



Illustrated by Eldar Zakirov

Cloudchaser

Tom Jolly

Chapter 1—Arnand, 2119

The toy robot danced wildly to the music being played. It flailed its limbs and spun around as sound poured from the ceiling, motions programmed by the laughing boy watching the dancing toy.

His older brother, Carlos, flung the door open to the small room and glared at his younger brother, alerted by his laugh. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

Lempa scooped up the toy robot and said, “Off,” and the robot stopped moving. “I’m playing. Don’t you have eyes?”

Carlos flushed red. “Don’t talk to me like that, or I’ll have your head cut off,” he said.

“Father won’t allow that.”

“I’ll be king someday.”

“Not today,” Lempa said.

“Let me see your toy.” He held his hand out. Lempa could see where this was going. Carlos would smash his toy. Lempa, though younger than Carlos, was taller and heavier, and he would jump on Carlos, and they would fight, and Carlos would lose that battle. Carlos would run to father afterward with his bruises, then Lempa would be whipped.

Lempa moved the toy behind his back. “No,” he said.

“You can’t say no to me.”

“Really? Listen; no, you can’t have my toy.”

Carlos clenched his jaw and fists. “Father will buy me ten of them.”

Lempa knew it was true. Whatever Carlos wanted, he would get. Whenever Lempa wanted something, it was carefully budgeted for out of his princely stipend. It didn’t seem like much, but he knew it was still far more than the average wage of a villager. His private tutor had made tours of the local villages part of his curriculum, and he found some small pleasure in wearing drab disguises to make himself appear common and learning to imitate their drawling speech.

“Then go ask father for ten of them,” Lempa said, tired of the posturing bully. “Before I have to beat you again.”

Carlos turned a deeper shade of red. “Father would have you whipped!”

“Not if I accidentally killed you. Then I would be heir to the throne.” The words had no more left his mouth than he realized how dangerous they were and covered his mouth with his hand. “I didn’t mean that!” he said.

But Carlos’ eyes were twin moons, in shock at Lempa’s words, and he ran from the room.

Lempa was whipped with a willow switch until welts rose from his back, even though Carlos had no bruises to show for their encounter. Just his word that Lempa had threatened him.

Weeks later, Lempa bought a book. It was a rare book, one of a kind, signed by a dead author well known within the kingdom. The subject matter was of mild interest to Lempa: a traveler’s guide to the planets in local star systems mixed with semi-fictional accounts of the author’s travels.

He was sitting on his bed, reading, when Carlos barged in again one day, tired of playing with and programming ten awkward toy robots.

“What are you doing?” Carlos asked.

“I am reading a book, as you can clearly see.”

“Give it to me.”

Lempa snorted. “Go away.”

Carlos approached the bed and read the spine. “Margi’s Travels on Other Worlds. Father will buy me all of her books.” He crossed his arms, as though it were a challenge.

“You don’t read anyway.”

“I will have all her books, and you will only have the one.”

“This one is signed by the author,” Lempa retorted. “It’s unique. None of yours will be. You can never have this book.” He held it up and waggled it in the air like bait above a fish. Lempa watched the rage build in his brother and wondered for a moment why he did this, since it invariably ended up in a whipping.

“I will get all my books signed!”

“You can’t,” Lempa goaded. “The author has been dead for thirty years. Unless you can raise the dead, and even if you’re king someday, you can’t do that. This is one-of-a-kind. You can never have it.”

Carlos ran to the king with Lempa following behind, curious as to how he would present his case this time. The boys found him in the castle’s library. After Carlos had superficially explained the situation, their father said, “It’s Lempa’s book. He bought it. If you want to read it, go buy a copy.”

“His is signed by the dead author!”

“Then get a book signed by a dead author. I’m sure there are plenty of them,” the king told him. “Even in my own library. Just pick one out.”

“But it won’t be *his*,” Carlos said, pointing at Lempa.

“Ah,” said the king, leaning back in the cushioned greatseat in the library, looking understandingly at the two of them. “You will have to learn that you can’t own everything. If you try, the effort will consume you. And your kingdom.”

Lempa hesitantly smiled at this result. He still had his book, his brother was angry, and he wasn’t being punished. All was good. But a few days later, he found his book torn to shreds on his bed, even though he’d hidden it away in a secret compartment in his bureau.

He bought a similar signed book, taking pains to flaunt it in front of Carlos, then quietly located

a Keeper in town who would hold valuables for a small price until one was ready to retrieve them. The woman had a good reputation and gave him a word and number to memorize when he left the book in her keep so he could fetch it at a later date. She didn't ask him his name, so he never worried about his brother locating his stash. He would let Carlos catch a glimpse of each new acquisition to torment him, then hide them away with the Keeper.

As he continued to buy one-of-a-kind items, he discovered that some of them became even more valuable over time, and supplemented his stipend by buying and selling items. People in the villages around the castle began to recognize him as an eclectic young collector who had an eye for rare and valuable items. There were rumors that he might be royalty, but he denied them all. His tutor had trained him well in playing the part of a shopkeeper's apprentice, little more than an errand-boy.

He was twenty-five when their father died and Carlos ascended to the throne. Though Lempa had long forgotten his childhood threat to kill Carlos, the new King Carlos clearly remembered it, along with his own threat to cut off Lempa's head, thus preventing any ideas that Lempa might have about taking the throne for himself.

He was hauled from his room one night by the king's guards and escorted to the castle's surgery where the procedure of having his head removed was explained to him.

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Chapter 2—Icehouse, 2190

The beer and wine festival reminded Nemala of Earth. A band played on stage, some sentimental tune from the 2150s, while people wandered about on the dark green lawn. But there were stark differences; Hades Station, the fusion reactor orbiting the planet, provided their sunlight. Smaller compact fusion reactors powered supplemental lighting for the area, creating a blur of secondary shadows. It was Icehouse's version of daylight, something that every dark-planet had.

Nemala drifted from booth to booth, flashing her wristchip for a sample of wine, or sometimes a sweet beer. Her father had tried to teach her everything he knew about alcohol before he died, although he always grouched about her lack of sophistication. "It either tastes good or it doesn't. Why should I worry about technicalities?" she'd asked him one day.

"Because other people care," he said. "It's part of the culture."

"You want me to impress some pompous ass with my knowledge of wine trivia? Can't I just enjoy the wine?"

He grumbled, and she learned things by accident just because he was always going on about them. It was one of the things that got her interested in bioengineering.

She held a glass of Merlot, the oldest grape imported from Earth, and breathed deep, imagining she could smell Earth in it.

"It's the yeast," the man in the booth said. "That's what gives it that nutty smell you're getting." He waved a hand at the false sun overhead. "I have to use supplemental lighting to get this strain to grow on the grapes. But it makes all the difference."

Nemala nodded and took a sip. It was a very pleasant wine. She smacked her lips noisily, and the man raised his eyebrows. "That's nice," she said. "Plain old *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* or some special tweak?"

The man made a curious face and said, "You know the name of the yeast?"

Nemala turned and swished her glass at the rest of the crowd moving between the booths. "Wouldn't you expect that from a bunch of wine snobs?" Her speech was slightly slurred, though she tried to compensate for it by enunciating too hard and knew she was making it worse.

The man laughed. "So you're a connoisseur of fine wines, and how they're made, then?"

She grinned at him. "Not really. I work at Doyes Pharma, the biotech place. Their main thing is gene-mining yeasts for interesting medicinal products, so." She drank, then put down her empty glass and stared at it as though unsure where the wine had gone. "I know a lot of yeasts. Rosewood Wines, huh?" she said, reading the label on the wine bottle. "You work there?"

"I own it. I'm Bogun Rosewood," he said.

“Nemala,” she said. “Pleased to meet you. So this is fermented with a mutated strain of yeast?”

“Yep, imported from France about six years ago, if you can believe that.”

“Why not? I’m guessing it doesn’t cost much to ship a gram of yeast a light-year. Another?” She held out her wrist and the glass. Bogun poured her a smaller glass and didn’t scan her subdermal chip. She raised her glass up to Hades Station and stared contemplatively through it. “Doyes messes with extremophilic yeasts, you know. They wouldn’t ever exist naturally on grapes, or any other crops, really. You know what would be cool to try?”

“Wine made using extremophilic yeast mutations designed by your company?”

She squinted one eye and pouted. “I don’t like people reading my mind, you know, Bogun. But the thought did occur to me that it might make for some interesting tastes.” She took another sip, then added, “And some of the Doyes strains spit out psychotropics. For medicinal purposes, of course.”

Bogun grinned. “You think Doyes Pharma will loan us their patented, unique, extremophile yeasts to make wine, do you?”

She tipped her glass at him and winked. “Their security sucks.”

It started as a joke, but the more they talked, the more detailed and serious it became.

It was easy to smuggle out a few samples from Doyes Pharma. The addition of an extreme environment of heat or cold, pH variations, radiation, pressure or chemicals, would certainly have some unique effects on flavor if the wine or beer could survive the change. It was worth testing.

Bogun Rosewood lived in a relatively small spaceship at the port. It was crowded with brewing equipment, and his only rent was port fees that were paid for by the products of his small operation. He tinkered with the ship and the brewery constantly, apparently much more skilled in both areas than Nemala would have guessed, given the environment. He also rented a few small greenhouses a few kilometers from the spaceport to grow grapes, occasionally purchasing grains from other growers so he could dabble in beers and whiskeys.

