

# INTERSTELLAR PIGEON

by Donald Westlake

*The natives didn't name their planet Casino for nothing - the crew members of Galactic Spaceship Hopeful were losing their shirts.*

FROM THE BEGINNING of Time, Man has been on the move, ever outward. First he spread over his own planet, then across the Solar System, then outward to the Galaxies, all of them dotted, speckled, measled with the colonies of Man.

Then, one day in the year eleven thousand four hundred and six (11,406), an incredible discovery was made in the Master Imperial Computer back on Earth. Nearly 500 years before, a clerical error had erased from the computer's memory more than 1000 colonies, all in Sector F.U.B.A.R.3. For half a millennium, those colonies, young and struggling when last heard from, had had no contact with the rest of Humanity. The Galactic Patrol Interstellar Ship Hopeful, Captain Gregory Standforth commanding, was at once dispatched to re-establish contact with the Thousand Lost Colonies and return them to the bosom of Mankind.

Why me?

Watching Captain Gregory Standforth sit at his desk and -- stuff yet another bird -- this one a blue-beaked yellow-backed Latter Sneezzer from Degeb IV -- *Why me?* wondered Ensign Kybee Benson, not for the first time. What flaw is there in me that I don't suspect? *Why did they choose ME?*

There was no question why the Galactic Council had chosen Captain Standforth to lead this one-way trip into obscurity. Just look at him now: a tall, skinny, mild-eyed fellow with his nose and fingers jammed up that dead bird's ass, tamping the excelsior in real tight. "Got to get it in real tight," the captain said, "or the wings'll sag." *Why me?* thought Ensign Benson. *I'm no misfit.*

Captain Standforth was, and would be the first to admit it. Were it not for the seven generations of glorious Standforth's preceding him in the Galactic Patrol, he never would have joined up, nor would they have taken him. Taxidermy was the only thing he really cared about, which was why strange stuffed birds from all over the known Universe pervaded the Hopeful like an eighth plague. Everywhere you looked, plastic eyes looked back, surrounded by feathers.

"Captain," Ensign Benson said, "we really should talk about Casino."

"In a moment."

Ensign Benson, a social engineer, an expert in comparative societies, the man whose job it was to *define* each of the lost colonies once it was found, to study it and describe what it had become in its 500 years of solitude, brimmed to overflowing with facts about Casino, the first colony they were to visit. The name itself, Casino, had been a brave, irony; the colonists had been a group of compulsive gamblers, who had joined to flee the temptations of society. What had they become in the past 500 years? "Captain--"

"This is the most delicate moment, Ensign Benson." The captain inserted a glittering green eye; balefully,

one-eyed, the Latter Sneezzer glared at Ensign Benson.

*Why me?*

"There's a spaceship coming!"

"Six to five it crashes."

Astrogator Pam Stokes, beautiful, brainy and blind to passion, entered the captain's office to find the captain stuffing yet another bird and Ensign Benson 'hopping tip and down on a nearby chair, rather birdlike himself. "Captain," Pam said, "we're about to land, sir."

The captain looked up, startled, the one-eyed bird impaled on his right hand. "Land! Why?"

"Because we're here, sir."

"Here?" The captain looked at the bird, which looked back.

"Casino, Captain," Ensign Benson said. "I've been trying to tell you."

Pam nodded. "That's right, sir. Fourth planet of the star Niobe." Whipping out her ever-present slide rule, she said, "Fifteen sixteenths Earth's size, one point oh oh seven six Earth's density, fifteen point one six--"

Rising, the captain said, "Yes, yes, yes, Astrogator, thank you very much."

"Just trying to keep you informed, sir. I may say, as astrogator, I had quite some time finding this spot. Celestial drift, you know."

The captain, removing the bird from his fingers and edging toward the door, said, "Is that right?"

Absorbed in her slide rule, Pam said, "Given a mean deviation of point oh seven five--"

"I'll just go supervise the landing," the captain said and left with the bird.

"Alter for nebular attraction," Pam mumbled, working the math, "on a scale of--"

Ensign Benson was beside her now. Stroking her smooth, tanned forearm with the tiny golden hairs all along its rounded length, he said, "I know a couple of mean deviations myself."

