

THE DRAGON THAT FLEW OUT OF THE SUN

STORIES OF THE XUYA UNIVERSE

ALIETTE DE BODARD

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THE DRAGON THAT FLEW OUT OF THE SUN

Here's a story Lan was told, when she was a child—when she lay in the snugness of her sleep-cradle, listening to the distant noises of station life—the thrum of the recycling filters, the soft gurgle of water reconstituted from its base components, the distant noises of the station's Mind in the Inner Rings, a vast unreality that didn't quite concern her, that she couldn't encompass in words.

Mother sat by Lan's side and smiled at her. Her hands smelled of garlic and fish sauce, with the faintest hint of machine oil. Her face was lined with worry; but then, it always was, those days. She wanted to tell a story about Le Loi and the Turtle's Sword, or about the girl who was reborn in a golden calabash and went on to marry the king.

Lan had other ideas.

"Tell me," she said, "about Lieu Vuong Tinh."

For a moment, Mother's face shifted and twisted; she looked as if she'd swallowed something that had stuck in her throat. Then she took a deep breath and told Lan this.

In days long gone by, we used to live in Kinh He on Lieu Vuong Tinh. It was a client state of the Dai Viet Empire, on the edge of the Numbered Planets—its name had come from the willow, because high officials posted there would part from their friends and share a willow branch to remember each other.

But we no longer live there.

Because one day the sun wobbled and quivered over Lieu Vuong Tinh, and grew fainter, and a dragon flew out from its core—large and terrible and merciless, the pearl under its chin shining with all the colours of the rainbow, its antlers carrying fragments of iron and diamond that glistened like the tips of weapons. And, because dragons are water—because they are the spirits of the rain and the monsoon, and the underwater kingdoms—because of that, the sun died.

The dragon had always been there, of course. It was nothing more than an egg at first—a little thing thinner than the chips they use for your ancestors' mem-implants—then the egg hatched and grew into a carp. Carps don't always become dragons, of course, but this one did.

No, I don't know why. Who knows why the Jade Emperor sends down decrees, or why rain happens even when people haven't kept up prayers and propitiations at the shrines? Sometimes, the world is just the way it is.

But when the dragon flew out, its mane unfolded, all the way down to Lieu Vuong Tinh, and into the ships that were fleeing the dying sun—and into the heart of us all, it marked us all, a little nick on the surface like the indent of a carver on jade. That's why, even now, when you meet another Khiet from Lieu Vuong Tinh, you'll instantly know—because it's in their hearts and their bellies and their eyes, the mark of the dragon that will never go away.

“The whole dragon thing is ridiculous,” Tuyet Thanh says. “I mean, what did they do, have a little chat and agree to serve us all this load of rubbish?”

They’re in the communal network—each of them in their own compartment, except Lan has made the station’s Mind merge both spaces in the network, so that Tuyet appears to be sitting at the end of her table, and that the bots-battle they’re having in the free-for-all area of space outside the station appears in the middle, as a semi-transparent overlay.

“I don’t know,” Lan says, cautiously. Tuyet Thanh is older than her by three years, and chafing at the restrictions imposed by older relatives. Lan wants, so badly, to be like her friend, cool and secure and edgy, instead of never knowing what to think on things—because Mother is so often right, isn’t she?

“Fine.” Tuyet Thanh exhales. She rolls up her eyes, and her bots flow out into a pincer movement—slightly too wide of their reserved area, almost clipping a passing ship. “Deal with this.”

Lan considers, for a heartbeat that feels stretched to an eternity—then she sends her bots to drill a hole in the centre of the pincer, where Tuyet Thanh’s formation is weaker. “No, but I mean the story is right about one thing, isn’t it? The grown-ups—it’s like...” Adequate words won’t come. She makes a gesture with her hand, frustrated—cancels it from the interface, so that the bots don’t interpret it as a command. “They’re marked. They... Have you never noticed they can tell who was on those ships? It’s like they have a sensor or something.”

“It’s just clothes. And language, and the way of behav-

ing.” Tuyet Thanh snorts. “A Khiet can tell another Khiet. That’s all.”

“I guess...” Lan says, feeling small, and young, and utterly inadequate.

“Look. There was no dragon. Just...”

This is what Second Aunt told me, right? She’d know, because she was twenty-five when they left, and she remembers them well—the years before the war, before the sun.

Anyway. There was the Ro Federation—yes, you’re going to tell me they’re at peace with the Empire now, that they’re all fine people. Whatever. Have you never noticed the adults won’t ever talk about them?

In those days, the Ro were our neighbours, and they wanted us gone. They were afraid of us because we were stronger; in the end, they thought that Lieu Vuong Tinh made quite a nice piece of space to have. And one of their—scientists, alchemists—I can’t remember exactly what they have out there—made a weapon that they said was going to change the way of things. Just point it at the sun, they said, and you’ll see.

And they saw, all right. It... it did something, to the atoms that made up the sun—accreted them faster than they should have, so that the star’s glow dimmed, and Lieu Vuong Tinh became... bombarded. Scoured clean and no longer fit for humans. So that we had to leave, because we no longer had a home.

And the Ro? Yes, today you’ll find them on the station, trading us their makings and their technology, as cosy as anything. But they’re out there too, in the ruins of Lieu Vuong Tinh, the red-hot slag mess that the Empire aban-

doned to them when they signed the peace treaty. No humans can go there, but they have bots taking it apart, mining it for precious metals and ice—so that, in the end, they still won everything they hoped for.

Don't look at me like that. It's truth, all right? Not the dragon crap—the thing that truly happened.

Yes. I hate them too.

“Mother?”

Mother looks up from the dumplings she's assembling. She only gets marginal help from the bots, preferring to do everything by hand. Once, she says, everyone would gather in the kitchen, helping others to put together the anniversary feast, but now, in the cramped station compartments, there isn't enough space for that. The aunts and uncles each make their own fraction of dishes, and the meal is shared through the communal network, stitching together the various compartments until it seems like a vast room once more. “Yes, child?”

Lan weighs the words on her tongue, not finding any easy way to bring them up. “Why did you never tell us about the Ro?”

Mother's face doesn't move. It freezes in an intricate and complex expression—it would be a key to the past, if only Lan could interpret it. “Because it's complicated.”

“More complicated than the dragon?”

Mother's eyes flick back to the table; the bots take over from her, leaving both her hands free. Her voice is calm, too calm. “Lan—I know you're angry.”

“I'm not!” Lan says, and then realises she is. Not even at Mother but at herself, for being stupid enough to believe

bedtime stories, for not being more like Tuyet Thanh—smarter and harder and less willing to take things on faith. “Did they do it?”

“The Ro?” Mother sighs. “It was one of their scientists who destroyed the sun, yes. But—”

There are no “buts.” “Then it’s their fault.”

“Don’t be so quick to fling blame,” Mother says.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Because of them—because of the sun—they’re here, stuck on the station; in cramped compartments where it seems there’s barely enough room to breathe. “Are you making excuses for them?”

Mother is silent for a long, long while. Lan is sure that Tuyet Thanh would have left a long time ago; turned her face to the wall and ramped up the communal network to maximum, trying to fill her ears with sounds she can control. But Mother always has the right words, always does the right thing. Lan clings to this, as desperately as a man adrift in space clings to faint, fading broadcasts. At last she says, “No. I’m not. Merely saying they had their own motives.”

“Because they were afraid of us.”

“Yes,” Mother says. “And people seldom are afraid for no reason, are they?”

Of course they are, all the time. Like they’re afraid of Lan in class because she’s smarter than them—is there any justification for *that*? Lan knows prevaricating and false excuses when she hears them—has been she so blind all along? How can she have been so stupid? “Did we do anything to them?” she asks. “Did we?”

Mother’s face closes again. “We never did like each other... I don’t know, child.”

“Then we didn’t.” Lan calls up the communal network, lets it fill her from end to end—blocking out Mother and her

feeble excuses. “You were right,” she tells Tuyet Thanh. “Adults are idiots.”

Today, on the Fourth Day of the Tenth Lunar Month, the Khiet community remembers the Dislocation of Lieu Vuong Tinh, and the Flight of the Evacuation Fleet to the Numbered Planets.

The war between the Khiet and the Ro lasted three years, though it had been brewing for years if not decades. The two had always been uneasy neighbours. While the Khiet rose to prominence with the help of the Dai Viet Empire, to whom they swore allegiance, the Ro were mired under a feudal regime and struggled to survive.

The Khiet's harsh, authoritarian regime had been making the Ro uneasy for a while. The inciting event was the so-called Skiff-Ghost Return, in the year of the Metal Dragon, in which Ro citizens were discovered to have been mind-altered by the Khiet—which set off an ugly, protracted series of skirmishes in which little quarter was given on either side.

The Dai Viet Empire refused to get involved at first, but could not in good conscience continue to do so after the Dislocation. Refugees were so numerous that they had to be scattered to various places among the Numbered Planets—the Mind-controlled Stations on the edge of the Empire taking on the bulk of them. Today, Khiet culture is a vibrant and ubiquitous part of our own culture, nowhere more so than during the anniversary of the Dislocation, when entire communities will gather in large ceremonies to remember the thousands who were lost in the hasty evacuation.

As usual, on the occasion of this anniversary, Scholar

Rong Thi Minh Tu, the Voice of the Empress, has extended the Empire's sincere condolences, and their wishes for continued prosperity for the Khiet.

“So...” Professor Nguyen Thi Nghe says, pursing her lips. “What am I to make of you?”

“He started it!” The words are out of Lan’s mouth before she can think.

Beside her, Vien shifts uncomfortably in his chair—at least he has the decency to look guilty. But then he opens his mouth and says, in Viet with the barest trace of an accent, “I... should have phrased my words more carefully. I apologise.”

Lan remembers the words like a kick in the gut—the smirking face of him, asking if she was all right, if she’d adapted to life on the station—as if he didn’t know, or care, that his people are the reason she was here in the first place. “Professor—” She can’t find words for her outrage. “He’s Ro.”

“Yes.” Professor Nghe’s voice is quiet, thoughtful. “The Empire and the Khiet signed a peace treaty with the Ro more than thirty years ago, child.”

Leaving them the ruins of Lieu Vuong Tinh—not that they would have known what to do, with the ruins of what had been their home, but still.

