

"WHEN IT COMES TO MILITARY SCIENCE FICTION
WILLIAM DIETZ CAN RUN WITH THE BEST." - STEVE PERRY

WILLIAM C. DIETZ

DRIFTER

PIK LANDO

BOOK ONE



Drifter

Pik Lando: Book One

William C. Dietz



*For my dearest Marjorie.
Thanks for the adventure, the companionship, and the laughs.
Remember, we'll know it when we see it.*

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Acknowledgments

Pik Lando felt *The Tink's* landing jacks touch duracrete and cut power to the ship's repellers. The freighter groaned loudly and slumped to port. The control compartment tilted with her.

Lando touched a switch and a green indicator light came on. Good. Number 3 lubricant began to drip from a special tank located under the port wing. As each drop hit the repeller-warmed landing pad it hissed for a moment and turned to steam.

Any maintenance tech in the empire would take one look, shake his or her head, and proclaim sadly, "Sorry, Captain, but your port-side landing jack hydraulics are shot. This is gonna cost you but good."

Lando grinned. Of course it wouldn't cost him "but good," since there was nothing wrong with the ship's landing gear, or any other part of the vessel for that matter.

The truth was that in spite of all appearances to the contrary *The Tinker's Damn* was in excellent shape. The ship's frame and skin had been welded together thirty years before Lando was born, but her electronics, life support, and weapons systems were only five years old. And her drives, well, they were practically new, and capable of pushing *The Tink* through space faster than anything short of a speedster.

"Speed," his father liked to say, "is a smuggler's best friend. You can forget all the fancy weapons systems and leather upholstery. It's speed that'll save your ass every time."

Lando knew it was true, as were most of the things his father had told him, which explained why *The Tink* looked like salvage but really wasn't.

With speed born of long practice Lando's fingers danced across the control board, shutting most of the systems down, and placing the rest on standby.

It was night outside. All four of his external vid screens showed Lando different angles of the same thing. The dark, partially lit shapes of other ships, a scattering of greenish float lights, and beyond them the low, blocky shape of HiHo's main terminal building. Most of the control center was sensibly underground, safely removed from the possibility of a drive explosion or similar accident.

Or as his father liked to say, "If bureaucrats value anything, it's what they sit on."

There was a soft chime from the ship's comset. A female voice flooded the cabin. "Ground control to newly arrived vessel FTC six-niner-two. Welcome to HiHo. Please stand by for a customs inspection."

Lando swore softly under his breath. Why so efficient? He'd hoped for some additional time.

Lando touched a key on the deceptively grimy control board. "Ground control, this is FTC six-niner-two. That's a roger... am standing by."

Lando's leathers creaked slightly as he stood and looked around. He compensated for the tilt through force of habit. The control compartment was a total mess. Empty coffee bulbs sat here and there, almost invisible under piles of old cargo manifests, and stray items of clothing. Lando was playing a role, the part of a surly, somewhat eccentric one-man freighter crew, and everything must support that image.

"You can't just *play* at it," his father had told him over the years, "you've got to *be* it."

An empty meal pak crunched under Lando's boot as he turned and made his way out of the cockpit. A light came on as he stepped into the tiny head.

Like everything else aboard *The Tinker's Damn*, the mirror was filthy. Lando's face rippled when he moved. The three-day growth of beard and the bloodshot eyes made him seem older than his twenty-six years. It had been a long run and he was tired.

Lando activated the tap, let some water flow into his cupped hands, and slapped it against his face. It felt good.

Wait a minute. Lando looked at his hands. They were clean. Completely clean. That would never do!

Lando touched a panel and it hissed open. He grabbed a jar labeled SKINSOFT, and opened the lid. Rather than the white cream the jar had originally contained, it was half full of Number 6 grease.

Lando took a dab of the black stuff and rubbed it into both hands. He was careful to get some of the grease under his nails. The result was a pair of grimy-looking paws that could belong to any engineer in the empire.

Now, should he pull one last check on the cargo? Or head for the lock instead?

Lando decided in favor of the lock. The cargo would be as he'd left it, and customs inspectors didn't like to wait, especially for the likes of tramp-freighter captains.

The smuggler walked down the narrow corridor, past the tiny cabins, through the circular lounge, and stopped by the main lock. He was just in time. There was a loud *bong* followed by a hoarse voice. "Inspector Critzer here... open up."

Lando palmed a dirt-blackened control panel and felt something heavy hit the bottom of his stomach. There were all kinds of customs inspectors. Good ones, bad ones, honest ones, and corrupt ones. Now for the fifty-thousand credit question: Was Critzer honest or corrupt? Of the two, corrupt was better. Honest inspectors are notoriously unreliable, while corrupt inspectors do what they're supposed to.

