

The turtles had canceled, the tidy kill-fee deposited to ship's funds before the message had hit her in box.

Just as well, thought Midj Rolanni, wearily. She sagged back into the pilot's chair and reached for the cup nestled in the armrest holder. She'd hadn't really wanted to reconfigure the flight deck for two turtles, anyway.

The 'toot wasn't exactly prime grade and being cold didn't improve it. She drank it anyway, her eyes on the screen, but seeing through it, into the past, and not much liking what she saw.

She finished the cold 'toot in a swallow, shuddered and threw the cup at the recycler. It hit the unit's rim, shimmied for a heartbeat, undecided, and fell in, for a wonder. Midj sighed and leaned to the board, saving the turtles' cancellation with a finger-tap, and accessing the stored message queue.

There wasn't much there besides the turtles' message—the transmittal, listing the cargo she'd paid Teyope to carry for her; the credit letter from the bank, guaranteeing the funds, half on cargo transmittal, half on delivery.

And the letter from Kore. Pretty thin letter, really, just a couple lines. Not what you'd call reason for off-shipping a perfectly profitable cargo onto a trader just a little gray—"...just a little gray," she repeated the thought under her breath—and Teyope *did* owe her, which even he acknowledged, damn his black heart, so the cargo was in a fine way to arriving as ordered, where ordered, and not a line of the guarantees found in violation.

She hoped.

Her hand moved on its own, fingers tapping the access, though she could have told the whole of Kore's note out from heart. Still, her eyes tracked the sentences, few as they were, as if she'd never read them before.

Or as if she hoped they'd say something different this time.

Her bad luck, the words formed the same sentences they had since the first, the sentences making up one spare paragraph, the message of which was—trouble.

*Midj. You said, if I ever changed my mind, you'd come. Cessilee Port, Shaltren, on, Saint Belamie's Day. I'll meet you. Kore.*

"And for this," she said out loud, hearing her voice vibrate against the metal skin of her ship. "For this, you shed cargo and take your ship—your home and your livelihood—onto Juntavas headquarters?"

It wasn't the first time she'd asked the question since the letter's receipt. Sometimes, she'd whispered it, sometimes shouted. *Skeedaddle*, now. Her ship didn't tell her nothing, but that she needed to go. She'd promised, hadn't she?

And so she had—promised. Half her lifetime ago, and the hardest thing she'd done before or since was closing the hatch on him, knowing where he was going. She'd replayed their last conversation until her head ached and her eyes blurred, wondering what she could have said instead, that would have made him understand...

But he had understood. He'd chosen, eyes open, knowing her, knowing how she felt. He'd said as much, and say what you would about Korelan Zar, he was no liar, nor ever had been.

"You go, then." The memory of her voice, shaking, filled her ears. "If this Job is so important you gotta take up the Juntavas, too—then go. I ain't gonna stop you. And I ain't gonna know you, either. Walk down that ramp, Korelan, and you're as good as dead to me, you hear?"

She remembered his face: troubled, but not anything like rethinking the plan. He'd thought it through—he'd told her so, and she believed him. He'd always been the thinker of the two of them.

"Midj," he said, and she remembered that his voice hadn't been precisely steady, either. "I've got

to. I told you—"

"You told me," she'd interrupted, harsher maybe in memory than in truth. She remembered she'd been crying by then, with her hand against the open hatch, and the ramp run down to blastcrete, a car waiting, its windows opaqued and patient, a few yards beyond.

"You told me," she'd said again, and she remembered that it had been hard to breathe. "And I told you. I ain't comin' with you. I ain't putting *Skeedaddle* into Juntavas service. You want to sell yourself, I guess you got the right. But this ship belongs to me."

His face had closed then, and he nodded, just once, slung his kit over his shoulder and headed down the ramp. Chest on fire, she'd watched him go, heard her own voice, barely above a whisper.

"Kore..."

He turned and looked up to where she stood, fists braced against her ship.

"You change your mind," she said, "you send. I'll come for you."

He smiled then, so slight she might've missed it, if she hadn't known him so well.

"Thanks, Midj. I'll remember that."

In the present, Midj Rolanni, captain-owner of the independent tradeship *Skeedaddle*, one of a dozen free traders elected as liaison to TerraTrade—respectable and respected—Midj Rolanni drew a hard breath.

Twenty Standards. And Kore had remembered.

She set down as pre-arranged in Vashon's Yard and walked over to the office, jump-bag on her shoulder.

Vashon himself was on the counter, fiddling with the computer, fingers poking at the keys. He looked up and nodded, then put his attention back on the problem at hand. Midj leaned her elbows on the counter and frowned up at the ship board.

*Rebella* was in port—no good news, there—and *BonniSu*, which was better. In fact, she'd actively enjoy seeing Su Bonner, maybe buy her a beer and catch up on the news. Been a couple Standards since they'd been in port together, and Su had bought last time...

"Sorry, Cap," Vashon said, breaking into this pleasant line of thought. "Emergency order, all good now. What'll it be?"

All spacers were "Cap" to Vashon, who despite it was one of the best all-around spaceship mechanics in the quadrant—and maybe the next.

"Ship's Skeedaddle, out of Dundalk," she said, turning from the board. "Got an appointment for a general systems check. Replace what's worn, lube the coils, and bring her up to spec—that's a Sanderson rebuild in there, now, so the spec's're—"

"Right, right..." He was poking at the keys again, bringing up the records. "Got it all right here, Cap. How're them pod-clamps we fitted working out for you?"

"Better'n the originals," she said honestly, which was no stretch, the originals having seen a decade of hard use before Skeedaddle ever came to her, never mind what she'd put on 'em.

"Good," he said absently, frowning down at his screen. "Now, that Sanderson—we have it on-file to tune at ninety percent spec that being efficient enough for trade work, like we talked about. You're still wantin'—"

"Bring her up to true spec," Midj interrupted, which she'd decided already and, dammit, she wasn't going to second-guess herself at this hour. If she was a fool, then she was, and it wouldn't be the first time

she'd made the wrong call.

