He would have been younger. My age. Late twenties."

"His hair was dark." Annalise dragged her bag onto her lap and started picking through it.

"Did you hear anyone say the name 'John Shroud'?" Jani paused. It had been years since she'd said that name aloud. "Did you read it anywhere?"

Annalise nodded. "I heard it." She looked up from her explorations of the bag. "I heard my doctor talking to one of the nurses, and he said that if Shroud found out what they were doing, he'd kill them."

Jani managed a smile. *Well, well, John.* She flexed her hands one last time, then let them fall. *Maybe I taught you something after all.*

"So." Annalise tied the top of the bag into a knot but kept it on her lap. "Now what?"

Jani stood and paced the corridor. *I knew the other shoe would drop.* Only this time, it turned out to be a hip boot. "The implant you have. It needs to be removed."

"Can you do it?"

Jani shook her head. "No. You need to go to a certain type of doctor."

*No. I'm not going back—*

"Not to Padishah. You don't have to go back there." Jani waited, watching Annalise until she felt sure the bright eyes wouldn't return. "You need to see someone who knows what they're doing." *Unfortunately, I know just who that someone is.*

"I don't see why I just can't stay here." Annalise tossed her sack aside and boosted to her feet. "You can bring me food, or"—she stared down at her shoes—"or I could stay with you."

*Oh shit.* "No, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't." Jani checked her timepiece. Had Delmen noticed her absence yet? Or, God forbid, Royson? "I need to get back to work." She held up her hand as the girl started after her. "Don't try to follow me, because—" *Because someone's already doing that.* "—because I don't work in a very safe area." She tried not to look around the chase, which offered all the coziness of a tomb. "I'll bring you some food later."

"Why can't I go with you?" Annalise's voice was sharp with panic. Only the lower pitch indicated that her other self hadn't emerged again. "I can work—"

"Right now, you need to stay put. Get some sleep—you probably could use some." Jani looked at her boots, the walls, anything but the girl's face. "Stay away from the offices. Someone could see you."

"No one has yet."

"It's called pushing your luck." Jani picked up her duffel and shouldered it.

"Look, I'm sorry, but you can't stay with me." She started up the corridor toward the entry, walking softly to dampen the sound of her boots.

"Andy?"

Jani slid to a stop and turned. "What?"

Annalise held up her hands. "It's still me. I think." She just stood, silent and small, and watched her.

*Even she realizes that she's getting worse—what if she goes wandering while I'm gone?* Jani scrubbed a hand through her hair. *Damn and damn and damn again.* "Look, you can't stay with me for too—" Before she could finish the sentence, Annalise snatched up her belongings and ran up to her.

"I don't need much room." She bounded sideways, like a two-legged crab. "And I don't eat much, and I'm real quiet."

*Except when you scream.* Jani followed after her and tried not to think about all the things that could go wrong.

#

Jani kept an eye on faces as she and Annalise rode the tram to the residential sector. *I don't see Mopey.* The few faces she did recognize, she had seen since her first day at the station. She knew where they lived and worked, which passengers they flirted with and which they avoided. If any of them had been trailing her, they'd have closed the net by now. In her experience, Service Intelligence didn't waste time.

She glanced at her new roommate to find her fixed on the shop storefronts, tiny parks, and other scenery, clutching her makeshift luggage to her chest like a stuffed toy. *Crap.* Station medical services couldn't help Annalise worth a damn now—they'd prove less than worthless as she continued to worsen, as the man-made gland in her brain misfired with greater and greater frequency, carved new connections and obliterated the old. *At some point, the damage will be irreparable.* Her personality would be altered beyond recovery.

"There's a carnival!" Annalise grabbed Jani's sleeve as they passed a crew assembling a merry-go-round. "We can go, can't we?" She didn't wait for an answer before turning back to the window and pressing her nose to the glass. "They've got bands on the weekends. The sign says so."

Jani turned away just as her eyes started to sting. *Don't blink.* Don't tear a film. *Breathe.* "Maybe." She scanned the faces of the other passengers once more. "We'll see how things go."

There were still a few hours to go before official end of shift, which meant that the tram station was emptier than usual. Easier to spot the too-curious watcher, but also easier to be watched. Jani herded Annalise into her flat block as casually as she could and wondered if anyone had yet noticed her absence from the dock and sent out the first panicked feelers. *I'm going to have some explaining to do when I get back.* As for whether anyone would believe her . . .

Annalise looked around the excuse for a lobby, eyes goggling as she took in the sitting area complete with semifunctional holoVee and the communications bank outfitted with actual working comports. She had calmed since she'd left the chase, so much so that Jani wondered whether the dim, purple lighting had aggravated whatever condition her augmentation had brought about. By the time they reached Jani's flat, she even yawned.

"I can sleep here." Annalise pushed through the door as soon as Jani keyed it open, beelined for the far corner of the room, and shook out her blanket. "And I can clean while you're gone, and cook dinner."

"There's not that much to clean." Jani opened the cooler and eyed the half-empty shelves. "And not much to cook until I get paid." She shut the cooler and leaned against the sink-counter arrangement that comprised her kitchen. "OK. Ground rules—"

The door buzzer sounded. Before Jani could tell her to hide, Annalise grabbed her blanket and bag and scooted beneath the daybed.

"Stay there until I call you out." Jani lowered her duffel to the counter, opened it, extracted her shooter. Activated the weapon and felt the warming hum. Walked to the monitor inset by the doorpad, checked the face of her visitor, and swore.

The buzzer blatted once more.

"Open the damned door." The door mike transmitted Royson's sullen growl as though he spoke in her ear. "I know you're in there."

Jani's hand stalled above the doorpad. *I'll have to drop him as soon as he comes in.* And Annalise would get to watch him fall. *And I'd have to explain why I hit him.*

"Timas?" The buzzer again. "If you don't open in five seconds, I get the manager to let me in. I'll tell him you stole my receiver." The buzzer again. "Five—"

The shooter grew warm in Jani's hand, like a living thing. *Use me. I'm ready—*  
"—four—"

*—and your young friend can watch you kill—*

"—three—"

*—the thing you do best—*

"—two—"

"No, it's not." Jani pressed flat against the wall and punched the doorpad.

"—whu—" Royson fell silent as the panel swept open. "OK." He stepped through the door, hands raised, silhouetted against the far wall. A perfect target. He glanced sideways, eyes widening when he spotted Jani, widening even more when he saw the shooter. "You can put that away. Please." He lowered his voice. "I just want to talk."

"Go to he—" Jani stopped. Somewhere between "I" and "talk," Royson's New Indiesian singsong had vanished. His English emerged flat now, marking him as Earthbound, or a colonial too well schooled to let his origins show.

"It's about the girl. The one from the vend alcove." Royson turned to Jani, making sure she could see that his hands were empty. "Yeah, I spied on you. Please—it's important." His stare moved from her face to her weapon. "*Dammit.*"

Jani struggled to gauge him, comparing the dense, cocky pain in the ass she'd dealt with over the past week with the wary, determined man who stood before her now. "You're quite the actor." She held up the shooter so that he could see her set it on standby.

"Yeah, everyone tells me I missed my calling." Royson walked to the middle of the room, hands still raised where she could see them. "I'd feel better if you set that shooter down where I could see it."

"I'm not concerned about your feelings." Jani waited until the door closed completely, then secured the lock. "And everyone thinks that *I'm* the verifier."

Royson shook his head. "I'm not—" He looked overhead, as though he expected something to drop on him. "Del doesn't trust you—he wants to know where you are at all times. When you slipped off the dock, everyone went a little nuts. I volunteered to look for you." He blew out a long breath. "Better me than any of those other guys. They're all crazy."

"I'll take your word for it." Jani boosted atop her desk. She set her shooter beside her but still within easy reach, making a point of turning the barrel away from Royson. "Start talking."

Royson eyed the shooter. "The girl. Her name is Annalise." He walked over to the daybed and sat. "I've been looking for her."

Jani watched as the heel of Royson's boot grazed the corner of a blanket, then exhaled as Annalise tugged the cover farther under the bed. "Are you family?"

"No." Royson tugged at his ear. "How do I put this?"

"You work for the bastards who augmented her."

"No." Royson held out one hand in a 'wait a minute' gesture while reaching into his pocket with the other. "I work for these folks." He reached out and handed Jani a small plastic rectangle.

Jani slid off the desk just far enough to grip the edge of the business card and pluck it from his grasp. Studied the engraving of a caduceus entwined with a double helix, the printing along the top. "Who's Neoclona?"

