SEVEN OF INFINITIES
HIGH-RANKING VISITOR in the antechamber, waiting for you.

When her bots pinged her unexpectedly with that message, Vân opened the door of her room, and found the mindship The Wild Orchid in Sunless Woods in the narrow space that served as common access to the quarters she and her student Uyên occupied.

What was the mindship doing there?

She was a member of Vân’s poetry club, except that she was a mindship and a celebrated scholar who’d graduated from the imperial examinations—whereas Vân was the daughter of a shopkeeper, with no degree to her name, making ends meet as a private tutor rather than enjoying the largesse of being a state official. Sunless Woods and Vân spent time together in the context of the poetry club, but certainly they’d never been intimate enough for the ship to pay her a private call.
Vân stepped into the antechamber. “Elder aunt. Are you here for me?”

“Child.” The ship rose, and bowed. “Yes, I am.” She wasn’t physically there: she was parked in orbit somewhere in the Scattered Pearls Belt, projecting down an avatar when she needed to be in the habitats. Her avatar was as unconventional as her name (which was itself a reference to scholars whose merit wasn’t recognised, a borderline criticism of the examinations system). Instead of a miniature version of herself, it was a vaguely humanoid shape: at first glance, she appeared to have two arms and two legs and to be about Vân’s size, but whenever she moved Vân would catch a glimpse of something far, far larger—sleek and polished metal, the reflection of distant stars, and a feeling the room, the entire habitat were twisting and folding back on themselves, unable to contain the vastness of her.

“Is there a place we could talk privately?” Vân couldn’t place Sunless Woods’s tone.

“Yes, of course.” She led Sunless Woods back into her compartment: her own private space, a small room with a bed, a table and a series of overlays of paintings and ceramics whose physical version Vân could certainly never have afforded. “Do you want tea?”

“Please.” The ship inclined her head.

The bots poured Vân a cup of tea—and a ghostly cup shimmered into existence for Sunless Woods, in an overlay of Vân’s
room. The mindship didn’t need food to sustain her body, but to her the complex, layered flavour of the tea would suggest pleasant memories—the same for Vân, reminding her of New Year’s Eve and the smell of banana leaves, and the crinkle of red envelopes handed to children.

The ship waited until Vân was almost done with her cup of tea before speaking. “I came here because there have been… discussions.”

“Discussions?”

_Sunless Woods_’s tone was dark. “On the suitability of your presence at the poetry club.”

For a moment—a suspended, agonising, horrible moment—Vân thought they had found her out. That they knew about Laureate An Thành, that the scandal she’d been running away from had finally caught her.

_How could they know?_ Laureate An Thành said, in Vân’s mind. _They can’t possibly tell the difference._ Her voice was withering. Vân could feel An Thành in her thoughts—a personality on a mem-implant offering Vân the knowledge she needed to go from passably good scholar to an excellent one. Mem-implants were commonplace, but they were ancestors of those who held them, physical people preserved as study-aids—and An Thành, whom Vân had put together from fragments of other people’s personalities, was the height of impropriety, disrespectfully scavenged from the dead and not related to Vân in any way.
They—Vân struggled for words amidst the bottomless pit in her stomach, and saw Sunless Woods, head cocked, watching her. “Elder aunt—”

The ship shrugged. It was a curiously expansive gesture that seemed to drag the air away from Vân. Her voice was dark. “They think you commonplace. Vulgar.”

Vulgar. Vân stared at her: this was familiar territory. Her heart sank. “This isn’t about my ability as a scholar at all, is it?”

For a moment she thought the ship would smile and lie, but Sunless Woods merely shook her head, her face taking on the hard planes of some faceted gem. “This is about your birth.” She smiled, but it was darker and a great deal less amused than Vân would have thought. “They use words like unsuitable, brash, unaware of the codes by which they all live.”

Because she hadn’t grown up with these codes. Laureate An Thành could help, to an extent—could offer knowledge and literary allusions, but of course something would always seem off to the other scholars, the ones whose families had been officials for generations. Vân said, chilled, “If the poetry club throws me out, I’ll lose my job.”

Word would get around. Uyên, her student, the daughter of the house in which Vân lived, wouldn’t want a tutor who was shunned by the scholar community.

Vân would lose everything.

Sunless Woods said, “I know.” It was rather sharper than Vân had expected.
“I don’t understand why you’re here,” Vân said.

A ping, on the network: someone else had entered the antechamber. A woman Vân didn’t know: middle-aged, her skin shining with the particular smoothness of cheap rejuv treatments. She wore only a handful of bots, like jewellery rather than the usual utilitarian approach: three serpentine ones wrapped around both wrists and around her neck—the lacquered, ornamental kind painted with vivid orchids. Vân couldn’t place her socially, which was odd because she usually had an excellent sense of where people fitted in on the habitats. “Hang on,” she said, half-rising.

But the door to the other compartment—Uyên’s compartment—had already opened, and Vân’s student Uyên stepped out. “Oh hello, younger aunt. Do come in.”

And they were both gone into Uyên’s compartment. Vân breathed out. None of her business, then.

Good.

“Why am I here?” *Sunless Woods* said. “To warn you.”

Vân opened her mouth. That was not the answer she had expected. “You can’t possibly—?”

“Disapprove of what they’re doing?” *Sunless Woods*’s voice was sharp. “This is about merit, not about who your parents were.”

As if that had ever been the case. Vân said, trying to breathe through the panic—what would she do, if Uyên’s family dismissed her?—“I don’t know what to do.”
“Appeal,” Sunless Woods’s voice was sharp. “Good steeds don’t always get the proper grooms, or jade the right carver to make it come alive.” Metaphors for scholars whose talents were going unrecognised, An Thành pointed out in Vân’s thoughts. The last one is a bit unorthodox.

“I—” Vân opened her mouth, closed it. She couldn’t appeal. She couldn’t afford to appeal. A board would take a look at her scholarly abilities, and if they dug too deep they’d find that Vân couldn’t possibly have a real mem-implant—and the scandal that followed would be even larger and uglier. It would lose her her job anyway, and see her shunned from good society forever. “I can’t, elder aunt.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Sunless Woods’s gaze held Vân’s, unerringly: in the faint imprint of pupils on the ship’s face Vân saw darkness, an exhilarating and endless plunge into the stars. She shivered.

Either. Both. “If I force the poetry club to keep me on, you know they’ll just resent me for who I am.” She tried, very hard, to make it seem reasonable, to not show Sunless Woods an inkling of fear.

A snort. “You can live with resentment.” The ship cocked her head to watch her. “Or would you rather lose your job?”

“I don’t understand why you’re here,” Vân said, again, stubbornly.

“Because things should be fair. Because you’re talented, and because this would be a colossal, infuriating waste.”
“I’m not—” Vân started, but a voice cut her off.

“Teacher?” Startled, Vân looked up. Her student Uyên was standing in the doorway, and something was off in her pose.

“What’s wrong?”

“I—” Uyên stopped, spoke up again. Her voice was shaking. “I think I have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“My visitor. She’s dead,” Uyên said, and raised hands that were shaking—and would have collapsed, if Vân hadn’t leapt from her chair to catch her as she faltered.

UYÊN’S CURRENT OVERLAY of her compartment was darkness: a vast and cavernous view of the heavens as if one were in a spaceship or small capsule, and the floor were glass. Beneath Vân’s feet was the River of Stars: a spread of lights underfoot that kept changing, drawing patterns that evoked words—fragments of poems by Hàn Mặc Tử, Lánh Ngọc, Đồng Hải Diệm…

Beautiful, Laureate An Thành said. **Uyên is such a very promising student. No wonder her mother has such high hopes for her. The daughter of the Captain who Swam in the River of Stars…**

Vân shook her head to dismiss the comments. Now wasn’t the time to let the Laureate take over. **Literature later. There’s a body, Laureate.**
An Thành subsided, with a regretful sigh, and sank to a bare whisper in Vân’s mind again.

