

According to the papers, his ship was waiting not in the hangar, but right out on the landing field. This probably meant it had not been on the planet very long. Alex stood on the platform, lightly holding on to the handrail -- a part of his specialization, imprinted through repetition, was the habit of always having at least three balance points when on a moving object. The platform glided out into the main tunnel and went hurtling along at full speed underneath the landing field.

Alex suddenly realized what had been bothering him about his new contract.

The right to choose his own crew.

Things like that just weren't done. Well, to be exact, they could be done, but only with the vessels built on this planet. But *Mirror* had been assembled on Earth.

Someone had to have been in charge of the ship on its way to Quicksilver Pit. Okay, so it may have not been a full crew, just the bare minimum -- a pilot, a navigator, and a power engineer. But to hire people for a one-way trip and then to start looking for a whole new crew on another planet -- that was absurd. Earth could offer a far better choice of specialists than a colony world, even a well-developed one.

There was also a useful tradition of keeping at least one member of the previous crew. Every ship had its own unique character, and an experienced person could often save not only time and money, but the very life of the vessel.

Weird...

The platform slowed down, stabilized under an exit shaft, and slowly started rising. Sixty five feet up, through layers of rock and then the concrete pad of the landing field.. Alex glanced at the Demon -- it seemed thoughtful and wary.

The ship was an experimental model? Something dangerous, still being tested -- trick a crew into it, and watch what happens? Not likely. Judging by the papers, it was a very good ship, and it had no unexpected novelties. All the equipment was standard. A dangerous route, perhaps? Also bull. People got lured into danger by money, insurance, discounts... anything but lies. There would always be volunteers to stick their heads into a lion's jaws, why make people do it against their will?

Something barely legal? The same objections applied.

So it wasn't about the ship. Everything was always about people, not metal.

Alex shook his head and tried to toss his doubts away. Not for good... just to put them away into a far corner of his mind.

The platform slid out through the open aperture of a hatch, wobbled a little as it adjusted to the new bearing plain, and sailed on over the landing field. After a few seconds, Alex really did forget all his troubles.

He was home...

Although it had lost its former prominence, the spaceport of Quicksilver Pit was still fully alive. Two shuttles were landing simultaneously, and at a distance Alex identified them as a couple of old *Manta Rays*, maybe the third, maybe the fourth model. He guessed what they were not so much by their shape as by the piloting trajectory and landing speed. In the middle of the field, spreading wide the three rings of its supports, stood a heavy *Cachalot* freighter, probably of maximum tonnage allowable in this spaceport. From it crawled a line of auto-loaders, clutching tanks and containers in their grippers. Working on a delicate pleasure ship, *Otter*, were small repair-robots that crawled along the ship's surface, checking and repairing the skin.

Here was the only place worth living. Here and in flight.

Alex was smiling.

His mood was no longer affected by the dull grayness of the sky, where smog and rain-clouds blended into a foul-smelling cocktail. Above this sky was another, clear and boundless, created for the freedom of flight... for him personally.

Then the platform skirted the *Otter*, and Alex saw his own ship. *Mirror* stood in the launch-ready position. It looked like a giant discus hurled by a titan, stopped in midair and hovering above the ground, in no hurry to soar into the sky. A bioceramic disc of ninety-eight point four feet in diameter, six supports, three main engines in a slightly unusual arrangement, clustered in the stern... Well, that might even be a good thing. The bulge of the bridge deck was slightly larger than average for this size vessel. It looked like co-piloting was possible. Although a lot depended on who that co-pilot turned out to be....

Alex swallowed to get rid of a lump in his throat.

Mirror was blindingly beautiful. The perfect ship, with its enlarged bridge, its unusual engine configuration, the tender green of its armor...

It was love at first sight. Just the ship's appearance was enough.

The same feeling as when a person capable of love is shaken at the sight of a face in a crowd. There might be dozens, hundreds, or thousands of other faces around, but they all are no longer important.

Sometimes Alex regretted not being able to love other humans. But only till he fell in love with a ship.

"Hello..." he whispered, gazing at *Mirror*.

The platform slowed down. Alex jumped down onto the concrete and walked up to the ship. Reached over, touching the armor carefully with just his fingertips. The bio-ceramic surface was warm and resilient. Alive.

"You know who I am..." said Alex quietly. "Right? You can see me... Hello..."

He went around the ship, touching the armor with his hand as far up as he could reach. The ship was silent. It was studying him, too.

"Do you like me?"

Now he was glad that there was no one aboard. This was his moment. Or, rather, he shared this moment with the ship.

"Receive your captain."

The identity chip below his collarbone remained motionless. There had to have been a request signal. But not a full identity check. And that was nice. It was a sign of reciprocity. Of trust.

A hatch opened overhead, and down slid a ladder with a small platform on the bottom end. Alex stepped onto it and let the ship take him up inside.