

FREE CHAPTER 1 SAMPLE

What the Dark Could Not Keep

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A Matter of Balance

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A Matter of Balance

The first thing Eli stole from Oren Marr was a heating coil. The second was six years of his life, though Oren would never have called it stealing.

The coil came out of a battered courier ship on a night when the outer decks of Kestrel Station were cold enough to freeze breath against the walls. Eli was seventeen. His coat had belonged to a much larger man, and he had stuffed the empty space with insulation foam. He had almost finished disconnecting the coil when someone behind him said, “That one leaks.”

Eli cracked his head on the engine housing.

An old man stood at the bottom of the service ladder, holding two mugs. One was plain grey. The other had a chipped blue rim. His left trouser leg was tucked into a magnetic boot. His right wasn't. There was a long silver scar beneath his ear, and the expression on his face suggested that finding a thief in his engine was less disappointing than whatever was in the mugs.

“The good coil's behind it,” he said. “Blue cable.”

Eli reached for his knife.

“You can put that away. If I wanted you arrested, I'd have brought somebody energetic.”

From the far end of the dock came a metallic bang.

Both of them looked up.

A loading cradle was coming loose from its ceiling rail. Beneath it, a little girl in a yellow maintenance vest was picking dropped fasteners out of a floor grille. The cradle tilted. One mounting bolt snapped, then another.

Eli didn't decide to move.

He threw himself out of the housing and reached towards her, although she was fifteen metres away.

Something reached back.

For an instant he felt the dock as if it were a thing held between his hands: every girder under strain, every cargo

sling, every boot clamped to the floor. The falling cradle caught against a resistance that had not been there before.

Blood ran from Eli's nose.

The girl scrambled clear. The cradle struck the deck hard enough to flatten its wheels.

Then Eli was on his knees, vomiting beside the stolen coil.

The old man put the mugs down.

"Has that happened before?"

Eli wiped his mouth. "No."

"Try again."

"Once."

"When?"

Eli said nothing.

The old man crouched, slowly, favouring one knee. Up close, he was less old than Eli had thought. Tiredness had done some of the work of age.

"Where are you sleeping?"

"Why?"

"Because there's a spare berth on my ship, and you've removed its heating."

Eli looked towards the girl. Her father was kneeling beside her now, checking her arms, her head, the front of her vest. She was explaining something with both hands. Neither of them looked his way.

"I don't work for free," Eli said.

"Excellent. Neither do I."

"And I don't call anyone Master."

The old man picked up the mugs. He kept the blue-rimmed one and held the grey one towards Eli.

"Good. Oren will do."

Eli stared at the mug.

“It's tea,” Oren said. “Not a contract.”

Eli took it.

Three days later, somewhere beyond Kestrel's shipping lanes, Oren placed a steel washer on the galley table.

“Lift it.”

Eli wore a keeper's cuff, an old instrument fitted with contact pads that rested against the nerves of his wrist. It amplified the same sensitivity that had caught the cradle. The metal was warm and smelled faintly of somebody else's skin.

He concentrated. The washer trembled, then shot across the room and buried itself in a cupboard.

Oren studied the hole.

“That was a wedding present.”

“The cupboard?”

“The cup behind it.”

“Sorry.”

“Hideous cup. Try again.”

He put down another washer.

Beyond the galley window, stars shifted as the ship rolled. Eli could feel something beneath their apparent stillness: a vast, slow pressure, like deep water against a hull.

Keepers called it the undertow. Engines could open a passage through it, but only a human mind could hold a ship's course steady inside. Machines knew where a destination ought to be. A keeper remembered what it meant to arrive.

“Think of a place you know,” Oren said.

Eli thought of a narrow kitchen on Ilex Station. Condensation on a window. His mother's thumb wiping flour off his cheek.

The washer rose.

He grinned.

“Easy,” Oren said.

Eli held it higher.

His mother was saying something. He could see her mouth moving, but the words had become muffled.

The washer dropped.

“What happened?”

Oren had caught his wrist and broken the cuff's contact.

“What was she saying?” Eli asked.

“What?”

“My mother. In the kitchen. I knew a second ago.”

Oren sat down opposite him.

“The undertow needs an anchor. We give it a memory. A little strain, and the edges wear away. Too much, and it takes everything attached to that memory.”

Eli stared at the washer.

“You could've told me.”

“I should have.”

There was no excuse in the answer. Somehow that made Eli angrier.

“Why would anyone do this?”

“Because there are people on the other end of the journey.”

Oren turned the cuff in his hands. He didn't ask Eli to put it back on.

After a while, Eli said, “How do you stop it taking things?”

“You learn what you can bear. You use the ship's fixed anchors whenever you can. And when the weight is too much, you find somebody to share it.”

He set the cuff between them.

“You can leave at the next port. I’ll give you enough for a room.”

Eli looked through the window. Kestrel was already too far away to see.

“What happened to your wife?”

Oren’s thumb stopped on the cuff’s clasp.

“I remember that I loved her,” he said. “Some days I even remember why we argued.”

Eli didn’t touch the cuff again that morning.

But he stayed.