



DEATH'S HEAD: DAY OF THE DAMNED

DAVID GUNN

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Lieutenant Sven Tveskoeg is a killing machine whose DNA marks him out as less - or perhaps more - than human.

He's survived everything a hostile universe can throw at him, but it's not luck that's kept him alive for so long. A lucky man wouldn't be picked out of obscurity to serve in the army of his Emperor, the machine-human hybrid OctoV.

Now Sven and his squad of misfit auxiliaries are in the empire's capital, Farlight, for a bit of R and R. But the emperor is missing and what begins as civil unrest soon becomes civil war as riots turn to slaughter. And behind the scheming and betrayals that threaten to topple OctoV from the throne he's held for thousands of years is, of course, the U/Free, a galaxy-spanning empire with the technology of gods and the morals of school children.

As anarchy takes over, Sven could just stay low and do nothing. But when has he ever done anything that sensible?

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DEATH'S HEAD

DAY OF THE DAMNED

David Gunn

For -
Do unto others as they would do unto you.
Only do it faster and harder.

Prologue

GENERAL JAXX APPROACHES A WALL AND SPINS ON his heel, his timing perfect as his left boot stamps on marble, his step echoing like a rifle shot off the walls of the emperor's audience chamber.

Twenty paces later, he turns and heads back. He marches with the iron determination of a man who remembers being whipped for marching out of step. In that memory he's eight, his first year at the Academy.

A fire burns in the great fireplace. OctoV likes to be warm. Or maybe he just likes his generals to be uncomfortable. The emperor wears full dress, and expects his officers to do the same.

The difference is he wears his lightly.

On the wall OctoV takes salute from his victorious troops. One of them is the general's great-grandfather. He stands behind a major in the Wolf Brigade, whose fur cloak must be vile in that heat.

General Indigo Jaxx is both younger and older than his emperor. OctoV was fourteen when the general was born. He was fourteen the year the general's father was born. He's been that age for as long as anyone can remember.

The general runs a hand through his cropped hair.

It comes away wet.

OctoV, the glorious and victorious, the undefeated and ruler of more worlds than any man can count, whose sweat is perfume to his subjects ...

Some generals vomit before an audience. Others kill themselves. One gave his ADC his own rank badges and told him to pretend. Both died the death that act deserved.

'Meeting him is like having your brains extracted, liquidized and returned by someone using a mallet and a blunt spoon.' The officer who wrote that left his own brains across the note on which it was written.

But Indigo Jaxx is not just general of the Death's Head, the emperor's elite force. He is Duke of Farlight, the most powerful man in the empire after OctoV. And since OctoV is not strictly a man at all ...

* * *

Aware his marching could be seen as nerves, General Jaxx stamps to a halt, pivots on his heel and stares out of a window. His heartbeat is steadying and his pulse slowing. When he sweeps his fingers through his hair they come away dry.

His body knows what his mind has yet to accept.

It has stood down its defences, untied the knot in his gut, dried the sweat on his ribs and replaced all three with a cold certainty that makes no sense but accepts no refusal.

OctoV is not going to show.

This afternoon's audience between the emperor and his empire's most loyal subject, General Indigo Jaxx, has been cancelled.

Taking a look around the audience chamber, the general nods grimly. His staff wait beyond the door, and under no circumstances must they discover the meeting never took place.

'Sir,' says Jaxx loudly.

This is what he always calls the emperor. The only one of OctoV's subjects allowed that latitude.

'Yes, sir,' he says. 'Certainly, sir.'

Having counted to a hundred, he bows himself out.

'Back to HQ,' he growls.

As General Jaxx leaves the palace without noticing a Wolf Brigade general's amusement, he considers what the

emperor's decision to cancel the meeting might mean, and knows it is not good.

Chapter 1

THE LIZARD'S MISTAKE IS TO MOVE. THE MOMENT it swaps granite for red dirt and the temptation of food, it's dead. Because my blade hisses through the air to open its spine from skull to tail.

