

MIKE BROOKS

'A RAPIDFIRE ROLLERCOASTER OF A READ'

Michael Cobley

**DARK
RUN**



IN SPACE

**YOU CAN ESCAPE EVERYTHING
BUT YOUR PAST...**

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About the Book

The *Keiko* is a ship of smugglers, soldiers of fortune and adventures. Travelling Earth's colony planets searching for the next job. And nobody talks about their past.

But when a face from Captain Ichabod Drift's former life sends them on a run to old Earth, all the rules change.

Trust will be broken, and blood will be spilled.

About the Author

Mike Brooks was born in Ipswich, England, and moved to Nottingham to study at Nottingham Trent University and never left.

He started to write stories and novels in childhood, has worked for a homeless charity since 2004, and when not working or writing he goes walking in the Peak District, sings and plays guitar in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

He is married, and has two cats and two snakes.

MIKE BROOKS

DARK
RUN



DEL REY

To Spike the cat, my dedicated writing buddy. Thanks for the cuddles, the purring, and for not trying to eat the laptop's power cable *that* often.

DROWNING BEND

RANDALL'S BAR WAS at least a mile beneath the rocky surface of Carmella II and had all the inviting ambience of an open sewer. The sign over the door was simple neon tubes rather than a holo projection, the lightpool table inside was glitching and the air had the thin, sour quality which suggested it had already passed through too many lungs. It was populated by a dozen men and half as many women sharing little but the lean, dangerous look of overworked and underfed Undersiders, in various stages of inebriation but all seemingly determined to get deeper into their cups. He'd known better than to even think of asking Randall for a beer, and so was instead nursing a smeared glass tumbler containing a clear liquid which could have passed for paint stripper had its taste been a little more refined.

He had been in less inviting premises of his own volition, but right now he was struggling to recall more than one or two.

'Hey!'

The thin, reedy voice was that of a kid.

'Hey, mister!'

There was no indication he was being addressed. He didn't turn around, just kept his head low and his concentration on the glass of spirits in his hand. Then, inevitably, there was a tugging on the back of his armavest.

'Hey, mister! Are you Ichabod Drift?'

Drift sighed and looked up at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar: sharp-boned features, shoulder-length hair dyed a shocking violet and kept out of his eyes with a black

bandana, skin a golden brown which had everything to do with parentage and nothing to do with the minimal amount of time it had ever been exposed to a star's ultraviolet radiation. He rotated on his stool and absent-mindedly reached up a hand to scratch at the skin around his mechanical right eye as it focused on the kid with a whirring of lenses.

Overlarge mining goggles stared blankly back at him over a dirty face topped by blondish stubble which, combined with the pitch of the voice and a near-shapeless one-piece overall - probably a cast-off from an older sibling - meant Drift wasn't entirely sure whether it was male or female. He essayed a grin, the same winning smile which had worked him into beds and out of trouble more times than he could count (and when money was as large a part of your life as it was for Ichabod Drift, you had to be able to count pretty damn high).

'*Sí, soy yo,*' he said agreeably, 'but who might you be? Kind of young for a Justice, aren't you?' Not that the Justices would be looking for him right now; apart from anything else, Ichabod Drift wasn't an outlaw ... exactly. He was, as old Kelsier used to say, 'of interest'. Exactly how much interest, and to whom, rather depended on what had happened recently and if he had a suitable alibi for where he'd been at the time.

'You the guy what killed Gideon Xanth?' the kid asked. Drift felt the gloom of the bar take on a sudden watchful flavour. Xanth's Wild Spiders gang had been a menace for the last eighteen standard months over three sectors of the semi-lawless honeycomb of underground passages, caverns and former mineshafts which made up the so-called Underside of the moon named Carmella II by the United States of North America. Drift had personally heard three different variants of the tale of how he and his partner had taken the Spiders down, then dragged Gideon's corpse back to the Justices' office in High Under to collect the

handsome bounty posted on his scarred (and partially missing) head.

'That was a way from here,' he said, casually adjusting his weight so he was facing not only his youthful interrogator but the door as well, and letting his right hand idly drop into the general region of the holstered pistol at his hip. 'I'm amazed word has spread so far, so soon. Where'd you hear that piece of news from?'

'There's a gang o' men just come into town,' the kid piped, 'and they was asking about if anyone had seen Ichabod Drift, the Mexican what killed Gideon Xanth. Said they'd give ten bucks for whoever told 'em where he was.'

