

# Hunting the Corrigan's Blood:

## Chapter 2

By Holly Lisle

Three whole days I spent in that reju unit; healing the first two and law-sealed the third. Three days while my quarry ran farther and farther from me and the trail grew colder. I spent most of those three days lying to the sporcs.

I was lying to protect my client, but I couldn't tell them that, of course. What I did tell them was that I didn't have any idea why I had been attacked, though I suspected it was because I was carrying a fair stack of rucets—originally, rucets were Regulated Universal Currency Exchange Tokens, but now that everyone knows there's no such thing as a universally acceptable currency, they're just rucets; that I didn't recognize the body in the locker with me, though she did seem a little familiar; that I was docked at Cassamir Station to replenish my personal biologicals stocks and to have the origami unit on my ship updated. This last was true, but certainly not the whole truth.

I wasn't entirely honest when I described the people who attacked me, but what I did tell the sporcs was true enough. My usually-sharp memory got very fuzzy when I tried to bring my three assailants to mind. I said I could only remember that they were of indeterminate color, of average height and weight, and of ordinary appearance except for their eyes. I described their eyes; pale and burning with a feverish, hungry intensity, eyes that had spent a good deal of time contemplating death and liking the images such thoughts conjured. Those eyes haunted my dreams and in my waking moments sent little chills across my shoulders and down my spine. I told the sporcs the truth about those eyes, but they weren't impressed. I didn't tell them that one of my three

assailants was gene-damaged; that he'd been a giant. That single tiny bit of information I kept to myself. I wasn't sure what I intended to do with it, but knowledge is power, and I wasn't in favor of giving away mine.

I think the sporcs would have kept the lock on my reju until I eventually broke and told them everything, except that my client came to my rescue and through a third party bought them off. Space stations are like that. They are the fiefdoms of the men and women who put up the capital to construct them and who run their businesses in them. Most stations are the result of private enterprise, and none that I know of answer to any planetary government. They have too much independent power to kowtow. As such, they can be benevolent havens or regimented hells.

Cassamir was neither, but somewhere in the middle. It was the communal property of Disney Starward Entertainment, Whithampton-Trobisher Ore Processing, Cassamir Biologicals, Kayne Fantasy Sensos, McDonald's, Monoceros Starcraft, Ltd., Huddle House Intergalactic, and The burgi Group. Because of its corporate ownership, it had a corporate personality, which I don't like, but which does mean that the sporcs know where their paychecks come from and remember that fact when pressure is applied. Even when murder is involved.

If you want justice, don't get killed on a space station. This was an old rule of mine, and one that I'd come too close to breaking.

Badger showed up late on the third day, bringing a few of my belongings for me. I first knew he'd finally come for me when his ugly face filled the reju faceplate, and at last that face was grinning. When I'd seen him the day before, he'd looked fairly normal—at least for him. Now, though, his skin was the most hideous shade of metallic green, and he'd had his irises done in iridescent purple and his hair staticked, copperflashed, and illuminated, so that it glowed even in

bright light and every hair stood away from every other and all of them crackled with sparks when he walked. I wish to hell I could keep Badger away from the bodyart shops. He has dreadful taste.

"You ready to go home?"

"Days ago," I told him.

He waited while the sporks removed the law-seals and helped me out of the reju. He'd brought a mini-holo for me and some clothes. I pulled on the jumpsuit, then flashed myself with the holo. The image took a second to build in front of me.

I felt the eyes of the sporks on me while I stood there. I'm used to stares; after all, I am a Maryschild. My mother was the founder of the Marys, that short-lived movement that she ostensibly started to eliminate racial tension by creating raceless children. When she started the movement, she purchased three fathers for me from a memorial sperm bank, all as physically different from her type as she could find. Then she insisted that the geneticist who cut and spliced her genes with those of the three dead donors double the recessives and remove the dominants so that my features would clearly reflect the 'pure' influences of each of my parents.

They do. From my mother I have my coffee-with-a-touch-of-cream skin and full lips and straight teeth. From one of my fathers I have high, sharp cheekbones and slanting almond-shaped eyes with a pronounced epicanthic fold, though the eyes themselves are a vivid and startling blue, the gift of another father. My hair is straight and the color of amber, my nose is long and thin. My body is long and angular. I look like what I am—an outdated fashion statement.

