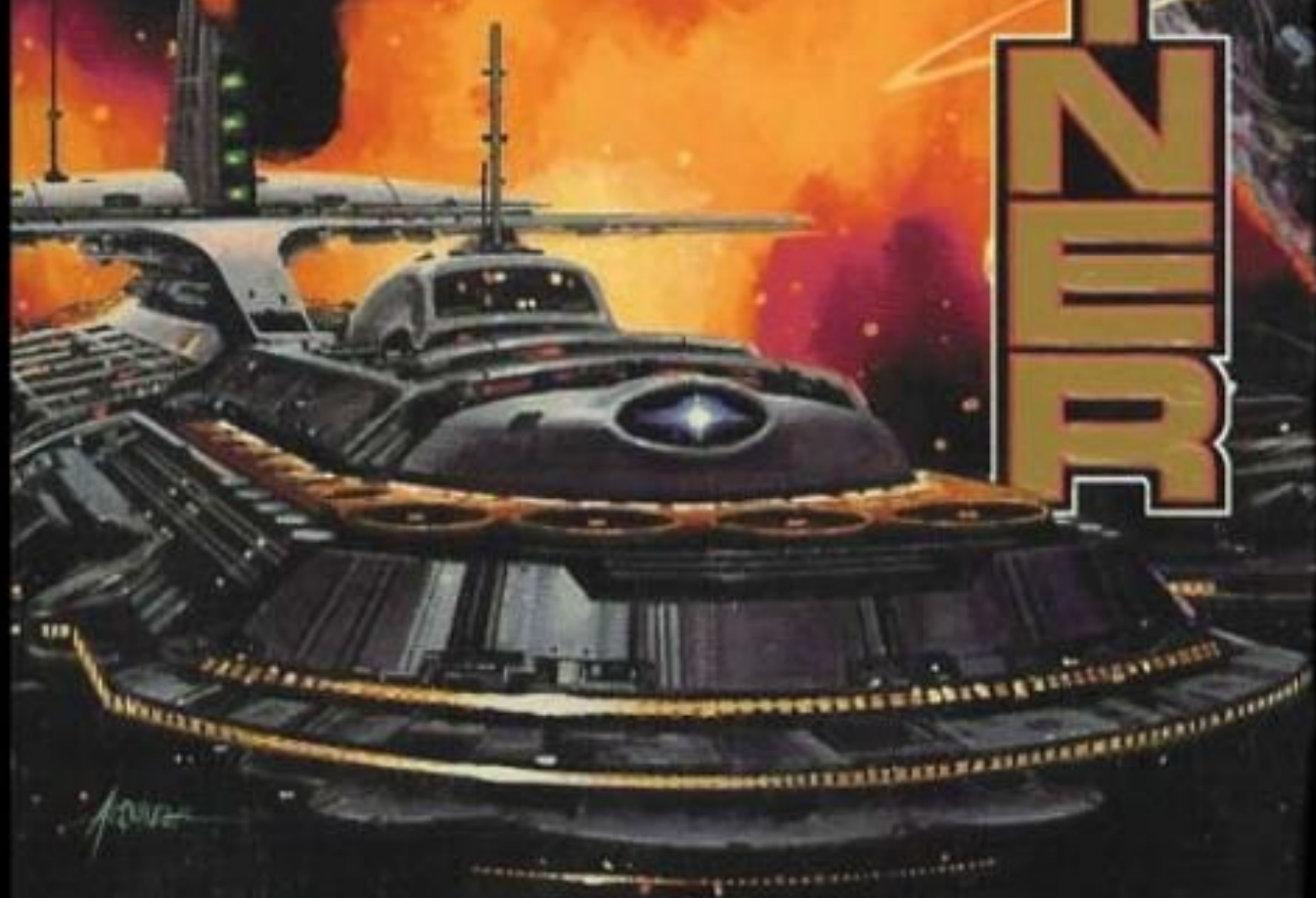


DAVID DRAKE

STARTER



By the author of
Ranks of Bronze and
Hammer's Slammers

72121-6 ☆ (CAN. \$6.99) ☆ U.S. \$5.99

BAEN
BOOKS

STARLINER

David Drake

EARTH: DOCKING

The starship shimmered yellow in the midst of three spikes of blue flux, the magnetic motors of the tugs which added their thrust to that of the larger vessel. Ribbons of aurora borealis filled the rest of the sunless sky with faint pastels.

Lieutenant Randall Colville didn't need to squint as he stared upward, because the limousine's sunroof grayed automatically to dim the dangerous brilliance of the tugs' discharges. The low-frequency rumble of the starship's passage through the stratosphere shook the car.

"Is that . . . ?" asked Lady Hilda Bernsdorf. She was in the driver's seat, but the limousine edged forward under external control in the line waiting for access to Port Northern's VIP parking.

Ran smiled at her, though there wasn't a great deal behind the expression at the moment. Hilda was a good lady, appreciative and quite appreciable. And the timing couldn't have worked out better

"The *Empress*?" he said. "No, probably a Planet-Class packet from Solar Traders."

Ran combed the fingers of his left hand through his short auburn hair as he considered the descending vessel. "The *Jupiter*'s on a Wednesday shuttle from K'Chitka. It's probably her. But she's not a third the size of the *Empress of Earth*, milady."

The limousine jerked forward again as the car at the head of the line cleared the final security check. The autopilot of Lady Bernsdorf's vehicle was capable of micrometric precision, but the Port Northern control worked in much coarser increments.

Ran made a mental note. The spaceport authorities should do something about that. Those with access to Port Northern's VIP lot understood the need for security as well as anyone on Earth, but they wouldn't put up with needless discomfort.

That wasn't a matter of concern to a junior officer of Trident Starlines . . . but thirty standard years in the past, Ran Colville had been born on Bifrost, the son of a hide-hunting ex-mercenary. Someday in the future, there might be a Ran Colville who was administrator of the greatest spaceport in the known universe.

"They're all ships," Hilda said. "They all take people places they don't want to be. . . ."

Her right hand tightened on the limousine's collective, a wheel with a 10-cm diameter. Forward and back motion controlled speed. Rotating the wheel turned the vehicle without need for the driver to consider the car's attitude or fan pitch. The control was disabled in the secure lane, so it didn't matter that the knuckles of Lady Bernsdorf's fine-boned hand were mottled with the force of their grip.

Ran laid his big left hand over Hilda's, squeezing just enough to remind her that he was present. Her features were as sharp and beautiful as those of a well-struck medallion. "Some people like to travel," he said gently.

He thought of Bifrost. Some people know that wherever they go will be better than where they started out, even if that means working their passage in the Cold Crew, outside a starship in spongy space.

Aloud, controlling his voice to prevent it from trembling, he said, "Is that why you didn't go with your husband to Nevasa? You don't like star travel?"

Hilda's hand twisted on the collective to grip his. She leaned toward him, reaching up with her free hand to draw him into a fierce kiss. Ran slipped his hand behind the woman and kneaded the flesh over her shoulderblades. The garment she wore was silk from a Waserli royal nursery chamber. The fabric was opaque despite its natural pale dun color, but it was so fine that he could feel the texture of Lady Bernsdorf's skin through it.

The line of cars advanced again. The stuttering motion was masked by Shockwaves reflected as the starship and its tugs neared the ground.

Hilda turned her head, breaking the kiss but continuing to hold Ran cheek to cheek with her. "The and other things," she said. "Sven isn't pleasant to be around when he's on a mission. If things aren't going well, he takes it out on whoever's closest. After a while, I decided that that wouldn't be my anymore."

"Well, ambassadors have a lot on their minds," Ran said. He twisted slightly to watch the sunroof through the blond halo of Lady Bernsdorf's hair.

A spot on the clear panel darkened. The limousine's sensors had noted potentially dangerous actinics and polarized against them before human retinas could have reacted. "This may be it," Ran murmured.

"Umm?"

"My ship. The Empress of Earth,"

Hilda stiffened, then relaxed and very deliberately released Colville. She straightened on her side of the car and touched a control. The limousine's windows were opaque to outside eyes; now the inner face of the windshield mirrored as well. She adjusted the angle of reflection and began fussing with her hair.

"I, ah . . ." Ran said awkwardly.

He wasn't sure what the woman wanted, but he knew he'd screwed up that time. She was a nice lady. She shouldn't feel that he didn't care about her when they parted, and he *did* care. But it had been a long road from Bifrost to Third Officer, Staff Side, of the *Empress of Earth*

"If your . . . if Count Bernsdorf is coming home early," Ran continued, "does that mean he's brokered peace and the emergency is over? Or, ah, that it's war for sure between Nevasa and Grantholm?"

"You're asking the wrong Bernsdorf," Hilda said curtly. She cleared the windshield as spaceport control jogged the limousine forward again. They were nearing the head of the queue. "Not that Sven would tell you anything. Or tell *me* anything. He's very professional. In five years, he'll be heading the Ministry of External Affairs."

