

LINESMAN



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LINESMEN'S GUILD—LIST OF LINES AND THEIR PURPOSES

LINE	REPRESENTS
1	Crew
2	Small mechanics 1—air circulation, heating, cooling, power. Overall comfort and running of a ship.
3	Small mechanics 2—tools. Interact individually with other lines for repair, maintenance, management.
4	Gravity
5	Communications
6	Bose engines (engines with the capacity to take a ship through the void)
7	<i>Unknown</i>
8	<i>Unknown</i>
9	Takes ship into the void
10	Moves ship to a different location in space while in the void

ONE



EAN LAMBERT

THE SHIP WAS in bad shape. It was a miracle it had come through the void at all, let alone come through in one piece. Ean patted the chassis that housed the lines. “You did good, girl,” he whispered. “I know that, even if no one else does.”

It seemed to him that the ship responded to his touch, or maybe the feel of his brain syncing with hers.

The crewman who showed him the lines was nervous but polite. “We’ve waited two months for this work,” he said. “Glad they’ve finally brought someone back.” He hesitated, then asked the inevitable question in a rush. “So what’s it like? The confluence?”

Ean considered lying but decided on the truth. “Don’t know. I haven’t been out there.”

“Oh. But I thought—”

So did everyone else. “Someone has to service the higher lines,” Ean said.

“Oh. Of course,” but the crewman wasn’t as awed of him after that and left abruptly once he had shown him the lines.

Ean supposed he should be used to it by now. But everyone knew the “real” tens—and the nines—were out at the confluence, trying to work out what the immense circle of

power was and how it worked. Not that anyone seemed to have come up with an answer yet—and they'd had six months to investigate it.

When the confluence had first been discovered, the media had been full of speculation about what it was. Some said it was a ball of matter that exuded energy on the same wavelength as that of the lines, while others said it was a piece of void space intruding into real space. Some even said it was the original source of the lines.

Six months later, with the Alliance and Gate Union/Redmond on the brink of war, media speculation had changed. It was a weapon designed by the Alliance to destroy all linesmen. It was a weapon designed by Gate Union, in conjunction with the linesmen, to destroy the Alliance. New speculation said it was an experiment of Redmond's gone wrong. They were known to experiment with the lines.

Ean had no idea what it was, but he was sure he could find out—if only Rigel would send him out to the confluence to work, like the other nines and tens.

He was a ten, Ean reminded himself. Certified by the Grand Master himself. As good as any other ten. He sighed and turned to his job.

He worked forty hours straight, stopping only for the meals the crew brought him at four-hour intervals, immersed in the fields, straightening the tangled lines. Creating his own line of the same frequency, calling the fragments into his line, much like a weak magnet might draw iron filings. It was delicate work, and he had to concentrate. He was glad of that. He had no time to think about how he was the only ten left in the cartels available to do work like this because all the other cartel masters had sent their nines and tens out to the confluence.

He sang as he worked. The deep, sonorous songs of the void—line nine. The chatter of the mechanics—lines two and three. The fast, rhythmic, on-off state of the gravity controller—line four. And the heavy strength of the Bose engines that powered it through the void—line six. He didn't sing line one. That was the crew line, and this wasn't a happy ship.

"I've never heard of a linesman who sang before," said the crewman who brought him his third meal.

Neither had Ean. But then, most linesmen would never

have described the lines as song either. He'd tried to explain it once, to his trainers.

"It's like the lines are out of tune but they don't know how to fix themselves. Sometimes they don't even realize they are out of tune. To fix them I sing the right note, and they try to match it, and we keep trying until we match."

His trainers had looked at each other as if wondering what they had gotten themselves into. Or maybe wondering if Ean was sane.

"It's because you taught yourself for so long," one particularly antagonistic trainer had told him. "Lines are energy, pure and simple. You manipulate that energy with your mind. You need to get that music nonsense out of your head," and he'd muttered to another trainer about how desperate the cartel master was to be bringing slum dogs into the system.

Ean had never mentioned the music again. Or the fact that lines had to be more than just energy. As for the thought that lines might have emotions, he'd never mentioned that idea at all. He'd known instinctively that idea wouldn't go down well. The trainers would probably have refused to train him.

