

SCIENCE FICTION WORLDS OF JEFFREY A. CARVER

Though All the Mountains Lie Between

by

Jeffrey A. Carver

First published in SCIENCE FICTION TIMES, and DRAGONS OF DARKNESS
edited by Orson Scott Card, Ace Books, 1980

Copyright © 1980 Jeffrey A. Carver

Later formed the basis of the novel, [DRAGONS IN THE STARS](#).

All rights reserved. This work is the literary property of the author and a part of his livelihood. You are free to download this story for your own enjoyment. You may print a copy, if you like, for your own use, including sharing it with friends. You may *not* post it elsewhere on the web. Permission to distribute for any except personal use is explicitly denied.

Though All the Mountains Lie Between

...In those days before the founding of the Guild, riggers lived with constant insecurity. Shrewd masters controlled them--often with subtle means, but controlled them nevertheless; and riggers then rarely supported one another against abusive masters. But if they suffered in the normal world, they found freedom in the net, in the dream by which they steered their ships, which their masters could never hope to share. The lucky rigger found a way to carry that freedom out of the net, to the other side of life...

--Jona'Jon'

Gazing Into Yesteryear, for ages 7-11

The starship moved quietly through the Flux, though its motion was invisible from the bridge, where Jael stood facing Mogurn. Only instruments told her of the ship's motion; she would see it for herself, more clearly, when she entered the rigger-net. She waited anxiously.

Mogurn's eyes were dark and stern. With his hands folded across his heavy chest, he studied her with those eyes, kept her frozen. "All right, Jael," he said, releasing her from his gaze at last. He glanced one final time over the thicket of instrumentation in the nose of the bridge, and then he indicated the rigger-station with a tilt of his head. "Go ahead and take the net," he said. "Don't tire yourself." With that he turned away, his robelike tunic spinning in folds, and he strode from the bridge. The door darkened to opacity behind him, leaving Jael alone in the ship's small control cell.

He doesn't trust me, she thought nervously, staring after Mogurn. Well, I don't care. She turned and made another brief inspection of the console, even though Mogurn had already done that with her, and then she climbed into the rigger-station, a couch recessed in a tight alcove on the starboard side of the bridge. She stretched out and relaxed gradually, staring at several mirrored monitors overhead as she tried to forget about Mogurn and think instead of the ship, of the Flux. She shut her eyes and let her neck settle against the neural contacts in the couch.

Her senses darkened and exploded outward into the rigger-net, outward from the ship, into the Flux. Into the streams of space. Jael opened her eyes to a vast and clear purplish sky; she floated like a seed high over a strangely glowing blue- and green-mottled landscape. The net glittered faintly around her, binding her to the invisible ghost of a spaceship which it was her duty to guide. She spread her arms, and in the net her arms billowed outward as great wings, filling with a rising updraft of wind. Jael (and the ship) rose, soaring.

The landscape beneath her was an odd matrix of color, reflecting her mood. It was her own image, painted by her mind on the flowing canvas of the Flux, on the currents which carried her and her ship through the curved passageways of space among the stars, bypassing the endless lightyears of normal space. The currents and tides of the Flux were objectively real, but it was her imagination, her thoughts and fantasies transmuted through the rigger-net, that detailed the realm through which she navigated.

Her feelings were quiet, now, and she flew silently through empty skies, daydreaming. She felt mildly depressed, neither happy nor actively unhappy, and she flew slowly, not even attempting to seek out faster wind currents. Hours went by, and she was content to float, to drift. Occasionally the landscape below shimmered and flared in response to tremors within her, aches which she kept unnamed. Certain longings she preferred not to allow expression; but whether she willed it or not, the landscape flared--now more and now less, sometimes with unfocused green fire and sapphire sparkles and sometimes with tiny billowing bloody plumes. The ache was always there within her and the landscape always responded to it.

She wished she could change the image somehow, drift away and leave the ache behind.

The com-signal chimed softly in her consciousness, and Mogurn's voice broke into

her solitude. *Jael, what's wrong? The feedback out here looks poor.*

The landscape turned to brimstone and filled the sky with burning haze. She tried to control it, to cover her anger. *Nothing's wrong, she answered. Everything's fine.*

Are you sure? Mogurn's voice was low, disapproving. She envisioned him on the bridge, squinting anxiously, leering at her still form in the rigger-station. His voice was bodiless in the net, but physically he must be very near. She countered an urge to avoid him by retreating to the extremities of the net.

I'm fine, she said. The image was disintegrating, creating a potentially dangerous condition. She drew more energy into the net, trying to stabilize the image.

I'm depending on you, said Mogurn.

Jael didn't bother to answer. She thought hard a moment, searching her imagination, and then she focused on the angry horizon. The colors bled, and crimson sunset swelled over mountains to the northwest. Mountains...

The route through those mountains was actually the most direct to their destination, Lexis; but it was more dangerous, by all reports, than the skirting route Mogurn had ordered. Still, he had not absolutely forbidden her to fly in the mountains, and after all she was the rigger--she chose the images and the streams of the Flux to ride. Ultimately the choice was hers. The net sparkled as she grew excited--at the thought of danger, at the prospect of quickening the flight. She knew she shouldn't.

Abruptly she transformed herself into a mountain eagle, and she caught a new current and soared northwest, pulse racing, net glittering like diamonds in the Flux.

Sunset ahead. Twilight. Mountains jagged and black against a maroon sky, deepening into evening.

She scanned ahead with the edges of her mind. Would there be dragons? Riggers in the starports boasted of dueling with dragons along the Aeregian mountain routes. It seemed that there was a special quality of the Flux in this corridor which demanded mountain imagery and, sometimes, dragons. Many riggers believed the dragons to be living inhabitants of the Flux; others said they were just especially compelling images. Either way, it sounded dangerous; it sounded glorious.

A sense of quiet anticipation settled around her as she winged toward the mountains. She rather hoped that dragons might appear, to ease her loneliness.

