

After the Dreamtime

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Richard A. Lupoff, after a dozen years in the East as a minion of IBM, lives now in Berkeley, California, in a pleasant house full of children, dogs, cats, old books and magazines, and phonograph records, and makes his way happily as a freelance writer. He is an authority on, among other things, early comics, paleolithic science-fiction novels, rock music, and the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs. His published work includes, apart from nonfiction items on several of the aforementioned subjects, three novels so far— One Million Centuries (1967), Sacred Locomotive Flies (1971), and Thintwhistle on the Moon (1974)— and the extraordinary, much-acclaimed novella "With the Bentfin Boomer Boys on Little Old New Alabama," in Again, Dangerous Visions. He makes his New Dimensions debut with a rich, powerful tale of aboriginal astronauts and tall-masted starships that is likely to remain a long while in readers' memories.

No, I do not see that membrane ships very closely resemble the clippers that long ago plied the living oceans of earth, those mighty windjammers that stood so tall above the ever-moving brine, their shafty masts thrusting canvas squares high into earth's salt-tanged air. Possibly our captain, Nurundere, would have something to say on the topic; he is learned in history, law and custom. Or better yet—but no, I forget myself, old Wuluwaid will tell you nothing.

Wuluwaid is gone; our modern outlook would mark him simply dead. The older religions would mumble of heaven, or reincarnation. Nurundere, our captain... now, he might have something other to say of the fate of Wuluwaid. In the tradition of our people, he might well say that Wuluwaid had returned to the Dreamtime.

I respect the ancient traditions. I would rather believe in the Dreamtime than in any heaven or the workings of the great wheel of karma, but what I believe in actually is very little.

"Jiritzu," old Wuluwaid used to say to me, "you lack all regard for your ancestry and for the traditions of our people. What will become of you and your Kunapi half Dua? For what did my Bunbulama and I raise our beautiful Miralaidj—to marry a lazy modern who cares nothing for the Aranda, who thinks that maraiin are mere decorations, who can hardly read a tjurunga?"

"She might as well marry a piece of meat!" And saying this old Wuluwaid would grimace, reminded by his own speech of the grayness of his skin, and I would embrace him. He would take my face between his two hands, rubbing my cheeks as if some of the blackness would be absorbed into his own melanin-poor cells, then sigh and mutter, "Soon I will be with my Bunbulama, and you will sail the membrane ships with my Miralaidj and she will bear you beautiful sons and daughters to carry on the line of the Aranda and to sail the membrane ships after you."

Wuluwaid envied me, I know. We were the sailors of the star-winds, we the Aranda and the Kunapi. We few thousands who owned a world, Yurakosi, where our old folk go to live when they become grayed-out, caring for the children too young for space. The rest of us, our melanin-rich skins protecting us from the hard radiations of space, were the select of all mankind.

We alone, we few thousand, can sail the membrane ships, working their decks and masts all but naked to the stars. Others envy our gift, blasting from sun to sun sealed in iron boxes, venturing out only when clad in clumsy, clanking spacesuits... and we in trousers and sweaters, the only living beings we know of who can survive as we are in deep space, sustained only by a close-air generator the size of a hand strapped to one leg.

Back on the mother planet earth our distant ancestors had been separated by some trick of geography, cut off from human crossbreeding and left to survive beneath the burning sky of the old Australian continent. Blackfellows, the other earthers called our ancestors when they found them after an isolation of twenty-five thousand years. Blackfellows, aborigines, or—confusing our ancestors with another black race of earth—bushmen.

Great Mother knows there were plenty of other blacks on the old earth. (There, Wuluwaid would be pleased with me; I call on the name "Great Mother" for strength even though I claim no belief in the old mythology of

the Dreamtime.) There were peoples in old Africa, old Asia, with as much dark pigment in their skin as we have in ours. But among our people there was some subtle difference, some microscopic chemical variation that was amplified by the hard radiation of space. Other humans would sicken and die in the raw blast of the cosmos. We alone could thrive. Only slowly, in the course of many years, does the solar wind, the cosmic radiation, break down our melanin.

Then we gray out. Then we can travel in space no longer on the decks, in the masts and the rigging of the membrane ships. Then to venture outside the protection of a passenger tank we would need to wear spacesuits, like other men. The decks are still open, but in a spacesuit one cannot work the lines properly, and even if one could—what point in thumping about like a leaden automaton in the midst of grace and freedom?

Sail in a spacesuit? No sky-hero has ever so chosen. Space is not closed even then to us. We can travel with the meat, we can loll in the comfort of the passenger tank along with the men and women whom we carry like freight in the passenger tanks of our membrane ships.

We can—but who would travel with the meat, who had ever sailed the night between the stars?

You have never done it and never shall. You cannot know one minnow's worth of the experience. You have seen representations, re-creations, of membrane ships, but they are feeble attempts to communicate the experience.

Start with a rod of collapsed matter, matter incredibly dense yet drawn so thin that it cannot exercise the usual property of its kind, of capturing all matter nearby and even all radiation, and crushing them to itself. The rod that lies at the heart of each membrane ship is so thin that it is barely visible—beside it a pencil lead is an incredibly fat cylinder, even a fine electronic wire is a gross and clumsy thing. A rod of collapsed matter drawn so thin that it is virtually invisible—straight as a plumb line and two hundred meters long.

At each end a matter converter, a small device using the agonized matter principle to convert a tiny chunk of the rod into pure energy, enough energy to start a membrane ship on her way from port-orbit upon her interstellar journey, or at the end of that journey to brake her from

interstellar speed and permit her to achieve port-orbit and unload.

Around that rod, place a structure of flat decking material, arbitrary in width, a hundred eighty meters in length, making a triangle in cross section, and around it a cylinder of this radiation shielding running the length of the ship. That makes the passenger tank: three gigantic rooms, flat of floor, their floors mounted at three-hundred degree angles to one another, sharing a common, curving roof.

There the meat stays during a voyage. They can come onto the deck to inspect cargo if they wish—some shippers insist on riding with their cargo and inspecting it periodically throughout a voyage—but what good is that? Clad in huge and cumbersome spacesuits like the repair crews of ordinary ships, they peer at us sailors in amazement and envy—we return their stares, our faces showing our pity and contempt—and then they crawl clumsily back through the airlocks into their tank.

When I am grayed-out—if I am grayed-out, I should say, for I am not in the least certain that I will live that long, that I will choose to live that long—when I am grayed-out I will ration out my last melanin carefully, making certain that I can sail back to Yurakosi as a man, not as a piece of meat. I will debark at Port Bralku, I will turn, still wearing sailor's garb, and wave farewell to the Kunapi and the Aranda aboard whatever membrane ship I have sailed. I will board a little shuttle craft and return to the surface of Yurakosi, and I will find myself a little house, perhaps at Snake Bay or Blue Mud Bay, and I will build myself a sailing canoe, and I will be a water sailor when I can no longer be a space sailor.

Never will I travel as meat.

Perhaps I will go to visit Wuluwaid's Bunbulama if she is still alive by then. She will be very old then if she is still alive. I will sit by her side holding her grayed-out hand in my grayed-out hand, and we will speak of her Wuluwaid and of her beautiful dead Miralaidj, and together we will weep. Perhaps my Kunapi half Dua will be with us then. Bunbulama will hold me and say, "Ah, Jiritzu, now we are alone. Now whom have we to love?"