Still, it is wrong. Still, it shouldn’t have happened.

“You’re my best two pupils,” Professor Nghe says. “Your aptitude with bots—the creativity you show when designing them...” She shakes her head. “But it’s all moot if you can’t at least be civil to each other.”

“I know,” Lan says, sullenly. “But he shouldn’t have

rubbed it in my face. Not now.” It’s the anniversary of the Dislocation; soon she will walk home, to Mother’s kitchen and the dumplings filled with bitter roots—to the alignment of aunts and uncles that all seem to be in perpetual mourning, as if some spring within them had broken a long time ago.

Vien shifts again, bringing his hands together as if to press a sheet of paper utterly flat. His eyes are pure black, unclouded by any station implants—they say that the station’s Mind won’t allow the Ro standard access to the communal network, because they cause too many problems. “I didn’t mean to.” He winces, again, rubbing his hand against the bruise on his cheek. “Yelling at me was fine. The slap...”

The slap had been uncalled-for. Mother would have had her hide, truth be told. She didn’t like Ro either—Tuyet Thanh was right; none of the exiles had forgiven them, but she would have said it was no call to be uncouth. She—

Lan finds herself rubbing her hand against her cheek, in mute sympathy with Vien. “Forget it,” she says, more harshly than she intended to. “I won’t do it again. But just stay away from me.” She won’t talk to him again—she doesn’t want to be reminded of his existence—of his people’s existence.

Professor Nghe grimaces. “I guess I’ll have to be content with that, shall I? Out you go, then.”

Outside, Vien turns to Lan, stiff and prim and with the barest hint of a bow. “Listen,” he says.

“No.”

“I won’t bother you again after this.”

We didn't mean to do any of it. I realise it's not an excuse, and that it won't mean much to you, but I have to try.

We'd been at war for years by then. You were modifying your own people—sending them to camps and facilities. Have you heard of skiff-ghosts? You were the ones who made them—because the soul went on, down the river to the after-world, and the body remained, with no awareness or affection. You made thousands of them, and not even for soldiering, merely so they would be obedient citizens.

We... we were scared. It wasn't smart, but who knew when you would decide that your own neighbours didn't suitably conform? You've always thought of us as amusing barbarians—with uncombed, uncut hair that we let grow because we won't use scissors on the body that is the flesh of our fathers, the blood of our mothers—and, if you were ready to do this to your own, why should you hesitate with ours?

There was... There were incidents. Ro coming back with a little light missing in their eyes, with movements that were a little too stiff. And one of those incidents pushed us over the edge.

I know you're angry. Just let me finish. Please.

Lieu Vuong Tinh was small, and isolated, and we thought it would only be a matter of time. If we sent enough fleets, enough ships, then the Dai Viet Empire wouldn't support you anymore.

But then the war dragged on, and on, and more ships didn't make any difference. Our soldiers bled and died on foreign moons, suffocating in the void of space, felled at the entrances to habitats—and some came back but never the same, emptied of all thoughts and all feelings, a horde of skiff-ghosts pushing and tugging at the fabric of our life until it unravelled. So, a man named Huu Quang had an idea for a

weapon so powerful that it would end things, once and for all.

I'm not trying to excuse him or the people who funded him. They all went on trial for war crimes, after the peace treaty was finally signed. We all saw what happened to the sun. We all saw the ships, and the fleet, and what happened to those who didn't manage to leave in time. We—

I'm sorry, all right? I know it doesn't make a difference. I know that I wasn't even born, back then, but it was a stupid, unforgivable thing to do. Most of us know it.

We're not monsters.

Lan stands, breathing hard—staring at Vien, who hasn't moved. She's raised her hand again, and he watches her with those impossible black eyes, the ones that are too deep, that see too many things. She realises, finally, that it's because he's unplugged to most station activity, that he only has the barest accesses to the communal network and therefore so very few community demands on his time. Mother's eyes, Tuyet Thanh's eyes—they always shift left and right, never seem to hold on to anything for long. But Vien . . .

"It's not true," she says, slowly—breathing out, feeling the burning in her lungs. "It's—all a lie."

Vien brings the palms of his hands together, as if he were going to bow. "Everything is a lie," he says, finally. "Everything a fragment of the truth. Don't you have relatives who remember?"

Mother, in the kitchen, saying she didn't know what they had done, and looking away. "I—" Lan breathes in again, everything tinged with the bitterness of ashes. "I

don't know," she says, finally. It's the only thing that will come to mind.

"Look it up," Vien says, almost gently. "There's no shortage of things on the network."

Written by the Dai Viet Empire, the hegemony's stories about her own people—what does it mean, if it means anything at all? She's called on the network before she's aware she has—and "skiff-ghosts" brings up all kinds of hollow-eyed, shambling monstrosities in her field of vision. "I don't know," she says, again, and inwardly she's calling for Mother, who is as silent as she ever was. Tales for children. Bedtime stories: the only narratives that can be stomachached.

Vien says nothing, merely watches her with a gaze that seems to encompass the entire universe. She'd rage and scream and rant at him, if he did speak, but he doesn't. His mouth is set. "I'll leave you," he says, finally, and walks away, his back ramrod straight, except that in the communal network, a little icon blinks, something he has left her, as a farewell gift. *Forgive me—this is all I can give you, on this day of all days*, the message says, and Lan archives it, because she cannot bear to deal with him or the Ro.

At home, Mother is waiting for her. The compartment smells of meat and spices and garlic. Everyone else is shimmering into existence, the entire family gathering around the meal for the ancestors, for the dead planet. "Child?"

Lan wants to ask about skiff-ghosts and the Ro, but the words seem too large, too inappropriate to get past the block in her mouth.

Instead, she sits down in silence at her appointed place, reaching for a pair of chopsticks and a bowl. As the Litany of the Lost begins, and the familiar names light up in her field of vision—the ones who are still there, still dust among

the dust of Lieu Vuong Tinh—she finds herself reaching for Vien's gift and opening it.

A blur, and a jumble of rocks; then the view pans out, and she sees a scattering of rocks of all sizes tumbling in slow motion, and bots weaving in and out like a swarm of bees, lifting off with dust and fragments of rock in their claws.

The view pans out again, until it seems to rise from behind the bots, slowly filling her entire field of vision—a corona of light and ionised gases, a mass of contracting colours like a stilled heart; a slow, stately dance of clouds and interstellar dust, blurred like the prelude to tears.

A live link to a bot-borne camera; a window into an area of space she's never gone to but instantly recognises.

What else could it be, after all?

Lieu Vuong Tinh: what is left of the planet, what the Ro are scavenging from the radiation-soaked areas. The place her people came from, the place her people fled, with the weight of the dying sun like ghosts on their backs.

Ghosts.

She wonders about the dead, and the skiff-ghosts—and mind-alterations and who bears what, in the mess of the war—and who, ultimately, is right, and justified.

The grit of dust against her palate, and the slow, soundless whistle of spatial winds—and, abruptly, it no longer matters, because she sees it.

The dragon's mane streams in the solar winds, a shining star at the point of each antler; the serpentine body stretched and pockmarked with fragments of rock; the pearl in its mouth a fiery, pulsing point of light; its tail streaming ice and dust and particles across the universe like the memory of an

expelled breath—and its eyes, two pits of utter darkness against the void of space, a gaze turning her way and transfixing her like thrown swords.

The mark. The wound. The hole in the heart that they all want to fill, she and Tuyet Thanh and Mother—and Vien—all united in the wake of the dragon's passage like farmers huddled in the wake of a storm, grieving for flooded fields and the lost harvest, and bowed under the weight of all that they did to one another.

Mother is right, after all. This is the only story of the war that will ever make sense—the only truth that is simply, honestly, heartbreakingly bearable.

SHIP'S BROTHER

You never liked your sister.

I know you tried your best; that you would stay awake at night thinking on filial piety and family duty; praying to your ancestors and the bodhisattva Quan Am to find strength; but that it would always come back to that core of dark thoughts within you, that fundamental fright you carried with you like a yin shadow in your heart.

I know, of course, where it started. I took you to the mind-ship—because I had no choice, because Khi Phach was away on some merchant trip to the Twenty-Third Planet—because you were a quiet and well-behaved son, and the birth-master would have attendants to take care of you. You had just turned eight—had stayed up all night for Tet, and shaken your head at the red envelopes, telling me you were no longer a child and didn't need money for toys and sweets.

When we disembarked from the shuttle, I had to pause—it was almost time for your sister to be born, and I felt my entire body had grown still—my lungs afire, my muscles seized up, and your sister in my womb stopping her inces-

sant thrashing for a brief, agonising moment. And I felt, as I always did during a contraction, my thoughts slipping away, down the birth canal to follow your sister; felt myself die, little by little, my self extinguishing itself like a flame.

Like all Minds, she was hungry for the touch of a human soul; entwined around my thoughts, and in her eagerness to be born, she was pushing outwards, dragging me with her—I remembered pictures and holos of post-birth bearers, their faces slack, their eyes empty, their thought-nets as pale as the waning moon, and for a moment—before my lips curled around the mantras of the birth-masters—I felt a sliver of ice in my heart, a hollow of fear within my belly—the thought that it could be me, that it would be me, that I wasn't strong enough...

And then it passed; and I stood, breathing hard, in the centre of the mind-ship they had laid out for my daughter.

"Mommy?" you asked.

"I'm fine, child," I said, slowly—breathing in the miracle of air, struggling to string together words that made sense. "I'm fine."

We walked together to the heartroom, where the birth-master would be waiting for us. Within me, your sister was tossing and turning—throbbing incessantly, a beating heart, a pulsing machine, the weight of metal and optics within my womb. I ran my hands on the metal walls of the curving corridors, feeling oily warmth under my fingers—and your sister pulsed and throbbed and spoke within me, as if she were already eager to fly within the deep spaces.

You were by my side, watching everything with growing awe—silenced, for once, by the myriad red lanterns hung on rafters; by the holos in the corridors depicting scenes from *The Tale of Kieu* and *The Two Sisters in Exile*; by the characters gleaming on doors and walls—you ran everywhere,

touched everything, laughing; and my heart seemed full of the sound of your voice.

