

# In the Deep

Kelly Jennings





## Praise for *In the Deep*

...as gritty and complex as the first novel-length adventure... // Strongly reminiscent of C.J Cherryh at her best.

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

*In the Deep* evoked for me // space opera at its best: C.J. Cherryh, Lois M Bujold, Arkady Martine, and Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Jennings offers character development and worldbuilding in spades to make a fractally complicated universe that feels real and lived in.

— Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer and Hugo finalist

## 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*

*Fault Lines (Escape Velocity 1)*

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) which became the kernel story for *Fault Lines*.

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To my mother, Shelbylynn Jennings,  
my first reader, gone too soon.





# Chapter 1

## Commercial Space Station Webster-1, Planet Durbin, in the Deep

**N**o one thinks it's a silver bullet." Corvo paused. "Do you have that term? Silver bullet?"

Velocity toggled her inskull uplink and ran an Orly. "Werewolves?" she said dubiously.

Corvo laughed. "This action is one of many. This is all we mean."

They had reached a junction on Webster-1's main concourse. Velocity paused, looking up and down the side corridors. In every direction, nothing but shadows and shuttered hatchways. On the bulkhead directly before them, a capture of Durbin, the planet below, stuttered and glitched as it turned. It was the only movement anywhere—no one stirred along the long curving lengths of the dusky corridors. They hadn't seen a single person on this station so far, which was beyond strange. True, like many settlement planets, especially those out here in the Deep, Durbin had problems maintaining its population. But even so, this was the sole commercial station in the entire system. Velocity would have expected at least some traffic. She toggled her uplink again and sent a query to Uri back on the ship. *Is there anyone on this station?*

Uri, their quasi-spiritual martial arts instructor, was a Pirian-

manufactured AI sold as a dagan—an Indaiya tutor. He replied promptly: *Station manifest shows six hundred and eleven permanent residents.*

Velocity frowned. For a station this size, that was dangerously underpopulated. Ten times that number would be underpopulated. Catching up to them, Tai shook his head. The multicolored beads that decorated his dozens of braids clattered faintly in all the silence. “This is like a horror animate. Where is everyone?”

The empty corridors were making Velocity edgy as well. She and her crew had spent the past year and a half, universal time, in Pirian space. Pirian stations were filled with light and color, animate murals and hard paintings, music, buskers, the spicy scent of various teas, and swarms of people. Not only was this station dark and empty, it stank of sweat and old solvents. Furthermore, its walls sported only pus-yellow anti-fungal paint. The capture of Durbin was the first attempt at art they’d seen. No directories, either. But also entirely ineffective shieldwalls—Uri had gone through them, as he put it, like an open door. Now he spoke through her uplink: *Go right, then right again. You want the second unit down.*

Velocity glanced right and saw a faint light from the corridor in question. She pointed with her chin. “That’s us.”

Down the corridor, they found an unmarked kiosk. Its door was open, and inside its tiny space sat a single agent, slouched behind a bolted-down worktable, watching something on her port. When Velocity appeared, the woman grimaced and pulled off her headset. “You’d be Captain Wrachant.”

“I would,” Velocity agreed. “Are you the Assistant Minister of Trade Odessa Lee?”

“Assistant *to* the Minister of Trade.” Lee looked Velocity over. Like Corvo and Tai, Velocity was wearing a skinsuit, the standard wear for any environment you didn’t entirely trust. These were plain grey suits with their ship’s name, *Susan Calvin*, across the back. From the twitch of the woman’s mouth, skinsuits were not

common on Webster Station. Lee brought up the file Velocity had submitted. “You want a trade license.”

“Sorry, no. That’s not correct.” Velocity reached to tap the *Return to Top* link on Lee’s tablet screen, and then tapped the emblem that linked to her trade license. “We already have a trade license, good for all planets affiliated with Ikeda-Verde Combine.”

Hayek-Lopaka Combine held the main trade lease here on Durbin. But Ikeda-Verde had an affiliate license. This was why the Pirians had chosen Velocity and her ship for this job. One of the reasons.

