

THE SILVER FLAME

by Josepha Sherman

AS I BROUGHT *The Dart* out of hyperspace and into the Stataka system, I called up a visual on my ship's screen. I already knew details of the planet's gravity (a touch less than Human standard) and atmosphere (quite breathable). Now I could see what the computer had already told me: Stataka really did look absolutely . . . well . . . mundane, the standard classification of water-and-land planet supporting oxygen-breathing life. In this case, that life was a slender, gray-skinned biped race, vaguely like my own species, Human, in having two eyes, ears, and so on. So, locals plus whatever space travelers might have put into Stataka's one public port.

Ordinary? Maybe, but I didn't have any complaints about a lack of drama. The latest overhaul of *The Dart*'s hyper-drive engines hadn't been cheap, and incoming cash was going to be very welcome. As *The Dart* sliced down through Stataka's atmosphere, I could see the gray buildings and bright lights of Kartaka, the city that sprawled around the spaceport. Kartaka had quite a reputation as a wide-open trading city. And yes, there was a quite a bit of illicit business taking place down there, if Alliance reports were accurate.

But from everything I'd been able to learn, Sei Sisar, the art dealer with whom I was dealing, had a reputation for honesty. The three-way contract to which I'd agreed, along with Sei Sisar and the Kuurae, was basic enough: Sharra Kinsarin—me—owner, captain, and one-woman crew of *The Dart*, to receive one religious artifact from art dealer Sei Sisar, and transport it back to its rightful homeworld of Kuuraet. Sei Sisar was footing half the bill to get the artifact home again, and the Kuurae were footing the other half.

Nothing unusual there: Reputable art dealers, once they realize they are holding stolen artifacts, do tend to return the things to their owners, since they want to keep their names clean. They return artifacts often enough for me to make a nice profit out of it.

Who am I? Nothing special to look at: Human, youngish, female, olive skin, and short dark hair. What I am is an art courier licensed in all one hundred and forty-three of the Alliance worlds and a few others—including provisional member worlds like Kuuraet—specializing in any objects too small and valuable to risk losing on one of the big ships. I'll add that I have another edge over the big guys: my little swept-winged Dart is swifter than most of them. I also, not incidentally in my line of work, have an implant that lets my brain adapt quickly to new languages.

Why me, though, and not a Kuurae emissary? Simple answer: The Kuurae are one of those races who don't like space travel. I mean, they really, really don't. The vastness terrifies them.

I brought my ship down through the layers of atmosphere, and a maze of other ships taking off or landing, to a waiting berth.

Sure enough, the ground crew insisted on bribes, but in such a good-natured way that I couldn't get angry. Besides, if things went according to contract, Sei Sisar would be covering this expense, too.

We settled on a price that included keeping The Dart ready for takeoff, and I set off to find my current employer. Daylight on this side of the planet, conveniently, which meant that I could get the artifact from Sei Sisar without any other delays. It would have made my life easier if someone had been waiting at the port with the object to be transported: signature, payment, refueling, and away. But Sei Sisar had insisted he was too busy for anything like that. Since I legally had to accept the artifact from him and only him, I was to meet him at his office, which he swore wasn't that far from the spaceport.

So be it. I fought my way through the crowds of embarking or disembarking travelers, fought my way into an empty groundcar, and gave it the proper coordinates, trying not to wince at the amount of credits it wanted for that relatively short ride. Should have walked—no, on second thought, this warehouse region wasn't exactly the place for a solitary stroll, even if I had included, as I always did when planning to carry art, my sidearm. Too bad Sei Sisar hadn't told me to meet him in his shop downtown; more people meant less of a chance of some would-be robber following me.

As the car made its efficient robotic way through row after row of dull gray warehouses and the occasional flurry of pallet-unloading activity, I glanced one more

time at the little image I'd downloaded. The Kurrae artifact's name translated to the "Silver Flame," though there wasn't anything flamelike about the tranquil, cross-legged, beautifully carved statue. It was a female Kurrae, thin and delicate as all her kind, vaguely humanoid, assuming that Humans had knife-sharp cheekbones, huge eyes, and faint scaling, and worked from what looked like pure white stone. A saint figure? No one knew too much about Kuurrae religious beliefs.

"We are .456 kilometers from the given coordinates," the flat AI voice told me suddenly. "I can proceed no closer."

I looked up in surprise—surprise that quickly turned to alarm. "Oh...damn."