'I see,' Drift said, a grim sense of unease stirring in his gut. Not that he hadn't been expecting this, but nonetheless ... Something must have shown on his face, because the kid suddenly darted back out of arm's length and scuttled for the door, as though worried that he (or possibly she) was about to be forcibly restrained from collecting the promised reward.

'Hey!' Drift shouted after the retreating shape. 'Did you get a name from any of 'em?'

'Only from the big guy,' came the reply, nothing but a begoggled head now visible poking back around the door jamb. Drift raised his eyebrows and motioned with his hand to suggest that maybe the kid should quit stalling.

'He said his name was Gideon Xanth.'

Then the head disappeared, leaving nothing behind but the swinging saloon door and a sudden atmosphere of expectation so tense Drift could practically taste it. Unless that was the bile.

'Well, shit,' he remarked to no one in particular, and slid off his stool to land his booted feet on the dusty floor. With the entire bar's eyes on him he ostentatiously straightened his armavest, adjusted his bandana, checked his pistols and then strode towards the door. Bruiser, the ageing but still massive bouncer, nodded to him on his way past.

'You sure you wanna go out there, Drifty?'

'Just a simple misunderstanding, I'm sure,' Drift replied with a confidence he didn't feel. Bruiser's forehead added some wrinkles to the lines already weathered into it as he regarded the scene outside.

'Don't look too simple from where I'm standing.'

'Oh, I don't know,' the Weasel piped up from next to him. Weasel was short and scrawny, and his job at Randall's Bar was to look after anything Bruiser confiscated from customers - which basically boiled down to any firearm larger than a pistol, as only a fool would enter a Carmellan drinking den completely unarmed - and then return it to them as they left, guided by his perfect memory. 'I'd say Gideon not actually being dead is pretty simple, really.'

'Depends on your point of view,' Drift replied, and sauntered out into what passed for Drowning Bend's town square. The chemical tang of the leak in the nearby industrial outflow lingered in the air, burrowing into his nasal passages again now he was what passed for outside once more, while far above in the solid rock of the curved habdome roof the lights were churning out steady, reliable illumination. Which was a little unfortunate in some respects; a few shadows to hide in would be rather convenient right about now.

The Wild Spiders were in the square. And sitting in his personal, custom-made, six-legged mechanical walker, the padded seat upholstered in what was rumoured to be genuine cowhide, was the imposing shape of Gideon Xanth.

Ichabod Drift had a momentary thought that maybe he'd just turn and head the other way, but then a shout went up. He'd been seen.

'*Drift!*' Xanth bellowed, his voice a basso roar. He flicked something large and shiny off his thumb, and Drift caught sight of the juvie diving to catch the promised ten-buck piece before fleeing into a side alley.

'*Hola*, Gideon!' Drift called back, settling his hands just over his guns. Two of them, at least; his backup was tucked in the small of his back under his belt. 'You're looking well!'

'Looking well for a dead man, you mean?' the gang leader snarled. 'Boys, cover Mister Drift for me, would you?'

At least a dozen weapons of varying calibre and roughly equal deadliness snapped up to point straight at Drift, which did nothing positive for his levels of either calmness or perspiration.

'That's better,' Xanth said, doing something with the controls in front of him and sending his walker clanking forwards while the Wild Spiders advanced on either side, their guns still trained and disappointingly steady. 'Boys, we all know that Mister Drift is a fast draw and a fine shot, so if he starts looking twitchy then feel free to ventilate him for me before he gets any ideas into his head.'

'Now, Drift.' The big gang leader's scarred visage frowned as he looked down from his elevated seat. 'I'm sitting there in a bar in Low Under, minding my own business, when I hear me some surprising news. Seems that I'm dead, and that you're to blame.'

'Opinions vary on whether it was me who pulled the trigger on you,' Drift replied, trying not to let his eyes stray around too much.

'Ah yes,' Xanth nodded. 'Your partner. It must have taken some balls to front up to the lawmen in High and claim you'd killed me, knowing that if your lie were found out then they'd string you up. Even *bigger* balls actually, given that you surely knew I'd hear and would want to disabuse people of the notion o' my demise. And given I know that deep down you're a cowardly lickspittle, Drift, it must've been your partner what came up with the plan.'

The theatrically conversational tone in his voice, pitched to carry to the observers behind door jambs and peeking out through curtains all around, abruptly disappeared.