The com-signal chimed again, chilling her pleasure. What now?

Isn't it time you came out? asked a bodiless Mogurn.

Is it? she replied, shivering in a sudden crosswind.

Six hours, Jael.

Six hours? she repeated, stalling.

What's wrong, Jael?

It may not be safe right now.

Not safe? Why not?

She spread her wings to catch a warm updraft. *Because--and she hesitated, then said--there may be dragons.*

His eyes squinted furiously, in her imagination. *Dragons? Dragons? The mountain route?*

Jael beat her wings furiously. *Yes.*

Find a stretch of safe passage. And then you come out and see me, Jael. His voice touched her like ice, and she stopped pumping. His anger made her tremble.

Yes, Mogurn, she answered, and the world grew cold with fear and loneliness. She did not want to face him, but she had no choice. Not if she wanted to receive the pallisp tonight.

Banking left, she flew parallel to the still-distant range, where she thought she could safely leave the net. But she stalled, gliding, watching the ominous peaks to her right, wishing that the fear and the loneliness would somehow subside. Finally she reluctantly set the stabilizers, the starship's sea-anchor in the Flux; and she set the alarms. Her senses melted back into her body as she withdrew from the net, and she opened her eyes, blinking, and looked around the rigger-cell and the bridge. Gloomy. Lonely. Nothing but instruments to greet her. She preferred it that way.

She climbed uneasily from the pilot-station and stretched. Her stomach said hunger, and her limbs said weariness. But Mogurn had said come immediately. Sighing, she left the bridge and went to Mogurn's cabin door; the ship was only a small floater, and the compartments were tightly clustered, so it was a matter of a few steps. She pressed the signal fearfully. The door paled and she stepped inside.

Mogurn was seated facing her, smoking. When she entered, he rose and gestured for her to sit. She slid onto a narrow bench-seat; above and behind her an expensive crystal tapestry covered half of one wall. Mogurn exhaled sharp-scented smoke and frowned, studying the end of his long, tubular smoking pipe. "Jael, why did you disobey me?" he said.

Jael shivered, certain now that he would deny her the pallisp. "I meant no disobedience--" she stammered, which was at least half true. He'd not forbidden her to rig through the mountains; he had only made it clear that he disapproved of that route, that in fact perhaps he was afraid of the mountains, or of the dragons.

Mogurn stepped closer, hovering over her, alternately blocking and exposing the

light panel behind him. Jael squinted nervously. "Did I not say that I preferred the longer route, Jael? Was there some special circumstance you haven't told me of, some need to take the more perilous course?"

Was that fear in his voice? No; he was the master. Jael bit her lip. "I--was having trouble--the other way. But this way--I think the stories are just stories. Dragons! They can't be real."

"What is 'real' to a rigger?" Mogurn asked sharply. "What is in the Flux, or what is in the mind? Either can destroy us."

Jael nodded mutely.

"And, drunken sods though most of those riggers may be, one should never laugh at a rigger legend, should one?"

Jael winced. "No."

"Now, are we still close enough to our original course to turn back?" He exhaled another cloud of smoke, which drifted past her face to be sucked into the ventilators. She opened her mouth to reply in the affirmative, but something stuck in her throat. She shook her head. "We can't avoid the mountains?" he growled, and she shook her head again. Mogurn stared at her, smoking. After a long moment, he turned away.

When he turned back, he held a small, gleaming cylinder with a dull grey sphere attached to one end. "All right, Jael. It is time for your pallisp," he said. His eyes showed no kindness, but his words nevertheless sent a thrill of relief down Jael's back. Unhappiness and loneliness welled up out of her soul in anticipation.

At Mogurn's gesture, she bent forward and pushed her hair up from the back of her neck. Mogurn stood close beside her and lowered the pallisp until the grey ball touched the base of her skull. She felt the touch, cool--and then a warmth seeped into her from the touch, a warmth which encircled the ugly, waiting feelings of alienation, of fear, of anger, and which closed around those feelings like flowing blood, heating and soothing and transforming the emotions, stripping and softening shells of defense and filling her with love, with companionship...

The wave turned cold. Jael swayed with dizziness as a tide of paranoia rushed over her. The pallisp was gone. She sat up, blinking wildly, struggling to hold back tears. As Mogurn spoke, she could hardly see him through blurred eyes. "That's all for tonight, Jael. You must understand what obedience means, even for a rigger." Jael trembled, desperate with pain and frustration. Finally she steadied herself. Mogurn said, nodding, "Now, Jael, help me with my augmentor--and then you may retire."

Though dying to scream, she obeyed. Mogurn reclined and she fitted the synaptic augmentor to his head and adjusted the controls; and when Mogurn was reduced to a silent figure fluttering his hands or pawing himself with a blind-eyed grin, Jael backed away and fled to her cabin. The pallisp--lord how she wanted it, needed it to take the lonely bitterness from her soul and turn it into something warm, and she

take the lonely bitterness from her soul and turn it into something warm, and she would almost kill for it, but only Mogurn knew how to use it and so she needed Mogurn, too. She stalked the tiny deck space of her cabin, brooding, and then she tossed and writhed violently in the sleep-field, unable to rest. Unable to stop thinking.

Unable to stop remembering.

Remembering... Dap, and the night and the dreamlink. Dap had been gentle and yet willful, telling her of the intimacies to be shared by riggers with the help of the dreamlink machine. And she had been young then--she was young now--and she had been seduced by his earnestness, his offer of friendship. Even now she could see his eyes, dark and earnest under silver brows, as he told her, "We'll be looking right into one another, and our souls will link..."