The contractions were closer together, and the pain in my back never seemed to go away; from time to time, it would rack my entire body, and I bit my tongue not to cry out. The mantras were in my mind now; part of the incessant litany I kept whispering, over and over, to keep myself whole, to hold to the centre of my being.

I had never prayed so hard in my entire life.

In the heartroom, the birth-master was waiting for us, with a cup of freshly brewed tea. I breathed in the flowery smell, watched the leaves dance within the shivering water—trying to remember what it felt to be light on my feet, to be free of pain and fatigue and nausea. "She's coming," I said, at last. I might have been said something else, in other circumstances; made a comment from the Classic of Tea, quoted some poet like Nguyen Trai or Xuan Dieu; but my mind seemed to have deserted me.

"She is," the birth-master said, gravely. "It's almost over now, older aunt. You have to be strong."

I was; I tried; but it all slid like tears on polished jade. I was strong, but so was the Mind in my belly. And I could see other things in the room, too—the charms against death, and the bundle at the back of the room, which would hold the injector—they'd asked me what to do, should the birth go wrong, should I lose my mind, and I had told them I would rather die. It had seemed easy, at the time; but now that I stood facing a very real possibility it seemed very different.

I hadn't heard you for a while. When I looked up, you were still; watching the centre of the room, utterly silent, utterly unmoving. "Mommy..."

It looked like a throne; if thrones could have protrusions

and metal parts; and a geometry that seemed to continually reshape itself—like the spikes of a durian fruit, I'd thought earlier on, when they hadn't yet implanted your sister in my womb, but now it didn't feel quite so funny or innocuous. Now it was real.

"This is where the Mind comes to rest," the birth-master said. He laid a hand in the midst of the thing, into a hollow that seemed no bigger than a child's body. "As you see, all the proper connections are already in place." A mass of cables and fibres and sockets, and other things I couldn't recognise—all tangled together like a nest of snakes. "Your mommy will have to be very brave."

Another contraction racked through me, a wave that went from my womb to my back, stilling the world around us. I no longer felt huge or heavy; but merely detached, watching myself with growing anger and fear. This, now; this was real. Your sister would be born and plugged into the ship, and make it come alive; and I would have done my duty to the Emperor and to my ancestors. Else...

I vaguely heard the birth-master speak of courage again, and how I was the strongest woman he knew; and then the pain was back, and I doubled over, crying out.

"Mommy!"

"I'm—fine—" I whispered, trying to hold my belly—trying to keep myself still, to gather my thoughts together—she was strong and determined, your sister, hungry for life, hungry for her mother's touch.

"You're not fine," you said, and your voice suddenly sounded like that of an adult—grave and composed, and tinged with so much fear it brought me back to the world, for a brief moment.

I saw on the floor a puddle of blood that shone with the sheen of machine oil—how odd, I thought, before realising

that I was the one bleeding, the one dying piece by piece; and I was on the floor though I didn't remember kneeling, and the pain was flaring in my womb and in my back—and someone was screaming—I thought it was the birth-master, but it was me, it had always been me...

"Mommy," you said, from somewhere far away. "Mommy!" Your hands were wet with blood; and the birth-master's attendants were dragging you away, thank the ancestors. There were strong hands on me, whispering that I should hold, ride the crest of the pain, wait before I pushed, lest I lose myself altogether, scatter my own thoughts as your sister made her way out of my womb. My tongue was heavy with the repeated mantras, my lips bloodied where I had bit them; and I struggled to hold myself together, when all I longed for was to open up like a lotus flower; to scatter my thoughts like seeds upon the wind.

But through the haze of pain I saw you—saw, in the moment before the door closed upon you, the expression on your face; and I knew then that you'd never forget this, no matter how it all ended.

Of course, you never forgot, or forgave. Your sister was born safely; though I remained weak ever after, moving slowly through my own home, with bones that felt made of glass; and my thoughts always seemed to move sluggishly, as if part of me had really followed her out of the birth canal. But it all paled when they finally let me stand in the ship; when I felt it come to life under my feet; when I saw colours shift on the wall, and metal take on the sheen of oil; when the paintings slowly faded away, to be replaced by the lines of

poetry I'd read to your sister in the womb—and when I heard a voice deeper than the emptiness of space whisper to me, "Mother."

The mind-ship was called *The Fisherman's Song*; and that became your sister's name; but in my heart she was always Mi Nuong, after the princess in the fairytale, the one freed by the power of the fisherman's love.

But to you, she was the enemy.

You put away the Classics and the poets, and stole my books and holos about pregnancies and Minds—reading late at night, and asking me a thousand questions that I didn't always have the answer to. I thought you sought to understand your sister; but of course I was wrong.

I remember a day seven years after the birth—Khi Phach was away again to discuss shipments with some large suppliers, and you'd convinced me to have a banquet. You'd come to me in my office and told me that I shouldn't be so preoccupied with my husband and children. I almost laughed; but you looked so much in earnest, so concerned about me, that my whole body suddenly felt light, infused with warmth. "Of course, child," I said; and saw you smile, an expression that illuminated your entire being.

It was a huge banquet: in addition to our relatives, I'd invited my scholar classmates, and some of your friends so you wouldn't get bored. I'd expected you to wander off during the preparations, to find your friends or some assignment you absolutely had to study; but you didn't. You stood in the kitchen, fetching bits and pieces, and helping me make salad rolls and shrimp toasts—and mixed dipping sauces with such concentration, as if they were all that mattered in the world.

Your sister was there too—not physically present, but she'd linked herself to the house's com systems, and her

translucent avatar stood in the kitchen: a smaller model of *The Fisherman's Song* that floated around the room, giving us instructions about the various recipes, and laughing when we tore rice papers or dashed across the room for a missing ingredient. For once, you seemed not to mind her presence; and everything in the household seemed... harmonious and ideal, the dream put forth by the Classics.

At the banquet, I was surprised to find you sitting at my table—it wasn't so much the breach of etiquette, I had never been over-concerned with such strictures, as something else. "Shouldn't you be with your friends?" I asked.

You glanced, carelessly, to the end of the room, where the younger people sat: candidates to the mandarin exams, like you; and a group of pale-skinned outsiders, who looked a bit dazed, doing their best to follow the conversations by their side. "I can be with them later," you said, making a dismissive gesture with your hands. "There's plenty of time."

"There's also plenty of time to be with me," I pointed out.

You pulled your chair, and sat down with a grimace. "Time passes," you said at last. "Mother..."

I laughed. "I'm not that frail." Though I felt weak that particular night, my bones and womb aching, as if in memory of giving birth to your sister; but I didn't tell you that.

"Of course you're not." You looked awkward, staring at your bowl as if you didn't know what to say anymore. Of course, you were fifteen—no adult yet, and ancestors know even Khi Phach had never mastered the art of small conversation.

I glanced at Mi Nuong. Your sister didn't eat; and so she spent the banquet at the back of the room, at a table with the avatars of other ships—knowing her, she'd be steering

the conversation at the table to literature, and then disengage and listen to everyone's ideas. It seemed as though everything was going well; and I turned back to the people around my table.

After a while, I found myself deep in talk with Scholar Hoang, one of my oldest friends from the Academy; and paying less attention to you, though you intervened from time to time in the discussion, bringing up a reference or a quotation you thought apt—you'd learnt your lessons well.

Hoang beamed at you. "Wonderful boy. Ready to sit for your mandarin exams, I'd say."

You looked pale, then, as if you'd swallowed something that had got stuck in your throat. "I'm not sure, elder uncle."

"Modesty becomes you. Of course you're ready. The fear will go away once you're sitting in your exam cell, facing the dissertation subject." He smiled fondly at that. You still looked ill; and I resolved to speak to you afterwards, to tell you that you had nothing to fear.

"In fact," Hoang said, "we should have something right here, right now. A poetry competition, to give everyone a chance to shine. What do you think, child?"

I'd expected you to say no; but you actually looked interested. If there was one thing you shared with your sister and with me, it was your love of words. "I'd be honoured, elder uncle."

"Younger sister?" Hoang asked me, but I shook my head.

I don't know how Hoang did it, but he soon got most of the guests gathered around a table laden with wine cups—making florid gestures with his arms as he explained the rules. The outsiders, who didn't speak the language very well, had all declined, except for one; but it was still a sizeable audience. You stood at the forefront of it, eagerly hanging on to Hoang's every word.

As Hoang handed out turns for composing poetry, I found Mi Nuong hovering by my side. "I thought you'd be with them," I said.

"What about you, Mother?"

I sighed. "He's fifteen, and proud of his learning. He doesn't need to compete with his forty-year-old mother."

"Or with his sister." Mi Nuong's voice was uncannily serene; but of course, navigating the deep spaces, the odd dimensions that folded space back upon itself, she saw things we didn't.

"No," I said at last. I wasn't blind; and had seen the way you avoided her.

"It doesn't matter, Mother," Mi Nuong said, still in the same serene tones. "He'll come around."

"You sound like you can see the future."

"Of course not." She sounded amused. "It would be nice, though." She fell silent, then; and I knew what she was thinking; that she didn't need to see the future to know that she'd outlive us all. Minds lived for centuries.

"Don't—" I started, but she cut me.

"Don't worry about me. It's not that bad. I have so many more things to worry about, it doesn't really loom large." She sighed—I knew she was lying to reassure me, but I didn't press the point. "Look at him. He's still such a child."

And she wasn't, not anymore—Minds didn't age or mature at the same rate as humans. Perhaps it was her physiology, perhaps it was the mere act of crossing deep spaces so often, but she sounded disturbingly adult; even older than I sometimes. "You can't hold him to your standards."

She laughed—girlish, carefree. "Of course not. He's human."

"But still your brother?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, Mother. Of course he's my brother. He's

such an idiot sometimes, but then so am I. It's what ties us together." Her voice was brimming with fond amusement; and her avatar nudged slightly closer to me, to get a better view of the contest. Everyone was laughing now, as a very tipsy scholar attempted to compose a poem about autumn and wine, and mangled words. The lone outsider stood by your side, and didn't laugh: his eyes were dark and intent, and he had a hand on your shoulder as he spoke to you—it looked as if he was trying to reassure you, which I couldn't fault him for.

"He worries for nothing," Mi Nuong said. "He'll win with ease."

