

*"I'LL BUY YOUR SHIP, CAPTAIN HELLFIRE," JANJA SAID ALMOST FORMALLY.*

Now it was the turn of all three to stare at the diminutive girl-woman with the almost white hair and impossibly steel-pale eyes; native of a pre-technological planet; former slave; formerly Corundum's...companion, then Hellfire's; always her own. A woman of a mere twenty years who hated the constant Fry setting of Hellfire's stopper and who kept hers on One because she did not like killing, or even violence; who had killed again and again, in defense of self and in revenge.

Janja, once Janjaheriohir of pastoral, perhaps idyllic Aglaya.  
Janjagiaya, pirate.

# SPACEWAYS

SPACEWAYS

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# SPACEWAYS

#8

**UNDER TWIN SUNS**  
**JOHN CLEVE**



**PLAYBOY  
PAPERBACKS**

SPACEWAYS \*8: UNDO! TWIN SUNS

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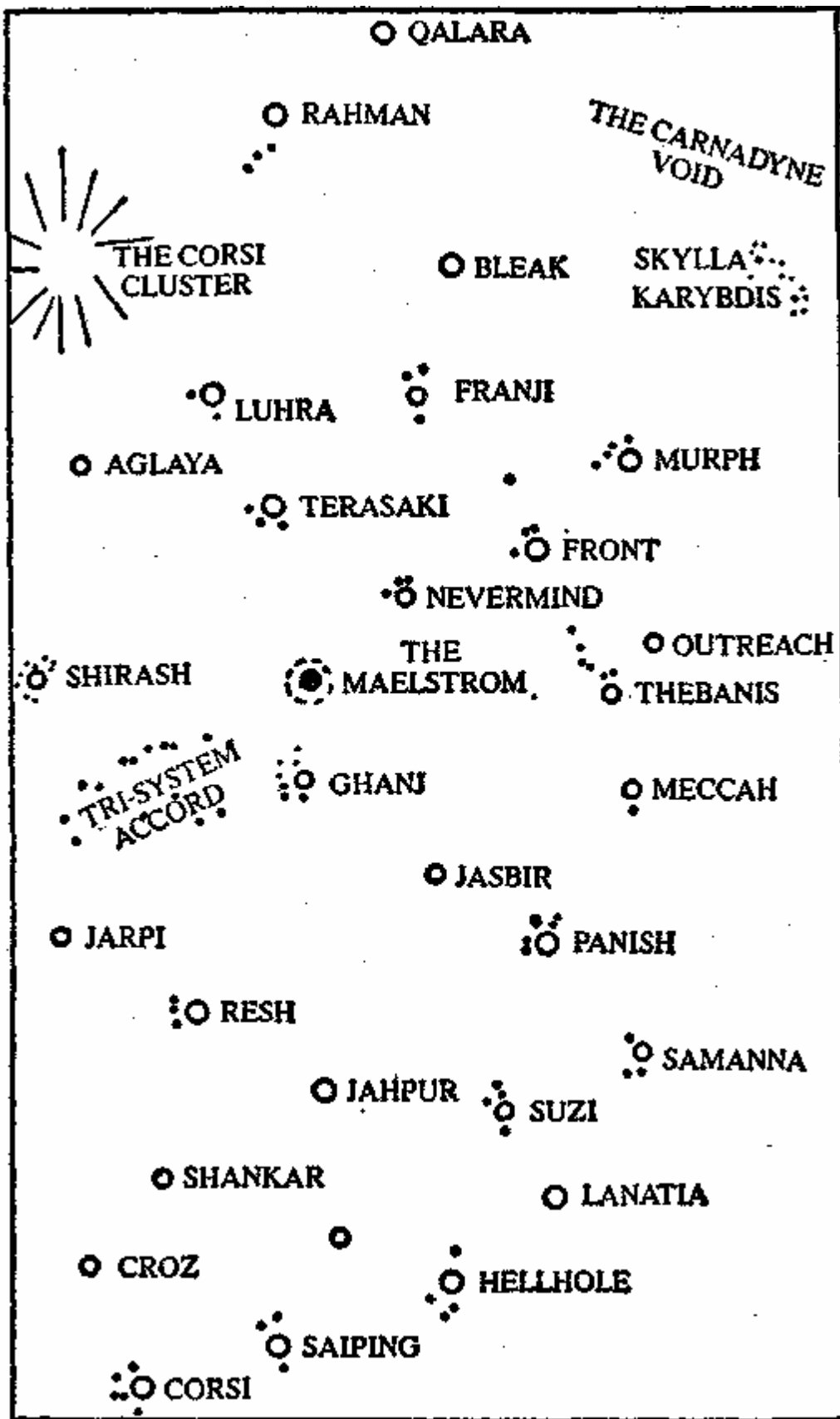
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*Rail travel at high speed is not possible because passengers, unable to breathe, would die of asphyxia.*

-Great Britain's Reverend Dr. Dionysius Lardner, mid-XIX century

*Space travel is utter bilge.*

-Great Britain's Astronomer Royal Dr. Richard Woolley, 1956



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. / 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)*

*/ know not of my journey's end Nor the time nor toll it will have me spend. But / 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

"They were undoubtedly the weirdest bunch I ever seen come off a spacer, I swear."

"Tell me, Jahl. Go ahead, describe them, please. What did you see?"

"Uh, don't get me wrong, Inspector. They was all Galactics, I mean. Humans, I mean. Except the Jarp, of course. But everybody accepts Jarps."

Stevedore Jahl waited, but the official across the table just kept staring with Those Eyes. Emotionless eyes. Hooded, unreadable eyes like brown rocks, flat as a snake's eyes.

*Inspector Snake-eyes*, Jahl thought.

The recorder light was off. Jahl knew the little thing responded to a voice, starting instantly and shutting itself off when the voice subsided. Jahl gave it another sidelong glance, and swallowed.

"Right," the stevedore said, and just had to watch the glo-red light on the inspector's recorder. It flashed hot red at the single word, then went dull orange. It seemed to return Jahl's stare, waiting. Staring like a cat. Like the inspector, all blank-eyed. It made Jahl nervous. Better to handle and load machines than have them give you blank looks and wait for you to talk to them!

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Jahl wanted to scratch, down in the coverall crotch, and refrained only with an effort of will. Holy cess! This was the first time Jahleh Ord had ever face-to-faced with The Gray Organization! It made Jahl feel nervous as a hust in a mosque.

Or as a stevedore on space station Soljer, having to talk to the superest of super-spooks: TGO.

"Right," Jahl said again. "First, the ship." The recorder's light went *bip . . . blip, blip-bip*.

"Would you stop looking at the light on my recorder and tell me your story, Stevedore First Ord? Try to relax! You're getting out of work talking to me, but I didn't come here to settle down with you for life."

That didn't make Jahl relax, but it did promote a grin. "No. No, *Inspector*. Uh no uh the ship-" And there went Jahl's eyes again, straying in the direction of that damned blinking machine.

The inspector heaved a sigh. "The thing just makes you uncomfortable, doesn't it. All right then, Jahl. I've got a pretty good memory. We'll just dispense with it. There." An un-uniformed sleeve rustled as the TGO investigator shut the recorder off completely, and even handed it to Jahl. "Here, you hold the flainin' thing. Let's just talk, Jahl."

"Oh, I, uh, I'm s-thanks, Inspector. I do feel better. That little light just . . . you sure it's all right not to record? You won't get in trouble or anything, will yer?"

The smile was tiny. "I won't get in trouble, Jahl, and neither will you. Promise. Tell me about that spaceship."

Jahl heaved a deep sigh and was visibly more re-laxed. Good, the inspector thought. Everything Jahl said would be recorded on the biochip contained in one of the decorative slubs of contrasting thread in this blouse, anyhow. The circuits were unbelievably tiny, far tinier than the ones in any imaginable microproces-sor. And it was pure organic, a little (! smaller than little!) cluster of synthetic molecules.

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With TGO, the ends justified the means, whatever the end result was, and whatever the means necessary to reach it. The crude blinker-recorder had been a deliber-ate trick. Far better to make a nervous witness even more nervous, then relax the poor bug by heroically removing the apparent source of the nervousness. And recording every word and sound anyhow.

"Well, Inspector," Jahl said, almost leaning back, face loose, "that ship wasn't much to look at. Not at all.

Not what you'd call a sleek spacer, yer know, or even a good-looking one. Not at all! A relic. A real homely spaceship. An old ram-scoop, see, the kind of spacer they call the duck-billed plastipuss of the spaceways. Been painted pretty recent, but that ship has took some hard knocks since then. Been bunged up and neglected since then. I mean, a paint job of dull orange and *pinkl* What kind of colors is that for a spacer, anyhow?"

The inspector had gone back to being Snake-eyes again. Might as well have been named Basilisk. Probably not, Jahl mused-but who knew what kind of names TGO people had? No one ever saw TGO people. You just heard about TGO. The Gray Organization! Jahl didn't know anyone who'd ever seen one.

This one hadn't given a name, and a stevedore on space station Soljer wasn't about to ask!

That's the way this inspector looked and stared, though. Like that lizard on "Captain Starstrider," Jahl's third-favorite non-interactive weekly holovision program. A basilisk, off some planet called Saiping. (But the in-spector wasn't Saipese, either. Jahl had seen them. They were mostly sort of old-gold colored.)

Jahl cleared a dry throat, wishing for an everchil pak of pop.

"So the ship come in and was cleared. No sweat. I seen it on the scope. Onscreen. I was on break and Farg let me up in the Security tower with him, so I could

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watch people come off all those ships that've been just all over. That ship come in and was cleared, and berthed. Grappled in. Airlocks linked and sealed and navel tunnel opened, into the station."

The inspector nodded encouragingly. Unwise to let this brainless Joser relax too much. But try to rush someone like Jahl Ord and blow a good interview. / *hope it's going to be a good interview. I could be doing something more interesting-like picking wax out of my ears.*

"Then, here come the first person off that ship. I stared. I had to stare! I just kept on staring-my pop even went flat! She was black, Inspector, that first person out of the navel tunnel off that ship. Blacker'n your hair or mine. I mean her skin shined purple under the station's overheads, I swear!"

Jahl paused to shake a black-locked head in recollection while the inspector made another encouraging nod.

"But then there was her hair. Yaller! I swear! I mean *yellow!* Yellow as a as I mean real bright yaller, Inspector. On top of that shiny purple-black skin! Like-I mean *black*, Inspector!"

Basilisk-eyes nodded solemnly. Showed all the emotion of a packing crate.

"She came out of that navel tunnel and sort of sidled to her 1-her right. *My* left. She was wearing a black vest, just a vest, arms bare except for a flashy bracelet, and a bright red halter. Just a band across her, uh, around her breasts. They weren't, uh, tiny either, if yer know what I mean. Then she had on a pair of bright yellow pants. Those low-waisted ones called tummy-teasers, fit tighter'n skin. Tight to the knees I mean *tight*, and wide at the bottoms. And she wore a stopper. Low, on her right thigh. Way she was letting her eyes wander around, she looked like she knew how to use it. Uh-just my impression, you understand."

"You say her eyes were wandering around? On feet, or sort of slithering? Or on stalks?"

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"Huh?"

The inspector sighed and shook that close-cropped head. "Never mind, Jahl. Sorry. She looked competent and her gaze was shifting, conning the station. Looking for trouble. Watchful."

"That's what I said, right. Firm." Jahl nodded. Was there something wrong with saying that weird-looking woman's eyes wandered? Hell, Farg's were popping out and wandering right between her legs, and he'd said so.

"Uh-since this is official, let's don't say she was looking for trouble. She was watching out for it, all right?" Jahl waited for the inspector's nod, then: "Then came the next one. Another woman. Real short, this one, and real pale. I mean *pale*. Her skin, her hair- almost white, I swear-even her *eyes*. Like water or something. Sort of blue gray."

"You saw the color of her eyes from the Security booth?"

"It's up so the Securityman on guard can see, Inspector, and I've got good eyes, firm."

"Were her eyes wandering, Jahl?"

"You-are yer making fun of me, Inspector?"

"Sorry, Jahl. Of course not. And she also had large-ish legs with large muscular calves."

Jahl stared. "You already know?"

"No, no." The inspector actually smiled, and gestured. "First you described someone who is celldyed, because people don't come *that* black, and not with yellow hair at all, and parents wouldn't do that to a child. So she's had a chromatic cyto-engineering job. Secondly you described an unlikely combination even for a celldye subject, and so I would suppose she was an Aglayan. Is."

"An Aglayan." Jahl looked as if a fly could have walked around on one eyeball without the stevedore's noticing. So this was what made a TGO inspector-good listening and good guessing! "Pos, she had thickish legs for her size, and big calves."

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"An Aglayan," the inspector said nodding. "A non-tech planet, on the Protected list. The only pale race in the galaxy-so far. And short, with good legs. Most of them are, uh, slaves."

"Oh. Oh-high-gravity planet, hmm? Anyhow she wore a stopper too. She had on a pair of black tights, boots, and a

tunic-white. A white tunic, pos. About the only color that wouldn't contrast with her skin! She come down the ramp and sort of sidled to her left. Never glanced at the black one. Watched the station. They was each maybe three meters from the mouth of the navel, on either side of it. Watching. Cool and flat-eyed. Just looking, keeping watch. With stoppers on their hips. Or their thighs, rather."

The inspector knew that "navel" was space station slang for the access tunnels that extended from the station's perimeter into the airlocks of the ships berthed outside. They were secured airtight and called umbilical-cals. Stationers turned that into "navel." Gods knew what turned "platypus" into "plastipuss." Just ignore, the inspector assumed.

"Suspicious," the inspector said. "Wary characters. So you watched them."

"Shit, I was already-excuse me."

"I've heard that word." The smile was subdued, but encouraging.

"Uh, firm. I watched them. And here come the third weirdo. Now him I recognized!"

"A man this time! And someone you recognized on sight?"

"I mean I recognized what that shader was. Is. An Outie. From Outreach. They all dress wild, you know? Big wide-brimmed hat. Bright yaller shirt, real blousy-sleeved. High-necked-a Saipese shirt. But he was an Outie. With a big fancy flashy belt buckle and blue tights-I mean *blue*, royal blue-and yaller boots. And, uh, an air about him. Like he owned the station. Cool,

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very cool. I remember thinking how swell of him, Captain of that ugly old ship, to have two women as security guards! Really unusual and good-shaped women, so he could just walk out that way. Like a real shah or a clan-chief."

"All right. That does sound like an Outreacher-and he is. His name is Trafalgar Cuw."

Jahl said, head cocked, "Falger Q?"

"Firm. Did he wear a stopper, too?"

"Pos!" Jahl nodded very positively. Jahl obviously had a fine mental picture of Trafalgar Cuw, who the inspector knew very well was not the captain of that ship, or any other. "Tall man. Good build, rangy. Nice looking too, just . . . uh, like an actor, yer know?"

"Theatrical. And garishly attired."

"Right. And wearing those wild clothes like I said, too. He walked straight ahead, toward Spoke H-the ship's berthed in H-2-and then I couldn't see him."

"Out of your vision, you mean?"

"Right. Firm."

"Walked to the mouth of the spoke," the inspector said, leaning back, eyes shuttered, "and turned to face the ship. Back against the wall-section beside the spoke-tunnel's mouth. Eyes on the mouth of the-I mean, gazing at the mouth of the umbilical. Also ready, and covering. Very cautious people. Then what, Jahl?"

"Then here come the next one. The tall skinny woman. Hair like copper or brass. Eyes like rocks or pieces of mahogany. Almost black. Thin, I mean, that one. Even her mouth. All angles, that woman. Pale purple tights on her legs, making 'em look longer and thinner. Black boots and a black military-like tunic that just made her look thinner. But . . . there was a look about her. Mean, I think. She looked like trouble, you know?"

"I do know, Jahl. A stopper, of course."

"Right. A stopper on her hip. The right hip-I spotted that because it looked so different from the others."

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She checked her, uh, guards?-and looked back up the ramp toward the ship. Called out something, I think. And here come the Jarp."

Jahl paused, got nothing from ole basilisk eyes, and went on. "A Jarp. Bright orange with hair like the red on a kid's toy, big round eyes."

"I know what Jarp looks like, Jahl," the inspector said. The voice was pleasant but the lips were firm and the eyes-unchanged.

"Sorry, Inspector. Jarps do look pretty much all just about alike, don't they."

"They say that about us Galactics, but go ahead."

"The Jarp was carrying the two satchels. Go-bags. They looked stuffed. It wore knee-boots, red, and red trunks, and a white halter that looked just obscene. I mean, you know Inspector-Jarps. Bulges above and below."

"Two breasts," the inspector intoned in a bored voice, "and a penis. And a vagina, not to mention one each ovary and testicle. Just so. A Jarp, from Jarpi. Cinnabar, a.k.a. 'Raunchy,' former slave of course, wanted for nothing except being on that ship. Captain Hellfire's ship."

"The skinny one. That woman captains that ship!"

"You're a marvelously perceptive person, Jahl," the inspector said, in a voice dry as the Great Sekhari Desert. "Fifth off the ship: a Jarp, carrying two go-bags. Stuffed. And . . ."

"Heavy looking bags, from the way it carried 'em. It stood there while the skinny one-excuse me, the captain-went to talk with the black one. Facing out and looking all around, both of 'em. Watching. Then the black one went back up the ramp and into the ship. Onto the ship, I mean."

"It's a celldye job and she ordered it herself. She's a master ship handler named Quindaridi."

"Quinda-all right. Master ship handler, huh?"

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"Believe it. Then wh-"

"Can't go by appearances, can yer!" Jahl shook a rakishly capped head. The cap was the same orangey-tan as the stevedore's coverall. "I mean, you don't look like what I always thought a TGO inspector looked like, even."

"You probably don't look like a stevedore either, Jahl. But come on, you didn't even know TGO had inspectors, I'll bet! Then what happened?"

The inspector checked a large, squared-off wristchron on a smallish wrist. It was a not-so-subtle reminder. TransGalactic Order was big and busy. They'd been at this inquiry for twenty minutes and so far Jahleh Ord of planet Jorinne had said precious little.

*Only assaulted my ears and linguistic sensibilities*, the inspector thought. *This Joser has all the brain power and education of a gravel road. All the imagination of an undershirt.*

Which of course made this Joser perfect for the job Jahl held. Cargo-handler on space station Soljer syn-chronously orbiting planet Jorinne, which in turn orbited stars Payne and Humason, or tried to orbit them.

The Jorinner-Joser was good for this kind of interview, too. Just the facts. Facts and a few amusing opinions, without speculations or embellishments. This exercise and the recording would be used in TGO's training, sure. An inspector got a bonus for that.

This wasn't really difficult for the inspector, who was also a Joser-or had been born such. And who knew that all men, women, persons, creatures, things were not born equal-and that even if they were, some over-came that debility.

*Most don't. Good! Stevedores are necessary. Are we TGO inspectors?*

"I seen-saw that Outie start toward the skinn-the captain, and it was right then that the two others come into my view. Out of spoke-tunnel H, heading for their

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ship in the berth next door, H-I. And then the SolSecs moved in, out of nowhere like, and them two put up a fight!"

"The two newcomers heading for Berth H-I, you mean."

"Firm!"

"By coincidence," the inspector said for the benefit of the busily recording biochip, "the ship berthed be-side the notorious *Satana* of the infamous Captain Hellfire belonged to the minor smuggler Karmal Pak."

Jahl said, "Uh."

The inspector scratched one stiff-looking green-bloused sleeve. "By coincidence, Pak and his crewmember Whiel came back from The Barber Shop, station Soljer's bar and lounge . . . just as Hellfire and company alighted from *Satana*. Sometimes I think that if it were not for coincidence, Jahl, very little of import would ever take place!" The inspector paused, making a mental note to substitute "and TGO" for "Jahl," later. Perfect training tape! "So Pak and Whiel were accosted by your station Soljer Security-SolSec-and reached for their weapons.

"And . . . now do think carefully, Jahl, and tell me what took place then, and I do mean just who did what."

The three Soljer Securers, one of each sex so far as Trafalgar Cuw could see, popped up in their spiffy green and blacks as if by magic. The two they accosted hit the deck, drawing as they went down. Real pros at taking care of themselves, Trafalgar Cuw thought, even while he was feeling relief. The SolSeccers weren't here for him and his companions, several of whom were perfectly capable, both in mental set and expertise, of wiping out every SolSeccer on Soljer!

They had come close on Mott-chindi's space station . . .

Meanwhile the two suspects squeezed their stopper

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grips so fast that the leader of the security squad was still mouthing ritual detaining phrases when she was hit by a Number Two stopper beam. That meant Dance, on Jorinne and most places; the dangerous knockout Two setting was used on stoppers manufactured out *in* the galaxy's boonies.

(Weird that most of the galaxy had been settled from ships Out There, on the spiral arm where Urth/Homeworld and Hawking were, so that the Galaxy Center area was called the Farther Reaches!)

One of the other SolSeccers was hit by the same beam, and he and his superior lurched into the weird, ugly little shuffle-dance almost in unison.

The third member of the security squad used his stopper-set on One, policer regs-on Whiel.

*Oh wonderful*, Trafalgar Cuw thought. *Messy. A and B put the Freeze-Dance on C & D, while E zaps B! You need a program to know who's doing what to whom!*

It could get a lot messier than that, he knew, with darling twitch-jerk Hellfire around. Only semi-competent as captain and a certified psychotic, so far as T. Cuw of Outreach was concerned. If Hellfire had a philosophy, it had to be *When in doubt, shoot!*

"Captain!" Trafalgar yelled. "please! Do *nothing!* Go your way! No Three-beams here, *please!* Please Captain-into the spoke!" Then, "Janja, we don't dare ignore this, because here we are, and the bad guys are getting the better of the good guys. Put a Two on the blue shirt, will you?" *So we bad guys can help out the good guys . . .*

His bright yellow sleeve had rippled and rustled with his gestures; Janja's bright yellow-white hair bounced as she dropped to one knee. Her stopper was coming out, and she held it before her in the professional's two-handed grip she had learned from Quindy. She directed the almost invisible beam-One, not Two setting-on the man in the blue shirt. Karmal Pak.

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Trafalgar kept moving. He entered that frozen tableau whose members concentrated only on each other, and he ended the impasse by giving Pak a yellow-booted kick in the right tricep.

Trafalgar never drew his stopper. Karmal Pak dropped his, releasing the SolSec leader from the neural disruption beam. Without pause, Trafalgar squatted fluidly. He used two fingers, just here, poking Pak as if casually. The smuggler sagged and flopped, unconscious.

That was easy. Karmal's sidekick was even easier. He gave up.

Janja bolstered her stopper and stood up, trying to look casual. These Josers weren't going to be quite sure what had happened and maybe *Satana's* crew could just ease quietly out of this. The two satchels clutched by the Jarp-Cinnabar-contained enough ex-otic jewelry to make them all rich. At least so they assumed, and the problem was that they certainly had no bill of sale for any of it!

Discussing all those Knoresse gauds with security or any other kind of policers wouldn't be all that much fun. Especially since proof of ownership was impossible without opening a large and squirmy can of worms. Knor was an unknown planet. Unknown, at least, to anyone save the five people of *Satana*, and Knor's own tiny population of diminutive slavemasters.

Besides, onboard *Satana*. were two weird, non-sentient entities that were unknown, uncleared, and doubtless both valuable and confiscable for "research and study." Finally there were the Knoresse. Two extremely unusual, presumably undisguisable and extremely non-Galactic aliens never before seen by anyone in the galaxy.

All in all, this was a profoundly rotten time to get involved with station security!

Yet Trafalgar had been right. They'd had to do something. Otherwise they'd be worse than suspect for not having helped out the law-and every one of them

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armed. Janja wondered idly: maybe if she tried faking a heart attack or going into labor or something they could all hustle along to Medical and leave security to do its job here, without questions that might prove embarrassing!

Meanwhile Trafalgar stood tall, empty hands uplifted, flamboyantly full sleeves blousing downward. His large-eyed gaze was directed at the security squad's leader. She was blinking, obviously unsteady. Getting herself together after having been made to imitate Sainvytus, whoever that ancient dancer had been.

Trafalgar Cuw was a man who saw women as women, rather than as co-representatives of that demeaningly desexing term, persons. This one looked pretty damned female, he thought, even in her emerald green uniform- with lamentably baggy pants blousing over black boots- complete with black belt and shoulder-boards. And the black beret perched not quite jauntily atop her glossy dark brown curls.

"Glad to be of service," he said, turning a sweet and ingenuous smile on her and her companions.

He was very good at that. Immediately the trio of emerald-and-blacks doubted their own comprehension, even memory of what had just taken place. This boyish, theatrically gesturing fellow with the open, disarming smile-a hero? No, no! He couldn't have accomplished what all three of them had botched. (Could he? No, no of course not!)

"What'd these dogs do?" he asked, in the same wide-open way. Still smiling, still wearing that wide-open face. No, of course this fellow couldn't be competent at instantaneous decisions, action, and violence.

"You don't need to know," one of the SolSeccers said.

"Don't be such a prick, Sarp," his superior told him, and Trafalgar blinked, then shot Sarp a swift odd look. Sarp didn't look offended or resentful; he looked shamed and hang-doggy.

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*Aha*, Trafalgar Cuw thought, *ole Sarp likes more than just the looks of his superior! Well nyah nyah to you . . . prick.*

"These are notorious smugglers," the squad's leader said to the man from Outreach. "And I think we owe yer some thanks, spacefarer."

"Name's Trafalgar," he said, sweeping off his eleven-gallon hat and executing a bow, hat sweeping across before him as if he had stepped out of the ranks of the King's Musketeers of a distant era on a distant planet. Or out of the movie version of Dumas's version of those *mousquetaires*, anyhow. "And I hardly did any-thing-your man Sarp there had one of 'em in a Freeze beam as fast as they put the Dancer on you and-him."

This tune Trafalgar's gesture was hardly so sweep-ing; that SolSeccer looked even hang-doggier than Sarp.

(Sarp was blinking, looking both surprised and pleased at this odd rainbow-clad man's nice words about him.)

"We just arrived. Just happened to be coming out of our ship, you see," Trafalgar said, gesturing back at the H-2 umbilical without looking at it. "Didn't know our lives were going to be endangered the instant we set foot on Soljer!" *A tiny bit of intimidation never hurts*, he thought, continuing to look just oh-so pleasant.

"Our thanks anyway, sir. Im Cosi, Sergeant: Station Soljer Security."

"My pleasure, Sergeant Cozy."

Wearing a quite pleasant face because it was hard not to, in the teeth of his nice-guy look, she glanced around. Trafalgar didn't. He was afraid to look to see whether Hellfire had made herself scarce as he had urged.

He hoped that she was surreptitiously watching from within the long tunnel that was Spoke H of the docking station's twenty in-use spokes. They all fed out here to the torus's perimeter from the hub of the big wheel in space, where the shuttleport would be located. Along with Sergeant Cosi's CP, the offices or booths of vari-

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ous offplanet factors-and some onplanet ones as well, with some advertisers-exhorters and probably a



procurer or three, too. Also Customs, Medical, Decontam, and surely a lounge as well as a restaurant of some sort. There would also be a room of electronic involvement-games, Trafalgar assumed.

His mental state would be greatly enhanced, as a matter of fact, if he could only know that Hellfire was in there pitting herself against a dragon or Saberserkers or something. Unfortunately he was quite certain that she was not.

"Your ship's just in, then," the sergeant said, looking past him curiously at the shortish woman with the almost white hair.

"Firm," Trafalgar told her. "That's Janja. Spacefarer First, and Compatrician Second," he said, promoting Janja. "Our First Mate is still on the ship. The Jarp is Spacefarer Second Cinnabar."

"Umm."

She remembered then to direct Sarp and the other SolSeccer to put detaining cuffs on the two smugglers. She bade Sarp remain here: "We'll have to go in and check the ship again, and put a seal on its lock."

Sarp nodded and she spoke to her wristchron, which was either a recorder or a commlink, presumably to her command post. Trafalgar watched-and Listened- attentively.

"Situation in hand. Suspects resisted and are detained. One subdued, one surrendered. Securer Khiade is bringing them along."

She looked at Trafalgar across her wrist, which she lowered slowly before speaking again: "The Jarp is a member of your crew, then?"

"Pos, Sergeant. Its name is Cinnabar. Sin-uh-bar," he repeated, when Cosi frowned a little. "But it's not my crew. I'm not captain. She's already gone along on her business." His accompanying gesture was not at all flamboyant and was as a matter of fact rather vague.

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Peeping out at them from the tunnel inside the spoke twenty or so meters away, Hellfire smiled. She eased her hand away from her bolstered stopper. Some kind of fellow, this Trafalgar Cuw! (She glanced back, saw no one else in the spoke, and eased her stopper's setting down to One.)

She certainly hadn't started out liking the Outie-a man who practically forced himself on her and onto her ship. Never mind that he had saved her beans and her life at the same time; she had saved his life too.

She had learned to like him. She had to like him. The man was competent and charming, and there was no way around it: he had saved her ship and thus all of them, several times. On Copperdock, Mott-chindi's space station, and on Knor, which should be named Zamharir: Cold Hell. He had pretty much taken charge back on Knor, during their escape from Survival while she was . . . debilitated. The charming rainbow of a man was as competent as he was mysterious, and attractive.

Not that attractive men were of any interest to Cap-tain Hellfire of *Satana*.

This time she was doing her best to be cool, taking advice for once, now that she was (almost) sure that she was going to be rich. And he and Janja had everything in hand. *Why, these station spooks actually owe us one!* She was glad she hadn't got involved. No doubt SolSec and planet Jorinne's authorities preferred the two smugglers as captives, to the random molecules Hellfire's stopper would have made of them!

She was a bit subdued these days, too, after her enslavement and sexual use by the stern masters of Knor.

The Knormen's drug had kept her quiescent, cowed, even a willing participant. In retrospect, the knowledge of what they had done to her was doubly worse for Hellfire than for Janja and Quindy, because Hellfire

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was a lesbian. She owed Janja, who had slain Hellfire's Knorese "master."

*And I owe Trafalgar and Quindy a punch in the crotch for not getting the coordinates of that piggish slaving planet when we redshifted it! Oh if only I hadn't been . . . debilitated. I'd go back and blow up the whole damned furbaggin's sisterslicin' place!*

Now she glanced again at Cinnabar, who had the satchels full of magnificently-wrought, gemstone-rich jewelry they had "liberated" from those swinish slav-ing Knormen.

*Come on, Cinnabar! Get away from there!*

Hellfire backed a couple of paces and decided to start ambling on along the spoke toward the station's center, the hub. She could have the shuttle schedule checked out and down-transport arranged before the others got here. *Booda's bones, do we ever have a lot to do, on Jorinne!*

In the airlock of Karmal Pak's ship, Sergeant Cosi put out a restraining hand. "Just a minute, Sarp." She lifted her wrist and spoke.

"Cosi here, onboard Pak's ship. What's the name of the ship that just berthed next to it?-in H-2?"

*Trouble, Cozy?*" her wristchron asked. *"Or just suspicious?"*

"Uh-huh. Give me the name of the ship, Trigger."

She waited, worrying her lower lip with the edge of her overbite, staring at nothing, thinking. Then:

*"Just berthed. Spacer Satana. Captain Naysan commanding."*

"Uh-huh. Captain 'April,' hmm? I thought I recog-nized this group of strangles! The captain's name isn't Naysan, Trigger. It's Hellfire. Tall very thin woman with hair the color of prass and the disposition of a grunjok. Sound familiar?"

"Uh-"

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Cosi smiled. Of course not. The dispatcher just had a job. Cosi was a serious policer. She was career-minded and she did her homework. She'd make prefect or take it to court for a competency test! Chances were that not even Prefect Havern knew about these people. He didn't study the incoming reports and warnings the way Cosi did. The grunje just studied the sergeant he called "dec-orative" and "my Cosi."

"Hellfire of *Satana*," she said, rolling her eyes in Sarp's direction, "wanted in connection with the Delventine raid months back, *and* a few charges on Mott-chindi-good old planet Macho. She's very, very dangerous, Trigger. And right now she's either right around you someplace there in the hub, or on her way down to see what kind of hell she can raise on Jorinne! Or . . . still in Spoke H on her way to . . . get the prefect on!"

"Not here, Cosi. On break. Not here at all, I mean."

While he has three of us on a detain-and-seal? Cobs, what a fart he is-and after the super-competent rascal I just met, too! Sergeant Cosi's eyes narrowed and she edged her teeth along her lower lip while she pondered, and tried to plan.

"All right. Listen, Trigger. She's quick to draw and quick to fire and word is she seldom takes her stopper down off Three. Brags about it. Extreme caution with her, understand."

"Understood. Are yer sure-"

"Of course I'm not sure! I've just seen three people that left Macho onboard *Satana* with Captain Hellfire, pirate, though. And it's a lot of coincidence to put three of the same description on another ship with the same name."

"Umm. Damn. Still fifteen minutes till I go on break."

Cosi rolled her eyes. "Won't work. We can't wait. Listen, I've got an idea. Try this, Trigger, and maybe we can catch ourselves a real galaxy-wide outlaw, a killer 'stead of a nitty lil' pair of snot smugglers."

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"I'm recording, Cosi."

Cos! nodded. Oh, sure he was. *If I'm wrong, the tape will pin it all right on me and blow me out of here. I'll be back onplanet and lucky to get a job as someone's nightwatch!*

She sighed. All right then. She had to take the chance. She started outlining her plan, as hastily as she had contrived it. Then the sergeant *told* the dispatcher to *move*.

2

It seemed a bit odd and maybe even untoward, but Hellfire really couldn't take offense. And for once she was only mildly suspicious. Medcheck was medcheck; scanners were scanners, and this round-faced little fel-low in the pale green med-service smock was after all little more than a clerk, doing his job.

"Detectors just flicker a bit, to be honest, Captain," the medical scanner-tech said with notable politeness. "That's all. But we'd really appreciate it if you'd in-dulge us, Captain."

She sighed at the imposition, and yet she almost smiled. Such a nice, almost apologetic fellow! "Think I may be harboring a bug or two, hmm? Well, I'd hate to take it down onto Jorinne with me. Starting epidemics really isn't my mission in life."

He made an embarrassed little gesture. "Ah, it's probably nothing, Captain. We keep the scanners pretty sensitive, and sometimes I think they may be set too high. But . . . well, I hope you don't mind the inconvenience."

Nice of him, considering that there really wasn't any choice and both of them knew it. That was a part of why he impressed her so. He didn't have to be so polite. His authority came from the Medical Director

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and penultimately the Station Supervisor-and ultimately the government down onplanet. He could have given her a crisp "Go Strip and put in your two minutes in Decontam, Cap'm; looks like you're carrying a mi-crobe and all it might do is wipe out Jorinne's entire population."

And she'd have to go through Decontam, or back to *Satana* and the hell away from Soljer, Jorinne, and this system. Which was exactly the choice open to her now.

She felt good. All those Knorese gems so intricately set in gold and silver made her feel good. Not because she was particularly fond of decorating herself with such gauds, but because of the wealth they promised.

Maybe it was worth all the hell on Cold Hell, since it would make her wealthy and thus truly independent. She was crowding thirty now, and aware of it. Certainly six years of piracy had not made her anything approach-ing rich. Those years had, on the other hand, kept her tense, lean unto skinniness; and kept threatening to prevent her from reaching age thirty. And she hated tension, and decisions.

Therefore she smiled and nodded. Maybe all clerks weren't rude dummies, after all! Maybe.

"Right. No peekin', now!"

He seemed to take that seriously, with embarrass-ment. "Oh, *no*, Captain-"

With a chuckle, Hellfire turned away. She passed the (medical) security woman lounging near the white door, and went in. She entered a room that surrounded her on three sides with plastiles in oyster white, spotlessly a gleam. The atmosphere was a nice bland, faintly humid temp, carefully maintained for the comfort of spacefarers with a need to be decontaminated.

She stripped.

Boots, tights, belt with bolstered stopper, tunic and underwear-all went into the pull-out bin. She closed it and heard it click. Heard it *whoosh*, moving through the wall.

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She knew the clothing-and stopper-would pass through a decontaminating unit more powerful than the one she must shortly experience. Her things would be waiting in the anteroom-or post-room-when she emerged into it.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the soundproofed door she had just passed through, the nice polite med tech-scanner waved a hand at the medsecer. At the same time, he lifted the minicomunicator to his lips. The comm had been handed him just two-and-a-half mins ago, with hurried instructions.

Now he spoke to the Soljer Securer on the other end of the commlink.

"All right, get to it. That skinny pirate bitch just went into the D-chamber, and she knows the drill. We can't delay. Do your job and let us get back to ours."

With a glance at the dangling rings that were a legacy of her enslavement on Knor, Hellfire was opening the pale green door. She entered the Decontam chamber.

(She still had not decided about those rings, which her "master," the late Torgex of Survival on Knor, had been wont to decorate with dangling ice-pearls. Natu-rally she wanted the hateful things off and out. They were reminders of an egregiously demeaning experience she wished to forget. Getting one of her shipboard companions to attempt to remove them, however, had not seemed wise. She could be hurt, even damaged, too easily. Thus, as *Satana* split the spaceways en route here, she had had time to consider the uniqueness of the rings.

(They *were* exotic and eye-catching, and they didn't hurt, and she had studied her mirrored image a number of times, thinking of what it might be like to leave the rings in place. . . .)

As she entered Decontam, she was not greeted by anything so crude as a puddle of chemically treated

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water. As a matter of fact she stepped naked into a bare, tiled room. The floor was padded, since some people had fainted, mostly from apprehension, and one of the fobbers had won a settlement. The gleaming wall tiles were of course backed by lead shielding.

Once the door was closed, it secured itself. The room secured itself. Anyone entering this chamber was obliged to remain for the requisite two minutes. Just stand around and think pleasant thoughts, was the usual advice to first-timers.

Hellfire, who was no first-timer, knew that she would become less than comfortably warm. The radiation she'd be getting had been proven harmless in lawsuit after lawsuit on station after space station, years ago. Most of the two-min period was consumed in reverse radia-tion, for safety. Just to be sure, spacefarer. All here is benign and for Your and Our Own Good, believe it!

She would depart free and healthy, free of any exotic microorganisms that might menace her and, more im-portantly to them, the good citizens of Jorinne. They had a right to be protected from what tradition called The Cryton Strain.

And that would be that, except for some tingling and possibly a bit of nausea. (Only in .078% of decontami-nation subjects, galaxy-wide. That was the figure pride-fully provided by whatever idiots went to all the trouble to collect and compile such gratuitous statistics.)

