

Man Kzin Wars 08



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Windows Of The Soul

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For Christian, with love

Transport tunnel nineteen is one of thirty-two that run the fifty-kilometer length of Tiamat's axis to link the docking hubs. Normally it's full of twenty-meter cargo containers, gliding in virtual weightlessness. Last night a roller jammed in section A near the down-axis hub. The Port Authority shut the tunnel down and sent in a tech. The

problem was a body. That's when I got involved. Pathology said it had been there nine days and the Scene Team had all the evidence. There was no reason to go down there myself, but I did. You can't get a handle on a crime if you don't get on the scene. I wished I hadn't.

The body was M18JSK98-Miranda Holtzman, nineteen standard years old, engineering student at the Centaurus Center for Advanced Studies. Her dossier holo showed sparkling blue eyes and brown-gold hair. She was a Wunderlander, just arrived in the Swarm on a work-study deal with a spun metal fabricator called Trist Materials. Good looking, smart and last seen alive at a

bounce-bar called the Inferno. She'd arrived with friends and left with a stranger. The witnesses agreed on dark hair and a Wunderlander build but little else. A movement trace came up blank. After she left the Inferno, she hadn't thumbed a single scanner-and on Tiamat that takes some effort. That was nine days ago. Pathology had it right on the money.

We identified her through her on-file gene scans so her next of kin didn't have to. That was a good thing. She'd been badly mauled in jamming the track rollers, but that wasn't the worst of it. She was slashed open from throat to groin and eviscerated, her skin was

flayed off and her limbs were missing. Her empty eye sockets stared at nothing. The coroner listed cause of death as "unknown." There wasn't enough left to tell.

Now you know why I wished I hadn't looked.

* * *

I tubed over to Trist Materials. They were closing down early, hampered by a swarm of Goldskin investigators. I grabbed the top cop. "Captain Allson, ARM."

"How can I help you?" He looked harried.

"I'm looking for the primary witnesses."

He pointed out the couple to me. They were sitting on a couch in the reception area holding each other. Tanya's face was drawn and pale, she'd been crying recently. Jayce looked sombre.

"You got somewhere I can hold an interview?"

"We have their statements."

"That's not what I asked." He looked sour. ARM outranks the Goldskins, but they don't like it. He beckoned over a uniform to set me up with some cubic. I called up their dossiers on my beltcomp. It helps to know who you're talking to.

PCL9C3N4-Koffman, Tanya C., 24. Born Tiamat Station. Graduate Serpent Swarm Technical Institute. Physical engineer for Trist. Unmarried. Holder of a non-current belt navigation certificate rated for polarizers and fusion. No outstanding warrants, no criminal record.

BG309003-Vorden, Jayce I. F., 23. Born Tiamat Station. Also an SSTI graduate and Trist's Compsys specialist. Unmarried. No warrants but he had a record, two hits, public mischief. I tabbed the entry for the details. University pranks. He'd hacked in to the scoreboard during a championship skyball game and displayed insults for

the rival team. Acquitted with a warning. Another time he'd gained access to the transit system and given himself priority routing and children's fare. Charged double back payments on his fares and five hundred hours community service. That was three years ago-he'd been clean ever since.

On a hunch, I punched up my desk from the beltcomp and did quick movement trace. Multiple hits-the pattern was clear. Jayce and Tanya traveled as a couple, starting three months ago. I scanned forward and found trouble in paradise-ten days with no visits. I called up the comm logs for the period. A few calls, all very short, then a long one.

Right after that, the visits started again. They'd fought and made up. The fight started a week after Miranda arrived and she'd gone missing the day they got together again. I called up her comm logs and found long calls to both of them, starting her first day on station.

The facts suggested a scenario. Jayce and Tanya have a good thing going, then pretty Miranda shows up and gets in the middle. A week later they sort out the triangle and go out for a no-hard-feelings party, which goes bad. Someone kills Miranda and the other gets involved. They make up the dark Wunderlander as cover. It wasn't a perfect theory, but it was a start.

I stuck my head out the door and called Jayce over. He was tall and slender with dark hair and eyes and a Flatlander's blended facial features. I tapped record on my beltcomp and began.

"What can you tell me about the night Miranda disappeared?"

He shrugged. "There just isn't that much to tell. We went to the Inferno after work like we always did. She was dancing with this Wunderlander. After a while they left together."

"By 'we' you mean Miranda and you?"

"Miranda, Tay and I." He was perfectly comfortable with his answer.

"You and Miss Koffman have been seeing each other for some time, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"I understand you and she had a serious argument a couple of weeks ago." I stated it as a fact.

He was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

I kept pushing. "I mean that Miranda Holtzman precipitated a rift in your relationship. That gives you a motive for murder."

The shock he displayed was genuine. I

just didn't know if it was due to hidden guilt or injured innocence.

"What was your relationship with her?"

"She was our friend, that's all."

"You didn't have an affair with Miranda which brought on a fight with Tay?"

"No."

"Why did you go to the Inferno that night?"

"We just did. It wasn't unusual, we went fairly often."

"The three of you."

"Yes."

"Did anyone else go with you?"

"There's a bunch of us who sometimes go out, friends of ours, but they didn't come that night."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, just busy I guess." He looked stricken as he said it. He felt he was digging himself in deeper with every word.

"So there's no one who can corroborate your story that she left before you."

"Tanya can."

I waved a hand dismissively. "Anyone else?"

"Maybe the bartender."

"But you don't know for sure."

He put his head in his hands. "No."

I changed tack. "What about this man she left with?"

He seized the question like a drowning man grabbing a straw. If I was asking it, I must believe his story. "He was a Wunderlander, thick dark hair. He had a glowflow bodysuit, set to rainbow smears."

"Had you seen him before?"

"Not that I recall."

"Do you think he knew Miranda or that she knew him?"

He was anguished. "I don't know, I wish I did. We just didn't know what was happening." Then, almost to himself, he repeated, "We just didn't know."

He was devastated by the sudden loss. Perhaps he hadn't known Miranda that well but he'd been with her the night she was killed. It wasn't his fault but he felt responsible anyway. Survivor's guilt-or simple guilt. Either way, I wasn't going to learn anything more. The Goldskins

would go over his statement and cross-check for inconsistencies. I just wanted a read on the first-pass prime suspects.

"You can go now, Mr. Vorden."

"What?" He'd sunken into a reverie while I pondered.

"You're done. Thank you for your help."

"Oh." He seemed bemused for a couple of seconds, then gathered himself. "Good luck, Captain."

"Thanks," I said, and I meant it. I hoped he did too.

After he left, I punched my beltcomp's

audio log through to my desk. I've got a program that analyzes voice microtremors-sometimes it even works. My system told me that Jayce was telling the truth-mostly. He was hiding something about his relationship with Miranda. That concurred with my theory. There had been infidelity, a fight, a murder. I just needed the link.

I had Tanya sent in. She was petite for a Belter-my height. Her eyes were red and she dabbed at them with a handkerchief. In other circumstances she would be pretty.

"Come in, Miss Koffman. Please sit down," I said in my best good-cop manner.

She sat, giving me a forced, trembling smile. She was barely holding herself together. If I pushed her, she'd go over the edge. At times like this it's a judgement call. Sometimes a little nudge brings an easy confession, sometimes it catalyzes uncrackable resolve.

And sometimes you're just adding pressure to a bystander already under emotional overload. *Maintien le droit*, the ARM motto cuts both ways. Tanya was a prime suspect. I would step softly, but I would find out what I needed to know.

"Look, I know you're upset. I just have a couple of questions for you, and then you

can go." I said it gently, coaxing. She nodded in response.

"Were you jealous of Miranda and Jayce?"

She didn't answer; she just shook her head, biting her lip.

"But they did . . . did sleep together?" I couldn't think of a more delicate way to put it."

She nodded. Paydirt.

"That didn't make you jealous?"

She shook her head. "We had a . . . you know . . . all three of us . . ." She

collapsed into tears.

I hadn't been expecting that. I sat back, implications running through my brain while Tanya wept. No use questioning her further now, my theory was shot. I needed to reassess.

I sent her out and pulled up the transit logs again and cross-matched all three of them for Miranda's tube station. They'd both been spending nights in her apt. Far from causing a breakup, she'd been the hinge point of a menage. Tanya and Jayce's transit pattern changed because they'd been spending their time at Miranda's. That didn't clear them but it reopened the question of motive. Miranda's file yielded another link. This

was her second time on Tiamat. At sixteen she'd been on a six-month school exchange with FRCK1798-Koffman, Bris, Tanya's younger sister. That explained why Tanya was more upset than Jayce and where the spark for the expansion of their relationship had come from. And it told me what Jayce had been covering up about his relationship with Miranda. At least part of what he'd been covering up. The information also offered some good motive possibilities-jealousy now for Jayce instead of Tanya or an old grudge rekindled for her. Even so, my instincts were telling me that they weren't the culprits. I needed another angle.

After a while I got up and grabbed the tube back to my office. On the way, I thought about dossiers.

* * *

C137PUDV-Allson, Joel K., ARM Captain. 33 standard years old. Born: Constantinople, Earth. Current assignment: Chief of Investigation-Tiamat Station, Alpha Centauri. Fingerprints, retina prints, gene scan. A holo of a man with a Flatlander face, Arab, African, Slav, Balt and Mongol-boringly nondescript on Earth, noticeably different on Wunderland. Date of birth, date of marriage, date of divorce. Medical history, educational records, details of promotion. Case

reports from Bangkok, New Delhi and Berlin. Commendations for service and commendations for bravery. Date of transfer outsystem.

A good record, I was proud of it. What's the measure of a man? Nowadays it's his data file. Dossiers are the tools of my trade. They give me a skeleton-my job is putting flesh on the bones.

The best cops are just one step this side of the law-that's how you get into a criminal's mind. I was one of the best. In deep-cover work, the line gets blurry. You make so many sacrifices you start to feel entitled to fringe benefits your cover requires you to take anyway. The

Brandywine case cost me my marriage. When it blew up, my position was confused.

The Conduct Review Board said, "Captain Allson's actions were directly related to his assignment and he did not act with criminal intent." They must have known more than I did. Prakit believed them because he believed in me but when the slot on Wunderland came up, he offered it, firmly. After Brandywine I'd never be safe undercover again, not on the Organization cases I'd made into my life. He never mentioned Holly, but it wasn't my cover that worried him. I took the assignment. What else was I going to do?

Wunderland-the name says it all. The colonists found a virgin paradise of mountains and forests, clear air and low gravity. They turned it into the jewel of Known Space, but the world they'd built was gone now. First the kzinti had invaded taking the land and turning the citizens into slaves-or dinner. Some fought, some fled, some tried to save what they could. Most just survived and carried on in a grimmer world.

Forty years later, Earth attacked with lightspeed missiles, twelve thousand gigatonne impacts that punched to the planet's core and blotted the suns from the sky. The UN wrecked the kzinti industrial base and much of Wunderland

in the process. The survivors cheered anyway, and dreamed of liberation. And it came, faster than anyone could imagine, in an Earth armada with We Made It hyperdrives. The Provisional Government was formed and the Wunderlanders began to heal the scars of conquest. The rebels came out of the mountains and the pirates came in from the Swarm. The few kzinti left insystem adapted, disappeared into the forest, or died.

But liberation didn't end the war. Alpha Centauri became the UN advance base. The Provo Government was controlled by UN advisors and the Serpent Swarm made a UN territory outright. The

economy went to full war production. The liberators quartered thousands of troops in Munchen in case the kzinti came back-and in case the Wunderlanders objected to the UN plan. Maybe the breakdown was inevitable. The kzinti were no harsher than the Provos and a lot less corrupt. A political party called the Isolationists emerged with a simple solution-Wunderland for Wunderlanders. The kzinti were gone, the Flatlanders could go too. By the time I arrived in Munchen, they were no longer a political party, they were a terrorist group. The Provisional Government's anti-collaborator campaign had become a random witch hunt. The whole infrastructure was

falling apart-transportation, medical support, civil services, even basic maintenance stripped to feed the UN war machine. The black market thrived on everything from pleasure drugs to biochips and a dozen crime webs warred over the spoils. Whole outland regions rejected the Provos and UN troops were used to impose control.

I should have thrived in that environment-it was my kind of work, but the rot had spread to the ARM. Certain individuals, certain groups had immunity. Investigations that got too close were closed down. Critical evidence simply disappeared. I fought a losing battle to clean up the agency and

made a lot of high-powered enemies. When they discovered they couldn't shut me up, they kicked me upstairs, big time. I wound up with the top job on Tiamat, half a billion kilometers skyward.

It was better on station. There was smuggling, theft, even murder-but no bombings, no assassinations, no gang wars. More importantly, the taint of corruption was gone. I needed that change most of all. It didn't tempt me, but it disturbed too many sleeping ghosts for comfort.

The tube stopped and I climbed out and hurried back to my office. I wanted to catch up to Hunter-of-Outlaws. One of the few wise decisions the UN made

was to let the kzinti left in-system run their internal affairs as long as they toed the UN line when dealing with humans. Tiamat has a lot of kzinti, most in the Tigertown high-G section. They were surprisingly good citizens, considering, but keeping relations smooth was a balancing act. Hunter was my high-wire partner.

He was on his way out when I got back. I grabbed him before he could leave and outlined my findings.

"What do you think?" I asked when I was done.

"Hrrr . . . If Koffman and Vorden are to be believed the prime suspect must be

the human she left with, on evidence of contacts. Since she left no transit log, it is probable she traveled on her companion's ident to the transport tunnel where she was killed. However . . ." he trailed off.

"Go on," I prompted.

He continued reluctantly. "The body was found near the kzinti sector. The corpse looks like a butchered prey animal. On the basis of these facts I would suspect a kzin."

I nearly laughed but he was dead serious. "You don't think a human would do that?"

"I have seen humans kill each other but I have never seen them strip a carcass so. It is the act of a carnivore."

"Never underestimate humanity, my friend." I grinned, but didn't let my teeth show.

He ignored the barb. "If it is possible, then we must consider it. It is conceivable the culprit was cutting the body up into manageable pieces and was disturbed before the task could be completed. Perhaps Miranda Holtzman held dangerous information and was killed to preserve its secrecy."

"I hadn't considered that, but you're right." I didn't go on.

Hunter considered, pupils narrowing. "Your manner tells me you have another thought." He knew humans well.

"Perhaps she was killed by a schitz." It was a wild idea, but it fit.

The kzin looked baffled. Maybe he didn't know humans so well after all. "What is a schitz?"

"It's a blanket term for someone who isn't wired properly. They respond to hallucinations, become paranoid or megalomaniacal. Specifics vary but they can be homicidal."

He knew what hallucinations were but-
"What is paranoid and

megalomaniacal?" He pronounced the words awkwardly.

"Paranoia is when you feel that the entire world is plotting against you. Megalomania is when you have delusions of grandeur." His expression continued quizzical. "As if a telepath was convinced he was destined to be Patriarch."

"A kzin so defective would not survive. I have never heard of these conditions."

"It's rare, the genes are being weeded out. There are drugs to control it too-but-med support is hard to get nowadays. On Wunderland people are dying for lack of it. It isn't so bad up here . . ." I trailed

off, thinking. Getting treatment was easy in the Swarm, but what if someone didn't want treatment?

"Why do you suspect a schitz if they are rare? Probability would suggest another scenario."

"Yah, it would. But Miranda was a pretty young woman last seen with an unknown male. Schitz crimes sometimes involve violent sexual motives."