...They drove in a groundcar from the rigger hall to a cottage retreat where the dreamlink machine was located. They glided over the roadway in a gorgeous pink sunset. Jael steeled herself as they stopped, as they walked up to the retreat--a real house, not a multiplex--but Dap touched her arm, smiling. The gesture lent her enough strength to overcome her doubt and her suspicion; and she entered the house with Dap, moving about touching walls and banisters with nervous curiosity. In a small back living room, the dreamlink machine, a specialized type of synaptic augmentor, was set up--a half-silvered hemisphere which projected a golden glow when Dap turned it on. "We'll just let the field coalesce for a few minutes," he said. "Sit down and relax." He gestured to paired-off seats just at the fringes of the golden field.

"What's going to happen? How will I know?" Jael asked nervously, thinking to herself, he's your cousin good old Dap and why are you worried, he knows what he's doing. Dap smiled at her question and leaned forward to touch her hand gently. His eyes twinkled, and she thought he was amused by her naivete, and perhaps being just a bit flirtatious.

"You'll know," he said. "It's gentle." He settled into his seat, looking relaxed but eager, and Jael realized she was worrying about nothing, after all. Nothing.

They talked idly, this and that about riggers and family, and Jael nearly forgot about the intensifying golden field in the room. Dap laughed, his eyes seeking hers, as he talked about his last flight--a three-system hop, fast and exciting, played in the net as skipping-stone islands in a tropic sea. It was a teamwork freighter flight with another rigger, and he hinted at the intimacy which underlay the teamwork. "It was the best part of the trip," he said, his eyes still seeking hers, holding her eyes a little longer than she wished them held. "My crewmate's gone out again," he added. "She left just the other day on a long haul. I miss her already. But I wouldn't give up that experience for anything."

Something in Jael choked silently, but she tried to contain it, to not betray her envy. There was a warmth around her, though, a suffused glow that somehow made it seem less important to hide her feelings. There was a gentle feeling of release in her

thoughts, and suddenly as she looked at Dap, she no longer heard his words alone, but saw visions directly from his mind, across the widening dreamlink. She saw the woman he'd rigged with, the flights of fancy across space, the sly querying Interest he felt now toward her.

Feelings stirred in her heart which she couldn't control, and before she was aware of what was happening, thoughts and images rushed up out of her mind like a fountain, and spilled glittering into space, into the dreamlink: glimpses of her half-brother steeling himself against their uncaring father, unable even to reach to his sister. Jael herself at her father's closed door, suffering and wanting and needing. Rigging an occasional flight alone, too lonely to dare to seek companions. The images rushed out, and so too did her anguish. Before she could stop herself, she'd released it all, glimpses of herself that she'd never meant to let any person see.

In the dizzying energy of the dreamlink, the openness suddenly wrenched, tore--as Dap betrayed his dismay, that someone could release such staggering need. Betrayed his revulsion. Dap, who had promised understanding. Without a word Dap closed himself from the dreamlink, faded in the glow that now was a suffocating shield around a Jael who fumed with self-loathing and hurt. Dap no longer would look at her, and as she cried mutely in pain, he rose and left without her, left her there alone and desperate in the dreamlink field.

She made herself her own last audience: she let her pain dance in the field like threads of fire, tightening around her like a noose, choking her, and no one here to help--there never was, neither Dap nor her father--they forgot their promises and closed the door, one just like the other. She wanted to kill them both, and she was going to kill herself with this hate if she didn't do something to--

--control it--

--bottle it--

--which she did, wrapping it tightly around her finger and corking it back inside. And then when she was safe, while she was still sane, she turned off the dreamlink augmentor. And she returned to the hall where the riggers mobbed and brooded, looking for assignments. And a few days later she found Mogurn--

--who offered her a job. And the pallisp.

She started out of a brooding daze. Sleep was impossible. But insomnia was better than the cruelty of dreams. She thought constantly of the pallisp, which alone could soothe her anxieties and fears. A sophisticated electrostim, the pallisp was illegal except in the hands of a psych-med; it was terrifying addictive, just as Mogurn's synaptic augmentor was addictive. But the pallisp was Jael's only release. Except for the net.

She could go to the net now, she realized. There she could let her feelings go--shape them and play them out in images. It was perilous to let dark feelings loose in the

them and play them out in images. It was perilous to let dark feelings loose in the net, but was it any better to keep them corked until they exploded? Mogurn would be furious if she went to the net now, while he was under his bliss-wire. But if she didn't do something, she would go crazy.

Leaving her cabin, she crept to the bridge. She climbed into the rigger-cell. The neural contacts touched her neck and head.

Her senses, electrified, sprang into the net. Into the Flux. The ship floated as a balloon-borne gondola in a nighttime sky, riding downrange winds. Jael let the breeze soothe her, and then she changed altitude, seeking higher crosswinds to take her to the mountains. The gondola swayed as she found the airstream she wanted. She set her sights upon the approaching range. A full, creamy moon sank slowly toward jagged black peaks, which looked like sullen teeth against the horizon. Backlighting by the moon, a blunt-nosed mass of clouds was moving out of the mountains toward her. Spooky. She liked it: darkness and gloom and eerily lighted clouds which looked like moving glaciers, or like bold angry pincers reaching out to shred the balloon...

The bag abruptly disintegrated. She caught at the air with her hands. For a moment she tumbled earthward, flailing, and then she controlled her panic and remade the image. The ghostly net shimmered and became a varnished glider, whispering downward through the air with her perched astraddle the fuselage. She leveled out, thinking: Take care! A rigger had to be careful of her images; dangerous thoughts could become real and could smash the ship into splinters, to drift forever in the currents of this strange reality, the Flux.

She let the wind soothe her face, let her feelings swirl ahead of her in the sky, in the emptiness between her and the clouds. They could hurt no one there. Time passed and she drew closer to the range.

The dragons stormed out of the clouds in random formation, like gulls out of a rain squall.

Jael stared into the moonlit night in astonishment. Dragons! Dreadful winged shapes, still distant, wheeled before the clouds. Sparks of red flame flickered. She could scarcely believe it; dragons weren't real--they were something from primal dreams, from legend, from racial fears and magical desires. But they were here in the sky right now, and she hadn't summoned them from her imagination--at least, she didn't think she had. Could they be real? Creatures which lived here in the Flux? Coolly nervous, she controlled the glider tightly.