His throat was raw. He drank the tea provided in one grateful gulp. "Do you think I could get some more tea?"

"At the rate you drank that one, you're going to need it." The crewman went off.

Ean went back to his work.

By the time he was done, the lines were straight and glowing. Except line one, which was straight but not glowing, but you couldn't change a bad crew.

He patted the ship's control chassis one final time. "All better now." His old trainers would have said he was crazy to imagine that the ship responded with a yes.

He didn't realize how tired he was until he tried to stand up after he'd finished and fell flat on his face.

"Linesman's down," someone shouted, and five people came running. Even the ship hummed a note of concern. Or did he imagine that?

"I'm fine." His voice was a thread. "Just tired. I need a drink."

They took that literally and came back with some rim whiskey that burned as it went down.

It went straight to his head. His body, so long attuned to the ship, seemed to vibrate on each of the ten ship lines, which he could still feel. This time when he stood up, it was the alcohol that made him unsteady on his feet.

"I'm fine," he said, waving away another drink. "Ship's fine, too," slurring his words. He gave the chassis one last pat, then weaved his way down the corridor to the shuttle bays.

Of the quick muttered discussion behind him, all he heard was, "Typical linesman."

The music of the ship vibrated in him long after the shuttle had pulled away.

BACK on planet, they had to wait for a dock.

"Some VIP visiting," the pilot said. "They've been hogging the landing bays all shift."

The commercial centers on Ashery were on the southern continent. There was little here in the north to attract VIPs. Ean couldn't imagine what one would even come here for. Maybe it was a VIP with a cause, come to demand the closure of the Big North—an open-cut mine that was at last report 3,000 kilometers long, 750 kilometers wide, and 3 kilometers deep. Every ten years or so, a protest group tried to close it down.

Ean didn't mind. He sat in the comfortable seat behind the pilot and dozed, too tired to stay awake and enjoy the luxury of a shuttle he'd probably never see the likes of again. He'd bet Rigel hadn't ordered this shuttle. He fell properly asleep to sound of the autobot offering him his choice of aged Grenache or distilled Yaolin whiskey. Or maybe a chilled Lancian wine?

He woke to the pilot yelling into the comms.

"You can't send us to the secondary yards. I've a level-ten linesman on board, for goodness sake."

Ean heard the reply as the song of line five—the comms line—rather than the voice that came out of the speakers.

That was another thing his trainers had said was impossible. He might as well have claimed the electricity that powered the ship was communicating with him. But humans were energy, too, when you got down to the atomic level. If humans could communicate, why couldn't the lines?

"I don't mind the secondary yards," Ean said. It would cut two kilometers off his trip home.

The pilot didn't listen.

"Level *ten* I said," and five minutes later, they landed, taxiing up to the northernmost of the primary bays, which was also the farthest from where Ean needed to go,

Ean collected his kit, which he hadn't used, thanked the pilot, and stepped out of the shuttle into more activity than he'd seen in the whole ten years he'd been on Ashery.

The landing staff didn't notice him. Despite the fact he was wearing a cartel uniform. Despite the ten bars across the top of his pocket. They knew him as one of Rigel's and looked past him and waited for a "real" linesman to come out behind him.

Ean sighed and placed his bag on the scanner. He *was* a ten. Certified by the Grand Master himself. He *was* as good as the other tens.

He'd been through customs so often in the past six months, he knew all the staff by first name. Today it was Kimi, who waved him through without even checking him.

God, but he was tired. He was going to sleep for a week. He thought about walking to the cartel house—which was what he normally did—but it was four kilometers from the primary landing site, and he wasn't sure he would make it.

Unfortunately, it was still a kilometer to the nearest public cart. A pity the pilot hadn't landed them in the secondary field, where the cart tracks ran right past the entrance.

The landing hall was full of well-dressed people with piles of luggage: all trying to get the attention of staff; all of them ignoring the polished monkwood floor, harder than the hardest stone; all of them ignoring the ten-story sculpture of the first settlers for which the spaceport was famous. At least the luxury shops along the concourse were doing booming business.

