

The Soft Weapon

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Logically Jason Papandreou should have taken the *Court Jester* straight home to Jinx. But...

He'd seen a queer star once.

He'd been single then, a gunner volunteer on one of Earth's warships during the last stages of the last Kzinti war. The war had been highly unequal in Earth's favor. Kzinti fight gallantly, ferociously, and with no concept of mercy; and they always take on several times as much as they can handle.

Earth's ships had pushed the Kzinti back out of human space, then pushed a little farther, annexing two Kzinti worlds for punitive damages. The fleets had turned for home. But Jason's captain had altered course to give his crew what might be their last chance to see Beta Lyrae.

Now, decades later, Jason, his wife, and their single alien passenger were rattling around in a ship built for ten times their number. Anne-Marie's curiosity was driving her up the walls with the frustration of not being able to open the stasis box in the forward locker. Nessus, the mad puppeteer, had taken to spending all his time in his room, hovering motionless and morose between the sleeping plates. Jinx was still weeks away.

Clearly a diversion was in order.

Beta Lyrae. A six-degree shift in course would do it.

Anne-Marie glared at the locker containing the stasis box. "Isn't there *any* way to open it?"

Jason didn't answer. His whole attention was on the mass indicator, the transparent ball in which a green radial line was growing toward the surface, growing and splitting in two.

"Jay?"

"We can't open it, Anne. We don't have the equipment to break a stasis field. It's illegal anyway."

Almost time. The radial double-line must not grow too long. When a working hyperdrive gets too deep into a gravity well, it disappears.

"Think they'll tell us what's inside?"

"Sure, unless it's a new weapon."

"With our luck it will be. Jay, nobody's ever found a stasis box that shape before. It's bound to be something new. The Institute is likely to sit on it for years and years.

"Whup! Jay, what are you *doing*?"

"Dropping out of hyperspace."

"You might warn a lady." She wrapped both arms around her midsection, apparently making sure everything was still there.

"Lady, why don't you have a look out that side window?"

"What for?"

Jason merely looked smug. His wife, knowing she would get no other answer, got up and undogged the cover. It was not unusual for a pilot to drop out in the depths of interstellar space. Weeks of looking at the blind-spot appearance of hyperspace could wear on the best of nerves.

She stood at the window, a tall, slender brunette in a glowing-green falling jumper. A Wunderlander she had been, of the willowy low-gravity type rather than the fat, balloonlike low-gravity type, until Jason Papandreou had dropped out of the sky to add her to his collection of girls in every port. It hadn't worked out that way. In the first year of marriage she had learned space and the *Court Jester* inside out, until she was doubly indispensable. Jay, Anne, *Jester*, all one independent organism.

And she thought she'd seen everything. But she hadn't seen this! Grinning, Jason waited for her reaction.

"Jay, it's *gorgeous*! What *is* it?"

Jason moved up to circle her waist with one arm. She'd put on weight in the last year, muscle weight, from moving in heavier gravities. He looked out around her shoulder ... and thought of smoke.

There was smoke across the sky, a trail of red smoke wound in a tight spiral coil. At the center of the coil was the source of the fire: a double star. One member was violet-white, a flame to brand

holes in a human retina, its force held in check by the polarized window. The companion was small and yellow. They seemed to burn inches apart, so close that their masses had pulled them both into flattened eggs, so close that a red belt of lesser flame looped around them to link their bulging equators together. The belt was hydrogen, still mating in fusion fire, pulled loose from the stellar surfaces by two gravitational wells in conflict.

The gravity war did more than that. It sent a loose end of the red belt flailing away, away and out in a burning Maypole spiral that expanded and dimmed as it rose toward interstellar space, until it turned from flame-red to smoke-red, bracketing the sky and painting a spiral path of stars deep red across half the universe.

"They call it Beta Lyrae," said Jason. "I was here once before, back when I was free and happy. Mph. Hasn't changed much."

"Well, *no*."

"Now don't you take all this for granted. How long do you think those twins can keep throwing hydrogen away? I give it a million years, and then, pft! No more Beta Lyrae."

"Pity. We'd better hurry and wake Nessus before it disappears."

The being they called Nessus would not have opened his door for them.

Puppeteers were gregarious even among alien species. They'd had to be. For at least tens of thousands of years the puppeteers had ruled a trade empire that included all the races within the sixty-light-year sphere men called "known space" and additional unknown regions whose extent could not be guessed. As innate cowards the puppeteers had to get along with everyone. And Nessus, too, was usually gregarious. But Nessus was mad.

Nessus was cursed with courage.

In a puppeteer, courage is a symptom of insanity. As usual there were other symptoms, other peripheral indications of the central disorder. Nessus was now in the depressive stage of a manic-depressive cycle.

Luckily the depression had not hit him until his business with the Outsiders was over. In the manic stage he had been fun. He had spent every night in a different stateroom. He had charcoal-drawn

cartoons which now hung in the astrogation room, cartoons that Jason could hardly believe were drawn by a puppeteer. Humor is generally linked to an interrupted defense mechanism. Puppeteers weren't supposed to have a sense of humor. But now Nessus spent all his time in one room. He wanted to see nobody.

There was one thing he might open his door for.

Jason moved to the control board and pushed the panic button. The alarm was a repeated recording of a woman's scream. It should have brought the puppeteer galloping in as if the angel of death were at his heel. But he trotted through the door seconds later than he should have. His flat, brainless heads surveyed the control room for signs of damage,

The first man to see a puppeteer had done so during a Campish revival of *Time for Beany* reruns. He had come running back to the scout ship, breathless and terrified, screaming, "Take off! The planet's full of monsters!"

"Whatta they look like?"

"Like a three-legged centaur with two Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent puppets on its hands, and no head."

"Take a pill, Pierson. You're drunk."

Nessus was an atypical puppeteer. His mane was straggly and unkempt. It should have been twisted, brushed, and tied in a manner to show his status in puppeteer society. But it showed no status at all. Perhaps this was appropriate. There was no puppeteer society. The puppeteers had apparently left the galaxy en masse some twelve years earlier, leaving behind only their insane and their genetically deficient.

"What is wrong?" asked Nessus.

"There's nothing wrong," said Jason.

Anne-Marie said, "Have a look out the window. This window."

Their employer obediently moved to the window. He happened to stop just next to one of the cartoons he'd drawn while in the manic phase, and Jason, looking from the puppeteer to the cartoon, found it more difficult than ever to associate the two.

The cartoon showed two human gods. Only the lighting and the proportions showed that they were gods. Otherwise they were as

individually human as a very good human artist could have drawn them. One, a child just about to become a teen-ager, was holding the galaxy in his hands. He wore a very strange grin as he looked down at the glowing multicolored spiral. The other figure, a disgruntled patriarch with flowing white hair and beard, was saying, "All right, now that you've had your little joke. .

Nessus claimed it was an attempt to imitate human humor. Maybe. Would an insane puppeteer develop a sense of humor?

Nessus (his real name sounded like a car crash, set to music) was insane. There were circumstances under which he would actually risk his life. But the sudden puppeteer exodus had left a myriad broken promises made to a dozen sentient races. The puppeteers had left Nessus and his fellow exiles with money to straighten things out. So Nessus had rented the *Court Jester*, rented all twelve staterooms, and gone out to the farthest edge of known space to deal with a ship of the Outsiders.

"I recognize this star," he said now. "Amazing. I really should have suggested this stop myself. Had I not been so depressed, I certainly would have. Thank you, Jason."

"My pleasure, sir." Jason Papandreou really sounded as though he'd invented the gaudy display just to cheer up a down-in-the-mouths puppeteer. Nessus cocked a sardonic head at him, and he hastily added, "We'll be on our way again whenever you're ready."

"I'll scan with deep-radar," Anne-Marie said helpfully.

Jason laughed. "Can you imagine how many ships must have scanned this system already?"

"Just for luck."

A moment later there was a beep. Anne-Marie yelped.

Jason said, "I don't believe it."

"Two in one trip!" his wife caroled. "Jay, that's some sort of record!"

It was. Using deep-radar had been more of a habit than anything else. A deep-radar on high setting was an easy way to find Slaver stasis boxes, since only stasis fields and neutron stars would reflect a hyperwave pulse. But Beta Lyrae *must* have been searched many times before. Searching was traditional.

Nessus turned from the window. "I suggest that we locate the box, then leave it. You may send a friend for it."

Jason stared. "Leave it? Are you kidding?"

"It is an anomaly. Such a box should have been found long since. It has no reason to be here in the first place. Beta Lyrae probably did not exist a billion and a half. years ago. Why then would the Slavers have come here?"

"War. They might have been running from a tnuclip fleet."

Anne-Marie was sweeping the deep-radar in a narrow beam, following the smoky spiral, searching for the tiny node of stasis her first pulse had found.

"You hired my ship," Jason said abruptly. "If you order me to go on, I'll do it."

"I will not. Your species has come a long way in a short time. If you do not have prudence, you have some workable substitute."

"There it is," said Anne-Marie. "Look, Jay. A little icy blob of a world a couple of billion miles out."

Jason looked. "Shouldn't be any problem. All right, Ill take us down."

Nessus said nothing. He seemed alert enough, but without the nervousness and general excitability that would have meant the onset of his manic stage. At least Beta Lyrae had cured his depression.

The *Traitor's Claw* was under the ice. Ice showed dark and deep outside her hexagonal ports. In lieu of sight her crew used a mechanical sense like a cross between radar and X-ray vision. The universe showed on her screens as a series of transparent images superimposed: a shadow show.

Four Kzinti watched a blob-shaped image sink slowly through other images, coming to a stop at a point no different from any other.

"Chuft-Captain, they're down," said Flyer.

"Of course they're down." Chuft-Captain spoke without heat. "Telepath, how many are there?"

"Two human." There was a quiet, self-hating resignation in Telepath's speech. His tone became disgust as he added, "And a puppeteer."

"Odd. That's a passenger ship. A puppeteer couldn't need all that room."

"I sense only their presence, Chuft-Captain." Telepath was pointedly reminding him that he had not yet taken the drug. He would do so only if ordered. Without an injection of treated extract of sthondat lymph, his powers were low. Little more than the knack for making an accurate guess.

"One human has left the ship," said Flyer. "No, two humans."

"Slaverstudent, initiate hostilities. Assume the puppeteer will stay safely inside."

The planet was no bigger than Earth's moon. Her faint hydrogen atmosphere must have been regularly renewed as the spiral streamer whipped across her orbit. She was in the plane of the hydrogen spiral, which now showed as a glowing red smoke trail cutting the night sky into two unequal parts.

Anne-Marie finished tucking her hair into her helmet, clamped the helmet to her neck ring, and stepped out to look around. .

"I dub thee Cue Ball," she said.

"Cute," said Jason. "Too bad if she's named already."

They moved through the ship's pressure curtain, Jason toting a bulky portable deep-radar. The escalladder carried them down onto the ice.

