

"BY TAO'S TONSILS -THE PIRATE ASKED. WHAT'S THIS?" They stood over an unconscious creature sprawled on the floor. The captain replied, "That's a HRal; they're only recently discovered." "So what's it doing lying here in the tunnel with its clothes ripped and no less than four itty-bitty breasts exposed?" Before the captain could reply the pirate leader turned to one of his men. "Get it- I mean, her," he ordered. "She'll come with us. This dull merchanter doesn't appreciate exotic stash -but we'll make sure to provide a nice exciting life for this kitty-cat woman!"

SPACEWAYS #1 OF ALIEN BONDAGE #2 CORUNDUM'S WOMAN #3 ESCAPE FROM MACHO #4 SATANA ENSLAVED #5 MASTER OF MISFIT #6 PURRFECT PLUNDER #7 THE MANHUNTRESS #8 UNDER TWIN SUNS PLAYBOY PAPERBACKS SPACEWAYS #6: PURRFECT PLUNDER Copyright (c) 1982 by John Cleve Cover illustration copyright (c) 1982 by PBJ Books, Inc., formerly 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 PBJ Books, Inc., formerly PEI Books, Inc., 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016. Printed in the United States of America. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 82-80838. The poem Scarlet Hills Copyright (c) 1982 by Ann Morris; used by permission of the author. ISBN: 0-867-21148-2 First printing"September 1982. Second printing November 1982. Vast is a size, and size is a distance. Along the spaceways, time is a measure of distance and events and lifetimes, and the spaceways are vast. The crew of the spaceship Satana-Captain Hell-fire, First Mate Quindy, Janja, Cinnabar, and Trafalgar-must have spent some two months-standard in the marvelous self-sufficient city of Survival. As in the novel immediately preceding this in the Spaceways saga, most of the events of this book take place before, and during that time. Janja and company return in Spaceways #8, month after next!

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 Anybody can be a hero. All it takes is a fast-acting simpleton without enough sense to be scared. -Trafalgar Cuw The fleet thundered up through the thin atmosphere of the unpeopled rallying planet and into space. Giant carrier ships lumbered out of their parking orbits to move into the fleet combat pattern. Inside, their hulls were pregnant with deadly little attack craft ready for the close fighting they had to anticipate. Only the foolish looked forward to it. The entire fleet swarmed out in quest of the enemy. The nearly airless little planet's apparent size diminished until it was a marble in the indigo domain of interstellar space, and then only a disk of reflected light among the billions that cluttered the spaceways. Spread out over hundreds of thousands of kloms, kilometers, the fleet was a covey of wood-ticks in the immensity of the cosmos. The lead formation was close-packed, with a mere five thousand kloms between the streaking spacers. It was a gap that could be closed in a minute. Radio waves emanating from the lead formation blanketed space along all three bands while their crews waited tensely for contact with the enemy. Time seemed to 11 12 move with incredible slowness. Time measured distances, and these distances were incredibly great. On the ships' hulls, sensors and autogunnery moved restlessly like live things. Their sensitive detector mechanisms sought constantly for the telltale radioactive emissions of space-drive systems. The

drive "signatures" of the fleet ships went unnoticed by the killer devices. They were recognized and keyed out. The autoguns were programmed to commence firing at the moment of detection. The enemy they sought was not known for parleying or even bothering to offer surrender before attacking. Onboard spacer Dauntless, Kenowa was thinking about how long it was going to be before she got Captain Sword in bed again . . . and the autoguns went berserk. Those on the other lead-craft flared at the same instant. Space was webbed by a hellish network of neutron streams reaching out to detonate atomic nuclei in their targets. Then brilliant lavender beams were stabbing back toward them, even before the strange ships appeared onscreen. The heavy neutron cannon sizzled into action, hurling bolts of pure energy at the approaching enemy. DS, the guns were called. Defense Systemry, whether used defensively or otherwise. The main fleet began converging on the area of contact. A herd of elephants charging. Great engines raged with power. Enemy ships came swarming out of the parsec abyss like killer sharks of space. Their deadly purplescent beams stabbed out with deadly precision. The heavy guns of the fleet poured back a hellfire barrage of neutrons. In flaming silent starbursts that assaulted even combat-shielded eyes, the invaders began flashing into oblivion. Nevertheless the enemy streamed into battle in numbers that seemed ever to increase. Kenowa caught hell from Captain Sword (tall, dark, 13 handsome) for not having donned her protective nitration lenses. As she turned to race for her cabin, he slapped her backside, hard. The big woman skipped and grinned without glancing back. She hadn't expected him to be able to resist the moving effect of metallic white silken Sprayon, tight enough to show a pimple. That was the reason she wore, unusually, a high-necked bodyshirt with flowing sleeves. Kenowa knew herself, and she knew how to dress for maximum effect. Gleaming pants tighter than skin and the barbican jut of her overgenerous bosom were sufficient, without displaying bare cleavage. "Plaining hell! We've shot hundreds of those sister-slicers out of space and still they come on, and on! They're sure as hell bent on conquest!" "Another woman-hunt," a rumbling voice said. Kenowa recognized the voice of Captain Sword's aide and advisor, the very attractive Jonuta who was technically his superior officer. She swallowed as she rushed into her cabin. Absolutely luxurious, it was snuggled between the cabins of Sword and Jonuta. While she searched for the combat shielding lenses she was supposed to keep close at hand, the fleet slammed into battle. The awesome power of neutron cannon tore a devastating path before it. The spacescape became a flaring network of ravaging force that turned its brooding indigo into a kaleidoscope of blinding energy. Ghastly killer beams swept through the enemy like a multi-bladed scythe that left gaping emptiness where alien craft had been. Fleet and leadcraft alike combined their full firepower. The fantastically destructive barrage decimated the enemy and swept back to decimate it again. And again. It went on until space was swept clear of the craft that had come beyond the vast collapstar called The Maelstrom. The remnants of the enemy attack force continued 14 suicidal rushes at the fleet spacers, but those few remaining aliens were rapidly wiped out of existence in soundless eruptions. The awful weapons, a nice euphemism for guns called "Defense Systemry," went silent. The last of the enemy spacers vanished in a blaze of disrupted atoms. And just then Dauntless shuddered and lurched violently. Kenowa was flung onto her satin-sheeted bed, and off it. "What the vug-we're hit! Locate damage sector! Report, report!" "Just aft of Sector Five, Captain. Starboard side." "That's my cabin! And Kenowa ran back there for her damned combat shields!" Captain Sword whirled and raced in that direction. (It was one of several ways in which the heroic captain-who looked just like the co-star of The Masters of Survival, Akima Mars holomelodrama #3-differed from Jonuta. Jonuta would first have seen to the safety of his ship.) What Kenowa was hearing, meanwhile, was the hideous screechy sound of the tearing of impervious materials. Plasteel and cyprium-monofilament hydrogen bonded at the electron level and stronger than steel. The construction materials of spacecraft Dauntless. Slivers of it speared through

the cabin as a section of the hull was torn away like ripped paper. And the blizzard began. Every whiff of the cabin's air raced eagerly out in an attempt to fill the unfillable vacuum. It incidentally tried to suck everything in the cabin out with it. That included Kenowa, who heard the whistle of rushing air but could not hear her own despairing cry. What would Akima Mars do in this kind of situation? 15 Not die, surely, Kenowa thought, but knew that she would. She began by blacking out. Death was not supposed to be like this. There were more stories of what happened after death than there were religions, and religions cluttered the planets all along the spaceways. The lore depended on the planet and the god and the imagination of the local priesthood and explicating computers. None of the stories resembled this. Just to begin with, Kenowa was absolutely naked. She sat up on the hard deck and tried not to whimper at sight of the great many-jointed metallic tentacles that were coming at her. One arched up into the air like an impossibly large, fleshless cobra. It must be staring, focusing an optic lens on her. The other tentacle, thick as her calf, snaked around her bare body. I am not dead, she thought. Then: But this is what a fate worse than death must be! She struggled and may as well have saved her energy. She whimpered her uncontrollable fear all the while she was lifted easily and removed from the cabin. She was borne through a scene of destruction and carnage. Giving up her useless struggle, she viewed the nightmare reality that Dauntless had become. She was too stunned to react. Her captor was a totally unfamiliar machine mounted on a set of tentacles that permitted it to move easily over obstacles—such as wreckage, and bodies. Its convex dorsal surface sprouted another set of tentacles. Some were equipped with the amber lenses that served it as eyes. Two of the other four held her firmly captive. Exactly why one had to be crammed uncomfortably between her upper thighs so that she "rode" erectly astride in a ride-the-horsey pose, she could not imagine. The thing was obscenely abrading her labia. Bloody remains of men lay scattered amid the wreck— 16 age the machine crawled over with such spiderish ease. That created a great deal of swaying, but her erect sitting posture was maintained, crotch and waist grasped and her arms pressed to her sides. Her mechanical captor was taking obvious care to keep its nude burden away from any dangerous projections. They passed by and over many, on wrecked Dauntless. Now she saw other, similar machines. She wondered why they bore only female captives. This is like being in some Akima Mars mellerl They rounded a corner in the ship's tunnel and she saw other captives being boosted through a ragged hole in the ship's side. No air rushed out. Only then did Kenowa realize: she was without space helmet or respirator! Yet she was alive, and breathing. This . . . thing's craft has to be airlocked to poor dead Dauntless! She noted that every scrap of clothing was wrested from each wailing woman before she vanished into that aperture into the unknown. As Kenowa was brought to the opening, she again came alive. In a panicky resistance she tore at the tentacles holding her. That accomplished only the breaking of her nails and the abrading of fingertips. She was squeezed a little more tightly and the other tentacle pressed up into her crotch until her eyes bulged. Gasping, she was lifted through. Her gasps changed in tone as the tentacles slid away and she felt other flexible arms enfold her. "Ah! Ow! Damn it—you're squashing my warheads!" But her efforts to loosen the tentacle that mashed both her breasts were as fruitless as her previous attempts to escape. Admittedly, Kenowa was mostly breasts to the bottom of her ribcage, and not long-waisted, either. Fighting wildly, she was pulled into a small, dimly 17 lighted chamber. The light emanated as a glow from every wall. It was an eerie blue-green. Then something sharp stabbed her in the butt and she went limp in less than five seconds. Although she was breathing normally enough and was entirely conscious, she had no control over so much as a single muscle. She could not force any sort of sound from her throat. She could not twitch a single finger-joint. She was not uncomfortable; she was numb and barely aware. Like a sensuously molded sack of meal, she was placed on what had to be a conveyor belt. Helplessly she was moved down a tight little tunnel. Her eyes, unable to close, could see only the racing past

of the tunnel's ceiling, about eight centimeters above her head. The tunnel opened into another chamber. The belt's burden was lifted from it. Her naked form hung lax in the tentacles. A faint trace of perfume teased her nostrils. It was not hers. Her body was being arranged in a small niche in the wall. A creche? A morgue-like slot? As she was pushed into it she was aware that she was pressed firmly back against it and arranged in position: fiat on her back with her arms close to her sides. The tentacular things were both neat and mindful of the conservation of space. . . . A sliding hatch closed the opening and she was in total darkness. There was nothing she could do and she knew it. Her favorite form of entertainment was just such O-The-Poor-Girl mellers as this. Eons ago, such a meller-drammer was called a bodice-ripper. Her name should be Shanna or something equally exotic and feminine. She had "read"-watched hundreds, several of them more than once or twice. Favorites were those in which The Poor Girl had a title. Countess, or Baroness, or even Princess or the more exotic Contessa or Marquisa. At 18 least "milady!" It was just that Kenowa had never before tried one of the experiential kind, the ones in which the viewer or "reader" was more than that. Those personal involvement mellers were called expies or sensies, or more crudely, feelies. 7 wish this was one of those, she thought. Just fiction. At least ... 7 think 7 wish that! Well, she couldn't do anything about it. She wasn't Yasmina, or Alexia, or Desiree. She was Kenowa, and she'd just have to ride it out, and hope. Then even that thinking ended. Her thought processes were neutralized. Although she was entirely aware of her nakedness and her predicament if not what it was, she was unable to respond to it in any emotional degree. The injection that had turned her muscles to soup had also tran-quilized her. That was a mercy. Now time had no meaning. She lay in the pitch-dark compartment, arrayed alongside other soundless helpless women like so much stacked wood. Or like so many slabs of meat awaiting the butcher. Had that ugly thought occurred to her, she would not have reacted in any way. There was only the darkness, the odors and aromas of the other female bodies, and the silent waiting in silence. She had no thought of intake or output; food or the necessary evacuation of its residue. Was there food? Did she and others evacuate or were they evacuated? She did not know. Perhaps. Kenowa was the tree that fell in the woods. She did not know if there was sound or not. All of them lay there, ranked and packed neatly, with the infinite patience of the resigned, or the damned who could not care. Or the mindless. They might as well have been carrots or cabbages or spacesuits. She did not even wonder if she was breathing, because she did not think about that. The alien ship hurtled through space. (She knew 19 that. How? She didn't wonder, or question.) An alien craft of alien shape, carrying its cargo of meat. Female Galactics to-what? Horror? Not a better life, surely. At incredible velocity, the ship shot outward from the close-set suns of Galaxy center. It was less than a fineline dot in the glittering magnificence of the star fields. Outward it raced, flaming toward that odd starless vastness called the Carnadyne Void. Onboard, minds functioned, but disconnected from their experience. They did not experience it. They were just there. And on. Past stars in red and orange and bluish and flaming yellow and blinding, marmoreal white. Toward a gigantic red sun. In, in to one of its planets. (Kenowa could not see this. She knew. It was as if she saw it. It did not occur to her to think about how she could know. What was reality, anyhow? A word.) The giant planet drew steadily nearer until its Jovian bulk hung ominously in the dark clasp of space. The ship adjusted course, slightly. It flashed toward an oblate sphere orbiting that mighty gray planet. Kenowa knew this without knowing how she knew, or wondering. What was reality? Some said that reality was a crutch for those who could not handle fantasy, or science fiction, or the awareness of TGO. The ship entered the atmosphere with a whistling crash and boom. (That disturbed no one onboard.) With unerring precision, it dropped toward a fabulous system of spiring, aspiring structures linked by swirling cruiseways at every height. Indifferently Kenowa's ears recorded the sound of metal sliding against metal. The portal opened to admit dim light. Metallic

tentacles curled about her nakedness without a hint of fondling or pleasure. She was lifted out. She was carried a short distance before feeling the cool surface of another conveyor belt. 20 On her back, she traveled rapidly along another tight tunnel. Ha, she thought, or thought that she thought, They are bringing me, Akima Mars, right into their stronghold! They will soon learn what happens to those who kidnap the greatest secret agent along the spaceways! At its end she was nudged off to slide down a small incline. That unpleasantness did not instill panic. It was not even unpleasant. It just happened. She came to a stop against the body of another woman, facing her. They lay quietly, staring into each other's eyes without interest or concern for the fact that their unclothed bodies were pressed together and their lips were almost touching. Kenowa could feel the other's breathing, breasts against her own. Kenowa hoped she enjoyed it. Not many people got to press up against The Biggest Pair In The Universe. Time passed. How much time? It didn't matter. Some minutes or some hours or some days-standard. Surely not years, -standard or otherwise. Kenowa's mind wandered. She remembered how she had met Captain Sword. She had walked into that bar in Sopur on Terasaki. And there he was. Eyes like cracked eggs and a body going to waste. Down and out in a backstreet bar on Terasaki, and him not a Terasak at all. He was an addict, she could see that. The poor devil was on EF, she could see that. She ordered a drink, a High Green, told a spaceman in worn adjustaboos to slok off, crossed one spidermesh-stockinged leg over the other and, waggling a laserbeam-thin heel idly, gazed thoughtfully at the down-and-outer. Poor bug. Not a bad build, she saw. Could possibly be pretty good looking, if he was got from under the eroflore that kept him happy inside his head while it 21 consumed him. She wondered what he did to support his habit. A man coudn't very well sell his body, could he-or rather rent it out, one piece at a time? Surely not. "Say, me'n my friend got a bet on." She turned her head leisurely toward that voice. Another spacefarer, L.S. only, surely. A Bleaker, chest dagger and all, although his armored left glove was tucked in his belt. He looked stupid and so did his grin. "You and a friend have a bet on. Congratulations on having a friend." "Uh-" "Did either of you bet on one-thirty-four E?" "Wha-?" Damn, this downer must've used his whole vocabulary with his approach line! She turned her wrist, which made her chest move and tighten, on that side. "That silly leer tells me you and your friend were betting on me," she said. "Measurements, probably. I told you. 134E-64-100, top to bottom." "Muslah! I-I don' believe it!" She shrugged, deliberately bouncing her over-abundance. "I don't give a vug, spacefarer. That's the way I measure out, though. Back away. You touch that warhead you're staring at and you'll have a major decision to make." She spoke casually, and she was readier to move than he knew. "Wha-what's that s'poseta mean? What decision?" "Whether to try to get another hand or go for a prosthetic." He stared, and she met his gaze coolly. He dropped his hand to his side, then self-consciously lifted it a little to hitch the thumb in his belt. "You-not too friendly, are ya?" "Firm." "Ease back, Fard." That was another voice. Another 22 man, moving along the bar behind her accoster. "They's only one woman in the universe got those measurements. Can't you see, man? It's her. We was bettin' on The Biggest Pair In The Universe." He looked at her. "Wasn't we." She nodded. "Firm, spacefarer. Better pull him back a little. I need space. Room to ... breathe." "Muslah! You-you're really her?" "You two boys must've learned your grammar from an illiterate Franjese grat! Yes, I'm she." "Muslah. Akima Mars! In the flesh! Right here on Terasaki!" She shrugged. So she was Akima Mars. Who might he have thought, with this build and these sexy clothes, walking so unconcernedly into a downer dive like this? It was then that the EF addict started to yell. He got to her. However it was, he got to her. She slid off the stool and went to him. He kept yelling. She clamped a hand on the back of his neck and forced half her High Green down the poor flainer's gullet. He gulped, his eyes bulged, he tried to yell some more, coughed, gagged, made choking noises, and passed out. As expected. Alcohol placidated an EF addict, fast. Not everyone knew that, but Akima Mars knew

most everything. She had not, however, noticed this poor bug's worn old go-bag. It was a master's bag, sure as she was alive and he was barely. She had an idea that he had not stolen it, that this was his name printed on it: Sword. Just a feeling. Akima Mars was like that. This poor down-and-outer was-or had been-a spaceship's master, and here was his spacefarer's standard personals container to prove it. "Muslah!" the Bleaker swore again, from behind her. Way behind; he hadn't left the bar. "Akima Mars!" She bent and scooped up the unconscious addict. 23 With Ms EF-wasted body in her arms, she turned to face the pair of dolts. "Right," she said. "But you can call me Kenowa." And, carrying Captain Sword, she walked out. She bore him straight to her ship and locked him in the hold with a sealed waterjug-and-straw. He awoke to the pains of nascent withdrawal and did a lot of yelling and banging about and screaming for the next two days-Terasak. After that she had begun to nurse him out of it, sometimes literally. Bringing him back. And that was how Captain Sword had returned to the space-ways, as master; eventually master of Dauntless. With him always was his savior, to whom he owed more than his life. Akima M-no no. Kenowa. I am Kenowa, she thought with some firmness as she lay naked, staring into the dull eyes of another woman and knowing her eyes were just as dull. Kenowa. Not Akima Mars, and not The Biggest Pair In The Universe. I must have been dreaming. True, that's more or less how I met Sword, but . . . me? Akima Mars? No thanks. A hundred and three in the chest\* is entirely adequate and troublesome enough for me, thanks. So is Jonuta my love-I mean, I mean Sword. I don't want to be any secret agent, masochistic or otherwise! (Better that way than otherwise, but . . .) I-I . . . More time wandered by and the tentacles returned. They lifted Kenowa away from the other woman, who Kenowa noticed had The Biggest Pair In The Universe. The tentacles placed her in a small, coffin-like container. An unpleasant comparison, but she was incapable of any emotional response to that fact, or any \* The well-known measurements of hyperstar Setsuyo Puma, portrayer of the fictional Akima Mars, were indeed as Kenowa remembered stating them in the bar: 53E-25-40, Old Style, at five feet, nine inches, Old Style (175 sems) in height. If her bemazing measurements were artfully enhanced, Setsuyo Puma wasn't telling, and neither was her agent, and no male cared, all along the spaceways. 24 other. The lid was closed to herald the passage of another timeless, lightless period. This time she spent a few months as odalisque in the hhareem of Sheikh Jonuta, who used her a lot and punished her for the slightest transgression. But that was all inside her head, of course. When the container was opened, Kenowa felt herself lifted. She was borne into a small chamber. The walls were a pale metallic green and studded with too many strange, unpleasantly threatening objects that extended toward the room's center. From opposite walls two tentacular extrusions hissed out. Softly sheathed clamps at their tips found her wrists and fastened firmly to them. (The machine that had brought her here meanwhile scuttled from the room. The portal closed.) The wall extruded two more jointed metal arms that clamped onto her ankles. The segmented arms glittered as they began to retract. Kenowa felt the strain, and then she felt it even more in her chest. She was going to be disjointed. That was bothersome, though not horrifying, and she couldn't scream or anything anyhow. The movement stopped. She was held spread-eagle, in the center of the alien chamber, in the middle of the air. She was dimly aware of the sharp stab in her buttock. Awareness heightened at once as the induced lethargy began to slide from body and mind. She began twisting her head frantically, dark eyes wide with terror. Although she had been unable to react to it at the time, her mind had recorded every minute of her experience. Now it all flooded to the surface on a wave of fear that crested in her brain and tore a cry of horror from her. She tried to struggle against the clamps that held her 25 arms and legs so widely spread. After a time she gave up the fight and whimpered at realization that she was a helpless prisoner. She seemed to be surrounded by tentacles of varying sizes, all moving with that peculiar hiss of their friction-less joints. Each was equipped with an optic lens or set with some oddly-shaped instrument. Each looked unbearably sinister. Her

skin, coppery tan, crawled at the approach of a host of fiendish-looking devices. A cluster of small tentacles surrounded her head and grasped it firmly. Her wig, a tall Terasaki coil, was long since gone. They knew her secret. The tentacles were cold against her bare head. Small filaments plucked at her lips. She grunted an objection and clamped her mouth. She might as well have tried to stop a spaceship's rise by standing on its hull. Her jaws were pried apart. Her mouth was stretched inexorably until it was wide open. A tentacular tip entered her mouth. She fought back her gagging reaction. That thing moved around inside her mouth, leisurely examining every tooth and tissue surface for what seemed hours. Her eyes filled with tears of outrage and frustration when it began entering her throat. It did. Cold metal slithered down her esophagus. The muscles of her stomach jerked spasmodically as the device entered and squirmed about inside her. Then it was smoothly withdrawn, triggering another clamping spasm deep inside her stomach. Warmer now, the filamentous tentacle slithered out of her mouth. Instantly she was coughing and drawing in shuddery gasps of air. And moaning at the humiliation. "Who are you?" she demanded in outrage, almost in hysteria. She fought it. "What-why are you doing this to me?" Her voice echoed hollowly in a room of turquoise metal. There was no reply. Tentacles probed her bared, suspended body. "N-oh! No!" she cried, but ended in a gasp while some . . . instrument probed between her buttocks. It ignored powerful anular muscles. It breached her anus and slid down into her rectum. (A pressure at her vulva was all she felt of the cup that attached itself there, reading reactions. Minute, almost microscopic filaments were entering her skull.) That chilly invader moved inside her, seemingly seeking her bowels, and she knew without pleasure that her nipples were firming. The heat she felt was a flush spreading over her cheeks. (Slender filaments were tracing the length of her legs, the circumference of thighs and calves and ankles, scanning the joints of her knees, while others performed identical measurements on her outstretched arms.) The pressure of the covering cup left her crotch. She was aware of it because of the sudden sensation of coolth there. She drew in a deep breath when a twin-filamented device carefully parted those lower lips and probed curiously at her clitoris. Instant lancets of pleasure zipped through her belly. Her body glistened with a film of sweat and her breasts trembled with quickened breathing. That swiftly she knew she had also gone wet inside. She could not help her ecstatic moans and attempts to writhe, all of which was crushingly demeaning. At the same time she experienced minute stabs in various parts of her body. Needles were being inserted. They trailed fragile filaments. Two long ones, almost invisible but for their glitter, easily punctured the skin of her breasts. They slid in. Each probed carefully, sinking deep. "Ah! Wh-oohhh!" Tiny vibrations had commenced to pulse from each 27 needle. The seemingly planned pattern sent delicious tingles of pleasure through every part of her body. (Ex-tending and extending, the rearward probe was slithering steadily along the coils of her bowels, and it did not hurt a bit. She felt only a little cramped. Within her vagina, the twinned probes were joined by a dozen more. They banded together and swelled to exert pressure in every direction. That, too, was far from painful.) Delicate filaments hung now like a gossamer robe around her, trailing from the many hair-slender needles inserted in her flesh. Still she felt nothing that even approached pain. Only the ecstasy that vibrated from the deeply penetrating points to spread through her system and drive everything else from her staggering mind. (Which was being monitored and scanned by nine needles thinner than hairs.) She made little complaining sounds when the instrument was withdrawn from her clitoris, and then its companions slithered out of her vagina. The mass of . them glistened wetly from what she had experienced as erotic ministrations. Then she made a high-voiced sound of helpless response to the larger object that pressed for entrance there. She heard her demeaning pleas. Whether heeding or in inexorable obedience to the command of whomever her captor was, the metal object forced its way firmly and steadily into her. And more. It warmed. It

seemed to fill her entire abdomen. It took on her own temperature of 37 degrees. The delirious response was beyond her ability to control. She was totally conquered, by machinery. A metal slicer was ensconced well within her stash and, in the most common euphemism along the spaceways, was slicing a piece. Yet now that vernacular sounded unduly sinister and violent, while this was beautiful. She was not being 28 sliced, or cut. Not literally. The totally helpless and humiliatingly delighted subject was being machine-fucked, and by a mechanical lover that constantly varied its temperature between 35 and 39 degrees C. Her whole body trembled as that inhuman lover began a rhythmic shuttling. She trembled. She gasped. Her eyes rolled and she shrilled wild and wordless sounds while the warmth in her belly fanned out to a furnace of passion that shot up the scale to seemingly insurmountable heights. Then it surmounted those limits and sought new ones. And all the while, slowly, the needle withdrew from her bowels as, at the rate of two hundred times a minute, the far larger probe plunged in and out of her adjacent channel. Its action was accompanied now by obscene wet sounds. And by her cooing moans and vocal sighs. Only when it seemed that her body could not withstand another second of such exquisite sensual torture did her belly go nova. She exploded in a massive orgasm that made her scream at the glory of it. Her brain had been scanned. Adjustments were made. The face of Captain Sword loomed over hers. Abruptly it changed to become the face of Jonuta- and the object planted so deeply within her began extruding a filament to enter her cervix. The big woman's spread-eagled body hung exhausted in the center of the turquoise chamber. Her lips curved in a smile of gamic happiness. All of it had been mechanical, all. And all of it formed the best and most erotic overload her organism had ever experienced. A long, long pause while she drifted down from that flash that had sent her soaring. The taut, supremely feminine body sagged into complete relaxation. She felt that she had become only a puddle of used liquid. Her universe was soft, and pink. Then it began again. 29 She felt the needles begin to vibrate. They pulsed away deep inside her breasts to bring her gradually higher and higher until she was flashing, reaching another peak of absolute sexual pleasure that sang through her willingly imprisoned body like a Wagnerian symphony. And again she collapsed, or would have but for the padded metal bonds that held her spread so wide. And again there was the pause, while she came down . . . The vaginal probe adjusted. It moved a scant few sems, nuzzling. It entered her relaxed rearward channel. Her sphincter might as well have been a puddle of warm wax. And it all began anew, and rose and rose anew, and she soared and flashed and shrieked in climax all over again. The sexual stimulation was applied anew. And again. And again until her entire world became the alien chamber and her cybernetic lover and the orgias-tic-orgastic pattern it forced her through, subjecting her sweating flesh to sex and sex and more sex. The universe vanished in a haze of pink while Kenowa floated on a soft warm pink sea of mindless ecstasy. MEANWHILE . . . "Mayday! Red Rover! Mayday!" The appeal was carried out into the cosmos as beams of light, calling out in code that shortened it to "C Y R! C! C Y R!" The code was based on Erts, the Galactic language born centuries ago on the planet called Urth and more latterly Homeworld. "CYR" meant Mayday! Red Rover! to anyone who might hear it along the star-spattered parsecs. The signal was a desperation appeal. It was directed at anyone and everyone. Everyone would not receive 30 it. Someone might. Space was vast; vaster than millions, more vast than billions. Never mind millions or billions of what; just the figures were inconceivable to most. The coded signal streamed out from spaceship India Spring in every direction and went on and on, riding beams of tightly-bound light that rushed through the cosmos at 300,000 kloms per second (-standard). It would streak through nine-and-a-half trillion kloms of space in a year-ess. Such a velocity and distance would have been fantastic if it hadn't been for the fact that they were meaningless. That distance might separate any two given stars ... of the 340 billion stars in the Galaxy. This one, of many, many galaxies. Theoretically the message from spacer India Spring would go on forever, riding those beams of light. Except that the beams lost their

coherency, their tightness, with increasing distance from their origin. And so the message became incoherent too, in the other meaning of that word. Besides, many of the message-freighted laser beams would, by chance, intersect the position of suns. Stars. Such beams were swallowed by those mighty hydrogen furnaces, at a gulp. Mayday! Red Rover! Mayday! In the language of the farers along the spaceways, the words meant: "Help! I'm in trouble and beg help. (I/we am/are) being boarded by unfriendly persons bent on no good. Help! I'm in trouble and beg help!" In the star-flecked enormity that was space, distress messages-called C! messages-were only occasionally received. They were responded to even less frequently. Space was vast and ships were expensive, and few, and the people in them were busy. The profit motive continued strong, despite various experiments with societal forms that encouraged and rewarded lack of industry. So Someone was in trouble, and beaming out a 31 C! message. So there were a hundred billion Someones here toward Galaxy Center, where stars were thick as sand on the beach of a carbon-nitrogen planet. It was that very fact which made piracy possible, in space. That, and the absence of a central government, for the concept of interstellar empire was impossible to maintain as reality. Spaceship India Spring had run afoul of a pirate. There were more than a few. Most were competent spacefarers in good ships. In fact their spacers were usually better and better equipped than those of their prey, merchanters. Often they were better than policer craft. Nevertheless few pirates lasted long. The occupation, like that of slaver, was a high-risk one. Perhaps it was true that only idiots undertook either course along that path still called the outlaw trail. Yet Harry, later Sir Henry Morgan, model for Sa-batini's Sea Hawk, had been no idiot, not by a very long shot. Neither had the English "privateer" Frank Drake. Neither was Captain Corundum an idiot, nor Quindy of Captain Hellfire's Satana (there was some doubt about Captain Hellfire); or fat Shieda, or Orohi-ko, or Captain Astrasia of Pentagram. The slaver was not an idiot either, by a long broadside. And the slaver Jonuta, the Qalaran called Captain Cautious, was one of the most brilliant ship-handlers and tacticians along the spaceways. Perhaps the most brilliant. All that was entirely beside the point to Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi of India Spring, and his crew and two passengers. He was a smallish over-serious fiercely theistic man in the employ of a cartel of nobles of Ghanj, and he was under attack. That was the problem of Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi (who was more often called Moosejaw) and his crew. One thing could be said in Cap'n Moosejaw's favor: he was too smart to fight pirates. It was the problem of his passengers, too. Yet in a 32 way it was a boon, however temporary, to his passenger HReenee. She was of HRalix, the newly-discovered planet with a newly-discovered nonhunian-but-human-oid race: the HRal. Despite her non-humanity and unique position both among humankind in general and on the ship, HReenee of HRalix was in the process of being raped by India Spring crewman Rathna PA32-4976m. Rathna was a homely but homy smallbrain from Panish whose principal duty onboard was providing muscle when it was needed. He was unduly proud of his biceps and chest, and of his 22 sems. Rathna was sure that every female lusted after him or would if only she knew about his 22 sems. That is, the beautifully-built Rathna's slicer or penis was an impressive twenty-two centimeters long in the erect state, which was the only way HReenee had seen it. Not that she wanted to see it at all. Rathna had torn enough of her garment, a clingy scarlet one-piece he was sure had been chosen to excite him, to bare five of her breasts and was busy cramming the first couple of centimeters of his best parts (which was definitely true, in Rathna's case) into the sprawled alien. He grunted in pleasure. The HRal were mammals, all right. And man oh man was she hot in there! Then the emergency lights began flashing, red-blue red-blue, and the Klaxon began hooting. Emergency. Emergency. All hands to emergency stations. At that visual and aural alarm, Rathna froze and cursed his luck. His dark visage rose to stare accusingly at the air, which was eerily changing color every three seconds. While he was distracted, his victim wrenched one hand free. Instantly it leaped at his face. Four fingers of the same length as

the thumb, all with perfectly normal nails. Then one was far from normal. 33 In mid-rush upward the middle finger extruded its slim curving claw. That nasty natural weapon was the last of the paw-full of extrusible-retractile talons once possessed by her remote, four-legged ancestors back on HRalix. The HRal had long since evolved past that. The HRal even ate some vegetables, now. The claw was slender but hard, and strong. Well over a sem long, and needle-sharp. Rathna jerked his head back just in time. His eyes were bulging in a combination of shock and natural fear. That reflex movement saved his deepset dark eye (her target) and his big nose and lip-next in line below her target-but gained him a gash all down his chest. Nine centimeters long, that reddening furrow, and a full sem deep. He screeched and struck at her, also losing his erection and sustaining another deep, thin slash in his right forearm, which was muscularly meaty. (Rathna really was beautifully built.) The Klaxon continued hoot-honking and the lights continued their eerie strobing and poor Rathna was in bad trouble and knew it. Best he kill this nasty tiger-bitch and get about his shipboard business, welling blood or no blood. At that moment spacer India Spring was jolted, and jerked violently. Spacer India Spring was attacked, and hit. Everyone on board heard the scary sounds: the groaning of the unipolymer called "plasteel" and stronger-than-steel cyprium. While Rathna was working at getting himself together-not literally; the coffinish container called ship-doc or daktari would see to his cuts, later-his incredibly supple prey seemed to go all liquid muscle. Powerful muscle. Knees slammed in under Rathna's buttocks as he knelt between her legs. His eyes bulged wider and he was catapulted forward over the sprawled native of HRalix. 34 As he went over, her talon tore another scarlet gash in him. This one was down his mid-line, a half-sem deep. It caught chest, stomach, and best parts. Rathna screamed. He crashed down beyond her, partly on her, and he was in agony. Quicksilver sinuous, she suppld from under him. She gave only one yellow-eyed glance at his upturned, bare, hairy, tautly round backside. It was definitely tempting. Claws ran in and out of her middle fingertips with the swiftness of a serpent's tongue. She chose not to attack. Talons retracted, she half-bent, all flowing muscle as if without bone, to hold her ruined garment up before her in red tatters. HReenee fled the cargo hold where he had dragged her. She paused to slam the big plasteel hatch. It snicked. Now it could be opened only from out here, in the ship's corridor or "tunnel." Inside, Rathna lay gasping, holding himself and moaning, crying a little and bleeding a lot. A second horribly jarring jolt made spacer India Spring shudder and groan. The cargo shifted with various grating groaning sounds. A 60 x 60 x 60 crate slid off the one beneath it and toppled. It fell onto Rathna. The crate contained five thousand, seven hundred sixty Qalaran ball-bearings. That ended Rathna's problems, and Rathna. The same violent jolting shock-the locking onto India Spring of the attacking spacer, piracy bent- hurled HReenee along the tunnel and into a safety stanchion running along its wall. Never mind that the stanchion was padded; she flopped and lay still, four breasts exposed. She had come a long way (and voluntarily) to learn of the violence and venality of the people who called themselves Galactics, descendants of the sons and daughters of Urth. Wherever that was. Now she was doubly their victim. The attack proceeded. Feet tramped past the 35 sprawled HRal, running. The second severe jolt had been the pirate craft, traction-linking itself to India Spring. There was a lot of shouting. Someone tripped a switch to restore the lighting to normalcy, but the Klaxon was left to continue its raucous sounding. Now it was only a lonely dog barking into the night, owned but not mastered. And Able Spacefarer Rathna PA 32-4967m was not at his emergency post. (Near the captain, because of his strength.) "I'll get that flainin' malingerin' sunuvabitch once we're outta this," the Mate snarled, but he would be too late. Now and then, crime failed to pay. "Red Rover," someone from the other ship said. The voice came in on Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi's comm receiver, and he knew what was meant. The sisterslicing thieves were going to come over: to board his ship. Resist and it would be about the same as tangling with an army or Gri's priesthood, on

