

# FAULT LINES

KELLY JENNINGS





# Praise for *Fault Lines*

In this fun, intrigue-laden space opera, // Jennings gives an intriguing glimpse of a much larger setting. // Fans of found family will love the portrayal of Velocity and her crew of scrappy underdogs.

— *Publishers Weekly*

Kelly [Jennings] has been compared with C. J. Cherryh, and I think deservedly. *Fault Lines* isn't burdened with the awful angst of Cherryh's [] *Cyteen*, but it has the same intensity and conviction.

— Gwyneth Jones, author of the Aleutian trilogy, winner of the World Fantasy, Clarke, Dick, and Tiptree awards

More political intrigue and gamesmanship than a standard space-battle story... // Solid world building, likable characters...nifty plot twists...

— Craig Clark, *Booklist*

A sharp, character-rich space opera packed with angry, capable women and attractive, vulnerable men. Jennings builds a large, politically complex world // but expresses this through an intimate slice...

— Tansy Rayner Roberts, author of the Creature Court trilogy, winner of multiple Ditmar and WSFA Small Press awards

## **Also by Kelly Jennings:**

*Broken Slate*

Note: the crew of the *Susan Calvin* made its first appearance in “Velocity’s Ghost” in *The Other Half of the Sky* (Athena Andreadis editor, Kay Holt co-editor; Candlemark & Gleam 2013).

# Fault Lines

Kelly Jennings



Candlemark & Glean

First edition published 2018

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Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
In Progress

ISBN: 978-1-936460-83-0  
eISBN: 978-1-936460-82-3

Cover art by Ciaran Gaffney

Editor: Athena Andreadis

Proofreader: Patti Exster

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This one is for Cooper,  
for everything they've taught me





# Chapter 1

## Hell in a Bucket, Free Trade Station, The Drift

**Y**ou're stranded here," the little girl said. "Everyone knows it."  
Tipping brandy ostentatiously into her glass, Velocity said,  
"Tell it to your nanny."

"I sold my nanny on Bastiat. For ticket money."

Velocity laughed. "Well then, you don't need me. Travel agency, six quats spinward. Big sign, you won't miss it."

Across the tank, a table of miners broke into a noisy quarrel. It ended in laughter, not blows, and Velocity sighed. When she looked back, the child was scowling. Pale as raw silk, her cropped hair dyed brilliant orange, she was so short she had to kneel on the bench to get her elbows on the table. She ought not to have been able to pull off that regal glower. The eyes, Velocity decided. Gengineered agate-blue, they had an entirely unchildlike intensity. Velocity sighed again. "Listen, Bon—Blondy?"

"Brontë," the child snapped.

Velocity paused; but she had no brief to mock anyone's deck name. "Brontë. While it's true I'm for hire, it's more as a troubleshooter, and less as a nanny."

"What is true," Brontë said, with the bright precise vowels of the inner Core, "is that you cannot make your deck fees. Or the fuel costs, or payments on your liens. Those last make your ship subject

to seizure at any civilized station.” Having stressed the penultimate word, she flattened her small hands on the table. “The truth is you’re desperate.”

Velocity swirled her brandy. Desperate was the word, she admitted. Maybe not desperate enough to take on jobs minding infants, though.

Brontë leaned forward. “I require transport to Hokkaido Station.”

“Ticketing agency. Spinward. Ask for Jens, tell him I said to book you a ship without pirates.”

“I’ll be traveling with my Security officer.”

“Tell it to Jens. Now, I’m working, so—”

“I can pay your dock fees and fuel costs, along with a bonus that lets you clear the back payments on your liens.”

Velocity managed to keep her expression from changing. “Well. I see why you need Security. I don’t see why you need me. Passage for two to Hockey, on even the best ship out of here, will run you, ah, somewhat less than that.” As the best ship out of the Bucket was likely to be a merchant freighter taking passengers as an afterthought, this was a safe calculation.

“I need your expertise,” Brontë explained.

“At navigating eight jumps?”

“For certain matters on Hokkaido Station.”

Velocity sipped her brandy. “Who needs killing?”

“No one. I need help with my aunt. Torres Ikeda Alonzo. But I don’t need her death. Just...your troubleshooting expertise.” Brontë scrubbed at her mouth with a closed fist, and added, “Torres has six of my bonded workers. She’s refusing to release them.”