Ean accidentally staggered into one of the well-dressed people. Rigel would probably fine him for bumping into a VIP. The man turned, ready to blast him, saw the bars on his shirt, and apologized instead.

These weren't VIPs at all, just their staff.

Ean waved away the man's apology and continued weaving his way through the crowd. It seemed ages before the lush opulence of the primary landing halls gave way to the metal gray

walls he was used to and another age before he was finally in the queue for the carts.

It was a relief to get into the cart.

Two young apprentices got on at the next stop. Rigel's people, of course. Who else would catch the cart this way? Their uniforms were new and freshly starched. They looked with trepidation at his sweat-stained greens and silently counted the bars on his shirt, after which they pressed farther back into their seats.

He'd been in their place once.

Four gaudily dressed linesmen got on at the stop after that. They were all sevens. Excepting himself, they were the highest-ranking linesmen Rigel owned. For a moment, Ean resented that they could take time off when he never seemed to do anything but work.

But that was the whole point of Rigel's keeping him here, wasn't it. Rigel's cartel may have had the lowest standing, and Rigel's business ethics were sometimes dubious, but he was raking in big credits now. The other cartel masters had sent their nines and tens out to the confluence. Rigel, who only had one ten—Ean—had kept him back and could now ask any price he wanted of the shipmasters who needed the services of a top-grade linesman.

"Phwawh," one of the new arrivals said. "You stink, Ean."

"Working." Ean's voice was still just a thread.

"Rigel's going to have words."

"Let him." He'd probably dock his pay, too, but Ean didn't care.

"And you've been drinking."

Ean just closed his eyes.

Cartel Master Rigel was big on appearances. His linesmen might have been ordinary, but they were always impeccably turned out, extremely well-spoken, and could comport themselves with heads of government and business. For a boy from the slums of Lancia, those standards were important.

The conversation washed over him. First, what they'd done on their night out; later it turned to the lines. Conversation always turned to the lines eventually when linesmen were talking.

"I went in to fix line five at Bickleigh Company," one of them said now.

Everyone groaned.

Kaelea, one of the other sevens, said, "I don't know why they don't get their own five under contract. We're in there so often, it would cost around the same."

"They tried that. Twice. The second time they even got a five from Sandhurst."

Sandhurst was the biggest line cartel. Over the past ten years, they had aggressively purchased the contracts of other high-level linesmen until now they had a third of all the nines and tens. Ean occasionally fantasized that one day the Sandhurst cartel master would see his work and offer Rigel a huge amount for his contract, too.

As if that was ever going to happen.

"I've been in there three times," Kaelea said. "You push and you push, and just when you think you have it right, it pops out of true again."

Sometimes Ean thought they were talking a different language to him. They used words like push and force when they spoke about moving the lines into place. He'd never pushed a line in his life. He wouldn't know how to.

His trainers had talked in terms of pushing and pulling, too.

"Push with your mind," the particularly antagonistic one had told him. "You do have a mind, don't you?" and he'd muttered to the other trainer that it was doubtful.

The first six months of his apprenticeship, Ean had wondered if he'd ever become a linesman. Until he'd learned that when they told him to push, they actually meant they wanted the line straight. He could sing the lines straight.

"It's probably a manifestation of your being self-taught," the not-so-antagonistic trainer had told him. "You push as you sing, and that bad habit is so entrenched now, you can't do it without singing."

Ean had never been able to break the habit.

He could feel the two apprentices in the corner listening as the linesmen talked. One of them was strong on line five, the other on line eight. Rigel didn't normally get anyone above a

seven. Ean opened his eyes, but he couldn't see which one it was.

The trainers had told him you couldn't tell what line a linesman would be without testing, but sometimes Ean could hear the lines in them. The trainers had told him it was because he'd learned bad habits by not being trained in childhood, and that of course he could tell what someone was because he'd already seen the number of bars they wore. Ean didn't care. He would bet that Rigel had just got himself an eight. How long he would keep him—or her—was another question altogether. A higher cartel would poach him.