An indicator light went from red to green, indicating that the outer hatch was closed. Lando touched a button, and as the inner hatch started to open, video appeared on the small screen located just under the lock controls. The smuggler didn't like what he saw.

The customs inspector had short salt-and-pepper hair, a small nose, and large sensual lips. The lower one protruded slightly, giving him a pugnacious air.

Lando saw that Critzer was about six feet tall. The custom inspector's once muscular body was now turning to fat. His blue uniform was neat enough, but a huge gut hung out over his police-style gun belt, and bounced slightly as its owner turned towards the inner hatch. Honest or corrupt? There was no way to tell.

The smuggler slid into the surly but slightly oily persona that went with his appearance, and waited for the hatch to cycle open.

Critzer stepped out, gave Lando an insulting once-over, and looked around. "This ship is absolutely filthy. Don't you ever clean the damned thing?"

Lando shrugged and smiled weakly. "Yes, sir, but I'm runnin' kinda short-handed, and it's hard ta find the time."

Critzer activated his portacomp and looked officious. "So, you're master of this wretched scow?"

Lando nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir. Patrick Dever's the name, sir."

Critzer looked bored. "Okay, Dever, let's take a look at your registry and cargo

manifest."

Lando unzipped a breast pocket, reached inside, and withdrew a small, carefully doctored data cube. Though entirely bogus, the cube was a nice piece of forgery, and had cost Lando more than two thousand credits. Money well spent if it worked, a ticket to the rock pile if it didn't.

One side of the cube had been smeared with filling from the fruit bar in Lando's pocket. The smuggler wiped at it with his sleeve, grinned apologetically, and handed the cube to Critzer.

The customs inspector accepted the cube with obvious distaste, dropped it into the receptacle on his portacomp, and touched a key. Data flooded his screen. He read aloud.

"Ship, *The Tinker's Damn*, registered on New Britain, to one Patrick Dever."

"That's me," Lando said proudly, and threw in a silly grin for good measure.

Critzer looked up from the screen and scowled. "Shut up, Dever. If I want to hear from you, I'll ask. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Most recent port of call, the Dallas industrial-agroplex on Terra, where you loaded five thousand pounds of animal protein."

Critzer raised an eyebrow. "Animal protein? What the hell for? We've got plenty of meat."

Lando did his best to smile ingratiatingly. "Not just *any* animal protein, sir. These are one hundred percent genuine Terran steaks, the best in the empire. Each one is perfectly marbled, hand-trimmed, and flash-frozen ta preserve that wonderful flavor. All ya gotta do is take one of these babies, defrost it, and pop it on an open grill. Before long, ya start ta hear that fat sizzlin' 'n' poppin'. Then ya flip it a coupla times ta seal those juices in, and bango, ya slice it up. It fair ta melts in your mouth, sir... and I'm thinkin' they'll sell real quick."

Critzer ran his tongue over thick, fleshy lips. Lando's description had set his stomach to growling and he could almost taste the Terran steak. He cleared his throat.

"Maybe, and maybe not. It's true that Terran cattle don't do well on HiHo, but we've got some pretty good variants, and I don't hear anybody complaining. Still, I suppose there might be a market, *if* you're willing to pay the duty."

"Oh yes, sir," Lando answered eagerly. "Of course I'll pay. I run an honest ship, I do."

"I'm glad to hear that," Critzer replied sanctimoniously. "There's far too much smuggling these days. Hang the bastards, that's what I say. That'll slow 'em down."

"Yes, sir," Lando agreed soberly. "That'd do it, sir."

"Well, enough of this chitchat," Critzer said, motioning towards the bow of the ship. "Let's see what's aboard."

Critzer began his inspection in the control room and worked his way back towards the stern. Whatever else he might be, Critzer was no fool, and the ensuing inspection was one of the most thorough that Lando had ever seen.

The portly inspector looked under, over, beneath, behind, and around everything. At Critzer's insistence, Lando was forced to open crawl spaces, to take up deck panels, to remove equipment facings and prove there were electronics inside.

Scared to begin with, Lando became increasingly frightened as the customs man proceeded to find many of the little hidey-holes he'd used successfully before but were

presently empty.

Lando came to dread the moment when Critzer would inspect the hold. Would the inspector see right through the scam, laugh, and arrest him on the spot? What were HiHo's jails like, anyway? Could you buy your way out?

These questions and more filled Lando's mind, and added weight to the rock in his gut until his hands were shaking and his mouth was desert-dry.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the two men passed from the engineering space into the hold itself. It was half empty. Here one could see *The Tink's* ancient ribs, still strong under layers of dirt, curving down to meet a heavily scarred deck.

The freezer module sat at the very center of the otherwise empty hold, illuminated by a single cargo light and strapped to sturdy rings set into the deck. A small break in the container's seal allowed a thin tendril of vapor to drift up and away from the lid.

