

UNDERTOW

ELIZABETH BEAR



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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BANTAM BOOKS

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This book is for Sarah and Allen Monette

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1

THE MORNING AFTER HE KILLED EUGENE SHAPIRO, ANDRÉ Deschênes woke early. Before his headset warb ended, he rolled from the bed and landed palms-down on the deck of his bedroom. He slept in loose white trousers; nudity implied vulnerability. The raw breeze through the long windows above his bed roughened his shoulders, scalp, and nape. A clap punctuated each push-up, and he followed the stretch with five sun salutations to warm up and release his muscles.

He dressed and skinned and was out the door in minutes.

His footfalls chased him through the leaden morning. Roaches and rats scattered before him, humanity's companions all the way to the stars. The air was thick with the promise of rain; André's skin steamed before he'd run five hundred meters. The tide was in, the streets riding high on the pilings, and though he ran through a commercial zone, his filters held. Just one pop-ad penetrated, and he squelched it with an eye-flick.

In André's neighborhood, the streets were wood slat, floating piers independent of the houses and shops moored to them. They echoed under his running shoes, a hollow *thump-thump-thump* steady and unadulterated by other sounds.

He might have been the only one awake in all of Novo Haven. If he lived on Bayside, he would have seen the fishing boats and tenders sliding gulfward with the first light of morning. But from here, on the thin channels of bay were visible between the floating streets and under the bridges, and the dinghies and scooters and small boats were still moored by the various steps that led up to street level. He passed more shops than houses; above them on the flat-decked, seaworthy cruisers were second-floor apartments with lifts or spiral walk-ups, but the lower levels had shuttered windows suitable for opening to catch sunlight and the attention of passersby. Ladders and gangplanks ran down to the water, where small craft waited and taxi drivers read the news and drank their coffee.

André ran by greengrocers and tackle shops, a geomancer's, an interface outlet, two brothels, a fixer shop for headsets and other implants, a skin-and-fashion store, a corner clinic, a beautician's parlor, and a Chinese restaurant. The bakery on Seagrove wasn't open yet, but good smells emanated from the back, and the clang of pans on counters rattled through the screen door.

He almost tripped crossing up onto the sidewalk beside the 400 "barge"—actually, a twenty-meter cruiser ringed with boardwalks and lashed to pilings. The barge was lower in the water than code permitted, and loosely moored. The sidewalk dipped alarmingly when his weight hit it, but he skipped

a step and kept running. More cooking smells now, the distant sound of engines, lights flicking over doorways as the landward sky paled gold. Someone ran on ahead, a woman with golden skin and black hair clubbed at the nape of her neck, her small breasts bouncing in a crimson sport top. He magnified her, recognized her, and decided she was a good enough reason to run faster. But she turned to port, down Amaryllis, between the white-and-pastel apartment blocks, and his road lay straight on. He didn't want to look too eager.

He wasn't jogging now but running, hard out, breath whistling between his teeth in misty streamers. His heels hit staccato, the street rocking under his stride. He counted breaths, pulling his elbows back each time his arms pumped, feeling the pivot and snap of each foot as it landed, as it left the slat again.

Running was good. Mornings were good. The wet air scraped his throat, chilled his lungs as he sucked it in, shoved it out again. Running hard, running cold, running over the water as the sun warmed the roof peaks and the streets began to hum.

His route was a circle. Or a ragged ungeometric circuit, which brought him panting back down Seagrove just as the bakery's armored shutters glided up, revealing the cheery blues and yellows of an interior bathed in full-spectrum light. Awnings, also automated, fanned out to shade the street. The light off the water would be brutal when the sun got past the rooflines. The fortune-teller next door wouldn't open until after lunchtime, but his awnings rolled out as well. A public service.

André let his pace drop to a trot, a jog, a stumbling amble. Sweat, and perhaps some condensation, slid down his chilled face, stung his eyes, and scattered off his nose. He slapped his biceps and thighs to get some heat into the skin, which felt like wax fruit. He set his status as unavailable when he ran—he liked the morning clean—but only an idiot would completely drop connex. So it was uncomplicated to check the price of bread on his headset. Citywide, it was a bit lower than the Seagrove bakery broadcast, but this was fresh and here and it smelled good. He transferred credit as he was walking up one of the bakers, wearing a tall white hat and a skin that made blue and gold sparkles in the depths of her irises, handed him a warm semipermeable bag over the window ledge. "Thanks, Jacinta," he said. She winked at him, that eye flashing for an instant, brilliant gold.

André wasn't wearing a cosmetic himself, so he contented himself with a grin. He wiped sweat off his bare arm, flicked the droplets over the channel, and watched the ripples as some lurking fish disappointed themselves on the mouthfuls.

Jacinta tapped a golden loaf steaming gently on a cutting board. It made a hollow sound. The scene rose sweetly. "Want a slice?"

