For Donal Little

Who convinced me that everybody really is an artist and that I’m a story teller.
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Chapter 1
It was the best of times. It was the worst of times—the classic good news/bad news scenario if ever there was one. At least that is how I felt as I hurried along to Captain Giggone’s office. The McKendrick Mercantile Cooperative had gotten off to a tremendous start on the St. Cloud Orbital. That was the good news. The bad news was that one of the members had gotten into a fight and the local authorities had been called in. As one of the ringleaders of the co-op, I knew my butt was on the line for either circumstance, so when the request to report bipped on my tablet, I was not the least bit surprised. My parents had named me Ishmael Horatio Wang, but I was pretty sure that when the captain got done with me, my name would be Mudd.

As I rounded a corner, I tried to figure out what she was going to say so I could prepare myself. I should have known better. There was no way I could have anticipated what was about to occur, and this was not the first time I found myself in such a situation. The captain had a way of doing that to me.

Pip, my friend and co-conspirator in starting the co-op, caught up with me just as I was about to knock on the captain’s door.

“You got summoned, too?” he whispered.

“You know what she wants?”

“I can make a pretty good guess,” he said ruefully.

We both pulled back our shoulders to straighten our postures, took deep breaths, and then I knocked.

We heard the captain’s firm voice from behind the closed door. “Come.”

Pip opened it and we marched in. I tried not to look guilty, though I felt I did a poor job of it. We stopped just inside the door and braced to what passes for attention on a merchant freighter. Pip did the honors. “Attendants Wang and Carstairs, reporting as ordered, sar!”

The captain was not alone and that did not bode well. All the senior staff sat around the deck-mounted table—Captain Giggone, of course, and Mr. Maxwell, the First Mate. Those two I had expected but Mr. Kelley, the Chief Engineer, and Mr. Cotton, the Cargo Master, surprised me. All the Division Heads were present except Cookie—Specialist First (Chef) Ralf al-M’liki—whom everybody just called Cookie. These august personages regarded Pip and me in a manner I could not quite put my finger on—something between fresh meat and dead meat.

The captain broke the silence. “Thank you for coming, gentlemen. We have a situation that we need your help in resolving.”

Pip and I glanced at each other quickly. I had no idea which we the captain might be referring to, or for that matter, what resolving either Pip or I was capable of doing. From the expression reflected in Pip’s eyes I was pretty sure he felt the same way.

“Yes, Captain. We’re glad to help,” I said, though I had no idea what I had just committed us to. Still, it was not like we—that would be the Pip-and-me we—had a lot of choice in the matter, seeing as how we were junior members of the crew.

The captain turned her gaze on Pip. “Mr. Carstairs, I’ve had reports from Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Cotton that you’ve been using the galley storage accounts to engage in trading at the last two ports.”

“Yes, Captain. Cookie and I have been working on reducing the overhead of mess operations on the ship’s overall operating budget.”

“And how has that worked out, Mr. Carstairs?”

“I’m not sure, Captain. I haven’t seen the final accounting for St. Cloud. At Margary, I think we broke even.”

“Broke even?” she asked, one eyebrow raised in question.

By then I felt pretty confused. I had no idea what Pip’s trading had to do with the trouble in the flea market on St. Cloud, and besides, I found it hard to believe the captain did not know the exact details of the ships accounts. I wondered why she was asking.

“Yes, Captain. I think we took enough in trade to pay for mess operations and still feed the crew in the manner to which they have become accustomed,” Pip said.

I was glad to hear Pip add the manner to which they have been accustomed part. The quality of the food on the Lois McKendrick was a matter of pride and I am sure the captain would not be pleased no matter how much Pip saved, if the crew was not satisfied.

The captain prodded further. “You think?”
“Yes, Captain.” I could see the gleam of sweat at his temple out of the corner of my eye, but he kept his voice steady. “Cookie thinks we actually turned a small profit, but my numbers indicate we broke even.”

“And for the St. Cloud leg?”

“I don’t know yet, Captain. I’ve been tied up with the co-op and haven’t seen the latest figures on the coffee trading.”

“I see.” She nodded once as if to herself and then turned to me. “Mr. Wang, I have another report that indicates you have taken and passed all four divisional half share rating exams in the six months since you’ve been aboard.”

Like the results of supply accounting, I was pretty sure she knew the answer to that as well. After all, it was on file in my personnel jacket, but I played along. “Yes, Captain.”

“And what will you do now that you have those ratings, Mr. Wang?”

“I wasn’t planning to do anything in particular, Captain. I was just trying to see if there was a division I might like better than steward.”

“And were you worried that you’d be stuck ashore…” she prompted. She laid it out like a statement but her inflection indicated a question.

“Well, not worried exactly, Captain. More like hedging my bets against unfortunate circumstances.”

“Do you want to leave the Lois?” she asked in a matter-of-fact tone. “Are you interested in pursuing such an opportunity?”

“No, Captain!” Even as I spoke, I knew my response was too vigorous. “I like it here. I have friends here.” I shut my mouth and clenched my teeth so I wouldn’t blurt out anything more ridiculous like, “Please don’t make me leave!”

Pip and I traded glances again. I had no clue where this conversation was heading and it looked like my friend was equally confounded. The captain studied us for a few heartbeats—I am sure it was a smaller number for her than for us—but finally she glanced around the table at the officers and gave a little nod toward Mr. Maxwell.

Mr. Maxwell fixed his gaze in Pip’s direction. The First Mate was a calm, deliberate man and did everything for a reason. He had a reputation for being so cold and calculating that a common joke was that robots considered it an insult to their warmth and personality when he was compared to them. Personally, I liked him and trusted him as much as any person I had ever known.

“Mr. Carstairs, you recently passed the cargo man exam and are qualified to take a full share birth in that division.” He glanced at his tablet then continued, “The Andrew W. Mellon is docked here at St. Cloud and has posted a cargo man berth for which we are prepared to give you the highest recommendation. Would you like to pursue that position?”

Pip blinked. “Sar?”

I could hear the confusion in his voice. Frankly, I was just as perplexed as he was, but the theatre of the absurd production playing out in the captain’s cabin was starting to get really interesting.

“Mr. Carstairs, the Mellon has a cargo opening,” the captain said. “If you want it, we’ll help you get it.”

“Have I done something wrong, sar?” he asked.

Myself, I was starting to have trouble breathing. I kept waiting for them to get around to the fight at the flea market, but all they were interested in talking about was leaving the Lois. I knew there would be a price to be paid, but I had no idea we were in that much trouble.

Mr. Maxwell and the captain exchanged a look. I had no idea what it might have meant, but I would recognize it again if I ever saw it. The next words out of Mr. Maxwell’s mouth really confused me. “No, Mr. Carstairs. In fact, you’ve done very well by the Lois and we want to do what we can to help you. This is a legitimate opportunity—one of several—and I wanted you to know about it before we offered you an alternative.”

“Sar, I’m with Mr. Wang. I like it here. I want to work with Cookie on the stores trading and see just how far we can take it.”

“So, you’d rather work here as a quarter share steward than transfer to the Mellon and work full share cargo? Is that what you’re saying?” The captain’s voice carried no inflection at all.

“Well, it sounds kinda silly when you put it like that, Captain, but yes, I guess that’s what I mean. I like what I do here.”

Mr. Cotton spoke up then, “You have amazing skills, ya, Mr. Carstairs. But I must say, we have no openings in cargo for a cargo man at the moment, ya.”

“Yes, sar. I’m aware of that. You have a good crew and I know they all like it here as much as I do. But I wouldn’t be able to do the kinds of trading on the Mellon that I’ve been doing here with Cookie. Besides, the co-op is just getting started, and I’m making some good money with that. It’s okay, sar. I don’t need a cargo slot right now or really anytime soon.”

There was another weird little pause while the officers all nodded at each other. The captain made a gesture
toward Mr. Kelley and he turned to me. “Mr. Wang, I’ve been getting reports from the environmental section that you’re spending time down there.”

“Yes, sar,” I answered promptly.

“You spent your breaks from galley duty to help them scrape sludge?”

“Well, just once, sar. But I’d be happy to help them again, if needed.”

“Spec one Smith reports that you aided spec three Ardele in swapping out the algae matrices for the number three scrubber. Is this true?”

“Yes, sar. She needed a hand and I was free for a couple of stans. It was kinda fun in a slimy, wet, mucky sorta way.”

“Was that before or after you got your engineman rating, Mr. Wang?”

“Afther, sar.”

“Ms. Smith reports that you have some odd ideas about sludge, Mr. Wang. Would you care to share one or two of them?”

“Um, well, sar. I thought perhaps we could use it as a base for compost.”

“Compost?”

“Yes, sar. At Margary me and Diane…er…I mean spec three Ardele, visited a mushroom farm. They grow a bunch of different varieties of fungus in a slurry made of hydroponic waste and chipped sludge. When I found out we were just giving our left over waste away it made me think there might be a better use for it.”

“And you thought we might grow what?”

“I dunno, sar. I was just interested in the idea. Margary uses hollowed out asteroids for their farms, and I thought we could do something similar since it didn’t seem like the mushrooms needed much tending to.”

“I see. And did you enjoy working in the environmental section?”

I considered that for a moment before answering. “Yes, sar. Yes, I did. Bri…er, Ms. Smith, Ms. Ardele, and Mr. Gartner are all great to work with.”

The weird little pause-and-nod exchange occurred again between the seated officers.

Finally, the captain said, “Okay, gentlemen, here’s the problem. Mr. Carstairs, you deserve a chance at cargo man, as you show exceptional capabilities in this area. Your stores trading for St. Cloud gave us a net profit of close to thirty-five percent over our stores budget. Not only did that cover the cost of feeding the crew for the last five weeks, but you’ve generated a very respectable surplus. Partly due to the short hop over here from Margary and partly due to your shrewd horse trading. You do us proud, Mr. Carstairs, and I am grateful. The problem is I don’t have a cargo slot to offer you, and there’s another little problem with regards to spec three Avery.”

That was it. The shoe I had been waiting to drop. Gregor Avery got into a fight while working the booth on the flea market. I was not sure what all the talk about tests, trading, and visits to the environmental section was all about but at least now we were going to find out our punishment for any culpability we had in that fiasco. In an effort to try and explain, I blurted out, “I’m sorry about that, sar. I don’t know what happened at the co-op—”

The captain interrupted me, “Oh, I don’t care about that.” She waved a hand as if to shoo away a pesky fly. “He’s always been a hot head. The more important point is that the tanker Audrey Moore has just hired him for their environmental section. So that leaves us short-handed.”

I was not positive I heard her right. I was so sure that Gregor, Pip, and I would all be paying the price for the flea-market incident that I was flabbergasted to hear she did not even care about that.

“He’s changing ships? I didn’t know that, sar. Although, he did mention wanting to get onto a tanker, once or twice.”

“Personally, I hope he enjoys it,” the captain said. “But getting back to the problems at hand and how you gentlemen can help us with them.” She gestured to Mr. Kelley.

“Mr. Wang, I am prepared to offer you an engineman slot in environmental,” he said. “Ms. Smith has been consulted and is most enthusiastic. Are you interested?”

“Well, yes, sar, but what about the galley?”

Mr. Maxwell answered, “Inquiry reveals we have several quarter share candidates available to us on St. Cloud, Mr. Wang.”

Mr. Kelley continued, “We know you don’t have the knowledge and experience that Mr. Avery did, but the section crew down there can’t say enough good things about you. They want you, if you want to go.”

While I was happy for the opportunity, I also felt bad for being promoted before Pip. He had more seniority and had been at quarter share for almost two full stanyers, while I had barely been aboard for six months. I looked over at him and said, “But Pip—”

Before I could finish the captain interrupted, “Before you go on, you should know we have another job in mind for Mr. Carstairs.”
Mr. Maxwell swiveled his gaze back in Pip’s direction. “Mr. Carstairs, your work in the galley stores has contributed greatly to the welfare of the ship. While we cannot offer you a cargo man position, we can offer you a raise in your current assignment. We will need you to stay in the galley in order to help Cookie break in a new attendant, but we’re prepared to raise your salary to cargo man scale at a full share rating with corresponding mass allotment. There is, however, one proviso that you continue doing what you’ve been doing since Gugara with regards to the stores trading.”

My brain vapor-locked at that point, but Pip, ever the wheeler-dealer, spoke up, “Just so I understand everything. I’m going to stay attendant rank on the books, but you’re going to pay me the same as cargo man, give me a full share, and increase my mass allotment?”

Mr. Maxwell smiled. “Yes, Mr. Carstairs, that is an accurate summation.”

Wanting to make sure I had everything straight, I said, “And I’ll be taking Gregor’s place in the environmental section as a half share crewman? And we’ll hire another quarter share to take my slot on the mess deck?”

The captain nodded. “Yes, Mr. Wang. The good news is that you’ll get a new job. The bad news is that Mr. Carstairs has to stay and train another quarter share hand.”

Pip and I looked at each other for a second before he turned back to the officers. “Well, I did pretty well with the last one,” he said.
Chapter 2
As soon as they dismissed us, we scampered to the galley to help Cookie with the lunch mess. My head reeled and I looked forward to slipping into the familiar lunchtime routine. In-port duty was always a welcome break from the busier service while underway, but I expected today would be a larger than normal turnout. We had been docked for three days and some of the initial interest in the orbital had worn off, not to mention more than a few crew members were running low on creds. Arriving at the galley, we found Cookie already underway at full steam ahead.

“Ah, gentlemen,” he greeted us. “You’ve finished with the captain, then?”

We both nodded. “You’re stuck with me, Cookie,” Pip told him with a grin. “But Ishmael here is going off to play with sludge as soon as the captain finds a replacement.”

“I suspected that would be the outcome. Congratulations on your pending promotion, Ishmael. I knew you’d move up quickly. In the meantime, we need to get some meats and cheeses laid out…”

“I’m on it, Cookie.” I glanced at the chrono. We were a bit later than normal, but nothing we could not handle.

“I’ll make up a fresh urn of coffee,” Pip volunteered. “If we have any left, that is. The captain said the trades gave us a rather large surplus in the stores account.”

Cookie grinned broadly at that. “Yes, I managed to hold onto a few buckets, but the prices were actually up a bit from when we first docked. There are some more items I’d like to talk with you about, but it can wait until after lunch,” he said, glancing at the chronometer himself.

We each went to our assigned tasks, meshing into the familiar pre-lunch pattern. Lunch was up and ready five ticks before noon and the rich smell of Cookie’s mushroom soup filled the mess deck. Lunch was a big success and the soup elicited more than a few compliments. After the initial rush of setup and service, I stood in the galley suddenly struck by the realization that I would no longer be part of the mess crew. Six months before, I had come aboard with no idea what I was supposed to do and little knowledge about why I should be doing it. Now, I was more than just a little sad that I would be leaving my first real job aboard.

Cookie must have sensed my thoughts because he came over and patted me on the shoulder. “You’ve done well here, young Ishmael,” he said with a warm smile. “If nothing else, you’ve managed to teach Pip how to make coffee.” We both laughed at that. Before I came aboard the Lois the coffee left much to be desired and straightening it out had been my first real accomplishment on board.

While we talked, Diane Ardele from the environmental section rushed onto the mess deck. She hurried over to us and asked, “Did you hear Gregor’s gone?”

“I heard he was going,” I told her. “Has he left already?”

“Yeah, just a few ticks ago. He packed his duffel and checked out. Brill’s been meeting with Mr. Kelley for the last twenty ticks about a replacement.”

Cookie and I shared a glance and Diane caught it. “What?” she demanded. “You guys know something. Come on, out with it.”

“Well…” I started, “rumor is you’re getting some greenie half share engineman with absolutely no experience to replace him.”

“Dammit! We’re running close to short handed down there as it is. Why can’t we get somebody who knows a scrubber from a filter?”

Cookie chuckled and bustled off. “I must get the pies out of the oven.”

“I understood her frustration and hoped she was not going to have the same opinion when she found out exactly which greenie half share engineman was being transferred into her section.

Just then, Brilliantine “Brill” Smith, the environmental section lead, came in. She smiled and waved. After filling a lunch tray, she stopped to speak with us before taking a seat.

Diane pounced when she came over. “You won’t believe it but I just heard we’re getting some greenie to replace Gregor!”

I bit my lip and Brill stifled a laugh. “News travels fast,” she said. “Gregor hasn’t been gone half a stan and already we have rumors about his replacement.”

“What did Mr. Kelley have to say?” Diane pressed. “Is it true? Do you know who it is?”

“Yeah,” Brill hung her head in dismay. “I’m afraid it is true. They’ve already offered Gregor’s berth to a replacement and he’s accepted, but I understand he has at least a little experience.”
Diane brightened a little with that. “Oh, really? What’s his background?”
Brill paused, allowing me to answer. “Well, I’ve worked a little with sludge, and I’m pretty familiar with changing out algae matrices.”
Diane glanced back and forth between us. Brill grinned broadly.
“It’s him?” Diane exclaimed.
“Yup. I tried to get somebody better, but we had to take what we could find on such short notice.”
Diane’s face ran through a range of emotions from anger, then confusion, and finally to pleased as the reality of the situation sunk in. “It’s really you?” she asked again and slapped me in the arm. “You sludge monkey! You set me up for that.”
“I hope you’re not too disappointed that you’re getting a greenie. I’ll tell ya, when the captain hit me with it this morning, I was about as surprised as you are right now.”
We settled in at a mess table so Brill could eat her soup before it got cold. “I actually talked to Mr. Kelley this morning right after Gregor told me,” she said. “I thought we’d have a bit more time, but the Moore is getting underway first thing tomorrow and they wanted Gregor aboard immediately.”
“We’re not too far behind that,” Diane pointed out. “How is this all going to work?”
“I’m not entirely sure and just doing what I’m told. They’re working on a replacement for me and I’m supposed to stick here until they find one. Mr. Maxwell seemed to think that wasn’t going to be too difficult.”
Brill paused from her soup and said, “St. Cloud is a good place for picking up quarter shares because working on mommy’s sheep ranch or daddy’s fishing boat isn’t all that much fun. Like all company planets, there is not a lot of options down there.”
“Amen to that,” I added. I started on a company planet and knew only too well how limited the prospects could be. If not for the Lois’s arrival at Neris, I would have been deported at my own expense after my mother died. “So, what has to happen to make this as smooth a transition as possible?”
Brill finished her soup and sighed in satisfaction. “Cookie makes the best soups in the galaxy.” Focusing on the question at hand, she replied, “We need to get you transferred over to engineering berthing to free up the deck bunk space for the greenie.”
It took me a moment to realize that by greenie she did not mean me. After being the junior member of the crew for six months, I looked forward to relinquishing that particular title. “What’s involved?” I asked.
Diane answered, “Oh, that’s nothing. Just go over to engineering berthing and claim an empty bunk and locker. Then move your stuff in. Strip the linens off your old bunk and reset the palm lock on your locker when you’re done with it.”
Brill concurred, “That’s about it. We’ll update the ship’s records when you officially transfer to the section.”
She stood up and cleared her dishes. “Speaking of which, I need to get back and finish the paperwork.”
“Thanks, Brill,” I told her.
She just smiled and gave a little wave before heading off in the direction of environmental.
“Ish?” Diane said softly. “I…um…I’m sorry for the nasty comment earlier.”
“What nasty comment?” I asked.
“About getting somebody who doesn’t know anything.”
“Oh, that. Are you still upset now that you know who the greenie really is?”
She shook her head. “No! I’m delighted. I was just afraid we’d get somebody who wouldn’t fit in.”
“Are you sure?” I pressed. “I know I don’t have anything close to Gregor’s experience.”
“Don’t count on that. You already have a better feel for it than Gregor ever will.”
“Maybe, but—the bottom line is that the department is losing a spec three and getting an ordinary engineman. You’re gonna have to babysit me for a while.”
“Yes, but you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. None of us ever thought about using sludge for anything but terrafoming material. I think you’re gonna liven things up down there in Foggy Bottom.”
“Foggy Bottom?” I chuckled.
“Yeah. It’s what Francis calls the section. It’s so humid all the time and so deep in the ship. It’s practically a swamp already. All we need are some frogs.”
“Lemme work on my ribbit,” I told her and we both laughed.
“Mr. Wang?” Cookie called from the galley door. “I could use your help…”
With a small wave, I left Diane with the lunch she had neglected while we talked over the changes ahead of us. Cookie needed help dishing up granapple cobbler and ice cream for dessert. Lunch wound down in good order after that, and by 13:00, Cookie and I started the after-lunch cleaning.
Pip came back to help with lunch clean-up and filled me in on the status of our trades. “The belts and buckles we brought all sold at good prices. Even the spare buckles did well because there are so many leather goods here.”
“Excellent! What about the stones?” My voice echoed from inside the big kettle that I was cleaning.

“I think we’ve moved close to three hundred of them at anywhere from two to three creds a piece. Your idea of buying that spool of leather thong material and threading them to make necklaces was pure genius!”

I remembered that first morning when we set up as the McKendrick Mercantile Cooperative, the booth across from us was selling raw leathers in various shapes. The guy had spools of narrow leather thong and I bought fifty meters for five creds. Pip and I acquired several kilos of smoothly polished semi-precious stones on Margary, our previous port of call. Each one was pendant sized and bored with a small hole widthwise through the top. The leather thongs fit perfectly. We originally hoped to get a cred a piece, but we ended up selling them for two and three times that depending on the stone. “Will we have any left to take on to Dunsany Roads?” I asked.

Pip smirked. “We aren’t selling any today and a lot will depend on whether either of us gets liberty tomorrow.”

I grimaced. “Oh, yeah. Forgot.”

“It’s not that big of a problem. They’ll sell just as well, if not better, at Dunsany,” Pip said.

“Any idea what we’ve made so far?”

He pulled out his tablet and started figuring. “Between the belts, the buckles, and the three hundred stones we’ve cleared about seventeen hundred creds. Not as good as Margary, but nothing to sneeze at.”

I nearly dropped the bowl I was rinsing out. “You mean we have almost five kilocreds from private trading just from Margary and here?”

He nodded. “Not a bad start, eh?”

Our salary and share allotment only amounted to about three hundred and fifty creds for the same period so we were making about eight times our salary in this part-time venture between ports. The amount staggered me.

“How’s the co-op doing?” I asked as I finished up with the dishes and moved to get a broom while I worked to control my excitement.

“Francis has it covered today, and Biddy is watching the booth tomorrow. We probably won’t get a good settlement on the final numbers until after pull out, but as of last night, nine of the seventeen people who took part have sold out of their stuff. Gregor’s squabble happened as we were packing up to leave so that didn’t affect any sales really. We only needed to make sixty-four creds to cover the booth cost for the whole trip and we had over a hundred creds as of last night with some big consignments going up today. I think each of the managers will end up with at least fifty creds and the co-op will make about two hundred, depending on how today is going and what happens tomorrow.”

I just shook my head and kept sweeping. “I never expected in my wildest dreams that this would work out so well. Back on Margary when I said, ‘Let’s rent a booth.’ It never occurred to me that we’d be at this point so fast.”

“No kidding,” Pip heartily agreed.

“How are the stores trading going? We all set for Dunsany Roads?”

Yeah, we had that pretty well ironed out before we docked. The ship trades are all taken care of in advance and that includes the cargo containers as well as ships stores. We’re not in port long enough to be able to mess around with deals on the ground after we arrive. Except for little things here and there like Cookie was mentioning.”

A sudden thought crossed my mind. “I’m gonna miss watching Cookie come up with all those dishes using the lamb.”

Pip laughed. “Maybe, but if I know him, you’ll be able to smell it cooking all the way down in environmental.”

Remembering the way his spicy beefalo filled the ship with a rich, savory aroma, I was pretty sure Pip was right about that.

“The only trade items not settled yet are the ones for Mr. Maxwell’s empty container and our own private trading stock.” Pip scowled at the thought.

The empty container was a little game that the First Mate had been playing with Pip since we left Gugara. He had asked Pip to give his best recommendations for what to put in a hypothetical empty container based on a trade analysis of the pair of ports involved. Of course, what started out as a hypothetical empty container soon became six hundred metric tons of cargo that had contributed more than two hundred kilocreds to the ship’s profit pool.

“Can’t find enough to leverage here to fill a container?” I asked.

“There’s plenty of cargo, but there’s no market in Dunsany Roads. St. Cloud and Dunsany are just too similar. And Dunsany is a hub with three other systems within jump range besides St. Cloud.”

“Well, where does St. Cloud sell its fish and rice?”

“Oh, there’s a good market for it on Margary, but we’re going the wrong way for that.” He sighed and shook his head.

“Same with the lamb and wool?”

“Yeah. Basically. Dunsany has the manufacturing base to process the grains and wool, but the margins are pretty small on that kind of stuff. Coming back out this way from Dunsany has the same problem.”
“Where are we going after Dunsany?”
“We’ve filed for Betrus, but we’re overdue for a last tick redirection. We typically get pulled off our published course about every five systems.”
“How many have we hit since the last time?” I finished with the sweeping and secured my cleaning gear in the locker while Pip thought about it.
“Eight. Averages are funny, and we could go a long time without being pulled off to a new course. But it’s something to consider.”
“So the alternate systems—what do you call them?”
“Level one alternatives,” Pip answered.
“Yeah. So, the level one alternatives out of St. Cloud are what?”
“Bink and Ablemarle. Bink is a heavy gravity world specializing in metals and machining. Ablemarle specializes in systems and software. A lot of the astronics that go into the ships coming out of the Manchester yards at Margary come from Ablemarle.”
After one last swipe of the work surfaces, I put away the last of the cleaning gear and headed out to make coffee. Now that I probably was not going to be doing it any more, I did not mind so much. Pip followed me out to the mess deck.
“Did you see anything you fancied for us to invest in when you were up at the flea?” he asked.
“Nope. But I didn’t get a good look around because I was helping Rhon with the booth all day.”
“Same here.”
“Seemed like there were a lot of knitted goods and some very nice woven things. The local weavers do excellent work. I bet I saw eight or ten of them just on my way to the head and back. I wonder how many it would take to fill the empty container,” I mused as I measured ground coffee into the waiting basket.
“A lot, but you know what we’ve completely missed?”
“What? Something besides lunch?”
“No, I ate while you were flirting with Diane. We’ve both got more mass allotments.”
“Well, not yet,” I objected. “Not until we get the promotions and such settled.”
“That’ll happen before we leave here. I’d bet the captain has a new attendant by morning.”
I pulled out my tablet and looked up the numbers. Half share rated crewmembers received an additional ten kilos so my mass allotment was going up to thirty. Pip was going up to fifty. “Wow, between the two of us, our mass allotments will be doubled!”
Pip nodded. “Makes ya wanna go shopping, doesn’t it?”
Chapter 3
According to our duty roster, Pip had the afternoon watch, leaving me free to go ashore. Personally, I was torn between going out to try to find some trade goods and staying around to see what developed. I left Pip and Cookie with their heads together over stores trading and headed down to deck berthing to pack what little I had to move. I did not think that would take much time and then I would be free to go up to the flea market to see how the co-op was doing.

Going in to strip my bunk and clean out my locker felt strange. I knew I was just moving across the passageway but it still seemed as if I was leaving home. It took only a couple of ticks to clear off my linens, pack my duffel bag, and reset the palm-lock on the locker. I checked around one last time to make sure I had not left anything tucked down beside the mattress or under the pillow and that was it. Done. One good thing about living out of a locker, when you’ve cleaned it out, you’re done.

The thought inevitably dredged up memories of my mother’s death. I remembered packing up all the stuff in our flat and shipping it off to storage on Siren. I became very sentimental over leaving that flat and wondered if I would always have that sense of loss whenever I moved.

It’s just a locker, I tried to tell myself, but it was really more than that. There was Big Bad Bev who slept in the bunk under mine, and Tabitha Rondita’s gentle snoring on the other side of the partition. I would miss having Pip across the way. I knew I was not really leaving them. We were still all on the same ship. Still, it pulled at me in a weird kind of way.

I got a hold of myself and headed over to engineering berthing. It was such a long way. I stepped out of deck berthing, walked the eight steps to engineering, and into the mirror image of the room I had just left. Midday is always quiet in berthing and made even more so because we were docked. It felt funny to walk into the empty berthing area, like I was sneaking in. With no one to talk to, it made me feel even more like an intruder. The place even smelled slightly different, a tang of something mechanical that I could not put my finger on.

I walked slowly around, looking for an empty berth. I had several to pick from. Of the five quads, none were completely filled. The bunk with the same relative position as my old one was free so I took that. It was as good as any and it seemed less likely that I would crawl into the wrong bunk by mistake out of habit. I tossed my bundle of linens onto the bunk, set the palm-lock on the corresponding locker, and stashed my gear in it. I hung my civvies on the hangers and put my boy toy belt on a hook in the back. Making up the bunk did not take long. Within half a stan, my moving day was completed. It felt odd being halfway between, like being in limbo.

As I was standing there, trying to decide what to do next, Brill came charging into the berthing area. “Oh, there you are!” she exclaimed. “I thought I might find you here.” She wore civvies—a tailored caramel colored jacket over an emerald blouse along with beige straight-legged slacks. “Are you all moved in?”

“Yes. Just trying to decide what to do. There’s still a couple of stans left before the flea market closes, but I don’t want to go alone. Also, I’m not sure I should leave Pip in case the new greenie comes in.”

Brill smiled at me. “At a minimum, the greenie won’t be here before evening watch. I suspect the captain will need to go down to the hiring hall on planet in the morning, so you’ve got nothing to worry about there. You’re off now, right?”

“Unless you’ve come to give me some other news, I’m still a mess deck attendant, and Pip has the duty.”

“Excellent! Let’s go shopping. I want some of that Ishmael insight to help me with my private cargo choices!”

“And I owe ya a dinner,” I reminded her. “I should probably settle that debt before you become my boss.”

“Deal. After the luck you’ve been having with trades, you can afford it. Meet me at the lock in five ticks or I’ll leave without ya.” She waved airily and sashayed out.

I began to feel better as I changed into my one set of civvies.

My old bunkie, Beverly Arith, introduced me to flea market shopping. Her black leathers, military crew cut, and tattoos usually cut a wide swath through the throngs of people clogging the aisles. Whenever I walked in public with Big Bad Bev, the reactions of people who saw her entertained me to no end.

Shopping with Brill was an experience of a different nature. Where Bev attracted attention for her tough appearance, Brill got noticed for her height. In a universe of people who seldom topped two meters, Brill’s two and a quarter left her towering over almost everybody. She walked with a slight stoop and had to be careful around the ship not to bang her head into hatch combings. She was perfectly proportioned, long legs and neck, a narrow waist,
and a somewhat muscular physique. Until you stood next to her, you did not realize how tall she really was. She had a broad face that most would not call beautiful but was far from plain. Her wide set brown eyes, high cheekbones, and cute nose were appealing in their own way. She usually wore a ready smile and had a razor sharp wit. She was what my mother would have called a sweetie.

Unfortunately, I don’t think the other people on the orbital saw her quite the same way. If Bev got stares of fear and awe, Brill got incredulity and amusement. As we headed into the flea market, those around us would go quiet and stare, only to buzz in our wake like flies. I kept catching bits of conversations with words like Amazon and freak in them. The general derisive tone made me angry.

Just before we entered the flea market’s main sales hall, Brill leaned down to me and murmured, “Thank you, Ishmael, but getting angry will only make your day worse and won’t change their minds.” She smiled beatifically and I noticed how the emerald in her blouse set off her brown eyes.

“But it’s so unfair,” I protested quietly. “You amazing and they’re—”

“Hush! I’ve been tall since I was ten stanyers old. I’ve made my peace with it, can’t you?” She squeezed my hand and I felt my anger melt away.

“You’re gonna be a bitch to work for, aren’t ya,” I said at last.

She laughed and nodded. “But you don’t work for me yet, so let’s just enjoy ourselves. I need you to find me some decent trade goods for Dunsany.”

After a while, the stares and the giggling did not seem to matter. Brill and I knew what was what and the rest was just noise.

Our first stop was at the co-op’s booth. Spec three environmental Francis Gartner was booth manager, and while not as tall as Brill, he was still taller than average, and I spotted him over the crowds in the aisles before we actually reached the booth. His string bean build made him appear taller from a distance but until you saw him standing next to Brill, you could not appreciate how skinny he was. The booth looked good. The McKendrick Mercantile Cooperative banner was clipped to the back drape and matching navy-blue cloths covered the two tables. Our grav pallet acted as a raised dais in the back of the booth. From it, Francis could see what happened around him and left most of the floor free for traffic. He even had a big round button pinned to his blue shirt that said, “Booth Boss.” As we approached, Sandy Belterson finished closing a sale on some small item I could not quite make out, and she sent the customer back to Francis to pay for it. Compared to our first rough outing back on Margary, we looked like real pros.

Francis smiled broadly when Brill and I walked up. “Hey! Am I glad to see you. What in the world is going on at the ship?”

Brill gave as innocent an expression as I had ever seen, and turned to me. “Is there something going on at the ship?”

“I don’t know. Is there?” I asked in return but we were not fooling anyone.

For his part, Frances just kept glancing back and forth between us as if he was trying to decide which one to hit first. “Don’t make me hurt you,” he finally said playfully. “Gregor was packing up as I was getting ready to leave to come up here. What’s going on?”

Brill relented. “Gregor’s gone. The Moore needed him aboard at noon and the captain signed the transfer.”

Francis grinned like he had won the lottery. “Outstanding!” he said with just a bit too much enthusiasm. He tried to backpedal a bit. “I mean, that’s good for him. I know he wanted to be on a tanker.”

“More like he wanted a bunk-bunny, you mean,” Brill muttered.

Francis flashed his eyebrows up and down but did not say anything.

I made a mental note to find out what a bunk-bunny was, although I had my suspicions.

“What else have you heard?” Brill asked him.

He smiled mischievously at me before answering Brill, “Well, I heard a rumor that we’re getting some greenie engineman as a replacement.”

“It’s true. We had to take what we could find on short notice,” she said with a wink in my direction. “He has some potential, don’t ya think?”

Francis held out a hand and I shook it. He drew me into a hug. “Outstanding!” he said again, pounding me on the back.

“Yeah,” Brill said. “You shoulda heard Diane going on about the greenie we were gonna get saddled with before she knew it was him. I about peed myself laughing.”

Francis seemed concerned. “Is she upset?”

“No, I set her up as a joke,” I told him. “She came into the mess deck all upset about Gregor’s leaving and I played up about some inexperienced goof getting the job.”

“And she bought it?”
“Oh, yeah. She took me aside afterward to make sure I knew she was happy that I’d be joining the section. She seemed very sincere.”

Brill giggled. “Yeah, she only calls people she really likes ‘sludge monkey’ so you’re on her short list of good people.”

Francis put on a long face. “Damn, it took her a year to call me sludge monkey!” He burst out laughing.

Rebecca Saltzman called Brill aside just then and I took the opportunity to ask Francis quietly, “You sure this is okay with you? I know Gregor had—”

“Are you kidding?” he interrupted. “Hey, anybody who’d give up his break time to scrape sludge is good in my book. I don’t care what your rating is. Most of what we do is pretty mundane. You’ll have plenty of time to get caught up on all the theoretical stuff. You probably already know more than Gregor does. Diane and I had been talking about the possibility of getting you transferred into Foggy Bottom ever since you passed the engineman exam. Anything we can do to help you, just let us know. I mean that.”

A customer came over to ask about the brocaded vest on the table, and Francis winked at me as he went to answer her questions.

Brill wrapped up her conversation with Rebecca and we headed out of the co-op booth. They were all selling like crazy so it seemed like a good day for the McKendrick Mercantile Cooperative. We turned the corner and Brill said, “You know, I’ll help you, too, Ish. Francis and Diane aren’t the only ones who’re glad to see Gregor Avery out of the section.”

I stared at her in surprise.

“I’m tall, Ish,” she said with a mischievous expression, “Not deaf.”

“You’re gonna be a bitch to work for! I just know it,” I said in mock dismay.

“I’ve been called much, much worse.”

As we were walking along, a display of small, wooden carvings caught my eye and I steered Brill that way. A balding man with a long, sharp nose wearing what seemed to be homespun sat on a tall stool behind the table. Unlike most vendors in the flea market, he made no attempt to call attention to his wares. Brill and I walked up to the table and leaned over to get a better look. Made from a pale gray wood—gnarled and weathered—the figures were exquisitely crafted and finished with a velvety oil that brought out the natural grain of the wood. He must have had dozens of them representing a wide range of fish, animals, and birds. Each contained an inlaid bit of shell shaped like a heart on its chest.

“What are these?” I asked, having to work hard to look up from the figures.

He smiled and laugh lines crinkled the corners of his eyes. “Why, they’re wooden sculptures, my boy. What do they look like?”

I saw Brill’s eyes flicker from one figure to another. She examined the detail and the textures, certainly, but it almost seemed like she was searching for one item in particular.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I can see they’re wooden sculptures, and they are absolutely exquisite. But…what are they? What kind of wood is this?”

He smiled again. His seamed and weathered skin made him appear carved from wood himself. “The wood is windrift, and ‘tis a gift from the sea, which we gather on the beaches. The larger bits we burn for fuel. Some we carve.”

“And the hearts?”

“Ah, the hearts are bits of shell. The sea provides those as well.”

“These are not just souvenirs. They have some meaning. Can you tell us?”

He raised his eyebrows in amusement at this. “You see what you see, young sir. I am but a simple carver of shapes.”

As stall banter, his speech felt unusual. Most craftsmen wanted to prattle on to make their wares more appealing but I had to drag everything out of this guy. Maybe he was smarter than I thought because he was spectacularly effective at securing my attention. I could not get it out of my head that the figures were more than mere carvings. Perhaps I projected my own feelings onto them. I could not shake the feeling. To begin with, the carving was exquisite and the inlay work, flawless. The shapes emerged from the wood like they were always there hidden below the surface, and the carver merely revealed them.

“Good sir, I mean no offense,” I answered him formally, playing along with his script. “But I’m a simple lad and not familiar with your customs. Are they religious icons? Good luck charms? These seem like more than merely shapes.” I glanced at Brill again but she seemed oblivious to our conversation as she intently examined the figures.

The man relented then and admitted, “These are but the shapes in the windrift and shells of the sea. My family has been making them for decades, my father and his father before him. We collect the windrift and shells and carve them as the mood strike us. They bear no significance other than the love we have for the sea.”
His words seemed at once sincere and not completely true. As I was about to press him on the matter, Brill reached out and plucked a figure from the table. It was a heron, about six centimeters tall, with a delicately formed neck and long legs. The carving had a bit of rich purple shell as the heart. “How much?” she asked.

“All the pieces on the table are ten creds,” he said. “That’s the price.”
She placed the heron back on the table. “It’s lovely, but…no, thank you.”

We took our leave then, but as I was walking away, I noted the booth number.

A few meters down the aisle, we turned to each other. “What was that about?” Brill asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure, but we need to remember that booth. Ten creds is a lot for a small wooden artifact, but they might be worth every bit of it. The craftsmanship on them is spectacular, and each one seems to have captured the essence of its subject. That heron looked like it might reach out and strike a fish.”

She nodded. “It was lovely.”

“Why didn’t you get it?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it but as soon as he said the price, I didn’t really want it anymore.”
She shook her head slightly as if just waking up. “I mean, I wanted it, but I didn’t want to buy it.”

“I don’t know what I mean. How about you? Why didn’t you buy some?”

“I don’t know either. I just want to think about it.”

Yeah, I can see that. Ten creds is a bit much.” We continued down the aisle. Around the next corner was a booth selling powdered dyes and it reminded me of a conversation I had with Pip on Margary.

“I nudged Brill with an elbow and pointed. “You were looking for trade goods?”

“I’m not sure. We thought there might be a market because of all the yarn producers here. But when we did a little research, we discovered that St. Cloud dyes are kind of a cottage level export.”

Makes sense. If you have the yarn, you’ll find ways to dye it.”

We drifted into the dye booth and examined the dye packets. The couple behind the counter, a woman and her husband, were pleasant and business-like. The dye was packaged in paper packages from a few grams up to a quarter kilo. Each packet had a small sample of yarn attached to it showing the color the particular dye would produce.

Brill asked, “Do you have these in larger packages?”

The man laughed, but the woman shook her head and grinned. “The quarter kilo packets will dye ten kilos of wool to full saturation,” she explained. “That’s a lot of wool. For most normal uses, the hundred gram packets are preferred.”

The packets were spread on the table in a color wheel pattern with the purples on one end arching around to red on the other. There were no white dyes, of course, but blacks took up space in the center of the curve. I took out my tablet and snapped a digital of the display and sent it off to Pip.

“We’re crew from the Lois McKendrick,” I explained. “We’re looking for things to take with us out of the system. I’m interested, but I’d like my partner to come see.”

“Please, take a card,” the man said, offering a small item. “We’re happy to offer wholesale prices.”

I took the data-card and thanked them before Brill and I moved on.

“What do you think?” she asked as we turned a corner to head down another aisle.

“I’m not sure. The dyes are a good idea in practice, but I’m thinking of what they’d look like on the co-op table. As a trade good, they lack something.”

Yeah, I see what you’re saying. It does seem like a specialty kind of item. Either you want it or not.”

It was just about then when we came to a section that was dedicated just to yarn. There were dozens of vendors, and as we worked our way through them, we found Sean Grishan about halfway down the aisle. Sean was a short guy with a pug nose and sandy hair, a spacer apprentice in the deck division. He carried several skeins of a soft-looking yarn in a wide variety of colors. As hard as it was to believe, he spent quite a bit of his downtime on the ship knitting and crocheting. Back on Margary, his handmade lace earned him a pile of creds in the booth. Judging from the skeins in his bag, I suspected he had some new projects in mind. He waved when he saw us and had a kid-in-a-candy-store grin plastered on his face. “Hey, shippies,” he called.

“Hi, Sean,” Brill returned. “You look like you’re gonna be doing some knitting. How much yarn do you have there?”

“About five kilos worth, but I’m not knitting with these.”

“What then?” I asked. “Five kilos is a lot of mass.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, “but I’ve got a lot to spare. I unloaded almost everything I had between Margary and here. I’m going to use this stuff to make afghans!”
Brill laughed delightedly. “Afghans?”
“Yeah, I’ve had a bunch of patterns for crocheted afghans for nearly a stanyer. This is the first time I’ve had enough creds and mass allotment to actually get enough yarn to try them out.”
“So? This is good yarn?” I asked.
“There’s just about anything you want here. It ranges from good to excellent. It really depends on what you want to do with it. You looking for trade goods?”
“Thinking about it. Any suggestions?”
He pointed down the aisle in the direction we were heading. “Second booth from the end on the left side. Middle aged couple there has big bundles of really good, general purpose wool yarn. The best deals are in the hundred gram, worsted wool skeins. Excellent texture and she dyes it herself with local dyes. Real artisan class work. You can probably buy it for about two creds a skein.”
“Thanks, Sean,” I said.
“No problem. Thank you for getting the co-op going. If it hadn’t been for you and Pip, I wouldn’t be able to afford this.” He hefted his big bundle of yarn.
I did my best, aw shucks ’tweren’t nuthin’ impression.
“Well, I gotta get this stuff stowed. See you guys on the ship,” Sean said and he headed out.
“Thanks for the tips, Sean,” I called to his back.
As we wended our way onward through the crowd, Brill asked, “So, how are you going to handle this?”
“I’m gonna grab a digital and flash it over to Pip. Sean knows his yarn, so if he says this is good, I’ll take his word for it. Pip and I will put our heads together between now and tomorrow to decide if we want to buy it and, if so, how much. We don’t have any other good prospects right now, and since our mass allotments went up we’ll probably pick up at least a few kilos.”
The couple was, indeed, amenable to bulk purchases and I made arrangements for Pip to visit the next day. I bought a few skeins to take back to show him and the man put them in a carry-sack for me. Brill fell in love with some extremely soft yarns in warm earthy colors. I excused myself while she dickered. “I’ll be right back,” I told her.
I left the booth and headed in the direction of the head, but at the end of the aisle, I doubled back. It took me just a few ticks to find the booth with the carvings again, and the man beamed when he saw me coming back.
“You thought it over, young sir?”
“Yes, I don’t know what these are, but I’d like to buy some to take with me to Dunsany as trade goods,” I confessed. “Would that be acceptable?”
“The price is still ten creds,” he said, without changing the expression on his face. “They are what they are, and you may do with them as you see fit.”
I quickly selected ten of them. I let my hand choose without worrying about picking any particular piece. I sorted my selections onto a corner of the table.
As I picked them out, the man nodded with each piece as if he was pleased with my choices. When I finished, he wrapped each in a small piece of soft cloth and placed them gently into a carry-sack for me. I started to transfer the credits but he gave me an odd look with a raised eyebrow. “Are you certain you are done, young sir?” he asked.
I started to nod, but one figure caught my eye. With a smile, I gave a small bow to the man. “Thank you for reminding me, good sir. I seem to have missed the most important piece.” I picked up the heron and handed it to him to wrap.
As I left the booth, I stashed the sack of figures in the bundle of yarn.
When I got back, Brill was waiting for me, her purchases complete. “I was just about to send out the search dogs,” she said playfully.
“Got sidetracked,” I told her. “There’s a lot going on here.”
“Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?” she asked as we started off again.
“You mean for myself? Or to sell?”
“Either.”
“I’m always on the lookout for trade goods, but those I just kind of stumble on. It’s not like I’m looking for something specific but I know it when I see it.”
“Yeah,” Brill agreed. “It’s the excitement of the hunt that makes it fun as much as anything else. But what about personally? Anything in that department?”
“Well, I’d like to upgrade my wardrobe. These were my going out clothes back on Neris.” I indicated my civvies. “They seem a little—tired.”
“It’s hard to find clothes that fit at the flea market,” Brill said wistfully. “Not just for me. It’s impossible to fit no matter where I go, but flea market items tend to fall into the one-size-fits-all category to appeal to the most
people. Finding anything that is really good is basically luck.”

“That makes perfect sense, now that you said it.” I sighed. “Well, maybe in Dunsany I can find a tailor and a boot maker.”

“Maybe you won’t have to wait that long,” Brill said with a grin. She could see over the heads in front of us, and when the crowd cleared a bit, I saw what she was referring to.