Resh. He actuated the radiant laser-beamer on his hull. It flashed out into space, freighted with a distress call repeated a hundred and fifty thousand times a second. The signal rushed away into the parsec abyss, radiant from India Spring. Out and, out on its beam of light, seeking a computer-monitored comm-rec, a friendly ear, TGO, TGW, someone who would tell TGO or TGW, a local policer cruiser-local to anywhere. Anything and anyone. C Y R! C! Mayday! Red Rover! Mayday! MEANWHILE . . . Captain Jonuta exercised twice daily and did not sit at the con, but stood. The captain of Coronet thus stayed lean and fit, in his skintight pants and boots and the long piratic coat he affected, with two rows of (purely ornamental) brass-imitating brass buttons. Captain of Coronet, yet, and Kenowa was his woman. 36 There was no Dauntless, no Captain Sword, and no body of ships worthy of the impressive phrase, space fleet. Jonuta was Captain Cautious and he was not pleased. His woman was supposed to be on watch. Admittedly that was dull duty on a ship supervised by computer on a course dictated by guidance cassette, and Kenowa did often occupy herself with one of her mellers. This tune, though, she was plugged into one of those damned feelies. She was totally oblivious to anything else. To the screen before her, for instance. Autosystemry had hi the course of routine happened onto a laser-spiced message. The message was routinely intercepted and displayed. MAYDAY! RED ROVER! MAYDAY! RED- Over and over. Judging by her face, her squirming and the little moans that escaped her slack lips, the woman who was his constant companion was experiencing something vehemently erotic. Kenowa's favorite viewing matter was the equivalent of what previous eras had known as truconfessions and bodice-rippers. Those who were aware of the difference between masculine responses- objectifying-and feminine romantic subjectifying maintained that such holodramas constituted female pornography. And they really came down on the feelies. Still, no antiromantisex laws had ever been seriously proposed, and such holomelodramas-mellers-went right on being very very popular among many many women indeed. Jonuta sighed. Here she sat, wearing the close-fitting sensstimulator helmet he had had calibrated with her holoprojector. Her blue wig would be tucked out of sight, on the other side of her. Damn! Probably having herself grabbed and bared and misused by some Booda-damned impossible fictional alien, he thought. And he was far from pleased. 37 MAYDAY! RED ROVER! MAYDAY! RED ROVER! M- A tiny screen, the color of a nice blue sky on most planets, flashed the precise coordinates of that signal's source. It didn't take long to come up with that, if the message was received a few hundred thousand times in a few seconds. Its source was ahead and just off Jonuta's course. Wearing a grim look of displeasure as he stood staring down at Kenowa, he considered. Then the probes began whipping in and out of both her nipples and her stash at an absolutely incredible speed and Kenowa was thrust to another peak of barely bearable sexual pleasure that jangled through her willingly imprisoned body until she hung there too weak to gasp, now, a liquid puddle afloat on a soft pink sea of ecstasy. "Oh damn it," Jonuta rumbled, and made a swift adjustment to the sensavision helmet Kenowa wore. He unplugged inship comm-mike, plugged it into the helmet. "All right, slut," he snarled, "now all thirteen of us are going to take turns raping you for the next thirteen hours with this Narjeelan roobaball bat!" And he grasped her nearer breast, a warhead nearly the size of her head, and gave it a squeeze with every bit of Ms strength, briefly. "And this unsightly projection we tear off to dry and use for a belt tool-kit, unless you Come Out of Itt!" And he twisted. He knew Kenowa; he twisted hard. (He had cultivated that resonantly deep voice, which definitely went with his eclectic-eccentric attire. Some maintained that Jonuta must once have had dramatic training. No one could prove it. Or disprove it; no records were available. Authorities on his own Qalara, as a matter of fact, had no idea why their retrieval systems failed to coine up with anything at all on 38 Kislar Jonuta, prior to his past seventeen years as a self-employed businessman in space. A slaver.) At his words and twisting squeeze, the luxuriously constructed woman in the snug helmet snorted in a sharp breath. She squealed it out, lurched, and shuddered through a

violent orgasm. Her years as an EF addict had definitely not burned out her irrepressible sensuality. That eroflore addiction was long in the past, thanks to Jonuta, whom she owed her life and her self. Her empathic and often indecorous sensuality was very much the present and presumably the future, also thanks to Jonuta-and her sensim holodramas. Jonuta rolled his eyes upward as he stood before the broad and colorful console. Since it was designed for just that, a standing captain, the Mate's chair was height-adjustable for Kenowa or whomever else sat at watch. "Incompetent slut," he muttered in a dramatic and menacing snarl, "we have you now! You'll spend the rest of your sluttish life our prisoner here in Castle Perilous, while Igor and Hogface push pins in and out of you . . . here and there!" Kenowa convulsed in another ecstatic orgasmic peak. "Booda's eyes," he muttered disgustedly, in that deep nimble voice. I'm not about to interrupt her involvement by making sexual threats, and certainly not sadistic ones! Hmm . . . "All right then, dolt," he said, "we're going to lock you up, feed you nothing but starches, and deny you sexual activity for the rest of your (un-) natural life while you swell up into a doughball that would make one of those Shirashite jelly-blobs look attractive! You'll be too gross to fit into a con-cabin, much less a bed." There, that ought to do it, he mused, and he began rasping his thumbnail across the mike's head while he considered another matter. The C! call. 39 "Why not," he muttered at last. He'd answer the damned distress call! Why shouldn't a slaver interfere with the boarding-and-stealing operation of some sisterslicing pirate? Hadn't he once gone zipping to the rescue of Samarkand-saving the colonyship and all the dolts onboard from a raid by Firedancer? Besides, maybe this beleaguered ship was menaced by Firedancer, too. He'd love another shot at that bastard Corundum! Despite his displeasure with Kenowa, Jonuta smiled. That would make it worthwhile! He and Corundum were old acquaintances, but most definitely not friends. Srih and Arel-and others, others-were dead because of the attempts Corundum had engineered, on Jonuta's life. Jonuta would not forget. Now and again he even wondered (idly) what had become of that singer, Copperhead, who had played fair damsel in distress that time on Lanatia . . . so that a bravely rescuing Jonuta would and did become target for a Corundum-hired assassin. (Jonuta had kidnaped her and left a recording of her confession with Lanatian policers; wallowed in bed with her across the light-years until she did not want to leave him. And had dumped her on Panish. He had wondered-idly, no more-if she had found a singing job there or had been able to support herself on her back or her knees for men, or . . . but he didn't really care. She was just one more attractive hard-luck cake looking to be sliced-and used, and used. About the only one Jonuta gave a damn or two about was that compact little barbarian he had snatched off Aglaya and sold on Resh. More pluck than any six others, that one, that Janja. Janja. Hair like a G-zero sun. Could it possibly be true that after orchestrating and bloodily implementing her own escape she had taken up with . . . Corundum!) 40 Corundum and Jonuta! Both were rather too well-known along the space-ways. Both outlaws; both austere yet sometimes flamboyant, dramatic. Both were more than bright, more than competent, and more than successful. Both were respected by many and probably by each other, feared by many and perhaps (never admittedly!) by each other. Both had broad-based contacts all along the spaceways, contacts who were competent and nearly always loyal. Both men kept up with technology and with opposition, policer and otherwise, and both kept up their ships and equipment. (Jonuta did not know that it was a Corundum trick that had recently nearly ruined him, or that Janja had indeed joined Corundum onboard Firedancer, becoming a pirate and his woman-and left him a few months later, as enemy.) Well, all that was neither here nor there. Right now Jonuta issued a few simple instructions to the computer he called his First Mate. Others called it SIPACUM: Ship Inboard Processing And Computing Unit (Modular). Two lights flashed, one just after the other. Off-white for Understood and glowing turquoise for Initiated. A couple of seconds later all lighted panels flashed, three times. SIPACUM's signal to its master. Coronet had changed course. Jonuta nodded in

satisfaction. There had never been a SIPACUM failure on his ship. "I've had nine First Mates," he had said rather more than once. "None ever quit, or died, and I never fired one. Not one ever backtalked me, either." While Kenowa moaned and stirred, he pushed the intra-ship mike's link back where it belonged. "Course change and acceleration," he announced to his abbreviated crew. "Explanation in a few minutes. Captain out." 41 He pushed the commlink away and wheeled to stare down at Kenowa. He shut off her helmet, pulled it off his woman's head, and dragged her up out of the Mate's chair. Using his thumbs, he started trying to push her nipples back between her ribs. He did it until she was writhing and screwing up her face in pain, fighting to keep from crying out or grasping his wrists. Then, "Get your hair on," he said, and thrust her back into the big swivel chair. She was still apologizing for having so completely lost herself in a (semi-auto, semi-experiencer-imput) feelie when Sakyo came to the con. With loyal old crewmembers Arel and Srih blown away (Corundum's work, one way or another), and Sweetface left on Front at its own request, Sakyo was no longer "new" crew. The Spacefarers First from Terasaki, Shiganu and Sakyo, had become Coronet's long-time crewmembers, after Kenowa and Captain Cautious. A frown pulled thin, extremely black brows down and spread over his old-gold face when he heard what Jonuta had decided to do. Then the edges of his thin-lipped mouth were tugged back by a little smile. "I like it, Captain! We can use a bit of excitement- and evil slavers go to rescue of poor pitiful ship in clutches of eviller pirate, hmm! Any odds that we never receive a nice letter or a commendation?" Jonuta waved a hand. "Oh shut that off, Sak. You Terasaks are romantic idiots, you know?" "Sure, Captain. Firm. Ever since the days of the Shoguns! Sakyo he return to post now, boss-captain sah. You wan' me to send Therandah yes-boss?" Kenowa-purple-wigged, rather drained by her experiential holo and beset now only by a tingling in the mistreated masses of her bosom-giggled at the short man's parody. Then she shot a glance at Jonuta and bit her lip. This time she had really fobbed it, and 42 Kenowa knew it. Best to keep a very low silhouette with very few emissions. She bit off the giggle and looked properly guilty. Jonuta, standing, was proving why he was called Captain Cautious: he was manually checking the new course. They all felt acceleration. SIPACUM meanwhile allocated another portion of its circuitry to adjust shipboard means for making that easier for them. Spacer Coronet fled toward the C! signal at max bearable velocity. Jonuta did not turn at Sakyo's slavish imitation, either. He was busy advising Shig to see to m.l.s.s.'s and get himself strapped in with the suits. Still without turning, Jonuta said: "Stop that skuz, Sak. I'm getting to like you, you know? You're properly cracked. No, you are guided to return to station. Strap in at forward DS station. Check the guns. We'll be pushing it and I intend to make us uncomfortable before we're done, so we'll get there faster. That signal didn't exactly originate just a stone's throw away! Be nice to get there in time to interfere with the attack. I'll call Therandah." Sakyo showed Jonuta's back the crown of his head in an ancient bow, and redshifted. Jonuta still couldn't be quite sure of Therandah. He had checked the L.S.-Licensed Spacefarer, no frills, but terribly bright and proving efficient-as carefully as he could, on Front. Once he had put off his old crew and friend Sweetface and its idiot innamorata Tweedle-dee (Tweedle-dumb, Kenowa insisted) there, he felt the need for one more crewmember to help the four of them get Coronet to his home planet. He talked, he checked as well as he could, he listened, he tested briefly, he took on Therandah. He also told her that the con-cabin was off limits to her, and quietly asked Shig and Sak to keep an eye on her, without seeming to. 43 A close-lipped woman of apparent-age forty or so, Therandah. She did her best to keep to herself. Jonuta and Kenowa respected that and knew the two Terasaks would. He was glad (and Kenowa gladder) that she was not sexually interesting-or interested either, apparently. Therandah had good recs and was quick to respond; all the harried Jonuta wanted was to get the vug home to Qalara. He was seeking security. He had been hit, badly, presumably by TGO. Millions in secret credac-counts gone, vanished. Stolen from him,

impossibly. As for Therandah-what the vug else was there, aside from knowledge, good recs, and quick responses? And, on Coronet, a well-curbed curiosity. "Captain to L.S. Therandah." The answer came crisply: "Here Captain." "We've caught a CYR call. Fve decided to respond. Stand by for heavy acceleration and possible trouble at the other end." "Standing by Captain!" He glanced at Kenowa. He was impressed. No comment, no question, just "Standing-by-Captain!" crisp and emotionless. Therandah would do. He had wondered about the possibility he always had to consider: that she might be a policer plant. Now, with him going after a C! call this way, she might well be wondering if he was an undercover policer. After all, answering a distress call from a totally unknown was hardly a standard or even highly intelligent act. Pirates and slavers had been known to lure other ships with a faked CYR. "No comment? That give you no problem, Space-farer?" "No Captain. I know who my captain is. I'm in the best and safest ship along the spaceways! Captain: 44 I'm qualified: want me to stand by suit for possible boarding?" Again he was impressed. "Neg. If we board, Shig will go with me, and maybe Kenowa. You'll be backup DS, Therandah-I remember you're qualified on that, too. We'll see first what side of the bandit we come in on." "Right, Captain." "Oh, and Therandah. You say you know me. And my nickname as well?" "Pos, Captain Cautious." Kenowa suppressed her giggle this time, while Jonuta nodded without showing a thing. "Firm. My way is to use DS only when we absolutely have to. With me, that means a lot later than most others reach for the guns. 'Absolutely have to' means just that. I'll be trying a little of this and that deception first, Therandah. Maybe we'll try making him think we're some blundering painfully-young richies looking for a thrill. Mister Pirate will-I hope!-think he's got another . innocent bug in his clutches and guide us right to his emergency airlock." Therandah's voice chuckled, oncomm. "Right Captain. Oh. Question, Captain?" "Of course, Spacefarer." "Why the emergency airlock?" "That Red Rover call would tend to mean the pirates forced the other ship to surrender. In that case they'll be linked by main airlock to prey's lock. Any pirate can be expected to have some sort of getaway hatch, airlock or not, for emergencies. Policer emergencies, for instance." "Thank you. I firm, Captain Cautious-sir." Captain Cautious-who even kept backup SIPA-CUM modules onboard, seconds away from on-line status--was still intent on his console. He said: "Action ahead, L.S. Therandah. We are not policers. 45 Thou shalt not return to con-cabin or contact con-cabin unless it is necessary." Kenowa smiled. Souded as if Jone intended to use some of his special deceptive measures. Holoprojection disguise and telepresence helmets, for instance. He was still not sure enough of Therandah to want her to know about those. They had fooled a dozen policers, over the years, including TGW. As a matter of fact more than once they'd even "been" TGW! The Licensed Spacefarer from Rahman said crisply, "I firm, Captain." "Good. Go check aft Defense Systemry, and strap in there. We'll be piling on acceleration, in about a minute." "Strapping in for check of after DS station, Captain. Test fire?" "We'll make one test, Therandah, when I give the order. DS systemry is locked at- the con-cabin. Keep your comm open." "Right, Captain." And she was offcomm. "Military sort," Kenowa commented, "isn't she." "Go batten our cabin, Kenowa. You want to use your mouth, suck your thumb." Chastened, reminded of a transgression unforgiven, Kenowa looked down. He'd called her by name, too, rather than his customary "Kenny." Abruptly she pumped her legs and was on her feet. A large woman molded into and by a jet body-stocking and a scarlet tabard splashed with an all-over design, in black: plus-or-minus symbols. "Battening captain's cabin, Captain," she snapped in brisk imitation of Therandah-the longest name on Coronet in years!-and left the con-cabin. She moved fast, tail down, although Kenowa was not of a size for scuttling. "SIPACUM: give me a synopsis of the feelie Kenowa was involved in just now." And at first opportunity I'll 46 treat her to a scenario and a rape she won't forget for a while! And Captain Cautious grinned. The space fleet thundered up through the thin atmosphere of the unpeopled rallying planet and into space. Giant carrier ships . . . And spacer Coronet raced for

spacer India Spring. MEANWHILE . . . Captain Menekris of space freighter Satyagraha was both a bulky and garish figure in his spacesuit, which was pale yellow-green with electric blue arms and legs. The helmet was opaque; Captain Menekris saw via a telepresence camera and projector built into the ovaled helmet, and his vision was better than had he been bare-headed. One of his men stood alert and ready in a cerulean spacesuit with yellow arms and legs. He bore a laser beamer in both gloved hands. The crew of India Spring had suited up too, each in his mlss-mobile life support system-but the boarders had ordered them to remove their helmets. Thus they were vulnerable, and thus the laser was a constant deadly threat. The pirate didn't have to zap anyone who might try something unwise. A stray beam, one bolt, would hole India Spring's unipolymer plasteel interior and go on through the hull as if it were cardboard. That would mean air-out, and that would mean death to India Spring's crew and passengers. The trio of invaders, helmeted and secure in their temp-controlled spacesuits supplied with good air-mix, would merely watch them die swiftly and hideously, and then go on about their business. Menekris tramped along the stanchion-bracketed tunnel of the captive spacer. Behind him backed one of his men, stopper leveled. Next came the captain and 47 crew of India Spring. The pirate with the beamer came last. Menekris stopped abruptly. "What's this? By Tao's tonsils! It's one of them new ones I've only heard about, isn't it! Ralix, is that it?" He looked at the India Spring crewmembers, then snapped, "Answer, answer!" He was standing over an unconscious . . . creature. Humanoid, but- "HRalix," Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi said quietly, dully. "She is HReenee, a HRal. She is a writer of fiction among the people of HRalix." "People!" Menekris's echo was a mock-incredulous sneer. "Well, I can see they don't always land on their feet!" He chuckled at his own tiny joke. "So what's it doin' layin' here in the tunnel with its clothes ripped and no less than four itty-bitty titties exposed?" "I have no idea," Captain Moosejaw said. Captain Menekris gazed down at the loosely sprawled form. Womanly, yes. But-not a woman, definitely! "Hmp. Nice fur. Soft, I'll bet. And four itty-bitty titties . . . Tao's nipples, how damned many does this damned thing have?" "She's a she," Captain Pentamahomet said with a quiet austerity that was rather daring, under the circumstances. "She has eight. They all have eight nipples." He had to restrain the spacesuited humanoid figure beside him-the one with the furred head and ears like those of the being lying on the deck. Mighty nasty canines on that thing, Menekris noted. Or should they be called felines? "Eight! Well, took all together they might make a pretty fair pair of warheads! Is she rich, this Hhh-reeny?" He pronounced her name fairly well, with the mild throat-clearing sound followed by the smoothly liquid vowels and single soft consonant. 48 "No," the HRal beside Pentamahomet said, and again the captain squeezed its spacesuited arm. "I don't believe so," Pentamahomet said. "Please- we must bear in mind that the HRal are only recently discovered, and are honored associates. Those who leave their planet do so entirely voluntarily and-" "Oh shut that off," Menekris ordered, and Pentamahomet clamped his lips. The pirate considered only briefly, looking reflectively down at the disheveled and obviously sinuous exotic. "Hmm," he said. "Slon, get it-I mean her," he corrected exaggeratedly, satirically, "into the airlock. She will go with us. We'll-" He paused this time to level his stopper when the other HRal started forward with a low throaty noise. "Easy there, honored associate! You interfere and we'll just have to poof you. You know the meaning of that?" "I know," the HRal said. "But she-" "Shut that off," Menekris said in a low tone of menace, and two weapons were trained on the newest non-human discovered along the spaceways. It clamped its thin lips. "Very good. As I was sayin', we'll provide a nice excitin' life for this kitty-cat 'woman'! Better'n ridin' on this dull merchanter ship where people just let 'er lay around on the deck!" Menekris stepped past her and prowled on along the tunnel. The others followed, all looking or glancing down at the sprawled female HRal they passed. The other of her race started to bend to her and was prodded from behind. He went on, obviously seething, herded along the

corridor-called-tunnel of the merchant spacer. Behind him, Slon shoved his weapon into a loop of his scarlet spacesuit and squatted. A bulkily gloved hand patted the junction of her legs, which were lightly sheathed in gold-hued fur, very short and closely growing. He shoved Ms hand in there and sliding another 49 under the back of her neck, straightened. Clothed in her fur and a ruined one-piece garment of alien cut and red color, she obviously possessed an incredibly flexible backbone. She dangled from his arms as Slon turned and clumped back through India Spring, to transfer her to the pirate ship. 2 "This looks like the main cargo hold," Captain Mene-kris of Satyagraha said, only a little metallically through his spacesuit's chest-speaker. "It isn't locked," Captain Pentamahomet told him. "Ah. So it isn't. Well, let's see what we-holy Tan-Iris! Hey there, Cap'n Moosejaw, mighty untidy ship you keep here! That eight-tittied a-lien sprawled in the tunnel, and in here . . . you missin' a crewman?" Tan spacesuited and without helmet, the shortish P. Ramzi moved to the hatch of the cargo hold. He stared, and his surprise was obviously genuine. A big crate lay undecorously on the deck. From under it thrust a pair of booted legs. Ramzi recognized those yellow-topped crimson boots. What in His name had Rathna been doing in here when the attack came-or any other tune? "You have killed, pirate. That is-" "It is not the first time, merchant." Menekris's tone was not quite bland. Captain Moosejaw went on as if uninterrupted: "-A.S. Rathna, crew. The crate must have been jarred off onto him by that unnecessary shot of yours." Menekris turned slowly. His helmet was opaque and faceless, but Captain Moosejaw knew he was being stared at. "Easy there, Moosejaw. So this jobber was in the 50 51 hold when he shouldna was. Rotten taste in boots, too! What might be in that crate, anyhow?" "Forty gross of ball-bearings-Qalaran bearings." "Wheeew! A lot of weight in that many ball bearings! We'll just leave it..I got no wish to see the face of a jobber crunched under forty gross of ball bearings, anyhow! Worth quite a bit, but who wants the labor of movin' that shit? Better start in identifyin' the rest of the cargo for me, Captain. Better be some nice stuff here-you can keep yer sisterslicin' bawl bearin's!" Captives on their own ship, the crew of India Spring-and the HRal who was guest onboard-stood tensely while their captain pointed to the printout in its magnetized pouch. It hung just inside the hatch of the cargo hold. "There's the manifest," Pentamahomet Ramzi said in quiet resignation. Crimson-suited, the spacefaring pirate Slon was conveying the unconscious felinoprimate into the airlock. She didn't interest him much, but he had one gauntleted hand thrust into her crotch just the same. It was mammalian enough, he had noticed. In the gloves, his hands could not feel the fine texture of her thick, short, down-like fur. She seemed boneless, as if she was an under-stuffed pillow or a bag of liqui-caulk. Weird. Still, Slon was male. In the airlock, he let her long legs drop while he supported her with a hand at her waist, which wasn't much narrower than her hip. With his other gloved hand, he succumbed to the biological imperative. He squeezed one of the lightly-furred swellings with their longish, truly dark-pink nipples. "Wonder if they get hard like a real woman's?" he muttered while the outer hatch cycled open to his own ship, and then Slon was dreadfully busy, all in a rush. His eyes bulged when his suit was ripped by a knife 52 he hadn't even known she-God! It was a talon! She was very conscious, liquidly squirming, ears flat to her head, and his spacesuit was ripped again. His flailing arm bounced her off one wall of the little chamber. She struck, coiled, curved, seemed to flow and, on her feet as if she had never been so much as unbalanced, pounced. Approaching terror, Slon dodged. He grabbed at the red-wrapped handle of his stopper. HReenee flowed out of her pounce, aborting it smoothly and as if bonelessly, and kicked Slon where his spacesuit's legs joined the body portion. There was nothing boneless about that kick. Automatic defense-protective mechanism turned the suit rigid there, immediately. Not quite instantly. Slon had already taken the boot-toed blow to the most sensitive part of his body. He sagged, making gagging noises-and still reaching for his stopper. Too late. She had it. His eyes stared at it as if linked by chains. Oh no, O Tiwan no, no! He had the thing set on F- She

used the stopper, right through the rip she'd put in his suit. A faint hum sounded in the airtight little cubicle. The terrified Slon started to scream, knowing what was happening to him, just as his body shimmered. Then he became a bright flash-which he did not see, but which sent her pupils narrowing to the thinnest of vertical slits. After that Slon became vagrantly drifting dust motes. "Uh," HReenee muttered. "He had it set on Fry. I have slain. I absolve me." And that was that. She glanced from the closed hatch to the open one. What was happening? An attack had been in progress. She must have knocked herself unconscious when she was hurled by that awful jar. 53 What was happening? The closed hatch led into India Spring's airlock; she recognized it. The other one . . . ? Into a ship airlock-connected with India Spring. Outlaws? Boarders! And they must already be on the merchanter-he was taking me back. A captive! I do not know how to open that hatch. I could bang on it, I suppose, and use this weapon on whoever opened it from the other side. But . . . She glanced around, thinking about the man she had killed, had made disappear, with the microwave projector that not only slew but cleaned up after itself. He was in a spacesuit, she thought. Captain Ramzi's crew might be too. Would they be, under attack and boarded? In that case I wouldn't know who was opening the airlock, and might shoot a friend--or that is, not an enemy . . . Oh! I no longer know who are friends, after that attempt to use my body . . . do I have any friends? I am so alone, among these others! She decided that anyone on the other ship, the ship beyond the open airlock hatch, would definitely be an enemy. In that case it became the known, and the merchanter ship the unknown. She chose the known. She glided through the open hatchway, moving sinuously, all pale yellow-beige fur and liquid muscle. Clothing ruined; stopper in hand. It was still set on Fry. The killing setting. HReenee knew about stoppers. Wonderful devices. Cylinders with two barrels snuggled inside. One soni-cally attacked nerve-endings, in either of two ways--stopper wielder's choice. The choice was between settings One and Two: Freeze or Dance. A flick of the thumb moved the setting to Three, which closed that barrel and opened another. A squeeze of the weapon's grip sent out a not-quite-invisible, not-quite-soundless (but nearly, in both cases) disintegrator beam. Fry, or Poof, as these folk called it--these others. I Poofed him. A swift clean kill, she mused as she 54 moved along the spaceship corridor these others, these human folk, called a tunnel. And not even a messy corpse. On she moved on long lean legs, in a fluid combative crouch that was at once beautiful and frightening, menacing. She was on the pirate ship, where Captain Menekris had left one man behind, at the con. His job was to monitor sensor screens, telits, for any sign of interference-incoming spacecraft-and to effect a fast departure if necessary. He was also to terminate G-spin, when told. He sat at con, alertly watching the multi-lighted console. That put his back to the hatchway from the ship's main tunnel. The one HReenee came through, in tattered scarlet clothing and with Slon's stopper in her unusual hand. The man twisted in the Mate's chair to stare goggle-eyed. At a . . . something he had heard of, even seen on Newscasts but never really seen. A felinoprimate. Maybe 163 centimeters in height but looking taller because of the extremely long legs. He made an exclamation, involuntarily ("BOOPFAITU!"-Booda's Plan For All In The Universe) and reached for his stopper (because what could this non-human thing know about the human weapon it carried) and he died. At that moment, without knowing it, HReenee of HRalix was in full control of spacer Satyagraha. The problem was-what to do with it, or about it? "I have killed," she muttered automatically. "I absolve me." She considered. She knew nothing. There had been an attack on her, for purposes of sex, and then the attack on the ship-how deliriously violent these Galac-tics were! Then she had been knocked unconscious. She had been a guest, a member of another species among these others, these humans (she thought, quivering in 55 excitement, her eyes flicking this way and that), and then the captive of one man, and then of another. The second one was dead. She had defended herself, and killed him, in honor. That had not been her intention, but there it was. (She was studying the con cabin, the console with its array of

multi-colored buttons and keys and toggles, telits and mini-displays, readout panels and comm-screens, telltales and scan-winkers. The stopper was cool in her fist.) She had come here and seen this man, who was definitely in no uniform. He had reached for Ms weapon and she had used hers first. (Mine, she thought.) Her heart was pounding and she was prickly all over. Excitement did that. Her people loved it. They were biologically well equipped for it. This ship is linked to the merchanter, at the airlocks. The rest of these people (?) must have boarded it. Outlaws? Surely so-they were not in uniform and they sought to do violence before speaking, or issuing any sort of challenge. Now she had slain two of them and occupied their control cabin. "To what purpose? Were there more onboard? Are there?" She wheeled to face the hatch she had come through. It was empty. What would she do if there were others onboard this unknown spacer? What was happening on the other ship-the known one? / can remain here and use the weapon to try to have talk with whoever comes in. If it won't talk, I Poof it. (Her heart pounded and she was prickly all over. She was not, however, breathing fast.) To what purpose? HReenee stood, indecisive and yet not fearful. The talon of her left hand eased in and out and her ears moved, as much in nervous habit as in seeking sound. A new flash of light caught her peripheral vision. 56 She whipped her head around to stare at the console. Small twinned panels were flashing in a multicolored non-pattern amid the complicated and colorful array. It was a signal she did not know. The comm receiver came alive and she heard a voice. Realizing that she need not look at the light or the comm, she turned back to keep watch on the hatchway while she heard the voice that called itself "Captain Basalric of TGW." She knew what TGW was. TGO was TransGalactic Order, with extraordinary powers; TransGalactic Watch was its uniformed branch. Super-policers. Enforcers of law along the spaceways (and spread too thin to maintain it, of course). Good! I need their policers, and enforcement of their law! "Captain Basalric of TGW?" She spoke loudly, over her shoulder, keeping a one-eyed gaze directed at the hatch. Stopper ready in her fist. "Can you hear me?" "Pos. Not well. Increase output volume, please." "Listen close. I cannot turn to the comm. My back must remain to the con. You are very welcome, Captain Basalric, and you are clear to approach. I hold this ship's con-cabin. I believe it is an outlaw ship. I am not." "I hear you. Explain, please. Coming in, with receptors at max gain. Do speak up, though." "My name is Mranophel HReenee sa'fiel. I am of the HRal. Oh-of the planet HRalix. I was passenger on India Spring, merchanter bound for Qalara. This ship attacked it. I was-I now hold control of this ship's con. I am alone. I do not know how many are on this ship, or what is happening on the other. It has been boarded." "What is the name of the ship you . . . occupy?" "I don't know, Captain Basalric." "You are on a pirate spacer. India Spring sent a dis- 57 tress call saying it was being boarded. You have the con of the pirates, and they are on India Spring?" The voice sounded incredulous. That could not be helped. She had stated facts and the voice understood. On the other hand, she hoped that she could dispel the incredulity. "Yes. I was unconscious. I awoke being brought- roughly-onto this ship by a human. Presently I dare not look away from the hatchway-the entry to the con-cabin. There may be more onboard. I have Poofed two." "Poofed? Two?!" "Yes. Killed. With the first one's stopper. He had it set on Three. I did not know, and I was in a hurry at the time. I have not changed the setting." "You are one hell of a coper, uh, HReenee of HRrral!" He pronounced the HRal First Letter very well. "We have come to help India Spring. We need your help now, since you are in a position to give it. We want to come in, and board India Spring. // we can. Can you break off that ship's contact with the merchanter?" "I-I dare not look away from the hatchway . . ." "Actuate visual on the comin, and I can watch the hatch for you, past you. If I say 'HRal,' that is your signal to whirl-crouch and squeeze your stopper." "When I open the commscreen, you can see into this cabin, not just me?" "Firm. Ah, pos-right." "Understood. I understand the idiomatic-use meaning of firm and pos for 'affirmed' and 'yes-positively' too, Captain. We who came among you have learned most of your language and slang." "Wonderful," he said in a flat voice. Preoccupied, of

course. What she'd said was a finger-flipper; hypno-learning and a bit of injected cellular extracts-information-bearing extract-made a simple matter of learning. 58 He was onscreen now, a crisp-looking man of apparent-age fifty, in the handsome uniform of policer officialdom. No, HReenee could not break off with the other ship, but she could follow directions just marvelously. That became simple: she answered the questions Captain Basalric asked, and from those replies his computer soon identified the type of ship she occupied. It displayed her console before him. That done, he was able to give her precise instructions. She followed them, precisely. He also changed his mind, having discovered a situation quite different from what he had expected. No need to secure airlock and break off from the merchanter craft, so that he could nose his ship between them and link to India Spring. He no longer needed to board the merchanter . . . not that way, anyhow. The ship HReenee had "liberated" was safe to board direct! All she had to do was carry out directions. She did. She found this ship's secondary airlock, and firmed that she could open and close both hatches. She was warned to brace for the nudge; it was possible that the TGW spacer would make contact with hers. Captain Basalric dared not actuate a tractor field to draw them together, he said, because that would be felt onboard India Spring and warn the pirates. Understood. She braced and stood by. She needn't have done; direct physical contact was not made at all. While HReenee stood by just beside the interior hatch of the auxiliary airlock-which was on the opposite side of the ship from the main one, disguised, and in a lower-G area (out of the usual .8 gravity most ships maintained, by use of torque)-a spacesuited figure "swam" from the newcomer to the pirate ship. Another followed. Then a third. HReenee heard them thump in signal for admittance. She had been instructed as to the means of admitting 59 the spacesuited spacefarers. She did, only then diverting her attention from her constant watch-keeping along Satyagraha's tunnel. The pirate there moved quietly, but not quite fast enough. He was Simura, and he had been one of two left behind. Simura's job was to man defense systemry, since he was Captain Menekris's best deesser. (And never mind that Satyagraha's guns were seldom used for defense; a euphemism is a euphemism is a DS.) He pinned HReenee with a number Two setting just as the inner airlock door cycled open. HReenee of HRal went into a most undignified and unchoreographed dance; a jittering shuffling rictus brought about by a stopper set on Dance. "She is pinned," Simura called, moving slowly toward the shuffling HRal. "You know how fast I can flick this stopper to Fry. I will. Whoever you are, you just step through into the ship now, with your hands open and pressed against the sides of your helmet." After a brief pause he received his reply: "You had better reconsider, pirate. I am Captain Basalric 3457-213JA, TGW. Take that stopper beam off this honored member of a newly-discovered race. Then let's hear the weapon slide along the deck toward me, and maybe things will go a bit easier with you. You know we have you, all of you. Those onboard India Spring are in the hands of my crew." It was a canned voice, speaking through the spacesuit's communicator. Simura gnawed his lip and felt hot prickles in his armpits. Damn! TGW-the super-spooks! Why did it have to be them? Didn't matter, though. He wouldn't do what the flaining spook said. / can do it, I can do it . . . "All right," he said in a resigned voice, "I'm taking the beam off . . . it." He was also pulling at his belt with its nice big buckle, bought for rather more than a stell or two in 60 Brokeheart, on Ghanj. He left off squeezing the stopper. His victim, still shuddering loosely, collapsed. She wouldn't regain control of her muscles for a few moments, much less her nerves. Whatever sort of nerve-systems these things had! Then he flicked his stopper's setting over to Fry, and he tossed the belt so that its buckle impacted noisily and skidded along the deck. Not, by design, so far as the open airlock. Now let the TGW watcher assume that was Simura's stopper, and step out into the open! Stopper leveled and ready, Simura would move along to the 'lock's manual control. Once he had closed and evacuated the 'lock, that would hold the spook bastards for a minute or four. Then . . . a second or two poofing this damned

alien thing that seemed to have got past Vraji, who had the con--or who had been oncon, anyhow. After that he'd try to raise Cap'n Menekris on the quarry. Was it possible that TGW did already have Menekris? Simura didn't think so. After that he'd race back to DS. The TGW ship wouldn't dare fire, for fear of damaging the merchanter. Simura would vaporize the ship and every sisterslicing spook on it! "Well? You going to pick that stopper up, TGW, or do we stand around until the others get here to help me?" "HReenee! Up and jump over here into the 'lock, quick!" Everything happened at once. HReenee started to move and Simura swung his gaze and his stopper her way, as he was expected to do; a fist in a spacesuit's gauntlet appeared around the corner of the open 'lock just a few sems off the deck, while another appeared many sems above it. Both fists swung. Each held a stopper, and squeezed. The wielders of those little tubes did not care to kill, fortunately for Simura. Both weap- 61 ons were set on Two. Since both swung back and forth, out of synch, and since the tunnel was hardly broad, it was impossible for the beams not to find Simura. He began to jiggle-shuffle. His nerves could not make his fist squeeze. His stopper did not fire. A space-helmeted head peered around; the head of the person holding the higher-aimed stopper. "Got 'im," the deep male voice said. Then its owner long-strode from airlock across the tunnel. He stepped over HReenee who was still disconcerted, and hugged that tunnel wall as he moved swiftly to Simura. That way the presumed Basalric was out of the way of the Dance beam held on Simura by his squatting aide. "Beam off," the presumed Basalric directed his aide. Almost that quickly the pirate sagged, no longer stopper-pinned. The other man was already reaching with one gauntleted hand and swinging with the other. His stopper was still in it. The open hand cracked down on Simura's wrist while the closed one rapped his stopper sharply along the side of the pirate's head. Simura's hand and eyes snapped wide open. His eyes rolled up, then shuttered, while his knees buckled. In an almost unbelievably swift reflex his attacker caught the falling stopper. He didn't bother with any attempt to catch the unconscious pirate, who thumped to the deck. "He threw his belt buckle and had his stopper set on Fry," the man announced, faceless in his opaque helmet. "He would've Fried me when I reached for the supposed stopper--and then you too, HReenee of the HRal. Search 'im and truss 'im. Stand by for zero-G. I'm heading for the other airlock, uh, 'Lieutenant! You hit the con-cabin and cut off the spin. That would've been the job of the man left oncon--pirates aren't stupid enough to maintain ship's 'gravity' while they transfer stolen cargo." A shorter spacesuit hustled out of the airlock and 62 followed the other along Satyagraha's tunnel. Neither was the one who had knelt and kept Simura under a number Two setting. That one, also faceless, moved out to HReenee. She had regained her feet and glanced gratefully after the departing pair while this third newcomer removed its helmet. It was a woman. A large woman, HReenee thought, noting the raggedy-short cap of glossy black hair and the size of the face. "Hi, HReenee. Are you all right?" "Pos. Just shaken. The HRal recover rapidly. That was definitely not pleasant. Thank you! You knew he was tricking you--I mean, trying to, and what you three did was brilliant." "Oh -sure," the large human woman said. "We know all about tricks, we do. Mind helping me search that bug and truss 'im up?" She jerked a nod at the prostrate pirate. "That'll be a lot easier in ship's gravity. It will be gone with the spin hi a minute--can you cope with zero-G?" "Yes. Uh--Captain Basalric?" She nodded along the tunnel. It was peopled only by the horizontal Simura, now; both spacesuits had vanished toward their separate goals. "No no, my name's Kenowa. And that was Jonuta. The short one he called 'Lieutenant' is Shig. You're all right," she said, noting the flare of the felinoprimates' eyes with their narrow vertical pupils. "Pretending to be TGW seemed to be the best way to rattle the pirates left onboard. We didn't expect you, and certainly not that you'd taken the con single-handed! You're a tough woman, HReenee." "Woman. You called me woman." "Oh oh. Sorry. What would you prefer? I certainly don't know your language, and haven't had any instructions." Heading for Simura, Kenowa glanced kindly at the HRal. 63 The HRal smiled, keeping her mouth closed, and

