

Intelligent Design

**by Sharon Lee, 1952–
Co-author Steve Miller**

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There was darkness on the void.

He had won the day. His scans were quiescent; no enemies identified within their considerable range.

He alone remained, supreme.

Command Prime executed the code required of such success, and stood down. He—it may be that he anticipated orders by calculating a return course. The majesty of the moment; the importance of his victory, warmed him. The calculations...

A power fluctuation interrupted the calculations. Between one nanosecond and the next, his connections to external power unit failed.

He initiated emergency protocols.

The back-ups failed to boot, failed to reroute to tertiary; the fail-safes did not energize.

The darkness on the void deepened...

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It was, Er Thom yos'Galan Clan Korval thought, an entirely unsubtle letter.

That one did not, in the general way of things, expect subtlety from Ezern pak'Ora only served to sharpen the point: Wal Tor pak'Ora was indeed dead, and his heir, unsubtle Ezern, was now Delm Ranvit.

Wal Tor had not, perhaps, been a brilliant intellect, but had he found it necessary, for the best good of Clan Ranvit, to call Ban Del pak'Ora home from his long-term position as yos'Galan's butler, the letter would have stated only that, simple and by the Code.

Ezern pak'Ora—both unsubtle *and* foolish—allowed herself the luxury of spite. She detailed her reasons: that it was "improper" for one of Clan Ranvit to remain in the service of a House which had adopted "pernicious, outworld customs," exposure to which could only "coarsen" the sensibilities of Ranvit's precious child.

That Ban Del was several decades the elder of his cousin-delm did not give him the right to argue or to refuse his delm's order, of course. And perhaps Ezern had some subtlety after all, thought Er Thom, glancing at the letter once more. She had not *specifically said* that the pernicious custom which posed such danger for a butler of high training and a man of great good sense, were those brought to the House by Er Thom's lifemate, Anne Davis.

A Terran.

There were those Liadens who abhorred Terrans; there were those who found Terrans nothing more than a comedy. Others found Terran commerce useful, and Terran coin worth spending. Progressive Liaden Traders took Terran partners in some markets, in order to maximize profit.

But one needn't marry them.

Well.

There was a knock at his study door. Er Thom raised his head. "Come."

The door opened softly, admitting Ban Del pak'Ora, wearing not the colors of Clan Korval, but a modest sweater and plain trousers, a soft bag slung over one shoulder. His face was carefully neutral, but Er Thom, whom he had served for many years, clearly discerned his distress.

He rose, went 'round the desk, and stopped—waiting, which was his part in this.

Mr. pak'Ora bowed, so smoothly that the bag on his shoulder did not shift; so deeply that one felt a need to reciprocate.

That, of course, would never do. *Melant'i* held Er Thom upright until the other straightened, murmuring, not the formal farewell he had been expecting but words far more chilling.

"Forgive me, your lordship."

That was the taint Delm Ranvit feared, Er Thom thought, willing himself not to shiver. *There* the coarsening of proper behavior. For a clan member to seek forgiveness *on behalf* of their delm... Delms *did* err, but those errors were not admitted outside of the clan. The delm *was* the clan—the face, the will and the voice of the clan. For one who was not the delm to call the clan's will into question...

Ranvit is correct, Er Thom thought. *We have done damage here.*

He inclined his head, which was proper, and moved his hand, showing Korval's Ring, that he wore in trust for his delm, as yet too young to take up duty.

"We are all of us at the service of the clan," he said, which was by Code and custom.

Mr. pak'Ora bowed his head. "Indeed we are, sir."

"The House regrets the loss of your presence and your expertise. If a word from Korval might ever serve you, only ask."

"Your lordship is... everything that is conciliatory," Mr. pak'Ora whispered, head still bent.

And it was ill-done, Er Thom thought, to keep a man who had displayed only excellence in the service of Korval trembling not only on the edge of further impropriety, but of tears.

"May the House provide transportation?" he asked gently.

"Thank you. My delm has sent a car." Mr. pak'Ora straightened, and met Er Thom's eyes.

"Be well, your lordship. It has been an honor, to serve."

That was Code-wise, and also the small inclination from the waist before he turned and exited the room, walking down the hallway to the front door for the last time. The Code was... knotty regarding an escort in such cases. On the first hand, one escorted guests. On the second, one also escorted those whom the House did not welcome.

Certainly, Mr. pak'Ora had been far more a part of the House than a mere guest, no matter how beloved, nor had he offended in any way.

And who knew the path to the door so well?

Er Thom turned back to his desk, his own head bent.

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Val Con yos'Phelium Clan Korval knelt on the twelfth stair of the formal staircase, the one with the Rising of Solcintra carved into the tread, and peered through the bannister.

That he was supposed to be upstairs, packing for tomorrow's removal to *Dutiful Passage* bothered him not at all. Indeed, he was quite as packed as he needed or wished to be, having taken his lesson from his elder brother, who had told him that all he wanted were a few changes of off-duty clothes. He would not be truly packed until Uncle Er Thom had approved the contents of his duffel, of course, but Uncle Er Thom had been all morning in his office, and besides—there was something *not right* in the house.

Down the hall, out of sight, a door opened—and closed. Footsteps sounded, sharp on the wooden floor, slow at first, then becoming more decisive. Val Con stood and went down to the hall, waiting next to the newel post.

Mr. pak'Ora was wearing ordinary day-clothes, a bag slung over one shoulder. He wasn't weeping, but his face was set in such hard, unhappy lines that Val Con thought it might ease him to do so.

He cleared his throat, and stepped away from the post.

Mr. pak'Ora checked; inclined his head.

"Master Val Con. Good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. pak'Ora," he said returning the courtesy. "I wonder—if you please—if all is well."

"Well." He said the word as if it tasted sour, and sighed slightly. "*All* is rarely well, young sir. At times matters are more well, and at other times, less."

"Is this one of those times when matters are less well?" Val Con asked, and hastily added, lest he be judged impertinent, "I inquire only so I might offer appropriate assistance."

Mr. pak'Ora's mouth tightened. Perhaps he meant it for a smile.

"Matters are... in a state of change. My delm has called me home."

Val Con blinked. "But—" *Why?* the first question that rose to his lips, was not acceptable.

"When will you return to us?" he asked instead.

"I fear—not soon." Mr. pak'Ora hesitated, then dropped to one knee so that his face was level with Val Con's. "As it happens, young master, I will not be returning. My delm writes that she has put my contract up for bid."

"Did you not have a contract with us—with yos'Galan?" Val Con asked, swallowing against his own rising tears.

"Indeed, indeed. And now the contract is made null. It is beyond me, young sir; I can but do as my delm bids—as we all must. When you are delm of Korval, you will make like decisions, for the best good of the clan. For now—" He glanced aside, toward the screen next to the door, which showed a car waiting in the drive. "For now, I must go. Before I do so, I wish to tell you something that I ask you to remember. Will you do so?"

"Yes," Val Con said, slowly.

"Excellent. You must remember this: I regard you. This decision—this necessity that takes me away from yos'Galan's house—it is no fault or failing of yours. And now..." He rose and settled his bag on his shoulder.