A large banner hung on the drape behind a booth that proclaimed: Bresheu et Fils. An impeccably dressed, portly gentleman with a bald pate surrounded by tufts of brown hair dominated the space with his presence. He held court, directing a small platoon of boys and girls in their tasks. Some measured. Some cut. But all moved with a common purpose. A table set up in the back of the booth held several machines, all humming merrily under dexterous fingers and sharp eyes. The booth—and I realized that it was actually a triple—boiled with activity.

I laughed out loud at the sight and Brill clapped her hands girlishly in delight. The chrono said we had less than a stan before closing, so this had to be our last stop. It was going to be memorable. I flashed a digital for Pip.

Brill touched my arm and murmured into my ear, “My turn to find the head. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here,” I said, distracted by the commotion. I turned back to the booth and tried to figure out where to begin.

As I started thumbing through the racks, a voice in my ear said, “How can we help you today, young sir?” I turned and found the man himself smiling at me. He held out a hand. “Bresheu,” he introduced himself, “at your service.”

I shook his hand and said, “Call me…that is…my name is Ishmael Wang, Monsieur Bresheu. And I am in need of a better jacket.”

He beamed a smile back at me. “Just Bresheu, Mr. Wang. May I call you Ishmael?”

“Of course.”

“What kind of jacket would you like, then, Ishmael?”

I pulled at the lapel of my glorified windbreaker. “I’ve outgrown this,” I said. “While the size is adequate, I find that it no longer fits me.”

Bresheu nodded knowingly. “I understand completely. If you would slip off your garment and try…” He snapped his fingers, and a girl hung an exquisite black sport coat on his hand. “This one?”

I stripped out of my jacket and Bresheu slipped the coat on for me. A boy immediately began tugging and straightening. A girl, who could not have been more than eight stanyers, plunked down at Bresheu’s feet and started writing the measurements as fast as a different boy could read them out. A tape measure flashed as he read numbers for neck, sleeve, length, chest, and waist. Bresheu tsked and shook his head. “No. This will not do.” Before I could even see whether I liked it or not, the jacket was gone.

He snapped his fingers again and a different girl, I think, hung a brownish, waist length jacket on his outstretched fingers. He slipped it onto my shoulders while the little girl with my measurements scrambled out from under his feet and the boy with the measuring tools stepped back, his eyes alert for the next command. Bresheu hummed once and said, “Possibly.” This coat stayed on long enough for me to realize that it fit as if it had been cut for me before Bresheu said over his shoulder, “Marc, the hip length frock, s’il vous plait!” He stripped the jacket off my shoulders in a single fluid movement.

A boy hustled from behind a rack, took the offered jacket from Bresheu, and replaced it with another, this one in a dark olive green. Before I even had a chance to see it, Bresheu had it slipped into place and a boy had buttoned the bottom three brass buttons. Bresheu tugged the shoulders gently and pulled down on the back before walking slowly around me in a full inspection. It molded to me and had an uncanny feeling of rightness.

“How does that feel, Ishmael?” Bresheu finally asked me.

“Incredible,” I told him. “But, how does it look?”

Bresheu snapped his fingers again, and two girls wheeled a large mirror over. Looking into the glass, I did not see myself right away. Thinking that they must have it turned slightly, I shifted to get a better angle and saw the figure in the mirror mimic my movements. The dark olive-green coat sported a single row of small brass buttons offset down the right side and rich chocolaty-colored leather trimmed the collar and sleeves. The cut resembled a military academy tunic and fell to just below my hip, much longer than the waist length jackets I was used to wearing.

“How does that feel, Ishmael?” Bresheu finally asked me.

“Incredible,” I told him. “But, how does it look?”

Bresheu gave a little shrug. “It could be. But I’m not sure the fit is perfect yet. Please reach straight ahead.”

I did as he instructed and I could feel the material bind across my back. Bresheu tsked. “As I feared. You are a runner?” he asked.

Confused at this I answered without thinking, “Yes. How did you know?”
“Your chest is larger and that’s what causes this binding here.” I could feel his fingers trace across just under my shoulder blades. He sighed. “This is just one half size too small for you. It needs a bit of fitting to be perfect.” He glanced at the chrono and tsked again. “I could have it ready by tomorrow…” he suggested.

I was still gazing at the me in the mirror. The coat seemed like it was the right one, but so much more dramatic than anything I had ever worn before. The flashy buttons and the leather trim seemed oddly theatrical. I blinked and noticed Brill had returned and was eyeing me critically. “What do you think?” I asked her. “Is it me?”

She smiled. “It’s spectacular, certainly. But, is it you?” She shrugged. “You’re the only one who can answer that.”

Then Bresheu’s words sunk in. “Tomorrow? No. I have duty tomorrow. And we leave for Dunsany Roads the day after,” I told him.

“Pity,” he said with a downward twist to his lips. “The coat is spectacular on you, Ishmael, but it needs just that bit of tailoring to make it perfect. Could I tailor it and have it sent to the ship, perhaps?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I told him peering once more in the mirror. “The coat is spectacular on you, Ishmael, but it needs just that bit of tailoring to make it perfect. Could I tailor it and have it sent to the ship, perhaps?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I told him peering once more in the mirror. “This is a fantastic piece, but I wonder if it’s perhaps—I don’t know—too dramatic?” I sighed. “I don’t know that I have the presence to pull this off.”

Bresheu smiled back at me from the mirror. He caught my eyes in the glass and leaned into my ear, “Ishmael, there is an old saying that the clothes make the man. Is this the man you wish to be?”

I broke the gaze and examined myself once more before looking back in his eyes. “I don’t know, Bresheu. I need to think and we don’t have much time.”

“You are a wise man, Ishmael,” he said and slipped the coat from my shoulders. A girl took it and disappeared. Bresheu slipped my own jacket back onto me and gave it his little tugs.

“May I suggest that you think upon this during your voyage, Ishmael?” Bresheu said. He slipped a business chip out of a sleeve and inscribed a single letter B on the case. “When you get to Dunsany, present this chip at the establishment of Henri Roubaille. If by the time you get there you know who you are, then Henri will be able to fit you.”

“Merci, Bresheu,” I told him. “My apologies for taking up your valuable time.”

He shook his head. “But why else am I here? Please do come and see me the next time your travels bring you to St. Cloud.” He offered his hand and a warm smile in parting.

I took the hand and gave my own smile in return. “I’ll be sure to visit you sooner next time,” I told him.

Just then, the warning pings sounded to let the shoppers know that the flea market was closing. I saw Brill still standing by the mirror and we joined the stream of people leaving the flea market.

“Why didn’t you get it?” she asked. “It was exceptional. You looked good enough to eat,” she said in a tone that took me off guard.

I chuckled. “I don’t know. It just didn’t feel right. I’m not that showy.”

“I can appreciate that,” she said. “But, still it was very yummy.”

Concerned with where this conversation was heading, I suggested we go find some food.
Chapter 4
End of day shoppers crowded all the restaurants that catered to the flea market and did not offer the best choices, so Brill and I went down a couple of levels. We found a seafood restaurant that specialized in local St. Cloud fish that looked good. A sign in the window proclaimed, “The fish you eat today, slept in Starvey Bay last night.”

Brill and I both laughed. “Is that just a little too much information?” I asked her.

“Yeah, it’s a little creepy, but I guess it’s better than the alternative,” she agreed.

The hostess was good. She took only one double take at Brill’s height and then seated us at a very pleasant table close to the kitchen but not in the main traffic pattern. Unlike a lot of the orbital restaurants, this one did not have every square meter jammed with tables, which made it feel open. The walls were adorned in lifesize digital murals of various seascapes—probably from St. Cloud itself. All in all, it was a very tasteful display in spite of the rather tacky commentary on the fate of our soon-to-be dinners.

“Thanks, Brill,” I told her when the drink orders were placed and we had settled in.

“For what?” she asked.

“Well, I was feeling a little—displaced—that’s not the right phrase, but something like that.”

“Displaced?” she prompted.

“Yeah. When you found me, I’d just finished moving and felt a bit lost. There wasn’t anybody in deck berthing when I left and nobody in engineering when I got there. I felt like—I don’t know—suddenly disconnected somehow. Does that make sense?”

“Oh yeah, I can see that.” Our drinks arrived—a nice bottle of white wine from a Dunsany vineyard—and interrupted our conversation with the rigmarole of uncorking and tasting. The wine was smooth, dry, and had a nutty aftertaste. “It’s funny how you get attached to a bunk like that. I know when I moved out of engineering and into chief’s quarters I almost cried. It felt like I was leaving home.” She smiled wistfully.

“Well, anyway when you came in, and asked me to come out with you that meant a lot. So, thanks,” I told her awkwardly.

The server returned to take our orders and I picked a grilled abo-iba steak and Brill went for the munta fillet. The abo-iba is a large, deep water fish—a fast swimmer and very streamlined. The flesh is dark and has a texture that is more fibrous than flaky. Munta is sort of a cross between salmon and sea bass. The restaurant began to fill up slowly around us as the evening crowds began filtering in.

“So? Why didn’t you get that jacket?” Brill asked after a small pause. “You didn’t even ask how much it cost.”

I shrugged. “It was tempting. Back on Gugara there was a black leather jacket with a beautiful silk lining and silver buckles that I passed by. I didn’t buy that one because it cost more than I had and it weighed three kilos. But I’ve kind of regretted that decision every time I’ve put on this thing,” I said, indicating my coat.

“So, aren’t you afraid you’re going to regret not buying this one?”

“A bit, but Bresheu put his finger on it.”

She arched her eyebrow in inquiry. “I was too far away to hear what he said.”

“He told me clothes make the man and then asked if my reflection was the man I wanted to be.”

“And you didn’t want to be that man?” she asked.

“It wasn’t that. The problem was that I just didn’t know. There was a certain attraction, of course. It was a spectacular piece.”

“I have to give you credit. You know quality when you see it.”

“Thanks, but the point is that I never really thought seriously about what I wanted to do, let alone who I wanted to be. When Bresheu said that, it was the first time I’d even considered that I might have a choice in the matter.”

She nodded sympathetically.

“So, yeah, I may regret not buying the coat, but it just felt like I needed to think about that idea of who I want to be before I commit to being the man who wore that coat.” I snorted. “I’m sorry. I must sound like a loon,” I said, suddenly self-conscious.

Brill shook her head. “Not at all, Ish. You sound like a guy who’s getting it together. No need to apologize for that.”

The food arrived and we paid attention to it for a few ticks. My fish was excellent—grilled to perfection and
seasoned simply with salt and cracked green peppercorn. It came on a bed of sweet sticky-rice with steamed broccoli on the side. The wine matched the meal perfectly.

I broke the silence by saying, “So, what about you?”

Brill appeared startled. “What about me?”

“Where are you from? How’d you get to the Lois?” I asked.

She took a sip of wine and a bite of fish. “You mean like, ‘What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” she asked with a giggle.

“Sorta. Why is it that a highly trained and talented individual like yourself is working as a spacer?” I asked.

“Seriously. You’ve got a master’s degree in environmental sciences, right?”

“Good memory,” she commented. “What do you think I should be doing instead?”

“I dunno. It’s just that I kind of wound up in space as a last resort. You must have had plenty of other options.”

She sipped her wine and glanced around the room as if considering how much to tell me. I waited her out.

Finally, she seemed to make a decision and put her glass back on the table. “You saw how people reacted earlier,” she said softly. “I’ve been tall since I was ten. High school was hell. The university was only marginally better. I graduated with a degree in biology and then just went on to grad school. I dunno, maybe I was hiding, but I didn’t feel ready to venture out in the world yet. Anyway, while I was there I learned about closed ecologies…like ships and stations. I got interested in it. I got my first quarter share about six or seven stanyers ago—on the mess deck like you did.”

“If you were interested in your own survival, you might have gone directly into environmental?”

She shook her head with a little shrug. “It was the first open berth I could get. I used that to get my foot in the door and then took the spec three test for environmental.”

“So you jumped the engineering ratings?” I prompted.

She nodded. “With my background, the spec three test was pretty easy. I never did have to learn about engine oil and propulsion systems.”

I figured she left out a lot, but I did not press. “Have you always been on the Lois?”

“Mercy, no!” She laughed. “The Lois is my third ship. I’ve been with her for about four stanyers. Before that I was on the William Hedley—a thirty-kiloton ore hauler that regularly makes the run from here to Diurnia. I started on the Soyokaze. She was a fast packet that made the run of Confederation systems carrying VIPs and light cargo. I made my rating there, but they did not have an open spec three slot. The Hedley did so I took that and got some experience under my belt.” She stopped for a moment, staring at some distant, unseen point. “When the berth opened on the Lois, I was ready for a change, so I moved over here as spec three and worked up to spec one by skipping again.”

“That master’s degree came in handy,” I commented.

“Mr. Kelley is always after me to go into the officer corps. With a degree already, it’s relatively easy. They have a special program at the merchant academy for people with experience and degrees.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Well, I’d have to be a general engineering officer. Spec one is as high as I can go and stay in environmental. I like what I do and moving up, just for the sake of being an officer, isn’t something I’m interested in.”

“I can see that. But don’t you feel like—I don’t know—like you’ve maxed out?”

“Never. There’s always something new to learn. Recently I heard about this screwy idea to mix used algae matrix and sludge.” Her eyes danced over the rim of her glass as she took a sip.

We finished eating and the waiter cleared our dishes away. I had a cup of coffee for dessert, but Brill ordered a decadent looking chocolate something. While sipping reflectively, I remembered my bag with the sculptures in it. The heron was right on top, wrapped in the bit of folded cloth and secured with a red string. I reached down to get it.

“I hope you don’t mind…” I started to say as I pulled it out. When I looked across the table, I found Brill holding out her hand as well. She also held a small object wrapped in a bit of folded cloth and secured with a red string.

“Welcome to the section, Ish,” she said offering the present to me. When she saw what I had brought up in my hand we both laughed. “Oh, that’s too funny!” she said.

“I was going to say, I hope you don’t mind that I went back and got you a figure, but it seems that I wasn’t the only one that took a detour on the way to the head.”

We traded bundles and I waited for her to open hers first. “They were so spectacular, I couldn’t resist,” she said. “I was looking for something small that wouldn’t mass a lot.”

“I’m touched,” I told her, weighing it in my hand and trying to think what it might be.

She pulled the string and carefully unrolled the cloth revealing the heron. “I thought so,” she said, wrapping her long fingers around it and holding it to her chest. “It was gone when I went back. You already had it, didn’t you?”
“Yup. I have no idea what you picked for me, though. I don’t remember any that stood out in particular.” I cast my mind back trying to think of all the figures I saw, but there were so many of them.

“Actually, it wasn’t on the table,” she said. “When I went back, the old man pulled it out of a box and handed it to me. It was weird, but it was perfect so…”

“It’s not a whale, is it?” I asked.

“Open it and see.”

I pulled the string and unwrapped it. A perfectly formed dolphin lay in the folds of cloth. The dark purple shell of its heart gleamed in the light of the restaurant. I stroked the grain with the tip of a finger and felt the smooth surface slide almost sensuously over my skin.

“Wow.” Was all I could get out of my mouth.

“Do you like it?”

I nodded and looked at her. “Thank you. I don’t know what else to say. I’m…flabbergasted.”

She carefully re-wrapped her heron, tying the string securely before slipping into the inside pocket of her jacket. “How strange we both went back to the same booth.” She laughed. “But you didn’t need to do that, Ishmael.”

“Well, I really wanted to. You’ve gone out of your way to make me feel at home in the section and helped me so much when I was studying for my engineman rating. When I saw that heron in your hand, I knew it belonged to you. I was really surprised when you put it back.”

Brill gave her head a little shake. “I don’t usually go in for small bits of this and that, but this—” She patted the pocket. “Is something very different, and I’ll treasure it. Thank you. I think that’s the first time anybody has ever given me a gift for hiring them.”

I re-wrapped my dolphin and tucked it safely into my jacket just as the waiter came back with the tab. It felt odd, but good, to be paying. I was shocked at the amount—forty creds—but then I remembered how much Pip and I had made with our trading. I added a generous tip, and we headed back to the ship.

When we got back, I automatically went to my old locker in deck berthing and I was surprised to find it empty. I chuckled and headed to engineering. “I wonder how often I’ll do that,” I said to myself.

It took only a few ticks to get out of my civvies and into my shipsuit. I pulled the wrapped dolphin out of my jacket and transferred it to my pocket. The chrono said 21:00 so I headed to the gym to see if I could catch Pip. He was just coming out of the showers. “Hey! Did you buy anything good? I got those digitals. They looked great.”

“The yarn looks like the best bet,” I told him. “I bought a few skeins as samples to show you. Sean says it’s good stuff and I trust his judgment. He bought something like five kilos of the stuff himself.”

Pip slid into his shipsuit and we headed for engineering berthing. “What about the dyes?” he asked.

“I dunno. Brill was with me and we talked about it. We both came to the conclusion that the appeal would be limited, so I’m not sure how appealing it would be as a trade good.”

“What about buying some for the empty container?” he asked. “Do you think dye would be good for that?”

“It doesn’t mass much so that would be a lot of dye. I don’t know if you could get enough to make it worthwhile…or even if it would sell. Don’t they have dyes on Dunsany?”

Pip pulled out his tablet. “Let me look into that. Dunsany has a lot of textile processing. They might have dyes but they could value something in particular, like the purple or red they make here out of the snails.” He made a note.

“Did I send you a digital of the little sculptures?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. What little sculptures?”

“There was this strange guy with just a table. No sign or anything. The table was covered with these spectacular little wooden sculptures. Birds, fish, that kind of thing, all of them were carved out of some kind of local driftwood.”

I pulled the dolphin from my pocket and unwrapped it to show him. He stared at it for at least two ticks but made no move to touch it or pick it up. “What is it?” he asked finally.

“It’s a dolphin.”

“No, I know that, doofus!” He grinned at me. “But what is it? Some kinda local voodoo?”

“Funny you should ask. That’s what I thought when I saw them. If you see the guy, you’ll think so even more.”

He was…strange.

“How much?”

“Really strange.”

He snorted. “No, how much were the sculptures?”

“Oh, that. Ten creds.”

“What did he start at?”

“Ten creds. It wasn’t negotiable.”

“Odd.” He paused and ran a finger over the end of his nose in thought. “I would have started at fifty for these.
Are all of them this good?”

“Oh, yeah. I bought ten more for trade goods on a whim. They weigh almost nothing and it seemed like a good investment of a hundred creds.”

Pip nodded thoughtfully. “Interesting. What’s the inlay work?”

“He said it was a bit of shell from the beach, but whatever it is, every piece I saw was inlaid perfectly, just like this one.”

“How many of these do you think we should take? Even if he won’t haggle on the price, ten creds seems like a pretty low price for something of this quality. And it’s light enough that we could hold onto them even if they didn’t sell on Dunsany.”

“I bought ten—well, eleven actually. I gave one to Brill as a thank you gift for hiring me.”

“So you have nine more besides this one?” he asked absently, still examining it but not touching.

“No, ten. Brill gave this to me.”

He looked at me with one raised eyebrow. “I hope that’s not the local engagement ritual or anything. Could be awkward to be married to the section chief.”

I laughed uncomfortably and probably blushed. “I don’t think so.”

Mercifully, Pip did not press the matter. “So how many should we get?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got a hundred creds into them now. You wanna pick up ten of your own?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said slowly. “Lemme think about it. So hey, what’s with the tailor booth?”

“Oh, that was the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long time. Bresheu is amazing and he runs the booth like it’s an orchestra and he’s the conductor. He snaps his fingers and whatever he wants is immediately taken care of.”

“Sounds impressive.”

“You have to see it to believe it.”

“Did he have anything you liked?”

“Nothing that fit me,” I said.
Chapter 5
I left Pip going over his notes and looking into dye for Dunsany. I was tired, and it was already late, but I needed to release some of the tension that had been building all day, so I headed for the gym. After a dozen laps on the track, I baked myself in the sauna and let the day just slip away. I felt strange. When I first came aboard, I knew as little about mess duty then, as I did about working in environmental now. Perhaps less, because when I interviewed with the captain back on Neris, I did not even know what job I was applying for. The only thing I was pretty sure about was that it was likely to be dirty, boring, and unpleasant. It turned out to be none of those and I smiled to myself remembering my early weeks aboard and thinking about how much things had changed.

Way back in the beginning, I remembered Cookie telling me that I should consider what path I wanted to take before I found myself being forced down one not of my own choosing. The captain had given me a choice. I could have stayed on the mess deck, except of course, I could not. Somehow, though, I did not feel like I was being forced. At least not like the way I was when I needed to get off Neris. It just seemed as if Lois needed me to move to environmental and that made the other options irrelevant.

That thought must have been bothering me, because once I came to the realization, I suddenly felt as if a weight had been lifted. I headed for the showers then to my bunk. I had the duty in the morning and it could possibly be the last day I woke as a member of the Steward Division.

When I got back to the berthing area, I discovered that Rebecca Saltzman, a spec three in the power section, was one of my new bunkies. She was sprawled in the lower across from me. Rebecca was obviously from a heavy-G planet. Where Brill was tall and willowy, Rebecca was short and powerful. She looked like she could bench press a shuttle craft, but she also had a delicate and angelic face—heart-shaped with what my mother would have called good structure. Rebecca also had the most amazingly sexy voice—halfway between a guttural purr and a growl. It was not some affectation but rather an artifact of her high-G home planet. She also had a liquid laugh that could turn heads at twenty meters. I liked Rebecca, but I did not know her that well—other than seeing her on the mess line.

“Hey!” she said with a smile when she saw me come in. “I wondered if that was your gear up there. I saw you up at the booth with Brill and heard you’d transferred into the division.”

“Yup. That okay?” I asked, nodding toward my bunk.

“You bet. You don’t snore do you?”

I laughed. “I don’t know, but Pip’s never complained about it.”

“Well, if he hasn’t complained, you’re probably okay,” she said with mock ruefulness.

“Who’s in here?” I asked indicating the lower under mine. It was the only other bunk taken in the quad.

“Mitch. You know him? Fitzroy—machinist over in propulsion?”

“Medium height, brown hair, about twenty-five?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s him. Of course, that also describes about half the men on the ship. Whatever happened to tall, dark, and handsome as a description?”

We laughed and I realized that everything was going to be okay.
Morning routine was typical for port duty. Sean Grishan, the duty watch stander, managed to find me in my new bunk. Everybody aboard knew of the crew changes in the works, of course. The details were still up in the air, but we all knew the ship would leave St. Cloud with a new hand. As I showered and got ready for work, I wondered if there had been the same air of quiet anticipation just before I had joined the ship in Neris. I pushed that thought away and beat feet for the galley.

By the time I got there, Cookie had already started setting the bread, and I kicked into prep mode. Starting with coffee, I moved to biscuits and finished at the omelet station. I pulled out some of the dried mushrooms we had gotten on Margary and put them in a little warm water to loosen them up. Then I diced some onion and grated a bit of cheese. All the ingredients went into small bowls that Cookie or I could draw from when we started making the omelets.

“So, young Ishmael,” Cookie spoke at last, “today may be our last time working together. How does it feel?”

“Strange. This has been my home for the last six months and now I kinda feel like I’m moving out.”

“You have accomplished much here, and you will accomplish more I am certain.” He finished rolling up the loaves and covered them with clean towels to proof. Most of them would be sandwich bread by the time the day was out. Cookie surprised me then by taking a plate and going to the customer side of the omelet station. “I wonder, Ishmael, if I might trouble you for an omelet,” he said with a smile. “Could I have one with mushrooms, cheese, and perhaps some ham?”

I gaped for a moment in surprise. “My pleasure, Cookie. You like your omelets a bit loose, right?”

“Just so, Ishmael. Just so.”

Before long the morning watch came in and I took care of them while Cookie enjoyed his meal on the mess deck.

Pip showed up near the end of breakfast. “Good morning! It seemed strange to find your bunk empty.”

“No stranger than waking up in engineering was for me, I bet. You want an omelet?”

“No thanks. I just came down for coffee and a pastry. I told Biddy I’d help her set up the booth this morning. We’ve already covered our fees for this trip, so I’ll probably take some more of the stones up and set them out while I’m there. This afternoon I’m going to go looking for that statue guy and the yarn people you talked with yesterday.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it planned out pretty well. What did you learn about the dyes?”

“Well not surprisingly, Dunsary has a lot of textiles. They process a lot of the wool from here, and they grow cotton and flax locally. They have some local dyes—mostly plant based—and I was right about the red, purple, and black dyes. They do buy them from here and they’re pretty highly valued. I don’t know how much production is available. If we could get a container load, we could probably sell it.”

“You’re thinking about Mr. Maxwell’s empty container?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but I don’t have a line on commercial quantities, so I don’t know. What we can get easily here in container loads is wool, rice, and frozen fish, but the margins are really small on those items. I’ve already recommended that we go ahead and load one container with raw wool. We’re already taking three containers as part of a scheduled shipment and adding one on spec isn’t really very expensive.”

“Well, for our stuff, I’ll contribute the extra ten kilos I’m getting for moving up to half share, and you’ve got all our joint funds still, so whatever you find at the flea market is fine by me. I’m not going to get back up there before we get underway.”

“Okay,” Pip agreed, “between us, we’ve got a lot of open mass so I’ll probably try to fill it.” He slipped into his free-flowing analysis mode. “I’m leaning toward the yarn. I talked to Sean last night after you left and he says this is prime material and clued me in on some things to look for. But if we buy forty kilos that will be a lot of yarn, and I’m not sure we can sell it in Dunsary. How about we commit to twenty kilos for now and I’ll see if I can find anything to diversify the load with?”

“Sounds good. I trust your judgment. I’m trying not to be spoiled by the successes we’ve had so far. We’re bound to throw a deal here sooner or later.”

Pip gave a self-deprecating laugh. “That’s probably truer than I’d like to admit to myself.”

I pointed at the chronometer. “If you’re meeting Biddy, you better move it.”

It was still early when I finished the breakfast cleanup, and Cookie shooed me out of the galley, so I headed back to the gym. I did not usually run early in the day, but with so much uncertainty, I thought I better get it in while I still could. I overheard one of the deck gang saying that the captain had already gone down to the planet, so we
could expect a new hand any time.

After my run and a shower, it was still early. I rambled on down to environmental to check in. Francis had the
port duty watch, and he grinned when he saw me. “You reporting for duty?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. Still waiting.”

“Nerve-wracking, isn’t it?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Unbelievably!”

“Oh, I believe it. I think almost everybody has been through it at least once. In a way, shipboard promotions are
worse than transfers. With a transfer, you pack your gear and you’re gone.”

“Someday you’ll have to show me how that works.”

“How what works?” he asked.

“Transfers. For instance, how did Gregor get a new berth without going down to the Union Hall?”

Francis looked concerned. “You’re not planning to leave already, are you?”

“No, no. It’s just one of those mysteries that I’ve always wondered about. Why does the captain have to go
down to the Union Hall to hire a new hand but Gregor gets a new berth on another ship almost before we dock?”

“When you get a tick, bring up the communications options on your tablet.”

I groaned and had a flash of déjà vu. All through my first weeks aboard, Pip kept springing little surprises like
this on me. I had been aboard for weeks before I discovered the ship had a gym. My tablet had a good schematic of
the ship, but I had never thought to check for recreational areas. It was one of those situations where, if you did not
know it existed, you never thought to look. I could not remember the number of times I had tripped on that mistake
and was chagrined to think I had just done so again.

I pulled the tablet out of its holster and pulled up the communications options. At first I did not see what
Francis was talking about, and then I saw the StationNet option at the bottom of the list. I had noticed it there, of
course, whenever we’d been in port, but I had never pulled it up. Pip had even talked about using it to hunt for trade
goods. I opened it now and saw the local options including a duplicate of the Union Hall data. All the ships in port,
and those due in the next few weeks, scrolled across my tablet. I knew from experience that I could dig into that data
and find an amazing array of information on each of the vessels.

Francis came around to glance over my shoulder. “Bring up that opening for spec three in ship handling.” He
pointed out an item on the list. I did and the full listing popped open on my tablet just as if I were sitting at one of
the Union Hall data ports. “See that little icon?” He pointed out a tiny picture of sparks. “That’s the comm link. Select it.” When I did, the application for the post showed up on my screen already filled out with my own personnel
jacket data. The words: Insufficient Qualifications scrolled across the bottom of the screen. “If you were rated, you’d
see a link that would let you apply for the post right there.”

“And I don’t have to go down to the hall? We just meet on station?”

“Or aboard ship. It would be easy enough. The Moore was docked just three locks down from the Lois.”

I glanced down when he said that and realized that the listing for AMoor on the display was marked: Departed.

It gave me an odd feeling. “This is really happening, isn’t it?”

Francis patted me on the shoulder. “You’re gonna be fine, Ish. Everybody’s nervous when they change jobs. At
least you know what you’re getting into.” He spread his hands to indicate the environmental space around us.
“You’ve already scraped sludge and pulled algae matrix. Those are the worst jobs we have. The rest is mostly just
tedious.”

“Okay, but I’ll be glad when this transition period is over.”

“Hey, by this time next month, you’ll wonder why you ever took this job,” he teased me with a soft punch to
the shoulder.

I headed back to the galley to set up for lunch.

Apparently, Cookie had been up to his armpits in pastry dough because I found him pulling darberry and
granapple pies from the ovens. Two kettles of soup—potato-mushroom and a spicy smelling beefalo stew—were
ready for the buffet. “Expecting a big crowd for lunch, Cookie?” I asked him.

“Ah, Ishmael, between it being last day in port and the possibility of seeing the new hand, we should have a
record turnout for port-side lunch and dinner as well, no doubt.”

I set that thought aside and got on with the lunch drill. I started a fresh urn of coffee and scrubbed down the
next in rotation to get it ready. After that I laid out the meats and cheeses for sandwiches and filled a basket with hot
biscuits just as the chrono counted down the final ticks to lunch. I started taking food out to the buffet just as the
crew began assembling. Cookie, as usual, had been correct, and I lost myself in the familiar rhythm of lunch duty.

The routine was disrupted when my tablet bipped with a message from Mr. Maxwell. “Attendant Sarah Krugg
arriving shuttle lock 12A 13:00. Please escort her aboard.”

I showed the message to Cookie who looked at the chrono. “You have just enough time to put on a fresh
shipsuit and meet our new hand, Ishmael. Leave the rest of the luncheon to me. Go make a good impression and make her feel welcome.”

It was probably my imagination, but I could feel the crew’s eyes on me as I left the galley and headed for berthing to get changed. I wondered what drove a girl—this Sarah Krugg—to take a job on the mess deck of a freighter. Then I remembered my own experience as quarter share and wondered if she even had known what job she applied for. I jumped into a fresh shipsuit and looked up the location of the shuttle docks on the station schematic before heading for the main lock. Bev had the duty and just winked at me as I checked out.

“Be nice, Ish,” she said. “He’ll be scared.”

“She,” I corrected.

“Oh?” she said in that prompting tone that I really hoped to master myself some day.

“Sarah Krugg. I’m assuming that’s a girl,” I said with a grin.

Bev smirked at me. “You’re not just another pretty face, are ya?”

I left the lock laughing.

The shuttle docks were on the other side of the station, but it only took a few ticks to get around to them. As I positioned myself outside the lock at 12A, I had a flashback of when I stepped off the shuttle to find Pip waiting for me back on Neris. I looked around and realized that I was standing in about the same spot as he had been. It felt weird to have the boot on the other foot, as it were.

I did not wait long before I heard the docking clamps latch and the lock started to cycle. I wiped my palms nervously on the sides of my shipsuit and watched as about a dozen people exited the lock and peeled off in both directions down the passage. When the throng cleared a bit, I picked out the green and gold of Federated Freight and saw Sarah Krugg for the first time.
She was not exactly what I expected. I easily recognized the new shipsuit and lost look, neither of which were a surprise. But I had been expecting a girl or at least a young woman. Sarah Krugg appeared to be nearly as old as my mother had been.

She spotted my matching suit and eyed me warily. We met in the middle of the passage. “You must be Ms. Krugg,” I said fatuously. “Call me…err…that is…my name is Ishmael Wang. The first mate sent me to meet you.”

I held out my hand and I thought I saw her flinch, but it was gone so fast I could not be sure. She studied my hand for a moment before gripping it briefly but firmly in her own dry palm. In that split second before she let go, I could feel the calluses on her palm and along her fingers. I tried a welcoming smile and hoped it was working. She seemed very closed off.

“Hello Mr. Wang,” she said.

Standing next to her, she came up to my nose and had to tilt her head slightly to look me in the eyes. Her hair was longer than I was used to seeing after so many months aboard—almost to her shoulders—and it had a peculiar bleached appearance to it, like it had started life as a soft brown but had been burned almost white in broad streaks. Looking into her brown eyes, I realized that she was not as old as I had thought at first, and I wondered briefly what kind of life she must have had to age this way. She seemed—bruised in a way that showed in her eyes.

I started talking quickly to cover my awkwardness, “You can call me Ish, Ms. Krugg. We don’t stand on ceremony much around here. Is it okay if I call you Sarah?”

She nodded uncertainly and shifted her duffel.

“Okay then, Sarah, let’s get you introduced to Lois and the rest of the crew. Everybody’s quite anxious to meet you.” I started down the passageway with a little nod. “It’s just this way and not very far. You’ll be working with Cookie and Pip. They’re both really nice.” I realized I was babbling and stopped myself to ask the first question I could think of. “Do you snore?”

“Snore?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah. It seems to be the first question everybody asks a new bunkie.”

She looked down and then quietly said, “Um…yes actually, I’ve been told that I do. Will that be a problem? I don’t think I do it very loudly.”

I glanced over my shoulder and whispered, “I wouldn’t worry about it. Tabitha snores, too. But I actually found it kind of comforting in an odd sorta way.”

“Tabitha?” she asked.

“Yeah, Tabitha Rondita sleeps on the other side of the partition that I used to use before my transfer to engineering berthing. You’ll meet her. She’s nice, too.”

We had entered the commercial docks by then and I slowed a bit so Sarah could catch her breath and look around a little. I remembered my first time on the docks and how different everything seemed. There was a lot going on as all the cargo men performed their synchronized dance of moving items to and from various places.

“You okay?” I asked her softly.

“Yes,” she said a bit unsteadily. “I think so. But it’s all going so fast.”

“I know exactly what you mean. It’ll be okay. It wasn’t all that long ago that I came aboard for the first time. Did you get the your ass is mine speech from the captain?”

“Yeah, is that normal?”

“I have no idea, but I got one, too. It’s the only thing I remember about my interview with her.”

“Is everything as bad as she said?” Sarah asked, letting a bit of her fear show for the first time.

“Not even close.” I laughed. “Not even close.”

By then we had made it to the lock, and Bev was still on duty. “Bev, meet Sarah Krugg. Sarah, this is Beverly Arith. She’s not as scary as she appears.”

“Hey!” Bev protested. “Who you calling scary?” She smiled at Sarah and held out a hand. Again, I thought Sarah flinched and Bev shot me a quick glance like she had seen something, too. “Welcome aboard, Sarah. This ignoramus hasn’t been telling you lies about us already, has he?”

Sarah did the press-and-release handshake again and smiled tentatively. “No, actually, he’s been very considerate.”
“Ish, Mr. Maxwell wants to see her in the office right away, but when you take her down to berthing why don’t you put her in the bunk above mine?”
“I don’t know. I never slept in a bunk before.”
“Uppers are easier to get out of,” I told her. “But harder to get into.”
She smiled a bit coldly. “That sounds fine.”
Bev nodded deliberately at me. “Ish? Mr. Maxwell is waiting…”
I was not really sure what was going on there, but I led the way into the ship. I lowered my voice a bit, “Mr. Maxwell is a little scary. But he’s really good at his job. Don’t let the robot-act scare ya.”
“The what?”
“Never mind. You’ll see what I mean.”
We made it to the office and I straightened my shipsuit. “You ready?” I whispered.
Sarah took a deep breath and let it out slowly before nodding shortly.
I knocked and heard Mr. Maxwell say, “Come.”
I swung the door open and led Sarah into the office. “Attendant Wang reporting with Attendant Sarah Krugg as ordered, sar.”
Mr. Maxwell did his best robot impersonation as he swiveled his gaze to Sarah and said, “Welcome aboard, Ms. Krugg. Mr. Wang will get you settled in deck berthing and introduce you to the rest of the mess staff.”
I recognized the command and said, “Aye, aye, sar.”
“Do you have any questions for me, Ms. Krugg?” Mr. Maxwell asked.
She shook her head and said, “No, sar. Not at this time, sar.”
He turned to me then and went on, “Mr. Wang. As of this moment you are promoted to engineman and will assume your duties in the environmental section of engineering when Mr. Carstairs returns from liberty.”
“Yes, sar. Thank you, sar.”
He looked at both of us and nodded. “Dismissed.”
I led the way out and closed the door behind Sarah. She started to speak, but I raised a hand to stop her. Again the déjà vu was thick as I remember the exact same thing occurring six months earlier but then I played the part of the greenie and Pip was my guide. After a couple of turns down the passageway, I stopped and muttered the same words Pip had given me, “That went well.”
Sarah had an oh-my-god expression that I recognized so well. “He’s not that scary?” she asked. “You call that not scary?”
“Yeah. I know. But there really is no good way to prepare anyone for their first meeting with Mr. Maxwell. Trust me, it gets easier over time and like I said he’s very good. You’ll see.”
I could tell I had not convinced her, but she seemed willing to let it go for now. Instead, she took a different tack and asked. “You just got a promotion?”
“Yup,” I told her.
“How long have you been aboard?”
“I was a quarter share greenie like you last September.”
“And you already got promoted?”
“Yeah, it’s been an interesting six months.”
“What did you do before?”
“Same as you. You’re getting my old job. I was a mess deck attendant.” I checked the chrono and saw that it was 13:30. “Come on. Let’s get your gear stowed and go help Cookie clean up after lunch. Once that’s done we can get you settled in proper.”
I took her down to deck berthing and gave her the choice of the bunk over Bev or the one under Pip and she took the upper. We got her duffel stowed, the palm-lock set on her locker, and then I took her to meet Cookie.
When we got to the mess deck, there was not a lot to do. Cookie had taken down the buffet and was just starting to sweep down the mess deck. It was odd, though, because Pip and I usually cleaned off the tables before we swept and swabbed. I could still see empty mugs and the odd dish left out.
“Cookie, I’d like you to meet your new mess attendant, Sarah Krugg.”
Cookie bestowed one of his beatific smiles on her and gave a small bow. “I am delighted to have you join our little family.”
“Thank you very much.”
I could feel her unwinding a little bit for the first time since I had met her.
“Very well, Sarah, no time like the present to get started.” Cookie handed her the broom and dust pan. “Here, we must clean this place up and make it ready for the evening meal. Could you take over while I talk to Mr. Wang?”
She glanced around dubiously and then looked at the broom and dust pan. “Of course, Cookie, but…”

“Yes, Ms. Krugg?”

“Do you have a bucket and a cloth? If I am to do a proper job, I think I’d like to clean the tables, first.”

Cookie smiled and hid a grin behind a mug of coffee. The method to Cookie’s madness now made sense as I recall his first little test with me regarding making coffee. Sarah was going to do just fine.

“Of course, Sarah.” Cookie turned to me and said, “Ishmael, show your shipmate where she can find the supplies she needs, won’t you?”

I escorted her to the galley and gave her the quick half-cred tour before returning to Cookie. He drew me into a pantry to leave Sarah by herself on the mess deck. “You’re a rascal, Cookie.”

He beamed. “Thank you, Ishmael, I do try.” He turned serious then and asked, “Ishmael, did Sarah, or any of the officers tell you anything about Ms. Krugg’s background, or why she is here?”

“No, Cookie, why do you ask?”

“She didn’t say anything about where she’s from?”

“We haven’t exactly had a lot of time,” I pointed out.

He looked concerned. “Be kind to her, Ishmael. Unless I’m mistaken, she hasn’t had a lot of kindness in her life. I suspect she may have been beaten recently.”

I was shocked. I had no idea how Cookie could know such a thing just by meeting her, but I had learned long ago that Cookie was always right.

He peeked out to the mess deck then. “Go and show her the ropes. The best thing for her right now is to start getting comfortable with her new surroundings.” He smiled. “Pip is in for an interesting time.”

I slipped out of the pantry and helped Sarah clear the tables. I showed her where to put the dirty dishes and how to load the big san unit. We slipped into an odd kind of rhythm very quickly and as we worked, she seemed to relax so long as I was not standing too close to her and did not move quickly. I wondered about Cookie’s statement about her being beaten. It only took a few ticks and the mess deck was cleaned up and we moved into the galley to give it a quick brush and swab. Cookie had left the tray of meat and cheese out, but as I went to stow it in the cooler, I noticed Sarah looking at it out of the corner of her eye. “Did you get lunch?” I asked suddenly.

She shook her head, and I saw a scared, unexplainable expression.

“I’m so sorry! I should have realized that you were on the shuttle…and…Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?” I asked.

“Yes, please. If it’s not too much trouble,” she asked timidly.

“Oh, of course, just don’t tell Cookie I didn’t feed you right away. He’d string me up for having you working hungry.” Behind her, I saw Cookie poke his head out of the pantry and nod in the direction of the potato-mushroom soup kettle still left on the cook top before he disappeared back into the pantry, closing the door silently behind him. “Would you like some soup? Perhaps a sandwich? Either? Both?” I was falling over myself after being so initially inconsiderate.

“Are we allowed…?” she asked.

“Allowed?” I laughed. “We’re required. Now, what’s your pleasure? I can highly recommend the potato-mushroom soup and Cookie bakes the best bread…This cheese is a bit sharp but I like it a lot…” I found myself blathering away about the food to distract her. There was something wrong, and while I did not know what it was, I knew that a good meal wouldn’t hurt.

I pulled out a stool from the prep table and told her to sit while I checked on the soup. It was still warm but I cranked up the burner a bit anyway. “Would you like a cup of coffee?” I asked. “It’s usually pretty good.”

She nodded shyly and I fetched her a mug from the mess deck. By then the soup was hot enough to eat and I served a bowl for each of us and found the basket of biscuits left from lunch. I saw her eyeing the tray of meats and cheeses as well and I dragged that over to our makeshift picnic on the prep table. She seemed hesitant as if she needed to ask for permission. “Dig in. We’re all family here,” I said as enthusiastically as I could.

She split a biscuit and made a meat and cheese sandwich out of it before diving into the soup. I also took a cup and the potage was very good. I realized that I was hungry myself. Silence settled around us as we each gave our bowls some serious attention. At first she ate slowly and a bit shyly, but as the warm soup, fresh biscuits, and hot coffee worked their magic, she became less reticent. I took a look at her—a really good look—and realized that lunch was not the only meal she had missed recently.

“You can always get something to eat here,” I told her conversationally. “Day or night. You don’t have to wait until meal times. That cooler is for watch standers.” I tossed my head in the direction of the stainless steel door. “There’s always a tray of meats and cheeses there. We usually put out some sweet things, too, like pies and pastries. It’s available all the time.”

She eyed the appliance, looked at me, and said very softly, “Thank you.”
“You’re welcome,” I told her just as softly. After a minute I added, “You’re safe here.” I don’t know why I said it, but I did so while concentrating on scraping the last bit of soup out of my bowl with the end of a biscuit. I popped it into my mouth without looking at her.

We finished our lunch and cleaned off the prep table around 14:30. “Come on. We need to get you settled and your bunk made up.” For the next stan I showed her where to get the linens, how to get a fresh shipsuit, and how to make up the upper bunk without having to crawl all the way up into it to get the corners even. At 15:00 we visited Mr. von Ickles and got her set up with her tablet and credentials, then I gave her a quick tour of the gym and sauna. “When I first arrived, Pip didn’t tell me for weeks that there was a gym here. I didn’t want you to have to find out about it the way I did.”

“This is amazing! I had no idea there would be anything like this aboard.”

“Oh, it’s not all peaches and cream. Wait until we get a suit drill in the middle of the night. That’s never a good way to wake up out of a sound sleep.”

By then it was almost 16:00 and we headed back to the galley to prep for dinner.

“I thought you were leaving the mess deck,” she said as I showed her around the pantries.

“I am. But I have to wait for Pip to come back from liberty. When he does, I can hand the watch over to him and then I’m free to go. It’s okay. Tomorrow, I’ll be in environmental trying to learn what I’m supposed to do down there.”

She nodded. “So in the mean time you’re stuck with me?”

I shook my head. “Nope, it just means for a few more stans I have some clue about how to do stuff. You’re just the icing on the cake,” I said reassuringly.

Cookie bustled in and we started the evening prep. The menu included marinated lamb and some fresh greens from planet-side. I showed Sarah the basic setup for the dinner routine while docked and she took to it right away.

“It won’t be this easy when we get underway,” I told her. “But Pip and Cookie are good to work with.”

To no great surprise, Cookie’s prediction about the dinner turnout proved to be correct. I think half the crew showed up that night.
Chapter 7
Sarah and I had just finished dinner cleanup when Pip burst into the galley. He skidded to a stop when he saw Sarah. I do not recall ever seeing Pip so surprised before.

“Sarah Krugg, this is Philip Carstairs, but everyone calls him Pip. Pip, this is Sarah Krugg, the new mess deck attendant.”

Pip held out his hand and I took it as a good sign that Sarah did not flinch. We were making progress it seemed.

“Hi, Sarah, welcome aboard!”

She gave his hand the press-and-release motion and said, “Yes, I snore, but not too loudly.”

Pip shot a dirty look in my direction but I just continued putting away the broom and pretended not to notice.

“Sarah’s in the bunk over Bev now,” I told him. “Sarah, you should know that this guy is across from you in the other upper.”

A wary expression crossed her face and I mentally kicked myself. “He doesn’t snore—much,” I added.

Pip caught the exchange and I could see he realized things were a bit odd. I gave him a little shrug while Sarah’s attention was on him.

Pip put on his friendliest smile and said, “That’ll work out great. The schmuck that used to have that bunk would snore like a chainsaw. I don’t think I’ve gotten a decent night’s sleep since Neris.” Pip tried to appear innocent.

Sarah’s eyes moved back and forth between us a couple of times and then she seemed to relax a little. She frowned in curiosity. “Whose bunk was it?”

Pip nodded in my direction and winked.

“Oh, is this the bunk with Tabitha on the other side?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, that’s how I know it’s a good bunk. The mattress has hardly any lumps.”