He gave me another quizzical look. "Violent sex is a contradiction in terms. How can genes for this behavior propagate?"

"Schitzies aren't rational, I don't know

how they think. Dammit, I've only even heard of one schitz; this is just what I learned in training." I thought about the case I knew. An autodoc misread a med card and a quiet sculptor murdered his roommates in a blind rage. The error wasn't his fault but . . .

Hunter interrupted my reverie. "We have a wealth of possibilities—a kzin with a lost temper, a human with a definite motive and a connection to the victim, a schitz engaged in random murder. We lack information. I suggest we gain some."

I smiled. "Let's do that." Hunter could be relied on to cut to the heart of the matter. He gave me the kzin gesture that meant

concurrency-between-equals and left. I watched him go and pondered. There was another possibility.

Hunter's dossier told me he'd once been Kurz-Commander, in control of the kzin base on Tiamat. During the occupation he'd gained a reputation as a hard but fair governor and a ruthless, efficient rebel hunter. He'd earned respect and even affection from his human charges but he was their prime target on the day Tiamat revolted. He survived because he was off station, organizing a ragtag group of tugs and mining ships into a last-ditch defense against the Terran fleet. He survived the battle and the labour camps and eventually wound up

back on Tiamat-this time to maintain order among the stranded kzin. He was the logical choice, he knew more about the asteroid's workings than anyone of either species. I relied heavily on his experience and judgment.

That gave him a lot of power, and made me vulnerable.

I called in Tamara Johansen, head of Criminal Investigation with Tiamat's Goldskin police. She'd served on Tiamat since before the liberation and would have had my job if the UN hadn't dumped me on top of her. It was a credit to her professionalism that she didn't let her resentment show-much. When she arrived I filled her in.

"Where do I fit?" she asked.

"There's a fourth scenario. Maybe Miranda was killed by a kzin with some connection to her. What if she knew something she wasn't supposed to?"

"What are you getting at?" She was intrigued.

"Look, we've got fifty thousand kzinti on-station. They're the ones smart enough to adapt to human rule. They know they have to work with us. That doesn't mean they've changed allegiance. Hunter-of-Outlaws doesn't mind suggesting that a kzin might have killed Miranda in a rage. What if a kzin killed

Miranda because she knew too much about kzin underground activity?"

She didn't look impressed by my suspicions. "We know they run an intelligence net, but it isn't much. I'd be surprised if they've got a secret worth the trouble a murder investigation will bring. They can't even get information back to Kzin."

"What's your theory then?"

She held up an imaginary magnifying glass. "It is a cardinal error to speculate in advance of the facts." She gave me an exaggerated scowl.

I laughed and the ice broke a little.

"Speculate anyway, Holmes, I won't hold you to it."

She became serious again. "I'd suspect a Kdaptist."

"What's a Kdaptist?"

"They're a kzin cult. They've only surfaced once in the swarm, but the case was a lot like this one. Right after the liberation, a fighter jock named Detoine disappeared. He was a real war hero, very famous. Had every decoration you could get, most of them twice. There was a huge search."

"So what happened?"

"We got nothing. Then three years later a kzin got caught with a human skin-the DNA was Detoine's. Turns out the kzin was a high priest in this breakaway cult. They believed their god abandoned them and they used Detoine's skin in their rituals to try and get him back."

"And the rest of Detoine?"

"They ate him. To absorb his heroic warrior spirit."

I shuddered involuntarily. "That's a close enough pattern to be worth investigating. That's your angle. Keep me posted."

She gave me a thumbs-up and turned to

go. I stopped her before she got to the door.

"Why do you think Hunter is covering this up?"

She shrugged. "We don't know that he is. He was still in a security camp down on Wunderland when all that happened, he probably doesn't even know about it. Remember, Hunter-of-Outlaws is a kzin. His personal honour is the core of his identity."

"Meaning?"

"Getting involved in a cover-up is risking his honour, so he probably isn't. But if he is, it'll be something big. Very

big."

She went off to start her inquiries and I sat at my desk and pulled up the files on the Kdapt cult. Service number K78131965-Squadron Leader Jean-Marc Detoine. Valour Cross, UN Cross, UN Medal and bar, Flight Medal and two bars and a dozen lesser awards. He had forty kills in atmosphere and eighteen in space. UNF Command put a lot of pressure on when he went missing and the Goldskins turned Tiamat upside down. They found nothing. Three years later, a kzin named Trras-Squadron-Battle-Planner forgot his shoulder pack in a tube car. The Transit lost-and-found opened it and discovered Detoine's skin,

but Trras had scoured his quarters of evidence and committed suicide by the time the pack was traced. The search team got nothing but a paw-written Kdaptist creed. That dead-ended the case until a smart investigator connected the Kdapt view with the fact that Trras still carried his Fifth Fleet name. Seven kzin were found with similar names. All seven were involved with the cult. All seven were shot. I skipped the details and called up all unsolved murder files since the liberation. None came close to the Kdaptist's flay-eviscerate-devour pattern.

I pondered. If any Kdaptists were left, they weren't very energetic. Anyway,

Miranda hadn't been eaten-at least not all of her. Perhaps Hunter simply didn't consider the cult a possibility worth mentioning. So, what else was big enough for the kzin underground to risk a murder investigation, big enough for Hunter-of-Outlaws to put his personal honour on the line?

Hyperdrive was the obvious answer. The UN's ongoing campaign against kzinti interstellar trade was strangling their empire. That strategy depended entirely on their lack of FTL travel. Hyperdrive ships aren't even allowed to dock at Tiamat because of the kzin population. The secret of hyperdrive was the only information they could get

back to Kzin faster than a laser.

Was that what was going on? Was Hunter involved? I forced the question out of my mind. If he was on the level, there was no problem. If he wasn't, then Johansen and I would catch him-sooner or later. In the meantime, the angle was worth following. Trist Materials had nothing to do with hyperdrives, so Miranda wasn't a primary-source spy. I did a movement trace for the last two weeks of her life, then cross-referenced to anyone connected to the hyperdrive project. I got about a hundred thousand possible contacts, including myself. Hunter was right, I needed more data. Without it, I'd drive myself paranoid.

Thinking of paranoia brought me back to the schitz angle. I hoped it was wrong. I didn't want to think about a human depraved enough to do what had been done to Miranda.

* * *

Tiamat is a potato-shaped asteroid, 20 kilometers by 50 kilometers. The Swarm Belters formed it into a rough tube, spun it for gravity and honeycombed it with tunnels. It rotates every ten hours, creating a 1G pull around the circumference. Ships dock at the axis, low gravity industries take up the center of the tube, farms and parks take up the periphery. The Inferno was on a commercial arcade on the .4G level.

After work, I tubed up to see how Miranda spent her last hours.

It was packed when I got there. Sound dampers kept the pulsating music out of the pedmall but inside it was deafening. The dance floor was a mass of gyrating bodies in simulated free fall down a holographic bottomless chasm. Dante-esque demons circled above them before plunging past into the depths. The dancers took full advantage of the low G to leap and twirl in fantastic combinations. Artificial pheremones filled the air with sex and danger.

I sat down at the bar. A local sound damper gave some relief from the

thunderous beat. The usual selection of alcohol was on offer, as well as an array of pleasure drugs ranging from mild to mind bending. I ordered vodka and turned to survey the crowd. It was a mixed group, about half Swarm Belters and the rest an even mixture of Wunderlanders and Flatlanders. They were young and well off-the engineers and technicians who formed the backbone of Tiamat's industry, engaged in the species' oldest rituals.

I didn't have a specific goal in mind, I just wanted to circulate and see what I learned. Putting together a dossier is easy nowadays. An ARM ident and a few keystrokes make a thousand

databanks divulge your secrets-bank statements, travel logs, medical records and more. Your life is laid out for me to read like entrails before a soothsayer. I have a window into your soul and through it I can know more about you than your closest friends. And yet the bare facts never describe the real person behind them. That was my real purpose for being at the Inferno. I wanted to put flesh on Miranda Holtzman's bones.

A huge dragon with burning eyes and golden scales swooped over the dancers and immolated them in holographic flames. They obligingly shrieked and writhed to the floor as the beast roared in triumph, drowning out the music as the

controller changed tracks. It flew off in forced perspective, flapping heavily as the dancers picked up the new beat. A tall, elfin blonde caught my eye. I smiled back but made no move to go over. A short conversation in body language. "You look like fun, come join me." "Tempting ma'am, but no thanks." I beckoned to the bartender to refill my drink. As he did I showed him Miranda's holo. His manner stiffened ever so slightly. "I've already told the Goldskins everything I know."

"I'm not a Goldskin, I'm just doing a little unofficial inquiry."

He relaxed a bit. "Well, I've seen her of course. Her crowd were all regulars in

here."

"Are they here tonight?" I didn't look around.

"They haven't shown up yet. I don't expect they will, since the news broke about her." Miranda was on all the 'casts.

"Yah, I understand. Listen did anything unusual happen the night she disappeared?"

"I really couldn't tell you; it was a week ago and I wasn't paying attention. I didn't know anything was wrong." He looked anguished, as if her death was his fault.

"No, of course not." Reassuring. "Listen do me a favor and keep your ears open. If you hear anything, let me know." I handed him my callcard and he assured me he would call with almost comical solemnity. My work is high drama for the citizens.

On the dance floor, another woman was looking at me, this one was a red-haired Wunderlander. She held my gaze for five intense seconds before whirling away, sensuous as a cat. Not an invitation but a challenge. "Bet you can't keep up."

I looked for the blonde. She was on her way out, arm in arm with a UNF captain. Maybe she liked Flatlanders. She was a Belter and I watched her long legs with

frank appreciation. She caught me looking and gave me a look. "See what you're missing."

I shrugged and went to the edge of the dance floor. The holoshow had become a stormscape, thickened with real fog from a hidden nozzle. The clouds twisted in the virtual wind, forming wraiths for an instant before collapsing back into mist. At the height of the transformation, bolts of lightning formed eyes in the dark folds of their cowls. When the redhead came by, I caught her hand and she pulled me into the maelstrom. Her dancing was precise but uninhibited. I fell into rhythm with the bouncebeat, catching my partner and

spinning her back into the crowd. Drowning myself in the deep blue pools of her eyes. I forgot about Miranda-and Holly.

As the music climaxed, she pulled me to her, pressing herself hard against me in the crush. She gave me the merest whisper of a kiss when the drumbeat crescendoed. Then thunder drowned out the music and strobes split the clouds with artificial lightning. She spun away as the new rhythm came up. By the time the spots cleared from my eyes, she was gone.

I was disappointed but intrigued. We hadn't spoken a word but her message was clear. "Catch me if you can."

She'd chosen the right man for the job.

* * *

The next day I got down to business. Identification had put together a composite holo of our suspect. Interview reports were trickling in as well. I also did a little personal work on UN time. I called up the Inferno's sales files for the previous night, cross-referenced for sex and description and found three women who might be my mysterious redhead. I screened their holos and found a match.

TLU5A169-Suze Vanreuter, 32,
unmarried, no dependants, no record.
She was a mining engineer, just arrived

on Tiamat as a consultant to Corona Exploration. That's confidential information. A lot of speculators would pay high to learn that a prospecting operation has hired a mining engineer.

I wasn't interested in the stock market. The file didn't mention her catlike grace. The holo didn't show the sparkle in her eyes. No matter, I knew where I could find the real thing. I closed my eyes and remembered her taut body pressed against me. And the kiss. She put more erotic energy into that barely-there kiss than most women put into an orgasm.

That thought gave me pause and I thought back to my life with Holly. She'd been more than an enthusiastic bed partner,

she'd been my lifemate, my friend. Losing her left an aching void in my soul. Was I now replacing her with Suze? Surely I was too experienced, too jaded to confuse love and lust.

I decided not. Suze wasn't better, she was different. I didn't love her, I didn't even know her, but I desired her more than I'd ever desired a woman before. Even more than Holly.

Hunter came in and looked over my shoulder. I should have closed my door. He gestured to Suze's holo on my screen. "What is this one's role in the crime?"

I blanked the screen. "She isn't a suspect, she's just a woman I saw at the Inferno

while I was gathering information. I called up her file for . . ." I hesitated " . . . personal reasons."

The kzin nodded knowingly, rippling his ears in amusement. He had dealt with humans, he understood the subtext of the conversation. "You have mated with her."

I was taken aback. "No, I haven't, I am . . ." I groped for words " . . . interested in learning if I want to mate with her."

The big cat sniffed the air, looking baffled. "How can you not know if you are attracted to a female? Certainly your pheremones speak of desire."

Did he have any idea how personal he was being? "I do know I'm attracted to her."

"Then you have already learned what you need to know."

"Well . . . It's not so simple, she also has to . . . want to mate with me."

"And this information is available in her dossier?"

"No no no. She's made it clear she's interested in me. I'm looking at her file to get to know her better."

"Would it not be easier to ask questions directly? And if you both desire sex with

each other, why have you not already mated?"

Curiosity might not be killing the cat but it was certainly embarrassing the human. I groped for words, then inspiration struck. "Among humans, sexual negotiations are often like a hunt. The goal is hopefully achieved, but the real attraction is the excitement and challenge of the chase. The harder the pursuit, the more satisfying the feast is."

He nodded sagely. "I understand. This is the violent sex you spoke of earlier."

"No!" He was making me look like a schitz. "There is no violence involved."

"How then do you secure sexual relations with a resisting female?"

"She isn't resisting, damnit! She wants to be caught. More than that, she's actively seeking me as well."

"This sounds more like a duel than a hunt."

"Yah, maybe that's a better word." I was relieved that some understanding had been conveyed. Now maybe we could move on to less personal topics.

My relief had come too soon. Hunter had another question. "How do you determine the victor in this duel then?"

I wondered if he knew how disconcerting his persistence was. I watched him for signs of amusement but his face showed only curiosity.

I answered carefully. "There isn't a winner or a loser. If we manage to establish a . . . relationship . . . on mutually acceptable terms, we both win, insofar as we have gained something pleasant and desirable."

The kzin just looked baffled. "A hunt with no hunting, where neither side knows if it is predator or prey. A chase that ends not with feasting but with procreation. A duel with no winner. Why go through these convolutions? If the scent is right, mate."

It occurred to me that battle might be a better analogy. I started to sort out how to explain it in those terms but quickly gave it up.

Hunter was shaking his head dolefully. "I will never understand humans."

I was content to let him wonder. My concept of kzinti had been formed by holocubes on Earth. I'd learned they were remorseless alien killing machines intent on turning humanity into slaves and game animals. If anyone had told me then that one day I'd be trying to explain the dynamics of bounce bar dating to one, I would have died laughing.

I didn't laugh now. I didn't want Hunter to feel I was making fun of his lack of understanding. Even so, it was hard to keep my teeth from showing through my smile. I cleared Suze's file from the screen and brought up my investigation records in its place. I spent some time filling him in on my suspicions and intentions. He listened carefully before speaking.

"Have you further evidence that a schitz is involved?"

"None yet, it's still just a hunch."

"I would not dissuade you from your line of inquiry but I now have concrete reasons to suspect a kzin."

"What evidence?"

"My liver councils my head but my head councils my tongue."

It took a couple of moments before I figured out that the saying meant he wasn't going to tell me. I tried another tack. "How long before you know?"

"Soon enough, today or perhaps tomorrow. Even now First Tracker is stalking our quarry. I will inform you when I have more information."