The limousine shuddered from the hammering roar of the incoming starship. The eye-saving filter in the sunroof had expanded to the size of a gravy boat. It was almost black, indicating a near-uniform intensity of flux between the starship's own motors and those of the eight tugs aiding its descent. The vessel's mass was such that her own motors were being run at high capacity despite the large number of tugs adding their thrust.

"This is a—"

Ran Colville looked at Hilda in sudden confusion. Until she spoke, he'd forgotten she was present.

"—considerable promotion for you, isn't it, Ran?" the woman continued smoothly, as though her clear blue eyes had failed to notice her ex-lover's abstraction. "This ship is bigger than any of the others you've served on."

Ran gave a wry chuckle. "A Planet-Class liner is bigger than anything *I've* served on," he admitted. "And the *Empress of Earth*, well, she's the biggest there is, my love Except maybe for the *Bras* and that's a matter of how you measure the two of them. Yeah, this is a promotion."

Without changing her neutral expression, Hilda said, "Since Sven is coming home from Nevasa that means he's failed. If there'd been a realistic chance of Nevasa agreeing to peace talks, he'd have gone on to Grantholm. Federated Earth doesn't want an interstellar war to break out, but since both the principals do—they'll fight, won't they? Because they're fools."

"I don't figure it either," Ran said, staring upward toward the *Empress of Earth*. "Nevasa and Grantholm have everything they could want already. It's not like B-B . . . It's not like some of the fringe worlds, where people don't have anything to lose from a war."

Not like Bifrost.

The *Empress of Earth's* descent had been braked to a near hover by thrust at high altitude. Now she was dropping again, supported primarily by the tugs. The limousine's filters paled, permitting details of the huge vessel to show through a gray haze. Landing outriggers extended from the cylindrical hull, and the panels concealing the lifeboat bays were withdrawn.

The podded reaction engines were snugged into hollows while the *Empress* maneuvered in a gravity well. They drove the vessel in sponge space, fed and maintained by the Cold Crew while everyone else was safe in the starship's insulated interior.

The limousine grated to a halt at the guard kiosk. A canopy clamped over the vehicle, sealing it from the North Polar elements. The driver's-side window withdrew before Hilda touched the controls. An attendant in civilian clothes with an identibox on her left shoulder leaned into the opening.

"Lady Hilda Bernsdorf," Hilda said coolly. She stared directly at the identibox. "Meeting Countess Bernsdorf, a passenger on the *Empress of Earth*."

"Randall Park Colville," Ran said. He blinked involuntarily, though he knew the tiny burst of laser light which painted his retinas was of too low an intensity for him to notice. "Reporting for duty as a junior staff lieutenant aboard the *Empress of Earth*."

There was a brief *zeep* from the attendant's shoulder. "Milady, sir," she said as she straightened. "Thank y—"

The closing window cut off the last of the perfunctory phrase. If Port Northern's data bank had not cleared the occupants' identifications, or if sensors had indicated anything doubtful within the vehicle, the limousine would have been shunted into a holding facility hardened against nuclear weapons before the check proceeded.

"Ran," Lady Bernsdorf said. She was facing the windshield as the limousine staged through the double airlocks which protected Port Northern against the elements. Hoarfrost formed despite the static charge of the dome covering the port facilities. It zigged like frozen lightning against the aurora pastels.

Ran looked down at his companion. "Milady?"

"We agreed that this was only for a few days," Hilda went on in a controlled voice. "That we never try to see each other again. Because it was too dangerous."

Ran thought he understood at last why Hilda had been so tense ever since they got up in the morning to make the drive. "Oh, milady," he said gently. She still wouldn't look at him.

He leaned over the console and kissed her rigid cheek. "Did you think I was going to wreck your life? Oh, love, I'm not that sort. You've honored me greatly with your company. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. Least of all cause you problems with your husband."

The limousine halted in its assigned space—less than ten meters from the VIP entrance to the passenger terminal. Ran pressed the door release. The panel shrank from an impervious sheet to a centimeter-thick block resting on the lower coaming.

He got out. He thought Hilda had started to say something, but when he looked back she was still seated, and her eyes were straight ahead.

Ran stretched. Passengers and the uniformed but unarmed doorman glanced at him—a young man of middle height, in the white uniform of a Staff Side officer of Trident Starlines. Men on Bifrost were rangy rather than solid, but no one who had ever seen a Bifrost Cold Crew riot doubted the strength—or the ruthlessness—of those who came from that bitter world on the fringe of civilization.

The atmosphere of the parking area was slightly warmer than that set by the limousine's climate control. It contained vague tinges of lubricant and ozone from the vehicular traffic. At the distant rear of the lot, a monorail hissed to a halt and began transferring the normal mass of passengers and visitors to the slideways that would take them within the building.

Ran looked up through the cleardome of Port Northern. For a moment, all he could see was steam.

roiling in patterns of compression and rarefaction from the thrust that balanced the starliner's huge mass.

The view cleared abruptly. The motors of the tugs and starship had blasted away all the condensation on the landing field.

The *Empress of Earth* hung poised a few meters from touching the ground: 800 meters long, 150 meters across the diameter of her cylindrical hull; built to the precision of an astronomical device despite her enormous mass.

The highest expression of technology within the known universe . . . and Ran Colville was a captain officer aboard her.

He straightened his cap. He considered throwing it in the air, but he'd gotten this far by not putting a foot wrong professionally. He wasn't going to jeopardize his chances of getting much farther.

Shouting with laughter hidden by the thunder of the starliner landing, Ran Colville marched toward the entrance and his future. He didn't look back at the limousine, which still sat with the right-hand door open.

Franz Streseman's monorail compartment was a party of Grantholm citizens: two couples and six single men. All of them were middle-aged, all of them were buzzed if not drunk; and they were very loud. Franz sat stiffly, staring toward his hands crossed in his lap and thinking about the engineering degree he was leaving behind.

Perhaps forever; but "forever" was a concept beyond the experience of an eighteen-year-old, which made the utter disruption of his life was a present reality.

"*Damn, damn, damn the Mindanesians,*" sang the party from Grantholm, all the men and three of the women joining in on the choruses.

Franz knew the lyrics, from a camp song of the Mindanao campaign twenty years before. Mindanao had been settled from Earth, mostly by Filipinos and other East Asians, but with funding and contracts from Grantholm. The colony fell behind on its repayment schedule, because a significant proportion of its wireweed production was being diverted to interloping traders at free-market prices rather than going to Grantholm on fixed-rate contracts.

Grantholm's determination to have its rights sparked a full-scale rebellion.

"Cross-eyed, dirty-faced ladrones," the party sang.

"Underneath the triple suns, civilize them with our guns,

"And return us to our own beloved homes!"

The men in the Grantholm party were of an age to have served on Mindanao, but it was unlikely that all of them had done so. Grantholm had developed a network of dependant worlds through a combination of entrepreneurial drive and governmental action. Most of the armed forces which put down the Mindanese Rebellion—and they *did* put it down, though wireweed production was only now beginning to equal what it had been before the war—came from those subject planets.

Five years after the Mindanese Rebellion drowned in blood, Mindanese battalions were serving Grantholm on Cartegenia during the "emergency" there.

"Social customs there are few," boomed the Grantholm men.

"All the ladies smoke and chew . . ."

The monorail swayed gently as its gyroscopic stabilizer matched the polar winds without difficulty. Ultra-high-frequency sound predicted the force and direction of gusts, feeding data to the stabilizer, so that the monorail actively met disturbances instead of reacting to them. Magnetic bearings supported the cars which slipped along above the rail without direct contact, and the podded drive motors vibrated only at the molecular level.

The cars' physical environment was as smooth as human endeavors could be in the real world. The social environment within Franz Streseman's compartment, however—

"And the men do things the padres say are wrong . . ."

~~The compartment was designed to hold thirty people in comfort. Besides the Grantholm party~~ there were only five others, huddled, like Franz, at the further end, though the monorail was packed on this run.

A family of six—father, mother, and children, none of whom was older than ten standard years—shuffled into the compartment from the next car down. The adults hesitated for a moment, blinking if fearful that the apparent emptiness was a trick.

A Grantholm man noticed the newcomers. "Hey!" he shouted. "This compartment isn't for slant-eyes!"

"Yeah," cried one of the women. "Ride out there!" She pointed to the white expanse beyond the car's full-length side windows. Violent winds lifted dry snow from the ground and whipped it into ghastly patterns. "There's plenty of room for your sort."

The newcomers were in origin Tamils, from low on the Indian subcontinent. Their eyelids had no sign of an epicanthal fold—

And more particularly, they were as unlikely to be citizens of Nevasa as were those folk in the front of the compartment

"Pardon?" said the man. His smile was broad and as humorless as that of a man dying in convulsions. "I am Parvashtisinga Sadek and—"

"Go back where you came from, slant-eye!"

"Hey, you can leave the wife. I might have a use for her!"

"Save the oldest girl, too!"