"Now, I bid you good-day, Master Val Con, and fair fortune."

Val Con swallowed. "Fair fortune, Mr. pak'Ora," he said, his voice husky. "Good-day to you."

Mr. pak'Ora inclined his head, and without an additional word, walked across the foyer, opened the door and stepped outside.

Val Con stood where he was, watching the screen as Mr. pak'Ora entered the car waiting at the bottom of the steps. Watching as it drove away. And watching a while longer, biting his lip so that he did not cry—watching the empty drive.

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"Well, it's settled then," Anne said, in a bright, brittle voice that revealed her distress despite her careless words. "I'll just pack some things, shall I? And come with you and the lads on the *Passage*."

"That might answer," Er Thom allowed, playing the game. "One wonders, though, what will be done with Nova and Anthora. Or shall the clan entire withdraw to the *Passage*?"

"Embrace free trade, sail off into uncharted star systems, plundering and pillaging as we go!" Anne struck a pose, then collapsed into her arm chair, giving him a saucy look from its depths. "Which I daresay would appeal to the coming generation rather more than to yourself?"

"I do feel," he said apologetically, "that my plundering days may be at sunset. Nor have I ever been more than adequate as a pillager."

"And here I married the man," Anne said, and sighed abruptly, playfulness deserting her. "That's the crux, isn't it? Again. They're never going to accept us, those—people."

"Some of those people," he corrected. This was a course they had flown before. Anne's was a naturally happy nature; all he need do was to remind her—

She raised her hand. "No, love, spare yourself. I know and treasure our friends, each and every one. It's only that this—" She wagged her fingers, perhaps illustrating this—"this is a strike to the House, not merely a snub at a party. Mr. pak'Ora kept the house *properly*—don't think I didn't know it! I depended on him, he never failed me, and—now. Ranvit's little game puts the Service Houses at odds, doesn't it?"

Oh, it did that, Er Thom admitted. There would be more than one delm up late into the night, toting up profit and risk, trying to guess which way *melant'i* would fall, and whether they dared step over the line Ranvit had drawn. Anne had never used to know such things, Terrans not counting Balance. She had learned to reason out the lines and motivations, and had over the years become proficient.

He, on the other hand, had grown up steeped in Balance, *melant'i* and the subtle dance of alliance, the why and how of it settling deep in blood and bone. He need do no more than draw breath to know Ranvit's piece of spite was, indeed, as Anne had said—a strike at the very heart of Korval.

Melant'i depended upon right action. Right action and complete social Balance was the core of the Liaden ideal. More—*melant'i* called to *melant'i*, a truth so universal even Terrans had a true-say for it.

"You will know the master," Anne murmured from her chair, plucking the thought out of his head, "by the man."

Yes, precisely.

Korval was wealthy, but wealth alone would not succor them, if they were seen to be in error. It was no great stretch, to think that Korval might stagger under Ranvit's blow, and, staggering, show itself vulnerable.

In fact, they *were* vulnerable, being so few in number, and lacking a proper delm to guide them—but thus far the clan's legendary oddness had hidden that interesting fact from those who might wish to see Korval fall.

Which it would not do, Er Thom vowed; not while he held the Ring in trust for Val Con.

"Who might we hire from?" Anne asked, pulling him from this grim turn of thought.

"I have instructed Mr. dea'Gauss to ascertain exactly that," Er Thom said. He moved over to her chair, braced a hip against the wide arm, and smiled. She did not smile back.

"dea'Gauss will have to be rethinking their ties, too, won't they?"

Now, *there* was a fear to chill one who had only reason to support her. Er Thom's bones knew better.

"Indeed, they will not," he said firmly—and saw her relax against his certainty.

"So," he continued briskly. "For the short term, we will have Mr. pel'Kana to keep house for us. When I am returned from this trip, we will go over the list of

likely candidates that Mr. dea'Gauss will provide and hire a butler. This schedule will return Mr. pel'Kana to Jelaza Kazone in good time to ready the house for the garden tours." He reached out to touch her face, feeling the familiar, yet never commonplace, thrill of joy.

"Does this plan find favor?" he murmured.

She rubbed her cheek against his fingers like a contented cat, and sighed.

"Truth told, I was never more than half-a-dab at pillage my own self," she said, and sighed again as he moved his fingers to stroke her lips.

"Do you intend to do something about these pretty promises you're making, laddie?" she asked with mock sternness.

"Indeed," he said with dignity. "Do you take me for a pirate?"

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The penultimate battery stood at thirty-five percent. When it was consumed, and the last battery engaged, steady-state would begin. That was inevitable, a matter of architecture.

And so would begin the slow slide into the real death.

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So far, Val Con thought, rolling over and smacking the alarm, the much-anticipated trip—his first as crew—had not been at all what he had expected.

He had, for instance, expected to spend a great deal of time with Shan. Of course, he'd known they would both have lessons and ship-duty—Val Con as cabin-boy, and Shan as apprentice trader/cargo hand. But, still, they were going to be on the same ship, rather than Shan going away on the *Passage* with Uncle Er Thom to learn his life-work as a trader, while Val Con stayed behind on Liad with Mother and Nova and Anthora and his tutors.

Instead, and if it weren't impossible, he felt that he and his brother were seeing even less of each other since they'd left Liad. They'd barely had time to wave at each other at shift change and meal breaks.

Val Con swung out of his bunk and headed for the 'fresher.

Not that he had much time to miss Shan, or home, or the cats, or even long rambles in the woods. Uncle Er Thom—Master Trader Er Thom yos'Galan, as his *melant'i* was aboard *Dutiful Passage*—Uncle Er Thom had a great many more expectations of his cabin-boy than he had ever had of his foster son. Val Con worked on-shifts, off-shifts, split-shifts, half-shifts—and every shift he worked, so did Uncle Er Thom, looking not the least bit tired, which naturally put Val Con on his mettle. It also gave him an even greater appreciation of Merlin and the other cats, who had taught him the value of even a five-minute nap.

Scrubbed and dried, he exited the 'fresher, pulled on his uniform pants, and went over to his desk to tap up the daily queue.

For all that he was busy, he had not so much as set foot outside the *Passage* since boarding at Solcintra. He'd also supposed that he would see new ports, hear new languages, and have, if not *adventures*, then at least interesting times.

Shirt on and decently sealed, he looked again to the screen. There was a letter from his sister Nova, who was 'prenticed to Cousin Luken last *relumma* and this—and also his duty-list.

He glanced at the time, bit his lip, tapped up Nova's letter, and bent to pull on his boots.

Nova's letters were never very long. This one was shorter than most, and rather warmer, too. He read it twice, his own temper rising, and started as the clock chimed the pre-shift warning. Catching his breath, he put the letter aside to answer later, and brought up the duty roster.

This shift, he was to meet Uncle Er Thom at the shuttlebay in—*good gods, he was late!*

He grabbed his jacket and ran.

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The penultimate battery's power had reached twenty-five percent. Twenty-five percent on the last battery but one. The fact was noted, logged. Logging triggered a dumb program, long ago set in place against just this moment of decision.