Not even close.

Vashon was nodding, making quick notes on his keypad. "Bring her to true-spec, aye, Cap, will do." He looked up.

"You'll be wanting the upgraded vents, then, Cap? If you're going to be running at spec I advise it."

She nodded. "Take a look at the mid-ship stabilizer, too, would you? Moving her just now, I thought I noticed a slide."

"Cause you come in without cans," he said, making another note. "But, sure, we'll check it—ought to ride stable, cans or no cans." He looked up again.

"Anything else?"

"That's all I know about. If you find anything major that needs fixing, I'll be at the Haven."

"Haven it is," he said, entering that into the file, too. "Cash, card, or ship's credit?"

"Ship's credit."

"Right, then." He gave her a crabbed smile. "She ought to be good to go by the end of the week, barring we find anything unexpected. You can check progress on our stats channel, updated every two hours, local. Ship's name is your passcode."

"Thanks," she said, and shifted the bag into a more comfortable position on her shoulder. "I'll see you at the end of the week, barring the unexpected."

She nodded and he did and she let herself out the door that gave onto the open Port.

"Going *where*?" Su Bonner paused with her beer halfway to her mouth.

"Shaltren," Midj repeated, trying to sound matter of fact, and not at all reassured by the other woman's decisive headshake.

"Shaltren's not the place you want to be at this particular point in time, Captain Rolanni, me heart." Su put her beer down on the table with an audible thud. "Trust me on this one, like you never have before."

"I trust you plenty," Midj said, spinning her own beer 'round the various scars on the plastic tabletop, that being a handy way to not meet her friend's eyes. "You know I do."

"Then you've given over the idea of going to Shaltren." Su picked up her beer and had a hefty swallow "Good."

Midj sighed, still navigating the bottle through the tabletop galaxy.

"So, what's wrong with Shaltren? Besides the usual."

"The usual being that it's Juntavas Headquarters? That'd be bad enough, by your lights and by mine. Lately, though, there's more. Chairman Trogar, they say, is not well-loved."

Frowning, Midj glanced up. "Must break his heart."

"Not exactly, no." Su had another swallow of beer and shook two fingers at the bartender. "What I heard is, he means to keep it that way. Anybody who talks across him or who doesn't rise fast enough when he yells 'lift!'—they're dead right off. He's got himself an aggressive expansion plan in motion and he doesn't mind spending lives—that's anybody's but his own—to get what he wants."

Midj shrugged. "The Juntavas always grabbed what they could."

The new beers came, the 'keeper collected Su's empty, looked a question at Midj and was waved

away.

"Not always." Su was taking her last comment as a debating point. "I'm not saying every decent spacer should sign up onto the Juntavas workforce, but I will say they've been getting carefuller in later years. They're still trading in all the stuff nobody ought, but they haven't been as gun-happy as they were back in the day..." She raised a hand, showing palm.

"Cold comfort to you and yours, I grant. The fact remains, there was a trend toward less of that and more...circumspection—and now what rises to the top of the deck but Grom Trogar, who wants a return to the bad old days—and looks like getting them."

"Well." Midj finished her beer, set the bottle aside, and cracked the seal on the second.

"So," Su said into the lengthening silence. "You changed your mind about going to Shaltren, right? At least until somebody resets Mr. Trogar's clock?"

Midj sighed and met her friend's eyes. "Don't see my business waiting that long, frankly."

"What business is worth losing your ship, getting killed, or both?" Trust Su to ask the good questions. Midj kept her eyes steady.

"You remember Korelan Zar," she not-asked, and Su frowned.

"Tall, thin fella; amber eyes and coffee-color skin," she said slowly. "I remember thinking that skin was so pretty-looking." She fingered her beer. "Your partner, right? He was the one that told you one day he'd take you to Panore for a vacation, right?"

Midj nodded, said nothing.

Su's sip was nearly a chug, then she continued into the silence.

"Right. Always wondered what happened to him. Never got around to asking. Must be—what? Fifteen, eighteen Standards?"

"Twenty." Her voice sounded tight in her own ears. "What happened to him was he figured he had to sign on with another crew—he had reasons, they seemed good to him, and that's all twenty Standards in the past. Thing is, I told him, if he ever needed to ship out—call, and I'd come get him."

Su was quiet. Midj had a swig of beer, and another.

"And where he is, is Shaltren," Su said eventually, after she enjoyed a couple of swigs, herself "Midj—you don't owe him."

"I owe him—I promised." She closed her eyes, opened them. "He asked me to come."

"Shit." More quiet, then—"How soon?"

St. Belamie's Day had begun as a joke; at need, it had become a code—he'd remembered that, too, and trusted her to do the same. It was a moving target, calculated by finding the square root of the diameter of *Skeedaddle*, multiplying by the Standard day on which the message was sent and dividing by twelve. Accordingly, she had about twenty Standard Days on Kago before she lifted for Shaltren.

She'd wanted to time it closer, but there was the ship to be brought up to spec, and she daren't gamble that Vashon would find nothing wrong. Likely he wouldn't, but it wasn't the way to bet, not with Kore waiting for her, with who knew what on his dance card.

"Couple weeks, local," she said to Su, and the other woman nodded.

"Let's do this again, before I ship out," she said, and finished off her beer in one long swallow. She thumped the bottle to the table. "For now, gotta lift. Business."

"I hear that," Midj said, dredging up a grin. "I'm at the Haven for the next while, then back on-ship. Gimme a holler when you know you got time for dinner. I'll stand the cost."

"Like hell you will," Su said amiably. She got her feet under her and was gone, leaving Midj alone with the rest of her beer and the tab.

He walked down the ramp easy, not hurrying, a pilot on his way to his ship, that was all. He turned the corner and froze on the edge of the halfway, still out of range of the camera's wide eye and the woman leaning against the wall, gun holstered, waiting.

Waiting for him, he had no doubt. He knew her—Sambra Reallen—who hadn't been anybody particular, and now ran in Grom Trogar's pack; high up in the pack, though not so high that calling attention to herself might get fatal. If she was here, calmly waiting for him go through the one door he had to go through then he was too late.

