

"WOMEN! GET'EM!" A molten gaggle of men came boiling up the alleyway. They stopped at the sight of three women and a Jqrp, then sprinted after them en masse. The fourspacefarers bolted into the nearest building and up a flight of stairs,. They broke into the nearest apartment and waited for the men. There was no sound of feet, but eventually they heard a big shoulder hit the outer door. After Janja carefully unlocked the door, the man slammed into it again. He came flying through and lay sprawled on the floor. He looked up and smiled. "Holy Tao's toenails! I'm in Nirvana!" Hellfire brandished her stopper and grated, "Name's Hellfire." Her stopper was set on "fry." "We're pirates," Janja added. "Ever been raped by a Jarp?" Raunchy asked conversationally. SPACEWAYS #1 OF ALIEN BONDAGE #2 CORUNDUM'S WOMAN #3 ESCAPE FROM MACHO #4 SATANA ENSLAVED PLAYBOY PAPERBACKS SPACEWAYS #3: ESCAPE FROM MACHO Copyright (c) 1982 by John Cleve Cover illustration copyright (c) 1982 by PEI Books, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by an electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording means or otherwise without prior written permission of the publisher. Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada by Playboy Paperbacks, New York, New York. Printed in the United States of America. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 81-86031. First edition. The poem Scarlet Hills copyright (c) 1982 by Ann Morris; used by permission of the author. Books are available at quantity discounts for promotional and industrial use. For further information, write to Premium Sales, Playboy Paperbacks, 1633 Broadway, New York, New York 10019. ISBN: 0-867-21066-4 First printing June 1982. For Jorinne A: All planets are not shown. B: Map is not to scale, because of the vast distances between stars. SCARLET HILLS Alas, fair ones, my time has come. I must depart your lovely home-Seek the bounds of this galaxy To find what lies beyond. (chorus) Scarlet hills and amber skies, Gentlebeings with loving eyes; All these I leave to search for a dream That will cure the wand'rer in me. You say it must be glamorous For those who travel out through space. You know not the dark, endless night Nor the solitude we face.. (reprise chorus) I know not of my journey's end Nor the time nor toll it will have me spend. But I must see what I've never seen And know what I've never known. Scarlet hills and amber skies, Gentlebeings with loving eyes; All these I leave to search for a dream That will cure the wand'rer in me. -Ann Morris 1 The qualifications for self-government in society are not innate. They are the reward of habit and long training. -Thomas Jefferson The insurrection began twenty-nine minutes after they set foot on the planet called Mott-chindi. They were off the spacer Satana, lately out of Raunch on Thebanis. They were here on business. Their business was the selling of goods stolen in space, but never mind that. An exotic quintet not one of whom belonged on Mott-chindi, a rough-and-tumble mostly-male planet (partially) colonized only because of its rich copper deposits-and sneeringly called "Macho." All five wore sidearms. They were soon more than thankful for that. They were Hellfire: long, lean, semiattractive (if you liked them long, rangily lean, and mean-looking), cap-tarn of Satana; Raunchy: long, lean, bisexual both by nature and genetic heritage-and orange, truly orange of skin as all Jarps were; Syrians: extremely female with hair dyed the color of golden wheat, definitely attractive to both sexes but tough luck for males; 11 12 Crystal: medium everything except-looks and bosom, which were extraordinary; and Janja. Janja was, short, at once wiry and rounded, unnaturally pale among these of the Galactic and Jarp race. Her hair was so blond as to be almost white, and her eyes were like mist against an azure sky. Definitely female. Economically rather than luxuriously constructed-and dangerous. The others did not know that Janja, like the scarlet-haired hermaphrodite from Jarpi, was definitely not Galactic. That is, despite appearances she was not quite human. Or human-plus, perhaps. (Crystal and Syrians and Hellnre were dark of skin and [natural] hair, of course; everyone was, except Aglayans. Hellfire's hair was the color of brass or rather prass, dyed or celldyed. Janja was from Aglaya, a

nontechnological and preyed-upon planet called a Protected World. It was not.) Their sidearms were called stoppers. Slender tubes with three settings. Number One jiggled the nerves and made the victim shuffle-dance. Number Two jangled the nerves and robbed the victim of voluntary movement and considerable thought. Number Three killed and cleaned up after itself. A stopper was a squeeze-grip tube inside which two slim barrels lay snugly parallel. Thumbing the setting to Three actuated the mechanism called Fry. Nonbio-logical targets became very very hot. Biological ones, fauna of any kind, were roasted, toasted, fried, consumed, reduced to calc: ash. The technological innovation that had been miniaturized to become setting Three on stoppers had been called a disintegrator at the time of its perfecting. Far too dramatic a term, "disintegrator"! Oldtime stuff, Buck Rogers stuff, for those who remembered that silly fiction of an ancient century. A disintegrator ray indeed! So it was just Three, or Fry, not the hideously graphic and melodramatic "disintegrator ray." That's what it was, though. All five off Satana wore belt-holstered stoppers. Hell- 13 fire's was on her right hip, which was both lean and angular. This ruddy late evening on Mott-chindi she wore a flippy little skirt on those hips, over figured lavender hose that were tighter than skin but breathed. It amused her to dress so, sometimes, particularly on a mostly-male world called Macho. It might prove enough distraction to improve a business transaction. The miners of Mott-chindi were paid in TSMCo or CupreCo Mines scrip. That Macho scrip was good just about anywhere along the spaceways. They came swooping through space to Mott-chindi and docked upstairs, and after shuttlevator time and standard delays for ID and clearance and arrangements, they walked onto the nowhere little mostly-male planet. Buildings were dull, dumb, and utilitarian. Even the sun was macho, sullen and ruddy and surly. And a little under a half-hour later the mini-war started. The quintet off Satana was ambling along a quiet street ridiculously called Skyflower Boulevard because they wanted to avoid the crowded, noisy bright-light district. Skyflower Boulevard was a little wider than what most cities on most planets called alleys. Somewhere close by some maniac set off a bomb. Somewhere else a little farther off someone else tried to and blew him/her/itself up, along with a gray-and-black composite "stone" building housing the offices of four offplanet factors for three companies and an offplanet government. A chunk of composite building "stone" (dark yellow) came end-over-ending down to smash into the street less than a meter from Janja, and a sharp-edged shard shot past her at about two gravities to make a mush and an amputation of much of Crystal's right arm and extraordinary bosom. Blood spurted many centimeters, and anyone who thought Crystal could be saved must also believe in the jinn-called-genies and Urth and the Easter Bunny and Justice as a natural law. Just like that. Bloodily, muti- 14 latedly dying on nowhere Macho. One of the very best-looking women along the spaceways. "Oh, Crystal," Hellfire said in horror, seeming all lost in emotion, but then a man came running around a comer carrying a wide-bored pulsar weapon and Hellfire drew and Fried him in a bit less than a second. Like the pirate Corundum, the prass-haired pirate Hell-fire was quick to draw and good at killing, and being horrified and in shock were not enough to get in the way of those skills. Syrians was making sick-kitten noises and shaking all over. Her gaze was fixed on Crystal, who was down and twitching while she drained her life out in long squirts. Wheaten-haired Syrians looked like a nubile male-oriented female in need of succor-except that she had her stopper out and her knees had automatically flexed in a slight crouch. Ready for anything, this liberated Sek who played a strictly femme role on Satana. And who was in charge of DS for Defense Systemry, meaning she was ship's gunner. A coveralled man came running, yelling. A (round) window in a (dark yellow) building opened, and another man gave it to him with a loud nasty percussion rifle, and Raunchy shot that man right out of the window. He fell back inside. Banshees were shrieking tinnily in the hardly thick air of Mott-chindi; alarms. Those crackly noises had to be weaponry of various kinds along with bodies popping like com. The strange ululant noise was unmistakably

lots of people yelling, not in chorus but cacophonous as Kenton trombones. The whole city had erupted in noise and seemed to be going crazy. It occurred to Janja to step over against a building wall and put her slim taut back against it. She took up watch back the way they had come. Her stopper was in her hand. She wished now that she hadn't let Hellfire talk her into wearing this entirely too well fitted tunic of Saipese blue with the sexy cutouts all down the long sleeves. 15 -All five off Satana were wild of eye, restless of eye. Hellfire, thin-lipped mouth working in her bony face, took a step that brought her over the mess that was Crystal, rnessily dying. No one considered that it was anything other than mercy: Hellfire leveled her stopper and squeezed its grip. Most of what had been Crystal was mostly poofed, vaporized, leaving behind motes of fine ash. The trace of odor was just a tug at the nostrils. On Skyflower Boulevard. "I think we'd better head for the ship," Hellfire said. Wild, wary, and very mobile of eye. "Sounded like that's where the first explosion came from," Raunchy said. . Its huge lemurlike eyes swiveled this way and that, dark and observant more than wary. Like Janja, it had joined Satana on Thebanis. More than Janja, it was fascinated with and by Hellfire, mostly as sex partner. Raunchy was Hellfire's first Jarp. Hellfire was Raunchy's first lesbian experience. Raunchy was also the first Jarp Janja had seen that dressed to minimize its breasts, and the leather-imitating plasmer breeches of equhyde showed little penile bulge. Weird, for a two-sexed creature to look sexless! "We'd better head that way anyhow," Hellfire said. "We're in the middle of I don't know what. A real bungle. Let's assume that a war just started and we can't trust anyone at all, and head back for the ship. Who wants the other side of the street?" Several seconds passed silently while eyes rolled. "I will," Janja said, because no one else spoke. They were in peril, and one was dead. No one wanted to separate. Janja didn't either. Janja ran lithely across the street. It was easy for her and beautiful to watch, a short woman from a high-grav planet running in .75G. The street was not all that wide. She reached its other side just as a bright red truck came careering around another corner and someone in it took a shot at her. The truck looked like 16 a gigantic ladybug. The shot looked like a streak of the fires of-hell. The pulsar blast did a nasty thing to the (dull tan) wall near her. A missile from a noisy percussion side-arm struck shards off that same wall a half-meter from her. The flattened slug sang away like an angry wasp at impossible speed. Obviously the people in the truck had seen only her, not her companions across the street. Just as obviously they were soaring on emotion, excitement. Else why on mostly-male Mott-chindi fire on an attractive, even exotic woman? War makes instant enemies and outlaws, she thought, staying amove. The truck came rushing on. TMSMCo, its sign said. Maybe the rivalry between employees of CupreCo and TMS Mining had boiled over into this lunacy of violence—a mini-war fought among a few miners on a sparsely peopled world no one! gave a damn about! Except TMSMCo and CupreCo. Four stopper beams made the onrushing vehicle too hot for continued occupancy. It zigzagged wildly, men yelling. Then it went rushing out of control while three men hurled themselves out of it. One rolled three or five times and then did not move at all. Another made yelpy-whiny noises, clutching bis leg. Enemy or not, broken leg or not and Ready or Not, Hellfire Fried him. She'd have done better to aim at the third man. Janja had noted that Hellfire hardly had the cool competence of Captain Jonuta—who had stolen Janja from "Protected" Aglaya and sold her into slavery on Resh-or Captain Corundum either. Him she had abandoned or fled on Thebanis to take ship with Hellfire all too precipitately, after that almost-all-night interracial bi-sex session with Hellfire and Raunchy. (Janja had wondered with some apprehension if Corundum might try coming after her. She had hardly dreamed that trouble would come in the form of a "war" + riot on nowhere Macho.) 17 The third man had landed almost running and rolled once and was up again. He had not seen the truck's driver. He had also not let go his large double-barrel pistol, the noisy made-on-Front-for-macho-Mottchin-dese percussion variety. It wasted the energy of a minor explosion on the expelling of a small projectile, which left

it just faster than the speed of sound, not light, and could go right through a person. A missile from it knocked more shards off the wall a half-meter from Janja, who had dropped into a squat, and another kicked up slivers from the ugly yellow "stone" sidewalk between Hellfire and Raunchy. Syri-aris lurched and yowled "Owww!" Flecks of sidewalk had hit her silver-striped claret-colored skintites with a lot of momentum. Both projectiles, bullets now misshapen and slightly flattened, made falsetto buzzing noises in ricochet. (And somewhere another explosion erupted.) Janja wondered if they'd have shot the stupid bug if he hadn't come up spewing bullets. No one could be sure whether Janja's or Hellfire's stopper beam Fried him-except that Janja's weapon never had been and was not now set on Three. Hellfire was fast and more experienced. Hellfire also seldom bothered to thumb her stopper down to One or Two. During those eight or nine seconds, the truck crossed the intersection obliquely and entered a corner building the hard way. The noise was awful. Careening metal shrieking loud enough to sear eardrums. The (dirty yellow) building was ruined but did not collapse. It seemed to swallow the ruined truck at a gulp. Dust roiled back out of the holed structure like a cloud of smoke. Someone dived out a window, squealed on impact with the pavement, rolled, scrambled up, and ran as if chased by demons. Then she saw the man lying still in the street and beyond him the offworlders with naked weapons. With- 18 out slowing she executed a tight turn and ran the other way. Key the sirens, wailing and ululating. Key the vocal multitudes; and the angry-ugly crackle and pop of weapons and warm-blooded targets and buildings accidentally hit. Mix in the roar of engines and the foomP of another explosion, blocks and blocks away. Call it insanity. "The Booda-damned swine have caught us in some kind of revolution!" Hellfire yelled. "Must be!" Janja yelled, and "Oh thanks," Raunchy yelled satirically. No one laughed, though Captain Hellfire's teeth flashed while she waved a hand as if directing a military charge. She started running. Janja did, too, down the other side of the street, concentrating to compensate for gravity less than half what she'd grown up in and a bit lower than Satana's as well. Even short-legged as she was, powerfully muscled legs drove her like a foal born just long enough ago to be able to lope, awkwardly. Longish, coltishly lean Raunchy followed its chosen captain. Its penis and breasts jiggled now, while its translation helmet fought to cope with curses and prayers. They were uttered into its receptors in the whistles that were speech and language on Jarpi. Syrians brought up their rear, short legs pumping and everything jiggling. All four crouched in stoppers-ready positions of readiness when another bright red truck came barreling along three centimeters above the street. This one was only rushing, probably fleeing. Not firing. It raced on. Along Skyflower Boulevard two coveralled men came out one doorway and a woman another. All three saw three running offworlders and a Jarp, also running. All three whipped right back inside their respective buildings. Someone in the act of exiting yelled as it was run into. From a second-floor window someone heaved something at Raunchy. It missed and 19 shattered noisily. A shame; there weren't that many flowers on Mott-chindi, in or out of pots. The Jarp did not glance up. They ran. The town-Macho was not big enough to raise a city, and hadn't-was noisier than an amusement park on holiday. The town was called See You, which had begun as someone's clever Cu, the symbol for copper. The Satana quartet reached an intersection where six or seven men were yelling and shooting at each other. Three were coveralled. One wore a sort of uniform, dirty tan. Beams and bullets streaked and keened and did property damage. Pieces of building shattered amid eddying bluish smoke. The sharp odor had to be that of cordite, which Janja had never smelled. Of course she had never seen anyone using firearms that were centuries and centuries out of date, either. Bang! Poom! Vreee! The two groups of combatants weren't about to let three offworld women and a Thing interrupt their private war. They were too busy shooting and yelling and ducking. One paused to stare, started to yell "Women!" and was wounded by a bullet that knocked him back ward and down.

Janja, Raunchy, Syrians, and Hellfire crossed the intersection at the

run. They dashed on along the twilit street called Sky-flower, having crossed Rosebud Lane. Clothing shimmered as the wrinkles of movement leaped this way and that. Syriaris complained about the bobbling of her breasts, calling them "knobbles" rather than the common "warheads." Janja and Hellfire were un-un-derstanding; Janja's were too taut, and Hellfire didn't have enough to bob. People still screamed and yelled, and somewhere a loudspeaker was urgently blaring words. They were unintelligible. Engines roared and old-fashioned gunnery banged and boomed and pop-popped away. Sirens shrieked or wailed, ululating. 20 The four offworlders ran. Pirates, fleeing, and they weren't sure from what or to what dubious haven. Copper-rich Mott-chindi had become far wilder and more dangerous than mere space pirates, even their quick-on-the-trigger captain. "I th-think I'm-m goinng to-o have mi-ighty sore legs ... by the ti-ime we ge-et ... to the shuttle . . . port!" Syrians gasped. "Save your breath-for run-ninng," Hellfire retorted. They reached the intersection with another charmingly named street; this one was Fatass Alley. From the corner building came the sound of a child wailing, but never mind that: a molten gaggle of men was boiling up Fatass toward Skyflower as if they'd been booted by one gigantic foot. "Women!" "Hey, wait, ladieeee!" "Wow, stash!" "Get 'em!" "Hold it, spacefarers!" That last one came from a less excited voice and emanated from behind a gun. The spacefarers did not hold it. They sprinted across the intersection. Some idiot fired. His plasma bolt took a bite out of the corner building a few centimeters behind Syrians, who had become last simply because she was the slowest. With a shocking curse she stopped, swung, and from one knee, two-handed, squeezed her extended stopper. Men screamed and cursed. One Fried. Hellfire had called a pause to look back. "Oh shit," she snapped. "Now you've done it! Here-we'll never outrun them, or their shots, anyhow. Into this building." Speak for yourself, long-legged and slow, Janja thought, but she joined the others in bursting into the doorway. They faced a flight of (faded red) steps and another door, faded blue. Hellfire tried it. It opened. In seconds all four were in someone's warm-smelling living room. Chairs, divan, threadbare rug undeserving of the title carpet. A couple of tables, assemblage stuff. An ordi- 21 nary sodium light and a handsome twist of neon in blue and yellow, too fancy for this apt. Hellfire advanced toward the door across the room while Raunchy locked the one behind them and then the grat came snarling from behind the dark divan and launched itself on Hellfire before she had a chance to swing her stopper its way. She went down fighting a beast the size of a twelve-year-old-boy. Someone's pet and watch-grat in black, yellow, tan, orange-tan, and hot pink, white stockings and tail-tip, big eyes in bloodshot sclera, tufted cocked ears, and a bright red anus. And a wide-open mouth crowded with teeth. Prominent among them were curved fangs the size of little fingers. Over six sems long, they were hardly little in the animal's mouth. Hellfire went down yelling and trying to defend. The grat's chomping, slavering snarls were awful. Nasty beast mustn't have been fed for a week and obviously liked rangy spacefarers best. Janja and Syri circled, jittery but afraid to shoot. It did not occur to either that her stopper set on Two would be effective; both Hellfire and her attacker would be Frozen, but she would recover while they did a better job on the beast. Janja did notice that Raunchy switched off the system of straps and metal that formed a sort of helmet; it translated Jarp whistles into the Galactic tongue, Erts. The Jarp pursed its lips to form its little mouth into a perfect o. Janja, heard nothing but felt gooseflesh. What the vug? The grat released its toothy grip to .howl and swerve away from its intended victim. Cowering, eyes rolling wildly, it ran in lunatic circles. Almost at once it was drooling foamy spittle. Then Hellfire, on one elbow, Fried it. "What the fart happened to that flainin' beastie?" Hellfire gasped, rubbing her arm and looking around. Syri offered a hand in rising, while Janja noted that the captain's shirt, polymer armor disguised as silkeen, 22 was unholed by claws or fangs. That wouldn't prevent bruises, of course. "T'lootl'l Ideet'l'loo," Raunchy replied, and looked instantly, ludicrously guilty. "Turn on your dam' transl-" Hellflre

broke off, staring at the woman who lurched into the room from the door at its rear. She was a slattern, obviously used up and boozed up. She had the look of a bust who had kept hustling several years past the time she should have retired or found other work. Picking through garbage, maybe. Loose adipose-backed flesh bulged against and spilled out of her old pink robe. Hair, dyed to match, hung in sweaty strands like overused string. Pale, veiny fingers clutched a half-liter bottle. Its dark green color concealed its contents, or lack of content. "Tao's foreskin, am I ever glad you cakes dropped in long enough to finally get rid of that Saining damned furbag of a slimeball grat! That was the worst-tempered dam' animal I ever seen or had to duck and feed too slicing off-ten! Holy Tao, I've hated that slipsucker for years! Do you gals know that sisterslicin' beast has bit me about six times over the years and et my own dinner more'n once? Can you believe that grick? Damn, hell, Gehenna, and Tao's balls! You oughtta just see the perfectly good paira skintites that furbag et a hole out of so I always have to pretend I just tore it when I'm out on bizniss! Watch-gtat, he calls it! Keep the place safe, he said! Lookat that di-van, willya? That slipsuckin' furbag shed hair all over it and practiced eatin' prowlers on it to boot! Somebody oughtta give you buncha dolls a medal, by Tao's slicer! Lissen, I wisht I had one, or a millyun scrippoes forya, ya know? Hey, you're pretty pale to dye yer hair such a pale color, too, yaknow? And I'll bet you're one of them Jarps. You don't scare me none. I've seen Jarps on the holo-haven't seen you, have I? I mean all you Jarps tend to look just-" She paused to knock back a swig from her bottle. "They got bigger bulges 23 on the holo, but I guess yer all built different just like us, huh? Hey say, 're you ladies-an' Jarp," she added with an abbreviated bow that endangered her balance, "some kind of Aww-thority sent over here to help cool off the damfool sisterslichin menfolk of this slimeball nowhere furbag of a metrop-olis?" For long seconds they were silent, able only to stare after all that slurry chatter. Then Hellfire shook her orangy-red hair. "Neg. Actually we're trying to get back to the spaceport." "You mean you dolls wasn't sent in here to help all these horny men soar? Shit, some of ourselves need help just keepin' up with their demands, yaknow?" "No, actually we came in on business, and now all we want to do is get away, fast. We're pirates." "Oh shit," the woman said, and drank. She returned in haste to the other room. She slammed the door. From its other side her voice rose: "This is my home, girls, not th' way 'to th' slicin' spaceport! Shit, that's way up in the air anyhow. I mean space." "Damn," Hellfire said, getting up at last. She rubbed her arm and winced. "Ouch." "Glad to be of help," Raunchy belatedly told the door. But since its translation helmet remained switched off, no one understood. "Turn yer furbaggin' helmet back on, Raunchy," Hellfire said, carefully slurring, and Syriaris giggled. Raunchy quickly complied. They looked around. "This place is starting to look like a trap," Syri said, and right on cue a big shoulder hit the outer door to add an exclamation point to her words. Janja looked at the others, raised an eyebrow Hell-fire had persuaded her to darken, and unlocked the door. They didn't have to wait. The same man slammed into it again. This time it flew open to precipitate him into the room, tripping over Janja's outstretched leg on the way. He sprawled, rumpling the rug with his 24 chin. Or nose; no one cared which. From that spot and in that position, he looked around. "Holy Tao's toenails! I'm in Nirvana!" Hellfire made her voice sound like something out of a Reshan tomb. "Name's Hellfire," she told him, brandishing her stopper. "We're pirates," Syrians added. "Ever been raped by a Jarp?" Raunchy asked conversationally. People short on knowledge assumed that the orange hermaphrodites just had to be eternally horny. "Oh shit," the man said. He scrambled around, lurched to his feet, and ran. On his way out the door one of his shins again encountered Janja's calfy leg. He sprawled into the entry hall of the apartment building. Janja slammed and locked the door. The four off Satana looked at each other long enough to share a grin. It was brief. Something whacked the door from the other side, and they heard an explosive report. "Damned old-time percussion guns and their lead projectiles! Get away from that door, ladies." Hellfire

whirled to try the one through which the woman had disappeared. Her voice rose slurrily from the other side: "You cakes V Jarp ever see a thing called a shotgun? Leaves about a millyun little holes in ya. Messy. Git away from that door. As a mattera fack, just git." "Can't!" Hellfire called back. "Listen, we don't want to hurt you or anybody else on Macho. We're attacked. It's a bunch of looters." "Homy looters," Syrians added. "They've just gone wild," Hellfire finished, with a dark glance at Syri. "You know what they want from us." "They seem to be revolting," Raunchy's helmet speaker said helpfully, in Erts. "Amen!" the voice said from the other side of the 25 door, with fervor. "But git away from 'at door. I'm grateful about that flainin' furbag of a grat, but you gals v did break in, after all, and I swear I'll shoot, and you know slicin' well I'm too grat's-ass drunk to miss!". There wasn't time to laugh; two impacts shook the outer door. "Janjy," Hellfire said. "Stand beside the door and open it so you're behind it. As soon as I get those downers, out of here and up the steps. Now! Syri?" They were a fine and practiced team, Janja saw. Both women squatted with one knee on the tired old rug. Both rested one elbow on the other knee and leveled their stoppers at the door. Not without nervousness, Janja unlocked it. She took a deep breath and a long step backward, opening the door against her. She heard only the faintest of sounds; stoppers were all but silent killers. She edged from behind the door in time to see Heilfire and Syrians rushing at the doorway. Janja joined them. The odor was there, and dust motes drifted aimlessly in the little entry-hall/stairwell. She knew that two men had just been reduced to vagrant molecules. They ran noisily up the steps. Raunchy came last, backing. A bullet and a pulsar bolt messed up a couple of steps, and Raunchy backed faster. An explosion splintered the bottom several steps into ruin. Smoke followed the fleeing quartet up to the second floor. "You mongoloid tunnelworm!" a man's voice bellowed. "That damned grenade just took out the steps we need to follow 'em!" Up here was a dark hall with two doors. Heilfire kicked one in, easily. While they explored that apartment's three rooms, Syri wondered aloud what had happened to the grat. "I did it," Raunchy said. "I whistled." "Whistled!" "Hell you did! I didn't hear anything," Syrians said, at the same time as Janja said, "Is that what I felt!" 26 "Probably," Raunchy said. "The grat felt it a lot worse." "Ultrasonic?" Hellfire called, returning from the third room. "Empty. Out looting and shooting, probably." Raunchy was nodding. "Most animals have limited vision, one way or the other-mostly because of the placement of their eyes, not to mention their height. They compensates with senses of smell and hearing beyond ours. Yours. I cut out my translahelm an'd whistled up a lot of decibels. Beyond your hearing level. The grat heard, though, and it hurt." "Damn," Hellfire said, looking out a window. "I didn't know you Jarps could do that!" "You never asked," Raunchy said. The sound of male voices rose from below. Raunchy hurried out to the top of the steps and over behind the railing. The others froze, listening to men beating on a door already weakened by shoulders and the explosion. It tore inward, and Janja knew their pursuers were in the apt they had just left. It was directly beneath them. "I think those sisterslicers aren't political," Hellfire said. "I think things are down to looters already!" "Looters tend to show up fast," Syri said. "Like roaches when the lights go out. I remember one time back on Sekhar-" There rose more deep-throated noises of a door being attacked right under them. Then came the deeper boom of a minor explosion-or a very loud report. That was followed by male yells, not in chorus. Next came the sounds of several running feet as the men vacated the main room of the woman with the pink hair and green bottle. "The old bust let go with her shotgun," Hellfire advised. She was wearing a tight smile with nothing pretty about, it. Hellfire really hadn't enough lips to make half a mouth. "It's a powder-and-spark percussion weapon that shoots lots of tiny pellets in a cone-shape that keeps widening with distance from the muzzle. If 27 she was far enough from the door, she probably hit as many as three of those bastards." "Right through the door?" "Don't underestimate old-time weapons. They killed a lot of people mighty competently over a lot of centuries.

Particle weapons weren't even invented till about the beginning of the twenty-first, and they were b-" She broke off at the loud voice from below. "Get that divan to bridge these mint steps!" "Those men will be mad," Janja sensibly pointed out. "We'd better get out of this place before they decide to blow up the whole building." "Cloud-top's right," Hellfire said. "They must have more'n one grenade." "I hope we don't get that old muth killed," Syri said. "If they poof her, it's her fault. She's the one who fired. You don't think they'd have bothered to rape that, do you?" "I guess not. But they'd sure as Allah's Truth rape me!" Syrians swung to a window. The apt had three, but never mind the front one. They would not be going out that way. The tight little alley, barely a walkway, was too far below. The adjacent building was nice and close, but its nearest windows were too high or too far to the left. They tried the other side. The situation was the same, except that the nearest building was way over there across Fatass Alley. And higher than this one besides. "Blast," Syriaris said and opened the silly triangular window to peer out. She found it necessary to relieve herself of a cliché as she looked down at the street: "So near and yet so far! Blast!" A man came around the building, looked up, saw her. He yelled and winged a shot at her. More shots bellowed, inside the building and below. "We're in trouble," Raunchy said. "That's the last time I get picked up in a bar by a lesbian pirate!" No one laughed. The Jarp was right, and they knew it. Their pursuers had started off joky and horny. Now 28 they were hurting. Short at least two of their number, they were angry and vengeful. They would not leave now until they had their cornered prey-or had destroyed the building with the four in it. Janja, Syrians, and Raunchy looked at Hellfire. "Sorry, girls. Stay away from that window. We'll cover it, and the stairwell. Why, we might hold 'em off for hours." "Until some nice nippers come along to rescue four admitted pirates?" Syrians suggested; policers were "nippers" on Sekhar. "Or until these scum use a grenade or three to poof us and the buildin' too?" Hellfire stared at her in a way that made Janja nervous. She knew how fast Hellfire's temper rose and how volatile it was. She also knew that in Hellfire that translated into violence, fast. "I'll listen to a better suggestion," Hellfire said. "Want to play besieged castle and make what they used to call a sortie, meaning we go running out and try to Fry them all before they get us?" Syri's sag lowered her shoulders appreciably. "I'm sorry. It's just that I don't like being helpless. I'd rather be vaporized in space than blown up on this flea-nest ball of copper-or killed by a little bitty piece of lead right out of history!" "Pos," Hellfire said, nodding. "I know. Not to mention raped." Syrians looked sharply at her. She shuddered. Her eyes were wide and fearful as she snapped a glance around at the others. "Listen! Don't let that happen to me!" Janja refrained from commenting on this further example that Syri's concern was solely for Syri. Janja was interested in the new noise. It was loudening, somewhere below the open window. An engine, approaching. Men were yelling, too, and the sound of their voices had changed. She went to the inverted triangle of a window. "Stay away from there!" Raunchy called. 29 "No, look. We're about to be forgotten." That sounded so good that her companions crowded to the window to look down. A bright yellow truck was whooshing down Fatass Alley. On Mott-chindi, yellow meant policers. Coming to rescue a quartet of pirates? No-racing to cope with a band of looters. Maybe the woman downstairs had called. Maybe these policers were just cruising, looking for trouble to deal with. The truck rocked to a stop just below their aerie. It settled to the pavement, the top of its cargo portion a meter and a half below the window. Policers swarmed out of it, helmeted and face-shielded, clad in yellow polymer armor and all toting stuff bigger than stoppers if no more deadly. They trotted around either side of the truck in businesslike manner and attacked the pursuers of Satana's crew without so much as a "Halt!" Those men resisted. The result was firefight on Sky-flower Boulevard, noisy. Janja and Hellfire looked at each other. "You're right, Cloud-top. We're forgotten. You thinking what I'm thinking?" Janja glanced down and back at Hellfire. "Probably, Cap'n Prass-top, probably." In gravity



that almost halved her weight, Janja pounced easily out the window. She landed just atop the cargo section of the policer truck. Hellfire was in the window, alertly covering her. Flat on her belly so as not to be seen by the battlers a few meters away, Janja peered over into the interior of the truck's hold. There was one way in and out: the rear. Rather more heavily, Hellfire joined her, with Syriaris covering. "Empty," Janja muttered. "Of people, I mean. Benches along both sides, facing each other. Propped by metal legs. There's a box of some kind." "Ammunition, maybe." Syriaris dropped down to join them while Raunchy 30 covered her, and they made room for the Jarp. "Aliens last," Raunchy muttered sourly, and pounced down. Like the others, it doubled its legs completely on impact, to soften the shock and the sound. No one heard, they assumed-but ten meters away on Skyflower Boulevard, a man saw. One of their pursuers. Squatting, he started rising, started pointing, and was shot by a policer before he accomplished either. "Must be why some people call policers good guys," Raunchy said, flopping onto its side, full-length. "So what're we waiting for," Hellfire said quietly. "Off this thing and up the street the way it came. It provides our cover! We can swing left toward the shut-tleport at the next intersection." - Janja only just avoided saying what she thought: That would be stupid. Instead she said, "Wait. We have a truck." "Just the top "of one," Raunchy muttered, lying prone. "With the driver and somebody on the mounted gun still in the cab," Hellfire pointed out. "Locked in from the inside-and you can bet it's stopper-proof." "But . . . heatproof? It's metal, and this surface isn't," Janja said. "You and Raunchy could lie flat and use your stoppers to heat it up. When those two come boiling out, Syri and I freeze them. Who can drive it?" "I can," Hellfire said, narrow-eyed in consideration. "Good! Then once we've liberated the truck, you swing into the cab. We three pop in back to shoot at any pursuit." Syri said, "You want the captain, to pop into a truck's cab too hot for a pair of armored policers? What, and roast?" "They'll be worried by the rising heat and I won't. Besides, the heating effect of stoppers on metal is shortlived." Janja nodded excitedly. "Besides, those policers will vacate fast, thinking something far worse is about to happen. The moment they do, stoppers off the cab." 31 "And on them," Hellfire nodded. "All right." "What if they don't just jump right-out?" Raunchy asked. "Sensible question," Hellfire said, frowning. Janja smiled. "You already provided the answer. We jump off the truck and run up the street and duck left at the next intersection." The others grinned, and Hellfire chuckled. "Good-o, Janjy! But it's Syri in the cab with me to handle the gun. It's probably a sounder, for crowd control. And we'd better do more than just freeze those two, Janjy. So-you and Raunchy do the heating job. I'll let you know the moment they start piling out, and Syri and I'll take care of them." "But-those aren't rebels or looters, Hellfire. They're policers, just doing their job and no menace to us." Hellfire stared at her with mahogany-colored eyes gone cold as lustrous brown stone. "So, we never come back to this nowhere skungeball planet. Just freezing 'em won't be enough to give us tune to get in and get this thing moving." "But you could freeze them and then hit them, knock them out-" "Janjy: you want to talk about who's captain?" Janja saw the mean look, and she saw Syriaris's, too. She didn't like Hellfire's more-than-willingness to kill, and she didn't like that part of the current plan. She also couldn't see a choice, and this was the wrong time to lecture or start a debate over ethics. It was not getting any earlier, as the deepening redness reminded her. SeeYou was starting to turn mauve as the sun set. Janja turned away, glanced at Raunchy. They elbow-crawled to the front edge of the cargo hold's roof and looked down a few sems onto the shining yellow roof of the cab. The big white MPP stood for Mott-chindi Public Protectors. Orange Jarp and pale Aglayan exchanged a glance before leveling the mouths of their stoppers at points fifteen or so sems-for-centimeters apart. 32 "Janja . . . Three," Raunchy reminded. Janja had killed, but for good Aglayan reasons: gaining freedom and taking revenge. Nervously and with misgivings, she reset her weapon to the killer intensity. After another exchanged look, they squeezed. There was

little sound and no radiant heat; the metal absorbed it. The lettering had been added; it smoked and was swiftly ruined. Molecularly bonded yellow paint held. Janja felt the sweat of tension. The paint began to show signs of blistering as the not-quite-invisible beams increased its temperature. And the temperature within the cab. The MPPs could have withstood a great deal more. The point was, they didn't know how much more might be coming. They didn't know what was happening at all, except that cabin temp was rising. As Janja had surmised, nervousness worked faster than heat. It mingled with curiosity and became unbearable a lot sooner than the temperature. Then a door swung out on either side of the cab. Raunchy and Janja didn't need Hellfire's signal. They saw the doors open, saw the yellow MPP helmets. Instantly Janja relaxed her grasp on the stopper's yielding grip. At the same time Hellfire and Syrians started squeezing theirs. Enter Heisenberg. The four plotters had not reckoned on the uncertainty principle or that ancient law of the universe: if something can go wrong, it will. Mott-chindi was a rough planet. SeeYou was a rough mining town. The armor of Mott-chindi Public Protectors not only gave with bullets and dropped them harmlessly, it was impervious to the Three setting of a stopper beam. The two policers looked up, not because they felt or heard anything but in their effort to discover the source of the heat in the cab. Good for them, Janja thought, straggling up into a squat; they get to live! Then she pounced on the . 33 driver, whose large pulsar sidearm-yellow-was coming up. He went down under her assault, feeling more impact than her size and agility indicated. The banging of the back of his helmet on the bottom edge of the open door, then the pavement, dizzied him but left him conscious. She hit his gun-arm with everything she had. It probably broke when its elbow slammed down against the street. That was still not enough. He had the stuff to grab Janja with his other arm, a faceless local behind the one-way plas of his helmet's visor. Then Hellfire pounced down, grunted, wrested Janja aside, and stomped the man's neck. He quit moving. Hellfire snatched up his dropped weapon and threw herself into the truck. "Into the back, Janjy!" she called while she threw-scooted herself across the roomy seat of the roomy cab, fast. Janja obeyed. She ran around and pounced easily into the open rear of the truck. Whirled and waited, crouching. A few seconds later she helped Raunchy in. They couldn't close the doors, and their companions were busy starting the truck. Raunchy lost its balance and fell when the vehicle rose a few sems on its air cushion. Janja held her balance-until the truck lurched forward like an unleashed grat. Then she very nearly went right out the back. Not quite. "Hang on," Raunchy called. "We'll be whipping around that corner, turning right!" They hung on. The truck lurched again, then vectored in air and shot at an angle across the intersection. It raced down Skyflower while its former passengers yelled and tried to decide whether to shoot at then: own vehicle. Just in case they did-and because balance demanded-Janjy and Raunchy stayed down. "What happened to the man on your side?" "Whew! Syri and I were both wrestling with him, and he was strong. I guess the only shot Hellfire had with the pulsar-beamer was at his left leg. His armor didn't hold long, and after that it was easy." While 34 Janja shuddered, the Jarp went on, "Wonder what's in that box?" It was right beside Janja, who was holding onto a bench-leg with one hand. The case was not fastened down. A good-size packing case that was obviously heavy, since it hadn't slid around. She lifted the lid and reached inside. Out came her hand nestling an oversized brown egg. "So what is it?" "Grenade. Maybe smoke, maybe sonic, maybe explosive. Killer explosive, I mean-it'll blow up in any case, one way or another. Don't squeeze it. You arm those things by squeezing. That's just a shell, see. The charge goes off six seconds later." Janja nodded. Seconds and hours, at least, were standard throughout the spaceways. It was only days and nights and seasons that varied from planet to planet. Hence the phrases "days-s" and "years-s" or "-ess," for standard. For some reason a standard day was twenty-four hours long. "Charming," Janja said, studying the dangerous egg while making sure she wasn't exerting any pressure. "So you squeeze it and throw it pretty fast.