Velocity grunted. A property dispute. Property dispute resolutions tended to be relatively simple, if a little dull. Also, as an exile from the Combines, she would be more adept at handling their policies than most here on the Bucket, the child was right about that. She found herself tempted. On the other hand, like most exiles, Velocity kept an eye on the politics of the Inner Core. Six months earlier, Ikeda-Verde Combine had weathered a coup—a hostile takeover, as the Combines

called such things. The Ikeda House Board had lost its Primary Seat Holder, Dhia Ikeda Hayek, who had only held the Primary Seat for a few years. Dhia had been killed in a perfectly reasonable shuttle accident, along with two heirs to the Seat, and twenty incidental bonded workers. Directly afterwards, several other heirs to the Seat had also died, in various other accidents and illnesses. Last Velocity had heard, inheritance issues and stock prices were shaking out all over the Republic. “You’re an Ikeda,” Velocity said, making sure.

“Nowhere in the line.”

It was a fact that Velocity didn’t remember a Brontë Ikeda anywhere along the line to inherit in Ikeda House. Ikeda-Verde Combine was ranked sixth among the top ten Combines currently in power, so its Board Seat members and their direct heirs, particularly the heirs to the Primary Seats, were straight enough in her memory. However, it was also true that every heir to the Ikeda House Primary Seat she knew off-hand was dead now. After a moment, she toggled her inskull uplink and ran an Orly. Torres Ikeda—Torres Umi Alicia Ikeda Alonzo—popped right up. She was in the line to inherit, currently ranked a tentative eleventh for the Primary Seat on the Ikeda House Board—tentative because at least five heirs in front of her were only missing-presumed-dead.

The search for Brontë Ikeda came back null. But given that Brontë was no more this child’s register name than Velocity was hers, that meant nothing. Capturing an image of the child, Velocity ran another search. Null again. This also meant nothing. Most Combines kept images and captures of their minor children off-nexus for just this reason—so scrod like Velocity couldn’t pirate their images in the public sphere, see who they were, and decide the snatch was worth the stick.

“I don’t involve myself in Combine power struggles,” Velocity mentioned.

The unnatural blue eyes shifted, taking her measure. “This would be a stupidly indirect way of fighting for a Board Seat, Captain Wrachant.”

Velocity grinned. “Good point. Well, tell me what you want. Specifically.”

“You’ll do it?”

“I didn’t say that. Start talking.”



Hell’s Bucket, a Free Trade concern, was stinking, leaking, and overcrowded, the sort of station where you wore your skinsuit and kept your eye on the nearest e-kits. Velocity had spent more time docked here since leaving Dresden than she liked to remember; and even here—Brontë was right—her credit stood short. Brooding, she took the lift three levels out from the concourse to Station Security.

Security: hah. Thieves, more like. Though berths were cheap on the Bucket, bribes made up for it. Luckily, the current lot were willing to take theirs in trade, skilled techs being rare this side of the Drift. “Your boy’s not done,” the Station Security officer on the gate said as she came through the hatch. “Another three, four hours’ work yet.”

Velocity looked at the wallboard behind the gate, though she didn’t need external clocks, not with her inskull uplink. “Midwatch. That was our deal.”

“Yah, well, he’s a lazy bit of ship filth. You didn’t tell us that.”

“We can re-negotiate more work for more pay. Until then, give up my tech.”

The Security argued, which Velocity expected. The Bucket, like most Free Trade space, saw a deal (negotiated, agreed upon, witnessed) as more theory than obligation. Velocity kept her boots firmly on the line. Freeters treated anything like civility as a request to be robbed. The Security was restating his main point a third time, louder, when Rida emerged from the back corridor, slipping the strap of his tool case over his head.

“Captain,” he said, walking past the gate.

“Hey! Hey!” The Security rose.

“Your boss has my call sign,” Velocity said, her palm on her Vyai short rifle.

The Security bellowed his argument for the fourth time: “You’re on our dock, you’ll follow our rules!”

As if the Bucket had rules. Rida kept going. Velocity ducked through the hatch, following him. “I hate this place,” Rida said, when she caught up.

“He’s just making noise.”

“Some shift here, you’ll come find me impounded. How much noise do you plan to make then?”

Velocity moved a little closer to him, matching her steps to his. “Tai and I wouldn’t let that happen.” Rida shot her an angry look. “Good news,” Velocity said, changing the subject. “We might have a job.”

They had come to the lift; Rida leaned on its call panel. “Another plumbing job? Another job chipping rust from some idiot’s boards?”

“A real job.”

“One that pays in crap or one that pays in shit?”

“Mzala.” She cupped the back of his neck, and then squeezed his shoulder. He scowled more darkly. The lift opened, and they got inside. A weeping stationer, skinny and bruised, darted up the corridor, calling for them to hold the lift. Rida hit shut instead. “That wasn’t kind,” Velocity reproved.