What was left was the verbal equivalent of a knife, bare and sharp and about as friendly. 'Where's the bitch, Drift?'

'That's no way to talk about a lady,' Drift shrugged.

He didn't even see the blow coming. He was simply aware of Xanth doing something with his hand, and then one of the spider-walker's metal legs lashed up and knocked him backwards some six feet, leaving him sprawling in the dirt.

'Not talking about a lady, Drift,' Xanth growled. 'I know ladies. I've met 'em, dined 'em and bedded 'em. Even loved one, once upon a time. I'm talking about that bitch you run with, who ain't no more of a lady than I am. Where's Tamara Rourke?'

There were a few seconds of uneasy silence, while Drift tried to get his breath back and disguise the fact that by propping himself up on one elbow his right hand was once more straying close to the butt of a pistol. However, he was saved having to answer by the appearance of a small red dot on Xanth's left temple.

'Here.'

Drift risked a look to his right. There, Crusader 920 rifle raised to her shoulder and trained on Gideon Xanth as she walked steadily forwards, was Rourke. She was short and slight, dressed in a dark green bodysuit which would have merely emphasised the boyish nature of her figure had it not been drowned in the billowing depths of a long coat. Her hat was pulled low, and her eyes glinted in her dark-skinned face as she flicked her gaze along the length of the Wild Spiders' line. Half of them switched their aim to cover her, but they weren't fool enough to start firing when she had a bead on their boss. Tamara Rourke's reputation as a deadshot was well-earned.

'Rourke, you shouldn't be as loyal as you are,' Xanth snarled. The gang leader wasn't even pretending to be conversational now there was a weapon pointing at his head, which Drift couldn't really fault him for. 'Might be

you could've got outta this hole while we were busy with this worm, but you had to come sticking your nose in again.'

'You'd only have chased me down anyway,' Rourke retorted, somehow managing to shrug without losing her aim. 'Could say the same about you, though. You were reported as dead to the authorities. You could have given up terrorising war widows and extorting merchants and crawled off to a retirement somewhere with the money you stole. You wouldn't have been the first.'

'And maybe I woulda done that,' Xanth growled, 'gone off and laughed up my sleeve at the Justices while I was spending my money, but there's some things you don't let lie. One thing would be the two of *you* claiming that you killed *me*.' His scarred face set into an expression of murderous hatred. 'The other is that you needed a body to claim that bounty, and there was only one man this side of the surface who was as big as me. You bastards killed my boy Abe, and dragged his corpse to those scum-suckers in High Under.'

'Told you we should've shaved a dead bear and put it in a coat,' Drift remarked, looking sidelong at his partner.

'The import costs would've swallowed the bounty,' Rourke replied evenly.

'Shut up, you!' one of the Spiders snapped at her, trying to aim his shotgun even more emphatically. Drift attempted to match him against the descriptions circulated of Xanth's known associates, and failed. Either a relatively new recruit, then, or simply someone no one had ever bothered to identify.

'Or you'll do what?' Rourke demanded. 'One of you so much as sneezes, Gideon here's missing his head.'

'You think I care about that?' Xanth roared. '*You killed my boy!* You can shoot me, but the two of you ain't leaving here alive!'

Had it been Ichabod Drift on the other end of that firearm, he would have said something snappy. Something memorable. Something that anyone who'd heard it would have been forced to repeat so the story would have grown in the telling, and listeners would have been astounded at his wit in a dangerous situation.

Of course, that would have given the Spiders a second or so of warning, and Tamara Rourke had never been a gambler. As a result, the moment the last syllable signing their death warrant had left Gideon Xanth's lips, the Crusader barked once and half of the big man's skull exploded sideways in a shower of blood, bone and displaced neurones.

The Wild Spiders, crucially, hesitated for half a second. They were gang fighters and used to bullying barkeeps, extorting tolls from travellers or engaging in piecemeal shootouts with others like themselves, preferably when they had a numerical advantage. The notion of a lone woman casually shooting their leader dead was completely alien to them.

As a result, none of them reacted in time.

Drift hauled his pistols out and started blazing away; he saw two Spiders drop from hits of some sort, but then he had to roll desperately aside as Xanth's bulk slumped forwards onto the controls of his walker and sent the gyroscopically stabilised machine stamping forwards, directly towards him. His weren't the only shots to ring out, however; a hailstorm of fire exploded from the buildings around them, with the suddenly exposed Spiders at its centre. Several of the gang started shooting back, but their misguided attempt at making a stand came to an abrupt end when a whistling noise heralded the arrival of a shell which detonated on the back of one of their number. Virulent orange flames licked up instantly, and the splash from the blast set alight the clothing and flesh of two more.

