

Justice for Mrs Combs

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

by
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Based on Elite by David Braben & Ian Bell

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Chapter One

"G-g-goal!" announced the vid screen for about the 70th time. Muted cheers sounded from the other side of the bar. True to their brief planet description, the Esveorians love their Zero-G hockey. Can't see the attraction myself. Too random, too simple.

But then, I guess there's not much else to get excited about on Esveor. True, there are far worse places in the 'verse. Its two billion citizens have some form - or forms - of government, and despite the ever-changing coalitions and the constant bickering, rudimentary services at least are available in most places - and to most people. And yes, the flamingo-pink oceans are a sight to behold, at least for the first hour or so. But when all's said and done, it's really just your average, dull farming planet.

Average and dull could be good, though. As I sat there drinking away what was left of my savings, gazing sleepily down at the slowly revolving sphere below, the farming life was starting to gain appeal. The two-acre property displayed on my datapad was modest but not entirely unaffordable; I might have been a poor spacer, but if I sold the ship I could make a decent go of it on a world such as this. Machines would do most of the actual work, leaving plenty of time to acquire a suitable farmer's wife and attend to the serious business of breeding. Hmm - small and fat. Perhaps not this planet.

It would have to be somewhere, though, if a job didn't arrive soon. That or piracy - not that I'd last a week on my own. Not in the Gecko. I glanced at the datapad again; no messages.

I finished my drink, stood up with some difficulty and lumbered towards the exit. That's when I saw her - long, straight, dark hair, probably early thirties, pouty lips, teary brown eyes. Sat on her own, with a fair few empty glasses on the table before her. She noticed me noticing and I swiftly refocused on the door. Too tired for any of that now, potential farmer's wife or no.

"Mister?" she called urgently. "Mister?"

"Me?"

She motioned to the seat opposite her, eyes round with hope. "You're Jack Voysey, aren't you?"

How did she know me? "I am." I stood there, ready to keep walking.

"Private investigator?"

I smiled warily. "Yeah." So she'd seen my ad. So far all it had yielded were a couple of random crazies and an elderly lizard with no money. Should have taken it down months ago.

"I'd like to hire you." She gestured at the seat again, her hand a little shaky but her gaze unwavering.

"Look, lady - it's gone [I glanced at my watch] 5am, you're drunk and I'm worn out. Why don't you try me in the morning? Or rather, afternoon."

"A thousand credits," she said quickly. "I'm serious. A thousand credits to investigate the death of my husband. And more if you need it."

I stared back at her blankly. Behind me the vid screen trumpeted another "G-g-goal!" and a few local patrons clapped and murmured approval.

"If you're serious, it can wait till tomorrow," I replied, and left before she could get another word in.

The quiet strains of Pachelbel's Canon woke me at noon, accompanied by an ineffectual puff of meadowy fragrance. A thousand credits, and more if you need it. That would keep me in the black for quite a while - assuming she was being serious, and assuming this death wasn't the type that, if examined too closely, would lead to my own.

I got out of bed and walked the few steps into the shower. The Gecko's living quarters were necessarily cramped, but I was used to them by now, and had few possessions. I had inherited the ship from my aunt - hence the fragrance - when she died some three years previously. She'd been, improbably, an escort for hire - the non-salacious kind, I mean. Not always the safest of occupations, yet she'd died not in the vacuum of space but from a heart attack on a skiing holiday. If she hadn't been halfway up a mountain she would probably have been okay. Better for me, I sometimes selfishly considered, if she had died in space - then I'd have got a brand new ship from the insurance, though it would still only have been a Gecko. I hardly knew her.

This ship had been my passport out of the force, which I'd joined so naively with visions of solving crimes and unmasking villains and generally being just like my old man, or how I imagined him to be. He was killed in a docking-bay shootout when I was in my teens; my mother ran off years earlier. Instead, I found myself on a Coriolis station above Rizala, inspecting ships for slaves and narcotics. There was no finesse, no subtlety whatsoever to the job. I wound up hitting the Rizalaian brandy pretty hard, but instead of firing me they transferred me and allowed me to retrain as a Viper pilot, out of respect for my father. That was better for a while, and I proved moderately adept with a laser, and moderately adept at bragging about it to women, but the occasional adrenaline rush of combat was eventually far outweighed by the interminable waiting about, the patrolling, the chasing off of cretinous boy racers. The pay was lousy too.

The Gecko, then, was my fresh start, but as my dwindling finances testified, far from a perfect one. Anyone with a basic knowledge of spacefaring craft knows that the Gecko isn't equipped with a hyperdrive. No hyperdrive means you're dependent on others, so you either join a pirate gang (a tough move for an ex-cop), follow randomly in the wake of witchspacing vessels as a lone opportunist, or - if you want any chance of staying alive - work as an escort for hire.

So that's what I'd done - only with pilots of Cobras and Mambas and Outriders to compete against, the work hadn't been as steady nor as respectable as I'd have liked. And one or two close encounters aside, the whole escort thing itself hadn't satisfied me either. Sure, I was seeing the galaxy, but I wasn't doing any more than skating along the surface.

Hence, on a whim, I got myself a PI licence at Edzaon, a system where you can acquire such antiquated oddities for little more than the price of a beer. Then I placed the ad, a brief, amateurish affair that skipped over my lack of actual experience. Finally, it might have brought me something.

The dryers stopped and I emerged from the shower. I dressed in my usual dark, functional outfit and went through to the cockpit to watch the news and drink a coffee. I'd recently set the machine to make the coffee weaker, as I was running low on beans. As I walked over to press the button, I glanced casually at the viewscreen - and there she was. Sat on a bench by the hangar door, reading from her datapad. God knows how long she'd been there.

I got my coffee, sat down in the tattered pilot's chair, put my feet up on the console and watched her, sipping slowly. She seemed outwardly calm, patient. I magnified the view. Her eyes were clear now, her expression neutral, unreadable. Evidently I hadn't pissed her off too much by walking out on her. I took in her figure; it was difficult not to. She was well put together, that was for sure. I wondered who she was.

I finished up my coffee, opened the entrance hatch and strolled down the ramp. She watched me like a hawk as I approached, remaining seated.

"Mr Voysey."

"Ma'am."

"All rested now?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, perfectly, thank you." I seated myself beside her.

"Your ship doesn't look up to much." The vaguest hint of a smile.

"That's the idea," I lied. "So who are you, and who was this husband of yours?"

"I'm Valerie Combs, and my husband was Sam Combs, a businessman."

"Here on Esveor?"

"In Oort City, yes."

"What was Sam's business?"

"Mainly bars." Not the best news. "He owned three of them - well, I do now."

"I see." I wondered whether Mrs Combs had once worn a barmaid's outfit. "What else?"

"A small restaurant, and he had a stake in a casino." Which only meant about a thousand possible suspects, many of them undoubtedly dangerous.

"How and when did he die?"

She gazed off towards the ship. "Three weeks ago. He was found in an alley just after dawn. He'd been stabbed in the neck a few hours earlier." She said it without any visible emotion.

"Any surveillance cameras?"

"None in that part of town. He was seen earlier heading roughly that way on his speedbike. He liked to ride around on his own sometimes, late at night. The police think he took a wrong turn and asked the wrong guy for directions. A drug addict, or just a psycho. They found the bike burnt out a few blocks away. No prints. And they took his wallet, watch and wedding ring." She sniffed and looked back at me.

"You seem to be taking it rather well, now that you're sober." I watched her reaction. She scowled and then smiled thinly.

"If I'd killed him, I wouldn't be hiring you, would I?" I gestured my acknowledgement of the point. "The police seem convinced it was some random crazy. They're still investigating, but this is Esveor, not some corporate utopia. I don't think they're going to find him."

"Do you think your husband was killed randomly?"

She looked away again. "I guess so. I don't know."

"Had he been acting strangely before it happened? Was there anything he was worried about? Anything to do with business?"

"The police asked me all that. Nothing I know of. They haven't found anything in his computer files either."

"Was he... involved with anyone besides you?"

She turned to face me, smiling sadly. "They asked me that too. Sam and I have been - were - happily married for eight years. I loved him, Mr Voysey, and he loved me. There was no one else." Those brown eyes moistened slightly. I believed her.

"Of course, Mrs Combs. I had to ask."

"I know." She sighed. "He probably was killed like the police said. But when I saw that you were here... If there's any chance of making a difference, of finding whoever took my husband away from me..."

I should have walked back to the ship when she said "casino", broke or not. But I hadn't.

"I'll do my best."

A couple of hours later I was in a shuttle heading down to Oort City, having accepted my fee and enjoyed a halfway decent lunch for the first time in about six weeks. She said she'd told no one about coming to see me, but I'd still thought it best to leave the Gecko behind, anonymity being the best policy. Sadly, there wasn't much of a crowd to blend into; while plenty of cargo is ferried between the surface and orbit, most of Esveor's traders prefer to remain offworld rather than commute. I shared the cabin with just one or two families and an elderly couple with weathered faces; farming folk back from holidays on Rexebe, perhaps.

The shuttle passed through the clouds and my seat-back vid screen showed a vast patchwork quilt of fields, torn in the middle to reveal a shimmering grey scar. I was glad of the gun pressing against my chest; glad too that it was legal to carry here - with a permit, naturally. The scar resolved into tower blocks and main arteries and suburbs,

and then we were levelling up and descending into the gloomy spaceport. The wheels hit the ground with a dull thud and I felt the strange sensation of instantly losing ten per cent of my weight as the artificial gravity ceded to Esveor's 0.9G. It was like taking off body armour - which perhaps I should have worn. Still, I convinced myself, it ought to give me a slight edge over the locals.

Having passed through what passed for customs, I headed straight for a vehicle-rental booth and hired a robo-car. I directed it to the former location of Mr Combs's body and sat back as it whisked me through the busy, indifferent streets. The local police would have been all over the place already, but I wanted to get the feel of it myself. I'd researched Mr Combs over lunch; he must have been street-smart given his line of work, and he didn't strike me as the kind of guy who would stray into a dodgy area by accident. Still, even smart guys can be unlucky.

The car pulled up at the end of the alley and, after glancing around cautiously, I got out. This was a rough part of town all right. Disused warehouses, twisted chain-link fences, small huddled groups of homeless drifters, or worse. The light was already starting to fade; I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. I directed the car to circle around town for half an hour and started walking up the alley to the spot where Combs came to rest.

It didn't take long to reach it. I recognised all the little details of the crumbling grey wall that I'd seen in the news footage. It was overlooked only by the back of a warehouse. A good spot for murder. There was nothing there now apart from a couple of rain-smearred bereavement messages - the usual stuff - and the remains of what had obviously been some very fine wreaths. Fucking savages couldn't even respect the dead.

As if on cue, a straggly-haired hobo shuffling down the alley in my direction made his presence felt with a cough. I wheeled round and made him aware that I was carrying. He coughed again and gave me a little nod intended to indicate his harmlessness. I kept my eyes on him as he approached.

"Friend o' the murdered guy?" His raspy voice suggested he was even better acquainted with lethal brandy than I had once been. So did the smell.

"Yeah."

"My pal Nate found him - called police too. Bloody ugly sight his neck was. Tiny hole, all the way through." He gestured accordingly. "Took Nate in for questioning all day. He got three meals out o' them, though."

"Bully for Nate. Did anyone see anything?"

He smiled, betraying a serious lack of dental hygiene. "You ain't a friend. You're police, ain't you? Come to bother us again. Plain-clothes police..."

He touched the jacket and I flipped. I grabbed his neck with my left hand and slammed him into the wall, drawing my gun with my right and pressing it hard against his temple. He took it pretty calmly.

"Listen, fucker," I spat, "I was a friend of this man. I'm not the police and I don't give a damn about your rights. If you know something about this, you'd better fucking tell me. If they can't solve his murder, they sure as hell won't solve yours."

He chuckled warmly, as if we were discussing some foul in a hockey game or how funny kids are. "Won't solve yours either."

I just glared at him, breathing hard. He wasn't as dumb as he looked. Unlike myself.

"You need to chill, pal. Waving that thing around won't get you nowhere in this town - 'cept like your friend. Police already been all over here, asking everyone. Nobody saw nothing - 'cept Ol' Hoy-tens reckons he maybe heard the bike go past. Says he was half asleep."

"When? Where was he?"

The hobo smiled again, and glanced pleadingly at the gun. I decided to relax the pressure on his skull, then carefully holstered it, maintaining eye contact and keeping a firm grip on his collar.

"Spare any credits?" He inclined his head towards the folded-up datapad poking out of my inside pocket. It was my turn to laugh.

"A transaction with you? No thanks." I fished in another pocket. "You can have these - packet of mints. All I got. Improve that breath of yours."

"No need to get personal." He took them, grinning. I waited, figuring he had nothing else to do.

"Hoy-tens was round the corner." He gestured further along the road from which I'd come. "Says he heard like a high whining noise, like a bike."

"What time?"

"He don't know. Maybe two, three. Hoy-tens is kinda confused anyways."