Lee’s mouth twisted as she scanned through the trade license. It had been written and vetted by Ikeda House lawyers, so Velocity wasn’t worried. At least, she wasn’t worried about the trade license. While Lee read, Velocity looked about the compartment. Nothing on the walls, nothing on the deck. Odd. In her experience, people always personalized their work space. Lee’s workspace didn’t have even a slap-up of her favorite holiday spot. “You’re here to sell medical supplies?” Lee said.

“We’re here to establish a trade syndicate.” Velocity paused. “You did receive my request for an appointment with the Minister of Trade?”

Lee spun back up through the trade license, and then jumped to the main documents for the *Susan Calvin*. “You’ll have to petition Madame Drury for an appointment.”

*Avril Drury is chief clerk for the Minister of Trade*, Uri mentioned helpfully.

Every Republic planet was like this: layers upon layers of bureaucracy. Sometimes it seemed like bureaucracy was the Republic’s main export. “All right,” Velocity said. “Let’s do that.”

“Have to do it in person,” Lee said. “Downplanet.”

“Surely we can arrange for an appointment via the nexus?”

“Appointments taken in person only.” Lee scratched her armpit. “Next shuttle departs in thirty-nine hours.”

“In...thirty-nine hours.”

“Universal time. You won’t be allowed on the shuttle without a current health certificate signed by one of our physicians. Clinic hours are twelve to fifteen hundred.”

Velocity blinked. “You can’t be serious.”

Lee looked up. For the first time, she smiled. “Welcome to Durbin.”



“Downplanet?” Rida glanced at Tai. Though they looked nothing alike—Rida being round with a thatch of thick short hair, while Tai was tall and lean with long silky hair—they looked for a flash of a second identical, united in their delight. They both knew how much Velocity hated planets.

“Oh, hush.” She pulled her undershirt over her head. They were in the umbilical cabin, redressing after going through decon. “Uri, call a meeting in the galley. Ten minutes.”

“Yes, Captain.” The AI replied through the ship’s feeds instead of through her uplink, since Velocity had voiced her command aloud. In a moment, she heard him repeating the message throughout the ship. Tai, already dressed—he seldom wore more than leggings aboard ship—climbed after Rida, his long legs taking the ladder two rungs at a time.

Corvo, cross-legged on the bench by the umbilical, tugged on the swat many Pirians wore instead of a shirt—a band of cloth that tucked around their chest and over one shoulder. This one was orange, green, and bright yellow. Pirians liked bright colors. Golden-skinned, with a smooth cap of dark hair and bright dark eyes, Corvo was old enough to be Velocity’s grandmother. Like many Pirians, she had broad cheekbones and a round face. “You are unhappy that we must visit the planet?” she asked.

Velocity buttoned her vest. “We knew the job would likely take us downplanet.”

Corvo made the sideways head-wobble gesture Pirians used, the meaning of which Velocity still was trying to decipher. Sometimes it seemed to mean *That-might-be-so*. Sometimes it seemed to mean *Tell-me-more*. Sometimes it meant *That's-ridiculous-but-I'm-too-civil-to-say-so*. "When I was young, in Indaiyi sessions, I always ran away. And that is good. Tokalu."

"Get out of the way," Velocity said obligingly, which was more or less what the Pirian word *tokalu* meant.

"But not the only good, my dagan tells me. If we are too quick to run, she says, we miss the luck at the side of our eye."

Velocity scrubbed a towel over her cropped hair, trying to look as if she was thinking deeply about Corvo's words. Pirians loved telling stories, and their point was always that you should ponder them for fifty years and then reach awareness in one bold burst; which was fine, except she had a ship to manage. Corvo smiled and slid to her feet. "Life is daiya, Captain. This is all I mean."

"That's all you ever mean," Velocity pointed out. Corvo laughed, a great burst of hilarity, her head flung back and her mouth thrown wide. It was one of the things Velocity liked best about Corvo, the way she laughed with all her body. Still chuckling, the Pirian climbed after Tai and Rida. Velocity sat to pull on her ship boots, smiling herself, but also brooding. Speaking to Uri through her link, she asked, *What about the planetary shieldwalls?*

*Pssh, Uri said. The security here is pathetic. Years out of date. Unless we need access to Combine coffers, we should be fine. The real problem is the one we discussed earlier.*

*Insufficient satellite cover.*

*Correct.*

The trade lease system as practiced by the Combines was in theory beneficial to all parties. The way it worked, in theory, was that in exchange for a trade lease on a planet, a given Combine made credit available to those who settled the planet. This credit allowed settlers to buy necessities like agricultural chemicals

and machinery, domes, space stations, medical supplies, and communication satellites. For planets like Durbin out here in the Deep, thirty or more jumps from the Core, such credit was not usually available. Neither was any reliable market, given how far goods had to be transported. So those in the Deep benefited by having the Combine provide both credit and a market for whatever goods they produced; and the Combine benefited by having a favored status both on the import and export side of the market.