"Oh, hello, Kybee," she said, gave him a distracted smile and went away to think about the math.

On a grassy field not far from town, the spaceship landed, light as a feather (automatic pilot). A dozen citizens of Casino approached the great gleaming sausage and watched in admiration as an oval door in its side slid away to permit a ladder slowly to descend. Down that ladder, smiling heroically in the sunlight, resplendent in his Galactic Patrol uniform, came Lieutenant Billy Shelby, Hopeful's handsome, idealistic second in command. Pausing two steps from the bottom, he raised his hand like a Roman centurion and cried, "Hail, Casinomen! We come in peace!"

A citizen approached. "Seven to two," he said, "you don't know what day it is."

Billy's smile went lopsided. He said, "What?"

"Do we have a bet, stranger?"

Billy shook his head. When things confused him -- as they frequently did -- he just went on doing what he was supposed to do. "I'm here to find out if you're warlike," he explained.

The citizen frowned. "What's 'warlike'?"

"It's OK, Captain," Billy called.

The captain appeared, birdless, looked at the far horizon and fell down the stairs. Billy helped him pick himself up as Ensign Benson also emerged from the ship, accompanying stout Galactic Councilman Morton Luthguster, who came massively down the ladder as though down a grand staircase to his coronation.

"So this is Casino," the captain said, dusting himself off, looking around at a tree-studded landscape that looked much like northern Wisconsin in late September.

The citizen sidled up to him. "Seven to two *you* don't know what day it is."

The captain looked at his watch. "It's ten minutes to six in the morning. Greenwich time, on Earth."

"What *day* it is."

With another look at his watch, the captain said, "August seventh, eleven thousand, four hundred and six."

Of the citizen's patience, not much was left. "Not the date," he said. "the *day*."

"The day?" The captain shook his head. "Where?"

"Here!"

"Back on Earth, it's Tuesday. Unless my watch stopped."

Councilman Luthguster, having reached the second step from the bottom, now spread his arms wide and declaimed, "Welcome, Casinomen! Welcome to the bosom of Mother Earth! I am Councilman Morton Luthguster; I am here among you to represent the Supreme Galactic Council, and I have *full* treaty-making powers."

A citizen standing beside the ladder said, "Guess your weight."

Luthguster looked down askance: "I *beg* your pardon."

The citizen said. "Ten lukes says I can guess your weight within five-kilograms."

"I would prefer if you didn't," Luthguster told him. Looking around himself, realizing there was no one responsible here, that these were all layabouts and scalawags, he said, "Take me to your leader."

It was a normal day in the main plaza of downtown Casino. At benches and tables and grassy patches on the plaza itself -- a large round area rather like a roulette wheel -- pairs and small groups contested together, using various kinds of dice, cards, paddles, marbles, game boards, magnets and lengths of

string. Some needed no equipment at all: "Bet you two lukes *that* cloud passes the hill before *that* cloud." Next to three employment buses, potential fruit pickers, meat packers or assembly-line button pushers played 14-card monte against the employment agents; the winners took their ten Lukes' wages and went elsewhere, while the losers climbed, muttering, aboard the buses, resigned to a six-hour workday for no pay. Through the crowd passed a ragged beggar, limping, rattling something in a tin cup and whining, "Gimme a break, will ya? Gimme a break."

A prosperous-looking citizen counting out a recent handful of winning's turned toward the beggar his self-confident eye: "What's your proposition?"

The beggar rattled his cup. "Dice. High number. Two lukes -against a kick in the shin."

"You're on."

As they bent over the cup, the Earthmen arrived in the plaza, escorted by several of the citizens who had watched them land, one of whom pointed across the plaza at a large white wooden structure that looked rather like an old Mississippi riverboat. "That's the chief tout's mansion there."

"Ah," Luthguster said, nodding his pompous head. "The man I must see. Captain Standforth, you and your men wait here. We don't want to startle the head of government with a show of force."

"Yes, sir."

Luthguster waddled off with several citizens toward the chief tout's mansion. Billy Shelby and Ensign Benson gazed around at the citizenry, many of whom gazed back in a rather predatory fashion. Captain Standforth, head back, mouth open, gaped skyward in an abstracted fashion, till all it once he whipped out his stun gun and fired into the air.