Very deliberately, Franz Streseman got up from his seat. He stood in the aisle, facing the Grantholm party with his legs spread and his hands crossed behind his back in a formal at-ease posture. He said nothing, but he met the eyes of any who looked his way.

He heard the Tamils slip into seats behind him. The children began to chatter, but their parents shushed them. When Franz was sure that the last of them was settled, he walked forward two places and sat down again himself.

"Hey, we're coming into the station," noted one of the Grantholm women who was looking out the side window to avoid having to note Franz Streseman's presence. As she spoke, the car shuddered with the *thump, thump*, of airlocks. The monorail had passed into the vast protected doughnut of Pö Northern, encircling the open area where the starships landed. In the sudden stillness of the atmosphere, Franz felt the faint whine of drive pods braking the train.

Shapes and bright light fluttered past the compartment's windows. The images slowed to become platforms—empty to the right, packed with passengers for the return trip on the left of the train—the monorail decelerated to a crawl. Thrust pulled Franz forward against his grip on the handrail. The Sadek children squealed again, and the infant began to cry.

The car shifted with a loud *clack* as the superconducting magnets shut down and the monorail touched its support rail for the first time. The right-hand wall slid up and recessed into the car's roof. Warm, dry air bathed the passengers. The monorail's quiver had been too slight to notice during the high-speed run, but Franz noticed the absence now that they had come to a halt.

Baggage consoles were spaced a meter apart along the back wall of the platform, with a uniform attendant waiting near each trio of machines. Franz didn't run, but he was young and alone. He made to a console a half-step ahead of one of the Grantholm couples. The woman muttered to her husband as other members of their party spread across the consoles to either side.

Franz placed the ID chip he wore as a signet on his left little finger in the slot of the routine machine. The holographic display fluoresced in a random pattern, then reformed with the images of eight sealed, cubic-meter crates and four ordinary suitcases. The crates sat beneath a red mask; the

suitcases were outlined in blue.

Franz nodded and pressed the pad of his thumb to the cursor pulsing on the immaterial screen. An attendant, a woman with a dark complexion and indeterminate features, stepped over to him and slipped her own chip into the paired slot of the console.

She smiled professionally. "So, Mr. Streseman," she said. "You identify this luggage as yours and request that it be loaded aboard the *Empress of Earth*?"

"That is correct," Franz said in the formal response to authority which had been ingrained in him since birth.

"Eight pieces of hold baggage, four pieces to accompany you in your cabin. Would you like to make any changes now? You won't be able to do so once the vessel is under way."

"No," Franz said. "That is correct. I am returning to Grantholm for military service. I will not have need of the items in my hold baggage until, until I resume my education."

The luggage itself was in the lower compartment of one of the cars of the monorail. Robot systems would transfer it to the starliner, but there were practical as well as legal reasons for requiring passengers to identify their own property immediately before boarding.

"Say, *you're* from Grantholm?" asked the woman behind Franz.

"And you authorize Port Northern and Trident Starlines to examine these cases in any fashion they choose, Mr. Streseman?"

"That is correct."

The attendant placed her own thumbprint on the cursor, clearing the display. She removed her ID chip. "The *Empress of Earth* is at Berth 8, Mr. Streseman," she said in a slightly warmer tone. "Follow the blue arrows around the concourse if you don't know the way . . . but I don't think you'll have any difficulty seeing the *Empress*."

Franz turned from the console. The Grantholm woman pushed past him but her husband said, "Scuse me, buddy, but I heard you say you're one of the boys going home to teach Nevasa a lesson. I'm Hans Dickbinder."

He stuck out his hand. He was a black-haired man, a centimeter or two shorter than Franz but thin and soft-looking.

Franz clicked his heels and dipped his head in crisp acknowledgement. He did not appear to notice the man's outstretched hand. "And I am Franz Streseman," he said.

He strode off to the head of the monorail platform, from which slidewalks led around the concourse.

* * *

"Welcome to Trident Village," murmured a disembodied voice speaking Universal as Lieutenant Wanda Holly walked through the authorized personnel only doorway. The badges Trident Starline issued to emigrants when they paid their fares responded to UHF interrogation with the wearer's birth language. The greeting could have been in any of a thousand tongues.

If Holly's ID chip had not identified her as a Trident Starlines official, the voice would have added, "Please wait here until someone arrives to serve you." The intruder *would* wait, because both blast-proof anteroom doors sealed at the moment of unauthorized entry.

The door to the operations room collapsed open as Wanda stepped toward it. Danalesco, wearing coveralls with emigrant staff on the cuffs and supervisor in a red field on his shoulders, was alone in the room. He looked up from his console and called, "Yo, Wanda! Good to see you again. I thought you were done with us peons since you got your second stripe."

Wanda Holly wore a gray, one-piece fatigue uniform with the double stripes of a senior lieutenant on the cuffs. The upper stripe was twice the width of the lower, indicating that she was on the Star Side, passenger matters, rather than Ship Side, navigation and control. On public occasions, Sta-

officers wore gleaming white, while the Ship officers were in dark blue which was less likely to focus the attention of a passenger.

Around the Trident Starlines badge on her shoulder was the name of Wanda's vessel in script: *Empress of Earth*.

"How's it going, Danny?" she said. Her voice was pleasant, but she was checking the systems board as she spoke. A dozen segments were in the amber, about par for the course; but three were redlined, and she couldn't have hidden her frown if she'd wanted to.

"Cholera," Danalesco said apologetically. "Stage One passed them. We've sealed the affected dorms and the one on each side.

"Blacklisted the labor supplier?" Wanda said. Only detachment prevented her voice from showing disapproval.

"About three seconds after I sealed the dorms," the emigrant specialist replied. "Why don't you teach your grandmother to suck eggs, girl?"

She smiled. "Sorry, Danny," she said. "I don't want a cholera outbreak . . . and I *particularly* don't want the client-side supervisor to refuse a shipment and leave me with four thousand runny assholes in Third Class till we get back to Earth."

Wanda walked behind the console, shifting her viewpoint so that she could cover the panorama of Trident Village without interfering with the controls. It was Danalesco's unit, after all, though the decision as to whether or not to load a passenger or any number of passengers was made by the vessel's officers rather than members of the ground staff.

"Forty-two hundred and five," said Danalesco. "No, I'm a liar—seven. Three births and a death,"

Wanda looked over sharply again. Danalesco spread his hands. "Hey, healthy twenty-three-year-old male, blew out an embolism. *Not* contagious, girl. Ease off."

She shrugged and forced another smile. "This is the part that scares me, Danny. It's like loading sardines. If there's one bad fish here, four thousand are bad at the far end."

"So send Kropatchek," the supervisor said with a chuckle. "This is the Third Officer's work, after all. And don't worry about the cholera. Your full load had processed through to the output side before that lot was admitted."

"Kropatchek quit us this voyage," Wanda said as she eyed the screens. "He got an offer from Consolidated Voyagers and left us on Nevasa. He's to be First Officer on one of their combination packets on the Earth-Wellspring-Nevasa Triangle."

Trident Village was a huge operation; more accurately, two large operations. Would-be emigrants arrived at the input side, either individually or in batches of up to a thousand delivered by a labor contractor. They were housed in barrack blocks one stage better than prison accommodations which they were bathed and examined, and the strictly-limited volume of their baggage was checked and sterilized.

When the emigrants were cleared, they were marched by blocks—now called Loading Units of internal documentation—to the output side of Trident Village. Output side was the finest living and social environment that most of the emigrants had ever seen in their lives. It was vanishingly improbable that any of them would see its like again.

On the output side, shops provided cheap, high-quality clothing, information on various destinations, and social events which integrated frightened individuals into groups with their own pride and ethic. Group identity would help the emigrants on their long voyage and ease their life on the world which received them.

"Tsk, he'll be staging out of Port Southern," Danalesco said. "I could never do that. The facilities are all right, I suppose, but I'd have to root up my family and move from Metro Chicago. Kropatchek married?"

"Yeah, but I don't think that's very high on his list of priorities," Wanda said drily. "Red thinks he's god's gift to women."

The shops around the Trident Village concourse were closed. Fairy lights drifted from lampposts, providing a friendly, private illumination for the group dance going on. Traditional patterns formed and rotated, while the aurora borealis rippled the sky overhead.

"Chinese this time?" she asked. She was a pretty woman without being a stunner: of average height and a little too conscious of her weight to be comfortable about it. At the moment she was wearing her hair short and a color close to orange, but she would change back to her natural light brown before boarding the *Empress* on the outbound voyage.

"That's right," agreed the supervisor. "Thirty-five hundred for Biscay, the rest to Hobilo." He cleared his throat. "You don't think Kropatchek is god's gift to women?"

"Depends on the woman, I suppose," Wanda said. "I didn't notice that Red ever lacked for company."

Trident Village was not solely a humanitarian gesture, though there might have been some of that also. Even the largest corporations are run by humans, and humans not infrequently have human whims.

There were business reasons for the solicitude as well. Most of the Third Class emigrants didn't pay their own fare: that was arranged by the recipient world, working through labor contractors. But, while the emigrants themselves were unlikely ever to make another interstellar journey, they *did* send letters back to family members and compatriots about the way they had been treated en route to their new life.