For a heartbeat or two, I was not sure how the conversation was going to go. Sarah just stood there, kind of closed off again. Pip kept looking from me to her and back again, but thankfully, he did not say anything.

Finally, whatever she was thinking sorted itself out and she took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Good,” she pronounced with a little nod of her head.

“How’d it go in the booth, Pip?” I asked to get his attention. “Do you want some supper?”

“Yes, I could use a sandwich or something. It’s been a long time since lunch. And we have some stuff to take care of yet.”

I pulled food out of the cooler, and Pip started making a sandwich while I rummaged up a couple of plates for pie.

“She’s in the bunk over Bev now,” I told him. “Sarah, you should know that this guy is across from you in the other upper.”

A wary expression crossed her face and I mentally kicked myself. “He doesn’t snore—much,” I added.

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“How’d it go in the booth, Pip?” I asked to get his attention. “Do you want some supper?”

“Yes, I could use a sandwich or something. It’s been a long time since lunch. And we have some stuff to take care of yet.”

I pulled out the meat and cheese tray and said to Sarah, “There’s some darberry pie in here, if you’re interested.

If you leave it, Pip will just eat it.”

She smiled shyly and started eating while Pip picked up the story.

“I talked to the dye people, and they were nice. I do see what you mean about the packets of dye though. I bought about a dozen each of black, red, and purple. They were cheap and massed almost nothing. Maybe they’ll sell or maybe next trip we’ll pick up some uncolored yarn and do it ourselves.”

I went and got coffee for Sarah, Pip, and myself and slid the mugs onto the counter.

“Did you get any more of those statues?” I asked.

“No, I never found the guy, but I did come across Bresheu. That really was something to see.”

“Did you buy anything?” I asked curiously.
“Nope. I looked through the racks for a while, but nothing grabbed me. It did seem like good quality, though.”

He finished his sandwich, made short work of the pie, and washed it all down with the coffee. “So, Sarah,” he said while nodding toward me, “how’s he been treating you?”

She lowered her eyes and said, “It’s been a very good afternoon.”

“I even showed her the gym,” I told him. “She won’t have to discover it on her own—in four or five weeks!”

“You’re not going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Never.”

We both laughed and Sarah looked uncertain, but she did not flinch.

Clean up only took a few ticks and we headed back to berthing. “Sarah, you lead. That way you can make sure you know the way,” I told her encouragingly.

The trip was not a complicated path, but I was not sure how much attention she had paid when I first brought her aboard. Apparently, it was enough because she made straight to berthing and right into the proper quad. What I do not think she had counted on was Bev standing there in her ship-tee and shorts.

“Hi! Fancy meeting you here.”

“Oh, excuse me,” Sarah said. She stopped abruptly and tried backing out of the quad while looking down. With Pip and me right behind her, she ended up backing into both of us. There was a little traffic jam as she bumped into us and Sarah started looking around rather frantically.


Sarah was still trying to keep her eyes anywhere but on Bev. I could not figure out what was wrong, but I backed up to give her room and tripped Pip. All three of us went crashing to the deck. Bev’s reflexes were the quickest. She pulled Sarah out of the pile and lifted her effortlessly up onto her bunk in less than a blink.

Meanwhile Pip and I were busy getting untangled. I got to my feet first and stuck out a hand to help Pip up.

“We’re fine. Nothing damaged here,” I said.

Bev shot us a look over her shoulder. “Gentlemen, could you excuse us for a while? I think Sarah and I need to have a little girl talk.”

I looked over at Sarah, huddled up on my old bunk. “You okay with Beverly, Sarah?” I asked her softly.

Bev gave me a funny expression when I asked, but Sarah said tentatively, “Yes, thank you.”

“I’m fine, thank you. I’m just sorry to have barged in on you like that.”

“Like what?” Bev asked.

Sarah still wouldn’t look at her but nodded her head a little. “You know. Like that.”

Bev seemed confused and silently appealed to me and Pip for clarification. I was lost myself so I shrugged helplessly.

“I’m sorry, Sarah, but I don’t know. Like what?” she asked ever so gently.

Sarah motioned with her hand, pointing up and down then. “Like that. In your underwear.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Sarah moved closer to me. “You okay with Beverly, Sarah?” I asked her softly.

Sarah turned back to us. “Gentlemen, could you excuse us for a while? I think Sarah and I need to have a little girl talk.”

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Sarah motioned with her hand, pointing up and down then. “Like that. In your underwear.”

“Okay,” Bev said and I could see the light bulb glowing over her head. She turned back to us. “Gentlemen, could you excuse us for a while? I think Sarah and I need to have a little girl talk.”

I looked over at Sarah, huddled up on my old bunk. “You okay with Beverly, Sarah?” I asked her softly.

Bev gave me a funny expression when I asked, but Sarah said tentatively, “Yes, thank you.”

“I’m fine, thank you. I’m just sorry to have barged in on you like that.”

“Like what?” Bev asked.

Sarah motioned with her hand, pointing up and down then. “Like that. In your underwear.”

“Ish? You know you’ve started talking about the imaginary crewman as if she were real, right?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Well, of course, she’s not real, but you can’t tell me that the Lois doesn’t have some of the best people in the galaxy as crew. And that includes everyone right up to and including the captain.”
“Yeah, you’re right, but that doesn’t mean we have ghosts!”
“Not ghosts, Pip, spirit. We take care of our own.”
“Well, of course. We’re shipmates.”
“Exactly, and now she’s one of us, so we need to take care of her.”
“Okay, I agree. But that still leaves me with my original question. What do we do? How can we help her?”
“Trust Lois. She’ll sort it out. We just need to keep our eyes open and be ready to help when the time comes.”
“You do know that sounds like your brain has lost a data coupling somewhere, right?”
“Yeah. I know what it sounds like. But I like the feeling.”

We stood there without saying anything for a few more ticks. “How long before we can go back do you think?” Pip asked.
“I think it’s been long enough for us to go and get a status report. We’re going to have to rack out soon. You’ve got the duty tomorrow and I have to start my new job.”

We went back to the berthing area and found everything quiet. Sarah was rolled up in the blankets and appeared to be sound asleep. Bev was awake and guarding her. She backed us out of the quad and over to the berthing area’s table. When we got out where the light was brighter, I could see that her eyes were all red and puffy.
“Beverly?” I asked. “Are you all right?”
“Yes, I’m fine. We had a chat about the ship-tee and boxers. I think she understands now and seeing other people wandering about has helped. Sarah has some issues that will take some time to sort out. She shared them with me a bit, but I don’t want to speak for her. It’s her choice if she wants to say anything. I’ll warn you, though, the story is horrific.”

Pip sighed. “Anything we can do?”
Beverly shook her head. “Give her room. You’re both good-hearted guys even if you’re both blockheads,” she said with a grin. “Just treat her like a shipmate and don’t make a big deal if she’s a little further off balance than a normal greenie. We’re heading out tomorrow and the sooner the better. It will be good for her to get into a routine.”

“She’s exhausted. We had a little talk and I told her that I’d watch out for her while she slept. She rolled into the blankets and went out like a light. Tomorrow’s another day. I suggest that you guys call it a night as well. I’ll sit up for a bit in case she wakes up.”

“Is it going to be okay for me to sleep in the same quad?” Pip asked.
Beverly considered the question for a few heartbeats and I thought she might say no, but finally she sighed and said, “Well, bunkie. That’s the way we sleep here, isn’t it? I think it might be good for her to see how things work. Just keep it down tonight so she can sleep, okay?”

“No problem with that,” Pip said. “I’m gonna get ready for bed. See you tomorrow, Ish.” He headed into the san.

Bev turned to me and lowered her voice further. “You did good today, Ish. She trusts you, and I don’t think she trusts easily right now.”

“I didn’t do anything special. Just fed her and showed her around the ship.”
“Have no idea how far a simple friendly gesture can go, do you?”
“Well, she’s one of us now. We have to take care of her, don’t we?”
Beverly smiled at me. “You’re a good man, Ishmael Horatio Wang. In Sarah’s world, there haven’t been many of those.”

“I figured. Is she badly bruised?”
Beverly shot me a sharp look. “What do you mean?”
“I was with her all afternoon in the galley, Bever. I’m stupid, but I’m not blind. She’s got bruises on the left side of her face that she tries to hide behind her hair that she pulls forward. She might have a cracked rib on the right, and she’s favoring her left arm. If I had to guess, I’d say she hasn’t had a decent meal in about three days. Plus, she’s so dehydrated that even though I poured three liters of water and coffee in her over the course of the afternoon, she hasn’t even hinted about needing to use the head. When I first met her, she flinched when I extended my hand to shake, and you picked her up off the deck and lifted her into her bunk like she weighed nothing at all. I know you’re strong, but she can’t weigh more than fifty kilos.”

Beverly just stared at me. “Is that all?”

I shook my head. “She’s a hard worker and a good person. She has calluses on her palms and fingers from some kind of rough work, and she has a grip that could bend steel pipes. She’s spent a lot of time out of doors based on the UV damage to her hair and skin, and I don’t think she’s used to being around people. She appears old enough to be my mother, but I doubt that she’s got more than ten stanyers over me.”

“Anything else?” she asked with a half grin.
“Isn’t that enough?”

Bev stared at me for a long tick. “Yup, that’s plenty. How much have you told Pip?”

“Just a bit about what I figured out, but I won’t say anymore. Like you said, it’s her story to share. He’ll find out for himself if she wants to say anything.”

She looked at me hard, in a way I think I might have liked except that it scared me so much. It left me feeling both weak and strong at the same time. Then she sighed. “You’re a good man, Ish.”

“I’m a tired man, Bev. See you tomorrow.”
Chapter 8
I woke with a start and tried to figure out why. Then I remembered that I did not work on the mess deck any more. The watch stander had not come for me. I did not really need to get up, but after six months of rising at 04:30, my bladder told me that it was still working on the mess attendant schedule. I crawled quietly out of the rack and padded into the san. After my shower, I climbed into a fresh shipsuit and headed up to the galley to see if breakfast was ready.

When I stuck my head through the galley entry, I found Pip and Cookie being schooled in biscuit making by Sarah. “Look,” she was saying, “just because you have to make a lot of them, that’s no reason to make them so roughly.” She came only up to Pip’s shoulder but she could see eye to eye with Cookie, who gave every appearance of paying very close attention. “If you use the soft flour and cut in the shortening before you add the leavening agents, you’ll wind up with a much lighter biscuit.” She had the sleeves of her shipsuit pushed up and worked the biscuit dough with her hands deep in the bowl. The most dramatic change was that she had her hair pulled back in a pony tail. The left side of her face did indeed have several layers of bruising along the jaw line and around her eye. Neither Cookie nor Pip seemed to notice. She held the bowl at an angle so they could get a good look. “See? This is cut in nicely, and we haven’t bothered the structure of the flour terribly. If I just sprinkle the baking powder, baking soda, and a little sugar on here…” She matched actions to words. “I can use my hand to turn it like a garden spade tilling the soil.” Sarah proceeded to scoop and fold, scoop and fold, spinning the bowl on the counter a bit with each motion. “Now, this…” she stopped to show them the inside of the bowl again, “is ready for adding the liquid.”

Pip waved to me and Cookie nodded in my direction, but Sarah was so absorbed in her biscuit prep that she did not notice me there. I quietly withdrew to the mess deck and helped myself to a mug of coffee. I took a seat at a corner table, pulled out my tablet, and started reviewing the environmental section of the ship’s schematic. Hearing Sarah’s voice from the galley I found it difficult to concentrate on the tablet. I was trying to reconcile this Sarah with the fearful, wounded woman from the day before. The change was not simply dramatic—it was frightening.

I glanced up at the chrono and realize that there was still half a stan before the mess officially opened, so I holstered my tablet again, topped off the coffee, and headed down to environmental. Since it was going to be my new home, I thought I might as well get used to hanging out there.

Brill sat at the watch stander’s station, leaning back in the chair with her long legs propped up on the desk. She had her tablet out and was editing something on it with a stylus. “Good morning, boss!” I called.

She looked up and smiled. “Hey!” She glanced at the chrono. “What are you doing up so early? Don’t you know you’re supposed to sleep in when we’re in port?”

“My mind knows, but my bladder has a six month habit to break.”

She chuckled at that. “I can see where that might be a problem. So? You’re officially assigned to me now?”

“Yup, Engineman Wang reporting for duty. I think.”

She pointed to the coffee. “Is that for me?”

“You can have it if you want, but I already drank some. It has Ish-cooties on it.”

“Mercy, I haven’t heard that since grade school.”

“I don’t think I’ve said it since back then. You want a coffee? I’ll go grab you one if you like.”

She swung her legs down and stood up from the chair. “I do, but I’ll go get it. You sit and I’ll give you your first lesson in environmental watch standing.”

I took the chair which was still warm from her body, and she showed me the various displays on the station. They were basically real-time representations of the air and water systems. The center monitor showed a diagram of the ship similar to the schematic I was familiar with from my tablet. “Air is in green and water is in blue,” Bev pointed out. “You can use the stylus on the screen to isolate one or another system, rotate, zoom, and so on. Just like on your tablet. Try it.”

It did indeed work just like she said, but with the larger screen it was pretty dramatic.

Bev pointed out the displays to the left and right of the center. “Over there are the air readouts and over here is water. They are updated every few seconds and show you the pressures, chemical compositions, and system status. If any of them get out of whack, they change color and the location of the sensor that’s giving the reading will blink on the schematic.”

“That seems simple enough,” I told her.
“It is. Now, you sit there and watch for a bit. I’m going to run up for coffee. I’ll be right back.”

“What do I do if something changes?”

“Bip my tablet and I’ll come running,” she said seriously. “But it’s not terribly likely. We almost never get any problems here because we stay on top of system maintenance. Lemme go get my coffee and I’ll explain more when I get back.”

“Okay, sure,” I told her, although I was a bit nervous about being left alone with so little introduction.

“Good man,” she said and headed for the hatch. “Back in a flash.”

I sat there watching intently, my eyes flicking from screen to screen. I tried to figure out what the various graphs, charts, and tables were telling me. The air system had a tick-by-tick graph showing the incoming and outgoing air compositions. There were colored regions indicating oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and trace. It took me a tick or so to realize they were actually moving because they looked like just straight bars on the screen, but then I saw the time ticks scrolling across the bottom axis and realized the graph was being refreshed but the values were constant.

Just then, a small box opened up on the ship schematic display with the words: Automated System Integrity Check. Below that blinked the word: Running. It flashed for less than a tick before changing to: Air Systems Nominal and under that Water Systems Nominal—both in green text. A little acknowledge button flashed below it. I wondered what to do and just then Brill came back with her coffee and a plate of Cookie’s pastries. Seeing the display she said, “Oh, just acknowledge. Those happen randomly every stan.”

I used my stylus to press the acknowledge button and the little box disappeared.

“They get logged along with the length of time it takes for the watch stander to respond. Anything up to five ticks is fine. After that, it starts blinking. At fifteen ticks it will beep. At half a stan it automatically notifies the section supervisor and puts up a warning on the ship’s status display on the bridge. If it goes a full stan, it throws an alarm on the bridge and supervisor’s tablet.”

I considered that. “Got it. Moral of the story is, help won’t come for at least half a stan.”

“Exactly! Of course, the reality of the automated system checks is that they stave off the very real danger of falling asleep from the stultifying boredom of routine watch. Anything that might really be a problem with air or water supply will trigger a different set of warnings and alarms.”

“You make this sound a little scary.”

“Scary is good. It means you treat the system seriously. Remember that danger to you isn’t really the issue, but rather you’re the first line of defense against a failure that would leave the crew suffocating where they stand.”

“Okay, is it too late to go back to galley duty?” I asked and tried to add a little chuckle but there was some very real trepidation in my voice.

She smiled warmly back. “Yeah, sorry. We didn’t tell you this before because we needed to get you into our evil clutches first.” She made a comical muahahaha laugh that was totally at odds with the Brill I knew and the joke ended up putting me more at ease.

“So, why does it say nominal? Doesn’t that mean really small?”

She gave a little shrug. “Yeah, in common use it does, but what that’s really saying is that the discrepancy between what the reading should be and what actually came in is too small to matter. If something was out of range, the message would have been more detailed.”

“Out of range?”

“Sure. If the air mixture was off, or the water pressure too low, or anything like that, the ASIC would show you what subsystem threw the error and what the actual reading was. This is just the short version that says the ninety-eleven things we checked aren’t really different from what they should be.” Brill gestured with a toss of her head and I got up from the chair so she could settle in with her coffee and a pastry. “Help yourself.” She pointed to the plate with her mug. “I brought extra.”

For the next half stan, she explained the watch stander’s console and answered questions about my job. She showed me how to slave my tablet to the various displays so I could monitor the screens even when I was not sitting in the hot seat. “That’s handy when you have to make your rounds, or go change a filter or something.” She must have seen the concern on my face, because she grinned sympathetically. “Don’t worry. We’ll have you standing watch with somebody else for the first couple of weeks. You’ll get used to it pretty quickly.”

We hit a lull then and I sipped my now-cold coffee and nibbled a pastry.

“So, how’s the greenie?” Brill asked.

“I have no idea. When she came aboard yesterday, she was a real mess. Very timid—like a whipped dog. This morning, I found her teaching Cookie and Pip how to make biscuits properly.”

Brill almost choked on her coffee. “She was trying to teach Cookie?”

“I don’t know if he was just going along, or if he was actually getting pointers. I’ve helped Cookie make
biscuits plenty of times before. She wasn’t saying anything I hadn’t heard from him.” I shrugged. “Pip was learning, though, so maybe Cookie was just playing along for Pip’s benefit.”

“What’s with the bruises?”
“I don’t know. Might have been in a flitter crash. She’s dinged up enough.”
Brill gave me a glare. “You don’t believe that, though, do you?”
I shook my head. “No. Yesterday she kept her hair down and was trying to hide the bruising. Today, it’s like it doesn’t matter.”

“What happened overnight?”
“I have no idea. She had some kind of crisis when she bumped into Bev in her ship-tee and boxers down in the berthing area—”
“Well, that’s pretty scary, right there,” Brill teased.
I chuckled. “True. Between the tattoos and the piercings she can be pretty intimidating. But Sarah seemed more concerned that she found Bev undressed.”

“Ah, the walking around in her underwear thing?”
“Yeah, something like that, I guess. Bev kicked Pip and me out of berthing and by the time we got back, Sarah was wrapped in her blankets and asleep.”
Brill swung her feet up onto the desk and cupped her coffee close to her face, inhaling the warm smell for a few heartbeats, obviously pondering. Eventually, she shrugged. “Never underestimate the value of a good night’s sleep, I guess.”

“Maybe.”
“How’s the co-op going?” she asked, her eyes flickering across the displays.
“It went really well the first day and then I kinda lost track. It seemed to be going good the other day when we were up there. Francis said they’d sold a ton. Pip came back last night and I got some sketchy information, but we didn’t get much of an opportunity to talk in any detail. He said it went well and that we should get a settlement today.”

“Are you rich yet?” she asked with a grin.
“I don’t think so, but we’re gaining ground. Considering we started at basically zero after Pip’s little escapade in Darbat, I’m pretty pleased.”
“You’ve got a good eye, Ish. Pip can run the numbers until the bovines return to the barn, but you have the eye. You’ll always pick better than him. You two make an amazing team, though.”
I did my best aw, shucks routine. That kind of conversation always made me uncomfortable.
“I’m serious,” she said, refusing to let me off the hook. “You know share has gone up by almost twenty percent in the last two legs? And even people who weren’t that into private cargo are getting excited about the co-op.”
I smiled then. “I knew share had gone up, but I didn’t know by how much. That’s all Pip’s doing.”

“Uh-uh,” she said, shaking her head. “A lot of it was the reduction in stores expenses. Having a cost center flip into generating revenue is unheard of.”

“Well, that’s all Pip and Cookie!”
“Ish,” she said seriously, “Pip and Cookie were here together for months before you came aboard. Do you really expect me to believe that Pip came up with this idea? On his own?” She raised a skeptical eyebrow in my direction as she sipped her coffee.

I sighed. “Well, I mighta suggested it, but he and Cookie made it work.”
“Save it, mister!” she said with a grin. “I ain’t buyin’ this lil-ole-me act. Leave that to Diane. She has the cleavage for it.”
I almost blew coffee out of my nose at that.

“Okay, enough folderol. Go get some real breakfast, and come back here at 08:00 ready to spend the day. We’re getting underway this afternoon, so I want you ready to rumble. I’m putting you and Francis together for the first week, then I’ll shift you to Diane, and then I’ll take you for a week. After that we’ll see where we are, okay?”

“Sounds good. What’s the watch schedule going to be?”

“Standard underway rotation. It’s six stan watches, but only two people will be on in any given day so you get one day in three off. We’ll post the schedule because it’s confusing as hell when you start, but you’ll figure it out quickly. In port, we do twelves and twenty-fours. With three of us, that works well.”

“Okay, that made only marginal sense to me, but I guess I’ll figure it out. You want me to relieve you for breakfast or anything?”
She shook her head. “I’ll slave my tablet and come up to grab a bite in a few ticks. I want to finish up the paperwork to make sure we’ve got you firmly ensnared in our evil clutches,” she said with a grin.
I chuckled and slaved my tablet to the watch stander console as well. “Might as well get into the habit,” I told
her. I headed for the mess deck. Pastry aside, I was ready for one of Cookie’s omelets.
Chapter 9
The mess deck was in full swing when I got back there, or at least as full as it gets while docked. The first day in port only a few of the crew eat on the ship, but as the stay wears on, more and more of them come back aboard as money and the novelty runs out. Liberty expires three stans before departure, and while that was still a couple stans off, a lot of the crew was back aboard and getting ready to get underway.

I grabbed a plate and stood in Pip’s omelet line. Looking past his shoulder I could see Cookie and Sarah working on the yeast breads that they would be baking later in the day. “How’s it going?” I asked softly with a nod in their general direction.

“I’m not sure,” Pip answered. “Rhon Scham had the messenger watch this morning, and when I rolled over, Sarah was already headed for the san. Whatever she and Bev talked about last night seems to have made a difference, though. When I got out of the shower, she was suited up and waiting for me pretty much as you see her there.”

“And the biscuit lesson?” I asked as he slid the omelet onto my plate.

Pip grinned then. “I don’t know if that was some test of Cookie’s or what. I’ve seen Cookie make biscuits hundreds of times, and they are always good.”

I had to agree with that.

He slipped a couple of hot biscuits onto my plate beside the omelet. “I didn’t really see her do anything drastically different, but try them. Tell me what you think.”

Rebecca Salzman was waiting behind me, so I did not want to take up any more of Pip’s time. Rebecca and I smiled greetings, and I got out of her way. As I stepped away from the serving window, I felt disoriented. I could count the number of times I ate with the crew on the toes of one foot, without taking off my shoes. As I stood there surveying the crowded mess deck, I did not know where to sit. Beverly saved me with a nod toward a chair across from her.

“Good morning, are you having a strange day, too?” I asked her with a nod toward the galley.

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “I don’t know what to think. She barely moved all night. I was so worried about her. Then this morning, I wanted to walk up to her and ask, ‘Who are you and what did you do with Sarah?’” she joked softly.

I dug into my omelet and split open a biscuit. The omelet was good, but the biscuit was unlike anything Cookie had ever made. I like Cookie’s biscuits, always have, but this was something else entirely. The texture was light and flaky whereas Cookie’s were more cake-like. I put a dab of margarine on it and tasted it again. The old saying about ‘melting in your mouth’ came back to me.

Bev was looking at me strangely. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” I said after I swallowed. “Try this, though.” I handed her a chunk of biscuit.

She looked at it closely, shrugged, and then popped it into her mouth. I could see it register on her face.

“Where’d that come from? And are there any more?”

“Pip’s got a whole basket full over there.” I motioned toward the window.

Then the cred dropped for Bev. “Sarah?”

“Yup, I came up earlier for coffee. She was giving biscuit lessons to Cookie and Pip. Apparently, this is the result. The thing is, when I saw them, I didn’t see her doing anything really terribly different than Cookie taught me. Of course, I didn’t see the whole thing, but Cookie was paying very close attention.”

“Well, whatever it is. I hope she doesn’t stop.”

She started to reach for my other biscuit, but I playfully spanked her hand. “Mine!” I said with a mischievous smile. “Go get your own.” She got up to do just that, and I added, “And bring back a couple for me since you’re up.”

She stuck out her tongue. “Get your own,” she mocked me with a big grin. When she came back, though, she dropped a couple extras onto my plate.

Francis and Diane came onto the mess deck and waved as they got into the breakfast line. “Never overlook the obvious,” I mumbled to myself.

“What?” Bev asked.

“Something that Francis made me think of,” I told her. “Remember back on Margary when we were working that first booth?”
“Yeah.”
“He and Diane had a collection of brocaded vests, and he kept putting them out one at a time.”
“I seem to recall that, but how is it significant?”
“Originally I thought he was displaying them one at a time in order to drive the price up because people would think they were one of a kind or the last one or something. When I asked him about it, he told me that it was just easier to keep track of.”
Beverly raised her eyebrows and looked at me like I had started speaking in tongues.
“Seeing him just now reminded me of that. I was attributing more thought to something that was just convenience. In hindsight I’d over thought the situation and missed the obvious thing.”
“Okay…” Bev gave me a strange look. “And this relates to what?”
“Our little changeling in there.” I motioned toward Sarah.
Bnev pondered that for a tick. “And what’s the obvious thing?”
“Something happened over night to convince her to trust us.”
“You base this on…?” she prompted.
“The hair.”
“You are one strange man, Ishmael Wang. Hair?”
Just then, Sarah walked by the open galley door and I saw Bev’s eyes flick over toward the movement. “Oh,” she said as she looked back at me with a speculative glint in her eye.
I shrugged. “Either she trusts us or she’s testing us.”
“I don’t know, but it might be as simple as waking up fed, rested, clean, dry, and safe.”
Bnev wrinkled her nose at that. “Kinda simplistic, but I suppose.”
“You probably don’t remember because you’ve been aboard so long, you ole space-dog, but my memories are still fresh. When I came aboard, the only time I felt afraid was meeting Mr. Maxwell for the first time. My first pullout and first jump were a little nerve wracking, but I don’t know if I’d call what I felt as fearful. Despite all the unknowns, I’ve always felt safe aboard.”
There was a little pause then I added softly, “Trust Lois.”
Bnev gave a little chuckle. “Indeed, and if Sarah keeps making biscuits like these, I’m going to need to work out more.”
I finished the last of my omelet and looked at the chrono. “Speaking of which, I didn’t get my laps in last night, and I’ve got a stan before I have to report for duty in environmental. If you’ll excuse me?”
She nodded and waved. “Have fun.”
It felt good to let everything all go while I ran. Of course, I already felt a lot better to begin with. Sitting with Brill for just those few ticks and getting a kind of overview of what I could expect had gone a long way to assuaging my concerns. Seeing Sarah already beginning to fit in, helped as well. I was angry that somebody could have done something to make her act as she did, and I was able to channel some of that energy while I pounded out some distance around the track. Whatever had happened was back on St. Cloud so distance would help her as well.

I cut my run short, and made another mental note not to run so soon after eating. I found Biddy, Francis, and Rhon in the sauna when I got in there. They were almost giddy over the success of the co-op. “So, do we have a rough idea of the final numbers?” I asked them.

“Commissions and fees brought in something around four hundred creds,” Biddy said. “I’ll get the exact figures later.”

I sat down hard on the bench. “How can that be?”

Francis said, “We had almost twenty of the crew selling in the booth at one time or another. Most of them broke a kilocred so they paid the ten credit cap.”

Rhon chimed in with, “The commission on consignments made up the rest. There was not all that much on consignment, really, but it still amounted to more than a kilocred.”

I gave a low whistle. “So the splits would be something like two hundred for the co-op and fifty for each of the managers?”

Biddy nodded. “Something like that. We need to account for the booth and table rental, so we’ll be getting our tablets together later today.”

Rhon said, “Pip has a way to get us sync’d up so we’ll have a running total from day to day in Dunsany. It was one of those things we didn’t really think about coming in.”

They all got up and headed out shortly after that, and I sat for a few more ticks, marveling at how well everything was working. It could not last, of course. Something was bound to blow up in our faces and soon no doubt. I chided myself for my own fatalism as I headed for the showers. I wondered just how many creds Pip and I had accrued and how much yarn he had bought. He had made some comment about twenty kilos and I wondered where he had stashed it all.
I grabbed a quick shower before zipping into my shipsuit and heading back to environmental. I got there a few ticks before 08:00 and found Diane, Francis, and Brill waiting. “Okay, people,” Brill said, “we’ve got pullout at 14:00 which gives us six stans for any last port-side maintenance. Recommendations?”

Diane and Francis looked at each other briefly before Francis said, “Sludge. If we do the number one tank now, it’ll be good almost all the way into Dunsany. It’s gonna be due in three days anyway. Number two tank should be good until just before transition.”

Brill nodded. “Diane? Where are we on the scrubbers?”

“We did number three just before docking. Number four is due this week. Then we’ll restart the cycle.”

“So, do we do number four while we’re docked or wait until we’re underway?”

“Six of one, half dozen of the other,” Diane answered after a moment’s thought. “The matrix should be viable for another couple of days.”

“Okay, let’s hold off on the scrubber then and get full use out of that matrix before we trash it. If we all work on the number one tank, it won’t take too long.”

Everything sounded logical to me, but I was not really sure what the meeting was all about. Surely, nothing they said was news to any of them, and I wondered why they spent the time telling each other what they must have already known. With the meeting out of the way, we headed over toward the number one particulate precipitation tank. “Francis, you’ve got the duty, and Ish is your helper,” Bev said.

“Aye, Chief,” Francis acknowledged and pulled out his tablet to slave it to the watch stander’s station. He started to show me how to do it, but I turned my tablet to show him it was already set. By then we had reached the tank. “We have to close off the intake valves first,” Francis began and then walked me through the whole shutdown procedure. Once the water was diverted to the second tank, he started pumps that emptied the first back into the dirty water reservoir and we waited for the tank to empty.

The rest of the process I had been through before and it went smoothly. We were done by 10:30 and all the loaf pans were in the freezer. It was a messy job and Diane and Brill headed off to clean up while Francis and I finished restarting the number one tank. As we waited, Francis showed me the routine maintenance charts and explained that sometimes we would pull out small filters and replace them. We did one so he could show me and it looked relatively easy to do. It was just a simple matter of yanking out the old one and slapping in a new filter. The trick was knowing where they were and how to get the old one out without breaching the lines. We had our heads together over the ship schematic when the automated system integrity check came up and Francis did the acknowledgment.

“That reminds me,” he said, “after we get cleaned up, we’ll have to make the inspection tour.” Brill and Diane came back in fresh shipsuits and we headed for the engineering san to get cleaned up ourselves. Before we left, Francis formally passed the watch to Diane temporarily.

“That reminds me,” he explained. “And that means available to respond more or less immediately. We get a lot of leeway because we can slave the tablets to the station and do most routine things even if we’re not sitting right there, but if I’m going to be in the shower somebody else has to be minding the shop.”

“I can see where having more people to share that load would be good.”

“Yeah, we have enough for three sections, and if all we had to do was watch, it would be dead simple. It’s the extra stuff that takes two or more people that disrupts us, but we keep the ship well maintained so little things like scrubber maintenance and sludge recovery don’t get in the way too much. You’ll see.”

We both ducked into the showers and within five ticks we were back in shipsuits and heading down to Foggy Bottom. When we got there, Francis relieved Diane formally and then stuck his head in Brill’s office. “We’re going on VSI now,” he told her. “I have my tablet and it’s slaved.”

“Okay,” she said. “Be back in time for lunch. Stay on the path. Write if you get work.”

As we headed out, I started asking questions, “VSI?”

“Visual Site Inspection. We’re supposed to do it once each watch. By tradition we do it somewhere in the middle, just to break up the monotony, but you can do it at any time.”

“What’s that mean? Visual Site Inspection?”

He pulled up his ship schematic and changed the view to place a sensor overlay on it. “All the readings we see on the monitor back in the section come from these sensors,” he explained. “The readings are only as good as the sensors, so we visit each one several times a day. It takes twenty to thirty ticks to make the circuit, depending. It
makes for a nice stroll.”

“Be back in time for lunch?”

“She’ll hang out there in the office until we get back, just in case we need something. But she wants to go to lunch on time.”

“Stay on the path?”

“If something goes wrong, they know what route we’re taking through the ship and can find us quickly.”

“Is that likely?”

“It has never happened yet. But it’s a good practice.”

“Write if you get work?”

“Bip her if there’s anything that needs attention. The whole thing is kind of a ritual.”

We arrived at the first sensor package and Francis showed me the test port. He stuck the end of his stylus into the small hole and the sensor icon on our tablets blinked red, then green again. “Okay, next!” There were a lot of sensor packages to test, many only a few steps from the previous one. He had me use my stylus on some of them and check the display. There was not a lot to this part of the job.

“Doesn’t this get boring?” I asked after about the fiftieth package.

Francis snickered. “You have no idea—yet. But the alternative is sheer terror. You only have to live through one nasty environmental crisis to appreciate boredom,” he said with a smile. “Of course, if it’s really nasty, you don’t get to live through it so the boredom becomes moot.”

“What’re the odds?” I asked him, trying not to sound too alarmed.

“We’re good,” he said. “You have a higher probability of being murdered than of dying from lack of oxygen, for example. The key is keeping on top of things even through the boredom. As long as we keep checking, keep up with filter replacement, and stay on top of our air and water chemistry, you’re safer here than planet-side. Ships that are sloppy because it’s boring—or expensive—are the ones you want to be wary of. The Lois is not one of those.”

He took me down the length of the spine—the three meter diameter tube that connected the bow and stern sections of the ship—and we clicked off more sensor packages in there. It was five hundred and twenty-eight meters long and had eight airtight hatches along the way.

“It seems small for being the backbone of the ship,” I said, looking at the hexagonal spaces that we walked through.

“Yeah,” Francis agreed, “but remember that each cargo container is locked to the ones around it on the outside shell of the ship. The connections to the spine are really only needed for alignment. The real structural integrity—the reinforcements that keep the backbone from breaking—are on the outer edges of the containers.”

We finished out the tour by visiting the boat deck and engine compartments in the aft. It was the first time I had been down the spine, so I had never even visited this part of the ship in all the time since coming aboard. I was shocked by how large the ship’s boat was. Probably because it was the first time I had stood beside a shuttle craft and seen it resting on its landing struts. This one was basically an undersized planetary shuttle.

Francis saw me gawking at it and said, “They take it out for a spin a couple times a year. It doesn’t get much use because it’s expensive to run. It seats twelve but you don’t really want to ride in it with that many people. It’s a bit crowded.”

The Dynamars Auxiliaries were monsters. For months when I heard people talking about the kickers I had this mental image of a little rocket in the back of the ship. These were huge. I did not even begin to understand how they worked, but as I stood beside them, I realized that they needed to get a lot of ship moving. I chided myself for my own naiveties.

“How do you know if you checked all the sensor packages?” I asked Francis.

“We did them in sequence. If we’d gone out of order, the test would have gone red and then changed to a blinking green instead of a solid green. The missed sensor would have blinked yellow so you know where to go back to. That’s assuming the sensor passed. If it failed, it would go red and a blinking red would indicate a failed package test, but the missed packages would still blink yellow.”

We finished the tour at the aft engineering office and started back for environmental. We even made it back in time for lunch.
Chapter 10
ST. CLOUD ORBITAL
2352-FEBRUARY-21

The mess deck was crowded with all hands back aboard. The captain scheduled pullout for 14:00 and I knew that Cookie, Pip, and Sarah would have their hands full with people hanging around until 13:30. Francis and I stood together in line and he kept his tablet where he could see it. I glanced at mine periodically, but nothing showed up. I kept waiting for the automated systems check to pop up but it had the decency to wait until we were seated.

“Shouldn’t we go back down?” I asked as Francis settled in at a table beside Brill and Diane.

Brill said, “You can if you like, but as long as your tablet is displaying properly,” she nodded toward mine and continued, “and yours is, then you can see anything from here that you could see from there. Alerts and alarms will pop up on your tablet. We have it a bit easier than the bridge and engine room crew because of that.”

Diane asked, “Well, Ish? How’s your first morning as part of the Foggy Bottom gang?”

“Well, let’s see—it started out slogging and freeze drying sludge, then a marathon hike down the length of the ship and back up, but we’re all still breathing so I guess all in all not too bad so far.”

Francis patted me on the back. “You’re doing great.” He cupped a hand around his mouth, leaned over to Brill, but spoke loudly enough for me to hear, “I didn’t have to use the cattle prod once!”

Brill tsked. “He’s spoiling all your fun, Francis.”

“Maybe later,” Diane added with a mischievous grin.

“Okay,” Brill said, “here’s the drill. I’m first section, Francis—and by extension Ish—second, Diane third. We’ll be setting second watch when we secure from navigation detail at around 17:00, so Ish and Francis will get off at 18:00. That’s the good news. The bad news is that you two will be back on duty at 06:00.”

Francis added, “When underway, we run a modified twenty-four stan watch schedule, Ish. You already know we change on the sixes and twelves, but only two sections get the duty in any given day. That means we get one day off out of every three. The basic pattern is six on, six off, six on, twelve off, then six on, six off, six on, twenty-four off and it repeats every three days.”

“Ah! Disorientation,” I exclaimed. “Something I’m used to.”

Francis and I finished up quickly and headed back down to environmental.

“How do you spend the time?”

“It varies. I like to take a walk through the section periodically. Check for valve leaks, and keep an eye out for physical signs of malfunction. Just kinda keeping my fingers on the pulse as it were. Sometimes you spot something going wrong before it gets to the point where the sensor picks it up. That’s usually a good thing.”

“I won’t. My mother had a doctorate in ancient lit. I know how it works.”

“I don’t want to leave the Lois and there are no spec two slots in environmental here. I should get the rating eventually I suppose, but like I said I’m in no hurry. It’s not like I need the extra money a promotion would bring, and I like life on the Lois.”

I frowned a little trying to remember what he had told me back on Gugara. “You’ve got a doctorate don’t you?”

“Yeah. Astrophysics, but don’t hold that against me.”

“I’m not too motivated right now. I don’t want to leave the Lois and there are no spec two slots in environmental here. I should get the rating eventually I suppose, but like I said I’m in no hurry. It’s not like I need the extra money a promotion would bring, and I like life on the Lois.”

“I’ve got a doctorate don’t you?”

He looked surprised that I would remember a casual dinner conversation from months earlier but shot me a rueful grin. “Yeah. Astrophysics, but don’t hold that against me.”

“I won’t. My mother had a doctorate in ancient lit. I know how it works.”

He chuckled a bit bitterly. “Well, a Ph.D. isn’t what it used to be and astrophysics has gotten very political these days. Most of the money is in corporate positions in R&D.”

“R&D in astrophysics?”

“Yeah, almost all of the big corporate conglomerates have what they call R&D branches. It’s really exploration
and development. They send ships out to sit in the Deep Dark and look for new systems to exploit. They take about a hundred little probes with them and send them out in likely directions. The probes jump out, do a programmed survey, and jump back. Usually they jump back where they get picked up. The companies extract the data, refurbish the probe, and send it out again.”

“But don’t we know where the nearby stars are?” I asked.

Francis shrugged. “Yes and no. We need a pretty clear spot to put a ship in when we jump into a system. The Burleson drive gets unstable otherwise. You probably wouldn’t want to be on a ship that jumped into, say, a dark-matter cloud.”

“Why? What happens?”

“Dunno. We’ve never had anybody come back to tell us. I suspect it’s not because it was so nice that they just decided to stay.”

“Oh, that put transition in a whole new light for me. I’m glad I didn’t know that all this time.”

Francis saw my expression and gave me a reassuring smile. “In the shipping lanes, it’s not an issue. They’re scouted out well in advance of any big ship rumbling in. To answer your other question, yes. We do know mostly where the nearby stars are, but we don’t know a lot of detail about their systems. There are a lot of systems out there that are in exploration range that aren’t necessarily within commercial jump range. So, finding a commercially viable system usually means finding some way that it can be of value.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” I said. “What’s the problem?”

“Typical trip is eighteen months between ports.”

“Ouch! That’s a long time without fresh stores.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I thought forty days was long. So, you used to work on those ships that did the probing?”

“Yeah. Eighteen months at a whack is a lifetime, or at least it feels like it. First trip, I thought I was going to go out of my mind before we finally got back, but I was contractually obligated to make a second trip. While I was out there, I needed something to occupy my time so I studied”

“Ah, I see so that’s how you got into environmental?”

“Yep. When I got back I took the spec three test at the Union Hall and caught the next freighter out of the system with an open berth.”

“After three years in the Deep Dark, I’m surprised you wanted to ship out!”

“I got into astrophysics because I love it out here. I just didn’t like what they had me doing. Those long treks were just too hard to take. I much rather prefer life on the freighters. I like sailing out for a few weeks, getting to a port and then going out again.”

The automated systems check popped up again and Francis acknowledged it before continuing, “Three months I could have handled. No sweat. Even four. Maybe even six. It was interesting work and in my field of expertise but eighteen months in a tin can was way too long.”

Brill and Diane came in and I noticed that it was almost 13:30. Pullout in environmental was no more exciting than it had been on the mess deck. Francis and Brill sat in the only two chairs. Diane got a folded blanket out of a storage locker and put it down on the deck next to a bulkhead for us to sit on. We did not expect anything bad would happen, but things were occasionally known to go wrong on pullout so we settled where a little bumpiness would not send us crashing into each other or some critical ship’s component. We got the familiar announcement, “All hands, brace for pullout. All hands, brace for pullout.” over the ship’s speakers and I felt the familiar thump of the docking ring letting us go from the bow. This was followed by the weird moving elevator feeling for just a few seconds. The speakers then told us, “All hands. Pullout complete. Tugs cast off in three zero ticks, mark.” That was it. We were underway again. I wondered, briefly, how Sarah fared in the galley.

It felt strange to be just sitting there so I asked Diane, “Well, we’ve got three stans. If nothing else is happening, should we replace that algae matrix?”

“Good idea, but it’s against standing orders. We have to keep all the shipboard equipment up and available during navigation detail. When we shut down gear while underway, we need to notify the bridge and actually get permission first. They never turn us down, but it keeps everybody running the ship informed as to what’s happening down here.”

“So, we sit.”

She gave me a grin and a half shrug. “Unless you brought some playing cards.”

I sighed. “This is going to take some getting used to, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Welcome to the other side. It’s not harder, just different. You’ll adjust.”

I thought for a while. “What’s the regulation about project work?”

“What do you mean by project work?”
“Oh, I don’t know. What if I wanted to experiment with making a growing medium out of sludge, for example?”

“You can do what you like so long as you can see the readouts. Anything that keeps you from falling asleep is always good, like reading and studying. Watching holos isn’t considered good form, but Brill would just ask you to put them away. If you’re gonna play with growing compounds though, I’d check with Big B. She’s the plant sciences expert, and it’s a good idea to keep the section chief informed about stuff like that.”

“Big B?”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s Brill.”

Three stans was a long time, and I had to find something to do. My tablet was okay, but I kept thinking about the courses in my duffel and my portable computer. I pulled up the Spacer’s Handbook and started researching the full share ratings. The Handbook was the encyclopedia for everything there was to know about life in the Deep Dark. It was huge and going through it all would take a lifetime, but it contained training material for each rating and practice tests to help get you prepared.

My original plan was to get a full share rating in each division as a kind of insurance policy to maximize employability. Having all the ratings would mean I would be qualified for just about any open slot. As I sat there, it seemed almost pointless and perhaps naive. There did not seem to be much likelihood of me getting stranded, and I could not imagine leaving the Lois. Still, the extra mass allotment would be nice so I brought up the calendar. Sixty-eight days until the next test period—about ten days the other side of Dunsany Roads. The Lois was authorized to have a third spec three in environmental. I turned to Diane and asked, “Do you think if I passed spec three, I could get the promotion?”

She grinned. “In a heartbeat!”

“I’ve got sixty-eight days to study. Think I can do it by then?”

“Two months? Wow. That’s ambitious. It took me two tries, but I wasn’t working in environmental at the time.”

“What’s the downside? I skip the next test period and maybe hit the Union Hall at Betrus?”

“Yup,” Diane agreed. “That’s about it.”

I started reviewing the various environmental exam materials with Diane’s help. When the ship set normal watch, Francis showed me the log keeping functions, and we handed the duty off to Diane in time to catch some dinner. I was more than ready to get out of the section.

While waiting in the mess line, I saw Pip behind the serving station standing next to Sarah. She seemed like she was settling in well enough for having been aboard for such a short time. It was both good and strange to see Pip from this side of the line.

Pip waved when he saw me. “Hey, Ish! How’s life in engineering?”

“It’s still a little soon to tell, but I think it’ll be all right. I’m off now until 06:00. Wanna get together when you get cleaned up here?”

“You betcha. We’ve still got business to deal with from St. Cloud.”

After I ate, I stretched out in my bunk and read for a bit to let dinner settle. I did not want to repeat my mistake of running so soon after eating.

Around 19:30, I found myself beginning to nod off as I read, so I decided it was time to run. I was into my fourth lap when Rhon Scham caught up with me. Rhon was one of the watch standers and I was used to seeing her through bleary eyes when she woke me for mess duty. “Hi, Rhon.”

She gave me a friendly smile, and asked, “How’s life in engineering?”

“It’s a living. I think. It feels like I’ve been on duty for the last twelve stans, though. I’m off now until 06:00.”

She smiled. “Second section. Me, too.” We ran a half a lap before she continued, “Shifting from port-side duty to being underway is always a pain. You’re getting it over with early, though, so you’ll be in the groove sooner.”

“In the groove?”

“Yeah. Watch standing is boring and tedious, but it’s also crucial. These ships don’t fly themselves. When something goes wrong, the ship can tell you, but you need to interpret the data and take corrective action. Sometimes that means like RIGHT NOW!”

“I can buy that.”

“So, as time goes on, you get into the groove. Just like you’re probably used to getting up at 04:30 every morning. In a couple of days, you’ll be in sync with the new schedule. You’ll be in the groove.”

“What do you do on watch?”

