

THE MOURNING GLORY

by

Michael O'Connell

ACT I

© 2009 by *Michael O'Connell*

1

Shining Path Station
Sector Fourteen
Udin VI High Orbit

Kyn Tallin hurried his way through the familiar halls of Med Center Prime's seventeenth level, readjusting his bag over his shoulder as he went. He was late, but only barely late, so his pace was quick, but not frantic. The corridors were mostly empty, as the night cycle shift was just beginning, but he still didn't want to draw any undue attention to himself by running like a spastic idiot. Or by ramming into a stray heartcart as he rounded a corner. Whoever was on security tonight would probably be saving that vid footage and shooting it all over the staff network for weeks.

He slowed his stride to near-normal as he passed through the sliding doors into Station Thirty-Two, taking a deep breath and running his hands through his getting-too-long brown hair. There at the central desk, a circular data station, sat Tiga Gen, reading something at one of her many monitor screens, wearing her peach-colored MCP uniform. Her back was, of course, not to him, as his luck didn't generally run that good. The Benian woman looked up with her purple eyes, set wide beneath her protruding brow—lightly scaled like the rest of her emerald skin—and simply shook her head.

Kyn gave her an innocent grin—liberally laced with his natural charm—and held up his wrist chrone and pointed at it. His shrug asked her what four standard minutes could possibly mean in the grander scheme of things.

She sighed and held three of her fingers up, indicating that this wasn't the first time this week he'd made a late entrance. He winced, both comically and apologetically, and gave her a wide and disarming smile. She grinned only slightly and pointed down the hall he was headed for, and he gave her a grateful Sector Authority salute (had a Sector Authority trooper seen him, a civilian, using such a gesture, Kyn would probably have ended up a patient on this floor himself) as he quick-stepped past her.

He entered the staff bay and headed for his locker. And of course there was no chance he could have ended up in there alone. Not with the day he was having.

"Tallin," Gibri, a golden-skinned Rega with tiny horns perched on each temple, said, disapprovingly. He was in his civvies now, just hanging his uniform back up in his own locker.

"I know, I know," Kyn said, dropping his bag and punching in his locker code.

"Three times in a week is not good," Gibri said, closing his locker. "They start to notice."

"I had a test," Kyn said, yanking off his shirt and opening his own locker. "They notice if you run out without finishing. It's only four minutes. And it's just Tiga out there."

“Who’s going to get tired of covering for you,” Gibri warned. “I know she’s got a thing for humans, but unless you start throwing her some pink-skinned love, that well’s going to dry up.”

“Think that’d help?” Kyn asked, grinning, dropping his trousers and taking a seat on the bench.

“As if your sorry human bones could handle a Benian woman,” Gibri snorted. “She’d snap you in two. Oh, she’d apologize the whole time you’re screaming, but she’d still finish. You think I’m kidding. No.”

“Ouch,” Kyn grimaced at the thought, grabbing his peach uniform’s pants.

“We have a saying on Rega 7.”

“Yeah?” Kyn asked.

Gibri stood up. “If you’re late too often? They fire you.”

Kyn looked oddly over his shoulder. “That’s a saying?”

“What can I say? We’re not a very poetic people.”

Kyn pulled his tunic over his head and straightened his hair with his fingers. “It’s just a rough time right now, okay?”

“Two jobs and classes? You can’t keep this up, Tallin. When do you sleep?”

“Mostly during Astrophysics 12. Automated instructor. Not very observant.”

“Well, the Level Chief *is* observant, and he’s going to start to catch on. Unlike Tiga, he does *not* like humans. You’re all overly emotional, you grow hair in weird places and you smell funny. You push him, you *will* be jettisoned. Zero delay.”

“I need the money, Gibri,” Kyn sighed, putting his bag in his locker, momentarily feeling the weight of his life, not just this evening, on his shoulders. “One job isn’t going to do it.”

Gibri took a seat on the bench next to his coworker, his legs on the opposite side from Kyn’s. “You know,” he said, kindly, “you’re not the first being to leave his home rock and take a station job, thinking it was his gateway to the universe. Only to find he couldn’t afford to get back *off* it. Station life isn’t that bad. Maybe you don’t get to see the universe, but the universe does kind of come to you. How many different races have you met in this job alone, much less slinging drinks at that disgusting bar you work in?”

“Yeah,” Kyn said, tiredly. “All kinds of folks. All stopping off on their way to somewhere else. All going to the places I’ve never seen. I get to hear all the stories. I just never get to star in one.”

“Ever notice stories are always better than the truth?” Gibri asked, patiently. “It’s not a magical child’s tale out there. I know. True, it’s no paradise here, either, but a man could do worse. There’s civilization here. There’s law. There’s access to any goods you need. They’re overpriced, but they’re here. And you do good work here at Prime. You make a difference. A lot of men roaming the starways would trade it all for your existence. Maybe you’re where you’re meant to be.”

Kyn was silent, noticeably depressed by this thought. Gibri smiled sadly and patted the younger man’s shoulder.

“We have another saying on Rega 7,” he said.

“Yeah?”

Gibri stood. “Get home on time or your wife will get angry and make you sleep in a different room.”

Kyn grinned. “You guys ought to write a book or something.”

"We're thinking about it," Gibri said. "If it happens, I'll get you a copy."

"Hey, how's that kid of yours doing?" Kyn asked, lightening the mood.

Gibri smiled, and tried to make it a sarcastic one, but the warmth snuck through. "Getting his horns. So he's screaming like a stuck eeba most of the night."

"Okay, I have *no* idea what an 'eeba' is."

"Well, if you ever run into one, don't stick it. They make a very unpleasant noise." He turned to go.

"Wait, wait," Kyn said quickly, reaching into his locker and rummaging through his bag. Gibri waited, and after a moment, Kyn's hand came back with a small, stuffed waroola toy about the size of his fist. He tossed the fuzzy fake animal to Gibri, who caught it, underhanded.

"Saw it at the eight/six marketplace. A vendor was selling them. Thought Gefy, Son of Gibri, might like it. Maybe it'll take his mind off his horns for a few seconds at least."

Gibri studied it and smiled warmly. "You're all right, Tallin," he said, looking back to Kyn and holding the toy up. "I'm going to tell my son, 'look! The famous M.A., Kyn Tallin, bought this just for you!'. And then he'll look at me and think, 'why does my father continue to speak words to me when he knows I have no language skills yet and can't understand him? I wish he'd just shut up and feed me.'"

Kyn laughed and closed up his locker.

"Have a good shift, my friend," Gibri said, turning again toward the door.

"Wait," Kyn said again, jumping up and affixing his I.D. badge to the front of his tunic as he caught up with Gibri, who stopped just shy of the door. "How is he?"

Gibri knew immediately who Kyn was asking about, and exhaled tiredly, but sympathetically. "No worse, I don't think, but that's not saying much."

"Did the primary see him?" Kyn asked, expectantly.

"He did. For five minutes, maybe. Made a couple of notes in the file, but that was it."

"What notes?"

"Tallin," Gibri said, patient once more. "I have forty patients, and on my shift, unlike yours, most of them are awake. I didn't look, I'm sorry. I just checked his meds and his vitals. That's all I have time for."

Kyn nodded, but looked troubled. "How did he seem? I mean—"

"He's dying, Kyn," Gibri said, directly but softly. Kyn thought that might have been the first time Gibri had ever called him by his first name. "None of us can change that. It just...is. That's why I keep telling you not to get attached. I know you like the old guy. I do, too. But he didn't respond to the treatments, and we both know what that means. If he didn't by now, he's not going to. We're just keeping him comfortable. Sometimes that's all we can do. You have to get that through your head, brother. Otherwise part of you's going to die every time one of them does. And many, many more of them will."

Kyn looked down to the floor, nodding again, but barely. Gibri felt for him. After all, he'd been new at this job himself, once.

"It's just..." Kyn said, bringing his face back up with a look of frustrated surrender on it. "He's all alone, you know? No family, no friends. A man shouldn't have to...end things like that."

“That’s life out here. Some men stay planetside and bring in a crop and raise a family. Men like him hear the stars singing and chase after them the whole of their days. And a lot of them end up like him at the end. Not a credit left to their name and all alone in the universe. That’s...maybe something you should think about.” Gibri seemed to feel bad for saying that, but didn’t seem to regret it.

Kyn, for his part, didn’t like hearing it, but understood the thought behind it, and how it was meant.

“Just keep him comfortable,” Gibri said, closing things. “But be ready. It’ll get easier. I promise.”

With a final hand on Kyn’s shoulder, Gibri headed out the door and off to his family, a tram ride and a couple of lifts away. Kyn, thoughtful and quiet, left to begin his shift.

2

He made his rounds first, gliding from room to room in his familiar rhythm, greeting those patients who were still conscious (or whom he had to wake to turn them or take some blood from their arms or tentacles) and quietly checking those in natural or medicated slumber. Some were residents of the Shining Path way-station, but most were off one of the countless ships of all sizes and origins that were docked in the mammoth bays in Station Center. There were miners, injured in their dangerous work and brought here, the closest major medical facility to their job sites. Some were travelers taken ill from encountering an alien virus that disagreed with their physiology. There were a couple of Authority troopers with battle wounds from some border skirmish or another within the sector, with injuries too serious for their troop ship’s med bay to heal. MCP was an Authority Designate facility, which meant they had access to the best equipment and personnel, so it really was a top-rate med center. Kyn knew Gibri was right...he *was* lucky to have the job.

With everyone else seen to in his first rotation, he headed to his final stop. At the end of a long hall was room 1747, a four-bed room with a bulkhead view. It was dark as he entered, with the dim strip lights in the walls casting only a slight, warm illumination, so the view of the vast sea of stars out the thick window was clear and stunning.

And, no surprise, he found Yader Dell staring out at them as he lay, unmoving and silent, in his bed.

He’d had a private room on a different level when he’d first arrived at MCP, but that was before his funds had run out and his billing had switched over to miner subsidy, when such choices were no longer his to make. So for a while after, he’d had a rotating series of roommates. But Kyn had convinced the Secondary Level Chief that the patient’s coughing was keeping those in the other beds awake and disrupting their recovery. That was mostly true, but a little helping of dramatic license helped to sell it. So, once more, thanks to Kyn, Yader Dell had private accommodations. He seemed to prefer it that way, for reasons of his own, and Kyn felt that was the least he could do for

the man. Clearly he wasn't being gifted with many other breaks in what was left of his life.

Kyn took a few steps and double-checked on the man's waking state, just to be sure, before he spoke.

"Evening," Kyn said, quietly but cheerfully.

Yader turned his head on his pillow with what seemed like more effort than normal, spotted Kyn, and managed a weak smile. He was Yiddian, which made him mostly baseline human but for some cranial ridges and a flattened nose. He had once been stocky in build, but had withered away in frailty with his illness. His arms, once powerful enough for mining work in his youth—the brief career that had come back to betray him with this all-too-common ailment—were thin things with long lumps of veins tracing their length. His neck showed its veins as well, and what little hair remained on his head seemed as gossamer-wispy as a newborn's. His eyes were sunken, but still carried a defiant spark in their blueness.

He wasn't that old, as geriatric standards went. He was barely forty standard years past Kyn's twenty. But his sickness, and perhaps the life he'd led, made him seem as aged as the dim stars beyond the glassteel behind him. Life, Kyn mused, did not hand out its kindness liberally.

"Evening," Yader returned, in what was once likely a booming voice, but now was turned to a near-rasp—one that seemed to take a couple of extra breaths to recover from when used. When he'd first arrived in Thirty-Two, he hadn't used it at all. He'd barely acknowledged Kyn was there when the younger man was seeing to the patients, just letting what needed doing to him get done, nodding or shaking his head in answers to questions, and going back to staring out the window. When Kyn had gotten him the place to himself, though, Yader had changed. Part of it was likely because of his return to his preferred solo living. But the bigger part just seemed to be the gesture on Kyn's part. After that, Yader had begun speaking to him. A little at first, then more the next night, then the next. Somehow, the husk who had just seemed resigned to withering away and dying had turned, at least in part, to the man who he used to be. And a man whose company Kyn enjoyed very much.

Kyn stepped to the head of the bed and immediately reached for the monitor screen above it, his fingers going through their practiced dance to check the levels and readings taken from the probes attached to his patient's body. The numbers and blips and graphs didn't tell a pretty story, but not an entirely new one, at least.

"I miss any excitement while I was away?" Kyn asked as he ran through the routine.

"Some woman vomited about a month's worth of chow in the hall this morning," Yader said in his perpetually cracking voice. "Didn't think there was going to be any of her left after but her slippers."

"Ah, the magical stores of the MCP kitchens," Kyn said, contemplating a graph that popped up for his review. "Keeps folks from wanting to stay too long and take up bed space."

"Understandable," Yader said. "Accommodations being so opulent and all. Must be a waiting list to get in."

"Oh, our spa is worlds-renowned. There's a guy downstairs with a stick whose whole job is just to beat them off."

Setting the monitor back to standard mode, Kyn walked to the foot of the bed, where a smaller screen was built into the frame. He fingered a button there and scrolled down to read the primary's notes for today. They were maddeningly brief and emotionless, and clearly written by someone lacking either optimism or interest. Yeah, that pretty much described Medic Hollet. Kyn couldn't decide whether to be disappointed or disgusted. He gave up deciding and went with both.

"Roommates giving you any trouble?" he asked, mostly to mask his emotions.

"Surprisingly quiet," Yader said, looking across at two of the empty beds.

"Maybe they're just afraid of someone noticing they're there and feeding them."

Kyn slid a low, rolling stool with his foot as he went back to the head of the bed. He took a seat and relaxed and smiled, his ritual now finished. "Any bed sores?" he asked. With most patients in Yader's condition, the M.A. just rolled them over and checked. But he always paid this man the dignity of asking.

"Nah," Yader said. His eyes were on Kyn's face for a moment, but then looked past it, back out the window, and stared.

Kyn studied the man's face briefly, then turned his head, then his body, toward the glassteel, and looked out on the stars as well. As they both watched, a mammoth freighter's nose suddenly came into sight. The two men continued watching, without words, as its gray bulk lazily rolled by, until its tail appeared, its docking boosters the only engines firing. And then it was gone, and the stars were once again left to themselves.

"You had a test, didn't you?" Yader asked, suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," Kyn said, casually spinning his way back around and resting his arms on his knees. "Theoretical Hyper-Mechanics."

"Ugh," Yader said, looking like he'd swallowed something disagreeable and drawing his thick eyebrows together.

"Yeah, exactly," Kyn grinned.

"How'd you do?"

Kyn blew out a breath and dropped his chin. Raising his eyes to meet the other man's, he said, paying him the compliment of honesty, "Not great."

"You enjoy it? The course?"

"You know the food here? It's right on that same plane of enjoyment."

"Then why take it?"

"Prerequisite to Advanced Hyper-Cartography," Kyn said, sounding fatigued. "Which, of course, only works if you actually pass it."

"And if you do?"

"Then...level two. AHC, Stellar Mechanics, Metric Engineering, Advanced Systems Theory, String Mechanics III, Sector Nav Law, Intersector Politics and Regs."

"And you're really going to do that to yourself for three more years?"

"Two if I start stealing stims from med storage downstairs and cut out sleep all together," Kyn said with a smile. But the smile had more melancholy than humor in it, and he knew it, so he tried to stoke up a little more enthusiasm for both their sakes.

"Hey, but when it's all over, I'll walk out a Navigator Apprentice. Then I can sign on with one of the big haulers or science vessels and I'm off this box and out there." He turned his head involuntarily and took in the stars again, and marveled again at how just

saying that out loud felt in his chest. "Two years of that, and I'm licensed. Then I'm on a crew, making the big money.

"And when enough of the big money's saved up, I find just the right ship on Authority auction, throw down my credits, and the galaxy's all mine."

"Got it all figured out, huh?" Yader asked, studying the younger man.

"Man's got to have a plan to get where he's going," Kyn grinned. "That's what navigation's all about, right?"

Yader readjusted his body, with some strain, into a better position, and Kyn's muscles instinctively readied to assist him if it looked like he needed it. The old man managed.

"Still don't know why a kid like you isn't heading down the medical track. You'd be a good medic. Seems to come natural to you."

"Thanks," Kyn said with a polite, but genuine, smile. "I was. On the track. Back home. That's what the parents wanted. A big-time medic in the capitol city, pride of the family, finding a high-standing girl to marry and start a clan of wee ones with. Staying on the home world the rest of my days in comfortable luxury and rising to the top of the upper-class."

"Doesn't sound so bad."

"No," Kyn admitted with a contemplative stare at the far wall. "I suppose not. Can't blame a parent for wanting that for their child."

Watching the younger man's far-away look, Yader let his thin lips draw into a crooked smile. "Spent too much time looking up at the night sky, didn't you?" he asked, knowingly.

Bringing his eyes back to the other man's, and smiling back at this moment of connection, Kyn said, "Something like that."

Yader nodded, twice. "How'd they take it?"

"Uh," Kyn said, momentarily evasive as he scratched his head. "I...assume not well. I took the route of high bravery and left a note. Based on how the lead-up conversations went the last year or so before that, they probably got right to work changing the will."

"Just up and left?" Yader asked, surprised.

"Yeah," Kyn sighed. "Hard to explain. I was going through a rough time. Things between me and my father...not great."

"No need to explain. You did what you felt you had to, right?"

Kyn nodded. "That's what I keep telling myself."

"Well, that's the best a man can do. Lying to others, particularly women, is a sometimes-necessary part of living. Lying to yourself isn't really living at all."

Never having heard it quite put that way, Kyn nodded, thoughtfully. Something about that took a little weight off him.

Not wanting to think too much on his own life, lest that undo that feeling he'd just been given, he slid closer to the bed, put his elbow on it, near Yader's waist, and purposefully changed to a much better subject.

"You were telling me about Laden 3," he said, grinning, getting to the main reason he enjoyed this part of his night so much.