He left to help First Tracker set his snares. Tracker was Hunter-of-Outlaw's right-hand man-or rather right paw kzin. I find it incredible that a population of

fifty thousand can be policed by just two individuals-particularly when the population is made up of fiercely individualistic carnivores with hair-trigger killer instincts. The contradiction underscored the curious nature of the kzinti social structure. At first glance, it's barely a step above anarchy. Kzinti are always fighting amongst themselves for wealth, status and honor. They fight individually and in groups, usually violently, often lethally. The only leaven of law is the Hero's code of honor, a rough-and-ready standard enforced with rough-and-ready justice. Yet despite this, they possess a cultural unity and stability that defies humanity. They had a single language and world government

when human culture was nothing more than cave art. What's more, they have maintained their cohesiveness throughout the formation by colonization and conquest of an interstellar empire. Humanity's world government is already miserably failing in its attempt to make the transition to space.

Humans are more civilized than kzinti—any human can tell you that. But Hunter-of-Outlaws and First Tracker had no difficulty maintaining order in their bailiwick. Mostly they investigated the facts in disputes brought before the Conservors. They had lots of time left over to lend me a hand with human crimes.

Of course their caseload was helped by the fact that the kzin community required little "policing" in the human sense of the word. The Conservors offered guidance on the application of the honor code to new situations based on tradition and common sense. Individuals who violated the code were chastised, ostracized or killed depending on the severity of their transgression. Any other problem was a matter for the involved parties to settle by compromise, duel or Conservor arbitration according to their wishes. Most kzinti crimes were crimes against humans. It had taken a while after the liberation before kzin realized they couldn't simply kill a human for breaking a verbal contract or failing to show the

proper respect. Finally, the Conservors had decreed that loyalty to the Patriarch required survival which required that humans be dealt with under human law. Eventually the majority had come around to that view. Those who didn't got weeded out sooner or later. Then the problem became humans who cheated kzinti knowing they hadn't the resources to secure redress. This issue was a much smaller problem for the UN, partly because it still took a brave human to cheat a kzin, but mostly because they just didn't care.

They cared a lot about violence against humans though. I had been hoping that a kzin had killed Miranda because I didn't

want to think about a human so depraved. Now I worried that I might get my wish along with the explosive can of political worms it would open. Even ten years after the war, there were those who called for the extermination of the kzinti survivors of the Liberation. This incident would only fan those flames. If my fears about a kzin ring intent on hijacking a hyperdrive proved correct, the whole damn asteroid would go to war.

Alpha Centauri already had enough problems. I decided to keep working on the schitzies until Hunter gave me something solid. Before I'd hoped to find a kzin because I feared I'd find a schitz.

Now I hoped to find a schitz because I feared finding a kzin.

Niggling at the back of my mind was another fear-the fear that the killer might not be a schitz either. Faced with a crime like this, one's natural instinct is to push it as far away as possible, to an outsider, to a deviant, to an alien. Easy to do when the victim is innocent and the crime abhorrent. Harder when the crime is clean and abstract. Hardest when you see yourself reflected in the criminal.

The more unhuman you can make the criminal, the easier it is to deny the common threads that bind our experience together. To feel empathy for a criminal is to admit that it is circumstance as

much as virtue that separates the outlaw and the community. Most important, it is to deny ourselves the only socially sanctioned target for the anger and frustration obedience to the communal laws brings. If we didn't vilify outlaws, we might envy them for their freedom—the freedom we have traded for property, social position and stability.

I'd learned during Brandywine what true freedom is. Entering crime is like entering cold water. However daunting the prospect is at first, the exhilaration once you're immersed in it is indescribable. To make decisions with no pretense at morality grants immense personal power. Ironically, only when

you have rendered society's laws irrelevant can you be truly honest with yourself. Your thoughts become incisive, unfettered by external entanglements. Your mind is free, you can do anything you like, be anything you want. Ultimately, freedom is about power. Ultimately, society has only the power we give it. Refuse the demand to submit to the social norm and, if you are smart enough and fast enough, you can walk like a god on earth. Such freedom is a heady drug indeed.

That drug comes with a high price. It means sacrificing home, career, family, every anchor and reward society offers us. I wasn't ready to make that sacrifice

when Holly was my home. I thought I'd found a compromise in ARM undercover work-a challenging career, exciting work, unbridled license and a happy family too. I even got paid to do it, it was like living a dream. What I didn't realize is that freedom really is a drug-a little is never enough and too much is always disastrous. How far I'd slipped didn't register until I'd lost Holly and then it was too late. I nearly lost my career in the bargain and at the time I wouldn't have cared. I felt burnt out and directionless. I was an addict forced to confront my addiction. I made a decision and my career became the anchor that held me back from the abyss.

So far I'd managed to hold on.

I forced my mind back to the job at hand. Detective work is a matter of sorting through hunches. I glanced over the interview reports from Trist Materials and other sources. They were pretty sparse-Miranda had no family here and she hadn't been on station long enough for people to get to know her too deeply. I wasn't really as interested in what the interviewees had said as in the impression they'd made on the interviewer. Even more, I wanted to see if any of them had anything to do with hyperdrive production. None did, nor had any of my investigators red-flagged any as a potential suspect. With no way

to narrow down my search for a hyperdrive connection, I concentrated on the schitz angle. There were about five dozen people with severe schitz tendencies on their medical records in the Swarm. I cut that in half by looking only at males on the theory that the killing was a sex crime. By midafternoon I'd eliminated all but eight of them for having the wrong physical description, for not being on Tiamat when the crime was committed or some other disqualification. I ran a detailed movement analysis on the remainder, tying up my hardware for over an hour. Three were eliminated, none were implicated outright. What to do?

I considered having the remaining five hauled in so I could ask a few questions. I didn't have to haul them in, my desk performs voice stress analysis perfectly well over the screen, but I prefer to talk to a suspect one on one. It makes the interview more personal, raising the stress level and giving the software something to work on. Besides, I like to see the reactions for myself and come to my own conclusions. The computer isn't infallible and neither am I. Using both techniques cuts the error rate.

If it worked I could wrap the case up that afternoon, if it didn't at least I could eliminate those five and get to work finding a new line of investigation. The

risk was tipping off the murderer. If one of the suspects bolted, we'd have our man. Then we'd just have to find him. My instincts warned me that we never would. He'd disappear into the Swarm or the mountains down on Wunderland. Maybe in a year or ten the Provopolizei would catch him sniping politicians in Munchen for the Isolationists. The Isolationists would suit a schitz just fine.

My instincts were wrong, of course. I was used to Earth with its swarming crowds that could swallow a runner forever. Even on lightly settled Wunderland a fugitive who made it to the outskirts of Munchen could disappear into a thousand kilometres of

virgin wilderness. In Tiamat's sealed environment there was nowhere to run and very few places to hide. Every time the suspect keyed a phone, the call would be monitored. Every time he thumbed a door or bought something, the computers would log it. Every time he walked a pedestrian mall, the vidscanners would be looking for him. If he were so foolish as to board a tube car, he'd be delivered right to the Goldskin headquarters' tube station and left locked in until I felt like coming to collect him. Tiamat was a law enforcement dream and a privacy nightmare. I punched the front desk and had my schitzies rounded up.

All five came in voluntarily, concerned about the murder, eager to do what they could to help. Ian Vanhoff was the one I had the most hope for. He ran a power loader in the container bays of the down-axis hub, giving him direct access to tunnel nineteen. I was sure I had the case locked up when I read that in his file. He gave me an ironclad alibi. The night Miranda disappeared he'd been working an extra shift in a storage bay on the other side of the asteroid. It hadn't been run through his personnel card yet because of union rules but his foreman and the rest of the loader crew could verify the times down to the minute. His wife could vouch for his arrival at home.

Thank you, citizen, you've been very helpful.

Dieter Lorz was at his girlfriend's apt that evening. She could corroborate that, as could another couple who'd visited with them.

Thank you, citizen.

Myro Havchek was upgrading his single-ship license. He'd been at the library studying. Yes, there were people who could testify they'd seen him there.

Get out of here, citizen. I've got a case to solve.

Two lacked alibis. Keve McCallum

claimed to be asleep in his apt. Why hadn't the computer logged his entry? He didn't like the computer watching his every move, he had a mechanical lock on his door. Darren Sioban had been relaxing alone in a park on the 1G level. Why didn't he show as having taken the tube there? He'd walked, he needed the exercise.

Thank you, citizens.

The stress analyzer hadn't twitched, neither had my internal lie detector. I mulled it over. Could a schitz lie well enough to fool the computer and me? In our different ways we both responded to changes in stress. Getting past that would require nerves of ice.

So would taking Miranda apart.

Did not wanting the computer to know when you were home constitute paranoia? Knowing what I knew about information retrieval, it even made sense. What did Keve know about it? What did I expect from a registered schitz anyway? The drugs weren't perfect.

Were they?

Could a schitz off drugs construct a fantasy so powerful it became an internal reality? If the subject believed he was telling the truth, no lie detector would say anything else.

Was a schitz truly responsible for crimes committed while off drugs? I didn't even want to think about that one.

I had too many questions and not enough answers. I called up Johansen but she'd already gone. I dumped my interrogation files to her desk and tasked her to verify the alibis. I didn't expect them to be anything but solid. She wouldn't be thrilled with the job but she'd do it right.

I called up Dr. Morrow and found he'd gone home too. I hadn't realized how late it was getting. I asked the night intern a question. No, the drugs weren't perfect. Readjusting a schitz problem was a tightrope act. Too little and the patient destabilized. Too much and you had a

walking zombie. Once upon a time any deviation from the social norm was drugged until it went away-totally. Now the doctors tried to intervene as little as possible. Around Alpha Centauri there wasn't even a law to enforce dosage. Minor personality quirks were not unusual.

I asked some more questions. Yes, a schitz off drugs might suppress a memory, or move in and out of an alternate reality. Yes, a schitz off drugs might have the cold control required to beat a lie detector.

What would happen when a criminal schitz had his drugs reinstated? Would

his memory remain? How would he respond to the knowledge of his crimes? Anything was possible, it depended on the case.

Back to square zero.

Almost square zero. I left Johansen another message, asking her to collect blood samples from the group as well. Morrow could tell me if they were up to date on medication or not. If one of them wasn't, it would close the case up in a big hurry.

I put an ARM tag on their idents. That would stop them from boarding the next ship to never-never land. If any tried it, he'd be back in the hot seat as suspect

number one.

Would a schitz off drugs choose to go back on them voluntarily? Another unanswerable question.

I screened their psych reports. McCallum was manic depressive and paranoid. That explained his mechanical lock. Sioban was borderline schizophrenic and highly antisocial, hence his habit of walking alone in the park. They were both intelligent and well educated: McCallum was an electronics engineer and Sioban was a process control specialist. Neither had any history of sexual deviance or aggression, neither had a criminal record. Despite their minor quirks both

were productive, stable members of the community.

While they were on their drugs.

Without treatment they were question marks. They'd been diagnosed early and treated all their lives. Nobody knew what they were capable of, them least of all.

Even if one or the other was untreated, it wouldn't prove anything-none of the witnesses had chosen them. It would give me probable cause for a search warrant, which might turn up some physical evidence-the better part of Miranda had yet to surface. Until then I lacked a single link between the killing

and-anything.

I mulled my hyperdrive suspicions over again. I had even less to go on there than I did with the schitzies. I thought about Tanya and Jayce. They lacked motive for starters and they were just too upset by Miranda's death, genuinely upset. Maybe my instincts were wrong on that point. Maybe if I hauled them in and grilled them with the stress analyzer listening in, they'd crack.

Maybe I was grasping at straws. I needed another angle, but first I needed a break. If nothing better suggested itself tomorrow, I'd run a detailed movement trace on every ident that went through the Inferno's accounting system the night

Miranda disappeared and if that failed, I'd do it for every ident that even came within a kilometer of the place. If I split the compute task, I could get the results in a day or two, spend two weeks analyzing them and then maybe I'd have something to go on. Maybe. I was the last one to leave the office. Time flies when you're having fun.

* * *

I didn't go home after work, though I needed the rest. Instead I went down to the Inferno, eager for the second round of the developing game I was playing with Suze Vanreuter. On the way down I wondered what it was about her that

appealed to me so strongly. She was attractive enough but there was more to it than that. Her energy and spontaneity had touched a long-buried chord—a part of me that I'd lost contact with.

When I got to the Inferno, I waited just inside the entry for a few moments to let my eyes adjust to the lower light levels. The holoshow was a burning pool of lava and the dancers were individually encased in a dynamic, digital flame that clung and followed their movements. Periodically the lava would form into a diabolic face that laughed maniacally, swallowed the dancers whole and spit them out again. The music was darker and heavier than the night before but the

insistent, pulsating beat was the same.

I went in, expecting to find her in the middle of the show. Instead she was sitting at the bar. I sat down beside her.

"Good evening, Ms. Vanreuter," I said formally.

If my knowledge of her name surprised her she gave no sign. "Good evening, Captain Allson."

It was my turn to be startled. Perhaps I shouldn't have been. She probably knew the bartender. It would have been easy enough for her to discover my name. I hoped the surprise didn't show.

"Would you care to dance?"

"Enchanted." She favoured me with a megavolt smile and took my offered arm.

We danced as the holoshow engulfed us in living fire. The flames highlighted the blazing halo of her hair as she insinuated herself into the rhythm. Her concentration was complete, but she kept her eyes locked on mine. At first we connected only long enough to begin another energetic maneuver. As the night went on and the fatigue and endorphins built up, we stayed together longer and longer, building our own bubble of intimacy in the swirling throng.

It became hard to think straight, I wanted

her so much.

After a while we left, half exhausted from the energetic dancing. We walked arm in arm along the pedestrian mall, recovering. The absence of the lights, music, pheromones and people was like a dash of cold water after a hot shower, shocking but invigorating. We talked about inconsequential things. Eventually we found a restaurant that boasted authentic Earth cuisine. The menu was a mishmash of Tandoor, Canton and Milan. The food was good in its own right but only a loose approximation of the originals it claimed to duplicate. It didn't matter. The atmosphere was cozy and the company delightful. I already

knew her dossier, but I asked her about herself.

She shrugged. "There's not much to tell. I'm thirty-two. I'm a geologist. I used to do engineering work for the UN mining consortium. Now I'm an independent. That means I charge lots of money and I'm usually unemployed. No children. What else is there?"

"Parents?"

"Killed in the kinetic missile raid."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?" She shrugged again but her eyes became icy and distant, belying her

studied nonchalance. "Everyone dies sooner or later."

Talking about the past was risky. Alpha Centauri was heavy with ghosts. I changed tack. "Plans for the future?"

"I'm on a contract now. It's a good company. If things pan out I'll go permanent with them. If not, I'll find something else up here. I like it in the Swarm."

"It's more relaxing than Wunderland. No gangs. No assassinations."

"Is that why you came up here?" She seemed surprised.

"No, I came because of the corruption in the Provo government . . ." I hesitated, doubtless out of some residual loyalty to my organization " . . . and in the UN."

She nodded, far away for a moment. I didn't elaborate. She'd seen more of it than I had. "So you're an honest cop."

"I am now."

That sparked her interest. She raised an eyebrow and licked her lips. "You weren't always?"

"I used to work undercover. I spent most of my time breaking the law in order to enforce it."

"And?"

"I crossed the line."

"And you came back?"

"I couldn't go back, it was too late. I came out here."

She smiled. "And what are you doing here?"

"You mean what's a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?"

She just smiled and raised a querying eyebrow. I answered the unstated question.