Diarrhea, on the other hand, was just about a certain-ty. It was the one truly bad aspect of decontamination. Stool formation and regularity were the products of benign microorganisms that lived within the body. Re-lentless, indiscriminating Decontam slew them in their millions. So-as she emerged she would hear a *whu-chung!* and get a shot in the arm from the vaccine "gun" mounted in the jamb of that pale green door. The shot would go to work helping her body. It blocked diarrhea (in 97-point-something cases out of a hundred).

"La la la de da-ahh," she sang, hoisting an arm and

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lightly rubbing under it as if she was taking a shower. Might as well make the most of it, make it fun. Maybe Trafalgar Cuw had actually managed to teach her that. He seemed to be having a good time even when some-one was busily trying to kill or capture him.

A cool customer, that Cuw! A hero who pretended to be otherwise, to believe that heroes were either acci-dents or idiots. Hellfire smiled.

She had tried it with him, on *Satana*, en route here from Knor where that bastard Corundum had sent them. She'd been a lesbian all her life that counted, anyhow. She just didn't care for most men, and certainly not sexually. (True, she didn't care for most women, ei-ther.) That had been no great inconvenience, though it had made a pirate of her. She had made her sexual predilection clear to the captain who had signed her on, and he had assured her that was fine. She had the impression that his preference was for more

luxuriously constructed women, anyhow. The problem was that after a few months in space, even Hellfire had begun to look good to him. He tried to make her, and failed. A while later he tried harder. He tried rape. So she killed him. After that she had chosen to keep the ship and live on independently, as an outlaw. That meant piracy.

On Knor, though, or rather inside it, those furry shorties had enslaved them all. The drug Hellfire and the others were meticulously fed, daily, made them accept sexual bondage and even think they liked it. In Survival, the precariously balanced sole city of icy, dead Knor-inside a mountain-there were two kinds of people. Men (make that "men") and slaves.

Hellfire, Janja, and Quindy weren't men. They had been sexual slaves.

She had been ordered, bound, ringed, ordered, strapped, beaten, ordered and otherwise brutalized, and used. For over two months, until Trafalgar and Janja had busted them out. That was with the aid of Cinna-bar, who (or rather which, since, all Jarps took the

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pronoun "it," always) had not been affected by the Knormen's lipith; chemical enslaver.

Hellfire was stuck with the knowledge that she had engaged in a lot of heterosexual activity, a lot of it oral. Enforced and yet seemingly voluntary of course, because of the drug. She had thought about it and thought about it; she had spent a lot of time alone in her cabin, after Knor.

At last, on the third day in space, heading for the Payne-Humason system and Jorinne, she had decided to try an experiment.

An astonished Trafalgar Cuw had agreed to help. That is to say, to participate in heterosexuality with her, in the privacy of her cabin with its great big bed. He had not, understandably, seemed all that eager.

Hellfire wasn't eager, either. She just wanted to find out something, and thought she had to.

It didn't work. They both tried. No. Men were not her thing.

Strangely, rather than anger and recriminations and guilt, there had been conversation. Hours of it, while the others onboard had assumed-astounded-that the oddest of odd couples was setting lovemaking records.

They weren't. They were communicating, genuinely communicating, in an altogether different way. They were talking. And now she and Trafalgar Cuw were friends. They had a bond. Hellfire trusted him.

Maybe he understood the magnitude of that and maybe he didn't. Maybe he couldn't truly appreciate it; the point was that Hellfire trusted no one, because she had never felt that she could. That included even Quindy, more important to *Satana* than Hellfire and with whom Hellfire had a sometimes sadomasochistic relationship.

After that, the atmosphere on spacer *Satana* had been pretty darned nice. Hellfire could not exactly be described as a different person, but she was different.

She hadn't minded a bit the fact that Quindy and Trafalgar were definitely slicing a piece of cake now

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and then. Hellfire thought enough of Trafalgar-Traf, now, to her-that she hadn't left any marks on Quindy, who had been her Mate and her mate for several years.

And now they were on Jorinne's docking station at last, and soon . . . but right now she frowned, for it occurred to her that she was not at all uncomfortable. The temp remained a normal, controlled warmth comfortable to naked humans.

The opening of the door behind her coincided perfectly with the opening of the one before her, which meant the two fully dressed individuals had coordinated their entry by commlink. Their entry was an attack.

Trap!

Soljer Security Sergeant Cosi's hastily devised plan was a clever one. Get the very dangerous Captain Hellfire disarmed, naked, unsuspecting, and thus totally vulnerable. That way there was absolutely certainty that she could be taken with no loss of life, something she was good at bringing about.

Cosi had no way of knowing that Hellfire would be particularly susceptible to such a ploy. Despite all her bathing on *Satana*-a constant compulsive attempt to purge herself of Knor and Knormen-Hellfire had after all just as constantly been exposed to the two stigul Trafalgar had liberated from Survival's version of a lab, and to the two Knorese allies they had picked up. One of each sex.

Thus Hellfire found it easy to believe that she might be carrying an exotic bug.

In her wealth of (dyed, at the sub-follicle level) brassy hair, perhaps. (The hair on her head; below the eyelashes she, like most Galactics of her era, was absolutely hairless.) Thus Cosi's plan was far more logical and brilliant than the nervous SolSec sergeant thought.

It was just that there was an aspect of Hellfire that neither Cosi nor the two fully clothed SolSeccers-one the MedSec- who burst in on the entirely naked and

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terribly, almost ridiculously vulnerable-looking pirate took into account.

That was Hellfire's extreme competence at violence and defense. With her, it took the form of offense more often than not.

She saw the door open two meters away, directly before her. She saw the security uniform and recognized it. She saw the empty hands just as she heard the door behind her. She whirled, saw the MedSec, and "instinctively" knew

that she was the lesser foe. Hellfire wheeled and charged her. Naked.

Naked, Hellfire beat the shit out of both of them.

In something under three minutes, she stood alone in that antiseptic but now hardly sterile chamber. At her feet, untidily sprawled, lay both uniformed guards. One had drawn his stopper. It had not helped him against a silently raging tigress.

Hellfire was not quite winded. Naked and gleaming, she picked up that stopper. Then the other, which she extracted from the medseccer's holster-and rapped the girlish-looking young woman with it, in her nicely de-veloped but overly pointy breast, hard.

Stopper in each hand, stark naked, gleaming and presumably microbe-free-and triumphant, not to mention angry-Hellfire padded briskly to the green door; the Out door. She knew she'd been in here longer than the prescribed time, and without decontamination. But she was sure the door would be unlocked, waiting for those two furbags to drag her out.

Yet when she crossed the scanner's invisible beam the door did not open.

Instead, the emergency plate in it did. Gas puffed in, directly into her face.

"Oh you duty bast-" Hellfire said, with diminishing vehemence, and that was all. She crumpled like a dropped curtain and her lights went out.

### 3

"... just watching the way that Outie conferred with them," Jahl told the inspector? "Talked to them, I mean to them. Then all of a sudden, within two or three mins after they'd went in, the two Seccers come running out of the H-I navel. They ran straight to the spoke and out of my view. On the way the sergeant said something to the Outie, just as she ran by-Falger, you said?"

"Traf-al-grr Cue," the inspector said, "Yes. Outies may not get much, they say, but they certainly do get names!"

"Trafalgar Cuw." Jahl grinned. "Yeah! Well, while she went running past, the sergeant called something to Tra-fal-grr Cuw, and he waved. Big full sleeve waving like a flag on a pole with the wind up. But then he frowned, just watching after her, and turned to the others with him. The blond and the Jarp."

"Um-hmm. The sergeant is a she, I gather. I believe you didn't mention that before, Jahl."

The stevedore sat up rather straighter and stared. "Does it matter, *Inspector?*" she demanded, and for the first time she looked fully confident. As a matter of fact she looked ready to bite.

The inspector held up both hands. "No no, Jahl. Not

to TGO, and not to me," she assured the stevedore. "Well, yes it does. Good for her-the sergeant!"

"Right." Jahl nodded, stoutly holding her gaze, and suddenly old basilisk eyes broke down. Both women smiled. Then Jahl went on with her narrative.

"That's about it. Farg-the Seccer who let me up there in the Security tower to watch-got real busy. And my break was ending, and the Outie-Trafalgar- was huddling with the blond and the Jarp. You know . . . grabbles, Inspector, I'm damned if I can see how this has helped TGO, but I got to admit that it's been fun!"

"Beats working, hmm? Let me just double check a couple of points, Jahl," the inspector said, again glanc-ing briefly at her chronometer.

"My dearest darlings," Trafalgar Cuw said, "that was *odd*. Here is how I read it. Dear Sergeant Cosi is on to us. She just ran past, looked self-conscious when she looked at me and called out something banal, and away they went in a big hurry. Why? Rushing to put the screws on the captain, I'd say."

Cinnabar said-via the system of straps and electron-ically active studs that formed a sort of openwork hel-met on its violently *red*-maned head-"Oh shit."

"Probably," Trafalgar said, nodding.

Janja gazed thoughtfully in the direction of the spoke, which looked like the darkish, wide-open mouth of a giant worm. "And here we are. With two aliens on-board, these Josers will want to take and question and question and examine and decontaminate and test and question some more. And two bags of gems and pre-cious metals we couldn't explain satisfactorily to a six-year-old. *And* the two Stillwells."

"Right," Trafalgar said. "We're as vulnerable as bare balls in a kick-fight. Will you two please, please do what I ask?"

Janja studied his face, glanced at Cinnabar. The Jarp shrugged.

"Falgo, you're the most resourceful and probably knowledgeable among us," it said, translation helmet turning the whistle-speech of Jarpi into the Galactic language, Erts.

"Do not, repeat not, Cinnabar, call me that," Trafalgar said.

His manner and tone were so strong that Cinnabar blinked and nodded, looking as apologetic as possible. Just a joke, calling the Outreachers by the name the Knormen had given him. It was a stupid thing to do, the Jarp thought. *After all, the stump-legged little bastards called me just "orange thing!"*

"Look," Trafalgar said. "If I'm right and they're taking the captain right now or about to, we'll never make it to the

shuttle with those bags-or without! We can't bring Graborn and Laleemis off *Satana*. We can hold out onboard, though, resisting a boarding with everything we can think of except violence."

"And we're not even going to think about leaving without Hellfire," Janja said, just in case he might be considering such a step. She was not wild about Hellfire, now that she knew the captain's dangerously severe limitations. Janja's sense of honor, though, was Janja's, and it was a strong code.

Trafalgar merely shot her a look. "Of course not. What I want you two to do is forget what we were going to do-for now. Go back onboard. Tell Quindy everything that's happened, plus what I suspect. Then *wait*. I swear, I'll find a way, and work something out."

*The way he got us off Copperdock, maybe, Cinnabar thought. By pretending he was a TGO agent, and con-vincing Copperdock Control! Unless he really is with TGO, and not the subdeep-cover agent for TMSMCo he told us only after Hellfire "persuaded" him!*

Janja gazed steadily at him. "Trafalgar, you always

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do. I would not follow you into Hell, but I would hand you my baby, if I had one."

That was a major statement of trust on Aglaya, Janja's so-called (not by the natives!) "Barbarian" planet. Trafalgar Cuw did not know that, but knew that this strange pale woman, so young and so serious, was not inclined to indulge herself in idle mournings. That was preferable to the so-called "civilized" way of the spaceways, Trafalgar thought.

"Janja, I'll bet I just received a high compliment from an Aglayan or anybody else, and I appreciate it. I don't want your baby if you had one and I wouldn't know how to hold it besides. And we've already been to Hell together. It's called Knor, and it's *past*. Mean-while . . . do it, then. Take the satchels! Tend Stillwell and Stillwell Junior! Secure ship. If someone comes along, tell it via comm that someone onboard has Black Plague or terminal crotch-itch or something."

Neither the Jarp nor the Aglayan-who only the Jarp knew was not quite human, not really a Galactic, any more than the orange hermaphrodites of its own planet- smiled. Both nodded.

"And . . . you?"

"I'm going along to the hub and see a few people and see what develops," Trafalgar said easily.

"I get the impression that if I ask any more questions I'll get the same sort of new vague answers," Cinnabar said.

Trafalgar put a deep-tan hand on a brown, bony, and very orange shoulder.

"Ah, Cinnabar, how thou dost know me."

They both told him to be careful. Trafalgar saw the concern in their eyes. He said something flip, and waved a hand airily (with foudroyant flamboyance). Then he turned away and redshifted at the trot . . . toward Spoke G, not H.

They looked after him.

"You know what, Cinnabar? I'll bet that once he's

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out of our sight he tries for a new sprinting record, and I'll bet he beats the securers to the hub, too."

"You'd get no argument from me, Cap'n Janjaglaya. D'you-"

Janja whirled. "*Stop calling me that, Raunchy!*"

Cinnabar sighed, rolled large and perfectly round eyes, and nodded. "Do you think he's really a subdeep-cover agent for TMSMining Company?"

"Who knows, Cinnabar? With Trafalgar, who knows. He got us off Macho by 'being' a Prime Agent for TGO, and somehow 'proving' it. Whatever that is, it must be mighty big, because it worked."

"Says it's data implanted in computer memories long, long ago, since he's in his 'second lifetime' and there-fore a lot, lot older than he looks. I refuse to believe he's TGO, Janja."

"The Gray Organization. I'd rather not. Besides, there's sure nothing gray about him, is there! Come on. Back onboard dirty old sweaty old *Satana*."

They turned wearily away from the classy hotel and riches they had been looking forward to. As they started up the umbilical, the tall lean Jarp towering over the short, so-pale young woman of Aglaya, the former said, "Want to screw, Janje?"

4

*The dangers of gasoline-powered vehicles are ob-vious . . . The discovery with which we are deal-ing involves forces of a nature too dangerous to fit into any of our usual concepts. Expert testimony in the Congressional Record of the United States of America (Homeworld), 1875.*

"I need to see the chief of station security," Trafalgar Cuw said.

The very young Joser with the coalsack eyes stared at this garishly-attired spacefarer. He did have to admire the red

sash.

"Yes sir. May I ask why yer want to see the prefect, sir?"

"It's an emergency."

"Yes sir. Surely yer can understand why I'd need to have something to tell a person as busy as the prefect, sir."

"Oh sure," Trafalgar said. He gave the round-faced young man a steady-on look that made the fellow uncomfortable. The cloth strip on his chest identified him as Casuar. "I've just killed and eaten three babies, Casuar, and thought I really ought to turn myself in."

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That brought Casuar into an even more erect sitting position behind his little terminal-topped desk. "S-sir?"

"I said that I need to see the prefect, Securityman. I didn't say 'want to' or 'would like to,' I said 'need to,' and you still play keep-away secretary with your ques-tions to see if you can screen me out. Do I look like a nut-case?" Trafalgar snapped his fingers. "Come on, come on! You choose: Security chief or the station supervisor. I've got business and it's urgent. Important, even. Im going to talk with one or the other, real soon."

The SolSeccer stared. Half-frowned. Decided not to come back strong-just in case this rainbow-clad man was Somebody- and nodded. Seeming to remember abruptly where he was, he rose, meeting Trafalgar's gaze bravely but without challenge in his eyes. Then he headed for the emerald-hued door a little over a meter away behind him, across the anteroom of Station Secu-rity CP.

Trafalgar, waiting, maintained a serene look and smiled only a little.

Casuar knocked, paused for a couple of beats, and went into the boss's office. He shut the door behind him. Trafalgar struck a pose, assuming that he was being electronically scanned and eyeball-observed, onscreen.

Behind him the outer door opened. He turned to look, then to smile amiably at her, lifting his eyebrows and looking boyishly innocent.

"I don't believe it," Sergeant Cosi said. "How could you possibly have got here so fas-what are you *doing* here?"

"Waiting," Trafalgar said, answering the second ques-tion first. And then the first: "I ran. Felt good, after all that time cramped on a spacer. You know. Exercise." He slapped his sash. "Good for the old bod."

Still looking as nonplussed as a cat among strangers, she advanced a step into the antechamber. The door

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closed behind her. Trafalgar noticed that station noises stopped as if someone had hit a sound-dead button.

He had noted that when he came in, too. The ante-room was soundproofed-and, he assumed, so was the whole security command post.

*Dumb, he mused. Security cuts itself off from the life-sounds of the station it should be tuned to. What kind of rectum runs this operation?*

"Why-why are you here?"

"Same reason you are, I'll bet," he said, "Cozy. To have a talk with the boss. The prefect."

Her hand was near the dark handle of her stopper. He was watching that hand without appearing to be; his gaze remained directed at her dark, dark eyes. He is-sued a warning mentally, but not aloud.

"Why do you want to see him?" she asked, looking both tense and uncomfortable.

"Why don't we go in together, Sergeant, and you'll find out," he said amiably, with a nice smile that wouldn't allow her to take it as a snotty reply/suggestion.

That was disconcerting, but Cosi was after all a cop. Obviously when a suspect was already on its way in to see the head cop, that was convenient. The best course was to allow it, facilitate it, and be grateful.

Yet suspicion was a dark mist swirling in her mind. The man wore a stopper. Sergeant Cosi had reason to believe that he was competent. Suppose he intended violence? Suppose he knew about his captain's deten-tion and thought he was going to get her loose by going in and taking the prefect captive?

Such thinking was insidiously seductive. Cosi couldn't get it out of her head. The thought expanded like a dark gray balloon in her mind and became a stronger possi-bility with each passing instant.

She decided. Better to be sure. At the thought her hand closed around the butt of her stopper and at the same instant her eyes changed. Trafalgar was watching her eyes. He moved, and a cat might have taken lessons.

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Her stopper was something like point-seven of the way out of her holster when he was beside and slightly behind her and his own stopper, drawn so fast it ap-peared to materialize in his hand, jammed into the side of her left breast hard enough to make her gasp. That was deliberate, though not the sadistic act it appeared. It made a woman pay a lot more attention.

"Don't do it, Cozy," he said, low. "Just leave your stopper alone and please, oh please don't try something silly. I do *not* have designs on your boss, but I do just have to talk to him. With him, even. Far better if I could have done that alone, but you and Casuar sure wouldn't allow that now, would you! You recognized us and went onto the smuggler's ship to call back here, tell 'em to detain the captain, didn't you."

It wasn't really a question. She didn't bother to an-swer it. "How *could* you have gotten here so fast?" She kept

still, stiffly, trying not to flinch while the business end of his stopper was being mean to the outer swell of her warhead.

She worked to minimize those swells, because she was serious about herself and her career as a policer and wasn't interested in looking sexy.

"I really did run all the way," he said in a perfectly casual tone. "I wanted to be here afore ye, Cozy. Is that too forward? Probably. *Sergeant Cozy*. And in a very few minutes, believe it, I'll be handing you this stopper. And yours," he said, twitching it out of her holster. "Then you'll hand it back. Honest."

"We'll see. You do seem to be too smart to be getting yourself into this kind of trouble without some-thing on your side. And how can you even talk about being 'too forward' when you've got that thing shoved into my tit?"

"Oh, sorry, ma'am." He transferred the slender cyl-inder's muzzle to the rather deep indent of her waist. "Sorry, I did that to shock you into aborting your plan.

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We both know this thing'd have the same effect on you whether it's shoved nastily into what you so crudely call your tit, or your side this way, or your little toe. I do *not* want to use it, because I think you are very sharp and very damned good-looking too."

"Wow," she was saying sarcastically, when the emerald-green door opened and SolSeccer Casuar stood there staring.

"Prefect Havern will see y-Cosi?"

"This is Trafalgar Cuw, off spaceship *Satana*. He knows his captain, Hellfire, is in custody and he has his stopper in my side. If he uses it, freeze him. Or worse."

Then she slammed an elbow back, hard, and lurched forward in a twisting pivoting movement. Spinning, she aimed a kick at the rainbow-clad man man she had elbow-jabbed in the stomach.

Doubled only half as far as she expected, the rainbow caught her ankle as her foot flashed up. He aided it on its way up, and applied pressure in a forward move-ment. She went backward and down on her butt and Trafalgar stared at the other SolSeccer from above his own leveled stopper.

Casuar froze with his fingers just on his weapon's butt.

Staring at Casuar, Trafalgar spoke past him to the shocked man in the other room-and stayed out of the way of the prostrate Cosi's legs.

"Prefect Havern! Don't sound the alarm! I am TGO Prime- that's T.G.O. One, two, three, three, three, R-three, eight, eight, six, R.P.A. Key mat into your terminal and I'll tell you the exact words of the readout while you look at 'em, if you wish. Please."

The prefect, seated behind a desk four meters away, had risen. He was staring with all the shock and horror of a man watching films of the Holocaust. He frowned, blinked several times, worked his mouth, looked inde-cisive and miserable, and nodded. This was unlike any-

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thing he had ever experienced or thought about, and it was not covered in regs anywhere that he could remember.

Therefore he had no idea what to do. Therefore he nodded and did as he was told.

"Uh . . . TGO Prime?! Would you repeat the-"

Trafalgar repeated. Havern keyed it in. Later they would all remember his complete show of confidence: reversing his stopper and Sergeant Cosi's, he extended their butts to her.

"Genuinely sorry, Sergeant," he said. "Give you a hand up?"

On the floor, she took his stopper, grunted as she twisted a little to holster it, and reached up for her own weapon. She took that and then his empty, still ex-tended hand and, with a grateful look, yanked.

Trafalgar Cuw was whipped right over her and onto the floor with multiple thumps and a groan. Two stop-pers covered him immediately, while Cosi rose. Not without another wince and a grunt.

"Uh, oww!" he commented, half turning his head to give the sergeant a reproachful look. "Theba's mercy, Cozy, you're plain mean!"

"Theba's-that so-called goddess is not known to have any mercy!"

"Right. And neither have you. Ow. Damn. I think you've relocated my belt buckle in my navel."

Still floored because it seemed wise under two lev-eled guns, he looked up at the prefect. Or rather at his desk; from his position Trafalgar could not see the seated man.

"Prefect Havern?"

"Holster your weapons," Havern snapped. "Casuar, help that man up. Sergeant, *hand* him his stopper."

"Thanks, Casuar, but I can get up my-ow-self. Want me to quote the message that I assume is on your screen, Prefect?"

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"Unnecessary," Havern said, and wagged his head to double his reply. "This is beyond my experience completely. I had no notion this was even in the banks."

"It's in most," Trafalgar said. Without turning, he put back his hand to Sergeant Cosi. His stopper was placed in it.



*Um, warm hands that sergeant has. Cold heart, sure as I'm whoever it is that I am.* "I'm not happy to have it called up, though, and even less so in front of a couple of your brave Soljer-soldiers."

Havern stood rather abruptly, as if he thought perhaps he should be upright in this man's presence, and was trying to appear to have been erect all along. His eyes when he spoke, though, were directed past the nice-faced man who was casually sheathing his stopper.

"Sergeant, Securer Second Casuar. forget this hap-pened. Forget this man. Sergeant, you are on leave."

"Yes sir," Casuar said.

"Yes s-Sir!" Cosi said, in some combination of perplexity and anger.

"She did a nice job, Prefect. You mean she's *on* leave to help me get that *Satana* crowd down onplanet, not *re*-lieved, don't you."

Havern blinked, swallowed, and nodded with a jerk as if someone had pulled his strings too hard. "'Course! You are under this man's orders, Sergeant."

"Sir!" she snapped. Then, "May I ask what the message is on the prefect's screen, *Sir*!"

"You may not, Sergeant."

Trafalgar still spoke without turning. "Says 'TGO prime OVERRIDE. OBEY INSTANTLY-FULLY.'"

Blinking, Havern nodded in uncomfortable confirmation, but Trafalgar was not looking to him for confirmation. Now he turned to face Sergeant Cosi, who was reddish of face.

"You recognized the people off that spacecraft as those described in some policer in-bulletin, and confirmed the ship's ID while you were out of our sight onboard the ship in the next berth?"

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"Finn."

"Ufa-hub. Did it come from Mott-chindi?-Macho?"

She gestured helplessly. "Just-incame, sir."

"Umm. It mentioned an incident on Mott-chindi?"

"Firm! Absolutely!" Her chin was firm, too.

Trafalgar sighed and shook his head. "Well, some-one's in trouble there." He looked at Havern again. "*Satana's* crew went peacefully down onto Mott-chindi just as an insurrection started, and that means a raping riot, among those damned flainers! The five off *Satana* were confused innocent bystanders. Two were killed. Out of hand and for no reason. They fought their way back to the shuttleport, just as I did- separately. We had to threaten a slimy clerk there, and while we shut-tled up to Macho's station he contacted station security. *They* behaved stupidly," he said, neglecting to mention that so had Hellfire, and slain the prefect there besides, "and we had to fight some more, just to get onto the ship."

"You don't need to tell us these things, TGO Prime Cuw."

"Oh I know *that*," Trafalgar said. "I just feel more like talking than moving right now, at least until I get through picking belt buckle out of my stomach."

Only Havern saw, past him, Sergeant Cosi's swiftly suppressed smile. The prefect looked stern. Cosi looked through him.

"In order to get us off that damned station, I was forced to reveal myself to the Controller, just as I did here, with you. His instructions were to tell no one but the station's director. He understood that *Satana* and her crew and master were in my custody. I reckoned without an old feud between Hellfire-Captain Hellfire- and Corundum. You've heard of Corundum?"

"The space pirate. Of course. Word is going around, unconfirmed, that he also attacked the famous or infamous Captain Cautious, and was forced to jam-cram. As I said, I have no confirmation."

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Trafalgar's brows were up. "Hmp! Corundum tried it on Jonuta and got out-fought and went Forty Percent City, hmm? Too bad, too bad. Chances are I hope that isn't true, but I'll tell Captain Hellfire. Anyhow, Co-rundum hit us by surprise, and got us with a lamprey on the hull just as we took the Tachyon Trail."

"Jam-crammed?" Casuar blurted. This was the most exciting stuff he'd been a part of or heard in two years with Soljer Security.

"No no. The lamprey made our computer about as useful as breasts on a securer. We came out of 'sub-space' in time to miss a sun, narrowly, and bang down on an ice-planet."

"Iceworld?"

"No no, an unknown one. Worse. Snow up to here and a temp of minus one-seventy, with a constant wind. Nasty. We had no idea where we were and due to this and that we were taken prisoner by some real fobbers. Those bastards made slaves of us, using a drug. Oh, they had a sort of city or big town *inside* a mountain."

"Ab-solutely ex-traordinary," Havern breathed, sink-ing back into his chair with his gaze fixed on the rainbow-attired man. 'Where? What sun? What planet?'

"Due to the fact that our SIPACUM was out-worse than out; it was lying to us and seemed bent on killing us-and to the fact that we left in one hell of a hurry, we can't tell you."

Trafalgar Cuw had the coordinates of Knor and Knor's sun in his head. The moment he obtained that information he had ordered SIPACUM to self-wipe. Later he had told Hellfire he had no idea where they'd been. By the time she was herself after the weeks of drugged slavery, they were far from Knor and its cooling old sun. While he had no love

for the Knormen, he did not care for the thought of Hellfire's turning *Satana* around or at least returning later to vaporize that mountain, and the only people on the planet.

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Now he saw no reason to tell a different story to anyone else. And at that moment he had another fine thought, concerning the two Knoreses who were on *Satans* right now, voluntarily, having helped Hellfire and company escape their own rotten people.

"That captivity lasted two months. We escaped, partially due to the fact that the Jarp with us was unaffected by the drug and, since it couldn't speak their language, those arrogant bastards decided it was a lesser *thing*. We-

"Two *months!* As *slaves!*" That, in a female voice, came from behind Trafalgar Cuw.

"Right. This is our first planetfall since. What we need is R & R, and Hellfire is *not* going to make trouble on Soljer or down on Jorinne. We need R & R, and have business to transact, and that's it. By the way," he said, turning to Cosi, "you haven't seen Hellfire, have you?"

"I-no. I, uh, got them to put her through Decontam, so she'd be naked and unable to kill anyone, and so she could be seized, naked."

"Hey, that's really very clever, Sergeant. You said you directed that?"

"Uh, I-" Her gaze flashed helplessly past him.

"She did," Havern said sternly. "And it didn't work. Naked, she mopped up the two idiots who went in after her, and had to be gassed."

Trafalgar grinned. "I believe it! Uh-did the gas work?"

Casuar made a noise that sounded suspiciously like & chuckle, hurriedly caught and hauled back.

"Yes," Havern assured him.

"All right, Prefect. Have *you* seen her?"

"No."

"But you do have a report. What were you told is really *unusual* about that woman-aside from the fact that naked and unarmed and taken by surprise she's more than a match for two securers?"

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"One was just a medical securer," Casuar said defensively.

"Oh," Trafalgar Cuw said drily, without glancing at him.

"She, uh, seems to have, ah, some sort of ring piercing each of her-umm-nipples," Prefect Havern said, and they all heard Cosi's gasp.

Trafalgar turned again to her. "Hellfire is a lesbian. Those slaving swine not only made her a sexual slave, they ringed her that way. The things are some sort of quartz, carved smooth as metal, and they'll have to be *cut* out. The experience had quite an effect on her. On all of us," he added, not bothering to mention that what he had done in captivity was wallow sexually, slicing the willing little cakes those dummies of Knormen had sent him in droves, seeking to improve their staggering gene pool.

"Hellfire is . . . changed," he went on to the stricken sergeant, whose face looked ready to weep for Hellfire. "You can understand that I wanted to get to the nearest civilized planet as much as the others, and Jorinne was it."

Cosi looked down. "And we proved . . . not too civilized."

"Not at all, Sergeant," Trafalgar said briskly. "You showed exemplary policer mentality in studying and remembering the information about us, and in avoiding a potentially nasty situation by arranging a way for Hellfire to be taken. That's all good policer work. You had no idea of all the rest, and couldn't have. As a matter of fact, it probably wouldn't make a dam' bit of difference to any of you right now, if you were in charge, instead of me."

He turned back to Havern. "By the way-how is it that your sergeant made the plan, and long distance from station's perimeter, at that? Merely curious, you understand, Prefect."

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"I was on break," the prefect said uncomfortably, his eyes avoiding the Outreacher's steady gaze. "And my dispatcher was, uh, afraid to try to call me in, I guess."

*Terrified, no doubt,* Trafalgar mused. *A tyrant I'll bet, aren't you. Havern ole weak-chin! And you on break while three of your force were making an arrest of those two smugglers, hmm? Sloppy, sloppy. Must be someone's son-in-law or low-potential brother! About as much business in charge of station security as . . . Hellfire!*

*Except, come to think, that she wouldn't be plithit-shit!*

"Well, again I remind you that you don't know me, and don't know what you called up on your screen. Oh-please blank it. Now I'm going to ask for a little help."

"*Of course,* Prime Agent," Havern said, again bounc-ing up and looking eager to be of service. Eager to get off the previous subject and Do Something-Anything for this man who had so much power and therefore competence and who was therefore several times as bright as he looked-and several times more dangerous, undoubtedly!

"Good," Trafalgar Cuw smiled. "First, let me have the captain's clothing-and stopper-and let me be the one to deal with her. She's still unconscious?"

"Ahh, she should be . . ."

"Let's hope so," Trafalgar said, and it was a fervent wish. Hellfire could have been called fulminate of mer-cury, ready to flare up violently if she was so much as jiggled. "Then I'll want clearance for me and the crew of *Satana* to shuttle down planetside, with our gear."

"Of course. There will be no inspection and no question, Prime Agent."

"Good, good. And of course we'll have a Soljer Securer sergeant with us as escort." He smiled sweetly,

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then grinned. "Of course I may well have to carry Hellfire down onto Jorinne in a *sack* to keep her from wiping out our escort!"

- He turned to Cosi. "Hey, stop frowning, Cozy! In-stead of On Leave Until After an Investigation, you're on temporary duty to me, with pay!" And he winked. Charmingly, of course.

5

The ceiling was the color of pale yellow crocuses at twilight. The walls were brightly yet quietly covered in fabric. Spring green, strawberry sherbet, lime lollipop and more of the pale crocus shade, all edged with royal blue in the orderly tangle of a paisley pattern.

Each corner of the large hotel room was rounded, with Joser-apparent disregard for wasted space. Not really: the concavity of one round "corner" was a sonishower, and behind another was a latrine, and another housed a sit-down toilet facility. The fourth corner was a closet sans water.

The carpet was more of the strawberry sherbet-or maybe it was rose-and it was plush. It also covered everything. *Everything*. Seductively comfortable furni-ture was a scattering of eruptions of the carpet, like trees and bushes trying to retain their shape under kudzu. All with rounded edges. And all in strawberry sherbet. Three round-edged table-shapes were topped with insets of prestwood, finished dull so as not to be flashy.

The same paisley fabric covered the fourth wall, but it was not a wall. Behind the drape was a window. Beyond lay Komodi, capital city of Jorinne, sprawling in sherbety pastels under twin suns.

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The drape was drawn but Cinnabar had pulled it back enough to stand and gaze out.

Just now the canary colored Payne was way over to the northwest. Since Humason, the electric-blue dwarf, presently hung straight out from the window, almost overhead but easterly, it was visible. With Payne clos-er, it would not be. With Payne out of sight beyond the planetary arc, other more distant suns were nearly as bright as Humason, and the planetary triplet off toward the Chandrasek system where lay Franji was even brighter.

Despite the nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere and the car-bon base, intelligent life had not developed on Jorinne because it was not meant to. The universe did not intend for intelligent life to rise here, and had not allowed for it. Not with the weirdness of its orbit about two suns which in turn negotiated an almost preposter-ous orbit about a common central point.

Yet it was a stable orbit, and so was Jorinne's. And there was the breathable air and friendly gravity, and the beauty. And the uranium.

Humankind was not a race known for being daunted by what it was "not meant to do." Most idiots who had spoken that way were far, far in the past, where they had always preferred to be. Humankind had not been "meant to" invent time zones, or to fly, or to leave its planet of origin for its own single natural satellite. It had not been "meant to" accept science and scientific evidence over the writings of ancient desert tribesmen of a people who had been conquered and ruled so much they had invented grandiose supernatural tales and a single god.

Life was not "meant to" rise to intelligence on Jorinne, and it had not.

Instead, intelligent life had come to Jorinne, and named it. For Jorinne was beautiful, and its skies beau-tiful, and its suns not really all that inimical, and Jorinne was rich. Rich in uranium, rich in bauxite. And rich, as

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one of those settlers was serendipitously to discover (at age eleven, in the thirteenth year of Jorinne's coloniza-tion) in pearls. Lavender, translucent pearls that soon took on value because they so obviously were not human-created, or cultured.

They were called Jorinne Purples, and they were called Raindrops of Jorinne-*katarat al-Jorin'*. For no particular reason, then: *katarat* or cataracts.

Sixty-three persons had landed here, hundred of years ago. Fifty-nine remained alive a year-standard later. A year after that disaster had struck those strivers, and only thirty-seven survived to colonize a world. Yet they were

forty-eight, because of their children. Natives, losers.

Out of those settlers and their offspring and *their* children had risen nine wealthy families and seven super-rich families. Clans. The clans of Jorinne; the ruling clans.

Now there were hundreds of rich families on lovely pastel Jorinne, and nineteen super-rich, and twelve that were called hyper-rich; there were thought to be just over a hundred hyper-rich families in all the galaxy. Those twelve clans of Jorinne comprised 201 persons. Many of them and their scions lived in Komodi, which they had made beautiful.

In all the star-blazing, planets-teeming galaxy, only Ghanj boasted more wealthy people than Jorinne.

(And yet "boasted of" was not the phrase, for the Ghanji. Their planet was frowned upon by many, particularly those who were most willing to make judgments without hard evidence. *After all*, those prideful liberals were wont to sneer-a planet settled almost solely by folk from a land called Indistan on old Urth, who had proceeded to set up a feudal state similar to that of another place on that long-ago Urth-Home-world-called Saudarabia!

(All Ghanj thrive though, not just its lords and ladies, and the enlightened neofeudalism was not planet-

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wide. As a matter of fact it had given birth to a new world to describe a unique social state; Ghanjism.)

The families pretty much ruled Jorinne. That is, the clans. They controlled with extraordinary intelligence and foresight. Only a few losers remained determinedly poor. That segment of society ridiculously lumped together as "Labor" was so well treated that guilds were prideful enclaves with uniforms and customs and rites. Unions had not risen, for there was no reason.

Paradise? Oh no. There was greed on Jorinne, and theft and cheating, and violence and murder. Its people were, after all, Galactics: humans.

The sky Cinnabar of Jarpi looked at appeared, appropriately for pastel-fixated Komodi, to be a vast field of lime sherbet strewn with dollops of whipped cream. To the west it shaded into gold; eastwardly it became pale ultramarine-a triumph of the little blue star. Tomorrow Payne would flame over Komodi again, painting its sky saffron with clouds like puffs of white and yellow gold. Humason would vanish into that splendor.

The other room of *Satana's* suite in the Hotel Lex- the Eagle Suite-was identical, except that the ceiling was of Prussian blue. When the lights were out, it would show stars and planets-their brightness determined by a bedside switch.

Dull, Hellfire said. Two connected rooms and all the same! Gives the illusion of spaciousness-that is, even more spaciousness-Trafalgar said; an unbroken floor of rose and every wall the same pastels-with-royal-blue paisley. Weird, Janja called it, and Cinnabar agreed.

Cinnabar did like the way the sky and the city looked, though, all pastel and almost without sharp corners in its buildings. The Jarp stood at the window, gazing out from those great big round eyes. Turned back but not drawn, the drape formed a paisley cloak that fell down one side of its body to its heels.

Obtaining the suite had been easy, no matter the cost and the *Satana's* crew's lack of credit here.

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"We're here for the Fair," Trafalgar had said, and he had given the Hotel Lex's manager a peek into one of the sacks.

The loser's eyebrows tried to unite with his hairline while his eyeballs only just avoided rolling down his cheeks. (Tan. Only the vegetable-paint "mask" around his eyes was blue. The clan Jacabe.)

"Holy Vike! This is . . . not . . . costume jewelry?"

Trafalgar said, "No."

The manager lifted his head slowly to meet the Outie's eyes.

"You know, I believe you. You're here for the Fair."

"Right. A bit short of ready stells and with nothing established on your most beautiful of planets. But loaded with funds-to-be, as you can see."

From the bag he withdrew a necklace of crystal agate rings, interlocked without visible seams, and set with three fine faceted sunstones.

"Why not put this in the hotel safe." Closing his hand on the necklace, he plucked forth a fine honey chrysoberyl the size of the end joint of his thumb. "Or this in your pocket."

The manager had straightened to resume that eyeball-to-eyeball stare. He had nodded.

"This will be safer in our safe," he said, taking the necklace and the unset gemstone. "Their credit is good," he said, and waved a hand to his clerk. It was a managerial hand from which the chrysoberyl had miraculously disappeared.