Yader smiled, and sighed. "Ah," he said. "Yes, I believe I was."

Trying to keep his enthusiasm in check, Kyn settled in, resting his chin on his hand, and gave Yader his full, and rapt, attention. Though he also gave himself the usual silent reminder to not get so distracted that he didn't notice if all the talk was taxing his patient too much.

"This was after my mining stint. I'd been in one place too long, spent too much time in the belly of an asteroid." They both ignored the dual meaning of that statement, as he'd apparently spent just enough time there to pick up the sickness that was sapping his life. "I took my earnings and caught a transport to...what was it? Garea Station. Not as fancy as this one but a fair amount of traffic. There was a planetary survey ship just lost its engineer. Family emergency or something, sent him running home. They needed someone fast. I wasn't certified, but I knew my stuff. I applied and proved that to them. So I signed on and we headed out to Sector Twenty-Six. Deep, deep into it. This was a freelance operation, a crew of twelve. Science types, mostly. They did full-world surveys of uninhabited planets and moons, orbital and surface. They sold the data portfolios to colonizers. But that just funded the science. The science is what they were really interested in, the stuff they shared with the Science Bank.

"Laden 3 was the job I was on. Small, frosty rock. Habitable but unforgiving. We spent two months in orbit doing the mapping and atmo sampling before we ever touched down. That was the toughest part for me. They all had things to do during the time. Me, I just tinkered with the engines and waited to get my boots on land. We finally took her down after they decided on the first landing site. Kid, you can't imagine. Two months of staring down at that big white wilderness, itching to trek across it and climb one of those mountains, and finally getting to step out and feel that wind trying to push you over and daring you to come out and play. Glorious."

Kyn *could* imagine, and was. He could almost feel that wind himself, and the faraway tone in his tour guide's quiet voice seemed to make it even clearer to him, to add a coat of yearning to the vision.

"Cold?" Kyn asked, caught up as a school kid hearing a bedtime story.

"Like you never knew," Yader grinned. "No so much that we needed full atmosuits, but we wore enough padded winter gear that you could barely walk. Facewraps and goggles under the hoods. Thick boots. The captain—Degges was his name, good guy, smart guy—he knew how stir crazy I'd been going up there and asked me to do the honor of stepping out first. For all I know, my footprint might have been the first one ever made on that world. I felt like some ancient explorer, claiming that planet for my own."

The romance of that thought lit a tingle in Kyn's chest.

"It wasn't that big a planet, but from down there, it seemed like it went on forever. Endless plains, oceans of ice, tall, majestic mountains. A whole world of white. A place that had no idea the galaxy around it even existed. No cities, no people, no spaceports. Pure, untamed, peaceful wild. Just millions of years of hearing its own wind. It was something out of a dream."

"Wow," was all Kyn could whisper.

"We set up there to start and the crew got work on the survey. Here, they put me to work. Plenty of heavy lifting and trekking to do. I hadn't really felt a part of the crew until then. Hells, I even felt useful. My mining experience came in real handy when it came to drilling for samples in the caves. We set up sensors all over. We trapped

wildlife to study it and release it. Most of the indigenous life was nice and passive, lots of furry little critters. Not all, though. Me and this Chbakian botanist named Kabr were lucky enough to find the first predator. Ugly sucker taller than us on all fours, fangs the size of your forearm. We were dumb enough to wander into its cave. It would have torn us to pieces if I hadn't tranqed it. We had these tranque guns we used on the little fuzzies, fired darts. I must have shot a dozen of 'em into this beastie while it was charging us, with Kabr just standing there frozen and screaming the whole time. It finally dropped about half a meter from us."

Kyn realized he's been holding his breath during that part of the story, and let it out. "Wow," he said again.

"Yeah, Kabr got all weird about it. It's a Chbakian thing. I'd saved his life. That meant he and I were now brothers. And that's as real as full-blood brothers in their culture. Made me do a ceremony and everything with him. It was awkward, but kind of nice. I never had a brother. From then on, there was nothing between us we didn't share. Don't think I'd ever been closer to anyone. He was the best friend I'd ever had."

Kyn had never had a brother either, and imagined what that would be like. Yader made it sound really appealing.

"Well, we didn't share *everything*, I guess," Yader said, suddenly cracking a weak, mischievous smile. "There was this geologist on board. Full human. Her name was Nidra. Golden hair, full lips. Pretty as a Utredon sunset. And so damned smart. She intimidated the hells out of me. I barely even talked to her in orbit. I didn't figure she'd even given me, a gearcranker, a second thought. One chilly night down on the planet, though, after power-down, I found out how wrong I'd been."

Kyn smiled widely.

"Snuck into my bunk and shocked me stupid. I thought for a minute she'd got lost in the dark and slipped under the covers with the wrong guy. Turns out I'd been on her mind. Never underestimate, son, the effect a long voyage has on the female species."

Kyn laughed, appreciating the tawdry turn this tale had taken.

Yader's eyes rolled up to the ceiling, becoming unfocused in remembrance. "She was nice. Real nice. I wasn't used to nice girls. Guess she wasn't used to working hands like me, neither, so I was a bit of forbidden excursion for her. I didn't mind. No, sir. She was a good time. An unexpected bit of warmth on a few very cold nights."

As much as Kyn was dying to know more details, he felt asking for them would be...inappropriate. And kind of creepy.

"How long were you down there?" he asked instead.

"Ten months. Just long enough to put together a solid, general survey package. I was proud of what we did. Proud to be a part of something like that. I don't know what ever came of it. I never have looked back into it. Don't know if it got colonized or what. I almost hope it didn't. It'd break my heart to see high-rises and spaceports down there. It was perfect just the way it was."

"We could find out," Kyn offered, his mind working, feeling a sudden irresistible excitement at the idea, as if it was the epilogue to the story. "Check it on the datanet."

Yader sighed heavily, and there was the hitch of a near-cough in it. "Nah," he finally said. "I think I'd rather remember it the way it was. I want to go on thinking it's still as pure as my memory of it."

Initially disappointed, Kyn nodded, understanding (though he had no doubt that he'd be looking it up on his own later). "Yeah. I get you."

Yader grew quiet, looking up at the ceiling, and his good cheer seemed to have melted away. This made Kyn feel guilty, like his boyish curiosity was the cause of it. He considered the strange way that a memory could be both wonderful and painful, and for a moment, realized how different the universe must look when a man reached Yader's age. He couldn't completely grasp the concept, but understood that this was one of those things in life that could only be understood by the well-aged. This made him feel unusually young, and that, too, made him feel guilty.

"Ever do any more of that kind of work?" he asked, quietly.

"Nah," Yader said, pulled back from his somberness. "I found work on a long-haul cargo ship after that. Good pay, lots of chance for learning. Took me all across the quadrant. Got me the connections that started my stint in goods speculation. That's where the real money started. That's what eventually got me that ship I was telling you about."

It was almost funny to Kyn that Yader felt he had to remind him about that ship, like it was a detail he might have forgotten. It was the one part of the stories he selfishly pulled out of his patient that stood out most. A man with his own ship. It was a symbol of unlimited freedom, the epitome of independence. A passport to adventure. A ship captain made his own rules and his own destiny, went where he wanted, when he wanted. It was all that Kyn dreamed of.

"The *Fable Stone*," Kyn said, speaking the name of the ship aloud, reveling in how doing so made the image of it (the one he'd built in his mind, which is all he had to go on) more tangible. He had done some research on Yiddian culture since he'd first met Yader, in what little spare time he had, and understood the reference the name represented—a part of a myth passed down thousands of years through their race, a central icon in an instructional morality parable. "I can't even imagine all the places you and that ship must have seen."

"And I can barely remember them," Yader said, grinning tiredly. "We got around, me and the *Stone*. Across three quadrants. In and out of danger. From savage moons to fancy core worlds. From bottom credit to riches and back again. She was a good ship. A good friend. I do miss her."

Images of what some of those worlds, and those adventures, must have looked like danced across Kyn's imagination and made his stomach flutter with yearning.

"There were times I thought we'd never see tomorrow," Yader said, a faraway look in his eyes. "But she always pulled us through. So many worlds. So many faces. Some faces I can still see as clear as real. Like they've just dropped by to visit. Like—"

He gasped, suddenly, and blew out a harsh but impotent cough. He tried another breath, and suddenly two more belted out—ragged, harder coughs. His eyes focused into involuntary, helpless panic, and the coughs that followed clearly racked him with pain.

Kyn was pulled back from his daydreaming instantly, and he was on the job again. He didn't panic. This, sadly, was nothing new. He fought his urge to rise, the only kind of dignity he could offer the man, and just watched, cautiously, sliding to the edge of his stool, ready to move if needed. Yader squeezed his eyes shut and was overcome by the spell, riding it out, hacking up breath and bile and unable to change its course.

Kyn watched carefully, his heart aching, and felt as helpless as Yader. When the flurry of coughs started to subside, a rhythm Kyn could read well by now, he reached to a box on the stand at the head of the bed, wordlessly yanking a sanitary wipe from it. He placed it, promptly, into Yader's outstretched hand. Wiping the man's mouth for him was an indignity Kyn would only perform if absolutely necessary. Captain Yader Dell deserved better.

Yader gripped it tightly in his fist and coughed a few more times, but the coughs were smaller, the teeth gone from them. He brought the wipe to his face, wiping the dark goo there, and tried timid breaths until it was clear the storm had passed.

"You want oxygen?" Kyn asked, quietly. His eyes lit to the mask hanging on its tube near the old man's head.

Yader jerked his head back and forth in the negative, his eyes still closed and his labored but now regular breathing bringing him a kind of bitter relief. Kyn remained silent, not wanting to pity the man, yet unable to shake the feeling of unfairness in it all.

Yader brought his fist, clutching the wipe, down on the bed, a weak gesture meant to be defiant.

"You're due more pain meds," Kyn offered.

Yader, exhausted, shook his head again. "No. I hate those damned things."

Kyn pondered the choice between pain and pride, and how rare the man was who chose the latter.

"Damn every bit of it," Yader said, bitterly, his eyes opening again and moist from the coughing. "Listen to me. Going on about things past. Things I'll never see again."

"It's okay," Kyn said, now really feeling the guilt of being the instigator of these memories. He meant well, feeling that they'd be some comfort in the man's twilight, but he knew he, himself, was the one taking pleasure from them. It was self-serving, and he knew it.

"It's what we do," Yader said, seeming suddenly even more deflated by fatigue, but the bitterness, and an edge of anger, remained. "Yiddians. We mourn the past. We were once a vast empire, ruling countless worlds. Kings of all. And we lost it. We got complacent. Fat. Too sure. One great war, and it all crumbled. Now all we do is remember what was. We wish like children that it would all return, yearning for something that will never be again. Our whole culture is looking back. Never ahead. Because for us, the glory is gone, forever. We're just too damned stubborn to admit the truth. There is no tomorrow."

The sadness in his voice, more dark and heavy than Kyn had ever heard from him, broke the younger man's heart. He wanted more than anything to offer some words of encouragement, of hope...but like Yiddia, Yader had no bright future waiting. His glory was behind him.

Yader abruptly looked right into Kyn's eyes, his face almost desperate. "Don't waste it, kid," he said. "Not a day of what you have. You want my advice? Forget the schooling, forget the rules. Disappear. Sign on to the first scow leaving that needs a deckhand and never look back. There is no someday. Young is fleeting. Young is precious. Don't let a drop of life run down your chin. Take it all. Take it while you can."

A tangle of emotions kept Kyn silent. His pain for Yader and the naked weight of the man's words. The thought of doing exactly as the man suggested, the momentary possibility of it as an option. And the crushing truth of his life, and how much further he had to go before he could even dream of such things. But mostly, just the moment of uncensored, unbridled honesty between two men carrying their own brands of desperation. For that moment, their roles didn't matter. They could have been light years from the Center. Yader's illness and Kyn's uniform had no meaning. In that moment, they were equals.

And Kyn could find no words.

When none came, Yader slowly laid his head back on his pillow and closed his eyes, letting out a sigh that seemed to release the air from the moment they'd just had. Kyn watched him silently. After a few moments, he suspected the man had expended too much of himself and finally fallen asleep.

"There was this one world," Yader said, almost in a whisper, his eyes still closed. "Sector Thirty-Two. It was called Donaday."

Kyn swallowed, finally, the lump in his throat from moments before. And just listened.

"Green like nothing you've seen. Rich, living jungle. Air like a swamp, but light. Sweet. I'd blown an actuator. Barely limped my ship to the nearest world. That world. I set down, just for repairs. The locals were low-tech. Land people, you know? They'd seen enough ships, but didn't have their own. Didn't want 'em. Didn't care for the stars but for how they looked in the night sky. They were happy there. I could see why. It was paradise.

"Repairs weren't an option. Not exactly rich with parts merchants, this place. I was stuck there. Just had to wait it out until some convoy or freighter caught wind of my com beacon. The locals were friendly. Gracious. They took me in and treated me like family. Their way of life...the way they saw life...they taught me so much. I'd never known folks like 'em."

He swallowed, a loud, too-slow sound in the dark.

"There was a girl. Her name was Kaida. She was a weaver. Pretty important job to them. From first sight I couldn't keep my eyes far from her for long. She was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. Sparkling eyes. Silver. A silver-eyed beauty with hair down to her waist. White hair. Beautiful, silky white hair. It had a way of falling over one of her eyes, and when she smiled from behind it... It almost made me feel poetic."

Kyn smiled, a pure, still-sad smile.

"Took me a while to get up the satchel to talk to her. When I finally did, I felt like I got every word wrong. My stammering made her laugh. She was always amused with me. But never made me feel stupid. She was honest. Real. No guile. I looked for any excuse to talk to her. I learned a lot about them and their ways from her. Just to hear her talk. To hear that voice.

"One night she invited me for a swim. I hadn't learned enough of her culture to know that was a courting ritual. She'd left that part out of my lessons. Guess she did have a little guile in her, come to think of it."

Kyn laughed. Yader even managed to smile, just a little.

"We made love in that pool. And we fell in love. I'd had my share of women, but everything about her was different. Special. The way we could talk without even

speaking. The way she felt in my arms, like they were built to hold just her, and I'd just been waiting all this time for her to fill them. I'd never felt the way that girl made me feel. She loved every part of me. And I loved her back. I did. Love was something I never thought I had time for. Or the heart for. But I surrendered to it. I felt whole. Complete. Like a fool for thinking that way, too, but I didn't care. Not about anything but her."

Kyn tried to picture her in his mind. He didn't know how close his image was, but what he conjured was enough to make him feel at least a bit of what he was hearing in Yader's words.

"It was near a year before a deep cargo runner caught my beacon and landed. I'd started believing that day would never come. Part of me wished it wouldn't. But they had what I needed. With the right parts, repairs were a breeze. My ship could leave. I could sense it in her...Kaida. Hear it in her quiet. I told her it didn't matter. I was where I belonged, with her. I don't know if she believed me any more than I believed myself, but we both tried.

"I made it about six more months. Every night, I'd find myself staring up at the stars more, hearing that call. I tried to hide it from her, and she could tell. It made a distance between us. The distance grew. And soon, I couldn't hide it from either of us anymore. I wasn't meant to settle. I tried to make her understand. And I begged her to go with me, to let me show her the stars and all the wonders out there. But my wishes couldn't change her anymore than I could change myself. She was where she belonged. It was her home. For all my wanting it to be otherwise, it just wasn't mine."

Yader stared up at the ceiling in defocus and fell silent. Kyn was sure the tiles above were not what the man was seeing.

"It was the hardest of all my days, before 'til now," he continued, and the tremble in his voice seemed to confirm it. "I said good-bye to this girl I loved. She was brave as she was wise, but it didn't matter how easy she tried to make it for me. I knew I'd broken her heart. I promised I'd come back to her, to see her again. I truly meant it. But I left her there. Her, and a part of me. I did what I had to. A man can only fool himself so long. I went back to who I was. And the further away I got, the more time passed, the more certain I was that she'd moved on and forgotten me, that me coming back would only cause her more pain. I must have set my navs for that world a hundred times. But never jumped. Soon it was clear it was too late. I'd made my choice, and I had to live with it. With it, and who I am."

Kyn closed his own eyes, unable to stop the wave of sadness that rolled over him. He could see his own image of the girl, standing there on that green world, looking up at the stars and wondering if the man she loved would ever return. He knew that Yader's own vision of that must have hurt a thousand times more.

"Not a day's gone by, not one," Yader said, "when I haven't thought of her. Not a day when I haven't had to ask and answer the question. Had I done right? I keep answering yes. But the question just won't go away. And now..."

His voice trailed off. Outside, a transport shuttle eased past in the distance without either man noticing.

"If there was one place I ever could have called home," Yader whispered. "One place. It was Donaday. And if there was one I'd want to see...one last time..."

He didn't finish the thought, instead just letting out a long, unsteady breath. Kyn sat there with him in the dark, not bothering with words. What words would matter? He was just there for the other man. That was enough.

Finally, Kyn quietly spoke. "I'd better let you get some rest," he said. "I've got to get back to my rounds. I didn't mean to keep you this long."

Yader didn't respond, just continued to stare at the ceiling.

"Can I get you anything before I go?" Kyn asked, kindly. "Water?"

Yader slowly shook his head against his pillow.

"You want to check out the datanet?"

Yader was silent for a few moments, then, surprisingly, whispered, "All right."

Kyn was mildly shocked, and pleasantly so, more than anything just for being able to feel like he was doing something, anything, for the man. Dell almost never used the datanet. Kyn knew the man well enough now to know he likely wouldn't be sleeping tonight, so the idea of him doing something with his time besides looking at the walls or out the window made him happy.

"Great," he said, standing up and reaching for the flat, portable keyboard closed in one of the bedstand's drawers. When he had it, he reached up to a wall control panel and tapped a key, and a rectangular screen suddenly lowered from a ceiling panel, stopping at an angle to best be seen by a bed-ridden patient.