The woman Vân had seen earlier lay on one of those ever-shifting spreads of stars, her face by turns in light and shadow as the composition beneath her changed. Vân couldn’t see any wounds.

“May I?” Sunless Woods had followed her in.

Vân wasn’t sure if she was addressing Vân or Uyên; but Uyên hadn’t moved; was waiting for her to weigh in as the most senior person in the room. She nodded.

Sunless Woods moved, graceful, ethereal. Vân blinked, and all of a sudden Sunless Woods was no longer in the doorway, but kneeling by the corpse’s side, head cocked to stare at it, fingers resting lightly on the woman’s wrists, where her bots still lay coiled. Something spun in the air between them: a thread of light going from one to another, as Sunless Woods tipped her head back, lips parted—she seemed to be inhaling it all.

“What happened?” Vân asked.

“I don’t know,” Uyên said, and Vân measured the depth of her student’s panic. Uyên would rather deflect conversation than admit ignorance. “She said she had important business. I left her in there thirty seconds to rustle up some cooking bots for tea and refreshments, and when I came back she was on the floor. She had no pulse!”

Vân raised a hand, trying to stem Uyên’s panic. She was wound up too tight, still worrying about the poetry club and
all that it might entail for her. She was meant to project reassurance, but she felt small and scared and vulnerable. She forced herself to breathe. “All right. Back up. What happened before that? Who was she?”

Uyên made a face. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You—” Vân breathed in, again, slowing down. She wanted to say Uyên had been so effortlessly certain when she’d welcomed the woman in, but then she realised that Uyên would never look uncertain. She was so deeply worried of being judged and found wanting that her mask had become second nature to her. “So you didn’t know her?”

“No,” Uyên said. “She said she had some urgent business, and that it had to do with the examinations.”

The ones Uyên was meant to be sitting for in a couple of months—the ones Vân had been hired to help her pass, to make Uyên worthy of the first mother who had died for the Empire and given Uyên and her second mother the grace of an imperial title. “With the examinations?” Vân frowned. “Surely she’d know better than selling questions or cheating methods. The law is quite drastic on the matter.”

The only things allowed in the candidates’ cells during the examinations would be mem-implants—like the one Vân had, like the two Uyên had, the memory traces of her first mother and grandmother, offering advice and suggestions, the ancestors’ blessings made manifest.
Sunless Woods shifted. “You’re aware,” she said to Uyên, “that if she’d been found guilty of examination fraud you’d have been judged guilty as well.” She brought her fingers from the corpse’s wrist to her mouth, held them there for a while, as if pondering a particularly difficult problem.

An expansive shrug from Uyên. “I know the code. If I haven’t accepted anything then there’s no offence.”

Sunless Woods took the fingers out of her mouth. “You’d need to prove it. Jurisprudence isn’t on your side. It’s a really odd corpse.” She shifted—her eyes rolled up for a moment, and in that fraction of a heartbeat Vân saw the deepness of space in them, like a gateway to a place that would swallow her whole. “There’s no pulse, but there’s also no wounds whatsoever. Burn marks on her hands, but these aren’t lethal, and they’re also a few days old, at the least.”

“Poison?” Uyên asked.

Focus. Focus. She needed to think less on herself and more about her student, or she was going to fail Uyên. “Look, none of it is the point. The point is that we need to call the militia and let them handle this, to get you off the hook. Now.”

Uyên looked puzzled.

“Examination fraud is bad enough. Murder is worse,” Vân said.

If she closed her eyes she’d see the interrogation rooms again; the officious looking clerk smiling at her and gently, carefully insinuating that she knew more than she let on about
the affairs of her friends—that surely one had to be spectacularly stupid, or unaware, or a poor elder sister, to fail to see what was right in front of her eyes—and Vân, remaining silent and not knowing what she could do...

It was past. She had survived, but Hường Lâm and Dinh had not. She remembered the day both sisters had been transferred to the Twenty-Third Planet for their execution—standing in the crowd of the spaceport, trying to catch a glimpse of them, and Hường Lâm’s gaze finding her as the militia pushed her towards the transport mindship—the way her friend’s face had set, lips tightening, the little shake of her head that warned Vân no to do anything stupid.

_We protected you, big sis. Don’t go and waste it all._

It was in the past. Five years ago, and all that remained of it was dark and confused nightmares in which she never ran fast enough to escape.

A touch, on Vân’s shoulders—a warmth that was too sudden and too spread to be that of a human hand, but rather something processed through an overlay. She looked up. _Sunless Woods_ had effortlessly crossed the room and was standing by her side—and behind her, along her trajectory, was a faint imprint on Uyên’s overlay, like the radiance of ten thousand stars fading against the daylight sky. “Can I have a word with you, child? In private.”

Vân clamped her lips on the obvious “why?” that filled her thoughts. “Of course.”
She walked with *Sunless Woods* to a quieter corner of the room. A hush descended: the mindship, accessing the habitat’s command and asking for privacy. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

A smile that transformed *Sunless Woods*’s entire face, making her seem less distant and less severe. “Technically, no. But I have ways.”

“All right,” Vân said. “What do you want?”

*Sunless Woods*’s face was gentle. “Are you all right? You looked upset.”

Vân’s lips moved before her brain caught up with them. “Why do you care?”

A fraught silence. *Sunless Woods* moved to put a hand on Vân’s shoulder again. When she raised her arm oily darkness glinted in the space between arm and torso, as if she were trailing a cape of the cloth of Heaven—an unsettling and yet oddly welcome sight, a reminder that all of Vân’s concerns were, in the end, short-lived. Warmth spread, again, diffuse and unoppressive. She’d never craved anything so much.

“I’m sorry.” *Sunless Woods* withdrew her hand—Vân found herself following it with her eyes, and had to bodily stop herself from trying to grab it and pull it back towards her. Pointless: it would have taken a shift of overlays and specific instructions before she could actually interact with *Sunless Woods*. “I shouldn’t have touched you without your permission,” *Sunless Woods* said.
“No, it’s all right,” Vân said. And, forcing herself to find words in the desert of her thoughts—for a brief moment nothing came, and then Laureate An Thành was there, offering poems and references on friendship and loss and desire.

_As my ship tears itself from orbit_
_My heart twists and turns with the stars_
_Pained, falling and falling,_

_As I remember butterflies flitting from orchid to orchid…_

_Not helpful_, Vân snapped. She certainly wasn’t going to sleep with _Sunless Woods_. The thought she ever would was ridiculous. They moved in such different circles it would be short, awkward, and just create more resentment than pleasure.

“It’s all right. I’m sorry I snapped at you.” And then, before she could stop herself, “I liked it.”

“Ah.” Again, a pregnant silence that stretched until it felt it would snap.

Vân said, “I had a bad experience with the militia when I was much younger.” An exhaled breath. She couldn’t get Hương Lâm’s pale face out of her head. “It’s all right.” She raised a hand to forestall _Sunless Woods’s_ objections. “I was just a witness to a brawl. But that’s why I know how bad they can get, even with innocents.” Not a lie, but not the whole truth, either.

“Hmmm.” _Sunless Woods_ cocked her head, watching her for a while. Weighing her—except that this time it wasn’t about whether she thought Vân worthy, but something else entirely. Taking in the whole of her and…
Her mind blanked. She was afraid to ask a question that she knew *Sunless Woods* would answer with the same cool, devastating honesty.

