

Funeral Games

by [Margaret Ronald](#)

The visiting team gained possession of the ball, and the crowd exploded into bloody violence.

"Can we back up and see that again?" Min asked, scooting forward in her seat. The Protectorate official nodded and tracked the recording back. Again the ball went skittering over the field, and again the crowd surged to its feet, not celebrating but rioting, spilling onto the field in an ugly mass.

Not wanting to look squeamish, Min kept watching as the riot made its way closer to the recording eye. It was only after a spatter of blood hit the lens that Grigori, the intelligence officer, reached over and switched it off. Min cleared her throat. "This is what went out, right?"

"Yes." Grigori scowled. "The sports nets had it before we could halt the relay. Most unfortunate for all involved." He tracked back again, leaving the eye stilled on the field before the riot. "I will be honest with you, Dr. Rotekapel. There are many who do not look favorably on anyone from outsector prying into colonial business. The riots are over, after all."

Min's face burned. Grigori noticed her discomfiture, and smiled kindly. "I do not share their feelings. But you do understand, you are in a difficult situation. The Colonization Authority was no help to us when the Erdanni decided they were the only ones with colonization rights here. It is perhaps understandable that some would look askance at an Authority datasifter, even today. But do keep in mind that I requested you. You have my confidence."

Min looked down at her hands, fighting down the swell of pride behind her breastbone. "I understand. I'll get to work on identifying the ringleaders right away—"

"Ah — that is not necessary." He coughed. "We have identified and arrested the ringleaders already, and they have provided us with further names."

"But — I thought I'd be aiding your investigation."

"Not necessary. What we ask of you is not who, but how." He disconnected the recording from its socket and rolled it across the table to her. "The Protectorate is an expensive business for my nation, but for the good of the Byelans we must keep it going. Spinn broadcasts have supported much of our work. There are Spinn games taking place now, Dr. Rotekapel, all over the Byelan colony. We cannot stop the games. What I ask is that you tell us what made this game different — what we can watch for to prevent a second occurrence."

"Ah." Min rolled the recording between her palms, then switched on its small-op screen and returned to the moment before all hell broke loose. "Will I have access to all of your data?"

"Yes. All."

"Good. I accept." She played the clip again, studying it. The catch. The silence. The crowd. The blood.

They've put me in quarantine, Min thought, staring up into the recessed ceiling of her personal room. As if they're afraid I'll infect them with some offplanet bug.

It was a foolish idea, and unwarranted — certainly she wasn't any more isolated than Grigori and the rest of his Protectorate crew. The intelligence station was several miles from the coastal main city, on a rig so

loosely connected to the seabed that the floor shifted underfoot. *From space to sea*, she thought with a smile that was lost in the darkness, *and barely a stop on land between.*

Not that she'd wanted to linger on land. What little she'd seen of Byelo so far had been...unsettling. The few Byelans she'd seen at the port had been hollow-eyed, staring at her as if she were either their nemesis or their next meal. The low drone of singing followed them as the Protectorate's escort saw her through the streets, and twice she'd seen grown men and women fork their fingers at her, as if to avert evil. It hadn't bothered her so much at the time, but now, in this coffin of a room, the gestures and sounds took on a new meaning. You didn't find them offplanet, that was certain; the central worlds were much more cosmopolitan. As she was supposed to be.

In truth, she was as grateful to be kept apart from the superstitious Byelans as they were to be kept from her. Grigori and the other Protectorate officials had been as clear-eyed and cosmopolitan as you could find on any central world, and with much of the central worlds' disdain for provincialism.

It should have been comforting. But in the heavy shadows, with the murmur of the sea echoing through her room, so much like the drone of the Byelan songs, it was anything but.

An image floated to the top of her mind, as if carried there by the waves: one of the members of the cleaning staff, grizzled and stooped, his beard braided into a short, thick plait. He'd been there when she boarded the rig and had watched her with the same intent, hollow gaze. The same gaze...what was the word for it?

"Haunted," she said aloud, and then wished she hadn't. The room swallowed any echoes and returned only the sound of waves.