“He just wants to run a con on us,” Rida said, “like every other freet on the Bucket.”

Since he was probably right, Velocity didn’t argue. Instead, she told him about the Hokkaido job—only the outline, since she’d have to repeat it for Tai. She played up the rescue part of the job, how they were being hired to retrieve some bonded labor. The disgruntled expression didn’t leave Rida’s face. “Retrieve,” he said flatly. “Not set free. Get them back so this Combine silk can keep them under contract.”

Velocity didn’t mind this reaction. Back when Rida had been new to her ship, he would never have let her see his temper, much less

argued with her. She much preferred this irascible Rida to the polite, frightened child he had been then. “They’re being held as hostages. That can’t be pleasant for them. And Brontë seems nice enough.”

“A nice enough slaveholder,” Rida said.

The dock-level concourse was, as usual, swarming with beggars, buskers, and thieves. A tiny girl sold puppies from a basket; another, rebuilt handhelds from the back of a tuk-tuk. Water dripped from the overhead; the grimy deck was patched with scraps of metal and plastic. As she followed Rida, two little boys tap-dancing in a chalked-out circle called out, “Pesa! Pesa!”

Free Trade stations loved hard money. Velocity dug out a few coins and tossed them over. Even after all these years in the Drift, she had a hard time believing the brass discs were actually worth anything, but the kids scrambled after them.

Their berth was blissfully quiet. Velocity coded open the dock gate and locked it behind them, and they crossed their yard—empty at the moment of any cargo—to the umbilical gate. Both of them ducked into the umbilical. Rida reset its lock behind them. Tai’s voice came through the feed: “Meal’s ready, but I can hold if you want a scrub first.”

Velocity climbed on up to the galley while Rida bathed. Dinner was bean pau, served with sugar melon. Velocity opened a flask of Rustin white, figuring to help the discussion go down better. She explained the job to Tai while she did. Scrubbed and dressed only in clean canvas shorts, Rida climbed through the hatch when she was halfway through the story and her first bowl of wine. “A Combine Security officer?” Tai said doubtfully as she finished.

“A passenger,” Velocity said, “who’s fetching along her own security.”

Tai filled a bowl for Rida. Tall and lanky, with black eyes and brown skin, Tai wore his hair long. On most planets in the Republic, those in the contract labor system had their heads shaved, supposedly to control vermin. Though Tai had been years on the *Susan Calvin*, he’d come up in the system, and maybe never would leave that experience

entirely behind. Rida, short, round, and very good looking, his eyes smudged with thick lashes, had different nightmares in his past.

“She’s still Combine Security, Captain,” Tai said, handing Rida the dish.

“And that’s beyond the central point,” Rida said. “How the job makes us slavecatchers.”

“It does not,” Velocity said. Rida snorted, and Velocity added, “Hokkaido is three jumps to the other side of the Drift and it’s a nothing job, for which this Combine child will pay us enough to clear our slate. It will give us room to look for legitimate work.”

“Blood money,” Rida said.

Glumly Velocity poured the last of the wine into her bowl. The alternative was kiting out on their debts. Orleans-Vijo Combine held massive liens against the *Susan Calvin*. A few had come with the ship when Velocity bought her, but others she had been forced to incur over the years, for repairs and refueling. Paying them back had begun to seem impossible. Even keeping up with the interest payments was rough. More and more lately she had considered just running. They could jump further out system, cross the Drift into Pirian space.

Except the problem with *that* was they were not Pirians. If you weren’t in the fleet, you were last in line for any job at a Pirian station. Velocity had heard rumors that unaffiliated ships could buy into the fleet—that they could, in effect, become Pirians. She had no idea whether these rumors were true, or what it meant to become part of the Pirian fleet. She suspected, given the Pirian attitude toward owning things, it would mean giving over ownership of her ship. Anyway it didn’t matter. She didn’t have funds to buy shares in a box of bees these days. “It’s a soft job,” she repeated. “Basic work, big pay-out.”

“Too much payout,” Tai pointed out, “considering what we’re being hired to do.”

Velocity chipped at the rim of her bowl with her thumbnail. She had noticed that herself. “Maybe they’re just too green to know the going rate. Rich kid, out here on the edge for the first time.” Tai looked

doubtful. Rida scowled. “We won’t let them bring weapons aboard. Also,” Velocity tapped her forehead, just above her left eyebrow, more or less where her inskull uplink was seated, “I can watch them.”