"That's it? He didn't hear a struggle?"

"That's it, Serpico. You gonna let go o' my collar now?" I obliged him, stepping back a pace. Either the drifters were lying, or... Well, it was plausible. But there seemed enough people around for someone to have seen Combs turning into the alley at least. He must have been one stealthy biker.

"Did anyone see the bike set on fire?"

"On Mariner Lane, weren't it? No, no one I know saw it. Police found no evidence either. Guy got clean away." He popped a mint, straightened his crumpled jacket, nodded a shambolic farewell and then shuffled off.

"Your friend drove his fancy bike up the wrong alley," he called as he disappeared into the lengthening shadows.

Possibly he did. But maybe he had a good reason. A business meeting of some sort? Who would be shady enough - and yet trusted enough - for Combs to meet in this godforsaken place?

The car returned just as I was starting to get worried, and I gratefully climbed in and directed it back towards the centre of town. I flicked open my datapad and brought up the list of friends and associates Mrs Combs had provided me with.

Maybe it was a friend. Maybe they offed Combs so they could have a crack at his rich widow. Or it might have been the other way around. Maybe Combs was the jealous type and suspected one of his friends of sleeping with the missus. Maybe he brought the friend to the alley with the intention of killing him, but bungled it and wound up dead himself... Nah, it didn't add up.

I isolated the names associated with the casino and ran searches on the ten most important-looking. They all seemed fairly clean - but then, they would. One name had a few more "cleared of any involvement"-type stories surrounding it than most: Zander Ford. I did some further digging. Ford's was the biggest stake in the casino, followed by Combs's - now Mrs Combs's. He was well groomed, in his late forties, with dark quiffed-up hair, a muscular build and a square jaw. He wore shades in a lot of his pictures. I didn't like him.

I spotted the sort of nondescript hotel I was looking for, directed the car into the garage and checked in. My room was even smaller than my cabin on the Gecko. I headed out again immediately and bought myself a coat from a nearby department store, to better match the natives. Outside on the pavement I flicked open my datapad again as the rainbow-fringed sun dissolved into the horizon and a mag-train swept by overhead. Ford was divorced, and living in a wealthy suburb called Rembrandt Park. I'd never tailed anyone in my life, but I couldn't think of anything better to do.

An hour or so later I was parked a few doors down the street from Ford's, eating a takeout rice dish and trying to look nonchalant for the occasional passer-by. The tree-lined avenue was sturdy and serene in the early evening breeze, each house a glittering palace of prosperity. Ford's was a mock-classical affair, all pillars and cornices and earnest, athletic statues. The lights were on, but nothing was stirring apart from a robot fussing over the petunias.

A young couple walked past, chatting merrily about something second cousin Marsha had supposedly said and dolled up like characters from an antique play - probably on the way to some dinner party. Theirs was a life far more remote to me than that of my hobo and his pals. What the hell was I doing down here, playing the detective? I didn't even know whether Ford was home. I finished my rice and started watching a film on the datapad to pass the time.

Towards the end of it a sweeping beam of light caused me to look up. A limo had emerged from Ford's driveway and was heading towards me. I closed the 'pad and waited, finger on the ignition. It swept by and I counted to three, then fired her up, and was about to order a U-turn when another, rather ordinary vehicle exited Ford's and

headed the other way. It could have been the local plumbing engineer for all I knew, but I decided to follow that car instead.

It took me back across town, over a busy interchange and then into another leafy suburb, kind of a scaled-down, homelier version of the one I'd just left. Eventually the car turned into a cul-de-sac; I continued on for a bit, then parked and walked back. Looking at the map, I saw I was in an area roughly between the camera position where Combs was last seen alive and the hobos' alley. Which might have meant something or nothing at all.

I rounded the corner into the cul-de-sac and saw that the car was parked in front of a small, vine-covered apartment building at the end. Attached to the left of the building as it faced me was a frosted-glass stairwell; I could make out a figure ascending. I cautiously moved closer, keeping in the shadows of the hedges. The figure continued climbing to the third and final floor. On the landing was a section of clear glass, hopefully allowing me to see whoever it was before they entered the apartment. I held up my datapad, activated the cam view and zoomed in as far as I could.

Just then I heard a rustle off to my side. I turned, startled, to see a man half-concealed among the trees to the left of the neighbouring property, staring at me. I barely had time to process this information before he sprinted away towards the back of the building. Not thinking, I ran after him, round the hedge and up the driveway, somehow managing to pocket the datapad and draw my gun at the same time. Only when I reached the trees did the fear kick in like a boot to the stomach, forcing me to stop and listen, as my heart hammered away beneath my holster. He was still moving. I started running again, towards the sound, trying to suppress the thought of a laser suddenly punching a hole in my brain, maybe through the eye... I was round the back of the building now; I could hear the vid screen in one of the ground-floor apartments. Hockey as usual - but I would have given almost anything at that moment to be in there on the other side of the wall. I considered yelling, then I saw the man again in the light from one of the windows, rounding the far corner. I followed at a half-run, willing myself to be silent, giving the corner a wide berth as I approached it. I slowed and ducked down behind a bush, almost slipping. Gun hand shaking slightly, I listened again. Nothing, apart from distant domestic noises and a car passing back on the main road. I slowly peered round the side of the bush.

There was a swimming pool, the rippling water black as oil. Behind it and to the right, more trees - big, gently waving palms, casting complex, intermingling shadows on the lawn. Beyond these, the glass stairwell I'd been watching less than a minute ago. Close by the building, a deserted patio with a few tables and chairs and hefty stone plant pots; the man must have run straight onto it. But where did he go? Clockwise around the building again? Into the trees and away over the far wall? Or was he still lurking amongst the trees? Or crouched behind one of the plant pots?

I backed away into deeper cover and waited another five minutes. Then I started to feel safer, and a little ridiculous. The guy had probably been some petty thief, or maybe another drifter who'd wandered away from the herd in a drug-addled haze. Meanwhile, I'd lost sight of my objective, literally. Who might not even be important. Fuck it, I thought. I holstered the gun and whipped out the datapad, zooming into the depths of the trees, the plant pots, everything in sight. No mysterious man. I got up and walked towards the patio, and thence around to the front of the building. As I turned the corner, I half-expected him to be there, but he wasn't.

I breathed a sigh of relief and returned my attention to the other building. The car was still there, and there were no shadows in the stairwell. I decided to move round to the back of the property to see if I could get a glimpse through any of the top-floor windows. Then I could run a face search and call it a night - though God knows what I would do in the morning. I headed back down the driveway to the pavement and resumed my approach to the far building - and to my horror, I heard someone right behind me. I turned, reaching desperately for the gun, and received a sharp blow to the back of the head. I collapsed instantly.

I'm not sure how long I was out. I came to with a throbbing pain just above the neck, which made sense, though that wasn't very gratifying. I reached round groggily to feel the affected area - it hurt to touch, but it wasn't wet. Then I realised a figure was standing over me. I looked up and tried to focus on their face. It was Ford.

Chapter Two

Two things kept me from panicking. The first was the pain dulling my senses, making it all seem unreal. The second was Ford's expression - not angry or gloating, but calm and slightly curious.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his tone measured, unthreatening. My brain didn't appear to be functioning, so to buy some time, I awkwardly hauled myself up into a sitting position. I could feel a metal weight pressing against my chest and it took me a moment to appreciate what this meant: I was still armed. Why would his goon have left me armed?

He watched me, waiting, motionless. I didn't fancy trying anything. I wasn't even sure I could stand. Now I saw something else in his eyes, something that told me his calmness was just a facade, a calculation, and his mood could switch at any moment. I had to say something - anything. I grinned hopelessly.

"Three tabs," I slurred, waving three fingers in the air unsteadily. "S'all I had. Three little tabs. This guy was handing 'em out - would have been rude not to. And now she won't let me back in. Says I'm off my head - get lost, go to Tony's or something. All I am's a little up, you know? A little wired. Three tabs! Bitch needs to chill out. Needs to take one herself, have some fun for a change. Off my head, she says. Do I look off my head, pal? I don't fucking think so."

Ford took in my performance impassively, then snorted in disgust. "Fucking addicts," he sneered. I maintained my grin as best I could, as he hovered for a moment, uncertainly. I was about to launch into another pathetic diatribe when, to my immense relief, he turned and walked to his car.

"Merry Christmas to you!" I called after him, recklessly. But he didn't stop. I thought about drawing my gun, but the pain in my head reasserted itself, and then he was in the car and moving away. I sat there dumbly as he turned out of the cul-de-sac and disappeared.

After a few more seconds I forced myself to my feet, triggering a rush of light-headed nausea, and drew the gun at last. I looked all around me, pointing the weapon in every direction, trying not to be sick. I couldn't see anything in the shadows, but then I hadn't before. Slowly I began backing away towards the main road, before abandoning any semblance of stealth and half running, half stumbling round the corner and back to my car.

I reached it and made to open the door, but found myself vomiting in the gutter instead. Eventually I was able to get in and I directed it back to the hotel, slumping into the seat exhausted as it whisked me away to apparent safety. Should have said no when she said casino. I drifted into unconsciousness, only stirring again when the car pulled into the hotel garage.

I woke around ten, fully dressed but with a clear head, courtesy of the med patch I'd pressed against my skull before collapsing on the bed. A good thing I'd brought it with me. I peeled it off, wincing as I removed a couple of hairs in the process, then examined the affected area in the shaving mirror. I'd live. I removed my clothes, putting them in the laundry bin, and hit the shower.

Had I learned anything the previous night? I wasn't sure. I could still go back to Mrs Combs, return the money, say I'd done my best. But first I wanted to see who lived in that apartment, maybe go over there. Hopefully now it was daylight I wouldn't receive another bump on the head. I exited the shower and dressed in the only other clothes I'd brought with me, then flicked open the datapad - another thing my mystery assailant hadn't taken from me - and started searching. I worked out that I'd been in Barents Close, and the building was called Orion House. After a bit more hunting around, I found one obscure reference to the occupants - depending on how the apartments were numbered, the top floor was most likely inhabited by a Ms A Rosenberg. Or had been at least.

Ms A Rosenberg didn't sound too dangerous. Probably just some woman Ford was screwing. But why all the secrecy? Ford wasn't married, and Esveor was fairly liberal so far as I could tell. I decided to pay her a visit.

I directed the car straight into the cul-de-sac and parked right in front of the building. In daylight Barents Close seemed entirely devoid of menace; the buildings were bathed in warm, soft light, the gardens were as colourful as a child's painting, the shade under the trees was gentle and inviting. A cat regarded me lazily from a gatepost; a stunted old-timer was instructing a small robot on one of the lawns. Just try it now, mystery man.

I ascended the stairs to the third floor, enjoying that ten-per-cent-reduced gravity, then arrived at the door: a light sort of wood with a gold number seven on it. If a bunch of psychotic gangsters lay behind it, could I draw my gun in time? I knocked and waited. I heard footsteps approaching the door, then a pause, and then it opened.

A young woman, redhead, probably in her twenties. She was quite short, as per the planet description, but she was certainly not fat. She was lithe and she was lovely, in a red silk dress that left precious little to the imagination. Her face was delicately dusted with freckles, and her eyes were a quite startling, unnatural green. I might not have liked him, but Ford definitely had taste.

"Can I help you?" She leaned against the door, a puzzled frown creasing her perfect forehead.

"Are you Ms A Rosenberg?"

"Ann Rosenberg, yes."

"I'm Jack Voysey." I gave her a quick flash of the PI licence, like I'd been working the precinct for a decade. "I'm investigating a disturbance in the street last night. May I come in?"

"Of course, officer. Come through to the living room." I followed her along the hallway, trying not to look but failing utterly. "I didn't hear anything last night. When did it happen?"

"Around 9.30. An elderly man in one of the other buildings reported it. Says he saw a scuffle between two men in the street outside his window - one tried to pull a gun and the other knocked him unconscious and ran away."

She motioned for me to sit on a large white sofa. The apartment was expensively furnished; whatever Ms Rosenberg did for a living - and I had my suspicions - evidently paid well. She seated herself carefully in an elegantly carved chair opposite, crossing her legs in a quick, jerky motion.

"I'm afraid I have no idea who they could have been. Normally the neighbourhood is fairly safe."

Her expression was one of polite concern, and nothing more. Time to test the waters a little.

"Well, I was hoping you might be able to suggest some possibilities. You see, the elderly neighbour says that a short time after the second man had run off, he saw another man leave your building and stop to talk to the first man, lying on the ground. Says he thinks this third man was visiting your apartment."

Her frown deepened. "Kind of nosy, this neighbour, isn't he?"

"Most neighbours are. He swears he's seen this man visiting you before."

She smiled faintly and reached for a cigarette from the packet on the table beside her.

"A lot of men visit me, Officer... Voysey, wasn't it? Sometimes women too." She lit up, inhaled and blew smoke from her soft, scarlet lips; it curled in the air between us. "No doubt last night's visitor was curious as to why there was a man lying on the ground outside. He probably wanted to check that he was all right."