The first pass over the data was not promising. "Noise," she said, scrolling through the fifth screen of Municipal Data — Complaints — Minor. *Item: three shipments of flash-frozen eiara chips confiscated following health inquiry into Section E concessions.* She ran a finger below the line of text, warping the screen. "I understand you want me to have all the data, but most of this is only generating noise."

"My apologies, Dr. Rotekapel." Grigori bowed, as if courtesy would alleviate the problem. "It was done with the best of intentions."

"I understand. It's just a little much." *Item: subsidence causing plumbing problems in sections B through F; sanitation in section A therefore inadequate during peak times. Contractors fined and new bids for repair sought.* "It's not a problem. It just means I might have to go more slowly."

"Time is not a factor."

Item: owners of land adjacent to stadium registered complaint regarding disorderly behavior among team musicians. Musicians fined and registered under Protectorate records; offers of muffler walls parking lot were declined. Min shook her head and dragged down a construction screen. "I'll send a few spiders through this, but what I need to see is the game itself."

Grigori gestured to one of the far crates. "The recordings are at your disposal."

"Really?" She turned to eye the crate, then the open space where Grigori stood. "I can probably set up something —"

"Good. Incidentally, my superiors have authorized me to invite you to dinner on behalf of the

Protectorate. Our fare out here can be dull, and we wish to leave you with a better impression than the mess hall can provide."

"Sure," Min said absently, still figuring out how many crates she'd need to move into her personal room. "I mean, thank you, yes. That would be wonderful."

As it was, she almost forgot about dinner, having rigged half of the recordings to create a holographic representation of the stadium. If she were a sports fan, it'd probably have been the centerpiece of her living room. When the reminder went off, she cursed, and ran back to dig through her clothes for something suitable. The green dress with white trim hadn't traveled well, but she smoothed out the wrinkles and hurried out the door, only to collide with a man in the hall.

She stumbled back into the doorway. "Sorry," she managed, but any further apology stuck in her throat as she recognized the man as the one who'd watched her arrival. He stared at her, his impassive eyes widening just a fraction, then backed up, cleaning rig in hand, and mumbled something in Byelan. Min felt his eyes on her as she walked off, following her down the swaying hall.

Grigori's door was at the closer end of the rig, perhaps two turns down from hers. She sent a knock through the system and smiled at him when the door opened. "Sorry I'm late."

"God!" Grigori grabbed her arm and pulled her into the foyer, glancing down both ends of the hall. "Are you mad?"

"What? You did invite me, remember?"

"It is not a matter of invitation," Grigori snapped, then paused. "It is cultural. The colors you are wearing, they are considered by Byelans to be exceedingly bad luck."

"You're joking."

"It is primitive, yes, but it is important to them. And therefore it has to be important to us." He sighed, put a hand to his forehead, then gestured to the table. "Please, have a seat. The Byelans, I am afraid, are a very private people. They do not like having their beliefs examined in detail. As Protectorate in the wake of the Erdanni massacres, we must honor their wishes."

Min let out a long breath. *Let it go*, she told herself. "How different can they be?" she said as he poured her a glass of wine. "We're all humans here. It's not as if we're entirely alien cultures." *I wouldn't have gotten this job if we were.*

"The Erdanni were human too," Grigori said darkly. He took up a glass of the wine — it caught the light like poured rubies — and swirled it thoughtfully. "No, I think it is embarrassment that keeps them silent. The Byelans are not so much alien as primitive. They cling to every belief we should have dropped in colonization but did not...there is a standing joke among other officials that if you spent a night drinking with Byelans, by morning you would have heard so many ghost stories that you would not know whether you were alive or dead." He raised his glass to her. "Though I believe the hangover would be some indication."

Min smiled. "Have you tried it?"

Grigori looked up from the salver before him. "Hm?"

"Drinking with Byelans, hearing their stories."

Grigori laughed. "Oh, no. I am too busy. My work rarely allows for even such an evening as this."

"And I imagine it's difficult to get from this rig to the mainland." Grigori nodded. "It's an unusual structure...is it a leftover from the Erdanni occupation, perhaps?"

Grigori slammed his glass down so hard wine sloshed over the edge. "Absolutely not. We destroyed everything to do with them."