I am a living flag who was born to be waved in my mother's little war; her purpose in creating me was anything but benign. She wasn't looking for peace or harmony or even a kid she could love; she was looking for power, trying to create a

sweeping army of angry women who would bear their children and sit them at her feet so she could indoctrinate them into bitterness and plans for revenge against a universe she despised. And everything she taught was a lie.

Race doesn't exist.

Skin color exists. Hair and eye color are real. Body type varies from individual to individual, as does tooth shape and color, the form of fingernails, and the amount and texture of body hair. But 'race' is a phantom conjured up by people no different from each other than purebred Cocker spaniels are. Race is a lie, and the people who conjure by it, no matter their color or their politics, are liars.

The image finished building and I saw that the reju had reshaped my face again, making the jaw slightly rounder. It had also skinned out the little fat I had and stripped off a lot of muscle. Reju is supposed to return you to your genetic peak, but I don't know of a single place that hasn't set its units with local body fashion in mind. On Cassamir, skinny with big tits was the look, and I was going to have to spend additional time in my private unit to get back the muscular, small-breasted body I preferred.

"Looking sweet," Badger told me.

"Go dock a bot, you pervert."

He laughed; I grinned. Alive felt wonderful. Free felt even better.

We took a gravdrop back to our ship, and the entire trip, I tried to remember when I had been attacked and where and how. But it was all gone.

When we were inside and the privacy fields were up, Badg turned to me. "Do you still have everything?"

I grinned. "They didn't have any idea where to look."

“Perfect. Let’s have it.”

I reached into the right front pocket of my jumpsuit, undid the pressure-seal closure at the bottom, and stretched my hand through to the inside of my thigh. I pressed against my fleshtab. The fleshtab was the result of a black market breakthrough in reju technology on an ugly little private planet that circles the F-class star Tegosshu. The living skin separated and I pulled out two infochips. The first was a standard chip that Peter Crane had given me to help me get started on his job. The second was a dopplerchip I had taken of our meeting.

I handed Badger the dopplerchip and he dropped it into the holoplayer.

There was a soft hum; then the rec room became a gray-on-gray replica of Ferlingetta. Peter Crane and I took shape: solid-looking charcoal-colored three-dimensional forms seated at a gracefully filigreed gray table surrounded by gray plants and the increasingly less solid shapes of decor, staff, and other diners. Badger and I watched my double’s hand move away from the pressure point on my abdominal wall that had started the doppler recording.

“—to be so cautious, you must have made some ferocious enemies.” Peter Crane templed his fingers in front of his chin and smiled at the recorded me. The corners of his eyes crinkled.

Badger made a face. “My, oh, my. I wonder how he figured that out.”

“Shut up and watch.”

Peter Crane was one of the five most powerful people on Cassamir Station; the sole owner of Monoceros Starcraft, Ltd., and according to rumor, the biggest stakeholder in Cassamir Station itself. Sitting across from him, I had felt neither

the weight of his wealth nor the subtle demands of his power. Easy-going and friendly, he wore his straight black hair in a casual cut and his skin natural. His clothes were tasteful, hearkening back to Old Earth styles without slavishly imitating them. He was a fifth-generation stationer, a direct descendent of Athabascan Eskimos who invested their tribal earnings in space technology and made a fortune doing it. "If you're as good as Lize says you are, I'll make you twenty million rucets richer," Peter Crane said.

Badger paused the recording. "Which Lize?"

"Anelize Daredwyn," I told him. She was a former client—a good one. She had given Crane my contact information, and given me her recommendation of him.

The funny thing was, if Peter Crane had found me without having someone to vouch for him, I might have taken him on anyway. I rarely like my clients but I liked him.

I restarted the recording and my imaged self smiled at Crane. "I'm that good," the image assured him.

"You're that cocky," Badger said, grinning at me.

I damped down the hum of conversations in the rest of Ferlingetta and refined the sound of my conversation with Peter. I didn't bother to answer Badger. He knew I was good at my job.