All around the plaza, losers ducked for cover while winners crouched protectively over game boards, card layouts and die tosses. A large, big-bellied bird, with a pink tuft on top of its orange head and a lot of bright scarlet feathers on its behind, fell out of the sky and landed dead at the captain's feet. Admiringly, the captain picked it up by one green claw, while its fleas hurriedly packed their bags, left a note for the milkman and went leaping away. "Wonderful specimen," the captain said, turning his prize this way and that. "Never seen anything like it."

A cautious citizen approached, saying, "What did you *do*?"

"Taxidermy is my passion," the captain explained. "I stuff birds."

Where do you stuff them?"

"In the ship."

The beggar, limping worse than ever, approached the captain, rattling his tin cup. "Gimme a break, sir," he whined. "Gimme a break, will ya?"

The captain, embarrassed, took a coin from his pocket and dropped it into the cup. "Here you are, my good man." The beggar stared into his cup, dumfounded.

Billy Shelby said, "Shall I take the bird back to the ship. Captain?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant, thank you."

Off went Billy with the bird.

Another citizen, pointing after the bird, said, "Even money you can't do that again."

Scratching his wrist, the captain said, "Eh?"

"Even money's the best I can do," the citizen warned him.

The captain looked slowly around the plaza, at last registering the human activity here. "Are they," he said, pointing at one pair of dice players, "are they *gambling*?"

"They're all gambling," Ensign Benson assured him. "Fascinating, fascinating."

"My goodness," the captain said.

"They've turned their weakness into strength," Ensign Benson went on. "Their vice into virtue. Their swords into -- Well, no."

They strolled together over to a group playing cards around a cement table. "Pardon me," the captain said, "but is this a game of chance?"

"That depends," said one of the players.

"I mean a gambling game."

Another player -- the prosperous citizen, in fact -- said, "It's a fine game, my friend, and very easy to learn. Care to

sit in?"

"No, no. I'll just watch."

"Then come sit by me," said the citizen, hospitable as a spider. "Name's Scanney. I'll explain it to you as we go."

In the chief tout's office, the chief tout himself, in appearance a cross between a distinguished politician and a sleazy gambler, sat at a desk playing a board game against himself. It looked something like Monopoly but was much more complex, being spread over several layers of boards, with ramps, elevators and slides. The chief tout held two dice cups, one in each hand, and played one hand against the other. It had been years since anyone -- not even Scanney -- would play against him.

He looked up from his left hand's predicament as his secretary -- that is, the loser in that day's steno pool -- came in to say, "Three to two you don't know what Earth is."

"Original Source of mankind," the chief tout immediately responded. "'They brought us here five hundred years ago, said they'd be right back, haven't been heard from since. Why?"

"They're back," the disconsolate girl said, counting out three hard-won Iukes onto the chief tout's desk. "There's a fat one outside."

"Send him in," the chief tout said, smiling from ear to ear and rubbing his competing hands together.

A moment later, the fat one himself was ushered in, accompanied by two wolfishly grinning citizens. They'd be demanding a finder's fee later on; the chief tout could tell just by looking at them.

Meanwhile, the fat one was in voice: "I am, Your Honor, proud to announce that I am Councilman Morton Luthguster, representative plenipotentiary from the Supreme Galactic Council, and it is my esteemed pleasure to welcome you back to the Confederation of Earth."

"Haven't heard from you people In quite a while," the chief tout said.

. "I am empowered," Luthguster said, puffing himself up, "to negotiate with you on several fronts. Mutual defense, for instance. Trade agreements, technical advisory personnel. Earth can do much for you now that you're back in the Confederation."

"Trade agreements, eh?" Gesturing toward the game board, the chief tout said, "That's what this game's all about, in a way. Familiar with it?"

Luthguster gave the board a suspicious look. "Uh, no," he said. "I don't believe so."

"Sit down here," the chief tout said making room for a chair beside himself. "I'll show you how it works."

"I'm going to take a stroll around town," Ensign Benson said. "You'll be all right here, Captain?"

The captain nodded in a distracted way; most of his attention was on his new friend Scanney's explanation of this fascinating card game. "I'm fine, Ensign Benson; you go ahead."

"Now, if you get two alike," Scanney was saying, "that's good. But three alike is even better."