The dragons grew in the moonlight. They soared and circled far off her wingtips. Three dragons broke from the others and spiraled in closer. She caught sharp glimpses of them as they swooped past her. One flew so close that its scales looked like polished pewter in the moonlight, throwing light back in subtly altered form, grey but not grey, as though banked fires lay beneath the surface of the scales. The dragon's head was rough carved and tipped with flaring, glowing nostrils, and its wings were serrated and broad, not narrow as Jael had pictured dragons' wings to be. Its eyes glinted. Another swept across her path, and then for a moment she lost

...her eyes gleamed, and she stepped across her path, and then for a moment she lost sight, until she saw the three orbiting at a distance, as though she and her glider were hovering still in the air.

She held her course. What did one do when met by dragons? The old riggers talked in the bars of dueling--but what did that mean? These dragons looked capable of ruthless battle. Jael knew nothing of dueling and did not want to know. She wished she had come another way.

Are you afraid? she heard.

She looked around, frightened, thinking that Mogurn had awakened and was taunting her in the net as punishment. But the voice was not Mogurn's voice.

You are afraid, said the voice. Shall we kill you now, as a kindness?

With a start she realized that a dragon was speaking. She peered into the night and spotted a dragon alongside her whose eyes gleamed, betraying him in the night. The dragon edged closer. *What do you want?* she said hotly, fearfully.

The dragon's eyes flickered as it passed. The other two dragons retreated to join the rest, and the one remaining banked close by her, its eyes glowing brightly green. Turbulence buffeted Jael, and she fought to control the glider. *What are you doing?* she cried. *What do you want?*

Does that mean "No"? inquired the dragon, exhaling a cloud of sparks. It circled her. *You prefer to die in battle?*

What do you mean? Jael asked indignantly. *Who are you, anyway? What do you want--and how dare you speak to me that way?* She hunched low, pulled the net in around the edges.

Child! said the dragon. *One question at a time! You want to know who I am, and then--*

You haven't answered that yet!

Nor shall I. But you should not have given me so many questions not to answer. Do you think it's easy? Do you think you're the only rigger to come crashing through here looking for a fight?

Then it's true! You dragons are real!

The dragon sighed or snarled. *I never meant to tell you that! Duel, rigger!* It flipped in mid-air and bore down upon her, sparkling in the moonlight. It grew larger, larger...

Jael screamed. The glider shuddered. The dragon thundered and raked her with fire as it passed. *What are you doing?* she shrieked. Her skin sizzled, and flames crackled along the wings of her glider. Quickly she changed the image to a fireproof alloy glider. A flurry of snow cooled her skin and quenched the flood of energy in

the net.

The dragon approached again, flapping its wings slowly. It eyed her suspiciously. *Your reactions were slow*, it said and moved off.

Jael looked after the dragon in astonishment. Suddenly it turned and streaked toward her in another attack.

Jael froze. She tried to make herself small. The dragon grew with terrifying speed. Stop it! she screamed.

Peeling off in surprise, the dragon circled warily. In the moonlit clouds, the other dragons looked like small dots, wheeling and cavorting. *All right*, said the dragon testily. *If you didn't want to duel, why did you come here?*

Jael was dizzy with confusion, fear, and anxiety. *I didn't expect you to try and kill me!*

What did you expect?

I don't know. The dragon sighed impatiently and leveled off. He spoke in what seemed a mockingly measured and conciliatory tone. *Well, all right, then. Do you want to talk instead? I can see you're distressed, irritable--and who can blame you? I feel the same way myself sometimes. You want to just fly along and maybe chat lightheartedly? I promise not to try to kill you.*

Jael eyed him suspiciously. *Can we?*

Sure. The dragon tipped his head and winked. Jael nodded, but she felt uneasy. She decided to change her image; she became a winged pony and beat against the wind. *Very nice*, said the dragon, falling in beside her.

She did not answer. The night was changing, the clouds closing in. A moonbeam broke through the clouds to show mist swirling about a black and jagged mountain slope. *Do you know where we're going?* asked Jael.

Yes, said the dragon craftily--and suddenly it sideslipped and seized her in its talons. Jael's breath went out with a gasp. The dragon lowered its head, jaws gaping, as though intending to rend her with its teeth. Its hot breath washed back over her. Jael squirmed, twisted, and managed to roll forward just enough to kick with her hind legs. Her hooves caught the dragon squarely in the stomach and it wheezed, releasing her. Jael tumbled, beating frantically with her wings but losing altitude, headfirst, through the clouds. She glimpsed horrible sawtoothed slopes rushing to meet her. Frantic, she transformed herself to a hawk, warped her wings sharply, and pulled herself out of the dive. She spiraled back upward, squinting to evade the dragon.

Well done, the dragon said grudgingly, right behind her.

In a panic she looped up fast and came down behind it. She dogged its tail angrily,

and wary. *Liar! she snouted. you promised and you lie! is that a dragon's kind of honor?*

Of course.

What? she screamed. Do you all lie?

What the dragon did next she could hardly believe. One moment it was in front of her, and the next it was above her, and then behind, and it curled its wing around her like a net and scooped her earthward. She trembled and fluttered, a frightened bird, as they plummeted. The dragon lurched to a landing on a black outcropping of rock. It craned its neck to sniff her with smoldering nostrils and peer at her with green eyes. She puffed up her feathers and stared back. *You lied, and now you're going to kill me!* she squeaked.

The dragon seemed puzzled. *Of course I lied. Didn't they tell you before they sent you to duel?*

No one sent me! Jael cried. *I just came.* She choked in the dragon's breath. *Would you mind letting me have some air?*

Hissing, the dragon opened its wing. *I think you'd better show yourself as you really are,* the creature warned.