He nodded, once, turned, and went back up the hall, walking no faster than he had going down, and with as little noise.

*Too late*, he thought, as he reached street-level. *Damn.*

There were two ways to play it from here, given that he'd sworn not to be a damn' fool. The strike for the ship, that might've been foolish, though he'd had reason to hope that the fiction of the Judge's continued residence would cover him. The Judge's absence would still serve as cover, since he was the Judge's courier. But the fact that one of Chairman Trogar's own had been waiting for him—that was bad. He wondered how bad, as he ran his keycard through the coder.

If they'd been waiting for him at the ship, then they likely knew some things. They probably knew that the Judge and most of the household was gone, scattered, along with all the rest of the judges and staff who had managed to go missing before Grom Trogar thought to look for them. It was unlikely that they knew everything—and they'd figure that, too. Which meant he had a bad time ahead of him.

Nothing to help it now—If he ran anywhere on Shaltren, they'd catch him, and the inconvenience would only make his examination worse. If he waited for them, and went peaceably—it was going to be bad. Chairman Trogar would see to that.

If they'd been at the ship, they'd be here soon, if they weren't already.

The door to the house slid open.

He stepped inside, playing the part of a man with nothing to fear. His persona had long been established—a bit stolid, a bit slow, a steady pilot, been with the Judge since his itinerant days.

He flicked on the lights—public room empty. So far, so good. They'd take their time coming in—Judges and their crews, after all, had a reputation for being a bit chancy to mess with.

There was a some urgency on him, now. He'd planned for back-up; it was second nature anymore to plan for back-up. At the time it had seemed prudent and, anyway, he'd meant to be gone before it came to that.

*Meant to*, he thought now, walking quick through the darkened rooms, heading for the comm room and the pinbeam. *Meant to isn't will.*

He'd put a life in danger. Might have put a life in danger. If the first message had gotten through. If she hadn't just read it and laughed.

*I'll come for you*, she whispered from memory, the tears running her face and her eyes steady on his. He moved faster now, surefooted in the dark. She'd come. She'd promised. Unless something radical had happened in her life, altering her entirely from the woman he had known—Midj Rolanni kept her promises.

He'd had no right to pull her in on this. *Especially this.* Even as a contingency back-up that was

never going to be called into play. No right at all.

He slapped the wall as he strode into the comm center. The lights came up, showing the room empty—but he was hearing things now. Noises on his back path. The sound, maybe, of a door being forced.

Fingers quick and steady, he called up the 'beam, fed in the ID of the receiver. The noises were closer now—heavy feet, somebody swearing. Somewhere in one of the outer rooms, glass shattered shrilly.

He typed, heard feet in the room beyond, hit send, cleared the log and spun, hands up and palms showing empty.

"If you're looking for the High Judge," he said to man holding the gun in the doorway. "He's not home."

Vashon not finding anything about to blow down in *Skeedaddle's* innards, and the vent upgrade going more smoothly than the man himself had expected, Midj was back on-board in good order inside of eight local days.

She stowed her kit and initiated a systems check, easing into the pilot's chair with a sigh of relief. The ship was quiet, the only noises those she knew so well that they didn't register with her anymore, except as a general sense of everything operating as it should. Of all being right in her world, enclosed and constrained as it was.

When she ran with a 'hand—never with a partner, not after Kore—the noises necessarily generated by another person sharing the space would distract and disorient her at first, but pretty soon became just another voice in the overall song of the ship.

And whenever circumstances had her on-port for any length of time, she came back to the ship with relief her overriding emotion, only too eager to lower the hatch and shut out the din of voices, machinery and weather.

Hers. Safe. Comfortable. Familiar. Down to the ancient *Vacation on Incomparable Panore* holocard Kore'd given her as a yet unfulfilled promise after one particularly hard trade run.

She'd thought before now that maybe it was time to start charting the course of her retirement. Not that she was old, though some days she felt every Standard she'd lived had been two. But she did have a certain responsibility to her ship, which could be expected to outlive a mere human's span—hell, it had already outlived two captains, and there wasn't any reason it wouldn't outlast her.

She ought to take up a second—a couple of the cousins were hopeful, so she'd heard. The time to train her replacement was while she was still in her prime, so control could be eased over gradual, with her giving more of her attention to TerraTrade, while the captain-to-be took over ship duty, until one day the change was done, as painless as could be for everyone. That's how Berl took *Skeedaddle* over from Mam, who had gone back to the planet she'd been born to for her retired years, and near as Midj had ever seen on her infrequent visits, missed neither space nor ship.

Berl, now Midj shook her head, her eyes watching the progress of the systems check across the board. In a universe without violence—in a universe without the Juntavas—Berl would've been standing captain yet, and his baby sister maybe trading off some other ship. Maybe she'd been running back-up on *Skeedaddle*, though that wasn't the likeliest scenario, her and her brother having gotten along about as well as opinionated and high-tempered sibs ever did.

Still and all, he hadn't deserved what had come to him; and she hadn't wanted the ship that bad, having found a post that suited her on the Zar family ship. Suited her for a number of reasons, truth told, only one of them being the younger son, who came on as her partner once she'd understood Berl was

really dead, and Skeedaddle was hers.

Full circle.

The board beeped; systems checked out clean, which was nothing more than she'd expected. She had a cold pad spoke for at the public yard; some meetings set up across the next couple days couple of independents on-port she still needed to get to regarding their views on TerraTrade's proposed "small trade" policies. She'd write that report before she lifted, send it on to Lezly, in case...

In case.

Well.

She reached to the board, opened eyes and cars, began to tap in the code for the office at the public yard—and stopped, fingers frozen over the keypad.

In the top left corner of the board, away from everything else on the board, a yellow light glowed. Pinbeam message waiting, that was.

Most likely it was TerraTrade business, though she couldn't immediately call to mind anything urgent enough to require a 'beam. Still, it happened. That's why emergencies were called emergencies.

She tapped the button, the message screen lit, sender ID scrolled—not a code she recognized, off-hand—and then the message.