Childlessness is unusual among us. There is rivalry between the Aranda and the Kunapi to grow more numerous, but there is no serious wishing of ill between the tribes. There is need for us; no other race of mankind can sail the membrane ships. Without us there would be only the huge clumsy

sealed ships that other men can manage, ships constructed all of sealed and shielded tanks where men travel between the stars like bits of canned dingo-meal.

Bunbulama does not know that she is alone. She thinks that her man and her daughter are sailing the *Djanggalawul* on the great path from Yurakosi to N'Jaja to pick up passengers, thence by way of Yirrkalla to make the great tack at the place of the triple suns, from there to Nala to deposit our burden of meat, and onward by way of old earth before returning to Yurakosi.

Djanggalawul will brake as she approaches our sun, will swing into docking orbit at Port Bralku, sailors will make planetfall along with a cargo of trade goods, families will be reunited. Bunbulama will await sight of Wuluwaid her man and Miralaidj her child, but they are in the Dreamtime and she will not see them again on Yurakosi.

If I return to Yurakosi, I will bear her the word of what took place on this voyage. Otherwise the duty will fall to Dua, Kunapi, my friend. That I would not envy him.

I will not flee, I will not transfer to another ship nor make planetfall at any world other than Yurakosi. Not even at old earth, although I would like to set foot on the soil of Australia, would like to sail a ship on an ocean of old earth. But I will bear news to Bunbulama if I am not myself by then in the Dreamtime. If I am, Dua will carry word to Bunbulama on our world.

Our journey started well enough. On their little mudballs the meat were warring again. Old earth remained aloof, her concern turned inward as it had been since the fast ships had first permitted the escape of her nations to the stars, to find new planets of their own on which to plant their banners of nationhood or religious tyranny or politics.

The great nations of old earth had been dismembered, their petty successors had seen opportunity for new glory, out among the stars. Whole worlds had beckoned, an infinity of planets among which to choose. No matter that on nearly all the climate was too cold or too hot, the atmosphere poisonous, the land too dry or too rocky or the sea too deep.

Move on, seek another world, seek another star. Great Mother had made enough worlds in the Dreamtime; man could now seek and find as

many homes as he wanted.

But where men went, except for the Aranda and the Kunapi, it was as meat only.

Old earth grew more and more deserted, save for those few tribes whose tradition made them love the land itself. These stragglers spread out of their ancient home, what they called the Middle East, and covered the globe. Their interests were inward. They set a satellite dock above their world, called it Port Hussein, and did some trade with the new worlds.

As they still do, of course. But their interest is the earth.

And the *Djanggalawul*, like the other membrane ships, plied between the stars, carrying meat, carrying freight, faster and cheaper than the clumsy sealed ships of other men.

If the meat on their little mudballs went to war, it was of little concern to Yurakosi. The ships of the Aranda and the Kunapi traded with the meat, carried the meat about as they wished. Their money was good; with it we obtained the trade goods that made life on Yurakosi comfortable for the old people who spent their grayed-out years there and for the children whose early days were passed also on the planet, husbanding their precious melanin against the day when they might sail the membrane ships.

We braked to docking-orbit at Port Upatoi, the satellite of N'Jaja. The port workers were of course meat, tending their tasks as much as they can within the sheltering walls of their little artificial moonlet, venturing out from those walls into the vacuum and radiation of space only when they must, only when clad in the clumsy sealed suits that meat always wear in space.

The sailors of the *Djanggalawul* scurried about on the masts and the spars of our ship, glorying in the beauties of space. Of course our sails were furled—no need for membrane when the braking power of agonized matter is used, any more than there is when that same power is used to break orbit and commence an interstellar journey.

And of course the delicacy of the membrane is such that we would hesitate to leave it unfurled during docking or undocking maneuvers.

It is only when the journey is once under way that the matter converter is switched off—the use of the converter is little more than an auxiliary in any case—and the sails are unfurled.

Tall and thin, the masts rise from the passenger tank, standing far above the body of our ship. This, I think, is what makes some antiquarians compare our craft to the clippers of earth's seas. But while they rested atop their watery medium, their masts rising only upward from the sea, our ships are immersed in their medium of space, and we are free to build our masts out in all directions.

The masts rise, ringing the passenger tank like spokes from a hub, and from the masts there spring spars, and from the spars are hung the membranes with which we catch the star winds and sail between the suns.

Sailors is what we are, sailors and the sky-heroes of our people's tradition. Still we affect the scarification of our skin in the traditional maraiin, the sacred patterns of the Great Desert, of Arnhem Land whence our ancestors came to space. And still we dress in the garb of old earth's sailors— some think this vain affectation. Wuluwaid clung fiercely to it and was pleased that I showed willingness to wear the woolen cap, the heavy sweater and white duck trousers of tradition.

With both Wuluwaid and Miralaidj gone to the Dreamtime, will I be a sailor longer?

As we made dock at Port Upatoi, N'Jaja, I was off watch. I climbed a tall mast and sat on a spar, careful of the furled membrane even in its protective case—membranes are expensive as well as fragile. My sweetheart Miralaidj was beside me, it being her time off watch as well as mine.

Even now I can see her face as it was at that moment— the light upon her was the reflected light of the dayside of N'Jaja, a world of mottled green forestation, red earth and blue oceans. Miralaidj, sat beside me on the spar, hundreds of meters above the passenger tank. Her face was the blackest of black, rich with the generous melanin of youth. Her hair, long and glossy, hung in braids that would be no handicap to work or play. Her body filled her thick-knit sweater and tight trousers, every graceful line filling me with love for her, eagerness for our wedding and the days of the birth of our children.

Had we been other than sky-heroes we would have worn the heavy protective spacesuits that other spacemen need. But we of Yurakosi, protected from the radiation by our altered melanin, breath and pressure provided by our close-air generators, we alone of all mankind enter space as ourselves. As creatures to whom deep space is very nearly a natural habitat.

For as long as our melanin lasts, we can penetrate to the deepest part of the void—naked if we wish, although that is not the custom of our people. In most ancient times, in old Australia's deserts, our ancestors went naked. But once we became sea sailors on earth we began to wear clothing of the sort that still we wear as space sailors.

I placed my hand on the face of my sweetheart Miralaidj, with my fingertips tracing the maraiin raised there in her infancy, its swirls and symbolic patterns bearing their secret meaning known only to her, different from those of any other person. When we were married, she would tell me the meaning of her maraiin and I would tell her the meaning of mine.

Both of us had turned off our radios—we were out of touch with the rest of the crew of the *Djanggalawul* and out of the communication net that by now would link our ship with Port Upatoi. We could speak with each other only by leaning close so that our close-air envelopes overlapped, carrying ordinary sound waves between us.

I checked the dial on the close-air generator on my leg. The miniature digital clock face indicated that there was an ample supply of close-air for me. Miralaidj smiled as I leaned over her own generator, checking the security of its straps, the digital indicator on the face of the generator, to see that she too had a safe margin of air with her.

She placed her cheek beside mine, her mouth close to my ear, and said, "You take good care of me, Jiritzu. Without you I would surely forget my air!" There was irony in her voice, but a sweet warmth as well. She drew back laughing, the sound that carried through the close-air to my ears disappearing as our air envelopes separated.

