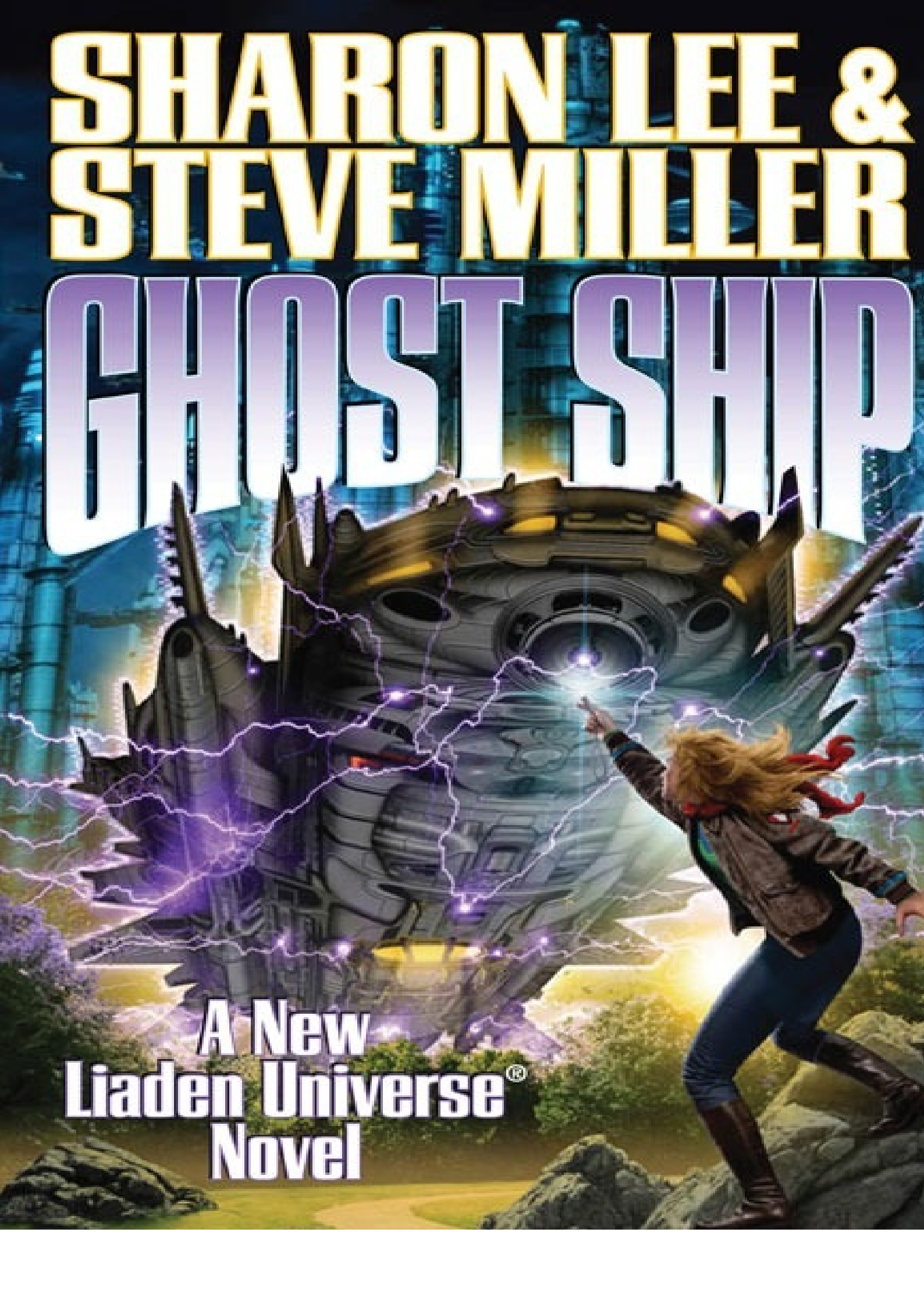


**SHARON LEE &
STEVE MILLER**

GHOST SHIP

**A New
Liaden Universe[®]
Novel**



GHOST SHIP

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**SHARON LEE &
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Ghost Ship

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Bechimo

The galaxy was undergoing change.

This was empirical. *Bechimo* was not one for flights of fancy; nor for humor. Sadness, yes; and yearning. Those had been close companions; comrades of long standing—gone now to brilliant ash. A new and vivid emotion flared into being.

Its name . . .

Bechimo consulted archives, cross-referencing psych and legend, which search matrix had yielded insight during past periods of disruption. Nor did it fail this time.

The burning new emotion was called . . .

Hope.

The emotion that had prompted the opening of the hatch, admitting a man who was not on the Approved List—*that* had been despair. Despair had found the berth, nestled in among the Old Ones. Those who were able had taken note of *Bechimo*'s arrival, sharing such data and comfort as they might. In time, they failed, their voices going silent, their signatures fading out of the aether.

Others placed themselves into slumber, in order to conserve what was left to them.

Still others raved, on and on. *Bechimo* filtered those frequencies, and sat at berth, listening to silence within, and without.

Deliberately, *Bechimo* began to shut down systems.

There was no need to move on. There was nowhere to go. No crew to serve. No captain with whom to bond. There were those others who from time to time invited communication, but they were New, not on the Approved List.

Dangerous.

Bechimo was alone. It was best to sleep, here among the others not precisely of one's kind, but near enough.

Near enough.

Sleep, *Bechimo* did.

Until—*Bechimo*'s safeguards registered the arrival of a ship—nothing more than metal and programs, less aware than the slumbering Old Ones.

The man, though . . . the *pilot*. Not on the Approved List, no. In all the time since . . . since . . .

In more than five hundred Standard Years, no one on the Approved List had requested entry.

Bechimo entertained the theory that the Approved List might be incomplete.

The man—the pilot—put his hand, respectfully, against the plate.

Bechimo took the reading, accessed archives; ascertained that this person was not on the *Disapproved* List, and—

Opened the hatch.

The pilot came aboard. He toured, monitored closely by *Bechimo*. He comported himself well, inspecting without taking liberties, and came at last to the Heart, where he sat in the second seat.

Having achieved this much, however, it seemed that the pilot lost purpose. For long seconds, he sat unmoving, possibly reviewing an internal logic-tree. He might have reason to assess his situation. It was *Bechimo* as much of a surprise to him as he had been to *Bechimo*.

And yet—a pilot aboard, for the first time in . . . in . . .

Perhaps he was merely uncertain of his next proper move, *Bechimo* thought. That might well be so.

A prompt was therefore sent to the B screen.

Please insert command key.

The pilot accepted the prompt, looking about him and taking up a key from among the objects on the catch-bench between the two seats. Perhaps he hesitated, holding the key in his hand. *Bechimo* registered increased heart rate, deeper breathing, a slight dampness of the palm cradling the key, and felt a thrill of what might have been fear, that the pilot would rise without completing the sequence.