Nemala visited him when she brought home a new strain of yeast, and whenever he finished a new batch of extremo-beer or wine. They would sample the results together and hope that there was nothing toxic in the mix. She avoided the pathogenic yeasts and stuck with Doyes Pharma’s mutations of standard wine, beer, and bread yeasts, but it was a thrill-ride of dangerous experimentation; some of the psychotropics came out in the wine, mixed in with the alcohol. Eventually, she was spending more time in his ship than in her apartment, even though she referred to the cluttered vehicle as his “spaceshit.”

“They’re going to catch you smuggling the yeast samples out one of these days, you know,” Bogun told her in bed one evening.

“I doubt it,” Nemala replied. She rolled over and toyed with the sweaty hair on his chest. “You know that Gamay you moaned over? From the rad-resistant yeast? Doyes has two tweaks on that strain that I can bring over tomorrow night.”

Three weeks later, they had a peculiar blend they referred to as “empathic wine.” Less than mind reading, more than intimacy, and it required that both parties imbibe, but oh, the sex was incredible. They didn’t know what caused the effect, speculating on everything from pheromones to synchronized brain waves, but at that point they didn’t care. What they knew was that they could both retire once they started selling it. This wine was one in a billion.

Bogun labeled the wine “Empathy,” and it didn’t take long for word-of-mouth to get out once a few couples had sampled the wares. After the first dozen bottles sold, he bumped the price up a hundredfold and still sold through the first batch in less than two weeks. He already had a regular network of under-the-table middlemen for his unlicensed sales, so it was easy to move. Rumors pushed the price up even further as Bogun waited for the second batch to ferment, which would make his distributors happy when they marked up the product.

“I’m going to quit my job at Doyes,” Nemala told him one evening, returning from work.

“Th’ secon’ batch isn’ even done yet!” Bogun was sampling-drunk again. “Cheg thish out,” he said. “I made some beer wi’ th’ special yeast.” He sloshed a tall glass at her. “Drink!”

She took the glass from him and sniffed at the amber fluid cautiously while surreptitiously digging a pill out of a belt-pouch. The ale carried the slight nutty odor that she recognized from the

yeast. "Huh," she said. "It smells nice." She dropped the pill in the glass as she took a small sip. "Tastes good, too."

She handed the glass back to him, and he grinned foolishly, then took a large swig himself. He stood there swaying for a moment, slowly stiffening, then scowled at her. "You put a Soberup in my beer. I had a nice buzz going."

"You sample your wares too much, my dear. Anyway, I wanted to talk serious. I'm quitting my job."

Bogun nodded and put his glass down. "Before you get caught. Wise choice. What are you going to do after?"

"I thought I might work at a winery."

Bogun grinned. "I might be hiring."

"Thinking more like a partnership," Nemala said.

"I'll have to discuss that with the owner," Bogun said. Nemala glared at him, and he held his hands up. "All right, all right! Equal partners. We have a lot of your extremo-yeasts here already. I could set up a lab on the ship's loading dock for you." He patted the side of one of the vats. "We can easily afford it after this new batch is sold off. Though I'd really like to see what it tastes like after it's properly aged a few years."

"You could always put aside a few bottles," Nemala suggested.

"What? At these prices? Not a chance."

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Chapter 3—Icehouse, 2190

Lempa Tarren never bought weapons for his collection, as a general rule. But an alien weapon from the ruins on the Bell worlds sparked his interest.

The purchase had been arranged through several intermediaries, cross-checking the validity and legality of the acquisition, but the transaction still ended up in a poorly lit warehouse, as though there was something shady about the deal. Lempa wore a disguise that made him appear nearly human, covering most of the black plastic body plates with clothing, and used a public AI car to get there.

"Why all the subterfuge?" Lempa asked the salesman.

"That's a fair question," the salesman replied while opening the trunk on his car. "First off, this is a big-ticket item. Very rare. It's alien, so we had to bend a few rules and grease some palms to get it here, mostly legal. A lot of people are interested in it just for the alien materials tech, ignoring the fact that it's a weapon, but lucky for them, the Bell worlds are littered with the bloody things."

"So the guns aren't really rare at all?" Lempa asked, thoughtfully tapping his plastic lower lip with a carbon-black plastic finger.

"No, Mr. Tarren. They aren't. But you knew that already, I think. The gun is just a carrier for the prize. As far as anyone knows, there is almost no ammunition in existence for these guns and no sign of the species that made them. Not living, anyway. We're confident that the guns are over eight thousand years old. A lot of the ammo was used up in testing back when folks thought the stuff was unlimited, just so they could figure out how it worked. You know, to find out where the targets were going. By then, some of the ammo was smuggled off the planet where it was put to good use. You might recall that skirmish around Lysenko when all those ships just disappeared." The salesman pulled a rifle out of his trunk. It looked like a toy: bright red and green and smaller than an average human might use. Lempa wondered if alien vision functioned at nonhuman wavelengths and the gaudy colors were strictly a human interpretation.

"Secondly," the salesman continued, "we're a full-service dealer." He waved his empty hand around at the tin-roof warehouse they stood in. "The environment is part of the purchase, providing the ambiance one might expect when dealing with gunrunners. Like wine at an art show."

Lempa chuckled. "Yet, the important thing is that I'm buying a unique item. Your boss assured me that this item was one-of-a-kind. That's all I collect."

“Of course, Mr. Tarren. Everyone knows that.”

It was true. His eccentricity had earned him a place in the news; he'd sleep for ten years, come out of stasis, shop for a new item for his collection, and then return to stasis. His collection was famous, even if no one else had seen it.

“If your contacts have done their homework,” the salesman continued, “you know there are only two rounds of ammunition in existence for this gun.” He lifted the gun, pointing it casually at an old 2167 Tesla on the far side of the warehouse. “If you like, I can demo the product right now, and then you'll have the very last bullet in existence. Assuming you're committed to buying it, of course. Or, you can take both of the bullets and dispose of the extra one at your leisure.” He held the gun out to Lempa.

Lempa hesitated, reluctant to touch the gun.

“Don't worry,” the salesman said, patting his jacket and smiling. “The last round is in a case in my pocket.”

Lempa nodded, took the gun, and examined it curiously, but he already knew he was going to make the purchase.

“What happens to the target?”

“Nobody knows!” the salesman said. He spread his fingers suddenly, mimicking an explosion. “Poof! It's gone. No boom, no debris, no gas, no drifting molecules, just gone. I have some video from the surviving ship at Lysenko, if you'd like to see it.”

Lempa returned the gun to him. “I would, thank you. Two bullets, you say?”

The salesman nodded.

Lempa pointed the gun at the Tesla and looked at the salesman for affirmation. If he shot the gun, then the sale was sealed.

The salesman smiled and tipped his head at the car. “Go for it.”

Lempa switched his optics to high-speed recording and shot the car. The bullet hit it, then a pocket of *something* expanded and swallowed it with darkness amid a confusion of shapes, and then it was gone with a soft puff of air. Lempa held the gun up and stared at it. Of course, it was just an alien slug thrower. The real power was in the bullet.

The salesman nodded again and pulled the encased last bullet out of his inside pocket, turning it over to Lempa. “It'll look good in your collection, I'm sure. A gun with one bullet. You ever think of making your collection public? I'm sure there are a lot of people who'd pay good money to see it.”

Lempa eyed him levelly, until he was sure the man was uncomfortable, then simply said “No.”

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Hades Station passed below the horizon and evening came. Icehouse was one of hundreds of settled darkplanets beyond the useful reach of sunlight from any star, and one of the stepping stones of the slow migration leading to other stellar colonies near Sol.

On the surface of Icehouse, dozens of smaller fusion reactors kept the streetlights shining and provided power to the community. When Lempa returned home after dark, he found the single door to his mansion broken in and police hovering around asking questions. Leaving the alien gun in his trunk, he approached his house, his tall, black-plastic figure pushing past the policemen who tried to delay him. It was easy to do; he was fifteen centis taller and fifty kilos heavier than the largest of them.

Inside, he quickly surveyed the entry lobby: two policemen in uniform and a detective, three smoldering security drones lying on the floor, and a corpse with a charcoal-rimmed hole in his chest. The corpse was the man he'd hired to guard the place, supplementing the drones. “Mr. Tarren?” the detective asked.

He spared a glance at the detective, then, ignoring him, walked into a larger room containing several display cases. Most of the cases were broken open, the contents missing. The items too big to carry were untouched.

The detective followed him into the display room. “Mr. Tarren?” he said again, a little louder than before.

“What?” he barked, then shook his head and took control of his anger. “Yes, Detective?”

"I see you have some security cameras stationed around the room. Can we get a copy of the video?"

"Yes, of course." He blinked once while accessing the component memories, then said, "I just sent the video from the cameras and drones to your station."

The detective raised his eyebrows. "Thanks. I'll let you know if we find anything useful. Were you notified when the break-in occurred?"

"No. I should have been, however. There are sensors—" He stepped back into the lobby and looked down at the corpse, wondering if the security guard had had anything to do with the lack of notification. He'd only hired him two months before, highly recommended, but Lempa wondered if he'd been involved with the theft, and someone higher in the ranks was cleaning up after themselves.