I seized her hands for a moment, a trace of the laughter returning as the sound waves were carried through her air envelope into mine where they were joined at our hands, and thence to my ears. "I will always take care of you," I said, knowing that my words were reaching her only faintly

after traveling through the air down my arms and up hers.

"If harm befell you," I said, "I would have to contend with the vengeance of Wuluwaid!" As if it were her father whose favor mattered to me and not my sweetheart's own. It was a standing joke between us.

"You know old Wuluwaid," Miralaidj rejoined. "He is so caught up in duty and tradition, he cares more about meat than about the Aranda."

"I know," I said—and there was some truth in that. Wuluwaid often said that the care of passengers was a sacred trust, that it was a charge to the Aranda and the Kunapi from the Great Mother herself, to transport those less fortunate than ourselves safely from one little mudball to another little mudball. Only we could know the joy of living in space—let the little crawlers have their safety and their wars.

"Look!" Miralaidj cried, holding her hand to my ear to conduct the sound. "Look, the shuttle!"

There beneath us a triangular craft had made its appearance. How long it had been climbing through the atmosphere of N'Jaja was of no concern: now it had burst from the air envelope, achieved orbit, and was itself approaching Port Upatoi to dock. Its thick body, its carefully rounded edges, its airfoil design all spoke of the clumsy hybrid duty which it served, rising through the atmosphere of a planet, entering orbit, carrying passengers or trade goods to the port... then dropping away, falling back into atmosphere, skipping across the top of the planet's air globe, constantly losing speed until it could fully re-enter the atmosphere and glide to a landing.

Neither true aircraft nor true spacecraft, the shuttle served as both, served clumsily but performed its task.

And now, where Miralaidj pointed her slender black finger, I could see the shuttle from N'Jaja approaching Port Upatoi. Behind it sputtered a tiny tail of reaction stuff—not even agonized matter for these little trips—and from time to time there would be a tinier spurt of vernier engines to make a minor course adjustment.

Wuluwaid, as his daughter had said, was down in the passenger tank, awaiting the arrival of the meat. He would know, as we all did, that the meat would be dressed in their heavy space suits, that they would clump

through the airlocks and corridors of Port Upatoi and make their way to the airlock and the passenger tank of our ship, the *Djanggalawul*. Normally this would be a slow process with halts and delays and the filling out of forms and stamping of documents, but not this time.

This was the assemblage of diplomats from a number of planets, ambassadors plenipotentiary and their staffs and flunkies who would be attending some sort of war conference with many more of their ilk at our next stop, N'Ala.

Little concern to us. Let the planet-squirmers have their squabbles and fight their wars.

Miralaidj tapped me on the shoulder and pointed down the mast we had both climbed. Scrambling up its meager handholds I saw the form of little Bildjiwura, Miralaidj's Kunapi half, her closest friend, a girl just making her first sail. It was unusual for our people to permit halving of two persons so disparate in age—Miralaidj a full woman nearly ready for marriage, Bildjiwura a slim little thing more than five years her junior—but as a child Miralaidj had astounded her family and friends in their town of Kaitjoua by declining to select a half from among the Kunapi.

Miralaidj was a child of five, long since talking and reading, learning now her simple sums in school, when she saw the newborn Kunapi, Bildjiwura. "She is my half," Miralaidj had said, and that was the settling of the question.

She had helped in the raising of her little half, an unknown thing among our people where halves were always expected to be of an age. When Miralaidj's parents, Wuluwaid and Bunbulama, had sent for her to be taken into space with them, Bildjiwura had remained behind in Kaitjouga on Yurakosi. For five years the halves had been apart, another thing amazing to our people.

But now Bildjiwura was sailing aboard the *Djanggalawul*, the halves were reunited, and I found myself occasionally burdened, more often delighted, with the presence of little Bildjiwura.

I stood on the spar Miralaidj and I had been sharing, lifted one foot and locked my ankles around the spar. I turned my radio on and tight-beamed a quick call to Bildjiwura.

Then I threw my weight forward, falling toward the passenger tank of the *Djanggalawul* (and toward the bulk of N'Jaja below). My ankle swung me around the spar. Bildjiwura pushed herself upward from her handholds, flinging both arms straight ahead.

We caught hands. I swung on around the spar, Bildjiwura's mass adding to the momentum of our swing. When I was standing upright again I clutched tighter with my ankles, released one of Bildjiwura's hands—she was straight over my head, now, feet uppermost—and grabbed the mast with my free hand.

Bildjiwura clutched my one hand even tighter, swung around our wrists as a fulcrum and landed on the spar beside me. She threw her arms around my waist and hung on, giggling and gasping for breath. For a moment it crossed my mind that she had a childish romantic feeling for me, but of course she was of the Kunapi, Miralaidj and I of the Afanda, and that was all that there could ever be of that.

We sat down on the spar again, Miralaidj, Bildjiwura and I. We all had our radios on now, and we could hear the proceedings down in the passenger tank even though we couldn't see what was going on.

Wuluwaid's voice we could hear, attending to the mechanics of the airlock and getting the meat inside; Captain Nurundere was of course present too. Everyone knew it would be old Wuluwaid's final sail—he had no intention of letting himself be treated like ballast; he was going to work every leg of the voyage. Captain Nurundere, of course, was duty-bound to welcome the meat aboard and see to their welfare.

Captain Nurundere and Wuluwaid had their radios on even though the atmosphere in the passenger tank would have carried their voices directly. Using their radios, they could be heard by the meat even before the passengers had removed their helmets—and also, our two officers, Nurundere of the Kunapi and his half Wuluwaid of the Aranda, could be heard by all of the crew of *Djanggalawul*, a method of keeping us informed of everything that transpired. Our officers hold their positions by merit and experience, but officerships are merely jobs of sailors, no different from being a membrane rigger, a mess chef, or any other job. They are of no different class from other sailors, and have no right to special comforts or to keep secrets from the rest.

High on our spar, the blackness of space stretching above us and the

radiance of N'Jaja below, Miralaidj and Bildjiwura and I listened to the actions in the passenger tank. We could hear the turnings, scraping and clanking of the airlock door, the hiss of free air moving from the tank into the lock, then being replenished from the reserve supplies of the tank.

Heavy metallic footsteps sounded as the meat emerged from the airlock into the passenger tank, their thick shoes rattling against the hard flooring, sending echoes off the curved metal roof. The number of clanks surprised me—the N'Jajans and their allies were a far larger party than I had expected us to transport. But all for the best. The tank was large, more passengers meant more fare revenue for *Djanggalawul* and ultimately more trade goods for Yurakosi.

When the last of the meat had come through the airlock and it had been resealed, Wuluwaid and two or three duty sailors moved to help the meat out of their helmets and suits. I could hear them working at this task, made needful by the clumsiness of the meat's protective garb and by the problems the meat would have in seeing inside the tank, through the heavily shielded faceplates of their helmets.

The first of the meat had his helmet off and (I could hear him clearly) exclaimed something as he caught sight of the sailor who had helped him off with his helmet. The meat's accent was thick and made understanding him difficult, but his words were something to the effect of "Bigaw! Hands offa me, boy!"

I wondered who had been helping him. Baiame? Kutjara? Young sailors, but strange that the meat would think either of them a child. Well, perhaps a custom of N'Jaja.