Urban slums and back-country villages accounted for virtually the whole of labor emigration, splitting the total down the middle in an average year. Word-of-mouth was the only form of advertising which worked in either environment.

Trident Starlines was willing to spend a little effort to encourage contractors to use its hulls because, though the fare per head was relatively low, four thousand Third Class passengers together paid the round-trip running costs of the *Empress of Earth*. Figures for smaller Trident Starlines vessels were in proportion. The First and Second Class fares became pure profit when steerage was full.

"We're breaking in a new Third Officer this run," Wanda said. She opened an unoccupied console with her ID chip and began to run the medical profiles of the emigrants slated to embark on the *Empress of Earth*. She kept her finger on the scroll button, pausing the display only when someone spiked above the normal parameters. In each case that she checked, Wanda found that the individual was a member of a family group of four or more.

The recipient worlds could afford to take a few grandparents. Besides, old folks were useful to watch the infants while all the younger adults in the community were working.

"Well, I'm glad to have you back for one load, Wanda," Danalesco said in a mild, serious tone. "You're tough, but you ought to be. Some of the officers coming through, they act like Third was made for me and my people were just janitors. That's not right."

He nodded toward the village dance. From the edges of the concourse, Emigrant Staff officials watched helpfully. Danalesco's personnel wore light cotton garments like those of the emigrants, with only saucer hats and Trident Starlines badges to set them apart from those they directed.

"They're people," Danalesco went on. "They oughta be treated like people, at least by us. When they get to Biscay or wherever, well, that's out of our hands."

"Yeah, well, this lot looks pretty good," the woman said. "The way it always does when it's on your shift, Danny."

"My pleasure," the supervisor replied, his tone underlining the truth of the words. "Know anything about the new guy? Somebody I've worked with in the past on other ships?"

Wanda removed her chip to shut the console down. "I don't think so, Danny," she said. "His name is ~~Ran Colville, Randall Colville. He's been with Trident for twelve years, which is something, but this is his~~ first run from an Earth homeport."

Danalesco raised an eyebrow. "And they're putting him on the *Empress*?" he said.

Wanda laughed. "There's planets out there besides Earth, Danny," she said. "He spent a year and half as First Officer on the *Princess Trader* out of Learoyd and Mithgarth, so he's got experience."

As Wanda opened her mouth to continue, her ear clip dinged a pure bell note. "Umph," she muttered, and attached the coil of hair-fine flex from the commo pod on her belt to a jack on the console. An artificial intelligence in Trident Starlines' central office clicked out orders in an emotionless female voice.

Wanda released the flex and stepped back. "Duty calls," she told Danalesco. "Colville's arrived at the terminal, and I'm to check him aboard the *Empress*."

"Good luck with him," the supervisor said.

Wanda crooked a grin at Danalesco. "Whatever that means," she said.

A passenger liner was taking off into the midnight sky. Its motors and those of the coupled tugboats threw harsh shadows across the emigrants dancing on the concourse.

* * *

The terminal's top level was for crews and ground operations personnel alone. The floor was of resilient, sound-deadening synthetic, practical but plain, save for the paths worn pale across it by decades of feet. There were elevators, slidewalks and communications booths, but Top Level had none of the frills and retail shops that packed the lower, passenger, concourses. x

There was a great deal of open space, and there was an unmatched view of the *Empress of Earth* through the clear wall fronting the inner docks. Ran Colville walked along slowly, staring greedily at the vast bulk. He knew that he was attracting amused attention from the handful of uniformed personnel on the slidewalks, but he didn't particularly care.

The *Empress of Earth* wasn't beautiful, exactly, but she was magnificent. This was Ran's first look at her, and he was more concerned with that than with the image he projected to strangers he'd never see again.

Bulk freight was sometimes carried between the stars in nickel-iron asteroids, ballooned to colossal size by controlled fusion jets, but interstellar passenger liners were far and away the most massive constructions humans had ever designed to fly within an atmosphere. The *Empress of Earth* and the *Brasil* of Consolidated Voyagers, operating from Port Southern in Antarctica, were the largest of the starliners.

Though Trident and Consolidated were fiercely competitive across a wide variety of routes, there was a tacit agreement at the top of the commercial pyramid: the *Empress of Earth* and the *Brasil* sailed the same nine-planet route from Earth to Tblisi, but on inverted schedules. When one of the superships left Earth, the other was lifting off from Tblisi on her return voyage.

The *Empress of Earth* was a commercial venture, but she and her giant rival were also ships of state. The government of Federated Earth preferred not to interfere in the operations of private companies, but the greatest starliners in the known universe were representatives of Earth, like it or no. When the giant vessels were nearing completion three years before, quiet representations to the directors of Trident and Consolidated made it clear that the interests of humanity and civilization required that the ships be operated in tandem rather than in cut-throat competition. The government would see to those interests if the companies did not.

The companies quickly announced complementary schedules for their flagships. The decision benefited all concerned. Neither line had a vessel that could comfortably pair with their giant to create a balanced flow of trade instead of a series of indigestible pulses. Few members of the public even

considered that there might have been another possibility

Wherever possible, the bureaucracy of Federated Earth worked on the principles of indirection and deniability. Nonetheless, the bureaucracy worked very well.

The *Empress of Earth* was a huge cylinder lying on its side. She was supported by the full-length outriggers she deployed when counter-thrust and air resistance had scrubbed off enough velocity in the upper atmosphere. On a solid surface, the lower curve of the hull didn't touch the ground. The thin soles of Biscay left yellow streaks meters high on the metal. These were steamed off during each landing at Calicheman, where a lake absorbed the raw power of starliners landing without tugs.

Teams pairing ground personnel with members of the ship's crew examined the docking bits, the great hooks to which the tugs attached their cables. The motors of the *Empress of Earth* were powerful enough to lift the vessel at full load from a gravity well deeper than Earth's, but at that level of operation, the magnetic flux would be concentrated enough to sever the molecular bonds of bedrock. Normally, and always on Earth, tugs balanced a majority of the vessel's weight during lift-off and descent. The bits which took that strain were tested by sonics and electrofluxing after each use—but they were also eyeballed by trained personnel who might notice corrosion or pitting before the hardware did. v

The starliner's outer hull was not smooth. Apart from the podded fusion engines for deep space operation, their stores of reaction mass, and the hatches for passengers, crew, maintenance, and equipment routing, there were staples in rows running the circuit of the hull at twenty meter intervals. They were the handholds and safety-line supports for the Cold Crew, the men—and the handful of women—who maintained the *Empress of Earth's* drive engines, riding the hull even in sponge space.

In theory, the Cold Crews worked with double safety lines. To move, a crewman was to set a new line before he freed the other one. In practice, and especially when the crews were shorthanded (they were generally shorthanded, even on the vessels of top-of-the-line firms like Trident Starlines) the men did what they had to do to make the speed and bring the vessel in on any schedule that the captain set.

And every few voyages, somebody missed a step or was caught clearing a jet with his long-hafted adjustment tool when the engine sputtered and threw him—

Out. Into space, or into sponge space, without even stars for final companions. Into the Cold.

The Cold Crews worked four hours on the hull, followed by eight hours inside for sleep or rest or at least warmth (if their souls could accept it) before they had to return to their duties. The Cold Crews were clannish. They couldn't communicate at all in sponge space, and they spoke very little under other circumstances.

When they fought, which was often, they did so with the fury of men who knew Death and Hell too intimately to fear either.

Ran Colville stared, through the clear wall and deep into his past. After an uncertain time he shuddered to alertness again and resumed his saunter along the *Empress of Earth's* vast hull. He forced a smile, both as camouflage and because he'd learned that a pretense of mild calm helped to drag his soul back from an emptiness deeper than vacuum in the sidereal universe.

"Lieutenant Colville?" called the woman who stepped from the lift shaft twenty meters ahead of Ran. She wore a fatigue uniform with two stripes; a senior lieutenant, and almost certainly Staff Sergeant, Second Officer of the *Empress*.

"Yes, ma'am," Ran said. "You're . . . ?" He nodded in the direction of starliner filling the view through the clear wall.

"Lieutenant Holly," she said, taking the hand Ran extended cautiously in case the SOP aboard the *Empress of Earth* was different. He'd served on some vessels in which officers saluted one another. It was a matter of the captain's whim, like much else aboard a vessel operating scores of light years from

home—and much of the time outside the sidereal universe.

"Let's get aboard," Holly continued, striding back to the structural pillar from which she appeared. At Top Level, it included a crew car as well as the paired lift and drop shafts. "I landed immediately to make sure that the Third Class loading would be under control, but there's always dozens of passengers having hissy fits during disembarking. It's almost as bad as the hour before we undock."

Ran wasn't sure whether Holly spoke sharply because she felt pressured by the immediate circumstances, or whether she was simply curt in all dealings with her fellow crewmen. There were plenty of Staff Side officers who saved all their social skills for their duties toward the passengers.