The conversation turned to the confluence. One of the sevens—Kaelea—had been out there to service the Bose engines, “Because the nines and tens couldn't do it, of course. They're too busy,” and Ean hadn't needed his eyes open to see the roll of eyes that accompanied that. “It's . . . I don't know. It's huge, and it's . . . you can feel the lines, but you don't know what they are, and—”

He could hear the awe in her voice. But he couldn't tell what the lines were. Sometimes he could pick the level from the linesman's voice when they talked about the line. He hadn't mentioned that particular talent to the trainers either. They wouldn't have believed him, or they would have said it was another bad-training defect.

Kaelea had said “lines” rather than “line,” which meant there was more than one line out there. What would have multiple lines anyway? A ship? A station? As Ean had pointed out to Rigel, he was good at picking lines. He'd at least be able to say if there were lots of different lines or just a few.

He'd like a chance to prove that he could find out, anyway.

“We make more money hiring you out while the rest of the tens are busy trying to work that out,” Rigel had said.

That was true. Ean was busier than he'd ever been, and Rigel smiled more broadly every time he sent Ean out on a job.

Ean dozed after that.

One of the linesmen touched his arm. He blinked blearily, trying to focus.

“Are you okay?”

It was Kaelea.

He realized the cart had stopped, and everyone else was out.

“Come on, Kaelea,” one of the other gaudily dressed people said.

“I don’t think he’s well.”

“Leave him, or you’ll be fined, too.”

“I’m okay,” Ean said. “Just really, really tired.” He wasn’t sure she heard him. Next time, he’d take more care of his voice.

He struggled to sit up and almost fell getting out of the cart.

“I’ll help you,” Kaelea said, waving off his protests, and led him up to the house. “My room is closer,” and by now he was staggering too much to care. God but he was tired.

She pushed him down onto the bed and started to pull off his sweat-stained shirt. “I don’t think Rigel saw you,” she said. “You may not get a fine.”

He tried to protest, but closed his eyes instead and was instantly asleep.

EAN woke, naked and sprawled out on the bed and couldn’t remember how he’d come to be that way.

For a moment, he couldn’t work out what had woken him either.

“He’s a ten, you say?” The clipped vowels of the Lancastrian noblewoman made him think he was back home in the slums of Lancia.

He struggled awake fast. That was one nightmare he didn’t want to return to.

“Definitely a ten.” The oily tones of Rigel, Ean’s cartel master, reassured him on that much at least. He was years past the grottoes of Lancia. “Certified by the Grand Master himself.” Then his voice rose and cracked. “You can’t be going to—”

It was all the warning Ean had before the disruptor beam slammed into his mind and ten lines of song came together in a discordant cacophony. His brain almost burst with the noise. He didn’t even think. He turned the lines so they flowed back in on themselves down the line, back to the disruptor. The weapon disintegrated in a flash of heat and flame. He was only sorry to see that the Lancastrian lady had thrown it down before it had disintegrated. He would have liked to have burned off the hand.

A disruptor was a one-use weapon, made with a full set

of lines, created especially to destroy other lines. Ean had heard they cost as much as a small shuttle. Who could afford one, let alone use it? Who would even think to use such a monstrous thing against humans?

“He is a ten,” the noblewoman agreed. She sounded almost surprised.

“Of course he is.” Rigel was white.

Ean was pretty white himself. A disruptor would have killed anyone less than a ten, could even have killed him if he’d been a fraction slower.

“I’ve dealt with you before, Rigel,” the noblewoman said. “Last time you sold me a five as a six.”

Rigel did that occasionally, when he thought he could get away with it, and most people knew a Lancastrian wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

“I . . . Surely not.” Rigel was back to his oily, obsequious best. He thought he was back in control.

Ean knew better. Lancastrian nobles may not know their line ratings, but they definitely knew revenge. He pulled on his pants and a pair of boots. He was in Kaelea’s room. He didn’t remember what had happened after they’d arrived. “So did you really want a ten, or just to teach Rigel a lesson?”

He was glad the gutter slum was gone from his accent. He spoke Standard now, could have come from anywhere in the Conglomerate. His voice, still hoarse, was better than it had been when he’d gone to sleep.