He placed the keyboard on Yader's lap. "There's some new novels in the library menu this week. And I think there's a big Steed tournament showing tonight. A Sector Twelve league finale. If you're in the mood for that."

Yader left the keyboard where it was for the moment.

"I'll check back in before I'm gone," Kyn said. "All right?"

Yader nodded, and his eyes moved to Kyn's. "Thanks, kid."

Kyn smiled. "You get some rest."

With that, he gripped Yader's hand, and the other man weakly squeezed his. With a final smile, Kyn released his grip and headed out the door, leaving his favorite patient in the dark. He suspected that there would be no Steed on that screen that night. He felt fairly certain that Yader was going to be accessing info and visuals on Donaday—if such visuals existed for what sounded like such a distant, small world.

Outside in the hall, he paused and leaned his back against the wall, feeling emotionally drained from the time he'd just spent in 1747. Maybe Gibri was right. Maybe he was a fool for getting close to patients like Yader, for letting himself care. His job would be much easier if he was like Medic Hollet, seeing them as nothing more than checks on a daily list, tasks to be completed and forgotten as he moved on the next. But learning that kind of detachment would be, as Yader put it, lying to himself. Caring wasn't something he could just switch off. And he knew that was going to make his time there difficult. But his troubles with that were nothing compared to what the Yader Dells of MCP were living through. So, difficult it would be, he figured. It was who he was.

3

His cycle brought him back by about four hours later, after all his rounds and other duties, and a stock check in one of the equipment bays. He found Yader sleeping, thankfully, with the keyboard laying at a tilt just off his chest. Kyn quietly crept in, reaching for and lightly lifting the keyboard, looking up at the screen and seeing it waiting on the main MCP Datanet screen. If Yader had been looking up his could-have-been home, there was no evidence left to confirm it.

He switched off the screen and it silently folded back into its ceiling bay, and he carefully slid the keyboard back in its drawer. He stood there watching Yader's labored breathing for a few moments, studying his face, imagining what it had looked like when the universe was still his personal frontier.

After about a minute of thought on the matter, and with a slight pause to look back at the window at the stars, he stepped silently out into the empty hall again and walked slowly back to staff bay.

He changed back into his civvies and left MCP through the staff entrance, walking at a slow-step to the tram station, his bag slung over his shoulder. The tram was customarily light on passengers at this early hour, and he sat, contemplative, watching the station walls' garish advertisements slide by outside the window.

He left the tram at 1504-X Station and walked the hundred meters to the lift bank. The doors of one opened, and he found himself alone in the spacious chamber, accompanied only by a discarded food wrapper and the festive music and jaunty voiceover coming from the ceiling speakers, pleasantly suggesting destinations of interest and entertainment on this side of the station. He blanked the words out, as he'd heard them all before, many times.

After a thirty-six level drop, the doors parted and he stepped out into the light bustle of the Green Haven District, a vast collection of taverns, shops, guild centers, sport venues and establishments of a more "adult" nature that were restricted to certain parts of the station. Located close to this level of Station Center, Green Haven was a first stopping point for crewmen and travelers of all types. Kyn walked past men and women of any number of races—some fresh off-ship and sightseeing, some loud and stumbling from a long night of letting off steam, some station workers—like him—heading toward or leaving from their jobs, some just passing through. The traffic was mix of pedestrians and small skimmers that hovered along carefully in their designated lanes.

He arrived at his second job, a very un-stylish tavern called K'ardo's, and, after stowing his bag and getting his apron on, started his bartending shift. The crowd, as usual during his hours, was fairly sparse, but a mixed-race crew of cargo-grunts, identifiable by the ship's patch on their jackets, was in loud, high spirits, and made his job a challenge (mostly from trying to keep them appeased and good-natured while trying to keep their hands off Tahyin, the pretty young waitress he shared his shift with). There was one solid vomiting (and a Rikran vomiting, so the resulting smell was extra-toxic),

one that he went ahead and cleaned up himself instead of bothering the dish boys in the back—whose job such work technically was—after ordering a trans-skimmer for the faltering Rikran and putting him in it, sending him back to his ship.

There was a heated political debate between a couple of minor diplomats who were slumming it in this part of the station, but it managed not to come to blows. A slurring human woman in her mid-30s occupied him with her tale of woe and lost love as he lit her cigs for her at regular intervals. He got to overhear a war story being told amongst a group of young Authority troops—younger even than him—and tried to hide his smile at the ludicrous and obviously embellished nature of it. The teller of the tale was clearly not much further out of standard training than those listening raptly to his story, and not likely to have been to all the places he was claiming.

The rest was just sliding drinks across the bar, accepting tips from those races whose culture didn't find offense at the whole tipping concept (some did, and a few of the justifications came right out of their religious teachings), trading chat and trying to make his customers feel welcome and, therefore, more likely to spend more creds.

When his shift ended, he stopped by the kitchen to grab an assortment of appetizers to put in a box to take home, one of the perks allowed to employees, and one he appreciated, since the money he wasn't throwing into school and rent was filling his meager savings far too slowly. He took a few minutes to chat with the gang in the kitchen before taking his box of eats and his bag and heading out into the now-crowded pathways of Green Haven. He held his box carefully as his walk back to the lift found him jostled often by the crowds, and the tram—this time—was standing room only. The ride home was, as always, too long, and standing the whole way, after all the hours he'd just spent on his feet, took the last of the energy out of him. But, regretfully, his day wasn't quite over yet.

Home, for Kyn, was on a residential deck of the station, one populated almost exclusively by station workers. Naturally, accommodations for employees weren't high on the priority list for the station's designers or management, so the units were blocky, packed together down endless halls, and were nowhere near a bulkhead, so they had to go elsewhere if they wanted to see stars—or anything besides their own four walls.

His long walk down his own hall passed countless simple doors, some with the designation screens even working on them. He passed numerous neighbors and smiled at most, though few returned the gesture, as most were hurried and stressed, on their way to start their own workdays. Finally reaching his door (his designation screen was of the non-working variety, so even if anyone was looking for him, the door wouldn't be identified as his—nor could a visitor leave a message there), he pulled out his key card, slid it into the door lock, and let himself in.

The overhead lights (the ones that still worked) flickered on at his entrance, and he closed the door behind him with his foot; swinging doors for residents, not sliders. The rental was essentially a box, all one room but for the addition, in one corner, of the sani—a closet-sized enclosure that barely had room for the toilet and curtained-off shower, much less enough for him. Rooms for other, larger races were on a different floor, with larger sanis to accommodate them, and Authority housing regs kept station

managers from charging more for them. Kyn being human, his was the standard-sized unit. It was not unheard of for a human-sized renter to hire a bulkier accomplice—say, a Gorqua—to rent the unit, while the smaller one actually lived there and enjoyed the benefits of the larger living space. Kyn knew a human girl who worked at one of the cafeterias at MCP who had done that, and for her, the space was worth the extra she paid her Luxenani accomplice to have his name and racial identification on the lease.

His (sadly) human-sized room barely had space for his bed, the tiny kitchen unit, a small half-sofa and his desk. He'd had to add shelves up and down the walls (plenty of space for those, with no windows to worry about) to hold his belongings, and pegs to hang his clothing on. A locked trunk at the foot of the bed held more valuable (which wasn't very) and personal belongings.

He dropped his bag—gratefully—on the bed and took a seat at his desk with his box of now-just-warm food; the take-home boxes did a good job at keeping things hot for a bit, but his trip home was a bit too long. He powered on his datanet unit, and the small screen, hung on the wall and at eye level, slowly faded into life. As it did, he pulled his box open and hungrily bit into a piece of spiced bread, and ended up devouring the whole thing. He started working his way through some batter-dipped vegetables as he pulled up his personalized menu screen and checked first, as always, for any messages.

There was one from residential management about forthcoming spraying for Sfruin blood mites that may or may not be in the walls (*oh, very nice*, he thought), advising that any pets should be removed from the residence for the day of and for two days after the spraying, and all foods should be kept sealed. Another was from a classmate of his—a Kully named Supa—with a request to reschedule their Nav Theory study group to two hours later than planned. The final one was a mass mail to all MCP staffers to remind them of the forthcoming Authority inspection of the facility, with a not-so-subtle reminder that failure to pass such inspections could lead to revocation of Authority Designate status, which, among other things, would result in the need for sizeable staff reductions.

He switched his screen to Sector News, a luxury he only allowed himself during his dinners, his time being as short as it was. Station News held no interest for him, both because he heard all he needed to hear about the goings-on on Shining Path during his shifts at K'ardo's and because his interests lay beyond the station's walls. The sheer amount of news going on in just this one sector, with all its many worlds, and so much happening in the worlds between worlds (stations, Authority city-ships, orbital colonies), was of course too much to digest in total. His personal filters set the grabs for his own areas of interest, keywords matching his fancy, severity levels, and many other parameters. This morning's shuffles offered him a bevy of general and specific selections, grouped by category.

He selected stories with video first, and filed through a handful. A factory station explosion, several light years away, had caused heavy worker casualties. As much as he preferred more uplifting news, he always watched for these to help him predict if any medships would be headed their way and dropping injured at MCP. This one might be bringing more patients their way, but it was impossible to tell yet. While he normally skipped entertainment news, one story told of holodrama star Gingis Vey signing a lucrative contact to promote Stellar Flight Explorations, a move that could bring them

more business, and in turn open up the way for more ships out in the starways...which meant more possible future work for him.

Sector Authority had made a major assault on the Chevel legion fleet, one known for its heavy trade in the slaving business. That particular criminal empire was one of the more influential and powerful, so it was quite a boon. The legions, in general, seemed to be moving more of their operations into Fourteen, and it looked like Authority was finally cracking down. A full-fledged legion war was a possibility if more raids like this one were carried out, and historically, those could be quite bloody if a legion were pushed far enough to start one. Time would tell what affect this win for Authority would have on Chevel's temperament. For now, at least, it was one for the good guys.

Several high-ranking Authority councilors were coming to Fourteen for a meeting on new trade legislation. A new ship design was in final testing cycles, one whose cutting-edge engines could open up exploration across the galaxy even further, and stocks for that company were soaring on the positive news. A general from the Rodante Federation had won the Authority Peace Medallion for implementing radical peace accords in their centuries-old war with their theological enemies in the next system over. An independent medical collective announced major breakthroughs in a promising treatment for Carrion Syndrome, an infliction devastating the twin worlds of Bonom Prime and Bonom Minor. The search for kidnapped Scoop team—the Seven Winds team of Hashi 4—continued, with the deadline for the pirates' ransom demand still counting down. A Din'i child of only four had become the youngest Outbound Academy graduate ever.

Finishing his meal, and getting up only briefly to grab a bottle of cold Treggan tea from his tiny cooler box, Kyn allowed himself a small allotment of reading time to browse the text of more complicated stories. So much going on out there. So much he longed to be a part of. Such news drove him, showed him the rewards for his continued self-abuse.

But soon enough, and with an exhausted sigh, he signed out of the news screen and opened his academic one. He checked the chrone reading and gauged the time he had available for study. He could make his goal...if he sacrificed even more sleep that day. He vaguely remembered what his life back home had been like, with his spacious bedroom in his family's impressive home. Had he really had the time for hobbies? Relaxation? Friends? Girls? Had he really slept away his days after long nights of fun, luxurious care-free slumbers in his oversized, comfortable bed? It seemed so impossible, and so long ago. It was a whole other life.

He rubbed his eyes and swatted the thoughts from his mind. Focus, he constantly reminded himself, was his friend. All that had come before was only a prelude to this, he told himself (as he did regularly). Hard work and keeping his eyes on the goal would see him through. It wouldn't always be like this. There was a new life waiting for him. If he wanted it bad enough.

Three hours of quantum theory and application made him wonder, in the back of his mind, if he really did.

4

Kyn made no pretense about his state of panic this time as he rushed through the Level Seventeen doors at a run, fighting to keep his bag on his shoulder. He was late. Nearly twenty minutes. He almost collided with a scanner tech rounding a corner, and didn't even stop to apologize. He would have to do so next time he saw the tech in one of the lounges. He had no time.

He skidded to a stop as Station Thirty-Two's door admitted him, his shame clear on every centimeter of his face. For once, luck seemed to be with him, as Tiga was nowhere to be seen at the desk. She had to know that he'd not made his shift-start, but apologizing to her (profusely and with great embarrassment) sounded better if he did it after he was uniformed up and into his duties. The dread of that moment haunted him as he all-out ran to the staff bay.

Bursting in, he found Gibri sitting there on his regular bench, already changed back to his civvies.

"I know," Kyn said, lamely, rushing to his locker and punching his code. "I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do! Class ran late and there was a maintenance holdup on the tram. I swear."

He all but tore his shirt off and dropped down on the bench, throwing his bag in his locker.

"Kyn," Gibri said.

"Did Tiga say anything? Damn it!"

When Gibri didn't respond, and Kyn finally picked up on that, he turned his head that way.

Gibri sat there, looking down, running his finger absently under the strap of his own bag. His face was impossible to read.

Suddenly, panic gripped Kyn, a vicious fist around his heart. Oh, gods. Gods and all five prophets. This was it. Of course Tiga hadn't been there. She was in the Level Chief's office. Doing what she had to do. Reporting Kyn's tardiness, and not his first. It was her duty. He had pushed her good will too far, and she finally had to do it. He could even picture her, quietly and with personal shame, explaining to the chief that she'd not reported the first incidents to him. Something like that could cost her her own job if the Chief was in the wrong mood. The guilt he felt was paralyzing. He felt his whole tenuous grip on his life evaporating at once.

"What?" he finally was able to ask, his face tight with fear.

Gibri raised his head, finally meeting Kyn's eyes, and there was a look of uncomfortable sadness there.

Kyn sat there, his eyes narrowing in desperate confusion. He cocked his head, questioningly.

And then his face, shoulders and heart sank in unison as he suddenly understood.

"No."

* * * * *

Kyn stood, arms crossed, leaning against the glassteel, alone in the dark room. He watched the stars, so pure and bright when viewed from the station, without the interfering veil of a planetary atmosphere to dilute their beauty. And space, too, was so much blacker when you were floating in it instead of looking up at it. That made the stars that much more comforting. No matter how dark and cold things were, they were proof that there was always warmth and light waiting, everywhere you looked, if you could just make it that far.

Captain Yader Dell had started a series of increasingly violent coughing episodes in the later afternoon. He was put on oxygen and monitored, with med levels increased to combat the infection—which amounted to throwing rubber spears at it. It had started its final offensive on his body somewhere in the early evening hours. The pain had been tremendous, finally causing Medic Hollet to order a complete analgesic saturation. Such an act was one of surrender when those whose careers were dedicated to preserving life had to face the solemn truth that all their knowledge and technology were sometimes not enough. The patient’s mind would go comatose at this point, though the body would continue, in vain, reflexively to cough out the sickness that was destroying it. It was an act of mercy. There would be no more pain for the patient. And the body, without will and determination to fight along with it, could only cling to its grasp on life for so long.

Ninety minutes before Kyn’s arrival, while he was still sitting in his class listening to his professor drone on about quarks, Yader Dell had experienced cardiac failure. All indicators showed that continuing to fight the inevitable would have been an exercise in both futility and cruelty. He’d arrested, his lungs no longer able to take in air and drowning in thick fluid, and, beyond pain or sorrow or fear, he passed from this life to whatever was waiting after.

Kyn, sniffing and wiping a tear slowly from his face, watched the universe for another few minutes before turning his head to face, again, the empty, freshly-made bed that had been the final home for a man who had known so many—and yet, had never truly had one. The sight of it made the room look all the more empty. No trace of his presence lingered. The very few belongings he’d had there were already sealed up and stored in wait. Kyn, feeling unusually spiritual, even tried to sense any of the old man’s spirit floating in the recycled air. He felt nothing. Soon enough, new patients would begin filling the beds, and the room would never even remember that Dell had been in there.

Taking a deep breath and moving his shoulder off the glass, Kyn walked slowly to the end of Yader’s former bed. He placed his hands lightly on the end of it and leaned there, looking down at the smooth blanket, folded sharply at the top, and the fresh, uncompressed pillow there. He thought of the man’s tired smiles, the stories he told of his extraordinary life, and the wisdom and courage that had summed up who he was.

Sniffing hard and composing himself, he stood up straight and set his jaw. He stood there, before the bed, and raised his right fist to his chest, a gesture he’d learned in the studies he’d done on Yiddian culture in the few fleeting periods of free time he’d had since first meeting the man he thought of as a friend, as brief as their friendship has been.

“Good journey, Captain,” he said softly, hoping he was getting the words right but knowing, in his heart, that Yader Dell wouldn’t mind if he didn’t quite succeed. “May your travels take you to your heart’s true calling. May your soul find the glory of your forefathers, and its place in their great halls. May you know peace.”

He held the salute, respectfully, then lowered his arm. His eyes, misty, stared at the above-bed display, which showed even, nominal levels. He laid his hand once more on the bed, then turned and left room 1747 to its silence.

It was Tiga, with no mention of his earlier late arrival and with obvious, genuine sympathy, who suggested he take the rest of the night off. He thanked her, kindly, but he had other patients he wanted to see to. He went through his shift in a thoughtful daze, completing his duties with near-robotic disassociation. When it ended, he changed out of his uniform, his body still seeming on autopilot, and caught his tram to Green Haven. He served drinks, but didn't have the strength in him for his usual social banter. Another vomit incident caused him to pull the mop and bucket from their housing and erase the evidence, while a pair of crewman laughed heartily and drunkenly at the foul event. He heard a ship captain trying far too hard to impress a couple of cackling ladies with tales of his daring adventures. His voice grated on Kyn's ears and temperament with each new unlikely story. Yader Dell, he was sure, would never boast so cavalierly about his journeys. He was no braggart (nor liar, as this man, to Kyn, clearly was, or at least a shameless exaggerator). Yader was a man of honor and humility. Or at least, he had been.