And, indeed, when your turn came, you got up, gently setting aside the outsider's hand—and made up a poem about crab-flowers, making puns and references to other poems effortlessly, as if it was all part of some inner flow you could dip into. People stood, silent, as if struck with awe; and then Hoang bowed to you, as younger to elder, and everyone else started to crowd around you in order to give you congratulations.

"See? I told you. He'll fly through his examinations, get a mandarin posting wherever he wants," My Nuong said.

"Of course he will," I said. I'd never doubted it; never questioned that you had my talent for literature, and Khi Phach's cunning and practical intelligence.

I looked at you—at the way you stood with your arms splayed out, basking in the praise of scholars; at your face still flushed with the declaiming of poetry—and you looked back at me, and saw me sitting with your sister by my side; and your face darkened in that moment, became as brittle as thin ice.

I felt a shiver go down my spine—as if some dark spirit

had touched me and cast a shadow over all the paths of my future.

But the shadow never seemed to materialise: you passed your mandarin exams with ease—and awaited a posting from the government, though you closeted yourself with your friends and wouldn't confide any of your plans to us.

The summer after your exams, we went to see Mi Nuong—you and me and Khi Phach, who had just returned from his latest expedition. We took a lift to the orbital that held the spaceport—watching the fractured continents of the Eighteenth planet recede to a string of pearls in the middle of the ocean.

You sat away from us, reading a book a friend had given you—the outsiders' *Planet of Danger and Desire*, which was the latest rage that summer—while Khi Phach and I watched the receding continents, and talked about the future and what it held in store for us.

At the docks, the screens blinked above us, showing that your sister had just arrived from the First Planet. We stood outside the gate, waiting for her passengers to disembark—a stream of Viets and Xuyans, wearing silk robes and shirts, their faces still tense from the journey—from the odd sounds and sights, and the queer distortions of metal and flesh and bones one experienced aboard a mind-ship in deep spaces.

There were dignitaries from the Court itself, in five-panel brocade, their topknots adorned with exquisite jade and gold, talking amongst themselves in quiet tones—and a group of saffron-cloaked monks carrying nothing but the clothes on their back, their faces calm and ageless, making

me ache for their serenity. Last of all came a vacant-eyed mother who hadn't survived the birth of her Mind, being led by her husband like a small child. My hands must have tensed without my realising it, because Khi Phach grabbed me so hard I felt bruised, and forced me to look away.

"It's over," he said. "You'll never need to carry another Mind again."

I looked at my hands, tracing the shape of my bones through translucent skin—it had never been the same since Mi Nuong's birth. "Yes. I guess it is."

When we turned back, you weren't with us. I glanced at Khi Phach, fighting rising panic: you were an adult after all, hardly likely to be defenceless or lost. "He must have gone to another dock," Khi Phach said.

We searched the docks; the shops; the entire concourse, even the pagodas set away from the confusion of the spaceport's crowd, before we finally found you.

You were at the back of the spaceport, where the outsider hibernation ships berthed—watching another stream of travellers, their pale skins glistening from the fluid in the hibernation cradles, their eyes still faraway, reeling from the shock of waking up—the knowledge that the thin thread of ansible communications was their only link to a home planet where everyone they had ever held dear had aged and died during the long journey.

Khi Phach called out your name. "Anh!"

You didn't turn; your eyes remained on the outsiders.

"You gave us quite a fright," I said, laying a hand on your shoulder, feeling the tension in every one of your muscles. I thought it was stress; worry at the new life that opened up for you as a mandarin. "Come, let's see your sister."

You were silent and sullen the entire way; watching Khi Phach introduce himself to the crewmember that guarded

the access to the ship, telling him we were family—her face lit up, and she congratulated him on such a beautiful child. I'd expected you to grimace in jealousy, as you always did when your sister was mentioned; but you didn't even speak.

"Child?" I asked.

I felt you tense as we walked into the tunnel leading to your sister's body; as the walls became organic, as faint traceries of poetry started appearing, and a persistent hum rose into the background: your sister's heartbeat, reverberating through the entire ship.

"This is stupid," you said, as we entered.

"What is?" Khi Phach asked.

"Mind-ships." You shook your head. "It's not meant to be that way."

Khi Phach glanced at me, inquisitively; for once, I was stuck for words. "Outsiders do it better," you said, your hands shut into fists.

We stopped, in the middle of the entrance hall—rafters adorned with red lanterns, poetry about family reunions, your sister's way of welcoming us home—I knew she was listening, that she might be hurt, but it was too late to take this outside, as you'd no doubt intended all along. "Better?" I said, arching an eyebrow. "Leaving for years in hibernation, leaving everything they own behind?"

"They don't take mind-ships!" You weren't looking at me or Khi Phach; but at the walls, your sister's body wrapped all around you. "They don't go plunging into deep spaces where we were never meant to go, don't go gazing into things that make them insane—they don't—don't birth those monstrosities just to navigate space faster!"

There was silence, in the wake of your words. All I could think of was all that I'd ignored; the priests' books that you'd brought home, your trips to the nearby Sleeper

Church, and your pale-skinned outsider friends—like the one who had spoken to you so intently at the banquet.

"Apologise to your sister," Khi Phach said.

"I won't."

His voice was cold. "You just called her an abomination."

"I don't care."

I let go of you, then; moved away with one hand over my heart, as if I could make the words go away. "Child. Apologise. Please," I said, in the tone that I'd used when you were little.

"No." You laid a hand on the walls, feeling their warmth; and pulled back, as if burnt. "Look at you, Mother. All wasted up, for her sake. All our women, subjugated just so they can birth those things."

You sounded like Father Paul; like an outsider yourself, full of that same desperate rage and aggressiveness—though, unlike them, you had a home to come back to.

"I don't need you to defend me, child," I said. "And we can resume that discussion elsewhere—" I waved a hand, forestalling Khi Phach's objections— "but not here, not in your sister's hearing."

A wind rose through the ship, picking up sound as it whistled through empty rooms. "Abomination..." Mi Nuong whispered. "Come tell me what you think—to my face. In my heartroom."

You stared upwards; as if you could see her; guess at the mass of optics and flesh plugged into the ship—and before either of us could stop you, you spun and ran out of the ship, making small, convulsive noises that I knew were tears.

Child...

I would have run, too; but Khi Phach laid a hand on my

shoulder. "Let him cool off first. You know you can't argue with him in that state."

"I'm sorry," I said to Mi Nuong.

The lights flickered; and the ship seemed to contract a little. "He's frightened," Mi Nuong said.

"Which is no excuse." Khi Phach's face was stern.

But he hadn't been there at the birth; he didn't remember what I remembered; the shadow that had lodged like a shard within your heart, that coloured everything. "I should have seen it," I said. Because it was all my fault; because I should have never brought you to the ship that day. What had I been thinking, trusting in strangers to protect my own child?

"You shouldn't torment yourself," Mi Nuong said.

I laid a hand on a wall—watching lines of poetry scroll by, songs about fishermen flying cormorants over the river, about wars dashing beloved sons like strings of pearls—about the beauty of hibiscuses doomed to pass and become nothing, just as we, too, passed away and became nothing—and I thought about how small, how insignificant we were within the world—about letting go of grief and guilt. "I can't stop," I said. "He's my son, just as you are my daughter."

"I told you before. He'll see it."

"I guess," I said. "Tell me about your trip. How was it?"

She laughed; giggled like a teenage girl. "Wonderful. You should see the First Planet, it's so huge—it has all those palaces and gardens, covering it from end to end; and pagodas that go all the way through the atmosphere, joined to orbitals, so that prayers genuinely go out into the void..."

I remember it all; remember it vividly, every word, every nuance that happened that day. For, when we came home, you weren't there anymore.

You'd packed your things, and left a message. I guess

you were a scholar in spite of everything, because you didn't send a mail through the terminal, but wrote it with pen and paper: crossed words over and over until they hardly made sense.

I can't live here anymore. I apologise for being an unfilial son; but I have to seek my fortune elsewhere.

Khi Phach started moving Heaven and Earth to find you; but I didn't have to look very far. Your name, barely disguised, was on the manifest for an outsider hibernation ship headed out of the Dai Viet Empire, to an isolated planet on the edge of a red sun—a trip sponsored by the Sleeper Church. The hibernation ship had left while we were still searching for you; and there was no calling it back, not without starting a war with the outsiders. And what pretext could we have given? You were an adult; sixteen already, with the mandarin exams behind you; old enough to do what you wanted with your life.

You wouldn't age in your hibernation pod; but by the time you arrived, twenty years would have elapsed for us, making the distance between us all but insurmountable.

Khi Phach fumed against the Church, speaking of retribution and judgment, making plans to bring this before the local magistrate. I merely stood still, watching the screen that showed the hibernation ship going further and further away from us—feeling as though someone had ripped my heart out of my chest.

Many years have passed, and you still haven't come back. Khi Phach took his anger and bitterness into his grave; and I stare at his holo every morning when I rise—wondering when I, too, will join him on the ancestral altar.

Your sister, of course, has hardly aged: Minds don't live like humans, and she'll survive us all. She's with me now—back from another trip into space, telling me about all the wonders she's seen. I ask about you; and feel the ship contracting around me—in sadness, in anger?

"I don't know, Mother. The outsider planets are closed to mind-ships."

I know it already, but I still ask.

"Have you—" I bite my lips, pull out the treacherous words one by one—"have you forgiven him?"

"Mother!" Mi Nuong laughs, gentle, carefree. "He was just a child when it happened. Why should I keep grudges that long? Besides..." Her voice is sadder, now.

"Yes," I say. "I've seen the holos, too." Gently, carefully, I pull your latest disk—finger it before triggering the ansible record it contains. An image of you hovers in the midst of the ship, transparent and leeches of colours.

"Mother. I hope this finds you well. I have started work for a newscast—this would please you, wouldn't it, my being a scholar after all?" You smile, but it doesn't reach all the way to your eyes; and your face is pale, as if you hadn't seen the sun in a long time. "I am well, though I think of you often."