What had been Sei Sisar's office was now a blackened ruin, still smoking faintly. Leaving the groundcar, I got as close as harried officials would let me. A fire, they told me unnecessarily. No survivors. No cause yet, though there were hints that it had been too hot to be natural, and maybe that there were some suspicious residues as well.

Well, as I've said, a lot of illicit business takes place in this city. Presumably someone had gotten annoyed at Sei Sisar for being too honest once too often.

No Sei Sisar. That meant no artifact. And no payment. Swearing under my breath and reminding myself that the late Sei Sisar had just had a rougher time of it, I turned back to the waiting groundcar—

Which was no longer waiting. Of course not, curse it! In my shock over the fire, I'd neglected to tell the thing to stay put. And I doubted I'd find another car so easily in his area.

All right. Start walking. You can find the spaceport again easily enough. Pretend you belong here, even though you don't look like a local.

Hell with trying to fit in. I'd just radiate my best "mess with me and die" expression and keep one hand on my sidearm. That worked on a good many worlds.

But as I strode defiantly along, a sudden whisper made me start.

"Captain Kinsarin! Please!"

I whirled, sidearm drawn. Who could possibly know my name—

The frantic hiss had come from a narrow space, not even a true alley, between two buildings. A slight figure huddled against one wall as though making a decision, then came toward me in a rush. I tightened my hand on the sidearm's haft, ready to fire—but he—she?—it?—stopped short just out of reach, almost completely shrouded in a

cloak two or three sizes too big and charred at the edges. Looked as though there'd been a survivor of that fire, after all.

"Please, please, I am not harming you. Captain Kinsarin, you must be taking me off this world!"

I wasn't about to get involved in some gang's activities. Bad enough that this being, who or whatever, knew my name. "Sorry. I don't carry passengers."

"I am not that! You must know this: I am what you seek—I am the Silver Flame!"

"Ah ... of course you are." And how do you know what brought me to Stataka? .

"No, wait!" A thin hand, six-fingered, not quite steady, and dead white, pushed back the shrouding hood just enough to let me see a dead-white face with enormous deep blue eyes and narrow, knife-sharp cheekbones.

She hadn't looked so weary in the image. Or so terrified.

The smallest pang of sympathy shot through me—along with a sense of downright "I've been had."

"Oh, hell," I said lamely.

The average Kuurae had tannish skin. This one wasn't an albino, not with those eyes. A mutation, then, and held sacred as a result. When you came right down to it, the contract had never actually specified a holy *statue* rather a holy *living being*. And no one had ever actually agreed or denied that the artifact might be much more than merely stone.

But why the pretense of an artifact at all? To keep the matter private? Or...to make it more convenient...

A cold suspicion settled at the back of my mind. It could well be.

Yes, but now that I had the "artifact," I also had a chance of getting paid by the Kuurae if not by Sei Sisar. Risky, if my suspicions were correct, but—if I wanted a safe, secure life, I would have joined one of the big corporations a long time ago. My ship could hold two as easily as one, so I added, "All right, let's get going."

"Yes, but—"

"You *do* want to get back to Kuuraet?"

"Yes! But they do not want it!"

They. I whirled to see four...beings. Definitely not from this world. Strongly muscled, tall as the average Human male, they stood on two legs, had a great deal of russet fur, gaudy jewelry, and sharp teeth—and they carried vicious-looking sidearms.

Great.

“Do you know them?” I whispered to the Silver Flame.

“They are of those who stole me!”

Even better. For a moment I thought of screaming and hoping that some of those officials going over the fire-charred ruins would come running.

Not a chance.

“Get behind me,” I snapped. When the Silver Flame hesitated, I tried to push her.

“Don’t touch me!” Her voice was suddenly that of an insulted aristocrat.

Oh, joy. “Just do it!” To the beings, I asked as coolly as though I wasn’t looking at all those weapons, “You want her?”

Unfortunately, they didn’t speak the local language. They also weren’t giving my implant enough of a sample for me to understand theirs. But most kidnappers don’t look so angry—that emotion, at least, I could understand on those furry faces—or so willing to shoot their own hostage.

I pointed my own weapon at the one who, judging from the glittery stuff about his (I assumed) neck, seemed to be their leader. Since they couldn’t understand me either, I quoted from some ancient Human vid in the archaic Earth language and said, “Go ahead. Make my day.”

The bluff worked. He held back the others, and in their moment of angry confusion I hissed to the Silver Flame, “Run!”