“Sit, wait, study. It depends. The bridge is a pretty active place. We’re moving really fast and there are adjustments we need to make to the sails and keel, sometimes as much as several times in a stan. The solar wind isn’t constant and it’s not uniform. We find pockets and swirls that require us to pay attention to stay on course.”
“Sounds interesting,” I said, remembering my last watch with Francis. “I’m building it up. Mostly it’ll make you numb from the sheer boredom.”

I chuckled and we ran our remaining laps in silence. When we were done, I waved to her and headed to the showers to rinse off before my sauna. I hoped I was not going to regret leaving the mess deck. At least there, I had Pip for amusement.

At 21:00 I headed over to deck berthing and ran into Pip and Sarah just getting in from the galley. “How was your first full day, Sarah?” I asked.

“Long,” she said shyly. “But fun in a way. I think I’m going to like it.”

She went on into the berthing area while Pip and I talked in the passage. “Well?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “I have no clue. She’s like a different person.” “How’d she do?”

“Great! She catches on really fast and she has a knack with breads as you probably noticed with the biscuits.” “Good. So, what about this yarn? You got a lot of it? Wanna give me a peek?”

Pip grinned and led me into deck berthing. He opened his locker and it was stuffed full. Then he opened the locker that went with the empty bunk under his, and it was full, too. I started laughing and then channeled Pip and his famous sayings. “My dog and her little puppies, Pip, how many are there?”

“One hundred skeins. Each one weighs two-hundred grams.” “They sell it by weight?”

“Apparently. I shoulda talked to Sean a little more, I guess. I thought it would be by length or something awkward like that to calculate.” “How much?”

“A hundred creds,” Pip said. “A cred each?” I was in shock that we got such a good price.

Pip laughed. “Yeah, it’s insane, but that’s what they charged me. They were selling it for three in the booth, so either their markup was really high or they needed to clear some inventory.”

He closed the lockers, pulled out his tablet, and we settled in at the table. “Okay, we’ve got a meeting scheduled with the Co-Op Steering Committee tomorrow afternoon, are you free?”

Pip asked. “Yup.” “The preliminary numbers are that the booth’s take from the flea market trading was four hundred and twenty creds which will be split between the booth captains and the co-op. That’s more than enough to cover Dunsany Roads, so we’re good there.” “I’m impressed. How’d you and I do?”

“I sold about three hundred and fifty of the stones with the leather thongs on them and all the belts and buckles. We’ve covered the costs for all the goods, so anything we sell is gravy at this point and we have a nice bit of a cushion to boot.”

He turned the tablet around so I could see his calculations, and I did a double take. The number at the bottom of the column was five thousand two hundred and eleven. “What? How!”

“Between the raw belts we sold at Margary, the ones with buckles we sold here, and a very large pile of small stones that’s what’s left. And get this…that’s AFTER I took out the costs of everything: the belts, buckles, stones, leather thong, and the yarn. Oh, and the dyes. They were cheap. I think twelve creds for the lot.” “But three hundred fifty stones at two creds comes to what? Seven hundred?”

“Your math-fu has no match in this universe,” he replied dryly. “And you would be right except they seem to have some kind of fetish on St. Cloud for that kind of thing. They sold for three to five creds each. Quartz was particularly popular and I had more than one bidding war over a good piece. I sold one of them for ten creds.”

I gasped. “That’s crazy!” “Maybe, but that’s what happened. Now, I’m going to keep one thousand two hundred and eleven for the pool and split the remaining four kilocreds between us fifty-fifty. Is that agreeable?”

I laughed. “Yeah. I think I can cope with that!” I pulled out my tablet and watched my credit balance go from five hundred and twenty to two thousand five hundred and twenty in the blink of an eye. I stared at it for a few ticks in disbelief.

As I put my tablet away, it reminded me of something. “Oh, are you done using the portable computer I lent you? I remember you said you were going to put your stores trading algorithms up on the ship’s computer…” “Yeah, that’s the plan, but it’s been kinda crazy. You need it right away?” I shook my head. “No, but I want to start working on some of the course work I downloaded from the
university. I think the plant sciences courses might be useful.”

“Can I have a couple of days?”

“Sure, I’m gonna be distracted by watch standing anyway. And I’m going to start working on my full share collection again.”

Just then, Sarah came out of the quad wearing her ship-tee and boxers. She seemed a little self-conscious but crossed into the san with only a smile and a little wave.

Pip lowered his voice and said, “We need to feed her more.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Could have something to do with the way her knees and elbows are the largest parts of her arms and legs.”

I snorted a short laugh of agreement before standing up. “Well, I need to rack out. I’ve got the mid watch. I’m outta here.”

“You’re not even gonna say hi to your ex-bunkie?” I heard Bev say from the quad.

Chuckling, I walked into the quad. “Hey—” I started to say. Out of habit, my eyes were drawn to my old bunk and clipped to the partition I saw a small statue with a bit of shell as the heart.

Bev must have noticed my shocked stare as she asked, “What?”

“Sarah has one of the statues,” I whispered.

“What statues?”

I sat on the lower across from Bev. “Brill and I found this odd guy up at the flea. He had a table full of dozens of these little statues. Each had a bit of shell as a heart. When I saw them, they looked—I don’t know—kinda odd. Like some kind of religious icon or something.”

Pip had come in behind me then and I nodded toward Sarah’s partition.

“I’ll be—” he said.

Bev climbed out of her bunk to see what we were talking about. “What is it? Some kind of seagull?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s a raven.”

“How can you tell?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but that’s what it is. That one was made by a different person than mine and Brill’s, but it’s definitely a raven.”

“You’ve seen a whelkie before?” Sarah asked, coming in from the entry to the quad.

“Yeah, in the flea market the other day.”

“Really?” she asked. Sarah kept her arms self-consciously in front of her as she moved past us and slipped up onto her bunk. After wrapping her blanket around her, she seemed more comfortable. I know I felt better because she was so bony it was difficult to see her that way.

“Yeah,” I told her. “Funny old geezer had a table full of them. What did you call them?”

“Whelkies. They’re carved from windrift and each one has a bit of whelk shell as the heart.” Sarah pulled hers down and held it up so we could see it. The rough, primitive carving had a shell with just the barest tinge of purple to it. “Some of the people on St. Cloud think of them as a kind of spirit guide.”

“A what?” Bev asked. She seemed really interested.

“A spirit guide. Depending on how superstitious you are, they’re anything from a curiosity like a horoscope, to a focal point for your spirit, or for some an actual guide.” Sitting there, holding her raven, and telling us about it she seemed almost relaxed. “Almost every little fishing village along the south coast has a shaman who carves these and hands them out to people. Usually if there’s sickness or tragedy in the house, the shaman will come and leave one of these behind.”

“That is a raven, right?” I asked her.

“Oh, yes,” she said, looking at me for the first time since she had hopped up on the bunk. “Are you sure you saw somebody selling them at the flea market?”

“Yup. There was this strange man in homespun clothes who had a weird way of talking. I thought it was just flea market patter.”

“Patter?” she asked.

Bev explained, “Yeah, sometimes a vendor will have a little act they do to make their goods more appealing or to draw people in. Sometimes they’ll tell jokes, or they’ll have a story about whatever it is they’re selling.”

“Ah,” said Sarah, “now I understand. Patter,” she repeated the word as if seating the term in her brain. She focused back on her whelkie. “This raven came to me about three weeks ago, now. It’s kinda rough, but I like it. The smoother and more finished it is, the more highly valued they are. Also, supposedly, the deeper the purple in the heart the more power it has. This one’s just got a little bit of purple, but he was powerful enough to lead me here,” she said with a smile which was a welcome sight to see, if only for its infrequency.

Pip asked me, “Doesn’t your dolphin have a really purple heart?”
“You have a whelkie?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide in amazement.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small packet. The string slipped off easily and the cloth fell away revealing the dolphin. The deep purple heart glinted in the overhead light.

“Wow!” Bev said, looking from Sarah’s raven to my dolphin and back. She started to reach for mine, but stopped and had an expression that seemed to be asking for permission.

I shrugged and offered it to her. She lifted it out of the little piece of cloth and held it up so the light gleamed off of its sleek sides.

As she was holding it up, Bev nudged me with her elbow and nodded toward Sarah. Our new shipmate was frozen, staring at the dolphin.

“Where did you get it?” she asked breathlessly, not taking her eyes off it.

“I told you. There was a guy selling these at the flea market.”

“You bought it?” she asked, and there was genuine surprise and possibly even shock in her voice. For the first time since meeting her she looked me directly in the eyes.

“Well, no,” I corrected. “Not this one. I did buy some—ten of them in fact, but this one was a gift.”

“It came to you,” she said.

“Came to me?” I asked. “What’s that mean?”

Sarah shook herself and took a deep shuddering breath. She held it, closed her eyes, and then slowly let it out. She spoke without opening her eyes. “The tradition says that the whelkies know where there is need and will come to those who need their help. Each is tuned to a particular individual and it will find its rightful owner.” She opened her eyes again and looked around self-consciously. “It sounds silly, I know, and I never believed in the old stories myself.”

Bev touched her arm gently. “Until your raven came to you?” she asked.

Sarah nodded. “My husband was— is—a fisherman. He’s looked up to in the village as a leader, but he’s really just a bully. He strong-armed my father and I became his wife.” She indicated the bruises on her face. “These are from him. About three weeks ago, he threw me against the wall so hard I cracked a rib.” She touched her right side. “The shaman came to treat my injuries.” She held up her left arm, and I could still see the residual bruising. “When he left, the raven was on my night stand.”

She took a few deep breaths and I thought she was done, but after a short while she continued, “That evening, just after sunset, I was sitting on the back stoop with the raven in my hands. I was frightened because I didn’t know what to think or what to believe. As I sat there, a spark of light glinted off the heart’s shell. It startled me until I realized it was just the reflection of the orbital glinting in the final rays of the setting sun—just a pinpoint of light in the darkening sky. I looked up just in time to see another point of light break off from it and drift away.”

She paused again before continuing, “A week ago, my husband went out fishing. His boat goes out for days, sometimes weeks at a time. As soon as he was gone, I made my way to the Union Hall at Port Starvey where Captain Giggone saved me.”

She gave a small, nervous laugh. “So, was it the raven that led me here? Or just the coincidence of reflected light?” She shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know. What I do know is I am here. What I feel is that I am safe for the first time in longer than I can remember. What does it mean that you have that beautiful dolphin?” Again she shrugged. “Perhaps, it’s just a lovely memento from somebody who cares for you. Maybe it’s a whelkie come to help you. Who’s to say?”

She heaved a great sigh. “There. That feels better.” Then she smiled.

The little trance-like state was broken. Bev stroked the side of the dolphin with the ball of her thumb as if remembering she still held it and then handed it carefully back to me.

Pip stared at Sarah like he had never seen her before. I knew the feeling. Bev was the first to find her voice and said, “Well, I know a couple of mess attendants who need to get some sleep, even if some environmental people don’t.” She stared pointedly at me.

“Oh, yeah.” I shook myself. “Right. As I was saying, I need to rack out myself. It’s been a long day.” Before I left, I turned to Sarah and said, “Thank you for telling us about the whelkies. I knew there was more to them than just simple bric-a-brac.”

“Well, now you know the story. What you believe in, is up to you.”

“True, and thanks for trusting us with your own story. You’re right about being safe here. Lois will take care of you.” I smiled at her and headed for my own bunk.

It had been a long day.
Chapter 11
I must have been tired because I slept straight through until the watch stander woke me at 05:30. Francis and I joined the other second shift crew and all of us managed to cycle through the san in just a few ticks. Nobody said much. I got the feeling it was more because we were all groggy rather than any deference to the sleeping crew.

On the way out of berthing, Francis headed down to relieve Brill while I ran up to get coffee for us. I could hear Cookie, Pip, and Sarah working in the galley and smelled cooking bacon. My stomach growled, but I settled for pouring two mugs and made a promise to come back for food soon.

By the time I got back down to Foggy Bottom, Francis was formally relieving a groggy looking Brill. She smiled when she saw me. “You holding up okay?” she asked.

“So far so good,” I told her. “Guess what, I found out what those little statues are called and found out some pretty interesting folklore about them.”

“You’ll have to fill me in later. Right now I want some breakfast and a little nap before I have to be back here for the afternoon watch.”

She waved and headed out. Francis and I settled down to our coffee, and I made sure my tablet was slaved to the station.

“Just to refresh my memory,” I started, “sometime in the middle of the morning we’ll run the VSI again?”

“Yup, and that’s the highlight of the festivities. Unless something breaks.”

“What if that happens?”

“Depends on what it is. We might get wet. We might get dirty. We might die.” He shrugged. “It’s hard to say.”

“Hmm. I think I’d just as soon avoid that last one,” I said with a grin. “When was the last time something broke?”

“On the Lois? Never has happened as long as I’ve been aboard. I don’t see that changing any time soon so long as we pay attention to business and keep our crap in the tanks.”

“How about we review the overnight logs before heading up to breakfast? It’s a good idea to see if anything unusual happened on the previous watch,” he told me. “That way you’re less likely to be surprised.”

“Makes sense.”

“Brill is good, and she’d have mentioned anything out of the ordinary, so I doubt we’ll find much of note. Still, it’s a good habit to get into.”

As expected there was not anything unusual in the logs, so we went up to the mess deck for a quick breakfast. While we were there, the automated systems check fired off, and Francis had me acknowledge it on my tablet.

“You’ll be standing watch on your own in a couple weeks, or less,” he told me with a grin.

After we returned to environmental, Francis startled me by saying, “Stay on the path. Write if you get work.”

“What?”

“Stay on the path. Write if you get work.”

“You’re gonna make me try to find my way alone?”

“Yep. Bip me if you get lost,” he said, leaning back in the watch stander’s chair and putting his feet up on the desk. “I can follow your progress from here. You’ll be okay.”

“But I thought you said we’d do this in the middle of the watch. It’s barely 07:30.”

“Traditionally, I said, traditionally. I also pointed out that we could do it any time.”

I could not think of any reason not to go, so I keyed up the overlay and headed out. It took me almost forty-five ticks and I missed one package during the trip, which I had to go back for, but I did not get lost. When I finally got back, Francis gave me a big grin and a thumbs up.

“That was amazing,” he said.

“What? Missing one?”

“Making it back at all.”

“What do you mean?”

He took a deep breath and said, “You’ve just passed the environmental initiation. It took me three tries before I could make it to the other end of the ship and back without having to call for help. It was a month of watches before I could make the run with only three missed stations.”

“You’re kidding!”
He shook his head. “Diane was able to do it on her second try, but Gregor never made the run without missing a station somewhere in the whole stanyer and a half he was aboard.”

“And you sent me out there alone after only one practice?”

“You made it, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

He shrugged. “I was watching you the whole way on the display. That one package, which is right behind the hatch in the spine, is easy to miss, but you backtracked to it in nothing flat. When you ran the after compartments without a miss, I was cheering and yelling in here. I’m surprised they didn’t hear me up in engineering berthing.” He wore a wide grin like a jack-o-lantern.

I did not know what to make of it. “It seemed pretty logical as I was doing it. All the packages are marked on the schematic. I just followed the map.”

“Exactly! But do you know how long it takes most people to figure that out? Oh, Ish, you’re gonna be great!”

I felt pleased that I did well, but still harbored doubts about my ability and the responsibilities that I had signed up for. Sure, the easy routine things are a snap but all the talk about something going wrong and everyone dying cast a sobering pall.

The rest of the morning passed uneventfully. Francis had me sit at the watch stander station and showed me how to check for routine maintenance tasks that might be scheduled during a shift. There were none for the morning watch, but we would have one in our evening shift. Then he took Brill’s chair and left me to handle all the routine system checks and keep an eye on the graphs. Over time, I noticed that they did fluctuate ever so slightly up or down, but they never moved far and always cycled back.

Around 10:00 Francis took me on what he called “a walk about” and we did an informal inspection tour of the section. The area was not that large in total, but the paths twisted back on themselves and took strange turnings behind and between massive chunks of equipment. He pointed out things to look for along the way like valves, which might be developing leaks, or the smaller filters that needed periodic replacement. He pointed out the one that we had seen in our earlier examination of routine maintenance tasks.

Brill came to relieve us at 11:45 and Frances regaled her with the story of my solo perambulation of the ship. She gave me a big smile and a high five. I still did not see what the big deal was, but I tried to be suitably excited for them. Personally, though, I was eagerly awaiting lunch and a nap. We had to be back on duty at 18:00.

Francis and I became a good team and he did not make me do all the VSI’s by myself. He claimed it was because he needed the exercise, but personally, I think he was just grateful for the company. After a few days, I had made a good start on the spec three study materials, but there was a lot of stuff to cover. I was not overly comfortable with some of the math and science, which there was quite a bit of. At the end of my first week, Brill moved me to third-section to stand watch with Diane.

To be totally honest, I did not understand why I did not just stay on with Francis. We got along well and he certainly knew his stuff. Once I started working with Diane, though, I recognized that Brill was exposing me to different styles of watch standing. Francis had been—not loose, exactly—but he was laid back and willing to go with the flow. Diane, on the other hand, was a checklist maker. On every shift the first thing she did was make a list of everything that needed doing and then she scheduled everything. At this time, do the VSI. At that time, do the department walk through. Any scheduled maintenance goes here. She was very good at it and, somehow, it suited her.

Having me around worked out well for her, too. Diane was the Scrubber Queen, and one of her challenges had been finding enough people to do the sludge tanks and replace the algae matrices in the scrubbers. Being on duty with her, meant she did not have to cajole anyone into coming in on their off-time to help. We had one midwatch where she and I spent the night up to our armpits in slime. We did the VSI early that evening and she picked a shift where there was no other routine maintenance. I am not saying that Francis would not have been able to find a two-stan window to do the scrubber, but with Diane, I always knew exactly what we would be doing, and when.

Even with all the planning, we still had a lot of time on our hands to just sit and stare at the monitors. After all, it was watch standing duty. I had known Diane for a while by then. She had gone with me back on Margary to visit a mushroom farm, and I had helped her out with a few tasks even before I actually joined the department. I am not sure which factor contributed the most, or perhaps it was both, but we slipped quickly into a level of synchronization that I had not really developed with Francis during my week with him. I am not saying that Francis would not have been able to find a two-stan window to do the scrubber, but with Diane, I always knew exactly what we would be doing, and when.

One odd thing about Diane was that she would never talk about her past. She was not that much older than me, but she had been working as a spacer for almost five stanyers. I knew she had been on at least one other ship before
the *Lois*, but she would not talk about it. “A girl needs to have a bit of mystery,” she would tell me with a sultry smile when I asked a question that was too personal. Then she would mug it up, batting her eyelashes like something out of an old movie, before changing the subject.

Two weeks out of St. Cloud, I adjusted my schedule once more and joined Brill. Our first watch together was an afternoon shift and I felt like I had not seen her in weeks. We passed each other back and forth during watch change, of course, but it was good to spend time with her again.

Brill’s style of watch standing was something between Francis’s and Diane’s. She would start the shift by enumerating the tasks we needed to accomplish but did not actually write them down or set a schedule for doing them. That first afternoon, all we had on our plates was the VSI and the automated integrity checks. Diane and I had done scrubber maintenance the day before and we were good for another week on sludge duty. That left Brill and I plenty of time for a good gabfest. I think she did not want to intimidate me with a bunch of questions about how I liked environmental, so she broke the ice with some small talk.

“So, you never did tell me…what did you learn about the sculptures?” she asked after we had settled in.

While I filled her in on the story that Sarah had told, she pulled her whelkie out of her pocket to get a good look at it.

When she saw me do the same, I think she was a bit surprised. “You carry yours, too?” she asked.

“Yeah, I would feel kinda naked without it. I always have it in my pocket, and I catch myself playing with it from time to time when I’m studying or walking around on VSI.”

“Well, maybe they’re magic and maybe they’re not, but they are very nice. I treasure mine, so thank you again,” she said before changing the subject back to work. “So how comfortable are you on watch?”

“I think I know what to do—so long as nothing goes wrong, but I have no idea what to do if something breaks.”

“Such as?”

“Well, what if the scrubber turns green in the middle of the shift?”

“It won’t. It takes several stans for that to develop, and the air mixture graphs would pick it up long before it got that far.”

“What if I find one of the sensor packages failing the VSI check?”

“Call me.”

“What if one of the pipes starts leaking?”

“Call me.”

“What if one of the graphs starts changing?”

“Call me.”

“What if I want somebody to talk to in the middle of the night?”

“Call Bev. She can come down here and smack you harder than I can.”

I laughed. “Very true.”

“Look,” she said seriously, “basically the role of watch stander is to alert the chain of command in case of anomalous activity. Diane and Francis, as spec threes, have the knowledge and experience to handle some minor routine maintenance on their own, which helps keep us up and running nicely and breaks up the monotony of watch standing for them.”

“That makes sense. But you don’t expect me to do that?”

“Not really, but I’m not going to say you can’t either. If you see a filter needs changing on your shift and you know how to do it, go for it. If you don’t, or even if you’re uncertain, pass it off to the next person. Nobody’s going to fault you for it.”

“Okay, that makes me feel better.”

“You’re an engineman, Ish, not a specialist. We all know you’re good and we appreciate your help a lot. But we also know you’re not trained to do much more than keep your eyes open. My charge to you, as your section chief, is to call me whenever you see something that you don’t understand. I will never be upset if you call me over something that turns out to be nothing. We may not survive if you don’t call me on something that turns out to be serious, and we all know you don’t have enough training or experience to tell the difference yet. So don’t try to be a hero.”

“Okay, I can do that. I got good marks in *Not-Hero* in school.”

“Good! What do we need to do this watch then?”

“VSI and section walk through. We’ve already checked and there’s no routine maintenance. We just need to stay awake and keep clearing the automated integrity checks.”

“You forgot one.”

I thought back over the list, but I could not think of what I had missed.

“Study for spec three!” she said with a laugh.
I grinned back at her.

“Okay, Mr. Wang, you’re now officially the watch stander of record for first section. You will log me in as your assistant and we’ll see how it goes.” She got out of the console chair and waved me into it. I swapped the logs as she had instructed and that was it.

Halfway through that third week she stopped coming to work with me, and when I relieved Diane for my first solo shift, she said, “Welcome aboard, Ish.”

I felt like I was finally a real member of the Foggy Bottom gang.
Chapter 12
Watch standing soon became as comfortable a routine as mess deck had been, but there were several notable differences. First, I missed my daily repartee with Pip and Cookie. Second, after months of feeling like I had no privacy, I suddenly found myself alone for long periods of time. This was especially noticeable when the rotation took me into evening and mid watches. Brill, as section chief, stayed in her office during the designated business day which was 08:00 to 17:00. It was not like we would be getting any walk-in customers so I was never sure why.

The ship’s normal business was done during those hours and she would occasionally have to attend a section head meeting.

In spite of being alone, I did feel like I was part of a team. Not the kind of team that Pip, Cookie, and I had been—where we were closely integrated and all working together to get the next meal out. Being in environmental was more like a relay race where I would take the baton, move it forward through the stans, and hand it off to the next runner. The good part of this new position was that when I was off duty, I got to know more of the other people on the ship.

One thing about working in the galley was that I would see people, they would disappear, and new people would show up as the duty sections rotated around the clock. Mess duty was like watching a kid on a carousel—every so often he would swing by on his carved horse, wave, and disappear around the bend again. Standing watch was more like riding the merry-go-round. You got to see the people riding the horses around you, talk to them, and get to know them a little better, but it was the people standing on the ground that periodically appeared and disappeared.

Tabitha Rondita was one of the people I got to know better. She was on first watch, too, but I had never really gotten to know her very well, in spite of the fact that for six months she slept on the other side of the partition from me. Rondita was an olive-skinned woman in her late thirties with black hair, dark brown eyes, and spectacular curves that her shipsuit seemed to emphasize. She was not fat—none of the crew seemed to be—but she was more rounded than most. While most of the other women aboard were slender and willowy, Rondita was what my mom would have called an earth mother type.

Most of the first watch seemed to hit the gym at the same time in the watch cycle. Many used it as a kind of pump me up for work period during the off part of the six-on-six-off-six-on section of the rotation. Tabitha would come in at the same time and climb on a rowing machine. I spotted her from the track as I did my laps and she would often row for as long, or longer, than I would run. We would smile and wave and after a few watch cycles we started meeting up in the sauna with three or four others that included Mitch Fitzroy, the machinist from Propulsion section who slept in the lower bunk under mine, Arvid Xia, a wiper from Power, and Sean Grishan who was on the bridge crew with Tabitha.

They all knew each other pretty well, of course, but they only had seen me from the mess deck. They welcomed me onto the merry-go-round readily enough and I soon found out that they teased Sean about his knitting.

“It’s crochet. With a hook!” he would answer, no matter how many times they would attribute his activities to the needle variety.

Arvid was a quiet, bookish guy who could sneak up on you with a pun faster than anybody I had ever met. Mitch was a nice guy, the archetype mechanic who really only lived for engines. Tabitha was the queen bee of the group and always complained about the size of her hips and thighs. Arvid and Sean seemed to enjoy them, though, as their eyes were locked to her whenever Tabitha walked out of the sauna. I am pretty sure she was aware of her effect on the guys, as well. Often she would stay in the sauna a long time until the others had practically passed out from the heat before she would stand up and languidly sashay out to the showers. Nobody ever said anything, but Tabitha clearly appreciated being appreciated.

My new schedule still allowed me the opportunity to see Pip, but we were no longer joined at the hip by identical duty cycles as we once had been. Because I had one day out of three completely off, we got plenty of chances to get together. Beverly was the one I rarely got to see during that time. She was on second watch, which meant she was almost always on duty when I was off. We had a few stans off at the same time, but I found that I missed her a lot. I felt awkward whenever I tracked her down when I knew we were both off. It felt like my moving out had somehow changed us. I supposed it had something to do with riding on opposite sides of the carousel.

Two weeks out of Dunsany Roads, Pip and I arranged to meet on the mess deck during his afternoon break and
it felt almost like old times. “So, how’s the stores trading coming?”

“Really good!” he said with a wide grin. “Dunsany has some of the only beef cattle in this end of the galaxy. They are not beefalo hybrids but real cows. There are also a good number of chicken farms, so Cookie is dying to try out some new poultry dishes. They don’t have as big a fishery as St. Cloud, though, so we’re hoping to get decent returns on some of the fish down in freezer five.”

“Nothing like the coffee deal, I bet.”

“They do have tea in commercial quantities, but, no, no coffee.”

“Back on St. Cloud we were talking about textiles. Didn’t you say they have a big cotton and flax industry?” I asked, trying to remember what he had told me.

“Yeah. Last beacon data indicated a fair amount of silk production as well.”

“So, what do you think we can expect to find in the flea market there?”

He sighed and shook his head. “It’s always a dice roll. I’d expect to see cotton and linen fabrics in various permutations from yard goods to finished products. Dunsany is a Confederation port, not a company system. This is the first one we’ve hit since you’ve been aboard. Big companies still hold the majority of the production assets on-planet, but they don’t have the same strangle-hold that they do in the other systems. The Lois has a huge load going into Dunsany Roads, although some of it’s being re-routed. We’ll be docked an extra day just because we’re swapping out almost a third of the containers.”

“Really? What are you putting in the empty container for Betrus?”

“Denim and canvas, I think.”


“Yeah, but they use denim and canvas for a lot of different things on Betrus. Burlap sacking would be another good choice, if we can find the right quantities and prices. They use a lot of burlap there.”

“Really? What does Betrus make?”

“They have a variety of agricultural products. Mostly wine, but also hops, barley, wheat, and oats. We’re scheduled to pick up containers of hops and wheat this trip.”

“Interesting. No beer?”

“No.” He laughed. “Beer isn’t like wine. It’s a lot cheaper to take the bulk dry goods and brew your own where you are.”

“Wait, did you say barley?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Single malt whiskey is usually made from barley. Can we sell it at a flea market?”

“Good question.” He pulled up a schedule. “We’re heading for Niol after Betrus. I suppose if it doesn’t sell, we can always have a party.”

“Well, let’s see what’s doing, first, I suppose.”

“True,” Pip agreed. “And what are we going to do with all this yarn?”

“We have a hundred skeins at a cred each, right?”

“Yeah, twenty kilos worth.”

“I have an idea, but I need to do some homework of my own first. I’ll let you know how it pans out.”

Just then Sarah came out of the galley and headed out, probably on her way to berthing. It reminded me that we really had not had much time to talk about her recently. When she was gone, I asked, “So, how’s Sarah doing?”

Pip scrunched up his face a little before letting out a breath. “Well, some days are good and others not so much. We had a couple of times before transition where she flinched whenever somebody stuck a plate toward her on the mess line. Sometimes she’s very positive and upbeat. Sometimes I hear her crying in her sleep.”

“Can you get her to go to the gym and maybe ride one of the bikes? Or row or something? The walls must be closing in by now.”

“I’ve suggested it, but she’s still self-conscious. She is beginning to put a little flesh on her bones, though. A month of Cookie’s cooking is really helping. She’s not quite so knobby, but she’s still shy around the rest of the crew. She seems okay though with Bev, Cookie and me. Except for those flinches, she’s been okay on the line. Something about being behind the counter maybe…”

“I thought she looked a little healthier, but if she doesn’t find something to do with her off time…”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” Pip shook his head helplessly and changed the subject. “But how about you? What have you been doing? Besides running and walking the length of the ship three times a day?”

“Studying for spec three.”

“You’ve given up the idea of a set of full share ratings?” he asked surprised.

“Well, realistically, what’re the odds that I’m not going to be on the Lois?”

“True,” he conceded.
“If I leave here, it’s most likely because I want to at this point, and I can’t see me wanting to.”
“You and me, both, brother. So, how’s spec three going?”
I shook my head at that one. “It’s a lot harder than the other tests I’ve taken. There’s a lot of science and math that I’m not really all that familiar with.”
“Well, hang in there, brain boy,” he said encouragingly. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.” He looked at the chrono. “I need to get in a run and a sauna before the dinner drill. You coming?”
“No, I’m gonna pass this time. I need to go do some homework.”
Pip nodded. “Okay, I’ll see ya round the mess deck, then,” he said with a wave. He left for the gym, and I headed for deck berthing.

Sean Grishan was right where I expected him to be—in his bunk with a crochet hook and a big ball of blue yarn. He was listening to something on a headset as he worked and I stood there for a heartbeat or two before he noticed me watching. His fingers danced along the yarn and the silvery hook glinted as he turned out stitch after identical stitch.

“Ish, hi!” he said, pulling off his headset. “What brings you to the spider’s web?”
“Hey, Sean. I wonder if you have a few ticks to talk a little business…”
“You kidding? Of course! What’s on your mind?”
I outlined my idea a bit at a time, and as I talked, I could see him fitting the bits and pieces together and nodding. As I got near the punch line, he started smiling. By the time I had finished, he was hooked. “Count me in.”
“Thanks, Sean. I think this is going to be an interesting experiment. I appreciate your help.”

Three quads down, I found Sarah sitting on her bunk, fingering her raven, and reading something on her tablet. She seemed a lot better than the bruised woman who had stepped off the shuttle, but she still had a haunted look around the corners of her eyes. I tapped lightly at the entrance to the quad and spoke very softly, “Hey, Sarah.”

She looked up at me and smiled. “Hi, Ishmael. Don’t see much of you these days. How’s it going in environmental?”

“I’m not ready for the gym,” she said a little defensively. “I like my little place up here.” And she patted the bunk.

“I told ya it was a good bunk,” I said with a grin. “But I understand about the gym. What I really needed was something to do. I remember feeling overwhelmed that all I did was work, sleep, work, sleep. The monotony drove me crazy.”

I could see that I had hit home with that. “Yeah,” she said a bit wistfully, looking about, “I’ve had a lot to learn and more to think about than I really wanted to, but I find myself wondering how much longer the trip is going to last.”

“How’d ya like a little project? Something to keep you busy and make some extra creds in the process?”

Her voice was a bit sharp and I was not sure what she expected, but I don’t think it had anything to do with what I was about to suggest. When I got done laying it out, she said, “That sounds like fun, but…I don’t know how.”

“We got that part covered, too. I just wanted to run it by you to see if you were interested before I got too far into this.” I smiled as reassuringly as I could as I started to back slowly out of the quad. “Lemme get some things arranged, and I’ll come back and see you again in a few days, okay?”

“Yes,” she said shyly. “I’d like that.”
Chapter 13
We were about ten days short of Dunsany Roads Orbital when we had a suit drill while I was alone on watch. It was the only Oh, damn! moment I had had as watch stander up to then. It was evening at around 21:30 and I was walking down the spine on my VSI. As soon as the whoop-whoop sounded, I knew I was in trouble. I already had the ship schematic on my tablet, but wasted a few seconds fumbling for the suit locker overlay. Luckily, I found one just four steps ahead of me in the spine, so I did not have far to go. The whooping stopped and the announcement started by the time I got a suit out and opened up. I locked down the helmet just as the announcement ended. My first thought was, whew but then it occurred to me I did not know who to tell or how to tell them.

I scrambled my tablet out and ran off a quick bip to Brill: On VSI, Spine. Suited but tell who? How? Covered...bipped back almost instantly. It was followed a couple heartbeats later with: Good thinking.

The all-clear announcement followed after a few ticks and I zipped the suit back into the locker with the red used tab out. The captain had not reported any fatalities, so somebody must have clued Sarah in.

When I got back from VSI, Brill was waiting for me in environmental. “That was fast thinking, and I’m sorry you had to do it.”

She popped the suit locker open and pulled out a used suit. The communications patch on the sleeve had several options, which I had no clue about. Brill ran through them one at a time including the press this button to report one. As one might expect, it was pathetically easy once you knew about it. Cookie and Pip had taught me how to use the communications patch to talk to them, but at the time, we never thought I would need to report for myself.

“Thanks, Brill. I appreciate your coming down here to tell me now before I forget.”
She laughed. “It’s my fault. I should have taught you that when you were on watch with me. It’s just one of those things that didn’t occur to me because you’d already been through six months of suit drills. Thanks for being so quick on your feet.” She waved then and headed out while I cleared an automated integrity check on the screen.

After she left, I pulled out my spec three materials and started up where I had left off. It seemed apparent that I was not going to be ready to take the spec three exam at the end of the month. After about a month’s worth of work, I still had not gotten through all the instructional materials, let alone mastered the practice tests. Still, I dug in and kept going. Francis found me there at 23:45 when he came to relieve the watch.

“Hey, Ish! How goes it?” he called from the hatch.
“Quiet. Ops normal. Cleared the last integrity check just a little while ago. I’m trying to get through this environmental specialist material and it’s just kicking my butt.”
“You’re kidding! What seems to be the problem?”
“I’ve been wading through the materials ever since we left St. Cloud. It never seems to end.”
He looked at my tablet over my shoulder. “You’re going for spec one? I thought you only wanted spec three. You’re almost through it, though. Good work! You gonna try to leapfrog like Brill did?”

Examining the indicator, I saw that I was, indeed, in the section for spec one environmental test. “Oh crap! I’ve been studying the wrong material all this time?”
“What do you mean?”
“Do you remember that first day when we pulled out of St. Cloud?”
“Yeah, you and Diane were sitting over there on the pad and waiting for navigation detail to be secured,” he said.
“That’s when I thought I might as well try for the spec three slot. It’s open and you guys are understaffed with me in it. The Lois is authorized for three spec threes.”
“Good thinking but how’d you end up studying spec one?”
“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “Diane and I were going through the materials and when the nav detail was secured you and I had the watch, so I bookmarked the beginning and just went back to where I had left off.”
“And?”
“And it looks like I bookmarked spec one and not spec three. I just never looked at it again. I was so sure I was studying three, it just never dawned on me.”
“Hmm. You think you could have been a bit distracted?” he asked innocently.
“You mean by changing divisions and all?”
“Oh, that might be, but I was thinking about Diane.”
“She wouldn’t have messed with my tablet—” I started to say and then noticed him grinning.
“Lemme just point out that you and the very attractive Ms. Ardele were playing kneesies on the floor over there for the better part of three stans. I’m just suggesting that perhaps you were not actually thinking as clearly as you seem to think you were.”
I did not know how to respond and just blushed—really red. Then I got mad because I had spent a month studying the wrong material.
“Well, I’ll start on spec three tomorrow. I’m too tired tonight.” I sighed.
“Mr. Wang, I relieve you,” Francis said formally. “I’m assuming you’ve nothing to report?”
“All ops normal, Mr. Gartner. No maintenance scheduled or performed. You have the watch.”
I started to leave when Francis stopped me. “Ish, I was teasing you.”
“Yes, I know, Francis, but…” I shrugged helplessly.
He nodded then. “I hear ya, brother. I hear ya.”
When I got off work, I intended to just go to bed, but that last half stan had set me off. So instead, I hit the track. A couple other watch standers were going in as well, and I saw Tabitha just settling into the rowing machine.

Eventually, my legs said, “Okay, we’re done now. We’re going to the showers and then to bed. You coming?” So I did.
I woke up too late for breakfast and too early for lunch. I showered and went to the mess deck anyway, and Cookie gave me a pastry. I took it and my coffee and went to find Brill. Diane had the watch and waved at me when I came in. “Hey, Ish. This is your day off,” she teased me.

“I see. I know. Is Big B here?”
She nodded her head toward the office. “Anything wrong?” she asked, looking concerned.
“No, just needed to talk to her about last night.”
Diane knew I was not telling the whole truth, but she did not press. “Hang in there, Ish. I heard you did good.”

The automated system integrity check came up, and while she was distracted, I headed for the office.

My feelings must have been written across my face because as soon as I stepped through the open door she asked, “Ish? What’s wrong?”
“I’ve been studying the wrong stuff for a month,” I blurted.
“I’ve been studying the wrong stuff for a month,” I blurted.
“Okay, breathe…in…out…good. Now, start slowly and perhaps throw in a clue about what in the world you’re talking about.” She was being lighthearted, but she was obviously concerned. I was not sure what expression I wore, but I had her attention.

“Sorry. I’m upset. I’ve been studying to get ready to take the spec three test on the next cycle.”
“Okay, so far,” she prompted gently with a smile.
“I’ve been working since the day we pulled out of St. Cloud. I started going over the materials with Diane during the nav detail. Once it was over, I bookmarked my place so I could go back to it.”
“Keep going,” Brill encouraged me. “Don’t forget to breathe.”
“I was getting discouraged because I could see that I would not be ready for the next test cycle. I’ve been reading for a month and I can’t get to the end of it. There was too much math and science that was taking me forever to wade through.”
“What?” Her brow furrowed in confusion.
I nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Last night, when Francis relieved me I found out I’d bookmarked spec one, not spec three.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and let it out.
“Holy crap, Ish! You didn’t notice?”
I opened my eyes. “Seems silly in hindsight but there’s only the one small notation in the top of the screen. I was so sure I’d bookmarked three that it just never occurred to me to check it again. I expected the material to be hard, so when it was, I just figured that was normal.”
“So you’ve been studying spec one ever since we left St. Cloud?” she asked to confirm what I was telling her.
“Yes.”
“How far did you get?”
I pulled out my tablet and showed her the bookmarked page.
“You’re almost through with it!”
“Yeah, but I don’t understand half of what I’ve gone through so far.”
“That’s not what has you upset, is it?” she said suddenly.
I shook my head. “That’s just stupidity. I’m used to being stupid.”
“Ishmael Horatio Wang, you are a long way from stupid, although if you keep talking like that you might
convince me. Now what the hell is going on?”
I lowered my voice and was overly conscious of Diane just outside the office. “Last night, when Francis
pointed out my mistake, he started teasing me about Diane. He said I probably was not thinking clearly because I’d
been playing kneesies with her.”
“That shit!”
“No, no.” I held up my hand. “He was teasing. He’s a good guy, and I’ve been teased before. He didn’t mean
anything by it.”
“Then what has you so upset, Ish?” she asked gently.
“What if he’s right?”
“What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.”
I lowered my voice as far as I could while still having it audible over the environmentals, “What if being
around Diane distracts me so much that I don’t know what I’m doing? I could put the ship in danger.”
Brill just gaped at me, and I wanted the deck to open and swallow me. Finally, she said, “You’re kidding,
right?”
“What? No. Why would I kid about that.”
“Well, Ish, that’s just about the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Do you really believe that?”
“I didn’t think so. But then again, how would I know? I thought I was studying spec three. What if I had
crossed the CO2 with the O2 lines instead? Or something equally stupid and dangerous?”
“None of us are infallible, Ish. Aren’t you being a little hard on yourself?”
“We’re talking about the safety of the ship. What if I can’t be trusted?”
“Ish, let’s be clear about one thing. I trust you with my life. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have you in my section. Not
only that, but I trust you with the lives of every person on this ship. I don’t for one instant think your gonads got in
the way of your brains. Ever. I’ve seen you work. I don’t buy it. I’m not even gonna rent it for the weekend.”
“But I studied the wrong damn material for the last six weeks! Is that reasonable?”
“I’m sorry, Ish,” Diane said from behind me.
“No, I’m sorry, Diane.” I turned to her. “I—”
“No, I’m sorry, Ish. It was a prank.”
“What?” I asked.
“It was a prank. I didn’t think you’d go this long without catching it.”
Brill started laughing.
“What?” I asked again.
“When we secured from nav detail, you set your tablet down on the station for a second. I changed the
bookmark from spec three to spec two. It was just suppose to be a joke. I didn’t realize you were studying it all this
time.”
“What?” I asked a third time.
“It was a joke, and I’m so sorry.” She looked miserable.
“Really?”
She nodded.
“Oh thank heavens, so I’m not going daft?” I asked.
“See? Now don’t you feel silly?” Brill asked.
Just then what she had said sunk in. “Wait, what did you say you did?” I asked suddenly.
She sighed. “I’m so sorry, Ish—”
“No, no, it’s fine, but repeat what you just said.”
“You set your tablet down on the station as we were setting the normal watch. I changed your bookmark from
spec three to spec two. It was just suppose to be a joke. I didn’t realize you were studying it all this
time.”
Brill’s eyes flicked to mine. “You set it to two?” she asked.
Diane nodded. “Yes, but I didn’t think he’d—”
Brill held up her hand, cutting Diane off.
“Just to be clear, you set it to spec two. Answer yes or no.”
“Yes.”
Brill looked at me. “Francis!”
“Had to be,” I agreed.
“What?” asked Diane.
“I’ve been studying spec one all this time, Diane,” I told her.
“No, spec two. I set it to spec two,” she said.
Brill held up my tablet with the spec one lessons on it.
“But spec one would be practically impossible without any background,” she protested.
“And in spite of that our man Ishmael Wang here has almost finished it in a month,” Brill informed her.
Diane was shaking her head, “But—”
Brill and I both said, “Francis!”
“He did spot it as soon as he looked over my shoulder,” I said. “Not that it would be too difficult for somebody
who knew what the real spec three looks like.”
“And he was riding you about Diane,” Brill pointed out. “Hard.”
“What?” Diane asked.
I could have died, but Brill said, “Francis was teasing Ish about being so captivated by your feminine charms
that he couldn’t see straight, hence his inability to see the difference between spec one and spec three.”
“What?” Diane said.
Brill nodded. “To the point where Ish here was ready to resign because he was afraid Francis was right and he
didn’t want to endanger the ship.”
“That’s crazy.” She rounded on me. “I’m a much bigger threat to the ship than you are, you great ninny!”
Brill and I looked at each other at her outburst. “I don’t think you meant that the way it sounded, Diane,” Brill
said dryly.
“Wait a tick,” Diane turned back to me. “You came down here to resign because you were afraid he was right?”
“I didn’t know how I could have messed up the bookmark,” I protested. “I didn’t think he was right, but I
couldn’t figure out how I had made such a big mistake. You’re a hell of a woman and all, but you’re crew. It’s not
something I’d do. But if he was right and I can’t really think straight around you…I might not know. I had to allow
for the possibility that I’m wrong.”
Brill sat in her chair with the most incredulous expression on her face. Then she stood up and that got our
attention. “Okay, who finds this hysterically funny?” She raised her hand and focused on me. I raised my hand and
we both looked at Diane. She raised her hand partway.
“Not hysterically, but it has its humorous side,” Diane admitted grudgingly.
“Now, other than poor Ishmael studying for spec one—which he could probably pass—what permanent harm
has been done?”
I looked from Diane to Brill and back again. “Well, as long as we’ve established my idiocy is not related to my
lack of emotional control, I’m okay.”
Brill turned to Diane. “Do you have any problems that we need to address as a group?”
Diane thought about it for a moment. “Well, since you put it that way. No.”
“In that case, go clear the ASIC!” she said with a grin.
Diane scrambled out to the watch station and acknowledged the beeping system integrity message.
Brill turned back to me. “Ish, you are, without a doubt, one of the most serious, well-meaning, intelligent, and
sensitive people I’ve ever met, but if you ever let something this stupid get this far again, I will personally strap you
into a precipitation tank and let it fill up.”
“Would you consider doing that anyway?”
She chuckled. “Don’t tempt me. Now, let’s see how far away from spec one you really are.”
“What?”
She held up my tablet. “If you have even half this material after a month, we can have you at spec one by the
time testing rolls around. Can you think of a more fitting comeuppance for our devious Mr. Gartner?”
“But—” I started to say.
“Sit down, Wang. That’s an order!” she said, but her expression betrayed her amusement.
Chapter 14
We had about two stans before Francis came back for the afternoon watch, so we had to work fast to come up with a strategy. Brill and I thrashed through the materials for about twenty ticks while Diane stewed at her station.

“You’ve done remarkably well, Ish,” Brill told me. “But you really don’t have the math skills for this yet, do you?”

“No, I don’t. I recognize it when I see it, but I’d be lying if I said I understood it.”

“Okay, let’s go for Plan B. Would you be happy with spec two?”

“I’d be happy with spec three. The Lois rates three spec threes and she deserves to be fully staffed.”

“Ish, do you know you talk about the ship like she’s a person?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, just as long as you’re aware of it.” She glanced at the chrono. “We need to either get a plan or wait until he has the watch and go form a plan.” She headed out into the section and nodded for me to follow.

“Diane?” Brill said.

Diane stuck her head out from behind the number two scrubber. “I’m here. Just checking the matrix we put in last week.”

“We need a plan or at least a plan for a plan.”

Diane slammed the scrubber’s case closed and came over to us. “I’m in.”

“Simple is better,” Brill said. “First question, can we all pretend that we don’t know he did it?”