They moved away, following the dark image in the deep-radar screen. Jason was a head shorter than his wife and twice as wide; his typical Earther's build looked almost Jinxian next to hers. He moved easily in the low gravity. Anne-Marie, bouncing like a rubber clown, kept pace with him only by dint of longer legs and greater effort.

Jason was standing right over the image of the stasis box, getting ready to mark the ice so they could dig for it, when the image quietly vanished.

A sharp crack jerked his head around. He saw a cloud of steam explode into the near-vacuum, a cloud lit from below by a rosy light. Anne-Marie was already sprinting for the ship in low flying leaps. He turned to follow.

A form like a big roly-poly man shot through the light into what must by then have been a cloud of tiny ice crystals. It was a Kzin in a vac suit, and the thing in its hands was a police stunner. It landed running. Under the conditions its aim was inhumanly accurate.

Jason collapsed like a deflating balloon. Anne-Marie was pinwheeling across the ice, slowly as dreams in the low gravity. The Kzin ignored them both. It was using a jet backpack to speed it along.

The ship's heavy, flush-fitting door started to close over the pressure curtain. Too slowly. Jason clung to consciousness long enough to see the Kzin's backpack carry it up the escalladder and through the pressure curtain. His mind hummed and faded.

Present in the crew's relaxroom were two humans, one puppeteer, and a Kzin. The Kzin was Chuft-Captain. It had to be that way, since the prisoners had not yet had the chance to refuse to talk. Chuft-Captain was a noble, entitled to a partial name. Had he not been alone with the prisoners, he would have been showing fear. His crew watched the proceedings from the control room.

The puppeteer lifted a head at the end of a drunkenly weaving neck. The head steadied, stared hard. In Kzin he said, "What is the purpose of this action?"

Chuft-Captain ignored him. One did not speak as an equal to a puppeteer. Puppeteers did not fight, ever. Hence they were mere herbivorous animals. Prey.

The male human was next to recover from the stunners. He stared in consternation at Chuft-Captain, then looked around him. "So none of us made it," he said.

"No," said the puppeteer. "You may remember I advised--."

"How could I forget? Sorry about that, Nessus. What's happening?"

"Very little at the moment."

The male looked back at Chuft-Captain. "Who're you?"

"You may call me Captain. Depending on future events, you are either my kidnap victims or my prisoners of war. Who are you?"

"Jason Papandreou, of Earth origin." The human tried to gesture, perhaps to point at himself, and found the electronic police-

web binding him in an invisible grip. He finished the introductions without gestures.

"Very well," said Chuft-Captain. "Jason, are you in possession of a stasis box, a relic of the Slaver Empire?"

Chuft-Captain gestured to the screen behind the prisoners. Telepath nodded and switched off. The prisoner had lied; it was now permissible to bring in help to question him.

It had been a strange, waiting kind of war.

Legally it was no war at all. The *Traitor's Claw* showed in the Kzinti records as a stolen ship. If she had been captured at any time, all the Kzinti worlds would have screamed loudly for Chuft-Captain's head as a pirate. Even the ship's name had been chosen for that eventuality.

There had never been a casualty; never; until now, a victory. A strange war, in which the rules were flexible and the dictates of personal honor were often hard to define and to satisfy. Even now ... What does one do with a captured puppeteer? You couldn't eat him; puppeteers were officially a friendly power. A strange war. But better than no war at all. Perhaps it would now get better still.

The Kzin had asked one question and turned away. A bad sign. Apparently the question had been a formality.

Jason wriggled once more against the force field. He was embedded like a fly in flypaper. It must be a police web. Since the last war the Kzinti worlds had been living in probationary status. Though they might possess and use police restraint-devices, they were allowed no weapons of war.

Against two unarmed humans and a puppeteer, they hardly needed them.

Anne-Marie stirred. Jason said, "Easy, honey."

"Easy? Oh, my neck. What happened?" She tried to move her arm. Her head, above the soft grip of the police web, jerked up in surprise; her eyes widened. And she saw the Kzin.

She screamed.

The Kzin watched in obvious irritation. Nessus merely watched.

"All *right*," said Jason. "*That* won't do us any good."

"Jay, they're *Kzinti!*"

"Right. And they've got us. Oh, hell, go ahead and scream."

That shocked her. She looked at him long enough to read his helplessness, then turned back to the Kzin. Already she was calmer. Jason didn't have to worry about his wife's courage. He'd seen it tested before.

She had never seen a Kzin; all she knew about them she had heard from Jason, and little of that had been good. But she was no xenophobe. There was more sympathy of feeling between Anne-Marie and Nessus than there was between Nessus and Jason. She could face the Kizin.

But Jason couldn't read the puppeteer's expression. It was Nessus he was worried about. Puppeteers hated pain worse than they feared death. Let the Kzin threaten Nessus with pain and there was no telling what he'd do. Without the puppeteer they might have a chance to conceal the stasis box.

It might be very bad if the *Kzinti* got into a stasis box.

A billion and a half years ago there had been a war. The Slavers, who controlled most of the galaxy at the time, had also controlled most of the galaxy's sentient species. One such slave species, the *tnuctipun*, had at last revolted. The Slavers had had a power like telepathic hypnosis, a power that could control the mind of any sentient being. The *tnuctipun* slaves had possessed high intelligence, higher technology, and a slyness more terrifying than any merely mental power. Slavers and *tnuctipun* slaves alike, and every sentient being then in the galaxy, had died in that war.

Scattered through known and unknown space were the relics of that war, waiting to be found by species which had become sentient since the war's end. The Slavers had left stasis boxes, containers in stasis fields, which had survived unchanged through a billion and a half years of time. The *tnuctipun* had left mutated remnants of their biological engineering: the *Frumious bandersnatch* of *Jinx's* shorelines; the stage tree, which was to be found on worlds scattered all across known space; the tiny coldworld sunflower with its rippling, reflective blossoms.

Stasis boxes were rare and dangerous. Often they held abandoned Slaver weapons. One such weapon, the variable-sword,

had recently revolutionized human society, bringing back swordplay, and dueling on many worlds. Another was being used for peaceful ends; the disintegrator was too slow to make a good weapon. If the Kzinti found a new weapon, and if it were good enough...

Their Kzinti captor was a big one, thought Jason, though even a small one was a big one. He stood eight feet tall, as erect as a human on his short, hind legs. The orange shade of his fur might have been inconspicuous to a Kzin's natural prey, but to human eyes it blazed like neon. He was thick all over, arms, legs, torso; he might have been a very fat cat dipped in orange dye, with certain alterations. You would have had to discount the naked-pink ratlike tail; the strangely colored irises, which were round instead of slitted; and especially the head, rendered nearly triangular by the large cranial bulge, more than large enough to hold a human brain.

"The trap you stumbled into is an old one," said the Kizin. "One ship or another has been waiting on this world since the last war. We have been searching out Slaver stasis boxes for much longer than that, hoping to find new weapons. .

A door opened and a second Kzin entered. He stayed there in the dilated doorway, waiting for the leader's attention. There was something about his appearance...

"But only recently did we hit upon this idea. You may know," said their orange captor, "that ships often stop off to see this unusual star. Ships of most species also have the habit of sending a deep-radar pulse around every star they happen across. No student of Slavers has ever found method behind the random dispersion of stasis boxes throughout this region of space.

"Several decades ago we did find a stasis box. Unfortunately it contained nothing useful, but we eventually found out how to turn the stasis field on and off. It made good bait for a trap. For forty Kzin years we have waited for ships to happen by with stasis boxes in their holds. You are our second catch."

"You'd have done better finding your own boxes," said Jason. He had been examining the silent Kzin. This one was smaller than their interrogator. His fur was matted. His tail drooped, as did his pointed ears. For a Kzin the beast was skinny, and misery showed in

his eyes. As certainly as they were aboard a fighting ship, this was not a fighting Kzin.

"We would have been seen. Earth would have acted to stop our search." Apparently dismissing the subject, their interrogator turned to the smaller Kzin and spat out an imitation of cats fighting. The smaller Kzin turned to face them.

A pressure took hold of Jason's mind and developed into a sudden splitting headache.

He had expected it. It was a strange thing: put a sane alien next to an insane one, and usually you could tell them apart. And Kzinti were much closer to human than were any other species; so close that they must at one time have had common microbe ancestors. This smaller Kzin was obviously half crazy. And he wasn't a fighter. To be in this place at this time, he had to be a trained telepath, a forced addict of the Kzinti drug that sent nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand Kzinti insane and left the survivor a shivering neurotic.

He concentrated on remembering the taste of a raw carrot--just to be difficult.

Telepath sagged against a wall, utterly spent. He could still taste yellow root munched. between flat-topped teeth. Chuft-Captain watched without sympathy, waiting.

He forced himself to speak. "Chuft-Captain, they have not hidden the stasis box. It may be found in a locker to the left of the control room."

Chuft-Captain turned to the wall screen. "See to it. And get the puppeteer's pressuresuit. Then seal the ship."

Flyer and Slaverstudent acknowledged and signed off.

"The relic. Where did they find it?"

"Chuft-Captain, they did not. The stasis box was found in deep interstellar space, considerably closer to the Core, by a ship of the Outsiders. The Outsiders kept it to trade in known space."

"What business did the prisoners have with the Outsiders?"

"The puppeteer had business with them. It merely used the humans for transportation. The humans do not know what business it was."

Chuft-Captain spit in reflex fury, but of course he could not ask a Kzin to read the mind of a herbivore. Telepath wouldn't, and would have to be disciplined; or he would, and would go insane. Nor could Chuft-Captain use pain on the puppeteer. He would get the information if it was worthless; but if the puppeteer decided it was valuable, the creature would commit suicide.

"Am I to assume that the Outsiders did in fact sell the relic to the prisoners?"

"Chuft-Captain, they did. The sum was a puppeteer's recorded word of honor for fourteen million stars in human money."

"A lordly sum."

"Perhaps more than lordly. Chuft-Captain, you may know that the Outsiders are long-lived. The male human has speculated that they intend to return in one or more thousands of years, when the recording of a puppeteer's voice is an antique worth eights of times its face value."

"Urrr. I shouldn't stray into such byways, but ... are they really that long-lived?"

"Chuft-Captain, the Outsider ship was following a starseed in order to trace its migratory pattern."

"Urrr-rrrr!" Starseeds lived long enough to make mating migrations from the galactic core to the rim and back, moving at average speeds estimated at point eight lights.

A patterned knock. The others entered, wearing pressure suits with the helmets thrown back. Flyer carried the puppeteer's pressure suit, a three-legged balloon with padded mittens for the mouths, small clawed boots, an extra bulge for a food pouch, and a hard, padded shield to cover the cranial hump. Slaverstudent carried a cylinder with a grip-notched handle. Its entire surface was a perfectly reflecting mirror: the sign of the Slaver stasis field.

The prisoners, the human ones, were silently glaring. Their post-telepathy headaches had not helped their dispositions. Telepath was resting from the aftereffects of the drug.