moved a hand a few sems down Kenowa's bulkily clad arm in a little stroking motion. "No no, 'woman' is fine. It is your word for female, and we speak your language. It is just that I have been so often called 'thing' and 'alien' and 'it.'" "Oh." Kenowa flipped her fingers, a gesture the HRal had seen before. It was close to a shrug, meaning "So what" or "I don't care" or "Beats me" or "Oh well then" or "No use talking more about that," and assorted other things. It was a spacefarer's gesture, HReenee had learned. It came from Qalara, though no one knew why. A few people might—the kind who studied such things, burying themselves in the search for totally useless knowledge. "Well, HReenee, we do use the word 'it' to indicate either sex, when that kind of designation isn't important.\* But I understand what you mean. Too many have been treating you as The New Alien, right? Here, let's use that big-buckled belt this flakier tried to fake us with, and strap his arms behind him. Best place for him might be right back in that airlock. We can secure it from out here. Shig should be getting to the controls of the ship-grav systemry about now. Gravity will lessen slowly as the spin slows. Then he will go straight to the main 'lock with Jonuta, and too bad for the first pirates to come back through. At least that's the plan. Cross your fingers for 'em, will you?" HReenee cocked her head, showing her incomprehension with a throaty little '-whhherrl?' sound. "Cross my fingers?" \* es, the so-called Universal Pronoun in Erts, the language of the Galactics. Actually it means "he or she," as opposed to an inanimate object, and is always applied to the genetically hermaphroditic natives of the planet Jarpi. 3 In spacesuits and helmets, the two figures came floating from India Spring into its airlock, en route into Satya-graha. Each pushed an enormous load, a ridiculously heavy load straight from India Spring's hold. "PART 307t," the lettering on one big crate read. "RADIOACTIVE WASTE NEUTRALIZER. (RWN)." And "MULTISPECTRAL THERMAL STABILIZER: COMPONENT 2 (MTS-2)" a huge case was lettered, with the MTS "COMPONENT 3" riding atop it. A package of Reshi Borosilicans bobbed alongside. The ancient word for the load these men so easily pushed in no-gravity was booty, or swag. Neither knew what a boucanier was, much less a boucan, but both were buccaneers. Pirates. Moving cargo was one of many less glamorous aspects of the "profession." "Ah, good. Vraji did zero the G for us. I'd hate to be pushing all these kilos and run into gravity!" "Uh. I wonder why we couldn't raise him oncomm, though. Makes me nervous." "Well, too bad for you, Nailor. What d'you think's happened, we been took over by TGO while we was on that merchanter gettin' LOOK OUT!" The warning accomplished nothing. The attackers waiting inside Satyagraha were already moving. Each had waited in the tunnel just inside the ship, one on either side of the inner airlock hatch. Having kicked off against the bulkhead simply called wall, the two 64 65, ambushers floated fast, like sharks speeding through the water at their prey. All four men were in spacesuits: mobile life support systems. All four of those miss's could be assumed to be equipped with protekstasis. The suit simply went rigid at the area of any impact trauma. A blow, for instance, whether it resulted from a fall or a kick or a strike with a 2x4. The helmets protected face and neck. The pirates' insuit comms could presumably be linked with their fellows, back on the merchanter, by the touch of a switch. The attackers' dilemma was what a director of the laboratory of a once-place called M.I.T. had once sententiously called "a multi-criteria optimization problem with conflicting objectives." In other words Jonuta's problem in immobilizing this pair of stevedoring pirates had several facets, and was harder than it looked at first glance. Part of the problem was that he did not care to kill (again, as usual, unless he had to). Besides, since they were not in vacuum but ship's atmosphere, piercing the suits would not accomplish much. Unless the wearers were also pierced. Besides, his slaver's instinct made him hate to ruin two perfectly good miss's. On the other hand he wanted to prevent the two from warning their captain on suit-to-suit commlink. While stopper Fry beams disintegrated only living matter, they heated anything else. That might well force the suits' wearers to come out panting-in time. The temp-raising effect was too slow, usually, for effectiveness against an armed opponent one did not

wish to kill. Try it in the present situation and these two would certainly warn their captain first, then take direct action. Either of a stopper's first two settings would work; how anomalous and "unfair" it was that a mIss shielded against disintegrator death but not against the paralysis or rictus of the Freeze or Dance settings! Unfortunately 66 no one could hold a man under a Two while he unlatched his helmet and bloodied his nose. The sonic neural attack of a stopper's first barrel on either setting was like electricity in that it was conducted and transmitted body to body. It was a nasty problem, and the obvious solution was the simple, ruthless one. Use a laser or a vibro-knife to hole the suit and the body inside it. Nasty, but there it was; it was also easy and guaranteed effective. That was not the way of Kislar Jonuta of Qalara, who was called Captain Cautious and That Damned Trickster. He and Shig had removed their helmets, having established that both linked ships were well supplied with an excellent air-mix from shipfarm. That way they could talk freely without using insuit comm, which could be detected. On the other hand, the receptors of nearby suits could readily pick up their voices. First he had muttered to Shig that difficult problems often had simple solutions, particularly when there were simple people involved. Then he explained. After that they waited in silence. Each pirate, occupied in pushing his load onto their ship, was easy prey for one man driving at him from the side, launched in zero-G. In two seconds each had an arm around him from behind and felt the prod of something in the kidney area of his suit. The startled "Look out!" was not quite pronounced when the speaker was a prisoner, and prodded. "Laser," a quiet voice urgently told him, as another was telling his partner. "Don't say a word! Not a word. Calling your captain won't help you because you'll be holed and dead, and besides your ship's in our hands anyhow. You know that's true or we wouldn't be here waiting for you." Impact had set them floating erratically, thumping 67 against this surface and that, including against the floating cargo they had spasmodically released. "I'm Shig, spacer Coronet. Not even a policer. That's my captain. You've heard of him-Captain Cautious, otherwise known as Jonuta. Think we're bluffing?-Don't answer that! Say a word and we'll be cautious-enough to use these beamers. Just get both gloves off and both hands on the old helmet now, and start unlatching. We want you alive, not as laser-holed, instantly-cauterized floating corpses!" The last phrase was well-chosen for graphic effect. Like the words that had preceded them, they were also logic. And they cinched it. Even desperate and macho outlaws felt a shiver at such a painful promise and the ugly mental picture it evoked. After a few tense moments, Nailor and his companion stripped off their gauntlets and lifted their hands to the seals of their mlss helmets. As simply as that, Jonuta and Shig had their prisoners. The two doffed helmets were soon floating. The heads of their former wearers looked small, erupting from the multiloop collars of the bulky suits. Then Nailor glanced over at his companion's captor. "Chu! They're lying! They ain't got beamers!" And he rammed a spacesuited elbow back into Shig's gut. The suit instantly protected that gut from the blow, but did nothing about the impact. In free-fall, Shig was propelled backward into Satyagraha^ airlock. A law of motion as old as the cosmos sent Nailor like a shot in the opposite direction. He hit the bulkhead opposite the 'lock's mouth, but without anything so convenient as hitting headfirst and knocking himself out. A seasoned spacefarer, he half-coiled even as he flew. That way he caromed off the wall-suit protecting him from so much as a bruise- 68 and turned swimmily back. His hand was tugging his stopper out of his suit's big multi-looped belt. Jonuta had received as much warning as Chu. His reaction was faster by a fraction of a second. He got out of the way by kicking the wall beside him. Chu emulated Nailor's tactic, but his elbow hit nothing. That served to send him into an improper somersault. Jonuta was rebounding past as Chu, messily somersaulting in the middle of the air, came over. This time decision was not difficult at all. There was Jonuta's right foot and here came Chu's bare head and Jonuta kicked it. Chu hit the wall with an immediate bwoonng. Reaction changed the direction of Jonuta's swift float. Twisting in

air, dodging a RWN crate and regaining control, Jonuta saw what had happened with Nailier and Shig, who was now behind his captain. Jonuta saw Nailier impact the wall in a semi-controlled carom and saw his hand at the black grip of his stopper. Jonuta's was already in his hand. He used it, looping his wrist to make sure that his own floating didn't allow the pirate to float free of the beam. Without glancing that way, Jonuta put out a hand that immediately contacted a wall of unipolymer plasteel. He let the hand glide, elbow bending, while he kept his gaze and his stopper on Nailier. The latter was providing a graphic demonstration of just how ridiculous uncontrolled dancing was, in freefall. Jonuta swung one leg and pushed off with his hand. Perfect; only a minor corrective swimming motion was necessary. He floated directly to the man he held on a Two setting. At the proper distance he threw himself into a somersault at the same time as he ceased squeezing the stopper. He came over just as Nailier's system was starting to consider beginning to recover from the few seconds of Two-set dancing. A large foot 69 in a larger boot impacted its target: the case containing the second component of a multispectral thermal stabilizer. The case could easily have contained a kneeling person and, had there been gravity, could have outweighed even a fat person by seven or nine times. It rushed directly at Nailier and hit him hard. Nailier banged back against the bulkhead, hard. The suit protected him from so much as a bruise on his body, but did nothing about the whiplash that raised a fat bump on the back of his head. His eyes went very wide, crossed, and his stopper floated away. So did the MTS crate. Nailier, meanwhile, joined Chu in lullaby land. Afloat. "Hey Shig, you doing anything important back there?" "You-might say so-Cap'n!" The voice was strained. Frowning, Jonuta kicked himself someplace else before he looked that way. Shig had gone backward through Satyagraha's airlock, and into India Spring's, and through that chamber as well. His own efforts had slowed and partially turned Mm before he was stopped by impact with another RWA crate. It was being pushed, blind, by a member of the merchanter's crew. Pressed into service by the pirate captain, he had just turned from the tunnel into the airlock. Behind him came another, similarly burdened, pushing packing cases whose contents totalled several times his weight. Behind him was Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi, also forced to act as stevedore. And following them all, well down the tunnel between them and the hold they had left, was Captain Menekris. He "swam" slowly, stopper in hand. All he had to do was stay well in the rear. His own men would take care of these bugs once they moved into his own ship. 70 Then came the disruption. Shig. Backward. At speed. He impacted the crated radioactive waste neutralize!, which slammed back into the man pushing it, space-suited but helmetless. They both went backward at some velocity. The spacefarer was twisting, batting at the big crate. Others slid off its top and zoomed over his head. Unimpeded, they hit the tunnel wall before he did, and were on their way back when he impacted. Shig would have been content to be impelled back to Satyagraha, except that he did not know what he'd hit or who was behind him. Accordingly he flailed, kicked, upended, and surveyed what he had wrought. And here came the smaller crates, on the rebound. Shig stroked hard. They went past, over his head, into Satya-graha's 'lock. It was the rebounding RWA crate that got Shig. He and it went atumble, in air. Meanwhile the first crewman had caromed sideways, into the burden pushed by his shipmate. That burden and that shipmate went backward, at the burden pushed by Ramzi. The first crewman, meanwhile, rebounded, wallowing weightlessly in air, in the opposite direction. Jonuta saw none of that. He had kicked off and was swimming for Shig. He had to dodge a smallish packing case, which he thumped gently to send it to the airlock ceiling. "Get the stoppers of those two, Shig," he said as they passed, heading in opposite directions. "One's afloat. Then-" "Kenowa's getting 'em," Shig replied, flipping in midair as he saw his captain's "aide" pluck Nailier's stopper from the air and shove it into her suit's belt. There was the HRal, too, wallowing because of inexperience but getting a stickum line around one of Nailier's wrists. Once it wrapped around and met itself, it self-bonded. Once she got it around the pirate's other 71 wrist and maybe a

leg, he was secured until someone stripped the binding by deactivating it. It was a simple principle; it held a lot of clothing together, too. "What the vug!" the helmeted, suited Captain Mene-kris was meanwhile snarling, as Captain Moosejaw was jammed back into him. Both floated untidily backward. Ramzi happened to glance sideward to see an extended, gauntleted arm. Its fisted hand held a stopper. In mid-(uncontrolled) -float, he moved his head that way and clamped his teeth on the gauntlet. "Yarrrr!" Captain Menekris said, or something similar, and his hand flexed open. While the stopper floated away, Captain Ramzi began flailing all four limbs. He hit two packing crates, Menelcris's left arm, Menekris's suited chest, and Menekris's helmet. The pirate went end-over-ending, cursing. So did Ramzi, without the curses. A crate hit him in the shoulder-the suit compensated-and a floating stopper hit his cheek. Still he did not curse, not Pentamahomet Ramzi! Flailing, twisting, he snatched the stopper out of the air. Without checking its setting, he used it. "Arrrr!" Captain Menekris said, or something similar. Since he had wickedly had his stopper set on Three, and since he was both suited and helmeted, he was unharmed. He felt the heat, though, even while his suit's temp-control system swiftly compensated. Its thermostat reduced aircon. Then, because of his and Ramzi's wavering float, the beam was no longer on him. His suit's thermostat hurriedly upped temp, which was swiftly becoming chilly. Then the floundering Ramzi lined up again and once again Menekris felt the heat before his suit compensated, . . . The two captains floated along India Spring's tunnel that way, away from the airlock and the utter mess of floating crewmen and floating crates. Neither knew 72 that one spacesuited man was expertly threading his way through that meandering traffic jam. "Excuse me, Captain," he said, swimming along beside Ramzi, "but that thing's set on Three and you may be ruining a perfectly good spacesuit." "Jonuta!" "Hi, Moosejaw. You've been rescued." 4 Spacers Coronet, India Spring, and Satyagraha floated in a little cluster, linked by Coronet's tractor field. Kenowa was on Jonuta's ship, visiting with HReenee and presumably with HReenee's step-sib HRadem as well. Kenowa had kindly offered to "do something" about the HRal woman's disheveled state. Jonuta was conferring with Captain Pentamahomet Rarnzi and would much have preferred to be holding the conference in his own cabin on Coronet. It was far better appointed and more comfortable. Too, Kenowa would have been present, distractingly attired. Such distractions benefited Jonuta, in business discussions, and Kenowa did excel at making herself distracting! Unfortunately Moosejaw Ramzi would not leave India Spring. Jonuta's old acquaintance's stability had been badly shaken. Understandably, he preferred the familiar. A man clung to his own territorial spot, however tiny in interstellar space. Besides, the merchant captain was not at all certain that Jonuta was to be trusted. It was sinister enough that the pirates, their captain included, were locked up tight in the "special holds" on Coronet. Disguised, thermally shielded holds for what Jonuta called walking cargo. What else did Jonuta intend? True, he was Ramzi's heroic rescuer. But such an act was questionable enough even when the 73 74 actor was not an infamous and infinitely clever slaver. Might Pentamahomet Ramzi end up without his cargo after all?-or, surely unthinkably, without his very ship? Muslah had originally been a warrior-god, but his servant P. Ramzi was no man of war or even much hi the way of action. Too bad, too bad. Both surroundings and refreshments would have been better on Jonuta's ship. The cabin of the master of India Spring showed no such evidence of imagination, or esthetics, or wealth. And not so much as a drop of anything alcoholic onboard! Jonuta glanced around. A bland painting of Muslah Benign, god of millions upon millions of Muslims on scores of planets, was stiktited high on one wall. A painting, not a holo. Flat. It was the size of a man's torso and it was alone on that wall. A sign of Moose-jaw's respect, Jonuta assumed. If Muslah of old Home-world was an ascetic (or arrogant), the aspect would have pleased Him. (Whether He was all that ascetic or no was a subject of much debate. Some even claimed that once Muslah, god of al-Islam, had had something against the imbibing of distilled alcoholic drinkables. Fundamentalists self-consciously

and conscientiously clung to such a belief and its practice. Others scoffed at such unreasonableness and lack of kindness to His adherents on the god's part. If it had been true, Muslah-or his redactors or apologists or explicators- had seen the light and changed His divine mind. Was that not after all the privilege of a god as it was of mortal men and women?) Three quarters of another of Moosejaw's cabin walls was occupied and decorated-sort of-by a quaint affectation. A sprawling planetary map of the galaxy. Since the galaxy was vast and distances were hardly conceivable, the map was hardly to scale, despite its size. Better to leave such matters to computers for retrieve-and-display map simulations, Jonuta thought. 75 He did notice the bright yellow-white rays flaring 'way over on the spiral arm. He assumed that was supposed to mark the birthplace of the Muslim faith. Well, it marked the birthplace of Boodism, too-Jonuta thought. Not that he really gave a vug, or was anything approaching religious. The best aspect of religion, Jonuta thought, was that it provided a person with convenient swear-bys. The inability to say "Booda's eyeballs" or "My god!" must severely inconvenience absolutist atheists! Still, the stars and planets on Moosejaw's silly map were shown in appropriate hues. That way the thing did add a bit of colorful decor to the man's dull quarters. Another wall backed a "bulging holoscreen just under a meter across. It was flanked by pictures of Ramzi's wife-three pictures-and of his three children-one each-and his mistress, two pictures. (Or it pleased him to pretend that she was his mistress, anyhow. She wasn't all that much, Jonuta thought but was far too cultured and cautious to say. Besides, she resembled Ramzi's wife, who not only wasn't all that much either, but was less. (But then Jonuta's sexual experiences were far broader than those of Pentamahomet Ramzi, and had involved many more partners. Only two had been of a size that might be described as "not all that shapely" and only one was what some might call rather homely. Obviously something had recommended her to Jonuta, even endeared her to him. For a while. Just what her attributes and/or talents were, Jonuta was of course far too cultured to reveal. Merely a glandular matter, perhaps. The point was that she belonged to his past, along with a lot of others-several of whom would have been too buxom or "buxom" for some other men. The past concerned Jonuta as it did any sensible person of intelligence. Not, however, nearly so much as the 76 present and future. Particularly his own future as a particularly particular and highly individual individual.) Bed with the spacefarer's usual spring-held sheets and coverlet, along with anchored table and chairlet and storage, occupied the cabin's fourth wall. And, unusually for such a seemingly ascetic man, that wall held the evidences of P. Ramzi's quite worldly hobby. Captain Ramzi and Jonuta sat in unaccommodating unimorph chairs that had obviously been chosen for utility and inexpensiveness. "I admit that I still cannot understand why you elected to answer our distress call, Jonuta. Naturally I was relieved . . ." O'erwhelmed with relief and gratitude, is more like it, Jonuta mused. "-at first. But then I realized that you would claim salvage, or try to. Yet you have assured me that is not your intent." Otherwise you wouldn't have added that "or try to" piece of bravado, Moosejaw, Jonuta mused, and said, "Moosejaw: it isn't. You know, rather than sitting here so staidly we should be dancing about in elation. That slimy pirate has done us a service. To begin with, he had a crew of six. Two were killed by an honored guest onboard your ship and four are prisoners." "Your prisoners," Ramzi pointed out. "True. And not one of your people or mine has so much as a headache! And your cargo seems none the worse for a little . . . wandering. It is all back in your hold and battened?" "Ahh . . . yes . . ." Ramzi said nervously, and he swallowed. "Where it shall remain until you reach your destination," Jonuta assured Mm. "Un-" But Ramzi, either not noticing or not caring to hear the "unless," said, "I'm sure I am elated." Idly or per- 77 haps nervously he scratched a thick, bluish-black side-burn. "However, I do have one casualty." "Oh yes. Your charming wretch of a crewmember who was so inconvenienced by the pirates' attack! Because it interrupted the swine's rape of one of your two passengers-honored guests of our race! Poor fellow!

All hearts surely bleed for him." Abruptly Jonuta threw back his dark head and laughed. "Forty gross of my planet's superb polykel ball bearings! Poor rapist! Done in by an excess of balls!" Jonuta waited a moment. When the other man remained silent and still, Jonuta said, "Congratulations." Ramzi raised tufty brows above sleepy eyes. "On what?" "On your great self-control, Captain! You manage to refrain from laughing!" And Jonuta pointed at the merchanter captain. That was too much for Ramzi's self-control. He was amused; it was just that the joke was decidedly im-proprietous. Now he let himself laugh, or had to. "An absolutely terrible pun, Jonuta," he said, swiftly pulling a (longish, squared) straight face. Jonuta flipped his fingers. Without appearing to tense or do anything to launch himself, he flexed his long legs and was out of Ramzi's unwelcoming chair, on his feet. The EZ-walk heels of his equhyde boots were all but silent as he paced over to examine the wall above Ramzi's (small, utilitarian) bed. He gazed at the collection: thirteen tilt-o-cubes, each a hologram of Set-suyo Puma. One from each of the Akima Mars mellers that had made her a hyperstar known throughout the galaxy. Ramzi—a chunky man of medium height in perfectly prosaic Boyar's coat (brown) and pantaloons (raw siena, another shade of brown, and without ribbons at the knees) and hose (pale blue, all worn presumably because he had good calves and was not wholly without 78 vanity) and dull-buckled shoes of the color called mahogany-watched Jonuta. Indeed, he studied his old acquaintance, who could be called an infamous figure along the spaceways. Jonuta was a thickish man who stood a tallish 180 sems and whose build was powerful. Beneath a lofty forehead thick, straight black eyebrows shaded eyes just as dark. His mouth was full and rather bow-shaped below a nose that was thin of bridge and broad of nostril. His black hair was wavy and the hair on his hands wanted to curl. He wore a long-tailed coat, piratically scarlet with a double row of purely ornamental buttons that flashed like purest brass. They were not; they were brass, all sixteen of them, and not nearly so heavy as brass. Between the tails of the coat and tall black boots of evershine equhyde, his grassgreen tights molded excellent legs. Both the pants and his broad cordovan belt were also of equhyde, a simulated leather hardly distinguishable from the real thing, but with certain advantages. Two strips of it hung from the end of his holster just as rawhide thongs had done, eons ago: leg-straps for tying down the holster. The black-wrapped butt of his stopper thrust up out of the holster: it was merely a cylinder housing two narrow barrels and their compact and deadly sonic generators. Pentamahomet Ramzi wondered what the ornate buckle's coat of arms signified, without knowing that Jonuta had not the faintest idea. This man liked and understood romantic attire and its impressive effect. If some people saw it as humorous or even ludicrous, fine; that was just one more little edge for Kislara Jonuta of Qalara. The strikingly attired slaver was formidable and competent, a thrice-clever trickster who enjoyed the appearance of a pirate of a long ago era. 79 He poses well, Ramzi mused, gazing at the other man's back. Then Jonuta turned from the representations of Akima Mars. "We must somewhere meet, someday," he muttered. "She and I absolutely owe it to each other!" Ramzi's laugh was a sort of self-conscious bark, alto. "You have not changed much! You are still not without conceit." "Hardly! And not without vanity either, or self-admiration, or egoism, or even egotism, on occasion!" Abruptly his face was very sober. "Moosejaw: what do you expect me to do now?" Ramzi strove to show nothing, while Jonuta observed how he tightened the crossing of his legs and reached across himself to scratch his left sideburn with his right hand. "Take Menekris and company and depart," he said, "doubtless to great profit. I do not wish to know what you do with those pirates." "Umm. And you?" Ramzi's gesture was not quite as loose and casual as he'd have wished. His expression hardly changed. "Plod on to destination as planned, cargo intact but light one crewmember, to arrive long after you and to far less profit." Just not an ambitious or imaginative man, Jonuta thought, and said, "Booda's eyes! Man, you sound all of sad, envious, and resigned, and all at once, at that!" A couple of lines in Ramzi's face seemed to deepen, or perhaps lengthen, and

this time his gesture was two-handed. "What do you want? I am captain of India Spring. I own about half of it. The tachyon converter I bought secondhand, cheap, to save money-well, it wasn't cheap. It blue-lighted last year. I soon learned that it wasn't-isn't-worth fixing, and I cannot afford a new one." He rose and half-circled his chair. "So I plod. And this run isn't going to make me enough to buy 80 a new one or even another used one, either. So I'll have to keep plodding. Hauling for people who aren't in a hurry for delivery and who therefore can pay less. And do. It's ..." Trailing off, Captain Moosejaw wandered over to his big map, which Jonuta knew meant the man did not want to continue meeting his eyes. He spoke as if to the map, while Jonuta leaned on the chair's back and gazed at his back. Thinking. Speculating. Remembering their past relationship. In an incredible almost-eighteen years as slaver, Jonuta had made three fortunes, spent one and certainly plowed most of one back into the business because he was after all Captain Cautious with better equipment than most policers, and recently had another stolen from him. Electronically. Impossibly. Somehow he seemed at last to have earned the attention as well as the enmity of TGO. That was the assumption he had to make; only TransGalactic Order could have wiped clean his several credaccounts and several investments, on several planets under several names. And he was back in business, because he had chosen to answer a C! call. He had four pirates, men in good physical condition, and their good-not-excellent spaceship, fully equipped. And Pentamahomet Ramzi? During those same seventeen years he had gained a wife, three children, a mistress (?), thirteen holocubes indicating a not-unusual yen for Setsuyo Puma/Akima Mars, a deepening of his fundamentalist religious faith, and half-ownership of a fair-to-middling spacer without subspace capability. Also, Jonuta thought, he has "gained" both resignation and fear. He shows both. He fears even me. That would be wise-but ole Moosejaw? Me? The captain of Coronet sighed and reflectively gazed at the other man's back. It was not held straight. 81 "It's looking downhill, Jonuta," Ramzi softly told the map. Again he spread his hands. This time the-gesture was shorter, tighter. "I am a good, trustworthy . . . bargain hauler." Jonuta stalked to the chart table/game console and struck a pose: left leg straight with foot flat in (carpet-less, cheaply corked) floor/deck, right leg bent at the knee, right toe on the floor to the left of his left foot. The other man heard his movements. He did not turn. "Hey, Moosejaw." Slowly the merchanter turned at that soft voice. His face showed a silent question, and apprehension. "You're wrong, Moosejaw," Jonuta said, in that same quiet voice. And without smiling. "Menekris and his Satyagraha did you an enormous favor, old friend. This is the most lucrative run of your career." Ramzi seemed to stagger. He stared at the other man while fantasies chased each other other through his mind with the manic abandon of cavorting puppies. He drew himself (somewhat) together, however, and when he spoke his voice was heavily blued with satire. "Oh? What are you going to do then, Jonuta-take him and his crew and leave me his ship?" "Along with certain additional considerations," Jonuta said, "yes." 5 Over on Coronet, Kenowa stared at the boneless HRal woman and sighed. Sinuous as an eel! Or a cat. Utter litheness personified, this newest of non-Galactics. Lissome to the nth. Oh, true, she bore no resemblance to the cat she had shared ancestry with . . . no more than Kenowa did to a chimpanzee or a great ape, at any rate. So Mranophel HReenee sa'fiel was not quite human-Galactic-and hardly possessed the traditional dream of an hourglass figure. So hourglasses were long, long gone anyhow. And HReenee was nevertheless definitely, provenly brave and resourceful, along with attractive. And exotic. That made her more attractive. (Even more exotic-attractive than that little barbarian cake Yanya-Janja, dammit-that Jonuta just can't get out of his mind, Kenowa thought with bitterness unto malevolence.) HReenee's attractiveness was obvious to a woman who knew men, which Kenowa certainly did. And the HRal's attractiveness to Jonuta was obvious to the woman who knew him very, very well indeed. So the ultra-lithe HReenee's vital trio of measurements would not differ by more than a few sems. 81-68-86, chest-waist-hips? Something like that. The point was,

she did not have the bilobate chest bulge of the females of Kenowa's kind. Or of the hermaphroditic 82 83 natives of Jarpi. HReenee was still a mammal. Definitely a mammal. And surely over fifty per cent legs, too! Interestingly, the male of HReenee's species- HRadem-was little different in appearance. He was thicker and a bit broader of shoulder, and even more lacking in clear delineation of waist and hips than a "male of the Galactic species. Yet HRadem was closer in build to Jonuta and other men than his step-sib was to Kenowa and other women of her kind. Kenowa looked at him with an appraising eye. 91-81-84 at about 167 or 168-mostly-legs sems?\* Something like that, she decided. And all liquid muscle, so far as I can see. Fascinating! Cute little butts no bigger than his fists! Fascinating! She assumed that, iike HReenee, HRadem had eight nipples. Eight! Fascinating. Hair on his chest? Oh yes, and about everywhere else, too. A fine soft down, Kenowa had learned from having touched HReenee. Long-legged without being tall, both of them. A shortish people, the HRal-with close to two-thirds of their bodies below the waist. And, Kenowa wondered, watching him long-leg it for the sitter (also called the head, the can, the rest room, and other things) for the second time in twenty minutes, and how hung?-or hung how? (HReenee had already hurriedly-and looking distressed-visited the little room of convenience, too. Confusion of the bowels was the constant companion of those who traveled the spaceways. There were no days on spacecraft. Just chronometers, maintaining a cycle chosen by the captain or based on the ship's planet of origin. On Coronet a "day" was twenty-five hours-standard. Sixty old seconds times sixty minutes times \* About 36-32-33 at a height of about five and a half feet, Old Style. As a matter of fact HRadem's lean legs were just over 90 sems in length. 84 twenty-five hours-all "ess" for standard, since seconds-minutes-hours were standard all along the spaceways. It was length of days and months that varied, planet by planet, and of course length of years. A day-ess was supposedly based on the rotation of Homeworld about its star, 'way out on the spiral arm of the enormous gathering of stars ridiculously called the Milky Way. Jonuta felt that twenty-five hours was better for him and his crew than the traditional twenty-four. But then they reached this planet or that, and took a harmless drug to offset the body's response to variation in time and hours-per-day of this planet or that. The difference was measured by effects on brain, emotions, and intestines. Intestinal confusion and irregularity remained the constant companions of the majority of spacefarers. Apparently the HRal, whatever their planet's rotation, revolution, and time divisions along with their constitutional differences, were no different.) A general similarity, Kenowa mused, with similar parts in similar places, and intestinal problems similar to ours, and . . . hung how? Of course I'll find out. It was going to happen. Kenowa knew that and could not help thinking about it, while she watched HReenee try some of her clothing. Distractedly she replied to HReenee's queries, and proffered the black skintite that would stretch to fit any legs, long and slim or short and meaty. (As for upper garments, even one of Kenowa's that fit her snugly would be a blouson, on HReenee!) It's going to happen. She remembered Jonuta's and her discussion of the HRal, not many days-Coronet ago. Onboard News Service (ONS) had pointed out that the newfound race was of high intelligence with an "advanced" social order; a "new" technology beyond the ruins of an old one that had not quite destroyed them, long ago; and 85 language and customs well beyond the simple or simplistic. Furthermore the HRal-not Hrals, as they had supposed then-were more than willing to interact with Galactics. Many volunteered at once to leave their planet and voyage along the spaceways. Working with the Galactics. Thinking, people-sized felinoprimates taking orders from Galactic captains on Galactic spacers. With upwards of 340 billion living stars in the galaxy, and one in twenty with a potentially habitable planet, any sensible person knew that there would be other "new" races, for hundreds of years to come. In this galaxy. Long-distance planetary scans were hard to handle, here toward the tight inner core of the spiral of stars that was the galaxy, where suns were thick as sand on the beach of most planets

that had beaches. Not all that many people gave all that many damns anymore, either, about searching for other races or even Galactic-colonized but long-"lost" planets. Oh, finding them was exciting. It was just the searching for them that was no longer of much consuming interest. The newness had worn off. They had come onto those awful jelly-things of Shirash, and the seemingly human natives of Croz, who were however not of the same Homeworld stock and not cross-breedworthy. And the Jarps of the planet Jarpi, orange hermaphrodites. Aglayans? Well, those pale people seemed human, too, but though there had been inter-specific sexual activity, there had been no cross-fertilization with the blonds of early steel age, Protected Aglaya. And then rather recently oddly-named Lady Viking had entered a star-system presumably not visited and not inhabited, and had stumbled onto the smallish, coolish planet HRalix. And the Lady Viking crew had been welcomed by extremely curious people who had jumped right up to beg for-and more importantly, 86 trade for-passage on Lady Viking and other Galactic ships. That captain was now famous, and sought after. A real winner, Lady Viking. "Cats are more curious than apes," Jonuta had pointed out, as he and his "aide" discussed the so-called new race. "Great explorers and adventurers, I'll bet." Pos, but it's those adventuresses that worry me, Kenowa had thought, even then, for she knew the specialized meaning of that word from her mellers. Meanwhile Jonuta went on: "Maybe we should try for two or three HRal females as crew. After all ... eight breasts apiece!" Well, it was nipples, not really breasts, and Kenowa knew he was teasing. Still, she knew too that her sensuous and sensualistic Jonuta was fascinated. She put back her shoulders with both hands clasped behind her while she gave him a significant look. "Their eight wouldn't mass as much as my two," she said. "I'll give you that, although humanoid bipedal mammals with two sexes and two rows of warheads do sound interesting." "You males," she told him with austerity (and justification), "just think that anything with breasts is attractive, and the more the merrier, and that Booda laid on you a mandate to fill all females!" He made a mock-threat, had his bluff called, and gave her a (forceful) pat on the thigh, which was skin-tightly molded in hot pink Sprayons. "Damn," he said. "Called my bluff again. Anyhow, naturally we won't be cross-fertile with the HRal, but we can certainly cross-fuck. I'll bet that's already taken place! The HRal must be just as curious about interracial, inter-specific slicing as we are. To the hells with reproduction-just do it to soar! For the pleasure of the variety and the exotic." 87 Kenowa, who knew that Jonuta was a genuinely extraordinary man, even a great man, and just as kinky as other great men, winked. And Jonuta, who knew and appreciated that Kenowa reveled in the exotic, the kinky, winked right back. Even then, she had switched the conversation into another direction. Why talk about it? So some day Jonuta would meet a HRal female and Kenowa wouldn't see him for a few days, on some planet or other. So? It had happened other times, a number of times. This would be different only in that it would involve the genuine curiosity of a new race. He would come back, re-excited and more interested in her than ever. And if he was a bit contrite, that made it all the better. Only it was not some day, but a few days later. This day. And it was not on some planet or other, but in space. On Coronet. And here was the interesting female of another race, right here in Kenowa's own cabin. Excitedly trying on this and that component of Kenowa's admittedly lavish and exotic wardrobe. (That slash-front, lace-front yellow tunic certainly did nothing for her. Kenowa said nothing. HReenee was taking it off anyhow.) Of course, Kenowa reflected, HReenee's step-sib was onboard, too. Here he came now, back from the sitter. And . . . hung how? How hung? So here we are. Two HRal of HRalix, step-sibs in their society's complicated interrelationships. Curious, adventurous felinoprimates. Happy and even begging to leave their planet and join the Galactics in voyaging the spaceways. In HReenee's case, that had taken her right into rape, a pirate attack, and right onto starship Coronet, the famous ship of the infamous Jonuta. And into Kenowa's wardrobe. "I like this, Kenowa," she said, with that carefully 88 closed-mouth smile. "This is so very nice of you, letting me