Min stared at him. "I — I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize it was such a sore point."

Grigori sighed and nodded. "It must be, for all of us. Much of what we did to combat the Erdanni was painful, but Byelo's history is what made it necessary. It would tear any man's heart to hear of the slaughters that took place. We were too late by years to prevent them, but what we do now can make up for them."

"That's very magnanimous of you," Min said, and then, spurred on by some impulse she couldn't quite name, added, "and I'm sure the mines in the north had nothing to do with your decision."

Grigori looked at her with exasperated patience, as if she were a toddler with a spoon up her nose. "It is not a matter of payment. You must understand," he continued, "we are in the position of guardians to the Byelans. Foster parents, perhaps, taking in a child who has been abused. What we want is only for the Byelans to be happy."

"I see," Min said. *But I wonder how the Byelans feel about being considered children.*

She lay awake again that night, Grigori's concealing overcoat flung over the foot of the bed. He'd loaned it to her to cover the bad-luck colors on her way back, but his smile as he'd draped it over her shoulders had been genuine.

The susurrus of the waves outside her window mutated into almost-words and back again as she drifted in and out of sleep. *Superstitions*, she thought, and the word brought her more awake. *Superstitions and taboos...ghost stories...I wonder how badly I scared that poor man...*

The room suddenly seemed too close, even with its cavernous ceiling, and she sat upright. *This is no good. I can't sleep now and I can't work tomorrow without sleep. Might as well use the time I've got.*

She pulled Grigori's overcoat over her nightshirt and walked out into the main room. Screen banks took up most of the close wall, now dormant save for a perpetually running newsfeed link. She'd abandoned most of it in favor of the circle of holofeeds that took up much of the floor. Min switched on the reconstruction and waited for it to form, layer by layer. At low resolution, the stadium stretched across the room, and Min could watch the game unroll even as she stood in the middle of it like some spectral colossus, pulling elements and images to hover above the stadium's rim.

She did so now, bringing up the profiles of the arrested ringleaders and locating them in the reconstruction. There were at least twenty of them, evenly spaced around the stadium. *Somebody planned this well.*

She stepped into the center of the simulation, lowered the sound so it wasn't more than a tinny drone, and constructed views of each of the ringleaders. It wasn't particularly illuminating; not one of them gave so much as a sign of intending to cause trouble until just before the violence broke out.

And that's odd in itself... She relegated the images to the space just above the field and sat among them. The stadium came up over her head; the field itself reached to her ribs. She tracked back to the point just

before the riot began, and then played forward. Each of the ringleaders seemed mesmerized by the game, but when the ball flew past the stands, they all froze, then stood as one, screaming for blood.

That's unnatural. No connection, no timing, no signal...is it something in the game itself? There were stories of brainhacks, going back to well before pre-colonization. But those had been repeatedly disproven, and anyway they didn't make sense for this situation. If you wanted to create chaos, there were much more efficient ways to go about it than programming sleeper agents.

Still...if I wanted to make the brainhack theory plausible, this'd do it. She scrolled back to the second before the fight, the moment of silence, and shivered as she saw the same expression on every ringleader's face: dismay, as if remembering something they'd much rather have forgotten, as if a curtain had been pulled back to reveal a rotting corpse.

She woke to a thin, squealing sound, followed by heavy footsteps. She sat up, the reconstruction eddying around her, in time to see a maintenance cart glide by on poorly calibrated lifts.

The Byelan janitor had his back to her, whistling through his teeth as he emptied bins and hosed up dust. After a moment, he paused by the newsfeed, which showed one of the early-morning Spinn games, one of the challenge playoffs, still in progress. A play went by too fast for her to decipher, and he shook his head, muttering under his breath.

Min got to her feet, putting her hand through a clot of rioters to do so. "You follow Spinn?" she asked.

The janitor jumped and turned to face her. Min pulled Grigori's overcoat closer around her. "Yes," he said. "I follow. Sorry. I clean now."

"No — don't." She stepped out of the reconstruction, trying to avoid the actual feedlinks. "Can you teach me?"

"Teach?" He raised one gray brow.