Rasp! Thump! Other helmets came loose from their collars, more meat were helped from their clumsy protection. I heard Captain Nurundere address himself ceremoniously to the leader of the meat party. His voice correct, his words those dictated by the serious custom of Yurakosi space sailors, Captain Nurundere spoke:

"Welcome, honored passengers, to our ship, *Djanggalawul*. Place yourselves in the care of sky-heroes. The Great Mother will guide and assist us in protecting you from demons."

I heard the brushing sound of Captain Nurundere drawing from his waistband his captain's *rangga*; in my spirit I could see him draw a

maraiin in the air with his magic stick.

To my amazement I heard the voices of several of the strangers raised in laughter! Not that I myself believe seriously in the magic of the rangga, the sacredness of the maraiin patterns or the picture stories etched on our tjurunga. Not to believe is one thing, but to insult the sacred traditions of one's hosts by laughter—this was scandalous.

"You boys pretty funny!" I heard a stranger's voice speak. "Owzbow gettin an officer down hya swikn talk seriously?" It was difficult to understand parts of his speech.

But our officers seemed to understand. I heard our captain's voice. "I am Nurundere," he spoke formally, "I am the captain of *Djanggawul*, your protector and transporter, sir."

"Ya?" the stranger's voice came. "Ya? Ya bunch a nigras," he said, great astonishment sounding in his speech. "Zevvabody on this ship nigras?"

There was a moment without speech, only the sounds of shuffling feet and persons continuing to remove space suits, then the stranger went on, "Hey, you!"

I could not see his movements, but clearly he must have addressed himself to the captain's half, for the voice of Wuluwaid came through our radios. "I am the half of our captain," the old man said. "If I can assist our charges they need but explain their requirements."

"Yeh, you old boy," the stranger said. "You don't look lacka nigra. Wha's going on heeh?"

"Nigra?" Wuluwaid said. "I do not understand."

There was the sound of more shuffling, some murmuring among the new passengers, then I heard their leader speak once more. "You mean to tell me"—I wondered that his accent lapsed and resumed as it did—"that this whole ship... that the black boy is really the captain of this ship?"

I heard Wuluwaid make a sound in his throat as if deeply hurt by the words of the passenger. Then he said, "I regret that I am as grayed-out as you see me. My half Nurundere is more fortunate in his blackness."

"Ahdoe get it, ahdoe get it," the stranger's voice said. "But oreye, oreye."

Then there was some confused speech, as several of the meat spoke at once, men and women tumbling over one another's words. I heard chunks of sentences, words merely. "Na really nigras," one voice said, and another used the word "Australia."

I heard Captain Nurundere explain to the passengers, briefly but courteously, the background of the sky-heroes, a bit about our world Yurakosi and our ancestors on old earth.

Very shortly our sailors set about to withdraw from the tank. Wuluwaid made arrangement with the leader of the meat, a man called Ham Tamdje, to provide a mess chef for the tank. This is a negotiable part of any journey—we prefer to leave the meat to their own devices as much as is possible, but if they are willing to pay, and desire extra services such as cooking, we will provide the service.

Soon Captain Nurundere, old Wuluwaid, Baiame and Kutjara were settled in the airlock. Through my radio I could hear the door sealed from the passenger tank. Then, from my post high on the spar with Miralaidj and Bildjiwura, I could see the airlock open, giving onto the deck of *Djanggalawul*, and the four sailors emerge, one after another, Captain Nurundere first, his woolen cap pulled over his head, his face as he looked upward for a moment clearly showing in its partial grayness, then old Wuluwaid looking nearly white of skin, so far grayed-out was he, then the two young sailors Baiame and Kutjara.

They separated to their posts. I heard radio communication links becoming activated, the *Djanggalawul* clearing with Port Upatoi control center. Every sailor on the ship must have had radio contact going with the net at that point, for without any command being issued from the captain or any other office, I could see the forms of sky-heroes swarming up and down masts, scattering across the decks of our ship, checking equipment, moving to duty stations preparatory to getting under way.

Miralaidj touched me in parting, dropped hand-under-hand down the mast, little Bildjiwura following close behind. She threw one glance quickly back to me and I could not restrain a smile before the two of them reached the deck.

Then I flung myself off the spar, diving headfirst for the deck below. There is no regulation against this kind of diving, and of course it is quite safe in deep space. A bit riskier in port, to be sure, but I was confident that I could gauge my acceleration and I flipped above the deck, landing with flexed knees, rolling once and springing erect again on the deck, my breath coming fast in my close-air envelope, my blood racing with the involuntary response of my body to the few seconds in free-fall.

This was the life of the sailor, the crewman of the membrane ship! The ground-squirmers who never leave their little mudballs, the seal-ship spacemen who man the heavy agonized-matter ships—what can any of them know of this moment?

I ran to the dogging locks that held *Djanggalawul* to the lock of Port Upatoi, and with other Aranda and Kunapi worked the heavy locks and seals open. Our task completed, we moved to our voluntary stations as the *Djanggalawul* made ready to move.

For myself I selected a handhold near the bow of our ship.

It was slightly precarious, and here in port where we hung momentarily within the gravity fields of both the artificial moonlet and N'Jaja itself there was none of the assurance that I would be carried along with the ship should my hand lose its purchase.

But no membrane sailor has ever been known to be lost under such circumstances—we of Yurakosi do not rely upon mechanical devices or elaborate regulations to assure our safety. Every Aranda and Kunapi is thoroughly schooled in the ways of space, everyone is expected to keep his or her body in condition, reflexes fast and mind alert, and to take responsibility for his own safety. Every sailor on *Djanggalawul* knew that, from little Bildjiwura to old Wuluwaid, and each bore responsibility for himself.

At the stern of our craft I could see the agonized-matter conversion taking place—the converter at the tip of our rod of super-dense matter chewed off a microscopically small bit of the stuff, passed it through the terrible process, and gave off the brightly glowing cherry exhaust I had seen so many times before. *Djanggalawul* began to move.

We pulled away from Port Upatoi. The gigantic disk of N'Jaja below us began to slide away. We were still in orbit of the planet even though we

had broken dock with the artificial satellite. Now we moved faster and faster around the equator of the planet, pulling into higher and higher orbit as we swung around the globe.

By the time we reached the center of the nightside, cities gleaming like distant suns across the continental mass below us, we were ready to swing away. *Djanggalawul* pointed her prow straight up, her tail directed at the center of the planet's mass, and with a final spurt of agonized matter the converter was switched off.

The ship was coasting now, N'Jaja's sun eclipsed for us by the bulk of the planet. Without need for any signal, the membrane riggers began scrambling up the masts to unfurl *Djanggalawul's* sails. By the time we had cleared N'Jaja's shadow, coasting on the speed of our matter-converter push, the sails would be spread and ready to catch the solar wind that would carry us to our tacking point near Yirrkalla.

But even before I began my work in the rigging I stood for a moment on a spar, one hand braced against the mast, gazing straight ahead of *Djanggalawul* in the direction of Yirrkalla. The sight was one I had seen countless times in my life as a sky-hero, but still it brought my blood to a rush and made my heart pound with a sheer thrill.