"Probably. But you understand I have to follow these things up."

"Of course. I understand."

"So I'd like to know the name of your visitor and your relationship to him, if you wouldn't mind."

She smiled again, more frostily this time. "Is this an official investigation, officer?"

I half-smiled back at her. "It may relate to a murder committed three weeks ago."

She was good, but she wasn't that good; I caught a slight flicker in her eyes. Now I knew I was on to something.

"A murder?" she asked, as naturally as she could, drawing on her cigarette again.

"I'm afraid so. Might I use your bathroom, Ms Rosenberg?"

She eyed me warily through the growing cloud of smoke. "Of course. It's along the hallway, second door to your right."

"Thank you."

I rose and walked back to the hallway. She couldn't see me as long as she remained where she was. In truth, I didn't know what I was going to say when I returned. All I could do was throw Combs and Ford's names at her and see if she buckled. I passed an open doorway to the left; judging by the large, sumptuously cushion-covered bed, that was where business was conducted. I tried to stay focused.

I decided to "mistakenly" open the wrong door - the one opposite the bathroom. I peered in - a small spare room, with a desk, a bookcase and a single bed. A room where little Ann could lose the silk and be herself. I soft-shoed over to the desk and took a quick look in the drawers. Nothing remarkable - tacky holiday souvenirs, stationery, broken toys and other knick-knacks, a few old-fashioned paper receipts, mostly in her name, with one or two in the name of Alexander Conrad. Maybe a pimp or an old boyfriend. I took a datapad snap and turned to sneak back to the hallway, then I noticed a picture on the wall beside the door. I moved in closer, and froze. It was him - my mystery attacker. Smiling in shorts on a beach beside a pink ocean - another time, another place, but unmistakably him.

My mind raced. Was he her pimp? Her lover? A former lover, attacking her clients out of jealous revenge? Had he seen me come up to the apartment?

I quickly snapped the picture and ran a face search, adding in the name Alexander Conrad to see if I got lucky. Bingo: Commander Alexander Conrad, space trader, Cobra Mk III pilot, DOB 6/4/3099; volunteered for the reserve Navy 3/1/3136, 53rd squadron, MIA 29/8/3136, presumed deceased; survived by Ann Conrad, née Rosenberg. Ann's husband, who supposedly died five years ago on the frontier, back from the dead.

A very profitable trip to the bathroom, unless I'd given her time to arm herself, or call for help... I quickly left the room - and found Ann walking up the hallway towards me.

"What do you think you're doing? That room is private!" Her dainty hands were clenched into fists; she may have been small, but that didn't mean she couldn't kill me. With Ford to dispose of the body...

"Where is he, Ann? Where's your husband?" I stared down at her as she kept approaching, fighting the urge to draw my gun.

"He's dead! Alex is dead! And you're not a policeman. Show me your badge."

"He was here last night. I know he was. And I just want to talk to him."

She stopped about two feet away. "You're one of Zander's boys - and not a very smart one. Do you know what he'll do to you when I tell him you've been pestering me?" She was shaking with rage - and fear too.

"I think he killed someone. Sam Combs, Ann. Was he a client of yours?" The flicker betrayed her; I went all out. "Does Alex hate what you've become, Mrs Conrad?"

Her alien eyes burned up at me - silent fury. "I'm calling the police - the real police - so I suggest you leave now."

She turned and hurried back to the living room. I made for the front door.

"Tell them the ghost of Sam Combs was looking for your husband," I called after her.

I descended the stairs two at a time and made it to the car with my skull intact.

No Conrad in the rear view as I swung out of the close. I opened the datapad, ran a search for Ann Rosenberg and got her DOB - 13/5/3114 - and official occupation: "performer". And then some. I brought up Conrad's picture again and pondered.

It certainly made sense. Conrad marries a girl much younger than him; she probably stays planetside while he's off trading computers and alloys and whatnot. Maybe relations get strained between them, maybe he suspects her of having an affair, or maybe he just wants to prove himself a hero - for whatever reason, he signs up for a Navy tour, a year away on the frontier. Something happens out there - something that keeps him away, perhaps for the whole five years. Thargoids aren't known for taking prisoners, so maybe a heavy attack forced him to hyperspace out and he misjumped way off the map. Or maybe the rest of his unit got annihilated and he went crazy, deserted. He finally

returns, without reporting back to the Navy. He discovers his beloved wife has become a whore. Still tormented by his combat experiences, he takes his rage out on a client - the supposedly happily married Mr Combs - ambushing him after an appointment, knifing him through the neck and biking his corpse out to a deserted alley. Ann's guilty act meant that he'd been to see her, she knew he was back - and she knew that he'd killed. Conrad attacking me meant that he wasn't finished yet - maybe he intended to kill me too, but someone disturbed him before he could stick in the knife. I was sweating badly.

Meanwhile, she thought that I was "one of Zander's boys" - and therefore presumably that Ford was looking for Conrad. She made out that she was big pals with Ford, yet it seemed she didn't want him to find her hubby - conflicting loyalties. Did Ford want Conrad dead? Was he actually, far from being Combs's killer, seeking to avenge his former business partner? Ford was the sort of man the police would listen to - was a desire for bloody, personal vengeance the reason why he hadn't tipped them off?

One thing was certain: I had to find Conrad. I wasn't sure I could get the jump on him in Barents Close... but maybe I wouldn't have to. Once a spacer, always a spacer - and a Cobra Mk III isn't a ship you part with easily, especially if it's gotten you through a war intact. I directed the car to the spaceport.

I located an access terminal in the main lobby and called up a list of all the ships currently berthed. Only one Cobra Mk III - and with a different registration from the one in the file I'd found on Conrad, EK-975. I decided to check it anyway, strolling past a disinterested customs official and heading out to a pad on the far edge of the complex. A beautiful-looking ship, all shiny panels and bright red paint - it had to be no more than a year out of the yard. I gave it up and returned to the lobby. Back at the terminal, I called up the berths for each of the other three spaceports on Esveor, and the six Coriolis stations in orbit. Plenty of Cobras, but no EK-975.

Temporarily stumped, I decided to get some lunch in a bar just off the lobby area. It was a typical dive - metal-and-leather decor, greasy and worn; half a dozen short-arsed locals, similarly past their prime. And of course there was the hockey in the background. I took a seat at the bar and ordered a burger and a Coke.

No EK-975 - but if there had been, Ford would surely have found it. The guy wasn't dumb. He might have had his boys check all those Cobras for faked registrations too - something that would take me far too long on my own. Instinct told me that Conrad had stuck with his old ship, which meant that either the berthing lists were wrong, or he was currently out in the black, or... he'd landed rough.

A grizzled veteran was nursing an ale and watching the hockey a few seats along from me; I sidled over and took the stool next to him. He sized me up with grey eyes that had obviously seen a lot better and a lot worse. I held out my hand.

"Jack Voysey."

"Lars Peterson." A firm handshake. "Offworlder, huh?"

"Yeah. How did you guess?"

"Not many offworlders bother to come down to the surface."

"I was bored. I'm waiting for a job."

"Oh yeah? What do you fly?"

"Gecko."

He snorted, then looked sympathetic. "That's old. What you doing with one of those?"

"An inheritance. What about you?"

"I fly an Iguana. Twin beams, 3.7LM, extra energy unit."

"Nice. What's your rating?"

He scowled. "Poor. You know, that always rankles me. 21 kills, 21 fuckers I got the edge on, and I'm apparently 'poor'."

"The EF ratings are insane. I guess they wanted to discourage complacency or something. Still, it could be worse - I'm Mostly Harmless."

"You did that in a Gecko? You deserve a medal."

"No, it was mostly in a Viper. I used to be a cop."

"Oh yeah?" He reappraised me. "How come you left?"

I lied. "I knew my luck was going to run out eventually."

"Smart kid. You go chasing the big ratings, you wind up orbiting a star in a million pieces. Legends are legends precisely because they're so fucking rare."

"G-g-goal!" blared the vid screen. Peterson put down his glass for some token applause. I cut to the chase.

"So, like I said, I'm not having much luck finding a job, and I was wondering if there are any rough-landing sites around here where I could maybe pick up some business."

He turned back to face me, eyebrows raised.

"You must really be desperate."

"I've been docked for a month."

"Ouch. Well, there is a place out to the west, Cooper's Crossing. 'Bout two hours by car. Flat land all around, with woods for cover. Small-time local traders land there to avoid docking fees. And attention. But I'm not sure they'd take kindly to an offworlder showing up out of the blue."

"I'll take my chances. Right now, I've got nothing else to do. Thanks for the info."

My burger arrived and we spent the next half hour shooting the shit: the Q bomb, the Thargoids, the usual spacer stuff. I finally made my excuses and left him to his game - an unassuming middle-aged survivor, kept alive by caution, quick reflexes and a decent ship.

Back in the lobby, I called up a map of the area west of Oort City on the datapad. There it was - Cooper's Crossing, apparently no more than a tiny village. On a whim, I had another look at Conrad's file. Among the few other details listed was his birthplace, Leidenville - a town only 20 kilometres from Cooper's Crossing. It felt right.

Before setting off, I figured I ought to check in with Mrs Combs. I put in a vid call on the 'pad and she answered within three rings, sitting down on a sofa in a large, wood-panelled room with a high ceiling - confirmation that Combs had made a good living.

"Mr Voysey. Are you making any progress?" She was wearing an elegant brown belted dress - a subtly seductive contrast to Ann Conrad/Rosenberg's red-hot passion.

"I believe so, Mrs Combs. I'm heading out of town for a few hours to follow up a lead."

Hope and a hint of suppressed anger crept across her features. "Do you... do you know who might have done it?"

"I've identified a possible suspect, yes, but I'd rather not say any more at this stage. I need to find some hard evidence."

She looked away, perhaps at a picture of her late husband, wringing her hands and murmuring to herself or to him. Then she regained her composure and nodded her acceptance.

"Could you update me in the morning? I won't be able to receive any calls this evening - I'll be dining at the casino."

"With Zander Ford?"

"Yes. He suggested it. Why?"

"Have a good evening, Mrs Combs."

The scenery was unremarkable as I headed out of town, chasing the falling sun. Plenty of time to reflect on my situation. What I needed was an out - evidence linking Conrad to Combs. Find his ship, find a way on board... find the murder weapon? It didn't seem very likely. If I found the ship, I'd probably have to surprise him or wait for him to show up... and then beat a confession out of him. Film it, send it anonymously to the police, report "job done" to Mrs Combs and then return to the Gecko. If I couldn't find the ship, or I didn't like the lie of the land, I'd have to return to Barents Close, see if anyone there saw anything, and, well, extract a confession - or at least a client list - from guilt-laden Ann. Somehow.

Which led me back to Ford. Unnaturally calm, violence seething beneath the surface - a gangster on the rise. Ann's behaviour told me he knew about Conrad - how did he know? Did one of his goons witness the murder? And making a date with widow Valerie - was he just being friendly, or taking advantage of his associate's demise, or had he somehow planned it? Ford's prints were all over everything - and his involvement could just fuck up my out.

The suburbs thinned away and I sped on into the countryside, the patchwork quilt I'd seen from the air. I loaded up another film to take my mind off it all.

A couple of hours later, with the sun setting, I arrived at the village of Cooper's Crossing. As the car took me along the main street, I wondered whether I'd let myself be led astray - there really was nothing to the place. A few small houses, one or two shops, a country tavern, and that was about it. I kept going past the last few buildings, a farmhouse and two metal silos. Then I heard it - the unmistakable sound of a spacefaring vessel descending through the atmosphere.

I stopped the car and looked up - an Adder, thrusters firing, heading down towards the ground further away from the village and a little to the north. It passed below the treeline and I got the car moving again, making a right when I spotted a likely turning. Eventually I came out into a large field surrounded by trees on all sides; there was the Adder dousing its landing lights, alongside another Adder and a Worm. Close by were some cargo containers and crude lifting equipment, a couple of tents, parked cars and trucks and maybe 20 people, small and mostly fat, a mixture of farmers and traders by the looks of things. They turned towards me as my car approached - hostile, suspicious of the stranger. The reassuring weight of my gun wasn't enough. I stopped the car next to the others, got out and walked over, trying to look tough yet nonchalant.

"This here's private property, offworlder. You having trouble directing your little car?" A red-bearded semi-dwarf, chewing on something foul. Sniggers from the group.

"I'm here to buy, if the price is right. Got a ship in orbit." I pointed up at the darkening sky.

"Have you now? How very exciting. Well, Cooper's is a local market, pal, and you ain't local."

I smiled and held out my arms in appeal. "I've been here a month, I've seen enough hockey to pass puck-shaped shits and I'm thinking of getting a farm. Surely you can bend the rules a little."

"Ain't you the comedian? Rules is rules, pal. What you doing down here anyways? Offworlders don't bother with the starports, never mind here."

"I told you - I'm buying. An acquaintance of mine needs some extra cargo for a delivery he's got lined up. I'm here to get it for him, at a fair price."

