

# The Sardonyx Net

Elizabeth  
A. Lynn



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*For Marta, who read it first, and  
for Debbie, who read it twice.*



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*"History is not romantic."*

—Nakamura Kenji, *History of Chabo*



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## Chapter One

Dana Ikoro, smuggler, stood facing Monk the drug courier across the floor of the starship *Treasure*. He was furious.

Monk had ebony skin and a sleek, shaven skull. She wore silver leggings and ruby earrings, and between her breasts dangled a shiny gold medallion, sister to the one Dana Ikoro wore around his neck. She was well known on the dorazine circuit. She was two meters tall and Dana had to look up to her.

It was not a position he liked. He clenched his fists in his pocket and swore under his breath in Pellish. Monk gazed at him, eyelids drooping evilly, ostentatiously bored. He repeated what she had just told him. “The drugs have already gone?”

She nodded, slouching. “That's right.”

He could see she enjoyed his discomfort, and it enraged him. “You want to tell me how you managed to lose three thousand unit doses of dorazine?”

She shrugged. “I follow instructions. Instructions said, Wait for a ship carrying this code, hitting these coordinates, at this time. I pick up the stuff from the robo, Jump here, wait. Twenty minutes ago *Lamia* jumps in, matches codes with me. I know *Lamia*. I know Tori Lamonica. We've done business before. Codes match, we transfer. Twenty minutes later, you Jump through with the identical code, the dorazine's gone. That's not my fault.” She gazed over his head as she talked.

Jacked, Dana thought. Damn it, Lamonica jacked me!

He'd never been jacked before. Dorazine was prime cargo. Damn and blast it, he'd never *carried* dorazine before! He'd had to buy equipment: the Drug spoiled at temperatures under 6 degrees and over 14 degrees Celsius. The special cooling unit had cost him five hundred credits, but he'd expected to realize at least three thousand upon sale of the drug on Chabad. He was not only out his own money but he'd been made a fool of, and in the smugglers' canon, ridicule presaged poverty. He might never get a second chance to run the drug.

It did not make him feel any better to know that he'd been taken by an expert. Tori Lamonica boasted of her skill in jacking cargoes in every sector, planet, and Port of the Living Worlds. He controlled his anger with an effort. This was Monk's ship; he could hardly tear it to bits as he wanted to—and Monk didn't care if he went bust as vacuum.

“Great,” he said. “That was my cargo. Now what do I do? Got any suggestions?”

She smiled, showing perfect teeth. “Jack someone else.”

Dana bristled. “That's not my style. I'm no thief.”

The tall woman yawned. “I wouldn't call Tori Lamonica a thief—not to her face, anyway. Who suckered you into this business?”

The question was rhetorical and insulting but Dana decided to answer it anyway; he might learn something. “I've been running comine,” he said. “I thought I might make more credits working for The Pharmacy.”

“Sure,” said Monk. “If you don't land in a cell.” She took two steps to the pilot's chair, sat in it, touched a button negligently. The screens came on. “Don't know why Tori wants your cargo, anyway. Dorazine's not safe.”

“What?”

“You haven't heard?” Monk tilted her head to one side. Even her eyebrows were shaved. “That new top drug cop, A-Rae. He's snake-mean about the dorazine trade. Obsessed. The cops have left off haunting drop points—not that it ever did them any good. They're clustered down in Sardonyx Sector off Chabad, picking runners up when they try to land, playing leapfrog along the spaceways.”

“I hadn't heard about that,” Dana admitted.

“The regulars are looking for other work,” said Monk. She chuckled, and stretched her legs halfway across the starship's floor. “The Pharmacy's *real* unhappy.”

All the regulars except Lamonica, Dana thought. He glanced at the starship's vision screen. It showed the darkness of spacetime normal, mitigated by the pulsing light from a nearby Cepheid. The yellow star had no planets, and that made it a convenient place for a drop point. There were hundreds of such points scattered through the eight Federation sectors.

“Lamonica's going to Chabad,” Dana said. It was not quite a question. Hypers did not ask each other about other Hypers.

Monk yawned again. “She's got nowhere else to go. She's carrying dorazine.” Her tone was weary—an expert, explaining something to a slightly stupid novice. Dana's temper flared. He turned and strode to the lock which connected Monk's ship with his own. He slithered through it, graceful as all Hypers were, balancing without thought as the floor rippled under his feet. Palming the hatchway plate, he waited for the door to open, then grabbed the bar and swung within his starship's curving walls. The door slid shut. He checked the seal.... “Disengage,” he said over the audio link.

*Zipper* jogged as the other ship sucked back the lock tube. Dana watched in his screen as *Treasure* Jumped, going from silver-gray to blue, to green, to orange, to blazing red.... After the ship vanished into the Hype, the rainbow emissions lingered in normal space.

The Cepheid pulsed, half a light-year away. Dana swore at it in Pellish. The day he'd been accosted in Liathera's, the Hyper bar on Nexus, he'd thought the luck was at last turning to smile his way. Now it seemed as if she were only playing with him.... He'd probably never get a chance to run dorazine again. Now he could go back to the gamblers' runs—running nightshade for the Verdians—picking up two hundred credits here, five hundred credits there, always watching his back for the Hype cops. Damn! He'd lived like that for six standard months, loathing every insecure minute of it. It was a cheap, chancy way to survive.

Or—he loathed the thought—he could sell his ship, and work for some damn corporate fleet, no longer Starcaptain but a simple pilot, taking the orders of some fish-brained, planetbound administrator.

He'd be damned and pickled before he'd live like that. Fingering the medallion round his neck, he wondered which of Liathera's regular customers had overheard his conversation with The Pharmacy's agent. It might have been anybody with good ears, catching a word here, a code there, waiting until the deal was set, then trotting off to sell the information to Tori Lamonica. He'd never know. He wondered how much she'd paid for the information. Savagely, he hoped it had been a lot.