It smelled of cinnamon and raisins. "Can't eat until I wash," he said. "But thank you."

Back at his house—the 1100 barge of Redbridge—he walked through the security field, which recognized the hard code access in his headset and let him in without so much as a tingle. He dropped off the loaf of rye, showered, depilated his scalp, trimmed his beard, and dressed. The sharp suit of gold-shot scarlet was Earth silk with an autofit. He inspected his image as rebroadcast into the headset, activated his stock ticker, chat boxes, news scroll, and the standard informational detritus of

his daily connex. His cousin Maryanne thought he was weird to leave it off in the morning—she probably reached for her connex the way her great-great-grandfather would have reached for his glasses—but the run with nobody in his head kept him centered. He thought of it as moving meditation, one brief chance to arrive at silence before swimming into the currents of the day.

He patted his house on the door to let it know he was leaving, stepped into his work shoes, picked up his walking stick, and went.

It was early yet, and André was his own boss. But there were messages to be answered, and he had rules about bringing work home.

It took him longer to walk in than he'd anticipated, and not because he strode through morning traffic now. Halfway down Fairview, when the shakes from exertion had finally settled out of his calves, an attention signal pinged at the corner of his field. His heart skipped painfully when he caught the ident.

He slowed, turned as if watching a bird dip-glide across the water. He crossed wavering slats and was balanced by the rail, the red blooms of a genemod geranium brushing his ankle. The woman who walked toward him through the crowd wore saffron: flowing trousers and an ankle-length open tunic over a white, square-necked blouse. Gold and citrine sparkled along the hollow of her throat; her hair was as sleek and black as it had been when he saw her running, but now it fell forward, framing her cheekbones and chin.

"M~ Zhou," he said, as she hooked the right-side locks behind her ear. "How kind of you to see me in person."

"Let's walk," she answered, taking his elbow and turning him with her fingertips, so he fell in step alongside her. They walked in silence along the awning-shaded street until he cleared his throat and glanced at her sidelong.

"Are we drawing out the anticipation, mambo?"

"Oh, very funny." There were more geraniums, their red as bright as snapping banners. The shopkeepers along this stretch had interplanted the stainless-steel city beautification buckets with kleenexplant and paperwhites, and the sweet aromas mingled with the sharp herbal note of the geranium.

Which made André sneeze. He filtered them out.

"Actually, it was a serious question. You must have thought about my offer." Or she'd not have come to find him, even if she had noticed him giving chase that morning.

"I wonder why you think you want to conjure."

Not an unexpected question, but he gave it a show of consideration. "Why I think I want it? Or why I do want it?"

“That’s a question I can’t answer for you.” Her fingers had gone from resting lightly on the bone of his elbow to threading through the crook. He permitted her to steer him.

The crowds thinned as they walked, but the second wave would emerge soon—those who did not choose to separate their home and work lives but who telepresenced, and who came out for their daily bread and fish and produce after the rush had faded. Or those who worked on other planets, and could do as well sitting in a café under a parasol, uplinked lag-free through a quantum connection, as they could in an overpriced office on Bayside, where you paid for the view and walked sixty barges to the nearest coffee shop because the rents were so high.

“Croissant?” Ziyi Zhou asked him, gesturing to an open-air café with a few lingering customers.

“Maryanne will kill me if I don’t eat at the office,” André said, excusing himself with a one-shouldered shrug. M~ Zhou was holding his right arm. He rubbed at his beard with the left hand. “But I’d love to buy you a cup of coffee.”

She stepped back, but not before she squeezed his arm. “You’re good at that.”

“Dodging questions?”

A good try, but she gave him not even a quirk of smile back. “Establishing a claim on people.”

He shrugged again, acknowledgment this time, and spread his hands. He had to squint at M~ Zhou through the sunlight. Fat biting flies zoomed overhead, hunting in pairs; he swatted them away backhanded. Somewhere back there was a reptile brain that never quite trusted technology. She did smile this time. “Does that mean you’re ready to answer the question now, André?”

“I can’t imagine an answer that isn’t something you’ve already heard a thousand times, M~ Zhou. Should I tell you that it’s because I applied to Rim’s Exigency Corps for training as a coincidence engineer when I was twenty, and the god-botherers wouldn’t take me? That I never wanted to be anything else? That I grew up on the idea of the corps as the people who were going to save the universe? It’s all quite embarrassing when you try to put it into words.”

“So you’re a romantic?”

He crossed his arms and felt the sun on his shoulders. The biters came back around, but this time zoomed off in pursuit of someone wearing a blue-lavender sunblouse before they got within swatting range. “I have to be.”

Eyes wide, she looked up at him. “Would you hand a child a loaded gun, André?”

“Depending on the child—”

“—exactly. Depending on the child. Maybe one in a thousand, you could trust to do more good than harm with such a thing. So prove to me that you’re that one in a thousand.”