Vaguely worried, Ensign Benson said, "You won't *play* or anything, will you, Captain?"

"No, no, no, I'm just observing. Now, Mr. Scanney, what are those cards with the nooses?"

In the main corridor of the Hopeful. Billy Shelby passed Astrogator Pam Stokes, still too involved with her slide rule to notice either him or the bird he carried. He said, nevertheless, believing it good manners -- and good for morale -- to greet crew members when spotted. Unanswered, he went on to dump the dead bird in the captain's office, then to make a quick round of the interior, reassuring himself that everything was spaceshipshape. In the main engine room. He found Chief Engineer Hester Hanshaw whamming away at a pipe with a hammer. The sound was awful. "Hester? Something the matter?"

"No," Hester said. "I'm just keeping my arm loose," Fortyish, stocky and blunt-featured, Hester was blunt in manner and personality and rather blunt in brain as well.

"Our very lives," Billy reminded her, "depend upon those engines."

"Is that right?" Hester hammered some more, flailing away.

Billy blinked at every bang. "Hester, is it *serious*?"

Hester put down her hammer and turned to frown at Billy. "You tell me," she said. Picking up a white plastic china coffee mug, she turned a spigot, filled the mug with black liquid and handed it to Billy. "Give that a taste."

Doubtful, Billy said, "Taste?"

"Go on, go on."

So Billy took a tiny sip, and his face wrinkled up like a cheap shirt. "Oogl" he said.

"You call that coffee?" Hester demanded.

"No! Is it supposed to be?"

"Yes, it's supposed to --" Struck with sudden doubt, Hester took back the mug and sniffed it, "No, you're right; that's crankcase oil. Wait a minute, now."

Turning away, Hester began following pipes with a pointing finger. Billy, making bad-mouth faces, headed for the door, but before he got there, Ensign Benson walked in, saying, "Bad news."

"Don't drink the coffee," Billy said.

"What? No, this is worse. The captain got into a game."

Hester looked away from her maze of pipes. "He what?"

"He lost the ship."

"Oh, Captain. my, Captain," Billy said. "Whatever made you do it?"

"I had a hunch," the Captain said. He looked dazed.

A citizen passing with an armchair on his head -- Scanney, the new owner, was moving into the Hopeful -- paused to say, "You should never draw to an inside quork."

The captain sat on his suitcase, far across the large field from his former ship. About him were his possessions, his birds and his crew: Lieutenant Billy Shelby, Ensign Kybee Benson, Astrogator Pam Stokes and Chief Engineer Hester Hanshaw. "Oh my", the Captain said. "What will I tell Councilman Luthguster?"

Luthguster rolled the four dice, turned over a card, moved a tiny pyramid three spaces to the left and groaned with disgust. "I don't believe such dreadful luck!"

"Easy come, easy go." the chief tout told him cheerfully. "That's the motto on our money," Presenting a document made ready by his now-grinning secretary, he said, "Now, Councilman, if you'll just sign here and here and initial over here."

Shaking his head, Luthguster signed. The two hovering citizens smirked at each other. "They'll never understand this," Luthguster said sadly, "back at the council."

"Your luck's bound to change,". The chief tout assured him. "Next inning, we'll play for reciprocal tariff agreements. My move, I believe."

"Damn, Pam," Hester said, her personality not improved by eviction. "Where did you ever *get* a slide rule? Why don't you use a pocket computer, like everybody else?"

"It was my mother's mother's," Pam said, blinking as she looked up from the tool in question. And my

mother's. And my mo---"

"How many generations back?"

"Sixteen."

Hester closed her eyes. "I withdraw the question."

"Rather than quibble among yourselves, like the clotheads you are," said Ensign Benson, who had no idea why his previous commanders had been discontented with his performance of duty, "why don't you turn your little brains to how we get rid of this mess?"

"I don't think you should talk to the gentler sex that way," said Billy, with many inaccuracies.

"Maybe Pam can find the answer in her slide rule," Hester said, glaring at Pam, who was sunk in contemplation of her heirloom.

Ensign Benson, about to speak harshly, paused to frown at Pam. "Hmmm," he said. "Pamela, dear?"

"Yes, Kybee?"

"You come along with me," Ensign Benson said.