Some spatters of volatile gel landed mere inches from Drift and he scrambled away from them, cursing Micah as he did so. The immolation cannon carried by the former soldier was far from a precise weapon; it was, however, a devastatingly effective one. As the howling, burning gang member's futile attempt at flight was cut short by a merciful bullet to the head from someone somewhere, the surviving gang members not currently flailing at flames on their own bodies hurriedly threw down their guns and thrust their hands determinedly into the air.

The shooting stopped. Drift got back to his feet, holstered his guns and dusted himself down. He caught sight of one of the Spiders glowering at him.

'What?'

'Everyone said your crew'd left you!' the man accused, his tone one of a six-year-old being told that there was no pudding after all. 'You was meant to have stiffed them on a share of the bounty!' Figures were emerging from the buildings around them; Micah still covering the cowed gangers with the intimidating mouth of his weapon, Apirana's rifle looking like a toy in his huge hands, the Chang siblings carrying pistols like they might even know how to use them and, alongside them, the half-dozen black-clad and mirror-visored Justices with whom they'd planned this whole sting.

'Well,' Drift sighed, 'I guess that's what you get for listening to rumours.'

JENNA

THE VELVET LOUNGE was a somewhat more upmarket affair than Randall's. For one thing, the spirits came out of branded bottles and didn't taste like more than two glasses would send you blind for a week. For another, it had actual upholstery instead of bare boards, although you'd need a thing for velvet to consider it tasteful. And for a third, instead of being buried deep in the warren of tunnels beneath the crust of Carmella II, it was on the surface, actual stars visible in the sky alongside the winking lights of the atmo-scrapers which towered around them like some sort of glittering fungal growths. Jenna McIlroy kept finding her eyes drawn to them as they flashed in her peripheral vision, occasionally mixed with the running lights of some cargo freighter or passenger liner. She tried to stop herself from wondering what the ships were, where they came from, what their purpose was. There was too much galaxy for her guesses to be anything but wild, and it was a good way to make herself paranoid.

'You'd have thought they'd have made the atmo safe by now,' Apirana Wahawaha opined in his curiously soft-mouthed, lilting Maori accent, nursing his solitary beer and scratching the dark whorls of the *tā moko* on his cheek. 'Big A' was without doubt the most immediately intimidating member of the crew of the *Keiko*, the jack-of-all-trades interstellar freighter which had been Jenna's home for the last four standard months; he was huge in many ways, from build to voice to personality, and the tribal tattoos which covered much of his skin lent him an alien air

to Jenna's eyes, even out in this galaxy of wonders. However, he rarely drank alcohol and never had more than one even when he did, so he sipped quietly and slowly. 'Seeing the stars is all well an' good, but I like to take a walk outside every now an' then, know what I mean?'

'Last I heard, they're still working on it,' Ichabod Drift replied. In stark contrast to the virtually teetotal Maori, the *Keiko's* whip-thin captain was a third of the way down a bottle of whisky and showing little sign of slowing. 'There are plants out there now, or something. Stars only know how long it will take to get it so we can breathe, though.'

'They won't be trying too hard,' Micah van Schaken put in, taking a pull from the tall glass containing the Dutch lager which he swore was the finest in the galaxy, despite the rest of the crew's repeated assertions that it tasted like thin piss. 'Once a person gets outside he gets all these ideas of being free, and that plays merry hell for a government.' He nodded firmly. 'Keep a man inside behind steel walls and thick windows, tell him that what you do, it's for his own protection. Make him think he relies on you, let him think the prison is his home, and he'll thank you for it.'

'You're a fountain of light and cheer, d'you know that?' Drift grinned at him, his silver tooth shining in the white of his smile.

The former soldier just clucked his tongue. 'You can laugh, but I've seen what freedom does to a man. Kills him, like as not.' He trailed off and stared at his drink, seemingly fascinated by the rising bubbles.

What does he see there? Jenna wondered. *Anti-aircraft fire? Blood spatters?* Humanity's expansion across the galaxy had not been the expansion into a peaceful utopia the idealists might have hoped. Once away from the First Solar System there were few laws to constrain people, and those rare planets or planetsized moons which boasted

atmospheres habitable to Earth-raised organisms without extensive terraforming were valuable in the extreme.