It's a small lizard.

All the big ones are eaten.

Picking it up with metal fingers, I hold it over the fire until its flesh crisps and the skin peels. The man I offer to share with doesn't want to. So I bite off its head, chewing happily.

'Sven,' Anton says. 'That's disgusting.'

It's not disgusting at all. It's hot and salty from the grass and the saline bugs filling its stomach. Believe me, I've tasted worse.

'He only does it to annoy you,' says a voice.

My side arm has been sulking since we landed yesterday. It wants battle. It wants slaughter. It wants glory and another chip upgrade. The SIG's got a wolf hunt instead. Pulling the gun from my holster, I toggle it into silence.

'Can I look?' Anton asks.

He takes the SIG-37 carefully. The piece has that effect on people. Full AI side arms are rare. Not to mention illegal. 'Pretty,' he says, handing it back.

Not sure that's the word I'd use ...

'Yeah, I know,' Anton says. 'Never ask a man if he's Legion. He'll tell you if he is. If not, there's no need to embarrass him.'

In my case telling people is compulsory. That's because I was once busted back from sergeant, and the law wants troublemakers identified early, particularly dangerous ones.

We're near the edge of the rift, hidden in scrub.

A fire burns behind us. Dry kindling and dry wood so it makes no smoke. A freshly killed rabbit roasts above it. The spit is made from thorn and I trapped the animal two minutes ago. Anton's hungry and still refusing to eat lizard.

'You know,' he says, 'it's good to see you.'

I'm waiting for the *but*.

'But we thought ...'

'OctoV suggested it,' I say, cutting him short. 'And a suggestion from our glorious leader ...'

'So the general had no option?'

'None.'

Anton is shocked. As well he might be. I'm here on leave at OctoV's suggestion. The idea that our glorious leader should bother with the welfare of a junior lieutenant, even a useful one, is so absurd I'm wondering about his real reasons. So is Anton, from the look of things.

'It's strange,' he says, 'how little Debro and I know about you.'

'What's to know? I'm a Death's Head lieutenant.'

'That's it?'

'Before that, a prisoner on Paradise.'

'And before that,' he says, 'the Légion Etrangère ... Sven, that's not really an answer.'

Sounds like one to me.

He tells me most people, if you ask them who they are, tell you about their family or their childhood, where they grew up, what they wanted to be. 'Come on,' he says. 'What is your earliest memory? Debro was wondering.'

Killing a dog. I'm five, maybe six. The dog is bigger than me. But old and toothless. The dog has only one canine. I have a brick.

I win.

Before I can drag the dog into hiding, older boys take it.

One of them uses the brick I used on the dog. When I wake, they're gone and so is my food for the week. The smell of meat leads me to their fire. From their surprise, they weren't expecting me to get up again. But I mend fast. How much faster than others I don't know back then.

And I fight dirty.

Kicking embers at one, I knee another between his legs. He's old enough for it to matter. A third turns to run and I kill him with my brick. They should have taken it with them.

No one argues when I go through the dead boy's pack and take his blade.

The dog is too hot to carry. So I use my new knife to cut free a half-cooked leg and spend the next two days throwing my guts up.

Anton wishes he hadn't asked. 'You know,' he says, 'maybe you shouldn't tell Debro after all ...'

Three hours to darkness. To be honest, I'd rather be here on my own. But it's his hunt. I'm only here because Debro, his ex-wife, thinks I'll keep him safe. Although the sour smile on their daughter's face when we leave says she believes the opposite.

'Something wrong?'

'Why?'

Anton glances at me. He's been doing that lately. Mostly when he thinks I'm not looking. 'You're grinding your teeth.'

'Thinking about Apt.'

That's Lady Aptitude Tezuka Wildeside, all of sixteen.

He decides teeth-grinding makes sense.

People keep to themselves in the high plains. Few families live here from choice. Most have fled debts or are running

from conscription in the army of our glorious emperor. A few like Anton are in exile.

Some are in hiding ...