The module had its own power supply, but was connected to the ship's as well. A thick black cable squirmed across the deck and disappeared into darkness.

Lando swallowed as Critzer ignored the tool boxes, storage cabinets, and other paraphernalia that lined the bulkheads, and went straight for the freezer. It was large, with four different lids set into its top surface, and a deactivated power pallet underneath.

"So, here they are," Critzer said patting the module's smooth surface. "Those famous steaks. Open this baby up and let's have a look."

Lando managed to hide the fact that his hand was shaking, by inserting his entire body between the freezer module and the customs inspector. Lando placed his thumb on the print lock and heard a faint click. He stepped aside and waved towards the lid. "There ya go, sir... a load o' prime beef."

Critzer grabbed the lid, lifted, and felt a wave of cold air rush past his face. Vapor swirled and dribbled over the sides. A light came on and revealed rank after rank of closely packed plastic bags. Each contained a single piece of meat.

Lando held his breath. This was the critical moment. Could Critzer tell the difference between frozen steaks and lab-grown human kidneys? Not just *any* kidneys, but high-quality blanks? Each organ requiring only hours of chemical conditioning prior to use? The next few seconds would tell. The government of HiHo had placed heavy taxes on replacement organs, thereby creating a rather healthy black market for spares. A market that Lando hoped to exploit.

Critzer turned. There was a frown on his face. His eyes glittered from black caves. "So tell me something, Dever, how do I know this protein is what you say it is? This might be monster meat from the planet Swamp for all I know."

Lando found it easy to look concerned. "The proof is right on the cargo manifest, sir. Take a look and you'll see certification from the processor, the proper Terran exit codes, and a sign-off from my insurance company."

Critzer hooked the portacomp to his belt, leaned back on the freezer module, and folded his arms.

"So what? Every one of those things can be faked by someone who knows what they're doing. Nope, the answer's a full array of lab tests. You don't have a thing to worry about, assuming that the cargo's legit, and if it isn't, well, the government has rock quarries for the likes of you. It takes a lot of granite to build a brand new capitol, and we're going at it full bore."

Lando forced himself to stay calm. There was one last chance. He produced what he hoped was a noncommittal shrug. "If that's the way it has ta be, then that's the way it has ta be. Still, there might be a shorter, easier way ta get the job done."

Critzer raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Oh really? And what would that be?"

Lando grinned. "Well, I don't know about you, sir, but I'm kinda hungry, and that bein' the case, I wondered if you'd join me for dinner? I'm in the mood for some nice juicy steak."

Critzer's face lit up, but turned to a frown. "Dever, are you trying to bribe me? Because if you are, you'll be swinging a sledge by sundown tomorrow."

Lando held up a hand in protest. "Never, sir! It's just that you seem a reasonable sort, and one bite o' Terran beef's worth all the lab tests in the world."

Critzer allowed his expression to soften. The very thought of a juicy steak filled his mouth with saliva. He swallowed. "Well, since you put it that way, I accept. After all, why incur the expense of lab tests if we can settle the matter right here?"

"Exactly," Lando agreed. "Now, if you'll allow me ta select the best o' the best, we'll fire up the galley and get dinner under way!"

Lando stepped up to the freezer, reached inside, and grabbed two of the plastic bags. The cold stung his fingers. Unlike those which contained kidneys, these bags were marked with tiny pieces of black tape, and had Lando needed them, there were four more as well.

The freezer lid closed with a solid thump as Lando held the steaks up for Critzer's inspection. They weren't Terran, but they *were* from New Britain, and almost as good.

"Pick your steak, sir... I guarantee you'll be pleased."

Critzer pointed a blunt finger at the larger of the two pieces of meat and Lando nodded his agreement.

"An excellent choice, sir. If you'll follow me to the galley, we'll throw these on the broiler, and prepare the way with a beer."

Critzer grunted his approval, and Lando began to celebrate. Even after all his overhead, and the stiff duty he'd be forced to pay on the Terran "steaks," he'd be fifty thousand credits richer. Crime not only paid, it paid very well indeed.

Wendy Wendeen brought her fist down hard. She felt the old man's sternum give slightly. Wendy positioned her hands for cardiac compression and leaned forward.

She pushed down and released. One... Two... Three... Eighty compressions per minute—sixty if she got help with the mouth-to-mouth—and a short pause after every five compressions.

The man had been standing only ten feet away when he collapsed. A quick check had confirmed her first diagnosis. No pulse, no respiration, and bluish lips. A heart attack.

Wendy looked around. A crowd had gathered. Most just stared, but one, a boy in his teens, looked as if he wanted to help. All he needed was someone's permission. Wendy caught his eye.