The messages all come through ansible; so do money transfers—as if money could reduce the emptiness of space between us, as if it could repay me for your absence. "I was sorry to hear about Father. I miss you both terribly." You pause then, turn to look at something beyond the camera—I catch a glimpse of slim arms, wrapped around you—a quick hug, to give you strength, but even that doesn't light up your eyes or your face—before you look at the camera again. "I'm sorry. I—I wish I were home again."

I turn off the disk, let it lie on the floor—it becomes ringed with scrolling words, with poems of sorrow and loss.

"He's happy," Mi Nuong says, in a tone that makes clear she believes none of it. "Among the outsiders."

Walking on a strange land, in a strange world—learning new customs in an unfamiliar language—away from us, away from your family. "Happy," I say.

I finger the disk again. I know that if I turn it on again, I'll hear your final words, the ones that come at the end of the recording, spoken barely loud enough to be heard.

I miss you all terribly.

Us all. Father and Mother—and sister. This is the first time you've ever admitted this aloud. And I've seen the other, earlier holos; seen how your eyes become ringed with shadows as time passes; how unhappiness eats you alive, year after year, even as you tell me how good life is, among the outsiders.

I'll be long gone when your pain becomes heavier than your fear, heavier than your shame; when you turn away from your exile and return to the only place that was ever home to you. By the time you come back, I'll be dust, ashes spread in the void of space; one more portrait on the ancestral altar, to be honoured and worshipped—I'll have passed on to another life, with the Buddha's blessing.

But I know, still, what will happen.

You'll walk out of the outsiders' docks, pale with the lack of sun, covered in the slime of your hibernation pod—shaking with the shock of awakening, your eyes filled with the same burning emptiness I remember so well, the same rage and grief that all you've ever held dear has been lost while you travelled.

And, like an answer to your most secret prayer, you'll find your sister waiting for you.

THE FROST ON JADE BUDS

On the comms-image, Chi looked much as Thuy remembered her: tall and thin and dour, almost skeletal, as if what had happened to her in her youth still stifled her metabolism – and, in truth, perhaps it did. Neither Thuy nor any of the family – nor, indeed, any inhabitant of the Scattered Pearls Belt – really knew the full extent of what happened to her, or how to reverse it.

"You look well, elder sister," Chi said. The words would have suited the imperial court; would have been appropriate for an elder of Chi's generation. There were other, more familiar ones, more suitable for the sister of one's blood; and Chi could have used them. She could have pretended to care. But of course she no longer bothered.

Thuy couldn't bring herself to lie. "You don't."

Chi laughed, but it didn't reach her eyes – and even the makeup and the plucked eyebrows couldn't distract from the red, burst blood vessels in her corneas. "You never could lie."

"Not to family," Thuy said, simply. She wondered where Sixth Aunt had got to; she'd left the ship a bi-hour

ago, saying she needed to find something in the Apricot Blossom Ho orbital, and hadn't come back. Staring into her sister's eyes, Thuy wished she could have counted on Sixth Aunt's biting wisdom and overbearing presence; on her reassurance that she was handling this the proper way; for anything that would have taken away that feeling of baiting a tiger with nothing but her wit to save her – and ancestors knew wit had never been her strength.

On Thuy's implants-feed, the signal from *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* flowed like a meditation prayer – the ship's trackers were attempting to trace the call, hopping from node to node in the network, discarding the more remote planets of the Black Tiger solar system, moving in closer to the centre...

Let them find something; anything that would help them. Let them track Chi down before it was too late.

"You shouldn't be here," Chi said.

"Did you expect me to stay away after I got your message?"

"What, that I was coming back to the orbital of my childhood?" Chi's voice was slightly ironic; as if already detached from the conversation. Of course it would be.

"You know what I mean," Thuy said.

The trackers were narrowing it further; to the middle band between the large space stations and the stunted, burnt planets; to the Scattered Pearls Belt itself...

Please please please...

"I know exactly what you mean. You have this pathetic notion that you can stop me, that you can make me change my mind." Chi's face was closed again – as serene, as enigmatic as the statue of Quan Am in the temples. "You're free to try, elder sister. But you'll never succeed."

And with that, the comms cut off. Thuy remained

standing for a while, staring at the emptiness in front of her eyes – the ship's network superimposed the images directly on her field of vision – and tried to banish her sister's image from her thoughts.

The Dragons in the Peach Garden spoke up. "I tracked the signal to the vicinity of this orbital, and then I lost it. I'm sorry, child."

Thuy sighed. "Not your fault, great-aunt." The mindship was old; old enough to have seen her mother and grandmother as children – old enough to remember everything about Chi before... the incident. "How close a vicinity?"

The calligraphy scrolling on the walls flickered, turning from red to pale pink for a barely perceptible moment – the mindship was a proud one, and not easily embarrassed. "A neighbourhood of at least three orbitals, including this one."

Anywhere, in other words.

Thuy stared at the walls, hoping to find some distraction, some wisdom in them. But her eyes were drawn inexorably to the intricate, etched pattern of chemical burnmarks--back from a time before the war, when *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* had been a transport ship for Galactic factories; when her overseer had cared little about acid damage from burst boxes – cheaper to hire a new ship than to bother spending money on repairs. No solace to be found there; only painful scars.

Thuy sighed. With a flick of her fingers she called up Chi's previous message, and stared at the vision that coalesced in front of her, as translucent and insubstantial as the Courts of Hell.

It was a mindship – one that bore as much resemblance to *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* as the calligraphy of a child did to a New Year's welcome scroll painted by a

master. Lines that should have been effortlessly flowing were crooked and jagged; the hull was a jumble of metals haphazardly joined, much as though everything had melted together in the furnace of the workshops.

Thuy moved her fingers, turning the image of the mindship back and forth – every new point of view revealing fresh details – exhausts bursting at sharp, impossible angles from the hull; rivets and connectors spread like fungi on the pitted surface; protruding fins and wings, cancerous growths in a tumultuous, nausea-inducing pattern that was impossible to take in all at once. It was hard to tell how much was the original Galactic ship and how much was Chi's painstaking reconstruction work, but Thuy suspected that even brand-new the mindship would have been an eyesore; and an abomination in more ways than one.

There had been only one line in the message; a handful of words that had chilled Thuy to the core of her being.

Is she not beautiful, elder sister?

She didn't know what the ship was called, but she knew who had made it; and for what purpose; and some of Chi's purpose in putting it back together.

For years she'd hoped that Chi's absence at New Year's Eves and family death anniversaries meant that she was somewhere else, whether in Galactic or in Dai Viet space; that she'd found a place where she could fit, where she could be happy. The message had proved otherwise.

She brought her fingers together; and let the ship vanish from her field of vision. "We're too late," she said, aloud.

The Dragons in the Peach Garden was silent for a while. "By those standards we've been too late for ten years, child."

"I guess so," Thuy said.

"I know what you're thinking," the mindship said. "It wasn't your fault."

"I know," Thuy said, but she didn't. She kept telling herself that, when she woke up in the grip of shadowy nightmares; when she remembered hanging in void of space, bathed in the merciless light of the stars – hearing Chi's heavy breathing and knowing it was too late—that even if her thrusters came online now she would never reach her sister in time...

It wasn't her fault. She had to keep thinking that; or she'd fall, and ancestors only knew how far she'd fall.

Thuy found Sixth Aunt at one of the stalls in the Scavenge Market, sipping lotus tea – by the smell that wafted up to her, the expensive, delicate kind grown only in the light of the Black Tiger star. An uneaten plate of cakes lay at her right hand.

"Sit down, child," Sixth Aunt said, with a graceful move of her sleeves. "Have a cake. They're not the best, but Madam Second makes a very good pandanus and durian filling."

"There's no time for that," Thuy protested. On her newsfeed, the Galactic delegation was being welcomed by the President of the Forest of Brushes; something flashed at the bottom of the image, a schedule that involved visiting the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Central orbital, and then the orbitals of the most powerful families in the Scattered Pearls Belt. The Apricot Blossom Ho, the orbital where they were, was second on the list.

"Pfah," Sixth Aunt said. "There's always time. The Galactics will put their hands on the pulse of power, and try

to see where it flows from. That's what they did, after all, when they first took us over as a colony. It'll take time."

Thuy shook her head. "My younger sister is here." But the habit of obedience won out; she picked a cake and bit into it – letting the rich tang spread in her mouth, a heavy burst of flavours on her palate.

"Of course she's here. Where else would she be?" Sixth Aunt was a small, plump woman with uncanny eyes – they were brown like most Rong, but in some types of light they shone green, as sharp and as deep as imperial jade.

"In Central," Thuy said, more sharply than she'd meant. Sixth Aunt had that effect on people.

This close to the edge of the Scavenge Market, it was quiet. The only people in Thuy's field of vision were a group of elderly men and women sitting at a table: ex-workers from the Galactic factories, their bone-atrophied arms flexed like lengths of tubing, their eyes covered with a bluish film sprouting hairs as fine as insect feelers; their faces prematurely aged, skin sagging like molten plastic on their cheeks and chins. They were all too common on the orbitals: the last remnant of those who'd handled Peters' Blue in colonial times, in places where the safety of the workers had been an afterthought to the lure of easy money – an unsettling sight, with the Galactics negotiating for the re-establishment of factories in the Scattered Pearls Belt.

Sixth Aunt, oblivious to her surroundings, sipped her tea, as daintily as if she'd been in her own quarters – her eyes closed in something approaching bliss. "Ah. One should always take the time for proper tea."

"Younger Aunt..." Thuy started; and stopped, for any word she could have added would have been disrespectful.

Sixth Aunt laid her cup back on the table, as carefully

as she'd have put down a winning hand of mat chuoc. "Finish your cake, child, and we'll go see a friend."

As they walked through the Scavenge Market, Thuy felt as though she were ten years back – as though she were one of the kids in the market, proudly showing vendors what they'd salvaged from the floating mass of debris in the Belt – kids borrowing the shuttles of their families' mind-ships, playing soldiers and immortals in the vast jumble of leftover junk from the Galactic War – picking up shiny things, bringing them back, never considering what might happen to them; as if the debris zone were just another playground.

"Takes you back," Sixth Aunt said – of course she could always tell what Thuy was thinking. In Mother's absence she'd practically raised her and Chi.

