

*And though we shall be parted by a galaxy or more,  
Yet ever in each others' hearts we'll stay.  
And you shall live out your life, and I shall live out mine,  
Until arrives some distant dire day,  
When troubles gather all about and I am sore beset,  
And for your help and succor I must pray.  
Then winging as my token, to call you to my side,  
Shall a rose from Old Terra come your way.*

from *Queen Orabella IV* (opera)



1

Rose

[CIRCLE]

Year 511 of the Sardinian League

“Jedrek nor Talin?”

“That’s him. He’ll be with you in just a bit. Can you wait?”

“Very well.”

The exchange reaches Jedrek distantly; he pays no attention. It is only words from an unreal world—reality is the universe within the three-centimeter marble he clutches between his palms.

Images swirl past him, endless linkages of thoughts and ideas. To his left, ten million designs for low-grav habitat modules dance intricate gavottes; to his right, a thousand equations quiver in ranked arrays. And before him, a maze of billions of documents stretches away to grey infinity.

He holds to his purpose and follows his quarry like a hunter pushing through thickest underbrush.

*Gotcha.* And following that, the experience of a powerful *aha!* Out of ten trillion bits of data, myriad techniques, he has managed to locate exactly what he needs. The answer sets itself into his forebrain and he lets the marble slip from between his palms.

The office and the world return, and as always Jedrek feels a tinge of regret.

He closes his eyes. “Denys, I’ve got it. It’s simple. The Empire synthesized dellsite beams under a grav field curved to match the loadbearing struc—who are *you?*” The presence of a visitor penetrates to him and he snaps his eyes open to look at the new person.

A slender woman, light-haired and pale-skinned, many centimeters taller than Jedrek or even Denys. Over a bony frame she wears brown coveralls, the general-issue utilitarian style of work clothing for Humans throughout the Galaxy. Above her left breast is a geometrical design involving a tight

spiral and a number of ovals.

Jedrek's eyes widen. An Independent Trader, here in his office—?

"I be Trader Raalhord, out from Independent Trade Ship *LaMancha*." She offers the quick hand-signal greeting of the Traders; when Jedrek returns it she smiles.

"Jedrek nor Talin, once out from Independent Trade Ship *Franklin*. This be Denys Archet, partner me." Even after so many years, Jedrek slips easily back into Trader pidgin. He cocks his head. "Trader Raalhord, surely *LaMancha* be not interested in space settlements to buy?"

"Quite not. This business be more mundane. Two days past rendezvoused we with *Akbar*; when *Akbar* captain hear we come toward Borshall, he ask we bear you a delivery. I here only to drop off package."

"Thank you. Surely you stay for meal?"

"No, truly must be on way. *LaMancha* two kiloparsecs away be, and back must me go, me cargo to supervise."

"At least let me give you chit for payment to cover." Jedrek reaches for his crediplate. Trader Raalhord's hand on his arm arrests his gesture.

"No payment. Profit with you be, Jedrek nor Talin."

"As with you, Trader Raalhord."

She places a package in his arms, a cylinder about a meter long and a few centimeters around. The outside is marked with his name and a few of his better-known ident codes; it also bears the warnings INERT ATMOSPHERE and DO NOT VACUUM STORE.

She kisses his hand, bows, and leaves the office. As the door slides shut behind her, Denys leans back in his chair and puts his feet up on his desk. "No payment. Since when do you get free favors from the Independent Traders? You know what they'd charge us professionally for that few hundred cubic centimeters of shipping volume?"

"The Library has a long history of helping out the Traders. When I left there I hitched a ride with *Franklin* and stayed on

a few years. They take care of their own." Jedrek frowns. Very few people would think to send him a package through the Traders. Who...?

One way to find out.

"Hand me your knife, Denys."

"Did you forget yours again?"

Jedrek shrugs. "Old habits. I never carried one until I moved here." He takes the stylus-sized instrument from Denys, dials for minimum dispersion and moderate power, and touches a contact. A red beam slices cleanly through the end of the cylinder.

Outer wrapping peels away and the office ventilation system steps up to rid the air of a sudden argon buildup. The contents of the package lay exposed in his hands, shedding a bit of perfume.

Yellow and velvety and perfect in aspect, he holds a single longstemmed rose.

Roses grow on many Human worlds, but he doesn't need a tenday's work with a superb biochem lab to trace the origin of this flower—only a handful of people would send him a rose, and it can only have come from one planet.

"I don't get it. Some admirer?"

"It's from Earth, Denys. A rose from Old Terra."

"So?"

Jedrek's eyes go to his own screen, to the plans that wait patiently. Blast, why did this have to happen now?