She avoided my shoving hand and darted away. Those ridiculously narrow alleys were almost too narrow for me. But as I squeezed my way through, following the slight figure of the Silver Flame, who had shed her bedraggled cloak to reveal a formfitting white sheath, I thought they at least served one purpose: They were too narrow for our hairy pursuers. One of those folks got off a blue-white shot of blazing force that sent stony splinters raining down on me, but I managed to return a shot of my own, and heard what was unmistakably a swear word from back there.

Yes, that smarted, didn't it? Too bad I don't have it set on killing force.

You didn’t do that, not and risk killing a local by mistake.

The hairy guys weren't worried about public relations. They continued shooting blindly, bringing down more stones. Swearing, head down, stung by splinters and pelted by pebbles, I forced my way on.

Lunging out into the open again, I nearly crashed into the Silver Flame, who had stopped short.

"Don't touch me!" she insisted.

The being was beginning to get on my already tightly strung nerves. *Payment*, I reminded myself. *You've got the contract.*

We'd come onto a street fronted by closed warehouses. By sheer wild fortune, I commandeered a groundcar. Feeding it credits till it agreed to take us at top speed to the spaceport, I collapsed back on the thinly padded seat, struggling to catch my breath and staring at the seemingly self-possessed Silver Flame. "What the hell was that all about?"

She stared at me with those enormous blue eyes. "They wanted me back."

"Sure they did. That's why they were trying to kill us." Her gaze never wavered. "That, I know not why."

"Of course not," I said dryly.

"I know not why," she repeated stubbornly, and turned away from me, falling resolutely silent, a white statue. And I, I thought, *her people really are going to pay for this, they are, indeed.*

Still...maybe she was just scared? That wouldn't be surprising. Maybe she just didn't know how to—

"This car reeks," the Silver Flame said coldly, and killed my sympathy in that instant.

The car's AI couldn't be insulted, of course. "Kartaka, Spaceport," it announced.

No furry beings anywhere to be seen. Maybe we were going to get out of here in one piece....

Yes, and surprise, surprise, the ground crew had been honorable in their bribe-taking. *The Dart* sat ready, looking sleek and narrow as its namesake, glinting in the sunlight. Beautiful, I thought with a surge of pride.

"Small," the Silver Flame summed up.

Oh, no, she wasn't going to anger me so easily! "After you, Your Saintliness," I said and ushered her inside without touching her. I didn't even attempt to help her strap herself in.

Our furry foes were still nowhere to be seen, but I asked for immediate takeoff clearance just in case. No problem there; another ship was already waiting for the berth. I sent *The Dart* soaring up through the atmosphere and the maze of air traffic, back out into the freedom of space.

Setting the ship's computer for Kuuraet's coordinates, I also sent off a quick, private, just-in-case message to the Alliance outpost nearest to that world. The Alliance is, of course, basically a trading organization, but it does have its defense branch. Granted, space is big and messages take time to arrive, but even so, I felt a little better for the sending—

And only then stopped to think that I had Kuurae with me—a member of a race who couldn't endure space travel. If she went into shock—worse, I thought in sudden fastidious alarm, if she got spacesick in these close quarters—

But the Silver Flame...merely sat, her white face unreadable once more.

All right, so at least one Kuurae could manage space travel. I wasn't so sure about her reaction to hyperspace. I'm a rarity among Humans, one of the few who can travel through that nowhere noplac without needing to be drugged. But that utter lack of anything recognizable has been know to drive many beings insane.

Did I have anything that would safely drug a Kuurae?

"What do your people take to get through hyperspace?"

Those great blue eyes gave me a sharp sideways glance.

"My people do not go through hyperspace."

"Your, uh, kidnappers couldn't have come all this way by sublight speed."

"No. But I do not know what was done."

"Great." As I rummaged through my medkit, wishing I had just a little more medical data about her race in the computer than a standard "biped, warm-blooded," and the basics of pulse and respiration rates, I asked, "Are you going to tell me what was going on back there?"

"You do not question me." It was that autocratic tone again.

"Hell I don't. This is my ship, and that pretty much gives me sovereignty rights."

“You do not question me!”

“You know, I could really start not to like—” No. Wait. She really had been through a lot lately, enough to drive a weaker person into shock. I couldn’t tell how old she was, either. For all I knew, the Silver Flame might have been nothing more than a child.

In a much gentler tone, I said, “It’s all right. You don’t have to be afraid. *The Dart’s* a swift ship, and I’ll have you home before—”

“This is not a ship, but a *toy!* And I was not afraid.”

“Have it your way. But I need to know if we’re going to run into any more trouble.”

“I am not a prophet.”

No. You’re a pain in the— “Who were they? At least tell me that!”