That was the theory. In reality, what usually happened was what was happening here: Hayek-Lopaka Combine issued minimal credit at high interest rates, and prohibited the import or export of any goods without a trade license—which they also issued, at a steep price. The trade lease system wasn't designed to keep planets impoverished, or technologically backwards. It was designed to enrich the Combines. The poverty and inferior tech were just side effects.

Durbin had been settled just over seven hundred years earlier. During its early centuries, Hayek-Lopaka had invested in the planet, since they were using it as a resort. They had 'tropol several islands in the temperate southern hemisphere, furnishing them with Earth-source flora and fauna; they financed resort companies, allowing them to rebuild the islands with beaches and gardens; other companies had rebuilt mountain ranges, creating winter lodges with skiing, skating parks, and other delights. Until recently, most of the profits the Combine extracted from Durbin had come from these resorts. There had been a small population of contract labor on the planet: cooks, kitchen girls, boot boys, groundskeepers, guides.

Then, over the last century, Oz, another Deep planet, got its own far lovelier resorts online. The number of tourists coming to Durbin dropped by half, and Hayek-Lopaka shifted to mining rich seams of lithium and molybdenum in the large barren continent in the northern hemisphere. The Combine withdrew credit from

the resort consortiums, investing instead in miners and mining equipment. There had been a surge in population, most of it contract labor, most from planets and stations scattered through the Deep. Hayek-Lopaka had not increased the credit line necessary to support this population, despite the increase in profits they were extracting from the planet.

Velocity leaned against the cabin wall, her eyes shut, trying to shake off her dark mood before she went up to the galley. She knew the source of her temper, and it wasn't the job. True, the job was risky. Corvo had warned her about that when the Siji council offered it to her. But at that point, the *Susan Calvin* had been in Pirian space for sixteen months. Sixteen months of nothing but wally work—hauling freight out to mining platforms; transporting refugees from Drift stations into Pirian space. Though this work paid well enough, Velocity had known the jobs were tests. Were she and her crew competent? Could they be trusted? Most importantly—from the perspective of the Pirians—were they daiya? She had known that if they didn't take this chance, they would be working wally on the edge of the fleet until they were as old as Corvo. Older. So she took this job and brought her crew here, across the Drift to a Republic planet filled with slaves. To a place where they weren't safe. Again.

Grimacing, Velocity rubbed the bone in her hand, feeling the callus of the old break. Then she let out her breath, got to her feet, and started up the ladder. Since the *Susan Calvin* was in dock, they had station gravity; so it was a hard climb.

As she'd expected, everyone was already in the galley: the two Pirians, Jusuf and Corvo, sitting shoulder to shoulder in the booth; Tai across from them; Rida filling bowls with coffee, made perfectly to everyone's preference. Velocity accepted a bowl (dark, strong, unsweetened) before sliding into the booth. She knew Uri had probably kept everyone updated; nevertheless, she spent some time rehashing what had happened on the station. "It was so

strange,” Tai added when she was done. “Like a ghost station. No one anywhere. Just the Assistant Minister of Trade.”

“Assistant *to* the Minister of Trade,” Uri corrected. He was not physically present. As a mechanical, he did have a physical body, which was currently stowed in its locker in the pit. Velocity had long since removed the governor that restricted the body to that space. He could have brought it to the galley. But mostly he preferred using the ship as his body. He added, “Funding for the station has been reduced every decade for the past five. Currently, Webster-1 is operating at fifteen percent of its peak budget.”

Rida sucked his teeth. “That’s barely enough to run maintenance, a station this size.”

“Marginal at best,” Uri agreed.