A. bunch of the citizens were whooping it up in the plaza. "Did you *ever*," one of them said. "see fish like those Earthmen?"

"It's like walking into a kindergarten," said another, "with loaded dice."

"Scanney's studying how to run that spaceship," said a third. "He's going straight to Earth. He figures he'll own the whole place in two weeks."

"Here come a couple of them." said a fourth as Ensign Benson and Pam came strolling into the plaza.

Grins and nods and a few waves were exchanged between Ensign Benson and the sniggering locals, until he reached the group that had been discussing Scanney, where he said, in an offhand manner. "Nice little games you've got going here."

"Want some action, Earthman?" Clouds, ants and in-out knockup were mentioned.

"Not this smalltime stuff," Ensign Benson said with manifest disparagement. "Aren't there any big-time games around this burg?"

"By big time," a tittering citizen asked, ..what do you mean?

"What have you got?"

"The Dive," several citizens volunteered.

"Sounds right. Lead me to it."

Within The Dive -- a great, cavernous place, in which the gaming tables were brightly, whitely lit, but the far walls and the high ceiling remained in windowless gloom -- a kind of low intense buzzing was the only



sound, as though a million bees were getting caught up on their back orders of honey. Citizens and croupiers and dealers hunched over the tables with no small talk, no conversation except the words necessary to keep the games going. "Ah, yes," Ensign Benson said as the simpering citizens led him and Pam into the joint. "This will do just fine."

A hostess approached, slinky in off-the-shoulder red. "Interested in a little action?"

Just to watch, for now," Ensign Benson told her. "What's the highest-money game here?"

Koppel," she said, pointing, "at that table right there."

"Thanks."

"My pleasure," she said.

At the edge of the clearing, Hester busily, grumpily, steadfastly, clumsily worked at making a lean-to out of leafy branches. The captain sat on his suitcase among his birds. Billy paced back and forth, gazing mournfully from time to time at the distant Hopeful.

It was Billy who broke the silence: "Pam says the odds of anyone's stumbling onto this place and rescuing us are eleven billion, four hundred sixty million to one."

"Don't talk about odds," the captain said.

Hester said, "I could use a little help around here."

Billy looked at her project. "What on Earth is that?"

"The same thing it is on Casino," she said. "A lean-to."

"It leans mostly that way," Billy commented.

"It'll keep the rain off."

Billy looked skyward. "It isn't gonna rain."

"Wanna bet?"

The captain groaned and covered his face with his hands as Councilman Luthguster came blustering in, saying, "What's going on around here?"

"Oh, Councilman," the captain said, leaping to his feet and knocking over several birds. "I can explain."

"You can?" Luthguster turned on the captain an eye as baleful as that on any of his birds. "You can explain why Ensign Benson is gambling?"

The koppel table was now the center of interest as half a dozen players faced Ensign Benson, the new shark in town. Having watched koppel for 20 minutes -- it was a pokerlike game but with more cards in more suits and more complicated rules -- having received a tiny frightened nod from Pam, Ensign Benson had converted his watch and camera and other salable possessions into lukes and had taken a seat at the game. Pam stood behind him, nervously fidgeting with her slide rule and from time to time nervously

clutching at his shoulder, while Ensign Benson went through his first table of unbelieving opponents like a piranha through a cow.

The stakes were higher and the crowd of spectators was growing fast when the other Earth people came hurrying into The Dive. "Ensign Benson!" cried the captain.

"Hello, Captain," Ensign Benson said, with a casual half wave, half salute. "And raise a hundred lukes," he said, pushing forward a small stack of chips.

"You'll ruin us!" the captain cried. "We can't afford your gambling debts!" To the Casinomen at large, he announced, "Don't gamble with this man; he has no money!"

"Wanna bet?" asked a bystander.

Calmly, raking in the lukes, Ensign Benson said, "I'm winning, Captain."

"Ensign Benson," the captain ordered, unheeding, "consider yourself under arrest. Return to the ship at once and confine your. . ." At that point, he ran down, blinking, remembering that he didn't have a ship anymore. None of them had quarters to which they could confine themselves.

Then Billy leaned over to whisper in the captain's ear, "Sir, he seems to be winning."

"Never seen a man learn a game so fast," said a bystander.