*Situation's changed. Don't come. K*

The room was softly lit, his chair comfortable. For the moment, there were no restraints, other than those imposed by the presence of the woman across the table from him.

"Where is the High Judge, Mr. Zar?"

Her voice was courteous, even gentle, despite having asked this selfsame question at least six times in the last few hours.

"Evaluation tour, is what he told me," he answered, letting some frustration show.

"An evaluation tour," his interlocutor repeated, a note of polite disbelief entering her cool voice. "What sort of evaluation?"

"Of the other judges," he said, and sighed hard, showing her his empty hands turned palm up on his knee. "He was going to visit them on the job, see how they were doing, talk to them. It's a regular thing he does, every couple Standards." That last at least was true.

"I see." She nodded. He didn't know her name—she hadn't told him one, and she wasn't somebody he knew. She had a high, smooth forehead, a short brush of pale hair and eyes hidden by dark glasses. One of Grom Trogar's own—his sister, for all Kore knew or cared.

What mattered was that she could make his life very unhappy, not to say short, unless he could convince her he was behind on brains and info.

"It seems very odd to me," she said now, conversationally, "that the High Judge would embark on such a tour without his pilot."

They'd been over this ground, too.

"I'm a courier pilot," he said, keeping a visible lid on most of his frustration; "not a big ship pilot. I fly courier work, small traders, that kind of thing. I stay here, in case I'm needed."

She hesitated; he could almost taste her weighing the question of the rest of the household's whereabouts against his own actions. Questions regarding his actions won out.

"You went to the courier shed this afternoon, is that correct?"

"Yes," he said, a little snappish.

"Why?" Getting a little snappish, herself.

"I had a 'beam from the judge, with instructions."

"Instructions to lift?"

"Yes."

"And yet you didn't lift, Mr. Zar. I wonder why not."

He shrugged, taking it careful here. "There was a guard on the door. It smelled wrong, so I went back to the house and sent a 'beam to the judge."

"I see. Which guard?"

He had no reason to protect the woman who'd been waiting for him. On the other hand, he had no reason to tell this woman the truth.

"Nobody I'd seen before."

She shook her head, but let that line go, too. Time enough to ask the question again, later.

"Once more, Mr. Zar—where is the High Judge?"

"I told you—on evaluation tour."

"Where is Natesa the Assassin?"

She was trying to throw him off. He gave an irritable shrug. "How the hell do I know? You think a courier assigns judges?"

"Hm. And the destination of the lift you did not make?"

He shook his head. "High Judge's business, ma'am. I'm not to disclose that without his say. If you want to 'beam him and get his OK..."

She laughed, very softly, and leaned back in her chair, sliding her dark glasses off and holding them lightly between the first and middle fingers of her right hand. Her eyes were large and pale gray, pupils shrinking to pinpoints in the dim light.

"You are *good*, Mr. Zar—my compliments. Unfortunately, I think you are not quite the dull fellow you play so well. We both know what happens next, I think? Unless there is something you wish to tell me?"

He waited, a beat, two...

She shook her head—regretfully, he thought, and extended a long hand to touch a button on her side of the table. The door behind her slid open, admitting two men, one carrying a case, the other a gun.

The woman rose, languidly, and motioned them forward. Kore felt his stomach tighten.

"Mr. Zar has decided that a dose of the drug is required to aid his memory, gentlemen. I'll be back in ten minutes."

*Don't come...*

Midj stared at the message, then laughed—the first real laugh she had in—gods, a Standard.

"Don't come," she snorted, leaning back in the chair in the aftermath of her laugh. "Tell me another one, Kore."

Shaking her head, she got up, went down the short hall to the galley and drew herself a cup of 'toot, black and sweet.



Sipping, she walked back to the pilot's chamber and stood behind the chair, looking down at the message on the screen.

"Now, of all the things he might've expected me to remember, wouldn't that have been one of 'em?" She asked her ship. There was no answer except for the smooth hum of the air filtering system. But, then, what other answer was needed? *Skeedaddle* knew Kore as well as she did.

As well as she *had*.

Twenty-six years ago, Midj Rolanni had been taken up as trader by Amin Zar, working beside the least of Amin's sons, one Korelan, who also had a head for trade. Their eighth or ninth stop, they were set to meet with one of the Zar cousins, who was a merchant on the port. Taking orbit, they collected their messages, including one from the cousin: "Don't come."

Amin Zar, he took a look at that message, nodded, broke open the weapons locker and issued arms. They went down on schedule, whereupon Amin and the elder sibs disembarked, leaving Kore, Midj, and young Berta in care of the ship.

Several hours later, they were back, Amin carrying the cousin, and a few of the sibs bloodied—and Midj still had bad dreams about the lift outta there.

After it all calmed down, she'd asked Kore why they'd gone in, when they'd clearly been warned away.

And he'd laughed and told her that "Don't come," was Zar family code for "help."

She sipped some more 'toot, took the half-empty cup over to the chute and dumped it in.

The time, she thought, going back and sitting in her chair, had come to face down some truths.

Truth Number One: She was a damn fool.

Truth Number Two: So was the Korelan Zar she had known, twenty Standards ago. Who but a damn fool left the woman, the ship and the life that he loved for a long shot at changing the galaxy?

And who but a damn fool let him go alone?

What came into play now was those same twenty Standards and what they might have done to the man at his core.

She noted that he never had said he'd changed his mind, in that first, brief call for her to come get him. The Kore she knew had never been a liar, preferring misdirection to outright falsehoods. It looked like he'd kept that tendency, and its familiarity had been the one thing that had convinced her the letter was genuine; St. Belamie giving her a second.

And this—this was the third validation, and the most compelling reason to continue on the course she had charted, in case she was having any last minute doubts.

"You gonna die for twenty Standards ago?" She asked herself, and heard her voice echo off the metal walls of her ship.

*You gonna turn your back on a friend when he needs your help?* Her ship whispered in the silence that followed.

*No*, she thought. No; she'd done that once, and it had stuck in her craw ever since.