"Investigating the Holtzman murder."

"I sort of suspected as much." Miranda was big news all over the asteroid.
"How's it going?"

I hesitated, a police reflex. Investigative work-in-progress isn't classified, but neither do you want it to be common knowledge. Most importantly you never want the criminals to know where you are in the investigation. If they know you're on to them, they'll flee. If they know you're not, they'll just sit tight. What you want is to leave them uncertain, unwilling to commit to flight, unable to hold their ground with confidence. That way they're more liable to make mistakes. Once in a while they

just can't stand the strain and voluntarily surrender.

On the other hand Suze wasn't with the press. She wasn't even a Swarm native plugged into the local gossip net. The odds of the information getting back through her were vanishingly low. She was a reasonable person who would hold anything I said in confidence. I was walking the road to paranoia again.

"It's going, that's about it. We're still looking for connections."

"Do you have a suspect?" Her eyes were burning blue electric arcs. The thrill of the chase.

"I thought it might be a schitz, but it doesn't look like it now. My partner thinks it's a kzin."

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a different kzin."

She laughed. "There's hope for you yet."

"Why?"

"Most Flatlanders can't tell kzinti apart."

"I couldn't when I first arrived, I've learned since," I said, a trifle affronted.

She held up a hand in apology. "I'm sorry. It just reminded of an old joke."

"Which old joke?"

"Promise you won't be offended?" She was smiling, impish dimples appeared, as if she were already laughing at the punchline.

"Go ahead."

She waited a second to get her expression under control. "How can you tell a Flatlander?"

"How?" I played along.

"You can't, they won't listen."

We laughed together and went on to other topics. Later I told her about

Brandywine-and about Holly. After that I told her about tracking criminals and what it was like to crack a major case. She told me about hunting minerals in the Jotuns and how she felt when she made the strike that became the Wind Pass Complex. Her eyes were full of the wild, unbounded sky when she talked about the absolute freedom of hiking the high Jotuns alone and the power of total self-reliance. I suddenly understood what drew me to her. I recognized the look. I'd seen it on Earth, in the mirror.

We didn't talk about how we planned to spend the rest of the night but when we left we shared a tube car and she didn't punch in her address. By the time we got

to the door of my apt the tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

We went in and I offered her a seat. I have a miniature wine rack that holds six bottles. I went to get the glasses and asked, "Would you like a drink?"

"I didn't come here to drink." I turned around, surprised. She ran a finger down the front of her jumpsuit, unsealing the fabric. Her gaze was steady, half mocking, half inviting. It was the same challenge she'd offered the other night. "Bet you can't keep up."

I put the glasses down and went over and kissed her gently. She returned it with enthusiasm. A while later she

pulled me down to the carpet. I didn't resist.

Afterwards we cuddled and talked in bed, making love languidly in sharp contrast to the almost desperate intensity of the first time. There was all the delight of exploring and discovering a new lover but little of the awkwardness. There had been other women since Holly. Asheya Ramal, sometime partner and longtime friend had pulled me into bed and away from the brink after Brandywine. Kerry Smythe, whom I'd known since childhood, had given me a last-minute going-away present before I'd left Earth. On Wunderland I'd lost a weekend with a blonde Valkyrie named

Hanse who taught at the university. Asheya had been for solace and Keri for remembrance. Hanse was to forget. Suze was something more.

Was I falling in love this fast? A week ago I would have said I wasn't capable of it at all. Did I want to get involved? The wounds of my divorce were still too fresh. On the other hand, the sooner I started getting over Holly the sooner they would heal.

Don't think too much. Enjoy it for what it is and worry about tomorrow tomorrow. I traced patterns on her skin with my finger.

She had a fine scar that ran from her

nipple to her cleavage before it faded out. It was thinner than a hair, barely noticeable. I traced it with my forefinger.

"What happened here?" I asked.

She hesitated before answering. "You know I worked for the mining consortium. They sent me up to sub-survey a new site. We were doing test blasts and a booster went off in my face." She shuddered. "It should have been no problem but the UN had all the hospitals tied up with the attack on W'kkai. By the time I got med-aid it was too late to prevent scarring. They told me I was lucky to live." She sounded bitter. "That's why I quit."

"They're barely there at all." I reassured her although I knew it wasn't the scars she was bitter about. I kissed the uphill end of the line.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she growled, then pulled me up and kissed me hard. I would have begged to differ, but I was otherwise occupied.

Later I found other scars on her thighs, arms, chest and belly. One ran from her forehead to the side of her nose and across her cheek. They were all nearly invisible, just tiny misalignments in the texture of her skin. My detective's eye couldn't help reconstructing the accident. From the pattern of the tracery she'd

been kneeling and bent forward slightly-likely setting the time dial on top of the charge. That saved her life. Boosters are shaped to explode downwards and the main detonation cone would have killed her on the spot. Instead she'd taken the backblast in the chest with spillover onto her belly and face. The scars came from agonized weeks spent bathed in Nutrol and breathing through a tube in an autodoc because real treatment wasn't available-proper clonal reconstructive surgery would have left no marks. I felt a cold wind brush against my back. Such a near thing. A little more pressure on the lever of fate and I would never have known what I missed. I didn't say anything more, I just held her tighter.

* * *

I arrived late the next morning. Hunter was on his way out. He rippled his ears knowingly but mercifully didn't ask any questions. Johansen was logged out checking alibis. First Tracker was doing something with the Conservors, probably playing poetry games. The usual backlog was waiting for me when I got to my desk. I scanned my messages first, prioritizing-coroner first. Johansen had delivered five blood samples. All five showed my schitzies had the right dosages.

Well, it had been a good hunch anyway.

I scanned down. There was the usual

assortment from 'casters, looking for information on the killing. I forwarded them to the PR desk for the official brush-off. The rest were routine, half an hour of dull but essential paperwork. I buckled down to it; I wanted my desk clear when I started setting up the movement trace.

I was almost done when Hunter came in without knocking. "We have captured the kzin who killed the human Miranda Holtzman." His voice had more than the usual snarl to it. He turned on his heel and strode out again.

I sighed, picturing riots in the tunnels when the news broke. Be careful what you wish for, it might come true. I

followed him out.

Work in the outer office was stopped dead with everyone staring at First Tracker. The big kzin was standing with his foot in the small of another kzin's back. The prisoner was lying spreadeagled and bleeding from numerous minor cuts. Hunter stooped over, grabbed the hapless captive by the scruff of the neck and turned his face to the gaping office staff. "This sthondat," he snarled "is known as Slave-of-Kdapt!" He screamed something into the prisoner's ear and dragged him into his office, nearly overbalancing First Tracker in the process.

Tracker spoke little English. He gestured towards the door as Hunter slammed it and said "Dominance." He looked around the room, lips twitching over razor teeth. Everyone was suddenly diligently at work again. When he was satisfied that he'd quelled the gawkers, the kzin picked up a box, handed it to me and said, "Evidence." Then he curled up on a visitors' couch, cozy as a kitten. He fixed his golden eyes on the door to Hunter's office, ears up and swivelled forward. For the first time I saw that he too was suffering from various cuts and contusions. The first scream came through and his mouth relaxed into a fanged smile.

I opened the box. Inside was a large, misshapen hunk of fine leather, crudely tanned. I didn't need DNA analysis to tell me it was Miranda Holtzman's skin.

A crash and another scream came through the door. First Tracker licked his chops. I took refuge in my office.

It wasn't much of a refuge. My office is right next door to Hunter's. Goldskin headquarters was once a factory process floor. It was converted to offices by installing inch thick sprayfoam walls. They were adequately soundproof for normal conversation, but that wasn't what was going on now. The modulated snarls came through almost unimpeded by the barrier, punctuated by crashes,

thuds and shrieks of rage and pain. At least I was away from Tracker and his intent satisfaction at the mayhem.

Sprayfoam is a mass-saving necessity on ships and a handy convenience on Tiamat. Its strength-to-mass ratio is very high but you can put your foot through it with a solid kick. I expected half a tonne of clawing, raging carnivores to land in my lap at any moment. Someday I'll have the budget to install privacy fields. I've seen a lot of violence, but brutalizing a prisoner like this ran against my grain. Slave-of-Kdapt, or whatever he'd been before Hunter renamed him, was a killer but he was still a human being.

No, I corrected myself, he wasn't a human being, he was a kzin, an alien carnivore whose species was dedicated to the enslavement of mine. Did that make a difference? Perhaps it did. After all, it was his own species working him over. Why did it disturb me then?

Because I'm a cop and so was Hunter-of-Outlaws and cops don't beat up prisoners to extract confessions-not where I come from.

Not on Earth, but they did on Wunderland and kzinti still weren't human. It wasn't for me to tell them how to run their internal affairs. I didn't even know if a kzin would respond to a nonviolent interrogation; maybe this was

the only way that worked.

I still didn't like it.

I pushed the unease away. We had the evidence, we had the murderer, soon we would have the confession.

Except . . . The hyperdrive question kept buzzing around in the back of my head. If Miranda's death was connected with a spy ring that Hunter was covering for, how better than to hand me a culprit and dump the blame on a defunct cult? It wouldn't be hard for them to find a volunteer amid the despairing, honour-starved kzin of Tiamat.

That thought decided me. I wasn't going

to accept confessions at face value. After Hunter was through with his interrogation, I'd pass the suspect up to the frightening efficiencies of UN Intelligence. I'd have an answer I could trust by shift-end tomorrow.

Case closed.

I opened the next file, someone was reprogging stolen keycards and draining citizens' bank accounts. It would take a lot of specialized knowledge, electronics, crypto and bank procedures at least. I set up some search keys and began screening dossiers, trying to tune out the sounds coming through the wall.

After an hour I'd made some good

progress, narrowing down the field to about two hundred possibles. I picked the dozen who seemed most likely and set up a movement trace to link them with fraudulent withdrawals. While the trace ran in the background, I worked the opposite angle, starting with those who had access and linking that data back to the required skills. Hopefully I would get cross-matches and a start point for my investigation. I stopped noticing the violence next door until it ended.

I was trying to put my finger on the absence when Hunter strode in. He had a nasty slash on his chest and his expression was even less pleased than before. He didn't waste time. "We have

a confession."

I wasn't surprised. "Good, put him in confinement and I'll get the proceedings drawn up." Hunter was in no mood for paperwork. That was a help. I'd have the suspect shipped up to UNF Intel quickly and quietly and he wouldn't even know I'd done it.

"Slave-of-Kdapt has confessed to no crime against human law."

"What?" I was dumbfounded.

"He is not the criminal we seek."

I gestured mutely at the box containing Miranda's remains.

"He tried to imply that he had slain the human Miranda Holtzman himself. He has now admitted that he bought the skin from a human. Not only did he accept carrion from . . ." he paused, substituting words " . . . another species and claim it as hunt-prey, he lied to hide his shame. That even the lowest coward could sink to such!" He paced and spat curses in the Heros' Tongue.

"Let me get this straight. He pretended that he did kill Miranda, but he didn't really? Why would he do that? He must know the penalties he's playing with."

"He has the liver of a sthondat and less honor. We pitiful survivors of K'Shai are thrice cursed by the Fanged God."

He snarled again, twitching his tail and raking the air with his claws.

I decided to let the point go. The complexities of kzinti honour weren't my concern. The fact was, Slave-of-Kdapt wasn't a fall guy for kzin intelligence, or at least if he was, Hunter-of-Outlaws wasn't involved in the coverup. That was the good news. The bad news was the killer was still unknown, still at large, and human.

Case reopened.

I filed my account-fraud data and went over the interrogation with Hunter. Slave-of-Kdapt had been Machine Technician. He was known to be a

Kdaptist. He'd been caught because he'd started bragging about "following the true Kdapt faith." Tracker was quick to pick up on this spoor and the pursuit had been easy. Kdapt rituals with human sacrifice had been forbidden by the Conservors as disruptive of the essential kzin/human relationship but the hapless Technician's real crime in kzin eyes was trying to gain status through lying.

Hunter and Tracker were both too wound up with bloodlust for my taste. It was another hour till shift end but I sent them off to catch a ztigor in the Tigertown park. I wanted to talk to Slave-of-Kdapt myself and see what I could learn. They left, snarling amicably

to each other. I called their battered prisoner in, had him make himself comfortable and began. I started by pulling up the schitzies I'd culled from the databank. Slave-of-Kdapt didn't finger any as the one who'd sold him the skin but admitted he couldn't always tell humans apart. His own description was almost uselessly vague and it fit a Belter, not a Wunderlander. He was pathetically eager to please, as though he could save himself through cooperation. Hunter thought he'd committed no human crime, but I could think of a dozen charges to bring against him ranging from concealing evidence to accessory to murder. For a kzin the penalties ranged from a short life in a labour camp

to quick death in front of a firing squad. Even that was better than the fate his fellows had in store for him. Slave-of-Kdapt had violated his honour code. He would be an outcast. Eventually he would starve or die of misery or fall afoul of another kzin and be torn to shreds.

I questioned him thoroughly and fruitlessly. I was used to dealing with kzin like Hunter, whose mind stalked problems like game and pounced on solutions with precision and clarity. Machine Technician wasn't dull exactly—just woefully naive and uncurious beyond his narrow specialty.

He knew of other Kdaptists but didn't

think any of them had anything to do with the murder or any other crime. They all followed the Conservor's dictum that human laws be respected. He didn't know Miranda Holtzman or anyone who might want to kill her. He didn't have any enemies who might be trying to frame him for her murder. He'd lied about killing her because he wanted the honour it would bring. Evidently that didn't violate the Conservor's dictum because it broke no human law-so he'd thought. Of course he realized he'd broken his honour code but he didn't think he'd get caught at that. Obviously he hadn't thought out the consequences of his claim becoming well known. His only motivation was status-he wanted

more space and a kzinrett. It was the human who sold him the skin who'd suggested that Miranda's skin and the false prey-claim could be the way to achieve that. What humans would know he was a Kdaptist? He didn't know, he'd made no particular secret of it. He was sure he didn't recognize the human involved? Absolutely.

There was one correlate. Machine Technician's job was servicing loading equipment in the down-axis hub. That put him just five hundred meters from the point Miranda's body was found. It might be coincidence, but it was the only link I had.

I didn't charge him, I bought him a ticket

to Wunderland. There were thousands of miles of wilderness down there, where Machine Technician could become Trail Stalker or Chaser-of-Gagrumpths with all the space he wanted and his own kzinrett if he could find one. Slave-of-Kdapt and dishonour would be forgotten. Pity for criminals is something a cop can't afford. Those feelings are reserved for the victims, but Machine Technician was as much a victim as Miranda. He'd been set up to take the fall, and he would have played his part to the hilt and to the death if Hunter-of-Outlaws' thorough . . . interrogation . . . hadn't allowed the truth to come out.

Or, come to think of it, the interrogation I

had planned for him with UN Intelligence. Their methods are much gentler, but they're a lot less pleasant on balance. Machine Technician was lucky he'd been caught by one of his own.

He left, thanking me with embarrassing profusion. The one thing worse than an arrogant, dominant kzin is a pathetically humble one.

When he was gone, I went over the data and summed up.

Item: A male Wunderlander had left the Inferno with Miranda-if our only two witnesses were to be believed.

Item: A male Belter had sold her skin to

Machine Technician, someone who knew him well enough to know he was vulnerable to this particular frame-up, but not so well that the kzin had recognized him.

Item: Machine Technician's admittedly inadequate description of the suspect was at considerable odds with the couple's.