"It's not a who, it's a what." Royson sat back in a sprawl. "It's a small start-up. Medical R&D. Run by some guys who are smarter than any three people I've ever known." He shook his head. "I don't know the whole story about the girl. All I know is that Neoclona had been working with this other lab. At some point, they found out this lab performed illegal experiments, trying to alter brain chemistry. Behavior. Like Service augmentation, but more complex. They tried to work a deal to take charge of the subjects, to try to treat them, but in the meantime a couple of them escaped. We recovered a boy on Padishah. We had Annalise spotted for a time, but lost her. She didn't have any family along the Pearl Way, not much money, so we figured she couldn't get far. We planted people at every station, and waited." He shot an irritated look at Jani. "But you found her first." He sat up slowly. "I need to get to her. Her condition's—"

"—deteriorating." Jani watched the edge of a shadow under the daybed advance, then retreat, as Annalise moved around. *I hope she's not claustrophobic.* Or that the darkness under the bed wouldn't trigger an attack.

"You know something about what was done to her?" Royson hesitated. "Well, you would, wouldn't you?" He wiped his hands along his thighs. All of a sudden, he seemed unable to look Jani in the face. "I don't care about you, all right?"

Jani shrugged, even as her heart stuttered. "I'm devastated."

"You know what I'm talking about." Royson seemed fascinated by the chipped rock pattern of the lino flooring.

"You're a deserter. I don't care. Help me corral the girl, and I'll forget I ever saw you."

Jani braced her hand on the desktop. Felt the heat from her shooter, mere centimeters from her grasp. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's a Service-issue shooter. And don't try to tell me that you bought it in a pawnshop." Royson watched the weapon like a snake he feared might strike. "You've got a Service augment. I figured that out yesterday, after the spill. The alarm set you off. The red color. I thought you were going to explode."

"And yet you kept pushing."

"You were new. I had to feel you out. Make sure you weren't a verifier, someone who'd make my job harder." He tilted his head to one side, his voice softening. He did

earnest well. "Will you help me? You know what's going to happen to her if she doesn't get treatment—you saw it with Spacers who were augmented when they shouldn't have been. That thing in her head is going to fry her brain—"

Jani watched as the underbed shadows stilled. "Be quiet."

"I'm trying to tell you—"

"*Shut up.*"

Royson stared at her, brow furrowed, mouth agape. Then his eyes widened. "She--?" His gaze flicked around the room. "She's here. She—" He slid off the daybed onto his knees, then sprawled flat and looked underneath. "I'll be damned." He reached into the dark recess. "Could you come out here—come out here, please? Miss? My name is—you can call me James Royson, and I'm trying to help—come on—don't—*ow—flying*—!" He jerked out his arm and tumbled over onto his back, his hand a blur as he shook it like a match he sought to extinguish. "*She bit me!*"

"What the hell did you expect, trapping her like that?" Jani slid off the desk, shooter in hand. "You may as well come out." She walked to the daybed, giving Royson a wide berth in case he should attempt to go after the shooter, injury or no.

A bag and blanket emerged. "I should've hid in the bathroom," Annalise muttered as she slid out after them.

"*I'm here to help you.*" Royson worked into a sitting position and cradled his hand. "Dammit—she broke the skin."

Jani caught a glimpse of the beading gash in the meaty part of Royson's hand, between the thumb and index finger. "You drew blood." She nodded at Annalise, who beamed. "Good job."

"Thanks. A lot." Royson flexed his damaged hand, wincing with every twitch. "Look, Shroud told me what might happen to her. He gave me some meds. They'll keep her stable until he can treat her."

Jani flinched at the sound of John's name, then prayed Royson didn't see. "Shroud?"

"John Shroud. One of the chiefs at Neoclona." Royson shook his head, face alight with wonder despite the pain. "That is one weird bucky boy, but if my life was on the line, I'd want him as my medico."

*That's what you think.* Jani held out her hand. "Do you have the meds with you?"

"I'll give them to her myself."

"Not until I see them." When Royson scowled, Jani smiled. "Newark. I do more than bite."

"That's not my real name, fer chrissake." Royson twisted so that he could reach into his right side trouser pocket with his uninjured left hand. "Think I'd be stupid enough to use—" He swore under his breath as he contorted and probed before finally freeing a small vial. "There's only a few pills in here. Enough to see her through a day or two." He held out the container. "I need to contact Shroud and let him know I have her."

Jani took the vial. Shook it, and heard the pills clatter. "Where is he waiting for you?"

Royson pointed toward the floor. "Downstairs. On Victoria."

*Crap.* "What's he doing there?" Jani blurted the question, then gave herself a mental kick when she saw Royson's brow arch. Waited for him to ask her why she cared about the good doctor's whereabouts, and waited some more. *Maybe he'll forget I asked.*

He had enough on his mind, after all. *If I had John holding my leash, I'd be edgy, too.* She imagined a white-haired figure seated by a comport, long fingers drumming atop the table, waiting for his agent's call. *You've been so close, John. All this time.* No wonder she felt so jumpy.

She looked down at the vial. It bore a handmade label cut from scrap parchment, the edges straight and even. Two lines of spindly handwriting, like antique script, as distinctive as the man who inscribed them. *For Annalise—one tablet every six hours.*

Jani beckoned to the girl. "You need to take one of these now." She twisted off the cap and shook out a tablet, a small white oval devoid of markings.

Annalise took it from Jani's hand and examined it skeptically. "Will it work?"

"Probably." Jani looked over at Royson, who had discovered the tiny kitchen sink and now occupied himself by rinsing his injured hand under the tap. "Should they be taken with food, or not?"

"Shroud didn't say anything about food." Royson adjusted the water until it flowed so cold that the faucet frosted over.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Royson leaned against the counter and glared at them. "You know, you two are looking at me with the exact same go-to-hell expression." He closed the tap, slamming it hard enough to rattle the plumbing. *"I'm here to help, dammit."*

"Yeah, I've heard that before." Annalise tossed the tablet into her mouth and bit down. "Tastes like chocolate."

"The man knows his patient." Royson grabbed a dispo towel from the sink-side dispenser and dabbed at the wound. "Give him a few years and some money, he'll work it so we all live forever. If you have any spare cash lying about, throw it his way. In five years, you'll be able to buy your own planet."

*That sounds depressingly familiar.* Jani looked down at the floor so that Royson couldn't see her face. "Did Shroud tell you how he was going to work that out?"

"He interned at the Consulate hospital on Shèrá back when we were still getting along with the idomeni, before their last civil war." Royson's voice lightened as he waxed expressive. He was a John Shroud fan and didn't care who knew it. "He and a couple of other doctors, Val Parini and Eamon DeVries, figured out how to tweak human genes using idomeni genetic material."

*Make that almost figured out.* And oh, the gulf between the two was as wide as wide could be. Jani put a hand in her pocket and fingered her bottle of filmformer.

"Wasn't that illegal?"

Royson laughed. "Who the hell cares? How many laws would you break for a chance to live forever?" He crumpled his damp and bloody dispo and tossed it into the trash. "Shroud's been perfecting his techniques for the past five years. Still a few problems, but he should have those worked out anytime now."

*You have yourself a True Believer, John. Must be a relief to impart to someone who doesn't argue with you.* Jani hid a grim smile. "What kind of problems?"

"You've seen idomeni, right? You know the way they look, yellowy skin and eyes like marbles? He hasn't been able to figure out a way to keep that from happening. Whichever systems model he uses, those characteristics always seem to carry over."

"Systems modeling? He's not experimenting on people?"

"What are you, crazy? He can't do that until he has the science nailed down." Royson grabbed a clean dispo from the stack and wrapped it around his hand. "He'd be shooting in the dark, working on live bodies now. Who knows what he'd wind up with?"

"Yeah." Jani caught a glimpse of her reflection in the polished surface of the receiver. "Who knows?" She squared her shoulders and looked Royson in the eye, hoping her face appeared the mask she needed it to be. "When do we move?"

"Tonight, after shift ends." Royson nodded toward Annalise, who had curled up on the daybed and watched them with half-closed eyes. "Shuttles for Wodonga leave on the hour. By the time we get billets and some chow and such, we should be able to make the one at eighteen-up. I have a skimmer waiting in the garage, charged and ready to go. I'm taking her to a place Shroud owns, about a half hour or so away—"

"*Why?*" Jani glanced at Annalise, and lowered her voice. "Hand her over up here—it's cleaner. From here, they can take her anywhere. They can get lost in the crowd, and no one will be able to follow. It's one less ball that can be dropped."

"We're covered, all right?" Royson pulled a small documents folio from his pocket and held it up for Jani to see. "She's a Family runaway. Her folks sent me to find her and escort her home. Dad's in the diplomatic." He pointed to the Commonwealth seal affixed to the front of the folio. "No questions." He studied Jani for a moment, and his eyes softened. "It's not that I don't appreciate you finding her, but she's not your problem anymore." He hesitated, then edged closer. "Mind if I ask you something? When was the last time you had a takedown?"