It was small wonder unofficial wars over viable agriworlds or mineral-rich moons had been bloody, with all sides sending in troops, under blanket declarations of *protecting our interests*. Micah had once been part of the European Commonwealth Frontier Defence Unit but had apparently grown weary of spilling blood to make anyone richer but himself. He was far from the only former soldier to have come to that conclusion, and Jenna couldn't blame any of them.

'You think freedom's so bad? Try the alternative sometime,' Jia Chang said pointedly. The Red Star Confederate was one of the more heavily authoritarian interstellar governmental conglomerates, and Jia and her brother Kuai made no secret of their desire to earn enough money to move their parents out of Chengdu on Old Earth. The *Keiko* apparently hadn't been to that many Red Star systems, since Drift's Mandarin was poor and his Russian not much better, but by all accounts legitimate shipping was so heavily regulated it was virtually impossible to get work as an independent contractor. And the shadier types of employment were, if anything, even more tightly controlled by the gang bosses.

'They'll green this world if they can,' Tamara Rourke said firmly. She nodded at the looming shadow of Carmella Prime, the mighty gas giant visible as a blue-green crescent through a couple of the higher windows. 'Most of this place would get enough light for crops to grow even with the orbit cycle, and the chance of an agriworld is too good to pass up.'

Micah just grunted. The dour Dutchman had a tendency to do that, Jenna had noticed; give his opinion, then refuse to engage in subsequent debate. Then again, military service was unlikely to install much in the way of back-and-forth reasoning in a person, preferring instead the

approach of 'Is it still moving? Shoot it again, then.' Which, to be fair, was what Micah was on the team for.

'So what's the plan now?' Jenna asked. She was the youngest and newest of the crew, and still keenly felt her junior status even if the others didn't really treat her like it.

She'd been in a bar on Franklin Major, desperately trying to find a way off-planet despite having nowhere near enough money for a fare, but her fruitless search for a ship prepared to take her on had turned into an apparent attempt to drown herself in alcohol instead with what little cash she had.

She didn't remember the evening well, but it seemed that at some point she'd ended up talking to Tamara Rourke and had dragged the older woman outside to demonstrate her ability to hack her way through an electronic lock while apparently blind drunk. That trick had got her a berth with them (as well as nearly bringing down the local law enforcement on their heads, but it seemed that Drift was willing to put that down to teething troubles), and so far she'd proved adept at accessing information they had no right to, patching them a new broadcast ident on the fly when they'd suddenly needed their ship to be something else, and finally fixing the bug which had been causing the holo-display to wobble like an shivering epileptic whenever anyone wasn't leaning on one side of the board. She couldn't shoot straight for love nor money, however, which was why she'd been left on board the planet-going skiff called the *Jonah* during the crew's most recent escapade.

'The plan,' Drift said, sipping his whisky and pausing a moment to roll the smoky flavours around his mouth with what looked to be something approaching genuine pleasure, 'is to head back to the Justice offices tomorrow and see if there are any more tasty-looking bounties posted.'

'The same trick won't work twice,' Rourke warned. She'd removed her hat to reveal her close-cropped hair, a solid

mass of black unbroken by any grey. No one seemed to know exactly how old Tamara Rourke was; not even Drift, who'd been running with her for the best part of eight years. Jenna suspected that she was well into her fifth decade, probably a few years older than the Captain, but her face could have belonged to someone twenty years either side of that depending on what sort of life they'd had, not to mention if they'd taken Boost to slow the ageing processes. That, combined with features which were more slightly delicate than overtly feminine, her boyish figure and a surprisingly deep voice, meant that if needed to she had a fairly good chance of passing for a male. Although Rourke had never said anything, Jenna had the faint ghost of a memory and a rather stronger sense of worry that she'd actually made her first contact with the *Keiko's* crew by drunkenly trying to chat 'him' up.

'Don't be negative,' Drift chided his partner with a clucking noise of his tongue and a wagging finger. 'Think of what we could earn here! I mean, take the money we made today.' He checked items off. 'We made enough to fix the grav-plate on the cargo bay Heim generator, redo the heat shields on the *Jonah*, refuel, and still have some left over for a few drinks. For one day's work!'