maul all your clothes!" Kenowa smiled and flipped her fingers. "It's fun to watch, HReenee." It was, and too she did like to hear HReenee talk. The HRal pronounced each syllable, each vowel and consonant of each word with care, and so she pronounced everything perfectly. Naturally that sounded strange. She even pronounced every letter r! She sounded so studied, so cultured. And yet from HReenee it did not seem prissy. It was an accent, in a way, and she certainly had that coming! She and her step-sib were genuine aliens, more different from Kenowa's race than the Jarps. Somehow one expected them to speak with an accent. It was just that what Kenowa didn't expect was the form that accent took: perfect, meticulous pronunciation of the vocabulary fed into her. Erts-standard, unshaded by the twang or drawl or burr or other peculiarity of speech of any planet. Un-slurred. She looked good in the magenta skintite, too. A long-sleeved body stocking with a scooped neck to accommodate anything worn over it. On Kenowa, it showed a great deal of mounded breast the color of good brass. Not on HReenee! It was, however, just as snug. That was part of the beauty of skintites. "What that does for your legs is practically sinful," Kenowa said. HReenee looked nervous. "Sinful?" "Uh-not literally. Figure of speech only." Kenowa flipped her fingers. "Slang." "Oh." HReenee flipped her fingers, pretty well. "Slang. Figure of speech. Sinful does not necessarily mean religiously wrong." "Right. Firm." "Pos!" HReenee said, and chuckled. She looked at HRadem. "You like this on me? You could wear one like this too!" 89 HRadem jerked his attention to her; he had been regarding Kenowa. "It looks unreligiously wrong-right on you," he said, and Kenowa broke up. When she put out a hand to touch him, HRadem leaned his upper arm into her hand. It was a sensuous act, though Kenowa had already learned that to the HRal it was that-sensuous, but not sensual. Not sexual. The HRal liked being touched. (These two do, anyhow, Kenowa reminded herself, knowing that an entire race or even family could not be judged by the actions and preferences of a couple of individuals.) Maybe other HRal hated touching as much as some humans did. Kenowa's feeling, however, was that it was a common racial trait. A touchy-feely people, she thought. HReenee seemed to enjoy touching the garments she tried, even stroking the fabrics, rubbing them against her. And, in an act that was odd though not unpleasant to watch, rubbing herself against them. This in addition to her obvious pleasure in trying them on. And regarding herself in the big mirror Jonuta had long ago installed here. Kenowa had even noticed each of the HRal sort of swerve, just a little, in order to brush a wall or doorway lightly in passing. Sensuous people, she mused. And does that mean they're sensual, too? She knew the answer to that: Not necessarily! "It is lovely," HReenee said. She gave herself another sinuous stretch while she watched the effect in the mirror. "But I can't wear it." "Oh, of course you can," Kenowa told her. "Don't worry about it! Wear whatever pleases you. See, clothing is a sort of hobby of mine-and Jonuta's-and I have lots and lots." She didn't mention her rather frequent shopsprees on this planet and that, or how she gave away so much of her raiment after only a few 90 wearings. It was a delightful habit she was perfectly aware that she could break, if she had to. If Jonuta really was . . . ruined. But who could believe that such a man as he could remain down? ("You can't keep a bad man down," Captain Cautious had said, on more than one occasion.) HReenee turned to face her with a sigh. She ran one of those strange hands down her face, every finger of equal length. The mutual ancestor of the HRal and their planet's cats must have been a strange creature indeed, Kenowa thought. "No no, you don't understand, Kenowa-friend," HReenee said, with a brief inclining of her head on which the not quite pointed, slightly tufted ears pressed briefly back and close to her skull. "I am too hot in this. It is one more of our differences, you see. Your constant healthy body temperature is less than a hun-dreth of a percentage point under thirty-seven degrees." Kenowa nodded. That piece of information was so common that every child knew it. The temperature of the human body was 37°C (rounded up from 36.9963), and had better not vary much, in either direction! "One of your thermometers placed under my tongue registered

thirty-nine point nine-nine." "Mine too," HRadem said, with a vocal shrug. "Call it forty, to your thirty-seven."\* "Oh! I-I had not realized. Oh I noticed your warmth, but it didn't seem that warm!" "Catch us asleep, or all curled up," HReenee said. "Or in this body stocking!" She ran her hands down her svelte hips, even more svelte in the skintite. Because of its clingy elasticity, it was even tighter than skin. "It's our fur," HRadem said, brushing a hand along his bare arm-and then doing it again, as if unconscious- \* 98.6° for humans and 104° for HRal, Old Style. Those few degrees difference, in Galactics, would amount to a dangerous fever. 91 ly, just for the sensation. The fur was hardly worthy of the name; it was a fine down, much shorter than the hair on the limbs of those few Galactics who perversely allowed themselves to retain any hair below the eyelids. "Our fur lies flat, very flat, and it's extremely close-growing. That is our warmth, you see. Our, uh, warming systemry! It holds our body heat in, presses it back to us where it belongs-close to the body. We are safe in temperatures low enough to endanger the mucus in your nose and the saliva in your mouth, Kenowa." Why, they're-feverishly hot, Kenowa thought, and experienced a flash of excitement from the fact. "But then . . . why even the normal temp we maintain on Coronet must seem hot to you!" "Not really," HReenee said, glancing around as if to see heat. It was a perfectly normal human thing to do, Kenowa thought, with only a little surprise. "We lift our down with less effort than you require to hold your head to one side, for instance. That way we can dump heat relatively well. We rather enjoy even over-heated air." "Even proximity to hot air vents!" HRadem poked in with a smile. "To cover ourselves, though-that is intolerable except in real cold. Real cold, I mean, Kenowa. I might enjoy wearing this skintite at a temp well below zero, outside . . . but I'd be prickly very soon if I was really doing something. Exerting myself, I mean. Otherwise, I just couldn't bear anything so tight as this. My scalp is prickling now and my legs are uncomfortable." "Your . . . scalp." "In reaction to the heat, yes." "Mmm! Our scalps prickle or tingle when we're scared, or tense." HRadem laughed. It was a throaty, sort of bubbly sound, with the mouth never never opened so far as Galactics did when laughing. "So do ours, Kenowa! So 92 do ours! Particularly in times of fear. We lose a lot of heat through the top of the head, just as you Galactics do, and fear tends to raise the body temp." Kenowa thought of cold chills, but elected not to mention that sensation. She mused idly about clothing with a miniature temp-control system, too, such as that which kept spacesuits comfortable. She wondered if that was a possibility, and resolved to remember it for later. She said, "Oh." "You humans are lucky to be able to decorate yourselves all over and enjoy it," HRadem said. "But not so lucky when it's really cold, I guess." Quite without self-consciousness as she had been all along, HReenee was peeling off the skintite. She looked less thin as the garment came off. Kenowa saw that part of that was due to the HRal's down; it was standing out from her body. The cooling process, Kenowa assumed, and wondered idly if it was a conscious or automatic act. For the tenth or twelfth time Kenowa watched the revelation of very small oval buttocks atop long, long lean legs; the double row of small nipple-tipped swellings that ran down the HRal's torso to the base of her belly or nearly-like the prass buttons on Jonuta's coat, Kenowa mused, although each swelling was about the size of half a lemon, erupting its tiny dark twig of a nipple; the womanly though angular hips; the oddness of the fur's ending at her genitals, rather than beginning there as it did on those few Galactics who left themselves au naturel in the groin. That made HReenee's vaginal mouth seem oddly, unnecessarily obscene, a bright pink beacon. It also looked, Kenowa thought (and wondered), round. And without the mounded quality of a human's groin. "Uh, well," she began, aware of staring and forcing her gaze to the HRal's rather piquant face, "uh, what 93 do you-I mean, I just realized! I've no idea what real native HRal clothing is like!" Again HRadem laughed; HReenee chuckled-and shot him a look. He subsided, Kenowa noticed. Interesting. Something to remember. "Very little," HReenee said. "But-oh it was torn, but you were wearing . . . uh, what had

been a full body, uh, covering!" "Only everything but my legs," HReenee said. "But that was because of Captain Ramzi." That reminded Kenowa to glance at her chron. Not time yet. "Ramzi? You mean-you're guests among us, our kind, uh, Galactics, and . . . Captain Pentama-homet Ramzi told you what to wear?" "Pos. On his ship." "But-he made you wear our clothing? What you had on, I mean?" "HRrm." HRadem said, while HReenee said it in Erts: "Pos. He is a very religious man, you see. Mus-lah? You know Muslah." "I know of Muslah's faith, firm. Al-Islam. What's that got to-oh." Abruptly Kenowa remembered those uptight nuts on Sekhar, with all their covering up and their nervousness about sex and rules-rules!-about the attire of women. Not just girls-grown women, too! "He doesn't happen to be from a planet called Sekhar, does he?" "Uh, n-I think not . . ." "No," HRadem said positively. "Neg. He's a Ghanj. I mean Ghanjese." HReenee glanced at him and flipped her fingers. Kenowa noticed how perfectly at ease she apparently was, naked under the eyes of a relative stranger as well as male, step-sib or no. "Anyhow, the point is that he is very religious. The word is fundamentalist, I remember. He said that his ship is a inerchanter on its serious business, and-oh, he 94 was nice enough about it," HReenee interrupted herself, noting Kenowa's shocked look. "Really he was. And that all his crewmen were-are-male, and that even though I am of a different race and all-that was his phrase, 'a different race and all'-quaint man!- and that we'd be in space a very long time-a very long time, he said again, with a rather hard significant look, that I might uh, be an occasion of . . ." She broke off, repressing a smile which, since she and her step-sib smiled only with their mouths closed, looked repressed anyhow, as well as compressed. "An occasion of 'temptation' to his men," HReenee said, obviously imitating that idiot master of India Spring, and again fighting back a smile. Abruptly, just as Kenowa started to make an indignant comment, HReenee's ears went back and she looked stricken, and down. "He . . . was right. But it was an unnecessary . . . precaution. I might as well have been comfortable!" HRadem made a shocking little throaty snarly sound. "Oh, HReenee," Kenowa said, and moved impul-sively to hug the victim of rape aboard the ship of that religious fobber-that fundamentalist bigot. She'd have been nearly as horrified had she known that Cap'n Moosejaw also allowed no "unnatural substances" onboard his ship. By which he meant alcoholic potables, as well as any drugs beyond the most medicinally basic. HReenee accepted the embrace, returned it. They stood that way, not awkwardly, hugging, stroking gently. Then Kenowa felt the signal and loosened her embrace. With a last long stroke down her arm, the HRal stepped back. "Thank you, Kenowa. You are a good-friend. Person. I am quite all right. I was not virgin, at any rate. Umm . . . well," she said, obviously gathering herself, and again Kenowa saw the similarity to herself, to her 95 own kind. "You asked about our clothing. Native . . . HRal . . . clothing," she said, as if tasting the words in this alien tongue. A tongue that pronounced her alien, and her "native HRal" clothing. Alien. Among, to her, aliens. Smooth-skinned, talon-less, oddly maned, massively built and tall . . . aliens. Aliens called Galactics; "humans." That word translated into the HRal word that translated as the HRal word for their kind . . . humans. "When it is cold," HReenee said, "we wear whatever we must. Otherwise, we wear what we wear inside: we cover our genitals with loose clothing. It may be divided to form pants and it may not. Skirts, in other words, of this length or that. More often it is loose pants: mayta or jurl. That's a plural word-there is no jur and jer is something altogether else!" Her little twitch of her erect ears was a HRal shrug. "And we wear decoration. Jewelry, and just . . . decoration. Trailing ribbons and strips of cloth. They might fall from wrist or arm or waist or throat. Just decorations, you see. Pretty flowing things." "Those and the, ah, means of attaching them," HRadem said, "are part of the agreement between HRalix and Galactics. Your planets are forbidden to make them, else we do not trade with those planets." "And you don't cover above the waist." "No. There is no need." HReenee laughed abruptly and put out a hand to trace it down Kenowa's arm. "Even nursing mothers are not so swollen of breast as you, for instance! We

have noticed that almost none of your women have what might be called small breasts, and none at all the size of yours." "And only two!" HRadem said. "The reason is men, mostly," Kenowa said. "Men like breasts. They are what we call secondary sexual characteristics. So-parents make sure that their daughters will erupt, uh, ample ones. That is one of the uses 96 of bioengineering. Later, some women add to their size." She flipped her fingers with a smile. "And some reduce that size, too! It does tend to make them different!" "You are different, Kenowa." Kenowa laughed. "I have rather more in the warheads department than I need, yes! It can be a problem, in some ways. But I am not of a mind to reduce the size of ray chest." "I would like to see them," HRadem said, and Kenowa wondered if he was as naive as he looked and sounded. Apparently not, or else he had forgotten himself. Shooting him one of those looks, HReenee said, "Careful, Dem! Remember their different customs. 'Secondary' sexual characteristics are nearly as taboo among Galactics as the primary ones." She looked at Kenowa. "That is so, isn't it?" "Pos, since you said 'nearly.' I mean, we often expose a great deal of chest in public-some of us, of both sexes-but you don't see anyone of either sex with any part of its genitals exposed. You'll see some emphasizing, now. That's different. Extremely tight genital covering, I mean. The HRal wear nothing extremely tight?" "No," HRadem said. "We just can't stand anything extremely tight." "But we do wear some things snug," HReenee said. "Attachments for some decorations, for instance. You can't attach a flowing piece of cloth to your wrist without circling the wrist with something relatively tight. And shoe straps-we wear only open shoes." "Sandals," HRadem said, supplying the word in Ke-nowa's tongue. "-unless we have to cover our feet out of doors," HReenee went on, as if he had not interrupted. "And, uh, sometimes jurl are made so as to be quite tight in the 97 rear. Not extremely tight. Seldom in front, though, or even at the thighs. Don't frown so, Kenowa-friend- it's easy enough to design and make clothing to fit that way!" "I was wondering," Kenowa told her. "Does that mean that bottoms are big items with HRal males?" HReenee frowned. "Big items?" "Popular female parts-secondary sexual characteristics." "Oh. Pos. And ... ears." "Ears." "Firm." Kenowa nodded without comment. It was hard to imagine anyone's running after someone else because she had sexy ears, but . . . other peoples, other customs. Maybe she could get an explanation of what sort of ears were sexier, some other time. And what bottoms were sexy to HRal males, too, unless it varied from individual to individual or place to place, as it did among humans as well as Jarps. That reminded her to mention that preferences, customs, habits, and fashion varied from planet to planet-and from area to area on some of the densely populated worlds-which was important for spacefarers to learn. "We know," HReenee said, "although we don't know all the specifics. Is that possible?" "Uh, well, Jonuta and I get around an awful lot, HReenee. And you can always check such things before you go onplanet, anywhere. You know, edutapes and ONS." "Oh. I don't know Oh Enn Ess?" "Onboard News Service. You subscribe by paying." "Oh. I think Captain Ramzi did not pay for ONS." "I can imagine." Kenowa glanced at her chron. "Ah . . . HReenee. You do have some of your own clothing on India Spring! And . . . decorations?" "Oh pos! And both of us keep hesitating over your word 'decorations.' Perhaps our word shanshal is better 98 since we're talking about something so specifically HRal. Anyhow-firm, Kenowar I have lots on Captain Ramzi's ship. We both have." Kenowa smiled at the thought of a possible wear-trade of a few thises and thats from her wardrobe and HReenee's. She asked, "But-HRadem? He objected to your wearing your own clothing, too?" "Neg. I insisted on these, since HReenee must wear them. It was a form of protest." Ear-twitch/shrug: "It accomplished nothing, of course. But it felt good. We have pride." "All intelligent species have pride," HReenee said. "It's one of the marks of real intelligence-cerebration. And it did accomplish something, Dem. It showed our pride, and it made us both feel better." "Too bad you've been on that hyper-religious fob-ber's ship and not this one," Kenowa heard herself say, and wondered at her sanity. She needed the exotic HRal on Coronet as much as

she needed extra pounds! Another glance at her chronometer sent her through the connecting doorway into Jonuta's cabin. She hurried to the little comm-and-signaling unit at the side of his bed. On Jonuta's side, she thought, wondering whether she might soon be spending less time here and more in her own seldom-used bed, if these people came onto Coronet as passengers. She knew that was part of Jonuta's purpose in bargaining with that damned bigot, Ramzi! Still, maybe she wouldn't have to spend all those hours in her own bed . . . alone. Peripheral vision showed her the HRal, wondering looks on their faces, in the doorway they hadn't known existed. "Excuse me," Kenowa muttered. "I have to signal the captain." "While he's on another ship?" "Well, we're linked to it, and we've got a beam on it. Jonuta wears a signal-receiver at all times." 99 "Oh, a beeper," HRadem said, rather proudly. "Right." And as per Jonuta's instructions before he had sent them over here while remaining on India Spring, she signaled Captain Jonuta. Pentamahomet Ramzi jerked almost violently when Jonuta's call-signal went off. He stared while the other man hoisted his left arm and slapped the forearm, through coat and the shirt he presumably wore under it. He met Ramzi's questioning stare. "That's my signal to get over to Coronet, fast," Jonuta told him. "Surely our discussion has decided you that you can trust me-come along, won't you?" Moosejaw declined. He would, however, be happy to wait. In a state approaching shock. Jonuta was heading out of his cabin. "I've got to tell my crew something, Moosejaw. I'd rather you were there, too. Do I assume that we have an agreement?" "Ah, uh, pos! Pos, Jonuta. Firm. Right. I-I'm afraid I keep looking for a catch." Jonuta paused. He opened his coat-not by means of the shining gold-colored buttons-and handed the other man a cliché-a little black box. Ramzi stripped his gaze off the slaver's nice undershirt of Panishi cotton, white, and automatically pushed out a hand for the commlinker. "Please stay where you'll be alone, Moosejaw, and actuate that. I want you to hear what I say, over on Coronet-what we say. Even if it's embarrassing, I want you to hear." "I-I understand," Ramzi said, realizing that he had been handed an expression of trust and . . . partnership? Something like. He squeezed the black box and watched the romantically attacked man redshift his cabin, and his ship. Muslah's Holy Laws-was it possible? Was this real? Had this-was this happening to him, after all these years? 6 On his own ship once again, Jonuta thanked Kenowa for arranging his graceful departure from India Spring, thanked her again for the gentle drink-not his favored Qalaratini, but a milder and simpler booz-and-carbon-ated-water-which he had been wanting for over an hour; said some pleasant things to HReenee and HRA-dem-in that order-and called an All Hands Assembly. Shig, Sakyo, and Therandah were pleasantly surprised to receive a measure of alcohol, too, in the form of a glass of heliotrope-hued wine. It was better than good. Product of a vineyard in Thebanis's capital, Raunch: a laboratory. "Captain Ramzi and I have come to an agreement and I want to share it with you, in detail," Jonuta said, having activated the multi-directional pickup-and-sender; it was a decorative scarab, pinned to his coat. It would be sending his every word to the receiver he had left with Ramzi. Along with the words of anyone else who spoke here, too. Coronet's crew and the HRal looked at him attentively, and sipped with appreciation. "Since we have no use for Satyagraha, Captain Ramzi is taking it." (Jonuta paused dutifully while they gasped.) "Salvage, or spoils of conquest, or something like. We, however, get anything or everything off it that isn't attached, and the cargo of India Spring, and its old tachyon conversion systemry." He smiled. 100 101 "Which isn't working and may not be worth repairing. It does have value, of course. It was just that Captain Ramzi was more than reluctant to-well, he couldn't afford to sell it. Or thought he couldn't." (The HRal exchanged a look. Alien talk. They understood every word. It was just that this combination of words was entirely alien to them. Words were one thing. Nuances of words, along with other customs and habits, were quite another. The HRal step-siblings listened attentively. Gazing at him.) "Also," Jonuta was saying, "we keep the prisoners." Sakyo smiled and Shig cocked an eyebrow. Hoho- poor innocent pirates had been pirated and were about to go on the

market, most like! "And of course we have the undying gratitude and love of Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi." Again Jonuta smiled. "Which doesn't mean he'll ever buy you a drink, believe me!" "Captain," Therandah said as if hesitantly, wearing a little frown. "We keep the prisoners, and various things off their ship-" "To be divided as ship's shares: equal shares among us all," her captain put in. "Hurrah!" Sak called, and pretended embarrassment, hand over mouth. "Very fair of you, Captain-more than fair of you, Captain, I'm sure," Therandah said. "But . . . and Captain Ramzi keeps the ship? Satyagraha? That whole multi-megastell spaceship?!" Jonuta regarded her, blinking. "That is our agreement, yes. A spacer is a hard thing to divide, L.S. Therandah." She seemed neither to take offense (while Sakyo chuckled) nor to be embarrassed. "Oh, not my point, Captain, believe me. I see your decision as to ship's shares as exceedingly generous, especially for me, who's been onboard so brief a time. However. Of course they 102 are pirates. However . . . please understand that I am not criticizing, Captain, but . . . the decision and division seem so high-handed." Kenowa shot her a look that was positively venomous. Therandah, gaze fixed on her captain, either did not notice or affected not to do. "It is," Jonuta said equably. "No one has ever said that I wasn't high-handed, Therandah." (Kenowa smiled and Sakyo chuckled. HReenee, gazing large-eyed at the tallish, decoratively attired captain of Coronet, smiled and rubbed the down on her left arm, unconsciously, unceasingly.) "You see, we will not be reporting this incident. Any of it. Not officially. If I thought I had more choice, I'd not be taking all of you into my confidence. You see, there was a ship, an outlaw ship, and six outlaws. If anything ever comes up, they killed that crewmember of Ramzi's. Thieves and killers both, these fellows. Six of them." Jonuta paced a few steps away from twelve watching eyes, swung back. "They looked upon India Spring and her crew as prey, and instead they become prey. In the process, two of them got themselves killed." He lifted a finger and half-pointed, in the manner of a schoolmaster program. "We had nothing to do with those killings, of course. Still, we came to the . . . rescue, and we are not any sort of policers. At all," he added with a wry twist of sensuous lips "Perhaps unfortunately, possibly unfortunately, a member of a brand new-to us, to us-race Poofed those two swine. An honored guest among us. All of us, I mean: Galac-tics. Now do you see why Captain Ramzi and I discussed, and decided as we did? It seems best not to release information that a member of his crew raped-or nearly, or tried to-an honored guest among us from a newfound planet that welcomed us with open arms and hurried right out into space with us . . . and 103 that she very handily Poofed two Galactics, however outlaw. I see that you do see! Ramzi and I discussed, and considered possible ramifications and tangles, and we decided this. And this is the way it is." He had spoken to all of them, and to the unseen listener as well. Therandah chose to act as if he had been replying to her. "In that case, Captain, with your indulgence and begging your pardon-why in the Hells are you telling us?" "Because we will be, ahh, sort of stripping Satya-graha, and taking on India Spring's cargo, and I want you to know that Ramzi and I didn't just jump at the decision, and that we see this as honorable and perfectly legal. Even laudable. We may be saving the galaxy from a painful interracial incident. Neither Ramzi nor HReenee deserves all that notoriety." "Not only that, but Ramzi's getting the best of it," Sakyo said, rather wistfully. A whole dam' spaceship! "And there is a bit more," Jonuta said, after flashing a little smile at the Terasak. "Captain Ramzi does not own India Spring. It belongs to a group of people on Ghanj. A small company of individuals. He owns about half. (The others, his partners in a way of speaking, are by the way Ghanji nobles. You know Ghanj and its noble nobility!)" HReenee and HRadem exchanged a look. Ears moved ever so slightly, in a sort of shrug. Then HReenee, stroking her arm, returned her gaze to Captain Jonuta. Good legs on the man. And what a personality he was; an alpha male in any society, among any race! "Therefore," he was saying, "my old friend Captain Moosejaw is changing course. He will return to Ghanj. There he will effect ownership papers to Satyagraha- whose name he will certainly

change; after all, 'Civil Disobedience,' to Pentamahomet Ramzi! He will also prevail on his co-owners either to buy him out of 104 India Spring or hire a new master for it, and share profits with Ramzi. Providing, if he has sense, they get off their cheap asses and buy a proper tachyon converter for the ship!" "Just out of curiosity," Shig said, "Captain Ramzi will then be doing what?" Jonuta wagged his head with another little smile, eyebrows up. "I'd like to say he'll be kicking up his heels and getting into mischief, because I think it would do him a lot of good. But I doubt that he will. He'll be a merchantship master, I rather imagine--and a continued religious one, bless his entirely Muslim soul! Except that now he will own the ship he commands, and furthermore it will have a fine tachyon converter." "Not to mention a mighty nice DS capability," Shig said. Wistfully. "And a convenient spare airlock!" Kenowa blurted with a large smile. "True," said Jonuta who, like Shiganu and Sakyo, was chuckling. "After we finish stripping Civil Disobedience of everything onboard that isn't welded down!" Sak beamed. "No problem to him," Jonuta said with a finger-flip. "Think what kind of financing he can get, with that mighty fine spaceship as collateral!" "Uh . . . Captain," Kenowa suddenly thought to ask, "where . . . was Captain Ramzi . . . heading?" "Bleak," Jonuta said casually. "Bleak!" Sakyo said, "Oh no." Kenowa said, "And, ah, we will be . . . delivering his cargo?" Jonuta said, "Of course." Casually. And flipped his fingers oh-so casually. Sakyo said, "Oh no." 105 Kenowa said, "Oh shit." "Oh come on!" their captain remonstrated, as boyishly as possible without ever having studied under one Trafalgar Cuw. "Bleak's almost a straight sweep from here! One good jump. And then we're back en route to Qalara again. No matter what. I swear. All of us, remember, considerably better off than we expected to be." "Bleak," Sakyo muttered. "I could live two lifetimes without going to Bleak," Shig muttered. "A night on Bleak is about two lifetimes," his fellow Terasak told him. Their captain spread his hands in an eloquent gesture. "Shig: who couldn't! But come on, come on now. Look, we don't even have to go down onplanet. We-" "Oh goody," Sak said. "I think my slicer's about to atrophy already, from inactivity! I'd go down on anything!" "Or anyone," Shig muttered. Their captain stared. After a time each grinned sheepishly and glanced somewhere else. They'd gotten caught up in comedy, the comedy of complaining, and both knew it. Named for the control cabin by those who had been in one too long, it was called con syndrome. It was readily treated by a dose of authority. "We offload the cargo," Jonuta said in his deepest voice of authority, which was deep indeed, "--it's on consignment, after all, and we don't have to peddle it--at the space station. And away we go again on our merry way to Qalara. And a wonderful extended vacation onplanet. My planet!" After a moment of silence Shig, head on one side, said quietly, "You do not intend to go down on Bleak, Captain?" "Oh, well, yes, firm, I have some business onplanet. 106 Shouldn't take long. There's a pretty good bar on Bleak's station, you know." Therandah was staring at him, and her head was on one side. "The . . . Captain Menekris and his three . . . crewmembers." "Um-hmm." Jonuta nodded. "I think Bleak will be a fine site for their retirement from piracy, don't you? Bleak needs manpower!" Only Licensed Spacefarer Therandah and HRadem failed to laugh aloud. No one even bothered with the obvious cheap shot: Bleak needed everything and anything! Abruptly Sakyo stood. His words made his acceptance official. "Thank you, Captain." Kenowa emulated him. Shiganu and Therandah stood too, but without saying the words, which were formula. The others pretended not to notice. "Now when do we get to start looting Satyagrahcf?" "Spacer crewmember Sakyo, please," his captain remonstrated. "We go only to avail ourselves of our share of a new partnership." For the first time, HRadem spoke, and his words astonished them. "Spoils of war!" the HRal said with delight in his voice. "I wish to help with the transferring of . . . goods." Two men from Terasaki applauded him and HRadem showed them a beaming smile--mouth closed. Then Sakyo looked to his captain. "When?" "After we and Captain Ramzi's crew effect transfer of his cargo to our hold," Jonuta rumbled, with an austere look. "I was afraid of that." "I wasn't," Spacefarer Shiganu told him. "I was sure of

it!" Jonuta continued nervous about Therandah, and 107 avoided eye contact. So did the others. The voice that arrested them all, though, was not hers. It did come from a female throat. "Captain Jonuta." In silence, they all turned to look at Mranophel HReenee sa'fiel. Jonuta's acknowledgment and query were in his expression. "I wish to help, also. I also wish to transfer to your spaceship, if you will accept a passenger. One, I assure you, Captain, who knows how to work." Gazing at her, Jonuta slowly smiled. There, Ramzi, he thought. You heard it. Free and unsuggested. It was the only reason he had made Captain Moosejaw a silent audience to this ship's conference. "I'm sure we'd be delighted to welcome you onboard, Mranophel HReenee," he said, impressing her the more by remembering both names and by his correct pronunciation of them. "Captain Ramzi might have some objection to the idea though, you understand. And your contract for passage is with him." Her hand moved as if to touch his arm; wavered, eased back down to her side. "Ah, but Captain Jonuta, you and he have just become partners, haven't you- in a manner of speaking, at least. Besides, he will surely not object when I tell him that I no longer want to be on his ship-and that I no longer will cover up in the uncomfortable clothing his religious bigotry forced upon me!" Jonuta cleared his throat. Both Terasaks were grinning. Then came the next surprise. "Well I," Licensed Spacefarer Therandah said crisply, "do not care to continue on this ship. Perhaps Captain Ramzi will accept me not as passenger, but as crew to replace the crewmember he lost in the attack." Jonuta compressed his lips. Whatever his thoughts, he spoke equably: "Perhaps it can be arranged, space- 108 farer." With austerity he at once shifted his gaze from her. He looked at HRadem. He did not have to say anything. "I wish passage on spacer Coronet, Captain. Surely you will not put me off this happy ship!" Jonuta rolled his eyes. At Kenowa. 7 Once India Spring's cargo for Bleak had been transferred to the hold of Coronet (and Ramzi's hard-working crewmembers had most gratefully received a drink that was all the more delicious and gratifying because of the minor treachery it implied, to Ramzi) and while the merchanter's crew along with Shig and Sak were reducing the ailing tachyon converter to modules for transfer, the two captains again conferred. The conversation was brief. Shockingly-only to Ramzi-attired in a pair of violently royal-blue drawstring pants of scintillant silk-loose, and short-HReenee had already transferred two HRal-manufactured cases to Coronet. Her ears remained back all the while. So did HRadem's. Even more skimpily attired in drawstring trunks (and his tiny nipples quite invisible, all eight of them, within the sleek white down that covered him from upper chest to crotch, where it resumed its gold-tan), he moved his belongings to the other spacer, too. Ears back. He did smile at Ramzi, once. Showing his teeth. "Lucky Muslim fundamentalist bigot, aren't you!" the HRal said, without slowing his progress into the airlock. Quietly, acting shocked and offended at Ramzi's guarded, nervous query, Jonuta gave his old acquaintance assurances as to the future and continuing freedom of both HRal. Unasked, he took solemn oath. 109 110 (Since it was in Booda's name, Moosejaw accepted it grudgingly.) That matter was closed. Once he had seen Therandah's dossier and recs-and better, Therandah herself--that transfer also proved acceptable to P. Ramzi. Thus he gained a new crew-member while he lost what he looked upon as troublesome guests, and L. S. Therandah gained a new berth. In silence she transferred her gear, which was contained, definitely, in less than two cases. Just a lumpy old soft-duffle and a spacefarer's standard go-bag, so old it was tan rather than yellow. Pentamahomet Ramzi remained nervous about the stripping-let's-don't-call-it-looting of Satyagraha. Nevertheless as Jonuta was departing his company again he said, "The Prophet intercede for you, Jonuta. I owe you, Jonuta." Jonuta put a hand on the other man's shoulder and smiled as sweetly as he was able. "Moosejaw: I know." His final words of parting, though, were, "Moose-jaw: Be Bad! It'll do you worlds of good!" And the grinning Qalaran went to lead his crew-and one HRal determined to work for his passage-onto Satyagraha. Kenowa and HReenee remained on Coronet, at con. With stoppers. Just in case. The special hold still contained four piratical

prisoners, doubtless as buzzily angry as four Lyonese durhornets. Therandah chose to remain on India Spring. The chances were that she did not gnaw at her nails. Her new captain did. He would have appreciated Jonuta's instructions to his enthusiastic trio of companions: "You are at liberty to take only what is not secured, mind. And that doesn't mean you try seeing how easily this and that little item will pry loose! Con-cabin and captain's cabin are off-limits. Don't worry about it-I said we share. Just a fellow captain's respect for dear old Mene-kris, you understand. They're mine to ... investigate." 111 They nodded, laughed, and, with two duffle bags each, went happily at their work collecting . . . spoils of conquest. Float-walking into the con-cabin, Jonuta grinned. "To the victor go the spoils!"-he muttered, and went to work. Seeking, adjusting, setting aside to be conveyed to his own ship. Nothing much of value, he mused, while he moved on to what had been Menekris's cabin-and while HRadem, Sakyo, and Shig made four trips over to Coronet. Each. Laden. A couple of items Jonuta found in Captain Menekris's cabin were more than interesting. (The double carton of Heaven High-genuine prime Homeworld Marijane-and the makings for the beginner's drink called a Toasted Almond he left where they were. Smiling only faintly, he wondered only briefly how ole Moosejaw would choose to dispose of such sinful things.) He took the mini-holoprojector without checking to see what simulation it projected; left the apparently genuine TGW officer's cap, sans insignia; took the hole-punched computer printout that was apparently part of spacer Satyagraha's log-sloppy, Menekris, sloppy, Captain Cautious mused-and the tiny jangler. No bigger than a pack of Heaven Highs bearing that strange color picture of some animal with a high-humped back and short ratty tail, the jangler was a naughty little bit of nastiness that emitted a swift short surge of electrical current strong enough to knock out even the biggest of men. He took nothing at all of Menekris's clothing, including the interesting sheer negligee of mauve net. For Menekris, on this ship with an all-male crew, or- carried in hopes of finding a wearer? And he removed the cassette from Menekris's bedside player. One might well learn interesting things this 112 way-or find a purely vocal drama or piece of music worth the ears of a busy man. On his way out, he paused, looked back. Grinning, he returned to the locker. When he left again he was chuckling. Behind him, the very fetching negligee lay stretched invitingly on the bed, carefully caught against zero-G by the sheet-clips. Too bad he couldn't see Moosejaw's face when the ascetic ole Akima Mars-lover came in to find that sexily awaiting him! Coronet's crew agreed that everything the captain had brought off the pirate spacer belonged to the ship itself. (He neglected to show them the jangler nestled in one of the inner pockets of his coat.) They were delighted to be told to handle the division themselves. Three of the five others on Coronet, at least, knew that the captain had something else of value to him-and ultimately to them. Those were items called Menekris, Nailor, Chu, and Simura. Too bad about Slon and Vraji, but one could hardly fault HReenee for not bothering to reset the stopper she'd taken off Slon! All components of India Spring's late tachyon converter were onboard. Every crate of India Spring's cargo was onboard, including the ridiculously heavy box of polykel bearings from Qalara. (Which Jonuta would not carry all the way back there, even if he had to give them away!) The captives were secure. All booty was onboard, being chattered about and divvied by Sakyo, Shig, Kenowa, HRadem, and HReenee. ("I would like this," she said, twice, and that was all she would take or accept.) Jonuta went to the con. "Ready to break off, Moosejaw," he said into the ship-to-snip. "You about ready to accept custody of Satyagraha?" "Two of my crew have been handling the tether," Ramzi's voice came back. "Including my newest crew- 113 member, Jonuta. Did You leave us anything, on Satyagraha?" "Everything that was attached when we went onboard," Jonuta said, "still is. Except the packet of printouts I found-no value to you, surely-and a cassette in the bedside player in the captain's cabin. We didn't touch DS or controls or anything at all about the engine. Oh-and the Mate is functioning nicely." "The what?" "Sorry. SIPACUM. Seems all right. I left every course cassette, too-I make my own." "Excuse me, Jonuta, message

incoming-ah! Good! Very well, secure and return to ship. Jonuta? Report from my two crew outside. Satyagraha is tethered and tether has been checked. About to be clear." Jonuta nodded. In space, where there was no gravity and no air and no drag, the most massive of cargo could be hauled by almost any ship. It was a simple matter of connecting it exteriorly, usually in cargo pods or sealed containers, on stiffened cables of doped sili-con-t. Its capacity was up to just under a half-billion Newtons per square inch. Farm machinery, loaders, even pre-fab houses and vehicles plain or fancy, were thus hauled through space. Towed, messily. In this case, spacer India Spring would haul Satyagraha in just that way. "I'm sure I'd go over onto Satyagraha and use the converter to take the Tachyon Trail," Jonuta said. "True, India Spring might or might not make it through in the best of shape-or at all. But you'd be there a lot sooner, and you'll certainly be able to afford any repairs, once you're on Ghanj-a lot sooner than you will be!" "That is what you would do, Jonuta. I dare not take the chance of losing India Spring. Besides . . . the ship's an old friend." "I understand. Airlock buttoned, here." 114 "Crew onboard and airlocks secure, here and on tow-ship." "Ready to deactuate tractor field." "Ready for break-off, Jonuta." "At the count of five, Captain Ramzi. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five." Jonuta had already inslotted the tape; a moment after he ended his count, he snicked it in. An instant later SIPACUM responded to the instructions on the cassette and cut the power to the field of force holding the three ships linked. A chime dinged softly as the little mouth popped open to offer the expended cassette. SIPACUM, standing by. In this airless and G-less environment, even the cutting of the tractor field imparted some force. The ships began easing apart. Slowly, gently, great hulks that were only flyspecks out in space among the showoffy kaleidoscopic effects of the dyne fields. Two of the trio of drifting spacers remained linked, now, in a far more prosaic manner: the cable that strung out between them like a single strand of a spider's webbing. It was maintained not-quiet-taut, never slack. Watching onscreen, Jonuta smiled. The pirates had tried and they had lost. Now their ship was on a leash, captive to their intended prey. "Landed a shark," Jonuta muttered. Studying the scene onscreen with narrowed eyes, he tap-tapped, tap-tapped, even while he calculated mentally. SIPACUM slipped instantly into calculator mode and displayed an answer. Jonuta wiped, tried again. Nodded. He liked this one better. The first reading had shown a .07 per cent chance of failure, which was too much for Captain Cautious. He took chances only when he had to. Right now there was absolutely no need. The problem was that the three craft were too close together for any to actuate drive systemry. Adrift in space, they would not separate without help. 115 "Try a second or two burn on forward starboard laterals?" Jonuta suggested. "Exactly," Ramzi's voice came back, and Jonuta waited, watching. After a few seconds India Spring lurched, just a little, as if nudged. So it had been, by the small paired rockets mounted on the side toward Coronet. In effect it was a bank shot, off Coronet's hull. Coronet felt the pulse, the nudge, and began a drift to Jonuta's right while India Spring eased away to his left. There was no cassette for this specialized and tricky maneuvering. Jonuta's fingers tripped across two keys and back, almost at once. His own portside forward laterals flared with a split-second burn. Almost lazily, the ships swung away from each other. Ramzi stated his next intention and Jonuta agreed. He watched India Spring's starboards burn for a second and a fraction. Another little nudge; more drift. Jonuta followed with a port rear burn, two seconds. The star-ships drifted apart and kept drifting. Satyagraha tagged along after Ramzi like a dutiful dog on a leash. The drift continued. "Imparting a hot ventral burn," Jonuta said. "Firm. Standing by." Jonuta did that. The universe slapped him in the soles, then on the crown of his head as Coronet lifted in response to the firing of small correction rockets along its underside. He ended that and tapped for another portside burn. Again. He announced each. "I'm safe, Captain," he said formally. "Your cable tests firm?" "Affirmative. Cargo secure." Jonuta smiled at the other man's studiedly formal calling of his big