Jani shook her head. "I'm fine."

"You're in worse shape than Little Miss Bitemark." Royson tucked the folio back in his trouser pocket. "Look—you're a deserter, fine, but you tried to help her, and I think you're all right. I could add you to the paperwork, no problem. Just say the word." He glanced at his timepiece, and exhaled with a *whoosh*. "We need to get going." He walked to the daybed, wrapped a sleeping Annalise in her blanket, and carried her into the hall while Jani collected her things.

As Jani shut the door and activated the lock, she sensed what little connection she felt with the flat crumble. She would have to leave as soon as Royson and Annalise departed. Delmen's distrust, and the questions that would follow Royson's disappearance, would dog her otherwise, and she had no desire to find out just how crazy her soon-to-be-former coworkers really were.

She followed Royson and his limp passenger down the hall toward the lift. One of her neighbors opened his door just as they walked past, and smiled.

*He thinks we're a family.* Jani smiled back. Families always made people feel comfortable. *Best cover of all.*

#

The return trip to the docks proved uneventful. Jani and Royson both watched fellow tram passengers while Annalise slept between them, using first Jani's shoulder as a pillow, then Royson's.

"She can stay here until we move." Royson keyed into an empty office two hallways removed from the docks. "I scouted it for a week. No one entered or left during that time." He laid Annalise on the floor and tucked the blanket around her, then slowly straightened. "You better get back." He took a handcom from his pocket. "I need to call Shroud."

"I'm going to stay. Someone should be here when she wakes up." Jani lowered to the floor beside Annalise's huddled form. "I don't want her to panic, or go wandering."

"I'll lock her in."

"She shouldn't be left alone."

"Del is going to ask questions."

"Does he know about this place?" Jani waited for Royson's slow headshake.

"Then he won't know where to look for me, will he?"

"No. That's not the way I plan—"

"*I'm staying*. Is that clear?"

Royson threw Jani a half-assed salute. "Yes, ma'am." He glared at his handcom. "I'm going to have to go over to the passenger concourse. Too much interference on this side." He started for the door, then stopped. "So what's the story? How do we explain your disappearance?"

Jani bumped the back of her head against the wall, as if that could knock loose some imagination. "Oh hell." She looked down at her clothes, battered boots and yesterday's coverall. "Somehow, I don't think they'll believe that I did a bunk to go shopping." She blinked, then pressed her fingertips lightly against her eyelids—her films felt grainier than usual, which meant they were starting to break down and needed to be replaced. *Dammit—not now*. "Tell them that I went upstairs to talk to the suits. They think I'm a suck-up anyway, so that should work."

"Nope. That was the first place Del checked." Royson frowned. "Then there's the fact that I went to look for you and didn't come back right away." He drew up straight and looked everywhere but at her. "I think we both know what the best excuse is for our extended absence."

Jani scanned his face for some sign that he joked. Unfortunately, she couldn't find any. "You're kidding?"

"Trust me, that's one thing this crowd will accept without question." Royson nodded. "I'll tell them that I left you to sleep it off. It'll give me a chance to describe the event in question to the assembled." He finally looked at her, his gaze steady, his expression as grave as a judgment. "I found you in the corridor. Our eyes met, and we realized that our mutual dislike had given way to a deeper feeling."

"Yeah, complete disgust." Jani started laughing, then found she couldn't stop. "You're sick!" She dabbed away tears and prayed her eyefilms remained intact.

Royson smiled sheepishly. "Well, we've found out you can smile, at least." The grin wavered. "Although I confess that I don't quite see the humor." He looked down at his handcom and headed for the door. "Sit tight. I'll be back in about two hours."

Jani tracked the sound of Royson's receding footsteps, grappling with vague uneasiness as they faded to silence. *Now we wait*. Always the worst part of any job. Too much time for one's imagination to run rampant. Too much time for things to go wrong.

"I'm scared."

Jani looked over at Annalise to find her peering out through a gap in the blanket. "I wondered if you were really asleep, or just faking."

"The pill made me tired. I did sleep a little." Annalise disentangled from Royson's careful wrapping. "Is John Shroud going to fix me so I live forever?"

Jani shook her head. "I don't think so."

"But you know who he is, don't you?" Annalise worked into a sitting position, the blanket still tight around her shoulders. "You asked if he was the one who worked on me, and I saw the way you acted when Royson talked about him. I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were." Jani felt the words bubble to the base of her throat, like acid. That was the worst part of the life she led now, more weighing than the loneliness, the hardship. The need to talk, a desire that at times overwhelmed her like physical pain. *She won't tell.* And if she did, would anyone believe a child? *John would. He'd believe anything where I was concerned.* But hours would pass between the time Royson left the station with Annalise and they hooked up with John on the Victorian surface. With a little luck and some fast footwork, the Created would be long gone before the Creator learned of her existence.

"I just don't like doctors." Jani paused to clear her throat. Talking to someone else was always harder than talking to herself. The filters kicked in whether she wanted them to or not. "I was in an accident a few years ago. Technically, I died, but a doctor brought me back." She looked down at her right hand and shivered, recalling the shiny redness of tank-grown skin that pulled and itched each time she moved. *John Shroud saved my life.* She inhaled through a regrown nose, shaped so differently than the one she'd been born with, felt her resurfaced lungs fill. *But I'm not like everybody else anymore.*

Annalise yawned. She still looked tired, but the tension had left her, driven away by the drug and the fatigue it induced. "What kind of accident was it?"

Jani hesitated. Well, this was the tricky part, wasn't it? *A transport crash. All aboard killed, except that one came back from the dead.* "Skimmer crash. Stabilizers failed, and I went into a wall."

"Were you by yourself?"

*No. My troops were with me.* The fourteen remaining members of the Twelfth Rover Corps. *And the pilot. And the officers sent to arrest me.* All gone to ashes in the hot desert wind, near an ancient idomeni shrine called Knevçet Shèràa. "Yes." Jani nodded. "I was alone."

"My mom got into an accident once, on the way home from a party. She broke her arm." Annalise's head bobbed to one side. "I don't like doctors, either. They try to make you into what they want you to be instead of letting you be what you are. Why do they do that?"

*Because sometimes they fall in love with you, and they want you to live forever.* "I don't know." Jani pushed to her feet and paced. "Are you hungry? Do you want some food, or something to drink?"

"No, thanks." Annalise sat up straight. "Should I have another pill?"

Jani checked her timepiece. *One and a half hours to go.* "Not yet."

"You're coming with us, aren't you?" Annalise picked at a corner of the blanket, then pulled off a length of weave and began to braid it. "Royson said that you needed to see Shroud."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

*Because I fell in love with him, too.* And because people in love sometimes did things that they didn't normally do. *Even when, technically speaking, they weren't really people anymore.* "Because I'm fine."

Forty-five minutes later, Jani heard a soft footfall outside the door. The *patpat* of fingers on the touch pad, entering code. She pulled out her shooter and activated it. Glanced at Annalise. "Stay down."

Annalise nodded. Stretched out flat on the floor and watched, wide-eyed.

Jani lowered the roomlights, then pressed against the wall next to the door, shooter raised and ready.

The door slid open. No sound at first. Then a familiar grumble. "Flying fuck—"

"*Get in here.*" Jani guarded the entrance until Royson had stepped inside. Then she closed the door, brought up the lights. Lowered her shooter last of all. "You could have been a little louder. People don't hear loud, but their ears perk up when they hear quiet and careful."

"I'm home, dear." Royson rolled his eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you?" He held out a candy bar to Annalise, tossing it to her when she nodded eagerly. "No one knows about her, all right. No one cares."

"It's nice to be loved," Annalise said as she bit into a mess of nut-studded chocolate.

Royson shook his head. "I can't win for losing with you two." He dug into his pocket, extracting another candy bar. "You're covered where Del's concerned," he said as he handed it to Jani. "I kept him well entertained throughout the afternoon with descriptions of our exploits." He turned his back as soon as he passed off the snack. "You're perfectly safe, Captain Kilian. No one knows you're here, either."

Jani stilled. The chill started in her gut and worked outward, freezing her limbs, setting off a roaring in her ears.

"Jani Kilian." Royson turned back to face her, his eyes alight. "Wow." He dragged a third bar out of his pocket and tore off the wrapping. "A few months ago, I was on a job on Hortensia when an alert went out through station security that you'd triggered some system or other." He tore a chunk out of the candy and popped it in his mouth. "Was that you? Were you there?"