"Hey, you! Yes, you! Can you perform mouth-to-mouth?"

The boy nodded silently and fell to his knees. Wendy watched the teenager check the old man's airway, pinch his nose shut, and blow air into his lungs. One breath for every five compressions. Good. The kid knew what he was doing.

... Four ... Five ... Pause. A woman was fanning air towards the old man as if that might help him breathe. She had sun-damaged skin, a beat-up electro-implant where her right eye had been, and the look of a rimmer. Wendy nodded in her direction.

"Ma'am? Would you do me a favor? There's an emergency comset mounted on the far bulkhead. Pick up the handset, and tell whoever answers that we've got a medical emergency on D deck. We need a crash cart, cardiac monitor, and resuscitator. Got that?"

The woman nodded and disappeared into the crowd. She was back moments later.

"They won't come." The woman said it levelly. A statement of fact, nothing more.

Wendy pushed. One... Two... Three... "What do you mean 'they won't come'? This man is dying! Did you tell them that?"

The woman nodded. "I told 'em, miss. They said I should read my ticket. Something about medical services being available on C deck or above."

Wendy swore. Damn them! She'd known about the restrictions on a D-deck ticket but hadn't taken them seriously. Surely a fellow doctor would place more value on a passenger's life than the words printed on a ticket? Apparently not.

Wendy checked the man's pulse. Nothing. She looked at the boy. He shook his head. No pulse and no respiration.

Wendy considered the contents of her medical bag. She did have some epinephrine cartridges for her injector, but even if the drug worked, the old man would still need intensive care and she had no way to provide it. Not without use of the ship's medical facilities.

The boy caught her eye. Wendy shook her head. Both of them stood up. She looked around. The crowd had started to thin out. Death was nothing new to these people. Rimmers mostly, fresh from planets where life was hard, and death came young.

But the onlookers didn't go very far. D deck was too small for that. Being the globe ship's lowest passenger deck, "D" was located right above the hold, and was rather small in circumference.

That hadn't stopped the shipping company from packing them in, though, and Wendy was reasonably sure that there were more passengers on D deck than on A and B combined.

The result was a crowded maze of curtained-off double-tiered bunks, lights that burned around the clock, the smell of food cooked over portable burners, air so thick you could cut it with a knife, and noise that never stopped. Talking, laughing, yelling, and crying. It went on around the clock.

It made Wendy yearn for Angel's wide open spaces, for the clean wind that whipped across the open plain to chill her skin, and the privacy of her own room.

A newborn baby cried somewhere behind her and Wendy looked down. The old man's cheap blue ship suit seemed to billow up around him as if filled with air instead of flesh.

The old man's features were enlarged with age. He had a large beak of a nose, ears that stood almost straight out from the side of his head, and a long thin mouth which curved up at the corners as if amused by what had happened.

Wendy felt someone brush her arm, and turned. The woman with the electro-implant smiled hesitantly. "His name was Wilf. He had the bunk over mine."

Wendy smiled. "Did he have friends or relatives aboard?"

The rimmer shook her head. "No, miss, none that I know of."

Wendy nodded. "Well, we can't leave Wilf here. Let's carry him over to the lift tube. The crew will take it from there."

The woman made no move to help. "They won't say anything for him, will they?"

Wendy imagined a couple of bored crew members, laughing and joking as they loaded the body into an ejection tube.

"No, I don't suppose they will."

The rimmer pointed to the brooch pinned over the pocket of Wendy's jacket. It was a triangle surrounded by a circle of gold. "You're Chosen, aren't you?"

"I'm a member of the Church of Free Choice, yes. Only our enemies refer to us as The Chosen. They use those particular words to make us seem arrogant and self-centered."

The woman gave an apologetic shrug. Light reflected off her electro-implant. "I meant no offense."

"And none was taken."

"It's just that I'm not very good with words, not that kind anyway, and I wondered if you'd say something for Wilf. You know, something about God and so on."

Wendy nodded solemnly. "I'd be proud to say something for Wilf."

And so it was that three strangers said goodbye to a man none of them knew, while their fellow passengers looked on, and a costume ball took place two decks above.

Later, after they'd carried Wilf's body over to the lift tubes and notified the ship's crew, Wendy had retreated to the comparative privacy of her own bunk. The curtains were thin but better than nothing at all. A pair of newlyweds were busy making love right below her, but Wendy tuned them out.

She discarded the distractions around her one by one until she was all alone inside a cocoon of warmth and peace. It was there that she examined Wilf's death and the circumstances that surrounded it.

She felt no sorrow, for Wendy believed that Wilf's essence lived on, but the manner

of his passing troubled her greatly. Why had the ship's medical personnel denied him treatment? How could the vast majority of her fellow passengers be so callous? What could she have done to make things better?