"Open it," said Chuft-Captain

Slaverstudent removed an empty cubical box from the table, set the stasis box in its place, and touched a pressure-sensitive surface at the table's edge. The cylinder ceased to be a distorting

mirror. It was a bronzy metal box, which popped open of its own accord.

The Kzin called Slaverstudent reached in and brought out:

A silvered bubble six inches in diameter, with a sculptured handle attached. The handle would not have fit any gripping appendage Chuft-Captain knew of.

A cube of raw meat in something like a plastic sandwich wrap.

A hand. An alien hand furnished with three massive, clumsy-looking fingers set like a mechanical grab. It had been dipped in something that formed a clear, hard coating. One thick finger wore a chronometer.

"A bad thing has happened," said Nessus.

The Kzin who had opened the box seemed terribly excited. He turned the preserved hand over and over, yowling in Kzinti. Then he put it down and picked up the sphere-with-a-handle.

"Let me' guess," said Jason. "That's not a Slaver box. It's a tnuclipun box."

"Yes. The first to be found. The handle on the bubble tool is admirably designed to fit a tnuclipun hand. The preserved Slaver hand must be a trophy- I am quoting the student of Slavers. Jason, this may be a disaster. The tnuclipun were master technologists."

The "student of Slavers" was running his padded, retractile-clawed hands over the sphere-with-a-handle. No detail at all showed on the sphere; it was the same mirror color as the stasis field that had disgorged it. The handle was bronzy metal. There were grooves for six fingers and two long, opposed thumbs; there was a button set in an awkward position. A deep, straight groove ran down the side, with a guide and nine notched settings.

Anne-Marie spoke in a low voice. "It looks like the handle of a gun."

"We need information," said Jason. "Nessus, is that bigger Kzin the boss? The one who speaks Interworld?"

"Yes. The one with the bubble tool is a student of the Slaver Empire. The one with the white stripe is the pilot. The mind reader is resting. We need not fear him for several hours."

"But the boss Kzin understands Interworld. Do the others?"

"I think not. Your inaptly named Interworld is difficult for nonhumans to learn and to pronounce."

"Good. Anne, how are you doing?"

"I'm scared. We're in big trouble, aren't we, Jay?"

"We are. No sense fooling ourselves. Any ideas?"

"You know me, Jay. In a pinch I usually know who to call for help. The integrator if the house stops, the taxi company when a transfer booth doesn't work. Step into an autodoc when you feel sick. If your lift belt fails, you dial E for Emergency on your pocket phone. If someone answers before you hit the ground, scream." She tried a smile. "Jay? Who do we call about Kzinti kidnappings?"

He smiled back. "You write a forceful note to the Patriarch of Kzin. Right, Nessus?"

"Also you threaten to cut off trade. Do not worry too much, Anne-Marie. My species is expert at staying alive."

"Undoubtedly a weapon," said Slaverstudent. "We had best try it outside."

"Later," said Chuft-Captain.

Again Slaverstudent dipped into the cylindrical box. He removed small containers half filled with two kinds of small-arms projectiles, a colored cap that might easily have fitted a standard bowling ball, a transparent bulb of clear fluid, and a small metal widget that might have been anything. "I see no openings for bullets."

"Nor do I. Flyer, take a sample of this meat and find out what it is made of. Do the same with this trophy and this bulb. Telepath, are you awake?"

"Chuft-Captain, I am."

"When can you again read the-"

"Chuft-Captain, please don't make-"

"At ease, Telepath. Take time to recover. But I intend to keep the prisoners present while we investigate this find. They may notice some detail we miss. Eventually I will need you."

"Yes, Chuft-Captain."

"Test that small implement for radio or hyperwave emissions. Do nothing else to it. It has the look of a subminiature communicator, but it might be anything: a camera, even an explosive.

"Slaverstudent, you will come with me. We are going outside."

It took several minutes for the Kzinti to get the prisoners into their suits, adjust their radios so that everybody could hear everybody else, and move them through the double-door airlock.

To Jason, the airlock was further proof that this was a warship. A pressure curtain was generally more convenient than an airlock; but if power failed during a battle, all the air could leave the ship in one whoof. Warships carried double doors.

Two stunners followed them up the sloping ice tunnel. Jason had thought there would be four. He'd need to fight only the boss Kzin and one other. But both carried stunners and both seemed alert.

He took too much time deciding. The boss made Nessus stand on a flexible wire grid, then did the same with Anne-Marie and Jason. The grid was a portable police web, and it was as inflexibly restraining as the built-in web in the ship.

The Kzinti returned down the sloping tunnel, leaving Jason, Anne-Marie, and Nessus to enjoy the view. It was a lonely view. The blue and yellow stars were rising, invisibly. They showed only as a brighter spot at one foot of the red-smoke arch of hydrogen. Stars showed space-bright in curdled patterns across the sky; they all glowed red near the arch. The land was cold rock-hard ice, rippling in long, low undulations that might have been seasonal snowdrifts millions of years ago, when the Lyrae twins were bigger and brighter. Black-faceted rock poked through some of the high spots.

Several yards away was the *Court Jester*. A thick, rounded, flat-bottomed disk, she sat on the ice like a painted concrete building. Apparently she intended to stay.

Jason stood at parade rest on the police web. AnneMarie was six inches to his right, facing him. For all of his urge to touch her, she might have been miles away.

Two days ago she had carefully painted her eyelids with semipermanent tattoo. They showed as two tiny blackand-white-checked racing victory flags, rippling when she blinked. Their gaiety mocked her drawn face.

"I wonder why we're still alive," she said.

Nessus' accentless voice was tinny in the earphones. "The captain wants our opinions on the putative weapon. He will not ask for them, but will take them through the telepath."

"That doesn't apply to you, does it?"

"No. No Kzin would read my mind. Perhaps no Kzin would kill me; my race holds strong policies on the safety of individual members. In any case we have some time."

"Time for what?"

"Anne-Marie, we must wait. If the artifact is a weapon, we must recover it. If not, we must survive to warn your people that the Kzinti are searching out Slaver stasis boxes. We must wait until we know which."

"*Then* what?"

"We will find a way."

"We?" said Jason.

"Yes. Our motives coincide here. I cannot explain why at this time."

But why should a puppeteer risk his life, his *life*, for Earth? Jason wondered.

The boss Kzin emerged from the airlock carrying the sphere-with-a-handle. He stood before Jason and held it before his eyes. "Examine this," he commanded, and turned it slowly and invitingly in his four-fingered hands.

There was the reflecting sphere, and there was the bronzy-metal gun handle with its deeply scored groove and its alien sculpturing. The groove had nine notched settings running from top to bottom, with a guide in the top notch. Squiggles that must have been tnucltip numbers corresponded to the notches.

Jason prayed for the police web to fail. If he could snatch the artifact-

The Kzin moved away, walking uphill to a rise of icy ground. A second Kzin emerged from the pressure curtain carrying an unfamiliar gadget of Kzinti make. The two Kzinti spat phrases at each other. Kzinti language always sounds like insults.

Nessus spoke quietly. "The meat was protoplasmic, protein, and highly poisonous. The small, complex tnucltip implement does operate in hyperspace but uses no known method of communication.

The fluid in the clear bulb is forty percent hydrogen peroxide, sixty percent hydrogen oxide, purpose unknown."

"What's the Slaver expert carrying?"

"That is an energy-output sensor."

The puppeteer seemed calm enough. Did he know of some way to interrupt a police web?

Jason couldn't ask, not when the boss Kzin could hear every word. But he had little hope. A police web belonged to the same family as a pilot's crash field, triggered to enfold the pilot when signaled by excessive pressure on his crash webbing. A crash web was as deliberately foolproof as any last-ditch failsafe device. So was a police web.

Probably the puppeteer was slipping back into the manic state and was now convinced that nothing in the universe could harm him. Somehow that made Jason's failure worse. "One thing you should know, Jason, is that my species judges me insane." It was one of the first things the puppeteer had told him. Unable to trust his own judgement, Nessus had warned him by implication that he would have to trust Jason's.

They'd both trusted him.

"I had to show you Beta Lyrae," he said bitterly.

"It was a nice idea, Jay, really it was."

If he'd been free, he'd have found a wall and tried to punch it down.

Chuft-Captain stood on a rise of permafrost and let his eyes scan the horizon. Those points of dark rock would make good targets.

The weapon was uncomfortable in his hand, but he managed to get one finger on the presumed trigger button. He aimed at the horizon and fired.

Nothing happened.

He aimed at a closer point, first pressing and releasing the trigger button repeatedly, then holding it down. Still nothing.

"Chuft-Captain, there is no energy release."

"The power may be gone."

"Chuft-Captain, it may. But the notches in the handle may control intensity. The guide is now set on 'nil'."

Chuft-Captain moved the guide one notch down. A moment later he had to resist the panicky urge to throw the thing as far as possible. The mirror-faced sphere was twisting and turning like something alive, changing shape like a drug nightmare. It changed and flowed and became a long slender cylinder with a red knob at the end and a toggle near the handle. The handle had not changed at all.

"Chuft-Captain, there was an energy discharge. Eek! What happened?"

"It turned into this. What do I do next?"

Slaverstudent took the artifact and examined it. He would have liked to fire it himself, but that was the leader's privilege and right. And risk. He said, "Try the toggle."

At a forward motion of the toggle the red knob lit up and leapt away across the ice. Chuft-Captain wiggled the handle experimentally. The red knob, still receding, bobbed and weaved in response to stay in line with the cylindrical barrel. When the knob was a red point sixty yards distant, Chuft-Captain stopped it with the toggle.

"Variable-sword," he muttered. He looked for a target. His eyes lit on a nearby tilted spire of dark rock or dirty ice.

Chuft-Captain gripped the artifact in both furry hands, like a big-game fishing pole, and swung the red light behind the spire. The artifact fought his pressure, then gave way. The top half of the spire toppled, kicking up a spray of chipped ice.

"A variable-sword," he repeated. "But not of Slaver design. Slaverstudent, have you ever heard of a weapon that changes shape?"

"No, Chuft-Captain, neither of the past nor of the present."

"Then we've found something new."

"Yes!" The word was a snarl of satisfaction.

"That tears it," said Anne-Marie. "It's a weapon." Jason tried to nod. The police web held him fast. The other Kzinti came outside and moved up the rise. Four Kzinti stood spitting at each other, looking like four fat men, sounding like a catfight. Nessus said, "The first notch must have been neutral. They intend to find out what the other notches do."

"It changes shape," said Anne-Marie. "That's bad enough."

"Quite right," said the puppeteer. "The artifact is now our prime target."

Jason grinned suddenly. The puppeteer reminded him of a cartoon: Two bearded, dirty convicts hanging three feet off the ground by iron chains. One convict saying, "Now here's my plan. . .

First we wish away the police web. Then...

Again the Kzinti captain moved the guide. The gun reverted to sphere-and-handle, then flowed into something hard to see at a distance. The boss Kzin must have realized it. He came down the hill, followed by the others. One at a time the Kzinti moved them to the top of the rise, so that they stood several yards behind the firing line, but still in the police web.