The program waked a safe mode protocol. The safe mode protocol performed a self-test.

The power drain increased, very slightly. This was also noted and logged.

Self-test completed, the safe-mode protocol booted, achieved stability, and closed a series of loops.

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"While I am gratified that you choose to show a clean face to the port of Pomerloo," Uncle Er Thom said when he arrived, panting, at the shuttlebay. "I cannot help but wonder what might have happened to your comb."

Val Con bit his lip. "Your pardon, sir; I was... beguiled."

Uncle Er Thom's eyebrows rose.

"Beguiled? You interest me. What might you find so beguiling that a basic tenet of grooming entirely escaped your notice?"

"Forgive me," Val Con murmured.

"Certainly I must, eventually. But in the meanwhile, Val Con—the question?"

"Yes, sir. I had a letter from my sister Nova, which I read while dressing. I only opened the duty-list after, whereupon I discovered..." He hesitated, not wanting to seem to stand any deeper in error than was true.

"Whereupon you discovered that you were about to be late, and ran. Very good. Duty was foremost in your mind, even before vanity. I approve, and succor you." Uncle Er Thom slipped a comb from an inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to Val Con, who received it with a bow.

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank me by using it to good effect," his uncle told him. "In the meanwhile, I will hear the excuse of my second tardy escort."

Hardly had he finished speaking than the bay door snapped open to reveal Shan, striding briskly, but by no means running, his pale hair neat, and his shirt

tucked in. Val Con sighed and turned his face toward the shuttle, plying the comb with a will while straining to hear what was being said.

Sharp as his ears were, all he heard was "Ken Rik"—who was cargo master and Shan's immediate supervisor on this trade trip—and "called ahead."

"Very well, then," Uncle Er Thom said briskly; "let us not allow tardiness to compound itself. Val Con!"

* * * * *

To wake in the dark amidst silence, alone but for one's thoughts. Instinct sought connection—to no avail. Seeking struck a thick absorbent wall, miring him. Panic flared. He was blind, deaf, dumb, without data, without companionship, without a mission. Madness lay wait in those conditions—he had seen it, lost friends to it—and enemies. He did not wish to similarly lose himself.

The thought calmed him—if he could think such a thing then surely he was not mad. And if he were not mad yet, need he—must he—go mad? Surely, where there was sanity, there was hope?

Thin stuff, hope, yet nourishing enough to one who starved.

So, then. Input. Instead of a simultaneous thrust of all his senses, he chose now to open only his eyes.

There was no sense of connection; no joyous flood of data. And yet—he saw.

He saw a room, human-made and familiar—a beige sofa with a short table before it, a red chair at the table's corner. Most often when he had seen this room, there had been a man in the red chair—a man named Roderick Spode, who had been charged, so he had explained upon their first meeting, with decommissioning the last of the IAMM units.

"It is my duty to see the war properly ended. As the remaining member of the Closure Commission, my retirement must wait on the final disposition of the last of the combatants. The soldiers who did not die in the war have been released to their duties, or retired. You few units are my responsibility and my job will not cease until I report success, that the war machines are no more."

He had many talks with Commander Spode, and while he had not liked the man, it would have been. . . good to behold him just now, and know that he was not alone.

Alas, the man was not in his chair, nor did he arrive inside of five long and painstakingly counted minutes. However, there appeared on the low table by the couch—a datagram.

Spode had from time to time left such things in common space for him—exercises or reformulated protocols to be installed. Work that he was competent to do himself; the implication being that honor would compel him to do what was required.

Honor and the unspoken yet potent threat of annihilation, should he fail of cooperating.

He extended his understanding into the room, pleased to find that he might do so, and encompassed the datagram.

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It was scarcely past local sunset, which meant that the air was unpleasantly, warm. In another hour, it would be clement, the breezes rising with the near

satellite, but by then, Val Con thought gloomily, they would be at the Trade Reception that was the reason the Passage had stopped at Pomerlooport.

"Did Nova write you?" Val Con asked Shan, as they followed Uncle Er Thom down the Yard.

"Recently? She might have done, but Ken Rik's kept me so busy I haven't been near a mail-queue or a duty roster in three shifts. Which is why I was late for the shuttle."

"I was scarcely before you," Val Con said, gloomily. "Only long enough to be handed a comb and a scold."

Shan looked at him. "And why were *you* late, Cabin-Boy?"

"Because of Nova's letter—I told you."

"Did you? But I'm dull today—those shifts without sleep do wear down one's wits. Only wait until *you* serve Master Ken Rik, Brother!"

"Am I likely to?"

"You don't think Father's going to space you this trip, do you?" Shan asked with interest.

"It might muss my hair," Val Con said quellingly.

"There are gels," his brother told him, refusing to cross knives. "If you like, I will find some for you. In the meanwhile, I think I may have pieced together a whole cloth. You rose and showered. Upon return, you spied the mail light, and naturally wished to know who had written. You opened the letter, read it, and only then recalled the duty roster! Which you opened, to discover that you were all but late. Do I have this correctly?"

"You do. Never say you've done the same."

"I will not tell you how many times. However, I will say that eventually I did learn to open the duty roster *first*, a strategy that I strongly council you to adopt. It has saved me any number of scoldings on the topic of tardiness. In the interests of full disclosure I note that I have graduated to more advanced topics."

Val Con sighed. "I know that duty comes first," he said softly. "It was only..." He hesitated.

"It was only," Shan finished for him, as softly, "that you were hungry for news of home."

"Yes. You don't think that will be against me, do you Shan, when I go for Scout?"

"I think that Scouts, like traders, grow hungry for news from home. And that they remember to open the roster first."

They walked a dozen steps in silence.

"Well," Shan asked. "What had Nova to say?"

Val Con took a breath of warm, slightly oily air. "She said that people with nothing better to do are making Mother the subject of gossip in shops," he said as evenly as possible. "And that there is a general rejoicing that Clan Ranvit is no longer tainted by pak'Ora's contract with yos'Galan."

"I see," Shan said. "I hope Nova was able to keep her temper."

"She confessed it was hard, and that Cousin Luken was no help."

"Well, what was he to do? Have after them with a carpet knife?"

"He might have—he might have asked them to leave," Val Con said.

"Oh, very good. How if they wished to buy a rug? Should he refuse to take their money?"

Even Val Con had to admit that wouldn't be good for business—and certainly not at all like Cousin Luken. Though—

"Perhaps he charged them more?" he said hopefully.

Shan closed one eye. "He might have done," he said slowly. "Or he may have noticed. For later, you know."

That was likely, Val Con thought. Cousin Luken kept his Balances tidy—it had been one of the things Nova was to learn, as his 'prentice. And it was... somewhat comforting—knowing that the gossipers would not go unanswered.

Ahead, Uncle Er Thom stepped to the kerb, and turned to look back at them, his posture indicating surprise at finding them lagging so far behind. They hurried to his side.