I'm on extended leave. It's the same thing.

The ground is hard, the grass sparse. Water is rare as hen's teeth. Sixty miles from where we sit it pisses oil instead of rain. A pall of smoke hangs to the north of us and drifts from the roiling flames that rise from the rift floor. A hundred fires, a thousand fires. No one knows or cares. The rift is just somewhere to avoid if you have sense.

A geofforming malfunction, Debro says.

No idea what that means.

There is a deadly beauty to the hills around us. The heat will bake you, and the cloudless nights freeze your flesh to your bones. False paths wait to tip you down ravines. Sour water poisons those who drink unwisely. And that's before you meet the snakes, wild dogs and mountain cats. And wolves.

Anton is an ex-captain of the palace guard, ex-husband to Senator Debro Wildeside, one of the richest women in the empire, and an ex-inmate on Paradise, a prison planet on the other edge of the spiral arm.

Me, I'm ex-Legion.

Think I might have mentioned that.

He's told Debro we're here to shoot a rogue wolf.

I know better. Anton wants to talk. You'd think, out in the desert, that he's trying to avoid the spies of our glorious leader. But since our glorious leader hears everything, I assume he wants to avoid being heard by Debro.

Anton grins when I say this. 'You've changed.'

'Adaptive,' I tell him. 'That's me.'

His eyes widen. Adaptive isn't a word I use.

'Said so in my last psych report.'

'The one they shredded?'

Yeah, that one.

'So,' I ask, 'what's this about?'

The last time Anton and I talked was on Paradise. I was keeping him and Debro alive. Times change. I get the feeling he's trying to repay his debt.

'Sven,' he says, 'if you need money ...'

'I don't.'

Anton sighs. 'We know you're in trouble.'

That is one way of putting it. Dig two friends out of prison. Blow up an enemy mother ship. Protect some snot-nosed colonel from his own stupidity. Get my general promoted. Win praises from our glorious leader. And end up with a list of enemies longer than I can count, starting with General Jaxx himself.

Welcome to the Octovian Empire.

Anton won't let me shake off his thanks.

That tells me how things have changed. In prison I'd simply punch him into silence. Now we're on his ex-wife's land, with his buggy parked behind us, and he owns the hunting rifle I'm using. It's a beauty, too. Perfect balance, a custom stock and a telescopic sight so true that looking through it feels like being there. The round's 7.62, full metal jacket. Anton's old-fashioned like that.

'We couldn't believe it,' he says.

He hesitates.

'No.' The man corrects himself. '*I* couldn't believe it. Debro always said you'd come through. But when the guards arrived ...'

Memory chokes his voice.

'Leave it.'

Being freed isn't the first thing on anybody's mind when the guards turn up. Being taken for questioning. Being shot. But freed?

Time to change this conversation.

'You really think a wolf's out there?'

Anton squints towards the goat we've tethered to a post. The animal has sunk into an exhausted silence. Its tugs

against the rope are weaker than they were an hour ago.

'Yes,' he says.

'Then we'll give it another five minutes.'

'After that?'

'We go looking.'

His laugh is a bark. 'Believe you would.'

What's to believe? Temperature's dropping and night's coming in. There are tacos and cold beers waiting for us at Wildeside. The sooner the wolf is dead, the sooner I get a drink.

'Sven ...'

Seems I won't have to go looking after all.

The wolf is huge. Grizzled and grey around its muzzle. It's also limping, and has a gash on its haunches that looks fresh. As it crests a boulder, the beast stops to look back. Neck out, head held awkwardly.

'Clear shot,' Anton says.

I can see that. Hell, I've rarely had an easier target. The animal's backlit by twilight. My line of sight is clear. And the animal so close the scope is a luxury.

So what stops me?

That gut feeling I get before shit goes bad.

'Sven ...'

'Not yet.'

Anton scowls, but he waits in silence. So does the wolf. The goat, however, goes berserk. All the more so because the wolf is ignoring it. When the SIG-37 shivers out of standby, I know we're in trouble.