The captain said, "What?"

"Why don't we make it interesting gents?" Ensign Benson said, riffing the outsize deck. "Ever hear of something called pot limit?"

On the Hopeful's command deck, Scanney lolled at his ease on his favorite chair, chatting with a pair of his favorite cronies. "So we *can't* dope out the hyperdrive," he said. "When the time's right, they'll teach it to us themselves."

"Boy, Scanney," said a crony. "how ya gonna do that?"

"They'll be around pretty soon, ready to dicker, but I don't talk till tomorrow. A night in the open air; that'll help."

"You're some operator, Scanney."

"Yes, I am. Three to two it rains tonight."

"I wouldn't bet against you, Scanney."

At that point, another Scanney crony ran in to say, "One of the Earthmen's playing koppel at The Dive!"

"What?" Scanney sat upright and put his feet on the floor. "They better not use up their credit before they deal with me."

"But the Earthman's winning!"

"Impossible", said Scanney. But he got to his feet, saying, "Come on, boys, let's take a look at this wonder."

Ensign Benson looked around the table at nothing but empty chairs. In front of himself, and piled on a special side table brought out for the purpose, was an amazing number of lukes. 'Boys?' Ensign Benson said, "You quitting on me?"

"I don't buck *that* streak anymore."

"I may be crazy, but I ain't stupid."

The spectators gawked, eight deep, Pam stood behind Ensign Benson, nervously clutching her slide rule in one hand and his shoulder in the other. The captain, Billy, Hester and Councilman Luthguster stood just to the side, open-mouthed. Ensign Benson looked around. "Who'll take a seat?"

"Ten lukes," a bystander said, "says you don't find anybody to play against you."

"You're on," Ensign Benson said as Scanney and his cronies came pushing through the crowd.

"What's this?" Scanney demanded. "Game over?"

"Not if you'll sit in."

Scanney looked at the assembled crowd, at the lukes piled up around Ensign Benson, at the ensign's calmly welcoming smile. "Er," he said.

"Unless you don't feel *up* to a little game."

"Up to it?" His public reputation, the presence of his cronies, his own bravado all combined to force him into that chair. "Deal, my friend, and kiss your worldly goods goodbye."

Ensign Benson smiled at the bystander. "That's ten lukes you owe me."

"Will you take a check?"

"I'll take anything you've got," Ensign Benson said.

When Billy stepped out of The Dive for a breath of air, he saw Niobe, this planet's sun, just peeping over the horizon. Night had come and gone, and now it was day again. Inside, the epic battle between Scanney and Ensign Benson went on, seesawing this way and that, Ensign Benson always ahead but somehow never able to deliver that final *coup de grace*. From time to time, the participants and observers had paused to consume something that claimed to be coffee and something else that looked like a prune Danish --or possibly a stinging jellyfish -- but the pauses were few and the concentration intense.

And suspense was turning at last into dread. Billy didn't *want* to go back in there, but a sense of solidarity with the crew forced him finally indoors once more, where he circled the outer fringes of the crowd, decided solidarity didn't mean he necessarily had to stand *with* them all the time and found himself a new angle of vision, near Scanney, instead.

A tense moment had been reached; yet another tense moment. Ensign Benson was pushing stack after stack of lukes into the middle of the table; when he was finished, a hoarse Scanney said, "I'm not sure I can cover that."

"You want to concede?" Ensign Benson was also hoarse.

Billy watched Scanney study his cards. Then he watched Scanney's hand reach down to a narrow slot under the tabletop and tap something there as though for reassurance. Tap a --- Tap a ---- *A card!*

"I'll stay," Scanney said, his hand coming up without that card. Billy stared at the man's right ear.

"Then cover the bet," Ensign Benson said.

"Will you take my I.O.U.?"

"I'll do better. You put up the ship."

"The ship?" Scanney was scornful. "Against *that* bet?"

This was the moment Ensign Benson had been waiting for. He seemed to draw strength from Pam's hand on his shoulder. "Against," he said, voice calm, eyes unblinking, "against everything I've got."

Again Scanney's finger tips touched that hidden card. "It's a bet," Scanney said. "Deal the last round."

Ensign Benson dealt the cards.

"Captain" Billy yelled across the table, pointing at the black darkness above. "Shoot that bird!"