"The items that were stolen. Anything special about them?"

Lempa nodded. "Of course. They were all unique. Last of their kind. That's what I collect. And they were all popular items. Easy to market, lots of potential collectors, and hard to trace." He thought of the shattered cases: a rare bottle of fifty-year-old Laphroaig Scotch from 2080. It would probably just be piss in a month. There was a signed letter from Anders Vandermeer to the Journal of Gravitational Physics on the theory behind stasis. And a one-off wooden puzzle box from puzzle craftsman Arturo Ransom custom-made for his spouse. And more. All priceless, all gone. He swept his gaze around the room, anxiety eating at him like acid rain.

"Any other items lost?"

He shook his head. "I think not. I only keep a small fraction of my collection displayed at any time. For my own viewing pleasure. The rest of the collection is securely locked up."

"Where's that?" the detective asked.

Lempa ignored the intrusive question. "Once you're done reviewing the video, I'd ask that you delete it. My collection is not for public viewing. I didn't work to get this collection just to share it." He glared down at the detective, fully aware that his height and his angular plastic face were intimidating. The detective resisted taking a step back, but he did give a satisfying twitch.

The detective cleared his throat and asked, "Any idea who might have done this?"

Lempa turned away from him and stared at the wreckage. Of course he knew. A king from another world did this, hiring the local riff-raff to do his bidding, still trying to put Lempa in his place. The local police could do nothing about that. "Not really," he replied.

The detective grunted. Lempa could see he didn't believe him.

Broken glass, steel, and splinters of wood littered the display area. He waited patiently for homicide to get rid of the corpse, take their photos, look for prints, and leave, then sat down on a unique, but not particularly valuable, wooden chair and sighed an all-too-human sigh. He felt tired, worn down, but knew that was just psychological. The energy core powering his frame and crystalline mind was performing just fine.

As long as he lived among people, especially with his reputation in collectors' circles, he would always be a target. King Carlos used that fact like a sledgehammer. This wasn't the first time he'd lost valuable items. What he needed was a place where no one could visit. A hiding place where he could be alone with his prizes, unique in its own right. The last of their kind, on a world no one could find. It was time to leave Icehouse and buy his own planet.

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Chapter 4—Icehouse, 2190

Bogun hauled a case of Empathy wine into the Dark Star Pub and put it on the counter. "How many bottles you want this time? The price has gone up; I'm asking three hundred credits a bottle, limit six bottles."

"What?" Maxi cried. "It was only two hundred last week."

"Supply and demand, Maxi. Do you want any? I've got five more pubs to hit before Hades sets."

Maxi crossed her arms. "What's with the limit on bottles?"

Bogun unloaded one bottle and put it on the counter. "Everybody wants it and I want to keep everyone happy."

“Or the same level of unhappy.”

He shrugged. “Same thing. You want it or not?”

“So if I take six at three hundred credits each, maybe you could sell me a few more at four hundred?”

Bogun laughed. “I’ll charge you that next time I come through, if that helps.”

“You’re an asshole, Bogun.”

He grinned as he handed her the rest of the six-bottle case, which she immediately stashed behind the counter.

“Beer before you go, Bogun?” She took his card and transferred the credits to it.

“You still have that chewy dark stout from Pembroke?”

“We do. Full pint?”

“Sure.”

It was midafternoon, and the bar was empty, the best time to make deals with the owners. While Bogun sat and sipped his beer, Maxi put one bottle of Empathy on display behind the bar. Five minutes later, another man walked in. He was neatly dressed, but his face was scarred and his nose had obviously been broken a few times. From the look on Maxi’s face, Bogun could tell the guy was trouble.

He sat down and ordered a beer. “I see you got some more of that special wine,” he said, in between sips. He nodded at the bottle of Empathy.

Maxi pointedly avoided glancing at Bogun. “We got it in last night.”

“I’ve heard real good things about it. Isn’t Rosewood a local winery?”

“I think so. I’m not sure where they’re located.”

Bogun stole another glance at the guy and thought, *you do not want to lie to this man, Maxi*. But he was glad she did.

“Maybe you have his phone number?” the man said. “I’m a distributor.”

Mobster, Bogun thought. *He carries himself like a thug.*

“The morning manager places the orders, so he’d have it. Can I give him your number?”

“Nah. I’ll just come by in the morning. He’ll be working?”

“Yeah, he’ll open up at nine.”

“Great.” He took another sip, looked over at Bogun a few seconds longer than necessary, then turned and left, leaving most of his beer on the bar.

Maxi frowned at the waste of the beer, then glanced over at Bogun with an apologetic look.

“You know who he is?” Bogun asked.

“Have you heard of the Renner Cartel?”

“Yeah. Drugs, smuggling, and bad loans. Expensive wines aren’t exactly their line of business.”

“It’s hardly a wine, is it? The Cartel has a reputation for taking over profitable operations, and not by buying them out. I bought you a little time, but they’ll be looking for you.”

“Thanks, Maxi.” He tossed back the rest of his beer and walked out of the bar but returned a minute later with another bottle of Empathy in his hands. He handed it to her. “This one’s for you and Jim. Save it for a few years, wait for a special occasion, okay?”

“Sure, Bogun.” She looked down at the bottle grimly. “This will be the last one, won’t it?”

“We’ll see,” Bogun said and left.

* * *

Bogun was tying down equipment for transport when Nemala came in. “We going somewhere?” she asked.

“I’m not sure yet, but I want to be ready. One of the Renner Cartel thugs came into Maxi’s asking about getting in touch with me. I guess when wine gets expensive as drugs, the drug dealers start getting interested.”

“You think they’re coming after us?”

“Yeah, I do.”

She sat, watching him work. “I’m surprised they haven’t just bought a glassful as a sample and tried synthesizing the active ingredients.”

“They could try. But I thoroughly filter out the yeast before selling it, so they won’t be able to reproduce the active ingredients unless they can synthesize them some other way, without the yeast. But it’s more likely they’ll just take over the operation and force me to work for them.” He grabbed another tie-down strap, carried a crate into storage, and found a place for it. “We could go into hiding for a few years. Start a new batch, bottle it, then wait in stasis while it ages. It’d be worth a small fortune when we came out with it.”

“We’?” Nemala asked.

He stopped working and looked at her with concern on his face. “Um. I just thought . . . since you quit your job . . .”

“That I’d want to jump up and fly off to who-knows-where with you?”

“. . . sort of. Do you want to stay here on Icehouse? I mean, you could. There’s no real link tying you to the wine. The Cartel wouldn’t be looking for you.”

“So you don’t care whether I go with you or not?” Nemala pried.

He sighed and leaned against a crate, holding a hand out imploringly. Nemala laughed, walked over to him, and kissed him. “You’re so easy,” she said. “Where could we go that they couldn’t find us?”

“Maybe a small asteroid in the middle of nowhere? Someplace where the ship’s heat won’t be detectable?” He gazed up at the ceiling, curling his lip, thinking. “I’ve got an idea,” he said. “There’s this crazy collector guy I know, Lempa Tarren. I tried to sell him the last bottle from a limited-run whiskey batch I put out. He didn’t go for it and gave me a long lecture about collectability. But I learned that he intends to take his whole collection off-world. He means to go into hiding. I have a dock-loader friend who could put a tracker on his ship. We could follow where he goes. He’s got a habit of going into stasis for ten years at a time, then coming back out for a shopping spree for his collection. If we can land on his hidden planet and stay there for over five years while he’s in stasis, we can claim a thousand hectares under planetary squatter laws. We’d get our wine *and* some property out of it.”

“If it’s one of the dark worlds, it may not be worth the photons to file a claim.”

He rubbed a whiskey chin. “I doubt if he’ll pick an ice ball. He said, ‘Someplace unique, like my collection.’ So that eliminates asteroids, drifting free in deep space, and any run-of-the-mill unsettled dark planet. Stasis requires a lot of energy, so his ship would stand out like a light bulb on a dark world. I bet he’ll pick some place that has decent natural heat to camouflage his ship’s heat signature, maybe geothermal? But well off the stepping-stone path to Teegarden. Hard to find. Someplace nobody would think of looking for a madman’s collection. It’ll be perfect for us. In stasis, five years will go by in a blink. We’ll be rich.”

He grabbed another tie-down strap. “In the meantime, I’ve got to move the ship to another dock where the Cartel can’t find me tomorrow morning. I’ve still got an alias or two I can burn, and it’ll buy us a few days.”

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Chapter 5—Cloudchaser, 2192

“If the point of this is to keep from getting visitors, this is the place for you. Nobody wants to start a settlement on a planet that’s going to be destroyed in twenty thousand years. And it’s unique, as far as we know, which should make you happy,” Coreman-27 said. “It aligns well with your collector’s sensibilities. One-of-a-kind.”

Lempa Tarren nodded thoughtfully, observing the two planets live for the first time. Both were dark planets, with no proper sun to warm them. One was a little larger than Uranus, and the other a little smaller than Earth, and they both would normally have been invisible against the black carpet of space. But the Earth-sized ball was in orbit around the gas giant with a gap of just under a thousand kilometers between them, orbiting it every three hours, and that made things very interesting. “The glow,” he said, “what causes that?”