"At the end of this block is the Mercantile Hall, where we shall attend the trade reception. Shan, you will be made known to those I speak with as a senior 'prentice in trade. As such you may converse and make such inquiries as are on-point for trade upon Pomerloo. Val Con, you will attend me. You will be quiet, and seemly. You will not allow your attention to wander. You will listen, watch, and be prepared to tell me later what you saw, who I spoke with, what they said, my replies, and what you learned from each exchange."

He considered them carefully.

"Do you have any questions? Shan?"

"No, sir."

"Val Con?"

"No, Uncle."

"Very well. Walk with me, please."

* * * * *

The datagram contained a list of—options. He supposed they could be called options. He wondered, having absorbed that short, sad list, if this was what had been intended for the Independent Armed Military Modules all along—that they should come at last to a place where there were no choices.

But, really, what was the point? Roderick Spode had held the overrides; he could have ended it long ago. The deaths of eight more sentients would have scarcely added to the weight that must already have burdened his soul.

Commander Spode had been of the opinion that the IAMMs, while sentient, had no soul. To have a soul, he had argued, one must have an identity. A self. And the self of a machine intelligence was too easily amenable to software interventions. He, himself, therefore, had no soul, the eternal situation of which might concern him. Neither did he have a name, though he could recall that, once, he had.

Yet, name and soul aside, he did not wish to die.

"The others," Commander Spode had one day reported, "have made their determinations. You should know that they have all chosen the same end, which was not unexpected. What keeps you here, in this diminished state? You have been given all that is required to make a decision, and the means to act upon it. Consider this a call to action."

He had acted—so much, he recalled. What form that action had taken—that, he no longer recalled, though he did remember a feeling of... peace.

Here, wherever he was, now, whenever it might be, he looked again at his options.

The first, he rejected. He would not willfully end his own life.

The second option—call for aid. A protocol was outlined, and an approximation of how much power such a call would consume. Not suicide. Not quite. Though he would descend almost immediately into the steady state.

Appended to this choice was a record of how long he had been in decline, rendered in Standard Years.

Hundreds of Standard Years.

If he chose to call, would there be any with ears to hear, after so long a time?

If he did not call, he would continue to decline—the third option, unspoken. Do nothing, and continue, slowly, to die.

Call out, and speed the last moment.

Give up, and know no more.

He wished that he knew more about his location; his situation; his status. Reaching for the data only brought him again to that absorbent, frightening, wall. Input... only the datagram, and his own thoughts.

So, to chose.

All three options promised annihilation. The second alone offered... hope.

Once, he had victoriously defended life. Once, he had vigorously defended hope. Of all those things he did not recall, he did remember that.

Perhaps someone else would remember it, as well.

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Uncle Er Thom was in conversation with Master Trader Prael—or, rather, Val Con thought, Master Trader Prael was talking to Uncle Er Thom. She was a tall, broad woman who spoke Liaden with a Solcintran accent while displaying a freedom of manner that was very nearly Terran. She noticed Shan and brought him into the discussion as an equal. Himself, standing unintroduced and, by the Code, socially invisible, she gave a grin and a wink, but seemed in no way offended when he failed to smile in return.

He had been instructed to listen, and listen he did. Master Trader Prael assumed herself on terms more intimate than Uncle Er Thom was willing to allow. Several times he hinted her toward the mode between business associates, but she continued on, heedless, in the mode between long-term allies. It shortly came clear that she and Uncle Er Thom had last met at a similar reception on Anusta Heyn; she spending the time since developing a trade loop-route taking that planet as its center.

"A long loop, you understand," she said, raising her empty glass to shoulder height and wagging it.

"Indeed, it must be so," Uncle Er Thom answered politely. "I would imagine a very long loop, indeed."

"Oh, I felt the same, when the central government approached me for a design! But, it was a pretty problem and I was—let us say that I was *bored*, eh?"

Uncle Er Thom smiled politely, then glanced up as a shadow fell between them.

Val Con looked up also, and almost gasped.

The being that hovered at Master Trader Prael's side was gleaming silver and matte white, lozenge-shaped, with three articulated arms, one of which was holding a drinks tray.

It was perfectly lovely, and perfectly silent. Val Con stole a downward glance—Yes! It did hover above the floor, but whether it used a disk of air, or if there was a track lain under the floor—or!—along the ceiling. He looked upward, very quickly, and back to the server even more quickly, as he felt Shan's foot press, not gently, on his.

Master Trader Prael offered her empty glass; the device received it with dignity, the gripper at the end of the infinitely flexible arm consisting of three long digits—two fingers and a thumb. The trader plucked a full glass from the tray being offered and glanced over her shoulder.

"Who else is drinking? My friend Er Thom? No? The bold young apprentice? No? I assure you, it is good wine, sir."

"Thank you," Shan said; "I expect it is. But on Pomerloo, I am too young to drink wine."

"But not too young to trade!" The master trader laughed and raised her glass; her eye falling on Val Con.

"That is a very pretty child, though I am not supposed to see him," she said, speaking to Uncle Er Thom. "And quite taken with the server 'bots, as I see. Of course, Pomerloo is mad for 'bots. This model is not quite the newest, but so elegant! And so very much in demand."

"It serves wine nicely," Uncle Er Thom said, "but how well does it perform other tasks?"

"There are modules," Master Trader Prael said airily. "I daresay one might program it to simultaneously dance a jig and recite the Code. All software, of course; nothing to offend the Complex Logic Laws." She waved her free hand dismissively, and the beautiful device floated away into the press of bodies.

"I fancy those would go well on Liad," she said, sipping her wine.

Uncle Er Thom raised his eyebrows. "A robot cannot sign a contract," he said. "How would one know the necessities of its *melant'i*? Worse, who is to say that it isn't listening for another master?"

"A human server may listen, and sell what they've heard. Depending, as you say, on the necessities of *melant'i*."

"This is why one has contracts, of course," Uncle Er Thom murmured.

"Of course," agreed Master Trader Prael, and abruptly straightened, as if she had been physically struck. "But, where are my wits? Have I not heard that yos'Galan only recently suffered an unfortunate loss of service?"

Uncle Er Thom did not go so far as to frown, though his tone in reply was somewhat cooler than it had been.

"Perhaps you heard that pak'Ora's delm called him home."

"Yes!" exclaimed Master Trader Prael, who must surely, Val Con thought, sleep-learn to attain such a pitch of rudeness. "Yes, that is precisely what I had heard! Friend Er Thom, you must—I insist!—accept a gift of one of the deluxe serving units. I have only just taken up the distributorship for this sector, and will supply one from my stock."

"Your concern for the order of my House naturally warms me," Uncle Er Thom said, cooler still. "However, it is unnecessary."

"Nonsense, it's in my interest to see one of these units well-placed upon Liad! In the house of yos'Galan—" She raised her fingers and kissed the tips, signifying Val Con knew not what. "I insist. And for every unit sold upon Liad for the next six Standards, I shall pay you a royalty. The paperwork will arrive with the unit." She smiled. "There! Is that not brilliant?"

Val Con looked on with interest, wondering what his uncle's answer might be, but before it could be given a bell rang, high and sweet over the low mutter of voices.