At length, *Sunless Woods* said, with unexpected sharpness in her voice, “They’re unfeeling louts drunk on their own power, and you should never have had to deal with any of that. Will you give me permission?”

“For what?”

Vân thought it would be about touching again—about what would come afterwards, a host of confused feelings within her suddenly clamouring for nebulous release—but *Sunless Woods* merely said, “I would like to, ah. Involve myself in this.”

Vân tried—and failed—to slow down the heartbeat that seemed to be resonating all the way into her fingers. “You? Elder aunt…”

“I can stand between you and the militia. You’d find dealing with them difficult.”

“Not as much as Uyên would. I have no intention of shirking my duties.” She’d clamped down on the other panic, the fear she’d lose the poetry club and her livelihood: this was more urgent and the consequences would be far more drastic.

Fond, amused laughter from the ship, coming back to her in trailing echoes that bore no resemblance to the geometry of the room. “Of course you don’t. Nevertheless… The other thing is that I’d want to look into this myself.”

“Surely the militia—”
“Oh, never fear, we’ll call them. But you know as well as I do that this is a single-tribunal posting, outside of the numbered planets. The militia is overworked; the magistrate young, inexperienced and flooded with requests.”

“I don’t understand,” Vân said. “You’re a scholar.”

A silence, stretching for just slightly longer than it should. When *Sunless Woods* spoke again, she said, “And as a scholar, I’m curious about anything that would affect the examinations,” but Vân had the distinct feeling the answer would have been quite different if the mindship hadn’t checked herself. “And I’m not without resources of my own.”

Vân had never been good at diplomacy: her old childhood dream of being a scholar in the imperial palace had been as unrealistic as it had been high-flown. “Fine. If you tell me why. Really why.”

That same laughter, startling her with how utterly young and carefree it sounded. The mindship was ancient. She had to be: mindships all were, and in the club’s meetings she’d made it clear she’d already been an adult at the time of the uprising, seven years ago. “I’m curious,” *Sunless Woods* said, finally. Noise came rushing back in, and she walked back to the corpse, gesturing for Vân to follow her. She lifted one arm, so that the elaborate and overlarge silk sleeves fell down, baring its length. “Here.”

At first, all Vân saw was skin, brown and paler than her own, and with the faintest hint of the particular tan that
came from too much time spent in space. But then something shifted: layers of disguises peeling away like a cook expertly slicing at meat, until an archaic symbol shone, visible across all the overlays—the way it should always have been, a mark that couldn’t be disguised or removed for anyone with the right query tools.

“Furtive theft,” Vân said, aloud. And, on the other arm, the same symbol. Not only a thief with an offence grave enough to be marked, but a recidivist. “Child?”

“I told you, I don’t know her!” Uyên said.

Vân didn’t think she was lying.

Sunless Woods didn’t seem to, either: her whole attention was on the corpse. “It’s a good disguise,” she said. “A very expensive one: they’re not temporary mods. She’s altered her whole being, including genetic modifications. Finding out who she originally was is going to be extremely difficult if not outright impossible. Which means that whatever else she was, she wasn’t poor, or without means. And whatever she wanted from Uyên, it had to be worth all this.”

Vân said, stubbornly, “I still don’t see why—”

“I’m involved?” Sunless Woods stood up in a fluid movement, her head turning thoughtfully taking in the entire room. The effect was uncanny. “Call it…a challenge.”
THE WILD ORCHID in Sunless Woods was old, and experienced, and she really, really shouldn’t have involved herself. For starters, Sunless Woods wasn’t her real name, and contrary to what she’d told Vân, she wasn’t really a scholar, either; or native to the Scattered Pearls Belt, or a decorated hero of the uprising.

Just like the dead woman, Sunless Woods was a thief; and she supposed that the only thing that separated her from the corpse was that she’d never been caught. Throughout the years, she’d carried a succession of identities and names, slipping in and out of them as easily as a human would put on new clothes. She’d lied and stolen and laughed her way through the Đại Việt empire; and come here in the Belt…well, for a rest, she supposed. For a chance to enjoy life rather than test herself, again and again, against the rocks of the world. The last thing she should have done was involve herself with the affairs of the militia, or give them any reason to question her identity.

And yet…and yet, she liked Vân.

Most of the scholars she’d met were puffed up with their own importance, or utterly certain of the way the world was made—with them at the apex as their natural, Heaven-given right. Vân was the kind of person who walked through the world expecting it to kick her: even her reaction to the poetry club trying to dismiss her had been typical—fear, not the outrage Sunless Woods had felt on her behalf. She was currently standing next to Sunless Woods and trying very hard not to show how nervous she was.
“I don’t understand,” Vân said, staring at the compartment in front of them. The door was narrow but high, metal engraved with an interlocking pattern of lotus flowers and boats. The sign was engraved as well, and with no further decorations in overlay. “Bare-house.”

Sunless Woods said, “I have a friend who could help us.”

“In here?” Vân’s face puckered, close to panic. “It’s a—”

Sunless Woods laughed. She couldn’t help herself. “My friend has peculiar habits. She doesn’t bite, I swear. But she’s seen enough dead bodies, and I want to run our little problem by her.” It was probably better to leave off said friend’s more unsavoury activities, or the exact context in which she’d viewed bodies.

Vân looked as though she’d rather be running the other way. Then her face set. “Uyên risks trouble with the militia if we don’t solve this fast.”

“Not only with the militia,” Sunless Woods said. She kept her voice light, inconsequential; because she was worried and didn’t want to show it. “Possibly with the murderer. And also… that woman may not have worked alone, and her accomplices will want revenge for her death.”

Vân stared at her, for a while. Her usual good-natured face narrowed, became as sharp and as incandescent as a just-forged blade, and Sunless Woods suddenly had the uncomfortable feeling that Vân saw through her—not only her motivations for helping Vân, but also everything that she kept a secret.
Something lurched within her—not within her avatar, but within the large metal body in orbit, a gigantic heartbeat in corridors and state rooms suddenly blurring and skipping.

“Serious trouble, then,” Vân said. “And you’re not the kind of person to exaggerate.”

She was. She’d been, depending on her persona. She opened her mouth to protest, and then saw Vân’s determined expression. “No,” she said, the lie tasting sharp and acrid on her mouth. “I guess not.”

Vân squared her shoulders. “Uyên is my student. I hate those places—they’re the height of indecency—but that’s of no consequence.”

A silence. They stared at each other. Sunless Woods ached to hug Vân, and knew she couldn’t afford to. “It does you credit. Come on, child. It’s that way.”

The door opened on a narrow corridor, and then a quick succession of five other doors. The second one had the same pattern of lotus flowers and boats as the first one, except that the rightmost part of it was bare, and then on every subsequent door the pattern would be a little smaller, and the emptiness a little larger—until the last door, which had no engravings whatsoever on it: just a sheet of matte metal which reflected only the faintest of silhouettes, like a mirror that had lost its silvering. The darkness was absolute.

Behind the last door was a counter, where a bored-looking employee handed them tokens in the same kind of metal as the
last door. He did a double-take when he saw *Sunless Woods*, and put back the token he had been about to give her, to retrieve another one from the pile—not a physical one but a thing that existed only in overlay. “Here. You know the rules.”

Vân was already disrobing, with visible discomfort. Her bots piled up, inert, on the pile of clothes: the token she was wearing would disconnect her from the habitat’s network and prevent the display of any overlays.