Tai took a breath, as if to argue, and then just ran his hands through his hair, which he wore loose here under station weight. The uplink let her access the ship’s grid directly—let her monitor every feed in the ship—so she could, theoretically, monitor their passengers non-stop.

Furthermore, almost certainly neither Brontë nor her Security would suspect that Velocity had an uplink. Inskull links were even less common in Republic space than they were here in the Drift—here, they were uncommon due to the expense and because Pirians, who might have afforded them, considered them *adaiya*—*out of balance, wrongly done*. Only someone who was *adaiya*, to the Pirian way of thinking, would commit so much in resources for so small a gain. In Republic space, the links were both proscribed and believed to be insanely dangerous. Not without reason, either: medical care and skill in Republic space being what they were, the risk of infection both with the initial surgery and along the port was much higher than it was in Pirian space.

“We’re a hundred and twenty watches on the Bucket now,” Velocity said. “This is the only serious job offer that’s come near us. It’s this or I start renting one of you out for real.”

Rida flinched, and Tai shot Velocity an exasperated glance. “She’s joking, Ridashi. Maybe run a deep Orly first, at least? Rid can do it without tripping flags.”

“That’s fine. How long will it take?”

Rida gave her the sort of nervous look he used to give her when he was new to the ship. “Maybe,” he said, and licked his upper lip, “if I can use premium channels, maybe two watches? Or three. If I have to use basic, three or four.”

“Use premium.” Velocity squeezed his shoulder, smiling. “Let me know what you find. I’m going to grab some pit.”



She looked back from the hatch: Tai had an arm around Rida, murmuring in his ear. Guilt heating her belly, Velocity dropped down into the trail.

In the scrub outside the pit, she woke the dagan via her uplink while pulling off her station gear. Her jih was stuffed in her locker, where she had left it more than six watches back. She sniffed the fabric, shrugged, and pulled the suit on. She did the waistband with the correct thief knot, and then ducked through the flap hatch into the pit.

The dagan was emerging from the gear locker, its flex-skin rippling. The “real” dagan, if you could use the word real for something built of code, lived in a program uploaded to the ship’s brain. This mechanical body was only a tool it used, here in the pit. The pit itself was large for a ship’s cabin, with several of its planes flattened—it was like being inside a buckyball. Velocity settled to the surface which, under the push of the station, was its deck, and set about stretching. The dagan, its dark face peaceful, mimicked her motions, just as if its muscles were organic, as if they needed warming up. “It’s been seven watches since our last session,” the dagan noted.

Velocity rolled to her knees and began stretching her shoulders. “I’ve been busy.”

Behind its eyes, the slight flicker that meant the dagan was accessing its link. “You’ve been in the station bistros.”

Velocity had bought the dagan some years back from a Pirian rebuild shop on Surya Station, both because it was cheap and because Indaiyi was supposed to be the best general purpose workout around. Unfortunately, with Pirians you couldn’t separate the mystical from the practical. Also the dagan never shut up. Part of its programming, undoubtedly: every Pirian Velocity had ever met was three-fifths amazingly helpful and two-fifths non-stop lecture.

Only much later had Velocity understood that the primary function of the dagan was subversion. When she’d understood this, she’d felt more stupid than betrayed. Of course it was here to subvert her. It was Pirian. Subversion was what they did.

“So you found work,” the dagan said now, moving into the first position for First String.

Velocity followed the dagan’s lead as they moved through First String and then First Following String. This was one she had trouble with, due to old breaks in the bones of her left forearm and hand. She ignored the pain as they spun through the rolls, just as she ignored the ache of her bones on cold stations.

“Shady work,” the dagan added.

“Oh, please,” Velocity said. “Who said that?”

“Keep your head up as you turn. You can’t see the enemy if you’re watching your feet. Combine money?” the dagan added. “Or Free Trade?”

“Why would I mind taking money off some fret?”

They finished the warm-up, and Velocity attacked, choosing Borrasca, a string which worked better with weight. The dagan countered, dropping its center of gravity and turning around that center to catch her and roll with her. Shortly she was pinned beneath it. She smacked the mat, and the dagan slipped away, back into Awarê stance.

Velocity retreated, breathing deeply. *Remember to breathe*: that had been the second lesson. Right after: *Run away if you can*. She put herself into attack stance, thinking what to try next. The dagan waited, its dark eyes calm. “No lecture?” Velocity asked, in a useless attempt at distraction. “Don’t I get to hear what a fool I am, to deal with the Combines again?”

“If you know it’s dangerous, why do you need to hear it from me?”