Jani almost nodded, caught herself in time. The memory started her heart galloping. An old comport code from her Service days, used to send free messages. She should have known better than to try to use it, but she'd been broke, as usual, and had needed to make a call. *I almost didn't get offworld in time . . .*

"Wow and wow and wow." Royson broke off another chunk of candy, caramel stringing after it like a tether. "But the ID kit contained your old biometrics. Your old face. Shroud said you're completely different now, right down to retinal scans. He made sure." He talked as he chewed, one cheek bulged with chocolate. "Five years ago, I was fresh out of Boot. Just arrived on Phillipa when the story broke. Twenty-six Laumrau killed at Knevçet Shèràa. A documents examiner, they said. Did it single-handed. Picked 'em off one by one as they took a sacramental meal in their tents." He boosted atop a desk, heels knocking against the drawers like a little boy. "They hushed it up quick, of course. You uncovered too much, made too many people look real, real bad."

Jani heard her voice like an echo in her skull. "I don't know what you're talking about." Jani lowered into a chair. Set her shooter on standby and tucked it back in her duffel. Her right arm tingled. Her left, as usual, felt like deadweight. "You have me confused with someone else."

"Nope—John described you like you were standing in front of him. I couldn't have shut him up if I wanted to." Royson grinned. He could have been running down the plot of the latest action holoVee. "Family bastards and Service bad hats promised to support the Laumrau in their war against the Vynshà. In exchange, they arranged for the Laumrau to perform mind control research on human subjects, at a Laumrau hospital shrine called Knevçet Shèràa." The heel banging slowed, then stopped. The grin faded. "But they needed a documents examiner with experience with both idomeni and human paper to cook the books. Transfer records, data. Patients, too, if necessary. Who better to do that than someone who had trained at the Rauta Shèràa Academy, left even the Laumrau examiners in the dust?" He set the candy aside. His speech came hushed, rapid. "But you figured out what was going on. How did Shroud put it? 'Jani possesses a keenly honed sense of right and wrong, and the will to act on it.'" He looked at Annalise, and the glint in his eyes softened. "Now I think I know why you're taking this so personally."

Jani looked at Annalise, who watched her in turn, jaw stalled in midchew.

"Jani?" The girl's lips barely moved. "It's a pretty name."

Jani looked into scared blue eyes, and felt something deep inside break. There were times when the lies came hard. Then there were times when they wouldn't come at all. "Thank you." Annalise smiled, and she smiled back, eventually. "John seems to have learned judgment over the years. He can bring her back."

"He can bring you back, too," Royson said, his voice almost a whisper.

"He's done enough where I'm concerned." Jani felt something move in her hand. She had squeezed the candy bar so hard that it cracked in its wrapping, the pieces moving under her grip like broken bone beneath skin. She loosed her hold, let it fall to the floor. "Did he tell you what came after?"

Royson nodded. "They arrested you. Piled you and your people aboard a transport to cart them back to Rauta Shèràa Base." He set aside the remains of his chocolate, wiped his fingers on his pant leg. "Then the transport—"

"You can stop now."

"—crashed." Royson hung his head. "Everyone aboard killed."

"Except that three young doctors from the Rauta Shèràa consulate clinic found one charred husk that wasn't quite killed enough." Jani held out her fake left hand, and flexed it. *And one of those doctors went a little overboard.* In every way, professional and personal.

"The work they did on you was amazing. What they learned saved I don't know how many of my buddies later on." Royson sat forward, eyes brightening anew. "They're great men."

"But men just the same." Jani fingered one eyelid. Both eyes felt as though sand had blown in them. She needed to change her films soon. To get out of the room and off Victoria Station as soon as she possibly could. "Please." She looked across the room at Royson, saw the pity in his eyes, mixed with just enough admiration. The open, honest look of someone who just wanted to help. *God help us both.* "We leave in a few minutes. I'll go with you as far as the shuttle concourse. After that, please let me go my own way."

"Why?" Royson pushed to his feet and walked across the room to her. "They're waiting for you down there. Shroud's worried about your condition. I told him about the spill episode, and he said you need a takedown as soon as possible." He crouched at her

feet, then moved to one knee like a lover proposing marriage. "He can provide you all the help you need, all the protection. Why are you running in the other direction?"

Jani struggled for just the right words. When it came to John, they always proved hard to find. "John Shroud and I have a history."

Royson blushed. "I know."

"He'll say whatever he has to in order to get hold of me. Then he'll lock me down, and only tell me what he thinks I need to know, and only let me do what he thinks I should do. Because he wants me to be happy. And he doesn't want me to worry." Jani glanced at Annalise. The girl had pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her face. "And part of me would let him, because sometimes I just get tired. Sometimes, more than anything, I just want a little peace." Her throat tightened. "But it's not right. Living like a caged exhibit, like a collector's item—it isn't living. It's not even existing."

"Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven?" Royson rocked back on his heels and maneuvered into a sitting position. "A sergeant I knew used to rattle off that lit shit all the time. I'll tell you the same thing I told him. Hell is overrated, Captain."

Jani shook her head. "I'm not a captain anymore."

"Yeah, you are." Royson studied her for a time. Then he picked up the broken candy bar and tucked it in his shirt pocket. "You're coming with." He boosted to his feet with the smooth motion of someone with two fully functional legs. "And you'll come quietly." He jerked a thumb at Annalise. "Because you don't want to do anything that might attract attention and mess things up for her." He glanced at his timepiece. "All I have to do is pick up the new travel docs at the mail drop, and we'll be ready to go."

"New docs?" Jani hefted her duffel. "Why can't I just amend the old ones?"

Royson shrugged. "Why take the time to forge when Shroud can send us clean paper written to cover three people?" He strode to the door, head high, the man in command. "Not that you couldn't make the changes—I know better than that. But you know better than anyone that scanpacks leave marks in whatever paper they touch, special encodes that identify the examiner who made the amendment." He stood at the doorpad, hand hovering. "I think Jani Kilian's encodes would set off alarms, don't you?" He looked back at her, eyes narrowing as irritation warred with the pity and admiration and this time came out on top. "Do we want a repeat of Hortensia?"

"I know how to erase encodes," Jani said through clenched teeth.

Royson tapped his hand against his thigh. A slow, even beat, as though he counted to ten. "I'm going to go to the mail drop now and pick up the clean paper. I'll be back here in ten minutes, then we can leave."

Jani stood. "You'll have to pass by the dock to get there—"

"*Goddammit.*" Royson stepped back from the door. "How many times do I have to tell you—we're fine. Nobody's interested in a little girl."

Annalise's head came up. "I'm almost twelve."

"Thank you for that—I'm leaving now." Royson struck the doorpad with his fist. "It will be all right." He stepped out into the corridor, then paused to look back, his hand braced on the door track to keep the panel from sliding closed. "Just think, in a couple of months, we'll reminisce about this over dinner and laugh."

Jani stared at him, the racing tumble in her head stopped cold. "What—?" She caught sight of a new light in his eye, something that gave even his irritation a savor all

its own. *He's just trying to distract me.* And at that particular moment, he was doing a hell of a job. "John would have something to say about that."

"Maybe." Royson winked at her. "Unless he can do more than talk, he's in trouble." With that, he pulled his hand away from the track, letting the panel slide closed. "Ten minutes." Then came his receding footfall, followed by silence.

"I think he likes you."

"Then he's the one who's in trouble." Jani glared at Annalise, who had clamped a hand over her mouth to hide her grin. Then she pushed a hand through her hair and stood. "You should stretch your legs. Once you get to the passenger concourse, you'll be doing a lot of sitting." She shouldered her duffel and paced, dredging her memory for the layout of the passenger concourse and the locations of the emergency and employee exits. *I have an employee code. It should work.* All she had to do was find an excuse to go somewhere by herself, or with Annalise. *The restroom.* That would work. Even a riled-up Royson would be reluctant to force his way into the women's bathroom without sufficient provocation. *I'll pick one with two doors.* She'd be out and away before he realized she'd left—

Footsteps outside the door, louder this time. An impatient hand punching in numbers. The panel sliding open—

—to reveal a harried Delmen, who stepped inside, then let the door close behind him.

"OK, Timas, we need to talk—" His gaze fixed on Annalise, and his jaw dropped. "What the hell?" He stared at Jani and winced. "Look, I don't want to know what you and that clown have been up to, I really don't." He pressed a hand to his forehead. "I'm already going to need psychotherapeutics to erase some of the shit he described." He sighed, let his hand fall. "Something came up that I need you to look at. Could you please come back to the office with me?"

Jani watched his hands, his face. Listened to that soft voice, that never sounded too angry no matter what happened. "How did you know to look for me here?"

"One thing you learn fast when you're a dock lead is where all the hiding places are. Vacant offices are a big favorite." Delmen eyed the ceiling, rocked his head back and forth. "To answer your next question, all the supervisors get all the room codes for the entire wing. If it's got a coded panel, I can get inside."