“The smaller planet, which we’ve tentatively named Cloudchaser—as the new owner, you can, of course, call it whatever you like—orbits the primary, Cloud, at about fifteen kilometers per second. Its mass drags some of Cloud’s atmosphere higher as it passes, creating a tenuous band around the equator, which it impacts as it orbits. The blue glow on the leading edge of

Cloudchaser is caused by the hydrogen colliding with its atmosphere. It shades to orange near mid-planet. The white glow you can see behind Cloudchaser is from the lightning passing between the two planets, and the shifting green and blue curtains on the trailing side are from the auroras.”

“It’s stunning,” Lempa murmured. “Beautiful.”

Coreman-27 raised an artificial eyebrow at Lempa.

Lempa noticed the look. They hadn’t had much time to become familiar on the way out to view the planet; both had been in stasis for almost the entire trip. “You seem surprised. I am not an artificial intelligence. My memories and sensibilities are completely human, even though the storage is crystalline.” He turned back to look at the planet. “But I believe I am unique.”

“Like your collection.” Coreman-27 glanced behind them, where a red 1959 Chevrolet pickup truck was on display in the middle of the deck: the last one of its kind, restrained in a decorative steel frame. The walls of the ship held similarly unique treasures in brightly lit alcoves. A collection of things for a single viewer to admire.

“Just so,” Lempa said. “You said we could land on this planet? That it has an atmosphere of sorts?”

“Yes, it does. The configuration between the two planets is surprisingly stable. Cloudchaser is tidally locked to the primary, so the same hemisphere is always facing Cloud. It’s well outside the Roche limit, and the heat that supports its atmosphere is generated by the friction with Cloud’s hydrogen. The leading side is over two hundred degrees Celsius, but the trailing side has a small, stable area surrounded by high mountains that stays around twenty Celsius, and is expected to go no higher than thirty degrees over the next ten thousand years. The degradation of the orbit is very gradual. The kinetic energy of the gas giant’s hydrogen isn’t enough to strip the heavier atmospheric molecules from Cloudchaser, so the air pressure in the temperate zone remains relatively constant. Tolerable even by human standards.”

“Your company, Dark Planet Surveys, told me that this planet would remain isolated and hidden, a secret,” Lempa said. “Even you will have the memory that you were ever here erased. But if that’s true, how did DPS find this planet to begin with? Couldn’t anybody locate it again?”

Coreman-27 shook his head. “First of all, my memory isn’t partially erased. I’ll be destroyed. I’m a temp copy of a real person back at DPS headquarters. Highly interactive, you see, but not AI. After the closing documents are encrypted and beamed back to Icehouse, I will self-destruct. As for the planet, there are millions of dark rogue planets located every year. Few are surveyed or settled except along narrow paths to other stars: the ‘stepping stone’ strategy of interstellar travel and colonization. Cloudchaser is close to the settlement string leading to Teegarden, but far enough off the beaten path to be of little interest. DPS discovered that it had a unique, pulsing thermal signature and investigated it. Most of the dark planets, as you know, are not significantly warmer than the CMB, with a few exceptions, requiring multiple fusion reactors to establish any sort of settlement.”

Lempa grunted acknowledgment.

“Trust me,” Coreman-27 said, “it’s pretty to look at, but nobody but you is going to want to settle here. It has very little free oxygen, for one. And who wants to live on a planet that’s being eaten by another planet?”

He laughed. “You mean, no one else is crazy enough?”

Coreman-27 shrugged one shoulder noncommittally. “Crazy is a relative term. Desires and needs define actions. Even if someone else discovers this, you will already be recorded as the owner. Legally, no one else can land on it without your permission. And, as you said, who’d be crazy enough to try? Worst case, they admire the light show from afar. And you have to admit; it’s unique, like the rest of your collection.”

Lempa nodded. It was something to see. Even as Cloudchaser passed behind Cloud, the planet was trailed by swirling glowing gasses and scattered arcs of lightning, as though some beautiful, angry god was pursuing it.

* * *

Chapter 6—Cloudchaser, 2193

The *Rusty Tap* tailed Lempa to his new world, despite the fact that Lempa had filed a false flight plan to visit Coalring, a darkplanet a little less than one light-year away from Icehouse. Once Bogun had learned of the subterfuge, he filed an identical travel plan to Coalring. People would wonder; Coalring and nearby Grendel were having heated relations, headed toward war, and nobody with any sense was traveling that direction except for arms dealers.

Bogun and Nemala waited patiently for him to set up whatever base he needed to take care of himself and his collection. They drifted in space a hundred million kilometers away, a tiny, undetectable dot lost among a field of stars, and remained in stasis for an extra year.

When they came out of stasis, they closed with the unusual planetary pair, as stunned as Lempa had been as they approached.

"Lempa Tarren is living on *that*," Bogun said.

"Technically, he's in stasis for ten years, plus the time he took to set up, minus the time we were asleep," Nemala said. "I wouldn't call that living. And he's a construct, so maybe he just turned himself off."

Bogun shook his head. "Not exactly a construct. I read up on his history. He was a human prince on Arnand, a patriarchy, but not heir to their throne. Somehow, he pissed off the king. They give them a choice of death, or being put in an artificial body with no actual rights on Arnand, though they're still recognized as sentient beings. Their original brains are downloaded, then destroyed, the data transferred into their new crystal brains."

"If their brains are destroyed, how is that different from dying?"

"Well, they also compress the carbon of the old brain into a diamond, and that becomes part of the new brain, with some impurities added so that it can exist as a working part of the neural network. I don't think it has any functional value, though. Not really any different than dying, I guess."

Her face twisted in disgust. "I'm sure that makes them feel better. Sol, that's brutal."

"Uh-huh. On Arnand, even in his construct body, he'd have been killed off in a few years if he stayed in the public eye, if people remembered that he'd once been a prince. So Lempa became a recluse and created a fake persona to cover the fact he was artificial. He never showed his face to the public and people started treating him as a mysterious human collector. The king discovered what he'd done, but by that time Lempa had gathered enough resources and contacts to leave the planet."

Nemala shrugged indifferently. "I can't say I'm particularly sympathetic to anyone who used to be a prince. Either way, whether he's turned off or in stasis, he won't be outside exploring the planet. As long as we can land over a hundred clicks from his setup, coming in below his horizon, he's not likely to notice us, automatic detectors or not. Look at that," she said, pointing to narrow, meandering lines on the viewscreen. "He built some roads. Probably to fetch raw materials to build part of his base."

"See if we can find a place away from the roads, then," Bogun said. "Maybe those are for automated patrols."

"Once we land, I want to scatter some of my yeast samples. This will be an amazing environment for fast mutations of the strains I brought." She tapped the display. "See the lightning area between the two planets? The yeast will have access to both Cloud and Cloudchaser's atmospheres, storm systems, and all the temperature and radiation gradients in between. Whatever they become, we can sample them before we leave the planet. Maybe I can sell them back to Doyes."

"Or maybe since they'll know that the strains you're bringing back are derived from their own patented strains, they'll just arrest you and confiscate them," Bogun said.

She scowled at him. "There are other pharmaceutical companies on other worlds."

"I'm thinking that it wouldn't be healthy for either one of us to return to Icehouse," he replied. "Anyway, it occurs to me that the yeast will have nothing to eat. No one has ever detected life on a darkworld."

"The yeast can survive on simple sugars, which can form spontaneously from inorganic

processes. We might get lucky here.”

* * *

They brought the *Rusty Tap* in fifteen thousand kilometers above Cloud, moving slower than Cloudchaser's orbit, high above the hydrogen vapors in Cloudchaser's path. The smaller planet caught up with them, and they skimmed the high glowing clouds, where the fiery winds began to slow and cool as they came around the outermost side of the planet, then they dropped below the dark mountain ranges concealing them from Lempa's base.

Bogun and Nemala spent a month setting up their homestead. The atmosphere had very little free oxygen, so any time they spent outside required breathing air, though clothing consisted of no more than standard streetwear with a light coat. It rained on occasion, and it didn't take long to discover that mushrooms were very easy to grow on Cloudchaser, if the soil was pretreated.

Regular crops of grapes, barley, and hops were much harder to grow and required the extensive use of artificial lights. Since a darkworld was their likely destination, they'd stocked up on full-spectrum lighting panels shortly before their departure. The crops weren't large; they expected to make small batches at high prices, and there was just the two of them. They intended to spend most of their time in stasis, letting automated systems tend to the crops and alarm systems to drop them out of stasis in case of some failure or emergency that they needed to handle in person.

Nemala helped with the crops initially, preparing them for automated care. They were all fast-growth varieties, so the two of them spent less time in stasis than they first expected. After the first month, Nemala commented, “You know, I miss having coffee and a bagel at the local shop.”

“We have coffee,” Bogun said. “I thought you said this was so romantic here?”

They were both squeezed into the ship's small dining area. Nemala put down her coffee cup. “I did, but I had friends back on Icehouse who I saw on occasion. Places I could visit. Now, you're it. Working in the gardens, testing yeast samples, and you. If we get bored with each other, it's not like one of us can just leave, unless we're heading toward Lempa's place, and I don't think he'd be happy to see us, you know?”

Bogun seemed pained. “You're bored?”

She shrugged. “There's work to do, but I want something besides work. Other people. Some excitement.”