"Spinn. Can you teach me the rules? I try to follow the commentators, but —"

He made a farting noise. "Terrible. You learn nothing from them." She grinned. He returned the smile, then, remembering himself, ducked his head. "Sorry. I clean now."

"Never mind the cleaning." She held out her hand. "My name's Min. You're Byelan, right? I'm from the Colonization Authority —"

"I know. Authority." He took her hand, held it a moment, then let go. "Yes, Byelan. All my life." The screen buzzed with muted applause, and they both turned to look at it. He whistled at the replay. "Bad call. Terrible call. Protectorate judge." He turned back and looked her up and down, as if deciding on her suitability. "I am Yev."

"Yev." She stepped out of the reconstruction and pulled out a notescreen. "So what made that a bad call, Yev?"

"I am not saying you have done wrong," Grigori said. "I am saying that it may confuse him."

"Confuse him how? I'm the one who's confused at the moment. I can't tell the difference between a

secondhand goal and a threefer." Min shifted in her seat, trying to get a better view out the window of the transport. She'd argued with Grigori for a full day before getting permission to visit the stadium, and only gotten it because she insisted on seeing the full three-dimensional layout of the place.

"Byelans...do not respond well to being in positions of authority. It is perhaps a cultural principle." *Like all the other ones they've got*, Min thought wryly. "Even the associated prestige of a connection to someone from outsector might be enough to inflate his opinion of his influence, and on such a small station as ours it is necessary to preserve a certain harmony among the staff."

"I'm sure he wouldn't cause any trouble," Min said. Grigori only shook his head, and Min returned to her study of the blurred Byelan landscape.

They passed at least a dozen separate stadiums, all constructed in the Protectorate style of architecture. *The Byelans must be even more Spinn-mad than I thought; I don't think we've gone five clicks without seeing a stadium.* "How much further?"

"We are there." Grigori spoke to the driver, who nodded and steered them into a transport lot. A gray wall curved ahead of them, blank save for the pocks of ticket booths at its base.

Min glanced at the stadium, and her eyes narrowed. "This isn't the place."

"No, Dr. Rotekapel, it is only that you are not used to our architecture —"

"This isn't the place. I've been staring at reconstructions of that stadium for five days now, and I can tell you that this isn't it." Even the subsidence pattern was wrong; the wrong side was sinking into the ground, giving the stadium an off-kilter look among the straight buildings to either side. *Perhaps that's a feature; I swear most of the stadiums we saw on the way had the same problem.*

Grigori eyed her, then nodded. "You are correct. That stadium is twenty clicks west of here."

"Dammit, Grigori —"

"That stadium is off limits to *everyone*, Dr. Rotekapel. Not even I am allowed there. Until the investigation and interrogation is complete, we cannot let anyone onto the grounds. I thought to bring you here instead, since you claimed to need only a general sense of the layout, and our stadiums are built to the same design."

Dry wind blew leaves into Min's face; she brushed them out of the way as she walked ahead. "I don't have words to tell you just how unacceptable this is, Grigori. But since we're here, I'm going to look around."

Her honor guard easily caught up to her.

The stadium smelled of stale urine and damp rot. A few Byelans looked up from their cleaning work at Min's passage, averting their eyes when they saw Grigori. The subsidence problems were just as bad here; there were places where the floor rippled. "I hope the plumbing isn't shot in this one as well," Min muttered. "Excuse me a moment."

Her escort insisted on waiting outside the door to the restrooms, and Min gave grudging thanks that they hadn't accompanied her inside. It wasn't until after she was done that she noticed the wreath.

It was made of green and white ribbons, woven in a herringbone pattern, and lay beyond the sterilizers on the far wall. Min took a step closer just as a Byelan woman emerged from a closer stall. The woman set a scrap of paper on the ground, lit it, and hummed to herself while it burned down. Several similar

piles of ash lay to either side of the wreath.

Min waited until the paper had burned down, then touched the woman's shoulder. "Excuse me."

The woman jumped and spoke in Byelan. She was about Yev's age or a little older, and a long scar like a red worm marred the left side of her face. Min tried to apologize in broken Byelan, then gave up and pointed to the wreath. "Bad luck?"