The boss Kzin resumed his firing stance,

Position number two was a parabolic mirror with a silvery knob at the center. It did nothing at all to the rock Chuft-Captain was using for a target, though Slaverstudent reported an energy discharge. Chuft-Captain considered, then turned the weapon on the puppeteer.

The puppeteer spoke in the human tongue. "I can hear a faint high-pitched whine."

"Another control dial has formed," Slaverstudent pointed out. "Four settings."

Chuft-Captain nodded and tried the second setting. It did not affect the puppeteer. Neither did the third and fourth.

"Chuft-Captain, will you hold down the trigger?" Slaverstudent cautiously peeped over the lip of the parabolic mirror. "Urrrr. I was right. The knob is vibrating rapidly. Setting number two is a sonic projector-and a powerful one-if the puppeteer can hear it through near-vacuum and the thickness of its suit."

"But it didn't knock him out or anything."

"Chuft-Captain, we must assume that it was designed to affect the Slaver nervous system."

"Yes." Chuft-Captain moved the guide to setting number three. As the gun changed and flowed, he said, "We have found nothing new. Sonics and variable-swords are Common."

"Mutable weapons are not."

"Mutable weapons could not win a war, though they might help. Urrrr. This seems to be a projectile weapon. Have you the small-arms projectiles from the stasis box?"

"Chuft-Captain, I do."

The magazine under the barrel swung out for loading. It took both kinds of projectiles. Chuft-Captain again sighted on the rock, using the newly formed telescopic sight.

His first shot put a nick exactly where he aimed it.

His second, with the second-variety projectile, blew the rock to flying shards. Everybody ducked but Chuft-Captain.

"Should I empty the magazine before moving the guide?"

"Chuft-Captain, I do not think it matters. The bullets should certainly be removed, but the tnuclipun must have known that occasionally they would not be. Will you indulge my curiosity?"

"Since your curiosity is a trained one, I will." Chuft-Captain moved the guide. The projectiles still in the gun popped out through the shifting surface. The artifact became a sphere-with-handle, and then ... a sphere-withhandle. The new sphere was smaller than the neutral setting. It had a rosy hue and a smooth, oily texture unmarred by gunsights or secondary controls.

The trigger button did nothing at all.

"I tire rapidly of these duds."

"Chuft-Captain, there is energy release."

"Very well." Chuft-Captain fired at the puppeteer, using his marksman's instinct in the absence of a gunsight. The puppeteer showed no ill effects.

Neither did the female human.

In momentary irritation Chuft-Captain thought of firing the dud at Telepath, who was standing nearby looking harmless and useless. But nothing would happen; he would only upset Telepath. He moved the guide to the fifth setting.

The artifact writhed, became a short cylinder with an aperture in the nose and two wide, flat metallic projections at the sides. Chuft-Captain's lips drew back from neatly filed feline teeth. *This* looked promising.

He drew aim on what was left of the target rock- a dark blot on the ice.

The gun slammed back against his hand. Chuft-Captain was whirled half around, trying to keep his feet and fighting the sudden pressure as a fireman fights a fire hose. Releasing the trigger didn't shut off the incandescent stream of plasma gas. Pressing the trigger again did. Chuft-Captain blinked his relief and looked around to assess damages.

He saw a twisting trail of melted ice like the path of an earthworm hooked on LSD. Telepath was screaming into his helmet mike. An ominously diminishing scream. The other Kzinti were carrying him toward the airlock at a dead run. From the trail of thin, icy fog his suit left on the air, the weapon's firestream must have washed across his body, burning holes in nearly heatproof fabric.

The human female was running toward her ship.

A glance told him that the other prisoners were still in the police web. Telepath must have knocked the female spinning out of the force field while trying to escape the firestream. She was plainly visible, running across flat ice.

Chuft-Captain shot her with the stunner, then trudged away to pick her up. He had her back in the web when Flyer and Slaverstudent returned.

Telepath was still alive but in critical shape. They had dumped him in the freeze box for treatment on Kzin.

As for position five on the tnucltip relic:

"It's a rocket motor," said Slaverstudent. "As a short-range weapon it could be useful, but primarily it is a one-Kzin reaction pistol. One-tnucltip, that is. I doubt it would lift one of us against respectable gravity. The flat projections at the sides may be holds for feet. The tnucltipun were small."

"Pity you didn't think of this earlier."

"Chuft-Captain, I acknowledge my failure."

Chuft-Captain dropped it. Privately he too acknowledged a failure: he had not considered the female dangerous. Humans were sentient, male and female both. He would not forget it again.

Position six was a laser. It too was more than a weapon. A telescopic sight ran along the side, and there was a microphone grid at the back. Focus it on the proper target, and you could talk voice-to-voice.

"This will be useful," said Slaverstudent. "We can find the voice and hearing ranges for tnuclipun from this microphone."

"Will that make it a better weapon?"

"Chuft-Captain, it will not."

"Then keep your passion for useless knowledge to yourself." Chuft-Captain moved the guide to the seventh setting.

"Darling?"

Anne-Marie didn't move. The police web held her in a slumped sitting position. Her chest rose and fell with shallow breathing. Her eyes were closed, her face relaxed.

"Nice try," Jason told her.

"She cannot hear you," said Nessus.

"I *know* she can't hear me."

"Then why-? Never mind. What did that rocket setting look like to you?"

"A rocket."

"Using what fuel source?"

"Is it important?"

"Jason, I know nothing of warfare or of weapons, but my species has been making and using machines for some considerable time. Why did the projectile weapon not include its own projectiles? Why did it throw them away when it changed shape?"

"Oh. Okay, it can't throw away its own mass." Jason thought about that. "You're right. It can't be using its own fuel. Nessus, it's a jet. There was an intake somewhere that nobody noticed. Waitaminute. You couldn't use it in space."

"One would affix a gas cartridge at the intake."

"Oh. Right."

"One could not be sure a given atmosphere would burn. How is the gas heated?"

"A battery in the handle? No, it couldn't put out enough power, not without- But there has to be one. Nessus? The Kzinti could be listening."

"I think it does not matter. The Kzinti will know all about the weapon soon enough. Only the captain can profit from learning more before he turns the weapon over to his superiors."

"Okay. That battery must use total conversion of matter."

"Could you not build a fusion motor small enough to fit into the handle?"

"You're the expert. Could you? Would it give enough power?"

"

"I do not think so. The handle must contain a wide variety of mechanisms to control the changing of shapes."

They watched the Kzin test out the laser form.

"You could do it direct," said Jason. "Change some of the matter in the reaction gas to energy. It'd give you a terrifically hot exhaust. Nessus, is there any species in known space that has total conversion?"

"None that I have heard of."

"Did the tnuclipun?"

"I would not know."

"Things weren't bad enough. Can you see Kzinti warships armed and powered with total conversion?"

A gloomy silence followed. The Kzinti were watching the weapon change shape.. The boss Kzin had not spoken; he may or may not have been listening to their discussions.

Anne-Marie made small protesting sounds. She opened her eyes and tried to sit up. She swore feelingly when she found that the web was holding her in her cramped position.

"Nice try," said Jason.

"Thanks. What happened?" She answered herself, her voice brittle and bitter. "They shot me, of course. What have I missed?"

The seventh setting was a blank, flat-ended cylinder with a small wire grid near the back. No gunsight. It did nothing when Chuft-Captain clicked the trigger button; it did nothing when he held it down, and nothing when he clicked it repeatedly. It had no effect on the target rock, the puppeteer, the humans. Its only effect on Slaverstudent was to make him back warily away, saying, "ChuftCaptain, please, there is an energy discharge."

"A singularly ineffective energy discharge. Take this, Slaverstudent. Make it work. I will wait."

And wait he did, stretched comfortably on the permafrost, his suit holding the cold a safe tenth of an inch away. He watched Slaverstudent's nerves fray under the fixity of his stare.

"What have I missed?"

"Not much. We've decided the jet that knocked you down converts matter to energy."

"Is that bad?"

"Very." Jason didn't try to explain. "The sixth setting was a more-or-less conventional message laser."

"The seventh does not work," said Nessus. "This angers the captain. Jason, for the first time I regret never having studied weapons."

"You're a puppeteer. Why should you .. ." Jason let the sentence trail off. There was a thought he wanted to trace down. About the weapon. Not any particular form, but all forms together.

"No sentient mind should turn away from knowledge. Especially no puppeteer. We are not known for our refusal to look at unpleasant truths."

Jason was silent. He was looking at an unpleasant truth. Nessus had said that it didn't matter what the boss Kzin overheard. He was wrong. This was a thing Jason dared not say aloud.

Nessus said, "The Slaver expert wants to go inside with the weapon. He has permission. He is going."

"Why?" asked Anne-Marie.

"There is a microphone grid on the seventh setting. Jason, could a soldier use a hand computer?"

"He- *wasn't a soldier!*" Jason clamped his teeth on the words. "Probably could," he said.

Presently the Slaver expert returned holding the tnuclipun weapon.

To Jason, the artifact had taken on a final, fatal fascination. If he was right about its former owner, then he could stop worrying about its reaching the Patriarch of Kzin. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut. In minutes he and Anne-Marie and Nessus and the four Kzinti would be dead.

Slaverstudent said, "I was right. The artifact answered me in an unknown speech."

"Then it is another-" signaling device, he had been about to say. But it would have been built to signal tnucltipun, and the tnucltipun had been extinct for ages yet the thing had answered back! Chuft-Captain felt his back arch with the fighting reflex. There were ghost legends among the Kzinti.

"Chuft-Captain, I believe it to be a computer. A hand computer could be very useful to a warrior. It could compute angles for him as he fired explosive projectiles. It-"

"Yes. Can we use it?"

"Not unless we can teach it the Hero's Tongue. It may be too simple to learn."

"Then we pass to setting number eight." Chuft-Captain moved the guide down to the bottom setting.

Again there was no gunsight. Most of the genuine weapons had had gunsights or telescopic sights. Chuft-Captain scowled, but raised the weapon and aimed once again at the distant, shattered rock.

Jason cringed inside his imprisoned skin. Again the weapon was writhing, this time to the final setting.

There were so many things he wanted to say. But he didn't dare. The boss Kzin must not know what was about to happen.

The gun had twisted itself into something very strange.

"That looks familiar," said Nessus. "I have seen something like that at some time."

"Then you're unique," said Anne-Marie.

"I remember. It was one of a series of diagrams on how to turn a sphere inside out in differential topology. Certainly there could be no connection.. ."

The boss Kzin assumed marksman stance. Jason braced for the end. What happened next was not at all what he expected.

Unconsciously he'd been leaning on the police net's force field. Suddenly he was falling, overbalanced. He straightened, not quite sure what had happened. Then he got it. The police net was gone. He slapped Anne-Marie hard on the butt, pointed at the

Court Jester, saw her nod. Without waiting to see her start running, he turned and charged at the boss Kzin.

Something brushed by him at high speed. *Nessus*. Not running away but also charging into battle. *I was right*, thought Jason. *He's gone manic*.