The world was wreathed in fog, but the night air revived Jael somewhat. *All right,* she muttered. Concentrating, she transformed herself back to Jael, a human girl, in the nexus of a ghostly neural-sensory net. Haloing the net was a shimmering ethereal spaceship.

Impressive, acknowledged the dragon. *I just wanted to see you, though, not your spaceship.*

She made the spaceship disappear. She stood lonely and frightened and cold before the dragon. *My name is Jael,* she said.

The dragon reared its head back and shrieked in dismay. Its cry reverberated through the mountains. *I did not ask your name!* it wailed. *Why have you given me your name?* It blew a great gout of fire into the night and screeched and scratched at the rock in distress.

What's the matter? Jael cried, covering her ears.

Finally the dragon quieted, rumbling and fuming unhappily. *Now I am obligated to give you my own name, and then I shall no longer be able to lie to you--or to duel!*

Jael scowled. *Never mind. I don't want to know your name.*

The dragon settled down glumly. *It is Windrush-Wingtouch-Highwing--Terror-of-the-Last-Peak.*

I don't want to know!

I suppose you may call me Highwing. I am the Sire of the four fastest--

You are a braggart, said Jael coldly. The dragon whuffed into silence. It shifted position awkwardly; the crag was crowded with the two of them. I only want to be on with my flight, Jael said. You aren't helping me much.

You didn't come here to duel with us? the dragon asked, in a wounded tone. Jael wondered if she really had hurt his feelings. Highwing watched her thoughtfully. You are upset about something, he observed. And not just about me. Do you want to talk about it?

No.

I have given you my name. You can trust me.

You? After you lied and tried to kill me?

That was when we were dueling. Before you knew my name. It was expected.

Not by me.

Uncomfortable silence followed. Highwing cleared his throat steamily. Some of the clouds broke and stars appeared over the mountains. Jael stared at them longingly.

Another voice broke the silence. *What's going on?*

Highwing peered around in confusion.

I'm flying, Mogurn, answered Jael.

Come out of the net at once, ordered Mogurn's bodiless, furious voice.

I can't. There are dragons. Jael glanced at Highwing. Please don't argue, she thought. It's both of our lives.

I'm disappointed in you. You get yourself out of trouble, and then you come and see me. Mogurn broke the link.

Highwing's dragon eyes glowed over his snout. *I see, he said. You must answer to someone on your spaceship. But you don't like it. Am I right? His gaze bore into Jael. Little Jael, he said, perhaps you had better come with me for a while. Perhaps I can help.*

She glared at him, startled by the suggestion. *Why? Never!*

I am your servant now, Jael, because we have exchanged our names, and you really must come with me. It is our duty to help each other if we can. The dragon sounded utterly earnest.

Why should I trust you? she shouted, stamping.

I am all you have at the moment, answered the dragon mildly.

Irrationally, Jael felt her anger subsiding. Some part of her wanted to go with this dragon--even though he'd tried to kill her. She squinted at him--at his huge unblinking eyes, at his great knobbed and finely scaled head. Certainly he had nothing to fear, and no need of tricking her. *I suppose,* she said cautiously, *you're going to promise not to hurt me. And I should believe that.*

No one can promise not to hurt, little one, said Highwing.

Jael was startled. The answer seemed honest. And at the moment, what choice did she have? *Not that I believe you,* she said, *but what did you have in mind?*

Climb onto my back. The dragon crouched low, and after a long hesitation Jael climbed up and perched astraddle his back, just in front of his wings. She held onto his neck. *Hold tight,* he said, and unlimbered his wings and sprang into the night air.

Jael clung, dizzy with confused emotions, with relief and fear. The wind whispered at her, and the movements of the dragon's powerful musculature soothed her. Instinctively she stroked his silken-hard scales. *I like to be scratched behind the ears,* the dragon remarked as he flew.

Abruptly she stopped. *Too bad,* she said coldly. Highwing chuckled and banked so that she could see the landscape below. They were flying very low. Mountain landscape rushed by, jutting rock and dark ravines. He banked the other way, descending. She clung breathlessly. A valley spread open in the night. *Where are we going?* she shouted. The dragon belched a flame in answer.

They slowed and passed through a veil of mist. She felt a curious shifting, or twisting, of her time sense. Stars seemed to sparkle inside the veil, and she glimpsed dark stone walls sliding by. The veil shimmered and vanished, and in clear night air they glided into a fairyland valley. Highwing followed a trail of glittering dust strewn in mid-air, and below them, soft lights swung in the boughs of trees. Gossamer strands crisscrossed overhead, forming a continuing arch under which the dragon flew, barely fluttering his wings. *How do you like it?* he asked proudly.

Jael stared about in puzzled fascination. To the left, a waterfall spilled into a starlit pool, where several odd-looking creatures watered. *It's pretty,* she said, *but what are we doing here?*

Highwing craned his neck to look back at her. *Little one,* he said. *I wish I could remember your name. What was it?*

Jael, she said stiffly. Then she saw the twinkle in his eye. She flushed at the teasing, feeling--what?--anger? Perhaps--but despite herself she felt a trickle of warmth.

Little Jael, the dragon said.

Quit calling me "little"! Now that did make her mad.

Dear me, said the dragon. Don't you know? I call you that as a measure of our friendship, little Jael.

We have no friendship.

You say that now, large Jael. But we have come for you to see otherwise.

Jael hiked herself up to look the dragon squarely in the eye. *Hah!* she said. And then her gaze locked with the dragon's, and she seemed to fall into the depths of those glowing eyes, down a twisting spiraling pathway to the edge of another consciousness: a mind watching hers, almost as in the dreamlink field. But the consciousness she touched here seemed far deeper than any she'd encountered before, and she sensed that it was kinder, and that it observed her with interest but without malice or displeasure at what it saw. Catching reflected images of herself, she realized suddenly that the other saw beneath her surface, deep within her thoughts. She shivered, and her shiver resonated down the pathway and reflected back in a sympathetic chord. Astonished, she pulled free of the link, of the dragon's gaze, and she sat back blinking.