So if there were two people involved, that pointed to a conspiracy and away from a schitz. If not, it pointed back at Jayce and Tanya. I still lacked too many pieces of the puzzle. I didn't even have a motive.

Tammy stuck her head in the door. "I

hear you got a Kdaptist confession."

"Sort of. What we didn't get was a culprit."

"I heard that too. What's up?"

"Hunter tracked down this kzin who claimed he'd killed Miranda. It turns out all he really did was buy her skin from a human and try to claim credit."

"So he's an accessory after the fact. Why did you send him to Wunderland?"

"You hear a lot."

She grinned. "I keep my ears open."

"He was set up and framed, pure and simple. Now that his honour is compromised he's an outcast up here. I thought I'd give him another chance."

"What about using him as a witness?"

"Wunderland is still the safest place for him. How long would he have on Tiamat?"

She winced. "Good point. Well, I have to say I'm glad to hear it wasn't a Kdaptist after all."

I cocked my head. "Why is that?"

She held up her beltcomp. "Here's all the data I've tracked down on the Kdapt cult

and current Kzin intelligence operations." She held her other hand up, thumb and forefinger forming an empty circle. "Zero."

"Sorry for the goose chase."

She smiled. "Don't be." She waved the beltcomp. "I've got a new contact and some leverage for a couple more out of it anyway. So where are we now?"

"We know there are at least two people involved. They must have planned to frame Machine Technician in advance of the killing-that's not the sort of detail you work out while you're hiding in a transport tunnel with a corpse. So Miranda wasn't chosen at random. That

puts us back to Vorden and Koffman the love-birds, unless someone-some group-wanted her dead for a specific reason."

"It can't be the couple." She waved at the composite holo on the screen. "This is a male."

"We only have their testimony to say there's a second male. Anyway, I think it would be pretty easy to fool Machine Technician on that aspect. Loose clothing would be all it would take."

"Visually, yah, but he could smell the difference. But you're right about the testimony."

"Suppose it's a group for the sake of

argument. They must have had a specific reason they wanted her dead."

"So what's the reason?"

"That's what we need to know. Something she knew or something she'd done. She just wasn't up here long enough to have become involved in anything serious. Trist Materials doesn't handle anything worth killing for and if they did the target wouldn't be their brand-new exchange student."

"So it must have been something she was already involved with down on Wunderland."

"Right. Especially since a Wunderlander

is a major suspect."

"What groups operate both groundside and in the Belt?"

I considered. "Anyone could send up an assassin. Any of the crime rings, the Isolationists, Kzin intelligence, collabo underground, collabo hunters. Even a few branches of the Provisional Government if she crossed the wrong people."

She shook her head. "We know it's not the tabbies at least. The killers are human."

"But they could be working for the kzinti."

"Get serious. They tried to frame a kzin for the crime and ruined his honour in the process. If they were working for the kzinti, their bosses would eat them when they found out. Alive."

"Good point."

"We've got a lead, though. If she was killed by Wunderland assassins, they must have come up between her arrival and her death. That's a narrow window. Cross-check the Inferno's attendance list with the passenger manifests for every ship that arrived during that time period."

I entered the search request and we watched the screen while it collected the

data and compared it. It came up no matches.

"Maybe they knew she was coming. Try the previous six weeks."

I tapped in the query. It took a little longer this time because there was more data to retrieve and sort. The result was the same. no matches.

"Damn!" I cleared the screen.

"Not damn. Now we know the killer was already here. That means we've got to be dealing with an organization that's already in the Swarm. Smugglers for one of the crime rings probably."

"We'll have to get the Provopolizei involved. Get them to dig out a contact list for us."

"Attack it from both sides. Run a movement trace on every person who went through the Inferno that night too."

"I already thought of that. It'll take hours to run and weeks to analyze."

"So what have you got to lose? Run it overnight and we'll start the Goldskins on it in the morning. If we get a match, we'll refocus. At least you won't be totally reliant on the Provos."

She was right, of course. I wrote a cable to the ARM on Wunderland instead of

the Provopolizei. It was adding another bureaucratic step, since they'd have to go to the Provos anyway, but I knew people I could trust in the ARM-people who could smell an evolving coverup. Then I set up my board to run the trace and let it go. Somewhere in the mass of data that it would generate would be the critical clue. I'd just had to find it-if the murderer was in fact the man she left with and if he didn't have a false ident. It would be hours before the trace was done. I screened Suze and made a date for dinner.

* * *

We met at the same Earth cuisine restaurant as before. Why not? The

atmosphere was intimate and the menu inviting. Suze was already waiting when I got there. She greeted me with a kiss and asked, "How's the case going?"

"Well, we got a kzin who confessed to the crime."

"So you're done?"

"Well, not exactly. It seems he was confessing because he thought he'd gain status by it. He didn't actually do it."

"I don't understand."

"I don't think he understood himself."

"So where do you go from here?"

"Good question. Right now I'm running a movement trace on everyone who went through the Inferno that night. The murderer has got to be in there somewhere, unless he used a false ID."

"How do you know the man she left with is the killer?"

"Miranda wasn't just a random victim; someone wanted her dead for a reason. They watched her, figured out her movements and set her up."

"She was just a kid! Why would anyone want to kill her?" Her eyes showed worry.

"We don't know yet. Someone she was

involved with on Wunderland, a criminal group."

"Do you know which group?"

"I haven't got a clue right now."

"I think that's your problem alright." The concern went away and her smile developed those mischievous dimples.

I missed the joke and riposted with a brilliant, "What?"

"You haven't got a clue."

I threw a miniature shrimp from my stir fry at her. I didn't throw it hard but I grossly misjudged the gravity field and

the morsel went flying past her on a high, slow trajectory that eventually intersected the back of a balding patron's head. He looked around in irritated surprise while I tried to look oblivious and Suze suppressed giggles with difficulty.

It became a game after that. We took turns picking targets and launching shrimp at them. The low light level helped conceal our nefarious intent but the fifth time the maitre d' caught us and we were asked firmly to leave. Suze asked him if he'd call the ARM if we refused at which we both collapsed into gales of laughter. He turned red and looked ready to burst but she got ahold

of herself and apologized, then smoothed over his feelings by insisting on being allowed to buy two liters of their crumbleberry cream pudding before going because it was so incomparably good. On the way down to the tube station she poked me in the ribs.

"Maybe you shouldn't have picked the maitre d' as a target."

"You're the one who threw the shrimp while he was looking."

"I had to. He was already watching us to see if we were the ones doing the throwing."

"No need to confirm his suspicions."

"He wasn't suspicious, he knew. He was just waiting to catch us."

"All the more reason not to hit him with a shrimp."

"He was a witness. I couldn't let him live," she said with mock ferocity.

"The shrimp or the maitre d'?" I asked innocently.

She laughed and poked me again. I caught her around the waist and held her and we walked arm in arm to the tube car, giggling and kissing. It wasn't in the best traditions of the ARM for Tiamat Station's Chief of Investigation to go around in public acting like a giddy

teenager. Well, hopefully nobody knew who I was. Anyway, I felt better than I had since I'd arrived at Alpha Centauri and if anyone did notice me I didn't care.

Back at her apt she called, "Dessert!", opened the pudding container and sampled some with her fingers, then gave me a crumbleberry-flavored kiss. In the process some of the pudding spilled on her jumpsuit. That was an invitation if I ever saw one so I unsealed it and spilled some more pudding, then kissed it off. We fell to the floor into a sticky tangle of clothes and pudding, and passion. That led to the shower and steam and more passion which in turn led to the bed, cuddling, contentment and

... love?

Maybe love.

I fell asleep with her in my arms, serene for the first time since I'd left Earth.

* * *

I was late again the next morning. Tammy winked at Hunter, who rippled his ears and double twitched his tail in a manner I could only assume was meant to be suggestive. I glared at them both and got another tail twitch from Hunter and a look of "Who? Me?" innocence from Tammy. Tracker snarled something at Hunter, then rippled his own ears as he was let in on the joke.

I was feeling too good to let it bother me. If my lovelife boosted morale I'd just chalk it up to my doubtless outstanding leadership skills. In the meantime, I gathered what was left of my dignity and went into my office.

On my desk display the exhaustive movement trace was done and waiting for attention. I went over my mail first. There was a message from Wunderland and I screened it, expecting a response to my ARM query. It was from a Provo named Loreli Novostet. She was working to penetrate a smuggling operation that supplied UN weapons to the Isolationists. An informant had given her a tranship code that had turned out to

belong to a twenty-meter cargo container arriving from Tiamat. The cargo carrier's crew knew nothing, of course, and both the shipping and receiving companies were fronts. Perhaps I had some information that might help?

She'd attached the crew's idents and an inventory of what they'd seized. I called up the idents and dumped the dossiers for hardcopy, then scanned the inventory list. My eyebrows went up as I read—cases of pulse rifles with ammunition and battery packs, hiveloc launchers, sniper sights, infantry battle armor, combat drugs, hundreds of kilos of Tridex, boosters, a field hospital's worth of medical equipment, flash grenades,

surveillance gear and more than enough comps and comms to run a regiment.

And something bizarre. A nitrogen freezer jam packed with somebody's limbs and organs. She'd attached the DNA pattern.

My hands flew over the keyboard. I knew the scans would match even before the computer screened Miranda Holtzman's gene record.

Organlegger. The word felt strange. A long time ago failure of a vital organ meant death. Transplant technology changed that. With a little luck you could live as long as your central nervous system lasted-as long as you could find

donors to keep you going. Everybody wants to live forever but the organ banks couldn't always supply what you needed when you needed it. Organleggers took up the slack through kidnap and murder. It wasn't a nice profession but it was very lucrative.

Nowadays medical technology is more advanced. Autocloning has eliminated the need to scavenge for donors. Organlegging is yesterday's crime, like cattle rustling.

But medtech is in short supply around Alpha Centauri and the UN forces have first call. People were dying because they couldn't get treatment. The Isolationists had bigger medical

problems. A suspected terrorist can't just show up at a hospital with blast trauma or laser burns and get treatment. Organlegging was a natural for them. They already had an effective and ruthless organization in place. It would take only a few donors to meet their own needs and what they didn't use themselves they could sell on the black market to finance their operations. Once news of their new sideline broke, they'd probably start using it as a terror weapon. For some reason, people dread being broken down for parts much more than simple death. A few prominent kidnappings would apply a lot of fear in high places.

Not a pleasant scenario but it gave me an edge. Miranda hadn't been chosen at random. Somewhere out there a terrorist was in need of spare parts. His tissue rejection profile would match hers. I called up Dr. Morrow. Rejection profiles weren't part of a person's file anymore, could he derive one from Miranda's gene scan? He could. While I waited I started a report to send down to the Provopolizei.

He was back on the screen an hour later. Miranda Holtzman was a rare universal donor. There were only a few thousand in system who couldn't accept her tissues.

I cursed myself. Of course she'd been

chosen for exactly that reason. Another blind alley. I shelved the report and ran a trace on the container's tranship code. The shipping and receiving companies were fake but the container itself was real. Maybe its movements would give me a clue.

Container 19C01FD4 had arrived aboard the freighter Achilles at the up-axis docking hub, customs' sealed and coded for transport from MUN42104K to TMU19J234C. The manifest said "Machine Tools." I called up the operations manual for the cargo system and figured out the codes. "TMU" is the up-axis hub's destination code. "19" indicates the nineteenth of the asteroid's

thirty-two axial transport tunnels. "J2" is the second container bay in the tenth two-kilometer section of the twenty-five that make up the length of the transport tunnels. "34C" is the third level of the thirty-fourth container rack in that bay. Once unloaded from Achilles, the automated routing system would have sent the container down tunnel nineteen to its destination and the receiver would have been notified of its arrival and shown up in due course to sign off with the Port Authority and take charge of its contents.

So far so good, but nobody had signed it off as received. The computer didn't even log it as arriving at 19J2. The next

time there was a record was thirty-seven hours later as the container was being loaded aboard the freighter Canexco Wayfarer at the down-axis hub, still customs' sealed and manifested as "Machine Tools." Point of origin TMU19J234C, destination MUN42104K-Munchen Spaceport, Wunderland.

A neat trick. The container had been shipped from Wunderland and arrived on Tiamat, traveled straight through the core of the asteroid, come neatly out the other end and gone back where it came from. Somewhere along the line whatever was inside it had been taken out and Miranda Holtzman and an

arsenal of UN weapons had been put in. So far as the computer was concerned nobody had touched the container so there was no way to trace the smugglers through it. The chips containing the tranship codes are crypted and self-verifying to prevent containers from being electronically hijacked en route. You need a Port Authority ident to originate or receive a shipment and of course that gets logged in the shipping control net. Somehow the smugglers had managed to swap origin and destination without the ident.

The trick got neater when I called up the information on container bay 19J2. It didn't exist. Somewhere in tunnel

nineteen a 2000 cubic meter tranship box had disappeared for thirty-seven hours. I screened the history file for container 19C01FD4. It had traveled from MUN42104K to TMU19J234C and back twelve times. The tranship net had never logged it as delivered to anyone anywhere since it entered the system three years ago.

A picture was coming together and it wasn't nice. The Isolationists needed medical support and had decided to get into organlegging. They'd made a list of universal donors and Miranda was on it. Her departure for Tiamat put only a minor crimp in their plans. They already had a sophisticated smuggling operation

set up in the Swarm to ship stolen UN weapons to Wunderland. She'd been targeted, abducted and packed into a freezer to ship down to Wunderland in a weapons consignment already set to go. The freezer wasn't big enough for all of her so they'd left her torso in the tranship tunnel and sold her skin to the Kdaptist Machine Technician to blur the trail.

I would rather have found a schitz. This was carefully calculated murder for profit. The people responsible for it couldn't be treated for some neurochemical imbalance. They were cold-blooded killers, plain and simple.

The most frightening thing was the organization. The killers had some major

resources behind them. They were probably already long gone. Even if I caught them it wouldn't stop more innocents from being snatched and killed to fill the Isolationist organ banks. I could only pray they confined themselves to organlegging. If they decided to escalate, things would get a lot worse-and I would be one of their first targets.

It was time to take a better look at tunnel nineteen.

Johansen wasn't around so I collared Hunter. As an afterthought I belted on my patrol pack as well and we went down to the Port Authority at the up-axis hub.

Jocelyn Merral was Port Chief, a handsome woman in her fifties-iron-gray hair and a penetrating gaze. We asked her to shut down the tunnel so we could go over it with a fine-tooth comb. She didn't get upset, she just refused. It would be too disruptive to her operations. Tunnel nineteen had been shut down for maintenance and investigation already. The backlog had kept a ship overtime at the down-axis hub. Did I have any idea how much that cost? It wasn't going to happen again.

I couldn't just order it done. The Port Authority is its own police within its jurisdiction. I tried to reason with her. "Ma'am, we are investigating a murder

that involves the Isolationists and the smuggling of UN weapons to Wunderland. Surely the Port Authority is as interested in resolving this as we are."

She spoke slowly and firmly. "The Port Authority is not at all interested in shutting down transport tunnels at the casual whim of the ARM."

"Casual whim" was the key phrase. What she meant was that if we wanted her cooperation we were going to have to supply more information. I didn't want to do that. The odds were long someone in the Port Authority was involved with the smugglers, and as one of a handful with command access to the tranship net

Merral was high on the suspect list.

Instead, I tried bargaining. "Look, we just need to inspect tunnel nineteen. Can that be done without shutting it down?"