In the moment that *Bechimo* thought he would rise and depart, the pilot instead sat sharply forward and placed the key properly in the board.

Bechimo—that flash of heat, of *hope*—*Bechimo* accepted him.

Samples were taken, and archived; systems were introduced to this, their Less Pilot. *Bechimo* stood by to receive orders.

The pilot, though—*Win Ton yo'Vala* was his designation. The pilot abruptly turned the command key to the off position. It was no matter, though it would not do for him to leave it behind, were he to exit the ship. *Bechimo* sent a prompt, reminding the pilot to remove the key.

This he did, appearing suddenly agitated. *Bechimo* considered administering a calmative, but the pilot's stress levels were somewhat below those readings necessitating such action.

The pilot *Win Ton yo'Vala* took the other command key from its place on the bench, stood, returned to the hatch—and exited.

Bechimo puzzled over this, coming at last to understand that process was at work, and rightly so. First came the Less Pilot, to inspect, and to declare himself. Once satisfied that all was in order, the Less Pilot would report to the Captain-candidate, and present the Over Pilot's key. Did the key accepted then properly would Pilot *yo'Vala* escort the Captain to *Bechimo*, and the Builders Promise would be fulfilled.

The keys retained contact, as was their function, and thus *Bechimo* knew when the Captain's key left the Less Pilot and entered the keeping of another. That other, however, did not propose themselves. It would seem that the key had become cargo.

Systems alert—even feverish, were such a thing possible—*Bechimo* stirred in the berth among the Old Ones. Stirred, but did not disengage.

The key could be recalled, if necessary. Yet *Bechimo* chose to believe that the Less Pilot had acted with what he considered to be honor. Perhaps, indeed, the Less Pilot had sent the Overkey away which he decoyed enemies of the ship.

Such things had happened before.

It was that memory that impelled *Bechimo's* careful disengagement from berth, the rippleless slice between the fabric of space. Best, perhaps, to be near when the key found the Captain. Enemies were no light matter.

Bechimo followed the Captain's key, and thus knew the instant that the Captain-candidate received it, and was found fitting. Hope flared ever brighter. *Bechimo* drew nearer yet, slipped fully into space.

. . .

But the Captain did not divert the course of her dumb vessel, nor order *Bechimo* to stand firm against boarding.

Slipping away, *Bechimo* monitored the situation. It would appear that the Captain, also, was in a state of flux. On consideration, *Bechimo* again withdrew to the berth among the Old Ones, trusting that the Captain would come, when it was safe to do so.

Time passed.

The Captain did not come.

Others came, as others had before, not on the Approved List and lacking that quality which had moved *Bechimo* to open for Pilot yo'Vala. These *others* behaved as pirates, and thus *Bechimo* issued a warning that even pirates might comprehend. They withdrew—and returned in force, wielding weapons, hull-cutters, overrides.

The answer to this was well known. *Bechimo* did what was required, in defense, as the Builders had taught.

And still the Captain did not come.

Worse, Less Pilot yo'Vala fell into the hands of another band of pirates, who introduced programming in opposition to his native environment. *Bechimo*, no longer safe among the Old, was informed by the key, slipped closer, though hidden still. From a prudent proximity, those things that could be done were, including influencing to Pilot yo'Vala's cause those of the Old which were enslaved by the pilot's captors. An escape was effected, but not before the pilot had experienced financial corruption on a catastrophic level. The key wavered, then, and would have withdrawn. *Bechimo* overrode its impulse; it was for the Captain to say who of the crew was worthy. Thus the key remained with the damaged pilot . . .

Until it reported itself in proximity, yet physically estranged from the Less Pilot.

Bechimo understood this to be process. The pilot's compatriots would of course work to restore him to precorruption conditions. It was understood that such restoration might consume some time. It was understood that, sometimes, such processes failed of restoring . . . all. And yet, it was the Builder's Law: the Captain alone decided, for the crew, for the cargo—and for the Less Pilot.

Prior to the Less Pilot's estrangement, both keys had been in the same place. *Bechimo* had moved then, slipping between the layers of space, certain that, now, at last—but the keys separated.

Bechimo translated to a less chancy location, and entered normal space, simultaneously noting an anomaly in this well-known quarter. Cautious sampling was performed. Recordings were made. Data, in a word, was gathered, analyzed and filed.

Bechimo slipped away between the layers of space, to another location, and so remained, listening to the keys, harvesting that data which came across the common bands, the while musing upon the alteration of the galaxy, and the fragile durability of hope.

Jelaza Kazone
Liad

“Hello, cat.”

Theo bent down to offer her finger to the feline in question—a plushy grey with four white feet—presently at full stretch on the window seat. She had to pull the sleeve up on her jacket, to get the cat out of way.

The cat lifted her head and touched her nose to the tip of Theo’s finger, then looked up at her with squinched yellow eyes.

Theo smiled back, absurdly warmed by the simple welcome.

Not that she’d been made to feel *unwelcome*, here in Delm Korval’s house. She’d come at a bad time, which she’d known, but—*necessity*, as Father would say—as he *had* said, actually, and Delm Korval had agreed.

The first complexity, absent the several she’d brought with her, hoping that the Delm could help her. Delm Korval wasn’t one person, but two, a man and a woman, *lifemated*—a relationship Theo wasn’t really sure she had precisely straight and—the man . . .

“Allow me to make you known to my son, your brother,” Father had said, like it was *perfectly natural*. “Here is Val Con yos’Phelium, and his lifemate, your sister, Miri Robertson.”

A brother . . . Theo had blinked. She might also have gaped.

Jen Sar Kiladi had been Kamele’s *onagrata* for all of Theo’s life. He was her genetic father, which wasn’t always the case on Delgado, and he had never once mentioned that he’d been attached to another woman—before. At least, Theo thought, not to *her*.

Now that she thought about it, *of course* Father would have been someone else’s *onagrata*—eventually several someone else’s. Kamele had used to say that he was an “acquired taste,” in that half-joking half-exasperated tone she used when he’d done something particularly out of the way. Despite that, Theo did know that Father had been approached by at least two highly placed scholars, who could, in her listening-at-doors best friend Lesset had said knowingly, afford to please themselves. He had—obviously—refused them. And Theo, silly kid that she’d been, had just assumed that he had *always* been with Kamele . . .

Yet here stood Val Con, a slender, brown-haired pilot somewhat her elder, who disputed Father not one whit, but merely inclined his head formally, and murmured, “Sister Theo. I am all joy to see you.”

“Kind of a shock, I know,” Miri had added, sympathetically. “Not too long ago, I didn’t have any kids at all. Now I got sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts and who knows who through him,” she jerked her head at Val Con. “And more cousins than you can shake a survival blade at on the other side.” She grinned. “You’ll get used to it.”