She wasn't a bad-looking woman, not that Ran cared much about looks—or the fact that she was probably a few years older than he was. Personality might not be everything with him, but it accounted for a good ninety percent of his interest.

Anyway, he didn't mix business and pleasure. Women were always cheap, once you figured out what coin a particular lady wanted to be paid in. He liked women as well as any man in the universe did, but he wasn't about to let his pecker get in the way of his duty.

The crew car was reeling back from an open hatch on top of the *Empress of Earth*. The transparent vehicles weren't intended for use by large numbers; the twenty or so personnel aboard this one put it well beyond its listed capacity. The supporting girder of basket-woven monocystal fibers swayed dangerously. It was unlikely to shear, but it might well jam, unable to extend or retract. If that happened, the car would bob in the polar winds until a maintenance crew reached it from a cherrypicker.

Lieutenant Holly glanced at the slowly-retracting car and stepped away from the access door. "We'd better keep out of the way," she muttered. "It looks like the whole Cold Crew's in the basket."

The car grunched against the building before locking home. Because of the extra weight, it hit the support step and had to bounce to clear it. The access hatch opened. Men, heavysset and dark-haired with enough features in common to have all been members of the same family, burst from the car like buckshot from a gun barrel. They crowded into the drop shaft without a word or a glance around the concourse.

Holly waited till the last of them were clear, then stepped into the car they had vacated. "Kephalonians," she said. "Most of Trident's Cold Crews come from there or Pyramus."

"And Bifrost," Ran said without expression as he followed her into the car.

"Right, and Bifrost," Holly agreed. She smiled for the first time and stuck out her hand again. "My name's Wanda, by the way."

"Ran," Ran said, glad for the change in atmosphere.

"They say that if you look into a Cold Crewman's eyes, you can see all the way to Hell," Wanda prattled on. There was nothing hostile in the comment. It was as if she were discussing schools of fish in the Great Central Trench of Tblisi.

"I've heard that," Ran said. There wasn't enough emotion in his voice to make the words agreeable.

Under the Second Officer's control, the crew car began to travel toward the *Empress of Earth* again. "Me, even the Starlight Bar—the observation dome in our nose—is too close to being nowhere," she continued. "I keep out of it except when I've just got to be there."

"Yeah, I can understand that," Ran said.

Normally, a sheet of First Class passengers would have been marching across the broad gangway extending from the terminal to the vessel. Today, the usual procedures were disrupted. A party of ten aides and bodyguards disembarked in a cluster around a tall man with a mane of preternaturally pale hair. A dozen other guards and officials, wearing clothes so formal that they might as well have been uniforms, advanced to meet him.

A slight woman in a tailored dress that flowed like beige fire stood at the terminal end of the gangplank.

Wanda Holly pointed down at the gathering. "That's Minister Sven Bernsdorf," she commented. "The Terran government sent him on a peace mission to Nevasa. He traveled out by the *Brasil* and then straight back with us. I hope that means good news."

"It's out of our hands, at any rate," Ran said. He stared for a moment at the slight, blond woman waiting for the ambassador. A good lady. He hoped she'd be well, but that was out of his hands too.

Then the car locked itself onto the hatch coaming, and Third Officer Ran Colville prepared to go aboard the *Empress of Earth* for the first time. . . .

* * *

The initial Staff Side meeting was held in the officers' lounge of the *Empress of Earth*.

The room was decorated in the style of an 18th-century English coffee house. It had a central table with benches of coarse-grained wood, seats built into the sidewalls, and the auto-bar was hidden in a paneled kiosk whose pillars supported a wooden canopy.

The fireplace opposite the door was of marble, but the realistic flames were switched off for the moment. Instead, holographic birds flitted across the spring-blue sky beyond windows of small, square panes.

There was no reason that the room shouldn't have been of simple, utilitarian pattern, but the decorators who designed the public areas of the *Empress of Earth* hadn't quit when *that* series of jobs was done.

Something that to Ran Colville was merely a little gray bird sat on the "outside ledge" of a window and chirruped in a tiny voice. Despite his tension, Ran grinned at the hologram.

His initial reaction to the period decoration had been negative. *This sort of nonsense was for passengers, not for the professionals.* Thirty seconds later, he found the ambiance growing on him. He didn't especially like the dark, heavy wood and the clumsy furniture, but the lounge had character. Character, instead of featureless homogeneity that could have been interchanged with similar spaces on a thousand other ships.

Character was what made the *Empress of Earth* special. Passengers were attracted to her for her size, for the quality of her table and the service provided by her human and automated staff . . . but repeat customers and the word-of-mouth they provided came because passengers felt comfortable aboard the vessel.

Interstellar travel was a nerve-wracking business even for a ship's personnel. Vessels still vanished for reasons that could only be conjectured. Perhaps catastrophic engine failure, perhaps collision with debris in the sidereal universe; perhaps a sponge-space navigational disaster that left the vessel wandering without hope of recovery or even of making a planet-fall within the limitless volumes of space.

A lifeless box, however prettily decorated, was no more reassuring than the surface pleasantry of a robot whose thought processes were both hidden and utterly inhuman. The officers' lounge of the *Empress of Earth* wasn't simply an exercise in period imitation. It had an eccentric spirit of its own.

A ship with character at all levels was likely to breed a crew whose competence protruded at the corners through their smooth veneer. Between them, they would get more custom than mere scheduling and safety statistics alone would explain.

"Where's Babanguida?" asked Commander Hiram Kneale, head of the *Empress's* Staff Side. He stood in front of the kiosk, clearly ready to start the meeting.

Ran hadn't met Kneale before. The commander was a broad man of middle height, with strong features and hair that swept back across his temples like a flow of gray cast iron. He had a resonant voice which civilized but did not conceal his irritation at the missing member of his team.

"He's on the way, sir," offered a senior rating with the name MOHACKS over the left breast pocket of his white uniform. "Had to make a comfort stop, is all."

For the purpose of the meeting, the vessel's entire Staff Side—three officers and five ratings who should have been six—was gathered in the officers' lounge. Mohacks had a superficially open face, but Ran hadn't missed the look of cold appraisal in the enlisted man's eyes when he looked at the new Third Officer.

"If he's late again," Kneale said without bluster, "he can see how comfortable he finds the galley for however long he remains in the crew of the *Empress*."

The door opened and closed again so swiftly that it was hard to imagine how the tall man with skin the color of African Blackwood had been able to slip through it during the interval. "Very sorry, Mr. Kneale," the newcomer said. "I found a little boy in the head off the Embarkation Hall, crying his eyes out. He was trying to get into the supply closet 'cause he'd mistook it for the outside door, and his mother, she was some strict religious order and wouldn't go into the Men's to fetch him."

Babanguida met Kneale's glare with warm, brown eyes as innocent as those of a puppy wagging its tail from the middle of a puddle of urine. After a moment, the commander said in a neutral tone, "Good to have you with us again, Babanguida." Kneale hadn't forgotten anything, wasn't promising anything. He was just holding the matter in abeyance.

He cleared his throat "Very well," he began. "Most of us know one another already, but there are two new faces. Crewman Second Class Blavatsky—stand up, Blavatsky."

A plump woman in her mid-20s obeyed, smiling nervously, and sat back down again on one of the seats along the bulkhead.

"Blavatsky has transferred to us from Ship Side, so perhaps some of you know her already," Kneale continued. "She'll be on my watch. And we have a new Third Officer, Lieutenant Randall Colville. Yes, that's right, stand up."

Ran rose, meeting the eyes of his fellows with a swift deliberation that acknowledged everyone but didn't delay the proceedings. He nodded to the commander and seated himself again on the bench across the central table from Wanda Holly.

"I understand you've been running Colville through his paces already, Ms. Holly?" Kneale said.

"He was in his whites, so I let him field calls while I changed from fatigues," Wanda said with a smile. "There weren't any problems. He can do my work any time."

"Passengers are pretty much passengers, whichever side of the galaxy," Ran said easily. "The only tricky one was the family of K'Chitkans who wanted to disembark on the crew car—"

"How did you handle that?" Kneale said, responding with the quick certainty of an autoloader returning to battery after a shot.

"The birds?" Ran said. K'Chitkans were thick-bodied and had large heads, but their distant ancestors had once flown. They didn't look particularly birdlike in Earth terms, but males had a crest of tall feathers and vestigial beaks were common among both sexes. "Well, frankly, I loaded them into a crew car, went over with them, and made sure they got on the drop shaft to the passenger level. They'd booked the Asoka Suite. I decided that was enough of an outlay for Trident Starlines to live with a kink in the rules."

Kneale smiled crisply. "A good decision," he said. There was no emotional loading in his voice. The message was in the words themselves. That sort of man was dangerous, because it was easy to believe that he didn't mean what he said . . .

"Very good . . ." the commander repeated. "Mr. Colville, the ratings on your watch are Crewman First Class Mohacks and Babanguida. They're experienced men. You'll find them capable of dealing with most situations without calling for help . . . but the responsibility is of course yours."