He hadn’t expected it to be easy. “A virtuous life by example isn’t enough?”

She snorted. “I know what you do. You have your own ways of influencing the future, M Deschênes.”

A retreat from the first name. Calculated, like everything else about her. “It’s a living. And that concerns you? Because I do adhere to certain ethical standards.”

The twist of her mouth told him everything he needed to know. There was no point in arguing situational ethics in a society in which skinning, data mining, and routine privacy invasions were a matter of course.

André dated an archinformist. Personally, he thought what he did was more ethical. He just *kills* people. Cricket took apart their lives, everything they might have backed up, relegated to hard memory, recorded on their headsets or in the data holds. Only wet memory was safe from her and her data-mining fellows, both those who worked for Rim and Core—the Rim and Core of the Earth-settled territories, not the rim and core of the galaxy, though to judge by popular entertainment broadcasts a lot of people didn’t know the difference—and those who went freelance.

And without people like her, without the absolute knowledge of the stuff of people’s lives, the kind of manipulations conjures like Ziyi Zhou and licensed coincidence engineers performed would be impossible.

Never mind skinning your boss into an anteater, or secretly holocording the girl in the next cube so you could take her home and do whatever you wanted to her avatar... Compared to what M~ Zhou did in running people’s lives for them, determining their fates, André’s professional modus operandi of quick, un-telegraphed, painless death was as humane as it got.

For one thing, if his subjects ever so much as knew he was coming, he had erred badly. He didn’t take cruelty jobs. And an encounter with him was the best most of his subjects could have hoped for.

If he came looking for somebody, they’d earned the visit.

It was a more honest trade than conjure, he thought bitterly. How dare Zhou hold that over him?

But there was no way to say that, not when he was asking her to teach him. Because he knew what the next question would be, then—a reiteration. *So if you think it’s wrong, why do you want to do it?*

And he knew the answer, too. Not just passion, though the passion was there, and he would have sold himself to Core to get it and taken their damned destiny lock, let himself be chained to the service forever. But something else, the thing he was scared of losing. And yes, he was aware of the conflict implicit in that as well, though he wouldn’t call it—quite—hypocrisy.

Maybe *bargaining*.

What André wanted was control. And self-defense, of course, but to pretend that was all of it would be self-deception. He gave her the second half.

“I want to be able to take care of myself,” he said. “I’ll run up on people who have the mo

working for them. Who've paid somebody like you or Jean Gris or one of the others"—one of the lesser, because every other conjure in Novo Haven, hell, every other conjure on Greene's World, was lesser than Ziyi Zhou or Jean Kroc, who they called Jean Gris—"or who've sold themselves to Rim for the protection. And I need a little mojo of my own."

"And it's that simple for you?"

He shrugged. Omitting wasn't *really* lying.

It was enough to make her nod a little. But the razor lines beside her eyes didn't soften, and wasn't just a squint into the sun. "Fine," she said. "But I *am* in a precarious position." As a licensed conjure, she meant. It wasn't illegal to know how to do it. But it was illegal to try, or own the necessary equipment. "And you do work for Rim, and for Charter Trade."

"I'm not going to sell you to Jefferson Greene, Ziyi."

She turned so that her shoulder was to him, her back to the sun. Their shadows stretched ahead on the decking as she started forward. He hurried two steps and caught her. "That's not why I'm concerned. As I said: maybe one in a thousand children can handle the responsibility that comes with that gun."

"I already carry one of those."

"Was that a threat, André?"

As if that would get him anywhere. "It was a plea for lenience. As you very well know. Are you trying to see if you can pick a fight with me?"

The arch of her eyebrows confirmed it. "My situation is complicated by another issue. Of those thousand children, maybe five of them can actually *operate* this gun with professional skill."

"Everybody gets lucky once in a while."

"You can teach most people to carry a tune, but one in a thousand is born to be a singer."

He stopped. She walked three steps more before she did likewise. She didn't turn back to him. "So it's no, then?"

I'm sorry, André, he prayed for. Maybe if you could prove to me I can trust you—

But what he got was a flat shake of her head, the glossy blunt-cut ends of her hair whisking over golden-yellow-clad shoulders. "You're not a child I can hand a gun, André. I hope...I hope this won't prejudice our relationship."

"If you mean," he said, "am I likely to respond in a manner you might regret? M~ Zhou, I don't bring my work home."

She glanced over her shoulder and gave him a tight little smile and a nod. "Good then, that's settled."

Come talk to me if you need some work done. Or send Cricket.”

“I will,” he answered, and watched as she walked on, until the crowd swallowed her. When she passed out of sight he turned and knotted his hands on the rail, leaning over the channel. Fish flocked to his shadow, hopeful of crumbs, wary of an opportunistic seabird that swung around to see if any would pass too high. “Shit,” he said, and kicked the upright with the instep of his shoe.