*Sunless Woods*’s token tingled in the palm of her hand. The sensation of coldness spread from there to the rest of her body, a tightness that seemed to be getting worse and worse until she felt curiously weightless and empty: the sensation of her own metal body in orbit, which was always running in the background, had been temporarily...not removed, because it would have been impossible for her avatar to exist, but attenuated so much that it might as well be.

Truth was, she hated the bare-house as much as Vân, but for different reasons. She wasn’t even sure she understood why *The Bearer of Healing Wine* chose to spend their habitat-bound days there.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Most people who came to the bare-house came there for calm: to remember the bodies they were rooted in without layers of clothes and overlays, or the distraction of the network. An unpleasant enough experience for a human; a borderline torture for a mindship, whose ability to interact with people not onboard.
their bodies happened through bots and avatars. Silence was not required, but it was often respected. *Sunless Woods* and Vân wove their way through room after room—people reclining in seats, or sitting at tables and sipping tea laced with hallucinogens, making quiet conversation or drunken poetry—a handful of naked scholars feverishly committing their latest creations to memory, or to the mercy of fragile and irreplaceable paper.

Vân was turning betel-nut-red after the third such room. “These are—”

“The foremost poets of the Belt?” *Sunless Woods* laughed. She’d had her share of lovers, shipminds and humans both; and she did like Vân but wasn’t attracted to her. Or at least shouldn’t have been; but for a brief moment as Vân turned towards her, she saw the taut way Vân held herself—and longed to run a cascade of bots down her spine until that tautness became something else—a tight breathless desire that would make Vân feel, if only for a single moment, that she was free. “Some of them. It does give you a different perspective, doesn’t it?”

Vân’s face was answer enough. *Sunless Woods* let her hand brush Vân’s shoulder, though Vân wouldn’t be able to feel anything. “Come on. She’s over there.”

They found *The Bearer of Healing Wine* at the back of the bare-house, sitting in a room without windows or decoration. Her avatar was the classic one of a ship: a smaller version of the sleek, spiked shape that would be in orbit around the belt. She was staring, intently, at the shape of a splayed-out bot on the
table: it had been neatly taken apart with every component set a little apart from its neighbours.

“Attempting to understand the secrets of the universe again?” Sunless Woods asked.

Wine shifted, moving so that her avatar faced Sunless Woods; though in reality it was a shifting of attention more than that of meaningless physical manifestation. “Ah, elder aunt. Didn’t expect to see you quite so soon. The house was kind enough to lend me this.”

Without bots, she wouldn’t have been able to take it apart; and with only a fragmentary network she couldn’t even enjoy tea or food or any of the other overlay delicacies. But it pleased her, for some reason. “I still don’t understand why you like it so much,” Sunless Woods said. Wine was—had been her lookout: the one who made the maps of the places they’d steal from, and stood watch. She could move through corridors lightning-fast, if needed. And, as a backup, like Sunless Woods, she could serve as a getaway ship. They’d seldom had to use that option, because things hadn’t gone that badly wrong.

A silence, like a human shrug. “It’s…relaxing. Like deep spaces, but without being accountable to any passengers or official or traffic harmony. Oh.” She turned. “Forgive me, I hadn’t seen you brought a friend.”

Vân had been carefully gauging the interplay between both ships: because when she bowed, it was with the politeness applicable to a slightly older peer. “Elder aunt.”
Laughter. “Big’sis will do. Where do you keep finding them?”

“We’re in the same poetry club,” Vân said, blushing again. It was adorable. “She said you could help.”

“Help?” Wine sounded puzzled, and a little sarcastic.

Sunless Woods said, “We have a mysterious corpse.”

The other ship’s laughter made the room shake. “Always these, isn’t it?”

Sunless Woods gave her a warning, edged smile.

“Ah,” Wine said, understanding without words the issue—that Vân didn’t know who Sunless Woods was. “One of these. What about the corpse?”

Sunless Woods rubbed at the token in the palm of her hand, the one that confined her to a single, small, localised body. “It would be much faster if I could share sensory input with you.”

“Well, tough luck,” Wine said. “Try words. Last I recalled, you were pretty glib.”

Sunless Woods was no scholar, but she loved words—because they were the pathways to humans and shipminds alike—because she had her avatar and her bots, but neither of them had as much impact as the hooks words could dig in people’s brains—to flatter, to seduce, to incense. But her current persona wasn’t glib or silver-tongued, and of course Wine knew who she really was, but Vân didn’t.

Sunless Woods summarised, as best as she could, the state of the body as she’d found it. “Branded thief,” she concluded
with. “And—I thought she’d been poisoned, but I don’t think the symptoms match, so I want your opinion.”

“Hmmmm.”

“I scanned the body.” *Sunless Woods* ignored Vân’s look of shock. “Every organ was collapsing at the same time. She must have been in excruciating pain, if only for a short while. I’d have said tortured, but—”

“Yes, that’s usually matched by physical wounds. *Khi*-flow in the body?”

“Bad. Not completely blocked out, but starved in all the meridians.”

“Mmm. The eyes, what about them? What colour were the whites?”

If *Sunless Woods* had had access to her records, that would have been a much easier question.

It was Vân who spoke up, looking clearly ill at ease. “Something was off with her eyes. I thought she might have been smoking Hell Bridge or Lantern Poppy, but…”

“Tinged with grey, then.” *Wine* snorted, very gently. “That’s very unusual, but I’ve definitely seen it before. It wouldn’t be surprising, if she was a branded thief. Death by exile implants.”

“I was afraid of that,” *Sunless Woods* said. “Do you know—”

“Who she was? No,” *Wine* said. “Your thief was condemned to exile, and the perimeter of this exile didn’t include the Scattered Pearls Belt. But she came back anyway, and
the implants the tribunal injected her with ate her alive—as a warning to get out, and then as a punishment when she didn’t.”

A silence. Vân had looked shocked, now she was horrified. “She didn’t look—”

“Like she was in pain?” Wine laughed. “Some people are very good at hiding it.”

“Mmmm.” Sunless Woods liked this less and less. Uyên had inherited a compassion title by virtue of her dead mother, but her family, the Lotus Vũ, were small and rather insignificant. Yes, Uyên herself was promising and brilliant, but her surviving mother had barely any money to pay Vân’s salary. If Sunless Woods had still been at her old occupation—if she hadn’t retired or taken a break or whatever she was currently doing—she would only have visited the habitat of the Lotus Vũ if she had a very good reason. A love affair, or a heist that needed to be cased beforehand.

Uyên hadn’t known the woman, and anyway wouldn’t have been attracted to that type. So not a love affair. A heist, then—except that this was the kind of heist that had led an exile in terrible pain to return to a place that would kill her. Sunless Woods said, aloud, “She must have wanted something very, very badly.”

“Hmmm.” Wine was pensive. She said, at last, “That kind of bad never ends well.”

“You mean she’s dead,” Vân said. “Surely—”
“Surely she wasn’t working alone,” Sunless Woods said, more sharply than she’d intended to. Her own old crew had scattered—except for Wine, and a few others who still owed her favours or loyalty or both—but a theft, even in this kind of place, would have taken, oh, a bare minimum of three or four people. “And something like that, wanted badly enough? I don’t think death, or the militia, will stop the rest of them.”

“I agree,” Wine said.

“But—” Vân started, checked herself. “Why Uyên?”

“I don’t know,” Sunless Woods said, with some irritation. She’d hoped to impress and comfort Vân, and obviously it had just opened more questions. She’d sent the remnants of her crew digging what they could on Uyên, too; but so far they’d come up empty-handed. Uyên liked drinking and going out with other candidates at night, and didn’t always show up at her lessons with enough sleep, though she always made an effort to be punctual. But that hardly set her apart from literally any other teenager in the Belt.