By the time the four off *Satana* were settling into the Eagle Suite, they assumed that manager Jacabe had politely required another of the Lex's guests, here for the fair, to appraise one or both of the bribes-that is, credit references.

("And I'll bet that appraiser will be the first person on Joser we hear from," Janja said smiling, and Trafalgar smiled back. And winked. He knew how to get things started.)

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Sergeant Cosi ensconced herself in the small room just down and across the hall. Trafalgar had pointed out that she could take the available third room of the suite at less cost, and secure the connecting door. No; she wanted to be separate from those she "escorted."

"And better able to keep an eye on us," Hellfire muttered, but went on along to the end-of-the-corridor door labeled Eagle Suite.

As Cosi had entered her room she turned back to give Trafalgar a wide gaze from those big girlish eyes.

"Is all that flash in those totes real?"

"Flash" for glittering gauds, he thought, and "tote" for bag. He nodded. "Yes."

"Both totes?"

"Yes."

She rolled her eyes. Like big round gemstones in their own right, he thought, except that they were liquid, those jasper-brown eyes. "Holy Lady Vike! And it's yers? All of it?"

"Ours."

"That's what I meant."

"Ours. All of it. We're a coalition. The Satana Co-alition. The captain agreed long ago to its division. Not ship's shares, but equal. Equal shares among five of us."

*Of course she didn't know or have control over what she was saying at the time, but she hasn't tried to back out on a promise made under the influence of Knoresse lipith. While we were busy fleeing glor-yuss self-sufficient Survival of Knor!*

"And, uh . . . do yer have receipts for all that jewelry?"

"No."

"Oh god. You did buy it, though?"

"No."

"Oh double-god, Trafalgar Cuw! You say that right out, to a policer-"

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"Nah, to a space station security sergeant," he said, smiling easily.

She gave him a challenging look. "You sound sneery. As if yer don't think a lot of space station securers."

"Not when their prefect wouldn't know his posterior perforation from an excavation."

The corners of her pretty mouth twitched, but the smile didn't make it past her policer control.

"You have a pretty mouth, Sergeant, you know that?"

"Never mind that, charmer. You . . . wouldn't care to tell me how your 'Satana Coalition' came by that jewelry without receipt, would yer?"

"Traf?" Hellfire called, querulously. Like Cosi, she stood in a hotel doorway, door partway open. Or partway closed.

"Be right there, Captain. Conferring with our escort, you know. We have all that jewelry and need protection, you know."

While Hellfire replied with a rude snort, he turned back to Cosi and in the same tone of voice said, "Sure, Cozy. We stole it."

She laid her cheek against the door's edge and thumped it gently with her fist while she squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh, slime."

"I hope that's merely a Joser expression meaning 'shit' or something, Cozy, not a comment on me. We stole the jewelry from its makers. The same ones who put the rings through both the captain's nips. *And* through her First Mate's- *and* a ring through the skin of each of the Mate's outer thighs. Right through the flesh, yes. Wonderfully decorative, those swine thought-*and made* them slaves. *And* raped them repeatedly, and *loaned* them to others, and left them in bondage for hours, and ordered them. And beat them. Aside from the fact that they demeaned them by considering them natural slaves . . . meat."

When she looked up at him, cheek against the door,

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the girlish eyes in her girlish heart-shape of a face were hopeful.

"Truth?"

He was on the point of saying "Cross my heart and hope to go Forty Percent City, it's truth," when he stopped himself.

He pulled an affronted look, made a cold-faced half-bow accompanied by a flamboyant across-the-body gesture of his arm in its blousy sleeve, and took the few steps up the corridor to the *Satana* group's suite.

Security Sergeant Cosi looked sadly after him, biting her lip. He never glanced back. The door to the suite closed after him. At last Cosi sighed. She entered her room, tugging the door shut after her.

The four off *Satana* had cleansed themselves and gratefully slipped into the Joser robes Trafalgar had ordered, giving the name of the Lex's manager as reference-Paddefstu ja-Jacabe. All four were in multi-colored pastels, and Trafalgar picked the brightest (tur-quoise, yellow, green, and azure). He had also called for food and beer, and been astonished when the door announced a visitor by its gentle *bong*. No, room service was not that fast; this was a bottle of Assinibasca, Jorinne's finest "bourbon" whiskey, and a big handsome bowl of fruit.

"I think you got the wrong order to the wrong room," he told the youngster. "I asked for beer and fowl, with-"

"Compliments of the Jacabe of Lex, sir."

"Oh! Well, bloody nice of him, don't you think? Care to stick around and have a beer with us?"

"Oh no sir! Maybe I'll hurry down and try to get that order of fowl and beer, though!" And the youngster redshifted, rapidly, without so much as a decistell for his trouble.

Someone else brought the food and beer, however. By that time they had all sampled the whiskey with a bit

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of Joser water-which tasted strangely like water, for a city-and a piece of fruit each. They ignored the rest of the fruit, set aside the Assinibasca, and ate the basted, baked, buttery Cornish hens with gusto and dripping fingers, which they licked frequently.

"Nice beer these people make," Trafalgar said, belch-ing, beaming, and carrying the rest of his over to "a couch-shaped eruption of the carpet.

"That Assinibasca must be their best," Hellfire said. "It's almost as good as Satana!"

They all laughed. Satana-juice was all they had called the alcohol excreted by the two stiglul Trafalgar Cuw had laboriously brought away from Knor. Stillwells, he called them. Hellfire draped herself on another divan (?) while Cinnabar stretched on the floor with its head on the edge of a short chair (?).

"So what do we-" the Jarp began, and the commu-nicator hummed.

Janja was still up; she went to the comm. The others stared curiously.

She said "Hello?" and listened; said "No, spacefarer and computrician Janja," and listened; said "Yes" and after a moment "Yes" again, and then a third time. "Oh yes," she said after some more listening, "just a moment." She turned to the others.

"One Yaood Something of Ghanj is inquiring after our merchandise."

Hellfire grinned. "Ah! The fellow the manager got to check those samples you left with him, I'll bet, Traf!"

Janja turned back to listen. "He would love to come right down and look at our merchandise," she announced.

"Gracious me," Trafalgar said with a mincing ges-ture, "before the *Fair*? How dreadfully gauche!"

Cinnabar's lazy pose had gone; the Jarp sat erect on the floor. "I'm for it!"

"So am I!" Hellfire said, grinning.

"Uh-Captain." Trafalgar still sprawled on the divan as if dropped there. He gestured with his beer pottle.

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"May I suggest that we tell him we have other contacts to make, and are after all here for the Fair, and think we shouldn't give advance showing of our merchandise. If he tries to convince us, maybe we'll let him! We *could* use a definite credaccount here, and a few ready stells as well."

"Stellar . . . monetary . . . units," Cinnabar said, defining stells with relish, and the Jarp licked its lips in an exaggerated way.

"Well, that's one way, and I guess it is better that you handle it, Trafalgar . . . you're definitely the sales-man among us," Hellfire said. She was putting a fine face of confidence over her apprehension.

"The best way, I'll swear," he assured her.

Janja jerked her head toward the window. "What's that noise?"

The others looked, heads cocked in listening atti-tudes. Hellfire said, "I don't hear anything . . ."

*I didn't either,* Janja realized, approaching the drape-concealed window. *I cherned menace, anger, with that sense these Galactics don't have-and don't know I have. I cherm mass-mind, . . .*

Her people's cherning ability was not telepathy, not really. That extra sense or brain-node detected emo-tions, intents. When it emanated from a group of peo-ple, it was an unavoidable mental "noise" that impinged on her consciousness and commanded her attention.

She crimped the drape back, leaving only a small slit so that she could see out without being noticed. Then, remembering even as she saw that they were nine sto-ries above the streets of Komodi-the corner of Ransom and Savoy, in fine-she pulled the drape farther aside. She stepped close to the window, and looked down.

"Demonstration of some sort," she announced. "A sort of mob-not a huge or really angry one, I think, but a large group. I thought everyone was happy on Jorinne."

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"Everybody isn't happy *anywhere*, Janjy," Helifire said quietly.

"Oh," Cinnabar remembered. "While you were to the shower, Janja. I was trying to catch up on the news. Holo-vid said that a demo was scheduled for 1600. It's sixteen-twenty, now."

"Scheduled?"

"Firm. Licensed and approved. I gather that all demos are, on Jorinne-otherwise they're stopped. I gather there are lots. losers are among fee very best-off people in the galaxy. That gives them plenty of time to think about being dissatisfied, and to bitch. They do. Uh . . . this demo's because there's a Ghanji lord and his retinue here in the hotel."

"Josers don't like lords," Trafalgar said, with a smile in his voice. "Clan chiefs now, that's different! Come to think, I noticed there's another demo sched-uled for oh-nine-hundred. It's about . . . I forget. And another one later. People from over in Leprekaun. They think the Fair's bad for Jorinne! Bring in all them funny furriners, I reckon."

Janja saw no violence. Just placards and open mouths in faces made ugly by the distortion of their yelling. Everyone seemed to be wearing something black, at least one item. And pastels. She looked back at Trafalgar Cuw.

"Leprekaun?"

He waved a hand, loosely. "Big mining town down the continent a ways. They probably just think they ought to have the Fair down there!"

Hellfire asked, "What else did you see on the news, that we ought to hear about?"

"Oh-you know the spacegoing whorehouse? Ganesa's *Be Lively!* It seems to've vanished from the spaceways along about when we did. No sign yet. Oh, here's something interesting. Still no word about the theft of the Heart of the Universe from a museum on Panish. Seems-"

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"Ole lady Adesina's famous firegem? How many times is this that thing's been snatched, anyhow?"

"I thought it was Shanki property."

"It was," Trafalgar said, "Shankar 'loaned' it to Panish, or Harmony, and you can bet it was considered theft-proof. It was stolen about the same time we-you know. I gather there's some scandal about it. But I was tuning out, thinking how nice it was that gems were in the news, and wondering what we might get for a few nice little Knoresse gewgaws on Shankar!"

"Consider it gone," Cinnabar said. "That's been over two months ago. Someone else is rich with some-one else's jewels!"

"Maybe," Trafalgar said. "Anyhow, with the Fair starting here day after tomorrow, gems V things are in the news. Oh-and a demagogue was really stirring things up and threatening some real trouble, on Luhra. He was offed. Murdered. You know-'assassinated.' "

"TGO," Hellfire opined.

Trafalgar shrugged. "Probably." He upended his beer pottle, peered, poked his tongue in. "Oh-did I mention Corundum?"

"Do you have to?" Cinnabar said, but Hellfire and Janja came visibly alert.

"Prefect Have-not up on Soljer said that Corundum's *rumored* to have tangled with Jonuta, shortly after he did us, I gather, and . . . lost. He went Forty Percent City. So Have-not thinks. Maybe."

"Oh, I hope so," Hellfire said, almost snarling.

"It's an unconfirmed rumor, remember."

"I don't know that I hope so," Janja said thoughtfully, walking over to a corner. "I've been looking for-ward to going after dear Cor!-oh blast! This is the *male* corner!"

Trafalgar and Hellfire laughed; Cinnabar said, "What? You mean to tell me that even room corners are single-sexed, on this fobby planet?"

"Yes. That's the one with the stand-up facility,"

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Janja said, crossing to another corner and touching the control that swung half the convex "wall" silently inward. A light came on as she went into the little room.

"Well . . . you've got to remember that going Forty Percent City is like a planetary weather *prediction*. Except on all those planets where weather's controlled absolutely, I mean." The sprawled Trafalgar sorrow-fully set down his empty pottle. "Forty per cent proba-bility of precipitation makes people moan and groan about getting wet tomorrow. But what it means is that there's a *sixty* per cent probability of no rain! Jam-cram's the same. There's a fifty-nine point-something probability of reconversion-emergence from 'subspae\* -alive, although with some damage."

Cinnabar said, "So it's six to four that *if* Corundum forty percented, he'll survive. Or already has."

"Damaged," Hellfire said, with relish. "I hope his SIPACUM-his precious Jinni-is absolutely fraggy!"

"That would be nice," Trafalgar said. "Still, there's also that nice one out of two-and-a-half chances that no one will ever see the bastard again."

"Or miss him," the Jarp said. It stole a glance at its chron. Thirteen minutes and a fraction since the Ghanji and Janja had Off-commed.

"Hellfire," Trafalgar said thoughtfully, "what do you think you'll do *if* we sell this Knorman gaudery, and for enough to make lords of us? Not to mention ladies."

"Nothing's going to make a lady of me," Hellfire muttered, but it was automatic levity, mouthed without thinking.

She looked at her hands, which began to writhe their long fingers like so many little snakes. A Knoresse ring glittered on one; a thickish band of gold set with a beautiful cabochon-cut star ruby. Ruby, she mused idly. One of the components of corundum. Ruby and emer-ald. And the abrasive, emery. That had been Janja's

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name for the infamous and sententious Captain Corun-dum, during the months she had spent with him.

*Then she met me in that bar on Thebanis,* Hellfire thought, but she twitched her head to throw off that line of thought. She was only putting off answering the Outie's question, and she knew it.

She answered, without looking up. She spoke to her hands. Her knuckles paled as she tightened her fingers, working them as if they'd gone arthritic.

"I . . . I think I'll sell . . . sell the ship and . . . and retire," she said. Her voice was uncharacteristically quiet and the words seemed to be having trouble getting up out of her throat. "May . . . maybe on . . . on Ghanj? Someplace where I can lord it. I mean lady it."

The astounded Cinnabar had turned around to stare in disbelief.

Trafalgar Cuw was nodding. "I think that's extremely wise, Hellfire. I wouldn't recommend Ghanj, because no amount of money can buy a title, or even buy into that hidebound society of theirs. But retirement now, that's probably the best decision of your life. And there are lots of places where you can lady it, with cred up to here."

Cinnabar said, "But Hellf-"

"I'll buy your ship, Captain Hellfire," Janja said almost formally, emerging from the relief comer. Her Joser robe was jonquil and lime, beige and azure, a flashing rustle of spring as she walked.

Now it was the turn of all three to stare at the diminutive girl-woman with the almost white hair and impossibly steel-pale eyes; native of a pre-technological (pre-industrial, *pre-steel*) planet; former slave, formerly Corundum's . . . companion, then Hellfire's; always her own. A woman of a mere twenty years (or nineteen? -or twenty-one?) who hated the constant Fry setting of Hellfire's stopper and who kept hers on One because she did not like killing, or even violence; who had killed again and again, in defense of self and in re-

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venge. A plain old-fashioned now-and-then berserker, Trafalgar Cuw considered her-but he knew her no better than anyone else.

Janja, once Janjaheriohir of pastoral, perhaps idyllic Aglaya.

Janjaglaya, pirate.

She knew that Aglayans were not humans, that they were *different*, that she was not human, not quite. (Or that humans were not quite Aglayan!) She knew that her people's ability to choncel, even their "minor" ability to cherm, were not possessed by these Galactics, these humans. The ones she still thought of as Them, the thingmakers, for she was not one with them.

She could not choneel because she had yet to find a male of her own people who could, passively, provide her with that ability.

Only Cinnabar of Jarpi (and Thebanis, and *Satana*) knew that Janja was just as alien as it was, only more human *looking*.

They stared at her, all three of them. And Cinnabar was less astonished and more delighted than the others.

"I'm ready for a ship, I think. Especially if you are retiring and I can persuade Quindy to stay on, on *Satana*. You know I am competent with ships and ships' computers, Hellfire. I've learned much by studying-and from you, and Corundum, and Quindy. From Trafalgar," Janja added, with a quirk of her lips that was not quite a smile. "And you know I have a mission." (A Mission, she thought of it, and made it sound that way, as if it were a holy thing.) "I want Corundum."

"So do I," Hellfire said, "but it may be too late for that, if this rumor Trafalgar tells us about is true."

Janja waved a hand that said "*no matter*." She said, "My Mission is that I want Jonuta. That is my purpose and my life. Since he destroyed my life on Aglaya, he provides its purpose among . . . you."

*Theba's eyes,* Trafalgar Cuw thought, *but she makes*

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herself sound so alien . . . and looks so too, with the purposefulness of her and those cinerous eyes. He real-ized how seldom he had seen her smile, how little she joked.

*She runs mighty deep, Janja the "barbarian" does, and may be the deepest and the best of Satana's lot. As we thought.*

"Jonuta's crewman murdered the man who was to be my Lifemate. For no reason, they Fried him, on my lovely, peaceful Aglaya on a lovely and peaceful day when Tarkij- my lover and intended-and I were mak-ing our plans for our long future together. One future for us, as one, as Lifemates."

She swallowed, paused, stood as tall as she could, at 156sems.\*

"One of his crewmen was killed on Qalara, and Jonuta thinks that Corundum was responsible. Corun-dum said not. I do not know-the other / killed, with pleasure. On Franji, in a bar, with Corundum's stop-per. I want their chief. I want the premier slaver in the galaxy; Captain Jonuta. Captain *Cautious*," she added, her face twisting and going ugly with the sneer follow-ing the intensity of her words.

*Driven by vegeance,* some would have said of this small, intense woman. They would have been right.



It was the only purpose she had found among Them. It was not enough, but it served.

"So . . . I need a ship. *My* ship. If we do indeed have enough gauds of Knor to be rich or nearly, Captain Prasstop-I'll buy your ship. You set the price."

"Janjy, Janjy," Hellfire said, with uncharacteristic feeling.

"If it is not *Satana*, Hellfire, it will be another ship. It is what I will do."

Hellfire heaved a sigh and returned her gaze to her hands. "If . . . if we gain enough from these evil-

\*156 centimeters: 5 feet, 1½ inches, Old Style.

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origin jewels, Cloud-top, that will be the way of it- what you say. If we gain enough to provide each of us with true wealth, as much as a half-million stells, I will sell you *Satana* for exactly half its value arrived at by an outside appraiser. I will record that, and stand by it. But oh Janjy, I wish you wouldn't just-"

She was interrupted by the humming of the com-municator.

All four of them jerked. They had been so intent that they had been as if mesmerized by Janja's intensity. Only that had made them forget the expected call from Yaood Somebody of Ghanj. And just under seventeen minutes had passed.

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In Survival of Knor, latterly the home of the crew of spaceship *Satana*, art took one form: the working of metals and stone into jewelry and gauds. The noblest senator was proud of his skills as lapidary. Tunnels ran back into the mountain for the mining of more and more gemstones, both precious and lesser. Gauds were traded among Knormen the way boys might trade marbles. When one tired of a piece of jewelry or saw other possibilities in this or that mounted stone, one pried forth the gem-stones, melted down the gold or silver, and began a new piece. Few pieces of jewelry lasted a lifetime to be passed down to progeny, in Survival, on Knor.

Jewelry and drinking were the national hob-bies, along with keeping women in their place. In Survival mat meant lower than a snake's rectum-but aglitter, as possessions, with jewels and incredibly wrought, cut and polished rings, even chains of quartz.

Available to the downy little men on Knor was just about everything lapidarian except amber and pearls. (Yet their superb spheres and cabochons of smoky quartz resembled pearls more than anything else, and fine ones at that.)

Every piece of jewelry in Survival, whether worn by a noble lady or her servant, was meticulously and lov-

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ingly hand-wrought. Every piece was one of a kind. That made them unique not only on Knor, but in all the galaxy.

Trafalgar Cuw had been given or perhaps loaned a belt buckle-a slide-an amulet, and an armband that were both gaudy and rich. He had made the loan permanent. In addition, he had stolen a few little items as he and his companions made their escape from Survival:

An intricately-carved man's bracer of solid fine silver; a nice ring with a smooth-cut fat sapphire; another of gold bearing an intaglio filled with perfectly-fitted bits of ebony, and another with a good flashy cabochon or lozenge-shape of citrine, yellow as Quindy's hair; a man's bracer or armband of *gran*, Survival's lichen-derived "leather," set with four small rubies in diamond-shapes of silver mountings; and a man's amulet, on a thong of gran. It was of formed crystal brightly enameled with orange-red mercuric sulfide: cinnabar.

(Later Trafalgar had kindly offered it to his Jarp shipmate of the same name. Cinnabar had turned it down with strained politeness.)

He had also filched a thin silver ring, unimpressive in Survival yet nice, with its tiny piece of jade perfectly cut into a green cross. And a perfectly plain band of gold that happened to be two millimeters thick and so pure that it was almost soft, and already scarred.

Those one-of-a-kind treasures he had merely taken in passing, as it were-from hapless Knormen the fugitives had been forced to knock in the heads as they fled. He had also retained his magnificent belt-slide, his amulet, and the bracer of gran set with so many overly bright chips of so many colors of quartz that it endangered the sight of anyone looking at it in good light.

(The amulet was about the same; too many chips of too many hues, too much flashing refulgence. Told so by his shipmates. Trafalgar affected an attitude of shock at their obvious lack of esthetic appreciation for magnificent adornment, and swore that they were merely envi-

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cms. No one, however, tried to take it from him. On the other hand, they did squint and affect to avert their faces with exaggerated wincing.

("Be charitable," Trafalgar said. "It wards off Bleakers." Sure enough, no Bleakers were seen on *Satana*.)

There had come a night in Survival when a certain Torgex and his friend Boskar had decided to get together for a private party with their two new possessions, the exotic slaves Midnight and Love-fire. That their names happened to be Quindy and Hellfire was of no interest or consequence to those two masters of Survival.

Since their noble wives were elsewhere, Boskar and Torgex disported themselves mightily with strong drink and with their drug-tamed slaves. One of them hatched the idea of adorning each of the latter with everything on the premises. Growing ever more inebriated on the absolutely free stiglul-produced alcohol of Knor, they did just that.

To begin with, the slave Midnight/Quindy already wore her 'permanent jewelry.'

The outer curve of each gleaming black thigh was pierced by a thin ring of large diameter, each of clear-cut, refulgently gleaming crystal quartz and each brilliantly wrought in a perfect circle. Another ring, this one transparent but gold-flecked, carved and polished from a single piece of rutiled quartz, pierced the halo of her right breast just at the base of the purple-black nipple it tended to keep larger than her left.

On that night much was added. She was at length lovingly arrayed and more aglitter than the sky her captors had never seen, by night or by day.

An amethyst-studded little rope circled her hips to support her master's idea of a "skirt." The band consisted of three ultra-slim strands of Knorman hair interwoven with two of gold wire. Tiny gold-link chains depended from it at six-millimeter intervals, terminating

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in flashing pendants that seemed to dribble from her hips.

A loop of gold pierced each earlobe, and from each were slung three other rings that did not quite hurt but were too heavy to be comfortable. Above each of her lobes a new hole had been made, and from each of these flashed a topaz the color of her jonquil hair.

Quindy's other pendants were even less comfortable.

The pendants were diamond-shaped pieces of constantly twinkling, color-flashing crystal, prismatically faceted beyond even the ability of any computer-and-laser-equipped stonemason on any of the high-tech worlds out beyond no-tech Knor. Those ostentatiously large pendants—which had strained even the earlobes of her mistress—were suspended from pinch-clamps on Quindy's nipples. (Yes, they hurt.)

At her throat, a single ruby flashed from a band of braided silver. The gem was as large as her thumbnail; as thick as her little finger. Just below it, a carcanet or jeweled collar gleamed and sent forth polychromatic flashes right down onto the tops of her bare breasts. It was heavy, almost massive, in silver and tiny inset quartz chips—and an even eighty uniformly one-carat stones, in eight colors and five shapes.

Her arms had flashed and tinkled that night, all scintillant and jingly from biceps to fingers—on which had been loaded no fewer than eleven rings; every one her "mistress" possessed.

The yellow-haired black woman had been as aglitter that night in Survival as a vista of twinkling multi-colored stars seen from space unsullied by atmosphere. And far more breathtaking.

That was Quindy. Hellfire was jewel-bedecked as well, and was hardly less resplendent. Additional color was provided by the whip-marks on her skin, which was darkish but far from black.

Thus did Torgex and Boskar of Survival bedeck their enslaved captives, and two hours later Torgex and Boskar

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were dead, and every bit of that truly magnificent jewelry left Survival, and Knor, with the five off *Satana*. Along with it came away what Janja had worn, and Cinnabar, and Trafalgar. And what Trafalgar last-minutely stole as well.

All, all of it, they had agreed and Captain Hellfire had confirmed, was theirs equally. The four crew of *Satana*, and Trafalgar Cuw. Each was in for a one-fifth share.

Now, because of the great Fair that made Jorinne famous throughout that sprawling parsec abyss called the galaxy, they had come to Jorinne to begin the process of turning captivity into profit. Two months of ghastly degradation, they hoped, would yield them wealth for life.

The inspection of their ill-gotten wares began with the visit to their suite by one of Ghanj's very best and most renowned gemologists and dealers.

Yaood Pilishishi of Vasishta on planet Ghanj was a very big man who looked as if he belonged in a work-er's uniform. Instead he wore the full pants of northern Ghanj—his were burgundy, with tucked cuffs and side-strip stripes of black braid—and a full white shirt, worn outside the pants. It was called a dasheek and was just long enough to cover Yaood Pilishishi's butt, when he stood. Its neck was round and low enough to show his collarbones; the extra-full sleeves were three-quarter length to display brawny arms like oak branches. The shirt was embroidery-trimmed with black and silver thread.

On his thick left wrist he wore a plain silver bracelet set with slender topaz cabochons arranged in a top-of-the-wrist

sunburst. On the right, his chron was set in a broad, heavy-looking jet black band that turned out to be just that: jet, and heavy. He wore three rings, one of which looked sufficient to purchase a controlling inter-est in Hotel Lex.

He had a face like a block of brown wood beveled to

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a slightly rounded softness around the edges and below the chin. His curly hair was worn extremely short, and glistened like the band of his chronometer. His beaded black slippers appeared to be of felt. He carried a small briefcase that was obviously high-impact resistant, and just as obviously expensive.

*Myrzha* Pilishishi was politely and mildly affable and completely businesslike until the first of the two sacks was opened for his inspection. (Janja and Cinnabar had flanked the door, stoppers ready, when he entered, and now had made sure the door was secured. Only his size bore any semblance of menace.)

"Oh, oh my . . . oh my, my," Yaood Pilishishi said low, making it sound like a religious chant. The fact that he dropped to his knees to stare at the glittering contents of the big bag off *Satana* added to the illusion.

He stared. He stared long. Cinnabar, Hellfire, Trafalgar, and Janja exchanged looks above his glistening curl-topped head, which was bowed as if in reverence over aU that gaudery.

Abruptly he lifted his head. "I am a stupid, undisciplined man for a trader, as you see. It is that the gem enthusiast in me is paramount, not the dealer. Other-wise I would cover; pretend to be only mildly interested in this gaudy display. I cannot. Here is beauty, and fine, fine workmanship."

He glanced down at the array of jewelry. "Tell me . . . has my mother indeed birthed two stupid chulwars, rather than just my brother, or . . . is all this as it appears-hand-wrought?"

"From the very beginning," Trafalgar answered him. "From the first taking of the stones from the mines, where there is no machinery."

"It is all hand-made," Hellfire said. "And not by Galactics."

"As a matter of fact," Cinnabar could not help adding, "it came off no known world-and we do not know now to return there."

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"Oh. Oh my." Yaood squeezed shut his large, nearly black eyes and managed to look smaller. "Oh . . . my. Please . . . you will not be insulted if I assure myself of the reality of these gems?"

"Just don't bite the gold," Trafalgar said. "You'll leave toothmarks."

"You will pardon me if I do not laugh at your jest, sir. I am far too impressed . . . and I believe that you may well be right. The gold does appear to be of such fineness." Still, on his knees, the large man half-twisted to touch his briefcase. "Here . . . I have my instruments . . ."

"Security," Captain Hellfire said.

Immediately one of the room's rounded corners opened and Cosi appeared. Her eyes were fixed on the Ghanji dealer. While her hand rested as if negligently on the butt of her stopper, her posture was one of an expert's preparedness.

The Joser policer looked very good, Janja thought- as she took up a similar stance, for she too was identified as Security. It was really very clever of Trafalgar to have called Sergeant Cosi and got her to come over and agree to this. Now they made an impressive show of well-protected people, rather than merely four spacefarers carrying a fortune.

*Better that than to have someone assume we are less than what we are,* Janja thought, *which is deadly. This way maybe there will be no attempts and no violence.*

If only the attractive Joser could tear her large-eyed gaze from all that polychromatic dazzlement spread on the carpet before Yaood Pilishishi!

He looked almost mildly at Cosi, and at Janja. "Ah, good. You have employed guards, and one ostentatiously uniformed. Good, good. You are most wise."

He had no way of knowing that all four of his Joser-robed hosts were armed and more than ready to meet any attempt at theft or trickery. The multi-colored pastel robes covered much.

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"No one here could suspect such a person as you, *Myrzha* Pilishishi," Sergeant Cosi diplomatically said. "None could consider that your case might contain other than the tools of a professional dealer in gems, from a planet known for honor. I am here merely for my decorative value." And she smiled, decoratively.

Three people twitched their gazes at the attractive young Joser. No one said anything. And Janja kept her eyes on the big man on his knees.

"With your leave," he said to the room at large, and opened his case.

No one noticed that both Cosi and Hellfire sucked in a deep breath, just in the event the opening of the case actuated an automatic release of gas. Yaood did not notice that Hellfire slid a hand casually under a fold of her robe where it spread across a divan-eruption. Her stopper lay there.

There was no gas. The open case did not reveal a weapon. Nor did the Ghanji withdraw a jeweler's

mon-ocular and scales. Revealed was a highly specialized minicomputer with highly specialized attachments.

He looked up. "Do you have these catalogued?"

"No," Hellfire said, while Trafalgar said, "Of course." They looked at each other. He winked the eye on the side of his head turned away from Yaood. "Sorry, Captain. I forgot we were to play dumb."

That was more cleverness. There had been no such agreement, and the collection had certainly not been measured, weighed, or even listed.

"I shall record, then, and hand you a copy before I leave," Yaood said.

He slapped a stikpatch onto the chest of his dasheek and slapped the little microphone onto the patch. The microphone clung. The jeweler's petros scanner and lapidator he tugged out on their extensors, and commenced to apply them to each piece of Knores jewelry he took up. They fed their information back into the computer, which recorded even as it displayed for Yaood.

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Yaood meanwhile dictated the carat weight and hardness and precise dimensions of the stones (insofar as their settings allowed), along with a description of the whole piece and the quality of the metal. All were impressive. In fact the dealer was obviously disbelieving more than once, and made a reassessment.

On those occasions when he said, "Silver, pure fine" and "gold, twenty-four carat and past ninety-nine," he sounded again like an ardently devout monk at his prayers.

His hosts watched. None of them spoke a word. They had his vowed assurance of confidentiality, and they listened to the cataloguing of their property. And exchanged looks. Cosi looked as if she had swallowed a frog. Hellfire was trembling. That did not bother Trafalgar Cuw and indeed was entirely understandable; he felt as if he had swallowed a frog, too. His heartbeat was definitely up.

Outside and below, another demonstration began. It wasn't that no one paid attention, on Joser. It was just that demonstrators were not aggrandized by the electro-news medium, and no one had to fear violence. Demos were a part of Jorinne's life and culture; a planetary tradition.

At last, at very long last, the big man had finished applying his computer-linked instruments to the last of the contents of the sack he did not know was one of two, and had muttered its description into his recorder. That was a necklace of three crystal agate rings "incredibly shaped and polished to the smoothness of plasteel," with three fine faceted sunstones "of precisely four-point-two carats each, and of a quality beyond the best Jasbiri sunstones I have seen."

He sat back, staring, shaking his head. "I sit in AH Baba's cave," he murmured, and was offered a drink. He refused politely, distractedly.

"A favor," Hellfire said, and handed him the brace-let she wore.

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It was duly scanned, examined, weighed, numbered, described, recorded. So were Trafalgar's bracer, amulet, and the big slide on the belt he fetched from the closet. While Hellfire handed Yaood her earrings, Janja and Cinnabar added the gauds they wore. None bore an etched or stamped Made In Survival; all were.

The other sack contained more, including everything that had adorned Quindy . . . except for the three rings that still pierced her flesh. No one mentioned the other sack.

At Yaood's questioning expression at the flood of personal jewelry for his appraisal, Hellfire confirmed the agreement she had made while under the influence of the Knores drug. And this time it was recorded, with and by an outside witness: Yaood Pilishishi.

"All of us are off my spacer, Myrzha Pilishishi. A long, long way away from here we were attacked and our ship's computer was knocked out. We survived, barely, by making crash-planetfall on an uncharted world . . . somewhere. All of us were captives of the makers of this jewelry for more than two months-ess. We were theu- *slaves*, Myrzha Pilishishi! *Slaves*, of swine without the hint of technology!"

He stared, blinking in shock and astonishment.

"We escaped," Hellfire said. "And we managed to bring this with us. It represents only a tiny portion of what they have, but unfortunately we do not know where we were. No, not even the quadrant or the system. Anyhow, *all* of us were slaves, and we *all* participated in the escape-these far more than I, since I was drugged. So. Everything we brought away is *ours*, as a unit. We share equally."

"Incred-ible," Yaood murmured, shaking his big curl-topped head.

"So," Trafalgar said, "if any of us wants to keep something, its value must be deducted from whatever we realize from the sale of the rest. That belt buckle

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isn't mine; it's *ours*. The same is true of those earrings Janja just handed you."

The Ghanji nodded. "I understand. You did not need to tell me this, sir and madam-any of this. Your

business is your own. I will say that it is my great pleasure to meet and I hope to deal with people of such diverse backgrounds-races! -who are so mutually de-voted. A team, as it were." He made a rather formal bow, still on the carpet. "It is also my very great pleasure merely to handle these jewels, I assure you all!"

Abruptly his smile widened. "And I can see readily that you will not have any gemologists' verifax, or bills of sale for any of this jewelry!"

"You are a most understanding and welcome man, Myrzha Pilishishi," Cinnabar said.

"And I hope we are indeed able to do business with you," Hellfire said. "I believe we should have some-one else confirm your estimation of our merchandise though, don't you agree?"

"Unfortunately I am forced to say that I do, Captain-*sitti*. Would that I could suggest the person or persons you next consult, but I can see that my motives might be suspect. On the other hand, there are some dealers- and collectors, oh yes, and collectors-here, both losers and from offplanet, come here for the Fair-whom I wish I could warn you against! *Please* be careful in that. You have much here of value."

He took up one of the mismatched earrings Janja had placed before him, still warm from her lobes.

They were all crowded around the big man seated on the carpet, now-a carpet whose rich rose or strawberry sherbet hue incidentally provided a fine, lustrously dark background for the displaying of the massed scintillants before Yaood Pilishishi.

Abruptly the locked hall door swung in. At the same time a man appeared in the doorway to the adjoining room. He carried a stopper and so did the woman who

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stepped in from the hotel corridor. She nudged the door shut behind her, using her foot. Everyone heard the lock engage.

Both intruders looked at nothing but the little group-ing of people on the carpet. And at Cusi.

"Don't," the man said, gesturing at her with his stopper when she started to draw hers. "All of yer just rise slowly and step away from that interesting pile of glitter on the floor, please. We won't be long. It is just that you have a few little things we want."

"I assure you that we need them more than you do," the youthful woman said, with a smile so flat that it was frightening.

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Janja stared at the man-little more than a boy, she thought, and never mind her own scant years; she was worthy of Agiaya and *They* had aged her. He was familiar . . . of course! He had been in the lobby while they registered themselves into the hotel.

Of course. And he had seen Trafalgar reach into one of the sacks to bribe, er, convince the manager that they were trustworthy for their accommodations. Not to men-tion in-roora meals, drinks, and seven maids amilking, if they had a yen toward such perversions.

So this youthful little fart had seen that, and greed mounted up inside him like steam in a boiler, and he hadn't lost any time!

He'd got his kitchen-help girlfriend or sister, and a couple of stoppers, and popped right up. With two passcards, to gain entry through locked doors. And here they were, trying to look confident and tough, unthink-ingly thinking they were going to be wealthy for life, just like that. Never mind how they'd get out of the Lex; out of the city; off Jorinne with their take. (With such a sizable cache of flash they'd be instantly suspect and wouldn't dare try disposing of it onplanet . . . other than to a fence, Janja realized. But that would be for a third or so of the worth of their gemmy riches.)

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Then Trafalgar Cuw was rising from the floor, look-ing really scared, actually shaking so that his long robe rippled. That had to be an act, and Janja was instantly alerted.

"You . . . you aren't going to . . . c-can't mean to . . . to . . . to Poof us, over a handful of pretty rocks," the Outie stammered, backing as if unaware of his movement. As if automatically placing distance be-tween him and the potential death in the muzzles of those two stoppers. Backing, Janja observed, from the others, from his companions, from Janja, who was on the opposite side of the little circle from him.

He backed toward the room's wall separating it from the corridor. Behind Janja was the outer wall; the great big draped window.

*He's separating, she realized. Putting distance be-tween us.*

And she, too, stood. Slowly. No jerking movements to bring on the tightening of a nervous hand on the grip of a stopper, which was its trigger.

Slowly, staring as if fearfully at the intruders, she began to back in the direction opposite the obviously frightened Trafalgar Cuw . . . who she had decided wasn't likely to be scared if he were on collision course with The Malestrom.

No, he wasn't scared. He was faking. On the instant, he had hatched some plan. A Plan.

Janja rose and backed then, concentrating on being alert, and ready.

*How about 'Ready For Anything?'-I hope!*

Looking like a nervous boy, the male invader jerked his stopper, jerkily. He was staring at Trafalgar and radiating all the confidence of a deepwater fish nine kilometers inland.

"Hey! Be still! Don't be scared, shader-we don't want to hurt yer, not none of yer, much less kill yer! These stoppers're set on Two. You'll be OK. Just be

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still and we won't use 'em at all. If yer *make* us, we will, but it won't kill yer. Just be *still! Stop*, dammit!"

"Well," Trafalgar said, not interrupting his steady, slow sidling to the wall, "that's good news! We've all been hit by Two beams, I believe, and obviously we've survived. If everybody moves, then, you can't make us *all* Dance, can you! I'll take my medicine . . . Janja! To the window!"

Trafalgar said all that rapidly, and then moved rapid-ly. Naturally the intruders reacted. The male was nearer Janja, but his stopper was leveled at Trafalgar. Accord-ingly his companion aimed at Janja (very unprofessionally extending her stopper and holding it well out from her as if rather afraid of it). She squeezed. He squeezed.

*A hell of a chance he's taking with my life*, Janja thought. *What if that nervous bug is lying and one of those stoppers is set-or both of them-on Th-*

Then she stopped thinking coherently, because she couldn't think at all.