Maybe you count a little, depending on how far you want to throw it, or try to." "And you don't know what this one does, hmm?" Raunchy shrugged. It wriggled closer. "Let's find out." With the truck barreling straight down Skyflower, the Jarp rose onto its knees, hunkering down. It drew a grenade out of the box with one orange, double-thumbed hand. Janja saw it squeeze. Behind them, two men and a woman were yelling and shaking their fists—which grasped pipe and wrenches—after the policer truck. Callously Raunchy slammed the brown egg at them. Their yells changed and they ran when the grenade hit the street and rolled their way. Nothing else happened. The truck fled on toward the shuttleport. 35 "Shit," Raunchy said, picking up another. "Maybe you just didn't squeeze hard enough. It was effective just the same." "Was, wasn't it." One thing the special helmets worn by Jarps didn't translate; the whistly-wheezy sound of their laughter. "But if we weren't moving I'd have been giving them one to throw back at us, see?" Raunchy examined another grenade while Janja released her grip on the metal brace under the bench. "Ah. I felt something give when I squeezed that time. The shell pressing in on the trigger, I suppose." "Are you sure?" Raunchy studied the grenade. "Sure." "It's armed?" "Pos." "Then might I suggest that you toss it out of here?" Janja's attempt at staying cool blew with the ticking away of seconds. "Right," Raunchy said, and threw the brown egg out the gaping doorway. It didn't get far. Fortunately the truck was moving away from it at a good clip. The grenade exploded in air with a nasty crack-toom! about a meter away. The bright flash made them squint and the concussion, while not great, rocked a truck riding on a cushion of air. Greasy-looking clouds of gray-brown smoke billowed and Janja noted that everything beyond it became invisible. "Smoke-bomb," Raunchy said conversationally. "Oh." Then both of them were flopping and wallowing about on the floor of the truck amid forty-eight rolling smoke grenades, because the truck had gone spastic. Unable to see or know what had caused the explosion, Hellfire had assumed they were attacked. Instinctively she had taken evasive action. The yellow MPP truck fled down Skyflower Boulevard, swerving wildly from side to side. It scraped a parked mini-car. That grazing impact tumbled Raunchy and Janja anew. Neither could see worth a jinkle because of the explosion. They wallowed. "Let's, ah, not tell Hellfire what did that," Raunchy suggested. Hanging onto a bench-leg again, Janja nodded silently. This time she was clinging with both hands and trying to hook an ankle around another brace. Soon Hellfire straightened up, having received no evidence of further assault. But then the blinking Janja and Raunchy were looking at a car whipping around a corner behind them. It raced after them. Arms came out windows. Their hands held guns, and the guns began firing. "Rebels," Raunchy muttered, "out to get the law. They think we're it." Something slapped a wall of their haven sharply, twice, and whined away. After a moment Janja realized that a bullet had just rushed in, hit two walls, and ricocheted right out again. "Not bad shots, either," Raunchy remarked. "Might I suggest that we stay down?" Janja and Raunchy exchanged a look. "Might I suggest that we MPP people should be doing our job and putting down lawlessness?" Janja said. "Right." They picked up a grenade apiece, squeezed, paused, threw, picked up another each, squeezed, daringly counted to four, and threw fast and hard. This time both first squinted, then closed their eyes. They saw the flashes behind their eyelids, heard the crack-foams, and opened their eyes. They saw only rolling-rolling clouds of what looked more like animated graybrown-black grease than anything else, including smoke. It was smoke. Since they didn't hear a crash, they waited watchfully, holding another grenade. The smoke was left behind, and no car appeared. Both occupants of the truck's cargo hold jerked at the sound of a voice within their haven. A moment later 37 they knew it was Hellfire, her voice coming through a bit tinny via a communicator up front. Sensible, especially in a police vehicle. It was even sensible in a way that the supplier had cut corners by installing a rotten speaker in the cargo hold. Understandable, anyhow. Nothing but the worst for official buyers. It offset the kickback. "What the vug's going on

back there?" They glanced around, looked upward. Janja spoke to the grill she could not see in the "ceiling." "Do we need a microphone or something?" click "I hear you. The pickup's so policers up here can hear prisoners back there. What happened, I said." "We found a box of smoke grenades. A car was chasing, shooting at us. We tossed four grenades at 'em. It's pretty smoky back there, but they don't seem to be coming anymore." "That I can see with the rearview scanner. We stole a truck nicely equipped with smoke grenades, hmm? Hey-did you two set off that other explosion?" The odd couple in back exchanged another look, and eyes rolled. "No!" Janja called. "We thought we were done for when that went off! Not hurt, though." "You must have eluded someone in a window overlooking the street, the bastard," Raunchy said, smiling and rolling its great big dark eyes at Janja. "You're both all right?" "Oh, pos," Raunchy said. "Just rattled around a bit. Along with all these grenades." "So sorry," Hellfire said with a smile in her voice. Oh well. From Hellfire you took smiles any way you could get them. "Sure." "I really can't say that I care much for Mott-chindi," Janja said in a conversational voice. Raunchy flopped on its back on the floor, laughing -then winced. It had flopped back onto a grenade, 38 which was digging into the Jarp between its shoulder blades. "Hellfire! Look Out!" That was Syri's voice, rising toward a squeal in her fearful excitement. Janja and Raunchy took it as a signal to hang on tight. How nice if this nicely equipped MPP vehicle had a scanner or two back here! Yet that it did not was both likely and sensible. This was the truck's cargo hold. A cage, locked from the outside, for conveying prisoners back to MPP HQ, wherever in SeeYou that was. Or for conveying a squad of policers to an area that needed them, wherever that might be. Neither group needed to see where it was going. The truck was struck a violent and noisy blow. It lurched wildly. Grenades rolled just as wildly while Janja and Raunchy did their best to hang on. Their legs slithered and their bodies urgently announced that they wanted to be free to bounce around. Now the truck's insane swinging back and forth told them that Hellfire and its computer guidance aids were fighting for control, "Rotten slsterslicer!" Hellfire's voice snarled. "Blow him away, Syria!" "Wait, Hellfire-it was an accident. He was barrelin' down that street to turn toward the shuttleport same's us, that's all. They look like spacefarers in that car, don't you think?" "Bunch of bastards!" Hellfire snarled, and more loudly, "Why don't you sunsavugs watch where we're going?" "Look," Raunchy said, and Janja did. The sons of vugs in the damaged car were behind them now. Following? "Give those downers a smoke grenade or Six!" Hell-fire yelled. Still lurching, the truck straightened out and was again on its way down Skyflower toward the shuttleport to space. Raunchy and Janja exchanged their nth glance. "I think Syri's right," the Jarp murmured. "They're 39 not after us and they're not really following us. I think they're just headed for the 'port, too. Just as fast as they can go, the same as we are." Janja nodded. Since the truck had straightened up and was scudding along on a level course, she let go one hand's hurtful death-grip on a brace. "Probably. You be ready to lob a grenade at them, Raunchy. I'll start getting these others back into the box. Having all this potential explosion and smoke just rolling around, banging off me, is worse than maddening." "Right." They began-and the truck lurched violently leftward. It heeled just as violently half over while groaning in the throes of what felt like (mis)applied torque. Janja and Raunchy floundered and slithered while grenades rolled and rattled. Their knees clonked together. They were aware of the shriek of grinding metal and knew that this time Hellfire had hit something more than a glancing scrape. Both clung to bench-legs on opposite sides of the cargo hold. Each was using both hands. "Oh, dammit!" Hellfire's voice snapped from above their heads. "Tried to avoid something and hit it anyhow," Raunchy opined. "Or hit something else," Janja postulated in a voice dead and dry as a desert on Syriaris's home planet. The truck backed, jolting both passengers in new directions. It stopped, stalled on its cushion of air. They lingered long enough for a man to try a little action. He appeared at the tailgate, big-eyed and sweating. In an instant he had swung up and was

inside with them. After a moment he was able to see in that dimness. What he was best able to discern was a pair of stoppers. Both were leveled at him. "Oh shit." "Stay right there," Janja said. "And you'll be all right," Raunchy added, finishing the sentence as if they had practiced. 40 "Oh shit." He was on Ms hands and knees with his back to the street behind the stalled MPP truck. One foot and one ankle were not quite! in with him. They rested on air. "But... uh ... look, I-" Raunchy waggled its stopper in that bright orange, six-digitated hand. "Just stay right there, jacko." He did, hardly happy about it. Then the big yellow vehicle bucked and jerked forward. Janja saw his mouth and eyes go very wide just before he vanished out the back. The car behind them had been unable or afraid to go around. Now it swerved to avoid the poor unfortunate, who must have thought he was hitching a ride to the shuttleport in a stolen policer truck that was not likely to have an occupied rear. The car missed him. It also banged into a parked minitruck, sent two people scurrying in pure fright, mangled a parked lectro-gyro two-wheeler, and plowed into an obscenely painted place of business proudly called Hairy's New York Bar and Hologamery. The place had been noisy when the five off Satana had passed earlier, and they had crossed to pass it on the far side of the street. The car's entry was a lot noisier. "On the other hand," Raunchy said, "Mott-chindi does have its moments." They broke up, sprawled on the floor, laughing while the truck moved on down the street, not as fast as previously. They passed the mangled tunnel-tractor they must have hit. Two men shook their fists and screamed curses. One fist sprouted a finger. Raunchy moved to the open hatchway to wave. Staring, the men forgot to curse and stood with their forgotten fists motionlessly upraised. Janja, gazing out the back, began to frown. Her stomach was beginning to feel as if she had been gorging on grease. "R-aunch-y? Is it poss-ible that smoke is ... an emetic or something? Makes you sick?" "No. It's formulated not to. Probably motion sick- 41 ness. Some people can handle all sorts of things-acceleration and inspace maneuvering and shuttling up and down-but don't dare ride and look back. Maybe you're one of those. Nauseous?" "Pos," Janja said, and quit looking out the back. The box contained about half the grenades. She let the rest of them roll around. They must surely be safe enough. They weren't being squeezed, after all. And she didn't feel like doing anything but lying still and looking at anything that showed no movement. The truck came to a halt. A full stop this time; it settled to the pavement with hardly a jolt. Jaaja let out a long sigh and kept still. "Hey!" Hellfire's voice said from above their heads. Automatically they looked up at the "ceiling," and just as automatically they felt silly. They had found no grille up there. That was understandable. The presence of a visible speak-box or grille would merely have invited MPP prisoners to attack it, either as plain vandal meanness or in an attempt to find a way out. "We're there. Or nearly. There's a hellaceous mob milling around. A thousand or more. Looks like half the people on Macho want to get on the shuttlevator and the hell off this nowhere planet." Raunchy said, "Policers? Guards?" "A few, MPP and Shuttleport Authority. They're barely coping. Some of these people are pretty insistent." "Wild," Syriaris's voice said. "Angry," Hellfire added. "That's called panic," Janja said, kneeling, putting oversize brown eggs back into their box. "Ideas?" Hellfire's voice. "We're a good half-klom from the gate. The final gate, I mean, to Clearance and the boarding platform." All this way, and now a half-kilometer to go-and a gaggle of panic-edged people between them and their goal! Would this rule of the god Odtaa-One damned 42 thing after another-never cease? Oh for the security of sweet spaceship Satana, home in space! "Suppose you give this official-lookin' vee-hicle full power and I just open up with this gun so conveniently mounted," Syriaris suggested. "Those that don't get out of the way for 'the MPP' will wish they had!" Janja's face showed her shock while she stared at the ceiling as if into the eyes of Syriaris. "You do that without me," she said. Raunchy stared at her for a moment, then reached over and squeezed her leg. "Me too." It looked up at the ceiling and repeated: "Me too." "Consider that idea rejected, Syri," Hellfire intelligently said. "Sit

and wait awhile?" Raunchy suggested. "We might have as long as six or seven minutes," Janja said, "before people get curious about this official truck. Or nasty about it, or both. They must think we're here to be mean, and the policers here already must think we're the backup help they've been praying for-probably calling for, on mini-corns. That might be too late for any option other than shooting our way out. Or backing over innocent people who just want to get away from this conflict. Hey-what kind of thing is that mounted gun up there? I mean-what does it do?" "It's just a sounder," Syriaris said. "A sonic inter-ferencer. Broad-beam, forward directed. Since the beam fans out in an arc and the thing swivels a little, it will cover about a hundred degrees of arc, not all at once. A sounder's a beamer, not a gun. I shouldn't have called it a gun. Ifs enough to protect this cab to the doors, in other words. It doesn't even have a kill capacity and won't do a thing to help you two back there. Can you close the doors?" "Not without getting out," Janja said. "That," Raunchy added, "does not seem advisable." "What's it do then, Syri-stun?" "It can. At standard settin' it just makes people real 43 real uncomfortable. Makes 'em feel like bein' somewhere else, real fast." "Not too nasty a gun at all," Raunchy said, glancing at Janja rather hopefully. "'Course not," Syrians said as if righteously miffed. "Not a gun at all. It's for crowd control, subduin' and facilitatin' the app-rehension of criminals or disturbers of the peace. Not for litterin' SeeYou's streets with dead Machos! You didn't think I was suggestin' just headiri for the gate through a sea o' corpses, did you?" "Pos, I did, Janja thought, but she didn't say it. Instead she posed another question: "How far ahead does the effect extend? The sonic interference with-what? Nerves?" "Look, Janjy, this is getting windy. Do you have a plan or something? We have edutapes on Satana, you know, and you can learn all-1-1 about sonibeam projectors" "Captain, I feel a plan coming on. Syri?" Janja crossed her fingers against the volatile Hellfire's blowing up at her. Another name for Hellfire could have been Mercury, fulminate of. "I can't answer that last one anyhow, Yanya. I got no idea of the beam's reachout range. It weakens rather than just stoppin' with distance from the projector, I know that. And it won't reach a full half-klom, that's for sure. As for what it attacks, well, who's a doctor? I can't explain this stuff. It makes the, uh, victim want to get away-just have to, Ifs unbearable, you know? That's all." "All right, girls, this gives me an idea," said Hell-fire, who would surely have emasculated any man who dared call her a girl, and most women as well. Her tone, manner, and voice reminded them who was cap-tarn. "We can sit around and talk when we're safely back on Satana, all right?" "Listening, Captain," Janja said briskly. "All right, suppose we do this. You two hold on tight back there while I take this thing up onto its air 44 cushion. We turn on the siren, actuate the sounder at its low setting, and start easing toward the gate. Slowly. The siren will fob everyone and make us seem official. The sonic beamer won't hurt anyone but it will sure clear the way for us. We cruise right up to the gate. After that . . . well, we don't have a rulebook with us." "Sounds workable to me," Raunchy said slowly, looking at Janja. "Sounds awfully easy," Janja said doubtfully. "Hmp! Everything doesn't always have to be hard, Cloud-top! You're with me now, not Corundum!" Don't I know that! Janja kept that thought to herself, too. "If you're anxious, though, maybe we'll be lucky and have to fight our way past the gate itself." "Uh-" Raunchy pointed. Some men were coming, on foot. Spacefarers. Their eyes were directed at the open rear of the truck. Naturally they were armed. They exchanged words, and came purposely on. Any second now they're going to break into a trot and hop into what they see as an empty truck, Janja thought. She said, "Don't put yourself out on my account, Captain!" That completed the ritual of Hellfire's power assertion and Janja's submission. Hellnre was mollified and restored, and she proved it by chuckling. "All right. Brace yourselves, but there's no reason to hang on. We are just going to ease forward." With a rumble and a little hiss, the truck rose three sems off the pavement. The siren came on. Not a howler or a screamer but a whoop-WHOOP whoop-WHOOPER. A rise of yells and screams made Janja and Raunchy

assume that Syri had actuated the sonic in-terferencer. The sounder. Being caged in a truck's cargo hold with no portholes or optics and able to see only out the back was neither fun nor soothing. Janja dared ask, "Lowest setting, Syri?" "Yes, Yanya, lowest nit pick settin'! No one's even jallin' down." 45 "Or dancing, damn it," Hellfire said. "But they are moving out of the way on either side, though. We're clearing a lovely aisle with the goodole shuttlevator at the other end of it. A couple of minutes now and we're there." The truck's movement might have tempted the men coming along behind, but when the siren came on, they decided not to try to run and pile on, which Janja was sure had been their intention. "Piece o' cake," Syrians said. Glumly? "Lovely." Raunchy whispered: "Why'd you make her mad by asking her that, Janja?" Janja gave her orange friend a straightforward look. "We can't see, Raunchy. For all we know, she's Frying dozens of already scared and innocent people and we're driving right over dozens more." "You care? On Macho? They've tried to kill us!" "Not these. Yes, on Macho. Or anywhere else. There are usually options that don't involve just killing, Raunchy. That's easy, killing. I've done it. These Galactics taught me how. But we have brains. Why not use them, and make the easy way-killing-the last resort?" The Jarp stared at her. Then it nodded. "I've heard good questions from you, and good answers, Janja. I hope I'm there to sign on when you have your ship and are Captain Janja." Janja smiled, then laughed a little too sharply. Now that was a concept she had never considered! All she really wanted was to turn back the clock and be back on Aglaya with Tarkij, whom Jonuta's slavers' had murdered. What a sweet and innocent Janja she had been then! So happy in her ignorance, with never a moral choice to make beyond whether to play Lifemate to Tarkij before the ceremony. Now . . . but turning back the clock was not possible. There were too many clocks on too many planets, and Janja knew too much. Now. In Aristotelian black-white terms, she had be- 46 come gray. Now all she wanted was to find Jonuta and rid the spaceways of him, forever. It seemed longer, but just over a year-ess ago she had been what They, these Thingmakers and casual killers who called themselves Galactics, would have called a happy savage back on "Protected" Aglaya. So now I have served and sexed on two pirate spacers and killed and I ask and answer well. Sun-mother's Light! Captain Janjaheriohir! What a thought -if only Raunchy knew what a ridiculous concept that is! "I heard you, Raunchy. Thanks and you're crazy. Besides, all's well-look." The Jarp followed the direction indicated by Janja's nod. Behind them were no corpses, no suffering people. Just a narrowing aisle between two groups of milling people, obviously part of what had been one group parted by sonic beamer and truck. Just as obviously already recovered from the beam of coherent waves of sound that had made them skip and jostle and shove their way aside. Now they were cautiously moving in again, filling the aisle behind the truck. The truck kept moving. Siren on, hideous. Sonic projector soundlessly, sounding, clearing the way. "Somebody's going to get smart enough to fall in right behind us and let us take 'em right through.the crowd," Janja said. "Or smart enough to try jumping in with us," Raunchy said nervously. The truck stuttered. Janja felt a shiver and heard the rattle. She and Raunchy exchanged their nth2 look. The truck and siren died. A moment later the vehicle didn't settle to the pavement; it banged down. "Oh shit!"-Hellfire "Power pack?"-Syrians "Right. Absolutely dead."-Hellfire "Oh shit."-Raunchy "You hear that, back there?"-Hellfire 47 "We heard," Janja said, and shocked them with a coolly sensible question. "How far are we now?" "'No more than eighteen or twenty meters!" Hellfire said. "Damn! Each one looks about a klom long!" "Might as well be eighteen or twenty light-years," Syrians snarled. Uncomfortably Raunchy and Janja watched the closing in of the people behind the truck that had forcibly parted them. They looked distinctly menacing. They had a right to be mad, and they comprised a mob. There was an ancient cliché about the violence potential of a mob. "Been nice knowing you," Raunchy said quietly. 2 There is authority and there is Authority, and there are authorities and there are Govmint Clerks. When the latter mistake themselves for the former, they should be given a choice: go

find honest employment or be popped into a sack and drowned. -Moris Keniston Authorities suck. Clerks suck authorities. -K. Jonuta While Janja and Raunchy nervously watched the closing in of a mass of people behind the truck that had forcibly parted them, the invisible ceiling speaker again brought them Syriaris's voice from the truck's cab. "Well, ladieeee, here we are down to five stoppers, one MPP pulsar sidearm, and a 'sonic rifle.' Goal is eighteen to twenty meters away, an' the people linin' the aisle on either side of the sonic beam are not I say again not happy with us." "Five stoppers? Sonic rifle?" "Crystal's stopper," Syrians said, "and there's a long-barreled hand-held sonic interferencer here in the cab. 48 49 Shall we get out "and start in shootin', back to back and shoulder to shoulder against the mob?" "While we walk down a cleared aisleway with them on both sides? Us as targets? We'll either be mobbed, or the policers in the crowd we've made mighty unhappy will burn us down. Not a chance." Janja's right," Hellfire said morosely. "Agreed," Raunchy said. "Got any better ideas?" Syri's tone was pure sarcasm. "Pos!" Janja's reply was almost a shout. She was bright-eyed, staring out at too many people from the cargo hold's dark, dark interior. There was a definite sinister aspect to their slow moving on the truck's rear. Janja missed Raunchy's smile and satisfied nod at the blonde's "yes." "Pos!" Janja repeated. "We're loaded with smoke grenades back here. Can you break that big sonic-thing or wedge it so that it maintains its beam by itself? The mounted one, I mean." "If s on automatic now," Syri said, and her tone indicated that it was only with an effort that she refrained from adding, "dummy." "Good! Suppose we can stand its effect for a minute or so, running straight before it?" "I see your point, Janjy. But if we can do it, so can all these people. They're going to rush us, beam or no." "Or merely poof us as we play run-the-gauntlet between the occasional policers and local guards," Syrians added, again with the implied "dummy." "No, listen. Suppose Raunchy and I just heave a couple of these grenades out-that's about to become an urgent priority!-and yell a warning. As soon as smoke makes us invisible, we scuttle along the sides of the truck carrying more. We toss two or three ahead, dead ahead, and leave one or two in the cab, armed at the last instant. Nearly everyone will panic but us. And they won't see the four of us dashing straight ahead to the gate and the platform." "In that smoke? We won't be able to see, either, 50 Janjy. We'll get separated, and it'll be an hour before all four of us get to-ah! You're suggesting that the sounder beam -will guide us to the gate, if we can stand staying in it." "Pos! I am! We can stand it to survive, can't we! Syri! How narrow can you focus that beam?" "Ah-down to a twenty-degree arc. I think it intensifies, though." "Good! We'll just have to bear it. No one will come into it with us-in the smoke, if anybody starts blundering into our 'aisleway, the sonics will chase him back out again. All we have to do is run, right through the smoke. Come on ... people are closing in back here. Lower the power on the sonic beamer and widen it or swing it; whatever you have to do. Until we get there. We've got to throw and get out of here!" "Hey, Bik, you hear voices coming outta the back end of that truck?" "Do it!" Hellfire's voice came. "I think she's got a workable plan and I don't see any choice. As soon as they get to us, Syri, aim at the gate and tighten the beam. And bring ,that sonic rifle-use it. With you leading, we'll be able to run right through on one good deep breath, with nobody in front of us! Great!" "Brilliant, Captain!" Janja called. "That will do.it!" "A clever diplomat, too," Raunchy observed almost smugly and very quietly. Having made its "discovery" of Janja and its decision concerning her competence and destiny, the Jarp now had the certainty and smugness of a religious prophet. It added, "Ready?" "Is there somebody in that truck? Hey!" That caller and others, males twenty to one, were moving in confidently now, coming at the open rear door. Even under the bright lights of the shuttleport area-and partly because of their glare-none could see into the darkness inside the truck. Yet. "Absolutely," Janja said. Each with grenade in hand, they exchanged their double-n2 look, and squeezed. 51 "On four and yell. Two. Three . . . four!" Out went two little brown eggs, well squeezed. Janja let



out the most ghastly shriek she could come up with and so did Raunchy. The grenades hit the pavement, bounced, rolled. . . . The approaching Mottchindese started trying very hard to be very modest, i.e., behind as many others as possible. Since they were all trying simultaneously to accomplish that same self-effacing objective, the result was a frenetically fluid melee in which everyone pushed and shoved to be behind everyone else. crack-toom! -ack-toom! Shrieks. Yells. Curses. Dense smoke boiled the color of curdled chocolate, like grease miraculously become lighter than air. Janja and Raunchy had opened their shirts and were stuffing in grenades. "I'll carry the box, Raunchy. This is only about half-gravity for me. You go first, stopper out. Set on Two, Raunchy." "Right. Which side, Cap'n Janjaglaya?" "Stop that! Think about Hellfire's personality and stop that, Raunchy. Uh-on Hellfire's side, both of us. Now!" Raunchy sucked up a breath and scrambled out of the truck. Janja pulled the box to the edge of the tailgate, popped out, misjudged, nearly lost her balance on alighting. Caught it, stabilized, whirled, grabbed the box containing between twenty and thirty smoke grenades. She didn't grunt. Someone emerged from the smoke, eyes shut. Janja rammed the box into his midsection and watched him flop back into the smoke, to set off new unhappy noises from those he flopped into. Raunchy swung around to the right and up the left side of the truck. People yelled, pointing, some raging. None tried charging. A dangerous alien criminal escaping from the back of the Mott-chindi Public Protector truck? Not their business; stay back and don't get involved. The orange thing had a stopper, anyhow. Holy Prophet, there came another one! Tiny, all pale 52 and with hair dyed white. Had to be dye, didn't it. Carrying a box of-Get Back! The door of the yellow truck's cab swung out, designed by its manufacturer to serve as a shield. Hell-fire saw Raunchy, then Janja. "Tighten the beam, Syri! Get the rifle and pop out on your side. Just ignore those people and head forward. We go, with you first, then me, then-" "I know," Raunchy said, but it wasn't angry. "Jarps last!" The crowd noise had risen and there wasn't a happy person within a kлом. "Here, Captain, grab some grenades just in case!" Janja set a foot on the cab's mounting step, rested the box on her knee. Steadying it with one hand she dipped out a brown egg and squeezed. "Here, catch!" What was it about the words "Here, catch" that made them an irresistible mandate? The hands of the foremost man jerked up automatically. The small brown egg bounced free of his unconscious attempt to grasp it. It exploded just as it touched the pavement, or a millisecond before. He and everyone else on the truck's left vanished behind the usual revolting smoke and a lot of panicky noise. "Back, you bastards!" Syrians yelled from the other side at the same time as Raunchy lobbed a brown egg over the top of the cab. "Syri! Stop that!" "Syri! Grenade coming! Close your eyes!" Syrians didn't close her eyes. It was sheer rotten luck that too close to the front of the backed-away crowd on her side was a yellow uniform. An M-c Public Protector. At the sight of what emerged from the beam-generating MPP truck he had been mindlessly respecting, he looked very surprised. At her snarling insults and warning, his face went mean. He tossed his sonic tube from right hand to left, elbowed a man out of the way while he drew his pulsar 53 pistol, and sent a hot stream of plasma zipping to boil away a good half of Syriaris's internal organs, right in the middle. At the same moment Raunchy's grenade went off, right at his feet. It wasn't that Syrians never knew what hit her. She knew, but only for a second or so. Then she was extremely dead, and only then did she begin to fall. Hellfire shrieked rage. She, Janja, and Raunchy hurled grenades almost simultaneously over the cab and into the roiling smoke between Syri and her killer. Each fervently hoped that the MPP man lost a leg or three in the trebled explosion, but they had sense enough not to try to see. The flash was enough to roast retinas. The smoke was a churning wall that looked thick and evil as an inexperienced artist's idea of a collapstar-a Black Hole. "Come on!" Janja snapped while she hurled another grenade straight out in front of the truck. She charged after it, pulling in a great big breath. "Aaahhh!" It staggered her; the sonic beam seemed to zero in and pounce on her, and it was worse than being hit by a

stopper on Two-which she had experienced. Suffering, hardly in control of her self, she had to drive herself ahead, will herself to throw the grenade she was squeezing and to run not to the side and relief, but straight on. There was no letup in the torture or in her having to will herself to do what was necessary. She had to stay in the beam. Had to make for the gate now invisible behind the smoke she had created. She did, fleeing the torture she knew she could escape merely by dodging a few steps to either side. Her gasp had cost her the deep breath she had drawn to get through the smoke. Now along with everyone else she tried to hold her breath in reverse; she refused to take one. She could feel the smoke, but it was as nothing compared with the sonic horror. It was like running through a desert wearing a total 54 blindfold while invisible demons stuck phis in her ganglia. Lots of pins. She ran, or thought she ran. O Aglay's Light, how long? It's only a few meters, I saw it. How many weeks is it taking me to cover a few meters? She didn't know whether Hellfire was behind her and she didn't care. She couldn't care. She could care only about Janja. Poor Janja, she thought, and heard a whimpering sound that must have come from her. She ran. She could think only of outrunning the torment. Only later would she realize that she had not run at all but had barely moved, forcing one foot and leg forward, then dragging the other up to it, and past. A cripple running through cold molasses. While all those demons stuck pins in her ganglia. And all the while she tried not to breathe, but needed to because she wanted very much to scream her guts out. This nowhere planet sneeringly called Macho had eaten Crystal and it had eaten Syrians and it was still hungry. Slaving. It wanted poor little Janjaheriohir, too. Sunmother help! She was running along a black corridor of horror to escape horror and if Hellflower or Sunmother Herself had gotten in her way, Janja would have run her over. If Hellfire and Raunchy were back there, coming, enduring the Horror-good. If not, too bad. She wanted to run forever. She could not stop. She could not go back. She had been running for weeks and still she was trapped in the beam and the smoke. Her thinking was only just able to go beyond the most basic animal level. The s-level; pre-animal level. It was fight or flee and she could not fight. Her thinking or "thinking" was on the order of Pain/Awful/Run/Get Away from Pain. The just-beyond pre-animal part was But straight ahead! Stay in the Horror to escape the Horror-and Macho! She ran, or thought she did. Suffering, raving. Going mad. Was it diminishing? 55 Dared she try to believe it? Dared she try to hope? Could she be reaching the outer reach of the awful beam? Or was she starting to begin to commence to start becoming accustomed to the Horror, inured to it? Or was her brain burning out? She ran. The smoke was definitely paling. So was the interference, the Disruption that was sonic Horror. Cleverly she pulled a grenade out of her gaping shirt, squeezed, held, ran, emerged, and gasped in a breath- out of the smoke!-and then tossed the grenade desperately aside rather than cleverly ahead, because she was almost there! Am I, or have I gone insane? crack-toom! Screams and yells and a pistol shot. Bldaml She raced on. The Horror had let go and was lost behind her, outrun and defeated, before she realized it. Now it was just a nagging discomfort. Just. She ran into the closed gate of glass or reinforced plas and it hurt. Hurt a knee and both thighs and her forehead and even her belly which, in this gravity, was not just flat but nearly concave. Men stared at her from the other side of the thick glass or plas. They had cut the power to the gate's automatic opener! Uniformed men. Authority; Authorities. Sweating, she began feeling around on it. Why at this intensity, she thought, sweating and trying not to weep or shriek or pound pleadingly on the glass or plas, why, she could bear it! She wouldn't be a whimpering weeping drooling gibbering maniac for at least another three minutes. "Uh!" Someone had floundered right into her back, knocking her against the barrier. "Hellfire?" "Same to you, sister!" Just as he spoke, an unwelcome breeze brought greasy grenade-smoke rolling into the area before the gates. Blindly, Janja slammed back an elbow, at hip 56 level. Then she whirled to drive the same fist into the unseen man at a slightly higher level. The poor jacko, be he local or fellow spacefarer, took

both hard swift-driven blows right in the stomach. Janja moved away to her left. Blinded now by her own smoke, she tried to remember where the seam was in the "wall of glass or plas. That seam was the gate, a door some five sems thick, which usually opened as one approached. She remembered and found the seam, with some surprise-and then was surprised far more by recognizing Hellfire's nearness. She had chermed not just emotion with that Aglayan ability, the extra sense she possessed that They did not, but she also knew who it was! Hellfire. It was a first, and exciting, and- And she would think about it later. The ability that made her truly alien seemed to be expanding, at least in this time of extreme stress. "Hellfire! This is it!" she said before she saw her. "We can't climb over, and they've deactivated the automatic opener. There's no way to open this gate on this side." "Janjy!" Only then did the other woman emerge from the smoke. "I was afraid you hadn't made it. Well, we're not going to be stopped now by a little old glass wall. I'd climb a mountain or make it with a man to get away from this . . . this Horror!" "Me, too!" Raunchy's voice said-or rather the voice of Raunchy's translator, and Janja almost laughed. They had all three made it this far. Now . . . "Just stand well back, 'cause there'll be a firesplash," Hellfire bade them. "This MPP pulsar beamer ought to do the trick. Ah, the smoke's starting to clear away, too. That will-" The wall opened with a faint sucking sound, and they felt the outrush of cooled air-and smelled it. "Please don't! My hands are up. Come on in to the platform, uh, ma'am-just don't ruin the gate. Can you 57 imagine what might happen if all those people were free to burst in here?" The Shuttleport Authority guard who had opened the gate was stepping back inside, stopper sheathed at his hip, his hands elevated. He faced two women and a Jarp, all with leveled weapons. The one with the pulsar beamer thrust out her left hand, palm up. "We thank you and bow to a sensible man. Reach across yourself and take out your stopper, please, and reverse it before you lay it on this palm. Merely a precaution, I assure you. Anyone can see you have more sense than to try going against three of us. We are not only what is called desperate characters, you wouldn't believe how desperate!" He handed her his stopper with care, exactly as she had specified. "I believe I can, ma'am. I remember you--you came onplanet less than three-hours ago. On Mott-chindi we do certainly recognize and remember fe-males, you see. Ma'am." "Captain." "Captain," he amended. "You have a ship up at the docking station?" "Right. It's mine." Hellfire was looking past him at the Reception/Clearance booth. Raunchy was covering the two men there who, naturally, stared. One looked as if his name should be Rainbow. "Uh-Captain . . . weren't . . . weren't there more of you? With your party, I mean?" Hellfire gave him a searing look from eyes the color of what had been mahogany and now was mahogny. "Pos. We were five. Your planet just murdered two of my crew. All we want is off!!" "Oh, Captain!" He sighed and looked down. "Oh, damn. We've had communication with town, of course-can you believe that we aren't even sure what's going on?" "I believe it. Neither are we. Neither are all the stupid vandals and assassins shooting up each other 58 and the policers-and innocents, back in SeeYou. Now all we want is to get the Gaining Gehenna off Macho. Oh-and do close the gate." She watched while he did. Raunchy never took its gaze off the' other two at the Clearance booth. "Now let's just go over and join those two," Hell-fire said, and the four of them did that. Lord lord but that one jacko was a wild dresser! Handsome slunk probably fancied himself quite the boy with women, too! Then Hellfire was glaring into the eyes of the Port Authority clerk and the brightly dressed space-farer. The clerk must have been harassing him. "His papers are in order and so are ours," Hellfire announced, waving the nasty policer pistol. "You, friend guard, are coming up with us. Just for the ride. Merely a precaution. We certainly wish you no harm. You have a job to do and you have sense enough to decide not to do it by the book when that's smart. He saved your closed gate from being holed with this," she told the clerk, again casually waving the pulsar beamer. The clerk watched that yellow pistol with the eyes of a bound lamb looking at a boa constrictor with a growlingly empty

stomach. Hellfire added, "You agree?" The clerk's gaze continued fastened on the beamer. "Hey! Clerk! Do you agree that this intelligent guard saved the gate and thus Macho a lot of expense by letting us in? All we want is to get to our ship and redshift so far from your ugly old sun it'll be just a surly memory behind us." "Uh-oh, uh, pos, I, uh, agree. You . . . Tige saved . . . uh, port facility . . . please, uh that. . . pistol . . ." Obviously there would be no trouble from this mouse. Janja couldn't remember the last time she'd seen anyone so scared. Fobbied up past the eyeteeth! She worked at letting her own tension flow out of her. It wasn't easy. "Now, clerk. You are going to facilitate our going 59 up posthaste. I see a shuttlelevator car just waiting for us. That means there's one up-top and I'll bet it's loading. When that light comes on, that means it's on its way back and this one can go up. Now clear us posthaste chop-chop starflare fast or you will be deader than Einstein." In a clever, nimble move the spacefarer swept past the clerk, whose open-mouthed jaw was seeking union with his chest, and laid the mouse's discarded cap over a small pink plate set into his countertop. "It's an alarm," the brightly attired man said. "Heat actuated." Hellfire shrugged. "Nobody'll be responding to an alarm anyhow. They've got a real mess back there." "Don't I know it! My sincere thanks, Captain Hell-fire, for so expeditiously expediting my clearance. I think this creep was playing with me, amusing himself until the light flashed to let him know the other shuttle is returning." The spacefarer made a flamboyant bow with much flowing of sleeve. He was wearing a figured yellow tunic, Saipese style-short tight cuffs at the ends of extra-blousy sleeves, side-closed collar that was high, standing though not stiff, with two purely ornamental buttons-and a bright red sash worked with gold thread. His shockingly royal blue pants were skintight stretch over pretty good legs. The tights sleeked down into yellow equhyde boots that rose to points just short of his knees. And he wore a Wayne, or broad-brimmed hat, white with a scarlet band of reptile-grain equhyde. Hellfire cocked an eyebrow at the apparition. "Purely happenstance as I'm sure you know. Now are you two ready to do as I said, clerk, or shall I shoot you and make other arrangements?" "Probably the wiser course regardless," the colorful spacefarer said. "Look," Hellfire said, waving the pulsar beamer his way. "I've already speeded your departure or at least ended your burok problem here and in return you 60 have covered an alarm signal that wouldn't bring help anyhow and told these two who I am. Now suppose you just shut up while we complete our redshifting off this skungeball world. Furbag, that is," she said, twisting her lips as she remembered the pink-haired woman's favorite word. "Well, clerk?" "Uh . . . ah . . . r-reg-regulations say that-" "You don't need to take me up with you, sir, uh, ma'am," the uniformed Shuttleport Authority guard said. "I mean you could just like you know tie me, maybe? Up?" "You'll be coming right back down on the returning shuttle," Hellfire assured him. "I like you. Clerk? You want to be official and burok me about rules 'n' regs? You do not perhaps value your balls?" "I do-do indeed, Captain. There are . . . f-five seats left on the shuttle, Captain. Your pa-papers are clearly in or-order and you are herewith cleared to depart Mott-chindi and the Haltonarp System posthaste star-flare fast chop. Chop." Sweating, he glanced around. The light was on. Shuttlelevator #1 was on its way back down. "Shuttle standing by-y to go up as soo-soon as you are ab-board, Captain." "Ah, Sub'nalla, how I do love intelligent port officials who just cut right through the old burok and get honest spacefarers on their way to faring in space!" "Mer-might I please Captain a-ask the name of your ship?" "What the vug for?" "I should be happy to or-order . . . to request its preparation for departure from the spacedock, Ca-aptain." He had almost gained control of his stutter, but not quite. The fellow looked very earnest indeed. Hellfire looked at the man with the flamboyant attire and gestures. "What is your ship? Also you seem to have the advantage of me as to names." He made another sweeping rainbow bow, with rustles. "My sincere apologies, Captain. I am Trafalgar Cuw, 61 Captain, spacecraft Jarik." He pronounced his last name "Cue." "There's a ship's name for you to input,