Chuft-Captain pushed the trigger button. Nothing happened.

It was really too much. He stood a moment, marshaling words for *Slaverstudent*. A brand-new kind of weapon, and it wouldn't *do* anything! Half the settings were duds!

He knew it as he turned: something was wrong. The danger instinct sang in his nerves. He got no other warning. He had not seen the ship lights go out. He heard no sign of pounding clawed feet. The sounds of breathing *had* become a trifle heavy...

He started to turn, and something hit him in the side.

It felt as though an armored knight had run him through with a blunt lance. *It hurt*. Chuft-Captain lost all his aplomb and all his air, bent sideways as far as he could manage, and toppled.

He saw the world turned sideways, glowing through a blue fog. He saw the human female struggling futilely in *Slaverstudent*'s hands; he saw *Flyer* aiming a stunner across the ice. He saw two running figures, human and puppeteer, trying to reach the other ship. *Flyer*'s stunner didn't seem- to affect them. The human had the tnucltip artifact.

He could breathe again, in sharp, shallow gasps. That blow in the side must have broken ribs; it could hardly have failed to, since *Kzinti* ribs run all the way down. That blow had felt like a puppeteer's kick! But that was ridiculous. Impossible. A puppeteer kick a *Kzin*?

The puppeteer reached the ship far in advance of the slower human. He paused a moment, then turned and ran on across the white undulating plain. The human also paused at the ship's entrance, then followed the puppeteer. *Flyer* was running after them.

Behind Chuft-Captain the ship lights were dim, but brightening. Hadn't they been dark when he fell? And the stunners hadn't worked. And the police webs...

So. The eighth setting was an energy absorber. Not a new thing, but much smaller than anything he'd heard of.

But what had hit him?

There was a hissing in his ears, a sound he- hadn't noticed. Not breathing. Had somebody's suit been punctured? But nobody had been attacked. Except-

Chuft-Captain slapped a hand over his side. He yelled with the pain of motion but kept his hand pressed tight while he reached for a meteor patch. He risked one look under his hand before applying the patch. There were four tiny holes in the fabric. They might easily have marked the claws of a puppeteer's space boot.

The boss Kzin held his marksman's stance. Jason was moving toward him at a dead run. He had to get the weapon before the Kzinti realized what had happened.

Nessus passed him like a live missile. The puppeteer reached the Kzin, turned skidding on two front legs, and lashed out. Jason winced in sympathy. That kick had been sincere! It would have torn a man in half, crushed his lungs and rib cage and spine and life.

The mad puppeteer had barely paused. He ran straight toward the *Court Jester*. Jason scooped up the fallen weapon, skidded to a halt, and turned.

A Kzin had Anne-Marie.

We'll see about that! His fingers moved to the weapon's adjustment guide.

A second Kzin held a stunner on him.

The stunner would start working the moment the tnucltip weapon shifted shape. He'd lose everything.

He could hear Anne-Marie swearing tearfully as she fought. Then her voice came loud and clear. "Run, dammit! Jay, run!"

He could throw the weapon to Nessus, then charge to the rescue! They'd get *him*, but ... but the puppeteer was well out of range ... and couldn't be trusted anyway. A puppeteer who kicked something that could kick back was beyond psychiatric help.

Anne-Marie was still kicking and using her elbows. Her Kzinti captor didn't seem to notice. The boss Kzin lay curled like a

shrimp around the spot of agony in his side. But the third Kzin held his pose, still bathing Jason in an imaginary stunner beam.

Jason turned and ran.

He saw Nessus leave the *Jester's* entrance and go on. He guessed what he would find, but he had to look. Sure enough, the door was soldered shut.

The laser setting would have melted the steel solder away from the hullmetal door. But the third Kzin was finally in motion, coming after him, still trying to use the stunner.

Jason ran on. The puppeteer was a diminishing point. Jason followed that point, moving into a cold waste lit by a fiery arch with one bright glare spot.

"Flyer, return to the ship at once."

"Chuft-Captain, he's around here somewhere. I can find him."

"Or he could find you. Return to the ship. The rules of this game have changed."

The Kzin was gone. Jason had stalked him for a time, with his weapon set to the energy-absorbing phase and with his thumb on the guide. If he had seen the Kzin, and if the Kzin hadn't seen him ... a variable-sword, a hair-thin wire sheathed in a stasis field, would have cut one enemy into two strangers. But it hadn't happened, and he wasn't about to follow the Kzin back to home base.

Now he lay huddled in the hole he'd dug with the rocket phase.

"Jay!" It was Anne-Marie. "Have to talk quick; they're taking off my helmet. I'm not hurt, but I can't get away. The ship's taking off. Bury the weapon somewh-"

Her voice faded and was gone. The public band was silent.

Nessus' voice broke that silence. "Jason, turn to the private band."

He had to guess which band Nessus meant. He was third-time lucky.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yah. Where are you?"

"I do not know how to describe my position, Jason. I ran six or seven miles east."

"Okay. Let's think of a way to find each other."

"Why, Jason?"

He puzzled over that. "You think you're safer alone? I don't. How long will your suit keep you alive?"

"Several standard years. But help will arrive before then."

"What makes you think so?"

"When the Kzinti pilot entered the pressure curtain, I was calling my people for help."

"What? How?"

"Despite recent changes in the fortunes of my people, that is still most secret."

Telepathy? Something in his baggage or surgically implanted under his skin? The puppeteers kept their secrets well. Nobody had ever found out how they could commit painless suicide at will. And how Nessus had done it didn't matter. "Are they coming for you all the way from Andromeda?"

"Hardly, Jason."

"Go on."

"I suppose I must. My people are still in this region of the galaxy, in the sixty-light-year volume you call known space. Their journey began only twelve years ago. You see, Jason, my people do not intend to return to this galaxy. Hence it does not matter how much objective time passes during their journey. They can reach Andromeda in a much shorter subjective time using normal space drives. Our ships approach very close to lightspeed. Further, they need brave only the dangers of normal space, which they can handle easily. Hyperspace is an unpredictable and uncomfortable thing, especially for those who would spend decades traveling in any case."

"Nessus, your whole species is crazy. How did they keep a secret like that? Everyone thinks they're halfway to Andromeda."

"Naturally. Who would stumble across the fleet in interstellar space? Between systems every known species travels in hyperspace - except the Outsiders, with whom we have agreements. In any case, my people are within reach. A scout will arrive within sixty days. The scouts are fitted with hyperdrive."

"Then you're safe if you stay hidden." Damn! thought Jason. He was all alone. It was a proud and lonely thing to be a costume hero. "Well, good luck Nessus. I've got to-

"Do not sign off. What is your plan?"

"I don't have one. I've got to see the Kzinti don't get this back, but I've also got to get Anne-Marie away from them."

"The weapon should come first."

"My wife comes first. What's your stake in this, anyway?"

"With the principles behind the tnuclip weapon the Kzinti could command known space. My people will be in known space for another twenty-eight human years. Should the Kzinti learn of our fleet, it would be an obvious and vulnerable target."

"Oh."

"We must help each other. How long can you live in your suit?"

"Till I starve to death. I'll have air and water indefinitely. Say thirty days, upper limit."

"Your people should not cut costs on vital equipment, Jason. My people cannot arrive in time to save you."

"If I gave you the weapon, could you stay hidden?"

"Yes. If the ship came in sight, I could shoot it down with the laser setting. I think I could. I could force myself - Jason, will the Kzinti call other ships?"

"Damn! Of course they will. They'd find you easily. What'll we do?"

"Can we force entrance to the *Court Jester*?"

"Yah, but they took my keys. We couldn't use the drives or the radio or get into the lockers."

"The laser would let us into the lockers."

"Right."

"Have you weapons aboard?"

"No. Nothing."

"Then the *Court Jester* would be no more than a place from which to surrender. I have no suggestions."

"Chuft-Captain, the eighth setting must be the way the artifact is recharged. It does not itself seem to be a weapon."

"It can be used as one. As we have seen. Don't bother me now, Slaverstudent." Chuft-Captain strove to keep his tone mild. He knew that his rage was the companion of his pain, and Slaverstudent knew it too.

Neither had referred to the fact that Chuft~Captain now walked crouched to the side. Neither would. The Kzinti captain could not even bandage himself; though when they reached space, he could use the ship's medical equipment to set the bones.

The worst damage had been done to Chuft-Captain's ego.

Had the puppeteer known what he was doing? His small clawed foot had shattered more than a couple of ribs. One day Chuft-Captain might have been Chuft, the hero, who found the weapon that beat the human empire to its belly. Now he would be Chuft who was kicked by a puppeteer.

"Chuft-Captain, here comes Flyer."

"Good. Flyer! Get your tail in here and lift us fast."

Flyer went past at a quick shuffling run. Slaverstudent shut the airlock after him, helped Chuft-Captain strap down, and was strapping himself in when Flyer did his trick. The ship rose out of the ice, dripping opalescent chunks and shining blue-white at the stern.

On the smoky arch of Beta Lyrae the bright point had reached its zenith. Behind their permanent veil the two stars had pulled apart in their orbits, so that the vague brightness shaded into an orange tinge on one side and a green on the other.

"One thing we do have," said Jason, "and that's the weapon itself."

"True. We have a laser, a flame-throwing rocket, and a shield against police stunners. But not simultaneously."

"I think we may have overlooked a setting."

"Wishful thinking, Jason, is not a puppeteer trait."

"Neither is knowledge of weapons. Nessus, what kind of weapon is this? I'm talking about the whole bundle, not any. single setting."

"As you say, I am not an expert on warfare."

"I don't think it's a soldier's weapon. I think it's for espionage."

"Would that be different? I gather the question is important."

Jason stopped to gather his thoughts. He held the gun cradled in his hands. It was still at the eighth setting, the peculiar, twisted shape that Nessus had compared to a diagram from differential topology.

He held history in his hands, history a billion and a half years dead. Once upon a time a small, compactly built biped had aimed this weapon at beings with ball-shaped heads, big single eyes, massive Mickey Mouse hands, great splayed feet, and lightly armored skin and clusters of naked-pink tendrils at the corners of wide mouths. What could he have been thinking the last time he stored away this weapon? Did he guess that fifteen million centuries later a mind would be trying to guess his nature from his abandoned possessions?

"Nessus, would you say this gadget is more expensive to produce than eight different gadgets to do similar jobs?"

"Assuredly, and more difficult. But it would be easier to carry than eight discrete gadgets."

"And easier to hide. Have you ever heard of Slaver records describing a shape-changing weapon?"

"No. The tnucltipun would understandably have kept it a secret."

"That's my point. How long could they keep it secret if millions of soldiers had models?"

"Not long. The same objections hold for its use in espionage. Jason, what kind of espionage could a tnucltip do? Certainly it could not imitate a Slaver."

"No, but it could hide out on a sparsely settled world, or it could pretend to be a tnucltip slave. It'd have to have some defense against the Slaver power."

"The cap in the stasis box?"