Now he had nothing: no money—well, very damn little, just enough to survive—no dorazine to sell, not even the name of a contact in Sardonyx Sector. He blanked the vision screen to help himself think and sat in the navigator's chair. It creaked. Everything on *Zipper* creaked or whined or rattled, except the Drive. But she was *his*, his ship, his home, his ticket to the Hype. No one who was not a Hyper could quite understand what it felt like to have your own ship. He'd picked her out of the Nexus yards with Russell O'Neill's help.... He wondered if, by some lucky chance, Russell might be working Sardonyx Sector. Russell the Pirate; Russell the thief. Russell might know someone on Chabad.

But Russell did not run drugs. Indeed, the redhead had warned him sharply that if he was planning

turn drug courier, he should stay well away from Sardonyx Sector.

“I won't argue morals,” Russell had said. “But consider some facts—the Yago Family owns the Net and the Net runs on dorazine. So, when you transport dorazine to Chabad, you can figure that most of it is destined for the Net. But it's as illegal to transport dorazine to Sardonyx Sector as it is in any other sector of the Federation, and if the Hype cops catch you with it anywhere in the sector, they'll take you and convict you and toss you into prison, and from prison you'll go to the Net, where they'll shoot you full of dorazine and turn you into a slave on Chabad, and serve you right. You want to run drugs, that's your business, not mine. You make your own ethical choices. But you'd better get some more experience on the circuits, Dana, before you try to run dorazine.”

Dana grinned, remembering.... That conversation, like many others during the six months he'd been pilot on the *Morgana*, had ended up in bed. He'd never made love with a man before, but he learned soon enough that it was hard to say no to Russell. The loving had been fun. But he'd kept the lecture in mind over the last eight months. For the first two of them, he had even looked for legal work. Russell had he heard of *that*, would have surely laughed. Finding nothing that sparked his interest, Dana had turned to the drug trade. Gamblers' runs had seemed exciting, at first, but the excitement quickly palled. And then, in Liathera's, the agent said, “You've got quite a reputation. Aren't you getting a bit tired of gamblers' runs?”

Dana admitted that he was.

“You're young, tough. Maybe you'd like to pick up some bigger credits?”

“Sure.”

“Want to work with The Pharmacy? You'd need some supply money—nothing much, maybe eight hundred credits—and a contact in Sector Sardonyx. But you've got that, I'm sure.”

“Sure,” Dana said again.

He'd lied. He didn't know one single soul on Chabad. But the agent hadn't known he'd lied, and why should he? With a cooler full of dorazine, Dana had figured, he'd find a dealer after two hours on Chabad. The agent's instructions were simple. They liked two-courier runs in the dorazine trade. Dana, as the second runner, would be responsible for making pickup and paying the transfer fee. He would then proceed from the drop point through the Hype to just off Chabad. He would land *Zipper* illegally, fly his bubblecraft to Abanat, the planet's only city, and meet—find, Dana had thought—a dealer.

Half an hour ahead of him, with his dorazine in *Lamia's* cooler and six years of experience in Sardonyx Sector, Tori Lamonica was thinking about him, and laughing.

He scowled at *Zipper's* walls. Then he punched instructions to the ship's computer, putting the starship at half-gee gravity. Shedding his clothes, he jumped for the monkey bars. The smooth metal bars, each a meter long and half a meter out from the wall, ran up one curving wall at intervals, like ladder rungs, over *Zipper's* ceiling and back down in a regular track to the other “side” of the continuous wall. Hand over hand, Dana pulled himself along until his shoulder muscles ached and his ivory-yellow skin felt oiled. He dropped lightly down, breathing hard. Climbing the bars was good exercise, and they were remarkably useful when the ship went into null-grav. Better than magnets in free-fall.

Now—what to do? He could return to Nexus. He was not *entirely* without funds, and in a cache in the wall he had a small stash of comine which it would not be hard for him to sell. Or—he grinned—he could go on to Chabad and try to run a doublejack on Tori Lamonica. He'd have to be crazy to attempt it, inexperienced as he was and without a single contact in Abanat. The only thing that might make it work was that Lamonica would not be expecting it....

And why not? His grin widened. He could try it. He'd never been to Chabad; he might as well see it

It could be fun. He pulled his jumpsuit back on. The comine, still wrapped, sat snugly in its hole in a wall panel. Grabbing it, Dana palmed the inner door of the lock, pushed the bagged powder through, closed the door, and punched the button which released the outer lock door. He turned on the vision screen to watch the comine go: transparent bags bursting, comine floating, granule by granule, into vacuum, wreathing the ship. With no drugs onboard, he should have no trouble landing on Chabad's moon and passing the inspection which he knew they would subject him to in Port. Clean as a cop or tourist, he would ride a shuttleship to Abanat, well ahead of Tori Lamonica taking the tortuous overland route from her concealed ship in her bubblecraft. When she arrived in Abanat, looking for her dealer, he, Dana, would be waiting for her.

He wondered if he should jettison the dorazine cooler. Its very presence on the ship would tell a co what he had really come to Chabad for. But, damn it, he'd paid five hundred credits for it, and besides he would need it if—when—the doublejack worked. They would suspect him, but they might do that anyway, and so what if they did? Intent to commit a crime was not by itself criminal.

He touched a button on the computer console. Clear music lilted through the ship, obliterating the hum of machinery. It was old music. It had been written by a man named Stratta during that strange and joyful time after the Verdian ships touched on Terra. Dana had heard it on a street corner in Nexus. He had practically had to shake the composer's name out of the startled street artist. He had never paid much attention to music before, but this music was—different: clear as a theorem, stirring and haunting. He carried with him in *Zipper* a collection—perhaps the best collection that existed—of Stratta's pieces, on musictapes. They perfectly complemented his solitude.