Velocity leapt into Fohla. The dagan pivoted, grabbed her elbow and bicep, torqued up on the elbow and down on the bicep, and slammed her forward. Velocity got her shoulder under her in time for a roll and let the momentum spin her to her feet. The dagan gave her a nod of approval. Half of fighting was learning to fall. That had been the third lesson. “How much choice do you think I have?” Velocity

insisted, her breathing ragged. “My crew needs food, fuel, and a ship.”

“You should consider your other motives in taking this job.”

Velocity flung herself into a very sloppy Yu attack. Not bothering with a counter, the dagan slid sidelong, out of the way. *Run away if you can.* Velocity hit the wall with a thump.

“This child is not your sister,” the dagan said. “Helping her now won’t absolve you of what you did then.”

Abruptly, Velocity stood straight. “End session.”

She knew it was impossible, but as the dagan shut down and folded itself back into the locker, she thought she saw reproach in its mechanical eyes. Annoyed, mostly with herself, Velocity left the pit and climbed up to the sauna. She set the long cycle going and while it ran made a list via her uplink of everything she needed to get done if they took this job, and then a secondary list, of what she might do if they didn’t take the job. The second list was much shorter than the first. She’d run them out of options, or at least the debt on the ship had. Alice, her sister, had nothing to do with it.

The drying cycle started. She shut her eyes while the hot air buffeted her, refusing to think about her sister, or any of that which had happened so long ago.

## Chapter 2

### Hell in a Bucket, Free Trade Station, The Drift

**A**s usual when Rida had a problem to solve, he went at it non-stop. Tai did pit, made dinner for everyone—taking a bowl up to Rida, since he wouldn't remember to eat otherwise—and then climbed through the ship to their rack.

It occurred to him as he unbuckled their bunk, yawning, to wonder if the Captain had considered the problem of housing their passengers. Exhausted by the double watches he'd served, he spent no time worrying about this. Instead, he fell into sleep almost as soon as he'd strapped into the bunk. Since they were at dock, and under push, he didn't have to strap in. But after all this time on the ship, he slept better when he did.

Some long time later Rida unstrapped the bunk just enough to slide in with him. "Mm," Tai said, only half awake, moving to make room. When Rida had strapped them in again, Tai wrapped himself around him. "You smell awful."

"Too tired to scrub."

Tai nuzzled his shoulder. "What time is it?"

"Afterwatch third." Rida burrowed down into the bunk, fighting for a share of the pillow. Tai let him have it. Rida took his hand and held it against his own chest. "I'm not finding much."

"There's a shock."

Rida grunted. “I need an image of her Security. If I had that, I could hunt her out.”

Tai wrapped himself more closely around Rida, the weight and warmth of his rounded muscles easing something deep inside him, as it always did. “You’re working too hard,” he murmured. “You don’t have to work this hard.”

“Not like I can sleep anyway. Not with the Captain bringing these silks on ship, to do who knows what to us.”

“Hush,” Tai said, hugging him close. “Hush now, Ridashi. We’ll be fine.”

Rida shoved back with an elbow. “You don’t know that. You don’t know everything will be fine. Not anymore than she does.”

Tai pulled him close again, kissing his shoulder. “Did I ever tell you about when I was a kid in the orphanage on Sarat?”

“Is this the story about how you rooked fruit from the bosses’ garden or the one about how you’d hide up in the adit, ditch work weeks at a stretch?”

Tai bit his shoulder this time. Rida banged back harder with the elbow. “Mkashi,” Tai said. “No, this is the one about how every year or two, the bosses would run a cull.”

Under his hands, Rida’s muscles went tight. “They what?”

“Sarat didn’t fund orphanages all that well. Also, the bosses had to have their cut of the funds. So when the board money ran short, they’d line us up, all of us old enough to stand—they didn’t cull the babies—and the boss would go down the line, pulling out jesses. They’d take the culls out to the pit, that was this old shaft that was played out, shoot them, drop the bodies down the pit.”

Rida was silent.

“We used to—all of us, in the orphanage—we’d talk and talk, trying to see what it was, how the bosses decide who to cull. What we could do,” Tai explained, “so they’d choose someone else, not us. Keep our gear mended. Keep clean. Stand up straight. Look them in the eye. Don’t look them in the eye. We watched, we just—we worked

*so hard*, love, trying to understand what it was they did wrong. Our brothers. Our bunkmates. Why they'd been culled. What they had done, so we would not do it." Tai hugged Rida tight, all his own muscles hard at the memory. "But they hadn't done anything. They died because the board money was short."