The far stars and galaxies were spread before us: the seven stars that early sky-heroes had seen as the beak, eye, fins, gill and tail of the Baramundi fish; the swirls of glowing intergalactic dust whose colors had suggested our legendary Rainbow Serpent; the formations of the Greater and Lesser Wallaby. I stood for a moment with my radio switched off, a mere score centimeters of close-air separating me from the endless void, the silence of the galaxies filling my ears and their splendor my eyes, and I wondered.

What is it like to be an ordinary man?

Were one not born to sail a membrane ship, were the cells of one's skin not blessed with protective melanin that permits us of Yurakosi to do without radiation shielding, what meaning would there be in life?

And in that distant time when I was fully grayed-out—how could I face the life of a ground-squirmmer, even on Yurakosi where sky-heroes could retire with honor? I saw myself, then, husband to Miralaidj, father of many sons and daughters who would sail membrane ships. Perhaps

Bunbulama lived through her child; Wuluwaid would do the same after this voyage was complete. But to be an ordinary human, to travel as meat on a membrane ship, knowing sky-heroes, knowing of their lives but unable to share their experiences—what could it be like?

I looked back at the deck of *Djanggalawul*, saw my fellow sailors working busily to rig our sails for the solar wind. I switched on my radio, caught the flow and rhythm of work, joined in. Our work was strenuous and precise, a joy to perform. By the time it was finished the crew were ready to assemble on deck for the day's ration of grog.

There is no day or night in deep space, so deck lights and rigging lights glow throughout a journey. To keep the ship working the crew are divided into watches, each watch with its own officers and the captain, a member of no watch, held responsible for the conduct of all.

Sky-heroes are few and precious to humanity; their safety on voyages is placed above all else except the welfare of meat, for the tradition of Yurakosi holds that the host must extend himself to any degree to safeguard his guest, and passengers are our guests, aboard the membrane ships even though they pay for that privilege.

The annals of Yurakosi bear no greater shame than the story of Elyun El-Kumarbis, a Pan-Semite of old earth who bought passage on the membrane ship *Makarata* sailing the great ellipse route from NGC 7002 to Al-ghoul Phi. A black man of Ghanaian descent, Elyun purchased sailor's garb and a close-air generator and donned them in a private room at Port Hussein.

When he boarded *Makarata* along with the other passengers, wearing a standard protective spacesuit, no one could tell the difference. Inside the passenger tank of *Makarata* he found an inconspicuous corner, removed his spacesuit, mingled with a group of crewmen who had entered the tank to perform routine tasks, and exited to the deck along with them.

Elyun El-Kumarbis managed to stay on deck for nearly a quarter-hour before he collapsed from radiation and was found out. He was carried below deck and treated at once by the ship's medical officer, but of course he died within the hour. The captain and watch officer responsible for the incident were immediately ordered by vote of the crew to spend the rest of the voyage as meat. When they reached Yurakosi they were immediately shuttled down to the surface and never again permitted to leave the

planet, although both had many years of melanin still in their skin.

But Elyun El-Kumarbis, tradition tells, spent that last hour of his life raving over the beauty and the joy he had experienced. His last words were given to begging that he be permitted upon deck again, which was not done, or that he be buried in space, which request was met.

Three standard days—merely, a matter of watches, of course —after *Djanggalawul* left Port Upatoi the captain announced a ceremonial dinner in honor of the ship's passengers. The tank had been furnished, in accord with the passengers' wishes, in luxurious style. One deck was devoted to dining salons, a bar, a lounge and an entertainment area. A second was partitioned into private quarters for the N'Jajans and their guests. The third was set up as an artificial outdoor environment, with thick plant life and even a small constructed lake.

With Nurundere at our head, wearing ceremonial crimson plumes in keeping with the ancient Aranda practice, a group of men and women from the crew trooped through the deck airlock and emerged into the passenger tank. Our chefs had taken over the passenger galley for hours before the meal, preparing a lavish dinner of old-style dishes.

The table was set with places for Aranda and Kunapi on one side of a long white-covered board, N'Jajan and other meat on the other.

Captain Nurundere's seat was at the center of the long table, on a small dais; opposite him sat the senior member of the party of passengers, a N'Jajan ambassador called Ham Tamdje who was traveling to the big war conference on N'Ala.

Captain Nurundere stood at the beginning of the meal: a tall, imposing man, still with the mark of the sky-hero on his face despite the loss of most of his melanin, his clothing a set of common sailor's garments with only the head-plumes of the ancient Australian chieftain to mark his rank.

Opposite him stood the N'Jajan Ham Tamdje, a man with too much flesh on his face, pale skin marked with red veins in his cheeks and on his nose. He wore a suit of some local cloth from his home world, a sort of yellowish vanilla color, with a white shirt and a piece of colored cloth knotted around his neck.

The crew women in our party were dressed as were the men. Those of

the meat wore odd gowns that hung to the floor, most of them also coming only partway over their bosoms; the effect was altogether as if their clothing was hung three or four handbreadths lower than intended, and threatened to fall off them at any moment.

Nurundere made the same welcoming speech I had heard captains make on membrane ships for years—the pleasure at having distinguished guests aboard, concern for the comfort and safety of passengers, sacredness of the sky-heroes' trust, and so on.

Ham Tamdje looked a little uncomfortable during the captain's remarks, then he said the passengers appreciated our hospitality and the good food and everybody sat down and the food actually came.

I was seated opposite a woman who introduced herself as Missy Julietta Cadle. She was an administrative assistant to the plenipotentiary from N'Tensi. She had wavy yellowish hair and a great deal of pale flesh that seemed to quiver anytime she moved. She asked me what it was like to be a sailor.

"Work," I told her. "Sometimes it is lonely, sometimes companionable, and very beautiful when we are outside."

She wanted to know if she could go outside.

I explained why she could not.

She said we sky-heroes were being unfair to the passengers just because we were black and they white. I tried to explain again why passengers could not go outside without protective suits. I told her the story of Elyun El-Kumarbis.

She said, "But he was just a dirty nigra."

I said, "It would happen to anyone who ventured outside without protection. Anyone except a pure-blooded descendant of the old Australian aborigines. Not even hybrids—there have been a few, there were some in the early days of the membrane ships, deliberate attempts to increase the number of sky-heroes, but they did not have the protective melanin.

"Only we may go."

"You're as bad as a Jew," Missy Cadle said.

I said, "What's that?"

"They were an old earth people. Full of uppity notions, thought they were better than anyone else. And full of nosy do-good ideas about nigras bein' equal of whites. We learn about old earth races in school on N'Tensi."

"What happened to the Jews?" I asked Missy Cadle.

"Oh, they got together with some of their neighboring peoples and formed that Pan-Semitic Empire that took over old earth when all the other nations went out to colonize new worlds."

Somehow I didn't understand what she was driving at. We kept up our meal—ship's rations basically, but served as fancy as a top Kunapi chef could make it. The meat provided us with beverages from their home worlds, mostly whiskey. The meal wore on. Down at the far end of the table some of the meat and some of the crew were leaving their seats, disappearing to other parts of the passenger tank.

Missy Cadle said, "What I mean is, you Yurakosi people seem to think you are all so special because you can go into space the way you do, and you won't let anyone else do it!"

Again I tried to explain that it wasn't our choice that kept others in their tanks or in their suits. It was a quirk of nature, a dirty trick on the other ninety-nine-point-odd percent of humanity and a lucky break for the Aranda and the Kunapi.