“A culture in crisis,” Corvo said. “We knew this.” She sounded pleased: crisis for a Republic planet meant opportunity for Pirians.

On the way back to the ship, Velocity had used her uplink to build an agenda for this meeting. She brought it up now, on the galley wallboard. “First off,” she said. “Everyone going downplanet, I want you at that clinic at twelve hundred hours. Uri, what’s that ship time?”

“Afterwatch half-second,” Uri said. “I’ll give everyone a twenty minute warning.”

“Good. The shuttles here run once every two hundred and fifty hours, and I do not feature sitting on this ship waiting for the next run. Second—” She paused, because Tai had raised his chin. “Yes?”

“What about the *Ruka*?” Tai asked, meaning the *Susan Calvin*’s runabout. “We have enough fuel for a few runs to the planet.”

“Five runs, round-trip,” Uri agreed.

“We’ll keep that in reserve,” Velocity said. “If they’re requiring a health certificate to go down to the surface, we have to assume tight border control. Better to tread softly for this initial contact. Which brings me to point two. I’d like to keep our initial landing party to three.”



Rida, over by the grill, made a sound of protest. Since he had interpreted her correctly, Velocity didn't comment. Tai spoke up: "You. Me. Who else?"

"Oh, you're going, are you?" Rida said. Tai grinned at him. "Captain," Rida objected. "You need a negotiator. That's me, not Tai."

"Negotiation is later. Reconnaissance first. Jusuf will be the third. You and Corvo will work with Uri, up here."

Rida squinted, thinking this through. Jusuf Sungai was a Siji intelligence officer, though the Pirian term was Tactical Second. Unlike Corvo, who had been born to the fleet, Jusuf had been taken in—rescued out of contract labor as a child, and adopted by a Pirian ship. So he didn't look like a typical Pirian: his skin was darker, his face narrow, his body language far more contained. He'd draw less attention than a born-Pirian might, in other words, which was only one of the reasons Velocity had chosen him over Corvo.

"Third point," Velocity said, before Rida could argue further, "everyone has installed their netbots, right?" She glanced around the galley, seeing no dissension. Pirian netbots were a nanotropic device, a closed communication network. Cheaper and less risky than Velocity's own inskull uplink, they used the subject's bones and neural system to create a communication relay. Netbots required access to an AI and were intentionally short-lived, lasting just under a hundred hours, but more certain than pocket docks in a tricky situation. "When does the network go live?" she asked.

"Nine hours from now," Uri said. "Plenty of time."

"Right. Fourth point: We are a peaceful delegation hoping to establish a trade syndicate. On the other hand, we are also a Free Trade ship." Velocity smirked. "I think we can get away with a few weapons."

Tai gave her his crooked grin. "Define few."

"Nothing above a Sema snub." She pointed at Tai as he opened his mouth to argue, and he subsided, still grinning. "Show restraint.

We don't want to alarm their Security. Also, keep your baggage light, but remember we may be downside for several watches... several days," Velocity corrected herself with a grimace. "Uri, what's the state of their environmentals?"

"It's called weather when you're on a planet. High temperature two degrees today, humidity thirteen percent, sunny early in the week with storm systems moving in later. Temperatures expected to fall as the storm advances."

"Two degrees? You mean twenty."

"Ah. No. I did send a précis concerning planetary conditions to your dropbox."

"Actually two degrees?" Velocity inhaled and then just shook her head. *Planets*. "Tai, Jusuf, access this précis and dress appropriately." She ran her gaze down the agenda. "Their shuttle leaves at topwatch third, ship's time. Be packed and at the umbilical by topwatch second." They murmured assent. Velocity glanced around the galley. "Any comments?"

No one spoke, though Rida sucked his teeth again. She answered her own question: "Security."

Tai nodded. "I noticed that."

"Security?" Corvo drew her fine Pirian eyebrows together.

"It's a Combine station," Tai explained. "Should have Security thick as ticks. At the gates, at the docks, everywhere. I didn't even see a Security kiosk."

Corvo did the sideways nod. "Perhaps a result of being so underfunded?"

"This is the Republic," Velocity said. "They will do without medical to buy Security officers. They'd probably do without environmental techs. No Security..." She shook her head. "That's worse than odd."