That ugly whole-body rictus took Janja and Trafalgar Cuw. Shaking all over, they simultaneously twitched and shuffled . . . on legs that appeared to be made of barely firm rubber. They were utterly helpless, pitiful *things* now possessed by the technological demons of those two stoppers.

They were also fully occupying the attention of both stoppers and both intruders.

While the squatting Yaood twisted around to stare from one of the breakers-in to the other, Hellfire sort of wallowed off a mini-couch eruption in the carpet. Writh-ing, rolling, her hand inside her robe. It came out with her stopper, and she used it. On the male.

A new Hellfire indeed, after her awful experience on Knor! For once her stopper's setting was at Two: Dance. The youthful male began that ugly twitch-shuffle Two-setting "dance." His grasp on the actuating grip of his stopper relaxed as his whole body did, in a way. That freed Trafalgar of the beam. While every mistreated and

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thoroughly confused nerve in his body sought to regain control, the Outie staggered against the wall with a *whump*.

Sprawled on the floor, Hellfire directed her beam past Yaood's bulk, to his right. And the thief continued jiggling in the grip of that almost-invisible neurally-disrupting beam.

His partner jerked, too, but on her own and in indecision.

As her stopper whipped over to aim at Hellfire, obviously the worst menace now to the Great Theft, its force released Janja from neural bondage. Janja went still, and in a second she had sagged and fallen like an empty sack.

The female thief's beam found Hellfire. Hellfire began jerking-and Sergeant Cosi, Station Soljer Security, pinned the young woman with her stopper while the man, released of Hellfire's beam and staggering, tried to get his fingers to cooperate in aiming and squeezing at the newest menace-Cosi, while Trafalgar stood against the wall, held up by it while he shook his head and blinked and Janja, impropriously on hands and knees, stared down at the hazy carpet and worked her eyes while wagging her head . . .

And Cosi swung her beam to catch the male thief before he pinned her (unfortunately jolting Cinnabar as she swung her weapon, since the Jarp was in the act of rising and got in the way; the beam passed on to find the thief and Cinnabar flopped) and the female intruder, released from Cosi's beam, staggered and shook her head in piteous, twitching little jerks while making distinct sobbing sounds . . .

And Trafalgar and, surprisingly to everyone, Yaood Pilishishi launched themselves almost simultaneously.

Janja had got herself together and onto one knee in time to see the Ghanji drive his bulky body into the male thief's legs as if he were at tackleball practice.

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Both of them sprawled, the intruder backward. His harids opened reflexively and the stopper flew.

Meanwhile Trafalgar's charge at the woman bore her into the corner just beside the hall door. The corner opened and both of them thump-banged noisily into the closet. The dry one.

"O Lady Vike," Sergeant Cosi said, "what a mess!"

The punctuation mark to her exclamation was pro-vided by the *chunk* of Yaood's big fist banging down, hammer-like, onto the chest of the inept young would-be thief he had borne down. The poor incompetent grunted and his outstretched legs jerked.

Thumping-banging-scratching-scrabbling noises issued from within the closet, whose partially open doorway extruded two legs. One was Trafalgar's and one was not. The second one squeaked loudly and

flesh slapped flesh in a sharp smack. Trafalgar's voice said, "Arr!" His opponent-or victim-again squeaked loudly.

"Holy Sunmother's Light," Janja murmured, sud-denly feeling a wicked urge to laugh. She told herself sternly to forget that untimely impulse.

"Owww!" the closet said in a female voice, amid more thumping and scambulous sounds.

"*Tm-falgar*," Hellfire said querulously, pawing her-self to her feet. She paused in the squatting position, blinking her eyes against a wave of dizziness.

"How *exciting*," Sergeant Cosi said unprofessionally. "Six months of station duty dull as a completely auto-mated shoe factory, and now two stopper-fights in one day! You people certainly do attract excitement, don't yer!"

"How'd you like to have this thing crammed up your- oh." Hellfire had whirled angrily, stopper com-ing up, but she discovered that she was looking right into the barrel of the sergeant's.

"Allies, remember?" Cosi smiled sweetly.

"Trafalgar?" Janja moved toward the closet, wary of

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the outstretched legs of Yaood's conquest. "Do you need *help* with that big vicious criminal?"

The Outreacher's voice came back muffled: "She<sup>s</sup> 'ot 'omehing stuffed i' my mou'!"

Cinnabar stared at the closet. "*What!*"

"Said she's got something stuffed in his mouth," Janja said. "I think."

The other voice from the closet came back strongly before she had finished explaining, "Stop biting my breast, you bully!"

Hellfire broke up. Janja rolled over her eyes and aborted her move to Trafalgar's aid. When a woman called a man "bully," she had given up and was ready for an altogether different game. Janja turned to Yaood and his supine prisoner. Yaood was huffing, in the act of rising, and Janja pushed out a hand.

"Here, *ally*, take a hand up."

"Thanks," Yaood said, accepting her hand, and she felt his considerable weight as he came to his feet. He looked down at their former accoster. "You lie still or I'll step on your chest."

"Yessir."

"Better still," Cosi said briskly, appearing beside Yaood, "let's have him on his feet so I can confine his hands behind him. You're in a lot worse shape then when you came in, little friend, and under arrest be-sides. Want to get up quietly?" "Oh, slime," the fellow said dejectedly, and moved. He gasped. "Damn! Big son of-I'm not sure I can."

"Doesn't matter to me," Cosi said, bolstering her stopper and producing a set of shining cuffs. "Just roll over and put your hands back."

The would-be thief stood. He looked sourly around, at all of them.

"Damn, what a dam' dumb thing to try this was," he muttered, in manner surly. Suddenly he jerked his head toward the closet. "Eumie! Give it up and come out of there." And he put back his hands for Cosi's cuffs.

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"I'm *trying* to, dammit!" Eumie's strained voice gasped, from the closet. Out of the outthrusting legs moved.

*Click. Click.* And Eumie's accomplice was in custo-dy, hands linked behind him in bands of plasteel.

"Trafalgar," Hellfire called, almost laughing. "Let that poor li'l girl out of there!"

"I'm trying to, dammit," Trafalgar called, and the closet's other outthrusting leg moved. His. The laughter was general.

"Uh, Cinnabar . . ." Janja said, motioning.

She held the closet's door wide as she could-someone yipped-while Cinnabar tugged at Trafalgar's bootless leg. Someone yipped and the leg jerked. With a sigh Cinnabar seized the other ankle, the woman's. She made a squeaky sound and tried kicking.

"You be real, real still," Trafalgar's voice came, "and I'll try backing out. Let go, dammit."

"Oh," she said, and then, "uh! Ouch-owww! Be *careful*, yer big bully!"

Robe hiked high, Trafalgar Cuw presented an unin-spiring sight as he backed out of the closet. He was thoughtful enough to seize the leg of Eumie just before it tried one last kick at him. He twisted and she squeaked.

Then, brushing Cinnabar and Janja aside, Trafalgar got to his feet, still gripping that ankle, and began pulling. He dragged the disheveled young woman out of the closet.

She had not been exaggerating. No teethmarks were visible in the cloth, but the fabric of her shirt was all wet, just where it was poked up by her warhead. She grunted when Trafalgar dropped her leg.

She looked down at her shirt, up at him. 'Dam' sex-nut bully!"

"Doubtless true," Cosi said, moving in close. "So mean of him to pick on a poorr innocent li'l girl . . . when all she

was doing was betraying an employer . . . breaching hotel privacy . . . breaking and entering . . .

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misusing hotel property-namely passcards . . . bran-dishing a potentially deadly weapon in 'such a way as to cause fear for life itself . . . employing that weapon on innocent people . . . *and* attempting a massive theft!"

Sergeant Cosi paused a moment for breath. Then, "Them's the charges, little girl. So far you haven't added resisting an officer of the law. I'd be delighted if yer did."

Eumie made a whimpering sound and looked a bit smaller.

"Now get up, sis, and let's get these nice bracelets on you. They aren't the ones yer came for, but Sweet Lady Vike works in mysterious ways."

Trafalgar was looking at Cosi with a bright smile. "Oh, I like all that! You've got some good lines. Cozy!"

"See? The grunjok *is* a sex-nut," the bedraggled Eumie said, and shook away Janja's offer of help. She stood.

Now she looked small, like the little girl Cosi had cruelly called her or someone's bedraggled and mishan-dled little sister. Not at all like the would-be thief who had been so swift to threaten-and to use her stopper. With a dark look at Trafalgar Cuw and another at Cosi, she turned and allowed herself to be cuffed.

"Slime's sake," she said almost squeakily, looking smaller still. "I never done a bad thing in my whole life and I had to let that shader talk me into *this!*" Eumie raised her voice for her accomplice's benefit. "We'da been better off to've tried hijacking a TGW spaceship, Gort! This buncha grunjoes is *mean*, and she's a real policed"

"Ah, shut up," her accomplice said churlishly, while Hellfire also answered:

"You know it, little girl."

"Good advice for you, Eumie," Cosi said with pro-fessional crispness. "You too, Gort. Well? I'd say I don't dare leave you people, Captain Hellfire, Trafalgar-

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I've been made responsible for yer, and obviously yer a prime target (no matter how competent you bunch are at defending yourselves)! So-who's going to call Hotel Security to haul these two off?"

"What?" Trafalgar said, trying to snarl. "You mean before I even rape her?"

Eumie cringed away against the nearest warm body, glanced up at a bright orange face, and cringed away from the Jarp. Cosi smiled and rolled her eyes as Eumie nestled against her.

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The culprits had been hustled away by Hotel Security and Komodi'a Hotel Lex was minus two employees whose ideas, like their eyes and ears, were too big. Manager Paddefstu ja-Jacabe had made his profuse apol-ogies to the guests in the Eagle Suite, and canceled all charges thus far incurred with a simple wave of his hand. He also personally gave them the rooms without charge for the following day and evening. And he had been thank-you'd out of the suite and back to bis duties.

"For one thing, he has to hire a couple of new employees," Trafalgar muttered darkly.

Yaood Pilishishi had been welcomed as a member of the "family," as Hellfire put it-oh lord, but that woman was changed!-and had agreed to remain and break bread with them. That meant dining and wining as well as humanly possible, since it was on the house. Prices were not ignored as they planned and made their order; they tended to choose by magnitude of cost.

A brief conference among the *Satana* "family" led to swift agreement, and Yaood Pilishishi was advised that he was official agent for the Satana Coalition and their disposal of all or part of the Satana Collection.

The burly man from Ghanj was delighted. He inun-dated them with vows of the honest and true efforts he

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would soon be making on behalf of the newly-born Satana Coalition.

The Jarp member of the "family," meanwhile, dis-played restlessness and eventually announced a need for something or other, downstairs. It departed, wearing the quintuply-colored Joser robe and a more than handsome Knorese bracelet.

In the down-lift, Cinnabar was stared at by two burly-surlly men who were obviously bodyguards. Surely not of the plump and demure woman in the magenta sari sashed with pink, whose eyes seemed permanently down-directed. No, all three were obviously companions of the fine-looking lady from Ghanj.



By the time the lift reached G for ground level, they were acquainted. Next they reached agreement not to leave the lift. In short order it was on its way back up, bearing all five of them. The fine-looking lady was that indeed; she was the Lady Ismara Parvati ne-Glap Zirandary, noble wife of Lord Vashina Raj-Zirandary (ne-Glap) of Ghanj, and she was *so* glad she had not taken the private lift from their top-floor suite.

Cinnabar was about to be introduced to his lordship. Object: a private showing of the Satana Collection. Milady Ismara coveted the bracelet the Jarp wore.

When the room's comm chimed, Roomserv had not yet delivered the impossibly and indeed ridiculously sumptuous (and wine-heavy) dinner the Satana Coalition had ordered.

Hellfire started for the comm; Trafalgar stayed her with a wink.

"Captain Hellfire's Satana Coalition suite," he said, wearing an expression supercilious enough to qualify him as a literary critic. Hellfire rolled her eyes while the others chuckled-and Yaood nodded as if to say "Well done."

Trafalgar said, "You *What?*", listened some more, and swallowed. "You sure he is the real article, Cinnabar?"

Umm. Oh, really! Ummm. But my dear fellow member of the Coalition, we are awaiting *dinnah!*" And he listened some more, slewing his lower face to one side as he chewed at the inside of his mouth.

Everyone else in the room was staring at him, and that included their brave protector, Cosi of Jorinne.

"Just a moment." Trafalgar turned from the comm to look at them: Hellfire, Janja, the bulky Yaood, Cosi in her uniform. All looking at him with curiosity and expectation.

"Yaood, what is the name of the Ghanji noble staying here in the Lex?"

"The Lord Vashina Raj-Zirandary (ne-Glap) or Arjala, with his wife the Lady Ismara of the family Parvati. And servants, including his own security men."

"Whew. This is pretty incredible, so get ready. Our outgoing Cinnabar never got those mints it set off after because it never reached the sub-lobby. Easy, troops; Cinnabar is all right. Cinnabar *isfinel* On the down-lift, Cinnabar met Lady Ismara. And security men; two. And servant . . . Mauvri?"

Yaood nodded. "That is one of the names, pos."

"Uh-huh." Trafalgar wagged his head. "Well, Lady Iz admired Cinn's jewelry. Cinnabar is presently in the most noble Zirandary (ne-Glap) *suite*, which occupies the top floor and which I'll bet makes this li'l suite look like a hovel on Bleak. Lord Whatsisname wishes to negotiate for the purchase of the bracelet Cinnabar is wearing. Lord Etcetera also wished to have a showing of the Satana Collection for his noble eyeballs."

"Holy slime," Cosi muttered. "You lucky shaders!"

"Holy shit," Hellfire said. "A *lord?* A Ghanji *lord?*!"

Trafalgar made a sweeping bow, somehow getting quite a bit of flamboyant flutter-flap out of the sleeve of his Joser robe.

He said, "Indeed, my Captain!" Then, "However, as you heard, I coyly advised that we are about to dine.

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Yaood, is such coyness cool or should we be . . . what should we do?"

Yaood pushed all of himself to his feet on sturdy legs encased in full burgundy-hued pants. "Be respectful! Viscount Vashina could buy this hotel without noticing, and he *knows gems*. He is a collector. His wife gets to wear only some of the collection, which is one reason he takes his own bodyguards wherever he goes. They are known to have killed."

"Oh" Cosi said as ifwhelmed, thinking of the rewards of traveling as personal security for a man of wealth and position and even title. She stared at the comm, blinking, resembling a bird-dog at point.

"Advise, uh, Cinnabar to call him 'Milord Vis-count,' " Yaood was saying, "and to say that the bracelet belongs to the Satana Coalition, not her-uh, him . . . er, itself, and that I am your agent. Naturally Milord Viscount Vashina knows of me."

"Ah," Janja said, looking at Yaood with new warmth and respect.

Trafalgar said, "And-"

"First, just that," Yaood said, starting to move to-ward the other man. "Shall I instruct the Jarp, since you have so kindly asked my advice?"

"Pos!"

"*Kindly*" Hellfire echoed satirically. "The word is '*wisely!*'"

Trafalgar stepped aside and they listened, hearts going pitter-pat, while Yaood repeated his advice to Cinnabar. He ended with, "Do not wait for his reply, but say 'Yes?' to the comm, as if I'd said something further."

*Oh I do like the way he conducts himself*, Janja was thinking. *Yaood, you may be worthy of Aglaya!* Meanwhile Yaood waited attentively. They all waited.

Abruptly the gemologist spoke again, which told them their Jarp shipmate had completed its recitation and said 'Yes?' to the comm, in the signal for additional

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instructions. Yaood Pilishishi, puppetmaster by in-hotel communicator!

"Say 'However, my lord, my captain instructs me, and I concur most heartily, to insist that the Lady Ismara accept this bauble as a gift, since she admires it. Then strip that bracelet off and *hand* it to her nearest servant, with a bow to the lady and to the lord."

"Oh, shit," Hellfire said. "Just hand it ove-oh, shit."

"And say, 'Accomplished, my captain,' to the comm, 'over the noble lord and lady's protestations,' " Yaood was instructing. "Pro-test-ations. Firm."

Yaood waited, looking almost serene and happier than a re-elected politician. And attentively anticipat-ory. Then:

"Ah good, good, Cinnabar my friend! *Forget* the bracelet, believe me! That gift is an investment-and Lord Vashina knows it. Now advise him with respect that we are dining, and shall await his pleasure in two hours. Then, Cinnabar, put this down, bow out, and *leave*."

*An investment*, Hellfire thought, narrowing her eyes. *Why, this Yaood is a valuable ally-he's worthy of Satana!*

They all waited, staring at Yaood and the comm. Soon the Ghanji, nodding and beaming, flipped it off. At the same time, the door announced a visitor. With swift smoothness Cosi drew stopper and took up station beside the jamb, while Janja opened.

Cosi relaxed with a smile. The arrival of their dinner announced itself by its mingled aromas, all superlative.

Nevertheless the two hotel servants were watched- and kept covered, unobtrusively-at all times while they set up and set the table and arranged on it dinner sufficient for a half-score hungry miners. And the door was secured after them.

A moment later, Cinnabar arrived, *sans* bracelet. On the other hand, it smugly wore a stiffly collared, sump-

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tuously voluminous cloak of rich olive green velvet. The Jarp bowed, trying to swirl the cloak as its Outie friend might have done.

"I am sorry I could not leave at once as you instruct-ed, Myrzha Pilishishi, but as you can see Lord Vashina forced a return gift on me."

Yaood nodded. "Merely a token, and he knows we know it. And call me Yaood, Cinnabar. By the way, the simple title 'myrzha'\* is not used on Ghanj. We employ 'sidi', as in that is a most handsome cloak indeed and you wear it well, Cinnabar-sidi.\*"

Again the smugly smiling Jarp bowed with some flamboyance. "With thanks, Pilishishi-sidi." Straight-ening, it shot a nervous glance at Janja. "Do you think this color clashes with my skin, Janjaglaya?"

Hellfire snorted. Janja said, "No no. Another green might, but not that one, Cinnabar. It's beautiful."

"I think we're set," the Jarp said.

"I concur," Yaood Pilishishi said, beaming.

"Well, I'm just sick," Hellfire said. "All this fantas-tic food fit for a-a Ghanji lord!-and I'm way too excited to eat! *Two hours!*"

Cinnabar shook its orange head. "No. The Lord Vashina regrets and Lady Ismira regrets even more, but their presence is required at a reception this evening-at the capitol! We are to await their call at some time after ten tomorrow morning, *if* that is convenient. That high lord is so polite you'd think he was starving and trying to cadge a meal!"

"Most are," Yaood said with some nationalistic/ planetistic pride.

"Oh shit," Hellfire said, staring at the empty goblet in her hand as if wondering what had happened to the bemazingly expensive wine she had just knocked back. "How'll I ever stand it?"

\*Both translate roughly as "mister" and, at times, as "sir," just as "Mister" does.

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"By drinking," Trafalgar said, and did. He also refilled Hellfire's goblet.

Cinnabar also decanted some wine. Janja worried her lip. She was not much on drinking, but the captain was right. However would they be able to stand the sus-pense unless they were thoroughly anesthetized! She joined the others.

Yaood joined them. He raised a plass-no, it was a *glass*, break-resistant crystal-on high. "To the Satana Coalition! To Cinnabar ne-Jarpi! If this is to be as-easy as I think it may, I shall refuse ten per cent and take only five!"

They drank to that. And poured more. And drank to Yaood. And poured anew, to drink to Cinnabar. The food, steaming, cooled.

The Jarp set down its glass. "That had better be all for me. I have a, uh . . . well, with the kind permis-sion and agreement of the Viscount and his lady, I am returning to the suite in an hour or so to admire the grand view of Komodi and Jorinne's sky, from the top floor."

"After the lord and lady are gone, you mean."

"Pos."

Janja cocked her head. "You're going back up there to do what?"

"To spend a quiet evening of mutually instructive conversation with Mauvri and Shaf. Neasy and two body-guards will accompany the lord 'n' lady. Oh, don't roll your silly eyes, now-we'll be well chaperoned. Two of milord's security men remain behind. Not to mention the hotel security woman lurking around up there."

"Uh-huh," Trafalgar said, winking at Hellfire as he refilled her glass. "And who's this Shaf, Cinn?" Or maybe he said "Sin."

Cinnabar flipped its fingers. "Oh, the lord's traveling companion, manservant-sort of a valet, I guess. They'll probably just bore me with exciting tales of glorious Ghanj."

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"Well, you be careful with those exciting tails, Sin-ful Cinn."

They drank to that.

"Cosi," Trafalgar said, "in Theba's name, stop being so flainin' professional! Join us. *Drink\**."

"Oh, I absolutely-

Cinnabar interrupted. "Oh, by the way. Our break-in really fobbed poor Manager Jacabe-there are two hotel security people on this floor, now. And a Joser policer- Municipal Safety Unit, they call it-just outside the door."

Cosi stared. "Really? Two hotel sec *and* an MSU man?"

Cinnabar nodded most positively. "Firm. Absolute-ly. Mean-looking fellow, too."

Cosi smiled. She also visibly relaxed and accepted a crystal tulip-glass brimmed with Rowanberry '39-the most expensive wine on the Roomserv list-and smil-ingly clinked goblets with Trafalgar Cuw. She gazed at him over the rim of her glass.

He suddenly sat down at the handsomely decorated, incredibly viand-laden table set by the hotel Roomserver and her roboserv aide.

' I think I'd better just-

"If you eat in front of me," Captain Hellfire of *Satana* said, "I shall spit in your food."

Yaood made a face that combined shock and revul-sion, and turned away. Trafalgar stared at his captain, then at the uniformed SolSec sergeant.

"Oh well then," he said, "I'm certainly glad we removed your cute little bomb from my thigh, dear Captain! Cosi, please bring this bottle. No no, this one-the full one. Ill just fetch out this nice casserole . . . and whatever this savory-looking bird is. Or was." He stood, casserole in the crook of one arm and silvery-contained bird held against his chest, and gave them all an austere look. "*I am hungry, and able to eat. My friend*

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Sergeant Cosi and I have certain security matters to discuss," he said pompously. "Over dinner. Elsewhere."

Janja's smile bloomed like a passion flower. "May we expect to see you again before morning?"

"Theba's eyes, what an improper question! Will you see me before morning! Well, not," Trafalgar said, "if I am lucky."

Cosi shot him a look, but maintained her composure. She took up the unopened bottle. "Likely not," she said, and headed for the door with a very full bottle of deeply crimson lake Rowanberry '39.

Trafalgar bestowed a superior smirk on his shipmates, bowed to Yaood, and hurried to accompany their per-sonal SolSec agent-carrying casserole and bird.

The door closed behind them.

"Well I'll be stung and snake-bit," Helffire mut-tered, staring at that door.

Naturally Cosi's "Likely not" rode right at the sur-face of Trafalgar Cuw's mind as he stood, laden, while she opened the door to her room.

From the beginning he had seen her as a woman rather than a thing, a security "person," and now he had more respect for her competence and cool profes-sionalism. Besides, somehow juices were always higher after the excitement and danger of violence. Now she looked even more attractive. Despite the teasing aromas issuing from the food he held, he was a male and she a female of the same species, and his senses were aware of the ancient call of pheromones, whether he was anywhere near consciously aware of it or not.

*In other words you have the hots for her, he told himself as she swung open the door and gestured into a dim room. Well, don't forget that she's a policer and the lady doubtless isn't ready and besides there's that rumbling in your stomach, Traffy me lad. Plenty of time to have a try at Getting Involved That Way once we've eaten and imbibed and visited a bit!*

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*Besides, I'd hate to scare her off and get ordered out now, before I've had some of this marvelous-smelling fowl!*

"Thanks," he said more coolly than he felt, and went in. She closed the door after them. It locked automatically, he assumed.

This room was smaller than either of those comprising the Eagle Suite, and the colors were different. Yet it was similar. The carpet—a rich sylvan green—was as thick and resiliency deep as the one in the suite. While he paused, squinting around in quest of something resembling a table, she turned on the light. That added little brightness; a pale green twist of sculpture mounted on each sideward wall now revealed itself to be neon tubing. Each emitted a pale green glow, and it was soft and pretty and easy on the eyes.

"Oh that's nice," he said, looking around at swellings or eruptions in the dark carpet.

A bed-shape, a semicircular chair-shape with attached table-shape, a curving divan-shape. Before the pastel-striped drape across the far wall, though, stood a perfectly normal-looking table and a pair of chairs. A glass butterfly mobile in several pastel hues hung above the table's center, and he knew it was another neon light.

He headed that way and eased himself of his aromatic burdens.

"Do you—" he began, turning, and then she was plastered against him, arms going over his shoulders and around his neck, fingers slipping into his hair, her breasts unusually hard pressures against his lower chest and her lips coming after his with warmth and hunger.

"This is so sudden," he was going to say, but didn't because he couldn't.

His mouth was otherwise occupied. As a matter of fact she had made it her property. Not only that, her tongue was out and moving. Not only that, so were her hips. Subtly amove. Squirming her uniformed loins

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against his—which were contained by nothing but the Joser robe.

He was glad she had put down the bottle of wine, somewhere. Just a fleeting thought, as practicality fled.

He ran both hands around her waist and pressed his fingertips up into her lower back. Pressing her to him was totally unnecessary, but it was instinct or nearly. And it was what he wanted to do.

Her tongue toyed with his, and her hand toyed with the hair at the back of his neck. His fingers meanwhile apprised him of how firm her back was, how totally free of anything but skin over muscle over bone. A good back, and a good waist, nicely indented. He moved his lips, which were surrounded by hers.

The trouble was, dammit, he was going to have to move one hand soon, because she kept moving and with that kind of mobile pressuring in that area he was definitely responding and he was going to have to reach between them to adjust himself down there. It would soon hurt. It always did, when a man's slicer was pressed down and wanted to stand straight up and assert itself!

Then she peeled her lips from around his and eased up her grip along with her straining against him. And her hips mercifully stilled their rocking movement.

That was merciful, yes—but he wanted to use both hands to start that cradle rocking again.

She was breathing hard, and flushed. "Do you get excited after some action—the dangerous kind we just had over there, I mean?"

He nodded. "Positively. I was thinking about that just that as we came in, as a matter of fact. Watching you. I get even exciteder\* when a good-looking woman gives me that kind of kiss, too." His voice was as low and quiet as hers, though he had better control of his breathing.

\*The writer, a linguist, accepts no responsibility for the strange speech of these strange shaders!

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His hands moved on her back, upward. What the vu-oh. A strap, across her back under the uniform shirt. How unusual, when so very very few women wore them because a little cellular adjustment could make them unnecessary—a bra! No wonder she felt so hard in the warhead department. Digging holes in his chest.

*So Cozy doesn't want to be sexy, when she's Sergeant Cosi. All professional, Sergeant Cost of Soljer Security!*

And he thought, *Oh yeah!*

He renewed the kiss experimentally, but she had cooled, begun to think. After a few moments he eased his lips away. She sighed.

So did he. "Think we ought to eat a bite or two and get acquainted, try to come down off that excitement-danger high a bit?"

She looked down. "I, uh, 'mafraid I pressed yer too fast, too hard."

"Oh no," he said, rubbing her back. "But don't look down there or you'll see what got hard fast because you were pressing."

She chuckled. "Since there's other security protect-ing the whole floor now, I thought I'd change out of my uniform before we ate. Now I think I'm afraid to."

He let her feel his fingers, impressing flesh. "Afraid to? This isn't armor, you know." Then he voiced a sudden thought: "You think of it that way though, don't you?"

"All right now, no psychoanalyzing."

"Sorry. I was *not* making fun, Cozy."

She smiled. "Do yer know you hauled off and called me that the moment we met? Or rather 'met,' up on Soljer?"

Her fond tone made it sound as if she was talking about something that had taken place years ago. Months, at least.

"Sure. I have a long memory. Hours and hours. I

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was being deliberately flip, then. If you don't like my calling you that, say so."

"I like it. I even liked your being deliberately flip, to a security agent you'd just met, in a strange environment. You were just so cool. You don't sweat much, do yer?"

"Depends on how hot I get. Or who's getting me hot-and how."

"Oh oh, comes the innuendo." She didn't bother with the silly flirtatious behavior of digging him in the ribs or something similar; they weren't kids and besides she didn't know him that well. That would have been an altogether different kind of familiarity. "No, I don't think of this uniform as armor. Sort of a shield, sure. I consider that necessary-no fair being a womanly woman and a seccer all at once!"

"That's a damned good observation," he interrupted, "not to mention mighty considerate of you, womanly woman." And, lest she was one of those who found it hard to take compliments--Quindy was-he said, "But what did you mean about being afraid to change now, Cozy?"

"Oh. What I meant was that once I get naked I'll feel myself wanting to stay that way."

"Oh," he said, pronouncing exaggeratedly, "my." He felt her stiffen just a little, and added, "You do what you want and let me do the feeling you. It's fun. You feel really good, woman."

When that didn't bring so much as a chuckle, he released her and stepped back. He caught her downward glance at his robe and refused to look down there.

"Cozy: go change into something less officious-I-mean-official. I'll crack open this bottle and pour us-oh blast, we forgot to bring any of those fancy crystal goblets with us! Well, it won't look as lovely in a couple of hotel plasses, but it'll taste good. Off with ye, woman."

Smiling, she went to the sitter, which in this room

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was a room, separate and small, with all facilities pres-ent. Both of them knew there was no question of her undressing before him.

Now he glanced down at the semi-tented aspect of the lower front of his Joser robe. A soft-on, an old friend of Trafalgar's had called it.

"Down boy," he muttered, and twisted the little plastikey on the side of the wine bottle's neck. It re-leased, and after a moment popped its seal. He flicked it off to let the wine start breathing, whatever that meant. He glanced around.

"Oh damn. Cozy? These fobboes have put the plasses in there, I guess. None out here."

"Minute," she called, from the other side of the closed door.

"Who the vug ever drinks in the bathroom anyhow," he muttered, easing up a comer of the transparent cover over the chicken. A wave of unconditionally wonderful aroma rashed out to embrace his face in its warmth.

"Oh lord. Still good and warm, and it's going to be just wonderful! Some lovely food and some nice wine and men . . . heh-heh. Into me arms, me proud beauty."

The bathroom door asked, "Did you say something?"

"Just muttering," he called. "This food smells better'n anything I've had a whiff of in about half a year."

He rolled his eyes, remembering that before pushily getting himself onboard *Satana* and then Knor he had been on Mott-chindi. Busily fomenting revolt. A planet "settled" only by mining companies because of its copper and nicknamed "Macho" because of all those swaggery miners packin' their old-time hawglegs was not a place to look for *haute cuisine*. Oh, the steaks were good enough. Protein-enhanced tablets born in a lab, tiny for shipping out to Macho but swelling into big steaky-tasting steaks with heat and a little water.

They were not, however, the best of the kitchen of Hotel Lex!

He examined the casserole. Cheese, rice, some green

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vegetables, finely cut, a few red traces (pimientoes?), onions, *and-oh, wonderful. More fowl. Clever of you, Traf me boy*\

He tried poking in his finger for a bite, gasped "Ow" and whipped it out to poke it into his mouth. As the little hole closed up in the casserole, steam curled upward.

He sniffed the wine bottle, fidgeting. Smelled like wine. Good. Its age didn't matter; he assumed that '39 was a good year or it wouldn't have topped the list and borne the largest price after that bubbly stuff he hated. Then the door opened behind him and he turned around.

Cosi was a woman all right.

The woman who emerged from the sitter, bearing a cheap hotel glass in each hand and wearing a tentative sort of smile, did not wear a uniform. As a matter of fact the only thing she wore was that nervous, unself-confident little smile she was trying to make look natural and full of confidence.

"Hi," she said in a small voice. It quivered a little; so did her chest.

"Oh hi," he said, as if casually, and set down the bottle beside the casserole.

Three or so seconds later he had his robe off and was hurling it in the general direction of a corner. While he stared at her, which was one hell of a pleasant occupation.

She was blinking in surprise, but still held out the surely forgotten glasses. He took them from her and set them on the table.

"I think that, uh, chicken is going to taste just great, lukewarm," he said, reaching for her. "Maybe even cold."

"I was hoping yer'd say that," she said, reaching for him.

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Cosi ... a rather angular, strong-jawed face on which the most arresting feature was a pair of straight, downy brows done in darkest brown. There were also the assertively straight nose and the mouth, also straight and thin of lip-and, he had already discovered his the best of ways, really exuberant and expert at kissing. Assertive kissing!

Her neck was rather long, sensuously so because it gave her a swan-like look, a vulnerable look, as if his need of protection. Her chest was shallow and the lobes high, taut, wideset, hard-looking. Surely she didn't really need that holster to still those stiff cones, he mused.

Her waist flowed in and flowed out into womanly hips that were not lush because there was not a micro-gram of spare meat on her. Her little belly even showed muscle, and the strong leaders on either side. Below, she was as hirsute as his the crotch as he, which was not at all. Absolutely hairless, from the eyes down. The lump of her sex bulged aggressively, in mauve.

That was Cosi; what Cosi saw was a man with moderately broad shoulders, moderately developed chest and wirily strong arms, with a lean waist and no hips to speak of. Pronounced nipples and a visibly shallow navel that was almost perfectly round. His length of

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thick sheer stood almost straight out in half-erection. Sullen, blood-heavy, handsome. Starkly and blatantly male. And pointing at her as if yearning out to her nakedness.

It's not polite to point, she thought, but she elected not to say it. If it was what was up front that counted, she was worth counting, and so was he.

Beyond the physical and more importantly to Cosi, because she was a woman, was the fact that he was an alpha male and he wanted her. She felt all warm and swimmy. Prickly.

"Awright baby," he said in a mock-snarl that was patently not serious without being at all ludicrous, "so here's where you and that great body yer flauntin' . . . get it!"

That went right through her. Lest he misinterpret the shudder she felt, she told him: "Oh yes. That way. Let's do it that way."

"What?"

But he wasn't stupid and he wasn't interested in playing the game of demanding explanations just to extract them. He had hit her with mock-roughness and she had said that was what she wanted. He reached for her breast, with strength.

"I don't understand what y'mean, sister. All I want is these hard warheads and the use of yer body." And he clamped, with both hands.

All the bone went out of her.

The twinned arch of her breasts heaved and shuddered with the ever-rising nervousness of her breathing and her heartbeat. Yet somehow she was leaning toward him, as if unable to help herself. Offering . . . proffering the taut lobes he was mistreating.

"Uh!"

Strong fingers fired her nerve endings as they strove to sink into flesh too firm to be deeply dented. The possessive grasp, however, sent the hot blood rushing to gorge her nipples. She gasped wordless sounds that

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were not quite sighs and not quite pained either, while his fingers flung tenaciously and moved, moved, breast-groping her. The crowns of her breasts swelled, each beginning to stand up and out in tight

darkening erections.

Her reaction was to pull away. She fought that reaction, because she liked the more-than-firm treatment she was receiving. With her elbows tucked close to her sides, her hands went down and between their bodies.

She found an engorgement far more interesting to her than her nipples. He was erect, too, and she stroked and caressed it, traced out its lines, the hardness of it and the softness of its helmet-like head.

"Lower," he said, twisting her breasts without real viciousness. "That thing doesn't need manipulation; it wants to split you open right now. The balls."

She obeyed, her hands sliding down to his scrotum. She was careful, but she teased with changing pressures. Then she was aware of the extra pressure he was exerting on her breasts. Downward. She let her knees bend, slowly. His head rose away above her. She was looking at his lower chest. Then at his stomach, a nice male almost-flat stomach. With a hot hard staff standing right up in front of it. Assuming that he wanted her mouth and was "forcing" her to give it to him, she opened . . .

And he sank down with her, onto the floor that was all carpet, furniture and all.

He kept one hand on her breast while the other slid over her smooth hip, seeking her bottom, found it easily in its rounding bulge, and tugged her against him.

This time it was his mouth that surrounded and possessed hers. He kissed her in much the same way she had him, with more strength.

"Open," he said into her mouth, his hand clamping and one finger wickedly in her rearward cleavage. She opened up, within the circle of his lips, and he tongue-raped her mouth in an obvious suggestive way that sent heat and little shivers all through her.

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They lay sprawled on softness of carpet and the kiss went on and on. Her hands clawed at him without using her nails and she squirmed, with his mouth owning hers and his tongue stiffly thrusting in and out of her and two of his fingers inside her. Moving, moving in her.

He rolled across her without moving mouth or hands, so that they lay on their sides. She gasped when fingers emerged from her, gasped when a long-palpated breast was released and came alive with a heated tingling, grunted from the stomach when he changed hands, the fingers again easily entering and his other hand taking her other breast. And the possessing kiss went on, and on.

When he moved his mouth and head at last, she ducked her head. She found a stubby, pronounced male nipple and gave it her tongue. His shudder and throaty noise was message enough. She smiled. She opened her mouth wide and pretended to chew at his chest while all the time concentrating on the nipple. And squirming, writhing, shivering, while he kept her manually impaled, doubly impaled in an exciting way no one ever had before, and when he moved, and slipped easily into her she almost screamed.

They became the best and happiest kind of animals then, wallowing on the carpeted floor, lunging and writhing at each other.

Her legs went high to cleave the air with a pedaling motion while he stroked down into her. Then she had to cease that pedaling when he turned them onto their sides and clamped her to him with his hands on her buttocks while he maintained their genital union and kept pumping. After a while he was tugging and she was atop him, grinding down, slamming herself down, getting her feet under her on either side of his legs to take him as deep as she possibly could. That way he could and did return both hands to her breasts, and squeeze with what she thought must be all his strength, and the lunging plunging woman loved it, loved it.

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At last she sank drooping, resting from her up-and-down plunging . . . and made a fearful squeaky noise when he toppled her again onto her side.

Control left him then and he gasped and clutched her while his movements went frenetic and at the last moment she actually shouted her delighted encouragement and he practically yelled in his orgasm.

He lay still, holding her and being stroked. He did not withdraw but waited until nature accomplished that for them.

"Here goes the traditional wet spot in the carpet," he said, very low of voice.

She squeezed him. "They must be used to it. A hotel that doesn't provide a bed with sheeting but covers all the furniture with carpeting must have some simple means of getting everything out of the carpet."

"I hope so. I guess. Or maybe I don't give a vug at all."

At last he rearranged himself to lie on his back beside her. She lifted her head to accommodate his arm and a hand came around and onto her breast.

"Umm. Long arms and big hands are nice."

He chuckled. "The better to ensnare you with, m'dear."

"You do a very good job of ensnaring a woman, man."

"Why don't you, uh, reach down and do what it is you do to bring yourself off," he suggested in that same throaty voice.

"Oh, oh . . . I soared," she said, a little embarrassed.