Theo wasn’t so sure, and was immediately made even less sure by the interruption of the eight-foot Clutch Turtle, who had been watching the proceedings with interest, forgotten, if you could believe something so large standing in plain sight could be *forgotten* until the moment it—*he*—chose to speak.

“Sister of my brother and of my sister, I greet you! I am Twelfth Shell Fifth Hatched Knife Clan of the Middle River’s Spring Spawn of Farmer Greentrees of the Speakmaker’s Den, The Edger. In the sho-

form, I am called Edger. May I know your name?"

His big voice buffeted her like a sudden wind. Theo looked up—way up—into yellow eyes the size of her head, with slit vertical pupils, like a cat's.

Her name? She'd dared to dart a look to Father, who looked back at her blandly, which meant that he thought she could figure it out for herself.

She cleared her throat.

"My name is Theo Waitley," she said slowly, as she tried to remember the little bit she'd read about Clutch Turtles. Something about the shells—they kept growing, wasn't that it? So that a Turtle with a largish shell, like this—like *Edger*—would be . . . older than she was, anyway. And the names, like the shells, kept getting bigger, as the person gathered achievements.

"I'm young," she said, hoping that she wasn't just about to be rude, "and just beginning my name."

The big yellow eyes blinked, first one, then the other. Theo swallowed.

"It is well said," Edger pronounced, "modest and seemly. I look forward to learning your name as you grows, Theo Waitley."

"Thank you," she managed, relief making her already shaky knees shakier.

"It is I who thank you," he assured her, and about then Val Con suggested that she take a few moments' rest in the morning room while he and Miri attended to some necessary business.

Father slipped his hand under her elbow and guided her into the house, down a hall and into the morning room, where there were handwiches laid out under cool covers, with pastries and fruits on outlying plates. Beverages included tea, coffee, fruit juice, water.

"The delm will send for you when they are able to give you the attention you deserve," Father had told her. "If a parent may suggest it, perhaps you might partake of the food on offer, and practice board-rest until you are called."

Theo bit her lip against a sudden urge to cry. He was leaving her? She'd just found him!

"Won't—will you stay?" she managed.

He shook his head, his smile regretful. "Alas. There is so much to do that even an indolent old man has been pressed into providing what poor service he might." He touched her cheek. "I will see you again, before you leave, Theo. Rest now—and eat something."

She'd eaten something—a nut-butter and jelly handwich, which tasted so good that she had another. After the second was gone, she was thirsty, so she'd drawn a glass of water—*no more tea*, she told herself firmly—and, too restless to attempt the nap she was starting to feel the need of, wandered over to the window . . . where she discovered the cat.

"Do you mind," she asked, gently rubbing a pointed ear, "if I sit here with you? I promise not to take up too much room."

The cat smiled again, which Theo took for a *yes*. Carefully, she curled into the corner, drawing her knees up onto the cushion. The window was open, one half swung out into the day, admitting a light breeze saturated with the scents of the flowers in their orderly beds along the lawns.

She settled her shoulder more comfortably into the corner and considered the view, trying to decide if it were better than the barely controlled growth of the inner garden she had just lately quit.

It was certainly, she thought, *different*. Like her present situation. If she'd taken time to analyze it, the three problems she brought to Delm Korval, the one that was *least* likely to have been solved immediately was the puzzle of Father's whereabouts.

Except, she reminded herself, that Father was Val Con's father, too. Sleepily, she wondered after Val Con's mother. She tried to work out whether she had a formal-to-Liadens relationship with the mother of her brother, but the sun and the breeze and her general state of exhaustion defeated her efforts.

Theo sighed, closed her eyes, and nodded off.

~~The cat stretched, rose lazily and ambled across her knees to her lap, where she matter-of-factly curled up, purred briefly, and resumed her nap.~~

- - - - -

Daav yos'Phelium Clan Korval, as he was once again named, entered the final data-string and sat back in the desk chair, waiting for what his inquiries might bring.

Many years ago, this room had been his office—as much his as anything else in a dwelling that had housed generations before him and, with a smile from the luck, generations after. It had, according to the note on the door, been tied down and cleared for transport. He opened the door, discovering thereby that the note was accurate; though it was but the work of moments to liberate desk and chair and to bring the computer, still gratifyingly able to find the planet-net, online.

That same computer now chimed, requesting his attention. He leaned forward and touched a key to accept the queued files.

Theo's license, of course, was an open book to one who was not only a Master Pilot, but who had the use of Korval's access codes. The records of her ship, proud *Arin's Toss*, even now resting at Solcint Port . . . those were trickier.

Daav was no stranger to trickery, and he possessed what was very nearly a supernatural touch with research line. Still, whoever had the ultimate keeping of *Arin's Toss* had taken great care to be discreet, and he didn't like to force the issue, when doing so might lose Theo her employment.

She came very quickly, commented the voice only he could hear. *Did you expect her so soon, Daav?*

"I hardly know that I expected her at all," he answered. "A pilot new-come to first class surely has better things to do than to be wondering after the whereabouts of her aged father."

Kamele must have written, Aelliana said, *to tell her that Jen Sar had gone.*

That, he conceded, was very probably how it had been, and what Kamele's state of mind might be at this point in her relationship with Theo's father, he found himself reluctant to imagine. As she was a woman of great good sense, it was likely that she wanted to murder him—for which he would blame her not at all.

Ought we to write? Aelliana asked.

"How would we begin to explain ourselves? We will seem either mad or craven." He shook his head, frowning at the screen. "And truly, Aelliana, it seems a poor Balance, to involve Kamele in Korval's little unpleasantness."

There were those who wanted Korval—all of Korval—dead, or worse. There were those; the number and disposition as yet unknown. And Kamele, who had lived all of her life on a Safe World .

"Perhaps it's best to let that connection die."

How? Aelliana asked. *Theo has found us.*

There was that.

Daav sighed.

"I propose that we plunge our ship into a sun and have done."

Inside his head, Aelliana laughed. *That never works.*

His lips twisted toward a smile, then straightened as the door opened.

"Father," Val Con said from the threshold, "may I come in?"

"By all means! I have here for your perusal Pilot Waitley's tale thus far. The ship's is murkier, and I hesitate to push my point."

"How murky, I wonder?" Val Con asked, coming cat-foot to the desk.

Daav spun the screen, watching his son's face as he took in the data. One eyebrow twitched; he hitched a hip onto the edge of the desk and leaned to touch the scroll bar.

"The pilot is . . . conservative," he murmured. "That hardly seems like us."

"The pilot was taught young to distrust herself and to set the good of the many before her own necessities."