Three kids ran past Thuy, laughing. She caught a glimpse of what they were carrying – cracked, warped devices that hummed with threatening noises, and the blackened remnants of smart-mine swarms – one wrong word, one wrong gesture and they would not only expel paralyzing gas but cause their swarm-mates to do the same.

She opened her mouth; but Sixth Aunt forestalled her, shaking her head.

"They're spent. Harmless."

And they both knew it was a lie; that she didn't know, that she *couldn't* know how damaged they were. They both knew how dangerous it could be, to be out there in the Belt debris, in what had once been the front line of the independence war against the Galactics. But the kids were gone, rushing ahead to sell their new toys; or to play in the nooks and crannies of the orbital. Thuy bit her lip, fighting an urge to run after them; but what would she have done? There

were dozens of kids in the Scavenge Market, all of them carrying things that could be equally dangerous.

The market was quieter than usual; its customary ebullience gone. It hung almost... silenced, watching the screens; watching the Galactics. They'd been gone for forty years, longer than the lifetime of half the people of the orbital, but old habits died hard.

There'd be protests, of course; demonstrations against the return of their former masters – but the Imperial Court had planned for that. Security had trebled at all keypoints, and the Galactics would be moving in their very own bubble of quiet, deserted space. They would meet the leaders of the Scattered Pearls Belt; smile and discuss what they wanted, as if nothing had ever happened, as if the war was but distant, harmless memories.

No security, however, would ever protect them against Chi.

Sixth Aunt led Chi to one of the smaller stalls at the back of the Scavenge Market; so small, in fact, that it seemed to be selling almost nothing but a few holo-displays. Then Thuy's eyes caught the holo-displays – and saw that the stall was empty, not because it sold small trinkets, but because its products were too large to be lined up on shelves.

The owner was a middle-aged woman with a few hints of white at her temples. She smiled at Sixth Aunt. "Your friend, yes?"

"My niece," Sixth Aunt said, nodding. "Child, this is Madam Anh."

"And she'd be the one looking for a ship?" Madam Anh nodded.

Thuy looked at the holos.

"Mostly parts," *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said,

unexpected speaking up on her comms-link. "This is a helioidal thruster, and this is a multi-input reconstructional antenna... And, oh, I wouldn't mind one of these..."

"We don't have the money," Thuy subvocalised. "Besides, it's all Galactic tech –"

"No sense in closing oneself to new things, I've always said."

Thuy tore herself from the conversation to find Madam Anh deep in talk with Sixth Aunt. "I'm afraid I can't help you, elder sister – you'll understand that my customers expect confidentiality..."

"Pfah." Sixth Aunt's lips pursed, in that all-too-familiar gesture. "What harm does it to know who purchased what ship parts? We're no longer under the Galactics, and maintaining mindships is no longer frowned upon – there's no need to hoard your knowledge from us."

The Imperial Court probably kept a watch on ship parts, but in a desultory fashion: part of the Scattered Pearls Belt's attraction was the freedom to trade, and traders who got controlled too often moved to places without such restrictions.

Madam Anh grimaced. "With some customers, it's clear that they need... a little less attention in their direction."

"Of course," Sixth Aunt said "But I'm not interested in who they are." The lie slipped, smoothly, easily from her lips. "I just think they might have something else we need, based on what they bought here."

"She's my sister," Thuy said, ignoring the sharp look Sixth Aunt threw her. "We need to make sure that she's fine."

"What if I told you she was?" Madam Anh asked. Even though Thuy kept her eyes lowered as a sign of respect, she

could feel the weight of Madam Anh's gaze. "Would you truly go away then?"

Thuy took a deep breath – and then, before Sixth Aunt could stop her for impertinence to an elder, she said, "If I believed you told the truth, yes."

A sharp inhalation of breath from Madam Anh – a moment which hung suspended like a knife – and Sixth Aunt, starting to say, "I apologise –"

Madam Anh made a small, sharp noise – a bark of amused laughter. "The young always challenge authority, do they not?"

"I'm sorry," Thuy said, feeling the heat of the blush spread to her cheeks. "She's my younger sister, and I'm the one responsible for her care."

"That is the role of parents," Madam Anh said, though her voice was a little less sharp.

Thuy waited for Sixth Aunt to speak up, but she didn't. It fell to her, then; because she'd spoken up and pulled the conversation towards her as inexorably as a star pulled its comets. "Mother and Father are dead."

"You're too young for them to have died in the war." Madam Anh's voice was flat.

Thuy shook her head. "It was afterwards. Fifteen years ago. Their ship was going from Central to the Eastern Sea Tran orbital, right next to here. It must have collided with some debris on the way back." She'd said it so many times now that the words came out on automatic, without any emotion; a mere fact of life that couldn't be budged or changed no matter how hard she beseeched her ancestors at night.

Madam Anh was silent, then. It wasn't as if this was an uncommon story; there was enough debris in the Scattered Pearls belt to last over several lifetimes, ten thousand booby

traps and ambush tools the Galactics had dropped as though there were no tomorrow. Most of the Independence Forces' weapons were inactive or easily avoided by now; after all, they hadn't wanted to lay waste to their own country. The Galactics, though, had been in their colonies, and hadn't much cared by the end whether they destroyed the entire Belt if it meant winning the war.

"So, yes, tell me she's fine and I'll go home," Thuy said, forging on even though the little voice at the back of her head told her she'd better remain silent, better let her words sink in. But she couldn't. There was no time. "But I doubt she is."

"Your sister was here," Madam Anh said at last. "Looks much like you – if you'd not eaten or slept for days on end. Bought a couple parts." She waved a gnarled hand; and one of the screens changed, rotating a handful of parts Thuy couldn't identify. "Those ones."

Thuy heard *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* stir on the comms-link, giving her the technical details on each part and the possible uses in language so dense she could hardly process it.

"That doesn't help," she subvocalised. And then, aloud to Madam Anh, "Did she say – anything?"

Madam Anh spread her hands. "No."

"But she was not well," Thuy insisted.

Madam Anh sighed. "If she'd been my daughter, I would have sent her home and fed her caramel pork and crab fritters until she got some fat on those bones." Before Thuy could speak up, she gestured, and the holo-screens shifted, to display a point blinking amidst the stars.

"That's where she asked me to deliver the parts," Madam Anh said. "Take a good look and memorise it, because I won't show it to you twice."

"Got it," *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said.

The screen went black again. "May your ancestors send you good fortune to find her," Madam Anh said. "She needs guidance, that one."

You have no idea how much.

Thuy bowed to Madam Anh, and followed Sixth Aunt out of the market. Sixth Aunt's lips were pursed; she couldn't tell how much was disapproval, or scepticism. "You think she'll be gone," Thuy said.

"Of course. I didn't raise fools," Sixth Aunt said.

A noise tore through the din of the Scavenge Market – an explosion, soon swallowed again by the hubbub around them. What had –? Thuy couldn't see very clearly, but there was a crowd clustered around one of the stalls. A handful of medic-drones swerved past them, intent on getting to the wounded.

Text scrolled at the bottom of her field of vision, on the newsfeed for the market: *explosion near the Street of Calligraphers. Minor wounds: three victims. Major wounds: none. Precautions: none. Expect minor jams around stall 17573.* It wouldn't be more than a blip on people's feeds; an everyday occurrence in the Scavenge Market. People knew, after all, what risk they were taking by tinkering with Galactic debris. Everyone knew. Everyone had always known.

If only it were just explosions. If only it was just flesh wounds, easily closed, easily cured – limbs, easily regrown, shards and projectiles, easily extracted, though even that thought was trivialising other people's hurt.

But, of course, Galactic weapons had gone beyond that a long time ago; and Thuy and Chi and Sixth Aunt knew all about that, too.

"Well, we're here," *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said. "No one will be too surprised if I detect a distinct absence of spaceships."

Thuy sighed, massaging her temples. "It was the best information we had. Are you sure –? A mindship would have many ways to conceal itself –"

"Yes," *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said, patiently, as if to a small child. "But not this thoroughly."

They were in the middle of the debris field. The various objects lit up on the ship's sensor: mine swarms, acid traps, enhanced-gravity bombs, and the odd, twisted objects that couldn't be properly labelled by the ship's systems. Those were the best finds for kids; the chance of finding something new.

Thuy remembered a time, ten years ago, when the biggest debris of the swarm had lit up on their shuttle's scanner; the way Chi's eyes had lit up from the inside, the begging and pleading that they needed to go check the thing out, that it would be an experience to boast about to their cousins, that they might even bring something back, something pretty enough to outrank the holo-projector that Cousin Hieu had salvaged from the ruin of a Galactic shuttle. She'd always been curious; and Thuy had never been able to refuse her anything.

"She was here," Thuy said, aloud.

"Quite obviously. Equally obviously, she's not here anymore." Sixth Aunt was sitting at the table, staring at a map of the square quadrant. Underneath, in transparency, the table showed the Galactic delegation exiting the Hall of Supreme Harmony. They were smiling, their teeth as white and as sharp as those of tigers on the prow. No doubt they'd got what they wanted – perhaps even the military bases they'd been angling for, the 'buffer zone' between the Scat-

tered Pearls Belt and the much larger Dai Viet Empire. "You remember colonial times," she said to *The Dragons in the Peach Garden*.

The ship sniffed. "When they thought it fitting to send mindships on extended delivery runs throughout the galaxy – treating us no better than beasts of burdens, and caring little as to whether we saw our families again at New Year's Eve? Yes, of course." She didn't sound pleased.

"Everyone in the family ended up working for them," Sixth Aunt said, thoughtfully – and, to Thuy, "You weren't born, of course. But their soldiers drove customers away from the restaurant with their rowdiness and arrogance, and paid like misers. Your grandfather had no choice but to take work at the barracks – and not be paid much more than an errand boy."

"Is this really the time?" Thuy asked. She knew about the Galactics – about the slow, orchestrated ruin of their family – but that wasn't the point. The point was that they couldn't afford another war with them; and that was what would happen if Chi had her way.

Sixth Aunt stared at the table and its image of the Galactic delegation – her face as unreadable as Chi's had been. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who knows what the future might hold?"

"It's the past I have no interest in conjuring up again," *The Dragons in the Peach Gardens* said, stiffly.