One good thing—she could go on her own time, now, since the way she saw it, "don't come" trumped St. Belamie.

Smiling, she reached to the board and opened a line.

"Tower, this is *Skeedaddle*, over at Vashon's Yard. How soon can I lift outta here?"

There were restraints this time, uncomfortably tight, and a violent headache.

So, he thought, laboriously. *You wanted to make the guy with the gun use it, and he did. Quitcherbitchin.*

"He's back," a man's voice said breathlessly from somewhere to the left.

He'd managed to land some blows of his own, which didn't comfort him much, since he was still alive.

A man hove into view, his right check smeared with blood and a rising shiner on his left eye.

*Good*, he thought, and then saw the injector. *Not good.*

He tried to jerk away, but the cords only tightened, constricting his breathing—some kind of tangle-wire, then. He might be able to—

"No, you don't, fly-boy," the man with the injector snarled, and grabbed his chin in an iron grip, holding him immobile while the cold nozzle came against his neck.

There was a hiss, a sharp sting, and the injection was made. The man with the black eye released him and stepped back, grinning.

He closed his eyes. *Fool*, he thought.

The drug worked fast. The irritation of the wire was the first to fade from his perception, then the raging headache. He lost track of his feet, his fingers, his legs, his heartbeat, and, finally, his thoughts. He hung, limbless, without breath or heartbeat, a nameless clot of fog, without thought or volition.

"What is your name?" A voice pierced the fog.

"Korelan Zar," another voice answered, slowly. Inside the fog, something stirred, knew the voice and the name. Recognized, dimly, peril.

"Good," said the first voice. "Where is the High Judge?"

"I don't know," he heard himself say.

"I see. Why were you going to your ship?"

"Orders."

"What orders?"

He was listening in earnest now, interested in the answer; expecting to hear another, "I don't know..."

"Orders to get out, if it looked like going to hell." *Well*, he thought, inside the thinning fog, *that certainly makes sense.*

"And things in your opinion were going to hell?"

He'd said so, hadn't he? "Yes."

"Ah," said the voice. That not being a question, he found himself speechless. Time passed; he felt the fog growing dense about him again.

"What," the voice said, sharp enough to shred the fog and cut him where he hung, defenseless. "What was the text of the last message you sent to the High judge?"

"Situation stable," he heard himself answer.

"When was that?"

"Four weeks ago, local."

More silence; this time, he found he was able to concentrate and thin the fog further. He could feel

the shadows of the tanglewire binding him to the chair; a breath of headache...

"You were at the comm when we located you earlier this evening. Who did you send to?"

A question had been asked; the drug compelled him to answer with the truth, but the truth had facets...

"An old girlfriend."

"Indeed. What is your old girlfriend's name?"

The answer formed; he felt the words on his tongue, swelling, filling his mouth, his throat...

"Impressive," the voice didn't ask, releasing him. Exhausted, he fell back into the fog, felt it close softly around him, hiding the restraints, the pain, the sense of his own self.

"What," the voice asked, soft now, almost as if it were part of the fog, "is the code of the last receiver to which you sent a pinbeam?"

Calmly, his voice told out the code, while he sank deeper into the fog and at last stopped listening.

She set *Skeedaddle* down in the general port, calling some minor attention to herself by requesting a hot pad. Tower was so bland and courteous she might have been back on Kago, which didn't comfort her as much as it maybe should have.

Sighing, she levered out of the pilot's chair and stretched, careful of her back and shoulders, before moving down the hall.

She pulled a pellet pistol from the weapons locker, and a needle gun—nothing more than a trigger, a spring and the needle itself. Completely illegal on most worlds, of course, though she'd come by it legal enough: It had been with Berl's body, when it came back, with his ship, to his sister.

She slipped the needle gun into a hideaway pocket, and clipped the pistol to her belt. That done, she straightened her jacket, sealed the locker and went back to the galley for a cup of 'toot and a snack while the hull cooled.

The fact that they hadn't killed him was—worrisome. That they kept him here, imprisoned, but not particularly misused, indicated that they thought there was more he could tell them.

He'd had time to consider that; time to weigh whether he ought to file his last flight now and preserve what—and who—he could.

The end of that line of consideration was simply that he wanted to live. His one urge toward suicide had failed and he couldn't say, considering present conditions, that he was sorry on that score. If it came down that he died in the line of doing something useful, then that was how it was. But to die uselessly, while there were still cards in play—no.

That decision left open the question of what he could do of use, confined and maybe being used as bait. Not that the Judge would fall for bait, but Grom Trogar might not know that. In fact, Chairman Trogar might well see the Judge's concern for his household and his courier as a weakness to be exploited. Big believer in exploiting other people's weaknesses, was Mr. Trogar.

Having the time, he thought about his life past, and what he might've done different, if he hadn't been your basic idealistic idiot. Put that way, he could see himself staying with Midj, leading a trader's prosperous life, raising up a couple of kids, maybe getting into politics. There were more ways to change the galaxy than the route he had chosen. And who was to say that change was the best thing?

He'd been so sure.

She had a plan, if you could call it that. Whoever had done the alias for the pinbeam Kore'd sent his last message from had been good, and if she'd started with no information, she'd right now be on a planet known as Soltier, somewhere over in the next quadrant. Knowing that Kore was on Shaltren made the exercise of tracking the 'beam something easier, and she thought she had a reasonable lock on his last location.

Nothing guaranteed that he'd still be at that location, of course, but it was really the only card she had, unless she wanted to go calling on the chairman, which she was holding in reserve as her Last Stupid Idea.

For her first trick, she needed a cab.

There was a cab stand at the end of the street, green-and-white glow-letters spelling out *Robo Cab! Cheap! Quick! Reliable!*

*Right.*

She leaned in, hit the call button, and walked out to the curb to wait.

Traffic wasn't in short supply this planet-noon, and the port looked prosperous enough. If you didn't know you were on galactic crime headquarters, in fact, it looked amazingly normal.