"Yessir," Ran said. He didn't look toward the crewmen, but he knew the type well enough to

imagine the air of bland appraisal with which they stared at his back.

Mohacks and Babanguida were clever, intelligent career-enlisted men. They'd have their scams and fiddles which earned them several times the salary Trident Starlines paid them, and they'd think they were smarter than the officers who were their titular superiors.

What Mohacks and Babanguida *weren't* were officers. They would never understand why some of them gave orders and *they* obeyed, for all their intelligence and experience. They thought it was education or class or pull . . . and all of those things had an effect; but the difference in mindset between those who led and those who didn't was more basic than background.

Mohacks and Babanguida were going to survive, because they were smart and skilled and kept a low profile by avoiding responsibility. They didn't want rank, because they didn't think it was real the way what *they* had was real: wealth and comfort and freedom in their terms.

Most of the folk who worked their way off Bifrost on starships died in the Cold Crews, or died on shore as flotsam washed up on the shores of sponge space. A Bifrost boy who cheated his way from the Cold Crew of an unscheduled freighter to Trident Starlines' Officers Academy couldn't imagine how someone else could stop because he felt comfortable. Comfort wasn't an option on Bifrost, only survival.

Commander Kneale's face set. There was no particular emotion in his expression, only assurance. "Most of you have heard this before. Listen anyway. We are the Staff Side of the finest starship in existence today, the *Empress of Earth*. Ship Side navigates us to our destinations. The Purser's section provides the passengers with the services they require, as they would require them in a dirtside hotel. Engineering makes sure that the fusion drive propels us in deep space and the magnetic motors land us and lift us off safely. All of these things are important.

"But *we* are important as well," Kneale continued. The level of his voice had been rising by imperceptible degrees as he spoke. "Staff Side is the lubricant that makes our *Empress* the success she is. You'll hear Ship's officers mutter that all the Staff is for is to keep passengers from pestering the *real* officers . . . but without those passengers, there wouldn't be a need to navigate the *Empress* anywhere."

Kneale's voice boomed. This wasn't a lecture or even a pep talk, Ran realized. It was a sermon by a fire-breathing preacher so committed to his beliefs that he would willingly die for them.

"You'll hear stewards say that they do the real work," the commander said, "while Staff Side just swanks . . . but if the unexpected occurs, if Third Class riots, or a couple starts fighting with steak knives in the First Class dining room, *we're* the ones who'll deal with it. If all the engineering officers collapse from food poisoning, *we'll* nurse the *Empress* home. I did that on the *Capital de Buch* between Lusignan and Arcwell, and any officer who serves under me is qualified to do the same!"

Kneale stood splay-legged and set his massive fists against the points of his hips. "The *Empress of Earth* succeeds, and she will succeed, because we of Staff Side will make her succeed, whatever it may cost us personally. If there's anybody here who doesn't think he or she is capable of giving one hundred percent to Trident Starlines if the necessity arises—tell me now, because that'll be easier than having me learn the truth the hard way."

He glared around the lounge. Nobody spoke.

Ran met the commander's eyes without expression. His lips were in a state of repose, neither tense nor smiling.

Commander Kneale broke into a grin. "So long as you know I mean it, children," he said mildly.

"We know you do, sir," said Mohacks.

Kneale unclenched his fists and tented his fingers in front of his chest. "Very good," he said. "Mr. Colville, do you have any questions before we break up?"

Ran cleared his throat. "I intend to be worthy of the *Empress of Earth* and of the trust Trident

Starlines has put on me, sir," he said. The truth was more complex than that, but that was true.

He turned and looked at Mohacks and Babanguida. The faces of both ratings froze. "I intend to be a good officer to the men under me, but I understand that I *am* their officer. It's part of my duty to see to it that they do theirs."

"Yes sir!" Mohacks said. Babanguida's face could have been cast in concrete.

"For the rest," Ran said, facing around to Kneale again, "it's like I said before. Passengers are passengers, ships are ships. I have a lot to learn about the *Empress*, but there's nothing in my duty aboard her that I haven't accomplished on lesser vessels."

Kneale smiled vaguely. "Are there any questions for Mr. Colville, then?" he said.

"Ah, sir?" asked Crewman Blavatsky. Her voice was hesitant from doubt that enlisted personnel were included in the offer.

Ran nodded. "Yes?"

"Is your family from Earth, then?" Blavatsky said.

"It's a full ten years since I've set foot on the planet, Blavatsky," Ran said. He chuckled in the well-tested belief that good humor would deflect attention from the way he avoided answering the question. "I left Earth at the end of Officers' Academy, and I haven't been back since."

"If there are no further questions," Kneale said calmly, "you're all dismissed in accordance with the duty roster. Have a safe leave, people."

The enlisted personnel were all on their feet before the last syllable was out of the commander's mouth.

"Where *is* your family, Ran?" Wanda Holly asked in a firm, clear voice.

"Ma'am, I don't have one," Ran answered flatly. He smiled. There was no humor in the expression.

The pause among the ratings dissolved into a rush out the door. Ran started to follow them.

"If you wouldn't mind, Colville," Commander Kneale said, "I'd like a word in private with you in my office."

"Certainly, sir," Ran said. His face was as bland as Mohacks' a moment earlier—

And he felt the pressure of Wanda Holly's eyes on his back.

* * *

The file on Randall Colville came aboard from the mail gig which met the *Empress of Earth* when she dropped from sponge space into the solar system. The gig, making one or two more sponge space transits than the starliner dared and by braking her slight mass hard, would arrive on Earth twelve hours ahead of the larger vessel—a half day that could be crucial with some information that could not be entrusted to electro-optical transmission no matter *how* scrambled.

Commander Hiram Kneale read the file as soon as the gig was under way. The new man's record with Trident was exemplary. His background before taking service with the line was sketchy and somewhat unusual, but there wasn't anything remarkable in it. Colville had been born on Earth, in the Aberdeen Prefecture, and had emigrated to Satucia with his parents as an infant.

There were no file entries after that until Colville reappeared as supercargo—purser's assistant—on the *Prester John*, whose captain had enthusiastically nominated Colville for a place in the Trident Officers' Academy in Greenwich Prefecture. Colville had started slow in the academy, but he proceeded at an accelerating pace and had been rewarded with a Third Officer's slot on a mixed-load packet that traded between Wallaby, Granholm, and Munch. From there on out, Colville went from a successful tour to success—as was to be expected in an officer assigned to the *Empress*.

Only . . . unscheduled freighters like the *Prester John* didn't carry supercargos, and one glance at Ran Colville in the flesh told Kneale what the holographic portrait in the files had led him to suspect. Colville didn't come from Satucia, and he probably hadn't been born on Earth. He was a Bifrost man as sure as Hiram Kneale had been raised in the lemon groves of Sulimaniya, where each tree had i

own drystone wall as protection from the summer winds.

"So, Mr. Colville," Kneale said from behind the desk in his office. "I hope you'll be comfortable aboard our *Empress*. She's a fine ship. The finest."

Holographic projections curtained the walls of the commander's office. Many officers used the luxury fitment to display scenes of their homeworlds or their families. Kneale's walls were four views of the *Empress of Earth*, docking on Earth and Tblisi, Grantholm and Nevasa—the major worlds of her run.

On the ceiling was a fragment of the *Empress's* bow, framed by the twisted light of sponge space. The hull metal shimmered with the rime of gases which had migrated from the vessel's interior when she dipped back into the sidereal universe. Ran Colville's eyes kept flicking up toward that view. His expression was unreadable.

The hologram had been taken from one of the *Empress's* lifeboats. The photographer, a Szgrania hexabranched, displayed her genius in the shot, because relationships in sponge space were not what they appeared to the eyes of the body. To correctly judge the direction and distance that a camera—or ship—or gun—would travel on its path to another object in sponge space was a calculation at which the most powerful artificial intelligences failed a dozen times for every success.

Military forces throughout known space continued to experiment. Sponge space was the perfect cover for an attack—if one could calculate where one's target was.

"I'm very honored to be assigned to the *Empress*, sir," Colville said. "I hope I'll be worthy of her. I'll do my best to be worthy of her."

He met Kneale's eyes firmly, perhaps fiercely. Well, there was no falsehood in those statements. Colville was willing to die trying. That was how he probably *would* die one day, always pushing harder to be the best at whatever he saw as the next step up, until it turned out that what had seemed to be a step was really a long drop—

"The *Empress* is special, Mr. Colville," Kneale continued. "And I don't mean that she—she and the *Brasil*—are valuable artifacts, though they're that as well. We can be quite sure there are men on Grantholm and Nevasa today calculating how many troops they could pack aboard either superliner for a lightning invasion of the other planet."

Kneale didn't know how to explain to the stiff-necked young officer across the desk from him that Colville had already succeeded. The very falseness of Colville's beginnings made the man Colville will created more real—and therefore more useful to Trident Starlines—than a fellow who'd simply walked up the path of success which his birth laid out for him.