“You do not question me!”

“Look, I have no intention of meddling in Kuuræ affairs—”

“You do not question me!”

A spark flared where her hand clenched the armrest, a wisp of smoke began to rise, and with it, the first hint of a flame—

I acted in pure instinct, practically tearing her from the seat, not even knowing how I’d unfastened the harness, and tossed her aside so hard that she went crashing to the cabin floor, stunned with shock. Of course, I have a fire extinguisher in the cabin, and had the tiny flame out in about three seconds. But I lingered over the work for a few minutes more, trying to get my heartbeat back down to normal.

A pyrokinetic. The Silver Flame was a pyrokinetic. Rare, any type of psionic gifts, rarer still this sort.

I was still too angry and, yes, too scared, to care. Dragging her back up, I plopped her back into the seat, aware only now of how downright hot her skin felt.

“You idiot!” I shouted. “God of Worlds, you utter *idiot!* Starting a fire in a spaceship, a closed environment surrounded by space—what were you trying to do? Kill us both?”

She blinked up at me. “I did not think—”

“That seems pretty clear! Damn it, I could, by every law, throw you out of *The Dart* into space here and now!”

“Yes.” It was the merest whisper.

A pyrokinetic.

God of Worlds, yes, I was on this ship with a—a psionic fire-starter.

Something clicked into place in my mind. “The fire,” I said. “Sei Sisar’s office ... the whole building. That was your doing.”

Her head drooped like that of a scolded child. “Was.”

“But...why? And, damn it, don’t give me that ‘You must not question’ nonsense!”

“It was not meant...” Her voice trembled. “I thought only of...escape. I had escaped. Sei Sisar... he has dealt with the Kuurae, so to him I fled. He helped. Sei Sisar contacted Kuuraet. And you.”

She looked up at me. For the first time I saw genuine emotion clear in those big eyes, and was pretty sure it was sorrow. Of a sort, anyhow. And I thought, I was right.

Wasn’t I?

“How old are you?” I asked her suddenly. “By your people’s standards, I mean.”

Reluctantly, she confessed, “In years, not yet of the Grown. But I am the Silver Flame!”

An adolescent. No, an adolescent pyrokinetic. “No one’s denying that. Please. What else happened, back on Stataka?”

“It was not a true escape, not for me. They are the Uwar-tai. And they found me. And I...they...I...did not mean to harm Sei Sisar. But I feared. So greatly I feared.”

“And you panicked.”

Her head drooped again. “Did.”

Was she regretting what had happened? Or, I wondered uneasily, merely regretting her lack of control? I would almost have been willing to give her the proverbial benefit of the doubt...if only I hadn’t seen that flame spark into life under her hand. What happened if she panicked again, here, aboard my ship?

But some more pieces were clicking into place. “They, the, uh, Uwar-tai kidnapped you to be a weapon, didn’t they?”

“It was so. They wanted a storm of fire to sweep away their foes. But I—I cannot do that, not so wide a fire! They...they would not believe me.”

“Hell,” I said softly. “And they still don’t.”

A ship was forming on the view screen. From its coordinates, it could only have come from Stataka. And from its size and downright predatory shape, it could only be a warship.

Fight or flight? “First,” I said, “let’s see what they have to say.”

“But you don’t speak their language!”

I grinned. “Don’t worry. I will.”

“But—no! They are not truth-sayers! They will be false!”

Ignoring her, I opened a communications channel, standard Alliance frequency. Would they know it? Or were they really just the “shoot first” type?

Not quite.

The first words their glittery-necklaced leader said were, of course, unintelligible to me. Those were the most dangerous moments, when I didn’t answer and they might lose patience.

Then the implant went to work, and after a dizzy moment, I was able to identify myself and my ship in reasonably smooth Uwar-taik. “Why do you follow us?”

“You know why! We are not at war with you—yet. Surrender that...thing and go your way.”

I glanced at the Silver Flame, who had gone into her rigid statue-mode. “Sorry. Can’t do that without a really good reason.”

“She has killed!”

“So, I don’t doubt, have you. So, for that matter, have I. In her case, it was self-defense.”

“No!” That was a teeth-baring roar. “No! Never that! That thing you harbor is a foulness! She has *killed!*”

The full meaning of the word suddenly translated. With a shock, I realized that what he really meant was: Murder.

“Not!” the Silver Flame protested, but very softly. “Not.”

“I don’t deny she killed,” I countered the Uwar-tai leader. “But only after you...” There didn’t seem to be a word in Uwar-taik for “kidnapped.” “After you stole her away from her, uh, pack.”