Up the street, a cab cut across three lanes of traffic, angling in toward her position, the green-and-white Robo Cab logo bright in the daylight. It pulled up in front of her, the door opened and she stepped in.

Mistake.

"Good afternoon, Captain Rolanni," said the woman pointing the gun at her. "Let's have lunch."

The door snapped shut and the cab accelerated into traffic.

It was going to take a bit to disable the camera, but he thought he had a workable notion, there. The hard part was going to be getting out the door. After that, he'd have to deal with the details: scoping out where, exactly, he was, and how, exactly, to get out.

He'd read somewhere that it was the duty of prisoners taken in war to attempt to escape, in order, so he guessed, to make the other side commit more resources to keeping their prisoners where they belonged. It had occurred to him at the time that the efficient answer to that might be to shoot all the troublemakers in hand, and institute a policy of taking no prisoners. On the other hand, Mr. Trogar having erred on the side of prisoner-taking, he supposed there was a certain usefulness to confounding the home guard.

Or, as the Judge was a little too fond of saying, "Let's throw a rock in the pond and see who we piss off."

Surprisingly enough, it was lunch, and if there was a guard mounted outside the door of the private parlor, and her host was armed, nobody had gotten around to taking the gun that rode openly on her belt, much less searching her for any hidden surprises she might be carrying.

Lunch was simple—pre-made sandwiches, hand pastries, real coffee, and some local fruit.

To hear her tell it, the host's name was Sambra Reallen, which was as good as any other name. She professed herself a not-friend of the current chairman, on which point Midj reserved judgment, considering the manner of their meeting. Since she also seemed to hold some interesting information, Midj was willing to listen to her for the space it took to eat a sandwich and savor a couple cups of the real bean.

"You're here for Korelan Zar," Sambra Reallen said, and it was disturbing to hear that fact stated so baldly, no "am-I-right?" about it.

There being no use playing games, Midj nodded slowly and sipped her coffee. "Man asked me to give him a ride off-world. That against the law?"

The other woman grinned, quick and feral. "At the moment, the law here is the chairman's whim. Given that—yes, I'm afraid it is."

"That's too bad," Midj said, hoping she sounded at least neutral.

"You could say that," Sambra Reallen agreed. She wasn't drinking coffee, and she hadn't even bothered to look at the sandwich in front of her. "Captain Rolanni, do you have any idea who Korelan Zar is?"

Well, that was a question, now, wasn't it? Midj shrugged. "Old friend. Called in a favor. I came. That's how we do things, out where the chairman's whim counts for spit."

Another quick grin. "I'll take that as a long 'no,'" she said. "Korelan Zar is the High Judge's courier."

Midj sipped coffee, considering. She decided that she didn't really care what the Juntavas had to do with judges or judging, and looked up to meet Sambra Reallen's sober gaze.

"Kore was a hell of a pilot," she said, which was nothing but the truth.

The Juntava snorted. "So he was and so he is. He's also been with the High Judge for twenty Standards—maybe more. The two of them came out of nowhere—the High Judge, he wasn't a Judge then; the closest we had to Judges were the Enforcers—and that wasn't close at all. He sold the Justice Department idea to the then-chairman—the chairman that the present whimsical guy we've got replaced, you understand. The two of them—Zar and the Judge they set up the whole system, recruited Judges, trained 'em and set 'em loose. I don't know how many Judges there are now—the last number I heard was thirty, but I think that's low—very low. The High Judge isn't a man who shows you all the cards he's got in his hand—and Korelan Zar's just like him."

It was a fair description of Kore, all things weighed. And the project itself jibed with the one he'd tried to sell her on, sitting across from her in *Skeedaddle's* tiny galley, holding her hands so hard she felt the bones grinding together. Bunch of crazy talk, she'd thought then. Now.. Well, say the years had given her a different understanding of what was necessarily crazy.

"Not that I'm disinterested in your problems," she said now to Sambra Reallen "but I'm not quite grasping what this has to do with me."

The other woman nodded vigorously. "Thank you, yes. You do need to know what this has to do with you." She leaned forward, face intent, eyes hard.

"The High Judge, his household, all the Judges I know about and all those I don't—are gone. Say that they are not blessed with the chairman's favor. I don't doubt—I *know*—that the High Judge had a plan. He must have foreseen—if not the current situation, at least the *possibility* of the current situation. He would have planned for this. His very disappearance forces me to conclude that he *does* have a plan, and has only withdrawn for a time to marshal his forces and his allies."

Midj shrugged. "So?"

"So." Sambra Reallen leaned deliberately back in her chair. "About a month ago, local, the chairman realized the High Judge had not been seen in some while. That the entire network of Judges, as far as they are known, had slipped through the hands of his seekers. He realized, indeed, that the sole member of the High Judge's household remaining upon Shaltren was—"

"The courier." Midj put her cup down, all her attention focused on the other woman.

Sambra Reallen nodded. "Precisely. The word went out that Korelan Zar should be brought to the chairman. How Zar heard of the order, I don't know, but I'm not surprised that he did. He made a strike for his ship, as I was sure he would, and I waited for him there, hoping to divert him to a safe place. Something must have spooked him; he returned to the High Judge's house and was taken into custody shortly thereafter."

"Hm. How 'bout if it was you spooked him?" Midj asked. "I'm thinking that altruism isn't exactly your style. What'd you want from Kore in exchange for the safe berth?"

The other woman's face tightened. "Information! The High Judge must be planning something—I must know what it is! The chairman can't be allowed to continue—he's already lost us ground on three significant worlds and will loose Stelubia entirely, if he's not stopped. All of that would be reason enough, if there weren't Turtles in the mix, too!"

Midj blinked. "Turtles? Clutch Turtles?"

"There's another kind?"

"Not that I know of. These would two, and asking after the health of a couple of humans they adopted, am I right?"

Sambra Reallen nodded, sighed.

"Indeed," she said finally, finding her pastry's icing a fascinating diversion from the discussion as she weighed some inner necessity.

"These things are too big to be secret," she continued, "no matter how much any of us wish to hide them. Here you are, fresh in, and already the word is out.