He didn't bother boxing up what he often referred to as one of his "amalgam dinners", as he found there was no hunger in him. He spent the ride home in what amounted to one continuous blank stare, oblivious to the other passengers bumping into him. When he finally stepped into his rental, he felt completely numb. He dropped his bag on his bed, stood staring at it for a couple of minutes, then sank slowly into the chair at his desk. He spent a few minutes lost in silent contemplation before he thought to turn his datanet unit on.

It cycled up, and his main screen showed only two messages waiting.

The first was from the University. Specifically, from the Overseer's Office. He opened it, and it was filled with stock phrases and carefully-worded legalese, clearly a form letter that simply imported his specific information into it. He didn't process most of the words. He didn't need to, because two stood out very clearly to him. They might as well have been highlighted.

Academic probation.

His eyes squeezed shut, the only part of his tired body to move. Clearly, he hadn't calculated just how much of an effect his latest poor test performance would have on his overall academic record. The equation was clear enough now. The timing for this news was almost absurdly bad. He felt it physically pressing down on his shoulders. All the work he'd been doing, all the studying—obviously not enough of it, but a man could only deprive himself of so much sleep—it suddenly felt like he'd just been cycling his engines. All this effort, this struggle, and for what? To find himself on the precipice of student release. He would now have to work twice as hard, if not more, to bring his rating up to salvageable. Which meant more study. Where was he supposed to find the time? He needed both his jobs just to handle his tuition. It was an maddeningly circular

riddle. And he felt like the last of the hope he clung so desperately to to keep him going was suddenly leaking out of him like air from a pin-pricked balloon.

He opened his eyes and decided the message was too painful to continue looking at, so he closed it out, but its implications echoed even with it out of sight. He felt empty inside, defeated, his mind vainly searching for some hidden solution that would make everything all right. He found none, of course. He felt as though the earlier events of this terrible day had weakened his immune system, and this new virus had now easily crept into his body with no resistance to slow it, and infected him completely.

He looked at the second message waiting. It was from MCP.

He opened this one to find that it was not another group mailing sent out to all staff. It was addressed to him directly. Unlike the first message, it wasn't wordy and lengthy. It was very curt, and very direct.

And it advised him to report, at mid-day, to the Center Director's office.

Not to the Level Chief's office. Not to Personnel Station. Directly to the Center Director's office.

Kyn slowly lowered his head to his desk and pressed it there, and just as slowly raised his hands, ran his fingers through his hair, and laced them together behind his head.

He suddenly, for the first time, truly understood what it felt like to feel old.

5

Kyn stepped off the lift on level thirty-eight, pausing, first, to readjust his best collar band, which felt like it was tightening on its own and trying to choke him. The thin band, encrusted with a ring of tiny off-green stones, was one of only three he owned—whereas he'd had a whole drawer filled with them back on his homeworld. It complimented his light green tunic and the gray jacket and trousers he wore. His hair was carefully held in place with sculpting gel, which he hoped wouldn't start running down his temples in rivulets if he started sweating more than he already was.

He'd decided, painful but practical as the choice was, to skip his studies and try to get a couple of hours sleep, as the meeting he'd been called to was to take place what was, for his schedule, the middle of the night. And of course, he'd been unable to sleep, with all the shards of his life grinding around in his head, along with vivid visions of any number of worst-case scenarios regarding his future. He'd finally given up, cursing himself, showering and getting dressed in his best clothes (which weren't really all that great, he noticed bitterly). As this meeting was not on his shift and he was not management, regs held that he should attend without his work uniform, with the unwritten reg being that if he was going to see the head of the whole facility, he damned well had better dress nicely.

He'd never met the Director personally, though he'd been in the same room with him twice. Once was when the Director was making his stops at the different levels' staff parties on Ascension Day to give his holiday wishes, and the other was at the all-staff

annual meeting, when the Director had addressed them all from the stage podium in the main auditorium. But Kyn knew his face well from video staff updates and proclamations, and from the various holopics of him around the Center. It was a confident, serious face that commanded respect and instilled the appropriate level of underling fear; a face that Kyn had been seeing, behind his eyes, the whole tram ride to MCP.

He turned left and headed down the relatively quiet hall of the Admin level, one that didn't suffer from the bustling of bodies and carts that patient levels did. The uniforms up here, such as the one worn by the nameless administrator who walked past him, not bothering to look up from his datapad, were white and affixed with rows of small colored ribbons above the left breast, showing academic and professional rank. He found himself holding his breath as the man passed, and let it out when he'd walked on. His acute paranoia that had been his traveling companion since stepping into the Center's main entrance had let him imagine the man looking up, recognizing him immediately, and shaking his head at the soon-to-be-released M.A. that everyone up there had been talking about.

His pace was a medium speed, a balance between his need to rush, showing his appreciation of the seriousness of this meeting, and his dread at attending it. His legs felt heavy and weak. But he did his best to control his breathing and tell himself he was ready to face this.

He paused just shy of the double doors to the Director's suite, not knowing exactly how he was supposed to compose himself but feeling the need to make some kind of gesture of it. He closed his eyes and squeezed his fists open and closed. He wished, again, that he'd been able to talk with Gibri, to ask his advice, but his co-worker's shift had not quite begun, so he hadn't bothered stopping on seventeen. No, Kyn was on his own.

Not wanting to get snuck up on while standing in such a way, he took a resolute breath and stepped forward. The doors, each holding exactly one-half of the MCP logo, spread apart before him.

The Director's assistant, a male Parussi with pale red head tentacles, wearing a white uniform with only two ribbons (one silver, one light blue), looked up from his console at the desk and smiled professionally.

"M.A. Tallin?" he asked.

Kyn nodded respectfully and tried not to swallow. "Yes."

The Parussi nodded without addressing him further and pressed a button on a com box next to him. "Director? Medic Assistant Tallin has arrived."

"Send him in," a deep voice said after a slight pause.

Kyn felt his heart skip a beat, and his mind tried desperately to glean any kind of reading from the tone and the words used by the disembodied voice, but he got nothing. The response was flat and emotionless.

The Parussi looked up at him, with another practiced, and seemingly disinterested, smile, and said, "You can go right in." He went immediately back to whatever he was working on at his monitor.

Kyn's eyes rolled to his right, to one of the suite's waiting couches, and he felt a longing for it, as, in his vision of how this moment would go, he was to have a few minutes of waiting on it before his meeting, a last chance to collect his thoughts and

mentally prepare. He didn't take this deviation as a good sign that the other expectations he had would match his wishes.

"Thank you," he said, with a nod of his head that the assistant didn't see, and looked up at the waiting single door on the far wall. For a moment, his legs didn't seem willing to take him there, but he forced them out of their paralysis and walked forward anyway.

The door seemed to slide sooner than he'd expected, and that gave him an involuntary jolt. He paused outside it as it opened. Inside, a desk sat in front of a shuttered bulkhead window. Behind it, in an overly-large chair, looking regal in his uniform with its intimidating collection of ribbons, sat Center Director Ganner, a tall, graying human male with broad shoulders.

He was leaning back in his chair, holding a datapad in one hand, his gray/white eyebrows drawn together as he examined it. While he didn't look up at first, the other human in the room, seated in one of the office's two desk-front chairs, rolled his head around and looked at Kyn. This man was younger than Ganner, but looked to have about fifteen years on Kyn. His suit, like Kyn's, was civilian, and the color scheme seemed slightly off, the deep blues of his jacket and pants not quite matching, if you looked close enough. His long hair, brown and thick, was tied back in a tail, and there was a thin sheen of stubble on his face, suggesting either that he hadn't shaved that morning or that his beard grew faster than the average human's.

He gave Kyn a non-committal smile as the Director finally looked up.

"Good day, Mr. Tallin," he said, neither smiling nor frowning. "Would you have a seat, please?"

"Yes, sir," Kyn said, stepping in and letting the door close behind him, having a sudden memory flash of being called into the schoolmaster's office in secondary school after he and two other boys (what were their names?) had been caught with clearly forbidden fireworks in their possession. As he rounded the waiting chair, he tried to avoid looking at the man in the one next to it, and what ramifications his presence there might have. As Kyn sat (as straight as he could), the Director put his datapad down on his desk and rubbed his chin.

"M.A. Tallin, I'd like you to meet Advocate Bon Nroman," he said.

Kyn hoped his face hadn't just betrayed the alarm that pulsed in his chest. An advocate? Why did an advocate need to be there? The reason became quickly clear to him. There were procedures to be followed, legal ones, when the termination of a worker occurred, just to protect the Center's liability. Any hope he'd had of this going another way than he'd envisioned evaporated, just like that.

The advocate turned and extended his hand with a smile. "My pleasure, Mr. Tallin."

Kyn turned, quickly, and shook the man's hand, afraid that rudeness might somehow make his situation worse, though he couldn't imagine how. "My pleasure, sir," he returned, graciously, forcing a smile of his own.

The man sat back in his chair and Kyn did likewise, noticing, as he did so, a thick business satchel under the man's chair, between his feet. Director Ganner looked past both of them and upward, an unfocused stare. He seemed to be collecting his thoughts. The silent interim seemed to go on for an eternity, and made Kyn want to scream to break it.

"As you know," Ganner said, leaning forward and placing his hands on his desk, casually meshing his fingers together, "we lost one of our patients yesterday. Sadly. A Mr. Yader Dell."

"Yes," Kyn nodded, agreeing quickly, as it seemed like the right thing to do, but the unexpected statement confused him.

"You saw to him on your shift. Even got him a room to himself, I'm told."

More baffled panic made him grip the arm of his chair more tightly. "I...felt that his condition...his coughing, it wasn't fair to the other patients, and—" *That* was what he was getting fired for?

"Yes, yes," the Director said, cutting him off dismissively, but there seemed to be no rude intent in it. "That's not an issue, Mr. Tallin. You used your judgment, and we encourage that kind of thing here in our staff, at all levels." He appeared to direct that last part toward the man seated next to Kyn.

"Yes, sir," was all Kyn could think to say.

The Director paused to choose his words again, and Kyn spent the pause with his thoughts racing around like a dive bat trapped in a bell tower.

"We have an...unexpected situation here," Ganner said, his tone diplomatic. "With this patient."

"Is there...some question of his care?" Kyn asked, regretting the words as soon as they left his mouth. He just couldn't stop them. The advocate presence now made a different kind of sense. Was someone taking legal action against the MCP regarding Yader's death? And if so, who? He had no family, that much Yader had made clear...if Yader had been completely honest with him, that was. While he feared speaking out of turn, the thought that someone was somehow implicating him in some wrong-doing regarding Yader overrode his survival instincts and stoked a small blossom of anger in him.

"No, no," the Director said, looking suddenly confused himself, and as apologetic as one man clearly in superior ranking to another could be. "Nothing like that."

The advocate suddenly chimed in. "No, there's no indication of that. From what I can tell, he received exemplary service in his final days. I have no issues with his care, Mr. Tallin."

Then, Kyn wondered, what *did* he have issues with?

The advocate's words seemed to please Director Ganner, who nodded graciously. He turned his attention, then, back to Kyn.

"The situation before us lies in his dispensation."

Dispensation was the euphemistic term used to describe the disposal of an expired patient's remains. With so many cultures of so many species treated at the MCP, there was, naturally, an entire department that dealt with the proper methods of dispensation, ones kept carefully in line with racial customs, religious doctrines and the patient's wishes. As few beings preferred to think of such things when admitted to a medical facility, such preferences were (or were supposed to be) detailed in their personal medical

files carried in any civilized patient's datapad, and were transferred directly to the MCP system upon their registration. Lacking such directives, the Department of Dispensation turned to next of kin for instructions on the arrangements, or, if that was lacking (as it often was), to the MCP's expansive cultural database to find the closest logical approximation.

"He was Yiddian," the Director went on. "Their culture calls for incineration of the remains. There were few questions about Mr. Dell's—"

Captain Dell's, Kyn corrected, but only in his thoughts.

"—cause of death, so the post-mortem examination was quick. His body has already been through the process."

Hearing that fact was unexpectedly painful to Kyn. Knowing the man had died was one thing. But now knowing that there was nothing left of his mortal shell but so much ash made it undeniably final. He felt the hollow pangs of sorrow again that he'd mostly buried after he'd gotten the message that ordered him to come to—whatever this was.

"Are you all right?" the Director asked.

Kyn hadn't realized that he'd been staring blankly at the polished window shutters, nor that the room had fallen silent.

"Yes," he said, quickly, mildly embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

The Director nodded, seeming to understand. He went on. "As you know, the D.O.D. arranges appropriate transport of the remains, including incinerations. Assuming there's no next of kin, as is the case with Mr. Dell. We haven't had a great number of Yiddians in our midst, and fewer, thankfully, that terminated here. The usual methodology involves shipment of the remains to the Yiddian prime homeworld, to their central temple. The priest administrators handle the final arrangements on their end."

"Yeah," Kyn nodded, his words again seeming to come of their own accord, "there are tunnels there, under the main temple. Ancient tunnels. It's a very sacred place to them. There's these...I guess you'd call them holes in the tunnel walls where the remains are placed. They're sealed with these flat, round stones with Yiddian prayer inscriptions carved into them.

"And the ashes," he went on, making a measurement with his hands to try to illustrate what he was talking about to the Director, "they're put in these metal tubes, about this big." His approximation suggested about a quarter of a meter. "They call them..." His brow creased. "I can't remember the word in Yiddian."

"Dral hanna," Advocate Nroman said, smiling softly. "Translates roughly, in Core, to 'soul reliquary'." He turned his eyes from Kyn to Ganner. "Kid knows more about this stuff than I do."

Feeling like he'd spoken more than he should in this setting, and among these men, Kyn shifted a bit in his seat and kept any more gems from his Yiddian data studies to himself.

Ganner raised his eyebrows a bit at Kyn, seeming somewhat impressed, or at least surprised. "That's how things normally happen," he continued. "But we have an unexpected complication. It involves the patient's final wishes on his dispensation. There were changes made, by him, the night before he passed."

Kyn blinked, dumbly. How could he have—

And then he remembered. Yader has asked for datanet access—well, agreed to, more than asked. Kyn had assumed it was for a distraction, or to reminisce on his years through planetary research. It had never occurred to Kyn that the man might have used it to conduct legal business.

“His updates were transmitted to his advocate,” Ganner said, nodding his head toward Nroman. “And became binding, of course, as soon as they were received. On his passing, automatic notice reached Advocate Nroman’s office. Which led him to contact MCP Admin first thing this morning.”

This was all a mystery to Kyn, who hadn’t even known Yader had had an advocate.

“And the nature of these updates, due to their...uniqueness...prompted Admin to elevate the matter to me.”

Kyn waited silently, baffled at both what was going on and the dawning reality that maybe he wasn’t there to beg for his job after all.

“Most details of the dispensation remain Yiddian norm,” Ganner said. “It’s the issue of transportation where they deviate. Mr. Dell withdrew the standard shuttle delivery clause. In its place, he requested that his remains be delivered to their final depository personally. By an individual. A specific individual.

“That would be you, Mr. Tallin.”

Kyn blinked again, but several more times than last. “Me?”

“You seem to have had a very high opinion of this patient. Apparently, the feeling was mutual.”

Kyn’s mouth opened and tried to work, but could only get out something of a breathy grunt.

“I take it by your reaction,” Ganner asked, studying him, “that you had no prior knowledge of this?”

Kyn shook his head, slowly at first, then quickly. “No, sir. None. This is... Well, it’s news to me, too.”

Ganner read him and nodded. “You can see, of course, where this puts us—MCP—in an awkward position.”

Actually, no, he couldn’t, but thought better of voicing that fact.

“This is new ground for us,” Ganner continued, and Kyn was relieved to find the previous question had been a rhetorical one. “We have regulations, clear ones, dealing with all matters of dispensation. But a request like this, it falls into civil regulation, and the laws binding such contracts. You’re an employee here, bound by MCP regs and clearly defined limits to your duties. Matters of dispensation are clearly outside of your duty scheme.”

So he *was* still an employee. He wished that he was less confused so that he could properly take that in and feel the huge splash of relief he assumed he’d be lavishing in later.

“But then, the legal request initiated by Mr. Dell concerns you as a citizen and an individual. This is apart from MCP regulation. However, the nature of your relationship to the deceased existed within the context of your M.A./patient association. There’s a very fine line drawn here between civil contact and Authority medical regulation. And you seem to be standing right on it, young man.”

The use of the term ‘young man’ again took him back to that tense meeting in Schoolmaster Widdik’s office. This didn’t help to relax him, or convince him that his seeming reprieve from job release over his tardiness hadn’t been replaced by an unexpected new krant-hole he seemed to have tumbled into.

Apparently sensing Kyn’s jangled nerves, Ganner smiled lightly. “Don’t misunderstand me. You’ve done nothing wrong here, Mr. Tallin.”

Mild, fragile relaxation ensued.

“We just have a bit of an odd tangle here. The legal ramifications of which Advocate Nroman and I have been pondering here this morning. From what I understand, this request by Mr. Dell is quite unusual for his own culture, not just for Sector law. It would appear it’s quite an honor, this thing he’s asked of you. You must have made quite an impression indeed.”

“He was...a good man,” Kyn said. “It was honor enough just to know him, sir.”

Ganner nodded, smiling knowingly, and Kyn could almost read his thoughts word for word.

Rookie. They all do this when they’re new.

“So here’s where we are,” Ganner said, leaning back and crossing his arms.

“After a lengthy discussion, I’ve come to the conclusion that this request, if handled properly, does not engage you as a representative of MCP. If it’s your choice—and I want to stress that point, that it is your choice, and you’re under no obligation to this facility to decide either way—to accept this...let’s call it, this honor...then you’ll be acting on your own accord as a free citizen of this Sector.”

Nroman nodded, slowly and calmly, as he listened to Ganner’s words, a sign that they’d already come to this agreement before Kyn entered the Center.