He told the computer to find him the fastest course to Chabad. It blinked figures at him. The course took three standard days: two in the Hype, a Jump from this into another hyperspace current, another half a day in hyperspace, half a day through spacetime normal to Chabad's only moon. He told the ship to use the course. He settled into the pilot's chair; the Drive came on. Spacetime normal went away. Dana cleared the vision screen; from rainbow it darkened into the brutal, mind-capturing blackness of the Hype. At an unimaginable distance, red dust glittered, the dust of dying stars, or of stars not yet born.

Ikoro smiled as the music wove its melody around him. His young, rather stern face relaxed. His dark eyes lost their angry gleam. Lamonica had a start on him, but it would take her at least a day to fly from the wilds of Chabad to Abanat. He tapped his fingers to the complex, familiar tune. Even if the Hype cops boarded him, which they might not do, since he had only a minor reputation, even if they did, they would have only a shred of evidence on which to hold him.

“To Domna Rhani Yago, from...”

Rhani Yago sat in the alcove of her bedroom, sifting through her mail. The hot, bright light of Chabad's sun drove through the panes of glass, reflecting sharply off the papers and lightening the color of the deep blue walls. A few elegantly calligraphed missives dignified the day's scattering of computer-printed reports. The topmost letter was from the manager of the Yago-owned kerit farm in Sovka. Respectfully hysterical, he informed her that kits from the last four litters of Prime Strain kerits had been found dead in their cages, apparently from massive internal hemorrhage. He enclosed the post-mortem analyses from the Sovka laboratory. Rhani examined them: translated from their jargon, they said: “*Sorry, we don't know what this is.*”

The next letter was from Sherrix Esbah, Family Yago's principal drug dealer in Abanat. Apologizing, Sherrix stated firmly that she could not possibly supply her usual quarterly shipment of dorazine. The drug runners were bringing in comine, nightshade, tabac, zimweed, but the pressure was on in Sector Sardonyx, and no one was carrying dorazine.

The next letter was grimy. Rhani opened it with care, read the ugly threat within, and put it away. Beneath it was her house steward's report. She laid that aside too, for later. She had no doubt that it would be accurate; Cara Morro had run the Yago estate for twelve years, since before the death of Rhani's mother Isobel, and her reports were unfailingly accurate. The last letter lay sealed. It bore the Dur crest: a stone axe, raised to strike. "*From Ferris Dur,*" read the superscription, "*to Domna Rhani Yago.*" Rhani touched the beautifully textured paper with her fingertips. Paper was one of the few things that could be manufactured out of the tough, orange, thumbsized grass of Chabad. A month ago the lettering would have read, "*From Domna Samantha Dur.*" But Domna Sam was dead. Half of Abanat, it had seemed, had joined the twilight procession that had taken her coffin to its grave. It would be hard for Ferris to succeed her. He was waiting out the forty days of respect before he took the title Domni. Family Dur was the First Family of Chabad and they never let you forget it; everything they did or said or owned had style. At least, it had been so when Domna Sam was alive.

Rhani broke the seal on the letter. She read it in growing puzzlement. "...Demand to speak to you on business of import to Chabad ... reply without fail ... hope this will be convenient for you..." Such phrases did not belong in a letter from the head of one Family to another. This was how she might write to the manager of the kerit farm. She controlled her annoyance and laid this communication, too, aside. She turned in her chair to look at Binkie, her secretary. "Do I have to go on?"

"You might want to look at the PIN reports."

PIN stood for Public Information and News, Chabad's wonderfully redundant news system. It catered mostly to the tourists. Rhani glanced at the headlines. "WHAT TO DO AND SEE AT THE AUCTION." "Feh," she said disdainfully. "THE LIFE-CYCLE OF A KERIT." "They only print what we give them." She touched the threatening letter. "There have been more of these lately than usual, haven't there? Some steps should be taken to find their source."

"I'll see to it."

"Tell Cara I'll see her here this afternoon. And one last thing. Send a communigram to my brother."

Binkie's training held, his face and voice did not change, but his long pale hands fisted at his sides. "What message?"

"Send a précis of these letters. Let me see it first. Include the report from Sovka, the letter from Sherrix, and the one from Ferris Dur. And you'd better include the threat. The Net should be off Enchanter. Send a message capsule with a 'For-Your-Eyes-Only' seal. The whole sector doesn't need to know our business, so leave the Yago crest off the capsule, and omit the place of origin. Zed will know."

"As you wish, Rhani-ka." He took the letters from her, and went to the compscreen to draft the précis. Rhani gazed out her window. The familiar image of the breeding in Sovka—white buildings, orange grass broken by the bleak wire fencing of the kerit runs—superimposed itself upon the even more familiar green. The death of eighteen Prime Strain kerits was going to hurt the breeding program. The manager sounded badly flustered. At least he had been able to keep the news of the deaths from leaking out to PIN. He had been her mother's appointment to the position; Rhani had been planning to suggest to him that he should retire.

And something was wrong with Ferris Dur, if he thought he could order her to meet him, as if she were his employee or his slave, and not in fact his equal, and head herself of the Third Family of Chabad. She remembered him vaguely from the last few months when Domna Sam had been so sick, giving orders to the house slaves; he had struck her then as an arrogant, impatient man. She wondered what he thought was so important that she would drop her work to see him, and why he didn't simply tell her what it was. Eventually he would.

The veins in the polished marble of her desk gleamed in the sunlight. That was something else Chabad produced: stone. But there were few quarries on the planet: workers and machines could not endure the glare of Chabad's sun, and the breakdown rate for both was ridiculously high. Rhani traced the patterns with one finger. The marble was lovely and cool. The drying up of the drug supply worried her badly, and she hoped it would not go on long. It had never happened this severely before.