"Certainly, I have just the thing." I was startled by her ready agreement. Information is currency to me, dealing for it is second nature. Merral had just been concerned about the efficiency of her operation. I wasn't used to taking people at face value.

She ushered us out of her office. The gravity was about a twentieth of a G and the corridors had static fields in the floor to aid traction. Merral walked in effortless forty-foot strides. Hunter

moved with easy feline grace. I kept unsticking myself and hitting my head on the ceiling before settling awkwardly back to the ground. They had the manners not to laugh too much.

We left the corridor and entered the hub itself, a vast space full of container racks. I'd been in tunnel nineteen myself but there were no containers in it then. The files on the shipping system contained diagrams of the containers and the hubs but they gave no concept of the scale.

Shipping containers are ten meters square and twenty long. The down-axis hub is a hollow cylinder, a klick across and half that deep. Eight rows of storage

racks line the hub-twenty-four thousand containers in hundred-meter piles. From any given point inside the cylinder the floor slopes upwards at an impossible angle and the looming racks seem about to topple over. Eventually the floor becomes what common sense dictates is a wall with the rows of racks marching up it with no respect for the gentle but insistent one-twentieth G tug beneath your feet. Farther still the wall becomes a ceiling with the racks dangling from it like massive swords of Damocles. Containers are moved simply by launching them from the rack sorters on gentle trajectories either to the docking hub at the center of the cylinder or one of the tunnel entrances around its edge. The

empty space in the middle of the cylinder was full of containers in free fall and I had to consciously keep myself from cringing as they flew overhead with quiet rushes of air. I felt like a mouse in a warehouse, scampering to avoid being crushed by the frenetic, incomprehensible activity going on overhead.

Merral was watching me. "Impressive, ay?" she asked.

"Impressive isn't the word. I can't believe you let those things go in free fall."

She laughed. "It looks like disaster in motion, doesn't it? Actually it's very

safe. There are eight hundred sixty-one trajectories. Whenever one is in use, all the intersecting flight paths are locked out until the container is down and clear of its destination."

I looked up at the graceful, ponderous, hundred-thousand-tonne aerial ballet. It wasn't that I doubted her, but it was hard to shake the feeling all those containers were going to fall on me as soon as God cut the strings.

Our destination was a cargo box, but this one had doors and large windows cut in the sides. Powerful lights were mounted flush with the walls. Jocelyn thumbed a door open and waved us in. "We use this for troubleshooting and inspections. It

carries everything we need, and we don't have to shut down a tunnel to use it."

Inside the container was mostly empty space. There were doors and windows in the floor and ceiling as well as the walls and all the surfaces were padded and well equipped with handholds. Strapdown chairs with mounts that locked into the handholds were set up beside the forward windows. A quarter of the bottom rear was given over to a series of cabinets that housed batteries, switches and various tool chests. Beneath the forward window there was a spartan control board with a compact data terminal as well as various buttons, gauges and comm gear. Beside it was a

small keypad. I recognized it at once from the tranship operations manual. It was the container's shipping control panel, a duplicate of the one mounted on the outside.

I walked over and examined the panel. When Jocelyn joined me, I asked, "This contains the tranship codes?"

"Not just the codes, everything about the shipment. The freight manifest, maximum and minimum allowable temperatures, power requirements, loading parameters, whether the container is pressure sealed, center of mass, priority level, customs codes, COD status and charges. Everything." She tapped a few keys and cryptic data slid over the small

screen inset on the panel. PRI, COD, KPA, BOT, and others along with numbers that didn't mean anything to me. I did recognize two codes. SRC and DST indicated the container's source and destination-both were rack addresses in the up-axis hub.

I tapped a few keys and managed to bring up the DST code. "Can you set this up to go anywhere?" I asked Merral.

"Anywhere on Tiamat. The lockouts don't allow us to be loaded for an offworld destination. This container isn't vacc sealed. I'll set it for the outbound receiving racks at the down-axis hub with a routing override so we get tunnel

nineteen. That'll take us right through Tiamat."

It was better than I'd hoped for. "Can you try TMU19J234C?" I asked.

She looked at me with the half accusing "How do you know what that means?" look that's usually reserved for medical patients who show their doctor some basic piece of medical knowledge. Specialists hate it when you trespass on their specialty. It makes them less special. Nevertheless, she thumbed the pad to authorize the change and punched in the destination code. After a couple of seconds the screen displayed accepted, then reverted to DST: TMU19J234C.

"This transaction is now logged in the transport net, correct?" I asked.

Merral nodded, adjusting the restraining straps that held her in her seat. She motioned for me to do the same.

"Is there any way to circumvent that?" I asked, fumbling with the belts.

"How do you mean?"

"Can you enter destinations into this panel without having the system become aware of it."

"It could be done. You'd have to block the scan transceiver and trick the panel into thinking it had transmitted the

change and received a valid authorization verification. It wouldn't be easy, we use dynamic encryption. Why would you want to?" She reached over and helped me get buckled in.

"A smuggler might change an onworld destination for an offworld destination, or perhaps just make a shipment the system isn't aware of."

"I see what you're getting at, but you misunderstand me. If you prevent the panel from talking to the net, the net will just ignore it. It won't get sent anywhere. There's a lot of ways to break the system, but once it's broken it won't work properly."

"I don't follow."

"Look, the system is vulnerable to tampering and there's no way to avoid that. Rather than try to make it tamper-proof we've made it fail-safe. Getting a container to move involves a series of steps, with our control procedures built into the chain. If any link is broken the system flashes us a trouble warning and won't move the container."

"And the data in the panel itself is all self-encrypted so you need a Port Authority ident to change it, correct?"

Merral warmed to her topic. She obviously enjoyed having someone show an interest in her work. It probably didn't

happen too often. "Not quite. The source address is always locked so we can back-trace a shipment, nobody can change that. When the shipment arrives and is accepted, the destination address is copied to the source so the container can be sent out again. Manifest, COD charges and destination are set by the shipper and then locked when the PA verifies and seals the shipment. The user functions-like humidity, temperature and all that-can either be set and locked or left open at the shipper's discretion in case they need adjustment in transit."

"So you can't change the source or the destination in transit unless you have a Port Authority ident."

"Not even if you do have a PA ident. Once a setting is locked, it can't be changed until the receiver accepts the shipment and signs off with us. The system only lets that happen at the destination address."

"What if you hacked it, opened the box and modified the software?"

"All you'd do is cause a self-encryption verification failure. The system would halt the container at the next control point and drop a trouble flag."

"What if I supplied my own panel that allowed in-transit re-routing?"

"It still wouldn't work. Firstly, it would

fail PA verification at the point of shipping. Second, the tranship net and the panel would disagree on the destination as soon as you modified it. The net would halt the container and you'd get another flag. It's fail-safe."

Fail-safe. It's a one-word lie. Nothing built by humans is fail-safe. I knew someone was playing games with the tranship net. What Merral was really telling me was that I needed to look for hackers in the net's high-level control software or corruption at the Port Authority itself. I didn't tell her that: she might be the one I was looking for.

Instead I offered a compliment. "Sounds like you're pretty secure. I've seen banks

with looser systems." I meant it too. I didn't mention that I'd seen banks with looser systems because I'd gone in to investigate the frauds that had occurred at them.

"You've got to understand, there are better than two million containers in the system. Every day we move thirty thousand of them through Tiamat. The cargo value in just one of those can get into the tens of millions of crowns. We can't just lose track of one." There was pride in her voice. She was a hands-on technocrat and the tranship system was her baby.

The conversation was interrupted by the

arrival of the conveyor crane. The rollers on the container rack slid us into the jaws of the waiting cradle. I felt like Captain Nemo being attacked by a giant squid. There was a clang as the locking dogs engaged and then we were on our way, swaying gently in the minuscule gravity field. The crane loaded us onto the roller rails at the end of our row of container racks. The cradle disconnected and the crane swung away. The rollers began spinning and our container moved off.

I watched out the windows like a kid on a train for the first time. There was a double jolt as we were loaded onto a sorter, then a gentle surge as we

launched into free fall. I watched in fascination as we soared past the tops of the container racks. We spun slowly and I got a revolving view of the entire, bustling hub. To my surprise we didn't come within a hundred meters of another container. What looked like near misses from below were a trick of perspective. There was all sorts of room.

We reached the top of our parabola and began to descend. There was another surge as tunnel nineteen's container receiver pulled us in. We landed perfectly flat and I realized what the spin had been for-Maintain This End Up at All Times. The whole experience was exciting but vertigo inducing. I got my

stomach back under control and looked over at Hunter. He had eschewed the human-sized observation chairs, choosing instead to curl up on top of a large tool bin that afforded him a convenient view and loosely belting himself in with some cargo straps. He looked completely at home, curse him.

I was clearly going to have to get more zero-gravity time if I was going to fit in on Tiamat.

The conveyors hummed and with a gentle swaying we slid into the yawning entrance of tunnel nineteen. The swaying stopped as our container was grabbed by the roller tracks on all four sides of the tunnel. Darkness fell as we left the

entrance behind. Merral hit a switch on her control panel and the floodlights came on, lighting the way ahead.

Vertigo jerked at my stomach as my inner ears fought to reconcile themselves with my eyes. The containers move down the tunnels at about fifty kilometers an hour. That's not very much in the scheme of things but with the tunnel walls rushing past just inches away it seems very fast indeed. The tiny pull of Tiamat's rotation is overwhelmed by the acceleration and deceleration forces along the container's axis as it's braked or speeded up to allow for other traffic in the tunnel.

My brain carefully weighed all this information and decided that I was falling headfirst down a bottomless elevator shaft. It was worse than the freefall in the hub. My knuckles were white on the arms of the chair and I found I couldn't make myself let go.

"How long will it take to get there?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm. It came out sounding tense anyway.

"About forty minutes." It was clearly just routine to Merral.

Hunter yawned, curled up and went to sleep.

A track shunt appeared ahead of us.

Luminous letters flashed by, too fast to actually read but I registered them as Y2. A black opening flashed by.

I closed my eyes and took three deep breaths and found I could relax my grip. I was just sitting in a chair in very low gravity. The seatbelt pulled gently as the container responded to the tracks and I could hear the whine of the rollers. I sat on my hands and opened my eyes.

Vertigo hit again, but I forced myself to keep sitting on my hands. Eventually I got used to the view. Another opening, another junction and W1 flashed by. Merral had brought up a tiny hologram on her board. I recognized it as a map of the shipping tunnels. Tiny white dots

moved slowly along its tributaries. She pointed to one highlighted in red. "That's us."

I asked her some more questions about the tranship net and its security arrangements. She was happy to oblige me. I got detailed information on how data was stored, how transmissions were crypted and errors caught, how containers were sealed and how physical access was controlled. It really was an impressive system but she kept using the word "fail-safe." An engineer really ought to know better.

After a while the conversation lagged and I fell to watching the hypnotically

repeating panorama of tracks, rollers and supports. P3 streaked past. I thought about Holly and Suze. P2, P1, O1, N4, N3. I stopped counting them and thought about Suze.

My reverie ended when the deceleration kicked in and pushed me against my safety belt. A scrabble of claws from behind told me that Hunter's nap had been interrupted and he'd nearly slid out of his improvised restraints. We slowed to a fraction of our former speed. A tunnel junction was coming up.

I looked in amazement at the luminous figures on the tunnel wall. J2-the container bay that didn't exist. The floodlights illuminated a track shunt

ahead, leading into a side tunnel identical to all the others we'd passed so far. I'd expected a complex trail of trapdoor computer programs and corrupt customs checkers. I'd imagined secret doors, illicit tunnels or a Slaver device that could move cargo containers into hyperspace pockets. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I certainly hadn't expected a perfectly normal tunnel junction, labelled with glowing letters four meters tall.

The rollers braked our container some more and we were switched onto the side track. We rocked slightly from side to side as we entered the container bay and lost the stability of being guided on

all four sides. Automatic handling gear clanged as it coupled to the container's lifting lugs and slid us up a container rack. It was only four tiers high but otherwise identical to the one we'd started in at the up-axis hub. The locking dogs engaged with a solid thump and we were stopped.

Merral looked around from the side window. "Here we are," she said, as if there were nothing unusual about it. I looked out the window and I knew we'd hit paydirt. Jury-rigged spotlights lit the scene. Most of the immense bay was empty, with only a single row of empty racks, although the conveyer was built to service a dozen more. Another container

was shunted onto the bay's only loading ramp. Its end doors were open and stacked around it were hundreds of white plastic crates stamped with UN code numbers. I had gambled on finding a lead. I'd found smuggler central.

Hunter and I piled out and jumped the thirty meters to the ground. He landed in a combat-ready crouch. I came down less gracefully but my nerves were just as taut. I drew my stunner from its holster on the belt of my patrol pack. I don't usually carry the pack but I was glad I'd brought it this time. Now I wished that I'd worn my body armor too. For the first time I noticed Hunter's only weapon was his ceremonial dagger and I

realized that it was all he ever carried.

Merral came down after us, cautiously. J2 was just the disused container bay she'd expected, but she was more than smart enough to make the connections. Without words she took up a position behind us, watching the tracks leading to the container tunnel and letting us concentrate on the bay itself.

Nothing moved. I was about to relax and tell Merral there was no danger when Hunter's sharp "Siisss!" warned me to silence. He was in a frozen crouch, his ears swivelled up and forward, twitching slightly back and forth. One paw was gesturing for quiet.

Suddenly he leapt, sailing across the vast chamber in seconds. His target was the entry to an access corridor in the opposite wall. He flew through the opening with unerring precision, landed on a handhold and took off again, down the corridor and out of sight. I followed him awkwardly. I knew I could never have the big cat's reflexes, but I fervently wished I had at least Jocelyn Merral's easy grace in microgravity. I missed my jump by better than twenty meters and floundered down while she waited patiently. The access corridor was half a klick long. I swallowed my ego and let Merral hold on to me. She pushed off into a long parabola. A couple of kicks en route brought us to the end of the

corridor. The pressure door to the next section was closed and Hunter was examining it intently. He turned to us as we arrived.

"I heard a sound, which I now presume was this door being opened and then shut. There is fresh scent in this tunnel of a human male. He must have fled when our container's lights entered the trackway." The kzin showed his fangs and licked his chops with a deep-throated mrrrowl. "There is much fear in his sweat."

I went to thumb the door open but the plate had been ripped open and bypassed. Not even an ARM ident would work now. Closer inspection

revealed the locking mechanism. A hole had been cut in the door's plasteel surface and a simple lever and pivot engaged the securing bolts inside. A metal pin attached to a chain could be inserted to hold the lever in the locked position. With the pin in place the door was proof against anything short of heavy energy weapons. The holes rendered the door useless in a depressurization emergency, but the smugglers wouldn't be worried about that.

I tried the handle reflexively. It didn't budge.

"I have already attempted that," said

Hunter mildly.

"It's clear we're not going to get through. Let's seal this bay off and get the crime scene team down here."

I grabbed the comm unit from my patrol pack and called Dispatch. I didn't get anything but static. No repeaters in this unfinished section. Our runner had made a clean getaway.

Merral noticed the problem. "There's a Port Authority comm on the control board in the container." Hunter snarled in acknowledgement and launched himself back down the corridor, eager to be on with the chase.

I let him go, turning to Merral. "You know about this place?"

"Of course." She gestured at the door and the pirated wiring the smugglers had used to power their floodlights. "Although evidently I didn't know everything I thought I did."

"Tell me about it." We turned back down the corridor.