"Or something else, something it was wearing when the Slavers caught it."

"These are unpleasant ideas. Jason, I have remembered something. The Outsiders found the stasis box in a cold, airless world with ancient pressurized buildings still standing. If a battle had been fought there, would the buildings have been standing?"

"Slaver buildings?"

"Yes."

"They'd have been standing if the Slavers won. But then the Slavers would have captured at least one of the weapons."

"Only if there were many such weapons. I concede your point. The owner of the weapon was a lone spy."

"Good. Now--"

"Why were you so sure?"

"Mainly the variety of settings. The average soldier would get stomped on while he was trying to decide which weapon to use. Then there's a sonic for taking live prisoners. Maybe other settings make them feel fear or pain. The rocket would be silly for a soldier; he'd get killed flying around a battlefield. But a spy could use it for the last stage of his landing."

"All right. Why is it important?"

"Because there ought to be a self-destruct setting somewhere."

"What did-? Ah. To keep the secret of the mutable weapon. But we have used all the settings."

"I thought it would be number eight. It wasn't. That's why we're still alive. An espionage agent's self-destruct button would be made to do as much damage as possible."

Nessus gasped. Jason hardly noticed. "They've hidden it somehow," he said.

The *Traitor's Claw* was big. She had to be. Redundantly, she carried both a gravity polarizer and a fusionreaction motor. Probably she could have caught anything in real space, barring ships of her own class, many of which were serving as police and courier ships in Kzinti space. Kzinti records listed her as a stolen courier ship. She was a squat cone, designed as a compromise between landing ability and speed in an atmosphere. In contrast, the flat *Court Jester* had been designed for landing ability alone; she would not have tipped over on a seventy-degree slope.

There was more than speed to the courier ship's two drives. Before it had ever seen a gravity polarizer, the human empire had taught the Kzinti a lesson they would never forget. The more efficient

a reaction drive, the more effective a weapon it makes. A gravity polarizer was not a reaction drive.

Flyer used both drives at once. The ship went up fast. Six thousand miles up, the *Traitor's Claw* went into orbit.

"We can find the prisoners with infrared," said ChuftCaptain. "But it will do us little good if they shoot us down. Can the laser setting prevent us from going after them?"

"We can call for more ships," Flyer suggested. "Surely the weapon is important enough."

"It is. But we will not call."

Flyer nodded submission.

Knowing what Flyer knew, Chuft-Captain snarled inside himself with humiliation and the digging agony in his side. He had been kicked by a puppeteer in full view of two subordinates. Never again could he face a Kzin of equal rank, never until he had killed the puppeteer with his own teeth and claws.

Could that kick have been cold-bloodedly tactical? Chuft-Captain refused to believe it. But, intended or not, that kick had stymied Chuft-Captain. He could not call for reinforcements until the puppeteer was dead.

He forced his mind back to the weapon. The only setting that could harm the Kzinti was the laser ... unless the rosy sphere unexpectedly began working. But that was unlikely. He asked, "Is there a completely safe way to capture them? If not-"

"There is the drive," said Slaverstudent.

"They have the laser," Flyer reminded him. "A laser that size is subject to a certain amount of spreading. We should be safe two hundred miles up. Closer than that and a good marksman could burn through the hull."

"Flyer, is two hundred miles too high?"

"Chuft-Captain, they are wearing heatproof suits, and we can hover only at one-seventh Kzin-gravity. Our flame would barely warm the ice."

"But there is the gravity polarizer to pull us down while the fusion flame pushes us up. The ship was designed for just that tactic. Now, the fugitives' suits are heatproof, but the ice is not. Suppose we hovered over them with a fiveKzin-gravity flame . . ."

Jason held a five-inch rosy sphere with a pistol-grip handle. "It has to be here somewhere," he said.

"Try doing things you ordinarily wouldn't: moving the gauge while holding the trigger down ... moving the guide sideways . . . twisting the sphere."

Silence on the private circuit. Then, "No luck yet."

"The fourth setting was the only one that showed no purpose at all."

"Yah. What in-"

High overhead a star had come into being. It was blue-white, almost violet-white, and for Jason it stood precisely at the zenith.

"The Kzinti," said Nessus. "Do not shoot back. They must be out of range of your laser setting. You would only help them find you."

"They've probably found me already with infrared scopes. What the Finagle do they think they're doing?"

The star remained steady. In its sudden light Jason went to work on the weapon. He ran quickly through the remaining settings, memorizing the forms that used the trigger as an on-off switch, probing and prodding almost at random, until he reached neutral and the relic was a silver sphere with a handle.

The guide would not go sideways. It would not remain between any two of the notches. It would not twist.

"Are you making progress?"

"Nothing, dammit."

"The destruct setting would not be too carefully hidden. If a weapon were captured, an agent could always hope the Slavers would destroy it by accident."

"Yah." Jason was tired of looking at the neutral setting. He changed to laser and fired up at the new star, using the telescopic sight. He expected and got no result, but he held his aim until distracted by a sudden change in pressure around his suit.

He was up to his shoulders in water.

In one surge he was out of his hole. But the land around him was gone. A few swells of wet ice rose glistening from a shallow sea

that reached to all the horizon. The Kzinti ship's downblast had melted everything for miles around.

"Nessus, is there water around you?"

"Only in the solid form. From my viewpoint the Kzinti ship is not overhead."

"They've got me. As soon as they turn off the drive, I'll be frozen in my tracks."

"I have been thinking. Do you need the destruct setting? Suppose you change to the rocket setting, turn the weapon nose down, and fire. The flame will remain on, and the weapon will eat its way through the ice,"

"Sure, if we could think of a way to keep it pointed down. Odds are it'd turn over in the first few feet. Then the Kzinti find it with deep-radar or seismics and dig it out."

"True."

The water was getting deeper. Jason thought about using the rocket to burn his way loose once the water froze about his ankles. It would be too hot. He would probably burn his feet off. But he might have to try it.

The blue Kzinti star hung bright and clear against the arch of dust and hydrogen. A bright pink glow showed the Lyrae stars forty-five degrees from sunset.

"Jason. Why is there a neutral setting?"

"Why not?"

"It is not for collecting energy. The eighth setting does that very nicely. It is not for doing nothing. The projectile setting does that, unless you put projectiles in it. Thus the neutral setting has no purpose. Perhaps it does something we do not know about."

"I'll try it."

The bright star above him winked out.

"Chuft-Captain, I cannot locate the puppeteer."

"Its pressure suit may be too efficient to lose heat. We will institute a sight search later. Inform me when the human stops moving."

Nessus' idea would be a good one, Jason thought, if only he could make it workable. Much better than the destruct setting. Because if the destruct setting existed, it would almost certainly kill him.

Probably it would kill Nessus too. The destruct setting on an espionage agent's weapon would be made to do as much damage as possible. And there had been total conversion involved in the rocket setting. Total conversion would make quite a bomb, even if it weighed only four pounds, and the converted mass a fraction of a milligram.

The Kzinti-produced swamp was congealing from the bottom up. His boots were getting heavy. Each had collected a growing mass of ice. He kept walking so that they wouldn't freeze to the bottom.

He'd searched the neutral setting, handle and sphere, for hidden controls. Nothing showed- nothing obvious. He tried twisting various parts of the handle. Nothing broke, which was good, but nothing would twist either.

Maybe something *should* break. Suppose he broke off the gauge?

He wasn't strong enough.

He tried twisting the ball itself. Nothing.

He tried it again, holding the trigger down.

The silvery sphere twisted one hundred and eighty degrees, then clicked. Jason released the trigger, and it started to change.

"I've found it, Nessus. I've found *something*."

"A new setting? What does it look like?"

Like a white flash, thought Jason, waiting for the single instant in which it *would* look like a white flash. It didn't come. The protean material solidified.

"Like a cone with a rounded base, pointing away from the handle."

"Try it. And if you are successful, good-bye, Jason. Knowing you was pleasant."

"The blast could include you, too."

"Is it thus you assuage my loss of you?"

"You sure you don't have a sense of humor? Good-bye, Nessus. Here goes."

The cone did not explode. A time bomb? Jason was about to start looking for a chronometer on the thing when he noticed something that froze him instantly. -

A hazy blue line led away in the direction he happened to be pointing the cone. Led away and upward at forty degrees, wavering, as tremor in his fingers waved the cone's vertex.

Another weapon.

He released the trigger. The line disappeared.

The Kzinti ship wasn't in sight. Not that he would have used it as a target, not with Anne-Marie aboard.

A hidden weapon. More powerful than the others? He had to find out. Like Chuft-Captain, he tried to assume marksman's stance.

His feet were frozen solidly into the ice. He'd been careless. He shrugged angrily, aimed the weapon a little above the horizon, and fired.

A hazy blue line formed. He slowly lowered the vertex until the line touched the horizon.

The light warned him. He threw himself flat on his back and waited for the blast. The light died almost instantly, and suddenly the shiny horizon-to-horizon ice rippled and shot from under him. It took his feet along. His body snapped like a whip, and then the ice tore away from his feet.

He was on his face, with agony in his ankles.

The backlash came. The ice jerked under him, harmlessly.

"Jason, what happened? There was an explosion."

"Hang ... on." Jason rolled over and pulled his legs up to examine them. The pain was bad. His ankles didn't feel broken, but he certainly couldn't walk on them. The boots were covered with cracked wet ice.

"Jason. Puppeteer. Can you hear me?" It was the slurred, blurry voice of the boss Kzin.

"Don't say anything, Nessus. I'm going to answer him." Jason switched his transmitter to the common channel. "I'm here."

"You have discovered a new setting to the weapon."

"Have I?"

"I do not intend to play pup games with you. As a fighter, you are entitled to respect, which your herbivorous friend is not-"

"How are your ribs feeling?"

"Do not speak of that again, please. We have something to trade, you and I. You have a unique weapon. I have a female human who may be your mate."

"Well put. So?"

"Give us the weapon. Show us where to find the new setting. You and your mate may leave this world in your own ship, unharmed and unrestricted."

"Your name as your word?"

No answer. "You lying get of a ..." Jason searched for the word. He could say two words of Kzin; one meant hello, and one meant- "Do not say it. Jason, the agreement stands, except that I will smash your hyperdrive. You must return to civilization through normal space. With that proviso, you have my name as my word."

"Nessus?"

"The herbivore must protect itself."

"I think not."

"Consider the alternative. Your mate is not entitled to the respect accorded a fighter. Kzinti are carnivorous, and we have been without fresh meat for some years."

"Bluff me not. You'd lose your only hostage."

"We'd lose one arm of her. Then another. Then a lower leg."

Jason felt sick. They could do it. Painlessly, too, if they wished; and they probably would, to avoid losing Anne-Marie to shock.

He gulped. "Is she all right now?"

"Naturally."

"Prove it." He was stalling. Nessus could hear everything; he might come up with something ... and was ever there a fainter hope?

"You may hear her," said the boss Kzin. There were clunking sounds; they must be dropping her helmet over her head. Then Anne-Marie's voice spoke swiftly and urgently.