They were difficult questions, and Wendy failed to find any easy answers. But the episode did prove the elder's wisdom. There is little room for good where people are packed too closely together and machines hold sway. The sooner she reached HiHo and discharged her responsibility, the better.

Two more cycles passed before the liner reached the correct nav beacon and made the transition from hyper to normal space. Like most of the passengers on D deck, Wendy knew very little about the physics involved and was forced to trust the machinery around her.

Part of Wendy, the part that had grown up on a farm where even robo-tillers were regarded as necessary evils, was troubled by this dependency on technology.

Another part, the part that had attended and graduated from the Imperial School of Medicine on Avalon, trusted machines and what they could do.

Both parts felt the momentary nausea that goes with a hyperspace jump and gave thanks that the first half of the journey was nearly over.

But it still took the better part of a full cycle for the ship to work its way in from the nav beacon and enter orbit around HiHo.

After that it was semiorganized chaos as everyone pushed and shoved, hoping to get aboard the first shuttle dirtside. They were soon disappointed, however, as passengers from A, B, and C decks were taken off first.

Hours passed. Children cried, people argued, and the air grew thick with tension. The pressure of it, the feeling of being confined within such a small space, gave Wendy a splitting headache. She popped two pain tabs and washed them down with some of the ship's bitter water.

And then, when all the upper decks had been cleared, and the D-deck passengers were clumping their way aboard a pair of clapped-out contract shuttles, Wendy forced herself to go last. It was a form of self-discipline, a self-imposed penance, a punishment for her own lack of inner tranquility.

Finally, after she had passed through the liner's huge passenger lock, and boarded the reentry-scarred shuttle, she got to look out a viewport. This, and only this, was the part of spaceflight that she loved.

Wendy saw nothing of the spacecraft's bolt-down seats, the bare metal bulkheads, or the trash-littered decks beneath her feet. Her eyes were completely taken with the huge brownish-orange orb below, a one-in-a-billion miracle of physics, geology, biology, and chemistry that could support human life. A creation so wondrous, so perfect, that it could single-handedly prove the existence of God.

Not some white-haired tyrant in a mythical realm, but a natural order, which had expressed itself in a multitude of ways, including the planet below.

These were fourth-class passengers, and the pilot had her orders, so she chose the shortest and most economical path down.

The trip was smooth at first, but the shuttle started to jerk and shudder when it hit the atmosphere. Adults swore, children cried, and the hull groaned in protest.

Wendy shut it out, kept her eyes on the planet below, and held onto the armrests with all her strength.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity but was something a good deal less, the shuttle glided in over HiHo's principal spaceport, and lowered itself onto a blast-burned landing pad.

The other passengers released their seat belts within seconds of touchdown, and stood in the aisles.

Once again Wendy forced herself to wait, rising from her seat only as the last few people were exiting the main hatch, and following behind them.

It was early afternoon and Wendy blinked as she stepped out into bright sunlight. Her boots made a clanking sound as she made her way down the metal roll-up stairs to the duracrete below.

It was warm and she took a moment to strip off her jacket and stash it in her backpack. That, and the molded duraplast med kit, was her only luggage. Somewhere behind Wendy a destroyer escort fought clear of its pad, engaged drives, and screamed towards space.

It was a long walk from the economy-class pad to the low-lying terminal, but Wendy enjoyed it, glorying in the opportunity to stretch her legs under the vast sweep of HiHo's blue sky.

She had been to HiHo twice before, so she found her way through the crowded terminal with little difficulty, and stepped out onto a congested street. There was garbage everywhere. It smelled, and the heat made it worse.

All sorts of transportation was available, ranging from long black limos to beat-up hover cabs.

Wendy disliked both options, and looked for something simpler, closer to bone and muscle. There were no animal-drawn carriages in sight, but she did see a dilapidated pedicab, and waved it over.

The vehicle's operator was an ancient Tillarian, so wrinkled and burned by the sun that he looked like a raisin from which all moisture had been drawn.

Like all of his basically humanoid race, the Tillarian had a crested skull and a pair of very round eyes. He wore a sweatband with an advertisement on it, a pair of baggy shorts, and some sturdy sandals.

As Wendy climbed into the pedicab's passenger seat, she wondered what whim of fate or personal decision had brought the Tillarian to HiHo and left him stranded like a piece of sentient driftwood.

Unlike many of the alien races that man had encountered among the stars, the Tillarians were antisocial almost to the point of paranoia, and rarely ventured beyond the limits of their native system.

Wendy provided the Tillarian with an address, and he placed his feet the worn black pedals. Pumping hard, he pulled out in front of a hover cab, ignored the blaring horn, and slid into the flow of traffic.

Five cars back, the woman with one eye swore as her limo driver rear-ended a delivery truck and Wendy disappeared into traffic.