A passing businessman chuckled under his breath and rolled a sympathetic eye. André caught it and rolled one back, and they shared a rueful grin for a moment before the businessman was past him.

Women.

What are you gonna do?

But women might be the answer, too. He composed a message to Cricket, thought about it, and added a paragraph on either end. Her connex was down; either she was sleeping, blocking, or busy. So he sent it head-mail rather than instant message.

She’d get it the next time she checked in. One of the interesting things about Cricket was that Cricket knew *everyone*.

In the meantime, another one of his messages was from a man named Timothy Closs. And that one might mean a paycheck, if everything played out right.

Coincidence made Timothy Closs tired.

And it was only due to an awkward coincidence that there was more than a minimal loss of life when the barge exploded. It blew up between twelve and thirteen, the darkest time of the morning when neither diurnal humans nor crepuscular ranids tended to be awake. The recruitment barge should have been empty except for a night watchman, who was scheduled to be on deck when it exploded—and if he had been where he was supposed to be, he would have lived.

But the evening crew had stayed behind for some impromptu overtime. The sort where “working late” was a euphemism that even the most naive spouse would be unlikely to believe, given a good whiff of the miscreant’s breath. So there were four men aboard, in the control cabin.

The rear of the barge would have been empty, too, had not one of the native affairs coordinators been an insomniac and behind a deadline, also been working ridiculously late. Uneuphemistically, in her case

She’d been in the interview room, open to the water and astern of almost everything—a sealed bathyspheric bubble accessible only via an airlock or the warm waters of Novo Haven Bay. But what exactly she was doing there three hours after midnight was a question that Closs knew would probably never be answered.

Cold, freak chance: there wouldn’t be enough recovered of Lisa Anne Angley for a decent burial

Let alone any possibility of recovering her hard memory. The Bose-Einstein condensate processor and solid-state core of her headset were so much particulate in the sea air Closs breathed.

His sunrise came on like war. Recovery teams were already moving over the wreckage, illuminated under the glare of sodium-vapor lights. The gray dawn couldn't compete.

Closs watched from the deck of a Charter Trade cruiser a half-kilometer off, shoulders squared in a smart-fabric wind-cheater. The day should heat up later, but for now the morning was cold, and suppressant foam dotting the water had quenched the floating fires.

Technically speaking, Closs didn't have to be here. He curled his gloved hands on the rail, stealing heat from his palms. Technically speaking, he'd probably get a better view of the proceedings on the screen wall of his office.

But technicalities weren't going to boost shattered morale the way having an officer on scene would. An officer of the corporation, rather than a real officer, these days, but Closs still had enough sense to stay the hell out of the incident commander's way. And it didn't hurt to show up and look interested and confident. It was good when the team was comfortable with the boss, knew how to respond around him, knew that the chain of command was strong. It saved on time and precision loss to panicked errors when one wandered down from the ivory tower and startled those who weren't accustomed to one's majestic propinquity.

His headset plinked, the reserved code for his staff archinformist, Maurice Sadowski.

"Hello, Maurice." There was visual. He must be calling from a desk.

"Hello, Major." Maurice was fortyish, square-jawed, his hair ponytailed at the nape of the neck. He wore a lightcoil spiraled through the rim of his left ear, but he'd deactivated it in observance of the tragedy. It shone dull bronze. He picked at it with a thumbnail, frowning. "Nobody's claimed responsibility."

"Well, the forensic team says the night watch was fucking around belowdecks, so anybody could have sailed up and tossed a grenade. But that isn't what happened."

"The bomb was placed?"

Closs leaned his elbows on the rail and steepled his fingers. Maurice's translucent image floated before him, projected into his brain because that was a less complex feat than projecting it onto his retinas. "The blast originated in the engine compartment," Closs said. "There wasn't any bomb."

"Mechanical failure?"

"Anything's possible," Closs said. "The barge was serviced three weeks ago."

Maurice flinched. "Freak accident," he said. "A freak accident that somebody engineered."

"Yeah," Closs said. "I think we've got an unlicensed conjure on our hands."

It wasn't earth, the stuff Cricket Earl Murphy spaded through, that gritted under her fingernails and left damp brown patches on the knees of her trousers. It wasn't earth that she scratched clawed fingers into, raked up moist and crumbling, black as the void between stars and redolent of rotting. It wasn't earth; Earth was on the other side of a long irrevocable relativistic slide, her old life receding like a missed train station.

It wasn't *earth*. But people used the word anyway.

Cricket found it—alien was an ironic word, when she was already on another planet—but alien work so with her hands, unskinned and unconnected, only sensing the texture of the soil with her fingertips. At home, she gardened, but she did it with all her skins and augments intact. She could zoom in to examine the fine grains of sand among the loam, check chemical composition, gather data effortlessly.

