

FREE CHAPTER 1 SAMPLE

What the Light Demands

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A Different Kind of Tea

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A Different Kind of Tea

Oren had begun putting mint in his tea.

Eli discovered this four months after Nacre, when he took the wrong mug from the galley table and found that the universe had made another small alteration without consulting him.

“What is that?”

“Mint.”

“I know what mint is.”

“Then we're making excellent progress.”

Oren was sitting beneath the photograph of Lena, mending the elastic in a glove. His blue notebook lay open beside him. Most of the entries on this page were recent. A replacement seal. The name of a dock clerk. A restaurant that had charged them for water and should therefore be avoided on principle.

“You never used to like it,” Eli said.

Oren pulled the needle through.

“Do I like it now?”

Eli looked at the steam rising from the chipped blue rim.

“I suppose you do.”

“Good. I bought rather a lot.”

They were docked at Ansel again. Beyond the window, a supply tender moved between the station's loading arms. Oren had brought the Spare Room in himself, using the fixed anchors and a short, familiar passage. Nothing had been lost. Afterwards he had written the date in the notebook, then crossed it out and written LANDED WITHOUT AN ARGUMENT.

Eli had considered correcting that.

Instead he put down the blue-rimmed mug and found the grey one.

The knock at the airlock came while Oren was testing the glove.

Tamsin entered first. Behind her stood a woman in a faded route-survey coat, holding a flat case with both hands. Her dark hair was cut short enough to expose the

pale line left by a communications headset. She had taken off her boots before stepping over the inner threshold.

“Why?” Eli asked.

She looked down.

“Some people care.”

“We're not those people.”

“I'll remember that.”

“This is Neri Sen,” Tamsin said. “She knows where the old service depots are. More importantly, she knows which ones haven't fallen apart.”

Neri set the case down, careful not to knock the mugs.

Tamsin placed a green release control on the table.

It was one of hers. Eli recognised the broad button, the separate return cable, the little copper interruption bar that physically broke the contact when a person let go. No command cuff could order that bar to remain closed.

A second piece had been clipped beneath it: a narrow white housing carrying a reader for a residency card.

“What's that for?” he asked.

“It logs contributions against your household account,” Neri said.

She opened the case. Inside were contracts, maintenance diagrams and a photograph of Neri beside a hospital bed. The man sitting up in it had her narrow mouth.

“My brother, Lev. He used to turn restaurant chairs over to see how the joints were made. Got us asked to leave once.”

She flattened the photograph against the case.

“Now he tells people he used to make furniture.”

Eli waited.

“He knows what a chair is. He can tell you every tool he needs. He can't remember making anything for anyone.”

Oren set down the glove.

“An overload?”

“Small contributions. Three shifts a week. More when the freight was late.”

“The limits should have stopped it,” Tamsin said.

“They stopped each shift. They didn't stop him coming back.”

Neri turned one contract towards them. There was a schedule of payments. Below it, in smaller print, the payments became credits. Housing, heating, passage priority, access to the clinic that assessed whether a person was fit to contribute again.

Eli found the withdrawal clause.

“He could leave.”

“Yes.” Neri's voice was level. “He could leave the circuit. He couldn't take his room with him.”

Tamsin touched the copper bar with one finger. It moved cleanly.

“The switch works,” she said.

Neri nodded.

Through the open airlock came the distant sound of a cargo alarm. Two short notes, a pause, two more. Somewhere, someone was moving something too heavy through a door too narrow for it.

“Bellwether relay,” Tamsin said. “In orbit above the outer moon. Their council refused the next contribution agreement. Their main fixed anchor has a cracked housing. The Directorate's withdrawing the support they're borrowing.”

“Withdraws?”

“Forty hours.”

She opened a council message. A woman stood in a freight office with clinic transport slips spread across her desk. She picked up one, then another.

“We can keep one shuttle running on ordinary thrust,” she said. “But the ice works and the surface clinic are on opposite sides of the moon. Tomorrow I’m supposed to tell these people whose journey we can afford.”

“The core restores those short passages,” Tamsin said. “Not the long-haul supply lanes. They’ll still have to buy freight.”

Eli looked at the contract again. Directorate was printed across the top, beneath a mark like three lanes joining into one.

Neri put a maintenance inventory on top of it.

“There’s a compatible core at Depot Nine. Retired, not broken. Big enough for Bellwether’s local traffic. We install it, they can stop buying anchor support from the Directorate.”

“How big?” Oren asked.

“Six tonnes.”

“The ship will be delighted.”

“The external cradle can take it,” Eli said.

Oren glanced at him.

“If we replace the upper brace.”

“I was going to say that.”

“No, you were going to discover it loudly.”

For a moment, Tamsin smiled.

Then she unfolded the depot notice. The core was scheduled for reclamation in thirty-two hours. Its permit had been refused twice. A third request had returned with an invitation instead.

Director Iona Rusk would be pleased to discuss an alternative arrangement with the engineer responsible for the Nacre rescue system.

Tamsin had underlined pleased so hard the paper had torn.

“Is this a job?” Eli asked.

“Bellwether's offered payment in parts and six months of free docking.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“I'm not asking you to volunteer Oren,” she said.

The galley went quiet.

Oren drew the permit towards him before Eli could answer.

“What does the journey require?”

Neri laid out the route. First the Directorate's regional terminal, on the far side of Ansel's own ring. From there, a registered passage to Depot Nine in the outer system. Beyond the depot lay Bellwether and its moon, close enough to reach on ordinary engines.

Oren asked about the depot's power supply, its old loading trams, the condition of its service boats. He knew that model of station. He did not pretend to know what thirty years of neglect had done to this one.

When he finished, he closed the notebook.

“I can do the mechanical work.”

Eli almost said he could do it himself.

Oren waited.

“All right,” Eli said.

Neri bent to put on her boots.

“You should know something about Rusk.”

“What?”

“She doesn't think she's rescuing a station.”

Tamsin lifted the control from the table.

“What does she think she's rescuing?”

“The way everything works.”