"Denys, listen to me." Jedrek takes a deep breath. "I swear to you, this is very serious. I have to leave—I don't know how long I'll be gone, I don't even know when I'll be able to contact you."

Denys' feet hit the floor. "You're kidding. In the middle of a project? *This* project?"

"I know how much Terexta Trojan Two means to the firm."

"It's *you* the firm needs. Your access to Imperial technology gives us an advantage that no other planning corporation can beat."

Jedrek looks away. "I know you'll be needing me, for a dozen problems like the one I just solved. But I *have* to go. I'll try to anticipate what I can before I leave, and I'll dump as much data as possible from my marble to the puter, but it's going to be—"

"What?" Denys stands up. "You can't leave, not after we've worked to get Archetalin Enterprises flying...."

"The firm isn't going to fail—we've taken it that far together. While I'm gone, control will revert to you... and if you want to buy me out, I'll let you do it at half the market value." He meets Denys' eyes. "With any luck, I won't be gone more than a year."

Denys puts his hand on Jedrek's chin, his azure eyes burning into Jedrek's hazel. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

Jedrek nods. "When I worked at the Library—when our Circle broke up and we all went our own ways—we made a pact. If any of us got into trouble that we couldn't handle, we would send a message to the others." He holds up the rose. "This is the message."

"No other information? How do you even know who sent it, or where in the Galaxy it came from?"

"No other information can only mean that it came from Terra herself. I've got to make my way there, and I've got to hurry."

"And I suppose you'll fly yourself there in your personal starship?" Denys' tone is derisive; he seldom has anything nice to say for Jedrek's piloting ability. There is little nice to say.

"I know better than that. Even if I were the Galaxy's best pilot I wouldn't want to venture though the Transgeled alone. No, there has to be a Trader ship headed in that direction soon; I'll just hop a ride and keep transferring until I get to Terra."

Denys shakes his head. "You're a fool. I don't know why I put up with you." He waves at the office. "And you expect me

to keep all this together while you're gone? Alone?"

"You can do it." For an instant the thought of inviting Denys along crosses his mind—Jedrek pushes it away at once.

"I realize how much I'm asking. Believe me."

"Oddly enough, I do." Again Denys shakes his head. "I'm going to miss you."

"Don't."

"All right, run off to Terra. But first make sure you've put down all the details of that grav-field shaping technique. And...and please hurry back." A sigh. "When do you leave?"

"I have to check on Trader ships. No sooner than two days. As quickly as possible after that."

Eyes closed, brows raised, Denys whispers, "We have work to do, then."



Borshall falls behind at many times lightspeed, blue and white on the tachyscope. Jedrek glances at the Independent Trader shuttle pilot next to him, then back at the viewscreen. As quick as that, Borshall is invisible, its sun a star among many, identifiable only by the radial velocity assigned it by the boat's puter.

Ahead lies Trader ship *Narmer*, then step after step of transfers as quick shuttle boats outpace the slow-moving Trader Ships. And finally, more than a third of the way around the Galaxy, Earth.

Who is calling for help?

Why?

And...why, Jedrek asks himself, is he answering?

He sighs and closes his eyes. The days to come will not be peaceful; he'll be happy for any rest he can get now.



**LOOKING FOR SPACE?****Look no further!**

Whether you're interested in a family vacation getaway module in the Spanshorran Rings, or a permanent habitat for two million, Archetalin Enterprises is the company for you.

Using long-lost technology from the Terran Empire, we provide superior construction at a price that leaves our competitors in total eclipse.

We also provide repair and renovation services for existing settlements and habitats, including expansion options.

With offices on Borshall, Terexta, and Sedante, we are fully licensed in all systems in the Sardinian League, and accept payment in all League currencies.

For a free consultation, contact *consult@archetalin.bor* on BorshallNet or *archetalin@borshall.biz* on LeagueComm.



2

**Terraformer**

**[CIRCLE]**

**Year 11 after the breakup of the Circle**

Jedrek sits in his tiny cabin and rolls his data marble between his palms. The marble has a lot to say about the Transgeled, little of it good and none of it up-to-date. The Imperial Catalog of Planets is over thirty-five hundred years old; it passes the bounds of possibility that any worlds in such an unstable area remain as they were under the Empire.

The Independent Traders maintain files on every world they deal with; those files are concerned only with trading data, however, and as a matter of custom Trader Ships do not swap files very often. In addition, some of the lesser worlds go a century or so between Trader contacts. In a hundred years of revolutions and wars and political upsets, everything changes.

Jedrek sighs and looks around the tiny cabin, a transient's room in a shuttle racing to meet Independent Trade Ship *Alexander*. Set in the wall, as in every room built during Imperial times, is a full-size term with a display screen about half a meter square. Currently, that term links him to the ship's puter and all the data stored therein, plus an ultrawave hookup to the mother Trade Ship...if there are enough channels to spare.