The woman's face worked for a moment. "Yes. Bad luck." She hurried away, cowering away from Min's guard at the door. Min cursed herself for not fastlearning Byelan before her arrival. The Protectorate had told her she wouldn't need it, but they'd really crippled themselves by not asking for a cultural analyst.

Then again, maybe they didn't want a cultural analyst. I'm the least experienced person the Colonization Authority has, and I'm on my own...and Grigori asked for me.

They don't want an investigation. They want cover. For what?

She didn't know, and the heaps of ashes wouldn't tell her.

The faces of the ringleaders stared down at her as she sat in the center of the reconstruction. Her dataspiders had found nothing, coming up against blank walls of encryption when she tried to learn about the ringleaders, getting lost in endless tangles of irrelevancy when they went looking for other facts.

Grigori had invited her to dinner twice. The first time she'd politely declined; the second she'd pleaded poor health. *Which isn't untrue*, she thought, staring at the faces; *only it's not so much poor health as poor sleep*. Even Yev had started to notice, and his measuring look these days was tinged with genuine concern. *But I can't sleep in there with the ocean outside and the drone, the endless singing . . .*

Min caught herself and laughed. " 'Dear Colonization Authority,'" she said, " 'Please take me off this assignment; I appear to have gone mad.' Get a grip, girl. Think this out rationally. Think this out as if it were numbers."

She swept the ringleaders' faces aside and into long-term memory, then ran the replay again. *Follow the faces. They're not people; they're data, follow them as you would a display...*

Game game pause riot blood. No. Again. Game game silence riot. Watch the faces, watch where people are looking, where the data goes. Game game pause riot. Watch around the ringleaders, see what's triggering them. Game game pause —

No. Not a pause. She swept her hands through the reconstruction, bringing up the sound files. The pregnant pause just before the riot began wasn't totally silent; the recording eyes had picked up a very faint thread of something. She set the audio filter to high resolution and went through the replay one more time, halting it in that moment of suspension.

Behind the closest ringleader, a woman in green and white opened her mouth. She spun to the next: a man in green and white sitting beside this ringleader. The next: a dark-eyed girl wrapped in a green and white shawl, staring straight out as if to meet Min's gaze.

Near every single one of the ringleaders there was a man or woman in green and white. *Bad luck colors...bad luck for the other team? But they're on both sides...*

She pulled each face from the crowd and played through the pause again. They were speaking in unison,

their lips moving with the same uncanny coordination that the ringleaders showed. *They're the trigger. How?*

The door opened. Yev, with his maintenance cart. Min stepped out of the reconstruction, leaving it stilled for now. "Yev, can you answer a question for me?"

He smiled and spread his hands. "I answer lots of questions. Spinn question?"

"Not quite. The colors...um, green and white together. Are they really bad luck?"

His eyes went to the reconstruction and its ring of faces, and a spasm of almost physical pain crossed his face. "Yes," he said. "It is bad luck to die. It is bad luck to be abandoned."

Without another word, he turned and left. The audio filter chimed with the results, and without her prompt to stop it, began to play. After a second, the grinding, sexless voice of the translator began to speak over it:

"What haven for those who are left/Abandoned by your absence/What haven for those who mourn/Abandoned by your death."

Yev didn't come back. Min stayed cooped in her rooms, trying to find some record of the singers outside that one recording, and playing the song over and over again. It was a funeral song, under Protectorate interdict.

We only want for the Byelans to be happy, Grigori had said. Or, we want the Byelans to be only happy. But there had been too many deaths to ignore.

Facial recognition files listed each of the singers, but their full data was under Protectorate encryption. Min chewed the ends of her hair and glared at the CLASSIFIED screen. *I could hack through that in a matter of hours — no, minutes — but if I do, I get tossed off-planet.*

Maybe that would be best. Leave this place, the songs and the sea that drove her insane, leave it to its game and ghost stories and leave it. Grigori would see nothing wrong with that; he'd mentioned the end of her contract the last time he visited.

"Hell with you," she muttered, and went looking for Yev.