'Arid wastes,' it says. 'Pitiless sun. Poisonous water. A million miles from the nearest decent bar. Remember how you said we'd be safe here?'

Not sure I put it like that.

'Guess what? You were wrong.'

Very slowly, I hand Anton back his rifle.

'Go,' I tell him. 'Get back to the buggy.'

The idiot shakes his head.

'Listen,' I say. 'I didn't bring you back to get you killed.
Leave. I'll keep you covered.'

'Sven,' he says, 'I can't—'

'Just do it.'

'Guys,' my gun says. 'Focus on what's out there.'

Chapter 2

I CAN PUT A NAME TO THE DANGER. SERGEANT Horse Hito, killer by appointment to Indigo Jaxx, general of the Death's Head. Now Hito is a man I regard with respect; I just didn't expect him to find me so fast.

Torn between its prey and the person coming up behind, the wolf hesitates. Probably thinks Sergeant Hito wants its supper.

'Just Hito?' I ask.

My SIG does that whirring thing. 'No,' it says. 'Two ...' It hesitates, flicks a few diodes. 'Three ... Four,' it confirms finally. 'The first has broken away. He's heading towards us.'

Doesn't sound right to me. 'Stealth camouflage?'

'No ... Yes.' The SIG sounds puzzled. 'Maybe.'

'Fucking great.'

'Not my fault,' it says. 'It's—' I ignore whatever else my gun wants to say. Because the trouble is here.

'Sven,' Anton says.

Yeah. Seen it.

Fuck knows what it is. But it's not General Jaxx's assassin. Even Horse Hito at his ugliest doesn't look this rough.

Triangular face, sunken red eyes, needle-like teeth. When the wind changes direction we smell its stink. Like vinegar. The weirdest thing is its skin. Silver and leathery.

Anton fires.

Picking itself up, the creature gazes towards us and then turns to the wolf, which finally breaks its silence with a long low growl.

'It's a fury,' Anton says.

I'll take his word for it. 'Hollow-point,' I tell my gun.

Flechette's too specialized and I don't plan to light the night sky with incendiary, which would simply advertise my position to anyone else out there. Like the real Horse Hito.

Hollow-points spread. That's why I use them. These slugs keep 99.8 per cent of their mass and achieve a 300 per cent spread on a typical torso shot, and I fire three in quick succession. Turns out to be as pointless as shooting holes in a wet paper bag.

'Wait,' Anton shouts.

So I hold off going after it with a knife.

As the fury advances, the wolf tips back on its haunches. And then it springs. That's when something strange happens. Instead of dodging, the fury slams its fist into the wolf's ribs.

We hear bones break.

Gripping the wolf's scruff with one hand, the creature rams the fingers of its other hand into the animal's chest. The wolf howls. Obviously. Blood runs down the fury's wrist, but it also drips from the wounds we punched in its gut.

'Fuck,' I say.

Anton nods. 'Drinks through its fingers.'

'Blood?'

'Only blood.'

I can see why he's worried.

Now the wolf's dead there's no prize for guessing the next target. Unless we were the target all along. Mind you, there's always the goat. Ripping free my knife, I flip it round and throw.

Bleating turns to a scream of pain.

And the fury racing towards Anton hesitates. Twitching sideways, it heads for the goat instead. Grabbing the animal, the fury sinks its fingers through muscle and fresh blood begins to trickle from its gut.

The bastard has skeletal arms and legs, a sack-like gut and a focus so tight it can't do more than one thing at once. Fight or feed, not both.

That's its weakness.

Maybe it's used to people backing away. Or maybe I just imagine something flicker behind those eyes.

'Sven,' Anton says.

'I know what I'm doing.'

'Hey,' says my gun. 'Always a first time.'

We're circling, the fury and I.

It lunges and I block its wrist. Like being hit with a steel bar. Next time I'm going to use my combat arm. I step sideways and it steps sideways. Not sure this thing is alive in a sense I understand. But it mimics my steps perfectly.