Chabad had to have dorazine. It was the glue that held the slave system together; without it, the men and women who did most of the labor on Chabad would grow sullen and angry, resentful of their penitential status; they would plan and scheme and ultimately rebel. Without dorazine, Chabad would need an army to keep them at their jobs; with dorazine, all it needed was the drug. It often struck her, the irony of the Federation statutes that made transport of dorazine to the sector illegal. The law was a sop thrown to those who felt that slavery (unlike prisons, brain-wipe, forced therapy, etc.) was immoral, and yet the moralists could not see that dorazine was the one element that made slavery endurable for most of the slaves, that kept them docile and sane, most of the time. It was the moralists who had created The Pharmacy and the drug runners, not Chabad.

Rhani contemplated, for a few moments, making the formal request of the Federation of Living Worlds that the sale of dorazine to Chabad be made legal. Legalization would slash the black market price. It might even force The Pharmacy, whoever and wherever it was, to sell her the dorazine formula. For five years, Sherrix—and Domino four years before her—had sent a message through the drug network to The Pharmacy: *"Name a price. Family Yago will buy."* They had never answered; Rhani did not even know if the offer had reached them. There was precedent for a Yago to approach the Federation. But she shook her head; only for an emergency would she consider bringing Chabad to the attention of the Federation. It was easier for them all to buy the euphoric/tranquilizer on the illegal market than to subject Chabad to the presence of and problems created by outsiders.

Pushing back her chair, she walked the few steps to the glass doors that led onto the terrace garden. She slid the doors open and walked out onto the balcony. Amri knelt there, watering the fragile dawn plants that nestled in the brickwork. Seeing Rhani, she stopped work. Rhani smiled at her and gestured at the pale blue blossoms. They looked random, stuck in the cracks of brick. She remembered Timithos digging around the bricks with a trowel, setting each tiny plant into a crack by hand. Nothing green grew accidentally on Chabad. "Go on, Amri," she said. Amri picked up the watering can.

The lawns lay below the balcony, green and lush, pretending to be a countryside. The estate was eighty years old. It had been built by Orrin Yago, Rhani's grandmother. Rhani dimly remembered Orrin: an old, bent woman with silver hair who leaned on a black cane. Beyond the estate wall lay orange hills. West of the Yago estate by ninety-seven kilometers lay Abanat, Chabad's capital and only city, set like a bright jewel by the shore of a warm and sluggish sea. North of Abanat lay Sovka; south of it, Gemit, site of the Dur mines. White-and-black roofs and bits of green marked where the colonists of Chabad lived. Elsewhere on land it was hot, red-brown, and dry. Nobody lived there now.

Once someone had. Rhani leaned on the balcony wall, looking over the green of the estate to Chabad's terra-cotta hills. She knew her planet's history rather better than the tourists who swarmed the streets of Abanat. At the end of the twentieth century, Old Earth reckoning, the Verdian ships had landed on that planet, bringing the hyperdrive equations and access to the galaxy to the human race. Repossessed of a frontier, humans set out with great energy to colonize the stars. They founded New Terra, and New Terrain, and Enchanter and Ley and Galahad and Summer and colonies on planets all over the Milky Way. The center of their universe became Nexus Compcenter, where the starship fleet was based. A colony might be no more than several thousand people. Some were less. They survived, fighting heat and cold and disease and famine and the venalities of humankind.

In most colonies, criminals, however the colony defined them, were either killed or ostracized. In one sector of space, the colonies—who were light-years away from each other in spacetime normal but a few days' flight from each other in Hype time—decided to create a prison planet, on which criminals could be dumped to work out their salvation or damnation apart from those they had harmed.

They chose an uncolonized, largely lifeless world circling an AO dwarf star, and named it Chabad. Its seas were salty and warm, its land masses regular and dry and covered with orange plants whose stalks were thick as an average human thumb. It had no birds, no bears or seals or tigers or horses or trees, no maize growing wild. It had beetles and snakes and clawed vicious, furry predators named *kerits*. The colonies in Sardonyx Sector sent their criminals there, with tents and tools and packets of seed.

Most died. More arrived every year, to burrow and thirst and mostly die. At the end of the first century after the opening of space, a group of investors came to Chabad from Nexus. There were four of them: one of them was Lisa Yago, Rhani's great-great-grandmother. They mined and tested and scanned. They discovered huge cores of silver and gold. They developed techniques to breed the truculent kerits for their incredibly beautiful fur. They realized that Chabad's inhospitableness itself could be exploited, and they built Abanat on the seashore. They watered it with towed icebergs from Chabad's small poles. They turned it into paradise, a feast of color and light and music, and beyond paradise lay the barren rusty hills of Chabad.

The rich of Sardonyx Sector came to Abanat to play. Tourists on Chabad bought kerit pelts and handblown glass and tapestries and golden chains and silver rings, and slaves.

Rhani gazed at Amri, still watering the flowers. The young slave's eyes were focused and clear, pupils normal, and she had none of the symptoms of the dorazine addict about her. It was a point of pride with Family Yago that their house slaves were never kept on dorazine. The dorazine that the Yagos bought went to the kerit farm in Sovka, or to the Net. Most of it went to the Net. Rhani rubbed the top of the brick wall. It was powdery with dust. It had seemed a logical transition to the investors to make the criminals who came to Chabad each year into slaves. Surely, it was easier to be a slave than a prisoner in a cell, or an exile condemned to swelter and starve in the shadeless valleys of Chabad's hills. She recalled the text of the threatening letter. It was the fourth in three months. "WE WILL KILL YOU, SLAVER. Signed, The Free Folk of Chabad."