clerk. Be good and we'll owe you forever." She looked at Janja. "Go and stand just inside that shuttlelevator's hatch, will you? Stopper in holster, hand on stopper." Janja nodded and went. Hellfire turned to Raunchy. "Do escort the guard and Captain Trafflesomething onto the shuttle." Raunchy nodded and did. The guard looked distinctly unhappy but remained smart: he made not a sound, and his only move was toward the waiting shuttlelevator car. Captain Trafalgar Cuw of Jarik paced beside him, smiling and accompanying his amiable talking with rastly flowing gestures of his yellow-sleeved arm. Hellfire gave the clerk the most sinister look she could summon. That was sinister indeed from a lean mean-looking woman with dark tan skin, eyes darker than dark, and hair like new prass, all orangy-yellow. And a yellow MPP pistol in her hand. And a stopper at her angular hip. "You see how ruthless and desperate we are, clerk. Your charming civil uprising or whatever it is has cost me two members of my crew, who were also friends. I haven't even had time to weep. Expedite." "That decision is already made, Captain. You're expedited." "And if you say naughty things about me to the authorities and all the nice clerks up on Copperdock, I swear I'll come back and carve my initials on your scrotum. With a flourish. Maybe my whole name. With ID numbers." He looked as if he believed her. "I-you are merely a spacefarer returning to her own ship to depart a planet in strife, Captain. You are cleared through to your berth." "You're a doll! I wish all sorts of good things for you!" With that Hellfire turned and hastened to the waiting 62 shuttlelevator. She was grinning. A smiling Trafalgar Cuw stood in the hatch of the longish bullet of a car. His presence there kept it open. Within a minute the shuttlelevator car was on its way up to the huge torus that was Copperdock, the Mott-chindi spacedocking station. Raunchy was happily explaining to the guard-Tige-that the hardest thing it had had to re-learn and get used to off its native Jarpi was the numbering system. Holding up a hand flanked by four fingers flanked by two thumbs, it suggested that Tige guess the numerical base, on Jarpi. Tige got it right the first time. The Shuttleport Authority clerk, meanwhile, stepped into his booth and buttoned open a storage bin. He took out an Enkephax tab and a skeweez-pak of ever-chil pop, Lanatian cherry. The soft-drink container hissed as he stripped off the seamed polymer band. Popping the pill, he washed it down with the cold cherry pop and stood for several seconds, holding his breath, eyes closed. In less than a minute the pill had lied to his brain, which hurriedly released its own gentle and benign narcotic, Enkephalin. He felt it and waited, deep-breathing for a few seconds. Then he turned to his combox. Looking angry and self-righteous all at once, he opened the communications link with the docking station. To the answering computer he said, "Instructions." It was not instructions he wanted, and the computer "knew" it. It responded to the code and connected him immediately. A quiet voice said, "Security. What's the problem down there, Chak?" 3 "How many chin-ups you can do is not going to matter when you're commanding a platoon." -Brig. Gen'l Joseph Franklin, commandant, West Point "Intellect has replaced brawn." -General Jeanne Holm, USAF "How much muscle does it take to launch an lCBM?" -Rep. Patricia Schroder, House Armed Services Committee The trouble with shuttles and elevators into space was that, unlike spaceships, they couldn't soften the experience for the passengers. There was no way around the discomfort of the period of acceleration, the crush of motion-induced gravity, and the increasing weight. Acceleration had to be withstood. Still, the discomfort was pale compared to that created by throwing an entire spaceship up and out of a planet's atmospheric envelope. That was a silly thing to do, and it had not been done for centuries. 63 64 They were going up, from Macho: Hellfire and Trafalgar Cuw, Raunchy and Janja, the gfoundport guard called Tige, and twenty-six others. All popped the tablet called simply the v-pill; the v was for velocity, and the pill's effect was to lessen the discomfort and dangerous aspect of high acceleration. They all strapped in snugly, meanwhile deep-breathing. And all were aware of a velocity that suddenly doubled the .75 gravity of Macho and then increased it some more. In seconds every passenger's experientiation of weight was drastically heightened. Hurtling vertical

acceleration added weight everywhere on each person's body. Tissues showed it. The portly appeared suddenly fat. The fat became gross (and had to sign waivers, in advance of boarding). Everyone looked saggier and thus older. No one liked it. All spacefarers endured it, one way or another, at one port of call or another all along the spaceways. Still, when overfed company executives had business on Mott-chindi that they felt must be seen to in person, the shuttlelevator was gentler. In a way, acceleration built more slowly, but lasted longer. So did deceleration, in both cases. Seasoned spacefarers were assumed to be tougher, and were. They could withstand more of acceleration's effects. They had. And they were proud of it. They were also treated to unnecessary background information by one of those humans who thought it was an actor and, in making the inflight tape, had worked hard to make everything sound pleasant and interesting. Palatable to children; the eternal voice of the self-conscious and pretentious guide. "The planet Mott-chindi completes its axial rotation every 21.5 hours," Voice said, up and down, up and down. "Mott-chindi's spacecraft docking station, Cop-perdock, orbits at a very precise distance. But it is most easily remembered by rounding it off to 29,900 kilometers." (The determinedly pleasant Voice pronounced it 65 "keelo-meeters," which made spacefarers roll their eyes. They half-swallowed the second part of the word, saying "kill-AH-mtrs." Even so they pronounced it infrequently. "Kloms" was entirely enough, as "sems" was sufficient for centimeters and "redshift" nicely described "go" or "depart." Saying "day-ess" was far simpler than "day-standard" every time, and the term "stopper" had been invented by farers along the space-ways, too. They found "multifunctional personal beam-sidearm" far too much, and the planetbound coinage "mufper beam" just hadn't taken among the swaggering farers of space.) "At that height," Voice continued, "Copperdock orbits Mott-chindi every twenty-one point five-hours." "No one representing officialdom is about to call Haltonarp II 'Macho,'" Trafalgar said, his wry smile made ugly by acceleration, while Voice continued. "Thus the station remains in precisely the same place relative to the planetary surface. Once such a geosynchronous orbit has been stabilized absolutely around any planet, the inspace facility can actually be physically attached to the planet itself-to the spot that is always directly 'below' the station." "Gosh," Hellfire sneered. Even the planetbound knew this elementary stuff. The relatively simple engineering of the arrangement had emerged in theory before the end of the XX century back on Home- the Kindergarten Era of space travel. "Some worlds along the spaceways use a shuttle system to transport freight and spacefarers to and from their one or several space stations. Other planets, particularly those with lesser gravitational force, employ an elevator or 'shuttlelevator'; the so-called Skyhook system. Some even call this a beanstalk, from the ancient fanciful tale about Yahya and the magical bean plant which grew and grew even up into the sky, and which he then climbed to the palace of a giant. Such a Skyhook system is doubly effective, even necessary, when the planet is a major exporter. Mott-chindi is both a 66 lower-G world and a major exporter. The planet was originally colonized because of its enormous copper deposits. For that reason it retains a strong corporate presence even now, when it is birth-planet to thousands." "Meaning it's a dictatorship of fat-ass corporations," someone said from behind Janja. "Gosh, thousands," someone else parroted, and chortled. The explanation went on, and so did passengers' comments. So did the upward rush of the tube-car that was larger than the track they had used to get to it. Janja thought about it. She had learned much from these Galactics, these Thingmakers, both artificially and by study. The main reason for confining spaceports to space, she knew, was economic. Geosynchronous satellites did not require oceans of plankton and hectares of trees to offset onplanet spaceports-which were enemies of oxygen. Hectares of cleared, hard-surface landscape radiating pollution and massive noise. The locals also saved themselves that noise and broadcast pollution from deep-spacegoing vehicles entering and leaving the planetary atmosphere. Too, this way spacers need not be constructed so as to fare through both airless

space and planetary atmosphere. They need be spacegoing only, with no need for streamlining. As a matter of fact, a lot of cargo was carefully packaged and crated and hauled exteriorly. No ship so festooned with outboard cargo could have got itself off a planet. Early spacecraft had of course departed from the surfaces of their planets and returned home to them- one way or another. Thus their main energy consumption was waste. It had to be expended to keep them from falling back. To enable them to get away from the drag of a planet's atmosphere and the tug of its gravity-and to slow down so as to return intact, with living crews. Hence that weird-sounding old phrase, "escape velocity."

67 Far less expensive was a shuttle system. The shuttle used some form of rocket propulsion and became a form of aircraft on reentry. Its job was to shuttle passengers and freight from surface to inspace stations. (Janja gasped and swallowed hard while all around her others groaned with the cessation of massive acceleration. Now the shuttlelevator car "coasted" upward, though at enormous velocity. They'd all be subjected to the same forces at the other end of their journey. The car must decelerate, either slowly for a long period of time or rapidly for something like a half-minute. Otherwise it would burst right through the station and into space, for which it was hardly well equipped.) Once the huge wheel of a station-in-space was orbited, spacecraft made their "landings" there; they were docked electromagnetically. There they off- and on-loaded cargo, passengers, and crew. All were ferried to and from the planet "below" via shuttlecraft of various sizes. While that was less expensive and less baleful to the ecosystem than the old way, it was not cheap. Once a skyhook and elevator from planet to station were constructed at enormous expense, it was cheap. As a matter of fact, the skyhook cars provided energy for each other. The necessary braking process also turned a generator. Energy into energy. It might not be patentable as a perpetual motion device, but it was about the next best thing. Moving upward at a relatively sedate few kloms a second, Macho's skyhook cars needed a ridiculously short time to reach Copperdock. There was time for a nap, though hardly for a real sleep or a game of khatun. No allowances were made for those dreadful ogres called Unforeseen Delays, Hellfire thought, glancing over to see that Janja had gone to sleep. Good idea. Wish I could. Wish I had an Enkephax- or something stronger! After what she had just been through and done, Hellfire was not one to sit down in a padded shuttleleva- 68 tor car's seat and immediately start to read or discuss the weather on Macho or anywhere else. No use discussing the political weather. They had survived it- three out of the five of them off Satana, having left Quindy onboard-and were on their way back. Empty, dammit, handed. Still, Hellfire might have been called an adrenaline addict, and all that adrenaline slamming all that blood to the brain tended to make a person tired afterward. Even sleepy-and that was not considering all their exertion in getting themselves to the shuttleport! The thoughts made Hellfire yawn. That was nice. It was pleasant now, too, without all the pressing G-force of their velocity to mash her thin lips against her teeth. Idly, she let the Voice talk on without hearing its words and helplessly considered the possibility of Unforeseen Delays on a skyhook tube-car. (Since she did not know that Janja was not quite human, she did not know that the blond had a great deal of control over mind and body and had put herself to sleep.) The problem was that an unforeseen delay on a magnetically levitated car whizzing upward within a cage-work of thumb-thick cables many times the strength of steel was likely to be permanent and terminal for all passengers. The idea was not to think about that sort of possibility. Not thinking about it worked, too. After all, it didn't happen. The system was safer than walking or even riding the street of any city anywhere along the spaceways. It really was. Loss of life of persons riding skyhook cars: one. And that was from a heart attack that had been untreatable for several hours because of upward transit time. (Now the materials for emergency treatment were onboard all tube-cars.) The fact that an unforeseen delay would take out thirty or so people very quickly was not to be thought about. Hellfire didn't. Voice had at last shut up and the car was awash in 69 soothing music. A few passengers

were quietly discussing events on Macho, and what the situation might mean for future business. Janja was asleep. Trafalgar Cuw was nodding. Even the uniformed Tige looked sleepy, though hardly relaxed. The nervous guard sat between Trafalgar and Hellfire, with Raunchy right behind him. Almost effortlessly now without acceleration, Hellfire opened her tunic's bodice. Inside she tucked both her stopper and the recently acquired pulsar beamer. They weren't exactly comfortable with her shirt closed again, but she was past uncomfortable and at least hadn't much bosom to discommode. Idly she rubbed her nipple through the fabric, letting her eyes close. They were going up. The trip would be swift and yet long because it was dull. Captain Hellfire, Captain Cuw, Tige, Raunchy, and Janja. Hellfire could not be bothered worrying about whether the clerk below had decided to complain to on-station security. There was nothing to be done now. They were merely passengers, with no control. The only place to be was in this seat and the only place to go was up. Had Hellfire known that Janja of Aglaya had "programmed" herself to waken at Tige's slightest untoward movement, the captain might have been more mentally relaxed. She didn't know. That was information Janja had not shared, along with knowledge of her cherming ability. They had shared adventure, meals, some confidences, and bodies. Hellfire enjoyed the lithe Aglayan's hands and mouth on her, and she enjoyed hers on Janja. The blond's breasts, supported by muscles developed on her high-G planet and so firm as to approach hardness, were fun to manipulate and to suck and nibble. Too, while Hellfire was pure lesbian and assumed that Quindy was, the Jarp and the Aglayan were not. The hermaphrodite was bisexual both by genes and inclination. Janja had become so by choice. And it was interesting, fun, even exciting, to watch the Jarp slip 70 its erect orange-red slicer into Janja's pale little stash, all wet from Hellfire's mouth, and slice away until they soared-while Janja fondled her lover's breasts. Hellfire thought about that now, fondling her own nipple through her shirt. Since her eyes were closed and she lay back relaxed, Tige watched with interest. Not much there but by Tao's foreskin it was female! "So I told her shit, she hadn't lived until she'd made it with a Jarp," Raunchy was quietly telling Tige, "and so-" Surely it is not possible not to think about the possibility of disaster, Hellfire thought, suspended here between ground and space, but still in gravity. It's a long long fall. And then she proved that it was not impossible. Hellfire fell asleep.

4 Aggression is always a consequence of frustration. -Freud The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that's the way to bet. -Runyon's Law Five had left Satana and gone down onto Macho. Three returned. Four, with Captain Trafalgar Cuw of Jarik. And five, with Shuttleport Authority guard Tige, but he hardly counted. On the arrival of the shuttlelevator in the hub of Copperdock, he was thanked, patted, loosely saluted, given his stopper back-bolstered; be cool now, Tige- and seen oft on the next tube-car down. He didn't wave. Hellfire was looking around as if casually. A rangy woman with a rather sharp face, in a tunic with a flippy little skirt over lavender tights. Reconnoitering in place. "No mass of security converging on us," she said- quietly, since one CS man stood close by, hardly noticing her. "Maybe that darling li'l clerk went back to shuffling printouts and counting his toes after all." 71 72 "You aren't yet at your ship, Captain," Trafalgar Cuw said. "Never trust a clerk until you're a solar system away." "Ah, but it's your ship's name he has, Captain!" He bowed, bright yellow sleeve rustling and pants tightening as if threatening to give up. "Ah, but if he did call up here to Copperdock Security, they'll have linked your ship with the name I so stupidly provided, Captain." "Was that mere stupidity, Captain?" "I assure you that it was, Captain. I did recognize you, and stupidly-indeed, I was showing off-called you by name." He struck his chest with a punishing fist, hard. Good chest on the man! "And how is it, Captain, that you know my name?" "Oh, I don't, Captain. I only know your nickname. But shall I tell you now or while we walk to your ship's berth?" "What about your own ship, Captain?" "Ah," he said with another of Ms flowing Three Musketeers gestures, "a gentleman always escorts a lady to her



door, Captain." "Or her hatch?" She laughed. "But what's that got to do with us?" "Well, indeed, perhaps I can't always be called a gentleman, Captain, but you-" "First time I've been called a lady since I was four or so years old-Captain. My ship's in berth C-2. Hmm. Janja . . . Raunchy . . . just in case . . . suppose you two go down Spoke D, and Captain Q and I will take B. At the rim we all turn and converge on C-2 and Satana, then, from two directions. With care. Just in case." The Jarp nodded and gave her an imitation of Captain Cuw's elaborate bow. It turned to Janja. "You, uh, still have a couple of those little brown eggs inside your shirt, Janja?" As they moved away together, Janja said, "I know 73 I'm not Akima Mars with The Biggest Set In The Universe, Raunchy, but they aren't that small. And you very well know they're not brown, either." Trafalgar Cuw stood gazing after them. "Remarkable. What easy intimacy! A happy crew on a happy ship, Captain! Are they-lovers?" "The Jarp was talking about smoke grenades, Captain," Hellfire said with a laugh, "and Janja knows it. Come along-Spoke B is this way. You really have two names, and one of them is only the letter q? Where are you from, Captain?" "From Outreach, Captain. And no, it isn't just an initial." He spelled "Cuw" for her. "Duties don't get much, but we do get good names. Usually. Where are you from, Captain?" "I pass. Now tell me-oops, getting crowded around here, hmm?" She and Trafalgar separated to get around a group of five Saipese with their old gold skins. "How'd you know me on sight, Captain?" "Maybe you're more famous than you think, Captain." She shot him a glance as she turned to watch Janja and Raunchy move from the hub to the mouth of the spoke designated B. Nearby, also on their way along Spoke D to the station's rim or outer perimeter, were two others. One was a Copperdock Security man. He had dropped lightly off the side of a cargo loader, rolling along on tires that towered over the CS man in his tan and black uniform. Hellfire and Trafalgar moved toward the outer edge of the torus along the tunnel inside Spoke B. Nearby, heading the same way, were three others. One was a Copperdock Security man in his black-trimmed beige uniform. "I do wish I had a weapon," Trafalgar said. "Just in case, Captain." "I believe that I would bet my left boot that you do have a Weapon, Captain?" 74

"Interesting wager, Captain. I do know, of course, that you are carrying two." "I know you know that, Captain. And I am definitely not going to put one into your hand, Captain." "Hmmm." "Want to try being more specific about recognizing me?" "Welll . . ." They walked, their boots making echo sounds in the tunnel that was wide enough for four to walk abreast. A wagon wheel with a spectacular glandular condition, that was space station Copperdock. A wheel with hub, spokes, rim. The hub was the terminus of the beanstalk shuttlevator and housed several offices and various factors, along with vending machines and a Security CP. From it radiated spokes bearing the imaginative and exotic designations A, B, C, etc. All led to the rim. Eighteen were tubular walkways. Tunnels A, H, O, and V were not walkways and were much greater in circumference. Copperdock's cargo hauler/loaders were bigger than huge. At the far end of each spoke-corridor, the area bearing the same letter was naturally a much larger section of arc. Each portion of the arc housed two berths. Each spaceship was electromagnetically docked either B-1 or B-2, C-1 or C-2, and so on. Simplicity and technology continued to coexist, all along the spaceways. Some planets were circled by more than one such torus. Even so a spacer had to wait, now and then. Not so at Copperdock above Mott-chindi called Macho. All Copperdock's slips had never been full at one time. Spacer Satana, registered as independent merchanter, was nosed into berth C-2. C-1 had been empty on Satana's arrival, hours ago. The crew had spent a great deal of time getting down onplanet, and then off, and now back up to Copperdock and berth C-2. By way of spokes C and D, just in case. 75 "You know, Captain," Trafalgar said quietly, "I can't think of a good reason for that beige-and-black to be walking along Spoke B, so unhurried. Indeed, perhaps matching our pace? He seems to be. Suppose one of us stops and lets him pass, so he's between us. Just in case." "Captain, you are a most clever man. Agreed, just in case." He made a sweeping gesture. "Since you are doubly

armed, you should be the rear guard. Captain." "Hmm. But since if he's not here by chance it's probably me he's interested in, he won't let me fall behind him." Concerned now, Hellfire ceased playing the back-and-forth "Captain" game. "Ah. I recognize and concede your point, Captain. Suppose we both just sort of pause and join him, one on either side of the dear lad, and engage him in conversation concerning events below?" "Nice idea," Hellfire said, and they did that. The beige-and-black, flanked and perhaps outflanked, couldn't see a way out of the situation. The three proceeded abreast, amiably conversing. "Raunchy," Janja said thoughtfully. "Why would a security man be walking along this tunnel, not hurrying?" "Hm. All sorts of reasons. One of which might be that he's pacing us." "Because that clerk called up a nasty report on us." "Possibly." "If they wanted us, what would they do? Wait for us at the ship, where there are a lot fewer people than at the hub?" "By far! And assign two to be on the lookout and accompany us along the spoke?" "So as to be behind us when we get there." "I think we're building quite a case," the Jarp said. "So do I. Slow down. I'm going to turn and head 76 back. You walk a little, then turn and call to me. I'll be behind Mm. Or he'll have turned to follow me back toward the hub." "And if he is?" Janja sighed and compressed her mouth. "We'll have to ... do something," she said, in a tone of weary resignation. "Setting Two." Two minutes later they had the CS man between them. He was visibly nervous. Then Janja had another idea. "Officer," she called, and he paused, turning. Yes, he looked wary, ready. He wore a stopper, not a plasma bearer. "Officer," she said, "what do you know about the trouble down on-planet?" After that they walked together, with her on his right. The poor beige-and-black couldn't see a way out of the situation, and looked about as comfortable as a bust in a mosque. They emerged onto the perimeter and Janja was carefully noncommittal. He automatically turned left when Raunchy did. "Well," Janja said, "thanks, and I hope it all works out down on Macho." And she turned right, toward the E berths. "Uh-I, uh . . . good luck, ah, spacefarer." She walked twenty paces, assumed that gave him time to sort out his priorities and make a decision, and executed a nice to-the-rear-march. Now she followed the man who was presumably following Raunchy, toward C-2 and spaceship Satana. Hellfire and Trafalgar, with Copperdock Security-man Yazel, emerged from Spoke B and turned right onto the rim concourse. They evaded a crowd clustered at B-2 rather than threading through and risk losing Yazel. Looked as if someone of importance was arriving in berth B-2. Who cares, Hellfire thought. My problem is whether

77 I'm walking beside a policer set on my tail or just a disinterested CS man ambling along on his regular rounds. He certainly doesn't seem to have anything else to do. "You mentioned that you'd seen a rival as you left your ship, Captain," Trafalgar said. "Unscrupulous sort, you said. Why don't you just lag behind a little while I run up there and along the umbilical. I'll just make sure no one's waiting in ambush for you. If he happens to be there, he won't know me." Clever, jacko, Hellfire mused. This way we find out if Security is waiting for me-or has sealed the ship! "No need to do that, surely," good old Yazel the CS man drawled; tall, powerfully built sufficient to keep his uniform snug in all the right male places, and not half bad-looking. "Aeafter awl, no one's likely to try anything naesty when I'm with you, Captain. Besides- that sure does sound unlikely." "Oh, of course it does," Hellfire said, as if casually. "But I do appreciate the offer and like the idea. Thanks." "No trouble," Trafalgar said and started ahead. Yazel's jaw worked. "But-" "Be right back!" Trafalgar accompanied that with a cheery wave. His full yellow sleeve insisted on making it flamboyant. "Don't," Yazel said, reaching for his stopper. "I'm afraid I'll haf to-" Hellfire stepped cozily close and dented his back with the business end of her stopper. "Don't. I'm afraid I'll have to insist." She was close to elation. At least Trafalgar's ruse had worked! Yazel was now out in the open as a man assigned to her. They were waiting for her. The false name she had given him had accomplished nothing. Of course, neither had he. "Wh-you caen't-" "Yes, I can. Keep walking, Yazel. Slowly. I'll stay 78 close and no one knows the CS man's a

captive. Easy now, handsome. I hardly ever bother to take this thing's setting off Three, and you must have been told what a ruthless furbaggin' flainer I am. Traf!" she called. "They're there." Trafalgar whirled and continued moving backward as he called, "I'll go along and count 'em anyhow." And he smiled, whirled back, and went on at the trot. Yazel walked, looking straight ahead. The ruthless furbaggin' flainer was close beside and just behind him, stopper's muzzle riding his back at the kidney. His size and her closeness made it all but invisible. "I'm not sure why you're doin' this," he said, "but you're just diggin' a hole for yaself. Awl we have is a complaent from the the Clearance officer, planetside." "Myrzha clerk? So I thought." She stayed close and made sure Yazel kept feeling the muzzle of her stopper. "Must not have been as scared as I thought, damn him. Nice of you to decide to be honest. Slowly, now." "Why not. Awl we wawnt to do is to make some mad noises, maybe slap your wrist verbally, and tell you never to threaten a Clearance clerk agin. But this- now you've got a stopper in the back of Security!" They met another couple who looked at them, but not with much interest. They passed. "No," Hellflre said. "Just in the back of one Security man. Look, Yazel, I'm angry. Badly shaken. And I admit it- scared." She told him what had happened down on Macho, and he made sorry noises about her two murdered crew. "So I certainly wasn't about to slow down for that officious little clerk. You got any idea what a self-important swine that sort can be? I'm just not taking any wrist-slap, jacko. I don't have it coming. I'm alive and my crew aren't. I will kill to get away from Copperdock, Yazel. I swear. I just won't take any more. None." "I'm wearin' a commlink. Let me contact the maen waitin' at your ship. I'll tell him what you've tole me 79 and that our best course is to staend way back and watch while you leave this system." "You got authority, Yazel?" "Nope. The maen waitin' at your ship has." And probably knows who I really am, Hellfire reflected. We were recognized when we raided that damned Delventine colony awhile back, and the report's been sent around. Those "few words" with CS will lead to Macho Public Protectors, if there are any left, and detention to await TGW or somesuch. Oh, no! "Won't work, Yazel. It doesn't scan. When we get to my berth, you can talk to your boss from the mouth of the umbilical. Oops-please relax. I'd rather have you "right with me this way than all around me as dust motes." He shuddered. Probably never been threatened before. "You'd never get away with it. Too many people all around." How many times an outlaw heard that phrase, reflecting only the wish of the speaker! "Uh-huh," she said, knowing that if she had to Fry him the people around them would be mostly running in other directions. They were passing berth B-1 now, still moving past others. The luridly attired Trafalgar Cuw was not in sight. Already in the airlocked tunnel connecting Copperdock's interior to Satana on the exterior, then. Must be-ah! And here came Raunchy-also accompanying or accompanied by a CS man! Neither was the other's captive, Hellfke saw-but where was Janja? "Easy, Yazel. Don't try signaling that beige-and-black. The Jarp's with me, you know." "Hey! What's goin' awn there?" A man in stevedore's hot orange coveralls was peering, trying to see between Yazel and Hellfire, wondering if he could have seen what he thought. Oh no, Hellfire thought, and her desperation level jerked upward. He's seen the stopper and knows! Now 80 what-poof him first and take a chance on Yazel's reflexes while I swing the stopper back to him, or- While she worked at her decision, all in less than a second, the CS man and Raunchy continued to approach. The beige-and-black was looking from Hellfire to Yazel to Hellfire. 5 Age does not diminish the extreme disappointment of having a scoop of ice cream fall front the cone. -Jim Fiebig It was Yazel who solved the dilemma. He hit on a way to avoid an unfortunate scene that would probably have been worse than unfortunate for the damnably sharp-eyed stevedore. "This is a Security exercise, fella. A drill for your future saefety. Git the hell awaey. Just do your job and keep your mouth shut." "Big shot," the stevedore last-worded, and he got the hell away. "That was brilliant, Yazel," Hellfire said, feeling a little weak in the knees and a tightness in her skull. "Shaitan's balls, you belong in my crew!" "Not hardly. I could never staend this sort of tension.

Just don't squeeze that thing diggin' a hole in my blouse. It isn't really set on Three, is it?" "Probably. Usually is. I didn't check. I told you, Yazel; Macho is a downer. Bad shit. I don't care what I have to do to redshift. I'd rather be dodging an 81 82 A-zero sun or balancing on the edge of a blue-event horizon than spend nine more minutes here." She saw Janja then, a few paces behind Raunchy and the other CS man, and a thought suggested itself. "Yazel: I'll bet you have a special phrase to let that jacko know you're in danger, and he'd better keep a cool head and empty hands." She added a little twist of her wrist that made him flinch. "Tway!" Yazel called. "Code Eight-two. Be easy!" Hellfire tensed. Another twist of her wrist made Yazel hasten to assure her that he had just told Tway he was a hostage and to do nothing. Tway and Raunchy kept coming, with Janja right behind them. Her eyes were on the butt of Tway's stopper, thrusting up on his left hip out of an unlatched holster. No no, Janja, don't take his stopper, Hellfire thought. So far we aren't attracting attention and have this area all to ourselves. We've got it made now. Much as she loved what she did, decisions were the hard part. As her anxiety rose so did her headache and her danger-ousness. Each group was a few meters on either side of the airlocked umbilical they were approaching. It opened and Hellfire's heart leaped. Yazel grunted at the twitching pressure of gun hi back. Out came a smiling Trafalgar Cuw, all yellow and scarlet and blue and flashing gold thread and yellow boots and flowing sleeves under that great big eleven-gallon hat. Just as Hellfire started to sigh in relief, she saw that Trafalgar wasn't alone. A beige-and-black accompanied him. And another. And another. Oh damn oh damn, she thought, and her head seemed to expand with mounting internal pressure. Trafalgar winked and flashed her a big smile to indicate that all was well. Too late; she had hit on her version of ingenuity and started talking just as he did. 83 Trafalgar: "These gentlemen were just-" Hellfire: "Code Eight-two!" Trafalgar: "-leaving." And then he stared, aghast, and frowned. "Oh, no," he said, while Hellfire registered what he had been saying and realized she should have kept quiet. She muttered, "Oh, shit." The three CS men with Trafalgar were doing a lot of looking from her to Yazel to Raunchy to- The beige-and-tan with the enameled red-and-gold suns on his collar points spoke to Trafalgar: "I'm afraid this has gone further than our discussion covered." He gave Hellfire a thick-browed look. "I am Prefect Chenith, director of Station Security. We were leaving, as your persuasive friend tried to tell you. We know about your experience down onplanet, and I can understand your feelings. But now ... I can't allow you to take one of my men hostage and then just walk away." "Pre-fect," Yazel began, sounding worried, and was silenced by a gesture from his superior, who spoke on. "If you shoot that man, Captain, you've spent your hostage and are ours. And we are not going to let you pass. Best to give it up now while you're in only a little trouble." And he drew his stopper. Oh no, Janja thought desperately, don't push her! Not her-don't! "Prefect!" Yazel and Tway were yelping, almost together. "Don't press me this way!" Hellfire said, and her voice raced up almost into a yell. There was just the shrill tinge of hysteria. "I have to," thick-browed Chenith said in the same deliberate, stern tone. "You have overpressed me. Stoppers out, boys. Yazel, step away from her." "Stay cool, Yazel!" Hellfire tried to say quietly, but she was almost yelling, tingling all over, her head starting to pound as she whipped her stopper rightward to shoot Chenith from Yazel's right hip. The sound was only a faint insect hum, accompanied 84 by a minor wavering of the air. That was all and that was enough. Chenith jerked, shivered, shimmered, and became a bright flash and then scattered components the size of dust. The faint odor of Fried, disintegrated man rode the filtered and refiltered air of station Cop-perdock. Someone yelled. A full, lemon-colored sleeve whipped with a little flapping sound in the wind of its own passage as Trafalgar swung and punched the nearest CS man, stiff-fingered, under the sternum. The fellow jerked, unable to yell. His fingers flexed and Trafalgar snatched his stopper. While the man started to fold up, Tway elbowed Raunchy, hard, and whipped out Ms stopper. His eyes were on Trafalgar Cuw. That was the first two

seconds. "Tway! No!" Yazel yelled. A couple of other people, uninvolved people in nearby berths, also yelled. Then they began getting themselves somewhere else with undignified haste. The man Trafalgar had punched was still falling. That was the next couple of seconds. Trafalgar started to turn toward Tway, warned by Yazel's call and the direction of his big-eyed stare. Trafalgar would be too late. Raunchy was on one knee, quivering, mouth slack, breathless and hurting. Hellfire was clutching the arm of Yazel-who felt her quivering-and striving to keep the third upright beige-and-black pinned with her glare. Less than a meter from Trafalgar, he was obviously working at making up his mind. Considering the odds. If he raised his drawn stopper and froze this persuasive rainbow of a man, would the orange-haired killer send him after Chenith, Fried and-nothing? (Was it time to disregard regulations and boost stopper setting to Three?) She was still mostly behind Yazel, who apparently was not going to do one slicing thing. Tway's stopper swept up to line up with Trafalgar, who was still in the act of turning toward him. The 85 man he had punched had impacted but was not quite Settled in his fall. Janja, who had lost a lot of innocence since her kidnap off Aglaya, lost some more. "Yaaaaahhh!" she yelled to startle Tway, and charged to kick him in the back of the knee. He groaned loudly and naturally squeezed his stopper as he fell. The invisible beam presumably went well over Trafalgar's head, to accomplish nothing. Other people were yelling while Janja banged the cylinder of her stopper against the side of Tway's head. He was in the act of falling. The difference the blow made was that now his eyes were closed when he hit the deck. He stayed there, unconscious. So did the man Trafalgar had hit. Trafalgar finished turning and his gaze met Janja's across the fallen CS man. Another two or three seconds had passed. Trafalgar spun back to face the man in the act of thumbing his stopper's setting upward from Two. He had decided. Yazel was in the way of the killer, but he could poof this peacock. "Throw it down, Plelly!" Yazel yelled. A siren began wailing. There was no longer anyone else anywhere near berth C-2. Plelly didn't throw it down, and Trafalgar rammed down hard with one leg to hurl himself sideways. Plelly squeezed. His bolt went somewhere and the stopper Trafalgar swung, spraying, made the Security man dance. All that had to be done now was pluck his stopper from his nerveless hand. Plelly was out of it. Then he really was. For a moment no one knew who had Fried Plelly. Plelly-dust was still adrift when the astonishingly black, astonishingly good-looking woman appeared in the umbilical tunnel that ramped up to Satana's airlock behind him. Shining jet flesh was rather precariously contained in a red halter and pants the color of her hair, which was the color of lemons. 86 Her voice and tone were cool enough: "A little trouble, Captain?" "That man was helpless-I had him dancing!" Trafalgar stormed at her. "No trouble now, Quindy," Hellnre said. "That is Trafalgar Cuw: friend. Janja! Raunchy! Into the umbilical-get onboard!" "Captain-" Yazel began. He was shaking, just a little. "You just stay Code Eight-ified, Yazel, and you will stay vertical," Hellnre told him". She watched Janja and Raunchy hurry past her First Mate, Quindy. They trotted into the tunnel and up the incline toward Satanct's rim-sealed, open airlock. She blinked when Trafalgar hopped up and went right with them. The sound of the siren was awful. A loudspeaker blared too, but Hellfire's brain didn't register the words. She was quivering and felt almost dizzy. Shaitan's balls, what a mess! Two Fried and two unconscious-and what to do with Yazel, the only smart one? At last she remembered to relieve him of the weight of his stopper. Obviously it didn't matter. He had definitely shown no inclination even to touch it. "Yazel. You know that the EM lock on docked ships is controlled only by the station. If Controller doesn't open the switch, spacers can't leave. Run-do-not-walk down Spoke C to Control and tell 'em how smart it would be to let us get out of here posthaste chop-chop lightspeed." "They'll never let you go," he said quietly. "Not now." She stepped around to face him. Stared into his eyes so that he could see the hard, glaring purpose of hers, hard as gemstones, hard as mahogany. He saw a tinge of something else, too. Madness? Desperation that bordered the dark alleyway of madness? "If they

don't, Yazel, we will break the final part 87 of the code. The covenant between spacers and space-stations. We'll open up with Defense Systemry." "Ship's DS? You couldn't! Try to blast your way out-oh God, no!" She nodded. "Will. I told you. Macho's done me real filthy grimy dirt. I'll try not to, Yazel-but if I have to destroy your goddamn sisterslicing station and send it down to finish the job the locals have started in that furbag town, I'll do it. To me, remorse is just a word I can usually spell. I swear I'll do it, Yazel. Go!" Yazel stared with wide, horror-filled eyes. His adam's apple jumped with his convulsive swallow. Then he turned and ran toward the mouth of Spoke C. And a huge cargo loader appeared at the far end of the station rim's arc. It came rolling along on its enormous tires, blaring its big ugly-voiced horn to get people out of the way. It and the siren did not form a pleasant melody. And Hellfire stiffened and started an ugly, rigid sort of dance. Quindy saw that from one knee just inside the mouth of the station-to-ship tunnel. Striking and nearly as garish as Trafalgar with her truly black skin and truly yellow hair, ike-red halter and tight-assed, wide-legged yellow pants. She held her stopper before her in both hands, swinging it as she swung her gaze. She was searching for the person who was holding a number Two stopper setting on her captain. The cargo loader kept coming, yellow and red and shiny. Taller than a tall truck and just as wide. Two big plastiflex "arms" uplifted to bear a pair of great big packing cases the size of coffins. Larger. The ugly sound of its hoarse klaxon combined with the station's alarm siren in a rage of sound to stimulate madness. Captain Hellfire continued her helpless dance. Quindy continued her fruitless search, with eye and stopper. The loader kept coming. Its horn mercifully ceased to blare. The way was clear before it all the way to berth E-except for Hellfire. E-2 was out of sight 88 around that section of the station's arc. The station siren kept up its maddening falsetto screaming. Trafalgar came trotting out of the umbilical behind Quindy and squatted beside her. "Hi," he said conversationally, looking searchingly about as she did. "You're coming out of your top." She didn't pull it up and she didn't reply. Both their gazes swept the curving offloading area; the mouths of tunnels that were spokes back to the rim; the moving loader; the sprawled CS men. And the helplessly "dancing" Hellfire. "It has to be the loader," he said without looking at the woman squatted beside him. "Try training a Three setting on those bales in its lifter. Maybe you can heat 'em up enough to-" She lost the rest. This-Trafalgar Q?-person had lurched up and forward to charge at Hellfire. His ill-gotten gain of a stopper was thrust into his sash. The klaxon started again. Siren, klaxon, and loader kept coming as Quindy swiveled on one toe and knee to carry out his instructions, because they seemed sensible. She certainly wasn't seeing any other source of Hell-fire's helplessness. Maybe some bastard or bastards were sardined in one or both of those cases, pinning her with a stopper on Two until the loader (one speed: slow) could run her down. Two-handed, Quindy squeezed and moved tier stopper in a figure-8 that played the beam over both crates. She couldn't spot a hole through which someone might be directing Ms own beam. It sure was all he and Mm, on this world and its station! Trafalgar, meanwMle, raced across the oncoming loader's path at Hellfire without slowing. Running, he Mt her with a shoulder and they both sprawled. That was necessary. Grabbing or even touching someone under a stopper beam was like touching someone holding onto a hot electrical wire. The neural disruption transferred to anyone else in physical contact. 89 Having knocked her out of the beam, he kept rolling as she did. The strange aspect was that even with the loader bearing down on them, Trafalgar Cuw hardly seemed businesslike. He occupied himself in ripping open the stunned, wallowing woman's shirt. "Hmp! Sure isn't crowded in here." Both of them jerked when the stopper beam found them again. Quindy's efforts hadn't accomplished anything. As their bodies rolled apart, Hellfire slurring curses while she jerked, the attacker unwisely decided to keep his beam on her. Trafalgar rolled free. His efforts had accomplished the first part of his purpose. In his hand when it emerged from Hellfire's shirt was the pulsar