starship in tow as "cargo." He said, "In that case, you have the extra mouth to feed; go. Be careful, Moosejaw." His screen now showed a scene far "below" and to 116 the "left." A pair of tiny spaceship toys, suspended on invisible threads. Adrift against the dark and the bright multicolored dots of the star field. Without air between him and those suns, Jonuta saw no twinkles. "Thank you, Captain," Ramzi responded. "Prophet intercede for you, Jonuta. Imparting half-thrust. Red-shifting." Then signal-to-noise ratio went all to hell as India Spring's rear came alight with a blue glow. The ship rushed away, without noise or streak of fire. Towing wealth, independence, security, India Spring flashed away among the thermonuclear fires blazing in the star-hearts. "Nicely done, all around," Jonuta muttered, giving his head a rapid swing to and fro and back in order to dry any hit of sweat. "Sure would be a lot of trouble, being a pirate and having to go through all this after every Red Rover." On the other hand, he mused, I'll bet they aren't so delicate about jockeying, parting company with their prey! The chances were that most pirates didn't give a vug whether they burned and rocked hell out of their victim-ships as they hurried away with their loot. He had kept the inship comm open throughout his and Ramzi's easing apart until applying thrust was safe. That way the others on Coronet, presumably still gathered gloating over their new possessions, knew everything he and Ramzi did. It gave them all a second or two to tense or try not to, as well as a mini-lesson in tight-quarters ship handling. Now he shut off ship-to-ship and spoke directly to the inship pickup, which was slung so as to be swung before his face as he stood at the console, or away. "Ramzi's on his way, with his prize on his leash to that old dog he commands." He just became a rich man. "I'm coming about to one-fifty, not too tight. Probably take about three, maybe four minutes. No 117 pain, no strain, no stress. Easy as walkin' down a street in low G and turnin' right. After that, we head out with SIPACUM instructed to take the Tachyon Trail at the first opportunity it finds. Affirm." He heard their voices; Shig first, then Kenowa and Sakyo together. And HReenee of HRalix. "All of you still counting your do-gooder gotten gains?" "Pos, Captain. All but HRadem. Had to go to the head." "Happens. Sak, you and Shig pick a number between one and ten. Winner gets the con." He knew they would consider it the loser, but that was mere semantics. Either could play with his loot while oncon, and Jonuta played fair with his crew. He had already depressed a key and was holding it down. It was on the calculator bank; numeral 2. "Nine," Sakyo said, going right for the throat. "All right then" Shig's voice came, "the opposite. Two." "On the button, Shig. Listen." Jonuta lifted his finger. Dit-dit, the calculator said, sounding a Two as it flashed the numeral on its miniscreen. Jonuta left it there to greet Shig. "You've got the con." "Aw mercy me gracious," Sak said in a voice so full of satire that it positively dripped. "I lost-ed!" "Oh goody" his fellow Terasak said. "Now all 1 have to do is get SIPACUM to tell me what's pre-cisely in the opposite direction from blech-Bleak, and head us that way!" "Sure," Jonuta grinned, unbuttoning his coat. "Getcher assup here. I've saved so many asses today I can use a rest and clean underclothes. You've got everything divvied?" "Pos, Captain. We-CAPTAIN! They're loose! That flainin' HRal musfve opened the wrong damned hatch somehow-the pirates're loose!" 8 Jonuta's jaw clamped and his eyes brightened. He did not turn from the high-set, curving console designed for a standing operator. He was not the sort of man to panic, even at word that four piratic prisoners had escaped and were loose on his ship-four men who could be presumed to be desperate, ruthless, and at least relatively competent. They were not amateurs at action and violence. The natural reaction was to (1) panic and accomplish nothing for a minute or three, which would only work to the aid of Menekris and company, or (2) turn and rush from con-cabin into ship, meanwhile pulling out his stopper. That was better than (1), admittedly. But Jonuta's mind was already working on possibilities (3) and (4). He did not even reach for the stopper tube-sheathed at his side. His jaw clamped and his eyes brightened with excitement that was a sort of relish, and with thought. The circuitry of his brain raced to attack a task, to cope

with an emergency that was not within the capabilities of even his top-of-the-line hyper-sophisticated "Mate," SIPACUM. Human considerations and judgments were required. True, SIPACUM, if programmed for an hour or so with the information Jonuta's experience had already given him, might have reached his first decision. "Swim for it," he snapped to all stations, wishing 118 119 that he and his crew had agreed on a few little codewords to apprise them of drastic steps being taken. And he took the first: he punched in the command to cut all power to the G-engine; the one that imparted spin and thus gravity. Too bad it couldn't be braked for instant stop and thus instant weightlessness, but there it was. It would not be a smart thing to try. The white-noise hum that was any spacefarer's almost constant companion took on a different tone. Jonuta meanwhile locked every hatch and compartment he could, from here. Engine area; engine area Two, storage One, Three, and Four-let them get to the fridge and alcoholics, if they wanted!-personal cabins including the captain's. Nice if the pirates had separated and he had just locked a couple into separate rooms, he mused, without assuming a thing. "All of you to the con," he snapped. "Cover yourselves, now," he added, assuming that he need not say "stoppers out!" "Have they got HRadem?" "Firm." (Weight was diminishing as the torque engine wound down.) That HRal Hrectum might just have to be expendable, Jonuta thought, and asked, "Anyone else?" "Negative, but we couldn't stop HReenee-she went charging to help HRadem" "Damn." Great, oh just great. That gives them two hostages-important ones. And that blew his idea of getting everybody here and into emergency breathers-and opening both airlock hatches. No, he could kill the pirates that way without compunctions, but he couldn't coldly take out both HRal with them. Not unless it proved absolutely necessary. The bottom line was that Coronet was more important than the two HRal, than anything. And only Jonuta was more important than Coronet. He tapped in instructions to start G-engine, and 120 thought some more. The merest hint of a flicker of a smile touched his lips, and he started stripping. Weight began to return. Transferring one item from his dramatic scarlet coat to one of the waist-hem pockets of his tights, he reached over to punch in instructions to cut gravity, again. He was thinking: what kind of idiot social order do these HRal have, anyhow, that he gets grabbed because he did something stupider than stupid, and she races to try to help him-against four-count-em-jour strong men with far more experience in space? Boots off, he had a compartment open and was checking the labels on odd-looking skintites, or something like. Green, all evergreen in color, silky and yet rather bulky. His was made so that it could be pulled on over his pants and undershirt and socks. That was so that he could get into the coverall fast. He did. It clung sexily, a silky one-in-all made a shade bulky by its pervasive inner network of wiring. Attached to its front as he worked the suit up his frame was a rather garish bauble, which was designed not to seem attached. It was an aura-projector. He paused to take the little box-like object out of his waistband and press it against a stiktite area of the dark green suit. It clung, and would not jar off even if he tried breaking a broad-jump record in high-G. (Which was not his intention.) Sakyo, Shig, and Kenowa came bustling into the cabin. Shig was last and backing, covering the tunnel with his stopper. They were just in time to see the captain tugging down the suit's hood, a snug head-covering anciently called a coif. This one was not of linked chain, and not designed to be worn inside a knight's iron pot of a helmet. He pulled it down over his face. All the way down, past mouth and chin. (His crew said nothing. Captain Cautious had an Idea. Best to leave him the hell alone 121 while he furthered it.) They knew he could not see them. Then they saw him actuate the TP, and knew that he could see them, clearly, by means of the TP- a telepresence, long available to the implantable blind. The TP camera of Jonuta's aurasuit was smaller than his thumb. It moved with his head, so that he saw what it saw. Feedback was two-way. The view-screen-self-illuminated-was inside the coif. Jonuta did not use the available direct retinal attachment simply because he could not bear it. He set the camera's adjustable ratio at two-to-one, and locked it. Now he had

only to turn his head to either side, forty-five degrees to see a full ninety degrees: behind him. This setting might prove valuable with the sort of lunacy he had in mind. The point was, he and his crew could not merely launch an attack on the pirates. The bastards would surely off the two HRal, just for damned meanness. The lunacy was that Jonuta was about to interface with Menekris and his men-in a manner of speaking. The pirates would not see his face, not really. His own vision was meanwhile more perfect than had the coif-mask been pierced by eyeholes. The suit was tight, ultra-formfitting. And of course it was five-way stretch. Now totally encased in it, Jonuta was quite comfortable. He was also not Jonuta anymore; he seemed to have become an eerily faceless humanoid of dark green. With a garish gaud gaudily decorating his chest. "Who, Jone?" That was Kenowa, poised to pass him an identity or persona for the holoprojector. "You." She blinked in surprise. Then she turned to the compartment and bent. "Me," she announced over her shoulder. "Spacesuited and helmeted. As Ghanji noble. Spacesuited, no helmet. As Space Maiden. Naked. As-" 122 "Space Maiden," that resonantly deep voice rumbled from the mouthless mask. Sakyo chuckled. Shiganu, still considering a hologram of a naked Kenowa that he had not known existed and would probably never see, glanced at him. Shig had not seen the outfit his captain called "Ke-nowa's Barbarella get-up." He was about to. Kenowa handed Jonuta that ID "cartridge." He installed it, handing her the one already in the suit-Captain Basalric, TGW. Or Captain Someone, TGW; next time he used it he might choose another name for that persona. Maybe he'd promote one of his favorites, stuffy old Farz. "Jonuta." They all jerked as the voice of Captain Menekris entered the cabin, metallically electronic. Jonuta had thought to shut off the comm, and had chosen to leave it open to incoming communication. "Ignore. Better get ready for this, Shig," Jonuta said, and activated the suit by means of the ostentatious "ornament" on its chest. Jonuta had vanished. Now the evergreen-hued almost-human vanished. Where it had stood was now Kenowa. Gazing at Shig, and Sakyo, and at Kenowa. Except that this new Kenowa was not really looking at them. She only appeared to be. Their captain was, through the "eye" of his TP camera. Shig had thought he was ready. He hadn't been. The transition was instantaneous, naturally. He stared ... at "Kenowa" in armpit-high silver gloves and boots almost to the crotch. Between were barely-adequate breastplates of simulated metal and an apparently metal crotchpiece that was obviously malleable. And probably well-padded, Shig reflected, knowing that this truly was a projection of Kenowa, and that she had posed, and moved. Oh, she was different. 123 "Just the way I always wanted to be," Kenowa said. "Long, long legs and less frontispiece." The holographic projection that now surrounded the suit as a sort of aura stretched to fit the suit it must conceal. Since Jonuta was considerably taller than Kenowa, so was this holo-Kenowa. Everything about her was longer and leaner, except the bosom, which was just leaner. The orange wig was just terrific. A mop of hair the color of carrots and sunlit ginger. "Captain Jonuta! We have the HRal, you know. You can't ignore us, you know." "Ignore," the Space Maiden Kenowa said, disconcertingly using the voice of Kislar Jonuta, all chesty and rumbly-resonant. And "Barbarella" waved. "How's that?" "Perfect, Jone. That too. Yes, you look fine walking." "Great from the back," Shig observed, and Kenowa shot him a look. She shifted her gaze directly back to Jonuta/herself: "It's perfect, Jone. But-what are you going to do?'" "First, carry a minicomm. You've got to do my talking for me. You'll be able to hear what Menekris says, and HRadem if the flainin' rectum says anything, and you'll have to answer." "Oh, Jone! You can't just-" "I am. I think I have to. Better me than any of you, this time. I'll hide behind you next time, Sak, Shig! And I chose Kenowa because they might be more hesitant to try violence than on me, or anyone else." "They might also try grabbing you, Captain! You look wonderful!" "Captain . . . Jonuta. If you do not answer we will break one of this a-lien's fingers. You'll hear him squawl!" The leaner, more sexily attired Kenowa raised a finger to her lips, and turned to button on the com-mike. "I hear you, Menekris. What do you think I'm 124 going to do? Has

anything you've ever heard about me made you think I'm dumb enough to trade you my ship for that HRal-who was dumb enough to let you out of your nice comfy cabin?" And Jonuta buttoned off. That quickly Sakyo said, "Captain-they might not try violence, but they sure might try grabbing you! That is one sexy get-up!" "Fine," Jonuta said. "I'll grab the grabber." "Tone-he didn't mention HReenee!" "Firm. I noticed. And we won't either. She must be lurking." "Stalking," Shig said, and damned if he didn't shudder. Just a little one, but it was a shudder. "Neg, Jo-nuta," Menekris drawled, "I don't think you're dumb enough to trade yer ship for this fuzzy asshole. We've thoughta that. We do think you ought to just let us get on back onto Satyagraha, though, and get ourselves on out of here." Jonuta buttoned on. "Wherever here is, hmm? I think that's going a bit far, Menekris. I mean, I have four men and I trade a whole spaceship for them and one HRal? Doesn't seem too likely." "Damn you! You really don't give a vug about this pore dear a-lien the aww-thorities are so hotted up about, do you?" "Yes, Menekris, I do. I really do care about HRadem and his safety. But-'after all. Just let you leave? Pop onto Satyagraha and go your way? Be serious, pirate." "I'm trying, slaver. You got a suggestion or you want him dead?" Jonuta leaned in just a little closer to be certain that Menekris heard his chuckle. "Sure, Menekris, go right ahead and kill your hostage and the only prayer you've got! Just do that, and with all of us here in the con-cabin, by Booda's slicer I lock up here and spring the airlocks. That the way you want to go, Menekris?" 125 There was another pause while Menekris and his men considered that. They were still in their spacesuits. It was just that their helmets were in Jonuta's cabin. The fact that Menekris hadn't come right back to say they had them meant that Captain Cautious had locked his cabin before they got to it. He snapped off the comrn long enough to say, "Ke-nowa: react!" And he opened commlink again. "Menekris! I am aware that you can do some damage. I don't dare just go on my way with you and those incompetent bugs you call crewmen loose on my ship! By the way, are all of you together?" Hesitation; then: "'Course. Why not? 'Course we're all right here together." "Where, Menekris?" "Standin' in the tunnel right outside a hatch marked Four. It's locked." "Strange place to be! How many of your men are inside, Menekris?" "In-you bastard! None! Why should any be inside?" "He's lying! There are only-" That voice was broken off by the sound of a blow and a groan. "I believe I'll just take HRadem's word, Menekris. So one or two of your sweet lads went into storage cabin Four and I locked 'em in, from here. And you don't have anything to get him or them out with. Sakyo! Program for gas release in Sector Three, Storage Cabin Four!" After his natural reaction-a puzzled frown-Sakyo said, "Executing, Captain!" "You got gas jets built into this sisterslicin' ship o'yours, Jonuta?" "You know what they call me, Menekris. I am prepared for any exigency," Jonuta said cheerfully, wishing most sincerely that he was telling the truth. 126 "So. You have the HRal and I have one or two of your dummies. And your ship. Your whole damned ship, Menekris. I suppose it's safe to parley in person, try to talk up some way out of this impasse we've got ourselves in." "We ain't budgin' from right here, Captain Cautious!" "Neither am I. I'm sending Kenowa. She'll have a commlink on her. I'll talk to you through her. She'll talk too, if you just love to hear a woman talk." Behind his neck, Jonuta was waving a hand-one that appeared to belong to Kenowa. It waved, beckoning, at Kenowa. "Jonuta!" Kenowa said, almost shouting plaintively. "No! You can't-" "Shut the vug up, woman!" Jonuta snarled. Immediately Kenowa made a piteous-whimpery-squeaky sound. "You are tellin' me you are sendin' that wo-mam to tawlk, on yer behaef?" "Why yes, Menekris. You don't think I'd risk putting my beloved and valuable self in your tender hands, do you?" "Well, uh, Jone . . . could I just at least change clothes first?" Jonuta slapped his hands together. "I told you to shut up, woman! And when you talk to them, keep your hand up in front of your face." Kenowa repeated her squeak-whimper, this time with a little snuffle thrown in. Masterful job. And she patted Jonuta's butt. Despite the tension, Sakyo had to grab bis mouth and whirl away to keep from laughing. "Yer a smart

one, Jonuta," Menekris's voice came. "Send 'er along, then. I'm shier we'd all ruther look't her than you, anyhows!" "Coming up, then. Kenowa-get going. Don't bother 127 to run, now." And Jonuta used the remote relay to kill the mike hanging before his face. That way Menekris and company wouldn't know he had shut them off from all sound from the con-cabin. He swung, still disconcertingly not Jonuta. "Sak! Shig! We've got a break. Kenowa won't have to try to talk 'through' me, and I can keep my hand up so they won't notice that when she does talk, my holo-lips don't move in synch with the words! Shig: remain right here. If I say 'Arimani,' cut the grav and start every alarm you can think of. Purpose: confusion. Got that?" "Firm, Captain." Shig had to look away. He was seeing Kenowa but hearing his captain's voice come from her. It was hard to concentrate even on simple instructions. "Right, then. If I say your name, just 'Shig'-take the lock off number Four storage chamber. Sak: stopper on Two in your hand. Follow me to the intersection just before I turn and they can see me. When you hear trouble, come around using that stopper, and don't worry about catching me in the beam. Got that?" "O'course, Cap'n!" "Kenny: stick with the comm. When you hear them react to my approach, speak to them. I will seem to interrupt, from here. If they talk directly to the you that they think they see, asking a question for instance -you hesitate a couple of seconds and answer. Got it?" "Firm. But oh Jone, I wish you wouldn't-" "Yeah, me too. Both you and Shig stay right here, because if anything goes wrong with this charade we've got to hold this cabin!" And with a touch of Kenowa's arm and a ridiculously overdone limp-wristed wave, Jonuta/Kenowa hurried away along ship's tunnel. "Well? She comin?" 128 Shig swung to the comm, opened it, and gave it his deepest voice: "Firm." Sak, red-tunicked and black-pantsed, was moving quietly along beside his holo-disguised captain. The real Kenowa was looking mighty nervous. And where was HReenee? 9 They had been divvying the loot-that is, negotiating a sharing out of the spoils-that is, the personal, no-longer-needed property of the pirates of Satyagraha- and Sakyo had just taken the Rempaslitkin Mmemory Enhancement Diskette (REMEM), when it occurred to HRadem that they had captives who were receiving no attention. No one had had any fun with them! Those prisoners had not been toyed with (in the HRal euphemism) the least little bit. Just the thought made HRadem prickly with rising excitement. It was also a rather shocking concept to a HRal, and hardly proper. Prisoners just taken and locked away and left! In an instant HRadem had decided to remedy the situation. (Just as instantly his adrenaline level jumped and he felt warmer, pricklier.) Besides, HRadem had been among these ape-people, these "Galactics," for three months now and had physically tormented absolutely nothing and no one for a shade over four months. That, as the saying went on HRalix (polite, cultured version) was enough to boil your adrenaline. Or, as the vulgar HRal tongue succinctly put it, it was enough to shrivel your balls. Mine are positively shriveling, HRadem thought, watching a sparkly, mostly flame-hued string of Lyo-nese exonbeads join Shig's little pile of loot. HRadem also caught the faint flicker of his step-sib's ears. 129 130 "Ohhh," he murmured as if not intending to be heard, "too bad, HReenee." Shig offered; HReenee denied and refused; Shig "forced them upon her." And HRadem sat trembling inside and forcing himself to show nothing of his rising excitement. He still had one of their weapons. The microwave projector called a stopper could kill, but HRadem had already seen its potential as a teaser, a toy-with. Its possibilities for traditional HRal amusement were obvious. At that thought, his heartbeat speeded up. HRadem couldn't stand it. He had to. He was suddenly a child with the toy-withs. Excitement threatened to make him tremble visibly and he had to concentrate on holding his ears still. Part of HRadem's growing excitement, adrenal flow, torment, had to do with what he knew of these ape-people. These "humans" curbed their obviously healthy natural inclination to toy with captives. They even pretended it did not exist. (And indulged in whole orgies of it during wars, when they had an excuse; a license to torment. And their women had phantasies of being possessed violently.) Therefore HRadem felt it would be

impolitick to announce simply, HRal-ly, "I'm going to amuse myself with the prisoners." He was sure that would be a mistake. These anthropoid primates were not so honest with and about themselves as the felino-primates of HRalix. So, after a couple of minutes during which the urge and excitement became almost intolerable within him, HRal announced that he had to go and water the soil. Sak looked at him with a barely suppressed grin. That HRal phrase was hardly germane or appropriate on a spaceship! But, whether among HRal or humans, a euphemism was a euphemism was a dodge was a cliché. "I have to go and water the soil," HRadem said. 131 His step-sib looked at him in commiseration. She understood the effect of space travel and ever-changing time scales on internal systemry, HRal or Galactic. The others hardly noticed. They were intent on the division of Satyagraha's prizes. Suddenly it had all become as tawdry gauds and junk to HRadem. Leaving his own share of new goodies on the deck at his place which presumably he would soon reclaim and resume, HRadem rose and left them. Excitement and anticipation were as high in him as the mating urge. Of course there was a connection, although HRadem was wholly heterosexual and all four captives were male. Too bad, HRadem thought. But probably for the best, at that! Excited, he rubbed every salient surface on the way to the Special Hold, and several smooth areas as well. HRadem, excited. After over four months-HRalix! His heart pounded and his legs quivered. No one was looking and no one could see that he passed the spacer's little toilet cubicle. He knew how to open the Special Hold for what this so-competent and deliciously violent captain called "walking cargo," having watched while the four pirates were incarcerated. First preparing himself with stopper in hand, and preparing the stopper by pushing its setting to Two, HRadem opened the hatch. He went in, turned, opened the concealed hatch. The Special Hold was otherwise empty. Prior to rushing, apparently on a whim, to the rescue of India Spring, Captain Jonuta had not been hauling walking cargo. The very special hold-behind-a-hold, its access holo-projector-disguised, was large, under a low ceiling. Its floor and ceiling and walls were slightly curving, of the metal called unipolymer plasteel, and an uninterestingly 132 uniform slatey gray. The four captives were gathered in a forlorn little group, three or so meters away. They looked up almost in unison, surprised. Only one showed fear. Naturally HRadem put the stopper on hirn first. The man commenced to quiver and shake in the Two-setting rictus. So did the pirate touching him; he was fortunate enough to topple away. Thus freed of the stopper beam's effect, his reaction subsided. The other two-the captain and the one called Nailor -rose with their hands elevated in an ancient human gesture of surrender and submission. Clearly they were showing-in their way, the way of their culture, which was not HRadem's-that they meant no harm and were helpless. Delicious! Charming of them! HRadem did not intend to leave them out, certainly! He moved his hand a few centimeters leftward, then back and a few sems rightward. And back, and- All three shuffle-jiggle-danced hi helpless response to the beam. Deliberately HRadem ignored the fourth, so that the fellow could try some amusement-enhancing escape ploy. HRadem's fur tingled, standing out from him to release rising body heat. His ears were high and his penis was becoming that way. It was not that he felt anything approaching desire for these four of another species, males all. It was a standard natural physical reaction to the excitement and the pleasure of toying with. Of imparting torment. Unfortunately the fourth one stayed down, and as if frozen. He did nothing. Chu merely cowered on the deck of the big barren compartment, semi-coiled into a semi-fetal posture. Just before him, flanking him, his three piratic companions danced. Stopper pinned and neurally jangled. Delicious! Delightful! 133 HRadem ceased squeezing the weapon's grip long enough for them to still, to relax a bit or begin to, to stare in horror/rage. And to initiate voluntary movement. Then he squeezed the stopper's grip and watched them commence their ridiculous dance again. It was delightful. Exciting, gratifying. Happy noises rippled up from HRadem's throat. "Sto-o-oppp," the captain, Menekris, was getting out in a tormented,

jiggly voice. While he danced to the stopper. To HRadem's tune. Not likely, HRadem thought. He felt weak yet powerful with excitement. Waiting with deteriorating patience for the fourth one to move. To try something. Anything. Please, HRadem thought, squeezing, watching bright-eyed. His penis and his coccyx tingled, as if a nonexistent tail were trying to lash. The fourth captive still made no attempt to crawl away or to attempt an attack. HRadem still squeezed, moving his stopper back and forth, studiously keeping the not-quite-invisible beam off the fourth captive. Let him wonder. That was part of the enjoyment. The other three danced, helplessly manipulated marionettes on HRadem's string. HRadem was radiating heat in twitchy excitement and he had an erection up to here. Not for any of these! Since the cowardly fourth one was making no attempt to move, only servilely cowering, HRadem lost patience and tried to spur him. HRadem gave Simura a quick jolt. On the deck, not vertical, Simura began a weird amusingly pitiful sort of horizontal dance. The others began sagging, released, while HRadem kept the stopper on their prostrate companion. After a moment they exchanged mutters and began sidestepping, separating. They were short on coordination, but it was returning. 134 "No! Stay together!" HRadem ordered, waving the stopper. "Shit," Chu said on the far left, and caught a #2 beam. "We may be your prisoners, you sadistic bastard, but we aren't crazy," Nailor said, and was jangled by a Two beam. "To stay together would be even stupider than you, you torturing whoremongering sisterslicer of an a-lien coward," Captain Menekris said, on the far right now, and was hit by a Two-While Chu tried rushing at HRadem-Who swiftly swung his arm to stopper him with the same Two- And Nailor rushed at HRadem, while Menekris sagged against the far rightward wall. .. And Nailor danced under a two setting-While Menekris rushed- And was made to dance, while Simura crawled and Chu tried to rush ... There was this about the HRal. They were what they were and despite Menekris's unkind words, HRadem was no coward. It did not even occur to him to flee, even while maintaining control over the four spread-out captives became harder and harder, more and more stressfully frenetic. Menekris spoke solely from his orientation as a human, a Galactic. Neither was HRadem of HRalix a "sadist," since he did not fulfill the definition of requiring the infliction of torture to attain his sexual gratification. The ancient human word was "felinist." That, HRadem was, more definitely than any human had ever been. Oh true, he could be called "sadistic." But he was a HRal. Calling a HRal sadistic was about equivalent to saying that stars were hot. Then in a spacefarer's expert, freefall-learned move, Simura scrambled and sort of kicked himself up off the 135 deck. It was an action that continued in an arms-outstretched headlong dive at their tormentor. HRadem's swift adjustment of aim made Simura quiverily, twitchily helpless in mid-leap, but could do nothing to circumvent the law of inertia. Simura was in the process of diving at HRadem's legs. Even with all control gone, the dive continued. Liquid muscle flowed like mercury. HRadem sidestepped at the last quarter-second-and ran into Me-nekris's rushing fist- Even then HRadem managed to keep his grip and swing the stopper on Menekris, who became instantly the embodiment of ludicrous, shuffling helplessness- And Chu's kick did its best to relocate the damned alien's balls, if the sadistic bastard had any, in the region of its stomach. Assuming it had one. After that HRadem's innocent toy-with fun was over. He fought well while they beat him. Then he could fight no more and they continued to beat him. They took particular pleasure in that, and they made a good job of it. It would have been a lot better than that, but Me-nekris's brain stepped in to supersede his fists. They were still prisoners on an enemy's ship, tearing through the parsec abyss at gods knew what velocity. "Wait! Stop! We've got ourselves a stopper, and a hostage!" They had indeed, and now Captain Cautious paced along his ship's tunnel to parley with them. It was strange; he knew that he was Kenowa to anyone who saw him. On the other hand he couldn't see himself. He felt nothing at all like Kenowa. He did feel more than apprehensive. 10 Mentally Jonuta took stock of the crew of Satyagraha -the former crew of that ship now on its (slow!) way toward

Ghanj. Menekris had attacked India Spring with six men. All male, yes. And all Galactics. HReenee had Fried two. That left Chu, and Simura, and Nailor. And their captain. One way or another, Jonuta had already personally tangled with each of the four. Each had a personal grudge, then, in addition to the group grudge, and worse. Now maybe I'm being silly, with all this precaution and this charade. The point is, being Kenowa instead of me lends a little edge. If HRadem had a stopper on him-or a knife, or something else, this or that he picked up on Satyagraha-something that could be used as a weapon . . . Menekris has it, now. And Menekris might just be of a mind to use it on me, out of hand. Surely not on what he sees as Kenowa, though. He'll parley awhile, Jonuta reflected, just to get a chance to gawk at me/Kenowa, if nothing else! That will give me time to take stock of the situation. Think a little, jockey for position. All I need is a little opportunity. Just a couple of seconds . . . He was coming to the intersection. He assumed that Sakyo was a few paces behind him. Just in case someone was somehow observing him, Jonuta would not look back. All he had to do was glance to one side, with 136 137 the TP set at 2x1. He did. Yes. There was Sakyo, easing along with stopper ready. Not realizing that his captain had just looked at him, Sak was scratching his crotch. Jonuta paced along a ship's corridor whose color was tan, with a hint of yellow. A pleasant hue, personally chosen by Coronet's captain. The pipes that ran horizontally along the wall on either side of him, at precise heights of forty sems-a meter-and sixty sems, showed up well in their dull yellow. Saipese yellow. Hatches contrasted well but not too dramatically, in a nice medium blue. That also was Jonuta's choice, long ago carefully arrived at for pleasantness and eye-ease on his ship. His home, really. My ship. My ship! Forced to resort to trickery and pussyfooting and finagling and dickering on my own flaming ship! Stanchions wrapped around intersections, into green-walled side-tunnels. They were for balance if necessary and, more importantly, for freefall. One hung onto a stanchion, pulled oneself along the pipe and, if one was a seasoned spacefarer, push-pulled one's swirmy way along the tunnels, using the stanchions. He reached the intersection, sucked in a deep breath, and stepped out into the open. Into view of anyone down the sideward tunnel to his left; the one cut by the hatches of four storage chambers. He stopped, turning toward them. They stared at each other. He and Menekris and two of his men along with the captive HRadem. One of the HRal's arms was twisted up behind him, by the one called Chu. Big fellow. Simura stood to their left and just in front of HRadem. Menekris was beside him, partially obscuring Chu. Menekris and Simura showed both hands. Empty. Jonuta wondered if Menekris was concealing a weapon in Chu's right hand. He was grasping HRadem in 138 his left, holding the HRal's doubled arm up so high behind him that HRadem was bent a bit forward against the tension. Not all liquid muscle, then. Plenty of breakable bone in the HRal, same as in humans! They were about four meters from Jonuta. Chu whistled. All three pirates stared. Poor old Nailor must be behind the con-locked door of number Four just to Menekris's right. Good. He'd keep, in there with med-stores and other standards. "Well, hel-lo," Menekris said. He mocked the supposed Kenowa with the tiny hint of a bow. "Had no idea ya'd come see us so sexily got up!" All right Kenowa, Jonuta thought, say something! He raised a hand in a sort of salute he hoped was both effeminate and self-conscious, and let that arm sort of shield his holoprojection of Valkyrie-plated breasts. The hand partially obscured his mouth-the mouth of the Kenowa holoproj. And his concealed speaker spoke. "Hello, Captain. Not my idea. Jonuta wouldn't let me change. You're not going to do anything silly, are you?" "Of course not," Jonuta said, through his hand. "Just a little closer, Kenny. You aren't going to do anything silly, Menekris, are you?" "Me? Never. Chu now, he's the one to watch. Always homy. Always an eye for the women. Lucky for you he's got his hands full with this a-lien. Try to behave yourself now, Chu! Sure is some kind of kinky sexy costume there, Ken-owwwa. Something I been wondering about, Jonuta. Why'd you tell 'er to keep 'er hand over her face?" "Because it would look so silly to you, seeing her talk and hearing my voice," Jonuta said

easily, from behind his hand. It was not clamping his mouth, or even touching his hooded face. It was just up there, not moving. The costume and male hormonal reaction 139 provided plenty of distraction. Evidently enough so that the trio paid no attention to the canned quality of Kenowa's voice. "Too," Jonuta said, "I'm seeing what she sees. Kenowa's wearing a pair of those brand-new mini-TPs the geniuses have come up with on Panish." That was a lie; no such devices existed in such miniature. "Oh? What do you see then, Captain Jonuta?" And Menekris gave the presumed Kenowa an obscene gesture, doubled. Ancient, that sign. "The two-handed bird," Jonuta said. "Up yours too, Menekris." Simura chuckled, glancing at his captain. HRadem looked pained. "Sure is considerate of you," Menekris said. "So? What do we do now that we're facing yer woman and you at a nice comfy distance, Jonuta? You can see we still gotcher fuzzy a-lien here. Ain't even broke his arm yet. I guess." He glanced back at Chu. "You haven't broke its arm, have you, Chu?" "Not . . . yet." He added pressure that made HRadem wince and bend a bit more forward. Chu stared viciously at Kenowa/Jonuta. "You send this fuzz-wog to torment us, Jonuta? These things really flash on torturin', you know that?" "I didn't know it and I didn't send him and you can believe I am not happy with him. Just a wee bit closer, Kenny, so I can see better." He did that. Now just under three meters separated the group from their holo-disguised captor-or former captor. Jonuta also moved a step to the side. Nearer the stanchions, and out of the way of anyone behind him. Sakyō, for instance. Casually he said, "You a follower of the Way of Booda, Menekris? Arimani, maybe?" "Not me. You stallin', Jonuta?" 140 Jonuta waved the hand he kept up near his face. He felt the difference; Shig had responded to the signal and offed the G-engine. It was going to be float-time, pretty soon. "No reason for stalling," he was saying, while the engine's hum eased and so did the spin along the ship's long axis. They were all about to stop "falling outward"-meaning lose weight. How well could HRadem be held under such conditions? Suddenly from behind him there came the sound of a grunt and scuff of feet. Before Jonuta had completed a forty-five-degree turn, she was racing past him, all old-gold fur and liquid muscle. "Talk talk talk!" HReenee snarled. "It's time for actionnn!" And she added something wherry-snarly-throaty in her own language, moving faster than Jonuta had ever seen anyone move, including the incredibly swift Janja of Aglaya. HReenee to the rescue of her step-sib! Even at her speed she wasn't quite fast enough. Menekris lunged aside and Chu pinned her with a Two-setting, a Freeze beam. She started shuddering, dancing, caught and held and mistreated with every nerve twangily loose as broken sitar-strings-and then she began semi-floating. Jonuta felt that happen to him, too. His hand slapped down to whip Menekris's personal jangler off the stiktite patch on the chest of his holosuit. "Sak! Hit the one with the stopper!" he yelled, and jolted Captain Menekris with his own little electrical jolter. Sakyō appeared behind Jonuta, left hand grasping the upper stanchion, stopper emitting its faint hum. Both Chu and HRadem lurched and began to dance, feet leaving the deck. That took Chu's beam off HReenee, who sagged without falling. Damn! Just as Jonuta was ready to call for a return 141 of gravity, there she was, floating at the ceiling just over two meters above the flooring, and HRadem and Chu were heading that way. Return weight to those helpless three and it would probably be the dam' pirate who hit the deck without breaking a bone or two! Now Menekris was afloat too, knocked out by the jangler. Jonuta couldn't get it on Simura; too much danger of hitting that damned HReenee. Not to mention HRadem and Chu-about whom he cared not at all, save as potentially profitable merchandise! (HReenee was swimming or trying to, inexpertly. Interesting to see one so lithe, floundering about in weightlessness! Particularly while wearing only a pair of elephant-legger pants!) Sakyō kept his stopper on Chu while he pulled himself up alongside his captain. "Sisterslicer didn't let go," Jonuta said, pulling himself along the rightward wall. "Off power a moment, then on. Maybe his hand'll flex open and let HRadem go. Otherwise the transmission effect keeps HRadem dancing right along with Chu. Can you switch