Missy Cadle turned to a man sitting beside her. "Tell this boy," she said, pointing at me, "tell him what's going to happen if they won't give up their secret!"

The man drained a glass of his whiskey and tapped himself on the shoulder. There was something hard and bulky under his jacket. His speech was slurred and hard for me to understand. He said, "Breakin' bread with nigras. Julietta, if Ham din' tell us himself back in Upatoi I'd never have thought any of us could do it. But Ham says"—he stopped and wiped his mouth with his sleeve—"Ham says we could really do a job if we could have our own membrane ships, so we gotta find out how to sail 'em.

"Or else!" he said, and reached for a bottle and filled up his glass again.

I said, "There is no secret!"

Missy Cadle and the man beside her just looked angry and didn't say anything else to me. I wanted to talk to Captain Nurundere about what they had said. I thought of radio, but we had all turned them off during the banquet; there was no need for them, and the noise would have been terrible.

So I rose from my place and walked to Captain Nurundere's place, and put my hand on his shoulder and said very quietly into his ear that I needed to talk with him. Such requests do not come often among sky-heroes, and when they come they are treated seriously and quickly.

Captain Nurundere said a word to Ham Tamdje and rose, and he walked with me a distance from the table, and I told him what the two passengers had said to me. While I spoke with the captain I scanned the table. There were many empty places on both sides. Nurundere said, "I suppose the meat have invited our people off to try to get our secrets from them. Hah!"

He turned from me and strode back to where Ham Tamdje still sat in his yellow-white suit. I saw the captain speak to him, and although I could not hear what he said, Ham Tamdje's face grew for a moment very pale, then an angry red as he replied to Nurundere.

The captain said something more to Tamdje.

The N'Jajan rose from his seat. Captain Nurundere took a step backward. From the seat beside Nurundere's his half Wuluwaid rose.

Ham Tamdje reached inside his jacket and pulled out his hand with a small, old type explosive gun in it. He pointed it at Nurundere.

"All right," Tamdje spluttered. "All right, if you damn nigras are gonna keep your damn secrets, some white men will show you your place!" He pointed his gun straight at Captain Nurundere.

It was a moment of shock. My mind very nearly refused to accept the reality of what was happening. The meat were—were what? Were attempting to seize control of *Djanggalawul!* But why? We were

transporting them to their objective, we were, in a sense, nothing other than their hirelings anyway. What did they want?

They wanted something that did not exist: the secret—the secret!—of survival in deep space without protective suits. Anyone could survive the vacuum—that was possible ever since the invention of the close-air generator—but the hard radiation would kill any human not of Yurakosi stock. There was no secret—it was a simple fact, a part of reality—yet these people were demanding that we share the secret with them, demanding at the point of a gun.

"Ya'll tell me right now or you're one dead nigra!" Ham Tamdje slurred at Nurundere. The captain began to explain still again that there was nothing to tell, he gestured to emphasize his point, Ham Tamdje raised his gun higher. I saw the gray face of Wuluwaid, emotions flashing one after another across his features. As Ham Tamdje squeezed his trigger old Wuluwaid launched himself at the N'Jajan, arms outstretched toward his gun.

The weapon fired with a roar that echoed off the curving roof of the passenger tank. Old Wuluwaid crashed down on the white linen that covered the long table. In the moment that Wuluwaid had thrown himself at Tamdje's gun, I had flung myself also after him.

Ham Tamdje stood, clearly shocked by the result of his own rash action. In an instant I had seized his gun and wrenched it out of his grasp, holding it pointed not at the passengers but at the floor to show that I had no intention of firing it.

Captain Nurundere ignored both Tamdje and myself; he was bending over his half Wuluwaid. He turned him over so that he lay face-up on the table, but it was clear that Wuluwaid was dead or dying. He had taken the heavy old-fashioned bullet in the middle of his chest. Blood was pouring from the wound, and his face had faded still further, from its customary gray to a deathly white. Even in those few seconds his rasping breath ceased.

Up and down the length of the table something resembling a miniature war had broken out. The passengers had come armed to the dinner. The crew were without exception unarmed—membrane ships are craft of commerce, not of war, and Yurakosi has made neither pacts of alliance nor warfare in her history.

Within a matter of only minutes the rattling shots had ceased. Sky-heroes lay dead on the deck of the passenger tank. Meat armed with old-style guns rounded up the surviving sailors, Captain Nurundere included. For an instant I considered using Tamdje's gun to continue the fight but did not fire a shot—I thought, perhaps, of the sacred concern of sky-heroes for passengers, but chiefly I saw no gain in firing a few shots against so many armed enemies.

Ham Tamdje stepped before me, took his gun back from me and whipped it across my face, ripping open my cheek. His face held contempt.

"Cowardly nigra!" he snarled. Should I have shot him, then, while I had still had the chance? To what end? To kill a passenger? His own conduct might have forfeited for him the right of hospitality, I might have been held blameless—but it seemed to me at that moment that the battle, such as it was, was over. To have killed him would have been gratuitous.

At any rate, within minutes all of the captured sailors were forced into two cabins, men in one, women in another. Our radios and close-air generators were taken from us by the meat. We were told that armed guards would await us outside the door of the cabin in which we were held. Then the door was slammed behind us.

I looked about the cabin to see who was with me—over a dozen men including my half Dua. Captain Nurundere and Wuluwaid were not there. Wuluwaid, I realized, could not be there. He was by now in the Dreamtime. Nurundere, when last I had seen him, was unharmed. I called out to the others, "Does anyone know what happened to Nurundere?"

A Kunapi machinist I knew slightly, Watilun, said, "I saw him as we came in here, standing with the meat Tamdje. He seemed not to be hurt."

Of the crewmen in the room I determined that I was the most senior. Sky-heroes are an egalitarian lot; we pay little heed to rank or position, as you may already have noted. Still, for the purposes of the moment we needed someone to lead, or at least to coordinate our energies.

I assigned two men as door-watches and called the rest of our group to confer in a far corner of the room. Of us all, most were too shocked to contribute very much to the discussion, but my half Dua and the machinist Watilun put in their shares.

"We had best think this through," I suggested. "Can we assess the situation up to now, and decide how to respond?" I felt pompous speaking thus, but Dua and Watilun took me seriously.

"We men seem uninjured, Jiritzu. Apparently those not killed outright are unharmed," said Dua. "Probably the same is true of the women. We are divided, now, into these two groups, plus Nurundere. Tam Tamdje must have wished to parley with him; that was why he was kept out of this cabin."

Watilun said, "Some of us and some of the meat had left the dinner before the fight began. They may still be off fraternizing on the nature-deck."

"Unless they were lured away for a purpose," added Dua.

"I think not," I said. "The meat were carrying weapons, but I doubt that they expected a fight like the one that happened. Some of them seemed as surprised as we were."

Watilun said, "And there are still the duty watch, outside the tank."

"They must know that something is wrong," Dua put in. "Even with our radios turned off, the sound of the shooting must have been carried by the decking. Then if they tried to reach us by radio they would either have had no reply at all, or would have got a passenger."

"That is as it may be," I said. "But what should we ourselves do now? We can wait for one of Tamdje's people to come in and tell us what they want, or—"

"No! No!" both Dua and Watilun interrupted,, echoed by several others in the group circled around us. "We have to act!" said Dua.