"What you after?" A sandy-haired rube in a hideous tartan coat.

"Liquor. I'm buying in bulk, so let's cut the crap."

Snorts of amusement. They all looked at a dark-haired guy, early middle-aged, with a coarse, pockmarked face. He was sizing me up, considering the potential profit.

"If you're buying liquor, you can start by buying me a drink."

We went in my car at my insistence - I couldn't just leave it on private property, now, could I? Scarface asked about my ship; I lied and said I flew a Cobra Mk I. I asked about him and he said his family owned the largest brewery in the area, before launching into a list of facts and figures that was mercifully cut short by our arrival at the tavern.

I had to stoop to get in the door - a smoky, dimly lit rustic dive, all wooden beams, wagon wheels and other assorted country crap. The locals stared, greeted my companion - "Juiceman", "Joss" - muttered amongst themselves, then went back to their hockey. Scarface opted for a table at the front, ordering several drinks on my behalf as I slid into the seat opposite him. All from the brewery, he told me proudly - they did everything from pink-coloured "Oort Lake Lager" to whisky "strong enough to make a Thargoid talk sense". I doubted anyone off the planet would care for any of it, but held my tongue. The drinks came and he pushed the whisky my way - I refused, mentioning my old brandy habit, and he laughed and said that just meant I'd built up an immunity. He urged me to try a dark ale instead; I took it and he started on a paler variety, rabbiting on about wheat types and trade and corrupt politicians between hefty gulps.

By the time I'd reached the bottom of the glass I was heartily sick of Cooper's Crossing. Scarface was already on his third, and getting increasingly animated, but his eyes stayed sharp - despite his size, I knew he could hold it. The brewery man was clearly trying to loosen me up before entering negotiations. Enough of this shit - time to get what I came for.

"So, do any bigger ships ever land out here?" I tried to sound casual.

"Occasionally, yeah, but not often. It's mostly the small ones. Oort City's got the monopoly on bulk trade, and we ain't got much room for the big haulers. Plenty of space for your Cobra, though."

"You ever get any Cobra IIIs?"

"Very rarely."

"Ah. There's a guy I used to know in this system who flies a Cobra III - I was wondering if you might have seen any landing around here recently."

His eyes narrowed - he didn't like it. He took a long gulp and then set down his glass.

"A free word of advice, pal. Mind your own business. We're honest folk out here, doing honest trade, but any prying outsiders are liable to meet with an accident, if you get my meaning. You're here to buy liquor, so let's stick to liquor. I'm going for a piss, and when I get back, we'll talk numbers."

I shrugged compliantly, inwardly seething; he stood up and walked to the men's room. The cheap alcohol and stuffy air were irritating my throat; the background hockey noise was doing my head in. I was wasting time - my out was slipping away from me. I got up and went after him.

He was just zipping up when I opened the door; I acted on reflex - as he turned towards me I drew my gun and cracked him across the face. He yelped and crashed into a cubicle wall, a little blood spraying from his nose. He made to move a hand inside his coat; in a panic I kicked him, cracked him again - he fell to the floor, desperately trying to brace himself. Before he could recover I pinned him down and shoved my gun in his face.

"Arms on the floor! Don't fucking move." He obliged, sensibly, eyes wide and breathing in short rasps, bubbling blood.

"I think... I think you broke a tooth."

"I'll break a lot more if you don't answer my questions, right now. And don't try calling out or I swear I'll fucking kill you. Is there a Cobra III around here?"

"I... I... No. No."

"You're lying." Crack. "Is there a fucking Cobra Mk III?"

"Okay! Yes! Yes! There is, yes. Please, just stop hitting me..."

"When did you see it, and where?"

"I... I didn't see it. Rudi saw it, I don't know, about six, seven weeks ago. He saw it landing far west of here, on the edge of Tolly's Wood. We thought the pilot would come to trade, but when he didn't we figured he was a fugitive, hiding out. We didn't like to pry."

"No one's seen him?"

"No one's seen anything since it landed."

It fit perfectly. "You'd better not be fucking lying to me."

"I swear I'm telling the truth. I swear."

Watching him carefully, I felt inside his coat for his gun, keeping my own trained on his head. I found it, pocketed it and stood up, then pulled out my datapad and tossed it onto his chest. "Show me on the map."

He unfolded the 'pad with shaky hands, tapped it a couple of times and turned it round to show me. Satisfied, I took it from him and tucked it back in my pocket. He awkwardly raised himself up with his elbows, much like I had when sprawled before Ford.

"You'll not get away with this. Once everyone finds out..."

"You'll tell them you were drunk and you fell over. You heard of Zander Ford? He runs a casino in the city, and a lot else besides. I work for him. You tell anyone about what happened here, and you'll be the one who meets with an accident. Got it?"

He nodded meekly. I stepped back to the door.

"I'll leave your gun on the kerb outside. Any noise, I keep it and use it to kill you."

"I... I understand."

"Good. Get a med patch for those cuts."

I left the room. The barman was hovering suspiciously close; I chucked him some hard currency without breaking my stride.

"Tell him I don't do deals with drunkards."

I kept on walking - not too fast, not too slow.

The darkness was oppressive as the car took me deeper and deeper into lightly forested nothingness; narrow roads became tracks and the traffic fell away from scarce to zero. I looked up at the sky and saw a Coriolis winking high above - my real life waiting for me if I could only get off this planet in one piece. I had the car take the long way round - if Conrad detected me out here, there'd be nothing to stop him finishing the job. And if "Juiceman" and co formed a lynch mob and found me... Just as bad. I killed the lights and gripped my gun.

The track I was on ran past the alleged landing site about two kilometres to the west. When I reached the closest point, I turned off and had the car move slowly through the trees as far as I could go - a couple of hundred metres. Nothing but black, silent forest all around me - a thousand times worse than the trees in Barents Close. I stopped the car and flipped open the datapad - the brightness already set to the absolute minimum. I noted my position, folded it up and got out.

Darkness all around, enveloping me; crisp night-time cold. I started walking. The only sounds were my own breath and footfalls and some strange nocturnal insect. He could get within ten feet of me and I'd probably never know. But then, on the flip side, he probably wouldn't see me either... unless he had night vision. I pressed on, shivering, my finger on the trigger.

Trees, trees and more trees - then eventually a clearing. I approached cautiously, treading as softly as I could, skirting round the edge. It was empty. I kept going for another 15 minutes, found another empty clearing - too small for a decent-sized ship - then crouched down and checked the 'pad. I'd passed right over the point Scarface had indicated. The fucker could have lied to me, or Conrad could have left, or it might just have been someone else. But assuming he hadn't lied, his friend would have had difficulty identifying the exact landing spot from such a distance. I doubled back and began systematically searching the whole area.

An hour later I was thinking I'd wasted an entire evening. Maybe in the morning I could head back up to the Gecko and do an aerial search - though that might alert him. Then I spotted another clearing off to my right - and looming beyond the trees, a huge metal shape. Fear and triumph hit me simultaneously. I crept closer, staying as low as I

could. Unmistakable - the wide, angular form of a Cobra Mk III, a lethal beauty in the dark. No lights, ramp up and not a sound to be heard. No way to tell if he was on board.

I didn't fancy trying it - not until it was lighter. I retreated 50 metres or so, opened the datapad and estimated the most likely direction for him to approach from. Then I relocated to the safest place and hunkered down to wait. I began to feel the cold again. I had to keep forcing myself not to think of him creeping up behind me, blade out. I wanted to sleep; I couldn't sleep. Time dragged - I longed for the dawn.

A slow fade, a rainbow glow on the horizon, and then light at last. The first rays burst through the trees and caught the hull, making it sparkle - silver and blue, with plenty of battle scars. No movement, no changes of any kind. Fuck it. I stood up stiffly and crept towards the clearing. Circling around, I made out the registration: EK-876. Telltale newish panels and paint - almost certainly partially faked. Conrad's ship.

With the ramp up, there was only one way to get on board - through the emergency hatch at the top, if I could open it. Normally it would have been impossible to get to - but Conrad had landed hard against the edge of the clearing, clipping a few branches by the looks of things. Time to do something I'd not done since I was a boy - climb a tree. I sneaked up to the best option, wincing at the slightest crackle underfoot. Then I reluctantly holstered my gun and made my way up, sweating with the effort of trying to stay silent. Willing myself not to look down, and wishing the gravity was much, much lower, I carefully inched my way along a branch that took me out over the edge of the hull. As I got further out, it started to bend slightly, pressing into the metal and making my stomach do somersaults. Then I transferred onto the ship, ever so gingerly, and climbed up to the very top.

A thought had occurred to me while I was climbing: steal it. If Conrad was on board asleep, then so be it - I could get my confession, knock him out and kick him down the ramp. If he wasn't, even better - assuming he hadn't locked out the controls, I could take off, contact Mrs Combs, lay out the case for Conrad (minus the detail about her husband fucking a whore), advise her to go to the police, then break orbit and claim salvage a few systems away. Fly back, sell the Gecko... I reached the hatch. I tried it - it was locked. So much for getting rich quick.

I stood there, pacing the top of the hull, pondering my next move. I scouted the terrain - and I spotted something on the far side of the clearing below. A patch of earth a different colour to the surrounding soil. Newly dug ground - something had been buried.

I descended as fast as I could, though it was even worse going down. My feet hit the soil and I looked around for something to dig with, excitement overcoming my caution. Eventually I found a random piece of metal and scurried over to the site. After ten minutes of frantic, furtive, exhausting digging, I reached a large plastic sheet containing... well, it was a burial all right. I peeled back the top of the sheet - a dark-haired man, tough-looking, maybe late thirties, with a laser hole burned clean through his head.

Chapter Three

I'd seen laser wounds before, but this was different - up close, disturbingly surreal. I felt queasy and looked away. A second victim, presumably killed by Conrad as well. Was he another of Ann's clients? Or one of Ford's men who'd followed the same leads I had?

Cold fear seized me - I quickly got out the 'pad and took a picture, then I replaced the sheet and re-buried the corpse as fast as I could. When it was done and the ground looked more or less the same as before, I drew my gun and beat a swift retreat to my best-guess defensive position. Once I'd safely hit the dirt, I got out the 'pad again and started a face search.

As it was running I suddenly heard something - an electric hum, getting closer. A car. Fuck. I pocketed the 'pad and aimed my gun at the space beneath the ship, listening, heart thumping, willing myself to blend into the surroundings. Thank God - it was on the other side of the clearing. I heard the car stop and then faint noises - he was walking towards the ship, towards me. At last I saw him - Conrad, dressed in a grey trench coat, looking agitated. I followed him with my gun as he hit a remote, causing the ramp to descend from the Cobra. A long shot to make with a handgun, but if he just stopped moving... I rested the gun on a tree root, holding it steady, sighting perfectly. He stopped just before the ramp. Now was the time. Now. But I couldn't do it. I didn't know - and if I killed him, I might never know.

The ramp hit the ground with a thud. To my surprise, he didn't get on board - he stayed where he was, thinking, calculating. Did he know I was there? I thought about standing up - "Freeze! PI!" - but the shot would have been even harder. And it would have sounded ridiculous. I waited, wondering what was on his mind. Then I heard a ringing noise - Conrad pulled out a small audio-only comms device. I strained to listen, catching half of his side of the conversation.

"... I want it transferred ... Unacceptable ... in public ... Where's table 11? ... there at eight ... Remember what I'm capable of."

He ended the call, pocketing the device, and charged up the ramp looking even more agitated - frightened, even. He hit the remote on the way up and the ramp retracted back into the hull.

"Table 11", "there at eight" - I reckoned he was headed for the casino that evening. Ford's turf - my bet was he was talking to Ford. "I want it transferred" - some kind of deal between them. "In public" - they didn't trust each other. "Remember what I'm capable of" - Conrad threatening Ford, presumably referring to dead guy number two and probably Combs as well.

Putting it all together, it looked like Conrad was blackmailing Ford, perhaps in league with his lovely wife. Pay up or the world finds out about your whoring - or maybe worse; maybe Ford had revealed something incriminating during pillow talk. Ford hadn't taken the threat seriously, and so Conrad had murdered two of his associates, just to show he wasn't to be trifled with. It made sense - except that Conrad somehow didn't come across as being a ruthless killer. He looked nervous, out of his depth. "Unacceptable", "Where's table 11?" - he didn't seem to be the one in control. But then there was the corpse and his performance the other night in Barents Close - he was clearly capable of killing.

With that in mind, I figured I should quit while I was ahead. I got up and slowly backed away from the clearing, only turning around when I could no longer see the ship. I walked fast until I was well out of range, then checked the map and jogged the rest of the way back to the car. I got in, relieved, and directed it to return to the track and then to the hotel. As it picked its way through the last few trees, I checked on the progress of the face search. It was complete: no match. The car cleared the woods and exhaustion finally caught up with me; I fell asleep as it accelerated away.