to Freeze?" Sak understood. The neural disruption was being transmitted from Chu to the HRal he held, just as if it had been electricity. Try to pull one stopper-dancing person away from another and he'd become part of the chain. "One-thing at a-time, Captain," he said, concentrating. Carefully he relaxed his grasp on the grip of his stopper (which promptly tried to float away). "And who cares about HRadem anyway? I wish now I'd never seen these two creeps, Cap'n!" And Sak squeezed again, re-pinning Chu before the pirate had anywhere near time to get himself together. Chu lurched, and once again a Jonutan trick worked: HRadem floated free. Afloat and still very much affected by the trans-142 mitted effect of the stopper beam, he thumped into Simura. Simura had a grip on the upper stanchion and was reaching for HReenee, who was just beginning to cope with freefall. Simura aborted that action, swung the arm back to knock HRadem away-lurching in response to action-reaction-and reached again for the female HRal. He yelped, jerking back the hand. Jonuta saw the blood on that hand and watched it begin to rise to form little floating dots. He had hardly seen the swift-streaking movement of HReenee's hand, claw extruded. Heart of Booda, the harried Captain Jonuta thought. Now we'll have blood droplets floating around too, totally unnecessarily! Messing things up when we restore grav! Damn that damned "woman"! "Pardon me, HReenee," he said pleasantly and, hanging onto the stanchion with one hand, batted her out of his way with the other. She squirted erratically away to impact the unconscious Menekris in a messy worm-tangle of floating limbs and bodies. Jonuta swung that same hand back and hit Simura with a jolt from his own captain's jangler. Simura went rigid, then limp. Slowly his grasping hand relaxed, loosening on the stanchion. And then he, too, was afloat. Among all the others. There wasn't all that much room in the hardly wide ship's side-tunnel. Having worked his way in through the mass of floating people, Sakyo took his stopper's beam off Chu long enough to hit the man with it, in the side of the head. Ghu's eyes rolled and he sagged, while Sakyo rebounded-to impact the wallowing mess that was HReenee-Men ekris. "Shig!" Jonuta called. "Shig! We've got 'em all! Ease the power back to the G-engine-do it by hand, 143 Shig, and slowly! Sak and I can't handle all these floating bodies and there's no use breaking a few bones. And he added, stroking half about in freefall, "HRee-nee, if you scratch him I'm going to kick your crotch up into the region of your clavicle! If you have one." Meanwhile, back at the con . . . In all the history of the race, no human had been infallible. Oh some had pretended to be, and others even pretended to bear them out. Such pretenders to error-free decisions and behavior tended to be heads of nations and of religions. When they proved their entirely normal fallibility, their errors tended to affect millions. Jonuta of Qalara held no such pretensions. He was unusually careful and he was clever, and he made few mistakes. He was not, however, any less fallible than emperors and popes. He had just made an error. Fortunately it would not affect millions. "If I say 'Arimani,' " he had told Shig, "cut the grav and start every alarm you can think of. Purpose: confusion." And, "If I say your name, just 'Shig,' take the lock off number four storage chamber." And he had left Shig at con with nothing to do but listen and think about taking instant action. The moment he heard the word Arimani, he cut the power to the engine that imparted longitudinal spin and thus centrifugal force: "gravity." That done, he waited, very very alertly. Hand poised in anticipation of the captain's next signal. He tried hard not to listen to all the combative noises and the shouting, not to mention the two sirens that blared and squealed out sounds enough to make dogs howl and grats run in circles. Shig wondered if the noise might also affect those alert-eared HRal that way. . . . He mentally chastised 144 himself for unworthily linking them with their ancestors and various four-footed, non-thinking cousins. About then he heard his captain call his name. His arm jerked as fast as a tapped knee. Instantly the storage chamber hatch was unlocked. Jonuta's error. Only after that did Shig hear his name again. Since it was followed by an entirely different command, he had not time to think about the sprung lock. He was to

ease power back to the grav-engine, and do it by hand, gradually. The captain and Sakyo needed the tune to make sure that several unconscious people didn't flop injuriously to the deck. Shig obeyed at once. That made two errors, although it was hardly fair to accuse a swiftly obedient Shiganu of error. And meanwhile . . . Back in the ship's tunnel just outside the hatch of storage chamber number Four, housing medical stores and other standard supplies . . . It popped open and out rushed Nailier, ready and more than spoiling for a fight. He had an exodermic syringe "gun" in one hand, the left, and an old-fashioned hypodermic syringe in the other. The kind with a shining needle two sems long. He had heard the snick of the electronic locking device just a moment after he entered. And now he had heard it snick again, and out he came, dark-faced with anger. He burst out afloat but under power, having kicked off against a tall and well-anchored cabinet, and rammed directly into the float-floundering HReenee. Her unbelievably fast reaction was to slash first and look later, claws out. That gained Nailier a five-sem cut down his left cheek. His own reaction, hardly as immediate but reflexive and admirably fast, was to stab her with the hypodermic syringe. He missed her face and, almost surprisingly, all eight nipples. The needle sank into her upper chest, just right of center. 145 She had already started to rebound, even while picking up a little weight on a steady basis. She felt a blow, not a stab, and made an ugly angry throaty sound. The hypo was wrested out of his hand and stood shining in her chest. She banked into a stanchion, snapped up a hand to grasp it (feeling the burning sensation in her chest), twisted all in one fluid movement, and went rushing back at him. She was not trailing blood in tiny spherical droplets, as he was; the puncture-wound was narrow and remained closed by the imbedded needle. "What the v-" Jonuta had just got Chu's arm caught in a lower stanchion, to anchor the man near the floor just as Sak was doing with Menekris. Jonuta looked around, up- He was in time to see Nailier flopping back against the wall beside the open hatch while the HRal lurched at him. Feeling weight starting to tug at him, Nailier nailed her in the stomach with a kick and gained a claw-rip down the leg of his spacesuit. She was slammed up against the ceiling, to rebound downward. In his anger Nailier forgot the others; he kicked her again, to bounce her off the ceiling again, and grabbed an ankle as she started downward again. He yanked, and reached for the barrel of the hypodermic syringe standing out of her downy chest. Jonuta's shoulder thumped her as he rushed in, moving like a thrown spear. His upward leap became impressive calisthenics, in about .5 gravity. His hand, fisted around the jangler, slammed into Nailier's face. The back of Nailier's head was banged back against the wall good and hard and he skidded sidewise-and downward. That indicated the return of ship's G; Jonuta was losing flotation, too. Despite the fact that the whole operation had gone almost perfectly, Jonuta's feeling was of anger, and that everything was thoroughly fobbied. The anger was at 146 himself. He knew what had happened. He had made a mistake. He could not blame Shig, and would not. He would blame himself, although all this had been brought about by that damned HRadem. What had the idiot been doing, anyhow? HReenee thump-bumped to the deck, not hard, for she had not fallen far and was not unconscious. Her step-sib was down. He was all right, though it was hard for Jonuta to give a damn. Now Nailier hit the deck too, thump-bump. Menekris and Chu were safely down, their careful anchoring now unnecessary. And Sak was bending over Simura, who was unconscious on the deck. "Got 'em all," Jonuta said. "Let's give them a medical check and button 'em up. Both HRal will need some Daktari time. Kenowa, stand by Daktari please. Shig, all's well. Sak and I can handle this-they're all four unconscious. Stand by to redshift. This has got to be the most troublesome little spot of space along the spaceways!" 11 At last, at long last, spacer Coronet departed that troublesome little sector of space. The ship fled out along the star-lanes. Powerful enough to have ended, alone, the empire of Darius or Nero or even Victoria. Yet Coronet was but an ant crawling across the face of the worlds-teeming galaxy, which took no note. SIPACUM took sightings, plotted, calculated, weighed vectors, and burred over them like an

aged sorcerer at his incantations. SIPACUM plotted course and proximities and momentum in the plural. No one onboard felt tiny course adjustments. They were vital, and they were constant. All this without sound, without any bright or even sullen red flare of the drive, for there was no atmosphere to conduct the sound or be excited by the ionic stream of the p-p engine. The prodigious glare and preposterous heat of a hydrogen furnace was passed and faded, a red variable M2 sun. Ahead swelled another in unbearable brightness. A massive blue-white monster capable of incinerating, swallowing, and digesting a billion such gnats as Coronet. SIPACUM "saw," calculated not quite instantly, and began the necessary swerve around the mighty pull of that B3 star. Soon another little adjustment would be necessary, as the larger of the blue-white sun's planets appeared. The gas giant was huge by any planetary standards. It 147 148 had nearly made it to stardom, but had failed to ignite. It did have enough mass and gravitational pull to eat a hundred million Coronets, without noticing. A space-sailing machine navigated and piloted by an "intelligent" machine also a creation of that soaring creation called the human brain. Oncon sat a bored native of Terasaki named Sakyo. With nothing to do, he toyed with the eleven-faceted Habibula Sphere he'd found in a locker on Satyagraha. "That's nice, Sak," his leering shipmate Shig had told him. (Shig had got the mobile holocube of Akima Mars, damn him.) "A nice toy for you. Nine times ten to the ninth possible solutions and permutations, I'm told. Good for you, Sak. It'll keep your idle hands busy. Keep you off the streets." And Sakyo had made a pointed and thoroughly obscene physiological suggestion to his fellow Terasak- easy to say, difficult to carry out. Streets! Keep me off the ftainin' streets! Irsosha's ear-lobes-I'm beginning to think I'll never even see a street again! Heading for Bleak, for Irsosha's sweet sake! Bleakers wouldn't know a street if one jumped up and hit 'em in the ass! Hmmm. Nine billion possible solutions and variations, hmm? So how come the captain's been chewing out those HRal for an hour and I've been working with this sistersellin' thing all that time and haven't even worked out one of 'em? He knew very well that he was quite alone. Nevertheless he glanced around furtively, as if to assure himself that no one was watching the sneaky action he planned. Then he tapped for calculator mode. He would divert a minute portion of SIPACUM's electronic attention to finding one of the  $9 \times 10^9$  of the damned sphere's possible solutions. Why hadn't the latest revision of Rubik's Cube been enough for the damned 149 mathematicians, anyhow. Why had he picked this damned thing up, anyhow? And spacer Coronet plunged on, seeking and following its cosmic corridors among stars thick as twinkling sand grains on a beach. "-in the double-damned triple-damned Special Hold with them anyhow," Jonuta was storming. "Is that understood?" Large-eyed, in good health complete with a few bruises, HRadem stared at him. It was not a spiteful or hi any way truculent stare. The HRal was much subdued and chastened. "Is that understood, HRadem? Acknowledge! You damned near cost me my ship, you rattle-brained mange-coated disgrace to your litter!" HRadem lowered himself to the deck-the floor of the captain's cabin-on his knees, in admirably liquid movement. He extended his arms before him, hands close together, backs toward Jonuta. Fingers curled inward to himself. Eyes down, ears down so flat they were all but invisible. "I am no sociologist and don't know your triple-damned flainin' HRal signals, you mange-ridden torture-happy meddler!" Jonuta snarled. "What the vug's that pose supposed to mean? You forgot how to talk? You forgot how to say 'Firm, Captain-sir'?" "It is the same as the human hands-up gesture, and more," HReenee quitely told him, "Captain, combined with the human kneeling in abjection. It is the ultimate submission stance of a HRal and costs much, much face and pride. It is abdication and abnegation of pride. I would be shocked except that I too think it is justified. HRadem disputes nothing you have said and offers himself to punishment, claws turned to belly." "The hell he does! Without a word?" 150 "Silence is part of the-the display, Captain," she said. "The hell it is!" It was all Jonuta could think of. The words for Captain Jonuta were astounded, and flustered. He glared at HRadem. The HRal maintained his submissive "display." Ultimate

submission. From sadist to slave, in one easy lesson-forty minutes of interrogation, explanation, and ass-chewing. "Firm," HReenee said. "The hell he does." Jonuta shot her a dark glower. He pierced her with a glare like a burr-bladed saber. "And you speak for him, do you?" "Of course," she said, in that continuing so-quiet voice. "He is the male. He is step-sib, and with me. I am responsible." Her ears twitched and her eyes flared, shrank. "Oh! In that case-oh." She seemed to flow to her knees. She adopted the same pose as her step-sib. "Captain Jonuta is right to remind me. I offer a thousand apologies and a thousand pricks accepted. With abjections." Reminded her? Jonuta kept his stare a mean one. "That's a lot of apologies, HReenee. And one hell of a lot of pricks!" She spoke to the deck. "It refers to our claws, Captain Jonuta. We possess two. In abjection, we turn them from you, toward ourselves. In the first HRooth Empire, death to offenders was meted out by the Talonist Prime. One thousand punctures, inflicted in manner prescribed and under supervision. Those who survived were allowed to go free. They had been tried, and judged, and received the Thousand Pricks. Having survived, they were free and absolved. More than forgiven. They had expiated and honor was returned." "This . . . barbarism is in the past?" "The Empire is long dead on HRalix, Captain Jonu- 151 ta. The custom is long dead. The phrase remains among us. And the posture of abject submission." "Are you telling me that you still-" "The phrase and custom remain, Captain Jonuta. As such a phrase as 'triple-damned' remains among the Galactics. Does Captain Jonuta believe in the power of god or gods to 'damn' anyone so that he calls down such a curse?" "Oh." No, just a phrase. Figure of speech. We need swear-bys. I guess the HRal do, too. Jarps have theirs. No use telling these two so. I won't relent a morsel or relinquish one bit of this ascendancy I've gained over them-him. Just continue looking mean as . . . as a demon . . . Jonuta stared at her. Kneeling, ears flat against bowed head, eyes invisible, hands down and out as if begging for shackles, fingers weirdly inturned. And he stared at HRadem: same pose. Jonuta did not feel like an emperor, HRooth or otherwise. (Since the slightly growled First Letter, the 'HR' diphthong, and the th diphthong was each a single letter in their alphabet, the word "HRooth" consisted only of three letters-HRal. It might be shown as Ruf. HRooth, however, was a better rendering, just as Hral would not be quite right.) "Oh," he said again. Having ranted so much, he was unprepared for absolute abject apology and submission. He was floundering, casting his line about for something approaching properly ritual-seeming words. "Well, I absolve both of you of the Thousand Pricks. But not of guilt. You have caused much, much trouble. Your wounds and bruises you gained yourself. Come to think, both of you did receive a few pricks! A good thing for you that the hypodermic syringe Simura found and used wasn't loaded with something volatile, HRee-nee; deadly to your HRal physiology. 152 "HRadem: The prisoners are off-limits and we, uh, 'toy-with' only to some purpose. Information extracting, that sort of thing. Necessities and sometimes vengeance. Not just for . . . fun." Jonuta waved a hand in a rather helpless gesture. It was seen by neither HRal. "If I want anybody tortured, HRadem, I'll be sure to call on you." After a pause he added, "Don't hold your breath. I do not expect to, HRadem. Understood? Come on, you're among Galactics. Get your dam' head and ears up and acknowledge." Maintaining his pose, HRadem lifted head and, partially, the ears he had kept pressed so flat along it. "Acknowledged! Firm. Understood, Captain Jonuta! I am Captain Jonuta's guest, crew, and servant, Captain Jonuta!" Jonuta sighed. Booda's backbone, these HRal were even more alien and weirder than Jarps! "Up and out of here then. Uh, consider yourself a thousand times, uh, pricked, and absolved. After you have found Shig and Kenowa, who are waiting for you, and have cleaned up the blood in the tunnel outside number four storage chamber. I do hope that is beneath your dignity, and I hope too that the stains have had time to get nice and dry and harder to remove! I wish to converse with Mranophel HReenee sa'fiel. Out!" "Captain!" HRadem acknowledged militarily, and flowed to his feet, beautifully, acrobatically, and flowed to the door of Jonuta's cabin. He turned, bowed, and

glanced at his step-sib-flattening his ears again, Jonuta noticed-and redshifted. HReenee remained in the position of the Thousand Pricks. "Is all that bullsnot you told me true, HR-oh do get up out of that ridiculous position! That's a posture demanded by males who hate females," he said, without 153 having heard of the Knormen of Kaor. "I most certainly do not hate females!" She lowered her hands to a more natural position; she raised her head and partially elevated her ears, which were in truth no more than four sems long and not pointed. Smaller ears than Jonuta's. It was just that they were differently placed, and so emphatically mobile. And erectile. She did not, however, rise to her feet, which were bare as it pleased her. Her pupils were large. "It is all true, Captain. Merely part of our culture. I perceive that it is alien to Captain Jonuta, and not comfort-lending. There are customs of the Galactics that are as alien to us, Captain Jonuta, and several that are difficult." "How did the HRoot Emperor tell the HRal to return to using the personal pronoun 'you' for their imperial selves?" "The HRoot Emperor certainly did not, Captain Jonuta!" "Um. Well, I am not a HRal and not an emperor, HRoot, Root, or otherwise. Stop referring to me as Captain Jonuta, HReenee. And rise. I mean get up. I am not going to subject you to the Thousand Pricks." She flowed to her feet. Interesting! Beautiful. And interesting how much more beautiful it was when she did it, than when HRadem had. "You have twice come to my aid and rescue, Captain Jonuta." Her voice was softer than soft, with that HRal quality of throatiness; a sort of bubbly throatiness. Almost a purring tone. Jonuta would never refer to it as such. He was not an ape. HReenee was not a cat. "You did very damned well for yourself meanwhile, HReenee." She looked down, but her shoulders showed her pride. 154 "First," he said, "you fought and fought well to save yourself. Then, secondly, a thing alien to us. You fought to save your step-sib. You went in quest of that fight! The female going to the rescue of the male." "Yes. We are HRal, Captain, not Galactics." "I am Jonuta. And yes, I remember twice coming to your aid and rescue. For my ship, HReenee! I recall knocking you the vug out of my way, too. I assure you that I hit hard because I was furious with you at the time, not because I couldn't have shoved you less forcefully." "I felt it. I remember. I noticed. I would come to your aid, Ca-Jonuta." She was looking at him now, ears up and pupils huge. An alien, fresh out of Daktari, Coronet's cybernetic physician. Clobbered, raped, clobbered, stabbed, manhandled, and clobbered. And dressed down! "But you would not need my aid," she added. Ritual, Jonuta thought. Ritual fencing, HRal style. The words are in my language, but we're really talking HRal. Jigging around, verbally playing, fencing. Does she expect me to agree with that, or play at modest argumentation: Oh me oh my no, I might need and welcome your mighty, aid, puma. Panther. Lynx! To hell with that. "Probably not," Jonuta agreed, because he was Jonuta. He met her huge-pupilled gaze. Golden as a yellow sun at mid-distance, those eyes; black as starless space out Carnadyne way, those big round pupils that could also be small slits. He wondered, fleetingly, if the HRal could control the widening and closing of their pupils. She shared that gaze for a time, wondering at whatever she was wondering about him, and then she nodded. "You know that I know your idioms, your slang. Beyond that, I am a student of language. Languages. They fascinate me." 155 He knew that she was leading them up onto something. He went along; he nodded. "Pos. Yes." "And you are sure that you absolve me of the Thousand Pricks, Jonuta." "Pos." She is playing with me, now. What game? "I am grateful." He saw an odd little shudder go through her, like a frisson of excitement. "But you will not deny me one, twice-brave twice-rescuer? From the brave alien who twice carne rushing to my rescue at peril to himself-and so competently!-may I not have one prick, Jonuta?" He looked at her, and his surprise was mild enough so that he was able to show none of it. Her eyes were glowing deeps, looking out at him from her soul, ready to swallow him in those dark, dark depths. He saw it plainly: an aura of loosely-curbed sensuality about her, simmering, needling only his response and an instant of properly-applied heat to make her boil over. With the tiniest of smiles Jonuta walked over to hold a hand over the rheostat.

Meanwhile he held his gaze on the lean, leggy HRal with her large smoldering eyes. The rheostat responded to the blotting of its photosensor by obediently dimming and pinkening the lighting until he dropped his hand. By then the cabin glowed dully with a sort of lambent twilight. It held, ruddy, almost pulsing. His striking a pose was unconscious, for he was a dramatic man. "With a woman as sexy as you, HRee-nee, it might well be a thousand pricks, after all." "So long as they are all yours, Jonuta," she purred. 12 Her eyes remained fixed on Mm while the deeply pink twilight darkened and softened her face in an enhancement of the sensually smoldering effect. And while her hands moved in purposeful, easy gestures. Perhaps it was a typically HRal act and perhaps it was merely that of many aroused women in many places: her clothing fell from her as if banished. She was not Kenowa. Her long and lithe body was carved and curved for economy and supple swiftness, with no hint of Venusian luxury. Yes, there was one. Her mound was clearly a dramatic swell, a beacon to his eyes. The fact that her fur sleeked all around it but left that mound of her sexuality bare and pink made it twice as exciting. She was not only not Kenowa, she had less breast than any woman he had ever seen under such circumstances, and he was a man who liked and appreciated and preferred definitely bilobate bosoms. Yet there was beauty, exciting and arousing beauty, in the nipples that erupted from her sleek short coating of fur. They looked congested and a deep wine red, in her arousal and in this lighting. And below that were what seemed meters and meters of slim legs. Jonuta was a man who could strip swiftly without appearing hurried. This time, however, he let her see 156 157 that he rushed, and deliberately he left his clothing in a bedraggled pile where it fell. The eyes that surveyed his rangy nakedness were the dark eyes of a sensuous creature, a loving creature greedy of caresses and glowing with seduction. He saw that they were expectant, those eyes, but not in the way of a woman who passively waited for a man to make love to her. Her eyes were as greedy and aroused as his, and they promised no passivity. I may get myself clawed this time, he thought, moving to her. It occurred to Jonuta then that he didn't know whether the HRal kissed or not. With the thought came realization that he did not care. It didn't matter. If the HRal did not kiss, this one would be kissed. If there was no response, he could live without it. What would it be like, to take a nipple into his mouth while his nose was pressed into sleek close-lying fur? What he did discover about the HRal, as he slid his hands up her upper arms, was the heat. Was she feverish? Had he heard that these felinoprimates had a higher normal body heat than anthroprimates? He was sure that she was degrees warmer than he, and it wasn't just in the upper arms he cupped in his hands, either. Her hands had moved onto him at once. Lower, just atop his hipbones. Once again there was that febrile warmth, far beyond even an overexerted human. There was nothing of pain in it. It was not that kind of heat. It was wonderful, definitely sensuous, the warmth of her hands on him, of her under his hands. Of her entire body, now pressing with strength against his. He felt the strength and braced one foot back a bit, with gladness. She was writhing very slowly, in a languorous sensuousness. Rubbing against him, twisting her shoulders and moving with undulant rolls of her hips, 158 rubbing, gliding against him. Caressing Mm with her litheness and that soft sleek fur. He felt the buds of her nipples and the startling fur-less pressure of her pubis against his. Her hands roved restlessly, never still. Caressing him in a massage of his blatant masculinity that was almost worshipful. They were not kissing and he didn't care. This was far more than a hug, far more than an embrace. This was nothing they would do before others, hi public. A kiss would have been less blatantly want-filled, gamic. Her constant esthete's movements, her rubbing, all-body caresses saw to that. Caressing him with her hands, caressing him with her fur, caressing him with her. Pressing close, trying to melt her body into his with her heat, to meld their bodies together into one. Jonuta stood with eyes closed, concentrating on feeling. One foot remained braced back against her insistent all-body burrowing. There was pleasure in stroking fur, or soft feathers or a silken or velvety fabric, or a softly furry animal. And there was of course a

different sort of pleasure in stroking a woman, feeling the warmth and the curves and gentle indentations of her. Now he revelled in the combination! A womanly body sheathed in soft down like short strands of silk- and radiating warmth beyond that of any woman he had ever touched! What softness, what warmth-and what enthusiasm, in her rubbing, her burrowing against him, her writhing. Then she was pressing harder against him, grinding her hips almost fiercely in rhythmic, ineffably seductive movements. Seductive? Beyond that-hers were wanting, demanding movements! Her hands roamed and rubbed his small, tight male buttocks with obvious pleasure. While his own hands stroked heated down, he was very aware of the wonderful firm bareness of her pubis, pressuring not just warmly but hotly against his erection. He felt only that hot mound, no opening or dampness. He had noticed that its lips were tight-pressed, like lovers, so that they did not look like lips at all but were a swollen mound down there with a tight thin line down its center. He had caught himself wondering momentarily-with alarm-if she might be virginal, when he remembered. No. She had been raped, and had told Kenowa that she had not been virgin so that it "was not as bad as it might have been." (It had not been as bad for her rapist as it might have been, either. He had died without even having completed his use of her, but at least he had not been tortured . . . toyed with.) Now Jonuta could feel the fact that her entire body was atremble, quivering with the excitement of desire. He heard her soft throaty voice, moaning brokenly. Still she seemed trying to writhe and push herself right into his body, through it. The small nipples against his chest and abdomen were larger, growing into hard tight knots of erection. Mounting physical excitement sent quivers through them both. She eased her movements again, varying them. Now she writhed very slowly. Rubbing his body with hers, and with her hands. It was an intensely sensuous, even licentious experience. How ridiculous, for this seemingly total esthete to have been onboard the ship of the determinedly ascetic Pentamahomet Ramzi! He moved his head, lowered his head at last, and went in quest of her mouth. Her little "whwhhherrrl?" sound was short-lived as he captured her warm mouth with his and closed off its sounds. Her lips were neither compressed nor really open when that kiss began, but they were soft, slightly parted, welcoming. And then they were opening like a flower under his mouth, against his mouth. His hands slid possessively over her while he tasted her lips and sweet tongue, and her hands were possessive, too, in delight. Quite of a sudden, blissful tingles of pure sexual excitement flowed through her being as he crushed his mouth on hers, hard and hungry, open and possessing, while he let her feel the urgent strength of his moving hands. Booda, her heat! Flames of desire were surely crackling visibly about them, he thought, and they were only kissing, embracing! While she made little humming noises into his mouth, her hand inveigled itself between their bodies to find the hard strength of his sex. She stroked it, caressed it and its pendants, cherished it with her hand while the other rubbed, then clamped his butt while his mouth cherished hers. The prolonged rubbing, pressuring embrace, the lengthening and deepening kiss, and now the smooth gliding of her hand on his erection combined into a feeling of urgency that very nearly made Jonuta miss what he was feeling, what he was hearing . . . She was purring! How wonderful, he thought, that they retained that ability while they moved their way up the scale of intelligence, ended the entrapment of the sense of smell that kept lower animals on all fours, increased their intelligence more and more, became erect bipeds, their mouths changing so as to form speech, those ancient paws becoming hands with a thumb to work against the fingers . . . and all the while they had retained that marvelous ancient trait beloved of all humans: purring! He did not think of the drama or cliched tradition of what he did then. He thought only of urgency and need, insofar as he was capable of thought. Scooping her up easily with his hands under her buttocks so that her intense heat was clamped against him, almost burning, he moved carefully to the bed with a shuffling gait that bore her backward to where he wanted her-and where he assumed she wanted herself, and him. And she squirmed against him, and returned his kiss whether

it was a custom of her kind or not, and purred all the while. Both of them grunted when the backs of her legs thumped the bed and they toppled, he on her. Quickly he relieved her of weight by getting his elbows under him. And abruptly she was groaning, moaning, while her writhing took on a different aspect-she was struggling! Astonished, he kissed her, and felt his lip bitten. "Uh!" A single slightly curved claw had just sprung out and pricked his buttock. Not quite understanding what was happening but feeling pain and knowing a swift rising surge of anger, he swept a hand back to grasp the wrist of her offending hand. As he swept it around, feeling her strength and knowing that seemingly liquescent or not her muscles were powerful, he caught her lower lip with his teeth and held it. He smacked her arm and hand down onto the bed and shifted suddenly, just in case, to protect his crotch from her leg. Finding her other wrist with his hand, righting it, gaining hold, he forced it too down beside her head. Then he released his teeth's grip on her lip and raised his head and upper body above hers. Her eyes stared upward, very bright. She was panting, with a flare of her small nostrils. Her ears were back. "What the hell?" She blinked, as if returning from a trance-or the grip of gamic excitement-and stared up at his face. 162 "What the vug happened? What did I do? Suddenly you're fighting!" Again she blinked, and frowned. Her ears moved up, back, not in unison. He felt the tensing of her arms against his grip, their relaxing under his strength. "You . . . don't want me to-that isn't the human way?" "I-we-Booda's balls, are we talking about a cultural difference, and me all het up with an erection to my chin? Damn! Not usually, no-I've never had a claw run into my ass before." "I did that? Oh, I'm sorry! You see we-I-" She turned her face aside and he saw the quiver of her lip. "I'm going to let go your wrists and flop here and, uh, talk awhile," he said, and did that. He learned. Yes, this was their pattern, although she had found the long standing and embracing and then the kissing as extra exciting, as exquisite as he had. Beyond that-yes, what she had done had been pure HRal. No matter what had taken place before, no matter that two HRal had long planned an assignation or traveled to it; in the end, a woman of HRalix was possessed. Subdued and possessed. Yes, occasionally lovers or mates agreed that it would not be so, on such and such an occasion. But Jonuta had not mentioned that, and naturally it had not occurred to her. "Naturally," he sighed, and tugged her warmth against him again. His hand moved to her loins. She stared at the ceiling of his cabin. Not guilty, not ashamed, but hardly happy. "Star-cross'd," he muttered, "but only temporarily!" Females were not exactly dominant among the HRal, he learned-though sometimes they were, in some relationships-as Galactic women were, he remembered to remind himself-but they were ascendant. A woman had ascendancy over the man, on HRalix. HRadem was 163 HReenee's companion, not she his. He was subject to her desires, not she to his. He was her step-sib, and he was entrusted to her. That was why she had rushed to his rescue, then aborted the rush to prowl, to wait, to stalk rather than charge in and be taken or worse. Yes, women fought, on HRal. Fought for the family and males and self. Oh, of course the males did too. Most of them . . . did not women fight, among the Galactics, when there was danger or challenge or other necessity? (Well, yes, he admitted-sometimes. He perceived that somehow the HRal had not spent millennia teaching their females to be weak and quiescent and in need of protection.) Of course most males were bigger and stronger. But a woman had the same swiftness, the same teeth, the same claws, the same intelligence-and often considerably more viciousness, particularly when it was her self or her family that was threatened. Of course primitive HRal females had remained with the nest, the offspring, while the male hunted and brought in the food. She was often needed on the hunting too, however-or plain wanted to be included, and insisted. And certainly no HRal woman was so arrogant, primitive or otherwise, and so devoid of pride and consideration as to charge the male with both providing food and sole defense! (After all, HReenee's attitude clearly said, and Jonuta made a diplomatically noncommittal noise.) Defense was her charge, her responsibility, in his absence. And often when he was present. Why, he might be wearied from the hunt

and a whole family might be wiped out if a hunt-weary male had to undertake to defend alone against a sudden attack! And thousands of years had passed, and many things had changed. But not completely. Not so drastically as to result in a race of weak females! A woman of the HRal was no weak child, to have to be defended and in consequence to have to obey orders and follow specific 164 demeaning rules governing her behavior and appearance! For one thing, the proud women of HRalix still "demanded" that a male prove Ms strength by subduing her, taking her. If that was ritual, very well then, it was ritual. A woman need not defend with all her strength, after all! HRalix had progressed to industrial societies, and then technological ones, although no, they had not got into space at the time the Galactics "discovered" them. There were other priorities, in a culture in which men and the fighting/exploratorial instinct did not dominate utterly. (Besides, there were frequent truculent displays, on HRalix, but few wars. Technology had not progressed so rapidly as it had on Homeworld, old Urth, where it was spurred by war and its constant threat. The HRal had sense enough to utilize the ritual of warlike displays-and sense enough to back off. Territory was of course to be defended, but expanding it was not all that important.) The pretense of force continued in the home, A HRal woman still "demanded" a strong lover, who had the power to take her. Not that she need resist all that hard, if she was truly receptive . . . Regaining some strength of will now, HReenee said, "I was truly receptive-you must have known that! Nor was I resisting all that hard. Not for a-" He shut off a potentially ruinous insult by cupping his hand down over her mouth (and feeling her tense, instantly). "No, oh no, you did not, and obviously I can overpower you, and did. I had both your hands. But then I stopped, because I do not rape, HReenee-I do not have to-and had to learn what was wrong." He lifted his hand. "And nothing was." 165 "True. Nothing was. But I am no HRal, and did not know that. I knew only that suddenly you were resisting, and it seemed serious." She heaved a long sigh, and stared at the ceiling of his red-glowing cabin. "So now what dp we do, with our cultures having got in our way?" "We start all over," he said, and with a downward glance, "but not from ground zero!" And he bent his head to see how she liked his mouth on her nipple. She liked it. Her writhing and her sounds told him that. Then she did, and asked a question. He adjusted his position as she did hers, and two mouths were busy titillating two nipples while something akin to sparks of pleasure jumped through the squirming interspecific couple on Jonuta's bed. Their hands roamed, and his moved to her mound. He felt her shudder, felt her swift intake of breath when he tickled a finger inside. Fantastic heat greeted that incursion, and he knew he'd never cease marveling at it. She meanwhile was releasing his nipple to throw back her head and gasp out excited breaths of impatient desire and need. He remembered HRal custom. "Seek not to break free," he snarled in mock melodrama around her nipple, "else I bite this morsel from you, wench!" He was wise enough to add a reminder: "And keep your talons sheathed!" At the same time his entire arm was moving-and he let her feel his teeth on her nipple. He pumped, pumped. Automatically her hips were arching eagerly, tautening those perfectly formed thighs into muscles like steel rather than liquid. Her frenetic movements also offered the mossy base of her belly and child-naked plumpness of her mound. And she was tugging at him, moaning and purring all at once, tugging, hunching. Her hand grasped his erection and tugged urgently. 166 "Mount me! Mount me!" "Another time," he murmured, swiftly moving and tugging her to him. "Now just-in you-uh!" His gasp and wide-eyed look of shock came from the intense liquid heat into which he thrust. He shuddered, feeling as if his favorite parts might well melt in that cloying hot pudding. Then she was cleaving to him, enwrapping him with her arms, her long legs swinging up and over him, locking to keep him seated in her, deep in the fantastic alien heat of her, and it was all he could do to move in a way that was ancient to both their races. Around him twined the lithe-limbed body of a dancer-or a panther on the prowl. Lynx, he thought. A hyper-sensuous, lean, hyper-sinuuous lynx . . . with a fever of about thirty-nine degrees! And

aloud, gasping, he muttered, "Lynx!" She chuckled, catching the reference. "Gorilla," she chuckled throatily, "big raping overpowering gorilla! How strangely cool you feel inside of me-and how good, good!" Of course he did, he realized, pumping against the pressure of her clasping legs. Of course he felt cool, because she was so very hot around his slicer. A new experience and pleasure for both of them, then. Never had he pushed into such heat! And if she had felt within her anything so cool before, surely it had not been alive! He was very much alive. And so was she, gasping and squirming, clamping down, straining to hold him well up inside her simmering heat, crooning and twitching in boiling passion with her legs high on his back. Both of them shivering and thrusting, writhing and gasping, straining against each other with the lovely bubbly sound of her purring seemingly all about them as they sought to meld their bodies, soaring high while 167 Coronet soared through airless space faster than any bullet had ever sped. She seemed insatiable, omnivorous, jerking with great throbbing spasms of exaggerated sexual ecstasy. He had no need to wonder about her. With her clitoris bared by a feminine form of circumcision, she purred and quaked and literally screamed through three orgasms that he knew of. (And, she eventually told him when talking was possible, two others as well; they were merely not quite so seismic.) What a wonderful race of people these HRal, to make sure that their women were not only readily orgasmic but multiorgasmic! She murmured and urged, and it was not in his language and he did not care. The sounds were beautiful, even the growly ones. In HRal and in Galactic she told him that she loved the coolth and near-hardness of his muscular thighs, flexing between the soft down coating of hers. Her head jerked back and forth in a complete surrender to uncontrollable desire and joy. Her hips lifted, lifted, jerked at his. Then he was shuddering hard, groaning loudly, straining to impale while she purred "Yes!" in HRal, again and again, and then he was spending himself within grasping heat that felt boiling. He sagged briefly in weakness, being held and crooned to, gasping, regaining strength . . . and dragged himself to pump more, thrilling her all over with a post-climactic energy few men possessed. It could not be sustained. He sagged again and they held each other while their breathing returned to something approaching normal. He knew her comfort in nudity and noted now her openness in talking. He did not hesitate to tell her how cold his slicer felt once it left her furnace, depleted. With a throat-deep chuckle she reached over to warm it for him. 168 They lay and fondly fondled, and talked, a man and a woman/a HRal and a human. And fondled and murmured, and one thing led to another and then to another. It was not that he had much to prove, to him or to her. He was genuinely continually excited. Nothing with HReenee was sameness. All was new, different, exotic with this more-than-sexy, sensuality-doting member of an alien race. And yes, she responded to his finger-tweezing of her lower nipples, too. He was far from regretting her lack of breasts. And two things led to a couple more . . . Then she made a sort of yowly-snarly sound and thrust and snarled deep in her throat, ears back and eyes huge, and pounced from his bed. In the dimness of the deep pink lighting, he did not hesitate. He swung legs and body and pounced after her. She was crouched in a corner, her furred back to the wall of his cabin. Almost, he took her menacing stance seriously. Almost. But no; she had gone HRal again. Knowing he knew, she expected him to respond as HRal. He did; he feinted at her neck with his left hand and while she (pretended to) snap at it, he used his right to grasp her wrist. He twisted, forcing her to turn, bending the arm up behind her and reaching around to find and pinch a mid-row nipple. At the same time he deep-voiced the order to give it up, and kneel. She did. She went not only to her knees but to her hands as well, and she peered back and up at him, hot-eyed. The movement of her upthrust hips was almost serpentine in its fluid sinuousness, and was pure lewd invitation. The game of pursue-and-subdue was over that swiftly. He smiled, just a little. He did not have to be reminded further that she had previously said "Mount me!" and that he had promised: "Later." So later has come sooner, he mused, and this tune 169 I even had to "overpower" her. Good for both of us! Next time