beamer she had, courtesy the Mott-chindi Public Protection Agency. Trafalgar came up to a one-knee squat the same as Quindy's. He two-handed the beamer just as she did her stopper. The loader loomed huge now, ten or eleven meters away and coming. Air crackled as Trafalgar launched pulsar quanta from the yellow pistol. One arm of the cargo loader flashed with a hit. He redirected his aim to the other arm, hit, swung back to the first. Re-aimed, hit the right spot. Again the arm flashed. It began sagging. He fired at the second arm again, and again. "Uh!" He lurched and started to shiver as a stopper beam found him. Someone had woken up to the fact that this wildly-clad man was far more dangerous than the sprawled woman with the prass-colored hair and the lavender tights. Abruptly he was freed of the beam-by his own efforts. With a hideous groaning sound, both arms of the loader bent and flexed downward, ruined. The two crates spilled free and hit the deck with a terrible noise. If someone yelled, he was unheard above the sound of screeching metal and plastiflex; the loader was coming on inexorably, pushing its own broken arms along before it. It was nearly enough to merit the 90 cliché "juggernaut." The grating screech was nearly enough to drown out the siren. Nearly. The thing was two meters away from Trafalgar Cuw, and from his position it looked big as a spacecraft. "HELLFIRE!" he bawled. "ROLL LEFT!" He rose enough to hurl himself that way-with a tire over two meters tall and a meter wide just about arm's length in front of him, and coming. Having dodged the screeching ruined arms, he dived back behind them, close to the loader's high-set body. He hit the deck between the wheels and lay flat, stretched along its longitudinal line. Whether he prayed or not was for no one to know but Trafalgar Cuw. If he yelled, there was too much other noise for it to be heard. At the last instant he whipped off his wide-brimmed hat. The loader trundled on. Hellfire only just managed to roll free of it. As she got weakly to her feet, the Security man on the walkway beside the loader's cab hit her with another Two beam. Hellfire began dancing again. And the loader stopped, most of its bulk between her and Quindy. "Oh, dammit!" That from the rainbow-clad man sprawled unharmed under the huge machine. He had assumed it was cybernetically or at least remote controlled and would merely continue rolling on around the torus circumference. Now he had to crawl out. Since the clearance between his back and the pusher shovel poised under the monster was only nine or ten centimeters, he had to snake-crawl, wriggling on his belly. "Just keep thinking how badly you need to be off Macho, Traffy me dear boy," he muttered, crawling. And grunting. He emerged huffing behind the loader and swung his legs around rather than drag them out. He rose just in time to look over and see Quindy flop, jerking. 91 "Oh, wonderful," he muttered, clapping his hat back on. He dodged the other way to see if Hellfire had thought (and rolled) fast enough to survive. She had. She was even on her feet. And helplessly imitating someone out of legendry; someone named Sainvytus. He had been a dancer, Trafalgar assumed. "Oh, wonderful," he muttered. He spotted her nemesis, a beige-and-black who was carefully keeping his stopper trained on her while he clambered down off the loader. A metal ladder ran up its side to the cabin. The b-&-b was descending it awkwardly, facing out from the ladder. With his hand on the pulsar beamer in his sash, Trafalgar looked down. No! He moved his hand to the other grip poking up out of that rumpled sash of scarlet so flamboyantly decorated with a patternless slub-weave of gold thread. He drew the stopper instead, said "Hey!" and smiled when the man jerked his face to look his way. Trafalgar squeezed. The CS man started jerking in the Two-setting rictus; Hellfire stopped as he lost control and ceased squeezing his stopper. He also lost his balance and fell off the ladder. He tumbled against Hellfire and both of them went down. "Oh, wonderful," Trafalgar snarled, running. No hurry, really. Both pirate and security man were bewildered and bleary from loss of nerve control and muscles. Trafalgar was able to grasp the fellow's hair and tug long enough to bring his stopper down on the back of his neck. While he settled down for a snooze, Trafalgar helped up the cursing, dizzy Captain Hellfire of Satana. "Don't be too effusive about it, but I just saved your life. All I

want is transport off Macho." She was loose on. her feet and hadn't regained control of her eyes, among other things. "We are off Macho-and are you sure you want to be the only male on a ship commanded and crewed by women- and a Jarp?" 92 "Sounds lovely to me," he said with a bright-flashing grin. "Listen, we'd better-" "Huh," she sneered. "Suppose I told you we're all lesbians?" He rolled his eyes. "Even the Jarp?" She laughed scornfully. "I'd say oh shit and add that there's still a CS man up on the loader, other side, making Quindy dance." "Well damn it you damned man why didn't you SAY so!" While he rolled his eyes helplessly, she started around the loader. From its other side a voice rose: "Rob? You got that one?" "Pos!" Trafalgar called and fell flat. Looking under the loader, he smiled at the sight of a parr of black-booted, tan-pantsed legs. He also aimed and squeezed the grip of his stopper. The result was that Hellfire rounded the machine's bulk to find the CS man in a jiggle-dancing Freeze while Quindy was just getting herself up, weakly, at the mouth of the umbilical. Hellfire continued moving to her, at the trot. "Wonderful," she enthused and, from Quindy's side, smiling, she turned to aim at the stopper-Frozen Cop-perdock Security man. As advertised, Hellfire's stopper was hardly ever set lower than Three. Sprawled flat on the other side of the loader and aiming under it, Trafalgar Cuw saw part of the flash and watched his target vanish. He knew why and how. "O sweet Theba's britches, that is one vicious woman! Fried the poor bug with him already helpless as a paramecium on a lab-slide! I think we'd just better get this pulsar beamer stored away in a safer place and hope she thinks she just lost it," he muttered. He was getting himself up again and looking sadly down at filthied royal blue tights. The filth wasn't nearly as unsightly as the ripped fabric at the knee. "That flaining woman would be dangerous even with a hairpin!" 93 He hop-ran around the loader in time to see the empty umbilical. He heard their footsteps running up the ramp to the ship, though. "Hey!" " 'Bye, Trafler Kew," the voice came back hollowly from the ramped tunnel. "Thanks for everything!" "Rotten b-" 6 Cowards, it has been said, die many times. The brave, however, are just asking for it. -Trafalgar Cuw Skinned knee or not, Trafalgar raced for the gaping mouth of the umbilical tunnel at the best run he could summon. Under the circumstances it was championship class. Unfortunately the circumstances included three men moving swiftly toward him from the dkection in which the loader had been headed. Only one wore Copper-dock Security uniform but all three bore weapons. Trafalgar didn't have time to wonder whether they had broken out the plainclothes men or formed a mini-posse. A sizzling ionizing pulsar blast sent him scrambling back behind the ungainly bulk of the cargo loader. He yelled, and he yelled loud. Hellfire did not reappear. The trio kept coming. One jackass blasted one of the loader's huge tires. Trafalgar danced back and ducked a descending clutch-bar as the whole yellow-and-red 94 95 machine settled on that side with a groaning of metal and plastiflex and plasteel. "Traffy my dear sweet boy," he muttered, "I do think things are beginning to get a mite serious." A photonuclear beam added an exclamation point by zipping under the loader. It made a terrible noise when the pusher shovel stopped it. Trafalgar snuggled lovingly up to the ruined tire. "On the other hand," he mused, muttering his thoughts because it helped in times of stress, "those flaming women-lesbians all! Oh, what wonderful luck! As exotically attractive a group as ever I've seen. What criminal waste! They aren't about to get clearance to depart this place. If I don't get onboard and help out, that charming orange-head will blow up the station and her ship, too, sure. And these three fobbers are stopping me." He considered a moment, sighed, and gave his head a resigned wag. "Better to trade this three-man militia for the whole station. End justifies the means and all that. Why, they're menacing the whole station by stalking me! Maybe even SeeYou down on Macho!" With that he reopened the concealed nevelcro closure up the inside of one lemony sleeve. He extracted the pulsar beamer from the inner pocket hidden in the sleeve's blousy folds. He paused, pulsar in one hand and stopper in the other, and took one good deep breath. Then he pushed up the brim of his big hat with the barrel of the



beamer. He pounced sideways out into the open a meter from the loader to face the new trio of noble Copper-dock defenders. Depending upon catching them by surprise, he was surprised. He never used the pulsar weapon, although his stopper Froze two men because they were side by side. The third had separated from them to come around the loader. He neatly pinned Trafalgar Cuw with a #2 stopper setting. 96 Teeth chattering, eyes rolling loosely behind their glaze, a useless weapon in each useless hand, Trafalgar Cuw began jiggle-shuffling. Again. Just within Satana's airlock a panting Hellfire was taking notice of her gaping shirtfront. "What the vug happened here? Looks like I've been attacked by a sex-mad rapist!" "No rapist, Captain, definitely," Quindy assured her almost formally. That ridiculously colorful person threw himself at you to save you from the stopper on you-and that loader. Did you see the size of those tires? I think they must've meant to roll right over you." "Really." Hellfire's brows were up. She had not noticed that, having been incapacitated at the time. Her hand was out of sight inside her shirt's roomy bodice. "Well, look what I found!" "Captain-he isn't coming. More bandits out there!" Quindy was out in the tunnel, squatting in an attempt to see back down the enclosed ramp. "Uh! That was a pulsar burst!" "So they're going to take him down. We were about to button up and leave without him anyhow, weren't we?" Hellfire was gazing thoughtfully at the unusually large oval she had found in her shirt. She had tucked away this small brown egg long and long ago, back down onplanet! "No wonder I kept waking up uncomfortable on the shuttlevator!" The onyx-gleaming woman straightened to stare coolly into the eyes of the golden-hued one. "Pos, you were about to leave him. But I'm over being stoppered now, and I'm thinking again. He saved your life, Captain! And they're trying to kill him- because of you. If you don't go back to help him, I'm on my way." "Bitch," Hellfire said, "there you go playing Mother Quindy again!" And she ran down the ramp. As she reached its mouth, she filled one hand with her stopper and squeezed the object in the other. 97 "Yoo-hoo," she called, "catch!" And she tossed the smoke grenade at the pair of men advancing on the rainbow their compatriot had stoppered. One started automatically to catch, before he woke up and dived aside. The other froze in panic and became random molecules as Hellfire followed up her toss with a loving squeeze of her stopper. crack-toom! Greasy dark smoke boiled up. It and the smallish detonation were enough distraction so that the third man took his beam off Trafalgar. Trafalgar staggered with returning control, but not soon enough to keep from falling down. Hellfire could not see the action he was covering: he was swiftly restoring the pulsar to his inner sleeve pocket. Cursing, she raced over to help him up. "Into the ship, damn you!" She backed after him, keeping her stopper trained on the rear of the loader. The smoke hadn't spread that far yet, although the machine's forward end was being swallowed by it. The third member of the hastily raised little posse, however, had lost his nerve along with sight of his companions. He was already legging it down Spoke C, covered by the hulking loader. The backing Hellfire heard a little groan and half-whirled. The CS man whose stopper Trafalgar had, the one he had slugged after she poofed Chenith, was stirring. Keeping her gaze directed at the loader, Hellfire squatted, rapped him sharply on the back of the neck, and rose to keep backing. The man settled down for another nap. Hellfire followed Trafalgar Cuw up the ramp to Satana. She was surprised to back past Quindy. "Just backing you up, Captain." "Very good, First. Let's run." They whirled and ran. They ran fast enough to reach the ship's airlock at the same time as the still rather dizzy Trafalgar. 98 "All personnel onboard ship, Captain!" Quindy announced, crisp as any officer on a military ship and with as much necessity as an announcement that white stars were hot. "Thanks, Captain," Trafalgar said. "Zip us up, Quindy. No, wait-Janjy! Got another of those smoke grenades? Go fondle your ugly male parts, Trafalgar Pew, and shut up. Who wants you onboard anyhow?" "Two, Captain," Janja said, coming forward with a hand inside the shirt she had just opened. "I do," Trafalgar said quietly, with his gaze on Janja's hand. More or less. "Save one, Janjy," Hellfire said, shooting Trafalgar a dark glance. "Let's just

squeeze one, count four, pause, roll it down the ramp, and secure real-1-1 fast. Ready, Quindy? Ready, Janj?" "Ready Captain." "Ready Captain." "Squeeze. Close airlock. Three-four-now!" The airlock hatch was closing as the little brown egg went rolling out and down the umbilical. Satana's airlock closed just as its occupants heard the sharp little explosion. "Whew," Trafalgar Cuw said, running a smudged back of a hand across his forehead. "I don't know if I can stand this loud quiet after all that noise!" "Well stop yours then, Rainbow," Hellfire said. "What about your ship, Captain? Jarry, was that its name?" "Jarik, actually, but I made it up. I don't have a ship. Never have had one." The assembled crew of Satana rolled its collective eyes. "I sure would like you off my ship, man!" "Too late, Captain. We've saved each other's lives. We're bonded together-just as sister and brother, of course."

99 "Damn you, Trafalgar Pew-" "All secure, Captain," Quindy swiftly interjected, using a firm tone and a hopeful look, trying to redirect Hellfire's attention to the essentials. This man was hardly that. "Orders, Captain?" Hellfire gave her a look, shot Trafalgar one, and nodded. "Secure. To DS stations and stand by. Try to touch me and you're dead, Trafalgar!" And Hellfire legged it to the con-cabin. Before anyone could stop him, Trafalgar Cuw rushed after her. "What DS stations?" Raunchy said quietly. "We're not DS-ers. They're both down on Macho, forever." "I'll take shipside," Quindy said, glancing after her captain with a frown for Hellfire's oversight. "Now you two . . ." While she gave instructions, Satana hung snugly sealed off both from space and the umbilical, which gusted more greasy brown-black smoke into Copper-dock. Moments later Captain Hellfire was in her control cabin, staring holes in the image of a flushed Mott-chindese traffic controller on her commscreen. "Release this ship! Open berth C-2! You maniacs have killed two of my crew and tried to kill me, and I swear I'll open fire!" "I cannot release you, Captain." "Hellfire," Trafalgar said quietly. "Shut up," she snarled, and at the comm: "Can not? Slinker shit! You mean you won't! But you'd better, jacko! Think, for once. You dare not risk th-uh!" Having been struck sharply on the back of the neck by an expert, Hellfire sagged weakly in the captain's chair. Trafalgar straightened her in the big swivel seat with one hand and opened her shirt with the other. He felt about inside. No more weapons, no grenades. "Ner not much else," he muttered and smiled sweetly at the face that glared large-eyed from the commscreen. "One moment," he said pleasantly, easing Hell-fire out of the control chair. With her lying untidily at 100 his feet, he dropped into the contoured, extrapadded seat of Satana's chief officer. "Copperdock Control! Code coming. Input: T-as-in-Thin G-as-in-Giant O-for-Odor. Immediately! Now input this sequence: One two three three three .R-Rascal three eight eight six R-Rascal P-Prissy A-Anus. Got it?" "T, G, O,1,2, 3,3 ... what?" Trafalgar repeated the rest of it. "T, G, O (!) 1, 2, 3, 3, 3, R-3, 8, 8, 6, R-P-A. Got it. Encoded. Computer accessing, printing now-oh!" "Got it?" "Yes, sir!" "Got my picture too, from databank?" "Yes, sir!" "Good for us. Keep this between you and your superior only. Input three three two one I-as-in-Icicle. Got it?" The movements of the controller's arms showed that he was tapping it in. His face onscreen became a shade less dark as he stared at the code-accessed message on his terminal's screen. "Yes, sir! Got it, sir!" "Read it. Let's hear it, Copperdock." "That's not necessary, sir. I'm ready!" "Say it," Trafalgar snapped. "Says 'TGO PRIME OVERRIDE. OBEY INSTANTLY-FULLY.' That's all, sir. It's enough, sir! I mean . . . TGO!" "You have recorded?" "Yessir. That's automatic here, sir." "How macho," Trafalgar Cuw muttered, rolling his eyes. Then: "Open this berth. Release this spacecraft. My authority and my responsibility. Your station security chief is dead, and others because of their stupidity. Loader ruined because I ruined it to remove a menace -my responsibility my authority. Those itchy rectums tried to take me, Control. Now. Galaxy-wide wanted 101 Hellfire,, captain privately owned spacer Satana, in responsible custody my responsibility. Mitigated: two of her crew were slain on Mott-chindi-murder, due to incompetence and incapability local gov enforcement agency. Mitigation two: no violence was done by captain, Satana, or crew until violence done them.

12333-RRPA slash 3321 CUW repeat See-You-Double-v, custodian commander of Spacer Satana, now in custody, out. Acknowledge, Copperdock Control." "Sir, uh, Custodian, uh, Prime . . . ? Ah . . ." The traffic controller's adam's apple bobbed and looked as if it were about to slit his throat from the inside. "I, ah, don't know the procedure, TGO Prime, sir." "You have confirmed and recorded. Just release the oie ship now, fella." Beat, beat, sweaty wait while the sweating man unlucky enough to pull this shift as controller performed three standard, swift tasks. "Berth C-2 open sir!" "Very good. Very military. Never wore a uniform, myself. All done, then. Shut off your screen and get back to business as usual, Controller. Take report from CS Officer Yazel, who is commended and recommended as a cool-headed and sensible security man with sense enough not to interfere with an obvious psychotic. Onions to everyone else from the ground up, especially the cretinous clerk at shuttleport and excepting you, Controller. Ends." Trafalgar batted away the microphone and buttoned off sound and picture. He glanced down at the unconscious Hellfire, leaned back, sighed long, and sagged in her high-backed con-chair. When he crossed his legs, he looked sadly at the torn-out knee of his garish pants. "Whew! One damned thing after anoth-" Something, a feeling, made him interrupt himself and turn in the chair, slowly. Hands clearly in view and motionless. He looked large-eyed at them, and didn't bother to smile. They didn't either. 102 They were a meter away. The very black woman stood just inside the con-cabin. The very orange Jarp was in the hatchway. Trafalgar Cuw looked into the dark bore of Quindy's leveled stopper, and Raunchy's. He sighed again and spoke very softly. "Oh, wonderful." 7 CORUNDUM: an esp. hard mineral of the composition Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, forming the valuable gemstones ruby and sapphire. The massive, abrasive, nontransparent forms are known as emery. -Universal Edutapes Through the parsec abyss whipped a speck that was neither comet nor sun nor the satellite of any sun. It was Firedancer, one of the best-equipped ships on the spaceways. In Firedancer's con-cabin stood the spacer's owner. His name was Corundum. He stood staring at ever-changing displays and busy readout panels in a variety of hues carefully selected to minimize glare. His ship's sensors and SIPACUM- Ship Inboard Processing and Computing (Modular)- reported, constantly. Sinisterly black-clad as his sense of drama pleased him, Captain Corundum, very dark and with jet hair falling in waves to his shoulders, stood with shoulders back and hands clamped behind his back. It was indeed a Napoleonic pose, and the well-edu-103 104 cated and rather esthetic Corundum was indeed well aware of the fact. While the precipitate and definitely surreptitious departure of the one he called his Primeval Princess angered him, it disappointed and insulted him more. Corundum was no angry man. He was on the hunt. It was an occupation he much enjoyed. Therefore he was better than good at it. Besides, in another matter he had been gratifyingly successful. His deception out on Murph's moon, Dot, had served its intended purpose-when he combined it with his inspace destruction of a TransGalactic Watch craft and all hands. TransGalactic Order believed that the ship of its uniformed branch had been blown away by Corundum's chosen enemy, because that was what Corundum wanted TGO to believe. Now the wrath and power of TGO had descended on Jonuta and would continue to harry the slaver. "Let him squirm," Corundum muttered, only just aloud and only to himself. "After a time Corundum will solve all his problems for him. All his problems. But first ... Janja." He glanced sideward and the con-cabin's lights flashed off his implanted optics, which appeared to be enormous black pupils. They replaced the eyes legally taken from him long ago in a barbaric punishment for one of his first criminal acts. The horrible punishment had only embittered him. From the bitterness grew a dark crop of resolve and determination. Those combined with his genius to make him the most successful pirate along the spaceways. He was a proud man. In addition to being a quiet-spoken and surprisingly cultured man, Corundum was one of the most ruthless individuals in the cosmos. He was proud of that, too. He smiled grimly, alone in Firedancer's con-cabin, and his voice was just as grim. "So, Primeval Princess," he muttered, only to him- 105 self and the SIPACUM he

called Jinni. "Franjistation confirmed what Corundum surmised when you did not return to me. You chose to flee Corundum, without so much as a note, and take up whorish company with that scrawny lesbian bust Hellfire. Just the sort of volatile careless girl to get herself blown away before she sees the age of thirty. Well, Janja, well. This is unworthy of you and of Corundum. How can Captain Corundum hold up his head among those who aggrandize themselves by considering themselves his peers? Corundum, your savior and benefactor who trusted you! "I shall find you Janja, 'Cloud-top.' " His use of Hellfire's nickname for Janja was a sneer. "And then, my dear little ungrateful barbarian, we shall take proper leave of each other!" Corundum, on the hunt. Not even TGO was as good at it as Captain Corundum of Firedancer. He was a connoisseur, a studier of noise. Space was full of noise, on several bands. Every sun, every ship on the spaceways constantly spat radio noise in every direction. That was hardly all. Messages were continually crisscrossing the so-called void between the suns as well; messages whipping out at more than 300,000 kloms per second. The speed of light itself, because the messages rode light. Human-made hitchhikers on human-generated beams of narrow, concentrated, intense light; "coherent" light: lasers. Each beam repeated the message it carried hundreds of times a second. Firedancer's hull was almost crowded with seekers, the hounds of technology. Radio receivers and reflector antennae, radar detectors and infrared scanners, flux meters and EM-field sensors, mass detectors and even lowly telescopes. The reflector antenna turned, turned, ever seeking. They were all Corundum's hounds, the best available, 106 chained in place and ever sniffing in all directions. They snuffed up every laser message that impinged upon them, fed each into SIPACUM-called-Jinni ("Jeanie"). Jinni held them ready for display, a hound eager to show off its catch. A dozen key words triggered Jinni to apprise its master of their interception at once, by means of a soft, mellow gong sound. Otherwise, from time to time the master actuated the screen and viewed the messages. Other peoples' messages, to other people separated from them by the space that was Corundum's chosen home and that he thought of as his domain. Meanwhile sensors reached out along the spaceways from Firedancer to scan and record and analyze various bits of noise. Many were the emissions of other spacecraft. Many of those were known to Jinni and thus to Corundum, as if they had been recognizable signatures written across paper, legibly. Jinni's data banks were stuffed with them, and even with styles of message that might identify anonymous senders. Hours and hours of measuring and comparing work were involved in each case. Jinni processed each in seconds. Then it rendered its judgment as swiftly. Judgment as brilliant and nearly as omniscient as the old Jinn or "genies" of legend. Of course Corundum's Jinni was "smart" enough to admit a succinct Don't Know when that was applicable. After that it would respond only to his direction: Guess. That, for a SIPACUM or any other computer, was an entirely different process from what humans called guessing. Over the years Corundum had become extremely adept at intercepting other craft in space. It was almost simple; a matter of collecting data and using it. It made him a highly successful entrepreneur in the high-risk business of piracy. Any policer force up to and including TGO would have made him a creamy offer to join as, say, tactician: 107 intercept expert. (More likely with a less penetrable job description such as inspace identification adviser.) That is, had any polieer force known of his virtuosity. Since none did and Corundum did not advertise or brag (truthfully) even to Janja whom he had trusted, he had never received such an offer. That was good. Corundum knew that detailed computer research, a good SCED, might reveal him. He had to assume that no one had thought to instigate such a thorough search/ compare/extrapolate/display in quest of knowledge of his uncanny ability. For in that case the offer would have been made. In that case Corundum, a confirmed, happy and successful outlaw definitely not in quest of rehabilitation or honest employment, would have declined. In which case he would have become Galactic Enemy #1. TGO could run such an exhaustive SCED. But the galaxy was bigger than big, and all of it was TGO's province.

TGO was busy and TGW was spread thin along the spaceways. Nor was funding unlimited, even for the little-known oh-so-secret super-policer force known most often as The Gray Organization, dedicated to the maintenance of a semblance of galactic order with the philosophy that its desired end justified its means. Any means. In a way, such unusually successful outlaws as Corundum and Jonuta had more resources than TGO. But only, as Jonuta was learning to his anguish and staggering financial cost, in a way. Of course that latter fact also assured Corundum that the feared-indeed awesome and terrifying-TGO was not infallible. Captain Corundum had tricked it into punishing Jonuta for Corundum's crimes! Therefore Corundum did not worry about any polieer force except TGO. Nor did he bother to worry about TGO's initiating a SCED on him. If it ever happened, it happened. Life would change again. It had already changed many times, for the eyeless Koran-tu'um of the 108 planet Meccah. It had made him Corundum, who was a conundrum. And all he had in mind just now was finding another spacer called Satana, and one onboard named Janja of Aglaya. 8 ... life means a mighty leap, even higher above its origin into the radiant infinity of space, time, and understanding. -rocket developer Krafft Ehricke Captain Jonuta of Coronet was not surprised to find his cabin almost eerily bathed in a pink-red glow. He and Kenowa had equipped it with various lights, mobile and otherwise, and he had installed the control himself. It was for personal rather than computer control of the lighting color and intensity. He was not surprised to find Kenowa, glowing pinky red in the soft illumination they called the sex-light, in Ms bed. It was a bed, not a bunk. He was delighted, though again not truly surprised, to find her wearing a yellowish-beige, one-third-cup deerhyde (c) bra and loin-piece. The latter was merely a thin strap from which depended a fringe of thirty or so very thin strips of yellowish beige Softaskin (c) deerhyde (c). He was mildly surprised that she had contrived to turn the thin strap into a (hyper) old-fashioned garter belt. Attached to it were ultra-thin black straps supporting (hyper) old-fashioned black hose. They were so 109 110 tautly tugged and so tight over her admittedly large (hyper) shapely thighs and relaxed calves as to appear gray, the shade called Peatmoss Nebula Gray. (Made of the polymer Cling-U, the hose were also practically indestructible and would last a lifetime or nearly.) What was surprising was that she also wore blinding-ly shiny black pumps with long long high heels no thicker than her little fingers. The oldest fetishes, he mused. Leather, garterbelted hose, and stilt heels. What a woman his big woman Kenowa was! "Hello," she said hi a low voice but naturally, "you are a handsome specimen of hew-man. You are, however, wearing entirely too much." Jonuta remedied that, hurrying without appearing to be. Jonuta knew women. Jonuta also knew Jonuta, and he knew Kenowa. She knew him too, and knew that his undressing was hurried without appearing to be. "You look dangerous," he told her when he was naked. "So do you. And it's not polite to point." "I'm not p-" He looked down. "Oh." She was right. He was pointing. Wonderful woman! "I have a surprise," she said lazily. "No doubt. Beyond the fringe, so to speak." She looked startled, then amused, then pleased. "Oh, my love! You remain full of surprises and sweet words! I love you!" Without waiting for his response in the usual way of one who uttered those three words, she went on: "But then I have another surprise." She's colored and flavored her nipples, Jonuta guessed, and wondered: What color? She patted the pink-lit bed beside her. "Come join me. Want to see Dark Invader, Akima Mars meller number fourteen?" "Stare at Setsuyo Puma when I have you right here in the flesh?" It was a gallant response, but they both knew the answer. Every male wanted to see the latest in the most famous holodrama series in the galaxy. Not to mention 111 replays of the first thirteen-especially #2, Captive of the Centaurians, and #4, Sheikh of Sekhar. Every man and most lesbians as well. Otherwise, only women sufficiently secure in their own womanhood and selves-and sure of their men-were also big fans of the audience-delightingly masochistic secret-agent mellers that were an excuse to display the nigh-fabulous hyperstar Set-suyo Puma: "The Biggest Pair in the Universe." Akima Mars #12, From Resh with Love, had set records. So had #11,

just as the star presumably did. "Well," Kenowa said, lowering and stretching her sheeny-stockinged left leg while raising her right at the knee, all languidly, "we could just sort of mess around a little while we watch. Unless you don't want to. Or don't want to watch." Most women would have stopped there, to push and tease their men, to force the choice. Kenowa did not. She was Kenowa. Former drug addict always sensuous woman crazy about Jonuta. She knew about Pyrrhic victories and liked her face too well to cut off her nose. She may or may not have been sure of herself. If not, she was a better actor than Setsuyo Puma, if a bit less top-heavy. "Now I," she said with a lazy smile, "would love to watch that hypersexy hyperstar's newest adventure. With you." "You ignite to Akima Mars?" he said, sliding into the bed beside her. Wickedly he added, "Doesn't make you feel inadequate, hmmm?" "Hmp," Kenowa hmped, and strutted her chest. Kenowa had a considerable plenitude of chest to strut. "Bilobate" was hardly adequate as an adjective. "All over a handful's a waste, isn't it?" Jonuta reached over and grasped a handful. There was plenty of overflow. "That phrase was invented to be spouted by flat-chested wimmen . . . and their men." "Or their boys," she got out scornfully, but she was starting to gasp and writhe. "Ohhh . . . you'd . . . better stop . . . thumbing my, uh, external sensor node . . . 112 or . . . we'll never get ar-ound to . . . seeing this mel-ler." He wasn't ready to stop. Possessive fingers ravished her breasts until their crests were raised and thrusty in excitement. She made small throaty noises. A sort of torment filled her chest and infiltrated her entire being. It was a familiar torment and a welcome one. The torment of pleasure, of desire rising fast as a heated thermometer. My hot-stuff treacherous man-loving rough-hands-loving sluts of breasts and responses, she thought, and felt her hips working ever so slightly, instinctively. She felt herself going limp, malleably limp with desire. But not her nipples! They were far from limp. Rigid little knobs tried to push holes through the halter's "cups" that covered about a third of the elastic flesh he was palpating. She sort of lunged, and their kiss was very warm and very mobile. Then he was pushing her back. "Sorry," he said, being mean, "you want to watch Akima and I'd do anything to accommodate." With a last pinch, neither gentle nor harsh, to the extrusible sensor node she had mentioned, he folded both hands on his chest, corpse-style, and stared at the wall. She clamped her hands to her breasts. "You dog," she husked, pushing hard. But her lips curved into a smug smile. He'd be back. "Sticks and stones," Jonuta said. "You have connected the Rollem controls to the jack, young lady?" "I have," she said, and thumbed the button. Akima Mars #14, Dark Invader, began. Not quite life-size between them and the wall-not-bulkhead directly opposite the foot of the bed. The music hit with the punch of a pulsar cannon. Red exploded liquidly all over the screen and ran, and the music died as they watched an apparently bare Setsuyo Puma swim through the apparent blood, stopper in teeth. The scene was cleverly murky. Was she nude? 113 The movie was neither murky nor all that clever. It was ridiculous, but then they all were. That was part of their charm. Part of it: the success of the holomovie melodramas, mellers or holomellers, derived from Set-suyo Puma's measurements of 134E-100-64 at 175 sems height,\* and her (and her promoter's) knowledge of the ancient psychology of the race called Galactic or "human," males and females alike. Long ago such mellers had been called bodice-rippers when they were softcore and degs for degradation when they were genuine-certified hardcore pornography. Titillation. Seduction not of the innocent but of the guilty at heart/ mind, if not in deed. The first scene introduced the villain of the title. Whether he or it, the Dark Invader was a bionic hybrid all in shining black carapace, glossy and glistening, hard and reflective as anthracite. Menacing, discomfiting. Faceless within the fitted black helmet and wearing a melodramatically long black cloak, not cape, lined with the rich red of the wine called Suzite Scarlet. His voice was deeper than deep2 and it was quickly established: this downer hadn't a nice inclination in his/its (polyplas-and-synthesteel-and-plasmer-and flesh?) body. He/it was obviously unquestioned dictator of a crowd of similar bipedal man-size man-shaped black

constructs (no reason given). They came from Another Universe, as if another galaxy wouldn't have been enough, through that gigantic collapstar called the Maelstrom. Their purpose was the conquest of no less than the Milky Way. That began with their snatching a spaceship in flight, after which they proceeded to the torture-questioning of its five crew. (Two males, a Jarp, two stomachless, more than attractive starlets.) Their methods of forcibly extracting information were astonishingly lacking in \* 53E-25-50 at 5' 9", old style. The ancient phrase was "traffic stopper" or "ridiculous" or "bovine," depending upon the eye and hostility of the beholder. 114 technological sophistication, though no more so than showing hand-operated gunnery on a spaceship. The methods were also effective. Two captives survived, one of each sex. Thus Dark Invader learned about this galaxy, and Galactics. Their reason for attacking and wiping out the entire planet Jasbir was ambiguous or worse. Unless one recalled that Akima Mars #10, 298 Sems in Peril, had taken place on Jasbir. (Supposedly, with a few anomalies and out-and-out errors delightedly pounced upon by fannish cognoscenti whose inner needs demanded critical evaluations of everything.) So there was that perfectly good set from #10 just waiting to be used again. Or destroyed, as it spectacularly was before the eyes of Jonuta and Kenowa. And billions of others, because that was the way the Akima Mars audience was measured: in the billions, all along the spaceways. "Simple," the Dark Invader, Arkon, told his nasties. "Hardly worthy of our power!" And he turned his eerie red optics sinisterly • on a big star map: the galaxy anciently and ridiculously called the Milky Way. "Shudder," Kenowa muttered, as: Cut to: Akima Mars, bare 134Es in hand. Both hands. The scarlet wig foaming down all over her shoulders and down her back was, neatly, the same hue that lined Arkon's cloak. Akima Mars was using those fantastic flesh-pillows to masturbate a sprawled, silly-smiling lover who was obviously absolutely out of his skull with delight and passion. Zoom in on her left earring, a dangling ringed planet in gold. (It was a romantic image that persisted, though in truth only two such planets, uninhabited and uninhabitable, had been discovered. Rumor was that the ringed planet was older than what humankind were pleased to call the Settling of the Galaxy.) The ringed planet dangling from Akima Mars's nice left ear began to pulsate, definitely. 115 Cut to: lover's ecstatic face. Cut to: hers, a truly attractive face with pronounced bone structure, neither beautiful nor harsh. Voice-over! "Double-O Nine," the voice said, for such was her ID code though few knew why after all these centuries; with her build she was not just one better, but two. "Double-theta Nine," it repeated. (Shot of her working her jaw, gritting the tooth that previous mel-lers had established as being her response signal.) "Double-O Nine. Two comms. Follows. First: that man is an agent of DOG comm ends. Second: invasion of galaxy from Elsewhere (another plane of existence?) requires your services. Ends. Awaiting acknowledgment." Cut to: her cheekbony face. A flicker of eyes like melting chocolate. A slight passing grimness as if an icy breeze might be parsing over the chocolate, hardening it. Then nothing save her passion and attentive-ness to what she was doing. She was, after all, a professional. Spy. Pull back for longer shot: kneeling over and astride her lover of the moment, now established as an enemy agent doubtless put on her by Disorder This Galaxy, she continued her breasty manipulation of his rampantly erect slicer. Frequent insta-cuts to: his face, gasping, ecstatic. Steady masturbation by pounds and pounds of startingly firm woman-flesh. Slicer like a cannon sliding along the valley between two warheads. His arousal follows a rising curve. His eyes glaze. And his orgasm, accompanied by excellent shot of her breasts being powerfully grasped and cruelly indented by both his hands and both hers (inadequate, all four). Then he sprawls back, weak in postcoital ennui. Obviously this is the perfect time for her to take out the DOG agent. She does not. Her use of towel on her breasts is tastefully just invisible to the camera. Cut to: her hand, bronze in hue and long of finger, 116 quadruply ringed. Fingers press obviously together with purposeful force. From the underside of the ring on her longest finger extrudes a small,