“She murdered!” he roared. “Not honorably, not battle-red—she murdered my pack-brother!”

“Wait. Wait! I’m, uh, honor-tied to return her to her people. Then we can bring the whole matter before an Alliance court—”

“No courts! Blood!”

With that melodramatic howl, he broke contact.

“Hang on,” I told the Silver Flame. “We’ll shake them in hyper—”

But I didn’t dare go into hyperspace! I hadn’t a clue as to what would happen to a Kuuræ—and the thought of a Kuuræ pyrokinetic going berserk—

“Never mind,” I amended. “*The Dart’s* fast enough in sublight.”

Manual controls now...send *The Dart* zooming straight for a moon, slingshot around it and come back toward the enemy. Bank aside, slip past them, more agile than they. Damn, but their pilot turned almost at once, following me.

All right, my friend, try this!

I hurled my swift *Dart* around another moon, then onward through a maze of asteroids, banking this way, that, never quite in danger, never quite out of it. We were pulling away from the enemy, and I felt my lips peel back from my teeth in a sharp grin. We were going to—

“No!” the Silver Flame shrieked suddenly. “No, no, can’t—can’t stand—no!”

I gave her a quick, sideways glance and saw wild hysteria in her eyes. There was a limit to even this Kuuræ space-endurance.

And where her hands clenched the armrests of her seat, smoke was beginning to rise

“Land,” she screamed at me, “please, please! Land!”

Or go up in flames. Not exactly a choice. I did a quick, frantic scan: We were much too far from Stataka by now to return there, I didn’t dare risk pushing the Silver Flame all the way over the edge by going into hyperspace, and nothing safe was near enough...

Ha, yes. Maybe. That wasn’t much of a planet, barely more than a moon, but it had rudimentary vegetation, atmosphere, and gravity. Enough to allow an emergency landing. Once the Silver Flame calmed down a little, I’d try whatever tranquilizers wouldn’t kill her—

“Land!” she shrieked in my ear, and I jumped so violently I almost sent *The Dart* into a nose-dive.

“Shut up!” I shouted back at her, and won enough startled silence to let me concentrate on bringing my ship down safely. Popping the hatch, I said, “See? Solid land.”

And then went into a coughing fit, because the air really wasn’t thick enough to breathe.

That didn’t seem to bother the Silver Flame. She was up and out of *The Dart* before I could unfasten my harness. By the time I caught up with her, she was dancing about easily in the light gravity, her face a white mask but her eyes blazing.

Let her play a little, I told myself. *Calm herself down.*

It was only play. Just a young thing letting off tension. Only play.

Then why was I suddenly so unnerved? Why was I thinking that very little I’d seen her do so far had been, when you came right down to it, rational?

Let her play, I amended, then tranquilize the...fire out of her

I alternated between frantically checking the readings on my medkit and just as frantically scanning the nearly black sky, looking for a moving dot. Our pursuers, even if they caught up with us, couldn’t land here, not with that big warship of theirs, but I prayed they didn’t have something powerful enough to scorch this whole little planetoid.

Evidently not. Unfortunately, what they did have was a shuttle.

“Visitors,” I snapped to the Silver Flame.

But she danced lightly out of my reach.

“Damn it,” cough, “this isn’t a time for,” cough, “games! Don’t you,” cough, cough, “want to get home?”

The shuttle was landing. Cursing under my breath and fighting down further coughing, I drew my sidearm. If she wasn’t going to come back, I was going to shoot her and pray the force only stunned her.

At this stage, I wasn’t going to be praying too hard, either.

Damn! There was the enemy, ten...no, fifteen of them, led by that glittery-necklaced fellow. Suddenly the Silver Flame was back at my side, her eyes still bright.

“They shall die.”

It was said so cheerfully that a cold shiver raced up my spine. “I thought you said you couldn’t do that, not a fire that size!”

“I can. Will.”

“But—no! Wait!”

God of Worlds, she meant it. And seeing that too-tranquil face and those wide, bright eyes, I knew the truth: The Silver Flame was nowhere near sanity.

The Uwar-tai had drawn their weapons, too, stalking warily forward. They didn’t know; they weren’t close enough to feel the heat radiating from the Silver Flame. In another second they were going to be a fireball, fifteen beings destroyed without a chance—

“Damn it, no!”

Maybe it wasn’t the brightest thing I’ve done. I mean, I’ve never been the Willing Sacrifice. But the thought of watching fifteen murders—no! I threw myself between the Silver Flame and the Uwar-tai.