The noblewoman glanced at him and Ean saw for the first time the distinctive blue eyes of the Lyan clan. He forced himself to not wipe his suddenly damp palms down the side of his trousers. This wasn’t just any clan. This was royalty.

The woman was smiling, actually smiling, at a slum creature like him. She wouldn’t do that if she knew what stood in front of her.

“I did want a ten, but I wasn’t planning on getting one from here,” she admitted.

Rigel didn’t get it, not at first. He opened his mouth and closed it again. “But he’s a ten,” he whispered, finally.

“If I’d died, I wouldn’t have been, would I,” Ean said. He understood Lancastrian revenge.

“But I would have offered her at least a nine.” Not that Rigel had any nines.

Both Lancastrians shrugged.

“When I ask for a six, I expect a six,” the Lancastrian noble said.

“But—” Rigel couldn’t seem to stop the fish imitation.

Ean gathered up the rest of his clothes. “You obviously don’t need me.” He could see Kaelea hovering in the passage. “I’ll leave you to it then,” and made for the door.

“Hold,” said the Lancastrian noblewoman. “I’ll take him,” she said to Rigel.

Rigel smiled his oily smile.

“Less the cost of the six I purchased.”

The smile stopped, fixed. Then Rigel bobbed his head suddenly. “Of course, my Lady Lyan.”

Lady Lyan. Only three women could call themselves Lady Lyan, and Ean bet this woman wasn’t one of them. Any true daughter of the Lancastrian emperor would be tied up so tightly in protocol and security guards, she wouldn’t be able to move. So who was this imposter? She must be one of the illegitimate children. There were rumors they were plentiful. Not that Ean cared, he supposed, but he hoped they would never come across true Lancastrian royalty or soldiers while he was working for the imposter. They were likely to all be killed.

“And I want the contract,” Lady Lyan said.

The color faded again from Rigel’s face. “But—” Ean could almost read his thoughts. No matter what Rigel said, Ean brought in 90 percent of the money right now. “Well, obviously that will cost more,” Rigel said eventually.

“I don’t like being cheated,” Lady Lyan said. “I don’t like my staff’s dying because I give them tasks they can’t do. Take the money and be glad I didn’t destroy your whole cartel as I planned to.”

Rigel made one more token protest, but Ean knew he’d already lost. The Lancastrian had done her homework. She knew how much it would hurt Rigel to lose his only ten, whether by death or by contract conversion. That was what she had come in today to do, and they all knew it. Ean was just grateful to be alive.

Even so, he was surprised Rigel didn't protest more.

Lady Lyan beckoned to Kaelea, still hovering in the hall. "Witness."

Kaelea looked as if she would turn and run, but Rigel beckoned frantically, too.

The exchange of contract took less than a minute. They all witnessed, then it was over.

If Ean was lucky, the Lancastrian noble would on-sell his contract today. Then, finally, maybe, he could get out into the confluence with all the other nines and tens. He didn't want to think about the alternative—stuck working for a Lancastrian. He'd sworn he would never have anything to do with Lancia again.

THEY left immediately, without giving Ean time to pack.

"Send his things on," Lady Lyan ordered Rigel. She looked at the shirt Ean now had time to pull on. "Except the uniforms."

The thought of Rigel's pawing through his possessions gave Ean the creeps. He was unlikely to get anything sent through. He considered demanding time to get his things, but he hadn't collected much in the ten years he'd been with the cartel, and anything of value was already programmed into his comms, which was in his pocket. Better to save his fights for important things, he decided.

His new owner had a private cart waiting. Not owner, Ean reminded himself. Employer. This woman might own the contract, but she was still obligated to pay him. And if she didn't—for who could trust a rich Lancastrian to abide by their contract if they could get out of it—then he could go to the cartel Grand Master for breach of contract. His contract stipulated minimum amounts, plus bonuses, and how frequently he was to be paid. He thought about the contract as they waited for the cart. It wasn't good pay.

His new owner—employer—must have been thinking similar thoughts. "Does Rigel pay everyone so badly?"

Only those desperate enough to indenture themselves into a twenty-year contract. Ean shrugged. A Lancastrian like her

wouldn't understand how badly he'd wanted to become a linesman.