At least the Free Folk of Chabad are terse, she thought.

A dragoncat, its coat flame-red, long tail waving, came silently onto the terrace and poked its head under her hand to be stroked. It rubbed its shoulder against her thigh. She petted it absently. It went to sniff at Amri, who scratched its ears. It purred. Rhani smiled; she loved the graceful beasts. They had full freedom of the house and grounds. They were imports from Enchanter, whose labs had given them their fanciful name. They had sharp claws and great speed and were rather more intelligent than the great Earth cats whose genes they had been bred from. They fretted, sometimes, at the heat, and the sameness of the smells, at the lack of hunting, and especially at the walls that edged the greenery and kept them in, unable to run. But in the burning, waterless plains, they would only die.

She went back to the house, and touched the intercom. "Binkie." It sounded through every room. Silent as one of the dragoncats, he came to the door. "Get me the files on the personnel at the kerit farm," she said. "Someone has to be promoted to the cretin manager's place."

He bent over the computer. "Yes, Rhani-ka."

Sitting at the desk, she dug out a piece of paper and her favorite pen. She wrote to Sherrix in their private code, offering to pay double the quoted price for dorazine if that would unblock the market,

although she did not think it would. Then she spread out her steward's accounts, and was soon absorbed in them. The rise and fall of her household, for an hour, was as important to her as the rise and fall of her financial hegemony. When Binkie brought the stack of printouts to her, she said, without lifting her head, "Leave them here."

The fair-haired secretary/slave laid the files down on one corner of the big marble desk, and went away.

Zed Yago, commander of the Net, paced along the curving corridor of his kingdom toward his cabin. His eyes stung. He had been wakeful for nearly two shifts, supervising the transfer of slaves from the Enchanter prison ships to the Net cells, and he was very tired. The Net rotated in spacetime normal on Enchanter while the third shift checked out the systems before the final, long-awaited Jump to Chabad, to home.

Two crew members passed him; they were suitless, as he was, looking forward no doubt to well-deserved sleep. They murmured greetings, and he nodded back, friendly but aloof, for on the Yago Net he was king, master, overseer, senior medic, and controller. He touched the pouchpocket on his chest, feeling the slight stiffness of the scrap of microfiche. A message capsule had brought it through the Hype to Enchanter, and Enchanter had 'grammed it to the great, graceful, silver torus.

In his cabin, Zed slid the microfiche into the viewer's slot. Words marched across the creamy background. Zed recognized his sister's secretary's style, and smiled.

But as he read the message, his smile vanished. When it ended, he tossed the plastic strip into the disposal, and brushed the switch of the communicator that put him in touch with the bridge.

"This is Zed."

"Clear, Zed-ka." That was deep-voiced Jo Leiakanawa, his second-in-command, the Net's chief navigator.

"Double-time the checkout. Get us home."

"Yes, Zed-ka." The communicator pinged once and was silent. Zed sat on the hard bunk. His hair was red-brown, like his sister's, and he wore it to the shoulders, and almost always tied. He stretched his legs out, staring without seeing at the bulkhead in front of him.

Three out of ten Chabadese months he lived in the Net, not luxuriously. The great craft consisted mainly of the Drive Core and two kinds of storage space: holds for food, water, and drugs; and cells in which people could stand, sit, and lie. They could not walk more than a few steps; where on the Net would slaves need to walk to? The crew cabins were little bigger than the slave cells. Each year the Net traveled to Sabado, Belle, Ley, and Enchanter, the other four worlds of Sardonyx Sector, to choose prisoners from their prisons to fill the Net cells. The sector worlds paid the Net for this service. The Net had particular standards: some criminals were too brutal to make useful slaves; others, too stupid. The Net medics, including Zed, spot-checked prisoners and reports before allowing the prisoners to be loaded. This, Enchanter, was the end of that circuit. Now the Net returned to Chabad, where the Auction would be held.

Non-Chabadese swarmed to the planet at this time, willing to live in Abanat and pay exorbitant residence taxes so that they might own one, two, a household of slaves. Wealthy Chabadese bought house slaves. The city bought maintenance slaves. Slaves came with their owner's credit disks in their hands to buy garden or factory or workshop slaves. Ex-slaves, now with skills and businesses to run, came to pick out slaves. Family Yago prospered. The worlds of Sardonyx Sector slowly refilled their prisons. Net crew members spent their credits in the Hyper bar in Abanat. In seven months a shuttleship would take them, broke and bored, from Abanat to Port on the moon, and they would reach the Net to Jump once more.

“Attention, third shift crew. Attention, third shift crew.” That was Jo's voice. Zed heard the sound of running feet outside his closed door. ~~The crew would be angry at the new orders; they were tired of working hard.~~ Zed shrugged. They would not show their irritation to him. Complaints would go to Jo, she handled the crew. She was good at it. Though he was its commander, Zed knew very well that he could not have run the Net without her. That knowledge did not trouble him at all.

For one swift, sybaritic moment, Zed permitted himself to think of Rhani standing in the moonlight on the green lawn of the Yago estate, or smiling under the Chabad sun, waiting for him. That vision had succored him for five years on Nexus, while he learned to be a pilot and then a medic; even now it eased his heart. With practiced discipline, he turned away from it to think of something else: the message, particularly that enigmatic communiqué from Ferris Dur. Till the building of the Net—begun by Orrin, finished by Isobel Yago—Family Dur had been richer than Family Yago. Now, without seeing the balance sheets, Zed guessed that Family Yago's profits exceeded Family Dur's, and had for ten years. Samantha Dur had not been a woman to see money flowing past without trying to tap it. She had made a formal offer to buy into the kerit farm. The offer had been refused. In the Chabad Council, her deputy had moved to raise the hefty fee the Yagos paid yearly for license to operate the Net. The Council defeated the bill. He wondered if, in pique and in senility, she had initiated a bit of sabotage at the kerit farm. Rhani would know better than he; she knew the old woman as well as anyone. But Zed knew that at ninety-three Samantha Dur had never learned to listen when someone else said, “No.”