Yev was in the mess hall, mopping up a spill. "I need to talk to you," she said. He gazed at her with the same suspicious expression he'd had when she first arrived, then nodded.

The wall of screens showed faces of each of the singers as they entered. Yev stopped dead in the doorway. Min slipped past him. "Yev, I'm sorry. But I have to know who these people are."

"No," he said. "We respect our dead. Let them keep their secrets."

"Yev, these mourners need to tell us their secrets." He turned and stared at her in shocked confusion, the first real emotion she'd ever seen on his face. "They started the riots. They were the ones who sang the funeral song. If you tell me who they are, I might be able to have the Colonization Authority look into it."

Yev looked back at the pictures, then laughed, the laugh of someone who has learned not to laugh where he can be heard. "I cannot tell you," he said, and turned away.

"No — Yev, please —" She glanced at the reconstruction and shook her head. *Time to use my last*

trick. "Yev, wait a minute."

He did, and his brows furrowed as she took out a silver tetrahedron and flipped the top open. "This is a privacy shield," she said, taking his hands and curling her own around them. "No one can see or hear us. Yev, who are the singers?"

He shook his head. "You are asking the wrong question."

"Then tell me what the right one is!"

Yev gave her another long, measuring look. "You should not be asking *who*, but *where*." He slid the shield into her hands, closed them over it, and stepped away. "The girl in the last row is my daughter Viola," he said as the door closed behind him.

Min stared after him, the shield thrumming in her hand. "Fine," she said in the metallic silence. "They wanted analysis, they'll get analysis."

The first thing to do was to lock the door and destroy its remote triggers. She hadn't lied about the shield, but she'd left out the one thing that had kept her from using it so far: shields could and would be detected. In the meantime, though, she had a direct link to the Protectorate's system, and the skill to use it.

She started a remote hack into the encrypted database, set on Viola's name and image. At the same time she brought up satellite photos, building plans, anything that could help her to ask *where*.

Ecological reports came in first, and she cursed again. Subsidence. That should have tipped her off; most of Byelo was on very firm ground, and municipal records showed little to no incidence of subsidence. Except in the stadiums. Every one of them sank, as if the earth had reached up to draw them down.

The shield began to beep, its senses picking up someone's scan. Min paid it no notice.

The hack came up with Viola's file just as she made a match between a series of satellite scans and a planning map from the early days of the Protectorate. She printed Viola's file and stuffed it under one arm as the maps slid together on screen, the red marks for stadium plans matching up with dark blots on the satellite scans. Blots of churned-up earth, unfilled pits.

A thick dread built up in the pit of Min's stomach. The screens flickered, as if their circuits couldn't bear the news, then shut off as one, leaving her in darkness. *They've cut the power. Smart of them, and stupid of me; I should have arranged for a bypass as soon as I arrived.*

The ocean's drone had stopped.

She folded her hands over Viola's unread file, waiting in the silent dark. Even when the whine of cutting torches seared the air, she didn't turn around. Not until Grigori turned her chair to face him did she respond to the Protectorate officials surrounding her. "Dr. Rotekapel, this is an unexpected and ungrateful breach of trust —"

"You broke my trust first," she said without glancing at the his armstrongs. "You told me I would have access to *all* the data."

"I assure you, we gave you access to all you needed. We had no idea that you would violate the sovereignty of Protectorate filespace. Our understanding of the Colonization Authority was that they were not in the habit of espionage."

"How many?" she asked. When he didn't answer, she got to her feet. "How many of the stadiums were

built on mass graves?"

Grigori let out a long breath. "The graves are the legacy of the Erdanni occupation. To leave them as they were would have been to invite unhealthy obsessions with what had happened. We thought it best, as part of the healing process —"

Paper crumpled under Min's fingers. "Some of them were much more recent than that."

"Part of destroying the Erdanni legacy," Grigori said evenly, "is dealing with any collaborators they left behind."

"And how did you determine who was a collaborator?" But she didn't need to ask. The answers were already on Grigori's face.