"Jay, darling, listen. Use the seventh setting. The *seventh*. Can you hear me?"

"Anne, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she shouted. "Use the seventh . . ." Her voice died abruptly.

"Anne!"

Nothing.

There was fast, muffled Kzinti speech in his earphones. Jason looked at the weapon a moment, then dropped the guide to setting number seven. Maybe she had something. The cone writhed, became a mirror-surfaced sphere...

"Jason, you now know your mate is unharmed. We must ask for your decision immediately."

He ignored the burry voice, watched the weapon become a flat-ended cylinder with a grid near the handle. He'd seen the Kzinti using that.

"Oh," he said.

It was the computer, of course. The tnucltip computer. He smiled, and it hurt inside him. His wife had given him the only help she had to give. She'd told him where to find the only tnucltipun expert in known space.

The hell of it was, she was perfectly right. But the computer couldn't hear him, and he couldn't hear the computer, and they didn't speak a common language anyway.

Wait a minute. This was setting number seven; but if you counted neutral as the first setting, then - no. Setting six was only the laser.

Finagle! The Belter oath fitted. Finagle's First Law was holding beautifully.

His ankles stopped hurting. Decoyed! He twisted his head around to find his enemy. The bargain had been a decoy! Already his head buzzed with the stunner beam. He saw the Kzin, hiding behind a half-melted bulge of ice with only one eye and the stunner showing. He fired at once.

The weapon was on computer setting. His hand went slack, then his mind.

"I do not understand why she wanted him to use the seventh setting."

"The computer, was it not?"

"Chuft-Captain, it was."

"He could not have used the computer."

"No. Why then did the prisoner-

"She may have meant the sixth setting. The laser was the only weapon a human could have used against us."

"Urrr. Yes. She counted wrong, then."

The ship-to-suit circuit spoke. "Chuft-Captain, I have him."

"Flyer, well done. Bring him in."

"Chuft-Captain, do we still need him?" The Kzin was not in a mood to argue. "I hate to throw anything away. Bring him in."

His head floated, his body spun, his ankles hurt like fury. He shuddered and tried to open his eyes. The lids came up slowly, reluctantly.

He was standing in a police web, slack neck muscles holding his head upright in one-eighth gee. No wonder he hadn't known which way was up. Anne-Marie was twelve inches to his side. Her eyes held no hope, only exhaustion.

"Damn," he said. One word to cover it all.

The Kzinti yowling had been so much a part of the background that he didn't notice it until it stopped. After a moment the boss Kzin stepped in front of him, moving slowly and carefully, and curled protectively around his left side.

"You are awake."

"Obviously."

One massive four-clawed hand held the tnuclip weapon, still at the computer setting. The Kzin held it up. "You found a new setting on this. Tell me how to reach it."

"I can't," said Jason. "I found it by accident and lost it the same way."

"That is a shame. Do you realize we have nothing to lose?"

Jason studied the violet eyes, fruitlessly. "What do you mean?"

"Either you will tell me of your own free will, or you can be persuaded to tell, or you cannot. In any case, we have no reason not to remove your mate's arm."

He turned and spoke in the Kzinti tongue. The other aliens left the room.

"We will be leaving this world in an hour." The boss Kzin turned and settled his orange bulk carefully in a Kzinti contour couch, grunting softly with the pain of movement.

He meant it. His position was too simple for doubt. The boss Kzin had a tnucltip weapon to take back to Kzin, and he had two human captives. The humans were of no use to him. But he had great use for Jason's knowledge. What he offered was a simple trade: knowledge for the meat on their bones.

"I can't talk," said Jason.

"All right," Anne-Marie said dully.

"I *can't*." The cone form was too powerful. Its beam must set up spontaneous mass conversion in anything it touched. And he couldn't explain. The boss Kzin might hear him, and the Kzinti didn't know just what they were after.

"All right, you can't. We've had it. How did they get you?"

"I got stupid. While the boss Kzin was talking to me, one of the others snuck up and used a sonic."

"The seventh setting-"

"I didn't have time to figure anything out. There isn't enough air to carry sound out there."

"I didn't think of that. How's Nessus?"

"Still free."

The boss Kzin broke in. "We will have it soon. The puppeteer has no place to hide and nothing with which to fight, not even the inclination. Do you expect it to rescue you?"

Anne-Marie smiled sourly. "Not really."

The other Kzinti returned, carrying things. There were pieces of indecipherable Kzinti equipment, and there was a medkit from the emergency doc in the *Court Jester*. They set it all down next to the police web and went to work.

One piece of Kiinti equipment was a small tank with a pump and a piece of soft plastic tubing attached. Jason watched them wrap the tubing three or four times around Anne-Marie's upper arm. They joined the other end to the pump and started it going.

"It's cold," she said. "Freezing."

"I can't stop them," said Jason.

She shivered. "You're sure?" He gave up. He opened his mouth to shout out his surrender. The boss Kzin raised his furry head questioningly - and Jason's voice stopped in his throat.

He'd used the hidden setting just once. For only an instant had the blue beam touched the horizon, but the explosion had damn near killed him. Obviously the hidden setting was not meant to be used on the surface of a planet.

It could be used only from space. Was it meant to destroy whole worlds? But Anne-Marie hurt!

She said, "All right, you're sure. Jay, don't *look* like that. Jay? I can grow a new arm. Relax! Stop *worrying* about it!" The anguish in Jason's face was like nothing she'd ever seen.

The burry voice said, "She will never reach an autodoc."

"Shut *up!*" Jason screamed.

Soft Kzinti noises entered the silence. One of the Kzinti left: the pilot, the one with a white streak. The others talked. They talked of cooking, Kzinti sex, human sex, Beta Lyrae, how to hunt puppeteers, or how to turn a sphere inside out without forming a cusp. Jason couldn't tell. They used no gestures.

Anne-Marie said, "They could have planted a mike on us."

"Yah."

"So you can't tell me what you're hiding."

"No. I wish I spoke Wunderlander."

"I don't speak Wunderlander. Dead language. Jay, I can't feel my arm any more. There must be liquid nitrogen in this tube."

"I'm sorry. I *can't help.*"

"It is not working," said Chuft-Captain.

"It should work," said Slaverstudent. "We may not get results with the first limb. We probably will with the second. The second time, they will know that we mean what we threaten." He looked thoughtfully at the prisoners. "Also, I think we should eat our meals in here."

"They know that limbs can be regrown."

"Only by human-built machines. There are none here."

"You have a point."

"It will be good to taste fresh meat again."

Flyer returned. "Chuft-Captain, the kitchen is programmed."

"Good." Chuft-Captain incautiously shifted his bulk and tensed all over at the pain. It would have been nice if he could have put pressure bandages around his ribs. The ribs had been set and joined with pins, but he could not use pressure bandages; they would remind his crew of what had happened. He would be shamed.

Kicked by a puppeteer.

"I have been thinking," he said. "Regardless of what the human tells us, we must take the tnuclip relic to Kzin as quickly as possible. There I will drop you, Slaverstudent, along with the weapon and the freeze box containing Telepath. Flyer, you and I will return here for the herbivore. He cannot be rescued in that time. He will be easy to find. A sight search will find him unless he digs a hole, in which case we may use seismographs."

"He will have a month to anticipate."

"Yes. He will."

"Can you understand me?"

Three pairs of Kzinti eyes jerked around. The voice had belonged to none of them. It sounded foreign, artificial.

"Repeating. Can you understand me?"

It was the gun speaking. The tnuclip weapon.

"It's learned their language," said Jason. And all the hope drained out of him.

"It'll tell them where to find that setting you were trying to hide."

"Yah."

"Then tell me this, Jay." She was on the edge of hysteria, "What good will it do me to lose my arm?"

Jason filled his lungs and shouted. "Hey!"

Not one Kzin moved. They hovered around the weapon, all talking at once.

"Hey, Captain! What *sthondat* was your sister?" They all jerked around. He must have pronounced the word right.

"You must not use that word again," said the boss Kzin.

"Get this thing off my wife's arm!"

The boss Kzin thought it over, spoke to the pilot. The pilot manipulated the police web to free Anne-Marie's arm, using a cloth to protect his hand while he removed the cold, deadly tube. He turned off the pump, readjusted the police web, and went back to the discussion, which by then had become a dialogue. The boss Kzin had shut the others up.

"How's your arm?"

"Feels dead. Maybe it is. What were we hiding, Jay?"

He told her.

"Ye gods! And now they've got it."

"Could you use an anesthetic?"

"It doesn't hurt yet."

"Let me know. They're all through torturing us. They may eat us, but it'll be all at once."

The computer was doing most of the talking.

A Kzin was holding up the tnuclip cap, the one they'd found in the stasis box. The computer spoke.

He held up the small metal object that might have been a communicator. The computer spoke again.

The boss Kzin spoke.

The computer spoke at length.

The boss Kzin picked up the weapon and did things to it. Jason couldn't see what. The Kzin was facing away from him. But the weapon writhed. Jason snarled in his throat. He commonly used curses for emphasis. He knew no words to cover this situation.

The boss Kzin spoke briefly and left, cradling the weapon. One of the others followed: the expert on Slavers. Jason caught one glimpse of the weapon as the boss Kzin went through the door.

The Kzin with the white stripe, the pilot, remained.

Jason felt himself starting to shake. The weapon, the soft, mutable weapon. When the boss Kzin had left the room, he'd carried a gun handle attached to a double cone with rounded bases and points that barely touched.

He didn't understand.

Then his eyes, restlessly searching the room as if for an answer, fell on the empty stasis box. There was a tnuclip cap and a

small metal object that registered in hyperspace and a preserved Slaver hand.

It began to make sense.

Did the computer have eyesight? Obviously. The Kzinti had been showing it objects from the stasis box.

Take a computer smart enough to learn a language by hearing it spoken for an hour. Never mind its size; any sentient being will build a computer as small as possible, if only to reduce the time lag in thinking with impulses moving at lightspeed or less. Let the computer know only what its tnuclipun builders had taught it, plus what it had seen and heard in this room.

It had seen a tnuclipun survival kit. It had seen members of a species it did not recognize. The unfamiliar beings had asked questions which made it obvious that they knew little about tnuclipun, and that they could not ask questions of a tnuclipun. They didn't speak the tnuclipun language. They were desperately anxious for details about a tnuclipun top-secret weapon.

Obviously they were not allies of the tnuclipun.

They must be enemies. In the Slaver War there had been, could be, no neutrals.

He said, "Anne."

"Still here."

"Don't ask questions, just follow orders. Our lives depend on it. See that Kzin?"

"Right. You sneak up on him from behind; I'll hit him with my purse."

"This is not funny. When I give the word, we're both going to spit at his ear."

"You're right. That's not funny."

"I'm in dead earnest, And don't forget to compensate for low gravity."

"How are you going to give the word with a mouthful of saliva?"

"Just spit when I do. Okay?"