"This bay was supposed to serve a whole new industrial subsector they were going to put in right after the liberation. Turns out they overestimated the requirements and they never needed the space, so they just sealed it off and left it."

Her explanation made sense but there were other problems. "The tranship net doesn't even know it exists."

We turned the accessway corner into the main bay. Hunter jumped down from the container. "The crime scene team and a detachment of Goldskins are on their way. They will open the pressure door from the other side. I will meet them there." He leapt off again without waiting for an answer.

"Of course it does," Merral continued.

"It doesn't." I paused, decided to trust her. The smugglers already knew we were on to them anyway. "Miranda Holtzman's internal organs were found in

a shipping container on Wunderland, along with a cache of stolen UN weapons. The container's point of origin was 19J2, but when I tried to punch up the data on it the system drew a blank."

"You did a shipping trace to get that data, right?"

"Yah."

She nodded. "When you do a trace, the net uses the billing system data because normally you're interested in who owns the shipment and who's paying for it. This bay isn't in the billing system because no customers are registered to it so it would never show up. But the routing software knows about every

node around Alpha Centauri and that's the data set that gets used when a shipment is set up and verified."

The picture became clearer. "Is there any way someone could swap the source and destination addresses without a Port Authority ident, or at least without logging it in the computer?"

"Too easy." She laughed and tapped a few keys on a board at the base of the container racks. Its display came up with a duplicate of the inspection container's shipping panel. Another press brought up SRC and DST. She hit a final key and the readout flashed REJECTED for a moment and then, magically, TMU19J234C and TMUCA147A

switched places from origin to destination. "You just refuse delivery."

"What?"

"You refuse delivery. If you accept the shipment, you need a PA ident to accept the COD, clear customs control, verify the manifest and all that. If you refuse delivery, the tranship box just gets bounced back to point of origin still sealed so none of that matters, so you don't need the ident. The shipper's delivery bond is forfeited to pay for shipping the container back and the transaction is cleared out of the net. It's a user function."

"A user function?" I couldn't believe my

ears. "What happens if a refused shipment gets re-refused by the shipper?"

"Why would anyone do that?"

"What would happen?" I tried to keep my voice level.

She shrugged. "I don't know . . ." She paused, thinking. "Grounded at the originating port, I suppose. At worst it would go back to the recipient again. It couldn't get lost or redirected, only a PA ident can change the source or destination. Nobody could claim it unless they signed off with us." She paused again. "Unless . . ."

"Unless it got shipped here."

She nodded, understanding the problem. The tranship system had a couple of assumptions built into it - that the Port Authority was physically present at all the system endpoints, and that no shipper would refuse its own refused container. With dynamic encryption and multilayered security measures, the system was considered fail-safe. But a couple of reasonable assumptions made a security hole big enough to shove a twenty-meter container box through that wasn't defined as a failure. There were no hackers, no high-level corruption. The system just worked the way it was designed to. It was a brilliant setup, a

sort of digital jujitsu. The smugglers were only caught because of human error. I wondered if they considered their system fail-safe too.

It would be a while before the crime scene team arrived. Merral scrambled up the container rack to call in her findings to her team. I took the opportunity to look into the cargo box on the loading ramp. I got a shock. The white crates were all clearly labelled. They contained high-tech drugs, each molecule assembled atom by atom in zero gravity. I recognized some of the names-Polyhalazone, Quadrol and Ricaline. Every case here was worth fifty thousand crowns at a minimum, at

least treble that on the black market, and there were hundreds of cases. There was more in the container, stacked parcels of brown quickwrap a half meter on a side. I ripped one open. Brand new fifty krona wafers spilled onto the floor. I couldn't begin to guess how much was in the package. The next package yielded twenties. I ripped open a third. Hundreds. I picked one up and looked it over carefully. It gave away nothing to the naked eye although I knew it had to be counterfeit. I would have heard of a theft this big-the whole system would have. I was willing to bet it was a very good counterfeit. The Isolationists never did anything with half measures.

The scale wasn't half-measured either. I counted packages and did some quick mental arithmetic, then did it again because I didn't believe the results the first time. This container held a billion crowns at a conservative estimate. The krona isn't the rock solid currency it used to be. Its value has been steadily eroded since the start of the occupation and the slide has only accelerated since the liberation. Even so, a billion crowns was a staggering sum. A fraction of a percent of counterfeits in the cash supply will upset a currency's stability. With the Provo Government's grip already shaky, there was enough here to undermine the entire system's economy. If this container got through to Wunderland, Alpha

Centauri would be in chaos within a month.

It wouldn't, though, because we'd gotten here first. I felt suddenly shaky. This was a major haul. I was well aware of what the Provos knew and did not know about the Isolationists. The scale of their smuggling system, their expansion into medical facilities and organlegging and their counterfeiting operation were all new pieces of information. We were going to get positive DNA idents from this site, and the Goldskin interrogators would get the names we didn't have from the ones we caught. This investigation was going to break the back of the Isolationists in the Swarm before they

even got going and shut down a huge smuggling ring as well. The information we gained would let the Provopolizei put a major crimp in their operations on Wunderland too.

It was a good feeling-it was the way I used to feel when Prakit and I started to unravel one of our big cases back on Earth. And why not? This was just as big-maybe bigger. Tiamat might well wind up crowning my career and I'd only been here a month.

My enthusiasm damped itself. The whole Wunderland half of the project depended on the Provopolizei. They might well be "convinced" to close the case down by some pro-Isolationist politician.

I shook off the negative images. I was doing my job and doing it well. Wunderland was out of my control, but I'd already scored a major victory just by catching this shipment. No politician could take that away from me.

Merral came in, gasping when she saw the cash.

"Impressive, eh?"

She just nodded.

"Don't get too excited, it's not real."

She looked at the stacked packages
"There must be hundreds of millions of

crowns here."

"A billion at the very least."

She whistled. "They could crash the market with this."

"I think that's the plan."

She tore her gaze away from the money and handed me a hardcopy. "Here, you're going to need this."

It was from the data terminal in the inspection container. It listed thirty-six tranship boxes that had passed through 19J2 at some point, along with their points of origin, shipper, receiver and supposed manifest. This bay was a hub

for smuggling activities ranging from UN outposts at the edge of the system to remote monorail stations deep in the Jotuns on Wunderland. One container was even shuttling back and forth from Earth itself.

Hunter came in and reported. "The crime scene team has arrived and the access tunnel has been secured." He took in the container's contents and for the first time ever I saw him at a loss. "There is . . . considerable wealth here."

"Almost certainly counterfeit."

"Of course." He was back in control that quickly. "Shall I inform the UNF authorities that they can recover their

pharmaceuticals as soon as the team has finished their sweep?"

"I'll do it; you take over here." His practicality reminded me that there was plenty of work to be done. The bay was secure and the sweepers would give me a report. I had to start coordinating the authorities whose jurisdictions were on Merral's destination list. It was a big criminal organization. Not everyone would get warned in time. A lot of crooks were about to get caught.

Johansen came in with First Tracker in tow. I took some time to fill them in on the findings and set them to tracing our runner. The sweepers were already at work in the bay by the time I left. I tubed

back to the office and got the paperwork under way. I'd only been at my desk half an hour when the screen chimed. I punched the call through. It was Suze.

"Hi, am I interrupting anything?"

I smiled. "Big exciting things, but I'm glad you called anyway."

"Why don't you knock off early and tell me about them?" Her smile was rich in promises.

"I really shouldn't . . ." I looked at my long list of to-dos " . . . but what the hell." Any excuse to dodge paperwork. A twelve-hour delay wouldn't make much difference in the course of the

investigation. I was just sending preliminary reports anyway. Most of the information I needed wouldn't be back from the field lab until tomorrow.

"Great, your apt, thirty minutes. I'll order dinner."

"Sold." She punched off and I stored my work in progress.

* * *

Suze was waiting at the door when I got to my apt. I thumbed the plate and kissed her. We went in and I unslung my patrol pack and hung it on a hook by the door. She looked at it with curiosity.

"You carry a gun?"

"It's just a stunner."

"Does that have anything to do with your big exciting happenings?"

"Not a whole lot as it turns out. We closed down an Isolationist smuggling operation in an abandoned container bay today. And we know who killed Miranda."

"Who?"

"The Isolationists." I paused, then shut up. I'd been about to tell her about their organlegging operation, but there was no need to upset her.

She didn't notice my hesitation. "Catch anyone?"

"Not yet, but we will. We got a big pile of stolen drugs and about a billion in counterfeit krona as well."

She whistled. "That is big and exciting."

I grinned, still very pleased with the success. "I have to convince the management that I'm earning my pay."

"You won't get fired this week anyway." She reached past me and took my pack off the wall. "What else do you carry?"

"Just what you'd expect. Comm unit, binders, medkit, beltcomp, shockrod,

that sort of thing."

She opened the pouch and examined the medkit. It was ARM issue on Earth, more advanced than what was given out here. "You're ready for anything, aren't you?"

"As much as I can be."

She took out the binders, simple double circlets of stainless steel-very low tech. She locked one cuff to her right wrist.

"Anything at all?"

She held out her arms towards me, wrists together. Her eyes were high voltage arcs. She wore a look of

invitation and defiance-"I dare you."

I walked over and gently took her hands. Her gaze didn't waver. Without breaking eye contact, I lifted the other cuff and closed it around her left wrist. The lock is usually inaudible. This time the click sounded like a gunshot.

She parted her lips. I pulled her arms over her head and kissed her fervently, pulling her pliant body hard against mine. Eventually, I picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. My apt is on the .8G level and she was as light as a feather in my arms.

* * *

The screen chimed, though I had it set for privacy, dragging me out of a deep sleep. Priority call. I punched it through and got the Goldskin dispatcher. Emergency. Johansen had arrested a suspect and shots had been fired. She was hit-no word on her condition yet-and the suspect was fleeing. The Goldskins were in pursuit but weren't pressing their quarry. He had a strakakker and was moving along a pedestrian promenade. They didn't want to provoke a firefight.

I didn't blame them. I punched the dispatcher into audio only and patched in security surveillance. They'd be following him on the monitors. The

screen showed a crowded arcade from halfway up one wall. A surging disturbance in the throng marked the escaper. He was a dark-haired Wunderlander, running awkwardly in the low G, brandishing his weapon and screaming. People were desperately scrambling out of his way. As I watched, a startled kzin leapt straight up and grabbed a light fixture on the ceiling fifty feet overhead. The fugitive jerked his gun up to cover the sudden motion but didn't fire. Between his panic and lack of coordination, it was a miracle he hadn't already emptied the strakakker into the crowd. One hint of pursuit and he'd do just that. The Goldskins had made the right choice. Let him run,

exhaust himself and then hole up somewhere. Even if he took hostages and wound up killing them all it would be no worse than a shootout down on that floor. Hopefully, it would turn out much better.

Hopefully.

Suze came up behind me, rubbing sleep from her eyes and looking very fetching with her hair tousled into a fiery halo and wearing an oversized jump-shirt from my wardrobe.

"What's going on?"

I spoke quickly. "We've got a runner. Tammy tagged a suspect from the

container bay bust and got shot."

The dispatcher was still waiting for instructions. I split the screen and punched up Control's map. I got a floating 3D planview of the arcade and the levels around it. The fugitive was a tiny red ball on the .3G level, heading down-axis. Gold spheres marked the cops positioned around his route, moving to get ahead of him but staying out of the way. As long as he didn't open fire they'd stay there. Clusters of blue-marked med teams held in readiness. Control had sealed the pressure doors behind him but not ahead. Any route he chose was fine with them as long as it was off that arcade. I zoomed the map

out and punched up a history trace. A red line showed his path. He was panicked but he wasn't running blindly. He was going straight down-axis, moving in every time he had a chance. He was heading for the low-G industrial zone near Tigertown.

Heading for the down-axis hub.

I told the dispatcher as much and blanked the screen. Suze was looking over my shoulder and I nearly knocked her over as I got up to grab my clothes. I threw them on in record time and grabbed my patrol pack. At the door I paused long enough to kiss her good-bye.

"Back soon."

She grabbed me with surprising strength, kissed me hard and whispered fiercely in my ear. "Don't let him live."

"What?" I said, taken aback, not understanding.

"Don't let him live. If he's caught, there'll be a trial. He's an Isolationist, they can buy the court or blackmail it or break him out. He'll get away. It's not right, after what they did to that girl." Her gaze was intense, burning blue. "If he's shot while escaping . . ." She let her voice trail off.

She didn't need to say more. I kissed her

fiercely and left.

Control had a tube car ready and held on standby. I jumped in, thumbed the plate and the door slid shut. The route panel was already set for the down-axis hub. The dispatcher obligingly shunted everyone else out of my way and I made the thirty-kilometer trip in record time. On the way, I thought about Suze's plea. An armed and dangerous fugitive killed while fleeing arrest. There would be no questions if I ordered shoot to kill. We'd lose the chance to interrogate him of course, but he wouldn't evade justice—and it would be justice. Even if he wasn't an Isolationist with blood on his hands, he'd proved murderous intent by

shooting Johansen.

Frontier justice. It wasn't the way the ARM did business on Earth, but this wasn't Earth. Maybe I should issue shoot to kill orders anyway. It was a reasonable response given the situation. I had to think of the danger to my troops as well. Stunners don't have a lot of range and if the runner got off a burst before going down it would be messy, even if we fired first. Pulse rifles would more than even the odds.

I decided to wait and see. Any risk of a firefight, I'd give the order, but not until. I'd played by the rules since I'd arrived and I wasn't going to go back now.

In the end it didn't matter. It was all over when I got there. The runner went straight for the down-axis hub. Control evacuated the accessways and when he got inside an empty corridor they sealed him in. His strakakker was loaded with armor-piercing explosive ammunition and he emptied it trying to blow open the plasteel pressure doors. When they failed to yield sufficiently, he reloaded and blew his head off instead.

Armor-piercing explosive. I felt sick as I remembered Johansen. I called the medical section and asked how she was, dreading the answer I knew I would get. Tammy took five rounds point-blank from her left hip to her right shoulder.

Her body armor was blasted to ribbons absorbing the detonations. She might as well have been naked, she was dead on the scene. First Tracker took rounds in the thigh, belly and chest but his heavier kzin armor and built-for-battle physique saved his life-hopefully. The doctors would rebuild his devastated abdominal cavity and autoclone replacements for damaged organs and limbs, if he made it through the night.

He'd called in the shooting and the suspect, tourniqued his femoral artery and was giving CPR to Johansen when the crash team arrived. I'd pin his medal on myself.

If he made it through the night.

I screened Tam's journal for information. She'd done a search on the transit system logs for anyone who boarded a tube car in the access corridor to J2 up to five minutes after Hunter and I had chased our quarry from the container bay. One of the names on that list was a drive technician-HJ3U659A Wurzmann. Peter K. Wurzmann was suspected of smuggling but never charged through lack of evidence. Wurzmann took the tube to his apt, then another to the down-axis hub where he'd boarded the mining ship Voidtrekker. Johansen was on to him by then, but the police tag went on his ident seven seconds after he'd passed customs. Voidtrekker cleared docking

control ten minutes after that and left on a prospecting trajectory that was bound to be a total fabrication. A comm check showed Wurzmann made four calls-Voidtrekker's captain, a co-worker, a Wunderland tourist, and a Wunderland doctor named Joachim Weiss. The last call was marked no answer. Comm checks on the recipients expanded the list to sixteen names. Fifteen people had taken off with Voidtrekker-everyone on the comm list except Weiss. Weiss was the one with the strakakker.