Four millennia ago, that term would have given complete access to Imperial Centcom—and thence to any ultrawave transceiver in the Galaxy. A user would have been able to search the Grand Library on Terra and any of a myriad planetary databanks.

Gone, all gone. The marble between his palms, the few others like it, and the data packages stored in the Solar System—these are the only remnants of the Grand Library and all Imperial knowledge. And even these data go further out of date with each passing year.

With a savage gesture he returns the marble to its sealed

pouch at his hip. Twenty years of his life spent serving the Grand Library...what more can it expect of him?

The wall-term calls for attention, and Jedrek hits the comm key. The shuttle pilot's gaunt face appears in the holoscreen. "Jedrek, communication we have from Trader Ship *Odegaard*."

"Be Shrev Loudin still *Odegaard* Captain?"

"Yes. She greetings sends to you."

No sense wondering how the Captain of *Odegaard* found out that he was aboard. If the unofficial gossip network of the Independent Traders could ever be harnessed, it could very well act as the nucleus of a new Empire.

"Captain Loudin asks can we stop at *Odegaard* on way past."

"I think no. I want catch *Alexander* still in Otrud system."

"*Odegaard* scheduled port-of-call in Trimenoorden Hegemony. Be only twelve parsecs away from next *Alexander* stop. Two days from now. Be okay?"

One thing that hasn't changed in thirty-five hundred years is the position of the stars...Jedrek touches his marble and smiles. From Trimenoorden it is only a kiloparsec to the main trade lane passing out of the Transgeled and into more civilized areas around Geled. And from there to Terra is only a shuttle's hop.

Besides, it would be good to see the Captain and crew of *Odegaard* again. Jedrek served time in the ship years ago—no doubt some of his repairs still function in the craft, would function long after he was dead.

"Okay, we meet *Odegaard*. Be your trade schedule disrupted?"

"Cargoes me be traded on *Odegaard* as easy as on *Alexander*. Crew votes for *Odegaard*."

Jedrek shrugs. "Call me one hour before arrive, please?"

"Okay yes." The pilot's image winks out.

*Odegaard*. Finally, something he knows and can count on in all the shifting changes of the Transgeled. It isn't until now,

with a lost security is restored, that he realizes how much he craved it.

A security that will have to sustain him for the rest of the trip.



The shuttle comes out of tachyon phase into a war. A few ships are idly hurling missiles and laser beams back and forth; the shuttle pilot gives full power to her defense screens and makes a series of tricky maneuvers, then ducks back into translight speed for a microsecond.

“Worry not,” the pilot says over her shoulder to Jedrek. “Always war these parts. You learn: get used to it.” She touches the controls and frowns. “I jump too far a bit. Ten minutes to *Odegaard*. *Odegaard* in high orbit that planet.”

On the screen is a bluewhite crescent. Jedrek reads position from the naviputer display, then reaches into his pouch and cups his palm around the marble.

He finds the planet’s Imperial listing without difficulty:

CELSIUS. Mars-type planet, third in its system. Discovered in TE 64 and terraformed over the next twenty years under an Imperial Council grant. Celsius obtained its name from the overwhelming coincidence that the length of its sidereal year (17,724,305 and 5/18 standard seconds) was exactly 5/9 of the Terran sidereal year....

Why was the coincidence “overwhelming”? What, in the first place, was so coincidental about the inconvenient fraction 5/9? And why did all this lead to the name “Celsius”? The hyperlinks are missing—the poor marble holds only a tenth of the Grand Library’s data, and after Jedrek finished stuffing it with technical information, there was no space left for most of the Galactic Anglich Dictionary Database. The resultant dead ends have bothered him ever since.

Nor is the mystery made any clearer when the marble goes on to tell him that Celsius' chief cities in Imperial Days were named Tepid, Boiling and Absolute Zero....

*"Odegaard coming up."*

The suns are cut by Celsius' limb; against glaring sunset there is the movement of shadows, and Jedrek peers closely, straining to see a shadowy shape—

As the shuttle moves into eclipse, shadows suddenly come alive with a million faerie lights. Girders, odd-shaped life pods, the starlike gleam of ports, and over it all the indistinct pearly haze of a defense screen at lowest power...this is Independent Trade Ship *Odegaard*.

Jedrek's pilot takes her shuttle planetward of the large ship, moving in a predetermined course toward an assigned docking berth. Jedrek turns from screen to screen, his head spinning with the beauty of the ship as it sweeps past against the stars. Five kilometers long, holding perhaps a quarter-million crewmembers, *Odegaard* has tripped the starways unceasingly since the time of the Empire. Millennia and generations passed, age after age of people who knew only this ship, ignorant of the change of politicoeconomic systems, ignorant of the decline of technology, ignorant in some ways of even the powers of their long-dead sires who had built the ship. The Independent Traders know but one life, and that is to trade—and if in trading they manage to stitch together the remnants of a once-Galactic society, well, they spare little time or concern for that.