"No you didn't," he said flatly, but swiftly softened the words: "Not the big one, and lady, I had the big one! Go ahead, while I amuse us both with this-must be the tightest breast on Jorinne. I've had a hell of a time getting a grip on these warheads."

"You did a mighty good job of it! They'll be sensi-tive for days!"

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"Nah. Just hours. Later I'll try to fix 'em so they'll be touch-sensitive for days!"

A shiver went through her. "What a fearsome threat! I'd better jump up and run now while I have the chance, hm?"

"You better."

Her reply to that was predictable: a series of unneces-sary movements that ended with a firm downward bump-ing to indicate that she was not about to run and was firmly rooted to this place. His hand was warm and strong on her breast, not quite containing it.

Her hand eased to her loins as if straying. She stopped it, setting her teeth into her lip. She frowned at the ceiling.

Oh no. He was awfully wise and terribly sophisti-cated-and emphatically good!-but she just couldn't do as he suggested. Masturbation was for privacy. Man-less privacy, tickling herself into the big one (usually while entertaining a nice fantasy about a superlatively handsome clan-lord, or the actor Gryphon Tor, or, per-haps strangely, about that infamous Captain Jonuta. (Who, so far as Cosi knew, had never visited Jorinne.)

*Oh, I'd like to . . . but I just think I can't, not with a man right here, no matter how comfortable I am with this man!*

She let his strange name run through her mind: Trafalgar Cuw, Trafalgar Cuw . . . Truh-fal-grr Kew . . .

Fortunately he was kind and thoughtful enough to threaten, clamping her breast and going back to that snarl he had used before. Ordering her to "getcher hands on yer stash and rub yaself off, sister, er else I tear this doughball offa yer chest."

She was still nervous, and some embarrassment re-mained, but it was nice of him, she thought. This way she was able to slip easily into the fantasy, to be "forced" to masturbate while lying right here beside him.

She did. His hand fondled her breast and squeezed its

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nipple the entire time. More than nice of him, Cosi thought, because it always took her a long while.

It was lovely to have a man who was so patient and concerned about helping her to the peak of her pleasure, as he had reached his. This was a man worth having, she thought, and knew that no such man as Trafalgar Cuw was about to settle down on Jorinne, or content himself with one woman.

About that time she hit the crescendo and went soar-ing away on it, trying to quell her squealy noises. Lying on the floor, he held her for a long while, and she clung. Spent, exhausted, happy, and yes, grateful.

"Let's find out how that handsome roast chicken-thing and casserole are when they're pretty chilly."

"Let's," she said, and they got up and did that.

Several floors above, a dark man and woman from Ghanj were enjoying an entirely new experience. They were entertaining in their own parlor, as it were; that portion of their noble employer's suite that provided their quarters. Sipping excellent wine, they were visit-ing with a guest: one of those orange beings from the planet Jarpi.

This was not the first Jarp Shaf and Mauvri had ever seen, but this was the closest they had ever been to one except in passing (on the streets of Komodi, during last year's Fair), and the first they had ever talked with.

This one was really very nice, and was already a person to the two Ghanjis, rather than "a Jarp." It told wonderful stories about adventures along the spaceways and on other planets where they had never been and presumably never would be.

It was also a very interesting looking being-person, Mauvri thought. Alien, different and, now that she *knew* Cinnabar, exotically attractive.

It really was orange. Not deeply brown as she and Shaf were, or tan or beige or "red" or coppery or bronze or the "yellow" of Saipese-which she had

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seen only on Jorinne, during the last year's Fair. And its hair was a genuine, almost dazzling red. Those great big eyes were *round*, rounder by far than those ancient people of Homeworld some Asians had used to call "round-eyes." They were set in a sort of heart-shape of a face, a smoothly rounded wedge. From a broad fore-head, the face narrowed steadily to end in a little chin that was almost pointed. The nose was not even slightly down-tipped as most Galactics' were, and was a bit broad of septum and nostrilar flare.

All in all, Mauvri thought, Cinnabar had a rather sweet-faced look.

No Jarp spoke Erts because no Jarp could. The poor things' long, pointed tongues and small mouths made human speech impossible. Jarps trilled and warbled. That was their language. Otherwise they wore



the trans-lation helmets. A system of straps and hardware called a translahelm. Except for the very, very few who could somehow afford to have implants. Or who had been provided with implants by some wealthy master.

Yes-master.

Shaf asked about that and then acted embarrassed. Cinnabar assured them it did not mind talking of Jarpi, and Jarps. Yes, it had been a slave once, and it had been called Raunchy. It served as name. (Cinnabar did not say how it had come to be free, and they were too polite to ask.)

Occasionally groping for terms, Cinnabar explained the Jarps of planet Jarpi. It tried to explain as if objec-tively, from the human viewpoint.

A normal Galactic female possessed two sex-controlling chromosomes; she was "constructed" as 46, XX. It was the double-X that made her female; that made Mauvri female. Assuming that Shaf was a normal Ga-lactic male, his chromosomal pattern was 46, XY. The Y factor made him male. The chromosome designated as Y had instructed him, between his second and third

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months as a fetus, to form two testicles rather than two ovaries.

Now and again among humans/Galactics, a genetic "sport" turned up. It was designated XXY or XYY and showed at least some semblance of the characteristics of both sexes. Such people were hermaphrodites, from two sub-ancient gods of ancient Homework! (one of each sex), Hermes and Aphrodite.

Even the primitive medical "science" of the earliest days of space exploration had been able to adjust such unfortunates so that the sport became one sex or the other. (Errors were made in that differentiation. Psy-chology was involved, too. Occasionally a hermaphro-dite medically aided along the female route should have been male, and vice-versa.)

Now simple genetic engineering solved such prob-lems before they became problems.

And then spaceship *Sunflower* stumbled onto a hot, swollen sun and its planets-and this one was inhabited by an intelligent race!

The planet was Jarpi. The race was Jarp. Not Jarpan, or Jarpese: Jarp. It was the second new race found by Galactics-114 years-ess ago. Jarpi was at its early steel age, and Jarps were not only different, they were *strange*.

The different customs of those flame-haired, orange-skinned bipeds turned out to be a minor difference. The main difference lay in the physical.

Hermaphroditism re-entered the spaceways, and this time it was not medical genetic anomaly and not a problem. Not for the Jarps, anyhow. True, there was a problem at first . . .

Because 01 the unfortunate "rape" of *Sunflower's* crew-both sexes-by Jarps who were not even aware that they were "raping," Jarpi was never placed on the Protected list. Galactics had their vengeance for the ab-used crew. Jarps became slaves everywhere save on Jarpi, and still were, and the term "sunflower" was

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sneeringly applied to a Jarp-Iover. (By, Cinnabar was in haste to point out, the stupid, meaning the bigoted.)

Study and analysis by fascinated human scientists came up with a most unusual, almost incredible chro-mosomal description of the natives of Jarpi: 45, XXXYYh.\*

The Full House Syndrome or Full-House distribution, it was called, commonly. Scientifically it became known as the SchwartzVik Configuration, after the scientist who first identified it so precisely. Unfortunately some misread one aspect in the notes to her learned paper:

"H for . . . Hermaphrodite?" Mauvri asked, all wide of eye and intent on Cinnabar's explanation-or on Cinnabar, at any rate.

Cinnabar shook its head. "No-it indicates 'heredi-tary factor.' We are born male-female or more properly female-male; one sex and both."

The Jarp would not repeat the nasty canard applied by Galactics to its people: *Careful about getting a Jarp aroused- which is all too easy! You may well get raped, one way or another-no matter which sex you are!*

"Does . . . does one dare ask . . ." Mauvri broke off. She could not say it. A culture such as that of her native Ghanj led to a rather exaggerated politeness, and a curbing of natural impulses and outbursts,

"I am sensitive," Cinnabar said, "but not that sensi-tive. After all, we are talking about my favorite subject!"

"Jarpi!"

Cinnabar shook its head lugubriously. "Me," it cor-rected, and its two-person audience smiled.

"I think I can ask what Mauvri did not wish to, I think," Shaf said, looking immediately away. "Do you

\*Loyal and discriminating readers will realize that this was misprinted in the first Spaceways novel, *Of Alien Bondage*, as 46,XXXYYh. Publisher and author apologize.

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think of yourself as woman or man? Do you prefer women or men . . . sexually?"

"Sexually?" Cinnabar echoed, all innocent and straight-faced. ' I did not know that the people of Ghanj ever thought of such things."

Strangely, it was Shaf who looked nonplussed and then down, and Mauvri who laughed openly.

*She has a pretty tongue*, Cinnabar thought-*for a Galactic. And her attitude is promising, since I do prefer females, one way or another.*

"I apologize for teasing," it said, with a Jarp gesture of contrition. Neither Ghanji recognized it, of course, but a Jarp had its code, and the code was Jarp. "I do not think of myself as either man or woman; I think of myself as Jarp. You see? Sex exists on Jarpi, just as sexuality does. It is just that we are all both sexes. We learned to differentiate only when your people came to Jarpi. What a revelation that was-and continues to be!"

"Revelation?" Shaf asked, with his head tilted to one side.

"Pos. Consider . . . for one thing, either of two Jarp mates may impregnate the other, and such often hap-pens. Among you, only one sort-one sex-may bear the child and nourish it. That has led to many customs and attitudes among you that do not exist on Jarpi."

"Either . . . impreg-*at once!* You mean two Jarps, mated, might both be pregnant, by each other?"

"Well, *that* doesn't happen very often, Mauvri. Not simultaneously, I mean, because we avoid it. It is in-convenient!" Cinnabar made a gesture and a musical sound the translator passed through untouched. It was the chuckle of a Jarp, and it was a nice sound. "Any-how, as to the question do I prefer men or women, sexually . . . the answer is yes. Firm."

After a pause for effect, Cinnabar asked, "Might I have some more wine?-after I return from the sitter?"

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"Uh of course," Mauvri said, while the Jarp crossed the room, Joser robe swishily amove.

Cinnabar had no need to relieve itself and no desire to wash. This had seemed an excellent time to allow the two attractive Ghanji to ponder, and perhaps exchange a whispered word or ten. They were fascinated and at least somewhat aroused, Cinnabar knew. It gave them plenty of time.

"Cinnabar," Mauvri said when it returned to them, "we have . . . a proposal." She looked hurriedly away once she had made her daring statement.

Cinnabar pretended ignorance, which had long mas-queraded as innocence. "Oh?" It picked up the new-poured wine, and bowed its thanks.

It watched Mauvri glance at Shaf, who looked en-couraging before glancing away. The woman, the Jarp had already noted, was more aggressive than the man. Shaf was tongue-tied, poor fellow, and leaving all to her. *The broaching of the subject and the . . . negotia-tions*, Cinnabar mused.

"It is . . . difficult to say it," Mauvri said. Com-fortably, almost plushly-constructed Mauvri of Ghanj.

"Of course it is," Cinnabar said, and drank. Setting down the shapely lavender glass brought from Ghanj by its hosts' more-than-wealthy employer, it bent, caught the hem of its multi-pastel Joser robe in both hands, and held on as it straightened.

Mauvri and Shaf soon saw that Cinnabar wore noth-ing under the robe.

They also saw what a hermaphrodite looked like.

Smallish, its penis looked a bit more imposing than it might have, because it was firming, in anticipation. Smallish, the widest breasts were nicely shaped, with luridly red aureolas. Taut cones, those sleekly shining warheads. Smallish, the hips were nevertheless a bit too pronounced for a male. The long limbs were slim, hairless, gleaming orange. Cinnabar had a navel, of course. Shadowed dark orange, and largeish.

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Calmly showing them a pair of smallish buttocks that were still a bit more longishly oval than a male's, the Jarp went to the wallplate and dimmed the room's lights. It reduced them to a real pupil-enlarging dimness.

"Have I made it easier? If not, I shall snatch up my robe and flee away embarrassed into the night."

"You have made it easier, beautiful Cinnabar," Mauvri said, and rose.

She divested herself of her garments, revealing a concavely rounded belly and breasts like moons, above short sturdy legs whose sturdy thighs framed a deli-cately small-looking stash. And she moyed to Cinnabar, wearing only her low-lidded little smile.

Chicken, repressed, Shaf waited until they were in-volved in an embrace and kissing before he rose and quickly undressed.

Cinnabar never pushed. Experience had taught it that human males considered it more blessed to give than to receive. That is, to impale rather than be entered. The daisy-chain that eventually evolved was not complicat-ed, but it was involved. There was plenty of everything for everyone.

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Cinnabar returned to the "Satana Suite" during the night, having left the far more spacious suite above before its lordly proprietor returned. By that time the Jarp's companions were asleep. Checking the locks on the doors, Cinnabar wondered if Trafalgar was asleep. . . . The Jarp accommodatingly avoided disturbing anyone.' Cinnabar stretched out on the floor-that is, on the deep, soft carpet that absolutely covered the

suite.

It was awakened next morning by Hellfire's voice. She was conferring with their new friend/ally/adviser, Yaood. Today the big Ghanji wore a white dasheek decorated in red and black, over full-cut black pants. They shone like satin, which they were.

Cinnabar tried to blot out their voices.

Asked to identify the least valuable of their treasures, Yaood was waffling. Because the Knoresse gauds were hand-wrought and obviously so, though far, far from crude artisanry, he avowed that he could not possibly say what value a person might set on which. Gemstones had a value of their own, because they were gemstones. That depended on their cut, their size, their brilliance, their perfection or lack of it. A particular piece of jewelry, on the other hand, might to one person be the

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most beautiful thing she had ever seen and instantly coveted, while another might well feel the same way about an altogether different piece. In that case "value" -or at least the price to be realized-depended upon the preference of the individual.

"Yes, oh firm, I understand, of course," Hellfire said with an impatient air, and she repeated her request.

"Yaood, we have few stells and no cred at all, on Jorinne. Zero. There's cargo on my ship, but nothing like our collection, here. I don't want to bother with trying to market it, now that I know we really have something. The problem is the *meanwhile*, Yaood. See, we need some things-clothing, for one. I want some-one to advance us some cred or live stells on something here." She gestured at the sparkling array of their gemmy wealth. "Not as advance against purchase; as a loan. Obviously it is secured!"

"Ah! Why did you not say so?! Captain Hellfire, you have taken me into your confidence and trusted me further than that. Why, we have even fought off bandits together! Come, my friend-I need only make a call or two."

A few moments later Hellfire, Janja and Cinnabar had learned just how respected and well off Yaood Pilishishi was. They also had credit, on Jorinne. Smil-ing, slipping on a Knoresse bracelet that was more than nice, Hellfire turned to Janja and made a suggestion. (Trafalgar Cuw had still not put in an appearance.)

Soon Janja and Hellfire, without eating but wearing shipboard garb that was at least newly cleaned courtesy of Hotel Lex, departed in quest of better. At least they were handsomely bejeweled.

Yaood warned them to have care. Both women, the short and the tall, gave him open looks and tapped the butts of their holstered stoppers. And Hellfire winked.

"One thing we're good at, Yaood my dear friend. Taking care of ourselves!"

Yaood nodded, gave her bracelet a significant look,

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and spread his outsized hands. Smiling, the two women left. Neither of the security people waiting outside offered to accompany them, thank Musla and Booda-*or make that Vike, here on Jorinne*, Hellfire thought.

She walloped the door to Cossi's room with the heel of her hand-in passing, then broke into a leggy lope. Grinning, shaking her head, Janja sprinted after the taller woman. Since Jorinne's gravity was 1.21 stan-dard, running was no problem. Janja's native Aglaya was a high-grav planet and her lungs and calves and the puller muscles in her thighs were accordingly large- along with her stamina, which was considerable.

*On the other hand, she mused, I have been spending a lot of time onboard ship. If I do gain Satana out of all this, I may just try to impart more centrifugal spin and thus more gravity to my ship! Surely that would be good for all onboard- whoever we are.*

They went down, and outside, squinting.

Payne was a yellow-white presence in the sky, not an orb or a disk because no one dared look up even in its general direction. Little blue Humason may or may not have been up there; it was invisible in its sister sun's bright intensity. No more than a couple of puffball clouds hung up there, in a sky whose azure was tinged with yellow until it appeared a pale turquoise.

Still, it wasn't all that hot. More noticeable was the bustle.

Komodi was crowded for the Fair, and more fairgoers were still being shuttled down onplanet from Station Soljer. Taxicabs were not plentiful. Public transport, however, was both good and astoundingly reliable. The gleaming bulletshape of a hovercar, marked R.C.H.S., soon conveyed the two off spacer *Satana* to the sprawl-ing fairgrounds with its multicolored pavilions and con-stantly buzzing crowd.

"Cloud-top" and "Cap'n Prasstop" wandered, not quite aimlessly. They were a mismatched pair, but there was nothing unusual in that. It was Janja's hair that

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drew the most attention. Its sunny color was more than unusual. And of course the adornments they wore, Knoresse gauds, attracted interested looks.

This was after all the Great Fair of Jorinne. People were here from farther than far, and nearly all were interested in buying and selling. A great portion of what would change hands in the next several days would be jewelry. The bracelets, earrings, and rings the two women wore were definitely looked at with searching and speculative eyes.

Of course the Fair attracted thieves, and some of the gazes Janja and Hellfire drew were from that element. Naturally security was good. No one was interested in having its pavilion raided by that seeming ghost-with wings?-who had made off with the Heart of the Uni-verse from its "theft-proof" niche in a Panishi museum.

Wandering but not aimlessly, seeking, Hellfire and Janja entered the Saipese area. There they found what they liked. By then they had turned down three offers for the "flash" they wore so casually.

Because it seemed fun, each bought a matching jumpsuit, in red. The garments were fitted to the body, including upper arms and legs to the knees. Each sleeve flared and was cut into a point behind, while the pants were flared at the bottoms, and long. Over their boot-tops, in fact.

A bustling gold-skinned Saipese made miraculous adjustments in extraordinary time. And proudly escorted them to full-length mirrors.

Despite the difference in their heights and degrees of angularity and roundness, both women looked good in the suits of unrelieved red.

"Wants something to set it off," Hellfire said, twist-ing her neck to peer over her shoulder at her small, high backside.

"I have just the thing," the merchant said, reaching for a shining belt of gold links.

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"So have I," Janja said, while Hellfire said, "Too gaudy, I think . . ."

What Janja had found was not so expensive or profit-able as the belts of gold links the Saipese hoped to sell them, but the sashes were perfect. They were black, four fingers wide, with bias-cut ends that would dangle long.

Tieing hers, Hellfire turned down another opportunity to dicker over her bracelet. She didn't so much as look away from the mirror.

"Made for me," she murmured, and tugged down the zipper another sem or three.

She and Janja agreed: what fun to put them all in uniform, by buying identical suits for Cinnabar and Trafalgar Cuw.

"And Quindy," Hellfire said. "Poor Quindy, lan-guishing as usual up on the ship 'cause she's sort of afraid of being onplanet."

"And Sergeant Cosi," Janja said.

Her captain whirled to stare at her, sash streaming aflutter. She looked gloriously dramatic in the black-sashed red, Janja thought, and knew that she did, too. "*Uniforms*," hmm? Mighty sexy uniforms-and she wondered just what Trafalgar's male package would look like in tight red. Not to mention Cinnabar's male *and* female bulges!

"That policer?" Hellfire was saying. "What do we owe her that we should buy her one of these? Let 'er buy 'er own furbaggin' clothing!"

Janja didn't smile, though Hellfire continued to use that ridiculous word she had picked up on Mott-chindi-Macho. "I like the idea of our all being in uniforms, that's all," she said, indicating the mirrors.

Hellfire looked. Her expression showed her admira-tion of the way the two of them looked, side by side in scarlet with trailing ribbons of jet.

"Besides," Janja said, in a sudden stroke of clever

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diplomacy, "when we're ready to leave, we simply take the suit back from Cosi and present it to Quindy!"

Hellfire cocked her head and an eyebrow, looking at Janja's reflection. "I like that! Firm then, Janjy! Let's do it."

They did that, while this person and that gave them interested looks. The suits were more than fetching on both women. The jet black sashes made them even more attractive, and dramatic. Yet dramatic attire stretched shinily taut here and there was only part of the reason for stares.

The tall brass-haired woman and her short blond companion still wore some most handsome and unusual jewelry. By now five individuals had queried, wanting to buy or at least discuss price. Each had been told the gauds were the property of Satana Coalition, which would be holding a showing. It would be announced.

Another offer was made while their delighted Saipese tailor made the calls to establish their credit. He had already been happy to accommodate in every way. Obviously he and his two associates suspected that Janja and Hellfire were more than they wished to ap-pear, and were betraying their wealth and standing by their attitudes and the fine adornments they wore, all aflash,

"Oh-twenty-three thousand stellar buying units," Hellfire told the maker of the latest offer. He was a substantial looking man, older, with a quite young woman-Terasak, Hellfire thought-clinging to his arm.

He blinked. Twenty-three thousand stells was enough to outfit a spaceship, if not to buy one. Why Hellfire had

popped such a sum off the top of her head neither she nor Janja could have said.

"Hmm," the man said thoughtfully, gazing at the bracelet. "I would tend to offer sixteen."

Hellfire smirked. "Sixteen stells? You are a dreamer!"

"Not sixteen; of course not! Say-seventeen thou-sand stells."

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"Thou-sand," Hellfire said, almost squeaking.

Janja was just as astonished, but moved quickly. "*Sit*, what we wear is the property of the Satana Coalition, as we have said. Perhaps we were unwise to wear it today, here. If we could have your name and where you are staying, we will see that you have opportunity to bid on this and a few other little trinkets we have. All hand-made, all absolutely unique," she added, indulging in a bit of quiet hawking. She'd never have thought herself capable of behaving this way, as a merchant.

But. . . s17,000S!

*What do we have, anyhow? This jacko must be rich and that bracelet is far from my favorite among all the things we have-how many like this man are there? Why, we've absolutely got to hold an auction!*

He gave them his name, too. He was staying at the Lex, too.

The merchant from Saiping returned then, beaming. Their credit was just fine. Oh pos, of course, firm; since the parcels were troublesome and the *ladies* hardly in need of such encumbrance, he would be happy to send them to their lodgings. They arranged for the delivery of the other three suits, then, along with the clothing the two of them had worn to the fan-grounds.

They kept their stoppers.

Janja was right, naturally. They should not have worn the gauds.

The two dramatically crimson-clad women wandered amid the noise and the colorful bustle, seeking peeks at other gemstones and finished gauds from other worlds. All about them were colorful pavilions brimming with the goods of several worlds and equally colorful sellers and buyers from even more planets.

They ran onto their potential buyer again at the Qalaran pavilion.

That was good; all Janja could think about there was Captain Jonuta of Qalara, and how she had so long longed to go there after him. Now she was experienced

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enough to know that she was likelier to run onto him on any of a dozen other planets.

*Unless I go out to Qalara and just wait-which might take a month or a year-or longer!*

At any rate, their prospective buyer with his silent and so-decorative young companion was pleased to see them again, and to tell them all about the wonderful car on display. It was a Hummingbird, and he owned one, he advised. That added to his stature; the Hummingbird was a small vehicle, high-priced and prestigious. He talked of the groundcar's VIC and wanted to demonstrate it. The Qalaran merchant-and a watchful security man-advised him pleasantly that such would not be possible; this Hummingbird's Vocally Interactive Computer was presently elsewhere, being tested.

Janja and Hellfire moved on. Both wanted to see what the Ghanji display offered. And some of the local pearls, too; Joser cataracts.

They fulfilled the cliché of losing track of time and were shocked to discover how little of it they had left.

"We've got to get back to the Lex for our *private showing* for goodole Lord Whatsisname of Ghanji!" Hellfire gave her head a self-important wag as she spoke the words "private showing."

Janja was nodding. "Umm, pos . . . Hellfire . . . I think we'd better call the suite. Consider the offers we've had, and that jacko's willingness to pay seventeen-k . . . and probably more. We'd better warn the others not to let Lord Zirandany buy anything-we've *got* to arrange an auction, Hellfire!"

"Hmm." Hellfire gazed thoughtfully at her. "You're right, Janjy!" she said suddenly, smiling delightedly. "You're just so flaining clever, Cloud-top! All right, I'll call before we leave here. Come on; the RCHS station's over there, and there must be a public comm-booth or three."

They hurried as best they could through a crowd that had swelled since their arrival. Janja was right, natural-

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ly. They should not have worn the Knorese gauds. Now they tried to hurry toward the public transport station: Rown Clan Hovertrans Service. And yes, there were commbooths nearby.

Hellfire would make the call; Janja moved to check the hovertrans schedule. She did that-noting that transport to several hotels was without charge, and that the Lex was among them. They need wait only two or three minutes.

As she turned away from the information readout, she was blocked by some idiot who complained that "this flainin' planet's flainin' twin suns have struck me flainin' blind" and asked her what the schedule was.

Meanwhile Hellfire completed her call quickly and turned to walk into a waiting young man who, since he wore pastels, she took for a Joser. At once he asked about her bracelet, in a voice that sounded recently pubertous.

*This is one who's moonwatching*, she mused impatiently. *He sure doesn't look like a prospective buyer for what we've got to sell!*

Nevertheless, frowning at being almost jammed between two of the pink-and-blue commbooths, she told him

hurriedly about the Satana Coalition and an auction.

"Oh, there's more flash like that, huh?"

"Firm. We'll be having an auction, as I said . . . uh, in a couple of days. It will be publicized."

"You're sure right, Hink," he said. "We want her, all right."

That didn't sound good, and Hellfire started to reach for the stopper she had tucked inside her jumpsuit. She saw only the youth before her, not the man who long-stepped smoothly into the niche behind her. Swiftly he gave her a sharp hand-edged blow on the back of the neck.

Hellfire's eyes bulged but were closing as she folded. Her only sound was a muted *urp*. The youth who had accosted her didn't even have to step forward to catch

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her. His companion behind her did, under her arms. The youth with the boyish tenor squatted to grasp her ankles. He nodded. Hink began backing, between the commbooths.

Janja moved around her own accoster just in time to be shocked by the view between two pastel-hued commbooths. Two men were boosting a lean and obviously lifeless figure in red into a private car, also red. The bias-cut ends of a black sash trailed forlornly.

"Hellf-" Janja began, and the man who had complained of his sight made a grab for her Barring and its glittering pendant.

Her hand blocked his, swiftly and automatically. Not quite automatically but just as swiftly, she pivoted on one foot while her other knee shot up. It jolted to a stop precisely between the very tops of his thighs.

He was folding, just starting to throw up, when she pounced to race after the kidnappers of her captain.

They had Hellfire into their domed little red car already, and one was in beside her. The other was rounding the car to its other door. His companion glanced over to see the oncoming Janja. She saw a thin, bony young face; he saw anger that made her intent obvious. He thought fast.

Just as the blond reached his side of the vehicle, he thrust the door open with all his might. He yanked it shut as his cohort did the other one. Two seconds later the car got under way.

Struck hard and unexpectedly, Janja was swept back-ward. She stumbled. That caused her to totter several steps, and she fell.

The red hovercar, unable to move without menace in any direction other than vertically, whipped straight upward. The falling Janja had a glimpse of its ID numbers, and she sprawled. The car went up and away, bearing the unconscious Hellfire.

## 11

*You'll never get that sucker off the ground!* un-identified bystander at the Wright Brothers' test flight.

*Flight by machines heavier than air is unpractical and insignificant, if not utterly impossible.*  
Simon Newcomb, astronomer and mathematician, 1902

Sprawling, Janja realized the existence of another problem. Here at the edge of the crowded, noisy fairgrounds she was just as helpless as if she had not worn her stopper, which was tucked into the bosom of her new jumpsuit. *If* a shot had any effect on the kidnappers' car, she would be endangering not only Hellfire but dozens of others. If that thing fell out of the air . . .

*And dummy Janja, she castigated herself, was so relaxed and casual she didn't even cherm menace from that fobber who tried to tear my ear lobe just to get one earring!*

Asprawl and shoving herself up from the ground, she looked hurriedly about.

For once, she saw no policemen. No security personnel. She did spot something that her desperation translated

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into a hope of following Hellfire's captors, at least. It was desperation and adrenalized thinking that led her to make such a mental connection. It involved performing a criminal act.

Three or so meters away a smallish man in pink and cerulean was just getting out of a handsome little yellow car. A very handsome car, indeed. Not a Flicker. Janja recognized it, or thought she did, from a memory that was only minutes old: surely this sporty little yellow job was like the electric blue car back in the Qalaran pavilion. A Hummingbird.

She stared at it, trying to think, licking her lips and swallowing hard,

Then she glanced up, squinting against a pale blue sky yellow-cast into glary turquoise. She saw the kidnappers' car, turning in air, starting away.

Pushing herself up and off with hands and strongly muscled legs, Janja was running before she had straight-ened up. Forward momentum substituted for balance.

"Stand by," the small man beside his car was saying to no one, since the machine was empty. "I'm just going t-"

Janja interrupted him worse than rudely. She thrust him aside on the run and hustled on by. Once she was inside his sporty vehicle she realized how precipitate her act was. And perhaps more than "merely" ill-advised! Never mind the good cause: she was trying to steal a car. And one thing she had never learned in her intense studies was how to drive planetside vehicles. Certainly she was not facing a spacer's console, which while ten times more complicated was by now a familiar old friend.

Again she swallowed and worried her lower lip with her teeth while staring at an array of readout and tell panels. She saw very few instruments.

*Strange. Can it be so simple?*

And then the next thought: *Not to me!*

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She needed an instruction program and knew it. Still . . .

Ignition was obvious, at least. She punched it in. The Hummingbird came alive with a low-level vibration that bragged of a superb engine and doubtless reminded some of a hummingbird. A glance to her left showed her the oncoming hand of the car's rightful and right-fully irate owner. The hand was rushing at her.

She used both her own hands, simultaneously: she hit the window button and the power bar. The window responded instantly. It whipped up and shut, in time to bark the knuckles of its owner. The car responded just as well-it also shot straight upward.

The kidnap vehicle was zipping away above the red-and-green-and-yellow pavilion of some merchant consortium or other. Janja saw that her car's panel had both a speaker and a comm-grid. Could its owner have been speaking to his c-of course! VIC!

Feeling a little silly, Janja had a go at it.

"A scarlet hovercar at about three o'clock," she said, hoping that she did face a vocally interactive computer, and that something would come of it. "ID number Aleph-two, six-six-four."

"Is scarlet red?"

Janja twitched at the sound of that pleasant-voiced question, and nodded. "Pos," she hurriedly added.

"Identified," the nice voice said from the car's speaker. "Instructions?"

Janja blinked. "I am to follow it. Keep it in sight, but at distance," she instructed. "It's supposed to be leading me to where I have an appointment."

"This vehicle is equipped with an automatic theft reporting system and is linked to Komodi policers," the computer advised pleasantly. "You appear to be stealing this vehicle."

"Nonsense! What is the name of this vehicle's owner?"

"Komodi Rentals Unlimited. Who are you?"

"Your programming is rude. What is the name of the

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present leaser?" Janja tried not to grit her teeth. She felt both frustrated, and ridiculous.

"Doubtless you mean lessee, from the tone of the question and the fact that I just identified the leaser. This vehicle is presently leased to Kublak N37202. It is not possible for me to be rude. I am not human."

Janja jittered in the seat. "Of course! I am Kublak's wife! He is calling the policers while I follow that car. The two men in it have just stolen my ID."

"The vehicle in question reads as containing three passengers."

"I saw only two, male. They grabbed my ID. Maybe they had an accomplice or grabbed a human being as well. Look here. I am wearing scannable gems of value and have credit in the name of Satana Coalition."

The little yellow car, high- but perhaps not over-priced at that, was balancing on air above a little clump of upward-staring people. One of them was a small man who was dancing up and down, pointing with one hand and shaking the other in the shape of a fist.

*What now,* Janja thought, while a couple of seconds passed. *They're getting away and I'm stymied by a talking computer-a politely rude one, at that! Sophisticated enough to make a judgment about what I meant when I said a wrong wor-*

'Satana Coalition credit verified on Jorinne," the vehicle's computer said. "True, you do not appear to be a thief, by any logic. Please hold the gemstones in question before my-thank you. Scan complete. It is judged genuine. My judgment is that no logic could be served by you stealing a car. Where is yours?"

"On my planet and that is not germane. Carry out my instructions-and the word is *your* stealing, not *you*."

"Tell my programmer."

Janja was starting to sweat and practically bouncing, watching the red car streaking away until it no longer appeared red. She did not bother with considering any

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paradoxes implicit in the term "redshift," meaning *go* or *leave*, when a redshifting red car was becoming black.

Abruptly but smoothly she was grasped in a firm grip and pressed back into the over-padded seat. The broad, padded belt had merely *appeared*. It was also not de-signed for someone her height, or the seat's elevation was not. With a gasp she clapped her hands to her chest and drew her breasts free of the restrainer. Instantly the belt snugged in some more, this time just below her breasts. She removed her hands.

"Safety restraints activated," the car told her unnecc-essarily. "Now implementing passenger instructions. Automatic guidance?"

"Pos," Janja said in a sigh. Now she felt that this was going to be ridiculously easy. "Automatic-everything."

The reason both cars had at once lifted straight up was that their safety scanners had gauged endangerment to people and property in any horizontal direction. Now this one would track Hellfire's kidnapers, and without Janja's knowing a thing about driving! It would also avoid hitting anything or breaking any traffic laws. She assumed.

*I hope.*

All she had to worry about-*I hope*-was Hellfire. If only those rotten kidnapping bastards didn't decide to remove their captive's scintillant Knoresse gauds-or cut them off-and dump her out!

Janja's illicitly gained sportscar was zipping into ac-tion. Its passenger grunted. Having protected her with passive restraints obviously controlled by itself-that is, if-it had caused the car to shoot off at a real velocity that bragged silently of its pickup speed. The velocity gauge didn't appear to move; it snapped halfway around the dial in one blurred jump. From zero to 100 in a couple of seconds. Janja felt that acceleration. She felt nothing else, and heard only a hum.

*A Hummingbird's hum*, she told herself.

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She was doing plenty of other thinking, too; fast thinking. She spoke to her pleasant-voiced . . . pilot.

"Ah . . . when A2-664 turns, turn also, but at a different angle. We do not wish to intercept." Or *give them cause to notice us*, she added mentally, and hoped the computer's abilities did not extend so far as to catch or intuit her thoughts. "When A2-664 puts down and stops, swing away and circle back. A long circle."

"Acknowledged. I am reporting this to Municipal Safety Unit."

"The local policers."

"Pos. It seems the best thing to do, since we are not being led to an appointment, but following another vehicle, not in pursuit, but with an attempt not to be noticed. Are you a policer?"

"Computer, this is the weirdest conversation I've ever carried on. Or been carried along by. Are you called VIC?"

"For vocally interactive computer?"

"Of course."

"Neg. I am called Saladin."

"Salah ad-Din?"

"Saladin, as one word."

"Standing for what?"

"It is a name. I am called Saladin. It does not stand for anything. I am the newest and best computer and guidance system available. The Mark IV. Thus I am CAGS IV."

"CAGS Four," Janja said, nodding. She could no longer distinguish their quarry from other traffic. "Are we still following the red car ID'd as A2-664, CAGS Four?"

"Pos. You cannot see them. They cannot see you. I can see them. I am also as you know a V.I.C. model CAGS."

"That makes you CAGSVIC, then."

"It makes me *a* CAGSVIC," the unwaveringly pleas-ant voice told her. "As you are *a* woman. You have a  
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name, however, and so have I. I have been given a name."

"Oh. Saladin."

"Firm. You have not commented on my decision to alert MSU and you have not responded to my query. You are avoiding it?"

Subtle and sophisticated, to phrase a question that way, Janja mused. She said, "No. I am not a policer. You are welcome . . . no, you are *instructed* to contact policers-"

"M.S.U.," CAGSVDC IV Saladin corrected in its pleasant voice.

"Where I come from computers don't interrupt," Janja said, tight-lipped. "Look here, I am more than disturbed and therefore not in a totally logical mood. I am not in a mood to be interrupted, either."

"Acknowledged. Apologies. Are you in a mood to be corrected?"

"Corrected? I have said something wrong?"

"Logic is not a mood," Saladin said pleasantly. Janja was beginning to wish it would snarl, or shout, or something other than sound so damned equable and nice about everything.

"Acknowledged," Janja said with austerity. "Pos, then: contact MSU. Give them our registration and the ID number of the vehicle we are following. Two men onboard-uh, in it-publicly kidnapped my companion just outside the commbooth at RCHS station, and are carrying her off. They knocked her unconscious."

"That is a new story," Saladin said, without the hint of accusation in its voice.

"It is the true one."



"It is the third story you have told me," Saladin said. "You do indeed begin to sound like a criminal."

Janja ground her teeth.

"You do not reply. I have re-analyzed and am con-vinced that you are not a criminal. It is possible that you commandeered this car, but you did so far an

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honorable purpose-the possible preservation of a human. It is my present judgment that you did not answer my last observation minus two not because you are a crimi-nal, but because you feel it is beneath your human dignity to reply."

"Saladin, you are a genius."

"Just a highly sophisticated construct. We are fol-lowing a car containing three persons. You say that they are two men who have kidnaped a woman. I acknowl-edge. It does sound more like holofiction than truth."

"Doesn't it! But you are programmed not to say that I lied, aren't you?" Without waiting for a reply-which it made anyhow-she went on: "She is tall, slender, attired in a red jumpsuit with a black sash-and many many stells worth of jewelry."

"Unwise."

"Oh, thanks, Saladin dear. She is dressed as a matter of fact identically to me. Both garments are less than two hours old. Now would you please advise the policers without advising that they are called MSU?"

"That is already implemented," CAGSVIC Saladin said.

"Say again?"

"That is already implemented," the computer duti-fully repeated.

"Hmm. Well, not even a highly sophisticated con-struct can be perfect, can it. Say again in different words."

"I have been transmitting on a channel that identifies me clearly to the policers. All that you have said has been transmitted to M.S.U." If the words sounded smug, the ever-pleasant voice did not. "We will not be spotted as pursuit by the vehicle we follow. Unless they put down soon, to ground, we will doubtless be overtaken or intersected by M.S.U. patrol."

Janja could just hear the separation and the periods between the three letters of the policers' abbreviation. She was learning and inferring much. She also felt that

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if she did not have this semi-sane, semi-inane conversa-tion to keep her occupied, she might well go fobby, wondering about Hellfire. And/or waiting for her to be thrown, jewel-less, from the car ahead.

That reminded her. "The car is still ahead? We are still in pursuit?"

"Pos."

"There are still three persons onboard? In it, I mean?"