glistening pinpoint. Jonuta watched her hand clap to her right breast and her twitch as the glistening pinpoint sank into her nipple. Pull back: to show her rising on her knees, leaning forward, planting her palms on the bed just beyond her lover's head. Massy breasts dangle over his face. His eyes change, coming alight. Tight shot of his mouth closing on her proffered right nipple, his cheeks insinking in suction. Cut to: her face, showing obvious pleasure (overdone). Pull back as the naked Akima Mars rises, maintaining the mystery as always of her vulva, which had never been shown quite naked . . . throwing back the scarlet mane all viewers know is a wig, a trick of Holodynamavision making most viewers duck as the hair seemed to switch past their faces . . . her left knee lingering on the bed as . . . He goes into death rigors, looking surprised, accusative of glazing eyes, having ingested poison stabbed into her right nipple by the middle ring on her left hand. "Some poisons are effective only when taken orally, as in sucked," she murmurs to enlighten her duller fans. One eyebrow up, "Die happy, sucker," she adds in a mutter to the DOG agent, and she hurries in that fluid Setsuyo Puma way to begin encasing herself in one more exotic Akima Mars jumpsuit. This one, interestingly, is of shining black polymer to remind viewers of Arkon. It clasps her without a wrinkle and flashes its twenty or so purely ornamental buckles and D-rings, all in chrome. Kenowa was making mental notes on the suit. Jonuta really ought to have her, she thought suddenly. He'd show that mountain-mammared bitch what it's all about! 117 "Did you guess she was injecting herself with poison?" she asked. "Sure," Jonuta said, and she believed him because he always guessed and, on those isolated occasions when he had predicted wrongly, admitted it. Next the standard Akima Mars visit to headquarters, "on an unknown planet well off often-used spacelanes." During that sequence the Director was made to seem stupid because the writer was. He used "decimated" as if it meant destroyed/annihilated/extirpated rather than merely killed one in ten; he used "penultimate" as if it meant final rather than next-to-last. Ten or so, minutes later Akima Mars was a hardly credible "Braas Sunbrite," astrophysicist (!) en route to Panish. She wore the director's idea of plain, de-sexing astrophysicist attire—a blouse that wasn't tight and was closed all the way up to the collarbones. In addition she was encased in pants of a coral hue—skin-tight—and beige boots to match the blouse. Fortunately there was a gala masquerade on the spaceliner bearing her across the light-years, and she dressed exotically for it, complete with also-exotic jewelry, a lot of it, and sub-root hairdye: prass or brass to match her first name. This of course was the outfit she wore during the Emergency, with no chance to change. Too bad. A few minutes after that she and a handsome diplomat and his sleek but whiny daughter were prisoners of Dark Invader's bionic vanguard. Two of them tied her and used an exodermic syringe to implant a tiny needle-bomb in one component of her 134E. They demonstrated its efficacy, messily, on another prisoner who, though less endowed, exploded spectacularly and nauseously. Then they raped her. Two things in gleaming black armor, presumably hard. From behind. Presumably they were unable to resist the deed, as she showed herself unable to resist climaxing. The sleek but whiny girl was both horrified and contemptuous. Only then did the pair contact boss Arkon. Angered 118 at their display of independence, he poofed both with electric blue zaps from an extended finger (black, glistening, fleshless). In short order the white-bikini'd Biggest Pair In The Universe was in his hands both figuratively—since his hands weren't really hands—and literally, since the Pair was definitely real, whether bioengineered per speculation or no. Her scintillant jewelry remained intact. For some reason his iron control slipped when his bound, raped, bejeweled, mostly-unclad prisoner made rude noises about his manhood or lack thereof. He punished her by shooting several high-voltage jolts into the sleek but whiny diplomat's daughter. After that Akima Mars and the Girl-Sherazaad— had to watch, achingly in bondage, while the entire TriSystem Accord of planets, far far from Panish and the Maelstrom, was spectacularly destroyed. Even then the strutting monster didn't feel that he'd gotten even for the slur. At last he got around



to what everyone had been waiting for-presumably including Akima Mars. The audience-delightingly masochistic secret agent for THORN was soundly, even viciously punished with wire, lectrowhip, and some sort of lizardish creature from Dark Invader's universe. She took it all-and climaxed on camera, with sweat and dilated oral interior. She, the stupid but constantly remonstrating diplomat, and his sleek but whiny daughter spent the next fifty or so minutes-ess as prisoners of the Dark Invaders. Among other things, they easily poofed a fleet-let of TGO ships and a pirate named Tojuna, during which Jonuta went definitely stiff, while limping in the area of most interest to Kenowa. Akima Mars tried one flashy attempt at escape. Unsuccessful, despite a high dive that through the miracle of holodynamavision had every spectator preparing for a lapful of Setsuyo Puma. She was recaptured, tortured, 119 and used; sneered at and gloated over; and carefully shown from every angle with her elbows unmistakably strapped together behind her while Dark Invader Arkon perpetrated vicious acts on the primary manifestation of her talent and secondary characteristics of her sex. Someday, Jonuta mused, staring, I've got to meet that woman. We both deserve it! By this time Sherazaad seemed to agree, having gained great admiration for agent OO-9 during the latter's valiant and acrobatic escape attempt and her subsequent horrid punishment. Both Sherazaad and her father appeared to be flashing on their fellow captive. Accordingly the no-longer-sleek or even whiny young woman made the supreme sacrifice to facilitate the escape of Akima Mars, the One Person Who Could Save the Universe. Her escape was followed by a no-grav scene in which it was proven to hundreds of millions of non-spacefarers that breasts float; and then by a running scene in gravity that must have gone on for a full minute that seemed ten, extremely bouncily. The sequence doubtless strengthened resolve and penile muscles throughout the galaxy. An interfering Dark Invaders guard was bounced off a bulkhead by a flying Akima Mars and had his circuits shorted by the remnant of her bandeau. Attired from the hips down in the leggings and boots of that guard, which fitted her perfectly, she satisfyingly mopped up on seven or eight of the enemy, mostly by whirling and leaping kicks. By now she also had one of their blue-beam zap-guns. She reached the prominent hiding place of the trigger for her implanted bomb seconds ahead of a horde of them, and she and the diplomat successfully blasted themselves clear in an emergency lifepod. It spun away from the huge Dark Invader ship against an unusually black backdrop of space. Removing-with carefully shown masochistic overtones-the implanted bomb from her own already crowded mammary, she used it to blow Arkon's flag- 120 ship all over the holoscreen, which made it seem to blow up all over Captain Jonuta's cabin. Spinning helplessly in the spacepod awaiting rescue by the Authorities, the now-seen-as-heroic-and-almost-worthy diplomat assuaged Akima Mars's hurts by licking the few droplets of blood from the wound in her breast. That part Kenowa missed. By that tune she had her back to Akima Mars and her mouth full of Jonuta. Naturally enough, he was inflicting mild manual indignities on her dangling, large (though hardly 134E) breasts. Then he dragged her up over him to kiss her almost brutally even while he turned her flopping onto her side beside him and darkly invaded her. To their mutual enjoyment he rode her very hard, across several parsecs. He may or may not have been thinking of Akima Mars/Setsuyo Puma; the squirming gasping clutching climaxing Kenowa definitely was not. Spaceship Coronet became tachyons to leap the light-years, returned to solid matter again, and her captain throatily sounded his arrival at an ancient destination beloved of all men. "Setsuyo Puma, Akima Mars," Kenowa languidly, happily murmured awhile later, "never had it so fucking good." 9 Credo quod incredibilis est. -Bishop Idioticus Believe only half of what you see and nothing that you hear. -Dinah M. Craik Trafalgar Cuw was not watching an Akima Mars meller and he was not getting laid. Trafalgar Cuw was in trouble. "Well, creep?" Hellfire snarled. She stood over him, hands on lean hips, radiating enmity and pugnacity right out of the sexy attire she had donned for Macho and hadn't yet changed. "You want to say a few well-chosen words-oops, make that un-chosen words, creep, just the real scrute, the truth!

Or do you want another bust in the mouth?" Trafalgar's gaze lingered briefly on her bust and rolled to take in the staring, unfriendly faces of Janja and Raunchy. He looked up at Hellfire again. Yes, up. From the spaceship's deck, more often called the floor. Talking really wasn't the easiest thing in the cosmos for him. Breathing was work enough. Blood was like 121 122

thickening mucus in his nose, and it was sticky on his lip. Worse, he was wearing three or four meters of monofilament polymer cable. Hardly a cocoon, but . . . The single strand was thinner than his little finger and woven of nothing. It was one molecularly bonded strand capable of hauling a truck through gravity. Uphill. It hadn't a minimicromillimeter of yield or stretch, and naturally Quindy had pulled it really tight around him. She had cut her finger doing it, as a matter of fact. Then she had decided she liked him better at a lower level so she'd kicked his feet from under him. He had been indecorously decorating the deck/floor ever since. They had revived Hellfire. Hellfire was undamaged. A pill ended her headache by selecting every unnaturally taut muscle in her body and relaxing every one. Her first act, after a glower at the bound man, was to check the con. Good for her, he thought. She found all well: they were streaking away from Macho and (because of him) there was no pursuit and no attempt to intersect/intercept. She didn't bother to congratulate Janja, who he noticed was good at the con. A fast learner. Nor did Satana's captain trouble to thank Trafalgar Cuw for saving her butt and getting them off Copper-dock not only swiftly but safely. Instead, she called for a drink and used her foot to turn him over. With him face down and helplessly bound, she returned the blow to the back of the neck. Action-reaction bonked his forehead on the deck and bloodied his nose. Hellfire liked that. He saw some crystalline flashes and redded briefly, but unfortunately failed to black out. The Jarp brought her a drink, something alcoholic, and Hellfire liked that, too. It was weird, anomalous to the only man on Satana to hear its (her!) captain say thanks, sweetly, and see her bestow a fond and grateful pat to the Jarp's backside. Not that Trafalgar had any- 123 thing against Jarps. It was just that this was the first non-hostile, non-aggressive act on Hellfire's part that he'd seen. Come to think, it was aggressive, at that. Next she swigged deeply, regarding him from those diamond-hard garnet-dark eyes with true hostility. And some pleasure. That was anticipation, he decided unhappily, and he was right. She squatted, hoisted him with a fist in his hair, and busted his lip. Nasty knuckles the woman had. Sharp as her tongue and hipbones. Nasty ring she wore, too. Only after that did she try a couple of questions (while the canary-haired coal-skinned woman tactfully suggested that she give the con her experience since collapstar 37-b-known as Double-Ugly only because it was not too far, as galactic distances go, from 26-B, Ugly-was dead ahead and getting closer at rather too many kloms per second. Quindy took the con, and Trafalgar tried the light-bright-cute touch on Hellfire. It worked about forty percent of the time. This time was one of the other sixty percent. He was very grateful that the toe of her boot caught him in the inner thigh rather than where she'd aimed it. Now she asked Mm, the only man on a ship full of women + the Jarp hermaphrodite, if he'd like a bust in the mouth. He swallowed-thick, salty-and managed not to make the light-bright-cute reply that came to mind. Not. that Captain Hellfire's bust interested him much. "I'm ready to talk. But this-band . . . it's so tight I can barely breathe, much less t-" "I can hear you," Hellfire interrupted, in a voice like ice from the Muslim Cold Hell. Wonderful. Nice try, Traffy m'lad. "I wish you'd allow me a few minutes to talk. I mean, rather than get mad and relocate my teeth before I get started. I have an explanation. It isn't a quicky, Captain." He was 124 careful to make no reference to the possibility of the rearrangement of his balls rather than his teeth. "I hear you, bug. No guarantees. You slimewormed your way onto my ship and you knocked me out, hard, and took over. And Quindy heard you tell Copperdock Control that you're TGO." Trafalgar met her gaze and reminded himself that she was not only fobbied but so close to being around the bend that she was barely visible. He decided to tell her anyhow. Maybe the

others had some inkling of fair play. One of them, anyhow. A shipful of lesbians; lord, lord! Quindy seemed to have some sense and some influence with her fulminous captain, at least. "I saved your life on that station, Captain, and I saved all our lives by getting us off the station. That those facts make me your hated enemy is hard for me to handle." He saw her eyes flicker and her hand tremble. Was that the sound of ice cracking-under Ms feet? Certainly there were no cracks in the ice of her voice: "I've got a lot here that you can't handle, jacko. What makes you an enemy is lies and trickery-and those three little initials. T ... G ... O." Just as he opened his mouth to speak, she added, "And you knew my name too, down on Macho. I'm starting to wonder about coincidence." "True, all true. All right, Captain. I am worse than just forbidden to talk, but I'd rather save my jewels and my life and take chances later with the Company. I am older than I look. I am a second-identity, subdeep-cover agent for TSMC Company." "Mining? You?" "TSMC is a mining company, true. But mining's one thing I have never had to do. One. It's also one of the two companies that 'settled' Mott-chindi ... by importing miners and taking extra-good care of them so they stay there. They became colonists." "Took care of them," Hellfke repeated, sneering. "Mostly by rescuing a bunch of outlaws and jailbirds 125 and setting up Macho as a sovereign planet about ten mins later. With government, so the 'colonists' couldn't be got at by offplanet prosecutors and policers. And later by supplying them with a few shiploads of down-and-out whores." "Hm! You are surprisingly well informed, Captain Hellfire. They weren't all down and out, though." Someone chuckled, and Hellfire looked as if she had to bite a tooth to keep from smiling. I do believe, Trafalgar mused, that it is remotely possible that she is not quite so dam' mean as she appears-and wants to appear. Not quite. "They weren't all volunteers, either," Quindy said, from the big chair at con. She didn't swing to look at them as she spoke. "Seems to me that was reputed to have been one of Artisune Mizuni's very most profitable transactions." Janja remembered that name from her self-ordered studies. Artisune Mizuni was the only pirate who had ever succeeded to such an extent that he actually assembled a fleet. Its disappearance, almost in a snap of the fingers, was ascribed to the shadowy and ubiquitous peacekeeper, TGO. "So you've been a deeper-than-deep-cover agent for a corporate mining octopus through two ID 'lifetimes,' " Hellfire said, "and know about me and my occasional dealings on Macho. Maybe you know more about Macho than anybody, hmm? So ... what about the TGO connection, Rainbow?" He wanted to say that he'd only been through one "lifetime" and was hardly finished with the second, but that seemed unwise. She might see that as a challenge. Which might lead to her proving herself right by ending his second "life." "All right," he said, wishing he could buy a nice big deep breath somewhere. "So . . . look, some TSMC secrets I can't discuss. Can't reveal. I mean can't, physically." "More like mentally? Mind-block?" 126 He nodded. "Exactly." Hellfire blinked. She had spoken incredulously and still looked that way. Also confused, astonished . . . and ready to believe. Maybe the right word was a simple "awed." The concept of a corporation having such secrets that it had mind-blocked spies, secret agents ... it just had not occurred to her. "Grabbles. It never occurred to me that a flaming mining company could be so flaming furbag important!" At that admission Quindy snorted. Hellfire glanced sharply at her Mate's back. Or at the high back of the con-chair, anyhow. "I believe your Mate knows. I gather she wore a uniform, once." Quindy did not turn. She didn't comment on Ms second surmise, either. "TSMC is one of the very largest corporate structures that ever existed, Captain." "Shit." "Doubtless that too," Quindy said. "All the same, his story is becoming believable, Captairi." Hellfire heaved a great big sigh. She glanced around. "Raunchy-sweetheart, would you get me another of those?" "And a citromine?" Raunchy suggested, taking its captain's empty plass. "Bitch," Hellfire snapped. "When'd I ever need an antintoxicant after two much less one drink?" And she re-surprised Trafalgar Cuw by shooting the Jarp a smile. Raunchy departed into the living area of the ship. "I think I'll change my name," it

said, helmet-translated words trailing in its leggy wake. "Trafalgar's a nice name. Substantial." "It's in use," Trafalgar Cuw grunted. Either he was building gas or his bonds were (bond was) tightening. "Don't be so swift and so confident," Hellfire snapped. "So what were you doing on Macho, Myrzha double-deep-cover secret agent?" 127 "Bombing," he said. "What?" "Failing to head off that disagreement between companies that became a run-in and then seemed to be growing into a nice little war," he told her, because considering the trouble it had cost her, it really didn't seem smart to let her know that he had brought about the mini-war. As a matter of fact, he hadn't bombed at all. He had succeeded. He had accomplished his mission on Mott-chindi. "Oh. You, huh. I sure wish you were more competent." "Me too, Captain, me too." She regarded him thoughtfully. "So-how come you didn't have a ship waiting?-couldn't even get off that skungeball of a planet without going through the same burok we lesser persons have to put up with?" He gave her the ingenuous-boy look he was good at. It came naturally. Trafalgar Cuw was a boyishly, romantically good-looking male. Not, definitely, a boy. He said, "If I could shrug and spread my hands sheepishly, Captain, I would. Being a deep-cover agent is sometimes tough, not to mention troublesome and even dangerous. Being a longtime subdeep-cover agent is even worse. If I produced ID, 'pulled rank,' or had a ship waiting to get me offplanet or even tried to subvert some little bug like that clerk back on Macho, I might well poof my cover. That would get me a nice desk job someplace in a big TMSMCo facility." When she continued to stare at him, he added, "Hmm . . . maybe right now I'd welcome a nice desk job someplace." Hellfire had already thawed a bit. Trafalgar was hardly inexperienced at convincing, at talking his way into things-and out of trouble. Now her melt began. Whether she wanted to or not, she smiled at his words. He seemed so glued, so unfobbied, so natural. Resourceful, too, and good in an emergency. A quick thinker who took direct action. 128 He saw her smile and was delighted. That was a good sign. The Jarp helped-it returned to hand Hell-fire her second drink. Trafalgar swallowed hard and looked covetous. To the Jarp he said, "How do you feel about 'Gibraltar'? I've always thought that would be a nice name." "Ugh," Hellfire said. "Scheherazade?" Trafalgar suggested, eyeing Hell-fire's drink. It was the loveliest old-amber hue he could remember ever having seen. "Or Sherazaad. That's the Ghanji version." "Pretty word," the Jarp said, seeming to taste it the same way Hellfire did her drink. "Sure it is," the captain said. "And it also takes a week to say. Imagine having to call you and say all that name in a hurry!" It occurred to that most silent of observers, Janja, that she knew the perfect name for Raunchy. She knew it from Corundum, and from looking it up later. Corundum had applied it to her once, as an alias, when he was tricking that man on Dot into thinking he was Jonuta. But she would save the suggestion for a better tune. Was this handsome rascal going to get out of this? Her chermmg ability was not useful as a lie detector, but she chermed nothing approaching menace from him. And Hellfire's was fading. Mellowing. Hellfire stabbed a finger down at Trafalgar, then decided to join him. She squatted before him. He put a mental chain on Ms eyes to keep them from sprinting right up under her flippy little skirt. "Oh, look," she said and poked his bare knee through the rent in his royal blue tights. "Him tore him's pants. How'd you do this, Rainbow?" He was delighted to be asked. "You won't like the answer, Captain." "Oh? In that case I'd better insist." Perfect! he thought, and stared straight into her eyes. "Tore the knee out of my pants while knocking you 129 out of the way of that cargo-loader that was going to run you down while you were frozen on a Number Two, Captain sir, and beggin' the captain's pardon for not saluting, Captain sir." Raunchy glanced at Janja and rolled its great big eyes. Hellfire sighed. "And I came back for you, too. All heart, both of us. Just all heart. If I hadn't, you wouldn't be here and I would be . . ." He let Ms eyebrows rise just a little while he waited for her to finish that one. She'd be where? Still tethered to Copperdock, under siege, or blown in space-dust and -debris? ". . . never mind," Hellfire finished. No mention of the fact that it

was Quindy who had daunted her captain into going back for the man, out of the alleged goodness of her alleged heart. She sighed again. "So here we are, and I can't remember when I wanted so badly to strip and get clean." Trafalgar Cuw refrained from inviting her to go right ahead. She said, "Oh-Raunchy! Why don't you do just that?" "Thanks, Cap'n," the Jarp said, and redshifted happily. Orange-shifted, Trafalgar Cuw thought. "That's the best idea I've heard all day," he said. "Whatever day this is." "Where?" Hellfire immediately responded, and laughed at the spacefarers' standard joke. He showed her a weak smile. "Sorry, Captain sir. It hurts to laugh." He added, "Where? Uh . . . behind a console-terminal desk in a nice TMSMCo facility. Anywhere." "You are a charmer," she said, and that fast her face went hard and cold. Her voice matched. "All right. I think you've evaded it long enough. So what about TGO, Myrzha Company Man?" For the severalth time his arms twitched because they were trying automatically to make an expansive gesture. 130 "TMSMCo is big, Captain Hellflre, and old, and . . . everywhere. It is powerful, Captain, power-full. Such organizations have entirely enough cred to buy people. Or rent them, at the least. Clerks for instance, and master programmers even, and even people in higher burok authority. Also, I am in my second ID, and not so youthful as I look. And-hmm! You a first-timer, Captain Hellfire?" "Pos," she said. "Twenty-eight years, Lanatian. I've lost track of what that is in years-ess." "Wow," he said, "a mere babe and so successful! Young enough to be my daughter!" And he winked. "As I was saying . . . and, all modesty aside, I am very good and very resourceful. I not only have a false TGO ID-no card, just accessing numbers in my head-I'm even in the TGO mainbank. That of course makes me real. Who's to disbelieve a computer, much less TGO's master data bank? Even my picture's in there. That is an ID I save for special occasions, naturally enough. Real emergencies. I-" "Why? I mean, why did you use it this time? Why this ship?" "Captain! Because I am on it!" Both Janja and Quindy chuckled. "Janjy," Hellfire said without turning from their captive, "run an all-ship systems check. All pos, Quindy?" "All pos, Captain. Just skimming the spaceways on water skis a half-meter wide, Captain. Everything simple and beautiful. Just took a lateral vector around a really beautiful binary I don't even remember seeing before. A blue and a red. Mighty unusual!" "Sapphire," muttered Janja, "and ruby." She settled into the seat beside Quindy and depressed two keys before slipping in the systems-check cassette and actuating it. SIPACUM began showing her what beautiful fine shape spaceship Satana was in. Janja stared, thinking about rubies and sapphires. Gemstones 131 gleaned from that hard, abrasive mineral called corundum. Quindy had turned around. "A TGO cover," she murmured, eyes narrowed. "Actually tricking the tricksters! Outgraying The Gray Organization! That really is something. Oh, that really is something." Snowy teeth flashed in superb contrast with jet skin as she smiled. "Oh, I do like that!" Squatting before Trafalgar Cuw, Hellfire looked at her. "You believe it, Quindy?" Jonquil hair stirred as Quindy turned her head to look long and searching at the bound man. He concentrated on looking open as a boy and honest as a printout, and Quindy knew he was doing that. She looked back at Hellfire, and Trafalgar held his breath. "Captain: I believe him. His story's as incredible as Janja, or as you being captain of this ship, or the galaxy itself. It's so incredible that I believe it." "You're the one who saw him. You heard him talking to Copperdock Control." "I did. He rattled off numbers and letters, acted as confident as a planetary president or a Reshan priest. Told the poor fobbied bug on Control duty what to do-and told him to tell no one but his top superior. Pointed out that you didn't initiate any of the trouble. Called the chief of station security stupid. So. Why tell that little traffic controller to tell no one but his big boss? Then he sagged and sighed, I remember. Trafalgar, I mean. I see it now-that was in relief! All the pressure was off. He had succeeded-in playing the role! Incredible-beautiful!" Quindy's eyes twitched Trafalgar-ward again. "But it's possible. You've heard the stories about Jonuta and his tricks!" Hellfire nodded. "I've wanted to meet him for years. And that crazy Janjy wants to kill him!" She shook her

head, looking at Janja's back. The blond didn't turn from the screen she was watching; SIPACUM still displayed ship-check. And she actually thinks we're going to search for Jonuta, find him, and poof him! Hellfire 132 smiled and jerked her head in another single shake. "Then all Trafalgar wanted was to get off Macho, same's we did. So he got us off, too-uh, helped us get off. Could have been killed, too. Risked his life, as the saying goes. It's beginning to seem a shame, isn't it?" "Shame?" Quindy cocked her head. Hellfire drank, rolling her eyes in Trafalgar's direction. "I was looking forward to cutting his balls off." Trafalgar rolled his eyes in Quindy's direction. "A shame," she nodded solemnly. "Doesn't seem the thing to do now, Captain." Trafalgar looked at Hellfire. "Quindy, Quindy," she said. "What d'you think we ought to do with him, Quindy, this shaitan onboard Satana?" Quindy looked at the subject of their discussion in time to see him roll his eyes her way, from Hellfire. Her full lips twitched in the hint of a smile. "What should we do with him, Captain? I'd say cut him loose and give him a shower and a drink. But no stopper, of course." Trafalgar delayed his sigh of relief. He saw the two women exchange a long look. Not quite away from the edge of the Blue Event Horizon yet, Trafalgar my boy, he told himself. "All right," Captain Hellfire said. Trafalgar Cuw stopped holding his breath. But before they freed him of his bonds they showed him the needle. He recognized that tiny hollowed sliver and knew it wasn't hollow. He watched them insert it into the exodermic syringe and set it against his left inner thigh, very close to the jewels. Thup, and ouch, and his thigh was implanted with a bomb. It was radio triggered, and Hellfire had the trigger. Oh, wonderful. I hope they've got plenty of makin's. I'm going to want two drinks, at least! 10 We live on an ordinary planet, one of nine that orbit a typical, undistinguished star. And this star, our sun, is just one among billions scattered around our Galaxy, -William J. Kaufmann Black Holes and Warped Spacetime It is senseless to say that an adult could seriously say' to his readers that the God who sat and ate lamb stew with Abraham created the universe. -Vardis Fisher Kenowa twitched her head in a mini-negative. "Cat-people! It's just incredible! No matter what we see in all those exciting holodramas and mellers-they're just fiction. Our kind has been all over the galaxy for centuries and centuries. And still a new race can just turn up this way, on a totally unknown planet in an un-visited solar system! It's incredible!" " 'Credible' just means believable, Kenny," Jonuta told her. "So in-credible should mean unbelievable. But it doesn't, because we have no choice about believing facts. It must just mean almost impossible to believe, right?" 133 134 "Oh thanks, Professor Cautious," she said and rolled large chocolate eyes. The tall man called Captain Cautious smiled. Late off a very brief visit to the planet called Front, they were hurtling through space with the usual complete lack of sense of movement. He stretched out a long, tautly muscled leg, well shown off in wrinkle-free tights, and he smiled at the Wagnerian woman under the big blue coil of a coiffure. Both of them knew it was a wig, all 20 centimeters of its height. Both of them knew too that the filigree work of gold thread on her vest of Saipese blue (worn over nothing but Kenowa) was real, as were the bulges straining the vest and tugging at its front laces. He said, "Asked for that, didn't I. But look, Kenny. The estimate of number of stars in the galaxy keeps being adjusted. Upward every time, except back during the era of Matana's Mistake. The estimate these days is for upward of 340 billion living stars in this galaxy." Kenowa sighed, which on her was almost spectacular. "And too flaming many dead ones. Collapstars-all those Black 'Holes' that slow us down so much, dodging 'em. Three hundred forty and . . . what is that? Nine zeroes?" "Pos. Last I heard, the computer-enhanced guesstimate was for about seventeen billion habitable planets in this little old section of the spaceways we call the Milky Way. Those are just potentials, not necessarily inhabited or even all that flaining pleasant." "But-that's ridiculous! One out of every two stars has one habitable planet? We know better than that, Jone!" "No, no, you took seventeen into thirty-four. It's three-forty, and that has to go into seventeen. That's about five percent, not fifty. So about

one in twenty stars has a potentially habitable world. Or worlds. A lot of those twenty don't have any planets at all." "Oh well, math." She flipped her fingers. "That's what calculators are for. Anyhow, I know that more than half the stars in the galaxy aren't alone. They're part of binary systems, even trinarities. Surely the only way any of their planets would be inhabited is by us, as colonists. It's worse than unlikely that any sort of thinking beings have risen on a planet of a multiple-star system." "True. Statistically impossible. Yet thinking beings did form and develop, on Shirash. They merely adapted to the nuttiness of two suns—a bright topaz and a dull old ruby—with an eighty-year period." "Yes, well, just lump those Shirashi and their nasty overdeveloped telepathy in with collapstars, since we have to avoid the whole Shirash system, too! Anyhow—this new planet, Jone! This new race is similar to us! But felines! Felinoids, I mean. Bipedal, thinking, civilized beings with hands, like the Jarps—but not both sexes'rolled into one! And these are more similar to us than Jarps—just descended from cats, not apes." He didn't bother to correct that. It was only little people who always had to catch others up in little errors or slips of the tongue to make themselves feel bigger. Galactics weren't descended from apes per se, but from common ancestors. The recently discovered Hral—more properly Hralixans—weren't descended from cats, but from a common ancestor of their planet's cats. The word was that on Hralix, primates had never gotten much past the lemur stage. These newfound Hral were astounded to meet primates whose mouth parts had evolved so that they could form words! Jonuta smiled, thinking of what he and Kenowa knew of felines. Each with frenum connected to gums. They could make plenty of noise, but the natural formation of words was impossible to any cat. Not, however, for the thinking, upright felinoids of the recently discovered Hralix. "Don't doubt that I'm fascinated, too, Kenny. Another race! And smart, with a social order and an old technology or its ruins and a 'new,' and a language and customs well beyond simplistic or primitive." 136 "The News says there are already Hral on our spacers and planets. More than willing to interact, to be taken off Hralix, to work with us! Thinking, people-size felinoids taking orders from Galactic captains." "Sure. Cats're more curious than apes. Great explorers and adventurers, I'll bet. Maybe we should try for two or three Hral females as crew," he suggested, all innocent of face. "After all ... eight breasts apiece!" Kenowa squared her shoulders, clasped her hands behind her, and gave him a look. "Their eight wouldn't mass as much as my two," she said with austerity, not to mention justification. "I'll give you that, although humanoid bipedal animals with two sexes and two rows of four warheads do sound interesting." "You males just think that anything with breasts is attractive and that Booda laid on you a mandate to fill all females!" "Keep up that kind of talk and I'll have to knock you around a bit, woman." She answered that with what is deserved: "That kind of talk, that kind of talk." There. She had kept it up. "Damn," he said, patting her thigh—not without force. "Called my bluff again. Anyhow, naturally we won't be cross-fertile with them, but we can certainly cross-fuck. I'll bet that's already taken place, too! The Hral must be just as curious about interracial slicing as we are. To the hells with reproduction—just do it to soar; for the pleasure of the variety and the exotic." Kenowa, who knew that Jonuta was as kinky as any great man and knew herself to revel in the exotic, the kinky, winked at him. Jonuta, who was delighted that what others called exotic attire was standard for Kenowa, winked back. She switched the conversation into another direction. Why talk about it? So someday he'd meet a Hral female and Kenowa wouldn't see him for a few hours or a few 137 days, on some planet or other. So?—He'd come back, re-excited and more interested than ever. And if he was a bit contrite, that made it all the better. "The Corsi Cluster raises the odds against habitable planets, doesn't it—eleven stars so close there's nothing between 'em or orbiting 'em." "We think," he reminded her. "It isn't an area anyone cares to get close to, much less explore. Too many stars too close-packed. Solar winds lie hurricanes in space. Lots of heat, lots of light and radiation, and a real

insanity of magnetic fields and flare-forces tangled like virgin vines." She elevated her eyebrows. "What kind of vines? What's that?" - That brought a few more forcible back-of-the-thigh pats, happily bestowed and happily received. Kenowa came as close to purring as a mere two-breasted non-felinoid could. She looked at the screen again, the News about some sort of trouble on Mott-chindi, wherever that was, and went pensive. "You know, one in twenty still doesn't sound like much. Neither does five percent. But seventeen billion . . ." She made a helpless gesture. ".What have we checked out? Maybe a thousand?" "Oh, more than that. And settled on fewer than two hundred, so far." He shrugged. They were in the con-cabin of spaceship Coronet, whose captain seldom sat at con but stood. He flipped on the calculator mode and interface and keyed in numbers. "Let's talk about days-ess and years-ess. Standard 365 days of 24 hours each. Look. If we could get around fast enough to investigate twenty suns every month-ess and find that one habitable planet, we'd only need a billion four million years to check them all." "Now that," Kenowa said, parking a large haunch on the console's edge, "is in-credible, irn-possible to believe, and rid-iculous." Her skirt, split to the cloth-of- 138 (not) gold belt, separated widely. She didn't seem to notice, but Jonuta did. "True," he said, and in the same tone, "I see you're in heat. So suppose we could find a way to check twenty suns every 168-hour-ess week. That would really cut the time down. Why, that way we'd need only 340 million years." He snapped his fingers. "Still rather a long time," Kenowa said, looking down at her thighs. It wasn't as if they were bare; she wore hot pink SpraYons under the azure skirt or rather "skirt." She was sorry to have touched off this discussion/exposition. She didn't really give a damn. What Kenowa gave damns about was Kislar Jonuta of Qalara. In heat? Sure, always. But she was also deliberately provoking. Providing him with a choice of distractions. The man needed distractions. His personal troubles had recently escalated unbelievably. (Incredibly, she thought.) At least he seemed to be past all that moping and being snappish. Damn it! He had never cleared his so-turnable head of that damn little white-headed cake he'd taken off Aglaya as part of the normal course of his business. Janja. That little piece was still something special to him, damn it; there was no way around it. Oh, if only we had never made that trip to Aglaya! He never got so involved with a . . . acquisition, before. It was probably coincidence, but since then everything had seemed to rush downhill for Captain Cautious. The perfectionist, the hyper-successful, the ever-resourceful. In less than one year-ess he had lost first one trusted crewman, then another. Killed, both of them. Shot down-one during an attempt on Jonuta's life, on his own homeworld! More recently a fortune had been impossibly, electronically stolen from him. A real fortune, and with it he lost security and esteem. Surely Corundum had engineered the attempts on his life, but the wiping out of his credaccounts on several planets had to be a concerted plot possible to no one except TGO. A name for shadows, with the reputation 139 for being able to accomplish anything-and willing to do anything to accomplish, too. The Gray Organization. So why, after all these years on the spaceways, had TGO just now decided to come down on Jonuta of Qalara and Coronet? As a result, he had become a moping, snappish, depressive downer. Their sex life suffered. His self-esteem suffered. And he fell out with a true and longtime friend, his final valued longtime member of crew. The Jarp, Sweetface. Kenowa sighed. How Sweetface and Jonuta had always joked! How fond they had been of each other! And now no more jokes with Sweetface. No more of its toodle-wheeting noises. No more "Dammit, Sweetface, turn on your translator!" Now Sweetface and its stupid fellow-Jarp lover had been put off on Front, as per Sweetface's "request." Now Coronet and Captain Cautious, who in the final analysis had not been cautious enough, were rushing through space toward Qalara. Hounded, running to ground? Something like that. He had to know whether TGO-who else could it be- had gotten to him and his massive holdings and credac-counts even there, on his home planet where he was a respected investor and patron of scientific research. At least this finding of a new race interested him. And



these odds he was working out for her occupied his attention. Better that his mind be occupied this way than in thoughts of what had happened to him. What had been done to him. Or thoughts about Sweetface. Or about the LS-Licensed Spacefarer, no frills or higher rating but just terribly bright—he had signed on, on Front, just to get Coronet to Qalara. Had they investigated her sufficiently? One could never be sure of new people, and in Jonuta's line of business that became doubly, trebly to the point. Jonuta was a dealer in live cargo. People. Jonuta's business was slavery. Thanks to such "Protected" 140 worlds as Aglaya, he sold more than he purchased. He was hardly unknown, as the "Tojuna" in that Akima Mars meller proved. So Kenowa kept her interested expression in place, because what she gave damns about was Jonuta, and Jonuta was hurting. There was no question but that she would do absolutely anything for him. He had saved her from the horror she had been in and headed deeper into, as an Eroflure addict. Their relationship was informal: She was Jonuta's woman and both of them called her his aide. Both of them knew they were loved, by each other, "So," he was saying, "suppose we use about half the Gross Planetary Product of ten or so worlds to outfit a hundred or so exploratory spacers . . . and find some way to get around even faster . . . and send them forth to go boldly where no Galactic has been before. Let's say they can check the planets of twenty suns every day. That way . . ." He was tapping in the new numbers. "Uh-oh. Only four hundred million years to check 'em all." He shook his head. "I never ran that up before. Incredible!" "That's what I said, lover." "Hmm?" He was staring at the screen, going pensive, thinking that this one of many galaxies might well be cluttered with thinking beings that he and even his descendants would never see. Incredible! Maddening! "That's what I said to begin with, that started you off, Jone. Incredible." She contrived to get one leg a bit higher, both farther apart, and tried swelling her chest against the laces of her vest. Ouch. "Umm." He sank his rangy frame into the captain's chair and stared at the console. It was dull. All systems were fine, functioning perfectly. Ship on course. Velocity: incredible. "I know, Kenny. That's why I said it, too. Except that I mean it's incredible that we've actually stumbled over five planets occupied by beings other than our kind. And none of them billions or even millions of 141 years ahead of us, as the old predictions assured us they would be. Instead they are all on their second time around, on tired planets they didn't quite destroy." She nodded. "Tired planets" was as good a description as any for the worlds of intelligent beings who had achieved technology and then erased themselves and their civilization and their technology. Legend had it that Home, once the Galactic race's origin, once Urth, had almost done. Except for Aglaya. Aglaya didn't seem to fit anyone's equations or surmises. The current theory was that pastoral, iron-age, virgin-forested Ag-laya's people had all been wiped out by a plague of some sort, long and long ago. The virus or bacillus, had died in turn, since it had nothing else to attack but itself. And then pre-people had returned to healthy "young" Aglaya and become people. Odd people: all pale, and pale too of hair and eyes. Unfortunately that led Kenowa to thoughts of Janja. She didn't care to think about that one. Better that her owners on Resh had succeeded in killing her! Instead they had tortured and used her until she had not broken but rebelled. She had slain them both and escaped—somehow. If she were just nicely dead, then Jonuta wouldn't think any more about her, would he? He was holding up one hand and ticking off the five planets he had mentioned. "Crozz," he said, folding down the little finger. Then the thumb: "Aglaya. And Shirash." (Ring-finger.) "And now Hralix." Down went his index finger. She sat perched on the edge of the console, a big woman who nevertheless perched rather well. One eyebrow was up as she gazed at his still elevated finger. She knew that was no accident. Not with her sexy, ever-sensuous Jonuta! She eyed the fork of his tights. "Uh, that's four, Jone." He regarded his stiff middle finger as if in surprise. "So it is. The fifth is Jarpi, of course. Five inhabited worlds not settled by us. The other inhabited worlds and satellites we know about we colonized, one way or 142 another." He wagged the digit he still held straight up and rigid. "Jarpi.