The shuttle spins, viewscreens track against stars and planet and ship—and then *Odegaard* engulfs them in a durasteel-and-dellsite womb.

Disembark from your ship, turn to the left, and sooner or later you'll reach a startrippers bar. It is a universal custom of Humanity. On planets, the establishment might be kilometers from the spaceport in an appropriately seedy portion of town; on board *Odegaard* it is a twenty-five-meter cubical volume just down a dimly lit hallway from the main docking bays.

Returning Traders always stop in for a drink or jolt when their missions are completed—for visitors it is *de rigueur* to be seen at the bar. Jedrek is accompanied by six of the shuttle's crew...the rest will follow after securing the boat. He doesn't worry about his luggage. *Odegaard's* central puter, which routes thousands of packages daily, can handle his three small bags without supervision.

When he enters the bar, a fight is in progress. The bartender has switched off grav for the spectacle; the two combatants float in mid-chamber, grappling and shouting drunkenly. Jedrek pushes his way to the bar, hands it his crediplat, and taps for a package of skyhitabs. Breaking the seal, he pops two of the tabs into his mouth. Seconds later, the jolt hits him and he leans back to watch the fight in a much more receptive mood. Barehanded wrestling, rules as old as the race...they are getting along quite nicely.

In a matter of minutes, a winner emerges. The loser presents his front to the victor, turns his head aside, exposing the neck. The winner bows his head, kisses the losers forehead, and then the two separate. Grav cycles to normal, and the patrons turn to their own pursuits.

"Jedrek nor Talin?"

The speaker is a Trader; she wears a complicated set of jewelry and symbolic markings revealing to the practiced observer her exact station aboard *Odegaard*.

"Yes?"

"To *Odegaard* be welcome. Captain her compliments sends. She want to see you outside." The woman leads him out of the bar and through a door. On the other side, in an unused storage chamber, stands *Odegaard's* Captain.

Shrev Loudin is tall and thin, and wears her fiery orange hair short and spiky. Her jewelry is elaborate, and rank tattoos start on her left cheek and train halfway down her left forearm.

"Shrev." They embrace.

"What you be doing with yourself, Jedrek?"

"I to Borshall went and be now respectable." He grins. "Now be designing settlements."

"And you back come to us. We trade just about anything—but not much market for space settlements in this part the Galaxy. Not much profit for you."

"No, I be on way to Terra. Not back to Trading." He glances around the room. "Can we somewhere more cozy go, for drink and talk?"

"I be sorry, Jedrek. The Mistress asks see you. She learn you be coming, she convince us change course so take you aboard."

"The Mistress? Who be that, new Astrogator?" On a Trade Ship, the Astrogator is often held in reverence approaching that of a priest or priestess.

"No. She has own ship. You must ask her."

Whoever she is, this Mistress must be a very powerful woman. Independent Traders are loath to change course, to alter in any way their ships' orbits around the Galactic Core. "Take me to her."

"Follow."

Half a kilometer away, Shrev stops Jedrek at an airlock door; viewscreens about him show a ship cradled between girders of *Odegaard*. On any other scale it would be a staggering vessel: fully a hundred meters long, marked with the designs of the Trader ship and...is it possible?...the six globes of the Terran Empire.

Jedrek suppresses a chill. It must be some kind of relic. He touches his marble, its surface cool against his palm. The Imperial Ship Registry reports no vessel with this configuration.

The airlock inner door opens. Shrev motions Jedrek in. "She want see you alone."

As he crosses through the airlock, there is the slightest change in pressure and gravity. The inner door opens and a mechanical voice greets him. "Welcome to Independent Starship *Worldsaver*. Please follow the indicator light." A

bright dot of green forms in the air in front of him; he walks after it. Only a few steps later a door opens and he enters a banquet room.

A dinner is set out on a table done up in the most sumptuous style of the Late Empire. Behind the table, behind food and gleaming serving dishes, behind decanters of varicolored liquids, sits a short, chubby woman with long ebony hair and the darkest possible eyes.

Jedrek cannot not resist stepping forward. Time has not been kind to her, and she's gained more than a few kilograms, but there is no chance of not recognizing her. Cilehe.

On the table before her, in a white vase, is a single red rose.



"So you be Independent Trader now?"

"Not really." She sips the sweet wine made on board *Odegaard*. "Please, speak Standard. I'm not a Trader."

"Oh, right. You're 'the Mistress.' What does that mean? How did you manage to get a Trade Ship to change course?"