'A day's work which could have got us both killed,' Rourke said flatly. Jenna was still learning the minute variations in the older woman's expressions, which were the only indication whether she was being dryly deadpan or deadly serious. Usually, as now, she played it safe and assumed serious. Apirana said he'd seen Rourke laugh once, but Jenna wasn't sure she believed him.

'Everything was completely under control,' Drift insisted, raising a glass with one of his dazzling grins. He was the natural showman of the pair, the carnival barker to Rourke's quartermaster. By the time people realised that they should have been paying attention to the slight, dark figure in the background they'd usually been scammed,

bluffed or violently inconvenienced. 'Here's to doing the law's work for them!'

'I reckon we're about done here,' Apirana disagreed. 'Grabbing a few small fry an' then taking Xanth down, that's one thing. Ain't no one gonna be welcoming us now our names are known, though. Xanth was easy to find. Smaller marks won't be; anyone who knows anythin'll clam up, an' then we're no better off than the Justices. Worse, because they've got authority and we've got nothing except guns.'

'Guns can work,' Micah said.

'Only if we wanna break the law ourselves,' Apirana pointed out acidly. Micah just shrugged and returned his attention to his lager: so far as the mercenary was concerned, violence was a language everyone understood.

'I'm enjoying being on the *right* side of the law,' Kuai put in, fingering the dragon talisman which hung around his throat. He didn't add 'for once', but then he barely needed to. Drift and Rourke's approach to the laws of the various governments across the galaxy had always been one of convenience over obedience.

'Because you do so much dangerous work in that engine room,' Jia snorted. She tapped herself firmly on the chest. '*I* judge the radar shadows, dodge security craft, hug a freighter's drive cone to mask our emission trail, risk frying us all in the backwash, plot the jumps between systems—'

'And if *you* get it wrong *I* still get arrested or killed,' Kuai pointed out.

'Whiner.'

'Just saying, I prefer when there's less risk of death or prison, I don't think that's—'

'*Cállate*,' Drift sighed, and the Chang siblings obediently fell silent. He tipped another two fingers of whisky into his glass, sniffed, sipped, then set it down on the table again. 'Tomorrow morning I'll go back to the Justices' office and see if there's anything which looks feasible and worth our

time. If there is, we Do Some Good and get paid for it. If not ...' He shrugged. 'We'll see what our options are.'

LAW-ABIDING CITIZEN

THERE WAS A definite social strata on many of the mining and ex-mining worlds Drift had been to, and indeed 'strata' was the most accurate word for it. The government offices and the rich, well-to-do and well-connected lived on the surface. Even when the surface didn't yet have a breathable atmosphere, like on Carmella II, hermetically sealed mansions, atmo-scrappers and government office buildings with their faux-Gothic cladding still sprawled in a mess of money and authority, interconnected by a web of elevated pedestrian walkways. Meanwhile, airtight buggies and crawlers drove between ground-level airlocks, tracks and tyres kicking up clouds of dust and dirt into the ... carbon dioxide, or nitrogen, or whatever the air outside was currently composed of. Drift wasn't sure and didn't really care; if he tried to breathe it then he'd suffocate and that was all he really needed to know.

Below ground, though, people got poorer. Once a mineshaft had been stripped of whatever the locally available mineral was, the company could make a second income by opening it, widening it and selling it on to a developer, who would put in basic prefab living quarters. In somewhere like Carmella II, where the crust had been plundered widely and deeply, there was a veritable honeycomb of passageways and chambers, and no shortage of people to fill them. This was despite the claustrophobic conditions and the dependence on electricity not just for luxuries but for simple survival: the Air Rent scandals of fifty years ago might have been a thing of the past, but if

the atmospheric seals failed or the pumps died then the whole shaft could still be at risk of asphyxiation.

‘Why would anyone choose to live down there?’ Jenna asked, fiddling absent-mindedly with the chunky metal bracelet she always wore on her right forearm and nodding towards one of the maglift platforms which led down into the Underside. They were standing in the brightly lit access hall – a cavernous building almost the size of an aircraft hangar – and watching people bustling to and fro: miners, Justices, cleaners, office personnel and others with less obvious roles and purposes.

‘There’s not many that do,’ Drift replied easily. He was slightly hung-over, but the afterbuzz of yesterday’s successful job was keeping him from feeling too sorry for himself. That and the sizeable bounty they’d netted: Gideon Xanth on his own had been worth fifty thousand USNA dollars, although their cut had been reduced since they’d been working with the Justices. Even so, he winced slightly as a growling six-wheeler headed towards one of the larger, vehicle-only shafts with a throbbing roar which seemed to reverberate off the inside of his skull. ‘But mining doesn’t pay that well, and if you want to save up enough to get off this rock then you need to keep your living costs down. It’s cheap down there, and that’s the truth.’