Was Ferris Dur trying to follow those implacable footsteps? Zed tried to remember what the Dur heir looked like. Dark, he thought. They didn't meet more than once or twice within a year. Zed ignored the social whirl, preferring the solitude of the Yago estate to tourist-laden Abanat. He hated parties.

His wrist communicator let out a tone. “Yes, Jo,” he said.

“Zed-ka, the checkout is proceeding as ordered, no problems, but we have a medical query on Level 6, Block A, Cell 170, and I can't get response from Nivas.” Nivas Camilleri was the on-shift senior medic.

“She's probably asleep,” said Zed. “She worked two shifts, like everybody else. What's the situation?”

“Permission is asked to increase dorazine dosage.”

“I'll look.”

On Level 6, Block A, outside the door of Cell 170, a worried junior medic stood, peering through the door of one-directional glass, keys jangling in her hand. The occupant of the cell was a brown fat man. He was sitting on the bunk, huffing; there was a purpling bruise on his forehead. As Zed watched, he gathered himself up, hunched his shoulders, and threw himself into the bare wall, keeping his hands against his sides. His head and one shoulder hit the wall; he fell, gasping, to the floor. He crawled back to the bunk again and faced the wall. “Senior, don't you think—” said the junior medic.

“Yes,” said Zed. He brushed a hand over his head, freeing his hair from its tie so that it fell to his shoulders. Taking the key from the junior hand, he opened the cell door and went inside.

The fat man looked up. He had split open the bruise on his forehead. Blood trickled down the left side of his face. Zed glanced at the wall screen on which the prisoner's name, age, crime, planet of origin, planet of imprisonment, dorazine dose, and length of slave contract were noted. “What are you doing?” The man did not answer. Zed repeated it. “What are you doing, Bekka?”

Bekka's gaze fixed on him. His pupils were moderately dilated. “D-d-damaging the merchandise.”

“Why are you doing that?”

“You think I'm going to go and be a slave?” He staggered upright. “Get out of my way.”

He took a deep breath, preparing to launch himself forward again. Zed took a step and caught the man's left arm, fingers finding the nerve just above the elbow. Bekka's feet went out from under him at the unexpected pain. He landed hard, his face screwed into a grimace. “For a man who managed to embezzle credits from two fairly astute companies, you're not very bright,” Zed said. He put the pressure on. “Are you listening?”

“Ah—don't—yes!”

Zed let go. Bekka curled the fingers of his right hand around his left elbow. “You're an accountant and a programmer. A slave with talent can go far on Chabad. You're on a five-year contract. At the end of five years, you'll step into the streets of Abanat a free man, with credits enough to buy passage offplanet, a house, a business, even your own slaves. You'd be surprised at how many ex-slaves stay on Chabad when their contracts expire. Make trouble and you'll spend the next five years in a dorazir doze, grinning like a dog, with no sense of who or where you are. Behave, and you might get to keep your senses and do the work you like. You understand?”

“Yes,” said the rebel.

“Then stop acting the fool. Will you behave?” Zed touched the man's left arm again.

He jumped, and stammered, “Yes. Yes.”

“Good. Clean him up.” Zed left the cell to let the junior medic work. He was almost disappointed in how swiftly the man had capitulated, but not, he reflected, disappointed enough to have prolonged the incident. Bekka was not, physically or emotionally, an especially interesting type. The medic worked swiftly. When she finished, she came into the corridor, locking the door behind her. Bekka sat quietly in his cell, a gel bandage over the cut. “Tell the guards to check on him every two hours,” Zed said. “And increase his dorazine dosage for the next three days to one-point-five-five, until we get to Port.”

He went back to his cabin. The encounter with Bekka had made him sweat. He stripped, and stepped for a few minutes under the warm spray of the shower. A visitor to the room might have been surprised. It contained no ornaments, no pictures except a small holocube of Rhani Yago, no pillows or rugs, nothing to soften the utilitarian severity of walls and floor. In comparison, the technicians' quarters in the Net were hedonistic. But no one knowing Zed Yago would have been surprised. He was not that kind of a sensualist.

He lay down on the bunk. The ship's walls hummed softly. Zed Yago lived three months out of his year within that sound; he no longer heard it.

It changed. The equipment check was complete. In the Core of the Net, the Drive came on. The ship jumped. Zed curled his knees almost to his chest, and closed his eyes.



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## Chapter Two

Coming into Port on Chabad's moon, the sky was thick with ships, if, Dana thought, you could pretend that an airless planetoid possessed a sky.

The ships were invisible but extremely audible. "Flight Tower calling *Seminole*..."

"*Seminole* here, Juno on the stick. Hello, Control. Will you tell Ramirez to please get his nose out of my ass!"

"Control to Ramirez, back off. Calling *Mirabelle*. Come in, *Mirabelle*."

"*Mirabelle* here, Control. Ramirez on the stick. I'm backing off; two hours I've been backing off. My passengers are sick of staring at the shiny side of a rock."

"Tough shit, Ramirez. Calling *Cholla*, Hello, *Cholla*..."

Lying on his bunk, half-asleep, Dana grinned as the pilots bickered and snapped at each other across the spaceways. He rubbed his eyes. He'd slept since the Jump out of hyperspace into spacetime normal. Crossing the ship to the control console, he pulled a food bar from the unit and sat in the pilot's chair to add his own voice to the chatter. "*Zipper* calling Flight Tower. *Zipper* calling Flight Tower."