Jani nodded. "What's the problem back at the office?"

"Screwed-up invoice on a new shipment. Declared values don't square. Customs has questions, and I don't have answers."

"And you want me to come with you now?"

"Yees."

"Why?"

"Because it's your job?" Delmen massaged his temple. "If it's overtime you're angling for, you can deduct the time that you two"—he waved toward Annalise— --you *three* spent in here doing--*God*, I don't want to know."

Jani remained in place. "Royson said that you ordered him to follow me." She shifted her weight so that it balanced evenly on both feet, gauging her numb left leg as best she could. "Who did you order to follow him?"

"What?" Delmen remained in place as well. Since he'd entered, he'd kept his back to the wall and hadn't done much more than turn his head. "Look, I—" He reached

behind him, then brought his hand back around. "I should've known you'd ask too many questions." The shooter shone jewel green in the chemical light. "Come with me to the office. Now."

Jani motioned to Annalise. "Get your stuff."

"No. She stays here." Delmen edged away from the door so that he could reach the pad with his free hand. "I just need you."

"What did you do to Royson?" Jani pointed to Annalise, who stood pressed against the wall clutching her bag. "What are you going to do to her?"

Delmen glanced at Annalise, gaze flicking up and down before settling back on Jani. After a few seconds, he arched an eyebrow. "You oughta know."

"Damaged goods. Salvage and sell." Jani waited for some response. The twitch of an eyelid. Anything. *You've done this before, haven't you, you bastard?* "Someone's looking for her."

"Nope." Delmen shook his head. "I spotted her in the corridor a few days ago and ran a runaway check. No one matching her description has been reported missing through proper channels." The boyish grin shone for an instant. "Improper channels don't count."

"Does the taste of real coffee mean that much to you?" Jani saw the flicker in his eyes then, and gave herself a mental kick. The object wasn't to rile him, but to talk him into letting them go. "I have a friend downstairs who's interested in her. He'll sweeten whatever price you were offered."

Delmen frowned. "The deal's set. I don't like to renege. Complicates future dealings." He paused, but he didn't hesitate. Not one bit. "Now I will do it in here, in front of her. Or we can go out in the hall." He shrugged. "Your choice."

Jani could feel her heartbeat slow, sense the roomlight brighten, colors sharpen. *It's all slow motion but me.* All the old rules bubbled up from her memory. That shooters were lousy in close quarters. Middle distance, fine. Clear shot to the head or center of mass, fine. But close in, they stank worse than spilled flavoring. Close in, there was always a chance—

—especially when part of you just wanted a little peace.

Jani shrugged her duffel off her shoulder, caught it by the handle, and flung it at Delmen. He ducked to the side, shooter still raised and ready.

Jani pressed forward. Raised her left arm to shield her head. The arm that couldn't feel. The one with no blood in it. The one that could take the hit.

Delmen sighted down.

Grinned.

Fired.

The pulse packet whip-cracked, struck Jani's arm, knocked her back. Her head snapped 'round, right arm twitching and heart skipping as the energy that crossed the biobarrier between her fake limb and the rest of her filtered through. She staggered. Almost fell to one knee, but recovered in time.

Felt the wet warmth splash her coverall. Carrier, pink as the flavoring, the stuff of animandroid limbs. The stuff of nightmare, and bad action holoVees.

Her left hand twitched. Her heart steadied.

"What"—Delmen stared at the dripping carrier—"the *fuck?*" Then he raised his gaze, looked her in the face.

In the eye.

"Ohmygod—" Delmen's shooter hand wavered. The barrel drooped. "What are you?" Then his mouth twisted as the rage took hold. "You're one of *them*? You're one of —son of a bitch!" He brought up his weapon again—

—just as Jani drove forward. Hit him square in the chest. Rammed him into the wall. Heard the gasp as the impact forced the air from his lungs. Sensed the shock as he struck at a woman and met a man's strength. Grabbed his shooter hand at the wrist and squeezed. Felt the bones crack beneath the skin like candy in a wrapper. Heard the shooter strike the floor.

Heard Delmen scream.

Jani grasped his arm and spun him around. Vised her left arm around his neck so that her forearm pressed against his trachea, stopping his voice in midyell. Gripped her left wrist with her right hand and levered in hard and fast. Felt the crunch, his body sag as he slumped against her. Heard the gurgle and rasp of a dying breath.

Loosened her grip, and stepped back, and let him fall. Monitored the twitching, then the final stillness.

Turned to Annalise to find her backed into the corner, eyes wide and skin so pale.

"What—?" Annalise stared at Delmen's body for long, slow seconds, then raised her eyes to meet Jani's. "There's something—" She swallowed hard. "There's something wrong with your—eye."

Jani blinked, felt the cool, comfortable nothing of an eye without a film. Pressed a finger to her cheek and came away with a soft sliver of white. "Do you have a mirror?"

Annalise stared down at her bag as though she'd never seen it before. Then she crouched and scrabbled, and came up with a tarnished oval. Straightened slowly, balanced on the balls of her feet, poised to bolt.

Jani broke eye contact and switched her gaze to the floor. Felt the heat rise up her neck. "I'm not a monster. I won't hurt you." Her chin burned—she touched it, fingered the sticky smear of drying carrier.

Felt a hand on her arm and looked down to find Annalise standing beside her, mirror in hand.

"Thanks." Jani took it from her. Breathed deep. Looked at herself.

"Are you human?" Annalise's voice shook.

"I'm not sure anymore." Jani studied her eyes. The right, film still intact, the dead dark green of a bad holograph. The left—

"It's all green." Annalise tilted her head to stare up at her. "Even the white is green. Lighter green, but still."

Jani focused on the cracked marble thing John had made. Jade set in old glass, dark and light, the iris half again as large as a human eye's, the sclera clear and real and oh so alien.

"Idomeni eyes are darker. The ones I've seen." Annalise edged closer, her earlier panic a memory. She seemed enthralled now, probably because she had something to fix on besides the dead body on the other side of the room. "I haven't seen many idomeni, but—"

Jani pulled the bottle of filmformer from her pocket, shook it, then tilted back her head. "My eyes were destroyed in the crash." So John grew new ones. *He didn't realize until it was too late that the starter tissue had been contaminated.* Three drops. *One one*

*thousand . . . two one thousand . . .* All the way to ten. Blink. She lowered her head, then turned to Annalise. "So?"

"I like the real one better." Annalise's voice emerged hushed. "But I can see where it would cause a problem."

"Yeah." Jani blinked again and felt the right film shift. "Excuse me." She pulled down her lower eyelid with the knuckle of her right thumb, worked her thumbnail beneath the edge of the film, and flicked out. The film peeled away with a *pop*, and dropped whole into her waiting hand.

"Eww." Annalise gripped the stark green-and-white thing by the edge and examined it. "Wow."

"Yeah." Jani tilted back her head. Applied the drops. Counted and blinked. "We need to move." She checked her timepiece. "I think we just missed the shuttle we were supposed to be on." She glanced at Delmen's body, then at the door.

"It's OK, right?" Annalise hugged herself. "Because he's dead. No one else is after us?"

Jani shook her head. "I doubt he was working alone up here. And whoever he sold you to must be waiting somewhere. In the station. Downstairs." She tossed the mirror back to Annalise. Then she walked over to Delmen's body, crouched beside it, and started searching. Pockets. Shirtsleeves. Inner pant legs. Ignored the feel of dead flesh, the reflection of the light off dark hair. Sensed Annalise move in beside her. "You can wait by the door."

"I saw you and him talking in the hall the other day." Annalise stood over her, bag gripped in one small fist. "You both laughed. You liked him."

"He would have killed me and sold you off like a chocolate bar." Jani examined her takings—vend tokens, a code card. Nothing with writing. No notes or business cards. *Kept it all in his head, damn him.* Maybe he'd been more of a pro than she gave him credit for. "He made the decision, and crossed the line." *And I was there waiting.* Because she had crossed that line long ago.

Jani stood. Drummed the fingers of her left hand against her thigh, and realized as she tried to stop that her fingers didn't want to.

"It's all weird." Annalise poked the hand with her finger, then jerked back as it twitched.

"I lost too much carrier. The fibers are misfiring." Jani shook out the hand, and felt the jittering ease. For the moment. "We have a lot to do, and no time." She recovered her duffel and opened it, dug out her shooter, and activated it, whispered a prayer to Ganesh that nothing important had been broken. "Stay behind me." She shouldered her bag, then picked up Delmen's shooter, set it on standby, and pocketed it.