I call myself an "Independent Reclamations Specialist;" I find things—expensive things—things stolen from their rightful owners. I return these things for fifteen percent of their retail value. I deal primarily with corporations because corporations are where the money is. I occasionally accept employment from a private customer, if the missing item or the manner in which it disappeared interests me; the money is never as good as corporate money, though.

“Good,” Crane said. “I admire skill above all things.”

A woman sauntered down the manicured grass path to our table; she was small and lithe. My memory supplied the absent details of red hair, ivory skin and freckles.

I hit the pause button and turned to Badger. “That’s her.”

He squinted and looked uncertain. “The corpse?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to go back and track her now?”

I thought about it, then shook my head. “Not yet. Let’s finish this first, then focus on her and see if anything interesting comes up.”

Badger resumed the holo, and the waiter flipped her hair back, and the thousands of tiny braids swung over her shoulders. “Mado Crane?” Her gaze passed over me as if I were invisible; she focused entirely on Crane. “How may I be of service?” She ducked her head in his direction when she said it. She didn’t acknowledge me.

“A bottle of my private stock, please. The Gorland Harvest ’46.” Crane turned to me, pointedly forcing the waiter to acknowledge my presence. “And would you like anything else, Mada Drake?”

“Please it’s just Cadence and no, I’m fine.”

“The desserts are all excellent.”

My doppelganger shook her head. “Really. Old Earth cuisine is much richer than anything I’m used to. I couldn’t eat another bite.”

“Holy hell,” Badger said. “You passed up Old Earth dessert at a place like that? I wouldn’t have. They probably bring in the stuff from planet-side. I’ll bet they don’t use any reconsta

at all.”

The little things got to Badger.

Crane waved the waiter off.

“What do you want me to find for twenty million rucets?”

He stopped smiling. “A man named John Alder, acting as a purchasing agent for a financial concern called the Winterleigh Corporation, acquired from me a ship—the best private yacht Monoceros builds, our newest model. He said Winterleigh wanted it to permit its officers to travel quickly and in comfort when on business. I’d say fifty percent of my top-of-the-line ships are used for that purpose.”

He paused, and my double nodded.

“That true?” Badger asked me.

“Mostly. Monoceros’ corporate customers make up sixty-four percent of their business, but I think he was just rounding.”

My imaged self was busy trying to look worthy of a twenty million rucet fee. “Your most expensive private yachts sell for right at a hundred million rucets,” the other me said, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees. This posture change is supposed to tell my client that I’m earnest, eager, and attentive. Probably it doesn’t say much more than that I have a hard time sitting in a chair for more than an hour. But I try to give a good impression. “My fee is fifteen percent of the retail value of whatever I can collect. Fifteen percent of the retail price of the most expensive ship you sell is fifteen million rucets. You could do a lot of things with the extra five million, Mado Crane.” The other me smiled, trying to look relaxed. I recalled distinctly that I hadn’t been relaxed. “Or I could.”

“Trying to lighten the situation with humor?” Badger asked.

“Trying to figure out why he wanted to overpay us so heavily.”

Crane looked past my shoulder and up; he was watching the cold expanse of space showcased by the enormous window that made up most of Ferlingetta’s far wall. I saw my image turn to look at the window; in the doppler holo it was a flat, shiny gray expanse.

“What’s he looking at?” Badger wanted to know.

I had to think for an instant. “A convoy of freighters was docking.”

“The station’s private club could give its patrons a clear view of the origami point, and they chose the docks?”

“It’s about money,” I told Badger. “The rich don’t want to see beauty. They want to watch their money coming in.”

Crane’s image turned away from the window. “The fifteen is your fee. The extra five million is a bonus for you, because this is personal.”

“You were a friend of ” My double paused for a second. “John Alder?”

“No.”

“You’ve dealt with Winterleigh before?”

“No.”

The doppleganger pursed her lips, and I felt my own follow suit as I watched the conversation replay. “Five million rucets is a lot of personal.”

“Yes. It is. But the Corrigan’s Blood is a lot of ship.”

My other self waited.

Crane sighed, leaned forward, rested his arms on his knees.

Sincere, intent or else his butt was getting tired, too. "Like most of our best ships, the Blood has trans-fold navigational capability. The Blood has a new model of TFN unit, however, that permits on-the-fly course changes while in hyperspace, and the detection of origami points from within hyperspace."