"You're saying there's nothing I can do," Rida said.

"Well, eventually, maybe. Eventually I was in a place where I could do something. But when I was nine? Nothing." Tai shifted, moving even closer to Rida. "Sometimes, when there's nothing you can do, you have to wait until there's something you can do. And fretting yourself sick when you can't do anything, that's not useful."

Rida was quiet. Tai didn't know if this meant he was thinking, or if it meant he was angry, or what it meant. Rida had come up in a tech house on Tija Station, raised up as an apprentice. Up until he ran out on his indenture at sixteen, he'd had a soft life. Or at least it always sounded soft to Tai, no work except tech work, getting fed every day, never mind no one with a gun to his neck. "Captain's meeting them again, Midwatch next," Tai offered. "Go with. Get an image of the Security then."

Rida turned in his arms and reached up to cup his face. "If I'd been in that orphanage with you," he said, "we'd have figured out something to do."

Tai smiled. "I'm glad you weren't," he said, and kissed the sweet place next to his eye. With a dozy murmur, Rida relaxed entirely, falling to sleep. Tai lay drowsing beside him for some time, trying to fall back to sleep himself. Eventually he unbuckled the bunk and slid out.

He was thinking of an hour or two of pit, followed by a session in the scrub, his usual remedy for these dark angry moods, but when he emerged from their rack, he saw the galley lights were up. Climbing up through the trail, he peered through the galley hatch: the Captain, tucked into the booth with her legs folded under her, drinking coffee and working via her uplink, to judge by how her eyes were flickering.

In her leather leggings and a long-sleeved undershirt, she looked the same she always did to Tai: long, lean, and tasty.

He climbed into the galley, and headed for the coffee. The Captain always made it too strong, but he filled a bowl for himself anyway. Hunting out the tube of condensed milk, he squeezed in thirty or forty milliliters. “Are we running short of biscuits?” he asked, settling in the booth across from the Captain. She shot him a distracted glance, and he moved his chin at her. “Is that what that face means?”

“Oh.” She grimaced, and then twitched her left eye, shutting down her uplink. The angular, crooked bones of her face settled into a disgruntled scowl. “Just running data on Ikeda-Verde Combine. Their boards and history.”

Tai didn’t know much about IVC specifically. Taveri-Bowers had held the mines on Sarat. “Good people, are they?”

“I hate this,” the Captain said, brooding. “It’s why I left Dresden, to get away from crap like this.”

“I thought you left because you didn’t want to die for a Board Seat.”

She turned her bowl of coffee like a top, setting it spinning on the table. “Well, keeping my head on my neck, that was *some* of it,” she agreed. He laughed at her and smiling faintly she spun the coffee again. “Machiavellian pirates,” she said. “To read their history, you’d think they spent their time building wonders instead of plotting how best to cut each other’s throats.”

“What does Ikeda-Verde do?” Tai asked. “Besides cut throats, I mean.”

She spun the bowl once again. “Science, mostly. They’re the Combine that works up most of the nanotrope protocols for the settlement planets.”

“Or not,” Tai said, thinking of Sarat, which had been minimally ’tropol. Speculation in the barracks had given any number of reasons why this had been so—why TBC had settled a planet and then never rebuilt it—but in fact, he knew, as with the bosses at his orphanage,

the simplest explanation was the best. Cheaper to let jesses die young from the hostile environment than to pay what this IVC wanted for the rebuild.

“Or not,” the Captain agreed. Her eyes were distant, turned inward, lost in some memory. “These two will be like that,” she added. “Funds before everything. I’m like that half the time, if you notice.”

Tai stayed silent, politely. The Captain reached out and caught the bowl, stopping it mid-spin. “You don’t have to put up with it, from them,” she said. “If this Combine child starts treating you like she’s got your contract, or the Security does, you let me know. You don’t have to stand for that. Not on this ship.”

“Rida fell asleep,” Tai said. Confused by this sudden swerve, the Captain squinted. “Right in the middle of my very best allurements,” he added, and gave her a wickedly smutty look through his lashes. “What about you?”

“What about me? Are you asking if I can stay awake through your best allurements?”

Tai laughed again. “A challenge,” he said, and picking up her bowl took both it and his to the sterilizer. When he turned, she was studying him, the disgruntled, unhappy look gone. Most of what he had been after, he had to admit. He took her hand and pulled her toward her cabin.