Here, in Lucienne's garden, she did not use connex. She felt, and smelled, and cocked her head to listen to the sound the grains made when she rubbed them together. A different kind of parsing, almost medieval.

She was getting the hang of it. But she still couldn't quite get used to it.

It was almost pointless to compost such soil as this, but she didn't let that stop her, folding the crumbled dark mixture into earth that was no lighter, aerating the soil, laying it down in soft beds ready for the hungry roots. She never would have done this in her old life, deep in the chaotic, elegant Core. Where houseplants were tended by hired gardeners or service bots, and were lacy froths of greenery or slick broad-leaved, jade-colored exotics, orchids hung with flowers that looked like they would bruise in a strong breath—things that were toxic to gnawing children and unwary pets.

Not tomatoes, leeks, ramps, radishes. Not maize, red and white and golden, single kernels pushed down in their mounds with a thumb, the hole closed and scattered round with bean and squash seeds. Not marigolds, just as effective against the native pests of Greene's World as they were against those of Earth, and which Cricket was planting now, seating each one in its carefully dug hole amid the vegetables, a scatter of compost under the roots. She pressed each one into place with the side of her thumbs and smiled. Not much in the way of tomatoes, but the early peas were almost ready, the billowing pink and white flowers faded. She should pick some now, while they were sweet.

As if reading her mind—which might, in fairness, have been possible if both of them hadn't had their headsets and connex shut down—Lucienne came out of the minifab with a bucket in her hand. This was Lucienne's garden, though not Lucienne's house. Or, more precisely, Lucienne stayed there. But the house belonged to her lover, Jean.

The garden, however, he stayed out of, except for purposes of rambling through—and, when the tomatoes were ripe, picking the occasional tomato. It was Lucienne's, and Lucienne shared it with Cricket.

And that was pretty good.

Lucienne crouched beside Cricket and held out a damp rag. “Is that the last of the marigolds?”

Cricket, wiping her hands, nodded. “It should be all in.”

“Good.” Lucienne Spivak rattled the bucket as she rose to her feet. “Let’s take some back on again.”

Lucienne was a tall, curvy sort of woman, the skin of her brown thighs slightly dimpled below the ragged hems of her white shorts. She wore real cloth, old-fashioned, which was a side effect of living with Jean as well. He liked to talk about mature technologies, the redundancy and robustness of biological systems over technological ones. *A human being is more than just a biomechanical machine.*

Cricket was never exactly sure if she believed him, or if all the world really was predetermined, and consciousness some cruel joke of the wide ironic universe. Jean had to disagree: he was a conjurer, and changing the future was his livelihood. But Cricket knew a fair number of scientists who would swear that even the measurable statistical effects of coincidence engineering meant nothing about free will, because the act of the engineering and its outcomes had already been determined.

Of course, as far as Cricket was concerned, it didn’t make any real difference. You were still stuck not knowing one way or the other until it happened, and even if it didn’t matter what you did, when the anxiety hit, it sure felt like it.

She picked up the watering can and watered the last marigold, then stood, pushing herself off her knees flat-handed. Lucienne caught her under the elbow and gave her a boost. Lucienne’s thick, dark brown braid fell over her shoulder, banging Cricket on the ear. Lucienne’s first name was French and her last name was Ukrainian, but she herself looked Indian or Pakistani. And Cricket still had to keep reminding herself that none of that mattered on the Rim, where there were no nationalities.

Or rather, there were. There were the *important* nationalities. Like, Rim company man, and alien and colonial, and Coreworlder, and criminal. By which the Rim meant people like Lucienne. Revolutionaries, Greens, fair-trade activists, native-rights agitators.

But not like Cricket. No matter what Cricket had done in her other life.

Though if Lucienne kept asking, you never knew. She might become a criminal again. Of a better sort, this time.

They moved along the row of peas in stooped, companionable silence. Pods pattered into the buckets first a thin layer and then handfuls. Some plants still held sprays of blossom among the nearly ripe legumes and their curling tendrils. Cricket snapped one off and tucked it into her thin crepey hair. Lucienne, laughing silently, copied. The flowers were baby-pink, breath-white. They smelled so sweet that Cricket kept looking around for the lilies.

“Did you know your boyfriend sent a message to Jean?” Bluntly, without games or preamble. That was Lucienne.

Cricket, on the other hand, was a liar. But maybe not to Lucienne. Well, not often. “André’s not my boyfriend.”

“So you knew, in other words.”

She nodded. She slipped her hand among the leaves, found a spray of round, firm pods. They cracked off the stems when she twisted them. The surfaces were not quite as smooth as they looked and stuck to her fingers slightly when she shook them off into the pail. “You’re not granting me any great revelations.”

“Do you think—”

Cricket shook her head. “He told me, actually. And I—”

Lucienne pressed both fists into the small of her back, the bucket swinging against her hip. She arched, stretched, stooped again. “He wanted you to put in a word for him, did he?”