They're no more-and no less- eternally ruttish than we Galactics, but it's called the Horny Planet. And that reminds me." "Of what? You want to go to Jarpi? Another Jarp or two rather than two or three cat-gals with eight warheads apiece?" His jaw tightened. "Jarps! After offloading that ungrateful idiot Sweetface and its dam' paramour on Front, I'll be happy to go the next century or two of life without seeing another flaining Jarp. No, Kenny, what it reminds me of," he said, regarding his upraised finger, "is that it's time for Sakyo to take this con duty and you're sexy and I feel that way." "Oh, you are, you are, believe it! And-good. What would you like to do about it?" He cocked an eyebrow at her and idly scratched his cheek with the badfinger. "Want to be raped right here in the con-cabin? Say--in that very chair? Wanna soar, cake? Wanna get sliced right here?" "Are you giving me a choice, or are you intent on this Dark Invasion of my poor bod-dy?" Pretending a fearful hands-to-bosom gesture, she pressed her breasts in to make them bulge against the vest lacing while creating a cleavage thinner than a pen-drawn line. "Well-" "In case you are," she said hurriedly in case he wasn't, "I'd love to have a few mins to go and arrange something in the cabin." "Hmm! Surprise, eh? I wonder if it will be Dark Invader again. All right, Kenny, do that! Do just that! I'll be along." He buttoned on the inship comm. "Sakyo to the :con, please. Routine watch. Sak?" "Coming, Captain. Glad to hear it. I don't mind good old dull turns at watch, Captain!" Kenowa had slid off the curve of the console. She gave Jonuta a broad wink and thumped the arm of his con-chair with her hip. His arm shot out to cross her body at its juncture. His hand clamped her farther 143 hip and the swell of her butt. "Oh," Kenowa squeaked, like a damsel in distress, while she pretended to strain against the arm. It slid up her as Jonuta rose. His mouth came over her lips firmly and his hands moved restlessly over her backside. Fondling, pressing her to him. Her mouth opened to claim his tongue and suck strongly at it. The clamping of his hands on her large rearward cheeks felt good. She surged against him, pressing in, moving. The kiss went on and on, and the hard package of his loins grew harder and larger. Savoring the pulsing warmth and provocatively moving firmness of her against him, he massaged her backside with both hands; massaged her parted lips with his own. Her nostrils flared and went pale against her passion-flushed face. Kenowa ignited, that fast, and he knew it. Now she had the extra thrill of wondering whether she was going to get cut of here or if she was to be "raped" right here in the con-cabin lit by its multicolored console lights. And with Sakyo on his way! Now that, the sensuous Kenowa thought, would be quite a new thrill-having Sak enter while she and Jonuta were wallowing in sexual embrace! "Oh, sir," she said in the best squeaky imitation she could summon, "if only you'll let me go now, I promise I'll make it up to you later." He nibbled at her lip. "Get hence, then, wench, and I'll come to thee by moons-light." "Tee-hee," Kenowa said ridiculously, and squeezed both his small tight buttocks as he released her. His swinging hand only brushed her backside as she left the cabin they pretended was the most important one on Coronet. Both of them knew it was not. The captain's cabin was, since that's where the bed was. Wearing a little smile, Jonuta rearranged his tights, which had grown tighter, and began to perform the exercises he worked through twice daily. Sakyo of Terasaki was held up just a little on his way to take the con. He tarried to watch Kenowa's back- 144 side as the big woman moved away from her. Hmm. Looks in heat, he mused, and went on his way. When he entered the con, it was to find his captain standing on his head. In the con-cabin. At the conn. In space, way in the middle of nowhere. At a velocity of three-quarters lightspeed. 11 The struggle to become oneself is, for every human individual, so staggeringly complex a task. . . . the woman's struggle to liberate her self (or certain aspects of her self) from its thrattdom to magical figures from the past-to liberate the adult person from the shackles of her childhood. -Maggie Scarf, Unfinished Business "But neither Janja nor Raunchy-I-mean-Cinnabar has any idea how to handle DS, Captain." In the same way that "disintegrate" meaning "kill" had, in only the latest of avoidance euphemisms, become ,"poof," the

harsh term "guns" had become "gunnery" and then "weapons system/systemry" and eventually an even less militant "Defense Systemry." Naturally that was more often shortened to a simple DS. "So we stay out of trouble, Quindy! Stop worrying, Mother Quindy!" Hellfire, freshly emerged from the soni-shower and even vanitized a little, sank into the free-form-and well-anchored-chair in her cabin. She pretended a yawn. 145 146 "That was a rough experience, all of it. I need to relax and think about somethings else for a while. I need to think about nothing! You weren't down on that skungy planet, afraid you'd never get off! The tension of questioning Rainbow was no pleasure cruise, either." "I know, Captain." Standing behind her, Quindy squeezed the other woman's shoulder. It was a casual gesture, almost without thought, and yet it was affectionate. "It's not possible for me not to think: ship, all the time, Captain. And to worry. You know that. It's my training, and we're undercrewed." Her hand kneaded absently, comforting the bony shoulder it knew so well. The shoulder was covered now, in one of the very softest of fabrics. The most Hellfire wore was sleeves. They were long and full, of shining silkeen. Otherwise the strap-belted tunic fell not quite to mid-thigh and was open to the waist. The tunic was lavender. Hellfire was pure sex, for those who liked it long, rangily lean, and mean-looking. She responded to Quindy's hand not by softening but by seeming to move toward it, to curl without curling, like a long lean and mean cat. "Janja's a natural," Quindy went on, voicing thoughts. "She does have a real affinity for SIPACUM and ship handling. She's just astonishingly good, given the length of time she's been at it. Still, she's not all that experienced. She's untested in oncon emergencies, and her experience with DS is nil." "I'd just as soon we didn't have any emergencies, Quindy," the captain said almost petulantly. "Ummm. A little to the left . . ." "R-uh, Cinnabar is just all right. It does carry out instructions perfectly, specifically." "I don't know why it thinks it just had to change its name, damn it. At least the name Janjy suggested sounds nice, with that soft c." "Raunchy wants to fit in and to please you, Captain. It fell that the nickname was just . . . raunchy. We Galactics do tend to name Jarps, you know, because 147 their own names are untranslatable whistles. And we give them nicknames, not real names. Raunchy is happier, as Cinnabar." "Well, what the vug," Hellfire said in that same petulant way. Quindy knew it; it was the girl in Hell-fire, but she certainly didn't say so. "A nickname's good enough for me! And what's 'cinnabar' mean, anyhow! It's just another word for red-orange. Mercuric oxi-no, sulfide. Shit." "I guess I could change my name to Onyx," Quindy said, almost smiling. "Black jade!" Hellfire said with a grin in her voice. "Or Topaz, for your hair! I think it's cute the way that gutsy little Janjy just hauled off and started calling me Cap'n Prass-top back in that bar on Thebanis. 'Course, I had just called her Cloud-top." Quindy rubbed and kneaded in silence for a moment to make the transition. Then she returned to her cataloguing of the new pair's lack of experience.- "Janja has memorized a few of the cassettes, just a few by now, and she has no experience at tactical ship handling. If we get into any trouble, only you and I are qualified to be of any use at con and DS. Right now Satana's a sort of cripple, Captain." And she added, "Thanks to Macho," because she knew to be careful with Captain Hellfire. If Raunchy had become mercuric sulfide, Hellfire was closer to fulminate of mercury: handle with extreme caution. Hellfire sensuously moved her lavender-sheened shoulder under the very black hand. The nails were a nice cerulean color, with just a hint of green in it. Quindy wore no rings. "You sound like you think we're about to tangle with a whole TGO fleet!" Quindy shook her head, although Hellfire wasn't looking. "The job is to think ahead. To try to think of everything and be ready for everything that might happen before anything does happen. That's what you've got me onboard for. I-" "Neg, I love you for your hands, Quindy." 148 Quindy knew better. "I was trained that way. It's like programming. I think ahead." "It's called worrywarting. Quindy the SIPACUM!" Hellfire reached back to squeeze a thigh snugly encased in chartreuse pants, tight to the knees and widening below. "Anyhow, are you forgetting our ...

passenger?" At mention of him, Hellfire lifted a blousy-ripply-sleeved arm to touch the little capsule suspended from a cord to rest on the center of her chest. "Trafalgar Pew is probably expert at DS and the con. He seems to be good at about everything." Hellfire didn't see Quindy's little smile before she said, "Trust him at Satana's con?-on the guns?" , "Quindy, Quindy! Trafalgar likes Trafalgar. That's why I relieved him of his boots. Going barefoot also relieves him of some of his damned slicerconfident over-maleness. But if we get into trouble, he'll be gladder than glad to apply whatever skills he has. He's proven that on Copperdock. If the alternative is-poof!-he'll function. Even strive! And excel, I'll bet you. It's called self-preservation, and he's good at that." She kept fingering her hardly ornamental pendant; it was the detonator for the bomb implanted in Trafalgar Cuw's thigh. "And in case he has. any silly ideas, I have this. And I locked all Defense Systemry at the con. Just in case he might have an idea about turning one of the guns on part of the ship. Meanwhile, Mother Quindy . . . what should we do? What are you suggesting? That we start drilling Janja and Raunchy on Defense Systemry now?" "No, no, I guess not." Quindy, her hand kneading almost unconsciously, sighed. "But-I don't think I can relax just now, Captain," she said, adding the last word to let Hellfire know that right now she was not lover but First Mate of Satana. "You and your dam' space academy military train-Ing! The ship's fine, Quindy, just fine. Macho's just a little disk behind us now, and nobody followed us. We aren't being hassled or tracked, and I don't want 149 to think ship right now. I want to relax-I need to soar." Quindy sighed again. "I know. So let me take the con this time and send you . . . who?" "Jan-jy," Hellfire said throatily, cat-lazily. Moving slowly, just a little, as if in rhythm with some music audible only to her. "And Sinnn-abarrrr." She smiled lazily, pleased to have remembered Raunchy's real name. Behind her, Quindy tightened her mouth. Four of them on the ship, and that man, that damned attractive competent man . . . and Hellfire wanted to tie up three-quarters of ship's complement, strictly for pleasure. Soaring! She said, "Both. Uh, Captain . . ." Hellfire came alive swiftly as a prodded cat. Dipping her shoulder from under the gently moving hand and whirring to face the other woman, all in one movement. That fast her eyes were hard and her face had gone ugly. Her hands came up fast, curling. Each thumb and the side of each curved forefinger seized the outermost point of stress of the grass-green halter Quindy had so recently donned. Staring into her eyes, Hellfire clamped hard, and twisted. Hard. Quindy's mouth sagged open and her eyes went all liquescent. She made no outcry and no attempt to back away or to defend herself from the other woman's viciousness. Quindy stood and took it, with her eyes gone soft. "Damn it, damn you, Prefect Quindy, ole big-nippled supersensitive-nippled Prefect Quindy, climb off my back!" And twisting, elbows well out to the sides, Hell-fire tugged. Down. Arms at her sides, the suffering Quindy sank to her knees. Her eyes showed her suffering, her eyes and her sagging mouth. Hellfire stared down at her. She did not sneer at the 150 suffering or the sensuousness in that face of polished black jade. She tugged again, toward her, pulling the other woman by her convenient handles. Still Quindy made no attempt to resist or pull away. She came as she was pulled, shivering a little in the pain she so clearly accepted. She thrust up the captain's short tunic with her nose and pressed a moving soul-kiss to the mouth within the garment. Its lips were not so thin as those of the captain's other mouth. Hellfire hunched, head thrown back. Her hands rose to Quindy's hair, and Quindy shivered at the pain of circulation bursting anew through her nipples. Again the captain's fingers gripped, pressed hard. "Sometimes you're-uhmm-like a damned mother!" She thrust to mash Quindy's nose with her parted pubes and the hard bone there. "Ahhh. Sometimes you're a good pal and adviser." Hunch. "And sometimes you're just a dam' pain in the ass prefect!" She accompanied that with the hardest hunch yet, simultaneously taking a long stride forward and releasing her grip in Quindy's hair. The kneeling mate of Satana was bowled over backward to flop pitifully on the (carpeted) deck. "I'm sorry, Captain," she said in a tiny voice. From

the floor. "Never a prefect, though, Captain. Just a lieutenant. I'll go be one." "Good." Hellfire stood wide-legged over her, staring almost expressionlessly down at her. Quindy looked down before that gaze. She turned onto her side to rise. That swiftly Hellfire whipped off the pen-thick strap that belted her tunic and lunged. One knee bent to dip her low in a fencer's move, while her arm snapped back and rushed forward. The strap cracked loudly across the tight seat of Quindy's brightly yellow-green pants. Quindy lunged with a muted "uh!" and hurried from the cabin without a word. She neither glanced back nor put back her hands to her burning buttocks. 151 Captain Hell-fire turned smiling to regard the bed. No bunks or bare decking in the cabin of Satdna's commander! She had bought the amorphous bed on Franji, and she loved it. It was a fine big one, with manufactured ocelot sheets that were softer and furrrier than the real thing, those leggy little spotted pets on Panish. She decided to pop a repsonal before the others came. Just one; just a little chemical relaxation and a bit of head-changing. "Love you, Quindy," she murmured and knew that she wouldn't have to remind herself to say so later. A lot later! Quindy was making her way to the con cabin, growing heavier. Hellfire had remodeled the interior of Satana, once she had made her first rewarding raid and had the wherewithal. Deliberately she had turned an area nearer one of Satana's poles into the master's cabin, so that gravity would be less. That was good for sleeping, good for bed games. Ship's gravity was technically maintained at .9-ess, by the application of centrifugal force. Now Quindy moved from the .75G of the captain's cabin to the con, where weight was just short of "normal." Her lower lip was caught in her teeth and beads of sweat gleamed on her forehead and upper lip. And I have to be the one to go to work, she thought unhappily. God, I almost came! She grasped her crotch as she walked and squeezed its healthy bulge with all her might. It occurred to her then to wonder where the man was. Not in the con-cabin. Janja was, alone, in the captain's chair. SIPACUM's lighted interactive interface showed that the blond was studying, again. Quindy shook her head. This amazing little woman whose lithe body looked so white in contrast with hers when they were naked together! The short "barbarian" who was so short and so very, very bright! 152

Simply put, Janja was the fastest learner Quindy had ever encountered. And dedicated to learning, too. The con-chair turned a little, and Janja peered around its high, padded back. "I've got the duty," Quindy told her, "and the captain desires your presence for R&R. Where's Raunchy? Oh, damn it-I mean Cinnabar?" Janja shrugged. "Talking with Trafalgar, maybe. The captain requests my servicing services, hmm?" "And Cinnabar." "Ah. Three of us. Maybe boss-captain wants to see me get orange-sliced." Janja rose and stepped past her, carefully not touching. "Poor Quindy, huh." "Actually I asked for the duty," Quindy said, with no knowledge of Janja's Aglayan-femaie ability to cherm. She couldn't read minds, but she certainly felt emotions, desires, intents. How could Quindy know that she was mentally "broadcasting" sexual arousal and need, which Janja picked up as an animal sniffed pheromones and identified estrus? As a matter of fact, Jarps had that ability or were cursed with it, too, to some extent. Janja did a red-shift and Quindy closed her eyes for a moment before she sank into the captain's chair. It was still pleasantly warm and-uh! I'm still a bit sensitive, aft. Well, it had been only one lash, and through clothing, at that. It would pass quickly. Tightassed pants sure did help transmit the sting, though! Seconds were required to assure her that all was well with Satana. The ship was heading out for the Carnadyne Void, where Quindy would cut all power and initiate a long loop on pure p=vm, accumulated momentum. Drifting, though at speed. Until Hellfire awoke, all glue-eyed and puffy of lips-all four lips-and they had a Meeting. Then they'd decide where to go, what to do. Hardly a council of war, as the old clichemeisters had 153 put it. A council of pirates. The merchandise they had expected to sell on Macho was still onboard. Quindy punched for calculations and display. (A telit winked in eye-eez pink, advising of the no-danger proximity of a planet nineteen degrees off the axis of Satana's spin. The frozen ball belonged to that star they had easily swept past. An

orange sun with a temperature no higher than 4200C, it was also too far to do anything for this lonely planet. So what? Gather all the nothing planets in the galaxy and you'd have another galaxy's worth. Throw in Mott-chindi, too!) Quindy put that out of her mind and studied the display. In about an hour-57.943 minutes-she'd need to swerve around Skylla. Or, if she felt lively and adventurous (and bored), take the ship between it and its nearby fellow collapstar, Karybdis. That was fun. Roche's Alley, the channel in space between the two black holes, was less than a light-year across. The pull of each extended well in toward the inner Lagrangian point, the invisible line down the center of that invisible channel between the two invisible killers. Someone had bothered to (computer) estimate that in another few million years Karybdis would eat Skylla. Maybe. Unless Skylla managed to pull Karybdis across the center line first-or rather to swell itself to such gross power with the matter it constantly sucked in that it would envelop its neighboring dead star. At that it still wouldn't be as big as the Maelstrom, at the core of the galaxy. Long before that, though, there'd be no threading between them. Not unless someone found a way to move ships faster than light, too fast even to be caught by the prodigious pull of a collapstar. Quindy smiled wanly. Not likely! A neutron star that became a black hole exerted influence long, long after its demise and disappearance within its own incredible gravity field. A dead man named Einstein continued to exert his 154 influence, too. The speed of light remained a barrier for everything but tachyons. (The telit flashed off. The orange F-type and its last lonely planet were behind them. Only the telltale called telit and SIPACUM, which had avoided it without anyone's feeling a thing, had noticed one more star system in the vastness of the parsec abyss.) Ex-lieutenant Quindaridi, once of Ghanj, had run Skylla and Karybdis five times. It was probably a record. Who cares? She closed her eyes tight, shuddered, and tried to concentrate. To have something to do she initiated Systems Check. She decided to follow that with SIPACUM auto-check and then to occupy herself in working up a new course-guidance cassette. It would order an inertial drift in a long parabola around the far side of the Carnadyne Void. She would follow that with the if-unless: a list of circumstances, exigencies to trigger a warning alarm. She told herself that was what she would do (while SIPACUM and its auxiliary arms checked every component of the ship and flashed a green All's Well light for each). Over and over Quindy told herself that was what she would do. A new cassette. She thought about details of the program, pushed them around her mind. She had to ... Because she was just consumingly horny with the tingliest pair of nips along the spaceways but did not, did not wish to sit here and play with herself across the light-years. She would do just that, but she'd at least have the knowledge of how hard she had tried to talk herself and discipline herself out of it. She was doing that right now. Trying. Knowing she would fail. 155 Her hands quivered. They had places they wished to rush, and those places had nothing to do with the ship. SIPACUM kept checking and silently reporting, displaying a schematic of the area or part being scanned, and then the green light. And Quindy kept trying. She was so damned efficient, so pridefully a nigh-perfect second officer (well-born, they'd say back on Ghanj), that her own lack of ability to control and discipline herself was a constant accusation within her, an embarrassment to her. She chided herself, punished herself for her weakness. She had always wanted to be perfect for her father, like her father. She had striven and still strove. The child-perceived perfection of Lord Emsdaridi of Ghanj, though, eluded her, or at least her perception. Far beyond the vast majority of ship's officers-including seconds and captains-in both ability and dedication, in both competence and resourcefulness, she was nevertheless imperfect in her own eyes, and she was ashamed of her imperfection. It was more than unfortunate: Quindy was tops, admired and respected, but Quindy didn't think much of Quindy. It would have been no different had she been the Lady Quindaridi-n'ems of Ghanj. She even picked at herself, manufacturing things to chastise herself about. She had always disliked the fact that her skin was a lighter tan-brown

than her father's, than most (or so she perceived). That was mostly in her good but treacherous mind, of course. The consummately competent woman who had been Lieutenant Quindy was hardly unattractive. Nevertheless, she had wished she were a bit darker, the better to show off her cheekbones and strong, almost square jaw. Then, she thought, she would be attractive. So, in a time when any individual- could be any color it wanted, Quindy naturally and predictably did nothing about it. Meanwhile she became a lieutenant who was thinking 156 and performing well beyond grade, saving others' faces, making others look good and better. When her captain was promoted to a bigger and better ship, a better command, he asked for Quindy in his crew. She was grateful. It did not occur to her that her captain had been promoted because of her zealous labors and the resulting accomplishments. Then came the disgrace of that worst of happenings on spacer Poulander. And Quindy punished herself. The celldye job was permanent because that was what she demanded. She punished herself by making herself gleaming black, and she was sure that now she was less attractive than she had been. In truth she was twice as striking and attractive, luminously beautiful of skin as a fine lignite of that lignite gemstone called jet. As a matter of fact, the celldye technician ("cy-tological chromatician") had just had to have her right then and there. That became Quindy's first lesbian experience. It also accounted for the next five months-ess of her life. It was all wasted while she did nothing but be submissive and available to make the Chank celldye tech happy sexually. Nevertheless and naturally, Quindy saw herself as less attractive this way than before. Then came the break, the wasted nights in space-farers' bars in Shankar's port city, and then came Hell-fire. After that came the bright yellow hair, which was Hellfire's idea. The smitten Quindy had done it for Hell-fire. Hellfire loved it, and Quindy would admit to rather liking the cascade of yellow tresses that framed the raven gleam of her face. That didn't matter. She was not perfect. She was not what she wanted to be. She was not up to him, and so she saw herself as unattractive. And now she kept telling herself that she was going 157 to occupy the time between here and the Carnadyne Void in cutting a new program for the familiar maneuver out there. Meanwhile her aroused body kept clamoring for an altogether different activity. Mentally, Quindy fought Quindy . . . 12 may i feel said he (I'll squeal said she just once said he) it's fun said she. -e. e. cummings When Trafalgar Cuw started to enter the con-cabin, the canary-haired black woman had her halter down off one pointed breast and her pants open. One hand thrust down and in while the other pinched her nipple with thumb and index and the other three fingers drove her turquoise-painted nails into the bared warhead. Both arms were moving, the second only in a quiver brought about by the strain of clutching with all her might. Trafalgar froze. "I like you barefoot, Rainbow," Hellfire had told him, and she had taken his boots. Bitch! Thus he was in stocking feet, and Quindy had not heard his approach. Of course, he mused, one eyebrow up, she mightn't have heard me if I'd. come along singing "Scarlet Hills." Just a bit preoccupied, First Mate Quindy! 158 159 He stood motionless, scanning the scene. Telit panels told him the ship was safely zipping along a well-set course. On SIPACUM's mainscreen flashed a graphic of part of the ship's low-mass scanner, followed by the glow of a pale green light. It went out, and he was looking at another component of the same scanner, and then the green light again. Exhaustive systems check in progress, he mused. Good. The ship saw to itself while the First Mate continued rubbing herself off, meanwhile apparently trying to pinch through her own breast. A nice pretty breast, too, he mused, like a young eggplant with a mauve nipple. Until she bruises the poor thing black! One brow up, Trafalgar backed silently out. He returned along the corridor that spacefarers called a tunnel. Satana's artificial gravity lessened as he neared a pole, so that he walked more carefully. It wasn't possible to ignore his physical response to what he had seen, and thought, but he tried. Down, boy. His goal was the tiny cabin just past (and too near) the captain's. He'd been escorted here previously. He tried the latch, found it unlocked, and entered the medium-sized ship's tiny

"bar." From the stock of colored alcohol he drew two measures, piping it into the disposable tumblers through the valves in their lids. A couple of skweez-paks of everchil pop, mildly lemon, he set beside the booze- an ancient and honorable Persian word. With care he held them in place on the counter'for just a moment; here gravity was about forty percent, and one had to be conscious of each move. Then, cramped for space, he stripped. Not floating; his motions formed something more akin to a one-man ballet in slow motion. Not a hair on his body below the waist, like most Galactics, though he had opted for some (macho) strands on his chest and as nipple decorations. Naked, he picked up his scarlet sash and shook it. 160 (He banged his elbow in the tight quarters and) as the sash opened, it floated just as a spider's web did in normal gravity. It unfurled, silk spun by the five-sem-long tantogrbds of Terasaki. It was horribly expensive stuff, grixsilk, and supernally light though opaque. His sash contained two strips of it, each a meter wide by four long. He draped himself with it, with care. Clothes under his arm and drinks in both hands, he returned through the ship draped in a Terasaki keemo. Very red, very thin and clingy, and very sexy. Many males on Terasaki wore them, although never in public. Trafalgar began whistling "Spaceways" long before he reached the con-cabin. And he took his time, once he'd started the deliberate noise-making. Poor Quindy! He had warned her in mid-soar and only just given her time to order her halter and pants before he walked in behind her. Only just. Barely. When a woman was as black as she, it was hard to tell whether she was flushed or not. It wasn't as if Quindy showed red! But Trafalgar knew. He knew what she had been doing and he knew her eyelids would be heavy. Her heartbeat would be rapid and her mouth reluctant to close. And he knew that her face was suffused with blood, whether she showed a flush or not. In the captain's chair she turned to stare. He stepped up beside her, keemo fluttering. A step past and to the right, and he sank into the mate's chair. Hers, technically. "H'lo." "Hello to you. Where did you get that. . . garment?" "I carry it with me. My pants're torn and the captain borrowed my boots and that shirt has dust-ragged several floors, including this one. So I just slipped into something more comfortable." His face showed no smile as he mouthed the cliché second only to "turned on his heel" and "the gathering dusk," and his voice was perfectly normal. 161 He set down his burdens, took up a skweez-pak, and popped its seal. Liquid could be trusted to perform as liquid here, well away from the low-G area of the ship's poles. "Hey, First, you know what?" She was staring. At the soft, red, diaphanous and yet emphatically male garment, mostly. It covered even his arms, mostly. Yet when he sat, one leg was bared higher than mid-thigh. Good thighs the man had, "No," she said automatically, distractedly. "What?" "If I were an enemy I could have the ship. One person on duty, and me coming in behind her. Three in one cabin-the captain's." He bent a little to pull a small cylinder out of a knotted pants leg. "Here you go, First." He proffered it, reversed. Leaning on the rightward arm of her chair, head down and eyelids heavy, she gazed at it, then at his face. "A custom-made ministopper. Suppose I just reach over and squeeze its grip?" "I would embarrass myself," he said, and shrugged. "It isn't on Three, of course, but did you ever notice those things don't have a setting for 'log-off'?" "Never thought about it." Rather lazily she took the stopper. As a sort of symbolic act, she laid it on the deck between their big padded con-chairs. "Lieutenant, would you join me in a drink?" She controlled her twitch and so gave him no satisfaction at having surprised her, calling her by her old rating. A guess? Or did Trafalgar Cuw know everything? She turned to stare at the console. Best not to look at him. The man was sexy, but she told herself that in her present condition even a rutting grat would seem sexy. The green light was flashing in a silent electronic shout. SIPACUM was finished. "All green and no alarm." Trafalgar observed. "Ship checks out perfect. That helps my mental state a bit, 162 since I'm a sort of voluntary kidnappee on a ship I know nothing about!" "Umm." She leaned forward, just a little, to flip a toggle. SIPACUM quit trying to attract her attention, bragging about having completed its task. Satana rushed on,



impossibly eating up thousands and thousands of kloms per second. Gazing at the console, she said, "You were expecting someone else to be here oncon, weren't you." He expelled a long sigh. He had gotten rid of some of the lemon soda by drinking it neat and was mixing his drink. Why had she asked that, he wondered, noting that it was obvious she was looking at the console only to avoid looking at him. Interesting. All right, I'll go along. "One tries. Pos. I expected someone else to be on-con." "The girl," she said, staring at the instruments. "Careful, Quindy, using that word betrays your age! Pos. I thought Janja had the con." "I replaced her about twenty mins ago." "Oh." And immediately initiated all-systems check and started rubbing off. Interesting! "Not going to join me in a drink?" He sipped. "Ahh. I think the drink you kind people kindly gave me just kind of replaced all the adrenaline I'd used up, or something like that. Hardly noticed I had it." "Why the girl?" That had to be deliberate, he mused. Quindy called Janja "the girl" again, after what he'd said. He kept his smile to himself. Quindy knew that he was on his second ID "life" and was bragging that she was no girl. Interesting! "First, Quindy, do understand that I've got nothing to do and am very grateful not to be in the cargo hold or worse. I'm thinking only of me, as a male, and not meaning to give offense: because she isn't lesbian. She may be bi-, but she's not exclusively lesbian." "Oh. You know that, do you?" 163 He sipped. "Ahh. Lord lord, but that's good. Sure, Quindy. I'm male, awfully bright, and no boy. I know that." They sat side by side, a half-meter apart, gazing straight ahead. Both apparent age thirty or so; he a lot older. And he had a prop, something to do with his hands. The drink. He wasn't nervous, and he had the prop as security. Of course he was making her nervous. That was his intent. Wouldn't look at him, eh? To the console she said, "We won't be seeing them for hours. And hours." "Oh? What if we have an emergency?" He waved a hand loosely. "Meteor shower. Tentacular monskers from Outer-outer space. The ghost of the Enterprise." "That would be different, naturally. But there'll be no emergency." He noticed that she also was not calling him anything. Interesting. "You plan to swing around Skylla or thread between 'em, First?" She let it show, this time: "Grabbles! You know our course?" He gestured at the array of instruments, colored readout panels and colored telits, the shining keys, the screens, using his drink. "It's all there, just like handwriting. I know the spaceways, Quindy. I know lots of things. Some few of them are even worth knowing." "Umm. Are you from Terasaki?" "No, I just like their silk, and this keemo. YOU?" "Oh, no!" "Sorry. I don't know everything, Quindy. I just noticed that you know a keemo is Terasak." "I know lots of things," Quindy said. "Some few are even worth knowing." He chuckled, sipped. "What about when you called me lieutenant." "Ah, I was right, then." He waited; she didn't comment; he went on. "Maybe it shows. Maybe I know from sneaky studying, checking. I check things all the time, Quindy. Just things. Checking. Always. Ahhh." 164 He sank back, scrunching into the big chair, and sipped happily. "It does show, in a way. That you were military is obvious to anyone who looks and listens. I'm a trained looker and eavesdropper-I-mean-listener. But you're Hellfire's second, and happy in that role. So you weren't captain or you couldn't stand being her second. But you were an officer. That shows. And you're good. You know ships and you're concerned about this one. More than its captain, as a matter of fact." He gestured. Scarlet silk rustled, flowed beautifully, and most of an arm revealed itself. "I decided on lieutenant's rating. Say, you know-I never intended to have two more drinks. But I'm not man enough not to drink the other one I brought for you when this one's gone. That's getting pretty close." She reached over as if languidly, looking just past him. "Give me that and start a new one. Whatever's left is all I want." He turned his seat-pillowed head to look at her and waited. When she met his gaze, he gave her a lazy smile. "Me too." And he handed her his plass, looking at her face. "Bastard! I take your meaning-what a cocky thing to say! And stop that. That's got to be the most deliberately knowing look I ever saw. A regular leer." She closed her hand around the plass. He didn't let go. "Really?" It

was his ingenuous-boy voice, but Trafalgar's eyes didn't change. He held hers with them. "But I doubt that you do take my meaning, First Mate. You said 'all I want,' remember? All I want. Me, too. I knew who was on duty up here." He let go the plass, and it quivered in her hand. She turned away and laughed lightly. "Oh, of course," she said to the console. Pitty-pat, Pitiy-pat goes the old heart, he thought. He said nothing. He was studiously putting together the second Yellow Sun. They streaked past a whole solar system without a word or a sensation of movement while he made the drink. He extended the plass.

165 "Loan me a finger?" She jerked; he had caught her in reverie, way back in there among her thoughts. She loved the way l got us off Copperdock. What're you thinking, Quin-deeee? "What?" He smiled, leaning lazily back, head turned her way and the plass still extended. "Loan me a finger." It was flirtation at almost the most basic juvenile level, and they both knew he knew it. Eternal Theba! Does he know! She elevated a glistening finger, in ebony. "Aren't you afraid it might come off?" Trafalgar laughed genuinely and answered genuinely: "I hope not! That skin's just beautiful on you!" Devil! Bug son of a vug! "No thanks, anyhow," she said. "Stir your own drink." "Then sip the top off, will you?" His arm, extending the plass, did not move. She forced her gaze from the panel just past him to his eyes, had to force it then to the plass. Sexy sensuous Theba-damned cocky slicer-confident bastard sunuvavug! Abruptly she took the new drink and knocked back a good stiff slug. "Ahhh." She sagged back just as he was. After a long while she passed her arm across her chest-ouch-to " offer him what remained of the first drink. "That's good! Too good to give up, now I've had a taste.-Here." "Oh, no. True, I did bring the second drink for you. But now I've had time to get my heart set on it. Give it back." With her left arm still across her chest-pressing in, though she was sure he didn't notice-she lifted her right for another swig of the new drink while continuing to proffer the first. "Neg. Take this and like it. Ahhh. Good. Called a Yellow Running Dog, isn't it?" "I'll . . . take it, Quindy," he said in a voice quiet enough to let her know it was a threat. 166 "On this ship? The captain'd rather have your balls than your company, and I'm Ship's First. You'll take nothing, man." That's it, he thought. Ifs done. Has to be done. That's provocation, and as Bhagjee said, Provocation is Invitation to him who is of stout heart! He twisted in Ms seat so as to face the side of hers. He took the nearly empty plass from her with his left hand and grasped her left hand with his right. He pulled, tightening her arm across her chest, hard. "Unh . . . uh!" He used that hand as lever to flex up out of his chair, really increasing the pressure on the pinched nipple. Then he released it to swing in front of her, between her and the console, and easily plucked the second plass from her. He stood before her and deliberately endangered bis balls by putting back his head to drink half that second drink. Posing, flexed and taut, flaunting. The softest of draped silk tented over a two-thirds erection roused by his thoughts and their by-play, and he knew she stared at it while he drank. Then he lowered the plass and stepped in, astride her legs as she sat. He thrust the plass at her, thrust his other hand into her grass-green halter. He twitched it down to expose bobbing pointed breasts, one with a darker and larger nipple. And he brushed away his keemo to show her a bobbing, pointing slicer, not quite erect. She was trembling, and her eyes had filmed. She accepted the plass. Shaking, staring, she drank. She did not swallow, but let her right arm swing down to set the plass between the con-chairs. Just as his hand closed on the breast he saw was marked from fingernail pressure, she sat up and forward to treat him to a mouthful of cold drink on his penis. "Uh!" She began swirling the drink in her mouth around the thick and thickening flesh in her mouth, and his hand clamped. 167 "I saw you, you incredibly sexy woman," he said low, trying not to gasp. Raw animal delight and desire surged in him, a hard force. Her mouth ringed him. Her soft, warming, clingy lips covered and encased it completely. Those lips were like a noose of velvet-covered steel. "I saw you," he persisted, working not to gasp. "Hand in your crotch and the other one clamping hell out of this poor darling mistreated beautiful woman-breast! Uh!" Her wide O of a mouth made slippery

sucking sounds, deliberately obscene sounds. His eyelids lowered in pure pleasure and he pushed, just a little, willfully challenging her, impaling her face. She accepted that, and clung, and began moving her head. "Oh lord lord but that feels good! Lord lord but this is a fine firm pointy beautiful woman-breast! Calling it a warhead just like any other woman's would be a criminal of-uh!-fense. Obviously you need another hand to give it what it wants. While you do what you want." She made a moaning sound and her hand came up and cupped, fingers cuddling his scrotum. Quivering all over, his words having assured her that he really had seen her-which excited her still more-she swallowed at last and began moving her mouth and tongue. Sucking, moving her head, reaching around to grasp small tight buttocks, eating it again after these three years since she'd been busted for eating a man, in uniform, in space, during a simulated emergency on Poulander out near Saiping, and had vowed never never to forget duty again, to place ship paramount where it belonged and keep it there, and never never to have one damned thing to do, ever ever again, with a man. His hand clamped and twisted liquid fire into her breast. The sensation went all through her, and the fire. She started doing her very best to swallow his slicer. His eyes glazed and he swallowed in little spasms. Strong sexual pangs tightened his scrotum within the gentle cradle of her hand. He stared down at the glow- 168 ing yellow head bent over his loins, and he barely saw that moving head. Her lips were tightening, forced by his expansion to bulge in a wider oval. He felt soft, warm, clingy lips and moving swirling tongue. Her hair tickled his lower belly and he didn't mind a bit. She was a leech, a greedily tonguing leech, and he'd have fought an army for her. That thought made him feel a little guilty about his roughness. He eased up the mashing pressures of his hands. Suddenly her teeth tightened, hurting. Then she and her mouth went limp, quiescent. She was no longer a passionate lover. She had become only a kneeling woman with her mouth limply open. A passionless slave. What the-he wondered what had happened, and he experimented. Again he tightened his hands, clamping, fingers moving, pressing in to malleable flesh. Immediately she made a sighing sound and began imitating a leech again. He got the message. She wanted the feeling of possession, even unto discomfort. Nothing unusual about that, even among women so competent as Quindy. Smiling, he pushed, tightening his buttocks to impale her face in its more than willingness-and feeling her hand tighten on his butt. She pressed him to her, into her mouth, and held him there. Instead, he recognized her experience and her love of what she was doing, and he guessed at her psychology and her desires; needs. With both hands he grasped her head, hard. The third drink was all hers. 13 The element of the unexpected and unforeseeable is what gives some of its relish to life and saves us from falling into the mechanical thrallldom of the logicians. -Winston Churchill