“We can spend more time in stasis,” Bogun suggested. “Let the automated equipment do most of the work. Five years will go by fast, then we can make our squatter's claim and leave. I'll have to sell the booze somewhere. But maybe some more people will move in here later, put in some shops or something. We could stay.”

She glanced toward the tiny port window in the room. “It's got a weird sort of beauty, sure, but who's going to want to live here permanently?”

Bogun raised his hand. Nemala sighed. “Time to get to work,” she said.

Over the next few weeks, Nemala used a drone to drop some of her yeasts into prime locations on Cloudchaser, hoping that the unique, chaotic environment would help evolve interesting new strains over the next five years.

Within two months of arrival, they were both in long-term stasis, only dropping out into realtime once a month to verify that the automated systems were still functional and to share company.

Most of the time, except for the soft moan of the winds in the hills above their ship, the intermittent rustle and clank of the robots taking care of the crops, and an occasional gust of rain pattering the covers above the plants, the place was as silent as death.

In a hundred-kilometer temperate circle of scattered ponds and runoff channels surrounding both Lempa's and Bogun's settlements, Nemala's yeasts competed for the slim resources available and grew, thin grey tendrils of cellular clusters straining across the rugged landscape, where moist winds picked them up and carried them into the skies.

* * *

Chapter 7—Cloudchaser, 2197

Stasis, Lempa thought, was a misnomer. He wasn't held still in time, his body was merely redirected along a near-light-speed path, tossed back and forth like a baseball along a one-centimeter

length so that relativistic time dilation took effect. That part he understood; time still passed for him normally, but relative to the ship and the planet Cloudchaser, it was very, very slow. The part he didn't understand was how the machine could simultaneously toss all the molecules in his body to and fro without tearing every molecule apart from every other molecule. He wasn't dead yet, so apparently it worked.

He looked up at the chronometer and noted that only four years had passed outside, less than a day for him. After he'd landed on Cloudchaser and set up his home, he didn't expect to return to realtime for ten years, skipping through time to look for odd, eclectic items to add to his already large collection. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I should just collect odd planets.*

There were a few things that would automatically drop him out of stasis. Defects or loss of power in the stasis room were an obvious potential cause. Drastic changes in the weather would do it, as would uninvited visitors. "Alkestis," Lempa asked the ship, shortly after dropping back into realtime, "what took me out of stasis?"

"There was a radio signal hailing you."

Lempa wondered if there was some document that hadn't been signed when he purchased the world. Perhaps some new version of Coreman, the real estate salesman, had returned to straighten things out. "Who is it?"

"Captain Malor of the corvette *VenDaal*, out of Coalring."

"Military? What does he want?"

"To talk to you."

Lempa sighed. "Put him on."

Captain Malor was a young man with long, straight, black hair and a twisted smirk that told Lempa he was about to have an unpleasant conversation.

"Good day, Captain Malor," Lempa said. "What can I do for you?"

"Lempa Tarren. So this is where you went to hide," said the captain.

Lempa remained motionless and expressionless. For an opening line, it didn't hold much promise for any sort of cordiality. Still, for such a simple statement, it carried a lot of information. The captain knew who he was and that he didn't want to be found. It also sounded as though he was specifically looking for Lempa, and considering that he'd only been in stasis for four years, then the time it took the encrypted closing documents to beam back to Icehouse, plus the time for a ship like the *VenDaal* to return, meant that Dark Planet Survey had given up his location, despite their guarantee.

The fact that the ship hailed from Coalring could mean that someone, perhaps from the Renner Cartel, followed the false trail to Coalring, found out he wasn't there, somehow acquired or hired a warship, then returned to Icehouse to squeeze the Dark Planet Surveys for his real location. The timing was about right. And here he was.

As though to prove the point, Captain Malor continued, "Just to bring you up to speed, you are probably unaware that the darkworlds Grendel and Coalring are at war over a power source, a primordial black hole, and the stepping-stone path to the Teegarden system is currently lacking a few planets since they're busy shooting at each other. So, folks are looking for safer alternate routes with viable colonial planets. And guess what?"

Lempa stared at him silently, waiting.

Captain Malor frowned. After a few uncomfortable moments, he said, "This planet is very close to one of the alternate routes!"

"*This* planet is *my* planet, Captain. Its name is Cloudchaser, and since you know who I am, I'm fairly confident that you know I legally purchased it for my own use, and that the purchase was registered at Icehouse. While you're welcome to orbit it, or even build a colony-station around it if that's what you want, I don't need or want visitors here."

"Well, funny thing," Captain Malor said, "Coalring doesn't recognize ownership of property by artificial constructs. Not even of those fancy little collectible things you value so much."

Lempa bristled. "I am a *human*, Captain Malor. Not an AI, not a construct. Besides, this planet is registered under Icehouse laws, not Coalring."

Malor laughed acidly. "You must not have heard me mention that there's a war going on,

Tarren. And I'm based out of Coalring. And I'm the one with a warship."

A deserter that stole a warship, most likely, Lempa thought. "I would highly recommend that you do not land here, Captain. You will regret it," Lempa said.

Captain Malor laughed again and said, "Okay, robot," and switched off the connection.

An explosion shook the entire building, knocking some of the displays from their shelves. Glass shattered, and a low rumble filled the air.

"Alkestis? What was that?" Lempa asked.

"My primary body at the landing site—that is to say, your spaceship—has been damaged. The adjacent buildings housing the construction bots have been destroyed by the blast. I believe it was an energy weapon from the *VenDaal*."

Lempa put his fist to his mouth, remembering he had no fingernails to chew, then dropped it. There went any chance of escape.

"The *VenDaal* has released a lander," Alkestis announced.

Lempa nodded. The corvette would be more than enough to deal with a one-man colony. He considered his resources; he'd replaced the three security drones that had been destroyed at his Icehouse mansion, so he could bring those to bear. It wasn't much. And there was the alien Gun With One Bullet, still in storage below. At best, he could take out their lander with it, assuming it was functional, but still have the warship to deal with. The *VenDaal* would certainly spit out more landers if he destroyed the first one. His construction robots might have looked threatening, but they had been destroyed in the blast.

Of course, the Gun With One Bullet was also a priceless artifact. One-of-a-kind. It would be foolish to use it in this conflict, diminishing his collection further. Then again, the present vector of activity seemed to be pointing toward the probable loss of everything, including his life.

But what if it was just a ship full of deserters? Reavers and thieves? Escaping the war to claim what spoils they could from the borders and outlands? That would explain why there was only a single corvette. Maybe he could deal with them. Based on their brief conversation, that seemed unlikely. But perhaps he could threaten to let Coalring know that their deserter warship was marauding nearby. It was a toothless threat; even if he got a message off to Coalring, it would take nearly a year to arrive there, and even longer for any sort of help to arrive, and the help might be worse than the reavers.

Grumbling to himself, Lempa unpacked and loaded the Gun With One Bullet, hoping he didn't have to use it. He grabbed some conventional hand weapons and activated his security drones. Sliding into his red 1959 Chevy pickup truck, the centerpiece in the large room, he started it up and tapped the sticky gas gauge with a fingertip. The needle grudgingly came off the peg. He revved the engine a few times, thankful that the synthetic gasoline would still function after a hundred years or more.

He sent a signal to the outer door, and it swung open. He drove out onto the dirt road that the construction robots had scraped four years before, jostled as the truck bounced over the threshold and onto the gravel.

Lempa turned on the headlights, splashing light across the brown road. The port and his damaged ship were only two kilometers away, a rare flat spot on the rugged terrain large enough to host a spaceship. Above, the aurora shifted in lazy olive-green waves, and the raging lightning storm between the two planets provided a flickering white glow toward what he called "the South." A dimly lit cloud of hydrogen trailed back behind the two planets, and a red ring lit the distant horizon. It was a beautiful night, but then, it always was. A temperate twenty-two degrees centigrade, not quite Earth sea-level pressure, and negligible free oxygen, but he didn't need it anyway. The gasoline in the truck had its own oxidizer tank. He sped up to eighty kilometers per hour with the window open, feeling the wind swirl around the skin sensors on his black plastic carapace. He laughed, an electronic sound, and hung his left elbow out the window.

Lempa would be damned if he would let anyone else on his planet.

* * *

Chapter 8—Cloudchaser, 2197

Lempa could see the bright flames from *VenDaal*'s lander as he approached the landing site.

The flickering blue light cast shadows from the scattered, broken debris from his storage buildings and damaged ship. He parked outside the debris perimeter and sent a mental signal for his drones to hide within the twisted metal sheets. He stepped out of the pickup truck, grabbing the Gun With One Bullet and an energy rifle, then secured himself behind a large scrap of metal from a storage shed, and waited.

The lander settled on the ground. Lempa's hand twitched on the gun. It would be a terrible waste to use it, to say nothing of the expense, but it would give him a bluff to work with. Destroy their lander. Make it cease to exist. Threaten them with further annihilation with a weapon they knew nothing about, especially regarding his lack of ammunition.

It could work.

He sent the drones up as a distraction and aimed carefully from his hiding place.

Two gun turrets on the side of the lander destroyed all three drones and shredded Lempa's body with a stuttering roar of hard ammunition. The Gun flew wide and fell to the ground.