"Good," I answered him, "I agree entirely. Now, what *can* we do?" Dua looked at a loss, so I turned to Watilun, "Have you worked inside the passenger tank? Is there anything we can do to get out of here, either into the rest of the tank or back outside?"

He rubbed his head with both his hands, concentrating. For the first time I studied this Kunapi: strong features, bushy hair, his skin still dark with unused melanin. He seemed a competent man, resourceful. He said,

"I have worked on the collapsed-matter rod, adjusting braces for the tank and decks. I have worked on the converters."

"How do you get to the rod?"

"Hmm." He rubbed his chin. "Normally from the deck to the converter at either end of the ship, then along the rod from the converter. But there are service ports for access to the rod. Let me look over here."

He stood up and walked to a bulkhead near the corner of the cabin. He knelt and worked for a few moments on the base of the wall. It came away from its place, and a section of flooring with it. Beneath was a large rectangular plate, heavily sealed at its edges. There was bright-colored lettering on the plate.

"Mother," Watilun spat. "The meat took my close-air, I can't go down there without it. For that matter, I can't open the seal without this cabin losing its air!" He sat back on his haunches and closed up the floor and wall sections he had removed.

"All right," I said. "That won't work. What other ideas do we have?"

"We can try to overpower the meat when they open the door," Dua suggested.

"That's a desperation plan," I said. "We should be able to do something on our own, without waiting for the meat to do something first."

One of the sailors nearby asked, "What if we just wait? What will happen? What do they want?"

I sighed, not at the questions but at the irrational meat whose actions had provoked them. "These passengers," I said, "refuse to accept the fact that they can never be sky-heroes. They want the secret of how we can stand the radiation of space, I suppose as soon as Captain Nurundere tells them the secret they will free us and go on with the trip."

"But there is no—"The sailor stopped himself. I nodded.

In the silence that followed we could all hear a stealthy sound of someone beneath our feet. Watilun ran to the bulkhead and again opened the section leading to the seal beneath the floor. There the face of little

Bildjiwura looked up at us, full of youth and excitement, with no sign in it of fear.

Watilun and Dua pulled her into our cabin. She said, "One of the women knew how to get under the floor from our cabin. I came first as I am the smallest. The rest will follow when we send for them."

"That will do it!" Watilun exclaimed.

We all faced him, our question needing no words.

"You go ahead back," he said to Bildjiwura. "I think we may yet be saved, but we will all have to be in this cabin first."

"How can it be?" I asked Watilun.

He turned to me, very solemn in mien. Very solemn in mien.

"If we do not regain control of our ship," he said, "what actually will happen? How serious the result? What price can we justify to save our ship?"

"I think the N'Jajan Tamdje is little short of mad," I said. "If he finally realizes that there is no secret, he and his fellows might do anything. They will be enraged. Crazy. But if they refuse to accept that truth, they'll be equally desperate; they will try anything to learn what they think we are concealing from them."

"What should we do?" a crewman called out,

Watilun said, "We can kill them." He looked around. No one spoke. "We can assemble in one cabin—either this or the one the women are held in now. The meat didn't clear these cabins of furnishings—I can easily booby-trap a cabin to open that floorplate when the door is opened.

"Once that happens"—he made a sweeping, downward gesture with both his hands—"the air from the entire passenger tank will go out in a matter of seconds. The only safe place in the tank would be in a sealed cabin, and as far as we know the only people in sealed cabins are ourselves."

"What about Nurundere?" Dua asked. "And what about all of us who

are off with passengers, who had already gone off before Tamdje showed his weapon?"

Watilun said, "They will be lost with the passengers."

We sent Bildjiwura back to the other cabin for the women.

When they arrived we repeated the entire discussion. Some were for proceeding, others wanted to wait and hope for a less lethal solution. The crew on watch, it was hoped, would use radio and realize that something serious was wrong. They would seal the airlock to the tank and make for port.

While we were arguing the door to our cabin was flung open and the captain was shoved in. The meat didn't even look in and see that we had doubled our population!

With the door slammed behind him, Nurundere advanced to the center of the cabin and seated himself. There was blood on his face, his clothing was torn. He said, "They're mad. They absolutely refuse to accept truth."

"What happened to you?" I asked Nurundere.

"I was questioned by Tamdje and a few of his associates. This doesn't mean anything"—he wiped some of the blood from his face—"just some scratches in a scuffle. But they intend to take this ship to their port, back to N'Jaja, if we won't give them the secret of protection in deep space. Make us hostages of some sort. It's totally senseless, but we could be held for years;"

"Watilun has a plan," I said.

The captain asked what it was, and Watilun told him.

Nurundere sat for a long time unanswering. "I would prefer to avoid that," he said at last. "Killing passengers, even these, and losing sky-heroes as well. If there is any other way, we should seek it."

"I agree," said Watilun. "But what other way?"

Nurundere faced me directly. "Your thought, Jiritzu?"

"Captain, they took your close-air and your radio?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear any attempts at communication between the deck and the tank?"

"I did," he said. "Several times the deck tried to call. Tamdje ordered his people not to reply."

Dua said, "But what about our fellows who left the dinner early? They would still have their radios and their close-air!"

I said, "They would! Then they would have heard the deck call! And they would have heard the shots! What can they be doing?"

For a reply the lights in our cabin flicked out. In a single instant we went from bright lights to total darkness.

"That must be it," Nurundere's voice came through the blackness of the cabin. "The deck must be acting now to help us. Watch officer now is, mm, Uraroju. Good, she'll do a good job."

From the tank beyond our cabin there came shouting and the sound of running and tumbling. "Uraroju cut the power to the tank," a woman's voice said. "That means that the door seals are open!"

We must all have started at once, headed for the door, but the voice of Nurundere stopped us. "Wait!" he shouted. "Before we go out, what will we do?"

There must have been ten confused replies at once. Nurundere said, "We mustn't just run out. That will serve no purpose." As if to emphasize his words, there was the sound of shooting once more from the tank outside.

"What should we do?" someone asked.

"From the sound outside, the meat are disorganized. Get out of this cabin as quietly as we can, in case they decide to slaughter their prisoners. If only we could get our close-air equipment back... but we don't know where they have it.

"Just get away from here, get away from the concentration of their

weapons. Spread yourselves, head for the nature-deck. We can count on Uraroju to rescue this situation. Until she does, we have to stay away from the meat and their guns."

We got out the doorway well enough. The meat who had been guarding the door was gone. We could see practically nothing—the tank is completely sealed, a total environment. Panels for space-viewing are built into its roof, but Uraroju had had their coverings closed when the power, was cut off.

The meat had not planned for total darkness, and I could hear them stumbling and crashing about, shouting to one another. We of Yurakosi had a great advantage over them; equally blinded by the darkness, yet we knew the arrangement of the tank, we were completely at home aboard *Djanggalawul* with its odd gravitic effects as one moved from the center of a deck toward its edges.

I led Bildjiwura by the hand, she the only member of the crew making her first voyage. We found our way from the cabin, moved across the deck. By the varying strength and pull of the dense rod that provided the ship's gravity, I could gauge our distance from the angle where the decks joined.