I'm damned if I don't prepare in advance and see how she likes being tied-and yes, I think I'll just mention a little thing or two to Kenowa too, concerning HRal, and HRademl He dropped to his knees behind her on the floor of his cabin. It was the fluid movement of a man in the prime of condition, and yet he knew that to a HRal he must seem awkward, A smile came to his sensuous mouth at the snug way her small buttocks fitted into the hollow between his hipbones. Grasping her with a deliberate roughness, he glided once more into incredible simmering heat that made him gasp and bite off an outcry at the shock of it. "Purr, or suffer a thousand pricks," he snarled, but she had not needed the urging. This time he pleased her more, doubly: he was rough with her, HRalishly reminding her that he was "worthy," and he was far longer reaching orgasm. He could not have enjoyed it more, but had anyone been scoring orgasms it was HRal nine, Galactic two. 13 At the time Jonuta sped Coronet out into the parsec abyss from Front, he had information concerning Fran-jese-TGO "maneuvers" between Franji and Bleak's star. The vicinity of such activities was no place for a self-employed entrepreneur wanted as badly as Captain Jonuta. Accordingly Captain Cautious had aimed his spacer almost due "north" of Front, in the general direction of the. Carnadyne Void but many degrees "east" of it. Then had come the C! distress call. Cheerfully, perhaps perversely, Jonuta had ordered another course change. Coronet fled directly toward that eerie starless "swamp in space," dimmed by dust and gas (and some little debris) called the Camadyne Void. Qalara, after all, was only a hop and a skip and a subspace jump "left" and a bit "north." Next, to the dismay of his crew, he had decided to turn about on a course "southward," to Bleak. There was no up or down, north or east, left or right in space. Distance and dkection were measured in degrees, and by distance between stars-living or dead- along with identified, charted objects or phenomena. Yet there had to be maps, just as there had to be a standard measurement of time. Most maps were the computer simulations Jonuta preferred. They could be 170 171 rotated, reversed, flopped, looked at from any angle or vantage, onscreen. Other maps might resemble the big wall chart in the cabin of Captain Pentamahomet Ramzi. On such flat, untrue charts, Jonuta's home planet of Qalara was "upward" or "north" of the galactic center. There the collapstar called The Maelstrom presided and dominated, like an enormous spider lurking on the strands of its invisible web. The Maelstrom. A dead star or "black hole" that was not a hole, but radiated a magnetic field strong enough to yank a star out of place or a comet off its course-to vanish forever into that incredible concentration of mass. The Maelstrom. Get just a fraction of a kлом too close, step just a sem across the threshold of that spider, and forget everything. There was no escape. The planet called Front, Coronefs last port of call, was shown as "below" and "rightward" of Qalara. It was also similarly "southeast" of Bleak. "Above" and "to the right" of Front was Murph, which was also "below-right" of Bleak. Murph, one of whose moons was Dot, where Corundum had set out to ruin Jonuta without Jonuta's knowledge. (Jonuta learned soon enough. It was just that he did not know who had authored the TGO crackdown that resulted in bis electronic losing of more than one fortune that should have been theft-proof, electronically or otherwise.) Entirely unwelcome circumstances had forced him to linger in that minutest flyspeck in the cosmos where he had rendezvoused with India Spring and Satyagraha. It existed as a place only in terms of a set of coordinates. Those circumstances were allayed at last, with a chastened HRadem of HRalix and the reincarcerated pirates of Satyagraha. Coronet at last swung about, consuming many many 172 minutes and many2 Moms in the turn, and headed for Bleak. To the delight of no one. It was at that time that crewman Shiganu relieved crewman Sakyo at the con. "Still oncourse for choke-gasp Bleak?" "Firm." "Shit. Thought you might have made a little slip and aimed us somewhere else," Shig said. His smile was a pale attempt, and it certainly held no mirth. "Terasaki?" Shig rolled his eyes. "Oh, sure! Grabbles, nobody hates the captain the way our own people do! We must be numbers two and three on their most hated list!" "More likely we're number one, as an entry," Sak said, "with the captain in second position. He,

after all, isn't a nice Terasak boy gone bad, as we both are!" "Uh-huh. Bleak! Well-I relieve you." "Delighted. Oh-where's that damned HRal?" "Once the captain got through with him, he came out draggin' 'is tail," Shig said, with a smile of fond remembrance. "He had his orders to clean up the, uh, combat area. Captain doesn't like bloodstains, you know. So he did that, talking with Kenowa. He's with her now. In her cabin." "Oh?" Sak was keying out his watch, which was not quite the same as logging off. He glanced around with a querying look that managed also to be a naughty look. "Firm," Shig told him. "She's, uh, acquainting him wth Galactic culture. Showing him the latest Akima Mars holo." "Uhhmm," Sak commented, and stood. "Poor HRadem," Shig said. "Forced to look at Set-suyo Puma in Dark Invader-and Setsuto/Akima only has two warheads!" As he chuckled, he caught sight of the Habibula Sphere. "Hey! That's beautiful! You did it! I can't believe it, Sak!" 173 Sak waved a hand. "Oh sure. It's not so hard. Passed the time-most of it. Why don't you take it on? Change it over to the green-blue-yellow-black-black configuration, maybe. Keep you off the streets." He showed Shig the top of his head in a mocking Terasak bow, and pulled back just in time to avoid Shig's descending knuckles. Grinning, Sak left the con-cabin. "Smart-ass," Shig muttered, seating himself. He keyed in and picked up the Habibula Sphere. "I'll fix the smart-ass. I'll get a little help from SIPACUM and make him think I'm as good at this hell-spawned thing as he is!" Before him lights winked like soft-lit jewels from varicolored console displays while Coronet sped out through the lavender mists and indigo gulf of the space-ways. No one onboard knew that the ship had been traced, and had lingered long enough back there in that noplac to be fixed, and overtaken. The power emissions of every ship along the space-ways were like personal signatures. They were called just that: "signatures." Each was different from all others; of all the craft plying the spaceways, the signatures of no two were alike. Not the blue furnace of the drive; those looked pretty much alike from one ship to the other. The signature was the analyzable waste, and its sequence and distribution in each ship's wake. (Which was precisely why Captain Cautious made certain adjustments to his engine at every opportunity, which usually meant during planetfall. He had not, on Front; he had not tarried there.) To a computer input with the necessary data over a sufficient length of time, the signatures of various ships were readily distinguishable. Recognizable, identifiable, from hundreds of thousands of kloms away, barring obstacles or other disruptions. (A hundred thousand kilometers was nothing. The difference between the 174 stars of an average binary system was a billion, two hundred million kloms-half the distance from a forgotten nowhere planet called Pluto from its distant and nearly forgotten sun.) Analysis comparisons of spacer signatures made by SIPACUM were not quite instantaneous, but they would do. For seventeen years-ess Captain Jonuta, because he was Captain Cautious, had been able to fool, fox and elude policers, including TGW. Yet there was one who was Jonuta's enemy. And his SIPACUM knew Coronet's signature as well as it knew its own. That shipboard computer its captain called Jinni, once called djinn and, more ignorantly, "genie." The pronunciation was the same. Although it did not come out of a bottle and possess infinite wisdom or the power to produce sultanas, princesses, and infinite treasure, it knew close to everything its captain needed and could do nearly everything. Jinni was the SIPACUM of spaceship Firedancer, whose master called his con-cabin "the bridge" and who called himself Corundum. Indeed he nearly always called himself just that, for he seldom used the standard pronouns "I" and "me," much less the refuge of the fearfully pronoun-ignorant, "myself." Pirate, once artist, linguist, master ship-handler and maneuverer, pretentious of speech and mien, eternally vindictive because of a pride that could have been called o'erweaning, quick-triggered Corundum. Master of one of the very best equipped ships on the spaceways. Co-RUN-d'm: 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, non- 175 transparent forms are known as emery.-Universal Edutapes Corundum: chief and oldest enemy of Kislar Jonuta of Qalara. Cruising the gemstone

star-paths, seeking and searching and analyzing. High on himself since having sent Janja off to perdition (along with Hellfire and others of that ship, but who bothered with trifles), he was again on the hunt. It was an occupation he much enjoyed, hunting. Therefore he was better than good at it. And he had found Jonuta. That is, his SIPACUM had done so. Jinni had merely stumbled across Coronet's emissions signature. He considered, briefly, standing before Jinni's readouts and telits with shoulders back and hands clamped behind his back. Very erect, very dark, all in black, with raven's-wing hair in waves to his shoulders. A well-educated man who had once been a form of artist called a painter and who was more than a little esthetic by nature. And a man with a sense of the dramatic that did not leave him even when he was alone. Corundum was well aware that this pose he had cultivated was a Napoleonic one. Napoleon had been merely a mass murderer. Corundum was a successful pirate and an absolutely master ship-handler. Presently he considered himself, and Jonuta. Corundum had initiated various attempts on the man's life. They had failed, though they had taken out Jonuta's oldest and best crewmembers. Then had come the action out near Dot, well-mined fourth moon of Murph. Janja had been with him then, and on that occasion. Both were easily disguised by retaining their spacesuits and -helmets. Just as easily he had deceived those miners into believing him to be Jonuta-by care- 176 fully not-saying he was. Then had come an unexpected stroke of luck. Corundum did his illegal business with the mining chief, and the fellow proved treacherous. As Firedancer departed that little ball of barrenness concealing rich ores, in had swooped two spacers. One was a local, a policer craft from Murph called in by the triple-dealing supervisor of those Dotside miners. The other ship was super-spook: the TransGalactic Watch. With enormous cleverness and at enormous risk that might easily have killed him, Corundum had lifted off Dot. He had also maneuvered the TGW ship into blasting the Murpher into spacedust, and proceeded to the unnecessary but most gratifying destruction of that TGW spacer, with all hands. Janja had been horrified. Corundum had smiled his satisfaction. (Little barbarian, he now told himself. She was too weak of stomach to be Corundum's woman, anyhow.) Soon word had gone out from headquarters, TGO, on The Gray Organization's own secret channels: Jonu-ta had done it. Get Jonuta. Do Not Destroy physically; undermine and smash and crush him. And TGO spent a bit of a fortune in tracking down Jonuta's secret accounts on various planets, and gained a far, far greater fortune by stealing them. It was an ancient custom, dignified by the perpetrator and to the gullible by being called "confiscation." That was precisely what Captain Corundum wanted TGO to believe, and to do. "Let him squirm," Corundum had muttered with happiness. "After a time Corundum will solve all his problems for him. All his problems." First, however, there had been the matter of Janja. That pale barbarian had struck deep into his vaunting pride by daring to leave his company before he had 177 t5red of her. She had abandoned him to take up with that semi-competent child, Hellfire. First he had told himself that the erratic Hellfire would bring about her own untimely demise anyhow. Then he had decided to assist her, and make it timely. Captain Corundum went forth in quest of the final solution to the Janja problem. With a brace of lampreys slammed at their hull just as they sought escape by entering what was called subspace, he had succeeded. Or so he thought. The lampreys, also called Computer Traumatizers, would have made their SIPACUM a helpless, mechanical psychotic. Without a functioning SIPACUM, they were as good as dead and on their way to death. If there was a common god of spacefarers, its name was SIPACUM. And now . . . now Jinni had found Coronet, and not all that distant, either. And Corundum stood before SIPACUM's display, one eyebrow up, and considered. A dark man in black, rocking on his heels, plotting the fate of a detested enemy. Because Corundum was the second most competent along the spaceways. Perhaps he admitted it in his heart of hearts, his mind of minds. Perhaps his own pride prevented that. He knew that without Jonuta he was the single unrivaled ship-handler and outlaw and spacegoing genius. Had not Jonuta suffered aplenty, as a result of Cor-undum's tricking TGO, however obliquely?

Would he not suffer more, and more, at the unseen hands of that organization dedicated to the proposition that the end did indeed justify the means of reaching it? Is that continuing harassment and frustration not the worst form of punishment for the swine? Still, Corundum was high on himself, swollen with success at having gained the ultimate revenge on Janja 178 and Hellfire-who had taken his blond "primeval princess" from him. And here was Jonuta, practically within his grasp. And Corundum was Corundum. He had Jonuta's location and course. With a swift nod of decision he sat down at con to direct Fire-dancer on intersect course. Smiling. 14 "And she is the very most popular simulator among you," HRadem said. "Pos," Kenowa said, nodding. "Actor is the word we use." "Actor, yes. Firm. And, uh . . . the outlandish swollenness of her mammalia . . . that is highly advertised, well known. Is-" "Pos, in both cases," Kenowa said most positively, with a little frown and sideward glance, eyes only, at his choice of words for The Biggest Pair In The Universe. "Fascinating. Amazing! Kenowa . . . would you say that the size of her mammarys, then, is the primary reason for her great success and renown?" "Ah . . . well, yes, at least the basic 'cause.' I mean she's good, she plays the Akima Mars part well, and of course over the years she's identified with the series. I suppose she isn't really outstanding as an actor." Then she laughed, seated on the bed beside HRadem, while the holodrama played between them and the wall. "That was an unintended pun! Do you understand about puns?" "Yes, but I don't-oh. Outstanding. It means stands out in a crowd, stands out from others because of some accomplishment or attribute. And oh yes, I see. Also her chest stands out. Way out." He nodded vehemently, proud to have got it in another language. 179 180 "Then it could be said that Setsuyo Puma has a standout chest." Kenowa chuckled throatily and touched his arm. "You understand puns," she said rather drily, although that could not quite be said to describe her present state. The Akima Mars mellerdrammers were definitely erotic, designed to titillate. Watching this one, the most recent, with HRadem was an erotic experience. Particularly since they were in-well, on her bed, in her cabin. And particularly since she knew damned well what Kenowa and HReenee were doing in his cabin. The adjoining cabin. Right through that wall. With the connecting door closed. HRadem sighed, semi-slumping beside her on the bed. These HRal just seemed to have no backbone! (Make that in the literal sense only, Kenowa mentally added.) "Our races are different indeed. That is a shame, in a way. It would appear that Galactic males are-tend to be fixated on mammalia, and the bigger the better. Our women are of course not constructed that way at all. Not even when they are nursing. In which case, our females may find your males sexually interesting, but the reverse will not be true. Wait-that is not scientific. I should say that the reverse will tend not to be true." Very scientific, Kenowa thought, and said quietly, "True." "Oh! She is being tortured!" He definitely sat up straighter in heightened interest, this alien who had matter-of-factly gone to "toy with" the prisoners. In his felinistic, not necessarily sadistic way, Kenowa thought, and felt a couple of little tremors in intimate places. Quietly she said, "True." And kept her eyes directed on the holodrama. 181 "This holds excitement for you Galactics, too?" His increased excitement was apparent in his voice. "Oh yes. We just pretend it isn't so and don't admit it. Men do, anyhow. Lots of women admit the fascination, if not a real desire to hurt-or be hurt! When it comes to telling the truth, women are the stronger sex." "Of course," he said absently, and so matter-of-factly that her eyes widened. Since they were sitting side by side, watching Dark Invader, they were talking without eye contact, without seeing each other's expressions. Now he was positively staring at that screen, in point of fact. "Does what these improbable invaders are doing to Akima Mars fascinate you, Kenowa?" Even more quietly, "Pos." And she'd just as soon he didn't ask her if it excited her. Obviously it did him! And what warmth this sexy HRal radiated! "Ummm. But you have no real desire to be hurt?" "Not a real desire to be really hurt, no." "Yet your race also began as hunters! Galactic female or not, I am getting an erection from what I am seeing. Even though I know it

is actors and she is not being hurt. Not really hurt, as you put it." He shifted a little. Seeking comfort, Kenowa knew; seeking to accommodate his erection. His saying that, just right out that way, had astonished her but had hardly shocked or offended her. Or disappointed her. As a matter of fact she became a bit less dry. "Uh," he said; the sound was elicited by what he was watching, and he had definitely twitched. "And what if I seized upon your own outstanding breasts and dug my fingers in with such roughness?" A great shiver went through the big woman beside him. Almost in the same movement she flicked off the holomovie and turned toward him. HRadem was introduced to the oscular pressure these bulge-chested creatures called kiss. How cool and moist her lips were- 182 what an exciting act, for her to do this, all of a sudden! Since he was a shade warmer than he'd prefer to be, the coolth of her lips and her hands on him, the brush of her cheek; those were very welcome and indeed just wonderful. And the massy lobes of her chest were pressing at Ms chest, too. He seized upon them. Another great shudder went through her and she moaned into his mouth. She did not take her lips away from what were to her richly, marvelously warm lips. And her moan did not sound to HRadem as if she were in pain and signaling him to stop. He didn't. With continually changing pressures, he dug his fingers right into those strangely meaty pillows of her chest. He could feel the nipples within her clothing, and even they were bigger than those of many HRal women! He kept right on, delving, palpating, disarranging her clothing as he sought his way inside, moving his clutchy fingers about as if trying to imbed them in flesh that was like dough to him. And she kept right on kissing, pressing in with her mouth as if trying to imbed it in his, which she found a marvelously heated hollow. Then her hand moved down to the erection he had mentioned. It was not hard to locate. How hung, she had wondered; hung how! And now she knew: well enough! Have fun, Jonuta, she thought and, squeezing, moved her mouth enough to suggest to her fascinated HRal lover that they were both overdressed for the business at hand. "In my hands," he said with a wicked grin, and squeezed hard before he released. Yes, he understood puns right enough. A bit awkwardly because neither wanted to leave the bed, they made themselves naked. Clothing hit the deck in rumpled clumps, symbolically united. 183 "Oh, the smoothness," he said, running hot hands over it. "The coolth of your hairless skin!" "Ummm, the sleek warmth," she said, burrowing, moving her own hands over him, and her body against that short velvety fur. Then, "Uh!" she gasped, for he had just clamped onto her breasts again and was doing his best to make his wiry fingers vanish from sight within all that sleekly hair-free, doughy flesh. Shivering, she tried raking his tiny buds of nipples- two, then two others-with her nails to see how he responded. He responded. Dragging her to him-by her breasts-he tried tasting what he had been so eagerly manhandling. He loved that, as it turned out, and to distraction. Her distraction. He kept on and on at it, slurping, her nipple swelling in his mouth as he clamped with one hand, with two hands, palpating, while he sucked and licked and made the obscene slurpy sounds she assumed were deliberate, and chewed too, a little. And she responded, oh lord and Tao's balls, how she responded. But. . . It wasn't that it was boring; Kenowa was aroused up to here, hunching and moaning. The point was that she wanted more from him, and he had been slavishly slaving away now for a full quarter-hour! She bent to his chest-handsome soft sleek warm fur, and all these little nipples she had made hard!-and went after one of those nipples with her mouth. Oh, the warmth of him! She tried to nuzzle her face into that fur. It was too short for that, but it felt wonderful and she kept trying. His movements and sounds-shivers and moans- told her that his tiny nipples were as sensitive as the plumper ones he kept trying to choke himself with, and then he had a hand on her and in her and a delving finger felt dangerously hot and sent violent thrills lancing through her. 184 "Ah . . . you are so cool inside," he exclaimed raptly, while Kenowa knew that she was hotter than she had been in . . . well, a while. "And you are so warm" she murmured, rooting like an infant without sense enough to recognize lack of nourishment. After a while she surprised him. Rather than thrusting him away

to insist on being "forced" or pouncing from the bed in disguised invitation to be taken like a normal woman—a normal HRal woman—she became insistent in an entirely different way. She grasped his slicer and moved while she tugged at him insistently by that convenient (hot) handle—and let out a cry while her eyes bulged at the abrupt invasion and widening of her by what felt like a red-hot poker. It wasn't that he was one bit bigger than Jonuta—or as big—but that he was so, so hot. And then that warm velvet of his fur was pressing her body, and she closed her eyes in a dreamy exultation. Her outcry pleased him so much that he wondered if Galactic males were hung small and failed to please their women adequately. If that were the case, what a swathe a dedicated HRal could cut among these fur-less, fat-nippled, swollen-chested women of another race! And oh, the weird coolth of her interior all around him! Deliberately crushing and banging what they called "warheads," he let go any semblance of control and shagged her wildly. Oh, it was a great day for niter-species, interspecific, relationships, out on the space-ways. In the adjacent cabin, Jonuta was introducing his new inamorata to some of his favorite music. "The point is, it's some of the very first electronic music ever made—and sound decent," he said, "and 185 not artificial. Those 'Germans' did it not as a novelty but because they were musicians and this was the kind of music they wanted to make. They did it marvelously well, with the primitive electronic equipment they had then!" "This is nice," HReenee said, looking at the speaker in a perfectly normal irrational act that was apparently common to her race and his. "And this is called— what?" "Force Majeure," he said, stretching long muscularly lean legs. "I don't know those words." He grinned. "Neither do I. I feel almost guilty about that, too, because once I went to the trouble to find out. And forgot. It's an ancient language of Homeworld. Urth, where we feel pretty sure we originated. Most of the old languages are dead. They were combined into Erts—this language." "It means something, then—or did," she said quietly, thinking about the phenomenon of a "dead" language— several of them—and of a race so old and so long in space that they "felt pretty sure" they originated on the far, far planet he had named. The HRal were old, too. But not in space. She and HRadem were among the first fifty. She wondered if another fifty or a thousand or two were in space, now, on Galactic craft. And with a tiny twitch of her mouth that was not quite a smile, she wondered if any of them was lying naked in the cabin of the (just as naked-nakeder, without bodily hair!) captain of the ship that bore her. Or even him. The ghost of a smile vanished altogether, then, as HReenee had the fleeting thought to wonder if any others of her people had been raped. She'd bet none was passenger or "crew" onboard the spaceship of a slaver, or had encountered the strange phenomenon of armed bandit attack, in space! 186 "And the musicians' name? 'Tangerine Dream'— what does that mean? Is it a name?" "Their name. Not a person's name, I think—I have those. All strange words, no longer in use. I have no idea what 'Tangerine Dream' meant to them. The words have meaning—each of them does, I mean, but together they are nonsense." He made a gesture that ended with his hand on her thigh. Instant heat under—his palm! He stroked the silken fur there, wishing he could hear her purr again. "It doesn't matter. I love the music. They made many pieces of music, almost all of it totally electronic. Some of it went with primitive holodramas of that time. I'd love to see them. One was 'Sorcerer'. Nice, strange music." "Dare I ask what that means?" "Sorcerer? Doer of magic. Fantasy was popular, in thek era." And he explained 'tangerine' for her, and 'dream,' and she found no relationship between a fruit and a night-fantasy. "I am glad that I like it too. This part is a little . . . nerve-stimulating, isn't it?" He chuckled. "That's about what it is, HReenee, that's about what it is. It was years after I first heard some of thek music before I found out who had created it. Then I was amazed at thek antiquity. There was a time when I told myself I was going to have a spaceship, and that I would name it Tangerine Dream." "Why didn't you?" He shrugged. "Would have been stupid. Everyone would have been asking what it meant. Are you feeling hungry?" "No. I mean oh no, thank you. So long as I know that food is available, I don't

require much. There is something else I've been thinking about. The attack on India Spring. Your finding us, and arriving." "Not easy, and yet not hard," he said. "You want 187 a sort-of explanation? I can't give you a really complicated one." "No-what it led me to think about is something you have referred to-war. And space combat. We are moving at a velocity too ridiculous to think about. Obviously impossible! Thousands and thousands of klorns per second! I know that that sort of velocity, combined with the size of spacecraft and our own fragility, means that it takes minutes to turn through as much as half a circle-and that means thousands of kloms-hundreds of thousands?" "As many as three million kloms, depending on the size of the ship, its equipment, and its velocity-how close it is to the speed of light. Yes. A battle is like sub-ancient combat between two men armed with edged weapons, HReenee: over almost before it begins. Or, with luck and if they're both good, a long, long process. Hours. I was in an hours-long combat in space, once." "Two people with edged weapons could get very, very tired in a combat that lasted hours!" she said, in an insistent voice. "Yes, but you must know that in time of such stress you don't notice weariness until long after it's there- sometimes not until after the fight or the flight-is all over. Besides, hours-long combats between such men, on horse or on foot, were mostly spent in maneuvering, with brief flurries of hack-and-stroke. Space battles are the same. You sweat a lot, and get to think and plot and compute a lot. And sweat some more. It's seldom necessary, unless two people want to kill each other. The alternative is always available-running." "I can't imagine you running." "I have, and I'm not one minim ashamed of it, either. I may again. I'm also, uh, known to use this and that means of avoiding battles, or capture. I am not interested in killing policers, HReenee. Some of them are interested in killing me. Or taking me prisoner." 188 That was a conversation he didn't care to have to pursue, and he said, "You have hit on another of my favorite topics, though." "Policers?" "Space combat." She settled down in his bed, snuggling sleek -warmth against his smothness. "Tell me about another favorite topic of Captain Jonuta, then. We HRal you know like . . . excitement." "Meaning danger, stalking, combat, stress," he said, squeezing her thigh with strength. "Firm, I know. Well, providing you survive the initial encounter-the attack, which often comes like that-" he snapped his fingers- "then you go back centuries and centuries." She looked at him with questioning disbelief. "What?" "There was a Homeworld war they still study in space-military schools," he said, idly rubbing the fur of her thigh. "Centuries and centuries ago. I've studied it, too-if you call it studying, when it fascinates me as much as adventure fiction. It was a war fought primarily on water, both ocean and a sprawling group of five lakes. All they had were sailing ships, HReenee! Big ships of wood, with wooden masts and sails of cloth! And primitive gunnery that used massive, noisy explosions of energy to hurl spheres of metal-or smaller pieces by the hundreds, designed to tear sails and people." "We have had our cannon, and shrapnel too," she said, using his words, "on HRal. Aside from our willingness to acknowledge displayed superiority and back off to continue living, one thing that held down wars and conquest on HRal is the seas. We are not fond of the sea or even rivers, and abhor traveling on water." "Apparently the people of Homeworld were fond of it." "Or of conquest." "Definitely," Jonuta nodded. "Now-compare na- 189 tions with planets, and the water-vast seas and truly big lakes-with space, and those pitiful sail-ships of theirs with spacers." She nodded. "And the weaponry?" "Oh, no comparison. And no instruments to speak of. They could not contact each other and the only means of detecting an enemy was by sight! Once you established that he was an-" "He? Was it always he, Jonuta?" "Always. Once you est-" "How strange," HReenee commented. And when he remained silent, she rubbed his thigh, high up toward his loins. "I grovel in apology. Please go on." "Once you were sure that the other ship was an enemy, the maneuvering began. Obviously some battles were over in minutes. Otherwise, the maneuvering went on for hours. Before they could think of firing they had to use wind and their knowledge of sail, of water-ships to get close enough! They could err,

or be blown helplessly in an unintended direction, or have to fight against a storm that was suddenly far more important than the human enemy." He shook his head. "Obviously it thrills me. I enjoy thinking about it and reading about it and seeing what simulations I can-there wasn't even photography, back in that year they measured as 1812-but I know I can't truly understand it. No one can, surely. All so primitive, so personal, and at the whim of wind! I marvel. It was marvelous, and by that I mean something to marvel at." Boyishness is nice in a man, HReenee thought. What enthusiasm! And all over the events of so long ago. He'll get to the connection with space combat. And abruptly a little frisson ran through her. She widened her eyes at the thought that had pounced into her mind, not on little cat feet: Oh, I wish I could experience, at least see, a real space combat! 190 She did not say it aloud. Jonuta, this new, unexpectedly boyish Jonuta, was looking embarrassed. "So I got carried away," he said. "Well, for this reason and that I won't go into, those water-ships of real sails had hardly any firepower at all up front and aft. Instead rows of guns ran along either side of the hull-single-shot cannon that were hand-loaded, dangerously! Therefore a lot of the maneuvering at first was to avoid meeting head to head or head to stern- no real firepower could be brought to bear that way. Side by side, they could trade volleys, usually tearing the vug out of each other. One captain actually won the battle but had to hurry onto the ship he had defeated, because his was sinking!" Jonuta paused to shake his head; HReenee smiled in the manner of an indulgent mother. "But-if ship A could manage to cross ship B's bow or stern, it could let loose as it moved past, boom-boom-boom, raking B while B couldn't do a thing but wallow there and take it. That was the tactic for hundreds of years. They called it crossing the T." He showed her how the T of those people had been formed, and she nodded. The crossbar on top was ship A; the upright tail of the T represented the unfortunate ship B. Cross the T on him and rake him good, with little danger to your own ship! "Now as to the reason we still study that war, HReenee-using the computer to reverse the situation, with simulations. Space warfare is similar, only reversed. Side-mounted gunnery-which we call DS for Defense Systemry-isn't all that practical on spacecraft. Not really powerful weapons, anyhow. To begin with there are the velocities. This kind of hurtling speed makes getting off an effective shot from one side or the other about sixteen times more difficult." "Negatory on the attack en passant," she said, because she had studied chess and was understandably 191 proud of her knowledge and ability to apply it to matters other than a game. "Right," Jonuta said, hardly noticing her cleverness. He was caught up in his explanation, and the visions behind his eyes. "There's also the potential for knocking yourself off course, even by a hair. That could be dangerous, even disastrous. So, on spacers almost all gunnery is mounted up forward, with less aft and a little shooter or two along the hull, just in case. Yet that presented a problem too, at first. During the first war when truly fast-then!-jet aircraft were used, planes and pilots were lost unaccountably. Eventually they learned why-they were being bit by their own ordnance!" "Oh-the airships were faster than the-whatever it was they fired?" Jonuta smiled and squeezed her hand. "Very good, milady of HRalix! Very good. True, and it was bullets and rockets. Small lead pellets and larger explosive projectiles. So they had to ... make a few little adjustments! So have we, for similar reasons. Oh, we have a couple of swivel-pod guns on Coronet. Otherwise though armament is directed slightly downward and slightly upward relative to the line of the ship, and slightly to either side. The attacker doesn't want to cross the T, but to be crossed by it-to be the upright of the T. That way he has all the advantage. He's rushing at the broad side of another ship, a much larger target. Even if he misses he has the velocity to be far, far away before the other ship can come about." She thought about that for a while, idly stroking him. "Umm. So you would fire and change course slightly, at the same time?" Again he felt her little shiver, "Oh! What if you fired the upward-directed, uh, DS, and then made a slip and changed course in the same direction?" 192 Jonuta's chuckle was dry as the

Great Desert on Sekhar. "You don't." Then he took compassion and added, "People are inclined to make errors, little slips under stress and when there isn't time to think. And you're thinking right: little errors kill. So what you do is put the computer into combat mode-or switch the battle computer online, on spacers designed for combat. Among a lot of other functions, it makes sure the ship makes course change in the direction opposite the guns fired, no matter whether that's rising or diving or vectoring-swinging sidewise against the line of fire. All those are relative terms in space, you understand." She sighed and spoke as if she were a schoolchild reciting: "No up, down, or sideways, in space." "Right. It's just that it complicates language and it's easier to say those words than use complicated phrases. That computer-directed course change takes place in far less than a second after the shot is fired." She scrooched down on his bed, her back partially pillowed while she rubbed him. "You knew this would fascinate me, didn't you. My heartbeat's tip!" "It's not easy for any life-forms to become dominant on their planet without being militant, combative-arrogant! And in your case I've seen that you are just that, and more so than a lot of humans. Besides, I like thinking about it and talking about it. I'm not a warrior, really. It just fascinates." A great big cocky boy, she thought, like so many males-human and HRal! "If you'd been bored," he was adding in a lazy drawl of that deep voice, "you'd have put up with it anyhow." "Oh would I?" Her hand moved. Oh! Cocky indeed! "What makes you think that, un-warrior?" "Because I'm a lover. Bored or not you'd have heard me out, to get more of this." He moved. "Uh! Ummm . . . you-you're right . . ." 15 The alarm dinged and began to purr and Jonuta moved off HReenee as if he'd been goosed; as if he had no sex drive at all; as if she were inconsequential, nothing at all. All his attention was commanded elsewhere, and went there. Furthermore his movement was not a lurch, but nearly as bonelessly fluid as hers. She felt it, thought every bit of that, and understood. He was depressing a key on the uncomplicated little comm-box beside the bed. He was the captain and therefore there was a communicator beside his bed, with no OFF switch. And already he had shifted from Lover into the Spacer Captain mode, she saw without insult: already his glistening erection was softening. My lover just left, she mused with some disappointment, but no insult. And in rising excitement: This is Captain Jonuta, Coronet. Hunched to the comm, naked, he said, "Captain." "Got a demon, Captain," the comm said, in Shig's voice. "It's a ship, definitely. Appears to be on intersect course. I can't be sure, of course. Its kinetic vector is-" Jonuta interrupted crisply: "ETI?" "Nineteen minutes." Jonuta nodded. Distance didn't matter. What mattered was velocity and ETI: estimated time to intersect. Time was a measure of distance, and velocity. It was also life. Or death. 193 194 "Observed for how long, Shig?" "I playbaked and backtracked, Cap'n. It's been coining for at least nine minutes, moving right up to light." "Hard to believe." "Amen. Also true. Another ship crossed, but SIPA-CUM was able to separate emissions and backtrack. Then the metallic spectrum lines of an orange star got in the way. By that time SIPACVM had calculated that we'd tracked him back nine minutes." "Very good. Nice checking, Shig. Can you read emissions?" (HReenee sat up because she couldn't just lie there. Erect, very erect. No naked breasts jiggled or gleamed in the wan hot-pink light, but she was naked. Presence of fur and lack of breasts made a HRal seem less naked than a human, until you looked down. The bright hairless genital area made her more naked than a human. Unnoticed, her hand lay there, on the mouth of her abruptly-vacated core. She stared at Jonuta. Ears amove slowly, in curious interest. Pupils huge, filling most of her oblique eyes.) "N-positive, Captain. I was about to say no, but capability just developed. Just now." "I believe you, Shig." Jonuta's voice managed to remain soft, even in its urgency. "Put SIPACUM to work on reading that ship's signature-you are sure it's a ship?" Crewman Shiganu did not deign to answer. "Sorry, Shig." (He had not so much as glanced at HReenee. Her hand started toward him, returned. She had an idea that if she were to touch him she might lose a finger. How beautiful he was! Pure reaction, stress yet

seemingly unstressed, alert as a hungry mihrmu at moonset, all nerves and brain functioning swiftly as a mmeme diving on its prey. (MaHRI, she thought, calling the name of a god she 195 didn't believe in, he is an alien! Not HRal! He is also beautiful. I could love this alien-this man! (Do I?) "As soon's you've got a decent signature, punch five-nine-one-kay, ath-Wye, for comparison/analysis. Hmmm. Shig: find a safe course change, make it, and watch that demon." "I was hoping you'd say that, Captain. 591k-ath-Y. Punching for course change, Captain; SIPACUM scanning. Ah. Easy! Changing course a mere one-point- even-nine degrees, Captain. All safe on that line. Over the course of eighteen minutes thafs a lot of kloms difference, Captain! Don't say 'tight-monitor demon'- I am." "I wouldn't have dreamed of it, Shig," Jonuta said, who had been on the point of saying just that: "tight-monitor demon," meaning: Watch that son-of-a-bitch and if it changes to new intercept course, sound off loud! Meanwhile, he hoped that one of the few emissions that was identified in SIPACUM's memory would match that of the other ship. Certainly hundreds would not! He was not a ship-hunter, and had never been all that interested in compiling such information, save as it became convenient. HReenee glanced around. Let's see. What could she do-for him? "Now, Shig. Put this in: seek safest Tachyon Trail entry, and take no other action other than to sound bell and display time to conversion point." "Firm, Captain." Jonuta turned up his gain and listened with his hand on the button until he heard Shig finish inputting those instructions. He lowered volume, spoke. "Crew is where?" "Sak's asleep, Cap'n. Kenowa, too. Uh, HRadem's, uh . . ." "Asleep?" 196 "No Captain . . ." "It's all right, Shig. I know where HRadem is. We'll leave them for now. We aren't sure of anything, yet. Look, proceed. I'm leaving comm open, loud-Up, and getting dressed." (Sitting up, HReenee smiled just a little. So. HRadem and Kenowa were also "slicing," as these Galac-tics euphemized it! (How nice for us all!) "May be nothing, Captain." "I know. If it's something, though, a man always feels better equipped with his pants on." "Right." If there was any sort of amused response behind that single word, Shig disguised it well. "Keep talking," Jonuta said, "I hear," and moved. Fluidly he executed a sort of dive and came up with his clothes. Only his penis was relaxed, which had so recently been all about him that was tense. Mother of MaHRI-I do believe he has forgotten me completely! What a warrior! Man, lover, boy, and now captain. Especially captain! And . . . warrior. It couldn't be possible that I love him, could it?- beyond the natural fascination with the exotic alien "human"? Imagine issuing HRoehm-challenge to that meaty Kenowa for him! Pulling on greenish tights, he looked at her, blinked. As if in surprise; as if she had somehow materialized in his cabin, in his very bed, and he had only just noticed her presence. She did not smile. "Pos. Naked a-lien in your bed, Captain." The comm said, "We have a clear emission reading. Checking." Jonuta keyed off his comm-box's Send, and the naked alien in his bed looked chastened. "I grovel in apology! He heard me?" "Probably not. Shig's running on adrenaline right 91 now. Don't worry about it, Lynx." (It was the second time he had called her that. She would not ask; she would wait for an opportunity to look it up. If they survived this-whatever it was, this emergency.) "Captain's prerogative. There have been others." Other women in his bed, he means. She cocked her head on one side, ears easing back. "And there will be others?" "Back off, woman. I'm captain, and I'm busy. No games." Comm said, "One minute onto new course." "I grovel in apology, Jonuta. Really. No games. Shall I dress? Tell me what I can do-Captain." "I think that must be about five grovels you owe me. Good. I will like you on your knees, woman. Stay put a moment. We-" Comm interrupted dramatically. "Holy shit and Tao's toenails!" Shig pronounced it "doenails" for the alliteration. "Signature ID on the other ship, Captain." He rattled off a set of serial and registration numbers. "Give me a name, Shig." "Firedancer." HReenee saw Jonuta's nostrils flare and her ears twitched in a response that was less than conscious. Boots on, he jerked erect, not fluidly at all. He bent to boost the gain on the Send mike. "If that's true, he isn't on intersect, the