“That being said, there would be a matter of the time required to complete this task, and that’s something that would infringe on your shift schedule here. Advocate Nroman has helped me see the solution to this as well. As Mr. Dell had no next of kin, you, as his...representative in this matter, would be fulfilling that role. As such, as a staff member of this facility, you would technically qualify for the standard bereavement allocation. This would allow you to fulfill your obligation without it reflecting on your service record or attendance rating. Nor would it, then, cause you a loss of wage, assuming you returned to your duties within the one-week period. I’m sure for a young man, that last part is a particular concern.”

“Yes, sir,” Kyn agreed, still waiting for everything to slow down at some point.

“This solution keeps our legal and ethical responsibility to our patient’s wishes,” he said, sliding a glance toward the advocate, briefly, “while freeing you to conduct your own part in this without personal penalty or engaging yourself as an MCP operative.”

“Everybody wins,” Nroman summed up, grinning.

“I see,” Kyn said, which was at least mostly true.

“We’d do well to get Advocate Nroman on our staff,” Ganner said, grinning at the other man. “I sense we’d rather have him on our side than not.”

“I’ve never been one for uniforms,” the advocate joked, and Ganner laughed lightly.

Joking was good. It took the tension out of the air, and at least partly out of Kyn. He managed to unclench some muscles that he’d let stiffen to near-steel rigidity.

Still have a job, he repeated in his head. Still have a job.

"Now you don't have to decide right this moment," Ganner interjected, addressing Kyn. "I'm sure you have plenty of questions for the advocate here. And in reviewing your records, I saw that you're a student as well. I'm sure arrangements would have to be made on that front as well."

And there went his relaxation. Thank you kindly, Director.

"And you understand that this is not a legal requirement, correct? That the request is legally binding, not your agreement?"

"Yes, sir, I do. Thank you."

"Good," Ganner said. "Not something you were expecting, I'm sure. Life does throw us twists from time to time."

"Yes, sir," Kyn agreed. "No, I didn't see this coming."

"Well, then that makes three of us," Nroman said, his companionable tone seeming to signal the end of the official portion of this meeting. "He got this one in just under the wire, Captain Dell. I suppose he knew his time was close."

"Yes," Ganner agreed, solemnly. "Terrible thing, Litmun Disease. I saw plenty of it when I was a young medic. No lick of mercy in it. Awful way for a man to go."

The three of them sat in nodding silence, all in non-verbal agreement.

"So," Kyn said, after getting up his courage to speak, and turning toward Nroman. "What is it, exactly, he...wanted me to do?"

Ganner suddenly, and conspicuously, cleared his throat. "Gentleman, at this point, this matter no longer involves the MCP, so I shouldn't be privy to the details. I have a staff meeting to attend, so I'll take my leave of you."

He stood, tugging down on his immaculate jacket, and Kyn and Nroman respectfully took their feet as well.

"Feel free to use my office for your discussions if you'd like. You're welcome to it. I'll let my assistant know."

"Very kind of you," Nroman said with a slight bow as Ganner walked around the desk.

Ganner stopped next to Kyn and held out his hand. Kyn took and accepted the firm shake.

"Thank you for your service, M.A. Tallin," the Director said, sounding very sincere about it. "I'm well aware that we're only having this conundrum because of your clearly excellent patient care. This reflects well on you, young man."

"Thank you, Director," Kyn said, hoping he wasn't blushing.

Ganner patted him on the arm. "You've got a good future here at MCP. Proud to have you with us."

Leaving Kyn to digest that (and imagine Gibri's disbelieving face when Kyn repeated those words to him), he stretched his arm across to Nroman, who shook with him.

"My pleasure, Advocate Nroman."

"And mine," Nroman returned.

"You change your mind about that uniform problem," Ganner said, stepping toward the door and grinning over his shoulder, "you give me a com, all right?"

"Food for thinking," Nroman grinned back.

The door slid open, and Ganner paused within the frame, turning back toward Kyn.

“Oh, and when you’ve made your decision? Just let your Level Chief know. He’s aware of the situation. He’ll process the arrangements if you choose to go.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Ganner turned, and the two remaining men saw him stop at his assistant’s desk before the door slid shut, blocking them from sight.

Nroman sighed, seeming pleased, apparently, with how things had gone. He turned to Kyn and seemed to study him. Kyn smiled uncomfortably, not sure which one of them was supposed to speak next.

It was Nroman who did, after he tilted his head toward the door. “Let’s give him a minute to clear out, show him we appreciate his hospitality.”

“Okay,” Kyn said, uncertainly.

“And then…”

“…what do you say we take a ride?”



They left the office, with Nroman telling the assistant they’d decided to discuss their business over lunch, and to thank the Director for the use of his office. They rode the lift down to the main lobby, Nroman leaning in a relaxed stance with his satchel on its strap over his shoulder. As they exited and strolled through the tall, expansive chamber—with its peaceful fountains, colorful plants and towering hologram of Dzyx Ara, the Blndo founder of the MCP, with his fur-coated face looking down at the lobby with great compassion—Nroman made small talk, asking Kyn how long he’d worked there, what he was pursuing at the University, where he was from and the like. Nothing dealing with Yader Dell. Kyn decided he’d let the advocate be the one to bring up the topic.

They walked down the entry stairs together, out into the plaza, one filled with an ocean of mid-day pedestrian traffic, plenty of them in MCP uniforms. Kyn kept the leisurely pace Nroman was setting, walking beside him as they continued to chat and seemed to be heading for the tram station.

The station did end up being their destination, but they didn’t board a tram. In a pay stall was a two-door personal skimmer that Nroman pointed a remote toward, and its doors raised on their own. Kyn was impressed. Not at the model of skimmer, as it was far from top-of-the-line and had numerous scratches marring its dull paint. Shining Path Station kept skimmer traffic down by setting trade prices on the vehicles—ones not used for pay transport—restrictively steep, and charging exorbitant amounts for licensing and registration fees. For most, the cost wasn’t worth the little convenience they offered—the trams moved a lot faster and had no constant barrier of pedestrians to slow them—but for some they were a status symbol. In Nroman’s case, Kyn guessed it was the cost of doing business, an investment designed to impress potential clients.

“Hop in,” the man said, heading to the front of the vehicle to unhook the charge cable. “Just move the stuff in the seat. Sorry about that.”

Kyn leaned in and carefully transferred a scattering of data cards and food wrappers to the floor in front of the seat. He'd considered putting them in the area behind the seats, but there was a mountain of similar items already there and he didn't want to mix them together, in case the cards on the seat were more pertinent to Nroman (the ones in the back looked like they might have been tossed there years ago, with the aroma of tang sauce on one of the wrappers the only evidence to the contrary).

He nestled onto the cracked, faded upholstery of his seat and took the chance to check out the skimmer's systems. Nothing too fancy. Data unit, navigation system, all out of date. This was the type of skimmer friends of his in third school had been given by parents who didn't quite trust them with newer, more expensive models.

Nroman climbed in on his side, first placing his satchel behind his seat (Kyn was sure that its usual resting spot was the seat Kyn now occupied), and powered up the engine. With the press of a button the doors slid back into place and sealed them in. Checking the rear cam, Nroman waited for some passersby to get clear, then keyed the hover button, and the skimmer rose off the deck. He looked over his shoulder instead of trusting the cam alone (something Kyn's father had taught him during their frustrating driving lessons), backed the vehicle up, then turned the yoke and slid them slowly through the tram plaza and into the designated skimmer lane.

"Quite a way to start your day, huh?" Nroman commented, edging behind a trans-skimmer with a pair of thin, orange passengers visible through its rear glass.

Kyn let out a breath he felt he'd been holding for half a standard hour. "I thought I was going up there to get fired."

"What?" Nroman laughed. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Kyn said, embracing the relief of unabashed honesty. "I've been late to work a lot. School."

Nroman laughed again, a good laugh, not a cruel one. "Sorry for the scare, kid."

"It's okay," Kyn smiled. He huffed a sigh. "I think I just aged ten years. Holy gods."

"I can see why. Probably never even been on that floor before, I bet."

"And I don't want to be. Ever again."

Another laugh from Nroman. Kyn decided he liked the man. He leaned back in his seat and let the tension of the morning melt off him in invisible waves.

"I didn't know Captain Dell had an advocate," he said after a few moments. "He never mentioned."

"You two talk a lot?" Nroman asked, braking gently as the trans-skimmer ahead did so (not-so-gently).

"Yeah," Kyn nodded. "I'm on the night shift, so it's quiet. There's time between duties. We didn't at first, but he opened up after a while. He was a good guy."

Nroman nodded, concentrating on the lane ahead, taking a quick look in the rear cam to check traffic behind them.

"Did you know him well?" Kyn asked.

"Nope," Nroman said, bluntly. "Met the man all of once."

"Really?" Kyn asked, surprised.

"When he first arrived on station and came to my office. Seemed like a decent type. Struck me as having been a real friendly guy, before he got sick. But he was pretty

far along by the time he found me. Man like that, he doesn't dock himself and surrender to medics until he knows the choice is gone."

"Yeah," Ken agreed, unhappily.

"After that, any other contact was strictly datanet, MCP to my office. And those stopped pretty quick. I was surprised when I got his last transmit. It'd been a while."

"Can you tell me what he wants me to do?" Kyn asked, finally having an opening to pose the big question.

Nroman made a purposefully uncertain face, and a noise to go with it. "Not just yet. Hold that 'til we get where we're going."

Kyn studied the man's profile, curiously. "And where are we going?"

"Just somewhere where the view's a little better," he said, cryptically. He turned his head to Kyn and grinned assuredly. Not sensing any kind of malice in his words, Kyn chose to leave it at that, and to see where else this bizarre day was taking him.

They traveled a good four kilometers and ended up waiting in line at a massive skimmer lift, watching as indicator lights signaled vehicles, assuming space was open, to enter before the doors came slowly down behind them, accompanied by a sharp warning clang. As they waited their turn, Nroman asked him if he was familiar with Tauntic jazz, and pulled up a couple of musical selections when Kyn stated he was not. The rhythmic, swirling and curiously soothing music passed the time, and filled the void that the lack of answers to the questions at hand left.

When they finally slid into the lift, Nroman indicated to it, through his dash's data unit, that they were headed all the way to the top—Apex level. There were a handful of stops along the way, with vehicles entering and exiting the spacious enclosures, and the skimmers to their left and right both departed.

When the doors opened on Apex level, Nroman pulled carefully out and followed the skimmer lane further into the station. Soon, as they came up on Station Center, he found a charging stall and angled them into it, and to a stop. The skimmer lowered gently to the deck, and Nroman cut the engine.

"Let's take a walk," he said, as though he'd just thought of the idea. The doors raised and he stepped out, so Kyn did likewise. Nroman slung his satchel back over his shoulder as he sealed the vehicle up again, not bothering to hook up a charging cable, since it had just recently been maxed.

He started toward a tunnel, thick with travelers, pilots and crews, and Kyn followed.

"I like to come up here and walk sometimes," Nroman said. "Sometimes to fish for business, if my client count's low. Cargo jocks always have some kind of legal needs. Trade regs, transfer contracts, things like that. They're usually looking for a drink or a meal before they hit the datanet to find a local advocate, so I can trawl in the taverns, grab a bite or a few cocktails, log it as business expenses."

"Very proactive," Kyn grinned.

"Opportunity likes an anxious suitor," Nroman smiled. "Or sometimes I just come up here to think. Work through a touchy problem, or just clear my head. The view always helps."

They left the tunnel and entered the main throughway, and ahead of them, a wall made up mostly of bulk-thick glassteel stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction. And through it, the gargantuan expanse of the station's docking port could be seen, and in it floated a breathtaking vista of starcraft, from massive cargo haulers and Authority troopships to smaller pleasure or personal transports. Many were berthed, with sturdy docking arms securing them and telescoping boarding tubes leading from their access hatches to thick portal doors on this side of the glass. Some, like an excursion liner that looked like it held around two thousand passengers, floated slowly by, either docking in or departing from Shining Path Station. Far across, though the seemingly endless crowd of ship traffic, the level's other bulkhead could be seen.

It was a view, indeed. Kyn knew it well, as he'd spent plenty of his own time watching ships come and go, imagining the stories each one had to tell. But he'd never come all the way to Apex before, usually restricting his own daydreaming stints to Green Haven's level.

Nroman walked all the way to the glass wall, Kyn at his side, and they stopped and looked outward, and down. From up there, all the scattered rows of ships of each descending level could be seen, a sight that illustrated just how colossal the station really was.

"Makes a man feel small, doesn't it?" Nroman remarked, peering down.

"It does," Kyn agreed, experiencing and relishing in the vertigo he felt from looking down from that height.

They spent a couple of minutes just watching the ships, and the carefully orchestrated bustle of dockings and embarkations.

Nroman casually unzipped his satchel, dug through it, and came out with an oversized, rectangular datapad.

"I'll need your binder," he said, holding the pad out to Kyn, "before we discuss things further."

Drawn out of his reverie abruptly, Kyn turned, caught off-guard by the sudden shift in focus.

"Oh," he said, looking at the pad, suddenly feeling the welling up of expectation in his chest. "Sure, of course."

He looked down and narrowed his eyes at the screen that took up roughly half of the pad. The text there was voluminous, and so filled with legal double-talk that it may as well have been another language all together.

"Uh, what am I—"

"Standard confidentiality covenant," Nroman said, nonchalantly. "Ties the business between you, me and Captain Dell to bound privy. It's required in contracts like his."

"I see," Kyn said, looking hesitantly at the jumble of words that didn't seem like a normal, reasonable person would assemble together in such a way.

"You want to read it first?" Nroman asked, seeing Kyn's pause.

"Um, no," Kyn said, dismissively, as that didn't seem to be a requirement in this situation, and would probably only serve to further underscore his ignorance. "It's fine."

As Nroman continued to hold it toward him, Kyn placed his thumb over the standardized reader pad below the screen. Binding appendages varied by species—for humans and many humanoids, the thumb was the accepted method. The clear square

flashed briefly as he held his thumb to it. After a moment, a beep came from the datapad, and a box appeared on the screen above the contract's text, filling with information about him—his full name, homeworld, Sector citizenship status and the like—almost faster than it could be read. The box vanished and was replaced with another that said 'Binder processed and filed.' That box, and the contract below it, suddenly disappeared.

Nroman took the datapad back, powered it down, and replaced it in his satchel.

"Come on," he said, motioning with a tip of his head to their left, and started walking at a slow, relaxed pace. Kyn, feeling apprehensive but pleasantly anxious, followed.

They continued along the path of the docking wall—portal doors, glassteel and ships to their right, foot traffic, slow-moving cargo skims and tunnels leading to outward parts of the station (and all the pleasurable distractions that longhaulers would be looking to spend their credits on) on their left.

"After our discussion here is done," Nroman said, looking not at Kyn, but past Kyn, watching a nearby group of crewman loudly debating the proper way to get a stack of containers onto a skim, "you and I will have no further contact. Not face to face, not by com, not by datamail, not by Rendi carrier hawk. This is it." He turned his gaze to Kyn for a moment. "It was nice knowing you. I'm sure I'll always cherish our time together."

Kyn looked at him dubiously. Nroman turned his head and kept walking.

"Wait," Kyn said after a moment of just looking befuddled. "*What* is it he wants me to do again?"

"Just what I said," Nroman said, looking through the glass as he walked. "To carry his remains to their final resting place."

"To Yiddia, right?"

"Could be," Nroman shrugged.

Kyn stopped walking. Nroman took a few more steps, then paused as well, looking back. His expression was blank.

"Could be?" Kyn repeated, his voice raising an octave. "You don't know?"

Nroman shrugged again. "Nope."

Kyn made an exasperated grunt. "But...he told you. That's why we're here, because of what he told you."

"And that's what he told me. And I told you. I'm nothing if not efficient."

Kyn spread his arms apart in a helpless gesture. "But...that doesn't make any sense. That's all he said?"

Nroman took a couple of steps back toward Kyn, and noticeably lowered his tone, though no one seemed to be in earshot. "There are further instructions. Ones just for your eyes. I had no access to them, nor do I have any desire to access them."

"What instructions? Where?" Kyn asked, just about fed up with all these games. He wanted to know what was going on, and now.

Nroman smiled. "Patience," he said. "Our discussion's not over. You young guys, always wanting to rush to the end of the story. Just keep it down, walk with me, and relax."

Kyn snorted an incredulous laugh. "What is this, a spy holo? Was Dell S.A.I. or something?"

Nroman said nothing—actively said nothing. His eyes narrowed and looked directly into Kyn's, and his face was poignantly serious.

Kyn's eyes widened, and his body froze.

Three more seconds of this glare continued. And then Nroman burst into a chuckle.

"Not to my knowledge, no," he laughed

Kyn breathed, finally, and looked at the other man like he was crazy.

"You've got to work on that gullibility thing, kid," Nroman snickered, turning away. "Someone's going to sell you bog land on Thagus one of these days."

Nroman started walking again. Kyn glared after him, feeling an uncharacteristic urge to strangle another being, and then caught up with him.

"Yader Dell was just a ship captain, trying to make his way in the worlds," Nroman said when Kyn was back at his side. "He told you as much, I'm guessing?"

"Yes," Kyn said curtly, not enjoying being the butt of this advocate's strange humor and simmering with a little resentment.

"They're an odd breed. No attachments, living in the moment. I can appreciate the romantic notion of that. Cruising the starways, never knowing where that next credit's coming from. It's not me. I like my feet in one place. Being a part of a community, knowing all the players, all the rules. I like a little thrill of the unknown as much as the next citizen, but in manageable doses. I'm a controller. Being tossed around by the whims of the worlds, playing the odds? Not for me. I leave that to the Captain Dells of the universe."

Kyn hadn't prayed in quite some time—though he'd been tempted to in the last few hours—but he was close to praying that Nroman would get to the point.

Nroman stopped next to a portal hatch and leaned his back against the glass, turning toward Kyn.