"Simple. I own about forty per cent of *Odegaard*."

Jedrek coughs. Forty per cent...! "Excuse me, Honored Sayyid. I don't know if I am fit to dine at your table. Where did you get *that* kind of money?"

"It's a long story. After we all broke up, I spent a year or so hopping about near Terra. Then I decided to head away. You'd hitched rides with the Traders; I thought I might as well follow."

"You were chasing after me?"

She blushes. "Not at all. I didn't know that much about the rest of the Galaxy, you know. Best to go in someone else's tracks, I thought."

"Go ahead."

"Well, it must've been sometime around '76 that I hooked up with *Odegaard*. You must have just finished hitching with the ship."

Jedrek thinks back, mentally adding tendays and months, converting from Sardinian League dates. "About a year after, probably."

"Soon we passed through the Epsilon Dentanna system. No, don't go for your marble, I'll fill you in. The one habitable world is Trworgyn, oversize moon of a gas giant. It was terraformed and settled late in the Empire. A greenhouse-effect atmosphere kept temperatures bearable. But they hadn't taken care of themselves. Over the millennia much of the atmosphere had leaked off, and there were no Imperial Navy ships around to fine-tune their ecology. To top it off, a century earlier they'd been in a war with some neighboring world or other—I never did get the details straight—and chain reactions set off in the upper atmosphere were destroying the ozone layer. No defense against the gas giant's radiation belts."

From somewhere at her side, Cilehe produces a crystal marble that, but for the selection of information it carries, is twin to Jedrek's. "Do you remember all that work I did on plans for re-terraforming Luna?"

He remembers. One summer Cilehe spent hours every day with the Grand Library's master puter—she calculated every detail of her plan. It would have worked, too, if she'd ever gotten around to implementing it. A few comets here, repairs to a ring of mirrors there, a good deal of energy to hydrolyze the Lunar seas...and the decay that had been proceeding since the first Sack of Terra could be reversed. But Cilehe never made the effort.

Jedrek nods.

"It turned out that all I had to do was move a few decimal points and the calculations applied to Trworgyn. It took five years, with *Odegaard* doing most of the work, but Trworgyn was saved. I took in half the profits. I bought into *Odegaard* and when we stopped at Tep Kecor shipyards I had them refit this ship as *Worldsaver*."

"And you've been re-terraforming planets ever since?"

“Seven in the last three years. It gets easier with practice. And each world pays heavily. There are a lot of wars out here, and many times ecological weapons are used. The arrangement works to the benefit of *Odegaard*, the planets involved, and myself.”

“It’s a good thing you put all the Empire’s terraforming data into your marble.”

“Certainly is.”

“Too bad the ship will have to get along without you for a while.”

“Whyever?” She frowns, then her eyes shift to the rose.

“Oh, *that*. Don’t tell me you’re taking it seriously?”

“Don’t tell me you’re *not*?”

“Course not. Listen, Jedrek. Who could have sent it?” She ticks them off on her fingers. “It wasn’t me, and it wasn’t you. Sukoji? Can you imagine her getting into trouble and calling for help?”

“Of course not.”

“Kedar, then? Kedar? He wouldn’t ever get into a situation in which he might not come out on top. That leaves only *Drisana*.”

“I’d already figured that out.”

“And you want to answer this? She probably wants to have a reunion. To convince us all how wrong we were to leave the hallowed halls of Alexandria. I can do quite nicely without that, thank you.”

Jedrek shakes his head. “*Drisana* needs help. I’m going to help her. Blast it, we were a Circle. Don’t you remember the vows we took?”

“Do you think I care about those vows now? Have we kept them? Did *you* keep them, running off to New Sardinia or wherever you went?”

“*Borshall*.”

“Did Sukoji keep her vows? Not even Kedar stayed. And now you want me to go back to keeping my word, keeping a promise made to a Circle that no longer exists?” She takes a

breath and makes a show of calmly sipping more wine. Her hand is shaking.

He says nothing. Cilehe stares at him, looks away, then a tear trickles down her right cheek. "What are you staring at? I've found a life I'm happy with. Finally. Do you think I want to give it up and go chasing back to Terra with you? Think again."

Jedrek settles back in his chair. "Happy?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Yes, happy. A whole shipload of Independent Traders to do my bidding, worlds at my feet, a big ship to live in with every comfort I could wish..." Her voice catches.

"Do you have friends, Cilehe? Do you have anyone who means to you what our Circle once did? Or are you caught up in this big luxurious ship afraid to face the Galaxy or the people outside?"

For a moment he thinks she will throw a tantrum. Chancy, being this personal with someone he hasn't seen for eleven years. She might be a different person. But...but he knows the old Cilehe is still there.