Cricket shook her head. “I wouldn’t trust him. He’s not like you. Not an idealist.”

“I trust you.”

“And I sleep with him, so he must be okay?” When Lucienne looked up, Cricket was smiling at her, worrying the string out of a pea pod with her thumbnail. “You realize that doesn’t follow.”

“No,” Lucienne said. “Anyway, whatever you think of André, I wish *you’d* come with us. At least to meet them.”

Us meant Lucienne and Jean. Them...

There was a temptation. Cricket dropped the pod in the pail and reached for another one. “The froggies.”

Lucienne glanced over her shoulder, as if somebody could possibly be listening. “Tonight. Stay for dinner; come out after.” She shook the bucket. “Damned if we don’t have enough peas.”

Some men stop believing in love as they grow older. Some simply stop expecting it to find them.

Jean Kroc had never succumbed to the first failing, though the second had seemed likely. Whether he had any use for the emotion himself had remained an open question, one complicated because the image of happy domesticity did not fit the role of conjurer he portrayed. Which was an odd thing; if people came to you for happiness, wouldn’t they expect you to be able to provide happiness for yourself?

Which had always been the sorcerer’s secret. Knowledge might be power. But power was a long walk from joy.

But today, there was Lucienne standing beside him, her elbow brushing his elbow, her long almost black hair braided thick as his wrist down her back, with her high cheekbones and her almond eyes and the beauty mark in the corner of her mouth, looking like Durga come to life, without the tiger. And so as Jean helped Lucienne shuck peas in the kitchen, and Lucienne's slight, riverine friend Cricket boiled the salted water, the settled domesticity of the scene amused him.

It might have been four hundred years before, some randomly selected afternoon in the first century B.G. The kitchen was gas and electric, no smart appliances, no adaptive fab. He lived off the grid, Jean Kroc did. Lucienne teased that if he could sink a well, or if the river water were halfway safe, he'd haul buckets rather than palm a tap.

It was a pleasant kind of teasing, though; keeping the house unconnexed served her as well as him. The lives lived within it were safe from registry in any data hold, which was a necessary thing for anybody who wanted to keep a secret. Cricket's research skills were proof enough of that. Jean had seen her generate a complete list of a Rim associate manager's sex partners, accurate—by Cricket's estimate—to 95 percent, simply by hacking her security monitor. Which had still been registered as one of sixty-four thousand factory presets.

Elapsed time, thirty-five seconds.

However, it also meant that when a hum of motors was followed by the crunch of footsteps up the clamshell path—Greene's World bivalves, not real Earth clams, but people, Jean included, were sloppy about terminology—he couldn't snap on a smart perimeter with a headset command and have six methods of disposal at his fingertips. Black security was illegal, which wouldn't stop anybody who thought he needed it.

Which was why everything Jean would have killed to protect, other than himself and Lucienne, was fifteen miles away.

He slicked a thumbnail up the inside of the pod he still held, let the peas drop into the bowl and roll down the little pyramid there while their green musk rose, then cast the husk aside. It turned over midair, sideslipping, and landed in the stained white sink. Jean wiped his hands on a towel and thumbed a keypad hung on his belt.

He didn't use connex, but that didn't mean he didn't have screens. The big one on the wall by the window lit up, showing a speedboat moored at the end of his rickety parawood dock. The boat was a four-seater, ivory and rust in Rim Company livery.

"Corps?" Lucienne asked softly, cracking open another pod with her nails.

The piping below the gunwales was jade-colored, for the Greene's World Charter Trade Corporation. Not the Exigency Corps. Salt stains curling along the boat's bone-colored flanks gave the incongruous appearance of medieval embroidery. A woman in a Rimmer sunshade, her clipped hair blue, sat in the back, bent over with one finger pressed to her ear and the expression of somebody on heavy connex. Two men were tromping up the white path to the door. "Local," Jean answered, and watched Lucienne's shoulders pull back.

Cricket gave a quick twist of her neck to stare at him sideways, lids wide enough that white rings stood around her water-brown irises. “You sure?”

He took the slotted spoon from her hand. “You have some reason to be scared of the Corps? Turn the stove off; I don’t think this will take too long.”

She did what he said, silently, and went to sit on the creaking wicker sofa while he and Lucienne went to the door. He timed it just right; the Rimmer had started to knock when he pulled the door open.

Jean granted the medium-brown, medium-height man who leaned back so suddenly a certain amount of credit. He didn’t fall over and he recovered himself fast. “Jean Kroc?”

“I am he.”

The Rimmer glanced over Jean’s shoulder. His own backup stood at the bottom of the steps, off to the port, covering both his partner and the door. “And is this M~ Spivak?”

“M~ Spivak can speak for herself,” Lucienne said. She didn’t step forward out of the shadow, however.