“I probably can,” I said.

“I don’t know if I’m up to that,” Diane said. “Under the circumstances, I can’t really fault him for resetting the bookmark. But I don’t like that he was riding Ish. That ain’t right.”

“Well,” Brill said, “if we take the short approach, Diane will only need to keep it together long enough for a quick gotcha. We’ll be done with him by noon. Is that doable?”

Diane started to smile. “Depends on whatcha have in mind, but yeah, I think I can.”

“Okay, here’s what we are going to do.”
Francis was prompt. When he walked through the hatch to environmental he was met with a well scripted tableau.

“Very well, Mr. Wang, since you cannot be trusted, I accept your resignation effective immediately,” Brill said authoritatively. “We’ll find a replacement at Dunsany Roads, and since there are no other openings on the Lois, you’ll be placed ashore there. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Chief. Thank you, Chief,” I said. “I can’t allow my feelings for Ms. Ardele to endanger the ship any longer.”

Diane’s face crumpled up and she had to turn away so we could not see her tears. Frankly, I suspected it was laughter she was hiding.

“Hi?” Francis said uncertainly. “What’s going on?”

“Ah, Francis, good you’re here.” Brill turned to him. “I understand we owe you some thanks for uncovering Mr. Wang’s weakness for Diane.”

“Wha—?” he said.

“Last night, Francis,” I said to him. “You were right. I was so distracted by Diane I didn’t even know what chapter I’d bookmarked in my tablet. It’s true. Whenever I’m around her, I just can’t think of anything else.” I hung my head in shame, and also so he wouldn’t see the corner of my lips twitching as I fought a grin.

“But—” he began.

“Ishmael has explained the situation, Francis. Thank you for being so diligent and spotting the problem. The safety of the ship is, of course, our first concern. We’ll be putting him ashore at Dunsany, and in the meantime, he’s going back to help out in the galley where he can’t do any serious damage.”

“But—” he tried again.

“That leaves us short-handed. I’ve spoken to Mr. Kelley and he doesn’t have anyone to spare, so you’re going to have to cover his watches until then.” Brill was a bulldozer. She just kept pushing and pushing.

“But—” he tried a third time.

“I’m sorry, Diane,” I broke in. “I never meant to hurt you.” I had no idea what I was saying. I was just trying to keep the play going.

“Mr. Wang, I think we’ve had just about enough from you,” Brill said coldly. “You’re dismissed.”

I headed for the hatch and I could see Francis’s face out of the corner of my eye. He was just about primed.

“Thar she blows!” I thought.

“Wait!” he shouted.

“Yes, Francis? You have something to add to this conversation?” Brill asked.

“Is this about the bookmark on his tablet?” he asked.

“Why, yes,” she said. “It is.”

“And you think he’s incompetent because he was so distracted by Diane that he doesn’t know what he’s doing?”

“I believe that’s a fair assessment,” Brill agreed. “You yourself pointed it out last night, I believe. At least he had sufficient integrity to bring it to my attention this morning.”

“But I was just teasing him!” Francis objected. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Oh, Francis, I think you don’t give yourself enough credit. Obviously you are more observant than you know and must have picked up on Mr. Wang’s state of mind,” Brill answered. “The fact remains, that if he can’t keep his head on straight enough to know what bookmark he’s setting on something as simple as his tablet, how can I trust him with the lives aboard this ship? These people trust us to care for them. I can’t overlook the fact that he did not know he’d set his tablet for spec one and during six full weeks he had been so distracted by Diane that he didn’t realize it until you pointed it out to him.”

She was good—very good.

“But,” Francis said, “he didn’t set it to the wrong chapter.”

“Oh?” Brill asked archly. “Then how do you explain this?” She held up my tablet to the page that Francis had last seen me reading. “This is clearly spec one material.”

“True, but he didn’t make the mistake in setting it,” he said.

“I don’t follow, Francis. What are you saying?” Brill asked.

“He didn’t make the mistake in setting it. I set it to spec one the day we pulled out of St. Cloud. I never
dreamed he wouldn’t spot it,” he said miserably.

“So this whole fiasco is your doing?” Brill said incredulously.

Francis nodded and I recognized the can I just melt into the deck now expression on his face. I had been wearing it not so long ago.

“Mr. Wang?” she called to me. “Do you have anything to say to Mr. Gartner on this matter?”

“Yes, Ms. Smith, I do,” I replied.

Francis turned to me with a pained and stricken across his face.

“Gotcha!” I said.

There were about four solid heartbeats of frozen disbelief on Francis’s face before he turned to find Brill and Diane grinning at him. “Gotcha!” they both said together.

“But—” he began.

I walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, Francis. I know, or think I know, what happened.” I nodded toward Diane. “You saw her snatch my tablet and jigger the bookmark, right?”

He nodded.

“Then you thought you’d up the ante by boosting it to spec one?” I asked.

“Yeah, I never expected you wouldn’t spot it, but then watch after watch you came in with it. I’ve never seen anybody wrestle so hard,” he said with what sounded like admiration. “Then you rotated to the next shift and I never got a good opportunity to tell you. To be honest, I didn’t think you’d still be working on the wrong lessons until you mentioned it last night. I couldn’t believe how much of it you’d gotten through.”

“And ribbing me about Diane?”

“Oh, that. I’m sorry but it was just too perfect to pass up. I just couldn’t resis. When it comes to good-looking women, you’re easy to tease, Ish.” He looked at all of us then and said, “I’m sorry. Really I am.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is that good enough for you two?” I asked Brill and Diane.

Brill nodded. “Yeah. I’m good. What about you, Diane?”

There was something in Diane’s stance that made me think she was going to deck him, but she finally said, “Yeah. Good enough.”

“Okay, well, then I guess it’s good enough for me.” I held out my hand to Francis.

He looked at it and then my eyes before taking it. “You’re a good man, Ish,” he said softly.

“I’m an idiot, but it comes naturally to me. I don’t need to use brilliant women like these two as an excuse. I’m dumb enough on my own,” I told him with a grin. “Good, now? Anybody ready for lunch? I think Cookie’s doing lamb with garlic.”

Diane said, “All ops normal, Mr. Gartner. No maintenance scheduled or performed. You have the watch.”

Francis replied, “Thank you, Ms. Ardele, I relieve you. I have the watch.”

“Kneesies,” Diane huffed as she brushed by him, heading for the lock.

“I’ll catch up with you in a few, Ish,” Brill said. “I’ve got some loose ends to finish up.”

I waved and followed Diane out. I almost felt sorry for Francis.
Diane was waiting at the ladder. “You think she’s going to ream him out?”
I shrugged. “She didn’t say much to you. The infraction isn’t worth a reaming. If he’d just left you out of it, I probably wouldn’t have thought twice about it. I’m partially to blame as well. I should have noticed. I’ve been pretty disoriented what with changing sections and trying to get used to watch standing and all.”
“Well, what’s done is done. Let’s get some lunch.” As she turned, she asked, “Did you mean what you said about two brilliant women?”
I chuckled. “Yeah, of course.”
“You couldn’t have said beautiful women?”
“Well, that part seemed obvious.”
She stopped ahead of me on the ladder and looked back. “Really? You think I’m as pretty as Brill?”
“Honestly? I think you are both amazing on so many levels that being gorgeous doesn’t even compete with the rest.”
“Damn, you’re good! Do you think that stuff up on the fly?”
“No, I have a team of writers who think it up for me and communicate via an implant in my ear. Now, do ya think you could move it? I’m getting hungry.” I laughed.
She laughed, too, and continued up the ladder.
“And, Diane?”
She looked back again.
“Don’t be too mad at him. He didn’t mean any harm.”
She gave a little I heard you but I’m not sure what I think about it yet shrug and scampered up the ladder.
When we got to the mess deck, we found a table and saved a seat for Brill. Cookie had, indeed, prepared lamb with some green beans and potatoes. The succulent meat was delicately seasoned with just salt, pepper, and a trace of garlic. It was utterly delightful and I ate every bite. Brill showed up about ten ticks later and took the seat we had saved for her.
“I gotta give ya credit, Ish,” she said as she sat. “The section has been plenty lively since you joined us.”
I blushed. “I’m sorry. I really only want to do a good job.”
She grinned and winked at Diane. “It’s okay. We were getting into a rut. This has bounced us out of it pretty well. Now, about that exam…” She pulled out her tablet and pulled up a quiz and started asking me questions.
Diane offered encouragement in the beginning, but the longer it went on she ended up just sitting and watching. Her head bobbed back and forth from me to Brill and back again, like she was watching some kind of tennis match. Finally, Brill came to the end and grinned. “Seventy-eight!” she said triumphantly.
“Yeah, but what test?” I asked her.
“Spec two.”
“But I haven’t studied spec two,” I protested. She wagged her eyebrows at me. “Think of how well you’ll do once you have.”
Diane’s eyes went wide. “That was amazing.”
“Okay, Ish,” Brill said, “you’re on midwatch tonight and then afternoon tomorrow, right?”
I was so in the groove as Rhon had called it, that I just nodded. I did not even need to look any more.
“Hit the tablet on spec two tonight. Pay attention to the sections on water purification and distillation—those were the questions you did the worst on. I’ll work with you tomorrow afternoon and we’ll see where we are after that.” Her tablet bipped and she headed out. “Time to get back to work.”
Diane and I were off duty, so we sat there for a while. “You were amazing,” she said.
I shrugged. “I guess I picked up more than I thought.”
“You decided not to go for spec one? I thought Brill said she thought you could pass it.”
“She was being overly optimistic. I’ve been wading through the material, but I really don’t have the math background to understand a lot of what I read. I picked up pieces based on the context, but that’s one of the reasons I got so frustrated. I’d been studying for over a month and I just could not get my arms around it.”
“You seemed to have picked up enough, though.”
“Maybe.”
She looked at me with a raised eyebrow.
“Okay.” I grinned. “Yes, I seem to have picked up a lot. The theory and background I could follow in the
lessons. It was when they got into the explanatory math and science that I got lost.”

“Well, you got a month of watches to get it together. You can almost pass it now. You’re going to out rate me soon!”

We split up then and I stuck my head in the galley to see Pip and Sarah. “Would you guys have a few ticks around 14:00 to get together in deck berthing?” I asked.

“Yup,” Pip said. “Is this about your little project?”

“Yeah, I need to line up one more player, but if you two can be there, I think we can get a jump on Dunsany.”

“I’ll be there,” Sarah said with a smile.

I waved and went off in search of Sean.
When Pip and Sarah got to the berthing area they found Sean and me waiting at the table. I had given Sean a little warning about moving slowly around Sarah until she got to know him. I spent only a few ticks with introductions and by then Pip was getting anxious.

“Oh, for the love of the holy handmaidens of harridan,” he said. “You’ve been driving me crazy, now out with it. What is this big plan of yours?”

“Well, we’ve got a lot of yarn…”

“Yeah, that much I know,” he said.

Sean’s eyes got bigger. “How much is a lot?”

“Twenty kilos,” Pip said.

“Sweet mother of mohair,” Sean channeled Pip. “A hundred skeins?”

“Yeah, we took your advice back on St. Cloud and picked them up pretty cheap.” I nodded in the direction of Pip’s locker. “Would you care to do the honors?” I asked him.

He palmed the lock and opened the locker showing all the skeins stacked in there. I thought Sean looked like a kid in a candy shop when he saw them.

“Show him the other one,” I suggested.

Pip opened the other locker as well.

“That looks like a lot of yarn,” Sarah offered shyly.

“Yeah,” Pip said. “You should have seen me trying to find enough room to stow it all. I thought I was going to have to beg pantry space from Cookie.”

I reached in, pulled out a couple of the skeins, and put them on the table in front of Sean. “Okay, Spiderman. What kind of webs can you spin out of this?”

He fingered the threads of one of the skeins. “Are they all this same weight?” he asked idly as he examined it.

“Yup,” Pip said. “Only thing that is different is the color.”

“This is a nice utility-weight yarn. We could make almost anything out of it except maybe baby clothes. What’d you have in mind, Ish?”

“I know you’re making afghans from yours,” I told him. “How’s that going?”

“Pretty well, actually. I’ve almost finished my third one. I’ve had enough practice so that I can do one a week now. I should have four to sell when we get into Dunsany. Maybe five.”

“Can we see a finished one?” Pip asked.

Sean went to his bunk, pulled a brightly colored blanket down, and spread it on the table. Sarah ran her hand across it. “This is lovely,” she said. “My aunt used to do this kind of work when I was a girl.”

Even Pip seemed impressed. “How much yarn did this take?”

“Four skeins for this one.”

“How much will you ask for it?” I asked him.

“I’ll ask for two hundred creds, but I’ll take one twenty-five,” he said.

“I’ll ask for two hundred creds, but I’ll take one twenty-five,” he said.

Pip asked. “You think you’ll get it?”

Sean nodded. “Oh, yeah. Look around the flea next time and you’ll see a lot of this kind of work and some of it in the three hundred to five hundred cred price range depending on size, pattern, and workmanship.”

Pip looked at me then and nodded once. “Okay, Ish. I’m hooked. Tell me the punch line.”

“We have yarn and I have to confess, I don’t think yarn is going to sell on Dunsany. We’ll move a few of them, but it’s a textiles planet. They already have cotton and linen. It’s also not terribly cold so the extra warmth of wool yarn doesn’t carry a lot of benefit.”

“We’re taking container loads of wool!” Pip protested.

“Yeah, but probably to be turned into wool cloth and shipped off planet with the rest of the textile exports.”

“Okay,” Pip said, “so what’s your idea?”

“If we turn it into something that can sell at a higher price point than the raw yarn, then we have an opportunity to take a hundred creds of yarn and make a really good return.”

Sean spoke up then. “What are you thinking of making? Afghans take a lot of time and yarn.”

“What about shawls?” I asked.

Pip looked confused, Sarah thoughtful, and Sean started grinning.

“Do you have a pattern for an open-weave triangular-shaped shawl?” I asked Sean.
He scrambled from the table and headed for his locker. While he rummaged around, Pip asked, “Shawl?”

“It’s a kind of wrap that women wear around their shoulders like a cape.” I told him.

“I know what a shawl is. But you’re thinking of making them?”

I shook my head. “Not me—them.” I pointed to Sean and Sarah.

“Got it!” Sean said and brought back a picture of a woman wearing exactly the kind of shawl I had in mind.

“Perfect,” I told him. “How much yarn to make one of these?”

He consulted the text printed on the back. “Three hundred grams in rough numbers.” He picked up the skein from the table and checked the tag on it. “This kind of yarn, too, medium weight worsted. This is the most commonly used weight of yarn so you picked well.”

“So, a skein and a half per shawl?” I asked.

“Roughly,” he said. “Depends on how the pattern goes; certainly two skeins will do it with a lot of the second one left over.”

“And how much do you think we could sell them for?” I asked him.

“Depends on a lot of things, but anything from fifty to a hundred creds. I should think.”

Pip sat up at that. “Two creds worth of yarn becomes fifty?”

“Well, two creds worth of yarn and about ten stands of labor, but yeah,” Sean replied with a half shrug. “You got this yarn for a cred a skein?”

Pip nodded.

“You caught them on a good day. Double skeins of this quality are usually five creds. I paid three for mine.”

“So, basically, a day’s labor, two skeins of yarn and we get fifty creds?” I re-focused the conversation.

“At least,” Sean agreed.

“Okay, what we need then is a way to make these.” I tapped the picture on the table. “Can you teach Sarah how to do it? And loan her a hook until we get to Dunsany and I can get one for her?”

“Easy. There’s nothing to it. I can have you crocheting in ten ticks. I bet you could have one of these done by the day after tomorrow.”

“Okay, wait, what about the money? What kind of arrangement are we talking about?”

“If we got five creds a skein, we’d be feeling pretty good, right?” I asked him.

“Yeah. I’d be really happy with a five hundred percent margin.”

“Okay, and the shawls should go for fifty creds?” I asked Sean.

“Easily. I was getting five for my lace doilies.”

“Okay, wait, what about the money? What kind of arrangement are we talking about?”

“I want to finish my afghans,” Sean added.

It took most of a stan but we ironed out all the loose ends. In the end we agreed that we would try to sell the yarn but would set aside ten skeins for Sarah and Sean to work with to teach Sarah how to make the shawls. That still left us ninety skeins to try to sell. We would know better once we got a feel for how well the yarn itself sold. It would be a chance for us to test the idea out. Sarah had time to make a few shawls to offer at the co-op in Dunsany Roads. I suspected Sean may have a couple of his own by then, too.

Just when I thought it was all settled, Tabitha walked into the berth area and saw the picture of the shawl.

“Oh! That’s beautiful, Sean, are you making those?”

“Not yet,” he admitted, “but I’m going to teach Sarah how. You wanna learn, too?”

She got a funny look on her face. “Hon, I haven’t done any crocheting since I was a girl…” her voice tapered
off and she got a little smile on her face. “My mother used to make the most gorgeous white lace.” She turned to him and asked, “You have a spare hook?”

Sean looked at me. “Same deal?”

Pip and I shared a glance. “The more the merrier,” I told him. “How many hooks do you have?”

Pip asked, “How many should we buy in Dunsany?”
Chapter 15
Two days out of Dunsany Roads the captain passed the word about customs inspection. Because Dunsany was a Confederation system and not corporately owned, we had to go through an inspection exercise with the local authorities before we could leave the ship. A section in the back of the Handbook explained customs declarations and the kind of goods we were prohibited from taking into Confederation ports.

Pip and I sat on the mess deck after lunch and I asked, “What do you do if you have something that’s prohibited? It’s kinda late at this point to get rid of it.”

He grinned. “Do you have anything on the prohibited list? And can I have some?”

I laughed. “No, it’s just that none of the stuff listed is—technically—illegal on any of the corporate planets except maybe the radioactives and nerve agents.”

“And the biologicals,” Pip reminded me.

“Okay, and the biologicals, but what do you do if you have some poka-juice you just wanna pass through and sell at Betrus?”

“There’s an embargo locker down in main cargo. We put anything we don’t want to be considered in the inspection in there before we dock. The customs people put a tell-tale on the locker so that they know if it’s opened while we’re docked. Anything in there stays put and that’s all they care about. Cargo manifests are easy to check and track and they just lock the prohibited cargo canisters to the ship. We can’t leave without them.”

“Will they search the ship?”

Pip chuckled. “I doubt it. It would take forever. Commercial carriers generally operate on the honor system. They make it easy for us to comply with their rules and regs and so we do it. Occasionally you hear of some small indie captain trying to smuggle stuff into a Confederation port, but it’s really not worth it.”

“Why?”

“Ishmael?” He looked at me seriously. “Have you not noticed that we’ve just traveled through five other systems where anything you wanted to sell was legal? Why take the risk on smuggling when you can sell it legitimately in the next system over?”

“Oh,” I said.

The forms themselves were easy and I did not have anything to put into the embargo locker. Still, I could tell we were in for a rather different experience on Dunsany Roads than our other ports. Pip went for his afternoon run and I headed down to deck berthing to see how the crochet work was coming.

Sean had taught Sarah and Tabitha how to crochet. Tabitha only really needed a refresher because she had done simple lace tatting as a girl. Sarah knew the theory, but had never held a hook before. They had been at it about a week by the time we docked and I was shocked to see how much they had done. Sean, of course, had almost finished his afghans and supervised the shawl work. I found the three of them in Sean’s quad, Sean and Tabitha sat on opposite ends of Sean’s bunk and Sarah occupied the lower bunk across from them. Sean was working on his sixth—and last—afghan.

They seemed cozy, all settled in and surrounded by their yarn and talking softly together. Sarah looked as comfortable as I had ever seen her, and Sean looked pleased to have Tabitha nearby. They had not talked about the arrangement when in the sauna so I wondered if they were keeping the project quiet for some reason. Tabitha kept up the queen bee posture when in the sauna, but I thought she and Sean had an easiness between them while they crocheted that I did not really see in the gym.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Great!” Sarah answered without looking up. “This is my third and I think it’s going to be the best one.” She held it up then for me to admire.

“Wow, that looks excellent!” I told her and it did.

Tabitha added, “I’m on my fifth, but I think she’s beginning to catch up to me with those young fingers,” she joked.

That startled me. Somehow I had the idea that Sarah was actually older than Tabitha, but that was probably just because of how she had been when she first came aboard.

“So? What do you think of this as a way to pass the time underway?” I asked.

“This is fun,” Sarah said. “I can take my hook and a ball of yarn up into my bunk in the evening and get all
cozy and think about the money I’m making.”

“I’m dreaming these silly patterns,” Tabitha said. “I close my eyes and I can see them in my sleep.” They all chuckled at that. “But I like it.” She sighed. “Takes me back to when I was a kid.”

“So? How much yarn do you need to hold you over to Betrus?”

Sean looked at me speculatively. “Seriously?”

“You’ve burned through twelve skeins in a week. That’s almost two a day and we’ve got almost fifty days to Betrus. We don’t have a hundred skeins left anymore.”

Tabitha looked at me out of the corner of her eye and asked, “How much would you charge to sell us the remaining stock?”


“I’ll give you two hundred fifty for the hundred skeins and take the mass onto my allotment right now. That’ll give us the stock we need for our crochet work and you’ll get your mass allotment cleared along with a nice profit on the deal without having to do anything,” she rattled off.

“Talk to Pip,” I said again. “He’s the money man. I just find the deals. That would take us out of the picture on the shawl deal, but that’s okay with me. I only wanted to find some way to leverage our investment.”

“Thanks, Ish. This was a really good idea,” Sean said. “It’s a lot more fun as a group.”

I checked the chrono and realized I still had two stans before dinner, so I pulled out the spec two environmental materials and ran through a practice test. Brill had been drilling me on watch for the last week, so I was getting a much better handle on it and a lot faster than I would have expected. The test went smoothly and when I finished, the score popped up—eight-five. Enough to pass, but the real tests were tougher so I needed to do better. I went back through the test and started digging out the questions I had missed. With a mid-watch coming, I had some time to study before I would see Brill the next afternoon.

I began to think that Francis had actually done me a favor.
I had the morning watch the day we were scheduled to dock at Dunsany Roads so I asked Brill, “Hey, boss? How do we handle watch standing while we’re docked?”

“Well, we pretty much do things the same way as underway, except the watches are a lot longer and a lot looser. Basically, twelves and twenty-fours. With the three of you, that’s twelve on and twenty-four off. We change at 06:00 and 18:00 same as the rest of the ship. By convention, the senior watch stander picks which section he wants and so on down the line. You’re junior so you get what’s left. Different divisions have different requirements but that’s what we do.”

“Wow.” I looked around the section area trying to image being in here for twelve stans at a stretch.

As if reading my mind, Brill said, “You don’t have to stay in the section all that time. The ASIC’s don’t run when we’re docked and running on station power, so you won’t have to deal with that every few ticks. Anytime you want to leave, just slave your tablet and the console will relay any problems to you. You still need to do the VSI once per watch, but that’s still less than normal. We just need to time the last one so it occurs within six hours of pullout.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“It’s quiet everywhere on the ship when we’re docked so hanging out here isn’t that big a deal. Just don’t fall asleep. You can do pretty much anything you can do with your tablet in your hand. That rules out sauna and shower, but if you want to go up to the mess deck, or even hang out in berthing, you can do that if you like.”

“So, I can study?”

“Yup. How’s that going?”

“I took a practice test the other day and got an eighty-five, so it’s climbing. I need to go over the thermal conduction and capacity sections again. I keep reversing hot and cold in my head.”

“Remember that we’re not talking about temperature there but energy levels. Takes more going up than coming down. The temperature is an artifact—an indirect measurement—of the energy level in the fluid. All the transfer on conduction and capacity are based directly on energy, not the abstraction that temperature provides.”

“Oh, that’s what that meant,” I said as one rather confusing passage in the material came back to me. “Thanks.”

“So, enough shop talk. What are you gonna do ashore?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “What do watch standers do ashore?”

“Ishmael Horatio Wang, if you’re gonna go pick out clothes, at a real shop, and spend real credits then you cannot be allowed to go alone.”

“Oh, no? Why not? Is there some Confederation thingy?”

“Um, yeah, that’s it. It’s a Confederation rule. All men have to take at least one woman with them when they shop for clothes.”

“That’s kinda hard on single guys, isn’t it?”

She considered and shook her head. “Not the good ones. The trick for them is figuring out which woman to take.”

“Henri!” I exclaimed.

“Henri?”

“That’s the guy’s name…the one I’m suppose to see. Henri Roo-something.”

“Henri Roubaille?”
“Yeah, that’s it. Henri Roubaille.”
“He gave you an introduction to Henri Roubaille?” she sounded amazed, incredulous.
“Yeah.”
“Oh, we are so going shopping,” she crowed.
“Who we?” I asked beginning to get suspicious.
“Hmm, good question. Who wouldn’t want to go to Chez Henri? Diane will kill me if we don’t take her. Me, of course, you’re not going without me. Oh, and Beverly, if we can swing the watches. Rhon Scham would be good, too, and I owe Jillian a favor for Arghon.”
“Wait! Jillian?” I asked. “The only Jillian I know is the second mate!”
“Yeah, that’s her.”
“You want me to take the second mate with me clothes shopping?”
“This isn’t the mall, stooge! We’re talking about Chez Henri!” she exclaimed with a grin.
“Okay, what is Chez Henri? Why is this such a big deal? It’s just a tailor shop.”
“Oh, no. Not a tailor shop. This is way beyond a tailor shop.”
“If it’s not a tailor shop, what is it?”
She laughed. “You really don’t know?”
“How would I know? My mother bought my last set of civvies. What I know about clothes is that cotton wrinkles easily.”
“Oh, we are gonna have so much fun with you,” she said and I confess, that might have been the first time she really scared me.
Docking at a Confederation port did not seem any different from the others. We went to navigation detail just before 15:00. Diane had the afternoon watch so she stayed on duty, but Francis and I had to report just the same.

When we got settled, Brill came out of her office and said, “Okay, people. Time to pick your watches. We should be docked at 18:00 so first section will get the duty. If it’s earlier than 18:00 when we secure the nav detail, whoever picks first watch has to fill in the difference. Agreed?”

Since I did not have a lot of choice, I just nodded. Diane and Francis agreed as well. It did not really matter in the long run.

“Francis?” Brill asked.
“Second,” he said.
“Diane?”
“Third,” she said.
“Okay, Ish, that leaves you with first.”
I just nodded. “Okay, by me.”
“Take the pad and go curl up on the floor of my office,” she told me. “You had the morning watch and you’ll be awake all night. Try to get a little nap in while we’re maneuvering.”

I did not think it was likely that I would sleep, but she closed the door and when I laid down, I nodded off. It was not a sound sleep, but it was probably better than nothing. I had gotten a good sleep the night before so I was not too worried.
Brill opened the door and said, “Ish? Rise and shine.”
I clambered up off the floor, dragged the pad out with me, and threw it in the locker. The chrono said 17:45.
“We’re here?” I asked trying to get my brain re-engaged.
“Yup. Just secured from nav detail.”
I yawned and my brain popped a little. I relieved Diane and slaved my tablet to the console. Francis was already gone. Diane and Brill were looking at me in a way that I found a bit disconcerting.
Brill said, “Tomorrow when you get off watch, grab some sleep. We’ll come at 13:00 to take you ashore.”
Diane had a smile that I could only classify as predatory.
“Take me where ashore?” I asked warily.
“To fulfill your promise to Bresheu, of course. To visit Henri Roubaile,” Brill replied. “We’ll want to do it early in our stay so that if he needs to do any adjustments there’ll be time before we have to leave.”
“Now, wait,” I said. “This is all well and good and I appreciate you guys helping me stay out of trouble with the Confederation authorities by shopping with me, but this guy sounds expensive. Can I afford him?”
Diane answered, “It doesn’t cost anything to shop. If he doesn’t have anything you can afford, then you just don’t buy it.”
Brill suggested, “Ish, why don’t you go get something to eat. Diane and I will hold down the fort here until you get back.”
“Thanks, I need coffee in the worst way.”
As I headed out the door, Diane asked Brill about the Confederation authorities but I was too groggy to pay attention. Naps do that to me sometimes. I was afraid it might be a long night.
When I went back to environmental, I took a fresh mug of coffee with me. Diane had gone, but Brill was sitting at the console. “You didn’t have to wait,” I told her, indicating my tablet.

“No problem, Ish. I’m going to grab some supper in a tick. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I nodded. “The food helped perk me up and I can always wander around the ship.”

“How’re you doing on the spec two materials?”

“Really good. I’m still not confident that I could pass the real exam, but I’m getting mid-to-high eighties on the practices. That’s probably good enough, but I want to go over that fluid thermodynamics section a couple more times.”

She stood then and shook out her legs one at a time. “You’ll have plenty of time.”

“So? We’re going to see Henri tomorrow afternoon? Who all is going?”

“If you’d asked me, I’d have said you and Diane were completely uncalled for.”

I shrugged. “Wind through the sails, boss. The tablet thing was just stupidity on my part. I can’t imagine why I never noticed. Ultimately, he probably did me a favor because I doubt that I’d be getting ready for the spec two exam if I hadn’t spent a month banging my head against spec one.”

“That’s true enough. You’d be ready for spec three though.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. In the end, it’s irrelevant. As for the Diane thing, he was right about that. I am too easy to tease about women. Maybe having my face rubbed in it so badly helped me, too.”

She smiled sympathetically. “Well, Diane thinks the world of you, Ish. We all do.”

“Aw, thanks. Growing up, I didn’t have sibs or an extended family. I always wondered what it would be like. I think I’m getting a feel for that now.”

Laughing, she nodded. “Yeah, that’s true. Well, I just wanted to touch base with you before heading out for supper. I’ll be aboard all night, so if you get in a bind, or can’t stay awake or anything, bip me, okay?”

“I’ll be fine. The nap and the coffee helped.” I held up my mug with a smile. “There’s plenty more where this came from.”

“Oh, I’ll stop being a mother hen. Carry on, Mr. Wang.” She laughed as she headed for the hatch.

I liked hearing her laugh.

I settled into the console and ran a little checklist of things I needed to do before morning. Diane had changed out the water line filters on the number three scrubber pumps earlier in the day. Nothing else needed scheduled maintenance until we had to swap the algae matrix in a couple of days, so I got no help there. I only needed to do one VSI and decided to save that for 03:00. It would give me something to do on the back side of the watch. Sitting there at 18:30, twelve stans looked like a long, long time.

There was nothing to be done about it, so I put my feet up on the console, made sure my coffee was in easy reach, and settled into my studies. I had a long time to sit, nothing else to do, and nobody was likely to interrupt me. I pulled up the section on liquid thermodynamics and started from the beginning.
Chapter 16
Eventually the long night ended. Francis showed up right on time at 05:45 and smiled in sympathy when he saw me. “You holding up?”

“Kinda. Not as bad as I thought it would be. I got a lot of studying in.”

He looked uncomfortable at the mention of studying, so I added, “You did me a favor with the bookmark thing, you know?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“If you hadn’t set it to spec one, I’d still be slogging through spec three and wouldn’t have even thought about leapfrogging a rating.”

“Well, I still feel bad. I thought sure you’d have caught the file setting as soon as you brought up the lesson.”

“Hindsight, eh? I should have. I’ll never make that mistake again, but you were also right about me being distracted. There was a lot going on then. Are you ready to take this on?” I jerked my head at the console.

“No, but it’s my turn.”

“All ops normal, Mr. Gartner. No maintenance scheduled or performed. You have the watch.”

“I relieve you, Mr. Wang. I have the watch. And keep an eye out for the girls this afternoon. They’ve got something up their sleeves.”

Laughing I headed for my bunk and a few stan’s sleep before I found out what it might be.
I had set my tablet to bip me at 12:30 so I had time for a shower before leaving for Roubaille. I woke a lot more refreshed than I thought I might be. My body had adapted to the watch cycle pretty well. Something about teaching it to sleep when I needed to and to stay awake when that was required. The old ideas of morning and night seemed a trifle artificial in the twenty-four stan world of watch standing. When I came out of the san, Bev, Brill, and Diane were all waiting for me. Normally, that would have been scary enough but under the circumstances, I almost turned around and walked right back in. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was met with.

Beverly, of course, was in her black leathers, but instead of the usual armor plating under it, she wore a kind of silky chemise in a pale color that looked white next to the midnight black of the leathers. The material glowed against her darker skin. She was not wearing the jacket buckled at the waist the way she usually did, but instead she left it open all the way down the front so that the tails swung free. With her buzz cut hair, tattoos, and piercings she looked both fascinating and terrifyingly fierce.

Diane wore heels and a black suit with an absolutely stunning green silk blouse unbuttoned so far she risked imminent danger of indecent exposure. The collars of both the blouse and the jacket were turned up to frame her face but also accentuated the plunge by extending the V even farther. Before I managed to track up to her face, I could not help but be aware of the softness swelling under that silky blouse.

When I finally got a look at Brill, the urge to retreat to the san became almost too much to bear. She looked awe inspiring, wearing a pair of straight legged slacks and very pointy shoes. Her legs seemed to go half way to the overhead before disappearing into a dark-red tailored jacket with offset black buttons. This was not the scarlet red of blood but a richer almost burgundy color without the purple overtones. The tailoring on the jacket was impeccable. The fabric hugged every curve—and there were some fascinating curves. Her jacket had a standup collar—it was almost military and oriental all at once, but really neither. She wore no blouse under the jacket, or at least none that I could see. This left her long neck, throat, and upper chest exposed in a way that shipsuit and tee never would. She did not have Diane’s cleavage, but she did not suffer one iota from the lack. She had done something with her hair, too. It had a kind of wild, spiky appearance that was totally at odds with the collected and cool Brill I was used to. She was smiling in a way that was very disturbing because of the way my body was reacting.

“Wow.” It was all I could get out past the blood pounding in my ears.

The three of them looked at each other and passed some primal communication that I could not interpret.

“Don’t forget the chip from Bresheu,” Brill reminded me.

“We’ll see you at the lock in five ticks,” Diane added.

“We know where you sleep,” Bev warned me as they left.

I sighed and put on my civvies. Straightening my jacket in the mirror, I grimaced at the guy looking back at me. He did not seem too pleased with what he saw either. With any luck, he would be wearing something a bit more presentable to wear when I got back.

When I got to the lock, Sean had the duty. “Good luck, Ish.” His face twisted into a mischievous grin as I signed out.

“Are you coming?” Bev asked.

Sean shrugged helplessly and I waved to him as they escorted me out of the ship.

Brill asked, “Do you have the chip?”

I pulled it out and held it up. “Right here.” As I slipped it back into my pocket, I saw their eyes following it the whole time with a kind of hungry reverence.

Seeing them again, I almost turned and retreated into the ship. If the lock had not already started to cycle closed, I might have bolted. There did not seem to be quite enough oxygen in the docking bay and the stinging cold was not helping my feeling of sudden overload as Bev’s body responded to the temperature under that silky chemise.

“Now that we have your attention,” Brill said, arching an eyebrow, “shall we go?” She turned and led the way, while Bev and Diane waited to block my retreat. I took a deep breath and followed her to the lift. I was very aware of how nicely tailored the slacks were and wished, just a little, that her jacket were a bit shorter. I could hear Beverly and Diane striding along side by side just behind me, not quite in step, but very close to it.

At the lift, Brill stopped and held the door while Diane and Bev ushered me into the car. As I turned I could see a half dozen people staring after us before the metal doors cut off the view. We had walked right through the group
of them, and I had not even noticed. Judging from the looks, they had noticed us.

The lift stopped at level eleven and the doors slid apart revealing the posh opulence of the upper deck. Brill strode out over the lush carpeting without looking back. She did not need to. The possibility of me not following her was as remote as a planet suddenly breaking from its orbit. At that moment, I understood the concept of magnetic personality in a whole new way. Besides, I had the impression that Bev and Diane were prepared, and able, to carry me should I balk.

As we walked down the nicely appointed corridor, the feeling of being completely at the mercy of these three powerful, brilliant, gorgeous, sexy women almost overpowered me. I could barely breathe. It scared the hell out of me, but I also realized just how much I enjoyed it. I felt like I was riding a roller coaster without seatbelts.

Near the front of the shop I caught sight of us as a group reflected in the glass. Brill, the statuesque goddess, strode the deck like some modern-day Valkyrie. Diane and Bev were in escort position one step behind me and offset one left and the other right. I was in the middle and did not feel so much like a prisoner but kind of protected. I straightened up and tried to walk with a bit more confidence. If these magnificent women thought I was worth protecting, then I wanted to at least pretend to be worthy. The glimpse was over in a flash as we hit the double doors and Brill sailed through them and into Chez Henri.

Chez Henri was nothing like what I thought of when I pictured a shop in my mind’s eye. I immediately realized that I was way out of my league. Upon entering, I noticed there were no displays of any kind. There were not even any mannequins. The entry consisted of just a podium where a woman wearing a tweed suit stood and peered at us over antique-looking half-glasses. Doors flanked her on either side. The whole set up reminded me of a posh restaurant. Sizing us up with a glance she addressed Brill. “Good afternoon, madam, do you have a reservation?”

Brill is not easily intimidated, especially not by tweed-suited receptionists. “We’d like to see Monsieur Roubaille,” she said with a cool smile.

The receptionist was a pro and merely smirked. “Many people would, madam, but without a reservation, I am afraid it is quite impossible.”

“Excuse me,” I spoke for the first time since leaving the ship and with what I hoped was considerably more confidence than I felt. “My name is Ishmael Wang and Monsieur Bresheu said I should pay a visit when I arrived in Dunsany.” I produced the chip and held it up.

“Impossible. Bresheu is in St. Cloud,” the woman said dismissively, thrown off by my interruption.

“And, as it happens, we have just arrived from there.”

Brill slid smoothly aside and I stepped forward.

“If you would be so kind as to pass this on to Monsieur Roubaille, we can wait.” I handed her the chip.

She took it between thumb and finger as if suspicious of its cleanliness and turned it so the flowery B was visible on the casing. She controlled her emotions well, but her eyes flared slightly as her eyes focused on the chip. She looked first at me and then at each of the women with a new kind of uncertainty.

“Of course, Monsieur,” she said finally with a small nod in my direction. “I’ll be but a moment.”

She disappeared through the door on the right. I looked behind me and saw Beverly and Diane arranged so they could watch the entry while Brill was standing off to the side with a small, satisfied smile. She winked once quickly and gave the tiniest of nods.

I could hear the voices coming from behind the door even before it burst open and a thin man rushed into the entry with the receptionist in tow. “Mr. Wang?” he said, looking at me. “My name is Henri Roubaille. Welcome to my shop. How may I help you today?”

“Bonjour, Monsieur. As you can see, I am in need of some more suitable clothing.”

“Certainly, if you would please step this way?” He indicated where the receptionist held the door open and swept us into the inner sanctum.

I followed him through the door and Brill, Diane, and Beverly trailed me. We entered into a smallish room with sofas and easy chairs arranged artfully around a coffee table. To be honest, I had no idea what to expect, but it was not this. I had yet to see a single garment that was not already in use and I grew more confused as each tick passed.

“Please, have a seat.” He swept a hand at the chairs. Brill nodded to Diane and Bev who sat together on one sofa while she took one of the side chairs. I followed and took the seat she had indicated with her eyes. M. Roubaille stood in attendance at the front of the room and, after a few ticks of pleasantry on the subject of refreshments, began the serious business. “How may I serve you this afternoon, Monsieur?”

Brill spoke while I was still trying to figure out what I was doing. “M. Wang needs an outfit, Monsieur. We visited Bresheu in St. Cloud but ran out of time before he could decide and M. Bresheu graciously provided the introduction to you.”

M. Roubaille paid particular attention to Brill but his eyes periodically tracked to Diane and Beverly as well. “And do we know what kind of outfit? Formal? Evening wear? Day wear?”
“Casual, multipurpose, suitable for business or a dinner with a colleague,” she replied instantly. “Something that fits him. Perhaps a suit or some other ensemble.” She smiled and finished with, “That is why we have come to you, Monsieur.”

I heard the words, but I did not understand the message that Brill had just given M. Roubaille. Apparently, he did because he gave a little bow to her and said, “Of course.” He turned to me and asked, “Shall we begin, Monsieur?” He held out his open hand indicating a passage to the side. I stood and followed him.

He led me around the corner to a small, draped changing room. I could hear Brill and Diane talking in low voices on the other side of the partition somewhere with Beverly punctuating the discussion, but I could not make out their words. Everything was quiet and muffled.

Roubaille stood me in the middle of the room and said, “Very well, Monsieur, if you would kindly slip out of your garments?” He held up a sumptuous-looking white robe. I stripped off my boots, pants, and shirt, laying them across the back of a chair. “The under garments as well, Monsieur. The canvas must be fresh.”

I slipped off my ship-tee and he slid the robe over my shoulders while I stripped off my boxers from underneath. My socks were the last to go. I should have been nervous but the robe felt so luxurious against my skin. I did not even flinch at being practically naked with this strange man in the room. Besides, I did not want to embarrass Brill and the rest by making some kind of scene. I could still hear them talking softly and I found their quiet conversation comforting in a weird way.

“If you would slip into these, now, Monsieur…a bit of support, yes?” He held a pair of briefs toward me and I slipped them on under the robe. After months of boxers, the soft cotton briefs felt a bit odd, but comforting. “Now, I think we are ready to begin. If you would stand here?” He indicated a spot on the floor and pulled a drape open to reveal a mirror. He came to stand behind me and we looked into the glass together for a moment. He stood just a bit shorter than me and off to the side so he could see me well in the glass. He reached up with one smooth movement and slipped the robe from my shoulders and I stood there looking into the glass wearing only the snug briefs.

“So, Mr. Ishmael Wang? Who do you think you are?” he asked it softly, catching my eyes in the mirror. He did not ask it the way my mother used to when she was angry. His query put a particular emphasis on the word think.

“I’m just a guy. Nothing special, but I’d like to have some decent clothes.” I smiled at his reflection in the mirror.

He tsked and shook his head at me. “Please do not waste my time with this foolishness. You arrive at my shop with an introduction from Bresheu himself, and not merely a business card. No, you present a custom data chip with his initial on the case! You arrive in the company of not one, but three of the most delightful and strikingly beautiful women on this end of the galaxy, and you have the audacity to say to me ‘I’m just a guy’?” He pursed his lips in a puckered little smile. “I think we both know you are more than that.”

The world receded and I found myself staring at the mirror. The running had done a lot for my body over the last few months. While I still was not beefy across the arms and shoulders like Pip, the muscles in my thighs and calves were pretty well defined. Not bodybuilder material but still pretty decent and I was surprised to see the way the light fell across my stomach. I had never been fat in my life, but neither did I have washboard abs before—even when running track in school. I ran a hand across my stomach while the shadows played in the mirror. I did a half turn and looked at the way the running had shaped up my buttocks before I realized what I was doing and glanced at M. Roubaille. He merely stood with the robe in his hands and waited patiently.

“Please, M. Wang.” He offered a reassuring smile. “You cannot afford to be shy. You must have a good look at yourself if we are to understand how you should be dressed.”

So, I took a deep breath and turned this way and that. The white cotton briefs fit perfectly and I started to get an idea of how others might see me—young still, beyond the coltishness of youth but not yet at that point of full maturity—slight of build but definitely male.

“How do you like what you see, M. Wang?”

It did not exactly feel natural standing there looking at myself in the mirror while this stranger watched me, but it was as if that part of my mind were numbed. I knew it was weird, but the weirdness did not seem to matter. “Yes.” I nodded slowly, still looking at myself in the mirror. “I think I do.”

“So, are you ready to try on clothes?”

I nodded.

“Very well,” he said and slipped the robe back over my shoulders. “This way, please. I think we are done measuring.”

“We should?”

He nodded to the glassy sensors in the flooring and walls. “Of course, Monsieur. I must know your physical dimensions, just as you need to know your spiritual ones.” He peered into my face. “Yes, I think we are ready.”

He led me back out to where the women were seated. It was a little disconcerting to be in public wearing not
much more than a robe, but it was not that much different than the sauna, if I did not count M. Roubaille, his assistants, and everybody besides me dressed to the teeth.

“With your permission, ladies,” he addressed them, “we will begin.”

He undraped another mirror and stood me in front of it. I was afraid for a moment that he was going to whisk the robe off and leave me standing there in my briefs again, but instead he took a pair of beige slacks from a hovering assistant and helped me slip them on under the robe. I felt better with pants, but the feeling did not last long as he then stripped off the robe and left me standing in front of the mirror wearing only the slacks. The mirror was angled slightly so I could not see the women seated just to my right in its reflection, but I could sense their eyes on me. M. Roubaille tugged the seam and smoothed the fabric over my backside in an oddly impersonal manner—as if he were dressing a mannequin. They looked good, fit well, but Brill summed it up when she said, “Too old.”

Stepping back, M. Roubaille nodded and said simply, “Yes. Indeed.”

He reached out and plucked a different pair of slacks from another assistant’s hands. He slid the beige pants down my legs and handed them off while helping me into the second pair, a nicely tailored pair of twill slacks in a chocolate brown. I stood there for a moment, looking at myself barefoot and shirtless in the mirror.

“Too formal,” Beverly offered.

“Hmm,” M. Roubaille said, thoughtfully. “You may be right. How do you feel about denim, M. Wang?” he asked.

“Denim?” I asked, still contemplating the twill in the mirror trying to decide what Beverly found formal about them.

“Yes, denim. What are commonly referred to as blue jeans?”

“I like them very much.”

His assistant produced a new item and M. Roubaille helped me out of the twill and into a pair of dark-blue denim jeans. They were buttery soft—as if they had been washed about a hundred times, but were not the least bit faded. They had an absolutely perfect dark-blue color. The pants slipped up my legs and across my rear like they were made for me. I felt the soft fabric hug my thighs and settle low around my hips. They had a button fly instead of a zipper and as I struggled with the unfamiliar placement, I spotted the white cotton robe lying across the chair where M. Roubaille had placed it after I had tried on that first pair of trousers. Suddenly I became conscious of all the people in the room who had watched me get into and out of several pairs of pants. I heard what sounded like a soft whimper from the direction of the couch, but I did not dare turn my head. I hurriedly finished buttoning the jeans and looked at myself in the mirror trying to ignore the flush of red that flooded my face and naked chest.

Roubaille turned me this way and that so I could get a good look in the mirror, and I heard Brill say, “I think those will do.”