Vân’s face set again. “Well, that won’t do. My thanks, big-sis,” she said to Wine. And she turned on her heel and was halfway gone from the room before Sunless Wood found words.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“To give Uyên a stern talking-to until she discloses whatever she’s been hiding from me,” Vân said. “What else?”

There was silence, for a while, after Vân left. Wine broke it.

“Your latest interest?” she asked.
“I’m retired,” Sunless Woods said, more irritated than she should have been.
“From thieving, or loving, or both?”
“I’m not answering that.”
A snort from Wine. “Of course you wouldn’t. And admit it—you’re bored.”

Sunless Woods said nothing for a while. She knelt by the table, and stared at the splayed-out bot. Metal legs, and optical bands, and here, the processing unit that would relay simple orders through the network... “What about you? Are you retired as well? Back to commercial transport, for the good of the Empire...”

“You know what I think of the empire,” Wine snapped. And, in a softer tone, “But you also know yourself. Obscurity never really suited you. I’m surprised you’ve held out as long. A year?”

“A year is nothing in shipminds’ lifespans,” Sunless Woods said. But...but, nevertheless, she was no longer making headlines. No more holos or vids of her thefts or the daring escapes—no news channels running her scathing memorials against the order of things. Instead, she was a member of a poetry club—a good, law-abiding member of society, upholding the order of things.

Wine wasn’t speaking. Sunless Woods would have asked her why she enjoyed it so much here, but she knew the answer already: that in the bare-house, Wine wasn’t beholden to
anyone or anything—no duties or bonds or endless demands on her from a society she’d gladly set afire. “You’re right,” Sunless Woods said. “It’s so dreadfully boring, being an honest ship.”

“Investigating a murder is practically militia work,” Wine said.

“You’ve seen Vân. You know the militia will eat her alive.”

“Oh, I have,” Wine said. “I like her. She’s got that same fire burning that we all did once, doesn’t she? But not the same taste for the limelight. I wonder if she has your taste for challenges.”

Challenges. The thrill of evading guards without ever spilling blood—those tense moments, struggling to hack into a security system, where everything hung in the balance and Sunless Woods’s entire life could be upended—and afterwards, seeing her exploits splashed on every news channel—knowing that she was out there, that her name was out there, that people would know her and who she was.

But people were fickle, weren’t they? And she was very much yesterday’s news.

She hadn’t expected it to viscerally matter quite as much.

Wine said, finally, “You know we’d come, if you called. The old crew didn’t scatter that far. A good ambitious project…”

“We’ve got all we need,” Sunless Woods said. “And it was getting too dangerous.”

“But—as you said yourself—it was never about money.”
“Hmmm.” *Sunless Woods* was tempted, in spite of herself—if only to get back at the militia in the Belt, which had so obviously made Vân’s life a misery—something large and loud that would show them who truly held the best game tiles. “I’ll sort this one out first. That should make enough headlines, shouldn’t it?”

“Of course,” *Wine* said, in that tone of voice which suggested that she knew exactly how it would turn out.

Vân marched into Uyên’s quarters burning with righteous anger—all of which, unfortunately, didn’t last past seeing Uyên herself.

The overlay had been switched off, revealing the small cramped room for what it really was—without the mods to increase the sense of walked distance, it was nothing more than a compartment onboard the station, not particularly large or particularly luxurious: a mark of how the grace of Uyên’s dead captain mother had only carried them so far. Drawings of various classical figures adorned its walls: brush, ink, paper and ink stone, and images of scholars aboard spaceships, lifting wine cups to the stars.

Uyên herself was sitting at the table where she usually worked on the classics—she had a small overlay open in front of her, a diagram of linked poems and memorials quotes
that Vân could recognise but not make sense of. Laureate An Thành came to the fore of Vân’s thoughts. *They’re just disjointed quotes, no meaning or coherence to them.* Uyên was adding names as Vân came in: not any references that An Thành recognised.

Uyên looked up, and smiled despondently. “Just trying to remember everyone who might have a grudge against us. It’s not a really large list.”

Something fluttered and broke in Vân’s chest. “Child…”

Uyên shrugged—looked at Vân for a moment, and then her usual arrogant mask was back on. “The militia made a mess of things, looking for evidence.” She gestured: at first Vân couldn’t see anything, but then Laureate An Thành, who had a better eye for detail, pointed out the dents in the metal walls, and the lopsided way some of the house bots walked. “Never mind. I’ll make another overlay. A better one. I always thought the poetry was insufficient.”

A pause. Clearly a query directed at Vân, who, caught off-guard, floundered, desperately looking for an answer—An Thành puzzled, thinking that the poetry had been in good taste, but obviously Vân had never conceived An Thành to finely analyse feelings of hurt and low self-worth. An Thành was knowledgeable and authoritative, bringing Vân the knowledge she lacked to function in literary circles, the deep-seated, intuitive mastery of the classics that required private tutors and expensive schools, all the chances Vân and her friends at the
poorly-funded state school had never had: an act of fundamental redress. *Not the time, Laureate*, Vân said. And, to Uyên, “Everything can be fixed.”

The militia. The woman’s possible accomplices, looking for revenge. Vân wasn’t even sure where she’d start to fix it all, but her duty was to protect Uyên.

“Can the dead walk the station again?” Uyên’s voice was bitter.

*There is no birth or death, no ebbing or arising.* Vân ignored An Thành, and slid next to Uyên on the bench. “Why don’t you show me your list?”

It was short, and unfruitful. Uyên’s dead mother hadn’t had time to make enemies: her rank of captain had been bestowed posthumously, and about the only people who might have held a grudge were the Rợ, the barbarians she had so thoroughly defeated by leaping into the vacuum without the protection of a shadow-suit. Uyên’s other mother had a life that *Sunless Woods* would have described as boring: she ran a publishing house which produced scholars’ poetry books—the old-fashioned paper kind, as well as full-on sensory immersion ones with custom overlays. As to Uyên herself…

Vân ran down the list of Uyên’s possible enemies, trying to contain growing disbelief. “A friend you argued with about the colour of the flowers in Đông Hải Diễm’s ‘Conduct of Scholars’?”

“We were drunk,” Uyên said, with some of her old haughtiness back.
“I see.” Vân kept her composure, which was hard to do—both watching Uyên’s face, and because Laureate An Thành was keeping up a helpful commentary of which colour the flowers really had been—which managed to combine masterful scholarship and utter uselessness. “Well, it’s unlikely any of your arguments with your friends would lead to this.” She paused, glanced at the list. A debt owed to another student—but no, it had been a string of coppers, barely enough money to buy a plate of dumplings at the local teahouse. Definitely not the sort of thing that would convince an exiled thief to go die here. “All right, so it’s not you.” Her gaze wandered around the small, bare room. “But maybe it’s this place.”

“This place? Really?” Uyên looked sceptical.

Vân couldn’t say she was feeling very confident, either. She called up the network, and sent queries about the previous owners of the house. “When did you move in?”

Uyên bit her lip. “The year First Mother received her grace. Ten years ago.” Her voice shook: it was barely perceptible.

“I’m sorry,” Vân said, in the silence.

Uyên’s face was set. “Don’t be. I loved her very much, but it was her choice, in the end. She laid down her life to win a battle, and we, in return, were bestowed the imperial grace.” She sounded like she was repeating something she’d been told, over and over.

Vân wanted to hug her, except that Uyên was a teenager and her student—if she would even remain that once she found
out about the poetry club, but that was an unfair worry to lay at Uyên’s feet. Instead Vân said, “Grief is like the bamboo in winter: it never truly dies.” It was trite and facile, not the subtle quotes she could have had, if she’d waited for An Thành to weigh in with her own knowledge. But it would have been unfair to Uyên: it was the sentiment that mattered, and this had to come from Vân herself. “You loved her very much, and it does you credit.”