"As a rental vehicle I am accustomed to offplanet accents and to spacefarer slang, spacefarer. The 'on-beard' marks you clearly, and it is the second time you have used it. I am scanning. I am unsure whether three persons are still in the target car. There is considerable traffic as you see and not even highly sophisticated systemry is perfect. We are bne-point-one kilometers behind them-and slightly westward as well. It is not likely that any of the three has departed the car at this velocity and this altitude."

"I was thinking that-" Janja broke off. She did not want to say it. "Use your vaunted logic. Two men kidnaped a woman, presumably because of the jewelry she-you are right: unwisely-wears. And I queried as to whether all three are still in the car."

"Ah. In that case I can provide the answer you seek. Nothing has fallen from the car we follow. Nothing also means no one."

"Thanks, Saladin. You're a pal. Smart, too."

Janja heaved a sigh and checked her breathing. It was all right, and she had dissipated her self's adrenaline. She had no shakes. She was as relaxed as she could make herself, which was more relaxed than almost any Galactic would be, under such circumstances. They had not Aglayan mind-body control; control of processes and self.

"Oh," she said. "As to policer intersection-so long as they dispatch two vehicles, or go after A2-664 first."

"A good point of course, and they have been so warned. I may not instruct legally constituted authority

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as I may not say that humans lie, but I may advise and suggest. I have."

*No matter, Janja thought. I'm not really human, anyhow.*

"A2-664 turns leftward-westward," Saladin advised. "We will not turn until . . . precisely . . . now."

With a minimal tilt that Janja hardly felt, the yellow sportscar heeled a bit and swung into a new course. Janja stared down at rushing pastel buildings. All around her, above and below, other vehicles moved. The course of each was separated by at least a meter on all sides. A collision could take place only by deliberate design- human design. And at that two safety mechanisms would first have to be disabled.

The compass showed them on a new course, which was essentially meaningless to a spacefarer who had never

been on Jorinne before. She resigned herself to facts: she was unable to do anything at all save ride. CAGSVIC IV, which was far more than a voice, was fully in charge and was entirely competent. She had to believe that. It was necessary to her mental state. She was pursuing, just the same as if she were racing after the kidnapers on foot or at the con of *Satana*, or driving/piloting this congenially conversational vehicle herself.

That being the case, there was nothing for her to do. She was a passenger. She couldn't go any faster and she couldn't fire at the other car. Still, using her Aglayan control to put herself-her self-to sleep seemed *wrong*, in this situation.

(She told herself that she did not of course doubt her ability to put herself to sleep, under present circum-stances. Meanwhile she doubted her ability to accom-plish it. Therefore she told herself she did not choose to try.)

In that case . . .

"Obviously you have much knowledge, Saladin. Ob-viously top you can continue scan while you handle all  
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shipboard- uh, car functions, and at the same time converse with me."

"Acknowledged."

"Well, affirm or-"

"Affirmed. Apologies. I heard no question but real-ize now that one was implied. You may have noted that I am programmed to infer. Pos. I can perform several simultaneous functions, too, even while answering ques-tions, if necessary. It would be my judgment that you do not wish any sort of drink or other mood-changer. Music?"

"No. Nothing. Just answer some questions for me, please."

"It is my function-correction, part of my function," Saladin told her. Pleasantly.

"Good. I have some questions," Janja said, and began to learn about Jorinne and a few other things.

Some of her questions had to be reworded and from time to time she could not help double-checking on red car A2-664, but she learned, and was able to remain calm. Mostly.

Traffic thinned as the kidnapers led them farther from the city. Below were fewer buildings and more open terrain, flashy with crops in bright colors. And the yellow Hummingbird hummed on and on, after the fleeing red Flicker.

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*The acceleration which must result from the use of rockets . . . inevitably would damage the brain beyond repair.*

J.P. Lockhart-Mummery, 1936

*They'll never get that big sucker off the ground!* Unidentified spectator at Cape Kennedy (Home-world), 1957

The Joser terrain below was farmland now, all farm-land. Undulant terrain, rather than rolling. Crops were splashes of chartreuse and jade and citrine and a deep turquoise that was too beautiful to be weird. Houses and barns flaunted roofs of yellow and blue and pink here and there amid the crops and the groves of trees, and machinery gleamed in brightly painted plastic and metal. A cyber-something was moving along one field, doing something to six rows of something, simultane-ously. Roads like carelessly dropped ribbon were the strange off-white of fire-cleared, fire-hardened earth.

Such Thingmaker technological techniques, Janja had once noted, both sore wounded the land and cauterized the wounds. Permanent scars remained. They were also

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good, lasting roads requiring minimal upkeep-none at all, for years.

Ahead a dark mass sprawled across the land, strangely hued in blue-green. A forest, Janja realized, and her face softened. Chartreuse grainstems and ultramarine forestration reminded her of her own Aglaya. It grew more idyllic as it drifted farther away in time. And . . . duller.

It had been a year now, or nearly, since spaceship *Coronet* had put down on Aglaya to murder her lover and her life and force her into a new one.

"Target car is losing altitude," Saladin advised.

"Going to ground!" Her face changed with new excitement. "Maintain our altitude all possible while keeping it monitored." After a moment of thought she added, "Pass right on over if they land-if it lands. Mark the area and we'll come back after a long turn."

"If it stops, our only means of monitoring or identi-fying it must be direct visual."

"Is it going toward that forest?"

"That I cannot know. It-"

"Make a judgment based on evidence and logical progression."

"Probably it is landing so as to enter the woods," CAGSVIC IV-Saladin's pleasant voice said. "The woods are dense. Do you feel that should be 'woods is'?"

"No. Doesn't matter. Give me a continuing report."

"Target vehicle is definitely on landing approach, above a one-point-eight-lane road. The road enters the woods. Target vehicle is at forty meters altitude. Slow-ing and descending. Thirty meters."

"Change course, uh, westward, sufficiently to keep it in electronic sight."

Pleasantly the computer advised her that she was presently on a westerly course.

Janja made a face. "Change to northwesterly course sufficient to continue tracking target car."

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"Done. Target car is setting down on the road and is headed southwest."

"Is that into the forest?"

"Pos."

"You said *on* the road?"

"Pos."

The trouble with a talking computer, she thought, was that it did not respond to assumed questions, be-cause it did not recognize them. "Then it is not hover-cruising. Do you know why?"

"Affirmed."

She gritted her teeth. "Tell me why that car is on the road, although it is a hovercar." *Quindy could have programmed Saladin better!*

"The road is narrow. Trees border it closely on both sides. Riding an air cushion in such circumstances is construed as dangerous to passenger and vehicle."

"When we are just on the point of losing contact, swing back. We will hit the road a kilometer from the forest and proceed southwest. In pursuit. At speed. Record target car's groundspeed."

"Seventy-two k.p.h. Phrase 'hit the road' is not in my memory."

"Descend to land-rolling-on the road."

"Oh. We hit the road gently, lightly and rolling. That defines 'hit the road'?"

"Pos."

"I have added that to my memory."

Janja rolled her eyes and jiggled impatiently. "Won-derful," she said in a dull voice that belied the word.

"Oh, wonderful," Trafalgar Cuw said in that flat dull voice he affected to indicate that he meant anything but "wonderful."

He said it habitually in much the same way that Hellfire said "Oh shit." Already, he had noticed, both Quindy and Janja had picked up his "wonderful." As

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Hellfire had picked up "furbag" and "furbaggin'," as adjective, on Macho.

(He had been there just over a month, and had re-sisted the phrase. He had been working for TMSMCo- TMS Mining Company-as subdeep-cover agent. His job had been to foment trouble, unto insurrection. He had. The result was the riotous "civil war" that had so discommoded the crew of *Satana*-whom he had told that his job was to *avert* that insurrection-and begun the chain of events that were apparently about to benefit them all so much. The idea had been that TMSMCo would emerge with a far greater piece of Macho and its one resource and reason for colonization: copper.

(Too bad for TMSMCo's rival on Macho/Mott-chindi, CupreCo.

(Such matters were too trivial to concern TGO. Should one individual emerge as supreme boss on Macho-or anywhere else-*that* would concern The Gray Organiza-tion. Such a person would most likely be investigated, quietly. Such a person might be worthy of clandestine financing. Or of being killed. Or of both, in time. The "O" in TGO stood for Order. Order, to TGO, was not a synonym for "peace." Trying to maintain peace, even constant law and order, was an impossible under-taking and therefore ridiculous. Order meant continuity and some sort of balance. Something approaching predictability.

(Certainly it did not mean trying to end or avert insurrections except against a TGO-favored regime or puppet. Certainly it did not mean trying to end piracy either, or even slavery. Attempting to end or even control either would have been as silly and wasteful of funds and people and hardware as an attempt to end or control illegal drug trade.

(The point was that Trafalgar felt that the Mott-chindese situation, and his efforts, would lead to ascendancy there of CupreCo, not TMSMCo. The latter was en-tirely big enough. Powerful enough. More growth would

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make it more powerful and thus more arrogant. That did not tend to lead to one whit of an increase in its financial contributions to TGO. Let TMSMCo sag on Macho, then, in favor of CupreCo.

(Fairness was manifestly not the concern of any god. Nor was it a matter of concern to TransGalactic Order/The Gray Organization.

(Yes, TMSMCo subdeep-cover agent Cuw, Trafalgar, had double-crossed his employer on planet

Mott-chindi.

(He'd never be discovered, or blamed. Things hap-pened. It was part of the clandestine operations trade. Things happened, and sometimes they went the wrong way. Agent Cuw had accomplished good things for TMSMCo elsewhere, and presumably would again. He was an extraordinarily resourceful man.

(Meanwhile, very little was more important than order or some semblance of it, along the spaceways. Thus nothing in the galaxy was more important than Trans-Galactic Order. To TransGalactic Order, anyhow. Or to T. Cuw.

(Except T. Cuw's life, of course.)

"Oh, wonderful," T. Cuw said, on learning that Viscount Zirandary would not be able to meet with the Satana Coalition and examine their gems, today. To-morrow, positively. Apologies tendered. Busy busy.

Trafalgar said it again an hour later. He and an un-uniformed Cosi had spent thirty-six minutes playing AKIMA! in the basement game-room of Hotel Lex. He had interrupted to call the Satana Suite to ask Hellfire a question. Hellfire wasn't there. Janja wasn't there.

"Cozy," he said, absently rubbing her very taut bottom through her loose lavender tunic, "I think we have a problem. It's been forty-some minutes since Hellfire called to say they were on their way. Neither she nor Janja has shown up, or called again."

She closed her eyes, made a tight-lipped face, and sighed.

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"Damn. What shall we . . . cancel that. Want to go to the Fair, 'Falger?"

"Firm. After we go up and get our stoppers."

They headed for the lift, surrounded by the noises of game-machines and their players. "Want me in uniform?"

He gave her a look. "I want you on your back or on your knees, woman! But, no, let's try it as civilians."

She ran a hand down his thigh. "Firm. Meanwhile, I love yer sentiments and share them. Later."

"Yeah."

"I'll put on a pair of pants, though."

Staring at nothing, he nodded. "Right."

"We do think something, uh, untoward has happened to them," she said, seeking confirmation as the lift took them up to their floor. "Janja and Hellf, I mean."

"We do." He was staring at the paisley-covered wall of the lift.

"Umm." She leaned back beside him, thinking, one almost-straight brow arched out of kilter.

"Hellfire's volatile as an undamped reactor and just loves violence. First, we'll check with the local policers."

"MSU."

"Right. She may have been Poofed at last, or ar-rested for Poofing someone else."

Cosi nodded. "Janja?"

"She's pretty dam' stable, Cozy. Hates the third setting on a stopper. On the other hand I've seen her go berserker or something like. She's loyal and proud and she sure does believe in vengeance."

"MSU it is, then."

"First."

"Right. *First.*" Cosi sighed. Brows up, she joined him in staring thoughtfully at the paisley wall.

By the time they reached their suite, however, they had agreed to go out to the Fair, first. Even Soljer Security's best and a Prime Agent erred, sometimes.

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Janja, meanwhile, was whisking along a narrow road closely hemmed by tall trees and undergrowth. The trees met above the road, mostly, creating a pretty sort of twilight. The branches tended to blur into a jumbly mass.

"Distance report," she said. It was a question and a command.

"One-half klom," Saladin told her.

"We'll slow down soon. No, cancel. Slow now, to match speeds at one-quarter klom."

"Understoo-cancel. New data: target car is slowing."

A moment passed, dragging its feet. CAGSVIC IV's nice voice provided new information: "Target vehicle seems to be coming to a st-target car has stopped."

"Slow!" Janja snapped. "Cut speed by thirty per cent- uh! You do respond, don't you!" The safety restraint had tried to bisect or dissect her. "Now ten per cent more deceleration. Data?"

Trees continued to pass in twilight, but now they were individually distinguishable as the Hummingbird moved far more slowly.

"Target car is stationary. Emissions have ceased."

"That means engine off. What are you reading?"

"Pos. Heat. Trees make distinguishing of humans by thermosensing very difficult. However-pos: humans are separating themselves from the target vehicle. De-parting it."

"Saladin, you are an over-programmed talker! Cut speed by ten per cent again, then twenty more after five seconds."

"Apologies. It is true that I am a talker, though surely not over-pro-apologies. I will go silent."

"Don't you dare! *Distance report!*"

"Point-one klom."

"Accelerate gradually to regain point-six-six former velocity and say 'Now' just *before* we pass target car. Humans are taking which direction?"

"South by-"

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"In terms of left or right-mine."

"Left. To your left, as you face."

Janja quelled her heartbeat as it tried to accelerate along with the car. She stared rightward, to fix a landmark.

"We must be there. Number of humans?"

"Unable to-*Now*-distinguish. One large heat-source."

Janja saw the red car parked off the tree-lined, tree-shaded road, and saw the fence to her left. A gate. She took her bearings on a pretentiously full pink-flowering bush anyhow. Unnecessary, she knew; her car's com-puter was quite capable of bringing them back to the precise spot.

"Number of humans?"

"One large heat-source," Saladin said again. "Be-hind us and to the s-left."

"Two men carrying a woman, I hope."

"Able to distinguish two as we passed. I cannot confirm three. *Length* of heat-source would tend to confirm your judgment. Two, bearing one between them. That is only a surmise. We are point-two klom beyond their location."

*I might have tried attacking while they were carrying her, right there, and ended it right then, she reflected. But if I'd failed, that would be all of it. Better to do some sneaking.* She said, "Cease acceleration. Main-tain speed sufficient to stop in ten meters." She tried to sit forward, staring. Her seat's restraints would not allow the movement. "Cancel! Decelerate! That big splash of pink-it is a house?"

"You questioned?"

"Yes!"

"Confirmed. House."

"It should offer an easy turn-around, on this narrow road. Turn if possible and return to target car."

"Confirmed. Executing."

She had made a good surmise. The pale pink farm-

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house was close to the road. An even narrower lane led to it, and past. A tractor sat in that driveway, beside the house. It was yellow and all handsomely rounded as if for streamlining.

Janja's conveyance crawled past and, just as she started to call out to it, it stopped. Shuddered. Rose onto its air cushion. Rotated a full one-hundred-eighty degrees in air, slowly, and settled back onto the road. Janja sighed. Well, a person couldn't be expected to know everything. She had assumed the car would need a driveway to pull or back into, in order to reverse direction. Instead . . . up, around, down. And that was that.

"Return to the target car," she said in a subdued voice. "Slowly."

They moved along the tree-shaded road. "Are you able to distinguish the target car now?"

"Pos," Saladin said. "It still radiates heat."

"Lovely. Stop thirty meters before we reach it."

"Confirmed. Coming up. The curve makes the car invisible within twenty-four meters."

"In that case, stop there," Janja amended, with the feeling that she was far from in charge of this operation!

She also realized that she needed to know some things. C ACS VIC IV/Saladin was willing to provide the answers she needed, mostly. Yes, it would wait. Yes, it would secure the car against anyone else's entry- except, it helpfully advised, lessee Kublak N37202 or a representative of Komodi Rentals Unlimited. Yes, she could program a new key-phrase, hers only, that would bid it open. Not for her only, but for anyone who uttered the command phrase.

She depressed the lock-key, moved the little lever up, and depressed the two keys as instructed. Holding them in, she said, "Unlock and open command follows. Open to the phrase following the command-word 'Input.' Input: *Oh shit.*"

She smiled, although it was small and tight, almost a

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grimace. Her tension was natural and she did not seek to dispel it. Her choice of unlock-and-open phrase seemed brilliant. Should Hellfire escape and reach the car with-out Janja, before Janja, Hellfire would naturally try to open it. As soon as she found that impossible she would surely snap "Oh shit!"

Thus the yellow Hummingbird was programmed to open for either of them-Janja hoped.

CAGSVIC/Saladin stopped the car almost directly beside a twisty tree whose bark was a deep russet

interestingly streaked with gray like blown ash. The curve ended just beyond it. Beyond that, the red Flicker would be visible.

Across the narrow road, on Janja's right, now, ran a very ordinary fence. Three plastic rails bonded to wrist-thick poles set into the earth at intervals of about three meters. Fence and poles were pale turquoise. Lovely. The weeds growing beside the posts sported leaves of dark turquoise and many-petaled yellow flowers with centers that looked rusted.

"I want you to advise me, Saladin. I want to leave a command to tightbeam a distress call to Komodi policers, giving our location-"

"M.S.U.," Saladin primly supplied.

Janja ignored that: "-beginning twenty-five minutes after I leave the car."

"Confirmed."

"Well?"

After a moment, the ever-equable voice said, "I cannot respond to the word 'well'. Its meanings are several. Shall I supply them?"

"Neg! Well," Janja said in an exasperated tone that was practically a snarl, "how do I enter such a command?"

"You have done so. I shall tightbeam a *Cl* call to M.S.U. -Komodi twenty-five minutes-ess after you leave the car."

"Oh." Subdued, Janja opened the door and got out

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into what close-pressing, overhanging trees turned into twilight. She closed the Hummingbird's door, then tried it. It was locked. "Oh shit," she said, and tried again. The door opened easily.

"Shall I restart the point-four-one-six-to-infinity count?" Saladin asked, in its disgustingly pleasant voice that could almost pass for sweet innocence.

"Pos," Janja said, and slammed the door.

Immediately she wished she hadn't. The noise was loud, with only the sounds of insects and birds as competition. She moved, quickly but surreptitiously. Her heart had speeded again. She paused to assert Aglayan control over her self. Janja took conscious control of Janja<sub>2</sub>. She calmed-physically, at least.

She left the heat-hardened road and tested the fence with a fallen branch. Nothing happened, but she de-cided against climbing over. She went flat on the ground and scooted under the bottom fence-rail.

Crouching, keeping under the trees and avoiding the dapply patches of sunlight that fought their way down among their canopy, she moved parallel to the road. When she reached the point at which the red car had stopped, it was not there.

The bottom seemed to fall out of her stomach-and then she saw the car, the Flicker. It was moving into a narrower road. A driveway. She had not seen it when she passed because she had studiously avoided glancing this way, toward the house. Now, from behind a fat bush full of lavender blossoms and the hum of bees or Jorinne's equivalent, she followed the car with her gaze. And she saw the house at the end of the drive.

It was a minor astonishment; someone had actually constructed a small house of wood from this very for-est! With a pastel blue door that seemed almost to simper sweetly.

The car was red, was a Flicker, and its ID number was A2-664. It was the car and Janja was in the right place.

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She circled wide, wading tall grass to come up on the darker side of the house, under two enormous trees whose leaves were almost round. She moved in, slow-ly, pausing to stare and listen, moving again. A tracker of early iron-age Aglaya, skulking expertly-dressed in a black-sashed red jumpsuit made of high-tech poly-mer. And carrying a high-tech device called a stopper.

She eased around an almost-lilac bush and was at the house. It was tan. A meter away, a window was out-lined in the same azure as the door. Crouching low, she moved in beside it, under it. Slowly, slowly she straight-ened from her crouch to peer in. Marvelous-the win-dow was not opaqued!

All she could see in that dim room was part of a bed.

*Aglii be praised*, she thought, and tried the window. It was a push-to-the-side affair, and it was not locked. It did not squeak either, on its tracks coated with ad-vanced teflon.

Janja spent something like five minutes easing that window to the left and open. After that she exerted self-over-self control to spend another full minute doing absolutely nothing but waiting, listening. She saw noth-ing. She heard a voice, but it did not come from this room.

Getting into the room required less than a minute. Since she had been careful to stare at nothing but the interior of this dim room, her pupils had widened. That enabled her to see the bed, the shelving, the dully gleaming chest of pale green. And a door.

She decided to use the stopper only if she had to. There were two of them, and the only way she could

be sure of them, one at a time, was with the gun set on Three. That she could not do. Still, she held onto the cylinder-its setting at Two-as she moved easily across the bedroom to the closed door. As she neared she was able to distinguish its color: pale turquoise.

It opened just as she reached it.

She threw herself into a spin, getting out of the way

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of the incoming door and coming around fast to ram her stopper-grasping right arm into an almost flat but com-pletely relaxed belly. It was contained in a *tunica Jorinna* of pale green, paler green, yellow and blue, all in a swirly pattern.

The youthful belly's youthful owner gasped, only that, and bent over.

Her swift sharp whipping of the stopper down onto the back of his neck as he staggered into the bedroom sent him thumping headlong to the (wood!) floor. He made ugly breathless sounds; hurt sounds.

"Goffer? *What the vug?!*"

That from the also lean-but muscularly, powerfully built-second youth. He appeared in the doorway, wear-ing only topaz-colored socks and carrying a skweez-pak of beer. Gold and blue, labeled "Jacabe."

Janja jerked up her stopper. He saw that and jerked up his beer. As she squeezed the grip to make the kidnapper Dance, golden Jacabe beer sloshed up and out as if catapulted. He started to dance-while Janja went blind, beer all over her face and blinding her, stinging her eyes. She tried to keep the stopper lined up and knew she had failed when the beer pack bounced off her chest. She was still blind, flailing, when he kicked her in the thigh. She flailed, unable to see. Felt the connection and heard his grunt-and grunted herself when the edge of his hand rapped down on her wrist, hard. Her fingers flexed and the stopper joined the skweez-pak on the floor. She heard it roll.

She jerked, danced, flailed, kicked. All blind. She took a kick in the thigh again and in the left buttock as she tried to whirl away-and heard his chuckle-and another in the left calf that made her stumble into a slap to the face that jarred her and made her head ring- while she punched him someplace, blindly-and caught in return a punch to the chest that hurt, fist sinking into breast and hurting anew when she twist-jerked away, at the same time slapping out with both hands, but his

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kick to the knee aided her so that she banged back into a wall. She rolled along it-catching another kick in the butt and kicking out from the wall, wheeling to where she thought he had to be, kicking out hard-

Her ankle was grabbed and assisted in its upward rush. And up, and she tumbled backward.

She hit the wooden floor hard. Her teeth clacked. Her right elbow took too much of the impact and that arm was immediately useless. Then he must have squatted because the heel of a hand slammed into her forehead with a loud slapping sound and her head slammed into unyielding hardwood flooring with an even louder noise.

Behind her eyes a whole power station seemed to go up in a cascade of sparks.

While she lay sprawled, trying hard to *will* herself into movement despite her roaring head and its dazed state, he stomped her breast. Never mind that he wore no shoes; it hurt, and it hurt bad. She heard her scream and heard the chuckle that brought from him. Mean-while she was doubling up, clutching, protecting her-self, her eyes blinded anew by automatic tears while she twisted onto one hip, and he kicked her in the butt again.

That one jarred her and she moaned. She twitch-rolled away from him and tried a horizontally sweeping kick of her own. It caught a leg and she heard him gasp a curse of pain.

"*Damn you, stash!*"

Trying to hurry, she came half up off the floor and he heel-kicked her in the forehead and she slammed back.

This time the blaze of lights and dancing sparks ended in the total darkness of unconsciousness.

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*Sexual activity is unnecessary to life.* St. Justin Not only is sex unimportant, but also irksome. . . . I hate these instincts, which rob me of self-possession. I even despise the partner of the exercise.

John G. Haigh, murderer of nine, Homeworld, XX Century

Torture grows out of desire for retribution and . . . sexual repression. It is as human as the need to eliminate bodily wastes.

Jommo Sonado

The incident had many witnesses and was the talk of Fairgoers. The sprawling grounds of the Fair were alive with policers. Trafalgar and Cosi did not meet Kubiak N37202, but it did not take long for them to learn enough to send them hurrying to the main office-of three branches-of Kornodi Rentals Unltd.

From there Trafalgar called the hotel to give Cinna-bar an update on the Hellfire/Janja situation, while

Cosi sought more information. She flashed her Licensed Security Agent ID just long enough to get Komodi Rent-als' manager to talking-again. He described the car thief. It was still an accurate description of Janja. He

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described the car, too. Proudly as if the Hummingbird had been made here rather than on Qalara, he described it in detail.

*Then she could have sent word to MSU HQ, Cosi thought. And we didn't even think about asking the officers at the Fair if they had heard from a stolen car!*

She thanked the man profusely and got Trafalgar off the comm. He listened to her hurried words. They redshifted just as hurriedly, heading for Headquarters; Municipal Safety Unit-Komodi.

Janja awoke with a headache. She regained consciousness stripped of everything: jewelry, clothing, freedom and dignity.

The one called Goffer took his vengeance for being hurt by her and, more importantly, so easily bested by the short blond whom his pal, Halarik, had taken just as easily. In the same bedroom she had broken into, Goffer used her stopper. It was a lot of fun, making the naked and helpless cake Dance with her own stopper set on Two, and watching her jiggle.

Yet he was impressed. Janja jiggled precious little. She was nearly as lean as he, and just as taut, and the muscles of her legs were even better than his.

He inflicted the discomfort of making her Dance long enough for it to become nerve-jangling mind-knotting horror: two minutes. When he stopped, she collapsed. He ambled over to squat and thwack her stomach with her stopper. It was a delight, watching the supine woman try to double over and clutch herself with her arms absolutely helpless, up by her head. Her tongue came out and she ceased trying to move, at once.

Her arms were forced upward on either side, bent up at the elbows, hands beside her head. Each wrist was tightly bound by the black sash from her jumpsuit, which had also been passed, thoughtfully, around her neck. The message was obvious. The effect was obvious. Strain against the bondage and give up breathing.

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She quit straining. She kept her hands up beside her cheeks, flanking her face in a pose Goffer thought amusing and deliciously helpless. She could not even get her hands down to her shoulders.

"I've heard that too much forced Dancin' to the tune of a Two-set stopper scrambles the brain-permanent," Goffer said conversationally. "I wonder how much is too much?"

In the other room, Halarik was slicing the other one. He had just started when this one interrupted, and at-tacked Goffer. Halarik did like skinny, breastless cakes and stashes flanked by pointy hip-bones!

Goffer much preferred cakes built like the blond. Goffer did like warheads and along with millions of others, he entertained fantasies about Setsuyo Puma/ Akima Mars. This one's bosom could have been bigger and delighted him even more, but he did like the firm-ness of these tight, muscle-backed cones.

All in all, now he was glad that she had been dumb enough to come blundering in.

Besides, this way they had almost twice as much fine jewelry-free. *And* a good time! It would last until they got tired of these two offplanet cakes, or thought they'd better end it. Then they'd end it As a matter of fact, they'd end both of them.

With a hand on the helpless blond's hip, he jerked her onto her side. That exposed a pair of taut-skinned, muscular buttocks that were still unmistakably emphatically female. Halarik had bruised one of these cheeks. Goffer bruised its twin, using a swift sharp blow with her stopper. He watched her violent jerk and shudder. He liked to watch her powerless response to what he did to her, the dumb offplanet grunje!

In the other room, the skinny one with the brassy hair was grunting and groaning while Halarik used her. The grunts and groans were muffled. She had been so foul-mouthed when she came to that Hal had bloodied it for her. Her mouth. Of course by that time her wrists were

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securely bound and her sexy jumpsuit was open all the way to the crotch.

Opening the jumpsuit provided the revelation: her ring-pierced nipple.

"Hey, looka this," Halarik had said happily, curling his finger through the gleaming ring. "She's into pain and kinky stuff!"

"Great," Goffer said, nodding. Obviously nobody had a thing like that done to her unless she was just what Hal said. (She denied it, of course.)

Soon they found that it was best to gag her. They used part of one arm of her jumpsuit, ripped and sliced off. They forced so much of that red polyfab into her mouth that her face looked several centimeters longer, as if she was half chin. Since that wasn't too esthetically pleas-ing, they decided to cover it up, once they arrived here at the house.

Meanwhile the ring made her pretty easy to control. All they did was provide her with a leash. They attached it to



the nip-ring, naturally. It was a slender length of line that was easy enough to cut with the large clasp-knife Halarik loved—a regular knife, not electric or vibro- or anything fancy. On the other hand that cord was strong enough to tow a car for miles.

Now her widely gaping, stuffed mouth was invisible behind a smooth piece of black tape that covered her lower face from just under her nose to the tip of her chin. Both Goffer and Halarik thought her face looked real nice, ending in smooth shining black this way. The tape also held the stuffing in her nasty mouth.

"That's machinery-repair tape," Halarik had told her. "We repaired that nasty hole in yer lower face!"

Both of them laughed at that, and her eyes looked mean while she tried to struggle. Halarik ended that quickly enough, by tugging her leash until her nipple stretched and giving her a hammer-fist blow in the crotch.

Now she was in the other room, getting it up the

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middle from Hal. She sure hadn't acted like she wanted it!

They had made her stand up against the table. When her leash was pulled across the tabletop and tugged, she bent right over. Goffer held the cord there, taut, while Halarik crawled under the table to take its end from him. She didn't try to kick him, either!

Once they had sliced and ripped and tugged the jumpsuit off, Halarik had put the black sash back on her. He knotted it around her waist as a decoration and told her how much it enhanced her appearance. Now he used that sash; he tied the other end of the leash to it, at her waist. That way she had to lie stretched along the table, standing on tiptoe and bent very sharply at the waist.

Halarik liked it best that way, since he didn't care a thing about breasts but sure did love butts.

He also liked the concept of her being totally helpless this way, so he freed her wrists. So what? The leash held her in place. All she had to be told was that she'd get it good if she tried getting the tape off her face. He emphasized that by showing her his knife—fourteen sems long, folded, and twenty-five long, overall, with the blade out. He made just a little nick in her thigh. Just enough to bring blood and let her know he meant business and wasn't going to stand for any nonsense from her. She was a captive, and furthermore a toy, and that was all there was to it.

Goffer backed away from his own helpless toy to glance in there.

Oh, yes—Hal was really giving it to her hard, right up the middle from behind, slicing her so she'd walk bow-legged for a week. If she lived a week. If they let her live a week.

Her hands were free, but useless. Her nipple was constantly tugged by its ring. The ring in turn was tugged by the cord that ran taut along the table and over its far edge and back under until it was secured to her waist by

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her nice jet sash. Its ends dangled, fluttering with Halarik's jarring movements. Against her behind, into her from behind, up her stash and up.

The only sounds she could make were muffled, really muffled. Grunts, groans, all mostly vowels because of her propped-open mouth. And really pitifully dim because of the big strip of shining plastic tape.

She also made noises with her hands, now and again. Slapping them against the table in frustration and rage. And pain, maybe. Goffer wondered. She sure didn't like slicing! Her eyes and nostrils flared and she jerked her head back and forth.

None of it bothered Halarik. Maybe it delighted him, spurred him. He stood behind her, wearing only his socks, and pumped in, up, in, good and hard, hanging onto her hips and banging her butt as he went hi deep, giving it to her good. His grunts were a lot louder than hers.

*Dumb brass-headed stash, Goffer thought. Why I bet there's cakes all over Jorinne who'd just love to get our slicers up 'em, and the harder an' deeper the better!*

He, meanwhile, was more vengeful than horny.

Besides, once Hal got through slicing himself a piece of the skinny cake, he'd probably want to try the blond. That would mean making Goffer stop playing with her. Goffer considered that, staring thoughtfully at the blond huddled on the floor with her hands tied up by her face-to her neck.

He figured he'd better get in all the playing he could, while the playing was good.

Still thoughtful, he ambled back over to the blond.

He got her onto her feet again and shoved her back against the wall to the right of the bed with a thump that made her pale, pale eyes flare and roil almost loosely, delightfully. He gave her a quick hard squeeze to the left warhead before he backed away, grinning.

She wasn't as stringently gagged. A piece of old rope, about the thickness of Goffer's index finger, was

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all they used. They just forced it between her teeth and tied it behind her head. Tight, so it bit into her cheek and kept her mouth open in an ugly rictus that Goffer liked. She steadfastly, stoically refused to make noises around that partially effective gag.

Smiling, he sighted with the stopper and let her stare at it, let her think about it for awhile. Goffer learned fast. He knew about letting apprehension build into terror.

Then he squeezed. He made her Dance for another couple of minutes.

It was great. She shudder-jitter-shuffled in place, scrubbing her bare butt against the bare wooden wall the whole while. Mostly he watched her tits, wishing they were a little softer so they'd be livelier while he made her do the Two-step.

This time when he stopped stoppering her, she didn't fall down. Oh her legs were weak and she sagged, but she stayed up because she was leaning back against the wall. Blank and stupid of face. Mouth slack. Shot all up and down her naked, unbelievably pale-skinned body with shivers and nerve spasms that mingled with twitchy muscle spasms.

She sag-stood with another wall to her right and the bed on her left. Facing Goffer, who smiled and watched with interest and pleasure.

From the other room came the muffled sounds of the skinny one's grunts and the slaps of her hands; the louder sounds of Halarik's grunts of effort and increas-ing arousal; the slap-slap of his loins against the under-padded cushions of her backside and the squeaky scrooch of the table legs on the floor.

Ole Hal was pumping up her so hard he was moving the table!

Goffer grinned. *That* gave old prass-head some extra problems!

As to the blond . . . Goffer watched her getting herself together, regaining control of herself. The only  
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thing that had come out of her mouth around the piece of rope was some drool. He liked the helpless aspect of that, but it really wasn't too great to watch.

He sighed. *You have to take the good with the bad*, he thought, and gave her a few seconds' more of stop-per setting Number Two.

He had an erection up to here because punishing her was a real sexual stimulant. He really hated to stop tortur-that is, punishing her, though, only to start giv-ing her what he knew would be the greatest thrill of her life. *Richbitch cake, with her fancy joolry! Never had a Real man, I bet!*

*Bet she's never had it rough, the way a cake needs it and deserves it! I mean wants it.*

He hesitated in indecision. Give it to her before Halarik finished and came in from the other room, or make the bitch Dance some more to the tune of her own damned stopper?

He turned his head toward the other room to call, "Hey, Hal! How yer doing, stud?"

(Grunt) "Great, Goff . . . uh! . . . great . . . holdin' back . . . want it to-uh! . . . last 'n' last . . ." (grunt)

Grinning, Goffer walked over and jammed the end of the stopper's barrel into the blond's tiny stomach. She was already hard against the wall. Her eyes rolled and her brows rose in the middle, but her stomach didn't yield much. So he whipped the weapon up to give her a sharp rap on one bare breast with its barrel, then gave her a shove hard enough to topple her onto the bed.

He heard her make a helpless high-voiced sound and was delighted to have got a little vocal reaction out of the brave bitch at last. He aimed the stopper right at one bare, bruised bottom cheek and squeezed.

He held it on her, grinning, while he backed away. He kept the beam on her for another two-minute stint. This time she lay twitchy-groveling on the bed. Shiver-ing, moving almost like she was humping. Goffer liked  
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that. So she Danced horizontally. That was even more fun to watch.

Yes, Cosi and Trafalgar learned, Komodi Rentals' yellow Hummingbird-or rather its very latest state-of-the-art CAGS unit-had reported its activity, right after the theft. The CAGSVIC reported that the thief had identified herself as wife of the car's renter, Kublak N37202, Komodi's policers told them. That was a lie, they knew, because naturally they had a statement from Kublak. He had a wife, but she was back on Never-mind. Nor had Kublak picked up anyone or had even paid sexual activity, since he'd been on Jorinne.

The problem was that the CAGSVIC unit had failed to give even a general direction, had not been spotted, and had not communicated again. Nor had its driver.

Standing in an office of MSU-Komodi's main head-quarters, Trafalgar stared at the floor (imitation inlaid tiles, very effective; the tiles were beige and cerulean and the interstices were cream-colored). He raised his head to look at the MSU man. The man from Outreach wore his own clothing. It wasn't all pastel, but it cer-tainly was colorful.

"Sergeant, this is Sergeant Cosi, Soljer Station Secu-rity. She's assigned to us-the Satana Coalition. Our captain and her computrician-her friend and ours-went out to the Fair today. Interested visitors from offplanet, believing they were on a nice orderly world. Unwisely, they wore valuable and flashy jewelry. But-Theba's name, man, jewelry is what the Fair is all about."

Seated at his desk topped by console, comm, miniputer, recorder and a very ordinary scratch-pad, the policer sergeant nodded. He wore a pale green "mask" of paint or dye, meaning he was part of some clan or other.

"Now we all know," Trafalgar went on, "that two pieces of local slime put the snatch on Captain Helff,  
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and that her friend and crew member grabbed the near-est vehicle to give pursuit, don't we."

"Probably. We don't know they were *local* slime, and we do know that the neatest vehicle happened to belong to someone else. She knocked him out of the way to get it. Both he and Komodi Rentals are prepared to press charges."

"We'll just worry about that some other time," Trafalgar said.

The MSU sergeant gave Cosi an up-and-down with his big chocolate eyes and looked back at the

flashily-dressed offworlder. "I don't know what yer mean by that, and *maybe* it happened the way you said. The one thing we're sure of is that the blond stole that car."

"Because no policers or security guards were around, and it was either give chase or let her captain go who knows where with those swine! I assure you I'd have done precisely the same-*if* I'd been as quick-thinking as Janja."

The sergeant made a note. "So her name's Janja. Will yer spell it?"

The two stared at him. After all Trafalgar had said, this was all the reaction they got from this sergeant! All he was interested in was that at last he had a name to put on his dreadful car thief!

He looked up, saw those stares, and tried some heat: "I assure yer both that we have a really good record at recovering stolen cars, and on *this* planet judges aren't too lenient on them, either."

"Yeah? How are you and the local judges at kidnap-pers, rapists, jewel thieves, and other minor transgressors like those?" Trafalgar's stance and tone left no question as to whether he was seriously seeking information.

"Now look here, offworlder-"

"Don't call me offworlder, *Sergeant*. That sounds like bigotry, don't you think? Give me a 'sir' the same way you do everyone else."

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Staring, blinking in anger, the sergeant slapped his desk and opened his mouth to relieve himself of some sort of reply.