With the passenger tank's power system completely shut off, the air we were breathing began to become stuffy. At once the plan of Uraroju became clear: if only the meat failed to recognize the signs of what was befalling them, all within the passenger tank would become unconscious. If the meat understood, they could outfit themselves with the close-air gear they had taken from the crew, but they were clearly ignorant of space, or at least of conditions aboard membrane ships.

The crew on watch could come through the airlock, disarm the passengers and confine them to cabins, where they would recover when the power was restored and oxygen began to flow.

Dropping to the deck where I could make my way more stealthily than upright, I drew Bildjiwura down beside me. I, whispered to her what was happening, then began creeping with her toward the airlock.

I detected a heavy chair, crept around it with Bildjiwura, moved across a section of open deck, placed my free hand before me and felt the edge of a heavy, hanging cloth—the gown of a woman passenger! I froze! I heard a startled gasp, the woman pulled away, clearly terrified.

After holding my breath as long as I could I exhaled slowly and again, leading little Bildjiwura by the hand, began creeping toward the airlock.

After a few more creeping meters of progress my hand encountered a still leg, wearing the tight duck trousers of a sky-hero. I pressed Bildjiwura flat to the deck, held her in place for a moment to communicate my wish that she stay still, then ran my hands up the figure I had felt lying on the deck. I moved slowly, silently, but almost at once realized three things—the person was dead, she was a woman, and she was garbed as a membrane sailor.

Explosive bullets had taken out her belly.

I felt her hair with my hands, long braids. In the total blackness of the tank I ran my fingertips over the maraiin on her cheeks. I did not know the meaning of the sacred patterns, but I recognized them nonetheless: this was the body of my Miralaidj.

Half a sob may have escaped me—I felt Bildjiwura grasp me in the dark. Miralaidj dead, Wuluwaid dead. I had no thoughts of the Dreamtime. For me they were dead.

Miralaidj's Kunapi half Bildjiwura was now more than ever my charge. I could not stop to mourn my Miralaidj, I could not wail my song of grief. I could only draw little Bildjiwura in a half-circle away from the body of my love. Surely she must wonder what had happened, what I had encountered, but I did not stop to tell.

Now we were near the airlock. Now I caressed the face of little Bildjiwura, hoping she would be quiet until the coming struggle should end. My ears were beginning to ring, my breath was short in my throat. Colors seemed to swirl before my eyes in the complete darkness of the tank.

Surely this must be the approach of unconsciousness through deprivation of oxygen. Surely all of the meat, unused to conditions aboard membrane ships, were by now sprawled unconscious in the darkness. Now Uraroju and the others from the deck watch must come through the airlock, moving quickly, to disarm and capture the meat before they should die—yet also before they could recover their consciousness.

The ringing grew loud in my ears, but before I lost all awareness I heard

the machinery of the airlock working, heard the first hiss of air from within it. In my spirit I could see the airlock, opening. A sailor held a portable deck light— now I could see, not in my spirit.

The light was shined into the tank. Dead and unconscious bodies were scattered about, but standing between me and the airlock I saw for a moment one silhouette: gross, weaving, the edge of a sleeve of some nearly white material highlighted by the flare from the airlock, and in the hand emerging from that sleeve an old-style gun.

One N'Jajan had divined the plan of Uraroju. One who had not been able to warn the others—or who had chosen, in his growing irrationality, not to speak. One who had strapped to his leg a close-air generator, and was ready to fire at the sky-heroes coming from the airlock.

I drew a deep breath of still-stuffy air, rose to my feet as the figure of Ham Tamdje of N'Jaja spun clumsily toward me. I flexed my knees, gauging the gravity at this point, and launched myself across the deck toward Tamdje. No person other than a membrane sailor could have made that leap, but any experienced Aranda or Kunapi could have.

For a moment it was almost as if I were leaping from spar to deck in the free-fall of space. There was a blaze of light as Tamdje fired his gun, a hot impact low on my leg, then I crashed into his fat body and we tumbled to the deck. Now there was little struggle. Tamdje was soft and unused to space, I was hard and well at home. The wound in my leg would have mattered standing, but as we rolled and struck each other, gouged and squeezed there on the deck of the passenger tank, it meant nothing.

I struck and struck the N'Jajan, the deaths of my fellows now coming to me, the death of my Miralaidj before my eyes and my spirit. I could wail my song of grief now, could wail and scream at this fat, pale chunk of meat, could batter his flabby head against the deck of *Djanggalawul's* passenger tank until the hands of sky-heroes pulled me away from Tamdje the N'Jajan and I saw the pulpy mass I had made of our chief passenger.

When the other meat were confined to their cabins the sailors and Uraroju found the two in which the crew had been held. Their walls were marked with scores of scars where weapons had been fired—the meat had tried to massacre their captives when the power was cut. But now began the melancholy business of recovering the bodies of crewmen and women killed during the battle hours earlier, among them the bodies of Wuluwaid

and of Miralaidj. The sky-heroes were buried in space.

They were far from the first membrane sailors to die in the deep void, far from the first whose bodies were committed to the stars, to drift forever while their souls returned to the Dreamtime.

The body of Ham Tamdje was set aside for delivery to his friends. Some ground-squirming N'Missan became head of the passenger party, under cabin arrest by Captain Nurundere.

And we who survive are about to begin the great tack at Yirrkalla, near the three beacon suns, the most difficult and critical portion of the voyage. Shorthanded, Nurundere calls upon every available hand. My own trial is delayed to the end of this sail. Meanwhile I will do my share. I am one of the finest membrane riggers in the fleet! But afterward, afterward... I, Jiritzu, Aranda, killed a passenger. With my bare hands. That he was himself a murderer, armed, and would have murdered more sky-heroes had he escaped me, is all of no concern.

Surely there will be no criminal charge against me, but equally surely I will never be permitted to sail again as a sky-hero.

The meat will be delivered in shame to their destination. We will leave them at Port Corley circling New Alabama, leave them in disgrace to be dealt with as their planet-squirming fellows see fit to deal with them.

And after we reach Yurakosi? I will be put aground. I will be sent into Port Bralku, and ferried to the surface of Yurakosi, to seek out poor Bunbulama and tell her of the end of Wuluwaid and of Miralaidj. And then?

I, my skin still rich with melanin, a ground-squirming on a world of grayed-out codgers and black-faced children?

More likely I, will climb the highest mast of *Djanggalawul*, and cast my close-air generator to the deck, and launch myself as far into the deep as my muscles can send me.

In theory, a very strong sailor can break free, of ship's gravity and be lost in space. It has never been done. No sky-hero would perform so mad an act.

But I look closely after my wounded leg. It is not a serious wound, and I keep it well cleaned, and during every watch I exercise to keep my muscles in good condition. Before we reach Port Bralku my wound should be healed.

I, a ground-squirmer while still so young? I, the sky-hero who killed a passenger? I, whose beloved is in the Dreamtime?

Standing atop the highest spar of the tallest mast of *Djanggalawul*, beneath my feet the starwind-bellied membrane sails, above my head only the blackness and the million glittering points, and elsewhere in space the whispered, silent progress of other membrane ships, will I climb down, return to port, ride the shuttle ship, squirm on the ground of Yurakosi?

A very strong sailor might break free of ship's gravity and drift forever in deep space. He might return to the Dreamtime.