‘Cheap and grim,’ Jenna muttered. Drift allowed himself a smile. Jenna had been guarded about her history but he was fairly certain she’d originally come from either Franklin Major, where they’d taken her on, or its sister planet Franklin Minor. Both had needed little in the way of terraforming to be surface habitable and so were occupied almost exclusively by the middle classes or higher, barring the service staff such well-offs always needed. The odds were good that Jenna came from a monied background, and Drift couldn’t help wondering if it was high-level tutoring or teenage rebelliousness which had led her to becoming quite so expert with tech.

‘You should see it lower down,’ he told her. ‘There’s less lights and the air’s even worse. Down there, you get the shadow communities.’

Jenna looked sideways at him. ‘The *what?*’

Drift grinned. He was quite enjoying showing Jenna the galaxy, but couldn’t help taking some amusement from her lack of knowledge of some parts of it; it seemed the news holos on the United States of North America’s more affluent planets glossed over a lot of the more insalubrious details.

‘You know, the people who scratch out a living from the spoil heaps, or the little bits of mineral vein the mining companies didn’t think were worth their time.’ He tucked his thumbs into his gunbelt, warming to his theme. ‘Yup, that’s a place where names aren’t given and histories aren’t questioned, and you might be lucky to even wake up tomorrow morning, depended on how careful you’ve been about where you went to sleep. That’s where the worst sort of criminal hides out, you know. Of course, if you *do* wake up then you could decide to be someone else entirely.’ He stole a sideways glance at her. ‘It’s not entirely different to the *Keiko*, in that respect.’

‘You think we have the worst sort of criminal on board?’ Jenna asked, affecting a shocked expression.

‘That’s not what I meant, and you know it,’ Drift grinned. ‘Although if you define “worst” as “very bad at it” then Micah might qualify.’ He sighed contentedly. ‘No, that’s one of the great things about being alive now. There’s always room to be someone else, and there’s always somewhere people will be willing to let the past slide.’

He waited, but Jenna merely nodded soberly and didn’t suddenly volunteer any backstory to her life, which disappointed Drift a little. The *Keiko*’s rule that you didn’t ask about another crew member’s history was only unwritten because he was certain no one would bother to

read it, but he at least had an idea of what had brought most of the others together.

Rourke was the same enigma she'd always been, of course, despite running with him for the longest time. It had only been a year or so after joining forces that the pair of them had bailed a then-teenaged Jia out of a Shanghai jail on Old Earth. She'd been on a charge of joyriding a shuttle, and he and Rourke had felt strongly that someone with such obvious natural talent shouldn't be left to rot. The fact that they'd used false identities to do so was by-the-by, as was the fact that they'd jumped her bail the very next day with her brother hired as mechanic.

Apirana had been an ex-con and former gang member looking to go straight: Drift sometimes felt guilty about hiring him as muscle on their ship of questionable repute, but the big Maori had always been grateful so he figured it wasn't that much of a problem. Micah was a more recent addition and had only been with them for about two years. He hadn't talked much about his past in the FDU, but Drift would have put good money on the mercenary's face being on desertion papers somewhere. Jenna, however, was a puzzle. What would make a rich girl who might have just about hit twenty get blind drunk and leave her comfortable home with its breathable atmosphere to enlist with a bunch of ne'er-do-wells?

Normally, Drift would have idly seduced her to get her to talk about it, but to his surprise he'd realised over the last couple of months that although Jenna was pretty he wasn't attracted to her. Even more shockingly, *she* didn't seem attracted to *him*. Instead he'd found himself playing a combined role of tour guide and teacher, and feeling ... protective.

He must be getting old.

'Well,' he said, when it became clear that the girl wasn't going to confide exactly why she'd joined them, 'I'd best get on. Don't let Kuai spend all our money on parts, you

hear me? I don't want him going to town, we just need what's essential.'

'He says it's *all* essential,' Jenna replied, rolling her eyes. 'Don't worry; if he gets uppity I'll just beat him up.'

'Atta girl,' Drift laughed. He fought down an urge to ruffle her hair, and clapped her on the shoulder instead. 'I'll be back at the *Jonah* in an hour or so. See you then.'