Thuy tuned them both out. She stared at the wall—at the projected images of space, with the stars and debris helpfully labelled by *The Dragons in the Peach Garden's* sensors. She thought of Chi – of her sister, alone in the room of her rebuilt mindship, making her plans with the same ruthless clarity she'd applied to everything since the accident.

"Can you show me the projected path of the Galactics' shuttle?" she asked the ship.

The view zoomed out; a thin line of green threaded its way through the debris – a zigzag course through some of the less cluttered areas. "My best guess," *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said.

"That's assuming they'll take the obvious path," Sixth Aunt said, her eyes still on the map.

"Security reasons?" Thuy asked. "They'll assume there isn't a ship that can touch them; and ordinarily they'd be right." She stared at the map again, willing the truth to emerge from the jumble of debris – but the only truth that would come was the same Chi already knew; that nothing was fair or equitable in life.

"What would you do if you were Chi?" Sixth Aunt asked.

Thuy shook her head. "I can't tell what she would do. Not anymore."

Sixth Aunt said nothing. Chi had stayed a while, after the accident. At first, she'd tried to act normal; to pay her respects every morning to her other elders, to bring fruit fresh from the orchard to Sixth Aunt, to pretend that everything was fine. But the change that had come over her – the magnitude of what had happened to her while she'd hung alone in the carcass of the ship with her spacesuit's thrusters disabled – was like a wound in the family's everyday life, like a swarm-mine ejecting shards long after it had detonated, like smart bullets still worming their way through a body years and years after the impact.

The parts. Thuy blinked, and said aloud, "Can you tell me what the parts would be used for?"

"I don't know Galactic mindships very well, especially not old models cobbled back together," *The Dragons in the*

Peach Garden said, slowly. "But this one is a connector for a heartroom. And..." she paused; the scrolling calligraphy on the walls sped up, taking on an orange tinge. "Looks as if she had a thruster to fix, possibly one of the deep space ones."

"Deep spaces." Thuy said the words, tasting each syllable on her tongue. "There are no deep spaces involved in travelling from Central to the Apricot Blossom Ho orbital."

"No, there shouldn't be," Sixth Aunt said. "But she just wanted the mindship to be complete, didn't she?"

Deep spaces. Debris. Smart swarms. Too many ideas and images in Thuy's mind, overcrowding each other. "Could you..." she hesitated. "Could you remain in deep spaces and emerge just in time to fire your weapons?" Humans didn't like deep spaces; didn't go into them until they had to – the weird geometry and compressed timeline that enabled fast travel between the stars had strong, unpleasant side effects on humans, even more so when the mindship wasn't moving – it did something to your perceptions, twisting everything slightly out of shape until your brain and your body both felt equally sick. But Chi wasn't... She stopped herself in time before thinking "not quite human", because she didn't know where that thought would lead – Chi wasn't like most humans anymore, was she?

"In theory..." *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said. "Possible, but..."

"Chi would do it if it were possible," Thuy said.

Sixth Aunt sniffed. "She could be anywhere in deep spaces."

"She'll be close," Thuy said, with a growing certainty in her belly. "As close as possible to her exit point. She'll want to feel... connected to them." Even though she couldn't, strictly speaking – even though that feeling had been

excised from her long ago, by the same mindship she now made her home. "Can you take us into deep spaces, and look for a ship?"

There was silence, for a while. *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* said, "You haven't taken any of the standard drugs or thought-dampeners. Child, I'm not sure..."

"There's no time," Thuy said. On the table, the Galactics were finishing the boarding of their shuttle; their escort was likewise on board their own ships, the squad in full military formation – what show they were all putting on, smiling as if all sins and atrocities had been forgiven, as though the orphans and wounded and absences on the ancestral altars could really be wiped clean, given enough years; as though the debris of their weapons weren't still harming children. "We have to –"

"As you wish, child." The world lurched, and contracted; and everything vanished in a blur of darkness.

Everything seemed blurred, twisted out of shape, every surface coated with an oily sheen; and, on the edge of hearing, there was a booming noise like the waves of the sea (the sea Thuy had only ever seen on holo reconstitutions of Dai Viet on Old Earth). Thuy moved – with an uneasy feeling that she was doing so through thick tar, a feeling that didn't seem rooted in anything – her body, her perceptions – but a nagging one that wouldn't go away, like a distant pain that had yet to bloom.

And there was a presence with her in the room – a huge pressure against her mind, the touch of the mindship she was in – something that should have been familiar but wasn't, was utterly alien and discomfiting and a stark

reminder of the gulf between her and *The Dragons in the Peach Garden*. Her mind felt twisted and stretched and pulled in all directions, her thoughts running slow as honey and pressed against the confines of her skull.

Sixth Aunt still sat at the table, calmly talking to *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* as though nothing were wrong. "Anything, Great-great aunt?"

"It's not as easy as putting sensors online," *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* protested. "Give me a moment, child. I can't see anything –"

A screen-view appeared on the walls of the ship – before, it had opened up on stars, but now there was only oily darkness – and, swimming out of the swirls of odd, disjointed colours, Chi's hollow face. "Clever," she said. "Much cleverer than I expected of you."

"You're here, aren't you?" Thuy asked. "Waiting for their arrival? Younger sister, you don't have to do this –"

Chi's face twisted, in what might have been pain, or anger. "You want to dissuade me? Fine, elder sister. But we'll do it on my own terms. Come aboard."

On *that* ship? On that monstrosity, that mangled approximation of a mindship, the reconstruction of an entity that had already destroyed Chi and Thuy and the family –

Thuy looked at Chi – at the hollows in her cheeks; at the set expression in her eyes – remembered hanging in the void of space; remembered the heavy breathing in her comms-system, the background noises that still woke her up in her nightmares. Her mouth spoke before her brain caught up. "I'll do it."

"No," Sixth Aunt said. "You're a fool, child."

No. She'd been a fool ten years ago. She'd wasted time,

racing after the past that could not be erased or changed. "I have to," she said. "Don't you see?"

Sixth Aunt sniffed. "I see I've lost one child, to all intents and purposes. I don't want to lose another one."

On the screen, Chi's face was frozen in that odd expression – in her eyes, that desperate need for help that could not, would not ever be met; because Thuy had failed her. "You haven't lost either of us," Thuy said, firmly. "Please, Younger Aunt."

"I'll return her unharmed, if that's what you're worried about," Chi said. "Unless you don't believe my word?"

It was a challenge – an unseemly one, made from younger to elder, on the borders of insolence – and Sixth Aunt stiffened. "Manners, child," she said. And then, realising the futility of it, "I don't doubt your word."

"Good," Chi said. "Then we can go ahead, can't we?"

Sixth Aunt's mouth set in a frown; she opened and closed her mouth--the first time Thuy had seen her at a loss. Then, finally, she said. "There isn't much time."

"All the more reason to hurry, then," Chi said, with a smile that was cold and without joy. "Tell your ship to synch to mine. I'm sending my deep-space referential."

In physical space, a transfer from a mindship to another would have involved an access hatch, and a tube extended from one ship to another, a link that Thuy could have walked along.

Here, in deep spaces, none of that happened – *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* muttered under her breath while she sorted out some 'technical details', and cursed several times

at obsolete code configurations – and there was a wrenching, and a subtle reconfiguration of space – the oily sheen on the walls taking on slightly different tinges, the table turning from metal to crystal, the sense of the ship's vast presence increasing tenfold for a moment before receding to scarcely bearable levels. And then, as Thuy was still struggling to comprehend what had happened, *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* spoke in a voice like thunder overhead, "you can go ahead."

There was a door in the wall, where Chi's image had been. It opened only on a well-lit corridor – white-washed walls that looked incongruously normal; a few pictures on them that showed towering buildings under a moon so large it seemed to crush them – a Galactic planet, had to be, because none of the architecture looked familiar.

The ship's presence in the air was dilute, like a hundred scattered droplets of water; a relief after *The Dragons in the Peach Garden*.

Or was it? Did she really need so much confirmation that this was no ordinary mindship?

"We're with you," Sixth Aunt's voice said in Thuy's ears; but it was faint, and fading away already – as Thuy walked deeper and deeper into the ship.

There were no fountains, or scrolling calligraphy on the walls; at most a few symbols, like the cross of the Christian God and the blue-and-red flags of countries from long-dead history, and here and there, the spiral-galaxy and bird silhouette insignia that were the old mark of the Galactic armed forces. Everything smelled – stale, like old books, like a well-scrubbed hospital block, too clean, too empty to be real. And there was the same oily sheen of deep spaces everywhere, curling on the pictures and on the white walls; and the flickering sense of something following her through the corridors, some vast cosmic attention turned her way, in

that split-second moment before it turned from vaguely puzzled to hostile...

"Get a grip." Sixth Aunt's voice cut through the morass of her thoughts. "The Galactics' shuttle has left Central. You have half an hour before they reach our position."

Thuy said nothing. She followed the corridors, struggling to assert a sense of normalcy on something that had never been normal in the first place; followed the rising sense of dread within her until it was all she could do not to stop, not to retch on the crazily shifting floors.

At last, at long last, she reached what must have been the heartroom. There was nothing in it, save a huge rectangular box marked with a spiral-galaxy – masking the innards of the ship's Mind – and Chi, standing by the side of the box with one hand negligently trailing on its surface.

She wore a white ao dai. The traditional tunic hung loose on her frame, and in the freak geometry of deep spaces its colour seemed to have turned into the grimy hempen of mourning. "Elder sister. How pleasant of you to visit me. This is *The Frost on Jade Buds*."

A typically Rong name. "Not its original name," Thuy said.

"No," Chi said. "He had a Galactic name once, but it would have been... inappropriate, in the circumstances. Though –" she smiled, as if amused by a joke only she could understand – "his original name was *Despoiler*."

Thuy could feel the ship's Mind everywhere now – the unpleasant sharp tang of it; the pent-up aggressiveness coiled in the air, the eagerness. It *was* a war mindship, and Chi had rebuilt it. "You have to stop," she said, not knowing what other words to use. "Don't you see? You can't just target the Galactics –"

"Oh, but I can."

You're my younger sister, Thuy wanted to say. I know you're not a murderer. But she no longer knew what Chi was; what she'd been turned into.