The Rimmer cleared his throat. “I’m David Kountché,” he said. “My identification—”

Which was connex, of course, and Officer Kountché colored under his café-au-lait complexion when he realized the reason for Jean’s slight, incurious smile. He dug into his hip bag and came up with a warrant card, holoplastic, chipped at one edge, with his retinal print and image indelibly recorded on the surface. He was, Jean reassessed, a Dayvid with a y.

“If you’d like to come in, you have to take your shoes off,” Jean said, handing back the warrant card.

“I’m sorry?”

“No shoes in the house,” Lucienne said. She pushed past Jean and came out under the awning. Kountché stepped back to give her room, without seeming to realize that he’d handed her control of the situation. Lucienne continued, “And unless you have a warrant, I’ll have to ask you both to power down. Jean has a religious objection to connex in his home. Do you want me to come out instead?”

“We didn’t say it was you we needed to speak to, ma’am,” the Rimmer said. Jean could not fault him on politeness, anyway. Which wasn’t as rare a trait as you might expect, in cops.

“No, but you talked around me, so I guessed. Coming in or staying out? And who might your partner be?”

Officer Kountché cleared his throat. And, gamely, sat down on the plascrete steps and touched open the tabs on his shoes. “Officer Garnet Spencer, ma’am,” he said, and Officer Spencer tapped her sunshade just below the speckled band. Lucienne was too much of a lady to show it publicly, but Jean

Kroc echoed her concealed wince. Somebody's mother had watched too many romances.

"Delighted to meet you, Officer Spencer." He looked a bit like a boiled fruit: his eyebrows made pale swipes in the redness of his face. Lucienne pointed to his feet. "There's tea inside, or I can bring you a lemonade on the porch."

After trading one quick look—backed, no doubt, by connex—Officer Kountché finished pulling his shoes off and powered down. Officer Spencer opted for the hospitality of the front stoop, and Jean brought him a lemonade while Lucienne led the other one inside. When Jean returned to the living room—the kitchen was more an alcove off the side than a separate space—Cricket had taken herself back out to the garden and Officer Kountché was perched uncomfortably on the edge of a wicker slouch chair, maintaining a stiff spine as if in defiance of the urgings of the household gods. Lucienne had turned the burner back on under Cricket's teakettle, and was measuring leaves into a pot. "Whatever questions you wanted to ask me," she said, "you can ask in front of Jean."

The officer looked uncomfortable, but folded his hands over his knee. "Where were you last night, M~ Spivak?"

"Please. Call me Lucienne."

"You don't stand on ceremony?"

"I don't stand on much," she answered. "Occasionally, my principles. Sugar, Officer?"

"Sugar, please. And answer the question. Please."

Lucienne frowned, as if measuring spoonfuls of white crystals into the cup was an unwonted effort. "I was here."

"You can confirm?"

She shrugged. "No connex," she said. "I live here. I wasn't anywhere else."

Officer Kountché glanced at Jean, who leaned, arms folded, beside the door. "I'll testify to that," Jean answered.

"M~ Kroc," the officer asked, "what's your means of support?"

"I'm a prospector," Jean answered. "And I consult."

"No work in the, ah, service industry?"

Jean just smiled. "Not what I would call it, no. Does that have any bearing on your investigation of my partner?"

"Now, M~ Kroc," Kountché said, apparently having recovered himself, "I'm sure I never said your partner was under investigation."

The smile Lucienne gave Kountché was almost as plastic as the one she got back. “Jean,” she said, “there’s nothing here you need to defend me from.”

He unfolded his arms and said nothing. She turned back to face the counter and poured the tea. She served him and offered a cup to Jean, who waved it away with the back of his hand, then poured for herself. A delaying action, and a few moments later she ensconced herself across from him, her mug cradled between her hands. “So,” the officer said, “you can’t prove where you were last night?”

Whatever floated in the depths of her tea must have been extraordinarily interesting. She dipped her finger into the steaming surface and bit the resulting droplet from the tip. “Can you prove I was somewhere else?”

“What’s your relationship with the ELF?”

“The Extee Lib Foundation? I give them money. I volunteer in the front office. It’s a perfectly legal and registered charity. Officer.”

“Blowing up a native worker recruitment station is a charitable function?”

“Is *that* what exploded last night?” Lucienne leaned forward, between her knees, to set her mug down on the plascrete not far from the edge of the braided rug. “You think I had something to do with that?”

“I’m not suggesting any such thing.” He sipped his tea. If he was a hunting dog, Jean thought, his ears would be pricked up. “Do you know anything about it?”

“No connex, remember?”

He shook his head, as if it was a little hard for him to understand the implications. No instant news, no instant messages. No instantaneous communication with people on other planets, halfway across the galaxy.

No constant hum of commercials in the back of your brain. No hacked perceptions, showing you a woman in a red dress and heels when she was wearing a pantsuit and thongs, and weighed fifteen pounds worth of muscle less than the image projected into your brain.