She doesn't explode. She reaches for him, and he is there as she buries her face in his arm. For a long time neither speaks. Then she looks up into his eyes.

"It's not going to be the same," she says. "The Circle is broken forever, you know. We'll never get it back. No matter what Drisana thinks."

"I know that. I've known it since we broke up. You're going to have to learn it, deep down where it really means something. You're going to confront the pieces, else you'll never be free of it."

She nods.

"Good. I'll tell Shrev that we're leaving ship to connect with *Alexander*."

"No."

"I thought..."

"I am coming along. We can get to Terra a good deal

quicker in this ship." She forces a smile. "Are you still as terrible a pilot as you were?"

He ignores the question. "This is a wild area. We need protection. We'd better stay with the Traders."

"Never mind that. *Worldsaver* was a decommissioned Geledi Navy Destroyer, fitted with a power plant ten times over spec. Her lasers are powerful enough to bite neutronium. Her antigravs can drag small planetoids. And her defense screens can black out a planet. No one is going to bother *this* ship."

"Good. Let me get my luggage from *Odegaard*, then we can say our goodbyes and be gone."

"Goodbyes?" Cilehe brushes back her hair. "Yes, I guess I should tell Captain Loudin that I'm going away. I'm sure she'll appoint someone to manage my share of the cargo while I'm gone."

Cilehe gets up from the table and walks away. For a second Jedrek stares after her, then he too stands.

Before leaving the room, he notices that Cilehe's rose is beginning to droop. He pours the rest of his wine into the vase, then follows her.



Ship's Log  
Independent Trade Ship *Odegaard*

*19 Feb 6481*

PROPOSED: That *Odegaard* shall galactic orbit break. For time period ten years, *Odegaard* in local trade shall engage. Policy after ten years review shall be.

*Odegaard* shall trade strategy ally, with Mistress Cilehe Rev out from Independent Ship *Worldsaver*, Shareholder from *Odegaard*. Captain *Odegaard* shall Mistress Rev assist, with terraforming and associated trade, to profit of all.

Thus is the will of the Corporation.

VOTE:

Captain Shrev Loudin: Yea  
Astrogator Edoli Cais: Yea  
First Officer Lirit Noma: Yea  
Pilot Ros Dekel: Yea  
Cargo Mate Ojal Sundari: Yea  
Crew Liaison Huela Taariq: Yea  
Shareholder Cilehe Rev: Yea  
Shareholder Helki Loudin: Yea  
Shareholder Winta Stas: Nay

3

Sting

[CIRCLE]

6484 CE

A very ancient verse gives the names of the worlds encountered on the last leg of the Geled-to-Terra run:

*Bluewhite Barebia, barns and barrows;  
Tethys teeming, seastones sing and sigh;  
Kell creeps, keeping careful clockwork;  
Tut triumphal, tombs and towers;  
Yonder Euphrates, Kentaurus crucial.  
Ship, swing silent, slide soilward;  
Manhome magnificent.*

Of course, nowadays no one remembers that verse, still less the unprepossessing planet that occasioned it.

As *Worldsaver* swings through space and her naviputer picks out the beacons of the last five worlds, Jedrek reflects that things have changed since Terra ruled the Galaxy. Then, no ship would have been allowed within a kiloparsec of Sol without complete identification and verification from the TERRAD system. Now no one stops them, no authorities even care.

Inside the world of the data marble, it is as if the Empire never fell. And Jedrek has spent half his life in that world. The contrast is always with him, between the frozen past of the marble, and the decay and decline of the real present.

And he's never sure which one he prefers.

Fifteen light-seconds from Sol, Cilehe brings her ship out of tachyon phase. She shoots a smiling glance at Jedrek. "These antigravs will be tying space in knots as far out as Saturn," she brags.

"Just get us there."

Soon Earth is visible on the viewscreens. Jedrek compares it to similar views frozen in his marble, and sighs.

The Patalanian Sack of TE 381 did a good deal of damage,

much of it still visible. The Lagrange settlements, L4 and L5, LA and LB and all the others, working their way through the alphabet and several rows of punctuation symbols—they were blasted, wrecked, depopulated, their hulks simply never repaired. People might still live in those settlements—but if so they do not make themselves known to the mother planet.

Luna is a far more obvious catastrophe. Jedrek aches, comparing the ashen grey and black crescent on the viewscreen to images of a world once blue and alive. Most of Luna's seas are evaporated, her atmosphere a thin remnant hardly capable of kicking up a good dust storm, her legendary jewel cities now mostly dark. Whatever life remains on the Moon is a weak and degenerate remainder of her rich past.

"You use that thing too much," Cilehe says, gesturing to the marble between his palms. "It's not healthy to live so much in the past."