With a quick draw Bat Masterson himself would have admired, the captain unlimbered his stun gun and fired three blasts into the cavernous darkness of the ceiling. Spectators scrambled for cover, Scanney and Ensign Benson hunched protectively over their cards and chips and Billy slid forward and back like a master swordsman, although sans *epee*.

Ensign Benson was the first to recover. "What are you bird brains *doing?*"

"Well," said the captain, embarrassed, bolstering his weapon as ancient dust puffs floated down into the light. "Well, uh, Billy, uh. . . ."

"Sorry," Billy said, palming the 14 of snakes. "I thought I saw a bird."

"*Indoors?*"

"It happens," Billy said. "I remember once my aunt Tabitha left the porch door open and --"

"Oh, never mind," Ensign Benson said. "Scanney, I'm calling you."

Billy looked at Scanney, whose finger tips were at that now-empty slot, and the expression on the man's face was one of consternation and bewilderment, gradually becoming horror.

"Scanney?" Ensign Benson tapped his own cards on the table. "Want me to declare first?"

Everyone waited. Wide-eyed, slackjawed, face drained of color, Scanney at last managed to nod.

"Fine." Ensign Benson fanned out his cards. "Read 'em and weep."

But Scanney didn't; instead, he turned to look, with a world of understanding in his eyes, at the radiant, innocent face of Lieutenant Billy Shelby.

They all strolled back to the ship together, Earth people and Casino people in little chatting groups; there was general agreement that the night's big head-to-head koppel game was the stuff of legend. The

captain was delighted at the return of his ship but was even more relieved that Councilman Luthguster was taking the whole affair so well. "Personal contacts on the natives' terms are vital on a mission such as this," the councilman said. "I myself found it relaxed the chief tout if we played children's games."

A bit apart, Ensign Benson walked with Scanney, who had recovered from his losses and was becoming his old confident self. "Obviously," Ensign Benson was saying, "all those lukes I won can't do me much good on the ship."

"I'll be happy to invest them for you," Scanney said.

"Not invest. I cleaned you out, Scanney, so what's happening is staking you to a new start. It'll be a few years before I can get back, and when I do, half of what you have is mine."

"Hmm," said Scanney.

"Oh, you'll be able to siphon off a lot. But you can't hide it all, so we'll both make out."

"It's a deal," Scanney said. As they shook on it, Hester came by, clutching her hammer and looking truculent. She said to Scanney, "I hope you didn't mess up my engines."

"I am a lucky man, madam," he answered, "and a lucky man is one who doesn't mess with engines he doesn't understand."

Hester frowned at Ensign Benson. "What's he mean, 'madam'?"

"It's a local term for engineer," Ensign Benson said.

Meanwhile, at the ship, Luthguster was making a farewell speech to the chief tout and the assembled Casino people: "And I think that when your chief tout promulgates the various treaties and agreements we reached in this most fruitful visit, you will all agree that Earth has been more than fair. More than fair."

Under the speech, Ensign Benson went to Billy to say, "I finally figured out that bird shoot. Thanks."

"Oh, you're welcome. But the great part," Billy said, "was how *lucky* you were, hand after hand."

"That wasn't luck. It was Pam."

"It was?"

"God meant that girl, Billy, to be one of the great pieces of all time, but something went wrong somewhere, and she took the path of mathematics instead. She and her slide rule add up to one genius. It took her twenty minutes to figure out the odds in koppel; from then on, she gave me signals on my shoulder, and I knew the precise odds at every step of play.

"Ultimately, I couldn't lose."

"Unless somebody cheated," Billy said.

"Which is where you came in. Thanks again."

Luthguster at last was scaling the heights of his peroration: "I have been delighted," he announced, "to be the individual who brought you this tremendous news and effected this magnificent reconciliation. And now we must bid you a fond farewell."

"Tell them where you got it," the chief tout said, "and how easy it was."

As the Earth people started up the ladder, Hester's hammer clanged inadvertently off the metal rail.  
"Careful with my ship," Ensign Benson said.

The Earth people entered Ensign Benson's ship. The ladder retracted and the door closed. Soon a great, powerful humming was heard. "Even money it blows up," said a citizen.

"I'll take that," Scanney said.