No connex. Alone with the silence inside your own brain.

Not too long ago, of course, it would have been alien to Lucienne, too. But she’d adapted, as Jean had expected she would. If nothing else, it gave you time to think.

“You’ll answer questions under a lie sensor, if necessary?”

Lucienne smiled. “If you subpoena my cooperation. I know my rights, Officer.”

The answering tip of his head was tight. “Are you certain you don’t wish to call your solicitor now?”

“Why should I?” she said. “I’ve nothing to hide.”

JEAN LIKED THAT CRICKET STAYED ON AFTER THE RIMMERS departed, all three together. The one who waited on the stoop had left his untouched lemonade on the corner of the plascrete, all the ice melted and condensation rolling down the sides.

“As if you’d poison a Rimmer,” Lucienne said disdainfully, while Cricket was bringing the remainder of dinner out to her beloved compost pile. Lucienne dumped the glass in the sink and scrubbed it off by hand. She racked it and dried her hands on a towel, while Jean pressed his palms to her shoulders to feel her muscles slide. She leaned on the touch, letting him support her.

“He bugged the chair,” Jean murmured against the black hawser of her braid. “Want to give him a scareful after your friend leaves?”

She tossed the towel across the edge of the sink. “As if you haven’t already disabled it.”

He couldn’t shrug and rub her shoulders at the same time, so he settled for a kiss on the nape of her neck. Still brown, this skin, but paler, and vulnerable-seeming, nonetheless. “He can’t prove a thing. Breathe out.”

She obeyed, and breathed in, too, then repeated the process more slowly, with concentrated care. “If he could, he’d have us both in custody. It might be time to step back for a bit. We’re not outraged doomsayers, and I refuse to be herded. Either by Rimmer visits, or by Closs’s threats to assay settle the wetlands for mining potential, and hang the treaty. We’re not doing the froggies any good if we wind up inmates at a seaweed farm.”

“We’re not doing ourselves any good either.” He stepped back and let his hands fall away. “There’s always legal challenges.”

“If we could afford better lawyers.”

He nibbled his thumb, turning away from the window, through which the setting sun glared, flashing off spectacles that always drew a double-take when he was introduced to someone new. “I’ll see what I can do. About Cricket—”

“Yes. We can trust her.”

He licked his lips, put his shadow between them so he could see her expression when she turned

The line between her eyebrows was deeper, but the curl of her lips was wry.

“She doesn’t want to be a part of our revolution, Luce,” he said.

“But where she goes, Deschênes follows.”

He didn’t have a ready answer, so Lucienne continued, shading her eyes so *she* could look straight at *him*. “I’ll take her to see the ranids tonight. If that doesn’t shift her, nothing will.”

André walked home two hours later than he usually did. The traffic in the streets had fallen off; his meeting had stretched through the afternoon rush. A face-to-face meeting. One of the reasons André kept office hours—kept an office at all—was that his business wasn’t always best handled via connexion.

Cricket still hadn’t answered his call about Jean Kroc, which was for the best. He’d have more work for her if she did call. Cricket charged high, even as archinformists went, but she was worth every demark. And if she didn’t call, André would just have to get a head start on the information himself. Because his meeting had been with Timothy Closs, a Rim Company VP who reported directly to Jefferson Greene, the titular head of the Greene’s World Charter Trade Corporation.

And Charter Trade had contacted André because it was looking for a speedy resolution.

André wasn’t a nice man, and he didn’t do a nice job. But he also understood that it wasn’t that different from jobs that had been necessary, spurned, and not very nice since the first web-footed amphibian crawled from the primal ooze and set up shop to sell dirt to other amphibians from farth downriver. It was a living, and he didn’t play politics, and he didn’t execute grudges. He stuck to what passed for the ethical rules of his profession, and Charter Trade left him alone except for when he needed him.

And on Colonial Charter steadings like Greene’s World, the Rimmers were the law—and had been for the last 250 years, since A.G. 75 or so, though Greene’s World itself was not that old. And the only court of appeals was the Earth-centered, teeming worlds of the Core. Which relied on trade from the ever-expanding halo of the Rim to keep it fed and housed and enjoying an increasing standard of living. A lot of people came to the Rim because they couldn’t live in the Core anymore, for one reason or another.

Frontiers had always been a sort of social pressure valve.

Really, in the end, André just saved Charter Trade the money it would have spent documenting the kangaroo trial. And as for the family of the accused, he saved them some embarrassment.

The sort of people he needed to talk to tonight didn’t do business over connexion either. They also weren’t the sort to hang out in pool halls, Italian restaurants, or drinking establishments, adding a little stereotypical color to the place. But Nouel Huc did have an affection for a particular raucous dinner theater on Seagrove—West Seagrove, a much more upscale neighborhood than André’s. No

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