The pedicab's hard rubber tires hummed over hot pavement.

Since the three-wheeled vehicle had very little in the way of suspension, Wendy could feel each little bump in the road. But she liked the slow, steady pace at which the scenery moved by, the pressure of the warm, thick air against her face, and the feeling of connectedness that the ride gave her. A few bumps were a small price to pay for

such important pleasures.

Like many of the cities that grow up around spaceports, Zenith had evolved along the path of least resistance, until a certain level of success had been achieved and the second generation followed the first.

At that point a sense of civic pride had bubbled up from some unseen source, and with it, the desire to impose order on chaos, a process that involved master plans and zoning laws.

Wendy watched as the jumble of run-down bars, sex shops, and cheap hotels gave way to clean, orderly streets and carefully constructed stores.

Both areas, old and new alike, struck Wendy as crowded, confining, and ultimately deadening. She couldn't understand it. Given the fact that they had an entire planet to work with, why did they choose to live in each other's laps? Was it something in their genetic codes? A thousand years of conditioning? Or just plain stupidity?

Wendy was still considering various answers when the pedicab coasted to a stop in front of a well-cared-for building at the edge of town. The site had been carefully chosen so that it was backed up against the edge of a dry wash where no one else could build.

Behind and beyond the building there were miles of semi-arid land, dotted here and there with low-lying vegetation shimmering in the afternoon heat. And there, halfway to the brown horizon, mountains formed a jagged line between land and sky.

Wendy paid the Tillarian, tipped him handsomely, and made her way up a short walk to the blindingly white building. The front door was made of durasteel and strong enough to stop high-velocity bullets.

A brass plaque announced the name of INTERSTAR IMPORT-EXPORT and a gold-plated knocker invited Wendy to make her presence known. Like her brooch, it featured a circle with a triangle mounted within. She lifted the knocker and let it fall. The result was surprisingly loud.

A minute passed before a woman opened the door. She had black hair streaked with gray, a kindly face, and bright blue eyes. She wore one of the loose white tunics that many locals favored at home. Her expression was polite. "Yes?"

Wendy smiled. "Aunt Margaret?"

Aunt Margaret's face lit up with happiness. "Wendy? Is that you? You're all grown-up! Well, don't just stand there. Come on in! Here, let me take that case."

The inside of the building was just as Wendy remembered it. Cool and dark, part warehouse and part home. About half the structure was given over to the import-export business and the rest served as her aunt and uncle's home.

Wendy had been about sixteen years old during her last visit to HiHo, and the building had been brand new. It was the smells that Wendy remembered the best. A heady mix of preservatives, alien leather, and exotic spices. She'd enjoyed her time with her aunt and uncle and wished that this visit could be as carefree as the others had been.

Wendy followed Aunt Margaret down a long hallway and into a large room. It fronted on the dry wash and the desert beyond. Though forced to live in Zenith for economic reasons, her aunt and uncle had done everything they could to make their home seem as if it stood alone on a windswept plain.

"Sydney! Look who's here! It's Wendy!"

The room was just as Wendy remembered it. A large sunlit chamber full of the old-fashioned books that her uncle liked to collect, and the bright splashy canvases that Aunt Margaret painted when she had time.

Wendy's uncle sat in his favorite recliner, pipe in hand, a cloud of smoke hovering over his head. A computer sat on his lap, and his right leg was in a cast.

As Uncle Syd raised his head, Wendy found herself looking at a male version of her mother, and a lump formed in her throat. He had the same even features, the same high cheekbones, and the same brown eyes. Those eyes were filled with excitement as he tried to rise.

Wendy dropped her backpack and rushed to his side. "Don't you dare! What did you do to yourself?"

Uncle Syd gave Wendy an awkward hug and kissed her on the cheek. "What did I do to myself? And you call yourself a doctor? What's the matter? Never seen a broken leg before?"

Never mind. Let's have a look at you."

He made a show of looking Wendy over. She had short black hair, large luminous brown eyes, a nice straight nose, and full red lips. They curved upward in a smile. "Well?"

"Gorgeous," Uncle Syd answered solemnly. "Absolutely gorgeous. A terrible temptation to men everywhere."

"Oh, really?" Wendy asked lightly, "Then, why am I unmarried?"

"A very good question," Aunt Margaret put in sternly. "We receive letters, you know, and your father tells us that a number of young men have asked, and that you say 'no.' "

"My father exaggerates, and should mind his own business," Wendy replied primly. "Now, Uncle Syd, tell me about your leg. What happened?"

During the next couple of hours Wendy heard about the packing crate that had fallen on Uncle Syd's leg, the stiff competition they faced in the import-export business, and how hatred for the Church made matters even worse.