And it's going to be a bastard to kill.

It lunges, I block.

When it makes its fifth or sixth lunge, I step into it. And feel the creature's fist crack open my chest. Bones break and ribs are forced apart as it reaches inside.

Hurts like hell.

That is where the fury comes unstuck. Its skeleton might be metal. But so is my combat arm, which is piston driven and twisted with braided hose. Plus I kill on instinct. Now I might have learnt to keep that under control ...

... But everyone's allowed a day off.

Gripping its wrist, to stop it reaching my heart, makes the fury raise its head and hiss at me. So I tighten my own fingers and twist. Bones break somewhere under that leathery skin.

'Earth to Anton,' the SIG says.

I'm getting there.

Ramming my gun against the creature's throat, I pull the trigger and watch bits of steel spine, wire and withered flesh exit through the back of its neck. Hollow-point, got to love it.

'Throat?' Anton says.

Obviously. I doubt if it has a brain worth shooting.

Man down. Anton kneels at my side as blood pools in a fuzzy-edged circle round me. Darkness is here and the night goggles he's slipped over my eyes make my blood look almost fluorescent.

'Sven ...'

'I'm fine.'

He stares at me.

'Go get the buggy,' I tell him.

Flicking up his own goggles, he examines my face. Not sure what he expects to see without night vision. 'OK,' he says. He wants to say something more. Goodbye, probably ... Idiot thinks I'm dying.

He's right, of course. Only my metabolism isn't that simple. Already I can feel flesh closing and bones beginning to heal.

'Sven,' he says.

'Yeah,' I say. 'It hurts. Now fuck off.'

He leaves without looking back. Sir Anton Tezuka, armiger and trade lord ... Walks away, with his head up and shoulders back. Losing himself in the darkness to give his friend space to die with dignity.

Shit, you've got to love the Tezuka-Wildeside.

They're screwed to hell. But they know how to behave.

Reaching into the gash in my chest, I find a cracked rib and pull it straight. The broken ones are trickier.

There are three of these. Two have simply snapped, but the third is smashed in two places so I deal with it first. Feeling for the sharpness of broken bone, I slot the section into place. Hurts like fuck, again.

Always does. Every single time.

That's why I sent Anton away. Don't like showing pain, and sometimes, like now, it's impossible not to. Blood from

a bitten lip drips on my jacket. When the ribs are done, I settle myself against a rock and wait.

Anton isn't getting the buggy. He's gone to fetch a burial party.

Dumb bastard.

It's almost daylight before I hear a vehicle in the valley below. It's not the buggy. An ex-militia scout car to judge from its camouflage. Painted-out numbers are just visible on the turret. A whip antenna flicks in the breeze.

Gears shift and the scout car begins its climb.

Fat-wheels lurch as it bounces over rock and slams down again. The reconnaissance vehicle isn't fast, but it's powerful enough to grind its way up this slope.

I can hear it change gear, the wild dog that has been watching me can hear it change gear, and so can the buzzards circling high in the pink sky overhead. Guess Anton reckons that if Horse Hito is out there he'd have attacked already.

First out of the cab is a blonde-haired girl, who runs towards me, loses her nerve and slides to a halt, face twisted with misery. About a year back, the first fifteen years of Aptitude's well-ordered life crashed into mine.

The stiffness to her shoulders tells me she's crying.

'Hey,' I say. 'It's OK.'

'Sven ...?'

I'm almost on my feet, when she flings herself into my arms and almost knocks me over. I'm a foot taller, twice her weight and twice as broad. You need to see us together to realize how absurd that is.

'Dad said ...'

Aptitude stops. Realizes she's clinging to me.

She steps back. Probably just as well. Because I'm realizing all the wrong things. Like she smells good and her breasts are firm and her lips are close. She's sixteen, for all she's a widow. I'm twenty-nine, maybe thirty.

That's too wide a gap for either of us.

Of course, her husband was three times my age. But that's the Octovian Empire for you. 'Don't get rid of me that easily,' I say.