"Are we going to look for Royson?" Annalise walked to Jani's side, making a wide circle around Delmen's body along the way. "He's got all the papers."

"I know." Jani lowered the roomlights, then opened the door. Paused just inside the entry, and strained for any sound. Stepped out and looked down one end of the hall, then the other, shooter raised and ready. "Let's go."

"You need to clean your face." Annalise broke into a trot to match her pace. "You need to change your clothes."

Jani glanced down at the dried splash of carrier that coated the front of her coverall. "I know."

"You need to find Royson."

"I know."

Up and down hallways, the between-shift conduits in a dying station, empty and silent. Past the locker room to the dock entry.

Jani pressed the doorpad, then stood aside as the panel trundled open. Listened, and heard only the echoing quiet. Smelled the undercurrent of berries in the cool, filtered air.

Strode onto the floor, shooter raised, circling as she walked. Watching. Watching. Seeing nothing.

Stopped in front of the office, palmed open the door, and—

—gagged as an all-too-familiar stench hit her, and her stomach flipped.

Annalise pulled the neck of her pullover up over her nose. "What is that?" Her voice emerged muffled, thinned with panic.

"Wait here." Jani edged inside, shutting down the room lighting before the motion sensor detected her. The dock illumination through the windows shaded everything in grey, cast shadows where none should have been. She wished she had two more people with her, one to guard the door, the other, her back. She started with the cubes, checking each in turn. Moved back up the narrow corridor to the lost lambs' shelves, the coffee table. Smelled the stench grow stronger, burnt hair combined with singed cloth and cooked flesh, and knew what she'd find before she found it.

Royson lay on his stomach, one arm twisted beneath him, the other outstretched above his head, his legs a tangle.

"Maybe he's still alive?"

Jani looked behind her. Annalise stood just inside the entry, stare fixed on Jani's face.

*Not with that smell.* Jani kept that comment to herself as she knelt beside Royson's body. She fingered the charred cloth in the center of his back, avoided the circle of blistered skin beneath. *The entry wound.* He'd been standing beside the coffee table when he'd been shot in the back. She hoped Delmen, or whoever had shot him, had surprised him, that he never knew what hit him.

Again, the search through sleeves and pockets, the struggle to ignore the dead flesh beneath. Jani liberated the documents folio, the bottle containing Annalise's tablets, John's business card—

—and in the very depths of a pant pocket, all by themselves, a blue poker chip and a few centimeters of pink ribbon.

*Don't think.* Don't imagine what the things might have meant, because it was the imagining that killed you bit by bit. The *what had been*, stopped in its tracks, never to be followed by the *what will be*.

*. . . in a couple of months, we'll reminisce about this over dinner . . .*

Jani stuffed the chip and ribbon back in Royson's pocket. Gathered up the other things, and carried them back to her old cube.

"What are you doing?" Annalise dogged her heels. "We have to go."

"We can't go until we know what we have and where we're going." Jani sat at her desk and cracked the fasteners on her duffel, then rummaged through the layers until she struck scanpack. "Shooter fire—is like a bolt of lightning." She freed the device from its case and activated it, watched the start-up sequence scroll across the display. "It tends to

fry everything in its path." While her 'pack finished initiating, she opened the folio and removed the first set of documents. They proved to be the fresh transmittals from John, designed to cover three people, the time stamp showing they'd been received by the station mail service only thirty minutes before.

Jani unfolded the station letter, the diplomatic-level clearance that would guarantee them unimpeded passage from the station to Victoria's main shuttleport at Wodonga. Crisp parchment the color of sunflowers, the text etched with multicolored inks and the edges trimmed with enough foil to draw a lightning strike on a sunny day.

"Exterior really went overboard with the foil this edition." Jani picked up her scanpack, muttered a prayer to Ganesh to remove this particular obstacle quickly, thanks, then passed the device across the top of the document. Then passed it again. And again. "Shit."

"What?" Annalise wedged in beside her chair. "Nothing happened. That's good, right?"

"It means the paper's dead." Jani spoke as she would have to another examiner, wished she could have bitten back the word right after she said it. But Annalise didn't seem to notice, so intent was she on the document itself.

"What's it supposed to do?" She poked it, then drew back her finger as though it stung.

"I should get a whole string of numbers and letters across the display." Jani pointed to her scanpack, which sat atop the paper, dark and silent as a scuffed black brick. "All paper contains chips, insets, and weave coding that tells people like me which mint it came from, and when it was made, and who coded it originally. Where it's been, and whose hands it's passed through. Every change that's made to it is recorded and stored within." She pressed a hand to her stomach, which had started to rumble as her augmentation backed off, and the jitters reasserted themselves. "Then the paper gets hit by shooter fire, at which point it gets wiped as clean as the day it emerged from the kettle."

"Can't you fix it?"

"If I had about a week and a real documents center at hand where I could get hold of new chips and insets and the latest updates for my 'pack." Jani checked the clock on the wall, and swore. *Forty minutes for the next shuttle.*

She reached into the folio and removed the original documents, the set designed for two. Unfolded the station letter, a more sedate issue in lilac and cream, courtesy of the Commerce Ministry. Ran her 'pack over it, expecting the same nothing she'd seen before—

—and saw instead broken strings of code. Locations. Colony markers. Identifications. Names.

"Your name is Gita Birkin." Jani nudged Annalise with her elbow to keep her from crowding so closely. "I've heard of Birkins—they're affiliated with the Ulanovs." John's circle of acquaintances must have expanded over the years.

"Gita?" Annalise grimaced. "Why couldn't they use my real name?"

"Because they couldn't be sure that it wasn't contained in some system somewhere, and that someone wasn't already looking for you. A relative you don't know about. Your former foster parents."

"They don't care about me." Annalise tapped the letter with her finger. "What else does it say?"

"I'm reading it." More strings scrolled past, and Jani's heart stuttered. "Damn."

"*What?*" Annalise pressed closer than ever. "I hate it when you just swear, then don't say anything else."

"Royson had his ID coded in here, too." Jani pointed to the broken chains of numbers and letters. "The name, N. Royce, I can work with. But his gender and description are coded in here as well. So are a lot of Service designators." She rubbed her eyes, taking care not to apply too much pressure to her new films. "The best way for me to recode this is to leave as much alone as possible, which would mean that I would be N. Royce, Captain, discharged with honor, working in security services for an affiliate of the Ulanovs." She unhooked her touchboard from her workstation and inserted the connector into a jack located on the side of the scanpack.

Annalise boosted up on the desk, allowing her to loom and press too close at the same time. "Can you do it?"

"Yeah." Jani picked through the strings of code, filling in gaps and altering designations. "The problem is that once you add in the Families, you add in a whole new layer of complication that I would rather do without."

"Don't forget your encodes."

Jani's hands stilled above the touchboard. "Thank you." Her fingers started to move again, this time more slowly. "I know how to cover my tracks."

Annalise rested her elbows on the desk and cupped her chin in one hand. "This isn't legal?"

Jani laughed, a little. "No, this isn't legal. If the people who make the rules for documents examiners saw me doing this, they'd take my 'pack away." So much for clean hands. *And that last little step.* "You and I need to find new clothes," she said, not so much changing the subject as kicking it to the curb. "Because there's no way in hell that a Family git and her paid security escort would walk around dressed as we are at the moment."

Annalise straightened. "Where are we going to find clothes?"

"The warehouse." Jani entered the last edit to the documents coding, said another prayer that she had caught all she needed to catch, then unhooked the touchboard from her scanpack and reattached it to the workstation. "Women's clothing." She entered in the warehouse codes, and waited. "Aisle 4. Stack 2." She looked up at Annalise. "What size do you wear?"

The hunt for clothes went quickly. Jani worked as lookout while Annalise climbed over crates with a knife and code wand, popping locks and dragging out the chosen items.

"This is real leather." She had pulled on the tunic before they left the warehouse, a simple style in creamy tan that lit her skin and brought her hair to life. New pants followed, dark brown and fitted. Soft boots, and a large shoulder bag.

"Hang on to your old clothes." Jani adjusted her own weighty bundle of new tunic, trousers, and boots. "You never know." She checked the slip of paper that she had inserted between the office door and the jamb, saw that it was still in place, and coded in. Waited for Annalise to enter ahead of her, and waited some more.

"Can I stay out here?" Annalise stood back from the door. "I can't—" Her eyes glittered. "I can't—" Her voice pitched higher.

Jani dropped her clothes and scrambled in her pocket for the tablet bottle. "You don't have to go in." She shook out one tablet, all the while watching the girl for any sign of a personality shift. *Don't scream—just don't scream—*

"I'm OK, it's just—" OK or not, Annalise took the tablet, chewed and swallowed. "It's the smell. I think I'm going to smell it for the rest of my life."