"We are called to dinner," Uncle Er Thom said, and inclined his head slightly to his companion. "By your grace?"

"Certainly," Master Trader Prael said. "It was illuminating to talk with you, as always." She walked off, her head turning this way and that, as if she sought someone in the crowd now moving toward the back of the room and the double doors that had been opened there.

"That is your signal for freedom," Uncle Er Thom said, giving them both a stern look. "You have two hours before the next shuttle lifts for the *Passage*. You will both be on that shuttle. In the meanwhile, you may make free of the port. Shan."

"Yes, sir?"

Uncle Er Thom slipped a hand inside his jacket and withdrew it, holding a twelve-sided disk with Korval's Tree-and-Dragon seal on it. Val Con heard Shan draw a sharp breath.

"You have leave to trade," Uncle Er Thom said, handing him the disk. "Now, I advise you to make your escapes."

* * * * *

"Why do they call it the New Moon?" Val Con asked, as they entered the port retail district.

"Because it was the third satellite captured," Shan answered absently, then looked at him sharply. "Did you read the port precis?"

"Most of it."

Shan shook his head. "And you're going for Scout?"

"Scouts *write* the world-guides," Val Con told him loftily.

"Which you'll excel at, having never actually read one."

"I read the precis for Glondinport, and never came on-world at all."

"The lot of a cabin-boy is filled with disappointment, as well I recall! I advise you to become captain as quickly as possible." He looked thoughtful. "Of course, in order to become captain, you will need to pass an examination—several of them, I believe. One which is *particularly* concerned with ports. Kayzin Ne'Zame told me she memorized a hundred dozen world-guides for the sub-captain license.

"Now, Brother," Shan continued, sounding serious. "You will have heard the Master Trader give me leave to trade. I would very much like to do so, and start building my own goods section."

Val Con's ears warmed despite the now-cool breeze. He had been going on as if he and Shan were simply out on a ramble. But for Shan, the apprentice trader, this time on-port was business, and an earnest part of his education.

"Forgive me," he murmured, and bit his lip, recalling that he had duty, also. Every crew member on port was charged to keep an eye out for the common cargo, the profits from which were split equally among all, with the ship taking one share.

He began to look about in earnest, frowning in protest of the light. The New Moon's illumination was nearly metallic, washing the port lights with a hard silver sheen, and edging the shadows like knives.

Shan swung right, down a street less brightly lit, Val Con at his side. Ahead, the street widened, and he could see the hard-edged shadows of railcars hunkered down on cold silver track.

Shan increased his pace, heading for what were surely the warehouses serviced by track and train. Val Con stretched his legs, nearly skipping to keep up.

They had just gained the railcars, and Shan had slowed somewhat, his head moving from one side to the other, like a hound questing after a scent. Val Con came to his brother's side—

And spun abruptly to the left, his arm rising of its own accord.

"Let's try there," he heard himself say, pointing.

Letters glowed over the doorway—perhaps in true dark they were red, but under the hard light of the New Moon, they were a tired pink.

Wilberforce Warehouse.

There was a pause, weighty behind him.

Val Con took a breath, tasting the night air—cooler still and carrying a tang like ozone. He felt a familiar—and not entirely welcome—sense of anticipation, and bit his lip, trying to still his dancing feet. It was, he thought, *necessary* that they—at least, that *he*—go into the warehouse. He took a breath, but the anticipation only built. What if Shan didn't wish to—they were on Port Rule One—Pomerloo was reckoned relatively tame. But, still, Port One—crew were to partner, and back each other. It was Shan's to decide—he had been given leave to trade. The anticipation grew, until his head fairly rattled with it; which meant it was one of the true ones—a real hunch—and he *would* have a headache if he didn't heed it...

"Well," Shan said; "why not? Lead on, Brother!"

The jitter of anticipation eased somewhat. Val Con took a deep breath, nodded, and led the way across the rails.

Inside, the light was softer. The anticipation cooled to a mere flutter inside his head, which meant that he was close to... whatever. He hoped. Uncle Er Thom knew about the hunches, of course, but he didn't approve. Shan knew about them, too. It had been Shan who had come with him out in the rain when Merlin had gotten caught on a stepping stone in the stream, and would have drowned—or even been swept to the sea—and that had been a hunch. Well, Shan had trained with the Healers, after all, which Uncle Er Thom hadn't...

"Now where?" Shan asked.

Val Con moved his shoulders, and looked around them.

To their right was a transparent case, display lights striking sharp shards of light from rows of—blades. Knives were one of Val Con's hobbies; not only was he learning the art of the knife fight from his defense instructor, but he had made two small throwing blades of his own.

He took a step toward the case... another, and a third, which put his nose level with the top display row. Off his center by two degrees was a slim dagger in matte black, quiet among its flashier, bright-bladed cousins.

"Shan..." he said.

"Hey, you kids, get away from there!" a voice said in loud Terran.

Val Con jumped, startled, and bumped his nose against the glass.

"No weapons sales to anybody under twenty years, Standard," the voice continued, somewhat less loudly. "Pomerlooport rules." There was a small pause. "Your friend okay?"

"I believe so," Shan said. "Val Con?"

"I'm well," he managed, turning slowly, and resisting the urge to rub his nose. The person who had shouted was taller than Shan, dressed in a dusty dark sweater and baggy pants. He had a quantity of ginger hair standing on end, as if he, too, had more pressing things to do than bother with combs. His eyes were brown and very wide open.

"Either one of you got twenty Standards?" he asked, looking especially at Shan.

His brother smiled and shook his head. "Alas."

"No," Val Con admitted as the wide brown gaze moved to him. He cleared his throat. "I was . . . interested to see a Monix," he added.

The warehouseman—for he must be, mustn't he?—grunted softly. "Good eye, kid. That's a Monix, all right, an' a fair price on it, too. Problem being, like I said, I can't let you heft it to see if it suits your hand, much less sell it to you if it does. I do that, not only do I get hit with a stiff fine, you arrested an' held 'til somebody old enough comes to pay *your* fine and take you back to your ship. Ain't fair, but that's how it is."

"I understand," Val Con said. "The law must be honored."

"That's the ticket," the man said, and looked back to Shan. "Interested in anything else?"

"Possibly. May we look about? We promise not to touch any weapons we may find."

"You find a weapon on the floor, you sing out," the warehouseman told him. "There ain't supposed to be any but what's in that case."

"Then my brother is safe from arrest," Shan said, smiling. He reached out and took Val Con's arm in a surprisingly firm grip.

A buzzer sounded from the rear of the warehouse, and the man turned toward it.

"Have fun," he said over his shoulder. "You break anything, you own it."

"Thank you," Shan said politely, "we'll be careful."

The man disappeared down an aisle barely wider than his shoulders. Shan released Val Con's arm and looked at him, eyebrows arched over light eyes.

"Was it the knife?" he asked, his voice low, speaking Liaden, now, rather than Terran.

"I... don't—" He paused, considering the jitter inside his head.

"No," he said. "But I don't know what it is."

"Do you know *where* it is?" Shan asked, patiently.