The doppelganger's mouth dropped open. So did Badger's. "Mid-course changes?" I heard myself ask, sounding stupidly breathless. I was going to have to work on that.

"Almost instantaneous."

"And point recalculation."

"Absolutely. It will even predict new points. I've found several in my trial runs."

"My God," my image and Badger said in unison.

Badger stopped the holo and backed the conversation up. He replayed the last portion of it, then paused it and sat staring forward, as if he could see through the ship's walls to our own TFN.

If you've never run a ship through hyperspace, you cannot imagine what Crane's innovations mean. Hyperspace is convenient but damnably unfriendly. The math makes sense but the place itself doesn't. As far as I know, no one has ever understood enough about it to do more than figure out a way in and a way out. And those lines from origami point to origami point—the fold-points in our three-dimensional universe—were rigid. A drone watching a ship's speed and trajectory as it entered a point could calculate the ship's exact destination. Traffic control has always made use of that capability; interstellar surveillance drones called Spybees were stationed at the periphery of every point to keep records of ship ID, speed, trajectory, declared destination point, and calculated actual destination. The drones send that information to central intelligence-gathering stations, which analyze the

ships going through and look for correlations to crimes committed within the relevant time frames. Space travelers had less privacy than the planet-bound; but governments insisted there was a payoff. The Spybees were responsible for catching a number of serial killers, and were supposed to be a preventative to piracy.

With the new Monoceros ships, the Spybees would become worthless.

Badger turned to me and said, "I want one of those ships. Even if we have to steal it, I want one."

"That's evidently what Mado Alder thought, too. Which is why we have a job."

Badger looked at me and sighed, and slowly reached out and started the holo again.

"This was a prototype unit, then?" my image asked Crane's.

"No. It was one of our early production units."

I watched myself tip my head to one side; my puzzlement was obvious. "I can understand your desire to get your property back, but I'm afraid I don't understand why you're paying a bonus when you've obviously registered the technology and secured your rights against other manufacturers."

Crane's image looked into my image's eyes, and for a moment his face looked like it had never worn a smile. "I trusted John Alder. I've built much of my business on my ability to judge the characters of the people who come to me. I misjudged him badly and if word gets out, I'll find more like him waiting in my showrooms every day. This one mistake on my part could cost me everything I've worked for."

He stared out into space again. Unmoving, his gray holo image seemed to transform into a statue for one long moment.

Badger and I watched me say, "Then both speed and discretion are essential."

Crane looked back at me and nodded slowly. "You can't tell anyone who you're looking for or why. They cannot know you work for me. Not under any circumstances. I'm paying you well for your discretion. I demand that I get it."

"I understand. Do you know why Alder or the people who hired him to steal the Corrigan's Blood might have wanted the ship?"

Crane raised his eyebrows and smiled. "I can think of a hundred reasons, but I can't suggest one which might be more valid than any other." The other me looked disappointed. Crane shrugged and smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. Knowing a motive might save me a few days and then again, it might not. It won't change the outcome."

His image looked at mine—just a single penetrating glance, but even watching it second-hand that glance felt like being dissected alive. Sitting in the safety of my own ship, I could still recall it. With his stare fixed on me, I had felt his wealth and his power as a physical presence; a weight in the air I breathed. For that instant, I had not liked Peter Crane because he frightened me. But then he turned away, and when he looked back, he was just my newest client again.

The intensity of that glance reached Badger even at second hand—Badger, who could be dense as a dwarf star where subtle human interaction was concerned. "I would hate to have him as an enemy," he whispered.

"Me too."

Crane smiled gently. "So you'll take the job," he said at last. Not a question. A statement.

I watched myself nod and sit back in my chair. It was time to talk money; for this, I leaned back to demonstrate confidence

in my own power. Plus it was another excuse to move. I decided that I looked pretty good—pretty convincing. “I require twenty-five percent of my fee in advance. For operating expenses.”

Crane didn't even blink. “I know. I will have deposited three million seven-hundred fifty-thousand rucets 's in your Interworld account by the time you get back to your ship. Twenty-five percent of your actual fee. I'll add the five million in bonus money at the end, when you return the Corrigan's Blood and complete this job with the discretion I desire.” He smiled slightly. “Additional incentive, you know.”