And she hurled fire at me. I dropped, rolled, and came up shooting. Yes, my weapon was still set only to stunning force, and for a moment I was sure that wouldn’t be enough.

But with a sigh almost of disappointment, the Silver Flame crumpled.

The Uwar-tai came hurrying forward. *Now*, I thought *I’m going to die*.

But what happened was that their leader beat out the flames in my clothing that I hadn’t even felt.

Shaken, I looked up at him. “Thanks.”

“I am Haimarg, pack-leader.”

“I am Sharra Kinsarin, uh, of my own pack.”

“Why do what you just did?” he asked, nose wrinkled in what I guessed was confusion. “Life-risking for an enemy?”

I got to my feet, standing between him and the Silver Flame just in case, not sure where this was going. “I don’t like murder. Yes, and for the record,” a phrase that didn’t really work in his language, “I also don’t like kidnapping.”

That word didn’t quite work in his language either, but it was close enough. Haimarg’s lips drew back in a silent snarl. “You place honor-debt on me.”

“Do I? Then tell me what this was all about, and call that a settlement.”

He hissed at that, as did his fellows, and it took me an alarmed few seconds to realize the sound was an Uwar-tai laugh. “Courage as well as honor,” Haimarg commented to the others. “Interesting.” He turned back to me with the faintest lift of a lip. “It was not I who stole that creature.”

Daringly, I suggested, “Your pack-brother.”

“It is so. We are a warrior race; we fight with honor. But...”

“Killing from afar isn’t honorable, is it? Your pack-brother wanted a weapon that would do just that.”

Oh, smart move! He was at my side in a second, weapon against my neck, predator’s breath hot on my cheek, and I froze, not even daring to breath.

But then Haimarg released me with a grunt. “Courage,” he repeated. “Yes. Muraik made that mistake, for the good of the people. That creature...killed him.”

Time for another bout of courage. Or was that foolhardiness? “Seems to me the debts and wrongs are equaling out here. She wouldn’t have had the chance to kill your pack-brother if he hadn’t kidnapped her to use as a weapon.”

Haimarg snarled, and his warriors echoed him. But in a Flurry of motion, he was back among them, calling to me, “Get that creature back in your ship. We will follow, to be sure it reaches its home world.”

Right. The Silver Flame was still breathing, and I think I was relieved at that. I tugged her back into *The Dart*, got her strapped in like a cocoon, just in case she did wake up before we reached Kuuraet. And off we went, with our... military escort.

It was a blessedly uneventful voyage until we actually reached Kuuraet. Then, all my instincts uneasy, I sent a message to Haimarg, “Stand ready.”

“Understood.”

His ship vanished into the planetary shadow.

Oh, my instincts weren’t playing me false! As I’d suspected back on Stataka, when I’d first found myself facing a live being, not a stone artifact, I’d been set up. The Kuurae knew their holy being, their Silver Flame, wasn’t exactly sane, and they didn’t want the news publicized. Who would care if one small ship and one Human met with a tragic accident? Maybe the Kuurae didn’t like deep space, but that didn’t stop them from launching what might have been the only warship in their fleet.

That, of course, was when Haimarg brought his own ship out of hiding.

And joy of joys, there I was, caught between them.

I quickly opened channels to both ships. “Looks like I’m the translator here,” I said in both languages. Switching to the Kuuræ tongue, I told them, “You know who I’ve got here. And I know what you tried to do. Meet the Uwar-tai. Want to fight them?”

To the Uwar-tai, I said, “They’re dishonorable, I agree. But I’m afraid they *are* members of the Alliance.” Provisional only, but this wasn’t the time to argue fine points. “That’s one hundred and forty-two planets. Want a war with all them?”

“If we leave,” Haimarg said, and a hiss of Uwar-tai laughter was in his voice, “then the Kuuræ destroy you.”

Yes. I’d thought of that problem. “Anyone out there?” I called over another channel, using Alliance Standard.

And to my utter relief, a voice answered, “Got your message. Here we are.”

Three warships, three languages, and an awkward situation defused. Oh, and yes, I delivered the Silver Flame, through the Alliance, to the Kuuræ, and the Kuuræ delivered, through the Alliance, the total amount due me. The Uwar-tai, curious about the Alliance, agreed to preliminary discussions about membership.

Who knows? I might even get some new clients out of this. But right now, I’m heading for a brief vacation on Pentaiia. You may have heard of it. It’s an all-water world.

No chance of...stray flames.