Uyên threw a glance at the altar in a corner of the room, with its five tangerines and smouldering stick of incense. The holo on it was her mother, frozen in that everlasting land of youth cut off by death, with the captain’s badge she’d never worn in real life. “Filial piety. There’s nothing particularly noteworthy about this.”

“You know as much as I do that it can become a hollow, facile thing with no love or respect,” Vân said. “A performance more than a feeling.” She put all the authority she’d gained as a teacher into her words. “A mask over rotten insides.”

Uyên said nothing for a while. She laughed, a short and joyless thing. “The only thing I’ll ever hide with a mask is what society doesn’t want to see.”

Namely, how ruthless and dangerous she could be. One of her mothers had looked at approaching enemy vessels, coldly weighed odds and thrown herself into the vacuum as the best way to win her battle; the other had, without blinking,
sacrificed everything so her daughter would have the best education. And Uyên herself had every intention of making both of these matter. “It’s a dangerous game,” Vân said.

A snort, from Uyên. “You say this when you’re the one playing it best.”

“I’m not,” Vân said. Bitter laughter welled up in her: if she was playing it so well, why would the poetry club be throwing her out? “I can’t really say I’ve been a success at it.” The words welled out of her before she could stop them.

Uyên cocked her head at her. A silence: her eyes blinked, fast, as she accessed the network.

“I’m sorry,” Vân said, horrified at her own impudence. “Please don’t take what I said into account.”

“Ah,” Uyên said. Vân couldn’t read the expression on her face. “The poetry club.”

Vân’s blood froze in her chest. “Child. How—”

Uyên laughed. “Second Mother has contacts at the tribunal and among the scholars.” Her face changed again, hardened. Vân suddenly saw her first mother in her, ruthless and angry. She opened her mouth, but Uyên got there first.

“The poetry club are snobbish blinkered idiots.”

Vân stared at her, aghast and not sure what she had heard. “Your mother—”

An eyeroll that was pure Uyên. “Teacher. Do you really think she’s going to care about what a poetry club thinks of you?” A shrug. “That’s assuming she finds out.”
She couldn’t possibly be suggesting… Vân’s teacher instincts took over. “You owe respect to your elders.”

Uyên bit her lip. Finally she said, “Respect doesn’t mean slavish obedience. I like you, Teacher. I don’t see why the poetry club would make any difference.” A pause, and just as Vân felt she couldn’t be sinking any lower under the floor from sheer embarrassment, “Second Mother would want me to be taught by the best scholar in the Belt—and with your honoured ancestor in your brain, you could easily sit for the exam and get personally referred to the empress. You know you could.”

Vân felt as though she’d fled from a dog only to run into a pack of tigers. She wanted to say that An Thành was not her own ancestor, that she’d made her from discarded bits of other people’s ancestors, from the failed preservations she’d overseen as a student. The only thing that came out was a different kind of truth. “I wouldn’t deserve it.”

“Why?” Uyên’s voice was sharp.

“Because she’s too good,” Vân said. “Because she’d be the one taking the exam, not me.” Because she didn’t have any *right* to Laureate An Thành—An Thành wasn’t in her lineage, didn’t extend any of her blessings from beyond the grave to her.

“So you think mem-implants are an unfair advantage?” Uyên asked. She had two, Vân knew: a Second and a Fourth Ancestor preserved from either side of her family.
Words crowded in Vân’s thoughts. Yes, she wanted to say, as she’d said to Hương Lâm and Dinh when they’d been students in the poor, ramshackle state school, watching the wealthier candidates to the examinations stagger past them, their answers smooth and easy and never requiring more than a moment’s thought—and she’d felt a burning envy, and a desperate need to have what they had. But, if she told Uyên the truth—if she admitted that her mem-implant wasn’t her ancestor, that she had no qualifications, she’d lose Uyên’s regard, if not her livelihood. What she’d done wasn’t illegal, but it was unorthodox and scandalous—and Uyên’s family, desperate for acceptance among the scholars, wouldn’t tolerate it. “I think Laureate An Thành is a great comfort to me,” she said. With An Thành, she finally had the surety and confidence she had craved—and she wasn’t sure why, once spoken aloud, it felt curiously hollow. “But I don’t want to take the examinations. I don’t want to be at court. I’m not cut out for that kind of sky.”

“And you think I am?”

Vân snorted. “You? Of course you are.” Sharp and ruthless and ambitious, and utterly possessed of a sense of right and wrong. “Don’t lie to me. That’s what you’ve been breathing in since you were a child.”

Uyên watched her, for a while. Then she said, carefully, as if lancing a wound gone bad, “First Mother should never have died.”

“Ah.” Vân exhaled.
“It was a necessary sacrifice, and it brought us the imperial grace. But we should never have had the Rợ so deep within our own territory.” Her voice shook. No wonder.

“Scholars are allowed to criticise imperial policy. It’s not sedition,” Vân said, quietly.

“I don’t want to criticise it,” Uyên said. “I want to make it.” Her face, flushed, was transfigured; she stood with her fists balled, looking Vân in the eye with no deference or respect. She was fierce and utterly compelling, the kind of leader people would follow into supernovas or fragmenting orbitals. Vân had never felt so proud of her.

“You will make it,” Vân said. “I promise.” It was foolish, something she couldn’t even be sure to keep.

“Teacher.” Uyên’s face was taut. “Don’t worry about the poetry club. Please. I’ll sort it out if needed.” She bowed down, more deeply than respect warranted, and something shifted and broke in Vân’s chest.

Vân had been like that, once, burning with the desire to change things—not only her, but Hướng Lâm and Dinh as well—drinking and talking way too much, trying to find their own way of defying the society that had failed them. Vân, working at the mem-implant maker and taking home the scraps of people’s failed preservations to build Laureate An Thành under Hướng Lâm’s watchful eyes; and Dinh and Hướng Lâm, always quick to laugh, always quick to rage—except they’d turned to crime to get back what they’d thought
they were owed, and then it had all gone wrong and she hadn’t stood by them, only watched as they were taken away, keeping her safe with their silence…

There was a sour taste in her mouth, like the one of the tea they’d drunk, back then; her hands tingling with the touch of khăn chiếu tiles after one too many games, after one too many poetry competitions based on the tiles’ names—so many bad poems about the Nine of Infinities and the Eight of Threads, and the clacking of tiles like the chattering of sparrows…

A ping, from the network. The information Vân had requested on the house. Nothing of terrific interest, except… “It’s got interesting history,” she said. “Did you know about who built the house?”

Uyên’s face was blank, surprised. That was a no, then.

“Phạm Văn Ngọc Oanh, also known as Ngân Chi,” Vân said. She read through the information. “Poet and architect. Known for her puzzles.”

“Puzzles?” Uyên’s voice was scornful. “Teacher, with all respect, is this the time for games?”

Vân bit back on the obvious, which was that Uyên herself enjoyed khăn chiếu and drinking games a little too much. “You missed the ‘architect’ part. She put her puzzles in the places she built.”

Uyên stared at her. “Hiding places,” she said, flatly. “Here?” She moved, staring at the walls. “Where—”
“I don’t know. They say—” Vân’s lips moved for a while, taking in the network’s information—“they say she liked literary allusions.” She looked at the examples laid out in front of her: how pressing on three carps in turn in a scene of a pond at night would cause the reflection of the moon to open, revealing a safe; how a willow branch in a portrait of a scholar could be pulled, revealing a secret room behind bookshelves. None of this seemed to apply to the small room they stood in.