For the second time, I was jolted into consciousness by the car pulling into the hotel garage. I checked my watch: 11.13am. Just under nine hours to go before Conrad attempted to cash in his chips, perhaps literally. Remembering Mrs Combs's request, I thought about what I was going to say to her, then put in a call.

"Mr Voysey." She was immaculately dressed again, in a white jumper and trousers. It looked like she was in her bedroom.

"Mrs Combs. You requested an update."

She nodded expectantly. "Did you manage to get your evidence?"

"I got another dead body. Male, dark hair, largish build, possibly late thirties."

"My God. Who..."

"No match on a face search. Could you have a look at a picture for me, tell me if you recognise him?"

"I... Okay."

"No wounds, I promise. Hang on..." I cropped out everything above the eyes and sent it.

"God... No, I don't know him. Do you think he was killed by the same person?"

"It looks that way, yes."

"Do you... do you know who did it?" She was back to the hand-wringing.

"I'm still not certain, but I believe it was someone connected with Zander Ford."

"Zander? Connected in what way?" She looked stunned, horrified.

"That's what I'm going to find out. I've got a lead that whoever it is may be at the casino tonight."

Her hands shook. "Are you saying that Zander..."

"He may have had nothing to do with it - I don't know yet. And you mustn't say anything about this - you have to act normally, with him and everyone else. Are you alone in the house, Mrs Combs?"

"No, we... I have a valet."

"Try to always have someone around, whether you're at home or outside. I don't believe you're in danger, but you shouldn't take any chances. Stay away from the casino for now, and don't answer any of my calls if someone might overhear."

"I understand. Have you... do the police know about the second body?"

"Not as far as I know. And telling them now could mean a no-show tonight at the casino. I may tip them off tomorrow - I'll update you then."

"Okay." She paused, considering whether to say something else. "Be careful."

"Always." I ended the call.

I bought a snack bar from a vending machine in the hotel lobby and ate it on the way up to my room, imagining myself as something more than her hired help, and dismissing the thought before I reached the door. My clothes from the previous morning had been returned, clean and folded - not exactly formal evening wear, but they'd have to do. I hit the "Do not disturb" button, set an alarm, stripped and got into bed. As I drifted off, images replayed in my mind - Valerie Combs smiling sadly beside me; Conrad lurking in the shadows; Ford looking down at me, eerily calm; Ann leaning against the door, then her eyes, burning everything; the eyes of the dead man, glassy cold.

I woke again around five, beating the alarm, feeling physically weak but alert once more. I showered and dressed and headed out to a small cafe on the corner, wolfing down some greasy local meat dish. Then I went back for the car and directed it to the city's entertainment district - way too early, but I had nothing else to do. The traffic was heavy as I approached the area's main drag. It started to rain, and the flashing street signs, criss-crossing vehicles and overhead mag-trains blurred into some kind of neon-and-grey Impressionist panorama. I opened the 'pad and tried the local radio - some industrial rock, then a hockey station, then some slow, ancient jazz.

Midway through the second track, all piano and double bass and sultry vocals, I caught sight of it - the Casino De Luxe, a four-storey marble-and-glass monster whose garishly lit facade ran for almost half a block. I had the car turn and dive down into the parking garage, then I got out and took a lift up to the ground floor, along with a short, fat, well-groomed couple who stood as far away from me as possible. The doors opened and we walked over to a cloakroom, before moving on to the security people - Mr and Mrs Plump had nothing to declare; I surrendered my

gun to a shaven-headed tough, then followed them through a scanner and got the all-clear nod on the other side. An archway led me out onto the casino floor.

It was an impressive, if rather gaudy, sight. The ceiling was at least two storeys up, and dripping with chandeliers that appeared to hover in mid-air at various heights. The decor was mainly white, powder blue and gold, with huge gilt-framed oil paintings depicting all manner of military and agricultural triumphs competing with vid screens for wall space. Several large balconies overlooked the central gaming areas, which together contained maybe 50 tables - some roulette, some cards. The floor was a vast swathe of immaculate red-and-black patterned carpet, and around the edges were rows of slot machines and combat simulators, sumptuous leather seating and a long bar that stocked many hundreds of beverages on its orange-backlit shelves.

Populating this brashly luxurious scene were scores of Esveor's fattest and finest, laughing and yapping and recklessly spending - it may have been early, but already the place was doing a very healthy trade. Wondering just how much Mrs Combs made a year, I headed for the bar and paid through the nose for a Coke with a dash of whisky. I checked my watch - over an hour to go. Hopefully if Ford put in an appearance he wouldn't recognise me - or if he did, he'd just assume I was embarking on another night of hedonism.

I wandered over to the tables with my drink, casually looking for number 11. I found it - a blackjack table in the middle of several others, all fairly busy with punters. The minimum bet on 11 was 25 credits - pretty damn steep. I watched the game at a nearby table for a little while, then went to try my luck on one of the simulators. In 40-odd minutes I reached Above Average, before running out of change and extra lives. Thargoid nonsense ringing in my ears, I returned to the bar for another drink, then found a leather armchair with a reasonable view of table 11 and settled back to watch the show.

Conrad emerged from the archway two minutes early, dressed in a black suit and looking composed and determined. He headed for a counter next to the bar to buy some chips, then walked over to the table and sat down almost bang on the dot. There were three other players already there - an elderly gent, with his wife beside him; a woman maybe in her forties, all pearls and hairdo; and a young career-Navy lieutenant, resplendently pudgy in his maroon-and-grey uniform. If Conrad was nervous about sitting next to a military man, he didn't show it. His fellow gamblers acknowledged him with polite nods and hellos.

The round ended and everyone placed their bets for the next one - Conrad pushed about half of his chips forward, prompting a few raised eyebrows. The cards were dealt, and Navy Boy whistled and downed his drink. Old Guy played his hand, going bust, Pearls took a card, then opted to stand, and both Navy Boy and Conrad took no extra cards. Then the dealer played, and coughed up to Pearls and Conrad. So there it was - Ford was paying off his whore's dead husband with casino money. No suspicious withdrawal from his bank account - and of course, he was spreading the cost among his fellow shareholders.

A waitress arrived with another drink for Navy Boy, and the players placed their bets again. Conrad was more cautious this time, and with good reason - the house cleaned up. On to round three - and he pushed another lofty stack of chips forward. Navy Boy whistled a second time, then exclaimed aloud as Conrad split his hand, matching the first stack with a second. The dealer went bust; Conrad scored a shitload of casino coin.

By round 15 a large crowd had gathered to gawp at the action, gasping and applauding and blocking my view. I decided to risk detection and got up to join them. Conrad was smiling awkwardly; he looked a little uncomfortable with the press of people. In front of him were a dozen or so chip stacks in various colours - I estimated about 40,000 credits. This mighty haul dwarfed the relatively modest piles of the other players - Pearls was on about 2,000, and Navy Boy and Old Guy were almost done. The lieutenant wasn't taking it too well; he was finishing up yet another drink, red in the face and muttering under his breath. I noticed that a couple of security guys were eyeing him carefully.

The round concluded with the dealer only paying out to Old Guy; Conrad lost about 500 credits - chicken feed by now. The crowd murmured excitedly as the players prepared to bet again - and Conrad pushed forward a stack of ten purple chips, worth 500 credits each. Gasps and cries of amazement all round; Navy Boy shook his head in disbelief, then decided to follow suit, committing all of his remaining chips - about 150 credits. The cards were dealt - Navy Boy got two fives, Conrad got a queen and a four, and the dealer got a six. Old Guy and Pearls took their turns; Old Guy chose to stand on 17, Pearls went bust. A hush descended as Conrad tapped the table - he got a six. Onlookers whistled, whispered to each other how lucky this guy was. Navy Boy tapped and got an eight; he was sweating and scowling. Then all eyes turned to the dealer. He flipped over a jack, making 16; everyone held their breath. Then he hit and got a three - 19. Navy Boy had lost; Conrad had won 5,000 credits.

The crowd erupted, applauding Conrad, commiserating Navy Boy. Conrad turned to shake the lieutenant's hand - but the defeated player was glaring at the last card, shaking with rage, slowly rising to his feet. He pointed a trembling finger at the dealer. "This table is rigged!"

Gasps of shock - no one seemed to know what to say or do. The dealer looked hurt, but tried to be conciliatory. "Sir, it's just the luck of the cards. You played very well..."

"It's rigged!" Before anyone could react, Navy Boy lunged forward, grabbed the dealer by a lapel and punched him in the face. Women screamed, men tried to grab hold of him and security belatedly sprang into action, muscling in and dragging him away from the table. For a moment all was chaos; the whole casino was buzzing with alarm and excitement. Everyone watched as the lieutenant was escorted forcefully off the floor, shouting accusations. Then they turned their attention to the assaulted croupier, leaning against the table and clutching his face. A floor-manager type rushed over, calling to the bar for a med patch. Several punters ushered the dealer into a chair, fussing over him, and the rest of the crowd remarked on how terrible it was, how they'd never seen anything like it there before, and the officer was obviously inebriated and would probably be very sorry when he sobered up.

Amidst the commotion, I looked at Conrad. He was watching the dealer uneasily, fingering his chips, probably wondering the same thing I was: had it been an act for his benefit? Whatever he'd expected to happen, it clearly hadn't involved a punch-up. Nor a change of dealer - as the floor manager realised the poor guy couldn't continue and had a girl come over to replace him, Conrad turned white as a sheet. He did his best to look calm while the suit apologised to everyone and led the injured staffer away - then the girl was gathering up the cards, a waitress brought more drinks and suddenly we were back in the game.

Old Guy and Pearls placed their bets; Conrad hesitated for a moment, then pushed forward about 2,000 credits. The crowd settled down. The cards were dealt - Conrad got an ace and a five; the dealer got a queen. Old Guy hit and got 21; Pearls stayed put on 17. Conrad tapped the table - a six. Again - another ace. Again - a king, and bust. The audience sighed, and Conrad smiled shakily as the new dealer played her hand, turning over another king. This wasn't in the script. The girl paid Old Guy and took the other bets - and Conrad made a surprise announcement.

"I sense that little incident may have jinxed my luck, so, it's been an amazing game, but I don't think I'm going to push it any further. Thank you very much."

The crowd applauded, and he stood up and shook hands with the other players and the dealer. Hearty backslaps; Pearls paid him compliments, flashing her teeth, while the girl converted his chips into a high-value handful to return to the counter. The final tally: four silver, one orange, one purple, three black - 41,800 credits. A decent night's blackmailing - but how much more he had been after?

I returned to the seating area and watched as the crowd disbursed, still chattering excitedly, and Conrad went to cash in his precious tokens. He handed them over and the clerk swivelled a screen round to face him; he tapped it a few times and went through a couple of bank checks - a palm print, a voice ID. I wondered what he was thinking. Had he been going for 50 grand? A hundred? More? He completed the transaction; the clerk nodded, I prepared to rise - and instead of heading back to the archway, he walked over to the bar. Unfinished business - and maybe something else as well. As he seated himself awkwardly on an empty stool and ordered a drink, I sensed that he was scared to leave.

The drink appeared - a bright blue affair, possibly involving vodka. He took a careful sip and set it down, and I wondered how long I'd have to wait for something to happen. Not long, apparently - as he raised the glass again, a young woman sidled up to him and spoke a few words in his ear. She didn't seem to be flirting, which surely meant she was relaying a message from Ford. Whatever it was, Conrad didn't seem too happy. He voiced an objection; she explained further. Whatever she said appeared to swing it - he nodded reluctantly and she withdrew, leaving him to continue drinking, fidgeting, looking impatient.

I took a guess - Ford had said that the dealer who got punched was the only guy who could rig the cards right. The dealer was currently back in the staff room with a med patch over his eye; as soon as he was healed, he could return and open up another table, and the pay-off could resume in earnest. In the meantime, Conrad was to wait there. Conrad didn't like waiting. He was weighing it up: either Ford was being straight with him, or the punch-up had been staged and he was messing him about. If he was messing him about, to what end? Was it safer to stay put or to walk out?

I thought about what I was going to do when Conrad finally made his exit. Follow him into the lift, stick my gun in his back and frogmarch him into the car. Knock him unconscious as it drove away, then take him somewhere quiet and torture him till it all came out. I wasn't sure I could pull it off. I wasn't sure I wouldn't be walking into a shoot-out.

I saw that Pearls had cashed in her chips and come to the bar; now she was engaging Conrad in conversation - two card-playing comrades comparing notes on a truly remarkable game. Pearls was smiling easily, reassuring; Conrad visibly relaxed, ordering drinks for both of them. I began to see a way out for the man, and I was pretty sure he saw it too. He turned on the charm, feigning modesty over his fearless victory, doubtless dropping hints that 42 grand was peanuts to him. She lapped it up, and I prepared to move again.

Sure enough, after ten more minutes, they got up together and headed for the archway. I counted to 20 and followed, hoping no one was watching me on camera. As I emerged from the scanner, they were making towards the main entrance; I reclaimed my gun and coat and strolled after them, casual-like. The doors whisked open, leading me out into the night - the happy couple were at the bottom of the steps, turning left onto the busy pavement. They met each other's eyes, laughing, then Conrad started saying something and looked away as they prepared to cross the road or hail a taxi. The woman's expression subtly changed, and everything seemed to shift. It all happened very fast.