"Hm," said Val Con, touching a key. "Hugglelans Galactica, second to Pilot Rig Tranza"—he looked up—"who appears also to have been conservative, and unwilling to push the pilot beyond her comfort. An odd sort of care, from elder pilot to junior."

Daav tipped his head.

"Yes?" Val Con murmured.

"Pilot Waitley was . . . let us say, *rusticated* from Anlingdin Piloting Academy. I believe the phrase was 'nexus of violence.'"

Val Con smiled. "Now that," he said, "sounds more the thing."

"Yes," Daav said earnestly, "but recall that she was gently raised—unlike yourself—and taught to honor safety above sense. Such a dismissal, and in such terms—it would not be wonderful if the pilot had entered a period of . . . overcompensation."

"Thus requiring a deft touch of Pilot Tranza." Val Con looked back to the screen and touched the scroll bar. "Yes, it might be read that way. Well."

He was silent for a moment of study.

"*Arin's Toss*, out of Waymart, as all good ships must be out of Waymart. Owned by . . ." He paused then looked to Daav, his face exquisitely bland. "Crystal Energy Consultants?"

"Thus my reluctance to probe further."

"I understand. Perhaps the pilot will be forthcoming."

"If a father may say it, she is rarely otherwise. Speaking of whom—has she broken the furniture from boredom yet?"

"When I stopped in the morning parlor just now, she was asleep on the window seat, with Merlin's assistance."

"Excellent," Daav said, feeling not only his relief, but Aelliana's.

"Indeed. Now." Val Con straightened, and gave Daav a stern look from vivid green eyes. "What odd that the pilot's sole reason for arriving here is yourself?"

"Low," Daav returned promptly. "She had said whatever trouble she carries is complicated—and she is a truthful child. Her father vanishing from the arrangement she has known all her life is fairly straightforward, however distressing."

"As I have cause to know." Val Con sighed. "What part, if any, does the delm play in those matters that might lie between Theo Waitley and her father?"

"None at all. Theo and I shall deal between us, as we have always done."

"Ah. And Theo's mother?"

Daav glanced slightly aside.

"Your mother and I had just been discussing that."

"That's fortunate. I don't suppose you've achieved a solving?"

"Alas," Daav answered, and met Val Con's eyes. "We were not, you know, a very good delm."

"Yes, so I read in the Diaries, and so did Uncle Er Thom instruct me," his son returned, with a certain amount of acid.

Seated, Daav bowed, allowing irony to be seen.

"If Theo should petition the delm for her father's return?" Val Con asked after a moment.

“Korval does not command Kiladi,” Daav answered.

Val Con shook his head.

“No, that will *not* do! Should she ask, it will be in terms of *her father*, which leaves no room for *melant’i* games—and is precisely what I would ask, myself, were our positions reversed.”

Daav sighed. “If the delm will humor us—remand all questions and demands that Theo may put forth regarding her father to me. It is true that we have left some untidiness behind and would make what amends we might—but those difficulties are outside of the clan.”

There was a pause—a very long pause, as Daav reckoned it—before Val Con inclined his head.

“Unless and until the matter is brought specifically to the delm’s attention, you and Mother may pursue your own Balance,” he said. “But, mark me, Father; if it comes to Korval, it will be solved—and fully.”

“Of course,” Daav said, and smiled.

THREE

Jelaza Kazone *Liad*

Tranza had the music playing on the open band again, Theo thought groggily. Not bad music, actually, something she almost recognized, cheerful and uncomplicated. She listened, drifting nearer to awake as she tried to place the—

“Pilot Waitley?” inquired a plummy male voice. *Not Tranza*, was her first thought. Her second was that there was an intruder on *Primadonna* and if that were so, Rig Tranza was either incapacitated or dead. She kept her eyes closed, though her heartbeat was suddenly loud in her ears.

“Pilot Waitley,” the voice said again. “The delm will see you now.”

She took a breath, remembered that she was on Liad at the house named Jelaza Kazone, waiting for the Delm of Korval to find time to solve her problems.

Which, according to the voice, they had.

Theo opened her eyes.

The room was just as she had seen it last, minus the grey cat, and the addition of a man-tall metal cylinder surmounted by an orange globe, with three articulated arms spaced eccentrically around the central cylinder.

“Good day, Pilot,” it said, the orange globe flickering. “I am Jeeves. Master Val Con asked me to escort you to him.”

“Thank you,” Theo said, rolling off the window seat. She danced a quick stretch, and nodded to the ’bot.

“I’m ready,” she said.

* * *

The ’bot’s wheels were astonishingly quiet; in fact, Theo noticed, the whole thing was considerably better constructed than its unsophisticated chassis would suggest. There was no rattling or clanking like you might get out of a cargo ’bot, nor did it appear too large for its surroundings.

“Were you built to work here?” she asked. “Inside the house, I mean.”

You didn’t talk to a cargo ’bot, except to give simple orders, but a deeply programmed entity like the Concierge, back on Delgado, could hold up its end of a complicated conversation so well you’d think you were talking with a real person.

“I was built by Master Val Con and Master Shan to serve as the butler at Trealla Fantrol,” Jeeves said. “As Trealla Fantrol will not be making the transfer, I have been reassigned to Jelaza Kazone.”

The music was louder now. Jeeves paused and gestured with one of its arms, showing Theo an open doorway.

“Please enter,” it said.

She stepped into a library, but a library improbably wrapped and ready for transport. The shelves were sealed with cargo film; the furniture anchored to temp-clamps adhered to the wooden floor, the rug rolled and secured to the wall beneath the open windows at the bottom of the room.

Nearer at hand was a pleasant grouping of three chairs around a low table supporting three glasses and a stoppered blue bottle, beaded with condensation. To the right of that grouping her . . . brother Val Con stood at a tied-down desk, playing a portable omnichora.

The tantalizingly familiar music peaked, paused, and ended with a glissade of notes like a war spring rain. Val Con stood for a moment, fingers just a whisker above the keys, head bent as if he was listening to the echo of the music. He turned, smooth and easy, coming toward her with one hand extended, fingers flashing the pilot's sign for *welcome*.

"Thank you for your patience," he murmured. "I trust you put your time to good use."

Theo considered him, teased again by the sense of his looking like someone—she would have said that of course he looked like Father—except he didn't, precisely. Father's hair was dark brown sharpened by grey, his eyes were black, and his face—Theo had once heard Kamele say that Father's face was *interesting*.

Val Con, on the other hand, was . . . *pretty*, with his vivid green eyes, and his smooth, high-cheeked face. Where Father kept his hair cut neat to the point of severity, Val Con's was positively shaggy, and he had a tendency to tumble into his eyes.

On Delgado, Miri would've had to have been tenured *and* hold a named chair to have any hope of keeping so comely and biddable a man. Theo appreciated manners herself, but he didn't seem to have much in the way of *spark*.