Four watches after their first meeting, Velocity met with Brontë again. Rida accompanied her. He was sullen as they were prepping to leave the ship. Velocity knew what was bothering him. She almost always did. Like when she’d had him rented to the cop shop: Rida hated being around Security, he hated being left on his own on a Free Trade Station, he hated when anyone—but especially Security—started shouting. Not hard to see why he’d been ill-tempered then. This time, she knew, it was the job. He didn’t like any aspect of this job, and he



especially didn't like that they were taking Combine holders aboard the ship.

This second meeting with the Combine child was set for a teashop spinward in the stockholder's quat. Unlike Velocity's usual tank, the teashop was shiny clean, with bamboo deck covers and interesting art on the bulkheads. Brontë awaited them in a private booth, eating sherbet with ferocious concentration. On the bench next to her, the Security. Tall, with shorn hair, gray eyes, and thin pale lips, she wore a fancy Combine skinsuit, black on black, her muscles outlined crisp through its fabric. Brontë wore the same grimy swat she'd worn in the bistro.

Velocity got right to the point: "Dock and fuel fees up front, and half of the bonus. You provide that, we have a deal."

Sucking on her straw, Brontë squinted. "You expect the bonus up front."

Velocity shrugged. "Good faith payment."

"I'll pay a third up front."

This was more than Velocity had expected to get, frankly. "I'll also need data tags for everyone taking passage," she added, at which Brontë scowled. "It's a standard request."

"If our funds clear, that should be all the data you need."

"That might be true in the Core," Velocity said, though she knew better. "Not out here."

Disgruntled, Brontë scooped out a bit of glacé fruit and chewed on it. At length, her expression still discontented, she said, "Sabra, do you have our tags?"

"I'm afraid not," the Security said. "We can get them to you by next watch."

Velocity smiled. "Also, you'll bring no weapons aboard my ship." This time, the Security reacted, her chin lifting, her mouth flattening. "Will that be an issue?"

"I have weapons," Sabra said. "Yes."

"And you don't wish to leave them behind."

Sabra pulled an immense short rifle from her hip holster and laid it precisely on the table. “No,” she said. “I do not.”

Rida had drawn back. Velocity gave the Security a steady look. “A Lopaka, yes? But I don’t know that model.”

“It’s new,” Sabra said. “Lopaka TAC-20 Plasma short range. Developed for close use on stations and ships. Fifty bolts per minute. Precise within twenty meters. Three hundred bolts per magazine. And it travels with me.”

Velocity smiled again. “Not on my ship.”

Sabra stared at her. Velocity stared straight back. Beside her, Rida was stone-still. “Perhaps,” Sabra said eventually, “we can reach a compromise position.”

The compromise was that Sabra would send her weapons in a crate beforehand and Velocity would lock them in the ship’s armory. No one was happy about this. On the other hand, during Afterwatch Second the local debt enforcers had come by their gate, wondering with less civility than usual when Velocity would make payment on her deck fees. And this wasn’t Pirian space, either, where if you didn’t make your payments everyone got together and worked out a nice civilized solution.

At breakfast, Tai had pointed out another issue—berthing. The *Susan Calvin*, a merchant ship requiring minimal crew, had minimal living space. Finding berths for two more, even if one of them massed under 40 kilos, was a tricky proposition. (Rida had suggested locking the passengers in the brig. Velocity was almost certain he was joking.) The sole empty cabin was too small to house two passengers. Its single bunk, when deployed, nearly filled the available space, and it had only one tiny locker. Also, because it was near the hull, it had much less overhead than any of the other cabins.

Velocity and Tai debated logistics at length—it was like one of those riddles with a snake, a mouse, and a bucket of corn—before finally deciding that Tai and Rida would move into the smaller cabin and let their passengers bunk in their (slightly larger) cabin. Velocity

imagined that, for the amount she was paying out, their Combine child would think as little of this solution as her Security did of leaving her weapons in Velocity's armory during their trip.

Moving Tai and Rida meant packing up and storing most of their gear, since there was no room for it in the small cabin. Since Rida was still running the search for Brontë's identity, as well as packing the code for their jump out of Bucket, this task fell to Velocity and Tai. There wasn't much to move—neither Tai nor Rida had a great deal of personal property—but it still made six respectable bundles before they were done. “Storing them in the brig sounds better every minute,” Tai said, as they dragged the first bundles through the trail.

“Also, then we could keep them locked up,” Velocity said.

“Exactly.”

“They're passengers, not prisoners.”

“They're Core,” Tai said. “Worse, they're Combine. Pirates, not passengers.” He used the Pirian word for pirate, *gado*, which everywhere in the Drift, even among the Free Traders, half of whom *were* pirates, was a vile insult. Velocity glanced at him, and then shoved her bundle through the hatch into the hold, and climbed down after it.