The dragon counted itself her friend and companion. He truly did.

But that was impossible.

What was she to do, then? She closed her eyes and thought. She stretched her senses back through the rigger-net; she felt the ship, the flux-pile energizing the net, holding her here in the reality of the Flux. Should she pull clear now, face Mogurn and explain her folly, suffer his wrath in hopes of forgiveness, in hopes of the pallisp, the dear pallisp? And then return, to modify the image if she could? But...Mogurn was very angry. He would never give her the pallisp now.

She could stay. Highwing had said he would bring her through, that he would help her.

She opened her eyes and said, *Well?* The dragon's nostrils smoked inquiringly. *This doesn't mean anything--but shouldn't we be moving on?*

The dragon turned to face forward again. *As you say, diminutive one.* Jael glowered, but before she could speak, Highwing added, *Look!*

The scenery ahead was different, starker and yet more magical--faceted angular rock faces, gleaming faintly, towering high, and here and there among the faces dim alcoves and caves. Jael felt a strange premonition. In those caves lurked dragon magic. She clung to Highwing in wondering apprehension. As the dragon wheeled slowly, picking his way through a maze of vaguely gleaming passageways, Jael again felt that curious twisting of time, as though each turn moved her backward or forward through years, or stretched seconds to infinity. Soon she felt quite disoriented.

Presently the dragon came to a landing before the entrance to a small cave. *Well*, he said.

Well, what? Jael rose up and peered in. The cave interior was gloomy, lighted by a single moonbeam piercing the ceiling. An enormous spiderweb spanned the back of the cave, shimmering in the moonbeam. The web seemed almost alive. There was a sparkling of light across its strands, and then a vertical rippling of cold fire. Jael watched, puzzled. The web danced with ghostly quicksilver, and suddenly stilled, and Jael found herself looking through a living window.

At Mogurn.

It was Mogurn at the spaceport, not on the ship. The background slowly fell into focus: the rigger dispatcher room in port. This was Mogurn the businessman; Mogurn the merchant, the thief. Mogurn the trader in illegal and immoral goods. He was talking with someone--a spaceport crew steward. Hanging onto Highwing's neck, Jael strained forward to pick up words from the window, but she could hear nothing. Both men smiled meanly at something Mogurn said, and the steward turned and pointed. A female rigger stood in profile, beyond them.

Jael trembled, recognizing herself half a year ago. She looked meek, frightened, lonely. Mogurn leaned toward the steward, grinning, and withdrew from his hip pouch--just far enough for the steward to see--the probe of the pallisp. The steward nodded, winking. They touched hands in farewell, and something twinkled between their fingers as they did so. Then Mogurn strode toward the rigger, Jael, standing bewildered in the lobby. And Jael, her stomach knotting, watched the younger Jael turn, startled at a sudden sensation of warmth, of companionship. Watched herself meet Mogurn, watched herself accept work--and watched herself surrender to the pallisp.

Jael's stomach fought back as for the first time she really saw the uncaring anticipation on Mogurn's face as he enslaved her with the pallisp. And for the first time she admitted to the rush of hatred that shook her when she thought of the man. Humiliation and anger rushed up in a torrent.

The dragon stirred as she wrestled with her emotions, trying to corral them, and she heard him say, *Shall I burn him for you, Jael?*

Yes! she cried, blinking tears, not even knowing what she was saying. *Yes! Burn him!*

Highwing lifted his head and breathed fire. His breath was a blowtorch, a leaping flame that engulfed the cave. The ghostly Jael vanished, and the ghostly Mogurn whirled in surprise--and screamed once before he died in the incinerating fury of the dragon's fire. Jael gagged at the dying sound of the scream, at the sight of the man dying in hellfire at her command. But when it was over, and the smoke cleared from the gutted cave which had held the image of the man she hated, she felt a sudden release, a bubbling up of joy and freedom, a rushing of cleansed emotions. And almost immediately, a backwash of weariness.

She scarcely noticed as the dragon carried her away from that place. Her thoughts were blurred, confused. Time strained and slipped by.

Gradually she regained both her strength and her wits as he dragon flew through the stark-walled and misty vale. *You took that from my own mind, didn't you?* she asked softly, stroking his scales to regain the feel.

What? he answered idly. He banked to the right and turned into a bowl-shaped dell and landed abruptly. Jael stared, frowning. The dell was a small, wooded place, in fading twilight. As darkness filled in, hundreds of gnatlike fireflies appeared, darting and corkscrewing through the glade like so many fiery atoms. Hundreds more joined them, and more still, until a cloud of whirling sparks filled a space beneath several of the largest trees. Jael was about to speak, to say *Stop--no more*, when the whirling sparks coalesced and from their midst emerged a man. Dap.

Jael's breath stopped. Dap looked as always, handsome and gentle, but--and this astonished Jael, who'd witnessed this scene before, but had never noticed--he was also frightened, anxious, putting forth a brave expression which hardly disguised his terrible insecurity. The sunglow of the dreamlink field came over him (and over an invisible Jael) and as the augmentor worked its magic on him, his discomfort became yet more evident. Images of Jael's memories danced about him like tiny sunbursts: her father opaquing doors as he retired with his women and boys, some not much older than Jael; her brother (before the groundcar accident that took his life, as he ran from his insane mother) wincing with the pain he never allowed out, though it tore him apart; her father ignoring, shutting out their pain, teaching them how to make walls but never windows.

All this Dap caught, in the swirl of memories among the fantasies, desperately lonely fantasies, rigger fantasies which Jael let free in the dreamlink. "Is all this true?" he asked, frightened at the enormity of her pain. And Jael remembered her answer well. "Only fantasies," she had lied, even as she tried to sweep them away, to hide them. As Jael watched Dap draw back from the unseen Jael here, she recalled the agony she'd felt, the abandonment. But the expression on Dap's face was fear, shame for his own needs and wants in the face of his helpless inadequacy. As she tried to cover, so did he. As she was frightened, so was he.