Diane added, “Oh, yeah.”

After the briefest of pauses, Bev said, “I don’t know. Could he try on the twill again, just to compare?”

I lost it then and started laughing. They were obviously enjoying themselves. If they wanted to watch, some little imp inside of me wanted to give them something to see. I turned and looked back over my shoulder at the mirror, so I could see the way the denim hugged my butt. I brushed a hand across it ever so slightly.

“I think these will do nicely,” I announced to the room at large. Then I turned to face them and trailed a hand down across my stomach until my thumb hooked into the waistband and my fingers just hovered over the buttons.

“Do you think they fit?” I asked them. While my fingers drummed nonchalantly.

Diane repeated a breathy, “Oh, yeah.”

Brill cleared her throat and added, “Definitely.”

Bev just grinned with a very hungry looking glint in her eye.

M. Roubaille’s assistant on the other side of the couch just nodded. Her eyes were quite large and fixed on my fingers.

“Do you have something suitable in the way of a shirt, M. Roubaille?” I asked.

From the way he smiled, I got the impression that he enjoyed the performance much as I did—perhaps more. “I believe I do, M. Wang.”

He slipped a long sleeved selection in pale pink cotton up my arms and across my shoulders. It was not the smooth cotton I expected but a richly textured oxford cloth. “Pink?” I asked skeptically.

“Trust me. Few men have the ability to wear pink. You are one of them.”

I shrugged, slipped it on, and buttoned it, slipping the tails into my jeans. I felt the women’s eyes on me as I slid my hands down into my pants.

He had me stand still for a moment while he walked slowly around me, tugging and adjusting. He unbuttoned one extra button on my shirt. “You can get away with this,” he murmured with a sly wink.

I turned to face my audience again, letting the fingers of my right hand slide up to the collar of the shirt and
then play across the exposed upper chest where the extra button was undone. “Do you think this makes me look too
girly?”

The assistant standing behind the couch shook her head vigorously.
Diane cleared her throat before speaking. “Girly? Ah, no.”
Brill added, “If that’s girly then I’m on the wrong side of the fence.”
Bev just grinned some more.
He had me sit in the chair and handed me a pair of navy socks with padded toes and heels along with a pair of
low boots. The boots were made from an amazingly supple leather with a soft café au lait color and a brushed finish
that made them seem almost like a smooth suede. They slipped on easily and fit perfectly. I stood in them and
stepped to the center of the room. They had just a bit more heel than I normally wore, but the extra two or three
centimeters made me stand a little straighter.

“You need a jacket and a belt,” Roubaille said. “But how do you like this so far?”
I shook my head in admiration. “These are such simple clothes, but they fit so well they seem almost elegant.”
Grinning I added, “But the real audience is over there.” I nodded to where Brill, Bev, and Diane were seated.
He smiled. “They seem to approve, Monsieur.”
“I have a belt, perhaps,” I offered. I stepped back into the changing room and pulled the boy toy belt from my
pants on the chair. It had been made especially for me and held a sentimental value beyond the actual belt and
buckle. The leather slid smoothly through the belt loops and the golden buckle with the black dragon head rode
perfectly on my lower stomach.

“An excellent piece of workmanship,” M. Roubaille admitted. “And exactly the right touch of whimsy. Now,
for the jacket.” He held open a coat for me to slide into.
I slipped my arms into it and he pulled it up across my shoulders. Again, he surprised me with both color and
texture. The coat was made from a very narrow-wale, lightweight corduroy in an olive green. It was very close to a
neutral color, but picked up the pink in the shirt and countered it beautifully. It was a double-breasted cut with wide
lapels and a rounded collar like the old time sailor’s pea coats. It even had big, anchor-embossed black buttons. It
was light enough that I could wear it around the station without getting overheated, but when I pulled it closed and
tried the buttons, I could feel the warmth begin to build up. If I were ever stuck on the docks, this would certainly
keep me warm enough.

“Ladies?” I asked. “Will this do?”
I displayed it for them, buttoning and unbuttoning the jacket. I could not resist and even slipped it off entirely
and slung it over my shoulder. Again, he surprised me with both color and texture. The coat was made from a very narrow-wale, lightweight corduroy in an olive green. It was very close to a neutral color, but picked up the pink in the shirt and countered it beautifully. It was a double-breasted cut with wide lapels and a rounded collar like the old time sailor’s pea coats. It even had big, anchor-embossed black buttons. It was light enough that I could wear it around the station without getting overheated, but when I pulled it closed and tried the buttons, I could feel the warmth begin to build up. If I were ever stuck on the docks, this would certainly keep me warm enough.

“Ish.” She sounded a bit breathless.
I took Brill aside and asked softly, “Are you okay, Brill? You look a little flushed.”
“Fine. Really.” Her smile looked shaky to me.
“But, of course, madam,” he said and brought out three other selections—a classic white oxford, a turtleneck
jersey in a dark green that worked perfectly with the jacket, and a henley pullover with a simple rounded collar and
five buttons at the top.
I took my time trying each of them on, enjoying being watched in an odd way.

Finally, M. Roubaille asked, “If there’s nothing else, may I have your purchases wrapped, Monsieur? Or do
you wish to wear them?”
“Might I take a moment to consult with my friends?” As soon as he said the word purchases, a very panicky
feeling washed over me. I did not know if I could afford this. What little I knew of fashion made me fear I was in
way over my head.

“But of course.”

Brill, Bev, and Diane were all sitting there with very odd expressions and looking a bit flushed. “I’m sorry that
took so long,” I said. “But what do you think of the outfit?”
Bev spoke first. “It’s you, Ish.” She sounded a bit breathless.
I took Brill aside and asked softly, “Are you okay, Brill? You look a little flushed.”
“I’m fine. Really.” Her smile looked shaky to me.
“Okay, well, how do I ask how much this is going to cost? I’m beginning to worry that I can’t really afford it.
And I don’t wanna look like an idiot getting back into my old clothes.”
“You won’t look like an idiot. Just ask to see the statement. You can always pick a few pieces and leave the
rest. He won’t think twice.”
I nodded and turned to Diane. “What do you think? Will these work?”
“I think so, but if you could just slip the jacket off and walk over there and back for me once?”
I did as she asked, pretending not to know they were watching my butt. When I turned, I found her and Beverly
nodding at each other. “Yes, Ish. I think that works very well.”

“Very well, then, M. Roubaille, I think these will do. If I could see the statement?”

His assistant had a pleased little smile on her face as she presented me with the tablet displaying the accounting and then slipped back into the background while I consulted with Brill, Diane, and Beverly once more. The tab was two thousand two hundred and eight credits.

Diane gasped when she saw the amount. “Wow, I knew it was going to be steep but…”

“I can loan ya some if you need, Ish,” Bev offered in a lowered voice.

I looked to Brill. “Well, you really should keep the jacket. That’s only a kilocred and it is spectacular on you.”

I looked from one to the other before speaking. “No. The question is: how does this relate to clothing in general? I don’t buy clothes and I have no idea what a pair of jeans costs.”

Bev caught on first. “It’s about ten times what you would pay anywhere else, but you are never going to find clothes that fit that well ever again. I can help you if you’re short.”

I grinned and turned to the proprietor. “Thank you, M. Roubaille. This will be most satisfactory.” While Brill, Diane, and Bev looked on dumbfounded, I thumbed the bill.

He led me back to the dressing room where I retrieved my tablet and loose articles. The dolphin slipped nicely into an inside pocket of the jacket, and there was even a pocket for my tablet. His assistants bundled up my old clothing separately from my spare shirts and took everything back out to where Bev, Brill, and Diane waited.

“Are we ready, ladies?” I asked.

They all nodded, and M. Roubaille showed us out. On the way he handed me another data chip, this one inscribed with an ornate R on the case. “Anytime I can be of assistance, M. Wang, this will get my attention.” He smiled and added softly, “It’s not every day my assistants get to enjoy themselves so much, Monsieur. They hope you’ll return soon.”

“Thank you, M. Roubaille.” I offered him a smile and small bow. “This has been an amazing experience.” I tucked the case into my pocket beside the dolphin.

On the way out, I took the bundle of old clothes and stuffed it down the first disposal chute I came to. Brill, Bev, and Diane smiled at me. “Can’t afford the mass,” I told them.

“Well, let’s go out to dinner,” Bev said. “I feel like celebrating.”

On the way to the lift, I found myself in the lead with the women walking abreast behind me, Brill in the middle flanked by Diane and Bev. They looked terribly pleased with themselves for some reason—almost proud. “One of you will have to cover dinner for me,” I said. “That was almost all I had.”

“Oh, after this afternoon’s performance, I think the least we can do is buy ya dinner,” Brill said.
Chapter 17
We were on the lift heading for the restaurants on level eight when Diane’s tablet bipped. “I’m going to have take a rain check on dinner,” she said. “I’ve got to relieve Francis in half a stan.”

I checked the chrono and was shocked to discover that we had spent the whole afternoon at Chez Henri. Diane had the watch starting at 18:00 and it was already 17:15. My brain was having trouble processing everything. Of course it was late, we were headed for dinner, but somehow I had not connected the passage of time with Diane’s impending watch. I pulled my own tablet out and set an alarm for 05:15 just in case.

“You planning on staying out all night, boy toy?” Bev asked with a grin.

I shook my head. “No, but as crazy as this day has been, I don’t wanna take any chances.”

“You better not be late,” Diane said with a laugh. “I’m gonna be exhausted after this afternoon and staying up all night on the midwatch tonight.”

“We’ll get him back early,” Brill told her.

“Who says?” Bev demanded. “We need to take him out and show him off a little, don’t we?”

“Oh, yes,” Brill agreed, “but we ought to let him sleep tonight. He’s running on less than six stan’s sleep now. He’s got day watch tomorrow and he’ll be fresher tomorrow night.”

They were grinning at me the whole time they discussed my fate. “Don’t I have any say in this?” I asked.

Brill and Bev looked at each other and then at Diane. Finally, they turned back to me and Bev said, “No. Why do you ask?”

“Silly me,” I said. I was getting a bit giddy by then. I had not eaten since sometime in the midwatch when I had raided the cooler in the galley. For all her joking, Brill was actually right on the mark how tired I really was. I just hoped I would not fall asleep in my soup.

When the lift stopped at level eight, Diane gave me a little hug and a peck on the cheek. “You did good today, Ishmael. Thanks for letting me come along.”

I was too flustered by so much stimulation to say anything except, “You’re welcome.”

Brill led us off the lift and we waved to Diane as the doors closed. Brill asked, “So, what’ll we eat?”

“Chicken,” I said. “Or beef.”

They looked at me strangely.

“Chicken is a local specialty according to Pip. We’re getting some for the stores trading. Cookie’s going to be in his element between the chicken and lamb.”

“Lead on, McDuff,” Brill told me. So I started down the corridor with Bev on one side and Brill on the other. As we walked along, I noticed people staring. I had gotten used to it whenever I went out with either Brill or Bev. Brill because she was so tall, and Bev because she was so tough looking. With both of them decked out as they were, it did not surprise me that we were getting a lot of second glances. I myself liked catching glimpses of them in any reflective surface we passed. What did surprise me was that a lot of the stares were directed at me.

About fifty meters around the station, we came to a nice looking place with chickens spinning in a rotisserie oven in the window. We had smelled the roasting chicken from halfway down the corridor and Brill said, “That’s gotta play hell with the scrubbers. Do you know how hard it is to get that out of the air?”

We all chuckled and went in.

It was early for dinner, barely 17:30, so we got a table right away. We ordered a large chicken paella which they served family style in a huge crock pot in the middle of the table along with some superb crusty yeast rolls. I did not think we could possibly eat it all when I saw the size of the serving dish, but we left only a few loose grains of rice in the bottom when we were done. It was delicious and I confess I enjoyed having two of the three most strikingly beautiful and charming women in this end of the galaxy as dinner companions.

We did not spend that much time over dinner, perhaps a couple of stans. After we finished our paella and a dessert, the server brought our check and hovered. There was quite a line built up at the front door, and needing the table, they were not shy about letting us know it was time to go. Brill picked up the check over Beverly’s objections. Realistically, I knew I could have covered my part of the tab. I was not broke by a long shot, and compared to the two kilocreds I had just dropped on clothes, the twenty creds or so dinner would have cost me was not much. But I also knew that buying dinner for a friend or two was something that gave Brill pleasure. I was oddly pleased by her caring gesture and found myself looking forward to an opportunity to reciprocate.
After dinner, we sauntered down through the station’s levels, bypassing the office levels, and lingering on the shopping and entertainment decks. As we strolled, we garnered rather a lot of admiring attention. I could tell the women were as aware of it as I was and I tried to emulate their easy nonchalance over being admired.

As we got closer to the ship, I was also aware of a new feeling of which I did not quite have a name for. It manifested in odd little ways—small comments and little smiles, a hand on an arm, a few steps taken hip to hip, and the warmth of shared laughter. It was an easy intimacy I could not remember ever feeling before. As I grew aware of it in myself, I noticed that it was also something that Bev and Brill shared with each other as much as with me. It was not a sexual thing, although there was certainly an overtone of sensuality.

We hit the docks about 21:00 and Bev and I fell into step on either side of Brill. It was cold, so we crossed quickly to the Lois’s lock. We strolled along, the three of us, and I could feel the looks of the dockhands as they watched us pass. I had a mental flash of how I had felt leaving the ship in the afternoon. We had left with the women in complete control, but returned as members of the same tribe. While we had been shipmates all along, I felt like I had been initiated into some higher level of relationship. I had passed some milestone. Whether it had been that self-inspection in the dressing room, or the sudden realization of my own power to arouse, I could not say. Maybe it was something as simple as wearing clothes that really fit me for the first time in my life, but I could not help marveling over—and reveling in—the dichotomy.

Bev punched the lock code and the three of us strode onto the ship. Rhon Scham had the gangway watch and when she saw the three of us coming, I saw the reaction on her face. Her eyes danced from Bev, then to Brill, and came to rest on me. I smiled at her and unbuttoned my jacket, slipped just the fingers of my right hand into the pocket of my jeans, and stood with one hip cocked while Bev and Brill checked in. I pretended not to notice the way Rhon kept swallowing hard or the blossom of color around her ears and down to the collar of her shipsuit.

It took a bit longer for me to check in because of the adjustments to mass. While I left with only the clothes on my back, I came back with considerably more. The difference in mass was not all that much, an extra couple of kilos perhaps. Most of what I brought back did not weigh much.

As I followed Bev and Brill down the passage into the ship, I slipped off my jacket and slung it over my shoulder so Rhon would get the full effect of my jeans walking away. I did not look back but I was pretty sure she was watching. Brill caught the gesture and gave a low chuckle.

“Bev, I think we’ve created a monster,” she said softly.

Bev looked over my shoulder to where Rhon would be standing and grinned. “No,” she said, “he’s always been a monster.” She went on to add softly, “I think Rhon likes the new outfit, Ish.” We split up at the head of the passage to go to our separate bunks.

As I walked into engineering berthing, Rebecca Saltzman was standing at her locker and I savored the double take she had when she saw me coming. “Wow, you did good, Ish,” she said in open admiration.

“Thanks, Rebecca. It’s been a pretty interesting day.”

“I can see that,” she said with an easy grin. “Did you have help picking that out? Or did you do it on your own?”

“Well, I had to take a woman with me to go clothes shopping, didn’t I? I wouldn’t want to violate any Confederation regulations.”

She looked confused. “Regulations?”

I nodded. “Yeah, the one about men not being allowed to go shopping for clothes without at least one woman?”

“Who told you that?”

“Brill.” I shrugged.

At that moment I knew from the look on her face that I had been had.

“She got me, didn’t she?”

Rebecca nodded and filled the berthing area with that liquid laugh she had. “Big time.”

“Ah, well, it worked out really well. Maybe they should make it a reg.”

Rebecca looked me up and down in a rather frank and appraising manner that I might have found disturbing earlier in the day. “Maybe they should,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “Well whoever helped, it worked for you.” She grabbed a towel out of her locker and headed for the san. “If you’ll excuse me. I’m in sudden need of a cold shower.”

We shared a laugh and I started to unpack my purchases and stow them in my locker. In addition to the extra shirts, I found that M. Roubaille had included a couple extra pair of socks and a half-dozen pairs of the skimpy briefs. I grabbed a ship-tee and boxers from my locker and went into the san to change for bed.
Tabitha Rondita was the morning watch stander and she woke me just as my tablet bipped. I blinked some of the gunk out of my eyes and rolled out of the sack. I grabbed a quick shower, zipped into a fresh shipsuit, and headed to the mess deck for coffee. Pip and Sarah were setting up the omelet station and they both waved when they saw me come in.

“Hey!” I said. “How’d it go at the booth yesterday?”
Sarah beamed. “I sold all my shawls and made over three hundred creds!”
“I hear she’s a natural, Ish. Biddy said she dominated the table yesterday.” He looked at me oddly and asked, “Did you get a haircut or something? You look different.”
“I went clothes shopping with Bev, Brill, and Diane yesterday.”
He nodded sympathetically. “I can see where that would change a man. You going on watch?”
“Yeah, I’ve got day watch today. I just came to grab some coffee for now. I need to go relieve Diane and then I’ll be back for an omelet once I get things settled down there.”
“We’ll be here,” Sarah said.
I filled a mug with coffee and waved as I left.
When I stepped through the hatch, Diane sat at the console reading her tablet. She looked up as I entered and grinned. “Look at you! You’re walking tall this morning. What happened after I left last night?”

“How serious. We went out to dinner at a nice little place on level six that had rotisserie chickens cooking in the window. You could smell them half a corridor away.” I crossed to the console and put my coffee on the desk.

“I’m glad you were with me. It was an amazing day for me.”

He started to lift the omelet out of the pan and I held my plate while he slid the eggs onto it. “That’s what you said. Did you get anything good?”

“A few things. New boots, jacket, some shirts, and a pair of jeans.”

I took my plate to a table and he joined me with his coffee. “Well, I took Tabitha’s offer and sold her the yarn. We got two hundred fifty creds, but we’re out of stuff to sell here now, except for the stones.”

“How many of those do we still have?”

He pondered for a few heartbeats before answering. “A couple of kilos worth. Probably a hundred and fifty of them.”

“You going up today?” I cut into the omelet with the side of my fork and inhaled the warmth.

“Yeah, I thought I’d help out here for a bit, get some breakfast myself, and then head up after cleanup. We’ll be done here by 09:00 easily. Technically Sarah’s got the duty today but you know how it is.”

“I do, indeed.” I took a bite of omelet. “This is good. You’ve been practicing.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’m on today, but I get off at 18:00. Brill has something in mind for tonight, but I’ll be around tomorrow. I don’t go back on duty until the overnight watch. I can take any stones you don’t sell—or don’t want to sell—up to the flea in the afternoon, if you like.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’m on today, but I get off at 18:00. Brill has something in mind for tonight, but I’ll be around tomorrow. I don’t go back on duty until the overnight watch. I can take any stones you don’t sell—or don’t want to sell—up to the flea in the afternoon, if you like.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, and I spent a lot of cred yesterday so I’ll be looking hard tomorrow. Say, would you bip me when you head down to change? I’d like to get one or two of those stones for myself before they get picked over any more. They’d go great with my new shirts.”
Pip got a funny look on his face and leaned closer to me. “Ish? Is that you? What’d they do to you yesterday?” I laughed with him. “Yeah, I know, but we had a ball. I can’t even begin to describe it.”

Rhon Scham came in looking for breakfast so Pip scurried to fix an omelet for her. I pretended not to see her glancing my way every so often, but Pip noticed. He had a problem getting her to pay attention so he could slide the eggs onto her plate. He looked at me with a raised eyebrow and I just shrugged. I was done, so I bussed my dishes, refilled my coffee, and waved to him on my way back to environmental.

All things considered, it was a pretty uneventful watch. I took one break to pick through the rocks and I found a nice, dark green ovoid and a smaller white one with a golden streak in it. Just after lunch, I did the trap maintenance—not a difficult job but messy. I saved my VSI run until midafternoon to break up my studying and to stretch my legs.

Francis showed up on the stroke of 17:45. He grinned when he came in. “You survived yesterday, I see.”
“Oh yeah, it was touch and go for a while, but I made it.”
“Diane came in all flushed. What’d you guys do anyway?”
“Does the name Chez Henri mean anything to you?”
He shook his head. “No, should it?”
“Probably not. But that’s where we spent the afternoon. We got out just in time for her to come back to the ship and relieve you.”
“What is it? A restaurant?”
“Tailor’s shop.”
“They took you to a tailor?” He smirked at the idea.
“Yeah, we had a ball, actually.”
“Well, to each his own.”
“Mr. Gartner, all ops normal. Maintenance on number three water intake trap scheduled and performed. You have the watch.”
“Mr. Wang, I relieve you. I have the watch,” he replied, then added, “Did you get a haircut or something? You look different.”
“Nope, but you’re not the first one to say that.”
Chapter 18
Brill stopped by during my watch and we arranged to eat aboard before heading out for the evening’s festivities. Cookie had one of his garlic and lamb dishes on the menu with fresh potatoes and it sounded good to me. I had smelled it all afternoon every time I had gone into the mess deck for coffee. The aroma made me drool in anticipation. When I stepped onto the mess deck for dinner, I found Diane and Brill having some kind of intense discussion.

I crossed to their table and heard Diane say, “But Murdock? You know what happened the last time—”

Brill saw me coming and gave me one of those big smiles. “Hi, Ish.”

Diane turned to me then and I got a matching grin from her. “You even look better in that shipsuit. Funny what some new clothes will do, huh?”

“How’s?” I asked looking back and forth between them.

Diane shook her head. “No, just having a little discussion about a contractor.”

“We need some plumbing done and we’re just trying to figure out who and when.” Brill lied very smoothly, but I did not call her on it. If she wanted me to know, she would tell me. It did pique my interest though.

“Okay, well, I’m starved, so I’ll be right back.”

Sarah was in the galley with Cookie and they were working on something with a lot of flour scattered around the prep table. It looked like pie crust discussions, so I just waved. I did not want to get into the shortening versus butter debate just then.

The lamb and potatoes looked great, though, and they had sautéed some carrots as a vegetable side. It smelled divine and I took a big helping, dithering around the buffet until Diane and Brill had hashed out—or at least set aside—whatever it was they were discussing but did not want me to know about. When the coast appeared relatively clear, I headed back to my seat.

“Okay, what’s on the agenda for tonight?” I asked.

“We’re meeting Bev around 21:00, so we’ve got some time to get ready. There’s a bar down on the oh-two level that caters to spacers. Good drinks, music is usually live, and the people there all understand what being a spacer means,” Brill said.

I glanced at Diane who still had a bit of a glower going on and asked, “What’s that mean? About being a spacer?”

Diane answered, “Civilians have a different perspective. They’re going to be here next week. We’re not. It can be problematic at times.”

Whatever they were talking about was all Greek to me, so I just nodded like I understood. I dove into the lamb and potatoes. It was superb. Say what you will about the ambiance on the mess deck, but the food was always excellent. With Pip and Cookie augmenting the stores’ budgets with port-trading, it was definitely improving, too.

It did not take long to put away my dinner, so I bussed my plates and drew a fresh mug of coffee for dessert. I did not want to fill up too much. I had a feeling I was in for a long night. “Anything I should do to get ready?” I asked. “Trim my nose hair? Shave my legs?”

I caught Diane in mid-drink but she recovered well. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Mom always shaved her legs before a hot date,” I said with a smile. “And she always came home complaining about guys with an excess of nose hair.”

“Tell ya what,” Brill said. “We’ll shave our legs. You trim your nose hair. Clip your nails while you’re at it. You don’t know where those fingers might end up.”

She caught me with that one, but I did not recover as well as Diane had. I had to get towels from the galley to clean up the table. That was the point where I knew for sure that it was going to be an interesting night.

We horsed around over the remains of dinner until 19:00, then cleared our table to help Sarah out as much as possible before going our separate ways. I headed for the gym to get in a short run and a sauna. I took it easy because of dinner, but it felt good to run. I had been so busy the previous few days that I did not really have much of a chance to exercise. The sauna felt good too, and I had the place to myself. I let the heat seep into me and worked on that feeling of languid relaxation that only serious heat brings.

Afterward, I took a quick splash at the gym to get the sweat and grime off, but headed up to the berthing area to get my real showering in. Rebecca was reading in her bunk when I got up to the berthing area.
“Not going out?” I asked her.
She shook her head. “I got duty in the morning and I’ve already had one late night and hangover here. I’ll wait until tomorrow for another. Looks like you’re going.”
“Yup. Someplace down on the oh-two deck.”
“Well, have fun and leave some booze for us.”
“I’m not much of a drinker.”
“In that case, be careful. If the tip of your nose starts getting numb, shift to ginger ale with a cherry in it.”
“Does the cherry help?”
“Yeah, it makes it look like you’re drinking so people stop bugging ya.”
I made a mental note of that one. The implication of what she had said as well as the tip. “Thanks. I’ll remember.”

I like to have a good time as much as the next guy, but on my sixteenth birthday, Mom got me really drunk and I was sick as a dog. When I came to on the bathroom floor, lying in a puddle of my own making, she was sitting on the floor of the hallway outside. She said just one word, “Remember.” Then she left me to clean up the mess. Rebecca had just given me a good warning and I intended to heed it.

I took my jeans and briefs with me into the san and started to get ready. I took my time preening. It was not like I had a lot of beard yet. My hair was just too fine, but I had seen guys with wispy hair trying to look older by letting it grow out and I did not want to be one of those guys. While I was at it, I trimmed my nose hairs and clipped my nails for luck. The shower felt good and I let it finish what I had started in the gym. When I got out I dried off, slipped into my briefs and jeans, and bundled up my shipsuit and skivvies. I stowed them in the bottom of my locker and then faced the decision of which shirt to wear. The pink looked good, but I had just worn it and I wanted to spread the wear out a bit. The turtleneck was likely to be too hot in a crowded club, and the crewneck just did not feel dressy enough. I was standing there in my jeans, shirtless and barefoot when I realized Rebecca had moved to the berthing area table. I glanced over at her and caught her staring at me.

“What?” I asked. “Is something wrong?” I checked my buttons and made sure they were done up.
“Oh, no,” she purred in that voice that would melt titanium. “But if you’re gonna put on a show like that, I wanted a front row seat.”

I laughed and threw my wet towel at her. She caught it, threw it back, and pretended to go back to her reading. I pulled out the white Oxford shirt out of the locker, slipped it on, and slowly buttoned it up, taking care to get the tails tucked in just right. I picked the green stone and tied the leather around my neck so that it lay just below my collar bone in the hollow of my throat. I took my socks and boots over to the table and sat there to slip them on.

Rebecca moaned. “You’re a tease.”

“Thanks,” I said, and she slugged me in the arm with a laugh.

When I got the boots on, I pulled the coat out of my locker and slipped into it, leaving it unbuttoned before turning to the big mirror outside the san. I thought I looked good and, judging from Rebecca’s blush, she thought so too.

“Okay, well, I think I’m ready,” I told her. “Don’t wait up.”

“Take care, Ish. Have fun.”
Bev, Diane, and Brill were all waiting at the lock. Bev in leathers, of course, but wearing a man’s cut dress shirt with the top three buttons undone. With her smaller bust, the effect was devastating without being trashy. Funny the effect a shirt could have. Diane wore her painted-on sized jeans, a green scoop necked pullover, and a brown leather jacket. She walked that line between somebody you wanted to hug and somebody you wanted protection from. Brill stopped my heart, though. She wore a pair of low slung slacks in black leather and a cropped sweater in baby-blue mohair under a suede jacket. Her midriff was bare from the top of her hip bones to the bottom of her rib cage. She had a stylized tattoo of a sun around her navel, and the effect was smashing.

“Well,” I said when I could catch my breath, “I never knew you had a tattoo, Big B.”

“I have a couple of them,” she purred mockingly. “Play your cards right, spacer, and you might see another one.”

We all laughed and headed out for the lift, Brill leading the way. I laughed out loud when she briefly lifted the back of her jacket and I saw the blue butterfly tattooed at the base of her spine, just above the waistband of her pants. Yes, it was gonna be one of those nights.

Orbital’s are arranged like a layer cake with the dock levels near the middle. Everything above the dock is generally designated office, retail, restaurant, and residential. Everything below the dock is industrial. That’s where all the cargo canisters are processed and stored, among other things. Docks were the designated main deck and everything above that was numbered in increasing order while everything below was prefixed with a zero and numbered in increasing order. So level five was the fifth level above the docks, and level oh-two was the second level below the docks. We had the same set up on the Lois with the main deck being the spine level and the main lock, the gym was technically the oh-one deck and berthing was the first deck.

The place we were heading to was in the commercial zone, below the docks on the oh-two deck. A lot of the rowdier spots were below the docks to put a buffer between the residential quiet zones and the louder entertainments available. Put another way, everything above the docks was nice and everything below the docks was not nice. Tonight, we were going to not nice and this was terra incognita to me.

The lift doors opened and we could hear competing music coming from a variety of places in both directions up and down the corridor. There was a lot of heavy bass, most of it syncopated. The air felt as moist and heavy as it did in environmental, and the crush of people after so long aboard nearly overwhelmed me. I did not know where to look first but I followed Bev out of the lift like I knew what I was doing. Diane fell in step beside me and I could feel the heat of Brill’s body behind me as she strode along as rear guard. The natural bubble that opened for Beverly expanded around Diane and me and did not close immediately behind Brill so we moved quickly. Bev obviously knew where we were going and she arrowed right for it. We carved through the crowds and into a gaping hole in the bulkhead that did not appear to have any doors at all. Above the hole a laser sign painted the word: Jump! on the bulkhead.

Just inside the door, Bev paused and leaned back for a short confab. “We’re meeting them here, right?”

Brill nodded. “Usual spot or as near to it as we can get.”

“Who are we meeting?” I asked Diane.

“Some people we know from other ships. A few from the Duchamp, and maybe some of Brill’s old shipmates from the Soyokaze. Beyond that, we’ll see what happens.”

Bev led the way and before long we had found a group of people who had chairs saved for us and pitchers of beer already on the table. Introductions went by in such a blur that none of them stuck. Several guys in leather, a couple of women in tailored suits, and at least one woman who made Beverly look like a girl scout. Her head was shaved and tattooed, the pierced breasts were bare under a spiked leather vest, and the muscle-builder bulk tipped the scales in her direction. Ironically, she had the most welcoming smile. I guess when you are built like that, you can afford to be friendly. Her name was Al. She was the astrogator from the Hedley and had the most amazing repertoire of dirty jokes.

Somewhere around then, a waitress in a cut down shipsuit showed up to take our orders. I took a simple gin and tonic. Not the typical drink for an eighteen-year-old, I suppose, but Mom always had a bottle of gin around and we would occasionally have one after she got home from school. “I hate to drink alone,” she said one time and that was that. I was only seventeen, but after my sixteenth birthday party, I never was tempted to overdo it again. The occasional gin and tonic did not seem to hurt me any.

The drink cost ten creds and when the server came back with it I did not start a tab. I knew better. It was,
however, a strong drink and I knew I would need to keep an eye on it as the night wore on. The last thing I needed was a reputation as an easy drunk on my first night out. I settled in the empty chair next to Al and Brill grinned at me as she sat across the table. Bev was already circulating but kept an eye on us. Diane had a drink already as well, and she was chatting up a lanky guy in leathers. The snippets of conversation I could hear made me think she knew him already.

I turned to Al. “So? What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” I asked in a loud voice.

Brill almost spewed beer onto the floor and Al roared. The commotion attracted attention but I just sipped my drink and waited. Al turned to Brill. “He’s one of yours then, ain’t he?”

Brill grinned and gave a little shrug. “He works in my department, but don’t blame me for him. We found him that way.”

After that, we settled in for the evening. I kept one eye on my drink and the other open for the plumber. After a stan or so of easy drinking and sporadic dancing, the combined crews relaxed into an easy camaraderie. Al was a dear and we got on famously, all the implanted surgical steel notwithstanding. Several of the women in the group circulated around and occasionally sat down on the other side of me to strike up a conversation. Everyone seemed nice enough but there was not a lot of electricity in the air. The night had not yet gained escape velocity and nobody seemed too anxious to push the throttle. I got the feeling that something was coming, but it had not arrived yet.

Eventually, the crew from the Duchamp showed up—about eight of them. I paid attention because I knew that this was the crew that locked Pip in the scrubber for three stans as a joke and then hounded him off the ship. On the other hand, they were also the crew that found him a berth on the Lois rather than just stranding him ashore. I wondered if any of the people joining our party were involved in either incident.

Introductions raced around, and again almost everybody knew just about everybody else. I was the new meat and knew it. Two names stuck out when they floated across the table. Alicia Alvarez was the first and Steph Murdock was the second. The plumber had arrived.

Even if I had not heard the snippet of conversation earlier, Bev and Diane both bristled when Murdock joined the group. Steph Murdock was a hunter, one of those who were in it for the sport and not for the meat. She just wanted the kill. Brill looked like she had a bad taste in her mouth when she introduced us, and I was not sure why she was doing it. At that point, I had a pretty good idea of whose plumbing was the subject of concern—bless her heart.

Alicia Alvarez, on the other hand, was a real killer—petite, dark, vivacious with flashing eyes and olive skin much darker than even Bev’s or Tabitha’s. If I was gonna get killed, I knew who I wanted to do the deed as soon as I saw her, and even before I had met the plumber. She was the one who had told Pip that he needed to enjoy the ride. My breath caught in my throat as I thought of several delightful ways that might be interpreted.

Murdock wore a pair of slacks so tight they puckered and a top so loose she might as well not bothered. She plunked herself into the chair beside me and leaned in close. “So, you’re the new guy,” she said with a throaty growl. She leaned into me a bit, mashing a nicely padded breast into my upper arm, and I suddenly realized why they called this place Jump! There did not appear to be any speed limits. Brill was looking anywhere but in my direction, but I caught Bev glaring—not at me but at Murdock.

I leaned back a little so I could get my arm in a position to shake her hand. “Hi, my name is Ish. You’re Steph Murdock? Did I hear that correctly?”

She nodded with half lowered lids. “Yeah,” she purred. “We have a lot in common, I hear.”

“Really? You have me at a disadvantage then.”

“I used to be on the Lois,” she told me. “We have that in common.”

“That’s quite a coincidence.” I allowed and could sense even Al getting a little tense. I wondered why it was that so many women felt the need to protect me. I patted her beefy thigh discreetly under the table and slipped her a wink. She seemed surprised by the touch but I felt her relax.

“You used to be on the mess deck and now you work in environmental? Or so I hear.”

“You seem to know a lot about me,” I said. Brill caught my comment and tone. Diane was standing not two meters away with her back towards me but I could see she held her head slightly turned with an ear cocked in our direction. I did my best not to laugh. Bless their hearts, all of them. Two days before and I would have been irate.

“Well, you know how it is, everybody wants to get to know the new guy,” she gushed and leaned in a little more. I had to admit that the cleavage was spectacular in a slutty, overdone, tasteless kind of way. I bet she was a very successful predator.

“Well, I suppose that’s true,” I said and sipped my drink. “So how did you come to leave the Lois and go to the Duchamp?” I thought I knew but I wanted confirmation.

“Oh, I used to work the mess deck there, just like you! I passed the half share test for engineman. I wanted to go to environmental, but the Lois didn’t have any slots. We followed the Duchamp into port one day and Mr.
Maxwell, you know Mr. Maxwell, of course, he arranged with the Duchamp to trade me for a guy in the environmental department who was having problems.”

She used the fingers in the air around having problems. I felt a sudden and unfamiliar urge to punch a woman. Pip had wondered why Mr. Maxwell had been willing to accept the trade. I could see now that the Duchamp had gotten the short end of the deal, and my respect for Mr. Maxwell went up a couple of notches even though it was already very high.

“So, you’re in the environmental section on the Duchamp?” I asked. “Have you passed your spec rating yet?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you, honey,” she cooed. “We have a lot in common. We’re both half share and both working in environmental.”

“Oh? I thought you had passed your spec.”
“Ooh,” she squealed, “somebody’s been talking about me?”

Timing is everything and I gave it just a half beat so I knew that Brill and Diane would pick it up.

“Maybe I’m mistaken,” I said. “I thought you were the plumber.”

Brill did spew beer that time and I could see Diane’s head bow and her shoulders shake with laughter.

In the ensuing confusion and cleanup, Murdock found another target that was less problematic and moved in for the kill. I hoped she did not hurt him too much, sorta.

When we all got settled, Brill raised her glass in a silent toast and I returned it with a grin and a wink.

Al leaned in then and said, “I don’t know what happened, kid, but I like your style. If you ever get a hankering for a big, bald babe, look me up.” She winked and chuckled before calling for more beer.

One down. The real action had not begun but the night shifted into high gear.
Chapter 19
With the unsavory Murdock out of the picture, I was still faced with the problem of how to get to Alicia Alvarez. She was a popular woman and with good reason. She moved like a panther and was just as sleekly beautiful. The challenge was going to be cutting her out of the pack.

I leaned over to my new friend, Al, and asked, “What’s the protocol on officers?”

She leaned down so she could hear me over the rising noise. “What you mean, Ishmael? Protocol?”

I let my eyes flicker to where Alvarez was standing with a group of spacers. “Officers? Are they eligible?”

She still seemed confused until Alvarez looked in our direction. A slow grin spread across her broad face.

“You do like a challenge, don’t ya?” Al said into the top of her beer.

“I just need to know if the worst that can happen is she turns me down.”

“Everybody here is off duty. Nobody is wearing tabs and no one is saying sar. Beyond that you’re on your own, but you’ve already got high marks in my book just for considering it. You sure you don’t wanna come back to my flop with me?” she teased. “I’ll take out the sharpest pieces.” She flicked the skull pierced through her left nipple.

“You’re tempting, Al, but I’m afraid I’m not man enough for you.”

She roared again, but the noise had built to the point where almost nobody outside of our immediate group could even hear it. She leaned down. “If you’re man enough for what you’re thinking, kid, you’re more man than three quarters of the men here.” She started to drink her beer and stopped to add, “And half the women!”

She really was a hoot. I was half tempted to take her up on the offer. I learned some time back that orgasms and laughter go well together. Especially when shared.

Still, I pondered the problem of cutting Alvarez out of the herd long enough to get her attention. Just then the band started and Alvarez’s hips moved in time to the beat. None of the men she was with seemed to notice.

I drained my drink and put the glass on the table. It was only my second and it had been ginger ale. I knew my limit on gin, and I did not want to be anywhere near it. Brill caught the movement and looked at me quizzically, and I winked back. Then I stood up and leaned over to give Al a kiss on the top of her shaved dome. “Wish me luck, Al,” I said and slipped from behind the table. As I crossed over to where Alvarez was standing, one of the tall, dark men who thought he was entertaining her saw me coming. Her hips definitely rocked to the beat and I wondered if she was even aware of it. She saw what-his-name looking and turned to see what had got his attention.

I kept focused on two thoughts. The first was that the worst she could say was no. The second was that I was wearing Henri Roubaille.

She saw me coming and her head turned before she swung her body around. I smiled and looked into her eyes. I could see the oh-gods-what-does-he-want flash across her face, but I did not let it deter me. I stopped about a meter from her, held out my hand, and said the word, “Dance?” I know she did not hear me over the noise. I did not even hear it, but I knew she could see it on my mouth. I nodded to the floor in invitation. Tall, dark and boring tried to get her attention back with a careful hand on her elbow. I could see it in my peripheral vision, but I did not take my eyes off hers. I kidded myself into thinking I had a choice and that I might actually have chosen not to look. I was careful not to make it a demand, but more of an offer. With the offer extended, I waited for her to make up her mind. The idiot with her tried to get her attention once more, but she drained her drink without looking away. Her eyes laughed over the rim, and she handed the empty glass to whoever-he-was before taking my outstretched hand. With a smile, she turned and led me to the dance floor, her fingers still cool and wet from the glass. She started dancing before we even made it to the floor, feet shuffling and hips shaking with intent. I did the best I could to follow. I was not a bad dancer—just not a very good one.

“It’s not how well you dance, Ishmael,” Mom had said. “It’s whether or not you mean it.”

With Alvarez, I meant it—every last bit of it. Eventually the band took a break and I finally got a chance to talk to her. She spoke first, “You’re Wang, from the Lois?”

“Guilty as charged. You’re Alvarez, from the Duchamp?”

She gave a mock salute with her index finger. “Yeah, that’s me.”

I held out a hand, to shake this time. “Pleased to meet you. You dance like a mad woman!” I told her with a grin.

She took my hand and shook it firmly but did not let go. “You’re not so bad yourself,” she said while looking me in the eyes again. Gods, but she had beautiful eyes. “Can I buy you a drink?”
“Ginger ale would be good.” She still held my hand and her skin was scorching hot.

“Ginger ale? You came to a bar to drink ginger ale?” A smile danced in her eyes.

“No, I came to a bar to meet a fascinating woman. I drink ginger ale so I’ll remember her after.”

“Damn, you’re good,” she said with a delightful little laugh.

“Thanks, you’re a wonderful audience. I’ll be here till Thursday. Try the fish,” I teased her.

“Let’s see if we can find that drink.”

She did not let go of my hand as she led me off the floor and back toward the bar. As she led me past the table, Al raised her glass in toast and Brill turned, staring in disbelief. Diane saw her expression and I watched her track across to me. A huge smile erupted on her face just before the crowd closed around us and I lost sight of them all.

Alvarez led me to a table around the corner from the band and the worst of the noise. People back there were engaged in a variety of discussions ranging from a half dozen heatedly arguing the relative merits of various engine manifold temperatures on combustion efficiency to a quartet in black leather discussing the symbolism in Peneu Narvat’s new holo, *Lost in Transition*. Without the band blaring in your ears, you could actually hear yourself speak.

We sat down across from each other at a small table with a bad wobble and a smear of spilled drinks on it and the waitress took our orders. She came back in a tick with the drinks and a damp rag to swab off the table. I let Alvarez pay for the drinks, and when the waitress left, I raised my glass in toast.

“Thanks,” I told her.

“You’re welcome,” she said and sipped hers. “Oh, this is good,” she said with surprise.

“You’ve never had it before?”

She gave a little embarrassed flick of her head. “Actually, no. At least not straight.”

“When I realized who you were, I wanted to say thank you.”

She sipped again. Neither of us dared put our drinks on the table because it kept wobbling so badly. “Thank me? For what?”

“You remember a greenie wiper in environmental? Carstairs?”

“About a year ago? We traded him for Murdock?”

“Yeah, I believe so.”

“I remember him. Nice kid. Got off on the wrong foot with the crew and was in a hurry to get somewhere else.”

“That’s him. You gave him some good advice, and I wanted to thank you for it.”

“What did I tell him?”

“Slow down and enjoy the ride. He took it to heart. He’s doing well over on the *Lois*. He’s still on the mess deck and doing great things for the ship. He credits you for his turn around.”

She raised her glass in a vague toast. “Well, ya never know where the seeds will sprout, do you? Thanks for telling me. Is that why you asked me to dance?”

“No, I asked you to dance because even from across the room I could tell you needed to get out there and shake those hips, and none of the guys you were with seemed to notice.”

“What made you think I’d go?”

“I didn’t. But I was pretty sure you weren’t going to ask me.”

She laughed at that. “Well, that’s probably true. Although, give me some credit. I did notice that you disposed of Murdock pretty quickly.”

“You’re a good person. You look out for your own.”

“And she is one of mine after all, eh? You didn’t like her?”

“I told you. I came to meet a fascinating woman. Murdock just wasn’t that interesting. There’s more to life than cleavage.”

“Most guys don’t share that particular view.” She scowled into her glass as she spoke.

“I’m not most guys.”

She looked up and considered me then with a speculative light in her eyes. “I can see that.”

We sat there quietly sipping and looking at each other for a while. “Are you always this quiet?” she asked.

“Are you?”

“No! Usually I chatter away a meter a minute.”

I shrugged. “I thought we were communicating pretty well, actually. Am I boring you?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Let me know when I am and I’ll go.”

“Just like that? I say, okay, you’re boring me. And you leave.”

I gave a little shrug. “Of course. What else?”

“What if I bore you? Will you tell me to leave?”