"Guys like him," he said, his tone growing thoughtful and losing its humor, "they don't have families. Family gets in the way, makes a man grow roots. They tell themselves they can live without it, but deep down, they know there's something missing. There's a part of them that feels...empty. You know?"

Thinking back on his last conversation with Yader, Kyn thought that he did. This sobered him a bit, and he forgot about his resentment.

"Yeah," he said.

Nroman smiled sadly, knowingly. "You really did like the guy, didn't you?"

"I really did," Kyn nodded, quietly.

"Well, for what it's worth? I think you filled some of that big empty in him in his final days. I'm not going to pretend I knew him better than you. Or at all, really. But when I got his final amendments? I thought to myself, who is this Kyn Tallin? Why all this sudden trust in a total stranger?"

"You weren't a stranger, though. Not to him. I think, in the end, you were the closest thing he had to family. Sounds crazy, I know. But you meant something to him. You made a difference in his life. What there was left of it."

Kyn absorbed that thought. He wasn't quite sure how it made him feel. Good, on the one hand, but sad, too. A very thick kind of sad.

"And I just had to find out," Nroman said, quietly, "if you...I don't know, kind of felt the same. I can see you did."

Kyn just nodded, hearing Yader's stories in his ears, seeing the man's withering body, but the fire, too, still in his eyes that refused to go out. He didn't say anything. He just gazed out at the ships, both passing and resting.

Nroman watched him for a couple of moments, then turned and joined Kyn in his gaze.

They stood in silence together, until Nroman finally ended it with a sigh.

"Hey, look at that," he said, conversationally, breaking the lull, pressing his finger up against the glass and pointing toward the docked ship nearest to them. "They don't make 'em like that anymore, do they?"

Kyn accepted the invitation to small-talk for what it was—a buffer to transition them out of the emotionally awkward territory they'd fallen into—and picked up his part of it after a sigh of his own. "No," he said, looking at the ship Nroman had indicated. "No, they don't."

"What is that, a Q-42?" Nroman asked, squinting and looking the ship over.

"Q-58," Kyn corrected. "The 42s didn't have the vertical stabilizers."

"The..." Nroman prompted.

"The tail fin," Kyn smiled.

"Ah," Nroman said, nodding, with a small grin at his own ignorance.

Nroman was right—they *didn't* make them like that anymore... literally. The men were looking at a Malorian Landmark-class Q-58 small freighter. The people of Malor had been some of the best starcraft designers in the quadrant. That was, of course, until a holy war erupted on their world after a charismatic revolutionary stoked an anti-tech movement into a global inferno. When the smoke cleared, a theocracy ruled Malor, an iron-fisted one that enforced a lethally strict return to the pre-industrial ways of their people. Their final use of their sinful technology, three decades previous, was to blow their orbital shipyards out of the night sky, ending their long-famed trade in starcraft. Heretic ship designers who managed to flee the regime found open arms awaiting them at any number of other manufacturers throughout the quadrant. But the magic they'd worked as a body of builders was never quite replicated with them all split up. The age of the elegant, dependable Malorian ships had ended.

The one the two men were studying was a ruggedly-pleasing freighter about fifty meters end-to-end, an oblong, curving hull with twin, downward-slanting L-wings protruding at its rear, each packed with powerful sub-light engines. The fin gave it a pleasing, aerodynamic aspect, and an array of engines on the stern indicated the lightspace drive.

Kyn noted the arrangement of the array, recognizing that it had been substantially modified, its engine configuration set up for clearly advanced speed and longevity for a craft of that size. What he knew of engines—which was a respectable amount from all his reading over the years on starships—made him appreciate the set-up, the four-engine horizontal grouping with twin additional above and below the—

Wait a minute...

His reflection on the design came to a halt as something familiar prodded him. For a moment, he couldn't place it, only knowing that something about the nagging thought lit something urgent in him. It was a recognition, something from an elusive, but fairly recent, memory, one that suddenly became desperately important to find.

It had to do with the lightspace engines. The way they were set up. Something he'd heard from—

Kyn pulled his intense gaze away from the ship and turned it toward Nroman. Nroman was simply watching him, a blank slate.

"Whose ship is this?" Kyn asked.

"Your ship," Nroman said, matter-of-factly.

Kyn blinked, and stated the obvious. "I don't *have* a ship."

"Beg to differ," Nroman said. He leaned in front of Kyn, nonchalantly, and stretched his arm past. His finger tapped the central button on the registration screen set next to the portal that led to the ship's access tube. He straightened up, leaned back against the glass, and crossed his arms, watching Kyn patiently.

Kyn's head tilted slightly, and involuntarily, as he studied Nroman warily. Nroman's face gave no answers. He simply waited.

Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, Kyn finally let his eyes leave Nroman, and he turned his head toward the screen. He took one heavy step closer to get a better view of it. And he read what was there.

BERTH A-1087b

CRAFT TYPE: FREIGHTER / SMALL

CRAFT DESIGNATION: THE MOURNING GLORY

The next line hit him with a vertigo that had nothing to do with the view.

CAPTAIN: KYN TALLIN

7

Kyn stared at the words on the screen, waiting for them to make sense. He read them over several times. This did not help.

He turned to Nroman, who was looking at him innocently—but the innocence started showing some daylight through its emerging cracks. Kyn stepped back to the glassteel and put both of his palms on it, looking the ship over with his eyes wide and probing, analyzing its lines and wings and engines as if the answer to the question throbbing in his mind was printed somewhere on them—but it was an answer that was already in his grasp.

"The *Fable Stone*," he breathed, his fingers running slowly down the glass.

"Beg to differ," Nroman said, craning his neck to get the ship in his sights.

"That's the *Mourning Glory*. Says so right there on the reg. Somebody must have told you wrong."

With his mouth hanging slightly agape, Kyn gazed at it for a few moments more, then, drawn back into the ridiculous but sharp reality of it all, spun to face Nroman.

Nroman's innocent look quickly collapsed, and he gave up suppressing the smile growing across his face. "I've been waiting to see that look all *day*. It was worth the wait."

"Do I need to work on my gullibility again?" Kyn asked, a tinge of desperation in his voice. That was the only answer that made sense; he was getting his chain yanked again.

Nroman smiled and shook his head, looking quite pleased at how this was playing out. "Not this time. That reg is truth, kid. Nice and legal. That's your ship."

Kyn was too stunned to process it all—or, all of a sudden, to speak.

Snickering kindly, Nroman put his arm around Kyn's shoulders and started leading him away from the glass, guiding him like a drunk, with that same cautious, slow care that Kyn had practiced so many times putting patrons into skims at K'ardo's—the kind where you're ready to catch the guy if his legs suddenly give out.

"Let's have a seat," Nroman said, guiding them toward a glass-facing bench, one with a steady stream of cargo skims and dock workers ambling along behind it. "Nice and easy there, M.A. Tallin."

Kyn let himself be led there, and Nroman even turned him around, making it easier for Kyn's read end to find the bench, before Kyn lowered himself down. Nroman took a seat next to him, taking his satchel off and putting between his feet.

The advocate leaned back, put his arm behind the bench, and turned to face Kyn. "You all right?" he asked with a laugh.

Kyn shook his head slowly, staring through the glassteel at the ship. "I don't know."

"Just breathe," Nroman said, amused. "Take your time. Ship's not going anywhere."

"He talked about it...it was always in the past tense," Kyn said, still watching the physical manifestation of something that had only existed in his mind. "I just assumed he sold it. Or lost it. Or something. I didn't want to ask. The way he talked about it. How much he loved it. I thought it would be too painful."

"Oh, he did love it," Nroman said. "His love for it is what brought him to me in the first place."

He paused after that thought and took a few subtle, furtive glances around them, presumably to see if anyone was in earshot. Kyn, noticing this, finally turned his attention fully to his benchmate.

"Okay, here's the thing," Nroman said, taking a breath as if to start a long tale, and a long tale was exactly what Kyn needed desperately right now. Nroman leaned closer to Kyn, lowered his voice, and said, "Captain Yader Dell did not find me by accident. Yes, the first time I met him was when he came to my office. But he commed me before that. He was a referral. Client of mine knew him. Another starhopper. They're like a guild without membership dues, these guys. The ones who aren't trying to kill you over some vendetta are like your cousins or something. And family helps family out. It's this whole code they've got.

"So, anyway, my other client—a guy I've done a few deals for in the past—sent him my way. Dell was coming to Shining Path. That's reason one. Reason two is that Dell's needs were the kind which I'm...practiced in."

Nroman seemed to notice a look Kyn wasn't aware he was giving off. "You remember that confidentially thing you thumbed back there, right?"

Kyn nodded, and found himself nervously eyeballing a passing dockjock. Seeing this, Nroman looked at the man, too, then back at Kyn with a chuckle.

"I handle...special needs from time to time," he said, quietly. "The clients who know this know they can trust me, and they sometimes turn me onto others. With the understanding that the referral's going to be discrete, too. This guy throws me Dell's name, and wants to point him my way. I trust the guy, so I agree. Dell contacts me. Tells me his story. He's dying. Doesn't get all sentimental about it, just states the facts. He's finally giving himself over to medics, and probably much later than he should have, I had no doubt. There's a chance treatment can help, but it's very slim. He knows the score. And he knows how medics work. He has no homeworld residency. He never renewed his on Yiddia. No Sector interplanetary residency, so no coverage on either front. And he never bothered with any Captaining policy. Much more of cash-on-hand kind of a guy. He knows they're going to drain every last damn credit he has. No offense to your profession, of course. Just speaking facts."

Kyn shook his head, signaling that no offense was taken, and that he didn't want to bother with any kind of verbal response that would slow up the story.

"He didn't care much about the credits," Nroman went on. "He didn't have much anyway, and let me know he didn't have any kin to leave it to. Couldn't take it with him either. He knew he had the miner subsidy that would activate when his account was tapped, but also knew all his assets would be liquidated before that happened. And that meant his ship. And he would be damned to every happy hell—his words—if he was going to let his ship get auctioned off and broke down for parts and spread all over the quadrant. That's the worst fate guys like him can imagine. Those ships are a part of them. The best part of them. Sometimes the only friend they've got.

"So his request was, for me, pretty simple. The first part, anyway. I'd have my guy in Craft Reg do some magic." He paused and gave Kyn a look that was another subtle reminder of the confidentiality. "While Dell was in transit, that ship, by all records, would disappear. Well, not exactly disappear." He smiled mischievously. "I'm sad to say that poor ship met its fiery end when it blew a transline on atmosphere entry over Loika 2. Captain Dell managed to eject in a pod just before it broke apart. Pieces of it are spread all over the deep ocean floor."

He looked back toward the *Mourning Glory*. "Terrible shame. Sounds like it was a fine ship, too." He fixed Kyn with a grinning glance.

"That's all in the records now?" Kyn asked, clearly incredulous.

"Impressed yet?" Nroman asked back with a wry smile.

Kyn nodded. Which Nroman shamelessly appreciated.

"So," Nroman continued. "The *Mourning Glory* arrived on Shining Path, a ship owned by prospector named Genna Dia. Remember that name."

Kyn's eyes widened with a minor panic, as his mind had been momentarily elsewhere and the name had flown past him. "Gennad...?"

"Genna Dia," Nroman repeated, helpfully. "A nice fellow. Or, I'm sure he would be, if he existed. He's one of my ghosts. I've built a few for situations like this."

Okay, Kyn *was* impressed. But also starting to fear, more and more, that he was into something way over his head. The thought of a long stay on an Authority prison station crossed his mind.

“The ship docked and fees were paid up for six months of mooring. Coincidentally, about this same time, Yader Dell arrived here, having caught a ride on a cargo hauler. One owned by a man who owed me a couple of favors. Now he only owes me one. If anyone looked into it, they’d get confirmation that a passenger fitting Dell’s description took the ride.

“Dell arrived at my office, and we took care of business. Then he caught himself a tram and checked into MCP.

“And, well, you know the rest,” he added, solemnly.

“You said there was a second part?” Kyn noted.

Nroman nodded approvingly. “Good ear. Yes. That part had to do with his dispensation. His original plan was about as strange as I’ve heard, and I’ve heard a lot. After his passing, I was to put his remains on that ship. And I was to then arrange to have it remote-piloted—get this—right into this system’s sun.”

“Really?” Kyn asked.

“Kid you not. He and his ship were going to finish their long journey together. Nicely poetic, the kind of romantic notion you expect from these guys. And that was going to take some manpower. I was going to need a pull in a pilot I could trust, get him to fly it out, set up the remote, and would have needed a second ship for a mid-flight transfer to get him out before the final ride. That meant cost, people, and that all adds up to a greater risk of discovery. It was dicey, but hey...it was his money, and it was the man’s final wishes in the big, bad universe, so I took the job.

“Of course, that’s when *you* came along,” he grinned. “All things measured, you made my job a whole easier.”

Kyn closed his eyes and let it all sink in, or at least as much of it that could at that moment. When he opened them again, he realized it was time to finally say the words out loud, and it was surprisingly hard.

“So he left me his ship.”

“Technically, no,” Nroman said, taking a reflexive glance around again.

“Because he had no ship to leave. You, sir, won this ship in one mother of a big game of Tri-deck.” He studied Kyn for a moment. “You play Tri-deck?” he asked.

“No,” Kyn admitted, with a little embarrassment.

Nroman nodded. “Learn,” he said. “Just in case. Astronomical chance of that ever coming up, but better safe than the other way, I always say. Genna Dia’s a good fellow, but a stupid-as-stone gambler. He lost it to you fair and square. He wasn’t pleased about it, I can tell you, but plenty of stupid beings have unshakeable honor. He put you off for a while, but finally made the legal transfer.”

“And when was that?” Kyn asked, trying to keep up with all the details to be juggled.

“A few minutes ago. When you gave your binder.” Nroman deadpanned a realization. “Did I forget to mention that part?”

Kyn stared at him, and Nroman snorted a laugh, clearly at the look on Kyn’s face.

“What *else* did I bind?” Kyn asked, nervously, wondering if he might actually be the proud owner of some of that bog land after all.

Nroman waved a casual, dismissive hand that suggested Kyn could relax. "Ownership transfer, all the associated fees. Which are handled, don't worry. Overtake of the docking contract. Oh, and the excess of Dell's retainer, since I didn't need to finance any fancy ship-to-ship stunts or do any hires. That's gone to your account, additional winnings from the unlucky Mr. Dia. All the docs and figures are now in your datapad. You can check them later."

Ken had to ask. "Am I doing something really, really illegal here?"

Nroman considered his question. "Really, really? Not so much. There's no stolen property here. It was his to give, and he gave it to you. And you accepted it with no foreknowledge of nor participation in the creative registration switch. Foreknowledge makes a big difference in things like this. The heavier stuff, which amounts to registration forgery and coverage fraud, isn't on you at the front end. Worst case, you're a participant after the fact.

"If by some miracle any of this came to light, which it won't, Judicial Review has no time to bother with the likes of you. Any half-competent advocate would get you a manageable fine and a stern talking-to. And the way the transfer was set up on the ship? Discovery wouldn't even invalidate your ownership. At worst, they'd order the ship sold and the proceeds to go toward repayment to the Miner's Guild for the med fees, and you'd take the rest. You'd just end up back where you started, but with some decent coin in your account."

Kyn wore the nervous stare of the not-totally-convinced.

"Trust me," Nroman said, smoothly and confidently. "This is what I do, kid. No one has any reason to ever look into this. All red flags have been pulled down, folded, and put neatly away. No one knows a thing if you don't tell them." Nroman fixed Kyn with an important look. "And we are clear on that, right? That you can't tell anyone? Friends, co-workers, sure as hells not MCP."

Kyn nodded, vigorously. "Yeah, of course." His mind started throwing him questions about the best ways to deal with that, which led to more lies, and therefore more stress and more guilt.

"This isn't hijacking or slave-running. All right? Everybody gets what they want at the end of the story. MCP got paid. Dell got his wish. You got a ship. Only one that got screwed, maybe, was the Miner's Guild for paying fees they didn't need to, but considering their formerly lazy safety standards were the ones that got Dell sick in the first place? I don't plan to lose any winks over it. You?"

"No," Kyn said. "I guess not." No, that sounded like the absolute least that they owed Yader Dell.

Suddenly remembering, he asked, "So what about Captain Dell's instructions for me?"

Nroman pointed his index finger, from the hand that was resting on the bench, toward the ship. "In there. You sign into the ship's system, and you'll find your first text com as owner. It's from him. Whatever they are, you'll have to find out from the man himself."

Kyn tried not to look at the ship, because each time he did, he found he didn't want to *stop* looking at it. He looked around the docking bay instead, watching the rhythmic bustle of the place, listening to the coarse language, shouts, laughs and coughs, and the seemingly endless overhead com announcements that floated above it all.

“What am I supposed to do here, Mr. Nroman? I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” Nroman said, saving him the trouble of clarifying. “Legally? Whatever you want. You own that ship. It’s yours to do with as you please. You want to sell it, take the substantial mountain of credits and start yourself a new life somewhere? That’s your choice. I could leave you a list of honest dealers that’d fetch you the right price.

“Or,” he said, thoughtfully, “you find out what he had in mind for you, you get it done, and you keep the ship. I don’t know what’s in that message, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t want you flying it into any suns. I think he wanted you to have it. His reasons are between the two of you. You could fly it off this station and never look back. Go where you want.”

“But I’m not even a pilot,” Kyn said. “I’m a nav student.”

“You were a Star Ranger, weren’t you?” Nroman asked, a knowing twinkle in his eye.

Kyn showed his surprise. “How did you—?”

“I continue to impress, don’t I?” Nroman grinned. “Come on. You think I didn’t pull every line of data on you as soon as I got Dell’s transmission? I knew every detail of your life before breakfast.”

Confused, Kyn asked, “Then why did you ask me all those questions back at MCP?”

Nroman shrugged. “Passed the time, didn’t it?”