As he turned now to flee, Jael heard Highwing's voice, softly: *Shall I?* The dragon drew a deep breath.

No! she cried, startled. *Don't hurt him--don't burn him! I didn't know--I never realized!* Dap had fled out of fear, out of hurt. Perhaps even cowardice--but not hatred.

Highwing sighed, and the image and the cloud of sparks dissipated. *Did you remember it that way?* the dragon asked, rumbling.

No, said Jael. *No, I--* and she fell mute, remembering the abandonment she'd felt, thinking that Dap hated her, and remembering how she'd vowed never to let anyone touch her that way again.

anyone touch her that way again.

Well, then, Jael--look up.

Reluctantly she lifted her gaze. For a moment she couldn't see what Highwing wanted her to look at, and then--in a sheltered aerie high above the glade--she saw a man.

Who is that? she asked, though a suspicion grew in the pit of her stomach.

Don't you know? Without waiting for an answer, the dragon sprang aloft and carried her to a perch near the aerie, where she could look across and see for herself. It was her father. He was a cold-eyed, stiff-limbed man, exactly as she remembered him. He gazed outward, apparently expecting a caller, but the angle of his stance suggested retreat, as though he refused to leave the shelter of the aerie. His eyes stared, his mouth curled with distaste, as when he'd wondered aloud why he'd saddled himself with two former wives, a son, and a daughter.

Kill him, Jael said softly, anger and loathing rising out of her heart. *Burn him.* The dragon did not immediately obey, and for a moment her anger flew at Highwing. *I hate him, I say--burn him!* And then she knew why the dragon hesitated. Not because he disapproved--but because her father was already two years dead, at the hands of a jealous lover. What point to burn him now? She cursed futilely, squinting at this man who was so hopelessly cold, so desperately alone, who had turned two wives against him and taught a son and a daughter how not to feel. *All right, Highwing--never mind. Maybe he suffered enough. I doubt it, but maybe he did. Now let's get out of here.*

The man vanished into the aerie as Highwing turned. He leaped, and they were airborne. *Little one-*

Let's get out of this place, dragon! Jael answered darkly, her mood blighted by anger. The dragon vented smoke from his nostrils in sympathy. That angered her further, and she struck his hardened scales with her fists. *Take me out of this accursed valley and let me finish my journey in peace.*

The dragon circled higher. He was silent for a time before speaking. *As you will, Jael. But when I take you out of these mountains, we will be near the place where I must leave you--and you will be near your destination. There I shall have to say good-bye to you.*

Too many images burned brightly in Jael's mind for her to respond to the dragon's sadness. As if she were concerned anyway. It was the damned dragon who had brought her here, pushed her nose in those memories, made them hurt--although, true, he had burned Mogurn to a crisp for her, in image if not reality.

Jael clung silently to the dragon as he beat his wings to gain altitude, as the lights of the valley fell away behind them. Images flashed brightly through her mind: her brother desperately gathering his dignity, unable to share his hurt even with his sister; Dap and the other riggers struggling with their own loneliness and fear; a

rigger named Mariel who once treated her kindly; Mogurn in oblivion with the synaptic augmentor. She shook as feelings replayed in her mind faster than she could react to them, as memories of anger and pain and loneliness and frustration and hatred spawned a cyclone in her soul. Memories of a father who had loved no one, least of all himself. She scarcely saw the mountain peaks passing, dark and grim in the night, or clouds which muffled them and opened again, or the stars which gleamed like diamonds and then stretched peculiarly into lines...in response to the sensation of speed...in response to her fatigue in the rigger net.

In the faint roar of wind, she finally raised herself on Highwing's neck, understanding that she was exhausted, that she had been flying in the net for too many hours. *Where are we?* she asked, her voice straining.

On the way to where you wanted to go, said the dragon.

If I went away--to sleep--could you stay with my ship until return? The net sparkled, off color. She didn't even know why she'd asked that, but she felt a jab of pain, of loneliness. She didn't quite want to leave him.

I will be here, answered the dragon.

Sighing, Jael gathered her senses, materialized an image of the ship which was bound to her through the net, just a ghostly nose of the ship extending out of nothingness into the Flux, and she set the stabilizers astraddle Highwing. *I'll see you in a while, then, she offered.*

A plume of smoke. *Yes.*

Jael withdrew. Her senses darkened--and rekindled back in her own body. She climbed out of the rigger-cell and stood, weary, in the gloom of the bridge. She stretched once. Then she stole into the galley and ate ravenously, expecting an angry Mogurn to burst in at any moment. When she finished, and Mogurn had not appeared, she crept to his door and signaled. No answer. She paled the door and peered in. Mogurn was under the synaptic augmentor, his eyes rolled up into his head, a grimace stretching his mouth. His chest rose and fell slowly; otherwise he lay still. He hadn't been able to wait for Jael to help him.

Jael frowned, thinking reflexively of the pallisp, and then realizing that she didn't really need it just now. She could live without it while she slept. Turning, she went to her own cabin and fell almost instantly into deep sleep.

She blinked; her dreams fled. Mogurn's voice startled her a second time, growling, "Are you being paid to sleep?" The anger in his voice was sharp, too sharp. She turned to look at him, standing just inside her door, and she pictured him cremated by dragon fire. "Make yourself ready and come see me in the galley," he ordered. Then he vanished.

Jael roused herself worriedly. Mogurn sounded unwell, perhaps unstable. Could that be a result of a synaptic overdose? She'd have to be careful--best to get back

into the net quickly. And--strangely!--she was terribly anxious about Highwing. A queer ache settled in her chest when she thought of the dragon; it reminded her of the longing she felt for the pallisp. Or used to feel. At the moment, she didn't want the pallisp; she wanted to be with Highwing.