He raised a slim hand on which a heavy ring glittered, and stroked his hair off his forehead. Theo started, remembering that she had been asked a question—sort of.

"I had a nap," she said, "with the grey cat. I've been flying hard, and the chance to rest was welcome."

She hesitated before adding, "Thank you," then quickly nodded at the 'chora. "That was nice, what you played. My mother—Kamele—is a singer."

Val Con smiled faintly. "My foster-mother was a musician by avocation," he said in his soft voice. "It was she who taught me to play. My mother's passion is mathematics." He moved a hand, showing her the grouped chairs.

"Please, sit and be comfortable. Miri is delayed for a few moments. When she arrives, Korval will hear you. In anticipation of that, I wonder if I may ask you a question."

"All right," Theo said, eyeing the arrangement: one chair with its back to the door; one facing the bookshelves; the third with the shelves behind it. She looked to Val Con.

"I don't want to offend," she said carefully. "Is there an . . . intent . . . in the grouping that I might not understand?"

He smiled.

"In fact, there is not. With only three present, it is not possible to divide the delm, and no necessity for either of us to be at the right or left hand of the other. Please, sit where you will."

Sitting with her back to the door would show that she felt absolutely safe in his house, and might gain her some points. Theo thought about it, but the truth was that she *didn't* feel absolutely safe—although she had a feeling that Val Con might've inherited Father's sharp eye for a lie. She moved to the chair that backed on the larger room. It was a compromise position: she could see both the door and the window, but was still slightly exposed to the rear. In case there was, oh, a secret panel in the room on the opposite wall, or an assassin hiding under the omnichora.

Val Con bowed slightly as she settled. He took the chair facing the windows for himself, leaving the most protected spot for Miri.

"Now, sister," he said, briskly, "it is your turn to be gentle, should I inadvertently offend. Yes?"

She nodded, giving him her full attention.

"It is well," he said. "I learn from our father that you were properly enculturated according to the customs of Delgado."

Theo eyed him. “Father didn’t teach me Liaden custom, if that’s what you’re getting at. I did belong to the Culture Club at Anlingdin, and I’ve studied on my own since—since leaving school.”

“Ah. I must ask, then, if you are proficient in *melant’i*.”

Melant’i was a kind of social scorecard based on who you were when. It was like relational math only with people.

Theo shook her head.

“Not proficient,” she admitted. “What I know of the theory is that—” She chewed her lip. “If I promised you something as a pilot, I wouldn’t necessarily be responsible for honoring that promise if you called it in while I was being something other than a pilot—say, being Father’s daughter.”

Val Con’s left eyebrow twitched upward, which was all too familiar.

“I’ve got it completely wrong?” She’d been pretty sure that couldn’t be how it worked. A social system predicated on which bit of a person you were talking to *this time* would be chaos.

He shook his head. “In some measure, you have it precisely. Allow me, however, to agree that you are not proficient. Since speaking with the delm will involve what Miri terms ‘mental somersaults,’ I propose that you allow me to sort such *melant’i* as will come into play.” He gave her an earnest look. “I am accustomed to it, you see, and my interest as your brother is that you prosper.”

Theo thought about that.

“You’re going to stop being my—my brother when Miri gets here, and Delm Korval is in the room?”

“In essence, but you needn’t care about it, if it will distract you from a clear recital of your case. I will also mention that time is short; our transport will engage in just under six hours, local, by which time you ought certainly to be away.”

On the one hand, it *would* be easier to just tell her story, which was complex enough without having to pay attention to custom she didn’t fully understand, too. On the other hand, it wasn’t exactly advertant to let a man she’d only just met mind both sides of the negotiation, even if he was her brother.

“And, you know,” Val Con said, “our father would strongly disapprove of any attempt I might make to cheat you.”

Well, *that* was so, Theo admitted. Father was a stickler; he’d expect them to deal—in *Balance*, he’d say.

“All right,” she said, and smiled to show she appreciated his efforts on her behalf. “Thanks.”

She looked around the room, again noting the books bound tight into their shelves, and the furniture secured to the floor. Ready for transport, yes, but—

“What *kind* of transport?”

“The Clutch ship—it will have scanned as an asteroid in stable orbit when you came in. The Council of Clans named the day and the hour by which we were to depart Liad; anything we left behind to be forfeit to the Council. The delm wished to leave nothing to the Council, and my brother Edger, whom you met, was instrumental in negotiating with the Clutch Elders for the loan of a ship large enough to transport the Tree and this house.”

It was said so reasonably that it took a heartbeat for the sense of the words to hit Theo.

The Clutch asteroid ship in orbit was going to pick up the entire house, Jelaza Kazone, with the enormous tree growing out of the house’s center, and *transport them*?

Not possible. She was opening her mouth—maybe to tell him so, when he cocked his head, as if he’d heard a sound so soft it had slipped past her own excellent ears.

“Miri will be with us very soon.”

“How do you know that?” Theo demanded, which might have been less rude than whatever she

been going to say about his *transport*. Maybe.

Val Con gave her a bland look from bright green eyes.

“We are lifemates. We share thoughts, feelings and memories.”

Some of what she thought about *that* must’ve shown on her face because he smiled faintly.

“Yes,” he said, “but it does not seem so to us. In fact, nothing could be more natural. Now . . .” There was a slight pause. “Such bondings are not unusual in our clan.”

“Sorry to be late!” Miri swept into the room, dropped into the empty chair, and gave Theo a grin.

“You’re looking well rested, Pilot. Ready to tell out that complicated problem of yours?”

For all it was asked in easy Terran, Theo had a sense of—sharpening—as if the air in the room had suddenly taken on an edge. She looked at Val Con; he inclined his head, inviting her to start.

Theo took a breath.

“Actually,” she said, “it’s two problems.”

* * *

They were good listeners, the Delm of Korval, and in less time than Theo would have thought possible, she had laid the whole mess before them, from Win Ton’s unintentional, if not exactly accidental, waking of the ship *Bechimo*; his sending the second key—the Captain’s key, by chance—to her, without telling her what it was; his subsequent capture, torture and escape; their meeting of Volmer; the realization that *Bechimo*—which Win Ton, and the Uncle, too, considered an aware and emancipated AI—was looking *for her*. And her last, terrible sight of Win Ton, unconscious inside the autodoc on the Uncle’s ship; his prognosis certain death, unless *Bechimo*, with the last uncontaminated record of Win Ton’s DNA in her archives, found Theo, and accepted her as Captain.

“Scouts have a bias against Old Tech,” Val Con murmured, when finally she came to an end of it and slumped in her chair, exhausted with the telling. “An emancipated AI—one who has killed to protect her integrity, as might any other person.” He smiled, wryly, to Theo’s eye. “Yes, it is complicated. Theo Waitley. Congratulations. Truly, you are of the Line.”