"But she's more than that, our *Empress*," Kneale continued softly. "She's a symbol of all that's best of civilization. She mustn't be perverted from that course."

Kneale read poetry in the silence of his suite during placid moments, Millay and Donne and Vergil. He had never found in verse quite the solemn beauty which the *Empress of Earth* represented to him.

"I don't entirely follow you, sir," Colville said, cautiously. He was as obviously tense as a cocked trigger spring—afraid that his new superior was mad, and afraid that this was some lengthy charade to inform him that he'd been found out at last . . . which of course he had. He would never believe that it didn't *matter* that Kneale knew or suspected the truth.

"Were you ever a soldier, Colville?" Kneale asked abruptly.

"I . . ." the younger man said, "haven't been, no. My—"

The pause was to find the right words, because it was already too late to burke the statement "My father was a, a soldier, sir. He didn't talk about it much, but when he died I found a batch of chips from his helmet recorder. I . . . watched them when I found a playback machine."

Kneale's smile was as grim as a granite carving. "From Svent Istvan?" he asked. Thirty-five years ago, Grantholm had intervened on behalf of its nationals trading on Svent Istvan. Several of the

battalions had come from Bifrost, one of the worlds already under Grantholm hegemony.

"No sir," Colville said in a colorless voice. The question told him that Kneale suspected—or *knew*—the truth about his new Third Officer's background. "From Hobilo. During the Long Troubles."

"Right," said the commander, a place-holder while he considered his next words. "Then you have a notion of what I mean when I say that war is the greatest evil that man has had to face since before man was human. Because it's a perversion of skill and creativity; because it focuses all his abilities on destruction."

Colville licked his lips. "Yes sir," he said in the same flat voice.

"Starships are the means of bringing help and communication between worlds, Colville," Kneale went on. "In a war, it's troops and weapons and violence instead. Those of us who understand that evil have to prevent it from happening here on the *Empress*."

"But Earth isn't going to take sides in a war between Grantholm and Nevasa, is it?" Colville said, shocked into more openness than he'd permitted himself since entering his superior's suite. "Sure not!"

"No," Kneale agreed, "not that. But we have passengers from both planets, going home ahead of the crisis, and we'll be touching down on both planets unless war actually breaks out. It was tense on the run back from Tblisi, but it's going to be a great deal worse on the outbound leg. We—you and I and Lieutenant Holly—are primarily responsible for keeping the cancer from affecting the *Empress*."

"I wonder . . ." said Colville, turning his keyed-up brain to a problem that involved him professionally rather than personally.—"If it wouldn't be a good idea to take both Nevasa and Grantholm off the route now, before the shooting starts?"

He looked up at the ceiling again and continued, "Because as you said, sir, there are a lot of people looking at the military use they could make of the *Empress*. Both planets have national-flag fleets, but none of their ships has a quarter of our capacity, and—ships can't keep formation in sponge space. Having a large force on one vessel rather than spreading it out in packets on four hulls or more . . . that might be the difference between a beachhead and a disaster."

Kneale nodded appreciatively. "You're quite right, Randall—do you go by Randall?"

"Huh? Ah, Ran, sir. Actually. Though—" Colville smiled in a not-quite-calculating manner. "—I've answered to shithead a time or two. Anything you please. But Ran for choice."

"Staff Side officers traditionally don't stand on ceremony when we're alone," Kneale said, smiling also. "I'm Hiram—unless you screw up royally. Just don't make the mistake of calling Captain Kanawa 'Sam'—or anything else but 'Sir!'"

Kneale paused again, eyeing the younger man. Without really intending to do so, he'd thrown Colville badly off-balance. The threat of exposure, unstated and *unmeant*, still hung over the man, but going to a first name basis was a positive sign. You drove laboratory animals mad more quickly with random punishments and rewards than you could with a regimen of brutal punishment alone.

"Neither side is going to do anything as crude as an open seizure of the *Empress of Earth*," Kneale resumed. "Every planet but Earth is still a frontier, though some pretend they're not. The outworlds, particularly Grantholm, sneer at Federated Earth because she has so much power and doesn't use it the way they would—but they respect the power. They know that Earth could swat them, any one or all together, as easily as a whale could swamp a dinghy. Whatever else they do, they won't *force* the whale to take action against them; and commandeering Terran shipping would do just that."

Colville cleared his throat and said, "If the *Empress* were just to vanish, though, the Legislative Council would dither. The Federation bureaucracy wouldn't be able to act without authorization. And maybe if the ship was handed back after Grantholm won the war—with an indemnity for Tridem Starlines and any passengers who were in the wrong place when the shooting started—they might get away with it. Grantholm might."

The left corner of Kneale's mouth lifted. "That would be risky too, don't you think?"

Colville shrugged. "War's a risk."

"And you think Grantholm will win this war?"

"I think everybody on Grantholm thinks they'll win it," Colville stated flatly. "Personally, I think it comes to open war, they'll both lose, but they'll wreck fifty planets and kill millions of people prove it. But that's not my business. The *Empress of Earth* is my business."

Kneale stared at the younger man for long moments, deciding whether or not to say more. At last he went on, "Trident Starlines has a very rigid set of rules. For instance, the safety of passengers is paramount I'm sure that Captain Kanawa would unhesitatingly surrender his ship, this ship, if he felt that by doing otherwise he was risking the lives of his passengers."

Colville nodded, wary again, certain that the conversation was about to veer from normal channels.

"But some officers, even in an organization as *controlled* as Trident," the commander went on, "have bent the rules when they had to. And they're willing to do it again. For Trident, for civilization."

"Sir?" Colville said softly.

"I knew a fellow from Sulimaniya," Kneale said. His eyes were focused in the direction of the holographic mural behind Colville, the *Empress* undocking from Grantholm. The blue glare of the starliner's magnetic motors reflected between the low overcast and the soft, fresh snow covering the hills around the spaceport. "He killed a man—his business partner."

Kneale smiled. His expression was terrible to see. "Actually, he'd killed quite a lot of people a few years before, but they told him that made him a hero because he'd been guarding the Parliament House during the Enlightenment Riots. But this was different. He had to run.

"He got off planet—that was easy. What planet he ran to doesn't matter; it could have been almost anywhere. And he got a job as ground staff for Trident Starlines. That wasn't terribly hard either because he was only a janitor, hitting the spots that it wasn't cost-effective to program the cleaning robots to get. And that put him around the data base at night, when nobody else was in the terminal building."

Ran Colville was looking at Kneale with the expression of a man feeling a snake he *knows* is poisonous, but which may or may not be hostile to him. Colville said nothing.

"Nobody expects janitors to be able to use central, computers," Kneale said. "People are sloppy. They leave mechanical lock-outs open and they write passwords down on memo pads. So my friend built himself up an identity, confirmed it, and cut himself orders for Trident Officers' Academy. He didn't have a lot of problem after that. He *really had* the background, you see. Only he couldn't use the real one since he'd murdered the son of a bitch who'd been robbing him blind because he knew my friend trusted him."

"What are you telling me?" Colville said in a voice like shingles creaking in the night.

"I'm telling you that Trident Starlines needs resourceful officers," Kneale replied. "I'm telling you that people will believe a man is what he seems to be. I'm telling you that a man *is* what he seems to be. So it's very important that you and I and our friends all act like dedicated officers to whom Trident Starlines is more than our lives."

And to whom civilization is more even than Trident Starlines, but Commander Hiram Kneale didn't say that aloud.

His smile softened. "That's all, Ran. But particularly now, I thought it was important that you hear it. Go on about your business. I'm sure you have personal business to take care of before undocking."

"Thank you, sir," Colville said. He stood and saluted crisply.

He turned, then paused and looked back over his shoulder. "I—expect to make myself worthy of your trust, Commander."

"Hiram," corrected Kneale. "I expect you will too, Ran."

And that was god's truth. Because otherwise, Kneale would have seen to it that this hard-faced imposter was *under* the jail.

EARTH:

UNDOCKING

"Excuse me, Captain," said the beaming passenger just as Ran Colville's ear clip buzzed him. "I wonder if I might trouble you to stand by my wife for a picture? To show people back home that we were really here, you know."

The dip raided again. Somebody sure thought it was an emergency.

The center of the Social Hall—the *Empress's* First Class lounge—was a huge expanse, almost the worst room in the ship for Ran to find a place in which to flex his communicator to part of the structure. The walls sported holographic images of the buildings surrounding the Roman Forum in the time of Augustus, and the designers hadn't needed to modify the scale greatly to fit the available space.

Ordinary radio communications didn't work within the mass of metal and electronics that was the *Empress of Earth*. On so large a ship, a public address blaring audio requests from tannoys in every compartment was, for both practical and esthetic reasons, possible only in general emergencies. For most purposes, messages were pulsed in recipient-coded packets from infra-red lenses in the vessel's moldings. These were picked up and converted to audio alarms by the clip each crewman wore behind one ear.