Head spinning, she went to the galley. Mogurn was eating, and under his baleful eye she dialed something for herself. As she began to eat, he spoke sharply. "Twice you've disobeyed. And you entered the net without permission, and put us in trouble with dragons. Are we clear of dragons now?" His voice sounded strained.

Jael swallowed. Highwing, burn him! she thought, wishing that the dragon could be here to obey. She chose her words cautiously. "We could still have trouble." Mogurn's eyes flashed. "But we are nearing the final current to Lexis. I should return to the net at once."

The shipowner squinted, his facial muscles tense. "You don't like me much, do you?" he said tightly. "You never did. But you like your pallisp well enough, don't you? And there is no man who can wield the pallisp for you as I do."

Jael held her gaze rigid, meeting his. I do not need a pallisp, she thought...not any longer. Nevertheless, she trembled under Mogurn's gaze. "There will be no more mistakes, Jael. No disobedience. No pallisp--until you have removed this ship from danger." Mogurn smiled queerly, triumphantly, and crossed his arms.

What a pathetic man, Jael thought--however cruel. What weapon did he hold over her now? She still feared him physically, yes, but--"I do not need your pallisp," she said aloud. Her throat constricted. "And now I must--"

"You *stay* until I command you to *leave!*" shouted Mogurn furiously.

An alarm on the bridge quailed, signaling changes in the Flux. Mogurn started, jerked his head around. "Go!" he said bitterly.

Jael hurried. If Highwing had left her...

When her senses sparked outward into the net, she found herself astride the dragon, flying in clear winds over low mountains. She trembled with relief. Two suns, pink and orange, were setting before her. The sky overhead was a sea of liquid crystal, and she knew at once that she was bound upward for that sea. *Greetings, small one,* sighed the dragon, snorting fire.

Jael hugged his neck, wanting to cry. *Highwing,* she said softly, *did you call me?*

The dragon pumped his wings slowly. *I wanted you to return,* he said. *I don't know if I called you or not.*

I knew it was time to come. Are we--are we almost at the end?

Of my range, yes, Jael. Dragons do not go beyond these foothills. I am zigzagging to go more slowly, but we are almost at the end. Do you wish me to fly straight?

No--please no. Oh, Highwing, can't you come further with me? Or can't we go back? Even as she spoke, Jael knew that it was impossible. She had a ship to bring in, and even Mogurn was her responsibility. The currents of the Flux were inexorable; dragons could fly against them, perhaps, but Jael and her ship could not.

Sometimes friends must part, said the dragon softly.

And I made you leave, said Jael, half to herself, *when all along you were trying to help me. Just as you promised.* She was ashamed; tears wet her cheeks. *What will I do, Highwing? What will I do now?*

You will find others, said the dragon, *and I will still be here, thinking of you.*

Jael trembled and wept, and after a long time her tears dried. How could she dispel the terrible loneliness she felt already closing in upon her? The pallisp came to mind, and she turned it away. The price for that was too high, the comfort too short. No, Highwing's advice was best. However difficult, it was better than settling for the likes of Mogurn and the pallisp. Better than shelled-in emptiness.

Things will be different. Things will be better, she said, as though to the wind.

Highwing heard her and answered. *It will be different for me, too, little Jael. Never again will I duel a rigger without thinking of you. You, who have my name--and I yours.*

They flew in silence for a few moments. The lowest of the low mountains came into sight. *Highwing,* Jael said, *If I fly this way again, will I see you?*

The dragon breathed fire. *I shall be looking for you, little Jael, and so will other dragons. Cry, "Friend of Highwing!" and I will hear you, though all the mountains lie between us.*

Jael trembled with emotion. *Then let us fly high, now, and part in the sun,* she said, urging him toward the sky.

The dragon complied at once, soaring high toward the inverted lake of sunset crystal above their heads. Jael leaned with him into the wind, feeling it sting her cheeks and toss her hair, feeling the glowing radiance of the celestial ocean overhead filling her eyes and her soul. The two suns were setting now, but they threw their radiance in fuller color than ever into the sky. Channels opened in the clouds, and light poured through in great rays, washing over the dragon and Jael, and they flew up one of the beams, into the crystal sea, where colors shifted brightly and the currents of the Flux moved in streams and gossamer strands. And here, she knew, Highwing would leave her, for this was not a dragon's realm.

Highwing shivered, and she thought she heard echoes of weeping, and he blew a great cloud of smoke and sparks and a single brilliant, billowing flame. Jael caressed his neck one last time, and then extended her hands into space and turned

them into great webs touching the streamers of light. *Farewell, Highwing*, she cried softly.

Farewell, Jael, said the dragon, and he wheeled and suddenly Jael was no longer astride him but in flight on her own, rigger once more. Highwing banked and circled around her, his eyes flashing, and he issued a long, thin stream of smoke in final farewell, and then he banked sharply and plummeted.

Jael looked after him, holding her tears, as he dwindled toward his own world. *Friend of Highwing!* she cried after him, and her voice reverberated gently down the sunbeams and perhaps she was only imagining but she thought she heard his laugh echoing in the distance below. And then she set her sights ahead and knew that the tears would flow and dry, for a while, and she looked in the shifting sky for the currents that would carry her to her destination star system, to the end of this voyage, to normal space. And she thought of how she would tell Mogurn that she was leaving his employ, and his pallisp, and she laughed and cried and turned her thoughts back to the sky.

Until I return, Highwing, she thought, and she saw the streamer she wanted and caught it in her webbed hand, and with her the ship rose high and fast into the current.

| [Top](#) | [Home](#) | [Guide to Books](#) | [Meet the Author](#) | [The Writing Life](#) | [Writing Advice](#) | [Blog](#) |
| [Downloads](#) | [New & Forthcoming](#) | [Short Stories](#) | [Must Read](#) | [Bookstore](#) | [TV Show](#) | [Links](#)

13783