The pilot relaxed slightly, realizing that the Juntava was apparently too focused on her own set of woes to pursue Midj's familiarity with the doings of the Clutch.

"I've been reading history, Captain Rolanni. The vengeance that these two beings may visit upon the entire organization if their petition is mishandled—and there is no possibility that the chairman will not mishandle it—doesn't bear thinking about. I—Action needs to be taken. But I must know what the High Judge is planning."

"And you think Kore knows."

"Yes."

"But Kore's been taken by the chairman," Midj pointed out, trying to keep the thought—and its implications—from reaching real nerve endings. "If he's as ruthless as they say, he's already cracked Kore's head open and emptied out everything inside." *Including my name, my ship's name, and the fact that I was coming for him.* That *did* touch nerve, and she picked up her cup, swigging down the last of the cold coffee.

"The chairman tried to do exactly that," Sambra Reallen said. "Mr. Zar's defenses are formidable—also, as I discover from my study of the session transcript, he wasn't asked the right question."

"You got my name from the transcript, then."

"No." The Juntava shook her head. "I got your pinbeam receiver ID from the transcript. Mr. Zar could not be persuaded to part with your name, though he was obviously experiencing some ... discomfort for withholding the information."

The receiver ID was enough to sink her—present company being evidence—but she'd made it extra easier for them by coming on-world—and the joke was on her, if she'd taken an honest warnaway for code.

"So, what do you want from me?" Might as well ask it straight out, though she thought she had an

idea what it would be.

"I want you to pull him out of custody. I can provide you with his location, weapons if you need them, and a safe place to bring him to."

*Yup, that was it.* Midj shook her head.

"And what do I get?"

The Juntava pushed the untouched sandwich away and leaned her elbows on the table.

"What do you want!"

Just like that: Name a price and the Juntavas would meet it. No problem. She felt a hot flash of fury, felt the words, *I want my brother back* rising and kept them behind her teeth with an effort. Sat for a couple of heartbeats, breathing. just that.

When she was sure she could trust her voice, she met the other woman's bland eyes.

"What I want is Kore, free and in shape to leave, if that's what he still wants. And I want us both to have safe passage out of here, and a guarantee that we won't either of us be pursued by the Juntavas after."

There was a pause.

"I could promise you these things," Sambra Reallen said eventually, "but until I hear what Korelan Zar has to tell me—if he will tell me anything—I can't know if my promise will hold air."

She raised a hand, palm out. "I understand that you have no reason to love the Juntavas, Captain. The best I can promise at this point is that, if Chairman Trogar leaves the game, I will do my best to ensure that your conditions are met."

About what she'd figured; as good as she was going to get, and no time to negotiate anyway, with Kore's life on the line.

"Why hasn't the chairman killed him?" she asked.

The Juntava shrugged. "It could be that the chairman thinks Korelan Zar still retains some potential for amusement."

*Right.* Midj, sighed.

"I'll need a diversion. If Kore's high-level, then there are high-level people interested in him who'll have to be drawn off."

Sambra Reallen nodded. "I'll call a department chair meeting."

Midj blinked. "You can do that?"

The Juntava smiled, letting a glimmer of genuine amusement show. "Oh, yes," she said, "I can do that."

Getting out the door hadn't been so hard after all, though there was going to be hell to pay if—well, there was going to be hell to pay; it wasn't any use thinking there could be a different outcome to this.

He was sorry he wouldn't be on hand to see the finish of it, since he'd been in on the beginning. It had been a grand, beautiful scheme, so logical. So—simple. Introduce a Justice system into Juntavas structure. Feed and nurture and protect it and its practitioners for twenty, thirty, fifty Standards—they hadn't been sure of the timing, but hoped to see results within their lifetimes—easily that. Lately, he thought they'd been optimistic—and not only of the timing.

Still, he had a gun, courtesy of a guard even stupider than he was, and he knew where he was, and where he was going, more or less right down to his final breath. It was... freeing in a way. He felt at

peace with himself, and with his purpose. If he could kill Grom Trogar, then he could depart as happy as a man filled full of pellets could be, and the plan—his plan, that he'd given up his life of small happinesses to see through—would have a second chance at continuing.

It was convenient that his holding room was in the chairman's building. Convenient that he had committed the layout of that building, along with several others, to memory years ago. He knew where the secret stair was and the code that opened the hatch. He eased the panel shut behind him and began to climb.

He paused to catch his breath just below the fourteenth landing. Only one more landing, if his memory could be relied upon—and since he'd already decided that it could why worry about it now? The hatch opened in what used to be a supply closet in the chairman's suite. He steeled himself for the unpleasant truth that he might need to kill blameless people before he got to his target. He wasn't an assassin; even killing Mr. Trogar himself, much as it was needed, wasn't going to be a home joy. The important thing was not to freeze, not to hesitate. To acquire his target and shoot. He might only get one shot, and it was important to make it count.

Leaning against the wall, he once again went over his stolen gun. It was a good gun, loaded, well-oiled, with an extra clip of pellets riding in the handle. The guard had taken good care of his weapon. Points for the—

Above him and to the left, where the ongoing flight angled off the landing, there was a noise. A very slight noise, not immediately repeated, as if someone had scuffed a boot against the edge of a step.

He went to one knee on the step, raised the gun in two hands, and waited, breathing slow. *Easy...*

Another scuff, and a dim shadow on the dim wall of the landing. His finger tightened on the trigger. Silence—

And a sudden appalling rush of sound, as a dark figure hurtled down, hitting the landing flat-footed, gun out and pointing at his head. He had a moment to feel anger, then—

"Kore!"

He blinked. Stared up into a pale face and dark brown eyes, short dark hair showing a blaze of gray going back from the temple.

"Midj?" Slowly, he lowered the gun. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Back atcha." She lowered her own weapon and stood, a little stiffly, he thought. "But it's gonna hafta to wait. I'm supposed to be getting you out of here, to a safe place."

He frowned. "Safe by whose standards?"

"Woman by the name of Sambra Reallen."

He thought about it, shook his head. "Can't trust her."