It was dusky down here, the chill air scented with industrial solvent as well as the crates of spices in the cargo they'd hauled here to Hell in a Bucket. Ten or twelve of these crates remained, unsold among the new cargo they had loaded: web-packed Pirian-manufactured medicals, fifteen crates of wine, bundles of Pirian silk. These should all fetch prime prices over the line in Republic Space.

The brig sat in the center of the hold—'brig' being a fancy name for a strap-iron cage bolted to the deck of the hold, with only a suction tube for waste and no scrub at all. Right now it was packed full with some of their more fragile cargo. Velocity regarded it while Tai was strapping the bundles into cargo netting. “I get that I'm from the Core,” she said, “but what you're forgetting is that I'm from the Core. I grew up in a Combine. I survived that, and I've survived years in the Drift and in Free Trade space. I might be silk, but I'm not a fool.”

Tai smiled, the crooked, half-broken smile she had thought was long gone from his face. He moved close to her, reaching to straighten the collar on her shirt. “I know we have to do this,” he said. “Rida knows it too.”

“But.”

He smiled again. “But it’s still Combine Security, not to mention a Combine holder.”

Velocity bit down on her first hard answer. He was right. This was a bad decision, a bad risk. That it was their best choice didn’t make the risk any less. *You do what you have to do.* “I won’t let anything happen to you,” she said. “Either of you.”

His smile went a little more crooked. “I know you won’t, Captain,” he said, and turned back to work.



“That’s the Security?” Tai stood restless by the umbilical hatch. He wore a loose jersey over green and orange Pirian silk-knit leggings. His hair fell down his back in about fifty braids, liberally decorated with multi-colored beads. He and Rida had been bored. A tuk-tuk powered by two barefoot boys stopped by their gate. Brontë Ikeda climbed from it, scowling. A second tuk-tuk came rattling through the crowd; Sabra got out, reaching back to haul baggage onto the dock.

“Captain Sabra Walker,” Velocity said. “She’s got wonderful manners.”

Tai grunted. “You could barely tell those tags she shipped us were forged.”

Sabra paid the boy peddling her tuk-tuk, and went to pay the other two as well, leaving the baggage unguarded. Of course a kid from the concourse darted in to make a grab for it. Brontë, who had not seemed to be paying any mind, whirled and kicked the thief’s feet out from under him. Sabra shouted; the thief’s crew scattered into the crowd. Brontë, knee planted on the thief’s neck, snarled. Sabra gathered up

the baggage. Only then did Brontë let the thief go, rising to her feet and backing away. The thief bolted. Brontë stood watching him go.

“Huh,” Tai said. Velocity grunted agreement. Brontë and Sabra came toward the *Calvin*, Sabra lugging all the baggage. Velocity pushed the gate open.

Their passengers made no objection to the shared cabin, nor to Tai’s announcement concerning housekeeping. “We handle maintenance,” he said. “But no one’s going to clean up after you. Also, the only meal served is at Mainwatch Third. You’re on your own otherwise.”

“Mainwatch?” Brontë said with delicate contempt. Sabra’s lashes lowered.

“Tai will give you a brief on shiptime later,” Velocity said. “Hours and minutes are universal time. It’s Midwatch First now. Rid, how are we with station break?”

“Sawa sawa,” Rida said. He and Tai climbed into the com.

Velocity stayed in the galley another moment. “We’re breaking dock in,” she checked her uplink, “half an hour UT. Heading out toward the jump point at a quarter push. That’ll give us about point three gee, here on the ship. Six hours to jump at that push. I don’t expect you to stay in your cabin that entire time. But pit is locked down, as is the galley. Cold meals only, and I’d prefer passengers in skinsuits.” She paused, eying Brontë. “You do have suits?”

“Yes, Captain,” Brontë said.

“I’ll issue sedatives if anyone needs them.” Some people were bothered by jump, and preferred to sleep through it.

“We’ll be fine,” Brontë said.

Velocity glanced past her, at Sabra, and just nodded again. “We’ll talk after jump,” she said, and climbed up into the com.



## About the Author

Raised in New Orleans, Kelly Jennings is a member and co-founder of the Boston Mountain Writers Group. Her short fiction has appeared in many venues, including *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the anthology *The Other Half of The Sky*. The story she published in that anthology, “Velocity’s Ghost,” was given an honorable mention in *The Year’s Best Science Fiction 2014*. Her first novel, *Broken Slate*, was published in 2011. She is a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America.





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