“There are paintings…” Uyên looked dubious.

An Thành was quite happy to provide full context for the paintings: which scene of myth they represented, which scholar they portrayed. The room was a treasure-chest of portraits and allusions: way too many possibilities. She didn’t even know what they were looking for—a safe, another room, an alcove to hide in? The examples she’d seen seemed obvious in retrospect, but hard to find without any clues. “Wait,” she said. “The dead woman. Assuming she knew about the hiding place. Where was she?”

Uyên got up, and made a gesture. The River of Stars overlay shimmered back into existence for a brief moment—and then the corpse of the dead woman spread out over ever-shifting constellations. Then the overlay vanished, and the corpse—and just its imprint remained. It was pointing to a particular picture: a dragon spread over mountain slopes that descended all the way to the sea. A raging storm climbed from the shores to the mountain’s slopes, and the dragon’s antlers tangled with
stars—a constellation that was briefly unfamiliar to Vân, before An Thành weighed in. *The Celestial River, in the Tail of the Azure Dragon.*

Which was not very helpful.

What did the river stand for? Forbidden love, in the story of the Cowherd and the Weaver. The tumults that separated the lovers, only bridged by magpies. And the dragon was a different kind of impossible love: the Dragon Lord of Lạc, who had married the immortal daughter of the mountain and found that she still yearned for her home, and he for the sea.

*A hundred eggs,* An Thành said, sharply.

*I know the story.* The daughter of the mountain had borne a hundred eggs out of which had hatched a hundred children. When they separated, she and the Dragon Lord had each taken half their sons back to their homes.

*No, you don’t understand. Look. In the dragon’s mane.*

In the intricate lacework of the dragon’s mane, which fell from the mountains to the sea, were letters. Trăm. A hundred in Việt. Vân reached out, pressed them one by one. When she hit the last one, it sank into the painting with a click that resonated like an explosion—and an entire section of it swung inwards, a rectangle hidden amidst the storm on the shore.

A safe.

Vân let out a breath she wasn’t aware she’d been holding. Uyên was watching her with awe in her eyes. “Teacher...”
“It’s nothing,” Vân said, obscurely embarrassed and obscurely proud.

She’d half-expected to find eggs in the safe, but of course dragons weren’t likely to lay eggs in a small compartment in the Scattered Pearls Belt. Instead, what she pulled out were three things. The first was a piece of torn cloth that had been caught in the doorjamb when the safe had closed—the colour and hue of the dead woman’s clothes.

“I didn’t leave her alone that long,” Uyên said with a frown. “But I guess it doesn’t take that long, if you know how it works.”

Vân snorted. “Harder to find, though.” She spread the other two things on the table. One was a piece of something she didn’t recognise—a smooth metal surface, like the substrate for a holo, except that it was blank. It was small: she could close her hand on it, and something about it was vaguely familiar, though she couldn’t have said what. She and Uyên shook it, and couldn’t make anything appear on it. “It’s dead,” Uyên said. “Or unprimed.”

“Mmm,” Vân said. She picked up the last thing in the safe. It was another piece of metal, shot through with oily reflections. “I don’t think any of this was there in the first place. It’s more likely she opened the safe and hid them inside, when she felt she was dying. Making sure the militia would never find them.”

Uyên bit her lip. “I don’t know what that last thing is, either.”
Vân flipped it, watching the light play on it, again and again. “I do,” she said. “Except that she couldn’t have got it that easily.”

“Illegal?” Uyên looked worried. The laws on receiving stolen goods were strict, and they assumed guilt rather than innocence.

“Not illegal, not per se. Just extremely hard to get without the right kind of help. It’s from a dead mindship.” She bit her lip. “Let me call Sunless Woods.”

**SUNLESS WOODS HAD** been busy.

She hadn’t exactly followed Wine’s advice, but she’d listened all the same. Some of her old crew was in the Scattered Pearls Belt, and quite receptive to be contacted.

One of them was Thiên Hoa.

Thiên Hoa was a bots-handler from the First Planet, the only one among them who could effortlessly claim something close to the accents of power. She had one mem-implant from a faraway ancestor who’d passed the regional examinations: her accent itself was subtly off, a mixture of her own and of the archaic one of the ancestor preserved in the mem-implant, but what the gang had needed was sometimes no more than a few moments of doubt to evade pursuers. Thiên Hoa had been enjoying life, not a scholar, but as a merchant in possession of rather more wealth than what she actually traded in.
She met *Sunless Woods* in one of the better teahouses in the belt: in the middle rings of the Apricot Blossom Hồ habitat, a delicate multi-story structure where each table was surrounded by just enough walls to ensure privacy.

Thiên Hoa slid into the booth, calling up a privacy overlay that shimmered around them: something that would block off the sound. “Well,” she said. “That’s fairly fancy, compared to our old haunts.”

*Sunless Woods* had already ordered soup dumplings and rolled rice crepes. They’d appeared in her own overlay: she was chewing on the translucent dough dipped in fish sauce, getting faint and ghostly memories of her own childhood—the smell of squeezed lime on Mother’s hands, the sharp taste of chilies as her siblings fought each other for the rolling pin—*Sunless Woods* had always preferred to help with the sauce, it was less drudgery and more of a chance of achieving that delicate balance between salty, acid and sweet…

Faint, very faint: nothing like the wave of nostalgia that had overwhelmed her when she’d tasted Vân’s tea. It was for the best, all things considered. “How have you been?” she asked Thiên Hoa.

Thiên Hoa shrugged. Her bots rode in the jet-black mass of her hair, glinting in the light. “Oh, you know. Trying to get cargo from one end of the Empire to another. It’s quite a challenge, actually.” Her smile was wicked. “You?”

“I’ve been less bored,” *Sunless Woods* said.
“Oh, I don’t know,” Thiên Hoa said. She grabbed one of the soup dumplings and brought it to her mouth. “Your little… problem certainly is unexpected.”

*Sunless Woods* stiffened, and her own bots froze in answer. “How so?”

“The dead woman was hard to track. She knew all the tricks of evading surveillance. It’s not illegal, per se…”

But it was certainly suggestive. “Go on.”

“Best as I can see, she landed about two months ago on *The Goby in the Well*. And she didn’t travel alone.”

“She had a band.” *Sunless Woods* exhaled. She wasn’t sure if she was relieved or not.

“A small one,” Thiên Hoa said. “Three other people. Three women.”

“Mmm. And where are they now?”

A shrug from Thiên Hoa. “Hard to say. They seem to have vanished. I’ll have some of my people look into tracking them.”

Vanished, the better to regroup? To better plan whatever they’d had in mind. “I don’t like this,” Sunless Woods said.

A dazzling smile from Thiên Hoa. “Well, you’re going to like that next bit.”

“Out with it.”

“Oh my, we’re in a bad mood today, aren’t we? Is it the scholar? *Wine* told me you had a soft spot for her.”

*Sunless Woods* clamped down on an ill-tempered “none of your business”, because she was the one who had made it Thiên
Hoa’s business—and her friend was doing this as a favour to her. “Possibly,” she said.

“Ah-ha. She’s certainly pretty, and you could use a distraction.”

Trouble was, *Sunless Woods* wasn’t too sure the distraction was going to happen. Vân was worried about her own future and about Uyên, and sex was the last thing on her mind. “You were saying there was a bit I would like. I could use that.” As opposed to hypothetical distractions whose chances of happening looked less and less.