"I see you have at least some relevant research," he said after a moment, and motioned for one of the guardsmen to take Viola's file. Min held on, but the muzzle of an EDlauncher in her face was enough to loosen her grip. Grigori flipped through the pages, the line of his lips thinning. "This is a poor joke. I will have to tell my superiors that Authority analysts can neither be trusted nor produce meaningful work. As for you —"

"They'll know what I know," Min said. "If you kill me —"

Grigori shook his head. "I have no intention of doing so. The Authority does get angry when their analysts die, but one who comes back with nothing...well, that is not so unusual. I'm sure your youth will excuse any errors." He handed the file to one of his subordinates. "As for them knowing, why should they believe you? Consider: what proof do you have beyond your word? None. And you cannot send for more."

Min sagged. Grigori gestured to two of the guardsmen. "Have her returned to the shuttle, please."

The skiff was automated, but the Protectorate had seen fit to include an escort. He sat in the bow of the ship, muffled against the wind, not even acknowledging Min's presence. Perhaps he, too, was automated, she thought bitterly.

The flicker of the Protectorate station's lights faded behind them, leaving a violet sky and dark water, and, after a little while, a dim glow to the south. "Byelo," Min said softly, then sat forward. "Is that Byelo?"

The escort nodded once, the first movement she'd seen out of him. He wasn't much taller or broader than her, she judged; if it came to that, she might be able to shove him overboard. Assuming he didn't just kill her...but of course, the Protectorate wouldn't want her dead.

Your youth will excuse you. Well, yes, it would; the Authority didn't expect much from first-run analysis, and she could recover her credibility doing what she did best: datawork, numbers divorced from their source, patterns without persons.

She remembered the singers at the stadium, pouring their pain into a forbidden song. She remembered their fixed, hopeless gaze.

She leaned down, as if to adjust the ties on her shoes, and removed the a thin capsule from each sole. The man didn't move as she slotted the two together, turning the inert ingredients into a passable chemical stunner. *Authority regulations don't say anything about this, but they don't forbid it either...*

"Change course," she ordered, aiming the stunner at his ear. "We're going to Byelo."

Her escort glanced over his shoulder. "Good," he said, and unwound his scarf.

Min stared, the stunner artificially cold in her hand. "Yev?" He nodded. "How —"

"Protectorate is blind. Blind judging Spinn, blind judging us, blind to servants." He nodded to the stunner. "I am glad you decided to stay."

"What would you have done if I hadn't?"

"Taken you to your ship. Let you leave. And lost our voice outside the planet." He nodded to a patch of the glow that shone a bit more brightly. "That is Cold Harbor. I have spoken to others; they will be there as well. To see you, from Authority."

Despite her questions, he said no more until they reached the harbor. As he'd said, there were others waiting, Byelans all, though some wore Protectorate uniforms like Yev's discarded one.

They lifted her from the boat and set her on the dock, then waited with that same silence she'd gotten from Yev. The same pause, as if everyone was holding their breath at once.

"Um," Min said. "I'm from the Colonization Authority. I know what happened here."

And then, because she couldn't say the unspeakable, she began to sing the funeral song. She did not have a good voice, but it was soon drowned out by others, not screaming the words in violence this time, but a resolute chorus.

As the song grew, so did the crowd. Min came to the end of what she knew and stood shivering on the dock, surrounded by the echoes of her actions. Byelans continued the song, some going out into the streets, some carrying word to others. Like the ripples cast by a stone, the effects of Min's work spread out, into the city, perhaps even far enough to shake the Protectorate rig far out to sea.

Yev came up beside her and took her arm. "Come," he said. "We have a place for you. Sub links, pirate data, transmission hacks. We will keep you safe."

"Safe," she mumbled. "How can you be sure?"

He waved toward the crowd, spreading his fingers as if to cast a handful of something among them. "No stopping this time. Now we know you will hear us, and through you, the other worlds. I have told them what you showed me, the picture of my daughter, that she was at the stadium. We will not be stopped, now that we know what they want. They want freedom, as we too have wanted and feared to grasp."

"What *they* want?" Min shook her head. "Who?"

"Those we lost." He looked over his shoulder, at the lapping dark of the ocean. "My daughter, that you saw in the recording, that started the song. She was arrested as a collaborator twelve years ago. Her bones are beneath the stadium with the rest."