"It may be a good sign," Jusuf said. When they looked at him, he spread his hands. "Whatever the cause—funding, lack of trust in their own Security, chaos in the government—any of these benefit us."

Chaos and rogue Security officers did not strike Velocity as a benefit. She thought of how easily Uri had penetrated those shieldwalls. Was the Security here being kept deliberately weak? But toward what end? “We need more data,” she muttered.

Corvo made a sound of agreement. “That is why we have come.”

Velocity shook her head. “Right, two hours until the clinic opens. Start packing. Maybe eat something. Who’s on dinner?”

## Chapter 2

### Tauranga City, Republic Settlement Planet Durbin

The station's shuttle was junk, its benches mended with electrical tape and much of its safety gear non-functional. When Velocity objected to the latter, the pilots—both about fifteen years old—exchanged glances. “Don’t worry, miss,” one said. “We hardly ever crash.”

This was clearly supposed to be hilarious. Velocity made sure her crew were distributed in the few seats with functional safety gear—fortunately, the other three passengers didn’t seem to care—and took herself up to the extra bench in the cockpit. Neither pilot objected, not that it would have done them much good if they had: no Security on this flight either. Instead they interrogated Velocity about where she was from, and what it was like in the Drift, and was she a pirate, and had she ever seen a pirate, and whether she was hiring crew for her ship. “We’re good pilots,” the younger said. “I’m qualified in 5-space math.”

“Send me your vitae,” Velocity said.

“Our what?”

Just then the shuttle hit atmosphere; but after they touched down, Velocity stayed to explain what they should send her, and to give them her call sign. This wasn’t because she wanted a couple of half-educated Republic gutter rats aboard her ship, but because she knew kids like this were precisely the sort the Siji recruited in their

role as the militant arm of the Pirian fleet.

Climbing down the shuttle ladder, she was hit with viciously bright light and a wind so cold she twitched with shock, her fists clenching on the metal railings. She squinted, both against the light and the wind. Looking out, she saw Tai huddled with the crew and the other passengers around the shuttle's cargo hold, unloading their baggage and sharing it out, shouting over the wind. One passenger, an older woman in mining scrubs and heavy boots, headed away from the shuttle, walking purposefully, as if she had somewhere to be.

Velocity squinted in the direction the woman was moving. The painfully bright light was Durbin's star. She always forgot, until she was on a planet again, how violent starlight was up close like this. Planet-dwellers wore filters against it. Star-glasses. She made a note to acquire some as soon as possible. She climbed the rest of the way down, moving carefully: the planet's pull dragged hard at her every motion. Durbin was only .62 universal, but that was well over what most stations kept, and twice what they usually ran on the *Susan Calvin*. She and her crew would take some time adjusting to it, even with the nanotropic fix they'd been given by the Pirians, which—according to the Pirians—meant their bones and muscles would stay in prime condition no matter how long they stayed in microgravity.

The shuttle had set down on a wide flat plain, three or four hundred meters out from a tin shed. That was where the woman was going. Customs, Velocity assumed. The plain was rocky and barren. Far beyond the shed was a distant scrabble of buildings. Velocity scrubbed tears from her eyes and climbed the rest of the way down. Having read Uri's information on Durbin's environment, she had thermals on under her skinsuit and wore an insulated jacket. Also heavy thermal boots, instead of the soft ship boots she usually wore. She had worried about being too hot. Hah. Their two child pilots started for the customs shed. She led Jusuf and Tai after them, head ducked against the wind.

By the time Velocity reached the shed, her muscles were aching and she was out of breath. She hoped the Pirian 'tropes started working their magic soon. After the bright starlight outside, the shed interior was dark. It was also cold, and stank of wet dirt, wet clothing, and sweat. She stood blinking, waiting for her eyes to adjust. The shuttle pilots were talking with someone. Velocity couldn't understand more than one word in ten. This was common. Dialects always drifted over time. No doubt the recent influx of contract workers onto Durbin from all over the Republic had complicated that issue. Once she grew accustomed to the local dialect, she knew, it would be easier to understand.