Jason's shot brushed the Kzin's furry scalp. Anne-Marie's caught him square in the ear. The Kzin came to his feet with a howl. Then, as both humans cleared their throats again, the Kzin moved

like lightning. The air stiffened about their heads. The Kzin contemptuously returned to his crouch against a wall.

It became hard to breathe.

Blinking was a slow, excruciating process. Talking was out of the question. Warm air, laden with CO₂, did not want to dissipate. It stayed before their faces, waiting to be inhaled again and again. The Kzin watched them struggle.

Jason forced his eyes closed. Blinking had become too painful. He tried to remember that he'd planned this, that it had worked perfectly. Their heads and bodies were now entirely enclosed by the police web.

Now here's my plan.

"The puppeteer ran east," said Chuft-Captain. And he turned west. He didn't want to kill the puppeteer without knowing it.

The weapon was hard and awkward in his hand. He was a little afraid of it, and a little ashamed of being afraid: a hangover from that awful moment when the weapon spoke. There were ghost legends among the Kzinti. Some of the most fearsome spoke of captured weapons haunted by their dead owners.

Nobles weren't supposed to be superstitious, not out loud.

A computer that could learn new languages was logical. The only way to reach the setting for the matter-conversion beam had been to ask the computer setting, and that was logical too. A matter-conversion beam was a dangerous secret.

Briefly, Chuft-Captain wondered about that. It seemed that for an honorable Kzin every recent change was a change for the worse. The conquest of space had ended when Kzinti met humans. Then had come the puppeteers with their trade outposts; any Kzin who attacked a puppeteer invariably found himself not harmed physically, but ruined financially. No Kzin could fight power like that. Would the trunctip weapon reverse these changes?

There had been a time, between the discoveries of atomic power and the gravity polarizer, when it seemed the Kzinti species would destroy itself in wars. Now the Kzinti held many worlds, and the danger was past. But was it? A matter-conversion beam ...

There is no turning away from knowledge.

Haunted weapons ...

He stopped on a rise of permafrost some distance from the ship. By now half the sky was blood red. An arm of the hydrogen spiral was sweeping across the world, preparing to engulf it. Hours or days from now the arm would pass, moving outward on the wings of photon pressure, leaving the world with a faintly thicker atmosphere.

But we'll be long gone by then, Chuft-Captain thought. Already he was looking ahead to the problem of reaching Kzin. If human ships caught the *Traitor's Claw* entering Kzin's atmosphere, the Kzinti would clearly be violating treaty rules. But they weren't likely to be caught, not if Flyer did everything right.

"Chuft-Captain, this setting has no gunsight."

"No? You're right, it doesn't." He considered. "Perhaps it was meant only for large targets. A world seen from close up. The explosion was fierce."

"Or its accuracy may be low. Or its range. I wonder. Logically the tnuclipun should have included at least a pair of notches for sighting."

Something's wrong. The danger instinct whispered in his ear. "Superstition," he snarled, and raised the weapon stiffly, aiming well above the horizon. "Let us find the answer," he said.

In this area of Cue Ball the ice had melted and refrozen. It was as flat as a calm lake.

Nessus had stopped at the edge. He'd faced around, stopped again, held the pose for several minutes, then faced back and started across the flat, red-tinged ice. Muscles rippled beneath his pressure suit.

It wasn't as if he expected to help his human employees. They had gotten themselves into this. And he had neither weapons nor allies nor even stealth to aid him. A human infantryman could have crawled on his belly, but Nessus' legs weren't built that way. On a white plain with no cover he had to trot upright, bouncing gaily in the low gravity.

His only weapon was his hind leg.

Thinking that, he remembered the jarring impact as he had planted his foot in the Kzin's side. Two hundred and forty pounds of

charging puppeteer applied over five square inches of clawed space boot. The shock wave had jarred up through thigh and hip and spine, jerked at his skull and continued along the necks to snap his teeth shut with a sharp double *click*. Like kicking a mountain, a soft but solid mountain.

The next instant he was running, really terrified for the first time in his life. But behind him the Kzin had vented a long whistling scream and folded tightly around himself....

Nessus went on. He'd trotted across the frozen lake without seeing Kzinti or Kzinti ship. Now the ice was beginning to swell and dip. He'd reached the periphery of the blast area. Now there was a touch of yellow light ahead. Small and faint, but unmistakably yellow against the pink ice.

Ship lights.

He went on. He'd never know why. He'd never admit it to himself.

Thock! Hind boot slamming solidly into hard meat. Whistling shriek of agony between sharp-filed carnivore teeth.

He wanted to do it again. Nessus had the blood lust.

He went up a rise, moving slowly, though his feet wanted to dance. He was weaponless, but his suit was a kind of defense. No projectile short of a fast meteorite could harm him. Like a silicone plastic, the pressure suit was soft and malleable under gentle pressures, such as walking, but it instantly became rigid all over when something struck it.

He topped the rise.

The ship lights might have come from the *Court Jester*. They didn't. Nessus saw the airlock opening, and he charged down the slope so the next rise hid him from view.

The Kzinti ship was down. They must have landed with the gravity polarizer; otherwise he would have seen them. If they had then captured Jason on foot, he might still be alive. He might not. The same went for Anne-Marie.

Now what? The Kzinti ship was beyond this next rise of ice. At least one Kzin was outside. Were they looking for *him*? No, they'd hardly expect him here!

He had reached the trough between the two swells. They were long and shallow and smooth, like waves near an ocean shoreline.

The top of the swell behind Nessus suddenly sparkled with harsh blue-white sunlight.

Nessus knew just what to do, and he did it instantly. No point in covering his cranial bulge with his necks; he'd only get his larynxes crushed. The padding would protect his brain, or it wouldn't. He folded his legs under him and tucked his heads tight between his forelegs. He didn't have to think about it. The puppeteer's explosion reflex was no less a reflex for being learned in childhood.

He saw the light, he curled into a ball, and the ground swell came. It batted him like a beach ball. His rigid, form-fitting shell retained his shape. It could not prevent the ground swell from slamming him away, nor his brain from jarring under its thick skull and its extra padding.

He woke on his back with his legs in the air. There was a tingly ache along his right side and on the right sides of his necks and legs. Half his body surface would be one bruise tomorrow. The ground still heaved; he must have been unconscious for only a moment.

He clambered shakily to his feet. The claws were an enormous help on the smooth ice. He shook himself once, then started up the rise.

Suddenly and silently the Kzinti ship topped the rise. A quarter of a mile down the swell it slid gracefully into space in a spray of ice. It was rotating on its axis, and Nessus could see that one side was red hot. It skimmed through the near-vacuum above the trough, seeming to drift rather than fall. It hit solidly on the shallow far rise and plowed to a stop.

Still upright. Steam began to surround it as it sank into melting ice.

Nessus approached without fear. Surely any Kzin inside was dead, and any human too. But could he get in?

The outer airlock door was missing, ripped from its hinges. The inner door must have been bent, for it leaked a thin fog from the edges. Nessus pushed the cycle button and waited.

The door didn't move.

The puppeteer cast an eye around the airlock. There must be telltales to sense whether the outer door was closed and whether there was pressure in the lock. There was one, a sensitized surface in the maimed outer doorway. Nessus pushed it down with his mouth.

Air sprayed into the enclosure, turned to fog, and blew away. Nessus' other head was casting about for a pressure sensor. He found it next to the air outlet. He swung alongside it and leaned against it so that his suit trapped the air. He leaned into the pressure.

The inner door swung open. Nessus fought to maintain his position against the roaring wind. When the door was fully open, he dodged inside. The door slammed just behind him.

Now. What had happened here?

The Kzinti lifesystem was a howling hurricane of air replacing what he'd let out. Nessus poked into the kitchen, the control section, and two privacy booths without seeing anything. He moved down the hail and looked into what he remembered would be the interrogation room. Perhaps here....

He froze.

Anne-Marie and Jason were in the police web. Obviously; because both were standing, and both were unconscious. They appeared undamaged. But the Kzin!

Nessus felt the world swim. His heads felt lighter than air. He'd been through a lot ... He turned his eyes away. It occurred to him that the humans must be unconscious from lack of oxygen. The police web must surround them completely, even to their heads. Otherwise the shock would have torn their heads off. Nessus forced himself to move to the police web. He kept his eyes resolutely away from the Kzin.

There were the controls. Was that the power switch? He tried it. The humans drifted gracefully to the floor. Done.

And Nessus found his eyes creeping back to the Kzin.

He couldn't look away.

The carnivore had struck like a wet snowball thrown with awful force. He was a foot up the wall, all spread out on a border of splashed circulatory fluid, and he stuck.

Nessus fainted. He woke up, still standing because of the normal tone of his relaxed muscles, to find Anne-Marie shaking him gently and trying to talk to him.

"I'm worried about him," said Anne-Marie.

Jason turned away from the *Jester's* control panel. "He can get treatment on Jinx. There are puppeteers in Sirius Mater."

"That's still a week away. Isn't there anything we can do for him? He spends all his time in his room. It must be *awful* to be manic-depressive." She was rubbing the stump where the emergency doc had amputated her arm - a gesture Jason hated. It roused guilt feelings. But she'd get a new arm on Jinx.

"I hate to tell you," he said, "but Nessus isn't in a depressive stage. He stays in his room because he's avoiding us."

"Us?"

"Yah. I think so."

"But Jay! *Us?*"

"Don't take it personally, Anne. We're a symbol." He lowered his head to formulate words. "Look at it this way. You remember when Nessus kicked the Kzin?"

"Sure. It was beautiful."

"And you probably know he was nerving himself to fire on the Kzinti ship if I gave him the tnuclipun weapon. Finally, you know that he came voluntarily to the Kzinti ship. I think he was going to fight them if he got the chance. He knew they'd captured me, and he knew they had the weapon. He was ready to fight."

"Good for him. But Jay-"

"Dammit, honey, it *wasn't* good for him. For him, it was purest evil. Cowardice is *moral* for puppeteers. He was violating everything he'd ever learned!"

"You mean he's ashamed of himself?"

"That's part of it. But there's more. It was the way we acted when we woke up.

"You remember how it was? Nessus was standing and looking at what was left of the Kzinti pilot. You had to shake him a few times before he noticed. Then what did he find out? I, Jason Papandreou, who had been his friend, had planned the whole thing. I

had known that the boss Kzin and the Slaver expert were walking to their deaths because the computer form of the weapon had given them the self-destruct setting and told them it was the matter-conversion beam. I knew that, and I let them walk out and blow themselves to smithereens. I tricked the pilot into putting our heads in the police web, but I left him outside to die. And I was proud of it! And you were proud of me!

"Now do you get it?"

"No. And I'm still proud of you."

"Nessus isn't. Nessus knows that we, whom he probably thought of as funny-looking puppeteers - you may remember we were thinking of him as almost human - he knows we committed a horrible crime. Worse, it was a crime he was thinking of committing himself. So he's transferred his shame to us. He's ashamed of us, and he doesn't want to see us."

"How far to Jinx?"

"A week."

"No way to hurry?"

"I never heard of one."

"Poor Nessus."