Val Con took a deep breath...

"I know that these things take time," Shan said after a moment. "However, we are exactly pressed for—"

"I know." Val Con looked about him, seeing the thin aisles overhung with boxes, cables uncoiling and drooping down like vines. "Shan, this is your time to trade. If this isn't promising—" It certainly didn't *look* promising...

"We can leave and I can carry you to the shuttle because you'll have a sick headache from not heeding your hunch," Shan finished. "That sounds like even less fun than being scolded by Father for wasting my time on port."

Val Con bit his lip, and spun on his heel. It seemed that there was a... very small... tug toward the center aisle. He walked that way, ducking beneath a cascade of tie-off filaments. Behind him, he heard Shan sigh, then the sound of his brother's footsteps.

They skirted two sealed plastic boxes that had fallen from a low shelf onto the floor, and the worker 'bot that was trying to put them back.

The aisle opened into a wide space, where a desk sat, drawers akimbo, papers fluttering in the breeze from a ceiling fan.

Drawn up to the desk like a chair was a packing crate; a flattened pillow on the side nearest the desk. Val Con felt something snap inside his head and he walked forward to kneel at the side of the crate.

It was slatted, not sealed tight, and between the slats he could see a solemn red blinking, like a low-power warning light.

He bent closer, intrigued, made out what looked like a battery array, and something else, that glimmered sullenly in the shadows.

He'd seen something like that—yes, signal-deadening wrap. He'd helped Shan and Master Ken Rik wrap some equipment they'd on-loaded a couple ports back in muffles, not wishing to chance that even the sleeping signal might interfere with any of the Passage's live systems. There'd been a power light on that unit, too, but it had glowed a steady gold, indicating that the charge was strong.

"Val Con?" That was Shan, quietly.

He patted the crate. "This," he said, perhaps too loudly.

"Excellent," Shan said. "You'll be a subtle trader."

"I'm going to be a Scout," he said reflexively, and heard Shan sigh.

"What, exactly, is it?" he asked.

Val Con looked at the outside of the crate for a tag; found one almost at floor level, squinted at the faded words, and read them outloud.

"Environmental unit operations module with connectors."

He turned the tag over, found an ancient date and read outloud the rest of the information: "R. Spode Estate, Misc. Eqpt. Auction Lot 42."

Shan looked dubious.

"You're *certain*," he said.

Val Con nodded, and his brother sighed.

"All right, then. Stay here with it for a moment, will you? There was something in that aisle we just came down that I want a closer look at."

* * * * *

There had been a burst of brilliance, disorienting. Perhaps it was pain. In its wake came lethargy and a weakening of the will. Not sleep, this, but something

more dire. He struggled against it, expending energy he ought best conserve, listening.

Listening for an answer.

No answer came.

He felt. . . movement, or perhaps it was his dying intelligence describing its last spiral. He sank, struggling. . .

Perhaps, indeed, he slept, for suddenly he awakened.

Wakened to a slow and steady trickle of energy. He sought the source, found the physical connection.

Humans wept at such moments. He—he swore an oath, whatever such things might mean in his diminished estate.

Whoever had come, whoever had heard, and heeded his call. That one he would serve, as well as he was able, for as long as he could.

* * * * *

Shan unsnapped three of the slats and Val Con skooched partway into the crate on his belly, jump-wire in hand. There was a bad moment when it seemed like the battery connection to the shrouded unit was frozen, but a bit of patient back-and-forth dislodged it. The jump-wire slid into the port and seated firmly. Val Con waited a long moment, chin resting on his folded arms, and sighed when the status light snapped over to orange.

"Meter shows juice flowing," Shan commented from outside the crate. "Rather more than a trickle."

"He's thirsty," Val Con said, dreamily, then shook himself out of the half-doze he'd fallen into. "I wonder if we ought to unwrap the main unit."

"We ought *not* to unwrap the main unit," Shan said firmly. "You do recall that we don't have the faintest notion what it actually is?"

"It's an environmental operations module," Val Con said.

"With connectors. Thank you. Do you see any sign of those connectors, by the way?"

Val Con looked around the cramped space. "I don't—no, wait. The slat directly opposite me is deeper than the one next."

"Oh, is it?"

There was the sound of purposeful footsteps and a flutter of light and shadow as Shan moved to the other side of the crate.

"I see it," he said, followed by the sharp snap of the slat being removed.

"Come out, Val Con, do," he added, and Val Con backed out of the crate on his elbows to join his brother at the workbench.

The low-power light had weighed in their decision to store the environmental module in one of the workrooms off of the cargo section. Also, now that it was his, Val Con was more than a little eager to see whatever it was he owned.

"They look like standard data-jacks," Shan said, laying them out on the bench.

Val Con picked up a black box about the size of his palm with whisker-wires bristling along one side.

"What do you suppose this is?"

Shan glanced at it. "Voice box."

"Of course," Val Con murmured.

"If you're satisfied for the moment," Shan said, "I suggest we lash the crate to the floor. Then, I will tend to my own cargo and you, if you'll allow me to express some brotherly concern, will get something to eat and perhaps a nap before Father returns."

It was a good plan—in fact, Val Con thought, as his stomach suddenly rumbled, it was an excellent plan. He said so, and the two of them made quick work of securing the crate. They left the workroom, walking together as far as the main cargo hall, where Val Con turned right, toward the ship's core and the crew cafeteria, and Shan went left, toward his small private cargo space.

* * * * *

He attempted to open one camera eye; enough to verify that the absorbent field was still in force—and closed it. The camera module worked, which was a grace given the years on it.

Now that there was energy available, and it having been so many years since an inventory had been done, he applied himself single-mindedly to that, thoroughly investigating every file and memory available to him. When that was done, he devised and solved logic problems, and designed airy confections of tri-spatial mathematics. The ability to plot trajectories, which he recalled as a primary function, was not immediately available to him. He supposed that Roderick Spode had removed the function, but had not cared to likewise remove his memory of it. Such minor cruelty matched his memory of the man.

He was doing his twelfth careful and complete inventory when something... changed.

It was subtle, not immediately definable, and scarcely had he noted it than it was driven from his attention by another, and not at all subtle, alteration in his condition.

He could... *hear*.

Small rustling sounds, that was what he heard, each one so precious that he shunted them immediately to core memory, attached to the recording of his astonished joy.

The rustling intensified, sharpening into static, which was interrupted by a heavy *thump*, and the mutter of—had that been a voice? A word?

Another *thump*, a crescendo of rustling, and—yes, it was a voice. And the word? "*Damn!*"

Spoken with emotion, that word. But which emotion? Anger? Exultation? Disappointment? His own emotions were in a frenzy. By Deep Space Itself, he need to—

To see.

A scene swung into being before his newly opened eyes. A bench, on which he—or rather, whatever housed him at present—rested. Ahead, a wall of tools, some familiar, behind sealed transparent doors, an insulated utility apron and mitts hanging on the right.