For actual communication, the crewman switched on the commo unit on his waistbelt and turned so that the unit had a line of sight to a ceiling transceiver. When the commo unit was on and properly positioned, the system provided full two-way communication between all portions of the vessel's interior.

About a hundred passengers sat in the lounge or stood, viewing the holographic murals with an awkward nonchalance. They had arrived early and, with their luggage stowed in their cabins, had nothing very obvious to do. Most of them were new to interstellar travel—old hands at the business tended to arrive hours or less before undocking, perhaps having first called "their" steward to see that "their" cabin (or often suite) would be ready for them to slip into with the ease of putting on a favorite pair of shoes.

The furniture in the Social Hall mimicked the curves and color of the ivory stools of Roman senators, but common sense (or Trident officials) had prevented the designer from more than suggesting that thoroughly uncomfortable fashion. The chairs and couches had backs—which adjusted to users' posture. They were upholstered in red-purple silk, the true color of "imperial purple," though few of the *Empress's* passengers were going to make that connection.

Silk was neither more comfortable nor more lustrous than many of the synthetics that might have been used in its place, but First Class clients of the *Empress of Earth* could be expected to tell the difference. Thin silk cover cloths were laid over a synthetic base, edge-bonded, and replaced as soon as they showed signs of wear.

The used covers were a perk of the stewards. They were in demand among dockside whores in each of the *Empress's* ports of call.

"Of course . . ." Ran said professionally while his eyes searched his immediate surroundings and his brain dealt with three problems:

What was the emergency?

Where was the IR head serving this huge worn?

How could he get shut of these lonesome passengers without off ending them?

Some minds lock up when faced with simultaneous tasks. Others deal stolidly with one problem

a time, even though everything's going to hell in a handbasket outside their immediate narrow focus. Ran Colville treated batches synergistically. His responses weren't deep and they didn't even attempt to be "best"; but he was very fast, and fast got you a long way in a crisis.

"Right over here, madam," he said.

The IR head would be central, so he needed to move the passengers if his commo unit was to face the correct direction. He took the female passenger by the arm and swept her a short distance to the side where a cleaning robot industriously polished the floor.

In keeping with the decor, the robot was disguised as a meter-high column base, covered with contorted acanthus vines. Ran toggled off the mechanical switch and dropped the unit firmly onto the deck. With the woman in the crook of his left arm, he said, "Lieutenant Colville. Go ahead."

The passengers beamed, and Bridge—in this case the central control AI buried somewhere deep in the *Empress*—spewed information through the ship's structure and up the flex to the commo point which broadcast it to Ran's ear clip microphone.

Like her husband, the woman was well into middle age, overweight, and as desperately good-natured as a puppy. She was dressed in high style, a pleated dress of natural linen and a great deal of gold and faience jewelry, both mimicking Egyptian taste of the Amarna Period. She was obviously uncomfortable in such garb, but she was determined to be in on the voyage of a lifetime.

"Stateroom eight-two-four-one," said the artificial intelligence. "There has been a double booking. The Purser has requested aid."

The man's camera was a skeletonized handgrip supporting a body the size of a walnut. The trip lenses were of optical fibers as fine as spidersilk, with a 150-mm spread to create a three-dimensional image. The unit whirred as Ran turned to the woman and kissed the tips of her fingers. "Madam, sir," he said with a broad smile. "Enjoy your voyage on the finest vessel in the galaxy!"

Ran spun on his heel and strode from the Social Hall with a set expression that dissuaded other passengers from accosting him. Three steps along, he realized that he'd forgotten to turn the cleaning robot back on.

The hell with it. *That* was a problem the stewards could handle.

* * *

The prefix 8 indicated a First Class cabin. 241 was a location: Deck B, starboard rank. Deck cabins were often thought to be the premium units because entrances to the main public rooms were off that lower deck, but a number of sophisticated travelers preferred the higher level for just that reason. Traffic in Deck B corridors was only a small fraction of that on A.

Passengers, stewards, and luggage on static-repulsion floats littered the halls in sluggish movement, like cells in human blood vessels. Cabin doors stood open as stewards fed cases inside or at a time while occupants discussed shrilly where the items should be stowed. It would all get where it was going, eventually; but Ran Colville at the moment regarded the bustle as a moving obstacle course.

A party of Rialvans stood with their backs to the stretch of balcony overlooking the Dining Salon. They waited stolidly while, across the corridor, the dominant Rialvan female looked over their two cabin suite with the steward. The process might take more than an hour, but it wasn't a problem. The heavy-bodied Rialvans were painstaking to a degree that would be considered insane in any human culture, but they tipped well and they never made *active* problems for the staff.

No, the trouble was down toward the end of the corridor. Two stewards, dark-skinned men from New Sarawak like most of the Trident cabin staff, snapped to attention when Ran appeared—not because of his rank, but because they were so glad to pass the problem on to someone else.

A pair of male passengers, Caucasians who looked to be about 70 years old, waited in the corridor as well. One of them was a trim, tall man who stood with military stiffness. His fellow was short, so

bald, and seated on a cabin trunk. The plump man leaned against the corridor wall—a mural of prairie in late summer, with the milkweed pods beginning to open—with his right ankle crossed over his left knee.

"Ah," said the tall passenger as he noticed Ran. "Lieutenant, I believe? *Very good to see you.* I'm Richard Wade, this is my friend Tom Belgeddes—"

The shorter man grunted to his feet. "Charmed," he said in a friendly tone. He sounded rather as if he meant something more than conventional pleasantry.

"—and there seems to be a bit of a problem with our cabin," Wade continued without having paused for his friend to speak.

The cabin door was open. Another man popped his head out, then disappeared back inside.

"You'll take it from here, sir?" a steward asked Ran.

"Stick around," Ran replied. "There's going to be some luggage to move in a little bit."

He stood in the doorway. Wade and Belgeddes closed in to either side, making it look as though the Third Officer was the shock troop for their point of view—which was the last thing the situation called for. Ran stepped into the cabin and switched the door down behind him, closing the passengers out to the, corridor.

Luggage, much of it in the form of bales and packets instead of purpose-built cases, filled the center of the bed-sitting room. A family of six was positioned around the gear like the Huns at Chalons prepared to defend their leader on a pile of saddles.

"I am Parvashtisinga Sadek," announced the man who'd looked into the corridor. "This is my cabin. See!"

He offered Ran his ticket, a data crystal etched on the outside with the company's trident. The crystal was a wafer, 1-cm by 2. Its information could have been contained on a microscopic speck: the additional size was necessary for handling by life-forms rather than by computers.

Ran put the ticket in the palm-sized reader on his belt and projected the data in the form of a hologram that hung forty centimeters in front of his eyes. It was an Earth to Tellichery ticket, via the *Empress of Earth* in Cabin 8241, with everything in order. Five-person occupancy, which might be arguable, but a babe in arms would normally travel free. Date of issue was the twelfth of last month, three weeks before. The only unusual circumstance was that the ticket had been cut on Am al-Mahar rather than either of the terminus worlds.

"Thank you, sir," Ran said as he returned the wafer. "I'll check the other gentlemen's tickets, now."

"This is our room!" Sadek said in a shrill, forceful voice. "We will not move."

He, his wife, and three of the children stared at Ran as if they expected the white-uniformed ship officer to draw a long knife at any moment and begin to butcher them. The infant on the mother's breast looked up, hid his/her face with a happy gurgle, and peeked out again.

Ran winked, drawing another gurgle.

Ran left the door in the up, open, position as he stepped back into the corridor. "Mr. Wade, Mr. Belgeddes," he said, "might I—"

He paused, because Wade was already extending his hand with the two ticket chips in it.

"Of course, of course, my boy," Wade said. "By the book, just as it should be. I've been an officer myself, you know—at least a dozen times, if you count all the penny-ante rebellions that somebody decided to make me a general."

"That's right," said Belgeddes as Ran fed a ticket into the reader. "Dickie here, he never could keep out of trouble."

The ticket was Belgeddes' own, and it was perfectly his order: Cabin 8241, round-trip, Port Northern at both termini. Issued *through* Trident's home office in Halifax *on* the first of the previous month. Eleven days earlier than the Sadek family's ticket

- [*download online Went the Day Well?: Witnessing Waterloo online*](#)
- [read The American Plains Indians \(Men-at-Arms, Volume 163\) book](#)
- **[download Rapid Eye 2: The Plague Yard](#)**
- [The Comfort of Strangers for free](#)
- [download online Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora pdf](#)

- <http://www.1973vision.com/?library/Vegan-Soul-Kitchen--Fresh--Healthy--and-Creative-African-American-Cuisine.pdf>
- <http://www.netc-bd.com/ebooks/The-Sentinel-Mage--Cursed-Kingdoms--Book-1-.pdf>
- <http://rodrigocaporal.com/library/Rapid-Eye-2--The-Plague-Yard.pdf>
- <http://weddingcellist.com/lib/The-Comfort-of-Strangers.pdf>
- <http://fortune-touko.com/library/Inferno.pdf>