A car accelerated, approaching from the right; she turned towards Conrad, pulling something from her coat; I tried to move on wobbly legs. The shot - Conrad's body jerked; startled faces turned towards me. I was yelling - "Stop her!" - fumbling for my gun. Screams - she saw me; the car pulled up, door open. She let go of Conrad, diving inside; his falling body blocked the shot. Away - I was at the bottom of the steps, pushing through people running in all directions. I reached him, rushed out into the road - cars swerved to avoid me. Too late. I holstered the gun, shouting for an ambulance, and knelt by Conrad, supporting his upper body. She'd shot him close to the heart; he wasn't going to make it. He focused his eyes on me, shaking with fear, his life draining away.

"You... You're one of his."

"I'm a detective investigating the death of Sam Combs. I know Ford wanted you dead. Help me and I'll get him for you. Tell me what this is about."

"Ford." He inclined his head towards the road. "He hired her."

"Who killed Sam Combs? Tell me."

"Take... bag. She didn't get it." He smiled, feebly exultant. "Take the remote. Tell my wife... he killed me."

"Who killed Sam Combs? Conrad!"

"Ann," he whispered to no one. "Ann." Then he was gone.

I felt numb, immobile. Take the bag, take the remote. A crowd was beginning to form - I hadn't much time. I held him close, shook him slightly, pressing around his chest - making out like I was trying to revive him. I felt the remote in the left side of his jacket, slipped it up my sleeve and into one of my pockets. Then on the right side, a small package - I held him even closer and fumbled it inside my shirt. People knelt down near me - "Hey, the ambulance is coming", "I think he's had it", "Is he your friend?"; I laid him down, closed my coat, stood up and walked away. A few cries - "Hey!", "Where you going?" - but no one stopped me. I drifted back to the steps and started to climb, moving against the flow of people emerging from the building. Near the top I edged aside and paused for a moment. Sirens sounded in the distance.

I couldn't leave - I was sure to be identified, and they'd think I was part of it, maybe even the killer, unless I stayed and eliminated myself as a suspect. That meant I had to stash the goods. I looked around and spotted a bin attached to a lamp post about 20 metres away. It would have to do. Once more praying that no one was watching, I walked over and slipped both items inside. Then I returned to the steps and just sat and watched, as the sirens grew deafening.

"So you're telling me this man Conrad was a total stranger?" The detective paced the carpet in front of me, his hawk-like eyes fixed on mine.

"Yes."

"And yet I'm to believe you risked your life to save him."

"I saw the woman pull a gun. I acted on reflex."

"Why were you looking at the woman?"

"I noticed them both as I came out the doors. I'd seen them playing cards earlier. Half the casino saw them."

My interrogator stopped and leaned on the chair opposite me. "Which brings us to the next question: why were you leaving by the front entrance? You've already told us your car is parked in the garage below. Rest assured, by the way, it's being searched as we speak."

"I wasn't leaving - I wanted to get some air."

"Oh, I see. Is that why you stopped to get your gun?"

"You can never be too careful on a strange planet."

"Don't get cocky with me, Voysey. Or you're liable to remain on this strange planet for a very long time."

Smart and mean - he was wasted on this dump of a world. "Would you rather I'd just stood there and done nothing?"

"What I'd rather is that you told me the truth." He sat down, changing tack. "You're an ex-cop, Voysey. And you're carrying some cheap investigator's licence - and you advertise yourself as such. Are you really telling me you weren't involved in this? That someone didn't hire you, maybe to watch over Conrad?"

"That's right."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"All the reasons you just mentioned."

He got up again, exasperated. "Look, if you know something, you'd damn well better tell me." He walked round the table and leaned close to my ear, speaking quietly. "I'm not on his payroll, if that's what you think. I just want to solve this, whoever's behind it. We might not have much of a police force here, but if you've got evidence against him, if you're willing to cooperate, then I can finally nail the bastard." He straightened up and returned to the other side of the table.

"Detective, I'm just down here taking a break. That PI licence was bought on a whim, back when I still thought I wanted to do what you do for a living. I'm just here by chance."

He shook his head, disbelieving. "You don't know why that man was killed?"

"No."

"Okay, then - do you have your suspicions?"

"Sure. 42 grand. The guy scored a massive win and she was right there beside him, probably waiting for some rich sucker to come along. She lures him outside, tries to kidnap him so she can get the money and winds up shooting him by accident."

"I don't buy it. That was a high-minimum table, and she was playing with a fair stack of chips. No one that wealthy needs to kidnap for money."

"Well, she tried to get him into her car, shortly after he won a fortune at that table. And if she was conventional-wealthy, you'd have a face match on her, right?"

"Probably. But then there's this business with the Navy officer - who seems to have disappeared from the premises. No match on him either. No, I don't buy it at all."

"So put out a search for both of them. Have their pictures flashed up on every channel. Contact the Navy - assuming that guy wasn't just wearing the uniform."

The policeman sighed, looked down at the table. "They'll have left the system by now, I bet. And I'll be chasing vapour as usual." He looked up. "You're damned lucky there are several witnesses say you didn't fire, or you'd be heading for a cell right now, Mr PI. Get out of my sight, Voysey. And don't be surprised if I call on you again."

"Detective."

I rose and walked out of the makeshift interrogation room, returning to a corridor filled with witnesses and uniformed police. Ignoring the stares, I made my way over to the officer who was holding my gun, then headed back to the foyer. Casino staff were standing around idly, watching a forensics guy packing up his equipment; a

couple more officers were guarding the doors. A news crew were filming out on the steps. I walked over to the lift, attracting little attention, and took it back down to the parking garage. Two officers were hovering close to my car; they nodded and I got inside, then directed it away. One thought: Conrad's stuff.

The car turned at the top of the ramp and took me past the murder scene; the area where Conrad's body had been was now taped off, and a small crowd was watching the news crew. I kept on going for a couple of hundred metres, then pulled over and walked back to the bin. A quick check to see that no one was watching, then I fished inside. Thank God - both items were still there. I pocketed them and returned to the car, fearing a hand on my shoulder at any moment. Made it - I got in and rejoined the traffic, breathing hard.

Time to see what was in Conrad's package - perhaps what Ford had hoped to obtain. I tore it open and got goosebumps - a gold watch, a wallet and a wedding ring. I opened the wallet and there it was - Samuel L Combs, DOB 1/5/3097. Conrad hadn't murdered Combs; he'd been blackmailing Ford over Combs's murder. Ford did it, or ordered it, and Conrad could tie him to the hit.

The man buried by his ship - it had to be Ford's assassin. Conrad had killed him, and got Combs's stuff. If he could prove the assassin worked for Ford, testify in court that the guy went after him too, maybe because he witnessed the Combs job, that he stashed the guy's body and hid out of fear of reprisal... I knew of one police detective who'd get on board - assuming he hadn't been lying in that room as well. No wonder Ford had gone to all that trouble and expense.

I still didn't understand the how and the why - and there was only one person who could tell me. I checked the time - nearly 1am. They'd probably have sent round a couple of sympathetic types within an hour of the shooting. Break the news, subtly gauge the reaction, say "I'm sorry, but we need to ask you a couple of things", scope the joint on the sly. I could picture the officers now, trying to focus as she sat there in her silk. How would she have taken it? She'd probably have looked incredulous, shaken her head, insisted that he died five years ago. But how would she have felt inside?

As I approached the close I was passed by a police car - on their way back from the visit, perhaps. I parked on the main road, got out and walked round the corner. Her lights were on - I couldn't see anyone at the windows. I approached the building, eyes and ears open for any movement, any sound. No Conrad to worry about this time. I'd thought he was one of Ford's goons; he'd thought the same of me. I considered the odds of Ford being with her - highly unlikely. He wouldn't have wanted to be there when the police showed up, and he probably wouldn't have wanted her to look in his eyes when they told her.

I entered the stairwell and climbed, wondering whether she would simply refuse to let me in, call the police for real this time and have that cop car turn around. I pictured the detective grilling me again down at the station, shouting, threatening, throwing me in a cell. Third floor - her door was open. And there she was - slumped against the wall just inside, her face streaked with tears. She saw me and her features twisted into a strange sort of smile; she slowly lifted herself up, using the wall for support.

"You did it, didn't you? You killed my Alex." Her voice was quiet, slightly crazy.

"No. I don't work for Ford. You've got it wrong." I stepped closer, trying to look like a friend.

"You killed him, and now you're here to shut me up." She met my eyes - a blank stare - then looked away.

"I'm a private detective investigating the murder of Sam Combs. A woman hired by Ford killed your husband. I was there - I saw it."

She shook her head, then turned and started walking down the hallway. I followed at a distance as she spoke without looking back. "Zander wouldn't have wanted to kill him. Zander only wanted to frighten him. You decided to kill him to impress your boss. But Zander won't be impressed - you'll be dead too very soon."

She entered the living room, heading to the left, passing out of sight momentarily. I followed her in, a few paces behind. She was standing in front of a dresser. "Ann, I..."

Before I could react she yanked open a drawer and spun round to face me, holding a gun. I slowly raised my hands in dumb surrender. Fresh tears ran down her face - she was trembling; her eyes were wild. "You killed Alex! You killed my husband!"

"Ann, I didn't kill him! It wasn't me!"

"You're lying! You lied to me before - you're lying now!"

"I'm not lying. I'm a private detective."

The gun was shaking all over the place; I sensed - prayed - she wouldn't do it.

"I was with him when he died."

"No!"

"I was with him, Ann. He told me to tell you that Ford killed him. And the last word he spoke was your name."

Tears flowed freely now - she sobbed "Alex" and lowered the gun. I advanced, cautiously, and took it from her, then guided her over to her chair. She was frail, worn out. I fetched her a handkerchief from a drawer in her bedroom - doing my best to ignore all the slutty underwear - then sat on the edge of the sofa, waiting for her to stop crying, not knowing what to say. Eventually she calmed down enough to ask me what happened, and I told her, making Pearl sound a good ten years older, avoiding any suggestion that Conrad may have wanted more than just a means of escape. I handed her the remote; she cradled it in her hands - the key to the possession that defined his life, and the final proof that he was gone. Then something of her strength seemed to return and she placed it on the side table. I decided it was time - I asked her what happened with Combs and the assassin. She nodded, dried her eyes and motioned for a cigarette. I handed her one and lit it for her; she settled back into the chair, blew smoke delicately over her shoulder - the damaged seductress - and spilled the sad story.

"Alex came back two months ago. All that time I thought he was dead - I'd dealt with it, it was in the past. But now..." She wavered, then continued. "It was like seeing a ghost at first, like he wasn't really there. I asked him where he'd been and he said he'd had a misjump - he wouldn't really tell me any more. He said what mattered was we were together again - it would be just like it was when we first met, before we drifted apart. He wanted me to go away with him. I told him I couldn't - Esveor was my home, and things weren't the same any more. He said he still loved me, he was the same man I married eight years ago - but I knew he wasn't. Then I told him about my clients and he lost it - he hit me, then he ran out.

"I didn't see him for two days - I started to think I must have dreamt it - and then he turned up again. He said he was sorry he hit me, he could understand why I did what I did and he knew I'd need time to think things over. For a moment he was like the old Alex. I agreed to see him a couple of times a week, to see if we could start again. I didn't think it would work out, but we went on these dates, and Alex really tried - though he obviously hated the thought of my clients. And then..." She flushed with anger. "Zander found out somehow. He asked me about Alex - I said he was only here for a while. He asked if I was going to leave with him, like he thought I would, so I said I wasn't going to, and he seemed to be satisfied. But a few nights later... I had an appointment with Sam, and I heard his bike, so I waited for him to come up. Then he didn't, and when I looked out of the window his bike wasn't there.

"Then there was a knock at the door - it was Alex. He said he'd just seen someone stab this guy who looked a bit like him - he reckoned they might have been after him and got this other guy by mistake. He looked pretty scared, but he wouldn't let me call the police. He told me to call one of my clients and have them come over, so if this man came back he'd be watching the building. So I called Will Richards, and Alex left again. I was with Will for about an hour and a half, then he left, and then Alex came up. He said he'd shot the man and got him into his car. I couldn't believe it, so he took me to see, and it was true. He showed me all this stuff he'd found on him - Sam's things, as well as a knife and this comms device. There were all these calls recorded on it - he played me one and it was Zander's voice.

"Alex insisted Zander had tried to have him killed, but I said he was wrong, that Zander wasn't a killer. I said this man had obviously been after Sam, and maybe Zander too. Alex begged me to come away with him, but I refused... He got angry, said I was sleeping with a guy who wanted him dead, and I said he was mad, that he was the one killing people, and then he left..." She drew heavily on her cigarette, her hand trembling.

"What happened after that?"