Lempa's crystalline brain was well protected within a hardened shell, but the plastic skull surrounding it was lacerated beyond recognition. What remained of his head was detached from his body, lying upside-down on the ground, facing away from the lander. One of his hearing sensors still functioned and one eye, though there was a thick crack down the middle of the image. He heard sounds come from the lander, then a rover pulled up nearby carrying six soldiers. One got out to inspect the Chevy pickup; Lempa wondered if it had been damaged at all. Another came over to look at the debris that used to be Lempa. He picked up the energy rifle that was still secured in a holster on the side of Lempa's detached leg, saw how damaged it was, and tossed it back to the ground.

"Whatever this Lempa guy sent," the man said, "it's dead. Looks like it was some kind of robot."

"Not a military unit, I'm guessing."

The man sniffed, then chuckled. "I'd say not." He nudged the brain-core with a foot, skewing Lempa's remaining vision. He picked up the brightly colored Gun, examining it. It also bore scorch marks from their attack. "Looks like a toy."

"The guy is some weird collector. It probably *is* a toy. Just leave it. Damaged, anyway. We'll have enough to carry."

The soldier pointed the gun at their ship, aimed it, and said, "Pew, pew!" Then he laughed and tossed it on the ground.

Lempa was confused. Why hadn't the gun worked? He looked at the gun at the soldier's side as the soldier moved past him. His gun had a wider trigger guard than Lempa's gun, built for use by a fat-fingered soldier in a spacesuit. The soldier couldn't pull the trigger. They were all wearing full spacesuits, though all they really needed was a breathing mask and oxygen supply to survive here.

The men returned to the rover and took off toward the main complex, looking for loot. The gun lay three meters from his head, and it took him a moment for the reality to set in that he was just a head, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do to grab it.

* * *

The radio traffic made Bogun and Nemala aware of the *VenDaal's* arrival at Cloudchaser. Their crops were in a night cycle, and they rushed around madly to assure that the lights didn't come on, illuminating their little farmstead. It wouldn't be easy to see; the constantly shifting aurora provided cover from orbital observations. Unlike Lempa's sprawling installation, depending upon the obscurity of the location to hide him, Bogun and Nemala had taken some pains to disguise their ship's location, kilometers distant from Lempa's nearest road.

Over the previous four years, between the efforts of forcing the grapes and grain to grow in the lifeless soil of Cloudchaser, Bogun's extensive experiments in brewing, and Nemala's excited excursions to seed every harsh border environment with extremophilic yeasts and supporting bacteria, they ended up spending less time in stasis than they had originally intended. Starting a farm on a dark planet wasn't an easy task.

"They sent down a lander," Bogun said. "What if they find us? Kick us off the planet? Or take

the wine? Or my ship?"

Nemala watched the new ship on the *Rusty Tap's* monitor. The mystery ship had a much higher orbit than the planet Cloudchaser, orbiting Cloud once every eight hours versus the planet's three-point-four hour orbit. Over an entire orbit, Cloudchaser and the new ship lost line-of-sight for nearly three hours.

"It looks like a military ship," Nemala said. "I doubt that it's concerned about squatters or winemakers. On the other hand, if it's a pirate ship, anything goes. We need to lay as low as we can until they leave."

"If they leave."

"It won't be long before the lander arrives. Let's send a drone over to monitor the landing port," Nemala suggested. "Maybe we can get a clue as to what's happening."

"Lempa shouldn't even be awake now," Bogun said.

But he was. Through the lens of their drone, hovering a half-kilometer from the port, they watched him get blown apart.

* * *

They were stunned. Eight hours had passed since they saw the brief, one-sided battle at the port. "We just wait them out? Hope they leave without seeing us?" Nemala said.

"That's the smart money. Whoever they are, they're going to steal all his shit and leave." He frowned. "Unless they came here for the planet, and Lempa was just a bonus."

"That seems unlikely. Who would want a planet that's busy plowing into another one?"

Bogun raised his hands. "You saw what it looked like from orbit. Maybe they want to bring people here as a tourist destination."

A signal light lit up the monitoring console. "Activity at the port. They're back from Lempa's place. And their rover is loaded with stuff."

They watched the drone video as the men drove the loaded rover onto the lander. Two of them returned to the red Chevy pickup and squeezed inside the cab. It was a tight fit with their suits on. Another ten minutes passed as they figured out the antiquated controls, then the truck lurched forward, stopped, lurched again, then slowly crawled toward the lander and up the loading ramp. The door closed, and the lander lifted off.

Bogun flew the drone over to peer at the remnants of Lempa's body. A blue light flickered inside the shell of his head.

Bogun glanced at Nemala. "Shall we go check on our host?"

"What, you think he might still be alive?"

"We should at least try," Bogun said.

Nemala grimaced. "Yeah, I guess. Let's wait an hour; their warship will lose line-of-sight with Cloudchaser by then."

* * *

Their rover pulled up to the launch port in a cloud of dust and gravel, and they hopped out. Nemala approached the remains of Lempa and crouched down, examining him. "You look like shit," she said to his head, flipping it upright. The head hissed at her, a crackle broken by "Iem," followed by more hissing and crackling.

She turned back to Bogun. "Let's get all the pieces we can find. We might get some salvage money for them, even as chewed up as they are." She looked into Lempa's dark eyes. "And maybe there's still a functioning brain in there."

"What's this?" Bogun said, holding up the red and green gun.

"A toy gun? Maybe he meant to trade with the pirates. Probably some collectible."

"Trade with pirates? That'd be pretty stupid." Bogun tossed it in the back seat of the rover. "They're pirates." He started gathering up Lempa's remains.

* * *

They made it back to their shelter before *VenDaal's* lander returned for the next load, happy to remove the oxygen masks and tanks that they had to wear outside. Though the air was warm and the pressure was high enough, they still always had that reminder that Cloudchaser could kill them if they weren't careful.

It took two more lander loads for the pirates to empty Lempa's collection. Bogun complained that he couldn't illuminate his crops as long as the *VenDaal* was overhead since there was enough light leakage for an orbiting spacecraft to detect. While they waited, Bogun scavenged a voice box from supplies and tried to replace the damaged unit in Lempa's head.

"Did you know there's a tiny cooling unit in here? In his head?" he said. "Looks high grade."

"Why the hell would I know that?" Nemala replied.

"I was kind of talking to the head."

"Probably cooling whatever processor he has for a brain."

Bogun shook his head. "Nope. It's a separate module." He squinted at it while he wired in the new voice box. After a few minutes, he leaned back. "Should work now. Lempa?"

The voice box crackled with noise.

Nemala leaned over and stared into Lempa's dark, unmoving eyes. "You think he's still alive in there, huh?"

"Hard to say. If we get him to a well-equipped service station, they might have better luck."

They continued to monitor the port with a remote drone and could see that the third load was a light load. It appeared that the soldiers were ready to leave. Then the six-man crew piled into the rover and headed down the road in their direction.

"Dammit, did they see us?" Nemala said.

"Maybe they noticed that Lempa's bits and pieces are missing."

Nemala's brow crumpled into a knot. "There was a lot of debris in the area."

"Uh-huh. Maybe they're just seeing if there are some outbuildings they missed. If Lempa made roads, they had to go somewhere, right?"

They both knew the roads went nowhere. Nemala scowled. "They'll see our rover tracks."

"There are tracks all over the place." It was true. From Lempa's construction phase, between the robotic activity and Lempa driving around to monitor progress, several temporary roads laced the landscape, though most had filled in over the last four years.

"Ours are fresh. We should prep to take off," Nemala said. "Just in case."

"The crops will die." He jerked his head toward the wine vats. "And the motion will probably screw up this batch of wine."

"You've bottled up enough to last a while, and you still have the vats outside. We might be able to return later, and they might leave the vats alone. Let's secure what we have and get the hell out of here before their rover arrives. Their main ship will be on the other side of Cloud in about two hours, so they might miss us."

"The rover will see us launch, and report to their ship," Bogun said. He was already busy securing systems and tying down loose items.

"We'll have a couple-hour head start. If we go into stasis, we can pull twenty gees." She looked up at the ceiling in concentration, then said, "We'd be five million kilometers away before they have any chance at all of seeing us."

Bogun frowned worriedly at his cases of wine and chewed on his lip. The cases weren't built for twenty gees.

"Man, I can feel your anxiety," Nemala said. "Can you tone it down?"

"What?"

"Haven't you noticed? That weird yeast I have growing outside, the drug it's producing is getting all over everything. Everything fresh that we've been eating is contaminated with it. Every emotion you have, I can feel it."

He glanced at her, squinting thoughtfully, "Now that you mention it, the sex—"

"I knew that would be the first thing you thought of."

"Well, yeah." Bogun went back to the wine, struggling to pack it safely, sweating to get it right.

"We can always make more," Nemala reassured him. "I've sampled fifteen new strains of extremophiles from this environment, so it'll be easy enough for us to set up shop somewhere else."

Once the ship was ready to launch, Bogun crammed as much wine into his stasis booth as

would fit, leaving a narrow gap for his body to squeeze into. Nemala rolled her eyes but kept quiet. Several other cases of wine, beer, and whiskey went into underground storage bunkers, on the unlikely chance that the pirates wouldn't discover them, though they kept the bulk of the alcohol in storage on the ship. Nemala put Lempa's head in her stasis booth, but stowed the shattered parts of his body in a storage container.