Velocity's eyes began to adjust to the dusk inside the shed. She saw it was filled with immense mesh-wire cages, crammed with cargo: bundles and bins, net containers, heaps of cloth. One row of cages held contract labor, huddled in rows on the dirt floor, most of them wearing far less than she was, some of them children. Her pulse thumped in her throat. She glanced at Tai, who was watching the cages, his face expressionless.

The younger pilot, Mosel, turned to Velocity. "This is Sasha," he said, nodding at a woman seated behind a worktable. "She'll get you settled."

No Security here either, Velocity realized, taking another glance around. Even with all the contract labor, not a single Security agent on site. She stepped up to the worktable. Like the two shuttle pilots, Sasha was young, slender, and light-skinned, with straight dark hair. Once she learned that Velocity had a trade license from IVC and was willing to pay a five percent "surcharge" (no one said *bribe*) on their port fee, she asked no further questions. Instead, she loaded visas onto their data tags. "Keep them on you," she ordered.

A minute later they were out on the street, though *street* seemed a fancy name for the trail worn across the plain between the metal hut and Tauranga City, half a kilometer away. The shuttle pilots

stood nearby, talking and laughing with one of the other passengers—someone they knew well, apparently. Mosel glanced at Velocity and then came over. “If you need a place to stay, Yadav’s has the best beds. And he won’t charge extra for heat.”

*Extra for heat*, Velocity thought, bemused. But she thanked the pilot gravely. He crunched off across the gritty plain to get on a motorized two-wheeled vehicle. These in-line vehicles, Velocity would learn, were the most common form of transportation on Durbin. His partner climbed on behind him, and they roared off toward the city. The other passengers had already left, on similar vehicles. In seconds, they were out of sight, the noise of their motors gone. Only the rush of the wind was left. “Well,” Velocity said into the relative silence. “I guess we walk.”

“At least it’s not snowing,” Tai said, and set out along the battered sketch of a road.



Just as they reached Tauranga City, the mountains on the horizon rose up to block the light from the star. The planet grew abruptly colder. How did people survive here?

Yadav’s turned out to be a squat box constructed of dirty yellow brick, crowded cheek to cheek with similar buildings. The entranceway was a set of double hatches, with a dead space between them—a kind of an airlock, Velocity thought, only against the cold. Once inside, they found Yadav himself, sitting near a glowing red heat grid. He offered what seemed to Velocity, used to the prices on Free Trade stations, a reasonable rent, so she hired the entire fourth floor. No lifts, Yadav said. No meals. Also, no baths. Not just no private baths—no bathing facilities at all. Yadav directed them to a public bath, six blocks south. Whatever a block was. South was the direction of the southern hemisphere, Velocity knew, from her time on other planets. Standing in the chilly dusk

on the flagstone apron in front of Yadav's, looking up and down the corridor, she wondered grumpily why they couldn't just say port or starboard. *Directions to the Minister of Trade?*

Uri popped up a map on the tiny virtual screen at the upper corner of her left eye, and then widened the screen until it covered half her vision. The route appeared in bright red. *You'll need to talk to Avril Drury first, Uri said. The chief clerk. Her office is presently closed. It will open tomorrow at noon.*

Velocity oriented herself to the map, and began following the red line. Uri put in a bright yellow arrow to represent her and her movement, showing she was going in the wrong direction. She growled and reversed course. The route took her to Zuanchan Lane, which Uri helpfully informed her was the main commercial concourse in Tauranga City. All along the corridor, shops shed multi-colored lights into the darkness. Some projected holograms, complete with sound and music. The clatter and racket was interesting at first, and then annoying, and finally just noise.

Velocity found her shoulders hunched against it as she made her way through the sparse crowds. Beneath her boots, the deck was badly-lain brick and mud, mostly mud. She had to take care not to trip. The cold air was spiced with the scent of cooking meat, frying noodles, the harsh sting of brewing coffee. She took note of a bakery doing brisk business, and of a noodle shop not far from it. As she passed the noodle shop, she glanced through the steamy window and saw Jusuf eating at one of the long tables, surrounded by locals. *Fast work*, she thought.

*What?* Uri said.