She blinked at him. “What?”

“His idea of a joke,” Miri said. Leaning forward, she poured pale yellow liquid from the blue bottle into a glass. “Don’t dignify it.”

Theo nodded, took the glass offered, and cautiously sampled the contents. Lemon water.

“It seems to me that we are best served in the short term by doing nothing,” Val Con continued, accepting a glass from Miri in his turn.

The red-haired woman nodded, poured for herself, and leaned back in her chair.

As if in counterpoint, Theo leaned forward.

“Wait—nothing? Win Ton’s *dying!* And what if *Bechimo* does find me? What am I supposed to do with a ship the Scouts want to kill? Hide it under my pillow?”

Miri laughed. Val Con shook his head.

“Your friend is well enough for the short term,” he said, sounding startlingly like Father when he thought you were being exceptionally stupid. “Your employer’s healing units are everything he told you, and possibly more. There is nothing Korval can do at this moment that is not already being done by an expert who appears to believe he has a stake in the game.” He raised a slim hand as if to forestall her, but Theo hadn’t been going to say anything. “I grant that to be disturbing of itself, but it too, can wait upon closer examination.

“What does merit our immediate attention . . .” He glanced toward the ceiling. “Jeeves? Have you a moment to consult with us?”

“I am on my way, Master Val Con,” the rich voice said—not, Theo thought, from the ceiling, but

from the bookshelf to the left and slightly above Miri's head.

In fact, the 'bot was with them so quickly that Theo thought it must have been lurking in the hallway.

"Excellent," said Val Con as it rolled to a stop on the fourth side of the table, its "back" toward the window. "You will of course have heard Theo's story. If not, please access it now." He glanced at Theo. "You understand, Jeeves is his own person. As such, he has his own methods and resources."

Theo nodded slowly. An emancipated AI, constructed as a butler for a single house? That couldn't be right, could it? The Concierge had the whole Wall to take care of, and it hadn't been sentient. She had studied machine history; it had been a core course. And history had shown that sentient machines were dangerous. The last deliberate use had been military; the Terran Fleet had constructed three Admirals—tactical AIs, each in charge of a battle squadron, but that had been . . . seven hundred years ago, or more . . .

"I have reviewed Pilot Waitley's narrative," Jeeves said.

"Very good," Val Con answered. "I do not ask you to break a confidence, but I wonder if perhaps you are acquainted, or have been in communication, with *Bechimo*."

There was for a long moment no answer, though the orange head-ball flickered like a tiny lightning bolt in a thunderstorm was going on inside of it.

Theo thought of the ship's key, hung safe 'round her neck, and left it where it was. It had imprinted on her, by some action she didn't understand, but which Win Ton insisted upon. Until she understood the process, it was probably not a good idea to be handing it around to strangers.

"I cannot with certainty state that I have spoken with *Bechimo*," Jeeves said. "However, based on Pilot Waitley's report of Scout yo'Vala's actions and the fate of the boarding party that attempted to force entrance—I am concerned for *Bechimo*'s state of mind. This is an unsocialized person, with a justified distrust of humans, who is compelled, nonetheless, to find and be joined with her pilots. It would be well if Pilot Waitley contrived to be found as soon as is prudently possible, in a quiet location."

"We've got some concern for Pilot Waitley's safety and state of mind, too," Miri said dryly. "I'm sure *Bechimo*'s unstable—"

"Not unstable," Jeeves interrupted. "Merely . . . confused of purpose."

"And that's better, how?" Miri glanced to Val Con.

"Might be safer to set up the meet someplace reasonably busy, 'stead of a back alley. That way, if something goes bad, Theo's got backup."

"No." Theo shook her head. "Uncle said the same thing—about trying to arrange the first meeting somewhere quiet. Because she was engineered from Old Tech and new, and it's not just the Scouts who want her dead, or taken."

"For a man known to advise most often for his own benefit, the Uncle has been remarkably frank with you," Val Con said. "So far." He sighed.

"Very well, then, for the ship, certain matters must and may be solved, here and now. Theo—is there a ship's account?"

She frowned at him. "The *Toss* has its own—*Bechimo*? I don't know. I'd guess her original people would have set something up, but, old as she is, who knows if the banks they drew on even exist anymore?"

"Registration's likely to be funny, too," Miri murmured.

"Precisely. These things can be mended, proactively. Theo, please pick a port."

It took her a heartbeat to catch that he didn't mean just any port, but a port to serve as *Bechimo*'s home of record.

“Waymart,” she said.

“What ship ain’t outta Waymart?” Miri asked.

“And who will find it wonderful, if there is suddenly one more?” Val Con replied. “Jeeves, will you please ask Ms. dea’Gauss to set up a standard ship drawing account for *Bechimo*, with a clear registration out of Waymart, Captain Theo Waitley. When that is accomplished, please give Theo the data key.”

“He can just beam the data over to *Arin’s Toss*,” Theo said, before the full impact of that smooth flow of instruction hit her.

She snapped forward, glaring into Val Con’s pretty face.

He lifted an eyebrow—deliberately like Father, that’s what she thought, and, thinking it, felt her temper warm.

“I didn’t ask you to lend me money!” she said, sharper than was probably polite.

“Indeed you did not,” Val Con answered coolly. “Nor would I insult you by simply assuming that you had need. My concern here is *Bechimo*. A ship has necessities. And a hunted ship may come to doubt even ports that have been long secure.”

Theo took a deep breath, and didn’t say anything while she counted backward from one hundred to threes.

“They got this thing they say here,” Miri said into the silence. “Korval is ships.”

Theo gave her a curt nod. “I’ve heard it.”

“Who ain’t? Point is, it don’t just mean that Clan Korval owns more ships than’s strictly reasonable and has its finger in the shares of a couple dozen more. It means that Clan Korval, through every one of its members, holds the well-being of ships and of pilots as their legitimate concern. I don’t mean to be telling you other things that you’ve already heard, Pilot Theo; I’m just learning some of it, myself.”

Theo sighed, and inclined her head. “I’ve got a quick temper,” she said, remembering that saying *I’m sorry* to a Liaden was—not exactly rude, more like stupid, because it exposed a weakness.

Val Con laughed.

“Not alone there, either,” Miri commented.

“By no means,” he agreed, and gave Theo a nod. “Forgive me, I had thought it implicit, when clear it is not. I propose to establish a trigger account, attached to the new registration. Should *Bechimo* take that fund, then I will indeed have lent money—to *Bechimo*, who is her own person. The debt will then be settled between us, in a manner and time that we find mutually agreeable. Should the fund remain untapped for six Standards, it will return to Korval’s general ship fund, no harm done, nor insult taken.” He tipped his head. “If it transpires that this arrangement is found to offend *Bechimo*, I hope that you will, as my sister, plead the purity of my intent.”