"You don't understand", Thuy said. "I know you want your revenge, but what good would it do? The delegates aren't the ones who planted the mindship here; they're not the ones who... damaged you. What –?" "What do you want to achieve, she wanted to ask, what do you think you can do, start yet another war that will destroy us all? But the words remained stuck in her throat.

"I don't know what you hoped to achieve, coming here." It was such a matter-of-fact declaration it chilled Thuy to the bone.

"Come home," Thuy said. "Please. Sixth Aunt and the rest of the family want you back." Please leave this ship; this breaker of families, this maker of the dead."

Chi laughed, bitterly. "I think it's already too late for this, isn't it?"

"It's never too late. One drop of blood is always heavier than a body of water."

"Received wisdom." Chi grimaced. "You should know the value of that."

"I know the value of that." Thuy rubbed her fingers, feeling the grit of the ship between them, like the ash from burnt incense sticks. "That's the only thing that kept us standing. What else but values and received wisdom do you have to guide you through bitter times?" She knew all about that: the platitudes said at her parents' funerals, at those of her elders, of her youngers – all the meaningless words she'd said to herself at night, to lull herself back to sleep after the nightmares.

"You know what else there is."

"Revenge?" Thuy said the word, letting it hang in the air like a blade. "You have to let go of this."

"Because I should forgive? Here's the thing, elder sister. It's easy to say this when you're the one receiving the forgiveness. Have *they* come here contrite, asking for reconciliation? Have they admitted what is it that they did – have they said they're sorry for the thousands of deaths and orphans, all the attempts to utterly own or destroy us, all the debris that's still polluting and shattering our families? No. Instead they've come here for their own gain, offering us their meaningless protection against the Dai Viet Empire. And we'll indulge them again, because we can't afford not to." It should have been an impassioned tirade; but Chi's voice was utterly emotionless.

"Lil' Sis," Thuy said. She didn't understand. She didn't see.

"Look at this ship." Chi swirled around, her hands spread out. "Look at what they built. A living weapon."

A weapon, Thuy thought, fighting against a bout of nausea. A weapon that took smiling, happy girls like Chi – and made them into... this. Something that removed... love, compassion, filial piety. Chi *knew*, intellectually, that Thuy was her sister, that Sixth Aunt was the woman who had raised her; but felt nothing more for them than she did for random strangers. And she never would. The capacity to build new connections had been excised from her as neatly as with a surgeon's knife, taken from her by the ship in which she stood.

A weapon that turned people themselves into weapons, that struck at the heart of a society built on kinship and respect for one's elders, leaving only ashes in its wake.

"You see," Chi said. She had gained a disturbing ability

to read Thuy's thoughts; or perhaps her disgust was evident on her face.

"No," Thuy said. "Listen to me. If they die – If anything happens to them – we'll have another war. Is that what you want?"

"Is it what I want?" Chi shrugged. "Do I have a choice? Because they'll conquer us anyway, won't they? Trade is another way of waging war. We'll be seeing their holomovies and their soldiers and their factories worm their way into the Scattered Pearls Belt once more – exactly as we did seventy years ago. Now," she said, in quite a different tone of voice.

Now. What--? Thuy opened her mouth to ask a question, and then realised that her sister hadn't been addressing her.

"As you wish," the mindship – *The Frost on Jade Buds* – said. His voice was low and cultured, that of a scholar, that of an official; the aggressiveness in the air almost incongruous by comparison.

The world spun and spun, and collapsed – Thuy reached for one of the walls – felt a slimy cold seize her, climbing into her heart, slowing down each of her heartbeats until they became a pain against her ribs – felt the entire ship lurch so hard the wall suddenly seemed to rise up against her, and she found her left cheek pressed against it, but it was normal once more, cold metal and polished plastic, nothing like the odd textures of deep spaces.

She pushed against the wall and turned to stare at Chi.

Her sister stood immobile – her hand had gone back on the box, trailing on it as if this were the most beautiful thing under Heaven. How could she--?

On one of the walls was a screen, showing the same trajectory *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* had shown

Thuy – except that there was now a dark blue point, the position of the delegation’s ship and its escort. And another point – their own position? Another image, side-by-side with the trajectory, was plugged in straight from the news-feed, showing the same image Thuy had seen, the one with the Galactics walking down the stairs, smiling at the crowds as they wended their way to the shuttleport and their next destination.

“Please, Lil’ Sis,” Thuy said, making a last, desperate attempt. How could she find the words to convince Chi – how could she appeal to emotions Chi could no longer feel? “You’re not a murderer. You –” Chi wouldn’t survive this; not if the Galactics died. All their resources and firepower would go into tracking her down, into killing her; if their escort didn’t manage to vaporise her here and now in retaliation for the attack.

“You know this is wrong,” Chi said.

“I –” Thuy thought of the Galactics, smiling like sharks, like tigers as they strolled down the stairs of the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

“They’ll settle here again; do what they did seventy years ago as if nothing had ever been wrong. Do you think that’s fair?”

Thuy said, in the end, “Life is never fair. You should know that. It’s one of the first lessons Sixth Aunt taught us.”

Chi’s hand tightened on the rectangle. “Arm systems, please.”

Nothing changed perceptibly; but *The Frost on Jade Buds* said, “Systems ready. What weapon do you want to deploy, child?”

“Swarm-missiles,” Chi said. “Or anything you think they won’t counter.”

The ship appeared to mull on this for a moment.

"They're in an Immortal-model shuttle. They'll probably have lures against swarm-missiles. I believe a wide-radius electromagnetic blast would be more appropriate."

"As you wish." Chi shook her head. "As long as it blows them out of the Belt."

Thuy stood, struggling to take it all in, to make sense of this casual talk of death and destruction – coming from her own younger sister, from her own blood... It was the same as ten years ago: she hung in the darkness of space, powerless to do anything, to help her sister, to save Chi from herself.

She – She wished Sixth Aunt was there, but there was no sign of her or of *The Dragons in the Peach Garden*. They were probably still in deep spaces, with no easy way to determine whether Chi and Thuy were still with them. Now there were only the two dots, getting closer and closer to each other; and the voice of the ship going through the details of the weapons setup procedure in dry, technical language Thuy couldn't understand.

"They'll hunt you down," Thuy said. "They'll –" She thought of Chi, alone and unable to feel anything for anyone; thought of her single-mindedness, the sheer bloody obstinacy that had led to years and years of work, rebuilding the ship that had damaged her. And, for the first time, seeing the way her younger sister's hand clung to the Mind's resting place, Thuy thought of what *The Jade on Frost Buds* could mean, to someone who had nothing else to call hers in the whole of the world. "They'll destroy the ship," she said.

Chi's head jerked up.

"Piece by piece if they have to," Thuy said. "Do you think they'd let you steal their own technology and use it against them?"

"I'm no longer a Galactic ship," *The Frost on Jade Buds* said.

"You're a deserter," Thuy said, slowly – trying to remember that this was a mindship, one like any other – no different from *The Dragons in the Peach Garden* or *The Sea and Mulberry*, or any other of the ships she'd seen in the docks – and knowing, deep in her heart, that no mindship would have had that coiled aggressiveness, that general sharpness of metal shards. "And you know what they do to traitors."

"I'm no traitor," the mindship said, as calmly as if he had been discussing the solar flares forecast. "As far as I'm concerned, the Galactics left me wounded in the Belt, and never bothered to come back for me or even to communicate with me. I don't see how this makes me owe them any loyalty, if they won't even extend a thought in my direction."

"You're wrong," Chi said. "They won't catch us."

"Of course they will. You said it yourself – we just don't have their level of technology, and they wrote the book on war weapons. There's no place you can escape to where they won't find you. I know you don't mind dying –" and the thought was a shard of metal, lodged against Thuy's heart – "but are you going to drag the ship down with you?"

Chi didn't speak for a while; and the ship had fallen mercifully silent, as if he had clean forgotten about arming his weapons systems. At last, Chi said, and her voice was much smaller and more subdued than it had been. "Ship?"

"Yes, child?"

"You knew, didn't you?"

The whole room seemed to contract; the walls to become a little less bright for a fraction of a second. "Your elder sister is, technically, correct. I was made for war. Death is what happens to us all. Why should I mind dying?"

Chi was silent, again.

"Please," Thuy said. "There's no good way out of this, Lil' Sis."

"You're right." Chi's face was set. "Better take the honourable way. At least war is clean. Isn't this what they say?"

"You, of all people, should know that isn't true," Thuy said. War was messy and bloody; a mass of torn things, of torn connections that would never be repaired. It was absences at New Year's Eve and the other festivals, holos on the ancestral altar of men and women who looked barely old enough to have children; all the myriad details that hurt like twisted knives. "You know what war is. You've grown up in the ruins of it." She threw Chi's own words back at her, more viciously than she thought she'd ever do; but fear seemed to give everything a shrunken, sharp edge.

Chi's face didn't move. It seemed to be frozen with no expression, like the masks painted on theatre players.

"Please. Come home, Lil' Sis."

At last, at long last, Chi said, to the ship, "Stand down." And, to Thuy, "Fine. You win. But *The Frost on Jade Buds* comes home with me."

The ship? Thuy silenced the first reply that came to her lips. "Of course," she said, softly, smoothly. "That won't be a problem."

Chi smiled; and they both knew she knew about the lie. "Come on. Let's call Sixth Aunt, and go home."

Home. She wondered what place there would be, for the ship; for Chi – for the discarded weapons of war in a society that fought to cleanse the war from its history, that strove to rebuild itself into a peaceful, buoyant future.

Thuy caught a glimpse of the twin screens, one showing the trajectory of the delegation's shuttle moving away from them, towards the Apricot Blossom Ho orbital; the other the

Galactics coming down the stairs with the smug, oblivious smile of the powerful. The scrolling text of the feed spoke of favoured trade agreement, of the re-establishment of factories and military bases in the Scattered Pearls Belt; the slow, inexorable re-encroachment of their former masters in their everyday life, with no apologies for the war, for the lives ruined, for the people irrevocably changed.

War would have been a cleaner way out of this, Chi had said; and Thuy had told her, with the utter certainty of the desperate, that it was a lie.

Except that now, in the cold light of reason, she wasn't so sure if she'd been right; or even where – with her family's home on the verge of the insidious, devastating upheaval Chi had foreseen – either of them could make a fitting stand.