"You've been with him a long time."

Ten years two tendays ago. Ean had spent it repairing a military ship, the *GU Burnley*. He'd only realized the date because the captain of the *Burnley* had told him the ship was ten years old, too. Ean shrugged again. "You know what it's like when you're a kid and desperate to learn the craft." Not that he'd been as young as most. "Sometimes you'll do anything."

"With age comes wisdom, eh." His companion laughed. "I can relate to that. I'm Michelle by the way."

Which didn't help identify which Lyan she was, illegitimate or not, because every member of the Lyan household took a form of Michel as one of their given names. Still, it was clever. She had every right to use it although most of them would not have dared. This woman had guts, identifying herself the way she did.

"Ean Lambert," Ean said.

SURPRISINGLY, they made for the docks rather than the hotels, where the private cart avoided the landing hall altogether and went straight to a shuttle out on the edge of the field.

The name stenciled on the side of the shuttle was LANCASTRIAN PRINCESS—SHUTTLE 1. Ean shook his head at the bare-faced effrontery.

They took off without having to go through customs.

In the confined enclosures of the cabin, Michelle leaned back with a sigh and closed her eyes. Ean used the time to study his new employer.

She was classically beautiful, with the heart-shaped face and high cheekbones typical of the women of the Lancastrian royal family. Rumor said they had paid a fortune to geneticists over the last two hundred years to develop those looks. Her lashes were long and black, curled over clear, unblemished, cream skin. The geneticists had definitely earned their money in this case. Except for the hair, perhaps, which was the royal family black, but Ean could see a slight wave instead of the expected regulation straight. Nor the deeper-than-expected

dimples in her cheeks, particularly the right one. The emperor definitely wouldn't have liked that. Still, if Michelle was illegitimate, the geneticists wouldn't have been involved this generation, would they. Maybe some imperfections had crept in.

Ean smiled to himself, but it was a grim smile. Ten years ago, there was no way he could have studied even an illegitimate child of his regent this close. Michelle—and of course he would never have dreamed of calling her Michelle either—might own the contract, but there was no way Ean was going back to what he had been.

“What’s so amusing?” Michelle had opened her eyes—so very blue—and was watching him.

Ean met the blue gaze. “Will you on-sell the contract?”

“I don’t know.” Michelle sat up as the bell chimed for landing. “We do need a ten.”

So was there a job? And was it at the confluence? Ean hoped it was.

On-screen they could see their destination. A large freighter. Ean didn't recognize the model—it looked custom-built—but until six months ago, he had only worked on one- and two-man freighters and second-class company ships. Ships like this one in front of him were for the likes of House of Sandhurst or House of Rickenback.

The name painted three stories high on the side was LANCASTRIAN PRINCESS. The bay door they headed for had an enormous “I” stenciled on it.

The door in the freighter ahead irised open to let them in. The shuttle docked. The door closed behind them. This was definitely a private shuttle, and this was its regular docking pad.

Ean silently followed Michelle out into the ship proper.

The interior was luxurious. The softly textured walls and carefully placed lighting made the whole thing look like an expensive hotel. Everything was way above Rigel's standard. Ean couldn't even begin to calculate the cost of the fittings.

Even so, the ship had a military feel. It didn't help that the staff wore gray uniforms piped with black, and that every single one of them walked straight and upright. They all noticed Ean, and he could see that they filed whatever they had noticed for future reference.

Michelle led the way quickly through the center of the

ship to a room that looked like an office on one end but housed a comfortable set of three couches at the other.

One man was in the room. An older man. He looked up as they entered. "Misha. I found you your ten."

Misha was an affectionate form of Michelle, used among close friends generally. So this man—who wore the gray-and-black-piped uniform everyone else did—was a close friend.

"I found us a ten, too," Michelle said. "And I bet he didn't cost as much as yours did."

The uniformed man looked at him, and Ean was suddenly aware that he hadn't showered for more than two days, that his Rigel-cartel greens were sweaty and crumpled, and that he needed a shave.

"This is Abram," Michelle said. "He runs security and pretty much everything else."

Abram counted the bars on Ean's chest. "A genuine ten?"