"I only saw him once more. My Alex..." Her eyes welled up. "About a week ago I overheard Zander talking to one of his boys, saying he'd heard bad stuff about Alex and wanted him kept away from me. Then Alex came again. He said he was going to tip off the police about Zander, that the calls proved he hired the assassin. I told him what I'd heard Zander say, that Zander wanted to protect me from him. Then he said he knew I was used to rich men now... and he wanted me to know he would be able to provide for me. I said that money wasn't everything, and he gave this funny laugh and said, 'I'll see you soon.' And then..."

She started to sob, hardly making a sound. I felt I should put my arm round her, so I did, kneeling beside her chair, and she leaned into me.

"Ms, er, Ann, I should go."

She looked up at me through the tears - desolate beauty. "I don't want to be on my own tonight."

"Ann, I don't..."

"Please. I don't mean... I just need someone here. You can sleep in the spare room."

It suddenly hit me how tired I was. "What if someone shows up? What if Ford..."

"He won't. Please. Help me get to my bed."

So I got up and lifted her to her feet, then walked her to the bedroom like a feeble old woman. When we got to the bed she asked me to help her out of her dress, and I tried not to look any lower than her freckled shoulders. Then she slid under the sheets and I retreated to the hallway.

"Thank you, Mr Voysey," she murmured, resting her head on a pillow.

I closed the door and went to the spare room, my thoughts a jumble, arousal competing with my exhaustion. Then I lay down and the exhaustion won out.

I woke with a start to find dawn light shimmering through the curtains. I looked at my watch - 7.40am. Time to get out of there, think about my next move - hopefully my final move. I rose and went to check on Ann before I left. Her door was open - she wasn't there. I looked around the rest of the apartment. She'd gone - slipped out while I was sleeping. Various possibilities ran through my head; I paced the living room. Then I noticed Conrad's remote had disappeared. She'd gone to his ship.

Chapter Four

I swept past bleary-eyed pedestrians dodging puddles as the car took me back towards the centre of town. Maybe Ann was at the ship already. I wondered what was going through her mind - had she gone there just to grieve where she'd feel close to him, was she planning a suicide run at Ford's mansion, or did she intend to leave and never return? If she was leaving, there was only one chance of intercepting her - catching the next shuttle back up into orbit and flying down in the Gecko. And I had to intercept her, make her stay, if I wanted Ford convicted. I'd searched the apartment quickly before I left for the assassin's knife and comms device - no joy. They had to be on the ship.

The car approached a tall office building with a news ticker - I read the text scrolling across it: "Man shot dead outside De Luxe casino. Police searching for unknown female shooter." By now Ford would undoubtedly have seen the camera footage. He'd probably told his boys to start looking for me. Doubtful he had a face match, but if some of the police were on his payroll... All signs pointed to out.

My little investigation was over. If I managed to get to Ann, I'd call Mrs Combs and arrange a meeting. I'd hand her Combs's stuff, tell her Ford was behind everything, advise her to hire protection and contact the detective. If Ann was gone and didn't return, I'd have to tell her something else. I'd tell her the dead man she saw was a former associate of Ford's, and had killed her husband while high on tabs. Ford had found out and exacted revenge, and for her own safety - from him and the police - she'd best feign ignorance. Of course, that still left the shooting at the casino to explain...

Ford would walk, as he had done many times before. And I would be back in that station bar, waiting for a job. Although there was another possibility. I could attempt Conrad's scheme - blackmailing Ford. If Ann was out of the picture, he wouldn't know I didn't have everything - and with a new murder investigation right on his doorstep, he might be more inclined to play it safe. I'd have to do it on my terms, and never return to the system again...

The car pulled up in front of the hotel - I got out and rushed through the lobby into the lift. I drew my gun inside my jacket; the doors opened onto an empty hallway. I walked silently up to the room, aimed dead ahead and swiped my card - nobody home. I checked the bathroom, gun first, then grabbed my stuff and headed back down to check out. Two minutes later I was back in the car. I'd just directed it to the spaceport when I got a call on the 'pad - Mrs Combs. I accepted.

"Good morning, ma'am."

"I just saw the news - were you there when that man was killed?" She was wearing silk pyjamas and her hair wasn't perfect - she'd called straight away.

I was. She tried to kill me and hit him instead. She got away before I could shoot back."

"My God... Who was she?"

"The person I was tipped might be there, though I don't know her name yet. The police don't know either. I think she was trying to protect the killer."

"Was it... is it Zander?" I saw the fear in her eyes.

"I don't know, but I don't think so. It may have been that man I showed you. I don't have enough evidence yet."

"What do the police think? Do they know she was aiming at you?"

"No, but I have my reasons for not telling them yet. They're searching for this woman for last night's murder, and the best thing I can do right now is lie low for a while and follow their investigation. I'll contact you again in a couple of days - remember to act normally and stay around other people."

"I will. But will *you* be safe? You mustn't risk your life for me."

"Don't worry - she won't get another chance. And she's a terrible shot, unluckily for that man."

"They said he was in the Navy, and everyone thought he'd died five years ago."

"I heard that too. Whoever he was, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'll talk to you soon."

"Take care."

I closed the 'pad and sat back, Conrad's death scene overshadowing my faint pleasure at her concern. Staring out at the garish billboards and anonymous tower blocks, I saw his face again - the horror of realising his time was up, the dulling of the eyes at the end. The sooner I was off this planet, the better.

At last the squat, grey spaceport buildings came into view. I directed the car back to the rental bay, then walked quickly over to the terminal, mindful of the seconds ticking away, and feeling uncomfortably vulnerable. The lobby was fairly busy, thankfully - I looked around as casually as I could, hoping there wasn't someone lurking, watching me. A few cargo-hauler types loitering around; ground staff going about their business; some obvious tourists waiting for the shuttle. The next one was leaving in 15 minutes - I just had time to try and recruit my own pair of eyes.

I strolled across the airy, industrial space to the bar and ordered my usual Coke over the din of the vid screen. Presently the barman, a shortish, ugly-looking brute, set it down, and I leaned in closer.

"How would you like to do me a favour, and earn yourself a hundred credits? Nothing illegal."

His forehead creased into a deep frown, and he regarded me intently for a moment.

"Shoot."

"Someone may be passing through here in the next few days, and I'd like to know if they do. I want you to send me a message immediately if you see him."

"Who's the guy?"

I turned the 'pad around.

"I know him. No way. That's the casino guy."

"There'll be no trace whatsoever. The moment you see him, put a for-sale ad on the local BB for whatever you like - use the name 'Sinatra'. I'll have my computer monitor the board. Just do it straight away - that's all I need."

He considered. "I want a hundred now, 200 later."

I pulled back a little, matching his frown. "50 now, 150 later. I'll send the 150 with a legal-looking letter saying it was left to you in a will - hard currency, totally anonymous. If he doesn't show within a week, keep the 50 and forget about it."

"I want another five up front to pay for the ad."

"Done."

I finished up the Coke, left my exorbitant 55-credit tip and went to join the tourists, doing my best to fit in by flicking open the 'pad and viewing a weather report.

Out through customs, across the scorched grey Tarmac and onto the shuttle. That missing 0.1G kicking in - unexpected weakness - then up through the atmosphere, swaying slightly, up towards the darkness and the slowly spinning station, like an impossibly oversized mathematical toy. The tedious docking procedure, the sudden bustle of the main concourse, up two floors and along to the hangar, the safety of the Gecko, and finally out again, heading straight towards the looming circle of the planet. All the while wondering if she'd still be there.

Oort City lay ahead of me, ugly and insignificant from space. I pulled up slightly, checking the local map, and descended through the thickening air, the shields glowing hot. Down through the clouds and out into a bucolic vista, forests and fields stretching away towards a distant shoreline, myriad greens yielding to pink. I got my bearings - there was Cooper's Crossing, and up a little and to the right was the landing field; I could make out a solitary Adder. I stayed high, wondering what my chances of survival would be if I were to set down there. A little further, and there was the wood where the ship had been. I flew right over, studying the downwards external view, then turned and flew over again to be sure. All the clearings were empty; she'd left.

No suicide run, no real developments for two days. The police were still looking for Pearls - the news channels showed footage of her at the table, looking cool and calm. A pro assassin, without a doubt - maybe a freelance Fed or Imperial. Ford had made a brief statement to the press on the morning of my departure - a tragic, exceptional

incident, our security is second to none, every effort is being made to assist with the inquiry - and since then he seemed to have vanished. No Sinatra ads had appeared.

I finished my late breakfast and went to lie on my bed and read the novel I'd started the day before - an old-Earth story about ancient maritime warfare. I was just coming to a particularly dramatic engagement when a computer alert jolted me back into the 32nd century. I rose and went through to the cockpit - and there on screen was the bulletin board, with a new advert for "second-hand mood lamps, good condition, reasonably priced", apparently placed by one Colin Sinatra. My smirk faded fast - Ford was coming.

Quickly I called up the public-access cameras down at the spaceport and had the computer cycle through them. Several ships on the ground - a Moray, a cargo shuttle, a Cobra Mk I, a ship at the edge of the complex I couldn't quite identify, and another partially obscured by a building. No Ford-like figures anywhere in sight. I checked the list of all the ships currently berthed - the mystery duo were a Monitor and a Salamander. I looked at the shuttle departure times - no shuttle was due to leave for another 40 minutes.

Suddenly the ship behind the building took off and vanished from the list - the Salamander. That was Ford's - it had to be. I accessed the station's external cameras, selected one facing the surface and zoomed in on Oort City - there it was, a silvery speck growing steadily larger. I had the computer track it, zooming out slowly to maintain a good view. Was Ford going to dock at the station? Was he coming for me?

The ship held its course towards the camera, adjusting slightly to approach the nav buoy - docking for sure. As I hovered on my chair, it slowed to a stop; obviously the pilot was waiting for clearance. I pulled back the view and saw a Fer-de-Lance moving away from the entrance - then, to my surprise, it angled towards the Salamander, which turned and accelerated to come alongside it. I requested departure immediately.

Before I was out they went into hyperspace, leaving two ghostly clouds hovering a few kilometres away, portals to the unknown. I launched and veered towards them, unthinkingly. If I hesitated till they disappeared, all I had ahead of me was more waiting. If I followed, I'd be taking an awful risk, but I might discover something I could use. The lure was too strong. I put on my holster and my jacket, shoved the throttle forwards and charged into the nearest cloud.

The swirling hyperspace tunnel engulfed the ship; the Stardreamer engaged and I entered that strange state where time and thought are elusive, ineffectual. Dreams, but with no logical progression - a kaleidoscope of colour and sound, a thousand images all at once. A mini death; the body and mind held aside from life.

I emerged from hyperspace - Xeoner. Three ships on the scanner, about 15km away, high and to my left - I manoeuvred to face them. They were circling each other, lasers firing, hulls glinting in the sunlight. The Fer and the Salamander were engaging a third ship, silver and blue... I hit the STE and confirmed it - a Cobra Mk III. Ann. She'd lured Ford into the system somehow - told him she forgave him, begged him to come and take her home - and now she meant to have her vengeance.

Unfortunately, she was outmatched. Conrad's was a fine ship, and she was packing beam or military, but she was up against two similarly powerful craft, both decently armed as well. And their pilots were clearly experienced, whereas Ann was flying too loose, leaving herself open as she struggled to score a hit. In 20 seconds it would all be over.

I had to turn away, get the hell out of there, make for the planet. I couldn't hope to tip the balance in a mere Gecko - not against that kind of iron. To engage with no other ships present would be near suicidal.

I brought the power up to full, targeted the Salamander and fired my beam. I missed, adjusted, connected. He reacted instantly, diving, twisting, wheeling my way. I switched to the Fer, still hard on the tail of the tumbling Cobra. I fired and caught him on the starboard side - he evaded, just as I felt the crash of the Salamander's laser on my hull. I hit the injectors, desperate to escape the assault - he was packing military. I rolled crazily, made for the Fer, now turning to face me as well. 5km, 3km... I fired again, missed; he fired; we both connected briefly and I pulled up, flashing past him just metres away, hand hovering over the ECM.

I throttled back and turned hard, trying to get behind him. My front shield was gone, my energy down to three-quarters. A laser flickered in front of me. The Fer was taking me away from the other two blips on the scanner. Suddenly one of them changed from yellow to flashing blue - a hyperspace cloud. Then the remaining ship swung into view - the Salamander. She'd escaped. The cloud was my only chance.

I stayed on the Fer - a turn took him across my sights and I scored a brief hit. Then he turned again and straightened up; I followed suit, and we were charging at the Salamander - and beyond it, the cloud. I connected with his engine as he hit me with a rear-firing pulse, then he rolled aside and the Salamander clipped me again - the screech of hull damage. I stabbed at the injectors, knowing it was the cloud or death, and the Salamander

scored another hit, knocking them out. I turned towards my attacker, rolling and firing, down to two-thirds; I targeted my only missile and released at the last second... His ECM destroyed it instantly.