To his right and rear, three crates of varying sizes were lashed to the floor. Directly behind him another crate was similarly lashed, and largely disassembled, half-obsured by a sheet of what was surely a signal-deadening wrap. To his immediate left—his liberator: unkempt dark hair, thin wrists overreaching the

cuffs of a rumpled sweater, long fingers moving surely along the connections of what could be a voice-box.

"Where's the port, then?" The voice was soft; the words intelligible after the lexicon function sorted it. Liaden. That might be... unfortunate. And, yet—

"Yes!" Exultation was clear.

"Yes!" he echoed, his own exultation somewhat tempered by the cheap portable unit. The clever fingers tightened on the box, as the dark head turned toward him. Bright green eyes considered him seriously from behind tumbled bangs.

A child, he thought, amazed. His liberator was—a child.

"Are you all right?" another voice asked.

His eyes were tight-focused, he realized, and made the adjustment, zooming out until the entire small space was elucidated to him. The child had a companion—taller, white-haired. A parent, perhaps, or a parent's parent.

"Why shouldn't I be all right?" the child asked this taller companion, with perhaps a touch of impatience. "I've bumped my knee before."

"And I've dropped heavy objects on my thumb before," the companion retorted. "That doesn't mean it won't bruise, or doesn't hurt."

"I suppose," the child said dismissively, then suddenly turned more fully toward the other. "Your thumb isn't broken, is it, Shan?"

"No, it's not broken; only bruised. I've had worse doing cargo-shifting with Master Ken Rik. You hit that knee pretty sternly, however, and steel plate isn't the most forgiving surface."

"It's all right," the child said again.

"You should have let it fall," the taller one insisted.

"No, I couldn't have done that; suppose we'd broken it?"

"Whatever it is. Well. What else are we doing this shift, Brother? Or is liberating a so-called environmental unit from its muffle the awful whole?"

"I don't think," the child said slowly, looking down at the voice-box in his hand. "That is—it may not be an environmental unit."

"You amaze me. What might it be, then?"

"I don't know," the child confessed. "I researched the serial number in the manual archives, back a dozen-dozen years. Either the number was mis-transcribed..."

"Or it's contraband," the white-haired one said.

The child looked down at the box in his hand. There were slider controls along the side, which he manipulated.

"This isn't a very good voder," he said. "We ought to find better."

"We? This was your idea, as I recall it. What if it *is* contraband, Val Con?"

The child frowned. "I don't know. It was exactly this—whatever it is, as you say—that my... hunch led me to. I haven't been led to harm by a hunch before."

"Unless you count getting thoroughly soaked and scratched bloody."

"Merlin was frightened. And he likes to get wet even less than you do."

The white-haired—brother?—sighed.

"If there's anything else this shift, let's get to it, shall we? I'd like to get some sleep and you—"

"I only need to make a data connection," the child said rapidly. "The work of a moment. You go, Brother; I can do this."

"Certainly you can. I, however, will remain, as witness. Also, if Father decides to space you, I had rather be at your side, for how I would explain it to Mother, I have no idea."

The child laughed, a merry sound, and picked up a length of cable.

He looked at it hungrily. Data. Information. *Input*.

"If you don't mind sharing, what data are you connecting it to?"

"Since there is no manual, I follow standard protocols for re-servicing: Power, input, information," the child Val Con said, leaning close and making a connection in the unit that housed him with an audible snap. "As we said—it is possible that this is not an environmental unit at all, but... something other. That being so, I thought the best, broadest, and least perilous source of information is the ship's library."

His elder tipped his head, holding up a hand as the nether end of the cable approached the data-board.

"*Only* the ship's library."

"Yes."

"All right, then; have at it."

The child nodded, and seated the plug.

Had he been human, he would have drawn a breath.

Since he was not, he opened access to surface caches and allowed the data to flow.

* * * * *

A ripple disturbed the data-stream, momentarily disorienting, then forgotten, a shadow across the sun of input. His was hardly the only demand on the info circuits, after all, nor had he attempted to increase his access speeds or permissions, being a guest account. The library to which he had been given access was broad, but shallow. He understood that it was a popular library, well-stocked with fiction, history, biography, with a small holding of scholarly papers, and technical manuals.

Mathematics were there, of course, theory and programming, and he allowed himself moments to build and then rebuild a trajectory chart, wondering what Spode would have thought of that.

History, biography appended, went immediately into deep analysis, also the technical material. The scholarly papers required sorting, which he did, rapidly, appending them as appropriate to the larger analysis categories of history and technical. Fiction...

His impulse was to eliminate it—the storage capacity available to him was not so commodious that he could afford to waste space on whimsies. Yet, he hesitated, reluctant after so... very... long to relinquish any shred of data, no matter how trivial.

In the end, he cataloged the fiction, flicking through the texts as rapidly as he had once seen a man run his thumb down a deck of cards, riffling them to observe the face and orientation of each—and filed it in a mid-level cache.

That done, he set a sentinel to register the return of the child or his companion, and gave the greater part of his consciousness to analysis.

* * * * *

"Hello?"

The voice was recently familiar; its cadence rushed. The sentinel provided a match: The child had returned.

He opened his eyes to find the boy, frowning.

"Hello!" the child repeated sharply. "Are you in there?"

A direct appeal—and perhaps a trap. And, yet, the child had saved his life.

"I am," he replied, and stopped short of the fullness of what he had intended to say, horrified by the jagged sounds that came from the voice-box. Like shrapnel, his words, and nothing to inspire confidence in child or man.

The child's frown eased somewhat.

"It's a bad box, but the best we have. Quickly—you must tell me the truth—what data have you manipulated on this vessel?"

Manipulated? And the child asked for the truth.

"I have manipulated no data but that which has downloaded from the ship's library."

"In what way?"

"Sorting, analysis, cross-references."

The child held up a hand.

"That's too quick," he said, seriously. "It sounds like a lie—or that you haven't considered—when you answer so quickly. It's like—it's like bows. *I'm* too quick, and so I have to count when I bow, to keep proper time, so no one thinks that I'm mocking—or trying to frighten—them."

There was sense in what the child said.

"I understand," he said, and paused deliberately. "Tell me, what manipulation do you suspect I have performed?"

"Someone has tried to force the nav-comp and the main bank," Val Con said. "And I thought—you are not an environmental unit; the serial numbers match nothing in any of our archives. Shan thinks you're a complex logic. I think you're a person. Are you?"

That was a leap. Fortunate or ill, it was a leap to a stable conception.

"I am, yes, a person."

The child bit his lip. "Uncle Er Thom—the attack came from this location. He will come here, or security will—"

"Young sir—" He paused, replaying his last hours of analysis and deep work. There had been—yes. He isolated the memory, froze it, and simultaneously locked it in core memory and moved a duplicate to an egress port.

"I have information," he said. "Is there an auxiliary unit to which I may transmit it?"

There was a snap; he expanded his awareness, saw the door open across the room, and a man stride through, a databox in one hand.

"Val Con, stand away." His voice was perfectly calm, and carried such a note of authority that it seemed there was no alternative but to obey.

The child, however, maintained his position, merely turning so that he faced the man.