"I know." Jani shoved the bottle back in her pocket and picked up her clothes. "Stay by the door. I'll be right out," she said as she slipped inside the office.

The burnt flesh smell had lessened, but was still strong enough to make Jani's stomach clench. She dragged off her stained coverall and stuffed it into her duffel, then pulled on the outfit deemed more fitting for a Family retainer. Trousers and tunic in darkest blue-black. Black boots, and a matching slingbag large enough to swallow her duffel. And finally, because she was now officially a security operative, a black belt complete with holster, into which she tucked her old Service shooter.

*All dressed up with someplace to go.* "But where, James? You never got the chance to tell me." Jani sat down at her workstation and brought up a Wodonga directory, display after display of names and business advertisements. Entered John's name, then Neoclona's, and came up empty both times.

"Half an hour outside Wodonga." She brought up a map of the city, guessed the distance, inscribed a circle and checked to see what fell on it. Smiled. Memorized the names. Shut down the workstation. Shouldered her new bag, then walked down the aisle to Royson's body. "What was Delmen's plan? Murder-suicide? Make it look as though I killed you, then turned the shooter on myself?" She crouched down and touched one red, springy curl. Cleared her tightening throat. "I'll get her out. I promise." Then she whispered a prayer for the dead that she had learned from her mother, a prayer she had said too many times before.

Annalise met her at the door, hands filled with dripping dispo napkins, courtesy of the watercooler. "Your face." She handed Jani a napkin, then watched as she scrubbed. "How's your arm?"

Jani flexed her left arm. The muscles trembled but obeyed, moving as she wanted them to move. "Better, I think." She checked her timepiece. "Ten minutes to the next shuttle. Let's go."

#

Compared to the commercial wing, the passenger concourse of Victoria Station hummed like a hive. Business travelers from Padishah. Service recruits from across the Pearl Way. Families and station workers and students. They filled the food kiosks and streamed in and out of the shops that lined the concourse, their voices a multilingual rise and fall.

Jani scanned faces as she waited in the billet line. Security operatives were a common enough sight—no one offered her more than a cursory glance in return. More importantly, no one seemed interested in Annalise, who stood next to her and nudged against her every so often as though confirming her presence.

"Everybody always wants to go to Chicago." The billet agent addressed the crowd in general as she took the documents folio Jani handed her, spread out the station letter, and inserted it into the slot of her reader. "I been to Chicago. It's expensive." She

shivered theatrically, which set her dangling earrings swinging like pendulums. "And it's cold." She pulled the letter from the exit slot with enough force to make the device whine, refolded it, and tucked it back into the folio along with two boarding passes and a flyer for a new shop. "There you go."

Jani took the folio with a nod, then maneuvered Annalise to a couple of chairs in the waiting area.

"Why didn't she check the letter?" Annalise sat primly, shooting the cuffs of her tunic and plucking nonexistent lint from her trousers. "You did all that work."

"She spot-checked it with the reader. If anything hadn't matched up, she'd have called down an examiner from the Transportation Ministry, and they would have questioned us about who we were and where we were headed and why." Jani watched a pair of shabbily dressed women enter the waiting area and poke into one of the trash receptacles until one of the clerks chased them off. "Maybe the letter would have worked as is. Maybe. But if you do the work up front, it's one less thing you need to worry about down the line." Not that she didn't still worry. Her real limbs, in recovery from yet another augmentation burst, ached. Her bones felt lead-filled. *And my damned arm*—She flexed her left arm over and over, and felt the animandroid muscles quiver and cramp in response. *I should have done something to fix them.* But it would have taken time they didn't have. *I'll take care of it after.* After she had delivered Annalise to John. After she could breathe again.

Their call sounded. They headed down the gangway as though it was something they did every day. Handed off their passes to a disinterested attendant. Boarded the shuttle.

Annalise stuffed her bag into a floor-level grapple rack, then nestled into her seat, a business-class lounge upholstered in leather just a little darker than her tunic. "We're really getting out."

"Yeah." Jani stowed her bag and strapped in.

"You know where we're supposed to go?"

"I'm pretty sure, yes."

"They're waiting for us there already."

*No, they're waiting for you.* "They're probably wondering where the hell we are as we speak." Jani felt the engines rumble, the sweat bead. Over the years she had ridden more shuttles and transports than she could count, yet every time she felt the start-up vibrations, the old memories returned. The shouts. The takeoff shudder and roll. The . . . nothing. *The gods get one chance,* she'd once heard someone say. *If you survive one crash, you'll never need worry about another because they've shot their bolt.* "Your mouth to the gods' ears."

"Are you praying?" Annalise exhaled with a shudder. "This has been too easy, hasn't it?"

Jani studied the side of the girl's face, looking for some sign she joked and not finding it. *She's spent weeks in hiding, and half a day on the run.* Witnessed one killing and the results of another. *All that, and she asks if it's been too easy.*

"Yes, it has." Jani gripped the arms of her seat and waited for the breakaway.

#

Arrival at the shuttleport outside Wodonga, Victoria's largest city. Abumpy landing and hurried traverse through the concourse to the garage and the skimmer Royson had leased.

"Bay four nineteen—it's right down here." Annalise bounded ahead of Jani and down the narrow aisle.

"*Stay with me.*" Jani drew her shooter and activated it. She hated garages. Too many shadowed corners. Too many cramped charge bays to crouch in, vehicles to hide behind. *I wish John had met us here.* She would have risked a face-to-face encounter if it had meant avoiding this damned rats' nest of a place. *I need someone out front. Someone at my back.* Maybe two someones at her back, and even then she'd feel exposed. Vulnerable.

Annalise lagged beside Jani until they reached their bay. Then she quickened her step, almost skipping to the battered brown sedan. "Let's go—hurry up." She yanked at the passenger-side door mech.

"*Dammit.*" Jani reached out to grab her, bending at the waist and bringing her right arm up—

The blow came from behind, like a board across the back of Jani's shoulders. She dropped to her knees, her shooter skittering across the smooth concrete floor like a skipped stone. Tried to break her fall, but her damaged left arm buckled under the weight. Struck her chin on the concrete. Rolled onto her back, and caught sight of Mopey dragging Annalise back down the aisle. The girl fought his grip like a fish on a line, twisting and kicking.

Jani reached into her pocket, the roar in her ears overwhelming all other sound. Pulled out Delmen's shooter and activated it. Sighted down.

Fired.

The shooter crack echoed through the garage, silencing the roar. Mopey dropped to the floor, the back of his shirt smoking, while Annalise pulled away from him, slapping at her clothes as the shooter aura flashed 'round her, sparking and hissing.

Jani struggled to her feet, the pounding in her head easing as Augie once more took hold. She'd pay for it later, with nausea, aching, and the cramp of exhausted muscle. But now she walked down the aisle to where Mopey lay, still and scorched. Took Annalise's hand, felt the tingle of shooter static, and led her back to their skimmer. Opened the passenger-side door and bundled her into the cabin, followed by their bags. Recovered her shooter from the place it had fallen. Eased into the skimmer, closed herself in, then leaned against the steer mech until her hands steadied and the worst of the shakes had passed.

"Are you all right?" Jani waited for Annalise to answer, heard only a snuffle in reply, followed by quiet weeping. She rested her hand on the girl's shoulder, as much to reassure herself as to assure. "If they'd wanted to do it right, there needed to be two—one to kill me and one to take care of you. But there was only one of them. That means they're shorthanded. He may have been the only one we have to worry about."

"But you don't know for sure?" Annalise stared down at her hands, clenched in her lap. "You never know for sure?"

"No. You never know for sure. You just keep guessing, and hope you guess right." Jani let go Annalise's shoulder and activated the skimmer dashboard. Keyed the

names from the map into the autonav. Pressed the charge-through, and maneuvered the vehicle out of the garage.

#

The sunset scenery around Wodonga, Victoria, gifted the eye with the best that the colony had to offer. The mountains. The cool, clean air. If you didn't ponder what else went on out there besides the growing of the coffee trees, and if you blocked your ears to the distant rumbles of convoys in areas where no guidance tracks had been installed, ignored the occasional blast of long-range shooter fire, if you kept your eyes and your vehicle on the road, you could enjoy the verdant views and count yourself lucky to have seen them.

Problem with that was, if you stayed on the road, everyone could see you coming.

Jani skimmed alongside the two-lane, just outside a line of trees, staying as close to the guidance track as she could. Sometimes she'd lose contact, and the skimmer would shudder and whine. Then she'd reconnect and the directionals would reset, the vehicle surging beneath her like a horse gearing up to bolt.

"I don't want to die before I get there, you know." Annalise gripped the dashboard, eyes squinched tight.