I was out of options. I steered wildly towards the cloud, still 8km away. Both ships' lasers flickered around me as I performed some of the most incredible flying of my life. It wasn't enough. The hits came again, and I realised it was over - I stabbed at the autopilot and dived for the escape pod. I punched the button and the door snapped shut behind me; a second later I was slammed against the side as it blasted away from the hull. I looked on, numb, as the final shot sliced through the receding ship and it exploded, debris shooting everywhere, buffeting the flimsy pod as I struggled to breathe.

I was alive - but maybe I'd only bought a few more seconds. Ford wasn't the type to let an enemy just drift away. The Salamander loomed into view as the pod slowly tilted towards the planet - I shut my eyes, tried to pretend it wasn't happening... Then I opened them again, while I still could. I saw the spartan pod interior, my trembling hands pressed against the window, the ghostly reflection of my face among the stars. I changed the view and saw the sharp, silvery hull turning my way, the lengthening plumes of the pod's tiny engines as they fired into life. I drank it all in - my last moment, if the pilot pulled the trigger.

He didn't. The ship advanced - he was going to scoop me. Ford was curious - or he liked the idea of selling me into slavery. I wondered whether nothingness wouldn't have been the better option. I still had my gun... but there was no point drawing it. Ford was no fool - if he saw any danger, he'd simply leave me in there or blast me back out into space and destroy me.

The Salamander filled the window, its shiny metal plates scored here and there by laser fire. I wondered which of the marks were my doing. Then I was hurled against the wall again as the pod was pulled into the scoop.

After several seconds of being bashed about, it finally came to rest, and I picked myself up off the floor. My thoughts came into focus: make yourself look weak, lull him into a false sense of security. Quickly I opened the small storage cupboard attached to the wall and grabbed the bottle inside. Fake blood - one of the oldest tricks in the book, but if I didn't overdo it... I splashed a little on my forehead and shirt collar, and replaced the bottle. Suddenly I thought of what I was carrying, and hastily stashed my wallet, my datapad and Combs's stuff in there too. Then I stepped back in front of the window and waited, stooped over slightly, doing my best to appear injured and disorientated.

A face appeared - a man about my age, but more slightly built. Then his face, square-jawed and steely-eyed - I lip-read his reaction: "Him again!" He motioned to the other guy, presumably the pilot, and they both tapped their guns against the window. Ford mouthed, "Hands behind your head," demonstrating with his free hand. I nodded woozily and complied, looking away. A moment later I heard the bolts retract and the door squealed open; I returned my gaze to where the window had been. The pilot was smiling; Ford was his familiar eerie-calm self.

"Step out of the pod. Keep your hands where they are."

I did as instructed. The Salamander's cargo hold was a place of pure functionality - bare metal, worn machinery.

"Search him, Don." The pilot holstered his piece and stepped forward. "My Ingram's pointing right at your head, drug addict, and Don and I aren't that close." Flyboy soon located my gun and pulled it out, grinning. Once he'd finished patting me down, Ford indicated towards a nearby bench; I seated myself slowly, feigning exhaustion. I looked up and met his eyes again.

"Can I put my hands down now?"

"Be my guest." I lowered them gratefully; his stare intensified. "And by the way, if you're not as injured as you're making out, you should know I have excellent reflexes. I'll put a hole through you before you even get to your feet. Now... be so kind as to tell me who the fuck you are."

I attempted a look of weary defiance. "Why should I tell you?"

He gave a little snort. "Because if you don't I'll shoot your fucking fingers off. For starters."

Flyboy's grin widened. I knew he meant it - the fear made me light-headed. "Okay, okay. Just... could I have a drink? I'm feeling kind of faint."

"What do you think I am, a barman?"

"Please. One drink. I'll tell you everything."

"You'll tell me everything whether you like it or not."

"Then I'll stand up and either I'll pass out or you'll be forced to kill me."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Don - fetch our guest a glass of brandy. You - talk. Now."

I waited as Flyboy left through a doorway, chuckling as he went. Ford's gun arm remained steady.

"My name is Voysey. I'm a private detective."

"Detective - that figures. Working for who? You lie, you lose fingers."

"Valerie Combs."

He smiled - it looked strange on him. "Valerie? Naive little Valerie hired a detective to investigate me?" His features hardened. "I'm not sure I believe you."

"You killed her husband."

"The fuck I did. That useless-prick-assassin Rehnquist did. Then got himself shot."

I moved a hand up to my forehead and touched it gingerly. "He... was working for you."

"To kill that prick Conrad, yes. Not to kill Sam. I liked Sam. And I had a nice little blackmail angle going on him." He smiled again. "Naive little Valerie never found out he was fucking Annie every chance he could get. Cos he paid my man Tony once a month so he wouldn't let it slip. That fucker Conrad wanted to take Annie away - poor, crazy Annie - and fuck up everything." Flyboy returned with the drink. "There's a few things to report to your client, detective. Not that you'll get the chance, I'm afraid."

He motioned to Flyboy to give me the drink; the guy dutifully approached.

"You intend to kill me?" I took the glass, feebly.

"Oh no, detective, I think..."

As Flyboy turned I jumped to my feet and shoved him towards Ford, then immediately hurled the glass at Ford's head. He dodged, exclaiming with rage; I ran for the doorway, almost tripping over a storage crate. Shots hit the wall; I made it out. A small corridor with steps leading up to the cockpit - I took them three at a time. As I reached the top and the door opened another shot clipped the shoulder of my jacket, gouging my skin - I stumbled inside, too shocked to yell. I heard them starting up the steps, then the door whizzed shut; I scanned frantically for the lock button, found it and hit it. Pounding on the door - they wouldn't take long to find a way through.

I looked around the cockpit for a weapons locker - found it. Unlocked, with a single gun left inside. I grabbed it and hurried over to the console. Part of the viewscreen was showing the cargo hold; I switched the view to the steps. Ford was aiming at the door; Flyboy was tapping at a wall screen, overriding the lock. Out of time - I spotted the gravity control. I sat in the command chair and dialed the gravity up to 2.0G.

It hit me hard, but it hit them harder. Flyboy managed to steady himself against the wall; Ford overbalanced and went crashing down the steps, dropping his gun. I waited till he tried to get to his feet, then took it down to zero. Ford floated up uselessly to the ceiling; Flyboy headed up and away from the wall, turning slightly.

Now was my chance - I launched myself at the door, drifted across the room and used the edge of the doorway to kill my momentum. A quick glance back at the screen - Ford was about to push off the ceiling; Flyboy was scared, trying to sort himself out. I hit the door lock. It opened - three shots at Flyboy in quick succession. His scream lasted no more than a second. I sighted on Ford; he'd pushed off at the wrong angle. He started yelling, pleading, offering me anything I wanted. His feet touched the wall; the gun was behind him. He looked into my eyes and saw it was hopeless; he suddenly fell silent, and a calm came over him. I shot him twice in the head.

It wasn't over. I turned and pushed myself back towards the console; the door closed behind me, shutting me off from the spinning corpses. I reached the controls, got my knees down on the floor and returned the gravity to normal. Muffled thumps from the corridor. I hauled myself up into the chair.

The Fer was waiting patiently, flying alongside me and slightly ahead. Waiting for the boss to conclude his business with the prisoner. I glanced at the console - shields were at full, though the boosters were damaged; all other systems were functional. The military laser was at my disposal.

I showed no mercy. I cut speed, turned sharply till he was in my sights and held down fire. It took him half a full burst to register what was happening - he increased speed and tried to twist away, but I matched his manoeuvring. The laser overheated - I targeted one of the ship's missiles and sent it streaking after him. It was hardened, and he didn't react quickly enough. The Fer was extinguished in a ball of light, leaving nothing but a couple of charred panels and an expanding cloud of dust. I drove through it, breathing deeply, dripping with sweat and fake blood - alive, alive.

Three weeks later I was back in the same old Coriolis at Esveor, lounging in my new chair, staring out at the hangar door. I took a sip of coffee and massaged the back of my neck, wondering how she would look today, whether she'd be better off knowing the truth.

I'd claimed salvage at Xexedi - once my heart rate had returned to normal, I'd headed for the sun and then made the jump. The police there came close to locking me up when they saw the bodies, but relented when they learned I was one of their own and viewed the ship's recordings. The insurance money for the Gecko enabled me to buy off GalCop's cut and keep the ship, with nearly 20,000 credits to spare; I had the shield boosters repaired, bought a rear beam laser and a new security system, replaced everything in the bedroom, sent the barman his money and got my shoulder fixed at a fancy clinic.

I kept waiting for that smart, mean detective to show up with a warrant and two burly patrolmen; it didn't happen. I read the reports in the Esveor press; they all said Ford had been the victim of pirates, a tragic loss - his pilot managed to destroy their attackers, but not before the hull had been breached. My name was mentioned only in passing as the salvager. The 'pad rang a couple of times over the following days - probably journo's; I didn't accept. The stories moved on to Ford's legacy and his funeral; I saw Valerie in one of the pictures, expressionless in black. I figured the detective got what he wanted, and let it drop. No sense in giving the impression that Esveor was descending into anarchy - bad for trade, bad for legit business.

I took another sip and checked my watch, and the door opened - Valerie walked through, looking all business in a grey suit. I put down the mug and went to meet her. She stood and waited as I walked down the ramp, smiling a little when I reached the bottom.

"Your ship looks a bit better."

I gave her a half-smile. "I decided to abandon the old one." I gestured towards a bench and we both sat down.

"I'm glad..." She hesitated. "I'm glad you're flying it now, instead of him."

She met my eyes; I didn't know what to say. I handed her the package containing Combs's stuff. She took out the items one at a time, slowly turning them over in her hands, cradling them as Ann had done with Conrad's remote. The last was the wedding ring - she stared at it a while, until tears started to form. I gazed down at the grimy hangar floor.

"Why?" she asked softly.

I thought of the many reasons - love, lust, jealousy, greed, mistaken identity. Then I fed her the lie that would serve just as well, and probably had some truth to it. "Ford wanted control of the casino - he wanted your husband's shares. He couldn't get him to sell, so he had him killed, so he could try and get them from you instead. One way or another. It was that simple." I looked up; she was still staring at the ring, tears falling silently onto her lap. Then a darkness came over her.

"Did he... Ford..." Her voice was trembling with repressed rage. "Did you make him suffer?"

I recalled the man's desperate pleading, then his quiet acceptance at the end. Him or me. "He suffered. And I told him you sent me."

She gave no response - just stayed as she was for another minute, continuing to shed the occasional tear. At last she came out of it and began drying her eyes, putting her husband's things away. I was suddenly struck by the urge to tell her.

"Mrs Combs, I..."

"Of course - I'm sorry, Mr Voysey. You risked your life for me, and for Sam, and I owe you far more than I've given you. I hope another..."

"No, that's not... I got the ship, and that's more than enough payment."

"But I must give you..."

"I don't need it. Save it for the future. Save it for your future husband, and your family."

A flicker of a smile; her eyes twinkled briefly, then dulled again. "I can't... I can't imagine that."

"You will. Eventually." I looked away awkwardly. "Now I'd better go, and I'm sure you have your business to attend to."

I rose to my feet; she nodded and followed suit, then paused for a moment.

"What are your plans?"

I inclined my head towards the ship. "Computers and luxuries to Aanbiat, then on to Ororqu. I'm going to be a trader for a while."

She smiled. "Off to make your fortune, huh? Will you be returning any time soon?"

"Depends on the trade, but probably not."

"I see." She looked disappointed - I'd missed my chance to settle on Esveor. She held out her hand; I took it.

"Thank you, Mr Voysey. Jack. Thank you for everything."

I nodded sheepishly, looking into her brown eyes for the last time. "Goodbye, Mrs Combs."

Our hands came apart and I turned and walked back to the ship, her footsteps ringing in my ears. Halfway up the ramp I stopped and looked over my shoulder - she turned and waved, I waved back, and then the door closed and she was gone. I continued on up and hit the ramp-retract button at the top.

The command chair beckoned - I sat down heavily, and forced myself back into space mode. I did a systems check and powered up the drives. All systems nominal; three tons of computers and 17 tons of luxuries on board; 500-odd credits left in my main account. I called up station control.

"Control, this is Salamander CA-057 requesting launch clearance."

A short pause. "CA-057, Control - clearance granted. Have a good one, commander."

"Control, CA-057 - roger that."

I swung the ship around to face the opening bay doors, nosed forward and lifted off. As I eased out of the bay into the station's central void, I retracted the landing gear and the automatic systems took over. I sat back and submitted to the ghostly ballet, conveying the ship slowly down and to the right, towards the entrance.

Maybe I'd done the right thing. Maybe not. Maybe deep down she knew the truth about Combs anyway. Would remembering him as the perfect husband help or hinder her? I couldn't tell. I only hoped her grief wouldn't last forever. I thought of little Ann, flying a dead man's ship, perhaps finding solace in the spacer's life. I realised she was a lot like me, and swiftly refocused on the screen, now dominated by the entrance. Departure time. Acceleration pushed me back in my seat and I roared out into the black.