"It's such a tragedy, what Earth has become."

"It's not a tragedy. That happened a long time ago, Jedrek. Earth is the same planet it's been all your life. It's my home world, and I like it that way it is." She meets his eyes. "You can't spend the rest of your life convincing the Galaxy how wonderful Earth is. The rest of the Galaxy doesn't care. The Empire isn't going to come back. Terra isn't going to be rebuilt."

"I know that."

"Do you?" She sighs. "Still, I do wish I'd gone ahead with re-terraforming Luna."

"It's still not too late."

Cilehe closes her eyes. "It is. I don't even know what I'm doing here. Look, there's the spaceport beacon; I've got to take this bird down."

Eisenhower Spaceport has a message for them. As soon as *Worldsaver's* puter transmits their postal identification codes, the message draws itself on their data screen: TOUCH DOWN AT THE SPACEPORT. YOU WILL BE CONTACTED. It is signed with the seal of the Grand Library.

“What do you think?” Jedrek asks.

“I just follow directions. Touchdown in five minutes.”

Soon the four domes of New York are visible on the horizon. *Worldsaver*, directed by the spaceport traffic puters, spins down to a waiting berth. Jedrek closes his eyes for the final approach; he is willing to admit to anyone that he is not and never will be a confident pilot. When he looks again, Cilehe is shutting down the ship.

The Portmaster himself meets them, a dour red-faced man in an overstuffed business suit, with odd bits of gold braid here and there. Jedrek wonders if there are so few ships arriving at Eisenhower—or if the man has simply sized up *Worldsaver* and figures there is profit to be made.

When the Portmaster raises (ever so discreetly, of course) the matter of landing and berthing fees, Cilehe pays in something more valuable than the customary metals or drugs or offworld manufactured goods—Independent Trader chits, redeemable for merchandise from any Trade Ship.

The Portmaster is so delighted that he throws in personal baggage handling for no extra fee. Two heavy-browed semintelligent simis take their luggage and follow in their tracks. No mechanical autoservants for such rich customers, no. Engineered monkeys are much higher-class. Jedrek tries to hide his amusement.

Eisenhower Spaceport will live forever, Jedrek knows that for sure. Among the Library’s post-Empire holdings are the complete minutes of every (infrequent) meeting of the Terran Council. The Council’s very first decision after the Empire’s fall was to spare no expense in maintaining the Spaceport. A functioning, state-of-the-art Spaceport was the key to Terra’s survival without Imperial support. For decades every surplus erg and Imperial Dollar on the planet had gone to refurbishing Eisenhower Spaceport. Borshallan sapient puters make the port totally self-repairing even in the event of an asteroid strike, all construction is of imperishable dellsite and not simply permaplastic, and the Port’s defenses are better

than in Imperial days. Eisenhower Port is practically immortal...and as long as it lives, so lives Earth.

Jedrek can't help shaking his head. The port was designed for literally millions of transients per day; the very corridors are large as whole buildings. For its job, Eisenhower is a model of design, a model that no other world has yet matched. And how many pass through it now? Ten thousand a year?

"You're brooding again. Stop it."

Their slideway reaches the main terminal, and Jedrek has no more time to brood.

There are only, he thinks, about a half million people on Terra today. In a hall built to hold twice that number, there is a respectable crowd of derelicts and hustlers, the usual folk found at any port on any world or settlement. Faces are blurred, bodies indistinct—Jedrek is sure he saw the exact same people on Borshall when he left. Do they migrate from planet to planet, like an unpleasant, unwashed circus troupe?

"Need a place to stay, mister?"

Jedrek looks for the source of the voice, lowers his eyes, and finds it.

A young Human male of indeterminate age (15? 17? 20?) stands next to him, all of 130 centimeters tall. The boy has very short dark hair, a serious expression, and eyes that seem perpetually in shadow, as if peering out from under an invisible rock. He wears black denim overalls with feet and torso bare; a shapeless black pseudoleather cap perches atop his head.

"Welcome to Terra, nobles. My name is Sting."

"Your name is nothing," Jedrek answers, with automatic hostility. He just wants to get away from the terminal and, preferably, into a warm bath. "We're being met, so we don't need your services."

"Excuse me, Honored Sayyid. I did not mean to interrupt." With alarming speed the boy dances away from Jedrek's reach. He gestures to the two simis, who stand confused,

holding Jedrek and Cilehe's bags. "I see Rort gave you simis—they're conditioned not to leave the port. Wherever you're going, you'll need a taxi."

"Not interested. Nice try, lad, but go bother someone else."

"Bother *you*, Jedrek nor Talin." The boy turns up one of his palms. Traced in the surface of his skin is a series of fine metallic lines. They match those traced on Jedrek's and Cilehe's palms.