Theo snorted, and sipped lemon water while she thought.

“If *Bechimo* is her own person,” she said slowly, “then she *can’t* be owned. That’d be slavery.”

For some reason, Val Con smiled.

“That is correct,” he said. “However, a ship must have a captain—which I understand to be the reason behind *Bechimo*’s pursuit of yourself. The registration will be for the ship *Bechimo*, out of Waymart, Captain Theo Waitley. If, after you have had the opportunity to discuss the matter with your ship, it seems good to incorporate *Bechimo*, and thus gain her the mantle of corporate personhood . . .

Miri laughed. Theo blinked—and then saw the joke.

“A tautology,” she said. “The paperwork would be a nightmare.”

“It can become as complex as you like,” Val Con said. “But let us begin modestly. A new registration, and a drawing fund, should it be needed. I believe that we may trust to *Bechimo*’s

discretion. Jeeves?"

"I concur. *Bechimo* appears to possess discretion, and a good deal of common sense."

"That is well, then." Val Con looked to Theo. "A data key to Pilot Waitley when all is set in train please, Jeeves." He raised a hand. "I ask the pilot's forbearance. It is not her ship or herself that I doubt, but the breadth of her employer's goodwill."

Theo sighed, nodded, and sipped her drink.

"Thank you. Now, regarding those other strands to your puzzle. Understand that we do not refuse solving. However, we cannot undertake so complex a set of issues now, on the eve of our relocation. Come to us as your schedule allows, on Surebleak, and we will revisit these matters at greater leisure. Now, alas, we must take our leave. One more thing—"

As if that was a cue, Miri reached into her pocket and brought out something small that winked the light from the windows.

"This says you're under Korval's protection," she said, taking up where Val Con had left off. "I tell you to wear it wherever you go, but right now being under Korval's protection is what you'd call double-edged—just as likely to make you a target as get you some help. Take it, though, and keep it by. Never know when it might be handy."

"It" was a pin, Theo saw, receiving it. The face showed Korval's trade sigil—a dragon hovering over half-furled wings over a full-leafed tree.

"Thank you," she said, and slipped it into an interior pocket of Rig's—of her—jacket, hearing a tiny *clink* as pin struck coin.

"You should return to your ship now," Val Con said, "and lift beyond Outyard Eight. It would be best if you are not seen to move in our orbit. That you came to Korval is interesting, but not *of interest*. Many pilots have come to us since the Council's judgment; one more is not worthy of note." He smiled. "Much as one more ship to Waymart. We have already moved a number of vessels, but there are still dozens that must lift before the Council's hour is upon us. It would be better for you to be away from the most of it, should your employer contact you with your next assignment."

Theo nodded, and stood.

"Thank you," she said again, and swallowed. "I wanted to talk to Father again—"

"Of course. As it happens, his is one of the ships scheduled to lift soon. There is no reason why the two of you cannot drive to the port together." Val Con rose and held his hands out. Theo hesitated, then put hers in his.

"Thank you," he said seriously. "I hope you can accommodate yourself to a brother, Theo. I think I am going to quite enjoy having you as a sister."

FOUR

Runcible System *Daglyte Seam*

They came armed with pass-codes, the commander and her six-guard.

Three remained in the antechamber, to thwart enemies, had their enemies been canny enough to follow.

Another tarried at the third door, obedient to a prompt on the guard screen; and another again outside the fifth.

At the sixth and final door, Iridyce sen'Ager, Commander of the Fourth Level, placed her hand against the guard screen. The scan tickled her palm, the sampling needle pinched, accompanied by a flash that left blue images dancing on her retinas.

Were she *not* Fourth Commander sen'Ager, there would come another pinch, the last sensation she would experience. She knew this, of course, but felt not the slightest agitation. Why should she be agitated, or in any way dismayed? She was precisely Iridyce sen'Ager; thus the door would open for her.

"Await me here," she told the one remaining of her six.

"It shall be done," he responded.

The door opened and Fourth Commander sen'Ager went forward without a backward glance. Light came up in the room as she stepped over the threshold, a creamy illumination palely stained yellow. Fourth Commander sen'Ager felt her muscles loosen as she crossed the small chamber to the waiting chair. She sat, relaxing further and more deeply still, when the restraints snapped around wrists, ankles, and waist.

She was come to take up duty, and in this enterprise the light was her friend; the device that now clasped cool ceramic mandibles 'round her head, her chiefest ally. That such duty would fall to her—was unlooked for. Who would have expected the Commander to take a fatal strike? Who, anticipating such calamity, might guess that First, Second, and Third would likewise fall?

Leaving Fourth Commander Iridyce sen'Ager to become Commander of Agents.

The mandibles tightened; the creamy light clotted in her eyes until there was nothing else to see. Twelve dozen sharp wires pierced her skull and sunk, burning, into her brain.

Iridyce sen'Ager screamed, once.

FIVE

Arin's Toss
Solcintra Port
Liad

"Would you like some tea?" Theo asked, leading the way up the hall toward the heart of *Arin's Toss*.

"Thank you," Father said from behind her, "Tea would be most welcome."

She nodded and swung into the galley, waving at him to go on up to the pilot's chamber.

Tea quick, she told him in hand-talk. *Be easy on my ship*.

"Thank you," Father said again. He passed on, leaving Theo to wonder what she'd done that had made his eyebrow quirk.

The tea was brewing before she considered the security aspects. To give an unaffiliated pilot access to the bridge of her employer's ship, unmonitored and unescorted—that was—it wasn't proper ship security. She had a feeling that, to Uncle's way of thinking, it went double.

On the other hand, this particular unaffiliated pilot was *Father*.

Father wouldn't—

Leave his classes in the middle of the term? she asked herself. *Walk away from Kamele and the car and his house—his car—with no warning and no word of explanation?*

Her stomach cramped. Father was—Father had been . . . a rock. A stickler. He didn't tolerate lies, or excuses, or—or sneaking behavior. He—

The teapot tweeted. Theo swallowed, and took a deep breath. *Inner calm*, she told herself.

Carefully, she got the mugs down, and poured. There was an explanation for what Father had—what he had left in such . . . disorder. A perfectly rational, perfectly understandable reason. All she had to do was ask him, which she fully intended to do, not only for her own peace of mind, but for Kamele's.

In the meantime, she told herself firmly, picking up the mugs and slipping out of the galley, she refused to believe that he would sabotage her ship.

Father was standing in the center of the small bridge, hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket. As he was considering the board and the arrangement of the drowsing screens, it was no more than any pilot would do—from professional curiosity, if no other reason. He turned, quick and neat, when she entered, and smiled.

"Please," Theo said, relief making her formal, "take the copilot's chair."

Father's eyebrow twitched again, but he only inclined his head, matching her formality.