Their velocity was not quite within a nanometer of lightspeed, but it was close. Had there been a way to measure, the weight "of each individual on Satana would have been on the order of-never mind. Call it ridiculous. The weight of the entire ship and its complement of Hellfire, Quindy, Janja, Raunchy/Cinnabar, and Trafalgar Cuw was worse than that. Yet no one noticed. They were on Einstein's elevator, not watching it. Weight was relative. Everything else was relative. They did not even have to be confused or jolted by anomalies in red-shift and blue-shift. Sensor reporting systems and SIPACUM made compensating adjustments. On the other hand, there was an observer. Someone was watching Satana. Still, he too was part of the distorted machina, at these velocities. He too "saw" by means of instrument/computer compensated images. 169 170 Cruising the star-paths, seeking and searching and analyzing, Corundum had found Janja. That is, he had found Satana. At a speed not quite within a nanometer of light, spacer Firedancer came out of a minutely plotted arc and leveled out. It streaked toward a point in space less visible than a planetary equator or pole. Nothing occupied that point in space, or that area. There would not be anything there until a few instants before Fire-dancer reached it. At that moment Satana would be there. Consider a simple rectangle; a picture frame, for instance. Satana is at the upper left

corner of the frame, headed for the upper right corner. Firedancer is not at the lower left corner but is on a diagonal course from it to the upper right corner. Satana will reach it just before Firedancer, which just then will begin arcing on a new course. That course direction does not exist on a simple picture frame. Its description would require depth; a three-dimensional rectangle. Corundum had located Satana. Then he began stalking Satana. With all the time he needed, he and Jinni had plotted the arc and Firedancer's slingshot emergence from it, to race toward the point of intersection with the other ship. Then Corundum and Jinni had plotted anew to arrange for their arrival at the point just after Hellfire's spacer had passed through it. Next Corundum and his SIPACUM Jinni had plotted and set up Firedancer's veer, downward/inward" with relation to a picture frame. Corundum did not want to reach the same point in space at the same time as Satana, nor just before, nor immediately after. Any of those could precipitate disaster. No, he had to come close, on intersect course, so that for an instant the nose of Firedancer was aimed at the broad side of Satana. In that instant he must take his action. Next instant he must begin swerving on his 171 chosen and pre-set vector, so as to avoid that point in space altogether. Jinni displayed the whole scenario nicely, using an onscreen grid. It showed reality: the ships rushing toward the point of intersection. Only one was aware of the other, and its identity, and their precise relative courses. On Satana Janja was oncon. As usual, con-duty was dull. As usual for her, she was educating herself while SIPACUM guided the spacer on its course. A long-range sensor displayed a moving blip on vector 9-B-8. Relative speed of its movement proved that it was neither star nor planet. Nor was it a comet, and certainly not a vagrant asteroid. Another ship, probably. There was no reason to be alarmed about it. Janja knew that one only seemed alone in space. There were plenty of other needles in the haystack called Milky Way. And as Quindy had pointed out to the captain, Janja was inexperienced. Never mind what Janja was studying. It was not tight-angle maneuvering at velocity, or tactics, or space combat or evasion. Any of those interrelated subjects might have helped, but who knew that? Who could guess that the hounds of Corundum had been sniffing, sniffing, and were on the scent? On Firedancer, Jinni once again displayed the kinetic schematic. It showed reality, and it showed what would happen if all current factors remained unchanged. It still showed exactly what Corundum wanted to accomplish. Soon the computer schematic would be reality. On Satana, a Jarp's round mouth was busy at the lower mouth of a dark woman with hair the color of brass. She was gasping and running three fingers in and out of a far darker woman, whose hair was a 172 jonquil yellow. And she, using her mouth and both hands, was sucking the Jarp's right breast. It was about the size of a large orange, with a desire-erect nipple a sem and a half long. Unknown to two of that soaring trio in the captain's cabin, a man watched. The third member of the group-the yellow-haired black woman-was not sure he was there, but assumed so. On her hands and knees, she was blatantly showing him her upturned backside, naked and parted. At the base of the rearward valley hs saw three fingers moving, busily pumping, disappearing, reappearing, vanishing again. The watching Trafalgar Cuw had an erection up to here, just watching. He would very much like to join them. The tiny orifice Quindy turned up to him so tauntingly was the one of hers he had not entered, although he had a good idea that she would love it. Hellfire, wha was groaning and moaning under Cinnabar's mouth and so forcibly finger-slicing Quindy's stash, however, would doubtless not appreciate his intruding. They wallowed and he watched while the ship hurtled through space at a velocity that meant all of them were enormously heavy. They were, relative to this and that, but since they were on Einstein's elevator rather than watching it, they didn't notice. On Hellfire's ocelot sheets in the bed in the low-G captain's cabin, the only heavy aspect of them was their breathing. In the con-cabin, in the Mate's chair, sat odd woman out. Janja. She knew what the others were doing. She had refused to allow herself to think about it, and hers was a mind that was far more within her control than any of theirs. Instead she bettered herself, studying. And

held at bay her own treacherous mind's desire to vector off on thoughts of Trafalgar Cuw. The only man on Satana had made no approach to her. That seemed odd, although he did know that 173 Satana's master was exclusively lesbian, and that matters on Satana were lesbian. Janja's strictly Aglayan, genuinely alien-to-Them cherming ability was one that apprised her of emotions and dispositions, intents rather than facts. Still, she felt sure that Trafalgar and Quindy had soared together. Yet hunches were unscientific, illogical. She could not be sure. A cherm impression was more than a hunch, certainly, but to cherm was not to know of specific occurrences and relationships. Superior to them or no, Janja had to catch up before she was as competent as they-the Thingrnakers-in their culture. And superior or not, she was a woman. She could not help wonder why Trafalgar Cuw had not approached her sexually. But that was unworthy. She was studying, furthering herself, working to catch up. Or trying to. She concentrated: now, one did not get zero when one calculated the energy from any system in a vacuum state. She nodded. But-"zero" was a construction. An arbitrary concept, not an absolute, and ... SIPACUM interrupted by chiming softly and advising: EMISSIONS INDICATE THAT BtIP INCOMING FROM MAGNETIC N/NW IS A SHIP CLOSING, BUT TO BE NEAR MISS, NOT INTERCEPT, UNLESS CHANGE OCCURS IN VELOCITY. Thanks, SIPACUM, she thought. So what? There are plenty of ships on the spaceways, and there's been no communication or hostile action. Still, Corundum flashed into her mind. She threw that thought out. Then the comm alarm burred, and its light flashed urgently. Her heartbeat stepping up, Janja opened the comm and waited. Someone had signaled. Someone from Outside. Someone on that other ship wanted words with those onboard Satana. Janja sank teeth in her lower lip and decided that she'd wait to learn the identity and the message before she called the captain. SIPACUM sought, swiftly found, and linked Satana's concomm with the sender. The voice came in most clearly, and it was most familiar. "Greetings, Captain Hellfire! Hello, Primeval Princess. Corundum has come for you." Hellfire might have yelled for DS or lost her head and slapped the ship into tachyons to go Forty Percent City-so called because that percentage of those who jumped posthaste into tachyon mode and "subspace" were never heard of again. Quindy might have ordered up all shields and repulsion before assuming full but computer-enhanced control to take wild evasive action, and never mind who got banged around. Janja, without experience, was startled and very nearly terrified at the intrusion of his voice way the vug out here in nowhere in particular. Nevertheless, she did not freeze in what had once been called blue-funk. She knew that something must be done, and immediately. The problem was that this was completely new to her; beyond her experience even as observer. She did not know what to do and could not know Corundum's intent. It was hostile; she needed no cherming to tell her that! She would wonder later as to whether anyone had ever willingly and willfully left his company before her. Hardly calm but trying to be, she opened inship comm to the captain's cabin. "It's Corundum. We're attacked." (She was right. Having pronounced those few dramatic words he had decided upon and even spoken aloud in rehearsal, Corundum tapped the key. Only a touch. So much for Satana, and Janja. (No bolt of energy blazed from Firedancer. No beam of light that therefore traveled at the speed of light. Too fast, he had decided. They engendered no suffering, either of them. Not even swift deadly torpedoes went rushing at Satana. (Instead he launched two highly specialized drones, one just after the other. He knew what they did. Those on Satana would find out.) "Cassette number Two!" Quindy's voice whipped into the con-cabin. "Insert cassette Two, Janja!" Be calm, Janja told herself. Here's the rack of course-direction cassetted programs. This one's clearly marked Two. Poke it into the slot. Right. Should have done that at once. It activates instantly and yells "Urgent" at SIPACUM and orders tachyon conversion at the earliest possible opportunity, meaning as soon as it's safe. Preferably with at least a five-second warning. I'll remember now-if we survive this! Cassette Two is worth instant consideration any time a ship even looks as if it might be on intersect. Hurry it up, SIPACUM! Now

what? Oh-ASRS. She tapped that code, ordering SIPACUM to provide her a continuous All Sensors Report, SyncretLzed. The display began instantly, (The drones were called lampreys, though they were hardly eel-shapes. They were spherical kinetic seekers stuffed with comm-sending chips. They would find Satana and close. They would stick with the ship even if it changed course as drastically as its velocity and mass allowed. On impact they would cling to the hull, flattening out into patches. Instantly they would begin working away at softening the metal beneath them, meanwhile beaming an idiot's jumbled montage of signals at SIPACUM. Conflicting, confusing, and contradictory signals. The terrorist-designed weapons called lampreys were also called computer trauma-tizers.) Spacer Satana's SIPACUM immediately advised of the two tiny objects oncoming, either guided or drawn, at Satana from the other ship. (A moment after their launching, Firedancer began 176 its veer onto a new course. Corundum had no wish to cross the wake of any ship so closely, much less one whose whole computer system was about to go psychotic. Anything could happen. His own ship might be damaged. He might be damaged.) Satana's computry sought a safe moment for converting the ship and all hands to tachyons and hurling them past the lightspeed barrier that stood as a dam before all matter. The trouble was they were in that oddly starless but matter-junked indigo expanse way the hell out past the Carnadyne Void. (Firedancer swung away . . .) Onboard Satana, SIPACUM reported that the other ship was pulling sharply away on ventral vector 191. "We're fired on!" Janja snapped at the open comm. "Taking evasive action, Now!" She punched the code she had memorized: one-one-one. At once SIPACUM reassigned all necessary circuits to random movement. The first was to terminate the spin that centrifugally created gravity, after which it began to lurch over, "down," back, over . . . "No!" Hellfire yelled, running naked up the tunnel toward the con-cabin. "Not yet," she began, and then she went weightless. In mid-stride, at the run. Inertia carried her forward like a brakeless truck on a steep downhill grade. Curses bobbed in her wake. "Oh, shit," Quindy muttered, racing nakedly along the tunnel to the DS station, and she snatched at a horizontal stanchion as she ran. At that moment she went weightless. Her legs tried to race on ahead of her while she hung on, with a grunt at the wrench to her shoulder. She hung on, gritting her teeth, horizontal above the deck. After a moment she got herself together and pushed off, somersaulted in airless "air," and continued on her way, swimming the river of weightlessness. She heard the voice from ahead of her at the same time that Janja heard it oncomm in the con-cabin.

177 "Janja! Eject starboard escape pods! Open the damn DS, Janja.' I'm helpless up here!" Quindy smiled. Clever devil! Ever-resourceful Trafalgar Cuw. He had been spying on them. From outside the captain's cabin he had heard Janja's warning. Without hesitation, he had sprinted for the guns. Unfortunately, Hellfire had long since locked Defense Systemry at the con. He was powerless to fire. DS computer would not obey because the guns were logged off and capped. That's why he clamored now for the scandalous waste of escape pods, even in an emergency. Their ejection and outward rush might attract oncoming missiles by their movement. That might trick them and save the ship from all but a little detonation backwash. Maybe. She hoped. If Janja acted. And in time. Of course the very best thing about DS and con stations, right now, was that occupants of both big adjustable-swivel chairs were cradled in an aura of simulated gravity. Ting. That was SIPACUM's warning. "Stand by for Tachy-on Trail!" Quindy hoped they had five seconds. Still, they had a desperate need to- It was not, fortunately, five seconds. It was just under two. SIPACUM knew an emergency when it electrosensed one, and it did its best to redshift faster than a rabbit fleeing hounds. That way the second of the drones launched at them zipped through the area where the target had been. Inertia carried it on, with nothing kinetic to track and latch onto. Someone, someday, might pass through a nice peaceful area of space and receive a nasty surprise. Maybe not. Maybe the lamprey would find an asteroid instead. It was the most violent entry onto the Tachyon Trail ever experienced by anyone on Satana. It was as if they were not just converted to tachyons and sped on

their way faster than fast, right past Einstein's elevator. It was as if they were kicked, booted on their way. 178 They had taken on an external hitchhiker, and three of them knew it. More than one set of teeth was gritted, waiting for the explosion. What was it like, the instant of death, when you were a mass of tachyons? There was no explosion. Satana and its five crew went rushing on, thwarting relativity. When Quindy drift-lurched into the DS station, Trafalgar was saying, "Damn. We're hit. One less second and we'd have made it. Must be sisterslicing lampreys that sisterslicer slung at us. Lord lord, what a nasty man. We may never emerge from-hello! Anyone ever tell you you're the best-lookin' nekkid tachyon in the cosmos?" He pulled her to him, right out of the air. Both of them grunted when she settled into the chair with him, on him, and immediately regained close to nine-tenths of her weight. He said "Oops, pardon me" when he grabbed her in a place that was not found by accident. She squirmed. "It wasn't a torpedo, you think? I thought maybe that jolt was a detonation just as we hit the Tachyon Trail." "No such luck, I think. Lamprey, I think. Oops. Pardon me. Damn. Two fingers. So sorry." "We're not dead yet." "You noticed that, too. Hmp. Fingers seem to be stuck. No, Quindy, we're not dead yet. We are just absolutterly helpless." "You ... do you think we'll make it... back? Into real space, I mean?" "That depends. Oops, pardon me. That's your external thermal sensor node, I believe. So sorry." He gave it the kind of pressure it liked. "Uh!" She shuddered. "Will you stop? This is no time for-" "Gwendoline, my sweet," he said, and Quindy still did not know why he called her that-privately, "we are absolutely helpless. We cannot do one thing except try to make pleasant what may be our last mo- 179 ments. Like-mess around. Oops. Pardon me. Fingers slipped."- "Oh, stop," his naked lapful said. "Saying 'pardon me,' I mean. Your-unh!-hand's doing fine. That depends on what?" "Depends on what kind of Tacky Trail cassette you people use. You know, if you don't shift your weight just a little, my sex life may end even before the rest of me. Ah. Better. Good." "I can sure tell you. The cassette is my program, although Hellfire doesn't know I replaced hers two years ago. SIPACUM takes us in, holds us for a count of ninety unless safety prohibits or we override and it is safe, and brings us out. Next it displays our location, without being asked. That should hold up even with a computer traumatizer on the hull-shouldn't it?" She was almost pleading: say ifs so, make it so, make it so. "Should. I'm glad you programmed all that in, that way. Right now SIPACUM is one mixed-up collection of fobbied circuitry. We'll have to ride it out and hope." "Unh ... At the rate you're going, I'll be there before SIP-" "Quindy?" The voice was right there with them, and Quindy jerked so violently that Trafalgar worried about his fingers breaking off in her. "Right, Captain. Just arrived DS station. It's manned." "Nothing to shoot at now, Quindy. Better come to con." "I'm coming, Capt-oh, Captain. We probably have a lamprey on the hull. It's imperative that we leave Two inslotted and hope SIPACUM can carry it out." "A lamprey! Hmp! Forty Percent City otherwise, hm?" "That's about it, Captain. Coming to con." "Is he still there?" Quindy swallowed. Trafalgar pretended to gnaw the 180 back of her left shoulder. She squirmed on his lap, deliberately. Trafalgar gasped and behaved. "He was already here, Captain, ready to fire on the attacker or his missiles. DS was off at the con." "Both of you to the con." Hejlfire's voice was sharp. "So we probably have a Saining lamprey on the hull," Hellfire snarled. She wore the hooded robe Raunchy/Cinnabar had brought her, a Sektent. It had been Syriaris's. "What can we expect?" "Nothing predictable except trouble," Trafalgar said. "I suggest we all get ourselves into spacesuits." "Oh, shit," Quindy said, knowing he was right. "I-a lamprey is something I've never heard of," Janja said, and the others noted the ferocious look Hellfire gave her. The honeymoon was over. They were in trouble, bad trouble, and Janja had had the con duty when it came. That was Hellfire's fault; the captain had consistently been less than wise in awarding herself too much leisure while untrained hands minded the store. It was far easier, though, for her to blame Janja. Besides, instant weightlessness while running had given the captain bruises and a lump. "It's

trouble," Trafalgar said again. "It's a sphere that changes shape on impact. It's triple programmed. First it flattens out into a big patch, a pancake about twenty-five sems in diameter. And it'll be busily incorporating with us-bonding itself to the hull. It can't be removed without leaving a hole under itself about "ten sems across. That way it makes itself an indispensable part of the ship-a patch between us and air-out." "Charming," Quindy said. "And meanwhile it's broadcasting." "Well, sending-inward. Not quite broadcasting but beaming to SIPACUM. That's its third program. SIPACUM is right now picking up anywhere from six to a dozen command signals at once. They change constantly, conflicting and contradicting. SIPACUM 181 may survive and function. It's just that we won't be able to trust it." "Oh, wonderful," Quindy murmured, and Hellfire stared at her; it was a Trafalgar Cuw-expression. "How do we get the thing off?" Janja asked. "We don't, in space. We'd need to be in atmosphere. On a planet," Trafalgar said. "A lamprey's nasty. Really nasty." - The five of them exchanged looks in silence. Hell-fire turned, slowly, to give Janja a deliberate stare. Not only had the blond been oncon, it was she who had been the target. It was she who had brought upon them the murderous wrath of that damned demon Corundum. Obviously Janja could do or say nothing right as far as Hellfire was concerned. Janja chermmed the other woman's hostility and disposition to violence. She vowed to maintain a low image, with care. Cinnabar asked, "Can we test SIPACUM to know if it's reliable?" "We might," Quindy said. "We might try six times and get six perfect responses. But that wouldn't mean we could trust the seventh. A computer is just a made device of circuits, relays, chips. Yet it's like us in that it can be confused-even overloaded. Traumatized. I've never experienced a lamprey-before now, I mean! But I had to study the things and their effects. If we happen to order a veer along a starboard vector just for instance, at the same time as one of the sending chips on the lamprey orders port vector, SIPACUM might . . . have a nervous breakdown. That is, be unable to cope, and shut down." That brought another silence. This time it was freighted with horror. Corundum's murderous wrath indeed! Question: What really ran spacecraft? Answer: SIPACUM units. Q: What if SIPACUM 'shut down, in space? A: Death. Sooner or later, one way or the other. "You-you said . . ." Janja paused to get her ques- 182 tion together. "Why do we have to be onplanet to remove the thing?" Hellfire, who had picked up Janja in a bar and then a hotel room on Thebanis, now looked as if she wanted to hit her just for talking. This tune the blond's question was hardly stupid, but that made no difference to Hellfire. She preceded ship's computer into irrational responses. Janja chermmed the hostility; Quindy saw it. She spoke hurriedly. "Captain . . . the spacesuits?" Hellfire waved a hand. "Get the spacesuits, Janja. Maybe that's something you can handle." That bit of calculated nastiness struck the others silent. With her pale complexion there was no question: Janja's deep flush went right down her neck. She stared and rose slowly. There could not be trouble among them now, she told herself, and looked down. Looking straight ahead, she left the con-cabin. Unfortunately weightlessness ruined her dignity. She moved awkwardly, lurching, swimming. Hellfire watched scornfully. A spacefarer, so awkward in free-fall! How . . . pitiful! "What about Janja's question, though?" Cinnabar asked. "Why can't we get rid of the lamprey-thing in space? We have suits onboard. I suppose the sonic cutter wouldn't be useful, but-" Trafalgar waved a hand. "We'd have to burn it off. A lamprey won't pry off. It bonds itself as fast as it can by exchanging molecules with the hull. There's no way to cut it or knock it off from inside. That means not just air-out, if we tried it in space, but blowout. Even with a chunk of patching material twice or so its size all ready to pop into place, the person who burned it off would stand an excellent chance of being an instant posthumous hero." "Corundum might as well have blasted us into space-dust!" Hellfire raged, almost shouting. "No," Quindy said quietly. "That way we couldn't think about it or talk about it this way. Couldn't start 183 to sweat, this way. No, this is a lot worse. Slow, while apprehension rises." They were silent, contemplating death, and the



in-frequency of miracles, perhaps wondering about the various claims for the existence of afterlife, when Janja returned with the mobile life support systems: space-suits. She managed to bring all six, which was made easy by -freefall. She sort of floated under (leg) power, pushing the bulk before her. As she entered the con-cabin, a minor collision sent a helmet spinning from her grasp. Momentum carried it straight into Hellfire's shoulder, with some force. That was enough; it was the excuse the seething captain had been looking for. Expertly she thrust herself off the con-chair. As the highly trained and experienced Quindy arrested Janja's motion, Hellfire drove a bony fist into the blond's chest. Action-reaction sent Hellfire back in rebound, but she expertly twisted and caught herself to float. Janja shot backward out of the cabin and they heard the tunnel wall ring with the impact. Hellfire stared after her, as if hoping the blond would come swimming back with blood in her eye. Hellfire had no control over SIPACUM or Satana; she was more than ready to bolster herself with a fight. Quindy, an unintentional accomplice in the violence, hovered, turning slowly in air, looking as if she wanted to wring her hands, Trafalgar started forward. "What the vug are you doing, Captain?" Then he was looking into the muzzle of Hellfire's stopper. Above it, her face was ugly and her eyes uglier. "How'd you like to be a posthumous hero, man?" That's how they wasted their ninety seconds on the Tachyon Trail. 14 mgMG FG=G r2 --Isaac Newton "Ninety seconds are up-now. Here we go." The five people on Satana braced, expectantly. Nothing happened. Their ninety seconds as tachyons had elapsed. SIPACUM's instructions were to return them to normal after ninety seconds. It didn't. Nothing happened, or rather what had been happening continued. "Oh, God. We aren't coming out! SIPACUM's fobbied, and we'll spend the rest of our existence as-" The timer showed 92 when they emerged. The Quindy program that was cassette Two was effective, even with a lamprey-confused SIPACUM. Trafalgar said, "Congratulations Captain, Quindy." And he bowed with as much panache and sweep as he could in the bulk of a space suit. Naturally Quindy's program had endowed SIPACUM with some leeway. No matter what time had 184 185 elapsed, it would not bring the ship back into normal existence/normal space in the middle of a sun, dead or alive-or so close to one as to preclude escape from its pull. This time it had waited two extra beats. Perhaps a million kloms were covered during those two seconds. They had missed a sun. Even as the others sighed, Quindy was staring at screen and telits. "Oh, shit. We're almost on top of a planet!" They were. The screen was full of a cloud-covered world orbiting an aloofly distant, luridly dark-orange snarl of a star with a surface temperature way down, below two thousand degrees. Its spectral class was well downscale to an unendearing K-5. The planet wouldn't be warm even if it were closer to that cooling star- and not encased in an envelope of clouds thick enough to slice and serve on toast. "Where the vug are we?" At least they wore the miss's. Self-seals had made the process of getting into them swift and almost easy. Raunchy/Cinnabar had pointed out that it could get into Hellfire's if the captain could wear Quindy's. Quindy agreed and started donning the gear that had belonged to Syrians. Hellfire was sour, but this way Trafalgar Cuw managed to wedge himself into the longest-legged suit, Raunchy's. Janja could wear any of several mobile life support systems aboard. They were bulkily spacesuited, then, with helmets ready to hand, when Hellfire blurted her question: "Where the vug are we?" SIPACUM obligingly displayed a stellar schematic and ranked a set of complicated coordinates across the screen-and suddenly replaced both with others. They were entirely different. The lamprey had done its work; SIPACUM could not be trusted. "Oh, wonderful," Trafalgar said. "SIPACUM ain't telling." Onscreen, the clouded ball was growing large, fast. 186 Already it was near enough for them to see that it was no more a perfect sphere than any other planet. "Computer," Hellfire said terribly quietly, "trauma-tizer indeed!" "We could keep try-" Satana lurched. Actually lurched. "What the everlovin'-" "Launch a beacon!" Trafalgar interrupted loudly. "And fast!" Hellfire whirled on him. "You giving orders, man?" "No, woman, but look at what's happening! Poor confused SIPACUM seems

to've decided to take us down onto that planet! We don't even know what that cloud cover's made of-" "-and SIPACUM-won't-respond-to queries," Quindy reported, tapping the same keys over and over, "-but one thing we can be sure of," Trafalgar went on, "it's thick. That's no hot sun and we're well out from it, and all those clouds shield this planet from what little heat there is. That means it's cold down there. I mean death cold." Without comment Quindy tripped open a tiny compartment and flipped the toggle inside. That-she hoped-seized control from SIPACUM and put it into her hands. Her other hand pulled a lock button to explode a beacon-emitting drone out of its niche on the ship's hull. It would-she hoped-enter orbit of this world and stay there until recalled or deactivated, from space. Meanwhile it would emit a constant trouble signal that might be picked up by another ship, should one happen along, in a day or a month or a year or a century or never. The other ship might or might not do anything about it. "No! No!" Hellfire ranted, and tried to fight back the only way she could. Keying, shoving hi a course command control cassette, keying, trying another cassette, cursing . . . . while Quindy worked at bringing about a level- 187 out, triggering exterior shielding and-she hoped- the hull's refrigeration units . . . . . and spaceship Satana plunged in and down and was surrounded by the pasty whiteness of clouds of unknown composition. They were committed, now. A spacecraft never intended for atmospheric maneuvering was slamming down into the unknown atmosphere of an unknown planet. External photoptic sensors were functioning-they thought. All they saw on that screen was snowy-white. Then slate. Then a murky travesty of dirty white clouds. Satana, going down. "I don't have control!" Quindy cried. She .didn't sound panicky, but Trafalgar took special effort to sound calm and learned. "A lamprey would have one command-chip that constantly sent an order not to relinquish control, wouldn't it." It was not a question. Sweat glistened on his face above the bright-yellow, blue-armed spacesuit. "Meaning we're still helpless," Janja murmured. He nodded. "Meaning we're still helpless. We are going in, like it or not. SIPACUM is running the ship, and SIPACUM won't give up the con-and SIPACUM has become a mental defective. We'd better get our helmets on and check each other's seals and air." Janja and Cinnabar naturally turned to aid each other. Both wore yellow suits; the Jarp's sleeves were a brassy gold, while the blond's were white. Hellfire, staring wild-eyed at the console, lifted her helmet to set it in place as if she were unaware of the act. Trafalgar slipped Quindy's over her head while she sat,at con, still trying. He dogged the helmet. Then his own. They were faceless now, but with unlimited vision. The suits' telepresence "eyes" saw to that. Waldoes for the eyesight. He glanced at the Jarp and the blond, who seemed even shorter now in the bulky suit, and moved toward Hellfire. 188 "Check your seals, Captain?" he said and made the mistake of reaching for her shoulder. Her head jerked toward him, and her blue-clad arm rushed to her stopper. Trafalgar went dead still. He kept his face pleasant, unconcerned. Hers was hideous. "Captain-would you please check my helmet and air supply?" Those wild eyes stared. Then, as if she were journeying in across parsecs, she blinked. Trafalgar saw none of that; only the blank surface of her green helmet above the yellow suit. "Sure," she said, and her voice was as metallic as his. It was also muffled, and as she reached for his space-helmet's base, he gently pointed out that her chest speaker was off and she was talking between her shoulder blades. "Ever had a spacesuit on before?" Cinnabar asked, doubly metallic through translation helmet and suit's speaker. "Pos," Janja said. "We boarded a ship in space, a merchanter. Act of piracy. Corundum and I." Hellfire's hands twitched at Trafalgar's helmet latches, and he knew that behind her helmet her eyes were those of a madwoman. "Mention that name again and I'll burn a hole in your suit, Janja." Not "Cloud-top" and not "Janjy," they all noticed. Hellfire probably even meant what she said. Trafalgar stood as if loosely, glad now that his face was invisible, because he was ready to grab the captain and break an arm if necessary. Or try to. That was a lot harder in a spacesuit, which went rigidly resistant at much applied exterior

force. Besides, he had an idea that Hellfire was no pushover. He had an idea that he'd be better off tangling with most men than with either Hellfire or Janja. He knew about the deceptive strength in that compact little body. Meanwhile Janja was wisely not even turning her 189 helmet's forward surface toward the captain in what might be interpreted as a challenging look, and she was making no reply. That Hellfire was close to hysteria was obvious to them all. Janja, in addition, cherned the violence that in Hellfire was a lurking trap-spider, ready to pounce. Word was that those things came huge on Cinnabar's homeworld. Hellfire's potential for violence was huge, too. Quietly Janja asked, "-What's that whistling sound?" "Atmosphere," Quindy told her. She did not look up. She was still trying, sitting almost rigid in the Mate's chair and working away as if she had some hope of controlling the ship. It kept descending, a polite way of describing its rushing fall toward this planet. Atmosphere. Satana whistled down, in the planet's air now. Whipping through the drifting, wispy lower clouds of planet X near star X near ... X. Unknown rpt unknown. Uninhabited, that was for sure, under that chilly and distant old sun and under all these clouds. And cold. "Uh," Cinnabar said. "We're out of freefall." That was unnecessary. They all felt the change. It was as impossible to overlook as a wart on the end of a nose. The Jarp's comment was an oddly negative way of saying that planet (X) had a gravity shell and ' some sort of air and they were in it, caught by it, plowing down through it. They had weight again. There was some comfort in that. Precious little. "We're also taking a bit of lateral buffeting," Quindy said. "Takes a mighty high wind to do that at our velocity." "There'd be a lot of wind, wouldn't there?" Hellfire said almost sleepily and with little scientific justification. She was testing Trafalgar's seals, then his air. She nodded. "You're safe for vacuum. Mine?" His original purpose in approaching her! He feared that in her mental state she might well overlook something a lot more important than activating the proper suit speaker. He nodded and began checking. 190 Maybe wind and maybe not, he reflected, but a lot of cold, for sure. How cold? And he answered himself mentally: colder than Hellfire's tit in the Muslim cold hell! "We're almost down!" That was Quindy. Trafalgar and Janja, then Hellfire, glanced at a very important telit. It was functioning; proximity-sensing systemry was not linked with SIP-ACUM. It ignored the lamprey's blabber and functioned. The numbers on its illuminated gauge were changing with horrible rapidity, winding down. The figures were probably right. Satana was coming down fast and near-ing something solid, fast, "You're ready for vacuum, Captain," Trafalgar said formally and stopped himself just before he gave her a comradely pat. "We'd better strap hi or grab something now. Planetfall coming up." "Down," Cinnabar said dully. Except that it wasn't. Not yet. They missed that mountaintop (because something was functioning?) and abruptly the proximity sensors reported anew and the telit showed much higher numerals. They were still dropping fast. Aircon was working away and presumably pumping cold air into the ceils threading the huhl as a backup to heat shields. Satana continued to lose altitude fast, even though they felt deceleration. Nearing another mountain? Or this time the planetary surface, meaning ground or water? No, not water. "No soft-water landing on this world," Trafalgar muttered aloud. "Just ice. Thick and hard as our hull. So whether it's another mountaintop or the ground doesn't matter." "Yes, it does," Hellfire snapped. "If we hit the planetary surface, chances are we'll stay there." "Or sink into snow," Quindy said, sounding as abstracted as Trafalgar had. "True! You're right, Captain," he said, delighted to be able to say it. "And Quindy. Although-if we hit 191 a mountain we might well continue down it too, the hard way." "Wait," Janja said, and her voice was sharp. "You know I've been studying computers and programming more than anything. Why-" "I wish it had been tactics>" Hellfire said, but she no longer sounded accusing. "Me too. But-who could have thought of this? That we'd whip onto the Tachyon Trail just as the lamprey hit... that we'd stay in a bit longer because we were close to a sun . . . that we'd come out right on top of a planet and head down onto it? Why would a lamprey be programmed to stop us

from making planetfall?" Because that's what any sensible person would do to get the goddamn thing off, Trafalgar Cuw thought, but he said nothing. For one thing, Quindy was answering excitedly while air whistled past descending Satana. "You're right!" she yelled. "Let's see-it couldn't have been programmed to counter this command!" And over and over she keyed it: AVOID PROJECTIONS. SEEK AVERAGE SURFACE. SOFT LANDING. AVOID PROJECTIONS. SEEK AVERAGE SURFACE. SOFT LANDING. Maybe . . . Trafalgar thought, and then he got excited, too. He even put a hand on Hellfire's space-suited shoulder. "Captain! That should work-Quindy's brilliant! And consider . . . the moment we're down, we've got to go pull the plug on SIPACUM!" She twisted her shoulder away from his hand, and he tensed. "Listen, you . . ." He stood ready, his gaze open, brows up, face attentive. And of course she saw none of it. ". . . you're dead right," she said and started to sink into her con-chair while both he and, unnoticed, Janja, untensed. Just untensed; relaxing was impossible. Hellfire twitched upright before she touched the seat. "No, no, what am I thinking of? Shutting down SIPACUM is such a dangerous thing to do that I made it a remote control and concealed it in my cabin. Quindy?" 192

"If there's anything here to handle, I can handle it, Captain. Good idea for you to be back in your cabin ready to shut down SIPACUM, yes." Hellfire nodded and started for the hatchway. She was aware, as the others were now, of increasing weight. She had to walk, not swim. Some of that was due to deceleration-lots, they all hoped. Some of it was this planet's gravity. Pulling. Sucking at them. Down, down. "Oh-Captain!" Quindy called without glancing around. "I'm trying, and we are decelerating. But we still may come down hard. Please get yourself secured back there, Captain." "Right. All hands secure," Hellfire said, just as if she were in control, and left the con. Trafalgar gusted a sigh. No one said anything, although they were all just as relieved. Which was just a little. Janja was glancing around. "Three chairs and four people," she said. "More good thinking," Cinnabar said and plopped down into the auxiliary chair, well behind the captain's; the seat that was called simply the third chair all along the spaceways. "On my lap, Janja, and let's get these straps around both of us." "Grabbles," Trafalgar muttered, "missed my chance!" But his grin was missing as he started strapping himself into the available chair-the captain's. Quindy's ringers kept moving and so did the altitude telit. Janja saw the letter after the numerals change from k to m. "It's registering meters now, not kloms," Trafalgar snapped. "Here we go. Hang on!" Raunchy/Cinnabar hung onto the small woman on its lap. Quindy kept tapping her command. AVOID PROJECTIONS. SEEK AVERAGE SURFACE. SOFT LANDING. AVOID PROJECTIO- The numbers kept rolling down . . . slowly! "Lord lord," Trafalgar Cuw said, "soft landing after all. Twenty. Ten-now." 193 WhumpJ "Ouch!" "Captain!" Quindy called. "SIPACUM's power off repeat not on," Hellfire's voice said. "I do swear that I'm looking at a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere and a temperature so far below zero it makes my testicles retract just thinking about it," Trafalgar said. "Ship's down, and it's ours, Quindy, not SIPA-how're you at, uh, driving on snow?" "No driving!" she answered, almost yelling. She was trying, but Satana was doing its own thing. "We're skidding. No control at all. Ooops-here we go sideways! Groundspeed must be way over a hundred kph!" "Let's hope we hit a snowbank instead of a chunk of rock or whatever passes for rock on this pi-" Whump! Groundspeed was zero, suits had stiffened against whiplash, and down wasn't down anymore. 15 Noise proves nothing. Often a hen who has merely laid an egg cackles as if she has laid an asteroid. -Samuel L. Clemens Although there was no up or down or even particular sideways in space, nearly all spacecraft used centrifugal force, spin, to create some percentage of gravity. Spacers had "floors" and "ceilings" because chairs had to be anchored somewhere. With that as referent, Satana lay pretty much on her left or port side, with her nose angled slightly upward. Obviously the heat shields had performed: the ship had survived, and various external instruments still functioned. They had not been torn off by friction or, presumably, burned by the heat of friction in this planet's atmosphere. Satana, hardly intended to cope with atmosphere or onplanet

landings, had done so anyhow. That was the result of a number of factors, including luck and Quindy's expertise combined with her determination. She had fought for control and life all the way down. The planet helped. It was cold. The temperature out-194 195 side the grounded Satana was minus 116 degrees.\* A constant icy wind raised the chill factor nastily. "It's close to incredible," Trafalgar said, once they were sure none of them was harmed. A few moments later he made the same comment about the ship's having banged down and skidded to a stop almost unscathed. "A nice cushion, snow. We have more damage inside than out!" "Mostly mess," Hellfire griped. She had already told them about the jumble in the captain's cabin. There was little on Satana that wasn't anchored, battened down one way or another. Occasionally having this and that float about in freefall was one thing. Having them hurled about in this planet's .87G was quite another. In the absence of SIPACUM, Quindy was laboriously running an instruments check. If a system or a component reported, it was functioning. Of course there was no way to be sure of its accuracy. It was just that Quindy was impelled to seek that feeling of control. It was comforting. After the first two, she didn't bother to seek reports from the portside sensors and scanners. "We must be lying in snow," she said, talking more to herself than her companions. The entire cabin had shifted so that now it tilted strongly to starboard-while giving them all firm footing/sitting and the illusion that Satana lay nicely on the ventral surface of her hull. "S . . . snow . . ." Janja murmured almost as a child might. "What the vug else?" Hellfire snapped. Trafalgar gave her a sort of grin. "Mountains!" he assured her. "Ice," Janja said, as if testing and tasting the word, and she experienced a shiver at the thought. It brought a wistful memory of her own cloud-cloaked but ever-warm planet. \* 177 below zero, old style. 196 "Pos, definitely. You sound . . . surprised? Im\* pressed?" "Awed, I guess," Janja said. "I have never seen snow. Or ice, beyond crystals and cubes!" No one laughed. Quindy added to their cataloguing: "Wind." "As I predicted," Hellfire said with some pride. It felt good to be right about something, since they were no longer in control and knew it. Part of what it was to be human was to learn, to name. To be able to predict and eventually to control. The unknown was the greatest fear of their kind. The unknown was by definition unpredictable, and so beyond control. "Also nitrogen," Quindy said, working away at the console just as if she had control. "I have to believe these instruments. Nitrogen at about seventy-six per cent, and oxygen just nineteen per cent-frozen tight." "Grabbles!" Cinnabar interrupted. "That's-that's breathable! A bit short of Oh-two, but it's . . . air! Or would be, thawed a little . . ." "And damned near cold enough to freeze the saliva right in your-mouth, too," Hellfire told the Jarp with understandable exaggeration. "About two per cent CO2," Quindy muttered, almost to herself. "Less oxygen and more carbon dioxide," Trafalgar said nodding. "Sure. Because we're not going to find any plants out there working away at exchanging them through photosynthesis. And nobody breathing, no people pollution to raise the CO2 higher than that two per cent. Anything bad, Quindy? That kind of air composition doesn't belong here, you know. What else is there in that two-point-something per cent you haven't mentioned?" "Helium . . . about a per cent of argon . . . the trace of a trace of krypton . . . I find nothing harmful! It's amazing." She went on muttering, watching the onscreen reports and the running tally provided by the instru- 197 ments. Were they accurate? Were they fobbed and lying, as SIPACUM would have been had it been connected? "Also neutrinos," Janja said from the other chair. She had to be doing something; standing idle was maddening. All of them were tense and more than nervous and all of them knew it. Janja was almost painfully aware of it though, because she cherved it from each of the other four--though Quindy was almost calm. Admittedly Janja didn't yet have it all together as to just what neutrinos were or why, but she knew they belonged. And the detector reported a comfortingly normal neutrino bombardment. The Jarp was still marveling. "Air! We could actually breathe here! What's a planet with a cool sun so far off and such a thick cloud cover doing with just the sort of air