"Who are you?"

"Who I said. Sting's my name; apprentice at the Grand Library and part-time taxi driver."

Cilehe sighs. "What will Drisana think of next?" She stands back, hands on hips, inspecting Sting. "Can't say she's picked a winner this time. Still, what Drisana chooses to sleep with is no business of mine."

"Can't say you're that much of a winner yourself, tubs," Sting answers. In a second he is three meters away, waving. "Follow me. Sayyid Drisana sent me to pick you up along with the others."

Jedrek catches up; the simis have to trot. "Others?"

"Mesayyid Boratte and Yavam."

Oh, Sukoji and Kedar. "Where are they?"

"I'm taking you to them." Over his shoulder, at Cilehe, he throws a quick, "Step lively now, Sayyid Blubber."

Jedrek keeps his hand on Cilehe's arm as they follow the boy. Sting carries himself like a person either well-armed or not in need of weapons—Jedrek doesn't care to see if he lives up to his name.

Sting leads them past rows of autotaxis to a private skyboat marked with the seal of the Library. He relieves the simis of their burdens and sends them scurrying back to the port, then helps Jedrek and Cilehe into the boat.

The boy clicks off the autopilot and all at once the craft is airborne, swinging around obstacles on its antigravs as easily as a feather in the wind. Eisenhower's broad expanse of lined concrete falls away behind, and Sting flies the sixty kilometers

to New York in somewhat less than two minutes.

The four geodesic domes of New York sparkle in midmorning sun; the skyboat's polarizers are not quite fast enough to catch the occasional dazzle from a dome facet. Figures race across the control panel; Sting swings across the Queens dome and Jedrek barely has time to throw up his arms before the boat submerges in the East River. A second later they break surface inside the Manhattan dome, and sail upward like a metallic flying fish.

In and out of the ancient towers of the city they fly. Now Jedrek relaxes, allowing himself the luxury of feeling at home after a long, confusing journey. New York is a familiar place, both through the marble and by personal experience. No Terran is unfamiliar with the vistas of what had once been the most important city in the Galaxy.

Atop the Plaza Complex, three hundred meters above Central Park, the skyboat touches down lightly on the surface of a still lake. Before they even reach the shore, hotel autoservants swarm over the boat, snatching luggage and making a flourish for their arrival.

"Someone else had better be paying for this," Cilehe mutters.

Sting looks ready for a quick retort; but by that time they have reached the shallows. There, amid flowers, trees and milling people, is the welcoming party.

Kedar Yavam stands just under one and three-quarters meters; broad-shouldered and substantially built, his narrow face topped with light brown hair that has thinned and faded since Jedrek saw him last. He wears a green and blue jumpsuit and carries his customary inhaler—in all the time Jedrek has known him that inhaler has been filled with nothing more than a mild narcotic.

Standing next to Kedar, Sukoji Boratte looks almost like a member of another species. Not only is she a full ten centimeters shorter, but she cannot mass half as much as Kedar even after a heavy meal. She is wrapped in a wispy

cloak and her arms are ornamented with thousands of twinkling points of light. Sukoji's hair is a river of glowing ice, and when she steps into shadows her eyes glow like embers.

Kedar gives a tentative bow. "Welcome back, Cilehe. Jedrek."

For long moments there is no motion, only the distant dizzy feeling of years falling away, and then...Jedrek leaps over intervening water and has them both in his arms in the most sincere welcoming embrace he's ever given.



*Terra on the Cheap* by Tunella Gennero  
©6473 CE, Interstellar Publishing Group, Bosip

### **Eisenhower Spaceport**

Over 90% of traffic to and from Terra passes through Eisenhower, earning the spaceport its nickname “Gateway to Terra.” Regularly-scheduled tourist flights departing from Bosip and many other worlds are the best way to avoid variable landing and berthing fees. Be wary of pickpockets, con artists, and others who prey upon tourists.

### **Transportation**

Aircabs to New York City are available in front of the main terminal. Be sure to use only cabs displaying a license from the Terran Tourist Board.

### **What to See and Do**

**Main Terminal:** Believed to be the largest spaceport terminal in the Galaxy, the Main Terminal is an excellent example of Late Empire architecture. At its peak, the Main Terminal served five million transients per day. Don’t miss the many local food vendors, which offer the chance to sample authentic Terran cuisine like Athan’s Otdogs, the Madonna Bigmac, and Crottled Greeps. Wash it down with genuine Buckstar’s coffee.

**Grand Central Clock:** The centerpiece of the Main Terminal is perhaps the most famous clock in the Terran Empire. relocated from Grand Central Station in New York, the clock’s four faces are made from opal.

### **Hotels & Inns**

Many fine hotels and inns are available in New York.