They fully suited up. "No telling what condition our ship will be in when we come out of stasis," Bogun cautioned.

On their monitors, Bogun and Nemala observed the *VenDaal* rover turn off the main road onto their fresh tire-tracks and head toward their farm.

Minutes later, the *Rusty Tap* rose from Cloudchaser's surface and accelerated away, a bright, roaring star dimming quickly as clouds of dust obscured their passage skyward.

* * *

Chapter 9—Cloudchaser, 2197

Being in stasis wasn't conducive to observation of the external environment; the mechanism to slow time tended to fuzz-out any data or imagery. After two hours, the ship reduced acceleration to one gravity, then shut off the stasis. Only seconds had passed for the two of them.

"Well, damn," Bogun breathed. He surveyed the deck, awash in wine and ale, littered with shards of bottle glass. The storage compartment doors were open, bent, and twisted. "That's most of it."

"We'll make more," Nemala said. She moved to the deck's console display and brought up the image of Cloud. Among the other displays of light, a bright star lit up its horizon. "They're accelerating toward us. At thirty-five gravities. Can we . . ."

"No," Bogun said. "Twenty was pushing structural limits for us, to say nothing of my packing job."

Crackling, hissing noises came from her stasis booth. She turned and remembered that Lempa's head was still there. "You got something to say, Lempa?" The head hissed some more, creating sounds like random letters mixed with the broken crackle. Gun?

"He's probably angry with us for squatting on his rock."

"I wonder," Nemala said. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to make sense out of the noise. "It almost sounds like he's saying 'gun.'"

"The toy gun?"

"It's the only thing he has left from his collection. I guess it's important to him?"

"I can imagine, if it's the last thing he owns."

She looked at the screen again. "Let's get going. That fuel is costing them something. Maybe they'll turn around if they think it isn't worthwhile chasing us. After all, they already have Cloudchaser."

"But Lempa's the registered owner."

She looked at Lempa's head pointedly and said, "It's a warship. Something has changed that we don't know about."

They reentered their booths and triggered stasis. The ship's computer took over for what seemed like a few seconds, then dropped them out of stasis again. "Warning, the *Rusty Tap* hull integrity is damaged. You are losing pressure."

Bogun and Nemala drifted out of their booths, weightless, and surveyed the deck. There was a half-meter wide hole through both sides of the room. There was no air at all, except for a hazy gray smoke from the singed edges of the hole. "Rusty, what the hell happened?" asked Bogun.

"A beam weapon has pierced the control deck resulting in loss of atmosphere. Emergency protocols required bringing you out of stasis to deal with the damage, which required shutdown of the engines." The ship paused for a second, then added, "You are being hailed by the *VenDaal*."

Bogun glanced at a chronometer. They'd been in stasis for nearly three hours in ship time. Time enough for the *VenDaal* to catch up. He stepped over to the comm display and said, "Accept the hail. Patch the comm through channel four on our suits."

A man with long, straight, black hair framing his face appeared on-screen. "Captain Bogun

Rosewood of the *Rusty Tap*, I presume? I'm Captain Malor of the corvette *VenDaal*."

Bogun nodded slowly. Malor would have looked up his name from the ship's registration number on the hull. "I can't say I'm happy to meet you, Captain."

"I imagine not. So, I'm a little curious about what you were doing on my planet just now, and why you're in such a hurry to leave. My welcoming party was just about to visit your little farming operation."

"We are nothing to you, Captain. I make wine, and we were squatting to earn a homestead."

"Oh, squatters! You know your home is forfeit if you're caught before the time limit, don't you?" He waved a hand in the air, as though clearing the air of smoke. "You just have to leave, and leave all your stuff behind."

"We, uh . . . already did that."

"By 'home,' I mean the place you were living. Your ship is forfeit. We're going to take your ship, and whatever valuables you have on board."

"You're just fucking pirates," Bogun stated flatly.

"Ooo . . . that's such a loaded term. You should be much nicer to the guy that might drop you off at the next station we visit. More compliant." He grinned unpleasantly. "Enough chit-chat. Prepare to receive my boarding crew. I see you don't have a shuttle bay, so just meet my crew in your airlock. Save us punching another hole in our new ship. Play nice, and you might live through this."

Malor signed off.

Bogun motioned to Nemala to switch her comm to their secure channel. "Rusty, give me a view of their ship," Bogun said.

"Yes, Captain." The *VenDaal* was less than two hundred meters from their own, and easily ten times larger. It bristled with armaments.

"Not your standard pirate," Nemala said.

"Yeah. He's going to kill us anyway, I'll bet." Bogun said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. If we can get him to try your wine, we can convince him that it's valuable and we need to be on Cloudchaser to make it. Sell him on the idea that he needs us alive to manufacture it."

Bogun rolled his eyes, his mouth twisting. "I don't know." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw motion on his monitor: the boarding crew leaving the *VenDaal*. There were three of them. "Two of them to run my ship, one guy to escort us back."

"Or just shoot us," Nemala said.

"They'll at least want to ask us about the cargo. Then shoot us. We'll have the chance to make a deal with them. Grab Lempa's head, too, and his toy gun. See if they'll let us keep them. Part of the deal."

"What did Lempa ever do for us?" Nemala asked.

"It's what he *might* do for us. He gets an allowance from Arnand, his homeworld. We'll need his gratitude if we're going to start over." Bogun opened up the inner and outer airlock doors as Nemala grabbed one of the unbroken bottles of wine, Lempa's head, and the toy gun.

They stood together inside the open airlock, watching the three soldiers as they slowly closed the gap between them.

There was a crackle of noise on channel four of their headsets, a hiss and a pop, then the distinct word "Gun!" as it sounded loudly in his helmet.

The three soldiers jerked suddenly and brought up their arms.

"Dammit, Lempa!" Bogun lurched back behind a narrow steel partition bordering the door to space and watched as a nearly invisible beam grazed the metal barrier a few inches from his waist. He heard Nemala howl and turned just enough to see her grab her suited leg where it had been pierced, then suddenly felt an echo of sharp pain within his own leg. *The damned drug*, he thought. The suit's repair foam filled the hole in her suit and numbed her wound. "We're unarmed!" he shouted, then realized he was still on the private channel with Nemala.

"I know that," she growled back.

Channel four blurted out "Gun!" again. More beams played across the inside of the airlock,

barely missing them as they hugged the wall. Bogun glared at the bag containing Lempa's head. Why the hell was he doing this? What was it about a gun?

"Rusty, switch our comm to channel four."

"Done."

"We have no guns!" he repeated. More beams played across the walls of the airlock. They didn't believe him, or this was their intention all along and Lempa's outburst bought them a few extra seconds. The metal sizzled with bright red spots. The angle was changing as the soldiers flew closer. The lever to close the airlock was on the other side of the airlock, out of reach unless he made himself an easy target. Bogun fumed. Did Lempa's toy gun actually work? Was it loaded? How many rounds were in it?

He reached into the bag that Nemala carried and pulled out the toy gun. Holding it, he found that he couldn't get his suited finger inside the trigger guard. Too thick. "I need a screwdriver," he said.

Another male voice laughed. "They're going to throw a screwdriver at us," the voice said. Other voices chuckled.

Nemala jerked a screwdriver from her belt and handed it to him. Bogun levered the toy gun around the edge of the chamber by its handle, keeping his fingers out of view, stuck the shaft of the screwdriver into the trigger guard, and started pulling the trigger repeatedly, shooting blindly, hoping it wasn't a toy and that it had some area-effect like a flamethrower. It didn't kick. There was nothing. It was just a damned toy. Angrily, he threw it across the chamber, aiming for a lucky shot at the lever that would close the airlock. It bounced off with no effect and floated free, drawing more fire from the soldiers. Bogun took that fraction of a second to stick his head out and pull back.

The *VenDaal* was gone.

"Their ship left," he said to Nemala. Maybe it was maneuvering to the other side of their ship? Ready to attack them from a different angle? It made no sense. They were minutes, perhaps seconds, from dying.

"The ship..." someone said, then the play of deadly beams suddenly stopped. "Where the hell is our ship?"

Bogun didn't waste time wondering what had distracted their attackers. He lunged across the airlock and grabbed the handle, twisting it quickly. The outer airlock door slammed shut.

Bogun and Nemala tumbled back into the main quarters of the *Rusty Tap*, closing the inner airlock door. "What happened to their ship?" Nemala asked.

"I have no idea," Bogun replied. "It's not showing up on any of our displays. It left the area for some reason."

"Captain Malor?" a voice called out. One of the three soldiers.

"We need to get on that ship," one of the others said.

"Nemala, lie down on the deck." Bogun followed suit. There was no time to get into the stasis booths. "Rusty, two gees please," he said, forgetting he was still on a common channel.

"Shit," said one of the soldiers.

"There is a person riding on the outside of the ship," *Rusty Tap* reported a few seconds later. "Now three persons."

Of course, Bogun thought. Military suits were easily capable of providing two gees acceleration themselves. They just flew up and grabbed on to his ship. Bogun looked over at the hole punched through the sides of the *Rusty Tap*. Not big enough to crawl through, but the soldiers could toss explosives in there if they had them. He didn't have long.