"Can't not trust her," she countered. "She picked me up in port. Could've just as easy been the chairman, the way I hear it. She wants him gone and she don't want to 'Jinx the High Judge's play, if he has a play. Which you're supposed to tell her."

He snorted. "She wouldn't believe me." He thought again. "How were you supposed to get me out of here?"

"Same way I came," she said, jerking her head up the stairs. "We walk up to the roof. There's a monowing waiting to lift us out."

"OK," he said, and came to his feet. He smiled, then, and it felt like his soul was stretched so wide it might burst a seam.



"Midj. Thank you."

"No problem."

They were two steps below the fifteenth landing when the alarm sounded. Kore threw himself onto landing, fingers moving rapidly on the code bar. The panel slid open as Midj came up beside him.

"What's going on?"

"Damned if I know But the doors will seal in ten seconds—go!" He pushed her through and followed, into the dimness of the supply room.

"Where are we?"

Trust Midj to ask the question. "Chairman Trogar's office."

"Great."

"Could be worse. Let's see..."

Carefully, he eased open the closet door. The receptionist's desk was empty; he could hear voices, out in the hall, and slipped forward, barely hearing Midj's curse as she followed him.

He crept to the hall door, peered around—and abruptly gave up stealth.

In the center of the hall, surrounded by gaping humans, stood two large green—persons. On the floor beyond them, he could see a form, a shock of white hair, a widening pool of blood, a—weapon, though what sort of weapon he scarcely knew

The largest of the two green persons—sang. There was a *flash!* of pinpoint light, a *snap!* of sound and the weapon was molten metal, mixing with liquid red.

There was a stifled scream from the crowd; a shifting of bodies, and then from the crowd, one stepped forward and bowed.

"I am called Sambra Reallen Chairman Pro Tem," she said softly. "How may I serve you, Aged Ones?"

*Skeedaddle* was well away, on course for Clarine, and a chat with Teyope, should he have actually happened to deliver the cargo as commissioned. At least, that's what Sambra Reallen knew. It was the least of what Sambra Reallen knew, and Midj hoped she had joy of her new status. Talk about being in a position to honor promises.

"She'll have to be certified by the department heads." Kore sat down on the edge of the co-pilot's chair and held out a steaming cup. "'toot?'"

"Thanks." She took it, spinning her chair to face him. She drew a breath, thinking she might be about to say something, found her mouth dry, and drank some 'toot instead.

"I wanted to say." Kore was holding his cup between both palms, staring down as if the hot liquid were a navigation screen.

"I wanted to say—I'm sorry. I had no right to pull you into that, Midj, knowing what you—knowing what it could become. My arrogance. I thought I was ahead of the trouble."

"Well," she said, softly. And then again, "Well."

He looked up, amber eyes wary. The black hair showed some shine of silver, his face marked with the lines of responsibility and worry.

"Your plan. I mean your *old* plan. Is that playing out the way you'd hoped?"

He tipped his head, considering. Had a sip of 'toot.

"Not exactly. There were compromises needed. Somehow, I hadn't thought of there needing to be compromises. Some good people died, and I never meant that. Justice..." The ghost of a laugh. "Justice isn't always easy to cipher. I didn't expect that at all."

He sighed.

"That said—we've made progress. In some direction. We've introduced another player into the game, and another set of rules. Is that a good thing, a bad thing, or a null-value?" He shrugged. "Don't know."

*Right.*

Midj sipped her 'toot; used her chin to point at the board.

"Course is set for Clarine; it's easy to change, if you're expected somewhere. Or I can set you down where you say. Or you can stay on."

There, it was out in the open.

Kore was looking at her like he was thinking hard.

"Stay on?"

"If you want to." The cup of 'toot trembled a bit in her hand, belying her attempt at a casual tone.

She cleared her throat and met his eyes square. "Thinking over it all—I had the idea we'd been a damn good team, Kore. Had the idea we might be again, if you're wantin' it."

She felt a moment of panic then—a moment brought on in part by twenty years of the voice in her head nagging at her in odd moments, telling her *He joined up with his eyes open, Midj—they'll never let him go*— "That is," she said with a challenge, "if you want it and if they'll let you..."

A pause, getting long while he—and she—sipped at their cups. Then....

"There isn't anything I want more," Kore said slowly. "But I—Midj, maybe we need to do this in stages. First, I gotta get back to the Judge. I've got to let him know where I am, how it is with me. And—I'd like you to meet him. Talk with him."

Meet the Juntava who had stolen away Kore and twenty years of their life? She felt the anger rise—shook it off as he kept talking.

"Then, well, I got a couple standard years of vacation time coming. We could go somewhere... like maybe Panore."

He favored her suddenly with a grin that made her sway as she laughed.

"Years of vacation? On Panore, is it? What did you do? Loot the strongbox?"

His grin faded; and Midj felt a chill. *Suppose he had looted the joint?*

"Nah," he admitted wryly, "I didn't. It's just that I never really took much time off I mean the Judge project, it kept me pretty busy. And..."

"But Panore? I'd have thought you'd forgot that..."

He shook his head then, and snorted a quiet laugh, and kind of talked into his cup for a minute like he was afraid, or too shy, to look at her.

"Nah. I always *did* mean to get out to Panore, you know. And I always kept hoping there'd be some way I could maybe get you to go with me. So when I got a chance, I put some of my money into a condo-building out there... one unit's mine."

He looked up, caught the look of amaze that had left her mouth half open. She felt the words spill

out unbidden.

"*What?* Panore's for fatcats! Do you have any idea of what it costs to live on a place like that? I, I..."

He signed a quick *yes* in pilot's hand-talk as he finished his 'toot.

"So yeah, I do know But now that you brought it up, why don't we find us a cargo or two that'll take us out that way, make sure we can still work together. Then, we can make sure we can still play together."

He put the cup down, unexpectedly reached his hand to hers. "Tell me its a deal, and I'll sign the book as co-pilot right now, if you like."

"Deal," she said, and squeezed his hand before pulling the logbook out on its trip tray.