We're halfway back to Wildeside when my SIG wakes. Its faint shiver has me scanning the horizon for Horse Hito. Looks clear to me. Although I squint out of the window into the sun for a few seconds, because that's where he'll be coming from.

Well. It's where I'd be coming from.

'What?' I demand.

'Sven,' it says. 'The good news? Or the bad?'

'The good,' Aptitude says.

Anton suggests we start with the bad.

I sit it out. The SIG-37's locked to my DNA. So mine is the answer it's waiting for. Plus it wants to tell me anyway. 'Don't forget the other furies out there.'

'That's the bad bit, right?'

'No,' it says. 'That's the good. Most died.'

'What's the bad?'

'Debro owns the ship they died in.'

'OK,' I agree. 'That's not good.'

'Oh,' my SIG says. 'That's not the bad bit ...' It hesitates. 'Well, not the *really* bad bit. The ship was travelling on a false certificate.'

'Oh shit,' Anton says.

But the SIG's got more. '*And* its journey wasn't logged. You know what that means ...'

All trading journeys in the Octovian Empire must be logged in advance, with cargo given and routes outlined. Once chosen, routes must be adhered to. Failure to log an upcoming journey is treason. The penalty for treason is death.

Round here, that's the penalty for everything.

Chapter 3

IT'S ALMOST NOON WHEN WE CREST A SLOPE TO see a shattered cargo carrier on the high plain in front of us. Imagine a giant silver fish, and then smash its spine with a metal bar and that's how it looks.

Make that a fish with no markings.

'Poetic,' says my gun.

Slapping the SIG into silence, I tell Aptitude to stay where she is and Anton to cover me and kill anything that moves. Neither looks happy.

Too bad.

Gun held combat-style across my body, I head down a slope, giving myself cover where I can. That's most of the time, because the bits of slope not littered with rock have fragments of cargo carrier as big as our scout car.

Of course, that means anyone down there has cover too. Only the gun says the sole life sign inside the cruiser is on the edge of flickering out.

A section of tail fin lies in the dirt. A name stencilled beneath a number, both crudely painted out. The angle of the sun makes the name visible.

Olber's Paradox.

No idea who Olber was. Not too sure what a paradox is either.

The first casualty lies a hundred and fifty paces from the wreck. The cargo loader's guts make a pattern in the dirt, what's left of them. The arrangement looks accidental. His head rests twenty paces beyond.

Blowflies rise, furious at being disturbed. Only to resettle. There's a stink to the air. The heat isn't being kind

to the corpses.

This is nasty.

A crew member stares at the sky. Her eyes poached white by the sun. Her pistol is in its holster. The handle of a dagger juts from her boot. Although her neck is broken and the back of her head pulped, the blood on a rock behind her says her death is an accident.

'Still getting life signs?'

'They're fading,' the SIG says.

It directs me towards a middle section. This obviously flipped on impact and came to rest upside down. A wide scar in the dirt shows where it spun before hitting a massive boulder that brought it to an abrupt halt.

I'm surprised anything is alive in there at all.

'Hollow-point,' I say.

The SIG swaps clips.

Stepping up to a wall of ripped metal, I swing myself round its edge and sweep the inside. A dozen bodies lie at my feet. They're even ranker than those outside. Eight chairs and a table are bolted to the floor over my head.

Broken beer bottles. Dried blood.

A naked girl no bigger than a kitten whirls six inches from a cracked holo watch belonging to one of the bodies. Every time she reaches between her thighs, she vanishes in a crackle of static, only to reappear and start again.

Seems I've found the crew quarters.

One of the beds is occupied.

Its owner hangs limp from the fat strap that kept him locked down and alive when *Olber's Paradox* crashed. A hard habit to break. Buckling yourself in. Speaks to me of a life spent planet-hopping. Since the man can't release his belt without smashing everything left unbroken in his body, I have to go to him.

'Make it fast,' the SIG says.