Usually my clients feel the need to quibble about the up-front portion of the fee. I found the fact that Crane didn't a pleasant change.

Crane said, “This will help you get started.” He handed me a small, thin crystalline square: a high-density infochip. “This contains the background checks I did on Alder and Winterleigh, plus everything I found out about them after the Blood disappeared. You'll also find details of the transaction, and the people involved in that. And in the 'Ship' file, I've included specs and telltale codes to allow you to identify the Blood, as well as the ship's last known heading.” He laughed bitterly. “As if that were worth anything anymore.”

The other me took the chip and slid it into my pocket; at least, that was what Crane saw. The tiny movement that opened the pressure-sensitive pocket and slid the disk into my fleshtab was undetectable. I told Crane, “It doesn't matter. I'll bring back your ship.” We shook hands, and Peter Crane smiled again.

I reached out and stopped the holo.

Badger said, “Don't you want to see what he does when you leave?”

I wanted to see what the waiter did first, but Badger was right. I needed to finish watching Crane first. Always do only one thing at a time. This is another of my rules, and the only reason I had to make it a rule was because I broke it so often.

Badger pressed the resume button, and set the focus to stay on Crane as I walked away. We watched Crane sip his wine and watch me leave. His image got a little less distinct as I moved around the corner of the private dining room, out of sight. The braid-mopped waiter returned.

"Follow her," Crane said. "If she goes anyplace at all but back to her ship, notify me." He handed the waiter something small.

Badger and I both hit the freeze button at the same time, with the result that the image kept moving. He held his hands away from the control panel on his holo-chair and I backed up the image, froze it at the moment when the object was most clearly visible, and said, "Shipcom—enlarge and identify the holo target."

The rest of the holo disappeared, and the flat oval and a fragment of the hand that held it expanded until the oval was the size of a door. It hung in the air in front of us. The shipcom factored out the hand, which had begun to take on godlike proportions; then it began peeling away dopplered layers of the image, studying the areas of lesser density that remained. "Outer skin, five layers of moleibond."

The holo image had changed. Now it was a mesh of tiny threads; even at its enormously enlarged size, those threads were only slightly thicker than silk strands. The shipcom rotated the image, and areas of it lit up as the computer followed the threads and discerned their purpose. "The image is at maximum useable enlargement," the shipcom said at last. "The object is a credit chit for fifty rucets."

"Store the image," I said, and the shipcom's enlargement vanished. The frozen holo reappeared.

So he'd paid her to follow me. I wondered why. If it was just that he wasn't sure he could trust me, well, I could live with that. If he had another agenda, though

And whoever had beaten me had killed her. Again, why?

Badger sighed. "We ought to go a little more in-depth on Peter Crane. Fifty rucets to have the waiter follow you seems a little steep if she was a waiter. If she wasn't a waiter, then why was she waiting tables and why would he pay her?"

"His actions don't seem to make sense."

"No." Badger studied the frozen images of the waiter and Peter Crane. "They don't. Let's see what we can find out about both of them."

The shipcom said, "Your image is stored and cross-referenced."

And Badger glared up in the direction of the shipcom's voice. "Why don't you get a personality for that damned thing? It never jokes, it never says, "You look terrific," when I get dressed up, it never offers any opinions on anything. A real personality wouldn't be all that expensive, and we could afford it now." He gave me his best 'I'm adorable; humor me,' grin and added, "The place next to where I got Melatinted had some terrific shipcom personalities. Jenjer. Dorite. Hank, if you wanted to go male." His eyes dared me to go with a male personality.

I gave him a fixed stare and said, "The Hope's Reward already has as much personality onboard as I can stand. If I bought a personality for the ship, I'd have to get rid of you."

He laughed.

I resumed the holo, and the waiter walked away from the Crane

and toward the front door of Ferlingetta. The image vanished.

Badger stared at me, disbelief clear in his eyes. “You stopped recording?”

I stared back, defensive. “Well yes. I stopped recording as soon as I stepped out of the club. I only wanted a record of the interview.”

“Brilliant move,” he said.

Not particularly.

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