“They’ve been around,” Thiên Hoa said. “Your dead woman and her accomplices. Making inquiries in teahouses—the usual when trying to figure out the lay of the land and who’s who in the militia, and how far they could go before being on their radar. But they were also drinking quite a fair bit—” a smile that was pure Thiên Hoa, all sharp teeth moments before she drove the knife in—“and let’s just say they have no head for wine.”

“Ah.” *Sunless Woods* knew all about that, too. There was a reason the crew was on a strictly no-drinks policy when a job started. Wine was offered to other people, in the hope they’d misstep. “And you had ears.”

“I can hardly be expected to do my job as a merchant if I don’t keep abreast of what the criminal underclass is doing,” Thiên Hoa said, with mock plaintiveness, and with the absolute confidence of one who firmly belonged in said criminal
underclass. “Anyway...your dead woman boasted that they’d come here to steal a thing of great value.”

“I’d gathered that,” Sunless Woods said, drily. “Given that she defied an exile sentence to come back.”

“Yeah.” Thiên Hoa’s eyes glittered. “Just think of it. We could grab it from right under their noses. Like the old days—a score big enough to make the news channels and the memorials, and all the scholars excoriating us for not upholding the order of Heaven and Earth...”

“I’m retired,” Sunless Woods said, too quickly and too lightly.

“Yeah, right. And terminally bored, aren’t you?”

It had been restful at first—not having to look over her shoulder for the militia, not having to worry about whether she or the rest of the gang would get caught and whether they’d get tortured to turn the others in. And then...before she knew it, she was a respectable pillar of society in more than name, a scholar invited to all the right banquets and all the right parties—all of it ringing tame and hollow, and she had that particular twitch that sent the bots scurrying back every time she went into someone’s house and started cataloguing the things of value, and mentally mapping out where she’d have positioned her crew to clean everything out... And then, before she knew it, she’d become yesterday’s news—none of the banquets so much as mentioned her, and other criminals were the frisson of high society.

No one had told her how much obscurity would hurt.
“I make do,” *Sunless Woods* said, drily. But it’d be an honest job, wouldn’t it? Finding long-disappeared treasure was headline material, and it didn’t even require her to come out of retirement. She didn’t even have to steal it: just to find it and return it to its rightful owners. The people would lap it all up—love her and her generosity with none of the ambiguity they’d had towards the thief.

Thiên Hoa’s eyes shone in the darkness of their booth. “Don’t lie.”

“Fine,” *Sunless Woods* said. “I’d notify the newscasters in a heartbeat if I found it. I guess it would belong to Uyên, which would be a nice flourish—the daughter of the graced war hero.” Not that it mattered: she had enough wealth to satisfy her ten thousand times over, and she’d never stolen from those who badly needed funds. “Fame and adulation in one fell swoop.”

“I don’t think it belongs to Uyên, unless you’re feeling generous.” Thiên Hoa frowned. “Uyên’s room was only the last of several places they visited. Whatever they were looking for, it’s not specifically linked to Uyên. Here.” She extended her hand, and an overlay shimmered into existence on the table, pushing away *Sunless Woods’s* teacup.

It was a haphazard list of places that didn’t appear to have much in common with each other. The Great Western Compassion pagoda on the Apricot Blossom Hồ habitat, a Pavilion of the Meritorious on the Eastern Sea Trần habitat, a handful of private homes of which the Lotus Vũ’s was the latest.
“I’m not sure…” *Sunless Woods* started, and then her comms showed her the call that had been waiting for her for a while. Vân. “Child?” she asked, sharing it with Thiên Hoa.

“I need help,” Vân said. “To get onboard *The Elephant and Grass*.”

A pause. “I’m going to need a little more context,” *Sunless Woods* said, equably.

*The Elephant and Grass* was a casualty of the Ten Thousand Flags uprising: a mindship who’d died, not in deep spaces, but simply in an inconvenient corner of space altogether, stuck in the midst of asteroids and debris that made access to her long-winded, requiring special equipment.

“There’s a piece of that ship in Uyên’s bedroom,” Vân said, curtly. “In a secret safe.”

*Sunless Woods* clamped down on the many obvious questions. “Are you sure? There are many mindship wrecks around the Belt.”

“Yes,” Vân said. “I have a mem-implant with a very good memory of recent Belt history. It’s a piece of the hull, or somewhere exposed to starlight, and the pattern is characteristic.” She sounded like she was indulging a child—and must have realised it. “Sorry, elder aunt.”

“Don’t be.” In truth, *Sunless Woods* was fascinated—not only at the discovery, but at the way Vân, so usually staid and respectful, was forgetting herself. What else would it take, to make her blossom that way?
“It’s a long story,” Vân said. “Have you heard of Ngân Chi?”

Silver Branch? It sounded like a style name. *Sunless Woods* queried the network. “The architect? I fail to see…”

“She built the Lotus Vũ quarters,” Vân said. “I mean, the quarters that the Lotus Vũ family now occupies. And she was the mother of *The Elephant and Grass*. I’d say that’s one coincidence too many.”

Thiên Hoa’s face was a study in amusement. “Behave,” *Sunless Woods* sent her, across the table. And then the name, Ngân Chi. *An architect*.

A pause. Thiện Hoa frowned. Her own eyes went slack as she accessed, first, her mem-implants, and then the network. She got her results faster than *Sunless Woods*, no doubt due to some highly personal and not entirely legal accesses to closed databases. Her answer came to *Sunless Woods* on a high-priority thread.

“It’s not straightforward to find her name there, but she was involved in the Great Western Compassion Pagoda, and in all of these other buildings. Uh.” A pause in Thiện Hoa’s speech. “Was rumoured to have amassed a fortune in treasures—” images flashed across *Sunless Woods*’s field of vision, carved jade and delicate silver ornaments, and pearls and lacquered chests—“Except no one ever found anything. She died with only a few strings of coppers to her name.”

“Well,” *Sunless Woods* said, to Thiện Hoa, “I’d say dissipating money in old age is a fairly common occurrence, but the fact that our pair of thieves was searching all of Ngân Chi’s
buildings is suggestive.” A theft to go down in history. That certainly would make ample news headlines, regardless of whether *Sunless Woods* kept the money or not.

“Mmm,” Thiên Hoa said. “Are you going to tell her?”

“Not until we find out more,” *Sunless Woods* said. For all she knew, it was a legend and nothing more, and she felt embarrassed promising to Vân something she wasn’t sure she could deliver at all. And—if she was really honest with herself, and she usually was—she needed time to work out what she could do with this revelation, and how it changed things for her—or failed to. And, to Vân, “Why the ship? It’s not the only place the dead woman visited.”

“It’s the only one she kept a piece of,” Vân said. “That has to be significant.”

“Mmm,” *Sunless Woods* said. She stared at the list of buildings Thiên Hoa had found for her. The dead ship was easily the least accessible: a perfect hiding place? “All right. Let’s go search the ship.”

And, to Thiên Hoa, “I don’t think finding the treasure will be the end of it. That woman died in Uyên’s quarters, and her accomplices aren’t going to let the matter rest.”

Thiên Hoa’s face was grave. “You want a word put out?”

*Sunless Woods* barely hesitated. “Yes. Don’t use my name, but imply that Vân and Uyên, and their families, are under a greater protection, and that anyone who tries to kill them will have to answer to that.”
Thiên Hoa’s face was grave. “They will guess another thief is involved. I have to ask: are you sure? She’s just a flirt. To reveal yourself, no matter how obliquely, to the militia…”

“No one’s died on my watch,” Sunless Woods said. “Either from us or the militia or anyone we took valuables from. We’ve not killed, and we’ve not let inaction kill anyone, either. I don’t intend to start now.”

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