“I doubt that you could bore me. I don’t even know you yet.”
“Damn you are good. Classical training?”
“Mom was an ancient literature professor. I grew up on the classics.”
“You’re kidding!”
I shook my head. “Nope. Melville and Forester were her specialty areas, but I grew up with Shakespeare. What about you?”
“The only classics I ever got were at the academy, and there wasn’t much there.”
That last part sounded a bit bitter, so I did not push it. I steered the conversation a bit. “Where’d you get your philosophical outlook to enjoy the ride?”
She looked a little embarrassed. “Fortune cookie.”
It was so unexpected I laughed. “Okay, you got me with that one.”
“No, seriously. It was near the end of my last year at the academy and a bunch of us went out to dinner one night to an oriental restaurant down by the docks in Port Newmar. The whole evening we had this discussion about berths and ships. You know, where there were openings and who was going where—that kind of thing. We drank a lot of beer and no small amount of sake. I kept saying how much I wanted to be done with the academy and get onto a ship. Like getting onto a ship was going to be some kind of answer. Like by being there would mean I had have arrived, you know?”
“Oh, yeah. I know very well.” I just wanted her to keep talking. I did not care what she said.
“We got the fortune cookies and mine said, ‘Life is the only journey with a final destination.’”
“That must have made quite an impression.”
“Well, I’m still using it five years later, but at the time, I think the beer and sake were contributing factors.” She swirled the cubes in her glass for a few heartbeats before arching an eyebrow in my direction. “Can I ask you something?”
“Sure.”
“Where did you get that jacket? It’s spectacular.”
“I got it here on the orbital the other day. Chez Henri’s up on eleven.”
She snorted in disbelief. “You were not at Chez Henri.”
“What do you wanna bet.”
“If you were at Chez Henri, I’ll give you a night you’ll never forget,” she said with a smoldering look that I think she practiced in the mirror because it was very, very effective.
“No bet.”
“Ha, I knew it!”
“No, you misunderstand. You’ve already given me that. You’ll need to do better.”
She stopped and laughed. “Damn, you are good.”
“What’ll it take to convince you? And what are the stakes?”
“My gods. You were!”
I held open the jacket so she could see the label on the inside lining.
“That doesn’t prove anything,” she said, but I could tell she was not disputing my claim, just the evidence.
I finished my drink and put the empty glass on the table without speaking.
“You were!”
“Your boss? Of course.”
“She was there with me. She insisted on going.”
“No!”
“I took Beverly and Diane, too.”
“Beverly? Black leather, buzz cut Beverly?”
“Hey, that’s my shipmate you’re talking about.”
“And Diane Ardele? Works with you in environmental? Petite little mink?”
“Minx is more accurate, but yeah, that’s her.”
“You took three women to Chez Henri?”
“Well, Ms. Avril was busy and couldn’t go with us or there’d have been four.”
“You’re kidding!”
“I am not kidding. It wasn’t even my idea. When Brill heard I had an introduction to Henry Roubaille, she insisted. I thought we were going to have half the ship up there watching me change clothes.”
“You had an introduction?”
I gave a half shrug. “I think that’s about the only way you can see him. His receptionist is a real pro.”
“Where’d you get an invitation?”
“Bresheu on St. Cloud gave it to me.”
“You’re kidding!”
“You’ve got to stop saying that.” I stood and held out my hand. “Come on.”
“Where are we going?”
“You’ll see.”
She put her hand in mine, and I pulled her to her feet. I led her back to where Brill was still sitting, but she had moved to my old seat beside Al. Brill got a really funny grin on her face and Al gave me a big wink and raised her glass in my direction.
“You know these women, I think?” I said to Alvarez.
“Hi, Brill, Al,” she said.
“Hey, AA.” Al saluted with her glass.
“Hi, Alicia,” Brill said. “How’s it going?”
“Great! This one is something, huh?” She nodded in my direction.
Al spoke up before Brill could answer, “Hell, I’ve only known him for two stans and I know that!”
“You have no idea, Alicia.”
“Settle a bet for me, B?” she said.
“Sure, if I can.”
“Where’d he get this jacket?”
“Chez Henri up on eleven, why? He got the whole outfit there the other day. Bev and Diane and I went with him.”
“Jillian was too busy?”
“I think she’s slit her wrists by now, but yeah. She had the duty.”
“How did he get into Henri’s?”
“We were on St. Cloud and he got an introduction from Bresheu.”
“The Bresheu?” she asked.
Brill shrugged. “Is there more than one?”
“Why did Bresheu give him an introduction?”
Brill was grinning by this time. “Because the jacket he tried on there didn’t fit and we didn’t have time for it to be tailored before we shipped out.”
Alicia started laughing. “This is all true, isn’t it?”
“Oh, yes. Did he tell you his rating?”
“Engineman, isn’t it?”
“Well, yeah, but he’s also rated as Ordinary Spacer, Cargo Handler, and Food Handler. In a few weeks he’ll be spec two environmental as well.” She said it with a certain amount of pride.
Alicia looked at me with a speculative look in her eye. “You looking for a new berth?”
Brill said, “Hey, no poaching. He’s mine!”
I found I quite liked the way she said, “He’s mine.”
Alicia giggled and gripped my hand a little more firmly. The temperature rose in the bar by about ten degrees Celsius with that giggle. She looked back at Brill then. “Okay, can I borrow him for a few stans, then? I’ll bring him back, I promise.”
“Okay,” Brill replied warily, “but don’t break him. I need him on watch tomorrow night.”
I confess, it felt a little odd, being bargained over like that, but the comment that Diane had made at dinner about what it means to be a spacer hit hard just then. Something must have shown on my face, because Brill asked me, “You okay, Ish?”
“It just struck me what you said earlier about civilians.”
She nodded knowingly, even a bit sadly. “Have fun, Ish.”
Bless her heart.
“Don’t wait up,” I said and let the fascinating Alicia Alvarez lead me out of the bar.
Alicia Alvarez led me out of Jump! and straight to the lift. I found it quite pleasant, walking along hand in hand. I enjoyed the looks the other spacers gave us and I think Alicia did, too. She had a little smile on her face as we threaded our way through the clots of people flowing erratically through the promenade.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” we both said at once and laughed.

“Okay, you first,” she told me.

“You’ve already given me a night I’ll never forget. It was a sucker bet.”

“You think I’m paying off a bet?” she asked gently as we waited for the lift and she looked up at me.

“No,” I said just as gently. “Now, your turn.”

“You don’t seem quite as sure of yourself as you did earlier.”

“It’s a cultural thing. I’m still adjusting to life aboard I think.”

“A case of be careful what you wish for?” she suggested.

The lift arrived then and we got on with a rowdy group who rode up two levels and then fell off at the docks. She punched number seven and we kept riding up.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. You’re a fascinating and stunning woman. I don’t know you except remotely because of Pip.”

“Of all the women in that bar, you picked me because of Pip?” she asked with a little grin. “Why pick any? I’m sure you could have attracted some all by yourself.”

“Murdock was a set up,” I told her.

The lift stopped on level seven, and we stepped off, strolling along the curved passage, still hand in hand. I had no idea where we were going or even if we were going anywhere at all, but her hand felt nice in mine and that was enough.

“What?” Her brow furrowed into a quizzical scowl.

“I overheard more of a conversation than I was supposed to. Some people who care about me very deeply were trying to take care of me in a way they couldn’t.”

“You mean Brill set you up to get you laid?”

“Yep, I think so. She knew Murdock from when she was aboard the Lois. I can see why Murdock didn’t fit there. I think that’s why Mr. Maxwell was willing to trade her for Pip.”

Her mouth twisted into a wry grin. “I’m not sure she fits on the Duchamp either, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

“Anyway, Brill was pretty sure that if Murdock got anywhere near me, she’d latch onto the fresh meat. And she did.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Diane and Bev were livid about it, but Brill is a powerful force in her own right. I think that by the time Diane and Bev found out, it was a done deal and the meet-up at Jump! was only a matter of timing.”

“I think that’s why you unloaded Murdock?”

I shook my head. “A couple of days ago, I probably would have been. This is going to sound strange, but something happened up at Henri Roubaille’s—some kind of odd bonding. The whole thing was surreal. I think we became friends. Not just shipmates, but real friends.”

“You think? Isn’t that something you know?”

“Probably for most people, but I’m handicapped in that way.”

She gave me a crooked grin. “I dunno, Ish. You look pretty healthy to me.”

I laughed. “Yeah, physically. But I wasn’t kidding about my mother the lit professor. We lived in the university enclave on Neris almost all my life. Just mom and me. I wasn’t just an only child, but I was also an outsider in my peer group.”

“Have you always talked like that?”

“Yeah, pretty much as long as I can remember. Why else do you think I was the outsider in my peer group?” I teased her.
“Point taken.” She released my hand then and took my arm. It felt nice.

“Anyway, the nearest thing I remember to having a friend was Angela Markova about a lifetime ago. She left when her father went to work for another company.”

“Oh, my. Please pardon this next question…”

“No, I’m not a virgin,” I said with a crooked grin.

“Whew, I’m feeling guilty enough about cradle robbing without having to deal with that, too,” she said teasingly.

“I said I didn’t have friends. I knew a lot of kids. Some girls are turned on by brains—even some of the pretty and popular ones. They just wouldn’t talk to me when anybody else was around. I haven’t been a virgin since I was fourteen. I don’t even remember her name.”

“Good grief!”

“So, the upshot is, I’ve read about best friends. I know the idea of the boon companion. I’ve just never had one. It’s kinda weird.”

She looked me in the face. “You’re serious.”

“Very. Being aboard the Lois has almost been like being pulled out of solitary confinement. I mean, I had a life but it was just me and my mother and her occasional lovers. Life in the enclave was intellectually stimulating but emotionally bankrupt.”

“You seem pretty well adjusted,” she commented.

“Thanks. I’m very aware that my youth, while odd, carried a lot of advantages that many people never had. I was never hungry or beaten. We always had a roof over our heads and something interesting to do. I hear horror stories of people who grow up hungry, hurt, and abused, and I feel really lucky. My only problem is I never had a friend.”

“So you think that you and Brill and the others are friends now?”

“Yeah.” I paused and took a slow breath while I thought about it. “Something like that. And I think they see me as a bit of a shy backwater nerd who needed a little help in making a sexual connection. And I think they thought it should happen before we get underway again.”

“Why would they think that?”

“This is the first time I’ve been off the ship past 22:00 since I came aboard last September. They know I haven’t been sleeping with anybody on board and they know I haven’t had any opportunities in port. Pip got injured at my first port of call and I never even got off the ship for over three months. When I did, it was just to go out to dinner so I could have a meal I didn’t have to clean up after.”

“Yet you still seem relatively sane. I’m impressed.”

“Yeah, well, that’s open to debate,” I said with a grin.

“And you think they set up Murdock?”

“Oh, I know they set up Murdock. That’s a given. And I’m pretty sure they did it because they thought I needed it and Murdock was a sure bet. Distasteful, but certain. I think Brill provided the opportunity but left the outcome up to me. Murdock was there, she was available, and if I wanted it, I could have it.” I shrugged.

“And you didn’t want it?”

“Of course, I want it. I’m as healthy as anybody. I just didn’t want it with her.”

“Well, then why me?”

“Because you were the sexiest woman in the room andjust watching you was driving me crazy.”

“And because you figured if you could get me, you’d prove to Brill and the others that you didn’t need their help.”

I shrugged. “Well, perhaps as a side benefit, but that wasn’t the main reason. I’ve been looking forward to tonight, to the possibilities, ever since the other day in Chez Henri. I really didn’t think I would wind up with you on my arm like this. I was prepared for you to cut me off at the knees.”

“Well, then why?”

We stopped and I turned to her. “I’ve been cut off at the knees before. It’s not that bad. And there was the possibility of something magical happening.” I took her face gently in my hands and moved close to hers, feeling her breath on my skin. I smiled but did not kiss her. Instead, I turned back and tucked her arm back under mine and started walking.

“You bastard!” she said with a shaky laugh.

“So? I found you fascinating, sexy, powerful, and beautiful—not necessarily in that order, and I thought I’d like to leave the bar with you at the end of the night. Is that so bad?”

“Thought? Past tense?”

“Semantic trap. I thought that then because it is in the past. That has nothing to do with the way I feel about you
right now.”
“And how do you feel about me?”
“You are a fascinating, sexy, powerful, beautiful woman, and I’m enjoying every instant I’m with you. Now it’s your turn to be on the hot seat. How do you feel about me? Why did you let a common engineman dance with you?”
“Oh, that’s easy...because you asked, and very nicely, I might add. And you should probably know that you are not a common engineman.”
“Why do you say that?”
“Because a common engineman wouldn’t go to a bar wearing Henri Roubaille.”
“Okay, you got me there. But why cradle robbing? You got a thing for young stuff?”
“Truthfully, I was just dancing until we sat to talk. I had no intention of leaving so early with anybody when we sat down.”
“What happened?”
“We didn’t talk.”
“I remember.”
“I don’t know the last time somebody just sat with me without trying to impress me, get into my pants, or kiss up for one reason or another.”
“Well, for the record, I was trying to get into your pants,” I said with a grin. “I was just waiting for an invitation.”
She laughed again, and I found that I liked her laugh a lot. “Damn, you are good.”
“I interrupted, please continue.”
“Anyway, it was refreshing, so when we did start talking, and you still weren’t trying to impress me, it had the opposite effect. The more you weren’t trying, the more impressed I was. I’m still in awe over Roubaille and then to learn that you’ve talked to Bresheu as well. And you’ve impressed Brill beyond anything I’ve ever seen—and Al! My god, you impressed Al! I don’t know what’s more astonishing—Al or Roubaille.”
“Well, I should probably not be telling you this, but she was my fallback.”
“What?”
“Next to you, she was the most fascinating woman in the place. And she said she’d take out some of the sharper bits of steel.”
“She didn’t!”
“Have I lied to you yet?” I asked.
“Not that I’ve been able to tell,” she said warily. “You would have gone?”
“Are you kidding? If you’d turned me down? She’s a fascinating woman!”
“I think you’re pulling my leg, but anyway, after that I wanted to leave with you quickly before anybody else got their claws in you. Once word gets out that you were at Chez Henri, they’ll be knocking down your door.”
“They’ll have to get through Brill, Diane, and Beverly first, I think.”
“And that was the most impressive of all. Seeing Brill look at you like that. She’s not an easy person to get close to.”
“Believe me, I know.”
We walked along quietly arm in arm for a few ticks. It was quite pleasant.
“Was?” she asked at last.
“Excuse me? Was what?”
“You said, ‘I was trying to get into your pants’ before. You’re not now?”
I considered this for a moment. “In the first place, that’s another semantic trap. It’s past tense because it denotes action that occurred in the past.”
I stopped and turned to her again. “In the second place,” I said, bringing my face close to hers and again teasing her with my breath and inhaling the delightful smell of her. “I think we’ve already established that. At the moment we’re only negotiating time and place.”
I started to pull back again, but she caught my head and pulled me to her. “Not this time, you bastard.” Then she kissed me. Hard. Teeth were involved. Hers and mine. There were some other things that involved her sliding her arms up under my coat and holding onto me very tightly with those arms. I’m pretty sure, a leg was involved as well. It took a tick for my vision to come back afterward.
“Well,” I said a bit breathlessly. “I think negotiations are almost over. You seem to have made a decision.”
She grinned at me. It was a hungry grin. “Oh, yes. Some time ago. Have you?”
“Here?” I asked indicating the corridor.
“No,” she said emphatically. “I’m not in a mood to share you. At least not tonight,” she added with a very
naughty smile.

She took my arm and we walked a few meters to a small hotel where she had a room.

“Planning ahead?” I asked mischievously.

“Why, yes. I just didn’t know for what.”

She keyed the room open and held the door for me. I stepped into what seemed like a large room after all those months in a berthing area. It was a typical hotel single with bed, bath, holo unit, and communicator. She followed me in, closed the door, and set the privacy latch. I felt her hands run up my back and across my shoulders. “May I take your coat?” she asked coyly.

“But of course,” I told her and flexed my shoulders back so she could slip it off me.

She held it and stroked her fingers across it. “This is amazing,” she said, and pulled a hanger from the closet. She turned her back to me and hung it carefully, kicking off her shoes in the process. “Much better. My feet were beginning to get sore.” She was putting on a little show for me and I was enjoying it. She arched her back and reached for the zipper at the rear of her slacks, pulling it down slowly. The widening V showed more and more of the delicious flesh of her back and then the lacy waistband on a pair of black briefs. She finished with the zipper and allowed the slacks to slide down her legs. Stepping out of them delicately, she bent down, picked them carefully up, and straightened them before hanging them as well. She crossed her arms in front, caught the hem of her shirt, and pulled it over her head. She shook it once and gave it a hanger of its own. She was, of course, wearing no bra and I could barely wait to run my fingers across the smooth expanse of her back. She stood there for a moment, back to me. Knowing I was watching—wanting me to watch.

“You know,” she said turning her head in my direction to speak over her shoulder, “I am the second mate on the Duchamp.”

“Yes, I know.”

“When I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed.” A little huskiness crept into her voice.

“That’s as it should be,” I agreed.

She turned then and started walking very slowly toward me. I was pinned by her flashing eyes and could not even look down to admire her magnificent body. “So, how about it, spacer? Can you obey orders?”

Obey orders? I was not even sure I could breathe! “I’ll do my best, sar.”

“You’ll do exactly as I say,” she said moving slowly, slowly closer. “And execute my orders with speed and enthusiasm.” Do you understand?” she asked with a special emphasis on enthusiasm.

“I can be very enthusiastic, sar,” I managed to choke out.

She had reached me then and started unbuttoning my shirt. Slowly. She looked at my face and mouth, licking her lips before unbuttoning the next button.

“I can be very demanding, spacer,” she warned me in a low growl.

She unbuttoned another button.

“That doesn’t surprise me one bit, sar.”

She slipped the shirt off my shoulders, binding my arms loosely in the fabric before going to work on the belt buckle and buttons below.

“Why, I do declare,” she purred after a few moments. “You do seem to be up to the task.”

I did my best to follow her very explicit orders for the next few stans. And to perform them with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, which I had liked to believe was a great deal.
Chapter 21
The sound of a shower running woke me and I glanced at the bedside chrono. 05:30. Diane would be getting ready to relieve Francis about now. She was probably in the shower, too, and the thought brought a little pang. The sheets were a crumpled mass and stuck to me in several places. I stretched languidly. My arm slid across the warm spot where Alicia had been. I did not want to move, and I was not terribly sure I could.

She came out rubbing a towel across her hair and otherwise naked and proudly unselfconscious. That was a good sign, I thought. She smiled when she saw me. “You look pretty pleased with yourself this morning,” she teased.

“Well, not to brag, but you look pretty pleased yourself,” I teased back.

She grinned a little satisfied grin and made a *hm* sound in her throat as if considering it. “Yes,” she said finally, “I am.” Then she giggled, not at all girlishly.

“You have the duty?” I asked suddenly aware of the time, place, and circumstance.

She shook her head. “Not until tonight, but I’ve got an officers’ briefing at 09:30 I need to get back aboard for. What about you?”

“My off-day. Clear until 18:00.”

She finished toweling off and draped the wet towel on a chair. She stretched as unselfconsciously as a cat, arching her back and rolling her shoulders. I could see her eyes catch sight of my jacket hanging in the open closet. She padded over to it and stroked the corduroy as if patting some animal. She looked at me with a raised eyebrow and asked, “May I?”

I propped myself up on my elbows. “Sure,” I said, amused by her fetish for Rouhaille.

She slipped it off its hanger and slid it around her naked torso. I was surprised to see that it was a bit large on her. She had seemed, somehow, bigger. She pulled it tightly around her and I felt myself wishing I were that jacket, so she had wrap me around her naked body like that. Then I remembered that she had—just a couple of stans before.

“What are you grinning at?” she asked.

“What are you grinning at?” I returned.

“This coat feels amazing against my skin.”

“You’ll pardon my saying so, but it looks amazing against your skin,” I told her.

“Oh?” she purred. “You like this look?”

“Oh,” I said with a considering tone. “I don’t know. Could you walk over there and back for me once, just so I can get the full effect?”

She giggled in the back of her throat and sashayed across the room. The coat was not long enough, even on her, to cover completely. The glimpses as she walked away were as stimulating as when she started back. I was absorbed in the view.

“It seems as though you do like the look,” she said. She let the coat fall open as she walked. She did not stop at the edge of the bed but crawled on her hands and knees until she was right on top of me—hands planted in the pillows on either side of my head and knees straddling my hips. She lowered her torso until her breasts just touched my skin and her lips were less than a centimeter from mine. “Yes,” she breathed, with an experimental rolling of her hips. “You do like this look. I can tell.”

“Yes,” I gasped as she lowered herself onto me. “I think it’s a very good look for you.”
Sometime later, I said, “I think you’re going to need another shower now.”
She giggled into the side of my neck. “I was just thinking that you’re going to have to have the coat cleaned,”
she said breathlessly. “What have you got in the pocket?” she asked sitting up on me.
“My tablet?” I asked.
“No, this pocket.”
“Do you know what a whelkie is?” I asked.
“Yeah, some kind of a St. Cloud spirit guide. The shaman on the south coast carve them. You have a whelkie?”
“It was a gift.”
“Somebody gave you a whelkie?”
“Yup.”
“Can I see it?”
“Help yourself.”
She reached into the pocket and slid out the dolphin. “Oh,” she said.
“Stop squirming,” I said, “or you’re going to have to go around again.”
She ground her hips into me with a fierce look, “Quiet, you! I’m admiring. This is spectacular. I’ve seen a
couple, but nothing like this.” She ran a finger tip along the dorsal fin and impulsively kissed it before putting it
back in the pocket. “You’re just full of surprises, Ishmael Wang.” She caught sight of the time. “But we have to get
moving. I want some breakfast before I have to put my Second Mate cap back on.”
“I hope you’re going to put on a shipsuit, too.”
She laughed and lifted herself off me with a small sigh. Well, at least one of us gave a small sigh. I am not
really sure which one of us it was. She clambered off the bed and stripped my coat from her shoulders, laying it
across the covers. “You,” she said pointing at me as I watched the light slip over her naked skin. “Stop admiring me
and call for breakfast—coffee, eggs, sausage, and potatoes—enough for three people. Order something for yourself,
as well.” She turned and strode back to the head and I could not bear not to watch her go.
“Now, spacer!” she yelled back to the head and I could not bear not to watch her go.
I laughed and got on the comm.
Around 08:00 we stepped off the lift on the dock level. She had checked out of the room and had a duffel over her shoulder. “Work this afternoon, duty tonight, underway tomorrow,” she shrugged helplessly.

“Thanks,” I said.

“For what?”

“Just thanks. See ya round the docks, maybe.”

She growled, wrapped a fist in my shirt, and backed me up against the bulkhead. When she let me go, I felt thoroughly kissed. Several of the passersby seemed to think so, judging from their stares. I hoped she did, too. We did not say goodbye. She waved and headed to the Duchamp’s lock. I could not watch so I headed to starboard and back to the Lois.

The docks were really chilly and I tightened my coat around me. I could smell her on it. I wondered if I could get it cleaned—not physically but whether I could voluntarily give up that scent. “You’re being stupid,” I told myself. I agreed with me, but sometimes being right does not help one bit.

I keyed my way into the lock and signed aboard. Sandy Belterson had the duty. “Welcome home, Ish.”

“Thanks, Sandy. Anything shaking?”

“Well, you’re the talk of the ship. Again.”

“Which part?” I asked.

“Where should I begin?”

“Great gods! How bad is it?”

“No, no,” she said with a smile. “It’s all good.”

“Okay, just the highlights?”

“Chez Henri?”

“Old news. Days ago.”

“You trashed Murdock?”

“Well, not trashed. I just didn’t find her that interesting.”

“Brill spewed beer—twice?”

“Just once. First time was a near miss.”

“You danced with Alvarez?”

“True.”

“The last time anybody saw you, Alvarez was dragging you out of Jump!”

“False.”

“I went willingly.”

“Al offered to take you home?”

“You do have good sources!”

She looked at me sympathetically. “It’s hard, though, isn’t it?” she said softly.

I shrugged. “Yeah. It’s just one of the things you need to get used to if you’re gonna be aspacer, eh?”

“Pretty much,” she said a bit wistfully.

“Well, I better get on with being a spacer then, I suppose. I need to get some stuff from my locker and head up to the flea market. Who’s up there today?”

“I think it’s Rhon’s day to manage.”

“Thanks, Sandy.”

“You done good, Ish. Tough as it is,” she told me.

Down in the berthing area, I pulled out the small bag of whelkies, intending to take them to the flea. I took the bag around to my bunk and started going through them, trying to remember what I had picked out. I opened the first one. It was a wolf in a pre-pounce pose, knees bent, head up with a kind of playful/predatory smile, haunches gathered. I wrapped it back up and tied the string carefully around it.

The second was a fox, sitting upright with ears up and tail wrapped around its paws in front. I re-wrapped that one as well.

The third was a peregrine falcon. It was in flight, wings swept back, talons ready, head and neck fully extended, eyes focused ahead—fiercely sleek and beautiful. The deep purple heart seemed to pulse in the berthing overheads. I re-wrapped it carefully, tying the red string snugly around the bit of cloth. I put the wolf and fox back in the bag and
I stowed it back in my locker. I slipped the falcon in my jacket and headed off the ship. I went to the Duchamp’s lock and rang the delivery buzzer. One of the ratings came out, and said, “Can I help you?”

“I have a delivery for Alvarez, second mate?”

“I’ll take it.”

I pulled the small bundle out of my pocket and handed it to him.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“Do I need to sign for it?”

I shook my head. “Just see that she gets it.”

“Sure thing.” He shrugged, made a note on his tablet, and went back through the lock.

I headed back to the ship. I needed to find somebody to go shopping with.

Sandy was still on duty and just laughed at my coming and going. “Can’t make up your mind?”

“Ah, you know what it’s like when you’re running errands. You always get halfway and find you forgot something. Is anybody around?”

“Besides the watch section, you mean?”

“Yeah, I need to find somebody to go shopping with me.”

She laughed out loud at that one. “Good luck! I don’t know who’s awake. Anybody with the duty is on it, almost anybody who had the mid is sleeping. Why don’t you get a nap? You’ve got the night watch tonight, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Listen to yer Aunt Sandy. Grab a nap now, the midwatch will be getting up at noon, most of them, at least. Grab some lunch and go up this afternoon.”

“Good advice, Aunt Sandy,” I told her with a grin. “Besides, better deals in the afternoon.”

She laughed. “Oh, Ish, humor me? I gotta ask?”

“Ask,” I said with a shrug. “I seem to be the primary entertainment these days.”

“Well, that’s not new. You and Pip have been the prime entertainment on this ship for months now. But would you have gone?”

“Where?”

“Would you have gone with Al?”

I shrugged and told her, “A gentleman doesn’t tell.”

“Damn, you are good,” she told me.

I winced a little, but I waved and headed for my bunk. She made good sense and I was a bit tired.
I woke around 12:30 and grabbed a quick shower before zipping up a shipsuit. There was still time for lunch and I hustled up to the mess deck. Pip was on duty and I waved to him. In typical in-port fashion, only a few bedraggled watch standers, like me, were eating. Lunch was soup, salad, and sandwiches. It was a chicken soup and very spicy. We must have gotten the new stores shipments in. I took my bowl of soup and some of Sarah’s biscuits to a table and sat down.

Pip joined me, teasing, “You don’t speak to your old friends now?”

“Hey!” I smiled. “How goes it?” I tried the soup and it was absolutely wonderful.

“You had quite a night, I hear.”

“Oh, you know, a few drinks, a little dancing,” I told him with a grin. “I ran into your old shipmate, Alvarez,” I said nonchalantly.

“So I heard. You just getting back?”

“Naw, I been back awhile. Grabbed a nap. I’ve got the watch tonight.”

“Good thing, from what I hear.”

“Why? What’d you hear?”

“Some guy at Jump! took offense at you walking out with his girl.”

“What? That’s crazy.”

“Well, he was drunk. Maybe he won’t remember.”

“What happened?”

“The story going around is that he started to get hot and was about to head out after you.”

“I never saw him,” I said.

“Not surprising. Al decked him. Kicked him under a table and left him there to sleep it off.”

“Al decked him?”

“You cut a pretty wide swath, my friend.”

“Hey, Al is a very cool woman.”

“Oh, I’ve met Al. A few months back in a bar on Gugara actually.”

“And?” I asked. If I had been even half thinking, I never would have asked. As soon as I said it, I knew I was going to regret it.

“Well,” he said with a good-natured grin, “she didn’t offer to take me home.”

“You’re loving this, aren’t ya?”

“Yup. You can say that again.”

I chuckled and ate my soup.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

“Yeah, but thanks for asking.”

He wrinkled his nose in a no problem kind of gesture. “You’re welcome. There hasn’t been this much fun on the ship in forever, so I should be thanking you.”

“It’s going to be an interesting trip to Betrus, isn’t it?”

“A week after pullout, almost everybody will have forgotten.”

“Almost?” I asked.

“Yeah. Almost,” he said quietly. “Well, I gotta get back to work. You heading up to the flea this afternoon?”

“If I can find somebody to go with.”

“Good hunting. Find us something good!” He stood and headed back into the galley to start the after lunch cleanup. It was 13:00.
I headed down to the environmental section to see if Brill was in her office. Diane had the watch and was sitting with her feet propped up on the console. “Hey! The prodigal son returns. Welcome home!”

“Thanks, I think.”

“You missed all the fun at the bar last night.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I heard there was some rowdiness after I left.”

“You sure made quite an impression for your first night out.”

“Al decked a guy?”

“Yup,” she said with a laugh. “That tall, dark drink of water Alvarez was talking to when you asked her to dance.”

“Tall, dark, and boring?”

“That’s him. Some guy from the Sigler. He seemed to think you were muscling in on his turf. Had several loud things to say about your parents. When he started out after you, Al intercepted him just inside the door. That girl can move when she wants to.”

I just shook my head. “She’s a peach.”

“You made quite an impression on her.”

“So I keep hearing,” I said with a chuckle. “I need to go shopping. Is Brill around?”

She nodded toward the office. “Quarterlies, she said. She seems to be pretty busy.”

“Should I bother her?”

Diane considered for a moment. “I think maybe you should. Just to let her know you’re home in one piece and all. I think she’s been concerned.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

She shrugged and announced loudly, “Well, I’m going on my VSI now. See you later.”

“How much trouble am I in?” I asked her softly.

She shook her head. “You’re not in trouble. She is,” she whispered. She walked loudly to the hatch and slammed it behind her.

I went to the door, which was not closed. “Hello?” I asked.

She did not turn. “I’m sorry, Ish.” she said softly, looking at her screen.

“Sorry for what, B?”

“Murdock.”

“I understand. Please look at me.”

She turned and she looked miserable. “What’s the matter, Brill?” I was afraid to ask but more afraid not to know.

“When you unloaded Murdock last night, I was really glad. You made me look like an idiot with the beer, but that was almost worth it.”

“So, what’s the problem? Alvarez?”

“No, she’s a dear.”

“What then?”

“You knew Murdock was a setup. I feel cheap, horrid, and I’m afraid of what that’s done to us.” She was hunched around her arms and looking at the deck. Bless her heart.

“B?” I said softly. “What I know is that somebody who cares very much for me did something thoughtful, risky, and kind. You didn’t do anything except give me a shot at the surest thing you knew. And you didn’t force me to take it. You just arranged the circumstances. The rest was up to me.”

She sighed miserably.

“Would you have been happier if I’d gone with Murdock?”

“Oh, gods, no! I don’t know what I was thinking,” she said bitterly.

“You were thinking that it’s cold out in the Deep Dark and sometimes you wake up in the night and you just want somebody to hold you. And you were thinking that I didn’t know that I had to do that in port because we don’t do that on the Lois. You were so aware of how much I needed to hold somebody that you couldn’t help yourself. It’s what you meant by ‘what it means to be a spacer.’ That it means you hurt a lot and you make connections knowing that they’re going to be ripped away. That empty sex isn’t enough, but sometimes it’s better than the alternatives.” I stopped then suddenly wrung out.
She sighed. “Something like that, I suppose.”
“Did you think that if I couldn’t have you, I’d settle for Murdock?” I asked softly.
She looked at me in shock. “We can’t be having this conversation.”
“We can’t. In three days we’re going to go back out in the Deep Dark. We need to heal this and ignoring it
is only going to make it worse.”
“But we can’t—”
“Brill, something happened when we went to Henri’s. Something that bonded you, Bev, Diane, and me in a
way that none of us expected. Can you deny that?”
She looked at me for a moment but shook her head. “No.”
“This isn’t about sex, and it’s not about power. You’re my boss here on the ship. No problem. I’d follow you to
Hell and back. Actually, I may already have,” I said with a grin.
She laughed and I felt the knot of worry loosen. Slightly.
“We can’t ignore what we feel about each other either. We have to deal with it. That’s what happened with
Francis and the bookmark. It wasn’t about the bookmark. It was about Diane.”
She sighed and said, “True.”
“And that was even before Chez Henri.”
“What the hell happened to us up there?” she asked wonderingly.
“I don’t know. I feel like I was given a gift. Something I didn’t know I wanted but now that I have it, I can’t
imagine living without it. Like I had been asleep all my life and something up there woke me up. I assumed that it
was just me. That it was a normal thing for you three.”
She shook her head. “Diane feels it, too, and Beverly I think. She was mad as a wet hen over Murdock.”
“I saw the glares. I think the point is that we’re human.”
“What do you mean?”
“I mean that Beverly drives me crazy because I keep having these fantasies of—gods help me—being totally
and unequivocally screwed into the deck by her. And stupid stuff like Diane’s grin in the middle of changing out
scrubber matrices—makes me wanna rip the mucky shipsuit off her and take her right there in the slime with her
giggling like a kid. That every time you walk through that hatch, or I see you cross the mess deck, I want to hold you
and soothe away the hurts you carry. I don’t know how I know you hurt so much, but you do and it kills me. I want
to give you the only thing I can.”
Brill was looking at me wide eyed.
“That’s the part that’s human, and we have to live with that. The other part is the spacer part. Because we can’t
be human that way. Not here. Not on the Lois. Too much is at stake. Other ships have other ways but we are what
we are and we’re better off because of it.” I took a deep breath, but I was not done.
“So we go ashore and we meet the crew from the other ships. We connect the only way we can. I can be happy
for Bev when she stumbles into her bunk fresh from a hotel shower, and I can root for Diane when she sets her
sights on whatever his name was last night. And I could be happy for you, too, but you’re so hurt you don’t even try.
And in spite of that, you tried to help me not to hurt—but we’re still human and so it still hurts.”
I stopped then to try to get some kind of control back. “Do you know why I went after Alvarez?”
“To prove to us—to me—that you didn’t need me interfering in your love life?”
“No, because she was as close to you as I could get.”
“What?”
“Of all the women in the bar last night, there were only five who really interested me. You, Diane, and Bev
were off-limits. Was there anybody there sexier than the three of you?”
“I hardly put myself in the same class as Bev and Diane. They’re amazing.”
“I know, but everybody else does. Maybe I need to take you back to Chez Henri and have M. Roubaille take
you back to the dressing room to get a good look at yourself. Your heart knows what your head doesn’t.”
“What are you talking about?”
“You were—are—the leader. That day you took us up there and sailed into Chez Henri’s, you scared the hell
out of me. I was afraid I wasn’t worthy. We left the docks and I felt like I was being escorted like some kind of
prisoner. The three of you forcing me to go shopping.”
She laughed again.
“I remember thinking you were like some kind of Valkyrie in a red jacket. Bev and Diane were like shield
maidsens guarding your back as much as keeping me in line. You went through the front doors like a force of nature.
You made me want to be worthy of even being in your company. I’m getting goose bumps just remembering it.”
I rubbed my arms through my shipsuit.
“But that’s beside the point. You are in the same class with Diane and Bev and none of you are available to me.
When I saw Alvarez come in, I knew that she was in the same class as you three, and because she was from the Duchamp, she was fair game. How could I not at least make a play? If I have to settle for less than you, why shouldn’t I try for the next most interesting and sexy women available?"

Brill looked at me while I tried to catch my breath. With her looking at me like that it was not easy.

Finally she said, “You’re something else.”

“Oh, I think we established that long ago,” I said with a grin. “We’re just trying to negotiate what that might be at the moment.”

She chuckled. “Damn, you’re—”

I held my hand up to interrupt her. “That phrase is a little painful right now.”

“Painful?”

“I heard it a lot last night, and I miss her already.”

She laughed then. “You had Alicia Alvarez saying, ‘Damn you’re good’ all night?”

We started giggling then and I nodded a bit sheepishly.

“Damn,” she said, laughing. “You’re not good—you’re excellent!”

When the laughing fit passed, it seemed like the crisis was over.

“Are you okay now?” I asked gently.

“Are you?” she asked back.

“Not really, but I’ll heal. And as much as it hurts, I think it was worth the pain. She’s a remarkable woman.”

“You know, we dock with the Duchamp once or twice a stanyer.”

“Maybe I’ll have my strength back by then,” I said with a grin. “And I don’t wanna make any assumptions.”

She chuckled at that. “Oh, I don’t think you need to worry on that score. So? What do we do now?”

“Well, I came down to see if you wanted to go shopping. I don’t feel like going to the flea market alone.” I looked at the chrono. “Not even 14:00 yet. I got four stans till I have to relieve Diane. Fancy a shop?”

“Main lock, five ticks?” she said and we headed for the hatch.

We met Diane coming back from VSI.

“We’re going shopping. Mind the ship,” Brill told her on the way out. I could hear her pounding up the ladder.

“What’d you do?” Diane asked me bewildered.

“Just cleared the air a little.”

“She seems okay. Are you okay?” she asked gently.

“No, but I will be.” I smiled. “Thanks.”

“Anytime. You did good.”

I slipped back into my civvies and wore the crewneck pullover under my jacket. The coat still smelled of Alicia but it did not hurt quite so much. I beat Brill to the lock by about five steps and we fell out of it together, laughing. As we crossed to the lift, she turned to me suddenly and asked, “Who was the fifth?”

I looked at her in surprise. “You don’t know?”

She shrugged. “Nope.”

“Al.”

She giggled all the way to the flea market.
Chapter 22
The Dunsany Roads flea market was something else. The influence of the cotton and flax fields below were immediately apparent. Lightweight fabrics abounded. Several booths featured yarns and cordage of both flax and cotton fibers. There were bolts of fabric in both solids and various weaves including checks and stripes.

“What are we looking for?” Brill asked.

“Normal stuff. Low mass, high value. Pip said there was a small silk industry here in addition to the cotton and flax.”

“Silk scarves? Ties?”

“Yeah, those would be good. I think.”

We wandered through the maze of booths for over a stan before we came to the ship’s booth. Rhon Scham wore the Booth Boss button and grinned when she saw us coming.

“Hi, Rhon,” Brill greeted her with a small wave. “How’s business?”

“We’re down to the end here. I don’t think we’ll open tomorrow unless somebody comes out of the woodwork. Sean and Tabitha came up earlier selling the last of the shawls and afghans. The shawls went very well and Sean seemed real pleased. He paid his cap. We’ve had several people up here today selling like crazy.”

I thought of the stones in Pip’s locker and wondered if they would sell on Betrus. It was not worth opening the booth just for them.

Rhon turned to me and asked, “You shopping for Betrus?”

“Yeah, I spent all my money on clothes and I’ll need to start earning it back.”

She looked me up and down frankly. “Turn around so I can see the back?”

I turned obediently and when I turned back Rhon looked a bit flushed and fanned herself with one open hand.

“Enjoying yourself?” I asked archly.

“Oh, yeah. Trust me. Whatever you spent it was worth every penny.”


We waved and headed off down the aisle. After we’d gone about four meters, I leaned over to Brill and asked, “She’s looking, isn’t she?”

“Yup, but ya can’t blame a girl for lookin’, Ish.”

“I’m still trying to get used to being the one looked at.”

“No, trust me. I have experience in this department.”

We wandered along a few more aisles. “This is so frustrating,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s all the same stuff. I’ve seen this stuff in four systems now.”

“Yeah, but remember the first trip you made to the flea? All this stuff was there, too, but it was just the first time you’d seen it so it seemed new.”


“Boy toy?”

“Yeah. My first flea market was with Beverly back on Gugara. That’s where we found Drus Martin and the belts. I think I got spoiled by the success of that and I keep looking for the next Drus Martin.”

“What’s that gotta do with boy toy?”

“Bev did the dickering with Drus.” I smiled at the memory. “They went back and forth and pretty quickly came up with a price. In the end, Drus told Bev, ‘Your boy toy can have the same deal if he wants’ and so we both bought the first of the belts.”

“That’s priceless.” Brill laughed.

“I thought it was terribly embarrassing at the time, but the story gets better.”

“What’s better than that?”

“Pip went back the next day and bought a big bundle of belts at a great price. In part because Drus remembered us from the previous day as, ‘tough fem with leathers and an attitude with a skinny boy toy.’ As Pip was picking out the belts, Drus was working on her bench and by the time Pip had his selections and they’d done the deal, Drus
handed him a belt to give to me. It has the words ‘boy toy’ worked into the pattern.”

“You’re kidding me?”

I turned around and lifted the hem of my jacket to expose the belt. Behind me I heard Bev giggle and two other women make appreciative little oh my sounds.

“That wasn’t the smartest move I’ve ever made, was it,” I said without turning around.

A strange woman’s voice answered, “Oh, I don’t know. I kinda liked it.”

I turned to find Brill stifling laughter behind her hand and standing beside a couple of smiling gray-haired women. One turned to the other and with a wink at Brill said, “I didn’t know this flea market had a floor show, Mary.”

“We’ll have to come more often,” the other one replied.

“Thanks,” I told them, but I fought back the urge to do my you’ve been a wonderful audience routine. I could not do that part just yet.

They smiled at Brill, and the one who was apparently named Mary told her, “He’s a keeper, dearie.”

“Oh, I know. I’m just trying to figure out what to keep him in.”

The not-Mary one just patted her arm and said, “Your heart, dear. Your heart.” They were still smiling as they wandered off.

“Well, you certainly made their day,” Brill said after a bit.

“Only fair.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly.

We kept moving, following in the wake of the two ladies.

Three booths later we found the batik merchant. Brill spotted it first, of course, over the heads of the crowd. His booth was draped with the most spectacular colored fabric. Bold patterns in rich colors dominated his selection. He had several variations on a bamboo theme and dozens of others. Each piece was a work of art. The vendor was a potbellied man with long, gray-streaked hair flowing down his back. He wore a tie-dyed linen shirt, simple black trousers, and the first pair of sandals I had seen since leaving Neris. He introduced himself as Chuck.

We stepped into the booth and Chuck grinned, first at Brill and then at me. “You two look like individuals of exceptional breeding and taste!”

Brill burst out laughing. “Does that line work?”

“No,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “but the laugh usually does. How can I help ya?”

“Tell me about this fabric,” she said.

“Batik is an ancient form of dying. You put wax on the raw cloth in the pattern you want, then dye the cloth. The dye soaks into the fabric where the wax isn’t. Repeat the process for each color you want to use.” He indicated the panels of fabric around him. “These are the result.”

“Can I take a few digitals of your booth?” I asked the man. “I think my partner would like to talk with you about buying a quantity of this to take out of the system to sell. I’d like him to see it.”

“Sure, mister. You want me in the picture or out of it?”

I pulled out my tablet and popped a couple of snaps off to Pip while Brill was looking at the various panels. “These aren’t whole bolts of fabric,” she noted.

“Correct, miss,” Chuck said. “I carve up bolts because it’s a lot of work to wax, dye, wax, dye. Some days, I’m feeling lazy so I only do little pieces like these.” He pulled out a stack of pieces that were only about a half a meter square. “I think that one over there is my biggest.” He pointed out a large piece clipped to the drape at the back of his booth that had to be two meters wide and four long.

“What do people use this material for? It seems a shame to cut it up for clothing.”

“Oh, it depends,” Chuck said, warming to his subject. “Lots of people use the bigger pieces for drapes. The larger patterns and more pictorial pieces go for wall hangings. You mount a couple of them on a hinged frame and it makes a nice screen. Down below these smaller pieces get made into throw pillows. Some of the smaller patterns actually work pretty well as skirts. There are some textile grade patterns, really small stuff, that are done in big bolts that could be used for shirts, and even slacks. I don’t do those. I’m too lazy.”

Brill looked at me and I nodded. Between us we bought about eight pieces in various shapes and patterns. We took one of Chuck’s cards and I gave him Pip’s name.

When we left, I felt much better. Brill walked with something more like her old stride.

“It’s gonna be okay,” she said suddenly as we walked away from Chuck’s booth.

I looked up at her and nodded, “I think so, yeah.”

“How’d you get so worldly?”

“My mother was a lit professor. She had the wisdom of the ages in the literature that was her profession and she kept trying it out in her life. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t, but she never backed down and she
taught me to be the same way. She didn’t hide her pain from me. And she got hurt a lot. In spite of that, she never stopped living. She tried to teach me to see things as they are, not as I’d wish them to be, and that’s probably the hardest thing to do. I haven’t mastered it yet. Someday, maybe.”

The ping-ping-ping of the closing warning sounded across the flea market, so Brill and I headed out with the crowd and didn’t talk much all the way back to the docks. On the way from the lift to the lock, she started chuckling.

“What’s tickled your fancy this time?” I asked.

“Al.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

“I know. That’s why I’m laughing.”

“You find the notion funny?”

She shook her head. “No. I used to be on the Hedley with her. I’m laughing because you’re right. She’s a fascinating woman, and you knew it within just a few ticks of meeting her while most people would have dismissed her as a freak on sight.”

“No woman with that much confidence could be anything other than fascinating. I think that’s why you were so awesome the other day heading up to Henri’s. I didn’t tell you what he told me in the dressing room, did I?”

She shook her head. “No, you been holding out, you rat?”

“I’ve been rather busy the last couple of days. Cut me a little slack.”

“Well, tell me now, before we get back.”

“Well, I was standing there just wearing those little briefs.”

“Thanks, I don’t have enough problems? You had to leave me with that visual?”

“You want the story or not?”

“Okay, okay, I’ll be good,” she said contritely.

I savored the idea of just how good she might be for a heartbeat or two before continuing, “Anyway he’s got me looking at myself in the mirror and asks me who I think I am. I told him ‘just a guy.’”

“You are not just a guy!” she interrupted me.

I laughed out loud. “That’s what he said!”

“You’re kidding?”

“I’m serious. He got this little pursed-mouth expression and said something like ‘You arrive in the company of not one, but three of the most delightful and strikingly beautiful women in this end of the galaxy, and you say you’re ‘just a guy.’’”

“He was just trying to suck up to you.”

“Why would Henri Roubaille feel the need to suck up to me by complimenting the women in my entourage?”

“Who you calling an entourage, buster? But you’re right, he probably wasn’t sucking up. He really thought we were beautiful?”

“No, he thought you were delightful and strikingly beautiful. That’s at least two steps up.”

“Well, that put a little spring in my step. Thanks, Ish.”

“You’re welcome.” We were almost back to the lock when I asked, “Since we’re talking about being at Henri’s, would you tell me something?”

“If I can.”

“Do you remember when I was doing up the buttons on my jeans?”

“Oh, I think I’ll remember that for a long, long time,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

I chuckled in spite of myself before continuing, “That was the point where I noticed, finally, that I’d been through at least two changes of pants without the robe. I saw it just lying there on the chair and I kinda froze for a second.”

“Oh, I remember.”

“I heard somebody from the couch make a little whimpering sound.”

She chuckled. “Yup, I remember that, too.”

“Who was it?”

“Henri’s assistant,” she said instantly. “She was standing right behind the couch.”

I laughed loudly at that. “Oh, gods, that’s funny. I thought it was either Bev or Diane.”

Brill shook her head. “No, it couldn’t have been any of us.”

“No? Why not?” I asked, amused by her certainty.

“None of us could breathe, let alone whimper.”

We were laughing as we went back through the lock.
Chapter 23
Before I changed back into my shipsuit, I grabbed another quick shower to freshen up a bit. The night watch was likely to be long and I was going into it tired. I stashed my towel and civvies in my locker and the bag of whelkies caught my eye reminding me that I needed to get two more of them out. It took just a moment to pull the fox and wolf that I had spotted earlier and put them in the pocket of my suit.