"I couldn't kill him."

"So you hired him instead?"

"I didn't hire him," Michelle said, and her smile showed the full brilliance of the generations of genetic engineering that had made it, plus a dimple that same genetic engineering had probably tried to wipe out. She placed her card on the reader and brought up the contract. "I bought him."

Abram read the contract, then nodded slowly. "That would upset Rigel."

Ean thought it time to get back some control. He was a ten, after all. "If it's all right with you." He had to stop, because his voice came out thin and thready. He cleared his throat, and was glad the second attempt came out more strongly. "I haven't had time to clean up. I didn't get a chance to collect any clothes."

Abram looked at Michelle, who shrugged. "Rigel will send his things on."

Abram switched to Lancastrian. "We don't all have personal servants who have things packed in five minutes, Misha. His effects are unlikely to arrive before we leave."

"I'll replace them then." Michelle spoke Lancastrian, too. "I'd like that. He has a good figure under those stinking clothes."

"And so like you to know that already." Abram sighed and switched back to Standard. "I'll get someone to show you a cabin and get you some clothes," he told Ean, pressing

a button on the screen as he did so. “Our other ten will be here at 19:00. We leave when she arrives.”

An orderly in a gray-and-black uniform appeared at the door.

“Take Linesman”—he looked at the contract—“Lambert down to Apparel and get him a standard kit. I’ll organize a room for him while you do.” He looked at Ean. “We eat at 20:00. I’ll have someone call you.” He half turned away, hesitated. “Your voice. Is that normal?”

“Just strained.”

“Take him via the medical center.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ean followed the orderly in silence. Abram was the sort who’d look up Ean’s record as soon as he could. He—they—owned the contract now. Nothing was private to them. That little slip with the language wouldn’t happen again.

The orderly—a tall, willowy woman who looked to be a little younger than Ean and whose name above the pocket said RADKO—was polite, but not truly friendly. Even so, she took time out to show Ean various parts of the ship. “Mess hall down there,” she said. “Officers generally eat with the crew. Unless they’re invited upstairs, of course.” She looked sideways at him and for a moment Ean thought she was going to ask what rank he was. “Main lift well. Although most of us use the jumps, of course.”

It was a well-run ship. The lines were clear and steady, their song bright and joyful in Ean’s mind. Unusually, line one was the strongest. This was a crew who worked well together and looked after each other and their ship.

Or almost joyful, Ean amended. He could hear a slight off tone in line six. It was only minor, but it jarred because everything else was so perfect.

“And this is the off-duty area,” the orderly said. Ean thought, from her tone, that it wasn’t the first time she’d said it.

“Sorry.”

“Officers have their own bar up on the fourth.”

The bar on fourth was one bar Ean wasn’t likely to end up in. He wasn’t even sure he would end up in this one. Which left him precisely where? Stuck in his room, probably, given that they weren’t on-selling his contract immediately.

“Here’s Apparel.” The orderly seemed glad to have arrived.

Ean stripped and stepped into the cubicle, where a grid of lights started at his feet and moved upward, building a perfect model of him. They didn’t have tailoring modules in the Old-city slums. The first time he’d ever stepped into a cubicle like this had been ten years ago, when he’d started at House of Rigel. He hadn’t known what to do. Rigel had had to show him.

When he stepped out, the orderly said, “Your kit will take twenty minutes. I’ll bring them over to your cabin when they’re done.”

So at least he had somewhere to stay. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course not, sir.”

The “sir” was new, and as she led the way back to the newly allocated cabin, Ean thought he knew why. The soldiers’ quarters—and he couldn’t help but think of them as soldiers—were comfortable, but they were a marked contrast to the luxurious quarters that Lady Lyan—whichever lady she was—inhabited. Somehow, Ean had scored himself a cabin on the luxurious side of the cruiser. Some tens would accept that as their right. Rigel’s people might be trained to handle it, but he—Rigel’s only ten—had never experienced it.

“I’ll get your clothes, sir,” the orderly said, and loped off.