*Nothing. Pirians.* The red path told her to turn at the next cross-corridor and she did. This was a much narrower corridor, and entirely unlit. It crossed other unlit corridors. She glanced along them as she passed, seeing very few people. The cold and dark could explain that, she supposed. Light did show at some windows. After she had crossed six or eight of these corridors, she reached an



open space: Eccles Plaza, according to the map. On one side of it stood Parliament House, a six-story building made of stone, with ornate balconies and towers rising from its various levels. Shorter brick buildings stood on the other three sides. The red line on her map led to one of these, conscientiously skirting the fountain in the center of the plaza. The fountain was a stone statue, a giant fish woman. Water spouting from her mouth and fins and gills had frozen into long strands of ice.

Parliament House had arched lancet windows marching across every floor, but in the brick buildings the windows were vertical slits. The building where the Minister of Trade had her chambers was labeled Annex II on Uri's map. Lights showed in some of its windows. Velocity considered going to see if one of the lights might belong to Avril Drury. Instead, she started back to Yadav's. Her feet and back and bones ached. Enough gravity for one day. *Does this filthy planet not have tuk-tuks?* she asked Uri. She hadn't thought of this before leaving Yadav's. She and her crew had never been wealthy enough to hire transport before they went out to Pirian Space; and Pirian stations, of course, all had free public transport.

*I find none listed in the city directory,* Uri said. *I see several listings for transports, but these seem to be motorized.*

*Motorized?*

The map vanished and a capture of a vehicle appeared—an in-line vehicle like the one the child pilots had taken from the port: two-wheeled, brightly colored, rushing along a road like something from an animate. The person driving it was laughing, her hair blowing with the wind of her speed. Velocity frowned, calculating speed of impact and probable injuries for anyone falling from such a thing. It didn't even have safety restraints. *What about treni?* she asked, using the Pirian word for their free mass transit vehicles.

*Not that I find.*

Velocity grimaced. The lights of Zuanchan Lane appeared down the way and she stopped to rest, rubbing the small of her

back. Shadows separated from the dark corridor beside her, and three people—three children, she corrected herself—triangulated around her. They were stocky with layers of coats and woolen keffiyehs wrapped around their faces. One said something, murky through the wrap. Velocity stood straight. She'd dealt with thieves on dozens of stations throughout Free Trade space, so she wasn't confused about what was happening. On the other hand, none of these children had apparent weapons. Using her best Pirian, she asked if they were sure they wanted to do this.

The two tallest exchanged glances. Then the one who had spoken first yanked the keffiyeh from her face. "Pay us, kanji!"

Velocity, imitating Corvo, beamed happily and patted the child's cheek. Jerking away, the child pulled an impressively large knife from her pocket. Velocity caught her by the wrist, yanked her off balance and disarmed her. Hugging her tight, one arm around the child's throat, she stowed the knife in her own belt. The other two, who had started to move, froze, their eyes wide. "Tsk." Velocity switched to Public French. "If you're this bad at thieving, find new work."

"Let her go," the smallest child said. "We only hungry. Please, kas."

"Hungry? Surely you have a sick little brother at home? Or a grandmother?"

They exchanged glances again. The one she was holding said something in dialect, too rapid for her to understand. The little one shook his head, and she said it louder. Before Velocity could react, the other two spun and ran. They were out of sight in seconds.

"Ha," Velocity said. "Good for you." The child in her grip said nothing. Velocity got a good grip on the child's collar and pulled her around. "Who were they? Friends?" The child lifted her chin, her lips shut hard. "Right." Velocity patted the knife. "I'll keep this. I have work for a clever child, though. If you'd like to earn your money, come by Yadav's. Ask for Captain Wrachant."

She let the child go. Her expression went blank with surprise, but only for a second. Then she ran away too, even faster than her friends.



## About the Author

Raised in New Orleans, Kelly Jennings now lives in the Boston Mountains, where she writes science fiction when she is not catering to cats. Her short fiction has appeared in many venues, including *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *The Other Half of The Sky* and *Retellings of the Inland Seas*. Her short story “History of the Invasion Told in Five Dogs” appeared in *The Year’s Best Science Fiction: 35th Annual Collection* (2018). She has published two novels, *Broken Slate* (2011) and *Fault Lines* (2018); and she co-edited the anthology *Menial: Skilled Labor in SF* (2012). She is a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America. Find her on Twitter @delagar



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