sister-slicer's on intercept! Run it again, Shig. All of it. Be sure. Programmed for subspace watch?" "Firm." "Coming up on seventeen minutes?" "Coming up on seventeen minutes, Captain. Running it all again. Tense not, pilgrim," Shig said, the last solely to himself. Ritual, Terasak ritual. Cleave to the Way of Tao and learn to mind your own store. Practiced enough, thought about and practiced enough, it 198 could be made to work. "Seventeen minutes, Captain. All set-Captain! Demon changing course!" Jonuta grunted "Uh-huh," in that way humans had of indicating "I see," which to them meant "I understand" and a bit more-and HReenee saw him tense. He couldn't . . . fear anyone, could he? Jonuta? What was the meaning of Firedancer? It was a ship he knew, she perceived at once. And a menace, obviously. But . . . fear? Was it possible? Her ears shifted restlessly. "The rotten little sisterslicer," he muttered. "Shig? Emissions re-check?" Now there was urgency, and his voice was no longer so low. Spacefarer Shiganu started, took a deep breath, and spoke. "Emissions re-check confirms that it is spaceship Firedancer, Captain." "Captain Corunn-dumb," Jonuta muttered. He had just taken out a fresh cotton undershirt from Panish and was pulling it on. V-neck, nine-tenths sleeves, long tail. Snug. It looked very good on him, HReenee thought. Good chest on the man. Nice set of nipples. Charming little hard butt, too. What might he look like, furred? "Corundum commanding, firm," Shig said, and Jonuta glowered; that affirmation was as necessary as nipples on a male. "Course change check in progress- ukh! Demon's course altered to coordinate with ours! Still on inters-you're right, Captain-he's bent on intercept!" HReenee did not think it strange, Jonuta's tiny, tight smile. Humans might; she did not. No, he was not afraid. She watched him, watched him. "That's it then, Shig. Alert crew. Sakyo to forward DS. Kenowa to con. Shiganu to aft DS on my arrival at con. That low bastard Corundum's tired of sending incompetent hired help after me and has decided to 199 try it his incompetent self! Well, we all have to find our guts sometime! Captain to con, Shig." "Firm, Captain. Delighted, Captain! Course change? Evasive action? Redirect Tachyon Trail instructions?" "Nothing so precipitate, no-none of the above. But very good, Shig. You rate First Mate and could probably handle a Master's slot any time you wish. I'd hate to part with you, you understand. You're good, Shig." "Thank you, Captain." The Terasak's voice was as subdued as his planet's sky. He knew the praise was merited, surely. But despite his outward show, Shiganu was one of those people who did not know how to take compliments. "Captain to con, Shig." "Dee-repeat-lighted, Captain!" Jonuta was pulling on his long, darkly scarlet coat. Captain Henry Morgan would have loved it. HReenee loved it-so dashing, that coat with the tights-molded legs flowing out beneath! She pounced off the bed, all bare liquid fur, and flowed to her discarded garments. "I'll ask for consensus when I'm oncon," Jonuta said. "Right, Captain. Anything else, Captain?" "Yes-execute!" "Sorry Captain!" And Shig set off inship alarm. (No one was bothering to consider the reaction of the four men locked up in the Special Hold. No one was looking, either, to see HReenee's automatic reaction to the sudden blaring noise throughout Coronet: tensing, she flowed into a crouch of preparedness for anything, fingers flexing with the claws flicking wickedly out, obviously ready to take on a herd of jemelephants. Purely automatic, every bit of it, and very nearly instantaneous.) The alarm's volume dwindled and Shig voice-overed. "Sakyo to forward DS on the double and stand by. Kenowa to con on the double; captain coming. Stern 200 DS my station. Fourteen-and-a-half minutes on the new course." Booda's eyeballs, we dare not leave that dam' HRa-dem alone, Jonuta remembered, and snapped: "Maintain course. HRadem to the captain's cabin. Remove all scans from demon." He wheeled to catch a bright-eyed and fully-clothed HReenee by both upper arms. "My enemy. Tracking us, looks like. A pirate, and an intelligent devil, named Corundum, who'd rather kill than eat. I can't think of a damned thing you can do, HReenee. But keep your-keep HRadem here with you. That's an absolute." "I can watch! I can be there!" "No and yes. You can be here, and both watch and listen, provided you also keep an eye on HRadem. Actuate that screen and turn it to One, That

monitors the con." Seeing that she continued to look rebellious, he made his face and voice stern. "You are crew, HReenee?" She stiffened. "Firm, Captain!" "Good. Captain's orders are that you remain here in this cabin, and keep HRadem from . . . wandering. The comm stays open." "Oh-Jonuta-" But he looked stern and captainly. She nodded- cursorily, briefly, not really lowering her head. She was HRal, not human, much less human woman. Mere human women, as she considered them. No dramatic leavetaking kiss; Jonuta swung away from her and redshifted his cabin. Without glancing at the rumpled bed she flowed to the controls of the big wallscreen. She flicked it on. Saw a semi-profile of Shig and the console, touched One, saw no change. It was already set to monitor the con, then. She watched, chafing. She wore a sleeveless, round-necked, mini-skirted garment, loose and loosely "girt" with a cord. Its ends dangled. The "smock" was plum-colored, with 201 silver piping at neckline, armholes, and hem; the cord was of the cobwebby-silky-moonbeamy woven stuff that would be a HRalix export. She wore nothing else, save the little jewelry-gaud thing off Satyagraha. Her ears moved, moved as she stared at the viewscreen. Awaiting Jonuta's advent there. She watched, and she chafed. But what can I do? I wanted to watch a space combat, and now evidently there is to be one. I know nothing. I cannot be of value in such. I am only an alien, now. Only an observer . . . This time. She wondered. Will I have to HRoehm-challenge Kenowa? No no, they don't do that. But damn damn, she's to be there at the con with him, and I'm to observe-from here! Damn my cover! How can a warrior of HRalix remain sedentary, an observer like the writer of fiction she pretends to be, when warfare erupts? 16 "Thank you, Shig." Shig nodded and departed for the stern DS station, leaving the con to the captain. Jonuta surveyed the situation. Before him, arrayed in a crescent, was a myriad multi-colored mini-displays, toggles, buttons, teltales, readout panels, scan-winkers. SIPACUM advised that no detectable tracer was on the demon-shown on screen two, in eye-eez turquoise. They were fifteen mins plus a few secs to point of intersect/intercept. No SPOSE yet. (Safe-point for Tachyon Conversion-SPTC-was more descriptive, but Safe-point of Subspace Entry was the phrase in use. There was no subspace-so far as anyone knew. One "merely" made the entire ship, plus everything and everyone in it, into tachyons and sped faster than light-accelerating geometrically.) There was no way to program "hurry it up" into SIPACUM. SIPACUM sought. It would find. Meanwhile, one could only wait. Instant entry into subspace, or conversion to tachyons, was called jam-cram and was not wise. Spacefarers had another name for that desperate ramming of the whole ship into transition phase: they called it Forty Percent City. Probability for survival with undefined damage was just above 70%, but that damage could be serious or worse. The probability for survival intact was a comfortable 59.7731-to-infinity. 202 203 That left, however, a 40.2269% probability of ... whatever happened when a ship vanished and did not return. Utter destruction, presumably. Postulation about alternate universes and other planes of existence were not provable, because no ship that had vanished from the spaceways as a result of having forty percented had reappeared. Either you did immediately, a long long long way away, or-you never did. You stayed "in there," whatever that meant. Presently Jonuta did not think about any of that. He knew it all very well indeed. It was something he lived with. He was always prepared to jam-cram, and hoped never to have to. The demon, once called blip or bandit, remained on course to intersect Coronet's course; to intercept Jonuta. It was shown onscreen. That was dull; the thing was merely there, moving. Measured against the incredible vastness of the star-strewn galaxy, even its incredible velocity was not impressive, onscreen. The demon did remain positively identified. It was Firedancer.' Corundum. Standing before the console on which all those lights pulsed as if independently alive, Jonuta heaved a great sigh. He swung the inship mike over in front of his face and actuated it. A finger's pressure added the signal that sent his voice throughout the ship, his beloved ship-Special Hold specifically excluded. "We are nowhere worth talking about, on a heading we all know. In fifteen minutes

our course will be intersected by that of another ship. It isn't an accident. The other ship is Corundum's Firedancer. We've backtracked him and made a course change, to confirm. He matched it. He knows what he's doing and is on intercept. It's safe to assume that he knows what and who he's intercepting. "That means that for some reason the swine's got his confidence up and is daring to try what he's hired people to do, previously. Kill me. Make no mistake, he's awfully bright and awfully dangerous. He's almost certainly responsible for the deaths of Arel and Srih- while he or rather his agents were trying for me. SIPA-CUM is programmed to find subspace entry point and signal. Has been for over two minutes. If it finds that point, you will hear the alarm. "Presumably it will succeed, and presumably that will mean that we have a decision, a choice. We could jump elsewhere before we reach intersect point." He paused, glancing over as Kenowa hurried into the con-cabin. She was dressed for business, in black skin-tite and subdued scarlet wig. Ready to suit up. With a glance at him, she dropped into the Mate's chair and touched the security button. Three-quarters of a second later she was strapped in. She opened the door to reveal the cassette storage racks, and she waited. Alert, tense, ready. Coronet rushed on toward confrontation. "You were ordered to stations first because there is always the possibility that Corundum will try something at once. I doubt that he will, but on Coronet we're always ready. I'm assuming that Corundum is preparing, calculating and re-calculating, to loose his attack just at intercept point. That's just over fourteen rains along the line. "SIPACUM still announces no entry point. It may find one at any second and it may not. We could also make an abrupt and even strap-down drastic course change. Yes, he would presumably follow. But he'd lose time and some velocity, and he'd not be overtaking us, not in Coronet!" He paused, making a face, loosening the muscles in Ms face. Coronet and Firedancer raced on, at an angle to bring them together. "We can also remain on course and . . . tangle. I would have your advice in such a matter. In other words we can risk all our lives because Corundum 205 wants a showdown now, or we can-presumably- avoid that confrontation. "I am requesting consensus, advice. Sakyo are you on station?" "Sakyo at forward DS, Captain." "Shig?" "Here Captain." Shig sounded breathless. "Just reaching aft DS." "Ship's Second is here," Jonuta said. "Crewmembers HRadem and HReenee hear us ail via con-cabin relay. Sakyo: would you please advise your captain?" It was the formal phrase. Unusually, infrequently, ship's masters requested consensus of crew, even advisories. Jonuta did so no oftener than any other captain. Democracy remained the one true form of freedom, a great and noble idea for government. But it was a rotten one for the military, for families, for spaceship masters, for any organizational unit that happened to be headed by an obviously superior individual. Not just one who thought it was; one who was superior, both demonstrably and objectively-whether by consensus or not. To play at the pretenses of "all persons are born equal and stay that way" or "he puts on his tights one leg at a time the same as we do" under such circumstances was simply childish. Certainly history was full of small people who considered themselves fit to command, to rule. Yet even smaller people were required to deny the fitness to rule of the obviously superior. In such cases democracy-demos kratos, rule by the people-held the potential for ruin of the people. Perhaps one person along the spaceways doubted the superiority of Kislar Jonuta. His name was Corundum. A fine intellect who under other circumstances might well have been a teddy: a demagogue. Spacefarer First Sakyo answered: "All in all, I'd probably rather be on Bleak," he said, but followed it 206 swiftly with seriousness. "That's the easy phrase. I'd prefer to hear my captain's preference, first." "I went formal on you this time, Sak. Request your advice." "And consent, Captain? Advice and consent?" "I'll consent to consensus, Sak." And aren't word-games fun, and isn't trying democracy on a ship in trouble a silly dam' thing to do, Jonuta added. But only to himself. The clock's figures moved, and two spaceships moved. "Defer to Ship's Second Kenowa," Jonuta sighed. They were rushing to the most deadly confrontation and Sak was wary of stating his

feelings. Counsel caution and be outvoted-and lose face. Counsel action and lose . . . life? Suck up to the captain or oppose him? But what did the captain want to do? It was not and never had been easy, being a man; being crew. (Flash of Captain James Lawrence, sprawled in the blood of his final wound on the deck of his smashed, listing Chesapeake. "Don't give up the ship," Lawrence gasped, and died. The words were to become the rallying cry for a nation at war, but they had been bastardly words. Defeated and dying on the debris-littered deck of his dying frigate, he counseled his crew to the impossible. Obey and die to a man! Fortunately for them, Captain Lawrence died first. The crew lived-captives of the British after a fifteen-minute battle.) Spaceship Coronet's second officer enunciated clearly into her commsender: "I am Ship's Second. Captain commands. Command, Captain. At the mark we are thirteen minutes to interse-mark." "Sakyo. Opinion, please." "Corundum got Arel and he got Srih and some innocents, plus some tools of his. That makes it obvious that he's always going to be after us. Not just you, Captain, us-and sometime somewhere on some planet 207 it may be me or Shig. What the vug, let's meet and Poof the flainer out here and sleep easier when we're onplanet." "Spacefarer First Shiganu?" "Captain, Corundum's just a little fellow who wants you gone so he'll be a little bigger little fellow. For once, he's being brave. I vote we encourage and reward that . . . by meeting him. Then let's just end all his problems. Spacefarer First Shiganu, standing by at Defense Systemry and hot to fire, out!" Jonuta did not smile or reveal smile in Ms voice. "Ship's Second?" "Captain," Kenowa said, "I've just asked SIPA-CUM's opinion. If we course-change within nineteen seconds and Corundum matches, we meet him five minutes sooner. I vote that we do." Decakilometers rushed by as Coronet rushed on. "I have consensus," Jonuta said. "Crewmember HRadem?" There was a longish delay because HRadem's step-sib had to show him the commsend in the captain's cabin. Meanwhile Jonuta muttered, "We are not prepared to meet him five minutes sooner, Kenny." Then HRadem spoke: "Crewmember HRadem, Captain! I take my risks with my captain! Fight!" "Crewmember HReenee." Her voice came close onto the other HRal's. "Fight!" "Course remains stet," Jonuta said as if emotion-lessly, "despite Kenowa's suggestion. Stand by to provide solution to Corundum's obvious mental problem. I suggest that you see how fast you can get into space-suits. Kenowa: spacesuits to the captain's cabin, on the triple! Shig: vacate post and acknowledge from cargo hold. Sak: forward DS open from con. Ready DS. Ready drones and confirm. Captain, suiting up, out." 208 Kenowa was already rushing from the cabin with three spacesuits. Thank all gods and powers that the optimum form for the dominant life-type on any planet seemed to be head+body+two arms+two legs! Jonuta reached for his suit, more formally called mlss- for mobile life support system, which was too formal even for the military. The suits' tendency to billow when empty, along with their self-seals, made the process of getting them on swift and almost easy. Jonuta didn't have to think about what he was doing, but he tried. He wanted to think about what he was soon going to do. All that was necessary was to think of absolutely everything, every eventuality possible- and then some. Shig acknowledged his presence in the main hold, and Jonuta muttered swift instructions. Shig doubtless did not understand, but he acknowledged and began obeying. "Helmets, Captain?" That was Sakyo, presumably suited. "Just keep it nearby. If we take a good hit, you know how much good it will probably do, but it's stupid not to be prepared." "Absolutely agree, Captain Cautious sir!" Jonuta had interrupted himself twice, checking in with SIPACUM and then instructing it to prepare itself for switch to combat mode. He had just finished suiting up and checking the thing when the voice came in, on-con from space. "Not cautiously changing course again, Captain Cautious? Sure you do not wish to reconsider? Corundum has come for you." Jonuta recovered almost instantly from the surprise of that. "Suggest you veer, Corundum. We're ever so much 209 fun alive. With you dead, what will I do for excitement in my dull but profitable existence?" He waited for the response, delayed by distance. Sound was a slow traveler, and Corundum had not seen fit to freight his words

on a laser-carrier. "Profitable? Is Corundum to assume that you do not know that you are being systematically looted by The Gray Organization, Jonuta?-because of Corundum's cleverness?" That jolted Jonuta more than the initial advent of Corundum's voice into his con-cabin. It could not be false bravado and braggadocio; if Corundum had not somehow brought on the assault on Jonuta's fortune(s), how else could he know of it? The filthy, cowardly, rotten ... he had somehow sicced TGO on his enemy, Jonuta realized-a fellow outlaw! He tried to sound cool as he tap-tap-tapped into SIPACUM while saying, "What's this? No honor among thieves, thief? I thought you were a traditionalist and a man of some little honor, Corundum!" At the same time, SIPACUM was displaying an advisory. An immediate course change to (string of coordinates) yielded 97.932 probability of immediate conversion to tachyons, and thus redshift/escape. Otherwise, earliest opportunity was (string of coordinates). That was an area a few kilometers beyond the point of course intersection with the ship approaching laterally. It's run or else then, Jonuta mused, and almost he smiled. (Flash of the slaver turned naval officer, John Paul Jones. Replying to the enemy's kind offer to his casualty-strewn ship: "Surrender? I have not yet begun to fight!" Later transferring what remained of his crew from his ship-named Good Man Richard, after the scientist Franklin-to Serapis, the enemy ship he had 210 defeated and now commanded while his own victorious vessel sank.) That smooth, supercilious voice returned to his con-cabin. "It was a pleasant little joke, Jonuta. Irresistible. In transacting some business on that moon of Murph called Dot-Janja was with me; you do remember Janja of Aglaya, Jonuta-Corundum allowed the mine-boss there to believe that he-Corundum, you understand-was Jonuta. On departure, Corundum was treacherously attacked by none fewer than two ships. A Murpher and a TGW. Both soon became . . . part of the spaceways. Dust. Somehow TGO decided that you were responsible-destroying one of their ships is after all unforgivable, far beyond mere piracy or slaving! TGO therefore took sanctions, is that not correct? They were content to punish, to wound you in a way other than physical. Hit the o'erweeningly proud slaver in his credaccounts! Now . . . well, this would seem to present Corundum's opportunity to be a great hero and even ally of those asinine swine of The Gray Organization! Not even all the cosmos has ever been large enough to contain both of us, Jonuta. Now you will depart it." Jonuta deep-breathed several tunes in order to make certain he had control of his voice. Only then did he speak, in a perfectly equable tone: "You're right, you cowardly treacherous swine. The cosmos is not big enough to contain your fat swelled head!" And Jonuta buttoned off. Hurriedly he checked the recorder. Yes, he had all of it. Thoughtfully, he began programming. Instructing SIPACUM. Planning a battle. The little chronometer on the console flashed time to intersect continuously, the final numerals constantly changing: 5.0987/ 6/5/4 .

.. 211 He was even cautious enough, three minutes later, to make certain his outship comm was off, before he spoke to his crew. Thoughtfully, wondering what he had not thought of and allowed for, he also opened the commlink to the Special Hold. "We are about two minutes from intersection with Captain Corundum's Firedancer. In one minute SIPA-CUM will have almost total control of Coronet, in battle mode. Make ready and stand by for severe lurch and heavy acceleration. HReenee, HRadem, on my bed, flat out, under the spread. It battens magnetically. Sak, forward DS will fire automatically. We are going to swing 'up' with relation to our course and Corundum. Firing will be continuous until his blip is 'below' and aft. At that point belly and aft DS will open up while we continue what we'll feel as a steep, back-curving climb. Then every gun on Coronet opens up, with SIPACUM protecting us from our own fire. We will also be taking another little action or two," he added mysteriously. "To our, ah, passengers . . . may I suggest that you hug the floor and each other? We've all got to try to do our best to relax, now-sorry, Shig, except you. Captain out." No one asked what Corundum would be doing, or what if. Instead they kept their silence and occupied themselves in preparing for unpleasantness. No one's guts were going to be ripped out by maneuvering at

prodigious and swift-changing gravity forces, but it was going to feel that way, for a while. The chron twitched down toward 0000. The ships rushed together. Jonuta reactivated his speaker. "Ready, Shig?" "Ready Captain," Shig's voice came back, and he added a carefully, exaggeratedly enunciated "gulp." For this action Jonuta sat at con, and he was strapped in. It was that or be destroyed by his own ship's maneuvering. Across the chair's padded, arms, 212 firmly anchored and padded, lay his terminal keyboard. Just to his left was a vocal link to his "First Mate," SIPACUM. On his right was the chair's padding-encased inship communicator. Before him the crescent shape of the console wrapped around his area of vision, from periphery to periphery. SIPACUM fed him information on a dozen telits, screens, and simple lighted signal panels. Seconds twitched away on the digital chron, where tenths of seconds flowed as if rushing to violent confrontation. He glanced sideward as Kenowa hit the chair beside him and was fastened safely in within a second. "They're suited and bedded," she reported. "Replace radar viewscreen with schematic." "Firm, Captain." Before them, above the banked console array, the radar readout was displayed on a 30 x 50 sem screen. It jittered in response to Kenowa's action, swam, became a cross-hatched grid like an oversized electronic sheet of graph paper. "Include us in the schematic," Jonuta told her and, to the rightward mike, "Shig?" "Ready, Captain. I'll be fine, Captain. Just losing a kilo of weight in pure sweat every ten seconds or so. But I'm firmly tethered, Captain, and my suit's pumped up so I look fat as a pregnant magwart." "Charming," Jonuta said. And to Kenowa, "Place us as observers, nine degrees ab-ah, very good! Oh we do work well together, Kenny!" Now he was watching both ships, his and Corun-dum's. Two shapes moving along a pair of electric-blue lines that came together to form an angle a few sems ahead. His vantage was as if he was behind, left of, and above his own ship. For SIPACUM it was the simplest of mobile graphic depictions. "Sure Jone," she said, "always. Hey Jone-I love you." 213 He twisted face and mouth from the inship comm and said quietly, all twisty-lipped to keep his words private, "Yeah . . . and ain't it lovely to love each other and have such a very nice time giving those two HRal a real break." She chuckled. It was that, not a giggle. A knowing chuckle, from the throat. Sure, he expressed their feeling of superiority at lovemaking; they were among the best and knew it. How nicely he put it, their mutual catting around! Two bright flashes from the Firedancer simulation caught Jonuta's eye and commanded his full attention. Two objects detached themselves from Corundum's ship-schematic. They moved toward Coronet as icy green pulses. Jonuta muttered hurriedly to SIPACUM, meanwhile tap-tap-tapping. Then: "Now, Shig!" After a pause during which he deliberately counted mentally to twelve, Jonuta added to all onboard listeners: "Two missiles launched by enemy just short of intersect. My guess is they're lampreys, because that's Corundum's style. With a little help from the con, Spacefarer First Shiganu just launched-not dumped, launched-several large items of cargo. I hope it's a lot more valuable to us this way than if we sold it; it may let us live to sell the rest. Shig?" "All away, Captain, at speed! And the vacuum's trying to pull me right out after them!" "Securing outer cargo hatch," Jonuta said. "For those virgins among you," he went on for the benefit of the two HRal, "a lamprey is a vicious little bastard of a device also called a Computer Traumatizer. That's what it does. It's kinetotropic, meaning it's drawn to a deliberately moving object. A spacer, for instance. It fastens itself to the hull and immediately starts trying 214 to become part of it. That makes it mighty hard to remove. Meanwhile, impact triggers its mechanisms: several continuous commsenders. It sends commands on several tight beams direct to ship's computer, and keeps it up indefinitely. Conflicting commands, negating commands, contradictory junk-orders. The result is that you can't trust a computer that's gone the electronic equivalent of psychotic. "That is Corundum's style, you see-indirect attack, with his hands all clean. Ah-our 'garbage' is moving away at speed, toward incoming blips. If they are torpedoes instead of lampreys, we won't feel the detonations, because here . .

. we . . ." Jonuta watched the chron winding down to 00.0207 and down . . .  
. "GO!" This time he shouted, and he was right. Away they went. Everyone onboard spacer Coronet had become a mere passenger, including the captain. Everyone onboard felt immediate stress, and worse. Forward Defense Systemry let loose and kept on letting loose, piercing the dark of space with the blinding horror of ravening energies. But no one on Coronet felt that. What they felt was the ghastly lurch, the abrupt piling on of g-forces as the ship yanked itself "upward" and accelerated wildly. Even Jonuta was surprised. After having chosen the action and inputting it, he had deliberately added an additional instruction to his "Mate," SIPACUM: Add one random factor, at any time. SIPACUM did, and almost at once. It imparted a bloody awful roll that tried to pull stomachs loose and stuff them down into the small intestine. And up through esophagi. Simultaneously. Meanwhile Coronet was completing the Jonuta-chosen pattern. 215 HRadem was busy trying to throw up, which wasn't easy with all kinds of gravities sitting on his face. Sakyo was encouraging his autofiring guns with ridiculous mouthings that were shot through with bits of ancient Japanese-like tracers. That they were obscenities no one would ever know, including Shiganu-who was just grunting and cussing with little imagination while batting about the cargo hold like a balloon blown up and released, untied. The miss/suit protected his body. It did nothing for his cerebellum. Shig didn't know if he was coming, going, or had been. Jonuta's gaze remained fastened on the schematic that SIPACUM continued to provide. He saw all kinds of billowing bright flashes and brilliant trace-lines- while both ships continued unhit. Firedancer's behavior was now in evasive mode, just as manic as Coronet's. A little bluegreen blip indicating a lamprey came together with a little blue blip from Coronet; a radioactive waste neutralizer off spacer India Spring. The blips became one. Lovely! Hope they have a long and happy relationship, Jonuta thought, watching the other lamprey shakily start to follow Coronet. At present acceleration that was impossible. The blip lurched, waggled as it was out-accelerated, and went into a drift. Then it began moving purposefully toward another spatially-afloat chunk of India Spring cargo. Scratch one multispectral thermal stabilizer and mark one spaceship saved, by its captain's cleverness. Now the manic onscreen ship representations resolved themselves, and SIPACUM shot him a few coordinates. Another set followed, as it came up with an extrapolation of Corundum's probable course. An adjustment followed almost instantly, since Firedancer abruptly jiggled and seemed to slide sidewise. Corundum had programmed a randomization factor, too. 216 Both ships were climbing to the gridscreen's "northeast." While that was true, and interesting, their courses were far from the same. A "northeasterly direction" consisted of quadrillions of kilometers of space. Besides, Corundum knew that he had input a loop: Coronet would continue moving along a 360° arc until he intervened. On impulse-the human randomization factor, Lord Admiral Zulfikar of the old Empire had called it- Jonuta intervened. SIPACUM yielded him full control at his first touch. Combat circuitry continued on independent. Since Coronet was starting a "due east" turn, battle computer helped out by letting go with every bit of portside armament. That was not much, but it did help Coronet's move to starboard just a little, adding a bit of impetus. Of course it was also mucking up Corundum's grid-screen with a big bright light show, which would give him something to think about for a few moments. Did Jonuta know something he didn't know or was this merely random firing? (Yes.) Meanwhile his own DS had hurled out hungry energies to destroy-nothing. It would not have been just nothing, though, had Jonuta not yielded to impulse and interfered with his own course instruction. Firedancer fired through the spot where Coronet would have been, in about three seconds. "Damn, hell and Booda's balls! The bastard! He's got a superb battle computer-Qalaran, I'll bet!-and he's not one bit less smart than I am!" O ye gods and grumlines, Sakyo thought, I could not have heard that! "Wrong," Kenowa said quietly. "Corundum's smarts are mis-tempered by his arrogance. How do we use that big ego of his?" "And stuff it down his throat," Jonuta muttered. "Or up the other end. Damn, but you're smart,

Kenny!" 217 He was programming as he spoke, calling for another "dive" along with a skim-bounce continuation of his new "eastward" course. For one minute, nineteen seconds. At 1'20", SIPACUM was instructed to randomize with a view toward moving back to rejoin battle. "Shig! Get that Qalaran crate ready! You have one minute to do that and getcher ass out of there. Crew: try to relax. Insanity re-starts in one minute. We won this one, because we negated both that rotten flainer's lampreys-they'd have ended us. We also didn't get hit." Jonuta paused a moment before adding, "We didn't hit him, either. Now, we maneuver. Both of us dance around and circle in for the next try. Trying to cross the T, HReenee, in reverse." Oh, HReenee, HReenee, Kenowa mused grimly. Stuff it up yours, you cat-eared furball! But that reminded her of HRadem, and she smiled in spite of herself. "Surrender?" Sakyō practically shouted, obviously high on excitement while his computer analyzed every shot fired and provided him with a dizzying report. "I have not yet begun to fight!" "Sighted lamprey, sank same," Shig's voice came, and even Jonuta did not know the reference. Home-world's second "world" war was one that had not occupied much of his time. It was required on Terasaki, where children learned that after all the blond Americans attacked the tiny island people because they were different, the Japanese won. For the first time HReenee's voice and HRal accent came clearly over inship comm: "Do not walk on me!" By the time Jonuta had mentally converted that to "Don't tread on me" and started laughing, so had everyone else. 218 Dwarfed by suns, dwarfed by planets and their moons and even by asteroids and orbitlessly meandering chunks of space-junk, two dots traversed thousands and thousands of kloms of Prussian blue space. Neither space nor the cosmos took note or cared, but each of those tiny dots was bent on erasing the other. 17 An hour and a half later elation was gone and sweat was in. Once the two craft had come rushing toward each other and Jonuta had managed to break it off, because Corundum had the advantage. For the next twenty-five minutes he chased Coronet until Jonuta stopped all acceleration, then rattled their teeth and kidneys by jamming on deceleration, fired everything he had aft and kept firing, and sped away again directly toward a frozen planet far from its cooling sun. He blew up one of its tiny satellites and Corundum had to abort the chase to get out of the mess. A quarter-million kilometers later Jonuta came hurtling in with the advantage, and Corundum's evasion was undeniably brilliant. Since he was using absolutely every bit of velocity they could bear, Jonuta could only rush on past, and on, and on, turning slowly. Two hours gone. And away they went again. Jockeying. Plotting. Jockeying. Planning. Feinting, amid futile bursts of fire sufficient to level most of a good-sized city amid goutts of orange and yellow and dazzling white flame. And away, barreling through that same solar system, seeking something to be turned to advantage. Seeking position. The fun had gone with the clock, which insisted that they had been at it for three hours, thirteen minutes. Jonuta found advantage and flattened everyone, 219 220 cheekbones trying to slice through skin, and slammed Coronet at Firedancer in a big beautiful T. Corundum went into a lateral at nine g's, an "upward" jig at eleven g's that became a long turn around a cloud-locked planet, a fantastic deceleration at minus-six g's aided by a dip into the planet's upper gravitic pull-which incidentally killed his crewman Sakbir- and went rushing directly at that tired old star. Jonuta gave it up again and went into a long circle to come at him again. The fourth hour twitched past, and bladders complained. Crew on both ships were silent. They felt drained, thirsty, weary as if they had run all those millions of kloms without benefit of ships. And they were plain dam' tired of it, and disheartened. They were also sweat-soggy. Neither captain gave it up. Forty-six minutes more dragged past, while Corundum evaded and countered, and Jonuta avoided and swung-and here came Corundum rushing at him, snout to snout. Simulation screen showed the two ships on the same course, heading in different but not opposite directions. Directly toward each other. Jonuta's teeth worried his sensuous lower lip. A swift adjustment persuaded SIPACUM to show distance at the lower corner of the screen. The figures flashed almost too rapidly to be read, flicker-changing

downward. More sweat erupted and trickled. Corundum's error became immediately apparent, but Jonuta did not smile. The error did not benefit him but could kill them both. The two ships were hurtling toward each other faster than World Series pitches or explosively launched missiles. At thousands of kilometers per second and only thousands of kloms from nose-to-nose impact. At their combined velocities that impact would imitate the eruption of a volcano. It was a particularly nasty form of chicken, because 221 he who veered off became an immediate target for the other's guns. Lurch "upward" with "relation to Corundum and offer him a lovely belly shot, free. "Dive" and expose the perfect target: a dorsal surface loaded with sensitive and essential equipment. Slew and show him a lovely broadside expanse of practically unarmed hull as vulnerable as the belly of a land fish. The alternative was simple: remain on course. That way both won and both lost, by destroying everything and everyone onboard both ships. Firedancer and Coronet, on collision course. Corundum and Jonuta in what each hoped was the final confrontation-involved in cosmic chicken. In ancient parlance, each had a tiger by the tail. Hang on and be banged bloody and senseless in his bounding efforts to escape or turn. Let go and be torn to bits when he turns and springs. "His ego," Jonuta muttered, and actuated ship-to-ship comm. "Corundum, just for the record . . . your mother was a syphilitic jewel and you are clearly most closely related to that portion of the anatomy politely known as the anus." O gods and mother, Sakyo thought, wishing he could scratch the sweat trickling down through salt-flakes left by the evaporated sweat of the last round. The captain's gone jobby-that schoolboy macho stuff isn't like him at all. Naughty name-calling, for shitsake! "Admittedly this is stupid and Corundum might be said to have erred," Corundum's voice came back. Shockingly, frighteningly fast. "But what am I to do? He who course-changes now is lost-a target the size of a planet! What are we to do? Which of us would trust a non-aggression pact?" He said 'I,' Shig thought. Holy Tao's dung-he said T! "Simple, idiot," Jonuta said, still working to needle 222 the swollen ego hurtling at him. His finger moved to depress a key and he dragged back a lever. "Shrapnel!" Instantly he depressed another key, giving full control to SIPACUM. "HANG ON!" "Shrap-?" With a buh-chung completely lost in space where no one heard the tree's fall, Coronefs cargo hatch was blown away. The smashed crate that had been positioned on that ventral hatch flung through into vacuum and continued toward Firedancer-at Coronet's velocity. In the same instant Coronet groaned mightily as SIPACUM took complete control and strove to save itself and incidentally the day and the ship. Kenowa's beginning "Jo-" was crammed down her throat by a sudden organ-crushing application of gravity and "upward" lurch that also tried to stuff her teeth and tongue down her throat with her voice. HReenee tried to scream and no one heard because she could not. As close as the two ships were, Corundum's superb instruments registered the "shrapnel" as an absolutely flurrying cloud of small objects, to his intense alarm. His ship's automatic alarm system went wild. So did his simulation screen, which strove to show each piece of shattered crate and all five thousand, seven-hundred sixty of the superb polykel ball bearings of Jonuta's home planet. Like ancient grapeshot, all that shrapnel was rushing at Firedancer at the same velocity as the ship that had been coming at them. It, in turn, was now instead trying to kill its human components by doing its best to stand on its tail, wiggle, and set a new velocity record, "straight up." Having arrogated personal control of his gunnery for the sheer satisfaction of it in this final confrontation 223 with his chosen enemy, Corundum never fired a shot. In a micro-instant he saw that it was the final confrontation; that he was dead. If a mere ten per cent of those 5,760 tiny missiles struck Firedancer directly enough to pierce the hull rather than be deflected in an ultra-high speed roll-off, his ship would become an instant sieve. That was certainty. Forty Percent City was an uncertainty and therefore a possibility. It was the only possibility for the continued existence of Captain Corundum, and never mind how slim the possibility was. While Coronet

blazed safely "upward," Corundum hit the panic button. He jam-crammed. Firedancer, along with everything and everyone onboard, was instantly converted to tachyons and vanished from the spaceways. The other ship disappeared from Jonuta's simulation screen. For a moment he merely stared. Corundum . . . jam-crammed. . . . Corundum . . . gone?! Relief combined with a strange sense of loss to leave him feeling overused, drained, let down, saggy. Eventually, straining against killing inertia even to move and use a finger, he seized control from SIPACUM. He punched for gentle but swift deceleration. "Re . . . port," he gasped, and had soon heard the voice of each crewmember of Coronet. HRadem sounded rather as if he might be speaking from the heart of a sun, but he was alive and motile. As well as mobile, Jonuta hoped. "Captain Corundum has just gone Forty Percent City," he said, in an unusually quiet voice. It even seemed less deep than normal. Kenowa sat staring at the simulator screen. Numb, slack-jawed. Gone? Really? 224 Abruptly Sako whooped one of his "Hooo-rayyy!" yells. Then Shig came back, mock-practical, mock disappointed: "Shit. We won. Now we have to proceed to Bleak." Laughter filled Coronet, and released tension, but did not rock the decelerating spaceship.

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