The hatred was nothing new. It had started hundreds of years ago, when a small group of people had committed themselves to what they called "a life of free choice, guided by the voice within."

Unlike most religious groups, they had no ministers or priests, no written credo, no enforced rules. But they did share some common values. Included was a belief that life should be simple, nonviolent, and productive.

In order to pursue that kind of a life they avoided cities, built homes in rural communities, and did their best to avoid conflict.

But cities had a way of expanding, eating up more and more farmland with each succeeding year, until the life they'd sought to avoid surrounded and crushed their farms.

Avaricious land developers labeled them "anti-progressive"; other religions made fun of their self-directed ways, and planetary governments used their taxes to wage war.

So they moved from city to country, from planet to planet, but it was always the same. No matter how isolated they were, no matter where they went, others would come and take control. Unable to live under those conditions, the members would be

forced to leave their homes, often selling farms and other property at a fraction of their true worth, or losing them altogether. It was a pattern that had occurred over and over again.

In an effort to resolve this problem, a huge meeting was held. Representatives came from a dozen planets. Discussions went on day after day. And finally, after each voice had been heard, a decision was made. A world would be purchased, a planet where the membership could live life as they chose, and enjoy the fruits of their own hard work.

It was a bold plan, but more realistic than it might seem, since Imperial Survey ships discovered a couple of inhabitable planets each year, and most were offered for sale or colonization.

So a team of scientists was assembled and funds were pledged. Many years passed, during which a number of planets were considered but none was purchased. Some were too hot, some were too cold, but most were simply too expensive. The most desirable worlds, those with potential as pleasure planets, were bid up by the powerful mega-corporations.

But eventually, in what could only be viewed as a massive compromise, half of a planet was finally obtained. It was largely barren, and they'd be forced to share it with a mining operation, but something was better than nothing.

The planet was named Angel, and with the exception of the time she'd spent in med school, Wendy had lived there all her life.

So Wendy understood the stories her aunt and uncle told. Tales of planetary import licenses that went to members of more accepted religions, accounts of business deals lost because they refused to deal in arms, and stories of mega-corps that conspired to underprice them.

And for their part, the couple were hungry for news of the progress on Angel, since it was their dream to sell the import-export business and retire there some day.

How much land had been cleared? What crops grew best? And was the mining company causing problems?

Wendy's aunt and uncle asked those questions, and more, until the sun had set beyond the mountains and darkness had claimed the desert.

It was then, over one of Aunt Margaret's wonderful vegetarian dinners, that the conversation turned to the reason behind Wendy's visit.

Uncle Syd took a sip of wine, savored it for a moment, then let it slide down his throat. "So, enough of our silly questions. You came to HiHo for a reason."

Wendy smiled. "So don't keep me in suspense.... Have you got it?"

Her uncle nodded soberly. "It took the better part of three months to find exactly what the elders asked for, and a great deal of money, but yes, there are ten tons of concentrate waiting on Weller's World."

Wendy put her glass down and clapped her hands. "That's wonderful! The fertilizer will make a tremendous difference! We could be self-sufficient by early next year."

Uncle Syd held up a restraining hand. "Aren't you forgetting something? Weller's World is a long way from Angel. Not only that, but from what your father says in his letters, the company may try to stop you. How will you move it?"

Wendy took a bite of bread and chewed thoughtfully. "We anticipated that. I'll hire a freighter."

"Not a regular one, you won't," Aunt Margaret countered. "It wouldn't be worth it."

They'd charge double the going rate to carry such a small cargo."

"If they're willing to do it at all," Uncle Syd added. "Angel is way off the main shipping lanes and there'd be small chance of a return cargo."

Wendy shrugged. "Okay, I'll hire a smuggler. If everything goes according to plan, we'll need one anyway."

Husband and wife looked at each other. There was truth in what Wendy said. They'd be forced to deal with a smuggler eventually, like it or not. Uncle Syd nodded.

"Granted. But we must choose carefully. Most smugglers are little more than common criminals."

"Jonathan Troon could give us some advice there," Aunt Margaret said.

"Yes," Uncle Syd agreed, waving his fork in Wendy's direction. "Jonathan's our shipping agent. I'll contact him in the morning. If anyone could put you in touch with a reliable smuggler, Jonathan could."

"If there is such a thing as a 'reliable smuggler,'" Aunt Margaret said doubtfully. "Most of them traffic in arms and drugs."

Wendy smiled. "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

The woman screamed as the man in black leather brought the whip down across her naked back. Even though Wendy knew it was a holo, and even though the woman was okay, she still jerked in sympathetic response. Wendy had nothing against eroticism per se, or pornography for that matter, but couldn't stand to see violence used as a sexual stimulant.

She looked around. No one else was watching. The holo was nothing more than a backdrop for other activities. The background noise came close to obliterating the woman's screams.