'Have fun,' Jenna grinned, and turned to make her way towards where their engineer was waiting with what might have been impatience. Not that Drift was particularly bothered; for all of Micah's abrasiveness and Jia's arrogance, Kuai's needling passive-aggressiveness was the most tiresome personal trait of any crew member. Still, the man was good enough at his job to make it a price worth paying.

Drift took a deep breath to try to clear his head of the hangover fuzziness and walked over to the nearest pedestrian maglift platform with an undeniable spring in his step. He might not be rich at this precise moment but he was at least well-resourced, and that would make it easier to *get* rich.

The fact that he'd been trying to get rich without much notable long-term success for the last twenty years wasn't really anything he felt like worrying about right now.

The platform, a rectangle of scuffed metal plates, started its smooth descent into the shaft; a far quicker and more direct route than the meandering tunnels dug by the miners as they chased down seams. Sliding doors flowed together above, but the many small lights in the walls threw illumination over Drift and his fellow passengers: two Justices, rifles slung so they could be accessed quickly but leaving a hand free for the shock sticks at their sides, perhaps going to take up shift at the station below; a small woman in a niqab, her left thumb dancing over the remote operating the datalens which obscured her left eye, brows occasionally lowering into view as she tutted quietly and

frowned at whatever she was seeing; a gaggle of teenagers, loudly dressed in clothes which flashed corporation logos brightly enough to challenge the lights around them, the images and slogans crawling across their shoulders on the microweaves just beneath the transparent surface layer; half a dozen miners, destined for some far-off tunnel where the machines still roared and chewed; over in the corner, three hard-looking men who tried to watch the Justices without making it obvious, while radiating an aura even the teenagers seemed to recognise and respect.

Drift kept his eyes fixed somewhere on the floor and listened as hard as he could. The maglift was virtually silent in operation, and he wanted to hear any cough, mutter, whisper or rustle of movement which might indicate that the trio had figured him to be the man who'd taken Gideon Xanth down in Drowning Bend, but he didn't want to look at them for exactly the same reason as they weren't looking at the Justices. Thankfully, it seemed they were concentrating too hard on looking innocent to pay much attention to him.

The maglift glided to a halt in High Under and the security doors slid back, allowing them to exit the shaft. Everyone except the miners and the trio Drift had pegged as dangerous disembarked, the light from behind them casting their own shadows forwards as they emerged into the comparative gloom. Drift sniffed and grimaced slightly; the air 'upstairs' had the faint tang of purification after-effects but it still tasted cleaner than down here. He sucked down a lungful to get used to it again, then headed off after the receding shapes of the Justices who'd ridden the platform with him.

High Under was relatively affluent as Carmella II went, despite being below ground, but it was still one of the deepest Justice stations on this part of the moon; once you got much further from the surface the patrols started to thin and the response times were measured in days rather

than minutes. Still, the pockets of deep shadow were rarer than the pools of illumination here, the stores sold virtually fresh produce shipped in from systems with agriworlds, and the locals gave the Justices he was following no more than a glance instead of challenging stares, or disappearing like cockroaches on a bathroom floor when the light was flicked on.

The two lawmen cut right into a side street, then as he rounded the corner after them they walked through the mirrored double doors which looked almost like a giant representation of a Justice's visor (Drift had never worked out if that was intentional or not, but either way it reminded him of a ghost train he'd ridden on as a kid where you went through the mouth of a skull at the start). He slowed his step slightly to let the doors stop swinging – Ichabod Drift didn't follow Justices like a puppy, he was his own man and would be seen to enter in his own time – then strode boldly up to them and pushed the right-hand one open without a break in his stride.

That was the plan, anyway. As it turned out the door was stiffer than he remembered, so he had to slow to avoid walking his face right into it. Still, he didn't trip over and fall on said face or just end up pushing a 'pull' door, so he counted it as a sort-of win.

'Captain Drift,' Officer Morley greeted him from behind the counter, looking up. 'Brought in another menace to society already?' The mocking tone in her voice was playful, and totally negated by the slight grin; the Justices had, in general, been fairly impressed by Drift's willingness to play bait and with his crew's contribution to the efforts, and the bounty settlement had taken place without the usual twist of resentment as the clerk tried to work out whether he was paying one criminal for bringing in another.

'Am I not allowed a little time off?' Drift replied, spreading his hands in a gesture of faux apology and giving