Punching a hole in the wall gives me my first foothold and lets me stretch for a handhold above. It would sever

the fingers of anyone normal. But I'm using my prosthetic arm and aiming for a safer hold above that.

My arm's combat issue. No idea how many people have used it before me.

The real problem comes when I reach the top. Eight beds are bolted in a row. The one I want is in the middle. The bolts securing the nearest bed hold when I reach for it and swing free. After that, I swing myself from one metal bed frame to another. Takes me a couple of minutes to reach the last person alive in this ship.

'You in there?'

Something flutters behind his eyes.

'Wake up ...'

He doesn't.

'Sven,' the SIG says. 'Bad choice.'

OK, I'm not going to slap him awake. In the end I work my way to the side of his bed and reach for the buckle of his safety belt. It's jammed, obviously. So I'm hanging from an upside-down bed, trying to free someone who's bent double like a piece of wet washing.

'Admit it. You're enjoying yourself.'

Reaching between my shoulder blades, I find my throwing knife and half cut the strap. There's a story to that blade. But now's not the right time for it. Dropping the blade to find later, I reach forward and yank at the weakened strap.

He falls as the strap snaps. And so do I, almost.

At the last second, I tense my arm, and the bar, the bolts and my bones are strong enough to stop us hitting the floor.

Leaving my survivor in the shade, I search the rest of his ship.

Another dozen crew members are in various states of corruption. A small cage is full of those creatures that attacked earlier. Another cage is ripped open. The ceiling

above the first one did a good job of introducing itself to the floor, and it looks like a dead monster sandwich.

Sheet metal. Smashed creature. Sheet metal.

Works for me.

A quick trawl of the rest produces nothing useful. I had in mind gold, diamonds, body armour or at least some interesting weapons. The things legionnaires dream about, when they're not dreaming about beautiful young tribal women willing to remove their clothes.

Used to live in the desert. Probably shows.

And the only tribeswomen willing to take off their clothes did it for money, and were neither young nor beautiful. They were sullen and silent, and regarded us with something between fear, hatred and contempt.

Aptitude comes running. Only to stop when she sees me scowl.

'What?' she demands, chin up and eyes narrowing.

She really is ridiculously beautiful. Even wearing her father's old combat jacket and desert boots. I wonder about the jacket, before realizing it has a temperature-controlled lining and she's been baking up there in the truck.

'You didn't know it was safe to come down.'

'The gun said there was only one thing left alive in there. You're holding him. How can it not be safe?'

She's angry at being told to wait.

Probably angrier still at working herself into a state because she thought I was dead. Then discovering I wasn't. Several women who know me would get angry about that.

'Aptitude—'

She glares at me.

'Let's get him deeper into the shade.'

Taking his legs, she helps me up the hill, although I take most of the weight. We dump him in the shadow of the

truck and Aptitude goes to find a first-aid kit. She does it without being told. She's not the kid I think.

That's half the problem.

'Morphine,' Anton tells her.

Aptitude's already on it. She hands me a hypodermic with a tiny needle and a tube that needs squeezing. Might be old-fashioned. But battlefield morphine works and it's cheap and you can buy it anywhere.

Much like Kemzin 19s. The cookie-cutter SLR of choice for skinflint dictators everywhere. Anonymous, efficient, near impossible to break. Our glorious leader loves the Kemzin 19. Not that I'm suggesting for one minute that our leader ...

The crew carried Kemzins.

Now why would the crew of a cargo carrier be armed? Leaning close to the injured man, I take a better look and swear.

'What?' Aptitude demands.

I ignore her.

Pumping a second syringe into his neck, I watch the crewman's eyes roll back and his breathing steady. He's luckier than he deserves. A handful of smashed ribs, from where the strap compressed his chest on impact. A dislocated leg and cracked hip. A broken arm. Some ugly bruising. Could be worse.

The dehydration is killing him.

And we can deal with that.