"Thank you," he said, and seated himself gracefully, keeping his hands specifically away from the board. Theo handed him a mug and settled into the pilot's seat.

They savored the first sip in silence, then Father looked about him.

"She seems well cared-for. How do you find her spirit?"

Theo had another sip of tea, considering.

"Willing," she said. "We've only had this one job together—a rush, like I said. There wasn't anything I asked from her that she didn't give."

"And in return asked much of her pilot," Father murmured, meaning that she'd arrived in port just yesterday strung out and wobbly from too many Jumps taken too close together.

"Pilot's choice," she pointed out. "The ship can only fly the course the pilot lays in."

Father inclined his head. "True. Though some ships make the pilot's choice too easy." He sipped his tea and sighed gently. "An excellent blend." He looked up, black eyes sharp.

"I wonder," he said, "do you trust her?"

Theo blinked. "The *Toss*? Why wouldn't I?"

"No reason," he answered. "And it is perhaps impertinent of me to ask. The relationship between pilot and her ship is, of course, very personal."

Theo considered the last ship she'd served on. Rig Tranza had loved *Primadonna* better than a mother herself. She had respected the ship; she supposed their relationship had been . . . cordial. And trusting. Yes. She had trusted *Primadonna*, because she'd trusted Rig Tranza.

Arin's Toss, though . . .

"Too soon to know," she decided at last, looking into Father's face. "Though I don't *distrust* her."

"Fairly said. I wonder, do you trust your employer?"

Did she trust Uncle? Theo bit her lip, her fingers itching for needle and thread, as they seldom did. Lace-making helped her think, and to sort her feelings out. Recently, though, she'd been too busy to relax into the old habit.

"Too soon to tell about him, too," she said, slowly. "We have . . . aligned purposes, so I trust him . . . to a point." She paused. "Val Con said he doesn't. Trust Uncle."

"You must hold him excused," Father murmured. "There is a long history between Korval and the Uncle—and it is Val Con's duty to be suspicious on behalf of kin and clan."

Theo sipped her tea, then set the mug into the chair-arm cup holder, and looked up decisively.

As if he had not only seen her decisiveness, but divined her purpose, Father sighed, and slotted his mug as well.

"I haven't long before I must find my ship and lift," he said quietly. "You had best ask it, Theo."

Like there was only one question to ask, when she had a dozen—Why did you leave? Why didn't you tell Kamele? Why didn't you tell *me*? What happened? When—

"When are you going home?" As soon as she said the words, she knew it was the wrong question.

Father, however, tipped his head, as if considering it seriously, despite its obvious flaws, then raised his eyes to hers: "Jen Sar Kiladi," he said gently, "will not be returning to Delgado. The house on Leafydale Place, and all the rest of his possessions, have passed into your mother's keeping."

"She wrote to let me know that—and that you'd gone, without a word to her—without even a letter after you—after you'd come to safe port." Theo swallowed. "Father—no matter what . . . *obligation* you have to Delm Korval, you've got to at least write to her."

He shook his head. "I don't think that's wise, Theo."

"Not *wise*?" She stared at him. "Do you know how *angry* Kamele is?"

"I can make an estimation; certainly she has cause to be very angry, indeed."

"But you think it's not wise to write to her—or visit—and tell her why you—what was so important that you left your classes, your research; committed—Father, you'll never find another post! And your work . . ."

"Kiladi's work is solid," he interrupted. "If duty called him suddenly away, it will not be the first time in the history of scholarship that such a thing has happened. More, his students continue what he has begun, as they in their turn teach those who come after, while those who become scholars build upon and solidify his research. Balance is achieved."

Theo sat back, suddenly cold, and studied his face. He looked calm—sad, maybe—and entirely sane. But—

"You're talking about *Kiladi* like he's not you," she said carefully.

“Ah.” He leaned forward slightly, one hand out, the silver puzzle ring he always wore gleaming on his smallest finger.

Theo slipped her hand into his, felt the warmth of his fingers, and for a moment, she was a little again, and Housefather Kiladi was promising that he wouldn’t let her fall. And she hadn’t, she realized; she hadn’t ever once fallen while she was holding Father’s hand.

“Theo, please look at me,” he said now. She raised her eyes to his.

“Good. My birth name is Daav yos’Phelium Clan Korval. Jen Sar Kiladi is . . . something more than a fabrication, but very much less than an actuality.”

She blinked, her stomach fluttering like she’d stepped from one gravity state to another.

“You lied,” she said, her voice unsteady. “You lied to Kamele.” *And to me . . .*

He bowed his head, his fingers still warm around hers.

“In short, yes. I lied to Kamele, to you, to my colleagues, my students and everyone to whom I spoke across the last twenty Standards. Necessity existed.”

“*Necessity?*” That was a Liaden thing, and very serious; she knew that—had known it from a child. Even if she hadn’t known that you never lied to Father about necessity, she would have learned it from Anlingdin, from Kara, who joked about many Liaden customs, but not about necessity—and never about Balance.

“It was not, I admit,” Father said, “Kamele’s necessity. Or your own.” He paused, then continued in that soft way he sometimes had—*like Val Con!* Theo thought—“I will add that Balance would have faltered, without Kamele, and, later, yourself.”

Theo took a hard breath, trying to swallow her—anger, was it? or sadness?—trying to *think*, even if she couldn’t precisely at this moment *understand*.

“Father—whatever your name is here—you *were* Jen Sar Kiladi. Mother—Kamele—deserves an explanation.”

He tipped his head. “Perhaps you are right. However, I am not the one to give it to her,” he said softly.

Anger flared again. Theo snatched her hand away from his.

“If you won’t write to her, I will!” she snapped.

His mouth tightened, and he leaned back in the copilot’s chair.

“You will naturally do as you think right,” he said. “If you do send, I will ask that you send the truth.”

“Of course I’ll tell Kamele the truth!”

“Then hear it.” His voice was nearly grim, not a tone she was accustomed to hearing from Father.

Theo forced herself to sit back in the pilot’s chair, and picked up her tea. She sipped, glad that the mug had kept the liquid warm, and sipped again. *Inner calm*, she told herself, and put the mug aside.

“All right,” she said. “What’s the truth?”

“It is, as I believe the phrase goes, complicated. In short, because time flies, and soon we must, well . . .” He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

“Very well,” he said, opening his eyes.

“Some years ago,” he said slowly, “Daav yos’Phelium, then an apprentice Scout, accepted a wage on the terms of which had him create and maintain an alternate persona, which was to remain active in the world until it was discovered to be a deception. That persona was Jen Sar Kiladi, and he was on the scene once, until now, exposed.

“In the fullness of time, the Ring fell to Daav yos’Phelium, and he took up the *melant’i* and the duties of the Delm of Korval. A few years after that, he and his true lifemate were joined. Together

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