that says: life, flourish!" "There are many, many mysteries in the cosmos," Trafalgar Cuw said. "But whether we can breathe or not doesn't much matter. Nobody could make better snowsuits than we're wearing." He slapped the yellow chest of his air-conditioned mobile life support system/ spacesuit. Its airtank could pull oxygen out of almost anything, provided a bit existed, and the suit was designed to keep Galactics comfortable and very much alive in the coldness of space. "As damnably cold as it is out there, we'd be worse than silly to go out without helmets and our own air supply. We've still got a lot of unknown here, too." "I hate that word!" "What about pathogens?" "We're immune to microbes and viruses that haven't even been invented yet," Hellfire said. "They should all be mighty passive, anyhow, at these temperatures. Hmm . . . still . . . Billions could be blown onto a spacesuit and become active in the ship's warmth." She nodded. "Right. So we simply activate decontamination in the airlock." 198 No one commented. No one cared to think about that. It meant coming back, and no one cared to think about going out. "We won't worry about that, then," Cinnabar said. "So what do we worry about? Ice falls? Snow slides?" "Or just plain snow shifts," Trafalgar said. "It must be piled high and banked by all that wind, and it has to be powdery. Ski snow. You don't get slush or even water crystals at a hundred-sixteen below!" "Can we discount life?" Janja asked. "I mean . . . anything menacing?" "Sentient life just itching to go a few rounds with a spaceship?" Hellfire said sarcastically. "In that?" Trafalgar wondered but kept his counsel. He was thinking about what had to be done and preferred not ' to think about what might be. It was hard to get it out of his mind: that ridiculously huge monster of an "ice worm" that had been featured in one of the Akima Mars holodramas. "I'd think that yes, we can discount life," Quindy said. None of them was happy with Janja for asking why. While Hellfire glowered at her, Quindy answered. "To begin with, I read no emissions. That discounts any sort of civilization or even another downed ship and whatever might have come of it. Civilizations emit; civilized people emit." "What?" Janja asked. "Crud," Hellfire told her. Then the re-named Raunchy surprised them. "Life wouldn't tend to develop under these conditions, Janja. Probably. Even supposing that sun was nice and warm i until relatively recently and this planet's clouds protected it from what might have been too much heat and probably ultraviolet, once-any beings aren't likely to have survived the cooling of their sun." "And the freezing of the planet," Hellfire murmured thoughtfully. "That's possible, isn't it. That there were beings here I mean, sentient beings. And that sun may 199 not have been red all that long. In that case-millions or billions of skeletons, even frozen corpses may be out there under kilometers of snow and ice." "Fossils, anyhow," Trafalgar said. "If there were ever beings here, they may not have had skeletons! Don't forget those jelly-blob things on Shirash." "Ugh," Cinnabar said, with feeling. "Why not forget about those nasty, vicious things!" "Anyhow-damn. Wouldn't it be nice to have some idea as to where we are! To know something about that tired old sun. Theba's eyeballs, how helpless we galaxy-'conquering' spacefarers are without our big crutch: SIPACUM, true god of spacefarers!" Trafalgar waved an arm. In the bulk of the spacesuit, the movement was almost pitiful to those who well knew his penchant for sweeping gestures. Outside, the wind whistled and moaned. "A mightier god than Booda or Ra'ma or Allah or fat Gri or that Theba you and Quindy see fit to swear by, Trafalgar," Hellfire said, and they could all hear the tightness of her lips. Or Aglii, Janja thought while the wind wailed, or Sunmother, gods of my safe and carefree people on "Protected" and "uncivilized" Aglaya! And her lips, too, were tight. With a faint scrunching sound Satana shifted, just a little. That was all, and the ship did not even rock. Five people went immediately tight as drumheads. Waiting. Nothing more; just a slight shifting of the big ship's position in the snow. Outside the wind moaned and whistled across the snowscape. "Just a little settling," Quindy said. "That should be all. We heated up coming in and surely melted out a little nest. Now it's frozen again, into ice this tune rather than snow." She added, "I imagine." "Imagine, suppose, and guess," Trafalgar said. "That's what we've

got. Never realize how we depend on our computers for knowledge and handles on things, do we, until we don't have 'em around anymore!" 200 "Quindy, do we have to listen to the awful sound of that awful wind?" Quindy turned to look at the Jarp, no more orange than the rest of them now. They were all yellow and faceless in the space suits. "I think we'd better stay tuned in, yes." "Why?" "Because, just in case, we want to be able to hear-" "That's enough," Cinnabar said hurriedly. "Don't give me any more answers I won't like!" "All right," Hellfire said, and it was obvious that she spoke as captain. "Let's put all this chatter to some purpose. To begin with, anyone who has to relieve itself had better consider it strongly right now. It's more pleasant using ship's facilities than in a space suit. Next. . . well, we have to go out." Cinnabar was moving to leave the cabin as Trafalgar said, "Right. At least the lamprey's not on the portside hull." "Raunchy? Where to?" "Piss, Captain." "Oh, sorry." Hellfire looked again at Trafalgar; her miscalling the Jarp by its former unname was not worth anyone's comment. "And we need to know how Satana's lying, don't we." "Pos, Captain. If we're really in snow, we can melt our way out. Melt or re-melt our own hole. Laser or plasma torch will work fine out there." He managed to restrain himself from adding "I think" or any other qualifier. If something went wrong they could always blame him for being wrong. That might help their mental states, and it wouldn't hurt Trafalgar Cuw. / think, he added mentally. "Careful with that," Quindy said. "We may be on a hillside. Or the side of a big drift. Something." She gestured helplessly and returned her attention to the instruments. "Maybe," Trafalgar said. "I'd think the heat our hull picked up coming in will have melted us a pretty 201 good hole, though. We probably came down in clouds of steam. Impacted, I mean." Janja was appalled. "But when it freezes back-" "You just can't conceive of this kind of cold, Janjy. Any steam we raised when we hit would have come right back down as instant ice crystals." The wind squealed on a new note, and Hellfire twitched. "Or been blown for a kilometer or two as ice crystals!" She sounded almost as if she was smiling. At least she hadn't spoken with sarcasm, and she'd returned to her pet name of "Janjy" again. Hellfire's hostility toward the blond seemed to be dissipating, Trafalgar noted. Maybe it had occurred to their less-than-stable captain, who was responsible for the most inexperienced hand among them being at the con when Corundum attacked. "All I really worry about," Hellfire was saying, "is whether SIPACUM will function perfectly once the lamprey's cut off." "If ... if it doesn't . . ." Quindy said, but she couldn't finish it. "I hope the monster who dreamed up the lamprey died very slowly," "With a lamprey on his hull," Trafalgar said and gusted a sigh. The wind provided counterpoint. "Well, time to get to it. Captain, we'll need an experienced hand inside to drect the placing of a patch the moment we get that thing off the hull. As to that job . . . Cap'n Hellfire, sir, I've had inspace cutting experience, and I'm rated superior in a suit. Even this one of R--Cinnabar's. I volunteer." Without being able to see her face, he knew she was gazing satirically at him. "You looking to be a hero, Trafalgar Cuw?" At least she didn't call me Trafalgar Pew this time, he thought and said exaggeratedly, "Aww, just doin' whut any bigole macho male ort to do, Captain sir." He heard a chuckle from Quindy but none from the captain, and for a moment he feared that he'd misread Hellfire's seeming mellowness and his improved posi- 202 tion on Satana. Then Hellfire snapped him a travesty of a military salute. "Crewman Cuw, you're accepted." He bowed and was sorry the suit precluded his beloved flamboyance. "I'll need the captain to "go out with me," he said formally. "Oh? No objection, you understand, merely out of curiosity-why?" He gave her the answer guaranteed to pique her curiosity and gain her agreement: "I'll tell you once we're outside." And he affected not to notice the jerk of Janja's helmet, meaning she was giving him a frowning glance. So let her suspect collusion! He was looking out for Trafalgar Cuw. Naturally Hellfire nodded agreement. "Quindy, you'll stand by in here and direct Janja and Raunchy with the patch." "Right, Captain." Trafalgar said, "I have a totally selfish request first, Captain." She gave him a look, and he

could imagine her face, one brow up. "Oh? What's that?" "It isn't that I mistrust shipfarm's ability to keep cloning food without SIPACUM," he told her with a tight smile. "It's just that I'm hungry. And anybody, who mentions 'condemned man' and 'hearty meal' will be stomped or worse." No one could see, but Hellfire actually smiled. 16 It has been said that cowards die many times. The rest of us just stay scared a lot. -Trafalgar Cuw The world was gray, and blue, and bluish. Shadows were in black and purples. There was no light. No sun, no moon, no stars. Never mind the high albedo of snow; there was no incoming light to reflect. The sun was dim and tired, and the cloud layer was way too much for its little strength. Yet now there was light on this world with no name. Six small patches of illumination moved over what seemed normal, achromatic snow. Its whiteness glistened with mica-like flashes only when the mini-spotlights struck it. The lights were the helmet- and knee-lamps of two spacesuits. They were extremely powerful spots and yet mere flaring matches beside the great, looming bulk of spacer Satana. She lay, partly sunken in snow, huge and helpless end as pitifully out of her element as a beached whale. Around the ship windblown snow dunes rose and were overshadowed by hills, which were towered over by mountains. They might have been looming dark 203 204 dragons, brooding over a world grown too cold for them. All in gray and blue and slate, with the deep splashes of violet and black. The wind was a howling constant that kept the air gray as well with a fine mist of blown snow. It pattered against spacesuits, dusted over the helmets. Diamonds seemed to dance in it, diamonds and fireflies that were crystal reflections from the suit lamps. It was eerie, this being surrounded by cold sufficient to freeze skin and fat and marrow. And yet not feeling it. What they felt was the constant 24 degrees Centigrade provided by the aircon systems in their suits. The wind was a constant banshee wail. They experienced it as a force against their suited bodies. The yellow of the suits was garish in this realm of shadow. Looking up yielded nothing. There might as well have been no sun, not even a sky. Cloud sat on this planet like a fat butt on a small chair. Snow, banked and blown, and the wind were a unit that contained them, shielded them from all else. It was not, however, a comforting shield. Trafalgar touched Hellfire's suit, waited a moment while she turned to him. He gestured, then directed the laser away from them. The beam emerged like a line drawn by a fine-point marker. The two watched the steam. It became dancing crystals that eddied like bright gnats. They fell back or blew to fall elsewhere. The laser was tested, but its effect had raised whimsy in Trafalgar Cuw. "A new art form?" he said and, sighted on a brooding dune well away to bring another cloud of steam and another myriad fluttering twinkles. "Probably not new," Hellfire said too seriously, providing an almost stern voice of practicality. But they exchanged the ancient A-okay signal in the well-articulated fingers of their mobile life support systems. And they plodded. They had rigged ugly, ridiculous, platypus "snow-shoes" from dispensable grillework on the ship. It merely made them even more ungainly than the yellow suits 205 did. At least he had found grilles of hyperplass rather than metal. His weight of 78 kilos\* was down 10 in this gravity, but the spacesuit brought it right back up. "Whistle or hum or something, will you? This silence is eerie, and that damned moaning of the wind doesn't help." "I don't hum and I can't whistle," she said too seriously, and he rolled his eyes in a silent comment. She couldn't see, of course. "Syri always liked to whistle." He responded to that non sequitur because they'd have been lonely even if they had been holding hands. "Syria?" "Syri. Syriaris." Even through the suit's speakers, both activated, he heard the subdued tone, the pensive-ness in her voice. "Oh. Who's Syrians?" "Was. Crew. They killed her, on Macho." "Oh." They were plodding, buffeted a little by the wind. More than a little. He carried the heavy stuff because he was going to be the one who used it. He also heard the tone of her voice and knew that Syriaris was-had been-more than just crew, and that Hell-fire missed her, She was probably gone off in her head right now, he mused, thinking about her lost Syriaris and all that godawful experience back on Macho. He had to remind himself of her viciousness. He remembered Ms



thoughts about her back on Copperdock when she had unnecessarily Fried a(nother) man. "O sweet Theba's britches, that is one vicious woman! Fried the poor bug with him already as helpless as a paramecium on a lab slide! That flaming woman would be dangerous even with a hairpin!" It was true. It's still true, he reminded himself, and yes sir it is indeed smart to have her out here with you, Traf m'dear lad. \* 173 old-style "pounds," lessened to 150.5 by a gravity of .87 standard. 206 It was just that she was real, far from a cliché or a caricature, and that made her as faceted as a well-cut diamond ... or a tight little snowflake on this cold hell of a planet. Maybe she knew what remorse was and maybe she didn't. But she could pat Cinnabar or Quindy fondly, warm (a little!) to him and re-warm to Janja—a short time after she had been mercurially ready to do a lot more than knock her out the cabin hatchway and into a wall—and to think pensively. Mournfully. Mourning a slain shipmate who was also friend and, he assumed, lover. They're all lovers on this dhm' ship, he thought. All except the icky-ptui!-man no one wants onboard anyhow! Pore ole Trafalgar "Pew." Oh, well, I reckon I've done all right, at that. I wonder. Would she off me if she knew about me and Quindy? Or does she know? Maybe. In that case she might well think that leaving me here would be a fine way to solve the Trafalgar problem, Traf my dear boy. Glad to have you right beside me, Hellfire dear. Hellfire, he mused. Hellfire and ice! Hellfire hellion! And yet there's warmth in her, too, just the same as there is at the core of this Muslim Cold Hell of a sun-forgotten world. Just don't get silly-maudlin and sympath-empathetic and do anything silly like trusting the treacherous murdering hellion, he reminded himself. And he grinned within his opaque helmet as he made the mental addition: Or touching her, either! Actually she touched him, and it was more than a touch. It was also not deliberate. The high-impact double-superplas crosshatching of their impoverished footgear was effective on snow but no better on ice than a solid sole. For no particular reason he was walking or rather "walking" on the inside, next the ship. "Damn!" "Oops!" 207 "Look out!" "Ow! Damn!" Her outside foot had come down on ice. She slipped. She slipped into Trafalgar, awkwardly bulky miss into bulkily awkward miss. Action-reaction sent Trafalgar sideways. He banged against the hull. His suit went rigid and protective, saving his elbow. Nevertheless he dropped the laser beamer while she dropped the line gun. His other arm had also jumped automatically out to catch her. That was neither effective nor -necessary, since his body caught hers and the ship wasn't about to give way to their meager weight. She pulled away at the same time as he pulled back his arm. That combination of actions succeeded in dropping her, flailing, backward. Fortunately she missed the patch of ice and whumped down in snow. "Shit! God damn!" He leaned against the ship's bulk. It was nice to have around, he thought, and he said, "Hey, Hellfire. Please laugh." "Laugh!" She was getting herself up into a sitting position. "What the vug for, furbag?" "Because I've just got to!" he said on a fast and rising note, and then he was helplessly laughing. After a moment of that the sprawl-seated Hellfire reached over and pulled his leg out from under him. He thumped the ship and fell beside her with a flailing arm flung across her outstretched legs. Then she joined him in laughter. Inside the ship three oval-helmeted heads turned opaque faceplates up toward the talkbox. It brought them the sound of the two outside. "What-are they-doing?" "Laughing," Janja said. "Hellfire?" "Laughing! At a time like this?" Janja nodded. "Uh . . . Quindy . . . could they be 208 getting too much oxygen from the airtanks? Or could anything out there be . . ." She trailed off nervously. "Nothing out there, surely. The just-born infant daughter of a microscopic not to mention dwarf virus couldn't get into those molss," Quindy said, reverting to military acronym for the suits and pronouncing it with a short o. "Hellfire? Captain? Trafalgar? Please check your Oz mix?" "Oh, screw off, furbag. We're making a snowman." "You're right, Janja," Quindy murmured. "I think they must be getting too much oxygen—they're high as spaceport prices!" Between gusts of laughter the sprawled Hellfire said, "Want to?" That broke Trafalgar up again, and he wallowed in the snow. He got a hand on the hull, started to get up, and

discovered that the hull was like a sheet of glass. He fell. Again. They both started laughing. Again. The wind howled. In Quindy's voice their helmets said, "Captain? Trafalgar? Would you please reduce the oxy-mix of your air supply? You sound high." Naturally that broke them up all over again. Eventually he asked, "Want to what?" "What you told ole Mother Quindy. Make a snowman." He heard a giddy giggle and knew it came from his suit's speakers. "Will you stop that?" she ordered sternly, and giggled. "I don't think we can," he said. "Can't stop laughing? Hmp! I can! Get hold of yourself." He chuckled anew, started to grab his crotch, decided that wasn't too cool considering the company, and showed her his linked hands. "All right, I've got hold of myself, see? No, what I meant was-hey! Will you stop laughing? This is serious business out here. What I meant was that we 209 can't make a snowman. No way to get the snow to stick together, 's too cold. All powder." "Powder! It didn't feel like powder when I fell, spoilsport!" "All right, then, so it's hard, packed, under the surface. But we can't make a snowman. We'll either have to settle for an igloo or see about getting that lamprey off the ship. Lamprey? Ship? Remember?" "Spoilsport. Besides, I'm not sure we can." His helmet swung toward hers. "Why?" "I'm not sure I can get up." "You've got a point there." "I know, but the helmet covers it, doesn't it?" "Oh. Oh, that hurts. That's awful. That's it, Captain sir. I think we have been what's called re-releasing tension, but now we're going too far. That so-called joke must be a century old. Maybe ten." He looked around. "Suppose I swing around and put my back against the ship. I'll scoot my way up and then I can help-" "With that airtank on your back?" "Oh. Scratch that idea. Well, in that case, please hold still. Very still now." "Here you can't-ow!" "Sorry." He had braced himself against her and used her shoulders to get himself onto his junked-up feet. He moved carefully to the huge, looming barrel shape of the ship's hull. Turned, set his butt firmly against it. Stretched out an arm. "Give me a hand, Captain." "I guess if I say something like Why? You've got two already," you'll just make snotty remarks about my humor. Here. Uh! Thanks." "How's your, uh, rear assembly?" She put back a hand to touch, touch, then confidently spank snow off herself. "Ouch. Powder, right. I'm all right. Sorry I slipped into you." "Sorry I fell on you." "Well, I feel about ten times better now. Maybe we 210 should forget being sorry, Trafalgar." She turned. "My airtank look all right?" "Pos." And now we can start from scratch at getting tense again. She turned, tilted up her helmet, pointed. "There's our goal. A few more meters to walk." "Right. I have a brilliant idea, Captain sir." "Tell me it's walking single file rather than side by side." "This time let's walk single file instead of side by side. Oh, what'd you say?" "Captains first," she said and led the way on alongside the ship. He made sure she had taken three paces before he started after her. They reached their first goal, below the extrusible light mast. It was up and winking, a homing beacon for them in the darkness. Carefully she turned away from the ship and watched each time she planted a foot, lifting her knees well up and setting the makeshift snowshoes down with the diffidence of a cat wading through sewage. She didn't fall. "I think I'll watch from here," he said, facing her with his back against Satana. She slipped the line thrower, far more often called line gun, out of the belt sheath provided for it. And he felt chilly. For an instant he feared a pin-hole leak in his suit. Then he realized it was apprehension. Even after all we've just been through, after all that laughing and even shared laying on of hands, I'm still scared when we're out here where no one can see and she's facing me and draws from the hip! Damn. Too bad, Captain. You make a pretty good partner, and now and again I almost like you, or try. But I wouldn't trust you any farther than I could kick Satana. And you're worthy of that distrust, too, aren't you, Hell . . . fire! Probably, but she slid the line gun out to rifle length, made it click, double-checked the spool chamber, took one hand off it to give him a little A-okay signal, and 211 lifted the rifle-like thing to sight high above his head. At the light mast. Aiming was easy; she merely centered the little red dot of the laser sight and squeezed. Phut! and spizzz! and the line shot up

and away. He didn't hear another sound. "Hit it?" "Dead on! Perfect! First shot! Look!" And with both hands clamped to the rifle, she leaned back. And plopped backward into the snow. On the other hand the line didn't come down. "Uh . . . Captain sir ... you forg-" "-got to lock it taut. Yes. I know. Now. Do not laugh." "Wouldn't think of it." Seated up to the hipbones in very alien snow, she closed the lock, then collapsed the rifle into itself. The line ran straight up over his head and out of sight. This time her demonstration was effective: she used the line as leverage to get to her feet. He started to remind her to let the line rewind, to keep it taut as she walked toward him, and bit his lip. No use being a nag and joining Quindy as Mother Trafalgar. He noted that she did forget that, too, and the line limped as she took a step, then another toward him. He heard her "oh, shit" and watched her pause to ease the lock into the other setting. Now the line would maintain slack by automatically retracting into the barrel and back onto the spool. Since line guns were designed for use in space, none of them had had any doubts about the thing's effectiveness in this cold. What Trafalgar worried about was Hellfire's effectiveness. He knew how she had come by Satana. She had been part of its crew. Computrician, as well as he remembered. After a few months in space on that old merchanter without tachyon capability, even a long, lean, mean-looking, self-professed lesbian had begun to look good to the captain. Too good. He made his play, and Hellfire resisted. Hellfire killed him. Despite the fact that she was in the right, the dolt had been ship's captain, her captain, and offing him made her a crim- 212 inal. She had avoided accusation, explanations, indictment, and trial. She was a criminal; she remained one. She went outlaw. She kept the ship. Someone else onboard went the way of all flesh; three others stuck with her. One was subsequently space-podded from the ship-which was not Satana then-to Panish's space station, Panishport. He told the story. Meanwhile Captain Hellfire and the other two crew:-women- moved away fast. The successful raid on a little mining colony on Nevermind awhile later cost her one of those two women but filled the ship's hold. That success and the proceeds bought her a far better ship-on Saman-na-and more crew, good ones. Quindy came later; Janja and Raunchy-now-Cinnabar came later than that. And Trafalgar Cuw later than that, although he considered himself a member of Satana's crew no more than Satana's captain did. So because of her, a captain he wouldn't trust and whose survival past two days and a few kilometers he couldn't understand, he had crossed light-years, parsecs, and was standing here on an unknown and deadly cold planet ready to climb up and rescue her ship from the work of an enemy-not his. So that he could go back into space with her and wonder if they'd get someplace where he could redshift, fast, before she blew up or forgot something and removed herself from the spaceways. And the wind howled like a dirge for him even before he was dead. He kept telling himself that was no harbinger. And that he had to do this and was not that ridiculous creature he sneered at, a brave hero. You have to be brave and heroic just to get on the same ship with her, he told himself, taking the line gun she proffered. This-this just proves what a bloody rectum I am! As he turned from her, he checked the device as surreptitiously as possible. And he gave it a good hard pull before he entrusted himself to the line. He set himself. "Trafalgar." 213 His nape prickled at her canned voice from behind him. "Grant?" "Grunt! What's that supposeji to mean?" "Sorry, Captain Hellfire sir. It's a piece of slang I picked up on a planet neither of us wants to talk about or even think about. Means 'huh?' or 'whut?' " "Thanks, Trafalgar. No more Pew, I swear it." Gee gosh super, he thought, and said, "Aw shucks, Captain sir, it's the natural big male macho thing to do." And he set a foot against the broad-bellying hull. "You bastard-you named that planet after all." He chuckled, told himself to stop, wiped the smile off his face, took a step up, slid off, cursed, and hung onto the line gun. If he let go, the line would retract until the gun was right up there with the magnetic tip. Meters and meters away, on Satana. The ship was coated with a thin film of ice. He should have known that the makeshift snowshoes would be more hindrance than help on

such a surface. "Please hold the line, Captain," he said, passing it up. "Got to take my shoes off." "I will stay right with them and guard them with my life." He nodded. "I will appreciate that. Will you also help me up?" A few moments later he was making his difficult way up the hill of the hull, sans snowshoes. The grapple line plus partial power fed to his boot-sole magnets made that relatively easy, even in the wind of cold hell. Hellfire stood below, having moved from directly beneath him just in case. Trepidly he mounted the beached whale that was only a medium-size spaceship and was still large enough to swallow Moby Dick. He hand-over-handed his way up, careful step after careful step, like a mountain climber. Right hand grasping the ring grip of the line gun; left hand sliding 214 out along the thin line to grip it; foot sliding forward; moving up and, as his right hand moved forward, maintaining tension in the line while it retracted into the "gun." And again. And another step. And again, magnetized boots helping, thin sheet of ice cracking and sliding away behind him, down the slope and off to dribble onto the snow. There must be a better way, he reflected, but he couldn't think of one. The idea was that one did this sort of thing in space, when weightlessness kept his body from wanting to fall backward-because there was no down. True, it wanted to fall "up" with each step, but that was why suit-controlled magnets were built into the soles of his boots. The wind was at his back but he didn't notice that it helped his ascent. It wanted to shove him forward and right across and off the other side, and gravity and ice wanted to help him slide backward and off on this side, and all Trafalgar Cuw wanted was to reach that nice pretty little light-topped tower and hug it like a mommy. Or rather as if it were his mommy. He clank-pulled himself toward it and tried to think about nothing else at all. Nothing else in the world, he thought, because who could think of anything else on this world worth thinking about? He reached the light tower, a bit over a meter and a half high as extruded from within Satana at the flip of a switch. And he hugged it as if it were his mommy. After that he concentrated on un-tensing the taut muscles of his neck and his calves, his poor calves. And then he concentrated on just breathing for a while. That was nice. Wind and snow and minus 35 degrees C and Hellfire and TSMCo and TGO could just go to hell (the hot one). He was happy and secure, hanging onto a skinny little beacon "tower" atop the snow-beached whale that was Satana, way out of its element. As Trafalgar Cuw was. Time to get back to business. Cut power to the magnet and remove the grapnel line to pace along up 215 here? Or leave the line in place and let it pay out behind me, just in case I slip? Hmm. He looked to left and right along a broad hull that was positively porcu-pined with sensors, scanners, and other untidy manifestations of technology. He braced himself. Hanging onto the hardly towering tower, he cut the power to the magnet. With a thwp the "gun" sucked the line back in. The broad tip braced against the muzzle, ready to be relaunched. Triggering the line thrower simultaneously magnetized the tip. On impact it did its best to electroplate itself to any metal target. He hung onto the sturdy phallic symbol of the light-tipped beacon while he circled it to look back and down. The latter was useless because of the bellying hull; the former was next to impossible because of dimness and blowing snow. The snow's gray curtain swallowed and partially reflected the suit lamps while it defeated the telepresence camera that reported instant images to Ms eyes on the lighted screen just before them. Automatically but to no purpose, he squinted. Was that a dune? A big snowdrift piled against a boulder or hillock? Oh, wonderful; now his eyes were playing tricks as well. They-or the TP camera, which was probably squinting, too-tried to make him believe that was some sort of sinister shape moving up from the dune's other side. He swallowed hard, and his heartbeat stepped up. He felt a prickling in Ms armpits. Sure, sure, he tried to tell himself. And here comes a frost giant and a humonger-ous ice, worm, closely followed by Akima Mars with her cleavage open to the elements! Goose bumps all over those mightily mountainous mammaries. Sure, Traf. Get on with it, Tr- "Hellfire? Turn and see if you see a sort of, uh, oblique mound behind you. Snow dune, or something." He had to

assume that she would turn and look; 216 she was invisible below the outward arc of Satana's hull. He waited, squinting, squeezing his eyes shut to try again. What was that figure? A tenth of a second? The eye sees by means of light, the light it can or does admit. It doesn't matter how much one blinks or how much light impinges on the retina. Only the amount of light it admits in the first one-tenth of a second provides that picture called vision. In other words I'm not going to see a flaining bit better no matter how hard I try. "I see it," Hellfire's voice said, jolting him so that he twitched. Her suit was attuned to his, of course, so that she spoke right in his ear. "What about it?" "Look. Study it. Can you see anything else? Anything . . ." (he felt silly but said it anyhow) ". . . moving?" He heard her little gasp as if she were sucking air right out of his ear, like a bad radio announcer. He waited, chewing his lip. Looked away, then back. Trying to see the whatever-it-was sideways, as he knew people could see stars by looking beside them but not at them. That didn't work, either. And Hellfire said, "Neg. Nothing moving, Trafalgar. Are you?" "Gulp," he enunciated, and started moving. Get on with it, Traf me lad. No frost giants, no ice worm, no Akima Mars. No life on this snowball world. Except five of us, and the job at hand is to see to it that we stay alive. And he moved away from his security post. While he moved along the hull, staring down in quest of the lamprey, he dared not obey the worse than nagging impulse to look out there again. There's nothing, he kept telling himself. There couldn't be. Just that rotten dam' lamprey that put us here and keeps us here. Until I find it and get it off. Oops. He caught himself, stood still to regain his breath and recover from an adrenaline jolt. And he went on, as precarious with both legs as one-legged Ahab would have been walking on Moby Dick. 217 He reached a reflector antenna and grasped it to hang on for a few moments, just breathing. His glove didn't even stick to it; the cold of the thing would have peeled the skin off his bare hand before it let him let go. He moved on, now and again pausing to squeeze his eyes shut before daring to trust them again. Lost, he thought. Lost on Planet X. Great title. So where the vug's ole Akima Mars, coming loyally through the snow with brandy in one of her great big containers? The wind answered him; it howled as if with sneering laughter. "Find anything?" "Neg. See anything on that dune? Or anywhere?" "Neg." "Well, keep looking." "You took the words right out of my mouth." "Mike," he said. "Not mouth, mike." And he slipped. Away he went, whumping down and skidding right-ward and on over the arc of the ship's hull. He didn't see Ms life flash before his eyes and he didn't stop himself. His slide was stopped by the strut of a telescope. That didn't hurt much; the suit clamped rigid to protect the meat and bone it housed like a turtle in a shell. He embraced the strut. Nice invention, telescopes. Thanks, Givenchy or Davinchy or somebody; whoever invented the good old telescope. He attached the magnetized tip of the grappling line to the telescope strut and glanced around. Moving laterally with maximum care to a wrist-thick mast whose purpose he had forgotten-crawling-he passed the line across its upper side. When he stood, he had to brace against a gust of wind that felt strong enough to separate head from body. Wonder if ifs night or day. Whoever it was that a god shot craps with for the universe-god lost this one! He moved on, feeling more secure now with the ring grip of the line thrower in his hand, and so he slipped 218 again. The line held. That way he only banged down, hard. The suit held. The turtle inside it cursed. Hellfire heard him but not his words and feared she had missed a communication. "What did you say?" "Just some comments for posterity," he told her. "If you know any good curses I don't, I'm accepting contributions." "You all right up there?" "Sure, sure. Hard to stay up, that's all. I'm surviving." "Find anything yet?" His heartfelt reply was not precisely to the point, included some unlikely combinations, and didn't follow besides. She heard, and purred a low whistle. "Wow! You don't need any help with profanity from me, Trafalgar!" Enough time wasted, he told himself. He carefully got himself onto hands and knees-gloved, insulated, suit-warmed hands and padded, insulated, articulated, air-conditioned knees-and went on.

Searching. He knew better but was beginning to think of the lamprey as about the size of a needle. And Satana was a big haystack. He sought the little horror that had made them so helpless. Somewhere in this dimness of what was presumably the planet's eternal dusk, the lamprey was snugly flattened out on the ship's hull like a hard-thrown glueball. Is that something moving over there? He had paused again, clinging again, and had made the mistake of looking around, squinting, shifting the TP camera along the spectral range and trying even ultraviolet. Blue and slate and gray; violet and black. Movement? No, idiot, he told himself, it's wind and snow and straining eyes and an overactive imagination. They always told me I had an overactive imagin-quit wasting time, Traffy my dear lad. Get on with it. 219 He got on with it and kept on with it. The snow kept looking for ways into his suit, and the wind kept trying to turn him into a kite. He was sure he was aging a year per minute, because there was no way he could persuade his body to un-tense, much less relax. The lamprey might just as well have been alive and hiding. He was just under an hour in finding it, and it seemed ten hours. Hellfire and those within the ship made nervous noises, encouraging noises, impatient noises. None was effective. Trafalgar Cuw kept fighting the wind and the slipperiness of the iced hull, and he kept looking. Seems like ten hours, he thought. At a year a minute that made him too decrepit to do anything about the device once he found it... He found it. It was flattened out now, as if trying to look like part of the hull-which it was making itself. Fortunately the color was wrong and fortunately he was looking in the right direction at the right time, and when he slipped, his knee lamp found the computer traumatizer. The thing had taken out an emissions detector just before impacting the hull, he noted. He squatted. Well, surely we don't have to worry about any industrial emissions on this snowball! One hopes. That didn't stop him from looking anxiously around again, trying to see Out There. Sure. AH sorts of movement. Doubtless a million hideous monsters, he sneered at himself, and rose carefully to a standing position. No monsters. "Got it," he announced with enthusiasm, and undipped the tripod from his belt. It made a tidy little parcel, all folded and collapsed. "Praise be!" Hellfire's voice said in his earphones. "I keep imagining that my feet are getting cold. And that I'm seeing . . . things." "Ha, ha, ha," he said, and it sounded just that phony to him. Well, he was glad that she was scaring herself, 220 too, with straining eyes and the apprehension that wouldn't go away. And wind-driven snow. And squiggly shadows. "Welcome to humanity, Captain Hellfire sir!" He double-checked the tripod's lock joints. "Uh. Squatting. Tripod open and stable. Measuring. Ah-huh. Setting up-tripod. Damned ice! There. Setting the beam's cutting depth. This is going to be microsurgery! "Now mounting laser on tripod. Secure. Measuring the distance again, just in case, with laser attached to tripod. Just to be sure. Hmm. Measuring again. . . ." He was nervous about the depth of the cut and kept double- and triple-checking. There was no way he'd try such delicate work hand-holding the laser beamer. It could be adjusted to send out its beam of cutting light just to there, down to thousandths of a millimeter and presumably millionths. He hardly believed in millionths of millimeters, and yet he knew what he'd be doing to the ship if he cut the tiniest fraction too deep. A puff of wind while he was cutting; a little slip . . . Oh, no. With the tripod squared off and set on the hull and anchored there, and the laser mounted immovably on it, even a klutz shouldn't be able to damage the ship while relieving it of its nemesis. As long, he told himself, as I am absolutely sure of my advance calibrations. And he measured again. "Quindy? You have a fix on my location?" "Pos. We're there, Trafalgar. Standing right under you, standing by with patch ready." "All three of you are helmeted and on bottled air, just in case?" "Pos. And with a seal around this area, just in case." "Good. There sure have been a lot of just-in-cases around lately! Right, then-here goes. Beam on. Cutting." And after another moment: "Oh, wonderful. Steam. Going to have to take this slow, hi stages." And after another moment: "Trafalgar?" "Hmm? I'm getting there! Yes, Captain?" "Why did you want me out here with you?" 221 "All those

monsters we keep seeing, Captain. Bodyguard." "I don't believe you, Trafalgar." "I don't either. Halfdone! I'll tell you when I'm finished and back with you, Captain." "Suppose I guess. You don't trust me. You want me with you out here so you can be sure of getting back in." "Cap-tain. Hellfire! What a thought!" He was cutting, sweating, playing surgeon to a spaceship on its hull, in the dark or nearly, in minus 116 degrees C temperature, in a pretty mean wind. And grinning tightly, because she was exactly right. "Almost there! Ready, inside?" "Patch ready, Trafalgar." "Maybe you'd better just-ah!-stay back now. I've got this thing set so that it can't possibly cut through the hull, but-" "Oh God, Trafalgar, please be careful!" Tension held him so tightly that his stomach hurt and one arm was trying to quiver. "Oh, all right," he said, trying to relieve it. "Actually what I've been doing out here is jiggling around loosing random bursts, but if you think I ought to be careful-!" No one responded to that. Good, he thought. I hope they're as tense as I am. Then: "There! That's it! Get that patch up and on, my darlings. Lamprey is dead dead dead!" He started dismantling the laser rig and he started relaxing. Still, they were hardly out of danger until that patch was up and sealed. "Patch in place, Trafalgar. Congratulations!" He grinned inside his helmet. That word sounded good, felt good. He rose with the flattened lamprey in his gloved hand. Making sure he was not in danger of slipping, he sent the device skimming away to carry forth the ancient tradition: man lands on planet, man litters. 222 Now all he had to do was- "Captain?" He had the beamer attached to Ms belt and was collapsing the tripod. He twisted his helmeted head as best he could, as if looking in her direction would accomplish something. No reply, and he frowned. "Hellfire?" "Hellfire!" Quindy echoed, more loudly. "Hellfire?" Trafalgar's heart was pounding. Had she waited until she was sure he had saved her ship (assuming that SIPACUM now functioned perfectly as before) and was now hurrying back to the airlock? Doubtless carrying his parr of the snowshoes he had improvised?-planning to lock out the man she had never fully trusted? (Not that she wasn't right in that, but never mind.) Lord lord and Theba's curse! It would not be abandonment, not under these conditions! Not when the ship started to move, and him on it or all too nearby. He'd be the hottest thing on this Cold Hell of a planet. But just for an instant, he thought, hearing Quindy call the captain again. Then I'll be part of the damned planet-forever. "HELLFIRE!" To all the hells with the line he had so carefully strung! The job was done. He could afford to make time by sliding down. All he wanted was to get off this hull and try to reach the airlock in time to- "Oh quit shouting at me, you over-maternal idiots!" That was Hellfire's voice, and Trafalgar knew the feeling of a condemned prisoner receiving a last-instant reprieve. His stomach went all empty in a surge of relief. "I just got so excited when you announced that it's all done that I forgot and tried to jump up and down. I fell. Come on, Traf," she went on happily, while he burst out laughing and tried to pretend it wasn't slightly hysterical with relief. "We've got some celebrating to do. And then-well, Janja, I may or may not change my mind about not going after Jonuta just because you 223 don't like him. But Corundum, now . . . that's another matter. Let's get this ship off this snowball and into space and hunt that bastard down! Come on, Trafalgar, quit hanging around up there and let's be on our way, you big macho slow man, you!" While the others cheered noisily, Trafalgar laughed and started moving. And Janja thought, Primeval Princess is coming for you, Corundum!

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