"Don't say that," Trafalgar told him.

"Sergeant," Cosi said in a pleasant voice from a pleasant face, "you know, if yer just keep sitting there writing words on paper and calling people names in contravention of Regs two-nine-A and waiting to put the clamps on honest citizens trying to do MSU's work for yer-chasing kidnappers, for instance-you're going to have a big fat ass and weak legs." She smiled sweetly at the open-mouthed man. "Trafalgar, I think we should rent a car and just start wandering around. Chances are we'll stumble across the sexually abused corpses of Captain Helf and Janja a lot faster than MSU-Komodi."

"Now you look here-"

"We're looking, Sergeant," Trafalgar Cuw said. "What're you going to show us?"

"Uh-splut-the inside of a cell, if yer-"

"If we what? Don't shut up about your burgeoning backside? Don't tell you how terrific you and MSU are? Don't produce this heinous car-thief for you so you can persecute I mean prosecute her instead of the real crim-inals, Josers preying on innocent visitors to Jorinne's Fair, stupidly believing themselves safe on a civilized planet?"

The sergeant hoisted the aforementioned portion of his anatomy from his nicely padded chair and stood, looking ready to explode. Trafalgar backed a pace, leftward. Cosi backed a pace, rightward.

And the door burst fortuitously open. A young cop poked his head in, tunic off and shirt collar open. His voice was shockingly deep:

"Hey Sarge! Incoming message from that stolen rental car. Punch Two!"

Automatically blinking, a good cop, Sarge glanced

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down, at his desktop console and depressed the second key on the second row,

"... ninety-six kloms from the fairgrounds east perimeter," a pleasant voice was saying; "parking area Twelve. She instructed me to contact you if she did not return within twenty-five that is two-five minutes-ess. She has not. We tracked a red Flicker ID number Aleph-two six-six-four, containing three people. Her statement is that one of them was kidnapped at the Fair by two young males. She has doubtless gone, alone, to effect release or rescue, if her story is true. I am on Wait, on State Road One-one-six, Rockcastle District, three-point-six-seven kilometers from the northeast edge of a thick wooded area. The nearest klompost is four-point-one-one kilometers southeast, and is number Twenty. Acknowledge, please."

The sergeant did nothing but lean on his desk with both hands, staring at the door. Someone else would acknowledge the CAGSVIC unit's report, and the near-est patrol vehicle would be sent to the subject vehicle, soonest. Meanwhile the sergeant stood, bent with both hands planted on his desk, non-fat backside in the air, staring at the open doorway through which those two rudelings had just redshifted, at speed.

The sergeant dropped his butt into his chair, rose, looked down at the chair, removed the pad, and sat down again. He stared at the door.

"Hope those two don't get there first," he muttered. "Pushy as they are though, they might! Hope they don't get into trouble. One thing I'm sure of-they were never in this office!"

"You say something, Sarge?"

"Uh, pos. I said how about a cup of saufee?" *On second thought, I hope those two do get there first! And don't get caught, after they take care of those stinkin' kidnappers!* Then he was frowning, jerking his head. "What the rollin' vug is all that damn' noise?"

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The overhead comm-squawker told him as it told the whole building and every MSU car:

*"Two people, a man and a woman, have just stolen patrol car Nine from in front of headquarters! All cars are directed to be on the lookout for MSU patrol car Nine, now being driven by two unauthorized personnel, a woman and a garishly-dressed man!"*

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Outside, a stiff breeze was blowing, shaking the trees and making their leaves hiss with a rather menacing sound. It cut around the corners of the little house off State Road 116, that wind, and it seemed to moan and whisper. The wind of an alien planet-another alien planet. One of the many planets Hellfire had visited, one way or another; and to her all planets were alien, including the one where she'd been born.

Her reeling mind told her that this wind was babbling insanities and obscenities-just as she wanted to do. As she would be doing if she were not so uncomfortably gagged. The jaws of her stuffed mouth ached. She longed to lick her lips. She longed to babble obscenities!

*Take the tape off and all this wad of cloth out, she thought, and try to gag me with that filthy male thing of yours, why don't you! Then you'll learn what I think of it, and you-and what sort of teeth / have!*

Hellfire felt more than sorry for herself. She was beginning to believe in retribution. Not just "normal" vengeance: retribution, this evil done on her in payment for all her crimes. If ever she was freed or escaped . . . if she was allowed to leave this awful place alive or could win free of it . . . that was it. The end of her career as Captain Hellfire. Wealth or no, nothing

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could stop her from retiring from the spaceways, now. Nothing!

*No doubt about it, she thought in self-pity and self-castigation. I've led a rotten dam' life and done rotten dam' things . . . again and again. And now it's caught up with me! Maybe I've been deliberately flirting with death for years. Daring death to take me. Maybe I wanted it, wanted punishment. That's supposedly the explanation, the neat psychological explanation for flirt-ing with death, isn't it?*

*But not now! Not anymore-and so now I get it! Now it catches up to me. First on Knor, and now here. Grabbed and used by animals, making me one, using me like one . . . making me a slave!*

Once more she had been forced to endure that which was against her nature, that which she hated: sex with a man. Slicing. Her *stash sliced* with a swollen rutting male organ-a *sttcer*. An alien presence inside her body.

She hated it, hated him. Once again she had been *used*, raped and rammed and pumped full of disgusting male seed.

Now she stood on quivering legs, stark naked with her upper body lying helplessly across the tabletop made slicky-damp with her sweat. Quaking, she stared at nothing. She could only endure, and feel.

On Knor she had been drugged. She had actually cooperated, participated, because the drug made her think she was enjoying the heterosexual experience she so hated. Not this time. This time she had felt it, endured it in full awareness. Revolted and horrified, outraged and in pain. She felt reduced to the absolute bottom level of humiliation and subjugation and slav-ery. Slavery.

Having used her, climaxed in her to take the edge off his lust, this animal named Halarik now amused himself with her naked buttocks. She knew that her position tuned them up as if proffering herself.

*How can men be this way?*

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(Men? He was a *boy*, barely a man!)

How can they . . . how can he . . .

*And why me?*

*Why me, she thought in anguish. How can he con-tinue to degrade me, after he's reduced me, used me! Making me stand here this way, hurting, my nipple ' burning, degraded to the ultimate, to the level of an animal in heat. But I'm Not! And now he stands back there, invisible, gloating! Playing with me, fondling and palpating my ass as if it's his toy! His possession.*

*As if I'm some kind of-of thing, an object for his ruttish slimy amusement!*

Her skin crawled. It did. Not just the cliché; she could feel her skin as if acrawl with a hundred insects, a thousand worms, at his filthy mocking caressing *male* touch.

Then she heard the sounds from the other room.

She wondered Who-and inadvertently Halarik told her.

"Goffer? How you doing with that bulge-calfed blond, hmmm?"

*Janj!* He had described Janja. It had to be Janja; Cloud-top. Somehow she had followed! And somehow, they had captured her, too!

*They saw the gauds I was wearing-the jewelry made by those swinish Knormen!-and they saw an opportu-nity to snatch me for them, and they took it. I was hit, struck-I remember that, don't I? I*

*came to in their car, in the air. Tied. Should I consider myself lucky that they didn't just take the jewelry and dump me out at three or four thousand meters or whatever our altitude was? But no, they're male, and young, and they had a fe-male. So . . . in for a mini, in for a semi So they opened my clothing and played-found the ring those swinish horrid Knormen put in me . . . and brought me back here to play! Play! We got ourselves a it-male, one of those creatures with a hole up the middle. Let's use it. Right. Take the jewels and the stash too. Right.*

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*What a lark. Skinny bitch'll probably be grateful to get a little-Firm; I'll bet they thought that! That's the way males think.*

*And Janja saw, and somehow she followed. Surely there wasn't time for them to grab both of us-oh no, she wasn't in the car God I can't even think straight anymore! Janja saw, and followed. And now they've got both of us. All the jewels and two fe-males. What great good fortune! What to do with two females, two cakes, two stashes, since we got 'em as a bonus along with lots of stells worth of jewelry-set gemstones?*

*Use them, what else! Tie them and hurt them, poke them and plumb them and never mind that one of 'em is strictly homosexual. Fondle her bare upturned butt the way this bastard is doing right now!*

The thought hit her then, while she stood helplessly, bent from the waist, and he kept her legs apart with his own legs and fondled her bared and tensing bottom. The thought hit her with the impact of a crashing car:

And what would these two do with their captives *afterward*?

The empty feeling went all the way down to the pit of her stomach, right down to her intestines. She knew. These two Joser bastards wouldn't just let her and Janja go. They would get rougher and rougher and then sort of wake up, think a little about what they had done, and the consequences, and they would come to the inevitable horrible logical decision. The best thing to do with the well-used women was to use them up: kill them.

The identity of most stopper-on-Three victims could be ascertained, with modern technology and biochemical means. But the chances were long against that if Goffer and his fellow kidnaper, fellow rapist, fellow obscene fondler took their two victims out behind the house, and way out, into the fields among the trees and the grasses and the bushes, and Poofed them there.

Evidence would not exist. It didn't even need a wind

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to blow it away. A vagrant breeze, a gentle zephyr was enough to distribute human dust-motes outside, beyond finding and detection, much less identification.

Hellfire was very certain that she had devised just what would happen to her and to Janja, and instantly her mind changed channels. It moved into another mode. Now she was the pirate and the survivor, the Survivor, thinking, trying to calculate, seeking a means-any means-to Survive.

A horrible possibility suggested itself, and she had to consider it.

Had to deal with it. If it came down to it-yes. If it was the bottom line and the only real chance and she knew it-yes. She could do it. She'd have to steel herself, close her eyes and take a big deep breath. Set both hands against the table's top-her hands, mock-ingly free!-and . . . shove. With all her might. Rip the accursed ring through the flesh of her aureole and her nipple-to be free and able to fight or flee or both.

With purpose now rather than merely anguish, she turned her head in the opposite direction. Now she was studying the room. Looking for her stopper. She had accepted the ghastly information of her final disposal. She had even accepted the dread fact that she could if she had to rip herself free.

Meanwhile, though, she would much prefer another way. She studied the room, and sought her stopper. Gagged, and helpless.

She didn't see it.

In the other room, Goffer at last succumbed to the call of the flesh.

He piled onto his victim, and into her.

She grunted and chewed at the finger-thick rope that gagged her less than effectively and more than uncom-fortably. She tried to turn herself off, to dissociate herself, her self, from what was happening.

Unfortunately, she could not. There were no frigid women on her planet. Aglayans were a kind people who

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circumcised boys at infancy and performed a similar operation on girl babies. They found the hidden hood, slit it, opened it and peeled it, to bare the clitoris. It was ever there, open and bare, raw pink skin ready for stimulation. There were no frigid women among Aglayans, and already Janja's body was commencing helplessly to respond to her rapist.

Her fingers worked, seeking some way to deal with the bonds on her wrists-tight enough so that her hands were chilly, almost bloodless-that were also wrapped around her neck. She tugged-and strangled herself.

That brought a little sound from her and Goffer grinned. She didn't sound hurt, to long lean rangy Goffer, dig-ging in and pushing with his toes at the foot of the bed.

"Gettin' to yer, hmm? Enjoying it, fluff-hair? Well, stay right here and don't go 'way, little fluff-hair,

'cause it's gonna get even better!"

The horrible part, the demeaning crashing part, was that the piggishly rooting bastard was right. Her bared sexual trigger received its stimulation while he rammed and crammed, and Janja's arousal and response grew despite her efforts to endure as if she were an unpro-grammed automaton. She was not, and it got better.

Vehicles filled the sky of Jorinne in this area. Every car rushed along while others whizzed by on both sides as well as above and below. Speeds ranged from one-thirty-eight to one-sixty at this level; cars racing in several shapes and a halfscore colors-mostly pastel- and another dozen color combinations-mostly pastels, in swirls.

The driver of the pale jade Flicker didn't notice all that traffic. He didn't have time to notice other cars. All he was aware of was the onrushing MSU vehicle. Its snout was displayed in the very center of his viewscreen. The green-and-white patrol car was on collision course at a hundred and fifty kloms an hour.

Traffic was thick as swarming insects over a pond of

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a summer sunset, and far faster and more beautiful. Except for that onrushing patrol car.

It could not hit him, Reyshahrik was sure. He hoped. No car could hit another. He hoped. Automatic Avoid-ance for Safety systemry saw to that. If was foolproof and failsafe, he was sure. He hoped.

Yet-wouldn't it be logical for policers to be able to defeat AAS?

Was this green-and-white going to hit him? At thirty-eight hundred kloms and, according to his scanbeeper, 150 k.p.h.

On his way to Komodi for an important demo against Councilwoman Shariali and a little assignation after, Reyshahrik began to sweat. His car was unable to dodge because of the traffic paralleling his course on six sides, even cars not yet abreast him. AAS included semi-longrange scanners. Those kept car A from avoiding B by dodging into the path of C. They also absolutely avoided collisions and made sure that there was never a chance of A's having to dodge B, in a hurry.

Reyshahrik in his green Flicker was helpless, then. Unable to get out of the path of the onrushing white-and-green Municipal Safety Unit patroller. Sweat began to run.

The driver of the MSU car was starting to sweat, too. His teeth were set, lips pursed tightly. He had the sleek vehicle on Policer Override, Emergency Only, and now he could almost see the scared face of the driver rushing toward him at a speed of one-thirty (and decelerating for all he was worth!).

The patroller's driver's big eleven-gallon hat lay on the thighs of the woman seated beside him. She stared as if frozen, and not at the hat. Impact in sixteen seconds. Estimated combined velocity at impact, taking into consideration the green car's deceleration: 272 kph.

*Collisions are impossible of course, but I guess one at this velocity and this level would have to involve*

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*eighty or so cars! What a spectacle! Talk about look out below!*

"Truh-falgarr . . ."

That from the woman beside him, even while the man in the driver's seat said, "Now" and jammed his thumb against a button in the patrol car's console.

"Uh!" she gasped, as computer again took over and took instantaneous avoidance measures.

"Uh!" he grunted, as their car lurched into a swift climb and leveled just as swiftly, six meters and one-point-one seconds later. Moments later the green Flicker whished past immediately under them . . .

Directly toward the MSU vehicle pursuing the one Trafalgar Cuw had . . . commandeered. While "his" car yanked itself down into its former path-a maneu-ver executed with a suddenness that made them both grunt again-the other policer lurched wildly, narrowly avoiding a collision with poor Reyshahrik and setting off a chain of avoidance maneuvers that fouled up traffic for seven kilometers and five minutes.

No vehicle collided. It was just that much adrenaline and sweat was wasted and no less than forty-seven cars had to be AAS-guided into new paths to avoid disaster. Reyshahrik was fine, of course, and wasn't even late for the demonstration. His path was clear all the way, in this lane. Why those two manic policer cars had been in it headed the wrong way he could not imagine, and never learned.

The cause of all that ridiculous, car-zipping mess was, in standard accord with some obscene and insane ancient law of the universe, rushing on. Sweat-free and unmenaced, if not oblivious. His pursuit had had to reverse directions to avoid creating an even worse mess.

Correction. He and his stolen vehicle were not unmenaced. Here came two more policers.

"Theba's icy warheads!" Trafalgar snapped blasphemously. "Don't these flainers have anything else to do? Ill bet there are vicious traffic violators, con chairmen

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and sidewalk-spitters all over Jorinne, getting away with their monstrous crimes while every MSU patrol car on the planet must be converging on harmless well-meaning *us!*"

"Oh stop grotching, car-thief! These are only the fifth and sixth MSUers we've had on our trail."

"Tail, tail," Trafalgar corrected. Calculating, measuring, plotting. Trying to plan. And after a sweaty moment during which the two patrollers rushed closer, challenging, threatening, issuing silly orders to give it up and relinquish control of the stolen vehicle to them, he sighed exaggeratedly. (At the same time, he engaged Policer Override again.)

"Cozy my love, you are one good SolSeccer and a sexy lady besides, and I will doubtless love you forever or at least through tomorrow. But right now I'd sure trade you for an unpleasingly plump fellow Outie of mine named Varnalgeran Yuw."

"Fickle grunjok!-Why?"

"Vam can get out of anything."

"Hmp! I'd really begun to think you could!"

Again the sigh, as elaborate as the gesture he'd doubtless have made if there had been room. "No no. My talent is for getting *into* things!"

She pronounced the word with exaggerated diction: "Oh."

"-an official vehicle of the Komodi municipal government," the car-to-car comm was telling them. "Nevertheless, we are prepared to ignore all charges except the theft one if you will just-"

"Hush now," Trafalgar muttered, staring. "Six . . . five . . . now! Down six! Left *uh!* six! Forward twenty-two and up-make it twenty-four!-and up five. *Uh!*"

"You're-uh!-relocating . . . half my *uh* . . . skele-ton . . . maniac!"

"Mine too Cozy, mine too. Sorry Cozy dearest dar-ling," he said, all the while staring fixedly at his read-out panels after that series of manic maneuvers. "But

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by Kalahari we just eluded two more spooks, and they've pissed their pants besides, because they just missed collision by six or three meters! Teach 'em to try converging from opposite directions . . . and now they are busily avoiding several more."

She sighed, trying to sag into her seat. The tunic's skirt was rumpling under the backs of her thighs-way up. She wished she'd worn pants. At least his huge hat covered her legs. Safer that way, he had said, without the distraction. What a man!

"No doubt about it," she said quietly, "you're a genius."

"Attagal. That's what I want to hear. There went klompost Sixteen. We're almost th-oh, wonderful. Here comes another patroller."

"Wonderful," she said, Trafalgarishly. "Who's Kalahari? Another god of Outreach?"

"No no, just something I made up. Oh damn. We're out of traffic."

Cosi saw plenty. It was merely less dense. "That's bad?"

"Firm! I've been using traffic as a screen and getting us out of box after box by ducking at just the instant to create real trouble. Haven't you noticed? Now we're in the open and here comes that MSU car, hot on our trail from east-northeast."

"Tail, tail," she corrected. "But . . . correction. Two. Another dead ahead, nine traffic lanes up and downcoming fast."

"Aieeee! Abandon ship! Dive dive dive! Remember the ala mode!"

"What?"

"Try to relax," Trafalgar said, abruptly several times more serious after his indecipherable Outie outburst. "And you might, ah, want to close your eyes. I know *I'm* going to!"

"What? Why?"

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"Because we're all clear every lane below-*if* we really hurry."

"Trafalgar! No!"

"Told you to close your eyes." He began down-counting from seven . . .

The sort of warning he had issued and the new mania he contemplated had the opposite effect on Cosi's eyes.

"What're you going to dooooo?"

"Car Nine-Komodi, you are bracketed and ordered to-"

"Crash-dive," Trafalgar said, and slapped a lever, depressed two keys, and jammed his foot down.

Instantly MSU car 9-K dropped its sleek warhead-like nose and began descent at a steep seventy degree angle. Meanwhile it trebled velocity in just under six seconds.

At a wind-shrieking 459 kph, the green-and-white dived straight for the ground. It rushed up at them with incredible rapidity. Trees and planted fields and build-ings showed that, expanding to recognizable proportions so rapidly that Cosi forgot to close her eyes. Her stomach seemed to have been left somewhere behind, which meant high above.

Eyes wide, she did glance at Trafalgar. His eyes were closed. That's when she screamed.

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Janja looked up at the creature named Goffer. Long, lean, young, rangy, naked.

He was grinning now. Strutting and puffed up. Both of them were; Goffer and his friend Halarik. Each had wallowed on her, rotted in her, enjoyed her. Each knew what she could not dissemble even though she tried: she had enjoyed. A woman who derived pleasure from the ultimate violence and violation of rape!

It was the ancient male dream fantasy. Not always a sick one, but always an adolescent one.

Gentle tribespeople on a little-known planet named Aglaya had never dreamed, as they thoughtfully and kindly circumcised male and female infants alike, what they might be doing to the girls, the women those clefted Aglayans would become. There were no frigid women on Aglaya. But on Aglaya, rape did not exist.

Nor were there any frigid Aglayans along the space-ways, where they went as slaves and where rape certainly did exist. Unfortunately or perhaps fortunately, the daughters of Aglii and Sunmother were unable *not* to enjoy. As a matter of fact, some were dead for it. They had displeased older sadists whose pleasure was frustrated by a responsive victim.

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In Janja's case, both Goffer and Halarik took full credit for her helpless response.

Now Halarik had returned to Hellfire, whom Janja had not seen but knew was prisoner in the adjoining room. Right through that open doorway. Now Goffer, having finished another beer, stood naked on the end of the bed. He stood smiling, legs apart, over Janja. Goffer, triumphant male.

Janja lay still on the rumpled bed, amid the odors of sweat and sexuality, semen and fear. Her legs lay apart because she knew better than to close them. Her wrists remained bound so that her hands framed her face. And Goffer of Jorinne, naked and proud and triumphant, grinned down at her.

"I'll tell yer what I'm going to do now, fluff-head. First, I have ter go, and you look like a good toilet to me. After that, a few minutes of making yer jiggle again, with yer own stopper." He glanced over at the dresser beside the window, where the little cylinder waited. And he positively beamed at her.

"And then . . . well, good ole Hal give me the idea, fluff-head, you dumb stash! Then I'll turn yer over and try yer from the back-in the back. Bet yer enjoy that too, what d'yer bet. Hmm?"

She tried to stifle the shiver that flowed through her supine body. Hands tied to the sash of her new and ruined jumpsuit; the sash wrapped first around her neck. Stripped, helpless, bruised and twice raped. She spoke soft-voiced, the picture of crushed submission.

"And . . . and then . . . then what? You can't keep us here forever!"

He grinned. He slapped his hands together and had to tilt to maintain his balance when his sudden movement rocked the bed.

"Ah! Can't we? Well then, maybe I'll pare off one of those tight warheads of yers and make a purse out of it. Wouldn't hold much though, would it?" He grinned. "Nahh. Better we leave yer tits and make a nice profit

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when we sell the both of yer to Manjanungo. More'n these jools you was so stupidly wearing, ya stupid stash."

"Oh," Janja said, making him smile again in enjoyment of his triumph and his gloating, and drew her right leg nearly all the way back to her prostrate body and kicked him with precision, directly in his naked genitals.

"Since you mentioned jewels," she muttered.

Goffer didn't answer. He hurt too much even to scream. He made a croaky pukey noise and grabbed at himself even as he went backward. She had already twitched her foot back out of his reach. Still, he was too busy clutching at himself to try to grab at anything to stop his fall.

He went backward off the bed and hit the floor with a terrible noise. His bare butt hit the hardest. After that, his head did.

Hands bound, Janja rolled onto her side and swung her feet off the bed. She got herself erect in a lurch. Her first step was a stagger. A high-bound elbow hit the wall. After that, she *moved*. She hurried around the rumpled bed of her desecration to Goffer.

He lay sprawled indecorously on his back. The fact that he was no longer grabbing at himself was message enough that he was not conscious. The back of his head had hit hard, and not on the old rug that was partway under him, protruding in a thin-worn rumple of beige and faded blue.

"Goffer?" That was Halarik, calling from the adjoining room.

Instantly Janja stopped. She backed. Her hands were high and helpless. Any attempt to tug them free, even to get her fingers at her bonds, merely strangled her. The rest of her was not helpless. She put her back against the wall to the left of the doorway connecting this room to the room where Hellfire suffered.

Janja waited, shifting her weight onto her left foot and ignoring a few twinges. She had been on that bed a



long time, and taken more from them than their hard slicers.

Halarik, meanwhile, stood frozen, staring at that same doorway from its other side. One hand still on Hellfire's upturned buttock. He stared at the doorway less than two meters away, and he heard nothing.

"Goffer? What was all that noise?"

There was no answer. The other room had gone absolutely silent.

*What the vug?*

"Don't go 'way, prass-head . . . I got big plans for yer," he muttered. He gave her rearcheck a pat and headed for that open doorway to silence.

Instantly Hellfire swept both hands back. She twisted a little, hurting the pierced nipple by which she was tied, to get her hands at the sash around her waist. She had already plucked two knots free, without his noticing. Urgently seeking fingers found the knots.

Less than a body's length away, Halarik paused just short of the doorway.

"Goffer? Hey!"

Then he took a step, and he saw a hand on the floor, and then a head. Goffer's head. It lay on the floor, face up, and would have been staring at the ceiling had Goffer's eyes been open. They weren't.

"Goffer!" Halarik said, and rushed forward as he'd not have done without the knowledge that the short blond was helpless.

Her leg shot out sidewise and swept neatly between his moving ones.

Halarik stumbled and ran to keep from falling, out of control. Flailing-until he stumbled over the body of his companion. Janja was hurrying after him even as he tripped for the second time. This time he fell, cursing.

He hit the floor, hard, but without the momentum and height that had worsened his companion's impact. Besides, Hal landed on his arms and chest, and his head hit his forearms, not the planking.

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Somehow he maintained enough control with his jan-gled brain to tell himself to roll over. He did that. That way he was looking up at Janja's rush. That way he was able to give her a good hard kick in the lower leg.

She was knocked sideways to bang into the wall, without free hands or arms to catch herself. It hurt, and she couldn't find her balance. A picture fell off the wall and so did Janja.

He got up with a groaning grunt, knife in hand. He still wore his boots, as he had kept them on even while he used her on the bed. The knife came up out of the right one's side-sheath.

His glittering eyes fixed their stare on the fallen blond. Her odd blue eyes were very wide, and not with fear. In falling, her arms had tugged the sash tight around her throat. Janja was fresh out of air.

"To hell with Manjanungo," he snarled, and it was the second time she had heard that name. "Carving yer is going to be more fun than taking his money for yer!"

Those coldly glittering eyes did not participate in his half-smile. In a crouch, knife held low in the classic way, he moved toward her. Slowly.

"Don't try kicking, now," he told her quietly. "Not unless ya want yer fat calf opened up." And he twitched the knife, which glittered. "Yer know what 'hamstring' means, huh?"

Janja knew. And this time, she realized, was the last time. This time she hadn't the faintest chance. *I'm coming home, Sunmother.*

Halarik jerked his head around as Hellfire came charging through the doorway, and he felt like an idiot. The naked woman with the prass-colored hair held the sash from her waist in one hand. The cord from her nip-ring was still attached. What she had done was obvious. He knew he had slipped; he had been stupid.

It was just that she had been there so long, held by her nip-ring and the cord running from it across the table and back under to the sash knotted four times at

her waist. And then had come the loud noise in here, which Hal now knew was Goffer hitting the floor. After that he had been involved with the blond. All her skinny cohort had had to do was untie the sash, let it drop, take hold of the cord to end the tug to her breast, and slowly straighten up. After that she had been able to move rapidly, carrying her own leash.

She was moving rapidly, too. That charge had to be aborted, when he pivoted her way, still in his crouch, knife held low and out only a little. Poised to gut or slash.

"Come an' get it, slim. Or just go back in there and lay across the table and I'll ferget yer got loose. I like her, ya know. I swear-it's my fault yer loose, anyhow."

Likes *me!* *What a creepy slime he is,* Hellfire thought, while she stared wide-eyed. She backed a pace, looking terrified and uncertain. "I-I"

"Go on. Do it. You can't save her, slim, and you know it. I don't wanna have to cut yer open. I like yer, slim, ya know?"

She backed another pace, face working. The picture of fear and indecision. Almost convinced . . .

Halarik straightened, as naked as the other three in the room, except for his boots. He was beginning to smile . . .

And Janja kicked him in the leg as hard as she could. Just at the knee, above his boot-top.

He yelled, trying to turn while the kicked leg betrayed him. It was crumpling even as his knife rushed at her foot. She jerked it away the moment she completed the kick. Now he had been stupid twice. Hellfire had seen Janja without looking at her. Had feigned terror and confusion long enough for the blond to change positions just enough to aim her kick.

He was already crumpling. When his vengeful swipe with the knife missed her retreating leg, any possibility of catching his balance was out of the question. He fell.

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Automatically trying to catch himself with both hands, he imbedded his knife in the floor.

Unavoidably strangling herself with her own hands, her face darkening, Janja worked desperately to get up.

Halakirk was sprawled on his stomach. He got him-self up on one elbow sufficiently to jerk his other arm in an attempt to free the knife. He had no leverage in that position, and cursed. Then Hellfire's foot drove down onto his butt and mangled his naked genitals against the wooden floor. Halarik screamed.

On her knees, seeing everything through a deepening pink haze, Janja let herself flop onto his head. His forehead thumped the floor. Hellfire stomped his right wrist. His fingers flexed wide. The knife stood in the floor, not quite freed so that it tilted almost jauntily. Hellfire kept her foot on his wrist.

"Janja! Get up! Please just get up and out of his way."

Janja's face was dark and her tongue was trying to loll. She twisted her face to show Hellfire bulging, dying eyes. She had jerked the sash so tight when she fell-purely involuntarily trying to move her arms-that it allowed no breathing and would not loosen. She had not had a breath for well over a minute and was strangling. She could not answer.

She did manage to flop off Halarik's head. She was too weak even to grunt.

"Uh . . ." Halarik raised his head, gave it a jerk, and reached for her.

Hellfire lifted her right foot off his wrist and slammed the heel down against the back of his head. His face hit the floor noisily and a spurt of blood shot out to one side. His legs twitched.

Hellfire bent, seized the handle of his knife, and gave it a twisting yank. His efforts plus her standing vantage and the twist did the trick. The blade came free. Hur-riedly Hellfire squatted to grasp and slice the black cloth connecting Janja's neck and her left wrist.

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A moment later Janja was free, and gasping.

A moment after that Goffer made a noise and moved.

Hellfire swung to him, convinced that Halarik was unconscious. Squatting, she set the point of Hal's knife against Goffer's cheek.

"Move. Just try moving. Please. Blink and I'll ram this thing right through your face into your filthy mouth."

Goffer lay very still.

Janja rose. She hoisted Halarik's head by his hair, looked at his bloody face and side-bent nose, and let his head drop. It slapped into his blood and didn't move.

She stood and in one quick step moved to the dresser. From its top she picked up the stopper Goffer had lovingly laid there. Her stopper.

"He's covered, Hellfire. You can take the knife away."

The squatting Hellfire looked up at her. "What about that one?"

"Unconscious. Messy. Broken nose, bleeding fore-head, cut lip."

Hellfire nodded and stood, long and naked and lean. In one hand she still held the cord attached to her breast. With care, she sliced it off close to the ring. She looked down at Halarik.

"He-he . . . I think I'll just run this knife up his ass."

"Oh . . . please don't, Hellfire. Let's tie Goffer with that sash and cord first, then Halarik with the other one-my sash. Hands behind, and *tight*. I stole a car to follow you and I may be in trouble. Let's do something strange and be heroes: let's take both these pigs in to the local policers."

Hellfire stared at her. "Me? You? Policers. . . ." She interrupted herself to grin. "I love it! Thanks, Janja! You paid heavy for coming after me, and I sure won't forget. As to your ridiculous suggestion-I love it! How perverse! Let's do it!"

Janja's and Hellfire's brand-new jumpsuits were ruined. The two did gather a few pieces of Hellfire's. The legs of Janja's were intact, at least. She pulled it on and managed to pin and tuck the upper portion enough to make it wearable, with tears.

Skin showed through, here and there. She wore it without the sash, which was purely decorative anyhow. It was also in use. It held Halarik's arms undecoratively behind him, although he remained unconscious. Hellfire's sash served the same purpose for Goffer.

Goffer tried to bargain, coyly telling them about his "rich patron."

"Uh-huh," Hellfire said, pulling on his pants. "The same one you two were going to sell us to? I think we'll pass on that, thanks. Now I think you'd better just shut up and stay shut up, or we'll have to find something interesting to gag you with."

Goffer hushed, nakedly watching her belt his pants to her smaller waist amid an ugly clutter of little rumples. The avocado-hued pants had been tight on Goffer; below the hips where she almost filled them out, they were less so on the even leaner pirate. His yellow shirt made a fair tunic, worn out. That way it also covered the messy waist of the pants.

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Having reversed positions with their captors, the new captors left the two men naked. Except for their bonds. They didn't bother to pull the boots off the bloodily unconscious Halarik, although Janja pointed out that it would be a good idea.

Once they had forced Goffer to carry his associate out and down to the cars waiting on the far shoulder of the road, the two women bound Goffer again. Nothing had been done about the blood caked on Halarik's face and shoulders. He was breathing—a fact that was of minimal interest to Captain Hellfire of spacer *Satana*.

A little prodding persuaded Goffer to open his well, it was Hal's car. Janja's "Oh shit" sprung the Hum-mingbird's lock and brought a whoop from her sloppily attired companion. Either car, they learned, would accommodate four people—Goffer being gleefully advised that his fellow rapist's head would be pillowed on his knees.

"We take the fancy yellow car," the captain said, "which you said can drive itself anyhow. You handle that. Halarik in the seat beside you, more or less. Goffer and I in the back. I'll have my stopper and darling Halarik's knife. We merely leave their car." After a moment she smiled to add, "Unlocked. Maybe someone'll steal it!"

Grinning, she swung to Goffer. "Say something," she challenged. "Anything. Just anything at all, furbag."

Goffer kept his lips together.

Janja sighed. "Sure hate to get blood on this fancy c-oh-oh!"

A green and white vehicle came whining around the curve from the direction of Komodi. It went into a violent deceleration that had it slewing repeatedly back and forth. Its sleekly pointed hood bore a shamrock, the symbol of Municipal Safety Units all over Jorinne. As a matter of fact it could not stop in time and abruptly lifted a bit higher on its air-jets. It soared over their heads, grazed by low branches overhanging the road.

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Janja and Hellfire, squatting, squinted while their hair blew wildly. Hellfire cursed the MSU car and her flapping shirt-tunic.

"We'd better just go along with whatever they say," Janja yelled, "all right? I *did* steal that car."

Hellfire stared at her while, a few meters beyond them, the MSU patrolier came to a stop, rotated in air, and settled onto the road so that they were again looking at its pointy snout.

"Just let them take us in? But we've been—"

Janja knew Hellfire's volatility quotient. She talked desperately to persuade the pirate to forego resistance: "Just think: Jewels; Rich; Retirement!" she yelled, and then realized she didn't have to; the MSU car's whining engines had wound down.

"Oh shit," Hellfire said, crouching beside the Hum-mingbird, and performed an astonishing act. She handed Janja her stopper.

While Janja flashed her a big smile and made the weapon vanish, a pleasant voice from within the Hum-mingbird said, "I read the door already open; please advise," and the patrolier eased back to them.

Hellfire slammed the yellow car's door. Just as two very unofficial-looking people pounced from the green-and-white, one on either side, a growing high whine announced the rapid advent of another car.

"Hi!" Trafalgar Cuw called brightly, waving. "Hit the bushes, fast!"

A second green-and-white whipped around the curve, its velocity greater than Trafalgar's had been. Pursuit!

At once it began a wild swing-and-sway in its attempt to perform the impossible task of instant deceleration unto stop. Hellfire dived one way, into bushes, and Janja the other. So did Trafalgar and Cosi so that they flanked the road, two on either side. Goffer, wrists secured behind him, yelled and ran awkwardly. Halarik lay nicely still where he'd been dumped.

Then a blast of down-blown air rustled leaves and

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ruffled the unconscious Hal's hair as the second patrol-ler lifted hurriedly to cruise over the obstacle of its twin, parked right in the road.

"Brought help!" Hellfire yelled, just able to see Trafalgar's canary shirt through the bushes.

"Sorry," he shouted back in competition with hovercar whine. "They're chasing us!" He could just see her hideously baggy yellow shirt through the (mostly ultra-marine) brush.

"They're after me," Janja was shouting to Cosi, who was prostrated less than a meter away. "I stole that car."

"They're after us," Cosi was simultaneously yelling. "He, I mean; we stole that patrol car."

Both said, "What?" while the newcomer turned in air, and lowered. Two doors opened and two uniformed men pounced out. The car, doors swinging, eased for-ward until it was almost touching the rear of its stolen twin. Both were in the middle of the narrow road.

"All right, all of you-come out of those bushes!"

Hellfire rose into a squat behind a pushily broad, olive-froned bush. "You heard the nice man, Goffer- get out there!" And she gave the bound young man a violent shove. Then she ducked back and thoughtfully yanked at the front of her tunic/his shirt, until it ripped.

Goffer meanwhile burst noisily out of the brush and onto the limb-shadowed road. Wrists bound on his but-tocks, he ran for all he was worth, to avoid falling.

Since he was racing directly at a young MSUer, the valiant protector of the law protected himself from the naked apparition and thought later: he whipped up his odd pistol and triggered it.

The gun was set on burst-automatic. It immediately released five thumpers, within 2.4 seconds. Four of the hard "rubber" projectiles, each the size and shape of a marble, hit Goffer and bounced. Goffer screamed and fell down, wearing four red impact-marks.

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"Holy Vike, Ajiro, that shader's arms're tied behind 'im!"

At that loud observation from his older partner, Ajiro assumed a hang-dog look. But he kept his gun ready, because here came another one. Female. Shirt torn all to hell, flapping yellowly in front (and, disappointingly, revealing almost nothing). And here came a man, too. Also yellow shirted, and wearing a great big hat-ah, this was the rotten shader who'd made off with car Nine from headquarters!

Ajiro's partner Mersin, meanwhile, was covering the other side of the road. Their car's driver stood behind his open door-detachable for use as a minimum weight maximum-protection shield. On its top he rested a big two-handed gun.

Ajiro pointed at Trafalgar, who was emerging se-dately from the bush, hands in sight but hardly up-raised. "That man's the car-thief!"

Hellfire, screwing up her face and affecting a stag-ger, pointed to the crumpled Goffer. "That man kid-napped and raped me!"

"What?!"

"Don't be silly," Janja said, approaching Mersin with her hands in the open and both stoppers tucked into her bedraggled jumpsuit. "I'm the one who stole the *c-hit the bushes!*"

Policers and fugitives scurried as a third patroller came whining around the curve and went into the slew-rock-swerve that was now so familiar. A narrow road hemmed and presided over by close-pressing trees af-forded little room for maneuvering to offset attempts at instant deceleration. This newer newcomer also lifted swiftly to clear car Nine. It passed the two private cars parked at roadside, down-draft blowing Goffer's and Halarik's hair (all conscious personnel having hit the bushes to avoid being run down) and very nearly settled atop the second green-and-white.

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A hurried jump up and forward made the car look as if it had been goosed.

*The automatic accident-avoidance Things these Thing-makers make for human safety can be mighty hard on the humans they save,* Janja mused. And she shifted her prostrate self to avoid the indelicate prodding of one of her stoppers.