Ean left the door unlocked and went into the fresher. Michelle was right. He did stink. He soaped up, letting the needles of water wash the stink away. Eyes closed, thinking of nothing but the bliss of the warm water, the song of the ship flooded into his mind, still with that slightly off tone on the sixth line. Ean hummed a countermelody under his breath, trying to coax the line straight, but it was no use. Humming didn’t work. He had to sing it.

The orderly was waiting when he came out, the freshly woven clothes in a neat pile in front of her. Standard issue included underclothes and shoes, Ean was glad to see. She handed him an outfit.

“Thank you. You don’t have to wait on me.”

“Of course not, sir. But there’s still the medic.” She pointed to a uniform placed apart. “That’s the dress uniform. You’ll be wearing that tonight if you’re dining with Lady Lyan and Commodore Galenos.

Commodore Galenos being the casually introduced Abram,

Ean presumed. “Thank you,” and he smiled his appreciation. “I know nothing about uniforms, ranks, and what to wear.”

The orderly smiled back. “I didn’t think you did, sir.”

Ean was sure she didn’t mean it as an insult.

“The medic’s expecting you. To look at your voice and to check you over. He’s already called to see where you are.”

“Let me put these on first.” Ean took the clothes into the bedroom. He had a separate bedroom, which he was sure wasn’t standard military practice. He dressed quickly. His uniform was gray with the characteristic black piping. The only decoration was a tiny cloth badge woven into the pocket on his left chest and the name—LAMBERT—above it. Ean didn’t count the bars on the badge, but he knew there would be ten. It was a total contrast to the pocket of his companion, which was covered with badges.

He came out, and the orderly left at a fast walk. Ean followed. “Radko. That is your name?”

The orderly glanced back. “Yes, sir,” she said.

Ean wished she wouldn’t keep calling him sir. “Thank you for all this, Radko.”

“Just doing my job, sir.” But she smiled and somehow the atmosphere seemed lighter as they made their way through the corridors to a well-equipped hospital. It was worrying that a ship this size needed a hospital so equipped. What was this ship?

The medic was waiting for him. “At least you’ve cleaned up some,” he said, as he made Ean strip his freshly donned clothes and lie down under the analyzer. “I hear you stank when you came on board.” He held up a hand to stop any comment—not that Ean had been going to make one. “Nothing travels faster than shipboard gossip. Not even a ship passing through the void.”

“Even on a military ship like this?”

“Especially on a military ship like this.” Which confirmed, once and for all, what type of ship he was on. Ean wished he’d taken more notice of politics suddenly. He didn’t want to end up in the middle of a battle.

“What happened with the voice?” the medic asked.

“My own fault. Too much—” It sounded so lame. “I was singing.” He wondered how the other ship was going. It had

probably moved on by now. Ships didn't stay in port any longer than they had to.

"Hmm. Let me see you breathe."

For the next ten minutes, he peered into Ean's throat, X-rayed it and finally gave him a drink of something warm. It soothed as it went down.

"The miracles of modern medicine," the medic said. "We can tailor your genes so that your voice is deep or high, but we still can't fix a strained larynx. Although," and he paused, "if it's truly damaged I can replace it with a synthetic one."

Ean shuddered.

"I thought not. If you continue to sing like that, maybe you should take some lessons on breathing and voice control. Have you been trained?"

Ean shook his head. Rigel had paid for lessons on how to speak with a faultless Standard accent, but there hadn't been any voice training with it.

"So you won't use your voice so badly that you strain it again, will you?" It was an order.

"No, sir," Ean said meekly, and the medic let him go.

Radko escorted him back to his rooms and left him there.

He had two hours until dinner. Ean set the alarm on his comms—it wouldn't do to be late—then kicked off his boots and lay down on the bed.

He couldn't sleep. The off tone on line six buzzed into his brain and set his teeth on edge. After ten minutes he sat up, then stood properly—he wasn't going to be able to do this sitting down—got himself a glass of warm water from the sink in the bathroom, took a deep breath, and started to sing.

The line responded immediately. This was one beautifully tuned engine. It didn't take long. When it was done, Ean flopped back across the bed and didn't hear anything more until the increasingly loud, persistent beep of the alarm dragged him out of heavy sleep a hundred minutes later.