Yes, Kyn had been a Star Ranger. It was the name for a youth organization back on his home world of Adven. For boys, specifically. It was run by the Adven Defense Corps, his world’s much-loved (and rarely needed) global military. Even at an early age, his love for all things stellar was a clear obsession in his life. Waiting until his eighth birthday was torturous, but when he finally reached it, his parents knew there was no way around signing him up (he’d talked of little else the year leading up to it), and he entered, along with other boys his age, as a Comet. It was a dream come true, even if Comets had little else to do, at the start, but do crafts, earn badges in things like star recognition and alien cultures, and learn how to be good, responsible citizens. He’d loved every chance to put on his bright blue uniform and go to the weekly meetings at the ADC Outreach Center, and his first tour of a battle cruiser had nearly caused him to faint in his excitement.

The club had different age brackets, and he progressed through them one by one, each new level bringing more exciting new activities and chances for learning. Much of that learning involved starships, his great love. He absorbed it all, stacking up badges and oozing with pride at the praise of his squadron leader for his efforts. As the years went by, fewer and fewer of his fellow boys returned. While all the really great stuff came near the end of third school, a lot of young men didn’t hang around to experience it, because, frankly, being a Star Ranger wasn’t considered all that cool after a certain age. It took more and more of one’s free time—starting to feel like school—wearing the uniforms became slightly embarrassing and drew mocking jeers from other boys, and, most importantly, the Star Rangers didn’t admit girls. Adven was a world just starting to wake up from its historical gender divisions, and while there were, finally, some female ADC pilots, their numbers were few. Since most boys after puberty could think of little

else *but* girls, volunteering for something that kept them separate from girls, and something that girls weren't, by and large, impressed with, made little sense to them.

But Kyn lived for it. As his father considered his membership foolish (why did a future medic need to learn about starships?) and the dues became more prohibitive at the higher levels, Kyn had had to all but beg as each new year came up to be allowed to continue. His tenacity somehow won out each time, and he managed to reach the level of Defender by the time most guys his age were either involved in sports or, more likely, in nothing at all beyond having a good time. And as a Defender, he got to see all his perseverance pay off.

He got to fly.

The first year at Defender, it had been in simulators. At earlier levels, there had been some of that, but those were the more simple, arcade-style sims. But Defenders got to use the real things, the same ones the ADC pilots Kyn idolized trained on. Star Rangers trained for two-seater Saber fighter craft, the standard orbital patrol and combat ships of the ADC. There was no training on the weapon systems (these controls were blocked out on the sims), and no advanced combat techniques taught. Basic maneuvering and docking were the limits of their education, but that was fine with Kyn. He was no prodigy by any means; he started out rough, angry at himself and embarrassed for his low sim scores. But he kept at it, and soon found confidence, his relief soon turning to pride.

His final year as a Ranger was also his final year in third school. Keeping up with his school studies, his friends, and his Cadet training was hard, but he was motivated by his need to keep his father from gaining any excuse to pull him out of it, as his father was already reminding him of the final year costs on a regular basis. His real motivation, though, was the culmination of all his patience and work—real flight. His squadron started taking their meetings high above their world, in the ADC orbital station Stalwart. They had been there in previous years, for tours and to take passenger flights with real career pilots—the lack of any military conflicts between Adven and any other worlds allowed pilots time for such duties. But this time, it was the Rangers behind the stick, still riding with pilots (ones who had their own controls in hand and jumped in often) in unarmed, decommissioned Sabers. After proving his skills—not before sending his Saber, in an early run, into a humiliating barrel spin that caused his companion pilot no end of laughter—the day finally came for his first solo flight, with his pilot letting him do all the work, from disembarking to flying basic maneuvers in space to docking with the station. It had been both terrifying and incredible, one of the best days of his life.

He'd logged as much flight time as he could in the months that remained, but eventually his time as a Star Ranger had to end. His parents attended his graduation, his father even managing to display some pride at the ceremony. Kyn received both his graduation certificate and his orbital A-level pilot's license. And, of course, the obligatory post-ceremony visit from an ADC recruiter, as one of the main functions of the Star Ranger program was as a recruiting tool. His father made his feelings plainly clear to the recruiter, that his son would not be embarking on a military career. Though embarrassed by this, Kyn wasn't crushed by it. He'd entertained many fantasies about the life of a Defense pilot through his years in the Rangers, ones fed to the boys regularly by their squadron leaders and trainers, but in the end, the idea of following orders and flying only where he was told, and only between the worlds in his home system, didn't

appeal to him nearly as much as his true dream—to fly all over the quadrant and explore the many worlds and possibilities there.

And that dream, of course, was out of the question, as his father’s own dream for him was strictly enforced right after third school graduation, when Kyn entered university and began his medic education. That had lasted for a time. Until, as Dell had put it, he could no longer continue lying to himself.

“Your license is Authority certified,” Nroman was saying, drawing Kyn back from his memories. “So technically, you are a pilot.”

“Yeah, but only for compact craft. And not even atmospheric flight.”

Nroman shrugged. “You could upgrade. You could do some simulator time on small cargo vessels, study up and learn the Q&A part, take your test. They’re too busy for manned flight tests out here, so you could pass that on the sim, too. Those new credits in your account should cover the sim session fees.”

Kyn mulled that over.

“I’m just saying, it’s doable,” Nroman said. “If that’s the way you want to go. Nothing stopping you from flying out of here without a captaining license, of course, but you’d be stuck docking on backwater worlds in big fields without one. You want to dock at most civilized ports in Authority space, you’ll need to have one. Something to think about.”

Yes, Kyn had a *lot* of things to think about.

“Of course,” Nroman added, pointing at the ship again, “that all depends on whatever it is he’s got to say to you in there.”

Kyn sighed tiredly, feeling more than overwhelmed. “So,” he said, looking at Nroman, “that’s it?”

Nroman smiled. “Almost.” He reached down to the deck before him and opened his satchel. “Two things more.”

He pulled out an oversized bag made of thin, opaque plastic, one that had clearly been taking up most of the satchel’s interior. Kyn recognized it, immediately, even before seeing the logo on it. It was an MCP bag, one that Kyn had seen many stacks of all over the Center during his time there.

He handed it to Kyn. “Dell’s things. From his room.”

Kyn took the bag. It bulged at the bottom, and as Kyn’s hands touched the sides there, he could tell he was feeling rolled-up clothing and a pair of boots. There seemed to be a couple of small, harder items in it as well.

“Yours to deal with, too,” Nroman said as Kyn considered the bag, sadly, and set it respectfully down on the bench next to him.

“And, of course,” Nroman said. His voice was a little quieter, less casual. He reached back into the satchel with both hands.

His hands came back out with a metal tube, about a quarter meter in length. The metal was a very light green, with shallow carvings along its length. Each end was capped with decorative white stones, each permanently sealed to the tube.

Captain Yader Dell.

Nroman looked it for a moment, quietly, then handed it toward Kyn without words.

Taking a breath, Kyn accepted the tube with both hands, reverently. He turned it, delicately, with his fingers, looking at the inscriptions. There was a graphic one, a

representation of a mountain range, with one center peak rising taller than the rest. There were words or letters carved into it in the ancient, ceremonial language of Yiddia. One group of the glyphs was directly below the mountain range, and Kyn was pretty certain that it spelled out the Captain's name.

He considered the mountain shown, and smiled softly. "Mount Uris," he said, absently. "Birthplace of the Founding Scrolls."

Nroman watched him, not saying anything, and waited until Kyn placed the tube next to the bag.

"And that," Nroman said, sighing lightly, "is it. My job is done. The rest is up to you."

Kyn looked at the other man, hunting for words. "I really appreciate all the help," he decided on.

Nroman grinned and made a dismissive sound. "It's what I do. It's not often I get to feel good doing it, though. It's my pleasure."

They nodded at each other in silence. Then Nroman raised his eyebrows, let out a breath, and stood. Kyn quickly rose to meet him.

"Got business to get to," Nroman said. "I'd better launch. You want those dealer names?"

Kyn's mind raced, as the end of this surreal journey with this stranger was coming too quickly for him. So much he hadn't even had time to properly think about, so much to consider. It was all too big.

After a few moments of silence, he heard himself saying, "No. I don't think so."

Nroman smiled sagely. "Had a feeling," he said. He reached down and grabbed his satchel, slinging the now much lighter bag over his shoulder. "Guess this is it, kid."

Kyn, reluctantly, because he really didn't want to let the other man go, extended his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Nroman," he said, wanting to say so much more but knowing he never would have figured out where to begin.

Nroman took his hand and shook it. "Best of luck, M.A. Tallin," he said, warmly. "Thank *you* for helping me understand why he did it. You're all right."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Kyn grinned softly.

Nroman glanced toward the ship's docking portal, then back to Kyn. "Your access code is seven ones. You might want to change that pretty quick. Unless your memory's lousy."

Kyn turned and looked at the door himself. 'Ominous' was the word that came to mind to describe how it looked to him.

"And remember," Nroman said, politely, "if you have any further questions? Any questions at all?"

He slapped Kyn on the shoulder.

"Ask someone else."

Kyn turned back to him, and Nroman gave him a wink, and a grin. With that, he turned his back to Kyn, slid his hands into his trouser pockets, and walked away, whistling to himself. Kyn couldn't be sure, but he guessed it was something from Tauntic jazz. He continued to watch the advocate walk, and soon lost sight of him in the crowd.

And Kyn was left alone. Alone with a life that had just—he was starting to fathom—changed forever.

Alone with one very ominous door.



He gathered up the bag and the dral hanna, and turned to face the docking wall. At first he couldn't make himself move. Instead, he found himself casting glances all around—certain that he was failing miserably at trying to be subtle about it—not really knowing why anyone would be watching him but still feeling like everyone around him was. In reality, no one paid him the slightest mind, all of them going about their mid-day business.

Finally drawing up the courage, he forced himself to walk toward the door. The reg screen had gone dark. He tapped the activation button and it lit up once more, again spelling out the unbelievable.

Captain Kyn Tallin.

The words were still there. Nope—not a dream.

He pressed the proper on-screen button to change the display to the access lock, and he carefully tapped the seven ones on the keypad that appeared. A text box appeared that read ACCESS GRANTED, and with a jarringly loud thump that made him quickly glance around him again, the thick metal door hissed and slowly opened outward next to him. He waited until it came to a stop at a ninety-degree angle, inviting him inside. He peeked around the entrance, looking down the ten-meter transparent tube with a dull metal walkway lining the bottom of it. At the other end, another door awaited—one that held the *Fable Stone's* (no, the *Mourning Glory's*) airlock access behind it.

Afraid his standing around was going to draw attention to him, he stepped into the doorway and onto the walkway. He checked the wall inside and found the door controls, and the press of a red button caused the door behind him to hiss again and start to close. Another deep thud and an indicator light signaled that it was once again sealed.

With a swallow, he started walking slowly down the tube, and he immediately wished the walls weren't transparent. Though the artificial gravity was working fine, the vista give him the sensation of both floating and falling at once. Looking to either side, at the great masses of ships and the maintenance shuttles gliding between them, made him feel like he was walking on nothing but vacuum, and right out there among them. He made the mistake of looking down over the side and quickly tore his eyes back from there to focus on the door ahead. The need to have something more solid around him caused him to pick up the pace and get there quickly, his hesitation momentarily forgotten.

Standing behind the clearly marked safety line, he hit the button that brought the tube door swinging slowly out. This revealed the ship's airlock hatch, a durable-looking but well-scratched door with a closed access panel set into it. He pulled the panel open, and it showed him a simple keypad made up of numerically marked buttons. A small panic stabbed at his chest when he realized Nroman had only mentioned the docking access code. Was the ship's airlock code different? What if he couldn't get in? He

couldn't just go find Nroman and ask for it after the man had just made clear Kyn was never to contact him again. Was Kyn supposed to go find a docking officer and tell him he didn't know the code for his own ship and ask if they provided hack service to let him in?

Fortunately, when he decided to try the seven ones again, they worked. He exhaled with relief as the door opened inward, its systems sensing stable atmosphere on his side. Inside, he could see the bare cube of the airlock room, lit by a rectangle of overhead lights, vacant but for two ancient-looking pressure suits hanging on the walls and a pair of shallow, inset benches. Feeling the need to pause for a moment, Kyn looked down at the threshold at his feet, realizing that his next step was a pretty important one. Satisfied that he'd given the moment its proper respect, he went ahead and took that step.

The door on the airlock's opposite end, the one that led into the ship proper, had a circle of glassteel set in it, and beyond, he could see a very dimly lit, and very short, hall that led to a clearly less durable door—an interior door that didn't have to keep the vacuum of space at bay.

Seeing no reason to close the exterior hatch since the docking tube door wouldn't let anyone reach it anyway, he left it ajar, walked past the hanging suits and reached the interior door. A solid green light above its crank-lock handle indicated the ship was reading atmosphere and would therefore allow him to open it manually. With a pull, several spins and a push, the handle unlocked the door and let him push it open.

He walked quietly (for no rational reason) to the non-windowed door ahead. He recognized it as a simple slider, so forewarned himself not to be startled when it slid open. He didn't know why he was so jumpy. Obviously, he was entering a long-empty ship. Maybe it was some irrational superstition—maybe something to do with carrying the final remains of a dead man in his hand, which suggested to his imagination the possibility of the floating ghost of Yader Dell waiting on the other side of the door to deliver his final instruction in person. Shaking his head at his childishness, he stepped to the door, and it opened with a (thankfully) quiet hiss, revealing the opposite wall of the main hallway that it admitted him to. The main hall, like the short one he was in, had only slight, passive lighting, and was quiet and dark.

Determined to act like a grown-up, he put his fears behind him and stepped across the threshold.

And nearly jumped out of his skin when the overhead lights activated.

He grabbed the door jamb reflexively and closed his eyes tightly, letting his heart start beating again and cursing his idiocy. He calmed himself and opened his eyes, happy that he hadn't paid Captain Dell the indignity of dropping him on the deck. He made a mental note to remember the automatic lights next time, and to not go cardiac every time it happened.

He peered out and looked left first, toward the bow of the ship. The hall continued a short distance, with two additional sliding doors on either side, and ended as it opened into what looked like the ship's common area or lounge. Across that room was a thicker, sturdier-looking door. The bridge door, of course, made with security in mind on just about any proper starcraft, no matter the ship's function. There were an infinite number of reasons a pilot might need to seal himself on the bridge while flying; Kyn knew quite a few of them from a lifetime's worth of holodramas, but he doubted most of those came up that often. It was more likely a captain would just want to do his flying in

peace without the annoying questions of any passengers than using the door to seal out pirates and/or terrorists. Or evil sentient cosmic insects, as happened in some holodramas...

He turned his neck and glanced right, finding that direction to be the longer portion of the hall, with more doors inset along its length. The double doors at the hall's aft end were clearly lift doors, which would descend, he knew, into the cargo bay and the engine room.

He stepped fully into the hall and let the slider close behind him. Now, finally, he was sealed inside the ship, without the comforting sight of the docking tube visible behind him. He listened for any noises aboard. None stood out, and all he could hear was the unusually clear sound of his own breathing.

Damn, but it was quiet in there. Quiet as a...

Well. It was quiet.

His superstition finally got the better of him.

"Hello?" he said in no particular direction, not too loudly, not too quietly. He kept his tone normal and nonchalant, the idea being that if his voice expressed to the ship that everything was fine and he had no fear, then any dangerous spirits—by all rules of schoolboy logic—would be forced to flee. He listened, and no sound of either ghoul or stowaway reacted to his call.

While feeling the strong need to go room to room and do a complete check to verify his solitude, he opted for acting like a grown man instead—one with more important things to worry about right now.

He headed forward, not bothering with the side doors in the hall, and stepped into the common area. It was a square chamber, filled with typical lounge trappings. There were a couple of couches, a low, wide table in front of one of them with a data unit on it. There was also an oversized, comfortable-looking chair. On the wall across from the main couch, a plentiful vidscreen hung—currently, of course, powered down. Below that was a combination bar and kitchenette unit, with a couple of available stools bolted into the deck. He was sure there had to be a larger and more functional galley behind one of the sliding doors in the main hall, unless Captain Dell had been fine with processing his meals simply behind the bar and had converted the room for some other use.

He had expected the chamber to look more...lived in. Perhaps a blanket wadded up on one of the couches, or some unwashed glasses left on the bar. No such things were there. It occurred to him, then, why that was. Captain Dell had cleaned it all up before leaving. A man who expected to be coming back to his home probably wouldn't have bothered. Dell had probably said his good-byes to his ship, a thought that made Kyn achingly sad. He probably wanted her looking sharp for whoever it was that was going to be coming in to fly her, and his own ashes, into the sun.

Leaving those thoughts, and any further exploration of the lounge, behind for the time being, he stepped to the bridge door and tapped the activation button beside it. With no lock in place at the moment, it slid into the wall, giving a slight metallic scrape as it did, opening to an even more stunning vista than he'd received back in the docking bay.

His first sight was directly through the wall of glassteel ahead, and it gave an immediate sensation of floating right out there with the vast array of ships. The bridge was a sunken one, which would require the narrow five stairs at his feet to get down to, and the glassteel ran from the floor right up to the curving ceiling. Back home, his father

owned an impressive fish-gazer tank that he kept in his home office. Standing at the docking hatch, looking out at all the ships, Kyn had felt like he was staring into one of those tanks. Suddenly, out there in the middle of all of them, he felt like he was one of the fish.

He simply stood and watched for a couple of minutes, briefly mesmerized by the unbelievably mammoth engines on the stern of a Cluster-class freighter ahead, and the relatively miniscule maintenance techs in pressure suits slowly floating down between them, their descent modulated by thin booster packs on their backs. Then he had to watch as an Authority battle cruiser (a Seeker) rolled by, taking up a *lot* of the cruising space in the dock, all its lights blinking and many heads moving to and fro behind its bulkhead windows. It, and its crew, done with liberty, were on their way to their next stop, wherever in the quadrant that might be.