There was a lag, then a voice crackled, "Flight Tower to *Zipper*. Identify, please."

Dana pursed his lips. Of course they did not know him, as they knew Juno and Ramirez and the pilots of the passenger liners. He said, "*Zipper*, MPL-48 Class, home registry Nexus, pilot and owner Starcaptain Dana Ikoru. Request permission to berth."

Control's impersonal voice softened, momentarily respectful. "Permission granted, Starcaptain. Welcome to Chabad."

"Welcome," said a woman's voice. "Juno in *Seminole* here."

"Thank you, Juno," Dana said.

The other pilots echoed her, offering him welcome. Control broke in: "Starcaptain, please lock your computer in for descent."

Dana snorted. Pointedly, he said, "Wipe your own ass, Control." But Control was already bitching someone else.

His ship's computer yapped silent numbers to itself. They flowed across the compscreen. There was no need for him to be awake; nothing ever happened during descent that a ship's computer could not handle. Nevertheless, Dana watched compscreen and vision screen, listening with one ear to the reports from the other approaching ships. All pilots did that; it was automatic.

He wondered: Why the crush? The din of voices reminded him strongly of the landing approach to Nexus. Then he remembered, as Ramirez said sarcastically, "Control, if you keep us out here much longer, I'll have to tell my passengers they're going to miss the Auction."

"The Auction's not for another twenty-seven standard days," snapped Control. "Tell them to go to sleep."

"Oh, sorry, Control," said Ramirez sweetly, "didn't mean to upset you." The other pilots chuckled.

"*Mirabelle*," Control grated, "inform your passengers that you'll be landing in one standard hour."

"Control," Dana said, "this is *Zipper*. Request landing ETA."

"*Zipper*, this is Control. Your landing ETA is approximately six hours."

"Thanks, Control," Dana said. Sighing, he switched the audio to off/alert. If anything changed,

Control could signal the ship's computer and a warning light would flash on. He hunted through his tapes for something quick, light, and distracting; he was beginning to feel anxious about going planetside.

He found Stratta's "Two-Part Invention in C Major." With music making background to thought, he told the computer to show onscreen everything it had stored about Chabad.

He scanned the marching array of facts. He was not trying to learn any of it; rather, he wanted to get a feel for this place he was descending toward. *Chabad had been a member of the Federation of Living Worlds since Year 72 AF. Fine. Abanat was its capital and its only city. Great. There was a Hyper bar in Abanat called The Green Dancer. That was good to know; he would undoubtedly stop there in his efforts to line up a dealer and intercept Lamonica. Politically, Chabad was a representational oligarchy, run by a Council....* Dana skipped the political stuff. *The temperature in the temperate latitudes often rose as high as 62 degrees Celsius. Sweet mother, it was hot. Products for export included gold, silver, platinum, glass, paper, kerit fur, seaweed, apton—a kind of cloth—and Osub RNsub (small p), which the computer identified as a rare blood-type.*

Enough. Dana turned the compscreen off, wondering what kind of music they listened to, and if anyone there had heard of Vittorio Stratta. The computer could not tell him that. He doubted it: the only places he knew of which had tapes of Stratta's compositions were Nexus and Old Earth. Someday he wanted to go to Terra, to Florence, the city in which Stratta had lived. Indeed, he thought, for all he knew he was near it, insofar as any place in spacetime normal was close to any other place. On the Hype map, it was not close at all; Terra was in Sector Alizarine, and though it might be only ten or twelve light-years distant, by non-hyperdrive speeds that was very far away. But Hype routes and the distances of spacetime normal were seldom congruent. To get from Chabad to Old Earth, Dana would have to return to Nexus Compcenter and map a route from Nexus through Alizarine Sector to Terra.

It was strange to gaze at the sky and know that the stars you saw might have worlds you would never go to. The pathways to the Living Worlds flowed through an inside out, topsy-turvy universe where there were no suns or planets or inhabitants at all, only shipbound pilgrims who could not stop.

The theme of the music changed, interrupting his musings. Dana glanced at the vision screen. He was still quite far from Chabad's moon, but for a frightening moment he thought *Zipper* had somehow tumbled into a collision course with another ship. A wheel of silver loomed across the screen. A space station, he thought, and realized that no, it couldn't be a space station; Chabad had no need for one. Few worlds did—and anyway, this was clearly a ship, he could see the fusion thrusters bulging from a segment of the rim. He stretched a hand to the audio control to hear what the pilots' chatter might tell him—and drew it back as he realized what the wheel-like ship had to be. It was Chabad's property, the Sardonyx Net, returning to the planet, he guessed, after its journey through the sector.

He suppressed a tremor of distaste. The contract-slave system into which Sector Sardonyx impressed its criminals was no better or worse than methods in other places. There were worlds where criminals were brain-wiped. And anyway, dorazine runners could not afford scruples. The slaves on Chabad were his market, so to speak; the system which created them had created him. He'd better approve of it.

He listened to Stratta's "Invention" until it ended, and then slept again, after setting a four-hour alarm. When it woke him, he checked the screens and then turned on the audio link. So far he'd seen no sign of the Hype cops, and it made him wonder if Monk could have been mistaken. The pilots bickered with Control. He was close enough to the moon's surface to see the domes of LandingPort Station. There was nothing for him to do but watch and listen. It was only in the shifts and changes of hyperspace that the course of a ship could not be directed by a machine. The swirling currents of ruby

dust were unpredictable, unfathomable, inaccessible, some said, to any but an organic intelligence.

Shut in his round, metal canister, Dana hurtled toward LandingPort Station like a thrown stone.

The Flight Field, where he landed, was outside the living domes. Before leaving the ship, Dana touched his dark, straight hair with silver glitter and put his ruby earrings in his ears. He was damned if he was going to be mistaken for some gawking, tranquilized tourist. He called a bubble from Port and inserted his Starcaptain's medallion in its control slot, intending to tell it to go straight to the shuttleship port.