He motioned toward the stasis booths, and Nemala nodded. "Rusty, reduce acceleration to one gee." The ship shuddered suddenly; Bogun felt a vibration through his suit's boots. The soldiers were using explosives. But where? Bogun and Nemala climbed quickly into their booths, and Bogun ordered, "Rusty, give us stasis and twenty gees for ten seconds, *now*."

Before he finished his sentence, Bogun heard one of the soldiers on his comm call out, "Clear the ship!"

When they came out of stasis, there was silence.

* * *

The airlock's outer door had been blown open with an explosive charge. The airlock contained a dead soldier with a broken neck and the severed leg of another who didn't make it all the way out of the airlock before the engines fired. A lone voice called out on their comm; a suit radio now ten kilometers away and receding further with every second, fading into noise, calling for a rescue from the *VenDaal*, then the *Rusty Tap*. They listened for a short while, then switched over to their private channel.

"We can't go back and get him. They tried to kill us," Nemala said.

"No argument from me. He'd try to kill us again, given the chance."

"What happened to the *VenDaal*?"

"They took off. Who knows? Maybe we scared them off with the toy gun."

They stood in the middle of the dock and surveyed the damage. The airlock was unusable. The deck was open to vacuum. Spheres of wine froze as they evaporated and shards of glass floated in the vacuum. The storage compartment door wouldn't open far, though it was twisted enough that more globules of wine drifted out of the opening.

The air in their suits would last another four hours. Nemala examined her leg where she'd been hit with the beam weapon. "I'm going to need medical attention."

"We can't go back to Cloudchaser. The *VenDaal* might come back."

"The wine and beer will keep," Nemala said.

"Unless the guys stranded in the rover use it for food."

Nemala squeezed her leg. "I forgot about those assholes. They have grapes and grain, too. They might survive for a while if they're smart. Long enough for the *VenDaal* to pick them up."

Bogun pursed his lips. What the hell would make a corvette run away? A bigger ship? But there wasn't one.

"The nearest darkplanet to here is Schwarzwald, about half a light-year," he said. "They'll have the tech to repair the *Rusty Tap* and give Lempa a functional voice box, if not a full body. So, about a half-hour in stasis time."

Crackling noise broke into their comm, and a voice brokenly said, "Yes," followed by a garble of unintelligible noises.

Bogun turned to the bag sitting on the floor next to Nemala. "Lempa's head votes yes. And he might be paying the medical bills. Remember to put it in your stasis booth. He might be upset if he had to stare at the inside of a bag for a couple of years of flight time."

* * *

Chapter 10—Schwarzwald, 2199

On Schwarzwald, Lempa spent six months worth of his princely allowance to get a new body, after a functional voice box was connected to his head so he could gain access to his credit account. Bogun had had to assure the repair group that Lempa Tarren was a prince back on Arnand; he'd be good for it, though they made Bogun sign the forms, too, in case Lempa's head wasn't quite as functional or as rich as Bogun made him out to be. Worst case, Bogun thought, he'd have to pay for a voice box out of his own pocket.

Nemala and Bogun were waiting for Lempa when he came out of the rebuild. His repairman accompanied him, steadying him as Lempa became familiar with the new body.

Lempa spread his hands. "I guess I have you two to thank for this."

Bogun nodded. "You're shorter."

"And green," Nemala added.

Lempa looked down at his new body and sighed. "It's what they had available. I'll order something more imposing from Arnand once things have settled. I have a few questions for you, though."

"And we for you."

"I figured as much. Let me go first, my questions are likely much easier to answer. What the hell were you doing on my planet?"

Nemala laughed. "Squatting. Waiting for five years to run out so we could claim some land of our own."

“Making wine and beer and whiskey. All left behind, now,” Bogun added.

“You could do that almost anywhere,” Lempa said. “And on a planet that wasn’t going to self-destruct in twenty-thousand years.”

Nemala and Bogun exchanged glances. “There were some legal issues,” Bogun said, “and the local cartel on Icehouse was a little too interested in my product. We needed a place to disappear for a few years. We knew you were going into hiding, so we tracked you. Rode your coat-tails.”

“Hmm. So maybe not such a simple question. Legal issues?”

“My turn,” Bogun said. “Do you have any idea why the *VenDaal* ran away?”

Lempa laughed loud and long. When he stopped, he told them about the Gun With One Bullet. They’d shot at the approaching soldiers, missed, and hit the massive *VenDaal* instead, sending it and Lempa’s collection of one-shot misfit items to who-knew-where and stranding the three soldiers. The ship was gone from the universe, as far as Lempa knew. “The *VenDaal*, and all the things I’d collected!” he moaned. “Even the Chevrolet pickup. I loved that thing.”

“The ship was destroyed? By that stupid toy gun of yours?” Bogun sat down, his legs suddenly weak.

“That, and everything I’ve worked for. My entire collection.”

They didn’t speak for a minute. Then Bogun said, “Well, we’re all alive. As for your collection, we got you a little coming-out-of-death gift,” and handed him a bottle of Empathy wine.

Lempa stared quietly at it. “Um. Thanks. A bottle of wine. Not that I’m not grateful, but you are aware that I have an artificial body, right?”

“It isn’t to drink. It’s the last bottle of its kind. For this year, anyway. I sold the other three surviving cases to connoisseurs here on Schwarzwald and I seriously doubt that any of them are intact anymore. That makes this bottle the rarest of the rare. Start your next collection.”

Lempa sat down on a chair in the lobby. “Well, I’m stunned. You two have lost almost everything yourselves, mostly in the process of saving me. I have nothing—”

“Technically, you still own Cloudchaser. And technically, we didn’t make the five-year squatter residency requirements to claim our land before we had to bail. We wouldn’t mind having the planetary owner gift us the land.”

Lempa tapped the bottle with a plastic finger for a moment. “I think I can manage that. I’m not entirely sure if I’m going back there, though. I might end up reselling it. Find some place that’s a little more secure.”

“That would be unfortunate,” Bogun said. “Though lucrative for you. Based on what Captain Malor said, it appears that Cloudchaser is going to get a lot of attention as a new stepping-stone world from Earth to Teegarden. At least until the war is over between Grendel and Coalring. Of course, with no one living there at the moment, others might be contesting your ownership. If we were there, and you, it might be easier for you to maintain possession. You could sell small bits of it as it develops, and then others have an interest in your legitimacy. Then an orbital or two moves in, and we’re in business.”

“Hmm.” He looked doubtful.

“Second question; what’s that little extra fridge in your head for?”

Lempa nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, that. I was not aware of that until you mentioned it when you were trying to fix my voice box. I was stunned, to say the least.”

“You didn’t know about this?”

“No. It does make some sense, though. On Arnand, when I was downloaded, there was a doctor assigned to the transference of my consciousness to the crystal matrix in my head, and the destruction of my original body. She was a close friend, though, and I believe she must have kept a tiny fragment my true brain alive. If it’s true, that would change everything.”

“How so?”

“It’s the difference between me being classified as a cyborg, with rights of ownership and citizenship, and an android, with virtually no rights at all. Having a partly organic human brain means that my status as a Prince of Arnand is still valid, even if the brain cells serve no active purpose.”

"You would return to Arnand?" Nemala asked.

"Oh, hell no. If the king found out that I was partly organic, the doctor who did this would be executed and the offending part would be plucked from my head. No, I need to get the doctor off-planet before I let anyone know about this little brain-in-a-cooler I've been hauling around." He shook his head, rubbing a plastic hand across the dome. "And after that, as long as I don't return to Arnand, I can claim the private security forces due a true Prince of Arnand. I can return to Cloudchaser with those fighters, continue to receive my stipend, and start my collection over again. All over again." He bent over the wine bottle in his hand as though tired by its weight, staring at it. "You know, this whole thing about collecting started with my brother. The sole purpose was to taunt him. Then it morphed into a career and habit, a source of extra income, and a lifestyle." He put the bottle on the floor and leaned back in his chair. "Then he put my memories in this body, and it just made me more determined to get at him the only way I still could. Continuing this habit of collection. Owning something he could never stain."

Bogun motioned to the bottle. "It's a start."

Lempa picked up the bottle and handed it back to Bogun. "I don't think so. The destruction of the entire collection is a message, I think, giving me a chance to alter what I thought was an inevitable future. The collection was really of no value. That's funny, isn't it? Priceless objects that serve no purpose. On Cloudchaser, I can build something. I can start over. I can build a wondrous new world from scratch, for a few thousand years, anyway, and say that I've done something with my life. Orbitals will be built around Cloud, and when Cloudchaser is finally consumed by Cloud, oh, what an incredible sight that will be!"

Nemala smirked. "Will that irritate your brother, by any chance?"

"When I declare myself king of Cloudchaser? Oh, most certainly. More than anything. I suppose he will be long dead by the time Cloudchaser is lost. In twenty thousand years, there may be no king at all."

They were quiet for a few moments while Bogun considered the last bottle of Empathy. He felt Nemala's apprehension as she opened her mouth to tell Lempa about the drug contamination on Cloudchaser. What it might do to his security forces. Heck, what it might do for any future community of people living there. It would, indeed, be a "wondrous new world" far beyond Lempa's expectations. He glanced at Nemala before she could speak and gave his head a tiny shake. Not quite mind-reading, but getting there.

But there was business to worry about, too. Somehow, the bills still had to be paid. "These security forces that you're going to get," Bogun asked, "Do they drink?"

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