Holding the metal rail with his free hand, he descended into the cramped, compact bridge. There was more than enough room in it to stand up, especially with it riding lower, but not much room for walking around. It wasn't fancy, but functional. It had both pilot and co-pilot seats, both set before the expansive console—filled with controls, screens and lights that quickly overwhelmed Kyn's brain—that took up most of the bridge interior. Dual pilot operation was not a requirement on such freighters, but an option, and obviously Dell must have had all the controls and commands set up for single-pilot flight. Behind the co-pilot's seat was an optional navigator's seat, at its own console, the kind of station Kyn had imagined himself spending much of his coming years behind (though in his visions it had always been a much larger bridge on a much larger, heavily-crewed ship).

He found the proper button to power up the console's main data screen. It was angled for ease of viewing from the pilot's chair. Kyn thought about taking a seat in it, but changed his mind when he looked down at the fading, worn upholstery. The impressions in it showed that it was clearly molded to its long-time owner. It almost looked as though Captain Dell was still, invisibly, seated in it. So, instead, Kyn gently placed the dral hanna in it, and set the MCP bag on the deck between the chairs.

Crouching down next to the pilot chair, he accessed the keyboard and pulled up the ship's base data page. Opening the mail icon there, he found three messages, all addressed to Captain Kyn Tallin. The most recent was an official Authority one, from Craft Reg, surely containing all the particulars of the ownership transfer (he'd never been involved in such a transfer as was quite impressed at the speed of its processing). He skipped that one, much more interested in the two remaining ones, both sent from MCP by Yader Dell.

He stared at the date/time stamp on the first one, and it verified that it had been written and sent sometime after Kyn had left Dell's room, probably about an hour after Kyn had traded words with him for the last time. He hesitated before opening it, glancing down at Captain Dell (what remained of him), dressed in the fine metal-and-stone uniform he'd be wearing for the rest of eternity, seated where a captain should be, at the helm of his own ship.

His curiosity soon overcame his emotions, and he finally opened the message and, with a drawn breath, began to read.

Kyn:

You just left my room a little bit ago. The room that you got me all to myself. I never thanked you for that. Thank you has never been an easy thing for me to say. Maybe just because I try so hard not to be in anyone's debt that it rarely comes up. Maybe it's just how I am. But I am in your debt. And I want to say thank you for that.

I was going to make this a vid message, but I didn't want anybody outside walking by and hearing me talking to myself and thinking I'd gone feeble-headed. I also don't trust my voice much tonight, and you've had to hear enough of my coughing. And I kind of feel like this way, you can hear me. The real me. Not the me this thing has turned me into. I'd like to be that me one more time.

If you're reading this, that means two things. First, I'm dead. Second, you're on the bridge of the Fable Stone. Now the Mourning Glory. Both very Yiddian names. Guess you can take the man out of Yiddia, but not the Yiddia out of the man. You've also met my advocate, Mr. Nroman. I bet you ended up liking him like I did. And you also know that this ship is now yours.

And that, somehow, made it real. It was like he was waiting to hear it from the Captain before he could really start to believe it.

I did a lot of thinking tonight, and I know that I'm not long for the worlds. I've had a good journey. Some regrets, but few I'd change. I've done better than many. I've lived my life by my rules and been true to who I am. I figure that's good enough. I guess it's time to go, and maybe that's not all that bad.

I know we haven't known each other long, Kyn Tallin, navigator-to-be. But I've always been pretty good at sizing people up. I've known you long enough to figure out that you and I are the same. I look at you and see me, years ago, just starting out. Well, maybe me with a bigger nose.

Kyn laughed aloud in the silent cabin and noticed his vision warble a little.

Better or worse, my journey is done. But yours is just beginning. I envy you. I don't mean that in a bad way. Talking to you, watching your eyes light up hearing my boring stories, feeling that hunger in you, it's helped me remember how being that young felt. I'm in your debt for that, too. You've got so much life just waiting for you to take it. I want you to savor every minute of it. And I want to save you from stacking up too many regrets before you get to the good stuff.

So I want to give you that life. By giving you this ship. It carried me down my path, and now I want it to carry you on yours. It's nothing fancy, but it's sturdy and reliable and full of good yera. That's a Yiddian word. Kind of means luck, providence, and hope all at once. She'll get you there. Your job is figuring out where your "there" is. The best part of that is your "there" isn't near as important as what happens on the way to it.

Like I said, I size people up good. I know you spin things positive, and that's a good thing, but I can also feel what life's already starting to do to you. You were meant for the stars, Kyn Tallin, not for the work shift, not for the classroom, not to play by someone else's rules. So my gift to you, for the debt I owe you, is your freedom. Your freedom to be who you are. You weren't born to hear stories. You were born to make them. Now you can.

I know this is all happening fast and you have a lot to ponder. That's normal. Change is never easy. If you look around, you'll see that nature made it that way. Standing at the crossroads and looking both ways is the hardest thing a man has to do in life. But it's also the best thing. In the end, it's what makes him a man.

Before you do all your hard thinking, though, I have one more thing to add to it. I'd like you to stop now and close this message out, and go do something for me before you open the next one. Go to my cabin. You'll see some ugly old carpet there on the floor. I want you to find the seam and pull that up. Beneath it, you'll find a hatch. It's locked. A mini key card opens it. You'll find that card with my stuff that they should have given you at your hospital. It's on a cord that I wore around my neck, one I took off when I checked in. Find it, use it, open that hatch. There's something there I want to show you. When you've seen it, come back here and open the next message.

Go on. I'll wait.

It took a moment for Kyn to realize his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it. What was *this* now? Secret compartments and mysterious keys? He'd been trying to process all the emotions churned up by the Captain's words, but before he could even properly start, this new twist—in a day that seemed like it was never going to stop bringing them—hit him like a cold splash in the face and shoved everything else into the background.

He closed out the message and looked at the second one, sitting there on the screen and just begging to be opened, filled as it was with all the answers to whatever this suddenly irresistible new mystery was. But he'd never do that to Captain Dell. If there was something he wanted Kyn to see first, well, then Kyn would just have to go find out what it was. That, without doubt, was the easiest decision he'd had to make all day.

He stood up, lifting the MCP bag with him, and headed back up the stairs, leaving the Captain behind. He took a guess that the first door on the left after the lounge would be the Captain's cabin, figuring a ship captain would never want to be very far from his bridge. His guess turned out right, as he found out when the door slid open at a button's press.

It wasn't a huge cabin, but still more spacious than he would have assumed for a ship this size. The bunk was a wide one, and its blankets were tucked neatly in place, more evidence that the Captain had tidied before his departure. He paused in the doorway and looked around, letting a sudden reverence quell his desire to rush. This was where Yader Dell had lived. The ship was all his, but this was his most private corner of it, and Kyn felt a twinge of guilt being in it, even though he'd clearly been invited.

The wall opposite him had a narrow glassteel window, but a vertical shutter was sealed over it, keeping him from seeing the floating ships behind it. The cabin was not cluttered, furnished and filled simply. The wall opposite the bed had a desk built into it, and a chair sat in front of it, mag-locked to the deck where a square of the (yes, it was kind of ugly) brown carpet had been cut away for it. The desk had a data unit. The flat screen hanging above it probably doubled as a vidscreen when the data unit wasn't operating. It was on (probably came on when the lights did) and was lazily, and hypnotically, scrolling through a series of holopics of alien landscapes, some quite breathtaking. He preferred to imagine they were all places the Captain had traveled to instead of some commercially-produced package.

He stepped into the cabin and took everything in. Next to the desk was a full-length cabinet, likely with clothes hanging in it. There were drawers below the bunk as well, which could have contained just about anything. He took a closer look at a small statue, carved from a dull stone, that was on the desk next to the data unit. It was some kind of majestic-looking riding beast, its species and planet of origin unknown to him. He turned and looked at the shelves on the wall above the bunk, which were lined with low-tech paper books of the kind you still found on some worlds, and most looked quite old. There were other assorted items there, too—one globe of some distant world, a miniature set of intricate swords on a stand, some kind of transparent, purple crystal; all pieces of the life of the man who'd called the cabin his home.

Not long forgetting his purpose there, he placed the MCP bag on the bed and unsealed it. He pulled out the clothes first, carefully unrolling them and placing them near the foot of the bunk. The worn boots he placed on the floor next to it. Next he found the Captain's datapad, and set it down, making a mental note that he should probably go through it later, though he still felt like an intruder for the thought. He found a remote unit, and felt sure it was for bypassing the coding requirement to enter the ship, so he pocketed it. Finally, he found the datakey on the cord as described. He stared at it, then the floor, and felt a powerful tingle of anticipation.

He got down and checked the seams on the carpet, and found that it came up along the bulkhead below the window. Carefully, he pulled the carpet back, and it peeled back without much fuss. At first he didn't see anything but deck, but soon found the end of a hatch that was flush with the deck so that it didn't show beneath the carpet. He exposed the whole thing, and found the simple lock port, a slot within an indented square near one end of it. He slid the card into the slot, and after a second heard a barely audible click.

Taking a breath, he slipped his fingers into the small slot above the lock that allowed for lifting. He pulled, and the thin hatch came up. Beneath, it was about a meter deep, and within the space were stacks of gray metal storage boxes. He checked one of them on the top of one stack, and found the long, thin box to be of simple design with no visible lock, with a simple release allowing its lid to be lifted up on its hinges. Since that one was the first one he focused on, he went ahead and made it his first exploration. Pressing the release with his fingers, he lifted the lid and heard the metal hinge creak that sounded when he did.

He looked down into it. He continued looking down. Suddenly, his fingers went rubbery and the lid dropped again with a clank. He was so frozen in wide-eyed stupor that the sound didn't even make him jump, and his hand didn't move.

He crouched there, blinking, looking down at the lid. He took a few shallow breaths, and then, finally, reached down and lifted the lid again.

It was money.

Paper credits, to be exact. Stacks of them, bundled and tied with colored paper bands. He lifted one bundle, gingerly, and turned it to look at it. These were Roan paper marks. The quadrant, as a whole, ran on simple credits, just numbers calculated and transferred via datasteam. But not every culture accepted such currency, and certainly not worlds not aligned with Sector Authority. There were still those who preferred something tangible when they sold a good to someone or fulfilled a service. And besides that, there were just some who had an innate distrust of Sector banking and preferred to keep their worth...well, less monitored. For those who felt the need for paper marks, the one of choice, based on its historical market stability, was the Roan currency. While there were countless currencies from system to system, sector to sector, the Roan one was trusted and accepted almost everywhere, and was the standard for calculating rate exchange.

He ran his finger over, and then between, some of the stacks, trying to gauge how deep they went. The stacks went all the way to the bottom, each several bundles deep.

When the obvious next thought hit him, he dropped the lid and reached for the next box over, pulling it open. It, too, was filled with nothing but marks. The same with the next box. And the next. He went all the way to the bottom boxes, stacking the topmost containers on the deck next to him as he did, and found nothing but more and more of the same.

He fell back to a sit on the deck, looking at all the boxes around him. He tried to figure it all in his head, calculating the denominations and the worth of each bundle, the amount of bundles in each box, the number of boxes, trying to reason out the amount of credits he was looking at.

It had to be thousands.

Tens of thousands.

Hundreds of thousands.

His eyes, defocused, lifted and stared at nothing. He could feel his face tingling and cool breath passing between his parted, dry lips.

“God and prophets,” he whispered, numbly.

“I’m rich.”

Okay, you’re back.

Yes. Yes, Kyn was. Back on the bridge, but now, having an overwhelming need to sit down, had taken the co-pilot’s seat and transferred to that station’s monitor to continue his reading, and to find out in what other new way the whole universe had just changed.

As you just saw, I wasn’t what you call totally forthright with my advocate about my holdings. I said I liked the guy, and I do. But here’s a good thing for you to remember, if

you haven't figured it out in life already. Like and trust are usually better kept in separate cages. They don't always get along as nicely as you'd think they should.

I've worked long and hard to earn what's mine. At a time like this, when you're at the end of things, you find out what you have really doesn't matter so much. But that doesn't mean you want to lie in a hospital bed and watch the fruits of all your years drain away paying for treatments that have little chance of doing any good. They can have my accounts. But what you saw there represents the retirement I was planning so long for. Didn't plan on it happening for a lot more years, but I was going to do it in style when I was finally ready. I worked too hard for it. Too hard for it to pay for something that the Miner's Guild rightly owed me for. Or for a crafty advocate who'd know it was undocumented and untraceable and that there was no one left to notice it missing to line his pockets with. All due respect to Mr. Nroman.

So just like the ship, it's yours. Don't worry, it's clean. Mostly. I wasn't a slaver or a pirate or a legion darkrunner. It was all honestly earned, and handled wisely. I want you to have it. It was meant to finance my dream. Now the only dream I have left that's worth a damn is to see a good kid like you live his own. The thought of that makes me feel really good, and I haven't felt good in a while.

Do what you will with it. There's no guilt that comes with it. It's your money. There's plenty to get you started on whatever path you choose. All I ask is that you enjoy it, and let it take you all the places you've seen in your dreams, and do the things you've always meant to. You've got a ship. You've got a stake. The universe is yours, kid. All you have to do is go out there and take it.

Kyn just shook his head slowly as he read, feeling emotionally exhausted and still half-believing this was all a dream, and he was going to wake any moment with his head on his desk, a textbook file open on his screen where he'd left it when he dozed off, realizing he'd slept late again and was going to be late for his shift.

Now, there's one more matter, as Nroman told you as well. That's what to do with what's left of me, sealed in that tube that's in your hands by now.

Not in his hands, he thought, glancing over at the captain's chair, but certainly nearby.

The way of my people is that my ashes go back home to Yiddia for entombment under the temple. That's a nice thought. Be with the fathers, take my place with them. But while I was born there, Yiddia hasn't been my home in a very long time. This ship has been my home, really. And she and I were going to go out together, before I sent my changes to Nroman. That sounded right at the time. But after our talk tonight, I've had a change of mind about that. There's really only one place, besides this ship and the stars, that ever came close to feeling like home to me. You remember what it is?

“Donaday,” Kyn murmured, nodding.

Donaday. In case you forgot. Figured I'd better mention it in case you did, and save you from pulling your hair out.

Kyn grinned, warmly.

I want to be buried there. And I want you to take me. There's a hill there, overlooking the pool I told you about, outside the village of Kestor. Big and green, pretty as a picture, a big achor tree on top of it. I spent many wonderful times lying under that tree with Kaida. It's a place I was truly happy. Seems like a fitting place to spend forever.

So my request of you is this, my friend. Take this ship, and take me home. Bury what's left of me below the shade of that tree, and let me spend my eternity enjoying the peace I always found there. And take your time. I'm in no rush. You do what you have to do. That might include learning how to fly this thing. That's fine. You've got the time and the credits. When you're ready, don't speed your way there. Take as wandering a route as you please, taking in everything you can along the way. I'd be honored if the last leg of my own journey is the first leg of yours. I can think of no finer company to spend it with.

And when you get there? I'd ask for one last favor. Find Kaida. I assume she's still alive and well, knowing the longevity of her people. If she is, track her down. I want you to tell her that I'm sorry I had to go. That I'm sorry I never returned. And that I loved her all these many years with the whole of my heart, and she was never far from my mind. An awkward thing to ask, I know, but I'd be one last time in your debt.

I'll leave the rest of the details up to you. You'll figure it all out. I know you will. You're a good man, Kyn Tallin. It was my honor to know you for the time I did. You have a bright, shining future ahead of you. And it begins now. Enjoy it. Every day, every moment of it. May your journey bless you, and your heart find its home.

And get the sani looked at. The lever's sticking a bit.

Your friend,

Yader

Kyn smiled and wiped his eyes, coughing once through his smile.

He leaned back in the comfortable chair and stared out at the docking bay. A pleasure yacht was floating by, following a flashing remote beacon that was hovering twenty meters in front of it, guiding it toward its exit. He put a hand behind his head and scratched absently at his hair, and now, finally, was able to let it all sink in.

He thought about his life, all the plans he'd laid out so carefully. He'd arranged the pieces so meticulously, mapping out the coming years and letting that plan be his touchstone to his future. He even had the whole list detailed in a file in his datapad, and referred to it often, reminding himself of his goals, visualizing the steps. It had become

his whole life—the school, the jobs to make it through school, the stages of advancement after, all guiding him toward his dream.

What did that all mean now? He'd just had an amazing career moment in the Director's office, the kind of thing every employee there dreamed of, and it had seemed like a clear sign that fate was guiding him down that path. But now—he had to repeat this thought in his head to make it real—he no longer *needed* a job. Okay, he wasn't *rich* rich, not the kind of rich that went out and bought yachts and owned islands on tropical worlds, but he was suddenly well beyond his family's not-unimpressive holdings, and certainly light years from the meager means he'd been living on since striking out on his own. The jobs were to pay for school, and now he could pay for as much schooling as he wanted.

Without the jobs, he could have all the time he needed for his studies, and could finally excel at his coursework. He could finish faster, and finish well. But what, then, of the rest of his plan? The apprenticeship? The years required to get a stable head navigator position? That whole part of his plan was the prerequisite to the savings he'd begin, which was the prelude to his final goal, which was—

He glanced around the bridge, at its console and systems, cabinets and viewports. Which was to get his own ship.

And it was that moment that it finally registered completely.

This was his ship.

He had his own ship.

He slowly leaned forward in the chair, putting his elbows on his knees and his hands over his face. He stayed bent over like a man carrying a tremendous burden on his back, and was still. The slight hum of the life support systems, feeding oxygen in through a docking connection, was the only sound in the hibernating cockpit.

When he dropped his hands and let them fall to his legs, there were tears on his face. He turned his head toward the pilot's chair, to the last of a man who had called Kyn a friend, and had done so with so much more than words.

"Thank you," Kyn whispered, a tight, emotional smile changing the course of his tears.

"Thank you."

END OF ACT I