But as it rose from the surface, it changed directions, detouring, and deposited him at the lock of an inspection portal. Dana scowled, and stepped through. A hard-faced official greeted him. "Welcome Chabad, Starcaptain Ikor."o.

"Thanks," Dana said.

"What's your purpose in coming to Chabad?" the official inquired.

"Who wants to know?" Dana said.

The man pulled out a certificate I.D. NARCOTICS CONTROL, it said.

"I see," said Dana. The man repeated his question. Blandly, Dana responded, "Tourism. I've berthed my ship; I'm going planetside. I've never been to Chabad before, as I'm sure your records will tell you. I came to see the Auction."

The official looked skeptical. "Are you carrying cargo?"

"No."

"If you're carrying cargo, we need a cargo roster. Chabad interdicts certain substances: glass, paper, silver, platinum, living cargo of any kind, unless previously cleared..."

"I'm not carrying cargo. I'm just a tourist."

"We'd like to do a check."

"On what grounds?" Dana demanded, putting up the fuss a tourist would make.

"Section D, Article 49307 of the Federation Code: 'When any vessel or owner of said vessel is suspected or has previously been suspected of being or having been in violation of the Illegal Substances Ordinance—'"

Dana held a hand up. "All right."

The official opened a panel in the wall. "Key us in, please."

Dana inserted his I-disc into the unit's slot. This unit was specifically designed to make contact with the Flight Field, and could, if necessary, direct individually or en masse every berthed ship. Dana tapped out the code which would permit the Port inspectors to enter *Zipper*.

The official nodded primly. "Thank you."

Grimly, Dana said, "If your inspectors damage my ship, I'll personally wring your neck."

The official sniffed. He then inserted a second disc and punched out a code which registered the Port's guarantee that the inspection would be orderly and nothing on *Zipper* would be disturbed.

Hell, Dana thought, this is silly. No one smuggles drugs to Chabad this way. Besides, if the Chabadese ever decide to uphold Section D, Article 49307 of the Federation Code, the economy of the whole damn planet'll fall apart.

"Are you finished?" he said. "May I go?"

The official said coldly, "LandingPort Station takes responsibility for the safety of your ship until released by you, except in cases of uncontrollable accident, malice, fraud, insurrection, or act of god. Directions within Port are available from any Port employee and from the wall panels. Corridors are color-coded; please follow the arrows and do not pass beyond designated points. The blue stripe will lead you to the shuttleship loading port."

“Thanks,” said Dana. He thought, His mother probably runs dorazine on the side.

“You're welcome. Enjoy your stay on Chabad.”

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“Up yours, too.”

Glaring, the man slapped the wall plate, releasing the door lock. Dana smiled at him. At the corridor's end he turned right, following the pathway traced by the blue stripe.

The Yago Net arrived at Chabad's moon on time.

In Abanat the clocks were striking five. Zed Yago stood by a pilot's vision screen, looking—his eye said *down* but his training said: *No, not down*—at his planet, itself in phase relative to the position of its moon, a white and blue and orange quarter. Abanat lay in shadow. If it were daylight, he would even now be talking with Rhani. In the corridors he heard voices, orders, the shuffle of feet. The transport of nearly four thousand slaves from the Net to the Barracks in Abanat, by shuttle, had begun. It would take five days. At the end of those days, he and Jo and Genji Kiyohara, the chief pilot, would leave the Net, and a cleaning crew would board her. Zed disliked these days of transition; the functions of Port, the arrival of the tourists, had long ceased to interest him. He wanted to get home.

He gazed at the bright, thick crescent of his world, irritatedly willing it to turn.

“Zed-ka.” Jo had come up behind him. Of all the Net crew, she alone called him by his first name. To everyone he was “Commander;” to the other medics he was “Senior Yago.” She had been his second for nine years, as long as he had been the Net's commander.

“Yes.”

“There is a direct-line call for the commander of the Yago Net from a police officer by the name of Michel A-Rae.”

“The—” Jo was nodding.

“The very same.”

Zed scowled. Every five years or so the Federation gave the job of head of drug control to someone else. This was the latest holder of the job. “What does he want?”

“I don't know,” Jo said.

Zed stepped to the com-unit, touching a button to blank the distracting vision screen. He tried to recall what he knew of the man, but came up with nothing except the memory of a blurred image from a PIN transmission. None of A-Rae's predecessors had ever called the Net. “I'll take it.”

Maybe, he thought, A-Rae was about to tell him where all the dorazine had gone. The compscreen image cleared. Zed felt Jo move to gaze over his shoulder. There was a soft whisper through the room as the pilots heard what was going on. Zed said to the image, “I'm Zed Yago, Net commander.”

The man on the screen said, “I'm Michel A-Rae.”

Zed thought, I know that voice. He replayed the sentence in his mind—but nothing about it stood out, and even as he struggled to identify it, it lost its familiarity. A-Rae's face was unremarkable: he had the smooth brown complexion common to many Enchantians. From the minute transmission lag Zed knew his ship had to be quite close by. “Did you want to tell me something?” he said.

“Not precisely,” A-Rae said. He stepped back, so that Zed saw him en-framed. His uniform was plain, black without trim, and he wore the silver insignia of his rank on his chest. Behind him shadow moved, his ship's crew and staff hovering at his elbows as Jo loomed at Zed's, not in focus and barely seen. “You do know who I am.”

Does he think me a fool? Zed thought. “You are head of the drug detail of the police arm of the Federation of Living Worlds,” he said.

A-Rae tucked his hands into his black hide belt. “With jurisdiction over all inter-sector transport and sale of prohibited drugs in the galaxy.”

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