"You won't die." Jani dimmed the headlamps and thanked Ganesh for clear skies and the reflective whiteness of the regional stone. "I won't die." She pressed the accelerator and flared the lift mech, taking the skimmer over a tumble that had once been a wall. "Nobody else is going to die."

"Why can't you stay on the road?"

"I don't know who's out there."

"Would it matter?" Annalise squeaked as a branch struck the windscreen. "Just run past them."

Jani edged the skimmer away from the trees. "They could shoot us. There could be more than one of them, and they'd run us off the road. They could hit us with a pulse that stops the motor cold. The possibilities are endless."

"Mom used to say that when in doubt, you blinded them with footwork."

*Which might explain why she isn't around anymore.* Jani glanced at the girl, a sliver of light in the darkening cabin. "What did your mom do?"

"I don't know." Annalise shrugged. "Some of the guys that used to visit . . ." She turned and looked out her window. "They looked like the guy at the garage."

Jani worked her bruised shoulder. *If I hadn't leaned forward to grab Annalise, he'd have caught me across the back of the head.* And the evening would have ended much differently. "There will be no more garage guys in your life." She let the skimmer decelerate as the trees grew thicker and the scattered stone gave way to well-joined wall.

"Melbourne Hill Farm." Annalise squinted at the autonav display. "Are you sure they're going to be there?"

"It's the closest of the three coffee farms that are within a half hour of Wodonga." Jani slowed the skimmer even more as shrubbery scraped the bottom and closed in on all sides. "If we don't find them at this one, we'll try the next one, and if we don't find them there—"

"What if we don't find them at all?"

"If we don't find them at all,"—Jani tapped a beat on the steer mech—"I will call the code on the Neoclona business card and arrange to meet John."

"I don't know why you didn't do that in the first place." Annalise grew more and more fidgety, anticipation nerves swamping out the sedative effects of her medication. "Royson said that John just wanted to help you."

"They just wanted to help you at the hospital on Padi, didn't they?" Jani couldn't quite control the sharpness in her voice. "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

"They wanted to change me into something that was easier for them to deal with." Annalise glared at her. "I don't think it's the same—" She fell silent, then boosted up in her seat. "I see some lights. Off the to right."

"I see them, too." Jani slowed the skimmer to a shuddery halt. Drew her shooter and activated it before popping her gullwing door and easing to the ground. "Stay behind until I give the OK." She slammed shut her door, then trotted through the knee-high grass to the stone wall and poked her head just above the top. Searched for one thing and one thing only, because if she saw it, she'd know she was in the right place, and if she didn't, nothing else would matter.

Fifty meters or so distant, just off to the side of the road. Amid the small group gathered in the light of skimmer headlamps, a tall, slim form dressed in grey. A cap of white hair.

"Hello, John," Jani whispered. "It's been a while." She watched him pace, a walk as distinctive as his appearance. Weighty fluidity. A wraith framed by the gathering dark.

"Is that him?"

Jani's heart skipped. "I thought I told you to stay put."

"You weren't moving. I figured it was OK." Annalise had scrambled atop a rock and now peered over the top of the wall. "Why's his hair so white?"

"He's an albino." Jani watched John slow, then stop, and peer in their direction. "His tissues lack melanin, so his hair and skin are white, and his eyes are pink." She fielded Annalise's alarmed look. "He films them, though. Different colors to match his clothing."

"Yuck." Annalise wrinkled her nose. "Why didn't he just get his melanin fixed?"

*Because when he was a boy, his parents wouldn't allow it.* Jani watched John walk over to one of the skimmers. *And as he grew older, he learned that being different had its advantages.* "I don't know—maybe you should ask him." As John fell into conversation with the man perched on the skimmer's hood, she beckoned to Annalise. "See the man he's talking to? His name's Val Parini. He's easier to talk to than John sometimes. If something comes up, or you're worried about something, you can talk to him." She stepped back from the wall and listened, heard only insects and the odd nightbird. No rustling in the trees. No signs of circling subordinates sent to trap her. *He trusted Royson to bring me to him.*

"They—" Annalise stood on her toes, then gasped and would have scrambled over the wall if Jani hadn't grabbed the back of her tunic. "*They brought Ricky.*" She pointed to a slight figure standing near Val, so still he seemed as one with the stone. Dark, bowed head. A bouquet of flowers in one hand.

"You shouldn't keep him waiting. You should go." Jani kept her eyes fixed on Ricky until she felt Annalise's stare drilling the side of her face. "Don't argue with me."

Annalise's voice emerged tight. "You should go to them, too. Royson said you were sick."

"I can't." Jani stepped back from the wall. "Now, please."

Annalise didn't meet her eye as she stepped down from the rock, shouldered her bag, and made a few tentative steps toward the waiting group.

Then she stopped and looked back at Jani.

"Go on." Jani nodded to her. "You'll be fine."

"Will you?" Annalise stilled, then let her bag slip to the ground and ran back to her.

Jani braced herself as Annalise barreled into her and hugged her tightly. Touched the pale head, then unwrapped her arms and eased her away. "Go." She watched the girl walk away, pause to hoist her bag, then continue without a backward glance. Waited until she was out of sight, then ran back to the skimmer. Imagined the reunion that took place a short distance away as she reversed the vehicle and sped out of clearing. The tears. The hugs. The news of Royson's death, and all that came after.

John's questions when he realized that she wasn't there, and what he'd do when he realized she'd slipped his grasp.

*He'll go to the shuttleport.* He'd expect her to try to escape immediately, which meant he'd check the passenger concourse, the departure lounges. Which meant, of course, that she needed to go to the one place he would never expect her to go.

#

"Welcome to the Veterans Club, Captain." The attendant spun the register around, and handed Jani a stylus. "Please sign in here."

"Thank you." Jani filled in the blanks according to the information encoded in the station letter. *Name, rank, and C-number.* N. Royce, Captain, and the alphanumeric string she memorized after seeing it only once. When she came to the space marked "Last station," she hesitated, then entered "Fort du Lac, Phillipa" because she knew enough about the place to fake it in case any of the dozen or so retirees scattered about the club room engaged her in conversation.

The attendant glanced at her entries, then handed her back the station letter. "Specials today are chicken pot pie and steak and *pommes frites*, ma'am." He glanced at her. "Both are kettle crap, but rumor has it that the kettle the steak was cooked up in once came within a hundred meters of an actual cow."

"I'll keep that in mind." Jani hefted her bag and wandered into the clubroom, a surprisingly pleasant arrangement of tiled floor, potted trees, and woven wood furniture complete with mountain views.

She chose a table nearest the open window, and enjoyed the scent of fresh evening air. Ordered a bourbon and soda. Adjusted to being called "ma'am" for the first time in years. Opted for the steak, with *crème brûlée* for dessert. Checked her timepiece every so often and wondered when John would abandon his search of the shuttleport. *A few hours, probably.* After two or three shuttles had departed Victoria for the station and his crew had searched every bathroom and closet, and the realization dawned that his creation had slipped his net once again.

She savored the quiet, even as she sat facing the entry and checked every new face. Even as she wondered where she would go next, and what she would do when she got there.

*Hell is overrated, Captain.*

*Maybe, Mr. Royson.* Jani sat back, drink in hand, and remembered the expression on Annalise's face when she saw Ricky. *But sometimes it has its moments.* Even if they only served to remind you of the things you'd lost. The things you could never have.

She finished her meal, then adjourned with her coffee to the sitting room to bide her time. Given the proximity of the coffee farms, the club served the real stuff, black as space and deep as a cave. She drank it sans cream. John would have approved.

After a pleasant time spent perusing newssheets and discussing with a retired major the stylistic flaws of the latest Service uniforms, Jani visited the club bathroom. Added packets of sugar and salt that she had swiped from her table to a dispo of warm water, and mixed up her own version of animandroid carrier replacement. Using a filter syringe she kept for such occasions, she injected tiny aliquots of the solution into the lab-grown muscles of her left arm. After a few minutes passed and the constant quivering eased to an occasional twitch, she cleaned up her gear and departed the club.

Over the next hour, she made several circuits of the Service wing of the concourse. She disposed of the station letter and everything else she had taken from Royson and Delmen in various trash bins. She also disposed of Delmen's jewel-green shooter, knowing as she did that she would see his grin in her nightmares for years to come. The one he'd tossed at her when he'd teased her earlier that day. The same one he'd flashed when he'd aimed the shooter at her and sighted down.

Her load thus lightened, Jani sold the leather bag and the holster belt at an exchange shop.

Lastly, she visited a shrine. Sat in the quiet dark for a time, then lit candles for absent friends. Some five years gone. One, more recently lost.

Then she walked out of the shuttleport and dropped off the edge of the world.

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