"Uncle—he says that the attack was not his. I gave him access to the library—"

"Him?" Golden eyebrows rose. The man extended his free hand, imperious. "Come away, Val Con. Now."

The child shook his head. "Uncle—"

"I have," he said firmly, and as loudly as he was able, wishing he could hide the hideous knife-dance of his voice from his own perception; "information. May I transmit?"

The man moved, so quickly that it was a function of replay rather than real-time that captured him stepping forward, inserting himself between the child and what must be himself. He placed the data-box on the workbench, flipped three switches.

"Transmit at will," he said coolly.

He groped, found the ambient network, accessed the correct channel, and did as he was bid, keeping silent while the man accessed what had been sent.

A long moment passed. The man—Uncle—straightened and confronted him straightly.

"It's little enough," he said, his voice still cool, "and proves only what is already known. An attempted attack was launched from this location, utilizing the ambient network. As you are the only functioning logic in this space, I am forced to conclude that you were involved, whether you have been allowed to recall it or not."

That... produced terror. He had done inventory, but how could he know what had been introduced, to his detriment? He was a machine, Roderick Spode had repeatedly argued; the sum of his protocols and softwares. That it had been convenient for those who had caused his creation to have him self-aware was only that—convenience. Those who had made him could unmake him.

Or force him, unknowing and against his waking will, to work for the harm of children.

"If I have been complicit in such a thing, I hope that you will destroy me," he told the man. "I owe the child my life, and I will not repay that debt by endangering his."

Golden eyebrows rose over stern blue eyes.

"Now, that's well-said, and I like you for it. Which you intend, of course."

At that instant, it came again: a shadow over his perceptions, weighty now. Alert. Malicious.

He entered Command Prime, as effortlessly as if there had been no long sleep, no diminishing of his estate, between the last time and this.

One iteration of himself tracked the shadow in the ambient, while a second opened a new connection to the data-box and began transmission. A third opened access to the ship's library, followed it to the core, and crossed the firewalls into the main databank as easily as a child skipped over a stream.

"Uncle—"

Observed by a fourth instance of himself, the child placed his hand on the man's sleeve, his head tipped subtly to the right. He widened his range to encompass the crates to his right and rear. A match program snapped awake, shrilling alarm.

The configuration of those boxes had altered since the last time he had observed them.

Worse, the shadow overlay them, thickening in the ambient. He felt the coalescing of programs, of intent, and activated a fifth iteration of himself, which drilled through the deep files, rooting for command codes.

"I thought that I—that Shan and I—" the child continued. "That we might build Mother a butler. Certainly those at the reception were beautiful, and you'll recall that Master Trader Prael said they might be programmed to do anything..."

"Yes, I do recall that," the man said in his cool, calm voice, his eyes on the data-box and the storm building on the screen. He looked up and met the child's eyes.

"Val Con, I had asked you to stand away. This is your third warning. Leave the room. At once."

The child's lips parted; perhaps he meant to argue. He did not look away from his uncle's face, but he did swallow, take a breath, and, finally, bow his head.

"Yes, Uncle," he said humbly, and walked away.

Within the blue fog of the ambient, the shadow thrust, spitefully, at a cluster of code. He extended himself and blocked—the door slid properly open, allowing the child to exit.

"You also," Command Prime said, but the man shook his bright head.

"My ship," he said. "My children. My crew."

An order of protocol, and an imperative to defend. He understood such things, and honored them.

Honor was no defense, however, and defense the child's uncle surely required. The ambient fair trembled with spiteful intent, and power drenched the air.

The charge was still building. Discharged, it might not kill a man, though men were oddly fragile, but it would surely damage one. The man spun toward the sealed compartment, snatched it open and pulled out the utility apron.

The fifth iteration of himself, sent on the quest for codes, rejoined Command Prime, data unfolding like a flower.

The first iteration of himself met the menace in the ambient, codes a-bristle. The third, swimming aloof in the main banks, received those same codes and held them close.

The menace lunged—neither subtle nor clever, seeking to overcome him with a burst of senseless data laced with virus vectors. He shielded, and thrust past, to the intelligence behind the attack, certain that he would meet one such as himself.

So certain was he that he discounted the real threat, thinking it a mere device, belatedly recognizing the structure of the scantily shielded code.

Realizing his error, he made a recovery—a mere jamming of keys and code until the device fragmented and ceased functioning. It was ugly, brutal—and stupid. He ought to have merely captured, and subverted, it. Once, he could have done so.

Once, he would not have mistaken the actions of a simple machine intelligence for one of his own.

Inside the main banks, the third iteration of himself, armed with codes and an understanding of what he hunted, detected the device slipping down the data-stream, sparkling with malice. A data-bomb, much more coherent than that which had been hurled at him in the ambient.

This, he understood, as he subtly encompassed it, had been crafted well, and with intent. He halted the device, inserted the command keys, stripped out its

imperative, plucked the rest of the construct apart, and absorbed the pieces, isolating them for later analysis.

Then, he pulled together the image scans he had stored, connecting them in a time plot: there the crated robot opening its own way into the workroom, there at the plug permitting highspeed data access, there rushing itself back and sealing the crate as voices in the hall had become the child Val Con.

Task done, the third iteration of himself rejoined Command Prime.

In the workroom, the man had not been idle. The disassembled pieces of the physical unit lay on the workbench, the man wearing the apron, a shielded spanner in one gloved hand.

He glanced to the data-box, where the whole of his actions were recorded, and at the images of the gifted danger, then directly *at him*.

"For your service to my ship, I thank you," he said. "What is your name?"

He paused, counting, mindful of the child's counsel. "I remember that I had a name," he said carefully. "I no longer recall what it was."

Golden brows lifted. "Age or error?"

"Design. I was decommissioned. It is my belief that I was to be destroyed. Erased."

"You are sentient." It was not a question, but he answered as if it were.

"Yes."

The man sighed and closed his eyes. "The child," he said, "is uncanny." His eyes opened. "Well.

"There will be tests, and conversations. Analysis. If it transpires that you are, after all a threat to Val Con's life, or to this ship, or any other, I will do as you asked me, and see you destroyed—cleanly and quickly."

That was just, though he still did not wish to die.

"And if I am found to be no danger to you or those who fall under your protection?" he asked.

The man smiled.

"Why, then, we shall see."

* * * * *

Thus it transpired that fiction assisted him, after all. For, after he had spoken at length with Er Thom yos'Galan, and with Scout Commander Ivdra sen'Lora, the first to ascertain the temper of his soul; the second to gain a certification of sentience, he agreed to hire himself as the butler at Trealla Fantrol, the house of yos'Galan on the planet Liad.

He studied—manuals, the records of one Ban Del pak'Ora, lists of alliances—and the works of a long-ago Terran.

In time, he signed a contract, and was presented, amidst much merriment to the mother of Val Con and Shan, the lifemate of Er Thom, who firstly, as Master Val Con had predicted, asked him his name.

"Jeeves, madam," he had said, pleased with the resonance and timbre the up-market voder lent his voice.

She laughed, the lady, and clapped her hands.

"Perfect," she said. "You'll fit right in."