Two men lay unconscious, in the roadway. Both were naked except for the boots one ridiculously wore. Four other men watched the newcomer, three from the bushy roadside and one from the road itself, where he crouched behind his patroller. He still hung onto his big gun. He was also roundly cursing his newly-armed cohorts, who had blown off his beret and were duplicat-ing his recent maneuver: pivoting one-eighty in air.

Three women also watched-Hellfire clinging to Ajiro in a pretty good imitation of a damsel in distress hang-ing onto her valiant rescuer. Janja, across the road, was yelling into the ear of Cosi, who was sprawled beside her wishing she had worn pants.

Doors swung open while the third patroller settled to the road. The moment it touched, two men pounced out with ungainly thumper-pistols ready.

"All right," one barked, looking around after he began, "what the vug's going-hello? Anyone here?"

"Look out Zhamil-the bushes're full of 'em!"

Just as people began appearing here and mere from roadside bushes-some of them sheepishly readjusting their maroon berets-a high-pitched whine announced the speedy blueshifting of another car. This one came from the direction opposite Komodi and thus behind the line of three green-and-whites.

It appeared and instantly began decelerating at sight of the long obstacle. It rose swiftly, snapping off a branch with a loud crack, and rushed over the parked vehicles and sprawled kidnappers. It came to a stop just at the curve. The newest arrival was green and white, with a shamrock on the hood.

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The previous newest arrivals rose-one cursing-from the flattened positions they had adopted during an over-flight less than three meters above their heads. Then they bent to pick up their red berets.

"Holy Lady Vike," one snarled.

"Holy shit," his partner said, slapping his beret against his leg.

The door of the parked Hummingbird swung open.

The newest newcomer settled to the roadway, and reversed. Just avoiding Halarik, it stopped in a position that made it appear to be leading a parade of four MSU patrollers. Two green-uniformed red berets piled out of the back, on opposite sides. One cried out, having stepped on Halarik.

"Sweet Lady V.-we run over one!"

"Nice move, boys," drily called one of the MSUers from the car now fourth in line. "Come outta those bushes, all of yer, and come out with yer hands-Ajiro! What're you doing in them bushes? *Oh-oho-ol*"

Ajiro emerged with Hellfire still clinging to him. He hadn't the heart to peel off the poor thing, obviously just terrified. He paused long enough to tfump the open door of the Hummingbird with his knee. It closed.

"Had to jump off the road to avoid *you*," Ajiro said waspishly. "Think they's enough of us here?"

The roadside tree-boles and underbrush began to dis-gorge warm bodies. Policers. Women. A wildly dressed man carrying something that looked like an over-fed hat. Another policer.

Then, from the fourth car-now first in line-an amplified voice made heads turn and leaves rustle.

"all right! this is lieutenant bamunai everybody

INTO THE ROADWAY. LET'S SORT OUT POLICERS FROM CIVIL-IANS, IF YER DON'T MIND, AND TRY TO MAKE SOME SENSE OUT OF THIS WORLD CONVENTION. (Shut up, Lan. We did

not run over that man. He was there already.) anyone

KNOWABOUTTHISBOUNDMANINTHEROADWAY?" "There are two, Lootinant," Mersin said helpfully.

1%

"Yes!" Hellfire said in as squeaky a voice as she could summon. "He's a kidnapper and rapist!"

Ajiro gave her a look, incidentally casing the interior of her tunic, which sure did look like a shirt, male. "Really? Him too? Both of them?"

"There's another one, Lieutenant."

"THANKS. ALL RIGHT, SERGEANT. SORT 'EM OUT. WE ALL RECOGNIZE THE MAN IN THE COLORFUL CLOTHES FROM HEAD-QUARTERS DESCRIPT. WHICH ONE OF YER IS HIS ACCOMPLICE?"

"We all are," Janja said helpfully. "But you've also got two victims of kidnap and rape here, Lieutenant- and one of them outranks you-*and* the guilty parties. You still going to give priority to the man who bor-rowed your car to try to rescue us?"

Ajiro looked again at Hellfire, who was denting his jacket sleeve pretty badly. "Her too.?"

"Actually, I was trying to lead policers here," Trafalgar said, since it sounded good, and almost logical.

"YOU SURE SUCCEEDED AT THAT," the crowd-control

loud-hailer boomed. "Car Seven! Mount yer vehicle, back up, *ease* over us, and return to duty."

"Oh shit," one of the three men said as they headed for their car, the fourth in line.

The door of the Hummingbird swung open.

"son of a-uh, gerbolansk," Lieutenant Bamuna said.

"THAT'S THE CAR STOLEN FROM THE FAIR, ISN'T IT?"

"Excuse me," Cosi said, and dodged around the patrolman reaching for her.

"Who tied those two up?" Ajiro muttered.

"She and I did," Hellfire said. "We don't like being raped."

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," Cosi said, dodging around the car to appear before Bamuna. His car's open door was between them.

Mike in hand, he stared at her. "which one are you?"

"Hell of a callous thing to say when there's rape victims present," Hellfire said in a pettish voice.

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"I'm Cosi, Sergeant, Station Soljer Security, Lieu-tenant. Here on an undercover mission. These-"

"WHAT?!"

"Could you, uh, maybe switch off the amp or lower the mike," Cosi suggested, very nicely. "These others are off a spaceship docked up at Soljer. Visitors to the Fair. Very rich visitors, Lieutenant," she embellished. "Staying at the hotel Lex as guests of Manager Jacabe. Personal friends of Viscount Zirandary of Ghanj."

He stared, having lowered his mike, and seemed to shrink a little. "O Sweet Lady! What've we got ourselves into, an interplanetary incident?"

Cosi took a step closer to the barrier of the car's door. "A big catch and high praise, maybe your cap-taincy, if we work fast and smart. Want to share?"

Bamuna was frowning. "Share? Captaincy? Share what? And let's see yer ID."

She produced it. "And let's see yers," she said, straight-faced.

"See my-I'm right here, in uniform, badge on, and this is my c-" But as he examined her identification, he handed her his. She flipped it, glanced, passed it back, and regained hers. "Now share what?"

"Credit, Lieutenant Bamuna, credit!"

"Uh-huh. For what? What's this big catch?"

"These three are working with me," Cosi told him. "The two tied men are part of that big fat slave ring we all know about." (Bamuna's eyebrows sprang to atten-tion.) "They grabbed the, uh, prass-haired one over there with your man. She was decoy, but her getting grabbed wasn't in the script. The blond in the torn red grabbed the nearest car-that Hummingbird-in the ab-sence of any policers or Fair security personnel, and gave chase. She's no thief-she reported in, didn't she?"

"Well . . . uh, pos, the car did. But-"

"Those two roughed them up badly, including sexual abuse. They were going to sell them. They're procurers  
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for the slave ring. *The* slave ring on Jorinne, Lieuten-ant, that we've all been trying to get a line on for a year."

"Longer," he murmured, almost in a sigh.

"Oh, but didn't tell us up on Soljer until a year ago, hmm? I'll remember. Unfortunately we *may* be in trou-ble, but I'll take that responsibility."

"Respons-trouble? What trouble?"

She ticked off names on her fingers. "The Jacabe? Lord Zirandary? The women themselves-the one in the torn yellow shirt is *captain* of her ship, Lieutenant. Along with her computrician-the blond-she was raped, among other things."

The lieutenant closed his eyes and heaved a big sigh. "I hope you understand when I say I'm not too clear or too happy with any of this, Sergeant Cozy-"

"That's Cosi," Trafalgar Cuw corrected helpfully, from behind her.

Beside and just behind the Outie was a very alert and proprietary MSUer, thumper-gun in hand and pointed. "Lieutenant, this man says-"

"Hush, Mersin. And holster your gun, He's ah, cleared." Bamuna looked at Cosi. "You do mean *the* slave ring? Our Operation Straightback?"

"Firm. That ring . . . *the* ring. What is it now- forty disappearances in the past couple of years?"

"That's the official estimate, and it's conservative. Sweet Lady! And you've actually got a line on . . . what about the big catch, Sergeant? And sharing? You mean a joint operation?"

"Oh, well, even though the uncovering was accom-plished by offworlders and SolSec, Lieutenant, we don't want to cut out MSU-Komodi."

"Uh-huh. Dam' nice of yer. There's a . . . catch?"

"No catch, Lieutenant. As soon as you get unneces-sary patrol cars out of this cluttered area and back to work-they're probably needed, somewhere-and as-sure that the three 'fugitives'-they are called the Satana

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Coalition, by the way. Trafalgar Cuw, and Captain Hellf-" She only just managed to stop there, with the less incriminating abbreviation they had decided on for Hellfire. "And Janjaglaya. All working with me. Merely two cars commandeered, in pursuit of your Operation Straightback. Easy to explain, simple to rectify."

"A *patrol* car, stolen from *Headquarters*?"

"I was in that car, Lieutenant. You loaned it to me, remember?" She shrugged. "Simple. A little mistake. The Outie and I were merely leading your people to this place- with your permission."

"You're quite a, uh, agent, Sergeant Cosi."

"Quite a woman, too," Trafalgar Cuw offered.

Bamuna ignored him. He continued staring reflec-tively at Cosi, one eyebrow up.

"Maybe they'll agree to keep quiet about the sexual abuse too," she said softly. "We'll have enough on their captors, believe me."

That cinched it. "All right. I'll square it. It'll be a lot, lot easier if yer right about Operation Straightback, Sergeant. No charges against yer . . . associates. My responsibility."

She nodded and moved closer to the car's door. "I'm right, all right. And it's our roundup, yours and mine."

He started to speak, then remembered to lift his mike. "all right. we have the entire situation in HAND. ALL OFFICERS MOUNT UP AND GET YER CARS OUT OF HERE. OFFICER MERSIN: DRIVE THAT RENTAL CAR BACK TO KOMODI RENTALS AND TELL EM ILL BE ALONG TO EXPLAIN. THE TWO LADIES WILL RIDE BACK IN YOUR CAR. DELIVER THEM TO HOSPITAL OR HOTEL LEX AS THEY SPECIFY, VERIAN. THE MAN AND SERGEANT COSI HERE, STATION SOLJER SECURITY, will ride back with me." He paused to look at two of the three men of his own car. "You two get those bound men off the road and into their car. Drive them to Spinebluff Hospital and clamp on the security, Lan." "Yessir."

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"EASY NOW, BOYS. IN ORDER, AND OVERFLY US SLOWLY!"

One by one, the cars moved up, out, and away. Cosi had nodded her assurance to Janja, who explained to Hellfire. Trafalgar, Cosi, and Bamuna squatted beside his car while the others moved overhead, rounded the curve, and disappeared. Bamuna's driver had never gotten out of the car. As the whine of the last vehicle died away in the distance, Bamuna looked at Cosi.

"Those two snatchers are Goffer and Haiarik, Lieu-tenant. Mere cogs in the wheel. Vertebrae in Straightback, *if* yer like. They have to be, to let themselves be taken by two captive rape victims! But we know who they work for, Captain Bamuna. I recognize the name. You'll recognize the name. Half of Jorinne will recognize the name. Two-thirds, maybe. The name is also big enough to be the top boss of *our* so-efficient slave ring, believe me. This is Big, Lieutenant."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "What a day this would have been to call in sick! I damned near did! All-

"You not well, Lieutenant?" Trafalgar Cuw asked solicitously.

Bamuna rolled his eyes that way. "Headache up to here. All day. All right, Sergeant. Cure my headache. Who is it?"

"Joint operation, joint credit."

"Ser-geant Co-si! I've evidenced my good faith by clearing the area and agreeing to explain away the two *commandeered* cars! Now you hurt me!"

She nodded, but maintained her level look. "You're right. Sorry, partner. The two women were going to be taken to Manjanungo."

Lieutenant Bamuna stared at her. "O Sweet Lady Vike! That's-that's not even . . . suppose . . . but there may be *another* Manjanungo," he said, unconsciously lowering his voice over the name, "not the son of Clan-chief Manjarik!"

Trafalgar Cuw rolled his eyes. So that's who it was.

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Whatever he was. A Joser clan-boss's son, hmm? This was a large matter indeed!

"We can ask the one who's not in coma as soon as we get back to town-Goffer. I think he'll talk. His choice is to take a full rap on kidnap, rape, and torture."

Lieutenant Bajnuna squeezed his eyes shut. "O Sweet Lady Ever Just! *Manjanungo!*"

"Would've been a rotten day to call in sick, Lieuten-ant," Cosi said. "We're going to be heroes, and famous!"

"We're going to be in a lot of trouble! Manjarik Jacath is going to give us every bit of trouble he can- and he may well stir up other chiefs to fight his darling son's arrest for slavery!" He shook his head and stared at the trees by the roadside; stared at nothing. Then he looked at Cosi again, and reached out to squeeze her upper arm. "All right! We'll go get 'im, though, and we'll fight back. Call me Barky, Cosi. After all, we may well get ourselves disgraced and even murdered together!"

Trafalgar Cuw rose from the squat they had all three maintained. "Oh I don't know, Barky. You'll have some offplanet backing. Let me tell you a little about that, on the way back to Komodi."

"Barky" Bamuna stared at him, then at Cosi. "Don't tell me there's more I don't know!"

The man from Outreach smiled.

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*People do like to lord it over each other and feel superior whether they are or not. That makes slav-ery probable; human nature makes it inevitable.*

Moris Keniston

*Slavery, it has been said, is as natural among our kind as mom's strapple pie, and that appears to be true. My man's strapple pie was rotten.*

Trafalgar Cuw

Janja and Hellfire had suffered themselves to be es-corted quietly into hospital and had suffered themselves to be examined, both by woman and by machines. Neither was anything approaching permanently injured, physically. There was no further worry beyond the psychological, since neither could be pregnant until she decided, *if* ever she might decide. In that case she must undo the foolproof anti-impregnation work done long ago on her body.

*Her* body. That was the point, and that accounted for a great deal of the affront and the horror.

Janja's mind was long since bruised and scarred by rape and worse. She had Aglayan control of her self and had reckoned with the experiences, accommodated,

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changed. Janja abided. The psychological effect exist-ed, but it was no longer of importance. She was a far

different woman from the girl of innocence who a year ago had been snatched off her planet of innocence, Aglaya.

Janjaherrior, become Janja and called Janjaglaya, was far more resilient and in control than most human psy-chologists could believe. In the absence of real research, no psychologist knew mat she was not quite human-or was more than human-because she was Aglayan.The arrogance of the Thingmakers called Galactics-humans, Galaxy "conquerors"-was not conducive to their con-sidering that those they called "barbarians" and fit slaves might in some ways be superior to humans.

Naturally the psychological effect was greater in Hellfire's case. Hellfire was wholly human and was demonstrably not in control of self. It was rape that sent her along the piratic trail to begin with. She had long since gained independence and the arrogance it brought. That arrogance was also a pose and a shield. She had also long hated men. Once she came out of that, partially-and Trafalgar Cuw had had his positive effect on her and her attitudes-she remained what she had ever been: a homosexual.

She no longer hated all males, but definitely desired no sexual activity with them, even voluntary.

Trafalgar Cuw had changed Hellfire, and Knor had changed her. Yesterday's experience had been a blow and had added to the change. To a great degree, Hellfire was a different person. The pirate whom Janja had met and joined a few months ago would never have made yesterday's decision to pass Janja her stopper to prevent herself from using it. That neurotic (bordering on and sometimes spilling over into psychotic) "former Hellfire" would never have thought of such a concept, much less considered it. Captain Hellfire was indeed different.

For one thing, she no longer desired to be Captain Hellfire. She had been hurt and affrighted. Now those

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stones and precious metals she and her cohorts had brought away from Knor would allow her to cease being Captain Hellfire; to make and enter into and enjoy a new life.

It was not mentioned, but they all knew they owed the wealth to Trafalgar Cuw. It was he who had made very certain they brought away all they could, and had gone to some trouble to add to their . . . take. The man Hellfire had called "Trafalgar Pew" and whom none of them had wanted on *Satana*!

Now, the day after the hauling in of Goffer and Halarik, Trafalgar was off with Cosi and that Lieutenant Whatsisname of MSU-Komodi. A very big deal, in-volving a very big Joser network devoted to the selling of losers-and occasional visitors snatched at such places as the Fair!-into slavery.

Cinnabar had volunteered to go up to stay onboard *Satana* with Graborn and Laleemis of Knor-and Still well. Quindy had come down, in disguise, to join Janja and Hellfire in the Satana Suite, so-called. They missed the ever-resourceful Outie, but at least Yaood Pilishishi was here, bigger than anyone, full of know-ledge, and a friend. He acted as agent and abetter in what he called "disposing of" their jewelry.

The one-of-a-kind Knoresse gauds totaled forty-one pieces. By noon they had been appraised by three gemologists. None knew what the others had said. The Luhrese even sneered at the very name of Yaood Pilishishi of Ghanj. Professional rivalry-but at least there was no collusion in price-setting! That pointed up the signifi-cance of his valuation, along with his and Yaood's expertise and honesty (and the accuracy of their evaluat-ing devices): their overall evaluations were within 2.7% of each other.

The third appraiser differed on the total by just over four per cent, on the high side. That informal entity called the Satana Coalition felt confident that it had a fair evaluation of its wealth.

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It was wealth. The amount was, simply put, stagger-ing. In the millions of stells, yes. (Easily enough to buy planet Bleak, jonquil-haired Quindy said with a straight face, and her captain threw a pillow at the black woman.)

Each appraiser pointed out the same fact: the valua-tions naturally included only something of the absolute uniqueness of the gemstoned pieces, and nothing of their romance value. Except for the piece of Painite.

Within thirty minutes of his arrival *in* their suite, Lord Zirandary of Ghanj had made an offer of a million four hundred thirty-thousand stells for seven pieces. Two of those pieces were earrings.

He also admired the one-piece suit Quindy wore, red, with a dangling black sash whose ends were cut on the bias. Wise or not, Hellfire gave him a brief account of the sad story of her and Janja's bright idea concerning those jumpsuits, and the sad fate of two of them. The rather severe noble of Ghanj seemed uncomfortable if not quite horrified, and expressed regrets and concern.

He would not make an offer on the stone identified as Painite. It was only the third sample of that orthorhom-bic crystal gemstone identified-in the entire galaxy. One had been brought away from Homeworld. Only thirty years ago another of the garnet-red, emerald-hard stones had been found, on Jasbir. The Satana Coalition had agreed to Yaood's suggestion that they price the ring-set stone at one million stells.

"But what if we can't sell it? We don't want it, not something so unique it's worth *that*!"

Yaood smiled. "Perhaps you will realize so much on the sale of the rest of the collection that you'll decide to give it to a museum, or sell it to one at some token price."

Hellfire rolled her eyes. Such an act was not conceiv-able, because being wealthy enough was not conceivable.

Four buyers for museums beamed word back to their employers on their respective planets. One was neutral;



the other three urged Purchase. Such a stone would bring the institution fame, many visitors, and as a longterm result: gifts.

The wife of a clan-chief of Jorinne offered a bid of a million six for the precise assortment Zirandary wanted. Told that the Coalition was sorry, that deal had been done but that thirty-four pieces remained, she huffily broke off negotiations and communication.

Yaood Pilishishi was a privileged person and his own interest was obvious. Separating a modest four pieces, he showed them the average of their valuation: four hundred ten thousand stells.

"I would bid on these myself," he said. "Half the amount payable at once and the other half within four months."

"You plan to resell."

"Three pieces, yes."

"Four months-standard or Ghanji?"

Yaood shrugged his big sloping shoulders. "Either. The difference is less than six days."

The Coalition conferred, without Cinnabar and Trafal-gar. Yaood was advised that his price for the pieces was four hundred thousand stells, even, and that allowances would be made if he was not prepared to pay the second half within four months. (Since he was obviously pre-pared to do business at once, he must have the 200,000S, they reasoned. In that case, they needed it worse than he did.)

Yaood nodded, and they knew they had his word. Eleven pieces were removed from the display. Lord Zirandary had departed to do things about transferring credaccounting.

Fourteen minutes later his man Shaf arrived, bearing gifts. For each woman: a magnificent set of ear-pendants of Ghanji yellow-fine diamonds. For Trafalgar Cuw: a fantastic belt-buckle, bearing six yellow topazes and two emeralds, all small and all set in most interesting ways. For Cinnabar: a certificate.

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The Jarp had mentioned that the first thing it would do with wealth was undergo the operation to implant a translator. Thus it would dispense forever with the need for a translation helmet. The mini-translator and the operation were deadly expensive. Not now: now they were paid for by a stroke of Viscount Zirandary's sty-lus, some numbers, and six of his fingerprints.

"You *told* us our gift to Lord Z. was an invest-ment!" Janja told Yaood, with a glowing smile.

He merely nodded, his own smile a subdued one. The news meanwhile was exciting and wonderful enough to merit a call up to Station Soljer and the docked *Satana*, Cinnabar was delighted,whelmed, and emotional.

Another lord of Ghanj and another clan-chief of Jorinne arrived almost simultaneously, along with a Panishi attorney of definite means. Their presence created some strained moments. All three were admitted. Experts for each examined the remaining pieces of jewelry. Milord Estamardik immediately expressed his desire for the gold-wire-and-Knorse-hair "rope" with its amethysts pendent on tiny chains of gold. Its higher valuation was s100,000S. He offered that.

"But that is the very piece I want," the chief of clan Caldera said, although he had been studying other items. He promptly upped the bid by five thousand, also offer-ing nine for a pair of earrings appraised at nine, 9,720, and 9,400.

Yemahl Huhleem of Panish had been examining the ruby-set bracer or armlet of gran. It had been valued at fourteen thousand and priced at fifty, since gran existed only on Knor-inside Knor. Now he laid it down on the table and stepped back to observe. He did a nice job of blending in with the drapes, though he and his attire had nothing in common with their color. The attorney was that sort of man.

Acting affronted, Lord Estamardik offered 125,000 for the "rope"/belt and the earrings (which Janja thought far too big and flashy).

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"But this is too ridiculous," the Jacalder of Caldera said. "I *want* those pieces. One hundred thirty-seven thousand stells."

Jaws dropped, among the members of the *Satana* Coalition.

The Ghanji stared, also showing an affronted face and manner.

"But this is not honorable! I am a visitor on this world-a guest!"

"Agreed, absolutely," Yaood said with a vigorous nod. Today he wore all rich burgundy, and still looked just as big. "Thus we shall request no insults, and we shall positively not insult either of you but will favor neither."

*The meaning of diplomacy*, Janja mused. *He said nothing!*

Meanwhile Earl Estamardik smiled, bowed, and coolly said, "One-fifty."

The Jacalder returned to the flash spread over the table. He picked up a band of braided silver wire. From it flashed a ruby large as a woman's thumbnail and thick as her little finger. It had been valued at forty thousand, twice. He held it to the light, draped it over his fingers to admire it, and set it by the earrings and amethyst rope.

"I should be pleased to offer two hundred thousand stellar credits for these four pieces," he said with digni-ty, and returned to his seat.

While Yaood gazed questioningly and pleasantly at the Ghanji and that lord stared daggers and plasma bolts at the

tallish Joser, an interruption came: someone at the door.

"Your pardon is requested, my lords," Quindy said. She genuflected directly across the room from the door and leveled her stopper at it in a two-handed grip that looked terribly professional and daunting.

Neither bidder looked disapproving. Perhaps both were accustomed to more sophistication in protective mea-

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sures, but both understood security. As a matter of fact the bodyguard accompanying each moved into a better position to cover the door. All this was despite the two security persons out in the corridor, ostentatiously cold-eyed and ready.

The messenger bore packages and an uncomfortable look. She redshifted speedily. Each package was another gift from the Lord Viscount Vashina Raj Zirandary (ne-Glap) of Ghanj. Hellfire went aside to open them, and was soon grinning even as the Panishi ambled over to her. (Watched carefully by the red-suited Quindy.) Each package contained a gold-belted red jumpsuit, with black sash.

"Wonder how ole Traf'll like this one in his size," she muttered.

"Excuse me, Captain . . . would it be possible for me to purchase the arnlet and be on my way? I am not going to be part of the bidding of these two, uh, nobles."

Hellfire looked at him, blinking. He handed her a card. She examined it. Less than a minute later the Satana Collection was poorer by one piece and the Coalition richer by fifty thousand stells, and Kemal Huhreem had quietly and politely taken his leave of the suite.

Hellfire looked up in time to see Janja lean rather weakly against a wall. The Caldera-Estamardik was continued, and three hundred thousand stells had just been bid for four pieces of jewelry evaluated at a megastell less than half of that.

Hellfire made a swift call on the comm. Swift, and quiet, and very private. She learned a thing or two about the Caldera of Caldera, and his family. She also buttoned off and turned to him just after he raised the bid to three-twenty. Thousand. Stells.

"My lord Jacalder . . . your brother is the eminent physician and xenobiologist Caldera Meahdhi-daktari?"

"Why yes, Captain. Is that of interest?"

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"It is, assuming that he is in charge of quarantine or certification, with authority."

"Three-thirty-five!" Estamardik Earl of Esty napped.

Jacalder was nodding, smiling. "But surely there is no question of contamination with these otherworld pieces," he said, gesturing at the table.

Yaood was gazing with polite expectancy at Caldera; Quindy and Janja watched Hellfire, and wondered.

"Oh, of course not," she said. "On our ship docked at Station Soljer, however, are . . . some zoological specimens that will be of interest to your most distin-guished brother." She stepped closer to the Joser and spoke very quietly. "All of us have spent nearly a half-year in their company. They have shown no symp-toms of anything. We haven't either. We assume they are certifiable as safe to be introduced on Galactic planets. We also know that might require months and months and much, much burok problems."

"What is this delay? Is the other party going to raise my bid or have I purchased the pieces at auction?"

Quindy smiled sweetly at Lord Estamardik. "My lord, we do apologize for the necessary delay and beg your patient indulgence."

"Indeed! I am here to transact business! My schedule does not allow for such interruptions and I have been more than patient, surely!"

Quietly the chief of clan Caldera was saying, "I see and believe that I understand, Captain. I can only prom-ise instant action with regard to the zoological speci-mens you cryptically mention." He lifted a hand to stay her as she started to speak. "I am the Caldera of Caldera. I am sure that my brother would find it possi-ble to visit your ship this evening, if not this very afternoon."

"I think we couldn't ask for much more than that," Janja said, surprising them both. She had approached silently and unnoticed, having realized precisely what Hellfire was about.

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While Jacalder gazed at the blond with more interest than affront, Hellfire turned to the fuming Ghanji. He was just repeating his bid of three-thirty-five.

"My lord Earl," she said. "We are not professional dealers and signatories to no agreement. I very much fear that the bidding on the four pieces in question ended at three hundred twenty thousand stells, in favor of the Jacalder. With the permission of my partners, we will offer you your choice of the remaining pieces, at a price twenty per cent below their highest valuation."

"Un-unparalleled! Insufferable! Shameful! You are shameless and no gentlewoman, Captain!"

"Lord Estamardik: you are absolutely right."

The Ghanji's face worked. Tempted, he glanced at the table of scintillants. But his anger and his noble dignity won out. Without a word he gestured to his bodyguard, and departed.

"Were I a smaller man," the Caldera of Caldera smiled, reaching for the comm, "I might now request a discount

myself."

Hellfire blinked and her face worked. Janja surprised herself by speaking smoothly: "Were my lord a smaller man, we might expect such behavior. We might even yield."

There. He was both intimidated and challenged, and with respectful politeness. Again he gazed at Janja, and slowly smiling, he used the comm to contact his brother.

His credit was good, too.

An hour later a group of three persons arrived in the lobby of the Lex and one of their number mounted the elevator. Soon she was in the Eagle Suite, examining the array of fewer than twenty pieces of jewelry on an otherwise unadorned hotel table.

While she browsed, Quindy watched her and Janja and Hellfire adjourned to the suite's bedroom. They returned in new and perfectly fitted jumpsuits of a handsome red, sashed with black. They found that the

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woman had been joined by three others. One sat quietly across the room.

Introductions were made. Here were a wealthy-what else? -banker and collector from Thebanis and his "associate"-an obvious bodyguard-and the man who had been seated, to rise politely at the entry of the two women. He was Caldera Mehdhi-daktari. Oh, but clan-chiefs were powerful, and instantly attended to in their "requests!"

"Captain Hellf," Yaood said, "Sherizam-sitti represents a coalition, also. Her associates are in the lobby. They wish to negotiate for the handling of eleven items, here on Jorinne. They are experienced and at least one is very good at generating . . . interest. Romance, which can suddenly escalate the value of anything at all."

"We would like to transfer to you cred amounting to one-half the average evaluation of these eleven pieces," Sherizam said, "and retain them to sell as your agents. Our fee would be sixty per cent of the amount we are able to sell the merchandise for, above the amount of the evaluation."

"Let me see if I understand you clearly," Hellfire said. "Suppose a particular item is listed at one hundred thousand. To begin with, you pay us fifty thousand, at once." (Sherizam nodded.) "Next let's say you sell it for twenty. You owe us fifty, to begin with. Your fee is sixty per cent of the twenty, or twelve thousand?-we to receive eight thousand stells above the evaluation?"

"Exactly, Captain. Our credentials and credit ratings are available for your study."

Hellfire glanced at her associates. "We are five, in the Satana Coalition, and will have to confer on this. We would ask you to return in the morning. At ten?"

Sherizam sighed. "The transaction would be affected if some of the pieces we want are sold between now and then," she said.

"We would also be that many stells ahead," Janja

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said, smiling. They had all learned to smile politely, talk sweetly, and behave just as if they were practiced genuine merchants of class. Most of the time.

Sherizam glanced at Quindy and turned toward her- the obvious security guard-as she opened the sling-pouch she wore so casually. She removed a little packet and displayed its contents. Five pills of some sort. Not impressive at all.

Then she cracked one to show them that it contained a pearl. Or a gem that was called a pearl, anyhow: a cataract. Janja and Hellfire noted Yaood's gasp.

"Five of these would be our security," she said.

Yaood examined it briefly and cursorily. "Sherizam-sitti, your group have something definite in mind."

"We have. We will do what you people cannot do. We will sell each of those eleven pieces for a least twice its valuation. Not at once; first we will make them famous. *One at a time.*"

"And . . . what about the pearls . . . the Joser cataracts?"

"Each is not quite perfect and yet each is more valuable than a fine ruby of two carats or so. We will advance them to you, in lieu of the initial payment."

Hellfire said, "No."

Quindy said, "Captain . . ."

Yaood said, "Sitti, the Satana Coalition is five individuals, and me. We are soon to go in separate directions. In other words we wish to sell our merchandise for that which can be negotiated swiftly, cash or hard cred. We are not interested in owning fewer stones, however valuable, or any stones at all."

"As a matter of fact," Janja said quietly, "we are interested in nothing but hard negotiables, since one of us at least wants a spaceship, soonest."

"Pardon me," the collector from Thebanis said. "May I see the stone? Hmm. Beautiful. I do love these things! I have five cataracts, you know. Yes, I see . . . mine

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are better than this one. The point is, however, that I am in possession of an unusually excellent spacecraft which I am empowered to sell. Perhaps *all* of us should attempt to negotiate, together. Everyone here seems to have something that one of us wants."

"The first requisite for rational transactions," Yaood said happily, unconsciously rubbing his big hands together. "Let us sit down and reason together."

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*All's well that doesn't end with you in the hospital.*  
*Trafalgar Cuw*

*All's well that ends with you in the hospital if that's where you want to be!*  
*Cinnabar*

Caldera Mehdhi-daktari was instantly fascinated by the diminutive Knorese. Small, furred members of another and unknown humanoid race-and one of each sex at that! What opportunities for study they represented, and knowledge!

Soon, Graborn of Survival on Knor was just as excit-ed. He was in the presence of a man of science! A seeker of knowledge and possessor of much! How much he could teach Graborn and how stimulating it would be! And marvel of marvels-the tall Joser daktari felt the same way!

Janja and Cinnabar were sure they could trust Mehdhi. Nevertheless they tried to dissuade Graborn and Laleemis (who did not try to dissuade him at all. Laleemis only wanted to be with him and see him happy; therein, she was sure, lay her happiness. Sickeningly in love, Cin-nabar called its friends.)

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They could not dissuade their Knorman friend. The two Knorese would go down onto Jorinne with Mehdhi, and remain on Jorinne with Mehdhi, in the name of science; knowledge. Studying and teaching each other. Furthering science and their own mutual lust for knowledge.

Cinnabar and then Janja, Graborn's first offplanet friends- as he was their *only* friend among the masters of Knor-embraced both Knorese. Hellfire refrained. And Mehdhi took them with him, His Authority. Mehdhi was twice untouchable. He was who/what he was, and he was whose brother he was.

That problem was solved, though not as they had expected. The idea had been to get Graborn and Laleemis cleared, certified healthy and safe, and on their way to Galactic citizenship. Now the Knorese who had be-friended them, helped them, and insisted on leaving Knor with them, were no longer then responsibility.

The "problem" of the jewelry was solved, too, to everyone's satisfaction.

When they began negotiations with Sherizam, they hadn't even noticed that one of the eleven items she had separated was the Painite-set ring.

Now Mujaz, banker of Thebanis, had the five Joser pearls called cataracts to add to his collection. And Sherizam and her associates had the eleven pieces. They had come up with one million stells in ready cash. Cash! The eleven items were valued at just under twice that. The Satana Coalition had that amount coming, as well as fifty per cent of every stell over that amount the pieces brought-after Joser taxes.

Liaison and holding agent between Sherizam's Joser group and the Satana Coalition would be Jacabe, man-ager of Hotel Lex. And keeping an eye on Jacabe and Sherizam & Co. would be Cosi of Jorinne.

Now the Satana Coalition would take to space to-gether once again. Rich.

This time they would follow Mujaz home to Thebanis.

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There Hellfire would bid a surely tearful farewell to her home for years she would not count: spaceship *Satana*. After that it would become the property of a hastily-formed holding company, Mujaz's-with a further pay-ment of forty thousand stells to Janja. On Thebanis, then, she would take title to the ship Mujaz possessed because of its owner's default in payment.

The reason for the trade was simply that the spacer on Thebanis was newer and presumably better than *Satana*. Yet the amount already paid on it made it a "bargain," so far as spacers went. It was hardly used, and had never seen anything approaching trouble or bad use.

Janja didn't have the wherewithal yet, but she knew that she wanted *her* ship to have the newest CAGSVIG-IV interactively vocal computer as one module of *her* Ship's Inboard Processing And Computing Unit (Modular).

*Maybe I can borrow the cred from our ole friend Mujaz's bank . . .*

Immediately on arrival in Raunch of Thebanis, Cin-nabar would enter hospital, most voluntarily. There the Jarp would be translator-implanted. Oh yes; the credit of Viscount Zirandary of Ghanj was good anywhere. And both Cinnabar and Quindy would remain with Janja when she was Captain Janja of spacer (Unnamed).

Quindy was essential. Janja would have begged for her.

Hellfire? Hellfire didn't know just what she'd do. Hellfire would think about it.

"I'm fuckin' rich! I'll think about it. I'm filthy furbaggin' rich! I'll decide! If I can't decide, I can slicin' well afford to drift! We'll see where I wind up settling, to lady it over everybody in sight!"

Komodi Rentals was happy, with the little settlement from something called the Satana Coalition and the friendship of MSU-Komodi. Kublak was happy; his rental Hummingbird was his for as long as he remained on Jorinne, courtesy something called the Satana Coalition.

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tion. ("Nickels and dimes," Hellfire said with a finger-flip, or words to that effect.) The First Joser Trust was happy; it was awarded the credaccounts of the Satana Coalition.

Lieutenant Bamurra of MSU-Komodi was only mildly happy.

By the evening of the day after he had stumbled onto Cosi and the solution to Operation Straightback, that too-successful slaving operation was dead, on Jorinne. Bamuna and MSU had proof positive, plenty of it, and twenty obviously guilty "suspects" in durance vile. A few bore bruises from thumpers, the price for panicking when the arresting officers arrived.

Even so, Lieutenant Bamuna of MSU-Komodi was only mildly happy.

There had been no trouble from clan-chief Manjarik Jacath. There would be none. The poor old man was convinced of his son's guilt, and he was horrified and shamed by it. Cosi and Barky Bamuna were heroes, in no trouble at all.

As a matter of fact it was obvious that Barky would be Captain Bamuna by year's end.

Yet Lieutenant Bamuna of MSU-K was only mildly happy.

"I'm really sorry the bastard got away," Trafalgar Caw said. He was in the office of the Director of Security, Space Station Soljer. Sitting with one buttock on the leading edge-corner of the prefect's desk.

The SolSec Director sighed and nodded. "So am I, you can bet on that! And so is poor Bamuna. We put Man-janungo and his planetside associates out of business- destroyed the whole operation. Yet Manjanungo was resourceful enough to get himself up here and onto a ship-his own, a superb yacht-and out into space. All that before we had an inkling we'd not find him at home, waiting for the cuffs. As a matter of fact our concern was that he might suicide! We had no idea he could be so professional and resourceful, so . . . dedicated."

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"A true criminal, you mean. A thorough-going badass, is the word," Trafalgar said.

"That's three words, Falger. And TGO will be on Manjanungo's tail-right?"

"Trail, trail. Oh, probably. I know an inspector's being sent here. Fast. You'll have questions to answer. Once a TGO inspector conies in, it inspects and ques-tions everything in sight and on-site."

"I can handle that, Falger."

"I'm sure you can! The fun part should be answering the questions about your predecessor."

Trafalgar received a fingerflip. "Well, this was just the last of his incompetencies. If he'd been alert and anything approaching sharp-much less just plain com-petent at this job-Manjanungo never would have got away."

"And you'd still be Sergeant Cozy, Prefect Cosi."

She gave him a sardonic look. "Well-maybe. I do after all share credit for the inactivation of the Opera-tion Straightback file." She saw him glance at one of her monitors. It showed berth H-2.

She said, "You, ah, really do think you have to go, hm, tall, dark, flashy and sexy?"

"I think so, short, dark, all-too-uniformed and sexier'n me! Yes. One more time I'm going to ship out with *Satana* and those nuts."

"ToThebanis."

"To Thebanis," he nodded. "Pos. I think I'll skip kissing you goodbye and save it for a hello kiss next time I see you, Cozy."

She raised her brows, pursed her lips, remained seated behind the SolSec Director's desk. Her desk. (Maybe former prefect Havem could get a night-watchman's job, down onplanet.)

"Make it soon, Falger."

"Who knows, Cozy. I probably love you." He was on his way to the door. He opened it with a flamboyant

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gesture that rippled the cavalierly full sleeves of his canary yellow shirt.

"Sure, sure," she said. "Well, happy trails, Trafalgar Cuw."

"Tails, tails," he said, and was gone, running out to spacer *Satana*.