The bar was packed, full of spacers mostly, with a scattering of enlisted types from the Imperial destroyer that had touched down earlier in the day. They moved back and forth, a living tapestry of ship suits, uniforms, and body armor. She saw very few aliens, and assumed they spent most of their time in other, more cosmopolitan establishments.

The air was so thick with smoke that it made Wendy's throat sore. She hated the noise, the smell of sour alcohol, and the feel of bodies pressing in around her.

She looked across a pair of untouched beers to Jonathan Troon. She hoped that he'd notice her distress and take her somewhere else. No such luck. Troon was watching the crowd.

Wendy tried to guess what Troon was thinking, but the shipping agent was a cyborg, with a face of rigid plastic. Some cyborgs were too poor to pay for a lifelike plastiflesh face, but not Troon. Judging from his brand new ground car, and his expensive clothes, the cyborg could buy anything he wanted.

No, for reasons known only to the cyborg himself, Troon wore an expression of eternal happiness.

Wendy considered it. What if she was limited to a single expression? Would she choose happiness? Sadness? Something in between?

The cyborg turned in her direction and interrupted Wendy's thoughts. He wore a high-collared evening cloak, matching skin-tight breeches, and a pair of knee-high boots. "Is everything okay? Would you care for another beer?"

Wendy indicated the full glass in front of her. "No, thanks." She gestured towards the rest of the room. "Are you sure this visit is necessary?"

Troon shrugged. He made the gesture seem elegant. "It's like my mother used to say. If you want to swim with the fish, then jump in the ocean."

Wendy raised an eyebrow. "And if you drown?"

Troon laughed. "Mother was an optimist. You have nothing to fear, however. I guarantee your safety."

Wendy wanted to say that her desire to leave the bar had nothing to do with her personal safety, but that would seem ungracious. Troon was trying to help. The least she could do was wait the process out. Wendy hoisted her beer and forced a smile.

"Here's to the fish."

Pik Lando entered the bar and looked around. As Lando's eyes drifted over the crowd, he saw things that others might have missed. There were roid rats, rimmers, smugglers, bounty hunters, merchant marine, mercenaries, and more.

Bounty hunters sat in corners with their backs to the wall, constantly scanning the crowd for fugitives. Mercenaries drank the same way they fought, taking possession of entire tables and defending them against all comers. And, with a few exceptions, roid rats drank alone, as suspicious of each other as they were of everyone else, glowering at people who came too close.

Under normal circumstances Lando favored the bar, where he could watch the room in the large mirror, and leave quickly if the heat arrived.

But tonight was different. Lando was hungry and they didn't serve food at the bar. The smuggler wound his way through the tables, chose one next to a group of reasonably sober engineering types, and activated the tabletop menu. Burning blue letters appeared under the table's plastic surface.

Scanning through the menu, Lando saw steak, nearly rejected it due to the cost, but thought, *What the hell, I'm fifty thousand to the good, and I haven't had a good piece of meat since my dinner with Inspector Critzer. God bless his greedy soul.*

Lando grinned and touched the word "steak," followed by "medium," and "coffee, Terran."

He had just settled back, and was about to do a little woman-watching, when he saw one rise from her seat and turn his way. She was different. Not a spacer, not a bounty hunter, something else.

The short hair would look terrible on some, but was perfect for her. It served to emphasize the soft symmetry of her face. A face that looked, well, determined somehow, as if on some sort of important errand.

And then there was her body—a very nice body, which in spite of some shapeless clothes, managed to make itself known in all the right places. She wore a pin of some sort. A circle with a triangle mounted within. He'd seen that design before but couldn't remember where.

Yes, the woman had both potential *and* an escort in the form of an upscale cyborg. A borg with a plastic smile, a rather obvious blaster tucked away under his left armpit, and something else. An attitude that said, "Screw with me and you could wind up seriously dead."

What the hell? The unlikely pair were heading straight for his table. Heat? Competition? Clients? Lando had settled on the last possibility by the time they reached his table.

"Good evening," the cyborg said smoothly. "My name's Jonathan Troon, and this is Dr. Wendy Wendeen. Could we join you for a drink? Or some dinner perhaps?"

Lando made no attempt to rise. Troon, Troon. The name was familiar but he couldn't quite place it.

The cyborg spoke as if reading Lando's mind. "Your father might have mentioned my name. We worked together many years ago."

Jonathan Troon! Of course! Lando's father loved to tell the story of how he and a cyborg named Troon... had smuggled a quarter-million credits worth of black market biochips onto Terra by making it appear that they were part of the borg's motor control subprocessor.

Lando smiled and got to his feet. His slug gun slithered into its holster. The smuggler held out his hand. "I'm pleased to me you, Citizen Troon. My father has mentioned you many times."