The chrono said 17:30 and I slipped across the passage to deck berthing. Bev was there, getting ready to go on watch herself.

“Hey!” she said. “Good to see you survived your first night on liberty.”

Taking a closer look at my face, she asked gently, “You did survive?”

“You know how it is,” I told her and shrugged.

With a single quiet laugh she said, “Oh, yeah. You sure livened up what would otherwise have been just another boring evening.”

Somehow I had a hard time imagining how any evening that had Brill, Beverly, and Diane all in the same room could be boring. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the wolf. “I wanted you to have this. A little thank you for going to Henri’s with me.”

“Oh, I should be thanking you,” she said with a hoarse little croak in her throat. She took the small bundle and opened it. The wolf’s eyes seemed to glint even though they were only carved wood. She smiled when she saw it and I could have sworn that her smile matched the expression on the carving in an eerie kind of way. “Wow,” she said, holding it up to the light. “These are amazing, aren’t they?”

I chuckled in the back of my throat. “Not as amazing as the woman holding it,” I said softly.

She looked around the wolf she held in her hand and focused on me. “You’re a pretty smooth talker, Boy toy.”

There was not the usual teasing overtone in the way she said it this time, and it caught me in the pit of my stomach. She reached out and cupped a hand behind my neck, pulling my face towards hers. For just an instant, I thought she was going to kiss me, but she tipped her head forward and bumped our foreheads together once gently before releasing me.

“Thank you,” she said. Her breath was a soft caress on my cheek before she withdrew. “Now get your delightful little butt out of here. We’ve gotta go on watch.”

I turned to leave and she gave my butt a playful little spank as I left. It pleased me inordinately for some reason. Kinda friendly—almost.

I went up to the mess deck for coffee before heading back down to environmental. Pip and Cookie were in the final stages of the dinner buffet so I just waved, took my coffee, and left. It smelled like Cookie’s spiced beefalo was on the menu for dinner and the aroma made me drool.

When I stepped through the hatch, Diane looked at the chrono and said, “You’re early.”

“Yeah, a coupla ticks, but I was ready and I wanted to see you.”

“Everything all right?” she asked with real concern in her voice.

“As well as can be expected under the circumstances.”

She gave a weary little smile and patted my arm comfortingly. “I still wanna know what you said to Big B. Whatever it was, it seems to have worked.”

“We had a good time up at the flea market. That helped, too.”

“But she was so miserable all morning.”

“Yeah, I gathered. Do you know why?”

“Well, she didn’t say for sure, but I can guess.”

“Murdock?”

“Partly. She felt like an idiot for setting you up like that. How did you spot it?”

“I heard you on the mess deck and I kinda expected it after that day at Henri’s. Even if I hadn’t heard the name, I’d have known who the plumber was by the way you and Bev were acting.”

She looked a little embarrassed. “I’m usually not that bad, but that person pulls my chain every time I think of her.”

“It wasn’t really about Murdock, though, was it?”

She shook her head. “No, it was that you went after Alvarez right after.”
“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I wanna come back to that in a tick or two but can I ask you about going up to Henri’s? We haven’t really talked about that afternoon much and I need a little reality check.”
“Sure, Ish. Ask me anything you want.”
“Oh, don’t tempt me with that one,” I told her with a smile.
She laughed.
“Okay, did something happen that day?”
“What do you mean, happen?”
“I’m gonna tell you what I felt like and you tell me if I’m off base compared to how you saw it, okay?”
“Sounds fair, go ahead.”
“The four of us bonded in some really odd—but really nice—way. I don’t know if it was the march up there, the march down, you guys watching me change my clothes, or that I really liked having you watch me. Maybe it was I just felt so protected by the three of you. That would be okay if I were the only one who felt it. So, with that big buildup, my question to you is—”
“Yes, I did, and still do,” she interrupted. “I don’t know what, why, or how but we had something when we came down on the elevator that we did not have going up.” She was looking at me intently. “Is that what you mean?”
“Exactly. I didn’t know I was lacking it, but now that I have it, I never want to lose it, and I don’t even have a name for it.”
“Yes!” She almost shouted.
“Well, that’s what I told Brill. Along with the reason why I went for Alvarez.”
“Oh, my.”
“You were grinning when you saw Alvarez lead me off the floor,” I observed.
“Yes, I was.”
“What were you thinking?”
“I was thinking, you dog and I was so happy for you.”
“And you were a little sad, too?”
She shrugged. “Life on the Lois demands some sacrifices.” She looked at me shyly—which was shocking enough—but then asked, “You won’t laugh?”
“Well I can’t promise that, but I’ll try not to.”
“That day, back when you were working in the mess and you came and we changed out the algae matrices…?” she said, letting the statement trail off suggestively.
“Oh, gods, you’re kidding?” I told her.
“Nope. You looked so damn good.” She sighed and shrugged helplessly.
“Yeah. Which is what you were telling me with the ‘understand what it means to be a spacer’ stuff?”
She nodded. “Different ships have different cultures. It’s strange. Gregor did not like it here because of that. I’ve been on those ships before. There are some advantages, but I didn’t like being a bunk-bunny.”
I chuckled. “I can’t picture you as a bunk-bunny.”
“Yeah, well, lots of men—and not a few women—seem to think I’m attractive. I found it too distracting for comfort. Saying no isn’t easy on a ship like that,” she said this last part while looking off to the side in a kind of distaste—almost like she wanted to spit. “So, yeah, I was a little sad that I couldn’t have you, but I was glad for you that you were leaving with Alvarez. She’s something else.”
“Okay, so why do you think I went after Alvarez?”
“To show us you didn’t need us interfering with your love life.”
“That’s what Brill thought, too.”
“It’s not?”
“Nope. What I told Brill was that if I couldn’t have one of you three, then I wanted to get as close as I could get. There were only two other women in the bar that I was remotely interested in beside you three.”
“You think I’m in the same league as Brill and Bev?”
“What you think you’re better?” I teased her.
“No! Ya jerk. Brill has so damn much class it hurts me to look at her sometimes, and Bev has so much raw sensual confidence that I could almost go for her myself. You’d put me in that same group?”
I laughed. “That’s what Brill said about you two, but don’t tell her I told you.”
“She doesn’t think she’s in the same league as us? Good gods! She’s what I’d like to be if I grow up!”
“So, that’s why Alvarez. She’s in the same class, but unlike you, she’s not on the Lois.”
“Wait, you think Bev, Brill and I, are in the same class as Alvarez?”
“Well, not exactly, but she’s close,” I told her with a grin.
“I still can’t believe you thought you could pull it off.”
“I didn’t think I would.”
“But you went anyway.”
I shrugged. “One in a million is a lot better odds than zero.”
“Gods, you must have been out of your mind walking across that floor to her like that. What were you thinking?”
“Don’t laugh?”
“No promises. I have a feeling it’s going to be funny.”
“I was thinking two things. First, the worst she can do is say no.”
“And?”
“I’m wearing Henri Roubaille.”
She fought it valiantly—I had to give her credit—but in the end she lost it and dissolved into giggles.
“Yeah, yeah, big joke, but while you’re done laughing your cute little butt off, think about this.”
I paused for her to get her giggles under control a bit. “It worked.”
“I know. That’s why I’m laughing!”
I loved to hear her laugh—even if it was at me.
“Anyway. I came to relieve you and to give you this.” I held out the small package.
She opened it curiously and when she saw it, I thought she might puddle up. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed.
“This is a whelkie, right?”
“Yeah. I got it on St. Cloud. When I was going through my things earlier, I saw this one and thought of you. So I wanted you to have it.”
“Thank you!” she said with feeling. She held it up close to her face and stroked an index finger along its head and back, patting it the way one might pat a real fox, if one could actually pat a real fox. For a heartbeat, I thought she might kiss it the way Alvarez had kissed the dolphin earlier in the day.
Remembering that episode gave me a pang of a completely other sort that was centered somewhat lower on my torso, and I could not help but grin a little at the small jab of remembered pleasure.
“This reminds me of Brill’s,” she said, looking up.
“Yeah, Brill has a heron. They’re from the same guy.”
“You gave it to her?” she asked, but she had an expression that said she knew the answer already.
“Yeah, funny story. We saw this booth but neither of us bought anything. Later we both snuck back to it alone and bought whelkies for each other. Over dinner, I reached to give her the heron just as she was handing me the one she’d gotten for me.”
“You have one, too?”
I reached into the pocket of my shipsuit and pulled out the dolphin, holding it up so the section overheads glinted off the polished wood. The way the light slipped across it almost made it look like it was swimming.
“Oh, it’s lovely. Can I touch it?”
“Sure.” I held my hand out.
She reached out and stroked it a couple of times with just the tip of one finger along the back and dorsal in a gesture vaguely similar to the way Alvarez had.
“It’s so smooth. The wood almost feels soft,” she said dreamily. “You know Brill carries hers with her, too?”
“Does she? I knew she used to, but I didn’t know she still did.”
I looked at the chrono and saw 17:44 click over to 17:45. “You ready to hand over the watch?”
“Mr. Wang, all ops normal. No maintenance was scheduled or performed. You have the watch.”
“Ms. Ardele, I relieve you. I have the watch.”
She slipped her tablet into the holster and grabbed her coffee cup, still holding her whelkie in her other hand. As she slipped past me, she gave me a little peck on the cheek. “Thank you for the fox.”
“You’re welcome. Sarah says they have to find their true owners. The fishermen along the south coast there think they’re magical in some way,” I said as I settled into the seat and scanned the readouts once quickly.
“Maybe they are.” She regarded hers carefully once more.
I shrugged. “Maybe,” I told her idly as I finished my scan through the various status readouts. “Or maybe we just believe in the magic. Maybe we just let the icon represent the ideal which gives us a physical manifestation of an intangible.”
She laughed her bubbly laugh. “I don’t even know what you just said.”
I had to replay the sound of my voice in my ears to remember, then I laughed, too. “Sorry, one of the themes that Mom was always talking about. How ideas are often represented by objects.”
She held up her fox and let the light wash over it. “What do you think these are representations of?”
“Dunno. Maybe we apply a personal meaning to each one. That the meanings you and I apply aren’t the same as Sarah applies to hers.”

“You gave Sarah one?” she asked, surprised.

“No, she got one from her village shaman. A raven. The differences in style are obvious, but the representation is spectacular in its own way.”

“You gave one to Bev, though, didn’t you?” It was a statement more than question.

“Yeah, just now.”

“What’s hers?”

“A wolf.”

“Yes, that is fitting.”

She headed back toward the hatch. “Well, I’m off. I wanna grab some dinner and a nap before I head out.”

“Hot date?”

“Well, I can hope.” She grinned wickedly. “I can hope.”

“Good hunting! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” I said, inadvertently repeating the little catch phrase my mom and I shared when one of us had gone out.

She laughed and stopped with her hand on the hatch. “What wouldn’t you do?”

The events of the previous day spooled out delightfully in my brain, and I laughed. “Apparently not much!”

“Good for you,” she said. She started out again but stopped once more and asked, “What did you give Alvarez?”

“A falcon.”

She nodded. “Good choice.”

With a final little wave, she slipped out of the hatch, and I settled down to review the logs and check the maintenance schedule.
Chapter 24
At about 18:30, I slaved my tablet to the console and headed up to the mess deck. Pip waited for me with a big grin on his face. It did not seem possible that he would be so pleased just because of the digitals I sent him. I loaded up a plate with Cookie’s spicy beefalo and rice. There were some green beans, too, and I added a big pile of them. My body musta been telling me it needed the vitamins or something. I thought Pip was gonna turn himself inside out before I made it over to him.

“What’s got you all in a tizzy?” I asked. “Are you that excited about the batik? I brought some samples.”

“No, those are good but you will not believe this.”

“How do you know?” I asked with a chuckle. “You haven’t told me yet.”

“Last night, I was in my rack reading. After cleanup, Sarah shows up and settles into her bunk with the shawl work.” I could tell it was going to be a long story so I ate slowly. “She’s getting darn good, but anyway she’s sitting there and crocheting her little fingers off. We talked about the booth and how well she did and so forth. She said she had a great time, but sold all her stuff and was looking forward to Betrus when she’d have more things to sell.”

“Sounds like a new convert to the trading lifestyle.”

“She’s still not quite in the same plane of existence with us, sometimes, but everybody is really good with her and many actually wait for her. She’s got more grit than me, I’ll tell ya that.”

I just continued eating. He was having too much fun to hurry him and I knew he would tell me what had him so excited—eventually.

“So, anyway, I asked her, if she was looking forward to selling her shawls or just selling. She giggled and said she had so much fun she wished she could just sell stuff. I asked her, ‘Doesn’t it bother you being in that crowd of people all day?’ She said no because when she was behind the table it was sorta like she was in the galley. Because people were coming to her, she felt in control.”

I began to have second thoughts about whether he actually would get to the point of this story, but I did not have anything else to do, so I did not interrupt.

“So, I knew we had that pile of stones in the locker. I also knew neither of us was going to get up there to sell ’em so I asked if she wanted to do it for us. I offered her booth commission on any she sold. I didn’t figure it would amount to much, and I was pretty sure you wouldn’t mind.” He stopped there and looked at me like it had been a question.

“I was a little slow in noticing the pause, but said, “No, not at all. I was wondering just this afternoon about how we were going to deal with them.”

“What I meant is, do you mind that I offered her the commission? Ten percent?”

I shook my head. “Of course not, how much did she wind up with? Fifty creds?”

“Try four hundred.”

I do not think I could have been more surprised if he had hit me with the omelet pan. I blinked slowly in confusion. “She made four hundred creds in commission? In one day?”

He nodded with that big old grin plastered across his face. I knew he was telling me the truth but I could not quite process it. “But at ten percent she had to have sold,” and I lowered my voice to keep from screaming, “four thousand creds in a day? Less than a day, because I was up there with Brill around 15:00 and she wasn’t there then.”

Pip’s eyes dance in glee. “Yup.”

“Okay, you got my attention. Now back up and gimme the details.”

“You know how we thought there were about two hundred fifty or three hundred of them left? It was more like four hundred. The smaller ones kept falling to the bottom. In the end she sold just over four hundred of them in about six stans.”

“Gods, Pip, that’s about one a tic! For six stans?”

He just grinned, his head bobbing frantically in agreement.

The math fell into place then, too, and I practically yelled, “She got ten creds each!”

“Yeah, somehow, I have no idea how. I gave her the stones and leather stock last night and showed her how we were letting people buy the stones and then hack a piece of thong off the spool? Apparently she stayed up late and put a thong on every stone. She had some nice knot work to keep them together too. I saw them before she headed up to the flea with Rhon and the others. They looked good.”
“But ten creds a piece? You were getting five at the most.”

“When Rhon brought the pallet back, I asked her what was going on. Apparently our Miss Krugg is some kind of sales genius. She had bundled them into groups of fifty and stashed them in our cargo duffel. She would bring out a bundle and stand out near the edge of the booth and hawk them to the people walking by. She worked every angle, like the old get-em-while-they-last routine or calling them good luck stones. She hollered that they were fresh from the mines in Margary and just thirty creds each or four for a hundred. She even claimed they were blessed by a St. Cloud shaman. She had this whole bit going.”

“Wait! She was hawking them for thirty creds each?”

“Don’t look at me. She asked me what to sell them for and I just told her, ‘Whatever you can get.’ Rhon was killing herself laughing.”

“Where is she now?”

“She came in early and got some dinner, but she said she needed to get back to her shawls, so I suspect you’ll find her on her bunk. At the rate they’re going through yarn, I bet they’ll run out before we hit transition.”

“If you see Sean or Tabitha, you might tell them there’s a lot of really nice cotton yarn up in the flea. I bet they could shift to lacework and the mass on some of that cotton would be really low for the length.”

“Good idea. I’ll tell ’em.”

I sat there for a tick in stunned disbelief. “So, how much did we make?”

“We got two hundred fifty for the yarn we sold to the co-ed crochet team and three thousand six hundred twenty-five for the stones, after commission.”

“I laughed. “That was money well spent! We’d have been lucky to make two kilocreds and it would have taken us three days!”

“That’s what I thought, too!”

“So, we’re clear on mass?”

“Yup.”

“We’ve got a balance on our partnership of over five kilocreds again?”

“Yup,” he said again. “Something close to it.”

“You know this is insane, right?”

“Like you being dragged out of Jump! by Alicia Alvarez isn’t?” He laughed some more.

“She didn’t drag me. I went willingly. But to remain on subject…trading…that is. You’re going to go talk to the batik guy? Chuck?”

“Yeah, I didn’t get a good sense of what that was on the digital, but what I saw was interesting.”

“I bought some samples. Brill liked it, too.”

“Okay, sounds good. You wanna go with me? I’ll wait until you wake up. I’ll want to go in the afternoon.”

“Better deals in the afternoon!” We chanted together and laughed.

It suddenly dawned on me that this was the first time Pip and I were not on opposite port-side watches since I had been aboard. In the past we never could leave the ship at the same time. Obviously it occurred to Pip first. “That could be interesting. I’ll see if Bev wants to go. She’s on night watch tonight, too.”

He went back to start evening cleanup while I finished the last of my spiced beefalo and rice. I had eaten most of it without noticing. Pip’s news was just so startling. I checked the tablet, just to make sure I had not missed any alarms from environmental, but I had only been gone about a quarter stan. It seemed much longer.

A small icon flashed in the corner of the screen, letting me know I had a message—not a standard intra-ship notification but an incoming one from the StationNet. I looked at for perhaps a full tick before I opened it. It read:

It’s beautiful. Damn, you’re good.
—AA.

It was another tick or two before I could close the message and take care of my dishes.

One thing bothered me about Sarah’s little performance. I stopped at my locker for a tick and pulled the two stones I had gotten from the pile and stuck them in my pocket before I headed over to deck berthing. Pip was right and I found her crocheting on her bunk. “Hi, Sarah,” I said from outside the quad.

She looked up and smiled. “Hey, there! Everybody on the ship is talking about you! I didn’t know you were a celebrity.”

I chuckled. “Well, I didn’t use to be. Things just got out of hand.” I stepped into the quad and leaned against Pip’s bunk. “I wanted to thank you for selling those stones today.”

She grinned. “Oh, you’re welcome. I had so much fun. People were so nice and I even had some patter that seemed to help. Patter? That’s the correct phrase?”

“Yes, that’s right. You learn fast.”

“Thanks!” Sarah beamed and seemed much younger than when we first met at the shuttle docks. Not
physically. She still carried her age, but it looked almost painted on. I wondered how old she really was, but I was more than a little afraid to ask.

“Can I ask you something about your patter, Sarah?” I asked gently.

“Sure.”

“Rhon told Pip that you were saying the stones were blessed by a St. Cloud shaman.”

“Yes.” She looked down at her hands. “I did. I fibbed a little bit about how rare they were, but Rhon seemed to think that was okay.”

“I see. You didn’t think telling the people that the stones were blessed was a fib?”

She shrugged a little shrug and focused on her crochet work. “Maybe a little.”

“Only a little?”

She worked the yarn for almost a whole tick before speaking, “Did you know that shaman is often a hereditary position?”

“I’ve heard that it is in some cultures, yes. But how do they do it on the south coast?”

“The post is almost always passed from father to son. The son inherits the gift from the father, you see. Sometimes you find a shaman when somebody’s been sick...really sick. When they recover, they discover they’ve received the shaman’s gift. But most often it’s inherited.” Her fingers never stopped moving and her eyes never looked up.

“I see, and did the shaman in your village have a son?”

She shook her head. “No, my mother died having me,” she said it so softly that I could barely hear her.

“And you blessed the stones.”

“Yes. I blessed the stones.”

I pulled the two from my pocket and held them up by the thongs. “Would you bless mine?”

“Why do you want me to bless them?” she asked, looking up for the first time. “You’re not a follower.” There was something akin to anger in her eyes.

I shrugged. “A lot of people thought it was worth it today. Who am I to argue?”

“But I’m not really a shaman,” she spat. “I’m not a boy.”

“Maybe so,” I agreed. “But you’re not on the south coast any more, either. You’re on a ship that carries the spirit of a great woman. The captain of this ship is a great woman. Maybe the ship needs a great woman to be her shaman.” I shook the thongs, making the stones rattle together.

“You don’t believe that,” she said flatly. “You’re making fun of me.”

“I’m not making fun of you. I’m in no position to ridicule anybody. And to be a shaman, maybe, you only need somebody to believe in you.” I held the stones higher and offered them to her again. “It doesn’t matter to me what you believe in. The important thing is that I believe in you.”

She swallowed hard and looked at the stones like they might burn her if she took them.

Neither of us moved for a long time. Finally, she reached out and took the stones from me. She looked at me once more, then she closed her eyes and I could see her lips moving ever so slightly as if reciting to herself. She kissed each stone and handed them back to me.

“Thank you, Sarah.”

“Thank you, Ishmael,” she replied and with a little smile and a deep breath she went back to her crochet work.

I stepped out of the quad and almost bumped into Pip who had been standing just out of sight. “Clean up done already?”

“Yeah, you know what port-side mess is like.” He had the look on his face that told me he had been there for a while.

“Well, I need to get back to environmental,” I told him. “Wanna walk as far as the gym?”

He followed me out of the berthing area and then grabbed my arm. “What in the name of Venus’s hairy palms was that all about?”

“What?”

“That mumbo jumbo with the stones.”

“She’s come a long way, but she’s still healing.”

“No kidding!” he said. “So why are you encouraging her.”

“What? Why am I encouraging her to heal?”

“No! Why are you encouraging her in her delusion?”

“What delusion?”

“All this shaman stuff. First the whelkies, now the stones.”

“Well, the whelkies are real. I have one in my pocket. And she did bless the stones.”

“But none of that is any more magical than I am.”
“What makes you think you’re not magical?”
That stopped him for a few heartbeats.
“Are you going soft in the head on me, Ish?” he asked with genuine concern.
“Well, maybe. But I remember the story you told me about when you came aboard.”
“Yeah. So what? They traded me for Murdock.”
“And once you came aboard, things began to turn around for you.”
“That’s true, but I don’t see what that has to do with Sarah being a shaman and all this magic crap.”
“Why do you think things started changing when you got here?”
“I don’t know. I got a better attitude maybe. People were nicer here.”
“Or maybe they just believed in you,” I told him quietly. I noticed I still had the stones in my hand and I thrust the white one into his. “Here, lucky stone, blessed by a St. Cloud shaman. Wear it in good health.”
I left him standing there gaping at me as I turned and headed back to environmental. As I walked, I tied the green one around my neck and let it slide down inside my shipsuit. You never know.
Chapter 25
My tablet bipped me awake just after 12:00. Overnight watch had been low-key. Francis ribbed me good-naturedly about Al, but he seemed a bit groggy when he relieved me. I wondered if he had been out too late himself. I rolled out and hit the san for a quick shower before I zipped into a shipsuit.

Sarah was on duty in the galley. I thought she looked a little less pinched, but that might have been just a projection on my part. She and Cookie smiled and waved but they were still arguing about pastry dough and I didn’t interrupt. Lunch was a very nice fish and pasta dish. I was not sure if it was the last of the cobia fillets or some of the munta from St. Cloud. Whatever else it might have been, delicious came first on the list.

Pip came in dressed in civvies already as I settled down to eat. “You’ve already been out this morning?”

He grabbed a coffee and sat across from me. “Yeah, I went up and scoped out yarns. I saw Sean and Tabitha up there, so I suspect they’ll come back with more crochet materials. At this point they need more hooks, too, I think. They’re doing so well I’m sure there are others who will start up with them. Sean should charge for lessons.”

I laughed. “Or get royalties on the pieces.”

We sat there for a couple of ticks while I dug into the fish and pasta. I was hungrier than I thought.

Pip was not very talkative. I usually relied on him to carry the conversation. “You okay?” I asked him.

“I’m not very talkative.” He gave a shrug that made me doubt him.

I realized he wore the white stone under his shirt. “Nice stone.”

“Thanks,” he said, looking down. “It was a gift from a friend. It’s a lucky stone—blessed by a St. Cloud shaman.”

I grinned at him and he smiled back.

“You gonna finish eating one of these days so we can go shopping?” he asked.

Leaving the ship with Pip felt odd. The last time we had been off the ship together was when he had brought me aboard seven months before. My brain kept sliding sideways whenever I saw him walking beside me. I was so used to walking with one or more of the women. We cruised up to the flea market and headed right for the batik booth.

“Ah, Ishmael!” Chuck said as I came up to the booth.

He surprised me. “You have a good memory. You must see hundreds of people a day!”

“True but none of them want to buy bulk batik and take it off-station.” He turned to Pip then and held out his hand. “You must be Carstairs?”

“Well I don’t have to be, but I am.” He shook the offered hand. “Call me Pip.”

I wandered around looking over the goods while Pip dickered with Chuck. He bought about twenty kilos of fabric and Chuck bundled it into two ten-kilo packages for us to carry. Pip surprised me by pulling a folded duffel out of his hip pocket and sliding both packages into it. “We can trade off carrying,” he told me with a grin.

“Twenty kilos is going to get heavy fast.”

“Are you planning on shopping some more?” he asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Well I thought that since we’re here, we might look about. See if there’s anything else that strikes our fancy.”

Chuck overheard us and offered, “You can leave the duffel here if you like. Just slide it under that table over there and pick it up before closing.”

I thanked him while Pip stowed the bag.

As we left the booth, he looked at me curiously. “Is there something you’re looking for?”

“Yeah, trade goods for Betrus. Something different. Low mass, high value.”

He slugged me in the shoulder and laughed. “No, I mean is there something in particular?”

I shrugged. “Booths open and close every day. There may be something here that I like as much as the batik. We have mass to spare yet, don’t we?”

“Yeah, at least another twenty. When you make spec three we’re going to be up to our armpits in mass allotment.”

“We’ll have to shop with the grav pallet.”

“That’s a good idea,” he said with total seriousness. “If we either shop on days when the co-op isn’t setting up, like today, or we plan to take our stuff over to the booth, they can take it back to the ship.”

“Well, that also assumes we keep buying single large lots. With more mass allotment we can diversify a bit.”
“True. The batik is great though. Nice find.”
We sauntered along the aisles. “Thanks. It’s funny because I spotted it just after I complained to Brill that everything looked the same. Then we came around the corner and there was all this brightly colored fabric.”
“After you’ve been to about three of these places, you begin to see the stuff that’s in all of them. What amazed me was that you picked out Drus Martin’s belts. That was a real find.”
“You found the stones. I think we’re even there. I wish we had another five kilos of those.”
He laughed loudly. “I think we’d have saturated the market here.”
“Maybe but we’re leaving for Betrus tomorrow.”
I pulled out my tablet then and checked the ship statuses. It listed MarDuch as ENR Bink under the status. I slipped the tablet back into my pocket and turned my head to put my nose near my collar so I could smell her scent again and a muffled sound escaped my lips.
Pip patted me on the shoulder in sympathy. “Yeah, I understand, but it’s a small galaxy. You’ll see her again.”
“Thanks, but I was looking at that!”
He turned his head to see where I was looking and made a little sound of his own. “Those are spectacular.”
We hurried over to the booth and started talking to a tiny woman with almond-shaped eyes who introduced herself as Ping Fa Hwa. She had the most amazing collection of prints I had ever seen. I recognized the stylized form from some that I had seen in the gallery at the University of Neris. She had landscapes, birds, seascapes, and even some flowers.
“Did you make all these yourself?” I asked her.
“Oh, no. I am only selling them for our co-op.”
Pip looked at me and started laughing. Ping looked confused until I said, “We’re in a co-op, too. We know what it’s like.”
“What can you tell me about these prints?” Pip asked, his eyes distractedly scanning the brightly colored artworks.
She launched into a detailed sales pitch, so I left Pip to close the deal. I heard enough to learn that the prints were made on a kind of native parchment made from the local linen and cotton. The artists printed the images using a silk screen reproduction and each was a limited edition. She pointed out the small numbers in the bottom corners of each print next to the artist’s signature. Most of the prints were runs of a hundred or less because, she said, the reproduction process eventually degraded the screens. I didn’t know if that was true or not, but it sounded good. It didn’t really matter. The artwork was stunning.
The prices were likewise stunning, and I began to think that the price Sarah got for our shaman-blessed stones was less a miracle of salesmanship and more a factor of the local economy. Still, Pip bought ten prints for a kilocred and Ping slipped them into a large flat envelop of heavy parchment. The whole thing weighed less than a kilo.
As we walked back to pick up the duffel bag of batik fabric, Pip commented, “Of course, if we keep buying things like this, our mass allotments will be moot.”
I laughed.
It was a struggle but we got it all back to the Lois in time for dinner.
At dinner we ran into a bunch of people including Brill, Beverly, Diane, Arvid, Mitch, Tabitha, and Sean. It seemed like half the crew was aboard but getting ready to go out. There was a feeling that I had never had as a day worker in the galley. I do not think Pip caught it, but the sense of the flow of time across the watches was almost tangible. Diane was actually on watch and would be stuck on the ship overnight. Francis had already gone. I would relieve Diane in just under twelve stans. The mood was definitely *last chance* and spirits ran high. As we broke up from dinner, we reached the general consensus to gather at the lock at 20:00 and all head to Jump! together. Even Pip was going.

As we broke up, Brill said, “Well, you guys be careful, okay?”

“What do you mean?” I asked her. “You’ll be there to keep an eye on us, won’t you?”

She shook her head. “I’m bushed. I’m going to stay aboard tonight, I think.”

Behind her Diane was shaking her head in a vigorous no and making pulling motions with her hands. It was all I could do not to laugh.

“Come on, B,” I pleaded. “Just come have a drink and a dance maybe. We’ll have a few laughs and come back early. Pip and I both have morning duty.”

Diane started nodding yes, just as vigorously.

Brill dithered a little but eventually relented. Before she headed out to get changed, I asked, “Oh, could you do me a favor?”

“What? I’m already doing you one just by going!” She smiled when she said it.

“You remember the outfit you wore up to Chez Henri’s? The red jacket with the tab collars? Black slacks?”

“Of course, I don’t have that many clothes.”

“Wear that.”

“Isn’t that kinda dressy for a few drinks at Jump?” Her eyes narrowed.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. Do you think so, Diane?”

Diane piped up with, “No, I think it would be perfect.”

Brill laughed at the obviousness of our behavior and waved over her shoulder as she set off to change.

At 20:00 she showed up in the red jacket and she still looked like a Valkyrie to me.

We all checked out together which must have driven David ben Dour crazy as he tried to process the group of us all at once. Brill, Bev, and I stepped out of the lock and waited for the rest to get checked out.

Bev just shook her head and snickered softly. “I don’t remember the last time this many of us went out at once.”

“Whoa! I got the duty in the morning. I’m just going for a couple of drinks and then I’m coming home and going to bed.”

Brill made one of her *mmm-hmm* sounds.

Beverly just grinned at nothing in particular.

I looked up at Brill and realized she did not have a necklace on. Her throat and upper chest were spectacular on their own, but I thought it could use something to focus attention. I reached back and untied the leather thong and stripped off my green stone.

“Come down here!” I told her.

Bev winked at me.

Finally everybody got off the ship and we headed for the lift. Bev and I took up station on either side of Brill.
Bev in her leathers, looked like she would eat the next three men alive and they would love every bite. Brill had on her red jacket, while I sported my pink shirt and olive coat. We formed up in a kind of parade formation with some of the crew ahead and some behind. I spotted Rebecca Saltzman out front walking with Mitch Fitzroy. I never appreciated Rebecca’s ability to really slink. The genetic legacy of heavy-G did not seem to bother her stride one bit and I appreciated it in detail for several moments. I looked over my shoulder and saw Tabitha had her own little escort flotilla bringing up the rear with Sean on one side and Arvid on the other. All three of them looked like they were locked and loaded. Whoever that trio tangoed with was in for a hell of a dance. I started counting heads and realized we had almost half the crew in that one group.

I laughed softly.

“What?” Brill asked without looking down.

“Talk about your extended family,” I said.

Beverly chimed in with, “I was thinking dysfunctional, myself. I think every one of us is crazed.”

“Dysfunctional, no. Crazed, definitely. Every last one of us,” I told her.

We managed to get everybody on the big lift and went down in a single group. When the doors opened to the heat and moisture of the oh-two deck, we streamed off the lift in a herd. The corridors were not crowded. It was still relatively early, but the groups of people who were there parted in front of us and we sailed past.

When we got to Jump! the group broke up into table-sized bunches, some people choosing to pull tables together, others simply settling in threes and fours. The waitresses were kept hopping for a few ticks while everybody got drinks and the evening began to ramp up. Pip sat with Bev, Brill and me at a four-top and I looked around to see if I could see anybody familiar.

Brill leaned over to me and said, “The Hedley is getting underway in a couple of stans. Al’s not here.”

“Yeah, I know. I looked it up earlier. The Sigler left, too, so I’m safe from what’s-his-name.” I winked at her.

“I’m just getting a feel for the room.”

Pip laughed. “A feel for the room? You planning on moving in?”

“No, I just wanna see how the people are grouping up.”

Brill didn’t look comfortable and I asked, “Are you okay?”

She shrugged. “I don’t do well on these last night outings. Everybody seems so desperate.” She laughed self-consciously.

I looked at Bev who gave me a little shrug.

I turned back to Brill and said, “Do something for me?”

She barked a short laugh. “You mean something else? I’ve got your stone around my neck. What more do you want?”

“Close your eyes. I’m going to whisper a word in your ear. Hold it in your mind. Then finish your drink before you open your eyes.”

She looked at me like I was crazy, but she closed her eyes. I leaned into her ear, savoring the scent of her under the ship’s shampoo and soap and whispered. She giggled, but she finished her drink before opening her eyes.

“Now what’s that supposed to do?” she asked.

“Maybe nothing. But you gotta believe,” I told her and grinned.

Pip looked at me funny then but he didn’t say anything.

Beverly shot me an expression that asked, “What the hell are you up to?” I just shrugged and waited.

“Close your eyes. I’m going to whisper a word in your ear. Hold it in your mind. Then finish your drink before you open your eyes.”

“I’m gonna need more than that,” she said.

Beverly chimed in, “I was thinking dysfunctional, myself. I think every one of us is crazed.”

“Dysfunctional, no. Crazed, definitely. Every last one of us,” I told her.

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I turned back to Brill and said, “Do something for me?”

She barked a short laugh. “You mean something else? I’m already out, wearing the clothes you asked for, and I’ve got your stone around my neck. What more do you want?”

“Close your eyes. I’m going to whisper a word in your ear. Hold it in your mind. Then finish your drink before you open your eyes.”

She looked at me like I was crazy, but she closed her eyes. I leaned into her ear, savoring the scent of her under the ship’s shampoo and soap and whispered. She giggled, but she finished her drink before opening her eyes.

“Now what’s that supposed to do?” she asked.

“Maybe nothing. But you gotta believe,” I told her and grinned.

Pip looked at me funny then but he didn’t say anything.

Beverly shot me an expression that asked, “What the hell are you up to?” I just shrugged and waited.

The waitress came back then and put a drink in front of Brill.

“But I didn’t order—” she started to say.

The waitress pointed toward the bar. “It’s from the gentleman over there.”

We all looked and saw a nice-looking guy in a leather jacket and pullover. He raised his glass in silent toast.

Beverly ducked her head a little bit when she saw him and started to giggle. “The guy in the jacket?” she asked from behind a hand.

The waitress nodded. “Yup. That’s him.” She continued on to deliver an order to the next table.

Brill leaned into Beverly and asked, “You know him?”

“Oh, yeah,” Brill said with an emphatic nod of her head. “You should go over and thank him for the drink.”

“Really?” Brill said and looked again. He still smiled at her, waiting for her reaction.

“Oh, yeah,” Brill said again.

Brill looked puzzled and shrugged. “If you’re setting me up, Beverly Arith, I will make you suffer in ways you cannot possibly fathom,” she said darkly.

“You already do, hon,” Brill assured her with a smile so warm, two of the ice cubes in my drink melted. “I should go thank him for the drink?” she asked again.

Bev nodded very solemnly. “You’ll thank me tomorrow.”
The way she said it made even Pip blush.
Brill looked at me and I just said, “Remember the word.”
She made up her mind and stood up. I was so proud of her because she did not just stand—she really stood. Not the usual Brill stoop so she did not bang her head, but straight, tall, and proud like that day we sailed into Chez Henri. She picked up her drink and sashayed over to where he waited. As she approached, he slid off the stool and dropped almost to the level of the bar, but held a stool for her before getting back on his own.
I looked at Beverly and asked, “You sent her off to thank a midget?”
“He’s not that short. The angle and standing next to Brill makes it look worse than it is. He’s about a meter and a quarter. A little more maybe.”
“But you know how sensitive she is about her height…”
“Oh, I don’t think height is going to be an issue tonight,” she said softly with a peculiar emphasis on the word height.
Pip was leaning in on the conversation, too. “Why not?” he asked.
Bev shrugged. “What he lacks in height, he more than makes up for in length and width,” she said with an evil grin. I thought Pip might swallow his tongue at that, but when she added, “And he can lick his own eyebrows.” I was very glad I did not have a mouthful of my drink.
I turned to her. “You are evil.”
“Thanks,” she said smugly.
“I think you guys are becoming a corrupting influence on Ish. He’s change a lot since leaving the galley.”
Bev and I looked at each other and shrugged. “We try,” she said. “As much as we can.”
“I suspect this is just the beginning. Things are likely to be pretty lively in Betrus, too, don’t you?” I asked Bev.
“Yes. Yes, I think you’re right,” she answered.
Pip just shook his head and laughed. “Someday I’m gonna be able to tell my grandkids I knew you.”
“Yes, right. With your luck, you’ll be in the cell next to us,” I told him.
I ordered another round when the waitress came by and the room was already growing warm as more people arrived and overloaded the air conditioners.
About half a stan later, Brill came back to the table with an odd, dazed look on her face and the man in tow.
“Hey, guys, this is Steve from the Calhoun. Steve, I think you know Beverly, that’s Pip, and this is Ishmael.”
“Hi, Steve,” Bev said. “I thought you were getting off the old Hound.”
He shook his head. “Naw, you know how it is, once you get a bunk broke in, it’s hard to change.”
Bev raised her glass to that.
Brill broke in with, “Um, I’m going to go see Steve’s—”
Bev interrupted with, “Etchings?”
“Yes, etchings. Exactly.”
“We’ll leave a light on for you,” Bev said.
Brill looked at Bev with the oddest expression I think I’ve ever seen on anybody’s face then turned to me. I smiled and winked. “Remember,” I told her.
When they had gone, Pip said, “Sweet python of Pythias, those were tight pants he had on.”
Bev nodded, slurped an ice cube out of her drink, and started crunching it. “Steve knows how to get a girl’s attention, no question about it.”
I turned to Pip and said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling a little inadequate right now.”
“He’d make a horse feel inadequate,” Pip said with more than a little awe in his voice. “He won’t hurt her, will he?”
Bev laughed. “Only if she wants him to.”
About that time a strawberry blonde in a tight, white cashmere sweater, black capris, and knee-high boots laced all the way up plunked down in Pip’s lap and looped an arm around his neck. With a nod to me and a wink at Bev, she turned to Pip and held out her hand. “Hi, my name is Janette and my friend over there is Katie,” she said, nodding back to a brunette in a low-cut blouse sitting in a booth.
Pip shook the offered hand. “Hi. I’m Philip but everybody calls me Pip.”
She didn’t let go of his hand, but leaned in a little closer. “I wonder, Pip, if you’d settle a bet for us.”
“Yes. I will if I can.”
It is not often one sees Pip disconcerted, but the assets wrapped in cashmere so close to his face tangled his usually glib tongue.
“What’s the bet?” I asked.
“Well,” she said, looking directly into Pip’s eyes, “do you know that little sigh that a really satisfied woman makes?”
Pip said, “Yeah?”
“Well, see,” she went on, “Katie bet me ten credits you probably didn’t, but I bet you probably did.”
“Sounds like she owes you the ten creds,” I said, playing the straight man.
“Well, she’s not going to pay out ten creds just on your say-so,” she said with a delightful little pout still staring into Pip’s eyes. “I don’t suppose you’d come with us for a couple stans and prove it?”
“Why, yes. I’d be happy to,” Pip said. “But, what does she get if she wins?”
“She gets to teach you how.”
Bev said, “Sounds like a fair bet to me.”
Janette stood up and drew Pip after her.
As they started off, I called after her, “He’s got duty at 04:30.”
She checked the chrono, and tossed me a saucy wink. “That should be just about right.”
Bev and I watched them go, one on either side. Pip seemed a bit dazed.
“What was that?” I asked.
“Katie and Janette?” Bev asked back. “Bunk mates on the Alistair. They’re getting underway midmorning tomorrow.”
“Bunk mates?”
“Yeah, they have a different culture on the Alistair.”
“I dare say.”
“They’ll give him a good ride and then bring him home. They’re not cruel—usually.”
“You realize he’s going to be insufferable for a month?” I asked.
“Probably two,” Bev agreed.
“I hope he clipped his fingernails.”
Bev took another slug of her drink and nodded agreement.
“Tell me,” I said to her, “is the Lois the only ship—like us?”
“You mean where we don’t screw with crew?” she asked.
“Yeah.”
She shook her head. “No, actually, most ships are like that. Too professional or too much like family.”
“Seems harsh.”
“It’s not all that pleasant on ships like the Audrey and the Alistair,” she said.
“Oh, like being locked on a ship for forty-odd days with somebody you just broke up with?” I asked.
“Or being locked in a ship for forty days with a pair of feuding lovers?” she countered.
“Ouch,” I said.
We grinned at each other. “In spite of that do you wish we were on the Alistair?” I asked her.
She considered it for a bit while she chewed another ice cube. “No,” she said finally. “If we were, we wouldn’t have what we got and I’m liking that a lot.”
“Two more of my ice cubes just melted,” I pointed out.
“Please don’t talk about melting.”
“Sorry.”
She nodded. “So? What are you going to do now?”
I looked around the bar for a few heartbeats. “My work is done here. I think I’ll just drink up and head back to the ship. I got duty in the morning.”
“I do, too. Mind if I join ya?”
We swigged down the drinks and I threw a couple of cred chits on the table. “Let’s go,” I said.
We didn’t need to talk much as we walked back toward the lift. We were communicating just fine.
I pressed the call button and she turned to me with a frown. “What was the word?”
“Valkyrie.”
The lift doors opened and we rode it up in silence. When we got to the Lois’s dock, she keyed the lock and said, “Good word.”
“Thanks.” I paused as the lock cycled. “He won’t hurt her?”
“She’ll thank me in the morning.”
“Still.”
“Yeah,” she agreed with a sad little sigh.
The lock cycled open and we got on with being spacers.
The Golden Age of the Solar Clipper

If you enjoyed this novel, you will be happy to learn that…

Half Share is the second in the six book Trader Series from The Golden Age of the Solar Clipper. Nathan’s series tells the tales of everyday men and women, real people doing ordinary things and forging bonds of friendship while traveling the stars in the Deep Dark. It is a coming of age story of Ishmael Horatio Wang—he’s just an average Joe trying to make a living.

This series was originally released as Podcasts, an audio format distributed for free (donations accepted and appreciated), where chapters are released serially. The next four podiobooks in the series are available now and can be listened to at www.podiobooks.com. Ridan Publishing plans to publish each book in the Trader series in both printed and ebooks formats and editing is underway. If you wish to be notified as the books are released please send an email to: ridan.publishing@gmail.com and we’ll let you know when they become available.

Nathan’s stories are some of the most popular out of the hundreds of offerings from www.podiobooks.com, and as of December 2010 he held 5 out of 10 Top Overall Rated (#4 Captain’s Share, #5 Ravenwood, #6 Full Share, #7 Double Share, and #8 Quarter Share) and also 5 out of 10 Top Overall Ratings by Votes (#2 Double Share, #3 Quarter Share, #4 Full Share, #5 Half Share, and #6 Captain’s Share).
About the Author

Nathan Lowell has been a writer for more than forty years, and first entered the literary world by podcasting his novels. His sci-fi series, The Golden Age of the Solar Clipper grew from his long time fascination with space opera and his own experiences shipboard in the United States Coast Guard. Unlike most works which focus on a larger-than-life hero (prophesied savior, charismatic captain, or exiled prince), Nathan centers on the people behind the scenes—ordinary men and women trying to make a living in the depths of space. In his novels, there are no bug-eyed monsters, or galactic space battles, instead he paints a richly vivid and realistic world where the “hero” uses hard work and his own innate talents to improve his station and the lives of those of his community.

Dr. Nathan Lowell holds a Ph.D. in Educational Technology with specializations in Distance Education and Instructional Design. He also holds an M.A. in Educational Technology and a BS in Business Administration. He grew up on the south coast of Maine and is strongly rooted in the maritime heritage of the sea-farer. He served in the USCG from 1970 to 1975, seeing duty aboard a cutter on hurricane patrol in the North Atlantic and at a communications station in Kodiak, Alaska. He currently lives in the plains east of the Rocky Mountains with his wife and two daughters.
Awards for Nathan's Books

2010 Parsec Award Winner for Best Speculative Fiction for Captain’s Share
2009 Podiobooks Founder’s Choice Award for Captain’s Share
2009 Parsec Award Finalist for Best Speculative Fiction for Double Share
2008 Parsec Award Finalist for Best Speculative Fiction for Full Share
2008 Podiobooks Founder’s Choice Award for Double Share
2008 Parsec Award Finalist for Best Speculative Fiction for South Coast
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BOOKS IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE SOLAR CLIPPER

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 Fantasy Books by Nathan Lowell
 Ravenwood

 *Forthcoming

It's a time of change on the Lois McKendrick, Sarah Krugg joins the mess deck and Ishmael Wang moves to the environmental section. Just after getting accustomed to life aboard a solar clipper, Ishmael must learn a whole new set of skills, face his own fears and doubts, and try to balance love and loss in the depths of space.

Both Ish and Sarah must learn to live by the mantra, “Trust Lois.” For Sarah, there is the hope of escaping a horrifying past. For Ish, he must discover what type of man he wants to become and learn the consequences of his choices.

Return with the crew of the SC Lois McKendrick, as you set sail in the next installment of the Trader Tales of the Solar Clipper Series. All your favorites return: Ish, Pip, Cookie, Brill, Diane, and Big Bad Bey. You might even discover some new friends as you travel among the stars.
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