So we'd flushed our quarry and they'd fled. I guessed the Wunderlanders were Isolationists and the Belters were contract smugglers. They were probably

the entire control cell for 19J2-and they were all out of reach.

I screened Hunter and got him to take a search unit down to Weiss's apt. His lips were twitching back to expose his fangs, his speech laden with snarls and heavy with threats. He was barely under control. He took Johansen's death and Tracker's wounding as personal insults. After that, I called up the navy and asked them about intercepting Voidtrekker. A competent-looking commander told me the odds of an intercept were a little less than one in ten. Voidtrekker was polarizer driven, which meant she could put a lot of distance between herself and Tiamat in a very short time. A smuggler

ship would have shielded monopoles in her drive, making tracking impossible. Once she cleared Tiamat's control sphere she'd be very difficult to pick up.

"Will the navy try anyway?" I asked.

"There's no question involved." The officer checked something off-screen for a second. "We'll have three ships boosting in the next two hours."

I gave my thanks and rang off.

After that, I went over Dr. Weiss's file again. The Provos had him tagged as Isolationist leaning-that was nothing, most Wunderlanders were. Everything else told me he was Miranda's killer.

When the Goldskins had printed him for ID they'd gotten two files back. His retinas said he was Joachim Weiss, his fingertips said he was a bio-engineer named Cas Wentzel. Wentzel was on the Inferno's customer list for the night Miranda was killed and his movements for that night took him past the accessway to container bay J2. Weiss arrived on Tiamat just one day after Miranda, on the next available flight from Wunderland. He fit the physical description from the Inferno, such as it was. He was qualified to perform Class 3 surgery. I pulled up his library list. It was hopelessly technical but I gleaned all I needed to know from the titles-fifty-year-obsolete manuals about tissue

preservation and rejection control. They amounted to a primer for organleggers.

Tamara was avenged. Miranda was avenged. I tagged her case file closed.

I didn't feel the usual satisfaction I get when I close a case. Miranda and Tammy were still gone, Weiss's death wouldn't bring them back. His cohorts had escaped. The elation I'd felt when we'd shut down J2 was overshadowed by helpless frustration. On a hunch I pulled up his client files. Miranda Holtzman had been his patient since she was six. That was how he knew she was a universal donor, that was why she'd left the bounce-box with him. I felt ill.

It was late. In the morning I'd open a new case file on the flight of the Voidtrekker. I switched off the system and went home.

When I got back, Suze had gone out. I didn't blame her, but I did miss her. The events of the night and Johansen's death had left me totally drained. I fell into an exhausted slumber. Some time later I felt her slip into bed and snuggle against me, warm and soft. She gently kissed the back of my neck and I went back to sleep, feeling better.

* * *

The next morning Hunter was waiting for me.

"You are late. We have had developments."

"Why didn't you call me?"

He twitched his ears genially. "Your recreation had already been disturbed once."

I avoided the subject. "What happened?"

"There was an explosion in the down-axis docking hub."

"Serious?"

"Yes. The initiating explosive appears to have been thermite but the main blast and fire were caused by a volatile

aerosol inside a tranship container. Damage was extensive."

I envisioned the havoc that a two-thousand-cubic-meter sealed vapor bomb would wreak and marvelled at the kzin's capacity for understatement. We were lucky the whole down-axis hub hadn't been blown into space.

"What action have you taken?"

"The area has been sealed and the crime scene team is going over it."

"Findings?"

"A human corpse has been found that appears to have been inside the transport

container. The container itself was modified to support life."

"Support life? What do you mean?"

"We have found the remains of an oxygen recycler, food supplies and other items that indicate the container was designed to carry sentients in vacuum for extended periods."

I swore. The Isolationists had been moving people back and forth to Wunderland with perfect impunity, right under our noses. Finagle only knew how many. We'd missed a trick. Reception parties would be waiting for the thirty-six containers on Jocelyn Merral's list when they arrived at their destinations

but I hadn't thought about intercepting them in transit. It hadn't even occurred to me that some might still be within my grasp on Tiamat.

"What about the guards and the security monitors. How come they didn't pick this up in progress?"

"The Port was running its normal night shift. The monitors didn't pick up anything out of the ordinary."

"So the perpetrator must have had access."

"Hrrrrr . . . Either that or a tampered ident."

"Granted. So once again we have someone operating in the down-axis hub. Someone who didn't flee on the Voidtrekker."

He raised a massive paw. "It would be foolish to assume that only one Isolationist cell was operating on Tiamat. I would presume we have flushed only those with a direct connection to 19J2."

"What other information do we have?"

"Little enough. Damage was extensive. We can assume that they were willing to kill this individual rather than risk his capture."

"Have they ID'd the body?"

"The coroner's report has not yet been released."

If I never spoke to Dr. Morrow again it would be too soon. I was tired of sifting through the details of dead lives. I screened his office and asked him what the delay was. He was having trouble determining if the body had been dead before the explosion or not. I told him to make the ID priority one. He asked me to wait and I watched his pleasant pastel hold patterns. Hunter grew impatient and left to pursue his own work. Fifteen minutes later Morrow was back on with the results.

I thanked him and screened the file. K8DH3N37-Klein, Maximillian H. Graphic designer, unmarried, thirty-four standard years old, fifth generation Swarm Belter. No previous arrests. He'd lived his whole life on Tiamat and worked for Canexco, a large shipping company. A bell rang in the back of my head. Miranda Holtzman's fatal cargo container had been shipped down to Wunderland aboard the Canexco Wayfarer. Perhaps there was a connection? I called up Max's employee file. He worked in corporate communications-nothing to do with the handling of tranship boxes but his company ident did include access to both hubs.

But what was a graphic designer doing in the container bays of the down-axis hub, with or without access? Was he involved or just caught in the wrong place at the wrong time? On a hunch I screened the composite holo created from Machine Technician's description. It was a rough match, not good but not bad considering the sketchiness of the source. Was he the one who'd sold Miranda's skin? Insufficient data. What was a graphic designer anyway? Presumably some sort of visual artist.

It occurred to me that I'd never seen a file listing "Artist" or "Musician" or "Gardener" as a profession on Tiamat. This airless rock was made fit for life

with advanced technology and maintained by technologists. It exists solely to provide Alpha Centauri system with products of the very highest sophistication-products whose manufacture demands zero gravity or unlimited high vacuum or gigawatts of solar power. There's little room for someone not directly involved in survival-physical, economic or, since the kzinti came, military.

Of course the best engineers saw their work as art, even as the best artists refined their skills to a science. Maybe in this totally technical atmosphere, it wasn't surprising that people saw things through a technological lens. Idly, I

punched up the work roster for the parks on the 1G level. Maybe I'd find at least a gardener.

The roster was full of eco-engineers and environmental control technicians.

I blanked the screen. It was a meaningless exercise. A rose was a rose, whether it was tended by gardeners or botanical techs. I had a feeling the difference was important, but it was too subtle to put my finger on. What's in a name? Maybe nothing. What does it mean when a society insists on calling an artist a graphic designer?

My mind was wandering. It was early morning and already I needed a break. I

gave up trying to work and let my thoughts drift to Suze. She was beautiful, intelligent, sensuous, exciting, graceful, uninhibited, warm. Adjectives did her poor service. If I'd been able to find the words, I might have written a poem. Instead I called up her file again. When the computer screened it, I blew up the ID holo and dumped it to the printer.

Dossier holos never do anyone justice but her radiance came through the bad image. She was wearing her characteristic high-energy smile. Her hair was longer when the holo was taken, a burnished auburn river flowing down over her shoulders. Her eyes were a dancing, sunny brown-lending just a

hint of devilishness to her look.

I froze, cold horror seeping along my spine. Unnoticed facts clicked into place and my thoughts locked into a paralyzed frenzy of revelation and denial. I sat and stared for a long time. Then I combed her apt.

"Hi, what's up?"

I could hardly meet her gaze. I strove to keep my voice animated. "Care for brunch?"

"Sure, whenever?"

"Meet me at the office and we'll figure it out. Fifteen minutes?"

"Give me thirty and you've got a deal."

"See you then." She smiled her dazzling smile.

I rang off and waited as the minutes dragged by. I had the shakes under control by the time she arrived; even so I still couldn't bring myself to meet her gaze. Instead I tossed her the holoprint. She took it and stared at it uncomprehending for a moment. Then her face hardened. She dropped the holo and looked up. This time I forced myself to look her in the eyes. They were ice blue. Miranda Holtzman's eyes were ice blue.

Her voice was as cold as her gaze.

"Now what?"

"You tell me."

"Name a price, you'll get it. I'll just walk away."

"In counterfeit?"

"In cash. Or credits if you like. You name it, you'll get it."

I didn't answer her directly. Instead I asked a question. "Why?"

She turned my words around. "You tell me."

"You're an Isolationist."

She nodded.

"You're a mining engineer. I'd guess that makes you their explosives expert. Something went off in your face. They can't put you in hospital so you wind up with scars, and of course they have to get you a new set of eyes somewhere or you're out of action."

"Wrong." The bitterness in her voice ran deep. "I got my scars from the UN mining consortium just like I told you. They hand out defective equipment and when there's an accident, it's just too bad. All they care about is the damn production goals for the damn war. I was one of the lucky ones. Luckier than my parents." I could see the rage cross

her face at the memory. "That's why I'm an Isolationist."

"And your eyes?"

"I caught a laser bounce in a Provo raid."

"So you become the first beneficiary of the Isolationist transplant program."

"Not the first."

Of course not. "How did you expect to get past a retina scan?"

She laughed. "I think you'll find my file matches my prints. Someone forgot to update the holo-they'll pay for that."

"And that night in the Inferno?"

"I started going there as soon as I could see again. I knew you'd come after Weiss's stupidity. You or someone like you."

A vague unease tugged at the edges of my awareness. She was volunteering information too easily, too calmly. I forced it down. "Weiss messed up?"

"He couldn't get all of Miranda in the freezer. The dolt dumped her body in the transport tunnel instead of getting rid of it properly."

"And the hub last night, that's where you went from my apt."

She tipped an imaginary hat in reply, as if accepting a compliment. She was a professional. She took pride in her work.

"There was some evidence. It's not important now."

"And Klein?"

"Just a go-between. He got in the way."

I had one more question. "Why Miranda?"

"We needed a universal donor, and I've always wanted blue eyes." She smiled, briefly.

"Now what?"

Her voice was as hard and cold as steel.
"How much do you want?"

My heart sank and I shook my head. "I can't let you go."

Suddenly there was a gun in her hand, a jetpistol. Designed for zero-G combat, it had virtually no recoil. It fired miniature rockets designed to mushroom on impact. They would turn a living body into hamburger. It was almost totally silent, small enough to conceal easily and had no power source or metal to trigger security alarms. She had chosen her weapon well.

"I don't think you have a choice." She smiled. She was right. The choice was hers and she'd already made it. Even so, I had to ask. "What about us?"

She laughed, a short, explosive sound. "I liked you, Joel. It was fun, but now it's time for me to leave." She raised the jetpistol. Her expression held regret and finality. I wouldn't beg, but my expression must have spoken for me. Perhaps she thought I was afraid of dying.

I glanced at the stunner hanging on my patrol pack-two impossible meters away.

She caught me looking and a smile

played around the edges of her lips. I knew the expression. She was daring me to try.

I held her gaze but I didn't take the bait. "You can't kill everyone who knows you're here."

Her smile was as wide and predatory as any kzin's. "Watch me." The weapon's bore looked as big as a cannon's. Her finger tightened around the trigger.

There was a piercing scream and the wall behind her exploded around two hundred and fifty kilos of kzin. She fired reflexively but I was already on my way to the floor. Even so, she would have got me if Hunter's attack hadn't ruined her

aim. The rocket slug went past my ear with a nasty *zzzwip*, leaving an acrid trail of burned propellant. Another slug slammed into my computer, spraying shards of plastic and glass over my head. A second later it was followed by Suze and the kzin in a tangle of limbs. They hit the wall and bounced to the floor. The jetpistol sailed into a corner. She lay on the floor beneath him, returning his fanged snarl in kind. I had to admire her courage.

I picked myself off the floor and shook off the ruins of my computer. The room was filling with startled clerks and cops from the outer office. As they disentangled Hunter and Suze, I

retrieved the jetpistol and examined the thumbnail-sized hole it had left in the wall. On the other side was a crater the size of a serving platter. The outer office was showered in fragments of pulverized sprayfoam. Shattered remnants of my desk covered my office. I shuddered. It could have been the shattered remnants of me.

Hunter dusted himself off, scream-snarled and bounded out to work out the fight juices. Someone hauled Suze off to the tender mercies of the UN Intel interrogation section. When they were through raping her mind, she'd have nothing left to tell. I'd have rather seen her face Hunter claw to claw.

When everyone was gone, I sat down at my desk. By reflex I pounded the switch, not registering its destruction. After that, I just sat; eventually I went home.

* * *

Suze was in interrogation three days. Her trial should have been in the Swarm but the UN moved it to Wunderland so she could be made an example of. By the time the Goldskins were done with her the extradition paperwork was finished. I didn't see her off. Instead, I asked a favor of Jocelyn Merral and watched from the hangar bay control deck as the guards escorted her to the ship that would take her to Wunderland and the ProvGov's version of justice. She caught

sight of me as they led her onto the ramp and stopped, looking up. The guards yanked her along, and she was gone.

I kept watching out the window. I knew I wouldn't see her again. I just didn't want anyone to see my face.

* * *

That evening I sat at the bar in the Ratskellar, drinking beer and brooding. Earlier I'd sat in my room, drinking vodka and playing with the safety on a jetpistol that should have been sealed in an evidence bag on its way to Wunderland. I didn't decide life was worth living, I just couldn't live with myself if I took the coward's way out.

Of course, if I did I wouldn't have to. Alcohol doesn't make for logical decision-making. It was enough that I'd left the weapon behind.

The rockjack beside me suddenly left. His stool was taken by a huge orange hulk. Hunter-of-Outlaws ordered a liter of vodka and milk before speaking. "Humans have odd ways of celebrating victory."

I grunted. "Is it a victory I'm celebrating?"

"Hrrr. We have found the outlaw we sought and more besides. Several major criminal enterprises have been brought down and gutted. We have performed

our duties well and with honor and our belts are heavy with trophies. It is a triumph worthy of our names."

I didn't answer directly; I asked a question. "How did you know to come through the wall like that?"

"How could I not know? My office echoes to your voice all day. I cannot close my ears tight enough to keep it out. For years I've been trying to get a privacy field." He growled deeply.

So much for soundproof sprayfoam.

"I owe you my life, you know."

He waved a paw dismissively. "You

will repay that blood-debt when the situation arises. Now tell me why you choke on the meat of victory?"

"She offered me as much money as I cared to ask for. Of course, I couldn't take it."

"You are true to your honour."

"You don't understand. I loved her."

"I sympathize with your situation. Your species' reproductive arrangements are overcomplex. Such strong attachment to females can only lead to continuing tragedy."

"No, love is a continuing glory. She

loved me too, she just loved . . . freedom . . . more. I would have gone with her in a second if she'd let me."

Hunter was staring at me, openly amazed. "You would have sacrificed your honour for the affections of this outlaw female?"

"It would have been a small price."

His ears flicked and his tail twitched as he tried to make sense of that. He gave it up and quaffed his drink resignedly. "Truly, I will never understand humans."

I had to laugh. I clapped him on the back and gestured for another round. "Neither will I, my friend, neither will I."