'Let me,' Aptitude says, dropping to a crouch. She has a bag of saline solution in her hand. As we watch, she slides a needle into his wrist, lets the blood flow back to rid it of air bubbles and attaches a plastic tube, turning a petcock to let the liquid flow.

'Where did you learn to do that?'

'School,' she says.

Anton's watching with amusement.

'So,' Aptitude says, when her father disappears to fetch a splint. 'Who is he?'

His name is Carl and he's a cargo skipper. The last time we met I swapped my coat, ex-Death's Head, ballistic-lined, for passage into Farlight from an off-world orbit. I didn't know it then but I was on my way to kill her.

Aptitude ...

Anton's only daughter.

The one who's wondering what my scowl means this time. No idea what Carl's second name is. Probably doesn't have one. Most people I know don't. I do only because Debro gave me one.

Sliding my hand into his jacket I find his ID.

Same face, false name. Unless it was false last time round. Makes me wonder if the whole crew signed on with false papers. This makes me wonder something else ...

'SIG,' I say. 'Check the black box.'

'There isn't one.'

Of course there is. It's bad enough not logging the journey. But no black box? My gun will tell me *Olber's Paradox* isn't carrying an emergency beacon next.

'Hey,' the SIG says. 'Guess what ...'

The U/Free, who own three quarters of the galaxy, don't approve of unregistered ships. Being on the United Free's non-approved list is a bad place to be. Of course, the U/Free don't *own* anything. As they'll be the first to tell you. They are a Commonwealth of Free Peoples united in their wish for peace.

The fact we still use money amuses them.

On their planets, houses build themselves, the weather does what it's told and everything is free. Our habit of killing each other amuses them less. So they provide observers to ensure we slaughter each other according to the rules.

Break the rules and bad things happen.

Planets find themselves in different orbits.

Whole sun systems disappear. Galactic maps get redrawn. The U/Free talk quietly. But they carry a very big stick.

OctoV doesn't approve of unregistered ships either. Of course, his list of capital crimes would fill a book. Probably does. But we're talking serious here. Death for the captain. Death for his crew. Quite possibly death for the owner.

Our glorious leader and his ministers don't object to smuggling as such. They just want to make damn sure they get their cut.

'I mean it,' the SIG says. 'No recorder.'

Either this is black ops, or the captain came from so far out-system he didn't know the rules. We can skip that because Carl would have told him. So that means we're dealing with black ops.

Not good, given Anton promised OctoV to stay out of trouble.

'Where are you going?' he asks me.

'Forgotten something.'

'What?'

'My coat.'

Same flies, same headless cargo loader, same stench on entering the crew quarters. A woman lies on top of my coat, and her guts are rotted to the softness of jam. So I scrape the worst off with my knife, then take the thing outside and scrub it with handfuls of dirt.

'He had your coat?' Anton's looking at me strangely.

'Yeah. It's a long story.'

'We've got time.'

'He hasn't.'

Anton helps me load Carl into the scout car.

Using back roads, we loop round to approach Wildeside from the opposite direction, arriving as the sun is starting to set. Not sure it's going to make any difference. If OctoV

is lenzing us from high orbit, he'll have been tracking us the whole trip anyway.

Debro's not sure if she's delighted to see me alive, furious we're so late back, or prepared to wait to find out what happened. Being her, she decides to wait. And her anger fades when she sees Carl. Peeling back his shirt without wincing at the stink, she checks his broken ribs and Aptitude's handiwork.

She's impressive, Debro.

Aptitude is going to be like her when she grows up. Aptitude just doesn't know that yet. 'Get him inside,' Debro says.

Anton and I carry him between us.

The room she chooses is down three flights, and in the far corner of the palazzo. We're underground. I'm wondering if there's any significance in that when Debro's next question tells me, *yes ...*

'You plan to tell me where you found him?'

I shake my head.

'*Sven ...*'

'You don't want to know.'

'But Aptitude and Anton know already.'

'Then you'd better make sure you're the one who replies if anyone comes knocking. Hadn't you?'

She's smart enough to know that's an answer in itself.